

**Dimmelo
Sottovoce**

Tell Me Softly

Autrice bestseller di *È colpa mia?*

**MERCEDES
RON**

ROMANZO **SALANI**

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*To my family from Bali,
thanks for bringing back my inspiration*

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Contents

[Prologue: Kami](#)

[Chapter One: Kami](#)

[Chapter Two: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Three: Kami](#)

[Chapter Four: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Five: Kami](#)

[Chapter Six: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Seven: Kami](#)

[Chapter Eight: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Nine: Kami](#)

[Chapter Ten: Taylor](#)

[Chapter Eleven: Kami](#)

[Chapter Twelve: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: Kami](#)

[Chapter Fourteen: Taylor](#)

[Chapter Fifteen: Kami](#)

[Chapter Sixteen: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Seventeen: Kami](#)

[Chapter Eighteen: Taylor](#)

[Chapter Nineteen: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Twenty: Kami](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One: Taylor](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two: Kami](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three: Kami](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five: Kami](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six: Kami](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven: Kami](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight: Thiago](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine: Kami](#)

[Chapter Thirty: Taylor](#)

[Epilogue: Thiago](#)

[Excerpt from *Tell Me in Secret*](#)

[Prologue: Kami](#)

[Chapter One: Kami](#)

[*Acknowledgments*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

[*OceanofPDF.com*](#)

Prologue

Kami

I still remember it like it was yesterday. I had gotten up at midnight as we agreed. Even that made me nervous. I'd never been allowed to stay up that late before. At ten and a half, I was supposed to be counting sheep...but I wouldn't that night. I got out my pink flashlight—which I was proud of even if Taylor made fun of it—and stuffed it into my backpack. I was dressed; I just had to braid my hair. Braids were the latest fashion among kids my age. I peeked out the window and smiled as I saw a flashlight blinking in the window on the upper floor of my neighbors' house. That was the sign.

With a tingle in my stomach, I pulled the knotted rope out from under my bed just as Taylor had showed me and tied it to a table leg. When I was sure it was secure, I threw it out the window and tried to gather my courage. Tonight was going to be crazy—we were going to sneak into Mr. Robin's house and steal all the chocolate he had hidden in the basement. Mr. Robin was a grouchy old man who owned the local chocolate shop, and he was the stingiest guy I'd ever met. He would always show us the sweets he brought home, but at most, he'd give us a single rolled wafer cookie. He was a jerk,

and I could tell he hated us. Us being me and the Di Bianco brothers, Taylor and Thiago.

Taylor was my age and was my companion on all my adventures, and Thiago—well, he used to be, but since he'd turned twelve, he'd decided he was *over all this kid stuff*, to quote his exact words. Not that night, though. That night, he'd agreed to come along, and even if he'd act all special and never stop reminding us that he was basically a teenager now, I knew he was as excited as we were.

I climbed out the window, and right as I was halfway down, I heard them both coming close and whispering to me from below.

"Come on, Kami, they're going to catch us!" Taylor hissed. That made me more nervous.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" I replied, hurrying but trying not to kill myself in the process. My house was big, and my room was on the second floor, so high up we'd had to tie three pieces of rope together to reach the ground.

"Kam, get a move on!" Thiago was talking this time. Thiago was the only person who could make me cry, who could get under my skin. And he was also the only person who called me Kam.

A part of me had always wanted to show him I was as brave as he and his brother were, that I wasn't some dumb pampered girl, even if I wore braids and the cutesy dresses my mom bought me. But it never mattered what I did. No matter how many bugs I caught, how far I spit, how many adventures I went on with them, Thiago always laughed at me and made me feel like a little kid. And that's why I hated it when he grabbed me around the waist and lowered me impatiently when I was a foot and a half off the ground.

"You're not trying to back out, are you, princess?" he asked with that sly look his brother sometimes had too. There was a difference, though: when

Taylor looked at me, it made me feel calm, like I could do anything. But when I felt Thiago's green eyes bearing down, I got nervous, wanting to impress him.

"Don't call me that. I've always hated it," I responded, pulling away. He stretched out a hand and pulled on one of my pigtails.

"If you're not a princess, why are you wearing your hair this way?" he said. He untied one of my ribbons. Thank God I had rubber bands in too.

"Give it back!" I said. I was getting angry.

He laughed and put it in his pocket.

"Stop it, T, you're going to make her cry," Taylor said, grabbing my hand and tugging me toward him. I squeezed his hand tight, hating the tears that were threatening to flow from my eyes. I followed him, and we all started running.

Thiago got serious, playing the older brother, when we reached the creek that separated our houses from our stingy neighbor's. It was narrow, and the day before, we'd set out a board to be able to cross it. Taylor hated water, he always had ever since he almost drowned, so Thiago crossed first to help us over. When he reached out to me and I refused his hand, I'm sure I could see his green eyes glimmer with stung pride.

Soon we were at Mr. Robin's house. It was so exciting. For a ten-year-old girl, it felt like the bravest thing I could do.

Thiago crouched next to the small, shattered window in the back. We had broken it playing ball, and Mr. Robin had never fixed it. Looking inside, we saw all the chocolates and candies, their bright-colored wrappers neatly stacked on bookshelves and cabinets around the room. It was the biggest treasure we'd ever seen.

"Who's going in first?" Thiago asked, looking at me and trying not to smile.

"You're the oldest, you should go," I said, trying to be serious.

“Fine,” he said, smiling at Taylor and then at me. “Anyway, we don’t all need to go down, two people is enough. One person should stay outside, and we’ll pass them the merchandise.”

Merchandise, what a weird word. I would never have thought of it that way. It was candy!

Taylor and I looked at each other, indecisive and scared. I was shivering, it was dark, and the wind was making the trees shake. I’d never have admitted it, but I was terrified of Mr. Robin, and that made me want to go inside where Thiago would protect me. I couldn’t stand the thought of Mr. Robin coming out and catching me alone in his yard. Who knew what he was capable of?

“I’ll go with you,” I said before Taylor could say the same.

“Good. You stay outside then, Tay,” Thiago said.

After removing the screen, Thiago carefully stuck his hand through the hole and unlocked the window. The click echoed throughout the house in the silence.

“Shh!” I said, my eyes like saucers, my stomach in knots. “He might catch us...”

Thiago opened the window and stuck his head inside.

“We’re up really high. I’m going to try to land on this table in here and help you down.”

I nodded, anxious as he slid his legs inside and hopped down.

“Don’t take too long,” Taylor said, his blue eyes shining with fear.

It was my turn. I squeezed my legs through the window, thinking there was no way I’d have done this if it weren’t for Thiago. He had grown up that summer, unlike Taylor and me. Now a head taller than us, he had no trouble helping me in.

When Thiago let me go and we were alone in there together, I felt something strange, a deep connection that you only feel when you're doing something dangerous. We smiled as we looked around at the shelves full of chocolates, candies, and cakes.

"Come on, Kam," he said, helping me down. We grabbed blindly, stuffing our backpacks. For any child, this place was heaven: so much sweet stuff, and all of it at our fingertips. When we had everything we could take, we heard a noise.

I turned to Thiago, who looked frightened but also excited.

"He's awake," he said.

Another noise.

We zipped our backpacks, thinking it was too late to grab even one more piece of taffy, and rushed over to the window. Thiago threw the backpacks out to Taylor as quickly as he could.

"Run, Tay!" he said, his voice a strained whisper. "We'll catch up." Taylor nodded and took off, slinging both backpacks over his shoulders. I needed Thiago to lift me to the window from the table—it was too high for me to climb alone—and I said, "Help me!" wondering why he had a smile on his face.

"I want something in exchange first," that demon said.

"Fine, you can have my chocolate, but we need to go now!" I was terrified Mr. Robin would catch us.

"I don't want your chocolate. I want a kiss," he said. I was shocked.

"Gross! I'd rather die!" I said instinctively.

He turned around and grabbed the window frame.

"Fine, you can stay here," he said, getting ready to jump.

"Wait!" I said, grabbing his T-shirt and pulling on it so he wouldn't leave me behind. I don't know why, but how I felt about kissing him suddenly

changed. I was less grossed out than I was curious.

“Well?” he asked.

A thousand ungraspable thoughts were flooding my mind, and I felt dizzy as I pulled him toward me.

Before I knew it, his lips were touching mine. It was weird and warm and gross, yet I never forgot that moment or the joy in his eyes as he pulled away, smiled, and pushed me out of that dungeon full of candy and cakes. We ran like crazy, holding hands, until we reached Taylor. I still remember how excited we were, how happy, as we looked at our treasure.

That night was my first kiss...and our last adventure together.

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Chapter One

Kami

Eight years later...

As soon as I opened my eyes the morning of August 23, I could feel a strange sensation in my stomach. It made me think that maybe, just maybe, things would be different this fall. I wasn't excited about starting my last year of school, but I was looking forward to having my routine back. Spending the last month of summer with my parents and my little brother had pushed my patience to the breaking point. Why did Mom and Dad insist on going to the beach for so long if they couldn't even stand each other?

I was sure my mother hadn't wanted it. It had been my father's idea, 100 percent. Roger Hamilton wouldn't stop believing our family was normal even if it had completely fallen apart.

But I wasn't about to burst his bubble. Not again, anyway.

That made me look back at my wrist without realizing it. I've done it a few times a day for years, to stare at that scar on my skin—a perfect triangle just a little darker than the rest of my skin, which was slightly tan from the sun. I could still remember how much it had hurt when it happened, and even as the years passed, I could feel the pain in my chest

whenever I thought about it. A pain that wasn't just physical. How did everything change just like that? How could we go from being little innocent children to being consumed by a thing that marked our lives forever?

I knew the answer, but I erased it from my mind to avoid getting depressed again over what happened so long ago.

I got out of bed and stumbled into my bathroom. Everything was impeccable. Everything was in its place. I needed that sense of order there. It drove me crazy when I came home and nothing was where I had left it—it made me want to scream and shout and say *To hell with everything*. And I was usually quiet and calm, submissive and perfect. Or at least, that's the me I showed the rest of the world. If only they knew the truth...

I washed my face and brushed my teeth and combed my hair slowly, watching my face. I liked what I saw, but I'd have been happy not to look so much like my mother. I had inherited her blond hair, but mine was a little wavier. We both had the same dimples in our cheeks. At least my eyes weren't like hers; hers were sky blue, mine brown like Dad's, with long, thick lashes. I'd been lucky enough to only have to wear braces for a year, and I'd had perfect teeth since I was in seventh grade. That didn't mean I didn't have my issues, and naturally my mother did nothing to help them. Like when I turned fifteen and started getting acne. Every girl does at that age; some of my friends are still dealing with it. Obviously I hated having those red dots that had just shown up one day on my chin and forehead, but my mother went overboard. She took me to five dermatologists, changed my diet, forced me to get a treatment that cost a fortune.

Two years later, my skin was smooth as silk, but she still made me put on makeup before I went to school. God forbid someone notice my freckles or the bags under my eyes. Kamila Hamilton always had to be perfect, just like her mother, the ice queen—tall, blond, thin, elegant, and obsessed with her appearance. She was always calm, no matter whom she was with. I'd never

seen her lose her cool. Or just once. That one time when I'd opened Pandora's box...

Next to the makeup table by my closet was a mannequin with a sea-blue dress draped over it. I loved it; it was simple but expensive, like most of the garments packed inside my closet. It was perfect for a fancy dinner or a party, but not for the first day of class. That's how my mother was, though. Everything she bought me came with conditions, and a common one was that she got to decide when and where I'd wear it. And there was nothing I could do to change her. She felt the need to keep up appearances no matter what, and I was too tired to fight with her.

I put on my makeup and got dressed. Thankfully, the fabric was light and the cut summery because it was almost a hundred degrees out. I paired it with pretty white sandals that complemented my tan.

I looked in the mirror and liked what I saw, but I didn't like the person staring back at me. Why was I so sad? Was it because of Danny?

Danny and I started going out on my fifteenth birthday. I hadn't kissed anyone since kissing Thiago when I was a kid. I hadn't wanted to until I met Danny. We were inseparable from that day forward, but what had started as a typical high-school relationship had turned ridiculous, like some kind of lifelong commitment with our families planning our lives and telling us what we had to do at every hour of the day.

Danny was the mayor's son, and my father was the lawyer who managed the mayor's gigantic fortune. My father had studied at the best universities, graduated from Yale summa cum laude, and earned a doctorate in management at NYU's Stern School of Business. He managed a lot of people's money, including the few wealthy businessmen in our small town of Carsville. He traveled a lot, and we rarely saw him, but he was the man I loved most in the world.

Everything was about appearances for my mother, and to have her daughter going out with the mayor's son was like living in a Disney film. I liked it at first because I'd finally done something that had made her happy, but as time passed, my relationship with Danny turned into a jail cell, and I had no power at all over my own life. Danny tried to ignore his parents, but the pressure started to get to him too. He had started off as a sweet guy, very handsome. I was crazy about him, but his need to impress everyone brought out a nasty side of his character, and besides, all he could ever talk about was sex. I loved him—I really did, but I wasn't in love anymore. Especially not after what had happened the last time we saw each other.

I closed my eyes and tried to forget that last memory and the voice of my conscience reminding me that I'd have to talk to him sooner or later. The summer had been the perfect excuse to get the distance I needed, but we'd left a lot of things unsaid, and...losing my virginity to him and then running off to the shore had left so much unanswered.

I remembered that last day lying next to him. *What is it?* he had asked me as soon as he'd finished.

We'd done it in his bedroom. His parents were away for the weekend, and after two years, our expectations for the first time were enormous.

But I was crying. I was crying because even if Danny loved and respected me, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about someone else: the person I had never forgotten and was still in love within the deepest depths of my heart.

My brother, Cameron, walked through my bedroom door and shattered my moment of distraction.

"Mom told me you'd take me to school," he said. I turned to him with a scowl. My brother's school was next to mine, in a building connected to the high school by a long hallway that was used for exhibitions. Because it was registration day, I had to go in an hour before him, and that's why Mom was

supposed to take him in. He was little, and he needed all the sleep he could get.

He had so much stuff, he looked like he was going to camp instead of to school. His backpack almost cast a shadow over him. In one of his arms was his iguana, Juana, and hanging from his belt were a canteen, a flashlight, and who knows what else.

“Cameron, you can’t go to school with all that,” I said patiently.

“Why not?” he asked, indignant, furrowing his blond brows and squeezing his iguana tighter. That creature was repulsive, and it was getting huge, but Cameron adored it, so I guess I had to love it too.

“They won’t let you onto the playground like that,” I said, kissing the top of his head and grabbing my bag and my car keys. “Have you had breakfast?” I asked, walking out of my room with him in tow. My brother was six, almost seven, but for me he was basically still a baby—just as cute and every bit as annoying.

“Yeah, like an hour ago. You took forever to wake up...Mom’s gonna be mad.” He nearly tripped over one of the pieces of junk he was carrying around.

“Give me that,” I said. I hadn’t even realized he was carrying a frog gig. “Cameron, are you serious?” I couldn’t believe him. “Go put all this stuff back in your room.”

“Fiiiiiiiine,” he said, stretching the word out for a good thirty seconds before vanishing through his bedroom door. I walked down the long stairs. When I was little, I used to love climbing up on the banister and sliding down. For a second, I had the crazy idea of doing it again.

“What are you doing, Kamila?” a soft, cold voice asked. I looked down to find my mother waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs. I sighed and walked the rest of the way down. Anne Hamilton was, as I’ve said before, a beauty and one apparently impervious to time’s passing. Every day, she

looked younger than the day before, thanks to the thousands of dollars she spent on her appearance. She looked closer to twenty than forty.

“Good morning, Mom,” I said, walking past her to the kitchen.

“Boy, that dress looks good on you, doesn’t it? I told you it was a good idea to wear it for the first day of class.” She followed me into the kitchen. “It’s too bad you didn’t inherit my height. But you’ve still got time to grow.”

I flipped the switch in my head that tuned her out when she started with that same old song and dance. There was no need for me to listen. I knew perfectly well what she would say. I could sum it up in just a few words: *You’re not perfect enough. Not for me.*

The kitchen was big, just like every other room in the house. On one wall was a giant window that let in tons of sunlight. Through it you could see the gorgeous fields around the property. Prudence, our cook, was there. She’d been working for us as long as I could remember. She was so genuinely nice that I couldn’t help but smile when I saw her.

“Hello, Prue,” I said, noticing what she was making: scrambled eggs and bacon. Mmm. My mouth was watering.

“Good morning, Miss,” she said. She was being formal because Mom was around. “The usual?” she asked, referring to my breakfast.

“What else?” I answered, rubbing my chin as I watched Prue cut a grapefruit in half and offer it to me along with a cup of coffee. What I wouldn’t give for a plate of those eggs! But Mom said they’d be bad for my figure.

“Kamila, I need you to take Cameron to school, and on the way back, come by the club and help me set up for the tennis club cocktail hour,” my mother said, ignoring my sigh.

“Fine,” I said. But my mind was elsewhere.

Just then, Dad came in. He was tall with a big belly, his dark hair speckled with gray. His smile touched my very soul. He came over and kissed me on top of the head.

“Hello, precious,” he said as he sat down next to me.

My father was everything my mother wasn’t. If you saw them, you really would believe that old story about how opposites attract. They must have seen *something* in each other once to get married and have two kids, but I feel like relationships like that have an expiration date. One look at them proved it. The only thing that kept them together was that my father was too good to confront her, which meant that this cold, distant woman got to keep running our lives.

I loved my father a lot. He had been as good a father as he could be given the circumstances, and a part of me felt guilty for confessing to him what my innocent eyes had seen on that fateful night eight years back. Some people say what you don’t know can’t hurt you, and I guess that was my dad’s philosophy. My dad, who was now sitting next to me wolfing down scrambled eggs as if he didn’t have enough cholesterol in his veins already.

When my brother appeared in the doorway, I was happy to go, to leave behind that kitchen full of tension and unspoken reproaches.

My brother had left all his toys in the bedroom and—thank the Lord—had dressed in the clothes Mom had laid out for him: designer jeans and a polo shirt that would look like a dog had gotten hold of it when he came home. I could never understand why they’d spend thousands of dollars on a bunch of Ralph Lauren clothes for a kid who was just going to go roll in the dirt on the playground.

On our way to my car—the white Audi convertible my mother had driven until she changed it out for her glimmering red Mercedes—I couldn’t help but look at the moving truck parked next door.

My heart stopped for a moment, then started racing.

“Are we going to have neighbors?” my brother asked, excited.

The house next door had been empty since the renters, a couple in their twenties working remotely, had left after buying a house in the countryside. My brother was so excited—he thought maybe finally there would be someone in the neighborhood for him to play with. I should have been excited for him, but instead I was filled with foreboding.

I lowered my sunglasses to see better and felt a tingle in my chest as I watched a motorcycle park in front of the truck. Someone got off and went inside.

It was hard to see who it was from where I stood, but that feeling that had overtaken my entire body could only mean one thing.

“You’re going to be late,” my brother said from behind me. I had frozen as I’d tried to make out that figure and had completely forgotten where we were going.

“Get in,” I told him, opening the passenger door.

“Can we ride with the top down?” he asked, hopping up and down in the seat. I hit the button and the roof folded back, the warm breeze striking us in the face. I was doing everything automatically. I had to. My mind was entirely focused on the person who had gotten off that bike.

I started the engine, and we reversed into the street. We would pass right by the house next door, and I would see who was going to be moving into the house that held so many memories. But I already knew.

In a second, I had confirmed what every cell in my body was telling me was true. He turned toward me, his eyes hidden behind sunglasses, and my entire body tensed. The Di Bianco brothers were back. Or at least, one of them was.

I listened to my brother's theories about who our neighbors might be the whole way to school. I didn't want to tell him that I already knew who they were and that they definitely didn't have a child his age. I let him keep dreaming, and when we got there, I gave him a quick kiss on the cheek goodbye. He barely let me; he hated me hugging and kissing him—in public, at least.

I drove into the parking lot. Thankfully, my parents' plot to send me to a private school had never gone anywhere. My mom had gone to one, but Dad had argued it would give me character if I got to know *all kinds of people*... I don't know exactly what that was supposed to mean, but I'm sure it had something to do with my classmates' parents' bank accounts.

This was my last year, and I had sworn to myself things would change, that I would show people who I really was. I was tired of putting on that perfect face that hid all the turmoil inside me. This year, everything would be better. But *better* definitely hadn't meant running into Thiago Di Bianco in front of my house.

It was hard to reconcile the person I'd seen a half hour before with the kid with messed-up, dirty blond hair and green eyes. Thiago had changed. He was at least as big as his father, which didn't surprise me. Even when we were younger, he was taller than all the kids his own age.

Why had he returned?

When I got out of my car, everyone turned to look at me. They'd all expected to find the popular girl I'd effortlessly become. I knew what they were going to do: stare at my clothes, my hair, my makeup. And if anything was out of place or I looked slightly less glamorous than what they were used to, the nasty comments would start spreading around the school. Behind my back, of course.

A mop of bright blond curls blocked my view of the gawking students, and a second later, a warm, friendly hug enveloped me.

“Hello, Lady Kamila,” my best friend, Ellie, said. We’d been close since our first year there. Because she’d been a transfer student, she didn’t look at me like some kind of celebrity the way everyone else did.

“Please don’t call me that. You know I hate it,” I said, squeezing her. “Unless I get to call you *Elfie*.”

She stuck out her tongue at me. She couldn’t stand that name. It was her parents’ fault. Her full name was Galadriel, like the elf in *The Lord of the Rings*. Much to her father’s dismay, she detested the movies, the books, anything to do with Middle Earth, up to and including her own name. I liked it, though—it meant I could get under her skin whenever I felt the need.

A second later, the rest of my friends showed up to catch up on what we’d done over the summer. They always wanted to know where I’d gone and what I’d bought. Carsville was a small town, and it was dull too, so any news was welcome—especially for my classmates, most of whom had spent the three months between their homes and the public pool. My family’s trips, for them, were like something from a movie. Little did they know there was nothing about my life worth envying.

Inside the building, everyone said hi to me and smiled. Half the people I’d known my whole life; the other half were vaguely familiar, like faces in the crowd. I stopped at my locker to grab a notebook and a pen. It was the first day of class, and we usually didn’t do anything. Chloe was talking nonstop with Kate and Marissa about prom and graduation. We hadn’t even started the year, and they were already thinking about its end.

My focus was on keeping my grades up. I’d need to study if I wanted to get into Yale like my dad. I had to. I had to escape. I’d need to come back to visit my brother, I guess, but that was the least of my concerns.

While my friends chit-chatted away, someone approached me on the right, grabbing my hips and pressing my butt into his crotch. I didn’t need

to look to know who it was. I'd recognize that cologne anywhere.

I turned around to look him in the face.

"Hey!" I almost shouted, trying to be enthusiastic and probably overdoing it.

There he was: Danny. Handsome, tall, strong, captain of the basketball team, dark brown hair, blue eyes...I could keep going, and no matter how perfect the image in your head was, it still wouldn't do him justice. Anyone would kill to have him as their boyfriend. Anyone but me.

"You look amazing," he said again, pulling me toward him and pressing his lips into mine.

Someone familiar passed by us just then, walking to another locker a few feet away.

My stomach turned.

"Excuse me a sec," I said in a trance, knowing everyone was watching me as I walked down the row of lockers.

He'd noticed me; that was obvious from the tension in his body, the deep breath he took before he closed the door with a clang and turned the combination lock.

He'd changed. He was older and almost as tall as his brother. His eyes were the same, but they didn't shine the way they had when we were little, hanging out and getting into trouble. I had felt so close to him, so secure in his presence, but that camaraderie had disappeared. His hair wasn't blond like his brother's anymore; it was brown, and he had a tattoo on his neck, a Celtic symbol.

"Hey, Taylor," I said almost inaudibly. All those memories piled up and rushed through my mind: shared moments, games, laughter...

He glanced at me with surprise. I guess I wasn't the person he remembered either.

“Hey, Kami,” he said, cold and distant.

That stare made me shrivel up inside.

“You’re back,” I said. It sounded like a question.

“Yeah,” he said, uncomfortable, slinging his backpack over his shoulders.

I had so much I wanted to say to him, so much I wanted to share... So much had changed since we’d last seen each other. My life was no longer happy. There was no more laughter, no more adventure, just boring perfection, boring routine. He had been my confidant, my protector. Taylor and his brother had meant everything to me, and we hadn’t even been able to say goodbye. Eight years later, he shows up out of nowhere, and this is all he has to say to me?

Sure, my mother had destroyed his family, but she’d destroyed mine too, and I couldn’t understand why he was being so cold with me...I wanted to hug him, for him to like me, for things to be the way they had been in the past.

“I’m really happy to see you,” I said, as bravely as I could. “I missed you. You and your...”

“I gotta go,” he said, interrupting me with so much still left to say.

The bell rang just then. I flinched; it had startled me. Taylor walked past me and away. That wasn’t the way I’d imagined our reunion. I’d gone to sleep thousands of times thinking about what it would be like for us all to see each other again, but I never imagined it would be as strange and painful as that moment had been.

I was falling apart. I could tell by the way everyone was looking at me. I put back on the mask I always wore in these halls and restrained the tears that threatened to give me away.

“What are you looking at?” I asked no one in particular, turning on my heels and walking to class. My friends followed me, and I was grateful that none of them said anything—not then, anyway.

My feelings felt like they were about to come roaring out. But the ice princess, like her mother, couldn't allow such a thing.

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Chapter Two

Thiago

I hadn't been back even half a day, and her image was already following me. Kam... Shit. Why the hell had seeing her had that effect on me? She didn't even look like the person I'd known and adored when I was little. She seemed distant, stuck-up, not at all like the little girl with braids who used to make me laugh. I'd only seen her for a second, but it was enough to burn her image into my retinas. She'd grown. Kam was gorgeous, obviously. She always had been, but I didn't think a single glance would make me long for her like that. Kamila Hamilton wasn't my friend anymore. She wasn't the same girl I'd had my first kiss with; she wasn't the same girl I thought I'd been in love with when I was a little kid. No—the girl I'd just seen was the daughter of the woman who ruined our lives, the woman who had stolen my mother's smile, the woman who'd caused my father to abandon us. I hated that family with all my strength, and I hated Kamila most of all. If she'd listened to me, if she'd kept her damn mouth shut, nothing would have happened. My mother wouldn't have gotten depressed, she wouldn't have changed, she wouldn't have hooked up with that dickhead who abused her, and I wouldn't have to be doing a year of

probation because I'd split his face open. All Kamila had to do was keep her mouth shut.

Seeing her so happy, so radiant in her convertible, surrounded by money and without a care in the world, made my blood boil.

She hadn't suffered the way my brother and I had. Her family had stayed together. They didn't have money problems; none of them had to work some shit construction job to keep their heads above water the way I had. She hadn't had to drop out of college her first year like me. She didn't have any debts to pay.

I knew my father was as much to blame as anyone. But my father was an asshole and always had been. He'd cheated on my mother lots of times. I knew that. I always had. He wasn't even careful about bringing women over. He didn't even care if his sons were downstairs playing while it happened. The only person who wasn't clued in was my mother; it was like she lived in a bubble. It was a lie, but at least she was happy.

That's why I'd told Kam not to say anything. It was pointless, though. She was an idiot. She sang like a bird and ruined our entire lives.

And now we were back. My parents had divorced eight years ago. In those eight years, Dad had stopped visiting us. All we had of him was the child-support check that came every month—the bare minimum that the judge had forced out of him. That was all.

He'd abandoned us, the jerk—his two sons and the wife who had given him everything. He couldn't stay with us after what had happened, he said. Everything reminded him of what could have been. But did that mean he had to disappear? Mom still cried for him in secret. After all these years, she couldn't move on.

Taylor dealt with it better than I did, but I had to shoulder more of the burden. My mother never turned to him during the bad times, never even cried in front of him. Me, though...I'd had to be her life preserver. I was

just twelve when I watched her and Dad argue in court. I'd even had to testify that I knew about all Dad's affairs through the years. Those revelations almost killed my mother, but we couldn't let him get away with what he'd done. My testimony was the reason we got to hold on to the house, but it hadn't done us much good. My mother refused to live next to the Hamiltons, and because Carsville was a small town and demand for places to live was low, we couldn't rent it for as much as it was worth. We barely ever had a cent to spare. Our rent in Fairfax cost more than a mansion in Carsville. My mom and I fought all the time about selling it. That money could have been a lifeline, but Mom would never budge—we were keeping the house, it was hers, and she'd be damned if anyone was going to take it from her. And that was that.

Then we had to come back. Because of me.

As time passed, we each found our way of getting over what had happened—or telling ourselves we had. I tried to make sure my little brother had the best childhood we could offer him. But I lost myself in the process. I'd had to grow up fast, and I was dealing with adult problems when I was still just a boy.

The rage inside me made me fall in with the wrong people. I got bad grades and was finally expelled for fighting. I took my GED and got into college, though. I thought I was turning my life around, but all the bad things came to a head last year when my mother's bastard boyfriend hit her one too many times. I found him on the street and punched and kicked him until he passed out. All the rage I'd built up inside was channeled into those blows.

The asshole was head of pediatrics at a hospital in Washington, DC. He knew all kinds of fancy lawyers, and he did his best to get me thrown into jail. I did the penitent act for the judge, and I was lucky enough to get out on probation. But one more mistake and I'd end up behind bars. I couldn't let that happen.

So now we were back in Carsville. Where I was born. Where I'd been happy for twelve years until everything came crashing down. Mom's boyfriend had lived near us in Fairfax, and a condition of my sentence was that I had to stay five hundred feet away from him at all times. He was vengeful, and we knew he'd do anything he could to make me screw up so he could land me behind bars. We couldn't find anything decent in our price range near DC—already we'd been hanging by a thread. I told myself it would be fine, that maybe the Hamiltons had moved, but nope—already I'd seen Kam again, so I knew I wouldn't be that lucky. Nothing had changed except that we were older and way more fucked up. Or at least I was.

Taylor had gone to the first day of school. The movers had left boxes in the entryway and the living room. I had to leave Mom alone taking care of details because soon I'd be going to the school too, starting a job as an assistant basketball coach, which was the only thing I could find in this town—and even then, I'd had to lie about my record to get it. I'd help out with some clerical tasks, and I'd watch the kids in afternoon detention. All of this for peanuts. A great opportunity, I know.

My mother wasn't starting her nursing job at Carsville General Hospital till the next day, so I left her in charge of our things while I got on my bike and rode to the high school where I'd dreamed of being captain of the varsity team. Going back to high school is a nightmare for any twenty-year-old.

When I arrived, the lot was full of cars, but the students were all in class. I left my bike in the lot and walked to the principal's office with my helmet under my arm and my sunglasses on my head.

There was a woman in the office not much older than me. She smiled at me kindly but wearily. The first day was always exhausting, and I imagined she'd been dealing with the students' schedule issues as well as the teachers' meetings and agendas.

She looked curious as she asked, “Can I help you with something?” I realized she probably thought I was a senior.

“I’m Thiago Di Bianco, I’m here...”

“Ah yes, our assistant basketball coach. You’re taking care of some other things for us too, I heard.” I was happy to see word of my legal troubles hadn’t made it here. She was pretty with blond hair and blue eyes. Probably half the guys here had a crush on her. Not me, though.

“Yeah. If you’d like, you could punch me in and out and I could just go home,” I said, sitting across from her. She blinked as I turned my head and stared into her eyes.

“Principal Harrison wants to see you, to walk you through the rules and all that,” she said, giggling. I couldn’t say whether her laughter was irritating or amusing.

“Great,” I said, grabbing the piece of paper she held out to me and getting to my feet.

“His office is over there,” she said, pointing to a door with a plaque on it that read *Principal*. “By the way, my name’s Sarah.” She stretched out her hand. I shook it. Her grip was soft and warm.

“A pleasure, Sarah,” I said a little dryly, then turned around. It was strange, being here. It took me back to when I was twelve, dreaming of finally walking into those halls as a high schooler.

I had known Principal Harrison; my mom was friends with him. I had a vague memory of him joking around at a family barbecue about what lay in store for me when I started at Carsville High. He was sitting behind his desk when I knocked, and he looked up and asked me to sit down. I did so without uttering a word. We stared at each other for a few moments. He seemed, unlike the secretary, disappointed in what he saw. I smiled, hoping to lighten the mood.

“Mr. Di Bianco, it’s a pleasure having you here,” he said with feigned goodwill. “It would have been nicer if you’d graduated college first, but, you know, I won’t complain.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m happy to be here.”

“Let me be straight with you. I brought you on as a favor to your mother. Please don’t make me regret it. You will have the following obligations: you will help Coach Klebb with the athletes. I remember seeing you on the court when you were a kid, and I saw on your application that you’d lettered on your college team your freshman year. That’s an accomplishment. I’m sure you learned some things there that could help us out. We’ll likely be calling on you to do a little substitute teaching, as we don’t have a big pool of people here to step in when teachers get sick. It’s not rocket science; we really just need a warm body. Of course, you’ll also be in the library supervising students who have detention, and we may have you work as a counselor for the senior trip.”

That last part we hadn’t discussed.

“Wait, you want me to go to a campground and watch over a bunch of teenagers?” I asked, certain I was the worst possible candidate for that job. We all know what happens at those kinds of camps, and I wasn’t the one to play police inspector trying to keep the kids from sneaking beers or sleeping together.

“That’s correct,” he said. “Now, let me spell out the three golden rules for you. First, no drugs and no drinking. Second, no relationships with any students beyond the strictly professional. That extends to your brother, Taylor; I don’t want to see him getting special treatment or favors. Third, if I find out that you’re involved in helping any students break any rules, it’ll be big problems for you. Understood?”

“Understood, sir,” I said, standing up.

“Thiago,” he said, causing me to turn back. “I realize this may be difficult as you’re only a few years older than the students, so they may show some interest in you.” I probably shouldn’t have grinned then, but I did. “You’re not a kid; you’re nearly twenty years old, and whatever you do here, you’re the one responsible, OK?”

“Yes, sir.”

I walked out feeling chastened. Sticking to the rules wasn’t really my thing, and I’d have to be careful if I didn’t want this whole thing to blow up in my face.

Coaching was fun—more so than I’d imagined. Taylor was on the team, and it didn’t take long for the guys to figure out we were brothers. There was an instant closeness between me and the guys. I couldn’t help it; I was young, basically their same age. When they ended up dragging me into a game with them, I had to show them who was boss. “You’ve got moves,” Coach Klebb told me afterward, as we talked about the upcoming season while the kids showered. Everything was going great until I was walking to the teachers’ lounge and bumped into the last person I wanted to see: Kam.

We literally ran into each other, and I had to grab her shoulders to keep her from stumbling. My hands tingled where they touched her, and immediately I let her go. We looked at each other for what felt like hours, but was probably just a few seconds. Time seemed to stop as we noticed how each other had changed. She was so much more mature; she had the same traits I’d always known, but filled out, alluring. She was a young woman now, a gorgeous one. A stunning young woman I hated more than anyone.

Her eyelashes were long and dark. Her full lips in their glossy lipstick could have made me lose my grip on myself. I could still see the traces of

her dimples even though she wasn't smiling. Her cheeks were pink, not from makeup, but because she had a tendency to blush when she was surprised or embarrassed. And her body...my eyes wanted to take it all in, but I stopped them. One thing hadn't changed: I was still taller than her.

"Thiago," she said, surprised. My name on her lips surprised me more than I'd expected.

I could feel her voice in my groin.

Damn.

I clenched my jaws and told myself not to even look at her.

"Sorry," I said, trying to move past, but she grabbed my arm and held me back.

"Let go," I said, and I could tell she didn't like that.

"I just want to talk," she continued. She looked at me the way she did when she was little. Like a lost girl, but one who was ready to fight.

I stared down at her fingers wrapped around my arm and told her, gritting my teeth, "Let me go."

I needed to put distance between us. Nothing good could come of us talking. There were millions of things I wanted to reproach her for, millions of insults I wanted to shout at her. And if I let my rage get the better of me, I could lose this job and all it meant. I'd already lost enough thanks to her.

Frightened or shocked at my tone, she drew her hand back as if she'd burned it.

I turned around and started walking off.

"I'm sorry, Thiago." I didn't need to look at her to know she was crying.

"Sorry doesn't fix anything," I replied, ignoring the people standing there staring at us.

This was going to be hell.

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Chapter Three

Kami

I couldn't have imagined a worse day. I never thought that seeing Taylor and Thiago again would affect me like that, but it had. A few hours later when I left school, all I could hear the girls on the steps talking about was how handsome Taylor was, how sexy Thiago was, how exciting it was to have the Di Bianco brothers walking the halls.

I hadn't even known Thiago was there till I walked straight into him. And when I did, I was speechless. It made sense that all the girls were losing their minds over him. He looked like a model. His body had filled out spectacularly with age, and he had a face to die for. The feelings I had for him when I was younger flared up like an ember when I had him in front of me. But his eyes were like ice, and he made it clear that he didn't even want to pretend I existed. I'd never been so supremely dismissed. He'd been nice to everyone; he even remembered a lot of the kids' names, and they had welcomed him home with open arms. But he couldn't even bring himself to smile at me. And that hurt.

At lunch, I had to watch Taylor talking to everyone and making a point not to even look over at me. I was friends with the guys on the basketball team—they usually took the table next to me and my friends—and though

the guys usually talked with the guys and the girls with the girls, that day everyone joined in the same conversation. And most of it was about Taylor.

“Do you know why they decided to come back?” Kate asked, gaping at Thiago, who was sitting at the teachers’ table with his headphones on, keeping to himself. Taylor hadn’t changed like Thiago: he was the same funny, talkative guy as always. With everyone but me, I mean.

“Kami!” I had ignored Kate’s question, and she nudged me with her elbow. “They were your neighbors, weren’t they?”

“They were. And they are again,” I said, pushing away my tray without even trying a bite.

“What?! We need details!”

“Details about what?” I responded irritably. I just couldn’t manage being nice. I wanted to go home and not think about anything else.

“I don’t know. Wait, here’s an idea: how about you play the nice neighbor and bake one of those delicious cakes of yours. That can be your in.”

I imagined myself doing it: spending the afternoon measuring ingredients, mixing batter, creating the perfect icing for the perfect cake. I could walk to their house and the past would be the past. We’d eat cake together, and they wouldn’t stop talking about how delicious it was because—and I’m not just saying this because it’s mine—my carrot cake is the best in town. And everything would be the way it had been before they left.

The thought that this would never happen made me so sad, I didn’t even realize I’d stood up.

“Where are you going?” Kate asked. “Class doesn’t start for half an hour.”

“I need to take some papers to the principal’s office. I’ll see you in math.”

I nearly ran out of the lunchroom, and I spent the rest of the period hiding under the bleachers outside and drawing.

Luckily, Taylor wasn't in my math class—he was in calculus with the rest of the nerds who wanted to study medicine or engineering. Me, I was more of an art person: film, music, all that.

My last two classes passed quickly, and since cheerleading practice didn't start till the next day, I was able to go home early. But I remembered on my way to the car that Mom had wanted me to stop by the club for some BS. I took out my phone and saw a message from her.

Change of plans. I'm picking up your brother, but you need to stay home and watch him. We'll talk later.

Relieved, I sighed and put the car in gear, backing out of the parking space and heading for home. On my way, I glanced in my rearview mirror and saw a motorcycle catching up to me. I knew who it was as soon as I saw him. Thiago cut right and wedged himself between me and the car next to me, not even slowing down as he passed us both.

Startled, I hit the brakes. I could see the guy in the car behind me cursing and waving his hands. But I ignored him and drove on, trying to relax. As I parked my car in my driveway, I looked over. Thiago was walking into his house as if nothing had happened.

No one was home but my brother, our cook, and me. Through the window, I could see Cameron playing in the backyard, so I went straight to my room. All I wanted was to take off my dress and get comfortable. Mom wouldn't be back till late—when she canceled our plans, she always came home late. So did Dad. So I put on gym shorts and a T-shirt and pulled my hair up into a ponytail. The day had been exhausting.

I didn't realize I'd fallen asleep until the doorbell startled me awake. When I opened my eyes, I saw it was dark out. Shit! Prue went home at seven, so who was with Cameron?

I didn't hear the sound of video games or anything else upstairs, so I ran down the stairs.

When I threw open the front door, I was paralyzed. I found Thiago there with my little brother.

"Kami, this is our new neighbor!" Cameron shouted. "He plays basketball!"

I didn't know what to say. Thiago seemed to be staring through me. Coldly, he examined my legs, my hips, my torso, and finally looked me in the eyes.

He was intimidating, so I turned to Cameron, feeling the anger bubble up. Both Thiago and Taylor had given me the brush-off at school, scowling and ignoring my attempts to talk to them. These were the people I'd supposedly missed so much? The ones who had been my only real friends?

"Cameron, who told you that you could go outside on your own?" I hissed.

His eyes opened wide. "I just wanted to meet the new neighbors..."

"Go to your room," I said, taking out on him what I should really have taken out on the boy next to him.

My brother ran past me like a bullet but looked back to shout to his new friend, "Let's do it again, man!" I looked back at him with a scowl that made him take off again, not stopping till he made it upstairs.

The most galling thing of all was that when I looked back at Thiago, he was smiling.

"What the hell's so funny?" I asked, shutting the door behind me so my brother wouldn't hear us. I took a step toward him.

"You," he responded. "I didn't even know you had a brother."

"There's a lot you don't know about me," I said, almost cutting him off. My mother had Cameron almost a year after they left, so of course they

knew nothing about him.

I'd have preferred our first conversation in years not to be like this. In another world, I'd have been nice to him, and he'd have been warm with me. But unfortunately, life doesn't work out the way you wish it did.

"I know enough to tell you I don't want to have shit to do with you and your family," he blurted out. It was my fault—I should have expected that reaction.

"What the hell are you doing here, then?"

Thiago looked over at his porch, and I followed suit. We both saw Taylor observing us.

"We're here because this is our home, and we're not going to stay away just because of you and your family."

"You act like I had something to do with it," I said. I pressed my back against the door, but Thiago leaned in uncomfortably close.

"Keep your mouth shut," he growled.

It's not that I didn't feel guilty—guilt was eating away at me just then—but I was angry enough to keep it hidden. I'd harbored that feeling for eight years, and by now, I was used to not thinking about it.

"Look," I said. "I was ten years old. And anyway, my father had a right to know." Both things were true, but I still wish I'd listened to Thiago. If I had, maybe no one would have found out, our lives wouldn't have changed, we'd have been friends, and they'd never have moved.

But the ache in my chest made me stop thinking about it. And then Thiago struck the doorframe right by my head.

