

A woman in a white lace-up shoe and a man in a blue denim skirt are on a baseball field. The woman is in the foreground, and the man is behind her. The background is a grassy field with a dirt base and a baseball.

STRIKE THREE,
YOU'RE
Mine

Julie L. Spencer

Strike Three, You're Mine
(All's Fair in Love and Sports)

Julie L. Spencer

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CHAPTER ONE

Amberlyn

“Let’s go, Buccaneers!” I yelled and raised my poms in the air, my breath creating a puff of condensation that reflected the Friday night stadium lights. I bounced on my toes, appreciating the springboard give to the high school track that circled the perimeter of the football field but wishing we’d chosen our warmup pants rather than cheerleading skirts.

I was so ready for football season to be over. This would hopefully be the last game our legs would be subjected to the elements. October in Michigan pushed into cooler nights and through the remainder of the season we could justify warmups.

“Amberlyn.” Bella pulled my cheerleading sweater. “What’s wrong with Skyler tonight?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled.

Things weren’t going well on the field. My boyfriend, Skyler, the star quarterback, usually kept his cool under pressure. Tonight, he was yelling at his teammates and arguing with the refs and coaches. Something was bothering him, and I wished I could help. There was nothing I could do from the sidelines except cheer for him, and the team, and hope for the best.

My best friend, Jonnie, was also on the football field, and the arguments seemed to revolve around her. From the beginning of the season, she’d been a source of contention. High school guys didn’t want a girl on their opposing team.

Jonnie and the guys at our high school here in Grand Haven claimed the rest of the teams were afraid of her because she was the best wide receiver this side of the Mississippi River. But there was more to the controversy. No one wanted to tackle her. No one wanted to reach around her to steal the ball the way they would from a guy in fear they'd grab body parts that shouldn't be shown on a beach.

Things were different when she was a tomboy and about the same size as the boys. Over the summer she'd grown up and so had they. The boys became men, and she no longer looked like a tomboy. She was now probably the most beautiful girl in our senior class.

If Jonnie hadn't been my best friend since we were little kids, I'd probably be jealous of her. I knew a lot of other girls were. The cheerleaders warned me to watch my back because they thought Jonnie was moving in on my boyfriend.

I wasn't worried. Much. Skyler and I had been going out since our freshman year when we were on student council together and he asked me to homecoming.

Still, he'd been friends with Jonnie longer than he'd known me. The fact that they had some weird sports connection shouldn't have bothered me. Lately they seemed to have that same connection on *and* off the field.

If anyone would notice the change, I would. The three of us had been inseparable for years. Jonnie and I lived next door to one another, and Skyler was frequently over. The two of them taught me everything I needed to know about football to help me become a good cheerleader. They would talk about strategies and plays while I'd try to keep up and then patiently rewind the footage to explain things I didn't understand.

This fall there was a tension in the air, as if they didn't want to look at one another and loathed being in the same room. Yet I noticed that when Jonnie wasn't paying attention, Skyler couldn't keep his eyes off her. It was like he was aware of her all the time.

He was *my* boyfriend. He should have his eyes on me, not her. He didn't seem affected by my skimpy swimsuits or short cheerleading skirts either. I chalked it up to him being a gentleman. Now I wondered.

He also hadn't kissed me in weeks. He was never one to make moves on me or try to get me to do things we shouldn't. The few times we'd tried to make out over the years had been awkward and forced, as if we were only

making out because it was expected as boyfriend and girlfriend.

Was there any validity to what my cheerleading friends had warned about? Did Skyler like Jonnie as more than a friend?

The whistle blew, and a yellow flag flew into the air. I tucked my poms behind my back and lifted on my toes, trying to get a better look. Skyler was right up in the face of a guy on the opposing team, and Jonnie was on the ground.

I couldn't hear what Skyler was yelling, but more flags were thrown, and Skyler's best friend Logan pulled him away from the opponent, backing him up, helmet to helmet like two deer with antlers locked. The rest of the team reorganized themselves fifteen yards behind the line of scrimmage.

There wasn't much to cheer for in this situation. *Go, fight, win?* Fighting wasn't helping right now. *Fire up?* They were already hotheaded. *Let's get ready to rumble?* Not good either.

The other team scored a touchdown right before halftime, and I watched helplessly as our team hung their heads while jogging over to the locker rooms. I momentarily considered running over to the women's locker room to comfort Jonnie, who entered alone.

Instead, I hurried onto the field with the rest of the cheerleading squad to perform our halftime show.

CHAPTER TWO

Aiden

I was so ready for football season to be over. I jogged off the field and into the locker room with the rest of my downtrodden team, frustrated and angry. Not as angry as Coach Bryant.

“What was that mess I just witnessed?” Coach threw his clipboard to the floor of the locker room. “Who gave you authority to change the plays at the last second and not tell your receivers?”

Skyler had really messed up this time. As a defensive lineman, I hadn’t been privileged to what had occurred, but I understood the fundamentals. The quarterback could change the play at the last minute but had to pass the message all the way down the line. He had kept Jonnie out of the loop and given the ball to other players on purpose to keep the focus off Jonnie.

At first, she hadn’t complained. When our running back, Logan, had gained fifteen yards, we’d gotten a first down. When Skyler had handed off to our tight end, Jayce, we’d gained another first down. For each of those plays, Jonnie had thought her decoy, Doug, was the intended receiver and had finally gotten tackled in the confusion.

I understood why Skyler was deflecting attention. The other team’s cornerback was huge and fast. No player as small as Jonnie, guy or girl, should be playing opposite that monster.

Another thing I understood was why Skyler was protecting Jonnie so passionately. He had a crush on her. No, it was beyond that. I was pretty sure

Skyler was in love with Jonnie and had been for a long time.

Unfortunately, Skyler's attempt at distraction hadn't worked. All he had succeeded in doing was to make everyone else mad at him. Because our team received fouls and got pushed back so far, we couldn't recover. Now he was making matters worse by yelling at our coach.

"You kept your receiver in the dark during key plays at a time when she was being threatened by the opponent!" Coach's massive form hulked over Skyler. I felt bad for the guy, but coach was right.

"I was trying to *protect* her!" Skyler yelled.

"You left her *defenseless*."

Skyler cringed at his choice of words. "No..." Skyler's voice wavered. "I was—I was trying to protect her."

"By keeping her in the dark, you made her more vulnerable." Coach Bryant took two steps back and shook his head with disgust.

"You need to take her out." Skyler pointed out the door. "You need to bench her. That guy is too big, too fast. She's gonna—she's gonna get hurt..." Skyler's voice trailed off, and he stumbled back against the wall of blue and gold lockers. We all stood there, staring at him, helmets in hand, covered in mud and grass stains.

If a cornered puppy dog could have donned a football jersey and pads, that would have perfectly described Skyler.

I smirked and shook my head. "Dude, when are you finally going to admit it out loud?" I knew the truth. And Skyler knew that I knew. He was in love with Jonnie, and he had yet to own up to the fact.

His eyes darted around the room, never locking gazes with any of us.

"Ah, man, seriously?" Connor, our offensive tackle, shook his head.

"Not that I blame you, dude," Jayce said. "She is smokin' hot."

"It's not like that," Skyler choked out. "She's my best friend."

"Best friend with benefits," Doug mumbled.

"I would *never*." Skyler started after Doug, but Logan stepped in and held him back.

"Sky, dude, come on." Logan had him by the shoulders and pulled him away from Doug. His voice was calm, soothing. "We're on your side, man. You're our brother. We're here for you."

"Does Amberlyn know?" Jayce asked.

I wondered the same thing.

“That is none of your business, Jayce,” Skyler yelled. Logan pulled him back again, and Skyler didn’t fight him.

“We’re not gonna deal with that right now,” Logan said, locking eyes with Skyler. “The only thing we can help you with over the next hour is to get you through this game. What you choose to do after that is *not our concern*.”

Logan turned his head to Jayce and glared at him. Jayce was the first to look away.

Skyler glanced around the locker room, which was packed with sweaty, muddy football players, took a deep breath, and stormed into the adjoining restroom.

I felt bad for the guy but secretly my heart was racing. I’d had a crush on his girlfriend, Amberlyn, for years.

Amberlyn Jamison was out of my league. Rich, beautiful, popular, everything I was not. Not to mention, joined at the hip with her long-time boyfriend, ultra-popular, good-looking football star, Skyler Morgan. I knew I didn’t stand a chance.

But now? She would need a shoulder to cry on when she learned her boyfriend was in love with her best friend. I could be that shoulder.

That would take stepping way out of my comfort zone. I’d always been the chubby kid growing up, and in my subconscious mind, I still was. Years of working out had helped me gain muscles, running had helped me slim down, and my skills on the baseball diamond had changed the way others perceived me, but deep inside I was still that insecure chubby kid.

The next few hours were going to require me to push down my insecurities if I was going to stand a chance with Amberlyn.

I almost wanted to thank Jonnie for being the reason Skyler would soon be breaking up with Amberlyn. When I exited the locker room and saw Jonnie standing outside, with mud and grass covering her uniform and her hair falling out of its braid, I strode right over to her and pulled her into my arms.

I released her with a grin, put on my helmet, and ran onto the field. Jonnie was special to me. We went to the homecoming dance together and were running buddies the past couple of months. Just watching her interactions with Skyler, I’d guessed they liked each other. I even went out of my way to make sure they stood next to one another for pictures and shared a dance at homecoming.

Jonnie getting together with Skyler was more than just opening a door for

me to ask out Amberlyn; I was also witnessing two of my good friends falling in love.

I turned and jogged backward as Skyler came out of the locker room and wrapped his arms around Jonnie. There was nothing abnormal about that. Hadn't I just done the same thing? But their hug meant something more. I wondered how Amberlyn would react.

Barely slowing my momentum, I turned and searched for Amberlyn among the group of cheerleaders on the sidelines. None of them were paying attention to the entrance of the locker room where an embrace between the quarterback and the wide receiver was changing the trajectory of my life.

An hour or two from now Amberlyn would learn the truth, and I'd be there to catch her tears when they fell.

CHAPTER THREE

Amberlyn

“Oh! They’re back out.” I hurried the other cheerleaders to line up in our formations again. Most of the football team was already gathered around their coach, but Jonnie and Skyler were barely onto the field, running side by side like they always did. I tried not to be jealous. This was normal for them.

Still, I wanted to be done with football forever. I struggled to understand the game, even though I’d tried to learn. Plus, once the season was over, Skyler would have more time for me. The only people he spent time with now were his football buddies.

Skyler was the last guy to tuck himself into the huddle around their coach. I’d always wanted to know what they said to each other in that little circle. Their own little clique. A club excluding everyone except football players. I probably wouldn’t understand anything they said anyway. Whatever.

They broke their huddle and ran onto the field. The kickoff was uneventful, but when the offense took the field, there was a tension that could be felt all the way out here on the track. I wondered if the people in the upper deck of the stadium felt the rivalry.

“Come on, Skyler,” I whispered under my breath. “Keep it together. No fighting.”

The play started off fine. I sensed what was about to happen because I’d watched these guys play for years. Jonnie flew down the field like the track star that she was, some huge guy from the opposing team hot on her heels.

When she got close to the endzone, she turned toward the center of the field and looked over her shoulder just as Skyler's perfect throw landed in her arms.

Impressive. I wasn't sure how they did that. This was the reason I wasn't jealous of my best friend and my boyfriend. They had a connection that was otherworldly. It was like they knew what each other was thinking all the time.

My heart pounded as Jonnie raced that last few yards to the endzone, not turning back to see if that big guy was still on her heels, which he was. She just ran.

Touchdown!

My heart soared. Jonnie had done it! She'd gotten past that huge player, caught a really long pass, and gotten a touchdown!

As she spiked the ball in celebration, I watched in horror as that mammoth football player lowered his head and rammed his helmet right into Jonnie's back.

She didn't fall to the ground, she was flattened. Once there, she didn't move.

"Jonnie!" Skyler yelled from the center of the field. He ripped his helmet off as he ran. The stadium was in pandemonium as coaches and referees and players rushed forward.

Whistles blew. Yellow flags were thrown. The call was obvious even to the uninitiated cheerleaders. Targeting. Their huge football player was ejected from the game.

A little late now! I wanted to scream at the referee.

Skyler ran hard and fell to his knees near Jonnie's head, where she lay still, her helmet on, and her left arm tucked under her in an unnatural position. No one moved her.

"Why aren't they moving her?" I cried to Bella, who wrapped her arms around me. "Her arm is twisted all funny. That's got to hurt."

"They have to keep her still in case she has a neck injury," Bella told me, her voice calm and soothing. The team doctors from both sides of the field arrived and together they rolled Jonnie carefully onto a board while stabilizing her head and neck.

I was vaguely aware of Bella's arms, and other cheerleaders around me, and ambulance sirens, and people everywhere, and Jonnie's mom and dad, and people rushing around, and the Gator rushing forward, and Jonnie being

lifted in, and the team running after it to meet the ambulance at the back gate.

After shrugging out from under Bella's comforting arms, I ran toward where they were about to load my very best friend into an ambulance. The medics had her on a gurney in mere seconds, and I could no longer see her as they turned to wheel her away.

"Jonnie!" Skyler called out.

"Skyler," a weak voice cried.

"She's alive. She's going to be okay." I let Bella and Alisha pull me into their arms.

Skyler rushed forward past the coaches and team doctors to her side. "I'm here, babe. I'm right here."

My heart jumped. *Did he just call her babe?*

"Did you see my touchdown?" Jonnie's feeble voice held a smile.

"Yeah, babe, I saw it." Skyler reached for her hand and kissed her lips over and over, desperately, clinging to her hand. "I saw your touchdown."

My boyfriend just kissed my best friend. What the heck? My shoulders slumped.

Jonnie choked out something about being his playmaker and then winced.

"You'll always be my playmaker, babe." Skyler kissed her again. "Always."

"Okay, man, we gotta get her to the hospital," one of the paramedics insisted. "I need you to step back."

"I love you, Jonnie." Skyler kissed her one more time before someone pulled him back. Logan and Aiden held Skyler up as his knees buckled, and he choked out a request. "Somebody get me to the hospital."

They turned to where I stood with Bella and Alisha's arms around me and tears running down my face. I could tell the second Skyler realized I'd witnessed everything he'd just done.

I wanted to be angry at my boyfriend. He had betrayed me in front of hundreds of people, had declared his love for another girl and kissed her. *Kissed her!*

But all I could think about was my best friend and the ambulance siren that was now fading as it pulled onto the main road and toward the hospital.

CHAPTER FOUR

Aiden

Amberlyn rushed forward and threw herself into Skyler's arms, crying hard. "Is Jonnie going to be okay, Skyler? I'm so scared."

Skyler wrapped his arms around Amberlyn tentatively. In some strange natural transition, he was comforting Jonnie's best friend rather than his former girlfriend.

"I hope so," Skyler choked out, lowering his face so that his cheek rested against her head. "I'm sorry."

"Can I come with you to the hospital?" Amberlyn pulled away and looked up at Skyler, her brow creased and tears streaking her makeup. He wiped her cheeks, and my jealousy reared as he looked as if he might kiss her. "We can talk, ya know, about everything else later."

This wasn't supposed to be happening. I was supposed to be comforting Amberlyn and wiping the smeared mascara from her cheeks. I was supposed to be happy that my two good friends, Jonnie and Skyler, were finally together.

Instead, Jonnie was in an ambulance with serious injuries, and Skyler was still holding Amberlyn. I shook off my frustration, knowing there were more important things to deal with first.

"I'll drive," I said, patting Skyler on the shoulder. "Let's go get our pads off first, okay?"

"That's probably a good idea." Skyler pulled away and disentangled

himself from Amberlyn.

“I’ll go grab my purse and tell my coach where I’m going,” Amberlyn said. “I’ll meet you outside the locker room.”

The game had resumed with mostly second-string players. Logan and I flanked Skyler and helped him find his way to the locker room.

We pulled our jerseys over our heads, not bothering with a shower and change of clothes. We barely took the time to change out of our cleats, and within three minutes, we were back out of the locker room and found Amberlyn waiting.

Another person was waiting nearby. A sullen face I didn’t recognize because he’d hid behind a helmet that he now held in his hand. He was large enough to play college ball, and his jersey read 45. I couldn’t believe we ever let Jonnie play opposite him. What were we thinking?

Skyler stepped closer to him and had to raise his chin to look him in the eye. To his credit, he didn’t flinch. “You have a lot of nerve showing up here.”

“I’m sorry, man. I really am.” He sounded remorseful but still with a hint of cockiness behind his demeanor as if that was his natural expression.

“It’s too late for sorry.” Skyler spit words at him. “You’d better pray she’s okay, or so help me—” Before Skyler could finish his sentence, I grabbed him by the shoulders and turned him toward the parking lot.

“Come on, Sky, let’s go.” I dragged him along, but Skyler hollered over his shoulder.

“I hope you have a good attorney!”

“Skyler, come on. Let’s get to Jonnie.” Amberlyn’s voice and Jonnie’s name pulled Skyler back from his fury, and I dragged him toward my car.

The emergency room was already packed by the time we got there. Friday night was not a great time for an injury. We rushed to the receptionist desk, and before she could ask how she could help, Skyler blurted, “My girlfriend was just brought by ambulance. I need to know if she’s okay.”

“I’m sorry,” the receptionist said. “Only family is allowed back there. You’ll have to wait until one of her family comes out to give you more information.”

“But—but she’s my, my Jonnie. I need to know she’s okay.”

“I’m sure her family will let you know as soon as they have some news. Now go have a seat and someone will be with you shortly.”

“Come on, Skyler,” I said, dragging him away from the receptionist. I helped him to a seat in the far corner, and he slumped over, squeezing his eyes shut and pulling at his sweaty mess of hair.

I stood beside Amberlyn as we both watched our friend racked with torment. I wrapped my arm around her shoulders, and she pulled herself closer, sobbing quietly. I wished I could relish this moment, the first time I held her in my arms, but the moment was bittersweet.

I didn't want Amberlyn if having her meant Jonnie was injured.

But Jonnie *was* injured, and Amberlyn *was* in my arms, and there was no way to change the past. When I'd said I wanted to be the one to dry Amberlyn's tears, this wasn't what I had in mind.

CHAPTER FIVE

Amberlyn

“Skyler?” I sat beside him and softly laid my hand on his knee, and he startled as if just remembering I was there with him at the hospital. I tried to soothe him with my words. “She’ll be okay, Skyler. She wouldn’t have been able to talk to you if she wasn’t at least a little bit okay.”

“I shouldn’t have let her play against that guy.” Skyler shook his head back and forth slowly.

“You can’t blame yourself,” I said, smoothing the creases on his forehead.

“I’m sorry I didn’t break up with you.” Skyler’s voice held a level of vulnerability I wasn’t prepared for.

I sat back in my chair, lowered my gaze and dropped my hands into my lap. “We’re having that conversation already, huh?”

“We shoulda had it a long time ago.”

“How long has this been...?”

“Since Preschool?” Skyler chuckled sheepishly.

I looked up at him, and my jaw dropped.

“I’m kidding,” he said. “Sort of.”

“You know what’s funny?” I smiled shyly. “I kinda thought you were gay.”

“What?” He grinned. “Why?”

“Well, you never really made a move on me the whole time we were

dating.”

“I respect you too much for that.” Skyler took my hand gently in his. “You know, this is gonna take some getting used to.”

“What is?” I asked. He raised our interlinked hands.

“Not holding your hand and stuff. We’ve been together for so long, it just kinda comes naturally.”

“I have a feeling you’ll be holding someone else’s hand pretty soon.”

“Is that gonna be weird for you?” He raised his eyebrows.

“Nah.” I bumped my shoulder against his. “Just don’t go makin’ out with her in front of me, ’kay?”

“I’ll try my best not to.” Skyler chuckled.

“Seriously though, how long has this been going on?”

“I think when she got back from visiting her dad and all the guys started flirting with her, I got super jealous. She’s always been *my* Jonnie, not theirs.”

“Possessive much?” I asked.

“You know what I mean.” He squeezed his hand around mine. “We’ve been buds, best friends, teammates, for as long as I can remember. You nailed it a month ago.”

“What do you mean?” I creased my brow.

“You said, ‘If your best friend is a girl, doesn’t that make her your girlfriend?’ and I scoffed at the notion.”

“I had been right.” I sat up straighter and smiled.

“Thank you...” Skyler said softly.

“For what?” I asked, lowering my gaze.

“You just watched me *kiss* your best friend, and and...”

“Yeah, I know.”

“And you didn’t even slap me in the face or anything,” he said.

“The night is still young,” I said, a tiny grin creeping onto my face.

“You have been an amazing girlfriend.”

“And you’ve been an amazing boyfriend.”

“Thank you,” he said again.

There was commotion in the doorway as Coach Bryant and several other players and cheerleaders and schoolmates and teachers and family gathered in the foyer. Skyler, Aiden, and I hurried over.

“I spoke with Jonnie’s mom,” coach said, holding up his hands to quiet the

crowd. “They think she has whiplash and a mild concussion. Oh, and a dislocated shoulder.”

“She’s gonna be okay,” Skyler whispered. His statement was almost a question, almost a relieved sigh.

Coach patted his cheek, and Skyler’s shoulders relaxed. “Yeah, buddy. I think she’s going to be okay.”

“Can I see her?” Skyler asked.

“They’re going to keep her overnight for observation and to get her stabilized. Once they get her settled into a room, one or two of us will probably be allowed to quickly say goodnight. But she’s going to need to rest.” Coach looked around at everyone gathered. “We all need to rest. Why don’t you all go home and see her when she’s feeling better?”

“I’m not leaving until I’ve seen her,” Skyler said definitely.

“I figured you’d say that,” coach said. “I planned to wait with you.”

“Thank you,” Skyler choked out.

“I’ll get Amberlyn home,” Aiden said.

“She’s my best friend.” I clung to Skyler’s arm. “I don’t want to leave either.”

“It could be hours, babe. You need to get some rest.” Skyler pulled me close and kissed my forehead. “I’ll tell Jonnie you were here and that you’ll come back in the morning, okay?”

“Okay,” I squeaked out. I gave him one last hug and slipped from his arms.

My hands instinctively clasped onto Aiden’s arm like a lifeline. He was sturdy and strong and a refuge on what had turned out to be a horrible day.

CHAPTER SIX

Aiden

For the second time in a half hour, I had Amberlyn clinging to me. And for the second time in a half hour, I felt guilty for liking it.

I wasn't sure what to tell her or how to tell her that I've known for a long time that Jonnie and Skyler were in love with each other, that I'd brazenly gone out of my way to position the two of them close to one another at the homecoming pictures and basically encouraged them to dance together while Amberlyn had been in the restroom.

If I told her what I knew and what I'd done, I'd come across as a complete jerk. But if I didn't tell her, I was setting myself up for her to find out later and distrust me.

Had I inadvertently tried to break up Skyler and Amberlyn? Had I done that to make Skyler and Jonnie happy, or had I done it so I could get a chance to date Amberlyn?

I wanted to convince myself that none of my actions had been conscious efforts to break them up, but how could I see the situation any other way? Not that I hadn't been encouraging the inevitable. I mean, Jonnie and Skyler were meant to be together. They were soul mates or something.

All of this tumbled through my mind as we walked to my truck, Amberlyn clinging to my arm and crying softly. One thing I wanted to ask but didn't was if she was crying harder because of the loss of her long-term relationship with Skyler or her best friend being injured. Again, I would have come across

as a complete jerk. Maybe I was a complete jerk.

My old truck was not what Amberlyn was probably used to riding in, but at least it ran decently and got me to and from school. I held open the passenger side door and offered my hand to help her into the cab. When her hand slipped into mine, I almost sighed with contentment. I wanted to tell her then and there that I'd had a crush on her for years, but I didn't.

I hurried around to the driver side and started the engine. Before putting the truck in drive, I opened the glove compartment and dug around for some fast food napkins I could offer so she could dry her eyes. When I reached down to close the door to the compartment, my hand brushed along her bare knees exposed beneath her short cheerleading skirt. I tried not to let that distract me or allow her to see how it affected me.

"Thank you," she said, pulling down the vanity mirror and cringing at her streaked makeup. "Oh my gosh, I'm totally ugly-crying!"

"You look beautiful." Crap. Did I just say that out loud?

She paused her attempt to remove the makeup, and her jaw dropped; then she visibly shook off her reaction and turned back to her task.

I cursed silently and put the car in drive. I didn't have to ask where she lived. She was Jonnie's next door neighbor, and I'd been jogging every evening with Jonnie for months. I didn't have to wait long for Amberlyn to start rambling.

"I totally should have known. I mean, seriously, all the signs were there. They spent more time together than 'just friends' should." She held up air quotes and snickered, her voice growing shrill with hysteria. "Their connection was, like, oh my gosh. It was like they knew what the other was thinking. I was totally jealous." She burst into a new round of tears.

I didn't know what to do. I felt like Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory* when I patted her arm in a comforting gesture. I fought the urge to say, "There, there."

"You're such a good friend," Amberlyn said, grabbing my hand from where it rested on her arm. Third time in less than an hour that she was clinging to me for support. I fought the urge to smile. "Why haven't I ever noticed how good of a friend you are?"

"You've been a little distracted since our Freshman year of high school when you started dating Skyler. Plus, I would never have been on your friend radar."

“Why not?” She turned her head toward me.

“I was kinda short and fat back then.”

She looked me up and down, all six-foot-two of me. “I can’t picture you short. You must think I’m really shallow if I would judge you because you were fat.”

“It’s not that others *mean* to judge people who are fat,” I said. “They just do.”

“Well, if I did, I’m sorry.” She sounded sincere. Her voice lowered. “I’m glad we’re friends now.”

“Yeah, this is one of those days when you could really use a friend.” I turned my hand over and threaded my fingers with hers. She didn’t pull away, but she did stiffen briefly before relaxing her hand into mine.

“Thanks for being my friend,” she said as we pulled into her driveway. She squeezed my hand gently, pulled hers out of mine, and pushed open the creaking door to my rusty truck. “See ya Monday.”

“See ya.” I watched as she walked up to her house and made sure she got safely inside; then I backed out of her driveway.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Amberlyn

My phone binged Sunday night with a text from my now ex-boyfriend, Skyler. *Do you need a ride to school in the morning?*

Ugh, I hadn't thought of that. That would be extremely awkward to ride to school with my ex-boyfriend. I quickly sent a text back without considering the ramifications. *Nah, I'm good. Thanks.*

Crap, how was I going to get to school? Wake up early so my mom could drive me on her way to work? Not a fun option. A friend? I scrolled through my contacts, realizing how few people I interacted with since my boyfriend had been my whole world and Jonnie had been second. Neither of them was an option.

