



A Double Shot of Love (The Coffee Loft Series: Fall Collection)

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Category: Sport

Description: She absolutely must not fall in love...

Danielle Gillespie knows she needs to focus on three things: getting top grades in her college classes, preparing for medical school, and working as a tutor on campus.

She also knows that she absolutely doesn't have time for romance.

So even when she totally embarrasses herself in front of the hottest guy she has ever seen, Danielle isn't too flustered . . . until she learns that Mr. Hottie is Joel Lambert, the university's star athlete and the individual she will be tutoring for the entire month.

However, Danielle remains certain that she won't fall for Joel. She's not only too busy for love, she would never be interested in a cocky athlete, anyway. Plus, she's sure a celebrity like Joel would never be interested in a bookish girl like her.

Yet as Danielle and Joel start working together, she begins to discover that he's perhaps not the obnoxiously conceited man she assumed him to be, and she soon joins forces with him to fight for a cause they both believe in.

Now with everything—both on and off the court—suddenly on the line for each of them, Danielle realizes her regimented, academics-focused life is on a collision course with Joel's celebrity-athlete world . . . and her heart is going to have to decide what matters most.

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Chapter One

My brain is going to explode.

And advanced calculus is the dynamite.

I cast a final glance over the notes that I took during class today, and then I power down my laptop and slip it into my bag. I look out the windows of the city bus, watching as it comes to an idling stop at the curb. Its doors open with a hiss. I sling my bag's strap over my shoulder, pop up from my seat, and scurry off the bus to reach the sidewalk.

The bus roars away, and I take in the scene before me with a smile. It's the first day of October, and autumn has burst forth in all its glory here in the Lakewood region. The maple trees lining the sidewalks are swaying in the gentle breeze, their leaves glowing with vibrant hues of red, orange, and yellow. The afternoon sun is golden and bright in the cloudless sky. The air is invigoratingly crisp. Even the beautiful, turn-of-the-century brick buildings that line both sides of the road appear especially charming, thanks to the fall decorations that adorn their windows and entryways. As I finish absorbing the idyllic view, I sigh contentedly. Having lived in the Lakewood area for my entire twenty-two years of existence, this quaint part of town has always been my favorite, particularly this time of year.

My phone pings with a new text. I pull the phone from a pocket of my coat and check the message. It's from Savannah Drake, my best friend whom I've known since junior high:

Be sure to stop by the Coffee Loft on your way home. We have a new autumn drink that you'll love!

I smile again. The Coffee Loft is a coffee shop that's only about a block away, and I love going there for a study break, a late breakfast on the weekends, or whenever I need a change of scenery while pouring over the notes from my pre-med classes. Savannah has worked as a barista at the Coffee Loft since our freshman year of college, so over these past three-plus years, she has been my trusted Coffee-Loft informant, always letting me know when there are new menu items I need to try.

My mouth is watering in anticipation of a pumpkin scone and the new autumn drink, but when I notice the time on my phone, my smile droops into a disappointed frown. It's so late in the afternoon that I actually can't go to the Coffee Loft. I need to head home to the apartment I share with Savannah so I can resume studying for the big calculus exam we have tomorrow.

I permit myself to wallow in my disappointment for another second or so, and then I shove aside my remorse. Ignoring regret is something I've gotten good at over the years. I have to be good at it. After all, I chose the pre-med route, and when I made that choice, I knew it would mean long hours of studying and missing out on other things—both big and small—that I might want to do. There's simply no way around it. I must prioritize getting top grades, shadowing physicians, attending pre-med meetings, working as a tutor on campus, and doing everything else necessary to be a competitive, top-tier med school applicant. It's just the way it is.

I refocus on my phone and text a reply to Savannah:

I wish I could stop by, but I need to head home to study for the calculus test.

I swear that I don't even have a chance to blink before Savannah responds:

Earth to Danielle Gillespie: I'm pre-med like you, and I'm taking the same exam. You've studied way more than I have, so I know you can swing by here for a short break. (P.S. The new autumn drink is soooooo good!)

I snort a laugh. Savannah is not only brilliant and equipped with a fantastic sense of humor, she also knows me far too well. She knows precisely how to make a visit to the Coffee Loft sound too tempting to pass up.

I check the time again. The study-o-holic in me insists that I should go directly home. However, the part of me that yearns for a break is insisting that taking a little time to refuel at the Coffee Loft would actually be a wise idea because it'll give me the energy I need to study better later. It doesn't take long for me to be convinced. I send Savannah my answer:

Okay, I'll head over, but I can only stay for a couple of minutes.

Savannah answers with approximately one billion thumbs-up emojis. I put my phone back into my pocket and begin strolling toward the Coffee Loft while admiring the fall displays in the shops' windows. When I catch a glimpse of my own reflection in one of the windows, I slow my pace. Thankfully?miraculously, really?though I've been up especially late these past few nights to study, I don't appear nearly as frazzled or exhausted as I feel. My curly, dark red hair is pulled back into a ponytail that's reasonably tidy. The makeup around my green eyes hasn't gotten smeared despite the many times I've wearily rubbed my face today. My brown pea coat, cranberry-colored sweater, jeans, and ankle boots make for a rather cute outfit, which is a small wonder in and of itself, since looking cute during the week of an exam—when one's head is crammed with information like how to define uniform convergence for real-valued functions—is no guarantee.

The scents of cinnamon, pumpkin, and chocolate pull me out of my thoughts. I've reached the Coffee Loft, which is located in what I think is the prettiest building on

the street. This three-story structure was constructed in the early nineteen-hundreds like all the others in this lovely area of town. It has an awning over its tall front door, symmetrically spaced windows, and stunning woodwork. It's a gem of vintage craftsmanship.

I open the door and step into the shop, becoming fully immersed in the delicious aromas of the foods and drinks that are served here. The shop is laid out as one large room, which features a vaulted ceiling and chandeliers, exposed brick walls, ornate millwork, and the original hardwood floor with its decorative tile border. Sunshine is pouring in through the windows while sconces on the walls add additional light. A fire is crackling merrily in a fireplace that's far to my right. Straight ahead, about halfway back from the front door, is the huge order counter with its built-in display case. Several feet behind the counter is a swinging door that leads into the kitchen. Tables for customers are spread throughout the front half of the room. Over by the left wall is the spiral staircase that leads to the second and third floors, which are where the offices and staff break rooms are located. Currently, the shop's cozy ambience is being enhanced by the big band music that's playing over the sound system. And as usual, though the shop is busy, it doesn't feel busy. I swear there's magic here that makes one want to stay all day while sipping a hot drink and reading a novel.

"Hey, Miss Study Queen," someone says with amusement in her tone.

I snicker and face Savannah, who's behind the counter. She's grinning, and her blue eyes are dancing with a humorous gleam. Today, she has her brown hair tucked away in a low braid, she's wearing a long-sleeved shirt and jeans, and she has on over her outfit a maroon apron that's embroidered with the logo of the Coffee Loft.

I approach the counter. "I was tricked into coming here. You knew I would never be able to turn down a new autumn drink."

"Perhaps." Savannah shrugs. "However, I also knew you needed a study break. You could take that exam right now and ace it."

"You'll ace it for sure, but I don't know about me." I lean against the counter, suddenly aware of how tired I am. "I still feel like I have a lot of studying to do."

Savannah's brow furrows momentarily as she observes me, and then she readopts her smile. "Well, either way, you've come to the right place. This drink will be the perfect pick-me-up before you hit the books again. It's hot apple cider with cinnamon, caramel drizzle, and whipping cream."

"That sounds absolutely delicious," I tell her, sensing myself perking up already.

"Good. I'll make one for you right now." Savannah moves down the counter. She pauses and glances at me again. "A big one."

Savannah reaches past the towering stacks of small, medium, and large to-go cups, and she grabs an enormous cup off the top of the lofty-sized stack. As she does so, however, her shoulder bumps the cups, causing the whole stack to topple over. Savannah yelps and hops back as the avalanche of cups lands on the floor with a loud clatter. Immediately, all the customers pause what they're doing and look over.

Savannah is clearly holding back a laugh as she scans the mess. "I suppose this means I need to get some new cups from the back."

"That would probably be a good idea." I chuckle and move behind the counter. I motion to the cups on the floor. "In the meantime, I'll start putting these in the recycle bin."

"Thanks. I'll be back as soon as I can." Savannah gives me an appreciative look before she dashes through the swinging door that leads into the kitchen.

As the customers go back to enjoying their drinks and pastries, I tuck my bag under the counter and start gathering up as many cups as I can hold. I hear a jingle from the bell above the front door, but since I'm bent down and balancing approximately a gazillion cups in my arms, I can't see if the sound means another customer has arrived or someone has left the shop. A few strands of my hair fall into my eyes as I use my pinky finger to grab one more cup. With my arms overly full, I finally stand up straight again. And I freeze.

The most handsome man I have ever seen is waiting to order.

The man's brown eyes promptly meet mine. For one instant, I'm rendered unable to move, speak, or even breathe as I soak in the sight of him. He appears to be about my age. He's tall. He has sandy blond hair. His chiseled facial features are perfectly proportioned. And although he's dressed casually in a dark green sweatshirt and jeans, it's obvious that he's built like Hercules.

A few cups fall from my grip.

"Um, hello." I work down a swallow and find my voice. "Um, welcome to the Coffee Loft."

The man adjusts the strap of the computer bag that's hanging from one of his broad shoulders. His attention shifts to the cups in my arms.

"Do you need help with those?" he asks, his deep voice sending heat rippling down my back.

"No, but, um, thanks for asking." I drop several more cups. "So, um, anyway, I'm sure you want to place an order."

The man's expression is impossible to read. "That would be preferable, yes."

"Great." I clear my throat. "And you definitely can order, of course. That is, you'll be able to order as soon as?"

"As soon as I start cleaning up the mess that I made, so you can resume taking orders," I hear Savannah interject with exaggerated professionalism.

I snap my head over my shoulder. Savannah has reemerged from the kitchen. She has propped on one hip a big cardboard box that's filled with new, packaged cups. In her other hand, she's holding a box that's empty. Her eyes are shifting fast between Hercules and me, and I can tell she's fighting to keep another grin contained. When she reaches my side, she sets the box of new cups on the counter and holds out the empty box to me.

"Feel free to place those discarded cups in here." Savannah is still speaking in an over-the-top businesslike manner. "I'll get them into the recycle bin while you take this gentleman's order."

I give Savannah a fast, wide-eyed look that I know she'll understand. What is she doing? I don't work here! I don't have a clue how to take orders!

In the periphery of my vision, I notice the man glance at Savannah and return his attention to me. And he waits. Savannah waits, too, blinking at me with feigned innocence. All I can do is mirror her excessively polite demeanor and dump the cups into the empty box, fully aware that the sexiest man in the Universe is watching.

"Thanks," I mutter to her.

"Oh, it's my pleasure. Trust me. Now, if you'll please excuse me, I'll take these away." Savannah flashes a mischievous smile before she darts back into the kitchen and disappears.

I stare after her. There's a pause.

"So may I order now?" I hear the man inquire.

I slowly shift toward him. "Um, certainly." I step up to the old-fashioned register and mimic what I've heard Savannah say a thousand times. "So, um, what drink can I get started for you?"

The man's expression remains impossible to decipher. "What would you recommend?"

What am I supposed to do now? Recommend a drink of polynomials? It's like all the hours I've spent pouring over calculus have made it impossible to think about anything else. I gawk at the man for another panicked moment before I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind:

"We have a new autumn drink."

The man scratches the facial scruff on his chin, the motion drawing far too much of my attention to his sculpted jaw line. "Okay, I'll try that."

"You will?" My eyebrows shoot up. "I mean, um, great."

I lower my eyes to the register, which has been modified to include a high-tech keypad. I have absolutely no idea what button to push, so I tap a bunch of them all at once. The register emits a strange noise, and the keypad displays the purchase total on its screen.

"That will be three hundred dollars and seventy-four cents," I announce.

The man does a double take. "I'm sorry? What kind of drink is this, exactly?"

A flush starts rising from my neck into my face as I force a laugh. "Whoops. I forgot that this register isn't working. Please take a seat, and I'll get that drink made for you. No charge."

The man doesn't reply at first. Instead, he checks behind him. I glance past him to see what he's looking at, and I'm shocked to discover that several customers are staring at him, taking his picture, and chatting excitedly amongst themselves. And if I'm not mistaken, a guy seated by the window just whispered to his friend that he's going to ask Hercules for his autograph.

His autograph?

What is going on?

The man sighs and faces me again. "Okay, I'll go sit down. Thanks."

He takes a step away from the counter.

"May I get your name?" I call after him.

The man stops and puts his gaze back on mine.

I gesture to the register. "For your order."

"It's Joel," he tells me in a low voice. "My name is Joel."

"Joel," I echo. For no explainable reason, a little tingle zips from my head down to my toes. "Got it."

Joel strides to the back corner and sits at a small table that's tucked into an alcove and partly hidden from the view of the other customers. From my vantage point, I see him

pull a laptop out of his bag and set it on the table. Without warning, he looks over at me. I blush harder and avert my attention to the wall. I have no idea what to do next. Mercifully, Savannah reappears from the kitchen and hustles to my side. While she starts rebuilding the tower of to-go cups, she asks me in a whisper:

"What did he order?"

"I recommended the new autumn drink." I pretend like I'm fixing the not-actually-broken register. "I told him it would be free of charge, and don't you dare ask me any questions about that."

"Fair enough." Savannah's shoulders are shaking with silent laughter. "So you're going to make him what we're calling our Autumn Cider Swirl. I'll guide you through it." She's barely moving her lips as she talks. I had no idea that she possesses ventriloquist skills. "Grab a lofty-sized cup."

I'm rapidly running out of ways to appear fascinated by the register. "Can't you just make the drink for him?"

"And be the reason that you miss out on interacting again with the only man I've seen you crush on in years?" Savannah adds more cups to the stack. "Absolutely not."

"I'm not crushing on him!" I barely keep my voice to a whisper.

"Of course you're not." Savannah shoots me a side-glance that makes it clear she's not fooled. "Either way, though, you should probably start making his drink since he's watching you."

"He's what?"

I make the mistake of looking Joel's direction once more. My heart skips when I

discover that he is indeed watching me again?with a rather perturbed expression. I can't blame him for being irritated; instead of making his drink, I'm standing here like . . . well, like someone who isn't really a barista. If he figures out I'm a fraud, he might complain to the manager. And a complaint might get Savannah in trouble.

I roll back my shoulders. I guess I'm making Joel a drink.

I pull a lofty-sized cup off the newly built tower. Savannah conveniently makes herself busy cleaning the nearest countertop while she discreetly continues giving me directions. Under her guidance, I heat up a hefty serving of apple cider and pour it into the cup. I next add cinnamon.

Savannah moves to the sink to wash her hands. "Get the whipping cream out of the fridge."

I do as instructed and slather a bunch of whipping cream on top of the beverage. The end result doesn't look at all like the cute drinks Savannah makes, however. Instead, it just looks like a massive blob of white goo floating aimlessly on an apple-cider sea.

"Now finish with the caramel drizzle." Savannah pointedly shifts her eyes to a row of bottles that are on a shelf.

I whirl toward the shelf, locate the bottle that I need, and coat the top of the drink with about seventeen gallons of caramel.

"Okay, you're set." Savannah opens the display case, dons a pair of food-preparation gloves, and proceeds to rearrange the already arranged pastries. "Put a lid and a sleeve on the cup, and take it over to Joel."

"Wait a sec. How did you know Joel's name?" I hit her with a curious look. "You were in the back when he told me what it was."

Savannah meets my perplexed stare with one of her own. "Do you mean to say that you don't know who he is?"

"Should I?"

"Oh, this is good." The humorous gleam returns to Savannah's eyes. "Take Joel his drink, and then I'll fill you in."

The drink. Right.

I return my attention to the massive cup, which is nearly overflowing with scorching apple cider and pounds of whipping cream. As I anticipate talking with Mr. Muscles again, my stomach seizes with nerves. Talking to guys is not something I excel at. My skills are more in the realm of . . . well, studying. (And I mean studying textbooks and online course curriculums, not studying the otherworldly hotness of the man who's currently sitting in the corner and occasionally shooting questioning glances my way.) I don't have that natural ability to act both attractively confident and coy around guys. I'm only naturally good at academics. So I read. I study. I memorize. I score highly on exams. I tutor others on their coursework. And I avoid conversing with handsome men because I'm always an awkward disaster.

Fortunately for me, my social clumsiness doesn't matter. I'm not interested in pursuing romance at this point in my life, anyway. Correction: I can't pursue romance. I have to stay focused on getting into med school . . . and once I'm in med school, I'll be consumed by four years of brutally hard classes and clinical rotations . . . and after med school, I'll get swallowed up by four years of an OBGYN residency. Only after that, once I become an attending physician, will I have time for love. In other words, though I dream of finding my soulmate, it's going to be a long time before love can be part of my life.

I experience another potent sting of regret. I cast off the sensation, though, like I

always do. I'm truly happy to be on the path that I am. I love scholastics. I love medicine, and I'm ecstatic at the prospect of going to med . . .

The drink. I need to take Joel his drink.

I pick up the beverage, slip out from behind the counter, and start weaving past the other tables to reach the back corner. The cup is becoming exponentially hotter against my skin, reminding me that I forgot both a lid and a sleeve, but it's not like I'm going to turn back now. Instead, I pick up my pace while exuding my best I-totally-work-here attitude. When I reach the table, Joel stops typing on his laptop and lifts his eyes to mine.

His gaze is mesmerizing.

"H-here you are," I sputter. "This is a lofty-sized Autumn Cider Swirl."

My hand is shaking so badly that I set down the cup too hard. Whipping cream and boiling-lava-hot apple cider slosh over the brim and hit my fingers. I yank back my hand, accidentally smacking the cup as I do so. The gigantic cup teeters . . . and then in one horrible, slow-motion moment, it finishes tipping over, flinging Autumn Cider Swirl everywhere. Everywhere .

"Whoa!" Joel springs to his feet.

"Your laptop!" I cry out at the same time.

I dive forward, arms outstretched, to save his laptop from the sugar apocalypse, but my foot slips on the puddle of cider that's now collecting on the floor. I release a goat-like bleat as I start to fall.

Joel catches me in his arms.

Every single person in the shop turns and gapes at Joel and me. The room has become totally silent except for the music, the crackling of the fire, and the sound of the cider dripping off the table. The stunned stillness isn't broken until a woman uses her phone to take a picture of Joel while not-quietly informing her companion that she would love to "nearly die from apple cider and have Joel catch her, too."

I slowly raise my eyes to Joel's.

His gaze is intense as he holds me. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." I gather my footing. My face is seriously on fire. It's a face inferno. "Thank you."

Joel keeps one arm around my waist until I've fully regained my balance. He then lets me go. Before either of us can say anything else, Savannah appears at my side. She has a mop in one hand, and in the other hand she's carrying a bright yellow sandwich-board sign that says, Caution! Wet Floor! Below the writing, there's a stick-figure person falling in a way that's disturbingly similar to how I must have just looked. Savannah shoots me a glance before putting the sign on the floor and commencing with mopping up the mess.

I suddenly remember that Joel's laptop remains in the path of Lake Cider, which is still creeping across the tabletop. I make another move to rescue the device, but Joel steps in front of me and picks it up himself. I could be wrong here, but I get the sense that he doesn't want me anywhere near his electronic devices. I can't fault him.

"I'm so sorry about all of this." I push wayward strands of my hair from my overheated face. "I'll get you another drink."

"Thanks, but you don't need to do that." Joel puts his laptop into his bag. His eyes drift to the staring customers while he goes on saying to me, "I should probably clear

out, anyway."

Joel drapes his bag strap over his shoulder and walks off. I watch him go. When he reaches the front door, he briefly looks back at me and then exits the shop.

"So that didn't go quite as expected," I hear Savannah remark.

I moan and turn toward her. "No, it definitely did not."

"I'm sorry." Savannah makes the final swipe with the mop. "This was my fault."

"Don't be sorry. You were trying to do me a favor . . . a weird favor, but still a favor." I grab the package of cleaning wipes from the pocket of her apron and use them to dry off the table. "Besides, it's not like I'll ever see Joel again, so it's all good."

An entertained-looking smile reappears on Savannah's lips.

"What's so funny?" I demand.

Savannah makes a move with her hand to indicate that I should follow her to the order counter. "It's time to chat."

Curiosity piqued, I trail Savannah back behind the counter. She puts away the cleaning supplies and rinses her hands. She then starts expertly making another Autumn Cider Swirl while she asks me:

"Okay, we've attended tons of school sporting events since we started college, correct?"

I hesitate. This feels like a trick question.

"Correct," I eventually reply, drawing out the word.

Savannah pours the heated apple cider into a cup. "This has included attending lots of men's basketball games in the late fall and winter, as well as attending men's volleyball matches in the spring, right?"

"I guess so."

Savannah stirs cinnamon into the drink. "Now I realize that you hate athletics, and you only attend sporting events with me because you're a fabulously supportive best friend. Still, though, are you seriously telling me that despite all the volleyball matches and basketball games we've attended, you've never once noticed Joel?"

"Not once. Why would I have noticed him?"

Savannah laughs. "Considering Joel Lambert is the most famous athlete who has ever attended the university, and he's one of the best college athletes in the nation, I figured you might have at least noticed him."

"He's an athlete ?" I say the word with unmasked disdain.

If I needed another reason to forget about Joel, I certainly have it now. Joel is an athlete . He's one of those arrogant guys who thinks the world revolves around him because he plays a game. I'm all-too-familiar with his type. I grew up surrounded by jocks because my older brother, Dylan, was a multi-sport athlete himself; he even played college football before he went on to med school. Though Dylan and his friends were great, they were definitely the exceptions to the rule. The rest of the athletes usually looked down their noses at little, bookish me. Unfortunately, in more recent years, my experiences while working as a tutor on campus have only reinforced the jock stereotype. I've tutored plenty of guys who happen to be athletes, and many of them have been patronizing, dismissive, or intolerably self-absorbed.

"Yep, Joel is most definitely an athlete," Savannah goes on while putting whipping cream on the drink. "He's the starting point guard on the basketball team and the starting libero on the volleyball team."

"Wow. That's a big deal," I say with genuine admiration. I may find sports terribly boring, but I also know enough about athletics to appreciate the magnitude of Joel's accomplishments.

"Exactly. Joel is unquestionably a big deal . . . a two-sport, all-star, nationally recognized, potentially-going-to-play- professionally big deal." Savannah adds caramel drizzle to the beverage. "So I can't believe you didn't recognize him. What in the heck have you been doing during all the games we've attended?"

I shrug. "I don't know. Checking my phone. Clapping whenever you clap. Watching random people in the crowd. Waving my arms along with the cheerleaders. The usual stuff. After years of attending Dylan's games, I've gotten good at passing the time."

"Apparently so." Savannah slides a sleeve over the cup, puts a lid on top, and hands the drink to me. "Okay, here you go. You definitely earned this today."

"Thanks." I take a sip. It's delicious. "All right, now it's my turn to ask a question: if Joel is as popular as you say, why haven't I heard you talk about him before?"

Savannah goes back to cleaning the counters. "Though he's undeniably hot and athletic, Joel isn't my type. And trust me: ever since Travis and I broke up, I've devoted plenty of thought to the type of guy I want to be with one day."

"Oh, I know." I smile. "You want the classic tall, handsome man with dark hair and dark eyes."

"Precisely. Is that too much to ask for?" Savannah looks away to give a friendly wave

to customers who are leaving the shop, and then she refocuses on me. "However, while Joel isn't my type, he certainly caught your eye."

"No, he most certainly did not." I tip up my chin. "An athlete is pretty much the last guy I would ever be attracted to. Besides, you know I'm not looking for romance right now anyway." I take another sip of my drink. "So it doesn't matter if I do come face-to-face with Joel again. I'm definitely not interested."

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Chapter Two

"Do you think physicians ever actually use calculus?" Savannah inquires as we exit the lecture hall. "When you become an OBGYN, or when I become a pediatrician, do you think we'll ponder higher-order derivatives as we make clinical decisions about our patients?"

"Admittedly, I've never witnessed any doctor I shadow incorporate continuous random variables into their medical decision making?just like I've never seen them balance organic chemistry equations or work on physics problems." I laugh while pushing open the door that leads outside. "However, I like to think these subjects we stay up painfully late to study are providing a foundation for us to understand the topics we'll be taught in med school that do directly pertain to patient care."

"That's a very diplomatic answer, and I appreciate it." Savannah snickers as we venture into the afternoon sunshine. "After a test like the one we just took, it's nice to be reminded that there's a noble reason why we're putting ourselves through this academic torture. It's good to know it has been for more than merely acing the MCAT and ticking off boxes to graduate from college."

We break off from our conversation when we reach the outdoor coffee stand that's here on campus. The guy who's working the stand knows us so well that he starts prepping our usual beverages before we even place our orders. After we pay the guy, we pick up our drinks and resume walking. I start enjoying my pumpkin-spice deliciousness while sensing the weight of this morning's exam lifting off my shoulders. At last, I can focus on this beautiful autumn day, which is truly one for the record books. Leaves are dotting the brick pathways, the university's majestic

buildings appear especially grand with the fall-colored trees rising up around them, and students are lounging on the grass and seated on park benches while enjoying the crisp air and sunlight.

Savannah takes a drink of her hot chocolate before inquiring, "So how did the exam go for you, anyway? Not that I really need to ask. You knew the material better than the professor."

"I'm not sure about that, but I'm grateful to say it went all right. How did it go for you?"

"Fortunately, I think I did fine, too, which I'm especially thankful for since I got home late from the Coffee Loft last evening and didn't have much time to study."

My face heats up. "Ugh. Do not remind me about the Coffee Loft yesterday."

"Aw, it wasn't so bad." Savannah nudges me. "Yes, you had a slightly awkward encounter with the most famous guy on campus, but at least you got to talk to him. Lots of people would have paid big bucks for the opportunity to spill a scalding beverage all over his table."

I shoot her a look. "You're not helping."

"Sorry." Savannah laughs and finishes her drink. "Hey, now that we've conquered the exam, would you like to go grab an early dinner somewhere?"

"I would love to, but I can't." I hand my drink to Savannah to hold while I pull my green puffer coat from my bag and put it on over my black turtleneck. "I picked up an extra shift at the tutoring center this afternoon, since they're short-staffed today."

"That was nice of you."

I take my drink back from her, and we keep strolling. "I figure it's a good way to earn a few extra bucks to help cover the costs of traveling to med school interviews this winter."

"I signed up for an additional shift at the Coffee Loft tomorrow for the same reason." Savannah looks ahead to where the walkway splits in two directions. "Well, I suppose this is where we'll part ways. Good luck with work. I'll head to the apartment to see if I can whip up something reasonably nutritious for us to have for dinner when you get home." She pauses. "Actually, after today's exam, I think we deserve pizza. And homemade cookies for dessert."

I show another smile. "Definitely."

Savannah waves and departs in the direction of the campus bus stop. I go the other way to the Student Academic Center. It's my favorite building on campus. It's four stories tall, so it's large but not too huge, and its columns, stonework, and arched windows give it an elegance and old-fashioned academic feel that I adore.

I head up the building's stone staircase, tug open the front door, and go left down a wide hallway to the wing of the building where the tutoring center is located. The spacious main room of the tutoring center is brightly lit, has windows lining the entirety of the far wall, and has cubicles and tables scattered throughout. This afternoon, like usual, there are a lot of people in here, and the air is buzzing with quiet conversations as everyone works.

"Hi, Danielle. Thanks for coming today," I hear someone say.

I turn and smile at Rebecca, one of the graduate students who helps run the tutoring center. Rebecca has jet-black hair, light eyes, fun glasses, and several piercings in both ears. She radiates brains and coolness—and she gives off the vibe that she could destroy anyone in a scholarly debate.

"It's no problem." I unzip my jacket. "I assume you want me to take any walk-ins this afternoon?"

"Actually, no. I've got a specific assignment that you're perfect for."

Rebecca motions for me to follow her into her office, which is connected to the main room. She goes around behind her desk, wiggles the mouse of her computer to wake it, and reviews something that she has up on the monitor. She then looks at me and explains:

"A couple of days ago, a student reached out to me to set up his first-ever tutoring appointment. He's looking for help in the sciences, and since you're the pre-med guru on staff, I thought you would be a great help for him."

I nod. "Sure. What time is he coming in?"

"Well, that's the catch: he called this morning and requested to have his tutoring sessions held off-site."

I don't hide my expression of surprise. We don't often get requests to host tutoring sessions away from campus, though it's an option we offer as long as the student is vetted by Rebecca and the requested location is an approved public place that's not too far from the university.

I zip up my jacket once more. "Where does he want to meet?"

"At the Coffee Loft."

I do a double take. "The Coffee Loft?"

"Yep." Rebecca smiles. "I know how much you like that place, so it was yet another

reason why this assignment seemed ideal for you. We'll reimburse you for travel time and any other expenses you accrue to get there from campus, of course."

"Okay. Should I venture over there now?"

Rebecca checks the clock on the wall. "Yes, that would put you there right on time." She gives me another smile. "I'm so glad you were able to work today. Thanks again, Danielle."

"You're welcome." I start moving for the door. "By the way, what's the student's name?"

"Bryant Larson. I'll text you his number, so you can let him know that you're on your way." Rebecca picks up her phone and types with rapid-fire speed. "I'll also leave it to the two of you to schedule further tutoring sessions according to what works best for your calendars."

My phone pings with the text from Rebecca. I give her a salute and depart the office. I leave the building and follow the familiar route to the campus bus stop. While waiting for the bus to arrive, I shoot Bryant a text:

Hello. This is Danielle Gillespie, your assigned tutor. I'll meet you at the Coffee Loft shortly.

A moment later, Bryant texts back with only:

Thanks.

I hear an approaching bus and raise my attention from my phone; it's a bus that will take me to the adorable area of town where the Coffee Loft is located. When the bus stops at the curb, I board, grab a seat, and go through my well-practiced routine of

tugging my laptop out of my bag in order to use my commute time to study. I don't look up from what I'm doing until the bus reaches the stop I need. I shove my laptop back into my bag, disembark, and stroll to the shop. I pause outside the door to adopt my professional-yet-friendly tutor-ish demeanor, and then I go inside.

The barista, Nathaniel, gives me a welcoming smile; all the employees know me well, since I visit Savannah so often. I smile back at him and then peer around, trying to identify my client. There are a few people seated alone at different tables, yet none of them are college-aged. There's a couple by one of the windows, but they're gazing at each another in a way that makes it clear they're barely aware that the rest of the world exists. I'm hit with an unexpected prick of longing as I observe them; I hope that I'll find a man who gazes at me like that one day . . . in another eight years or so . . . when I finally have time for romance.

I sigh.

