



Misunderstood (Neighbor from Hell (YA) 1)

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Young Adult

Description: From New York Time's Bestselling Author R.L. Mathewson comes the YA series inspired by the Neighbor from Hell Series...

The Neighbor from Hell YA Series.

For readers who enjoy stories that leave them smiling...

Do you ever feel like life isn't going the way that you thought it would?

That's what Sebastian Bradford is realizing as he tries to figure out how everything went wrong so quickly. He'd never expected things to end like this, but then again, he'd never expected a lot of things and that was the problem. He just needed to figure out how to fix this before it was too late. There's only one problem with that...

He's about to learn a life lesson that he will never forget.

Mikey Campbell loves her family, baseball, and teasing a smile out of her best friend. She'd never met anyone like Sebastian before. He was smart, funny, incredibly kind, and way too damn serious for someone their age and she had no idea why, but she was determined to find out.

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Prologue

Monday

“I can do this,” Jamie told herself as she adjusted the heavy brown paper bag in her arms and slowly exhaled. That was followed by another, “I can do this,” with a firm nod since the weird looks that the small group waiting for the elevator doors to close was sending her wasn’t exactly helping.

As an older man in a pinstriped suit stepped into the elevator, Jamie nodded once again, opened her mouth to tell herself the same lie that she’d been telling herself since she decided to do this and–

Decided that she could use a few more minutes to convince herself that this was a good idea. With that in mind, she murmured an, “Excuse me,” as she headed toward the front of the elevator and nearly cried when the elevator doors began to close. Before she could panic, okay, so panic more than she already was, a large tan hand suddenly appeared, stopping the elevator doors from closing and giving her a chance to rethink this plan since it probably wasn’t going to end well.

Once she was off the elevator, she pressed her back against the wall, slowly exhaled and wondered why the incredibly handsome man in the expensively tailored suit that had saved her from making the biggest mistake of her life was watching her. Clearing her throat, Jamie pushed away from the wall, adjusted the bag in her arms, and murmured, “I’m fine.”

“And you look it,” he said, nodding as he reached over and pressed the elevator call

button.

“I am,” Jamie said, nodding like an idiot and for some reason added, “I’m here to interview someone.”

“Who’s that?” the man with the bluest eyes that she’d ever seen, asked, sounding bored as he checked his watch.

“Sebastian Bradford,” Jamie said, absently noting the curious look he was sending her as she stood there wondering how she was going to pull this off.

“I thought he didn’t do interviews,” he said, sounding thoughtful.

“I was kind of hoping that was just a rumor,” she murmured, feeling her shoulders slump in defeat.

Maybe she should try something else? Jamie wondered as the elevator in front of them opened its doors only to close a few seconds later with the two of them still standing there. At her questioning look, he said, “I got trapped in that elevator for five hours once,” with a shrug.

Nodding, because she wasn’t sure how to respond to that, Jamie went back to trying to figure out how she was going to do this. Besides begging that is, since she was fully prepared to do that just to get her foot in the door and if that didn’t work...

“I’m curious about something,” he said, reaching over to press the call button again.

“What’s that?” Jamie asked even as she debated making a tactical retreat.

“Why you’re here to interview a man that you don’t know anything about,” he said, sending her another questioning look.

Licking her lips nervously, she said, “I know that he doesn’t give interviews and that he’s partial to baked goods,” making his lips twitch.

“I see,” he murmured as his attention shifted to the large brown paper bag in her arms. “And you’re hoping that a bribe will be enough to get your foot in the door?”

“No, I was counting on begging to do that. The baked goods will hopefully help him overlook the fact that I’m in way over my head on this one,” Jamie said, nodding solemnly.

“Still doesn’t answer my question,” he pointed out as the elevator doors to their left opened.

“The editor for a magazine that I’m hoping will give me a chance made an announcement this morning that they’d give a junior writing position to anyone that lands an interview with Sebastian Bradford,” Jamie explained even as she couldn’t help but wonder if she was already too late.

“Well, that explains a few things,” he murmured, reaching over to stop the elevator doors from closing as he glanced over his shoulder.

Frowning, Jamie looked back and—

“Damn it,” she mumbled sadly when she saw the long line of people carrying white bakery boxes and bags waiting to get through security.

“You might want to get in,” he said as several people tried to duck past security and...

She found herself quickly getting into the elevator and pressing the call button for the twentieth floor as she prayed that the doors closed faster when the first wave of rabid hopefuls broke out into a run. Before any of them could make their way onto the elevator, the man who'd taken pity on her was pressing the "close doors" button and saving them both from being trampled to death.

"Thank you," Jamie said, sighing with relief as she leaned back against the cool metal elevator walls as the doors slid closed.

"You're very welcome," he murmured, joining her by the back wall. "Why didn't you Google him?"

"Didn't have enough time," she admitted. "I planned on doing that in the waiting room."

"What would you have done if he threw you out?" he asked, sounding curious as he gestured toward the heavy bag in her arms. "What's in the bag?"

"Donuts, pastries, and just in case those didn't work, about a dozen egg sandwiches. I'm not really sure what I would have done if he had me thrown out," Jamie said, absently noting that three of the fingers and the back of his left hand were paler than his right hand.

"Just got the cast off. Broke my arm and a few fingers playing touch football at a family barbecue," he said, answering her unspoken question.

"Oh," Jamie mumbled, unable to help but frown even as she had to wonder how he managed to break his arm playing a contactless sport.

"What's so special about this magazine?" he asked as they watched the numbers above the elevator door light up as they slowly made their way to the twentieth floor.

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“It’s my last chance,” she found herself admitting.

“That sounds ominous,” he murmured absently as he reached over and plucked the bag out of her arms.

“Thank you,” she said, unable to help but wince as the blood rushed back to her fingers. “I want to be a writer,” she found herself admitting.

“And you think this is the only way to make that happen?” he asked, sounding curious as he shifted the bag to one arm.

“No, but I need a way to pay my bills and I was hoping to be able to do something that I loved to make that happen,” Jamie admitted even as she couldn’t help but wonder if she was wasting her time.

Maybe she wasn’t meant to be a writer.

Maybe she should—

“Is that what you were planning on telling him to get the interview?” he asked, breaking into the depressing thoughts that kept her up most nights.

“I honestly don’t know what I’m going to say to him. I haven’t thought that far ahead yet,” Jamie admitted, struggling to take her next breath as she watched the light go out for floor nineteen, seconds before number twenty was suddenly illuminated and she thought that she was going to be sick.

“Fair enough,” he murmured as the elevator doors slid open and she suddenly found herself being herded out of the elevator and toward an imposing woman sitting behind a large oak desk and—

Jamie found herself looking at the most amazing picture that she’d ever seen hanging on the wall behind the woman that really didn’t look happy to see her. She’d probably seen thousands of landscape photos in her life, but she’d never seen one quite like this one. The details were...

Enough to make her momentarily forget that she really couldn’t go through with this.

“No, wait! I can’t do this. This was a mistake,” Jamie said in a rush as he guided her over to the desk when all she wanted to do was turn around and make a run for it.

“You’ll be fine,” he said, lying to her because they both knew no such thing!

“I really won’t though,” she mumbled hollowly only to whimper when they reached the desk and—

“Good morning, Amy. I’m going to need you to cancel my conference call with Beijing this morning and see if you can reschedule the meeting with the Paris office this afternoon,” the man that wouldn’t let her run away, said.

“That shouldn’t be a problem, Mr. Bradford,” Amy said with a warm smile as she handed him a stack of messages while Jamie stood there, trying to make sense out of what was happening.

This was Sebastian Bradford? Jamie thought numbly as she looked at him, really looked at him, taking in his meticulously combed short black hair, the thin scar just above his right eyebrow, the way that his eyes lit up with amusement, and the way that he filled out his suit to perfection and swallowed hard, because she’d honestly

been expecting a portly old man who would take pity on her and?

Oh, God...

“Would you like me to have breakfast sent up?” Amy asked, already reaching for the phone to do just that when the man that Jamie was here to beg for an interview shook his head.

“No need. My eight o’clock brought breakfast this morning,” he said, grabbing Jamie by the arm and led her toward the large imposing, ornate double doors.

“Is there anything that you need this morning, Mr. Bradford?” Amy asked, not really looking all that concerned that her boss was manhandling someone.

“Tell security that no one gets in without an appointment and hold my calls, please,” Sebastian said as he released his hold on Jamie to open one of the large doors before grabbing her arm again and pulling her inside before she had a chance to make a run for it.

“Umm, maybe we should talk about this?” Jamie said, trying to wrap her mind around what was happening.

“You’re interviewing me,” the man that she probably should have asked his name sooner, said, shrugging as he dropped the bag filled with baked goods on the coffee table to her left before heading toward a mini-bar to grab two bottles of orange juice while Jamie stood there, taking in the large, expensively decorated office that she’d been dragged into and found herself once again nodding like an idiot for no apparent reason.

“Okay,” she mumbled weakly as he handed her a bottle of juice and gestured for her to sit down.

“Where should we start?” the man who never gave interviews, asked as he sat down on a large, brown leather couch across from her.

“Okay,” Jamie found herself mumbling again as she sat down and tried to figure out what she was supposed to do since she hadn’t actually expected to get this far.

Lips twitching, the incredibly handsome man that she’d shared an elevator with helped himself to a lemon Danish from the bag as he said, “Why don’t we start from the beginning?”

And since that sounded like a really good idea, Jamie found herself nodding like an idiot and once again, mumbling, “Okay.”

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Chapter 1

Twenty Years Earlier...

“Yeah, I’m not doing it,” Sebastian said as he stared down at his mother’s latest attempt to...

Well, he wasn’t exactly sure what it was supposed to be, but he knew that he didn’t want to put the gray-greenish, crumbling, oozing substance in his mouth. But the problem was that he’d been dared by his brothers, who were both standing next to him, pointing flashlights on the gooey mess as they took turns poking it with a spoon because none of them wanted to touch it with their bare hands.

“Then you forfeit,” Jonathan, his brother and the reason that they were all down here, said with a satisfied sigh as he reached over and plucked the iPad that their mother let Sebastian borrow, out of his hands.

“Wait. I want a turn!” Mathew said loudly, earning a glare, which was the only warning that he was going to get if he got them in trouble.

“You weren’t in on this,” Jonathan pointed out.

“It was implied!” Mathew hissed as he pushed the sleeves of his Scooby-Doo pajamas up, slowly exhaled, picked up the spoon and dug in and right before they had a chance to see if their little brother would survive, th

ey heard it.

The sound of a door opening.

“Go!” Sebastian mouthed to his brother as they both slapped their hands over their little brother’s mouth, grabbed an arm and pulled him toward the back stairs.

“The brownies!” Jonathan whispered, making him frown until he remembered the gray mess they’d left on the counter.

Knowing just how badly this would end if their parents caught them out of bed, Sebastian released his hold on his little brother and mouthed, “Go!” before making his way back to the mess that he never would have guessed was brownies, slapped the foil on top of the pan, carried it back to the fridge, and slid it back onto the bottom shelf next to the brown mush that his mother had claimed was macaroni and cheese. As soon as he was done, Sebastian clicked the flashlight off and headed back toward the stairs.

In seconds, he was racing up the stairs, down the hallway, and sneaking into his room where he plucked the iPad out of his brother’s hands before climbing out their bedroom window with a satisfied sigh.

“Oh, come on!” Jonathan, who just happened to be afraid of heights, hissed while he blindly reached out as Sebastian crouched down on the small roof outside their bedroom window.

“Oh, is this what you wanted?” Sebastian asked innocently as he held up their mother’s iPad just out of reach of his brother’s mad grab.

“It’s my turn,” Jonathan said with a murderous glare as he leaned out the window another inch, but sadly, that just wasn’t going to do it.

“You’re right,” Sebastian said, nodding solemnly even as he shifted on the roof so

that he could glance at their sister's window to make sure that they hadn't woken her up.

"So, you're going to give it to me?" Jonathan asked, making Sebastian shake his head with a disappointed sigh, because really, his brother of all people should know better.

"I would. I really would but then, how would you learn?" Sebastian asked, returning his attention back to the iPad in his hands and pulled up Radcliffe Academy's homepage, curious about the classes they were offering this fall.

"You could have just said no," Jonathan said with a resigned sigh as he returned to the safety of their room.

"I could have," Sebastian said, shooting his brother a wink as he stuffed the iPad inside his sweatshirt.

"Just don't drop it. I want to check out the extracurriculars they offer before tomorrow," Jonathan said as he grabbed a book off their desk and dropped down on the bottom bunk where he would most likely fall asleep before Sebastian came back.

"I won't," Sebastian said, chuckling as he slowly made his way past his sister's window.

As soon as he came to the edge of the roof, Sebastian lowered himself to the next level and made his way to the chimney where he spent most of his time reading to get a break from his family. He loved them, he truly did, but sometimes he just wanted to sit back with a book and lose himself for a little while. Since they were all afraid of heights, this worked out well for him.

It also didn't hurt that this particular spot was close to his parents' room and he'd be able to hear if they decided to check on them, which would give him plenty of time to

return to the safety of his room and climb back in bed before they made good on all those promises to wring his neck if they caught him on the roof again. Until then, Sebastian was going to sit here and check out the insanely cool school that was going to save him from spending another year doing the workbooks that his mother downloaded from the internet.

He loved spending time with his mother and studying whatever he wanted, but he missed school. He missed gym class, missed hanging out with his friends at lunch, missed being able to get a new book every day from the library, and missed being taught instead of watching videos and doing busy work. For the past two years, his parents had been trying to get them into a new school, hoping to find a private school that would take them without costing a fortune, but thanks to their school records, none of the schools around here had been willing to accept them.

Except for Radcliffe Academy.

His mother had gone to bat for them, calling and emailing the school every week for the past year until the school finally gave in and allowed them to take the entrance exam. When their test results came in, the school offered them a scholarship and now, they were going to one of the best schools in the country and he couldn't wait. They'd have to take two buses to get there, but it would be worth it, especially if—

“Baby, please stop crying,” Sebastian heard his father say, making him frown as he looked up from the iPad in his hands.

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Curious, Sebastian shifted to the edge of the roof and looked past the chimney. When he heard the unmistakable sounds of his mother crying, something that he'd never heard before, he found himself shoving the iPad back in his sweatshirt and carefully moving around the chimney so that he could make sure that she was okay.

"Shhh, baby, please. Everything is going to be okay," his father said while Sebastian watched through their bedroom window as he pulled Sebastian's mother into his arms and closed his eyes. "It will be fine."

"No, it won't," she said around a choked sob as she wrapped her arms around his father and pressed her face against his chest.

"We'll figure something out. We always do," his father promised, but from the expression on his face, Sebastian could tell that he really didn't believe it.

Sebastian swallowed nervously as he knelt there, watching his parents, more terrified than he'd ever been in his life because he'd never seen his parents like this. When something went wrong, his parents usually teased each other until one of them was smiling and Sebastian knew that everything was going to be okay. But now...

Now, he was absolutely terrified.

"How are we supposed to choose?" his mother asked.

"I don't know, Zoe," his father said, making him frown.

"I can't do this."

“We’ll make it work,” his father promised.

“How are we supposed to come up with forty thousand dollars every year for the next eight years?” his mother asked, making his stomach drop.

“I don’t know.”

“How are we supposed to decide who gets to go to this school and have a real chance and which one stays here while we fumble our way through homeschooling him? I can’t do it, Trevor. I can’t do that to them,” his mother said as she held on tightly to his father while Sebastian sat there, realizing just how much his parents had been hiding from them.

They hadn’t offered them both a scholarship.

Radcliffe Academy had only offered one of them a scholarship, which meant that one of them wasn’t going anywhere. It meant eight more years of workbooks at the kitchen table, running errands with their mother, and trying not to die from boredom.

“I don’t think they expect us to choose, sweetheart. Sebastian got the higher score,” his father said as Sebastian sat there breathing a sigh of relief.

That is, until his mother spoke.

“What about Jonathan?”

“He can do another year of homeschooling, sweetheart. In the meantime, we’ll save every penny we get our hands on and we can send him next year,” his father promised as Sebastian wordlessly turned around and slowly made his way back to his bedroom.

“It’s about time,” Jonathan said, grinning as he sat up and tossed his book aside when Sebastian crawled back through the window. “I can’t decide if I want to join the robotics team or the soccer team. Both would be cool, but the robotics team gets a trip to Disney World if they win. We should both join. We’d definitely win then.”

“Here,” Sebastian said hollowly as he pulled the iPad out of his sweatshirt and handed it to his brother.

“You’re done?” his brother asked, looking surprised.

“Yeah, I’m done,” Sebastian said, nodding absently as he climbed onto the top bunk, laid down, and closed his eyes.

Chapter 2

Three Years Later...

“Do you know why you’re here today, Sebastian?” came the question that had already been asked by ten other therapists over this past year alone.

“I have a pretty good idea,” Sebastian murmured absently as he glanced around the large office, taking note of all the diplomas on the wall, the Marvel and D.C. Comics memorabilia throughout the large room, the huge flat screen television on the wall with every video game console known to man neatly lined up on the shelves below it, the large video game collection lining the bookshelves on either side of the large television, teen magazines covering the coffee table in front of him and couldn’t help but wonder why his parents thought this would be a good idea.

“Care to share?” the therapist that his parents hoped would figure out what was wrong with him, asked.

“Not really,” Sebastian said when he spotted something promising on the other side of the room.

“You like to read?” Ben, as he’d been told to call him, asked when Sebastian walked toward the collection of books on the other side of the room.

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“Do you like to ask questions that you already know the answer to?” Sebastian countered as he took in the selection of books in front of him, looking for something new to read.

“Fair enough,” Ben said before he suggested, “Then why don’t you tell me what you want to talk about.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Sebastian said, biting back a disappointed sigh as he took in graphic novel books, books on bullying, eating disorders, and depression, noting that Ben had the same collection of books that seemed to be standard in every therapist’s office, and was about to turn around when he saw it.

A book written on the best methods of behavioral therapy for teenagers written by the man currently trying to get inside his head. He made a mental note of the title before making his way back to his seat, noting that Ben already had a fresh legal pad and pen ready to go.

“Really? Because your parents were able to give me a list of concerns that they think we should talk about,” Ben said, throwing Sebastian a questioning look as he sat back down on the large leather couch across from him.

“Fine,” Sebastian said, gesturing lazily for him to cont

inue. “Why don’t we go over that list so that I can get out of here before the library closes?”

“Okay,” Ben murmured, looking thoughtful as he reached back and picked up a

manila folder off the large desk behind him. “Why don’t we start with school?”

“I’m homeschooled. There’s nothing really to talk about,” Sebastian said with a shrug.

“You don’t think turning down a full scholarship to one of the most prestigious schools in the country is something that we should talk about?”

“They didn’t have any of the extracurriculars that I was looking for,” Sebastian said, wondering when his parents were going to let this go.

“What were you hoping for?” Ben asked, clicking his pen open to make a note in his file only to pause and throw him a questioning look when Sebastian said, “Miming classes.”

“You want to be a mime?” Ben asked as his lips twitched in amusement.

“It’s the dream,” Sebastian said dryly.

“I can see that you’re very passionate about it,” Ben said, chuckling as he looked back down at whatever was written in his file.

“It’s all I live for,” Sebastian drawled before asking, “What else?”

“They’re concerned that all you seem to do is read.”

“There are worse things that I could be doing,” Sebastian pointed out as he took in the man sitting across from him, noting the meticulously combed dark hair, the neatly trimmed beard, the laugh lines around his blue eyes down to the unbuttoned shirt collar, blue jeans, and the way that he relaxed back in his chair and combined that with the way that he’d set up his office and knew that this one was going to try to be

his “friend.”

“True,” Ben murmured in agreement before moving on. “What about Mikey?”

“Is off-limits,” Sebastian said firmly.

“Why is that?” Ben asked, absently drumming his fingertips against the armrest of his leather chair as he shot Sebastian a curious look. “He’s your best friend, right?”

“She’s my best friend,” Sebastian corrected him.

Nodding, Ben said, “And she’s also your cousin?”

“No, she’s not. My father’s cousin married her mom. We’re not related.”

“But the rest of your family considers her part of the family, right?”

“Yes.”

“But you don’t see her that way?”

“No.”

“Then how do you see her?” Ben asked as he continued drumming his fingertips against the armrest, waiting for an answer that he was never going to get.

“Next question,” Sebastian said, leaning back in his chair and began drumming his fingertips against the armrest, mimicking the therapist’s movements until Ben realized what he was doing and stopped.

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“What about your other friends?” Ben asked, shifting his attention from Sebastian’s fingertips drumming in cadence with the seconds ticking away on the large clock on the wall across from him.

“What about them?” Sebastian asked, noting that there were twelve hundred seconds left before he could leave.

“Do you have any?”

“Imaginary or real?” Sebastian drawled.

“Do you have imaginary friends, Sebastian?” Ben asked, clicking his pen open as he shifted to get more comfortable.

“Don’t we all?” he asked, sighing heavily even as he noted that there were only nine hundred and seventy-eight seconds left.

“Usually not at fourteen,” Ben said, making a note.

“I’m a late bloomer.”

“What are their names?” Ben asked, glancing up from his notes.

“Bashful, Doc, Dopey, Happy, Sleepy, Sneezy, and Grumpy,” Sebastian drawled, making the therapist that was wasting his time with this, chuckle.

“And you’re very smart,” Ben said as he clicked his pen shut and tossed the file and

pen on the coffee table between them.

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” Sebastian pointed out.

“No, I don’t think there is either,” Ben murmured in agreement.

“Then you’ll tell my parents that therapy is a waste of my time?” he asked, hoping to end this once and for all.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Why do you think I need therapy?” Sebastian asked, noting that there was only one hundred and thirty seconds remaining.

“Because I think you’re hiding something,” Ben said, sounding thoughtful as Sebastian continued counting down the seconds.

“And what’s that?” Sebastian asked even as he had to give the man credit.

“If I knew that, we’d be having a completely different discussion,” Ben said, glancing down at his watch as Sebastian slowly drummed his fingertips three more times and?

Beep!

Before the loud chime finished playing its first alert, Sebastian was grabbing his backpack and heading for the door.

“I’ll see you next week,” Ben called after him.

Sebastian didn’t bother telling him that he wouldn’t be back since he’d probably figure that out on his own when he didn’t show up.

Chapter 3

Oh, that couldn't be good...

Worrying her bottom lip, Mikey watched her teacher pick up the book report that she'd handed in yesterday and?

Oh, that definitely couldn't be good, Mikey thought as she watched Mr. Rose look from her book report to her, frown in confusion, and glance back down again as he reached for the red pen only to rethink that decision and grabbed the thick red marker instead.

Rubbing the bridge of her nose to cover a wince, Mikey watched him shake his head in wonder as he read her book report. A moment, and two more bewildered looks in her direction later, he turned her book report over and?

Sighed heavily as he said the nine words that never ended well for her just as the lunch bell rang.

“Mikey, can I talk to you for a moment?”

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Since she knew that this wasn't going to end well, at least, not for her, Mikey cleared her throat and decided to go with a hopeful smile as she grabbed her bag and got to her feet as she said, "I can explain?" while the rest of the class filed out of the room, several of her friends throwing her pitying looks as they went.

"I'm sure you can," Mr. Rose murmured as he gestured toward the paper covered in red marker. "Did you read the book, Mikey?"

"I don't think that it would be in my best interest to answer that question," she said, nodding solemnly.

"Probably not," Mr. Rose murmured absently as he turned her book report over and skimmed the back before saying, "You didn't explain how the book ended."

"I didn't want to ruin the ending for you," Mikey said with a sad shake of her head and a heartfelt sigh that had him chuckling.

"That's very considerate of you," he drawled.

"I try," Mikey said, nodding solemnly.

"Can I ask you something?" Mr. Rose asked, leaning back in his chair as he considered her for a moment.

"Just as long as it doesn't end with a call to my parents," she said, making his lips twitch.

“Why are you failing my class?”

“Because you don’t accept bribes,” Mikey said, making him chuckle as he pushed his chair back and headed toward the bookshelves overflowing with books that Sebastian would probably kill to get his hands on. He’d probably like this class, Mikey thought absently as she watched Mr. Rose search through the bookshelves.

“I can see how that would be a problem,” Mr. Rose murmured as he paused when he came to a thick black book on the bottom shelf.

“It really is,” Mikey said, nodding solemnly.

Chuckling, he grabbed the black book and tossed it to her as he said, “This should help.”

Frowning, Mikey asked, “Help with what?” as she caught the book.

“You have a choice,” Mr. Rose said as he walked back to his desk and sat back down.

“Which is...” Mikey asked, glancing down at the book in her hand a

nd tried not to wince when she saw the title.

“You’re not going to like it,” Mr. Rose warned her.

“Probably not,” Mikey murmured in agreement.

“Let me ask you something first,” Mr. Rose said, leaning back in his chair as he considered her. “What were you hoping for when you handed in that book report?”

“That it would bring tears of joy to your eyes when you read it,” Mikey said, nodding

solemnly.

“It came close,” he said, matching her nod with one of his own before he gestured to the large book in her hand. “When are tryouts?”

“Monday,” Mikey weakly mumbled, not really liking where this was going.

“Baseball is?”

“My life,” Mikey stressed, cutting him off with the hopes that he understood what was at stake here.

All she’d ever wanted to do was play baseball.

That was it.

The first time that she saw a baseball game, she’d fallen head-over-heels in love. It wasn’t long before she’d discovered her love of pitching. She’d treated everything within reach as a baseball and after several unfortunate incidents that had ended with two broken windows, her mother flinching anytime she reached for her sippy cup, and the mailman refusing to deliver their mail if she was home, her mother bought her a toddler-sized baseball glove and a tennis ball.

That had quickly led to her mother banning balls in the house, begging the T-ball coach to let her play even though she’d only been three at the time and her obsession with everything baseball. She played every chance she got, begged everyone that made the mistake of making eye contact with her to play catch, and quickly learned to apologize for any and all unfortunate accidents that happened as a result.

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As the years passed, one thing became clear, she was meant to play baseball. It was the only thing that she wanted to do, which was a problem since her mom refused to let her quit school and focus on her baseball career. That was fine, because she had a plan, one that she'd been working on since she was little and one that had almost failed before they'd met Reese.

Her pitches had been wild and the parents of the other kids on the team hadn't been happy about her playing with them. That had led to her being stuck warming the bench and terrified that she would never get a chance to play. After she'd accidentally sent Reese to the hospital with a fastball, she'd expected her mom to put an end to her dreams. What she hadn't expected was for Reese to work with her and show her how to control her aim better. Once he'd married her mom, they'd moved closer to his family and she'd finally found a team that would let her play.

For the last three years, she'd waited for a chance to try out for the eighth-grade baseball team, biding her time on the travel teams, practicing every chance that she got just so that she would be ready because this was the year that everything changed. It didn't matter how many perfect games she'd pitched before, how many players that she'd managed to strike out, or how many homeruns she'd managed to score because none of that mattered anymore.

The only thing that mattered was getting on the team and securing the starting pitcher position and keeping it. Next year, there was going to be a lot of competition and she planned on doing whatever it took to make sure there was a spot on the team for her. Getting on the team this year would go a long way to helping her make the freshmen team next year. If she didn't get on the team this year...

God, she didn't even want to think about that.

Looking thoughtful, Mr. Rose nodded as he murmured, "That should give you three days then."

"For what?"

"To see how fast you can read that book and do your book report over again if you want to play baseball this year," he said, making her wince as he handed her book report back to her.

"Very quickly," Mikey promised as she gestured toward the door with the thick book that she had no chance in hell of finishing in three days. "I'm going to get started right now."

"That's probably for the best," Mr. Rose murmured in agreement as Mikey headed for the door, wondering how she was going to pull this one off.

She could see if they'd made a movie based on the book, but since that hadn't ended well for her the last time, mostly because she fell asleep before the end and decided to just wing it when it came time to write the book report, she would probably be better off skipping that option. That meant reading the book, Mikey realized as she opened the book to the back page and?

Groaned.

Six hundred and forty pages? Oh, there was no way in hell that she was going to be able to pull that off, Mikey realized as she shoved the book into her backpack along with the book report that she'd been hoping would be enough to raise her grade. She reached inside the pocket of her hoodie, needing the familiar weight of her baseball only to remember that she wasn't allowed to have it in school and sighed heavily as

she dropped her hand away.

Maybe she was going about this all wrong, Mikey wondered a few minutes later as she grabbed a plastic lunch tray and stepped in line. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad, she thought as she ordered a double-lunch and took her time choosing a particularly yummy looking cup of chocolate pudding with extra whipped cream and paid for her lunch before heading toward an empty table in the back.

It was just a book report, Mikey told herself as she placed her tray down, dropped her bag on the floor and sat down with a nod because she could do this. If she started reading the book as soon as she got home, stayed up all night and spent every waking minute for the next two days reading, then she should be able to pull it off. This could definitely work, Mikey thought, nodding only to end up groaning as she dropped her head in her hands because she definitely wasn't going to be able to pull this one off in time.

"What are you doing?" came the murmured question that had her dropping her hands away to find Sebastian helping himself to the hamburger that she bought for him as he dropped down in the seat across from her.

"Wallowing in self-pity," Mikey said as she grabbed a tater tot and popped it in her mouth.

Nodding, Sebastian said, "And you're really good at it."

"I know," Mikey said absently as she glanced around the busy cafeteria, making sure that none of the teachers had noticed Sebastian's presence even as she couldn't help but wonder how he kept managing to sneak in here without getting caught.

"Why are we wallowing?" Sebastian asked, popping another tater tot in his mouth as he leaned over and picked her backpack up off the floor.

“Because it brings me joy,” she said, grabbing one of the chocolate milks off the tray and took a sip as Sebastian searched through her bag to see if she had any new books to read. When he came across the book that she was supposed to read for class, he said, “The Count of Monte Cristo? I’ve already read this book,” with a disappointed sigh.

“Figures,” Mikey said with a pathetic groan as she watched Sebastian shift his attention to her book report.

“What’s this?” he asked, frowning down at her paper.

“My book report,” she said, switching her attention to her burger.

Blinking, Sebastian looked back down at the paper in his hands and—

“No, seriously. What is this?” he asked, making her eyes narrow on him as she reached over and snatched the paper that she’d really rather not discuss out of his hands and decided that a change in topic was in order.

“How was therapy?” she asked, watching as he ran a hand through his messy short dark-brown hair that somedays looked black, today being one of those days.

She liked his hair, but she liked his eyes even more. They were the bluest eyes that she’d ever seen. They were also the first thing that she’d noticed about him. The second? That he was too damn serious for a kid their age. While the rest of the kids in his family had been playing football, running around on the beach, and playing tag, he’d had his face buried in a book, ignoring the world around him.

The few times that he’d spoken to her, he’d been quiet, greeted her with a polite smile, asked her a few questions about baseball and then...

He'd have another book in his hands and the world around him was once again forgotten. She'd shrugged it off, figuring that he wasn't really interested in talking to her, which was why he'd taken her by surprise when he'd decided to go with her when she got stuck going with her mom and Reese on an errand to pick up tools for the renovation on their house. Not that driving two hours to pick up tools was her idea of a good time, but it had either been that or spending the day with her Uncle Eric at his office, helping sort through IRS forms.

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That had led to her sneaking over to the cottage Reese's family was renting for the summer, deciding that it would be in her best interest to bring someone with her to make it harder for her mom to change her mind and make her go with her uncle. With that in mind, she'd quickly decided to drag one of the boys with her since the girls hadn't seemed all that interested in baseball.

She'd quickly decided against bringing Sebastian with her because he was too damn serious and had settled on his brother Jonathan only to find herself dragged out of the room by Sebastian, who'd decided that he was going no matter what. That's when she'd realized there was a lot more to Sebastian than she'd thought. He was smart, funny, and entertaining, which she'd appreciated since it made the trip more interesting.

They'd hung out with his family, played Monopoly, watched movies, and had a sleepover at Reese's parents' house and then, the next morning when they got back to her house, it had been like none of it had ever happened. He'd gone back to his books and she'd been disappointed. She figured that he didn't want to be friends with a girl, which sucked, but she'd been used to it by then. Most of the boys that she went to school with didn't want to be friends with a girl, and the girls...

Definitely didn't want to be friends with a tomboy.

After her mother married Reese, Mikey hadn't really expected to see Sebastian that much other than at family gatherings, so it surprised her when she woke up one night to find Sebastian sitting on the bed next to her, reading a book. Before she'd had a chance to ask him what he was doing in her room at two in the morning, he'd shooshed her and told her that he was reading.

That had been followed by him stealing her pillow, hogging the bed, and ignoring her while she'd laid there, contemplating shoving him off her bed. In the end, she'd shrugged it off and went back to sleep, too tired to really care. Since then, they'd become best friends, not that he really gave her a choice, Mikey thought, biting back a smile, that

is, until he reached over and stole her hamburger.

Then, she settled on glaring at the boy that she couldn't imagine her life without.

Chapter 4

"Therapy?" Mikey said as she reached over and stole her burger back.

"What about it?" Sebastian asked, biting back a sigh as he contemplated buying another burger only to decide against it since it wasn't worth the risk of getting caught.

"How was it?" Mikey asked, finishing off her burger before he had a chance to steal it again.

"Life-altering," he said dryly, stealing Mikey's pudding as he watched her, taking in the way that her bright green eyes narrowed on him as she worried her plump bottom lip between her teeth, the way the stubborn curve of her small chin firmed in determination, and the Dutch braids she always wore her hair in, and?

God, she really was too damn adorable for words.

Nodding, Mikey said, "I can tell," making his lips twitch.

"Are you going to tell me about that book report?" Sebastian asked, gesturing to the

incoherent mess covered in red marker.

“Are you ever going to tell me why you’re not in school?” she countered back, making him sigh.

“Because I love homeschooling,” he said flatly.

“And I totally believe you,” Mikey said, blinking.

Narrowing his eyes on his best friend, he said, “There’s nothing to tell.”

“I see,” she murmured, looking thoughtful. “And the fact that you got expelled from this school after only one day...”

“Was unfortunate,” Sebastian said, reluctantly getting to his feet when the lunch bell rang, signaling the end to his daily reprieve from the boredom that was his life.

There was a heavy sigh and then, “I’ll see you after school,” Mikey said as Sebastian grabbed their tray.

“Maybe...” Sebastian said with a teasing smile that had her narrowing her beautiful green eyes on him.

“Please don’t make me beat you up,” Mikey said, trying to look terrifying as she narrowed her eyes on him, but she was too damn adorable to pull it off.

Still...

“I’ll think about it,” Sebastian said, shooting her a wink as he headed to the trash barrels by the back wall and took care of their tray.

After one last look at Mikey to find her pouting adorably, Sebastian made his way through the crowded cafeteria and headed toward the boys' locker room. He waited by the door to make sure that the coast was clear before he headed inside and made his way straight to the back entrance to the gym and seconds later, was pushing open the heavy security door that the coach kept propped open during the day with an old orange traffic cone that had seen better days.

He kept his head down as he made his way around the large brick building and cut through the staff parking lot. He headed to the bike rack where he'd left his bike. A few minutes later, Sebastian was contemplating a trip to the library only to remember that he'd promised his Aunt Haley that he'd stop by and grab the book that she wanted him to read.

At least it would help kill some time before it was time to walk Mikey home, Sebastian decided as he got on his bike and headed to his aunt's house. Ten minutes later, he was pulling into the empty driveway and?

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“Please let this be over,” Sebastian said, letting his bike fall over so that he could grab his phone from his bag when a loud chime alerted him that he had an email even as he told himself not to get his hopes up, but god, did he need this to be over.

He wasn't sure that he could keep doing this.

When he'd turned down the scholarship so that his brother could go to Radcliffe Academy, he'd told himself that something else would come along only it never did. For a while, his mother had doubled her efforts to try to find a school that would take him, but he'd ended up telling her that he didn't want to go back to school just so she would stop worrying about him. He'd caused enough problems for her. He didn't want her worrying about him. It had taken some time, but she'd eventually let it go.

At least he didn't have to do the packets that she downloaded anymore. As soon as Jonathan started at Radcliffe, his parents had purchased a set of matching books for Sebastian so that he could get the same education as his brother. The only difference was that none of his work would count, but he hadn't cared. He'd needed something more than busywork to do so that he didn't lose his damn mind. It had also made having to homeschool bearable.

Well, that and Aunt Haley.

When she went on maternity leave a year and a half ago, she'd taken over his education. Three times a week, he went to her house so that she could go over his work, suggest books that she thought he would enjoy, and helped him keep his damn sanity. If it hadn't been for her, he wasn't sure that he would have been able to handle being homeschooled for this long.

Then again...

He had a feeling that Mikey coming into his life had something to do with that.

He wasn't sure how to explain it, but she made everything better. When he was around her, he was able to forget how badly he'd screwed up his life and just breathe. She made him feel like everything was going to be okay and god, did he want to believe that was true.

For the past three years, he'd been biding his time waiting until it was officially time for him to start high school so that he could fix this. Now that he was going into high school next year, he had a chance. The public middle schools had been able to refuse to let him attend because of the expulsion, but the high school...

Couldn't.

They had to allow him access to a public education. He'd checked to make sure before he got his hopes up. The moment that registration opened for the incoming freshmen, he'd filled out the online forms, making sure that he hadn't missed anything before hitting Send.

For the past two weeks, he'd been waiting for the email that would make it official and now, he had to keep waiting a little longer, Sebastian realized, sighing heavily when he saw that it was a text message from his mother, reminding him that there was leftover spaghetti and meatballs in the fridge for lunch.

"Great," Sebastian said, sighing softly as he slid his phone back into his bag when the sounds of a board snapping had him glancing up.

"Please be careful, Steven. I don't want you to get hurt," came the panicked words that drew his attention to find Mrs. Blaine, Aunt Haley's grandmother, hugging the

old cane that she never went anywhere without against her chest as she peered over the side of her wheelchair to see why she was stuck on the ramp.

“The board broke, Mrs. Blaine, and it looks like it bent the wheel,” Mrs. Blaine’s newest helper said as Sebastian shifted his attention to the wheelchair, noting that it looked tilted.

“How bad is it?” Mrs. Blaine asked as Sebastian picked up his bike and walked it over the grass so that he could place it against a tree.

“It looks like the wheel is completely destroyed, Mrs. Blaine. If you want, I can bring you back inside and see if I can find a replacement in town,” Steven suggested as he reached down and tried to pull the wheel free.

“I’m afraid this can’t wait. I need to find out what my son is up to before he gets another chance to break my Haley’s heart,” Mrs. Blaine said, making Sebastian frown as she gestured for the large man to help her to her feet only to have him frowning when the man actually did what he was told instead of getting the other wheelchair out of the car and transferring her like he was supposed to.

She wasn’t supposed to be walking.

“Should I let your grandson know that the ramp is broken?” Steven asked as he helped Mrs. Blaine to her feet.

“Jason has enough to worry about. This can wait. We’ll just use the back door for now,” Mrs. Blaine said with a firm nod as she slowly made her way across the short distance to her car while Sebastian stood there, biting back a curse as he watched her struggle with each step.

He waited until after she was safely settled in the car and was pulling out of th

e driveway before he made his way over to the ramp that was supposed to make it easier for her to get into the in-law apartment that his Uncle Jason had built for her. With one last look over his shoulder to make sure they were gone, Sebastian inspected the wheelchair. The wheel was definitely destroyed and so were three of the boards. They were going to have to be replaced.

She definitely shouldn't be walking, Sebastian thought as he dropped his backpack on the ramp so that he could take a closer look. If Aunt Haley had been home and caught her, she would have glared at the older woman until she sat back down and waited for someone to get the wheelchair out of the car for her, but Mrs. Blaine was stubborn. Always had been, Sebastian thought with a fond smile for the stubborn woman who liked to keep Aunt Haley on her toes.

He didn't know much about Aunt Haley's grandmother other than the fact that she was insanely rich, had an unhealthy obsession with barbecue food, was stubborn, and loved to glare at him and he had no idea why. She always wore a fond smile for her great-grandchildren and an amused one whenever his brothers and sister were around, but when she looked at him...

He'd considered asking his cousins why she hated him, but then again, he wasn't exactly sure that he wanted to know. The only thing that mattered to him was that she'd stuck by Aunt Haley when the rest of her family had cut her off after she'd married Uncle Jason and for that alone, Sebastian would do whatever he could to help her.

Sebastian grabbed the warped wheel and after a couple of tries, finally managed to pull the wheelchair free so that he could get a better look at the boards. They were rotted through, Sebastian realized as he moved the wheelchair off to the side so that he could check the rest of the boards to make sure that they were safe. He found three more boards that needed to be replaced, but the rest of them still looked good. He glanced down at his watch and noted the time.

He had two hours before he needed to head back to the school so that he could walk Mikey home. Plenty of time, Sebastian decided as he headed to his uncle's garage. An hour later, he'd managed to find everything that he needed, sliced his hand open when he ripped up one of the rotted boards, cut new ones and nailed them in place. He'd have to come back next week and seal the boards, Sebastian decided as he wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his arm and focused his attention on the wheelchair.

After two more trips to the garage, he was finally able to get the wheel off and secured it to the back of his bike as he mentally calculated how much money he had in his wallet only to sigh when his phone alerted him to another message. Really hoping that his mother wasn't going to ask him how the spaghetti was, he pulled his phone out of his pocket, swiped it open, and—

Realized that he didn't know as much as he thought he did.

Chapter 5

"He does realize that we don't need him to walk us home every day, right?" Mathew asked with an annoyed sigh and a lazy gesture toward Sebastian, who was waiting for them on the park bench across the street.

"He's not waiting for you," Jessica pointed out with a pitying look at her twin brother that had Mikey's lips twitching.

"What are you talking about?" Mathew asked, frowning in confusion as Mikey reached into her backpack and grabbed the old Yankees baseball cap that Uncle Jason had given her after her Red Sox hat had somehow managed to find its way into the trash compacter during a Christmas party at his house a few years ago.

"He's here for Mikey," Jessica said only to add, "You make me sad sometimes," with a sad shake of her head before heading off to catch up with her friends.

"That's not true!" Mathew called after his sister. "He misses me!"

"He really doesn't," Mikey threw over her shoulder as she hurried across the street and headed toward her best friend, noting the strain around his eyes as he reached into his sweatshirt pocket and pulled out a baseball. Without a word, he tossed it to her.

"What's wrong?" she asked, absently catching the ball and began rolling it between

her hands.

Sebastian released a shuddering sigh as he shoved his hands into his sweatshirt pocket and sadly mumbled, “I just missed Mathew so much.”

“Really?” Mathew asked, grinning hugely as he joined them.

Chuckling, Sebastian said, “No,” making his little brother narrow his eyes on him as Mathew headed toward the fields where a game of touch football was already underway.

“You know you missed me!” Mathew threw over his shoulder as he ditched them.

“What’s going on?” Mikey asked as they cut across the park.

“Nothing,” Sebastian said, shaking his head as they made their way toward the picnic tables at the back of the park.

“Did I ever tell you how much I loved it when you lied to me?” she asked with a heartfelt sigh as she hopped up onto the bench and jumped onto his back.

“What makes you think I’m lying to you?” Sebastian asked, pausing to grab hold of her legs and shifted her higher before heading toward the sidewalk.

“Because I know you,” Mikey pointed out as she laid her chin on his shoulder.

“That doesn’t answer my question,” he said, sounding amused as he carried her down the street toward their houses.

“It really did though,” she said, wondering when he was going to realize that it would make things easier if he just told her what she wanted to know.

Sometimes he was just so damn difficult...

"It really didn't," he said when they reached her driveway.

"I'll find out eventually," Mikey reminded him as he headed toward her house.

"There's nothing to find out," he said, lowering her to the ground when they reached the back door and moved to place his hands back in his pocket, but not before she saw the dried blood staining the back of his hand.

"What the hell happened to your hand?" Mikey demanded as she grabbed his hand only to have him pull it away with a muttered, "Nothing," as he turned around to leave, for some reason thinking that she would just let it go. He had a lot to learn, Mikey decided as she grabbed his other hand and dragged him inside, noting that the normally busy kitchen was empty.

"It's nothing," Sebastian said, sighing heavily as Mikey released his hand so that she could drop her backpack on the floor and pull her sweatshirt off, watching his every move the entire time with a look that dared him to try to leave again.

When he only stood there, she narrowed her eyes on him until he got the hint and pulled off his sweatshirt. As soon as his sweatshirt was hung on a peg, Mikey was dragging him through the insanely large kitchen that Reese had built for her mother. Her stepfather had his eye on this house for a long time, but it wasn't until he'd fallen in love with her mother that he'd decided to buy it. He'd torn the house apart to its frame, redesigned the layout, combining the old kitchen, pantry, and dining room into her mother's dream kitchen with a customized kitchen island, two commercial refrigerators, multiple ovens, and enough cabinet space to make all of her mother's cooking fantasies come true.

Once the first set of twins were born, her mother had taken advantage of all the extra

workspace and started her own catering company to compliment her online recipe business, KaseyCooks.com. Reese had offered to build her mom a separate building for her catering business, but her mom had loved being able to spend time with Mikey when she was little and wanted to be able to do the same with the boys.

So, her stepfather had built a small play area in the corner of the kitchen for the boys and added a large bathroom, which made it convenient for interrogating teenage boys. With that in mind, Mikey threw the bathroom door open, dragged Sebastian inside and leveled a glare on him. “Start talking,” she said as she began rolling the baseball between her hands again, needing the soothing action to get her through this.

When he moved to walk past her, she reached back and closed the bathroom door. At his questioning look, she turned the lock, letting him know that he wasn’t going anywhere until she got her answers. He looked from her, to the door, and back again. “You realize that I outweigh you by thirty pounds, right?”

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“Forty,” Mikey said, waving that away as she gestured with her ball for him to get on with it. “Start talking.”

Sighing, Sebastian reached over and turned the sink on. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

“And if I was anyone else, I would probably believe that,” Mikey said as she walked over and hopped up onto the bathroom counter while he rinsed his hands off.

“Just drop it,” Sebastian said, turning the faucet off and reached for a hand towel only to mutter a curse under his breath when she placed her ball on the counter and grabbed his hand, pulling him closer so that she could inspect the gash running across his palm.

“Not happening,” she mumbled absently as she inspected his hand, noting the broken blisters, the jagged cut that didn’t look like it was going to need stitches, and the?

“Damn it!” Sebastian snapped as she pulled out a nasty looking splinter.

“You were saying?” Mikey reminded him as she reached for the soap.

“I fixed Mrs. Blaine’s ramp if you must know, you evil little gremlin,” he bit out on a hiss as she carefully washed his hand.

“That was very nice of you,” Mikey murmured as she used the pad of her thumb to carefully clean his cut, “but that’s not why you’re upset.”

He was quiet for a moment and then...

"I didn't get in."

"Didn't get in where?" Mikey absently asked as she grabbed a hand towel off the counter and carefully pressed it against his palm.

When he didn't say anything, she looked up at him as she said, "You know that you can tell me anything."

Sighing heavily, he said, "I tried to register for high school," taking her by surprise.

"

Really?" Mikey asked only to bite back a groan when he ground his jaw as he pulled his hand free with that look on his face that told her that he was about to shut down on her.

He was her best friend and she loved him more than anything, but sometimes, now being one of those times, she wanted to throttle him. Why did he have to make everything so damn difficult? Mikey had to wonder as she reached over and grabbed hold of his shirt before he could storm off and make her job more difficult.

"Tell me what's going on," she said softly, using her hold on his shirt to pull him back.

"They feel that it would be in my best interest if I continued my education from the comfort of my own home," Sebastian said, trying to shrug it off like it was no big deal but the look on his face...

"Can they even do that?" Mikey asked as she grabbed the antibacterial ointment, the

small box of gauze pads, and medical tape that her mother kept well-stocked for moments like this from the medicine cabinet.

“The only thing that they have to do is provide me with access to a public education,” Sebastian said, watching as she carefully laid his hand in her lap.

“And they found a way of doing that without allowing you to step foot on campus,” Mikey guessed as she carefully applied ointment to his cut.

“The district has started to offer an online alternative for students who don’t want to go to school, which means that they don’t have to worry about trying to come up with an excuse not to let me go next year. They were kind enough to send me a link so that I could register, along with a reminder that I am not eligible for any extracurricular activities because of my expulsion,” Sebastian explained as she finished bandaging his hand while she watched him.

For a moment, Mikey didn’t say anything and then, she asked the one thing that they’d always avoided talking about.

“Why didn’t you go to Radcliffe when you had the chance, Sebastian?”

“Just drop it,” he said, pulling his hand away, and this time, she let him.

“Why didn’t you go to Radcliffe when you had the chance?” she repeated, refusing to let it go this time.

“Because Jonathan wouldn’t have been able to go if I had,” he admitted, taking her by surprise because she honestly hadn’t expected him to answer her.

“What are you talking about?” Mikey asked, watching him as he rubbed the back of his neck with a sigh.

“You can’t tell anyone,” Sebastian said, looking as though he was debating whether or not he should say anything else.

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“Duh,” Mikey said, even as she gestured impatiently for him to get on with it.

“Jonathan didn’t get the scholarship,” he said, dropping his hand away. “I did.”

“And you let him take your spot,” Mikey said, knowing she was right before the words left her mouth because that was just the kind of thing that Sebastian would do for someone that he loved.

“Okay, then why don’t you apply somewhere else? What about Latin Scribe High School?” Mikey said, knowing that Uncle Jason would do everything he could to get him in.

“I wouldn’t let my parents spend forty thousand dollars a year on tuition and you suddenly think I’m going to be okay with them spending fifty thousand?” Sebastian asked, shaking his head.

“Maybe you’ll get offered another scholarship?” she said with a hopeful smile.

“I won’t,” the stubborn teenage boy who was really starting to piss her off, said.

“How do you know?” Mikey demanded, wondering why he had to make everything so damn difficult.

“It doesn’t matter anyway.”

“What are you talking about?” she absently asked even as she tried to figure out how she was going to manage to talk to Uncle Jason about helping Sebastian apply

without breaking her promise when he managed to take her by surprise and said the one thing that she'd never expected him to say.