Aiden! He was a friend. He'd said it himself. Without a second thought I typed him a quick message. *Would you be able to pick me up for school in the morning? I seem to have misplaced my boyfriend.*

He immediately sent me a laughing emoji. Then I saw the three dots indicating he was typing. *I'd be happy to pick you up. 7:30 okay?*

That would be perfect! Thank you! See you in the morning. Why was I so giddy to see Aiden? He was just a friend. I was *not* going to fall into a rebound relationship. I could live without a guy in my life. I would need to buy a car... I could do that.

But at least for the next morning, I would ride with Aiden. I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

I was waiting by the window with my jacket and backpack already on, so Aiden didn't have to turn off the car. He managed to park his truck and walk all the way around to open the door for me by the time I skipped down the porch steps.

"Your chariot, milady," Aiden said, holding open the door to his rusty truck as if he were holding open the gate to a horse-drawn carriage.

"Why, thank you, kind sir," I said in my best Southern belle accent, taking the hand he offered to help me up into the cab. When he closed the door, the scent hit me. He was wearing cologne, and whatever fragrance he'd chosen was suddenly my new favorite. The last time I'd been in his truck he'd just come off the field from playing on the defensive line, and he didn't smell nearly this good.

He climbed into the driver's seat and clicked his seatbelt into place. "Mind if we swing into McDonald's? I'm starving."

"Didn't you eat breakfast?" I asked.

"Yeah, but that was a long time ago." Aiden turned his head and reached around the back of my seat while backing out of my driveway.

"How early do you wake up?" I looked at the clock on the dashboard. 7:31 a.m.

"I try to make it to the batting cage by six."

"Batting cage? It's football season."

"I have a confession." Aiden leaned closer with a conspiratorial whisper. "I don't really like football."

"Me neither." I put my hand to my heart. Were we flirting with each other? Maybe a little. I tried to remind myself that I was not going to have a rebound relationship. Absolutely not. Still, I was allowed to flirt with a cute guy without it becoming a relationship. I cleared my throat. "So, you're really a baseball player in shoulder pads."

"Exactly! See, you get it." He held up his hand for a fist bump.

With hesitation, I bumped my knuckles against his as if I was one of the guys. "What I don't get is why you're already in training for baseball season when that's months away."

"By the time the season starts, the recruiters will have already made their decisions," Aiden said. "I want to be on that short list."

"What college do you want to play for?" I asked.

"You mean, what major league baseball team do I want to play for?" He

winked as he pulled up to the drive-through window, and my heart pounded with the realization of what he'd just said.

An older lady's voice crackled over the speaker. "Welcome to McDonald's. How can I help you?"

"Can I get two Egg McMuffins with hash browns and juice?" Aiden turned to me. "What are you hungry for?"

"I just had a bowl of cereal like twenty minutes ago. I think I'm good."

"Suit yerself." Aiden shrugged and turned back to the speaker. "That should do it."

The lady gave him his total, and he pulled forward to the window where he handed her a ten-dollar bill. While we were waiting for his food, I decided to address the concerns I had for his future.

"Are you really planning to skip college?" I bit my lower lip, hoping I didn't offend him.

"I dunno." He shrugged. "We'll see." The lady at the next window passed Aiden his large orange juice, and he shoved it into the cupholder between us, and grabbed the bag of food. He thanked the lady and pulled forward to exit the drive-through lane.

"And you think you're already good enough to play for the majors?" Again, hoping I didn't offend him, I backtracked. "I mean, maybe you are, I've never seen you play."

"Like I said, we'll see." He slipped one of the breakfast sandwiches out of its wrapper and drove with one hand while taking a huge bite. "Oh, this is so good. Are you sure you don't want a bite?"

He spoke through a mouthful of food and held the sandwich out toward me. It did smell really good. "No, I'm totally not hungry. But thank you."

Aiden was almost finished with his second Egg McMuffin by the time we pulled into the parking lot at the school. We were later than I usually arrived so when I saw Skyler's black Ford Fusion in its usual spot I whimpered and turned my head.

"Hey, you okay?" Aiden asked in a soft voice.

"I'm fine." My answer was curt, and my voice squeaked. "I just have to get used to the fact that I'll probably never have a boyfriend again, because who's gonna want me after my boyfriend cheated on me and dumped me in front of a stadium full of people?"

"You're not gonna start crying again, are you?"

“You did just get a whole new stack of fast food napkins.” I held up the little pile that had come with his sandwiches, trying to laugh off the threat of tears.

“Well, then, have at it. Cry as long as you need. I’m here for ya, girl.” He shoved the last bite of his muffin into his mouth, and I held up one of the napkins, pretending like I was going to wipe my eyes. Then I wiped the corner of his mouth, and we both laughed lightly, breaking through the seriousness.

“I’ll try to get through my classes today, but keep those napkins handy just in case,” I joked.

“They’ll be right here on the console, waiting for you this afternoon.” Aiden opened the driver’s side door and didn’t seem to register what he’d just said, but a little thrill ran through my spine. *This afternoon*. He was planning to give me a ride home too. I tried to hide a smile as I slid down from the cab of his truck.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Aiden

Should I hold her hand? No. Way too soon for that. She probably doesn't even like me that way. She's still crying over Skyler. I stepped down from my truck as she slid out the passenger side, landing gracefully like a dancer.

She was so petite and adorable, and perfectly proportioned for a cheerleader. What would she ever want from a linebacker who's twenty pounds overweight and a foot taller than her? What was I thinking?

"Aiden?"

I lifted my gaze and met her eyes. "Yeah?"

"What were you thinking just now?"

"Uh..." I couldn't possibly tell her the truth.

"Your eyebrows are creased." Amberlyn smoothed the worry lines on my forehead. The scent of her perfume radiated from her wrist to my face. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. "There, that's better. When did you learn yoga breathing?"

"The second you held your wrist up to my nose." Crud! I can't believe I just said that!

"You're so funny," Amberlyn said, bumping her shoulder against me and hitching her backpack over her shoulder. She held her own wrist up to her face. "This is the perfume my mom got me for Christmas last year that Skyler didn't like. I figured now that I don't have to make him happy, I can wear it all the time."

I couldn't tell if the way she sniffled was because she was smelling the fragrance or about to start crying again. Skyler. Even if I ever got brave enough to ask her out, Amberlyn would be forever comparing me to the hot, popular quarterback who dumped her for her best friend.

"Hey, come here." My arm involuntarily wrapped around her shoulders, and I pulled her into a side hug as we continued walking through the parking lot toward the school. "I like the way it smells, and like you said, you don't have to make him happy anymore."

"I don't think I ever did, Aiden." She lifted her chin to meet my gaze. "I don't think I was ever good enough for him."

Panic. I could easily say the wrong thing here. If I disagreed with her, I was invalidating her feelings. I could just hear my mom's social worker persona slipping over me. But if I agreed with her, I was basically saying she wasn't good enough. There was no correct answer. Instead I offered her a lighthearted gesture of compassion. "Do you want me to go back to the truck and grab those napkins?"

"No, I'll be fine." She wiped her nose across her sleeve.

"Very ladylike," I pointed out.

"Fine, go get me one of those stupid napkins." She stomped her foot like a frustrated little girl. Not far from the truth really.

I jogged back to my truck and grabbed the stack of napkins, slammed the door shut, and jogged back to her. She took one of the napkins gratefully and wiped the mascara under her eyes.

"Do you think I'll ever stop crying over him?"

"Sure, I mean, maybe you just need to go out with a different guy so you can get your mind off Skyler."

"Yeah, right," she scoffed. "Who would ever want to go out with me?" She held up the napkin as if to imply no one would want a girl who cries over an ex-boyfriend.

"I would," I said. Wait, what did I just say? Backtrack. "I mean, we're friends now, right? I could take you to a movie and maybe get some burgers afterward, just like a real date."

"Just... as friends?"

"Sure, I mean, you probably don't want anything serious again for a while, right?"

"Right... nothing serious." She started walking toward the school again,

and I hesitantly followed two steps behind. It was now or never.

“So, Saturday evening?”

She whirled around and lifted her gaze to meet mine and confidently nodded. “Yes, Saturday evening.” She draped her arm through mine.

“Cool.” I wasn’t gonna argue.

“I’ll even let you drive me to and from school all week between now and then,” she drawled in a perfect southern girl accent.

This deal was getting sweeter all the time. I stepped just ahead of her and held open the door like a gentleman.

CHAPTER NINE

Amberlyn

Our smiles fell as Aiden and I walked into the foyer and all heads turned. Our usual friends stood in all their usual cliques, in all their usual spots near the doors to the gym. I pulled my hand from the crook of Aiden's arm and hitched my backpack over my shoulder and gulped.

Friday morning when I had walked in arm and arm with Skyler, no one batted an eyelash. It occurred to me that every morning he also walked in with Jonnie. The three of us were together. All the time. Skyler basically had two girlfriends, and I was no longer one of them. I lifted my chin with a confidence I didn't feel and strode right over to my former boyfriend.

"How is Jonnie?" I rested my hand on his arm and forced my voice into a sickly-sweet concern that was more for the benefit of the nosy gawkers who pretended to be our friends. I knew exactly how Jonnie was doing. I was her best friend and next-door neighbor. "Did she get safely home from the hospital?"

The confusion in Skyler's expression quickly shifted into the same fake mask I wore. He knew exactly what I was doing. Getting him off the hook from having publicly embarrassed me Friday night. How I treated him in this moment was going to dictate how everyone treated us both for the rest of our high school career. He gulped and glanced around nervously. "She's tired, but yeah, they think she's going to be fine."

"Cool, I'm totally going to go see her tonight after cheerleading practice."

“I’m sure she’d like that.” He nodded, and I turned away, heading over to my usual group of friends.

“Bella, did you see my poms on Friday? I think I left them at the football field.” I forced a concerned crease in my brow as if losing my pom poms was the worst thing that had happened Friday.

“I grabbed them,” Alisha spoke up. “They’re in my car. I’ll bring them to practice.”

“Thank you.” I sighed with exaggerated relief. Maybe I should join the drama club. I was getting way too good at acting.

As I started toward the hall that would lead to our classes, I fought the urge to turn and smile at Aiden, but knew I probably still had a captive audience, all of whom had yet to ask why we’d walked in together. Instead I asked Alisha if she understood our math homework and commiserated with her about how confusing it had been.

Aiden and I saw each other a few times in passing during the day, and we smiled at each other but didn’t talk. He even winked at me once from across the cafeteria. I felt my cheeks warm as I coyly looked down at my tray of food. I sat with the cheerleaders like I always did, and he sat with the guys from the football team. I realized there was one ‘guy’ who was missing from their table, and she wasn’t a guy at all.

Jonnie usually sat with the football players. Of course, she did. She was one of them. Why had it never occurred to me before? She’d probably been sitting next to my boyfriend every day. There was almost a missing hole in the row of players on one side of the bench. A hole between Jayce and Skyler. The two guys would never have purposely gone out of their way to sit next to each other. But Jayce had a crush on Jonnie. They were sitting near each other because Jonnie usually sat between them.

My best friend was missing. If I’d had my own car, I may have been tempted to drive home and check on her. I pulled out my phone and snapped a photo of my gross cafeteria food, typed a quick note and sent it off to Jonnie. *You’re missing all the fun!*

A text pinged back right away. *Looks almost as tasty as hospital food!*

How are you feeling?

Vicodin, take me away! Jonnie said.

That bad, huh?

Mostly just my shoulder hurts. Oh, and my neck. And I’ve got a splitting

headache.

Sounds like your typical football practice, I texted and added a laughing emoji.

You're bringing me Moose Tracks after school, right?

Chick-flick marathon?

You're on! she texted. *Although, I think I'm going to take a nap between now and then.*

Good idea. See ya after practice.

She sent me a sleeping cat emoji, and I tucked my phone into my purse.

I pushed my cafeteria-slash-hospital food away, looking forward to ice cream and movies with my best friend.

My eyes were drawn back to where Aiden sat with his football team. I remembered what he said about baseball and how I joked that he was a baseball player in shoulder pads.

Now that I had that analogy in my head, I couldn't not see him that way. I wondered why he didn't sit with the other baseball players, but then I realized I had no idea who the baseball players were. Guess I'd figure it out fast if I was dating one of them.

Whoa, I was not dating Aiden. Was I? He was taking me out on a date on Saturday and would be driving me to and from school each day between now and then. Did that mean we were dating?

Whatever it was we were doing, I looked forward to practice being over so I could ride home in his truck. If I closed my eyes and focused, I could almost remember the scent of his cologne.

CHAPTER TEN

Aiden

“You’re late, Becker!”

“Sorry, coach,” I said, lumbering toward the center of the field as fast as my tree-trunk-sized legs could get me there. Although I was no longer overweight, I understood why the football team wanted me on their defensive line, and it sure wasn’t for my speed. I was so ready for this season to be over.

I shoved my helmet on and lined up with the other guys to do lunges and knee hugs and all the other torture exercises that were supposed to help us limber up for practice.

“Where were you?” Skyler grumbled.

“Batting cage.”

“Again?”

“I’m hitting pitches in the mid-nineties, dude,” I said through clenched teeth, too excited not to tell someone.

“No way...” Skyler straightened, and his mouth gaped.

“HitTrax doesn’t lie, man.” I straightened also and towered over my captain and friend. There was a reason why he was the quarterback and I was the lineman.

I couldn’t decide if my height made Skyler look like a little boy, or if he made me look like a giant. Probably somewhere in between, but I was self-conscious of my size.

“How accurate is that thing anyway?”

“Accurate enough that recruiters pay attention to the analysis reports,” I said. “And my exit velocity was almost identical to the pitch speed.”

“You’re losing me,” Skyler said.

“The faster I set the pitching machine, the faster my ball is flying off my bat,” I said. “You need to take a physics class.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Is there a problem, gentlemen?” Coach Bryant hollered.

“No problem, coach,” Skyler called back. He continued his walking knee hugs, and I caught up to him.

“Speaking of no problems.” I hesitated. “Thought I’d give you the heads up that I’m taking Amberlyn to the movies on Saturday.”

He missed his next knee hug and wound up faceplanting into the grass. Guess I should have waited until after practice to tell him that. Instead, I offered my hand and helped him up. “Sorry,” he muttered. “I, uh, tripped.”

“It happens.” I smacked him on the back with a smirk. “Let’s finish those knee hugs to the end zone, captain.”

He scowled, and we got back to work.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Amberlyn

“We need to stop for ice cream on the way home,” I said as I climbed up into Aiden’s truck. “Special request from our favorite invalid.” I clicked my seatbelt into place as the truck roared to life.

“Peace offering?” Aiden asked.

“You could say that.”

“Have you talked to her yet?”

“No... but...” I said. “I just wasn’t ready, ya know?”

“Kind of a huge elephant in the room.” Aiden raised his eyebrows. “I’m not sure ice cream is going to solve the problem.”

“Yeah, but it’s chocolate Moose Tracks ice cream.” There was almost a duh hanging at the end of the sentence.

“Ah, that does make a difference.”

“See, you get it.”

A mile down the road, Aiden turned into Meijer, and we parked far from any other cars. “VIP parking,” Aiden said.

“What?” I laughed lightly, looking around at the empty spaces around us.

“Could you imagine this beast squeezing between two grocery-getters? It could ruin my paint job.”

As I hopped down from the cab, I noticed the patches of rust in random spots on his truck and chuckled. I fought the urge to hold his hand while we walked but realized that was just out of habit. Aiden was not my boyfriend. I

didn't have a boyfriend anymore. I hitched my purse over my shoulder as a distraction.

We strode straight to the freezer section and I gravitated immediately to the Purple Cow Chocolate Moose Tracks. Aiden grabbed a second half-gallon.

"I need to taste this miracle chocolate concoction that cures all woes between best friends," he explained.

"Good idea." I draped my arm through his, and he walked me like a gentleman to the self-check-out lanes where we each grabbed our own station. In and out in five minutes and we were headed back to his truck. I almost wished it had taken longer so I could have spent more time with Aiden, but I knew it was time to face the inevitable.

Aiden dropped me off in my driveway, but I didn't bother going into my own house; I strode next door to Jonnie's and let myself in as I always did. I'd hate for Jonnie to have to get off the couch and walk all the way up the stairs from her basement bedroom.

After stopping in the kitchen to dish up two huge bowls of ice cream, I bounded down to find her scrolling through Netflix, presumably to find us a movie or something to binge watch.

Jonnie set the remote aside and reached for her bowl. I sat at the opposite end of the sofa as I always did. She still hadn't spoken. Guess I was going to have to start the conversation.

"So, uh, had a crappy weekend, huh?"

"Not all of it was bad." Jonnie bit her lip in a sheepish grimace.

"Interesting how the parts of the weekend that were horrible for me turned out to your advantage."

She lowered her gaze to the floor and whispered, "Sorry."

"*You* have nothing to be sorry about," I grumbled.

"Skyler and I both feel bad about how everything played out."

"I just want to know how long you were flirting with my boyfriend before he kissed you."

"That's the thing, we weren't flirting with each other. More like we were avoiding the obvious attraction for one another."

"Skyler and I talked about all this Friday night at the hospital," I told her.

"You did? What did he say?"

"I wanted to know how long you'd been sneaking around behind my

back.”

“But we weren’t!” Jonnie sat up halfway and cringed when she put pressure on her shoulder.

“That’s what he said too. Calm down. I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

“I swear, we weren’t sneaking around,” she pleaded. “We weren’t doing anything.”

“Would have been nice to not be blindsided by the whole thing,” I said and then mumbled, “Especially in such a public way.”

“I am so sorry about that. If I could go back in time... I’d...”

“You’d what? Not fall in love with my boyfriend—ex-boyfriend.”

“We should have told you the minute we realized how we felt.”

“Why didn’t you?” I folded my arms across my chest.

“He didn’t want to break up with you,” Jonnie mumbled.

“He didn’t *what*?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “What did he want? To go out with both of us? What a jerk!”

“No! It’s just that, he cares about you. You’ve been his best friend for years.”

“No, *you* have been his best friend for years. I was just arm candy.”

“That’s not true and you know it.”

“We had zero in common,” I said. “The only reason he kept me around was because I looked good on his arm.”

“If you had zero in common, why did *you* stay with *him*?”

She had me. I scowled and turned away. I didn’t know how to answer that.

“Maybe you liked having him on your arm also,” Jonnie suggested, her voice softened. “He is smokin’ hot, if I do say so myself.”

“Yeah, he is,” I admitted. “But I’m not going to let him, or any other guy, come between us. We’re best friends.”

“Yes, we are.” She started to get up again but cringed. “You’re going to have to come hug me because I can’t move.”

I set down my dish of ice cream and reached across the couch for a hug. Everything was going to be work out. Somehow. After a nice, long hug, we laughed, and I pulled away.

“Enough of this mushy crap,” she said. “Let’s watch a chick flick and forget about boys.”

“Sounds good.” I scooted back over to my spot and grabbed the remote control.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Amberlyn

“Decisions, decisions...” I scrolled through movie selections, trying to find something we both loved but that we hadn’t seen too many times or in the past few months.

Jonnie responded with a satisfied moan as she slid another spoonful of ice cream into her mouth.

Footsteps in the living room upstairs gave way to a rhythmic thumping as Skyler bounded down the stairs to Jonnie’s basement rec room that also doubled as her bedroom.

Great. Here goes nothing.

“Hey, babe, how ya feeling?” Skyler stopped short, and that awkward moment happened when he realized I was in the room. I reached for my ice cream and shoved a spoonful into my mouth, forcing myself not to answer him.

He wasn’t calling me babe anymore. Jonnie was his new girlfriend. He cleared his throat and kissed her forehead.

“Got an extra spoon?” He flopped onto the sofa in his usual spot, right in the center. Right between his two favorite girls. Again, I fought the response to hand him mine and offer to share.

As if realizing the position he was now in, Skyler hoisted himself back off the sofa and bounded up the stairs. Only one drawer in the kitchen opened and closed. He knew exactly where to find the silverware.

We’d been here together in this rec room, watching movies, and football

games, and sit coms and goofing off for longer than I could remember. Freshman year hadn't been that many years ago, and yet I couldn't think of a happy memory that didn't somehow involve one or both of these guys. I took a deep breath and grabbed the remote and scrolled through movie choices.

Skyler bounded down the stairs and reached his spoon into Jonnie's bowl of ice cream. I gulped, set my own bowl on the coffee table, suddenly no longer hungry, and kept scrolling.

"What'd ya guys wanna watch?" I asked playfully. "Sweet Home Alabama? Sleepless in Seattle?"

"Ehh, what else is there?" Jonnie asked.

"Ooh, here's one!" I couldn't believe I was about to do this, but I said it with a straight face and everything. "How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days."

They both stared at me, and Skyler's jaw actually dropped. How cliché. This was going to be fun. I raised my eyebrows.

"No?" I turned back to the scrolling list. "How about My Best Friend's Wedding?"

Still no answer from either of them.

"Clueless? Ooh, I love that movie. I can *totally* relate. How about Reality Bites. I love Winona Ryder."

"What are you doing, Amberlyn?" Skyler mumbled.

"Here we go, the perfect movie for the three of us." I softened my tone. "Keeping the Faith. It's about a girl and her two best friends, who she loves enough to want them both to be happy."

"You're right," Jonnie said. "That does sound like the perfect movie for the three of us to watch." They both seemed to relax.

I selected the movie and settled back into the sofa, propping my feet up and setting aside the remote.

"You gonna eat the rest of this?" Skyler reached for my bowl of ice cream that was melting on the table near where my feet were resting.

I used my toe to shove it toward him and gave him a half smile.

"Thanks." He removed my spoon, set it aside, and settled in next to Jonnie, leaning his shoulder against hers, and used his own spoon to shovel in a huge bite of ice cream.

"Oh, I remember this one," Skyler said around a mouthful. "A priest and a rabbi both fall for the same girl and neither of them is supposed to like her, ya know, 'cause a priest can't get married and stuff."

“That’s the one.” The three of us fell into a comfortable silence as we watched a movie together, just like old times. Almost.

I wondered what Aiden was doing right then...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Aiden

“I went over to Jonnie’s last night,” Amberlyn blurted ten seconds after getting into my truck Tuesday morning.

“How’s she doing?” As I turned my head to back out of her driveway, I purposefully met her gaze. *Dang, she’s beautiful.* Her fashionably straightened hair was silky and light, compared to the ringlets she usually wore Friday nights when pulling back a ponytail and fastening a huge, floppy bow in colors that matched her cheerleading uniform.

“We had a nice long talk, and I gave her a piece of my mind.”

“I bet you did,” I said. “Did you talk about me at all?” I wondered how long it was going to take Amberlyn to figure out how involved I’d been in their deception. Now that I actually had a shot with her, I felt terrible about how I manipulated the situation. It hadn’t been my place to tell Amberlyn her boyfriend was in love with someone else, but I shouldn’t have encouraged Jonnie and Skyler’s relationship either.

“Was I supposed to talk about you?” A little grin tugged at the corner of her mouth. “We’re just friends... right?”

“Right, yeah, of course, friends.” I changed the subject. “You wanna come see me bat?”

“Bat?” She raised her eyebrows.

“Yeah, like at the batting cages. They have this cool computer analysis thing that tells me how well I’m batting.”

“Are you really good?”

Was she flirting with me?

“I’m *really* good.” I nodded with confidence. Maybe showing her just how good I was, I’d impress her, and she’d forget all about mister-star-quarterback.

“Then, yes, I want to see you bat.”

Yep, she was definitely flirting with me.

“How about tomorrow morning I pick you up an hour earlier than normal and you can come with me to the batting cages?”

“You gonna buy me an Egg McMuffin afterward?”

“Heck yeah.”

“Then it’s a date,” she said with a grin.

“Ooh, I like this,” I said. “A date before our first date.”

“Wouldn’t that make tomorrow’s date our first date since technically it will be our first date?”

“But if you count going out for an Egg McMuffin a date, then yesterday was our first date.”

“I didn’t eat anything, so that doesn’t count.”

“But you could have,” I pointed out.

“True…” Amberlyn didn’t have a comeback for that one. “Okay, you win. Yesterday was our first date, tomorrow is our second, and Saturday will be our third date.”

“Does that mean I get to kiss you on Saturday? Since we will have gotten past the whole I-don’t-kiss-on-the-first-date thing?”

Amberlyn shrunk back in her seat, and her flirty smile faded.

Crap! Why did I say that? Ugh!

“We’re just friends, remember?” she whispered. “I’m not ready for anything else right now.”

“I’m so sorry. I totally didn’t mean to say that.”

“It’s not you, Aiden, seriously. I’m just not ready.”

“I get it.” Sort of. “I’ll back off.”

“Be patient with me, okay?” she asked in a tiny voice.

“I promise.” I had an overwhelming desire to lift her hand off her lap and hold it in mine the rest of the way to school, but I didn’t. I could be patient. Especially if it meant I got to spend time with Amberlyn. Friends or more? We were together. That’s all I cared about. We were together.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Amberlyn

I put on a fake smile all day Tuesday, but I was determined to open my heart and mind and stay present with Aiden at the batting cages. It wasn't his fault my emotions were so raw. He was doing a good job helping me through the worst breakup I'd ever experienced, and he was a great friend. Maybe more than a friend?

He obviously wanted to be more than friends. Still, it had been less than a week since Skyler had broken up with me, and I didn't want a rebound relationship. I could keep things light and easy with Aiden.

I climbed up into the cab of his truck and dropped my backpack on the floormat.

"Are you wearing sweatpants?" I fought the urge to giggle at his casual attire.

"I always wear sweatpants when I go to the batting cages," he said, backing out of my driveway. This was only the third time he'd given me a ride to school, and we'd already developed a routine. "My jeans are in my gear bag."

"Gear bag?" I glanced behind the driver's seat of his extended cab and noticed a long unzipped bag, revealing several metal bats and gloves and balls, and sure enough, a pair of jeans.

Something about Aiden's jeans gave me pause. They weren't neatly folded, freshly washed designer jeans. They'd been hastily removed, rolled

up and shoved in his bag as an afterthought, almost as if clothes in general were an afterthought. I kind of liked that. I also kind of liked that he'd already worn them once or twice. I turned back around and faced forward, never letting on that I'd been intrigued by his non-pretentious clothing choices. "So, where are we going?"