"You were an idiot. You ruined my life, and here you are living a fairytale!" he yelled. That resentment—that hatred in his face—had been seething for years. But we both knew he was wrong.

I needed a few seconds to get over the fright and the shock of someone I cared about so much treating me this way.

“Leave,” I said, knowing I was about to break down crying.

Since they’d moved, I’d never been able to truly commit to a friendship. I was scared of making another mistake, of losing someone again. I didn’t want to give anyone else the power to hurt me ever again. Thiago and Taylor still had that power, I realized. And they were prepared to use it. They hadn’t just come home—they’d come back for revenge, and I was sure they were going to make me pay.

“Leave her alone, Thiago,” another voice said, and I saw a hand come between us and draw him back. Thiago turned around as I stood there, stunned.

Taylor had intervened, and I was grateful for it. I remembered how he always used to mediate between us when Thiago was mean to me when we were kids. But this time, it wasn’t a childhood argument. This time, there were open wounds that were still bleeding, memories that still ached.

“Listen, you stay away from us, and we’ll stay away from you,” Thiago said, turning around to glare at me one last time. “And you should keep a closer eye on your brother.”

He walked down the steps of the front porch and jogged to his house with long strides.

Taylor told me warmly, “We didn’t come here to make your life hell.”

“Tell your brother that,” I answered, unable to shake off the situation.

“Some scars never heal,” he said, lifting his right arm to show me the same scar on his wrist that I had on mine. I knew exactly what he was trying to say.

The rest of the week passed without incident. Taylor continued to deliberately ignore me, and I only saw Thiago from a distance when I was working out with the cheerleaders. It was painful, but there was nothing I could do. The things we needed to talk about could cause an explosion if they all came out.

Everyone in town looked up to my family. All eyes were on us, and if people learned that Anne Hamilton had cheated on her husband with the Di Bianco brothers' father, who knew what might happen. Just as people admired and envied us, there were others who hated us and would love nothing more than to see us fall. I had found notes in my locker insulting me or trying to blackmail me in the past; I'd even gotten a death threat once. They were all just words. People were jealous of me, but they didn't know how empty my life actually was.

Though the season didn't start until later in the school year, there was an exhibition basketball game coming up, and we were all supposed to go to a party at Aaron Martin's house after. He was this girl Marissa's boyfriend. It was a ritual at this point. We did it every year, and we always had a good time. It was an exciting way to celebrate our first outing as cheerleaders.

I was nervous because Danny had asked me to be his date. We still hadn't talked about what was going on with us. I kept ducking him, saying I needed to take care of Cam. But tonight I wouldn't be able to. We were going to have to have *the* conversation.

I put on my uniform, a short red-and-white skirt and a sleeveless top in the same school colors. Since it was still late summer, my arms, legs, and stomach were exposed. In the winter, we wore a sweater and tights with the skirt. I combed my hair back and put on a tiara and some glitter makeup, painting an *L* on my cheek for the Carsville Lions.

I'd gotten into cheerleading because my mother made me, starting when I was in elementary school. I didn't like it at first, but I ended up getting used

to it. Anyway, I couldn't have quit if I'd wanted to; it was part of my role as perfect daughter. There were times I wanted to burn my pompoms right in front of my mother's face. I liked to imagine the heart attack it would give her.

When I walked downstairs, ready to go with a bag carrying a change of clothes, I found her standing in the doorway talking to someone: Danny.

"What are you doing here?" I asked when I saw him. Our agreement had been that we'd meet at school.

"Wow, you look great," he said, coming over and kissing me on the cheek. I wanted to pull away, but I couldn't with my mother right there.

"I called him. You told me you were going by yourself," my mother said. I couldn't stand the sappy look she got on her face when she saw the two of us together.

"Exactly. I said I was going by myself." I tried to make my anger evident. My mother scowled at me, and it was chilling. Then a frozen smile crossed her lips.

"Well, now you're not," she said threateningly. I tried not to let her see my feelings. I hated her sticking her nose in absolutely every bit of my business, up to and including my relationship with my boyfriend.

"Shall we go?" Danny asked, heading out the door when I nodded. But before I could make it through the door, my mother pulled me aside.

"Listen to me. Stay away from the Di Bianco brothers," she said, squeezing my arm. "Two people have already told me they saw you with them. Have you lost your mind?"

I jerked away.

"They said what they had to say, Mom. Now, if you don't mind, I have people waiting on me."

I didn't want to start a scene with Danny waiting for me by the car. This was the worst time for him to be there. I was going to have to keep an eye on him to make sure he got home safe. Danny wasn't chill; sometimes it seemed like he drank more than he ate.

On the way to the school, Danny tried to talk, but I wasn't up for it. The confrontation with my mother had put me in a bad mood.

When we arrived, he put his hand on my thigh and turned toward me.

"You look great tonight," he said a second time. I knew what he was after, and I wasn't going to give it to him. It wasn't just that I didn't want to; it was that doing it even once had been a mistake. Danny and I should have been friends. I didn't want a relationship, and I didn't want to owe anyone anything. I hardly knew how to love myself. How was I supposed to love someone else?

There was something wrong with me, and I didn't want to drag him down.

"Ever since you left for vacation, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. There's so many things I want to do to you, Kami..." His lips were on my neck now, and I closed my eyes as his hand crept upward. I reached down and stopped it, pulling back to look him in the eyes.

"Danny, what we did over the summer...that was a mistake." I tried to sound as serious as I could.

He blinked, confused, then opened his mouth.

"Babe, it's always bad for girls the first time, but that changes. We just need time. Practice." He tried to kiss me again.

"I don't want to do it again, Danny. I wasn't ready then, and I'm still not."

Danny pulled back.

"You're nearly eighteen."

“It’s got nothing to do with my age.”

“I waited two years for you, Kamila.” His tone changed as he let himself fall back into his seat. “Do you know how hard that is for a guy?”

For a guy? What the hell did being a guy have to do with it? I wasn’t going to say I was sorry for not doing it with him the whole time we were going out. It’s not like I was a prude—we’d done everything but, and in the end, I had given him my virginity for the simple reason that he wouldn’t shut up about it. That was my mistake.

“Danny, you and I want different things. I need to be alone. I’m sorry, but I want to focus on my grades, on my college applications...”

“Are you breaking up with me?” he asked, confused.

“I’m sorry, but...”

“Are you fucking breaking up with me?”

I slid my hands under my thighs and counted to three in my head before answering.

“Yes.”

Danny glared at me, then looked straight ahead.

“This must be a fucking joke...” As he kept speaking, his voice rose. “This summer you blew me off constantly. I wrote you every fucking night, and you’d maybe reply with a one-liner, but usually nothing, and you’d be like *oh, I can’t get service where I’m at*, and the whole time you were getting ready to dump me?”

Fuck.

“I...I needed the time to think.”

“About breaking up with me?! Tell me you’re kidding.”

I shook my head. I hadn’t intended to do it now, but after feeling his hands on me, I couldn’t wait. I didn’t want this relationship to bring me even more headaches when I was trying to have fun that night. If this was

what love was supposed to be, then to hell with it. I didn't want to be in love.

"Do you have any idea how many chicks I've turned down for you?" he screamed.

I stared at him, seeing a part of him he had never shown me...or almost never.

"You're right," he continued. "We should have broken up a long time ago." He slammed his fist into the steering wheel and kept talking. "You know what? You're a sanctimonious little bitch." I blinked, unable to believe his words.

"You're a fucking tease; you've been playing with me since I met you, with your stupid skimpy dresses and your seductive looks and your touchy-feely bullshit that never leads anywhere. I waited and waited, and now you're telling me you were never really that into me?"

"You can say what you want," I said. "It won't make me change my mind." I tried to get out, but the door was locked. We were far from the school building, with just a sea of empty cars around us. If Danny wanted to keep me in there, there wasn't much I could do. I tried the lock button, but he had the power locks engaged.

"Let me out, Danny."

He laughed bitterly, and I was gripped by an irrational fear that I tried to ignore.

"Open the goddamn door."

I looked into his eyes just then, and I saw that people have many different sides. They show us the one that's most convenient for them at that moment, and they hide the bad ones until the right moment comes—and then it comes out and leaves you frozen.

"Or what?" he asked. He'd never looked more frightening than in that moment.

I tried to think how the hell to answer him, but someone knocked at the window. Standing outside Danny's Range Rover was Taylor Di Bianco.

Danny forced a smile and rolled his window down.

"You ready to kick their asses?" Taylor asked, but his eyes were on me.

Could he see how tense I was? Could he see the fear behind the forced smile I put on?

"Yeah, be there in a few minutes," Danny said calmly. "We've just got some couple stuff to deal with, right, Kami?"

I weighed my possible responses.

"Honestly, I should go warm up," I said, trying the door again and finding it still locked. "Could you open the door for me?"

He ground his teeth, but he did as I asked.

So it was over. No more fights. No more boring, bitter nights. I had loved him—I really had, but I hadn't loved myself. And he should have known that.

I got out and walked to the gym while Taylor stayed behind talking to Danny. I made sure none of the fear or sadness I felt was detectable on my face. I walked over to my friends by the front door, so angry I wished I were stepping into a boxing ring instead of onto a court with stupid pompoms.

"Are you OK?" Ellie asked with a chuckle.

"I'm fine," I said, trying to remain calm. The sun was setting, and it was starting to get dark in the shadow of the building by the parking lot, where students were gathering along with some parents and the kids from the rival school. My cheerleader friends were excited and chirping like birds, and I tried to join them until I felt someone's eyes boring into my neck. I turned to find Thiago getting off his motorcycle. He walked straight to the gym entrance.

He passed me, but if he saw me, he didn't show it.

I tried to act as if it didn't matter as I focused on my warm-up. When it was time to go out on the court, I tried as hard as possible not to think of anything else, but the Di Bianco brothers had overtaken my mind.

Still, it was nice to shake the pompoms and move to the music. I missed a step, and Ellie shot me a nasty glance that forced me to focus. It was right when I was being lifted in the air and had to fall into my teammates' arms. I needed to be careful. Any mistake could leave me bruised...or with a broken neck.

Luckily, years of practice helped me through it. We put on a show, and all the applause and cheering from the stands left us in a good mood. We still had it.

We walked over to the sidelines to watch the game, and I had to pass right by Thiago and Coach Klebb. I couldn't keep myself from staring. Thiago was so handsome, and it was impossible not to notice. I'd seen him grow up. I remembered what he looked like when his two front teeth fell out; I remembered him in some of the lamest outfits imaginable. He'd always had something special, though. He and his brother. They had both turned out handsome. Much more than I expected.

What would it feel like if Thiago kissed me again? I asked myself, then immediately tried to pretend I hadn't; I focused on the conversation with my friends, who were already excited about the party after the game. I walked over to the cooler by the balloons to grab a bottle of water and caught Thiago peeking over at me, but I wasn't sure what his look meant.

I took a drink and tried to ignore him just as Victor Viani, the forward, came over and wrapped an arm around my wrist, pulling me toward him.

"What are you doing?" I asked, pushing him away and taking another drink. I could see the lust in his eyes as he grinned.

"Nothing. I just wanted to welcome you back. You're all grown up now."

I rolled my eyes, irritated. “*You’re* not,” I said.

I had my mask on that night. And no one was going to make me take it off.

“Don’t get mad. I’m just saying, you’re a real woman now. That’s something to celebrate.”

Cold sweat dripped down my back, and a chill ran up my spine.

“What the...?”

“I gotta admit, I was one of the guys who thought you’d still be a virgin when you went off to college. But hey, congrats, Lady Kamila. Now that we know Danny broke you in for us...” He spoke loudly enough for his teammates to hear, and they all started laughing along with him.

I felt sick to my stomach. I wanted to vomit. So much passed through my head just then: violent thoughts, little-girl thoughts. But I didn’t manage to say anything. Before I knew it, Thiago had grabbed Victor’s head and pulled him in to whisper something in his ear, audible only to the three of us.

“You say something like that again and I’ll have the coach suspend you for the rest of the season...after I wipe the floor with you. Got it?”

Victor nodded, silent.

“Now, get out of here,” he said, clapping him on the back before he returned to the game. Many of the people around were looking at us. There was surprise in Victor’s eyes, but the strongest feeling in them was fear, and he didn’t put up a fight before turning around and leaving. His friends were quiet too; they turned to cheer on their teammates, who were winning.

Thiago shot me a few more sidelong glances as he coached, but I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Was it disappointment?

Chapter Four

Thiago

That week had been hell. No matter where I turned, she was there. Not only did I keep running into her at school, I could also see her through her bedroom window every time I looked outside. When I was ten and she was eight, we'd come up with a kind of Morse code. It was the one thing she and I shared that my brother hadn't been a part of because his window looked out the other side of the house.

I was always a little envious of their relationship. It made sense. They were the same age, they understood each other better, but looking at each other out the window and sharing that code had made us close in ways Taylor couldn't imagine. When I turned twelve, my feelings changed, and I began to see her differently. I was starting to check out girls, and as for Kam, well, I always had this urge to find a way to be closer to her. She may have been the first girl I ever kissed—admittedly, it was a quick kiss and a clumsy one—but those years between ten and twelve are crucial ones, and it made me feel more mature to tease her, even if I knew it was an expression of how much I liked her.

Now, though, that difference meant less. She was basically an adult, and my affection for her was turning into attraction. But still, there was so much

rage inside me. I couldn't help but hate her. I still blamed her for what had happened, even while I also wondered what it would feel like to kiss her now. To kiss her for real. To savor her lips and feel her body pressed against mine.

I had observed her from a distance. She was the school's queen bee. Everyone talked about her, and everyone revolved around her like she was the sun and they were planets. Her life was perfect. Everyone said that; they all envied her, and that only made me hate her family worse. Why should her life be like that when mine had fallen apart?

Still, not everything I'd heard about her was good. There were lots of people that hated her. And people talked about her like an object. I'd heard them call her *ice princess*, and I knew that was a reference to her mother, the *ice queen*. In Anne Hamilton's case, the nickname made sense, and I still couldn't figure out why my father had chosen her when he decided to cheat on my mother. Sure, she was pretty, but she was a lifeless body, an emotional void. Was Kami like that deep down too?

What really got to me, more than I cared to admit, were the players' remarks in the locker room. In the last week, I'd heard all of them, from how hot she was to all the things they'd like to do with her. The dirty talk died down when Danny Walker, the team captain, walked in. Kami's so-called boyfriend was stuck-up, stiff. The mayor's son. Was he a good player? Sure. But he was also a dickhead and someone to keep my eye on.

I'd given him the benefit of the doubt at first because at least he hadn't said anything about Kam. And if anyone got out of line with their remarks, he'd scowl at them and shut them up. And they'd be quiet—at least until he left again.

But something in the past few hours had changed him, and what I heard him say before the game hit me in a way I could never have predicted. The thought of that dumbass actually having sex with her...

Victor Viani had pissed me off when he was talking to Kam, but I couldn't just fight him in front of the whole school. I tried to focus on the game, but in the second quarter, the cheerleaders started their routine, and it was hard to take my eyes off her. Kam was incredible. She was the star of the squad, and every time they tossed her in the air, I held my breath.

I couldn't forget my resentment against her and her family, though. Maybe she had been close to me when I was a kid, maybe she was the first girl I fell in love with...but none of that mattered because, at the end of the day, the Hamiltons had destroyed my childhood and my mother's life, and I'd never be able to forgive them. Especially that witch Kam had for a mother.

When the game was over, I was able to stop thinking about it and celebrate with my brother and his new teammates. I was happy for Taylor. He fit right back into our old life. He'd always been able to see the good side of things. In that sense, he was very different from me. His new friends not only respected me, they treated me like one of them. They were seventeen, some of them eighteen, and it was ridiculous for them to try to pretend I was another teacher in their thirties or forties. And I was glad they didn't try. I wasn't exactly flush with friends in this town, and the warmth the basketball team showed me meant a lot. Klebb seemed to get this too, and he didn't try to pester me about *fraternizing* with the other guys.

As I was wiping down, Taylor came over with Harry Lionel, our center who stood at nearly six foot seven, and invited me to a party later at Aaron Martin's house, the best power forward the team had.

I grabbed my water bottle and laughed.

"Guys, I can't do little kids' parties," I said to piss them off. My brother rolled his eyes, but Harry ribbed me, trying to persuade me.

"Come on, dude. Everybody wants you to come, Coach. Even if you are an old man." He grabbed my water bottle and dumped it over his head.

“I’ll see if I can make it,” I said. It wasn’t like I had anything better to do. Besides, my mother was working the night shift, so I wouldn’t have to worry about her being home alone.

My brother walked off to the locker room with his new friend while I put away the balls and picked up the water bottles and trash the players and fans had left behind. That was the worst part of the job, but I wasn’t about to complain. I needed the money, and I needed steady employment as a condition of my probation.

Absorbed in what I was doing, I barely realized the bleachers were empty. A door opened and closed behind me. When I heard dribbling, I turned just as the ball swished through the net, struck the wall, and bounced back in the direction it had come from. Looking over, I saw a pair of girl’s hands. It was her: Kam.

She had changed into a skirt, a white halter top, and combat boots that made her look taller than she was. She was almost too much for my mental health to stand.

She looked up, startled, and said, “Sorry, I didn’t think anyone was still in here.” Her body was tense. I could tell I was having some kind of effect on her, but I didn’t know what it was.

“Can I get the ball?” I said, trying to ignore the feelings that flooded through me each time I saw her.

She looked at me coldly and threw the ball straight into my chest. When I caught it, I turned and shot, making the basket and peering at her from the corner of my eye. She walked over to the benches where the cheerleaders had left their purses and water bottles during the game.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a cell phone I’d found under a bench and was planning to leave with the secretary on Monday morning. It was locked, and I hadn’t been able to figure out whose it was.

“Looking for this?” I asked. There was relief in Kam’s beautiful brown eyes.

“I thought I’d lost it,” she said, walking hesitantly toward me.

Amused, I stuck it back in my pocket. She stopped short as she observed me.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

I grabbed the ball and sank another basket. I knew she was watching me, and I was happy that I’d made a tough shot, a three-pointer from the far end of the court.

“You know, I think I’ll keep it,” I said, collecting the ball and walking over until I was face to face with her.

Her expression was like that of a person hearing a foreign language. I didn’t know if she didn’t understand or didn’t want to.

“Give it back,” she said with that stern tone she seemed so used to using.

“Or what, princess?” I asked, coming even closer. I didn’t know what I was doing; I just had the urge to piss her off. It was like when we were little and I used to pull her braids. I wanted a reaction out of her, but I also wanted to smell her perfume. And when I did, I could feel every one of my five senses go on alert.

She stepped back to try to keep some distance between us. She did that a lot—not just with me, with everyone. At least in public. And that pose of hers, distant, untouchable, made me want to disrupt it. I noticed the little dark freckles around her nose—those were new, she didn’t have them when she was a kid. And her lips, thicker than they used to be. Her long, curled eyelashes casting shadows on her reddening cheeks...

“I don’t know what your deal is, but give me back my phone, Thiago.” It turned me on, hearing my name come from her mouth. I was about to do something crazy—one of the craziest things I’d ever done—when the gym door opened again.

“Kami, you coming or what?” said the curly-haired girl who was always glued to her. I didn’t know her name. She stared at us for a second, not expecting to see me there, let alone so close to her friend. Kam turned with a smile so fake, I couldn’t believe the other girl didn’t notice.

“I’ll be right out, give me a sec. I’ll catch up with you,” she said. She turned back to me as the latch clicked. “Give it,” she ordered me, reaching toward my pocket.

I grabbed her hand and trapped it, pulling her in and whispering in her ear, my lips almost touching her skin.

“I’ll give it to you when I feel like it, Kamila.”

Then I walked past her and out of the gym. I’d crossed a line I swore I wouldn’t cross, but I didn’t care. Because I was going to have to give her back her phone, and to do that, I’d have to see her again...and I was looking forward to it.

Chapter Five

Kami

I couldn't think about anything but the heat of his lips on my ears and the way it spread all the way through my body. It had only lasted a few seconds, but it had turned my world upside down. Never had such a soft touch meant so much. But he hated me, and he was probably doing it to provoke me. Since Thiago's return, the part of me I kept hidden—that part I worked so hard to keep under control—was struggling to come out and destroy everything in its reach.

Damn him for having so much power over me! But why was I surprised? He always had. When we were kids, I had to be careful when he was around. I felt like a small, defenseless animal being hunted by a beast. Thiago eclipsed everything; his simple presence made that perfect pose I'd tried so hard to perfect turn to dust.

I cursed, thinking about my phone. I didn't know what he was after, but I wasn't going to play his game. He was going to give it back, even if I had to break into his house and steal it.

I was in a bad mood as I walked out of the gym. Ellie was there waiting for me, leaning against her car and finishing one of the day's many

cigarettes. I had already quit; I hated the smell of tobacco on my clothes, in my hair, and in my mouth.

“Were you flirting with the new assistant coach?” Ellie asked, looking like she wouldn’t have minded doing the same.

“You wish,” I said, getting in and looking in the mirror, trying to get a hold of myself and my quivering body.

“He’s hot as hell,” she said, starting the car and taking off toward Aaron’s house. “But for real now, what were you doing talking to Thiago?”

“He’s my neighbor; he just wanted to know if I needed a ride home,” I lied, knowing that was the last thing Thiago would ever do for me.

“Some of the girls told me y’all used to know each other when you were little,” she said, turning a corner and stopping at a stoplight.

“I used to play with his brother, Taylor,” I said as though it wasn’t important. “Thiago was just my neighbor, nothing special.”

“Oh, he was *just* your neighbor?” She turned from the road to stare me in the face. She did that all the time, and I hated it; she could do it forever without even blinking. The smile on her face couldn’t have been more malicious.

“Yes, Ellie. Just a neighbor. In fact, we always hated each other.” I mean, that wasn’t true. He hated me for what I’d done, but we’d been close before that. Especially the year before he left.

“There’s a thin line between love and hate...” She laughed.

“Yeah, you’ll find out how thin if you keep pushing me,” I said.

“Man, you’re in a mood tonight,” she responded, turning into Aaron’s subdivision, which was full of giant, fancy houses.

“I have to tell you something, though,” I said, remembering one of the reasons why my palms were sweating. “Apparently Danny was mouthing off in the locker room and told his friends I’m not a virgin anymore.”

Ellie stomped the brakes and looked at me open-mouthed. “You’re kidding, right?!”

I shook my head. I’d always hated the way boys talked shit about what they did with girls at parties or in their cars behind the school, but Danny had been my boyfriend for two whole years, and for him to just betray my trust like that...why was it so different with boys and girls? He’d been a virgin before he was with me too, and I hadn’t told the whole world about it.

“Victor came up to me during the game and said some shit about how I was a woman now and was part of some club...”

“Fuck Victor,” Ellie said, driving and looking forward again. “He’s an idiot. Danny probably told Aaron, and Aaron told everyone else in the locker room. I can’t imagine Danny spreading your business around like that.”

“Danny can be cruel when he wants to,” I said, remembering our fights and what he’d said to me a few hours before in his car.

“So what are you going to do?” she asked me.

“Dump him,” I responded, looking out the window. “Actually, I already did.”

“Get out!” she shouted, astonished.

“I did it before the game. I should have before I went on vacation, but I thought maybe if we had some time apart...I don’t know, that we’d miss each other and things would go back to how they had been...”

“Did you miss him?”

I shook my head.

“I like Danny, I really do, but I’m not in love with him anymore.” This was the first time I’d admitted it aloud.

Ellie nodded.

“You being back on the market, you know that’s all people at school are going to be talking about, right? Are you ready for it?”

At that moment, I couldn’t have cared less about people at school or what they thought.

“What I’m ready for is to get trashed and forget how horrible this week has been.”

Ellie took her hands off the wheel and clapped, and I leaned over to grab it, terrified, turning just before we veered off the road.

“We’re getting trashed!” she shouted excitedly as she started steering again.

I laughed and shook my head. She was incorrigible, but I wouldn’t have changed her for the world.

Aaron’s house was so big that our entire senior class was able to fit inside, along with some of the younger students. Plus, it had a big yard, so it wasn’t too close to any of the neighbors, and that made it perfect for a party. The music wouldn’t bother anyone, and the police would leave us in peace. I’m not exaggerating when I say there was enough beer there to stun an elephant.

Ellie and I got out of the car and walked to the front door.

Danny was standing there smoking a joint. He looked at me with an impossible-to-decipher expression, and the people around him glared at me too, as if they were accusing me of something. I had no idea how anyone would receive the news of our breakup, but there was one thing I was sure of: they would take sides. I had no idea if I’d come out winning or losing.

Ellie pulled my arm, trying to get me to ignore the hate coming off them, and we went inside to leave all that bad energy behind.

Inside, people were dancing, smoking, and making out in the corners—the usual things at a party like that. I found Kate leaning on the kitchen

counter after about five minutes. Marissa was there too with her boyfriend, Aaron, and some guy I didn't know. Kate hurried over to give us a hug.

"Girls, this is my brother, Julian," she said, pointing to the tall, brown-haired boy standing next to her. He had the same eyes as Kate and a pleasant smile. "Julian, these are my two best friends, Kamila Hamilton and Ellie Webber."

I reached my hand out to him. Kate had told us her brother was moving in with her. I say brother—he was really her half-brother. They shared the same father, but they hadn't been very close before. Julian was a year older, and his parents had split just after he was born. Their father remarried almost immediately, and his new wife had Kate shortly after. Kate and Julian had reconnected three years ago, and when Julian's mother moved to Florida, he arranged to come live with Kate and her family.

Julian was going to our school because he had to repeat a grade. Kate didn't like it, but I was happy at least to be able to get to know her brother.

Julian smiled affectionately and said, "I've only been here two days, but I can't tell you how many people have talked to me about you both."

"Don't believe all the rumors," I said jokingly, but there was a part of me that meant it. Kate went to pour herself a drink. I took my time examining Julian in her absence. He was handsome, but he wasn't my type. As this occurred to me, I remembered someone who was: Thiago. But I tried to push him out of my mind.

The party was at its peak, and the music and the beer put me in a better mood. Julian and I talked, and Kate seemed happy that her brother was fitting in. I excused myself to go to the bathroom and saw Taylor, who was playing pool in one of the side rooms. I leaned against the wall, hoping he wouldn't notice me. He was wearing a pair of ratty jeans, a Rolling Stones T-shirt, and a backward Knicks cap.

He bit his cheek as he bent over, concentrating, and shot with absolute certainty. I knew that gesture from when he was a kid. When I looked up, I noticed that more girls had come in. Normally, it was hard for the girls to get in on a game, but I must admit there was a good reason: almost all of them were terrible at pool. Soon I realized none of them were there to play anyway. They were all just devouring Taylor with their eyes.

I got it. He was handsome. More than handsome—sexy.

As if he could hear my thoughts, he looked up. He seemed surprised at first, as though he couldn't get used to the idea that we were in the same town again. For a second, he hesitated, but then he smiled with what looked like sincerity.

“Hey, Hamilton,” he called. “Get over here and show these guys how to use a stick.” I smiled back at him—my smile sincere, the first sincere one that had crossed my face all week. It was so nice to hear kind words from my old best friend.

I remembered the many afternoons I had played pool with Taylor. He was the one who had showed me how. It had taken a long time. Back then, the cue was longer than I was tall.

Was he drinking? Would he even speak to me if he wasn't?

Who cared? I tried to suppress my negative thoughts and walked over, pressing my way in between the three guys standing next to him. I recognized them from my math class.

“Are you sure about that, Taylor?” I asked, stopping in front of him. From his eyes, I could tell he was having fun. Something important was happening between us, even if I didn't know what. “You know, I'm not the little girl I used to be. You might be in for a surprise.” I grabbed the cue. Around us, people were whistling, and Taylor laughed and turned to our spectators.

“Ten bucks says I can beat her with my eyes closed.” I doubt anyone wanted to see those beautiful blue eyes close, though. I looked in them and saw warmth and nostalgia. Nothing like the coldness in his brother’s emerald stare.

“I’ll raise you,” I said, enjoying myself now. “The winner gets to ask the loser for whatever they want.” That made me anxious. I knew exactly what I’d ask for if I won, and I was hoping against hope that I would.

Taylor narrowed his eyes as the people around us started making insinuations.

“Anything means anything, Taylor!” some guy yelled from behind me.

“It’s a deal,” he said, and we shook on it.

I approached the table as Taylor gathered the fifteen balls and arranged them in the triangle.

“Ladies first,” he said, motioning toward me. I rubbed the chalk hard on the tip of my cue, bent strategically across the table, and struck the cue ball with precision. The other balls shot across the table.

“Solids,” I said, and Taylor stared at the table, plotting his next move.

A group had gathered around us. No one had ever seen me play before; I only ever played at home with Dad. My mom didn’t like me shooting pool. She said it was a stupid men’s game, and even at parties, I never joined in. Taylor made me feel comfortable, though; he had taught me the game, and taking him on now was like stepping back in time.

I knew my flimsy top and short skirt weren’t the most discreet garments for bending over the table, but I tried to put that out of my mind as I prepared to knock the yellow ball into the far corner pocket. It sank in with a loud click.

“Way to go, Kami!” Ellie shouted. She was standing there next to Kate, Julian, and our other friends who were cheering me on. I smiled and concentrated on my next shot. It was tough, and I’d have to hit one of his

balls before sinking my own, which meant I'd lose my turn. But since it was my only option, I carefully trained my cue in the gap between two balls and struck. The cue ball grazed the nine before sinking the six.

"I'm up, cutie," Taylor said, setting up a combo shot that he executed with ease. I cursed. I had one ball propped on the edge of a side pocket, and I worried he was about to knock it out of the way. Taylor bent over. He was nothing like the short, quiet boy I'd once known. He was tall now, handsome, with eyes and hair to die for. He had his brother's frame, just a bit shorter and thinner. But then, Thiago was two years older.

Taylor sank two more balls, which meant I was seriously down. Fortunately, he missed after the next shot. We played another twenty minutes, and at the end, we were tied. The tequila from earlier had gotten to my head, but I was sure I could still win. The music was loud, people were dancing and drinking, but I shut all of it out. I was in a bubble with only Taylor and the pool table.

"You're toast, Kami. You shouldn't stress yourself out over it," he said, watching me walk around to another side. If I knocked in the eight ball, I won. End of story. But to do it, I'd have to bank the cue ball off two sides, hard enough to reach the eight but not so hard that it bounced off the pocket. I ignored Taylor's words and chose my position, almost lying across the table. I didn't have any shame just then, though: if my plan worked, everyone there, including Taylor, would be freaking out.

"Ellie, come here," I said. She was buzzed, but not yet stumbling, and hurried over. "Get behind me, please," I said.

"Why, you need help?" she asked, confused. I laughed. Ellie didn't even know how to hold the stick. No, I just wanted to make sure nobody was gawking at my panties as I bent over the table.

"Just stay back there," I said, aiming the cue.

I felt her behind me and heard her laugh and say, “Ah, I get you. You don’t want anyone to see that sweet little ass.”

That remark provoked hooting among the boys, but I tuned it all out, and I noticed Taylor did too. He was entirely concentrated on my movements. I could see what he was doing. He was like me, judging the shot, the angles. As soon as I hit the cue, he knew he was done for, and a frown crept across his face.

In slow motion, my plan played out perfectly. With a loud, final crack, the eight ball sank, clacking against the other balls as it dropped into the ball return. Everyone shouted and applauded, and I clapped my hands and screeched too, relishing the sour look on Taylor’s face. We both knew the origins of that shot: I had beaten him with it before when we were kids. I still remember when he lost and had to give me his whole collection of football cards.

Pretending not to notice his seething expression, I walked over to him.

“That was a low blow,” he said, remembering the same thing I did.

“You don’t like the student surpassing the teacher?” I asked.

“I don’t like that smug look on your face,” he said. “Anyway, you shouldn’t let one lucky game get to your head.” As he answered, his features softened, and I could see he was having fun again.

“When you want, where you want, Tay,” I said, noticing the crow’s feet in the corner of his eyes from his smile.

I had always known his friendship was one I’d remember my entire life, that it would always have its place in my heart. He was the friend I could always count on. No matter what happened, he had always been there for me, had always forgiven me. And I needed that friend back now.

“You said whatever I want, right?” I asked, soft enough that no one else would hear me. His expression was surprised at first, then cool. “Well, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for what happened eight years ago. I’m sorry everything

turned out as it did. But what I'm sorriest about is losing you in the process. I want you back in my life, Taylor. Please, tell me you forgive me."

I'd never have said that stuff without a few beers and shots in my system. I'd probably never drunk this much before. But still, everything I was saying was true. Not just true but bursting with truth; there was nothing that mattered more to me than getting his friendship back. Or at least, that's what I felt just then.

Taylor's posture relaxed.

"It's not your fault, Kami. It's our parents' fault. I never blamed you for what happened. And I missed you too."

He hugged me, and for a moment, I felt all the things I'd lost when he and his brother left: warmth, safety, protection, love...I hugged him back, and I didn't care that we were surrounded by people. I didn't care about the rumors that might crop up or what my friends might say. I didn't care about anyone or anything else...until I saw Thiago standing in the back of the room.

Chapter Six

Thiago

I'd been watching her for some time. Neither she nor Taylor knew I was there. A part of me wished I was him just then, hugging her and feeling her body next to mine. Another part, much stronger and much darker, wanted to keep hating her. Hating her the same way I'd hated her for eight long years.

She saw me, and I could tell from her expression that she wished I wasn't there, that I was invading her space. She probably felt guilty, knowing all the harm she'd done to my brother and me. Had he really forgotten it, forgotten the pain her family had caused us? Did he not remember all those years when our mother could barely crawl out of bed? Had he forgotten how much we'd lost?

It kept crashing over me, harder and harder, like waves, that hatred in my heart, and I had to leave the room to keep from losing my shit. I went to the kitchen, hoping to find something that would calm me down. I was happy to see they had decent beer and not just the usual keg of Natural Light. I grabbed a bottle, took a sip, and leaned back against the kitchen counter, watching the girls who couldn't keep their eyes off of me. One of them could easily have been my age. She was tall and thin, her hair so blond it was almost white. I was pretty sure she was on the cheerleading squad, and

that meant she was one of Kam's friends, which meant I didn't want anything to do with her. But what I wanted didn't matter because as soon as I laid eyes on her, she started coming over.

"Hey," she said. Yeah, she was definitely one of the cheerleaders. "You're Thiago Di Bianco, right?"

"I am. What's it to you?" I said, taking another sip. I was trying to be curt, but she didn't care and went on talking like it was nothing.

"Your reputation precedes you. I've talked to girls who still remember you from when you were breaking hearts in sixth grade." Her approach caught my attention. I liked a girl who pushed back a little. I eyed her up, trying to figure out what she was getting at. Her smile was actually friendly, with white teeth and one canine slightly twisted. With that sweet face, I couldn't just blow her off, but I didn't really know how to just be friends with a girl—I never had been, not since what had happened with Kami when I was a kid. So instead, I turned to my old tactics, stepping closer to her and looking down. That always made girls nervous. But they liked it too, and this girl was no exception. I could see her subtly licking her lips.

"What's your name?" I asked, setting my beer down on the counter.

"Amanda," she whispered.

I smiled. I had her eating out of the palm of my hand.

I was about to kiss her when a hand landed on my shoulder and pulled me away. My reflexes were fast, and before I knew it, I had reversed our positions, and I was grabbing the guy's arm. Not just any guy, though: a guy more or less my height, a guy whose blue eyes I knew well. Taylor.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked, pushing my hand away.

My mind went blank. What was my brother asking me? What did he mean, what was I doing? Wasn't it obvious?

"Thiago, you can't," he murmured. People were watching us, I saw now, and even if I couldn't hear them over the music, they were talking too. I

realized what I'd been about to do as Taylor continued, "Bro, she's a student. If they find out..."

I turned away, cursing myself for being so stupid. Amanda was watching me, waiting for an explanation, clearly not amused with my brother.

"See you 'round, Amanda," I said, ready to leave. I'd been a moron for even coming. Even if I was just barely older than them, I couldn't be hanging out with Carsville High students, and especially not drinking with them. That alone was stupid, but if I actually made out with a girl here and someone told, the life I'd just begun to build here could immediately fall apart...

On my way to the door, I left my beer on the counter. Then the last person I wanted to see showed up in front of me before I could even react.

"I want my phone," she said, her eyes glowing with intense anger.

I observed her for a moment. Seeing her so pissed off strangely cheered me up.

"Buy a new one," I said, leaning against the doorway. Maybe I would stick around for a while.

"Thiago, don't be an asshole. Just give it back." She must not have realized I was devouring her with my eyes. It didn't matter how much I resented her; I couldn't help but stare.

"I see Little Miss Perfect learned herself some bad words," I replied. "Be careful no one hears you."

That pissed her off more, and she exhaled as she came closer to me.

"Thiago, I'm tired of your insults, and I'm tired of you treating me like something on the bottom of your shoe. Give me my phone and let's just enjoy the party in peace." She was speaking so softly only I could hear her.

Like something on the bottom of my shoe? She'd clearly misread me. Even with all those people around and the noisy music and the scent of

sweat and beer, her lithe form, her voice, the soft fragrance of her hair and skin were all I could sense.

I didn't react, so she took the lead, moving so fast that her hand was in my pants pocket before I realized it. I shivered and shoved my hand in as fast as I could. My own hand, big, with calluses, wrapped almost entirely around her small, elegant one. She tried to resist me, and I pulled her so close that there were just inches between us.

"You'd better not touch me, Kamila," I said.

Her brown eyes looked at me, offended.

"Since when do you call me that?" she asked. Somehow that seemed to have angered her more than me stealing her phone.

"Since when do I call you by your name?" I asked, toying with her again, curious as to what she would say.

She looked around to make sure no one was eavesdropping. When she turned back to me, that mask of hers had returned, but I thought I could still see a slight crack in it.

"If you don't give it back, I can't call my dad and tell him to come pick me up," she admitted.

I gave her a quizzical look. "Aw, princess, you don't have a chauffeur to drive you around?" I asked, provoking her.

"I don't."

"What about your car?"

She exhaled audibly, exasperated. "Thiago, let me go!" she said.

It wasn't until then that I realized my hand was still squeezing hers. I loosened my fingers and stepped away, trying to get hold of my thoughts. Kam was having an effect on me. When she was close, all I could think about was having her closer, and that unnerved me—hadn't I always hoped I'd never see her again?

Just then, someone else walked over.

“Are you all right, Kami?” a brown-haired kid asked. I didn’t remember him from school, but I did think I’d seen him somewhere.

“She’s fine, bro,” I answered, stepping between the two of them before I realized what I was doing. Was it an overreaction? Hell yes. *What’s going on with you, Thiago?* I asked myself.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” the guy said. Kam came forward to reply.

“I’m fine, Julian, thanks,” she said with a friendly smile. “Thiago was just telling me he’d give me a ride home.”

Now I was even more confused and irritated. *Julian. Julian...that name rings a bell*, I thought.

“If he can’t, I’d be happy to take you home,” Julian said. I didn’t like the way he was looking at her. I knew what was going through this head because it was the same thing that went through mine each time I laid eyes on her.

“I mean, if I’m not imposing...”

“I’m taking her,” I cut him off, grabbing Kam’s arm and pulling her away from him. Julian looked at her and then at me, and I saw something in his eyes I didn’t like.

“Haven’t we met before?” I asked him.

“I doubt it,” he said.

“Julian starts school on Monday,” Kam interjected, sounding calmer than she had in the minutes before.

“Good for him,” I said. “Let’s go.”

I pulled her toward the door, and she didn’t put up any resistance. I don’t know why, but my instincts told me I needed to get her away from that creep. Once we were outside, I let her go, and she repeated again that she wanted her phone back.

“Take me home, give me my phone, wah wah...why do you feel like you get to say who does what?”

“First of all, I can’t get home because you have my phone. Second, the phone’s mine. Third, I’m not ten anymore, and I’m not going to let you annoy me and pick on me the way you used to. I’m grown up now,” she said.

“Oh, you are, huh? Well, I sure wish you’d told me. Because you’re still acting like a little girl, and little girls aren’t allowed to have cell phones.”

“Dumbass,” she said, reaching for her phone, which I’d removed from my pocket and was holding up in the air. The closer she got, the harder it was for me to remember that I hated her. Her scent overwhelmed me, and the warmth was melting me inside.

“Give it to me, goddammit!”

Just then, someone behind me grabbed the phone out of my hand. We both turned to see who it was.

Taylor told me sternly, “Leave her alone, Thiago,” and passed the phone back to Kam, who smiled at him. Now I was annoyed again. This reminded me of when we were kids and they would take sides against me.

“Well, well, princess,” I said, “looks like your knight in shining armor’s shown up to rescue you.” Calmly, I took a cigarette out of the back pocket of my pants and lit it.

“Since when do you smoke?” Kam asked.

“There’s lots you don’t know about me,” I said, using the exact words she’d used with me a few days before.

“Give me one,” Taylor said and reached for my pack.

“You too?” Kam asked, looking disappointed. With me, she hadn’t been surprised, but then, Taylor had always been the good boy.

“I’ve got an idea,” Taylor said. “How about we all try to get along?”

All my suppressed anger, which I thought I'd managed to get away from that evening, returned with those simple words. How dare he just pretend what had happened with us was some kind of childish spat that time and distance should have made go away?

"I thought you hated her, little brother. What, y'all are supposed to be besties now?" I waited for my words to sink in. His eyes turned to the ground. Sullenly, he asked Kam, "Do you want a ride home or what?"

Kam looked back and forth between us. My words had made her feel guilty. But I didn't care. She deserved it.

"I know I'm to blame," Kam said, with an expression on her face too complicated for me to put into words. "But you're trying to put too much responsibility on me. I was ten years old, dammit."

I threw my cigarette butt on the ground and stomped it out.

"Your whole family was responsible, which is why I hate each and every one of you. Have a good night, now," I said, trying to stay calm. I walked off, not even waving goodbye to my brother.

I'd had enough of Kam. Enough flirting, enough toying with her. I would never betray the person I loved most in this world. She deserved better.

Chapter Seven

Kami

I knew Thiago was right, at least in part, but I couldn't help wanting to change his mind. Why? Because I cared about him...I cared about both of them, and I wanted so bad to have that unique friendship back that we had shared.

"Come on, Kami," Taylor said, waving me over toward his car.

I didn't comment on anything his brother had said. Especially about Taylor supposedly hating me. It had to be true, right? How could he not? I got in the car, and as soon as I breathed in, I knew the brothers must share it. There was a sweet masculine scent in it mixed with the aroma of tobacco. It was strange, the two of them smoking. For Thiago, it made sense; he looked natural with a cigarette, like a bad boy from the movies. But Taylor...