"I'm going to wait until I turn sixteen and get my GED so that I can go work for Uncle Jared full-time," Sebastian said, shrugging it off like it was no big deal while she sat there staring at the boy who had clearly lost his mind and just in case he didn't know, she decided that perhaps she should be the one to tell him.

Chapter 6

"Are you crazy?" Sebastian managed to get out before the crazed girl who had somehow managed to tackle him to the floor threw more facecloths at him.

"Yes!" Mikey hissed out as she blindly reached over, grabbed a handful of cotton balls and?

Forced him to turn his head before she could make him eat the damn things as she continued ranting at him. "You are not getting your GED! Do you hear me, Sebastian Bradford? You are going to find a way to get your stubborn butt back in school and you are going to?"

"What the hell is going on in here?" Aunt Kasey demanded, cutting Mikey off mid-rant.

Eyes narrowing in warning as she forced herself to release the handful of cotton swabs that he hadn't seen her grab, Mikey slowly nodded her head and bit out, "This isn't over," as she climbed off him.

With one last glare, she turned to face her mother and said, "He called me a filthy Mudblood," effectively keeping her word.

Without missing a beat, Aunt Kasey blinked at her daughter and asked, “Aren’t you?”

Nodding slowly, Mikey said, “We are no longer speaking.”

“At least he didn’t call you a Squib,” her mother said, making Sebastian bite back a smile as he got to his feet just in time to see Mikey narrow her eyes on her mother before she turned around and stormed off, leaving them to follow after her.

“Then I’ll go where I’m wanted, woman!” Mikey said with a huff as she grabbed her book, headed toward the front door, and?

“Don’t forget a jacket,” Aunt Kasey reminded her, sounding amused as she watched Mikey pause by the coatrack, narrow her eyes on both of them as she blindly reached up and pulled Sebastian’s sweatshirt off the hook.

Mumbling what he thought was, “Filthy Mudbloods,” she yanked his sweatshirt on and shoved her book in the large pocket before she continued to the front door where she once again paused so that she could shake her head in disgust and mumble, “This isn’t over,” as she let herself out.

“That was my sweatshirt,” Sebastian said, unable to help but frown because he actually liked that sweatshirt.

“Yeah, you’re never getting that back,” Aunt Kasey said with a pitying look before she returned her attention to whatever she was doing in the kitchen.

“That’s what I thought,” Sebastian said, sighing heavily as he headed outside in time to see Mikey, who was adorably pissed, storm across the front yard, pause when she came to the street to look both ways, giving him enough time to catch up with her, and once she was assured that it was safe to go, she stormed across the street, up his driveway, and let herself in the front door.

Sebastian closed the door behind them while Mikey grumbled to herself as she walked around the dinner table, pausing to pet his mother's dogs and completely oblivious to the amused looks that his family was sending her before she dropped down in the seat next to Jonathan, grabbed a paper plate and helped herself to a slice of cheese pizza from one of the many pizza boxes piled high on the large kitchen table.

"Hey, sweetie, how was your day?" his mother asked him, smiling warmly as she finished pulling what he thought might be a pan of baked spaghetti with extra tomato sauce out of the oven before she walked over and pulled him down for a hug only to frown. "It's freezing outside. Where's your sweatshirt?"

"Mikey stole it," Sebastian said, shrugging it off as he leaned down and kissed her cheek.

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“I needed to establish dominance,” Mikey said, nodding solemnly and making his father’s lips twitch as Sebastian walked around the table and?

“Hey!” Mathew snapped with a murderous glare as he found himself unceremoniously shoved off his chair so that Sebastian could sit across from Mikey, who he was guessing wasn’t talking to him at this point. “You could have just asked, jerk.”

“I could have,” Sebastian admitted as he reached over and plucked the slice of pizza that looked delicious out of Mikey’s hands before she could take another bite.

Mumbling to herself, something that he noticed that she did a lot when she was cranky, she grabbed another slice of pizza that he would probably steal as Mathew sat down next to him with a sigh and shot Jessica, who was too busy trying to finish her homework while she ate to really care what was going on, a pathetic pout that she easily ignored.

“What happened to your hand?” Jonathan asked, making Sebastian bite back a curse.

“Oh, my god! Sweetie, what happened?” his mother asked, worrying her bottom lip as she took in the bandage that Mikey wrapped around his hand.

Before he got a chance to answer, Mikey said, “He talked back,” only to nod to herself as she added, “He’ll learn.”

Chuckling, his father reached over and carefully took Sebastian’s bandaged hand into

his to get a better look as he said, “On the off-chance that Mikey didn’t beat you, you want to tell me what happened?”

With a sad shake of her head, Mikey asked, “My beatings aren’t enough for you, Uncle Trevor?”

“Of course, they are,” his father drawled, shooting Mikey a wink as he carefully pulled the bandage up to get a better look at the cut on Sebastian’s hand.

“Then why are you questioning my methods?” Mikey asked, doing her best to distract his father, which Sebastian appreciated since it actually worked sometimes.

“You really are a brutal little thing, aren’t you?” his father asked.

Nodding, she reached over and stole Jonathan’s glass of chocolate milk and finished it off all while maintaining eye contact with his father. “I really am.”

“And you’re really bad at changing the subject,” his father said with a teasing smile as he returned his attention to Sebastian’s hand.

“Not usually,” Mikey murmured, looking thoughtful as his father took another look at his hand.

“You want to tell me what really happened?” his father asked with a sympathetic wince.

Shrugging, Sebastian pulled his hand free. “I had to fix something for Aunt Haley.”

“And you forgot to wear gloves?” his father asked, sending him a questioning look as he sat back in his chair.

“They got in the way,” Sebastian said, noting the questioning look Jonathan was sending him.

“Next time wear them,” his father said with a pointed look at his hand.

Nodding, Sebastian reached over to grab another slice of pizza when he caught the way that Jonathan was staring at Mikey. Frowning, his gaze flickered to Mikey to find her staring right back at his brother. “Can I help you with something, pookie?” she asked, somehow managing to look bored.

“Why are you here?” his brother asked, looking confused.

Blinking, Mikey asked, “Why wouldn’t I be here?”

Instead of answering her, Jonathan followed that up with, “What is your mom making for dinner tonight?”

“Meatloaf and mashed potatoes with buttermilk biscuits.”

“And...”

“And chocolate fudge cake for dessert?” Mikey barely had a chance to finish when Jonathan nodded once, stood up and headed toward the door.

“But I made baked macaroni and cheese,” his mother said, sighing with disappointment as her shoulders slumped while the rest of them slowly turned their attention to the pan on the stove and swallowed hard as they stared helplessly at the red gooey mess that they were apparently expected to eat.

He loved his mother.

He did.

More than anything in this world, but the woman couldn't cook. What she could do was create disturbing messes that had been known to send people to the hospital, praying for death. He still didn't know how she managed to do it, and to be honest, he probably didn't want to know.

She was determined to learn how to cook and honestly, none of them had the heart to tell her that they were terrified of her cooking. She knew how much they loved food and she wanted to be able to do this for them, so they pretended that they weren't terrified every time she so much as glanced toward the kitchen. They also took turns cooking, came up with excuses to keep her out of the kitchen, and those times that she actually managed to get near the stove, they'd come up with a system that allowed them to safely discard her cooking without her ever finding out. But sometimes, now being one of those times, they were taken by surprise and left with no other choice but to panic.

He turned his head to see how his father was going to get them out of this when Mikey asked, "On a completely different subject, umm, do you think an overnight trip to the hospital would be enough to buy me a few more days on a book report?"

Before anyone could answer, Mikey mumbled, "Probably," to herself as she released a shaky breath, grabbed her plate and headed toward the stove with a weakly mumbled, "Totally worth it."

It took Sebastian a minute to realize what she was doing, and when he did...

“Wait! No, this is my only chance to play baseball!” Mikey gasped, struggling to reach the macaroni and cheese that wouldn’t end well as his father struggled to pull her back while Sebastian tried to pry the spoon out of her hand before she did something that she would regret.

As they wrestled Mikey to the ground, doing their best to avoid one of the elbows that she was throwing in an attempt to dislodge them, Sebastian turned his head to find his mother watching them with a questioning look on her face and before she could ask a question that none of them really wanted to answer, he said, “She’s watching her carbs,” only to grunt when the ungrateful brat took advantage and caught him in the gut with an elbow.

That led to him calling her a filthy Mudblood and her trying to ensure that he never had children.

Chapter 7

“I don’t understand this,” Mikey said only to groan when the book that she was being forced to read was suddenly plucked from her hands.

“I thought you went home an hour ago,” Jonathan said absently as he dropped down on the end of Sebastian’s bed where she was currently lounging along with the boy that she was no longer speaking with.

“You thought wrong,” Mikey said as she reached over to steal the book back only to have it pulled out of reach before she could grab it.

“I also thought you weren’t allowed to sleepover anymore,” Jonathan said, for some reason deciding to bring up the rule that their parents came up with when they both turned thirteen and decided that perhaps it wasn’t a good idea for them to sleep in the same bed anymore.

If it had been any other boy, Mikey would have probably agreed, but...

This was Sebastian.

He was her best friend, a bed hog, and...

Not that she would admit it, especially right now when she was supposed to be mad at him, but she liked waking up in the middle of the night to find him next to her, because it meant that she didn't have to worry about him. She knew that Sebastian could take care of himself, but sometimes he just looked so damn lost and lonely, which of course, was the reason why she kept letting him sleep over. It had nothing to do with liking the way that it felt to wake up in his arms.

Nope...nothing at all.

"She's not," Sebastian murmured absently from beside her as he continued reading a book that somehow looked even more boring than the one that she was stuck with.

"Then why is she already ready for bed?" Jonathan asked, gesturing to the T-shirt and shorts that she'd helped herself to from Mathew's room since he was the smallest of the three brothers.

"Because as far as everyone is concerned, I'm back in the comfort of my own bed fast asleep," Mikey said, gesturing for him to give her back the book so she could get this over with.

"I see," Jonathan murmured, sounding thoughtful as he glanced between the two of them. "Can I ask you something?"

"Only if you give me back my book," Mikey said with a pointed look at the book in his hands.

“Why don’t you ever ask me for help?” he asked as she gave up waiting for him to give her the book and snatched it out of his hands with a satisfied sigh.

“Why would I do that?” she asked, blinking at him.

“Because I’m smarter than Sebastian.”

Squishing up her face, Mikey said, “Are you though?” making him glare.

Eyes narrowing, Jonathan bit out, “Move over,” already getting up so that he could drop down on the bed next to her, forcing her to get out of the way and climb onto Sebastian’s lap before he had a chance to squish her.

Once she was settled comfortably between Sebastian’s legs, she settled back against his chest and?

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Ended up groaning when Jonathan reached over and stole the book out of her hands, again. “Where are you stuck?” Jonathan asked, thumbing through the book as he sent her a questioning look.

Knowing that it was pointless to argue with him at this point, Mikey reached over and flipped the pages back until she came to the spot where she was stuck and pointed at the sentence that she couldn’t make sense of. It probably didn’t help that she’d spent the last two hours sitting here, worrying about the boy that she was no longer speaking with.

She should be trying to get this book report done as soon as possible so that she could go to tryouts on Monday, but...

Mikey couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d told her this afternoon.

Blinking, Jonathan looked down at the book, then at her, and then back at the book before he asked, “You’re stuck on the first page?”

“Yes!” she bit out, ignoring the heavy sigh from behind her as Sebastian wrapped an arm around her, most likely to stop her from killing his brother.

“How long have you been reading this book?” Jonathan asked, throwing her another questioning glance that she really didn’t appreciate.

; “Two hours,” Mikey said with a look that dared him to say something about it.

“I see...” he murmured only to clear his throat and follow that up with, “Why did you pick this book?”

“I didn’t,” she bit out evenly.

“Then why are you reading it?”

“Why are you judging me?”

“Because it’s easy?”

Nodding, Mikey said, “We’re done here,” as she shoved Sebastian’s arm away, ignored his heartfelt sigh that she didn’t appreciate at the moment, crawled off the bed, making sure to knee Jonathan in the side as she went and headed for the door only to end up turning around, marching back to the bed and snatched the book that she hated more with every passing second out of Jonathan’s hands.

Once that was done, Mikey narrowed her eyes on him one last time before she remembered that she wasn’t actually supposed to be here right now and headed toward the window, grabbed her newly acquired sweatshirt and crawled out the window, allowing herself one last glare at Sebastian to let him know that this wasn’t over yet.

Not by a longshot.

*_*_*_*

“She’s going to kill you one day,” Jonathan murmured, looking thoughtful as they watched Mikey throw one last glare in his direction before disappearing out of sight.

“Probably,” Sebastian said, sighing heavily as he tossed the book that he’d already

read aside and moved to climb off the bed to go after her to make sure that she got off the roof safely when his brother's next words stopped him.

"Your therapist called today."

"What did he say?" Sebastian asked, watching Jonathan pull his cellphone out of his pocket as he shifted to get more comfortable on the bed next to him.

"Many things," Jonathan murmured absently as he scrolled through his phone, making Sebastian narrow his eyes on his twin brother, his fraternal twin brother, who lived to piss him off.

"You want to clear that up for me?"

"You want to tell me what's going on?" Jonathan countered, making Sebastian sigh as he shoved him off the bed.

"There's nothing going on," Sebastian said, ignoring his brother's pained grunt as he climbed off the bed and headed toward the window.

"No? Then why didn't you grab the book that Aunt Haley left on the table for you?" Jonathan asked, making everything in him go still.

"Which also makes me wonder what happened to your hand since Aunt Haley wasn't there to ask you to do anything," Jonathan said, sounding smug as he dragged himself back onto Sebastian's bed with a satisfied sigh.

"What does Mom and Dad think happened?" Sebastian asked, watching as his brother made a show of getting more comfortable while he was forced to stand there waiting for his brother to answer him.

“Oh, do you mean because you weren’t where you said you were supposed to be?”
Jonathan asked with a sad shake of his head, clearly enjoying tormenting him.

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“Are you going to tell me what the therapist said?” Sebastian asked as he grabbed a fresh pair of socks from his bureau and pulled them on.

Nodding, Jonathan said, “Just as soon as you tell me what you’re hiding.”

“I’m not hiding anything,” Sebastian said, pulling on his shoes only to bite back a wince when the movement caused sharp pain to rip through his hand.

“That’s not what your therapist said,” Jonathan said in a taunting tone that was going to get him hit.

“What does Mom and Dad think is going on?” Sebastian asked, reaching for his sweatshirt only to remember that the little bully stole it and grabbed an old one from the closet.

“That you’re jealous of me,” Jonathan said with a sad shake of his head, which was followed up with, “Not that anyone can blame you.”

“That really just went without saying,” Sebastian said absently as he pulled on the sweatshirt that was a little tight. “Anything else?”

“Oh, you mean besides the therapist telling Mom and Dad that they might want to consider sending you to military school?” Jonathan said with a look that told Sebastian that it was time to stop screwing around.

“Why are you doing this to me?” Mikey asked only to end up groaning when Nathan, her two-year-old brother, decided to stand up so that he could immediately drop back down on her back.

That was followed by his twin brother, Zach, throwing himself across her legs and pinning her to their bedroom floor so that her one-year-old twin brothers, Toby and Thomas, could shove their tiny feet in her face in silent demand as they finished off their bottles. With a glare, Mikey obediently kissed the proffered toes, noting the huge smiles on her brothers’ faces as she did so.

They were lucky they were cute, Mikey thought only to release a whimper when Nathan dropped back down on her back, reminding her that her brothers were evil.

“Daddy stories!”

“I just read you three stories,” Mikey reminded him, sighing heavily as she debated her next move only to obediently kiss her baby brothers’ toes when they offered the other foot. That was followed by Happy, her three-legged dog that loved to follow the twins everywhere, rolling over onto his other side so that he could lick the twins’ toes.

“Daddy stories!” Zach demanded as her baby brothers upped their game and settled on jostling her, hoping that it would be enough to make her give in to their demands, which of course, she would gladly do.

There was only one problem...

“Dad’s not home yet,” Mikey said only to grunt when her announcement was met with more bouncing and another, “Daddy stories!” as her baby brothers made her regret offering to read them a bedtime story.

Granted, she knew better when she did it, but she'd been hoping to use the distraction to get her mind off what was going on with Sebastian. Well, that and she really didn't want to read that damn book. Why couldn't Mr. Rose pick an easier book to read? she wondered only to mumble, "Thank god," when the boys suddenly climbed off her back.

"Daddy!" Nathan and Zach yelled in unison while Toby and Thomas dropped their bottles and held up their arms, smiling hugely as they waited for Reese to pick them up.

Chuckling, Reese sat down on the floor next to her with his legs stretched out so that the boys could climb onto his lap. With a groan, Mikey managed to sit up and?

"You want to tell me about your book report?" Reese asked, making her wince.

"I love you, Daddy?" she said with a hopeful smile that had his lips twitching as he helped Thomas and Toby climb onto his lap while the older boys settled in next to him and Happy, the traitor, moved closer so that he could snuggle against Reese's leg.

"I bet you do," Reese drawled, looking exhausted as he accepted the book that Nathan had been hugging.

Nodding, Mikey said, "I really do."

"You want to tell me about this book report?" he asked again, leaning down to kiss Toby's cheek while Thomas traced the words Bradford Construction written across his shirt.

"I would rather you tell me what you know so that I don't accidentally say something that will get me in trouble," Mikey said, noting the way that his green eyes that were

a lighter shade than hers, narrowed on her, which prompted her to say, “I love you, Daddy,” again, because at this point it really couldn’t hurt.

“Start talking,” he said with a look that told her that it would be in her best interest to do just that even as he smiled down at Nathan, who was trying to get him to read the book.

“There was an issue with the book report that I turned in,” she said even as she wondered how he found out about it only to remember that he went to school with her teacher, which apparently meant that she wasn’t going to be able to get away with a hell of a lot this year.

“What was the issue?” Reese asked, glancing at her as he opened the book so that the boys could look at the pictures.

“That I didn’t read the book?” she admitted with a wince only to add, “He’s letting me do a new book r

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eport to make up for it?” with the hopes that would be enough to save her from spending the next two weeks in her room when his eyes narrowed dangerously on her.

When he continued to glare, Mikey cleared her throat, opened her mouth to say something, thought better of it, cleared her throat again as she got to her feet with a mumbled, “I should probably go work on that.”

“I would,” Reese drawled, making her wince as she headed to the bathroom that she shared with the boys, pausing so that she could climb over the first baby gate before making her way across the bathroom, climbing over the second baby gate and closed the door behind her.

Once she was in her room, Mikey grabbed the book that she was determined to get through before Monday off her nightstand with a resigned sigh and threw herself across her bed. Determined to do this, she turned to the first page and quickly realized that she wasn’t going to be able to get through this without a dictionary.

That led to a search of her room, which resulted in her finding five dollars, a new understanding of why her mom didn’t want her to have food in her room, a quick trip downstairs to get rid of what she could only assume had been a peanut butter sandwich at some point, finding several incomplete assignments that she should have passed in last year, two more trips downstairs after figuring out what that weird smell coming from her closet was, and the realization that she didn’t actually have a dictionary.

She considered asking her stepfather if he had one, but quickly decided against it

since she didn't think it was a good idea since it had the potential to lead to questions about how she'd managed to do her homework up until this point without a dictionary. That led to her deciding that she was going to have to sneak out of the house again so that she could borrow Sebastian's dictionary, which was probably going to be awkward since she wasn't talking to him at the moment.

*_*_*_*

"What are you going to do?" came the softly whispered question that he'd been asking himself for the past two hours.

"I'm not sure," Sebastian answered absently, unable to help but frown as he watched Mikey shove their bedroom window open, crawl inside, and?

"Stupid floor," she mumbled, making his lips twitch as he watched her drag herself back to her feet only to sigh as she turned around and closed the window behind her. Once that was done, Mikey headed toward their desk, tripped, grumbled something that he couldn't quite make out before following that up with another sigh and a mumbled, "Stupid desk."

"Can I help you with something?" Jonathan asked, sounding amused as they watched Mikey try to search through their desk in the dark. Sebastian didn't bother asking her what she was doing here since she wasn't talking to him at the moment. Not that she was actually mad at him, because she wasn't. No, what she was, was a cranky little thing that lived to torment him. It gave her great pleasure knowing that she had him wrapped around her little finger and could torment him whenever she wanted, which was often.

"I need a dictionary," Mikey said as she turned her attention to the small bookcase overflowing with books.

There was a heavy sigh and then...

“You don’t need to pretend. We all know the real reason you’re here,” Jonathan said.

“Oh, and why’s that?” Mikey absently asked as she tried searching through the books in the dark.

“Because you can’t live without me,” Jonathan announced with what looked like a sad shake of his head. “It’s okay, Mikey. You don’t have to pretend anymore.”

There was a pause while Sebastian pushed his covers back, ready to beat the crap out of his brother and then, Mikey’s eyes went wide in the moonlight streaming into their room as she breathed, “Oh, my god, how did you know?” making him wince because he knew what was coming.

“Does it really matter?” Jonathan asked, smiling as he climbed out of bed and?

Ended up releasing a pained grunt when Mikey palmed his face and pushed him back on his bed, grabbed a pillow and shoved it on his brother’s face as she said, “Dictionary?”

With a muffled reply, Jonathan gestured toward Sebastian’s side of the room.

Nodding, Mikey released her hold on the pillow as Sebastian reached over and turned the lamp on by his bed. He watched as Mikey, who was once again wearing his sweatshirt, headed his way.

“Why do you need a dictionary?” Sebastian asked as he reached over and grabbed the dictionary off his nightstand. He considered asking her why she didn’t just use a dictionary app on her phone only to remember that she didn’t have a phone at the moment thanks to an unfortunate incident last month involving Jonathan and a bucket

of ice that...

It was probably for the best if he didn't think about what she'd tried to do with that bucket of ice, Sebastian decided.

"I just need it," Mikey said, not quite meeting his eyes as she reached over to take the book out of his hand only to sigh when he pulled it back.

"For what?" he asked, narrowing his eyes on her as he took in the way that she avoided looking at him, the way that her fingers toyed with the drawstring on his sweatshirt, and the way that she shifted nervously and knew that she was hiding something from him.

"For stuff," she murmured, still not looking at him.

His gaze flickered to the alarm clock by his bed. "What kind of 'stuff' requires a dictionary at eleven o'clock on a Friday night?" Sebastian asked as he tossed the dictionary on the bed beside him.

"Nothing that you need to concern yourself with," Mikey said as she gestured for him to hand over the dictionary while he sat there, considering her.

There was no doubt in his mind that the dictionary was to help her get through reading *The Count of Monte Cristo*, but the question was why? If there was one thing that he knew about Mikey, it was that she hated anything and everything schoolwork related unless it had to do with baseball. The only reason that she forced herself to go to school every day and do the bare minimum was so that she could play baseball.

And since tryouts were Monday...

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“Why are you manhandling me?” Mikey asked when he reached over and grabbed hold of her arm.

“Start talking,” Sebastian said, waiting for her to finish toeing off her sneakers before pulling her down on the bed next to him.

“I would, except I’m still not talking to you,” Mikey said as she reached down and pulled the covers up before snuggling closer to his side.

Once she was settled, Mikey reached over and grabbed the dictionary, dropped it on her lap and pulled the large book that he’d been wondering about out of her sweatshirt pocket. With a grumble, she opened the book, sighed heavily a few seconds later, and grabbed the dictionary. That was followed by her dropping the dictionary back on her lap, picking the book back up, finding the spot where she’d left off and?

Repeated the process all over again.

Biting back a sigh, he reached over and plucked the book out of her hand with a murmured, “What’s going on, Mikey?”

There was a heartfelt sigh from across the room and then, “She wants me.” That was followed by an, “Ow!” and a, “Why must you fight our love?” as Jonathan picked up the dictionary, which had bounced off his head a few seconds earlier, and tossed it back.

Grabbing the dictionary before she had a chance to maim his brother, not that he

didn't have it coming, Sebastian tossed the book back on the bed so that he could reach up and give her braid a gentle tug to drag her attention back to him. With one last glare in his brother's direction, Mikey grabbed the book that he damn well knew that she didn't want to read and mumbled, "Nothing."

"You're not going to tell me what's going on?" Sebastian asked, watching her as she glared down at the book in her hand.

"I'm really not," she said as she turned the page only to grumble something and go back to the previous page, drop the book and reach for the dictionary as he sat there, realizing that she really hadn't left him with much of a choice.

He was going to have to get his answers the hard way.

Chapter 9

"Are you ready to talk?" came the question that had Mikey trying to wiggle her way to freedom even as she vowed that somehow, some day, she would make him pay for doing this to her.

Oh, would he pay...

"Are you ready to get off me?" Mikey countered as she gave up wiggling to look over her shoulder and glare at the teenage boy currently lounging across her legs, keeping her pinned to the floor.

"No," Sebastian murmured as he turned the page of the book that he was reading while she laid there seething.

For several minutes, Mikey laid there, glaring at him, hoping that the unspoken promise of revenge would be enough to make him move. When it became obvious

that he wasn't planning on moving anytime soon, Mikey resigned herself to waiting him out as she laid her head on her folded arms, already bored out of her mind.

"You could just tell me what I want to know," Sebastian drawled a few minutes later.

"And you could just let me go," she pointed out as she glanced around, looking for something to do while she waited for the stubborn jerk to give up.

"I really can't though," he said with a sad sigh as she tried to pull her legs free again, but god, was he freaking heavy. Things used to be so easy before the big jerk had that growth spurt, Mikey thought miserably.

"I'd really like to get off the floor now," Mikey said, giving up trying to pull her legs free with a groan and looked around for something to throw at him.

"And I'd really like to know what you're hiding from me," Sebastian drawled as she realized that there was nothing within grabbing distance that she could throw at him.

Knowing that it was pointless to try to wait him out, she said, "I can't try out for the team unless I turn in a new book report on Monday."

"Why didn't you just tell me?" Sebastian asked, sighing heavily.

"Because you have enough to worry about right now," Mikey said as Sebastian shifted to climb off her and—

"Are you talking about military school?" Jonathan said, making her frown as she glanced back at

Sebastian to find him glaring at his brother.

“Military school? What is he talking about, Sebastian?” Mikey asked as she watched Sebastian get to his feet.

“Nothing,” he bit out with a look of warning for his brother as he reached down and helped her up. Mikey looked back at Jonathan in time to see him mouthing, “Sorry,” to his brother with a sympathetic wince that had Mikey absently nodding as she came to a decision.

“Where are you going?” Jonathan asked as Mikey headed for their bedroom door, deciding that she’d played enough games for one night.

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“To get answers,” Mikey said as she reached for the bedroom door only to find Sebastian suddenly in her way.

“You promised,” he bit out accusingly.

“No,” Mikey said, reaching over to shove him out of her way before she continued, “what I promised was that I wouldn’t tell your parents that you wanted to go back to school, but since this is a completely different topic, I think I’ll go see what your parents have to say about it.”

“Fine!” Sebastian bit out. “What do you want to know, brat?”

Folding her arms over her chest, Mikey met his glare with one of her own as she said, “Everything.”

Eyes narrowing on her, Sebastian said, “They’re thinking about sending me to military school.”

“Why would they do that?” Mikey asked, unable to help but frown because that didn’t sound like something his parents would do.

“Because the therapist thinks that it would be good for him,” Jonathan said, drawing her attention to find him watching Sebastian. “You want to go back to school? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it’s not a big deal,” Sebastian said with a pointed look at Mikey as he walked past her and headed back to his bed.

“Maybe if you told Mom and Dad they wouldn’t–”

“They’re not going to send me to military school without a good reason,” Sebastian said, cutting off his brother as he grabbed his book and dropped down on his bed.

“They might if your therapist is telling them to,” Mikey said, wondering why he wasn’t freaking out about this because this was definitely one of those things that he should be freaking out about.

She was definitely freaking out about it.

“Which is why I don’t plan on going back,” Sebastian said as he reached over and grabbed hold of her hand so that he could pull her back down on the bed next to him.

“So, your plan to avoid being sent to military school is to stop going to therapy and give your parents another reason to worry about you?” Mikey asked, blinking slowly.

“She has a point,” Jonathan said, dropping down on the end of the bed with a sigh. “You have to keep going.”

“Or you could just tell your parents what’s really going on,” Mikey suggested as Sebastian handed her book back to her.

“Nothing’s going on,” the stubborn jerk said, gesturing for her to open the book.

“Then you should have no problem talking to them,” Mikey pointed out as Sebastian gave up waiting for her to open the book and plucked it out of her hands so that he could do it.

“It’s fine, so stop worrying about it and focus on getting this book report done on time,” Sebastian said, handing the book back to her.

Knowing that it was pointless to argue with him when he got like this, Mikey grabbed the book with a muttered, “Fine,” and settled back, deciding that she might as well get this over with, but once she was done with this damn book report they were going to talk whether he wanted to or not.

*_*_*_*

“I really hate you,” came the weakly mumbled words as Mikey shifted between his legs so that she was curled up on her side with her head laid against his chest.

“I know you do, but we’re almost halfway there,” Sebastian said around a yawn as he glanced at his alarm clock and saw that it was almost four in the morning.

“I really hate you, too,” Jonathan said as he threw his arm around Mikey and—

Found himself shoved off the bed.

Ignoring his brother’s pained grunt and his sadly mumbled, “Why are you so mean to me?” Sebastian returned his attention back to the book that they needed to get through only to realize that Mikey had fallen asleep, again. She was so damn adorable, he thought, biting back a sigh as he gently cupped her shoulder and gave her a small shake.

“Mikey?”

A grumble, a groan, and the cutest damn whimper that he’d ever heard was her response as she blindly reached down, grabbed the comforter and yanked it over her head, almost knocking the charging wire from the iPad he’d been forced to use when it became obvious that they weren’t going to be able to read the book without turning the light on. Since he didn’t think it was a good idea to alert his parents to the fact that Mikey was sleeping over again, he’d used his last eBook credit and downloaded

the book so that they could read it on his iPad.

“We have to finish this book if you want to play baseball,” he reminded her, waiting for the moment when his words sank in and when they did...

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“Fine,” came the muttered response as Mikey shoved the comforter away with a soft sigh and an impatient gesture for him to get on with it as Jonathan dragged himself off the floor and walked the short distance back to his bed where he dropped down on his mattress with a groan and promptly began snoring.

“You’re too kind,” Sebastian drawled as he returned his attention to the iPad, noting that they were only forty percent through the book.

Damn.

At this rate, she was going to have to read all day, most of the night and all day tomorrow if she had any hope of finishing the book on time. For a moment, he considered writing the book report for her and breaking down the book for her in case her teacher asked questions, but she would probably throw something at his head if he even suggested it, Sebastian thought, unable to help but smile as he thought about the real reason that he liked her so much.

She was...different.

There was really no other way to put it. She was also funny, kind, smart, determined, too damn adorable for words, and one of a kind. Most of the kids their age were concerned with what everyone else thought of them, but Mikey didn’t give a damn. She never bothered to pretend to be anything else but herself. She knew what she wanted and who she was and didn’t give a damn what anyone else thought, which was the first thing that he’d noticed about her the first time that he’d laid eyes on her.

After spending four hours in the car with his family, he’d needed some time to

himself. So, while everyone else had been fighting over who was sleeping where, he'd been sneaking out the back of the cottage that his family had rented for the summer and found himself watching her. She'd been the cutest damn thing that he'd ever seen with her long hair in matching braids, wearing a baseball cap backwards and a baseball jersey at least two sizes too big for her as she yelled at her uncle for throwing like a girl and he hadn't been able to take his eyes off her.

Whenever Mikey was around, he'd found himself watching her, wondering what it was about her that drew him in. She was definitely the strangest girl that he'd ever met, but that hadn't been the reason why he hadn't been able to keep his eyes off her. It wasn't until he'd gone with her to pick up tools for the renovation on her house that he'd figured it out and once he did...

He'd panicked.

The way that she'd made him feel...

God, it had been addicting. She just made everything better and that terrified him because he knew that it couldn't last. He'd been tempted, more than a little tempted, to allow himself to let go of everything and just enjoy it while it lasted, but the thought of having to say goodbye to her had been enough for him to pretend that she didn't make him want more.

He'd tried to fight it, tried to tell himself that it was for the best even after he found out that Reese had married her mother and were moving in across the street from him, but he hadn't been able to fight it any longer. He'd needed to be near her,

needed to find out if he'd imagined it, and needed...

God, he'd just needed her.

“I know,” Mikey said, nodding against his chest. “That’s why you adore me.”

“I don’t remember saying that I adore you,” Sebastian murmured, unable to help but smile because they both knew that he adored everything about her.

“You didn’t have to say it,” she said, snuggling in closer to him.

“And why’s that?” he couldn’t help but wonder as he found the spot where they’d left off.

“Because I know,” Mikey said, nodding solemnly even as he couldn’t help but wonder if she really knew just how much she meant to him.

Chapter 10

The good news was that she probably didn’t have to worry about writing that book report anymore, Mikey thought as she took in the large man glaring down at her.

“Start talking,” Uncle Trevor said, not really looking all that happy to find her curled up in his son’s bed, which was understandable since she wasn’t exactly supposed to be here.

“I missed you?” she said with a hopeful smile only to add, “so much,” when he narrowed his eyes on her.

“What did we talk about, Mikey?” Uncle Trevor asked, sighing heavily as he folded his insanely large arms over his chest while he waited for an answer.

“That making Jonathan cry for my own amusement is wrong?” she said, ignoring the gasp of outrage from the other side of the room.

“For the last time, little girl,” Jonathan snapped as he shoved his blankets aside and got to his feet, “I had something in my eye!”

“No, he didn’t,” she mouthed, shaking her head as Uncle Trevor tried to bite back a smile only to end up clearing his throat and turning his head with a small cough to cover the chuckle that escaped.

“You know what? We’re over!” Jonathan bit out as he grabbed a change of clothes from his bureau and stormed off toward the door only to add, “Over!” once again as he slammed the door shut behind him.

At Uncle Trevor’s questioning look, Mikey said, “He’ll be back,” with a firm nod that had him opening his mouth to say something only to close it when Jonathan walked back into the room, looking calmer than he had a few seconds ago. With a helpless shrug, Jonathan said, “I forgive you.”

“For getting you stuck at the top of the Ferris wheel or for making you cry because I was bored?” Mikey asked, mostly because she liked clarification. She didn’t bother asking him if he forgave her for making that video since she doubted that he would ever forgive her for doing that.

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Then again, since he didn't know that she'd made a video...

It was probably for the best if she didn't mention it at the moment.

His eyes narrowed on her as he said, "There was something in my eye," before he took a shuddering breath and waved it off as though it was of little consequence. "For the sake of our relationship—"

"Ah, we don't have one," she pointed out only to have him continue as though she hadn't said anything.

"—I'm willing to forgive you."

And with that, Jonathan turned around and walked away, leaving her sitting there, shaking her head in disbelief as she turned her attention back to Uncle Trevor to find him rubbing his hands roughly down his face as he said, "I really just can't with that kid."

"Understandable," Mikey murmured, nodding solemnly as she glanced down to find Sebastian on his back with one arm thrown over his face, fast asleep on the bed next to her.

God, he looked exhausted, Mikey thought even as she couldn't help but smile. He'd stayed up all night, helping her get through her book and when she'd been too tired to make out the words, he'd taken over, reading to her while she'd curled up next to him with her eyes closed as she'd lost herself to the soft timbre of his voice as he'd made the story come alive.

At some point, she'd fallen asleep only to wake up to find Sebastian's arms wrapped around her, holding her close. When she'd tried to roll over onto her side, he'd growled as his arms tightened around her and pulled her closer until she gave up trying to roll over onto her side and snuggled in closer only to fall asleep within minutes. He really was a demanding bed hog, Mikey thought, biting back a sigh when she once again turned her attention back to Uncle Trevor to find him watching her, looking as though he was debating his next words.

Finally, he said, "Mikey, I really don't think this is a good idea."

"What's not a good idea?" she absently asked as she shoved the blankets off and swung her legs over the side of the bed while she reached over and grabbed her book that wasn't as bad as she first thought, off Sebastian's nightstand.

"Sleeping in the same bed with Sebastian," he said with a pointed look at them.

"Would it help if I told you that I hadn't planned on sleeping over, but that boy," and this is where she paused so that she could point a damning finger at Sebastian, "wouldn't let me borrow a dictionary without an interrogation?"

Frowning, Uncle Trevor asked, "Wait. Why don't you have a dictionary?"

"Because my religion forbids it," she said with a firm nod that had him narrowing his eyes on her.

"But your religion is okay with you sleeping in the same bed with a teenage boy?" he countered.

"It does when I have a book report due on Monday," Mikey said, holding up the thick book as proof.

“And you couldn’t have asked your parents for help?” Uncle Trevor asked as she slipped her feet back into her sneakers.

“Not if I wanted a passing grade,” Mikey admitted with a sad shake of her head that had his lips twitching.

“I see,” he murmured, looking thoughtful before asking, “And how exactly did you get in here?”

“I feel that it would be in my best interest not to answer that question,” she said, tossing the book on the bed so that she could reach down and grab the sweatshirt that really was quite comfortable off the floor and pulled it on.

“And I’m assuming that you’re not going to tell me how you got out of your house without your parents knowing either?” Uncle Trevor asked, clearly understanding her need for survival.

“You assume correctly,” Mikey said, sighing in relief as she grabbed her book.

“And I also assume that you’re going to want to go tell your parents about this before I get a chance to,” he said, making her wince.

“And just out of curiosity, when will that be?” Mikey asked, licking her lips nervously as she started to slowly move closer to the door, really hoping that he was kidding.

He wasn’t kidding.

“When I’m done talking to my son,” he drawled with a look that told her that she better move her butt and since that seemed like a good idea at the moment, she nodded, cleared her throat, and murmured, “That’s probably not going to end well for

me.”

“Probably not,” Uncle Trevor murmured as she stood there, debating her options only to decide that she really didn’t have a choice in the matter. With that in mind, Mikey nodded to herself, murmured, “Okay,” for some reason and turned around and did what she had to.

*_*_*_*

“Did...did she just hide in your closet?” his father asked, looking stunned while Sebastian sat up with a resigned sigh.

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“Probably,” Sebastian said around a yawn as he leaned back against the wall while he waited for the talk that he knew was coming, the one where his father let him know that he was worried about him, again.

His parents had been having these talks with him since he’d turned down that scholarship three years ago, and they always began the same way...

“We need to talk,” his father said, giving up trying to figure Mikey out and focused on Sebastian.

“About?” Sebastian asked as he watched his father try to figure out how to talk to him.

With a sigh, his father rubbed the back of his neck as he reached over and grabbed the desk chair and sat down. “Mikey for starters.”

“What about her?” Sebastian asked while he sat there, wondering when his father was going to bring up the therapist.

“How about the fact that I told you that she wasn’t allowed to sleep over anymore. At least, not in your bed,” his father said, leaning back in the chair as he gestured to the iPad.

Great.

Sebastian grabbed his iPad and tossed it to his father, who added, “You’re grounded for a month.”

“A month? Are you serious? For what?” Sebastian demanded, because there was no way in hell that this should end with him losing everything for a month.

One month of not being allowed to leave the house, of having to stay in his room only allowed to leave for meals, to do his chores, and most likely, go to therapy. There was no way that he would be able to handle that right now. Christ, he could already feel the walls starting to close in around him.

“How about the fact that you lied to me?” his father said as he turned the iPad over in his hands.

“What did I lie about?”

“Aunt Haley,” his father said with a pointed look at his bandaged hand.

“I didn’t lie about anything!”

“Where did you go after you left the therapist’s office?”

“To the library and then to Aunt Haley’s house to grab a book,” Sebastian said, deciding that there was no way in hell that he was going to tell him where he’d gone for lunch because he wasn’t about to risk his father taking that away from him, too.

“You never grabbed the book that she left on the table for you,” his father said, watching him.

“That’s because I didn’t go inside,” he bit out evenly.

“What did you do, Sebastian?” his father asked, looking resigned to whatever he was about to admit and that...

Pissed him off.

“Or what? You’ll send to me to military school?” he demanded, watching as his father cursed under his breath.

“Sebastian, I—”

“I have never

given you a reason not to trust me. I work my ass off to do everything you tell me to. I get my schoolwork done, do my chores, help Jessica and Mathew with their homework, make sure they get to school on time, and none of that is ever good enough!” he snapped.

“You lied and you broke a rule. You were told that Mikey wasn’t allowed to sleep in your room anymore,” his father bit out evenly, looking just as pissed as Sebastian was.

“I didn’t lie, but that really doesn’t seem to matter, does it? As far as Mikey is concerned, she was in way over her head and she needed my help. I texted Aunt Kasey and Uncle Reese as soon as I realized how late it was so that they wouldn’t worry about her. I also sent you and mom a text to let you know that I was helping Mikey with her homework,” Sebastian said, dropping back down on his bed since there was no point in getting dressed now that it looked like he was going to be stuck in his room all weekend.

“Sebastian, Mikey is—”

“The only one that doesn’t look at me like I’m a freak,” he finished for his father as he glared at the ceiling.

“Wait. Yes, I do!” came the smartass comment from the closet that had Sebastian narrowing his eyes as he climbed off the bed and grabbing his noise-blocking headphones and iPod. Ignoring the pained look on his father’s face, he walked over to the closet, yanked the door open and handed Mikey the headphones and iPod.

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With a grumble, she accepted them, pulling on the headphones and started the playlist that he'd created for her before returning her attention back to her book as he closed the closet door and—

“I don't look at you like you're a freak,” his father said.

“Yes, you do,” Sebastian said, dropping back down on his bed with a sigh.

For several minutes, his father didn't say anything and then...

“Please talk to me, Sebastian,” his father pleaded softly.

“I don't have anything to say,” Sebastian said as he continued glaring at the ceiling, tired of playing this game. If they wanted to send him to military school then—

“He was fixing Mrs. Blaine's ramp!” Mikey said in a rush as she hurried out of the closet, climbed onto his bed and—

Ooomph!

—slammed a pillow over his face before he could tell the little traitor to be quiet.

When Sebastian managed to shove the pillow away, she straddled his chest and slapped her hand over his mouth as she continued betraying him. “The boards broke, breaking Mrs. Blaine's wheelchair in the process. Sebastian got her wheelchair loose and replaced the boards. That's how he cut his hand. He forgot to grab the book before he left. And as far as last night, nothing happened. He tried to help me get

through this book and we fell asleep. He wasn't lying and nothing happened, so please don't send him to military school just because he's a stubborn jerk!" Mikey finished in a rush as she struggled to keep her hand over his mouth.

Once she was done, he glanced over to find his father absently nodding as he stood up. With a softly murmured, "Here," he placed Sebastian's iPad back on the nightstand before he walked out, leaving Sebastian alone with the traitor.

With a glare, he pushed her hand away and bit out, "Run," which had Mikey nodding with a mumbled, "That's probably a good idea," as she did just that.

Chapter 11

"Damn it," Trevor sighed, dropping his head as he grabbed onto the kitchen counter while he stood there wondering just how many times he was going to screw this up.

"What's wrong?" Zoe asked as she wrapped her arms around him and pressed a kiss against his back.

"I think I just made everything worse," he said, releasing his hold on the counter so that he could turn around and pull his wife into his arms.

"Is that even possible?" Zoe asked with a heartfelt sigh as she wrapped her arms around him and laid her head against his chest.

"He thinks that we look at him like he's a freak," Trevor said, pressing a kiss against the top of his wife's head as he tried to figure out how he was going to fix this.

This used to be so easy, Trevor thought, unable to help but smile as he remembered when Sebastian was a baby, the way that his face used to light up whenever he saw him and...

God, he missed those days.

He missed seeing a carefree smile on his son's face, the way that Sebastian would run outside so that he could be the first one to tell Trevor about his day, and the mischievous look in his eye when he tormented his brothers. One day, Sebastian had been a happy, carefree kid and the next, he'd stopped smiling, stopped tormenting his brothers, and became too damn serious and Trevor had no idea why. He'd tried to talk to Sebastian, tried spending more time with him, gave him space, did anything and everything that he could think of, but nothing worked. Sebastian shut down, barely talking most days, and closed himself off, escaping into books and they'd been forced to watch it happen.

"Why does he think that we see him as a freak?" Zoe mumbled against his chest as her arms tightened around him.

"I honestly don't know," Trevor said, debating asking Jonathan about it, but he wasn't the one that Sebastian confided in anymore.

That honor had been passed onto the adorable pain in the ass who lived to torment his son and was currently walking into the kitchen grumbling to herself as she headed to the pantry. With another grumble, Mikey opened the pantry door, grabbed the box of cereal that they bought just for her and with another sigh, shut the door and headed to the kitchen table. For a moment, Trevor watched Mikey as she grabbed everything that she needed from the cabinets and fridge before dropping down in a chair, pouring herself a large bowl of cereal and with one last grumble, opened her book with a heartfelt sigh as he stood there, debating doing something that he swore that he wouldn't do, but...

"Mikey, can we talk to you for a moment?" Trevor asked, leaning down and brushed his lips against his wife's before she could argue. With a softly whispered, "Trust me," he released her and headed to the table.

“I’m not a snitch,” Mikey said, not bothering to look up as he joined her.

“That’s not what I—” he started to say when she cut him off.

“Snitches get stitches,” Mikey said only to ask with a sad shake of her head, “Do you want me to get stitches, Uncle Trevor?”

With a sigh, Zoe sat down next to him and reached across the table to pluck the book out of Mikey’s hands. “We’re worried about Sebastian, sweetie,” she explained as Mikey worried her bottom lip between her teeth as she considered them.

“Can I be honest?” Mikey asked after a moment.

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Although, he wasn't sure that was a good idea, Trevor found himself nodding.

"You expect too much from him," Mikey said, making him frown as she turned her attention to her cereal.

"How so?" Zoe asked, getting up to grab the chocolate milk and a glass for Mikey.

"Take this morning for example," she said, pausing to murmur, "Thank you," when Zoe handed her the glass of chocolate milk. "You told him that you wanted to talk to him, but you never gave him a chance before you grounded him."

"I messed up," Trevor admitted with a sigh as he sat back in his chair.

Nodding in agreement, Mikey said, "I get why you're worried about Sebastian, I do, but the problem is that he knows it."

"What do you mean?" Trevor asked, frowning.

"It's the way you look at him, watching him like you're waiting for him to mess up and when he does, you kind of go overboard like you're punishing him to stop him from doing something worse. The only thing that you're doing is reminding him that you think there's something wrong with him," Mikey said with a sympathetic wince.

"There's nothing wrong with him," Trevor said hollowly as he tried to tell himself that she was wrong, but...

He couldn't.

*_*_*_*_*

“Why must everyone in this family manhandle me?” came the sadly mumbled words that had Sebastian

shifting his glare from the ceiling to find his father carrying Mikey over his shoulder and—

“That’s going to leave a mark,” Mikey said on a groan when his father dumped her on the bed next to him.

“What’s going on?” Sebastian asked, moving over so that Mikey could sit up only to release a pained grunt when the little brat shoved him out of the way and took his spot with a satisfied sigh.

“Let’s try this again,” his father said, sitting back down on the desk chair where he cleared his throat, shifted nervously only to follow that up by clearing his throat again and...

Apparently had no idea where to start, making Sebastian frown as he shifted his gaze from his father to find Mikey watching his father expectantly. When his father continued sitting there, looking at a loss for words, Mikey slowly nodded as she mumbled to herself, “I should probably go read my book,” and crawled off the bed, effectively abandoning him and giving him one more reason to be mad at her.

Once she was gone, Sebastian shifted his attention back to find his father gesturing to his iPad. “Your mother said that you were probably going to need a new iPad soon, something about running out of memory.”

Shaking his head, Sebastian absently said, “I don’t need a new iPad,” wondering where his father was going with this.

“Are you sure? Your mother said—”

“I don’t want a new iPad, Dad. It was a gift,” Sebastian said, cutting his father off before he could push the subject only to end up inwardly cursing himself when his father’s lips pulled up into a knowing smile.

A few years ago, Mikey had surprised him with an iPad simply because she knew how badly he’d wanted one. He’d been trying to save up for one for a few years, but something always came up, a birthday, Christmas, or he saw something that he knew that someone he loved would like and he’d have to start all over again. Just when he’d resigned himself to borrowing his mom’s iPad for a little while longer, Mikey had taken him by surprise and bought him one.

She’d done extra chores for her mom, helped her dad work on the house, did grunt work for Uncle Jared, shoveled snow, raked leaves, whatever it took to earn enough money to buy an iPad for him so that he could have one and...

He loved it.

“Do you want to continue going to therapy?” his father suddenly asked, taking him by surprise and making him wonder what Mikey told him.

“No,” Sebastian said with absolutely no hesitation.

“Okay,” his father said with a nod of understanding. “Then we’ll stop asking you to go, but I need to know that you’ll come to me if you have something that you need to talk about, okay?”

With a hesitant nod, Sebastian asked, “And if I mess up again?”

“Then we talk about it,” his father said, shooting him a wink as he left, leaving

Sebastian sitting there, wondering just how long this reprieve was going to last.

Chapter 12

“What are you doing?”

“You mean besides wondering why you keep staring at me?” Mikey asked as she forced herself to turn the page, destroying another part of her soul in the process.

“Besides that,” Jonathan said as he leaned over the back of the couch to see what she was doing.

“I’m trying to finish this book,” Mikey said even as she debated skipping to the end to find out how the book ended so that she could write the book report and just get it over with, but she couldn’t risk it.

“That doesn’t explain why you’ve been sitting in here for the past hour or why Sebastian is glaring at you,” he pointed out.

“Doesn’t it though?” Mikey asked with a sad shake of her head as she risked a glance at the boy that wasn’t talking to her, to find him sitting next to her, seething.

For a moment, she considered pointing out that she hadn’t actually broken her promise only to rethink that idea when Sebastian narrowed his eyes on her. Deciding that perhaps it would be best to take a break, she closed the book only to sigh and open it again when Sebastian bit out, “Keep reading.”

“So, back to us,” Jonathan said, making her sigh once again.

“There is no us,” Mikey reminded him as she found where she’d left off and forced herself to keep reading.