"Strike Zone," he said with a creased brow. "Haven't you ever gone to the batting cages?"

"When would I have ever gone to any batting cages? Skyler doesn't play baseball, you know."

"Hadn't thought of that." He drove in silence for a moment, contemplative, if I could put a word to his expression. "Cool, I won't have to worry about being compared to him."

"What do you mean by that?" I folded my arms across my chest, not really angry per se, more defensive.

"Well, it's just that, he's perfect at everything, and I'm... not."

"One, he's not perfect, and two, I wasn't comparing you to him."

"Amberlyn, you'll be comparing every guy you meet to him for the rest of your life. That's how it works with first love."

"Who was *your* first love?" I let my playful question hang in the air and fought the urge to reach over and tickle him.

He didn't answer, but I caught a tiny smirk as he turned his head away to look out the window.

"Come on, you can tell me." This time I did poke him.

"Oh, look. We have arrived at our destination. We'll have to postpone this uncomfortable interrogation." Aiden pulled into the Strike Zone parking lot, which was not nearly as empty as I expected for this early in the morning. I let the teasing rest as I slid down from his truck.

He opened the back door and grabbed his gear bag, zipping it closed in one swift move while lifting the heavy bag with another.

We met around the front of the truck, and he extended his hand expectantly. I hesitated and then reminded myself to stay open to possibilities. Why not? I clasped my hand in his and let him lead me into the building.

The echoing din and pings of balls hitting bats awakened my senses first and then the scent of new flooring and synthetic materials. I expected to smell a sweaty gym, but this was anything but. There was no unpleasant body

odor. More like the odor of athletes working hard.

“What’d you do, Becker? Sleep in?” A college age guy at the front desk offered Aiden a fist bump and then sat straighter when he noticed me. “Ah, I can see why.”

“It’s not like that, jack— uh, I mean, jerk. This is my *friend*, Amberlyn.”

“Ma’am, I am so sorry,” the kid backpedaled. “I’ve just never seen Becker with a girl before.”

“Aiden would like to prove to me that he is a better athlete than any guy I’ve ever dated.” I flipped my ponytail over my shoulder and batted my eyelashes at the young man. “Do you think he’ll be able to do that?”

The unsuspecting kid gulped, and Aiden laughed, pulling me away from the front desk. He squeezed my hand and leaned closer so I could hear him.

“Do you realize how you affect guys when you do that to them?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Looking up at him, I offered my most innocent expression. His gaze dropped briefly to my lips and then up to my eyes, which I blinked twice, and then raised my brows.

For a few seconds we stood in a moment where the world fell away around me and I couldn’t remember my own name or why I was standing there, and then a ball somewhere close hit a metal bat with a resounding ping and woke me from my stupor.

Neither of us spoke as we took a step back and Aiden let go of my hand to hike his gear bag higher on his shoulder. He led me over to a giant net enclosure and set his bag down.

“Come on.” He cleared his throat and extended his hand. “I’ll give you a quick tour of the building and show you the lounge where you can sit and watch me bat.”

Something shifted inside when I clasped his hand in mine, and I wondered how much longer I wanted to pretend this date was just as friends.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Aiden

What the heck was that? We went from casual flirting in the friend zone to suddenly gazing into each other's eyes like lovesick puppies. Okay, that pretty much described me anyway. But Amberlyn had made it clear she was not looking for a relationship so soon after breaking up with Skyler and I was trying to respect that.

She wasn't making it easy on me.

I led her around the four netted batting enclosures where my buddies were in various stages of practice. Off-season training was crucial for success come spring, and we all knew it.

Most of the guys were from our school so it wouldn't surprise me if she knew them, but she didn't seem to shrink away or hide the fact that we were holding hands. That had to mean something, right?

"Dude, what the heck?" Taylor James called to me from just inside the farthest cage. He and Russel Cade were pitching and catching, as they did most mornings. "When did you two start going out?"

"We're not," Amberlyn and I said at the same time and then turned to each other and grinned.

"Not really... I mean..." I said.

"Yeah, right, man, sell it to someone else." Taylor turned to Amberlyn. "I take it you've gotten over that idiot who was stupid enough to dump the coolest girl in our senior class."

“Aiden has been an instrumental part of my ability to spring back from that betrayal,” Amberlyn said with a flirting lilt.

Dang, she knew how to turn on the charm. “She just decided she likes baseball players better than football players.”

“Well you’ve come to the right place,” Taylor said, raising his hand like a gameshow host. “We have lots of baseball players here. Take your pick.”

“Speak for yourself,” Russel called, standing up from where he was crouched, waiting to catch Taylor’s pitches. “I have a girlfriend.”

“That’s okay, Russ,” Amberlyn called back. “I think I’ve already chosen my favorite baseball player.” She gave my hand a little squeeze, and I fought the urge to jump into the air and pump my fist.

“I dunno, you haven’t even seen me pitch,” Taylor said, leaning closer. “You might want to keep your options open.”

“I haven’t seen any of you play,” Amberlyn said. “For some weird reason y’all don’t have a cheerleading squad for baseball season.”

“Yeah, why is that?” I asked, pulling back and rubbing my chin thoughtfully. “I think you should start one.”

“I agree.” Taylor’s tone was serious. “And bring lots of your friends.”

“Hey, that reminds me,” Amberlyn said, looking up at me. “What position do you play?”

“First base,” I said.

“That’s just ’cause he’s lazy,” Taylor said. “He knows all he has to do is stand there and hold out his glove and the rest of us send the balls to him.”

“You’re one to talk. All you do is stand on that mound and play catch with your little friend, Russ.”

“I resent that remark,” Russ called from the other side of the cage. “Now, can we please stop flirting with the hot cheerleader and get back to practice?”

“Duty calls.” Taylor held up his gloved hand and offered me a fist bump through the net. “Good to see ya, man. Amberlyn, let me know if you change your mind and want to see a real man play baseball.”

“Very funny,” Amberlyn said. “See ya in civics class.”

“Bye, Amberlyn,” Russ called.

“Bye, Russ.” She waved lightly with her free hand, the one that wasn’t holding mine.

I relished in the way she gripped my hand as if she didn’t plan to let go. I didn’t want her to let go, but I really did need to get practicing. I led her

upstairs to the lounge and pointed out where she could look right down and see everything I did. No pressure on me. Gulp.

She leaned over the railing expectantly, and I bounded down the stairs. After a few good practice hits, I set the pitching machine to 95 mph and hoped for the best.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Amberlyn

Friday morning Jonnie was able to come back to school, and I decided to ride with her and Skyler rather than have Aiden drive all the way over to my house. I regretted the decision immediately but loved the chance to be with Jonnie when she returned to her semi-normal life.

Normal other than her having a boyfriend and me not. Well, not yet. Or maybe just not officially. Whatever. I was excited to see my best friend.

“Do I get to sit in the front seat?” Jonnie grinned with teasing admiration as I held open the passenger side door for her to climb into Skyler’s Ford Fusion.

“You won him fair and square.” I giggled.

“Very funny, you two,” Skyler said. “Now get in the car before we make ourselves late for school.”

We’d both been over at Jonnie’s house several times that week at the same time and everything felt perfectly natural. We were just three friends hanging out. In a lot of ways, it was more comfortable than when Skyler and I had been dating because our lives were at balance.

Skyler and I were never meant to be a couple. Ours had been a relationship of convenience. Someone to hang out with and hold hands with and stake a claim on so that when other girls thought of flirting with Skyler, he was always off-limits. He belonged to me. Except he never really had. He had belonged to Jonnie all along. And she belonged to him. They belonged

together.

Still, riding to school in the back seat of his car was different. Jonnie turned around, and we grinned at each other. “This is so weird,” she said.

“Hey, you guys, did I tell you that Aiden asked me to go to the movies with him on Saturday?” I pulled myself forward and hung my face over the back of the front seat. “Is that going to be weird for either of you?”

“Nope,” Skyler and Jonnie answered at the same time.

“He’s my second favorite guy on the football team,” Jonnie said, grinning over at Skyler. “I haven’t been able to go running with him in over a week. He’s probably enjoying your company.”

“He’s a good guy, Amberlyn.” Skyler told me, looking at me through the rearview mirror. “You’ll have fun together.”

“He’s excited for baseball season to start,” I said, looking down at my manicure.

“Don’t you mean basketball?” Jonnie asked, her brow creased. With football season ending, most people thought of basketball as the next sport of the school year. As tall as Aiden was, they probably wanted him on the basketball team.

“No, Aiden goes to the batting cage almost every day, and he’s hitting really well. He takes private lessons year-round.”

“You probably didn’t realize that,” Skyler said, turning his face slightly toward Jonnie. “Because you’re so focused on track season each spring. Aiden’s a great baseball player. He’ll probably have recruiters at his games.”

“Really? That’s so cool.” Jonnie faced forward again.

Conversation was light and easy as Skyler drove, and we arrived in our usual parking spot. Instead of walking along with Skyler holding hands, he wrapped his arm around Jonnie’s waist as they walked into the school side by side.

I had to admit to myself a little twinge of jealousy. Today was the one-week mark since the day our lives had turned upside down. I took a deep breath and then held open the door for my best friend since she had one arm in a sling and was holding Skyler’s hand with her other.

Thankfully Aiden was on the other side of the door, and his smile made me forget all about Skyler. Almost.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Aiden

“How was it?” I didn’t mean for my casual question to make Amberlyn jump. I probably shouldn’t have leaned over her shoulder to ask, but I wanted the conversation to stay between her and me rather than ask in front of all our friends.

Friday morning was game day, which meant all of us guys were in our jerseys and all ten cheerleaders were in uniform. The way Amberlyn looked in her cheerleading uniform made me wish I didn’t have to stay in the locker room during halftime or face the field while she was on the sidelines.

Tonight would be the first football game I’d play where I knew she’d be watching me. I prayed I didn’t fumble, literally or figuratively.

“How was *what?*” Her pouty lips were drawn on in lipstick designed to complement her uniform, not that any lipstick could match blue and white. The result was flirty and playful. So different from her usual natural look, the subtle beauty of every morning I picked her up for school. Well, every morning prior to today.

“How was it riding to school with your ex-boyfriend?” Did I sound jealous? Probably. Better tone it down. “I mean, was it awkward?”

“Not too bad.” She shrugged and kind of wrinkled her nose. “I saw him twice over at Jonnie’s this week, so it’s not that big of deal. We even watched a movie together the other day.”

“Together?” Yeah, I did sound jealous. My voice even cracked. “Just the

two of you?”

“No, silly.” Amberlyn elbowed me in the ribs. “The three of us. Just like we always have.” Her smile faded, and her shoulders stooped.

I put my arm around her and subtly turned her away from the rest of the group. I leaned closer to speak softly. “Not quite the same, though, huh?”

“Will you walk me to class? I don’t really want to talk about this in front of a bunch of people. Besides, I don’t wanna start crying or something.”

“Totally.” I kept my arm around her and led her away. I wasn’t sure if anyone noticed us leave, but I didn’t care. This wasn’t really romantic. I would comfort any friend in a similar manner. If everything progressed as I hoped it would, there would be plenty of time for romance when she wasn’t in such a vulnerable place. “We don’t have to talk about this at all, if you don’t want.”

I left the ball in her court. If she wanted a good listener, I’d be that for her. If she wanted a friend, I was okay with that. Or if she wanted a distraction, I could *definitely* think of a million ways I could distract her. Nothing prepared me for what she said next.

“He ate ice cream from her bowl.”

“Huh?” I straightened and dropped my arm from her shoulders.

“He used to always eat out of *my* bowl. And I almost answered him when he called her babe.”

“Babe? Like, Babe the pig?”

“He always used to call *me* babe.” She put her head against my shoulder, and I made a mental note never to call her babe.

“Amberlyn,” I breathed her name, and she looked up at me. There was so much vulnerability in her eyes, we were right back to last week when Skyler broke her heart. It hadn’t even been a full week. “You’re so much more than a babe.”

“Thank you, Aiden.” She blinked her beautiful blue eyes up at me, and I fought the urge to kiss her, make her forget all about that jerk.

No way. I would not allow our first kiss to be in a crowded school hallway and definitely not while she was crying over her ex-boyfriend. Instead, I wrapped my arm around her, this time less as a friend and more like how a guy would wrap his arm around his girlfriend.

She wrapped both her arms around my waist and squeezed. “You’re such a great friend, Aiden.”

And, we were back to the friend zone. I wasn't going to let that happen. I released her shoulder and lifted one of her hands. When she didn't resist, I laced my fingers through hers, which seemed a little more intimate. We walked that way all the way to her first class.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Amberlyn

“Grab your sweatshirt,” Aiden said. “It might get chilly later.”

“It’s chilly now,” I said. “Where are you taking me?”

“The pier.” Aiden’s grin spread wider. “And then out to dinner, and maybe a movie if you haven’t gotten sick of me by then.”

“I haven’t been to the pier in years. It’s usually so busy.” I pulled my hoodie off the hook near the back door.

“Not in early November,” Aiden said.

“That’s because it’s freezing in Michigan this time of year.”

“It’s fifty degrees. I think you’re exaggerating. And it’s supposed to get up to sixty this afternoon.”

“Ooh, balmy.” I faked a shiver.

We wound our way down Harbor Drive along the Grand River and turned into the Grand Haven State Park, which was busier than I thought it’d be for this late in the season. The white sandy beaches, so popular with tourists all summer long, were mostly bare, only populated with people in sweatshirts and jeans, like us.

The parking lot had plenty of spaces available, so we didn’t have to walk far to step onto the concrete pier. A light wind blew off Lake Michigan, and I was glad I brought my sweatshirt.

The waves crashed but didn’t break over the edge. In a few months, they’d whip off the water, creating giant ice sculptures over the sides of the pier,

rendering it unsafe for walking.

My hands stayed in the pocket of my sweatshirt until our brisk walk warmed me, and I pulled them out and let them hang by my sides.

Aiden immediately took advantage of my free hands and not-so-casually lifted my right hand and swung them between us as if we were two kids. In a lot of ways, we were just two kids. Two kids nearing the crossroads of making big, adult decisions. Where to go to college. What careers to pursue. With whom to build relationships.

I kind of liked the relationship building slowly between the two of us. Although in the same circle of friends, I barely remembered Aiden these past few years. He had been a figurehead in my boyfriend's shadow, not Skyler's best friend, but definitely one of his friends.

As if sensing the direction of my thoughts, Aiden asked a question that caught me off guard. "Did you know I've had a crush on you for years?"

"No." I pulled away just enough to look up at him. "You did?"

"Yeah, and you didn't even know I existed."

"You're right. I was just thinking the same thing."

"Wow, I was kind of hoping you'd say something like, 'of course I knew you existed,' he said. "It's just that I had a boyfriend.' Or something like that."

"Well, I *did* have a boyfriend." I raised my eyebrows. "I would have been kinda cheating on him if I'd been looking at other guys."

"True..."

"But I know you exist now..." I bumped my shoulder against his arm. "And isn't that the most important thing?"

"Definitely. Good point."

We had made our way to the end of the pier and took a moment to gaze up at the majestic lighthouse. The bright red contrasting with the dark blue water was breathtaking.

After stepping around the outside edge, Aiden rested his back against the base of the lighthouse and pulled me closer. I didn't resist when he placed both hands on my hips, slipping his fingers into the belt loops of my jeans.

Lake Michigan disappeared into my peripheral vision and all I knew was Aiden's eyes darting back and forth between mine. He sighed and pulled me even closer so that I was against him. He leaned forward, pulling away from the concrete base, but hesitated as if waiting for me to make the next move.

He was leaving the choice up to me. Was I ready for this? Although Skyler and I had only broken up a week ago, we hadn't been truly intimate in a long time, if ever. His kisses were quick pecks when we said hello or goodbye.

I was nervous, as if this was my first kiss. In a way, it was. This moment could become whatever I wanted it to become. We could share a quick peck and call it our first kiss, assuming we'd someday explore this further, or I could allow this feeling to flow through from the top of my head to the tips of my toes.

My hands wrapped around his shoulders and neck. Bravery overpowered nervousness, and I pulled him forward, slowly and gently. But insistently. No hesitation. I wanted this, and I knew he wanted me to set the pace and tone.

When our lips met, Aiden lost his perfectly controlled defense. His hands left my waist and roamed up my back and into my hair, pulling me closer as I pulled him closer. He was giving me the best first kiss a girl could ever ask for. It didn't matter that this wasn't technically my first kiss, it was *our* first kiss.

The waves of emotion washing over me caused me to abandon all thought to its power. Which was probably why I wasn't prepared for the giant splash of water that crashed over the top of the boardwalk, drenching us both in cold water.

We pulled apart, laughing and shaking water from our arms. My hair was dripping, my back was soaked. Aiden had mostly been protected with my body between him and the wave. There was that moment of disbelief when I couldn't tell if we were shocked from the way our bodies had been locked together or the way we'd been so rudely interrupted.

"Curse you, Lake Michigan," Aiden called into the air with frustrated laughter. "You ruined my first kiss."

"*That* was your first kiss?" I giggled as I tried unsuccessfully to brush the water off.

"Mm hm." Aiden grinned like a little kid and rested his hands on my hips again.

"Was it everything you dreamed it would be?" I asked, leaning closer so that I was inches from his face again.

"A million times better than I'd imagined." Aiden's voice grew husky and serious.

“It was me, wasn’t it?” I glanced down nervously and rested my hands on his strong, athletic arms.

“What was you?” he asked.

“Your first love.”

“Still is,” Aiden said, lowering his gaze. He bit his lower lip and raised his head to look me in the eyes. “How’d you figure it out?”

“A bunch of little things all adding together,” I said. “Do you think, maybe, we could have another first kiss?”

“Maybe a little less passionate the second time?” He raised his eyebrows. “I don’t want Lake Michigan to think I need a cold shower again.”

“I’m the one who got the brunt of the water,” I scoffed.

“Maybe you needed a cold shower too.” He grinned, pulling me even closer.

“I’ll take my chances.” And I did.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Aiden

Regrettably, we got cold very fast, and I was forced to drive Amberlyn home, cutting our date short by several hours. I cranked the heat in my truck, and Amberlyn rattled off a list of things she wanted to do when she got home.

A list of things that didn't include me, or at least wouldn't include me unless I was old enough to marry her.

"I cannot wait to sink into a hot bubble bath."

I would love to join you.

"And drink some Echinacea tea."

I would nurse you back to health if you got sick.

"Climb into my jammies."

Take them back off... slowly... in between kisses.

"And climb into bed."

"Okay, can we talk about something else?" My voice squeaked. "Or I really will need a cold shower."

"Sorry." She giggled and bit her lower lip.

"That is not helping."

She threw her head back and laughed.

"Amberlyn?"

She got serious for a moment.

"Would you mind very much if I pick you up for school on Monday?" I asked.

“I would love that.”

“And every day after that?”

“That would be fantastic,” she said.

I pulled into her driveway but didn’t turn off my engine, knowing she was cold and had... other plans.

She opened the door, slid down from my truck, but turned back toward me. “Hey, Aiden?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m pretty sure I was never in love with Skyler.” She didn’t elaborate, but I could read between the lines. I watched as she walked up to her house and opened the front door.

As I backed down her driveway, I made a snap decision to *not* drive home. Instead, I headed straight for Strike Zone. I greeted the guy at the front desk with barely a grunt, strode to my favorite netted enclosure, removed my damp sweatshirt, pulled out my favorite bat, and set the pitching machine to ninety-eight.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Aiden

Standing beside Skyler outside the girls' locker room while waiting for Amberlyn and Jonnie was beyond lovesick and bordered on stalking.

Nine giggling cheerleaders passed us before Amberlyn and Jonnie strolled out together, arm in arm.

"Hey, beautiful," I said. A few months ago, I never could have predicted this outcome. The whole situation was still surreal. The past week had flown by in a blur. Baseball practice, school, football practice, walking Amberlyn to class, and twice a day I got to drive to and from school with Amberlyn in my truck.

Amberlyn's face lit up with a smile, and she walked right past Skyler to hug me.

"Aiden?" Skyler startled as if just noticing me standing next to him. "You can't sneak up on a guy like that, man."

"If your head wasn't so far up in the clouds, you would have noticed I was standing beside you for approximately three minutes." I glanced down at my non-existent watch.

Jonnie pulled Skyler's focus back by slipping her hand into his. "You ready to play?"

"Huh?" Skyler's jaw dropped.

"Football?" Jonnie raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, right." Skyler held up the ball in his other hand. "Football."

“Come on,” Jonnie called as she started onto the field. “Pass me the ball.”

“Go long!” Skyler called to her. She ran, and he waited. He seemed to know instinctively when to throw at exactly the right time based on where she’d turn to catch the ball. His arm released a perfect spiral, and the football flew in a high arc over thirty long yards and dropped cleanly into Jonnie’s hands. Skyler and I both sighed.

“Oh my gosh,” Amberlyn said with annoyance. “Guys are so weird.” With that, she took off in the direction of the sidelines to meet the rest of her cheerleading squad.

“See ya after the game,” I called to her.

Amberlyn turned around and offered me a little wave.

“Thank you for breaking up with her.” I spoke out of the side of my mouth, intending my statement to be heard by Skyler only.

“Mr. Morgan, that was a heck of a spiral,” a voice said from behind us. We turned to see a guy in a Central Michigan University jacket and a clipboard tucked under his arm.

“Thank you, sir.” Skyler lowered his voice respectfully.

Another guy stood nearby with a Ferris State jacket on. “Mr. Becker, I understand you’ve improved substantially over the season.”

“Thank you, sir.” I nodded. “I’d like to think so.”

“We could use another good linebacker,” the man in the Ferris State jacket said.

“Talk to me after baseball season.” I chuckled. They had no idea how well I was already hitting in the batting cages. No offers to play college football would distract me from my ultimate goal—homeruns.

“Fair enough.”

A third man stood nearby, wearing a blue jacket with a lighter-blue logo that almost looked like a Detroit Lions logo, but I realized was some sort of ocean wave. *What the heck?* He didn’t approach me or Skyler but seemed distracted by our huddle of players over by the sideline.

I realized immediately where I recognized that logo from and turned around so I could whisper to only Skyler. “Grand Rapids Tidal Waves.”

“What the heck is that?” Skyler asked softly.

“Professional,” I said, a growing excitement in my chest.

“Professional what?” Skyler creased his brow.

“Women’s American Football League.”

Skyler's head snapped toward our sideline where Jonnie was warming up with our all-guy's team. The guy in the blue jacket was clearly watching her.

"Guess we gotta make this game count," I said.

We turned back to the two men still standing beside us, shook hands with each of them, glanced again in the direction of the guy in the blue jacket ignoring me and Skyler, and chuckled.

As we jogged over to our team, I asked quietly, "Should we tell her?"

"Heck no!" Skyler answered. "She needs to concentrate on playing this game, not showing off for a college recruiter."

"Pro," I corrected Skyler. "She's going straight to pro, dude."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Amberlyn

The past week had been great, the best I'd had in a while. Aiden was driving me to and from school. We hadn't kissed again, but we were hovering in that space between a brand-new relationship and having experienced a passion that lay just beneath the surface begging to come out to play.

Speaking of playing, I was supposed to be watching the game. We were down by three with ten seconds to go and still thirty yards from the endzone. They were in exactly the same position they'd been in that fateful night. From the way Skyler pulled away from the huddle, I could tell he didn't like the decision. He even risked a delay of game to look over and confirm the play. Jonnie nodded to him, and I knew in that moment what play had been called.

I couldn't believe she was brave enough to do this. I couldn't believe Skyler had agreed to it. As Jonnie stepped into position, everything came rushing back into my mind. The perfectly executed play; that huge defensive guy barreling forward; her lying on the ground, unconscious, with her arm twisted beneath her; Skyler holding her hand while she lay on the gurney about to be whisked away in the ambulance, kissing her and telling her he loved her right there in front of me and a stadium full of people.

This was a bad idea. She was my best friend. I couldn't stand to see her get hurt again. I also didn't want to relive that night. The night my heart was broken twice, once watching my best friend get injured and the other time

watching my boyfriend kiss her.

Skyler called the play. The center snapped the ball. Jonnie ran toward the endzone. Skyler hauled back his arm, and the ball sailed through the sky in a perfect arc, a perfect spiral, a perfect landing right into Jonnie's hands.

I held my breath. This was the time on that fateful night when Jonnie had run into the endzone with that huge football player on her heels. I didn't even process when the whistle blew, and the touchdown was called. All I could do was watch the guy barrel toward Jonnie and the whole flashback came full circle. He was going to hit her. She'd be on the ground again, and this time she wouldn't be able to get back up. This had been too much of a risk. Her life was not worth a touchdown.

The defensive guy barreled closer and closer as if in slow motion and passed right by her, slowing in resignation. He came to a stop and stomped his foot in frustration, then backtracked, turned around, and shook her hand in congratulations.

Our cheerleading squad went wild, jumping up and down and waving our poms in the air, yelling for our team and the winning touchdown. I stood with my shoulders collapsed in a relieved sigh.

Skyler ripped his helmet off and ran toward the endzone. He pushed past all the other guys congratulating her just as Jonnie whipped her helmet off also, her hair falling out of its scrunchy and draping over the shoulder pads of her uniform. Skyler swooped her up in his arms, and she wrapped her arms around his neck. Their lips met, and I had to look away.

"Hey, are you okay?" Bella scooted up beside me.

"I keep thinking it's going to get easier seeing them kiss, but..."

"I get it," Bella said. "You and Skyler were a couple for a really long time. You have every right to be jealous."

"I'm not jealous. I mean, I'm dating Aiden now, right?"

"Right..." Bella raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips.

As if his ears had been ringing, Aiden ran up behind me and swooped me into a hug. "Did you see that winning touchdown?"

"Yeah, I did." I laughed and fought to get down from his arms. Once back on solid ground, I turned and smiled at him covered in mud and sweat and disheveled hair. "Look at you. You're adorable."

"I know, I need a shower," Aiden said, a grin in his eyes. "I promise not to hug you again when I'm this sweaty and gross."

That wasn't the message I wanted to send, so I tucked myself right up into his arms and craned my neck to look up at him. "You can hug me any time you want."

"Probably shouldn't kiss you in front of all these people though, huh?"