I had my hands in my lap, and with my finger, I traced the outline of my scar, which took me back to the time when we'd called ourselves the Three Musketeers and were up for any kind of adventure imaginable.

I remember Thiago first came up with the idea. "We've got to do it!" he said, and he was so convinced that nothing Taylor or I could say would

change his mind. “I saw it in a movie; it’s a way of showing who your real best friends are. And you’re our best friend, right, Kam?”

I had nodded, terrified.

“Then that’s that,” he said, picking up the wire he’d bent into a triangle at one end and sticking it into the fire we’d built beside the lake.

“It’s going to hurt, though,” I said.

“Relax, Kam,” Taylor said. “If you don’t want to do it, it’s fine.”

“Shut up, Taylor! If she doesn’t do it, it means she’s not our best friend.”

“I am!” I shouted, indignant.

“Then show it,” Thiago said, pulling the makeshift brand out of the fire and asking for my hand. “If you do this, I promise nothing will ever come between us.”

And for some reason, I’d believed him.

Eight years later, that mark my thumb was caressing was just a thin outline on my tanned skin. A *friendship tattoo*, we’d called it. We’d all have it on our skin for the rest of our lives.

“Don’t worry about Thiago. He’ll come around; he just needs time. Being back home after so long hasn’t been easy for anyone.”

“You don’t have to make excuses for him, Tay.” I observed him from the passenger seat as he drove. Like Thiago, he had presence, a spark, and no one could resist his charm. His big hands deftly turned the steering wheel; his hair was a little longer than his brother’s and better cared for, and the brown bangs across his forehead brought out the blue of his eyes. He was handsome, and I was happy to have him talking to me again.

“Hey, stop staring at me!” he said, smiling.

I shrugged.

“I can’t. You’re handsome,” I said.

“You’re the good-looking one,” he replied automatically. “When you were little and all bony, I never thought you’d have those kinds of curves...”

I punched him on the shoulder.

“If you’re talking about my boobs, it’s just an expensive bra,” I said. My bust had always been a sore spot for me.

“You might think that. But I can promise you other people don’t. And you might as well drop the false modesty; it doesn’t suit you.”

“Whatever you say.” I looked out the windshield at the landscape in front of us, smiling, calm, just as he was.

When we turned into our development, I asked him not to drop me off right in front of my house.

“What, you don’t want to be seen with me?” he asked, arching an eyebrow.

Did that bother him, or did he understand? Unsure, I continued, “More like I don’t feel like answering my mother’s stupid questions. Plus, I’d like to talk to you for a bit. There’s so much I don’t know. How was life in DC?”

Stopping on a corner and cutting the motor, Taylor said, “DC...Life there is crazy. I missed Carsville, the calm here.”

“But it’s so boring!”

“Hey! How dare you insult my memories of my beloved hometown? What would we have done when we were kids without its strawberry pies and bingo games and bonfires at the fair...”

“Don’t forget International Food Day,” I added with a smile.

“That must be new!” he exclaimed, laughing. “International Food Day in a town where 99 percent of the inhabitants were born in the state?!”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” I said. “I guess they wanted to be more cosmopolitan.”

Taylor shook his head. “People here are crazy, and it seems like half of them are still living in the twentieth century, but still, it’s nice to be home.”

I nodded. Suddenly there were so many things I wanted to tell him.

“You should head inside,” he said, cutting me off. But his attitude was friendly, nothing like his brother’s.

“You’re right,” I said, wishing I could stay with him longer, wishing I could ask him questions until the sun came up. “Thanks for bringing me home.”

Taylor smiled and waited for me to make it inside. I wondered why he didn’t just pull into his driveway. Instead, as I turned back from my porch, he put the car in gear and turned around. Was he going back to the party?

I walked silently upstairs. Everyone was asleep, and before I went to my room, I peeked in on my brother, who was curled up under his blue comforter with its animal-print pattern. His nightlight, a little plastic dragon, was lit, and he was sleeping peacefully. My own room was next to his, down the hall from my parents’, thank God. When I walked in, I closed the door and leaned against it. I took a deep breath and started giggling. I’d made peace with Taylor. My old friend didn’t hate me anymore—at least not so much that he wouldn’t talk to me. And yet something else stood out more to me, something that probably shouldn’t have: Thiago. Each second spent with him. Every word he said. Maybe he was mean to me, maybe we were at each other’s throats, but then, I was used to that, in a way. We’d always been like that. Apart from a few moments that I held in my heart like treasure.

There was the time not long after he kissed me at Mr. Robin’s place, when we hadn’t seen each other for two days because we’d gotten sick from eating too much candy. My parents finally let me out to play. Taylor still had a stomachache, so Thiago was the only one to come out. I still remember how nervous I was to be alone with him after the kiss.

“Come here, I want to show you something,” he said, grabbing my hand and pulling me after him. I didn’t even hesitate. We walked past our houses on the lawn and into the woods behind them where we liked to climb the trees or play hide-and-go-seek. As Thiago walked on, the forest turned dense. I was worried we’d get lost, but then he stopped in front of a giant tree covered in branches so thick, they wouldn’t bend if you sat on them. Thiago showed me a part of the trunk where he had carved my name, his own, and his brother’s in sloppy letters.

“I found it a month ago,” he said. “Now look up.”

When I did, I couldn’t believe my eyes. There was a wooden platform, nothing fancy, but it would do. We’d been talking about making one of these for so long.

“A tree house!” I shouted, jumping up and down.

Thiago’s smile was glowing.

“It’s still not finished, but I was thinking we could all work on it together. It’ll be fun, and once it’s done, you can keep all your toys and stuff out here.”

Your toys, he said. That didn’t escape me. Thiago liked to say he was too old to play with toys, but I knew he still enjoyed it. He looked even happier about the tree house than I was.

“You want to climb up there?” he asked. He looked nervous. I think this was the first time we’d ever talked without some kind of argument. Maybe that’s what Thiago needed to control his temper—a little kiss now and again. So I decided to give him another one, this time on the cheek. Surprised, proud, he said, “Come on, princess,” without a trace of sarcasm. “Allow me to show you around your castle.”

Once we were up there, I saw the wood wasn’t in the best shape. There were gaps, and some of the boards were crooked. But I didn’t care; for me it was the finest fortress in the world.

We played a while, climbed the larger branches, and eventually stopped and rested, our feet dangling in the air as we watched the squirrels jump across the treetops.

“You know something, Kam?” he said after we ate an apple he’d brought along. “We fight a lot, and I like to pick on you, but you’re actually the coolest girl I know.”

“I thought you said I was a stuck-up little crybaby,” I said, kicking my feet back and forth.

“I mean...you’re a little bit of a crybaby.” I scowled at him. “But you’re not fussy like most girls, and you’re not scared to do stuff,” he added. “None of the chicks in my class would have been brave enough to come up here. And you surprised me when we broke into Mr. Robin’s house; you kept such a cool head. I honestly thought you’d burst out crying.”

“Does this mean you’ll stop messing with me, then?” I asked.

“I will if you do one thing for me.” There it was again, that sly grin.

“If it’s another kiss you’re thinking about, Thiago Di Bianco, you can forget it.”

He grunted, leaned back, and looked up.

“So I did all this for nothing.”

I smiled, but he couldn’t see.

The next morning, I got dressed in shorts and a T-shirt and went downstairs for breakfast. Dad was busy on the phone with someone, and my brother was chasing flakes of cereal around the bowl with his spoon. Mom was nowhere to be seen, and I can’t say I minded. I wasn’t in the mood to get grilled about where I’d been, who I was with, whether I made a good

impression, what time I got home... I sometimes felt like she was reliving her teenage years through me.

But then I heard that familiar voice behind me. “Kamila, what time did you come back last night?”

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed strawberries and milk out of the fridge. “Twelve or something, I don’t know.”

I spoke over my father, who was on the phone with some lawyer or accountant or something, shouting, “Impossible, I told you. That building was purchased more than three months ago; ask my secretary.” He was usually so calm, but he looked upset today. He was holding his cell phone so tight against his head, I was worried he’d crush it.

“Damn right I will!” he screamed. My mother, brother, and I all jumped in the air. She quickly regained her cool and asked, “Who brought you home, then?”

I was grabbing the blender from under the sink just then, and I pretended to be fiddling with it as I tried to come up with a convincing story. I couldn’t tell her it had been Taylor—she’d kill me if she found out.

“Kate’s brother did,” I lied, but at least there was a grain of truth to it—Julian had offered, after all. My brother turned on the TV in the corner and flipped to the cartoon channel.

“Kate’s brother? You mean the one her father tried to pretend didn’t exist for all those years?” Mom asked sternly.

“It’s her brother, Mom. He’s going to go to school with us, and I’m going to be hanging out with him. He needs it. He doesn’t even know anyone here.” To keep from having to hear her, I turned the blender on high and watched the strawberries disintegrate, turning the milk of my smoothie pink. She seemed to be waiting for me to finish so she could continue interrogating me, but that was when Dad walked back in. I guess he was done screaming at whoever was on the other line.

“I need to go out of town this weekend. There are problems with the company,” he said, for some inexplicable reason addressing this statement to me.

“Everything OK?” I asked, pouring my breakfast into a glass. He smiled, but it was hollow.

“Yeah, everything’s great, Kam. Nothing to worry about.” Then he turned to my brother: “Cameron, we’re going to have to put the park off for another day, OK?”

My brother was used to Dad canceling plans out of nowhere, so he nodded and kept chewing his cereal, barely paying any attention to him.

“Tell Prudence to pack my suitcase,” he said to my mother, who nodded, her mind clearly elsewhere. “Two suits and two shirts should do it. And my golf clothes. I’ll swing by to get it after a while, when I wrap things up at the office.”

“Bye, Dad,” I said, hugging him. My mother gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Take care,” he said. “I’ll be back Tuesday afternoon.” And then he left.

“What’s going on with the company, Mom?” I asked.

“You know I don’t like to get mixed up in your father’s business, especially when he’s having problems. It gives me a headache.” She took a hand mirror out of her purse and started spreading scarlet lipstick across her lips.

“Are you going out?” I asked. Some timing. Cameron couldn’t stay by himself, and I had plans. I was going for a run, and then Ellie and I were headed to the mall for clothes and school supplies.

“Yeah, they’ve opened a new spa about an hour from here, and I want to go check it out. I won’t be home till late.” I tried to respond, but she cut me off: “So Cameron will have to stay with you.”

Looking over from the TV, my brother asked, “Can we go to the park, Kami?”

I wasn’t going to disappoint him in front of Mom, especially not after Dad had done so. Really, she should have stepped in, but asking her to act like a real mother would be like asking for a miracle.

“Sure, but I’m going for a run first. Mom, what time’s Prue coming?”

“Kamila, Prudence won’t be here until this afternoon.”

“Then I guess I’ll talk to Ellie and tell her I’ll have to meet her later.”

I ran out before Mom could catch me, putting in my earbuds on the porch and taking out my phone to find my favorite playlist. I stretched and flexed my hips and, without meaning to, found myself glancing at the Di Bianco house. Thiago was out cutting the grass and...my God, he didn’t have a shirt on. Taylor was nowhere to be seen. When their mother stepped out on the porch, my heart stopped.

Kate Di Bianco had always been attractive, but her brown hair and green eyes made her fade into the background more than a person like my mother. I scurried down the steps, turning my back to her. If Mom came out and she and Kate saw each other, I didn’t want to be there to witness it. At best, it would be uncomfortable; at worst, it could get dangerous. To hell with my warm-up, then. I took off running. I was sure Thiago had noticed me, but I wasn’t about to stop and chat. My mother would be proud of me—she always thought we were too good for the people in our neighborhood, and she never bothered waving to them.

The run helped me clear away the tension of the preceding days and think through my frustrations. I stayed out for an hour, and when I got home, I couldn’t believe what I saw: my brother was with our neighbors again! He had his iguana with him and was talking a million miles a minute with Taylor and Thiago. I didn’t see their mom anywhere. My mom’s car was gone too. She didn’t even have the decency to wait until I’d gotten back.

Cameron heard my footsteps and looked up, and that meant I had to continue over. I took out my earbuds and tried to act cool, even though I was dripping with sweat and panting. If only it had just been Taylor there! Thiago's eyes made it impossible for me to cool down. At least he'd put a shirt on.

"Kami, come here!" Cameron shouted. "I want to introduce you to Taylor and Thiago!" I didn't tell him we already knew each other well. What would my mother have said if she knew he was hanging out with the Di Bianco boys? There would be hell to pay.

I walked up behind him and put my hands on his shoulders, looking at our two neighbors doubtfully. Taylor was clearly happy to see me. Thiago was—well...less so.

"Out for a run, huh?" Tay asked with characteristic cheerfulness, ignoring Thiago, who just stood and stared.

"Yeah. I mean..." I trailed off and turned my brother around to face me. "What are you doing here, Cam?" I asked, trying to make the situation comfortable.

"They asked me to come help them with their yard, and Mom never lets us do anything in ours because supposedly only the gardener can. Thiago's even letting me use the saw! A real saw! I'm gonna actually cut some wood! My friends will FLIP OUT!"

Flip out was my brother's favorite phrase those days. But the person about to really flip out was me. Taylor asked if we wanted to go with him to Lowe's, adding, "We need some gardening stuff before we pull out all the weeds growing in the back."

"HECK YEAH!" Cameron screamed, so excited he dropped his iguana.

"Sorry, Cameron, it'll have to be another day," I said. "I need to take a shower and make you some lunch." I could tell I had disappointed Taylor.

“No, Kami!” Cameron protested, on the verge of tears. “Please! I’m so bored!” Those blue eyes of his were so hard to resist! Thiago stepped away to pick up the prunings, tucking the shears in his back pocket with his back turned to us.

“I don’t mind taking him if you’ve got stuff to do,” said Taylor, while my brother jumped up and down, pleading. “It’s not far; we won’t be long.”

I knew Cameron would be in good hands, but I didn’t want to burden Taylor. My brother was my job.

“Nah, it would be better to save it for another day,” I said. My brother started throwing a tantrum, much to Taylor’s amusement.

“Really, Kami, I don’t mind.” I knew he meant it, but I couldn’t allow it. Mom would kill me.

“I’m sorry, but I really feel like he should stay with me.” It sounded rude—I could tell—and my brother totally lost it.

“You suck, Kamila!” he shouted and ran home. That was a bad sign, calling me by my full name. That was the same thing Mom did when she was mad. I was embarrassed, but I couldn’t let my brother hang out with them. It wasn’t appropriate. It was against Mom’s rules. My brother wouldn’t understand, but he’d have to deal with it.

“I’ll see you guys,” I said, walking away.

Chapter Eight

Thiago

Kam was the spitting image of her mother. Not just in the way she looked, but also the way she felt superior to my brother and me. Why was I so stupid? How could I just assume she'd be the same person she'd been when I left? I should have known the old Kamila no longer existed. She was pretty, sure, just like her mother; and just like with her mother, there was nothing behind that pretty face. I felt bad for her kid brother, being surrounded by such superficial people: Kam, the ice princess, and her mother, the ice queen. Everyone said it, and so far, I hadn't seen anything to tell me they were wrong.

When she said she wouldn't go to Lowe's with my brother, I tuned her out. I wasn't going to waste my time with her. I had more important things to do, like organize the workouts before our next game.

When I was done outside, I went to the kitchen and took all the cheese out of the fridge. That was another thing I had to learn to do: cook. Ever since my mother started working overtime shifts at the hospital, I was the one in charge of making dinner. She was going in tonight, and I could hear her in the shower getting ready to go when I started preparing the ingredients.

Once Kam and the kid went inside, my brother went to his room and didn't come out for the rest of the day. It didn't matter to me, really, but ever since we'd come back, there had been a strange tension between us. I got pissed when I saw him playing pool and having a good time with Kam. Them being friends again—that wouldn't work for me. It wasn't right. My brother owed me more respect than that, and I wasn't just going to forget it.

“Wow, honey, that smells amazing,” Mom said, walking into the kitchen and pulling on a jacket.

I was making macaroni and cheese—my special recipe, the first one I'd ever learned. I added cheese to the warm milk and stirred so it would start melting. I turned to find Mom looking for God knows what.

“What are you doing?” I asked, grabbing a chunk of cheddar and popping it into my mouth.

“I'm looking for Taylor's immunization records.”

“You didn't take care of that yet?” *Unbelievable*, I thought.

Taylor walked in and sat down, staring at her just as I was. Mom had the same brown hair and green eyes as me, and we were similar in other ways too, but she was short—Taylor and I got our height from our dad's side. Mom was pretty, and I wondered how it was possible that she hadn't managed to rebuild her life with a guy who was worth it. But I didn't want to judge her. She'd been burned, didn't trust men anymore, and now just wanted to be alone.

“Taylor, get up and help me,” she said, frustrated, opening and closing some of the still-packed boxes. I turned and kept cooking while Taylor looked around sluggishly.

“Why the hell does he need his immunization records anyway?” Mom asked, pushing a strand of hair out of her face and opening one last drawer.

Why the hell don't you keep any of your shit in order? I thought to myself, but instead I responded coolly, “The school has to have them on

file, and all athletes have to have a physical and immunizations on file in order to play.” I stirred the macaroni into the pot of cheese sauce and took a sip of the beer I’d just opened.

“Oh, thank God!” Mom said, relief filling her eyes as she squinted at the document. “You’ve got to take this to the principal’s office; don’t you dare lose it,” she said before giving Taylor a kiss on the cheek. Then, coming over to me, she said, “I’ll be back in the morning. Don’t overdo it on the beer, and don’t let your brother stay up too late playing Xbox; he’s got class tomorrow.”

“I thought you were going to have dinner with us!” I said.

“Honey, I don’t have time. I’m already running late.”

“Wait!” I stopped her, took out a plastic container, and dumped almost half the macaroni into it. “Here. Eat this on your break.”

“Thank you! I love you both!” She kissed me goodbye and ran out. My brother turned on the kitchen TV and took a beer out of the fridge for himself. He wasn’t supposed to, but we’d been drinking since we were fourteen, and Mom knew there was no point in making a rule we’d just break. So instead she made us promise we’d drink in moderation and never drive drunk. And we respected that and always obeyed her.

“You know what Harry told me?” my brother asked, settling down at the table again.

I looked up as I portioned out our two plates.

“He says Coach Klebb is quitting soon. He’s going to retire before Christmas. And apparently he’s impressed with your work. Supposedly, he mentioned you taking over for him to the principal.”

Klebb had dropped a hint about that to me too, but I didn’t want to get my hopes up. “I doubt it,” I said. “He loves his job, and I’ve only been there like five minutes...”

“Don’t bullshit me, Thiago. You’re like a basketball encyclopedia. You mapped out that last game—Klebb basically didn’t do anything—and it went exactly as you’d planned.”

“You’re exaggerating...”

“I’m not saying he’s bad. But you’re better. You’ll get the job. I know you will.” He leaned back as I set down his plate. “Fuck, this smells amazing.” He was at that age where he liked to curse a lot, I guess to show he was a grown-up. By the time he’d picked up his fork, he’d completely forgotten what we were talking about.

I started eating too, but unlike him, that conversation lingered in my mind. I couldn’t stop thinking about how much I’d like it if I really were picked to be the coach at Carsville. That was the most I could ever hope to do with basketball, the game I’d dreamed of playing professionally when I was a kid.

We watched ESPN while we ate and then cleaned up together, even though Taylor should have done it by himself since I’d cooked. While I put the plates in the dishwasher, Taylor wiped off the table and grabbed two more beers out of the fridge. I looked out the window at Kam’s place. Our kitchens faced each other, just as her bedroom and mine did, and she had just finished her dinner. I saw her laughing and holding her little brother up by the waist so he could help out washing dishes. He had on rubber gloves that reached up to his elbows, and foam covered his face and hair. She tried to look away when he splashed her with soapy water. I could tell she wanted to chew him out, but the whole thing was too funny, and her smirk gave her away, and this only made Cameron want to splash more.

“Why are you smiling?” my brother asked from behind me.

He might as well have pinched me. I jumped and then turned my attention back to the pots and pans, scrubbing away and ignoring his question. He looked outside, just as I’d done seconds before.

“She’s changed a lot, hasn’t she?” he asked. There was something peculiar in his tone. “She was pretty when she was little, but now...”

His words bothered me. Don’t ask me why—they just did.

“It’s all surface, bro. A pretty package, nothing inside,” I responded, pushing hard on the scouring pad.

My brother leaned against the counter and waited for me to look at him.

“You can’t keep blaming her for what happened, Thiago,” he said. “It wasn’t her fault that...”

“It wasn’t, huh?” I turned off the water. I wasn’t going to stand for any positivity on that subject. “Whose fault was it, then?”

“You know perfectly well that—”

“If Kamila had kept her trap shut, our mother never—”

“You can’t blame her for that, dammit!”

He was making me angry.

“She swore to me she wouldn’t say anything,” I said. It was true. I remembered her looking me in the eyes and promising me that no matter what, she’d never repeat what we had seen. “I begged her not to, and she did anyway, and the consequences of that—”

“Whatever. It’s past time you got over it.” He rarely talked to me so bluntly. “I don’t know why you’re obsessed with finding someone else to blame. Looking outside our family. Dad’s the one who fucked it all up, Thiago! Not our mother, not Kami, not her father, and not us, even if you keep asking what we could have done differently...”

“I never—”

“You think I never heard you at night?” His words surprised me. “You think I didn’t hear you crying at night saying her name? The way you’d shout in your sleep about how if only it had been you or me who—”

“I never said that. You’re my brother, and I love you. I never...”

“I know you love me. But you loved her more.”

“You’re being an idiot.”

“No, I’m telling you what I think. What I believe. What I know.”

“Well, you’re wrong!” I shouted, wishing the conversation would end. “And we’re never talking about this subject again. Look through that window and you can see the home of the person whose fault this is, and nothing you or anyone else does is going to change my mind about that.”

I didn’t wait for him to respond before walking off, slamming the door, and shutting myself up in my room.

When I peeked out the window, I saw she had been watching us. Our eyes met for a fraction of a second; then she drew the curtain and hid behind it.

Had she heard us shouting?

I hoped so.

Maybe that would help her finally get it through her head.

Chapter Nine

Kami

Look through that window and you can see the home of the person whose fault this is, and nothing you or anyone else does is going to change my mind about that.

His words had echoed clearly through my bedroom window, which I'd kept propped open in the muggy night. I guess the brothers didn't mind airing their dirty laundry. That was something my mother never would have stood for. When we fought—and fights there were, and lots of them—the first thing Mom always said was, *Shut the damn windows, I don't want the neighbors hearing!* Sometimes it was me versus her, sometimes her versus Dad, sometimes she even dragged Cam into it. She could be so cruel, but it didn't matter as long as the outer image of the perfect Hamilton family remained intact. She knew people loved to gossip about us, she never ceased to remind us of that, and I'd learned to control myself and to speak softly and slowly. Trust me, though: with her, it wasn't easy.

Knowing Thiago blamed me for what had happened eight years ago, for the suffering he'd been through, broke my heart. I'd always felt guilty. I'd always known if I hadn't opened my mouth that none of this would have happened, and growing up with that knowledge had scarred me.

For years, it was even hard for me to sleep. My father wanted to send me to a psychologist, but my mother kept saying I was just trying to get their attention. Me! I was the one who'd always stuck to the shadows. I hated being the center of attention, whereas my mother was the one who'd always wanted to show me off, like I was a little doll she could dress up in fancy outfits for others' delight. The Di Bianco brothers were the only ones who ever helped me figure out who I really was, who allowed me to explore my wild side, indulge my curiosity, my will to push things to the limit.

There was almost nothing left of that Kamila now, though.

I lay down in bed and grabbed a drawing pad that I always kept under my pillow. It was full of sketches. I loved drawing: it was the one thing left over from the girl I used to be, and I would never stop, no matter how much people thought it was kids' stuff. My parents didn't mind it, strangely enough. I guess my mother saw it as another thing about me she could brag about to her friends. When she took my drawings to show them, I always died of embarrassment. I usually wouldn't even let Ellie see what was on those pages. For me, they were more like a diary. My thoughts, all the emotions I never let anyone see, could come out there thanks to my number two pencil.

But I didn't like the eyes on the portrait I'd been working on all week. I wanted them to be perfect, but it was hard to match the perfection of the real thing: Thiago's eyes. His chin I'd captured, his aquiline nose, but his eyes... There was just no way to bring that vividness to life, the intensity he looked back at you with. I tried to think back to a few minutes before, when I'd seen them boring holes through me across the distance between our houses. But the pain in his words, the ache of knowing what he really thought of me, drove me to despair.

At least things with Taylor were going better. He'd been nice to me that morning, but then Thiago made me feel like a fool. I closed my pad and put it back under my pillow, turning off the light and promising myself I'd try

to get reacquainted with my old best friend tomorrow. Maybe things with Thiago were ruined forever, and I'd have to accept that, no matter how sad it was. I'd have to settle for the brother who still seemed to care about me.

"Give me an L!" we shouted with all the enthusiasm we could muster in cheerleading practice. "Give me an E! CARSVILLE!"

I felt the air swish around me, twisted with my arms pulled in tight, and after my turn in the air, I fell into the arms of my teammates. They tossed me again, I did a front flip, and I landed in front of them, taking a bow as they stood behind me in a pyramid.

There was no audience, but the guys on the team were warming up, and at least one of them kept glancing over at us. Victor Viani. When I looked up, he said, "Yeah, babe, that's how you do it!" I ignored him and turned to the other girls. After what he'd said to me at the game, I didn't ever want to speak to him again. I didn't even want to be there, yelling and screaming and shaking my pompoms in front of any of those guys. Ever since Danny and I had broken up, they'd treated me differently: either they were disappointed and resentful, or they were happy to finally make nasty remarks about me without Danny telling them to keep it to themselves.

Since when did being a girl mean that guys could shout disgusting things at you whenever they felt like it? I mean, a compliment is one thing, but just assuming you could shout *babe* at me across the gym, after that nonsense about how I was a *grown-up* the other day...who did he think he was? And I didn't care what he thought of my routine. I was an athlete just like him, not some dog waiting for a pat on the head and a treat.

"Everyone in the middle of the gym, now!" That was Thiago, shouting from one of the doorways. When I turned, I saw him with two men and a

woman in white coats with folders in their hands. “Cheerleaders too!” he added, looking straight at me.

All of us looked back and forth at each other as we approached the center of the gym.

“It seems like a lot of you have forgotten, but today’s the blood drive. These people are here from the Red Cross. I want everyone to make the school proud. Giving blood can save lives, so let’s show how much Carsville High cares.”

I looked around nervously, and Thiago looked up from his clipboard.

“Hamilton?” he asked wearily, as though bored before I’d even asked a question.

“Shouldn’t we have been informed of this?” I asked. All those white coats made me nervous.

“A notice was sent out to all the parents. I’m sorry your mommy didn’t read it to you,” he said contemptuously.

It might seem stupid, but the whole thing just weirded me out. I was an orderly person: my test dates, birthdays and holidays, even my periods I kept track of on my calendar. I suddenly had this vision of them sticking a needle into my arm and me fainting, getting laughed at, being ashamed. I hated doctors; I had ever since I got a lung infection when I was five years old. I felt my knees get weak.

“Hey, are you OK?” Ellie asked. From the worried expression on her face as we lined up to go to the bloodmobile, I figured I must look terrified.

I imagined them there in that van filling up sacks of blood, sticking labels on them, poking needles into people’s arms, and my stomach turned; my ears started ringing.

“I think I just need some fresh air.” I walked past the line and around the corner of the gym. The fresh air hitting my lungs helped me recover my nerves.

“Hey, Kami,” I heard someone say. “Are you all right?”

It was Taylor.

“Yeah, nothing to worry about.” I walked over to the bleachers and sat down, closing my eyes for a moment.

“You’re white as a sheet,” he said, his voice sounding like he was speaking from a thousand miles away.

“I just need a few minutes,” I said, lying down and feeling the cool metal of the bleachers on my cheek.

“Should I get the school nurse?” he asked. My eyes flew open.

“No!” I shouted, grabbing his arm to keep him from moving.

“You look like you’re about to pass out,” he said, crouching down. He pushed my hair out of my face and added, “I can’t believe you’re still afraid of needles.”

His fingers touching me made a pleasant warmth spread through my stomach. He was so kind, so good, and his attention made my anxiety abate. But then another voice, the exact opposite, interrupted us, shouting, “What the fuck are y’all doing?”

Taylor sighed and stood.

“She doesn’t feel good,” he said to his brother. “I don’t think she should give blood today.”

I struggled to sit up so I wouldn’t look weak in front of the person who seemed to want to insult me at every turn.

“This isn’t an option,” Thiago said, staring me down, almost as if he were X-raying me with his eyes. “I promised the coach and the principal I could get everyone on the team who was seventeen or older to donate. This is a big deal for them, and I’m not going to let her mess it up. Taylor, go ahead and get back in line. I’ll take care of her.”

Neither of us could believe his attitude.

“Getting a needle stuck in me is better than seeing your face,” I said, and stood up, feeling immediately faint. I stumbled, but Thiago’s strong arms caught me and held me up, squeezing me into his ripped chest. I smelled that scent I knew from years ago, but it had matured, the way they say old wine does. I wondered, *Is that what testosterone smells like?*

“Try and sit,” he said, placing me back on the bleachers. Seeming more worried than before, he said to his brother, who looked angry, “I’ll stay here with her.” I guess Taylor didn’t trust him because he took two steps toward us, and his brother reprimanded him: “I told you to go. If you don’t donate, I’ll make sure you spend Friday’s game on the bench.”

To reassure him, I said, “I’m fine, really.” I even tried to stand up again, but Thiago’s hand on my shoulder forced me down.

“Don’t move,” he commanded, his hand edging slightly closer to my neck. “Go on, Taylor.”

“I’ll try to get it over with fast,” Taylor said, giving me a reassuring smile. It meant a lot that he was worried about me—that the boy who used to always protect me was back here. It wasn’t until he vanished into the gym that I really realized who he’d left me alone with.

“What kind of idiot is afraid of giving a little blood?” Thiago asked. So much for that warm feeling his little brother had inspired. I shoved him away and glared at him.

“You ought to know,” I said. “You’re the biggest idiot I’ve seen around here.” Again, I tried to get up, and again, he stopped me.

“Will you just sit still? If you pass out, I’m not going to carry you back in.”

“I’m not going to faint!” I shouted, writhing against him, but that just made him put his other hand on my opposite shoulder, pinning me completely to the bleachers. He was there in front of me, strong and tall, and my eyes were staring straight at his T-shirt, imagining the chiseled abs

under it. For a nanosecond, I imagined lifting it and running my tongue around his bellybutton, to see if he tasted as good as he smelled.

But then I forgot all that and shouted, “Let me go!” I pushed him, but he didn’t move an inch. I looked up at him. He was smiling arrogantly.

“I’d have thought a cheerleader would have more strength than that,” he said. “Let’s make a deal. I’ll let go of you if you can manage to sit there without getting up or complaining.”

I started grinding my teeth, which I guess he took to mean I agreed.

He took a step back and looked at his watch, then asked, “Do you need me to call your dad?”

“Why?” I had no idea what he was talking about.

“So he can come hold your hand so you won’t cry?” He chuckled.

“You’re such an asshole!” I stood and lurched around him before he could grab my arm. When we were little, I’d told him how scared I was when I got sick and how Dad had held my hand when I’d had to go to the doctor and get all those shots and tests. Now he dared to use that against me? His cruel grin told me he didn’t give a damn about my feelings.

“OK, OK, I’m sorry,” he said, but I didn’t see any indication that he meant it.

“I’m going home,” I said, starting to walk off.

“Listen, Kami, I like seeing you toss and turn in the air as much as the next guy, but I have no problem telling the trainer to bench you if you don’t play along here.”

So he had been looking at me. The sneak. “Why do you even care about a stupid blood donation?” I asked.

Thiago hesitated before answering. “Rumor has it the coach might be retiring, and this is a way for me to make a good impression.”

“You think you could fill his shoes? In your dreams, maybe. Anyway, nice try with the threat, but since you’re offering to get me out of a sport I couldn’t give less of a shit about *and* telling me I’d be able to stop seeing your face all the time, I’m tempted to thank you.”

With a skeptical expression, he said, “Number one, cheerleading’s not a sport. Number two, why do you do it if you hate it so much?”

Without even thinking, I responded, “Number one, if throwing a ball through a hoop is a sport, then getting tossed in the air, doing a kick-double, and sticking the landing is definitely a sport. Number two, I didn’t say I hated it. I said I didn’t care about it.”

I tried to walk away, but he grabbed my arm and turned me around, staring him in the eyes.

“So you still haven’t gotten over your fear of needles,” he said.

“I’m surprised you remember.” Were there other secrets, other memories behind those green eyes?

“Yeah, it’s surprising the amount of shit your brain holds on to.”

That stung, and I fired back, “Yeah, shit’s the right word. That’s what you’re full of.” That stung him, but was I wrong to think he didn’t entirely mind me provoking him? Before I could figure it out, the gym door opened and Taylor returned with a cotton ball and a Band-Aid in the crook of his arm.

“Are you better?” he asked. Then, looking back and forth between us, “Don’t tell me you two are still arguing.”

“No, your brother was just entertaining me with his charming personality,” I said.

Thiago broke his stare to turn to his brother and said, “Can you deal with her? I’ve got to get back to work.” He walked back inside without waiting for a response.

“Kami, you shouldn’t pay attention to my brother,” Taylor said, looking frustrated.

“I’m not. It’s fine, don’t worry about me.” But it was true that I was still staring at the empty space where he’d stood, as if by looking hard enough, I could make him come back.

“I’ll talk to him.” Taylor rubbed my cheek, and I saw how gentle his expression was.

“Don’t bother,” I said, forcing a smile. “It was just a dumb argument. Your brother’s always loved pissing me off.”

“He’s that way with everybody, trust me. So...” He looked back at the gym. “Were you going to donate?”

Why lie? The thought of it made me panic, and I’d probably be woozy the rest of the day, but I didn’t want to leave the rest of the cheerleading squad in the lurch. My friends would kill me. I was the captain; who else would stand at the top of the pyramid?

“Will you hold my hand?” I asked sincerely.

He smiled.

“I’ll hold anything you tell me to hold,” he said. I slapped his forearm. He laughed, but as he walked me in, he turned serious. “Of course I will. I’ll stay with you the whole time, don’t worry.”

“Thanks, Tay.” I couldn’t help but give him a hug. I felt his hands on my waist and his cheek hot against my head. “I’m really happy we’re friends again,” I said, pulling back and kissing him on the cheek.

“Me too, Kami,” he replied with a shine in those blue eyes—his father’s eyes, as I remembered. “You ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.”

Chapter Ten

Taylor

There was barely anyone left outside the bloodmobile. We'd had the cheerleaders line up first and the basketball team behind them, and by now, only two players were still waiting. My brother was there too, sitting at a picnic table on the lawn, filling out forms and writing notes on his clipboard.

He was being a dickhead with Kami. He had to know it wasn't fair to hate her the way he did. And he scared her and made her sad; I'd seen it in her face every time he'd yelled and talked down to her. If he wanted to blame her, that was his problem, but she wasn't guilty of anything.

Seeing her again, talking to her, hugging her, had brought back memories from childhood that I hadn't thought about in years. Memories I'd stored away because they hurt me. Because the truth was, I'd missed her. Bad. Kami had been my friend since preschool. Our mothers became close at the same time we did, not long after I turned five. That was one reason why what Dad and Kami's mother did hurt so much: two people had betrayed us, not one. We had almost been like one family. How could she do something like that to someone who was basically her sister?

My brother looked up and motioned for us to get a move on. The two remaining players had already donated. When Kami went inside, I threw an arm over her shoulders. I could feel her shaking as she saw the nurses and doctor, and I tried to encourage her: “Be cool—it’s nothing, just a little prick.”

She sat down and closed her eyes as the nurse told her, “This will just take a second. Can I see your left arm?”

Kami stretched it out as I held her right hand and rubbed her palm with one of my fingers. She opened her eyes and looked away, over my shoulder, trying not to watch as they slid the needle in.

“Very good,” the nurse said. “Now, we’ll just have to wait a few minutes here.”

Fifteen minutes later, they took the needle out and gave her a cookie and a bottle of water. She was fine. She actually looked better than when we’d gone inside. I walked her out and noticed she was staring at Thiago, whose look was strangely gentle. It was an expression I was familiar with, the same one I’d seen all those times we’d had to take Mom to the doctor because she’d had another anxiety attack. He’d practiced that look; he knew it calmed her down. I always used to get so upset when she was sick, but Thiago was a rock, the very personification of confidence, the person who always made us feel safe. I was glad he’d found it in himself to be that for Kami just then.

I wanted them to get along so badly. She and I had been close, and I was glad we were getting close again, but I knew that between my brother and her, there was something special. At the same time, that made me angry. I was the one who had stayed with her, who’d forgiven her... So why was she looking at him like that? And if he really hated her so much, what did that stare of his mean?

Thiago saw I was watching them and looked back down at his papers. As Kami turned to me, I smiled and asked her if everything was OK. She nodded. But she looked pensive, even confused somehow.

“You sure?” I asked. When she wavered, I decided to go out on a limb: “Why don’t we grab some dinner?” I was hungry after practice, and I didn’t feel like dealing with my family just then.

Kami frowned and said, “Nah, I think I’m going to go home. I really don’t feel very good.”

“I could take you,” I said. It was true; she was suddenly white as a ghost.

“You can’t,” my brother said, walking up beside me, his gym bag slung over his shoulder. “I need you to help me out with some stuff here, and then you’d better go home and hit the books.”

“Dude, she’s sick!” I said.

“I’m fine,” Kami said.

“See, she’s fine!” Thiago repeated.

After looking back and forth, trying to figure out what was going on between us, Kami said, “OK, I’m going to head out,” adjusting her designer backpack.

My brother surprised me by reaching into his pocket and pulling out a stack of bills. He peeled off forty dollars and told me to pick something up for us on the way home. I thanked him, wondering how he could be so hot and cold—so kind at some moments and so cruel at others. As I pocketed the money, I jogged off, trying to catch up with Kami, and when I reached her, I asked, genuinely worried, “Are you sure you’re OK?”

“Taylor, I swear, I’m fine,” she said and smiled. I watched her lips move a little more attentively than I should have, then looked her in the eyes and said, “OK, see you tomorrow.”

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed me on the cheek. It wasn't the first time she'd done it, but it caught me off guard. And it left a tingly feeling that didn't disappear the entire night...

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Chapter Eleven

Kami

In the parking lot after the blood drive, as I dug through my purse for my keys, I was surprised when someone jumped out from behind my convertible, and I thought my heart was going to stop.

“Jesus!” I shouted when I saw Danny. “You scared the shit out of me!” I rested my hands on my knees and tried to catch my breath.

“Where are you going?” he asked, ignoring my complaints. I noticed his eyes were red and swollen, and as he came closer, he swayed from side to side. I could smell the alcohol seeping from his pores.

“Are you drunk?” I asked. I couldn’t believe it. But then I remembered he hadn’t been at practice.

“I’m fucked,” he said. He walked close to me and, without warning, shoved me into the car, pressing his body against mine. “You have no idea what you’ve done to me, do you?” In his face was hatred. I tried to push him away, but he grabbed my hand.

“Let me go,” I said, controlling my voice, but I felt scared as I looked into his dilated pupils. I’d seen him that way before, although not often, and it had always scared me. He always said drugs weren’t his thing, that he

cared too much about basketball to do them. But I'd seen him smoking weed at the party, and God knew what he was on now.

"It's all over," he said. "The team, everything." He grabbed my wrist and squeezed it until it started to throb.

"You're hurting me, Danny," I said, trying to get away from him. But he was too strong, too heavy.

"I can't do it. I can't keep coming here. All I can do is think about you. So I guess that's it, right? No more team, no more school, no more playing ball at college. All because of you, Kami. You've fucked my head up real good. I can't even think about anything but you and your goddamn promises of us being together forever and all the times you lied to me and said *I love you...*"

"I do love you, Danny, but I'm not in love with you." He was a wreck. And even though he was hurting me, I felt sorry for him... Should I have? Maybe not, but we had shared so much. Too many things to pretend it had been nothing, and too many for me not to worry about what the hell was going on with him.

He pushed his hips into mine grotesquely and pushed my wrist behind my head.

"I'll make you be in love with me again," he said. "You can't just throw our relationship overboard... You're *not* leaving me, Kami. I'm *not* going to allow it..."

He tried to kiss me, tried to force me to kiss him, but I looked away.

It was like I was with another person.

The Danny I had loved was gone... There was nothing left of him.

"Hey!" someone yelled from the other end of the lot, by the back doors to the school.

It was Taylor, who apparently hadn't left yet, and he came running toward me with Julian, Kate's brother.

"What the hell are you doing?" Taylor shouted, grabbing Danny's shirt and pulling him away. But he could see clearly what was going on. I held my wrist to my chest and started crying, and Taylor's eyes darkened with rage just before he turned and punched Danny in the face. Danny didn't even need a second to react. Soon the two of them were rolling on the ground and fighting.

"Stop, Taylor!" I shouted. "Stop fighting!"

I looked over at Julian, hoping he'd do something, but instead he joined in. It was two against one, and with Danny in the state he was in, you can imagine how it turned out.

"Stop!" I screamed.

Then I heard another person—a deeper voice, louder—and footsteps thundered toward us. Thiago stopped in front of them, with Coach Klebb not far behind him. Within minutes, all the athletes had left practice and were standing around them as Thiago pulled Taylor away and Klebb pinned Julian's arms behind him. Down on the ground, Danny was bleeding from the mouth and holding his ribs in pain.

"Calm down," Thiago told his brother between gritted teeth as Danny stood and stumbled away.

"Walker, get back here right now!" Klebb shouted, but Danny got into his Land Rover and sped off without a response.

I wondered how he would avoid getting expelled, but then, with parents as rich as his were, I knew he wouldn't have any difficulties whatsoever. As for how the team would react, that was a different story.

The principal was the last to arrive. There was fury on his face as he asked, "What on earth is happening here?" He stared at each and every one

of the students, then ordered us sternly, “Hamilton, Di Bianco, Murphy, in my office immediately!”

I narrowed my eyes at him. I hadn’t done anything! But I knew I had to do as he said.

Thiago whispered something to Taylor, who walked beside me and asked, “What the hell did he do to you?” He was legitimately worried.

“Nothing. I’m fine.” I was angry; I’d just wanted to go home. It seemed like the day would never end.