“There could be,” Jonathan said, releasing a tragic sigh and if she thought for one second that he was serious, she wouldn’t have reached up and—

“Ow! Why must you fight our love?” he asked as he rubbed the spot on his arm where she’d been forced to flick him.

“Because you’re only trying to torment your brother,” Mikey mumbled absently as she finished the page.

“This is true,” Jonathan murmured in agreement only to grunt in pain when Sebastian reached up and flicked his other arm.

“Leave her alone,” Sebastian said, shifting to get more comfortable next to her.

“I would. I really would, but then Mom would kill me,” Jonathan said with a sad shake of his head as he walked around the couch and dropped down on the cushion next to Mikey.

“And why’s that?” Sebastian asked, shifting his glare from her, which she truly appreciated, to his brother.

“Because we’re supposed to go to Uncle Jason’s and Aunt Haley’s house for a party,” Jonathan said, making her frown because she didn’t remember anyone mentioning a party.

“Cole’s birthday isn’t for a month,” Sebastian pointed out, absently gesturing for her to keep reading.

“It’s not for Cole’s birthday,” Jonathan said with a heartfelt sigh as he laid his head on Mikey’s shoulder.

“Then what’s it for?” Mikey asked, reaching over to push him away, but he simply ignored her and settled in more comfortably with a satisfied sigh.

“Aunt Haley’s family,” Jonathan said, making them both frown because that couldn’t be right.

Aunt Haley’s family cut her off when she married Uncle Jason and as far as Mikey knew, they hadn’t talked to her since. She wasn’t sure about all the details, but from what she understood, they hadn’t had much to do with Aunt Haley to begin with, but when she married Uncle Jason, they’d decided to cut her off. They were rich snobs who hadn’t been willing to give Uncle Jason a chance for Haley’s sake. As far as Mikey was concerned, it was their loss. Uncle Jason was probably one of the nicest people she knew. He was also funny, hardworking, and he absolutely adored Aunt Haley and their children.

“What are you talking about?” Sebastian asked as he reached over and shoved Jonathan away from her.

“Aunt Haley’s father contacted her out of the blue, giving her some lame story about how much he regretted pushing her away and how much he missed her. He wanted to meet his grandchildren and spend more time with her and a bunch of other crap that means that we get to go spend the day at Uncle Jason’s house,” Jonathan said, shrugging it off as he snuggled closer to her side as she sat there, considering what he said and...

“You like to eavesdrop, don’t you?” Mikey asked, unable to help but notice that he always knew everything first.

“It’s my passion,” Jonathan said with a heartfelt sigh as a thought occurred to her.

She glanced over at him to find him looking adoringly at her and asked, “You don’t

eavesdrop on my conversations, do you?"

"Only the good ones," Jonathan said, nodding solemnly.

With a murmured, "I see," Mikey stood up and tossed her book on the couch before she grabbed a pillow.

"What's that pillow for?" Jonathan asked, blinking innocently up at Mikey as she adjusted her hold on the pillow.

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“Nothing,” she mumbled absently, deciding that they should probably discuss a few things.

*_*_*_*

“Are you going to move over?” came the question that had his brother folding his arms over his chest as he pointedly ignored Mikey.

With a heavy sigh, Mikey glanced toward the backseat where Mathew, Jessica, and five of the platters of baked goods that her mother had made for the party took up the back before she shifted her attention back to the empty spot next to him and—

“You could have just asked me to move,” Jonathan grumbled only to follow that up with an, “Ow!” when she used her foot to push off his lap.

“And you could stop being a jerk,” Mikey pointed out as she settled in between them only to grumble something when his father handed Jonathan a large cardboard box filled with more food for the party.

Without a word, she climbed onto Sebastian’s lap so that Jonathan could put the box down on the seat between them, shifted to get comfortable and promptly ignored him, which was more than fine with Sebastian since he wasn’t talking to her at the moment. He wrapped his arms around her and laid his head back against his seat as he closed his eyes and resigned himself to the long day ahead. He normally wasn’t a big fan of parties, but today he was exhausted and the only thing that he wanted to do was crawl back in bed and pass out.

For a moment, he considered asking his parents if he could skip the party and stay home, but he didn't trust the girl settling back against him to keep reading. Knowing Mikey, she'd end up getting distracted by one of his cousins or spend the rest of the night tormenting one of his uncles, Sebastian thought, feeling his lips twitch as Mikey laid her head against his chest with a long-suffering sigh.

"Keep reading," he murmured.

"I am," she muttered, sounding so damn miserable that he couldn't help but smile as he opened his eyes and found her glaring down at the book in her hands.

"Where are you stuck?" Sebastian asked, shifting her on his lap so that he could get a better look at the page she was on only to find himself biting back a groan when he caught the scent of the lemongrass shampoo that she liked to use.

"I thought you weren't talking to me," Mikey said as he took in the way that her mischievous green eyes flickered in his direction before he found himself running his gaze down to the soft pink lips that he'd been thinking about a lot lately, unable to help but notice that her bottom lip was plumper than her top lip, even as he couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to—

Kill his brother.

The sound of someone clearing his throat had him looking up and finding his brother watching him with

an unholy gleam in his eye. Wagging his eyebrows, Jonathan shot Mikey a pointed look that was going to get him killed. Just as Sebastian reached over to discreetly do that, Jonathan stopped wagging his eyebrows, cleared his throat and had Sebastian frowning when he suddenly stopped smiling and...

Why was he pouting? Sebastian couldn't help but wonder only to bite back a curse when Jonathan released a shuddering sigh and announced, "I just can't stay mad at you, Mikey," with a dramatic snuffle there at the end.

Sebastian was definitely going to kill him.

"You really can though," Mikey murmured absently, not bothering to look up as she turned the page.

"No, I just can't do that..." Jonathan said, releasing another shuddering sigh that was going to get him smacked. "Not after everything we've been through."

"What exactly have we been through?" Mikey asked, sounding bored as she glanced up at Jonathan, who was looking at her adoringly.

So, gonna kill him...

"Too much to let a simple misunderstanding come between us," Jonathan answered, nodding solemnly.

"It wasn't a simple misunderstanding. I was trying to smother you with a pillow and if that man," and this is where she paused to point a damning finger at his father just as they pulled in behind a BMW parked in front of Uncle Jason's house, "hadn't pulled me off, I would have made you eat that pillow."

"And I would have loved every second of it," Jonathan said, nodding.

"There is something seriously wrong with you," Mikey said with a sad shake of her head as she returned her attention back to her book while Sebastian once again found himself reaching over to grab his brother by the back of his neck only to have the little bastard throw the car door open with a taunting grin and take off before he could

wring his damn neck.

Chapter 13

“Let’s go over the rules,” Uncle Trevor said, dragging her attention from the book to find him turned around in his seat and looking directly at her.

Wondering why he was looking at her, Mikey opened her mouth and—

“No baseball,” Uncle Trevor said, and yeah, okay so she could understand why that might be a problem with Aunt Haley’s family here.

Still...

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“What if I promised not to throw the ball near the house?” Mikey said, worrying her bottom lip because she’d kind of been hoping to get a chance to practice for a few hours before tryouts on Monday. She’d considered staying home since her parents couldn’t come today, hoping that her dad would have time to help her practice but decided against it since that would have meant ditching Sebastian and she couldn’t do that, not when she knew how much he hated going to things like this.

“What happened last year when you decided to toss the ball around outside Fenway Park?” Uncle Trevor asked, dryly.

“I made a grown man cry,” Mikey said, struggling to bite back a wince even as she decided that perhaps it would be for the best if she focused on finishing her book.

Nodding, Uncle Trevor murmured, “You made a grown man cry and...”

Biting back a sigh, Mikey said, “And I promised that I wouldn’t throw near anyone that hasn’t been warned that one of my fastballs has the potential to maim someone.”

“And...”

“I promised not to throw the ball near anyone that wasn’t physically able to jump out of the way in time,” she finished, unable to help but pout a little at the end there.

“Good,” Uncle Trevor murmured before shifting his attention to the rest of them. “This is important to your Aunt Haley, so please be on your best behavior and try to be nice to her nephew. He’s not used to us yet,” Uncle Trevor said as he gestured for them to go inside.

Resigning herself to spending the rest of the day trying to get through this book, Mikey climbed out of the car and—

“Get off me, you little demon!” Cole, Uncle’s Jason’s oldest son who’d she’d like to point out was six feet tall, the captain of the J.V. football team over at Latin Scribe High School, and fifteen years old, yelled somewhat hysterically as a little girl, who couldn’t be older than six, jumped onto his back and took him back down to the ground with a vicious growl.

“Where’s my money, punk?” the little girl demanded only to pause in her vicious attack to push her glasses back up her nose before she continued.

“I don’t owe you anything!” Cole snapped back, carefully trying to dislodge the little girl off his back, but she wasn’t going anywhere.

“You owe me five dollars and eighty-five cents!” she snapped as she climbed onto his back and held on, refusing to let him go until she got her money.

“What the hell are you talking about? That lemonade was only supposed to be a dollar a cup!” Cole said in outrage.

“Consider it interest!” the little girl said with a murderous glare as Uncle Trevor took one look at the scene before them and shook his head with a resigned sigh as he reached into the back seat and grabbed the large box of food that her mother had sent over and headed inside.

“Wait! Where are you going?” Cole demanded as he watched helplessly while Uncle Trevor headed inside only to turn a panicked look at Aunt Zoe as she grabbed a large platter of cupcakes from the back and moved to follow her husband inside.

“Try to play nice, sweetie,” Aunt Zoe said with a warm smile as she stepped over

Cole's sprawled legs and went inside, leaving the rest of them to enjoy the show.

"Play nice? Are you serious?" Cole asked in disbelief as Mikey plucked Sebastian's phone out of his pocket and began recording, "I really love this family."

"Is someone going to help me?" Cole demanded as he turned his glare on them.

"No," Mathew said as he helped himself to a brownie off one of the platters and settled in for the show.

"Make sure you zoom in if she makes him cry," Jessica told Mikey as she plucked the brownie out of her brother's hand.

"Sebastian?" Cole said, sounding really hopeful only to follow that up with a pained grunt when the little girl renewed her attack.

Mikey glanced over her shoulder to see if Sebastian was going to help him only to find him frowning down at her book, taking in the page where she'd left off with a sad shake of his head and a mumbled, "This just isn't going to work for me."

Afraid to find out what wasn't going to work for him, Mikey shifted her attention back to Cole just as a teenage girl with blonde hair, glasses, and a panicked expression on her face came running toward them and—

Promptly tripped over her own two feet.

With a muttered, "I hate my life," when she spotted them standing there. With a resigned sigh, she got back to her feet and pushed her glasses back up her nose as a blush crept up her neck as she forced herself to quickly make her way across the lawn toward Cole, who had somehow managed to roll over onto his back in the last thirty seconds, was forced to pull his arms free when the little girl grabbed hold of one of

them and attempted to make him slap himself.

God, she really loved this family, Mikey thought with a heartfelt sigh as her attention returned to the other girl just as she reached them.

“Katie, you’ve got to stop,” she mumbled, blushing furiously as she glanced at Cole only to quickly avert her eyes when he narrowed a glare on her.

“He owes me, Chloe!” Katie yelled as she attempted to renew her attack.

“I owe you nothing, you little demon! That lemonade was watered down!” Cole bit out, earning an outraged gasp from Katie.

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Narrowing her eyes on him, she nodded firmly as she allowed Chloe, who Mikey was assuming was her older sister, to pull her away as she said, “We’re selling cookies in my Wilderness Girls’ troop next month and guess who’s not getting any?”

“I’m your best customer and we both know it,” Cole bit out as he got to his feet to stare the little girl down.

With a smug expression, the adorable little girl that was quickly becoming Mikey’s favorite person on earth said, “You?

??re really not though. Your father is.”

“Without me, you won’t earn your cookie badge and we both know it,” Cole said, leaning down to get in the little girl’s face.

“The only thing your cookie sales got me was a participation badge,” Katie said, moving to get in Cole’s face when Chloe pulled her back with a mumbled, “Please stop.”

“Better listen to your sister,” Cole said in a taunting tone.

“Why would I listen to her when she thinks you’re cute,” Katie said, matching his taunting tone as every gaze swung to Chloe.

“I...I...” Chloe mumbled weakly, somehow managing to turn an even brighter shade of red as she reached over, grabbed hold of her sister and averted her gaze as mortification set in and once it did, she turned around, dragging her sister along with

her, tripped and stumbled her way to the house next-door.

“I’ll be back and when I am, you better have my money, punk!” the little girl yelled while they stood there, looking from the little girl that had managed to take Cole down, back to Cole and...

“Don’t,” Cole bit out in warning, a warning that his cousins immediately ignored.

“They live next door?” Mathew asked, looking greatly amused.

“I will kill you,” Cole said, dusting himself off.

“She’s cute,” Jessica said, nodding solemnly as Cole narrowed a glare on her.

“Which one?” Mathew asked, clearly enjoying himself as he helped himself to another brownie.

“His future wife,” Jessica said, making Mikey frown and before she could ask them what they were talking about, Sebastian was grabbing her hand and dragging her toward the house.

“What was that all about?” Mikey asked, letting him drag her inside.

“Nothing,” Sebastian said as he dragged her through the kitchen and into the living room, but something, mostly the way that he was grinding his jaw, told her that it wasn’t nothing.

“Why must you lie to me?” Mikey asked with a disappointed sigh as they paused by the large bookshelves that took up one wall.

“And why must you be a pain in my ass?” Sebastian countered as he selected a book

before continuing to drag her toward the back door.

“Because it’s my job,” Mikey said, nodding solemnly as he dragged her outside and headed toward the lounge chairs that had been placed off to the side to make room for the tables they’d set up for the party and gestured for her to sit down.

“Read,” Sebastian said as he dropped down on the lounge chaise beside her with a pointed look at the book in her hand.

“I’m afraid that I can’t do that,” Mikey said with a sad shake of her head as she reached inside her sweatshirt pocket and pulled out her baseball.

Within seconds, she was rolling the ball between her hands as she glanced around the large backyard, taking in the line of barbeques set up next to the patio, the tables covered with food, coolers, the men of their family working the grills while some of the women were relaxing on the other side of the patio only to frown when her gaze landed on the small group of people standing off to the side, looking decidedly uncomfortable in their designer clothes and the looks of disgust on their faces as they pointedly ignored the rest of the party. They would never be mistaken for Bradfords, Mikey thought before she moved on to a boy their age with dark brown hair and a scowl that looked painful, watching them with bored interest as he dropped down in a chair at one of the tables.

“You really can,” Sebastian said, reaching over to give her braid a gentle tug that had her focusing back on him.

“You’re probably right,” Mikey said, nodding in agreement before adding, “but we won’t know that until you tell me what I want to know.”

Chapter 14

“I thought you wanted help with this book report,” Sebastian reminded the brat determined to drive him crazy.

“And I thought you knew me better than to think that I would drop something like this,” Mikey shot back.

“It’s nothing,” he bit out, refusing to talk to her about this.

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“Then it shouldn’t be difficult to tell me all about it,” Mikey said with a syrupy-sweet smile that had him narrowing his eyes on the little brat.

“Fine. I’ll tell you what you want to know if you tell me what you said to my parents this morning,” Sebastian told her, curious to find out what she could have possibly said to convince his parents to stop trying to push therapy on him.

“I’m not sure that’s really going to work for me,” Mikey said with a helpless shrug.

“And why’s that?” Sebastian asked, unable to help but notice just how beautiful she was when she was trying to be devious.

“Because I have something that you want more,” Mikey pointed out as she continued to roll the baseball between her hands.

“You really don’t though,” he drawled, hoping that it was enough to convince her to start talking.

“I really do, which is why I think it would be in my best interest to negotiate a better trade.”

“We could do that...” Sebastian said, sounding thoughtful before adding, “or I could drag you upstairs and shove you in a closet, and leave you there until you finish that book.”

Slowly nodding, Mikey said, “I liked the first deal better.”

“I thought you would,” Sebastian murmured, gesturing for her to get on with it.

With a heavy sigh and an adorable grumble that had his lips twitching, Mikey said, “I told them that they expect too much from you,” making him frown.

“That’s it?” Sebastian asked, because there had to be more to it than that.

For the past three years, he’d told them that there was nothing wrong with him and that he didn’t need therapy, but they’d refused to listen and now...

Now, he wasn’t sure what to think.

“Well, that and I told them that they should beat you,” Mikey said, nodding.

“Of course, you did,” Sebastian murmured absently as he glanced back to find his father laughing at something Uncle Jason said and...

“Honestly, I think you took them by surprise with that freak comment,” Mikey said, drawing his attention back to find her gesturing with the baseball in her hand to get on with it.

For a moment, Sebastian considered changing the subject, but he knew that she’d just go to his brothers or one of his cousins and ask them. Knowing that he didn’t have much of a choice, he said, “Have you heard about the Bradford curse?”

“Does it have something to do with your inability to stop stealing my food?” Mikey asked, looking thoughtful.

“No, it has nothing to do with that,” Sebastian said, waving that off.

“Okay, so then what is it?” Mikey asked while he sat there, debating the best way to

explain this without making things weird between them.

That led him to wondering how she'd managed to be around his family for three years without learning about the Bradford curse. Then again, that probably had something to do with him, Sebastian thought as he glanced over at Jonathan, wondering why his brother hadn't told Mikey about the curse just to screw him over. Probably because Jonathan knew that he would kill him, Sebastian thought as he shifted his attention back to Mikey.

"Sometime back in the 1800's, my great-grandparents grew up on neighboring estates in England and from what I've been told, they took great joy out of tormenting each other. They'd made each other's lives a living hell. It got so bad that they were forbidden to be in the same room when they were little, but that apparently wasn't enough to stop them. They found ways to torment each other until they'd finally had enough and began avoiding each other."

"They didn't see each other again until they were both forced to attend the same ball. From what I've been told, they hadn't been able to take their eyes off each other. When they realized who they were, they were furious and that probably would have been the end of it if fate hadn't thrown them together. They continued making each other's lives a living hell as though they'd never stopped and fell in love in the process. Since then, every Bradford has met the same fate," Sebastian said, carefully choosing his words.

"And what fate is that?" Jonathan asked around a hot dog as he dropped down on the chaise lounge next to them.

"Nothing," Sebastian said with a glare that told his brother to leave it alone since he had no plans on telling Mikey everything. He knew better than to tell her anything that she could use to torture him with later, and he knew damn well that she would torture him if she ever found out more about the Bradford curse.

“Sebastian was just telling me about the Bradford curse,” Mikey said, moving over to make room for him.

“Oh, and why were we doing that?” Jonathan asked in a deceptively casual tone as his eyes danced with amusement while Sebastian sat there, inwardly cursing himself for not putting a stop to this when he had the chance.

“Because she asked,” Sebastian bit out.

“And what did you tell her?” Jonathan asked.

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“About your great-grandparents falling in love,” Mikey answered for him since Sebastian was busy glaring at his brother.

“Then I should probably take over from here,” Jonathan said with a sad shake of his head and a heartfelt sigh as though the prospect of screwing Sebastian over somehow pained him.

“Not necessary,” Sebastian bit out only to be ignored.

“Did he tell you that Bradfords don’t propose?” Jonathan asked, shifting so that he was facing Mikey.

“No, he didn’t get to that part yet,” Mikey said as she helped herself to a potato chip off Jonathan’s plate.

“Then I got here just in time,” Jonathan said, taking his time finishing off his hot dog as Sebastian sat there, contemplating killing the little bastard.

“Why don’t they propose?” Mikey asked Jonathan as he stuffed the last bite of hot dog in his mouth.

“Because if they’re thinking clearly enough to propose then they’re not really in love,” Sebastian answered, hoping that it would be enough to appease the little brat.

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It wasn’t.

“So, no Bradford has ever proposed?” Mikey asked, frowning in confusion.

“There have been a few...” Jonathan let his words trail off as he shot Sebastian a look that was going to get him killed.

“What happened?” Mikey asked, glancing between the two of them as she waited for an answer.

“It didn’t end well,” Sebastian said, gesturing for her to start reading.

Frowning, she glanced at Jonathan expectantly. With a shrug, he said, “They ended in disaster before they even made it to the altar. Uncle Eric tried, but ended up dumping his fiancée at the dinner rehearsal.”

“Wait. Uncle Eric dumped Aunt Morgan at the wedding rehearsal?” Mikey asked, looking adorably confused.

“No, Uncle Eric was engaged before he married Aunt Morgan, which brings us to rule number two,” Jonathan said as he held up two fingers. “Bradforde elope.”

When Mikey opened her mouth to ask a question, Jonathan cut her off with, “Or it ends in divorce. They also don’t go on honeymoons until after the first year.”

“But my mom and Reese went on a honeymoon right after they got married,” Mikey pointed out.

“And how did that end?” Jonathan asked even though they all knew how it ended.

Badly.

Uncle Reese ended up trying to surprise Aunt Kasey with a trip to the Bahamas,

which ended with them both being detained by customs, losing all their luggage, losing their original resort reservations and ended up getting kicked out in the middle of the night from the only motel they'd been able to find a room, and somehow ended up spending the night in jail.

Blinking, Mikey whispered, "We do not speak of it."

Nodding, Jonathan said, "Exactly."

"Okay, so Bradfords don't propose, they don't have traditional weddings, and they can't go on honeymoons until a year after they get married, is that it?" Mikey asked, pursing her lips up as she thought it over while Sebastian sent Jonathan a look that told him that he'd better keep his mouth shut.

With a mouthed, "I won't tell," and a wink in Sebastian's direction, Jonathan climbed off the chaise lounge with a nod and an absently mumbled, "Pretty much," that had Mikey frowning as she glanced back at Cole, who was sitting off to the side, glaring at the house next door.

"That doesn't make sense," Mikey said, gesturing to Cole as she looked back at Jonathan. "What does this so-called curse have to do with Jessica calling that girl Cole's future wife?"

"Does she live next door?" Jonathan asked, making a show of studying his nails as Sebastian shook his head, vowing to kill the little bastard if he said another word.

"Yes, why?" Mikey said slowly, clearly wondering what that had to do with anything.

"Just a lucky guess," Jonathan said, shrugging it off as he turned around and headed toward the backyard where Mathew and their cousin Joshua were tossing a football.

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Slowly exhaling, Sebastian turned his attention back to Mikey and—

“Oh, I almost forgot something,” Jonathan said as he turned around.

“What’s that?” Mikey absently asked as she opened her book and settled in to read right around the time that Sebastian found himself moving, desperate to get to his brother before he could screw him over and—

“Bradfords only marry their neighbors.”

Chapter 15

“Why?” Chloe asked no one in particular as she rubbed her hands down her face, slowly exhaling as she counted to ten and—

“You’ve betrayed me for the last time!” came the announcement from behind the locked front door that had Chloe dropping her hands away to glare at the reason why she was panicking.

“I betrayed you?” Chloe asked in disbelief because if anyone here had been betrayed, it was her. “You told him that I thought he was cute!”

“Because you do!” Katie shot back from behind the safety of the front door.

“No, I don’t,” Chloe bit out only to demand. “Why did you tell him that?”

“Because you’re always staring at him!”

“Glaring!” Chloe snapped. “I’m always glaring at him!”

“Same thing!”

“No, it’s really not,” Chloe said, sighing heavily as she stood there, rubbing her hands roughly down her face as she told herself that this wasn’t happening.

It just couldn’t be...

There was no way that her life was about to get worse than it already was. It just wasn’t possible, she told herself as she dropped her hands away. God, she hated her life, Chloe thought on a groan only to follow that up by wondering if she wasn’t making too much of this.

Maybe Cole hadn’t heard Katie? Or maybe he really just didn’t care? That was possible, Chloe told herself with a slow nod and the reminder that he barely knew that she was alive. With any luck, he wouldn’t mention it to his friends, Chloe hoped as she slowly exhaled trying not to panic, but it was kind of impossible since she knew what would happen if Cole ever told his friends what her little sister said.

They would make her life a living hell.

Not that they weren’t already doing that anyway, but something told her that if they found out what Katie said that they’d make it a hell of a lot worse and she really didn’t think that she could handle that. For probably the hundredth time this week, Chloe wondered if she’d be better off transferring to the public high school, but...

That really wasn’t really an option.

She’d worked her butt off to get into Latin Scribe High School. For four years, she’d worked her butt off, got good grades, studied day and night so that she could nail the

entrance exam, and did every extracurricular activity that she could fit into her schedule all so that she could make her application stand apart from the rest with the hope that it would be enough to get her a full scholarship.

And once her dream finally became a reality...

Cole's friends had turned it into a nightmare, making her life a living hell and making her wish that she'd never heard of Latin Scribe High School. It would be so easy to tell her uncle that she wanted to transfer, but then she would have to tell him why and she really didn't think that was a good idea considering that Cole's grandfather was his boss.

God, why couldn't she just be invisible?

Knowing that it was pointless to worry about something that she had no control over, Chloe checked under the doormat for the key that was supposed to be hidden there and wasn't really surprised when she couldn't find it.

"You interfered with my business," came the disgruntled announcement that had Chloe looking up and biting back a groan when she spotted Katie standing in the window, holding the spare key.

"Uncle Nick told you to let it go," Chloe reminded her as she stood up while she tried to figure out how she was going to get in the house now.

"Uncle Nick also told you to watch me," Katie pointed out with a smug smile as Chloe considered her options and realized that she really didn't have any.

Not unless she wanted to try climbing to the second floor to see if she could squeeze through the bathroom window and she really didn't want to do that, mostly because she wasn't a big fan of heights. That left...

“I guess I’ll just have to tell Santa Claus what you did,” Chloe said with a sad shake of her head.

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“You wouldn’t dare!” Katie said with a small gasp of outrage that had Chloe biting back a smile.

“Oh, but I would,” Chloe said, taking immense satisfaction in seeing the glare on her sister’s face, “I really would.”

Katie didn’t say anything for a minute, but then again, she didn’t have to, not when they both knew that she would never do anything to risk pissing off Santa Claus. She would—

“Then I better go make sure that it’s worth it!” came the announcement that had Chloe panicking as she watched her little sister suddenly disappear back behind the curtains.

“Katie?” Chloe said, licking her l

ips nervously as she shifted her attention to the other windows as she tried the front door again only to bite back a curse as she pushed away from the door and—

Got the wind knocked out of her when she ran into something solid. Before she fell back against the front door, a strong pair of hands wrapped around her arms to steady her. With a murmured, “Thank you,” Chloe moved to step back and...and...

“Where’s the little demon?” Cole Bradford, the boy that she’d rather avoid, asked, barely acknowledging her as he reached past her and knocked on the front door.

“Slowly destroying my will to live,” Chloe mumbled hollowly because this could not

be happening.

“I know the feeling,” Cole said, slowly exhaling as he reached up and rubbed the back of his neck while she stood there, unable to help but wonder one thing...

“Umm, what are you doing here?” Chloe asked, glancing from the boy that she wanted nothing to do with to the window as the curtains parted so that Katie could press her small face against the glass with a murderous glare.

“Paying off the little demon,” Cole said, reaching into his pocket and pulled a five dollar bill out and held it up for Katie’s inspection.

After a moment, Katie slowly stepped back, allowing the curtains to fall back in place. When Chloe heard the telltale click of the lock being turned, she pushed past Cole, grabbed the door handle and shoved the front door open, and–

Wondered where her sister was.

Damn it!

“Katie?” Chloe called as she glanced around the front foyer, looking for the little girl that had gone too far this time.

“Where the hell did she go?” Cole asked as he closed the front door behind them.

“Into hiding,” Chloe said as she started up the stairs to check Katie’s usual hiding spots when the sound of a door opening on rusty hinges caught her attention.

She wouldn’t...

God, who was she kidding? Of course, she would, Chloe thought, shaking her head in

disgust as she headed back down the stairs and made her way to the kitchen even as she was tempted to leave her sister down there until Uncle Nick came home, but...

Chloe couldn't do that to her sister no matter how much she pissed her off.

Katie was terrified of the basement, not that Chloe could blame her since it wasn't exactly her favorite room in the house either. Whenever Katie ventured down into the basement, which wasn't very often, it usually ended with Chloe being forced to rescue her.

At least she wouldn't have to tear the house apart to find her, Chloe thought as she headed for the basement door that had been left open. That was something at least, Chloe told herself as she paused by the door to flick on the basement light before forcing herself to go down the stairs and—

“What was that?” the teenage boy that she'd forgotten about asked as Chloe slowly turned around, telling herself that this day couldn't possibly get any worse only to find herself trapped in the basement.

With Cole Bradford.

*_*_*_*

He was going to kill Jonathan, Sebastian decided as he followed Mikey's curious gaze to find her watching his brother and—

“That explains so much,” Mikey said in a thoughtful tone, dragging his attention away from the little bastard hiding behind their mother.

“What explains so much?” Sebastian asked as he absently tapped his thumb against the book that he'd helped himself to from Aunt Haley's and Uncle's Jason's

bookshelf.

“Everything,” Mikey said on a wistful sigh as she continued to gaze dreamily at Jonathan. “God, our children are going to be so beautiful.”

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And just like that he was done, Sebastian decided as he stood up, glaring down at the little brat. “Read,” he bit out before he turned around and headed to one of the empty tables on the other side of the patio.

“Oh, come on. I was kidding!” Mikey called after him.

“Just read the damn book,” was all he said as he dropped his book on an empty table and headed over to the food, determined to ignore the little brat.

“Aw, don’t be like that, Sebastian. You know you’re my favorite,” Mikey said, somewhat appeasing him.

Somewhat.

When he didn’t say anything, mostly because she didn’t deserve his forgiveness, Mikey finally mumbled, “Fine.” He glanced over his shoulder in time to watch her release a long-suffering sigh as she opened the book and settled in to read. When he saw her lips pull down into an adorable pout, Sebastian found himself grabbing a plate for her and—

“Don’t tell me that you actually believe that crap,” came the question that had Sebastian looking to his left to find the kid that he was assuming was Aunt Haley’s nephew reaching past him to grab a soda. Before Sebastian could respond, he was walking back to his table and dropping down into his chair with a bored sigh. Not that he actually had a response, Sebastian thought as he found himself watching Mikey.

Once upon a time, he honestly hadn’t thought much about the Bradford curse but

now...

Now, he was wondering what he'd done to piss Mrs. Blaine off, Sebastian thought as he caught Mrs. Blaine watching him. Biting back a sigh, he finished making up a plate for Mikey and grabbed one for himself. When he was done, he placed Mikey's plate on the chair next to her before heading back to his table. Once he was there, he took a bite of his burger, opened the book he'd borrowed, and—

“Why did you do it?” came the abruptly asked question that had Sebastian glancing up to find Mrs. Blaine sitting across from him, her hands folded over the cane resting across the armrests of her wheelchair, watching him through narrowed eyes.

“Because it needed to be done,” Sebastian said as he glanced over his shoulder to make sure that Mikey was still reading only to find himself smiling when she mumbled, “Stupid book,” as she popped a chip in her mouth.

“How much do you want?” Mrs. Blaine demanded, dragging his attention back to find her watching him with a calculating expression.

“Nothing,” Sebastian said as he went back to reading his book.

For several minutes, Mrs. Blaine sat there, watching him, looking as though she was trying to figure something out. Whatever she saw, had her sighing heavily as she said, “I'd like a Coke.”

“Not happening,” Sebastian absently murmured as he popped a chip into his mouth.

“And why's that?” Mrs. Blaine asked, still watching him.

“Because you're not supposed to have caffeine,” he reminded her as he turned the page.

“A hundred dollars,” she said, making him sigh.

“No.”

“Two hundred dollars.”

“No.”

“Three hundred,” Mrs. Blaine said firmly, drawing his attention to find her watching him expectantly.

“Five hundred,” he countered, watching as a flash of something that looked like disappointment crossed her features before she managed to pull it back.

With a firm nod, she said, “Five hundred.”

Without a word, Sebastian walked back over to the coolers and grabbed some ice, threw it in a cup and poured some lemonade. Once he was done, he walked back over to the table and set the cup down in front of Mrs. Blaine. Biting back a sigh, he sat down, determined to get back to his book and—

“This isn’t what I asked for,” she said, sounding amused.

“No, it’s not,” Sebastian said, searching for the spot where he’d left off only to feel everything in him go still when he heard, “Thank you, Braxton,” and found himself looking over in time to see Aunt Haley’s nephew place a can of Coke in front of Mrs. Blaine.

“She’s not supposed to have soda,” Sebastian said as he reached over and plucked the can of Coke off the table before Mrs. Blaine could get her hands on it.

“She can have whatever she wants,” Braxton said as his gaze flickered past Sebastian.

Frowning, Sebastian followed Braxton’s gaze to find him looking toward the rest of Haley’s family to find a man with the same dark hair and light blue eyes as Braxton nodding approvingly and just like that, Sebastian knew why Aunt Haley’s family suddenly couldn’t live without her.

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It had nothing to do with Aunt Haley and everything to do with manipulating the elderly woman sitting across from him, and he had a bad feeling that he knew why. He just hoped that he was wrong.

“No, she can’t,” Sebastian said, keeping his gaze locked on Braxton as he popped open the Coke and took a sip.

“Says who?” Braxton demanded.

“Says her doctor,” Sebastian said firmly, wondering just how far he would go. Mrs. Blaine had a heart condition and Aunt Haley made sure that everyone in the family knew it to ensure that her grandmother couldn’t get her hands on anything that would interfere with her medication.

When Braxton moved to grab another Coke, Sebastian stopped him with a quietly spoken, “If you give her something that could hurt her and you end up making Aunt Haley cry, it will be the last thing that you ever do.”

Grinding his jaw, Braxton shot him a murderous glare before he turned around and stormed off while Sebastian watched him, making sure that he wasn’t about to try anything else. Once Braxton disappeared from sight, Sebastian shifted his attention back to his book only to feel someone watching him. Looking up, he found Mrs. Blaine watching him with that curious gleam back in her eye.

With a firm nod, she said, “I like you. You may call me Grandma,” before gesturing to her helper to roll her away, leaving him sitting there...confused.

Chapter 16

They were just trying to screw with her head, Mikey decided as she shifted her gaze from Sebastian, who was quietly reading a few tables away from her, to find Jonathan, along with Mathew and all their cousins watching her with knowing smiles and...

Definitely screwing with her, Mikey decided as she pulled the baseball out of her pocket and forced herself to read the book that she was beginning to fear would never end only to once again find herself watching Sebastian as she absently rolled the ball between her hands. This wouldn't be the first time that they'd tried screwing with her head.

They'd been doing it sinc

e she met them, which worked for her since she usually enjoyed screwing with their heads as well, but this...

They definitely had to be kidding.

She didn't know where they were going to end up when they were adults, but she knew enough to know that they probably wouldn't be living next to each other anymore. Sebastian would probably go off to attend some Ivy League school and end up living somewhere like New York or London while she ended up attending whatever college would give her the best chance to make it to the pros and once she graduated, she honestly didn't care where she ended up as long as she was able to play baseball for the rest of her life, which meant...

If what they said was true, then Sebastian would one day fall in love with someone else, who would probably have more in common with him and make him happy, and that was fine. More than fine, because Sebastian was her best friend and she wanted

him to be happy. That didn't mean that Mikey had to like whoever he ended up with, she told herself as she watched Sebastian head inside.

She considered following him and demanding some answers but the small group watching her every move, waiting for another chance to torment her, had her biting back a sigh. Besides, she had better things to do than to sit around wondering if they were screwing with her head. With that in mind, Mikey forced herself to focus back on the book in her lap even as she mumbled, "Stupid Bradford curse."

"You're Mikey, right?" came the question as the boy that had been glaring at everyone all afternoon sat down next to her. "I'm Braxton."

"That's me," Mikey said, biting back a sigh when she realized that she had no idea what she'd just read. With a groan, she flipped back to the previous page and...flipped back again until she found a page that actually made sense to her.

"I saw you play last year in the Chase Tournament. You have a pretty good arm," Braxton said as Mikey checked how many pages she had left to read.

"Thanks. Do you play?" Mikey absently asked as she mentally calculated how many pages that she was going to have to read between today and tomorrow and—

"First base," Braxton said as he reached over and plucked the baseball out of her hand.

Blinking, Mikey looked from her empty hand to the boy absently tossing her ball in the air and catching it. "That's my ball," she mumbled hollowly as she tried to make sense out of what was happening.

"Let's go play catch and you can show me that fastball of yours," Braxton said, tossing the ball in the air and—

“I’m gonna have to pass,” Mikey said as she reached out and snatched the ball out of the air before he had a chance to catch it.

“Why?” Braxton demanded with a look that told her that he wasn’t used to hearing no.

“Because I have to finish this book for school and I promised that I wouldn’t,” Mikey said, shoving the ball back in her pocket as she shifted her attention back to the book that was going to take a miracle to finish in time.

“Come on, just ten minutes,” Braxton said, sounding annoyed.

“No,” she said firmly, determined to get through this damn book so that she could—

“Whatever. You probably throw like a girl anyway,” Braxton said and just like that, Mikey decided that she could spare ten minutes to teach the jerk a lesson.

*_*_*_*

Source Creation Date: July 15, 2025, 6:33 am

“Open the door, Katie. I have your money,” Cole bit out between clenched teeth as he fought against the urge to pound his fists against the door, afraid that he’d scare the little girl that was slowly making his life a living hell.

“No, you don’t! You only have five dollars!” Katie snapped from the safety of the other side of the locked basement door.

“I can get the rest of the money if you let me out,” Cole said as he glared at the door, imagining all the things that he was going to do to the little brat once he escaped.

“You should have paid me my dollar in the first place!”

“And I would have if you hadn’t handed me a cup of water and called it lemonade!”

“That was the secret ingredient!” the little brat shouted back as Cole released a frustrated groan and forced himself to turn around and head back downstairs before he said something that he would regret.

With a heavy sigh, Cole sat back down on the cold cement floor with a muttered, “Your little sister is evil,” as he glared up at the basement door that the little demon had slammed shut over an hour ago.

“I know,” the girl that he really didn’t want to be locked in a basement with mumbled sadly as she continued to stare helplessly up at the locked basement door.

At least she’d stopped mumbling, “I really hate my life,” Cole thought since it had been a bit concerning for a little while there. God, he had to get out of here, he

thought, biting back a sigh because the last thing that he needed right now was to be locked in a basement with Chloe Anderson, especially now that he knew that she wanted him.

Not that he could blame her, Cole thought as he risked a glance to his right to find her staring helplessly up at the basement door. As flattered as he was that she wanted him, she just wasn't his type, he thought, biting back a sigh as he ran his eyes over her, taking in her honey-gold blonde hair, her baby-blue eyes hidden behind a pair of gold-rimmed glasses, the way she worried her teeth over her bottom lip that looked soft, down to the baggy T-shirt and worn jeans that hinted at a figure and back again.

She was definitely cute, but sadly, he just wasn't into cute. Even if he was, he wouldn't be interested in Chloe. She was quiet, barely said a word in class, always had her nose in a book, and definitely was not his type, which brought him back to the real reason that he came here today.

He should probably get this over with.

With that in mind, Cole slowly exhaled as he tried to think of a way to break this to her gently only to realize that he wasn't going to be able to do this without breaking her heart. Really hoping that she didn't cry, he opened his mouth and—

“Do you have your phone with you?” Chloe asked, not bothering to take her gaze off the basement door.

“No,” Cole quickly said, clearing his throat as he discreetly reached down and made sure that his phone wasn't sticking out of his pocket, because the last thing that he needed was for his family to find out that the little demon trapped him in a basement with Chloe.

He would never live it down.

Sighing heavily, Chloe turned her attention to the large basement that they were currently trapped in with a muttered, “There has to be a way out of here.”

There wasn’t, but he wasn’t going to say anything, mostly because he was debating whether he should wait until they were out of here before he said anything to her. If Cole waited, then he probably wouldn’t have to worry about seeing her cry since he would be able to leave, but...

This was going to be hard enough for her to hear. He didn’t want to do this in front of anyone and make this more difficult than it needed to be. It would just be easier to get this over with now. God, he wished that he didn’t have to do this, but what choice did he have? The longer that he let this go on, the worse it was going to be for her.

Telling himself that he was doing the right thing, Cole said, “Chloe, we have to talk.”

“No, we don’t. She’s my sister, which means that I’m the one that gets to beat her,” Chloe said as she stood up and after a heavy sigh, moved to go up the stairs only to go still when he said, “I’m not interested in you.”

For a moment, she simply stood there with her back to him and then slowly, oh so freaking slowly, she turned around and said, “What?” looking truly confused.

Biting back a sigh because this wasn’t going the way that he’d hoped, Cole said, “I’m just not into you, Chloe. I’m sorry.”

Blinking, she said, “Why exactly are you telling me this?”

“Because I don’t want you to get your hopes up,” Cole said with a sympathetic shake of his head as he added another, “Sorry,” because he really didn’t know what else to sa

y.

“Hold on,” Chloe said, raising her hand to stop him. “You actually think that I like you?”

When he shrugged, she slowly shook her head with a mumbled, “Unbelievable,” as she turned back around and headed up the stairs, leaving him sitting there wondering if that was it?

That was...

Easier than he'd thought, Cole mused, sighing in relief only to frown when Chloe calmly said, “Katie, if you open this door right now, I'll let you throw the expired eggs that I tossed in the trashcan last night at Cole and I'll even tell Uncle Nick that I'm the one that did it if he finds out.”

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Frowning, Cole heard the telltale click of a lock seconds before the basement door was opened and—

“Thank you,” Chloe murmured quietly as she stepped into the kitchen as Cole got to his feet and—

“Damn it!” he snapped when the first egg slammed into him. By the time the second egg hit, he was trying not to gag as the scent of rotten eggs hit him. By the third egg, he was making his way up the stairs, cursing Chloe to hell and back and by the time he made it to the kitchen, he was ready to kill someone.

Chapter 17

“Oh, that can’t be good,” Sebastian said, taking in the empty chair where he’d left Mikey before shifting his attention to the rest of the backyard, noting that none of his brothers or cousins were back here and...

Definitely couldn’t be good.

Trying not to panic, and it was always difficult not to panic when Mikey was involved, Sebastian grabbed her abandoned book and shoved it in his sweatshirt before he headed back inside the house, hoping that he’d somehow missed them when he came out. After a quick search of the kitchen, the living room, and his cousins’ bedrooms, he was biting back a curse as he walked out the front door, praying that he was wrong as he headed toward the park.

When he heard the collective groans a few minutes later, he bit back a curse and

moved his ass faster. He cut through the playground and the basketball courts and—

“Damn it!” Braxton gasped in pain as he shoved his baseball glove off so that he could hug his hand, which was already turning an interesting shade of red, against his chest.

“Is something wrong?” Mikey, who looked adorably pissed, asked, blinking innocently at the boy that was glaring in her direction while Sebastian’s brothers and cousins laughed their asses off.

“No,” Braxton bit out, looking like he wanted to throttle Mikey as he leaned over and snatched his glove off the ground and shoved his hand back inside.

“Then let’s see what you got,” Mikey said, gesturing with the baseball glove that one of his cousins must have lent her to throw the ball.

Glaring, Braxton grabbed the ball off the ground, straightened, and with a look that told Sebastian just how pissed the kid was at Mikey, he pulled back his arm and let the ball soar through the air.

With barely a flick of her wrist, Mikey easily caught the ball, further pissing the kid off as Sebastian shot Jonathan a glare as he headed toward Mikey.

“You want to keep going or have you had enough?” Mikey asked, tossing the ball in the air and catching it, looking bored while she waited for an answer.

“Just throw the damn ball,” Braxton bit out, holding up his glove as he struggled not to grimace.

Shrugging, Mikey said, “Okay,” as she pulled back her arm and sent the ball flying. Barely a second later, there was another, “Goddamnit!” as the ball slammed into

Braxton's glove. That was followed by sympathetic groans from their audience, right around the time that Mikey finally noticed him.

"Uh-oh..." she murmured, noticeably swallowing as she shifted, licked her lips nervously, and shifted her feet again as she did her best to discreetly shove her glove off her hand.

"We had a deal," Sebastian reminded her as he came closer.

"We did," Mikey said, nodding solemnly as she kicked the glove behind her. "But, umm, I just thought that some fresh air would help clear my head so that I could better focus on the book."

"You were reading outside," Sebastian said evenly, watching as she barely managed to catch a wince.

"And now, I'm ready to go back," Mikey said, smiling brightly as she moved to step past him only to end up gasping in pain as she grabbed her side and fell to the ground.

It took Sebastian a moment to figure out what happened, and when he did, he glanced over to find Braxton watching them, looking shocked as something like regret flashed across his features only to disappear so fast that Sebastian wondered if he'd imagined it. When the little prick said, "She should have been watching," a second later, Sebastian found himself heading for him, ready to knock that smug look off his face and by the looks of it, so were his brothers and cousins.

He barely managed to take a step in the little bastard's direction when something went flying past his head. A second later, Braxton released a gasp of pain as he grabbed his stomach and dropped to the ground, hard. Frowning, Sebastian looked back in time to see Mikey walking toward them with her hand pressed against her side, looking like she didn't have a care in the world.

With a satisfied sigh, she reached down and picked up her ball with a mumbled, “Good game,” as she stepped over Braxton, who was currently in the fetal position, and headed back the way they came. She barely made it two feet before she suddenly stopped with a murmured, “This just won’t do,” and turned around to face him.

When Sebastian opened his mouth to ask her if she was okay, Mikey gestured for him to turn around. Eyes narrowing on the little brat, Sebastian reluctantly turned around and felt his lips twitch when Mikey used Braxton’s battered body as a stepping stool to climb onto his back.

Once she was settled and her arms were wrapped around him, Mikey said, “You may carry me back,” releasing one arm so that she could regally wave for him to get on with it.

“You’re too good to me,” Sebastian drawled as he shot the little bastard curled up on the ground one last glare.

“I know,” Mikey said with a long-suffering sigh that had his lips twitching even as he decided that it might not be in their best interest to return to the party. Decision made, Sebastian turned around and headed home, even as he contemplated throwing the little brat in the closet to keep her out of trouble.

*_*_*_*

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“I can’t believe that arrogant–Argh!” Chloe bit out only to end with a groan, unable to think of a word fitting enough to describe the arrogant jackass as she grabbed another armful of dirty laundry from the hamper and shoved it into the washing machine.

And god, was he arrogant, Chloe thought in disgust as she shoved more clothes into the washing machine, slammed the cover shut, turned on the machine, and–

“What the hell is your problem?” Cole demanded as he angrily wiped rotten egg off his face.

Shaking her head in disgust, Chloe pushed past him and left because she honestly couldn’t deal with him right now. The hour she’d spent in the basement with him had been more than enough to last a lifetime, Chloe decided as she cut through the living room and spotted Katie relaxing on the couch, watching Harry Potter. Knowing that Cole wouldn’t really hurt her, Chloe headed up the stairs and went straight to her room, slamming the door shut behind her before she threw herself across her bed with a sigh.

When she heard the door open a few seconds later, she looked over her shoulder to tell her sister to get out only to bite back a groan when she spotted Cole walking into her room.

“We weren’t done talking,” he bit out as he closed her bedroom door behind him.

“We really were,” Chloe said, biting back a sigh as she reached over and dragged the chemistry book that she’d been reading when this nightmare started, closer.

“I was trying to be nice to you and let you down gently,” Cole snapped.

“And now that you have, you can leave,” she said in absolutely no mood to deal with this right now.

She just wanted him to leave her alone.

“Look, I wasn’t trying to hurt your feelings. I just—”

“And you did a great job,” Chloe said, gesturing toward the door. “So now you can leave.”

There was a heavy sigh and then, “I don’t understand why you’re being so difficult about this.”

“Then ask your friends,” Chloe said, shaking her head in disgust as she moved to turn the page only to end up glaring when the large jerk yanked her book away.

“What do my friends have to do with anything?” Cole demanded as he closed her book and tossed it on her desk.

“Besides the fact that you’re oblivious?” Chloe asked as she climbed off the bed, deciding that if he wasn’t going to leave, then she would.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Cole asked, slamming his hand against the door to stop her from leaving.

“Move,” she said, closing her eyes as she slowly exhaled, praying for patience only to end up chuckling without humor when he said, “What have my friends ever done to you?” because he couldn’t be serious.

“What have your friends done to me?” Chloe asked, opening her eyes as she turned around to face him. “Are you serious right now?”

“Deadly,” Cole bit out as he glared down at her as he dropped his arm away.

Nodding slowly, she asked, “How about the fact that they’ve gone out of their way for the past two years to make my life a living hell?”

“I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about,” Cole bit out, looking pissed as she reached back and opened the door.

“No, you don’t, do you?” Chloe said as she gestured for him to get the hell out of her room. “And that’s the problem.”

Chapter 18

“Oh, thank god it’s over,” Mikey said, sighing in relief as she closed the book that had taken her three days to finish and shoved it aside so that she could roll over onto her stomach and—

Groan when a set of strong hands clamped down around her ankles and dragged her across the bed. “Why are you doing this to me?” Mikey demanded on a pathetic whimper as she tried to grab hold of her comforter and drag herself back up to the comfort of her pillows for a well-deserved nap, but the mean boy who’d woken her u

p at the crack of dawn this morning had other plans.

“Come on, you’re almost done,” Sebastian said, ignoring her disgruntled grunt as he pulled her to the edge of her bed, rolled her over, and after a long-suffering sigh that she really didn’t appreciate, dragged her to her feet.

Once there, he turned her around and gave her a gentle shove in the direction of her computer. “Get writing,” Sebastian said with a satisfied sigh as he dropped down on her bed and grabbed a book off the stack that he kept on her nightstand.

“I can write it in the morning,” Mikey pointed out, moving to return to the comfort of her bed when Sebastian’s next words had her reluctantly turning around and forcing herself to cross the short distance to her desk.

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“It’s one in the morning,” he said as she dropped down in her chair with a sigh.

Deciding to make this short and sweet, Mikey turned on her computer, opened a blank Word document, put in all the necessary information and then gave a quick rundown of what happened in the book, making sure to add every adjective that she could think of before typing, “The End” with flourish. Once she was done, Mikey moved to hit print only to groan when she suddenly found herself being rolled away from the computer and the boy who oversaw her torture, shaking his head in disapproval as he read her book report.