"Why not?" I nodded toward the endzone "Everybody's doin' it."

"Because I want our kisses to be special, not a public display," he said quietly so only I could hear.

Something occurred to me in that moment. I wondered if Skyler and Jonnie's first kiss had happened the night of her accident or if he'd cheated on me before that. I gulped.

Why was I still thinking about Skyler? I had a perfectly great guy standing right in front of me who looked at me as if I was his dream girl. I needed to refocus.

"Besides," Aiden said. "My mouth tastes like I've been eating mud and grass." We both wrinkled our noses. Yeah, maybe we could wait for kissing.

"What are you doing after the game?" I asked, hoping he wanted to spend more time with me.

"Jayce was talking about having a bonfire at his house. You wanna come with me?"

"Heck yeah," I said and then reigned in my excitement. "I mean, yes, I'd love to come."

"Cool, should I pick you up in about forty-five minutes?"

"That sounds perfect." We gave each other one more hug, and he ran off to be with his team as they celebrated.

"Nice distraction," Bella said, nudging me with her shoulder.

I couldn't hide a grin watching Aiden run toward the locker room. I kinda hoped Skyler and Jonnie chose *not* to come to the bonfire that night.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Aiden

There's nothing more romantic than a bonfire overlooking Lake Michigan. The crackling and sparking flames, the waves gently lapping against the shore, someone's country music playlist softly lulling the small group into the submission of midnight.

The chill in the air forced Amberlyn to tuck herself close to me, and I wasn't complaining. In a lot of ways, I wanted to get closer. Physically and emotionally.

I was a senior in high school, and this was my first girlfriend. Seventeen and never been kissed, until last week. Now all I wanted was to kiss her again, and again, and again.

At least I was getting in a lot of workouts. Jogging, weightlifting, hitting baseballs, slamming my shoulder pads into the opposition's offensive line. I never knew how physically frustrating having a girlfriend could be.

My arm wrapped around Amberlyn's lower back, and my hand rested against her outer thigh. She snuggled in, and my face was at her hairline. I turned my head to nuzzle her hair and drew a long whiff of her flowing blonde silk that she'd released from its ponytail after the game.

I wanted to wrap my other arm around her and pull her down into the sand dune beside the bonfire but knew that was a very bad idea. Seventeen years of pent up frustration would not be tamed by making out with this incredible girl—woman—beside me. I would want way more than a kiss and needed to

put on the brakes right now.

Her lips brushed against my neck, and I moaned audibly. “You’re going to be the death of me,” I whispered.

“Never thought I’d see the day,” Jayce called from across the firepit. “When Aiden Becker would be kissing Amberlyn Jamison.”

I sat up a little straighter as if waking up from a stupor, and several guys laughed at me.

“Now I understand why you were such a willing participant in helping Jonnie get with Skyler,” Jayce said. “You had ulterior motives.”

“What’s he talking about?” Amberlyn straightened and pulled away, turning to look up at me. I cringed.

“I did not have ulterior motives.” I held up my hands in surrender. “Jonnie and Skyler were meant to be together, that’s all.”

“What did he mean by willing participant?” Amberlyn said through clenched teeth.

“Oh, come on, Amberlyn,” Connor piped in. “You’ve seen the homecoming pictures. You can’t possibly think Jonnie just wound up next to Skyler by chance without her date positioning her there.”

“If it hadn’t been for Jonnie’s polka dot dress and Aiden’s matching bowtie, the world would have thought Jonnie was Skyler’s date,” Doug said.

“A lot of people did think she was his date,” Logan pointed out. “When the video of their epic fight on the dancefloor went viral, the captions read Trouble in the Endzone? and asked what Skyler had done to break up the dream couple.”

Amberlyn had silent tears running down her face. I reached up to wipe one of them away.

“Don’t touch me,” she hissed. “I can’t believe you would *do* that.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. There was nothing else I could possibly say. It was all true. I knew the night Jonnie had asked me to the dance that she was in love with Skyler. She needed a decoy date, and I was her scapegoat. When she bought my bowtie to match her dress, I could tell there was some part of her using that as a means of making Skyler jealous.

During group pictures, yeah, I had positioned them next to each other. And that dance. I had all but suggested they dance together, knowing that would be the last straw. There was no way Skyler could hold Jonnie in his arms and go back to pretending he wasn’t in love with her. It was written all

over his face. I felt like such a jerk for not coming right out and telling Amberlyn the minute I figured it out.

“How could you?” she asked. “Was it your goal all along to get me to go out with you?”

“No, I never anticipated dating you.”

“I thought you said you had a crush on me for years!” Amberlyn narrowed her eyes.

“I did,” I insisted, and then my voice dropped in resignation. “I just never thought you’d ever actually go out with me. I never thought I’d be good enough for you.”

“You’ve got that right.” Amberlyn stood and spoke across the fire pit to her friend Bella, who was snuggled up next to Conner. “Bella, will you drive me home? I don’t want to be here one minute longer.”

“Uh, sure.” Bella stood from the log she’d been sitting on and gave Conner an apologetic smile and mouthed the word, “Sorry.”

With that, Amberlyn stormed away, Bella following.

I threw my can of soda as hard as I could down the dune, wishing I had something larger and heavier to take away my anger. The can crashed to the sand below with a loud hiss as the soda exploded out the side.

“Thanks a hellualot, you idiots!” I raised my voice.

“Sorry, man. I thought she knew,” Jayce said, shrugging.

“Great party, Jayce. Thanks for inviting me.” I rose from my seat and headed back to my truck. I gunned the engine and shifted into gear, forcing sand to fly out behind me. What had started off as a great night had turned into the worst night of my life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Amberlyn

I lay on my bed facedown, crying into my pillow. I couldn't believe Aiden would do something like that. How could he? How could Jonnie? Skyler? Was I the only person not in on this huge secret everyone else seemed to know?

My phone vibrated with a text, and I dug it out from my pocket.

Let me explain, Aiden's text read. Please call me.

Heck no! He didn't deserve the chance to explain. I didn't even text him back.

Instagram. I had to see for myself. There had been a million photos posted that night. Jonnie's dress had been my greatest shopping accomplishment. She was always such a tomboy, and I waved a magic wand and made her into a beautiful girl. Jonnie was the topic of conversation for days afterward. Heck, she'd been the talk of the town since she'd returned from summer vacation looking like a supermodel.

All the guys had a crush on her. They made fools of themselves trying to get her attention. Not Skyler. He had stayed by my side, barely looking at Jonnie as if he was mad at her or something.

Skyler hadn't been mad at Jonnie. He'd been mad at himself for liking her. He went out of his way to distance himself from her. And yet he didn't. They were together all the time. Football practice, driving to and from school, running together during warm-ups and cool-downs. They had an easy excuse.

They needed to be in sync for making plays. Jonnie needed to know what Skyler was thinking so she could be in the right position, either as a decoy or the intended receiver. Their minds were in sync all right. So were their hearts.

I opened the Instagram app on my phone and scrolled back through my feed several weeks to when homecoming photos started showing up. At first there were just random photos from friends. Grand Haven was a big high school, and I had lots of friends.

Finally, a picture of Jonnie. It was hard to miss that polka dotted dress. Most photos were completely innocent. Others... not so much.

Someone had created a montage of photos involving Jonnie and Skyler. Him lifting her into the air while celebrating in the end zone after the winning touchdown the night before the dance. Him with his arm around her while in the lineup for photos at the gazebo, their heads close together while I was distracted talking to someone else, barely acknowledging my own date.

Was this partially my fault? Had I neglected my commitment to Skyler? Taken him for granted? Or was this just a case of a relationship that was doomed to failure from the beginning?

One photo made me gasp. How had I never noticed this before today? The photo was grainy and dark, barely recognizable other than Jonnie's unmistakable polka-dotted dress and a clear shot of Skyler's face. He was holding her on the dancefloor with their cheeks close together. Skyler's eyes were closed, as if reveling in the treasure of holding the woman he loved in his arms for one brief stolen moment. His love for her and the torment it brought him was written as clearly on his face as if someone had used a Sharpie marker.

I kept scrolling, fresh tears pooling in my eyes.

Videos had been posted of their argument, with captions like "Trouble in the end zone?" and "Has the winning streak come to an end?" and "What did Skyler do to anger his best receiver?"

Most photos and videos were complimentary toward Jonnie, her sexy calf muscles and three-inch heels, her touchdowns, her dress, her hair. I smiled through my tears. I totally took credit for the hair, makeup, and dress.

The captions weren't necessarily uncomplimentary toward Skyler, rather more questioning, "What happened to break up the dream couple?"

None of them seemed to remember that Skyler and Jonnie weren't a couple.

Only one photo caption asked, “How does Amberlyn feel about Jonnie moving in on her man?”

How did I feel? The suspicion had been tickling the back of my mind for months, maybe years. The two of them had been best friends long before Skyler had met me. Jealousy hadn’t lifted its ugly head until Jonnie had gotten back from summer vacation. All the girls were jealous of Jonnie. She had the entire football team wrapped around her beautiful long fingers, including my boyfriend.

After a soft knock, Jonnie creaked open my bedroom door, a crease in her brow, biting her lower lip. “Mind if I come in?”

She didn’t wait for an answer to her rhetorical question, just slipped in and clicked the door quietly back into place. She padded across the room and climbed onto my bed, lying beside me and resting her head against mine.

“Aiden called,” Jonnie whispered.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“He’s really worried you’re mad at him.”

“Gee, what would make him think that?” I scoffed.

“Don’t blame Aiden,” Jonnie said. “He didn’t instigate the inevitable. Aiden isn’t the reason Skyler broke up with you.”

“Yeah, *you* are the reason Skyler broke up with me.”

“What would you rather have us do?” she asked. “Sneak around behind your back.”

“That’s not what I meant. You shouldn’t have—” I stopped.

“Shouldn’t have what? Fallen in love with him?”

“I don’t know. I’m just really confused.”

“You have every right to be confused,” she said.

“Aiden should have told me.”

“*I* should have told you,” she said. “And Skyler should have told you.”

“Ya think?”

“I’m sorry.” She pulled me into her arms as if I was her little baby. “If you won’t forgive me and Skyler, at the very least forgive Aiden.”

“I don’t know if I can,” I said.

“Try, okay?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Good. You got any Moose Tracks?” she asked.

“I think so.”

“Come on.” She pulled me to a sitting position. “Let’s go eat ice cream and talk about something other than boys.”

“Okay.” I slung my feet over the edge and sank into the plush carpet.

“Did you hear?” Jonnie asked. “That Christine Townsend signed with University of Michigan to play basketball next year?”

“We haven’t even started this year’s season,” I said.

“They’re basing their commitment on last year’s stats,” Jonnie said. She kept talking for another half hour about the upcoming girls’ basketball season while we ate ice cream, sitting on the bar stools at the center island in my parent’s kitchen.

I really should have been paying attention. I’d have to cheer for these girls. Cheerleading season didn’t end just because football season did. The looming basketball season forced my mind ahead to baseball season. Would I be cheering in the stands for our baseball team as well? In particular, for our hot first baseman? The guy who could hit 95-mile-an-hour pitches. Maybe. I took another bite of my ice cream, trying not to think about Aiden.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Aiden

“For the last time, I am *not* joining the basketball team,” I said, incredulous that Dylan was actually begging.

“But Matt twisted his ankle,” Dylan pleaded. “We’re short a starter.”

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t replace a starter, especially a point guard.”

“You’re taller than everyone else in the school. We’ll put you at center and move someone else to point guard.”

“I’m not risking a twisted ankle weeks before baseball season starts,” I said. “I’m practicing everyday with my personal trainer, my varsity coach, and my batting coach, and I’m going to get a full ride to college or head straight to the minors or majors. Baseball is my sport. I’m not playing basketball.” I turned and started walking away.

“Not even to be in the gym when Amberlyn is cheering?” Dylan’s smirk was almost visible through his voice, but I didn’t turn around.

“I can watch her from the bleachers.” Then I muttered, “If she ever forgives me.”

“Been there, done that,” Dylan said with resignation. During their junior year, his girlfriend, Christine, the basketball prodigy, had been forced to choose between her childhood sweetheart, a creep named Eddie, and Dylan, who had moved here halfway through the school year. She’d chosen well. Hopefully Amberlyn would also.

I turned to Dylan with compassion. “I’m glad that all worked out for you,

man. Here's hoping things work out for me too."

I gave him a fist bump and turned and walked away again, insisting under my breath. "I'm still not joining the basketball team."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Amberlyn

“You’re probably wondering why I called you all together,” Coach Marshall said, pacing in front of the group of cheerleaders gathered in the cafeteria. We were all sitting on the little attached seats or on top of the tables, backpacks and coats ready, anxious to get out of here and head home for the weekend. “We’ll be taking part in a service project over the next couple of weeks, and I expect you all to participate.”

There was a collective groan throughout the group. Those were rarely fun and usually involved physical labor and broken nails.

“We’re not going to have to do another bikini car wash again, are we?” Danielle asked. We all turned to her with gaping mouths.

“In December?” I asked. “Are you dense?”

“Now, now.” Coach gave me a stern look. Danielle didn’t mean to be a ditz; she just was. “The car wash—last summer—was a fundraiser. This is a service project. Besides, that car wash brought in enough money to supply new uniforms and poms for years to come.”

We all sort of shrugged and nodded. We’d held the event on Memorial Day weekend near the beach and capitalized on tourists from all over the State. We’d gotten huge tips from drooling college guys, along with their phone numbers.

That Saturday had provided dates and invitations to parties all summer long. It had also cost us two cheerleaders; one who failed her random drug

screening two days before cheer camp and one who found out she was pregnant right before football season started. Money or no money, I doubt we'd be doing that particular fundraiser again anytime soon.

"This service project is a collaborative project between all players on each team at the high school." That got everyone's attention.

"That's probably more than half the school," Bella said.

"Yep, this is going to be a huge undertaking." Coach nodded. "And it's for a good cause."

"What cause?" Alisha asked, her voice laced with suspicion.

"We're collecting donations of sporting equipment and raising funds for schools in Abidjan."

"Is this because of Matt's foreign exchange student from Africa?" Bella asked.

"Yes, Ariane is from the Ivory Coast on the continent of Africa." Coach nodded.

"She's so nice," Alisha said.

"I heard she learned how to play basketball really quickly and will be playing first string," Bella said.

"Apparently she was blown away by the amount of sporting equipment we have and would like to find a way to bring equipment home to the children in Abidjan," coach said. "We, and all schools in Michigan, probably most of the United States, have gently-used sporting equipment sitting around in closets not being used. We are going to gather as much as we can, box it up, and ship it to the schools over there. And we're going to have a holiday ball to raise money for the shipping costs. We'll probably try to get some business sponsors to help, and really get the community involved."

All the girls started talking excitedly. This was going to be the most fun we'd had in a long time. My heart swelled with excitement.

"We're going to be pairing up with other athletes from every sport in the school and gathering as many pieces of equipment as we can. You'll be contacting other schools, driving to those schools and picking up donations, and all of it will count toward community service. It will look great on your college applications."

"How are we going to be paired up?" I asked, a sinking feeling in my stomach.

"We're having a big kick-off assembly next Friday so the athletic director

can explain it to the whole school, and you'll be drawing names from hats to find out who your partners will be."

There were groans around the group, and the knot in my stomach twisted. I didn't want to get nervous—or my hopes up—that I'd be paired with Aiden.

"Anyone have any other questions?" coach asked. We all shook our heads and shrugged, but there was an air of excitement amongst us. "See ya Monday, ladies."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Aiden

“I know you all met individually with your teams and coaches, so I won’t go over all the details again.” Our athletic director, Mr. Burtrum did just that. We didn’t care. This was the most exciting thing to happen in the history of our school, and we needed some excitement. *I* needed some excitement.

The past few days not having Amberlyn by my side had been torture. This whole week she’d been riding to school again with Skyler and Jonnie. I wanted to cry when I saw them together. I’d started spending longer practices at the batting cages and arriving at school with minutes to spare before my first class, which was on the opposite side of the building as Amberlyn’s.

After a lengthy explanation that included lots of school spirit and clapping, Mr. Burtrum finally got down to the business of choosing partners. He called all the girls’ teams to come line up on the floor of the gym. The girls were going to be paired up with the guys to make it easier to reach out to teams in other schools nearby.

The event organizers, Trina Wynter and Matt Bailey, stepped forward with a large hat that presumably had guys names in it. Well, Matt rolled forward in his wheelchair. He had plenty of time on his hands now that he wouldn’t be starting point guard. He’d messed up his ankle the second day of basketball tryouts and was out for at least six weeks.

Trina had been cut from the girls’ basketball team on day one. She’d gained a few pounds in the past year and could no longer run down and back

on the courts as well as she used to. I could relate to that. After sitting around playing video games all summer, I was in no condition to play football at the beginning of the season either. Thankfully Jonnie had dragged me out jogging with her. We still jogged together most evenings.

Combining Trina's inability to sink a shot with her being out of condition, there just wasn't justification to keep her on the team, no matter how loveable she was. She was the type of girl who'd stop the car to carry a turtle to the shoulder of the road to keep it from getting crushed. She rescued and rehomed more kittens than I could remember. She tutored kids at the elementary school, sang the National Anthem at every home game for every sport, and always had time to lend an ear when someone needed a friend. She was perfect for this service project.

As they went down the line of girls from the volleyball team, basketball team, tennis team, softball team, and cheer squad, I listened for my name to be called. When Trina stood in front of Amberlyn, I held my breath. The odds were in my favor. There weren't that many guys' names left in the hat.

Amberlyn pulled out a name, glanced at it and looked directly at me. I couldn't tell if that was hope in her expression or dread. She practically whispered into the microphone. "Aiden Becker."

Murmurs ran through the crowd, but my eyes locked with hers. I kept my face stoic, not letting on how excited I was to have this chance to work with her for the next few weeks. Maybe I could find a way to help her forgive me. Hopefully we could at least go back to being friends. My pitcher, Taylor James, bumped my shoulder, but I never took my eyes from Amberlyn's.

I gulped. She didn't break eye contact from across the gym. I was going to get my girlfriend back. I just knew it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Amberlyn

“Look, I’m not happy about this, but we’re stuck together so I’m going to have to get used to being around you again.” I hurried out of the gym on the way to the cafeteria for lunch, fully intending to sit as far away from him as possible. He hurried behind me.

“Can we at least talk about when you want to meet to create a game plan?” Aiden asked.

I whirled on him. “You’re going to try to use this as an excuse to go out with me again, aren’t you?” We’d drawn a crowd, but I didn’t care.

“We can sit at your kitchen table, with your father standing nearby, with a shotgun in his hand if you want,” Aiden said. I fought to keep a straight face, wanting to laugh at the vision. “We just need to find a way to work together.”

“Fine, you can come over after my family has dinner tonight. And I’m sure my dad would love to have a nice, long chat with you.”

Aiden visibly gulped but didn’t flinch. “Would seven o’clock work for you?” He used his most professional and respectful voice.

“Fine.” I flipped my ponytail as I turned and walked away, heading for my usual table. Aiden sat at a different table than he normally did. It took me a moment to figure it out. Taylor, Russ, Brody, Carlos, Peyton, Joel... he was sitting with his baseball team.

He was dressed differently too. He was like a chameleon. During the fall he wore his varsity jacket all the time. Now he had on long shorts with Under Armor leggings underneath. His shirt was a long sleeve jersey material that looked soft enough to snuggle with and had a professional logo for something called HitTrax. Whatever that was, the shirt looked as if it had been given to him as an incentive bonus or sponsorship. The material hugged his chest and arm muscles in just the right places.

I could tell he was trying hard not to look in my direction. Apparently, I wasn't trying hard enough not to look in his. I made it a point to turn away and faced that direction for the rest of lunch.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Aiden

“Aiden, what a pleasure to have you over.” Amberlyn’s mother held open the door when I arrived at precisely seven that evening. “Come on in.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Jamison.” I nodded respectfully and stepped into the foyer. “I appreciate you allowing us to work on our school project. I hope we’re not interrupting your evening.”

“Not at all,” she said. “We’re running a little late getting dinner on the table, so I set out a plate for you. I hope you’re hungry.”

“I’m a seventeen-year-old athlete.” I chuckled. “I’m always hungry.” I slipped my sneakers off and looked up to find Amberlyn standing in the archway to the dining room with her arms folded across her chest and a scowl on her face.

“Amberlyn’s thrilled to have you working with her on this service project,” her mom said.

“Is she?” I couldn’t hide a smirk.

Amberlyn’s jaw dropped.

I’d never felt so vindicated in my life, and a hopeful flame lit inside my chest. “I’m excited to be working with her as well. She and I make a great team.” I winked at Amberlyn, and she narrowed her eyes.

I followed Mrs. Jamison into her elegant dining room and passed Amberlyn close enough for my arm to brush against hers.

“Jerk,” she grumbled.

“Girl-of-my-dreams,” I muttered. Amberlyn gasped, but I ignored her. “Dinner smells wonderful, Mrs. Jamison.”

“Thank you, Aiden. You’re welcome to call me Susan if you’d like.”

“Uh...”

“You won’t though, will you?” Mrs. Jamison laughed lightly. “I should have known not to ask. If I know your momma like I think I do, she raised you to be a gentleman.”

“Yes, ma’am, she did.” Without even registering my actions, I pulled out Amberlyn’s chair for her. She stood there with her chin raised in defiance but, after a few seconds, gave up and sat in the proffered chair. I sat much closer to her than was necessary in the generous space but stood quickly when her dad strolled into the room. I extended my right hand. “Good evening, Mr. Jamison.”

“Hey, Aiden, how are you?” He gripped his hand like a man. “Amberlyn tells us you’re hitting very well. Are you excited for baseball season to start?”

“Very much, yes.” My brain grasped onto the first part of his sentence: *Amberlyn tells us...* That meant she was thinking about me and talking about me. I sat and wrapped my arm around the top of her chair. She subtly leaned away from me, but I ignored her rejection. “She had the opportunity to come to the batting cages with me a few weeks ago. That was our first official date, right?” I turned to her, with my most innocent expression.

She pulled her lips into a straight line and turned to glare at me. I raised my eyebrows as if waiting patiently for her to answer. Her breathing increased and she nodded. “Mmm hmm.”

“That’s a fun first date,” her mom said with an affectionate smile.

Amberlyn’s younger brother and sister hurried into the room and took their seats, and the room grew louder with banter and laughter and passing dishes and sharing stories about their day. Throughout the meal Amberlyn remained stoic, although I caught her sneaking glances at me occasionally. Each time I would grin at her or wink or bump my shoulder against hers, and she would face forward again and lift her chin in superiority. I loved every minute of that dinner with her family.

“The kids and I will clean up in here,” Mrs. Jamison said when the meal was nearly over. “Why don’t you two take your school project into the game room? I cleared off the puzzle table so you’d have some work space.”

I stood and offered to help Amberlyn with her chair, but she shoed me

away and stomped out to the foyer to grab her backpack, which was sitting by the front door. I grabbed mine as well, and she led me down a long hall toward the game room. I stopped halfway.

“Oh, look at you.” I leaned closer to the picture on the wall of Amberlyn in seventh grade, with a mouth full of braces and too much makeup. “You were so cute back then.”

“That is the worst picture ever taken of me,” she said.

“It is pretty bad, isn’t it?” I took out my cell phone and held it up with my camera turned on as if I was going to snap a shot of the picture to use as blackmail.

“Don’t you dare!” Amberlyn tried to snatch the phone out of my hand, but I held it higher than she could ever reach. “I swear if you ever show that to anyone, I will kick you in places you don’t think about in your worst nightmares.”

“You want my phone?” I smirked. “Come and get it.” She’d have to tackle me to the ground to get the phone out of my hand. I’d like to see her try. No, seriously, that would be a dream come true to have her tackle me.

I lowered my arm and handed her my phone. She grabbed it and made a move to delete the photos I’d taken but quickly figured out I hadn’t taken a single shot.

“Jerk,” she grumbled and shoved the phone into my hand and continued down the hall in a huff.

“You’re adorable when you’re angry,” I called after her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Amberlyn

That boy was going to drive me insane! I practically threw my backpack onto the chair beside me, ripped open the zipper, and hauled out my notebook and pen.

Aiden sauntered into the game room and sat casually across from me, yawning as he set down his backpack and pulled out a slip of paper.

“What’s that?” I lifted my chin in the direction of his paper.

“The coaches of the guys’ teams gave us the instructions since you girls got to draw our names.”

“What are the instructions?” I asked, curious in spite of my determination to stay angry.

“They’ve divided up the whole Lakeshore region. Each couple will be paired up with another couple so we can reach all the different schools.”

“We are *not* a couple.” I crossed my arms. He barely paused, and I swear he was holding back laughter.

“You and I will be paired up with Connor and Addie from the volleyball team, and we’ll be in charge of reaching out to the Rockford School District.”

“Oh, I bet Bella is *furious* that Connor will be hanging out with Addie.”

Aiden stopped and looked up at me, with his jaw dropped.

“What? Bella and Connor are talking.”

“We’re not *couples*, remember?” Aiden smirked.

“Whatever.” I picked at my fingernails, pretending to be bored.

“I was thinking we could start by going to their school’s website and seeing if we could find out the names of the coaches.”

“I think we should start by calling the administration office,” I interrupted. “What?”

“You know, where the superintendent works. We can tell them about the project and see if they can get all the coaches phone numbers for us.” I stopped to wait for his reaction.

“That’s brilliant,” Aiden said.

“Thank you.” I genuinely smiled for the first time that day.

“You are so beautiful.”

My smile fell, and I panicked. “You can’t say stuff like that to me.”

“Why?” He lifted his eyebrows.

“Because you’re not my boyfriend any—I mean, you never were my boyfriend.”

“I guess we remember things differently,” he said.

“What do you mean by that?” I felt my lip quiver.

His voice dropped to a near whisper. “You may not remember having me for a boyfriend, but I will never forget the way it felt to have you for my girlfriend.”

“I was never—”

“Amberlyn, stop.”

“Stop what?” My voice was almost a squeak. He came around the table, knelt beside me, and placed his hands on my hips. He was so tall that even kneeling he was nearly at eye level.

“Stop fighting this,” he whispered. “Stop fighting me.”

I twisted a tiny curl of his hair around my finger. I swear the sound that came from somewhere deep inside him was practically a purr, and he leaned into my hand.