The three of us walked to the office, and the few teachers still in their rooms, along with the janitors, stared at us. How had word of the fight spread so fast? It wasn’t my fault, I kept telling myself. I stared down anyone who caught my eye as I wondered what was about to happen to me. We stood in a line as Thiago and Coach Klebb came in behind us, walking around to the other side of the principal’s desk.

“You can go ahead and tell me what happened,” Harrison said, looking at me first. No one uttered a word, myself included.

“Fine, then,” he said, standing up and pouring himself a cup of coffee from the small pot on his shelf. “That’ll be a week’s detention. And if you don’t pipe up now, we can go ahead and make it two.”

I stepped forward. It wasn’t those guys’ fault, and they didn’t deserve the punishment. But I didn’t want Danny to get in trouble, either. So I made the decision then to protect all of them.

“Sir...there was a misunderstanding,” I lied as convincingly as I could. “My ex-boyfriend and I were in a fight and the guys thought Danny was trying to hurt me. I know they thought they were doing the right thing, but they didn’t need to. It was just an argument, that’s all.”

“No, it wasn’t! He was trying to force himself on her!” Taylor shouted.

I looked at my wrist, saw where it was red and bruised, and hid it behind my back. But Thiago grabbed it from behind me and brought it forward for

the principal to see.

“He hurt her, sir. I saw it,” he said.

The principal examined my arms, then looked me straight in the eye.

“Miss Hamilton, is this true?” he asked.

Thiago gave me a soft squeeze, encouraging me to tell the truth, but I shook my head.

“No, my little brother did that to me yesterday when we were playing at home. Danny Walker’s never laid a hand on me.”

“What the hell...!” Taylor exclaimed.

“Why did Mr. Di Bianco get involved, then?” the principal asked.

“We were fighting, that’s true. But he never hurt or threatened me. I promise, sir.”

Why was I covering up for him? Because I knew they might expel him, and if that happened, he’d make life impossible for me.

The principal didn’t seem convinced, but he also wasn’t going to blame the captain of the basketball team if the victim—aka me—didn’t confess.

“We have a zero-tolerance policy for fighting at this school, no exceptions. Even if Miss Hamilton was in danger, there were better solutions than taking it into your own hands. All three of you will be punished with two weeks of after-school detention. Since you already have after-school activities, that means you’ll all have to serve it once practice is over, from six to eight every day.”

I couldn’t believe it. That meant I would basically spend my entire day at the damn school!

“Sir,” Thiago said, “I’m sorry for interrupting, but shouldn’t they just not practice for two weeks? Eight o’ clock is really late...” He was clearly upset.

The principal lowered his glasses. “Mr. Di Bianco, I’m the one who decides these things here. This is how we’ve always done it, and I’m going to need you to be a team player about this.”

Thiago looked humiliated. Now I remembered: he was the one in charge of detention. How the tables had turned: back when he was in school, he was always getting into trouble and had to stay late himself. Respect for authority had never been his strong point—not when we were younger, anyway. Having to shut his mouth and nod clearly got to him, and for some reason, I found that amusing.

We didn’t have the chance to say much else before Principal Hamilton waved his hand and motioned for us to leave his office. When we were outside, Taylor asked me, “Why the hell did you have to lie?”

Thiago’s expression was cruel and full of resentment as he walked off down the hall. Julian was the only one who didn’t seem furious. He just looked at his wounded knuckles, which were already scabbing over, with something like curiosity.

“Would you mind leaving us alone for a moment?” Taylor asked.

Julian nodded his head. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” he said, turning on his heels. But I stopped him and said, “Wait a second. Thanks for defending me, Julian. You didn’t have to, and I’m sorry it got you in trouble.”

“It was worth it,” he said with a timid smile.

As soon as he’d walked off, Taylor came around in front of me, brought his face within an inch of mine, and told me angrily, sternly, “Kami, answer me.” I noticed the soft blue of his eyes, noticed the swollen tissue of his hands, worse than Julian’s, and I felt twice as guilty. Of all the people at that school, Taylor was the last person I’d have wanted to hurt. “I’m not an idiot,” he went on. “I could tell something was wrong when I saw you with that asshole on game day when the two of you were sitting in his stupid car. This isn’t the first time something like this has happened, is it?”

Of course it wasn't. I felt a fire burning in my chest as I remembered that moment. I'd sworn I'd never think about it again, that I'd hide it in the deepest part of myself.

"Things are tough between us, Taylor," I said. "We broke up, and he's having trouble handling it. He loves me, you know? And I don't want to cause him problems..."

"What about my problems? I keep him from hurting you, and now I've got two weeks of detention! And you're worried about causing him problems? Him? What the hell is going on, Kami?"

"I'm sorry, Tay, I really am. I'll go back and talk to the principal again if you want. I promise, this was the last thing I..."

Taylor grabbed my arm and jerked me behind a column. Then he pulled his hand back, remembering my bruised wrist, and we both looked down at it, as if it were proof that I wasn't being honest with him. "If he even comes close to you again, I'll kill him," Taylor said.

I'd never seen him so angry. Acting that way because of me...it made me feel the way I did when we were little kids: protected.

"It won't happen again," I promised him, looking him in the eye.

In the ensuing silence, I felt the urge to reach up and touch his black eye, as if doing so could cure him, as if I could make that wound disappear. He hesitated, lips apart, wanting to say something, but before he could, a janitor passed by, and Taylor pulled away.

"You should head home," he said.

I'd almost forgotten that I was about to do that before all this happened. At least he'd made me forget how scared I'd been to give blood.

He told me he'd see me tomorrow over his shoulder as he walked away, and I felt bitter and powerless as my eyes welled with tears. I took deep breaths and hoped I wouldn't cry. My phone buzzed. It was a message from Danny: *Thanks for fucking everything up.*

I walked to the bathroom and shut myself in one of the stalls, trying to get a hold of myself before going back outside. I didn't want to risk anyone seeing me like this. How had it gotten this far? I didn't want Danny to feel this way. I didn't want him to hate me. I wiped away my tears, only leaving once I thought I wouldn't fall apart on the way home.

The next day at lunch, I walked into the cafeteria to find every single person in there staring at me. I hated that. I'd never wanted to be the center of attention; I didn't want people talking about me at all. It didn't matter if what they had to say was good or bad. I looked over to where the teachers were sitting and saw Thiago. His expression was inscrutable as he looked up, and soon he turned back to his tray.

Taylor was with the guys from the team. None of them were pleased to see me. I'd gotten some of them in trouble—I could have even gotten the team captain expelled—so I guess I understood where the hate was coming from.

My friends were at the same table as ever. I walked over as if everything was cool, as if I had no idea anyone was upset about anything, and plopped down in the seat Kate had saved for me.

"I heard you started a fight," she said.

"I didn't start anything," I said, opening my backpack and taking out my sandwich and bottle of water.

"I'm sorry, Kami, but you can't expect people to just keep quiet about the three hottest guys at the school fighting over you. Not to mention the hottest person on staff," said Lana, popping a wedge of apple into her mouth.

"Thiago didn't fight with anyone," I said, wishing I'd just stayed home that day. I even wished I were at detention, where no one was allowed to talk.

“I see you know perfectly well who we mean by *the hottest person on staff*,” Kate said. She loved needling me about these things, and it was impossible for me to hide my feelings from her.

The blood rose in my cheeks. But what could I say? It was true that our math teacher was good-looking too. Before Thiago came along, half the girls were in love with him. He was forty or something, but he looked twenty-five. Still, Thiago was in a whole other league.

“Lady Kamila, are you blushing?”

Dammit. I hated that stupid nickname! I stood and grabbed my bag.

“I’ve told y’all a million times, don’t call me that.”

They didn’t even apologize. I regretted losing control of myself, but before I could do anything about it, I’d already marched out of the cafeteria. I decided to go to the fields, where a lot of us liked to stretch out under the sun on our free periods. It would start getting cold soon, so I wanted to take in as much warmth as I could.

Somebody had followed me out there, and when I lay down, hoping to warm myself up inside and out, I noticed a shadow falling over me.

“Running away from your problems?” Julian asked, tossing an orange in the air and catching it in the same hand. My eyes followed it distractedly.

“If by *my problems* you mean other people, then yes.” He raised his eyebrows to ask permission to join me, and when I waved, he lay down next to me. He kept throwing his orange in the air, higher and higher, and caught it every time. I imagined it coming down and hitting him in the face, and I chuckled. I looked over to the football field, where a group of guys was tossing the ball. Twenty minutes left in the lunch period: twenty minutes before returning to the tedium of class.

“You know, you’ve got a gorgeous smile,” Julian said.

“I’m not much of a smiler, though,” I said, hoping I wouldn’t blush again. Julian’s hair was dark, his skin bronze, his eyes narrow. He and Kate

both took after their father, who had been born in Hawaii. I'd always been a little jealous of Kate's particular good looks. Her half-brother shared them. They made one hell of a pair.

"Yeah, but when you do smile, there's something behind it. I like that... It's not just the surface. The truth is, your smile tells me whatever you're thinking isn't very nice at all."

I couldn't help but laugh.

"I was imagining that orange coming down and hitting you in the face." He sat up at once and shoved me softly on the thigh.

"You're a psycho!" he shouted.

I sat up too, and we looked at each other, entertained. "We should be friends, right?" he asked, peeling his orange and finally freeing me from his intense stare.

"What is this, kindergarten?" I asked. "You think you just tell me we should be friends and that's it?"

"I like to cut to the chase." A huge grin spread across Julian's face as he handed me a wedge of his orange. "You want to go to the movies or something sometime?"

I didn't want to be mean and tell him no, but I wasn't even sure things were settled with Danny yet, and starting something with Julian already would be...

He continued, "I don't really feel like I'm fitting in here, you know? People tell me I'm, like, really reserved or whatever. I mean..."

I narrowed my eyes, trying to understand what he was saying.

"I guess I'm talking mostly about the guys. It's a small town, and...I'm not sure me being gay won't weird people here out."

"You're gay?" I asked.

He passed me another piece of his orange and nodded.

“Yeah. Barely anyone knows.”

I couldn't believe I'd been so self-centered to think he was coming on to me. Was I that suspicious that I couldn't just let someone invite me to the movies?

“Why are you telling me this?” I tossed the piece of orange into my mouth. “You barely know me...”

“Honestly?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Because you thought I was trying to hook up with you and you were about to turn me down.”

I couldn't believe it. He had read me like a book.

“I get it!” He rushed to defend himself. “Listen, if I were straight, I'd be into you, but trust me, you don't need to worry about that. I'm just looking for someone I can hang out with, and I like you.”

“I'm sorry I...”

“It's already forgotten. Anyway, you look like you've got your hands full with the Di Bianco brothers—I get that you wouldn't want to add someone else to the list.”

I blinked, confused.

“Why do you bring them up?”

“They're obviously insane about you.”

That made my heart race, but I couldn't believe what he was saying was true. “Give me a break. Thiago can't stand me! And Taylor, he was always my best friend. I hope he still is, but he's like a brother; he'd never think of me that way.”

Julian's lips pursed and moved to one side of his face as if to say, *Poor little thing.*

“Kami, Taylor’s in love with you, and so’s Thiago, whether or not he knows it. I get the sense that Thiago’s stuck in an inner struggle. A part of him wants to throw you against the wall and get it on with you, and another part of him wishes you’d disappear and never come back...”

How could Julian know all these things?

“You’re wrong there,” I said.

“I’m not, though. I understand men, and for them, you’re like...”

“You’re wrong!” I repeated, a bit too sharply. “You don’t know—there’s a million things you don’t know, stuff that happened between us you can’t even imagine.”

I was overcome with emotion and concluded softly, “Thiago hates me, OK? And he’s right to.”

With those words, I got up, grabbed my backpack, and headed for the car just as the sun started to set.

Chapter Twelve

Thiago

The students wandered in one at a time. If this had been a normal detention, they would have come in from 3:15 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. If I wanted, I could just let them go. Nobody was watching me—nobody who would tell on me, anyway. The only people left in the building were a few teachers trying to wrap up paperwork before going home and the janitors, who stuck around until nine.

It sucked being there, and I couldn't help feeling this was Harrison trying to stick it to me somehow. He'd said he only took me on as a favor to my mother. I didn't know what that meant, really, but what I did know was that no one else in town was jumping at the chance to take me on. People here gossiped; some of them knew what had happened between Kami's family and mine, and since her mother was rich and influential, naturally people had taken her side. Whatever. *Keep your head down and focus on your work*, I told myself. So I turned to a clean sheet of paper on my clipboard and drew up potential plays. I'd been working on them for a long time, and I hoped they'd work when we had our next exhibition game against Falls Church. They'd been our rivals since before I left town, and last year, they'd knocked our team out of semifinals for the state championship.

When I left, I tried to forget everything about Carsville, but I could never stop rooting for the home team. Next week's game was away. I knew that would add to the pressure on my guys. We needed to be prepared—that was the only sure way to win. I didn't have a lot motivating me in my life, but one thing that did matter to me was making it to number one. And with this team, I was pretty sure I could do it.

I heard footsteps and looked up to see her walking through the door. She met eyes with me briefly, then looked away. She took the last desk in the back to the right. She was still in her gym clothes—I guess she meant to shower when she got home? The thought of that excited me, and I tried to shove it away. When I saw her in her cheerleading skirt, that made it even worse. Those legs of hers, they were giving me headaches, especially when I imagined them wrapped around my waist...

Stop it! I told myself.

"You're late," I barked, trying to get a hold of myself.

Kam looked up from the notebook she'd just taken out, then over at the clock on the wall.

"It's 6:01," she murmured.

"If you're late again, I'll have to talk to the principal."

I knew I was being a jerk, but I just didn't care. Julian looked shocked. To hell with him, then. Kam pressed her lips together, clearly trying to stop herself from talking back. Smart move, I thought.

Eventually my brother strolled in, meeting eyes with no one. He dropped his gym bag and took out his phone. Kam crossed her arms and sat back, challenging me to say something to him too.

"Taylor, you're late," I said, tapping my pen on my paper.

My brother looked at the clock, just as Kam had, and said, "It's only ten minutes."

“Show up on time from now on,” I said, turning back to my work. I could feel the bad vibes coming from the back of the class, and Kam couldn’t keep her frustration in for long before busting out, “So when it’s me, you threaten to go to the principal, and when it’s him, you just shrug it off?”

My brother turned in his seat.

“Are you serious? After what I did for you, you want him to tell on me to the principal because I was ten minutes late?” He was angry enough that I wondered whether he’d finally come to the same conclusion as me: that it was best to stay as far as possible from Kam.

“All I want is fairness. If I’m a minute late and he chews me out, then he should at least...”

“He’s my brother, do you get it?” I asked.

“So f-ing what?!” Her ears turned red with rage.

“So if I feel like giving him special treatment, I will.”

“But that’s not...”

“Fair?” I interrupted her. “Come down off your cloud, precious. Life isn’t fair. Now if you don’t want more days of detention, you’ll quiet down.”

“Hey, now, that’s a little bit much...” I looked to the source of those words: Julian, who was smiling at me, unlike Kam, and didn’t seem in the least intimidated. I’d have liked to smack that smirk off his face, but instead I just said, “That’s enough talk for today. If you open your mouth again, I’ll keep you all here till nine. Trust me, I’ve got way better things to do, but if that’s what it takes, so be it.”

I looked down at my work, not caring how my brother, Kam, or Julian reacted. Fortunately, I was able to get some things done; they kept quiet until eight, when I let them go. Taylor waited for me to gather my things, and we walked together down the hall.

When we opened the door and walked outside, we saw Kam talking with Julian.

“I don’t like that dude,” Tay said as he came up beside me. I was glad to know I wasn’t the only one.

“I think I’ve seen him somewhere before, but I don’t remember where,” I said, taking out a cigarette and lighting it as we walked over to the car. My bike’s motor had started making weird noises, so I had left it in the garage. Once we were home, I’d figure out what was going on with it. I loved taking it out on the open road, but fixing it was a major pain in the neck.

“Are you sure?” Taylor asked, looking a little longer at Kam than he should have.

“Sure? No. But I’ve got a feeling...”

We passed just in front of them, and Kam tensed up. There was something strange in her eyes and my brother’s as they glanced at each other. What the hell was going on with them? Whatever it was, I didn’t like it, and I definitely didn’t like this new BFF routine they had going on.

When I got in the car, I pretended to be looking at my phone, but I was actually watching what was going on in the rearview mirror. As I did so, I got angrier and angrier, and after maybe a minute, I realized my brother felt the same way—except he wasn’t even trying to cover it up.

“Why can’t you stop staring at her, Tay?” I turned the key and sped out of the lot.

I needed to control my temper. I couldn’t just take everything out on my brother.

“I’m worried about her, Thiago.” WTF?

“You shouldn’t be worried. She didn’t worry about us when she tore apart our family.” I turned the wheel into our development. It was almost dark out, but there were still a few bands of pink, orange, even purple on

the edge of the sky. I just knew Mom would be on the porch staring at the sunset, the way she loved to, when we got there.

“Bro, I know Danny hurt her. And I don’t think it’s the first time.”

So I have to worry about another asshole now? My pulse sped up, and I responded, “I don’t think Kam’s the kind of girl to let anyone put his hands on her.”

“I saw almost the same thing happen the other day. And when I brought it up, something in her eyes told me I wasn’t on the wrong track...”

I hadn’t been wrong about Mom. There she was, mug in hand, the late September sun reflected in her eyes. I wish I could look into those clouds and feel the same peace in my soul that she did. Instead, it was just that constant frustration and anger that never left me.

“You honestly think he hits her?” My voice sounded sarcastic, but I think that was a reaction to what was going on inside me. I didn’t want to believe what I was feeling; I didn’t want to imagine someone could hurt Kam, and I didn’t want to admit to myself how much I cared.

Taylor took a deep breath before getting out.

“I don’t know, man,” he said, “but even the thought of it makes me want to go to his house right now and whup his ass.”

We turned just as Kam pulled onto our street and into her driveway. She got out and looked at us, then over at my mother, who had just stepped out to greet us.

“Why don’t you boys tell Kam to come over for dinner,” my mother said when we met her on the porch. Kam waved at my mother, and I clenched my fists as Mom waved back. I didn’t mean for anyone to notice, but Kam looked crushed. That image of her, so sad, remained burnt on the back of my retinas.

“If she sets one foot in this house,” I said, “I’m grabbing my things and going.”

I walked past Mom and Taylor and strode up to my room.
I'd had all the bullshit I could take for one day.

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Chapter Thirteen

Kami

It's impossible to convey what it meant to me for Ms. Di Bianco to wave to me, even if it was from far away. I felt so relieved, so welcomed again. But then I saw Thiago clench his fists. At least *she* was capable of looking me in the face, of smiling at me as though nothing had happened. And that lightened a bit of the weight I'd been carrying around since I was ten years old. It took the sting out of the guilt—at least a little. Thiago's mother said something to him, he snapped at her, and then my heart resumed aching as he stormed off into his house.

He'd been a dick that afternoon at detention. He couldn't just keep talking to me like that in front of everyone. It wasn't fair, him showing how much he hated me in front of everyone at school. Rumors would circulate, and the last thing I needed was everything from the past coming up again.

I walked inside and heard the sound of my brother playing some video game at top volume. My mother peeked out the kitchen door and motioned for me to go in there. I wondered what she wanted. When I went in, I found her stirring a pot of tomato sauce. Spaghetti was one of the only dishes she ever made. She usually made it on Mondays, when Prue was away, and those were some of the only times I actually liked sitting with her and

keeping her company. She acted like a normal mother, and if Dad wasn't around, she'd pour me a glass of red wine, which she did today. I took a sip as I savored the aroma of ripe tomatoes. I guess she shouldn't have let me drink, but whatever, that's how Anne Hamilton was.

"Don't get mad at me," I said, "but I got in trouble." I flopped down on the bench across from her.

Sucking her teeth, she said, "Trouble? You too?"

"Me too?" I asked.

"Your brother got in a fight during recess," she said, lowering the pasta into boiling water. "School called me, I had to go pick him up. His face is a disaster."

"What are you saying? Cam's never fought with anyone."

"Now he has. I told him he'd have to skip dinner as a punishment and he can't take Juana out of her cage."

"Mom!" I shouted.

"Don't *Mom* me," she replied angrily. "I should do the same to you."

"Make me skip dinner? Are you for real?"

"Worse. I'm taking away your phone." She stretched out her hand. "Give it up."

"You're not even going to ask me what happened?"

"I don't care," she responded, opening and closing her hand to tell me to hand over my phone.

"Mom, this is dangerous. Imagine if something happened to me."

"I don't want to hear your fairy tales," she said, interrupting me. "I can't believe both my children were caught breaking the rules at school on the same day. What will people in town say?"

"You honestly think anyone cares?"

“I care!” she shouted, snatching my phone when I finally, reluctantly, handed it to her. “You’re a little old for this kind of nonsense, don’t you think?”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right,” I said. “I’m going to go talk to Cam. You have dinner by yourself. If he can’t eat, I won’t either.”

I walked out, furious that she hadn’t even bothered asking me what had happened. She probably hadn’t asked Cam either. In the living room, I sat down on the couch, saying, “Hey, buddy.” I wrapped an arm around my little brother’s shoulders. I was surprised when he grimaced and said, “Don’t touch me!”

“Hey!” I couldn’t believe his attitude, and I sure as hell couldn’t believe his gigantic black eye. “What happened, buddy?”

“Nothing!” he shouted, throwing his controller against the table.

I hated seeing him like that. And something had to be up. He just wasn’t the kind of kid to go getting in random fights.

“You want to know a secret?” I said, almost in a whisper. “I got in trouble today too.”

“Really?” I’d piqued his curiosity.

I nodded and continued, “Don’t tell Mom, but three guys got in a fight over me.”

His eyes opened wide, and then he flinched from the pain.

“Yeah, I got in a fight too,” he murmured.

“That’s not good... Fighting never leads to anything good. Why’d you do it?” I asked softly.

I thought he was going to say something from the way he looked at me, but instead he shook his head and picked up the PlayStation controller

“It doesn’t matter. Anyway, I told Mom I wouldn’t do it again.”

He looked so sad. I wanted to come up with something to cheer him up, so I said, “Hey, I’ve got an idea. How about we set an alarm for midnight, and when Mom and Dad are asleep, we can come downstairs and eat as much spaghetti as we want?”

His eyes lit up. He loved that dish, and it was so mean of my mother to take away dinner as a punishment. “Sure!” he said enthusiastically. We gave each other a high five, and I kissed him on the top of the head before going up to my room.

I looked out my window—I couldn’t stop myself. My lights were off, so I didn’t think anyone could see me. There he was. Repairing his motorcycle out in the driveway. He was shirtless, his hair sticking out in all directions. Without thinking, I grabbed my pad and started drawing, though I could barely see a thing. In a sense, it didn’t matter; my hand did it effortlessly, while my mind was almost empty. I was so distracted that I didn’t even notice at first when he put his tools aside and looked up at my window. My hand froze; he had caught me. Only when he stepped away did I turn on the lights and look down at what I’d done. It was perfect. His furrowed brow was there, his penetrating eyes, bright with anger. How long had he watched me without my even noticing? How long had he remained there for me to be able to reproduce his image so clearly?

I closed my notebook and ran off to the shower.

Life went on—tedious, normal. I got up the next morning, drove to school, and found Kate in the parking lot waiting for me. She wanted to apologize for calling me Lady Kamila. “No worries,” I told her, but I appreciated the apology.

“You know I tried calling you for like an hour!” she said as I tried to excuse myself for my own bad mood, telling her I’d had a rough day.

“My mom took away my phone,” I said. I let her take my arm and walk me into the building.

“Jeez, what a bitch.” A look of horror crossed her face.

“You’re telling me. My dad lost his shit this morning too. *I’m so disappointed in you, I’m so ashamed of you, how could you do this, at your age*, blah blah blah... It’s one of the only times I’ve ever seen the two of them agree about anything, which means no phone till Monday.”

“Try and treat it as a screen detox, I guess?”

I rolled my eyes and we walked off to our respective lockers. I noticed as I took out my books that a sudden silence fell over the hall. I looked to the right and saw him—Danny, walking out of the principal’s office with his parents. They didn’t look angry, just deeply disappointed. His mother, Lisa, whom I’d always gotten along with, looked like she’d been crying. She caught sight of me and gave me a look that made me tremble. Did she really blame me for her son’s bad behavior? I looked away and back into my locker, praying for Danny to leave me alone. I knew him too well, though. He’d come over and try to get me to talk in front of everyone. I smelled him before I felt the heat coming off his body.

“Can we talk?”

I turned, wishing he would just give me my personal space. “We don’t have anything to talk about, Danny.”

“Kami, you owe me...”

“I don’t owe you anything. If you’re here because you want to apologize, then I’m all ears. If not, then I’d appreciate you just leaving me alone.”

“*You want me to apologize to you?*” His eyes were shooting sparks. “You know they kicked me off the team for the fall season, right?”

I turned and shut my locker, hugging my books to my chest.

“As they should have.”

I walked past him, not letting him say another word and certainly not letting him touch me. Kicking him off the team—that was nothing, and it showed how unfair things at school were. Danny had shown up at school drunk and tried to force himself on me. I still didn't know what I'd have done if Taylor and Julian hadn't shown up to help me, and he wasn't even getting detention! The whole fight was his fault!

I cursed myself for not being able to tell the truth when they asked me if he'd hurt me. The marks on my wrist were still visible. Someone needed to do something. When Danny was upset, he was completely unstable.

I walked to biology class and sat at the last desk by the window. That way, at least people would need to turn to look at me if they wanted to point and talk about me. Danny came in soon afterward and looked around, trying to find me. Behind him was Taylor. This wasn't going to end well. When Danny moved to sit by me, Taylor grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Taylor asked, as everyone stared at us. *Please, God, don't let there be another fight*, I prayed.

Danny pushed him, and they faced off against each other.

"Try putting another hand on me and see where it gets you, Di Bianco."

"Try putting another hand on her and see if I don't kill you."

"What's going on here?" Ms. Denell asked.

Danny turned and made himself smile. The shift in his attitude told me he'd been threatened with worse than getting kicked off the team. I assumed he wasn't stupid enough to start shit in class. The other day, he'd cried about how his life was over, how he couldn't imagine going off to college without me, but I could see he hadn't totally lost his mind and that his future still mattered to him.

"Nothing, Ms. Denell, we were just talking," he said, walking off and sitting down.

Without a word, Taylor sat, took out his pen and notebook, and listened attentively to our teacher. I didn't get him sometimes. Not for the first time, I wondered why he had managed to forgive me when his brother couldn't. In that way, I probably understood Thiago better. Resentment was easier to grasp than grace.

Ms. Denell gave her very uninteresting lecture on a subject that would probably have set the class on fire if it had been twenty or thirty years ago, but nowadays, with everything we'd seen on the internet, it was all passé: human reproduction. We were seniors. What was the point? Anyone who didn't know how babies were made by now should probably crawl back under the rock they'd emerged from.

"We'll be working in pairs this semester," she said, putting up posters of human genitals by the chalkboard. Whoever had drawn them must not have had much of an idea what they were like in real life. Did they really have to draw the people like two dolls? Wouldn't that make people feel weird about the whole thing later? She continued, "You'll need to do a research project on human sexuality. You can pick the topic, but it needs to be related somehow to adolescence. You can choose, for example, LGBTQ issues, how sex education is taught in schools, or what STDs are most common among adolescents. You're free to choose whatever topic you prefer, but you have to figure it out and let me know by Friday. I'll need to approve it before you can present at the end of the semester."

People started laughing, and friends signaled to each other, getting ready to pair off. "And everyone, this is not a joke assignment," she added in a louder voice. "It will be 50 percent of your grade, and your partner is the person you're sitting next to today."

Everyone started complaining. I looked over at Taylor. He didn't seem to care. Or if he did, he didn't want me to know what he thought about the whole thing.

“This Friday, you’ll need to bring in a one-page report on your subject and why you’ve chosen it,” Ms. Denell said, putting away her things. “I know many of you will be attending the game against Falls Church this weekend and will be missing my class, so if that is the case, you should bring it to me Thursday afternoon. You can leave it in my mailbox in the office, OK?”

We all nodded, and I tuned out the rest of the class. When the bell rang, I watched Danny stand. His partner was Susan Tribecky, his ex from before we were dating. I noticed that didn’t make me remotely jealous, even when she grinned at me smugly. If only she knew how little I cared.

“So, sex partner,” Taylor said, interrupting my thoughts. I rolled my eyes as I tossed my bag over my shoulder. “I can’t even begin to tell you the number of subjects I think you and I should explore together.”

At least he was relaxing, and when he smiled at me, I couldn’t help but smile back. He was always so cheerful. Or at least, almost always... I had to admit that lately he’d been awfully angry too.

“Let’s talk about it this afternoon,” I said, walking through the door and toward my locker. “Maybe we can hang out for a while.”

“We’ve got detention, remember?”

“Shit.” I had not remembered.

“I’ve got time after, though,” he said. When I closed my locker door, I saw he was standing much closer to me than I’d imagined, a glimmer of mischief in those clear blue eyes that I knew were driving the better part of the girls at school wild.

“The library closes at eight, though I’m not sure where...” It seemed obvious our homes were out of the question. But he responded, “Kami, you can come to my place. My mom really wants to see you.”

It was as if he’d read my mind. I paused a moment, feeling something too intense for me to deal with at that moment, at school, with half the student

body milling around me.

“Hey,” he said, cupping my neck. “Are you about to cry? You better not. I don’t want to see a single tear.”

I shook my head, electrified by his touch—my neck was one of the most sensitive parts of my body—and closed my eyes. *Calm down, dammit.* I responded, my voice trembling, “You know perfectly well I can’t go to your house.”

“You can. It’s my house, and I’m inviting you,” he affirmed. “The past is the past, Kami. And it’s time we left it behind and moved on.”

I shook my head and rushed to catch the tear that was falling down my cheek.

“If only I could make you understand—”

“You don’t have to make me understand anything. We can’t control destiny. There are things that are just meant to happen, and they’re no one’s fault.”

“I think you’re literally the only person who sees it that way.”

“Trust me, I’m not.”

He reminded me of his mother just then, of the woman who had taken such good care of us when we were kids. She had baked us birthday cakes, taken us to the park, sewn our Halloween costumes. We asked a lot of her with those costumes; we had no idea how hard we were making her work, and we chose the most complicated designs you could imagine. But she didn’t care. She’d make them, and then she’d take us trick-or-treating. That was something my parents never did; all they could talk about was how candy would make me hyperactive so I wouldn’t sleep. Katia Di Bianco loved the holiday, though. Not only did she walk us around our neighborhood, she even drove us to other ones so we could keep getting more and more candy—so much we didn’t know what to do with it when we got home. After sorting through it and dividing it up, trading Snickers

for Starbursts, we'd take whatever was left and pass it out among the kids at the hospital where she worked because they were sick and hadn't managed to go trick-or-treating themselves.

"Listen," Taylor said, "if it's my brother you're worried about, he's going out tonight near Stony Creek. He'll be home late, so I can promise you won't see him."

I took a deep breath and nodded.

"Fine. I'll come for an hour. We'll choose our idea, write an outline, and then I'm going home."

"Great." Taylor kissed me on the cheek and walked off, and it was all I could do not to reach up and touch the place where his lips had been.

I was finally going back to the Di Biancos' house. I was finally going to see their mom again. And I had no idea how I'd make it through it with my heart in one piece.

Chapter Fourteen

Taylor

I wondered if I'd made a mistake. If my brother found out I'd invited Kami over, there'd be hell to pay. He'd made that evident the day before, but I didn't agree, and even Mom had said she wanted to see her. Thiago couldn't keep blaming her for what happened. If she and I had gotten over it—or learned to live with it, at least—then he should figure out how to as well.

If he kept hassling me about our friendship, there were going to be problems. I knew that, but I didn't care. Coming back to Carsville meant coming back to my old life, and I was happy again. Of course it brought back the pain and bad memories, but you can't change the past, and there was no point in trying. And in the present, I liked Kamila Hamilton more and more every time I saw her. Not like before, though, when I saw her like a sister. Now I liked her for real. I wanted to get to know her more, and not just as a friend. We had been like brother and sister, but the years apart had put an end to that, even if I did feel weird and sometimes guilty for certain thoughts I had about her. I just couldn't help them.

I pictured her in my mind, and all the hairs on my body stood on end. We'd both grown up; there was no denying it, and there was no denying the way she made me feel. I wasn't an amateur by this point. I'd hooked up

with girls, and I'd been one of the first kids in my class in DC to lose my virginity early in high school. I remember my brother catching me sneaking out of the garage of our old house with a girl. I thought Thiago would chew me out, but he just gave me a high five. We were like that, the Di Bianco brothers: a couple of players, always with a line of girls waiting to get with us.

Thiago was two years older, but age had never mattered; he and I had always been inseparable. I remember he even used to buy me condoms at the pharmacy when I needed them. There was a time when he stood up for me to Mom when I showed up with a split lip and a giant bruise around my eye. If we both got in trouble, he always took the hit, telling Mom it was his fault. He was protective. Overprotective, maybe.

But there had been a distance between us since returning to Carsville. Over a girl, obviously. Kami, with her long hair and brown eyes. We were both obsessed with her, but for very different reasons. I woke up every morning thinking about her, and my brother spent every day thinking about how much he hated her. I wondered, though, did the intensity of his emotions conceal something else?

I got some books and notebooks out of my locker and walked to math class. Julian was the only guy I knew in there. It was an advanced section, and none of the other guys from the team were smart enough for it. He waved at me when I walked in, and I waved back instinctively, but I don't know...there was something about him that made me nervous. I didn't know if it was the way he looked at Kami or the way he'd hit Danny the other day. He hadn't been angry, the way I had been. He had looked calculating, cold, completely in control, as if he were trying to convince us of something with his show of heroism.

Or maybe not.

Maybe I was just jealous.

When class ended, Julian and I walked to the cafeteria. He'd joined the basketball team, and the others had begrudgingly accepted it. I didn't mind him following me to the table where the rest of the team was, but it seemed odd that he walked past all the guys to sit down with the cheerleaders.

I guess he thought that would help him get somewhere with the team?

He headed straight for Kami, and he didn't mind that everyone could tell, nor did he respect her personal space. But Kami smiled at him. Of course she did. She was too sweet not to. And the rest of the girls acted like it was natural for him to sit down and eat with them.

Well, to hell with it: if he could do that, I could too. Don't ask me what I was thinking, but I pulled up a seat on Kami's other side. Her best friend, Ellie, frowned when I nudged her out of the way.

"I'm sorry, Taylor, do you need something?" she asked, elbowing me in the ribs.

I smiled and stole a tater tot off her tray.

"We're going to Falls Church this weekend," I said, making things up as I went along. I could feel the heat rising within me as Kami turned to me, starting to glow with happiness as she saw I'd be eating lunch with her. "And I was wondering if you ladies would like to join us guys for an adventure unlike anything this school has ever seen..."

"He just wants us all to get in trouble the way he did," Ellie said sarcastically, touching up her lipstick.

"You're wrong there," I said, not even looking at her. "We're talking about a paintball tournament. Carsville against Falls Church. Who's in?"

Slyly, Kami asked, "Isn't it enough that they're going to stomp your ass at basketball?"

Everyone laughed except Julian. I pretended I couldn't believe what she said and poked her in the ribs, making her jump.

“You think *they’re* going to stomp *our* asses at basketball? Sorry, neighbor, but since I joined the team, the days of Carsville losing are over.”

“How are we going to get away, though? I’m pretty sure there are going to be chaperones the whole time...” she said.

“I guess that’s how we’ll figure out who’s a scared little baby here and who’s willing to act like an adult and tell Coach Klebb to shove it.”

“For real, though,” Kate said, “we’ll have practice that afternoon, and the game’s the next day, so when do you plan on organizing this paintball tournament?” Kate was another friend of Kami’s—the head cheerleader, if I wasn’t mistaken. She was looking at me, arching her perfectly plucked brows.

I smiled and looked around at everyone. “We’re playing that night,” I said. Then I stood up. “Anyone who wants in needs to tell me by tomorrow morning.”

Everyone started talking loudly, and as they did, I bent over Kami, whispering in her ear, letting my lips graze it softly to see how she reacted: “I hope you’re not too scared to sign up.”

Then I went back to the guys’ end of the table, unable to wipe the smile off my face.

Chapter Fifteen

Kami

I watched Taylor go back to sit with the guys. He had clearly found his place with them. It was almost as though he'd never left. Some guys still remembered him from before, but those who didn't had only needed a few days to become inseparable from him. Taylor was like that; everyone just naturally wanted to be with him. He wasn't serious and intimidating like Thiago. With him, you wanted to laugh, have fun, get in trouble, and forget the rest of the world.

It's hard to describe the pleasure I felt when his lips touched my ear. When we had been together lately, even when we'd just looked at each other, I'd felt...things. Heat. Nothing that resembled the excitement I'd felt when I was with him as a kid, the excitement of seeing someone who was like a brother...

I didn't realize I had gone on looking at him until something else caught my attention, and I turned to find Danny trying to stare me down. I wanted to show him I wasn't scared of him, that I didn't care what he thought, but I felt a pain in my chest instead and turned my eyes downward.

"Are you OK?" Julian asked. I'd felt so much more relaxed with him ever since we'd talked the other night. I enjoyed his company, he was easy

to talk to, and he'd been so open with me. He also listened, and not just because he was supposed to. He was actually interested in what I had to say.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I responded. Fortunately, Danny had started talking to one of his friends. Fortunately for both of us, I mean, because if Julian or Taylor caught him trying to scare me, they'd have both pounced on him again.

"Didn't you promise me we'd have coffee together soon?" Julian asked, picking at his unidentifiable cafeteria lunch with a fork.

"Yeah, let's do next week because I've got to deal with this biology project, practice, detention, plus the game this weekend..."

Julian nodded and said, "I get it. We're all a little overwhelmed. It's crazy to think the year's barely started."

Sighing, I nodded, took a sip of water, and said, "Welcome to senior year."

"Who's your biology partner?" Julian asked, poking around in his food.

"Taylor," I said, looking up to judge his reaction. I was surprised to see him looking thoughtful. Then he winked, and I couldn't help but grin.

"You like him?"

I turned the other way and shook my head.

"We've been friends since..."

"Since you were kids. I know. You've told me a million times."

"Sorry, I guess I repeat myself too much."

"No, it's not that. It's just that you talk about him every day, and I'm starting to get the impression you see him as something more than your childhood friend."

"What do you know about how I see him?"

"I observe things. You in particular. Something happens to you when he's around. I know more than you'd think, especially when someone's

interesting to me.”

With surprise, I asked, “Oh, so I’m interesting to you? Why’s that?”

Julian smiled, rested his chin on his fists, then shrugged. “I don’t know. You’ve got an aura.”

“An aura?”

“Yeah. It’s magnetic. It makes people unable to take their eyes off of you. Like, look: if we just analyzed you from the outside, you’re not so different from the other girls our age. I’m not saying that to offend you. I’m just saying what people like about you isn’t just your looks or even your personality, it’s this aura—it makes people want to be like you, or to be near you, at the very least.”

I was momentarily speechless. Then I said, “Sorry, I don’t have any aura.”

Julian laughed. “That’s exactly what people with an aura usually say: *There’s nothing special about me, I’m just like all the other mere mortals...*”

“I really am, though,” I insisted, but not without appreciating what he was saying.

“You’re unique, Kamila Hamilton,” he repeated, standing. “Like it or not.” He pointed at the tip of my nose and walked away.

He couldn’t be right, though. If there was anything special about me, it was the darkness inside me. A darkness that blotted out everything good and made people do things they would regret for the rest of their lives.

Practice was especially tough that afternoon. We’d had a rivalry with Falls Church forever, and that extended all the way to the cheerleading squad. They had scheduled our girls to compete against theirs just before the big

game. Kate, who had taken over as head cheerleader when I'd made it clear I wasn't up for it this year, was stressing out over the choreography. I ignored her. I was more interested in what the guys on the court were doing just then.

"Kamila, come on! Can you not get with the program?"

You could hear her screaming across the gym. Every single person stopped what they were doing and turned to watch with curiosity. I turned red as a tomato and glared at her. "Can you not stop screaming?" I asked.

Leading a cheerleading squad wasn't easy. I knew—I had done it—but rule number one was to always keep a hold of yourself. Fine, I was distracted, but it wasn't my fault that the game was three days away and we still hadn't settled on our routine.

"Pay attention!" Kate said.

I tried to bite my tongue, but I couldn't help telling her what I was thinking. "The way you're determined to do this pyramid is impossible, Kate, and we've barely had any time to practice because you can't settle on what routine you want to do." I was over it; I just wanted to go home. I was doubly pissed because I still had detention after, and Taylor and I would have to decide on a subject for our project after that.

"I'm the team captain—you don't get to tell me what to do!" she said, smoke veritably streaming from her ears. "Or maybe you want to run the team, since you know so much!"

She threw her pompoms on the ground and ran off like a little girl throwing a tantrum.

I rolled my eyes. All the other girls were staring at me, waiting for me to do something. So finally, I hurried after her.

"Kate, wait!" I called, running behind her after she'd already shut the door in my face.

“You know how hard this is for me,” she said, “but instead of helping me, all you can do is criticize me!”

“Kate, I know it’s hard, but I’m trying to give you some advice...”

“Fine, but you don’t have to do it in front of the whole team,” she shouted. I was glad we had at least left the gym. “Don’t you see they won’t respect my authority if you do that?”

“I’m sorry, OK? It wasn’t my intention. But seriously, we can’t keep wasting our time on that pyramid. They need to have a sense that we’ve got the routine worked out, otherwise they’re just doing a bunch of random moves. Focus on the choreography, and when you get that ironed out, we can do as many pyramids as you like.”

At first, Kate didn’t want to listen, but eventually she nodded, then looked to where a group of cross-country runners was stretching out.

“I don’t know why you don’t just do it. You’re obviously better at it than I am.”

“Don’t be stupid. You’re great. You just need to get your priorities in order.”

“Priorities. Sure.” She grinned and looked me in the eyes. “Like you with my brother, right? That seems to be a priority for you.”

I was confused at first. But when I saw what she meant, I started to laugh.

“You know what you just said makes no sense whatsoever, right?”

“Oh, really...? You do like him, though, don’t you?” She seemed scared of the answer. I wondered if it was possible she didn’t know her brother was gay. If not, I certainly wasn’t the person to tell her. So I tried to thread the needle, telling the truth but not revealing Julian’s secret.

“Kate, I swear, we’re just friends.” I wove my arm through hers and walked her back toward the gym.