My phone pings, jarring me back to reality. I check the new text. It's from Bryant's number, and it says:

I'm seated in the back corner.

My cheeks scorch as memories of yesterday flood my mind. The back table. The table that isn't easily visible from the front door. The table upon which I spilled a whipping-cream-slathered drink in front of the most handsome, buff, famous man in the region.

I shake my head at myself. I need to get over yesterday's debacle. That was then, and this is now. Today, I'm here to tutor. I'm not here to pretend to be a barista. That humiliation is behind me.

I roll back my shoulders and walk toward the alcove. When I get past the fireplace,

the man who's seated at the little table comes into view. As our eyes meet, the floor drops out from underneath me.

It's not some guy named Bryant who's at the table. It's Joel. Joel Lambert. The insanely hot, muscular man who makes my breathing get shallow. The guy I totally humiliated myself in front of yesterday. The undoubtedly arrogant athlete I want nothing to do with. Ever.

What is he doing here?

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Chapter Three

Joel's eyebrows rise. My jaw drops. There's one more beat of stunned silence as we stare at each other, and then, like a switch is flipped, Joel's expression becomes cryptic. I hastily employ an equally unflustered demeanor, but a tornado of shock and confusion continues swirling through me.

Why is the world's hottest narcissist sitting at this table? Where is Bryant?

A blink later, I emerge from my shock enough to finish processing the sight of Joel—who-isn't-Bryant. Unfortunately for my sanity, he looks even more attractive today than he did yesterday. He's again dressed casually, this time in a gray, long-sleeved t-shirt, dark jeans, and sneakers—and also as before, his clothing happens to show off his brawny physique. He has a baseball cap turned backward on his head. He still has facial scruff lining his jaw. And he's oozing a laid-back-yet-commanding aura as he sits there in all his muscular, manly, sexy amazingness.

My heart rate ticks up.

"Hello again," Joel breaks the silence, his lips twitching upward.

"Hello." I remain businesslike. "I apologize for interrupting. I'm looking for someone."

Joel lets his smile show. "Yes, I know. You're looking for me."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. Could he be any more conceited? His pickup lines

may work on others, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of thinking he's flustering me.

Because he's not flustering me. Obviously.

"No, actually," I state coolly, "I'm really here to meet with someone else."

"And like I said: I know." Joel is still grinning. "You're here to meet with Bryant, right?"

I do a double take. "Yes, I am. You're not Bryant, though."

Joel's eyes start sparkling with an amused gleam. "And you're not a barista."

My cheeks flame. "Okay, fine, I'm not. I was here yesterday doing . . . research."

Joel leans back and crosses his giant arms over his broad chest. "Research, huh?"

"Um, yes." I clear my throat. "Of sorts."

Joel chuckles, and to my aggravation, the rich sound sends thrilling shockwaves down my back.

Infuriating man.

Infuriating, alluring, intriguing man.

"I'm not sure what you find so entertaining," I remark pithily. "After all, you haven't been totally forthcoming with the truth yourself. You told my boss that your name was Bryant."

"Correction: when I met with your boss a few days ago, I received her permission to use an alias." Joel's smile widens. "Of course, I didn't know at the time that my tutor would be the fake barista who spilled a drink on my table."

I frown.

Joel laughs again. "Okay, okay, how about this? We'll say you were doing research yesterday, and we'll say that I'm going undercover today."

This is getting weirder by the minute.

"Undercover?" I repeat. "What do you mean?"

Joel doesn't answer. Instead, he checks his watch, motions to the chair that's across the table from him, and inquires:

"Would you like to sit down?"

At this point, my brain is tumbling too haphazardly for me to formulate a coherent response, so I say nothing, plunk myself down across from Joel, and drop my bag at my feet. I then silently pull in a breath while coaching myself to get a grip. Joel may have thrown me for a loop?again?but I won't let him get the best of me anymore. He may be the all-star on the court (and, clearly, in the weight room), but the world of academics is my realm. So I'm not going to get unnerved or intimidated by how famous, athletic, arrogant, or handsome he is. I will stay calmly focused and do an excellent job tutoring him so he can succeed in his classes.

And I'm going to start by taking control of the situation right now.

"Allow me to officially introduce myself," I say. "My name is Danielle Gillespie. I'm a college senior, and I'm majoring in human biology. I've been tutoring for over three

years."

"It's nice to officially meet you, Danielle." Joel pulls his laptop out of his bag. "I suppose I don't need to introduce myself, thanks to the research you did yesterday, but I'll introduce myself anyway. My name is Joel Lambert."

He's unbearable.

It's also suddenly clear to me why Joel requested to utilize an alias and meet away from campus. He's so proud that he doesn't want anyone knowing he needs a tutor?as if it's something to be ashamed of. Indeed, Mr. All-Star Hotness can't have anyone seeing him getting help with his schoolwork like a normal college student. He's too superior for things like that. He's a celebrity athlete and a party boy, and he has fans swooning over him wherever he goes. Frankly, it's ironic that a nerdy girl like me?a girl who dislikes sports, never goes on dates, and has no clue how to flirt?knows his type so well.

No matter how snobby he is, though, I'll keep this cordial.

I take off my jacket and hang it over the back of my chair. "So what are you majoring in, Joel?"

Joel turns on his laptop. "Computer engineering."

I barely manage not to reveal my surprise. Computer engineering? Computer engineering is one of the hardest majors that the university offers. Not many people attempt the degree?especially not athletes who frequently miss class and otherwise have their schooling disrupted due to their sport. I never would have guessed that Sexy Athlete Man is also a computer geek . . . and I find it immensely attractive.

A breath later, I mentally slap myself to my senses. I must stop crushing on Joel. We

move in totally different circles. He's a famous athlete. I'm a study-o-holic. I don't have time for romance, and even if I did have time for romance, I wouldn't be interested in someone like him. Besides, it's not like Joel would ever be interested in a girl like me, anyway.

"So what are you going to do with your human biology degree?" Joel looks up from his laptop.

I hesitate. I've lost count of the number of times when I've told a guy that I'm planning to become a doctor and he abruptly begins acting intimidated, defensive, or as though I'm a weird alien creature.

"I'm pre-med," I confess, bracing myself for Joel's response.

"Cool. What specialty do you want to go into? Or do you know yet?"

I wait for Joel to tack on a snarky or condescending comment . . . but he doesn't. It's like he's not intimidated or bemused by what I told him at all.

I wasn't expecting that.

"I hope to go into OBGYN." I tuck a loose strand of my hair into my ponytail.

Joel's eyes shift to my hair while I work on it and then return to my face. "It's impressive that you're willing to tackle so many years of training and education."

I observe him closely, attempting to determine if he's subtly mocking me, but to my astonishment, everything about Joel's demeanor suggests he's being genuine. A spark flickers in my abdomen, but I ignore it and quickly change the subject:

"So how can I assist you with your coursework?"

Joel shifts his laptop so I can see the online class syllabus that he has pulled up. "I'm looking for help with the classroom portion of my inorganic chemistry course, which runs until the end of this month."

I breathe a little sigh of relief. At least he's not looking for help with computer engineering. That's definitely not my forte.

"Great." I show a smile, making sure not to convey any judgment. I never want someone to feel self-conscious about seeking help with their studies. "Is this your first chemistry course?"

"No." Joel retrieves a textbook from his bag. "I'm a chemistry minor, and this semester I'm taking an advanced chemistry class."

I need another moment to wrap my mind around what I heard. Computer engineering with a chemistry minor? Joel clearly isn't just hot and athletic?he's brilliant, too.

This is not exactly a recipe for helping me to crush on him less.

Joel opens the textbook as he goes on. "I'm getting so busy this semester, and missing classroom time as a result, that it's becoming tough to keep up on my own."

I nod. "You're busy with basketball and volleyball, right?"

Joel stops what he's doing. "So you know I play sports."

"Yes, I do know," I reply evenly. I'm not about to let him assume I'm some fangirl who's crazy about him because he's an athlete. "I didn't know this about you until yesterday, however, when someone mentioned it to me. I actually hate athletics. I don't follow them at all."

Okay, so perhaps that came out a tad more harshly than I intended, but from the scrutinizing way Joel is studying me, it's too late to backtrack my comment.

"You hate athletics, huh?" Joel is peering right into my eyes. "Do you hate athletes, too?"

"Yes," I state. "I mean, no! I mean, of course not. That is . . ." I trail off, my face exploding with heat. I wonder how long it'll take Rebecca to fire me for insulting one of the most celebrated students on campus. "What I mean is that my brother played a lot of sports, so I was around athletes all the time. My brother and his friends were cool, but there have been plenty of jocks who've made it clear that I'm not in their league."

Joel's brows snap together. There's a sharp break in the conversation. I groan to myself. This discussion has gone totally off the rails. Yet I'm determined to salvage it. So I refresh my smile, bolster my unbothered tone, and add:

"Anyway, the point is that I grew up going to my brother's games and practices all the time, and I do attend sporting events here on campus . . . I just don't actually watch them."

Joel stares, and then he breaks into a smile that nearly causes me to fall off my chair. The next thing I know, he has started laughing. My heart spins at the sound, and before I realize it, I'm laughing along with him.

You're his tutor! Stay focused!

The voice in my brain restores me to reality. I fall silent. Joel stops laughing, too, and his expression morphs back into a blank slate.

I clear my throat. "Well, let's get started, shall we?" I scoot my chair closer to the

table. "Before we do, though, just one more question: would you like me to use your alias during these tutoring sessions?"

Joel shakes his head. "No, feel free to use my real name. I'm putting the alias on the tutoring schedule simply to help keep interruptions to a minimum."

"Interruptions?"

Joel uses one hand to rub the back of his neck. "Yeah, when I'm out in public, I'm often approached by people who want to talk, ask for an autograph, or take a picture. I really appreciate people's support, but the interruptions do make it challenging to get any studying done." He sighs and drops his arm. "That's why I came yesterday to scout out this coffee shop. I confirmed there weren't a lot of college students around, and my presence didn't draw as much attention as it would elsewhere, so I decided this would be a decent place to meet with my tutor." He grins. "That is, my presence didn't draw too much attention until a gigantic cup of apple cider spilled all over my table."

"Hey." I wave my hand in the general direction of the order counter. "You leave my barista research out of this."

Joel chuckles. "Okay."

I giggle, yet my mind is whirring as I think over what Joel said. He didn't request to meet away from campus because he's too proud to be seen with a tutor. Rather, he requested to meet here so he could get his studying done in peace.

Why do I get the sense that Joel isn't as self-absorbed as I initially assumed? And why do I also sense that this is going to make it even harder to ignore my attraction to him?

I think I need to move the conversation along.

"So regarding chemistry," I state, "you mentioned that the demands of your schedule are making it hard to always attend the lectures?"

Joel nods. "That's right. I'm in the throes of pre-season basketball practices, which are sometimes twice a day. There are also weight training sessions, team meetings, and . . . other commitments I have on my calendar." He coughs and refocuses on his laptop.

"That's all right." I motion to his textbook. "Why don't you show me what you talked about in class most recently, and we'll get started on your homework?"

"That would be great." Joel pulls his wallet from his back pocket. "First, though, how about I order us some drinks? What would you?"

A phone starts ringing. Joel gives me an apologetic look before he retrieves his phone from his bag. He glances at the caller ID, quickly gets to his feet, and puts the phone to his ear.

"Hi, this is Joel. Please hang on for a moment." Joel turns his attention back to me. "I'm sorry for the interruption, Danielle. I do need to take this, but it shouldn't take long."

Joel heads across the shop and goes outside. Through the big front windows, I see him begin to converse with the person who's on the other end of the call while he continues walking down the sidewalk and out of view. I sigh. It was probably a call from one of his coaches, and like athletes do, Joel is prioritizing his sports over academics . . . and over his tutor's time.

I shift my attention to Joel's open textbook, and I begin comparing the chapter's content with the online syllabus that's displayed on his laptop. I'm not sure how much

time passes before I hear a jingle from the bell over the door. Soon, out of the corner of my eye, I see a man approaching the table. I raise my eyes and remark:

"Joel, I was reviewing your notes, and . . ."

I trail off when I realize it's not Joel who's walking this way. Instead, I'm being approached by another guy who also appears to be college-aged. He's fairly tall and muscular, and he's tan despite the fact that it's October. He has spiky blond hair and blue eyes. He's wearing a sweatshirt that's marked with the university's mascot. And he's smiling at me.

"Hey." The guy reaches the table and gives me a nod.

"Um, hey." I peer up at him, perplexed. Why is he smiling? Does he know me? Have I tutored him before but forgotten his face?

"Do you mind if I sit down?" The guy doesn't wait for me to answer before he welcomes himself to Joel's vacated chair. "It looks like you're doing some pretty intense studying."

"Yes, one could say that." I'm still observing him in bewilderment. "I'm sorry, but do I know you?"

The guy's smile falters for a fleeting moment. "Not yet, but I'm hoping to change that right now." He winks at me. "I'm Kaden Cox."

It takes me a long, ungraceful second before I figure out what's going on: this guy is hitting on me.

Isn't he?

No, there's no way. Guys never hit on me.

So why does it seem like he's hitting on me?

I realize Kaden is waiting for me to say something.

"Hello, Kaden. I'm . . ." For crying out loud, I've forgotten my name. "I'm . . . Danielle."

"Danielle, huh? Nice." Kaden's eyes trace over me. "I hope you don't mind that I came over here, but when I saw a gorgeous woman sitting by herself, I had to meet her." He taps the textbook with his finger. "Especially when she's trying to act super-smart. It's kind of hot."

I sense my lips pressing into a straight line. I'm not impressed by this guy. At all.

"Actually, I'm not here by myself," I inform him.

"Oh?" Kaden glances around the room. "Are you here with your boyfriend?"

"No, I . . . don't have a boyfriend." I cringe. Why am I so awkward and uncertain when I talk with guys?

"Hey, if you're single, that's a score for me." Kaden wags his eyebrows. "So what would you say, Danielle, if I asked for your phone number?"

"I would say that I appreciate you asking, but I'm not interested." I'm getting kind of queasy. I just want him to go away. "Now if you'll please excuse me, I need to get back to what I'm doing."

Kaden laughs. "Your hard-to-get act is cute, do you know that?"

"It's not an act. I really need to study." I work down a swallow, and I reach for the textbook so I can gather up Joel's things and move to another table.

Kaden puts one hand on mine, trapping it on top of the textbook. "Aw, come on, Danielle, give me a chance."

"No, thank you." I try to tug my hand free. "Please let go."

"What about meeting on campus?" Kaden goes on in a flirtatious tone. "We?"

"Kaden, I believe she told you to let her go," a man states.

Kaden and I both snap our heads toward the sound. Relief washes over me when I see that Joel is coming this way. His expression reveals nothing, but his gaze is intense and locked on Kaden. I glance back in Kaden's direction. I see his eyes narrow at Joel for a split-second, and then he puts on a grin, removes his hand from mine, and stands up as Joel reaches the table.

"Relax, Lambert," Kaden says with an indifferent air. "I didn't realize Danielle was with you. Sorry, man."

A muscle in Joel's cheek twitches as he flatly replies, "Danielle is my chemistry tutor."

"You have a tutor? Are you serious?" Kaden chortles. "Lambert, I don't know why you work so hard at the classroom stuff. Our professors will pass us, no matter what." He tips his head in my direction. "That being said, if all the tutors on campus are as hot as Danielle, I might think about getting one myself."

Joel takes a step closer. "Kaden."

Kaden holds up his hands in a mock-halting gesture. "Don't worry, man, I get it: you need to study. I'll clear out." He turns, reaches down to the laptop, and types a phone number at the top of Joel's notes. He then grins at me and adds, "I meant what I said, Danielle: I want to take you out. So once you tire of Mr. Scholastic, give me a call." He stands up straight and faces Joel again. "See you at practice, buddy."

Kaden saunters off and joins a couple of guys who are waiting near the counter for their drinks. I release a strained breath while drawing in my hand against my body. Joel stays on his feet, watching as Kaden and the other guys collect their beverages and leave the shop. He then sits down and asks in hardly more than a growl:

"Are you okay?"

"Yes," I lie. "Is . . . Kaden a friend of yours?"

Joel puts his phone into his bag. "He's a teammate."

"Oh," is all I say in reply. I choose not to mention that I should have suspected Kaden is another athlete; he's precisely the type of self-worshipping man that so many of them seem to be.

Joel's jaw remains clenched as he pulls his laptop toward him. He then pauses and looks at me again. "Do you want Kaden's phone number before I erase it?"

"No, thank you." I make myself busy reading random textbook pages. "He's . . . not my type."

"Ah, that's right. You hate athletes."

I lift my eyes to Joel. He's tapping the backspace key hard.

"Like I said before, I don't hate athletes," I insist, aware that I need to restore some professionalism to this bizarre tutoring session. "Athlete or not, I don't have time to date. I won't have time for dating until med school and residency are over."

Joel's eyes flick to mine and return to his laptop.

I sit up taller. "So how about we get started on your homework?"

"Sure." Joel gets back to his feet. "I'll go order us some drinks first. Let me guess: you want a lofty-sized Autumn Cider Swirl, right?"

He grins before heading off toward the counter.

I shake my head. Joel's quip should irritate me . . . yet, oddly, it doesn't. It doesn't irritate me at all, in fact. Instead, his humor is making me break into another smile.

And I suddenly have the feeling that this is going to be a very complicated month.

Chapter Four

"Why . . . do we always . . . voluntarily subject ourselves . . . to this madness?" I pant as I sprint to the end my treadmill run. I then crank down the machine's speed to a walk while trying to catch my breath.

Savannah steps off the treadmill that's next to mine and mops her forehead with a towel. "I'm not . . . entirely sure. I suppose the appropriate response . . . would be that . . . as pre-med students . . . we want to be examples of . . . good, healthy habits." She takes a drink from her water bottle. "However, I think the more . . . honest response is that we figure . . . exercise is a way to offset all the . . . autumn desserts we love."

"I can't argue . . . with that." I get off my machine, grab my own water bottle, and take a huge swig.

Savannah tosses her towel into the dirty-linens bin, I pick up my bag, and we start making our way across the gym toward the exit. This sprawling gym is located within the university's Student Activities Building, which is so massive that I'm surprised it doesn't have its own zip code. In addition to the gym, this building houses a swimming pool, pickleball courts, rooms where yoga and other instructor-taught classes are held, basketball courts, a track, a bowling alley, an arcade, a movie theater, and a food court that serves about every type of food and beverage known to mankind.

Upon exiting the gym, we head straight down a long hallway to a set of double doors. Savannah scans her student ID card across the digital reader that's adjacent to the doors, causing them to unlock and slowly swing out toward us. We cross the

threshold to enter the women's locker room.

"So are you planning to finish that essay for English class this evening?" Savannah asks as we reach our lockers. "I think I'm?"

Savannah's phone pings from inside her bag. She fishes out the phone and falls silent as she checks her new text.

"Is everything okay?" I open my locker and grab my old blue sweatshirt.

"Yes. They're just looking for someone to cover this evening's shift at the Coffee Loft." Savannah's eyes dart to the clock on the wall. "I think I'll take it. I need to hurry home to change, though."

"Sounds good." I throw on my sweatshirt over my tank top. "In that case, I'll stay on campus to study outside while the afternoon sun is still shining. Later, after we both get home, how about we heat up those leftovers that are in the fridge?"

"That sounds perfect." Savannah hoists her gym bag onto her shoulder. "Oh, you mentioned earlier that you don't have your student ID card with you. Do you want to take mine?"

"Thanks, but I'll be all right without it. I'm not going anywhere else on campus where it's needed." I tug the elastic from my hair, letting my locks fall messily past my shoulders.

"Okay." Savannah smiles and moves for the door. "See you later."

Savannah leaves. I take a last drink from my water bottle before putting it in my bag. As I turn to depart, my eyes fall upon my reflection in a mirror, and I almost laugh. I don't know how some women manage to look beautiful after a workout. I always

appear like I was hit by a hurricane, and today is no exception: flushed face, messy hair, baggy sweatshirt, oversized shorts, and non-brand-name socks and sneakers. Though my outfit isn't glamorous, however, it'll do for an impromptu outdoor study session.

I leave the locker room and retrace my steps along the hallway. When I reach the other end, instead of continuing forward into the gym, I turn right, push open another heavy door, and enter a much longer corridor. The wall at my left is made up of floor-to-ceiling windows that provide a gorgeous view of the autumn foliage outside. To my right, almost the entire length of the wall is adorned with professional headshots of the university's intercollegiate athletes. Despite the countless times I have walked this corridor, I've never paid attention to the photos . . . until now.

Almost before I realize it, I've stopped by the section of the wall where the photos of the men's basketball players are hanging inside a display case. When I spot Joel's picture, a heated pulsation erupts in my chest. Joel's eyes are captivating. His slight smile conveys confidence without cockiness. He simply exudes athleticism and sexiness, and I can almost hear his deep voice and the rich, intoxicating way he laughs.

Not that I've been thinking about Joel since our tutoring session two days ago. I absolutely have not been thinking about him. I haven't been thinking about his good looks, his intelligence, the way he intervened when Kaden was bothering me, his sense of humor, how he bought me a drink, or how he's making me wonder if?

A loud noise at my left causes me to jump and spin toward it. My eyes get gigantic when I see that a big interior door at the distant end of the corridor is getting opened from the other side. I've never ventured as far as that door, and I've certainly never gone beyond it, but like all the other students on campus, I know precisely where it leads: it's one of two doors in this hallway that leads into the part of the building that's reserved for the university's intercollegiate athletes. The doors are flanked by security

cameras, and they can only be opened from this side by special ID cards that the athletes are issued. In other words, the realm of the intercollegiate athletes is a total no-go zone for mere mortals like me. From what I've heard, though, the mystical realm provides the intercollegiate athletes with their own practice gyms, locker rooms, meeting halls, weight rooms, theaters for watching game reels, physical therapists and trainers, and whatever else the university deems is worthy for the school's beloved athletes.

The door is pushed open farther, and three muscular guys who are dressed in tank tops and shorts stroll out into the corridor while laughing and talking amongst themselves. Though they're a long distance away, I can tell that their tank tops, which are darkened with sweat, are marked with the logo of the men's basketball team.

My body jolts.

The basketball team's practice must have just gotten over . . . and I'm standing in front of the players' pictures.

I need to get out of here.

I'm about to resume scurrying toward the exit, which is up ahead on the left, but then I realize that Kaden is among the trio of players who are strolling in this direction. If I go for the exit, I'll have to pass Kaden first, and the last thing I want to do is interact with him again. I quickly glance over my shoulder at the door that leads back into the hallway where the gym for regular students is located. However, that door requires a student ID card to open it from this side, and I don't have my card.

I think I'm trapped.

Another noise echoes through the air, and I hurriedly face forward again. My heart rate ticks up even higher when I notice that the second door leading into the

intercollegiate-athlete part of the building?the door that's on the right just beyond the photo displays?is now being opened. A few gals whose shirts let me know they're on the volleyball team step out. The door starts swinging shut behind them as they saunter past where I'm standing. My eyes begin leaping between the closing door and Kaden, who's drawing nearer and will surely spot me soon.

I'm not supposed to venture past that door.

But I don't want Kaden to see me.

I make a maniacal lunge for the door, slipping past it before it finishes closing. As I stumble to a halt, I hear the door's lock re-engage behind me, and then all is still. I exhale with relief. One unwanted encounter with Kaden avoided. All I need to do is wait a minute, and then I'll go back out into the corridor and continue on to the exit.

My eyes drift around where I'm standing. I'm at an L-shaped junction where two hallways meet, and it doesn't take long for me to decide that the rumors about this part of the building weren't exaggerated. This area looks like a professional athletic center, a high-end spa, a five-star hotel, and the headquarters of world-dominating company all rolled into one. I wonder what happens to non-athletes who are caught trespassing here. I wouldn't be surprised if it involves jail time. Or the FBI. Or being forced to launder the football team's uniforms for a semester as penance.

I should clear out.

I turn to open the door, but a loud beep alerts me that someone on the other side has used a badge to trigger the door to unlock. My heart jumps into my throat. I'm about to be discovered and sentenced to uniform-washing purgatory.

Instantly, every ounce of rational thought vaporizes from my mind. I whirl around and sprint down one of the hallways. When I reach a glass door, I tear it open and

bolt into the room beyond.

"Oomph!" a man exclaims as I crash into him.

"Ack!" I rebound off the man's rock-hard body.

I collect my footing and whip up my head. And I'm fairly certain the world stops spinning.

I just collided into Joel Lambert.

And Joel isn't wearing a shirt.

No shirt.

Just athletic shorts, socks, and sneakers.

No. Shirt.

I'm pretty sure my brain proceeds to melt and leak out my ears as I absorb the view of Joel's ruggedly chiseled pecs and abs, which are glistening with perspiration. A microsecond later, I draw in a silent gasp and avert my gaze, acting like the image of Joel's muscular, superhero-esque physique hasn't been emblazoned upon my memory forever. Only then do I realize that I've invaded the gym that houses the practice courts for the men's basketball team. The courts are gleaming under the overhead lights. The air is tinged with the aromas of rubber and sweat. I hear industrial-sized ceiling fans spinning, the echo of gym doors getting opened and closed, and the squeaking of sneakers on the hardwood floors as a few players who are on an adjacent court run agility drills. For one moment, all the sights and sounds take me back to the countless hours I spent in gyms watching my brother play . . . and then my brain returns me to the present . . . and I'm once again acutely aware that I've

trespassed upon the basketball players' sacred realm, I nearly decapitated the team's star player, and Joel is standing only a couple of feet away from me in all his shirtless glory while looking like he should be posing on the covers of fitness magazines.

I slowly trace my attention back to Joel, feverishly making sure my eyes don't drift anywhere below his chin. He's peering at me with his brows lifted a little. My face ignites, and my heart rate speeds up even more under his gaze. Up until this moment, I thought maintaining a perfect GPA as a pre-med student was brutally tough; however, it's nothing compared to appearing unfazed right now.

"Hi, Danielle." Joel uses his left arm to casually prop the basketball that he's holding against his left hip. "Are you . . . looking for me?"

Is it possible to die from embarrassment? Because I'm pretty sure I've reached that point. Joel thinks I'm some sort of over-zealous tutor who tracks him down at practice to discuss chemical thermodynamics and enthalpy.

"N-no." I'm speaking fast and barely aware of what I'm saying. "I was hiding from Kaden."

Joel's brows immediately drop down low. "What did he do?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Kaden never even saw me. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply . . ." I trail off and push my hair from my painfully hot face. If Joel would just put on the dang t-shirt that's dangling from the waistband of his shorts, I could think more clearly. Collecting myself, I try again. "What I meant is that I . . . sort of took a wrong turn and wound up in here."

Joel blinks a few times, and then his features relax into a grin. "You managed to get past the security system? By accident?"

I sigh. "It's a long story."

Joel chuckles while his eyes begin sparkling with unmasked amusement. "I can only imagine."

I realize that I'm starting to smile, too.

Earth to Danielle! He might have the finest biceps this side of Jupiter, and he might be smart, kind, and funny, but you absolutely cannot crush on Joel!

Mercifully, reason takes control of my frontal lobe once more. I retreat a step while sputtering:

"Well, um, anyway, I'm sorry to have interrupted your practice. I'll head out."

"You're not interrupting anything. Our shoot-around is over." Joel sets the basketball at his feet, tugs his t-shirt from his waistband, and puts it on.

Thank goodness.

"Oh. I see. Well, um, in that case, I hope you have a good rest of your afternoon." I resume backing up. "I'll, um, see you at our next tutoring session."

I hurriedly turn away from him and make a move for the door.

"Have you ever played basketball?" I hear Joel inquire.

I halt and face him again. "Not really. Not officially, anyway. My older brother, Dylan, and I played all the time in our driveway when we were younger. That's it, though."

"You never played on a team?"

I shake my head. "I never saw the appeal of any sport, to be honest. They all just seemed like a bunch of people beating up each other in various ways in order to get a ball into a hoop, across an end-zone line, or over a net." I shrug. "Sports simply aren't my thing."

"Ah. That's right." Joel seems to be studying me more closely. "And athletes aren't your thing, either." He uses the hem of his shirt to wipe his forehead. "Because guys who are athletes are self-absorbed jerks, isn't that it?"

"No, that's not it." I motion around us and show a hint of another smile. "However, you do have your own state-of-the-art practice facility, which is secured better than Fort Knox so peons like me can't set foot on the premises. That alone does suggest a degree of self-importance, don't you think?"

"Perhaps." Joel's eyes stay on mine as he picks up the basketball and rolls it between his hands. "Yet you got in here anyway."

Something about his tone sends sparks of heat shooting through my body.

"Yes," I reply, growing a tad breathless. "I suppose I did."

Joel shows a rather roguish smile, and he suddenly bounce-passes the ball to me. Acting on reflex, I drop my bag and catch it.

"You shoot first," he states.

I stare at him. "What?"

"You shoot first," Joel repeats, as though what he's saying makes sense. "Whoever

wins the game of HORSE buys drinks the next time we're at the Coffee Loft."

"I still don't understand."

Joel gestures to the hoop. "If you're going to help me understand chemistry better, then I'm going to help you understand basketball better."

"But . . . this isn't even a women's-sized basketball," I sputter.

Joel's grin broadens. "So you know more about basketball than you let on."

I allow my own smile to show. "And you know more about chemistry than anyone else I tutor."

We both pause, and the way Joel is watching me sends my heart wildly pounding. The moment is broken, however, when one of the guys who's on the other side of this astronomically large gym shouts:

"Hey, Lambert! Who's your teammate?"

Joel and I shift in the guy's direction. He's also wearing a team-issued tank top and shorts. He has black hair and dark eyes, and he has a friendly smile on his face.

Joel laughs good-naturedly. "This is Danielle. She's my tutor, and I've just challenged her to a game of HORSE."

"Very cool." The guy looks at me. "Hi, Danielle. I'm Seth Osborne, and I'm putting my money on you beating Joel, all right?"

I snicker. "I appreciate your confidence."

"My pleasure." Seth playfully salutes.

Joel is still laughing as he faces me again. "Okay, the wager is officially on. Since we don't have a women's-sized basketball, I'll shoot left-handed to tack on a disadvantage for myself. So what do you say? One game of HORSE?"

What do I say? I should say that I need to go home to study (this is entirely true). There's no reason to make a fool out of myself by competing against the star player on the men's basketball team. However, there's nothing in Joel's countenance that suggests he's mocking me. To the contrary, as unfathomable as it seems, everything about how Joel is acting is making me believe that he genuinely wants to . . . hang out.

And, I realize, I want to hang out with him, too.

"It has been years since I played HORSE." I take a few tentative steps onto the court. "May I ask for a refresher on the rules?"