He turned his face and grazed his nose along the inside of my wrist. I melted right into his arms, and before I knew what was happening, we were kissing, I mean, really, really kissing. I could almost hear the eighties make-out playlist dancing through the back of my mind.

“Gross,” my little sister Janie said from behind Aiden. “They’re kissing.”

With our faces close together and our breathing heavy, Aiden whispered. “I’m going to nickname your sister Lake Michigan.”

Then Aiden hopped up, almost knocking me over, and crawled toward my

sister like a giant tiger.

“I’m gonna git you, little girl,” he said in a playful voice as she ran squealing down the hall. He crawled after her, and I was left on the floor in our game room, alone with my traitorous lips.

“I can’t believe I just did that,” I pulled myself off the floor, gathered our paperwork and bookbags and headed toward the hall, flicking off the lights as I followed my sister and... my boyfriend. Oops.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Aiden

“I knew you guys would get back together,” Taylor said, punching the air with his fist. He called to the other side of the cage where Russ was waiting with his catcher’s gear strapped on. “You owe me twenty bucks.”

“You laid wagers on whether or not Amberlyn and I would start dating again?” I asked.

“What can I say? Easy twenty bucks.”

“I knew I was going to lose before I made the bet,” Russ called back. “That’s why you’re buying pizza after practice.”

I glanced between Russ and Taylor and sighed. “I envy you two.”

“Why?” Taylor asked.

“You guys are always together. All I get to play with is a batting machine.”

“And a gorgeous blond on Friday nights,” Taylor said.

“Not with her sister walking in on us,” I grumbled. “Or a giant wave crashing over the pier.”

“Bummer,” Taylor said, then turned completely around so his back was to Russ. “Just don’t do anything stupid, like Russ did.”

“What did Russ do?” I whispered.

“You hadn’t heard? He got his girlfriend pregnant.”

“No way. Seriously.” I peeked around Taylor at our star catcher, waiting patiently for Taylor to pitch to him. “Please tell me he’s standing by her and

not being a jerk or... worse." I gulped.

"Don't worry, she's definitely having the baby, even if she's sporting a watermelon under her cap and gown. At least she's planning to graduate."

"Well, that's good," I said. "Are they, like, gettin' married?"

"They're talking about it. Trying to weigh the options, do what's best for the baby, you know."

"Man, seems like such grown up decisions to be making during your senior year of high school." I felt the weight of my friend's predicament.

"He's gonna need our support this spring." Taylor almost sounded choked up about his best friend.

"That's what teammates are for, man." I patted Taylor on the shoulder before picking up my gear bag to head down to the furthest batting cage. "And I promise; I won't get Amberlyn pregnant."

"We'll come down and heckle you after we're done here," Taylor said louder, now that we weren't hiding our conversation from Russ. "That way you won't feel all alone." He made a show of wiping fake tears from his eyes.

"You cranking that pitching machine to a hundred yet, man?" Russ called to me.

"Nah, I haven't gone above ninety-eight," I called back. "I try to vary the speed every couple of minutes. Most guys our age aren't gonna be throwing that fast. I gotta be prepared for everything you slow pokes lob at me from the mound."

"Very funny," Taylor said, then got into position. He threw a pitch to Russ, and they all glanced at the speed gun. Seventy-eight.

"That would be a home run for me." I chuckled while walking away. Then my face fell at the irony. *And a sobering reminder not to take things with Amberlyn past first base.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Amberlyn

“They said they’d have a bunch of boxes in the high school gym full of used equipment,” Aiden said as we all piled into his extended cab pickup. A large enclosed trailer was hooked to the back of his truck, and we settled in to make the hour drive over to Rockford High School.

“Are they gonna have any guys there to help?” Connor asked from the backseat. “Or is it just the two of us?”

“Um, what about me and Amberlyn?” Addie asked from the seat behind me. “We can lift boxes.”

“Yeah,” I said, clicking my seatbelt into place. “If I can lift a cheerleader, I think I can lift a box of sporting equipment.”

“Speaking of cheerleaders”—Aiden glanced into the rearview mirror to catch Connor’s attention—“I heard you and Bella were going out now.”

“We’re talking.” Connor shrugged. “She’s really nice. Although our date got interrupted a couple weeks ago at the bonfire.”

“That was partially your own fault,” Aiden said. He left the school parking lot, inching forward to keep the trailer from bottoming out as he pulled onto the main road.

“That was mostly Jayce’s fault. If he hadn’t brought it up... just sayin’.”

“Do we really have to talk about this, guys?” I asked, my voice almost a squeak.

“Talk about what?” Addie asked, resting her chin on my seat back.

“The conversation at the bonfire that temporarily broke up me and Aiden.”

Aiden lifted my hand to his mouth for a kiss. He said under his breath, “Temporarily.”

“What did they say?” Addie wasn’t backing down. That or she was ignorant and didn’t realize how much this hurt me still.

“They claimed Aiden helped break up me and Skyler so he could go out with me instead.”

“Did you?” Addie turned to Aiden.

“No, I did not.” Aiden glanced over at me. “But I won’t claim I wasn’t a little bit happy about how things worked out.”

“I’m over it now,” I lied. I wasn’t over it at all. No matter how great Aiden was and how angry I was at Skyler and Jonnie, there was still a huge hole in my heart that was going to take time to heal.

Skyler had been my boyfriend for three years. Not a day went by that I didn’t want to send him a text about my thoughts or ideas or dreams or frustrations, or just to ask how his day was going.

He’d been my best friend. Probably more of a best friend than a boyfriend since we had a rather platonic relationship. That’s probably not how things looked from the outside because we were constantly connected. Either we were holding hands, or my head was on his shoulder, or my arms around his neck. I was always climbing on his back for a piggyback ride. And kissing, lots of kissing. Little kisses. Not making out. A peck on the lips to say hello or goodbye.

There was no passion between me and Skyler. There was no sexual tension. There was no head-in-the-clouds bliss or excitement to be in each other’s arms. Not like what I had with Aiden.

I glanced down and squeezed Aiden’s hand to let him know I was thinking about him. He smiled over at me and winked. I wasn’t sure what the future would hold, but right then, I was glad to be holding his hand.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Aiden

The holiday ball that was meant to be a fundraiser turned into a celebration of all the hard work and dedication from everyone involved. It was also an opportunity for the art and drama departments to show off their transformative skills.

“Oh my gosh, the decorations are beautiful,” Amberlyn exclaimed, pointing to the twinkling Christmas lights hanging from the ceiling of the gym. “It’s like the gym is snowing basketballs and mistletoe.”

Silver basketball cutouts shimmered, hanging at various heights on fishing line interspersed with hundreds of sprigs of mistletoe that had been dusted to look like they were covered in snow.

“Why basketballs?” I asked, holding my arm like a gentleman to lead Amberlyn into the high school gym. “Why can’t we skip right to baseball season?”

“Because it’s basketball season, you silly guy.” Amberlyn bumped me with her shoulder. “Come on, let’s go find our friends so we can dance.”

“F-friends... uh, okay.” I looked longingly in the direction of the table where my baseball teammates and their girlfriends congregated as Amberlyn dragged me in the direction of a table full of cheerleaders and football players and basketball players.

Football season ended weeks ago, and I was only on the team for fun and exercise, not because I loved football. I really didn’t like basketball at all, but

some of the guys on the team were nice so I allowed Amberlyn to tug me along.

Amberlyn gave hugs to some of the cheerleaders, and they gushed about each other's dresses and shoes, and somehow their makeup was "on point," whatever that meant.

I couldn't help think back to the last time we were all at a formal dance like this. My date, Jonnie, had been more concerned about the grass stains on her elbows from when she dove for the football the night before. She'd gotten the touchdown and that's all that mattered.

She'd also gotten her man. Which was the only reason the elegant Amberlyn Jamison was on my arm tonight rather than Skyler's.

Jonnie and Skyler were meant for each other, as evidenced by the way they were cheek to cheek in the corner of the dancefloor, eyes closed, in their own little world.

By the way Amberlyn seemed to be faking a smile and turning away from the dancefloor to avoid having them in her line of sight, I could tell she was remembering that night as well. This had to be hard for her.

"Hey, Amberlyn," I said, taking her gently by the elbow. "I'd like to introduce you to a couple of my baseball friends and their girlfriends. Do you wanna come over there with me?"

I pulled her toward me and into my arms, purposely gazing into her eyes as if to convey that the only person she needed to be thinking about right now was me, not her ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend.

"Yeah, um, that would be great." Her voice rose at the end in a squeak, and I wondered if I was going to need to find her a box of tissues. She rested her hands on my chest as she gazed up at me with those eyes.

"Hi," I whispered.

"Hi," she whispered back and lowered her shoulders with a sigh and mouthed, "Thanks."

"Come on." Without releasing her, I wrapped my arm around Amberlyn's waist and pulled her in the direction of my teammates. I kept my voice low to give her some details before we got over there. "You probably know everyone since we've all been in school together forever, but I don't know if you've heard about Russ and Julianne."

"What about them?" Amberlyn asked. I stopped and turned Amberlyn toward me, not wanting her to find out after we'd been standing there talking

a few minutes.

“They just got engaged.” I tried to keep my voice low and subdued, predicting how Amberlyn was going to react. She almost squealed with excitement, and I grasped her before she ran off to hug Julianne in congratulations without knowing the full story. “And they’re going to have a baby in June.”

“Whoa... okay.” Amberlyn raised her eyebrows.

“It’s not like they’re hiding anything,” I said. “She’s gonna finish school and stuff.”

“Well, that’s good,” she said. “Not gonna be easy.”

“I just wanted you to be aware,” I said.

“I’m glad you told me.”

“Anyway, let’s go be sociable.” I reached for Amberlyn’s hand and felt a sense of excitement about officially introducing her to my teammates as my girlfriend.

“Amberlyn, I *love* your dress,” Julianne said as we approached. The other girls in the small circle of friends all turned with curious glances. I was glad to see they were sort of welcoming my new girlfriend, other than Carla, who looked down her nose in a mild snub. She was probably jealous of Amberlyn. Carla had made advances on me multiple times in the past few years.

“Thanks.” Amberlyn hugged Julianne. “I hear congratulations are in order. Let me see that ring.”

All the girls gathered around Julianne as she held out her left hand and let the little diamond sparkle. I had to hand it to Amberlyn to turn a potentially uncomfortable situation into a bonding moment.

My eyes strayed over to where Russ stood with Taylor, and I couldn’t help chuckle at the way Russ was looking at Julianne. He obviously loved her. I was proud of him for taking responsibility when the next few years were not going to be easy. But part of me wondered if they would have wound up together if things were different.

Julianne was one of the popular girls, and Russ was quiet and mysterious. Taylor once described Russ as having bedroom eyes, which was a little ironic considering the predicament he’d gotten himself into.

Even though I was a head taller than Russ, I felt like a little kid standing next to him, as if he were five years older than me. He was about to be a dad, and I’d only had my first kiss a few weeks ago. There was a maturity that

accompanied his situation and not necessarily in a good way.

I let my gaze stray back to Amberlyn, remembering how I'd felt kissing her the first time and how the experience had awoken a long-repressed desire to go way further than kissing. If I messed up with Amberlyn and did something that compromised our virtue, it would have been because of a moment of weakness.

Russ was almost calculating in his maturity. I had a sneaking suspicion his relationship with Julianne was a result of a carefully planned romance cultivated over months or years. Unfortunately, one aspect of his planning didn't turn out the way he'd anticipated.

I wanted to keep my innocence, and I most certainly wanted to protect Amberlyn's innocence. She deserved that. We both did. A peace came over my heart, and I realized I'd fallen hard for Amberlyn.

Carla had drawn closer to me and kept giggling and laughing at everything Amberlyn said. She was making me nervous. As daughter of my high school varsity coach, she hung around our team all through high school. She knew way more about me than I was comfortable with. I even confided in her once about my crush on Amberlyn, and she tried to talk me into forgetting all about the cute, little, rich cheerleader who'd never give me the time of day. I was not in the least bit attracted to Carla and had distanced myself from her immediately after she said that.

The song flowing from the speakers shifted to a cheesy love song, and I slipped my hand into Amberlyn's. "May I have this dance," I asked close to her ear.

She turned to me with a sweet smile and willingly stepped away from the girls and into my arms on the dancefloor of our high school gym, right where a pair of seventeen-year-old kids should be.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Amberlyn

We made the rounds at the holiday ball. Between Aiden and me, we seemed to be friends with someone from every clique. We danced most of the slow songs, quite a few of the fast songs, and mingled in the downtime.

Skyler and Jonnie tore themselves apart long enough to socialize with the rest of us. Seeing them together officially as a couple rather than friends had been hard at first. Aiden helped me get past the awkward moment of realizing they were cheek to cheek on the dancefloor in an embrace like the night of the homecoming dance—the dance that caused a social media firestorm and eventually led to my breakup with Skyler.

I wondered how I would have handled seeing them together that night. I was in the ladies' room, chatting with my friends and touching up my hair and makeup, when somehow my best friend wound up in the arms of my boyfriend.

Would I have connected the dots? Would I have realized they'd fallen in love with each other right under my nose? Would I have figured out how naïve we all were trying to keep them apart? Would Skyler and I have broken up that night instead of me being humiliated in front of a whole stadium full of people?

That was then, and this is now. I was on the arm of the hottest guy in the school, Aiden Becker. Tall, strong, athletic, filled out in all the right ways. Aiden and I had chemistry, like *real* chemistry.

That was never a thing with Skyler. We had a lot of fun together. He held my hand and drove me to school and sent me Snapchats with heart emojis. We were goofy kids together. I missed that.

Which was probably why I didn't hesitate when Skyler suddenly hopped up from the chair where he sat with Jonnie across the table.

"Amberlyn, this is our song!" he called out and hurried around the table, grabbed my hand, and dragged me from my seat. "Come on, let's dance!"

Shut Up and Dance by Walk the Moon had been our song years ago, and we had a routine almost as choreographed as the music video.

Before I knew what was happening dozens of others were on the dancefloor with us. We spun and bounced and did breakdancing moves, and Skyler even flipped me over his arm as we'd practiced dozens of times back in the day.

At the chorus line the whole crowd yelled out, "Shut up and dance with me!"

My whole face must have lit up in smiles. I had my goofy friend back, and I was so excited. It didn't occur to me that Aiden hadn't joined us on the dancefloor until Skyler led me back to our table, grinning as widely as I was.

And then I noticed Aiden's glare. He wasn't happy.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Aiden

What the flippin' nightmare is this? Here we were enjoying the holiday ball, with friends all around us, when suddenly Amberlyn's ex-boyfriend, Skyler, stole her right from where she sat by my side.

We'd finally gotten past the awkwardness and could sit at the same table with Skyler and Jonnie without Amberlyn needing a box of tissues, and now this.

I watched in horror as the girl I'd fallen in love with danced and spun and gyrated and flipped and sang and yelled out, "Shut up and dance with me!" with her *ex-boyfriend*.

Skyler didn't deserve her. Skyler had left her, abandoned her, chosen Jonnie over her. I was the one who'd dried her tears. I was the one who'd driven her home the night of the accident and driven her to school the following week, and took her to get ice cream and McDonald's, and provided boxes and boxes of tissues. Okay, that's a minor exaggeration, but the point is valid.

I'm her boyfriend now. Not him.

I hadn't seen Amberlyn smile this wide in... I don't know? Forever? She was smiling, genuinely smiling. Smiling more than I'd ever seen her smile, definitely more than I'd ever *made* her smile.

Their dance wasn't just fun innocence; it was almost choreographed, like

they'd rehearsed it over and over. When he flipped her over his arm and held her, I wanted to scream. I almost stormed onto the dancefloor to rip her from his arms, but instead, I fumed from the sidelines.

When the song ended, Skyler hugged Amberlyn. Hugged her! As if he deserved to have her in his arms. I was shaking with anger by the time they walked in the direction of our table. I wasn't sure who I was angrier with, Amberlyn or Skyler?

It was obvious when Amberlyn noticed that I was upset. She stopped short, and the smile fell from her face. She bit her lower lip as if just realizing how her actions had made me feel.

I couldn't even speak. I stormed from the gym, slamming the doors behind me.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Amberlyn

“Aiden!” I called after him when he stormed out of the gym.
“Wait!”

I tried to follow him but running in strappy heels didn’t work well. Halfway across the gym, I slipped the straps off and picked up my shoes. By the time I got out the door, I wasn’t sure which direction he’d run.

The night was dark and cold. I ran into the parking lot in my bare feet, calling out Aiden’s name over and over. Within seconds of being outside, my feet were freezing and my voice hoarse. I trudged toward the door of the gym just as Skyler came out.

“Did you find him?” Skyler asked.

I shook my head and pouted. When I got close enough, I lowered my forehead so that it rested on Skyler’s shoulder, and he wrapped his arms around me.

“You’re freezing,” he said. Skyler took off his sport coat, wrapped it around me, and pulled me into his arms again. His smell

was so familiar, like coming home. Like nothing had ever separated us.

“He’s so mad at me,” I said, looking up at my ex-boyfriend. There was no romantic feeling between us, and I wondered if there ever had been. Skyler was a friend. A close, wonderful, special friend.

“He’ll forgive you,” Skyler said. “He’s just jealous. If he knew how little romance there ever was between you and me, he’d laugh this off.”

“I know, right.” I smiled and chuckled. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

“That there was no romance between us?” Skyler grinned.

“Yeah, I mean, we had a ton of fun, like, being your girlfriend was probably the highlight of my high school years, and dancing together like that”—I pointed toward the closed gym door—“just brought it all back. You were so much fun to hang out with. I miss that.”

“I miss that too.” Skyler’s smile fell, and his shoulders slumped. “I wish there was a way to have that part back without making Aiden and Jonnie jealous.”

“Jonnie probably wouldn’t even be jealous,” I said. “She’s had a front-row seat to our relationship since day one. Nothing would even faze her.”

“Probably not.” Skyler’s face took on a playful expression. “So... you and Aiden, huh? Things are getting pretty serious.”

“We seem to be taking two steps forward and one step back all the time,” I said. “Just when things fall into place, something happens to mess them up.”

“Eh, relationships go through ups and downs,” Skyler said, brushing off my concern. “You’ll get through this... if it’s meant to be.”

“Gee, thanks for the pep talk,” I said.

“Well, think about it, what if someone had told us a few months ago that you and I would get through our ups and downs?” He raised his eyebrows. “Some relationships were never meant to be.”

“I guess you’re right.” I sighed.

“But you and Aiden look really cute together,” Skyler said, pushing my shoulder gently. “I’d like to see you guys pull through.”

“Thanks, Skyler,” I said. “That means a lot to me.” I leaned into him, and he wrapped his arms around me again. He held me like that for a few seconds, and then he kissed my forehead.

“Let’s get you inside,” Skyler said. “You’re freezing.” We pulled away from each other, and Skyler reached for the door... which was locked from the inside.

“Oh no, we’re stuck out here.” I could hear the pounding beat of the music from the speakers, knowing the chance of anyone hearing us knock was slim.

“Come on, it’s not that far around the side of the building to the main door.” We started into the parking lot, and my feet immediately crunched on gravel.

“Ow, Skyler, I can’t do this.” I grabbed hold of his arm, cringing in pain.

“Here, I’ll carry you.” Skyler gathered me into his strong arms and carried me like a baby.

I leaned my head back and laughed as he picked up his pace, almost running into the dark toward the main door.

We must have looked like two crazy people coming in the door to the foyer outside the gym, faces flushed from the cold, Skyler carrying me, me carrying my shoes and wearing his coat over my skimpy cocktail dress, both of us laughing like little kids.

As Skyler set me on my feet, Aiden walked in the doors right behind us.

From the murderous glare Aiden gave Skyler, I could tell he was

angrier than he'd been ten minutes ago.

On a hunch, I stepped in between the two of them and placed my hands onto Aiden's chest, pushing him gently back and hopefully preventing him from rearranging Skyler's face.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Aiden

Watching Skyler lift Amberlyn into his arms and head off into the dark had been the last straw. Heck no was I gonna let that happen. I might have been angry, but she was worth fighting for.

I opened my truck door and removed the key from the ignition, turning off the engine, heater, and hard rock station I'd used to distract me from watching my girlfriend and her ex-boyfriend have a meaningful heart-to-heart conversation in the glow of the overhead light above the gym door.

His taking off his jacket and draping it over her shoulders had nearly broken my resolve. Knowing she was probably freezing was the only thing that stopped me from leaving the warmth of my truck, where I still needed a few more minutes to cool off before confronting her.

My limitations, and my patience, were yet unknown. I didn't trust myself not to yell at her or knock him onto the pavement. The last thing I needed was to get suspended from school for fighting at the holiday dance.

When he pulled her into his arms—twice—and kissed her on the forehead, I gripped my steering wheel as if it was the only thing keeping me in the cab of my truck.

But his lifting her into his arms. It was over. I ran into the night after them until I realized where he was taking her—the main entrance to the foyer outside the gym. Of course. They'd gotten locked out when I'd stormed out the side door of the gym and they'd both come after me.

I took a deep breath to calm myself down and opened the door just as Skyler was setting Amberlyn onto her feet.

Their smiles fell when they saw me walk in the door behind them, and Amberlyn rushed over to me, stepping in between me and Skyler, probably worried I was going to punch him.

Thought about it.

Several times.

I looked into Amberlyn's flushed face and regretted that my actions had been what led her out into the cold night. I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her into my arms, glaring at Skyler over her head.

To his credit, Skyler backed away, lifted his hands in surrender, and hurried into the gym, leaving me and Amberlyn standing there in the foyer.

I wasn't sure what to say.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Amberlyn

“Aiden, I am so sorry.”

“What exactly are you sorry about?” he asked through gritted teeth.

“Umm... dancing with Skyler?” Was I though? Not really. “Letting him carry me in his arms?” Nope, my feet wouldn’t have made it across that parking lot. What was I sorry about?

“Letting him hug you twice? Or kiss you on the forehead? Or wearing his coat?” Aiden lifted my arm by the fabric of Skyler’s coat, which was still keeping me warm.

“Would you rather have me stand out there and freeze?” I snapped. “After chasing you into the night because you stormed out of the gym rather than talk to me about how you felt when I danced with Skyler.”

“Your *ex*-boyfriend,” Aiden pointed out.

“Yes, my *ex*-boyfriend,” I said, pushing him. “Someone you shouldn’t feel threatened by because he’s my *ex*-boyfriend, as in past tense, prior to now, no longer in my life.” I pushed him again

and again.

“Someone you were still crying about a few days ago.”

“Weeks ago, not days.”

“An hour ago, you practically had tears in your eyes watching him dance with his new girlfriend and you expect me to believe you don’t still have feelings for him?” Aiden’s voice was almost as loud as mine, and he was probably restraining himself from pushing me back.

“I do still have feelings for him,” I said. “But not *romantic* feelings.”

“Yeah, right.” Aiden folded his arms and looked away. “I find that difficult to believe.”

“Believe what you want. It’s the truth.” I mirrored his stance, and we stood there at an impasse.

“Hey, guys,” Taylor called softly into the foyer. “They want everyone in here for a group photo. Do you think you can take the gloves off for a few minutes and come in for the picture?”

“Fine,” Aiden said, stepping around me and following Taylor.

“Whatever,” I said, and fell in behind him.

Almost every one of the 250 athletes from Grand Haven High School had chosen to attend the holiday ball, and attempting to capture a group photo was not easy.

I stood reluctantly next to Aiden, whose smile was strained, wishing for this night to be over. My feet hurt, I was still freezing, especially after giving Skyler back his sport coat, and I was tired of arguing.

But Matt and Trina had gone to too much trouble pulling together this fundraiser and service project for me to mess up their night. Matt stood bravely on crutches, and I could tell he was ready for this night to be over also. He’d appreciate his wheelchair after the dance but was in good spirits considering his entire basketball season was destroyed because of his injury.

Trina looked amazing in an emerald dress and her auburn curls pulled into an elegant updo accentuating a beautiful lei of flowers around her neck. She was so sweet to have brought us all together. For her alone, I would smile for this picture if it killed me.

Surrounding me on all sides were kids I'd hung out with for years, some newer than others. Standing next to Aiden was his pitcher, Taylor, who had escorted Ariane, the reason we all were here.

To the left of Taylor was the baseball team's catcher, Russ, whose girlfriend, Julianne, glowed from the tiny sparkling diamond engagement ring on her left hand and their baby growing inside her.

Jayce and Elizabeth had arrived together, although I wasn't sure if they were actually dating or just working together for this service project.

Bella from my cheerleading squad clung to Connor from the football team even though he seemed to be distracted by Addie from the volleyball team. That could bring out some cat claws later.

Dylan was holding his girlfriend, Christine, who was ready for her senior year of basketball even though she'd already signed a commitment letter to play for the University of Michigan next year.

My ex-boyfriend, Skyler, who'd recently accepted a full ride scholarship to play football for Central Michigan University had his arm around his supermodel girlfriend, my best friend, Jonnie, who also happened to be the best wide receiver Grand Haven High football team ever boasted.

We were an eclectic group. These were my friends. My teammates. Something about sports pulled everyone together. I leaned against Aiden and let my head fall onto his shoulder just as the photographer captured the shot, forever memorializing this moment. The moment when every high school athlete at our school had come together to bring sporting equipment to a group of kids

on the other side of the world. They had no idea what we'd just done.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Aiden

“You ready to get outta here?” I asked Amberlyn as the group dispersed. Some couples headed back to the dancefloor, some people went straight to the snack table, or stood around in groups, talking.

“Sure,” Amberlyn mumbled, still carrying her shoes and walking around barefoot.

“Would you like me to *carry* you,” I sneered sarcastically.

“Yes, actually, I would.” Her voice was nearly as sarcastic as mine. “It’s your fault my feet are torn apart and covered in gravel, not to mention freezing.”

“Fine, come on.” I scooped her into my arms awkwardly while she scowled. We didn’t even bother saying goodbye to any of our friends. Probably the angry expressions on both of our faces was a deterrent from anyone approaching us.

Without another word, I shoved open the door between the foyer and the parking lot with my shoulder, leaving the same way she and Skyler had come in. We trudged along in silence until we came

to my truck, and I fumbled to open the door with her in my arms.

With a little jostling, I deposited Amberlyn onto the front seat of my truck but kept her legs facing out. I picked up one of her feet, being careful not to lift her leg too high that she'd think I was trying to look up her skirt.