“He looks at you like he’s completely sprung.”

“You’re way off base, but it’s fine, think whatever you want.” I was uncomfortable. I didn’t want to lie to her or hide things from her, but I wasn’t sure I had a choice.

Kate and Ellie were two friends I shared absolutely everything with. And that made it hard not to tell Kate about her brother. But I was sure I was doing the right thing. It just wasn’t my business.

We continued training until six. I watched all my friends chatting as they walked to the parking lot, ready to go home. I had to grab my backpack and head to the library. I hated being there after six. The halls were deserted, there was barely any light coming through the windows, the whole thing was just depressing...

“Hey, partner!” I smelled Taylor’s cologne as his arm passed over my shoulders. “You ready for a round of hangman?” He said it softly enough that Thiago, who was in the doorway watching us, couldn’t hear.

I’d always thought the game was kind of dumb, but he and his brother could both play it for hours, and I’d never seen anyone so good at it. They came up with the longest, strangest words, and they had some kind of otherworldly capacity to guess when it was your turn to try to stump them. I used to think they cheated or that they had some kind of trick that helped them win.

“We should use the time to study, you know.” He frowned at me, and I couldn’t help but chuckle. That made Thiago look at us more closely, his expression icy as ever. “Come in and sit down,” he said. As soon as we walked past him, I saw Danny there in the back of the room. For the love of...this detention was going to be the end of me.

But actually, it passed quickly—not just because I played hangman with Taylor, switching to tic-tac-toe after he beat me five times in a row—but also because time with Taylor was just like that; he made the minutes fly by.

He was always fun to play games with. I remembered how much he used to like hide-and-go-seek and how Thiago could never find us.

Taylor had sat in front of me, and we were able to pass our paper back and forth without Thiago noticing. Danny was behind us, though, and he watched us like a hawk. I knew it, but I wasn't going to pretend like I cared. He was a grown-up now. His actions had gotten him here, he'd have to learn to deal with that, and he'd have to learn to deal with the fact that what we'd had was finished. He'd spent his whole life as a spoiled brat who got everything he wanted. I'd given in to him many times when I shouldn't have, and if he didn't like seeing me happy without him—well, I hated it for him, but he was going to have to deal with it.

When detention was over and I thought we were going to be able to leave, Thiago called us up to his desk. Julian and Danny hung back for a moment, then walked out. Taylor rolled his eyes and grinned reassuringly as we walked over to his brother.

“You two think you can just laugh in my face?” Thiago asked.

“Bro...” Taylor said, looking tense.

“This better be the last time you try and put one over on me, understand? This is detention, not playtime. If I see the two of you even look at each other again in here, I'll double your punishment and won't think twice about it. I've had it up to here.” He closed his folder and walked out.

Taylor followed him with his eyes and said, “I'm tired of this shit. I'm tired of not being able to be with you because he freaks out every time he sees you. Why the hell can't he get over it?”

“Taylor...” I said softly.

“Don't *Taylor* me. I'm talking to him tonight. I've had enough of this shit. I hate it: the way he looks at you, the way he talks to you.”

“You can't judge him for that.”

“The hell I can’t! You don’t deserve to be treated that way. I’ve put up with it as long as I could, but now I’m over it.”

“He’s just mad because he has to stay here and watch us.”

“Bullshit.” Taylor slung his backpack over his shoulder. “I know him. He doesn’t give a shit about that. You can’t even imagine the number of times I had to stick around school waiting for him because he’d gotten in trouble back in DC. He’s acting this way because of you.”

Maybe so. It wasn’t exactly news that Thiago couldn’t stand me.

“You drove here, right?” Taylor asked.

I nodded.

“Good. I’ll ride with you. I can’t stand to look at my brother right now.”

We walked out the front door and toward my convertible. I wondered what I should do then. Mom would kill me if she saw my car at the Di Bianco house. But if I parked in our driveway and didn’t come in, she’d ask questions. So instead, I pulled onto the street that ran behind ours and left my car there.

Taylor looked surprised at first, but then he understood.

“It won’t always be like this, I promise,” he said.

“Taylor, you can’t change the past.”

“Of course I can’t. Even if that’s the thing I’d like most in this world. But I can change the future, and I will. I promise this bullshit of you having to park on a different street just so we can hang out isn’t going to happen again.”

I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to argue, and I didn’t want to try to convince him that changing everyone’s attitude was futile. I was already nervous enough going to his house after so many years, seeing his mother... My heart was pounding, and he had to know.

“Hey! Relax. My mom knows you’re coming, and she’s looking forward to seeing you.”

I wasn’t sure that was true.

We walked to Taylor’s house. On the way, I saw Mom’s car outside my house. I never thought I’d say this, but thank God I didn’t have my phone on me. If she couldn’t get in touch with me, she couldn’t order me to come straight home.

As Taylor took out his keys, I noticed his brother’s car wasn’t there. I wondered what would happen if he came home before I left. At the same time, I definitely didn’t want to know. Taylor opened the door and motioned for me to enter. I felt a tingle in my stomach. Hundreds of memories came back to me—nostalgia—and the pressure in my chest made it hard for me to breathe.

The same wood stairway was there. I had always adored it—my house had the same stairs, but made of marble. This place was so homey; if it weren’t for my brother’s toys and video game stuff everywhere, my house could have been an Airbnb or a hotel suite. All my parents cared about was neatness and order, whereas Taylor and Thiago’s mother loved beauty and comfort, and her house was full of fresh-cut flowers and the scent of pastries and coffee. It had been that way before, and it was that way again, and all those sensations moved me deeply.

I closed my eyes for a moment. I heard us laughing. I heard us running down the halls. I heard us playing, pretending the floor was lava and jumping back and forth from the couch to the armchair. I remembered us building tunnels in the living room with cushions and sheets and playing games inside them at night, holding a flashlight over the board.

When I opened my eyes, the woman who had given birth to those two wonderful boys was smiling at me from the kitchen door. She was wearing a pink apron knotted at the waist. Her hair was pulled back, with strands of

it hanging loose. Her smile was sincere, but there was something different in her eyes.

“Kam, I’m so happy to have you back here,” she said. She liked to call me by that name, just like her sons. I felt paralyzed, with a knot in my stomach.

“I made you all a chocolate walnut cake. It’s still warm from the oven. I hope you like it,” she said, as if I hadn’t been standing there like a dummy, too rude to say anything back. “I guess you’re tired after that long day at school. How was detention?”

“It sucked. But we managed to have a good time, right, Kami?” Taylor said as he walked over to give his mother a kiss on the cheek.

“We made Thiago mad, though.” At last, I’d managed to make my voice work again.

“After all the times I got called in because of things Thiago did when he was little...he’d better not let his position of authority go to his head,” she said, walking back into the kitchen. We followed her. It was so nice seeing her there, between those yellow walls with white wooden cabinets.

“Have a seat and get to work,” Katia said. She cut the cake and set down a slice for each of us. I watched her from the kitchen table, thinking how she deserved so much more happiness than she must have had. Once she’d given us forks and napkins, she poured herself a cup of coffee and asked us if we’d like some.

“I would, please,” I said, swallowing after I noticed my voice sounded strange.

“No. Gross,” Taylor said.

“You don’t like coffee?” I asked. Was he insane?

Before he could answer, his mother responded, “Taylor? No matter how old he gets, he still wants his little hot chocolate with extra sugar and...”

“And a pinch of cinnamon,” I finished her phrase. “Are you serious? Still?”

His mother watched him, amused, as she set a cup in front of me. Taylor sat up straight, pretending to be serious as he opened his laptop but a little embarrassed, I think. “It’s the best combination of flavors known to man,” he said.

“You’re really selling it. Maybe you should go into the hot chocolate biz,” I told him, trying not to laugh.

“You’d make a fortune, honey,” his mother said, mussing his hair before disappearing into the living room. I looked at the empty doorframe with a feeling of longing and comfort.

“She always did love you,” Taylor said, taking my hand.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“I just do. Now let’s get to work because otherwise you’ll get home too late, and God forbid your mom starts calling and texting you like crazy.”

“No need to worry about that...she took away my phone.”

“Is that a thing? I thought parents didn’t punish their kids anymore.”

“Try me and find out,” Katia said, returning to the kitchen and picking her book up off the table. “I hope you’re not thinking of getting into any more trouble. Trust me, you won’t like what comes of it.”

I laughed as Taylor rolled his eyes.

“She’s talking because you’re here and she wants to show off.”

I shook my head and took out my notebook.

For half an hour, we tried to decide what we wanted to do. Talking about sex with Taylor could be fun. Even now, it was impossible to concentrate with all the dumb jokes he kept making.

“Why don’t we research the Kama Sutra? We can practice the positions. It’ll be like a study, and we can tell everyone—”

“Which positions are most painful?”

“I was going to say which ones led to the quickest orgasm. But you wouldn’t know, you’ve probably never had a real one yet.”

I tried to look at him knowingly. “Why would you say that?”

“It’s harder for girls.”

“You mean it’s harder for guys to figure us out,” I said.

With surprise in his eyes, he said, “I’m sorry, Kami, are these sexual complaints I’m hearing? Problems in bed? You know Doctor Taylor’s here to help you.”

I punched him in the shoulder and shook my head.

“Seriously, though,” he said while I tried to gaze at the screen. “Can I ask you something?”

“Depends on what.”

“Are you...?” He kept his voice low, in case his mother might hear.

“You’re on the basketball team, you must know the answer to that question.”

“Rule number one: never listen to what the guys say in the locker room,” he responded.

“Rule number two: don’t ask questions about things that don’t concern you,” I countered.

“Hey, now, this is scientific. How am I supposed to do a project on sexuality with you when I don’t even know if you have any experience with the subject matter? I need to be careful, figure out what I can and can’t talk about. I don’t want to scare you...”

“You dumbass,” I said, trying to push him out of his chair as he cracked up.

“You’re probably right about that, but still. Answer me, please?”

I focused on those blue eyes I liked so much, felt the trust that he transmitted to me with his kind expression, and decided I could tell him. “I was with Danny for two years, so yeah...we did it.”

“And...how was it?”

“I don’t think I’ll answer that.”

“That means it sucked. I’m not surprised.”

“Taylor,” I said, “you were just talking about how much harder it is for girls to enjoy sex.”

“And I stand by my word.”

“Trust me, it’s not.”

“Of course it is, Kam. Check the statistics.”

“I don’t need statistics. I know my body. I know perfectly how to...”

I stopped, feeling the blood rush into my neck and cheeks as I realized what I was about to reveal to him. Taylor smiled, but his look was deep, intense, and I thought, *Dammit, Taylor, don’t look at me like that!*

“Were you about to tell me you touch yourself?”

“No!” I fired back.

“You do, though.”

I wanted to run out of his house, but instead, I got defensive, saying, “So? It’s perfectly natural anyway.”

“It sure is. I do it basically every day.”

I laughed and shook my head.

“And you can bet I’ll do it tonight thinking about the image you just put in my head...”

As he said that, you could hear a pin drop. My breathing quickened. He was staring straight into my soul. “I don’t think it’s appropriate for you to imagine your friend...”

“Touching herself beneath the sheets?” He interrupted me, scooting his chair closer. “OK, then, let’s make a deal. I won’t imagine you doing it to yourself, but I will imagine me doing it to you...”

For an instant, I saw that too. Me in bed, Taylor touching me, kissing me, making me enjoy sex for the first time.

“You can’t even imagine the things I’d do to you,” he finished.

How had we ended up in this situation? First we were talking about a class project on human reproduction, and now we were hinting at what we’d do to each other in bed? I guess the assignment did sort of pave the way for it; it’s just that I never thought that way could exist between Taylor and me. Between *my friend* Taylor and me.

As he edged close to me, despite every rational thought in my head, the only thing I wanted was for him to kiss me. I closed my eyes, I felt his breath on my face, his hands touching my knee, his fingers slowly climbing upward...

“Did you like the cake?” Taylor’s mother interrupted us then, and as she walked in, we jumped back to our place. Katia must have seen something, but she pretended everything was normal. Taylor leaned back, still looking at me, and answered his mother calmly.

“It was delicious, Mom.”

“Have you figured out what you’re going to do for your project?” She placed her cup in the sink and took a glance at the notebook on the table. It lay open with not a single word in it, just a few of my doodles.

I wanted to run away. I needed to take in what had been about to happen just then. Taylor was supposed to be my friend, we weren’t supposed to be any more than that...or were we? Did he have feelings for me?

“I think we have, Mom,” Taylor said, pulling his laptop toward him.

“What?” she asked, surprised. But she wasn’t really paying attention. She had started rummaging around in the refrigerator, looking for something she

could make Taylor for dinner, I assumed.

“We’re going to discuss myths surrounding female sexuality. What do you think?”

I blinked, wondering where the hell he’d gotten that from.

“Myths, huh?” his mom said.

“Yep. We’re going to reveal what everyone’s been getting wrong.”

I smiled and nodded.

“I like it,” she said.

Taylor looked at me and mouthed the words *I like you*. My God. I really did need to get out of there. I was feeling a tingling in my stomach, and I didn’t know what to do with it, and I needed time to myself to think all this over.

“I’ve got to go,” I said. “If I’m not home soon, my mom will kill me.” I looked up at Katia, who was beating a bowl of eggs, and her warm smile made me wish I could just spend the night there.

“Of course, honey,” she said, wiping her hands on her apron. “It’s late. You can come back any time, though.”

This made me feel loved and awkward at the same time, and that feeling only worsened as Taylor walked me to the door.

“That was fun, right?” he asked, hands in his pockets and smirking.

I paused, trying to be calm. “Taylor...”

“You don’t have to say anything,” he said, stopping me, covering my lips softly with one of his fingers. “I like being with you. I always have. Everything else can wait.”

I didn’t understand what that was supposed to mean, but I also didn’t want to stick around to discuss it. I stood on my tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek, but surprised myself by sliding over to the corner of his lips. Don’t ask me why—I just did it, without thinking.

Taylor grabbed my arm, and I thought that touch would make me melt. What had happened in the kitchen was continuing now, and this time, I was the one who'd started it. I wanted badly to kiss him; maybe that would make clear to me what I really felt, maybe then I could see if risking it all was worth it, if being lovers really meant more than being friends. For days, I realized, I'd been thinking about it without admitting it to myself and dwelling on everything I felt when I was close to him: security, heat, attraction...

If anyone had told me then where I was headed, I'd have gone back in time and sat next to someone else to get a different partner for my biology project. Screw that: I'd have avoided any contact with Taylor Di Bianco whatsoever.

But nobody can tell us where our decisions lead, right?

Poor little Kamila...if only you knew what was in store for you.

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Chapter Sixteen

Thiago

The coaching job was a good opportunity, but I was worn out at the end of the day. It wasn't just the hours or even overseeing detention; it was all you were expected to do just to be a part of the team. I was constantly having to play nice with people, helping out with this or that, and that didn't exactly come naturally to me. Beyond that, I had myself to deal with. The memories whose clutches I was struggling to escape.

Often, at home, I felt the walls closing in on me. So much so that I started looking for my own place. I didn't care if it was a dump; I just needed to get away. But I had to think about my mom. Leaving her alone as soon as we'd moved back didn't strike me as the best idea. She would understand and pretend it didn't matter, but I knew moving back there hurt her just as much as it had hurt us.

I parked my car in the driveway—my bike was still out of commission—and walked toward the front door. I didn't realize there was someone there until she almost ran into me. Kam froze, and my brain needed a moment to realize she was actually there, that she was coming out of *my* house, that she had been with *my* brother, *my* mother...

“What are you doing here?” I asked, rage bubbling up inside me. I wasn’t in the mood for this shit. Not today. Kam was on edge too. She frantically combed her fingers through her hair, trying to come up with something to say. But before she could, I cut her off, trying not to look at her face, which brought up such confusing feelings for me. “You know what? Never mind. I don’t care.” I walked past her and slammed the door.

Once inside, I could hear my mother cooking in the kitchen and smell the onions in the pan frying in oil. My brother was on his way upstairs, and when he turned back briefly to look at me, I saw something strange: flushed excitement giving way to disappointment. So Kam had been with him. And he’d liked it. Well, I wasn’t going to dance around the issue.

“What the hell are you up to?” I asked, unable to hold back. I was surprised at the vehemence in my voice. I told myself it was because of Kam, because she’d entered a place I swore I’d never let her, but I could tell there was something else happening to me. I was jealous, even if I didn’t yet dare admit it. Taylor turned around and squared off against me.

“This is my house too.” I hadn’t seen him so serious in a long time.

“You’re still a kid, you don’t make the rules here. If I see her here again...”

“You’ll what?” He walked down a step, puffing out his chest. I held my breath to keep myself from slapping him across the face. I’d never done that before, and even the thought that I’d like to was shocking to me.

“I like Kami. And I think she likes me too. And I’ll have her over here as often as I like. You’re stuck in the past, and it’s time for you to get over it so the rest of us can carry on with our goddamn lives.”

He walked past me and out the front door, slamming it just as I had on the way in. I clenched and unclenched my fists, turned, asked myself what I was doing, what I thought would happen, whether I wanted a fight, whether

I wanted to tell him off, but then I saw my mother—eyes sad—watching me from the kitchen.

“Thiago, you can’t keep avoiding it,” she said with...sorrow? “Ever since you were little boys, I knew this would end up happening. I just never knew which one of you it would be.”

What the hell?

“I’ve got no idea what you’re talking about,” I said, interrupting her and trying to control my mood. “But there’s one thing I know for sure. I can’t go on sharing a roof with someone who killed the one person I loved most in this world.”

My mother brought her hand to her heart. I thought she was about to cry, and I didn’t want to see it, so I ran up to my room and locked the door.

Chapter Seventeen

Kami

My nerves were frayed when I walked inside. Being back in the Di Bianco house—seeing my old best friends’ mother again, almost kissing Taylor, coming face to face with the hatred in Thiago’s eyes—had been too much. Too much emotion for one day.

I closed the door behind me and couldn’t hear a thing. No one making a late-night snack in the kitchen, no one watching the news or playing video games. But then a shout broke the silence: my parents were arguing. That was nothing new, but normally they tried to do it down in the basement so we wouldn’t hear them. I don’t think they were worried about me as much as my brother. Doubly strange, it was my father doing the yelling.

“Don’t you realize how fucking frivolous this is? If it can’t be done, it can’t be done, and that’s all there is to it, dammit!”

“Frivolous?!” my mother replied in a tone that told me this wasn’t going to be pretty. “Let me remind you who said he wanted me to get operated on after I had Cameron!”

“Yeah, because you cried for a month straight about how your tits had gone saggy, and that was the only solution I could think of!”

“Oh, please!” my mother said with a bitter laugh. “Even I could come up with something more original than that.”

I walked toward the stairs, but instead of climbing them, I stopped and listened to the argument.

“Everything I tell you, you twist around, trying to make me into the bad guy. I have to stay away from home sometimes. It’s work, get it? I’m tired of you always accusing me of cheating on you. Especially when there’s one person in this fucking marriage that we know has a record of cheating.”

I stopped breathing. Not because of what he’d said, but the fact that he’d said it. That subject was taboo in our house. It was never mentioned, and we all tried to act like it had never happened.

“How dare you bring that back up after all these years?”

I ducked around the corner as I heard my mother run out and stomp downstairs, sniffing. I hated my parents fighting, but I hated it even more when I noticed my little brother curled up in a ball in the living room with a terrified expression on his face.

“Cameron! What happened?” I asked, kneeling next to him.

My mother heard me and ran around to face me. “There you are!” She pointed a finger at me. Her mascara was running, and she seemed more angry than sad. “What the hell are you doing coming home at this hour?”

“I was busy with a project for school,” I said, standing up.

“Why didn’t you call and let me know?!” she shouted back. “I was out having drinks with my friends, and I had to leave to go get Cameron from school. You were supposed to bring him home.”

“Since when?”

“Since I said so!”

“You never told me!”

“I sent you a text.”

“You took away my phone, remember?”

My mother fell silent for a few seconds, then screamed, “And after this, I’m keeping it another week!”

I couldn’t believe what she was saying. “Why?” I asked.

“Because I said so.” She pointed at Cameron and said, “And you’re punished too. If I hear you’ve gotten into another fight, I’m taking you out and sending you to military school! I swear to God!”

“No! I don’t want to go! I don’t want to wear a stupid uniform!” my brother shouted, but then he wilted under my mother’s fiery stare.

“Not another word,” she said.

“So you’re taking it out on the kids now?” my father called down. He walked downstairs, trying to take hold of the situation. My mother by now looked completely insane.

“They’re my children, and I’m trying to raise them to behave. You wouldn’t know anything about that, though, since you’re never here!”

“Oh, please!” my father exclaimed. He was losing his patience. “This has nothing to do with me being away from home. You’re mad because I told you we need to rein in our expenses, and you just can’t live with the thought that you might have to drink less or get one less mani-pedi a month.”

“I’m not going to give up my life just because you’ve decided to get paranoid about some crisis you’ve made up in your head.”

“We’re on the verge of bankruptcy!” When Dad screamed this, we all fell silent. Everything was so quiet, we could even hear my father’s breathing. “I’m going to work it out, but you have to understand that from now on...”

“I don’t have to listen to this shit!” my mother butted in again. “You caused these problems; now you solve them so your family can get on with their lives. It’s literally the *only* thing I’ve ever asked of you.”

She ran back upstairs and slammed the door.

What my father had just said had frightened me. I didn't care about the money—I wasn't like Mom in that way—but I was worried about him.

“Dad, what's going on?”

He stood there staring up toward their room, looking deeply disappointed. I swore to myself I would never do anything to hurt him in that way. I couldn't stand the thought that I might ever make him that upset.

“Everything's OK.” My brother jumped up and hugged him. “I know it's late, but Mom didn't make any dinner, I'm starving, and I could use a little fresh air. How about if I take you kids for a late snack and tell you what's going on?”

My brother nodded, then asked if he could bring Juana. Dad sighed and said yes but told him to grab a windbreaker too. As he ran upstairs, I told Dad I hadn't had anything to eat but a piece of cake and that I was starving.

Annoyingly, my brother insisted on going to McDonald's, which meant we had to drive out toward the interstate, but I got it. He was a kid, he loved junk food, and Mom would never let him have it. So Dad and I agreed to do it for his sake, even though a Big Mac wasn't exactly what either of us would have preferred.

When we got there, Cam and I sat down, and Dad ordered and brought over our trays. For a while, we talked about random things—the weather, what was going on at school—but when we'd nearly finished and Cam was making annoying slurping sounds as he sucked the last bit of soda through his straw, my father turned serious.

“Next week is going to bring changes,” he said. He kept his attention focused on me while my brother played with the toy from his Happy Meal. “The company's in bad shape. We took some wrong steps—I took some wrong steps—and a lot of our investors are getting cold feet.”

“What did you do wrong?” I asked, afraid for him, knowing how harshly he judged himself.

“I delegated something to the wrong person, and a lot of important people’s money has disappeared.”

“Did they steal it?”

“I don’t know the details yet, but there’s no other explanation that makes sense. It seems like Carrowell has been embezzling from us.”

“Can’t you fire him? Or go to the cops?”

“I wish it were that easy, but the thing is, Carrowell was doing it on my behalf. I trusted him, and I signed off on almost every one of those contracts.”

“Dad!” I felt panic take hold of me. Even my brother stopped playing.

“I’ve got a good lawyer,” he said, smiling at my brother and patting him on the cheek. “Everything will go back to normal, but I need time, and in the meantime, I’m going to have to cut some expenses.”

I nodded. “Is there anything we can do?” I asked.

Dad looked down and then back up at me. “I hate to ask you, honey.”

“Don’t worry, Dad. Whatever it is, I won’t mind.”

“We need to sell your car.”

The news hit me like a blow to the chest. I needed a second to absorb it. But now was no time to be selfish.

“Sure,” I said, asking myself how on earth I’d get everywhere on foot. “No worries.”

“I’m sorry, honey. You don’t know how sorry I am. But three cars is too many. I might even have to ask your mom to sell hers. I know, I know...” Dad had seen the look of shock on my face. I couldn’t imagine how Mom, who was so concerned with appearances, would react. “We’ll wait and see. At least for now, though, I’m hoping we don’t have to take that step.”

I nodded, wanting to say something, but not knowing what.

My brother pulled Juana in tight and asked, “Are we poor?” His iguana licked him, as if wanting to add emphasis to his question.

“No, we’re not poor,” my father said, maybe a little too assertively. “We’re just going to need to take a little more care with our money from now on.”

My brother nodded, and I looked at the bruises around his eye.

“You want to tell me what happened to your face?” I asked.

He shook his head and looked at my father, who told him gently, “You’re already in hot water with your mom, buddy. Don’t let me hear about any more phone calls from school, OK?”

“We were just having fun, though! We were playing pro wrestling.”

This kid... I couldn’t help but burst out, “Aren’t there any games you can play that don’t involve you guys hitting each other?”

He shrugged and that was the end of that. In the grand scheme of things, it hadn’t been that long since I was his age, but still, I couldn’t understand him and his friends. When I was little...OK, so I did break into someone’s house when I was little to steal a bunch of candy. I guess I wasn’t that much of a saint after all.

Dad bought us each an ice cream cone, and we headed back home. Mom was still in her room when we got there.

It was nice having Dad home. Mom was right about one thing: he didn’t come around much. We needed him there more. He took my little brother up to his room, told him good night, then went back downstairs. *His glass of water*, I thought. Dad always forgot it. And sure enough, I heard the tap turn on in the kitchen. He stopped in the hallway, already in his pajamas, and said, “Good night, princess. And listen, everything’s going to work out. I promise.”

He came in, kissed me on the forehead, and left. I’d never seen him look so upset. Well, I had one time. But I was little then, and I didn’t understand

what was happening.

I didn't like the anxious feeling that filled my chest just then. My dad was suffering, and my mother, who should have been supporting him, was making his life hell. I realized I'd have to be strong for him, try to put a good face on for whatever was to come. I could never have imagined everything was going to collapse, bit by bit, like a line of dominoes with no one able to stop it.

And I sure as hell didn't know the first piece had already fallen.

The next morning was a hard one for all of us. My parents had to tell our maid that they couldn't use her services anymore. Prue said her goodbyes and all of us were emotional, even my mother, who stared out the window and cried. Was it because she was going to miss her or because she'd have to do the cooking now? I wasn't sure. But it was hard to imagine her washing dishes or making any recipe besides spaghetti.

"Don't be a bad boy, now, all right?" Prue said to my brother, who hugged her and didn't want to let her go.

"Who's going to make my food now?" he asked.

"Your mother, honey," she said with a smile.

Cameron's eyes opened in terror.

"No! You can't go!" he shouted, almost squeezing the air out of her. I laughed, and I was happy my mother was too focused on the cigarette she was smoking to hear him.

"We'll miss you," I said with a sad smile.

"Take care of your little brother, dear," she said, pulling me under her arm. "And be good and help out your mother. It's no easy feat, keeping this house in order."

My brother and I nodded and accompanied her outside. On the porch—I couldn't help myself—I glanced over at the Di Bianco house. Taylor was getting into the car with Thiago. They both looked over. Taylor smiled, Thiago ground his teeth, and as soon as he'd turned the key, he stomped on the gas. Soon the two of them vanished down the street.

My mother appeared behind us.

"I'm going to get a handle on this situation or my name isn't Anne Hamilton," she said. We both turned to her. When I asked, pleasantly surprised, "Are you telling me you're going to get a job?" she looked at me as if I'd insulted her.

"Take your damn brother to school," she said, kneeling down and brushing off Cameron's clothes. "And no more fights, young man." She kissed him on the cheek, grinned, and walked back inside.

"Does Mom know how to work?" Cam asked.

I sighed. "Seems like she doesn't," I said.

I dropped Cameron off after almost getting in a fight with him because he kept insisting we should play hooky. He said we deserved to get away, just as Mom did when she said too many things were bothering her. I worried sometimes about her influence on him. We had this sense that he was still a baby and didn't understand what was going on, but he was the opposite. He was very sharp, and he'd soon realize something major had changed in our household.

I crossed the parking lot, and everybody waved at me as if it was just another ordinary day. It was funny to think about what a closed world families are. When we were at school, all of us were just teenagers trying to pass our exams, graduate, maybe get into college and get a scholarship. But there was so much else—affairs, fights, financial struggles—and all of that

was hidden inside us. Most of us never gave a hint about it. That's what we get for always looking at the surface. People are like apples: inside, they might be rotten and full of worms, but on the outside, they're bright and shiny, and you don't know what is lurking under that perfect skin until you take a bite.

That made me think: What would happen if people could see the worms eating their way through my supposedly perfect life? Would they stop saying hi to me? Would they stop admiring me or wanting to imitate me?

Probably so.

But the funniest thing was, I couldn't care less.

"Hey, babe," Kate said, coming out of nowhere and hugging me to her shoulder. "Double practice today."

I froze. "I can't go to two practices. I've got detention." How the hell had she not realized that?

"Shit! What should we do, Kami? We've got to rehearse. We suck, and the game is right around the corner."

"I know! But I can't skip detention. I'm sorry."

"Hopefully you'll stop getting in trouble."

I didn't have a chance to respond before she walked off. Senior year was proving to be hard. Between homework, these projects that counted for half your grade, cheerleading practice, and detention...

A thousand things were swirling in my head, and by the time third period came, I didn't know whether I needed a nap, a drink, or a vacation on a desert island. I was so distracted that I didn't even realize who had sat next to me in history until five minutes into the lecture. Our teacher was telling us we were going to watch a movie that day about the Bolshevik Revolution and that we'd have to turn in a project on it next week. *Great*, I said to myself, *more work. Just what I need.*

“You can choose from the following topics: the origins of the revolution and the justifications for it, Lenin’s role in the First World War, or the socioeconomic consequences of the Russian Civil War.”

I blew out a long breath. It was all so boring! I decided to raise my hand.

“Yes, Kamila?” Mr. Stow said.

“Can’t we choose something else?”

“If it has to do with the Bolshevik Revolution, sure, but you need to get my approval first.”

I nodded as the teacher turned off the lights and started the film.

“You’re going to do Anastasia, right?” the person next to me said.

I was startled and looked over to see Taylor. I hadn’t even realized he was there. I could barely tell he was looking at me in the scant light coming from the TV in the front of the room.

“How’d you know?” I asked, grinning.

“When you were little, you were obsessed with her. *I want to be a grand duchess*, you used to say. You even made us call you Anastasia one whole summer.”

It was true. Blame Meg Ryan: she did the voice of Anastasia in the movie, and I used to want to watch it over and over. I got mad when someone told me it was mostly made up and that the real Anastasia had been murdered along with her whole family in an attack by the Bolsheviks.

“If you want, I could help,” he whispered in my ear.

“I doubt you’d really be much help.”

“Hey, I know all kinds of stuff about Anastasia. Like how most of her servants hated her because they said she was picky and annoying.”

“That’s a lie,” I responded softly. “Lots of them said she was brilliant and she made jokes that used to crack everyone up.”

“She was a spoiled brat.”

“She was different.”

“Is that what you used to tell yourself when you’d cry because we wanted to play one game and you wanted to play another?”

It was true. My tantrums had been legendary, even if I’d never admit that aloud.

“Are you calling *me* spoiled, then?”

“I’m calling you precious.”

His answer surprised me, and he knew it. And because it was dark and nobody would see, Taylor reached over, grabbed a lock of my hair, and tugged it softly. He whispered to me again, but his tone had changed—it was deeper, more intense, more bewitching.

“Since yesterday, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about that kiss we almost shared, Kami. I want you...” His lips were so close to my neck, I started to tremble.

I thought of how he looked at me, how he had always protected me as a kid, and I knew he was someone who would never hurt me, who would take care of me and make me happy. I knew it—I could feel it in my heart. He was the same guy as always, the guy who always made me feel safe.

“Taylor...” I began, but I had no idea what in the hell I was supposed to say. And I didn’t get the chance to formulate the words because he kissed me before I could stop him.

I felt a tingle inside like champagne bubbles. He felt strong, resolute. Before I knew it, we were making out in the middle of class, with everyone around us and the teacher just a few feet away. And each kiss stretched on like an eternity...

He reached between my legs, and I trapped his hand with my thighs, grabbing his shoulders and pulling him close. His tongue twisted around mine. I could hardly breathe as his fragrance overwhelmed me. I couldn’t believe it. I was kissing Taylor Di Bianco. So many things passed through

my head just then: my mother, his mother, how we were friends, my ex, Taylor's brother...

"Fuck," I murmured as his lips glided over mine and his hand rubbed my thigh. I tried to stop him before it got out of hand, but before I could, the lights came on and the teacher was standing there staring at us.

"Taylor and Kamila, go straight to the principal's office."

Shit.

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Chapter Eighteen

Taylor

We just stared at the principal with no idea what to say. He'd been pissed about the fight, but that was nothing compared to this. I thought he was going to lose his mind.

"This is unacceptable!" he shouted for the third time.

I glanced over at Kami and tried as hard as I could not to laugh. She was glowing red. I nodded. But I'd already said I was sorry and didn't know what more I could do. So I repeated myself: "We're sorry, sir. It won't happen again. I promise."

"I should expel you two," he said, tapping his pen against his desk. "But first, I'm going to talk to your parents. At the least, you're looking at another week of detention. If I wasn't worried about this having unfair consequences for your classmates, I'd be overjoyed to tell you both not to go to Falls Church this weekend. But I'm serious: one more screwup and you're out of here. I'm not kidding. I've heard you say you want to go to Yale, Miss Hamilton, and Mr. Di Bianco, you told me you want to go to Harvard. Well, I can promise you both can kiss those dreams goodbye if you mess up again."

Kami was terrified. I could sense it, but I didn't want to look over at her. I ground my teeth and looked straight ahead. That was a low blow, him talking about where I wanted to go to college. I should never have said it, and I had to suppress the urge to tell him where he could stick his threats.

"Now get out," the principal said, turning to a document he was working on and not even looking up at us.

I opened the door and let Kami through first. Once we were in the hall, the first thing she said was, "Harvard?" She stopped me, seemingly unable to believe it.

It kind of hurt. Was she doubting that I had what it took to study at an elite university? I counterattacked, "Yale?"

Kami shrugged. "I've wanted to go there for years. I'd never admit this aloud to most people, but I got the idea because I was such a fan of *Gilmore Girls*. Still, though, it's a great school. Plus, my dad went there."

"What do you want to study?" I asked as we headed in the direction of the cafeteria.

"Art."

She always had liked to draw.

"I didn't know you were still into it," I said.

She nodded, but I wondered why she seemed so shy about it. I grabbed her hand and pulled her close before we entered the lunchroom, which was filled with the roar of voices. "Hey," I told her, "I'm sorry for this. Detention. Getting you in trouble."

She shook her head. "Don't worry. Anyway, it's my fault too." She smiled timidly.

I remembered just then the soft skin of her thigh, and I could feel the blood rushing into my groin.

"What happened, though..."

“I know. It was a mistake.” She said this with such confidence that my mind warned me I should take two steps back.

“Was it?”

She looked back and forth, almost as if she were in a rush. “I’m not ready to have anything with a new person. I just broke up with Danny, and...”

“Hey, hey,” I interrupted her. “Take it easy, OK? It’s not like we’re talking about getting married or anything.” I tried to make it a joke, but it was hard to hide my disappointment. That only seemed to make her more uncomfortable, though. Why was it so hard to say the right thing?

“Let’s just think it over,” I said “Not move too fast, just try to have fun. As you know, that’s my specialty.”

She nodded and bit her lip, and I could see the doubt in her face.

“Come on, now,” I said, “don’t do that.” I grabbed her lip and tugged it. And that made me need her again, made me want to stick my tongue in her mouth again and convince her that what I’d said wasn’t true, that we did need to move fast, because...

“Hey, you!” I heard a voice behind me. “Were you born this big a fuckup or did you have to train for it?”

I looked back.

“Just what I need...”

Kami tensed up as my brother came over. The look in his eyes was so cruel, I’m surprised she didn’t fall dead on the spot. When he reached us, he slapped the back of my head so hard I saw stars.

“Dammit, Thiago!”

“What the hell. You got detention again?”

Kami stepped away from us.

“Yeah,” I said, trying to play it cool. “Apparently you’re not supposed to make out in class.” I don’t know why I said it that way. I knew it was going

to make things worse. Way worse. But I was tired of how Thiago treated Kami, how he was always judging her. And I was tired of seeing what happened to her whenever he came around.

When Thiago got in my face, I was scared for a moment. Then something seemed to click in his head, and he turned to her. He seemed unable to believe it. There was a coldness in his green eyes I'd never seen, at least not with me.

"When I thought you couldn't sink any lower..."

Tears welled in Kami's eyes, and I immediately saw red.

"Take that back," I said, bumping my chest into him just before I pushed him. I knew if we fought, he'd probably beat the shit out of me, but I didn't care. My brother wasn't the type to trash-talk or roughhouse—if he hit a person, he'd put them on their ass. Anyone who didn't believe it should ask the people who'd tried to square off with him before.

"Or what? Or what, bitch? You'd better be glad you're my little brother because otherwise..."

I took a deep breath and tried to calm down. I couldn't screw up again. I couldn't fight. Not at school, anyway.

"Stop it, Thiago," Kami said, turning to my brother. "If you get in a fight, it'll be way worse for you than it is for him. You're on probation, and he's a minor!"

"Yeah," he said. "And I never would have gotten arrested and none of that other shit would have happened if you hadn't come along and fucked my life up." He looked like a lion ready to pounce on its prey. "You fucked up our lives. Mine, my mother's, my brother's. And don't even get me started on—"

"Goddammit, that's enough!" I pushed him as far as I could away from Kami. "Stop stirring up the damn past, Thiago."

“You disgust me,” he said. He walked past me down the hall, bumping my shoulder.

I looked at Kami. She was totally shaken up. I immediately pulled her close and hugged her. It took her a moment to respond, but then she wrapped her arms around me.

“I’ll talk to him,” I said. “I promise you this will be the last time he says something like that.”

“I deserve it,” she said, and tears began to cloud my eyes.

“Shh,” I told her, stroking her hair. “Don’t cry, Kami. Please. My brother’s an idiot. You and I...”

“No,” she said, pushing me away. “We can’t, Taylor.” She wiped her face with the back of her hand. “Don’t you realize? I ruined your lives! We can’t just pretend that never happened. This is never going to work.” She pointed at herself and then at me. “I can’t just get in arguments with your brother every day. And I can’t keep living with this guilt.”

“You’re not guilty of anything,” I said, slowly mouthing every word as I grabbed her cheeks.

“I am!” she shouted. “Stop acting like nothing happened, like I never...”

“It was an accident. And it’s time for all of us to move on from it.”

“Tell your brother that.”

“Enough, Kamila!” She was giving me a headache. “We’ve got to put this shit behind us. I’m tired of letting what happened govern my life, my mother’s life, Thiago’s life. He’s got to learn to move on.”

“I’m serious,” she said. “Please. From now on, you can talk to me about school, but otherwise...”

“I’m not going to let him come between us.”

“Taylor, come on.”

“You’re my best friend. You always have been, and that’s not going to change now. I’ve got to go, though. I need to get to physics.”

I walked around her and up the hall. But I promised myself nothing would take her away from me again. Not even my brother.

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Chapter Nineteen

Thiago

Kam didn't show up to the library for detention. I wasn't the only one who noticed. The three guys all stared at the door waiting for her to come, and I...I did the exact same thing. And I don't know why.

My brother hadn't spoken a word to me when he came in or even bothered to take out a book and pretend he was studying. He just threw on his headphones and started texting. I could have taken his phone, but things were tense, and I didn't feel like adding fuel to the fire. Kam's ex-boyfriend, Danny, was there too. He was looking worse by the day. Not that I cared, but I did wonder what it was about Kam that got to him. Then there was Julian, leaning back in his chair and reading a book without a jacket on it, so you couldn't see the title.

I opened my laptop, thinking I'd watch an episode of *Blacklist*, but that's when I noticed her come in. She was panting as if she'd run there, her hair was pulled back and wet as if she'd just gotten out of the shower, and her cheeks were flushed.

"Sorry," she said, looking at me.

I deliberately ignored her, focusing on my computer.

“Don’t apologize to me. Apologize to the principal.”

“It’s my mom’s fault. She didn’t show up to take my brother home, so I had to. That’s why I’m late.”

“And I’m supposed to care because...?”

I was trying to be indifferent, but seeing her there reminded me that she had kissed my brother. I couldn’t believe it, but I was constantly drawn to her, and I was infuriated with him. Was it really possible I was jealous?

“Please don’t make me talk to the principal,” she begged me. “He threatened to expel me. I’m hanging by a thread here.”

I leaned my forearms on the desk and looked at her just as the clock struck eight. No one moved, so I shouted, “Detention’s over. Everyone out but Kami.” She looked miserable. My brother stopped at the door for a second and shot me a threatening glance. When had Taylor and I become enemies?

When we were alone, before I could say anything, Kam began, “Thiago...”

“Stay away from my brother,” I warned her, before I could even think about my motivations or what those words meant.

Kam blinked with surprise. “What?”

“Stay away from Taylor, or I’ll make your life a living hell.”

“Are you threatening me?”

I stood. I wanted to look down at her at that moment.

“Stay away from my brother. Stay away from my mother. Stay away from my house. And stay away from me. I’m not kidding.”

She looked at her feet. I thought I’d broken her—I thought she’d say OK. I thought she’d agree to keep her distance. But then she looked up at me with a defiance I didn’t think I’d ever seen in anyone before.

“You can forget that,” she said.

I walked around my desk, taking a deep breath and trying to control myself, using everything—my eyes, my stature—to frighten her. She stood up and backed away. “If you don’t, I’ll make sure you sit here in detention for the rest of the year. It’ll be you and me alone in this library. I don’t care if it takes up all the free time I have; it’ll be worth it to make you pay.” I hadn’t realized I’d gotten closer to her until she had her back against the wall. I leaned a hand next to her face and smelled her without meaning to. Then I remembered she had kissed my brother. Taylor had tasted those plump, wet lips...

“You can’t do that. You can’t justify it.”

“Oh, don’t you worry. I’ll find justifications. I can be crafty when I need to be.”

“You don’t have that power. You’re a nobody at this school.”

“Try me, Kamila, and you’ll see.”

“Keep my name out of your mouth.”

“Oh, so we’re getting frisky now? Let me tell you something: I get to tell you what to do, not the other way around.”

“You can’t bully me.” She was deadly serious.

“Oh, I can, though. And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“Get away from me. You’re weirding me out.”