"You bet." Joel uses a hand to ruffle his hair. "Since you're going first, you get to shoot from anywhere. If you make it, I have to make the same shot or else I get the first letter in HORSE. If you miss, you get the first letter in HORSE, and then I choose the next shot. Whoever gets all five letters buys drinks the next time we're at the Coffee Loft."

I snort a laugh. "You might as well give me your drink order now."

"I don't know about that." Joel looks right into my eyes. "Something tells me you're a natural at this."

Once again, I'm dangerously on the verge of getting lost in his gaze, so I break eye contact and walk to the center of the key. I face the hoop and adjust the ball in my

hands. I'm trying to recall everything Dylan taught me over the years about shooting. Funny enough, I now remember that he also told me I was a basketball natural. He said I was athletic and had a great aptitude for the game; I'm sure he was just being a nice big brother, though.

With clumsy movements, I bend my elbow, dip at the knees, and shoot. The ball clanks against the front of the rim and rockets back toward me. Joel reaches out a hand with lightning-fast reflexes, batting away the ball before it smacks me in the face.

"We'll consider that one a warm-up." Joel jogs to the corner of the court, retrieves the ball, and passes it to me. "Try another one."

I accept the ball and refocus on the basket. All at once, an unexpected flash of determination moves through me. It doesn't last long, but I'm stunned to note that the sensation is actually familiar. It takes me only another second to identify it as the same sensation that used to fill me whenever I watched Dylan compete in his games. Only now do I recognize that the sensation proved I quietly cared about my brother's athletics far more than I understood at the time.

Strange.

I set up to take another shot.

"May I make a suggestion?" Joel asks.

I pause and look his way. "Please do."

Joel walks around behind me. He lightly rests his left hand on my left shoulder, and he places his right hand on my right elbow. He adjusts the way my elbow is positioned while saying in a low voice:

"Holding your elbow closer to your side will keep your shot better lined up."

I don't move. I don't speak. I don't even breathe. Joel's nearness and his touch have lit a terrifying, thrilling blaze in my core. I turn my head a little to look at him. His eyes meet mine. We both fall still. My heart pounds as the blaze inside of me rages hotter.

"I'm sorry," a woman remarks, "am I interrupting?"

Joel calmly pulls his eyes from mine, steps away from me, turns around, and smiles. I silently scramble to catch my breath as I also shift toward the source of the voice. A beautiful, tall gal is strolling our way. She's wearing a fitted blue tank top, which is marked with the logo of the women's basketball team, and black shorts that show off her long, toned legs. Her dark hair is pulled back into a ponytail. Her cheeks are flushed from exercising, yet she could easily walk the runway right now. She's like an athlete-movie star-supermodel combo. And her light-colored eyes are shifting between Joel and me.

"Hey, Felicity," Joel greets her. "Your team is done with your shoot-around, I take it?"

"Yep." Miss Solar System, who's otherwise known as Felicity, gets to Joel's side and shows him an adorable smile. She seems to take a moment before putting her attention on me. "Again, I'm sorry for interrupting whatever the two of you were doing."

"No apologies needed." I act unbothered, but I'm drowning in renewed awareness of my frizzy post-workout hair, my oversized gym clothes, and the fact that I'm holding a basketball without any athletic grace whatsoever. "I stopped by to arrange a study session with Joel, and he was nice enough to let me attempt a basket."

Felicity tips her head to one side as she observes me, her ponytail swishing perfectly

as she does so. "Are you a tutor or something?"

"Yes. I'm a tutor on campus."

"How neat." Felicity watches me a second longer before putting her attention on Joel once more. "I came over to let you know that a bunch of us are going out for dinner later, and we're inviting the basketball guys to come along. I'll text you the details once they're sorted out."

Joel is smiling at Felicity in a familiar, suave, relaxed sort of way. "Thanks. I appreciate the invite. I'm not sure if I can make it, but I'll keep an eye out for your text."

I'm trying not to blatantly stare at them, but it's kind of hard not to. Felicity and Joel look like they should be on the red carpet together. It's a harsh reminder that although he might find me amusing to hang out with, Joel would never truly be interested in me. While I know that I shouldn't care or be surprised by this, my heart cinches painfully with what feels a lot like disappointment.

"You need to come, Joel," Felicity goes on, giving him a playful nudge. "Don't lock yourself away studying tonight, all right?"

Joel chuckles. "I'll do my best."

"Great. I'll talk to you soon." Felicity bats her lashes at him before saying to me, "I hope you have a nice evening, too."

I summon a smile. "Thanks."

In a desperate attempt to appear like I know what I'm doing, I bounce-pass the basketball to Joel. However, my pass is low and short, causing the ball to nail him in

the foot before he can catch it. My humiliation ratchets up another notch. Felicity gives me a look that's saturated with pity, and then she waves to Joel and exits the gym.

"Hey, Joel!" Seth calls out once she's gone. "Are you ever going to ask out Felicity or what?"

Joel starts dribbling the ball. "You know I'm not interested in dating anyone right now, Seth."

I promptly make myself busy examining my fingernails. Joel isn't interested in dating?

Seth walks our way. "Well, I think you're crazy for your anti-dating stance, but I also admire you for sticking to what you've determined is best for you right now." He gives Joel one of those hearty man-slaps on the back. "Either way, I hope you'll come out with everyone tonight." He turns my direction. "And it was great meeting you, Danielle. Be sure to let me know when you beat this guy at HORSE, okay?"

My smile is growing increasingly strained. "Okay."

Seth rejoins the other players, and they leave the gym. Now it's just Joel and me in this humungous space. Our eyes meet. Things get very quiet.

"I should go, too," I tell him, working to keep my voice steady.

He nods once. "I'll see you at our next tutoring session."

"Yes. I'll see you then."

I walk to the baseline, pick up my bag, and escape the gym. Once I'm alone, the

emotions that have been thrashing around inside of me rupture to the surface. Tears sting my eyes. I can't believe that I was ridiculous enough to think Joel was enjoying a chance to spend time with me. He was only being nice since I embarrassed myself by charging into the gym.

I get outside and gulp in the early evening air. I can't think about this anymore. I need to go home. I need to study. It's the only thing I'm good at. It's the one thing I understand.

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Chapter Five

I can do this . . . I think.

I'm standing outside the Coffee Loft, trying to convince myself that I can meet with Joel for our second tutoring session without getting rattled. I can remain professional, calm, and in control of the situation. It doesn't matter how badly I embarrassed myself when I infiltrated the intercollegiate gym a few days ago. And it doesn't matter that I momentarily—foolishly—believed Joel really wanted to hang out with me. All that matters is helping him excel in his chemistry class.

I glance down, making sure my pea coat, white sweater, and jeans aren't too wrinkled after a long day seated in lecture halls on campus. I then put my attention back on the Coffee Loft's door. I pull in a breath, about to enter the shop, when I hear:

"Good afternoon, Danielle."

The sound of his voice sends my heart racing. I hastily remind myself to maintain a businesslike aura, and I turn around.

Heavens.

Joel is being backlit by the low-hanging sun as he approaches, so he basically looks like some sort of autumn deity. He's wearing a jacket over his button-up shirt, jeans, and sneakers. His hair is combed, and he's cleanly shaven.

I exhale softly. Chemistry. We're here to talk about chemistry.

"Hi, Joel," I reply.

He opens the door for me. I slip by him and go inside, catching a hint of his cologne as I do so. The mixture of cedar, sandalwood, and citrus triggers goosebumps of delight to scatter up my arms, but I coach myself to ignore them.

Joel enters after me and comes to my side. "I'll order drinks and meet you at the back table."

"You bought drinks last time," I remind him. "It's my turn."

"It would have been your turn, but I challenged you to a game of HORSE that we weren't able to finish, remember?" Joel smiles handsomely. "So I'm pretty sure the rules state that I must buy you a drink."

"Is that so?" I smile playfully in response. "In that case, I'll go grab the table. Thank you."

Joel heads toward the counter, and I walk to the back of the shop to claim our little, hidden-away table. It's not really our table, though, of course. It's not like this is a special place for the two of us. Because there's nothing special between Joel and me. I'm his tutor, and we meet here to study. Nothing more.

I remove my jacket and sit down. Joel soon arrives with a drink in each hand. He places one of the huge cups in front of me, and I happily inhale the delicious scents of apple cider and cinnamon. He takes the chair on the other side of the table, sets down his own beverage, and pulls his laptop from his bag. I lower my eyes to my cup and blow on the cider to cool it. I then raise my eyes back to Joel while asking:

"So what did you discuss in . . ."

I fall quiet. Very quiet.

Joel has put on a pair of glasses.

Glasses .

Rimless, circular glasses that make him look hot, nerdy, brilliant, sophisticated, and manly all at the same time.

I nearly drop my cup. How am I not supposed to get distracted by this ?

Joel glances up from his laptop, doing a double take when he sees me gaping at him. "Is everything all right?"

"Hmm? I mean, yes." I resist the urge to use my hand to fan air past my face. "I was just wondering what you covered in lecture today."

Joel motions to the online syllabus that he brought up on his monitor. "It sounds like they tackled some complicated redox reactions."

" It sounds like ?" I echo. "Does that mean you weren't in class?"

I make sure not to show any judgment. It's not uncommon for someone I'm tutoring to miss class. However, knowing this does help me better tailor my teaching for the session.

"That's correct. I wasn't in class." Joel sits back in his chair. "I was busy with a project that I've been working on for a while. Occasionally, the project overlaps with class time."

He shifts his attention back to his laptop without explaining more. As he does so,

however, the left side of his unzipped jacket opens farther, revealing that he has a sticker on his shirt above the left breast pocket. I recognize the sticker immediately; it's the sticker that all visitors to University Hospital are required to wear when on the premises. I get one from the front desk every time I'm at the facility to shadow a physician.

"You were at the hospital," I say quietly.

Joel's eyes spring to mine. I motion to his shirt. He glances down and calmly, though quickly, peels the sticker from his shirt and drops it into his bag.

"I go to University Hospital a few times a month to shadow physicians," I add gently. "I hope the reason you were there today wasn't too difficult and that all is well."

I return my attention to the syllabus, ready to steer the discussion back to chemistry, but I hear Joel state:

"I was visiting the pediatric inpatient floor."

I gasp softly and look at him again. "Oh, goodness, I'm so sorry."

"Please don't be sorry. I was there for a positive reason. The inpatient case managers call me whenever they learn that a pediatric patient is a fan of mine, and when I get those calls, I visit the child as soon as I can. I don't tell many people that I do these visits, however, so I would prefer it if you would keep this information between us."

I stare. For a long time.

This handsome, smart, funny, athletic man? a man who's already swamped with the demands of his rigorous academic and athletic schedules? makes time to visit children in the hospital.

Joel can't be real. He cannot possibly be real.

"It's wonderful of you to do that," I state.

"It's no big deal, but if my visits make those kids' days a tiny bit better, it's worth it." Joel gazes past me and out the window. "One of my younger sisters was in-and-out of the hospital a lot while we were growing up, and there were always people going out of their ways to make her experiences less scary. Observing those great people made an impression on me, and I try to repay the favor now." He looks at me again and shows a more amused smile. "Frankly, I think the kids are less excited about meeting me than they are about receiving the presents I bring them. I usually bring a junior-sized jersey, a stuffed animal, a mini basketball or volleyball, or something else from the sports section of the university's student store. The gifts are always a huge hit."

I'm listening and nodding with polite interest. However, on the inside, every ounce of me is pulsating with a wild yearning to grab Joel by the shirt, tug him across the table toward me, and plant a kiss on his lips.

I nearly gasp aloud.

I want to kiss Joel.

I really want to kiss him.

This isn't good.

"Anyway," Joel goes on, "the reason I don't tell people about my visits to the hospital is because I don't want my time there to be turned into a media circus. That's not what it's about."

"I understand," I tell him. "I won't say a word."

"Thanks. Those kids, and their families, deserve all the positive moments they can get." He resumes watching out the window. "That's why it's infuriating that the hospital is shutting down its pediatric outdoor play area."

"What?" My jaw drops. "The hospital is shutting down the outdoor play area that's designated for peds patients and their families?"

"Yep." Joel shakes his head with unmasked disgust. "I learned about it today from a case manager. Apparently, the hospital quietly came to the decision last week, citing budget cuts as the reason. The hospital is actually trying to claim there isn't money to fund the relatively few employees who are needed to maintain and supervise the play area, yet the hospital is spending millions of dollars everywhere else." He returns his focus to me. "I spent a lot of time in that play area with my sister. I know how important it is to kids and their families. It shouldn't be shut down."

"I completely agree." I sense my stomach sinking with dismay. "Shutting it down is a huge mistake."

Joel is quiet for several seconds. He then clears his throat and gestures to his laptop. "Hey, I'm sorry to have sidetracked our tutoring session. You were asking about what was discussed during lecture today, and?"

"How averse are you, exactly, to making your visits to the hospital known?" I ask before I can stop myself.

Joel arches an eyebrow. "What?"

I'm not sure what has suddenly come over me, but my brain is spinning with an idea that I can't suppress. I fix a more intense gaze on Joel and repeat:

"How averse are you to making your visits to the hospital publically known?"

"I'm very averse to publicizing my visits. As I said, the last thing I want to do is turn my visits into PR events." Joel squints with concentration as he observes me. "Why do you ask?"

"I ask because I'm thinking we could use your popularity to put public pressure on the hospital to reconsider its decision to shut down the pediatric play area."

Joel falls still. He then slowly sits back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest. "You said that we could make the hospital reconsider. You didn't refer only to me. You said we , as in the two of us."

I blink a few times. I did say we . Why did I say we ?

What is happening? Since when have I ever dared to pull my nose out of my books and do something bold or controversial? Never. I've never done anything to stir the pot in my life. I've always stayed the course, done what was expected of me, and made sure not to rock the boat. Heck, when I was little, I never even colored outside of the lines, and I definitely never ran with scissors.

Now, though, I find myself wondering: why have I been such a rule-follower? I respect and appreciate rules, of course, but I don't obey mindlessly or blindly either. There've been times when I've wanted to stop and analyze?and possibly question? some of the expectations I abided by, yet I never did. I never did because it's not in my nature to upset the status quo. Plus, as someone who's dreaming of going to med school, I've known for years that it's best to toe the line and not generate a reason for anyone to discard my future med school application. That's why, even to this day, I stay in my lane, literally and figuratively. I achieve perfect grades. I meet every requirement. I do all that I can to impress each professor and mentor in order to prove that I have what it takes to become a responsible, brilliant, caring clinician.

In other words, throughout my entire twenty-two years of existence, all I've done is

avoid doing anything brash or bold or wrong or exciting.

Have I been mistaken to play it safe? Or have I been wise and responsible not to blow my chances of accomplishing my life-long dream of getting into med school?

I don't know. One thing I do know, though, is that there's a beautiful outdoor play area on the University Hospital grounds that's an oasis of peace and a source of joy for pediatric patients and their loved ones. And I know it's wrong for that play area to be shut down.

However, I also know that the last thing I should do is get involved in something potentially controversial?especially if that something calls out a highly respected hospital. I'm about to start interviewing for med school, and doing something that might get me labeled as insubordinate could obliterate my chances of getting accepted anywhere. Not to mention, University Hospital is where I hope to do my OBGYN residency one day. In other words, it would be insane of me to publically clash with the top brass at the facility. I would potentially throw away everything I've worked for.

Yet something needs to be done.

"Yes, I did say we. " I'm nearly breathless as I speak. "I have an idea, but it needs your celebrity status to implement."

Joel snorts a laugh. "I'm no celebrity."

"This isn't the time to be modest." I smile at him. "Considering kids at the hospital are regularly requesting to meet you?and considering you chose to come to this remote area of the Lakewood region for your tutoring sessions specifically to avoid being interrupted by fans who want your autograph?I think you have enough celebrity status to pack a punch." I laugh quietly. "No one has ever asked for my autograph."

Joel starts laughing along with me. "Not yet, perhaps, but I have a feeling people will ask you for your autograph one day."

"I suppose you never know." I let my laughter trail off. "In the meantime, however, if there's anyone who can draw awareness to the issue at University Hospital, and do so in a positive light, it's you."

Joel's expression sobers. He leans forward, resting his forearms on the edge of the table. "Okay, so what's this idea you've schemed up?"

"It's fairly basic, actually: you request a meeting with the hospital's top administrators to discuss the issue of the play area. They would never take time to meet with an unknown like me, but they're bound to pay attention if Joel Lambert makes the request. Once the meeting is arranged, you'll post an announcement about it on social media, and?"

"I barely use social media," Joel points out. "I hate that stuff."

"But you have social media accounts, right?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Joel frowns. "We were asked to create them, if we didn't have them already, when we got our athletic scholarships. We're expected to post updates about games, et cetera. I post only when I have to."

"And do you have a lot of followers?"

"So I've been told." Joel's modesty is again as sincere as it is amusing. "But I avoid social media like the plague."

"That's perfect, actually. Since you don't post often, when you do post something, I'm sure it captures a huge amount of attention. So if you post about why you're meeting

with the hospital's administrators, the post will definitely get noticed. The hospital will get inundated with calls and emails from people who live in the area, and the media will start asking questions, too. The public pressure will be too much for the hospital to ignore."

Joel scratches his chin. "And when we finally do have the meeting with a few of the hospital's administrators, likely with media personnel in attendance, then what?"

"That's when we'll further express our concern about the hospital closing the pediatric play area. We'll make our case clear and concise, knowing the members of the media are recording the conversation and readying to spread the news. Of course, the hospital administrators will also be aware of the media's ability to publicize the meeting's outcome, so hopefully they'll elect to keep the play area open rather than face the backlash of negativity that will come if they still shut it down."

Joel doesn't reply as he peers at me.

A blush creeps into my cheeks. "I'm sorry. I've overstepped with this zany idea of mine, haven't I? I apologize for inserting myself into a cause that has been important to you for a long time. I'm sure you have your own ideas about what to do."

Joel draws in a breath. "You have nothing to apologize for. Your idea is fantastic, and having you at the meeting with me would be a huge help."

"You really think so?"

"Absolutely. You're a future healthcare provider, and you currently shadow physicians at the hospital. For those reasons alone, your perspective will be invaluable. Not to mention, you're an extremely smart and well-spoken woman. I . . ."

he falls quiet. His brow furrows. "Wait, though. Will doing this endanger your reputation in the medical world? You're applying to med schools, correct? If you

make waves with hospital administrators?especially in a publicized way?won't that hinder your chances of getting accepted somewhere?"

I sigh. "I won't deny that doing this may impact?perhaps severely?how I'm viewed by the med schools I'm interviewing at. The situation is made even more delicate because my number-one choice for med school is right here in the Lakewood region, and I dream of doing residency at University Hospital after that. Yet I believe this cause is important, and I believe that part of being a healthcare provider is advocating for patients . . . especially patients who cannot advocate for themselves."

Joel begins shaking his head. "I won't ask you to endanger your future in order to?"

"You're not asking me. I'm volunteering," I remind him. "I want to do this, despite the risk. I have to do it, because it's the right thing to do."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Besides, I'm guessing that I'm not the only one here who's taking a risk. By you drawing attention to this cause, I presume your coaches may get upset that you're spending time on something other than athletics, drawing publicity away from your team, and making waves with important people in the region. Am I right?"

Joel runs a hand through his hair. "Yeah, it could get messy, and not only for the reasons you cite." He exhales hard. "As an extra plot twist: Kaden's mother happens to be the president of University Hospital."

I need several moments to register what I just heard.

"Kaden's mother is the president of University Hospital?" I finally repeat. "Are you serious?"

"I'm serious."

I drop my head in my hands. How did I not figure this out? Like everyone else in the medical community, I know Angela Cox is the president of University Hospital. And Kaden told me his last name the other day. And considering there's only one famous, powerful Cox family in the region, I should have deduced that the two of them were connected.

Things just got a billion times more complicated, for both Joel and me.

I flinch. "So by doing this, you're going to clash with your teammate's parent."

"Yep." Joel nods. "My teammate's rich, influential, and powerful parent. The parent of the guy who has been gunning for my role as the starting point guard since our freshman year."

I start massaging my aching temples. "Then we need to change tactics. You can't endanger your senior basketball season, your starting position, your scholarship, and your future career. We'll figure out a different way to draw attention to what's happening with the pediatric play area. We'll?"

"No, we'll do exactly what you suggested. Like you, I want and need to do this," Joel calmly interrupts. "I'll reach out to the PR folks at the hospital tomorrow and set up a meeting. Once it's on the calendar, I'll post about it on social media. As you say, when word gets out, reporters will be salivating for an invite."

We both go quiet, holding each other's gazes across the table. My heart is drumming in a way that's unlike anything I've felt before. For the first time in my life, I'm doing something loud. Brave. Unexpected. Risky. And I'm doing it alongside Joel, a man who's rapidly winning me over in a way that I can't allow.

"All right. I'll wait to hear from you about the meeting." My hand is trembling as I motion to his laptop. "In the meantime, we have some chemistry to sort out."

Joel smiles. "That we do, Danielle. That we do."

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Chapter Six

"He's picking you up?"

I stop fixing my hair and meet Savannah's gaze in the bathroom mirror. She's standing in the doorway and observing me with a grin.

"Yes." I pretend like manic butterflies aren't slamming around in my abdomen. "Joel offered to pick me up so I wouldn't have to ride the bus to University Hospital for our meeting."

Savannah's grin spreads wider. "That's an extremely gentlemanly thing of him to do."

I go back to fixing my hair. "Trust me: it's not what you think. Joel is simply being polite, and it does make sense for us to arrive to the hospital together. That's all."

"Are you sure that's all?" Savannah wags her eyebrows. "What makes you certain that he's not, perhaps, interested in?"

"I heard Joel tell his teammate, Seth, that he's not interested in romance." I glance again at Savannah through the mirror. "Plus, even if he was interested in romance, he would never be interested in me. He's an all-star athlete and a celebrity, for heaven's sake."

Savannah doesn't reply, but her lingering smile makes it clear she's still not convinced. I opt not to reiterate my point, however. Instead, I focus on doing a final analysis of my appearance. I can only hope that I've struck the right balance with my

look for this hugely important meeting. I need to appear confident yet deferential. Intelligent and caring. Well-informed but not confrontational or insane.

It's like navigating a minefield.

I elected to pull back my hair into a low bun. I'm wearing more makeup than I usually do, without going over-the-top. For my outfit, I decided on a jade-colored sweater, black trousers, and kitten heels. I'm completing the look with small hoop earrings, a tweed black jacket, and the nicest purse-bag I own.

"You're going to be great, by the way."

Savannah's voice brings me out of my thoughts. I find her in the mirror once more. Her eyes are now shining with admiration.

"Thanks." I face her while drawing in a shaky breath. "I wholeheartedly believe in this cause, but let's hope I don't get jettisoned from the medical community by addressing it. Let's also hope that we can convince the administrators to change their minds about closing the play area."

Savannah gives me a hug. "No matter how things play out, you'll be able to hold up your head high." She steps back and checks the time on her phone. She sighs. "I wish that I could stay until Joel arrives, but I'm already late for work."

"It's all right. I appreciate you staying with me as long as you did."

"I was more than happy to do it." Savannah gives my hand a squeeze. "You've got this, Dan."

She shows a last smile and then darts out of the bathroom. I hear her scurry across the apartment, open the front door, step out into the corridor, and close the door behind

her. Suddenly, I'm alone and immersed in silence.

I go into my bedroom and grab my bag. All at once—and for probably the hundredth time today—the magnitude of what I'm about to do smacks into me. I, Danielle Gillespie, a meager pre-med student, am meeting with Angela Cox, the president of University Hospital. I'll be face-to-face with someone who has immense influence in the medical world and who runs the hospital where I hope to do residency one day.

I sense the color drain from my face. What am I doing? I'm not a businesswoman. I don't know anything about hospital budgets or the logistics of running that pediatric play area. I have no clout. I'm merely one of countless pre-med students who will be desperately trying to impress everyone during the cutthroat interview process this winter. So the last thing I should be doing is attending a meeting that will get me labeled as controversial and impertinent.

I drop onto a chair. I shouldn't be doing this.

How, though, could I not do this? I walk the halls of University Hospital regularly. I witness how much those kids love the play area. My whole reason for wanting to go into medicine is to help those who are sick and ailing, so I can't sit back and do nothing. Even if doing something means risking my future.

I push myself to my feet and walk on unsteady legs out of the apartment. I take the elevator down to the lobby and venture outside. The sun is bright and low in the sky. More leaves have fallen to the ground. The afternoon air has a bite to it that signals the colder weather of late fall is on the way. The aromas of campfire and pumpkin spice are in the breeze. Were it not for the fact that I'm about to obliterate my future, I would say this is another perfect autumn day. I hope that I survive it.

The sound of an approaching vehicle jars me to awareness. A black mini-SUV that matches the description Joel gave me is approaching via the circular drive in front of

the building. Joel spots me and pulls his vehicle to an idling stop in front of where I'm standing. I open the passenger-side door before I realize that Joel was starting to get out of the car to open my door for me.

"Hi, Joel," I greet him, my voice quivering as I slide into the vehicle.

"Hi, Danielle." Joel gets resituated and shuts his door. "I didn't mean for you to have to wait outside. I was going to come up to your apartment and knock."

"It's all right." I click my seatbelt into place. "I figured getting fresh air would be a good idea."

"Understood."

Silence settles over us as Joel drives out of the parking lot. I steal a sideways glance at him. He has on his sexy-nerd glasses, and he's wearing a crisp black polo shirt and dark jeans. He looks professional, handsome, and almost distractingly hot. I?

Joel's eyes shift my way.

I clear my throat. "So are you ready for this?"

"I think so." Joel seems calm, yet pensive, as he goes back to watching the road. "I read your email yesterday, by the way. The talking points you intend to raise during the meeting are great."

"Thanks. I looked over the notes you sent me, too, and I think the remarks you've planned are perfect. They're succinct, clear, and reasonable. They'll be a smart and effective way to start off the meeting."

Joel flips on the turn signal. "That's assuming the admin actually gives us a chance to

speak at all. The PR folks at the hospital were more than happy to set up the meeting? and they were delighted to allow reporters to attend?but when they realize what we're there to talk about, our meeting might get cut very short."

"Hang on." I shift in my chair to face him. "You didn't let them know what we're planning to discuss?"

"Nope. I didn't post the reason for our meeting on social media, either. People know the meeting is happening, but they don't know why." Joel starts to smile. "Frankly, I think the secrecy made the media even more interested and triggered heightened curiosity among the general public."

"That's perfect."

We share a grin and then both fall quiet once more. However, my mind continues racing, and I become so absorbed by my thoughts that I'm barely aware of the scenery going by. The next thing I know, University Hospital appears into view. The butterflies inside me launch another frenzied attack upon my abdomen. I clench my hands in my lap as Joel navigates into the parking garage.

"I have a keycard for the VIP elevator, which I typically use from here in order not to draw attention to my visits," Joel explains as he parks. He tugs the keys from the ignition and smiles again. "However, perhaps it's best to draw attention this time."

I nod. "I completely agree."

We get out of the car, trek across the garage, and enter the main elevator. I reach out to tap the button for the lobby just as Joel does. Our hands brush, the contact causing fire to blast up my arm and explode in my chest. My eyes leap to his, and the look in his gaze momentarily causes me to forget about the world. A heartbeat later, however, Joel pulls his eyes from mine and focuses straight ahead. I pretend to be

intrigued by the carpet as the elevator starts to ascend.

The elevator reaches the lobby, and its door opens. Joel gestures for me to exit first. We're not even three steps out of the elevator before people start noticing Joel and pointing in his direction. Excited chatter begins rippling through the air. More and more people turn to stare at him and take his picture. As we continue walking, I sneak another peek Joel's way. Impressively, there's not a hint of ego in his demeanor. He's not gloating from the attention or put off by it, either; he's simply going about his business.

We reach another elevator bay, and Joel glances over his shoulder in the direction of the lobby. He finally reveals a smile to me as he remarks in a low voice:

"I think we caused a decent stir back there, don't you? Hopefully, it'll help further spread the word that we're here today."

"I'm sure it will. However, we didn't cause the stir back there," I point out. "That commotion was all about you."

Joel eyes take on an amused gleam. He leans in toward me. "To the contrary, those people already know who I am. Now everyone is trying to figure out who you are."

I freeze.

Is he right?

Good grief, what am I doing here?!

The elevator pings, snapping me out of my stupor. I step into the elevator and Joel trails after me. He pulls his VIP card from his wallet, scans it over a digital reader, and presses a button for an unmarked floor. As the elevator begins rising, another

wave of nerves crashes down upon me. What's going to happen next? How?

The elevator comes to a stop, and its door slides open.

I gulp.

The elevator has opened directly at the back of a gargantuan meeting room. Bright lights are overhead. Big windows overlooking the cityscape line the wall to the left. Two important-looking people—a tall woman who's wearing an expensive business suit and a portly man in a button-up shirt and tie—are standing at the far end of the room and chatting with each other. In the center of the enormous space is a long table with several empty chairs positioned around it. And at my right is the most petrifying sight of all: a flock of media personnel who are equipped with video cameras, phones, audio recording devices, laptops, lights, and tripods.

Everyone turns and stares at Joel and me. There's a pulse of silence, and then a wiry, middle-aged woman with stringy brown hair and a baseline crazy look in her eyes emerges from the media throng; she's the only one who doesn't have an electronic gizmo in her grip. She's dressed in a blouse and slacks, and as she comes toward us, a manufactured smile appears on her thin lips. She extends her hand to Joel and says:

"Welcome, Mr. Lambert. I'm Lindi Cadding. I'm in charge of University Hospital's PR department, and I would like to say that all of us here at University Hospital are thrilled about your visit today."

"Thank you. We appreciate you having us." Joel shakes Lindi's offered hand while tipping his head toward me. "This is my colleague?"

The rest of Joel's words are drowned out by the commotion that ensues as the media herd clamors to capture photos of Joel and Lindi shaking hands. Lindi turns toward the cameras with her unhinged smile firmly in place. She waits until a few more

pictures are taken before she releases Joel's hand. She then shifts her attention to me. Her smile dwindles.

"Hello, uh . . ." Lindi pulls her phone from the pocket of her slacks and starts scrolling on its screen. "You're Dana, right? No, Danika?" She stops scrolling. "Ah, yes, that's right. It's Danielle. Danielle Gillespie."

"Yes." I maintain a professional smile. "Thank you for arranging this meeting, Ms. Cadding."

Lindi doesn't bother to reply to me or shake my hand, and no one takes my picture. To be honest, I'm not sure whether to be relieved or offended.

"Come." Lindi dramatically motions for Joel and me to follow her. "I'll make the official introductions."

Joel and I share a glance before we walk with Lindi across the room while the cameras track our every movement. The man and woman who have been standing by the far wall exchange a last word with each other, and then they come forward to meet us by the table. The man's smile is more like a grimace. The woman's smile is polished but doesn't reach her eyes, which narrow as they lock on Joel.