“It’s less than a hundred words,” Sebastian said, frowning in confusion as he read her book report.

“Which I’m sure my teacher will appreciate,” Mikey pointed out as she moved her chair closer to the bed only to gasp in outrage when Sebastian deleted her book report.

“That will get you an F,” he said, closing the file only to open the internet browser, and after a quick search, he gestured to the screen. “This is what a book report should look like.”

Frowning, Mikey watched as he scrolled down the page...and kept scrolling. “Are you serious? That’s like three pages long,” Mikey said, unable to help but groan when Sebastian grabbed her chair and pushed her back in front of the computer.

“It will be over before you know it,” he lied, giving her a patronizing pat on the head before he walked away, leaving her sitting there, feeling her shoulders slump in

defeat as she stared at the screen.

After a moment, she sighed and reminded herself what was at stake here. It was just one book report. She could do this, Mikey told herself with a firm nod as she opened another Word document and followed the directions on the book report template. Once she was done, Mikey sighed with relief and hit print only to groan a few minutes later when Sebastian plucked the book report out of her hands and went through it with a pen. Once he was done, he handed it back to her and had her groaning pathetically again as she turned back around in her chair and set to work.

An hour later, Mikey was exhausted, seeing double, but she was finally done. Rubbing her hands down her face, she turned her chair around and found Sebastian passed out on her bed. God, he was so damn bossy, but he was also the best friend she'd ever had, Mikey thought as she turned her chair around and after a quick Google search and a few clicks, found what she was looking for.

After a quick glance over her shoulder to make sure that Sebastian was still sleeping, Mikey turned her attention back to her computer. She clicked the link, opening a blank email and did the only thing that she could think of to help Sebastian, hoping that it would be enough, but if it wasn't...

Then she'd find another way.

*_*_*_*

Just let this be over, Mikey thought later that morning as she struggled to keep her eyes open so that she could watch Mr. Rose as he graded her book report. She felt her eyelids grow heavy as her head dropped forward only to force her eyes back open when she saw Mr. Rose reach for the red marker. Worrying her bottom lip, Mikey watched as he picked up the marker only to decide against it and put it back down and grabbed the red pen instead.

For several minutes, Mr. Rose sat there, reading her paper only to periodically look up at her, frown, look back down at her paper again and shake his head in wonder as Mikey did her best not to panic. She was exhausted, a tad cranky, and fully prepared to cry if she had to do it over again and she really hoped that she didn't have to do it over again.

"Mikey, can I talk to you for a minute?" Mr. Rose asked just as the lunch bell rang.

Nodding, Mikey took a steadying breath as she grabbed her bag and got to her feet only to wonder why her friends were always throwing her pitying looks whenever a teacher wanted to talk to her. She should probably be concerned about that, Mikey thought as she watched Mr. Rose sit back in his chair as he gestured to her paper.

"Who wrote that?"

"I did?" she said, wondering why that came off as a question.

"You did?" Mr. Rose asked, looking skeptical as he glanced back down at her paper.

"Every life-altering word," Mikey said, nodding solemnly.

"And you read the book?" he asked, throwing her a questioning look as he reached over and picked up her book report.

"Unfortunately," she said with a helpless shrug.

"How did you manage that?" Mr. Rose asked, looking curious.

"Desperation," Mikey said, making his lips twitch.

"Who helped you with your book report?" he absently asked as he picked up her

book report and took another look at it.

“My best friend.”

“And did your best friend read the book for you?” Mr. Rose asked, throwing her another questioning look.

“No, he slowly destroyed my will to live by making me finish reading it on my own,” Mikey said with a sad shake of her head.

“It’s well-written,” Mr. Rose pointed out, tossing her book report back on his desk.

“Apparently there’s a format for writing book reports,” Mikey told him.

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“Imagine that,” he drawled, looking amused as he considered her for a moment.

“Can I go to tryouts today?” Mikey asked, forcing the words out of her mouth as she stood there trying not to panic because she honestly didn’t know what she would do if he said no.

Besides cry that is, she amended a moment later when he reached for the red pen. She watched as Mr. Rose took his time going over her book report and just when she thought that she was going to be sick, he flipped back to the first page and–

“Good luck at tryouts, Mikey,” Mr. Rose said with a warm smile as he wrote an A at the top of her paper and handed it to her.

Mikey slowly looked down at the paper in her hands, her gaze zeroing in on that A before shifting to Mr. Rose, back to her paper, back to Mr. Rose, and–

“Thank you!” Mikey yelled over her shoulder as she booked it out of there, afraid that he’d change his mind.

As soon as she made it out of the room, Mikey slowly exhaled as she glanced back down at her book report and felt her lips pull up into a pleased smile. She did it! She actually managed to pull this off, Mikey realized in a daze even as she quickened her pace, eager to tell Sebastian.

She quickly made her way to the cafeteria and headed for the shortest line that she could find all while glancing every which way, looking for Sebastian. When she didn’t see him, Mikey grabbed a plastic tray and shifted her attention back to the

lunch line, willing it to move faster as she anxiously tapped her thumbs against the tray. The lunch lady barely had a chance to open her mouth before Mikey was asking for a double lunch, grabbing two milks, some fruit, and two brownies and shoving them on her tray.

With an absently murmured, “Thank you,” Mikey paid for her food, grabbed her tray and headed for a table in the back. Once she was there, she placed the tray on the table, dropped her bag on the floor and—

Threw herself into Sebastian’s arms when he suddenly appeared by her side.

Chapter 19

“You are the best!” Mikey said, hugging him tightly only to drop her arms away before he got a chance to wrap his arms around her.

“I take it that you did well on your book report,” Sebastian said, trying not to

think about how good it felt to have her in his arms as he sat down across from her.

“I really did,” Mikey said, nodding as she grabbed one of the chocolate milks off the tray.

“So, that means you can go to tryouts?” Sebastian asked as he helped himself to a chicken nugget.

Nodding, she said, “It also means that we can finally focus on all those things that you don’t want to talk about.”

“There’s nothing to talk about,” he said, popping the chicken nugget into his mouth as he glared at the little pain in the ass, hoping that it would be enough to get her to

drop it.

“And yet, we’re going to talk about it anyway,” the stubborn pain in the ass said with a look that dared him to argue with her as she plucked a chicken nugget off the tray and ate it.

“Shouldn’t we talk about tryouts?” Sebastian asked, hoping to distract her.

“Please don’t make me hurt you,” Mikey said, throwing him a pitying look that had him narrowing his eyes on her.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a pain in the ass?” Sebastian bit out.

Nodding solemnly, she said, “All the time,” making him chuckle as he helped himself to the other chocolate milk.

“Fine. What do you want to know, brat?”

“What are you going to do about school?” Mikey asked as she selected a French fry.

“I’m not sure yet,” Sebastian admitted as he reached over and plucked the fry out of her hand.

Grumbling, she grabbed another fry and quickly popped it in her mouth before he could steal it.

“I think you should keep trying,” Mikey said as though he really had a choice.

“And if I don’t get in?” Sebastian asked, because he honestly didn’t know what he would do if he didn’t get in at this point.

“You will,” she said with a firm nod.

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“And if I don’t...” he said, letting his words trail off because it was time that they faced reality.

He was screwed.

“You’re not getting your GED and going to work for Uncle Jared,” Mikey said, looking adorably pissed.

“Both of our fathers work for Uncle Jared,” he pointed out, wondering why she was making such a big deal out of this.

His father ended up dropping out of school when he was sixteen and went to work for Uncle Jared. His father had busted his ass to make something of himself. He’d worked hard, saving every penny he could and managed to flip his first house a few years later. He owned several rental properties and flipped several houses every year, but he still worked for Uncle Jared because he loved what he did.

The same could be said for her stepfather. Uncle Reese had been a police officer a few years ago, but it wasn’t a good fit for him. He loved working with his hands and—

“It’s not what you’re meant to do,” Mikey said, shrugging it off.

“Then what am I meant to do?” Sebastian asked, because he would really love an answer.

For the past few years, he’d been wondering when he was finally going to stop screwing up his life and figure everything out, but so far, the only thing that he’d

figured out was that he couldn't keep doing this. He wished that he knew what he wanted. It would make everything a hell of a lot easier, Sebastian thought even as he couldn't help but wonder if Mikey had any idea just how lucky she was.

She knew exactly what she wanted to do for the rest of her life and...

He was jealous of her, Sebastian admitted to himself, biting back a sigh as he grabbed a fry. God, he was an idiot. He wanted Mikey to be happy and would do whatever it took to make sure that happened, but he just wished that—

“You're meant for something better,” Mikey said, looking thoughtful.

“Thanks for clearing that up,” he drawled absently as movement across the large cafeteria caught his attention and—

Damn it!

“Looks like it's time for me to go,” Sebastian said, grabbing his bag off the floor and pulled it back on as he kept his gaze locked on the teacher watching them from across the room.

“What's wrong?” Mikey asked, following his gaze only to bite out a curse that her mom would probably wring her neck for. “Mr. Jenkins, the vice principal,” she mumbled unhappily.

“Definitely time to go,” Sebastian said, swiping a brownie off the tray as he glanced toward the double doors that led to the hallway and calculated the odds of getting to them before Mr. Jenkins, who was now making his way toward them.

Not good, Sebastian decided as he shifted his attention to his left and damn near sighed with relief when he spotted the open double doors leading outside. He shot

Mikey a wink as he stole the second brownie and headed for the door.

“I’ll see you at tryouts?” Mikey asked, making him smile.

He threw over his shoulder, “Maybe,” and with that, he stepped outside and moved to turn to his right only to spot a teacher leaning against the wall, talking on her cell phone. Sebastian quickly turned the other way and made his way toward the back of the building only to take off at a run when he heard someone yell, “Hey, stop right there!”

Knowing just how badly this would end if he did, Sebastian raced toward the parking lot, grabbed his bike and quickly made his way to Aunt Haley’s house. That had been close, too close, Sebastian thought as he got off his bike and leaned it against a tree. He moved to head inside when a chime drew his attention. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and couldn’t help but smile when he saw the message waiting for him, letting him know that Mikey finally got her cell phone back.

You better be there!

God, she was so damn cute sometimes, Sebastian thought as he quickly responded with a, Maybe. Sliding his phone back in his pocket, he headed inside and groaned when he saw the pile of work waiting for him on the kitchen table. Aunt Haley liked to keep him busy, but thankfully, she also liked to keep him fed. With that in mind, he headed to the refrigerator and found the plate of homemade macaroni and cheese and meatloaf that she’d saved for him.

She really was the best, Sebastian thought with a heartfelt sigh as he removed the foil off the plate and placed it in the microwave. While he waited for his food to heat up, he decided to go see if Aunt Haley had anything else that she needed him to do. He headed into the living room and—

“Bastian!”

—found himself smiling when he spotted Hunter standing up in his playpen, holding his arms out to Sebastian with a huge grin on his chocolate-pudding-covered face. It looked like his little cousin managed to hide another chocolate pudding pack in his playpen, Sebastian mused, noting that his cousin was covered from head to toe in chocolate pudding. When he glanced over at the couch and found Aunt Haley fast asleep, he wasn’t exactly surprised.

Hunter was a handful, but thankfully, he was also a really sweet baby and easy to please. Sebastian pressed his finger to his lips and lightly whispered, “Shhhh,” with a pointed look at Aunt Haley. When Hunter nodded, Sebastian reached down and picked his cousin up and settled him on his hip before he reached down and plucked the empty chocolate pudding cup off the floor where his cousin had thrown it in an attempt to get rid of the evidence.

He was definitely a Bradford, Sebastian thought as he carried Hunter into the downstairs bathroom. It took him a half hour to finally get every last drop of chocolate pudding off his cousin, but once he was clean and in a fresh diaper, Sebastian carried Hunter into the kitchen and settled him in his highchair.

“Are you hungry?” Sebastian asked, smiling when Hunter nodded excitedly.

He heated his food up again in the microwave as he made Hunter a bottle. Once the food was done, Sebastian grabbed two spoons and settled in the chair next to Hunter. After he finished feeding Hunter and gave him another bath to get the macaroni and cheese out of his hair, Sebastian grabbed the book that Aunt Haley set out for him and read to Hunter until he fell asleep in his arms.

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Once Sebastian placed Hunter back in his playpen and found the other pudding pack that his little cousin had somehow managed to hide in his blankie, he went back into the kitchen and got to work. Two chapters on European history, an essay, and a quiz later, Sebastian realized how late it was. If he didn't move his ass, he was going to be—

Once again wondering why Mrs. Blaine was glaring at him. With an impatient sigh, she gestured with her cane for him to hurry up. "We're going to be late."

"Late for what?" Sebastian asked, unable to help but frown as he reached for his bag.

"Your friend has tryouts today, doesn't she?" Mrs. Blaine said, once again gesturing for him to hurry up as he stood there, wondering where her helper was.

"Yes, she does, Mrs. Blaine," Sebastian said, pulling his bag on only to bite back a smile when she narrowed her eyes on him and said, "I thought I told you to call me Grandma," with a look that dared him to refuse.

Knowing better than to argue with the woman, Sebastian said, "Yes, she does, Grandma," somewhat appeasing her.

Grandma, Sebastian thought, testing the foreign word in his mind as he carefully rolled Mrs. Blaine outside and headed toward the sidewalk. He'd never had use for the word before now. His father's mother had passed away before he was born and his mother grew up in foster care and had absolutely no idea who her parents were. His dad's father was still alive, but as far as Sebastian was concerned that piece of garbage wasn't his grandfather.

Not after what he'd put his father through.

He'd abandoned Sebastian's father before he was born and when he was in his life, which wasn't very often, he'd treated him like crap. When he found out that Sebastian's father was dyslexic, he'd stopped pretending that he was anything more than a disappointment. His father had been fifteen years old when his dad decided to slap him around. Uncle Jason had stepped in, taking the older man to the ground before the rest of the men in their family had stepped in and taken over.

Sebastian saw him from time to time around the library, but he'd never said a word to him

. He wasn't worth his time.

The closest thing that he'd ever had to a grandfather was Uncle Jared. All of the men in his family had stepped up for them, but Uncle Jared had always treated Sebastian's father like a son. He'd always been there for them, from the day that they were born, their birthdays, and everything in between. He always went out of his way to make them feel special.

"What do you know about me, Sebastian?" Mrs. Blaine asked as they made their way to the baseball fields next to the middle school.

"Besides the fact that you're insanely rich, stubborn, and for some reason, you're always glaring at me? Not much," he drawled, earning a surprised chuckle from her.

"My Harold would have liked you," she said with a firm nod, sounding pleased.

"Aunt Haley's grandfather?" Sebastian asked as they took the paved path that led to the baseball fields.

“Yes. Has Haley told you anything about him?” Mrs. Blaine asked as he carefully navigated the path to the benches that ran along the chain-link fence.

“Only that he was by far the greatest man that ever lived,” Sebastian said, chuckling as he parked her wheelchair next to a bench before he sat down next to her.

“He was a very good man,” Mrs. Blaine said with a warm smile as they watched the baseball tryouts start.

Sebastian was looking for Mikey when Mrs. Blaine took him by surprise.

“You remind me of him,” she said quietly.

“Your husband?” Sebastian asked, glancing at her to find her watching him.

Mrs. Blaine nodded absently as she returned her attention to watching the tryouts.

“Tell me about him,” Sebastian found himself saying.

“He would be so disappointed with me,” Mrs. Blaine said with a sad smile that had Sebastian frowning.

“Why?” Sebastian asked, because he couldn’t imagine anyone being disappointed in her after everything she’d managed to accomplish.

“When we started Blaine Industries, our hope was that our children would never know what it was like to go without. We wanted to give them everything that we never had and make sure that they had choices in life. We wanted to give them the world, but the problem was that they came to expect it. Believe it or not, Sebastian, we didn’t raise them that way. We taught our boys the value of hard work, made them earn their way, but somewhere along the line, we failed them.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because we didn’t raise them to behave this way,” Mrs. Blaine said with a sad smile only to add, “They’re using my great-grandson to try to soften me toward them and ensure their place in my will,” at his questioning look.

“Braxton?” Sebastian asked, wishing that he’d been wrong about that. He couldn’t imagine what it felt like to know that your family was just using you and he hated that she knew that it was happening.

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Nodding, she said, “And I’m going to let them,” taking him by surprise.

“Why?”

“Because Braxton deserves to be saved like my Haley,” Mrs. Blaine said with a fond smile for his aunt.

“And that’s why you haven’t failed. Aunt Haley is a wonderful person and that’s because of you,” Sebastian pointed out, making her smile.

For several minutes, neither one of them said anything as the conversation lulled into a comfortable silence and Sebastian found himself watching Mikey. She never looked happier than when she was playing baseball, he thought, unable to take his eyes off her.

“Your friend Mikey is very beautiful.”

“Yes, she is,” Sebastian murmured in agreement.

“Why aren’t you in school?” Mrs. Blaine asked, making him sigh.

“I made a mistake,” he admitted, wishing that he’d done at least a hundred things differently.

“And how do you plan to fix it?” she asked, watching him.

“I honestly don’t know. I’m trying to convince the high school to give me a chance,

but they're not willing to listen, and honestly, I really can't blame them," Sebastian said with a helpless shrug.

"Why haven't you applied at Latin Scribe? Your Uncle Jason would probably be able to help you," Mrs. Blaine pointed out.

Shaking his head, Sebastian said, "I can't do that to Uncle Jason."

"Why did you turn down that scholarship?"

"It seemed like the right thing to do at the time," Sebastian said, even as he wondered why he was telling her any of this.

"If you could go back would you take the scholarship?"

"I couldn't do that to my brother," Sebastian said, because no matter how many times over the years he'd been tempted to change his mind, and god, had he'd been tempted, he could never do that to Jonathan.

She considered him for a moment, then with a firm nod, murmured, "You'll do."

Before he could ask her what she was talking about, Mrs. Blaine said, "Be ready tomorrow morning by nine," as her helper joined them. With that, she gestured for Steven to take her away, leaving Sebastian confused, once again.

Chapter 20

"Campbell, you're up!" came the announcement that she'd been waiting for all afternoon.

Taking a deep breath, Mikey grabbed her glove off the bench next to her and found

herself looking toward the stands and...

Felt herself relax when she saw Sebastian.

Slowly exhaling, she headed for the pitcher's mound. She was just here to have a little fun, Mikey reminded herself as she slipped her hand inside the glove that she'd spent an entire year breaking in just for this moment and held it up. Seconds later, a baseball was cushioned against the soft leather as Mikey focused on the catcher waiting for her to make her first throw.

Shifting her weight back onto her right leg, she took another deep breath, moved her arm back and let it fly. The ball slammed against the catcher's glove a split second later, eliciting a pained grunt that Mikey ignored as she held up her glove for the ball's return. She ignored the catcher's curse as he tossed it back to her, the assistant coach's shocked expression as he grabbed the radar gun, and the boys scrambling closer for a better view of her next pitch and threw the ball again.

Nothing else mattered.

The only thing she cared about was hitting her target and she made damn sure that she hit it every time. She kept throwing, giving it everything she had until the coach walked over and held up his hand, motioning for her to stop. With a nod, Mikey pulled her arm back and let it drop while she waited.

"How fast is she throwing?" Coach Dilmore asked as he glanced down at the iPad in his hands.

"She's nailing ninety-five miles an hour, every time," the assistant coach said, showing him the radar gun.

Absently nodding, Coach Dilmore glanced up at her as he said, "Keep throwing

fastballs until I tell you to stop,” before shifting his attention back to the iPad in his hand and walking away.

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Nodding, Mikey did what she was told. She kept throwing until he gestured for her to stop, and then told her to start throwing curveballs until he told her to stop again. She did that until he stopped her again and again, telling her to switch it up until finally he told her to go back to throwing fastballs before walking away. She kept throwing, ignoring the way that her arm was starting to ache and forced herself to focus. When he came back an hour later, he gestured for her to stop.

“Go bat,” he said, motioning for her get on with it.

Nodding, Mikey tossed the ball back to the pitcher and quickly did as she was told. Once she had a bat in her hands, she stepped up to home plate, rolled her arm a few times and got in position while a kid that looked a lot like the coach headed to the pitcher’s mound. Once he was settled, he took position and threw the ball, but she’d been ready for it. She saw the way that he gripped the ball before he threw it, letting her know that it was going to be a curveball. She managed to hit the ball, sending it to center field.

Before one of the boys trying out for center field managed to

catch it, someone was throwing the kid another ball. He kept throwing the balls and she kept hitting them, ignoring the way that the muscles in her arm and shoulder protested and—

“Campbell, get back on the mound,” Coach Dilmore said a half hour later.

Nodding, Mikey dropped the bat. She grabbed her glove and headed back to the mound. She glanced at the coach to find him gesturing for her to get on with it. By

the time he finally told her to stop, the muscles in her arm and shoulder were on fire and she could barely feel her hand, but she couldn't stop smiling.

"Line up!" Coach Dilmore called out, and within minutes, had everyone hoping for a spot on the team standing quietly in front of him.

"Listen up," Coach Dilmore said as he finally looked up from his iPad. "You all did a great job and you should be proud of yourselves. Unfortunately, I don't have enough spots on the team for all of you, and in the event that you don't make the team this year, I don't want you to give up trying. Next year, I will be taking over as head coach at the high school for the freshman team and will do my best to try to find spots for those of you who put in the work," he announced, taking Mikey by surprise, because she hadn't known that he would be taking over at the high school next year.

If everything worked out this year, that meant she would have a better chance to start next year. She just had to make sure that she showed him what she had, Mikey told herself as she stood there, biting back a smile as she risked a glance to her right to find Sebastian watching her.

She could definitely do this.

"If you make the team this year, just know that you will be expected to show up on time, work hard, and leave the excuses at home, because they have no place on this field. The team roster will be up Friday, until then, go home, relax and try not to worry," Coach Dilmore said, gesturing for them to leave.

Sighing in relief, Mikey turned to follow everyone off the field when the coach said those magical words that had her stopping and turning around.

"Campbell, can I talk to you for a moment?"

“Of course,” Mikey said, somehow resisting the urge to rub her shoulder.

God, it hurt. She’d never had to throw that hard for that long before without breaks, but maybe that was a good thing, Mikey told herself as she stood there, waiting for the coach to say something. He waited until everyone was off the field before he finally turned his attention to her.

“Why aren’t you trying out for softball?” he asked, which wasn’t exactly a surprise.

Every time she tried out for a team, the coaches always took her aside to make sure that she wasn’t making a mistake. They wanted to make sure that she was comfortable playing with the boys, and while she appreciated it, it got kind of annoying after a while, but she didn’t say anything, mostly because she wanted to make sure that he gave her a chance.

“I love playing baseball and I’m not really a big fan of softball,” she admitted with a shrug.

“Why?” he asked, looking like he was trying to decide something.

“I’m not a big fan of the way the ball is thrown and the game goes too slow.”

Nodding, he glanced back down at his iPad with a heavy sigh. “Look, right now I’m not really sure about you, Mikey. You have a decent fastball, but I’m concerned about you being able to throw under pressure. Your arm got tired quickly. You’re small for your age, which has its advantages at bat, but when you were running drills you had problems keeping up with everyone else. You don’t have enough upper body strength to handle pitching at this level and I’m not really sure that this is a good idea,” he finished with a heavy sigh before reluctantly adding, “If you really want to play, I could probably use you in right field.”

For a moment, Mikey could only stand there, struggling to wrap her mind around everything he'd said, but the one thing that grabbed her attention had her weakly mumbling, "But I'm a pitcher."

"No, you're not."

*_*_*_*

"Mikey!" Sebastian yelled as he ran after Mikey only to curse when he saw where she was going.

Damn it!

He didn't know what happened to set her off, but he knew that whatever it was, that it was bad. While he normally liked to spend time on his roof to clear his head and get his mind off everything for a while, Mikey only did it when she was upset about something. A few years ago, Uncle Reese built a treehouse for her, hoping that it would help, but it was never enough. When Mikey was upset, she needed space so that she could lose it without anyone seeing, which meant...

Damn it!

Sebastian watched helplessly as Mikey climbed onto the pile of old pallets stacked by her garage and pulled herself up onto the roof before disappearing around the back. He moved his ass faster, jumped on the pallets, grabbed onto the edge of the roof and pulled himself up. Once he was on the roof, he moved faster, heading toward the back, climbed onto the flat part of the next roof and—

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Felt his stomach drop when he spotted Mikey sitting beneath her bedroom window, hugging her knees tightly against her chest as she cried. God, she was killing him, Sebastian thought hollowly as he walked over to her and sat down next to her. He reached over and picked her up, placing her between his legs so that her back was against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly as she continued to cry.

“Shhh, it’s okay,” Sebastian whispered softly as he pressed a kiss against the top of her head.

They sat like that for a long time, long past when the sun finally went down and he should have gone home. Nothing else mattered but her. He kept his arms around Mikey, holding her while whispering that everything would be okay. When she was finally done crying, he leaned around her as he reached up and gently wiped away her tears.

“Feel better?” Sebastian asked softly as he wiped away the last tear.

With a sniffle and the cutest damn pout that he’d ever seen, Mikey stubbornly shook her head, making him bite back a smile.

“Do you want to go inside?”

Another stubborn shake of her head.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

A snuffle, a slight hesitation, and a stubborn shake of her head later, Sebastian murmured, "I see," before clearing his throat. "Would you like me to shut up and continue holding you while looking at you adoringly?" Sebastian asked dryly only to chuckle when she nodded.

"Fine," he sighed, making sure to sound put out as he wrapped his arms back around her.

When she snuggled back against him, Sebastian found himself watching as the first glimmer of stars appeared in the sky while he tried to figure out what could have set her off. He'd watched her when she ran drills, when she was waiting for her turn to pitch, and then for the next two and half hours the coach had her taking a turn on the pitching mound and at bat, and he hadn't seen anything on her face that would have led him to believe that something was wrong.

She'd been in her element, focused, and so damn beautiful, Sebastian thought, wondering if he'd missed something when he was talking to Mrs. Blaine. He didn't think any of the boys had been stupid enough to say something to piss Mikey off, mostly because she hadn't decked any of them, but...

Then again, it depended on what they'd said. If they'd called her a tomboy or made fun of her for playing a boys' sport, Mikey would have mocked them until they either cried or mumbled an apology and stayed the hell away from her. If they'd said something about someone that she cared about, she'd probably just beat the crap out of them. The only reason that he could see her crying was if—

"They're putting me in right field," Mikey said, making him frown because that couldn't be right.

"Why are they doing that?" Sebastian asked, trying to make sense out of what she was telling him.

Mikey was born to pitch. He'd never seen anyone with an arm like hers, which was why he was having a difficult time picturing her in right field. He'd watched everyone that pitched today and Mikey had easily been the best pitcher out there. She'd put in the most effort and worked her ass off to show them what she had. She'd also been the only one that the coach had worked for hours without a break, something that he'd taken as a good sign, but now...

"He said a lot of things, but basically he doesn't think that I can pitch at this level. He doesn't think that I could keep up," Mikey mumbled sadly as she tilted her head back against his chest so that she could look up at him.

Sighing, Sebastian said, "The guy's an idiot."

"That's not even the worst part," she admitted with a sniffle.

"What's the worst part?" he asked, wrapping his arms more tightly around her when a gust of cold wind swept over them.

"He's going to be the coach next year at the high school," Mikey mumbled, making him bite back a curse. If the coach was already hellbent on keeping Mikey off the pitcher's mound this year, then he probably wasn't planning on giving her a chance to pitch next year.

That would destroy her.

"It's over," Mikey said softly, sounding completely defeated.

"No, it's not," Sebastian promised her, because this was far from over.

Chapter 21

“I knew you’d be back,” Jonathan said with a satisfied sigh as he dropped down on Sebastian’s bed next to Mikey and—

Released a pained groan when Sebastian, who’d been pacing back and forth, reading something on his iPad, reached over and grabbed hold of his brother’s leg and yanked him off the bed before going back to pacing the room.

“Why can’t you accept our love?” Jonathan asked with a sad shake of his head as he pulled himself back up, and once again found himself knocked back on the floor before Sebastian stepped over him and dropped down on the bed next to Mikey.

“How sure are you that he’ll be coaching at the high school next year?” Sebastian asked, throwing her a questioning look as he swiped his finger across the screen.

“A hundred percent sure,” Mikey mumbled as she curled up more tightly into the fetal position, which as everyone knew, was the official position for loathing in self-pity.

&

nbsp; “Okay,” Sebastian said with a firm nod and a determined look on his face that told her that he’d come to a decision about something.

“What are you doing?” she asked, reaching over to pluck the iPad out of his hand.

“Coming up with a new plan,” Sebastian said as she turned the iPad around in her hands and...frowned.

“Latin Scribe High School?” Mikey asked, throwing Sebastian a questioning look to find him nodding as he plucked the iPad back out of her hands.

“We’re applying,” Sebastian said absently as he went back to doing whatever the heck he was doing.

“We are?” she asked, blinking up at him.

“Mmmhmmm,” he murmured absently as she laid there, unable to help but frown because there was no way in hell that she’d ever be able to get into that school.

“Sebastian?”

“Hmm?”

“I think you forgot something,” Mikey said only to purse her lips up as she thought it over before adding, “Make that two things.”

“What’s that?” he asked, continuing to scroll down the page.

“Besides the fact that my family doesn’t have fifty thousand dollars a year for tuition?” she asked. “I don’t have the grades to get into that school.”

“No, but you will,” Sebastian said, making her frown.

“And how exactly are you planning on pulling off that miracle?” Mikey couldn’t help but wonder.

“I’m going to tutor you,” he said with a shrug like what he was suggesting was no big deal.

“And the tuition?” she asked, wondering if he’d even thought this through.

“We’re going to apply for every scholarship that we can get our hands on,” Sebastian said with a firm nod.

“And why are we doing this?” Mikey couldn’t help but wonder.

“Because we really don’t have a choice, not if you want to play baseball and I want to go back to school,” he said, sounding determined.

“I don’t understand why you both just don’t apply to Radcliffe,” Jonathan said, sighing heavily as he pulled himself off the floor and dropped down on the end of the bed, forcing them to pull their legs up to make room for him. “I bet they’d offer you a scholarship this time.”

“Radcliffe doesn’t offer athletic scholarships,” Sebastian said, making her worry her bottom lip between her teeth because they both knew the real reason why he wasn’t going to apply to Radcliffe.

He wouldn't do anything to risk his brother's scholarship.

"Okay, so then why don't you ask Uncle Jason for help? He's the head of the History Department at Latin Scribe. I'm sure he'd be willing to help," Jonathan said only to add, "At the very least, you could probably get a letter of recommendation from him and Aunt Haley," when Sebastian started to shake his head.

"What if I don't get in?" Mikey asked, already knowing that there was no way in hell that she was going to get into a school like Latin Scribe.

"You will because I'm going to help you study for the entrance exam," Sebastian said, making her groan.

"There's a test just to apply?" Mikey asked, staring up at him in horror.

"And you'll do fine," Sebastian absently murmured as he reached over and gave her one of those patronizing pats on the head that was going to get him killed.

Grumbling as she lightly slapped his hand away, Mikey said, "Sebastian, let's face it. I probably won't get in."

"That's not really an option," he said, shaking his head as he returned to scrolling.

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“And why’s that?” she couldn’t help but wonder.

“Because you’re pitching next year,” Sebastian said, shrugging it off like it was a done deal, which of course, it wasn’t.

It also made her wonder about something...

“Sebastian, what will you do if I don’t get in, but you do?” Mikey asked, watching him as she waited for an answer that she had a feeling she wasn’t going to like.

There was a telling pause and then, he sighed, “I’ll keep trying to get the public high school to give me a chance.”

Nodding, Mikey murmured, “I see,” as she reached for the pillow to either smother him with it or to beat some sense into him, she hadn’t decided which yet.

Before Sebastian could react, she grabbed the pillow and began a brutal attack that he would never forget! When she was done with him, he’d stop doing stuff that pissed her off and—

“What are you doing?” came the bored question that had her glaring down at the boy that needed to stop worrying about her and start worrying about himself!

“Beating some sense into you!” Mikey snapped as she continued her vicious pillow attack.

“Really?” Sebastian asked, sounding amused as he reached up and plucked the pillow

out of her hands.

“Really!” Mikey bit out as she tried to grab the pillow back so that she could slap some sense into him.

“So, I have a question,” Jonathan said, just as Mikey gave up trying to steal his pillow back and eyed the one on Jonathan’s bed across the room. “Where did you go with Mrs. Blaine today?”

“How do you know about that?” Sebastian asked, shooting his brother a questioning look.

“I know all,” Jonathan said in an ominous voice that had Mikey rolling her eyes as she snatched the pillow from Sebastian and—

“Why must love hurt?” Jonathan mumbled with a heartfelt sigh as he tossed the pillow that had slammed him in the face only seconds earlier, aside.

“It will hurt worse if you don’t start talking,” Mikey said, already reaching for the pillow again.

“Fine,” Jonathan sighed, making sure to sound put out as he grabbed the pillow before she could get her hands on it and shoved it behind his head as he settled in more comfortably. “Joshua saw you pushing Mrs. Blaine toward the baseball fields after school.”

“She wanted to talk to me about something,” Sebastian said, shrugging it off as Mikey sat there, unable to help but frown.

“Doesn’t she normally glare at you?” Mikey pointed out.

Sebastian opened his mouth to answer her only to frown when Jonathan said, “She’s been asking about you again.”

“Again?” they both asked, zeroing in on that one word.

Reaching over, Jonathan plucked the iPad out of his brother’s hands with a shrug. “She’s always asking about you.”

“Since when?” Sebastian asked, unable to help but frown.

“She’s always asking Mom and Dad how you’re doing, what you’re studying, if you want to go back to school, what your plans are after high school,” Jonathan said before adding with a shrug, “the usual.”

“Why does she care if he wants to go back to school?” Mikey asked only to notice the way that Sebastian was frowning.

“What is it?” Mikey asked, shifting to get more comfortable next to him.

“She asked why I haven’t applied to Latin Scribe,” he admitted on a sigh.

“Mom and Dad would be pissed if they found out that she was offering to pay for your tuition,” Jonathan said with a snort of disbelief.

“She didn’t offer to pay for my tuition. She just asked me a question,” Sebastian pointed out.

“Are you sure?” Jonathan asked, sending his brother a questioning look.

“Yes!”

“And if she offered...”

“She’s not paying for my tuition,” Sebastian bit out, looking understandably pissed and she didn’t need to ask him to know why.

He would either figure it out on his own or he wouldn’t go.

It was as simple as that.

“What else did you talk about?” Mikey asked, hoping to change the subject for Sebastian’s sake. He had enough on his mind without adding this to it.

With one last glare at his brother, Sebastian looked at her as he said, “Not much. She wants me to come by in the morning.”

“Why?” she asked as he reached over and plucked his iPad out of his brother’s h

ands.

“I honestly have no idea,” Sebastian said with a sigh as he went back to figuring out how he was going to fix everything, which was something that she wished she could do for him.

“Damn it,” Sebastian said, sighing heavily as he glanced down at his watch. He was running late, but it couldn’t be helped.

After he’d walked Mikey, who’d been strangely quiet this morning, to school, he’d ended up helping Aunt Kasey load a catering order into the van. Once he was done, he ran back inside and downloaded an application to Latin Scribe High School only to run into their first obstacle.

They needed their parents’ permission just to send in the application. He’d been hoping that they could apply and wait to see if they got accepted before they told their parents. He didn’t want their parents stressing out over the tuition. If they couldn’t get scholarships, then there really wasn’t any point in telling them. He’d just have to figure something else out, Sebastian thought as he let himself inside and–

“You’re late,” Mrs. Blaine said as soon as he opened the front door.

“Sorry. I had to help Aunt Kasey,” he said only to add, “It won’t happen again,” when her eyes narrowed dangerously on him as she reached for her cane.

With a sniff, Mrs. Blaine said, “Don’t let it happen again,” as she gestured for Steven only to frown when she looked back at Sebastian. “Where’s your suit?”

“My suit?” Sebastian said, following her gaze to take in his long-sleeved shirt and jeans.

“You’re supposed to be wearing a suit,” she said with an accusatory glare like he’d done this on purpose.

“Wait. You didn’t mention anything about a suit,” he said, because he definitely would have asked more questions if she’d mentioned a suit.

Not that she'd actually stuck around after she'd ordered him to come here today so that he could ask questions, Sebastian mused as he watched her eyes narrow dangerously on him.

Was it wrong to be afraid of a ninety-year-old woman? Probably, Sebastian thought as he watched her gesture toward the living room with her cane. "I'm sure one of Cole's old suits will fit you," Mrs. Blaine said, gesturing for him to get on with it.

Knowing better than to argue with her, especially when she had that cane, Sebastian headed upstairs and after a search of his cousin's closet, he managed to find a black suit and a navy-blue shirt that fit him. His cousin had a few inches on him, but they had the same build, which made it easier to find a suit that actually fit. The box of Twinkies hidden in the back of his cousin's closet helped pass the time as he searched for shoes. Once he had a black tie in hand and had consumed most of the Twinkies, Sebastian headed back downstairs only to find himself rushed out the door and sitting next to Mrs. Blaine in the backseat of her car, heading toward the highway.

"Where are we going?" he found himself asking when they joined rush-hour traffic.

"We have work to do," was all Mrs. Blaine said before she closed her eyes and settled in for a nap while Sebastian sat there, wondering how he was going to explain this to his parents. They were going to kill him, Sebastian thought as he pulled his phone out of his pocket only to frown when he saw the message waiting from his mom.

Have fun!

Wondering why she didn't tell him what Mrs. Blaine had in store for him this morning, Sebastian slowly exhaled as he sat back. He found himself staring out the car window, absently watching the cars they passed by as the exhaustion from the last four days finally caught up with him and he found himself closing his eyes, wondering how he was going to pull off the impossible only to groan sometime later

when something hard tapped his knee.

“We’re here,” Mrs. Blaine said as he opened his eyes and found himself looking at the Blaine Building, a twenty-five-story building in the heart of downtown Carta. He’d passed by this building every time they came to the city, which wasn’t often, but every time he saw it, he found himself wondering about Aunt Haley’s family.

He debated asking Mrs. Blaine why they were there, but something told him that she would just glare at him. God, the woman loved to glare, Sebastian thought as he climbed out of the car. Biting back a yawn, he walked around the car to the other side just as her helper placed the wheelchair next to the car and set the locks. When Sebastian saw Mrs. Blaine reach out with a trembling hand to grab hold of the door as she moved to stand up and transition herself to the wheelchair, he bit back a curse and stepped closer. Before she could argue, Sebastian was there, pulling her into his arms and picked her up, absently noting that she weighed less than Mikey as he carefully placed her in her wheelchair.

With a nod and a murmured, “Thank you, Sebastian,” Mrs. Blaine settled back in her chair and gestured with her cane for him to push her inside. With one last glance up at the large building they were entering, Sebastian pushed her toward the double doors where two security officers dressed in black suits waited with welcoming smiles.

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“Good morning, Mrs. Blaine,” the larger of the two said as he gestured for Sebastian to stop.

“Good morning, Vincent,” Mrs. Blaine said with a warm smile as she reached over and took his large hand between her frail ones and gave it an affectionate squeeze. “How is Andrew doing?”

“He’s doing much better, Mrs. Blaine. He’s putting on weight and the doctors said that he should be able to come home soon,” Vincent said with a warm smile.

“That’s wonderful news,” Mrs. Blaine said, giving his hand another squeeze. “Tell Margaret that I’ve been thinking about her.”

“I will, Mrs. Blaine,” Vincent said, returning her squeeze with a very gentle one of his own before releasing her hands and—

Focused on Sebastian.

The warm, welcoming smile that he’d greeted Mrs. Blaine with was gone and in its place was a look of warning, letting Sebastian know what would happen if he did anything to upset Mrs. Blaine. Before he could make good on the unspoken threat, Mrs. Blaine said, “This is Sebastian, the boy that I’ve been telling you about.”

At that, the scowl was gone, replaced by a welcoming smile and...an amused twitch of his lips? Clearing his throat, Vincent reached over and shook Sebastian’s hand. “We’ve heard a lot about you.”

Not sure how to respond to that, Sebastian simply nodded as he returned the handshake as the other security guard chuckled.

What the hell had she been telling them? Sebastian couldn't help but wonder as amusement lit Vincent's face while he gestured for Sebastian to go inside. Telling himself that he was just being paranoid, Sebastian absently nodded as he pushed Mrs. Blaine inside and found himself glaring at the back of Mrs. Blaine's head when he heard the men laughing behind him.

Still glaring, he followed Mrs. Blaine's gesture and rolled her toward the bank of elevators as she greeted everyone she passed with a smile. Sebastian parked her in front of the elevators and reached over and pressed the call button. Once the elevator doors opened, he rolled her inside, watched as she pressed the button for the twenty-second floor with the tip of her cane, and continued to glare.

Lips twitching, she said, "I may have shared some of the stories that your cousins have told me about your exploits. You've kept us all quite entertained over the years," making him sigh because he could only imagine the stories that his cousins told her.

"Glad I could help," he said dryly, watching as the numbers above the elevator doors lit up.

"Me, too," Mrs. Blaine said with a firm nod, making his lips twitch as he leaned back against the elevator wall.

"Are you going to tell me why I'm here yet?"

"I could use the company," Mrs. Blaine simply said with a firm nod as the elevator came to a stop with a quiet ding, but he couldn't help but feel like there was something more to it.

Not that he was complaining since it saved him from trying to make it through another day without dying of boredom. When the elevator doors opened, Sebastian pushed Mrs. Blaine into an upscale waiting room complete with a receptionist that looked stunned to see them.

“Mrs. Blaine, what a wonderful surprise to see you!” the young woman said, but something, mostly the fact that the smile on her face looked like it was strained, told Sebastian that it wasn’t exactly a welcomed surprise.

“Mary,” Mrs. Blaine said coolly in greeting as she gestured for Sebastian to take her down the long corridor to their right.

“Mrs. Blaine?” Mary called after them only to groan as she rushed to catch up with them when they kept going. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Blaine, but your sons are in a board meeting. I would be more than happy to show you back to the waiting room and bring you something to drink while you wait.”

Instead of answering her, Mrs. Blaine ignored her and gestured for him to bring her to the large double doors at the end of hallway. Sebastian threw the receptionist one last look over his shoulder to find her wringing her hands together as she noticeably panicked before he shifted his attention to the double doors in question. When he raised his hand to knock, Mrs. Blaine gestured for him to open the door.

Not sure what he was going to find behind the closed doors, Sebastian reluctantly opened the door in front of him to find over two dozen people in expensive suits glaring in his direction. That is, until they spotted Mrs. Blaine next to him. He watched as one of the men that he’d seen at Uncle Jason’s and Aunt Haley’s house slowly stood up. He was guessing that this was Aunt Haley’s father, but he wasn’t really sure since he hadn’t been introduced to any of them.

“Mother, what a pleasant surprise,” Mr. Blaine said with a polite smile as he came

around the corner and—

Frowned when his mother gestured for Sebastian to push her toward the seat that her son had just vacated. Once Sebastian moved the chair out of the way to make room for Mrs. Blaine's wheelchair, he moved to leave only to bite back a groan when she gestured for the man sitting to her right to move.

Clearing his throat awkwardly, the man stood up with a murmured, "Excuse me," and quickly made his way to the other end of the table. Once he was gone, Mrs. Blaine gestured for Sebastian to take his seat. Aware that every set of eyes in the room was on him, Sebastian sat down next to her while her son st

ood there, looking as though he was debating his next words.

Finally, he said, "As happy as I am to see you, this probably isn't the best time for a visit, Mother."

"The last time I checked, this was still my company," Mrs. Blaine said as her eyes narrowed dangerously on her son.

He opened his mouth, seemed to think better of it, cleared his throat and pasted a polite smile on his lips as he murmured, "Of course," and with that, he moved his chair to her left and sat down as an awkward silence enveloped the room.

Sebastian glanced at Mrs. Blaine to find her patiently waiting for them to continue before shifting his attention to her son only to find Mr. Blaine watching him. Clearing his throat, he gestured to Sebastian. "And who do we have here?"

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“This is Sebastian. I kidnapped him,” she said, making Sebastian bite back a smile as he said, “She really did.”

With a nod, and a curious glance his way, Mr. Blaine cleared his throat and got back to the business at hand while Sebastian sat there, listening as the board meeting continued, surprised that it wasn't as boring as he thought it would be. They went over quarterly reports, stock updates, and...Sebastian was fascinated.

While they went over international trends that were affecting their dealings overseas, they were served a three-course meal consisting of soup and salad, followed by steak and lobster, ending with a large slice of cheesecake and a fruit plate. As they ate, Sebastian paid attention to what was going on in the meeting only to frown when the topic of conversation turned to Blaine Industries' latest acquisition, a line of luxury hotels that employed over five thousand people, and all the things that they were going to do to immediately bring up the value of its stock.

When they started talking about layoffs, Sebastian's stomach turned.

“We're going to start the layoffs on the first and aim for a total of two thousand layoffs by June,” Mr. Blaine said as he reached for his glass of wine only to go still a moment later when his mother spoke for the first time since the meeting started.

“No, you won't,” Mrs. Blaine calmly said as she gestured for her plate to be removed.

Clearing his throat, Mr. Blaine said, “Mother, we really don't have a choice if we want to turn a quick profit on this.”

“And the reputation of those hotels will suffer in the long run, which is not something that your father would have done. He would have only purchased those hotels if he could make them better. We built Blaine Industries with the purpose of improving lives, not destroying them.”

“With all due respect, Mother,” her son said, “we don’t have a choice.”

“Not while I’m the majority stockholder you don’t,” Mrs. Blaine said, coldly. “There will be no layoffs.”

Mr. Blaine opened his mouth only to rethink that decision and after a moment, nodded. “Very well.”

With a nod and a gesture for Sebastian to roll her toward the door, Mrs. Blaine said, “I’ll expect the files by morning.”

With that, Sebastian’s first board meeting was over and he couldn’t stop smiling as he rolled Mrs. Blaine out the door.

Chapter 23

“Wait. What the hell are these?” Sebastian asked, looking up from the stack of applications that she’d printed this afternoon. “I thought we were only going to apply to Latin Scribe?”

“We need to play it safe,” Mikey said, gesturing for him to get on with it with one hand while she scratched Happy behind the ear with the other.

“Play it safe?” he asked, shaking his head in disbelief as he looked back down at the large stack of applications, half of them they were going to have to get through this week if they had any chance of making the cutoff date for applying.

Not that she actually thought that she had a chance in hell of getting into any of these schools, because there was no way that she would be able to pull this off. No, the reason that she was doing this was very simple, she was making sure that the stubborn boy who was currently glaring at her was able to go to school next year. If that meant that she had to pretend to play along and fill out applications and stumble her way through writing essays so that he would apply, then that's exactly what she would do.

She knew Sebastian well enough to know that if she tried to push him into doing this for himself, that he would drag his feet. This way, he would be able to keep his options open and had a real chance of going to school next year. When he found out that she had no plans of joining him, well...

She'd figure that out later, because she wasn't about to hold him back.

Not for something like this.

"You're not going to military school," Mikey said when he wouldn't stop glaring at her, knowing that it was a good excuse as any to get him to do this.

"They're not going to send me to military school," Sebastian said, sighing heavily as he returned his attention back to the stack of applications that they had to get through.

"How do you know that? Did you talk to your parents?" Mikey asked as she shoved the other stack that she'd printed earlier out of the way.

"No," Sebastian said, shaking his head as he reached over and helped himself to the stack that she'd set aside.

"That seems like a wise decision," Mikey said, nodding solemnly as he sent the stack of available scholarships an approving look.

“Shut up and write,” he said with a mock glare that had her biting back a smile as she grabbed a pen and began filling out the first application.

For the next few hours, they sat on her bedroom floor, filling out applications, one right after the other until Mikey could barely see straight. One glance at the clock had her biting back a sigh and deciding that they needed a break. Decision made, she tossed her pen on the floor, reached over and grabbed Sebastian’s hand, and stood up, dragging him toward the door with Happy following after them.

“What are we doing?” Sebastian asked, sounding amused as he watched her carefully open her bedroom door and peek out, making sure the coast was clear before she pushed the door open all the way and made her way toward the stairs.

She didn’t answer him until they were safely downstairs and out of earshot of her parents’ bedroom. “We need a break,” she whispered softly as she continued to drag him toward the kitchen and once they were there...

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Mikey found herself glaring at Sebastian when he pointed toward the stools lining the kitchen island. When he said, “Go sit down,” she grumbled, but did as she was told for the simple fact that she didn’t feel like arguing with him at the moment, not when they both knew that he wouldn’t make as big of a mess as she would.

While her mother loved to cook, Mikey...didn’t. Love it, that is. Every now and then, she liked to try her hand at cooking just to see what she could do, which admittedly, wasn’t much. It was also a gesture that went unappreciated by her family since they normally ended up staring at whatever she cooked with terror in their eyes, something that should probably concern her.

“Did they post the roster yet?” Sebastian asked as he searched the refrigerator for something to eat.

“No, but I already know that I’m not pitching,” Mikey said, trying to shrug it off like it was no big deal, but it was killing her.

“How do you know that?” Sebastian asked, throwing her a questioning look as he pulled out the pot roast that her mother made earlier and placed it on the kitchen island before grabbing the roasted potatoes, carrots, and butter.

“Because I found out today that the coach’s son and nephews tried out for the team and they’re all going for the pitchers’ spots,” Mikey said, biting back a sigh as he grabbed a cutting board, careful not to disturb the video equipment and laptop that her mother had set up for KaseyCooks.com on the large kitchen island that Reese built for her.

Slowly exhaling, Sebastian said, “Well, that explains it then.”

“It really does,” Mikey said, still not sure if she should be relieved by the news or not.

On the one hand, there was a

good chance that the coach said what he did because he wanted to make sure that his son and nephews got the pitchers’ spots, but on the other hand, it meant that she really didn’t have a chance in hell of pitching on this team. It also meant that she would never get a chance to pitch in high school with him as her coach, which left her with a few options.