Weirding her out or turning her on? I looked at her cheeks, her blond hair, thinking *Fuck*... I fell into a trance, only broken when she spoke my name: “Thiago...” And hearing it made me feel everything except the apathy I was trying to show just then. I put a finger to her lips and said, “This thing with you and my brother, it’s finished, OK?” I wanted it to sound tough, but I could hear my voice softening. I was giving myself away. I felt a stirring inside my pants.

“Are you jealous?” she asked. And the echo of those words, soft as they were, traveled through my body like a shock wave.

Just then, a hand reached through the doorway, and we froze. It was Mel, the janitor. But she didn’t bother to look in, she just flipped the switch. She must have been making her last rounds before heading home. And that meant we were alone. In complete darkness.

My finger was still on her lips, and I could feel the tension in her face. I thought she’d push me away or insult me. I even wanted her to do that, but instead, her mouth opened and she started to suck. I opened my eyes wide, trying to see her in the dark, and managed to catch the flicker of her tongue wrapping around my finger. My body was warm, as if I were standing in the middle of a bonfire. She was torturing me. My brain turned off, and instinct took the wheel. I slipped my finger out, put it back in, imagined doing the same, but with a different part of my anatomy...and that fantasy nearly brought me to my knees. Watching her toy with me was more exciting than anything I could have imagined. But what the hell were we doing?

As I thrust my finger in and out, my eyes adjusted to the darkness, and I managed to see hers. I’m sure I saw in them what she must have seen in mine: pure lust. But something else too. Accumulated rage, bitterness, hatred, and arousal all at once. I could have taken her then and there, not even thinking of the consequences, but then I heard a noise out in the hall. I stuck in another finger, grabbed her neck, and pulled her toward me.

“You need to go, Kam. Otherwise, we’ll both be in hot water.”

I stepped back. Once. Twice. She was turned on, I could tell. And we’d barely touched each other. I saw something in her eyes that drove me wild. That called out to me. That told me to come closer, to put a hand under her clothes, to feel how warm and wet she was. She bent down, grabbed the backpack that had fallen at her feet, and vanished through the door.

Chapter Twenty.

Kami

I could barely see a thing. I had to feel my way along the lockers to reach the door. As I exited, I saw the janitor and told her there was still someone inside. She asked me what I was doing there, and I murmured a response, then jogged away, feeling in my pocket for my keys and getting in the car. I took off before Thiago could follow me and see the effect he'd had on me. When I was far away from school but not yet in my neighborhood, I stopped and hyperventilated.

What in the hell had just happened?

I brought my hands to my face and leaned my forehead against the steering wheel.

It's not like I was new at this. I'd hooked up with guys. I'd kissed guys under the bleachers with everyone watching. I'd made out with Danny in his SUV; I'd let guys feel me up in the pool, on the beach, in the woods. Danny and I had done it, and I'd done it to myself, I'd brought myself to orgasm. But none of it, absolutely nothing, had ever felt the way Thiago's fingers had moving in and out of my mouth.

I couldn't stop thinking of how he had eaten me up with his eyes. Those green eyes. Glowing with hatred, but also with a lust that made my heart race.

My underwear felt wet, and my body was asking for—demanding—more.

But Thiago!

Thiago hated me!

And he was right to.

Plus, there was Taylor. My best friend. And I loved him too much. The eight years without seeing him hadn't changed that. But we'd kissed. And yet, when I'd been with his brother, I'd wanted nothing more than for him to lift my skirt and do every crazy thing that came into his head. I had nearly told him to. When the lights went out, it's like we'd moved into a parallel reality where nothing in our past had existed. Where I wasn't forbidden from wanting him. That was going to be a problem.

A huge truck passed by, and the noise roused me from my fantasy that had begun taking on a life of its own. I needed to focus on something else. It had been a mistake. Thiago had put his finger there to try to shut me up, but I was crazy or something was wrong with me. I took advantage of him, sucking his fingers like they were candy... What the hell did he think of me? Had he wanted to take it further? He must have. *Kamila, stop*, I told myself.

But I couldn't. My imagination took flight like a bird migrating for winter. I thought of what it must be like to unbutton his pants, reach inside. Kneel down, take him in my mouth...

Someone honked the horn, and I jumped so much I almost hit my head on the roof of the car. So much for my fantasies. I forced myself to take several deep breaths and put the car back in gear.

Five minutes later, I was home, and Thiago's car was nowhere to be seen. It had been in the lot when I left. I wondered if Taylor was there. If so, he was probably waiting to talk about what had happened in class. What kind of person would hook up with one brother in the morning and the other that same night? I scurried inside and leaned my back against the door after I shut it. I'd made it; I was safe from my neighbors for now. But the calm didn't last long. When I went to the kitchen for a drink of water, my father looked up from his laptop, which was open on the table. The anger on his face made me freeze. He told whoever he was talking to on his cell phone that he'd call back in five minutes, then set it down and asked, without even greeting me, "Where the hell have you been?"

"At school," I replied quietly.

"I got a call from them this morning." He stood and retrieved a beer from the fridge. "I hear you've been kissing guys in class. Have you completely lost your mind?"

Blushing, I responded, "Dad..."

"Don't *Dad* me, Kamila. I thought we raised you better than that. I can't tell you how embarrassed I am. I was told they kicked you out of class, and the principal said this is par for the course lately—that you already got in trouble once, and apparently everything has to do with boys. I thought you and Danny were going out? Do you just kiss anybody?"

"Danny and I broke up, Dad."

I hated how he was talking to me, but I also didn't have much of a defense.

"Oh. Fine, then. I guess *that's* a good excuse to just go around kissing everyone?"

I wanted to tell him it wasn't his business, but that would only make things worse.

"Do you know what kind of image this is giving people?"

I sighed, ready for a lecture on how our family image mattered above all else. “I’ve always been hands off with you. You deserved it. I always thought you were very mature. And you know I adore you. But if you think I’m going to let you ruin your future because you can’t keep your hormones in check—”

“Dad! What are you saying?”

“I don’t have time, Kamila! I can’t keep you in line too. I have too much else on my plate. Thank God your mother doesn’t know about this, but if we get another call from the school, I won’t hide it from her, and I promise you she won’t be merciful. You’ll be grounded the rest of the year. You hear me? This is not the time for you to lose your head over a bunch of guys you’ll never see again. Yale. That’s the objective. You need to focus on that. Guys and everything else can come later. But for now, think about your future. Understand?”

I nodded. I was upset, but I knew he was right.

“The way things are going, you may well need a scholarship. I can’t promise I’ll be able to pay your tuition at an Ivy League university.”

After he said that, he left the kitchen. I felt like a kid again. And for the first time, I was worried about what lay in store for me.

I didn’t even have dinner that night. Instead, I sat at my desk, just in front of the window that looked out onto the house next door. I doodled on a sheet of white paper, waiting for Thiago to come home. Hoping he’d look out his window and see me. But he never did.

Before I got in bed, I looked down at the pair of lips I’d drawn. They seemed to be trying to tell me something. I’d always liked anatomical drawing, analyzing the human form, trying to figure out what traits made a person what they were, how feelings were expressed in the body. I think I managed to capture this in my art. But this time, I didn’t know who those lips belonged to.

Were they Taylor's? Or Thiago's?

The next morning, I got up early. After class that day, we'd be going to Falls Church, and we needed to bring a bag with clothes for the weekend. Falls Church was two and a half hours away, and it was the nearest town with a nationally ranked team.

I had no idea how the weekend was going to go, but two days in a motel with all my friends—including Taylor—and with Thiago as a chaperone was the worst thing I could imagine right now.

I threw my gym clothes and my cheerleading uniform into my bag. We'd spend the whole next day practicing. I included a couple of nice outfits in case we went out to eat, and naturally, I didn't forget my pompoms. I also grabbed my father's gigantic UFC shirt, which I loved to sleep in, and my makeup bag and skincare.

When I dragged my bag downstairs, Mom was waiting for me with breakfast on the table.

"You've got ten minutes, and then it's time for us to go," she said, finishing her coffee. I'd asked her to take me so I wouldn't have to leave my car in the lot for the whole weekend. I poured myself a bowl of bland cereal and looked up as I saw my cell phone slide across the table. I was surprised and excited as I picked it up and heard her say, "Call me when you get to Falls Church. And don't get too excited. The phone comes back to me once the trip is over."

So much for that brief moment of happiness. But at least I had the chance to check my Instagram and read my latest messages. Two in particular caught my eye. One was from Taylor:

I don't know what it is, Kam, but I can't stop thinking about you. Please tell me we can at least talk things over this weekend. Don't let my brother

come between us. Good night, precious.

Damn. I guess I wouldn't be able to duck him as easily as I'd hoped. Not that I wanted to, or not entirely. I liked Taylor, I liked spending time with him; he made me feel...good.

But then there was Thiago. He had made it very clear to me that my life would be a torment if I didn't stay away from Taylor. And I didn't doubt that he meant it.

There was another message from that morning at four a.m. I didn't have the number in my saved contacts. But I knew who it had come from.

Not a word about what happened. Don't mention it to me or anyone else. I hope this time you know how to keep your mouth shut.

I had no idea how I was going to handle all this. I could tell myself to stay quiet, and I would, but that didn't mean it would vanish from my mind...or his.

How could I look him in the face after what had happened? And worse still, how would I look at Taylor?

On the way to school, I blasted music through my earbuds so I wouldn't have to hear my mother talking shit about my father. I wasn't in the mood, especially not after my conversation with him the night before.

I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek when we arrived at school and went inside without stopping to talk to anyone. I walked to my locker, bopping my head to my music. As I gathered my books, I saw Taylor and his friends walking down the hall. I knew he saw me, and he tried to come over, but I pretended not to notice and walked off into the bathroom, where I remained until the bell rang. Because of that, I was late, and my math teacher didn't appreciate it.

The seats in the back were taken, so I had to sit in the front row. Mr. Gomez was telling us how to calculate a matrix. I guess he'd heard I was screwing up lately, because he wouldn't stop asking me questions. He even

made me go up to the board and do an exercise. And I'm not going to lie—I was completely lost. Math had never been my strong point, and I had barely studied at all this year. Dad was right: I was slacking. I wasn't thinking about my future.

“Kamila, this needs a lot of work,” Gomez said when he saw me struggling. “If you want to keep that GPA up, you're going to need to do better than this.”

I couldn't believe he'd said that in front of the whole class. Some of the kids there looked back and forth, surprised; others laughed, while others smiled and looked down into their laps, embarrassed for me. It was just as I'd thought. Secretly, everyone wanted me to fall.

And since school had started that year, I had the feeling I'd taken a nosedive.

“Girl, what's up?” Ellie asked later when I was coming out of history class. Thankfully, Mr. Stow had at least agreed to let me do a project on Anastasia.

“Nothing. I'm just distracted,” I said, walking with her to her locker so she could grab a new pen. Her old one had blown up on her in class, and she had blue ink all over her white shirt.

“Jesus, this is a disaster,” she said. “It looks like a Smurf took a piss on me.” I laughed. “Did you hear about Danny?”

I had been looking at my phone, at Taylor's message, which I still hadn't answered. We needed to talk about our biology project, but the thought of it gave me chills. I asked Ellie, “What did he do now?”

“Him, nothing... It's his parents. They just donated twenty grand to the school.”

“What?”

“You heard me. So magically the principal's given him a second chance, and he's back on the team. He'll be playing against Falls Church.”

I leaned back against the lockers and sighed, indignant. “No way!”

“Yes way,” Ellie said and pointed to the other end of the hall, where Danny was standing and smiling ear to ear, spinning a basketball on one finger. He loved that stupid trick. I couldn’t stop myself from walking up to him and slapping the ball so hard it bounced to the other end of the hall.

“Hey!” he shouted, but when we saw it was me, his look of surprise gave way to gloating. “Ah, it’s you. Guess you heard the news?”

“What, that you’re a dickhead? I already knew that.”

He was such a jerk, and what happened was so unfair. A guy who tries to assault people, gets in fights, comes in drunk, ignores his teachers, and he just gets away with it that easily?

“Jeez, I can literally smell the hate coming off of you,” he said, not even trying to conceal his satisfaction.

“I’m about to tell the truth about what you did to me in the parking lot that day,” I said and watched his expression change. “Don’t you dare try and play with me.”

“Kami, your threats are meaningless.” He stepped closer to me, then bent over so no one would hear. “Or do you really think people are going to believe the daughter of the biggest embezzler in Carsville’s history?”

I shoved him. How dare he call my father a crook? He stumbled backward, to my surprise. Either I was stronger than I thought or he was weaker. “Don’t you dare talk about my father.”

“Or what? What are you going to do? It doesn’t matter anyway. Everyone’s going to find out soon enough.”

What the hell? How did Danny know about the problems at my father’s company?

I felt someone come up behind me. Two hands wrapped around my forearms. As soon as I breathed in, I could tell who it was by his scent

alone.

“What did I tell you I’d do if I saw you near her?” Taylor said in a tone of controlled rage.

Danny looked up at Taylor. I was scared there would be another fight. I worried everyone was right: the only thing I knew how to do was cause trouble.

“Nice try, Taylor, but you’re not going to suck me in.” Danny stepped back, raising his hands. “I’m back on the team now, and I’m not willing to risk getting kicked off again. Especially not over her.” He sneered at me. Taylor tried to push me aside to wipe that ugly look off Danny’s face, but I grabbed him and held him back.

“You might be on the team,” Taylor said, “but that doesn’t mean you’ll make it onto the court. My brother’s the coach, and he chooses who goes out and who stays on the bench.”

Danny grimaced just as the bell rang and we all walked our separate ways. Finally, I looked at Taylor. He was more handsome than ever: his light brown hair, sexily neglected, his blue eyes still tense, his short-sleeved shirt hugging his biceps...

“You didn’t answer my message,” he said, seeming pissed and unconcerned with whether he made it to his next class on time. After looking at the ground for a second to regain my equilibrium after that assault on my hormones, I told him, “Mom took my phone away, remember? I’m in trouble.”

He didn’t seem convinced.

“Are we going to talk about what happened yesterday, or are you going to keep on avoiding me?”

I looked around. The hall was nearly empty.

“We’ll talk tonight at the motel, OK?” As I said this, I felt like I was reaching a point of no return. He nodded, but he looked hypnotized, staring

at my lips, not into my eyes.

“I put together the proposal for our project yesterday. You can look it over if you want, otherwise I’ll just drop it off in Ms. Denell’s mailbox.”

I nodded, grateful. I had completely spaced on it.

“I trust you. Just turn it in.” I forced a smile. “Thanks for taking care of it.”

“No worries. See you around.”

I watched him walk away, took a deep breath, and headed to philosophy class.

“You’re late, Miss Hamilton,” the teacher said. I apologized and sat in the front row. *Focus, Kamila*, I told myself.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Taylor

I'd had an ugly fight with my brother the night before. Normally we just argued about stupid shit or sometimes about our mom. But over a girl? Never...

Of course there had been petty jealousies. Over the summer at the beach, we'd run into some hot chick and neither of us knew which one she really liked. I have to admit, it was usually me. My brother was good-looking—I couldn't ignore that—but he was always so cold. That bitter sense of humor and that hard expression that concealed so much turmoil eventually got people down. I had always been more relaxed, a joker, the class clown. I could win girls over with my stupid remarks, and I knew how to get on people's good sides with gifts of candy and flowers. I saw life differently from Thiago. I just couldn't waste my time being upset. I always knew pessimism and bad memories would get me nowhere, and he was always an example of what could happen if you let them take over.

Kami...she made me happy. She made my heart race. She made me want to pamper her, protect her, take care of her. Not that she couldn't look out for herself. It's just that she awakened this protective instinct in me that I'd never been able to develop at home because my brother had been the

strong, powerful one. He took care of everything with Mom: cheering her up when she was down, making sure she took her medications, consoling her during long, dark nights when her memories and worries were eating her up inside.

Kami was the person I had been responsible for. When we were little, she always came to me when she got scared. Mine was the hand she held to be sure neither of us fell into the creek behind our house. I was the one she asked for opinions about her drawings. I was the one she picked for her side when we played games, and that—well, dammit, it made me feel special.

And I wasn't about to let anyone come between us. We kissed. It was intense. It was special. Maybe she might have expected something more romantic, but there in the dark, with everyone around us...you couldn't say that wasn't special.

And I wanted to do it again.

Seeing her this morning with that jerk-off Danny had nearly made me lose it. Danny Walker...what a joke. I thought we were rid of him for the season, then here come his parents with a big pile of cash, and all of a sudden, he's back on the team. At least he was no longer captain. That was me now. My teammates had been unanimous because of how I'd played in games and taken the lead when Danny was out. I knew that was going to cause problems, but what the hell did I care?

I was better than Danny Walker. That was a fact.

I was headed to the office, but when I passed Ms. Denell's room, I saw she was in, so I knocked at the door. She waved me in, and I handed her the paper that outlined our project on "Myths of Female Sexuality."

I couldn't imagine how I would work on that project with Kami without thinking of sex the whole time. But then, were we even going to work on it together? I could imagine her coming to me and saying, *It would be best if I work on one part and you work on the other...* The idea upset me.

She was the reason things had gotten so ugly with my brother the day before. He'd intentionally tried to hurt me, hadn't hesitated to strike below the belt, trying to make me think there was something wrong with my feelings for Kami. And it had almost worked. For a moment, he'd made me think that it was her fault that we'd lost our old life and that not blaming her made me a bad person. I even regretted sending her that message. But then I saw her this morning...

She had pulled her hair back with a colorful hairband that caught the light, and she was prettier than ever. I saw blame in her brown eyes outlined in mascara, but I saw longing there too when she decided to jump in between me and her ex. And I knew then that all my brother's talk was just bullshit.

He wasn't going to keep me away from her.

He could forget about that.

The day was flying by quickly. There was excitement in the air: everyone was stoked about the game but more so about a weekend away from our parents, ready to do whatever. I know I was.

The bus was departing after lunch, so I'd miss math and English. I was happy for the break, but I was especially happy to miss a day of detention. I stopped in the restroom to wash my hands on my way to the cafeteria, and as I was drying off, Victor Viani came in.

"Hey, Di Bianco!" he said, throwing his arm over my shoulders and leaning in. "Drinks on the bus?" he asked. I laughed. I liked the sound of that.

"Are you really asking?" I responded. I already had a flask of rum in my backpack and a bottle of Coke to mix it with. Victor smiled, punched me on the shoulder, and went on to the next person.

They were serving pizza that day, and I was starving. I winked at the lunch lady to get a second slice. Kami was a few places ahead of me in line, and she'd passed on the pizza, asking for nothing but a serving of the sad excuse for a salad that counted as our vegetable portion.

"Babe, your body needs something more than that," I said, coming up behind her and startling her a bit. "Otherwise you might up and blow away."

"Maybe..." she said. "But I could say the opposite to you. You've got a game tomorrow—is all that pizza really the best thing? What would your coach say?"

"I need the carbs. Anyway, I can eat what I want; there's not an ounce of fat on me." I pulled up my shirt and showed her my six-pack. "See this? One hundred percent muscle."

"Whatever," she said and walked past me to her table. I followed her and asked, "Word has it we're organizing a little party in the back of the bus. Are you in?" I whispered in her ear just before she sat down at a table of girls who were chatting so loudly we could hardly hear. I grabbed the chair next to her just as she frowned and responded, "If by party you mean getting shitfaced on cheap liquor and warm soda, I'll pass." She speared a leaf of lettuce and brought it to her lips.

"Damn! Don't be so boring! I know it must have hurt your feelings when I massacred you at pool, but that doesn't mean you have to turn into a goody two-shoes. And honestly, you're fun when you're tipsy."

"First of all," she said, "I'm the one who beat your ass, remember?"

I smiled and shook my head. "Sorry," I said, "probably all these carbs are giving me memory problems." I picked up my first slice of pizza and stuffed half of it into my mouth.

"And second: I don't drink before games."

I pretended to be disappointed. “Who’d have thought a girl with five million hours of detention ahead of her was secretly so responsible?”

“Stop trying to lead me down the wrong path.” She laughed.

“Trust me. If you think that’s the wrong road, you don’t know half the things I have in mind for you.”

She blushed. This seemed like a good moment to make my exit. “Remember, you promised me we could talk.”

“Taylor...” The mere mention of it seemed to stress her out.

“See you in the back of the bus. Let’s go ahead and call it a date.” I touched the tip of her nose and walked off to go sit with my friends.

If only I had known what was going to happen after our little party, I’d have probably thought twice.

Fuck that! I wouldn’t trade it for anything in the world.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Kami

After lunch, we gathered in front of the bus that would take us to Falls Church. Basically all my friends were on the cheerleading team, and almost all their boyfriends were on the basketball team, so it looked like a good time was in store. But I was nervous: I hadn't seen Thiago, and I had no idea what would happen when our eyes met again. I couldn't keep my brain from returning over and over to what had happened with him. I was so anxious, I was shaking.

Everyone else was talking while they waited for the coaches to come take roll and let us on, but I noticed Julian standing at a distance from the rest of the team. He was leaning on a column, staring into space as if he weren't one of us. When I caught his eye, I wandered over. I smiled, but he didn't smile back.

"Hey," I said. "What's up?"

He waited a moment before responding. "I guess I'm just getting bored waiting for us to go have that coffee," he said, voice quivering, a very serious look on his face. Was he angry at me?

"Shit, I'm sorry, Julian..."

He smirked. “I’m kidding, Kami!” His features relaxed. “I know you’re busy. Don’t worry about it.”

“No, I really am, though. If you want, I’ll come to your room tonight and we can watch a movie or something. I have the feeling everyone else is going to get wasted, and that isn’t exactly what I’m in the mood for.”

“For real?” he asked, excited.

“For real! I’m pretty sure it’s against the rules for me to go to a guy’s room, but I’ll figure out a way.”

“Huge,” he said. “Do you like horror movies?”

“I love them!”

It was so nice to see him looking happier. You don’t always know the effect you have on a person. And if Julian needed a friend, I definitely did too. He seemed like he could be a good one.

The coach arrived and called for us to line up in front of the door to the bus. Thiago was with him, holding the list with our names on it. *Shit*, I thought, feeling like I’d been punched in the stomach.

I fell in behind my friends and watched everyone climb the steps and take their seats, wondering what to do about that talk with Taylor. Because if I sat with him, Thiago would definitely see. I knew his threats of punishing me were serious, but was I really going to let him meddle in stuff that didn’t concern him? I got it—he hated me because of what had happened to his family. Fine, I could deal with that, even if it hurt. But his brother had different feelings, and he needed to respect that. He couldn’t tell other people what to do with their lives, and I planned on letting him know that the next time he decided he had the right to order me around.

There was another thing too: after what had happened, I was getting the feeling that Thiago’s real motivation was jealousy. No one could hold a grudge that long. The thought was so strange, though—Thiago, jealous? Thiago, attracted to me? It wasn’t real; it was like some weird dream.

The line was shrinking, and I kept moving farther back toward the end, trying to avoid contact with him. I was scared to face that moment when I'd have to look in his eyes and remember when I'd wanted him so bad. But then the moment came. Aaron Martin got in, and I was the last person left. I'd been stupid to hang back, because now there was no one there to stop him from doing or saying whatever crossed his mind.

He must have known I was trying to avoid him. I knew he had to be thinking about what we'd done the night before. I was almost squirming as I tried to walk past him, but he was like a magnet, and I froze, unable to keep myself from looking up.

He hadn't shaved and hadn't gelled his hair, but that only made him sexier. He looked rough, wild. And I wondered if he'd had a sleepless night too. If he had tossed and turned, with my image in his head.

"Kamila, get on the damn bus," he said, breaking the spell. Jerk. I felt like a pathetic loser. But in my heart, I knew I was right. He wasn't indifferent to me. He didn't just hate me. Beneath all that, I was sure I could sense desire.

Yes. Thiago wanted me, and worst of all, he didn't seem to be capable of hiding it.

I remembered his fingers in my mouth, his body burning like a sun. Those visions shattered as he grabbed my arm and said softly, so only I could hear him, "Please, Kam, just get in."

Kam. The name he always used to call me.

I stumbled onto the bus like a drunk. As soon as I saw him, Taylor pointed to the empty space next to him.

Sorry, Taylor, I thought. I'm not going to be able to do it.

It would be better to flounder under the icy look Taylor would give me two and a half hours later after we'd reached Falls Church.

I felt guilty, but I needed to get my emotions in order. I couldn't have sat there next to Taylor when my body was literally shaking from when Thiago had touched me. Had something changed between us? Was I wrong, or was he looking at me differently? If so, what about that message he'd written me telling me to forget what had happened?

I got out of the bus and grabbed my purple backpack. My friends were all smiling and laughing, and I could tell some of them were drunk. I couldn't believe Thiago and Klebb hadn't noticed. Everyone had been going crazy in the back of the bus; even a fool could have seen that.

I looked around outside. It smelled like pine trees and fresh-cut grass. I'd been to Falls Church before, usually just to watch our team get trounced. But with Thiago on our side, I was sure Carsville would come out on top. Falls Church was cute, with its little town square and its big white church. It reminded me of a Norman Rockwell painting. The people there were mostly Catholic—it was a very conservative area—and our guys always made a point of joking and cursing whenever they went anywhere to try to get under the locals' skin. I actually think the kids from the school envied us: we did whatever the hell we wanted, and they were always busy following rules.

We stayed in the same motel as always. It was like one of those places from the fifties you see in movies, with the rooms overlooking the parking lot, the metal stairs, and a crappy diner with bad coffee and frozen waffles. The good thing was, it did have a pool and a little hot tub, which we all took turns getting in and out of. Coach Klebb had family in town, and he always used the game weekend to visit them, inviting his brother to the motel and not really paying much attention to what we were doing as long as it didn't get out of hand.

We'd had pool parties the last two years. But with Thiago there, I doubted that would happen again. Ellie walked up to me waving our key cards.

"Come on, girl," she said. We always shared a room. Kate was staying with Marissa, and Lisa was staying with Chloe. Our rooms were all next door to each other, so meeting up at midnight wouldn't be a problem. When she opened the door, the smell of smoke and air purifiers smacked us in the face. Ellie's nose wrinkled as she said, "You'd think they'd have at least replaced the comforters." The room was small, no frills, but comfortable, with a king-size bed, a small TV, a desk, two chairs, and a bathroom in the back. I smelled the towels folded on the bed. They were clean, and the toiletries looked decent.

"I'm a little carsick," Ellie said, falling back on the bed.

It was starting to get dark out, and my stomach was rumbling.

"You're not carsick, you're drunk," I told her, tossing my suitcase on the bed, unpacking, and sticking my clothes in the closet.

"You're right! You know what I need? Food!"

"I'm not going out for food," I said. "You always do this to me. It's your turn."

"Come on! Pleeease?" She frowned like an angry baby. "I'll do it tomorrow!"

We had stopped for dinner on the way here, but if we wanted anything beyond that, we were on our own. There was a 7-Eleven across the street that had a bunch of frozen meals and chips. The closest thing besides that was a fast-food place a few miles away.

"Fine," I said. "What do you want?"

"Pringles! Sour cream and onion! And a frozen lasagna—I love that stuff." I raised an eyebrow at her. God knows what those frozen meals had in them, but whatever. She finished, "And some M&M's for dessert."

“Jesus, Galadriel!” I said, laughing and throwing a pillow at her face.

“I told you, don’t call me that!”

“Relax. You’ll get your garbage snacks in no time.”

As I walked out, I saw that most of the doors were open, with people walking into and out of each other’s rooms. Kate was outside leaning on the railing, holding her wallet.

“You too, huh?” she asked.

“Afraid so.”

“I think you and I are the only people who aren’t hammered here,” she said and followed me downstairs.

“I didn’t even have a drink,” I responded.

We walked to the 7-Eleven, feeling thankful we’d made it before everyone else came in and emptied the place out. I grabbed all that Ellie had asked for and got myself a bean burrito and pita chips with some hummus I liked—the same brand Mom usually kept at home.

When I got to the register, though, there was Thiago. He looked over at me and back at the cashier as I set my things down and waited. Then my heart froze: he was buying a box of condoms. He knew that I’d noticed, and a spark brightened his green eyes.

“You gotta do something to pass the time, right?”

I pretended to smile as I told the woman behind the counter I’d take some too: strawberry flavored, ribbed, size XL. I stiffened as I felt Thiago’s eyes on me. “I agree,” I said, “one hundred percent.”

“Don’t play with fire, princess. You don’t want to get burned.”

“Maybe I’m looking to get burned,” I snapped back.

We must have been entertaining to the cashier, but I didn’t care.

“Some people may be a little too hot for you to handle.” What was he getting at?

“I’m sorry, Thiago, are you trying to tell me who I should sleep with?”

He grabbed the bag with his things and took his change. “Almost. I’m telling you who *not* to sleep with.”

Just then, Taylor walked in. Kate came up behind me and laid her things down on the counter. Thiago looked at his brother, then made a show of looking back at me and saying loudly, “Good night, Kamila.” Then he walked outside.

The cashier scanned my items, and Taylor came over to say hi. I could tell that he hadn’t liked his brother and me talking at all. I tried to grab the condoms and shove them in my pocket just as Kate asked, “What the hell do you need those condoms for?”

Fuck. Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck.

I blushed and Taylor looked down, amused but suspicious.

“Strawberry, huh? Very tasty,” he said as I shoved everything into the bag.

“Yeah, it’s my favorite flavor,” I responded in a neutral tone, trying to let him know I didn’t feel like talking about it.

“Well, if you get the craving for it later, let me know.” The door opened again and Danny, Harry, Lionel, and Victor came in as a group. I wished I could vanish and prayed for the conversation to end so I wouldn’t give them more to gossip about. Kate asked Taylor out of nowhere, “So, party in your room at midnight, right?”

Taylor nodded. “You’re invited too, Kami. Bring those condoms. We need to make sure everyone stays safe.”

I struggled to pull the corners of my lips into a friendly expression. “I’ll think about it.”

I waited for Kate to pay and exhaled the giant breath of air I’d been holding as Taylor went to buy his food. She turned to me and asked, “Dude,

are you and Taylor going to have sex?”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed her arm. “Listen, if I decide to, you’ll be the first one to know about it. I promise.”

A bunch of us ate in my room and talked about everything and nothing: the next day’s game, the other cheerleading squad, who had a crush on whom.

“I think my brother likes you,” Kate said.

I remembered Julian asking if we could watch a movie and replied, “I told you, we’re just friends.”

Kate’s expression turned strange just then. She looked out the window, and I knew she was hiding something.

“Kate, is something up?”

She shook her head, but then Marissa started pushing her, and she opened up: “It’s just...you know, it hasn’t been easy. Having him at home, you know.” She looked uncomfortable and was biting down on the inside of her cheek.

I had forgotten about how weird their whole relationship was. Kate had barely known him before he came to live with them. That had to have been hard for her.

“Yeah, I get it,” I told her. “It must be hard, adapting to someone else at your house.”

“That’s not it. It’s Julian. He’s a difficult guy, you know.”

I thought of when I had hung out with him and couldn’t imagine what she was talking about. But then, what did I know? Lisa asked her what she meant, grabbing the last of the Pringles out of the tube.

“Mom told me when Julian was little, he used to spend the weekends with us. She said he wasn’t like the other kids his age. And, like, I was

always super relaxed, but whenever he and I were in the same room, I'd supposedly start crying my eyes out."

"Probably you didn't like him messing with your toys," Ellie said, taking a big swig of Coke.

"You can't remember it, though?"

Kate shook her head. "All I can remember is things changed whenever he came around. My parents would fight, my mom was tense—I had these fits."

"It can't be easy, having your husband's son with another woman coming around. And, like...I mean, when they had you, how old was Julian? One?"

"Something like that," Kate said, digging into more snacks. "It's hard to say this, but I wish sometimes he didn't live at my house. It's sad, but the way he just ignores us, how he never opens his mouth except to say *Pass the salt*, and how he locks the door to his room and blasts his music all the time..."

"I thought you guys liked each other." This was making me ask myself a lot of questions.

"We do...but you know when someone's trying too hard? Like, he's nice on the surface, but I feel like maybe he doesn't even like me."

"It's normal for brothers and sisters not to get along, Kate," I said, trying to reassure her.

"Sure. But, like...I don't know. Let's talk about something besides my brother."

I remembered things that Julian had told me. Was it his homosexuality that made him so reserved? Kate's family was mega-conservative. It was probably impossible for him to even think about telling his father, his sister, and his stepmother that he liked guys...

I didn't think about it too much more as I started cleaning up and my friends poured their first drinks into their red Solo cups.

"Are you really going to Taylor's room?" I asked. "It would be better for everyone to party together tomorrow, after the game." There I was, trying to be team captain again. Kate blew me off: "We're just going to be there for a little while. Are you seriously not coming?"

I shook my head. "I'm just going to hang out and watch a movie. If I'm going to get drunk after we beat the shit out of Falls Church, I need to save my energy."

Everyone nodded enthusiastically, and weirdly, no one but Ellie seemed to really care that I wasn't going. Did they always have more fun without me?

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kami

It wasn't long after the girls left that I went to Julian's room. I knocked softly on the door. I could hear what sounded like a riot at the other end of the hall. And that told me Thiago must not have been very interested in what we were up to.

That was strange to me because he seemed like he was taking his assistant coaching job seriously. But I wasn't about to complain. I assumed he was off with his stupid pack of condoms boning some chick he'd met in the 7-Eleven parking lot. Loser. I tried to put him out of my mind as I waited for Julian to open the door. When he did, I saw him bare-chested in a pair of gray sweatpants, barefoot, hair damp from the shower.

His torso was wiry and defined, with little freckles dotting his skin. *It's a shame you're gay*, I thought, but that was an awful thing to say. A shame for the girls, is what I meant. Any guy he got with would have the time of his life.

"I didn't think you were coming," he said with a grin. His brown eyes were glowing.

"I told you I would, didn't I?"

He stepped aside to let me through. “You might have been the forgetful type. Or maybe you give in easily to peer pressure. After all, I bet your friends are having a blast down there at the other end of the motel.”

“Well, I hope you’re pleasantly surprised.” I walked in and saw two single beds—one covered in his stuff, the other empty. “You’re not sharing a room?” I asked. I felt bad that he’d have to stay there alone.

“I like hanging out by myself. Except for when it’s movie night with you. That’s obvious, right?”

I smiled and showed him Ellie’s packet of M&Ms. She’d left them in the room, and I’d decided to steal them. She hadn’t paid me back anyway, so they were technically still mine. “Sorry I couldn’t bring popcorn,” I said, “but I’d rather have chocolate anyway.”

Julian laughed, motioned for me to sit down, and said, “Me, too. What do you want to watch?”

He hit the button on the remote and looked at the streaming options. I remembered hearing *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* was good; it was supposed to be terrifying. When I mentioned it and he told me he hadn’t seen it, I remembered that it was on Netflix and told him to click on the icon.

“I don’t have an account,” he said, sounding sad.

“For real?”

He shook his head, seeming embarrassed.

“Your sister has literally seen every TV series on the planet. Every time I talk to her, she’s like *did you see such-and-such on Prime, Hulu, Netflix, HBO...?* Why don’t you just text her and get her password?”

Julian shrugged and walked over to the fridge. “To tell you the truth, my sister and I don’t really get along.”

I thought he wanted to talk a little more, maybe. It was almost as if he'd intuited that Kate had brought him up to me earlier.

"Why?" I asked, acting like I wasn't paying much attention.

"Kate can sometimes...she can be a little cruel?" he said, fishing out two bottles of Coke.

Surprised, I asked him why.

"I think she's jealous that her mom and I get along so well. Like, I've seen her start fights spontaneously just because Rachel and I were talking about books or art or whatever."

"Are you serious? And you get along with her mom?"

"Of course I do; she practically raised me when I was a kid. I don't know if you know this, but my mom was in and out of rehab constantly the first three years after I was born. She couldn't take care of me, so I lived with Dad and his wife. And Kate too."

"I didn't know that."

"Kate acted like I stole her place. I mean, I get it in some ways. I needed attention. Having a mother who's a drunk leaves a mark on you. I had a really hard time sleeping—I was scared at night, I had bad dreams—so Dad used to come get me and take me to bed with him and Rachel. I slept in their room for a long time because it was the only thing that made me feel safe. And Kate..."

"You think she felt pushed aside?" I asked.

"A part of me does, yeah. But there's no way she remembers that. I think it got worse when she started getting older and her parents told her. You know Kate always needs to be..."

"The center of attention. Yeah, I know." I finished his words as I remembered all those times I'd glimpsed her jealousy whenever I'd managed to do something better than her or gotten something she'd wished

she could have. We were like rivals, but we always loved and respected each other.

It was strange to see the two sides of the story firsthand. But now I felt I understood them both better. I wished Kate hadn't twisted certain details around, but that was like her.

"If you want to see the movie, we can use my password," I said after a moment.

"Sure! Here, give me your Coke. I thought these were twist-offs, but they're not. I think I've got a bottle opener in my toiletry bag." He walked off to the bathroom.

When he was back, we lay down on the bed and I entered my Netflix password on the TV so we could watch the film. We ate his stash of chips and chocolate and drank our Cokes. The movie was hella scary. I even had to cover my eyes with my hands in a couple of scenes. At one point, I flinched and buried my face in Julian's chest. He wrapped his arm around me. I felt good. Knowing that he liked boys made me relax around him. I needed a friend like that. I'd had one in Taylor, but now it was clear it was something else.

As the film reached its second half, I started drifting off, I was so relaxed. My eyelids were heavy and I was yawning. At some point I fell asleep.

And I had nightmares.

The next morning, I opened my eyes, and for a moment I didn't know where I was. *What the...? Oh, yeah, Julian's room*, I thought, but if that was right, where the hell was Julian? I couldn't believe I'd slept in like that. Why hadn't he gotten me up?

I looked at the clock on the nightstand and nearly had a heart attack. Dammit!

I jumped up, put on my shoes, and went to my room to change. It was late; I had missed almost the entire morning practice. In my room, I found Ellie asleep too.

“Hey! Get up! Do you know what time it is?”

Ellie wrapped her pillow around her head.

“Shhh! Don’t yell,” she grunted.

“Ellie, Kate’s going to kill us. We need to get to practice!”

“Kate said we were ready, that we didn’t need to.”

What?

“We don’t need to train before a competition? You’re kidding, right?”

She barely moved and didn’t answer. I took off for Kate’s room. At least she was awake and opened the door, though she was still in her pajamas with a cup of coffee in her hand.

“What’s up?” she asked, letting me in.

“Kate, have you seen what time it is?”

“Uhh. Yeah.” She put her cup down and grabbed a hairband to pull back her hair.

She had a giant hickey on her neck.

“Marissa, get up!” I shouted, pulling back the covers. “Kate, come on! We need to practice!”

Kate scowled at me.

“Could you just relax?” she asked wearily. “We’ll do a quick run-through before the game. We’ve already practiced a million times anyway.”

“Kate, we need that pre-game practice, it’s what helps us to—”

“Drop it, Kami. You’re not the fucking captain anymore; can’t you get that through your head?”

I walked out and slammed the door. She had no idea how to run a squad.

An hour later, we finally made it to the gym, with just ninety minutes until the game. And we hadn't even warmed up! My teammates had bags under their eyes and were barely talking to each other.

That's why I'd always made sure no one got drunk the night before a game back when I was leading them!

We stretched out and did a run-through, and nobody could stop screwing things up. It was bad. We were nervous, and Kate was starting to freak out.

"What the hell is up with you guys?" she shouted after a totally uncoordinated routine.

I tried as hard as I could to bite my tongue. It was obvious what was up. Everyone was hungover!

"Again, dammit!" she screamed. We all looked back and forth. I knew it was pointless to say anything just then. But I would later, no question about it.

In the changing room, we put on our uniforms and did our hair and makeup. Everyone had to use extra base to cover up the bags under their eyes.

"What time did y'all go to bed yesterday?" I asked Ellie as she braided her hair.

"Like...four-thirty?" she said, a little embarrassed.

I couldn't believe it.

As we emerged into the gym, everyone faked a smile, trying to pretend that they weren't worried about blowing it.

It was the first time in ages I'd felt nervous before a competition. Normally, I loved the adrenaline, the music, the raucous atmosphere. I looked up in the stands and saw the guys ready to cheer us on. They looked tired too, and Thiago, off by himself in one corner of the bleachers, was

clearly furious. I had butterflies in my stomach, but I needed to focus, so I turned away from him.

Kate was saying some bullshit about how we were the best and who knows what else. My blood was boiling.

Someone shouted into a megaphone for the first team to come out, and we all sat down to see who our competition was.

As soon as the music began to boom and their routine started, I knew we were doomed.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Thiago

What a bunch of assholes.

Each and every one of them.

There was no other explanation.

I'd told my brother I wasn't about to play babysitter to a bunch of seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds—they were old enough to take responsibility for themselves and know what time to call the party off when they had a game the next day. But they couldn't, and there they were: a total disaster.

I had no idea how late they'd been up. I wasn't at the motel. I knew a chick in Falls Church who'd invited me over for dinner when she found out I was going to be in town. I was happy to accept. I couldn't stop thinking about what had happened with Kam: every hour, every minute, the image of it came back to me. I never thought something like that could turn me on so much. But it had. And we hadn't even kissed.

So I'd blown off some steam with my friend here. We'd been at it all night, in every possible position. And the whole time, I imagined I was with Kam.

As you can see, I had a problem.

She was the real reason I had showed up for the cheerleading. I had wanted to see her again. Cheerleaders, their routines, I couldn't care less about all that. Now, though, I wished I hadn't. They were a joke, and it was clear my guys weren't the only ones who were having trouble focusing. The only one who seemed to have it together was Kam. She kept shooting nasty looks at the captain, who hadn't stopped yelling at everyone since they'd arrived.

It was irritating. Her voice was like nails on a chalkboard.

I always felt like if you had to yell, that meant you were doing something wrong. If people didn't trust and respect you enough to just do what you said, that was because you weren't good at your job. But what did I know? I'd only coached guys. Maybe girls were a different story.

Finally, the cheer team started. I had to sit through three other teams' routines before the Carsville Lions took the floor.

Kam had her hair braided in pigtails that just grazed the top of her breasts, and she'd made up her face with glitter. Her cheerleader uniform clung to her body, and you could see her soft curves as her skirt bounced up and down with each step. I imagined standing behind her, pushing her spine downward, watching her arch her back as I lifted her skirt, tugged down her panties, and slowly...

I closed my eyes and told myself to stop and focus on anything else. I was starting to make myself hard, and the game was about to begin!

When I opened my eyes, their routine had started. Everyone was looking down until the music began and they started the dance they'd been practicing since the beginning of the semester.