I felt terrible. Her feet were a mess. I had a solution but wasn't sure she'd be willing to trust me. I decided to just commit to my idea and hope she didn't argue. After swinging her legs all the way into the cab of the truck, I pulled the seatbelt across her lap and clicked it into place. We still had yet to say anything to each other, and I avoided eye contact. Shutting the passenger door, I walked around the front and climbed in the driver's seat.

"Where are you taking me?" Amberlyn asked when we passed the road that led to her subdivision.

"My house." I didn't explain further, and she didn't ask any more questions.

My mom worked third shift tonight and wouldn't be home for hours. The house was dark when we pulled in my driveway, but Amberlyn didn't protest when I came around the truck and lifted her from the passenger seat and carried her up the front porch steps.

Once again fumbling with my set of keys, I unlocked the door one-handed and flicked on the hallway light. Leaning against the wall, I kicked off my dress shoes and lumbered up the staircase to the second floor.

Amberlyn didn't question my actions when I took her through my mom's bedroom and into her adjoining bathroom where a large garden tub had a variety of bath salts and oils and lotions. After setting her on the side of the tub and swinging her legs in, I started the water and waited until I'd adjusted the temperature with just enough heat to steam up the room but not enough to burn her.

"I'm gonna go grab you some shorts and a T-shirt to change into so you can soak your feet," I mumbled without waiting for a

response.

My bedroom was down the hall, and I pawed through my drawers until I found an old pair of sweat shorts that were almost too small for me and had a drawstring. I had a collection of T-shirts from my days in little league that my mom refused to throw away for sentimental reasons, so I found one that looked about the right size.

Back in my mom's bathroom, Amberlyn was searching through my mom's collection of body washes and oils and other scented additives. She found a bath bomb that exploded purple swirls into the water and must have felt heavenly on her feet because she moaned, and her shoulders relaxed.

"Here are some clothes," I said, putting them on the little settee nestled into the vanity. "I'll go change out of my suit and be back in a few minutes." I handed her a towel and pulled the door shut behind myself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Amberlyn

This bathroom was the nicest, most luxurious space I'd ever had the privilege to occupy. I never wanted to leave. Aiden had made a good choice bringing me here if he was trying to make amends. The elegant tile floor was accented with plush rugs and strategically placed fluffy towels, all tastefully coordinated in muted tones of taupe and champagne. The vanity mirror was lined with bulbs that seemed the perfect wattage for applying cosmetics, an impressive collection of which was organized on the vanity.

The garden tub had side and back jets and was big enough for two. My mind wandered to the boy in the next room who was taking off his clothes in much the same way I was. I forced away that thought as I climbed into a pair of his old sweat shorts that were easily ten sizes too large. The shirt was closer to my size and looked like something Aiden had worn in elementary school.

When I was finished changing, I opened the door a crack and climbed onto the side of the tub, letting my feet drop into the water that reached almost to my knees. If I was alone, I'd strip to nothing

and climb all the way in. But I wanted—no, needed—to talk to Aiden.

A soft knock at the partially opened door was the only indication that he'd come back into the room, and then Aiden climbed onto the edge of the tub beside me. He was wearing shorts that looked more like a swimsuit and a comfortable T-shirt. In his hand, he held a soft washcloth.

Without saying a word, Aiden reached into the water and wet the washcloth. After searching through the collection of bath products his mom had on the low shelf, he found a cleansing gel with essential oils and dolloped some onto the cloth. Then he reached for one of my feet.

There was nothing more romantic than having the guy you like wash your feet. I almost moaned out loud. Okay, I might have actually moaned out loud as Aiden gently cleaned the gravel and tar from the bottom of my foot.

The second foot wasn't nearly as easy. In order for him to reach my left foot he had to either twist my leg in a contorted way or lean over me. He finally just stepped into the tub for easier access. I could have moved over so he could sit on my other side, but I was having way too much fun watching him struggle. I giggled once and then clapped my hand over my mouth.

Aiden pinched his lips together, and I could tell he was trying to keep from laughing. He washed the second foot more quickly, tickling me. That did it. The giggle that escaped this time racked through my body, and I shivered, hunching my shoulders.

“You think this is funny?” Aiden was still pinching his face, and I could tell he was not far from losing control also.

With my right foot, I kicked just a little water at him, drenching his shorts and startling him.

“Be careful,” Aiden warned in a low growl.

“Of what?” I bit my lower lip when he and I finally looked each

other in the eye for the first time in half an hour.

“Don’t start a water fight with someone standing in a bathtub.” He leaned closer so that he was towering over me, his hands bracing himself against the tile enclosure.

“What will happen to me if I do?” I lifted my chin so that my face was closer to his. A few more inches, and we could have kissed.

“You don’t want to know,” his husky voice warned me.

Ignoring his warning, I lifted my foot out of the water a little and splashed him again.

“You really are asking for trouble.” His warning was more playful this time, and that scared me more than his growl. I tried hard not to laugh out loud as I splashed him the third time.

Aiden didn’t bother splashing me back, just grabbed me around the waist and pulled me into the deep tub, dunking us both in the water that was now almost up to our chests.

“You brat!” I squirmed half-heartedly to get out of his arms. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“Three times you splashed me, woman,” Aiden said. “You know what happens when you get three strikes in baseball?”

“I don’t know,” I egged him on, turning so I could look him in the eye. “What happens when you get three strikes in baseball?”

His face softened, and his countenance stilled. He tucked a lock of wet curl behind my ear, and his fingers hovered along my jawline, his thumb inching closer to my lips.

I could barely breathe, listening to the water rush into the nearly full tub, inhaling the steam that hovered in the room like fog, and feeling every nerve ending in my body come alive.

“You’re mine,” Aiden whispered. The statement wasn’t possessive or jealous; his words were a declaration of wonder. “I still have to pinch myself sometimes, not fully willing to believe that you really are... mine.”

“I’m yours, Aiden,” I whispered. “Believe me.”

“I believe you.” His face hovered closer, his lips inches from mine. When he shifted to pull me toward him, water sloshed over the side of the tub. “Oops.”

Barely breaking eye contact, Aiden turned off the faucet. I waited for him to return to his seated position in front of me. His T-shirt was soaked almost up to the neck, and he leaned closer.

I closed the distance, and our lips met, causing a frenzy to course through my veins. I climbed practically on his lap, both of us soaked through, my hands in his hair, his hands on my back, both pulling each other closer.

As if by some unspoken communication, we stopped kissing each other and pressed our foreheads together, breathing heavy but still in control.

“Amberlyn?” Aiden whispered.

“Yes?” My whisper was barely a breath.

“I would *never* do that to you,” he said.

I thought I knew his underlying message, but I wanted him to say it out loud. “What would you never do?” We pulled farther apart and looked one another in the eye.

“I would never... compromise you.” He took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “I would never put you in the position Julianne is in. I won’t. I won’t put either of us in that position.”

“I know.” I gulped. “I trust you.”

“You must trust me.” Aiden chuckled. “You’re sitting in a bathtub with me.”

“Fully clothed.” I held up my finger to make a point.

“Making out with me... in a bathtub.”

“Again, fully clothed.” I raised my eyebrows.

“Wearing *my* clothes.” He raised his eyebrows right back.

“What’s your point?”

“I think I must trust you as much as you trust me.” He ran his

hands down my wet arms and lifted my hands out of the water, kissing each of my knuckles.

“Am I allowed to say those three little words first? Or does conventional tradition require that I wait for you to say them before I can?”

“How about if we say them at the same time?” He nodded almost imperceptibly.

We each took a deep breath as if we were silently counting to three and then whispered, “I love you.

CHAPTER FORTY

Aiden

Now that Amberlyn and I had admitted we loved each other and committed to respecting each other's bodies, as much as a seventeen-year-old guy was physically capable, dating was easier.

Ahem.

If I can make out with my girlfriend in a bathtub and not take advantage of her, I can do just about anything.

Except double date with her ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend. She was testing my ability to keep my cool.

"Skyler, can we talk?" I leaned against the locker next to his, capitalizing on a rare moment when neither of the girls had classes anywhere near ours.

"Uh, sure." Skyler visibly gulped and slipped his books onto the shelf in his locker. He grabbed his gym bag, closed the locker door, and spun the combination dial. We started toward the wing where the gym was located, neither of us breaking the silence. Finally, Skyler cleared his throat. "So... talk."

"I'm sorry about how I reacted Saturday night."

“Probably should be apologizing to Amberlyn, not me,” he said.

“I already have. But you deserve an explanation.”

“I get it. You’re jealous.” Skyler shrugged. “If you knew she was more like a sister to me, you wouldn’t be jealous.”

“I realize that now,” I said. “But can you understand how I feel? You’ve always been the hot guy all the girls fawned over and I was the short, fat kid who had a crush on the prettiest girl on the cheerleading squad, who happened to be dating the hot guy. You have been my competition since our freshman year homecoming dance.”

“I had no idea you had a crush on Amberlyn,” Skyler said.

“There was zero chance of the two of you breaking up. What was I supposed to do?”

“Is it true what people are saying about you helping to break us up?” He stopped and pulled my shoulder to stop me from walking away.

“I dunno.” I shuffled my feet. “I didn’t think of it that way. All I knew was that you being with Amberlyn was breaking Jonnie’s heart and the longer you delayed the inevitable, the harder it was going to be for everyone involved.”

“But you had no problem swooping in and making a move on Amberlyn the minute I was out of the picture.” There was a mild hint of annoyance creeping into his voice.

“Do you really have a *problem* with that?” I narrowed my eyes. I didn’t mean to; it just happened.

“I’m very protective of her, like I would be if she were my sister,” he said.

“Guys don’t usually make out with their sister.” I folded my arms across my chest.

“Which is probably why Amberlyn and I never made out.” He mimicked my stance.

“Ever?” I raised my eyebrow, skepticism lacing my voice.

“We tried a couple times... a long time ago,” he admitted. “But it was awkward. Almost like kissing my sister.”

I shuddered involuntarily. Then I thought about the few times Amberlyn and I had made out, and it definitely wasn't like kissing my sister. We resumed walking toward the gym, the other kids in the hallway oblivious to our conversation. I mumbled one more thought before we headed into the locker room. “I'm in love with Amberlyn.”

“I know.” Skyler stopped me and put his arm on my shoulder. “Don't break her heart, man.”

I almost asked out loud, *like you did?* But I just raised one eyebrow. He beat me to it.

“Like I did.” Skyler lowered his gaze and pursed his lips.

“I won't break her heart,” I promised.

He reached out his hand, and we pulled each other into a half hug and then both cleared our throats and shoved each other away, chuckling. One more apology out of the way.

“Oh, and, uh, she wants the four of us to go on a double date next weekend...”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Amberlyn

The four of us met Friday night at Shea's Diner to discuss what we should plan for our double date.

"Do you realize we have very little in common besides football?" Aiden asked, his arm draped around the back of the booth, his hand absentmindedly twirling the curls at the end of my ponytail. We'd placed our orders and waited for our burgers, nothing else to do besides try to figure out something we could do together.

Skyler's creased brow and slacked jaw showed him trying to pull something out of the sky and failing.

"Not that I don't like football," Aiden said. "But not all of us can be famous celebrities, little miss pro-football player." Aiden reached across the table to jostle Jonnie's arm.

"Actually... uh..." Jonnie hesitated and fiddled with her napkin. Skyler lifted her hand in his and gave her a soft smile and a little nod of encouragement. "I turned down their offer."

"You did what?" I pushed away from the table, grasping at the

cheap Formica to steady myself. “When? Why? When were you going to tell me?”

“Just a few days ago,” Jonnie said. “They really weren’t offering much money and I want to go to college.”

“Not much money?” Aiden asked. “It’s pro-football. That’s bank.”

“Not for women’s leagues,” Jonnie said. “It’s not the same as for guys.”

“Why not?” I folded my arms across my chest, suddenly aggravated. The closet feminist in me seethed even as I glanced down at my clenched fists with my perfectly manicured fingernails digging into the palms of my hands.

“There’s not a demand for female football players,” Jonnie explained. “The only reason the NFL can pay their players so much is because they fill stadiums. Guy football players are like rock stars.”

“Well, *you’re* a rock star in my opinion,” I said, pouting.

“So where are you going to college, then?” Aiden asked.

“Central Michigan.” Skyler chuckled and Jonnie giggled beside him. “She wants to be near her favorite rock star.”

“Oh yeah, and the free tuition wasn’t a factor.” Jonnie slugged Skyler’s shoulder.

“Why do you get free tuition?” Aiden asked.

“My dad’s a professor there,” Jonnie said. “Money is a motivating factor.”

“Did you guys hear the bad news?” Skyler asked, his brow lowering. “Trina didn’t bring in enough money to mail all the sporting equipment overseas.”

“But we had a silent auction,” Aiden said.

“And all proceeds from the dance went to shipping costs,” Jonnie said. “How much are we short?”

“She won’t know until Monday when we get it all boxed up but

probably at least \$1,000 short still,” Skyler said.

“A thousand dollars?” My voice was a little loud, and I lowered the volume. “Where are we going to come up with that kind of money by Monday?”

“We don’t have to have the money by Monday, right?” Jonnie asked. “I’m sure if we can get everything boxed up and ready to go, maybe we’ll get some last-minute donations.”

“We can hope,” Aiden said.

“Hey, we should go over to the batting cages, and Aiden can show you how well he’s hitting,” I suggested. “I know that wouldn’t use up enough time for a whole double date, but it would be something that didn’t involve football.”

They all gaped at me as if I was crazy.

“That’s actually kind of a good idea,” Jonnie said. “I didn’t even know Aiden played baseball until a few weeks ago.”

“You still setting your pitching machine to ninety-five, man?” Skyler asked.

“I’ve gone as high as ninety-eight, actually,” Aiden said, coughing lightly. I couldn’t tell if he was being humble or pretending to be humble. Either way, ninety-eight was incredibly impressive. “I haven’t been brave enough to try anything faster.”

Suddenly, a gentleman in the next booth turned all the way around and looked right at Aiden. “I thought I heard a familiar voice back there.”

“Coach Jones!” Aiden hopped up from the booth and strode over to shake the man’s hand. He stood and gave Aiden a half-hug.

“Please, call me Anton,” the man said. “We’re outside the cage after all, and there are no young, impressionable minds to keep focused on baseball.”

“Thanks, coach, but I wouldn’t want to get out of the habit and slip in front of the kids,” Aiden said. He pulled the man by his arm and led him to our table. “Coach, I’d like you to meet my friends.

This is Skyler Morgan, who just committed to CMU for football next season.”

“Nice to meet you, Skyler.” Anton Jones reached across the table to shake Skyler’s hand.

“Likewise, coach,” Skyler said, standing halfway and shaking the man’s hand respectfully and then lowering himself into his seat.

“And this is our local celebrity, Jonnie Gillis, Grand Haven’s best wide-receiver.”

“Oh please,” Jonnie said, shaking her head at Aiden and then shaking hands with Anton. “Pleasure to meet you, coach.”

I wondered why Aiden didn’t introduce me first, or why he didn’t tell us who this guy was.

“And this”—Aiden paused dramatically and lifted me from my seat by pulling my hand gently like a gentleman inviting a lady to dance—“Is the lovely Amberlyn Jamison. My girlfriend.”

I smiled at Aiden and couldn’t pull my gaze away nor did his eyes leave mine as he addressed me.

“Amberlyn, this is Coach Anton Jones, the owner of Strike Zone, where I spend a large percentage of the time when I’m not at your side. He’s been my mentor for years.”

I finally turned my head to where Aiden’s coach stood with a gleam in his eyes.

“The honor is mine, Miss Amberlyn.” Anton nodded almost regally. “Great to finally meet the woman who has captured my young padawan’s heart and sent his head into the clouds.”

My cheeks warmed, and I held out my hand as the others had done. “Nice to meet you, coach.”

“Now,” Anton said. “There is someone I’d like *you* all to meet.”

I thought he was going to bring his wife over to meet us, but instead he draped his arm around Aiden’s shoulders.

“This fine young man is the soon-to-be-famous Aiden Becker, who is weeks away from choosing whether to go to college,

university, or professional baseball.”

Aiden pursed his lips and lowered his gaze to where his feet shuffled nervously. He hadn’t told me he’d already considered going pro.

I was reminded of the conversation with Jonnie about the professional team that had approached her and how they weren’t planning to pay her well. There was also the issue with college. Did Aiden want to go to college? We’d never really discussed that. Something else about the coach’s statement confused me.

“What do you mean he needs to choose between college *or* university?” I asked, creasing my brow. “Aren’t they the same thing?”

“Not if he’s considering eligibility for drafting,” Anton explained. “Once he signs with a Division I university, he will be ineligible for the draft until after his junior year.”

“Even for minor leagues?” Skyler asked, resting his elbows on the table.

“Even for minors.” Anton nodded thoughtfully. “But if he plays ball for a *community college*, he’s eligible at any time. That’s the path a lot of players opt for so they can get some experience at the college level while still being considered by scouts.”

“You mentioned a third option.” I gulped and wrapped my arms around Aiden’s giant bicep, almost possessively, like I was trying to hold him here with me. “Isn’t he a little young to be considered for professional teams?” Even as I said the words, I realized Jonnie had recently been offered a similar option and had turned it down.

“It’s very rare,” Anton said, releasing Aiden’s shoulder and stepping back to take a look at him with false scrutiny. “But with a body like his—tall, powerful, strong.”

“Lots of people are tall and strong,” Jonnie said. “What makes Aiden different?”

“HitTrax,” Aiden said, speaking for the first time since his coach

started bragging about him. He held his head confidently. “The real-time data analysis and video capture has been a game changer. Scouts don’t have to come to meet me or wait for me to mail them a DVD or something. It’s all right there for them to see.”

“He’s inching toward the Top 25 Leaderboard,” Anton said, raising his eyebrows at Aiden as if scolding him. “The only thing holding him back is his lack of confidence. As he mentioned a moment ago, he just needs to be brave enough to turn the pitching machine up a notch or two.”

Aiden lowered his gaze again and cleared his throat. “Anyway.”

I knew one thing that was a cause of insecurity in his life, and I intended to address the issue later when I could talk to him alone. This was not the time or place.

“Now, let’s discuss something a little closer to the present,” Anton said. “You need a way to raise some money for a friend. Maybe I can help. Tell me about the project.”

“The athletes at our high school got a bunch of donated sporting equipment, and we’re trying to send it to the Ivory Coast,” Skyler said. “Our foreign exchange student says none of her schools have any sporting equipment. Volunteers are showing up Monday morning to package it all up, but we haven’t raised enough money for the shipping costs yet.”

“And you’re down by a thousand bucks?” Anton asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Approximately,” Skyler replied with a shrug.

“Consider it done.” Anton nodded his head once definitely. The four of us just stared at him in confusion.

“Consider what done?” Aiden asked.

“I’ll donate the rest of the money that’s needed,” Anton said.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Aiden’s jaw dropped. He almost sounded like he was choking up. “Thank you, coach. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome, kid. It’s for a good cause.” Anton stepped back as a waitress came up next to him with a tray of burgers. “Let’s talk tomorrow when you come for practice.”

Aiden hugged his coach before he returned to his table, and Aiden sat down at ours.

“I don’t even know what to say right now,” Skyler said.

I was thinking the same thing. Aside from the money, Aiden’s life was potentially going to change very soon. I wasn’t sure where I fit into his long-term plans if he hadn’t even talked to me about them.

“I say, ‘Let’s eat!’” Aiden picked up the bottle of ketchup and squirted a large dollop on the side of his plate next to his fries and then picked up his burger and took a large bite.

I picked at my bun as everyone else ate heartily and wondered what was wrong with me. Why couldn’t I be proud of Aiden? Or excited for him? I’d just been handed a bit of information I wasn’t sure how to digest, but my discomfort had nothing to do with the hamburger in front of me.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Aiden

As I walked into the high school gym with Coach Anton Jones by my side, I was amazed at what had already been accomplished in so little time.

There were a surprising number of teenage volunteers for the first Monday of Christmas vacation. You'd think they'd sleep in. Some were organizing sporting equipment, others were packing and sealing boxes, and some had taken a break to dig into the boxes of pizzas laid out on a long table.

Over the past few weeks, donations of used sporting equipment had trickled in and filled the overflow gym. Now that school was out, all the remaining donations arrived in trucks and trailers from where kids had stored them in their garages for a few days.

The team of volunteers had spread everything out in the large gym, dividing equipment into groups—all the footballs together with shoulder pads and helmets; the baseball bats, gloves, and balls; the volleyballs; the basketballs; soccer balls and shin guards; etc. There were even donated cleats and practice jerseys and

uniforms. I looked around in awe.

I found Trina standing by the pizza table, looking exhausted but resigned to the need for a break and a bite to eat. We headed in her direction, and her eyes widened when she saw me and my coach.

“Hey, Trina,” I said. “This is my friend Anton Jones. He’s the owner of Strike Zone, where I work out at the batting cages.”

“Hi, Mr. Jones.” Trina rubbed her hands along her jeans to wipe off the pizza grease and stuck out her right hand to shake his.

“Trina, I understand you’re the young lady who started this whole project.” Anton’s tone was complimentary. “What you’ve done here is very impressive.”

“Thank you, sir.” She brushed a stray lock of hair away from her face, tucking it back into its ponytail. “It’s sort of gotten the better of me.”

“I understand you raised several thousand dollars to ship all the equipment to the Ivory Coast.”

“Yes, the community was very generous with donations to the silent auction and most of the student body bought tickets to the dance.”

“I’d like to cover the remaining cost for shipping,” Anton said.

Trina almost fell over. Matt’s arms encircled her from behind, holding her up, causing one of his crutches to clank to the gym floor. I stepped over to lift the crutch off the floor and tucked it back under Matt’s arm.

“Your hard work should not be in vain,” Anton said. “I want you to box this all up and get it ready to be shipped, and when it’s time, whatever you can’t afford to ship, I’ll make up the difference.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Jones.” Trina pulled away from Matt and threw herself right into Anton’s arms, her emotions overflowing. This had been the last big hurdle to overcome, and Coach Jones had answered the call.

Other kids gathered around to see what was going on, and Trina

pulled away, tears streaming down her face.

“We did it, you guys!” Trina called out. “Mr. Jones has donated the rest of the money we needed. All of this stuff is going to Africa!” There were enthusiastic cheers and applause and high fives around the room.

Trina turned back to Matt and wrapped her arms around him, nearly knocking him down. Thankfully Dylan was standing beside him and kept him from losing any more crutches.

“Thank you for all your help, and for believing in me and not letting me get discouraged,” Trina said to her boyfriend.

“You’re welcome,” he spoke close to her ear. “Your sweet idea inspired a whole community.”

While the two of them were having a sappy moment together, a couple kids from the football team lifted a box of packing peanuts and dumped them on Trina’s head like a jug of Gatorade on their coach after a winning game.

That started a packing peanut war that ended with bits of Styrofoam strewn from one end of the gym to the other. A little fun reprieve before everyone got back to work.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Amberlyn

“Can I trust you two to behave yourselves?” my mom asked, as she set a big bowl of popcorn on the end table. “Or should I send your brother and sister back here to watch the movie with you?”

“Mrs. Jamison,” Aiden said with a straight face. “You should never trust a seventeen-year-old boy with your daughter.”

“That’s great advice, Aiden.” Mom stifled a laugh. “Good thing you turned eighteen last week.”

“I know, right.” Aiden made a show of wiping his brow as if he’d dodged a bullet.

Mom winked at me as she left the game room, and I snuggled into Aiden’s arms, kicking my feet up onto the ottoman at the end of the overstuffed sofa.

“Do you ever wish we were all grown up and could just close that door and turn the lock?” Aiden’s soft voice close to my ear was a stark contrast to the playful way he’d been teasing my mom.

“Every time I kiss you,” I whispered, wrapping my arms around him so that my right arm was crushed between him and the sofa

back.

“Probably best if you don’t kiss me tonight.” He sighed and pulled me closer. “Darn it. Why’d you have to get me thinking about that?”

“You started it,” I said, smacking him on his stomach, which had zero give. “Dang, you been doing crunches? You have abs of steel all of a sudden.” I left my hand on his stomach, tracing the definitions of his six pack.

“Ever since I started dating you, I work out a lot more than I used to.”

“You do?” I looked up at him. “Why?”

“The same reason I’m not going to kiss you,” Aiden said through clenched teeth.

“Oh...” I chuckled lightly. “Sorry. Is this bothering you? Having me in your arms?”

“Yep...”

“Do you want me to move?”

“Nope.”

“You gonna behave yourself?” I asked.

“I’m gonna try,” I said. “And when I’ve tested my own limits, I’m gonna call up Jonnie, and we’re gonna go for our nightly run, and then I’m gonna go home and take a cold shower and pretend we never had this conversation.”

“Y’er funny, Aiden.” I laid my head on his shoulder, still wrapped completely around him and hoping he didn’t ask me to move anytime soon. We both took a deep breath and sighed at the same time.

“You said on the phone that you wanted to talk to me about something,” Aiden said quietly. “What’s on your mind?”

“The future,” I said. “Our future.”

Aiden pulled away and looked down at me with creased brows. “What’s got you concerned?”

“How do you know I’m concerned?” I asked, pulling my gaze away and resuming tracing patterns on his stomach.

“Let’s see, your tone of voice, your pursed lips, the way you’re avoiding eye contact.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were considering going pro right out of high school?”

“I actually *did* tell you that,” he said.

“When?” I searched my memory for any time he’d mentioned the possibility.

“During our first date.” His playful voice was toying with me.

“Which first date?” My mind flashed scenes of kissing at the end of the pier and having the frigid waters of Lake Michigan attacking us. Nope, nothing about baseball.

“In the drive through line at McDonalds when you weren’t hungry, and I was—”

“And I asked you what college you wanted to play for?”

“And do you remember my answer?” Aiden asked.

“You asked which major league team...”

“And have you chosen one yet?” he asked me.

“What?” I sat up a little further to get a better look at him. “Why would I choose where you were going to play?”

“Because I’ll want you there beside me.” Aiden searched my eyes and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear.

I gulped, my heart racing. “Like... forever?”

“I mean... I don’t wanna be presumptuous, but, yeah, kinda.” He stammered.

“Really?” I smiled, suddenly shy and unsure.

“You’ll probably want to go to college and stuff, right?” Aiden cleared his throat as if gathering courage. “I don’t want to put any pressure on you to make forever kind of decisions, but you should know where my heart is leading me.”

“There are colleges, like, everywhere, right?” I bit my lower lip.