Lindi clears her throat. "Joel and Danielle, I am honored to introduce you to Ms. Angela Cox, the president of University Hospital, and Mr. Elmer B. Pifferots, Ms. Cox's personal assistant." She motions from Angela and Elmer back to Joel and me. "Ms. Cox and Mr. Pifferots, this is Joel Lambert and, uh, Darlene . . . no, wait, it's . . ."

"Danielle," I reminder her.

"Right. Danielle." Lindi appears immensely underwhelmed. "Danielle Gillespie."

Elmer shakes our hands while muttering a word salad concoction of a generic, administrative-sounding greeting. He then moves aside, and I'm fairly certain he nearly bows to Angela while doing so. Angela steps closer to us. I instinctively stand up straighter under her scrutinizing gaze. She absolutely radiates power and authority; heck, even her short, dark blond hair is like a helmet of in-charge-ness.

"Hello, Joel." Angela's tone is cool as she shakes his hand. "It's nice to see you, as always."

Joel doesn't appear rattled in the slightest. "It's nice to see you again, too."

Lindi's eyebrows are rising as she observes the exchange. "Ms. Cox, you already know Mr. Lambert?"

"Yes, Lindi, I do." Angela continues shaking Joel's hand while adjusting her stance so the cameras can get a better angle of her. "Don't you remember that my son, Kaden Cox, is also on the university's basketball team? Of course, since Joel is the starting point guard, my son doesn't get very much playing time." Her eyes narrow at Joel again.

Yikes. If looks could kill, Joel would be a dead man.

Joel, however, still seems completely unflustered. "It's great having Kaden on the team."

Angela flares her nostrils and holds Joel's hand in her vice-like grip until the last photos are taken. Her smile appears set in cement, and she's basically aiming daggers at Joel with her eyeballs.

I think it's time to interject.

"Hello, Ms. Cox," I pipe up in a professional tone. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Thanks for having us."

Angela blinks and looks at me. I think she had genuinely forgotten that I was here. She quickly recovers her composure and replies:

"Hello, Diana."

I sigh to myself.

Angela motions to the table. "Let's sit down. As you can imagine, we're immensely curious to learn why you wanted to meet today."

Joel and I exchange another fast look before we go around to the other side of the table and take two chairs in the middle. Angela and Elmer sit directly across from us. Lindi plunks herself down on Elmer's other side, her manic gaze jetting around as the media personnel migrate to the far end of the room, which is now to the right of Joel and me, so they can get photos of the two sides squaring off across the table.

Before anyone can speak, the elevator door slides open again, and a group of people who are decked out in stuffy-looking business attire hustle into the room. I count two women and three men in the group. In near-perfect unison, they go to Angela's side of the table and take the rest of the available chairs. They don't say a thing as they peer at Joel and me. My anxiousness rises even higher. Joel and I are definitely outnumbered now.

"I invited a few other members of the hospital's administrative staff to attend," Angela explains, her cold gaze lingering on Joel. "I hope you don't mind."

"We don't mind at all." Joel gives the others a tip of his head. "Danielle and I are glad they're here, in fact, since this is a matter we want to discuss with them, too."

Angela does a double take. "You do?"

Joel nods, and in doing so, it's as though his commanding presence takes control of the room. "Yes. Danielle and I are here to express our concern about the hospital's recent decision to shut down the pediatric outdoor play area."

There's a beat of stunned silence. Angela's eyes momentarily widen. Elmer's mouth drops open. The administrators begin exchanging blank looks. The media folks hurriedly start taking more photos.

"I see." Angela glances at the cameras before smacking Joel with another harsh stare. "I didn't realize the decision was common knowledge. How did you hear about the plan to shut down the play area?"

Joel shrugs nonchalantly. "How I learned the information isn't important. What's important is figuring out how we can keep that play area open."

The reporters start whispering amongst themselves.

Angela's smile is becoming increasingly forced. "I'm admittedly surprised you're attempting to address this matter, since decisions like these are obviously not within your area of expertise. After all, Joel, you're a college athlete, not a hospital administrator." Her eyes track to me. "And you, Darryl, are . . . ?"

Everyone's heads swivel in my direction. My stomach drops as my whole future in the medical profession flashes before my eyes.

"I'm a pre-med student," I answer, barely managing to keep my words steady.

More animated whispering ensues among the reporters. A few photographers take my picture. Angela's attention fixes more severely upon me. Both Lindi and Elmer begin

typing fast on their phones. The other administrators share more empty glances as if they still don't know what's happening or where they are.

"Well, that is truly wonderful, Dixie," Angela tells me, patting her hair helmet. "We here at University Hospital certainly understand the hard work it takes to become a physician."

I could be wrong, but from the chilly way Angela is scrutinizing me, I'm guessing she doesn't find my career choice wonderful at all. Rather, I'm fairly sure she's already plotting how to have me banished from the medical world. Adopting a tone as though she's speaking to a couple of toddlers, she goes on addressing Joel and me:

"Now, as I mentioned, though this isn't your area of expertise, we're pleased to hear whatever it is you have to say, so please go ahead."

Joel and I silently communicate our next move to each other with our eyes: since we actually have the floor, Joel will start off with the introductory talking points he prepared.

"Thanks." Joel's composed demeanor is impressive; clearly, he's accustomed to performing in high-stakes situations while ignoring cameras. "What Danielle and I have to say is straight- forward: shutting down that outdoor play area to save a few dollars is prioritizing financial gain over the well-being of this hospital's youngest and most vulnerable patients. While I don't have the data on the exact costs, I suspect that the money required to staff and maintain the play area is insignificant compared to most of the hospital's expenses. There have got to be other places where this hospital can cut costs in order to do the right thing and keep that play area open."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the reporters creeping closer. Elmer goes back to writing an apparent manifesto on his phone. The administrators are peering at Joel like they missed their afternoon coffees. Lindi is biting her nails.

"We appreciate your concern," Angela states icily before pausing to smile for the cameras. "However, hospitals must ensure the budget remains balanced, even if it means doing things that don't make sense to those, like you, who are on the outside. Rest assured that before making our decision, we went through the budget meticulously with accountants, MBAs, and attorneys. After our thorough review, it was unanimously agreed upon that closing the play area would be the most efficient way to cut costs in order to bolster more critical programs. I can also assure you that University Hospital will continue providing our youngest patients with the most comfortable experiences possible." She gets to her feet. "Thank you again for coming by to express your thoughts. We enjoyed our time with you, and we wish you a great rest of your day."

I blink. Is Angela ending the meeting? Already? Just like that?

Elmer, Lindi, and the other administrators get up from their chairs. The media personnel start putting away their equipment. My shock gives way to despair. Yes, this meeting is really over.

It's can't be over, though. This is too important.

"Ms. Cox." Joel stands, putting his commanding form on full display. "I appreciate that you have other things to do, but if we could have a few more minutes of your time to discuss this further, it would be appreciated. As Danielle is prepared to explain, the play area is beloved and important, and it's?"

"And it's old and expensive to maintain." Angela's words are coming out in increasingly staccato-like syllables. "Again, I do appreciate you coming by, but this is a matter that's best left to the experts. Thank you for your visit."

Angela heads for the elevator. Her entourage scuttles after her. I push myself to my feet. My mind is in overdrive. My heart is pounding so hard that I can feel my pulse

in my ears. If I say anything, I'll finish annihilating any chance I have left of doing residency here one day. I can't stay quiet, though. I have to say something. And I have to say it right now.

"What if we challenge you to a game of HORSE over it?" I blurt out.

Wait. What did I just say?

The room becomes weirdly quiet. Joel looks at me with one eyebrow arched. Angela halts and spins my direction. Elmer also whirls around, and he goes back to feverishly typing on his phone. The other administrators are gaping at me like my head is on fire. Lindi's eyes are practically bugging out of her cranium as they shift to the media personnel, who are scrambling to set up their equipment again.

"I'm sorry?" A smirk appears on Angela's plumped-up lips. "Did you just challenge us to a game of HORSE?"

I am fully aware that I'm giving every person in this room a valid reason to believe I'm insane. Nevertheless, I pretend like my suggestion is the most rational thing in the world as I reply:

"Yes, I did. In a sense, at least."

Angela actually laughs. "Delilah, I appreciate your humor. I really do." She's still chuckling as she makes another move toward the elevator. "Have a good day, you two."

"I'm not joking, though," I call after her.

Angela stops again, her posture stiffening. She faces me once more. Her smile is gone. I peek around the room. Everyone else is understandably waiting for me to

explain myself . . . or perhaps they're figuring out how to get me contained in a straight jacket. It's hard to say.

"This is what I propose." I feign confidence, though I'm mentally scrambling to come up with this new plan in real-time. A game of HORSE was definitely not in the notes I prepared. "We'll set up a fundraiser event to draw attention to the issue of the play area needing to be financed, and we'll publicize the event throughout the region. People will be able to buy tickets to attend, and the featured part of the event will be a simple game of HORSE between two people of your choosing and two people of our choosing."

Joel's other eyebrow rises.

I keep speaking what I know is total madness. "If your team wins, the hospital can proceed with its plan to shut down the play area. If our team wins, however, the hospital will agree to keep the play area open."

Total. Silence.

Angela blinks and then scoffs. "You can't possibly be serious, Daphne."

"I'm completely serious." I cannot believe the words that are coming out of my mouth. I also can't believe that I'm maintaining a matter-of-fact facade. "In addition to the wager over the play area, the money raised from ticket sales will be donated to the pediatric department here at University Hospital." I smile innocently at her. "Now, don't you think the optics will be much better for this facility if tomorrow's headlines announce that the hospital has agreed to participate in a good-natured fundraiser on behalf of its pediatric patients, rather than how you decided to shut down the play area without exploring other budget-cutting options first?" I allow my eyes to float pointedly in the direction of the reporters, who are hanging on my every word.

Angela also looks toward the members of the media. She then peers at me again. The daggers in her eyes become bazookas.

"Ms. Cox." Lindi wipes her palms on her slacks before motioning to me. "I believe Deidre makes a good point. Given that the details of this meeting will be hitting the press tomorrow?and given how Mr. Lambert is a prominent and admired figure in the community?perhaps agreeing to the fundraiser would be a wise idea. It will be well-received by the people of this region . . . many of whom are private donors to this facility, I might add."

Angela's jaw muscles clench. A split-second later, however, she turns toward the cameras with a sparkling smile and proclaims, "University Hospital would be delighted to participate in the fundraiser that Dorothy has suggested."

Chaos erupts. The reporters begin shouting questions. Camera flashes are hitting my eyes. The other administrators appear like they've just clued in to what's going on. Elmer is blotting his forehead with a handkerchief. Lindi is scrolling her phone with supersonic speed.

Amidst the commotion, Joel faces me and breaks into a grin. I smile back at him and shrug.

"Ms. Cox, who will play HORSE on behalf of University Hospital?" a reporter calls out above the din.

Everyone falls into a hush.

"Why, that should be obvious." Angela tips up her chin. "Representing University Hospital will be Kaden Cox, whom many consider to be the best player on the university's men's basketball team. His teammate will be Felicity Iversen, the leading scorer on the women's team."

There's more rabid chatter among the media personnel.

"What about you, Joel?" someone else demands. "You'll obviously be shooting on behalf of saving the pediatric play area. Who will be your teammate?"

Stillness resettles over the room. Like everyone else, I'm watching Joel with profound curiosity. Who will he pick? Seth? One of his other teammates? A player from the women's team? He has numerous outstanding options. Who will his partner be?

Joel looks directly at the reporters for the first time since we arrived. "My teammate will be Danielle Gillespie."

I immediately begin racking my brain for who Danielle Gillespie might be. Hmm . . . Danielle Gillespie . . . let's see . . . the name does sound familiar . . . maybe she's on the women's team . . . or perhaps she's a coach . . .

Wait a moment.

Danielle Gillespie.

Danielle Gillespie?

Me?! Joel is selecting me as his teammate? Has he gone nutty? Everyone in here already thinks I'm crazy, but now I'm convinced that Joel has legitimately lost his mind.

Suddenly, all the cameras swivel back to me, and reporters start hurling questions my way.

"Danielle, in addition to being a pre-med student, you obviously must be an immensely skilled basketball player. How young were you when you first fell in love

with sports?"

"Miss Gillespie! Based on your extensive basketball experience, where on the court is the best spot to shoot from during a game of HORSE?"

"Danielle, are you willing to share the secrets of your athletic success?"

"What's your number-one piece of advice to those dreaming of being an athletic superstar one day?"

While the shouting and picture-taking continues, Joel turns my way. He's grinning again.

"Are you completely off your rocker?" I demand under my breath. "In case I didn't make this clear before: I don't play basketball. You absolutely cannot use me as your teammate. Not for this. The stakes are too high."

Joel's expression grows serious. "Danielle, the only reason we still have a chance of saving the play area is because of you. You deserve to be on the court so people know what you've done. Besides, there's no one else I want as my teammate."

"I may be the reason there's still a chance to save the play area, but if I'm your teammate, I'll also be the reason you lose." I can't keep the panic out of my voice. "You saw me the other day. I couldn't make a simple shot. I couldn't even pass the ball."

"So we'll practice." Joel must be living in an alternate dimension because he sounds completely confident. "You believe that I can succeed in my chemistry class, and I believe that you can succeed on the court."

I open my mouth to protest yet again. Oddly, though, no sound passes my lips. This

whole proposal is ludicrous, and Joel's choice to use me as his teammate is even more so. Nonetheless, that long-forgotten determination that I began to feel in the gym the other day is awakening within me once more. Deep down, I have a burning desire to be on the court—and at Joel's side—fighting for this cause. Almost before I realize it, I say:

"Okay. I'll do it."

Joel nods. He then looks at Angela, Elmer, Lindi, the other administrators, and the reporters—and he states for all to hear:

"I'll be in touch to get the fundraiser scheduled. Danielle and I look forward to seeing you there."

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Chapter Seven

Autumn isn't about basketball.

Autumn is about colored leaves, apple crisp, and corn mazes. And for those who like sports, autumn is about football, soccer, and women's volleyball.

Autumn is not about basketball.

So why, instead of frolicking in a pumpkin patch, am I making my way through the Student Activities Building to my own scheduled basketball practice? And why, instead of the adorable sweater that I was wearing earlier today when Joel and I were working on his chemistry assignment at the Coffee Loft, am I now dressed in another one of my old, oversized t-shirts and pairs of baggy shorts?

The answers to my own questions wallop me in the face: I'm here because fifty percent of the fate of the pediatric play area at University Hospital is riding on my shoulders—my non-athletic, non-basketball-playing, I-should-be-studying shoulders.

In addition to working on chemistry at the Coffee Loft earlier this afternoon, Joel and I finally had a chance to debrief about the bizarre meeting we had yesterday with Angela, Elmer, Lindi, the flock of other administrators, and just about every reporter in the Lakewood region. We hadn't been able to chat much after the meeting itself because Joel had practice and I insisted on riding the bus home rather than making him drive me back to my apartment, since doing so would have caused him to arrive late to his practice. Therefore, it wasn't until this afternoon when we had a real opportunity to talk about the meeting. Joel let me know that he had already followed

up with Lindi, and this weird event we're calling a fundraiser has been officially scheduled for October thirtieth. In other words, I have only a little over two weeks to prepare to shoot a basketball as skillfully as three college athletes . . . in a hugely publicized event that's being held in the university's main basketball arena . . . all while not causing Angela Cox to ban me from the medical community forever.

Not exactly easy.

When today's tutoring session concluded, Joel had to go to another shoot-around, and I went home and changed into my pathetic excuse for basketball attire. I then came here to meet up with Joel again, this time for our first-ever shooting practice. So this is why I'm now standing outside one of the secured doors that leads into the intercollegiate wing of the building. This is also why I'm mentally flailing to figure out how, in such a short time, my orderly life has flipped upside-down.

I use my phone to text Joel that I've arrived. Soon, the door is pushed open from the inside.

"Hey, Danielle." Joel smiles as he holds open the door for me.

I blink a few times as I stare back at him. He's sweaty. His hair is disheveled. His t-shirt is wrinkled and darkened with perspiration.

Why on earth do I find this attractive?

It makes no sense. I grew up around my extremely athletic brother and all of his athletic friends, and they were perpetually sweaty from their weight lifting sessions, practices, and games. I always thought it was rather disgusting. Yet here in this moment, as I take in the view of post-workout Joel, I'm finding that he most definitely does not strike me as disgusting. Rather, the sight of him is triggering quite a different response within me.

I can't think about how sexy Joel looks, though. I must remain focused. We have a part of the hospital to save.

"Hi." I step through the doorway, undoubtedly causing the gods of intercollegiate athletics to roar with laughter that I've dared to enter the premises.

Joel allows the door to shut, and then we walk down the corridor to the practice gym where I humiliated myself the last time I invaded this place.

"So are you ready for your first practice?" Joel grins as we the gym. "Or, rather, your second practice?"

I groan. "Please don't remind me about the last time I was here."

"Why not?" Joel halts, appearing genuinely perplexed.

I face him, confused by his apparent confusion. "Considering I looked like I had been hit by a freight train, and I humiliated myself, that afternoon certainly wasn't one of my finest moments."

Joel's eyes stay on mine. "That's not how I remember things."

He watches me a beat longer before he strides over to a cart that's filled with basketballs. I remain rooted in place, commanding myself to ignore how his intense gaze just set my heart ablaze. I thankfully snap back to attention when I realize that Joel is about to bounce-pass a ball to me.

"I made sure to get some women's balls for our practice." Joel makes the pass with coordinated, smooth movements.

"Great." I catch the basketball with absolutely no smoothness or coordination

whatsoever. "Thank you."

Joel gestures to the basket. "For today, I thought it would be a good idea to practice a couple of fundamental shots from each side of the hoop. This will allow you to brush up on your shooting technique before trying dunks or anything else too fancy." He finishes with another grin.

I snort a laugh. "A slam dunk. Right. I'll definitely be doing those soon." I pause, letting my demeanor grow serious. "Joel, I know we discussed this at the meeting, but I have to ask once more: are you sure that you don't want a real basketball player as your teammate? I won't be offended if you want to change the plan."

Joel steps closer to me. "I'm absolutely sure. You're the most determined woman I know, and you care about this cause. So you're the player?the person?I want at my side for this competition. Besides, as I said before, if anyone deserves credit for trying to save the pediatric play area, it's you. People should know what you're doing for the kids." His brow furrows. "However, if you don't want to do it, I completely understand."

I draw in and release a breath. "I won't deny that I'm terrified, yet I also want to be out on the court more than anything, as long as you're truly okay with the plan. I swear that I'll do everything I can not to let you down."

"There's no way you could possibly let me down." Joel reaches out and brushes my cheek with his hand. "You're the one who inspired me. You've inspired all of this."

Joel's touch unleashes exhilarating shockwaves in my body. Immediately, my brain screams that I'm not supposed to feel this way—just like I'm not supposed to think about how smart, funny, handsome, humble, and caring he is. The problem, however, is that my heart isn't listening to what my brain is saying, which is precisely why things for me are becoming more complicated by the moment.

Another second passes as we gaze into each other's eyes. Joel then clears his throat and strolls toward the hoop while stating in a frank, matter-of-fact tone:

"Let's begin with layups from the left and right side."

I exhale a breath. Basketball. I'm here for basketball.

I unglue my feet from the ground and join Joel near the hoop. Under his guidance, I shoot several layups from the right side and then from the left. I'm catastrophically ungraceful, yet with Joel's patient coaching—and with the muscle memory from all the years of shooting with my brother reawakening inside of me—the number of shots I'm making steadily increases. It's a tiny boost to my confidence, yet I'm painfully aware that shooting an uncontested, no-pressure layup is a far cry from competing against college basketball stars while the world is watching and the wellbeing of pediatric inpatients is on the line.

"You've really got the hang of it." Joel catches the ball after my last shot falls through the net. "How are you feeling?"

"Is it bad to admit that my arms are sore?" I roll my shoulders to loosen the muscles.

"It's not bad at all." Joel casually dribbles the ball to the left elbow of the key, radiating spell-binding athleticism as he does so. "Since you're doing great with layups, I suggest that the other shots we work on today be from the elbows. Getting comfortable with shooting from here will really come in handy for the competition."

"Sounds good. I need all the handy shots I can get." I whip my arms around in large circles before heading to Joel's side.

Joel gives me the ball. Once again, he shows no signs of judgment, mockery, or frustration as I shoot . . . and shoot . . . and shoot. My arms are burning. My wrists are

sore. I'm only making about half of my attempts. Yet empowerment is flowing through me, and I feel bold and alive in a way that I've never felt before. This is me doing something brave and a little bit odd. This is me daring to take a risk for once in my life. It's incredible.

"You're doing great. Seriously, you're a natural." Joel motions to the right elbow of the key. "Let's do the same shot from the other side, and then we'll call it a day."

I hesitate and stay where I am.

Joel's brows pinch together as he studies me. "Would it be better if we wrapped up now and practiced from the right elbow next time?"

"No . . . not exactly." I sigh. "It's just that . . . well, as you saw the other day, I can't make a basket from the right elbow. I've never been able to make that shot. I?"

"Well, well, who do we have here?" a man behind me asks with mockery thick in his voice. "Lambert, are you practicing for the fundraiser already?"

I groan inwardly, and my stomach knots up. I remember that voice. It's Kaden's voice.

Joel's eyes shift over my shoulder. His jaw muscles tense before he adopts a laid-back smile and replies to Kaden with:

"It's for an important cause, so why not?"

"Important. Sure. Whatever." Kaden is still striding up behind me. "And is this your teammate for the competition? I've been interested in meeting her. I read in the news that . . ." he trails off when he reaches my side and his eyes land on my face. He breaks into a huge grin. "Are you serious? You, the gorgeous coffee shop girl, are the

same Danielle who's Joel's teammate for the fundraiser?" He laughs. "It's great to see you again. I've been hoping I would run into you."

In the periphery of my vision, I see Joel take a step nearer to Kaden and me.

Kaden gives me another once-over with his eyes. "So in addition to being beautiful and smart, you're also athletic, huh? No wonder my mom was talking about you so much when she informed me about the competition." He slides closer and lowers his voice. "Look, even though I'm going to wreck Joel on the court at the fundraiser, let's not allow that to come between us, all right? I still hope you're going to let me take you out some time."

"Kaden." Joel inserts himself between Kaden and me just enough to force Kaden to back up. "Danielle and I are trying to practice."

"Fine, fine. I'll leave you to it." Kaden laughs again. "By the way, Lambert, I do appreciate you scheduling this fundraiser for right around when our regular basketball season kicks off. Our coaches will be watching, and it'll be another opportunity for me to prove that I should be our team's starting point guard." He smirks at Joel before facing me once more. "In the meantime, I look forward to seeing you soon."

Kaden starts whistling as he strolls out of the gym. Once he's gone, I drop my eyes to the floor. My budding confidence has vanished. No matter how much I want to try to help Joel win at the fundraiser, I shouldn't compete. I'm not good enough. Not only will I potentially cause a loss at the fundraiser, Joel may lose his starting position on the men's basketball team because I make him look bad.

Why did I think that I could do this?

My chest squeezes. My breathing gets stilted as my stomach churns.

"Danielle."

Joel's voice is firm and clear in my ear. I lift my head and realize that he's at my side.

"You look pale." Joel puts his arm across my shoulders. "Why don't you sit down?"

"Thanks, but I'm okay." I wet my lips and fake a smile. "It has just been a long day, and I'm a little worn out. I'll go outside and get some fresh air, and I'll be fine."

Joel's forehead creases. "I'll walk with you."

"It's really kind of you to offer, but you don't need to stay with me. I know you have other things to do."

"Danielle, I don't mind at all. Besides, I don't think it's a good idea for you to be by yourself right now."

"I promise that I'm all right." I fight to keep my voice steady. "Again, I appreciate your help very much, but . . . I would actually prefer to be alone."

I don't wait for him to protest before I slip his arm off my shoulders and walk away. I pick up my bag, leave the gym, and speed outside. Struck by the early evening chill, I yank my hooded sweatshirt out of my bag and throw it on. I next find my phone and put it on silent ; I need to shut out the world for a while.

I drop my phone back into my bag and resume walking fast. Am I overreacting to what happened back there in the gym? I don't know. All I know is that my life has been flung into the air, and I don't know where I'm going to land. Before I met Joel, my world was predictable, structured, and on-track. Now everything is in chaos. I'm willingly risking my future career. I'm starting to question if ignoring my heart is really what I want to do?yet if I manage to not get expelled from the medical

community, I'll have no choice but to keep romance on the shelf. Most importantly, I'm falling for a man who would never be interested in me and whose path is incompatible with mine.

Seriously, what is happening to my world?

I emerge from my swirling thoughts and realize that I'm standing in front of the Student Academic Center. Seeing this favorite building of mine actually grounds me a little. It represents all that's familiar and predictable in my life. This is a building where, when I'm within its walls, I know who I am and what I should do. In this building, I'm confident. I'm successful. I'm certain. And this building is precisely where I can get my thoughts and emotions under control.

Since it's early evening, the building is closed. Only the outside lights and a few indoor auxiliary lights are illuminating the place against the darkening sky. Thankfully, however, since I'm an employee, I have after-hours badge access. I shove my hand into my bag, locate my badge, climb the stairs, unlock the front door, and go inside.

All is still. Because only a few lights are on, strange shadows fill the corners. The quiet in here feels mysterious and like it has a life of its own. In the dimness, I let my eyes trace over the soaring ceiling and the grand staircase at my right. I then look left at the wide hallway that leads to the tutoring center. Another wave of much-needed calmness washes over me. Spending time studying at one of the computers in there will be the perfect antidote to my unrest.

I head down the hall and use my badge to unlock the door that leads into the tutoring center. Propping open the door with my foot, I slip my badge into the kangaroo pocket of my sweatshirt and flip on the nearest lights. Blinking in the brightness, I use a doorstop to keep the door open, and then I sit down at a workstation. I turn on the computer while inhaling the aroma of the old books that fill the shelves. I?

A noise outside the room nearly causes me to jump out of my chair. I freeze, my ears on high alert. What was that?

A few seconds pass, and then I hear the noise again. It sounds like . . . a kitten.

A kitten?

I spring to my feet and scurry out of the room. I pause in the hallway. It isn't long before the meow-like sound hits my ears once more. Following the noise, I take a sharp left and go down another corridor, which is lit only by a dim auxiliary light. I'm about halfway down the hall when I hear the sound another time; it's coming from behind a closed door at my right.

I try to open the door, but I discover that it's locked. I pull my ID card from the pocket of my sweatshirt and scan it across the electronic reader that's beside the door. I hear the lock release. I open the door slowly; I don't want to frighten the sweet little creature that's trapped on the other side. A rush of cold, musty air hits me. I can't see anything but blackness.

"Here, kitty, kitty." I take a step forward into the dark. "Here, kitty, kitty. Come here. I . . . ARG!"

The ground drops out from under me. My stomach leaps into my throat. I reflexively fling out my arms, causing my ID badge to fly from my hand. The next thing I know, I'm crashing down a steep staircase, banging around like a feral bowling ball in the wild. I can't see anything. The potent smells of dust and mildew are flooding my nostrils. My body is smashing against the stairs as I keep toppling downward with a momentum I can't stop. My left foot gets caught on a banister. There's a sharp twisting sensation in my knee. I cry out again. The dizzying freefall continues until I finally come to an abrupt crash-landing at the bottom of the staircase.

I don't move, stunned and sprawled out on the chilly cement floor in a pretzel-like position. I hear nothing at first except for my rapid breathing, but then I hear the kitten again. The noise is loud and clear this time . . . and that's when I realize it's not a kitten at all. It's a squeak coming from what sounds like an ancient furnace that's in dire need of maintenance.

I must have plummeted down into the building's basement.

Fabulous.

I blink a few times, but I still can't see much of anything; the eerie darkness is broken up only by the faint glow that's coming from the light in the hallway at the top of the stairs. The musty odor is so strong that it's making me nauseated. I'm beginning to shiver from the bone-chilling dampness. The only sound is coming from the kitten-that's-actually-a-furnace.

I groan and push myself up into a seated position. My whole body is sore from my unceremonious fall down the stairs. With a sigh, I attempt to stand, but a stab of pain in my left knee forces me back down. I moan again and push my loose hair from my face. I'm going to have to crawl up Staircase Everest to get out of this place, which is becoming colder and creepier by the moment.

A loud creaking noise from the hallway causes me to snap my eyes back to the top of the stairs. By the faint light that's up there, I see the door slowly swinging shut as though it's under a ghostly power. I don't even have a chance to cry out in dismay before the door finishes shutting with a definitive slam, casting me into total blackness. I then hear the ominous sound of the door locking.

A shudder ripples through me. Am I locked in here?! Who on earth would design a door to lock from the inside?!

The ghosts who haunt this basement, apparently, that's who.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

I sense my respirations growing shallow, but I force myself to exhale slowly. I can't freak out. I need to keep my wits about me. I have to discover a way out of this cold-and-haunted-and-undoubtedly-rat-filled basement before I'm either taken away by ghouls or I turn into a popsicle.

The cutting chill is soaking into me more with every passing second, and my knee is throbbing, but I tell myself to ignore all of it. Gritting my teeth, I slide-crawl to the base of the stairs and start using my hands to search the darkness. I need to find my badge. If I don't have that, unless I can miraculously and blindly locate an emergency release for the locked door, I'm not going to be able to escape.

I lean on one hip and use my arms to pull myself to the left of the staircase, and I resume feeling around for where my badge may have landed when it flew out of my hand as I fell. Time passes in a blur. Every movement exacerbates the pain in my knee, and I'm forced to stop frequently to rest. Gradually, the smells in here begin making my nausea almost unbearable. I'm shivering to the point that my teeth are clattering. Between the shock, the pain, the cold, and the dread that evil spirits are going to whisk me away to their gloomy underworld, I detect myself growing lightheaded. A sound like a waterfall fills my ears.

What if I touch a mouse? Or a dead body? Or . . .

I sense the rest of the color drain from my cheeks. On instinct, I lie down on the cold, disgusting floor.

I think . . . I might . . . pass out . . .

Why do I smell mildew?

Why do I feel like I'm inside a refrigerator?

Why can't I see anything?

I experience a split-second of petrified confusion, and then the ache in my knee jars me back to awareness, and I remember everything: I'm trapped in an eerie old basement with ghosts, rats, spiders, and a furnace that sounds like a small feline.

I grimace from the pain as I sit up. I'm numb. I want to throw up. I can't think straight.

My badge. Where is my badge?

"Danielle!"

A man's voice cuts through the blackness. I nearly scream. This is it. The ghosts are coming for me. It's the end. I . . .

Wait. I know that voice.

"Danielle!"