I was momentarily relieved. They were perfectly coordinated, moving to the rhythm of the music. I knew they were good, but damn... Not long afterward, though, something started to break down in the middle of their

routine. Right as they were jumping and doing somersaults and all that fancy stuff that always made the audience ooh and ahh.

Kam was the *flyer*—I’d only learned that term because I’d heard it so many times at practice. She was the one who got thrown in the air and twisted into amazing positions. She was doing great, but I couldn’t say the same about the people who had to catch her. One of the girls looked pale and on the verge of fainting. She was the only one who couldn’t even manage to smile at the audience.

And then it happened, as if in slow motion: everyone took their positions. Kam started at one end of the line, turning somersaults that got faster and faster until her teammates lifted her up and tossed her in the air. As she spiraled gracefully, the pale girl turned away to vomit, and the arms that were supposed to catch her disappeared. Kam looked down, her expression fearful, before she crashed headfirst into the ground, taking another girl down with her. I heard a scream that echoed through the entire gym. The audience was completely silent.

As I stood, I couldn’t help thinking *Come on, Kam. Get up. Please.*

But she didn’t.

I was over there in three seconds, jumping down the bleachers to the floor and pushing through the crowd that had gathered around her. The girls were shouting for a doctor. In thirty seconds, utter chaos had broken out. I knelt down beside her, not touching her because I was scared I might hurt her worse, praying that there was a doctor or at least a nurse in the room.

“Kam... Kam, open your eyes,” I begged, terrified.

Please...please...not her.

I heard my brother next to me shouting, “Someone call an ambulance!” He must have run down as fast as I did. Thankfully, Falls Creek had sideline medics who hurried over to load her onto a stretcher just as she started

opening her eyes. She blinked a few times, disoriented, then looked at me. I was desperate to know she was OK.

“I dreamed you were kissing me,” she said, and I knew she was delirious. But it didn’t matter. I heard it. And so did my brother.

They took Kam and the other girl to the athletic trainer’s office. I was furious with myself. I had been the one responsible for making sure things like this didn’t happen. I realized then that the game, the cheerleaders, coaching—none of that mattered. All I cared about was Kam being all right.

“I’m fine,” she said for the umpteenth time.

“You need to get a CAT scan,” my brother said. He hadn’t been willing to leave. I was on the other side of the room, leaning against the wall and watching as I waited for the medic to come back in.

“How’s Nadia?” Kam asked.

I told her what the doctor said, that he was 99 percent sure Nadia’s arm wasn’t broken. The most likely thing was a bad wrist sprain, which would mean a month or so of rest. No training, certainly no competitions.

“Dammit,” Kam said. “It’s my fault. I broke her wrist when I fell on her.” She sat up slightly on the stretcher.

“I said it was sprained, not broken, Kam,” I repeated patiently.

“Whatever, it’s still my fault.”

“It’s Marissa’s fault for turning around and puking when she should have been there to catch you. If she was sick, she shouldn’t have tried to compete,” my brother said.

“What none of you should have done is get drunk the day before the fucking competition,” Kam roared. I had to admit, I agreed with her. But I

kept a cool head and said, “Taylor, go warm up. The game starts in an hour, and you all need to start getting ready.”

“I want to stay with her,” he responded, not even looking at me.

“Taylor, please, I’m fine,” Kam said with a pleading expression.

“I don’t care what you said. You hit your head. You need to go to the hospital.”

The doctor came in just then and replied, “Trust me, it looked worse than it was. She was lucky. She’ll probably get a knot on her head and a little bruising, but she’s not showing any signs of concussion. I recommend you take her back to her room for rest and keep a close eye on her for the next twenty-four hours. If she throws up or if something doesn’t feel right, then she should go to the emergency room.”

Kam nodded, climbed down from the stretcher, and walked out with my brother and me.

“Do you want me to go back with you?” my brother asked, wracked with worry. There was something strange in his eyes: care, a softness. Was Taylor falling in love with Kam? That made me sick, but I covered it up as best as I could.

“Taylor, don’t make me repeat this again. Go practice. Now. I’ll worry about her. You’re the team captain now. You need to show leadership.” I could tell Taylor was cursing me inside. But Kam finally managed to convince him.

“Tay, if you don’t go, I’m going to get mad for real.”

“Fine,” he said, disappointed, and giving me a threatening look. “As soon as the game’s over, I’m coming to check on you.” He leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Kam was tense and said nothing as Taylor walked away. The air was thick with tension when we were alone. After a few seconds, she broke the silence.

“Are you going to give me another week’s detention because he kissed me?”

Well...someone was angry, then. Instead of giving in, I said, “Come on. The bus driver’s outside; he’s going to take us back to the motel.”

“What if I don’t want to go to the stupid motel, though? What if I want to stay here and watch your brother play? What if I don’t want to do what you tell me?”

I took a deep breath.

“Kamila, please. Get in the bus, go to your room, and let us play our game in peace.”

Instead of arguing, she started walking at a brisk clip. When she’d climbed the steps inside the bus, she turned around and said, “You don’t need to come along. Actually, I’d prefer you don’t. I don’t want you to have to act like it matters to you whether I make it back safe and sound or not. I realize you need to pretend you’re a good person to feel better about yourself. But you can skip it. Your job is to coach the basketball team. And it seems like that’s all you can handle.”

I was livid. I wanted to give her a piece of my mind, but just as I was about to open my mouth, I heard Coach Klebb shouting at me from the doorway.

“Thiago! Come here and explain to me why the hell I have half the team throwing up in the locker room!”

Kam smiled smugly and turned around, the doors closing in my face behind her. I looked back at Klebb. I wanted to ask him how it was only my fault no one supervised them last night.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Kami

One of the girls from the team texted me the whole night, so I was able to follow the game minute by minute.

And they won.

They won because they were prepared. Unlike us. Just the thought of it made me furious. Kate had no idea how to lead the squad. I got it: her dream was to be the captain, but it wasn't just a title, it meant responsibility. You couldn't party the day before a competition. No matter how much you felt like it.

I never liked being mean, but if I had to, I could do it. And that only made the celebration sweeter when we finally got to go home with our trophies.

I was anxious to see the guys on the team, even for a breath of fresh air. But I stayed in my room. My head was killing me. I still couldn't believe they'd just let me flop down on the floor like that. I was furious.

I heard everyone come back around seven. All the guys were shouting and clapping. They were so excited; I was sure you could hear them from miles away. Ellie opened the door a few seconds later.

“How are you?” she asked, worried about me, hanging her head.

“I’m fine.” I got up and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

“You’re mad, aren’t you?” she asked, sitting down on the bed.

I didn’t have time to answer before there was knock at the door. When I went to open it, I found all the girls ready to pile in, with Kate standing at the front of all of them.

“Hey! How are you?” she asked. She looked serious, but I could tell she wasn’t worried at all. She knew it had been her fault, but she couldn’t bring herself to admit it. I understood she wasn’t alone—the rest of the girls had gotten drunk too—but she was their captain. She needed to exert authority over them. Whether she liked it or not, she needed to earn their respect, and she wasn’t capable of it. Even I had lost the little respect I had for her when I saw that her stupidity had put my life in danger.

“I’m fine,” I said, letting her through. There were now ten of us packed into that tiny room.

“Where’s Nadia?” I asked.

“She’s coming back from the emergency room in an Uber. I sent a couple of girls with her. They had to put her in one of those air cast things. She’ll be able to cheerlead again, but not for a month,” Kate said. I imagined Nadia must be just as angry as I was. An uncomfortable silence spread through the room, until Kate finally broke it.

“Look, it’s not the end of the world, OK? So we lost once. Who cares? It’s one competition! We always win; we’ll win again. We could probably use a bit of humility for once, to help us understand what it’s like not to be on top.” She spoke her words to everyone, but I knew she was talking to me, and I wasn’t about to let it slide.

“Kate, are you insinuating something?” I asked, trying to control my rage.

“I’m just saying this is like a learning experience. We’ve lost, which means we get to see things from the other side...”

“Oh, please!” I couldn’t restrain myself anymore. “Cut the shit, Kate. We lost because you needed to set an example, and you couldn’t. You didn’t have the discipline, and you didn’t want it bad enough.”

“What about you, then?” she screamed. “I suppose you’re just perfect!”

“Kate, no one said that,” Ellie interrupted her, trying to calm the waters.

“Fuck off! Don’t take her side,” Kate said loudly, turning to her. “Everything was fine yesterday when you were chugging beer after beer. What was it you said then? Let me try and remember. Oh, yeah: *Thank God Kami’s not here; she would have ruined the party. Now that she’s not captain, the team can finally have a little fun.* That was it, right?”

I glanced at Ellie, feeling totally betrayed.

“I didn’t say that,” she objected, but I could see the guilt in her eyes. “I was drunk, OK? Kami, I don’t...”

“Just drop it,” I said. “I’ll tell you all another thing too. I could never have given less of a fuck about being a cheerleader. I only did it because I liked being with you guys—being part of a team, competing, winning, celebrating together like we always did. I decided not to be captain this year because I didn’t want everyone to think of me as a dictator, even if you were the ones trying to push me into it all the time. I took a step back. I wanted to hand it off to Kate because I knew she’d been dreaming about it forever. Some of y’all were mad at me; some of you were upset. I didn’t know if it was more because I was leaving or because you didn’t like Kate. But it doesn’t matter anymore because I quit.”

I felt a relief I hadn’t felt in a long time. I realized I had too much to deal with to have to be worrying about this.

“No, Kami. You can’t quit,” Ellie said, looking terrified.

Marissa added, “The team won’t be the same. Don’t fight with each other. We can fix this, can’t we, Kate?”

I turned to look at Kate and saw her enraged, arms crossed in front of her chest.

“If she wants to go, that’s her business. I’m not stopping her. And honestly, she got something right. She is a dictator. I hadn’t realized it until she said it, and I’m sorry to put it so harshly, but...you can’t have two alphas leading one pack.”

I held her stare. I felt like this was about something more than just the squad, but it didn’t matter. I threw up my hands. “No worries, then. I don’t mind being a lone wolf.”

I walked through them out onto the balcony and shut the door, taking in a deep breath of fresh air. Behind me, I could hear whispers. I knew they were criticizing me. And I wasn’t going to just stand there and listen to it.

Tears came to my eyes. I didn’t understand why. I’d never even wanted to be anybody’s leader. I’d become captain because it was what they all wanted, and I’d let them drag me along. I always did that with everyone, and I never asked myself what it was I wanted.

“Hey,” I heard a voice say at the other end of the balcony. I looked up and saw Taylor approach with a worried expression. “I was on my way to your room to see how you were doing, but I guess you’re well enough to come out. What’s up, Kami? Why are you crying?”

I turned and buried my face in his chest. He wrapped his arms around me, and I felt better. Much better. Even if I went on crying the way I would have when I was ten.

“Come on...let’s go to my room,” he said, and I followed him. I didn’t even hesitate for a second.

“So, we just witnessed a coup, right? I’m assuming you pushed Kate out?”

I punched Taylor on the shoulder and chuckled. He laughed so loud I felt all the pressure in my chest dissolve.

“I don’t even want to be the captain. I never did ...”

“Kami,” he interrupted me, looking me in the eye. “You’re not the kind of person who becomes a leader. You were born one. That’s a gift, and some people have it and others don’t. Look, I like Kate, as much as she might have fucked up today, but she can’t hold a candle to you.”

“Don’t say that,” I said, defending her reluctantly. But then I stopped myself. Why the hell should I be defending her? She was no one, she didn’t deserve it, and she was the one who had taken a friendship that had lasted for years and put it at risk trying to take my place.

“She’ll get over whatever’s happened and come crawling back to you asking for forgiveness,” he said, very sure of himself.

“You don’t know her, and it shows.”

As Taylor shrugged, I noticed he had a black eye, and I reached up to touch the bruise.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Someone elbowed me right when I was shooting a three-pointer. I still got it, though.” He grinned briefly before turning serious, pinning me with his eyes. I couldn’t say how many things I felt as he said, suddenly serious, “You told me we were supposed to talk.”

“I know...” I said softly.

“I waited for you all last night. I wanted to see you. Just you. Then I hear you were watching a movie with Julian? Why wouldn’t you watch a movie with me? Why aren’t you giving me a chance?”

I still had my hand on his cheek. Now I lowered it onto the bed between us where we were both sitting.

“Because with you, it wouldn’t have been possible to just watch a movie.”

With that, the atmosphere in the room changed. It got hotter, and there was something magical that seemed to fill it—a magic that only Taylor was capable of. Something at once calm, peaceful, and very warm.

“What would it have been, then?” he said, leaning over softly.

But before I could answer, his mouth was already touching the hollow of my neck. He missed me first, several times, brushing me with his nose and his lips, causing a powerful reaction instantaneously. Then his tongue came out, and those kisses grew much more intense.

“You’re right,” he admitted, “we wouldn’t have made it ten minutes into that movie.”

“Taylor...” I tried to stop him, but it was like trying to stop an oncoming freight train.

“Just let me taste you a little,” he said, almost begging me. “Just a little...” I didn’t have time to say yes before he kissed me on the lips. It wasn’t like that day we were in class. We were both alone now, and no one could stop us from doing what we wanted.

But did I want it?

My body seemed to. Taylor kissed so well, touched me so skillfully.

His hand was in my shorts, under my panties, and I said, “Taylor,” forcing the air into my lungs even though he was leaving me breathless.

“That’s right,” he said, “say my name. It drives me crazy.” And he slid a finger inside me. I fell back on the bed, and he lay next to me. His finger was jutting in and out, slowly at first, then faster. He kissed my mouth, my neck, then went lower down, lifting my shirt with his free hand and nipping at my nipple.

And I realized my brain was toying with me. Because I was imagining it wasn't Taylor kissing me, it was Thiago. Thiago putting his fingers deep inside me. Thiago nibbling my ear. Thiago whispering all the things he wanted to do to me.

"Kami, you're so wet," Taylor said. And that was enough to make me stop liking it. That one word. Kami.

But before I could tell him to stop, someone knocked at the door. Taylor sat back and cursed. "What the hell do they want now?" he complained. "They should be out celebrating."

Don't ask me why, but I had a feeling about what was about to happen. I hurriedly arranged my clothes as Taylor opened the door. Thiago was standing there and barged in. He looked at me first, then at Taylor.

"We're going back to Carsville," he said, clenching his jaw.

"What? Why?" Taylor asked, still lingering by the doorframe.

"Coach says you don't deserve a celebration. We've got two cheerleaders wounded and we barely eked out a win in a game we should have coasted through. Pack your bags. The bus leaves in half an hour."

"What the hell? We're supposed to play paintball!" Taylor shouted.

Thiago mocked him, twisting his balled fists under his eyes as if he were crying, then asked me if I felt better, acting as if his brother were no longer there.

An electric shiver traveled through my body, knowing he was worried about me. That he was actually worried about me. All I managed to say in response was "Yeah..."

"Good. Hop to it, then. We meet out front."

I stood as Thiago left. "This is bullshit," Taylor said. Then, coming very close, he continued, "Anyway, we've still got a lot to talk about."

“I know,” I replied. “And we will. But let’s wait for things to calm down.”

He didn’t rush me. As I walked to the door, I turned for a last look at him. There was sadness in his eyes. I didn’t know if it was because we’d been interrupted, or he could tell that I’d gone cold when his brother came in, or if he knew that our being together was going to cause problems... I was thinking about all that too.

“You know something, Taylor? When I was little, you were my prince, and your brother was like the evil wizard who was always trying to come between us. And it’s still that way. Maybe it’s time for us to accept that...”

He took my face in his hands to stop me. His skin was like fire, warming me when I felt frozen inside.

“Nobody’s going to come between us, Kami. Not my brother, not anyone else. I’m so glad you and I can be together again. I love it. It’s that simple. I always loved being around you, and it’s only natural that we want to take it to the next level. All I ask is don’t overthink it, OK? Let’s enjoy it and see what happens.”

I nodded and let him kiss me quickly on the lips.

“See you on the bus,” he said. “I’ll keep a seat reserved for you if you want.”

“Sure. See you inside.”

Taylor and I chatted nonstop the whole way back to Carsville. It had been ages since I’d laughed that much, and it helped me forget the looks on all the girls’ faces when I walked right past them to sit in the back with my best friend. If that’s still what he was...

Because...what were Taylor and I?

I loved how he'd touched me, but I had to accept the fact that the person I wanted to see when I opened my eyes was his brother, not him.

I was so confused. Could I like them both at the same time? Things with Taylor were so easy, they just flowed... But with Thiago, it was intense and deep, like a sweet poison.

Poisons were toxic, though, and I'd had enough toxicity in my life already.

Thiago didn't interfere with us on the way back. Even when he was walking down the aisle of the bus taking roll. I didn't know how that made me feel.

Was he not jealous anymore? Did I wish he was?

God, I was a wreck.

When they dropped us at school, my mother was there with my brother waiting for me. Her perfectly composed expression shattered when she noticed how close Taylor and I were as we stepped out. *Shit*. I turned around quickly and waved to him, whispering, "Sorry! See you tomorrow."

My brother ran over and jumped up to hug me.

"Kami! Kami!" he shouted. "I'm so glad you're back. You're gonna be mad though because your car's gone now."

I set him down and looked at my mom.

"We'll talk," she said.

I glanced back at the group and saw my friends getting their bags. All of them gave me a strange look, and I wondered what the hell Kate had said to them. Ellie was the only one who had the decency to wave at me. I responded in kind just before following my mother to her Mercedes.

"Kamila," she said, "would you mind telling me what you were doing with Taylor Di Bianco?"

I buckled my seat belt and acted offended. “Is that all you care about, Mom? Did you forget that I fell and hit my head? Thank God it’s just a bruise, but it could have been much worse.”

Mom pulled out of the lot and sped toward the highway.

“I talked to the coach. You think all I did was read that measly message you sent me? He told me the whole story. So sure, it could have been worse, but it wasn’t. You’re fine. So I want answers.”

“Taylor’s in my class, Mom. He’s friends with my friends, and we have to do a project together.”

“Those boys are going to get you in trouble. Ever since they came back, you’ve been behaving erratically. You’re distracted, you got detention—now you’re screwing up at cheerleading. I can’t even imagine what grades you must be getting.”

“My grades are perfect,” I murmured, looking out the window.

“I don’t want you hanging out with them, Kamila,” she continued, barely letting me finish. “I’m serious. We’ve already had enough problems out of them...”

“Problems out of them!” I cut her off, raising my voice. My mother stopped the car in front of the house, but I didn’t get out. “You’re the one who brought us problems, Mom! Or do I need to remind you of the consequences of your affair?!”

I was incensed. There was so much I’d kept stuffed down inside: so many fights, Thiago’s angry expression, Ms. Di Bianco’s sadness, Taylor’s regrets...

“Shut your mouth, Kamila,” she hissed. “Your brother...”

“Maybe my brother needs to know that our mother is a...”

She slapped me across the face before I could get the word out. “If you ever insinuate a thing like that again, I swear you’ll never enter my house

again.”

I got out without even looking at her. She hadn’t even given me a chance to say goodbye to my car. I wiped away the tear that fell down my cheek and went up to my room. Neither of my parents came to check on me, let alone tell me who they’d sent my car to or why they’d done it without me. Only Cameron cared. And when the shouting started in my parents’ bedroom, repeating the same scenario I’d heard all week, I found him there in the doorway, asking, “Can I sleep in your bed?” His pajamas were on inside out.

“Come here, you poor thing.” I turned around his top and bottoms so you could see the dinosaur print on the outside. “Of course you can.” I made a hollow for him next to me.

He cuddled up close to me and turned to see my face. His teeny hand came up to rub my cheek.

“How come Mom hit you?”

“Because I almost called her a bad word.”

“But I thought violence was never justified.”

I laughed.

“You mean *justified*. And you’re right. But maybe sometimes it is, just a little bitty bit.”

I could tell it was killing him to see our parents pulling further apart every day.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kami

The next day, when I went downstairs for breakfast, the house seemed oddly silent. Dad was making scrambled eggs, and my brother was sitting at the kitchen table.

“Good morning,” I said, pulling my hair back out of my face. “Where’s Mom?”

“She left,” Dad said. “She’s spending the week at a spa resort.” I could tell by his voice he was angry.

“A spa resort? I thought we were...?”

“It was already paid for,” he said. “She told me what happened yesterday in the car.”

I felt embarrassed that I’d almost called her a slut, but then it was her fault, blaming Taylor and Thiago for everything that was happening when she was the one who had screwed up their lives.

“I’m sorry,” I said, sitting across from him at the kitchen island.

“Don’t you dare even suggest anything like that again, you hear me?” he said.

I nodded, and Dad seemed to decide that was enough. “Shall we put on some music?” he asked. He wiped his hands on the flower-print apron wrapped around his waist and pulled out the tablet that was mounted to the wall. It controlled everything in the house, even the lights in my room. My brother and father both smiled when Dad played his favorite song, the Beatles’ “Here Comes the Sun,” and the three of us started singing loudly as we put the finishing touches on breakfast.

For a moment, I forgot all our problems and enjoyed being there with them. We had toast and bacon with our eggs. I squeezed orange juice; my brother set the table. It was so nice to see Cameron smiling. The night before, when he came to my room, I’d noticed his eyes were red from crying. I told myself I needed to pay closer attention to him. Everything at home was affecting him more than the rest of us.

Because it was Sunday, Dad said we could go to the park when we were done. But before we left, Dad and Cameron said they had a surprise for me.

“Close your eyes, OK?” Dad said as I walked out on the porch, and he disappeared inside to do whatever it was he had planned.

“All right... Three, two...”

“One!” Cameron finished impatiently.

I opened my eyes to see what they’d both been hiding: a white bicycle with a wicker basket painted with daisies. It was shiny and new and just waiting for someone to take it out.

I smiled. “Is that for me?” I asked.

“It sure is!” Cameron said. “Now we can go racing, Kami! A bike’s way more fun than a car!”

My father smiled at me, but his eyes were sad.

“I love it, Dad,” I said, and gave him a big hug.

“We’ll get you your car back, I promise,” he said softly.

“I don’t even need it. With the bike, at least I’ll get some exercise!”

Dad smiled. Around three, we rode to the park: Dad on the giant mountain bike he often took out on Sundays and Cameron on his tiny one covered in a million stickers. We spent the whole day out, just being together, eating our sandwiches on the banks of Lake Carsville. It was perfect. My mother had no idea what she was missing. She was so frivolous, she had never understood what really mattered.

I didn’t miss her the entire week she was gone. I didn’t miss my friends, either. For some reason, they were upset with me. I didn’t understand, and honestly, I couldn’t worry about it. It was getting to be that time of year when I shut down and spent whole days all by myself drawing and lost in thought.

There were times when I couldn’t help beating myself up. Times when every single detail of the past few days came back to me. I was sure Mom had left because she didn’t want to be in Carsville on that date, especially not with the Di Biancos back. It happened every year: one time she needed to visit our grandparents, another time it was a spa, another time it was a vacation with the women from the tennis club...

In the days following the competition, Ellie tried to talk to me, to ask me why I was standoffish with the girls and why I hadn’t shown up to cheerleading practice. She told me they all wished I’d be captain again, but they didn’t want to say it aloud because they were scared of how Kate would react.

Scared of how Kate would react... I kept repeating those words in my head, trying to figure out what they could possibly mean. Since when was a friend someone who inspired fear?

“Please, Kami... Come back to us,” she insisted, sitting down by me one day in the cafeteria at a table by the window on the far end of the room, where the rest of the team couldn’t hear us.

“Ellie, I just don’t see it right now. I’m sorry,” I said, picking away at my food. She was sad, but I could tell she was frustrated with me too.

“Oh, but you don’t have any problem hanging out with Taylor, right? You can spend all day with him. Is that what you are now, one of those girls who abandons all her friends for her boyfriend?”

My boyfriend? Was Taylor my boyfriend?

Speak of the devil... There he was.

“What’s up, Ellie?” he asked with a friendly smile. That smile that transmitted infinite calm.

Instead of saying anything, she looked back and forth at us and walked away to rejoin our friends.

“Is she still pissed off?” Taylor asked, tossing an apple up in the air and catching it.

I shrugged. “She doesn’t understand that I just need some distance from everyone right now.”

Taylor grabbed my hand to stop me from playing with my food.

“Hey, Kami...are you going to tell me what’s going on or what?”

For some strange reason, I didn’t want to. Maybe it was just looking out for Dad, but I couldn’t stand anyone knowing that he was practically bankrupt. It was enough having to listen to him arguing with his lawyers and clients. He’d been working from home lately. He’d closed his office in downtown Carsville and had even put our beach house up for sale.

I knew none of that mattered, it was just stuff, but still. I couldn’t help feeling sorry for Dad. Everything he’d achieved in life was crumbling, and my mother wouldn’t even lend him a hand or be there to support him. I’d had to step up, and there I was walking around the house pretending everything was OK, smiling even though I was torn apart inside so my father and brother could feel that things were still normal.

“It’s home stuff. And I don’t really want to talk about it right now.” I felt so guilty. He was the one who ought to have been upset these days: it was the anniversary of the time his father got caught cheating on his mother with mine. I should have been there for *him*, not him for me. But I couldn’t help it because it had been a terrible time for me too.

“Hey,” he said after we had changed the subject and talked a while about our biology project on sexuality. “I won’t be in class tomorrow. I’m not sure if I can see you this weekend, either.”

I nodded but didn’t look him in the face until he grabbed my chin and forced my face upward.

“Stop blaming yourself, please,” he insisted, pressing his forehead into mine. “Are you going to be OK?”

“Taylor, how can you be the one asking me if I’m OK?”

He almost scowled. “Kami, do you not understand that I care about you? That there’s probably nothing else I care about more? What can I do to get you to grasp that?”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter. Forget it.” I felt sad, and I tried to make myself angry to cover up that sorrow. “I need to go,” I said, and stood up.

Taylor watched me, unsure what was going on with me. I wasn’t sure myself. I knew he didn’t deserve that. Not with that generous heart of his: it almost seemed he had forgotten what my mother had done, what running my mouth about it had done to his family. But him being so sweet to me—there was something about it I couldn’t take just then! It only made me feel worse.

I stopped, bent over, and kissed him on the lips.

“I love you...and I’m sorry.” I walked out. And everyone in the cafeteria watched me go. Everyone waited for something to happen. Because...

Kamila Hamilton was no longer a cheerleader.

Kamila Hamilton no longer hung out with the cool kids.
Kamila Hamilton no longer drove a convertible to school.
And Kamila Hamilton was no longer the girl everyone wanted to be.

That afternoon, on the way to the library—after a few hours I’d actually had to myself now that I’d quit the team—I wished I could skip detention and just go home.

It was Thursday, and having to see Thiago the three days before had been torture. Everyone sitting in that room seemed to have something to say to me, some reproach—even Julian because I’d been avoiding him since the day we watched that movie together. He hadn’t done anything wrong, but there was just too much on my mind.

I sat at my usual desk and noticed that Thiago was looking sad. Very sad. His downcast eyes were like a knife to my heart.

It’s your fault he’s like this. Everything is your fault.

I looked down at the white piece of paper in front of me.

I looked down and started to draw.

I barely realized it as I traced a line here, a line there, cross-hatched shadows, retouched the features until they were perfect. I’d had that image in my head a long time. The four of them looking at the camera, smiling, happy, calm before everything went to shit.

I spent all two hours of detention working on that portrait. And when I finally allowed myself to look at it, simply to look at it and take it in... My God. I could feel the tears come to my eyes, and two seconds later, a shadow fell over the drawing and over me.

I looked up and saw Thiago standing there.

I saw something in him—pain at first, I thought, pain so deep that only someone who had lived through what he'd lived through could understand it. But then rage eclipsed it, covering him like armor that kept me from seeing his heart.

He grabbed the picture and balled it up cruelly. His stare seemed to dare me to say something. And he announced, "Detention's over."

I didn't respond. I just stood, ignored everyone's glances, and walked out.

Taylor ran up behind me shouting, "Kami!"

I only stopped because I knew he didn't deserve to be ignored.

"What happened? What was that all about?"

"Nothing," I said, trying to smile. "I guess he doesn't like people doodling." I don't think he believed me, but at least it kept him from digging any further.

"Can we talk a second?" he asked, taking my hand and dragging me toward the lockers, where no one could see us. I didn't see the need for it, since the school was basically empty. "I know you, Kami," he began. "And I know you're beating yourself up and won't stop until you can't go on. And I need you to promise me you won't do that. Promise me you'll find a way to convince yourself it wasn't your fault..."

He tried to hold me, but I pushed him away.

"It *was* my fault, though!" I shouted. "Stop lying to me and lying to yourself so you can make yourself love me! Your brother is right. He's the only one who's telling the truth here; he's the one who treats me the way I deserve. My mother never got me to stop feeling guilty. The psychologist I started seeing when I was a girl never did. I've still got this weight inside me. So why do you think you're the one who can make it go away?"

Taylor was dumbstruck, paralyzed. So I continued, "I deserve all this. I deserve for your family to reject me. I deserve to be hated. And I don't care

what you say because it's never going to change the way I feel."

I turned to stomp off and almost ran into Thiago. He had been there, hiding on the other side of the lockers, listening. He grabbed my arms to stop me, and I felt an electric shock. He said nothing. He just stepped aside and let me run away.

My mother was still gone when I got home. As far as I was concerned, it was for the best. If there was one person apart from me who was to blame for this, it was her. And Mr. Di Bianco, I guess, but he had been gone for a while.

I tried to close my eyes and relax my mind while listening to music and lying in bed, but it was impossible. Lightning kept striking, brightening the room, which was almost dark now that the sun was setting earlier.

The rain reminded me too much of that day. On TV, they'd said it would storm the rest of the week, and I had taken that as a sign. I got up, took off my headphones, and looked out the window.

How were they? How was Katia? How was Taylor after I'd shouted at him so unfairly? How was Thiago?

His room was dark, but the lights were on in the rest of the house. Outside, past the dark blue and gray, was the thinnest ray of orange against the horizon. I decided to go out for a walk, hoping I'd tire myself out enough that the images that had been tormenting me would stay at bay.

I told Dad I was going to Ellie's to study and that I'd be out late. I don't even know if he heard me. He was yelling into the phone at the end of the hall and didn't bother to answer.

As soon as I was on the porch, I looked at the empty space where I used to park and remembered my car was gone. I'd almost forgotten it after four days of riding to school and back on my bike. If I closed my eyes, I could

still remember everyone freaking the first day I arrived on two wheels rather than four.

It wasn't like I was the only one. There must have been a hundred kids who rode their bikes to school. But when I did it, it was like some earth-shattering event. It was true that Danny and I had the nicest cars of anyone there, but still. I managed to play it off for a little bit, telling people I needed the exercise, and a couple of people even talked about joining me, but soon the rumors about my father got around—I couldn't stop them—and people figured out what had happened.

Whatever. I tried to forget my classmates' mocking faces and decided a bike ride would do me better than a walk. I looked up into the sky, above the black clouds crowding over Carsville, making the beautiful night sky look sinister, and I thought *Screw you, sky, you're not stopping me* as I got on and started pedaling.

My neighborhood was fifteen minutes from downtown and half an hour to school by bike. But I decided not to ride in that direction. Instead, I wanted to go elsewhere, to a bad place full of sad memories—memories that could only hurt me because of how our lives had gotten fucked up eight years before.

I still remembered how that day began... Everything was normal, apart from me and Thiago knowing that our parents were having an affair with each other. It had been shocking, seeing my mother kiss another man, but even stranger was when she came home and kissed my father as if everything were normal and she didn't have a care in the world.

When you're ten years old, there are many things you don't understand. And you hope an older friend can guide you. But even Thiago struggled with what he saw that day...

I remember him calling me *princess*. “Come on, princess,” he’d said, pulling me along and helping me climb up to our tree house. We’d been working on it for days, fancying it up, and it now had three chairs, a table, some games, a telescope so Taylor could see the stars, a kite Thiago had made himself, and three of my favorite dolls.

I sat down and let my legs dangle in the air. It was so high. I remember thinking if I fell from there, I’d probably die...

“Where’s Taylor?” I asked.

“He’s still sick. Mom won’t let him come out and play.”

The dummy. He hadn’t been able to stop eating all that stolen candy despite his indigestion. I looked over at Thiago, who was examining the ladder we’d been making for the tree house—the *sanctuary*, as he liked to call it for some reason. He told me, “You can come up here whenever you’re sad. No one will find you. And old people, they’re too scared to climb trees.” He seemed sure of this; I didn’t know why. We started talking about how many steps we’d need—I think he’d measured it or something. Then, all of a sudden, we heard laughter.

I looked down and saw his father and my mother walking into the woods.

I tried to wave and say something, but Thiago covered my lips. I didn’t understand why, but he whispered that no one could know about our secret place, and I nodded as Travis Di Bianco pulled my mother close and gave her a long, sensual kiss.

Stunned, I looked at Thiago, but he had turned away. I looked back at my mother.

“Somebody’s going to see us,” my mother said, pushing Travis back slightly.

“Who cares? We haven’t fucked in a week. I need it.”

That was the first time I’d ever heard the word *fuck*. I wish the first time hadn’t been hearing some man talk about it with my mother.

“Where are the kids?” she asked, looking around as Travis sucked on her neck and raised her dress up.

“Far away, I hope,” Travis said. And after that came a series of kisses, moans, and groans that had a totally different meaning from any sound I’d ever heard a person make before.

Thiago tried to distract me, putting a pair of headphones on my ears and telling me in a reassuring tone, “Listen to this. It reminds me of you.”

I didn’t understand, but I was happy to let the music muffle the sounds coming from below, and I let that melody take me away from the discomfort, the fear, the misunderstanding...

On my bike now, I heard those notes again, those voices: Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell singing “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough.” And suddenly I was back in reality.

Without realizing it, I’d gone farther than I meant to, and the road was unfamiliar to me. That song...years ago, it had changed our lives, and now I was hearing it again. I pedaled and pedaled, flinching when a bolt of lightning tore through the sky.

Why was I going there now?

Was I sick in the head?

A masochist?

“Promise me, promise me you won’t say anything,” Thiago said after it was over, gripping my shoulders.

I was filled with doubts. “But...” I started to say.

“If our parents find out, they’ll split up. Is that what you want?”

“No! Of course not!” I was angry that he’d even asked. I tried to escape his grasp, but he just squeezed me tighter. “Let go of me, Thiago!”

“Promise!” His eyes were deadly serious.

“Fine! I promise!”

He let me go, and I rubbed the spot where he’d been clutching me. It hurt still, and I started crying. Thiago must have regretted it because he apologized. “I’m sorry. But it’s really important that you not say anything.”

“But...my dad needs to know,” I said a second later. Who was he to tell me what people should and shouldn’t find out? I felt grown up now—I felt as if someone had thrown a pitcher of ice-cold water on my head and I’d been cast into the world of adults, where not everything was pretty and my mother didn’t love my father and his mother didn’t love his father and... they were all supposed to be friends! Even a ten-year-old girl could tell that wasn’t right.

“Why? Why does he need to know? Do you want to hurt him? Make him sad? Do you want to start a fight and ruin their marriage? Because that’s what will happen when he learns the truth.”

Thiago was furious. Looking back, though, I could see he wasn’t angry with me; he was angry with his father. But he was taking it out on me then because I was there and because if he couldn’t change the truth, at least he could try to change me.

I promised I wouldn’t open my mouth. But the days passed, and I felt more and more guilty. My father was worried, my mother was distant... She was like a gorgeous doll in her perfect dress, with her perfect blond hair and perfect makeup, but with no real human feelings.

I remember one day she was at breakfast wearing a pretty gold bracelet with tiny pearls. I wondered when I could have something that nice. My father asked her, “Where’d you get the fancy bracelet?” It was an innocent question, but my mother got all defensive.

“Again with the interrogation, Roger?” she shouted rudely.

My father dropped his silverware on the table and looked up.

“Oh, sorry. I guess I was just a little worried at two o’ clock this morning when you still hadn’t come back from your friends’ house.”

“I told you: we were drinking margaritas and we lost track of time.”

“Yeah, at least half of that I’m willing to buy. You stank like a distillery when you got back.”

“How dare you! Do you even know how to do anything besides criticize me?”

“I’m not having this discussion in front of my girl,” my father said, taking a bite of his sausage.

“Kamila, go to your room! Your father and I need to talk about adult stuff,” Mom said.

“Anne, don’t shout.” I’d rarely seen my dad so serious.

I got up and walked out, but I didn’t go to my room as Mom had ordered me. Instead, I just hid behind the door to eavesdrop.

“If this goes on, I’m asking for a divorce. I’m tired of living this way,” my father said. His words terrified me. I knew what divorce was. Some of my classmates had told me about their parents’ problems at home. I prayed I wouldn’t have to go through that too.

“Oh, so you’re threatening me now? I can’t believe you,” my mother screeched. “Look how low you’ve fallen.”

“I can’t stand living with a woman who prefers going with her friends to the spa over spending time with her own daughter. A woman who’d rather slurp margaritas than be with her husband. And in the meantime, I’m working like a goddamn dog...”

“Don’t you even! I’m a far better parent than you! At least I’m actually here every day...”

“Please!” my father shouted. “Tomorrow our girl’s got a play at school and you’re going to be off at some stupid resort. Four days you’re going, and I told you I had a business trip! How many weekends this year has Kamila spent with the babysitter?”

“I deserve my free time too!”

“I don’t have any free time! I’m constantly at work! In the meantime, you’ll use any excuse you can find not to raise our child...”

“Are you calling me a bad mother?”

I held my breath in the ensuing silence. Strangely calm, my father said, “Yeah, I guess that is what I’m insinuating. Honestly, if it weren’t for how much I adore Kam, I’d regret ever having her with you.”

My mother laughed bitterly, and I heard her chair scraping on the floor.

“It’s a little late to change the past, big man...but go ahead and get your divorce and see who ends up with custody. Because I’ll tell you one thing: if you get a lawyer, I will do everything in my power to make sure she never spends another day in her life with you. If you don’t believe me, try me.”

I remember hiding in the hollow under the stairs as she stomped out of the kitchen. Then I heard her footsteps above me.

That night, I looked up the word *custody* on the internet. I remember the definition perfectly: *The protective care or guardianship of someone or something*. That didn’t sound so bad. But as I looked around more, I found accounts of divorce, people posting on message boards about how their parents wouldn’t stop fighting, horrible things that had torn families apart.

The more I read, the more frightened I got. *Custody* meant you might not see a person you loved ever again. And people got divorced for so many reasons. One of them was adultery. I didn’t know what that was either, so I looked it up.

That night, I must have learned all there was to know about cheating. I read real-life accounts. I read articles by therapists talking about how cheating was bad. I read about people lying and sleeping around who had traumatized their partners forever. I read about how divorce could turn your life into a nightmare.

And then there was something I saw on one of those pages where you ask strangers questions.

Would you prefer to live a lie or know the truth?

That made me reconsider whether I should tell my parents. That was the start of the nightmare—that nightmare that made me want to scream and wake up so everything would go back to normal. But I was so scared. I was terrified my mother would separate me from my father. A lot of people online said judges tended to rule in favor of mothers. I knew how she was—if she'd told him she intended to keep me away from him, I was certain she meant it.

In a sense, it was all their fault. Somebody should have put some controls on what I was doing online. But there were no filters, and no one thought to come to my room and ask what ten-year-old Kamila was doing up at two a.m. on a Thursday.

And that was the beginning of the end. The end of our friendship with the Di Biancos. My parents' near-divorce. The end of Thiago's parents' marriage. And the end of her.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Kami

I reached the yellow bridge between Carsville and Stockbridge and squeezed the hand brakes, almost skidding. I heard thunder again and looked up into the sky. It was going to rain, no doubt about it. A drop or two hit my face, wetting my cheeks, like tears squeezed out by the sky.

I remembered the balloons, the kids playing, the bounce house no one wanted to get out of, Taylor and me jumping inside it... I remembered my parents chatting with the rest of the guests. They'd done it up that birthday; the Di Biancos always did. There were clowns, there was an artist painting the kids' faces, there was a chocolate fountain you could dip donuts into—at least, it was supposed to be just donuts. But the brothers and I were such chocoholics that we ended up dipping fruit and candy, then Cheetos, fries, olives, anything we could think of. It was gross, but we had a blast.

I had still been trying to pretend nothing had happened, as if I hadn't said anything to my father the night before. He had been so nice. He'd told me not to worry, that they'd always love me and no one would take me away from him, that our family was too strong to break apart. And then he'd asked me to tell him what I'd seen and what Thiago had told me when we were up in the tree house. And I did. I told him because I'd been frightened,

because most people on the internet had said they'd rather know the truth than live a lie, and because, if they did get divorced, I wanted my father to fight for me and take me with him. I told him because what kind of mother would cheat on her husband with the next-door neighbor? I told him because I couldn't keep carrying that weight. Because every time I got in bed, I wanted to cry. Because every time my father tried to fix things with my mother, all I could think was that it wasn't worth it.

But I never thought of the consequences for the other family: for Thiago's mother, for my family's friendship with theirs. I didn't think of Taylor, who didn't even know what had happened.

My father just shrugged it off. I'd imagined he'd stalk out of the room like a wild beast—I thought it would be like the Third World War—but it wasn't even close. Now that I was older, I could understand that he hadn't because he wanted to catch them at it. My mother was sneaky and she was a liar, and my father knew that if there was no more proof than a ten-year-old girl's word, any accusation he'd made would go nowhere. My mother would have just made up excuses and been more careful in the future.

The rain started falling harder now, and I knew it was time to go back home. The pain in my chest was dreadful, but I got on my bike and started riding. It was later than I'd realized, and my bike didn't have any lights or reflective stickers. I was scared, especially when the cold crept into my bones and I realized I could hardly see.

I reached for my phone and remembered I was still being punished. No one would come to get me. I could only hope that the rain would let up, that I wouldn't freeze or skid or get hit by a car.

I wiped the water off my face and prayed I'd get home safely. I was pedaling hard and my eyes were on the road, but the only thing in my mind

was that party from long ago.

My mother and Travis had disappeared even before it was time to blow out the candles. I saw my father stand up and walk off looking for them. I had stopped playing, and there was a strange pause...then the racket from inside the house reached everyone, including those of us sitting on the far edge of the lawn.

“You goddamn son of a bitch!”

I looked over at Thiago, who had been sticking a piece of chicken into the chocolate fountain but had stopped, trying to catch his mother’s eye. Katia was on the ground just then, helping to paint the faces of the littler kids who had come to the party. We heard more noise, glass breaking, and my mother shouting. Someone turned off the music just as Thiago’s mother stood and looked at the house, pale as death.