She could apply to Latin Scribe High School like they’d planned and tryout for the baseball team or talk to her parents and see what they could do, which honestly, wasn’t really much of an option. There was nothing that they could do without pissing off her coach and making this worse. Her only hope was to keep her mouth shut and put in the work, showing the coach that she had what it takes.

Not really in the mood to talk about this right now, Mikey decided to change the subject. “When are you going to talk to your parents?”

“I’m not,” Sebastian said, grabbing a large onion off the counter and started cutting it.

“Why not?” she asked, wondering, not for the first time, why he was being so stubborn about this.

“As long as I stay out of trouble and get back into school, there’s nothing to worry about,” he said, shrugging it off like it was no big deal.

For a moment, Mikey sat there, watching him as he chopped the onion into small pieces as she thought about what he’d said and...

“Maybe it would be a good idea if you stopped showing up for lunch,” she suggested, even though she hated the idea of him being alone all day. If he wanted a fresh start, then they were going to have to do everything that they could to make sure he got it, which meant that they should probably stop sneaking into each other’s rooms at night.

“You’re probably right,” Sebastian said after a slight hesitation as the sound of the kitchen door opening had her looking to her left and murmuring, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have somewhere else that I need to be,” as she made her way to the door closest to her.

*_*_*_*

“Tell me that she didn’t really just hide in the pantry,” Uncle Reese said, sighing heavily as he rubbed the back of his neck while he shifted his attention from the closed pantry door to Sebastian.

“She has problems,” Sebastian said, stepping out of the way as Aunt Kasey took over the mess that he was making.

“She really does,” Aunt Kasey said as Sebastian’s attention shifted to his parents, who didn’t really look all that surprised to find him here. And who also didn’t look like they’d gone to bed yet, making him wonder what they were doing here.

“I assume that you have a good reason for being here this late at night,” Uncle Reese said, dropping down on Mikey’s recently vacated seat.

“You would assume wrong,” Sebastian said only to glare when the little brat said, “We really do!” from the safety of the pantry.

“And I can’t wait to hear it,” Aunt Kasey said with a warm smile as she gestured to

the cabinets. “Can you grab a frying pan for me, sweetie?”

Sending one last glare at the pantry door, Sebastian grabbed a large frying pan out of the cabinets for Aunt Kasey as his parents joined Uncle Reese and sat down at the kitchen island. While they waited for an answer, they helped themselves to the platter of chocolate chip cookies that Aunt Kasey kept filled for moments like this.

All of them looking at him expectantly.

Before he could open his mouth, the little traitor said, “You might as well tell them! They’re going to find out sooner or later!”

“We really will,” his father said while his mother, who was frowning down at the cookie in her hand, said, “My chocolate chip cookies never come out looking like this.”

“How do they usually come out?” Uncle Reese asked as he reached over and plucked the cookie out of her hand and popped it in his mouth.

“Greener,” she mumbled sadly.

“We’ll work on that,” Aunt Kasey, who’d been trying to teach his mother how to cook for the past two years, promised with a warm smile as she finished chopping the pot roast and vegetables and placed everything in the frying pan.

“You people need to focus!” came the demand from the pantry that had Sebastian once again glaring.

“What exactly are we going to find out, sooner or later?” his father asked, helping himself to another cookie as he waited for Sebastian to start talking.

Realizing that he didn’t really have a choice anyway, Sebastian opened his mouth only to once again glare when Mikey said, “We’re filling out applications!”

Really wondering why her parents didn’t beat her, he said, “We’re applying to private high schools.”

The stunned silence that followed had him biting back a sigh. This was one of the reasons that he didn’t want to tell his family. Besides the fact that they were going to ask questions that he really didn’t want to answer.

“You’re applying to high schools?” his mother asked with a hopeful smile.

He opened his mouth and—

“We’re applying to private high schools because the public school won’t let him in!”

Narrowing his eyes, Sebastian stalked over to the pantry, threw the door open, and—

“Uh-oh,” Mikey mumbled when he reached inside and grabbed her.

“Be careful! I’m precious, damn it!” the little traitor said as Sebastian threw her over his shoulder and carried her back into the kitchen.

“No, you’re spoiled,” Sebastian said as he shrugged her off his shoulder and dropped her on Uncle Reese’s lap.

“I prefer appropriately adored,” Mikey said with a firm nod as she shifted to get more comfortable.

“You really are,” Uncle Reese said, wrapping his arm around her to stop her from falling over as he grabbed another cookie, which Mikey immediately helped herself to.

Nodding, Mikey said, “I know,” as she gestured with the cookie in her hand for Sebastian to continue.

Taking a deep breath, Sebastian said, “I want to go back to school.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” his mother asked, looking really relieved while his dad...

“What happened with the public high school?”

“They told him that he can’t go because of his expulsion and if he wanted to go that he had to do the virtual option,” Mikey said, shrugging it off as she nibbled on her cookie.

“You have a big mouth,” Sebastian snapped as he snatched the cookie out of her hand

and shoved it in his mouth.

Shrugging, Mikey said, “I know.”

“Why are you applying, Mikey? I thought you were looking forward to playing for the Warriors?” Aunt Kasey asked, sounding curious.

Panic took over Mikey’s expression as she shot him a helpless look, making him damn near roll his eyes because she should know that he would never do anything to hurt her.

Revenge?

Absolutely.

But he would never do anything to hurt her and she knew it.

“She’s hoping to get on a team in a better division,” Sebastian said with a look that told Mikey that she owed him.

Nodding quickly, Mikey said, “I really am, which is why we’re going to need you to sign a few things so that we can apply.”

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“That doesn’t explain what Sebastian is doing here or why you’re both up at one in the morning,” Uncle Reese drawled, leveling a look on Sebastian that had him trying not to wince.

“It really does though,” Mikey said, finishing off the last bite of her cookie.

“How’s that?” Aunt Kasey asked as she started scooping the homemade hash onto plates.

“Because I made him,” Mikey said with a firm nod as she gestured for his father to hand her another cookie.

Sighing heavily, Sebastian gave a sad shake of his head as he said, “I really didn’t have much of a choice.”

“Not unless he wanted another beating,” Mikey said, looking thoughtful as she nibbled on her cookie.

“And I really didn’t want that,” Sebastian said, nodding.

“Not after the last time,” Mikey added with a shuddering sigh as he reached over and plucked the cookie out of her hand.

“I can see why that would be an issue,” his mother said, nodding in agreement as she gestured toward the kitchen door. “Why don’t you go upstairs and get the applications so that we can see what we have to work with.”

And with that...something inside Sebastian finally relaxed.

Chapter 24

She could do this, Mikey repeated the mantra that had been helping her get through the past week without losing it.

Well, that and she was in denial, which had worked for her up until a few minutes ago when she heard the announcement that Coach Dilmore was posting the team roster today. Now she was back to telling herself that it didn't matter what position she played as long as she got on the team. All that mattered was that she got her foot in the door so that she could prove just how good she was so that the coach didn't have any other choice but to give her a chance.

She would hate not being able to pitch, but she would be fine with it. She would, Mikey told herself as she watched Coach Dilmore walk into the foyer and head for the announcement board. She watched helplessly as he took his time pinning a white piece of paper to the board.

Once he was done, he walked away as she stood there, taking a deep breath and telling herself that everything was going to be fine. This would all work out for the best.

It would.

She just needed to remember that this was for the best. She could handle right field. She could do it, because this was just a temporary setback. Her mind latched on to that one word.

Temporary.

Because that's what this was, temporary. Things would work out for the best. They always did, Mikey told herself that this was no big deal. It wasn't. But no matter how many times she told herself that she still couldn't seem to make herself move closer to that board.

"This is ridiculous," Mikey told herself, hoping that it would be enough to get her to move.

It wasn't.

Long after everyone else had left for the day, Mikey stood there, staring at the board as she repeated all the mantras and lies that she'd told herself over this past week, hoping that it would be enough and...

Found herself moving closer to the announcement board.

"It's going to be okay," Mikey told herself with a firm nod, because right field wasn't the end of the world.

It was still a spot on the team, Mikey reminded herself with a nod only to find herself shaking her head somewhat frantically because it wasn't going to be okay. She really didn't want to play right field and no matter what she told herself it wouldn't be okay.

Praying that this had all been a bad dream and that the coach had changed his mind, Mikey forced herself to walk up to that board and look for her name. Taking a deep breath, Mikey slowly exhaled as she searched for her name and when she finally found it, she...forgot how to breathe when she spotted the two words typed in black across from her name.

Right field.

*_*_*_*

What the hell was wrong with him? Cole couldn't help but wonder as he once again found himself thinking about what Chloe said to him. Over the past week, he'd considered asking his friends about what she'd said but...

He didn't care.

At least, that's what he told himself but that didn't explain why he suddenly couldn't stop thinking about her. For the past four years, he'd barely noticed her and now, he found himself watching her whenever she was around, waiting by his locker just for a chance to see her, and taking the long way home just so that he could make sure that she got home safely all while telling himself that she was wrong. But...

He couldn't.

Over the past week he'd noticed how other kids treated her, the way they ignored her, taunted her, and seemed to go out of their way to make her life miserable and Chloe let them. He didn't know why that pissed him off, but it did. He watched as she sat by herself at lunch, pretending that she couldn't hear the assholes at the other tables talking about her. He watched as she stood by her locker, pretending that she was looking for something so that she could wait until the last possible second before she had to go to class. He watched other students go out of their way to make her life miserable, and he wasn't sure who he was more pissed at, Chloe for letting it happen or at himself for not noticing sooner.

As much as he would love to be able to say that it wasn't his problem, he couldn't do that. Not when he knew that Chloe was putting up with this bullshit every day. So, he'd started sitting at her table, glaring at whatever asshole ran his mouth until he shut up and left her alone. He made sure that she didn't have to walk to class by herself. He sat next to her in class to make sure that she didn't have to worry about some jerk throwing a pencil at her when the teacher wasn't looking, and he made sure that he was there to—

“Stop it,” Chloe said quietly as she glanced up from her locker to look at him.

“Stop what?” Cole asked as he finished shoving the books that he wasn’t going to need tonight in his locker.

“Whatever you think you’re doing, just please stop. You’re making it worse,” Chloe said with a resigned sigh as she closed her locker and headed for the front doors only to add, “Please,” as she walked past him.

For a moment, he considered letting her go, but...he couldn’t do that. Wondering why he was really doing this, Cole shut his locker and quickly caught up to her.

“How could I possibly make this worse?” he asked, because he honestly couldn’t imagine her life getting worse than this.

“Look,” Chloe said, stepping off to the side so that she could talk to him, “I appreciate what you’re doing, I really do, but I can handle this on my own.”

“Really?” Cole asked as he folded his arms over his chest as he leaned back against the wall while he considered her.

“Yes,” she said, reaching up to push her glasses back up her nose.

“How?” he asked, because from what he’d seen she hadn’t done anything to stop this.

“By ignoring them,” Chloe said, sighing as she headed for the door, leaving him standing there, shaking his head, because she couldn’t be serious.

“You really think that ignoring them is going to make this go away?” Cole asked when he caught up with her again.

“No, but most of them lose interest and—”

“You said most of them. What happens with the ones that don’t lose interest?” he asked, watching the way that she opened her mouth to say something only to close it and quicken her step, probably hoping that he would just drop it and leave her alone.

“Tell me what happens when they don’t lose interest,” Cole said, because he could only imagine what a bunch of spoiled rich kids could do to her to pass the time.

“It doesn’t matter,” Chloe said, softly sighing as they walked outside and made their way to the sidewalk.

“Then you should have no problem telling me,” he said, reaching up to pull his tie loose when she stopped again.

“Look, I appreciate the fact that you’re trying to help, but honestly, I don’t need it. I was doing just fine on my own. Okay?” Chloe said as she gave him what she probably thought was a reassuring smile before nodding as she turned to walk away.

“Then why are you taking the long way home?” he asked, moving to catch up with her again.

“Because you take the short way home,” Chloe said absently with a wince as she adjusted the large bag over her shoulders that was clearly too heavy for her.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Cole asked as he moved to follow her down Pine Hill Road.

“Everything,” she said as though that was supposed to explain everything.

It didn’t.

What it did was make him pluck the bag off her shoulder and throw it over his. When she went to take it back from him, he shifted it to his other arm and said, “Explain.”

“Have you always been this annoying?” Chloe asked, reaching over to grab the bag only to sigh when he stepped out of her reach.

“Yes,” Cole said, making her lips twitch despite the fact that she looked like she wanted to throttle him. Since he was used to that look, he didn’t take it personally.

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“Look, your dad is the most popular teacher in school and from what I’ve heard, your mom was too. You’re the captain of the JV football team, you’re popular, good looking, and everyone loves you,” she explained with a sad shake of her head, leaving him even more confused than he was before.

“And...” Cole said, letting that one word trail off, wondering if she was going somewhere with this.

“And I’m not. I’m a nerd, possibly a dork, I’m not really sure at the moment. I’m also a scholarship student who needs to get good grades to keep my spot, which means that I have to work my butt off. I’m not rich, I don’t fit in, and I’m probably never going to, and I’m okay with that.”

“You’re not making any sense. I’m not rich,” he pointed out.

“No, but you fit in, which means that when you suddenly take notice of me that other kids do as well. They’re watching me more, noticing just how much I don’t fit in and when you’re not around—”

“It’s worse,” Cole said, finishing for her on a heavy sigh.

Nodding, Chloe said, “They don’t just pick on me anymore because I’m a nerd or because I’m poor and my parents are dead. Now they’re speculating why Cole Bradford has suddenly noticed that I’m alive, and honestly, I don’t know how much more of it I can take.”

“What are they saying?” Cole asked her as she reached up and grabbed her bag off

his shoulder.

With a pitying look, Chloe said, “What do you think?” as she walked away and this time, he let her.

Chapter

25

“She doesn’t look so good,” came the softly mumbled words that Sebastian barely heard as he took in Mikey, slumped over a park bench, qu

ietly mumbling to herself as she stared ahead, looking shell-shocked and adorably pathetic. Not really sure what was going on, Sebastian glanced down at the arm hanging over the side with what looked like a crumpled piece of paper held tightly in her hand before glancing up at his siblings and cousins as they all stood around her, sending her pitying looks.

“What happened?” Sebastian asked when it became obvious that no one was going to jump at the chance to tell him.

With a sigh, his cousin Joshua reached down and gently pried the paper out of Mikey’s hand while she mumbled sadly, “I’m a pitcher,” and handed it to him. Frowning, Sebastian smoothed the paper open and ran his gaze over what looked like the baseball team roster only to curse when he saw it.

Right field.

Biting back a sigh, Sebastian glanced back at the top of the list to find three names with “Pitcher” after their names, noting that all three of them ended with Dilmore. He crushed the paper in his hand and tossed it in the trash can. He couldn’t believe the

coach actually went through with it. It was a dumb move, but something that they'd have to worry about later.

"Are you okay?" Sebastian asked softly as he knelt down next to the bench.

"I'm a pitcher," came the mumbled response.

"I know you are," Sebastian said, taking her limp hand in his and gave it a comforting squeeze.

"I hate right field."

"I know you do."

"I hate my new coach," Mikey said with a sniffle and a nod.

"I do, too," he admitted on a sigh.

"I don't think I can do this," she mumbled weakly.

"Yes, you can."

"I really can't."

"It's just for a few months, Mikey. Just to get your foot in the door and to keep your skills fresh. Once we get you into a new school with a new coach, you'll be back on the pitcher's mound," he promised her, hoping that it would be enough.

There was a slight pause, giving him hope and then, "I just want to lay here and feel sorry for myself," Mikey mumbled with another sniffle as she turned her head so she could stare at an old oak tree.

“And you’re doing an amazing job,” Sebastian said, biting back a sigh as he stepped over her and knelt down on the other side so that he could talk to her.

“I know,” came the weakly mumbled response.

“Would it make you feel better if I bought you an ice cream?” Sebastian asked, deciding that they should move on to the bribery phase to avoid wasting anymore time.

A sniffle, and a mumbled, “Maybe,” gave him hope.

“How about a movie? Would you like to go see a movie?” Sebastian asked, mentally calculating how much money he had in his wallet. With his allowance and the money his father owed him for helping him last week, Sebastian probably had enough to take her to a movie, buy her usual snacks, and take her out for a burger afterwards.

“I don’t know,” Mikey mumbled after a slight hesitation.

“We can hit the arcade and maybe go bowling afterwards,” Mathew said, jumping in and earning a killing glare from Sebastian.

Ignoring the warning look on Sebastian’s face, his cousin Elizabeth added, “We can also grab food at the food court.”

Before he got a chance to say anything, Mikey mumbled, “I like the arcade,” sealing his fate. Knowing that there was no way of getting out of this now, Sebastian grabbed Mikey’s bag off the ground and tossed it to Mathew. Biting back a sigh, he reached down and picked Mikey up, threw her over his shoulder and carried her home.

Ten minutes later, when he turned to carry her to her house, she stopped him with a

sadly mumbled, “I’m not ready to face them. Not yet.”

That made him pause. “They still don’t know?”

“Do you think I proudly share my shame?” she asked with a shuddering sigh.

Shaking his head, because he honestly didn’t know how to deal with her sometimes, Sebastian turned around and carried her across the street just as his father’s truck pulled into the driveway.

“What’s wrong with Mikey?” his father asked as he climbed out of his truck.

“I don’t think I’m ready to talk about it. Not yet,” she said around a few more adorable sniffles as his father put his bag down.

“Bad day?” his father asked as he reached over and plucked Mikey from Sebastian’s shoulder and threw her over his.

“It really was,” Mikey mumbled in agreement.

Sebastian grabbed his father’s bag and followed them inside just in time to hear his brother and sister asking their mom for a ride to the mall. When his mom spotted Mikey over his father’s shoulder, his father said, “She’s not ready to talk about it yet,” as he carefully placed Mikey down on the kitchen counter where she continued to pout.

With a damning finger pointed at Sebastian, Mikey said, “That boy promised me ice cream.”

Worrying her bottom lip, his mom said, “I don’t think we have any ice cream,” as she went to check the freezer.

“There’s ice cream across the street,” Mikey mumbled sadly.

When Sebastian stood there, glaring at her, she added, “It will make me feel better,” making it impossible for him to say no.

“You really are spoiled,” Sebastian said, sighing heavily as he headed for the door only to feel his lips twitch with amusement when she said, “Appropriately adored.”

Hoping that this helped, Sebastian quickly made his way across the street, around the back of the house and went inside where he found Aunt Kasey in the kitchen, cooking. At her questioning look, he said, “Mikey,” putting a world of meaning into that one word.

With an understanding smile, she gestured with a dough-covered spoon toward the first freezer. “There’s homemade chocolate chip cookie dough and peanut butter cup ice cream in the back.”

Mikey’s favorite.

Nodding, Sebastian grabbed a quart of homemade ice cream only to smile when one of the twins threw a ball outside their play area. After placing the ice cream on the kitchen island, he walked over to the play area that Uncle Reese had created for the boys, pausing along the way to give Happy a scratch behind his ears and grabbed the ball off the floor. “Here you go,” Sebastian said, leaning over to hand the ball to Nathan and give him a kiss on his forehead. With a smile, Nathan pulled his arm back and sent it flying again. With a mock glare, Sebastian obediently retrieved the ball and handed it back to him as he glanced at the crib in the corner, noting that Nathan’s baby brothers were fast asleep, along with his twin.

“Are you joining us for dinner tonight?” Aunt Kasey asked as Sebastian headed back over to the kitchen island and grabbed the ice cream.

For the past week, they'd been alternating between his house and this house, working on their essays and filling out their applications with their parents' help. They still needed to get letters of recommendation, but that shouldn't be a problem. At least, not for Mikey. He still didn't know what he was going to do since he doubted that any of his old teachers would jump at the chance to write a letter for him, and he didn't really think that any of the schools would be impressed with a letter from his mother.

He'd figure it out later, but for right now, he wanted to make this better for Mikey.

"Not tonight, Aunt Kasey. Mathew and Elizabeth are trying to convince my parents to let us go to the mall."

“Does Mikey want to go, too?”

“Yes,” Sebastian said even as he couldn’t help but hope that she said no so that he could avoid going to the mall and spend the rest of the night trying to cheer Mikey up alone.

“That’s fine. Why don’t you grab some money out of my purse for Mikey?” she said while he resigned himself to spending the rest of the night surrounded by his family.

Not that he didn’t love spending time with them, but sometimes he just wanted to relax and not have to worry about anything other than tormenting Mikey. He wouldn’t be able to do that if he had to keep his brothers and cousins out of trouble. He wasn’t worried about Jessica since his sister normally stayed out of trouble, but he would have to keep an eye on her at the mall. He’d seen the way boys had started looking at his sister and he didn’t like it. Granted, he didn’t like the way they were starting to look at Mikey, either.

“What are you planning to do now that Mikey is going to be busy with the team?” Aunt Kasey asked as Sebastian opened her purse and pulled out a twenty-dollar bill for Mikey.

“Probably read,” he said, shrugging it off since that’s what he normally did when Mikey was at practice.

“That sounds exciting,” Aunt Kasey said, making him chuckle.

He held up the twenty for her approval. When she nodded, he slipped it in his pocket

and grabbed the ice cream only to notice the curious look that she was sending him.

“If you’re interested, I could use some help around here,” Aunt Kasey said with a casual shrug that had him going still.

“Really?” Sebastian asked, trying not to get his hopes up.

“I’ve got more orders than I can handle and I could really use the help,” she said, going back to mixing whatever it was that she was making.

“Definitely, but what about Mikey?” Sebastian found himself asking because he’d always assumed that Mikey would end up working for her mom when she was old enough.

“She’s going to be helping after baseball season is over,” Aunt Kasey assured him.

“Does she know it yet?”

“Not yet,” she said with a devious smile, making him chuckle because he could only imagine how Mikey would react to the news.

“When do I start?” Sebastian asked, eager to have something else to look forward to besides hitting the library every day.

“How does Monday sound?” Aunt Kasey asked, throwing him a questioning look.

“Perfect,” Sebastian said, unable to help but smile as he headed for the door. “Thank you, Aunt Kasey.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie,” she said with a warm smile as he reached for the door and—

“How bad is it?” Aunt Kasey asked, stopping him.

He didn’t pretend to misunderstand

and as he looked back at her. “Right field.”

“Damn.”

Chapter 26

“How long are you planning on pouting?” Sebastian asked her as they headed for the bench just outside the mall entrance while they waited.

“Probably until you buy me popcorn and a large drink,” Mikey said, making his lips twitch as she dropped down on the bench with a pathetic groan, still wondering how she was going to do this.

“Now I’m buying you a large drink?” Sebastian asked with a teasing smile as they watched Jonathan take Mathew down in a headlock only to suddenly drop him to the ground when he spotted a group of teenage girls heading toward the mall.

“I’m worth it,” Mikey said, nodding solemnly as they watched Jonathan step over his little brother, ignoring his pained groan, and rushed to catch up with the girls.

“Are you though?” Sebastian asked only to chuckle when she leveled a glare on him. “Fine,” he said, making sure to sound put out. “I’ll buy you a Coke.”

“Then I forgive you,” she said with a heartfelt sigh.

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“For what?” he asked, sounding distracted as Aunt Haley’s SUV pulled up to the curb and they watched as Cole climbed out followed by Joshua, Elizabeth, and—

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Sebastian said as they watched as Braxton, who didn’t look any happier to be here than he had at the party last week, climbed out of the car. “What’s he doing here?”

“Spending time with his cousins, same as us,” Mikey pointed out as she reluctantly got up and joined them, noting that Cole looked miserable.

“What’s wrong?” Mikey asked, stepping over Mathew to join them.

“Nothing,” Cole said, sounding distracted as he rubbed the back of his neck with a sigh.

Nodding, Mikey said, “Good talk,” as she shifted her attention to find Braxton standing apart from the rest of the group, looking like he would rather be anywhere but here. For a moment, she considered ignoring him but...

She couldn’t do that.

“Ready for a rematch?” Mikey asked as she moved to join him.

Lips twitching, Braxton said, “I may need more time to recover first.”

“I should probably apologize,” she said, nodding solemnly.

Chuckling, he said, “But you’re not going to.”

“I’m really not,” Mikey said, unable to help but notice that he actually had a nice smile when he wasn’t glaring at everyone.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. I’m pretty sure I had it coming,” Braxton said, still smiling.

“You really did,” Mikey promised him, easily returning his smile.

“I don’t think your boyfriend’s happy that you’re talking to me,” Braxton said with a pointed look at something behind her. Frowning, Mikey glanced over her shoulder and found Sebastian glaring in their direction.

“He’s my best friend, but he does look uncharacteristically pissed at the moment,” Mikey agreed, biting back a sigh when she looked back at Braxton to find him returning Sebastian’s glare with one of his own.

Great.

Resigning herself to the long night ahead, she sighed with relief when everyone headed inside. With a quietly murmured, “See you inside,” Braxton moved to join them and—

“What exactly do I need your forgiveness for?” Sebastian asked, taking up their conversation from earlier as he joined her.

“For eating all my ice cream?” Mikey said, even though she should have known better than to trust a Bradford, even her best friend, with food.

“It was a long walk back to my house and I got hungry,” Sebastian said with a shrug

as he reached past her and opened the door for her.

“It’s a thirty second walk,” she pointed out in disgust.

“Not if you stop to look both ways,” Sebastian said, making her lips twitch.

“Just for that, now you’re buying me a pack of Reese’s Pieces, too,” Mikey said as they headed inside.

“God, you’re high maintenance,” Sebastian said with a mock glare as they got in line to buy their tickets.

“You knew this,” Mikey absently said as she pulled out her money to buy her ticket and—

“Here,” Braxton said, drawing her attention to find him handing her a movie ticket.

Frowning, Mikey asked, “What’s this for?”

“For last weekend. I wanted to apologize,” Braxton said, shrugging it off.

“You don’t need to do this,” she said, moving to hand the ticket back to him.

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“Yes,” Braxton said as his gaze found Sebastian, “I did,” before he walked away.

“Thank you,” she said, noting the absent nod of acknowledgement before she turned her attention to Sebastian to find him once again glaring at Braxton.

“I don’t like him,” he said as they moved up in line.

“Really?” she asked, blinking up at him. “I couldn’t tell.”

Grumbling something that sounded suspiciously like, “Brat,” they moved up in line so that he could buy his ticket. Once he had his ticket, they went to the concession stand where he refused to let her pay for anything. Since she knew that he was probably going to devour most of her food anyway, she shrugged it off and followed everyone into the theater even as she couldn’t help but wonder why they’d let Mathew and Joshua pick the movie.

A few minutes later, she was sitting down next to Sebastian and was surprised to find Braxton sitting on her other side. Shifting the large bucket of popcorn on her lap, she moved to get comfortable only to find both boys hogging the armrests. Biting back a sigh, Mikey settled in to watch the movie, deciding that it would probably be for the best if she pretended that they weren’t glaring at each other and focused on what promised to be a very gory movie.

An hour later, she had her arms wrapped around Sebastian’s arm and was pressing her face against his shoulder as she mumbled, “Is it over yet?”

“Do you want me to lie to you?” came the whispered response.

“Always,” Mikey said, nodding only to decide that it somehow amplified the sounds of bodies being torn apart and stopped.

That was quickly followed by her deciding that she’d had enough for one night.

Decision made, she released her hold on Sebastian’s arm, opened her eyes and headed for the exit sign while keeping her eyes firmly locked on the floor below. That was followed by covering her ears with her hands and trying to tell herself that she didn’t just hear what sounded like flesh being devoured.

Before she reached the exit, Sebastian was there, wrapping his hand around her arm and quickly pulling her through the door. Once they were a safe distance away from the sounds that she would really rather not think about, Mikey dropped her hands away, spotted a lovely bench just outside the theater and decided to kill some time there.

Sighing in relief, she dropped down on the bench, pulled her ball out of her sweatshirt and began rolling it between her hands as she sat back and waited for the movie to end. Sebastian didn’t say anything as he sat down, and to be honest, she really didn’t expect him to. He wasn’t big on malls, so she wasn’t exactly surprised when he pulled out his iPad and lost himself in a book.

That was fine with Mikey since that left her free to people-watch, her second favorite pastime. She watched as people came and went, guessed who was out on their first date, winced in sympathy for those who were probably about to get dumped, and found herself relaxing. A half hour later, she watched as their cousins walked out of the theater, all of them glaring at Joshua and Mathew before her attention shifted to a familiar looking girl standing off to the side with a little girl doing her best to drag her toward the arcade games.

“Isn’t that their neighbor?” Mikey managed to get out just as the little girl that really

seemed to have it out for Cole, suddenly turned around and—

Yeah, that was definitely their neighbor, Mikey thought, biting back a wince that Cole probably wouldn't appreciate at the moment. At least, she didn't think he would, but since he wa

s currently trying to crawl away from the little girl hellbent on beating him with a cutout of Tom Cruise, she decided just to go for it only to cringe in sympathy when the little girl somehow managed to get her hands on a wet floor sign.

Chapter 27

“Please don't make me hurt you,” Mikey said when Jonathan tried to move his sleeping bag closer to her.

“Why are you fighting our love?” Jonathan asked only to grunt in pain when Sebastian shoved him aside so that he could place the sleeping bag that he'd borrowed from Uncle Jason on the floor next to her.

Once he was settled, Sebastian reached over and helped himself to the pillow that he saw Aunt Haley give her earlier and settled back with a satisfied sigh. That was followed by a pained grunt of his own when the vicious little pain in the ass reached over and snatched it back, causing him to hit his head against the couch.

He considered stealing it back but decided that he'd wait until she was asleep. Wondering how he'd let her talk him into this, Sebastian pulled his iPad out of his sweatshirt pocket as he took in the rest of the living room, absently noting that everyone else had moved their sleeping bags closer to the television. Well, except for Braxton and Cole. Braxton had been given the other couch to sleep on since he was considered a guest and wasn't used to them yet. And Cole...

Was standing by the large bay window with an icepack pressed against his head, glaring at his neighbor's house. That probably wasn't going to end well, Sebastian thought as he reached for his Coke only to end up sighing and plucking it out of Mrs. Blaine's hands.

With a glare, Sebastian finished off half his Coke and placed it back on the end table with a look of warning that he knew the older woman was going to ignore. When she'd decided to join them for a movie, he had a feeling that it was just an excuse to get her sugar fix. Judging by the way that her eyes narrowed dangerously on him, he knew that he was right.

"Don't make me tell Aunt Haley, Grandma," Sebastian said with a look that told her that he would happily tattle his ass off if she pushed him.

With a huff, Mrs. Blaine focused her attention back on the movie. A few minutes later, movement out of the corner of his eye had him sighing and reaching back to steal his Coke away from her. This went on for several minutes until Mikey got up with a sigh and disappeared into the kitchen only to come back a few minutes later with a bottle of water.

Mikey managed to steal his Coke back when the feisty woman grabbed it and handed her the bottle of water. "Here you go, Grandma."

At Sebastian's stunned look, Mikey shrugged it off as she said, "I don't like to be left out," making Mrs. Blaine's lips twitch. Sebastian held his hand out for his Coke, but Mikey simply ignored him and took a sip as she stepped over him and settled in comfortably on her sleeping bag. He turned his head to glare at her when he caught the murderous glare Braxton was sending their way.

Biting back a sigh, Sebastian reached over and stole his Coke back and finished it off before shifting his attention back to his iPad. Sometime later, he felt Mikey curl up

against him. He swiped to the next page only to end up rolling his eyes when she grumbled in her sleep and snuggled closer. God, she really was a demanding little thing, Sebastian thought as he turned off his iPad and laid down next to her only to sit back up, reach over and swipe her pillow before laying back down and—

Glaring when she stole it back.

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“You really are a brat,” Sebastian mumbled as he curled up on his side so that he could wrap his arm around her.

“You knew this,” Mikey mumbled sleepily, making his lips twitch as he closed his eyes only to open them again in what felt like minutes later to find Mikey gone.

Frowning, he looked around the living room, noting that everyone else was asleep. Mrs. Blaine had gone back to her in-law apartment for the night, and Cole and Braxton were missing along with the brat who’d refused to share the pillow with him. Rubbing his hands down his face, he kicked the sleeping bag off and decided to go see what Mikey was up to. He checked the downstairs bathroom before heading to the kitchen where he found Mikey and Braxton raiding the refrigerator.

“What are you doing?” Sebastian asked around a yawn.

“Starving,” Mikey sighed as she gestured lazily back toward the living room. “Mathew and Joshua kept stealing our food.”

“You’ve gotta learn to eat faster,” Sebastian told her as he joined them, noting the way that Braxton was watching him.

“I don’t think that’s humanly possible,” Mikey said with a sad shake of her head as she grabbed three plates out of the cabinet and started making sandwiches.

At his questioning look, she said, “One for me, one for you, and of course, one for Uncle Jason to pay the snack tax,” making him chuckle since his father had the same rule.

Sebastian watched as she made quick work out of making the sandwiches, adding extra mayonnaise and meat to his, knowing how he liked his sandwiches. When she was done, she grabbed the plate for Uncle Jason and moved to head to the door only to stop, level a glare of warning on him, and said, “Don’t touch my sandwich.”

“I won’t,” Sebastian promised, nodding solemnly.

With a grumble and a resigned sigh, Mikey left. While she was gone, he decided to make himself useful and grabbed two Cokes from the fridge and—

“That’s kind of pathetic, don’t you think?” came the question that had him biting back a sigh.

“What is?” Sebastian asked as he grabbed the chips and tossed them on the table.

“Sucking up to an old woman to try to get into her will,” Braxton said as he finished making his sandwich.

“Isn’t that what you’re doing?” Sebastian shot back as he grabbed their plates and carried them to the table.

“Me?” Braxton drawled with a slow shake of his head. “I’m just getting to know my great-grandmother.”

Not really in the mood to deal with the little prick tonight, Sebastian said, “I don’t want anything from her.”

“Then I guess we don’t have a problem.”

*_*_*_*_*

“Why does this keep happening to me?” Chloe asked as she stared down at the little girl that was slowly destroying her will to live.

“I will not apologize for defeating my archnemesis,” Katie bit out only to wince when some of the ketchup that caked her hair when she’d decided that she needed to teach Cole a lesson with condiments, got in her eye.

“You got us banned from the movie theater for a year,” Chloe said, sighing heavily even as she couldn’t help but feel that they got off easy this time.

“There’s nothing good playing anyway,” Katie said, shrugging it off as she shifted her attention to the toys that she had lined up along the edge of the tub.

“He paid you, Katie. You’ve gotta let it go,” Chloe said, hoping beyond hope that her sister would just let it go and move on.

“It’s not about the money,” Katie said as she gestured for Chloe to get on with it. Sighing heavily, Chloe stood up and aimed the showerhead on Katie so that the water was hitting the spot that was caked with yellow mustard and relish. While the water slowly removed the condiments from her sister’s hair, Chloe shifted her focus on trying to figure out which shampoo would be able to cut through barbeque sauce.

“Then what’s it about?” Chloe asked, deciding that baby shampoo just wasn’t going to cut it tonight.

“Honor,” Katie said firmly.

“Really? What do you think Uncle Nick is going to say when he finds out that you attacked Cole out of honor?” Chloe asked as she gave up trying to figure out which shampoo to use and grabbed them all.

“He’s not going to find out,” Katie said, sounding smug...a little too smug.

“Oh, and why’s that?” Chloe asked as she placed all the bottles of shampoo on the floor.

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“Because if he did, then I might be forced to tell him that you had a boy over tonight,” Katie said, making her roll her eyes because that was just pathetic.

“And who was this boy that had nothing better to do than to hang out here on a Friday night?” Chloe asked in a mocking tone as she grabbed the plastic cup off the shelf and found herself slowly turning around when Katie pointed behind her and said, “Him,” with so much disgust that she knew, just knew, who she was going to see standing in her hallway before she turned around. When she saw Cole standing there, leaning back against the wall with his arms folded over his chest, she may have, ummm, freaked out a little.

*_*_*_*

“You might as well open the door. I know you’re in there,” Cole said, smiling at the memory of Chloe releasing the cutest damn startled gasp that he’d ever heard before she raced toward the bathroom door, stumbling over her feet twice before she managed to slam the door shut.

That had been followed by frantic whispers and then silence. Since they’d been busy at the moment, he’d decided to make himself useful by seeing what was in the fridge. That had led him to ordering pizza when he realized that the only thing in the fridge was expired lunchmeat and an insane amount of frozen dinners.

“No, you don’t!” Katie yelled back, making his lips twitch.

“If I didn’t, I do now,” he pointed out, taking great satisfaction from her startled gasp.

That was followed by, “No! You can’t talk to my archnemesis!” as the bathroom door opened and Chloe stuck her head out the door. “What are you doing here, Cole?”

“Why wouldn’t I be here?” he asked, mostly because he liked the way that she narrowed her eyes on him when she was thinking about killing him.

“Besides the fact that no one invited you and you let yourself in?”

“Yes, besides that,” Cole said, waving it off.

“You don’t live here?” Chloe pointed out only to roll her eyes when Katie yelled, “Stop talking to my archnemesis and help me out of this tub so that I can finish what I started!”

“But I live next door,” Cole pointed out, watching as her mouth worked soundlessly as she tried to think of how she should respond to that only to frown and ask, “Who’s that?” when the sound of someone knocking on the front door caught their attention.

“Pizza,” was all Cole said as he pushed away from the wall and headed for the front door where a Blackjack’s pizza delivery driver waited, shooting nervously glances toward Sebastian’s house next-door as he noticeably swallowed.

&nbs

p; “Thirty-five fifty-eight,” the guy said, never taking his eyes off Cole’s house as Cole pulled the money out of his pocket and paid him.

“Do the Bradfords still live there?” the guy asked, swallowing nervously as he risked a glance at Cole before looking back at his house.

“I think they moved,” Cole murmured thoughtfully, wondering if that would be

enough to get his house off the banned list so that they could start getting Blackjack's delivered to their house again.

"I've heard stories," the guy said hollowly.

"Really?" Cole said absently as he double-checked his order to make sure that they didn't forget anything.

"We're not supposed to talk about it," he said, noticeably swallowing as he glanced back at Cole's house.

"Isn't the owner married to a Bradford?" Cole asked, wondering when Uncle Arik was going to lift the ban, but then again, since he was a Bradford...

"I heard she lost a bet and had to marry him," the guy said, making Cole nod with a murmured, "That's what I heard, too."

"Well, I better get going," the guy said with one last look at Cole's house and muttered, "Goodnight," as he left.

Chuckling, Cole turned around and wasn't exactly surprised to find Chloe standing behind him, struggling to hold Katie back, who somehow managed to get all that mayonnaise out of her hair, from killing him.

"Pizza?" Cole said, raising the stack of pizzas in his arms as he headed toward the living room.

"Look, you can't be here," Chloe said as she followed him.

"Why not?" Cole asked as he placed the pizza on the coffee table and grabbed a slice.

“I’ll get the plates!” Katie said with an enthusiastic nod as she rushed off to the kitchen, making him frown.

He glanced at Chloe to find her shrugging. “She can be bought.”

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“Good to know,” he murmured, gesturing to the stack of pizzas. “I got extra mushroom.”

“We’re not supposed to have anyone over when my uncle isn’t here,” Chloe said, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth as she clearly debated letting him stay, most likely for the pizza but he was okay with that.

“And I’ll be gone before he gets home,” Cole promised.

For a moment, she stood there and then...

“Why are you really doing this?”

“Because we’re going to be friends,” he said, deciding that it was only right that she knew.

“We are?” she asked slowly, clearly not seeing the benefits of being his friend, but she would.

“Yes, we are,” Cole said with a firm nod as he gestured to the spot on the couch next to him.

“And why are we going to be friends?” Chloe asked, sitting down next to him with a resigned sigh.

“Great friends,” Cole corrected her, making her lips twitch.

“Sorry. Why are we going to be great friends?” Chloe asked as she helped herself to a slice of double-mushroom pizza, her favorite from what he’d seen in the cafeteria.

“Because I’m adorable,” Cole said with a sad shake of his head, because really, what else mattered?

That was followed by a blank stare and a mumbled, “This is so sad.”

“Fine. How about the fact that it entertains you when your sister attacks me, which means that by being my friend, that I would be able to provide you with endless hours of entertainment?” Cole said, watching as she thought it over, hoping that she said yes, because he was honestly running out of ideas to make this better for her.

Nodding, Chloe said, “There is that,” as she nibbled on her pizza but they both knew that it was because he was adorable even if she didn’t want to admit it yet.

Chapter 28

She would not puke...

She would not puke...

She would not...

Oh, she was definitely going to puke, Mikey thought as she somehow managed to force her trembling arms to keep moving, but it wasn’t easy. After nearly two weeks of this, she would have thought that she would be used to this by now, but she would be wrong, very wrong. Every day was worse than the last and she honestly wasn’t sure how much more abuse her body could take.

The first day, he’d made them sprint back to the school where he had them do fifty

pushups for not making it to practice early. That had been followed by making them sprint back to the fields, doing another fifty pushups before they finally were able to get to the warmup that he had planned for the day, which had been worse, so much worse than anything that she could have possibly imagined.

Every day, he pushed them for more, made them run more laps, pushups, sit-ups, and some evil combination of pushups, squats, and jumps that were quickly destroying her will to live. By the time that they actually moved onto practice, her arms and legs would be trembling and she'd have to force herself to find the willpower to go on.

Not sure how many more pushup/squat/jumping thingies that she could do, Mikey struggled to get back on her feet and—

Damn near cried when the coach blew the whistle for them to stop. Truly thankful that it was finally over, Mikey moved to take a step toward the bench to grab her glove only to end up biting back a whimper when Coach Dilmore yelled, “Ten laps!”

Repeating all those useless mantras that had been getting her through this, Mikey forced herself to run to the fence and move her butt. It took her a little longer than everyone else, but she finally managed to finish. Gasping for air, she once again headed to the benches only to end up biting back a groan when Coach Dilmore said, “Campbell, give me five more laps for coming in last!”

Knowing that she really didn't have a choice, she ran/stumbled back to the fence line and after sending up a few silent prayers, she forced herself to run. She ignored the way that her legs trembled and the stitch in her side threatening to drop her on her butt and forced herself to keep going, knowing that if she slowed down or stopped that he would make it worse for her.

By the time she was done, Mikey was gasping for air and forced to grab hold of the chain-link fence to stop herself from falling over. Deciding that she hated running

more than those pushup/squat/jumping thingies, she dropped her head as she gasped for air only to find herself looking up when Coach Dilmore said, “You’re weak, Campbell. Better work on that if you want to stay on this team.”

Nodding, because what else was she going to do? Mikey forced herself to push away from the fence and headed back to the bench. For a moment, she considered grabbing some water but thought better of it since it would probably earn her more laps. Reminding herself that she had a plan, one that didn’t involve puking or passing out, she grabbed her glove and forced herself to head to right field.

Once she was there, Mikey...was bored out of her mind within seconds. She watched as the coach grabbed a bat and gestured for the pitcher, his son, to start throwing. She watched as the pitcher threw the ball, noting that he was decent, but predictable. He channeled every throw, shifting his feet when he threw a curveball, adjusting his baseball cap for every fastball, and—

“Campbell!” came the shout that had her jerking her attention back to the coach only to end up grunting in pain when something slammed into her head, knocking her on her butt and had her deciding that perhaps she should have been paying attention to the ball instead.

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Definitely should have paid better attention, Mikey decided as she curled up into the fetal position and decided that it would probably be for the best if she stayed there until the high-pitched noise tearing through her head was finished. That was quickly followed by telling herself not to puke when the coach knelt down by her side and forced her to open her eyes.

She wasn't exactly sure what he was saying to her, mostly because of that whole high-pitched noise thing that she had going on at the moment, but something, mostly the way that he was glaring down at her and the way that he was angrily biting out words, told her that it wasn't good. That was followed by him pointing toward the bench and her opening her mouth to tell him th

at she was fine.

When he moved his lips again, more urgently this time with another angry gesture, Mikey forced herself to stumble to the bench. Ignoring the pitying look the assistant coach was sending her, she grabbed an icepack and pressed it against her head as she sat down on the bench and watched everyone else play. When she couldn't take it any longer, she dropped the icepack on the bench and moved to get up only to end up grabbing the icepack with a sigh when the coach yelled at her to sit back down.

As she pressed the icepack back against her face and watched as Coach Dilmore told Johnny Dawkins to cover right field, something told her that she should probably get used to warming the bench.

*_*_*_*_*

“How are you holding up?” Aunt Kasey asked as Sebastian carefully scooped the rest of the stuffing out of the huge turkey that she’d pulled out of the oven a few minutes ago.

“Good,” he said, even though he could honestly say that he was doing better than good.

For the first time in years, things seemed to finally be going his way. He was days away from being done with his applications. His mother had managed to get a meeting with the public high school thanks to his Uncle Garret, who was a lawyer with a reputation for being ruthless. He’d stopped sneaking into the school to have lunch with Mikey, but that was okay since he usually had lunch with Aunt Haley and Mrs. Blaine now. And once he was done with his schoolwork, he got to go work for Aunt Kasey, except for Tuesdays when he went with Mrs. Blaine to another board meeting.

He wasn’t sure how this was going to end, but for right now...

He had no complaints.

Aunt Kasey was really easygoing. She told him what needed to be done and left him alone unless she needed help with something. She let him set his own hours, paid him ten bucks an hour, and let him eat all the food he could handle. It definitely beat raking leaves for his dad, Sebastian thought as he finished scooping the rest of the stuffing out of the turkey. Aunt Kasey was getting a start on her holiday cooking videos this year so that she didn’t fall behind, which meant that she was cooking a huge turkey dinner with different side-dishes every day this week.

Definitely better than raking leaves, Sebastian mused as he focused his attention on the butternut squash that needed to be mashed. He grabbed the small bowl of brown sugar that she’d set out for him and—

“What happened?” Aunt Kasey demanded, drawing his attention to find Mikey walking into the kitchen, covered in grass and dirt with a large bruise forming on the right side of her face.

“Nothing happened,” Mikey muttered, looking absolutely miserable.

“So that large bruise forming on the side of your face...”

“Is nothing,” Mikey said, dropping her bag by the door.

Sighing heavily, Aunt Kasey said, “Go clean up for dinner. It’s almost ready.”

“I’m not hungry. I just want to go to bed,” Mikey mumbled sadly as she started to pull off the sweatshirt that she stole from him only to rethink that decision when she spotted him. She let it drop back down with a grumble and slowly made her way to the living room.

“Please tell me that they didn’t bench her again,” Aunt Kasey said, shaking her head in disgust as she focused on the mashed potatoes.

“What happened last time?” Sebastian asked as he dumped the brown sugar in the butternut squash before reaching for the butter.

“I’m not sure what she told you about the team that she was on back in the Cape, but they wouldn’t let her play. The parents complained about her pitches being too dangerous, which I understood, but the coach took that as an excuse to bench Mikey instead of letting her play a different position.”

“She should be pitching,” Sebastian said, glancing back at the door that Mikey had disappeared through a minute ago, wondering if there was a way to fix this now instead of having to wait until next year.

Uncle Reese could probably have a word with the coach but...

Mikey would hate that and it would probably make things worse for her.

“Yes, she should,” Aunt Kasey murmured in agreement only to follow that up with, “The coach is the reason why Mikey wants to go to a different school next year, isn’t it?”

After a moment, he reluctantly nodded.

With a muttered, “Damn it,” Aunt Kasey shook her head in disgust.

For the next half hour, they worked quietly. Aunt Kasey looked like she was thinking something over while Sebastian was struggling to come up with a way to make this better for Mikey. While everything was finally going his way, Mikey was struggling. Every day, she got up early to practice her pitches before forcing herself to go to school and ask for extra credit that she didn’t want to do so that she could bring her grades up. She struggled to get as much homework done during lunch as she could so that she had more time to practice her pitches before she had to work on extra credit, study for the entrance exams, and complete her application essays at night, which probably wouldn’t have been a problem if it wasn’t for practice.

Every day her coach worked Mikey until she was too sore to move and by the time that she came home at night, she was exhausted and all she wanted to do was crash. But, she couldn’t. She had to help her mom with dinner, play with her brothers, finish her chores, and then spend the next few hours with him working on their applications and he honestly wasn’t sure how much more of this she could take.

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It probably wouldn't be so bad if the coach wasn't making her life miserable, Sebastian thought as he moved to go do the dishes only to frown when Aunt Kasey handed him a plate overflowing with turkey and all the trimmings. With a warm smile, she placed two forks on the plate and slid two bottles of water into his apron pockets before gesturing toward the living room door. "Go," was all she had to say to get him moving.

He quickly made his way upstairs and walked into Mikey's bedroom to find her sprawled out on the bed. "I'm not hungry," she mumbled with a sad little snuffle.

"Good. That means there's more for me," Sebastian said with a satisfied sigh that earned him a murderous glare as he sat down on the bed next to her.

"Why are you so mean to me?" Mikey asked as he placed the water bottles on the nightstand.

"Because it's easy?" he said around a bite of turkey.

"This is true," Mikey said with a heartfelt sigh and a nod as she reluctantly sat up and grabbed a fork.

"Want to talk about it?"

"Not really," Mikey mumbled sadly as she helped herself to the turkey.

"Want me to beat up your coach?" Sebastian asked, watching as her lips twitched.

“Yes, yes, I would,” she said, nodding as she shifted her attention to the stuffing.

“What’s he done now?” Sebastian asked, turning the plate around to make it easier for her to attack the mashed potatoes.

“He’s punishing me for being slower than everyone else. Apparently, I’m not fast enough to stand around in right field,” she admitted with a helpless shrug as he sat there, thinking it over as he debated something.

Deciding that it couldn’t exactly hurt, he said, “I might be able to help.”

Looking really hopeful, Mikey asked, “Really?”

Nodding, he said, “I have an idea.”

Sighing, Mikey helped herself to a biscuit as she said, “At this point, I’m willing to try anything.”

Chapter 29

“Wait! No, I changed my mind!” Mikey screamed somewhat hysterically, but it couldn’t be helped. She also couldn’t seem to stop screaming, “I changed my mind!”

Unfortunately for her, the horrible boy that dragged her out of bed at six a.m. on a Saturday morning didn’t really seem to care. “Come on, five more,” Sebastian said only to emphasize his demand with another spray of ice-cold water from the hose.