Joel's call?which is louder this time?echoes through the air as I hear the door at the top of the stairs get torn open. The overhead lights are thrown on, causing me to put up a hand to shield my eyes.

"Danielle!"

"I'm . . . down here." My words come out oddly scratchy.

There's a sound like thunder as Joel sprints down the stairs, taking them two and three at a time. Blinking away the spots from my vision, I lower my arm just as he gets to the bottom of the staircase. He's wearing team-issue sweats. My ID badge is in his grip. He has my bag slung across his body by its strap. He turns fast in my direction, and when his gaze lands upon me, his eyes get wide. He jams my badge into my bag and lunges toward me, dropping to his knees at my side.

"Do you need an ambulance?" Joel puts one arm around my waist, holding me against him.

"No." I wince as my leg throbs. "I sprained my left knee, but it's nothing serious."

"You're freezing." Joel still has me braced against him as he rests his free hand upon my cheek.

"Yes, I . . ." I trail off, flinching again when my lightheadedness worsens.

Joel keeps his left arm behind my back while quickly putting his right arm under my legs. He stands, lifting me off the floor with ease. Immersed in the warmth of his body, I drop my head against his chest as he carries me up the stairs and into the hallway.

"My car is in the faculty lot just outside," Joel states in barely more than a growl. "I'll get you home."

My eyes close. "Thank you, Joel."

"You don't need to thank me," he says. "You're my teammate, Danielle. I'm not losing you."

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Chapter Eight

Joel isn't saying a word as he drives. I'm staying silent, too.

When we got to his car, Joel slid back my seat as far as it could go so I could keep my injured left leg stretched out in front of me. Now that we're en route to my apartment, he has the heater cranked up to maximum, and my shivering is thankfully subsiding.

"How are you doing?" Joel breaks the stillness, his words laced with tension.

I lift my head off the headrest and look his way. "Much better now, thanks to you."

Joel glances at me and puts his concentration back on the road. He doesn't reply.

"How did you find me, anyway?" I shift in my seat to view him better. "Up until this evening, I didn't even know there was a creep-tastic basement in that building. How did you know to look for me in there?"

"I didn't know to look for you in there. At least, not at first." Joel's jaw muscles are working as he adjusts his hold on the steering wheel. "After you insisted on leaving the gym alone, I was worried about you. I called your phone a couple of times, but the calls went straight to voicemail. I therefore took the liberty of driving to your apartment to make sure you got home all right. When I knocked on your door, however, no one answered."

It takes a beat for me to process Joel's words. He drove all the way to my apartment to check on me? I'm so overcome by this revelation that I don't even know what to

say. The only thing that comes out of my mouth is:

"Savannah is working at the Coffee Loft this evening, which is why she wasn't home."

"I know. I discovered that when I went to the Coffee Loft next."

"You also went to the Coffee Loft?" I'm unable to hide my astonishment any longer.

"You did all of that to make sure I was okay?"

Joel frowns. He suddenly cranks on the steering wheel, yanking the car over to the side of the road. He brings the vehicle to an idling stop, his hands still gripping the wheel while he stares outside.

"Um, is everything okay?" I dare to inquire.

Joel releases his hold on the wheel and faces me. "Danielle, I don't know what happened in your past to make you believe that guys who are athletes would never care about you, but not all guys are the same." The gleam in his eyes is fiery. Determined. Piercing. "So the answer to your question is, yes . Yes, I also went to the Coffee Loft to try to find you. I needed to know you were safe." He exhales hard and goes back to glaring out the windshield.

I stare at his profile, again rendered speechless, while a potent heat expands in my chest. All is intensely quiet. Joel turns his head to look at me again, causing the glow of the nearby streetlight to land upon his alluring features and make his eyes shine. Suddenly, the quiet between us electrifies, and our gazes lock in a more feverish way. A powerful magnetic pull seems to draw me to him, and I lean his way. Joel's chest rises and falls with his deep breaths as he leans toward me at the same time.

Assuming you don't get banished, you're starting med school next year, which means

your life won't be your own. So no matter how Joel is making you feel in this moment, nothing can come of it. Besides, he's going to become an even bigger celebrity soon. When this month is over, you'll be nothing but a vague memory to him.

The voice in my head gets its point across, brutally and clearly. I sit back. Instantly, Joel's face becomes empty of emotion, and he focuses out the windshield. He resumes driving, appearing as unruffled as ever. I attempt to look equally unfazed as I pull my gaze from him and stare outside, but my heart keeps thundering in my chest.

What just happened between us?

Did something just happen between us?

"In further answer to your question," Joel is speaking as if nothing is out of the ordinary, "when I got to the Coffee Loft, Savannah informed me that you hadn't been by. She also mentioned that you sometimes study in the tutoring center, and so I went there next. After I got into the building, I?"

"How did you get in?" I dare to look at him again. "The building was locked."

Joel's attention stays on the road. "It's locked until you kick open one of the back doors."

My jaw drops. "You managed to kick open one of those gigantic doors? I mean, don't get me wrong: it's clear you have more than enough muscles to . . . that is, I just didn't think that . . ." I cut myself off, my cheeks scorching.

Joel's eyes float over to me. Perhaps it's the way the streetlights are now dancing upon his features, but I swear he grins a little before he goes back to watching the street.

How utterly, aggravatingly cocky of him . . . and how immensely, roguishly attractive.

I quickly go back to watching out the window.

"When I got inside the building, I went to the tutoring center first, since the light was on in there." Joel is speaking in all-seriousness again. "I saw your bag, so I knew you had to be nearby. I started walking the hallways, and that's when I spotted your badge on the floor outside the door that led into the basement."

I push my hair from my face. "Joel, I don't know what would have happened, if you hadn't found me. Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me. Like I said, you're my teammate, and teammates look out for each other."

Before either of us can say more, my apartment complex comes into view. Joel parks, gets out of the car, and grabs my things from the backseat. He comes around to my side of the vehicle and opens my door. He slips an arm around my waist and assists me from my seat.

"How's the knee?" Joel is holding me against him.

I bear some weight on my left leg. "Fortunately, it's not bad. My knee is sore, but it's nothing that'll keep me from practicing on the basketball court every day until?"

My knee buckles. Joel immediately scoops me up in his arms and carries me into the building. Ignoring the stares of the other people who are in the lobby, he takes me into an elevator and up to my floor. Only once we're in front of the door of my apartment does he set me on my feet once more. My body is flushed as I accept my bag from him, pull out my keys, and unlock the door. Joel slips an arm back around

my waist and assists me inside while using his foot to shut the door behind us. With his free hand, he flips on the lights, and then he takes my bag and sets it on the foyer table.

I lift my eyes to his. His gaze traces down to my face. Instantly, that wild electricity? that magnetic pull? returns and consumes the quiet. My pulse rate rises. All I can think about is what it would be like to kiss him.

I need to say something. STAT.

"Do you like casserole?" I blurt out.

Joel's eyebrows rise. "Uh, yes. Casserole is great."

"Okay, um, that's good because we have leftover chicken-broccoli casserole in the fridge. It's delicious. Would you like some for dinner? It's the least I can do to repay you for your help."

Joel's eyes flick toward the kitchen. "Sure. Thanks." He slips his arm from my waist.

I pause. Did I just invite Joel in for dinner?

Is this a sort-of date?

A breath later, I coach myself back down from the rafters. Of course this isn't a date. I'm merely thanking him for rescuing me from the haunted basement.

"Um, please come on in." I motion for Joel to follow me.

I lead the way, limping into the main area of the apartment. I turn on more lights while doing a rapid survey for anything embarrassing that Savannah or I may have

left lying about. Fortunately, except for the two empty containers of ice cream that are on the couch near the remote control, I don't spot anything incriminating.

I move into the adjoining kitchen. "Please have a seat at the table, and I'll get the casserole heated up."

Joel returns to my side. "Why don't you sit down and let me do the prep?"

"Thanks for offering, but this is no problem." I open the fridge and pull out the heavy pan of casserole, which Savannah and I made the other night. "My knee pain isn't terrible; it's nothing that's going to keep me from practicing my shooting each day before the fundraiser."

Joel takes the pan from me nonetheless. "Speaking of the fundraiser, I was actually hoping to chat with you about it."

I slowly shut the fridge. Here it comes: Joel has (wisely) realized that if he's going to have any chance of saving the play area, he needs to jettison me as his teammate. It's the right call, even though it's crushing. I want to help those kids. I want to stop Angela from shutting down something that's important to young patients. I want to stop cocky Kaden from beating Joel. I also want to defeat sweet, drop-dead-gorgeous Felicity, who's clearly crushing on Joel and . . .

Okay, the Felicity part of things is beside the point.

The point is that I wholeheartedly agree that Joel should team up with an elite-level basketball player rather than staying weighed down by a chemistry tutor whose only basketball experience comes from shooting in the driveway of her childhood home. Yet although it's the right and rational decision, getting benched is still tough to absorb. The competitive streak in me, which up until recently I didn't even know existed, fiercely wants to be on the court fighting on behalf of those pediatric patients.

I can't be selfish, though. This is too important.

"I know what you're about to say, and I truly understand." I grab two plates out of a cupboard. "I agree that you need a real basketball player to join you for this fundraiser. There's too much on the line."

Joel sets the pan on the counter and watches while I put a big serving of casserole onto each plate. "Actually, that's not what I was about to say."

Relief mixed with surprise flashes through me, and the sensation is quickly followed by a hefty amount of confusion.

"It wasn't?" I put the first plate into the microwave. "So what's wrong?"

"What's wrong is that I signed you up for this fundraiser without stopping to consider the stress it would put you under." Joel rubs the back of his neck with one hand. "There's no one else I want on my team, but the publicity you're being forced to endure . . . the worry . . . the risks this event may pose to your future career . . . the obnoxious way Kaden is flirting with you . . . what happened this evening . . ." he trails off and drops his arm to his side. "It's not right for you to go through this. I can't allow anything like what happened tonight to happen again. I'll find a new teammate."

The microwave pings.

I turn from Joel, open a drawer, pull out some hot pads, and remove the plate of bubbling-hot casserole from the microwave. The kitchen seems particularly quiet as I carry the plate over to the table and set it down. Still saying nothing, I slip the other plate into the microwave. Though I'm saying nothing, however, my brain is spinning. Joel is being a gentleman. He's worried about my well-being as much as he's worried about saving the play area, and he is doing everything he can to make things right for

all involved. Not to mention, he deserves a more talented teammate.

So why is the competitive spark inside of me expanding into a blaze? Why do I want to practice for hours every day to make sure that Joel and I win? Why am I determined not to get scared off by Angela, Kaden, or the media?

Because this matters to me. And when something matters to me, I see it through. Whether it's acing a test, helping someone I care about, or ensuring I have a good enough application to get interviewed at top med schools—if it's important to me, I do all that I can to make it happen. And this determination includes doing all I can to save the play area.

I grab some glasses from another cupboard. "Before I reply, Joel, I need you to promise to be truthful with me. You have to be totally honest when you answer the question I'm about to pose, no matter how much you think it might hurt me."

Joel nods once. "All right."

"Taking all other factors out of the equation, who would you choose to be your teammate?"

Joel actually smiles. "That's easy. Like I've said before, the answer is you. Anyone who's willing to march into Angela Cox's office?especially when she's about to start interviewing for med school?has heart, grit, and tenacity. And that's who I want on my team."

I smile, too. "Then as I've said before, I want to be in the competition with you."

"Are you sure?" Joel's expression grows serious again. "Even after what happened this evening, and despite all you've had to put up with already?"

"I'm sure. I'm completely sure."

Joel's eyes don't leave my face as he takes the cups from my hands. Without warning, I'm rapidly consumed by another extremely inconvenient urge to throw my arms around his neck and kiss him. Thankfully, I'm saved by the microwave pinging again. I retrieve the food and carry the plate over to the table. Joel fills up the glasses with water and adds them to our place settings. I put down utensils and napkins, and he pulls out my chair for me. After I sit down, he takes his place across the table. We're just about to dive into dinner when his phone starts ringing.

"Sorry." Joel retrieves his phone from the pocket of his sweatshirt. He glances at the screen and pauses before silencing the noise.

"Please feel free to answer that, if you need to," I tell him.

Joel puts away his phone. "It's all right. It's Felicity. I'll call her back later."

I act unbothered, but there's an unmistakable stab of disappointment in my heart. I know it's absurd of me to feel this way, though; there's no reason why hearing Joel say Felicity's name should throw me off-kilter. Frankly, Felicity is a perfect match for him: she's gorgeous, athletic, and someone who understands the zany, stressful world where celebrity, student life, and rigorous athletic demands collide. She's also obviously crushing on him . . . and perhaps Joel is quietly crushing on her, too.

"Felicity seems great." I adopt a cheerful tone. "It's too bad she's already taken for the competition. The two of you would make a fantastic team."

Joel stops with his fork hovering above his plate. "So you think there's something going on between Felicity and me."

I take a bite of my food, chew, and swallow. "No. However, it seems that there could

be something. She certainly seems into you, anyway."

Joel proceeds to consume a huge fork-full of casserole and chug down approximately fifteen gallons of water. He then puts down his glass, refocuses on me, and firmly remarks:

"There's nothing romantic between Felicity and me. The last thing I would do is enter a romantic relationship at this stage of my life."

His words hit me once . . . and then twice. The first time, I idiotically experience relief. The second time, even more idiotically, I'm struck with more disappointment. I almost shake my head at myself. None of this should matter to me or come as a surprise. This shouldn't affect me at all, in fact.

So why, then, is this affecting me?

I bolster my smile and attempt to keep things lighthearted. "I'm guessing it's not common for celebrity-athletes like you to put dating on the backburner. You probably have women chasing you wherever you go."

"Nah." Joel's demeanor is as humble as ever. He starts cutting another bite of food. "However, I have come to learn that some women are more interested in my so-called celebrity status than they are in the man who's behind that status. It's one reason why I'm not interested in pursuing romance right now."

I pause. I'm ashamed to realize that I've never considered this perspective before. It must be awful for Joel—or for anyone in his position—to wonder if he can trust someone's true intentions and interest. I don't blame him for deciding to put away his heart.

"That must be hard," I comment.

"Well, as I said, it's one reason why I've decided to put aside romance for now." Joel looks at me directly. "Far more importantly, though, is that I would never drag the woman I love into this crazy life that I'm living. My schedule is hectic. I travel a lot. My days are consumed by sports and schooling. Not to mention, if I pursue sports after college, my world will get exponentially busier. I'm already fielding offers to play basketball professionally here in the States, to play professional volleyball in Europe, and to join the coaching staffs of several elite college men's teams."

My eyes get big. "Wow. That's impressive, Joel."

Joel shrugs. "I don't know if it's impressive. However, I do know that I would never want the woman I love to feel neglected because I'm living such a fast-paced, busy life. I also don't want her to be subjected to the absurd amount of media scrutiny that athletes' significant others are forced to endure." He shakes his head. "I'll stay single before I make the woman I love go through any of that."

I take my time drinking my water, letting myself absorb Joel's words. He's single not because he wants to be, per se, but because he wants to protect and prioritize the woman he cares about. Even if he fell in love, and he was certain that she loved him for the right reasons, he would still protect her rather than pulling her into his celebrity world.

And to think that I once assumed Joel was an arrogant, self-absorbed jerk.

And to think that, although our lives are drastically different, Joel's situation is reminding me of . . . my own.

"In a way, I understand what you mean," I dare to say. "While I obviously don't have a clue about what it's like to live in the spotlight, my life is so absorbed by other commitments that my schedule isn't conducive to romance, either. Though I want to find love, romance is going to have to wait for a long time."

Joel sets down his drink. Slowly. "And are you happy with your life as it is?"

I don't answer right away, and it stuns me that I need to ponder his question. Only a few weeks ago, I would have immediately and confidently replied that I was happy with my life's plan. Now, however, I'm not so sure.

"That's a complicated question," I confess. "I can honestly state that I love medicine and it's what I want to do with my career. However, pursuing this path means giving up a lot of other things I want, including a relationship." I look past Joel and stare out the main room's window. "Most daunting of all is that, much like how you describe your life's trajectory, this is only the beginning. If things go according to plan, after I graduate from college, I'll go right into med school, and after that will come several years of residency. My life won't be my own. So, like you, I don't want to get involved in a relationship because I can't give it the time it deserves. Plus, I don't yet know where I'll be going for med school or residency, and I wouldn't want to put a man through that uncertainty either."

When Joel doesn't reply, I shift my eyes back to his. He watches me a second longer before he resumes eating. Quiet settles over us. I realize, though, that it's not a strained or uncomfortable quiet. Shockingly, it's a calm, pensive quiet that makes me feel at ease with my own thoughts and emotions. I don't know how it's possible, yet out of all the guys in the Universe, this famous athlete makes me feel safe, whole, and understood.

The stillness is broken by the sound of the front door getting unlocked.

"Danielle, are you here?" I hear Savannah start walking toward the kitchen. "Joel stopped by the Coffee Loft and . . ."

Savannah goes mute when she reaches the kitchen and sees Joel seated at our table. She glances my way. A mischievous smile appears upon her lips for only a

nanosecond, but I know what she's thinking: she's thinking that Joel and I are . . . that we might be . . .

We can't and won't be together, though. Tonight's conversation has made that clearer than ever.

Savannah refocuses on Joel with a friendly smile. "Hey, Joel. Long time no see."

Joel stands and grins. "I hope you don't mind that I'm enjoying some of this fantastic food."

Savannah sets her purse on the counter. "Not at all. I'm glad you're helping us eat it." She looks between the two of us while pulling a plate from the cupboard. "I'll just heat up some for myself and head into my room to study."

"You don't have to go. You're more than welcome to join us." My tone is as casual and breezy as Savannah's, but I know she'll detect the hidden message in my words. "Feel free to stay and hang out."

Savannah's eyes dart my way, letting me know that she understood perfectly.

There is nothing going on between Joel and me, and there never will be.

And my heart feels like it's going to break.

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Chapter Nine

I sprint down the sidewalk, tug open the door of the Coffee Loft, and bound inside. Instantly, I'm submerged in the shop's delightful aromas and cozy ambience. However, coziness isn't what I'm focused on right now. Instead, while ignoring the customers' curious stares, I scamper to the back of the shop. Joel, who's seated at our usual table, does a double take when he sees me rushing his way.

"Is everything all right?" He gets to his feet.

I halt in front of him. I suppose it's a good thing that I'm winded from my impromptu outdoor run, because it conceals the fact that the sight of Joel is taking my breath away. While I look like a hot mess in my old athletic wear, Joel looks more alluring than ever. His hair is tousled, his glasses are giving him that sexy-nerd vibe, the way his sweater is sitting upon his frame is a blazing reminder of all his muscles, and he's radiating that calmly commanding presence that always threatens to make my world stop rotating on its axis.

"Everything is all right. I'm sorry for being late." I take the chair that's across the table from where Joel was sitting, and I drop my gym bag at my feet. "The bus was running behind."

A basketball rolls out of my bag.

Joel uses his foot to stop the ball. "Were you doing some shooting practice?"

"Yes, but only for a couple of hours." I bend down, retrieve the ball out from under

his foot, and stuff it back into my bag.

"A couple of hours?" Joel echoes as he sits down.

"Yes. I told you that my goal is to shoot every day, even on the days when you and I also have our scheduled practices." I pause, my brow furrowing. "Do you think it'll be enough?"

"Danielle." Joel adjusts his glasses, and something about the gesture combined with the way he has lowered his voice sends lightning zipping along my spine. "What you've done is already enough. It's more than enough. I?"

"Here are your lofty-sized drinks!" a man declares.

I turn and see the barista, Nathaniel, scuttling toward our table with two enormous cups in his hands. Nathaniel has been working here for years. He's in his forties, he knows everything about board games, and he has a penchant for bow ties. With a huge smile, he sets the drinks in front of Joel and me.

Joel gives him a friendly tip of his head. "Thank you."

"Yes, thanks, Nat." I beam at him.

"You're welcome." Nathaniel salutes playfully. "By the way, I've been seeing you guys all over the news. You're doing that fundraiser for University Hospital, right?"

My heart lurches. The news . Joel and I have been in the news . I've heard from friends and family about news stories covering the fundraiser, but up until this moment, the publicity hasn't seemed real. Suddenly, though, it all seems very, very real . . . terrifyingly real.

"That's right." Joel's affect remains unfazed as he answers Nathaniel. "The fundraiser was Danielle's idea, and it's happening at the end of the month."

"Well, I wish you the best of luck." Nathaniel shows us a thumbs-up. "My niece was hospitalized at that facility a few years ago, and she adored the play area, so I'm personally thankful for what you're doing. I'll definitely be at the fundraiser to cheer you on." He motions to our cups. "By the way, your drinks are on me, my friends."

Nathaniel salutes again and heads back to the counter. I watch him go, and then I put my eyes back on Joel and apprehensively inquire:

"So we're really being talked about in the news a little bit?"

Joel sighs. "We're being talked about in the news a lot."

I freeze. "Like, a lot a lot?"

Joel turns his laptop so I can see what he has up on his monitor. "More than a lot a lot."

Joel has an internet browser open to a social media page for the most prominent news outlet in the region. My eyes get wide when I see that the featured news story is about Joel and me. Not about the fundraiser. About Joel and me . Plastered right at the top of the story is Joel's suave, macho basketball headshot . . . and below it is a profoundly awkward photo of me that was hurriedly taken in the Student Activities Building at the start of my freshman year when I got my ID card. In the picture, my eyes are slightly closed, my hair is puffy, and my clothes are anything but stylish. Yet my smile is excited and eager. How is it possible that over three years have passed since that photo was taken? It's like I've had my nose in the books so much that I hardly noticed life going by.

"I can't apologize enough about all this attention that's getting dumped on you," I hear Joel growl.

I look at him. His brows are low. His jaw is clenched.

"It's all right. Though I'm not used to being watched by the media, I'm glad it's getting the cause in the news. However . . ." I motion to the laptop with a groan. "I wish they hadn't posted my terrible freshman photo for the world to see."

Joel's expression evolves to one of genuine confusion. "Is something wrong with that picture?"

"Pretty much everything is wrong with that picture." I actually laugh. "I look like late-puberty personified while you look all hot and athletic and muscular and . . ." I stop talking and take a fast sip of my drink, wincing as it scorches my tongue.

Joel studies my photo. "I'm not sure what you're talking about. You were pretty back then, and you've simply become even more gorgeous now."

I nearly drop my drink in my lap. Joel thinks I'm gorgeous? No, there's no way he really thinks that. He's merely being kind because a terrible picture of me has been posted all over the internet.

"That's nice of you to say." I glance again at my photo and cringe. "Nonetheless, I'll be glad when that particular news story is taken down."

"I'll be glad when the media stops hounding you all together." Joel shuts his laptop as if he's sick of looking at the monitor.

"I promise it's not a big deal. It's not like there's anything interesting for the media to dig up on me, anyway. My whole life has consisted of studying and . . . studying." A

lump forms in my throat as a heavy dose of regret squeezes my heart.

Joel's eyes meet mine across the table. His brow furrows once more as he observes me with his searching gaze.

I think it's time to change the subject.

I lighten my tone. "Thanks for the drink, by the way. It's always the perfect studying fuel."

Joel's tense expression relaxes. "You're welcome. I figured it wouldn't be a tutoring session without our regular drinks, right?"

Our regular drinks . The words make me feel happy and airy. Our drinks . Something special between us. Something that . . .

Something that will be only another memory after this month is over.

Joel reopens his laptop and pulls up some notes that he took in class. "Here are my notes from lecture today." He tugs his textbook from his bag, puts it on the table, and opens it to a chapter. "And these are the homework questions."

"Great. Let's see what we have." I read the first question aloud. "Acetone can be converted to isopropanol by hydrogenation. Calculate the enthalpy change for the reaction using bond energies."

"I tried crunching the numbers, but I'm not getting them to work out." Joel retrieves a spiral-bound notebook from his bag and shows me the calculations that he jotted down. "I'm not sure why."

I survey his work. "I recommend first examining the reactants and product to

determine what bonds are broken and what bonds are formed in the reaction. I think the best way to do that is by sketching out the Lewis structures."

"That makes sense." Joel begins writing on his notepad, his forehead creasing with a look of concentration that's a little bit attractive.

Actually, it's immensely attractive.

"What do you think?" Joel turns his notebook so I can see what he wrote.

I glance over his results. "Double check to ensure all the hydrogen atoms are accounted for."

Joel slides the notebook toward him again. "Ah. I left off a hydrogen." He resumes writing.

"Perfect," I tell him. "Now that you have the Lewis structures drawn out, use them to figure out what bonds aren't changed in the reaction."

Joel's eyes dart across his notes. "There are two carbon-carbon bonds that haven't changed, and five . . . no, six carbon-hydrogen bonds that haven't changed."

"Exactly." I grab a pen from my bag and a few napkins from the dispenser on the table. "That tells you what you don't need to worry about, so you can focus on the bonds in the reactants that are broken and the bonds that are formed in the product."

Joel goes back to making notes and using the calculator on his phone. "There's one mole of carbon-oxygen double bonds and one mole of hydrogen-hydrogen single bonds that are broken in the reaction. So that would be . . . a total of one thousand one hundred sixty-eight kilojoules of energy required."

I peek at my own notes, which I sketched on the napkin. "That's what I got, too."

Joel looks up and grins when he sees my scribble-covered napkin. "This is like second nature to you, isn't it? That's impressive."

I grin back at him. "I do like chemistry a lot."

Joel smiles a second longer, and then he clears his throat and lowers his attention back to his work. "As for the energy evolved from the bonds that formed during the reaction, I have one mole of carbon-hydrogen single bonds and one mole of carbon-oxygen single bonds."

"And . . . ?" I prompt.

"One mole of oxygen-hydrogen single bonds." Joel resumes using his phone to crunch the numbers. "So that's four hundred thirteen kilojoules for carbon-hydrogen, three hundred fifty-eight for carbon-oxygen, and four hundred sixty-three for the oxygen-hydrogen bonds." He raises his eyes to mine. "Or am I way off here?"

"You're exactly right. So the final step is calculating the enthalpy change."

Joel goes back to the calculator. "The change in enthalpy will be negative sixty-six kilojoules."

"Bingo. And so that means this particular reaction is . . . ?"

"Exothermic."

"Nicely done," I tell him. "That homework problem is a good example of how methodically going through the steps makes solving such an equation manageable."

Joel breaks into another swoony smile. "This is extremely helpful. Thank you."

"It's what I'm here for. Besides, I?"

"Ah, if it isn't the media's favorite duo," someone interjects.

I barely manage not to roll my eyes when I notice Kaden sauntering toward us with his trademark smug grin on his face.

Joel's expression empties. "Hey, Kaden. I didn't expect to see you out in this neck of the woods again."

Kaden grabs a chair from a nearby table, flips it around backward, places it next to me, and takes a seat. "Normally, you wouldn't see me out here, but I came on purpose. Not for you, though, Lambert." He winks at me. "I came hoping to find you, Danielle."

I don't hide my surprise. "Are you . . . looking to sign up for tutoring?"

Kaden tips back his head and laughs. "No. I'm here to insist that you go out with me."

In the corner of my eye, I see Joel sit up sharply.

I motion to the laptop and reply to Kaden with, "Well, as you can see, I'm right in the middle of a tutoring session and?"

"I didn't mean right now." Kaden is still chuckling. "I was thinking we could go out after the team's first official scrimmage this Thursday. What do you think?"

I stare at Kaden like he just informed me the standard atomic weight of carbon-twelve was changed. As crazy as it seems, Kaden is serious. He's serious about going out. At

least, I think he is, but I'm so clueless about this kind of thing that I could be misreading the entire situation.

"Kaden, I do appreciate you asking." I shift in my chair. "However, I'm going to decline."

Kaden's brows snap together before he puts back on a smile. "Oh, I get it: you don't want to be fraternizing with the enemy before the fundraiser, is that right?"

I sigh to myself. Has Kaden ever been told "no" in his life? He seems to have serious difficulty comprehending the word.

"Kaden." Joel reveals no emotion as he interjects into the conversation. "Like Danielle mentioned, we're studying. How about you allow us to finish without interruption?"

Kaden snaps his head in Joel's direction. "Relax, Lambert. Just because Danielle isn't falling into your arms doesn't mean she's not interested in someone else."

Joel's face remains a blank slate, but the muscles of his jaw begin to work.

Kaden returns his attention to me. "How about this: after Thursday's scrimmage, we'll go out for a low-key dinner. After the stupid fundraiser is over, then we'll go out on a real date."

If I'm not mistaken, Joel is currently cracking his knuckles under the table.

"Kaden, once again, I appreciate your offer," I state, "but I'm not interested in going out. Not this Thursday. Not at the end of the month. Not ever."

Kaden's grin vaporizes. He gets to his feet. "Don't tell me that you've fallen under the

spell of Mr. Star Point Guard, too. Trust me, Danielle: there are plenty of women waiting in line for Joel, and he doesn't care about any of them."

Joel stands up so fast that he nearly knocks over his chair. Though he appears as unaffected as ever, there's a storm brewing in his eyes as he tells Kaden:

"It has been great to have you stop by. However, Danielle and I need to get back to chemistry. My assignment is due tomorrow."

Kaden faces Joel squarely. His hands are fisted at his sides. "Sure, buddy. I'll let you study." He looks at me a final time. "I'll see you at the scrimmage this Thursday."

Kaden strolls away and exits the shop. Joel drops onto his chair, runs a hand through his hair, and mutters:

"I'm sorry about that, Danielle. It's no wonder that you think all athletes are self-absorbed clods."

I trace my thumb along the side of my cup while I attempt to collect my thoughts. At last, I reply:

"Admittedly, I used to think that. It's not what I think anymore, though."

Joel's eyes return to mine.

Suddenly, part of me feels like this is the moment when more?so much more?could and should be said. However, the other part of me insists there's no point in saying anything. Joel and I will be heading down really different paths soon, which means it's best for both of us to keep things simple. I therefore divert the conversation with:

"So what, exactly, is happening on Thursday with the team?"

Joel sits back in his chair. "It's an event the university hosts every year to celebrate the official start of basketball season. We have a team scrimmage, which is run like a regulation game. The projected starters and first players off the bench play against the rest of the team. It's a chance for the coaches to solidify the roster, and it's a last opportunity for those who don't play much to try to prove they deserve more time on the court."

"Gotcha." My mind is concocting an idea. "So Kaden will be attempting to prove at this scrimmage that he should be the starting point guard, correct?"

"Kaden has been trying to prove that since we were freshmen." Joel peers at me more closely. "You're smiling. What are you smiling about?"

"Oh, nothing." I motion to his textbook. "How about we get working on our next chemistry problem?"

Chapter Ten

I stop in the middle of University Hospital's lobby, peel the visitor's sticker off my sweater, and button up my coat. I then step outside. The late-afternoon air is delightfully crisp, the sun is bright, and the trees are showing off peak autumn colors. This is going to be a perfect evening to attend Lakewood's Fall Festival, which is held at the fairgrounds each year.