“They’re going to kill each other! Somebody separate them!” one of the guests shouted.

Katia Di Bianco ran inside, but before she could get there, my father and Travis burst out, fists raised. My father’s clothes were torn. Travis was dressed just in his pants.

Katia froze, looking utterly lost, just as my mother hurried out.

Looking at Travis, I saw red streaks all over his neck and chest. Mom had picked a bad day to wear red lipstick. A bad day to cheat on her husband with the father of a little girl who was just turning four years old: Lucy, Taylor and Thiago’s little sister.

Thiago ran over to the men, trying to stop them. He was a child, but he was almost as tall as his father already, and he was brave enough to get in the middle, shouting, “Stop!” Two other men came over and pulled my father and Travis apart.

“You were supposed to be my friend!” Dad shouted, looking almost insane. “That’s my wife! And you...”

I realized his tranquility the night before was just for show. Everything was coming out now. In that moment, I felt somebody grab my hand. I looked over to see it was Taylor.

“Kami, what’s happening?” he asked, with tears welling in his eyes.

I didn’t say anything. I couldn’t.

They started fighting again. No one could stop them. They destroyed everything in their path. The cake made to look like a castle fell to the ground. They knocked over the bounce house. The chocolate fountain was thrown on the grass alongside the table with the olives, the chips, and the chicken skewers.

Someone finally called the police.

The guests didn’t know what to do or say. And then everyone turned to Katia.

She seemed frozen until she heard the sirens. Lucy’s crying pierced the air, and she returned from her trance to face the humiliation, the deception, the shame...

“Where are my children?” she shouted.

My mother looked at her with sorrow. I felt bad for my mother for the first time in my life. *Anne Hamilton had finally had a real feeling*, I thought. She probably didn’t even know how to handle it.

They took Dad away in a cop car. I ran behind it crying, shouting for the police to stop.

The last thing I remember my father saying, with tears in his eyes, was, “It’s OK, honey.”

I’d never seen my father cry. It was chaos.

I remember Katia was screaming uncontrollably. “The keys,” she kept screaming. “Where the hell are the keys to my car?!”

Some of the mothers there tried to calm her down, but she pushed off anyone who dared approach her.

Lucy was sitting on the ground crying, and she didn’t stop even when her mother walked over, bent down, and picked her up. Katia took her keys from her purse and hit the unlock button.

“Thiago, Taylor!” she shouted to the boys. They ran over, Taylor crying, Thiago looking very grave.

I noticed Katia’s hands were shaking like mad and her tears were falling one after the other, leaving dark marks on the white asphalt.

Her car roared off, and with it departed life as we had known it up until then.

After that party, everything went to hell.

Everything.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Thiago

It wasn't going to be a nice day. I'd known it wouldn't be... Not a nice day, and not a nice week, either. Everything had been an uphill struggle for me ever since we'd returned from Falls Church. Practice, detention, the PE classes they'd asked me to oversee at the primary school next door... My work was taking over my life.

And even worse than the approach of the day I hated most in the world, I was starting to have real feelings for Kam, and I didn't know what to do with them. With every passing week, I was getting angrier and angrier, but it wasn't about what had happened eight years ago anymore; it was because I couldn't stand to see her with my brother.

Since we'd come back from our trip, they'd been inseparable. I'd threatened her, I'd told her I'd make her life at school hell...but I hadn't been able to bring myself to separate them. Not yet, anyway.

Seeing her in her room through my window, lips swollen after my brother had kissed her, was something that chased me in my dreams. Taylor having lunch with her, laughing as he hung out with her, fawning over her...her smiling back. Why couldn't she have been smiling at me instead?

But the answer was obvious.

Every room in our house was throbbing with pain. Every corner was dense with memories—memories that burned my soul and that I couldn't escape from.

My mother was in the bedroom we never went into, the door locked. I couldn't even go in to see how she was. But she was hurting. She always hurt when this day approached. The memories were just too much for her.

My brother was in the living room playing Xbox, in his parallel world where none of this had happened. I wasn't like him. Even the sound of cars made me remember it all. Everything reminded me of what had happened that day, and I was getting stir-crazy, so I decided to get the hell out of there. Get the hell away from that house and my memories. Get the hell away from the feeling of guilt. But above all, get the hell away from the pain that was so thick in the air I was afraid I would choke on it.

It was raining. Hard. My windshield wipers couldn't even break through the wall of water on the windshield. I cursed. I didn't want to go back home. I wanted to stay on the road. I wanted to disappear for a while. But the weather wouldn't let up.

Why was I going there? I wondered. Was I sick in the head? A masochist? Was it necessary? There it was: the yellow bridge. All the memories started coming back. They seemed to enjoy it. As if my memories were alive and wanted to torture me, make me feel guilty, fuck my life up the way they had fucked up my mother's.

I stomped on the accelerator. The same way she had that day.

"Mom, you're going too fast," I remember saying. I had been scared. I didn't even know where we were going. Mom was crying, and she kept saying, "Why? Why? Why?" Why had my father done this to her?

My sister Lucy was in the back seat crying. Her birthday had been horrible: her cake shaped like a castle had been destroyed, thrown to the

ground.

I hated my father... I didn't think it was possible to hate a person any more than I hated him. But I didn't know what was about to happen.

"Lucy, honey, calm down, OK?" my mother said, looking at her in the rearview mirror and trying to smile. But of course she couldn't calm down. Mom was shouting and crying and driving too fast.

My sister screeched, and even Taylor, who was always so calm, started crying, telling Mom to stop the car, that he was scared, that he wanted to go back to see Dad.

"Your father's cheating on me, Taylor," she said. I watched her face transform. "My husband is cheating on me with my best friend."

In that moment, I had the impression that my mother was no longer there. The car was on autopilot, and she had gone away to be alone with her suffering. Her foot, though—her foot was alive, and it wouldn't stop pressing down harder on the gas.

I saw the bridge at the end of the road.

"Mom, slow down!" I shouted, trying to drown out my brother and sister.

Mom seemed to return from wherever she'd gone off to. And then it happened.

I wonder sometimes if it was destiny. If God or whatever it was had willed that deer to jump out in the road just then, right as my mother was crossing a bridge at ninety despite the sign warning drivers to slow down to thirty-five... Had we done something wrong, that something as stupid as an animal crossing a road had to change our fate?

I remember her screaming. I remember the tire striking the bridge's edge. I remember the car spinning, flipping, falling.

I remember my brother and sister shouting.

I remember the fear, the glance out the window, the realization that we were falling straight into the ice-cold water of the lake.

When the car hit the surface, I struck the dashboard. We'd plunged more than thirty feet. For a moment there was silence. Life holding its breath, preparing for what was to come next.

I looked over.

My mother was unconscious.

I looked back, gripped by terror.

My sister was crying hysterically, but I couldn't hear her. It was as if someone had hit the mute button on life. My brother's eyes were opening and closing quickly. Then he screamed, "Thiago, we're gonna drown!"

That was all my brain needed to finally register what was happening. My sister's wails reached my ears, my brother's terror, the fear that we were going to drown. All of it. Even my mother's silence.

"Mom! Mom!" Taylor kept shouting.

I looked out. The water was surrounding us. It was pouring in through the air-conditioner vents and the cracks in the door, dragging us to the bottom of the lake. I looked around frantically, trying to find something that would break the glass. Mom still wasn't moving. I pounded the glass, tried the door handle, and—nothing. We were trapped.

"Tay!" I screamed. "Push down the seat! See if you can get the tire iron."

He was hysterical, and I had to stay calm, even as the water had reached our waists.

"Tay, listen to me. We have to break the windows or we're going to die. I need you to try to reach through to the trunk and get the tire iron."

He did, I struck the glass, and the water rushed in like an avalanche. I opened my eyes and did the thing I should have done before: unbuckling my mom's seat belt. Unable to talk, I tapped my brother's shoulder and

pointed to Lucy. Then I grabbed my mother by the shoulders and pulled her out of the sinking car. I remember taking one last look at it as it descended and I swam to the surface. Only then did my mother regain consciousness.

“Where’s Taylor? Where’s Lucy?” she screamed.

I didn’t even respond before diving and swimming downward with the most powerful strokes I could muster. I reached the floor of the lake and saw there was no air left in the car. My brother was trying to get Lucy out, but her seat belt was stuck. I looked at her and saw her tiny mouth opening and closing, her innocent face stricken with a terror that will chase me to the end of my days.

I pulled Taylor away. He was paralyzed. It took every ounce of strength I had to drag him out. There was barely any air left in my lungs, but I knew if I went all the way back up before descending again, she’d die. So once I saw my brother was all right and swimming away, I dove again. Her curls were floating; there was desperate hope in her tiny eyes. *My big brother will save me.* That must have been what she was thinking. I tugged and tugged at the belt, but it wouldn’t budge. I was crying. I could feel it, even as my salty tears mingled with the fresh water of the lake. Sorrow gripped me, despair as I let go of my four-year-old sister’s hand, leaving her all alone... But I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t breathe.

My head broke through the water, and I heard my mother screaming. The next time, she went down with me. We swam together to the car. We reached it, and I looked for one last time into Lucy’s lifeless eyes.

Mom tugged at the belt, I helped her, and we finally managed to disentangle it. She grabbed Lucy and swam back up with her. When I came up again, I saw a group of people on the bridge gathered and watching. Two men had jumped in and were swimming toward us.

“Call an ambulance!” my mother screamed. Taylor was already on the shore—someone had jumped in to save him. I watched my mom swim

toward the men. Looked at my sister. Lifeless. Unable to take a breath.

We reached the other end of the lake. Bystanders were there to take our hands and pull us out. I remember one of them, a big man with a kind face. I begged him to do something. “Please,” I said. “Please save my little sister.”

He took her from my mother’s arms, laid her carefully on the grass of the shore, and did CPR. I’ll never forget the image of it. That little girl I loved so much. More than anything. Just four years before, she had come into our lives to fill them with joy. Her with her pigtails, her stories about princesses and unicorns, the little hearts she liked to draw all over everything.

She used to follow me everywhere. If I did something, you knew she’d be imitating it soon afterward. She always told me she couldn’t wait till she was big so she could climb the tall trees in the woods with me.

I remember those giant hands pressing down on her tiny body—*Stop, you’re going to hurt her!* I wanted to shout, but the man was doing everything he could to get her heart, her lungs to work again. It had been too long, though. Her lungs were full of water. She’d never shout, cry, shriek—she’d never say *I love you* again.

There she was, in her waterlogged Cinderella costume. How she’d smiled a few hours ago when she’d unwrapped it and asked Mom to help her put it on, so she could be a princess for a day.

The ambulance wailed as it pulled off onto the roadside. I looked up and saw two paramedics hurrying down with a red trauma bag. The first thing they did was take out a pair of scissors and cut open her dress. That’s when I started to cry. It wasn’t her motionless chest, wasn’t her limp body lying on the cold ground—it was seeing that costume she had wanted so badly get destroyed.

“Please don’t let her die,” my mother said desperately, tears streaming down her face.

They did all they could.

For twenty minutes of sheer agony, of panic I can't even describe, they tried.

And when they stopped, there was a weird sense of relief. *They were leaving her alone*, I thought. They'd stopped touching her, pushing down on her chest, trying to blow air into her lungs. That's how out of it I was. *If they leave her alone, she'll be OK*, I told myself.

One of the medics looked over at my mother. At the same time, someone shouted from far away: my father. He was running down the hill toward us. His vocal cords must have torn as he fell before her on the ground. My mother was too lost in grief to notice him. Her precious blond-haired, green-eyed girl was gone.

I felt a hand grab mine. Almost unconsciously, I squeezed it. It was my brother. He helped me up; he pulled me in close. And all I could think to do was take him away from there. Away from the tragedy, from death, from that little girl we'd never see growing up.

I held his hand, and we ran away.

I couldn't believe my eyes. I slowed down and saw her through the windshield.

"What the...?" I said, passing her, then glanced again in the rearview mirror. I put the car in reverse, backed up, and cracked the window. "Kamila, what in the hell are you doing here?"

She turned and stopped. I got out and ran over to her.

"What are you doing?!" I asked again.

Her hair was soaked and clinging to her. Her clothes were soaked too. She was dragging her bike along behind her.

“Thiago?” she said, shouting to be heard over the rain.

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?” I shouted.

I grabbed her arm and jerked her away. She dropped her bike, but I didn’t care. Only once she was safe in the car did I go back for it, pulling the quick-release lever to take off the front wheel so it would fit in the back seat of my car. By the time I was in the driver’s seat again, I was starting to wonder if we were in the middle of a hurricane. I’d never seen rain like that before in my life. As I put the car in drive, I shouted, “Kami, I asked you something. Can you answer me, please?”

But she just stared straight ahead.

“Kamila...” I said more softly. I could tell something was wrong. When we reached an area where I could pull over, I parked and asked her again: “Kam...”

She turned before I could finish and asked, “Do you think you’ll ever be able to forgive me?”

Her cheeks were glowing, her body shaking from the cold. I turned on the heat and tried not to stare at her. I couldn’t because my feelings were too much for me just then. It was the anniversary of the day we’d said goodbye to my sister eight years ago. The day I fell with her off that very same bridge, the day I nearly lost my brother and mother too. The day everything changed forever.

Because I didn’t just lose my sister.

I lost myself.

If none of that had happened, my sister would be twelve now. Almost the same age I was when I lost her.

And yet, strangely, the pain I’d been feeling as the date approached—that bitter pain that ate into my muscles, my bones, my entire body—lessened slightly in Kam’s presence. She was a woman now, and maybe it was time

to recognize that she had grown up, that she wasn't the little girl I had blamed for ruining my life, my mother's life, my brother's, my father's...

I remembered telling her at the funeral, "I said to keep your mouth shut."

Her father had brought her, and I remember feeling confused that my mother had held him tight as she cried her eyes out, watching the little coffin being lowered into the ground at the Carsville cemetery.

"I'm so sorry," Kam had said, her face red from crying nonstop.

"This was your fault," I'd told her. "You know that, right?" I was standing so close to her that no one else could hear.

Kam had had her hair in pigtails—just like Lucy had a few days before, when she was still breathing. I hated seeing her like that, her clothing so neat, her hair perfect. My sister used to copy her—she adored her, she used to talk about how she wished she had a big sister like Kam.

"This is your fault," I'd screamed, and shoved her to the ground.

No one had seen it but my brother, and of course he'd come running over to protect her.

"Leave her alone!" he'd shouted. "You're the one who couldn't get Lucy out in time. If you'd have just tried harder, she'd still be here."

I'd frozen.

It was true.

And the pain of that memory would come back to me every night for the rest of my life.

I looked up again at Kam, that beautiful girl I had missed every day since I left Carsville, that girl whose smile I dreamed of and whom I tortured myself over because I knew I was supposed to hate her. I had tried—I had cultivated my rage like a garden, but I couldn't anymore. I couldn't keep lying to myself about how much she'd meant to me.

"Can you forgive me?" I asked.

She blinked. She didn't seem to understand what I meant.

"What?" she asked, taking a few seconds to absorb my words.

Outside, the rain plunked against the roof and the windshield. "I never should have blamed you," I admitted. It was hard for me to say that aloud. But my sister had died because of a chain of circumstances of which Kami had been one small part. None of us could have known what was going to happen that afternoon, and if we'd had the chance, every one of us would have done whatever we could to save her.

My father cheated on my mother with her best friend.

I asked a little girl not to tell what she'd seen.

Kam told her father.

Her father lost his cool at a child's birthday party.

My mother hit the bridge going three times the speed limit.

A deer crossed the road.

I didn't make sure everyone's seat belt was unbuckled before I broke the glass.

I could go on. I could keep adding to the list, and it would never end.

I felt Kam's hand on my cheek, and I shivered.

"I shouldn't have said anything," she said quietly.

"Sure, I guess..." I said, still not capable of looking at her. "But that wouldn't have changed the situation. It was my fault, Kam. I couldn't get to her in time. I couldn't hold my breath long enough. She never had a chance..." I heard my voice cracking. "I blamed you because it was easy. Because I thought maybe that way, I wouldn't have to blame myself."

"Thiago, it wasn't anyone's fault." I looked over finally and into her big brown eyes. "Sometimes bad things just happen to good people, even though they don't deserve them. Sometimes life knocks us down and reminds us that it's the boss, that it can do what it wants with us, that

everything can end in a minute. And that's why we have to live, Thiago. Live to the maximum. You can't blame yourself or anyone else for what happened to Lucy. You just need to live..."

"Live?" I looked at her damp hair, the lines on her face, the curve of her pink lips. "Why do I deserve to live when she can't?"

"Because life isn't fair," she responded, spilling a single tear. I reached up and stopped it from dripping down her neck. "And you should live. For your sister. Forgive yourself. Forgive everyone else and live."

I looked at that finger with the tear gleaming on its tip, brought it to my mouth, savored it...and it did give me the desire to live again. It gave me a feeling of possibility I never thought I'd know again.

We sat there in silence, listening to the rain and the thunder overhead... listening to each other's heartbeats and breathing.

"Tell me something," I said then. "Did you ever like me more than my brother?"

Kam looked confused, uncomfortable. But I wasn't going to let her wiggle out of it.

I cupped her cheek and pulled her close to me.

"Tell me," I said. I needed that response. More than I'd ever needed anything. I needed that response to begin again, to trust people, to believe that maybe, just maybe, life still had some happiness in store for me. "Tell me softly, and I promise that will be reason enough for me to start over again."

Kam tried to look down, but I wouldn't let her...

"Tell me, Kam...please. I need you to."

"It was always you, Thiago," she said. "It always was, it is, and it always will be."

And then, without hesitating, I kissed her.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Kami

I felt a thousand things when his lips touched mine. So intense that our mouths uniting was like a drug. It was dangerous, but I knew I would need it again. It was a sad kiss at first, full of bitterness and blame, anguish and grief, but it was necessary, vital, for both of us. Both of us had wanted that moment for far too long. Both of us had buried that longing in a place we didn't know how to access.

How different this was from that innocent peck when we were kids—before the thing happened that would ruin our lives, take over our dreams, steal our childhood away from us. His kiss now was desperate but also insistent. He was telling me I was his. He was letting me know with his tongue that he wanted every part of me and that he would make every part of me his.

“Come here,” he said, unbuckling first my seat belt, then his, and pushing the seat back. I slid over, mounted him, and let him kiss me all over, caressing me, invading me.

His hands gripped my back, slid down to my ass, squeezed me tight as he panted, “You don't know how long I've been wanting to do this, Kamila.”

I grabbed his neck and pulled him close, leaning back into the steering wheel, needing him. I needed him physically, mentally, spiritually. “Thiago...” I moaned as I felt his hands leave my buttocks and squeeze my breasts inside my sports bra, kissing my neck, making my hair stand on end. But it wasn’t enough... I needed more...

My hands slid under his wet shirt and clutched his chest. His body was pure, hard muscle, an athlete’s... I guess that was the one thing that had kept him going through the years. Eight years he’d tried to live without so much that he loved, his sister, his father—because I don’t think he ever saw him again—his mother, who was never the same after her depression... Even I could see the change in her a few weeks back when I went over to their house. That hadn’t been the Katia Di Bianco I grew up with. Of course Thiago had struggled. He’d tried to save his family and had ended up losing himself.

I cried, and he sucked away my tears, begging me not to, stroking my hair. But his gentleness broke me inside.

“Don’t ever leave me,” I heard myself telling him. “Don’t leave again. Don’t separate from me, please.” I felt that same abandonment I’d first known when his family left Carsville without saying goodbye. That pain I’d hidden behind a million locked doors.

He brought my face close to his and told me, “You’ve always been mine, since that kiss way back when we were kids.”

My stomach knotted. Was it excitement, fear, agitation... How did he make me feel so much? How could just one caress from him turn my whole body into gelatin? How could he make me melt with his voice and nothing more? That deep, masculine voice that reminded me so much of his brother...

I stopped. Or I tried to.

“What is it?” he asked, and his hand froze on my leg, just inches away from where I needed to feel him. I closed my eyes for a moment.

“Taylor...” I whispered. And the bubble around us burst.

I looked at him, but I couldn’t tell what lay behind that stare of his. Rage, maybe? Disappointment? Defeat...

“My brother,” he said, carefully enunciating each syllable, “he was always crazy about you. He may not have always known it, but I could tell. And it made me angry. We came back here and saw you again, and a part of me couldn’t stand the thought of him having you. I wanted you for myself, and subconsciously I think I was always trying to cut him off at the knees. I mean, I want the best for my brother, but dammit, Kam...”

I didn’t know what to say.

Taylor. I loved him. Of course I did. He was attentive, funny. Good. My Taylor, always up for a good time. My friend. But was that all? I’d never had the kinds of feelings I had for him with any other friend. But I’d also never had a friend like him.

Thiago wiped off the water droplets that had dripped down onto his forehead.

“We can’t have anything anyway, can we, Kam?” The way his hands were gripping my thighs told me something else, but he continued: “I want you. God knows I do. I could do it to you right now, make you moan with pleasure...but you and me...it’s impossible.”

It was. I knew it was. For a million reasons that had nothing to do with Taylor. Thiago worked at the school, he was a coach, it was totally against the rules... And if my mother found out, she’d kill me. She was already making my life impossible because she thought I had something going on with Taylor. If she knew I was with Thiago, there’d be hell to pay. And Thiago and I were just different. Like oil and water. Even as kids, we used to fight, yell at each other. He was always giving me a hard time...

“Let’s treat this as an olive branch,” he said. “Make peace, you know? The way we should have a long time ago.” Gripping my waist, he helped me back into the passenger seat. His body was so warm. And mine was so, so cold. I missed him already.

“Have you really forgiven me?” I asked, looking at his profile: his stubble, his square jaw, his long eyelashes, thick and slightly curved...

Thiago put both hands on the wheel and sucked in a lungful of air.

“I’m going to try,” he admitted. “I promise I will. But you need to understand how hard this is for me. I know it wasn’t all your fault, Kam, I swear I do. But I need to work on myself and try to figure out how to stop blaming all the people who were involved in my sister’s death...”

It wasn’t all your fault.

Those words echoed in my mind, tearing open again the wound that had started to heal just a moment ago.

“My parents were talking about getting a divorce,” I admitted then in a whisper. “My mother was threatening to take me away from my father; she told him she’d never let him see me again. I started searching on the internet—I read a bunch of stuff I never should have read, I didn’t understand, and I got scared. I thought that if Dad knew about what Mom was doing, he could stop it. I needed my dad. That’s why I said something.”

Thiago had listened attentively. I reflected aloud, “It’s funny how life goes sometimes, right? One woman only deserves the best, and she loses her husband, her daughter, and life as she knows it...and the woman who deserved to lose everything got a wonderful son and a husband who managed to forgive her.”

“I hate your mother, I hope you know that,” he said, cutting me off coldly. “Just as much as my father. I wish they both were dead.”

That shook me inside.

My mother dead.

I didn't want that.

I loved her despite how she was.

And this was Thiago's way of telling me we couldn't be together?

I took a deep breath and looked straight ahead.

"Will you take me home?"

Thiago started the car and didn't say a word on the way home. By the time we arrived, the rain had let up. My porch lights were on, and I could see my brother's head in the living room as he watched cartoons. We got out and Thiago helped me put the wheel back on my bike.

"I want to ask you something that's been eating at me ever since I got back to Carsville," he said then. I noticed his eyes were glued to my living room window. I knew what he was going to say.

"He's not your dad's," I said, and he looked at me surprised.

"I thought..."

I shook my head.

"My dad made her take a paternity test. Cameron's his."

Thiago nodded, and I think he was a little sad.

"He's amazing."

"He is," I agreed. "He's the one good thing to come of all that destruction."

Thiago seemed to want to ask me something more. But whatever his intentions were, he covered them up with his next question: "What's with the bike? Did you get tired of driving a convertible?"

I smiled miserably.

"My dad's bankrupt. He had to sell it." I took my bike from him, careful not to accidentally touch his hands. "Karma, you know..." I shrugged and turned around to keep him from seeing the sadness overcome me again.

My life was going to shit. But it was time for me to accept the consequences.

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Chapter Thirty.

Taylor

Looking out my window, I saw Kami getting out of my brother's car. I felt powerless. Powerless because I loved Kami and couldn't believe she and my brother could ever actually be anything. And yet I had seen the way they looked at each other. Looked *for* each other, really, because no matter where they were, each always seemed to be wondering where the other one was.

Ever since my sister's death, I had always tried to be the best at everything. The best student, the best athlete, the son who did everything that was asked of him, the guy who made everyone happy, who took advantage of every opportunity, who got over every difficulty. The guy who had gone on with his life.

I clenched my fist. I was tired of smiling. Tired of just accepting whatever came along.

Fine. My brother had held our family together. Fine. My brother had saved us during the accident. I understood that life had changed after our sister died. But I was tired of feeling guilty. Guilty for what I had, for what I had achieved. Guilty because I'd managed to make myself happy while my brother wallowed in despair.

Whatever was wrong with him, it wasn't my fault.

Kami left her bike in the yard and went inside. Her clothes and her hair were soaked. My brother's too.

What had they been up to?

I closed my eyes. I didn't want to even think about it. Kami had said we would try. She had told me she loved me, dammit. I knew, though: that *I love you* was the one you said to a friend, not a boyfriend, a lover, whatever it was I wished we were.

Everything was topsy-turvy, but she was my best friend, and I trusted her. I was certain that she was happier when we were together. We had always gotten through adversity together. Almost always.

I heard the front door close, and I hurried out of my brother's room, running downstairs and catching him. He avoided my eyes. I knew there was something he didn't want to tell me. And I felt something ugly inside. Something you shouldn't feel about a brother. Something you shouldn't feel at all.

"Where's Mom?" he asked, hanging his jacket on the coat tree and stepping onto the first stair.

"Lucy's room." My voice was cold, and he could tell. But I guess he decided to ignore it.

"We need to do something," he said as he kept climbing. "She can't go on like this."

"I tried to talk to her, but she doesn't care. None of what we said yesterday seems to matter to her."

Thiago walked down the hall to the door at the end, opened it slowly, and went inside.

I followed because I knew he needed me. I followed, even though my heart broke every time I entered that room.

The first thing I saw were the faded red letters, cut from construction paper, that read *LUCY* in an arch. My mother was on the floor, leaning against my sister's bed, with the pink sheets and the frame Dad had built by hand to look like a castle... She'd given him no choice; it was the only way they could ever get her to stop sleeping in the crib.

Her toys were exactly where they'd been eight years before. She'd been having a tea party before her birthday started: the little cups and teapot were still on the ground, and her stuffed animals were sitting around the wooden table with their tiny dishes, waiting for their owner to come back and fill their cups. But their owner never would come back.

My mother was holding her pajamas, smelling them, even though there couldn't be any scent left but dust in those sky-blue polka dots.

I remember when we moved away, she'd put a padlock on that room and told the renters we were using it for storage. I'd just assumed that was true. It never occurred to me that she'd left my little sister's room perfectly intact all those years.

If I closed my eyes, I could still see her coming downstairs, groggy, holding her favorite stuffed animal, Otto the Otter, rubbing her eyes and trying to wake herself up so she could play.

How she used to play. How full of life she'd been.

I could still see her laying out those teacups and forcing my brother and me to sit down for endless teatimes. It bored me to tears, and I'd complain the whole time, but Thiago was so patient...

Lucy would follow us everywhere and complain when Mom said she had to stay home because we played too rough and she'd end up getting hurt.

We loved her with all our hearts.

And we missed her all day, all the time.

But we had to get on with our lives.

“Mom,” Thiago said, sitting down next to her on the pink rug Dad had bought for Lucy because she said the hardwood floor hurt her knees. “You need to eat something.”

Mom closed her eyes and cried.

“Mom.” I sat down next to her and put an arm around her shoulders. It hurt so much to see the woman I loved most suffering like that. “You shouldn’t be in here.”

She shook her head, holding Lucy’s pajamas tighter.

“My baby,” she said, breathing deep, trying so hard to get the air she’d needed the whole time she’d been mourning. “Why did she have to go? Why did I have to lose her?”

Neither Thiago nor I had an answer. We all asked ourselves these questions. None of us could understand.

“Mom, it’s time to let her go. We need to get rid of this stuff. You made a promise to us.” Thiago was stern with her. I was always surprised that he knew so well how to talk to our mother, how he could be so sweet yet so firm when he needed to be. “When we talked about coming back to Carsville, we agreed we’d start over for real. And we can’t if you keep holding onto your grief.”

“I know...” she said. And after a while she stood. Wiped her tears. Looked at us both.

“You two mean more to me than anything.” She smiled. It was a sad smile, but at least it was a smile. “I love you more than you can imagine. Tomorrow we’ll get this stuff out of here and donate it to the church. Just let me cry for her one more time today. I keep thinking how today I should be baking her a cake with twelve candles on it...”

My heart ached as I visualized that.

Lucy at twelve...her curly hair pulled back or in pigtails, the way she liked... Lucy blowing out candles on her cake and unwrapping presents...

I stood and kissed Mom on her forehead.

“Whatever you need,” I said, and I walked out with my brother. But on the way, I grabbed a small porcelain cup that Lucy had clumsily painted my name on.

I deserved to keep something, didn't I?

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Epilogue

Thiago

The next week was tough. We had to pack up all my sister's things and tell them goodbye. My mother kept her pajamas, a stuffed animal, probably more—she said she wanted a drawer of keepsakes she could hold when the pain of missing Lucy got to be too much.

We took everything to a church downtown and we said goodbye. Then we went to the cemetery and left a colorful bouquet of flowers. We didn't say a word for a few moments.

Only when I put a lollipop down by her gravestone did I force a smile as I said, "That's for you, Lu. But you can't eat it until you finish your dinner."

I closed my eyes and imagined her responding with a giggle. She'd never listened to me. I'd give her a lollipop, I'd say what I'd just said, she'd promise she wouldn't eat it, and then later, she'd come downstairs and her tongue would be glowing red.

I had decided to go away for a few hours, be alone, think... I even had the idea of spending a few days in Falls Church or in DC, where I could catch up with old friends. I just needed out of Carsville for a bit. That much I knew.

I told my mother to take care when I dropped her off at home, got back in my car, and looked over at Kam's house. She came out the front door and went to see my brother.

I reached in my pocket and brought out that wrinkled piece of paper I'd taken off her desk in detention. I needed to look at it again. Even though I'd already done so a hundred times.

I smoothed it out. There we were, the four of us.

Taylor, Lucy, Kam, and me.

It was the same image from a photo we'd taken on her birthday. We were smiling, and you could tell I was trying to catch Kam's eye. I remember wondering even then if I should ask her to be my girlfriend. It was funny to think about now. Boyfriend and girlfriend at ten and twelve years old. It sounded so stupid now. But it still made me sad.

I needed to forget about her.

I put the car in drive and looked at her again.

Taylor didn't even bother glancing over, but she did.

Wait for me, Kam... Wait, and next year we can be together.

That's what I'd wanted to say to her when I dropped her off the night before.

But who was I kidding?

My brother deserved her. She was sweet, pretty, talented, and intelligent, and she liked him. And she was there next door waiting for him. She deserved him too, I knew.

I didn't have anything to offer her. Nothing good. And I no longer had the strength to keep fighting for her.

**Want more Mercedes Ron? Read
on for a sneak peek of *Tell Me in
Secret.***

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Prologue

Kami

There we were getting into trouble again. But this time, it was the older one's fault. The one who was supposed to be more responsible.

He'd made us come out here in the wee hours of the night, and the first thing he'd done was take some metal thing, a lighter, and a first aid kit out of his backpack. It didn't bode well, but that was just how Thiago Di Bianco was. And we always did what he said. He was older, and that was his right. He got to be the boss: it was as simple as that.

I had problems sticking to the rules sometimes though, especially when they came from a guy who had no problem pulling my hair or making me cry. But I had to admit I always felt safe with him, no matter how dangerous our adventures were. He was almost a father figure, and he always gave you that reassurance that told you that you weren't screwing things up.

The way he treated me had changed since we'd gone on our candy raid and I'd given him a kiss though. He didn't bully me as much as before, but he'd turned bossier, and it seemed like he was always either pushing me away or trying to get my attention.

"What are you gonna do with that?" I asked, looking at the lighter.

Thiago's ideas were getting riskier and riskier, and it took courage to keep up with him. I was open to adventure, but even I had my limits. Or maybe it was the age difference—I mean, I was only ten and a half.

“Nothing you can't handle,” he replied, getting up and walking over to the lookout, where he'd left his backpack.

I looked up at Taylor, who was watching the scene nervously.

We were in our tree house; we sometimes called it *the fort*. Thiago had put tons of effort into it, but it still looked like it could fall apart at any second. This was the first time Taylor had been up there, and you could tell he was impressed.

He took my hand and said, “Don't be afraid, Kami. I'm here with you.”

I smiled just as Thiago brought his own hand down on top of ours. “You don't even know what we're doing yet,” he said, sitting down. He was still clutching the lighter, and he showed us the piece of metal wire he'd been trying to hide earlier. At one end, it was bent into a triangle. “Do you know what this is?” he asked. And since neither of us answered, he responded, “It's proof of our friendship.”

“How is that piece of metal supposed to be proof of our friendship?” I asked, looking at it and the lighter and wondering what on earth he was up to. Thiago stared me down and said, “There's nothing more lasting than a tattoo, is there?”

And he flicked the little wheel on the lighter, drawing a spark.

“And since we're going to be friends forever, what's the best way to show it...?”

Starting to worry, Taylor asked, “What are you getting at, Thiago?”

But his brother didn't answer.

He held the triangle over the fire, long enough for it to glow orange, and when he was sure I was watching him, he pressed the burning metal into his

wrist, pursing his lips and closing his eyes as it seared his flesh.

“Thiago, stop!” I shouted, I couldn’t help myself, but he didn’t listen. He managed to take it for a few more seconds, then he pulled the brand away. Taylor and I bent over to see the result. It was bright red and a little wrinkly.

“Are you crazy?” I asked. I couldn’t believe what he’d just done.

Tay wanted to know if it had hurt.

“Not so much...” Thiago responded, turning his wrist back-and-forth. The triangle was now a part of him, clear as day, and would be forever. “So who’s next?”

Taylor and I stared back-and-forth at each other, both terrified.

“There’s no way you’re burning that into my hand!” Taylor shouted.

“It’s your wrist, not your hand, dummy,” Thiago corrected him. He didn’t seem to care what his brother thought, though—his eyes were on me. “What do you say, princess? You want to get a tattoo like a grown-up or you want to be a little bitch like Tay here?” I couldn’t believe how little his brother’s feelings mattered to him, but I also wasn’t going to let anyone see me scared.

“Don’t call me princess,” I said, took a deep breath, sat up on my knees and rolled up the sleeve of my sweatshirt. “Get to it,” I told him, not even blinking.

I can still remember how proud he looked then.

How proud, and how bad I let him hurt me just because I wanted to look cool.

Chapter One

Kami

It had been two weeks since the cold in Carsville had settled in, dragging off any last traces of summer, any sunlight, leaving us with torrential rains, tornado warnings, and few reasons to go out and enjoy ourselves. But then, I didn't have money to do anything anyway. Dad's situation was only getting worse. I'd have done anything to go spend an evening in town, drop by Mill's and have a strawberry shake or a coffee and a chocolate muffin... But I could forget that, I didn't even have a car anymore.

At least I could still look out my window. But even that was a double-edged sword. Because I couldn't stop following the movements of the girl who had been there for half an hour passing Thiago his tools and showing off her long legs in a miniskirt that barely covered her ass.

It was fifty-two degrees out. Wasn't she cold?

And where had this chick come from? How had he met her?

She was pretty, I couldn't deny that. Her hair was long and dark, her eyes blue, I was pretty sure. She was standing far away, but there had been a second when she'd turned, and in that same second the one ray of sunlight

we'd see that day had broken through the clouds, revealing her irises the color of the sea. Damn it. She was beautiful. Tall, thin, perfect.

This naturally made me think of my own self. Five-seven, shoulder-length blond hair starting to fade to a dusty brown since I hadn't seen the beach in months... I felt like a damn frog compared to her.

I saw those hands. Those hands wrapping around the girl's waist, the same hands that had stroked me in Thiago's car in the middle of a storm. If I closed my eyes and remembered it, my heart started speeding up, my body got hot, and my thighs squeezed together involuntarily. I flew back to that day and imagined what would have happened if we hadn't stopped at kissing, if his hands on my breasts, my skin, had gone lower down and touched me, if he had stared at me as he pleased me and our bodies joined together in...

Someone knocked on my door and spoiled the daydream.

"Kamila, your father and I want to talk to you," my mother said, peeking in. "Come down to the living room please."

She didn't say any more before closing the door. I heard her feet as she walked down the steps. I looked out the window; there was Thiago kissing her...

Something ached inside me. I don't know what it was. My heart was bleeding from lovesickness, or desire, or I don't know what. I was hurting. Bad.

I closed my curtains and stood.

What did my parents want now?

For weeks, I'd been shut up in my room, blasting music so I wouldn't have to hear them shouting, trying to travel far away in my mind.

Taylor had tried to get me out of there a few times. He had driven me to Stony Creek in his car to catch a movie or just sit at Starbucks and chat for a few hours. We were getting closer and closer by the day, and I felt an

almost addictive need for his company, his kisses, the way he cared for me and made me laugh.

I don't know how he did it, but every time we were together, he just made our problems disappear. I even forgot about Thiago when I was with him. It was like nothing existed except for Taylor and Kami, best friends forever...or a little more than that.

And yet, when he wasn't with me, I couldn't help but feel split in two. My heart wanted one guy, but I was hungry for another one... And that made me feel like the worst person in the world.

When I went downstairs, my brother, Cameron, was splayed out on the sofa, absorbed in his Nintendo Switch, the sound of Mario Brothers filling the room. He had been standoffish as hell the past few days. He didn't want anyone to hug him, he didn't want to play in the yard, he just spent all his time there in front of the TV, playing video games or watching cartoons. I could hardly remember the little six-year-old tadpole who used to be able to turn my mood around in an instant no matter how upset I was.

"So what's up?" I asked my parents, settling down next to him.

Dad had been stacking logs up beside the fireplace. He stood up straight, put the tongs aside, and looked at us and then at Mom, who announced, "Kids, your father and I are getting a divorce."

My mind froze at the same time Cam hit mute on the Nintendo and the entire room went silent.

"What?" I asked, once I'd recovered somewhat from the blow.

I got it: my parents fought. My mom was unbearable. But they loved each other, didn't they? They'd even gotten over her having an affair. Dad was someone who knew how to forgive, or so I thought...

"We've been talking it over, and we don't think it's healthy for you two to live in an environment where two people are fighting all the time..." Dad said.

“You never fight,” I reminded him. “It’s always her.”

Fear, rage, and impotence were boiling up inside me and I felt like a pressure cooker about to explode.

“Kamila!” Mom shouted indignantly. “This isn’t some kind of joke and you don’t have anything to say about this! It’s a simple reality, sometimes the love isn’t there anymore and...”

“Oh, please!” I cut her off, standing up. “Don’t come at me with this love bullshit. It has nothing to do with love running out. It’s the money!”

I tried to see Dad’s reaction, but he looked down at the floor. Christ. I could tell Dad didn’t want this.

“How dare you...”

“How dare I?” I screamed back. I was beside myself. “He has one setback, and you leave him in the lurch! Things get a little complicated, and you can’t go to the spa, you can’t blow money every day at the mall, Dad merely *suggests* you might need to get a cheaper car, and bang! You want a divorce.”

“That’s enough, Kamila,” Dad said.

“I don’t know what makes you think you can talk to me like that, you spoiled little brat,” Mom hissed, and I roared back at her incredulously, “Spoiled! I’m the one who’s spoiled?”

My mother’s mouth opened to respond, but then Dad’s fist struck the coffee table, and we all fell silent.

“That’s enough!” he shouted. “This isn’t up for debate. We’ve made our decision, Kamila, we’re getting a divorce, and we know perfectly well that you don’t like it. But we need to talk about how things are going to proceed and...”

“I’m going with you,” I told him without hesitation. “I’m not living with her. And I’m sure as hell not leaving you alone, Dad.”

“No. You’re staying with your mother.”

I looked over at Cam, who was frozen and listening attentively.

“We want to do this in the most civilized way possible. And right now, I’m not even sure where I’m going to be living. There’s not much work for financial advisors in Carsville, so I’ll have to go somewhere else. I’m trying to stay as close to home as possible, but there are no guarantees. You and your brother are halfway through the school year, and you don’t need the disruption, especially now, when you’ll have to start applying for college. You need stability, and that means staying here at your home with your mother is the best thing.”

“What?” My eyes were filling with tears. “Dad, I... I don’t want you to go.” I felt like a little girl, completely unequipped to deal with my emotions.

“I’ll try to come see you guys on the weekends...”

“Maybe, Roger. Don’t get ahead of yourself. There’s a lot that’s still up in the air. You shouldn’t go making promises to the girl you can’t keep.”

I looked at her with hatred. “Don’t call me *girl*. And don’t come at me with any bullshit about promises and whatever. He’s my father, he loves me, he *will* come see me, won’t you, Dad?”

“No one said you won’t see him,” my mother said with irritation. “But as long as you’re in this house, I’m your guardian, I make the rules, and visitation is something your father and I need to work out together.”

I laughed bitterly. “I’m eighteen, Mom. Try me with your rules and see if I don’t just move out.”

“Kamila...” my father rebuked me.

“Don’t you start in, too,” I told him. “If I want, I’ll move in with you right now, there’s not a damn thing she can do about it legally.”

I stood up, walked around the coffee table, and stomped upstairs.

I couldn't believe it.

Just when I thought my mother couldn't fall any lower...

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Acknowledgments

Here I am again, with another book, the first of a trilogy, and I wonder how I managed to do it. If I told you all the things that have happened from the time I started this book to writing the acknowledgments, you wouldn't believe me. I began this story after writing *My Fault* with no idea I still had two books to go before that story would end, and this was one of many other new ideas I was considering. Kami, Taylor, and Thiago waited years to have their moment, and I couldn't be happier that they've found a place on your shelves.

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About the Author

Mercedes Ron always dreamed of writing. She began by publishing her first stories on Wattpad, where more than 50 million readers were hooked on her books, and made the leap to bookstores in 2017 with Montena's imprint, launching the Culpables saga, a publishing phenomenon that has been translated into more than ten languages and has its own movie adaptation by Prime Video. Her success was followed by the sagas Enfrentados (*Ivory* and *Ebony*) and Dímelos (*Tell Me Softly, Tell Me Secretly, Tell Me with Kisses*), which consolidated the author as a benchmark in youth romantic literature with more than a million copies sold.

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