Wondering why he was doing this to her, Mikey forced herself to continue doing pushup/squat/jumping thingies while the horrible boy stood by with the hose, ready to squirt her if she tried to stop. Once she was done, Sebastian nodded approvingly as he tossed the hose aside, making her sag with relief, that is, until he reached for the stack

of egg cartons that she'd been wondering about.

"What are those for?" Mikey asked warily only to end up gasping in outrage when he pulled an egg out of the carton and threw it at her.

When she opened her mouth to ask him what the hell was wrong with him, Sebastian reached for another egg as he softly said, "Run."

"You can't be serious," Mikey said only to gasp when an egg hit her shoulder.

Taking his time to select another egg, Sebastian once again said, "Run."

This time, she decided that it might be for the best if she went for a lovely jog around the neighborhood. Decision made, Mikey turned around and—

"Hey!"

"Run faster," came the calmly spoken words that had her running toward the street to get away from the horrible boy that she was never talking to again!

*_*_*_*_*

"Go away! I hate you!" came the angrily muttered words that had Sebastian sighing as he glanced down at his watch.

"We're running five minutes behind," he told her, wondering why she was being so damn difficult about this as he double-checked to make sure that the Nerf gun that he'd borrowed from his little brother was fully loaded. He wasn't sure that he was going to need two hundred rounds, but it couldn't hurt.

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“I don’t care!” came the announcement that drew his attention back to the locked bathroom door.

“This is for your own good, Mikey,” Sebastian drawled as he debated his options.

“No, it’s not!”

Deciding that they’d wasted enough time with this, he made his way back to the hallway, walked the short distance to her baby brothers’ room and quietly climbed over the baby gate. Once he’d assured himself that he hadn’t woken any of her brothers up, he made his way to the bathroom door and reached for the doorknob. He wasn’t exactly surprised to find the door unlocked, but he was surprised to find the bathroom empty.

Climbing over the baby gate, he crossed to the other door and...

Sighe

d.

Just freaking sighed as he turned around and pushed the shower curtain aside. When the teenage girl that was currently trying to hide from him saw him standing there, she noticeably swallowed. When her gaze landed on the large Nerf gun in his arms, Mikey cleared her throat as she stood up and gestured awkwardly toward her bedroom. “I’ll just go grab my shoes.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Sebastian murmured in agreement as he stepped back,

giving her a chance to do just that.

When she hesitated, he switched off the safety and aimed the Nerf gun at her. With another murmured, “Right,” a nod, and a grumble, Mikey stepped out of the tub, climbed over the baby gate blocking her room, grabbed her sneakers and headed for the door. That was followed by Sebastian deciding that two hundred rounds probably wasn’t going to be enough.

*_*_*_*

“Finally,” Mikey mumbled as she shoved the practice test aside and promptly dropped her head down on her folded arms, too exhausted to do anything more than that.

“You finished with five minutes to spare,” the horrible boy that was making her life a living hell said, sounding pleased.

“I really hate you,” Mikey mumbled, shifting to get more comfortable.

“I know you do,” came the absently mumbled response along with a patronizing pat on her head that had her turning her head so that she could level a glare on him.

“Why are you doing this to me?” Mikey asked, too exhausted to do anything more than glare in his direction.

“You’ll thank me later for this,” Sebastian said, reaching over to give one of her braids a playful tug.

“I really won’t though,” she mumbled even though she knew that he was probably right.

They were scheduled to take the entrance exam next week on the one day that she didn't have practice, which meant that when Sebastian wasn't torturing her with early morning runs, pushups, and crunches, he was helping her study and giving her practice exams and now...

Now she just wanted the damn test to be over.

"Hey, it looks like you raised your score by twenty points," Sebastian said, nodding in approval.

Sighing with relief, Mikey opened her mouth and—

"Run."

"What?" she asked, blinking slowly as she raised her head and—

"Run," Sebastian said as he reached for the paintball gun that she'd been wondering about.

"Wait!" Mikey said, nervously licking her lips as she stood up, knocking her chair over in the process and—

"Run."

"Why am I running?" she asked, tripping over the chair as she backed away from the crazed boy following her.

"You're running a minute for every question that you got wrong," Sebastian answered, sounding bored as he raised the paintball gun.

"This," Mikey said, gesturing frantically between the two of them, "is the reason why

Jonathan is my favorite!”

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“You probably shouldn’t have told me that,” Sebastian said as he stepped around the kitchen table, right around the time that Mikey decided that a run at this time of night sounded lovely.

With that in mind, she raced to the door, threw it open, and made a run for it, hoping to lose him in the woods and—

“Ow!”

*_*_*_*_*

“This was a really good idea,” Sebastian said as he loaded more tennis balls into the ball machine.

“Ow!” came the startled gasp as the ball hit Mikey in the back simply because she hadn’t moved fast enough.

“She’s not running fast enough,” Mrs. Blaine said, gesturing with her cane in Mikey’s general direction.

“I completely agree,” Sebastian said, nodding in agreement as he turned the tennis ball machine that he’d helped himself to from the tennis courts, following Mikey as she raced from second base back to first and—

“Ow!”

“She’s definitely not moving fast enough,” Sebastian said with a sad shake of his

head as he watched Mikey turn around and head back to second base again.

“She needs to move faster,” Mrs. Blaine said as she reached over and turned the knob to a higher setting and—

“Ow!”

“That’s better,” Mrs. Blaine said, and he couldn’t help but agree.

*_*_*_*

This ended now, Mikey decided as she slowly, ever so slowly, pushed Sebastian’s bedroom window open. Once she was inside, she moved to close the window behind her only to rethink that plan since she would most likely need to make a quick escape.

Decision made, Mikey slowly made her way across the room, careful not to wake up the boy passed out on the bed on the other side of the room. She would make him pay, Mikey decided with a firm nod and—

“What are you doing?” came the whispered question from her left.

After making sure that Sebastian wasn’t awake, Mikey turned her attention to Jonathan and softly whispered, “Revenge.”

Nodding in approval, Jonathan laid back down and closed his eyes as Mikey slowly turned her attention to the reason that she was breaking in at two in the morning.

Sebastian.

The hell he’d been putting her through ended now!

She would no longer live in fear of having eggs thrown at her or have to wonder how early Sebastian was going to break into her room to drag her outside to run laps while spraying her with the hose.

Those days of living in fear were over!

After tonight, he would never chase her with water balloons again while yelling for her to run faster. She was going to make sure that he never—

“What’s going on in here?” Uncle Trevor asked quietly as the bedroom door suddenly opened, spilling light in from the hallway on her.

Swallowing hard, Mikey followed his gaze as he took in the large roll of duct tape in her hand before glancing back at her. At his questioning look, Mikey licked her lips nervously as she weakly gestured toward Sebastian, who was still thankfully fast asleep in his bed, and said, “Revenge?”

For a moment, he didn’t say anything and then...

“No permanent damage,” Uncle Trevor said as he carefully closed the door behind him, leaving her standing there trying to figure out what just happened until she realized that she was wasting precious time.

Giving herself a mental shake, Mikey shifted her focus back on Sebastian, quietly cleared her throat, and—

“Run,” came the softly spoken word that had her breath leaving her lungs in a rush as she watched Sebastian, who should’ve still been sleeping, sit up and...

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She wasn't exactly sure what else he was doing since she'd decided that it was imperative for her to turn around and head back to the window. She barely made it two feet before she suddenly found herself thrown over Sebastian's shoulder.

"You know," he began conversationally, "it's still pretty dark out. Why don't we work on your pushups for now?"

"But...my revenge," Mikey mumbled sadly, not really caring that she was pouting.

Sebastian gave her leg a patronizing pat as he said, "And it was terrifying. I'll probably have to sleep with one eye open for the rest of my life now."

With a sniffle, Mikey said, "Well, I guess that's something."

Chapter 30

"This just isn't going to work for me," Aunt Haley said as she placed the essay that he'd been working on for the past week back in front of him.

"What's wrong with it?" Sebastian asked as he handed the bottle back to Hunter, who had thrown it on the floor, hoping to distract Sebastian long enough so that he could steal his sandwich.

"Everything," Aunt Haley said, reaching up to push her glasses back up her nose.

"That really cleared everything up. Thanks," Sebastian said dryly with a mock glare that had her smiling.

“It didn’t move me,” Aunt Haley said as she helped herself to his chips while Hunter managed to get his tiny hands on his sandwich.

“It’s supposed to move you?” S

ebastian asked with a resigned sigh as he got up and grabbed everything out of the refrigerator that he was going to need to make another sandwich.

“So then, what are they looking for?” Sebastian asked as he made another turkey sandwich.

“More than this,” Aunt Haley said even as he had to wonder why he was wasting his time.

They were never going to let him in no matter how good his essay was, but then again, that wasn’t really the point was it? He needed to do this for Mikey. She wanted to play baseball next year and he was going to make sure that happened, which meant that he had to play along.

“Can you be more specific?” Sebastian asked as he reached for the mayonnaise and—

“Light on the mayonnaise, please,” Aunt Haley said, making his lips twitch as he reached for another plate. “They want a glimpse of who you are, how well you handle yourself, your ability to explain yourself, and they want you to convince them that you are the best choice.”

“Okay, so then what would you suggest I write about?” Sebastian asked as he quickly finished making her sandwich and started making one for himself.

“You could write about your expulsion and how that affected your life, but then you take the risk of reminding them that you were expelled from middle school, which

might not end well.”

“True,” Sebastian murmured in agreement, mostly because there was no way in hell that he was going to write about that when he didn’t even like thinking about it.

“You could talk about what it was like when your mom acted as a surrogate for Darrin and Marybeth, and what it felt like when you saw the triplets for the first time,” Aunt Haley suggested.

“That’s not really my experience though,” Sebastian pointed out since the extent of his involvement in that had been getting his mom snacks, trying to stay out of trouble, and watching his father lose his mind whenever his mother tried to do anything for herself.

Sighing, Aunt Haley said, “Good point. You could write an essay about the person that has made the biggest impact on your life?”

Before he could respond, she said, “Or you could write about an experience that changed your life?”

“There’s really not much to write about,” he said, since he doubted that anyone wanted to read just how pathetic his life was given that the answer to both of those suggestions involved Mikey.

He wouldn’t be able to write about why Mikey coming into his life had made such a big impact without reminding them just how badly he’d screwed up his life in the first place. That, and he didn’t like talking about Mikey. He knew that his family wondered about them, but—

“More mayonnaise,” Mrs. Blaine said as she rolled into the kitchen, making him bite back a sigh as he grabbed another plate.

“Or you could tell them about yourself,” Aunt Haley suggested, sounding thoughtful.

“I could...” Sebastian said, letting his words trail off as he made quick work of making another sandwich.

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“But you’re not going to,” Aunt Haley said, making him chuckle as he put everything back in the refrigerator.

“I’ll figure something out,” Sebastian said as he grabbed three bottles of water, the chips, and the bowl of potato salad that Aunt Haley made yesterday and put everything on the table.

“Okay. Then what about your personal letters of recommendation?” Aunt Haley asked as he grabbed their plates.

“I don’t have any,” Sebastian admitted as he placed her plate in front of her and—

“Does this have extra mayonnaise?” Mrs. Blaine asked, not bothering to look as she narrowed her eyes on him.

“Not unless you want Aunt Haley to beat me,” Sebastian said, going back to grab his plate.

When he returned to the table, Mrs. Blaine’s glare had shifted to Aunt Haley, which Sebastian appreciated. He put some potato salad on his plate, noted the way that his little cousin followed the move as Hunter licked his lips and got up and grabbed a small plate for him. Sebastian put a small scoop on the plate and moved to place it in front of Hunter only to bite back a sigh when his cousin shot him a glare of his own.

After adding a second scoop of potato salad on the plate, Sebastian took a bite of his sandwich and moved to return his focus to the chapter that he was supposed to be reading only to become aware of someone watching him. Looking up, he wasn’t

exactly surprised to find Aunt Haley and Mrs. Blaine glaring at him.

“What do you mean, you don’t have a letter of recommendation?” Aunt Haley asked.

“Your uncle and I are both writing you one.”

“Thank you, but you don’t have to do that,” Sebastian said, hating the idea of them putting themselves on the line like that. He—

“Ow!” he said, narrowing his eyes on his aunt as he rubbed his shoulder where her water bottle had bounced off.

“Stop being difficult,” Aunt Haley said, gesturing for him to give her back the water bottle.

With a glare, Sebastian reached down and grabbed the bottle off the floor and handed it back to her.

“Who else can you ask?” Aunt Haley asked, acting like she hadn’t just launched a water bottle at him.

“No one.”

“What about your Aunt Kasey? You help her a lot. Why can’t you ask her?”

“Because we all share the same last name,” he pointed out.

“I can see how that might be an issue,” Aunt Haley murmured, looking thoughtful as she took a sip of water while he couldn’t help but notice that Mrs. Blaine was once again glaring at him.

At his questioning look, she asked, “Why wasn’t I asked for a letter?”

“Because I was afraid that you’d beat me with your cane?” Sebastian said as Aunt Haley was forced to turn her head while Mrs. Blaine’s eyes narrowed dangerously on him and her hand twitched as though she was thinking about grabbing her cane, which she probably was.

Clearing her throat around what sounded suspiciously like a snort of laughter, Aunt Haley decided to change the subject. “How is Mikey doing with her essay?”

“I don’t know. She won’t let me see what she wrote,” Sebastian said, sighing heavily as he grabbed his water and took a sip, wondering why Mikey was such a pain in his ass.

“I thought you were helping her,” Aunt Haley said, frowning in confusion.

“I am, but apparently, I’m not allowed to see her essay until she’s done.”

“Maybe it’s personal?” Aunt Haley suggested, which of course only made him even more curious about what Mikey was writing.

“Are you ready for the test?” Aunt Haley asked as Mrs. Blaine continued to glare at him, something that he should be used to by now.

“As ready as I can be,” Sebastian said, even as he couldn’t help but wonder if Mikey was.

*_*_*_*

Well, she was now officially late for practice, but it couldn’t be helped, Mikey told herself as she knocked on the door.

Mr. Rose looked up from the papers that he was correcting. When he saw her, he

gestured for her to come. “What can I help you with, Mikey?” he asked with a smile as he tossed the pen back on his desk.

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“Can I talk to you for a minute, Mr. Rose?” Mikey asked, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth as she tried not to think about what Coach Dilmore was going to do to her when she showed up late to practice today.

“Of course,” he said, gesturing for her to sit down at the desk across from him. “I actually wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Good or bad?” Mikey asked, because she liked to clear that kind of thing up as soon as possible.

Chuckling, Mr. Rose said, “It’s good. I’ve been really impressed by how hard you’ve been working lately. We all have.”

“Thank you,” Mikey found herself mumbling awkwardly as she sat there, trying to figure out how she was going to do this.

“I’ll be honest. I’m curious about why you’ve suddenly started applying yourself to your schoolwork,” he said as Mikey took that as her cue to get on with it.

“I’m working on something, which is why I’m here. I need a favor, well, actually two,” she admitted.

“Of course, what can I help you with?”

“I’m trying to get into Latin Scribe High School.”

“Wow,” Mr. Rose said, looking stunned as he sat back in his chair.

“That’s why I’ve been trying to get my grades up,” Mikey admitted as she watched his expression go from shocked to curious and finally settled on thoughtful as he considered her. Nodding absently, Mr. Rose glanced at the windows for a second before looking back at her.

“I caught a few minutes of practice the other day,” he told her, watching her with a curious gleam in his eye that had her wondering which part of her humiliation he’d caught, the coach yelling at her or the part where she was forced to warm the bench now that he’d given her spot away.

Her new job was to warm the bench unless she needed to fill in for someone else if they couldn’t play because of an injury. Except for pitching, since he had plenty of backup for that. She was allowed to exercise with the team and run drills during practice, but that was it. The majority of the time she spent warming the bench.

She never thought that she would be able to hate baseball, but she was slowly starting to. Every day it was getting a little harder than the last to pull on her uniform and make herself go to that field knowing that she was going to sit on the bench. And the games...were the worst part. Being forced to warm the bench while her team played was probably the hardest thing she’d ever done, knowing that she should be on that field.

“Mikey, why aren’t you pitching?”

“I didn’t get the position,” she said, forcing herself to shrug it off like it was no big deal.

“You should have,” Mr. Rose said, taking her by surprise.

At her stunned look, he said, “I saw you pitch in the tournament last year. I’ve never seen anyone pitch a perfect game before. You d

id an amazing job, which had me wondering why your coach isn't using you."

"He doesn't want me to pitch," she mumbled, not really sure how to respond.

"And that's why you want to go to Latin Scribe, isn't it? To get a chance to play?"

"Yes," Mikey mumbled weakly because she would do anything for another chance to play baseball.

Nodding, Mr. Rose asked, "What can I do to help?"

"I need a letter of recommendation."

"Consider it done. I'm sure the rest of your teachers would be more than happy to write one for you, as well," Mr. Rose told her as he grabbed a pen and made a note in his planner.

"I'll ask them," she promised.

"What's the other favor you need?" Mr. Rose asked as he finished writing his note and tossed the pen back on his desk.

"I have to write an essay for the application and I was hoping that you could take a look at it and make sure that the grammar and everything was okay," she said with a hopeful smile.

"I'd be more than happy to take a look at it."

Nodding, Mikey pulled out the essay that she'd been working on for the past few weeks and handed it to him. Mr. Rose began reading it only to frown. After another moment, he glanced up at her, throwing her a questioning look before he continued

reading her essay. When he was done, he said, “That’s really good, but I just have one question.”

“What’s that?”

“I thought you wanted to go to Latin Scribe High School so that you could play baseball,” Mr. Rose said, looking confused.

“I do,” she quickly said.

“But this essay is—”

“More important.”

Chapter 31

“Are you nervous?”

“No,” Sebastian lied.

He was terrified. They’d stayed up until three this morning studying and he wasn’t sure that it was going to be enough. He’d never been this nervous about a test before, but the funny part was that he wasn’t worried about himself. If Mikey didn’t get a high enough score...

They’d just have to keep studying and take the test again, hoping that the schools would be willing to wait for her score before they made their final decision. In the meantime, they’d just continue applying for scholarships and hope that they were able to get enough to cover her tuition. But just in case that didn’t work, he had a backup plan.

Over the past month, he'd been searching for videos of Mikey playing baseball. He'd managed to find video clips of Mikey from when she was an adorable toddler throwing oranges at her Uncle Eric's head to last year when she'd managed to pitch a perfect game at the state tournament.

With his Aunt Charlie and Aunt Melanie's help, he'd been able to create a video highlighting Mikey's baseball career to help convince schools to give Mikey a chance, and hopefully, a full athletic scholarship. He planned on attaching a copy of the video with her application, and because he wasn't about to leave anything to chance, he was also sending a copy to every coach at the schools where she was applying, as well.

"What do you miss most about school?" Mikey suddenly asked him.

"Going to class," Sebastian admitted, making her squish up her face adorably.

"Really?"

"Really."

"There is something seriously wrong with you," she said, nodding solemnly.

"But you knew this," Sebastian reminded her as he glanced at the door marked, Quiet Please. Testing.

"I really did," she admitted, making his lips twitch as he looked around, taking in the rest of the kids that were here to take this test, noting just how nervous they looked and then looked back at Mikey to find her sitting back, looking completely relaxed as she rolled a baseball between her hands and—

"You're not nervous at all, are you?"

“Nope,” she said, letting the word pop.

“Why is that?”

“Because everything will work out for the best,” Mikey said, shrugging it off.

“You really believe that?” Sebastian asked, curious.

“Why wouldn’t I believe that?” she asked, frowning in confusion like she really couldn’t understand what the big deal was.

“Because of everything that’s happened,” he pointed out.

“And that’s why I believe it,” Mikey said, shrugging it off as she continued to roll the ball between her hands.

“Explain,” Sebastian said as he sat back and placed his arm on the top of the bench behind her.

“Just look at everything that my mom went through. My father died of cancer before he was sixteen, leaving my mom widowed and pregnant at fifteen years old. She could have easily given up and no one would have been surprised. They’d all expected her to end up like my grandmother, but my mother refused to do that. She got her GED, worked multiple jobs to keep food on the table and a roof over our heads, and worked her butt off to make her cooking website a success. She ended up marrying the man of her dreams, has five wonderful children, me obviously being the favorite—”

“Obviously,” he said dryly, earning a wink before she continued.

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“Her website is insanely successful, and now, she has a catering company that’s in high demand and I’ve honestly never seen her happier.”

“That’s because she worked her ass off to get where she is today,” Sebastian pointed out, giving her braid a playful tug.

“Okay, then look at your parents. Your mother grew up in foster care, ran away when she was what? Fifteen? Sixteen? She finished school, put herself through college, and after struggling to make it on her own, she fell in love with your father, she is happily married, and has her own business. It all worked out for her. And your father, managed to get his act together after dropping out of school and earned his GED. Things worked out for all of them in the end.”

“First off, they worked their butts off to get where they are today, so I’m not sure that you can say that everything just ‘worked out for the best.’ Secondly, I’m pretty sure that my mother lost a bet and had to marry him,” Sebastian pointed out.

“I’m sitting right here,” his father, who had been kind enough to take the day off to drive them here so that they could take the test, bit out, drawing their attention.

Blinking, Sebastian said, “I know.”

“There was no bet,” his father said, narrowing his eyes dangerously on him. “Your mother loves and adores me and cried tears of joy when I married her.”

“Are you sure they were tears of joy?” Mikey asked with a sympathetic wince that had his father’s lips twitching.

“You kids are brutal,” his father said, chuckling as he looked back down at his phone and continued scrolling through available properties online, probably looking for another house to flip.

“And you knew this,” Mikey said, nodding only to wince when the door to the testing room opened and a middle-aged man that really didn’t look happy to be here, gestured for them to go inside.

Knowing there was no turning back now, Sebastian slowly exhaled as he stood up, telling himself that everything would work out for the best.

*_*_*_*

“I can’t believe I failed,” Mikey said hollowly as she stared down at her untouched burger.

There was a heavy sigh and then, “You didn’t fail,” Sebastian said while she watched as he stole half of her delicious-looking burger.

“I’m sure you did fine,” Uncle Trevor said as he helped himself to some of her steak fries.

“Why must you lie to me?” Mikey asked with a sniffle, and because it felt like it was needed at the moment, a disappointed sigh.

“Why do you think we’re lying to you?” Sebastian asked as she watched her chocolate milkshake disappear.

“Because I was the last one to finish the exam,” Mikey mumbled sadly only to point to the large pickle on her plate since she wasn’t a big fan of pickles. A second later it was gone and she found herself looking out the large w

indow to her left, staring at the parking lot, wondering what she was going to do with her life now that her baseball career was over.

“Because you didn’t rush like most of them did,” Sebastian pointed out as she couldn’t help but wonder if she had what it took to be a paid assassin.

Probably not, Mikey thought only to wonder if she should learn how to cook and join the family business only to decide that might not be a good idea with her hating to cook and all. That led her to wondering if she should call Uncle Jared and see if he’d be willing to hold a job for her until she turned eighteen. She could do construction, Mikey told herself only to wonder if Uncle Jared would be willing to overlook the fact that she was afraid of saws, nail guns, and basically anything and everything that could leave her maimed or impaled on something.

“Are you planning on pouting until we get our test results?” Sebastian asked, helping himself to the rest of her fries.

“Yes, yes, I am,” Mikey said with a sniffle as she continued to pout, deciding that she really didn’t have a choice in the matter.

“That will really make the week fly by,” Sebastian said dryly as he reached for the rest of her burger.

“The camping trip should help get your mind off of it,” Uncle Trevor said, drawing her attention.

“Camping trip?” Mikey said, frowning only to roll her eyes when she was met with matching “Duh” looks.

“April vacation is next week,” Sebastian said as though that was supposed to mean something to her.

At her blank stare, Uncle Trevor said, “The family camping trip.”

It took a moment before his words sank in and when they did...

“Oh, god no,” Mikey found herself mumbling as she threw a frantic look at Sebastian, hoping beyond hope that he was going to tell her that this was a joke.

A really bad joke.

“We’re leaving Saturday,” he said with a shrug as though what he was saying was no big deal, but it was a very big deal!

The first two years she went with them, she’d had a great time. She got to hang out with all of her cousins and her favorite uncles, went fishing with her new grandfather and Reese, and stayed up all night telling ghost stories with the boys and then last year, it had been decided that maybe it would be a better idea if she slept in the girls’ tent. She loved Jessica and Elizabeth. She did, she really did, but with that being said, Mikey wasn’t sure if she could take another week of sharing a tent with them.

Not after what happened last year.

At first, it hadn’t been bad. They’d set up their sleeping bags, discussed which of the boys they were going to shove into the pond, she’d voted for Jonathan, and settled in to play a game of Monopoly. It wasn’t too long after that, that the camping trip turned into a nightmare and she found herself sitting there, praying that they stopped talking about boybands, actors they wanted to marry, makeup, and a million other things that she really didn’t care about. That was followed by an impromptu karaoke rendition of all of Justin Bieber’s greatest hits and Mikey praying for a bear to tear through the tent and put her out of her misery.

Unfortunately, that didn’t happen.

What did happen was her cousins kept revisiting the earlier topic of conversation, boybands, and further discussing the likelihood of meeting them and that somehow

led to a conversation about which one they could see themselves marrying. When they asked Mikey which boyband member she wanted to marry, she'd stared at them until they moved on. For seven hours, yes, seven hours, they'd giggled, whispered, and gasped as they talked about all those things that Mikey couldn't care less about.

After the first night, she'd figured that they got it out of their system and they would move onto something else the next night. She'd been wrong. Very, very wrong. Apparently, Elizabeth and Jessica were very passionate about boybands and had the teen magazines to back it up. So, while Mikey had been forced to lay there, staring up at the tent ceiling, her cousins had debated the pros and cons of marrying someone from the latest boyband or Theo James.

Once they came to a decision, Theo James, Mikey had hoped the nightmare would end. It didn't. No, what it did was progress on to other topics that had Mikey wishing that her parents came so that she could crash with them in their tent instead, but since her mom had just given birth to the second set of twins two months earlier, they hadn't been able to come. That left Mikey with nowhere else to go.

When the conversation moved on to which of the boys at their school they thought were cute, Mikey tried to change the subject only to somehow make things worse. The girls had decided to find out which one of their brothers and cousins Mikey thought was the cutest since she wasn't biologically related to any of them. When she'd told them in the driest voice possible that her baby brothers were the cutest Bradfords, they'd quickly agreed before asking her who she thought the second cutest Bradford was.

That's when she gave up.

That's also when she realized that she couldn't put herself through that again, not if she wanted to maintain a hold on her sanity. Mikey swore she wouldn't go this year and had planned to come up with a good excuse to stay home only she'd forgotten all

about it with everything going on with school, baseball, and—

Baseball!

Clearing her throat, Mikey shifted in her seat, doing her best to look disappointed as she said, “I can’t go next week. I’ve got practice and three games.”

Not that she was looking forward to warming the bench, but anything, and she really did mean anything, was better than sharing a tent with Elizabeth and Jessica. In fact, she was more than willing to see if she could schedule her annual dental exam next week if that’s what it took.

“Your parents already said you were going,” Uncle Trevor said, shrugging it off as he looked from her empty plate to his with a disappointed sigh. “God, I’m starving.”

“But they’re not going!” she pointed out, somewhat hysterically.

“Which is why they want to make sure that you go. They don’t want you to miss out on spending time with the family because of the boys,” Uncle Trevor said as he signaled for the waitress.

“But, baseball...” Mikey mumbled weakly, knowing that it was pointless to argue at this point knowing how her mom felt about family.

Up until three years ago, their extended family had consisted of Uncle Eric, her biological father’s little brother, and Aunt Sarah, her mom’s best friend, and that was it. She grew up without any cousins to play with, grandparents to spoil her, or a large array of aunts and uncles to torment, so her mom was trying to make it up to her by making sure that she got to spend time with Reese’s family.

“Your coach will understand,” Uncle Trevor said, but something, mostly the fact that

her coach seemed to really hate her, told her that this wasn't going to end well.

Chapter 32

"Now, let's see if we can come up with a solution that works for everyone," Principal Miller said with a polite smile as the school lawyer and the Superintendent finished reading through Sebastian's school records.

"I'm assuming that the school has a solution that they'd like to suggest," Uncle Garret said, looking calm while Sebastian sat there, slowly exhaling as he told himself that this was going to work out because if it didn't...

He was never going to listen to anything Mikey said ever again.

"We believe that the best solution to this situation would be to have Sebastian attend high school through our virtual program," Principal Miller said as the school's lawyer handed them each a packet on the virtual school program.

"And we believe that the best solution would be to allow Sebastian to enroll in the high school and give him a second chance," Uncle Garret smoothly replied.

"Sebastian has already had several chances over the years to rectify his behavior only to end up abusing those opportunities," Principal Miller pointed out as he opened Sebastian's file. "In elementary school alone, Sebastian had an extensive history of behavioral issues from disrupting class, property damage, skipping school, fights, bringing animals into school, detentions, suspensions, and on one occasion, he even locked his teacher in a closet with a large snake. To be honest, your son should have been expelled a long time ago."

"Since we're bringing up his elementary school records, why don't we discuss his grades?" Uncle Garret suggested, pulling out a small stack of folders and handed

them out. “Even with all those behavioral issues and missed school, Sebastian was able to maintain his grades and even set several academic records. Before his expulsion, Sebastian had skipped several grades and was placed in middle school—”

“Where he hacked into the computer system, tore through the firewall, made changes to his schedule, destroyed a science lab causing over ten thousand dollars’ worth of damage, and got into a screaming match with several teachers in the cafeteria, and that was all on his first day,” Principal Miller said, interrupting him.

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“Sebastian has already accepted responsibility for those issues and as for the last, I believe he was coming to the defense of several students that the school decided to make an example of because they didn’t have lunch money and chose to publicly humiliate them instead of showing them compassion.”

“We’re not here to discuss school policy,” the Superintendent cut in.

“That’s exactly why we’re here. You’re refusing to allow Sebastian the right to a full education based on school policy,” Uncle Garret pointed out.

“And virtual school will allow Sebastian to do that,” the principal said firmly.

“It’s not the same,” Sebastian’s mother said. “Sebastian has more than paid for his mistakes and he’s learned from them. He’s not the same kid anymore and he deserves another chance.”

“And the other students deserve an education without having to worry about your son’s disruptive behavior interfering with that,” the Superintendent pointed out while Sebastian sat there, admitting to himself that this wasn’t going well.

“He’s not going to cause any problems,” his father said.

“You can’t guarantee that,” Principal Miller pointed out.

“But I can,” Sebastian said before his mother could answer. “I’m not going to cause any problems. I just want to go back to school. I understand your concerns, believe me, I do, but I’m not going to do anything that will jeopardize this.”

Before the other side could argue, Uncle G

arret was taking over. “The problem is, the school failed to provide Sebastian with access to the programs that he qualified for. Several times over the years, Sebastian was tested and each time his scores indicated that he should have been placed in the gifted program. Instead, they left him in a regular classroom where he went unchallenged. He grew bored and unfortunately for Sebastian, he got himself into trouble. That won’t be the case now. With honors and A.P. courses available, Sebastian will have something to keep him challenged and out of trouble.”

“He can do those courses online.”

“Yes, he can, but he’s not going to,” Uncle Garret said smoothly. Without taking his eyes off the principal, he said, “Why don’t you wait outside, Sebastian, while we talk to your principal.”

Even though leaving was the last thing that he wanted to do, Sebastian knew that staying wasn’t an option, not if he wanted to prove that he’d changed. With a reluctant nod, he forced himself to leave. A minute later, he dropped down onto one of the hard-plastic chairs in the front office and tried not to think about what was going on behind that closed door.

When sitting there became too much, he headed outside, hoping some fresh air would help calm his nerves. To be honest, he really didn’t want to go to this school, but he knew that he didn’t have a choice. Never had. If a public school was fighting them this hard to keep him out, then he didn’t have a chance in hell of getting into one of the private schools.

Granted, he’d known from the beginning that he wasn’t going to get into any of the private schools, but then again, getting in had never been the point. He wanted to give Mikey a chance and he knew that the stubborn pain in the ass would never have

applied unless he did. He was going to do everything he could to make sure that she got into one of those schools. He just wanted her to be happy.

She deserved to be happy.

And he deserved...

Everything that he was getting, Sebastian reminded himself, slowly exhaling as he glanced back at the school. God, he hoped they let him back in. If they didn't, and they probably wouldn't, then he was going to go through with his original plan. He knew that Mikey would be pissed, but he couldn't do this anymore. With his history, there weren't many options left for him.

His best bet was to get his GED, beg Uncle Jared for a job and take classes at the community college, and maybe after a year, he would be able to transfer to—

“You’re on probation,” came the announcement that had him looking back to find his mother smiling.

“What?” Sebastian asked as he glanced at his father to find him looking relieved.

“You’re on probation. They’re going to let you enroll with the understanding that if you screw this up in any way that you’ll—”

“I won’t screw this up,” Sebastian said, smiling as he pulled his mother into a hug. “I promise.”

*_*_*_*

“Well, this is fun,” Mikey said as she watched her team get beaten for the fifteenth time in a row from the comfort of her bench.

It seemed that she wasn't the only one who'd figured out that the coach's son and nephews were telegraphing their pitches. Every team they'd come against had figured it out, which was probably why her team kept losing. The only one who hadn't figured it out was the coach. She'd considered telling him, but he'd probably just make her run laps, again.

Every time she made the mistake of asking him a question, he made her run laps. It didn't matter if she asked him if he wanted her to play today or if she asked him for a copy of the team schedule so that she wouldn't miss practice, he made her run and when he wasn't doing that, he made her sit on the bench. Every day she came to practice, ran drills with the rest of the team, got to warm up with the team and then, it was time for her to sit on the bench and wait for everyone to leave.

Once she'd made sure that everyone was gone, she snuck into the athletic shed, and dragged out one of the football team's tackling dummies and set it at home plate, grabbed five buckets of old baseballs, and stepped onto the pitcher's mound, and threw every damn ball as hard as she could until the last bucket was empty. Then, she collected all the balls and did it all over again, and again until the streetlights came on and it was time to go home. She made sure that she worked twice as hard as everyone else on the team, so that she didn't blow it when she finally got her chance to pitch.

Which wasn't likely to happen anytime soon, Mikey thought, forcing her hands to clap when the game was called in favor of the other team. She watched as her teammates shook hands with the other team while Coach Dilmore congratulated the other coach and—

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Maybe this was a bad idea, Mikey told herself as she watched the coach head her way to grab his stuff. Definitely a bad idea, she told herself when she saw the look on his face. Perhaps, she should let him know that she had to leave town tomorrow through a politely worded email?

When he absently muttered, “Good game, Campbell,” to her as he grabbed his stuff, she decided that he didn’t deserve a politely worded email.

“Coach Dilmore?” Mikey said after a slight hesitation because she honestly wasn’t in the mood to run any more laps. The twenty that he had her run before the game had been enough.

“What is it, Campbell?” he asked, not bothering to look at her as he shoved his iPad in his bag.

Clearing her throat, she somehow managed to force the words out. “I won’t be at practice this week. I found out yesterday that my family is going camping and I can’t get out of it.”

“How long?” he asked, still not looking at her as he grabbed the rest of his stuff.

“From Saturday until next weekend.”

“You’re going to miss three games,” Coach Dilmore said, finally glancing at her.

“Unfortunately,” she said with a helpless shrug.

“Well, I don’t see a problem with it. Have a good trip, Campbell,” he said, taking her by surprise.

“Thank you,” Mikey mumbled absently, unable to help but frown as she watched him leave.

That was it?

Seriously? Well, that hadn’t been so bad, Mikey thought as she watched everyone else start packing up. When the last straggler left a half hour later, she made her way to the athletic shed and set to work.

Chapter 33

“Are you ever going to tell me what you did to piss him off?” Jonathan asked as they watched Braxton through the opening in their tent.

“I have no idea,” Sebastian said, shrugging it off as he shifted his attention from Braxton, who had been glaring at everyone since his father dropped him off at their house this morning, back to the book that he was reading on his iPad.

“And you don’t care,” Jonathan guessed, not really sounding like he cared either.

“Who are you guys talking about?” Cole asked from the other side of the large tent that he’d claimed for himself. Normally they were forced to share the tent with their little brothers, but since Braxton decided to join them, Sebastian’s father had given Mathew and Joshua their own tent, most likely so that they wouldn’t overwhelm Braxton. Whatever the reason, Sebastian was thankful that he didn’t have to deal with his little brother and cousin bugging the crap out of him all night.

“Your favorite cousin,” Jonathan drawled as he gestured toward Braxton who was

sitting by the fire, glaring at whatever had pissed him off now.

“I have no idea why he came. He never talks to any of us. He just sits off to the side, glaring until it’s time for his father or grandfather to pick him up. That’s usually followed by glaring while they do their best to kiss Grandma’s ass,” Cole said, shaking his head in disgust as he watched his cousin.

“He doesn’t always glare, sometimes he just stares at Mikey,” Jonathan said, drawing Sebastian’s attention to find his brother watching him with an anticipatory gleam in his eye.

“True,” Cole murmured in agreement while Sebastian sat there debating throwing his iPad at his brother’s head.

“Of course, the quest

ion is, does Mikey stare back?” Jonathan asked right around the time that Sebastian decided it would be more satisfying to use his hands to slap that smirk off his brother’s face.

Decision made, Sebastian tossed his iPad on his sleeping bag and—

“What are you talking about?” Braxton asked as he walked into the tent that he hadn’t been happy to find out that he was sharing with them and dropped down on the sleeping bag that he’d been forced to borrow from one of their uncles after learning that they were planning on sleeping on the ground instead of staying in a private cabin like he was used to.

“Girls,” Jonathan smoothly answered.

“What about them?” Braxton asked, sounding bored as he grabbed an iPad out of his

bag.

“We were just discussing which one has caught our attention. I, of course, have professed my undying love for Mikey,” Jonathan said, shooting Sebastian a wink that was going to get him killed. “Cole has finally confessed his love for the girl next door and Sebastian was just going to tell us who has caught his eye.”

“I’m going to kill you,” Sebastian and Cole said in unison as they both moved to do just that when Braxton’s next words brought them up short.

“Isn’t Mikey your cousin?”

With an impatient gesture and a heavy sigh, Jonathan said, “Her mother married our father’s cousin. We’re not related. I’m going to need you to keep up here.”

“Wait. Reese is your father’s cousin? Then why do you call him Uncle Reese?” Braxton asked, frowning.

“Because we like to confuse people. Now, focus,” Jonathan said as he focused his attention back on Sebastian and gestured for him to get on with it.

When Sebastian sat there, glaring at his brother, Jonathan added, “We could always guess.”

“And I could always tell Mom that a bear dragged you off into the woods,” Sebastian bit out.

“Come on, it’s not like everybody doesn’t already know,” Cole said, chuckling.

“This is true,” Jonathan murmured only to frown when their tent flaps were suddenly shoved open and Mikey came in, dropping her bag and shoes by the door before dragging her sleeping bag behind her and grumbling as she made her way over to Sebastian’s side only pausing long enough to step over Jonathan. Once she was there, she dropped her sleeping bag down, kicked it to straighten it out, and with one last muttered grumble that sounded suspiciously like, “Stupid boybands,” she laid down, folded her arm over her eyes and slowly sighed.

“You do realize that this is the boys’ tent, right?” Braxton pointed out.

“And you do realize that all the girls are talking about is makeup, boys, and boybands, right?” Mikey shot back, not bothering to move her arm.

When Braxton opened his mouth to say something else, she cut him off with, “And you’re welcome to take my place,” as she blindly gestured toward the opening in the tent.

“And we were just talking about girls before you came in,” Jonathan pointed out, teasingly.

Without opening her eyes, she gestured for them to continue with a mumbled, “I don’t care.”

“So, you wouldn’t care if Sebastian was talking about another girl?” Cole asked, making Sebastian narrow his eyes on his cousin as he realized that he really didn’t have a choice.

He was going to have to beat the crap out of him, too.

“Not even a little bit,” Mikey mumbled around a yawn, sounding bored and making him frown.

“Why’s that?” Braxton asked as Sebastian glared down at his best friend.

“Because I’m his favorite,” Mikey said with a shrug that had Sebastian grinning hugely.

That is, until she stole his pillow.

Then he was glaring at her as he tried to take it back.

“God, some people are just so rude,” Mikey said with a sad shake of her head when he finally managed to steal it back and she was forced to roll over onto her side and steal Jonathan’s pillow.

“Oh, come on!” his brother whined, but Mikey simply ignored him as she once again settled in for the night.

“That’s much better,” Mikey murmured with a satisfied sigh only to follow that up with, “I’m starving,” a few minutes later with a groan.

“How can you be hungry? It was like a never-ending buffet,” Braxton asked, looking confused probably because of the insane amount of food that they had available all day.

Opening her eyes, she leveled a glare on his brother and cousin. “Because they,” Mikey said only to pause to point a damning finger at Jonathan and Cole, “kept taking turns stealing my food all day!”

“It was delicious,” Cole said with a satisfied sigh.

“It really was,” Jonathan seconded with a dreamy sigh that had her eyes narrowing dangerously on them.

“We are no longer speaking, sir,” Mikey said, nodding slowly as she shoved the sleeping bag open, grumbled, glared, and crawled back toward the tent opening, pausing only to knee Jonathan in the side and making him laugh before she grabbed her shoes, grumbled, and crawled out of the tent without another word.

“Where is she going?” Braxton asked, frowning after Mikey.

Grinning hugely, Jonathan and Cole shoved their sleeping bags aside and scrambled to follow after her as Sebastian shoved his sleeping bag open with a resigned sigh and muttered, “Pat’s.”

Chapter 34

“Here,” Jonathan said as he shoved a handful of crumpled bills into her hand, which was followed by Cole doing the same, along with a list of their demands.

Blinking down at the list in her hand, Mikey said, “You planned this,” as she turned an accusing glare on the boys who had taken great joy in starving her today.

“Obviously,” Jonathan said with a snort and a gesture for her to get on with it.

When she simply stood there, glaring at the boys that she would make pay for this betrayal, Cole reached over, gently grabbed Mikey by her shoulders and turned her around so that she was facing the infamous Pat’s, the country store that sold everything from penny candy to the best pizza in a fifty mile radius. It was also one of the many places that had banned the Bradford family, which she still hadn’t found out why.

Not that she really wanted to know...

Still.

“Did it ever occur to either one of you just to ask me to do this, instead of starving me?”

“We weren’t willing to take that chance,” Cole said as he gave her a gentle push to get her moving.

“I hate you both,” Mikey mumbled sadly as she headed inside.

“You can hate us all you want just as long as you don’t forget the fries,” Jonathan called after her, earning a murderous glare as she reached for the door only to have Braxton beat her to it.

“Here,” he said, opening the door for her.

“Thank you,” Mikey mumbled absently as she sent one last glare at the traitors only to frown when she spotted Sebastian glaring at something behind her.

She followed his gaze to find him glaring at Braxton. Not really sure what that was about, she sent him a questioning look as she headed inside. Making a mental note to ask him about that later, she paused in the doorway to count the money they’d shoved in her hands and quickly calculated how much she was going to need to cover everything on their list as well as her fee, of course.

“Did that sign really say ‘No Bradfords Allowed’?” Braxton asked, sounding confused and reminding her that he hadn’t grown up around his cousins.

“Yeah,” Mikey said absently as she shoved the money back in her pocket and headed toward the lunch counter where Pat was waiting.

“Are they going to stay outside?” Pat asked as he watched the boys settle on one of the picnic tables outside.

“Yes,” Mikey said with a reassuring smile as she placed the list on the counter, hoping that it was enough to make him overlook the fact that he had three Bradfords outside waiting to pounce.

Nodding, he glanced back at them only to narrow his eyes on Braxton. “Is he one of

them?”

“No, he’s not a Bradford,” Mikey reassured him, but Pat didn’t look convinced.

“What’s your name, kid?” Pat asked as he glanced from Braxton, who looked confused, to the boys outside and back again.

“Braxton Taylor.”

Pat considered them for a moment before nodding. “Okay,” he said, turning his attention to their list.

“Can I get an order of fries while we wait, please?” Mikey asked, knowing that this might be her only chance to eat something before the boys attacked.

With a nod and one last look at the window to make sure the boys were keeping their distance, Pat headed toward the back to start their order.

She really should have known the boys were up to something, Mikey thought, sighing heavily as she grabbed a handbasket and handed it to Braxton, who took it as he glanced back at the boys. “What was that about?”

“You really don’t want to know. Trust me,” Mikey said as she grabbed a handful of chocolate bars and dropped them in the basket before heading toward the chips.

“Probably not,” Braxton murmured in agreement as he followed her around the store. “Can I ask you something?”

“Just as long as I’m allowed to do the same,” Mikey said, biting back a sigh as she debated asking him if Sebastian had been talking about another girl, but...

This was stupid.

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Who cared if Sebastian was talking about another girl? It was none of her business. Although, as his best friend one would think that he would tell her if he liked another girl. But this was fine. More than fine, Mikey thought as she grabbed a bag of his favorite chocolate chip cookies off the shelf and added it to the basket only to rethink that decision and put them back on the shelf because he didn't deserve cookies.

?

??How can you stand them?"

"Stand who?" Mikey asked only to sigh as she grabbed the cookies and placed them in the basket because apparently, she was a pushover.

"Them," Braxton bit out coldly, drawing her attention to find him glaring at the boys.

With a shrug, she said, "I mean, I know that they can be annoying, but they do have their moments."

Rolling his eyes, he said, "Not them. I meant all the Bradfords," making her frown.

"Why wouldn't I like them? Mikey asked, having trouble figuring out what he was talking about.

"Because of how they treat my great-grandmother," Braxton asked, shaking his head in disgust.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, somehow even more confused than she had

been a minute ago.

“They’re all using her,” he bit out angrily.

“No, they aren’t,” Mikey said as she wracked her brain trying to figure out where this was all coming from.

When he opened his mouth, most likely to say something that was going to piss her off, she stopped him with a sigh. “No one is using your great-grandmother, least of all the Bradfords. All of them consider her family. I’m not sure what you’ve heard, but from what I’ve gathered over the years, Aunt Haley and Uncle Jason won’t even let her pay rent.”

“They built the in-law apartment for her so that they could help her and so that she could spend more time with her great-grandchildren. Aunt Haley won’t even allow her to spoil any of her children. No one in this family wants or expects your great-grandmother to give them anything. They actually like and care about her,” Mikey finished as she grabbed some snack pies for herself only to grab extras for the boys and tossed them in the basket before heading to the next aisle.

It wasn’t until she grabbed a twelve-pack of Coke out of the cooler that she realized that Braxton hadn’t followed her. She walked back to see if he was grabbing another basket and—

“That’s not what I was told,” Braxton said as he reached back and rubbed the back of his neck with a heavy sigh.

“Well, it’s the truth. You can ask your cousin if you don’t believe me. Your great-grandmother offered to buy him a car for his birthday next week and he ended up in a glaring match with her because he doesn’t want anything from her. None of them do,” Mikey explained even as she couldn’t help but wonder what his family had been

filling his head with all these years.

“What about your boyfriend?”

“What about him?” Mikey asked, sighing heavily because she just really wasn’t in the mood to explain that Sebastian was her best friend, again.

“What’s his sudden interest in her?”

“Please don’t make me hurt you,” she said with a heavy sigh and a helpless shrug. “Sebastian doesn’t give a damn about her money.”

“How do you know?” Braxton asked as Mikey moved onto the next aisle.

“Because I know him,” Mikey said, grabbing a few more candy bars as they made their way back to the counter. “Why do you call her Great-Grandmother? Why don’t you just call her Grandma like the rest of your cousins?”

Shrugging, Braxton placed the basket on the counter near the register before joining her. “That’s what my family calls her. Only Aunt Haley’s family calls her Grandma.”

“Why?” Mikey asked, hopping up onto a stool just as Pat placed a large basket of French fries in front of them. “Thank you,” she said as she reached for the ketchup.

With a nod, Pat headed back to the kitchen as Braxton sat down next to her. “They’re the only ones allowed to call her that.”

“Have you ever wondered why that is?” Mikey asked, popping a fry in her mouth.

For several minutes, he didn’t say anything as they sat there while she nibbled on French fries, wondering what the odds were of her getting a slice of pizza without one

of the boys stealing it from her and then...

“I know why,” Braxton said quietly and before she could respond, Pat was walking out of the kitchen with their order.

“All set,” Pat said as he placed the large stack of pizza boxes on the counter along with a couple of large brown paper bags and rang up their order.

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“Thank you,” Mikey said as she pulled the money out of her pocket and paid for everything. Once she had her change, she grabbed the stack of pizzas while Braxton grabbed the bags and headed for the door.

Before she reached it, the door swung open and Jonathan and Cole were relieving them of everything. Once her arms were free, Mikey quickly made her way to the bottom step where Sebastian was waiting, his back already turned so that she could climb on.

“Did you save me any fries?” Sebastian asked as he waited for her to get settled.

“Are you going to tell me why you were glaring?” Mikey countered as she wrapped her arms around him.

“I don’t like the way he looks at you,” he said as he watched Braxton head back to their campsite with Cole and Jonathan.

“And how does he look at me?” Mikey asked as she laid her chin on his shoulder.

After a moment, Sebastian said, “I just don’t like him.”

“Duly noted,” Mikey said, gesturing for him to hurry up before the boys helped themselves to her snacks.

Chapter 35

“Stop being such a big baby and get out here!”

“No!” came the response that had Sebastian narrowing his eyes on their tent as he debated the best way to get the little brat out when Jonathan took care of it for him.

He watched as his brother walked over to the tent, pulled back the flaps and threw something inside. Whatever he did was met with stunned silence that quickly morphed into a surprised gasp, a rustling in the tent and Mikey crawling out the back, quickly racing around to the front, muttering, “I really hate him,” as she raced toward him so that she could jump in his arms.

Once he had his arms around her, Sebastian glanced back in time to watch as his brother leaned inside the tent, grabbed something and—

“I really do hate him,” Mikey mumbled as they watched the snake that Jonathan tossed into their tent wrap itself around his arm.