“Everywhere.” Aiden nodded.

“So, it really wouldn’t matter which team we chose, as long as we were together.”

“As long as we’re together,” he affirmed, nodding again.

I forgot about my need to keep my distance and threw myself back into his arms, kissing him with all the passion and relief I felt at knowing he wanted a future that included me.

“Dang it, woman!” Aiden pulled away suddenly and gently pushed me away. “You are going to be the death of me.”

I giggled. “Sorry. Would you like me to call Jonnie for you?”

He sat up and put his elbows on his knees, leaning forward as if he was going to stand. “You’re lucky I have super-human willpower.”

I rested my chin on his shoulder, kneeling on the sofa and hugging him from behind, thankful he had super-human willpower and at the same time wishing he didn’t.

Aiden turned his face toward mine so that our foreheads were touching. “I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you too.”

“One more kiss, and then I’m leaving,” Aiden said. With care and control he closed the distance between us and kissed me gently with just a hint of passion blanketed by his superhuman willpower. Before pulling away he closed his eyes and took one long breath as if memorizing my scent. “Goodnight, Amberlyn.”

“Goodnight, Aiden,” I whispered back.

“I look forward to the day when I can whisper that to you as we’re turning off our bedroom lights,” he mumbled.

“Have a nice run,” I teased in a sing-song voice. “Bundle up. It’s cold out there.”

He grumbled something unintelligible as he pushed himself off the sofa and called to me as he left the game room and headed down the hall. “Tell Jonnie to meet me outside in two minutes.”

“I’m already dialing her number,” I answered, choosing the top number on my contacts list. The person whose name had been in my contacts list longer than my own parents. Before she even said hello, her sympathetic voice came through the line.

“Let me guess,” Jonnie said. “I need my running shoes and a pair of mittens.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Aiden

“We’re going to start off slow and try to elevate your top speed one mph every other day until you’re in the Top 25 on the HitTrax Leaderboard,” Coach Anton Jones told me.

Although I was still nervous, his confidence in me, and Amberlyn cheering me on, helped boost my self-esteem enough to embrace his plan. I nodded my affirmation and stepped into the cage.

I glanced up at the railing where Amberlyn was watching quietly from the lounge. She knew not to call out and distract me, but she did give me a little smile, and I smiled back and then refocused.

This wasn’t difficult. There was no reason why I hadn’t already upped my game. This was all mindset, and I now had everything in place to make this happen. My body was honed. I’d been running with Jonnie nearly every day for five months, lifting weights, eating right, and practicing in the batting cages at least once a day.

My coaches had trained me well, and I’d been following their advice, adjusting my speed every few minutes to prepare for the

changing environment of a high school baseball game.

Very few high school pitchers would be able to throw as fast as I could hit so it was imperative that I have the skills to hit the slow pitches as well.

Ninety-eight was the highest I'd attempted, and today we'd be cranking the pitching machine to ninety-nine. Coach decided not to tell me when he was adjusting the speed to make things as organic as possible. If I didn't know what was coming at me, I'd just swing to hit.

And I hit. And hit. And hit. And hit. And hit. I have no idea how long. Ten minutes? Thirty? I knew he wouldn't let me hit for too long in order to save my arms and shoulders from injury, so I lost track of time. When he was done, I was done.

He was done before I was ready for him to be done, but I knew he wouldn't steer me wrong, so I set aside my bat and grabbed my water bottle.

"Coach, are you almost finished in here?" Daniel from the front desk poked his head into the door at the back of the cage. "Your phone's ringing off the hook."

"And what is rule number one?" Anton asked him.

"Never interrupt you when you're with a student," Daniel said. "But, coach, there must be an emergency or something. You don't usually get fifteen phone calls in a row. And now it's ringing again." Daniel turned his head toward the front desk.

"And what is rule number two?" Anton ignored Daniel's urgency.

"Tell them you'll call them back when you're done with your student," Daniel mumbled.

"And rule number three?"

"*Never* tell them who you're with," Daniel said.

"And rule number four?"

"No comment."

“Correct.” Anton nodded. “Get used to saying that over the next couple of days.”

“Okaaay...” Daniel sighed and hurried toward the front desk.

“What was that all about?” Amberlyn asked, stepping into the cage after Daniel walked away.

“Let’s talk about this in my office, shall we?” Anton said, patting Amberlyn on the shoulder as he passed her.

“Wait,” I called after him. “You never told me how I did.”

“In my office,” Anton called over his shoulder.

“I guess we need to follow him to his office,” Amberlyn said.

“He probably wants to show me the playback and critique my swing.” I started gathering my gear and shoving it in my bag. “He’s got a wide screen in there.”

I took her hand, and we closed the door to the cage as we stepped into the hall.

“So, how did I do?” I asked. “Was that fun to watch?”

“Yeah, you make it look so easy. I don’t know how fast he was throwing them at you, but they seemed really fast.”

“They were. I could tell. He told me he was going to crank it one notch every other day, but I think he set it to one hundred at least once just to prove to me that I could do it.”

“I bet you’re right.” Amberlyn clung to my arm with an excited giggle. “That’s probably why he wants to talk in his office.”

As we passed the front desk, Daniel’s eyes were wide and his jaw slack as he held the phone to his ear. I heard him say, “No comment.” Daniel hung up the phone, still watching us as we walked by.

“That kid’s weird,” Amberlyn whispered.

“Becker, are you coming?” Anton called from inside his office.

Amberlyn and I picked up our pace and entered his office a few seconds later. I set my bag just inside the door and joined my coach on the chairs that surrounded the large screen television that hung

on the wall.

“So... how’d that feel?” Anton asked.

“Felt like I could have swung a few more times,” I said. “And I suspect you set the speed one notch higher than you said you were going to.”

“Really?” Anton raised his eyebrows and a hint of a smile played on his face. “How fast do you think you hit?”

“You set it to a hundred, didn’t you?” I chuckled, butterflies dancing in my stomach. “I knew it.”

“I *did* set it to one hundred,” he admitted.

I nearly jumped out of my seat and punched the sky. “Yes! I broke a hundred!”

“And a hundred and one,” Anton said.

“What?” I sat back down on my chair.

“And a hundred and two... and a hundred and three.”

“Wh—what?” I was vaguely aware of Amberlyn taking my hand in hers.

“Your fastest exit velocity was 102.64, landing you solidly within the Top 25.” Anton smacked my knee. “And *that* is why my phone is suddenly ringing off the hook.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Amberlyn

“What’s exit velocity?” I leaned closer to Aiden, keeping my eyes on Anton Jones, owner of Strike Zone where Aiden practiced. His office was large and filled with baseball memorabilia. I wondered if he was ever a famous ball player or if he was just a collector.

“The speed of the ball after it hits the bat,” Aiden mumbled, keeping his hand in mine. He’d taken mostly honors courses and was great in physics, but I had trouble wrapping my head around the concept. I grasped that faster was better and that’s all I really cared to know.

“I don’t understand how people know to call you.” I was missing some information. “He finished his practice session only ten minutes ago.” The sofa where we sat was low to the ground and meant for lounging to watch the large screen television where we’d assumed Coach Anton was going to show us the playback of Aiden’s time in the batting cage.

“It’s updated in real time,” Anton said. “The minute Aiden’s

name nudged into the HitTrax Top 25 Leaderboard anyone paying attention received a notification, and scouts earn their living by paying attention.”

“So... like a viral video,” I guessed. “Or watching Fortnite competitions on Twitch.”

“Exactly,” Anton said.

Aiden turned to me with his mouth hanging open. “You’ve watched a Fortnite competition?”

“I have a little brother.” I shrugged and squirmed in my seat. “Besides they’re kinda fun to watch.”

“We’re totally playing Fortnite later.” Aiden squeezed my hand with a grin and turned back to his coach. Before he gave Anton his full attention, Aiden leaned in and spoke through the side of his mouth, “Give us somethin’ fun to do together as a distraction.”

“Anyway”—Anton cleared his throat and had a gleam in his eye—“Colleges and minor league teams are going to want to talk to you, possibly some majors too, so we’re going to need to be careful. Do *not* sign your name to any piece of paper that has any writing on it, nor is large enough to fit writing on it.”

“Huh?” Aiden’s brow creased.

“Over the next few weeks, months, years, people are going to start asking you for your autograph,” Anton said. “An autograph on a piece of paper can also be referred to as a signature, and a signature can form a legally-binding contract. Sign a ball, or a shirt, or a picture of yourself, or a trading card, but not a piece of paper.”

Aiden gulped. “Um... okay.”

“Is Aiden going to be, like, famous?” I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. Part of me was nervous, part excited, part worried. How was his life going to change? How would mine?

We hadn’t made any formal promises or anything. Sure, we’d said we loved each other, and had sort of admitted we wanted to spend our lives together, but that wasn’t binding. If there was a

time to back away, now would be that time. I gripped his hand tighter. I couldn't imagine my future now without Aiden by my side, cheesy as that sounded.

"Not right away, if ever." Anton shook his head. "He's only famous within a very small circle of influential people right this moment. No one else will know about this unless we tell them."

"And we're practicing Rule Number Four," Aiden said with a grin. "No comment."

"Exactly." Anton nodded, sitting forward on his chair. "Now, forget that rule for a few hours and go home to tell your parents."

The three of us stood, and Anton shook Aiden's hand, patted me on the shoulder with a grin, and then we walked out of his office. Daniel was still fielding phone calls at the front desk and didn't acknowledge us when we walked out the front door.

When we reached Aiden's rusty pickup truck, he grabbed my hand. "Hang on a second."

Aiden opened the back door to his extended cab and tossed his gear bag inside, and then used the door as a barrier between us and the rest of the parking lot so that we were almost completely alone.

He used that tiny bit of privacy to his advantage and pulled me close, capturing my mouth with his in barely restrained hunger.

I imagined adrenaline and testosterone were racing through Aiden's body from the excitement of what had just happened in the baseball cages and the news we'd received afterward. I wished he didn't have to call upon his superhuman willpower and end our make-out session, but I knew he would.

He pulled away suddenly, breathing heavy, and pressed his forehead against mine, his eyes closed and biting his lower lip. His whisper was almost not audible, "Sorry."

"You don't have to apologize to me," I told him. "I almost sort of understand."

"Thank you."

“You ask me to climb into the backseat of your truck, and I will not hesitate to slap you across your handsome face.”

“You know I would never do that,” he said, pulling away to look down at me, with creased brows. “You trust me, don’t you?”

“Of course, I trust you. And I was sort of teasing.” I placed my hands on each side of his face and pulled him a little closer. “And part of me wishes... never mind.”

“Come on.” He closed the back door and opened the passenger door for me to climb into the front seat. “Time for you to meet my mom.”

“You didn’t tell her... about... ya know, me using her bathroom?”

“No, I didn’t.” Aiden kissed the tip of my nose. “Everything about that night was just between you and me.”

I nodded and offered him a soft smile.

“I love you, Amberlyn Jamison,” he whispered.

“I love you, Aiden Becker.”

“You know, Amberlyn Becker has a nice ring to it,” he said.

“Shut up and close that door.” I reached for the door handle. “Don’t you think you should introduce me to your mother first?”

“Okay, okay!” He held up his hands in surrender and backed away with a grin.

As he walked around the truck to get in the driver’s seat, I allowed myself to say the name out loud once, just to test it out.

“Amberlyn Becker,” I whispered. “Yeah, nice ring to it.” My eyes strayed to my left hand...

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Aiden

By the time Amberlyn and I got to my house, there was an extra car in the driveway.

“What’s Coach Hudson doing here?” I shifted my truck into park beside his sleek, black sedan with tinted windows and polished chrome.

“Who?” Amberlyn asked.

“You’ve never met my high school varsity baseball coach,” I explained. “We weren’t dating a year ago, and you’ve never been to any of my games.”

“Well, it looks like I’ll get to meet him now.” She shrugged, unbuckling her seatbelt.

“Just think, having him here will make the whole, ‘Hey mom, I want to introduce you to your future daughter-in-law,’ conversation a little less intimidating.”

“Oh my gosh, I am *not* getting out of this truck.” Amberlyn folded her arms across her chest defiantly. “I swear if you do that to me, I will tell her we took a bath together in her bathroom, and I

know you don't want to have that conversation with her!"

"Woman, I was totally joking." *Sort of.* "I wouldn't do that to you."

"You'd better not." She lifted her chin and pouted.

I leaned closer so that my lips were close to her ear and my breath tickled her neck. "Besides, it's *you* who doesn't want to admit you were making out with me in her bathtub. Am I right?"

"No." She nuzzled closer to me. "I mean, yes, I mean. Oh my gosh, just kiss me now, please."

I moaned softly as I pulled her into my arms, and we kissed for a good ten seconds before there was a knock at my window. Before pulling away, I mumbled, "Lake Michigan, your sister, my coach... I swear someday I'm going to make out with you, and no one is going to interrupt us."

"Maybe on our wedding night?" she suggested.

"Can we get married tomorrow?" I asked, still breathless from our kiss.

"Sure." Amberlyn giggled.

"Come on, let's go meet your future mother-in-law." I opened the door of my truck as Amberlyn called out to me.

"Don't you dare!"

I brushed past Coach Hudson as I rounded the front of the truck to hold open the door for my girlfriend. I held her hand gently as she stepped down, and I fought the urge to pull her into my arms again. I didn't release her gaze as I said, "Amberlyn, I'd like you to meet Coach Hudson. Coach, this lovely creature is my *girlfriend*, Amberlyn."

I stumbled over the word girlfriend after all this joking about getting married. We were too young to get married, barely knew each other, and had so many strikes against us that my batting average would be negatively affected by association. Still, dang, she made me feel good.

She pulled her gaze away first and smiled over at my coach. “It’s nice to meet you, Coach Hudson.”

“Nice to meet you as well, Amberlyn.” He nodded regally. Amberlyn seemed to have that effect on people. He turned back to me, all business now. “Is your mother home? We should make a plan for the upcoming... adjustments to your future.”

“Adjustments?” I gulped, and we began walking up toward the house. “I think my mom’s home. Come on in.”

The passenger side door of Coach Hudson’s car opened, and his seventeen-year-old daughter, Carla stepped out. “Daddy, can I come inside with you? It’s cold out here.”

“Sure, sweetheart.” Coach turned to me. “You remember my daughter, Carla, right? I think you’re in the same graduating class.”

“Of course, we *know* each other, Daddy,” Carla purred. Her father was unable to see the smirk she cast my way or how she looked down her nose at Amberlyn. “We’ve been... *friends*... for years.”

Oh crap.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Amberlyn

I didn't know what was going on between Aiden and his coach's daughter, but he was visibly nervous about her being in his home. Carla openly flirted with him even though all it did was cause him to pull me closer or squeeze my hand or rub my back. Although I loved the affection, I didn't love that he was reacting in response to Carla.

Aiden's mother was overwhelmed. She and I should have met under better circumstances. I would have liked to get to know her, ask her about her job as a social worker, find out about Aiden's father. I can't believe I've never asked him about his father. Instead, she was bombarded with life-changing information. I could imagine the underlying conversation in my head.

Hey, Mom, I want you to meet the girl I've fallen in love with. Don't pay any attention to this other girl who won't stop flirting with me even though it makes me uncomfortable, and you know my coach, right? Well, he's here because I sort of hit a baseball so hard that it got the attention of talent scouts who may or may not

want me to play professional baseball much sooner than we'd previously discussed. Oh, and is dinner ready? Because I just burned a million calories, and I'm starving.

Thankfully, dinner was ready, and Aiden took advantage of the large plate of spaghetti to avoid having to answer too many questions. The coach did all the talking, telling Aiden's mom similar things that Coach Jones had told us in his office. I sat beside Aiden while he ate but was uncomfortable eating in front of all these people in such uncomfortable circumstances.

Within half an hour, Laurie Becker stood and told everyone she had to get ready for her overnight shift at the hospital and thanked the coach for coming, effectively dismissing him from her home. He and Carla left graciously, and Mrs. Becker hurried up the stairs without a glance in my direction.

While he drove me home, I wanted to ask about the situation with Carla, but he was quiet and gripping the steering wheel, avoiding eye contact. When we arrived at my house, Aiden pulled me close for a hug, kissed me somewhat passionately but without the hunger from our earlier kisses, and I slipped from his truck.

The whole day had been overwhelming, and I wasn't sure how to react. He probably wasn't sure either. I headed straight for the kitchen to heat up some leftovers and went to bed early.

I drove my mom's car and met Aiden at Strike Zone the following day because I had cheerleading practice in the afternoon. It was the last day of Christmas vacation, and we had a basketball game on Tuesday. The cheer team had gotten rusty over the break, and we needed work.

Aiden was already in the batting cage when I arrived, so I gave him a little wave and pointed up the stairs, so he'd know I'd be in the lounge watching from afar, not distracting him. He waved back and smiled that smile that I loved, no tension, just happy to see me.

The lounge was nearly empty, just one other woman, a mom

watching her middle schooler work with a pitching coach. After watching her little boy pitch for a few minutes, I turned my attention back to Aiden and realized both his coaches were in the cage with him, leaning against the wall in friendly conversation. They didn't seem to put any pressure on him to perform a certain way; they were just there to support him.

The seat beside me creaked, and I was startled to see Carla Hudson sit next to me, her beady eyes sizing me up. I'd never particularly liked Carla, and she'd never gone out of her way to be friends with me either. Having spent the previous evening watching her flirt with my boyfriend made me like her even less.

"It's too bad you've finally agreed to go out with him after he's been pining after you all these years," Carla said in a sticky sweet condescending voice.

I didn't want to play games, but I had to ask. "Why's that?"

"Because, professional baseball players are just that... players." She looked down at her hands and picked at her fingernails. I couldn't tell if she was naturally a tomboy trying to be feminine, or an uptown girl trying to be one of the guys. Whatever she was doing, she was trying too hard, and it wasn't attractive. "They have a girl in every city where they travel. But you wouldn't know what it's like to have a cheating boyfriend, now would you?"

"What are you trying to do, Carla?" I turned in my seat and sneered at her. "If your flirting escapades last night didn't garner the attention you wanted, you just show up here to instigate conflict between me and Aiden? Skyler and I were more like friends. Aiden loves me as more than just a friend."

"Is that what he told you?" Carla laughed, and I raised my chin. She didn't need to know anything about what Aiden had told me. It was none of her business. "Ya know, he used to come talk to me when he was frustrated about you. Back when you wouldn't give him the time of day."

“I had a boyfriend.” I don’t know why I was defending myself to her.

“Yeah... but I didn’t.” She let her statement hang in the air and raised one eyebrow. I narrowed my eyes. “He wasn’t going to wait around forever, you know. Guys have needs. Wait—you didn’t think you were his first... did you?” She pretended to stifle a laugh behind her hand.

“His first... what?” A lump caught in my throat. “His first kiss? Of course, I was. He told me.”

“Oh, sweetie, it’s so cute how naïve you are.” She placed her hand on my shoulder, and I shook her off. “Haven’t you ever noticed how worked up he gets after practice?”

I had noticed that, but it was none of her business. I turned away from her and glanced down into the batting cage where Aiden was hitting with Coach Jones and Carla’s dad looking on, discussing his future and ways to make him a better ball player.

“You should see him after a game.” Carla sighed and put her hand over her heart as if she were flustered. “Some guys go jogging to cool off, some go to the weight room... Aiden comes to me.”

“Liar!” I stood suddenly and raised my voice, my hands shaking. “I don’t believe you for a second.”

“Believe what you want, Amberlyn.” Carla stood more calmly than I had and smirked. “There’s plenty of sand at every baseball diamond in the world. You can stick your head right in it. But there’s no way he’s going to keep you around once he goes pro.”

I glanced down into the cage where Aiden and his coaches were gaping up at us, startled by my outburst. Aiden’s nervous expression showed... remorse or guilt or regret. Carla knew him better than I did. She’d known him for years. She probably knew him in ways I didn’t even want to think about.

After snatching my phone and car keys from the table beside my chair, I practically flew down the stairs and through the lobby, out

the front door of the building and into the parking lot. Aiden called out to me as I ran, but I didn't look back. I shoved my keys in the ignition of my mom's car and slammed into reverse, tearing out of the parking lot with tears streaming down my face.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Aiden

“What did you do?” I didn’t mean to yell right in Carla’s face; it just happened. I knew she was at fault for whatever reason Amberlyn had run from the building.

“Step back, son.” Coach Wade Hudson held his hand across my chest, blocking me from reaching his daughter, who leaned against the doorway at the bottom of the stairwell, arms crossed, with a smirk on her face.

As if his feeble attempt to hold me back would have any effect if I wanted to push past him. I had a good sixty pounds of pure muscle on him as well as at least a head taller. The only reason I wasn’t strangling his daughter was because I didn’t want to go to jail. I also needed to know what she said, or did, that made Amberlyn so upset so I could fix it.

“What did you say to her?” My eyes narrowed. “What lies did you tell?”

“Are you accusing my daughter of lying?” Coach Hudson looked up at me with narrowed eyes.

“I don’t know.” I narrowed mine right back at my varsity baseball coach, towering over him. To his credit, he didn’t flinch. “How about if she tells us what she said to *my girlfriend* to upset her, and we’ll find out together if she’s *lying*.”

“I’m sure whatever happened, there was a misunderstanding,” Coach Hudson said.

“You’re defending Carla?” My jaw dropped. “After what she did last night, and then just now how she upset my girlfriend?”

“What did she do last night?” He still didn’t take a step back.

“She brazenly flirted with me in front of my girlfriend.” I pointed at her over his shoulder, feeling this should have been obvious.

“My daughter has a flirtatious personality,” he said. “I don’t understand why that’s bothering you. Unless... did you have an inappropriate relationship with my daughter?”

“Heck no!” I may have said that too loud. It didn’t matter. We’d already garnered the attention of every patron in the building. Then it occurred to me. Carla told Amberlyn she and I had a relationship. I shoved past my coach, with a brush to his arm. “Is that what you told her happened between you and me?”

“I merely told her that you and I used to... talk about her.”

“Me talking about her wouldn’t make her run away crying. Keep going. What else did you say?” Although I towered over Carla also, I stayed several feet back from her, not wanting anyone to think I was intimidating her.

Carla glanced at her father and then around at the other bystanders and then lifted her hand to evaluate her manicure. Finally, she spoke calmly and without emotion. “Daddy, this boy is making me feel very uncomfortable. I want him removed from the building.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me?” I took another step back from her and looked to Coach Anton Jones for help. “I didn’t do

anything wrong. She did. She said something to my girlfriend that upset her enough to run out of here crying.”

“We don’t have any proof of that, Aiden,” Anton said. “There are no video cameras upstairs in the lounge. We can’t accuse her of doing something wrong when we have no evidence.”

“The *evidence* was Amberlyn running out of here after Carla spoke to her,” I said, waving my arm toward the front doors and then to the bottom of the stairs where Carla was smirking again. “Coach, you know me. And you’ve met Amberlyn. You know I would never do anything wrong.”

Coach Jones turned away from me and spoke directly to Coach Hudson. “I think it’s best if you and your daughter head out for the day.”

“I am here with my student,” Wade said defiantly.

“Not if I quit.” I folded my arms across my chest and glared at him.

He growled. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, yeah, I would dare,” I said, a little too smugly. “I don’t *need* you, coach. I’m eighteen and could enroll at a community college tomorrow and be practicing with their team by the end of the week. Or better yet, just skip right to pro. I’m sure any minor league team would be happy to have me join them.”

“I am your varsity coach,” Wade said. “You belong on *my* team. I helped you get where you are today.”

I stepped closer to him. “My hard work and dedication got me to where I am today. Not you. Your daughter tried to destroy my life a few minutes ago, and I will not allow her to succeed. I cannot play for your team with her around, and because you can’t see what she did was wrong, I can’t play for you.”

Maybe I wasn’t officially quitting. Just laying my cards on the table. There were more important things to address, like finding my girlfriend.

As I walked away from my coaches and the other bystanders, I pulled my phone from my pocket.

Whatever Carla said to you, it wasn't true. Call me. Please.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Amberlyn

“How can she believe that?” Aiden practically screamed into the phone. He didn’t know I was sitting right next to Jonnie on my bed where we were eating chocolate Moose Tracks and I’d just finished regaling her with the details from my blowup with Carla.

He’d listened with increasing frustration while Jonnie told him what I’d told her that Carla had told me about what he does with her. Every time Jonnie added another detail his voice rose a little more. Mostly all I could hear was, “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Jonnie, you and I go running together every flippin’ night. I couldn’t possibly be with Carla, because I’m with you.” His voice was quieter but still crystal clear. “She knows that. Tell her. I know she’s sitting right next to you.”

“What makes you think that?” Jonnie’s voice rose at the end.

“Because it’s been less than an hour since she left the batting cages,” Aiden reasoned. “You are the first person she comes to when she needs a shoulder to cry on.”

“Give me that phone,” I said, grabbing it out of Jonnie’s hand.

“You’re right I’m sitting right beside her, because she’s my best friend. I should be sitting next to *you*. You’re supposed to be my best friend. You said you loved me. How could you love me and do those horrible things with Carla?”

“I have never done *anything* with Carla,” Aiden insisted. “I’ve never even kissed her. I’ve never shown any interest in her. I have rejected every pass she’s ever made at me.”

“So, you admit she’s made passes at you?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “Not since last year’s baseball season ended. I thought she’d gotten a boyfriend over the summer. I thought she’d give up. Maybe she’s only after me because she thinks I’m gonna be rich and famous someday.”

“Ya think?” I couldn’t believe he was just now putting that puzzle piece into place. Jonnie and I had figured it out a half hour ago. “Which brings up her point about pro baseball players being players with a girl in every city.”

“You know me better than that,” Aiden said. “My eyes have not strayed from you in years. Even as my heart broke watching you hugging and kissing Skyler. I never wanted any other girl but you. I have never kissed any other girl but you.”

“But will that change when you’re travelling? When you’re famous?”

“What can I do to prove to you that you’re the only woman for me?” he asked.

“I don’t know, Aiden. You’re the all-honors physics genius. You figure something out. I’m late for cheerleading practice.” With that I hung up the phone and tossed it into Jonnie’s lap. “Thanks for the ice cream. I gotta go.”

Ten minutes later, I strolled into the high school gym where my cheerleading squad had already begun practicing without me. There were a lot of kids in the building for a Sunday afternoon the day before school started after Christmas break. I guess all the teams

felt pressured to get back in shape for our basketball games on Tuesday.