I pull my phone from my purse and check the time. My day in the outpatient OBGYN clinic concluded sooner than expected because the doctor had to rush off to care for one of her patients who arrived to the emergency department in early labor. So I have some time before I'm scheduled to meet Savannah at the Fall Festival after she gets off work. I'm about to text Sav that I'll meet her at the Coffee Loft instead, but then I notice that my wallet isn't in my purse. I must have left it in the clinic's break room when I used my credit card to order lunch.

I dash back inside and scurry through the hallways to reach the OBGYN clinic. To my relief, the clinic hasn't yet closed; the receptionists are calling the rest of the doctor's scheduled patients to let them know that today's appointments need to be changed. I give the receptionists a wave before walking fast to the break room. To my relief, my wallet is on the counter where I left it. I stuff it into my bag and retrace my steps out of the clinic and toward the lobby. As I go, I begin composing my text to Savannah, but as I round a corner, I stumble to a stop.

Joel is out in the pediatric play area with a patient.

Through the floor-to-ceiling windows that provide a view of the enclosed outdoor

oasis, I can see Joel standing at one end of the mini basketball court. He's talking to a little girl who can't be more than five. She's dressed in a hospital gown, a big coat, and bright pink sweatpants. Her hair is in pigtails. She has a little nasogastric tube taped to the side of her chubby cheek, and she's holding a small basketball while beaming at Joel with the biggest smile her tiny face can muster. Meanwhile, a man and a woman who must be the girl's parents are watching from nearby and taking photos.

Joel says something to the little girl. She nods with earnestness, and then her brow furrows with concentration as she flings the little basketball up to the child-height hoop. The ball falls through the net for a basket. The girl laughs and claps. Her parents cheer. Joel smiles as he gets down on one knee and hands the girl the ball again. She promptly drops the basketball and throws her arms around Joel's neck and gives him a hug.

I am not crying. I am not crying.

Okay, so I'm crying.

Joel gently slips the little girl's arms from his neck, stands, takes her by the hand, and walks her over to her parents. I'm almost breathless as I watch. This is Joel Lambert. This is the most famous athlete in the region. This is a man who's getting inundated with offers to play sports at the professional level and coach elite college teams. This is a man who's brilliant, thoughtful, humble, and wise.

The man I'm beginning to fall in love with.

I nearly gasp aloud. Yes, in spite of my efforts to fight it, I am starting to fall in love with Joel Lambert.

My heart begins pounding as the epiphany soaks in. I'm falling in love with Joel. In

love . It's the most incredible, petrifying, confusing, glorious feeling I've ever experienced. I . . .

I can't fall in love, though. Joel doesn't want a relationship, and I don't have time for romance no matter how I may yearn for it.

I look again through the windows. Just then, Joel happens to glance in my direction. He does a double take when he notices me, and he breaks into a smile. More fire sparks in my core. I can't help it. Though it has only been twenty-four hours since we were at the Coffee Loft together, I've missed him and longed to be with him again.

Because I'm falling in love with him.

" Wait there ," Joel mouths to me.

Joel goes back to speaking to the girl's parents, and he shakes their hands. The parents take more pictures. Joel then walks with the family through the doors that lead into the hallway of the pediatric wing, and they disappear from view. For a microsecond, I consider running out of the hospital and not looking back. I could pretend that I didn't see Joel ask me to wait. In fact, I should run out of here. I'm on the verge of falling completely in love with him, and putting distance between us would be the prudent thing to do.

Yet I don't go anywhere.

Before I'm ready, I spot Joel exiting the pediatric wing. Through the glass walls, I see him go to the end of the corridor and take a right. A heartbeat later, he reappears into view as he enters the lobby. Soon, other people begin noticing him, yet Joel doesn't seem affected in the slightest. His eyes stay on mine as he comes my way.

"Hi, Danielle." Joel reaches my side.

I gape at him. How in the world am I supposed to chat with the man I've just realized I'm starting to fall in love with?

"Hi," I eke out.

"Were you shadowing a doc today?"

I nod stiffly. "Yes, in the OBGYN clinic."

"How did it go?"

"It was fantastic." I'm speaking in robotic-sounding sentences. I feel like every word coming out of my mouth is embedded with I'm falling in love with you, and I'm petrified that Joel will somehow figure this out. "The attending had to leave early, though, because a patient of hers went into labor."

Joel zips up his jacket. "Does that mean you're done for the day?"

"Yes. I'm done here, anyway." I start walking with him toward the exit. "I'm taking the bus out to the Fall Festival to meet Savannah."

Joel shoots me a curious side-glance. "The Fall Festival?"

I stop in my tracks, causing Joel to do the same. "Don't tell me you haven't heard of it. It's one of the best events of the year."

Joel chuckles at my horrified expression. "Actually, now that you mention it, it does ring a bell. I think that's where my parents took my sisters and me when we were young. These days, I guess I'm so absorbed with sports and school that I don't know what else is going on."

"That I understand." I sigh as we step out the door. "There's a lot I miss out on, too. The Fall Festival, however, is something I make sure never to miss. The hayrides, the caramel corn, the pumpkin patch . . . it's so idyllic that I squeeze it into my schedule even if it means staying up extra late afterward to catch up on studying."

Joel smiles again. "It sounds awesome."

I blink in the sunshine and observe him. If I'm not mistaken, he's being serious. Joel genuinely thinks the festival sounds like a good time. Never would I have thought that macho Joel Lambert would enjoy getting lost in a corn maze. Then again, every day I'm learning there's far more to him than I once believed.

"How about I drive you over to the fairgrounds so you don't have to ride the bus? It's a long way from here." Joel pulls a pair of sunglasses from his jacket pocket and slips them on.

For a second, I can't respond. I already know, of course, that when Joel dons his reading glasses, he's off-the-charts sexy. Now I'm discovering that Joel in sunglasses is a vision of pure hunky-ness. Mercifully, I finally manage to snap out of my daze enough to reply with:

"Thanks for asking, but I'm sure you have schoolwork or basketball to?"

"We had practice this morning, and my schoolwork can wait, just like yours." He grins. "I would be honored to drive you out there, Ms. Gillespie."

I smile in return. "Then I appreciate the offer, Mr. Lambert. Thank you."

Joel is still grinning as he tips his head toward the parking garage. "This way."

We fall into silence as we walk to his car. Once again, though, the silence isn't weird

or strained. I continue to marvel that this famous college athlete makes me feel comfortable being myself . . . and also feverishly, dangerously exhilarated.

It's all the more reason why my heart is going to shatter when we go our separate ways.

Joel's vehicle chirps as he unlocks it, and he opens my door. I blush incriminatingly as I slip past him to get inside. He closes my door, goes around the front of the vehicle, and gets into the driver's seat. He navigates out of the garage and flips on the radio. Classical music begins playing.

"Whoops. Sorry. I'll change the station." Joel reaches for the radio again.

"Please don't change it. I love classical music." I look his way. "It's particularly soothing whenever I'm worried about a test or overwhelmed with everything I need to do."

"I know what you mean."

We share a look that launches fireworks within me, and then Joel goes back to watching the road. I also stare out the windshield, deciding that it's best not to move much or say more; I'm afraid that anything I do may give away that I'm falling in love with him . So instead, the stirring sounds of Tchaikovsky accompany our journey out to the old-fashioned fairgrounds. By the time Joel pulls into the gravel parking lot, the sun is beginning to touch the horizon, giving off stunning hues of orange and pink. Joel parks, and I unbuckle my seatbelt. I'm about to thank him for the ride when my phone pings. I check the new text. It's from Savannah:

I'm going to be late! I have to stay at the Coffee Loft to cover for Nathaniel until someone else arrives to take over. (Nat twisted an ankle playing pickleball, and he's over in the Lakewood emergency department getting x-rays.) I'll get to the festival as

soon as I can. Again, I'm so, so sorry!

"What's wrong?" I hear Joel ask.

I whip up my head. "How did you know something is wrong?"

"The light in your eyes dimmed."

"What?"

Joel smiles once more. "You may not realize this, Danielle, but you have a light in your eyes that changes with your mood. It gets bright when you're excited about something, like when you're teaching or talking about going to med school. It burns hotter when you're determined to make a shot from the baseline. And it dims when something is bothering you."

I stare back at him. Joel notices things about me like that?

I realize he's waiting for me to reply.

"Fortunately, this text isn't regarding anything too serious," I tell him. "Savannah got stuck at work, so she won't be here for a while. That's all."

Joel tugs his keys from the ignition. He takes off his sunglasses and looks me right in the eyes. "Until then, may I accompany you at the festival?"

The fire in my core soars to never-before-experienced temperatures. What should I do? Is Joel merely being gentlemanly because he knows I'm disappointed and alone? Or is there something more to that captivating gaze of his? I have no idea. What I do know, though, is that it could be hazardous for my heart to spend more time with him—especially in a storybook place like this.

Joel's smile fades as my silence drags on. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to impose on something that you and Savannah planned."

"You're not imposing," I hear myself say. "In fact, I . . . I would like to have you accompany me."

Joel's gaze sharpens. He nods once and exits the car. My hands are actually trembling as I put my phone into my purse. Joel comes to my side of the vehicle and opens the door. I get out, my skin tingling as I slide by him.

Joel shuts my door and gives me a playful, slight bow. "So, Lady Gillespie, where do we start?"

I giggle. "Well, Sir Lambert, we need to get tickets."

"Then securing tickets shall be our first conquest of the night."

We walk to the adorable, turn-of-the-century ticket booths that flank the gated entrance into the fairgrounds. Past the gates, the sounds of laughter, excited conversations, and music that's being performed by a bluegrass band are filling the air, and the mouth-watering aromas of cider, corn on the cob, and scones are floating on the breeze.

I'm in autumn heaven.

"Two adults, please. Both students."

I blink back to awareness, and I realize Joel is paying for us.

"Here you are. Welcome to the Fall Festival." The elderly woman inside the booth slides Joel's credit card back to him along with brightly colored tickets. She smiles at

us. "You two make a handsome-looking couple, by the way. I hope you have a delightful time."

My eyebrows blast upward. A couple? Joel and I obviously aren't a couple. Should I say something to correct the lady? I don't want Joel to feel awkward. What should I do? I?

"Thanks. I think we will." Joel calmly slips his wallet into the pocket of his jeans and gives the lady a smile in return. He then faces me and gestures to the open gates. "All right, Lady Gillespie, the tickets have been obtained. Shall we proceed?"

I blush and laugh again. "We shall."

As we weave past the crowds to venture through the gates, Joel lightly rests his hand on the small of my back. His touch causes me to catch my breath with delight . . . it feels so natural . . . so protective . . . so right . It's like he's supposed to be at my side like this. I know it's crazy of me to think this way, but when he does lower his arm back to his side, I immediately find myself longing for his touch again.

We venture farther into the fairgrounds, and I'm soon nearly overcome with wonderment by the acres of vintage autumn utopia; it's as though we've been transported over a hundred years back in time. Twinkle lights, pumpkins, hay bales, sunflowers, and other gorgeous fall decorations are everywhere I look. Lamp posts lining old-fashioned pedestrian walkways are shining brightly. The bluegrass band is performing on a stage. Tractors are pulling huge wagons that are filled with people who are off to enjoy a hayride and the festival's famous corn maze. Two large red barns have their doors thrown open wide and are glowing with the warmth of light from within; the barn at our left is where food and drinks can be purchased, and the barn to the right is filled with autumn décor, lotions, soaps, artwork, and other charming items to purchase. And of course, taking up the majority of the massive fairgrounds are the amusement park rides.

I realize Joel is watching me with a smile.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

"Nothing." Joel keeps smiling nonetheless. "You just look happy right now, and it's . . . well, if I may be honest, it's a bit bewitching."

A current shoots down my back. "I am happy right now, Joel. I'm really happy."

"I am, too." Joel holds my gaze a second longer and then motions to the food barn. "How about an early dinner before trying some rides? Or were you planning on doing dinner with Savannah?"

I snicker. "Joel, allow me to let you in on a little secret: Savannah and I have no problem eating a second dinner or dessert when the occasion calls for it."

"Good to know." Joel tips back his head and laughs as we walk into the food barn. "So what would you like for Dinner One?"

"Does the combination of French fries and apple cider sound weird?"

"Nope. In fact, I'll order that, too."

Joel puts in our food request, adding a hamburger for both of us, and it isn't long before we have our mammoth-sized meals. We head outside and sit at a picnic table that provides a view of the band.

"You mentioned that you used to come here as a child." I pick up my hamburger, barely able to keep it contained in my hands. "So I assume you grew up in the Lakewood region like I did?"

"Yep." Joel wipes his fingers on a napkin. "You and I must have gone to different high schools."

I nod and take the first bite of my gigantic burger. It's scrumptious. I then look at Joel once more and ask:

"What's your favorite autumn memory from childhood?"

Joel seems to think this over as he drinks from his cup. "As a family, we did a lot of great activities, but my favorite was when my dad took me camping for a weekend in late September each year. My mom and sisters never wanted to go?they hated camping?so the weekend became special father-son time."

"That sounds wonderful."

Joel manages to consume about half of his hamburger in one bite while still looking like a gentleman. "What about you? What's your favorite autumn childhood memory?"

"Coming here. My family always came at least once during the week the festival was running. Even my older brother, Dylan, enjoyed it."

Joel's eyes fix on mine more closely. "So this place is really special to you."

"Yes," I respond softly. "Yes, it is."

We watch each other for another moment before going back to our meals. Contented, comfortable silence settles over us. Eventually, we finish our dinners (after I give Joel the rest of my French fries, which he polishes off with ease). He puts our garbage in the nearby recycle bin, returns to the table, and inquires:

"Are you an amusement-park-ride gal?"

I laugh and get to my feet. "Only if the ride isn't scary. A Ferris wheel and a merry-go-round are about my speed."

"Then let's go try them both."

We resume moving through the crowds, and Joel politely greets the people who are excitedly calling his name and taking his photo. As if being here with a celebrity isn't surreal enough, people are calling to me, too, and wishing me luck at the fundraiser. It's more staggering proof that I really have been in the news, and it gives me a whole new level of respect for how graciously Joel handles the constant attention wherever he goes.

We reach the merry-go-round, and before long we're enjoying the ride like two carefree kids. Joel is absolutely dwarfing a purple lion, and I'm grinning from ear to ear while seated upon a multi-colored dragon. Yet again, I realize that here with Joel? here in this moment? everything is astonishingly perfect. Somehow, a hunky sports celebrity and a pre-med book nerd have been able to help each other temporarily cast off the pressures of life and find joy together through simple, old-fashioned fun.

When the ride ends, we make our way to the Ferris wheel. We're guided into one of the baskets and seated side-by-side. The wheel begins moving with its gentle, soothing motion, gradually lifting us toward the star-filled sky and bringing the stunning nighttime scene of the Lakewood region into view.

The Ferris wheel comes to a stop when our basket reaches the top.

The breeze is soft. The evening stars are bright. The sounds of the festival are distant, making the rest of the world seem far away. That magnetic pull I can't fight swiftly fills my body and draws my eyes to Joel's. I find that he's watching me, and the fiery

look in his eyes makes my pulse soar. He rests his arm along the back of the bench. My lips burn with anticipation as he dips his head toward mine.

"Oh my gosh, it's Joel Lambert!"

A woman's call reverberates through the sky. Joel and I lean back from each other and peer over the front of our basket. The call came from a gal who's seated in a nearby basket with her friends. They all squeal and proceed to take a bazillion pictures of Joel, causing people in other baskets start craning their necks to get a view of Joel, too.

"Who's Joel with?" one of the girls wails.

"I don't know! Get her picture!" another gal says loudly enough for Argentina to hear.

Someone in a different basket chimes in. "Isn't she the one who has been in the news?"

"Yes! That's his girlfriend!"

"She's, like, a superstar basketball player!"

"She's so pretty!"

"Hurry, the Ferris wheel is starting to move again; get another photo!"

The Ferris wheel resumes its circular motion while the night air continues popping with the flashes of the cameras. Joel slides close to me and shifts his body to shield me from view, and he says in my ear:

"As soon as we get to the platform, follow me and don't look back."

When we get to the bottom of the ride, Joel motions to the operator that we're ready to get off. The operator opens the door of our basket and pulls back the bar that has been acting like a seatbelt. Moving fast, Joel steps out, takes me by the hand, and assists me onto the platform. Sliding his hand around my waist, he leads me past the hoards of people who are waiting in line and gawking at us.

"That's Joel Lambert and Danielle Gillespie!"

"I saw pictures of them on social media! They're, like, totally a couple!"

"How come we've never seen her at his games?"

"It's a secret relationship! How dreamy!"

Joel doesn't slow his pace until we've left the fairgrounds. We pass the ticket booth and head for the parking lot. He unlocks his car and tugs open my door. I get inside, and he shuts my door hard. As Joel jogs around to the driver's side, I finally exhale and begin to mentally replay what just happened. That was crazy. Seriously, how does Joel handle that everywhere he goes?

My mind clears a little more, and then another thought hits me: did Joel and I almost . . . kiss?

Joel opens his door. He lunges into his seat while shutting the door behind him with emphasis. He turns to me, revealing a fierce gleam in his eyes.

"How are you doing?"

"I'm all right." I work to settle my breathing. "Though I am wondering how you deal with that all the time."

"I've gotten used to it. Usually, people are well-intentioned and trying to be supportive." He rests a hand upon my cheek. "It's you I'm worried about, though."

"As I've said before, you don't need to worry about me. I signed up for this, and I'm not turning back now."

Joel slips his hand from my cheek. "Nonetheless, I'll be glad for your sake when this is over. Once the fundraiser is done, your life will get back to normal."

"Yes," I utter quietly. "I suppose it will."

I turn my head and stare out the window as I wonder: is going back to my old life what I want?

Chapter Eleven

"I don't even know you anymore," Savannah jokes.

I laugh as we stop outside of the university's gargantuan basketball arena. Legions of people are going by us to enter the building. The air is buzzing with pre-game excitement. Signs hanging above the doors announce that this afternoon's team scrimmage marks the official start of basketball season, but signs aren't needed; this event has been advertised throughout the region for days, and from what I heard on the news, the arena is nearly sold-out.

Funny how, up until now, I never knew this annual scrimmage was a thing.

"Okay, okay, it's true," I concede to Savannah with another laugh. "This is the first time in our lives when I've invited you to attend a sporting event rather than the other way around."

"Oh, trust me, I know." Savannah zips up her puffer coat to fend off the autumn chill. "I suppose, though, that falling for a guy does have a tendency to hurl one's personal universe upside-down and make one do strange things."

"I'm not falling for anyone." I quickly tug my coat more tightly around myself. "I'm merely assessing the situation in order to be better prepared for when I have to play here at the fundraiser."

Savannah fixes me with an I-know-better look. "Danielle, we're standing outside a sports arena, and we're about to go watch a men's basketball game at your request.

Not to mention, you've had a star-struck look in your eyes all month, and that look has been particularly pronounced ever since you spent time with Joel at the Fall Festival earlier this week . . . rather romantic time together, I might add, from what you told me about it." She grins. "So don't think for a second that you can fool me into thinking we're here solely for practical reasons."

I'm about to attempt another deflecting reply, but I don't. Savannah is my dearest friend. She knows me better than anyone else does. It's not like I can fool her.

I sigh. "Fair enough. I admit that Joel isn't the conceited jock I assumed he would be. He's . . . wonderful, actually." I have to pause as the dam that was holding back my emotions seems to crack. "Sav, he's smart, thoughtful, caring, and funny. He's incredible."

Savannah clasps her hands to her chest. "Oh, Dan, I'm so happy to hear you say this! I knew there was the potential for something special between the two of you! You guys had chemistry from the moment you met."

My smile fades.

Savannah drops her arms to her sides. Her smile disappears. "What's wrong?"

"Pretty much everything is wrong." I groan. "Joel isn't interested in romance, and I don't have the time to devote to a relationship. In other words, our lives are totally incompatible." I attempt a nonchalant shrug. "Not that it matters. When October is over, Joel will move on, become an even bigger superstar, and forget all about me."

Savannah's eyes are glistening with sympathetic tears, and she gives me a hug that conveys more than words ever could. I smile appreciatively, take a moment to collect myself, and give her a nod to indicate that I'm ready. We then head inside the building, becoming drenched in the lively pre-game anticipation. The sensation

instantly takes me back to all the sporting events I attended with my family over the years. I'm again shocked to realize that, although I never grasped what I was feeling at the time, I had a sports-loving streak inside of me all along. In fact, I kind of think that sports are . . . awesome.

Yikes. Savannah wasn't kidding. Falling for Joel really has turned my personal universe upside-down.

We enter the main part of the arena and stop at the top of a steep staircase to scout out where to sit. Music with a heavy beat is playing loudly. The enormous scoreboard that's hanging from the ceiling is flashing pictures of all the basketball players. Colorful spotlights are being projected onto the court in hypnotizing, swirling patterns. Fans are rushing to claim the best seats. And out on the court, the players are warming up; half of the players are wearing white tank tops with dark blue shorts, and the rest of the players are wearing blue tank tops with matching shorts. The coaches and trainers are walking the sidelines. Hoards of media personnel are clogging the areas under the hoops, and the cheerleaders are performing a dance routine.

It takes me only a second to spot Joel down on the court, and at the sight of him, scorching heat rushes through me. There's no question that he's a man who's totally in his element. He's taking practice shots at one end of the court with the other players who are wearing the white tank tops. His gaze is focused. His movements are intoxicatingly athletic, and the massive muscles of his arms and legs are on vivid display.

"Earth to Danielle."

I jump and snap my head toward Savannah.

"Enjoying the view?" she asks, grinning once more.

I blush. "Maybe a little bit."

"Good for you." Savannah chuckles before pointing to the first few rows of seats that are directly opposite Team White's bench. "Let's head there. If we move fast, we still may be able to get the front row."

In a blink, we're back in motion, charging down the stairs in a frenzied, determined effort to reach the front row before it fills up. We get there just in time to claim the two chairs nearest the aisle, but we stay standing and begin clapping along with the music like everyone else. I smile again as I gaze around the arena. I have no idea how many people this building holds, but . . .

This arena. This massive arena where I'm going to be competing.

My stomach churns.

"Hey, Danielle," I hear a guy say over the ruckus.

I emerge from my thoughts and realize that Kaden has come over to this end of the court from Team Blue's side. He's standing on the edge of the court so he's only a few feet away from where Savannah and I are situated. He's watching me with an arrogant grin while casually spinning a basketball in his hands. He winks as he goes on talking to me:

"I knew you would come. You can't keep away from me, can you?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Savannah hit me with a questioning glance.

"Hello, Kaden," I state his name with deliberateness so Savannah will know he's the guy I've been moaning to her about. The guy who's trying to steal Joel's starting position. The hotshot against whom Joel and I are competing at the fundraiser. The

son of Angela Cox, the woman who wields the power to banish me from the medical world for eternity.

"You're sitting with the wrong crowd, by the way." Kaden tips his head to his right. "Down there is where the students who are cheering for Team Blue are located."

I smile politely. "Actually, this is precisely where I want to sit."

"Suit yourself." Kaden winks again. "I know you're secretly cheering for me, either way."

With a swagger to his step, Kaden heads back to the other side of the court. As he clears from my line of sight, I discover that Joel has stopped shooting, and his eyes are shifting between Kaden's retreating figure and me. Before I can react, Joel resumes firing off shots with his meticulous, steady precision.

"Goodness, that Kaden guy is sure a piece of work." Savannah shakes her head. "In all the years of watching the men's basketball games, I've barely noticed him, but it's evident that he's even more obnoxious than you described."

"Obnoxious is definitely a good word for him." I take off my coat. "And that's why I want to make it clear that I'm not cheering for him."

Savannah's jaw drops as she sees my shirt. "Holy smokes. You're wearing sports merchandise? You're wearing Joel's sports merchandise?"

I giggle at her shell-shocked expression, and I glance down at the t-shirt that I have on. I bought it at the student store yesterday. The shirt has Joel's jersey number on the front and back, and his last name is printed across the back in big writing.

"If Kaden thinks I'm going to cheer for him, I intend to make it abundantly clear that

he's wrong," I state.

"Nice!" Savannah gives me a high-five. "This is one of the coolest things I've ever witnessed you do, Danielle Gillespie. I—"

An announcer's booming voice radiates out from the speakers, letting the crowd know that the scrimmage is about to begin. Everyone bursts into applause. The cheerleaders start a new dance. The lights dim while the spotlights dramatically illuminate the teams' benches. The announcer begins reading off the names of the players, cuing each player to jog to center court. When it's Kaden's turn, he puffs out his chest and struts to the center circle to join the others.

"And now," the announcer declares, "as the starting point guard for Team White, he's last year's leader in points and assists, and he's a three-time first-team All-American! So let's give it up for Joel Lambert!"

The audience goes berserk. The cheerleaders commence with a back-flipping bonanza. The media folks are taking pictures of Joel as though their lives depend upon it. Amidst the frenzy, Joel high-fives his coaches, goes out to center court, and fist-bumps the other players on Team White. He then turns to Kaden, who's waiting at the center circle. Kaden barely shakes Joel's offered hand.

The arena's main lights come back on, and the intense music fades. The players regroup at their respective benches to huddle with their coaches. The announcer explains that each squad will be directed by one of the team's assistant coaches, and the head coach will be watching from the scorekeepers' table.

The five starters for each squad return to center court. The head referee says a few things to the players and then tosses up the opening jump ball—and suddenly, the scrimmage is underway with Joel directing the expected starters against Kaden and others who are fighting to take over a starting position. The court becomes a flurry of

blue and white in what rapidly proves to be a fast-paced and intense game.

Joel is incredible out there. Concentration burns in his eyes as he dribbles, surveys the court, passes, defends, and takes shots from the perimeter. Every time he scores, the fans go ballistic while reporters clamor to get more photos of him. By the end of the first quarter, Joel is the high scorer for all players as well as the leader in assists. Yet there isn't an ounce of ego about him. He has that natural leadership quality that simply can't be taught, and he lets his skills speak for themselves. He really is made for this.

The second quarter is as feverish as the first. Joel makes another trick-pass to Seth, who slams it home to add another two points to Team White's score. Kaden is glaring, throwing elbows, and committing cheap fouls as he scrambles to keep up with Joel.

I tear my attention from the court to scan the audience, and that's when I notice that Felicity and the rest of the women's team are seated a few rows behind Team White's bench. As if she senses me watching her, Felicity peers my way. Her eyes drop to my shirt. I hastily avert my gaze, only to have it land on Angela Cox, who's seated in the VIP row behind the scorer's table. She's accompanied by Elmer, Lindi, and her business-suit-wearing entourage . . . and she's currently skewering me with a pursed-lip, narrow-eyed look.

"Who's the petrifying woman who looks like she wants to cut off your head?" Savannah asks me.

I groan. "I'll give you three guesses, and the first two don't count."

"Oh my gosh, that's Angela Cox?" Savannah's eyes widen with realization. "I've never seen a picture of her, so I didn't know what she looks like."

"Yep, that's her." I cringe. "The president of University Hospital, and the mother of the rival of the man whose jersey I'm wearing."

Savannah grimaces. "That's a lot of drama you have going on."

"Tell me about it." I sigh again.

A blaringly loud horn signals that it's half-time, and Team White is in a commanding lead. Applause rings through the air as the two squads jog off to the locker rooms and the cheerleaders start another routine. Soon, Savannah laughs and points upward while saying:

"Dan! You're on the scoreboard!"

I lift my eyes to the sky-high ceiling, and I blush when I see my face being projected onto the enormous screen. I laugh and wave, waiting for the camera to pan away. Instead, though, the shot of me zooms out to reveal the shirt I'm wearing, and then words appear on the screen:

Joel Lambert's girlfriend!

I freeze. Savannah freezes. Everyone else in our row freezes, too. People start taking my picture; even the reporters swivel their cameras toward me. More and more people are cheering, and all I can do is stand like a statue with an increasingly panicked smile on my face. Mercifully, the players emerge from the locker rooms for the second half, causing the cameras to finally shift away from me while the fans' attention goes back to the court.

"Well, congrats, Dan, you've officially joined the WAG club for the men's basketball team." Savannah sounds extremely amused.

I fix her with a bewildered look. "The what club?"

"The WAG club. You know, the Wives And Girlfriends club." Savannah gestures to my t-shirt.

I roll my eyes. "You're not making this any better."

"Sorry." Savannah puts on a more serious expression. "The good news is that people have short memory spans for gossip. The fundraiser will be over soon, and you won't be subjected to the insane attention any longer."

"I suppose that's true." I'm not sure if I feel relieved or devastated. Or both. "It will be over soon."

The horn buzzes again, and the third quarter gets underway. As the scrimmage resumes, it's evident the players are determined to either cement their positions as starters or overtake those who are ahead of them in the lineup. No one, though, is playing dirty like Kaden. He's hogging the ball and shooting with increasing desperation, fouling harder, and glaring at Joel in a way that makes his mother's icy expression appear saint-like.

The fourth quarter launches with Team White ahead by fourteen points. Joel sinks a three-pointer as if he's just getting started for the night, causing the fans to explode with more fanatical cheers. Kaden is visibly fuming as he receives an in-bounds pass, dribbles across the center line, passes the ball, and runs right into Joel, hurling him to the floor. Joel's head hits the hardwood. The ref's whistle pierces the air as a foul is called on Kaden. Team Blue asks for a timeout, and the players move to the sidelines.

Joel, however, doesn't get up.

As people start realizing what's going on, an anxious silence grips the arena. The

trainers and coaches rush onto the court and surround Joel. I'm barely breathing, and I'm clinging to Savannah's arm as I wait. At last, the throng around Joel parts, and I glimpse two trainers helping him to his feet. The audience cheers. I nearly faint with relief.

As Joel is assisted over to the sideline, the refs start speaking with the Team White coaches. Based on what I recall about the rules, the refs are probably inquiring if Joel will stay in the game and shoot the flagrant-foul shots himself, or if a teammate will shoot them on Joel's behalf.

My focus returns to Joel. He's now talking with the trainers and coaches. Suddenly, he looks past them, his eyes finding mine across the court. He does a double take when he notices my shirt, and he breaks into a dashing grin. He then shifts his attention back to his coaches and signals that he's all right. The fans go crazy. Joel continues grinning as he strides to the free throw line. The ref passes him the ball. He sets up to shoot and glances my way once more. He then calmly makes both foul shots.

The game starts again. Kaden has been benched, leaving Team Blue without their strongest player. The rest of the scrimmage goes quickly, and when the final horn pierces the air, the scoreboard confirms that Team White won by a large margin.