“Isn’t he cute?” Jonathan asked as he held up his arm to give them a better look at the snake.

“I know you do,” Sebastian said to Mikey even as he resigned himself to snake duty tonight, knowing that she wasn’t going to be able to go back inside until he checked for snakes every hour on the hour. But that was fine, Sebastian decided as he tightened his grip around her and moved to join the rest of his family.

“I don’t want to go,” Mikey grumbled as she laid her head against his shoulder.

“I know you don’t,” Sebastian said, biting back a smile that he knew she wouldn’t appreciate at the moment. “Would it help if I told you that it will be over before you know it?”

“No, because I know you’d be lying to me,” Mikey said only to gesture for him to put her down.

After making sure that Jonathan wasn't planning on sneaking up behind her and scaring her with that snake, he placed her on the ground and—

Sighed, just freaking sighed when she tried to make a run for it. Before she managed to make it two feet, he grabbed her by the arm, yanked her back, and after another sigh, picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder, wondering why she was being such a big baby about this.

“Just so you know, we are no longer speaking,” Mikey grumbled as she settled more comfortably over his shoulder.

“I already figured that out,” Sebastian said absently as he made his way down to the pond.

“If I drown—”

“I thought you weren't talking to me,” Sebastian said, mostly because she wasn't going to drown.

“I'm not.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Trying to give my last will and testament, but some big jerk keeps interrupting me!” Mikey snapped, making his lips twitch only to clear her throat and say, “Now, where was I?”

“You were professing your undying love for me!” Jonathan yelled as he ran past them.

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“You know that I’m going to need help getting rid of his body one day, right?”

“I already have the perfect spot picked out,” Sebastian told her as he carefully made his way down the narrow path that led to the pond.

“You’re a good friend.”

“I’m the best,” Sebastian said absently as he took in the last two boats and—

“Damn it,” he said, sighing heavily as he watched his brother quickly climb into the boat with Cole, Joshua, and Mathew.

“What is it?” Mikey asked as his attention went to the last boat.

“It’s going to be a long day,” he said when he spotted Braxton standing by the last boat, looking just as unhappy as Sebastian was about the boating arrangements.

“Because of my drowning?” Mikey asked, making him roll his eyes as he glanced out at the pond to find his father and uncles already fishing.

“You’re not going to drown,” Sebastian told her as he considered going to see what his mother was up to only to decide against it knowing that she would be pissed if she found out that they ditched Braxton.

“How do you know?” Mikey asked as he reluctantly headed toward the boat.

“Because you can swim?” Sebastian pointed out, already regretting his decision to

leave his iPad behind.

“I really can’t though,” Mikey mumbled sadly, making him frown.

“What are you talking about? You grew up on the beach,” he reminded her as he headed for the last dock where the jerk that they were going to be stuck with all day was waiting for them.

“Why are you always judging me?” she asked on a heavy sigh as he moved to put her down only to rethink it and carry her to the boat.

“Why are you always such a pain in my ass?” Sebastian countered as he carefully stepped into the boat, noting that everything they were going to need was already waiting for them.

Instead of answering him, she asked, “Would this be a bad time to tell you that I have to use the bathroom?” making him sigh.

“Why didn’t you go before?” Sebastian asked as he turned around, ignoring Braxton’s questioning look and stepped back onto the deck.

“You mean when I was cowering in my sleeping bag, hoping that you would leave me alone?”

“Yes,” Sebastian said, placing her on her feet only to end up narrowing his eyes suspiciously when he noticed the triumphant gleam in her eye. “You’re lying about needing to use the bathroom, aren’t you?”

Nodding, Mikey said, “I really am,” a split second before she took off running, leaving him standing alone on the deck, unable to help but sigh because she really was a pain in his ass.

*_*_*_*_*

He looked furious, Mikey couldn't help but notice as she nibbled on the delicious s'mores that she'd made to help pass the time.

Upon further inspection, she couldn't help but notice that he was also soaking wet from head to toe, caked in mud with bits of twigs and other things that she really couldn't identify at the moment, tangled in his hair and he was definitely pissed. There was no missing the murderous glare that he was sending her way. Her gaze flickered to Braxton to find him in a similar state and for some reason he was glaring at her, too.

Well, that couldn't be good...

Clearing her throat, Mikey held up her half-eaten s'mores in offering. When Sebastian's eyes narrowed dangerously on her, Mikey returned to nibbling on her delicious treat as she watched Sebastian, who still hadn't said a word to her, reach back and grab hold of his wet shirt and pulled it off. While he balled it up in his hands, she couldn't help but sit there, appreciating the sight before her.

He'd definitely come a long way since she'd met him, Mikey absently thought as she took in his well-defined chest and abs. Then again, all the men in his family seemed to be built like that. She wondered if it was genetic when he tossed his soaking wet shirt at her feet.

Blinking, she looked down at the shirt already creating a muddy puddle at her feet that smelled like stale pond water before looking up and—

“Why are you covered in black leaves?” Mikey asked, unable to help but frown because she'd never actually seen a black leaf before. Then again, maybe the leaves were from the bottom of the pond that he'd clearly went for a swim in, she thought,

but that wouldn't explain why some of them looked plump and...

Were they moving?

Frowning, Sebastian followed her gaze and...

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Made her realize that she probably should have kept that question to herself when Braxton suddenly screamed, “Leeches!” right around the time that both boys started to freak out a bit there.

Definitely should have kept it to herself, Mikey decided a moment later when she was forced to jump off the log that she’d been using as a bench when they started tossing the leeches that they’d managed to tear off, away.

That was followed by more screaming and a lot of panicking, which drew the attention of the rest of their family. That led to Mikey wondering why she hadn’t thought to grab her phone when this all started so that she could record this. Thankfully, Mathew and Joshua were on top of this, so she didn’t have to worry.

“What the hell is going on?” Uncle Trevor demanded as he walked over and quickly jumped out of the way of a flying leech.

“Get them off!” one of them screamed. She really wasn’t sure which one at the moment. Not that it mattered, Mikey thought as she moved to help Sebastian. While he continued to tear the ones off the front of his body, Mikey focused on his back.

Trying not to think about what she was doing, Mikey tried to wipe them off, but they wouldn’t budge. That led to her taking a deep breath and reaching for a particularly fat leech on his shoulder. She grabbed hold of the slimy, wiggly body and yanked it off. When it wiggled in her hand, she tossed it in the fire and forced herself to keep going. She was probably doing this all wrong, but at the moment, Mikey really didn’t care as long as she got them off.

It took her several minutes to get them all off, but once the last leech was gone, she—

Realized that Sebastian was definitely going to kill her this time, Mikey thought when he turned around and she found him glaring down at her.

Clearing her throat, Mikey said, “I missed you?” hoping that it would be enough.

It wasn’t.

Deciding that a hopeful smile couldn’t hurt, Mikey glanced over to find Aunt Zoe helping Braxton with the leeches on his back before returning her attention to Sebastian just as he reached for her.

Thankfully, Uncle Trevor grabbed him by his arm and pulled him back so that he could whisper something in his ear. Before Mikey could wonder about that, Sebastian took off running toward the bathrooms. Braxton was right behind him a moment later. With a heavy sigh, Uncle Trevor grabbed their bags from their tent and followed them, leaving Mikey standing there only to decide that she should probably go wash her hands when she remembered the leeches.

Wondering what happened at the pond, she made her way to the bathrooms only to frown when she heard one of the boys scream, “Oh, my god!”

That was followed by another, “Oh, my god!” This one louder as she finished washing her hands and headed back to their campsite, deciding that she should probably make this up to Sebastian.

Mikey headed to the tables covered in food and grabbed a plate. She loaded it with all of Sebastian’s favorites, covered it in foil, and grabbed a Coke from one of the coolers. Once she was done, she headed back to the campfire by their tent only to think better of it because of all the leeches currently writhing in the dirt and headed

back to their tent instead.

After a slight hesitation, Mikey went inside and quickly made her way to her sleeping bag, praying that there weren't any snakes hiding in the tent, ready to attack her as she went. Once she was settled, Mikey placed Sebastian's plate on his sleeping bag and—

Decided that it might be in her best interest to pretend to be asleep by the time that he got back. Not that she had anything to be afraid of, but she felt that it would be better if she didn't draw his attention when he was this pissed, especially since she may have inadvertently ditched him this afternoon and laughed with glee when she did it.

Definitely time to go to bed, Mikey thought as she crawled inside her sleeping bag and curled up on her side, and not a moment too soon. He definitely sounded pissed, Mikey decided as she listened to him drop his bag by the door before making his way to his sleeping bag and once he was there...

Mikey was forced to bite back a wince when she felt him glaring at her.

For several minutes, she was forced to lay there, struggling against the urge to make a run for it. When she finally heard the foil on his plate being removed, she felt herself relax. He ate quietly while she lay there, struggling against the urge to open her eyes and see if he was glaring at her.

When he finally finished, she heard him crawl out of the tent to get rid of his trash and was back a moment later. She heard him turn off the lantern and settle into the sleeping bag next to her.

Realizing that she'd somehow managed to survive, she felt her body relax as she slowly exhaled and—

“I didn’t see where Jonathan released that snake, did you?”

—found herself shoving her sleeping bag open and crawling for the tent opening only she never made it.

Before she could reach the tent flaps, Sebastian had his hands wrapped around her ankles and was dragging her back as he drawled, “Let’s talk about your betrayal this afternoon, shall we?”

Chapter 36

“Are you ever going to tell me what happened when you went fishing?” came the absently murmured question as they cut through the park.

“You mean the time when I spent eight hours in a boat with that little prick because you ditched me?” Sebastian asked as he glanced at Mikey to find her absently rolling a ball between her hands as she worried her bottom lip between her teeth.

Instead of answering her, Sebastian said, “You don’t have to do this.”

“I know,” Mikey said with the saddest little sigh that he’d ever heard, letting him know just how bad it was.

She didn't want to be here.

/> Mikey always wanted to play baseball. It didn't matter if she was sick, grounded, at school, eating, or sleeping. If there was a game going on, Mikey made sure to find a way to be there.

But not today. Today, she was dragging her feet and looking absolutely miserable. Over the last week, she'd been smiling, laughing, and tormenting him for her own amusement only to suddenly go quiet last night when his father announced that they had to go home early because Mathew took an unfortunate roll through a patch of poison ivy.

When her mom reminded her that she had a game today, she'd reluctantly nodded and spent the rest of breakfast staring down at her untouched pancakes. She waited until the last minute before she went upstairs and put her uniform on. When she was done, Mikey hesitated until it was finally time to leave and even then, it took her mom reminding her that she was going to be late to get her to go.

He wasn't the only one who'd noticed either, Sebastian thought as he glanced to his right to find Uncle Reese walking next to them, looking just as worried as Sebastian was. They needed to do something. The season was barely halfway over and he doubted that Mikey was going to be able to keep this up for two more months.

Hoping to distract her, Sebastian said, "He spent the entire time glaring at me. We didn't catch a single fish and when it was time to come in, we couldn't because Joshua and Mathew managed to steal our oars when Jonathan threw nightcrawlers at us to distract us. We were stuck out there drifting for two hours before we finally

gave up waiting for them to come back and ended up jumping in the water and swimming to shore where we got stuck in the mud.”

“I knew there was a reason why Jonathan was my favorite,” Mikey said, finally cracking a smile, which is the only reason that he let that comment slide.

Besides, Sebastian knew that he was her favorite.

“Looks like the game is about to start,” Uncle Reese said and just like that, the smile on Mikey’s face melted away.

“You don’t have to stay, Dad. I know that you have a lot of work to do,” Mikey said, which wasn’t like her. Mikey normally loved having her parents at her games, especially her stepfather.

“Cleared my day so I wouldn’t miss this,” Uncle Reese said as they reached the baseball fields. He pulled Mikey into a hug and kissed her forehead before he gave one of her braids a playful tug and said, “Go get ‘em.”

With a forced smile, Mikey nodded as she turned around and headed for the dugout only to stop when her coach walked over and asked, “What are you doing here, Campbell?”

“We came back early and I didn’t want to miss another game,” Mikey said, moving to join her team only to stop at the coach’s next words.

“You quit the team, Campbell,” he said, making her frown.

“What are you talking about? I didn’t quit,” Mikey said as Uncle Reese stepped forward.

“What’s going on?” Uncle Reese asked as he wrapped an arm around Mikey’s shoulders.

“Your daughter hasn’t shown up for practice or any of the games for a week,” the coach said, sighing heavily as though it pained him to say this.

“Because she was on a family trip. She told you last Friday,” Uncle Reese said as Sebastian reached over and took Mikey’s trembling hand in his and pulled her back before she lost it.

“And I told her that was fine because that was her decision, but I was very clear about the expectations that I had for every player at the beginning of the season. This wasn’t the first time that I had problems with Mikey. She’s been late before,” the coach said, making Mikey frown.

“It was one time and I had a note from my teacher,” Mikey said, looking confused.

Nodding, Uncle Reese said, “I really don’t think it’s going to matter what we say at this point, not when you finally found an excuse to get my daughter off the team. But, let me ask you something, what kind of coach benches a kid who holds the state record for throwing perfect games? It just seems to me that most coaches would be happy to have a kid like Mikey playing on their team.”

When the coach opened his mouth to answer, Uncle Reese answered for him. “Probably the same coach who wanted to make sure that his son and nephews made the team.”

“I really hope she wasn’t planning on coming out for the team next year,” was all the coach said as he turned around and walked away, leaving Mikey completely devastated.

*_*_*_*

“This was a stupid idea,” Sebastian said as he glanced down at the new target that he’d built for Mikey and sighed.

He’d been wracking his brain over the past week trying to find something that would cheer Mikey up, but so far...

This was the best that he could come up with.

He’d never seen her like this. She’d just shut down and he had no idea how to make this better for her. Over the past week, everyone had been alternating between trying to cheer her up and giving her space. She hadn’t said much since the coach kicked her off the team. She’d simply shut down.

After they’d walked home in silence, she’d headed to her room, took off her uniform and stuffed it in the kitchen trash before closing herself off in her room. She just laid there, staring at the wall and...

God, this was killing him.

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She hadn't touched a baseball all week. Refused to leave her room until Monday and the only reason that she'd left it was because her mother refused to let her stay home from school. Not that Mikey had put up much of a fight, she'd simply nodded when her mother told her that she had to go to school. The whole way there, she'd stared at the ground, never saying a word to him.

It had been the same way all week. He'd waited until everyone was asleep before he snuck into her room. She didn't say anything when he laid down next to her. She simply turned over and buried her face against his chest as he wrapped his arms around her and held her.

Maybe he should buy her a new bucket of baseballs? Sebastian thought as he grabbed the old throwing target that she'd managed to pulverize and carried it out front for trash pickup. He moved to go put the tools away when he spotted the mail truck at the next house. He walked back over to the mailbox and grabbed the mail for Aunt Kasey and headed back to the house when a thick envelope on top of the pile drew his attention.

Rerum Prep High School.

For a minute, he stood there, staring down at the thick envelope in his hands as he debated doing something incredibly stupid. This was a bad idea, but...

This could make everything better.

After a quick glance at his watch, Sebastian shoved the rest of the mail back in the mailbox and ran across the street to grab his bike. After a quick glance at the kitchen

window to make sure that his mom wasn't looking, he shoved the letter in his pocket and headed to the middle school.

Ten minutes later, he was out of breath and waiting outside the gym for the second lunch bell to ring. Sighing heavily, Sebastian leaned back against the brick wall and waited, tapping his fingertips against the brick wall as he counted down the seconds until the bell rang as he kept an eye out, just in case.

"Finally," Sebastian said, sighing with relief a few minutes later when the lunch bell sounded. He waited a few more seconds to make sure that everyone was gone before he glanced through the crack and when he didn't see anyone, he carefully pushed the door open and headed inside.

As soon as he was inside, Sebastian made his way to the boys' locker room and slipped inside, pausing at the end of the small hallway before he made his way through the locker room and did the same thing at the door that led to the main hallway.

When he heard the sounds of students heading to lunch, Sebastian pushed the door open and headed to the cafeteria, blending in with the rest of the students. As he made his way to the cafeteria, he slowly exhaled, hoping that they were going to be able to give her a full scholarship. If not, then that was fine. It was just the first school that had responded and he was sure that one of the schools was going to offer her a full scholarship after seeing the video he'd made.

God, he hoped so.

He stepped inside the cafeteria and moved to the side, searching for Mikey. When he didn't see her in line, Sebastian shifted his focus to the back tables and found her sitting by herself, staring down at her lunch and looking so damn miserable that he—

“Don’t move,” came the harsh command as he felt someone grab hold of his arm and before he could move, his arm was pulled behind him as someone used the move to drop him to his knees.

“You’re under arrest for trespassing,” came the announcement that had his stomach dropping as he felt cold metal close around his wrist.

His other arm was yanked behind his back seconds later. Sebastian felt the metal cuff close around his other wrist as he was yanked back and dragged out of the cafeteria. In seconds, he was laying on his stomach and–

“What are you doing? Let him go!” he heard Mikey scream from somewhere behind him.

“It’s fine!” Sebastian yelled, closing his eyes in defeat as he pressed his forehead against the tiled floor. “It’s fine!”

He was going to be sick.

God, he’d just screwed everything up, Sebastian realized as dread pooled in his stomach when his arms were grabbed and he was dragged to his feet. He looked over his shoulder to tell Mikey not to worry only to have the words die in his throat as he watched an officer pull Mikey’s arms behind her back and reach for his handcuffs.

Oh, God...

Chapter 37

“So, I was thinking,” came the softly spoken words that had Zoe smiling as she felt her husband’s arms wrap around her and pull her back against him.

“About?” Zoe asked.

“Everything,” Trevor said, pressing a kiss against the back of her neck before he let her go so that she could turn around and pull him down for a proper kiss.

“What are you doing home so early?” she asked as she brushed her lips against his one last time.

“Would you believe that I missed you?”

“Possibly, but I have a feeling there’s something else that you’re not telling me,” Zoe said with a teasing smile.

“I talked to the coach over at the high school about Mikey playing next year.”

“You did?” Zoe said, blinking in surprise.

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“Mmmhmm, we took a ride over there and decided to show the video Sebastian made to the varsity coach and talked to him about Mikey’s chances of playing next year.”

“We?” Zoe said, focusing on that one word.

“Me,” Trevor said, pausing to kiss her forehead. “Uncle Jared,” he said, kissing the tip of her nose. “Jason,” he said, leaning down to kiss her chin. “And Reese,” he finished by brushing his lips against hers.

“And?” she asked, smiling against his lips.

“And unfortunately, he doesn’t have any say over who plays on the freshmen team,” he said, sighing heavily with one last brush of his lips against hers before he stepped away.

“He can’t make Coach Dilmore give her a chance?” Zoe asked, regretting her decision not to say anything when this all started.

They probably all were after what happened, but they didn’t want to make anything worse, and now, Mikey was off the team and it didn’t look like that was going to change anytime soon. Not unless she was able to get into one of the schools she’d applied to. They’d be stupid not to accept her. Mikey was a sweet girl, who didn’t deserve this.

Sebastian didn’t either, Zoe thought only to tell herself that it was all going to work out. They just had to—

“But he does get to decide who plays on the JV team,” Trevor said offhandedly before his lips pulled up into a grin. “It’s not official, but he said as long as Mikey tried out for the team next year, he’d have a pitcher’s spot for her.”

“Are you serious?” Zoe asked, already reaching over to pull her husband into a hug when his phone rang.

“The spot’s hers if she wants it,” Trevor said as he pulled his phone out. Shooting her a wink, he answered the phone and immediately lost that smile as he listened to whoever was talking on the other line.

After a moment, he bit out, “Where is he?”

“Trevor, what’s wrong?” Zoe asked, watching as he hung up the phone and headed for the door.

“Call Reese and tell him that Mikey’s been arrested.”

*_*_*_*

“Hey, look at me, Mikey,” Sebastian said softly as she struggled to stop trembling.

She’d never been this scared before.

“It’s going to be okay. I won’t let anything happen to you,” Sebastian promised, but she could only nod her head as she struggled to stop crying.

She watched as another teardrop hit the tiled floor, joining the others. She couldn’t believe this was happening. The image of Sebastian being shoved to the ground kept playing through her head over and over again and—

This couldn't be happening.

Not now.

This was all just a bad dream. Just a bad dream, Mikey kept telling herself as she sat there struggling to breathe because this couldn't be happening. One minute, she was staring down at her lunch and the next...someone was telling her that she was under arrest.

After that, everything felt like a dream. She vaguely remembered being dragged into the principal's office where they'd started asking them questions. She hadn't been able to make sense out of what they were saying, but she knew that it was bad. The video of Sebastian sneaking into the school over and over again let her know that there was no getting out of this one.

After the last time that Sebastian snuck into the school and caught the vice-principal's attention, they'd decided to take a closer look at the surveillance video. When they spotted Sebastian sneaking in and meeting with her in the cafeteria, they'd decided to check the old footage and what they found was enough for them to decide to involve the police. So, when Sebastian snuck into the school this time, they'd been ready for him.

They didn't bother asking her who was sneaking into the school because they wanted to catch Sebastian in the act and they figured that she would warn him and now they were both in trouble. Sebastian was going to jail for criminal trespassing, whatever that meant, and they were waiting for her parents to make her expulsion official before escorting her off the property and...and...

She couldn't breathe.

God, she couldn't seem to get enough air, Mikey thought, desperately trying to get air

into her lungs and—

“Help her! She can’t breathe!” Sebastian yelled.

The officer that had arrested her moved to check on her, but someone else got there first. Mikey felt the handcuffs keeping her arms locked behind her back removed before she found herself picked up and looking into her stepfather’s face, but it wasn’t her stepfather.

It was Uncle Darrin.

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She could always tell them apart because he didn't have the scar on his brow from the baseball she threw, Mikey thought numbly as he laid her down on the floor.

"It's okay. Your Dad's on the way," Uncle Darrin said, giving her a warm smile as he checked her pulse. The sounds of her breathing grew ragged as she tried to focus on what her uncle was saying, but her head was spinning and she couldn't seem to get enough air.

"Do something!" Sebastian screamed. "Her lips are turning blue!"

Still giving her that smile, she watched as Uncle Darrin reached for the microphone secured to his uniform and said, "This is unit fifty-seven. I need an ambulance at County Middle School for a fourteen-year-old girl in respiratory distress."

"Unit fifty-seven, received for the fourteen-year-old girl in respiratory distress at County Middle School. I have a unit with an ETA of two minutes," came the response a few seconds later.

"She's under arrest," the officer standing over them said, drawing her attention and making it harder to breathe.

"No, she's not," Uncle Darrin said calmly as he cupped her face and gently caressed her cheek with his thumb.

"Get the handcuffs off my nephew," Uncle Darrin said only to add, "Now," when the officer didn't move.

“He violated the terms of his expulsion. We have it on video. He’s been sneaking into the school for more than two years now and she’s been helping him,” the officer said.

“Unless you have a valid restraining order, you’re going to have a hell of a time proving that a fourteen-year-old kid knew that he’d be arrested if he set foot on school property. So, I suggest that you take the handcuffs off him now and file for the restraining order that you’re not going to need because he’s never going to do it again.”

Mikey watched the officer glare down at them. Terrified that he wasn’t going to let Sebastian go, she opened her mouth and tried to beg him only she couldn’t seem to get the words out.

“Mikey?” Uncle Darrin said, looking upset for some reason. “Mikey? Mikey!” came the words that sounded far away as darkness enveloped her and pulled her down.

*_*_*_*_*

“We had to sedate her, but she’s going to be fine. We’d like to keep her overnight for observation though,” came the words that had Sebastian staring helplessly down at his hands.

He did this.

It wasn’t bad enough that he’d screwed up his life and his brother’s life, he had to drag Mikey down with him. He knew this was going to happen, Sebastian thought as he rubbed his hands roughly down his face. He never should have talked to her, never should have gone with her that day, and he sure as hell never should have crawled through her window that night and now...

She was paying for his mistakes.

“Who’s Sebastian?” the doctor asked Aunt Kasey and Uncle Reese.

“Her best friend,” Aunt Kasey said hollowly as Uncle Reese pulled her into his arms.

“She’s been asking for him. I think it might help her calm down if she could see him,” the doctor quietly explained.

When Sebastian moved to stand up, his father grabbed his arm to stop him. Without a word, he pulled his arm free and headed for her room, absently wondering when this was going to start feeling real. He ignored h

is parents calling his name, telling him to stop and kept moving until he saw Mikey, laying on a hospital bed with an oxygen mask over her mouth and wires attached to her small body.

Feeling his heart break, Sebastian walked over to her only pausing long enough to put the siderails down before he carefully climbed onto the bed next to her and pulled her into his arms.

“Sebastian?” came the mumbled question.

“Yeah?” he said, holding her tight.

“I think we’re in trouble,” she said, surprising a weak chuckle out of him.

“Yeah, I think we are too,” he told her as he pressed his lips against her forehead.

“Will you stay with me until I fall asleep?” Mikey asked, already sounding like she was halfway there.

“Yes,” Sebastian said as he watched his mother and father walk into the room.

They didn't say a word, but then again, they didn't need to. He watched as they sat down in the chairs against the wall and waited. When Mikey finally fell asleep, they stood up and waited. Sebastian forced himself to let go of Mikey and climb out of that bed. He looked at her one last time before he walked toward the door. When he saw Aunt Kasey and Uncle Reese sitting in the chairs across the hallway, looking like they'd been to hell and back, he forced himself to walk over to them and say the only thing that he could think of to make this better.

“You don’t have to worry. I’ll leave her alone.”

Chapter 38

“I think she stood you up,” Joshua said as he shoved the rest of the hot dog in his mouth.

“She didn’t stand me up, because it’s not a date,” Cole said as he found himself glancing at the trees separating their properties and wondering where she was.

She should have been here an hour ago, he thought, biting back a sigh as he shifted his attention back to his birthday party and—

“She can do better,” Joshua said, looking thoughtful as he focused his attention on his burger.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Elizabeth said, nodding in agreement while Cole stood there, glaring down at his siblings.

“She didn’t stand me up,” he found himself saying, again, when it should have been more than obvious that Chloe enjoyed spending time with him. Granted, she never invited him over to her house, but then again, she didn’t need to since he invited himself over to save her the trouble of doing it.

“Really?” his cousin Mathew said, blinking innocently up at him. “Then where is she?”

Narrowing his eyes, Cole said, "I hate you all," as he decided to find someone more worthy of his company. With that, he headed toward the food only to end up biting back a groan when he saw his mother's family standing off to the side, taking turns watching Grandma. He didn't like the way they looked at her.

He wished his mother hadn't invited them, but she was determined to give them a second chance and for her, he was willing to keep his mouth shut and smile politely when they reluctantly acknowledged his existence, but other than that...

He didn't trust them.

He looked away only to find himself watching his cousin Sebastian. He'd never seen him like that before. He looked...

Destroyed.

Sighing, Cole looked over to where he'd spotted Mikey earlier only to find her sitting in the same spot, sitting off by herself, staring down at the ball in her hands. She looked so lost. He moved to go see if she was okay when he spotted Chloe standing on the other side of the trees. She started to head to the party only to stop, shake her head, and turn around only to reluctantly stop when he called her name.

"Where are you going? The party's this way," Cole said, catching up with her.

"I was just coming to tell you that I can't make it, but I wanted to give you your present," Chloe said, shifting nervously as she held out a small box wrapped in green wrapping paper with a silver bow perfectly centered in the middle.

"What is it?" he asked, moving to open it only to have her stop him by laying her hand over his.

“You don’t have to open it now. It’s not really anything special. I just wanted to get you something for your birthday,” Chloe said, shrugging it off.

“Thank you,” Cole said only to frown when he said, “Are you sure you can’t come over?”

“I’m sorry. I have something planned with my family and this is the only day that Uncle Nick could get off so…” she said, letting her words trail off with a helpless shrug.

“I understand,” Cole said, biting back a sigh, surprised at how disappointed he was that she couldn’t make it.

Over the past month, they’d become good friends. He’d stopped stalking her and started spending time with her. Every day they walked to school together, sat together in class, they ate lunch together, walked home together and most days, they did their homework together. Most nights he snuck over to her house to binge-watch TV with her and let her sister torment him just so he could see her smile and...

He liked her, he realized.

“Happy birthday, Cole,” Chloe said, giving him a warm smile before she turned around and left.

Deciding that he’d save her a slice of cake and bring it over later, Cole headed back to the party. He went to put her gift on the table with the others, but curiosity had him turning it over in his hands as he glanced back at her house. With a sigh, he walked over to the chairs lining the patio and dropped down on one.

With a last look toward Chloe’s house, he tore the wrapping paper off and opened the thin white box only to frown when he pulled back the green tissue paper layered over

what appeared to be a very old book. The leather was aged and worn, he noted as he carefully opened the cover only to feel the air in his lungs leave him in a rush when he saw the words Emily Bradford written with Manchester, England 1850 written beneath it.

This was his great-grandmother's journal, Cole realized as he closed the book so he could run his fingertips reverently down the soft cover. He glanced over at her house as he carefully placed the cover back on the box and quickly made his way next door, deciding that this couldn't wait. He made his way up the porch, raised his hand to knock and—

“How come we're not doing anything for your birthday?” he heard Katie ask, drawing his attention to the open window next to him.

“We are doing something for my birthday,” Chloe said as Cole found himself moving closer to the window.

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“We’re sitting on the couch watching Harry Potter again. How come we’re not having a party?” Katie asked as Cole stood there, watching them through a break between the white curtains.

“Because I don’t need a party,” Chloe said as she gestured to the television as Cole bit back a curse. It was her birthday, too. “This is the perfect way to spend my birthday.”

“What about a cake?” Katie asked, making Cole frown.

“I don’t need a cake,” Chloe assured her.

There was a slight pause and then, “I think Uncle Nick forgot, again.”

“He didn’t forget. He’s very busy,” Chloe assured her little sister.

“What do you think Mom would have done for your birthday if she was alive?” Katie asked, sounding sad.

“Well,” Chloe said, reaching over to pull her little sister on her lap so that she could wrap her arms around her, “first thing she would have done was go overboard making sure that everything was pink from the frosting on the cake to the streamers lining the walls. She would have invited everyone that she’d ever met, cooked enough food to feed an army, and made sure that the party lasted until midnight, which I would have absolutely hated.”

Frowning, Katie looked up at her sister as she asked, “Why?”

“Because then I wouldn’t have been able to spend the day with my favorite person on earth watching Harry Potter,” Chloe said with a teasing smile.

“And Daddy?”

“Would have probably snuck into my room tonight with a huge piece of cake and way too much ice cream, which of course, would have resulted in a tummy

ache,” Chloe said, squishing up her face adorably for her little sister.

“I would have eaten it for you,” Katie said, nodding solemnly.

“And that’s why you’re my favorite person on earth,” Chloe told her as Cole turned around and headed back the way he came with the realization that there was so much more to Chloe than he’d ever imagined.

*_*_*_*_*

They should have sent him to military school when they had the chance, Sebastian thought as he slowly rubbed his hands down his face before dropping them away. They definitely should have screamed at him, but that would mean that they were talking to him at the moment. During the ride home last night, he’d waited for them to yell at him, ask him what the hell he was thinking, to scream at him, something, but they never said a word.

When they got home, they walked upstairs and closed their bedroom door. Not sure what else to do, Sebastian made dinner, helped Mathew and Jessica with their homework, and cleaned up the mess. They didn’t say anything, but then again, they didn’t have to. He knew just how badly he’d messed up, which was why he’d headed upstairs and waited for his parents to finally scream at him, but they never came.

Long after everyone else had gone to bed last night, Sebastian found himself heading onto the roof and climbing over to his parents' window, needing to make sure that they were okay only to realize just how badly he'd messed up when he heard his mother crying for the second time in his life. But this time, nothing his father said could console her. He'd forced himself to sit there and listen as his mother cried. When she finally fell asleep from exhaustion, Sebastian headed back to his room, ignoring Jonathan's questioning look and laid down.

This morning when his parents told everyone that they were leaving for Cole's birthday party, he'd considered staying home but he'd wanted to make sure that Mikey was okay. When he saw her walk into the party an hour ago, he'd nearly lost it. She was pale and looked so damn miserable, and it was his fault. The reminder that he'd done this to her was the only thing that had kept him sitting there when all he wanted to do was to go to her and—

And nothing, Sebastian reminded himself as he pulled his iPad out of his pocket and found himself watching her again.

"Talk to me," Jonathan said as he dropped down on the chair next to him.

"There's nothing to talk about," Sebastian said with a slow shake of his head as he stared down at the iPad in his hands.

"What happened?"

"I messed up. What else is there to say?"

"I've never seen Mom and Dad like this before," Jonathan said softly, drawing Sebastian's attention to find them standing off to the side, away from everyone else. He watched as their father pulled their mother into his arms and kissed her forehead. Even from here, Sebastian could tell that she was struggling not to lose it.

“It will be better when I’m gone,” Sebastian promised him as he found himself watching Mikey, who hadn’t said a word to anyone in the past hour.

“You need to make this right for her,” Jonathan bit out angrily as Sebastian watched Mikey.

He had to let her go.

“That’s what I’m doing,” Sebastian told him as he forced himself to look away.

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“No, what you’re doing is making this worse. She needs you.”

“No,” Sebastian said, shaking his head, “she doesn’t.”

“God, you’re such an ass,” his brother said, shaking his head in disgust as he stood up and walked away, leaving Sebastian sitting there, struggling not to look at Mikey again, knowing just how easily he would break if he did.

She deserved better than someone that was just going to ruin her life. Without him in the picture, she had a chance to fix everything and he wasn’t about to take that away from her. Her parents were going to fight the expulsion and they’d probably win, especially since he planned on writing a letter taking full responsibility for everything that happened.

Hopefully that would be enough to keep the private schools interested in her, Sebastian thought only to frown when his iPad alerted him to a message. Surprised that his parents hadn’t taken this away from him last night, he swiped his fingers across the iPad and—

Felt the air rush out of him when he saw the two emails waiting for him. The first one was from the exam center. Knowing that it wasn’t going to make a difference, Sebastian opened the email and saw his score.

150 out of 150 possible points.

Of course, he’d get a perfect score, Sebastian thought numbly as he hit delete and moved on to the next email, noting that it was from the high school. Slowly exhaling,

Sebastian opened the email and found himself numbly staring down at the proof that he'd screwed everything up.

He—

“What do we have here?” Braxton asked, sounding amused as he snatched the iPad out of Sebastian's hands only to laugh a few seconds later when he read the email.

“Give it back,” Sebastian said as he reached over to snatch the iPad out of Braxton's hands only to have the jerk pull it out of his reach.

“You got rejected from a public high school?” Braxton asked, laughing as Sebastian slowly became aware that everyone at the party was looking at them. “How do you get kicked out of a school that you're not even in? That's pathetic.”

“I'm not playing with you, Braxton. Give it back to me,” Sebastian said as he moved closer, reaching to grab it again, but Braxton wasn't done.

“Dear Mr. Sebastian Bradford, we regret to inform you that we will be unable to allow you to attend next year. You are welcome to enroll in the virtual alternative, please see the link below. We would also like to remind you that you are not eligible for any extracurricular activities or allowed—”

“Enough,” Mikey said, snatching the iPad out of Braxton's hands before he could finish, but the damage had already been done.

His family watched him with pity in their eyes while Braxton's family looked at him with disgust. Having had more than enough of this party, Sebastian turned around and—

“Aw, come on, don't you want to know what you're not allowed to do?” Braxton

called after him in a mocking tone.

“Go to hell,” Sebastian said, forcing himself to keep going, wondering just how soon his parents could ship him off to military school and get him the hell out of here before he—

“Give it back!” Mikey snapped right around the time that Braxton said, “Don’t forget your iPad.”

Before Sebastian could turn around, he watched as his iPad soared past him and landed on the driveway ten feet away with a sickening crack. He watched as his iPad broke in two with the back breaking off and skidding several feet away, leaving the shattered screen behind.

“What is your problem?” Mikey yelled, drawing his attention back in time to see Braxton shove Mikey out of his way and...

That was it.

He was on Braxton less than a second later, pulling back his fist and punching him, knocking him on the ground. Sebastian didn’t wait for Braxton to get up, he followed him down, punching him as soon as his knee hit the ground, barely aware of the blows that Braxton was landing and not giving a damn about anything else other than shutting him up.

He’d had enough.

He was sick of everything, sick of screwing up all the time, sick of the way that everyone looked at him, and sick of...sick of...everything!

“Sebastian, stop!” Mikey said, trying to grab hold of his arm but he pulled it free and

hit Braxton again and again until someone grabbed hold of him and dragged him off, but not before Braxton landed a kick, hitting him in the gut and knocking the wind out of him.

“Sebastian, calm down!” his father yelled as he pulled him back, but he was done.

Yanking his arms free, Sebastian shoved his father away, ignoring the startled look on his father’s face and stumbled toward the driveway, grabbing his ruined iPad and shoving it in his sweatshirt before he got the hell out of there.

Chapter 39

“Mikey!”

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“God, boys are stupid,” Mikey said, shaking her head in disgust as she paused long enough to grab a bottle of water from the cooler before she ran after the boy that was making this a hell of a lot harder than it needed to be.

Ignoring everyone yelling her name, Mikey ran after Sebastian. She didn’t bother yelling his name as she followed him across the street and wasn’t exactly surprised when he cut through the park. When he headed toward the football fields, she’d decided that they’d played this game long enough and did what she had to do.

“Ouch!” Mikey said on a pained gasp, trying not to overdo it as she slowed to a walk and grabbed hold of her side with one hand, and with the other, slapped her hand with the water bottle against the side of a tree as she leaned over and waited.

She didn’t have to wait long before she heard, “Damn it!” That was followed by a resigned sigh as Sebastian walked over to make sure that she was okay and that’s when she made her move...

“What the hell are you doing?” Sebastian asked as she tried to take him down to the ground so that she could slap some sense into him, but apparently, she hadn’t been able to get enough momentum before she made her move to make it happen.

“Getting really pissed at you,” Mikey said, deciding to cut her losses and move on, Mikey dropped to the ground and wrapped her arms around his leg and held on tight.

“Let go,” he said, trying to pull his leg free, but she refused to let him go until she said what she needed to say to him.

“You’re an idiot,” Mikey said, deciding that was the best place to start.

“Agreed. Now let go,” Sebastian said as he reached down and carefully tried to dislodge her, but she wasn’t going anywhere.

“No, we’re going to talk,” she said, dropping the water bottle so that she could tighten her grip.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” the stubborn boy determined to piss her off said as he gave up trying to pry her arms off his leg and moved on to trying to pull his leg free.

“No, we have a lot to talk about, starting with where you get off telling my

parents that you’re not going to talk to me again,” Mikey bit out as she was forced to wrap her legs around his and—

Held on tightly when the move along with his attempts to break free caused him to fall back and hit the ground with an, “Ooomph!” The move forced her to loosen her hold around his leg and before she could grab hold of him again, Sebastian was pulling his leg free and moving to get up, but she couldn’t have that.

“Mikey, I’m not playing around with you. Get off!” he bit out when was she forced to jump on his back and take him back down to the ground when he started making progress.

“No!”

“Yes!”

“Oh, my god, you’re insane!” Sebastian snapped, trying to drag himself free, but he wasn’t going anywhere.

“You knew this!” Mikey said as she quickly adjusted herself so that she laying was across his legs to keep him pinned to the ground.

“Mikey—”

“You do not get to throw away three years of friendship because we both screwed up! You do not get to turn your back on me when I need you the most! And you sure as hell don’t get to keep acting like everything in the world that goes wrong is your fault! I can take care of myself!” she snapped, still beyond pissed that he’d tried to pull this.

When she woke up this morning to find him gone, she’d been scared out of her mind that something happened to him. It had taken her parents a half hour to get her to calm down, and once they told her what happened...

She hadn’t believed them.

Sebastian was her best friend and he cared about her. She knew that he would never do anything to hurt her. Her parents wanted her to stay home and rest, but she wanted to see for herself. As soon as they came home from the hospital, she marched across the street to find out for herself only nobody was home. When her parents suggested that he was probably at Cole’s birthday party, she’d grabbed a quick shower to wash away the hospital stench, dutifully kissed her brothers when Aunt Sara and Uncle Eric brought them home, and headed for the door, telling herself the entire way to the party that it had been a simple misunderstanding.

Sebastian would never do that to her.

As soon as she walked into the backyard and saw the look on Sebastian’s face when he saw her, she’d realized that her parents hadn’t been lying. She’d forced herself to sit there, waiting for him, but he never came and now...

Now, they were going to settle a few things.

*_*_*_*

“Let go!” Sebastian said as he tried to pull his legs free without hurting Mikey, but the stubborn pain in the ass wouldn’t let go.

“Tell me why you did it!” came the stubborn reply.

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“Because you’re better off,” Sebastian said, damn near sighing with relief when he spotted his brother heading their way.

“No, I’m not!”

“Yes, you are!” Sebastian snapped, wondering why she always made things more difficult than they had to be.

“Give me one good reason why you think I would be better off without you!”

“Because I made you cry,” Sebastian bit out, feeling his stomach turn at the reminder only to end up rolling his eyes when she said, “I had something in my eye!”

“God, you really are a pain in my ass,” he sighed as he gave up trying to pull his legs free when his brother finally reached him. “Can you get her off me before she gets hurt?”

Sighing heavily, Jonathan leaned over to do just that when Mikey’s next words stopped him. “Sebastian was supposed to get the scholarship, not you.”

Frowning, Jonathan asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Mikey,” Sebastian bit out in warning, but the little brat refused to listen to him.

“The scholarship for Radcliffe was supposed to go to Sebastian but the stubborn jerk turned it down so that you could go to school instead,” Mikey rushed to explain and if he hadn’t already decided that their friendship was over, that would have done it.

“What is she talking about, Sebastian?”

“Nothing. Just get her off me,” Sebastian said as he tried to pull free only to growl in frustration when Jonathan joined her, pinning him down to the ground.

“What the hell are you doing? Get off!” Sebastian snapped, turning his head to glare at his brother only to find his brother glaring back at him.

“What the hell am I doing? What the hell were you thinking giving up that scholarship?” Jonathan demanded, refusing to budge.

“I was thinking that my brother wanted to go more!”

“Bullshit! You wanted to go to that school just as badly as I did. So, tell me the real reason you screwed yourself over.”

“Why don’t you ask Mikey?” Sebastian said, giving up on trying to be careful for Mikey’s sake and tried to pull his legs free, but his brother had his legs pinned down tightly beneath him and refused to budge.

“Good idea!” Mikey said with false cheer. “Well, it seems that your brother, the jerk, thinks that everything is his fault and truly believes that the only way to make things better is to screw himself over.”

“Because it was my fault,” Sebastian bit out as he gave up trying to pull his legs free and tried to roll over onto his back so that he could pull them off his legs and finally be done with this conversation.

“We both screwed up, Sebastian!” Jonathan said, sounding truly angry for the first time in their lives. “We did a lot of stupid things and it caught up to us. I was just as responsible as you were, so why were you the one that had to pay the price?”

“Just let it go, Jonathan,” Sebastian snapped, groaning in frustration when he realized that he couldn’t turn over onto his back.

“No, tell me why you let me take the scholarship?”

“Let it go!” Sebastian snapped as his hands fisted in the grass and he struggled not to lose it.

“No!”

“Fine! You want to know the truth? It’s because you wouldn’t have done any of those things if it wasn’t for me,” Sebastian bit out as he closed his eyes and pressed his head against the crisp grass.

“How do you figure that?” Jonathan asked, sounding curious.

“Because you’ve been at that school for three years and you’ve never gotten into the kind of trouble that we used to get in. I’m the problem, Jonathan. Me. I ruin everything that I touch,” Sebastian said, wondering why this was so damn difficult to understand.

There was a heavy sigh and then, “Did it ever occur to you that I learned my lesson? Or that the expulsion was the wakeup call that I needed to stop acting like an idiot? Or that I realized what I was putting our family through?”

“You don’t think that I know what I’ve done to this family? It’s all I ever think about! I put them through hell, but apparently that wasn’t enough and I had to screw up Mikey’s life too!” Sebastian shouted as he moved to pull his legs free and this time, they didn’t stop him.

Getting to his feet, Sebastian turned around and faced his brother only to find his

parents and half his family standing there, watching him. Ramming his fingers through his hair, Sebastian said, “Everything will be better when I’m shipped off to military school.”

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When nobody said anything, Sebastian moved to leave when Mikey's next words stopped him. "You think you ruined my life?"

"I know I did."

"I see," Mikey murmured, looking thoughtful as she reached down and picked up the bottle of water she'd dropped during her earlier attack and—

"Ow! What the hell is wrong with you?" Sebastian demanded when the crazed teenage girl tackled him to the ground.

"You! That's what's wrong!" Mikey snapped as she quickly straddled his stomach and—

"Are you crazy?" he demanded only to sputter when she opened the bottle and dumped it on his face.

"Yes!" she snapped as he reached up to stop her, but apparently the crazed girl wasn't done yet and started beating him with that empty bottle.

"I am sick and tired of your crap, Se

bastian Bradford! You are the most stubborn, annoying boy that I have ever met! You did not ruin my life, you jerk! So, stop acting like it! The only thing that you're doing is pissing me off!"

"Ow! Stop that!"

“No!”

“You are not going to military school! You are not going to drop out of high school and get your GED and waste your life when we both know that you were meant for something better! And you are not going to try to ditch me again just because you like to make yourself miserable! And you are not leaving me! Do you hear me?” Mikey shouted long after his father and Uncle Lucifer managed to pull her off him.

“That’s not your decision,” Sebastian said as he pulled himself up only to realize that they’d already let Mikey go and—

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he demanded as she took him back down to the ground and picked up where she left off.

“Everything!”

Chapter 40

“I’m not going to attack him again,” Mikey promised as she struggled to get free, but something, probably the way that she glared at Sebastian, gave her away.

“Liar,” Sebastian bit out coldly from the other side of the kitchen where he continued to struggle against his restraints, but there was no use.

They’d used the good knots to tie them to the chairs, which meant that Mikey wouldn’t be able to finish what she’d started until they let her go. But that was fine, more than fine with her because she could wait until they let her go and once they did...

She was going to slap some sense into the stubborn jerk.

“I think we need to talk,” Uncle Trevor said with a heavy sigh as he leaned back against the kitchen counter and crossed his arms over his chest while Mikey narrowed her eyes on Sebastian.

“Fine, but she doesn’t need to be here for this,” Sebastian said, further pissing her off.

“He’s right. Let me go and I’ll leave,” Mikey said, smiling pleasantly as she waited for someone to release her.

“That probably won’t end well,” Jonathan said around a large bite of birthday cake.

“It never does,” Jessica murmured in agreement with a sad shake of her head.

“Shouldn’t you be at Cole’s birthday party?” Sebastian asked, never taking his eyes off Mikey.

“Probably, but since Cole ditched his own party an hour ago, I don’t think it really matters,” Mathew said, shrugging it off as he reached for his sister’s slice of cake only to grumble when she pulled it out of his reach.

“This involves them too,” Aunt Zoe said, earning matching nods from the rest of her children while Sebastian seethed.

There really was no other way to put it, Mikey thought as she mouthed, “Watch your back,” to the boy that she was no longer speaking to.

“I’d just like to point out that this never would have happened if you’d picked me,” Jonathan said with a heartfelt sigh as he finished off his cake and stole his sister’s.

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“Lesson learned,” Mikey said evenly, refusing to look away first.

“He can have you,” Sebastian bit out.

There was a heavy sigh and then, “You kids are going to be the death of me,” Uncle Trevor said as he rubbed his hands roughly down his face.

“I think we should clear up a few things first,” Aunt Zoe said as she focused her attention on Sebastian. “You are not going to military school,” making him frown.

“What? But the therapist said—”

“Do you really think that we would send you off to military school based on the word of a therapist that you’d just met?” Aunt Zoe asked, shaking her head in disbelief. “We love you, Sebastian.”

“But I screwed up,” Sebastian pointed out, looking confused while the need to kick him intensified.

“Yeah, you did and we’re going to talk about that, but that doesn’t mean that we’re ready to give up on you,” Aunt Zoe said.

“It does mean that you’re grounded for a month and that if you ever do anything like that again, I’ll allow Mikey to beat some sense into you,” Uncle Trevor drawled.

“I’m ready to do that now,” Mikey said, nodding solemnly.

“And you’ll be joining him for that month,” her stepfather said as he walked into the kitchen, carrying Nathan.

“But...” Mikey began only to end up sighing when she realized that it was pointless to argue, especially since they were getting off pretty easily considering everything that happened.

“I just got off the phone with Garret. Seems that he had an interesting conversation with the school,” her stepfather said as he placed Nathan down on the floor so that he could make his way across the kitchen and climb onto Sebastian’s lap.

Traitor.

“What did they say?” Uncle Trevor asked as he grabbed one of the sippy cups that they kept here for the twins from the cabinet.

“First, I’m curious about something,” her stepfather said as he looked at Sebastian. “Would you have gone to that school if you knew that Mikey would get in trouble?”

“No,” Sebastian said with absolutely no hesitation.

“Why were you doing it, Sebastian?” Aunt Zoe asked as she took the sippy cup from her husband and poured some apple juice in it before giving it to Nathan, who was lounging comfortably on Sebastian’s lap.

There was a pause and then, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, that’s too bad because we need to figure out a few things including why you went to a school that you knew you weren’t supposed to set foot in,” Uncle Trevor said as he folded his arms back over his chest, letting his son know that he was more than willing to wait this one out.

For several minutes, Sebastian didn't say anything as he sat there, glaring at the kitchen cabinets as he ground his jaw and then finally...

"Because she makes everything better."

"I really do," Mikey said with a sad shake of her head and a heartfelt sigh that drew Sebastian's glare while Uncle Trevor tried to bite back a smile.

Clearing his throat, Uncle Trevor said, "That doesn't really explain why you had to break into the school every day."

"It made it easier to get through the day if I had something to look forward to instead of trying to figure out how to kill seven hours every day," he admitted with a shrug.