No sooner had I sat on the gym floor to warm up, my poms and water bottle beside me, did Aiden walk in and look around. It took him about two seconds to find me, and I could see his shoulders relax even from this far across the gym. I stood and lifted my chin, ready to challenge whatever he had to say.

But he didn't walk toward me. Instead, he stood in the doorway between the overflow gym and the main gym and called out in a loud voice, "Can I have everyone's attention?"

CHAPTER FIFTY

Aiden

Basketballs stopped bouncing and kids in the gym and hallway stopped practicing and socializing and turned curious or expectant faces toward me. Some seemed annoyed at my interruption, but I didn't care. This needed to involve everyone if it was going to work.

"Can you ask the wrestling team to join us in here?" I asked a kid who had stepped into the hall to refill his water jug. "Everybody needs to hear this."

I waited while my classmates wandered in from three gyms, the hallway, and the foyer. Both girls and guys basketball teams had been practicing, as had the wrestlers and cheerleading squad.

One team that wasn't here was my baseball team. I was glad in a way. They would have different opinions about what I was about to do. I wondered how many of them already knew what had happened yesterday. They'd find out soon enough.

"Aiden, what are you doing?" Amberlyn called to me.

"Just wait until everyone gets in here," I called back, walking to

center court rather than heading to the sidelines where her cheer team was now standing beside her. Good, she needed the support of her friends if she was going to get through this.

When most of the kids and coaches had gathered into the gym and surrounded me on all sides, I cleared my throat and spoke in a loud voice.

“I have a couple of announcements to make. But first, I have a question. Has anyone in this gym heard what happened yesterday?”

I raised my hand and turned slowly to see if anyone else raised theirs. None did. Except Amberlyn, and her acknowledgement was accompanied by a tiny smirk.

“Of course, you were there.” I chuckled and winked at her and then called out to our friends. “Yesterday I sort of broke my own personal record at the batting cages and got the attention of some scouts from colleges and pro teams.”

There was a low murmur in the gym, and I waited a moment for people to calm down.

“That was the good news,” I said, continuing my explanation about my strange behavior. “I don’t want to say negative things about other people, so I’m going to leave her name out of it, but a girl from our senior class told my girlfriend some horrible lies about me today.”

I stopped amid more murmurs, and I raised my hand again.

“How many of you have known me since elementary school?”

About a third of the gym raised their hands.

“Have any of you *ever* seen me with any other girl besides Amberlyn?” I asked, pointing at the girl I loved. “Have you ever known me to have a girlfriend? Or even a date?”

All hands lowered and some people looked around or shook their heads or shrugged.

“I have been in *love* with Amberlyn Jamison for *years*.” I stressed that in hopes of conveying to everyone in the gym the

weight of what I was about to do. Maybe to remind myself the reason behind what I was about to do. “Over the past few months she and I have grown closer and closer even as the world around us tried to pull us apart.”

For whatever reason, Amberlyn and I each took a step toward one another, and she lifted her hand to her heart. She was so beautiful with her hair in a sloppy ponytail, no makeup on, and wearing sweat shorts and a T-shirt. I cocked my head to the side.

That was *my* t-shirt. The one I’d given her to wear on the night of the holiday ball. The night we’d first admitted we were in love with each other. Not that I hadn’t already known.

“I love you, Amberlyn,” I said, no longer speaking to the crowd, and slowly making my way closer to her. “I don’t *want* this without you. Whatever *this* is. Whatever this becomes and whatever we choose to do and wherever we choose to go. I want us to do this together. I want to be with you forever.”

Amberlyn gasped and choked back a sob, her hands reaching out to mine and clinging to me. There was a question in her eyes. Was I really saying what she thought I was saying? I nodded, and her shoulders heaved again in a barely contained outburst of emotion.

“I want us to make this choice now, before all the other big choices have to be made. Because I want to make the big choices together.” I let go of her hand and tucked a lock of hair back that had fallen from her ponytail. “I don’t want us to ever do anything that would *force* us to make this choice together. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

She nodded once and took a deep breath. I could tell she knew I was referring to the position Russ and Julianne were in.

“I want us to make this choice because it’s what *we* want, and because it’s the right choice for *us*. For Amberlyn and Aiden. It’s just you and me.” I was whispering at this point. “I’m not saying we should rush things. Maybe plan something big and elaborate

this summer. Sometime before we go wherever we choose to go.”

She nodded again, and her affirmation gave me the last bit of courage I needed. Lifting her hand to my lips, I kissed her knuckles and took a deep breath before lowering myself to one knee. Even though she already knew what I was about to do, she gasped, maybe not believing I would actually go through with this.

“Amberlyn,” I whispered. “I’m yours. I’ve always been yours. There’s never been anyone but you, and I want you to know without a shadow of a doubt that there will never be anyone but you. Will you please do me the honor of standing by my side while I make some really big decisions about my future? Because my future includes you. Will you marry me?”

“Yes, oh my gosh, yes!” Amberlyn tackled me and fell into my arms while our friends cheered and clapped. I couldn’t imagine a better outcome for this moment than to have her crying and laughing and kissing my face and lying in my arms on the gym floor of our high school.

There was a loud squeal as Jonnie ran across the gym and interrupted our moment by pulling Amberlyn away from me and hugging her as they jumped up and down.

Of course, we were interrupted. I wouldn’t have expected anything less. I was glad I called Jonnie before I came to the high school. She needed to be here for this.

Amberlyn was surrounded by cheerleaders, and I sat on the floor, chuckling and watching them cry and laugh and hug one another.

A hand reached in front of my face. Skyler was ready to help me to my feet. I clasped his hand and used the leverage to pull myself to a standing position.

“Congratulations, man,” Skyler said, pulling me into a side hug that was just about as sincere as two eighteen-year-old guys could muster.

I pulled away from Skyler, turned to face him, and placed both hands on his shoulders. “I know I’ve said this before, but *thank you* for breaking up with Amberlyn.”

We grinned at each other and laughed and hugged again, and then I pushed him away and turned to the group of cheerleaders.

“Excuse me, ladies,” I said loud enough to get their attention. “Could I please have my fiancée back? I think she and I need a moment alone.”

They reluctantly released Amberlyn from their hugs amidst giggles and suggestive words of encouragement.

I lifted Amberlyn’s hand and pulled her gently toward the doors of the gym, leading her into the foyer and around the corner, into a darker hallway, away from curious eyes.

Before doing anything else, I asked her, “Are you okay with this? I didn’t overwhelm you, did I?”

“In a very, *very* good way, yes, I’m overwhelmed,” she said, stepping closer to me and lifting her face to mine. “And yes, I’m completely okay with this. I want to be with you forever too, and I want to stand by your side as we make these decisions together. I love you.”

“I love you too.” I lowered my face to hers, and we connected in a kiss that no one interrupted for a very, very long time.

EPILOGUE

Amberlyn

“Run, Aiden! Run!” I called out to him as he rounded first base, travelling way slower than I thought he should.

“He doesn’t actually have to run fast,” Julianne said, laying her hand across her belly and cringing. “His ball went over the fence. Running the bases is just a formality. You really need to learn more about baseball if you’re going to be Aiden Becker’s wife.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here to teach me.” I wrapped my hands around Julianne’s arm and realized we were the only two girls wearing engagement rings in our senior class.

“I’m glad Aiden changed his mind and decided to finish off the season with our high school team,” Julianne said. “Our season would have been trashed if we’d lost our best first basemen *and* best hitter.”

“He cares about the guys on the team,” I said. “Plus, he wanted to graduate with our class, not transfer to a community college halfway through his senior year.”

“Is he really playing for a community college next year?” Julianne asked. “He’s good enough to play for a D-I university.”

“If he starts at a university, he’s locked in until after his junior year,” I explained. “This way he’ll get some college-level experience, and we can do a little more exploring about where to play at the professional level.”

“And what about you? You don’t mind going to community college

instead of a university?”

“I don’t even know what I’d want to study.” I wrinkled my nose. “I’m not super smart, and I don’t have my heart set on any one profession, so I might as well just get some general ed classes out of the way and not spend a ton of money, ya know?”

“I’ll probably never go to college now,” Julianne mumbled. “Shoot, I’ll be lucky to make it to high school graduation. I’ve been having contractions all day.”

“You have?” I panicked and reached my hands out as if I could help her or protect her or something.

“Relax, they haven’t been super strong yet, well, maybe a couple of them, but I’ll be okay.” She waved her hand in the air, dismissing my concern.

“Shouldn’t you be at home resting?” I asked, still kind of panicking.

“Nah, I’m going to be resting quite a bit once this baby comes. I might as well get out in the fresh air and sunshine now while I can.”

“Is Russ excited to become a dad?” My hesitant question was shrouded in fake enthusiasm. Russ didn’t seem responsible enough to settle down and be a family man. I worried that Julianne would be alone with the baby while he was partying or going out with friends, or worse.

“Russ is... Russ.” Julianne’s face lit into a tiny smirk as she glanced into the dugout where Russ leaned against the wall, in full catcher’s gear, waiting to get back out on the field after we’d had our turn at bat. As if sensing we were watching him, he glanced our way and nodded a little greeting to the girl who would soon be having his baby. “I don’t think it’s set in yet. I mean, I feel her moving around all the time, but unless he takes the time to hold still and leave his hands on my belly long enough, he doesn’t fully grasp that there’s a little girl in there.”

“Bet it’s nice having him living with you...” I was trying to find some positive things to say about Russ. Sure, he was smokin’ hot, but he was also cocky and full of himself. I couldn’t help comparing him to the humble man who would be my husband in less than two months. I fought the urge to glance down at my ring again.

“I love having him with me *every single night.*” Julianne’s cadence changed, and she lifted her eyebrows.

“Every night?” I lowered my voice. “Even full term?”

“Heck yeah,” she said then leaned closer as if to share a secret. “I read it’s

the best way to go into labor. Russ sure ain't complaining."

"Uh... I imagine he wouldn't be." I gulped, really uncomfortable with the shift in our conversation. "I was more thinking about him being there when the baby's crying in the middle of the night and stuff."

"Shoot, my mom will probably be racing down the hall to come play grandma every time little Ellie wakes in the night." Julianne placed her hand on top of her belly. "Oh! She's kicking! Put your hand right here."

I reached over with excitement, and my jaw dropped as what felt like a foot moved under her skin. "Oh my gosh, that is the strangest feeling!"

"She is so ready to come out and meet the world," Julianne said.

"When's your due date again?" I asked.

"Next Saturday. Remember? I'm due on graduation day. Although I'll be surprised if—" Her sentence was interrupted by her doubling over and gasping for breath, grabbing for me and squeezing so hard I thought she was going to break my hand.

"Are you okay? Should I go get help?"

"Shh... just... hold..."

I let her squeeze me, recognizing that between the two of us, the pain in my hand was the lessor of the two. Contractions looked excruciating.

Julianne gradually started breathing closer to normal and slowly released my hand and eventually opened her eyes. "That was probably the worst one I've had."

"How are you not *freaking* out right now?" I asked. We both stretched our hands and rolled them around, hers probably hurting as much as mine was. I glanced sidelong at her. "Are you sure you shouldn't be..."

"I'm fine," she insisted. "They're only, like, a half hour apart." She pulled out her phone and opened an app to record the time and intensity of the contraction. I leaned over her shoulder.

"That's a really cool app. Helps you keep track of... uh, Julianne, you've had a *lot* of contractions today."

"I know, right? See why I don't think I'm going to make it until Saturday?"

"How close do the contractions need to be before you go to the hospital?" I asked, knowing very little about having babies.

"Eh, about five minutes apart." She shrugged. "I'm not even close to that. Oww! *That* was not a contraction! I swear she's trying to break my ribs, and

hips, and back. Oww! Okay, enough of that, girlfriend.” Julianne chuckled and rested her hand on her belly, love in her eyes.

“You’re gonna be a great mom.” I sighed.

No sooner had I said that than Julianne was grasping my hand again, gasping, her whole face in agony. A barely restrained scream came out as a soft screech.

Three minutes, maybe less, had passed since her last contraction. I shifted from panic mode to practical, no-nonsense understanding of what needed to be done. I yelled as loud as I could, “Russel!”

Russ stood from where he crouched behind home plate, ready to catch Taylor’s next pitch, and ripped off his catcher’s mask. In near comical speed, he tore his shin guards off and whipped his chest protector over his shoulder and tossed it into the dust beside home plate, along with his mitt. He ran to the fence and hopped over it in one swift movement that would have made track hurdlers jealous.

His cleats slipped on the metal bleachers, but he was at Julianne’s side almost before she was fully through with her contraction.

“Babe, I’m right here. I’m right here.” Russ wiped Julianne’s sweaty hair off her brow and took her hand, the one that wasn’t squeezing my fingers into a twisted, bruised mess.

“That was only about three minutes apart from the last one,” I told him. Julianne still hadn’t fully come back to awareness.

“Three? How long has this been going on?”

“This is only the second one she’s had since she’s been at the ballfield, but she’s been having them all day.”

“All day?” Russ’s voice squeaked. “Why didn’t you tell me, babe?”

“I didn’t... want you to... miss your game.” Julianne blew out a long breath and met Russ’s gaze.

“You silly girl.” Russ almost sounded as if he was going to cry. “Having our baby is a little more important than a baseball game.”

“You’re probably right.” She nodded.

“Do you think you can walk to the car?” Russ asked. “I think it’s time to go to the hospital.”

A siren sounded in the distance, indicating someone had called for an ambulance. Good. I’d feel more comfortable with her safely in the care of medics rather than being driven by a semi-responsible eighteen-year-old boy.

Russ and I helped Julianne stand, and several other people helped us get her down the bleachers and onto solid ground.

“I just wanna... sit down... for a minute,” Julianne panted. Someone quickly brought her a camp chair, and she collapsed into it, gripping the sides. She was probably in way more pain than she was letting on.

“Taylor!” Russ called to his best friend and pitcher. “Bring me my bag.”

Russ slipped off his cleats and pulled his jersey over his head, half undressed before Taylor tossed his bag over the fence. I ran over to grab the bag and brought it to Russ just as he whipped his baseball pants down to his boxers and yanked them off his feet, apparently not bashful in front of a packed stadium of high school baseball fans.

I averted my eyes, trying not to gape at the almost naked, really hot guy pulling a T-shirt out of his bag and over his head. He pulled on clean sweats and sat on the edge of the bleachers to lace up a pair of sneakers. In less than two minutes, he’d transitioned from baseball catcher into new-dad-to-be. I started gathering his discarded clothing and cleats and shoved them all in his bag.

“Here, I’ll take care of that,” Aiden said from beside me. I was relieved to see him there. “Where are your car keys, man? I’ll bring your car over to the hospital in a little while since I’m sure you’ll want to ride in the ambulance.”

“Ambulance? Yeah, right, I should ride in the ambulance.” Russ patted his legs, as if he’d be storing a set of car keys in his sweatpants. “Keys? They’re... uh... outside pocket.” Russ pointed to the gear bag that Aiden had thrown over his shoulder.

The sirens got louder and then suddenly stopped when the ambulance pulled into the parking lot at the ballfield. Within seconds, two paramedics were racing toward us with a stretcher.

Russ and I each took a shoulder and lifted Julianne to her feet. The paramedics helped her onto the stretcher and soon were pushing her toward the waiting ambulance.

“Good luck,” Aiden called out, and several other well-wishers called out similar sentiments. Most of us stood around, watching until the ambulance doors closed and the lights were flashing again, and they were pulling out of the parking lot. Aiden turned back to me, grinning from ear to ear. “We’re gonna have a baby!”

“Little Ellie’s going to have the most devoted team of favorite uncles there

ever was,” I said. Aiden picked me up and swung me around and then stopped and held me in his arms high enough that we could look one another in the eye.

“You wanna be next?” Aiden whispered excitedly. “We could have a baby a year from now. We’re gettin’ married, after all.”

“I don’t know. That looked really painful.” I laughed. “Maybe I should get through college first.”

“Y’er no fun,” he said and planted a firm but chaste kiss on my lips. He set me on my feet. “Guess I’d better go finish this ball game so we can get to the hospital to see the new baby, I mean bring Russ his car.”

“You’re so funny, Aiden.” I chuckled and pushed him gently toward the field. “Go be a first baseman for a few minutes, and I’ll wait for you right here.”

“One more kiss,” Aiden said, rushing back over to me and pulling me up into his arms again. After he kissed me and set me back on the ground, he said, “Okay, now I’m ready.”

Aiden ran over and hopped the fence and then ran over to his dugout where all the guys high-fived each other and hugged and gripped each other’s hands and gave each other fist bumps.

Before taking the field again, the team gathered around and draped their arms around each other’s shoulders, heads down in a circle.

“Amen!” They all called out, as they broke apart.

One of them yelled, “Let’s play some ball.”

Another of the guys said, “Let’s win this game for baby Ellie!”

As the back-up catcher pulled on his gear, the other guys jogged into the outfield and Taylor took the mound. When Aiden got settled on first base, he glanced at me, then winked, and turned back to the game.

Who knew what the next few years would bring? I held out my left hand and let the little diamond sparkle in the sunlight and then settled in on the bleachers to watch my future play out around a baseball diamond.

Love Strike Three, You’re Mine? Please leave a review on [Amazon](#) and Goodreads!

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Julie L. Spencer raised her family in the central Michigan area where she had a very full life managing a conservation district office, writing grant proposals & book reviews, and chasing after several teenage athletes. Julie wrote her first book when she was in junior high, but prior to publishing *The Cove*, her only published work was her master's thesis. She loves to read and write and has several more novels and non-fiction projects in the works.

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(together with its companion story,

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with co-author, Lara Wynter)

Experience Ashton and Michelle's Journey to Love in [Who Wants to Marry a Mormon Girl? Love Letters Series Book One](#)



CHAPTER ONE OF WHO WANTS TO MARRY A MORMON GIRL?

Michelle

Why did I sign up for this? Michelle fidgeted, surrounded on all sides by cameras. She knew they were recording her every move, capturing each facial expression, each deep breath she took trying to calm herself down. They would use any tiny sign of nervousness as part of the television show.

It sounded fun at the time. She'd been at the mall when the reality show Love Letters was holding casting calls for their upcoming season. Michelle sat in the audience and watched hopeful girls come and go, flaunting themselves in front of the producers, decked out in makeup and expensive clothing.

The host of the show, Rachel Gibbons, scanned the audience, stifling a yawn, and met Michelle's gaze. They locked eyes, and the corner of Rachel's mouth lifted. She leaned toward the guy beside her, and soon both were staring at Michelle, whispering and sizing her up.

Michelle shifted in her seat and set her shopping bag next to her. She wiped her sweaty hands on her jeans and pulled her gaze away. When she

looked up again, they were walking toward her.

Suddenly she was shaking hands with Rachel and a producer named Bruce, and they were asking her questions about whether or not she was single, if she'd ever heard of the show and if she'd ever considered coming on and being their leading lady.

She had the "right look" they'd said. She was "girl-next-door" cute and innocent. They'd find her some great guys, and she'd meet the man of her dreams, and get to fly to Los Angeles.

Those were the magic words. She'd always wanted the chance to leave Colorado and go on an adventure.

Michelle knew she wouldn't meet her forever husband on a reality show. This was just for fun.

Now, six weeks later, here she sat in a mansion in L.A. in a fancy dress, surrounded by strategically placed cameras and lighting, waiting for twenty guys to arrive in limos. Twenty guys who had been handpicked just for her. She couldn't decide if she should be excited or throw up. The way her stomach was clenched, it wasn't out of the possibility.

The makeup artist hovered over her one more time, dusting her forehead and nose, and then brushed her lips with one more sheen of gloss. Michelle could imagine the lady as a young girl playing with a Barbie doll, dressing her up and fixing her hair. The visualization brought out a tiny smile and she allowed herself one more deep breath, willing herself to relax.

Michelle sensed a shift in lighting and the boom mic lowered closer. She fought the urge to cringe away from it. The stage manager, crew members, and producer all seemed to tuck themselves behind the cameras, instinctively retreating off set. *This is it. No going back.*

"Action," the director called.

Rachel shifted in her seat, all business. Michelle tried to pay attention to everything Rachel was saying, welcoming her to the show, telling her how excited they were to have her on as the leading lady, and assuring her that they'd handpicked twenty eligible bachelors just for her.

"Are you excited or nervous?" Rachel asked. "You look nervous." Rachel still used her on-camera sickly sweet, fake voice, and Michelle knew she wasn't really concerned. It was all part of the act.

"I'm excited." Michelle lied, forcing her smile to look natural. "I'm ready to find love and start this journey." *Did I get the lines right?*

“Here’s how the show works,” Rachel said, as if Michelle didn’t already have the script. “Each week the guys will write love letters explaining why you should keep them on the show. You will then write love letters back to the guys you feel a connection with.”

“I hope I can narrow it down fast, because my wrist is going to get sore!” Michelle snickered. This was all for show anyway. The producers had advised her to make it look good for the cameras, which were suddenly more intrusive than they’d been just moments before.

“We’ll actually give you a set number of guys you need to eliminate every week.” Rachel said it with a straight face.

“This is going to be harder than I thought.” Michelle gulped. She wasn’t acting anymore.

“But you can use a computer and type the letters.” Rachel reached out and patted Michelle’s knee. “The guys are not allowed to type theirs, however. Theirs need to be hand-written and from the heart. We’ve found that you’ll be able to tell right away which guys are just saying what they think you want to hear rather than actually have a connection with you.”

“That sounds good.”

“Are you ready to meet the men?” There was a twinkle in Rachel’s eyes.

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I suppose.” Michelle stood, shook Rachel’s hand, and grumbled as she followed Rachel to where she would wait for her guys. “Here goes nothing.”

Ashton

“Ooh, she is smokin’ hot!” One of the guys leaned over so far Ashton thought his breath would fog up the window of the limousine.

There she stood in an emerald gown with capped sleeves and a modest neckline. Her light brown hair was swept up in a million curls clipped into place by little flowers.

“Great, we’re meeting little miss priss.” The dark-haired guy named Mason sneered and turned away from the window. He’d already had a few too many glasses of champagne on the ride over from the hotel.

“That’s kind of rude,” Ashton said. “She’s beautiful.”

“Elegant,” a guy named Victor said.

“And look at those long legs. Mmm, mmm, mmm,” the stocky guy added.

Ashton couldn't remember his name.

"She can wrap those babies around my waist anytime," another guy said.

"Gentlemen, show some respect." Ashton shook his head. "We're about to go in and meet her as if we want to date her, maybe marry her."

"I am *too* young to think about marriage yet." Victor sank back into the leather seat and folded his arms. "Besides there are many more women out there for me to conquest between now and the day I tie the knot."

"How old *are* you?" Ashton asked. He looked to be in his thirties, with neatly trimmed dark hair and an expensive suit.

"Twenty-nine. You?"

"I'm twenty-seven and already feel like I should have been married a long time ago. My dad's breathing down my neck about it." He shifted in his seat, craning his neck to see better.

"Bummer," Victor said. "I'm not ready to limit myself to sleep with one woman for the rest of my life. I'm still playin' the field."

"That's disgusting." Ashton shook his head and mumbled under his breath. He'd been with one woman, and that was a drunk mistake he vowed never to do again. He'd learned by his second year of college to limit himself to a couple beers a night and stay away from the hard liquor. He didn't want to mess up his life any more than he already had.

Coming on this show was just supposed to be a fun publicity stunt anyway. He had reached the championship level as a pro-surfer and was in between seasons. His agent had nudged him to capitalize on this chance to be on television in front of a national audience. Although Ashton had approached this stunt with low expectations, seeing this gorgeous woman made him reconsider.

Finally, the limo driver got the okay for the first guy to head out of the car and go meet this mysterious beauty standing near the entrance of a stately mansion. The combination of the twinkling lights with the ocean in the background was breathtaking.

Ashton waited his turn. After the fourth guy had sauntered up to her, spent a few seconds introducing themselves, and then strutted into the house, Ashton was sweating.

He stepped out of the limo and immediately his foot slipped, and he nearly fell back into the car. Ashton heard her giggle from all the way across the driveway. He felt his face and neck heat up. Great first impression. Real

smooth, Ashton.

“Falling for me already?” Her playful eyes teased him, and his breathing increased.

“Maybe I should just get down on one knee right now and we can skip the formalities,” Ashton suggested as he walked toward her. “Tell these other guys to go home because the man of your dreams has already fallen for you.”

She giggled again and reached her hands out for his. Ashton decided he could listen to that laugh all night long and vowed to make sure she had a smile on her face for the rest of the evening.

“I’m Ashton, and who might this lovely enchantress be?” He took her hands in his and squeezed gently.

“I’m Michelle. Nice to meet you, Ashton.” The blush on her cheeks was beautiful.

“Oh, I’m in trouble.”

“Where are you from, Ashton?” Her long lashes brushed her reddened cheeks and she squeezed his hands back.

“Arkansas.”

“Ashton from Arkansas,” Michelle said. “Very cute.”

“Yeah, what were my parents thinking?”

“They must have been thinking how adorable their son was.” Michelle bit her lower lip.

“Adorable Ashton from Arkansas. I like it.” He fought the desire to stare at those lips. *I’d better get inside before I do something incredibly reckless like pull her into my arms and kiss her.* He chose to lean in and kiss her cheek and then stepped back, releasing her hands. “I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

“See ya...”

Michelle

Oh... my... gosh. Wow. Michelle watched Ashton walk toward the house, his hands tucked into the pockets of his casual slacks. He was the only guy so far who was wearing a suit coat and tie rather than a tuxedo. Sandy blond hair with a hint of a curl hung down just low enough to touch his collar, and his blue eyes sparkled when he teased her.

Ashton turned one more time to glance back at her before stepping out of sight through the grand front door, a hint of a smile playing across his lips.

A man cleared his throat right next to her, and Michelle turned on her heel, almost forgetting she had fifteen more guys to meet. She was ready to call it a night and skip to her date with Ashton tomorrow.

Until she met Victor. His dark eyes pierced into hers, and he raised his eyebrows seductively. Everything about him made her feel weak and fluttery. His sultry voice caressed every word that came from those pouty lips. She had the strange desire to know what kissing him would feel like. A chill ran down her spine. Dangerous. In a good way.

What was that other guy's name again?

[Click here to continue reading Ashton and Michelle's journey to love in *Who Wants to Marry a Mormon Girl?*](#)

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