Celebratory music begins playing. Spotlights are gliding around the arena. The cheerleaders hustle back to center court to dance. The fans are chatting excitedly, posing for pictures, and filing out of the building. Media personnel line up to interview Joel and the coaches. Through the mayhem, I see Kaden storming toward the locker room alone. Meanwhile, Angela is also departing with her entourage trailing behind her.

"So are you and Joel still having your own shooting practice after this?" Savannah puts on her coat.

"That was the plan." I sling my coat over my arm. "According to Joel, the arena will remain open for a while, and so we thought it would be a good idea for me to get some experience shooting on this court."

"Sounds good. While you practice here, I'll take the bus back to our place." Savannah's eyes flick past me. "By the way: your rather handsome, famous teammate is on his way over here."

I whirl around. My insides quiver, and my heart skips, when I spot Joel walking our way as he's putting on his warm-up jacket.

"Hi, Danielle. Hi, Savannah. Thanks for coming," Joel greets us in his friendly, genuine manner. It's like he isn't even aware of his superstar status.

I, however, am so flustered and star-struck that I can't utter a sound. Fortunately, Savannah comes to the rescue by quickly piping up with:

"You're welcome. You had a great game."

"Thanks." Joel casually ruffles his hair. "The pre-season scrimmage is always a good time."

A fan calls out Joel's name, causing him to look over his shoulder. Savannah uses the opportunity to nudge me in order to get me out of my mesmerized haze. When Joel faces us again, Savannah promptly begins acting like she's checking her phone. Joel's attention settles on me.

"Hi," I say, finally finding my voice. "How's your head? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. I was stunned, but I didn't black out." Joel shrugs. "Kaden may have tried to get me out of the game, but I'm still here and only slightly worse for wear."

"I'm glad you're all right."

Joel peers right into my eyes. "Thanks."

There's a pause.

Savannah clears her throat. "Okay, I know you two need to practice, so I'll head out. Again, nice game, Joel."

She gives me a last glance, waves to both of us, and starts climbing the stairs for the exit. As I watch her go, I note that the arena has mostly emptied out now, which makes this building seem even more gigantic and intimidating.

"What's on your mind?" I hear Joel inquire.

I look his way. "To be honest, I'm thinking about how big this place is. More specifically, I'm thinking about how crazy it is that I'll be trying to make a basket on this court."

"Whenever I travel to another team's court, I remind myself that no matter the size of the building, the size of the court doesn't alter." Joel smiles. "If you can score a basket in the practice gym, you can score a basket in here, too."

I sense myself relaxing. "That's a good way to think about it."

"I'm glad it helps." Joel is still smiling as he holds out a hand to me.

I place my hand in his, allowing him to assist me down the step to get onto the court itself. He then slips his hand from mine, and we walk to the middle of the court. Our footsteps are the only sound as they echo throughout the cavernous space.

"I stashed some women's basketballs over here before the scrimmage." Joel jogs over to what was Team White's bench, reaches under the chairs, and pulls out a few basketballs.

"Wonderful. Thank you." I set my jacket and purse on the vacated scorer's table, and I face Joel squarely. "So what should we practice first?"

Joel doesn't reply. Instead, he unexpectedly breaks into another grin while passing me a ball.

I peer at him curiously. "What's so amusing?"

"I like your shirt, that's all."

"Thanks." I giggle. "I wanted to make it clear—especially to Kaden—that I'm cheering for you. After all, like you've said, we're teammates, right?"

Joel's gaze becomes deeply focused. He strides across the court, stops right in front of me, and replies:

"That's right."

And just like that, the fire of attraction reignites within my core, and suddenly all I can think about is how much I yearn for Joel to kiss me. My breathing hitches. I don't dare to move or speak. He doesn't say a word, either, but he doesn't have to; the look in his eyes makes it clear that he understands precisely what I'm thinking. He places one hand on my cheek while his gaze moves to my lips. I?

The sound of a locker room door slamming shut reverberates through the air. Joel and I jump apart. I nearly drop the basketball before I sputter:

"H-how about I practice shooting from the right elbow, since that's the basket I can never make?"

Someone clears her throat.

I jump again and spin in the direction of the tunnel that leads to the locker rooms. Felicity is standing there, staring at us closely. How long has she been around? What did she hear? What did she see?

I glance at Joel. His eyebrows rise momentarily, which is the only indication that he's as caught off-guard as I am. He then casually grabs a men's basketball from the nearby cart and starts dribbling while saying:

"Hey, Felicity."

Felicity smiles. "Hi, Joel. Forgive the interruption. Kaden asked me to get his things, since he forgot them when he left after the scrimmage." Her eyes trace over to me and zero in on my shirt. "And hello, Danielle. It certainly was interesting to see you labeled as Joel's girlfriend on the scoreboard during the game."

Joel stops dribbling.

"Um, yes. Yes, it was." I clear my throat. "It was definitely, um, unexpected."

Felicity studies me a beat longer. She then walks to the bench that was used by Team Blue and picks up a bag that's on a chair. She faces us again. "Well, I'll let you two get back to practicing?and whatever else you were doing."

She shows Joel another gorgeous smile before she walks away. A strained quiet follows. I shift toward Joel. His gaze is turbulent as he uses both hands to do a hard dribble of the basketball against the ground. Without him uttering a thing, he makes

his point clear: he doesn't want to get caught up in romance . . . or false rumors of romance. I don't blame him. After all, in many ways, this situation is even messier for him than it is for me.

"We don't have to practice today," I remark. "I'll do my own session tomorrow, and I'll concentrate on shooting from the right elbow then."

Joel exhales. "No, we should practice here while we can. It's a good idea for you to get used to this arena."

And in a blink, Joel and I revert to being nothing but business partners. He's polite and formal. I'm respectfully responsive to his advice. Gone are the shared glances that light fire in my core. Gone are the sizzling smiles, the accidentally-on-purpose moments when our hands brush, and the shared laughter. Gone are the near-kisses that make me believe he might really . . .

It's for the best, though.

Isn't it?

Chapter Twelve

I reach the Coffee Loft and pause outside as a tsunami of feelings slams into me. This is the last time I'm meeting with Joel to study. His final exam based on the classroom portion of his chemistry course is tomorrow. After that, he'll transition to working in the lab, and the TAs there will provide further tutoring assistance. So he won't need me any longer.

My heart squeezes painfully at the thought, and the brutal sensation worsens as I contemplate that this isn't only my last day tutoring Joel. Later this afternoon, we'll be having our final shooting practice. In forty-eight hours, the fundraiser will be over, and then there won't be a reason for us to spend time together any longer.

I realize, of course, that I shouldn't be agonizing over this. I always knew this day would come. Joel is moving on with his fast-paced, sports-centric, soon-to-be-rich-and-famous life. I hope to go on to med school, which means I won't have time for anything but my education. So I suppose it's a good thing that we've kept things cordial but distant since that near-kiss a few days ago. Whether talking about chemistry or practicing on the court, we've maintained a formal interaction style, which has been the right thing to do.

And I've hated it.

I've hated it because?somewhere amidst this zany, confusing, thrilling process of having my life thrown upside-down?I've finished falling in love with Joel. Completely. Totally. Forever. He's the most intelligent, caring, athletic, handsome, witty man I've ever known, and no one will ever take his place in my heart. Looking

back, I think I started falling in love with him well before I recognized it: frankly, I began falling for him on that clumsy, awkward day when I spilled apple cider all over his table.

I laugh, softly and sadly, while tears of both amazement and heartbreak sting my eyes. Who knew that love at first sight was real? I certainly never did before. Now, however, I understand that love at first sight was precisely what happened to me when Joel walked into the coffee shop.

Yet I must tell him goodbye.

My hand is trembling as I open the door and walk inside the shop. Wonderful aromas are wafting through the air, and the fireplace is radiating warmth on this chilly late-October day. I hardly notice the ambience, though. I'm too distracted. Instead, I give a quick smile to the barista, and then I put on my scholarly facade and walk to the table in the back corner. Our table.

Joel is waiting for me. He's wearing a sweatshirt and jeans. His hair looks tousled, as though he has run his hand through it several times. Behind his glasses, I can see darkness under his eyes, like he hasn't slept; this isn't surprising, though, considering he has an exam tomorrow and the fundraiser the next day. I haven't slept much, either. Between my extra shooting practices, tutoring, scrambling to keep up in my classes, and lying awake at night thinking about Joel, sleep has been hard to come by.

"Hi, Danielle." Joel stands and moves to the other side of the table to pull out my chair. "How did your English test go yesterday?"

"I'm relieved to say it went well." I take my seat. "I wasn't as prepared as I like to be, so I'm glad I pulled it off."

Joel goes back to his seat. "All the more reason why I'm sure you're looking forward

to having your life return to normal soon."

Another avalanche of emotion crashes down upon me. How do I respond? There's so much I want to say. There are so many questions in my mind and heart. Do I want my life to go back to the way it used to be? Do I have any other choice?

"Yes, I suppose life will go back to . . . normal." I muster a smile. It's all I can do. "You must be relieved to know your life will normalize, too."

Joel shifts his gaze to the windows. "I'm not certain my life will ever feel normal after this."

He's right, of course. Joel's fame is about to skyrocket as his basketball season gets underway . . . and then he moves on to volleyball . . . and then he decides what he's going to do for his career when college is over. Whatever path he chooses, he'll be a rich, famous, popular, bona fide celebrity.

I set my bag at my feet. "So what would you like to review before your final exam?"

Joel tugs his attention from the windows and refocuses on me. "There are some study questions the professor encouraged us to work through." He reaches to his laptop but pauses. "First, though, Danielle, I want to thank you. Your help these past several weeks has been incredible. You're a gifted teacher, a brilliant student, and a fantastic person. I couldn't have kept up in my class without you."

It's taking everything I have to stop my voice from shaking. "You're more than welcome, Joel. I've been happy to help."

Joel watches me for a long second or two. He then clears his throat, motions to the laptop, and remarks:

"Here's the first review question our professor gave us."

I adjust the basketball in my hands, dip at the knees, and shoot.

The ball spins around the rim and falls out.

I groan and hang my head. Hours and hours of practicing, and I still can't reliably sink a shot from the right elbow of the key.

With a sigh, I shake out my sore arms, jog to the baseline, and grab the ball so I can try again. Thankfully, the courts are fairly quiet this evening, which has given me the chance to practice without feeling too self-conscious. Other than the intramural game that's happening on the adjacent court, the regular gyms here in the Student Activities Building are empty. Go figure. It's eight o'clock on a Friday night, which means most people are out doing something fun. Something social. Something to bring balance into their lives.

Most people, however, don't have a massively publicized, high-stakes fundraiser to compete in tomorrow.

I dribble the ball back to the elbow of the key. Never in a billion years would I have expected to feel comfortable and agile when dribbling—or when shooting from most places on the court—but after endless hours of practice, and thanks to Joel's steady guidance, I feel shockingly coordinated. Perhaps Dylan was right all those years ago; perhaps I did inherit some of the athleticism that runs in our family. Amazing.

I wipe my hands on my baggy shorts and take another shot. I miss.

"Your shooting form looks fantastic," I hear someone with a deep voice remark. "I

mean it when I say that you're as good as the players who participate in walk-on tryouts for the women's team."

I freeze, wondering if I'm merely experiencing auditory hallucinations, and then I whip around. To my shock, Joel really is striding toward me. I haven't seen him since our final shooting practice yesterday afternoon, and I wasn't expecting to see him again until the fundraiser tomorrow. This evening, he's wearing a t-shirt and shorts, and he has a basketball under one arm.

"H-hi," I sputter. "I thought you had your team practice this morning."

"I did."

I glance around the gym. "So what are you doing here now? More importantly, what are you doing in this particular part of the building?" I grin. "After all, this is where the regular students roam; you belong in your fancy intercollegiate practice gym."

Joel chuckles, but his expression quickly grows serious. "I was restless, and so I wanted to come shoot for a little while to clear my mind." He stops in front of me. "And I remembered that you once mentioned how you like to practice in the late evenings when it's not busy, so I came over here hoping . . . I might find you." His forehead creases. "I should have texted you first, though. I'm sorry for interrupting."

"You're not interrupting," I tell him. "I'm glad you came. After all, you're still my teammate . . . at least until tomorrow is over."

Joel nods. Slowly.

My heart burns with how much more I want to say, but instead I change the topic:

"So how did your chemistry test go this morning?"

Joel breaks into another swoon-worthy smile. "Danielle Gillespie, thanks to you, I scored a ninety-six percent on that thing."

"That's fantastic!" I drop my basketball and throw my arms around him. "Congratulations! I knew you would . . ."

Oh heavens.

My arms are intertwined around the back of Joel's neck. He has let go of his own basketball and put his hands on my hips. I can feel the rise and fall of his chest against mine as he breathes. Our faces?our mouths?are so, so close.

Our abandoned basketballs finish bouncing on the floor, and as the sound fades away, all becomes still. I raise my eyes to those of the man I love. His brow is furrowed once again, and that storm is back in his gaze. I slip out of his embrace, pick up his basketball, and pass it to him.

"So how about one last practice, Joel?"

Joel catches the ball, his eyes staying on mine. "One last practice, Danielle."

Chapter Thirteen

"What am I doing, Sav? I must be insane."

Savannah comes up beside me and meets my gaze in the locker room mirror. "You're doing exactly what you set out to do. You're doing something brave, and you're standing up for a cause that you believe in." She gives me a side hug. "I'm more proud of you than I can say."

"Thanks." My voice echoes across the otherwise-empty locker room.

Savannah gives me another encouraging smile, and then I nervously start tying my shoes while my eyes drift around the room. This fancy facility is clearly intended for elite athletes—and I suddenly feel extremely pathetic in my simple green tank top, black shorts, black socks, and off-brand shoes.

I put a hand on my churning abdomen. "Is it a violation of the rules if I puke during the competition?"

"I'm not sure." Savannah chuckles and gets to work fixing my hair into a ponytail, since my hands are shaking too badly for me to do it myself.

"Are there . . . a lot of people out there?" I dare to ask.

"Yep. Even more than were at the men's scrimmage," Savannah replies with calm matter-of-factness. "I—"

The sound of the locker room door being opened causes both Savannah and me to turn around. Felicity strolls in, appearing confident and adorable in her warm-up outfit.

"Hi, Danielle." Felicity shows a cute smile. "Are you ready for today?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." I manage to smile in return. "What about you?"

I cringe as soon as the words leave my mouth. I just asked a starting forward on the women's basketball team if she's ready for a game of HORSE. Of course she's ready. She could do this with her eyes closed.

"Yes, I think I'm quite ready." Felicity puts her expensive athletic bag in a locker. Her eyes scan my non-glamorous outfit. "I'll see you out there."

Felicity leaves, and I drop onto a bench with a moan.

"Am I seriously about to compete against her?"

"You seriously are." Savannah reaches into my cheap bag and hands me my dented water bottle. "And you can do it."

I attempt to drink, but I'm quivering so much that most of the water drips down my chin and onto my tank top, leaving a huge water mark. Fabulous.

"We'll consider that adequate hydration for now." Savannah smiles again and returns the water bottle to my bag. "So whenever you say the word, I'll walk you out there."

I stand up on my wobbly legs. This is lunacy. I'm not a college athlete. I'm going to destroy my chance of getting into med school. I'm about to humiliate myself in front of countless people.

Yet I want to do this. I need to do this. For Joel. For those kids. For myself.

I swallow hard and give Savannah a nod. "I'm ready."

Savannah carries my bag as we leave the locker room. We head down a wide, long, tunnel-like corridor, which is painted in the school colors and adorned with pictures of prior years' sports teams. As we approach the far end of the corridor, which opens up directly at court level, the sounds of loud music and cheering crowds start filling my ears. When we reach the end of the corridor, I stumble to a stop. I tried countless times to envision what this moment might be like, but nothing could have prepared me for this. Nothing.

The whole world is here.

The arena is packed. Spotlights are swishing around the stands. The music is booming. Cheerleaders are performing. Legions of media personnel are lining up under the hoops. Seth and a gal from the women's team are standing at center court, dressed in their respective teams' warm-up outfits, and beside them are carts filled with women's and men's basketballs. To my right, over at the scorer's table, there's a guy wearing a black-and-white-striped referee shirt, and next to him is the same announcer who covered the men's scrimmage. Seated beside the announcer is Angela Cox herself, and she's again accompanied by her entourage from University Hospital.

I'm pretty sure I'm going to faint.

"Danielle."

I hear Joel's voice above the ruckus, and I sense myself grow more calm. Looking over my shoulder, I see him coming from the men's locker room. Though he's the undeniable star of the show, he's dressed simply in a plain t-shirt and black shorts. His affect is cool and composed, yet there's a focused gleam in his gaze. When he

reaches Savannah and me, he smiles at us and remarks:

"Fancy meeting you both here."

"Hey, Joel." Savannah laughs before glancing back out at the court. "Well, I suppose I should clear out." She hands me my bag. "I'll be in the front row with our families and friends. We'll be cheering louder than anyone." She gives me another hug. "You've got this, Dan."

She lets me go, gives Joel a thumbs-up, and darts out of the corridor. Once Joel and I are alone, he faces me. His expression is now difficult to interpret.

"How are you doing?" he inquires.

I exhale slowly. "Panicking beyond belief but still standing, so I'll take it as a win."

"Just being here is a win." Joel brushes my hand with his. "Look at all the attention that has been brought to the issue of the pediatric play area. This is all because of you."

"It's not all because of me. We did this together."

Joel tips his head toward the court. "Then how about we go show everyone what we're made of?"

My fear ratchets up another notch . . . yet my determination does, too.

"Let's do it," I tell him.

We step forward into the blindingly bright lights, and the fans go wild. The cheerleaders begin waving their pom-poms in our direction. The media personnel

point their cameras at us. The spotlights start dancing around where we're standing. I gawk at the scene, still trying to convince myself that this isn't a crazy dream. I'm really standing on this court, and I'm really about to compete.

I'm jarred back to awareness when, through the fray, I notice Kaden and Felicity. They're watching Joel and me from the opposite end of the court. Kaden's eyes are narrowed. Felicity has one hand propped on her hip, and she's smiling at Joel as though there's absolutely nothing else going on.

"Welcome, ladies and gentleman to the fundraiser!" the announcer says into his microphone. "Players, you have ten minutes to warm up!"

More seismic applause rumbles through the arena. I swear I'm no longer breathing as Joel and I head for the chairs that are along the near sideline. We set down our bags and then walk to the hoop on our side of the court. The gal from the women's team, whose jacket reveals that her name is Madison, brings two ball carts over to us. While the music thumps in my ears, Joel and I start taking warm-up shots with Madison athletically retrieving the rebounds.

My first shots are astoundingly bad. I'm drowning in the chaos, the awareness of Kaden and Felicity on the other side of the court, the cameras, Angela's chilling stares, and the sheer number of people who fill this arena. Slowly, though, I'm able to focus a tiny bit better. Though I still look terribly inexperienced compared to the others, at least some of my shots are going in.

"Hey, you're good at this." Madison grabs another rebound and passes the ball to me. "It's too bad we already had walk-on tryouts for the women's team, otherwise I would encourage you come out."

"I appreciate that, but I think one day under the spotlights will be plenty for me." I laugh nervously before I take another shot. It spins around the rim and falls out.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" The announcer's voice fills the air again. "It's time for the competition to begin!" My body lurches. It's time? Already?

Madison escorts Joel and me to the center circle, and Seth leads Felicity and Kaden to meet us. Kaden winks at me before spearing Joel with another fierce glare. Felicity simply resumes batting her eyelashes at Joel like she doesn't have a care in the world.

"Here are the rules!" the announcer goes on. "One player on the starting team will shoot from anywhere between the half-court line and the baseline. If that player misses, he or she gets a letter, and the next player will choose a new shot. However, if the first player scores the basket, the other players must take the same shot. Anyone who misses will be assigned a letter, and the following player will then choose a new shot."

A sudden burst of light from up above causes me to look toward the ceiling. The planetary-sized scoreboard has illuminated. Our names are listed in the left column of a grid, and next to our names are five empty slots for the letters of HORSE to be added. My stomach clenches. My name. On the scoreboard. With three intercollegiate athletes. It's unreal.

"If there's one player left from each team," the announcer continues, "it won't be a sudden-death scenario. A letter will only be accrued if a player misses a shot that his or her opponent made, so . . ."

The announcer trails off, and I look his way. Angela is sliding a handwritten note over to him. His eyebrows rise as he reads it. He then leans closer to his microphone, and adds:

"Also, if it does come down to one player from each team remaining, the option to demand a prove-it shot will be available."

An excited murmur ripples through the crowd. I turn so Kaden and Felicity can't see the bewilderment on my features, and I whisper to Joel:

"What's a prove-it shot?"

"It's a dumb decision, is what it is." Joel is also keeping his voice down. "Instead of shooting when both players are down to their last letter, Player One can choose a place on the court from where Player Two must attempt a basket."

"That doesn't seem fair to Player Two," I point out.

"That's why there's a catch to keep Player One in-check: if Player Two misses, he or she doesn't automatically lose; Player One must make the same shot to win. However, if Player Two makes the shot that Player One demanded, Player Two is the automatic winner. In other words, the risks of demanding a prove-it shot are high, which is why it's rarely utilized."

"Good." Relief washes over me. The last thing I need to worry about is an obscure rule complicating the game.

"Now for the coin toss to determine which team goes first!" the announcer directs.

A cameraman scurries up next to me to project the coin toss up onto the scoreboard. Seth pulls a quarter from his pocket and states:

"Kaden, your mother requested that you be allowed to call this."

A few boos radiate out from the crowd. I manage not to grin.

"Call it before it lands." Seth flips the coin into the air.

"Tails," Kaden says.

The quarter lands at our feet. We all lean in to see it. The video guy shoves his camera down close to the ground.

"It's tails!" Seth picks up the quarter. "Kaden or Felicity will shoot first!"

Intense music resumes playing. The cameraman scurries back to the baseline. At Seth and Madison's direction, the four of us walk to the half of the court where Kaden and Felicity warmed up. Joel faces me once more and asks in a low voice:

"Would you like to go second or fourth in the rotation?"

"Fourth." My mouth is so parched that I can hardly speak. "That way, I can watch everyone else shoot and perhaps learn something from what I see."

Joel nods before we turn back toward our opponents. Kaden signals that he'll be shooting first, and Seth passes him a ball.

"I'll take a three-point shot from the left," Kaden declares, smirking at Joel and me.

I gulp. A three-point shot? Right off the bat? A three-point shot is like heaving a basketball to the moon and expecting it to land in a teacup.

Kaden arcs the ball into the air, and it goes through the hoop with a crisp snap of the net. The audience claps politely. I bite my lower lip while Joel walks to the same place on the court where Kaden just shot from. Joel accepts a pass from Seth, sets up, and releases the ball. He scores the basket, too, and the folks in the stands detonate with cheers. It's now Felicity's turn, but she still seems far more interested in talking to Joel than paying attention, and she hardly glances at the hoop as she shoots. She misses.

"That's an H for Felicity!" the announcer pronounces while the letter appears by her name on the scoreboard.

I dare to breathe. Three-point shot avoided . . . for now.

Joel comes back to my side. "All right, you get to choose the next shot. Pick one of your best; don't worry if you think it's easy."

"Got it." I wipe my clammy hands on my shorts.

Madison passes me a ball. The audience begins chanting my name. Everything is a blur as I move close to the hoop. My brain is frantically replaying what Joel taught me, and I'm begging my muscles to recall everything I learned from my brother years ago as well as what I practiced this month. With unsteady hands, I release the ball. It goes in! The crowd goes crazy. I nearly collapse with relief.

Kaden saunters up beside me. "So a hot chemistry tutor can do layups. How cute."

I don't reply before I slide out of his way, though I know he's right: the shot I chose is ridiculously simple. I suppose that's a good thing for Kaden, though, considering he's distractedly wagging his eyebrows at me as he launches the ball. He misses the shot. My jaw drops. The crowd gasps.

"Kaden with an H!" the announcer states.

Kaden's jaw clenches, and he starts muttering under his breath as he storms off. Joel, meanwhile, sets up a new shot that's also close to the hoop, clearly keeping things within my range. He makes the basket. Felicity gives him a playful nudge and then makes the basket, too. Adrenaline is pumping through me as I take my turn.

I miss. Badly.

Sympathetic moans rise up from the fans. Angela and her entourage start clapping.

"That's an H for Danielle!" the announcer's voice rings out like a thundering curse from the heavens.

Kaden's smug expression returns, though sweat is lining his brow. He ventures beyond the three-point line once more and sinks another basket. Joel preps to take the same shot, but as he starts to shoot, Kaden makes a sudden, slight move in his direction. Joel reflexively adjusts his body in response, causing the ball to veer off-target as it leaves his hands. The ball hits the rim for a miss.

"An H for Joel!"

People start booing at Kaden.

"Kaden, you need to give the shooter adequate room, all right?" Seth is frowning. "That wasn't cool."

Kaden chuckles. "Hey, If Lambert wanted me out of the way, he could have asked."

The crowd is still booing at Kaden while Felicity picks a mid-court shot and drains it. This means I'm next. The arena falls into such a hush that I'm sure people can hear my heart pounding as I shoot. I miss again. Despair sweeps over me.

"An O for Danielle!"

"Aw, that's too bad, sweetie." Kaden gives me another obnoxious wink as he goes back behind the three-point line.

Kaden releases the ball, but he misses this time. The crowd isn't shy about cheering as an O appears by his name on the scoreboard. Kaden glares up at the stands.

Joel drains another low-risk basket. Felicity is chatting at him like the competition isn't even happening as she attempts the same shot. The ball doesn't go in, but she just laughs and resumes talking at Joel like it doesn't matter. Now it's my turn. Sticking to the game plan, I stay near the hoop. I score the basket.

"Okay, this is getting stupid." Kaden's brows are low as he storms up behind me. "It's time to get rid of you guys."

Kaden doesn't even wait for me to clear out of his way before he shoots. The ball clanks hard against the backboard and ricochets away.

"An R for Kaden!"

The audience celebrates. Meanwhile, Angela is piercing Kaden with a rather scary I-paid-a-lot-of-money-for-you-to-play-on-the-best-select-teams-over-the-years-so-you-better-not-fail-me-now look. I kind of feel badly for Kaden.

Joel drains another straightforward shot. Astoundingly, Felicity again barely pays attention when she shoots, and she misses for her third letter. Kaden scowls and begins pacing the floor.

I attempt another layup, and I nearly shrivel with panic as the ball swirls around the rim before dropping in. The fans respond with more applause, and I give them an appreciative wave before I move out of the way. Kaden is visibly seething as he scores the same shot. Joel sinks the basket, too. Felicity saunters up beside Joel, giggles while whispering something to him, and takes her attempt. She misses. While the announcer updates the crowd on the score, Joel comes over to me and says:

"You're doing great."

"It helps that you're selecting easy shots," I reply with a sigh. "Frankly, I'm sorry

you're not able to play by yourself. You would take shots that no one else could make. You would win this thing in a flash."

Joel leans in closer to me. "I don't want to be by myself, though. I want to be with you."

Our gazes hold for a beat before he steps aside. My heart is drumming more wildly than ever as I head to the basket, though I'm not certain if my palpitations are due to the fact that a bazillion people are watching me or due to the way Joel was just peering into my eyes.

I force myself to concentrate as I set up another elementary shot. Mercifully, the ball goes in the basket. Kaden's nostrils are flared, and there's more sweat on his brow as he chucks up an uncharacteristically stiff-looking shot. The ball hits the rim for a miss. That's an S for him. He's cracking under the pressure. I can't believe it.

Kaden huffs out a breath but stays beside me while Joel heads to the other side of the court. As Joel readies to shoot, Kaden unexpectedly drapes his arms over my shoulders. Joel's eyes dart our way. I shrug off Kaden's arm, causing Kaden to chuckle. Joel's cheek muscle twitches, and he hits Kaden with a severe look before putting his attention back on the hoop. However, Joel's gaze remains stormy as he shoots. He misses the basket. Moans rise up from the crowd.

Felicity's eyes dart fast between Kaden, Joel, and me. She waves Kaden over to her. The two of them confer in low voices. Felicity then saunters to the right elbow of the key for her turn. I grow cold. The right elbow. The shot I can't make . . . the shot, I realize, that they know I can't make because they each overheard me say so.

Felicity drains the shot with ease. She glances my way before sliding aside. Nausea is rising up inside me as I trek to the place of death on the court. The arena falls still. I make sure that I do everything precisely right with my shooting mechanics, yet I miss

the basket. Like always.

"An R for Danielle!"

I apprehensively lift my eyes to the scoreboard. Kaden has four letters, Joel has two, Felicity has four, and I have three.

Kaden makes his next shot. No one claps except for the University Hospital entourage. In contrast, when Joel makes the same basket, the fans celebrate. Felicity tosses her ponytail and starts saying something to Joel as she nonchalantly takes her turn. She misses. My eyebrows spring upward.

"Ladies and gentleman, that's Felicity's final letter!" the announcer declares. "Let's show her some appreciation for participating today!"

The crowd claps. Kaden kicks a chair. Felicity gives the people in the stands a wave, bats her lashes at Joel yet again, and walks to the sideline to watch the rest of the event with other members of the women's team. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that she's so carefree. This really has been nothing more than a game to her . . . and a chance to make googily eyes at Joel.

I snap back to attention when I remember it's my turn to choose the shot.

The arena gets tensely quiet. My body is shaking as I attempt another basic basket. The ball falls out of the hoop, and it's like the world crashes down around me. That's my fourth letter. One more miss, and I'm out of the competition, too.

Kaden's face is blotchy as he goes to nearly the half-court line and hurls up the ball like a madman. It actually goes in. The crowd gasps in amazement. My chest clenches. Joel will undoubtedly make the basket, but after he does, I'll have to take the shot . . . and I'll miss, which means I'll be out.

As Joel gets ready to shoot, he glances at me and grins. He then releases the ball, though it's not with his usual smooth shooting motion. The ball contacts the rim and falls away for a miss, giving him another letter. I gawk at Joel as he comes over to me.

"You missed on purpose, didn't you?" I demand softly.

Joel shrugs. "I had a letter to burn, and I'm not about to let my teammate get eliminated because of Kaden's Hail Mary shots."

I smile. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." Joel breaks into a grin of his own.

I accept a pass from Madison and take a jump shot close to the hoop. It goes in, leading to more celebrating among the fans. Kaden is breathing hard and fast as he takes his turn; he sinks the shot. Joel signals for a pass from Seth, but Kaden hastily snatches a ball out of one of the carts while saying:

"Hey, Lambert, take this one, buddy."

Kaden hurls the ball at Joel with bullet-like speed and force. Joel spins in Kaden's direction, but it's too late; the ball slams into the tip of Joel's right pointer finger. Joel lets out a moan of pain, drops the ball, and grips his right hand in his left. There's a split-second of stunned silence, and then the fans start booing louder than ever at Kaden.