"What I don't understand is why you told us that you wanted to keep homeschooling instead of going to Radcliffe when you had the chance," Aunt Zoe said.

When he didn't answer her, Mikey said, "Because he didn't want you to have to try to find a way to come up with the money to cover the tuition. He knew that if he accepted the scholarship, that you would have to find a way to cover Jonathan's tuition. He lied so that Jonathan could take his place."

"You have a big mouth," Sebastian said, sighing heavily.

"And you should have told them sooner," Mikey shot back, not really caring that she was breaking her word, not when keeping her mouth shut meant that Sebastian was stuck in a situation that made him miserable.

There was a heavy sigh and then, "Sebastian, it's not your job to worry about that."

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“Yes, it is,” Sebastian argued, which really didn’t surprise her since he was stubborn.

“No, it’s—”

“He can have the scholarship back. I don’t want it,” Jonathan said, drawing everyone’s attention. “I got to go for three years and now it’s Sebastian’s turn. I don’t mind homeschooling,” he said, shrugging it off.

Nodding, Mikey said, “Let me go so I can slap him.”

“You’re not dropping out of school,” Uncle Trevor said firmly. “We’ll figure this out.”

“I don’t want your scholarship. It’s yours,” Sebastian said, leveling an impressive glare on his brother.

When Jonathan opened his mouth to argue, Sebastian said, “They’re not going to let someone with an arrest record into that school.”

“We don’t have to worry about that,” Reese said, drawing everyone’s attention back to him as he pulled a thick white envelope out of his back pocket.

“What happened with the school?” Uncle Trevor asked as he pushed away from the counter so that he could pick Nathan up, who’d fallen asleep on Sebastian’s lap, and settled him in his arms.

“The good news is that they’re not going to file charges against Sebastian or seek a

restraining order. They're also going to take the expulsion off Mikey's record so that she can finish the school year. The bad news is that they're not willing to give Sebastian another chance and allow him to attend the high school next year," Reese said as Sebastian noticeably relaxed against his chair.

"Not that I'm complaining, but why aren't they pressing charges?" Aunt Zoe asked.

"From what I understand, Garret pointed out that Sebastian should never have been able to gain access to the school in the first place and was only able to do so because they put the students' safety at risk by leaving the gym door propped open. The fact that they chose to continue to allow that to happen after they became aware that it was happening so that they could catch Sebastian in the act was enough to get them to listen to reason."

"What's with the white envelope?" Jonathan asked as he finished his sister's cake.

"This?" Reese said, holding up the envelope before nodding toward Sebastian. "I'd guess that this was the reason why Sebastian went to the school. They took it off him when he was arrested."

"What is it?" Mikey asked, unable to help but frown when her father placed it on her lap.

"It's your acceptance letter from Rerum Prep," her father said as Mikey looked from the envelope in her lap to Sebastian. "They're offering you a partial scholarship."

"I hated to see you upset and I was hoping that would help," Sebastian said with a helpless shrug.

Nodding once again, Mikey said, "You're an idiot," even as she couldn't help smiling.

“I know,” Sebastian said, sighing heavily.

“When they let me out of this chair, I’m afraid that I’m going to have to hurt you,” she pointed out.

Nodding, Sebastian said, “I know that, too.”

“You’re going to have to keep homeschooling until we figure something out, but we will figure it out,” Uncle Trevor said, sighing heavily only to lean down and kiss Nathan’s forehead when her baby brother grumbled something in his sleep.

“I think that covers everything,” Aunt Zoe said, worrying her bottom lip as she watched Sebastian reluctantly nod.

“Umm, Sebastian’s still stubborn,” Mikey pointed out since she felt that needed to be addressed and she was hoping to distract him so that he wouldn’t shut down on her again.

“And you’re still a pain in my ass,” Sebastian shot back.

Nodding, she said, “This is true.”

“What about school?” Jonathan asked as he glanced at Sebastian, who she’d like to point out was once again glaring at her.

“We’ll figure it out,” Aunt Zoe said as Mikey’s eyes narrowed dangerously on Sebastian, because they had one last thing to settle...

Chapter 41

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“Okay, now this is officially the worst birthday ever,” Chloe whispered to herself only to swallow nervously as she slowly reached over to grab the baseball bat that she’d been forced to confiscate from her sister after she’d caught her eying it the other day when Cole stopped by to hang out after school.

Just a few more inches, Chloe told herself, her gaze never leaving her window as the man that was currently breaking into her room slowly pushed her window up and—

The bat was gone.

Of course, it was, Chloe thought, biting back a sigh as she moved to climb out of her bed, debating the best way to drag Katie out of the house without her finding out that there was an intruder in her room, mostly because she wouldn’t put it past her sister to take it upon herself to take care of the intruder on her own. She was probably going to have to gag her, Chloe realized, surprisingly okay with that as she glanced from the burglar that she really wished hadn’t picked tonight of all nights to break in, especially since Uncle Nick wasn’t here at the moment, to her bedroom door and—

“Damn it,” came the familiar mumble that had Chloe frowning as she turned her attention back to the burglar just as he carefully placed a large trash bag on her bedroom floor so that he could shift his attention to something outside her window.

Admittedly confused, and somewhat concerned that Cole Bradford was breaking into her room in the middle of the night, she reached over and turned on her bedroom light and...

That was definitely Cole breaking into her room, Chloe thought, watching as he

pulled several more black trash bags through her window.

She opened her mouth to ask him what he was doing here when her bedroom door was thrown open and Katie stepped inside, carrying the baseball bat that she was going to have to hide in the attic. With a smile that actually terrified Chloe a little there, Katie announced with satisfaction, “I knew you’d be back!”

Before Katie could follow through with whatever disturbing act of violence that was going through her head, Chloe reached over and plucked the baseball bat out of her sister’s hands. Ignoring Katie’s startled gasp of outrage, she focused on Cole. “What are you doing here?”

“You’re supposed to be asleep,” he said with a heartfelt sigh and a muttered, “This just isn’t going to work for me,” as he took in her room.

“And you’re supposed to be sane,” Chloe countered with a firm nod as she watched him glance around her room one more time before he walked over to her and—

“Hey!”

—palmed her face in his large hand and pushed her out of her room. Before she could respond, he was shutting the door in her face. When the door opened a second later, Chloe sighed with relief when she saw her little sister, who was most likely only opening the door to steal the baseball bat out of her hand, only to frown when Cole closed the door again with an absently mumbled, “We have work to do. Go away.”

“Just open the door,” Chloe said, reaching for the doorknob only to find it locked, which was kind of terrifying since she didn’t have a lock on her bedroom door. Somewhat concerned that Cole was willing to lock himself in a room with her little sister, who had started to refer to him as her archnemesis again, she tried the door.

Nothing.

After a few minutes, she gave up with a sigh and sat down, really hoping that she wasn't going to have to explain this to the police later. At least she didn't hear screams of pain or her sister's demands that Cole beg for mercy. That was something at least, Chloe thought as she sat there, bored out of her mind.

Just when she was about to give up and go see what was on TV, her bedroom door finally opened just enough for Cole to step out. When he gestured for her to turn around, she opened her mouth to ask him what he was doing, but apparently, she was taking too long for him.

"Close your eyes," Cole said as he stepped behind her and tied what appeared to be his school tie over her eyes.

"Is my sister alive?" she asked, making him chuckle like she was joking.

She wasn't, but she decided to take that chuckle as good a sign.

"Ready?" Cole asked as he turned her around.

"More like terrified," Chloe admitted when she heard her bedroom door open.

"Understandable," Cole murmured as he took her hands in his and led her inside where the familiar scent of burned wax met her and—

"Happy birthday, Chloe," Cole said as he removed the tie and Chloe found herself wondering if she'd ever seen this much pink in one room before.

There were pink balloons everywhere, pink streamers, a pink birthday sign, and even a large cake with pink frosting with her name on it. On her nightstand was an insane

amount of ice cream, pink plates, a bowl filled with pink M&M's, bottles of pink juice, and a large pink box with several obscenely large pink bows on top, placed in the center of her bed, and on the television was Harry Potter.

“Oh, my god...” Chloe said, trying to take it all in.

“Do you like it?” Cole asked, drawing her attention to find him holding a bouquet of pink roses.

“I love it,” Chloe said on a reverent whisper only to realize that she'd fallen a little in love with Cole Bradford at that moment.

Chapter 42

“Are you still pissed at me?” Sebastian asked his brother as he grabbed a book off his nightstand and dropped down on his bed with a sigh.

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“Mmmhmm,” Jonathan murmured from the comfort of his bed only to follow that up with, “Are you ever going to let her in?” and a pointed look at their bedroom window.

Sebastian glanced over at the window, noting that Mikey still had her face pressed against the glass. When she saw him looking, she narrowed her eyes on him and mouthed, “Revenge,” with a slow nod of her head. He watched her for a moment before he shrugged it off and settled back on his bed.

“Probably not,” Sebastian said around a yawn.

“I thought she was grounded,” Jonathan murmured thoughtfully.

“She is, but she takes her revenge very seriously,” Sebastian pointed out only to sigh when a light tapping against the glass dragged his attention back to find Mikey nodding in agreement.

“Apparently.”

“Are you ever going to talk to me again?” Sebastian asked as he opened the book only to close it with a sigh because he’d already read this book. God, he missed his iPad, Sebastian thought as he found himself glancing at Mikey.

He missed her more.

The only time he’d been allowed out of his room over the past week had been for meals, chores, and to use the bathroom. That was it. The rest of the time he spent in his room where he was expected to report in at random times during the day by

sending a picture of whatever he was doing to his parents to ensure that he was where he was supposed to be. Most of the time, he spent staring at the walls, counting down the minutes until his sentence was over, re-reading all the books in his room, forcing himself to nod whenever another rejection letter

came in the mail and his parents told him not to worry, and ignoring the pain in the ass late at night when she came to his window seeking revenge.

“That depends...” Jonathan said, letting his words trail off.

“On what?” Sebastian asked only to find himself looking at Mikey and—

Rolling his eyes when the little brat steamed up his bedroom window so that she could write “Revenge” backwards. She really was too damn adorable for her own good, Sebastian thought, tempted to open the bedroom window, but...

Nothing had changed.

She was still better off without him and he...was going to keep telling himself that until he believed it. In the meantime, he was going to focus on not dying of boredom.

“On whether or not I get Mikey,” Jonathan said, making him frown as he glanced over at his brother to find the little bastard grinning.

“But, she’s a pain in the ass,” Sebastian pointed out only to sigh when the tapping began. His gaze flickered over to the window to find her glaring at him, letting him know that she’d heard him.

Good.

“I’m willing to overlook that,” Jonathan said, nodding solemnly.

“She’s also violent,” Sebastian reminded his brother.

“I’m well aware of that,” Jonathan pointed out.

“I just feel like you could do so much better,” Sebastian pointed out with a helpless shrug only to end up biting back a smile when the tapping started again.

“Probably,” Jonathan murmured in agreement as they both glanced at Mikey to find her seething on the other side of their bedroom window.

With one last glare letting him know that she’d be back, Mikey slowly stepped back away from the window and—

“Ow!”

—had him off the bed and across the room a second later, trying to get the window unlocked only to end up shoving Jonathan’s hands out of the way so that he could open the window and climb onto the roof to make sure that she was okay. Only, he never got past the window before the little brat was there, shoving him back into the room and following him as she absently adjusted her backpack over her shoulder.

“You scared the hell out of me!” Sebastian snapped at her, still trying to will his racing heart to slow down.

Nodding, Mikey bit out coldly, “Revenge,” as she descended on him.

“You’re not even supposed to be here,” Sebastian snapped as he found himself backing away from her for some reason. It probably had something to do with that murderous glint in her eye, Sebastian realized as he continued backing up and she kept coming for him.

“Did you really think that I would forget what you did?” the crazed teenage girl said coldly as she came closer.

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“Go home, Mikey,” he said only to swallow hard when she kept coming for him.

“I told you that she was going to kill you one day, but you never listen,” Jonathan said with a heartfelt sigh as he closed their bedroom window, not really sounding all that concerned that Mikey was about to kill him.

“Why don’t you tell me to my face, huh?” Mikey said, reaching up to push him, which had him dropping down on his bed.

Before he could open his mouth to say anything, she was reaching for his pillow.

Oh, hell...

“You do not get to ditch me after three years of friendship because you feel like acting like an idiot!” Mikey said, well, shouted really, as the beating commenced.

Not that it actually hurt, because it didn’t. What it did was make it difficult for him to do anything more than cover his head with his arms while she slapped him with his pillow. It also alerted his parents to the fact that something was going on in his bedroom.

“What the hell is going on in here?” his father asked, making Sebastian sigh in relief.

That is, until Mikey decided to explain things.

“Your son is an idiot!” she snapped as she continued to slap him with his pillow.

“He has his moments,” his father murmured in agreement instead of putting a stop to this.

“Is someone going to get her off me?” Sebastian snapped.

“I just feel like you brought this on yourself,” Jonathan said from the safety of the other side of the room and Sebastian would have glared at the bastard if he wasn’t busy cowering at the moment.

“He really did,” his father said, sounding bored.

“This is the last time that you get to hurt me, Sebastian Bradford!” Mikey snapped, pissing him off.

“I wasn’t trying to hurt you, you little brat! I was trying to save you!” he yelled as he grabbed the pillow and tore it out of her hands.

“You know what? I’m done. Consider your message received,” Mikey said, shaking her head in disgust as she climbed off the bed and turned to walk away only to stop with a snort of disgust and reached back into her bag to grab something. With a coldly muttered, “Here,” she dropped a giftwrapped box on the bed and stormed out of his room, leaving him lying there, trying to catch his breath as he watched her go.

“What did she get you?” Jonathan asked as he quickly made his way across the room and jumped on the bed next to him.

“I don’t care,” Sebastian said, rubbing his hands roughly down his face as he tried to forget the look on Mikey’s face when she’d told him that she was done out of his head.

“Then I’ll open it for you,” Jonathan murmured thoughtfully as he grabbed the

present off the bed with a satisfied sigh and took his time opening it.

“Are you sure that this is what you want?” their father asked, sending Sebastian a questioning look.

“She deserves better,” Sebastian said, forcing himself to grab the book that he had absolutely no interest in and—

“Dibs!” Jonathan said on an excited gasp, drawing his attention to find him holding an—

iPad.

Damn it.

“She’s been saving up to buy you a new iPad since she found out that your old one ran out of memory,” his father said as Sebastian reached over and took the box out of his brother’s hand.

“She shouldn’t have done this,” Sebastian said softly as he ran his fingers over the cellophane wrapping, absently noting that she got the one with the highest memory capacity.

“No, she shouldn’t have. Braxton should have replaced the one that he broke, but his father is furious that you haven’t apologized yet,” his father said as he sat down on the end of Sebastian’s bed.

“I’m not apologizing,” Sebastian bit out because as far as he was concerned, Braxton had it coming.

“No, you’re not,” his father agreed, taking him by surprise. “I don’t know what’s

going on with that kid, but he shouldn't have touched your iPad.”

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Jonathan snorted at that. “He shouldn’t have touched Mikey.”

“True,” their father murmured in agreement.

Speaking of Mikey...

“I can’t accept this,” Sebastian said as he reluctantly went to hand the iPad to his father.

“That’s your decision but I think you’re making a mistake,” his father said as he considered Sebastian.

“I only make things worse for her,” Sebastian said, placing the iPad on the bed.

“Not according to her mother,” his father said, making him frown.

“What are you talking about?”

“You make her happy, Sebastian,” his father said, sighing heavily as he stood up, “but then again, the same could be said about her.”

Chapter 43

“Stupid Sebastian,” Mikey mumbled sadly as she sat there, staring out the window while her math teacher tried to explain...well, she wasn’t exactly sure what he was trying to explain since she’d stopped listening when he decided to add the alphabet to today’s lesson.

It had been a week since she told Sebastian that she was done and...nothing.

He hadn't called her, emailed her, or even asked his brother or sister to pass on a message to her and that was it, she guessed. He didn't want to be friends anymore. That was fine with her. More than fine. In fact, she was glad that he wasn't talking to her anymore since it now freed her to find a new best friend.

A better best friend.

She'd find someone that loved baseball almost as much as her, who liked watching movies, and who wasn't so damn serious all the time. The more she thought about it, the more she liked this idea. She'd find someone who didn't hog the bed, not that she would let anyone else sleep in her bed. He also wouldn't steal her food or drive her crazy, and he...

Wouldn't be Sebastian, Mikey thought miserably. She missed the big jerk. She considered sneaking into his room as soon as she got home so that she could talk to him, but her pride wouldn't let her. To be honest, she really wasn't sure that she could handle hearing him tell her that they shouldn't be friends again.

God, she hated this.

She—

“Mr. Vargas, please send Mikey Campbell to the office.”

—was in so much trouble, Mikey thought, biting back a wince when every set of eyes in the room turned her way. Really hoping that this wasn't going to end with another phone call to her parents, she cleared her throat as she stood up, grabbed her bag, and after noting all the sympathetic wincing aimed her way, Mikey headed for the door.

It was probably nothing, Mikey told herself as she headed for the office, but...

She was definitely in trouble.

Over the past two weeks, Mr. Jenkins had been watching her every move, waiting for a chance to make that expulsion dream a reality. Not that she could blame him, especially since the entire school heard about the meeting that ended with the Superintendent screaming at him. Besides the fact that the Superintendent had been furious to find out that they'd intentionally put students at risk by leaving the gym door propped open to catch Sebastian, there were also several videos going around on the internet of their arrest and of her being carried out to an ambulance.

That hadn't ended well...

At least, not for Vice Principal Jenkins and if he had his way, and she was really hoping that he wasn't going to have his way, Mikey would end up paying the price to

o. He'd tried to argue for suspension, detention, probation, and finally when none of that worked, he'd settled for glaring. Thankfully, she only had another month of school left before she could move onto high school where she could be miserable all over again, Mikey reminded herself as she turned left and found herself wondering why Mrs. Blaine was here.

Before Mikey had a chance to ask her what was going on, Mrs. Blaine said, "You're late," and with that, she gestured for her helper to push her toward the front doors.

Not really sure what she should do, Mikey glanced at the front office and when she saw Mr. Jenkins standing there, glaring at her, she decided that it would be in her best interest to see what Mrs. Blaine was kidnapping her for. Decision made, she quickly headed after Mrs. Blaine and—

Found herself staring at Sebastian, who was standing across the street, looking absolutely miserable. Good. He should be miserable, Mikey thought as she followed Mrs. Blaine across the street and when they reached Sebastian, she kept going because he could rot in hell for all she cared. There was a heavy sigh, and then she found herself picked up and thrown over the big jerk's shoulder. She didn't bother asking him where they were going because, quite frankly, she wasn't talking to him at the moment.

“Are you still mad at me?” came the hesitant question that had her glaring at his back.

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When she didn't say anything, he said, "Would it help if I told you that I missed you?"

"No, no, it would not," Mikey said, deciding that it would be better for everyone concerned if she cleared that up now.

"How about, I'm an idiot and you're the best thing that's ever happened to me?" he said, making her sigh, because that all really went without saying.

When she still didn't say anything, mostly because she was trying to figure out where he was taking her, he said, "I'm sorry, Mikey."

Feeling her bottom lip tremble, she said, "I'd really like to go back to class now."

"We could do that..." Sebastian said, letting his words trail off as he leaned over and carefully placed her on her feet so that she could see where he'd taken her, and once he did...

"I don't think we're supposed to be here," Mikey said, swallowing hard as she glanced from the baseball fields to the parking lot, looking for Coach Dilmore's black SUV and damn near sighing when she didn't see it parked in its usual spot.

"We really don't have a choice," Sebastian said, drawing her attention back to find three large men, all of them wearing white polo shirts with Latin Scribe High School embroidered on the left side of their chests, walking toward them.

"What's going on?" Mikey asked, unable to help but frown as she glanced back at

Sebastian.

“My apology,” he said, gesturing back to the three men headed their way.

“What?” Mikey asked in a daze, trying to make sense out of what was happening.

“You must be Mikey. My name is Coach Jackson,” the larger of the three men said with a warm smile as he offered his hand.

Nodding, Mikey shook his hand as she said, “And I have absolutely no idea what’s going on here.”

Chuckling, Coach Jackson gestured to Sebastian. “Your friend told us that we should come down here and see what you can do.”

“He did?” Mikey asked, frowning as she glanced at Sebastian to find him smiling as he—

Did he just push her? Mikey wondered only to narrow her eyes when what felt suspiciously like the tip of a cane gave her another push.

“Let’s see what you’ve got, Mikey,” Coach Jackson said as one of the men tossed her a baseball glove and she found herself smiling for the first time in weeks when Sebastian pulled a baseball out of his sweatshirt pocket and tossed it to her.

“Go show them what you’ve got, Mikey.”

Chapter 44

“Are you going to tell me what you’re up to?” Sebastian asked as he sat down on the bench next to Mrs. Blaine.

“What makes you think that I’m up to something?” Mrs. Blaine asked as she laid her cane across her lap.

“Because you have the same devious glint in your eye that Aunt Haley gets when she’s screwing with Uncle Jason’s head for her own amusement,” Sebastian pointed out as they watched Mikey step onto the field.

“Well, I may have made a few phone calls,” she said, making his lips twitch.

“And those phone calls led to what exactly?” he asked, settling back against the bench.

“Making sure that Mikey gets a fair chance,” she said with a pleased smile.

“Thank you, Grandma,” Sebastian said, sighing with relief, praying like crazy that this worked.

For the next hour, they watched as Coach Jackson had Mikey run drills, run the bases, and bat. When that was done, he had Mikey step onto the pitcher’s mound. Sebastian watched as a calmness that he hadn’t seen in months took over Mikey. They had Mikey throw over and over again, asking her to change it up from fastball to curveball and everything in between.

They were still working with Mikey when Coach Dilmore pulled into the parking lot an hour later. When he saw them, his expression went from confused to pissed in record time. Sebastian watched as Coach Dilmore shoved his bag back in his car and slammed the door shut before he headed for the field and straight for Mikey.

Sebastian stood up and moved to head to the field only to bite back a sigh when Mrs. Blaine gestured for him to take her with him. Deciding that her cane might come in handy, he pushed Mrs. Blaine onto the field just as Coach Jackson signaled for Mikey

to stop.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing on my field?” Coach Dilmore demanded as his attention shifted from Mikey to Coach Jackson.

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“It’s good to see you again, Jeff,” Coach Jackson said, reaching over to shake Coach Dilmore’s hand.

“What are you doing here?” Coach Dilmore demanded, ignoring the gesture.

“Came to meet Mikey, what else?” Coach Jackson answered, looking pleased as Sebastian came to a stop next to Mikey and took her trembling hand in his.

Swallowing nervously, Coach Dilmore’s gaze flickered to Mikey. “She’s not supposed to be here. She was kicked off the team.”

“So, I’ve heard,” Coach Jackson said, not really sounding all that concerned as he gestured for the man that had been holding the clipboard to hand it over to him. “What position did you have her playing?”

“I didn’t,” Coach Dilmore said evenly. “She couldn’t keep up with the rest of the team.”

“You’re telling me that a fourteen-year-old girl who can throw a hundred and one mile an hour fastball couldn’t keep up with your team, which hasn’t won a single game all season?” Coach Jackson asked, shaking his head in disbelief as he glanced back down at the clipboard in his hand.

“A hundred and one?” Coach Dilmore asked hollowly, looking like he was going to be sick.

“Mmmhmm, although I believe with a little practice that she’ll be able to throw

faster in time, and we're more than happy to help her achieve that at Latin Scribe High School next year."

"Now, wait a minute," Coach Dilmore said, holding up his hand to argue with him, but Coach Jackson had already focused his attention back on Mikey.

"What do you say, Mikey? Come play for me next year as my starting pitcher?" Coach Jackson asked with a hopeful smile.

Mikey's lips pulled up into a beautiful smile only to slip away seconds later with a softly whispered, "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't think my parents can afford the tuition," she admitted, looking absolutely crushed.

"Which is why it's probably a good thing that Latin Scribe is offering you a full athletic scholarship," Coach Jackson said, shooting her a wink.

"Really?" Mikey asked, looking like she was about to burst with joy.

"Really," Coach Jackson reassured her with a firm nod.

She opened her mouth only to close it as she looked at Sebastian and—

&

nbsp; "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. Just say yes," Sebastian promised her as he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“But—”

“Please don’t make me kill you,” Sebastian said, sighing heavily as though the idea pained him.

Lips twitching, she turned to Coach Jackson and said, “Yes.”

Smiling hugely, Coach Jackson looked at Coach Dilmore, who looked like he was going to be sick and said, “I guess we’ll see you next year.”

At that, Mrs. Blaine looked up at Sebastian and said, “I guess it’s your turn now,” making him frown.

“My turn for what?”

*_*_*_*

“This was a bad idea,” Sebastian said only to follow that up with a nod as he sat there, watching numbly as Mrs. Blaine told the receptionist that he was there to speak with the Dean.

“I told you that everything would work out for the best,” Mikey said as she rolled the baseball that he gave her between her hands as she looked around the large office, taking in all the old portraits hanging on the wall.

“You told me nothing, you little pain in the ass,” he whispered softly as he sat there trying not to panic.

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Blindly reaching over, Mikey patted him on the head with an absently mumbled, “I’m going to need you to man up here.”

“You’re evil. Did you know that?” Sebastian asked as he gently swatted her hand away.

“Yes,” she said only to ask, “Do you think we could check out the baseball fields after your meeting?”

“I’m sure that could be arranged,” Mrs. Blaine said as Steven rolled her over to join them.

“I can’t do this,” Sebastian found himself admitting with a shake of his head only to end up biting back a gasp of pain when Mrs. Blaine’s cane landed on his foot.

Looking innocent, she said, “You’ve come too far to give up now.”

Making a mental note to steal her cane and hide it, Sebastian glanced around the office, looking for an exit only to forget how to breathe when someone called his name. He looked up to find the receptionist gesturing for him to follow her.

“They’re ready to see you now,” she said with a polite smile as she waited.

When he opened his mouth to tell her that he’d changed his mind, Mrs. Blaine raised her cane and—

Sebastian found himself quickly getting to his feet and following the receptionist

down the hall. He shot one last glare over his shoulder as Mrs. Blaine's eyes narrowed in warning and her grip tightened around her cane. Message received, he cleared his throat and quickly turned around and focused on the portraits of every dean that had served at Latin Scribe High School since it opened over two hundred years ago.

When they came to a white door at the end of the hallway, she gestured for him to go inside. After a slight hesitation, Sebastian slowly exhaled as he reached for the doorknob and opened the door to find nearly a dozen people sitting behind a long table waiting for him, including Uncle Jason.

"Sebastian Bradford," someone said, drawing his attention to a man wearing a black suit with a bowtie, sitting in the middle of the table. "We were just reviewing your application."

"Have a seat," a woman with dark hair and a firm smile said, gesturing to the small table in the middle of the room. Unable to shake the feeling that he was on trial, Sebastian nodded as he made his way to the table and sat down.

"Can we get you something to drink before we start?"

"No, thank you," Sebastian said, hoping to get this over with quickly before he did something to make this worse.

"Why don't we get right to it then?" the man sitting across from him suggested.

After a slight hesitation, Sebastian nodded.

"We heard about the incident at the middle school. Would you like to tell us what happened?" came the question that he should have expected.

“I made a mistake,” Sebastian admitted, licking his suddenly dry lips as he slowly took in all the people staring at him.

“You seem to do that a lot,” a woman sitting at the end said as she opened a file, probably his, and read something.

Not sure how to answer that, Sebastian glanced at Uncle Jason for help only to find his uncle frowning as he read through his file. God, why did he come here? He should have told Mrs. Blaine that he’d changed his mind and went home when he had the chance.

“Destruction of property, suspensions, detentions, truancy, the list goes on and on,” a man at the other end of the table said, taking off his glasses as he sat back and gestured to Sebastian’s file. “I honestly don’t understand why you’re here wasting our time with this.”

After a slight hesitation, Sebastian nodded slowly as he pushed his chair back and stood up. “I’m sorry for wasting your time,” he said as he turned around to leave only to have the same man stop him with a question.

“We have thousands of applicants this year, all of them have worked hard to get where they are and all of them have better records than you. Why should we even consider giving you a chance?”

“Because no one else will,” Sebastian said, meeting his questioning gaze head-on.

“Why didn’t you accept the full scholarship from Radcliffe?” Uncle Jason asked, drawing Sebastian’s attention.

“Because I didn’t deserve it,” he answered honestly.

“And your brother did?”

“Yes,” Sebastian said firmly.

“Why?”

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“Because he wasn’t the one that made our mother cry,” Sebastian said softly, forcing himself to look away from Uncle Jason before he said too much.

“What was your score on Radcliffe’s entrance exam?” the man sitting across from him asked, sounding bored.

“A perfect score,” Sebastian said, watching as the board members looked down at his application and—

“You earned a perfect score on both tests?” the woman at the end of the table asked, looking surprised as the rest of the members looked down at the files in front of them.

A nod.

“Do you know Mikey Campbell?” one of them asked, making him frown in confusion.

“Yes, she’s my best friend,” Sebastian said, wondering what that had to do with anything.

“So, you know that she applied as well.”

“Yes, we applied together.”

“Did you happen to see the essay that she wrote for her application?” Uncle Jason asked.

“No, she wouldn’t let me read it,” Sebastian said, suddenly wishing that he’d pushed her harder to show him.

Nodding, Uncle Jason opened another file and pulled out a paper. He pushed it toward Sebastian. Frowning, Sebastian walked over to the table and picked it up, absently noting that it was two pages stapled together. When he read the title, he glanced up in confusion.

“Keep reading,” Uncle Jason said, gesturing for him to continue.

Sebastian looked back down at the paper in his hand and read the title again, wondering why Mikey wrote her essay about him when this essay was supposed to be about her. When he came to the first paragraph, his stomach dropped.

Although, this essay is supposed to demonstrate why I would make a wonderful addition to Latin Scribe High School, I can’t do that. Not when I know that there is someone else that should be there instead.

I want to tell you about my best friend, Sebastian Bradford with the hopes that you will read this letter before you have the chance to read his file because that will only tell you about the mistakes that he’s made and I want to tell you about the boy...

“With your school record, you would have automatically been rejected, but with your test scores, we would have seriously considered you. Your recent situation would have forced us to consider another applicant, but that letter,” the man sitting in front of him said, pointing at the letter in Sebastian’s hands that he was still trying to wrap his mind around, “has put us in a very difficult position. You see, we want the boy described in that letter, because that’s the kind of person that we hope all of our students will develop into by the time they leave us.”

“Is the boy she described in that letter you?”

Before Sebastian could answer, Uncle Jason spoke. “Yes, he is.”

“What would you say if we offered you a partial scholarship?” someone else asked before Sebastian could wrap his mind around everything that was happening.

“I would have to respectfully decline and wait until next year to apply again,” Sebastian said absently as he found himself reading the letter Mikey wrote again.

“Why is that?” Uncle Jason asked as Sebastian looked up and gave the only answer that he could.

“Because my parents shouldn’t have to pay for my mistakes.”

Chapter 45

“I’m an idiot,” Sebastian said with a groan.

“And if you hadn’t been saying that for the past week, I’d probably be concerned,” Mikey said, shrugging it off as she took in the large sign in Aunt Haley’s and Uncle Jason’s kitchen, congratulating her, Elizabeth, and Braxton for getting into Latin Scribe High School.

There was still no word from Latin Scribe about his application, but then again, he didn’t need a letter to tell him that he’d messed up. He already had thirty-two letters telling him the same thing, his scores were impressive but they just weren’t willing to take a chance on him. He didn’t need to hear it from one more school to know that it was over.

At least there was cake, Sebastian thought as he stole Mikey’s plate. With a glare and a grumble, she stole Jonathan’s, who simply settled on glaring before he moved to take it back, thought better of it, and stole Mathew’s. He should probably get

something to drink to help wash down all the frosting, Sebastian thought as he glanced at the refrigerator only to decide that he wasn't thirsty when he found Braxton's father glaring at him again.

He seemed to do that a lot, Sebastian thought as he shifted his focus to Cole to find him laughing at something that Chloe was showing him on her phone, while Katie watched his every move from across the room. That probably wouldn't end well, Sebastian thought even as he couldn't help but notice that everyone was in a good mood.

Well, everyone except for Bra

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xton and his father, who had somehow managed to disappear in the last minute. Thankful for the small reprieve from glaring, Sebastian glanced back down at Mikey just as she managed to help herself to a Coke. Realizing just how thirsty he was, Sebastian plucked the soda out of her hands and finished it off.

“Jerk face,” Mikey mumbled, making him smile as he reached back to place the empty can on the counter only to see Aunt Haley trying to soothe Hunter, who was crying softly in her arms.

“What’s wrong?” Sebastian asked as he placed his plate on the counter.

“Hunter’s blankie. I can’t find it,” Aunt Haley said, worrying her bottom lip as she glanced around the kitchen.

“It’s probably outside in his playpen. I’ll go get it,” Sebastian said, already making his way toward the back door where they’d spent most of the afternoon swimming.

“Thank you, sweetie,” Aunt Haley said as she tried to distract Hunter with a small slice of cake, but he simply shook his head and buried his face against her neck.

Sebastian walked into the living room and headed for the patio doors when a hand on his shoulder stopped him. Frowning, he looked back to find Uncle Jason handing him a blank white envelope.

“What’s this?” Sebastian asked, sending Uncle Jason a questioning look.

“Look for yourself,” Uncle Jason said, gesturing to the envelope in Sebastian’s hands.

Frowning, Sebastian opened the envelope and—

Was forced to reach out and slap his hand against the wall when his legs threatened to give out as he read the first line again. Latin Scribe High School was giving him a chance with a full academic scholarship and absolutely no mention of probation.

“Is this real?” Sebastian asked, praying that this wasn’t some kind of sick joke.

“It better be. I had to fight with your aunt and Grandma over who got to give it to you,” Uncle Jason said with a chuckle only to add, “You’ve earned it.”

“Thank you,” Sebastian said, feeling his lips pull up into a smile. Feeling like he was in a dream, he headed outside to find Hunter’s blankie as he stared down at the letter in his hands.

God, this couldn’t be real, he thought as he grabbed Hunter’s blankie before he turned around and quickly made his way back to the door so that he could show Mikey when he heard it.

Curious, Sebastian walked around the house only to come to a stop when he saw Mr. Taylor moving closer to Braxton, who was...trembling?

“You’ve wasted my time with this!” Mr. Taylor snapped.

“I’m sorry,” Braxton said, staring down at the ground.

“You’re sorry?” Braxton’s father asked in disbelief. “Do you know how much time I’ve wasted on you? You had one job, Braxton! One job! You were supposed to spend more time with your great-grandmother and make her like you! But instead, you got into a pissing contest with some charity case. Do you think that’s why I let you come home? To waste my time?”

“No,” Braxton said hollowly, but Mr. Taylor wasn’t done yet.

“You’re nothing but a disappointment. If you can’t get the job done, then I’ll find someone else who can and send you back to that boarding school and get you out of my hair.”

“I’m sorry,” Braxton said again only to flinch when Mr. Taylor moved closer.

“If you don’t get this done, then I promise you that you will be very sorry,” Mr. Taylor said coldly before he turned around and Sebastian found himself stepping behind a large hedge before he spotted him.

Sebastian waited until Mr. Taylor went inside before he stepped out from behind the hedge. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure that Mr. Taylor wasn’t coming back before he looked around the corner and realized why Braxton seemed so damn miserable all the time.

“I hate him,” Braxton bit out as tears rolled down his face and his hands clenched into fists.

“I don’t blame you,” Sebastian said, throwing Hunter’s blankie over his shoulder and shoved the letter from Latin Scribe into his back pocket as he moved closer.

“Did you know that they only had me because of Cole?” Braxton asked, wiping the back of his arm across his eyes.

“What?” Sebastian asked, wondering if he’d heard him right.

Nodding, Braxton said, “They knew that Aunt Haley was Great-Grandmother’s favorite, but they figured that Aunt Haley’s marriage wasn’t going to last and she’d come running back only she never did. Instead, she got pregnant with Cole and they

panicked.”

“And that’s where you came in?” Sebastian guessed, wondering what the hell was wrong with these people.

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“Great-Grandmother loves children so they were hoping that another baby would be enough to make her forget about Aunt Haley. So, after a lot of arguing, they decided that my mother would have to make the sacrifice for the greater good and had me, but the problem was that a new baby wasn’t enough to make Great-Grandmother forget how they’d treated Aunt Haley.”

“What happened?” Sebastian asked.

“What normally happens to kids in my family as soon they lose interest. They hired a nanny to raise me until it was time to go off to boarding school and that’s where I would have stayed except, they found out about Hunter. They’d hoped that a new baby would be enough to soften Great-Grandmother, but the problem was that my mother and aunts were apparently too old to get pregnant again. They considered adoption but didn’t think that would be enough to earn Great Grandmother’s forgiveness, so they decided that they had a use for me after all. They pulled me out of boarding school, enrolled me in a local private school, and decided that it was time that I spent more time with Great-Grandmother.”

“And that’s why they suddenly wanted Aunt Haley back in their lives,” Sebastian said, feeling sick to his stomach.

“They hate you,” Braxton said with a humorless laugh. “You should have heard my grandfather when he saw you at that board meeting. They ended up pulling me out of school early just so that they could scream at me.”

“That’s why you threw my iPad,” Sebastian said as everything slowly started to make sense.

Nodding, Braxton said, “I’m sorry about that. I tried to give you mine, but they wouldn’t let me. They were hoping that the black eye you gave me would be enough to make Great-Grandmother discard you, but—”

“They clearly don’t know her very well. She doesn’t give up on people easily,” Sebastian said absently as he thought about the day that Mrs. Blaine showed up at his house, demanding to know what happened. When he’d told her, she’d nodded and said something about needing to try harder.

At the time, he hadn’t known what she was talking about, but now...

“What happens now?” Sebastian asked as he watched Braxton rub the back of his neck.

“I don’t know. I just know that I don’t want to fix this,” Braxton said, slowly exhaling as he considered Sebastian. “Do you have any idea how lucky you are?”

“I’m beginning to see that,” he said hollowly as he realized just how much his parents had put up with and just how easily they could have given up on him only...

They never did.

“I’m not going to do it,” Braxton said with a firm nod.

“Do what?” Sebastian asked, watching as Braxton picked up a brick from Aunt Haley’s small tulip garden.

“He can go to hell. I don’t care anymore,” Braxton said as he threw the brick at his dad’s car.

“Christ!” Sebastian said, jumping back when the windshield cracked.

“What the hell are you doing?” Sebastian asked, watching as Braxton grabbed another brick, and this time, it shattered the windshield.

“Making sure that he leaves Aunt Haley alone,” Braxton said with a determined nod as he grabbed the baseball bat that one of his cousins left outside and—

“Braxton, stop!” Sebastian said as he put Hunter’s blankie down and moved to stop him only to jump out of the way when Braxton took out one of the headlights.

“Why should I?” Braxton demanded

as he took out the other headlight and then the passenger side rear-view mirror.

“Because he isn’t worth it!”

“No, but if I get sent back to boarding school then maybe they’ll leave everyone alone. They won’t be able to do this to Great-Grandmother or Aunt Haley anymore,” Braxton said as he took out the passenger-side window before Sebastian could grab the bat from him.

“He isn’t worth this,” Sebastian repeated as he pulled the bat away.

“What the hell are you doing?” Mr. Taylor shouted as he quickly made his way over to them.

Before Sebastian could move, Mr. Taylor had Sebastian by the shirt and was slamming him back against the car, knocking the wind out of him. When he went to do it again, a terrifyingly cold voice said, “Get your hands off my son.”

Mr. Taylor immediately released him and stepped back.

Wincing in pain, Sebastian pushed away from the car only to forget how to breathe when he saw the look on his father's face. He'd never seen his father this angry before and apparently, Mr. Taylor realized just how close Sebastian's father was to tearing him apart, because he quickly stumbled back.

"Look what your delinquent son did to my car!" Mr. Taylor snapped.

“It wasn’t Sebastian,” his father said.

“He’s holding a baseball bat!”

“I know my son. He didn’t do this,” his father said calmly as he moved to stand between Sebastian and Mr. Taylor, who looked like he wanted to kill someone.

With one last glare in their direction, Mr. Taylor turned to his son and snapped, “What happened?”

And that’s when Sebastian realized it was all over. With a few words, he was about to lose everything, and this time, nothing was going to save him, Sebastian realized as he looked at Braxton and waited for the words that would doom him. Braxton told him that his father wanted Sebastian out of the picture and it never even occurred to him that they would do something like this to make it happen. God, he was such an idiot. It wouldn’t matter if his father believed him, because the cops definitely wouldn’t.

Not after what just happened at the school.

This was it, Sebastian realized as the baseball bat fell from his trembling hand and—

“I did it,” Braxton said, taking everyone by surprise.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Mr. Taylor demanded.

“I did it,” Braxton said more firmly.

For a moment, Mr. Taylor stood there, staring at his son and then, “You’re going back to boarding school where you belong.”

After a slight hesitation, Braxton ground his jaw and nodded, once.

“No, he won’t. Not when you promised that I could spend more time with my great-grandson,” Mrs. Blaine said firmly as Cole pushed her up the driveway to see what was going on.

For a moment, Mr. Taylor looked like he wanted to kill Braxton with his bare hands only to have his expression turn calculating as he watched Mrs. Blaine. Clearing his throat, Mr. Taylor said, “If you’ll excuse us, I believe my son and I need to go home and think of an appropriate punishment.”

When Braxton moved to step past him, Sebastian stopped him. “Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Braxton said, shrugging it off as he picked up Hunter’s blankie and handed it to Cole.

“Say goodbye to your great-grandmother,” Mr. Taylor said, clearing his throat as he gestured to Mrs. Blaine, who was watching his every move.

“Goodbye, Great-Grandmo—”

“You may call me Grandma,” Mrs. Blaine said with a sniff, making Sebastian’s lips twitch as he watched her gesture for Cole to bring her back inside.

Braxton looked dazed as he watched her go and Mr. Taylor looked...pleased.

Sebastian threw one last glance over his shoulder as he watched Braxton climb into the backseat and couldn’t help but wonder if he would have been better off being sent

back to boarding school. Sighing, Sebastian turned around and found his father watching him.

“Are you okay?”

Nodding, Sebastian said, “I’m fine.”

When his father moved to turn around and head inside, Sebastian said, “Dad?”

“Yeah?” his father said as he turned around and—

“Thanks, Dad,” Sebastian said as he pulled him down for a hug.

“For what?” his father asked, wrapping his arms around Sebastian and held him tight.

“For everything.”

Chapter 46

“I can’t believe you pulled it off,” Jonathan said, shaking his head in amazement.

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Chuckling, Sebastian pointed out, “I had help.”

“True,” Jonathan murmured as the sound of their bedroom window opening drew their attention to find Mikey breaking into their room and—

“Stupid window,” she mumbled sadly as they watched in amusement as she climbed through their window only to stumble and fall on her adorable ass before she got back up with a sigh and closed the window.

“I knew you missed me,” Jonathan said, nodding only to duck out of the way of the stapler that Mikey grabbed off their desk.

“What are you doing here?” Sebastian asked as he watched her make her way over to his bed.

“Keeping you out of trouble,” Mikey said with a heartfelt sigh as she dropped down on the bed next to him.

“How do you figure that?” Sebastian asked as he moved over to make room for her.

“Well, by coming here, I’ve saved you from breaking your word to your parents and leaving you with no other choice but to sneak out just to come see me,” Mikey said with a nod as Sebastian couldn’t help but note that she was wearing his sweatshirt again.

“And why would I feel the need to come see you?” Sebastian asked as Mikey snuggled in closer to his side.

“Because you missed me,” she said with a heartfelt sigh.

“He just saw you two hours ago,” Jonathan pointed out.

“And they were two of the most difficult, heart-wrenching hours of his life,” Mikey explained, making his lips twitch.

“They really were,” he readily agreed, knowing that would please her.

“See?” Mikey said as she stole his pillow. “I saved you.”

“Saved me from what exactly?” Sebastian asked, stealing his pillow back.

“From getting in trouble.”

“Is that how you see it?”

“It really is,” Mikey said only to grumble when he refused to let her steal his pillow again.

After a moment, she settled in closer to his side only to sigh. “What do you think will happen to Braxton?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Sebastian said as they stared at his bedroom ceiling.

“Uncle Jason was pissed when he found out what happened. It took Aunt Haley an hour to calm him down and stop him from going after Braxton’s father,” Jonathan said, making them both frown.

“There’s gotta be something we can do,” Mikey said as she moved to pull a ball out of her sweatshirt only to discover that she didn’t have one. With a grumble, she

grabbed his right hand and busied herself by inspecting his fingers.

“Aunt Haley said that she was going to come up with excuses so that he can spend more time with them,” Jonathan said, sounding thoughtful.

“Do you think that will work?” Mikey asked, tilting her head back to throw him a questioning look.

“It couldn’t hurt,” Sebastian murmured, watching as her small fingers explored his. “But I doubt that his father would do anything to risk pissing off Mrs. Blaine right now.”

“True,” Mikey said as she returned her attention to his hand.

“Hey, I almost forgot to ask. Was that Coach Dilmore crying at the baseball fields the other day?” Jonathan asked, making Sebastian chuckle.

“He didn’t seem to take it well when he found out that Mikey had managed to break a hundred mile an hour fastball and was now playing for his team’s biggest competition next year,” Sebastian said, taking immense satisfaction at the memory of Coach Dilmore breaking down and begging Mikey to give him another chance.

Mikey had been too stunned to enjoy the moment, but thankfully, Coach Jackson had the presence of mind to pull out his phone and preserve the occasion. He’d already sent Mikey a copy of the video, which she’d watched a few dozen times already with the cutest damn smile on her face.

“I’ve gotta go,” Mikey suddenly announced, not sounding all that happy about it.

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“Why?” Sebastian asked as he watched her sit up.

“I told my mom that I was just running downstairs to find my history book,” Mikey said as she headed back to the window.

“And your history book is where exactly?” Jonathan asked.

“I don’t know. Probably at school,” she said, shrugging it off and making them both chuckle as Sebastian climbed off the bed and followed her to the window.

“That’s going to make it difficult to find,” Sebastian said as he reached past her and pushed the window open.

“It really is,” Mikey agreed only to turn around and place her hand on his chest, stopping him. “I’m afraid that’s as far as you go.”

“You really expect me to stay out of trouble?” he asked with a teasing smile.

She seemed to think it over for a moment before she said, “No, but I feel like we should at least pretend that you’re going to behave.”

“You’re probably right,” Sebastian said, nodding in agreement.

“I usually am,” Mikey said with a helpless shrug.

“Goodnight, brat,” he said, chuckling as he watched her climb out the window.

“Goodnight, Sebastian,” Mikey said with a teasing smile.

He started to close the window only to stop when she suddenly turned around. “What’s wrong?” Sebastian asked as he watched her begin toying with the strings on the sweatshirt that he was probably never getting back.

“It’s just that…” she began only to let her words trail off with a heartfelt sigh.

“It’s just that, what?” Sebastian asked, watching as she worried her bottom lip between her teeth as she watched her fingers absently wind themselves

s around the strings.

“You know, right?” Mikey asked as she glanced up at him.

“Know what?” he asked only to frown when Mikey reached over and grabbed hold of his shirt. Before he could say anything, she slowly pulled him closer as she leaned in and whispered, “That you’re my favorite,” only to turn her head and kiss his cheek.

With a satisfied sigh, Mikey released his shirt and disappeared out of sight, leaving Sebastian standing there, unable to help but smile as he watched her go.

“You do realize that kiss was meant for me, don’t you?” Jonathan asked as Sebastian reluctantly closed their bedroom window.

“Absolutely,” Sebastian murmured in agreement as he grabbed a book off their desk and—

“Why are you so mean to me?” Jonathan asked with a heartfelt sigh as Sebastian dropped back down on his bed, a slow smile tugging at his lips as he wondered if Mikey had any idea what was in store for her.

Epilogue

“Wait! That’s it?” Jamie asked in disbelief as she sat there, watching helplessly as Sebastian headed to his desk.

“I’m afraid so,” he murmured absently as he sat down behind the large desk and opened his laptop, putting an end to their interview and—

“You’ve gotta tell me what happened with Mikey. And Braxton, what did his family do to him? Was Mrs. Blaine able to save him? Did Mikey end up killing Jonathan? And Cole? Why does your mother’s food send people to the hospital? What happened with Chloe? Please, you can’t leave it like that!” Jamie said, not really caring that she was begging the man that was the key to her future, not when she had so many unanswered questions.

“I’m afraid that I don’t have any choice,” Sebastian said with a heartfelt sigh.

“But...” Jamie said only to let her shoulders sag in defeat when Sebastian shifted his focus to whatever he was doing and it became clear that this interview was over.

Resigning herself to spending the rest of her life wondering what happened, Jamie grabbed her bag and headed for the door. She should probably be concerned that this wasn’t going to be enough to win that job, but...

She wanted to know what happened with Mikey, damn it. Telling herself that she’d forget about them in a few days, she headed for the door and—

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“Do you know the pizza shop on the corner of Lexington and Concord?” came the question that stopped Jamie in her tracks.

“Yes,” she lied, but that was neither here nor there since she was pretty sure that she could find it.

“They have a pizza called The Beast. They also have the best steak fries in the city. Grab lunch and come here tomorrow at eleven and we’ll finish this interview,” Sebastian said, making her smile until he added, “But I have a few rules that we need to go over first.”

“Rules?”

“Mmmhmm, rules. If you want to continue with this interview, I’m going to need you to promise that you won’t Google my name or anything about my company. That includes asking around about me. If you do, the deal’s off,” he said, making her frown in confusion.

“Wait. How will you know if I keep my word?” Jamie found herself wondering.

“I’ll know,” he said, and for some reason, she believed him.

Unable to help but smile, Jamie nodded as she headed for the door.

“See you tomorrow, Jamie,” Sebastian said as she let herself out even as she couldn’t help but wonder if this counted as an interview. Probably not, but even knowing that wasn’t going to stop her from coming back tomorrow and finding out how this story

ended.

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