Horried, I sprint to Joel's side. "Are you okay?"

"Well, I have a finger that's severely sprained or possibly broken." Joel wincingly attempts to move his hand.

I glance at Kaden; he's watching Joel and me with a victorious grin. Joel notices Kaden, too. Clearing his throat, Joel empties his face of emotion, rolls back his shoulders, and picks up the ball. Everyone in the stands gets to their feet and cheers. Kaden's grin falters. Though Joel is acting like nothing is wrong, however, I see him flinch as he shoots. The ball clanks off the rim for a miss.

"It looks like that injury is affecting Joel's shot!" The announcer sounds genuinely distressed. "That's an S for him!"

I do a panicked check of the scoreboard. Joel, Kaden, and I are all on our last letter.

"Stay with the plan," Joel says to me while bracing his arm against his side. His finger is becoming more swollen and purple by the second. "Pick a shot that'll keep you in the game. Make Kaden prove himself. He's rattled."

I nod and find a spot on the court. Hardly breathing, I bend at the knees and send the ball into the air. It bounces on the rim once . . . twice . . . and falls in. Thank goodness.

Kaden easily makes the same basket, and there's a collective groan of unmasked disappointment from the fans. Seconds later, though, everyone resumes cheering as Joel prepares for his turn. His finger looks terribly painful, and his movements are guarded and jerky. Gritting his teeth, Joel attempts the shot. The ball circles the rim and falls out.

I freeze. The audience goes silent.

Joel is out of the competition.

"Ladies and gentleman, let's hear it for Joel Lambert!" The announcer's tone makes it clear that he's as stunned as I am. "Now we're down to Kaden and Danielle!"

Joel returns to my side, and he actually grins. "Well, partner, it's up to you now."

I shake my head. "Joel, I can't?"

"You can." Joel gazes right into my eyes. "You practiced and prepared more than anyone."

His earnest gaze makes my heart reignite with determination. I pull in another breath. I can do this. I. Can. Do. This.

The crowd is cheering. More adrenaline is pounding through me. The cameras are tracking my every move as I set up for a super-safe layup. I stare up at the hoop. Even from here, it seems a thousand miles away.

I have to make this basket, though. I have to.

I shoot. I miss.

I missed a layup.

I'm out.

"Remember, folks, that when there's one player left from each team, there's no sudden death," the announcer proclaims. "This means Danielle isn't out of the competition, but Kaden gets to set up the next shot."

The audience explodes with more applause, and the cheerleaders are doing flips. Working to catch my breath, I beeline for Joel's side. I'm still in this. We still have a chance. It's a tiny chance, but it's a chance.

Joel has been given an ice bag by a trainer. While holding the ice upon his injured

hand, he tells me:

"Kaden is crumpling under the pressure so much that he isn't thinking straight. I've never seen him deteriorate this badly, but considering he's carrying the weight of his mother's hospital on his shoulders, I'm not surprised. I have no idea what he'll try next."

The arena falls back into an unsettled quiet as everyone waits on Kaden, who's standing near the center circle and wiping his brow. At last, he raises his voice and declares:

"I'm demanding a prove-it shot."

Chaos erupts.

"Ladies and gentleman, Kaden is going to risk it all on a prove-it shot!" The announcer's tone has reached maximum melodrama. "He'll choose where Danielle must shoot from. If she misses, and then he makes it, Kaden wins. However, if Danielle makes the shot, she wins the competition!"

I am rooted in place, numb and still trying to process what's happening, when Kaden looks directly at me with another cocky smile and adds:

"And I want Danielle to shoot from the right elbow of the key."

A whooshing sound fills my ears. My head gets light. The arena suddenly feels ten times larger, and the lights seem a thousand times more blinding.

The right elbow.

An easy jump shot for a real player, but a shot I cannot make. I should have known. I

should have realized he would force me to shoot it.

"Danielle."

I hear Joel's steady voice above the commotion, and I look up at him.

He's searching my face closely. "What's the hardest exam you've ever taken?"

"Huh?"

"What's the hardest exam you've ever taken?"

"Probably the MCAT." I have no idea why we're talking about academics right now.

"It covered several topics, it was a long exam, and without a great score, there was no way to be competitive when applying to med school."

"And how did you do on the MCAT?"

I'm still peering at him in bewilderment. "Really well, thankfully."

"And you did well because you were prepared and you blocked out distractions during the test, right?"

"Yes. I . . ." I trail off, and I smile. "So what you're saying is that this is another MCAT."

"Exactly. You're prepared. You have everyone's support. Now you just need to go out there, block out the noise, and ace your exam."

I breathe in and out a few times, and then I let my eyes drift to the front row. I see Savannah and her family members cheering. My parents and older brother (who I

didn't even know had flown into town for this event) are on their feet. Friends, neighbors, and coworkers are calling out encouragement. I smile again, and I look up at Joel once more. He gives me a nod. I then start walking toward the key.

It's pure pandemonium in the arena, but I'm no longer noticing. The cameras are following my movements, yet I don't see them anymore. Madison towels off a basketball and passes it to me. I lock my attention on the hoop. I exhale slowly, imagining myself sitting in a crowded lecture hall on exam day. Soon, a familiar sense of in-control quiet settles over me. The world around me fades. I dribble the ball once . . . twice. I prop the ball in my hands. I bend at the knees. I close my eyes, knowing I've prepared and practiced this shot countless times. I've done my studying. My body knows what to do. I don't need to over-think this. I reopen my eyes. And I shoot.

The ball flies through the air in a journey that seems to take forever.

It swishes through the net.

I made the shot.

Joel and I won the competition. The pediatric play area is saved.

The world comes back to life around me. Everyone is cheering. Reporters are charging at me with microphones and cameras. My friends and family members rush the court . . . actually, it appears the whole student body and the entire Lakewood population is spilling out onto the hardwood. A blink later, I'm completely swallowed up by the throng. Camera flashes are hitting my eyes. People are shouting questions. Confetti (confetti!) is falling from the ceiling. Dramatic, anthem-like music is playing. The cheerleaders are doing a dance routine.

Suddenly, Joel is pushed through the throng to my side.

"Joel, how do you feel about saving the pediatric play area?" a reporter yells.

Joel looks right at the reporter. "I didn't save the pediatric play area. Danielle Gillespie saved it. She saved it with her determination, athleticism, and bravery."

The cameras swivel to me. I stare into the lenses, racking my brain for something to say. Before I can muster a remark, however, the crowd parts, revealing that Angela Cox is coming straight toward me.

Everyone backs up?everyone but Joel, that is; he stays right at my side. As I watch Angela getting closer, my stomach sinks. This is it. This is when I'm going to be eliminated from contention for med school and residency. This is when everything I've worked and sacrificed for will be destroyed.

Angela reaches me and stops.

And she smiles. A real smile.

"Danielle Gillespie," Angela says, miraculously not seeming to care about the cameras, "you've certainly put a wrench in the works as we're attempting to establish the hospital's budget for the next few years . . . and I thank you for doing so. Sometimes numbers make sense on a spreadsheet, but in real life, those same numbers don't make sense at all. So thank you for making us re-think our plan." She holds out a hand. "If you ever need a letter of recommendation, don't hesitate to ask me. Anyone who has the moxie to do what you've done is the type of person I want caring for me and my loved ones."

This cannot be real. This cannot be happening.

I'm trembling as I shake Angela's offered hand. "Thank you."

"You're more than welcome."

Angela walks off. I stare after her until I see Kaden pushing his way past the crowds to reach where Joel and I are standing. Joel takes a step nearer to me. When Kaden gets to us, he looks from Joel to me and back to Joel. He then says:

"Nice game, you guys. To be honest, I'm glad you won. That play area at the hospital needs to stay, no matter what Mom and her administrators may have thought."

Joel grins and uses his good hand to give Kaden an affable fist-bump on the shoulder. "Thanks, pal. I'm looking forward to another great season with you."

"Likewise." Kaden shows us a genuine smile in return and saunters off.

Before I can catch my breath, I become surrounded again by family, friends, community members, reporters, and fellow students. People are asking for my autograph and requesting to take selfies with me. More interview questions are hurled my way. I have no idea how much time passes before I manage to speak with everyone, pose for all the photos, and thank folks for coming. Finally, though, the crowd thins out. Only then do I realize that Joel is gone. Emotion thickens my throat as I slowly turn in a circle, taking in the scene. Joel stepped aside to allow me to have the spotlight, but this means I didn't have the chance to tell him goodbye.

Some of the arena's lights are shut off with a resounding clang.

This month is over. My time with Joel is done. Amidst all this unbelievable joy, I feel my heart break.

Chapter Fourteen

"I can't look at my score." I shove my phone into Savannah's hand. "I have my test result pulled up, but I need you to tell me what it is. And don't sugarcoat it."

Savannah halts alongside me in the middle of the campus square. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." I hide my hands in the pockets of my coat. It's November first, and the sunny, crisp part of fall has abruptly given way to the chill of late autumn. "I was a frazzled mess during the whole exam, Sav. I know I bombed it. I just need you to tell me exactly how bad my score really is."

I drop my eyes to the ground, waiting with dread. Today's biology test was one of the last scores that will go on my scholastic record before I start med school interviews next month. This test was profoundly important, yet over these past forty-eight hours since the fundraiser, I haven't been able to study. I haven't been able to concentrate on anything, for that matter. Instead, I find myself staring out windows and pondering how rapidly my life has returned to its predictable, structured routine—and how, instead of being happy, I'm miserable. I don't know if I'll ever be content as the person I used to be.

"Okay, here goes." Savannah looks at my phone. She frowns. "What score, exactly, were you expecting?"

I moan. "I don't even know."

"That's good." Savannah grins. "Because you got a ninety-nine percent."

I snap up my head. "What? Really?"

"Really." Savannah laughs and gives me back my phone. "You know, maybe being less absorbed in your studies worked in your favor."

I stay quiet. Strangely, I wonder if Savannah is right. Perhaps this is yet another example of something that I learned last month: being so one-dimensional and perpetually absorbed in my studies isn't necessarily always for the best.

Savannah grabs a pair of mittens from her bag. "Yikes, it's cold. I bet it's going to be a busy shift at the Coffee Loft this evening. Do you want to ride the bus over there with me before you head home? I'll make you an Autumn Cider Swirl."

"Thanks, but . . . no." I experience a painful squeeze in my chest. "I think I'll just head to the apartment."

Savannah's brow furrows. "I'm sorry. That drink probably reminds you of . . ."

"Joel?" I finish for her with a sigh. "Yes, it does. It always will."

Savannah's eyes drift around the campus square, which is dotted with the last of the leaves that have fallen from the trees. "You really haven't heard anything from him since the fundraiser?"

"I really haven't." I shrug. "There's no reason for me to hear from him, though. I'm sure he saw on the news, like I did, that University Hospital announced it will not only keep open the pediatric play area but fund some significant upgrades. Plus, Joel is in the throes of regular-season basketball now, and he's deciding whether he wants to go pro or become a college coach after graduation." I try to smile. "So there's definitely no reason he would interact with a meager tutor anymore."

Savannah hugs me. "I understand how badly it hurts to have your heart broken. I wish that I knew some way to make the ache go away. All I know is that you deserve nothing but total happiness, and I'm certain you'll have it one day."

I blink back tears. "Thanks, Sav."

Savannah steps back and checks the time on her phone. "I suppose I need to go to work. If you change your mind, stop by the Coffee Loft, all right? I'm there until eight."

"Okay."

Savannah walks away. I watch her go, and then I gaze around where I'm standing. I don't have another big exam for several days. I'm not scheduled to work at the tutoring center until tomorrow. The fundraiser is over. I don't even have a pre-med meeting to attend.

All at once, I feel very aimless and alone.

I wipe from my cheeks a few tears that I hadn't realized were falling. Yes, I still want to go to med school; I'm more excited than ever about the prospect of becoming a doctor. However, the whirlwind of Universe-toppling experiences that I went through last month made me realize that a medical education isn't all I want to have to sustain me over the next several years. While I used to believe that I would be content to keep my heart on the shelf until after residency, I now understand how wrong I was. This past month made me realize that if you truly love someone, you'll do whatever it takes to make that person the top priority in your life. It's not about perfect timing; it's about finding the person who's perfect with and for you. And such a person makes you want to bring changes into your life because you know it's completely and totally worth it.

I figured this out too late, though, but I suppose it doesn't matter. I'm only part of the equation. Joel doesn't want romance, and given the incredible future that's in store for him, and his noble reasons for staying single, I respect his choice with all my heart.

Lost in my thoughts, I wander to the bus stop and board the first bus that comes by. I barely pay attention to the route, and the next thing I know, I'm getting off at the fairgrounds. The fairgrounds where Joel and I spent a wonderful evening together at the Fall Festival. An evening that made me wish there might be a way . . .

There isn't a way, though.

I exhale hard. I don't know why I came here, but I also don't want to leave. So I pass through the unlocked gates and enter the fairgrounds. The Fall Festival is over, leaving this lovely place empty except for the few people who are currently strolling the manicured grounds, which act as a park for the community when the property isn't otherwise in use. I throw my scarf around my neck and begin walking the tree-lined paths, trying to clear my head.

My phone pings. I retrieve it from my bag and check my new text. The world tilts underneath me. It's a message from Joel:

Any chance you're available for a chemistry question?

My heart sparks and dances, but I sternly instruct myself to stop being ridiculous. Joel is reaching out for help with his schoolwork, that's all. Nonetheless, my hands are shaking as I text back in a professional, tutor-like way:

Certainly. When would be a good time to call?

Joel replies:

Actually, this particular chemistry question is better discussed in person. Is there a time when you might be available?

I hesitate, my fingers hovering over the screen. Frankly, I'm not sure if I'll be able to handle seeing Joel again. My emotions have already reached train-wreck status, so getting together with him and pretending like I'm not madly in love with him will be almost more than I can bear. Yet if Joel needs help, I'll assist him, no matter how tough it'll be for me. I text him back:

I'm available through the end of today, if there's a time that works for you.

I swear I don't even have a chance to breathe before he responds:

Where are you right now?

My cheeks get warm. He's going to think I'm an idiot, but I tell him the truth:

At the fairgrounds taking a walk. How about I catch a bus and meet you at the Coffee Loft?

Joel's response is immediate:

Stay there. I'll be at the fairgrounds in less than ten minutes.

I read his text a few times to make sure I understood it correctly. Joel wants to meet here? At the fairgrounds? To discuss chemistry? And if he's going to be here in less than ten minutes, that means he's already in this neck of the woods. Why would he be out here?

I sigh and return my phone to my bag. I can't get distracted with attempting to answer my own questions. I need to prepare for acting not-in-love with Joel when I see him.

Ignoring the way my heart is galloping, I hike my bag strap higher on my shoulder and resume walking as though I don't have a worry in the world. However, though I appear composed, I'm falling fast into the vortex of my swirling thoughts. I don't know how much time is passing, but the lamp posts are coming on, glowing cozily against the late-afternoon cloud cover. The breeze is stirring the trees. There's a hint of campfire aroma in the air, and I?

"Hello, Danielle."

I stop in my tracks when I hear him behind me. I pull in a stabilizing breath and then turn around to face the man I love.

Joel is coming toward me with steps that are strong and purposeful. The wind is tousling his hair. He's cleanly shaven. His jacket, blue shirt, and jeans are emphasizing his tall, muscular physique. And his gaze is fiery and locked on me.

"Hi, Joel." I'm becoming a bit weak in the knees. "How's your injured finger?"

"It's okay, I'm thankful to say." Joel stops in front of me. He raises his hand to reveal that his right index finger is in a small splint. "After the fundraiser, I went to the Lakewood Medical Center emergency department. X-rays showed the distal joint was dislocated, but there wasn't an obvious fracture. The ED doc, Ned Godfrey, relocated the joint and got me splinted up. I have an outpatient ortho appointment tomorrow with someone named Doctor Briggs, and I should get officially cleared to practice soon."

"I'm so glad."

"Thanks. I'm pretty relieved myself." Joel pauses. "So how have you been?"

"I've, um, been all right." I opt, of course, to leave out the hugely significant fact that

I've been absolutely pining for him. "I had a biology exam today, and I'm glad it's over."

Joel grins. "Let me guess: you aced it?"

"No, I . . ." My face gets incriminatingly hot. "Okay, I got a ninety-nine percent. Trust me, though: I was shocked. The last couple of days, I've barely been able to focus on studying because . . ." I fall quiet and avert my gaze.

"I haven't been able to concentrate on much of anything, either," I hear Joel remark.

I dare to look at him once more. Joel is watching me closely. He takes a step nearer, lowers his voice, and goes on:

"I can't concentrate because I can't stop thinking about you, Danielle. I can't stop thinking about how much I want to be with you, if by some miracle you will give me the honor."

It takes a beat for his incredible words to soak in, and then it's like lightning strikes my soul. My senses come wildly alive. A blaze ignites in my core. Tears of joy brim in my eyes.

"Oh, Joel," I tell him softly, "I want nothing more than to be with you, too."

Joel breaks into the most handsome smile I've ever seen. He takes my hands in his, and his touch causes the heat within me to spread through my whole body. His eyes are glinting in the light of the setting sun as he continues searching my face.

"For weeks I've known you were determined not to pursue romance, and I didn't want to do anything to cause confusion or get in the way of your education and career." Joel works down a swallow. "Yet my heart refused to let me rest; it kept insisting that

I might still have a reason to hope. That's why I needed to find you. As I said, I have a particularly perplexing chemistry question that only you can answer." He smiles again. "And my question for you is this: do you really think it's possible that a gorgeous, brilliant, kind, determined, brave woman could ever be interested in a foolish college athlete who has fallen completely head-over-heels for her?"

I laugh quietly as my tears drift down my cheeks. "That's an interesting chemistry question, indeed. Not long ago, I would have said that such a chemical reaction is impossible. However, I've recently discovered that not only is such a reaction possible, it's the most powerful, wonderful, and perfect reaction I've ever known."

Joel keeps smiling as he holds my hands to his chest. "I'm glad to hear you say that because I've reworked the equation over and over again, in a thousand different ways, and every time I've come to the same conclusion: I am desperately and devotedly in love with you, and there's nothing I want more than to be with you, if you'll have me."

My breathing catches as my heart begins to soar. "Joel, you're the most wonderful, caring, humble, intelligent man I've ever known." My voice is trembling with emotion. "And I'm absolutely and forever in love with you."

Joel goes totally still for a second, and then his gaze sharpens in a way that makes my insides scorch even hotter. In one fast movement, he lets go of my hands, wraps an arm around my waist, and pulls me to him. I grab his shirt, my lips sizzling with desire. He puts his free hand on my cheek, dips down his head, and connects his mouth to mine.

Heavens.

I thought Joel's moves were suave, strong, and sexy on the basketball court, but they're nothing—absolutely nothing—compared to the way he kisses.

Our kiss deepens as we continue sharing all the feelings we've been secretly holding onto for so long. I've never felt such bliss. Of all the things in my life that I've been certain of, I know this is the most perfect and right thing of all.

When our kiss is done, Joel tenderly brushes his lips against my forehead and then tips back his head to rest his eyes on mine. With another dashing smile, he tells me:

"Did you know that I began falling in love with you the moment you spilled that drink on me?"

I blush as I laugh. "Looking back, I realize that was the day when I started falling in love with you, too. I never used to believe in love at first sight, and I didn't want to admit to myself that it was happening, yet I began falling for you all the same."

Joel cups my face between his hands and kisses me again, this time in a slow, lingering way that nearly makes me collapse completely into his arms. He then says:

"As the days went by, it grew exponentially harder to stop myself from telling you how I felt. I only managed to keep the truth concealed because you had said that you weren't interested in a relationship, and also because I didn't want to drag you into this media-crazy, travel-heavy, sports-centric life of mine. So although I was falling more in love with you every day, and it was tearing me apart not to tell you how I felt, I remained quiet. I even made myself walk away after the fundraiser; leaving you that day was the hardest thing I've ever done." He shakes his head. "Since then, I haven't been able to think of anything—of anyone—but you. As I replayed in my mind all the times we were together, and all the moments when I dared to think that you wanted me to kiss you as badly as I yearned to do it, I finally dared to let myself hope. As foolish as I knew it was, I hoped that perhaps your feelings about romance had changed as drastically as mine had. Today, I could no longer stay silent. I had to find you. I had to confess the truth." He takes my hands back in his, raises them to his lips, and kisses them. "Danielle, I'll move heaven and earth to be with you. I'll change

my whole life, if you want me to. I'll do whatever it takes. I love you."

I sense more tears of ecstasy drifting down my cheeks. "My perspective on romance has completely changed, too. I've come to understand that love doesn't need to be delayed, and hearts don't need to be put on the shelf, if the right person is in your life. Because of you, Joel, I now believe that when you truly love someone, that's all that matters."

Joel draws me into his secure, wonderful embrace. "I know there are a lot of questions about our futures that we can't yet answer. I'm not worried, though. I know we'll make this work."

"I know it, too." I beam at him with pure, unrestrained love.

Joel begins kissing me once more, and I wrap my arms around him and kiss him in return.

"Danielle Gillespie, I love you," he says in my ear.

"I love you, too, Joel Lambert."

Our eyes meet . . . and then our lips meet again.

And the chemical reaction is absolutely perfect.

Source Creation Date: August 14, 2025, 6:42 am

"Danielle Lorraine Gillespie."

A professor in the College of Life Sciences, who's dressed this evening in dignified graduation regalia, says my name into the microphone. The sound reverberates out of the humungous speakers and across the university's football stadium. My fellow graduates, who are seated in the countless rows of chairs that are in front of the stage, applaud and cheer along with the sea of family members and friends who fill the stadium's bleachers. With a smile on my face, and dressed in a fancy graduation robe of my own, I make my way across the brightly lit stage. I accept my ceremonial diploma from the dean of the college and turn so the professional photographer can take my picture. I next look to the stands and wave at my parents, Dylan, Savannah's family members, Joel, and Joel's family. My dad is video recording, my mom is taking pictures with her phone and blotting tears of delight from her eyes, and Dylan? who's usually the master of keeping his emotions under wraps?is grinning and clapping loudly. Beside them, Savannah's family is also cheering me on with the same love that they've always shown me over the years. Joel's parents and younger sisters are applauding boisterously, too. And Joel . . .

Goodness, I love that man.

Joel is on his feet, clapping and smiling in that way of his that gives me exhilarating shivers. As if his smile wasn't alluring enough, he's looking strikingly handsome in his button-up shirt, slacks, and glasses that he knows I go crazy over. Yes, he might be built like Hercules, but he's a sexy computer nerd at heart, and it's one of the countless things about him that will forever make me weak in the knees. As of yesterday, he's also an official college graduate; last evening, Savannah and her family, my family, and I joined Joel's family here to watch him graduate from the

College of Computer Sciences magna cum laude.

Still facing my loved ones, I shift the tassel that's hanging from my graduation cap from the right side to the left. I then make my way down the steps to leave the stage. I join Savannah, who has been waiting for me since her name was read. Savannah waves her diploma holder in the air. I laugh and give her a hug.

"We did it, Dan!" Sav declares. "We're officially college graduates!"

"Can you believe it?" I'm smiling so much that my face hurts. "Who knew that when we met all those years ago, we would be making this incredible walk together one day?"

"I knew." Savannah gives my hand a squeeze. "From the moment we met, I knew we were destined to be best friends."

Tears brim in my eyes. "You're right, Sav. We were definitely destined to be best friends."

We link arms and make our way back to our chairs, and we resume applauding for the other graduates who are crossing the stage. I continue smiling as I soak in this perfect moment. The warm June evening is being accented by a gentle wind. The stadium lights are shining prettily against the growing hues of twilight. The air is filled with a stirring sense of joy, pride in the past, and excitement for the future. Though I've dreamed of this day for so long, this is better than I ever imagined, and it's even more incredible to ponder what's to come.

Savannah and I are both graduating summa cum laude , and we're preparing to start med school right here in the Lakewood region this autumn. There is no way to adequately describe the elation we felt when we each learned that we received early acceptance into our number-one choice for med school. We're thrilled to be staying in this area that we love so much while venturing forth into the next stage of our training

and education. I'm profoundly thankful that I'll have my best friend at my side through it all.

I break from my thoughts, and my eyes drift back to the stands, landing on Joel. Like he senses me watching him, he meets my gaze. He winks as he grins. I smile adoringly back at him. Being with Joel these past seven months has brought more meaning and wonder to my life than I knew was possible. As strange as it sounds, I can hardly remember what it was like not having him as part of my world. He shows me the true meaning of love in all that he says and does. He's an anchor, a confidant, and a never-failing support. He's quite simply my knight in shining armor. With Joel alongside me, the other pieces of my life fit into place better than before. Amazingly—yet exactly as we both intuitively sensed on that autumn day when we professed our love to one another—his sports, my plans for med school, and academics haven't driven a wedge between us; to the contrary, as we've supported one another, it has brought us closer while making our lives more rich and fulfilling.

I loved attending his home basketball games and volleyball matches throughout these past several months. Who knew that cheering wildly at sporting events was so much fun? Along with all the games and practices he starred in, Joel was constantly in the media, too, and for good reason. During basketball season, he led the conference in points and assists, he was one of the top scorers in the nation, he made the All-American first team, and the school's team went far in the post-season tournament. Right after basketball was over, Joel hopped into volleyball season. He was the nation's top libero, and the team made it to the national semi-finals. Through it all, though, Joel remained as humble as ever, and he made sure that I never felt bothered or intruded upon by the media madness.

I show Joel another smile before I return my attention to the stage. It isn't long before the ceremony officially concludes. While the crowd applauds, Savannah and I get to our feet with our fellow graduates and toss our caps into the air. I laugh with glee at the sight. Music starts playing over the speakers. The guests come onto the field to congratulate their loved ones. Savannah's family members give me enthusiastic hugs.

My parents make Savannah and me pose for approximately three billion photos. Dylan gives me a huge hug while lifting me off the ground. Joel's family members warmly congratulate me. Eventually, Savannah gets wrapped up in taking more photos with her family, and Dylan and my parents begin chatting with Joel's family while comparing pictures from yesterday's and today's ceremonies. While everyone else is busy, I turn toward Joel. He takes my hand, and suddenly it's like it's just the two of us.

"Congratulations." Joel kisses me in a way that's tame for being in the presence of family yet charged with so much passion that it makes me quiver in the most titillating way.

"Thanks, hon." I stand on tiptoe and give him another fast kiss. "You know what's funny? While the ceremony was wrapping up, I realized that I have no idea what I'm going to do with myself for the next several weeks. I have nearly three months before med school starts. That's the longest break I've had from studying since . . . well, since elementary school." I laugh. Slowly, though, my laughter fades. "I'm glad to have the time off, though. It'll allow me to spend as much time as possible with you before you . . . move away to start your new coaching job."

Joel's expression grows serious, mirroring mine. "Danielle, regarding that coaching job, there's something I need to tell you, but I wanted to wait until tonight to do so."

"Okay." I work down a swallow. "Do they want you to move out there sooner than originally planned?"

I'm doing all I can to appear happy. After all, I want nothing more than to support Joel in his career endeavors, just like he supports me. A few months ago, when he officially announced that he had decided not to play basketball professionally and had instead accepted an incredible coaching job at a Division One university, I couldn't have been more thrilled or proud. However, the job is on the other side of the country, which means we will be transitioning to a long-distance relationship. I know

we'll make it work, but I'll miss him desperately.

"No, actually, I'm not going to move away sooner than planned." Joel is searching my face. "I'm not moving at all, in fact."

"What?" I peer at him in stunned confusion. "What do you mean? Did the job fall through?"

Joel shakes his head. "No. A couple of days ago, I told them that I had changed my mind, and I formally turned down the offer."

"You turned down the offer?" Another pulse of shock hits me. "Why? I thought this was your dream coaching job."

"It was my dream coaching job." Joel unexpectedly shows a relaxed smile. "However, my dream of being with you is infinitely more important. You mean everything to me, and no fancy coaching job could ever make me happy enough to be without you."

I stare until I'm finally sure that I understood him correctly. Emotion lodges in my throat. New tears brim in my eyes.

"You gave up your dream job—your hugely respected, high-paying, dream coaching opportunity—for me?"

"I gave it up for us." Joel raises one of my hands to his lips and kisses it. "To be honest, as honored as I was to be offered the job, it never totally sat right with me. No respected, high-paying job is worth being apart from you."

"Joel." I can hardly speak. "I'm overwhelmed by the sacrifice you're willing to make, but I cannot allow you to do this. I can't let you give up your dream job for me. You have so much to offer. You're so talented. You've earned the right to do this. So I

can't?"

"My dream is to be with you." Joel gently brushes a strand of my hair from my face. "Yes, the coaching opportunity would be great in many ways. However, the job would also be an all-encompassing, exhausting, isolating existence. It would be like what I've been living these past several years but with exponentially more demands. So, yes, I once thought that coaching was what I wanted to do after college. Now, though, I'm certain that a fast-paced, sports-obsessed, lonely life isn't what I want at all. I've loved every moment of my athletic career, and I consider myself immensely fortunate for each and every opportunity it provided me. Now, though, I'm glad to be moving into a new chapter of life. It's liberating. It's exciting. It's right."

"You're sure? You're really sure?"

"I'm sure." His smile is so sincere. So genuine. "What I want is for us to be able to be together. And I want to have time to spend with family and friends. I also want to be able to enjoy other things I've missed out on for far too long." He takes my hands in his once more. "Trust me: I gave this a lot of thought, and I'm totally certain about it. This is why I accepted a job with a big IT firm that's located in the area. The pay is fantastic, and I'll get to work independently and choose my own hours. No travel, no stress of wins and losses, no getting hounded by the media, no living and breathing sports at the expense of everything else?just a steady, awesome job that's located in the place where I want to live. Most importantly, it's a job that will let me be with the woman I adore."

I draw in a breath. "You're absolutely positive that this is how you're going to be the happiest? Nothing matters to me more than your happiness, Joel."

"I am positive." Joel slips his arms around my waist. "The real question, though, is: will you be happy? Will you be happy with Joel Lambert as he becomes less and less of a weight-lifting, basketball-shooting, volleyball-passing, media-hounded athlete and more and more of a computer geek?"

I giggle. "Joel, I love you, always and forever, no matter what. Whether you're a famous athlete or a computer geek, you're the caring, brilliant, funny, wise, sexy man I fell head-over-heels for."

Joel's smile grows. "No words have ever made me more relieved or overjoyed."

I throw my arms around him. "I love you, Joel."

"I love you, Danielle."

We kiss again, and then we walk, hand-in-hand, to rejoin our families. I gaze around the stadium before turning to Joel once more. The look we share conveys everything. Yes, this era of our lives is closing, but the best years are yet to come. I cannot wait to see where they lead.

Thank you for reading A DOUBLE SHOT OF LOVE!