



A Player's Guide to Catching Feelings (Sweet Sports Kisses #4)

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Category: Sport

Description: This is a dual POV, kisses only, sports romance in the Sweet Sports Kisses Series.

A billionaire shortstop, a waitress who loathes him, and a disaster that has them stuck under one roof.

Avery

It's bad enough I'm working doubles at Clearway Park just to raise my baseball-obsessed brother. The last thing I need is Nash Fontaine—Chicago's most entitled athlete—as his new mentor.

So imagine my horror when our house is on the fritz and he offers his mansion as a temporary fix.

What's worse than falling for a playboy's charm?

Try losing my big promotion for fraternizing with the enemy.

Nash

I'm one scandal away from losing my contract renewal. Living with Benji and his sister, Avery, wasn't part of my image rehab plan.

But something about her challenges me like no one else ever has.

Playing house is easy. But when my parents show up and threaten everything, I realize I've caught the one thing I wasn't prepared for: Real feelings.

A Player's Guide to Catching Feelings, an enemies to lovers novella, is book 4 of the Sweet Sports Kisses multi-author series—a sweet/clean romcom sports collection set across the U.S. Each story is connected through the Play It Forward organization, bringing heartwarming romance, humor, and just the right amount of competition. If you're looking for no-spice, kisses only with the perfect amount of swoon, then this series is for you!

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Chapter One

Nash

“Looking good, Fontaine. Looking real good.”

I adjust my tie in the mirror of my Range Rover, practicing the same smile that landed me on Chicago’s “Most Eligible Bachelor” list three weeks after my trade. New team. New image. Same devastating charm. If only that were enough.

“One more scandal and you can kiss that contract renewal goodbye.” My agent’s words from this morning’s call make it hard to focus.

Like I need another reminder. The Bay City Breakers made it pretty clear when they traded me to Chicago one month before opening day that my “showboating” was becoming a liability.

A handful of paparazzi are already camped out by the gate of Clearway Park’s employee parking lot. Vultures. They’ve been desperate for any story they can get on the team’s new billionaire heir shortstop trying to clean up his image. And today, that’s exactly what I’m going to give them.

Nash Fontaine, arriving early for a meeting with management to prove he’s ready to play ball both on and off the field.

I grab my leather portfolio from the passenger seat and check the mirror one last time. Perfect, as always. Time to show Coach Donovan and the rest of the team why I’m

worth every penny of that contract.

I take the stairs two at a time until I reach the stadium's premium level and strut into The Dugout Club without feeling the least bit winded.

I flash another smile when I see Bucky Donovan, head coach of the Chicago Street Sweepers, and my agent, Carmen Sandovahl sitting at our usual table beside a floor-to-ceiling wall of windows that overlooks the field.

The rest of the room is packed with wealthy business executives and a handful of teammates, no doubt here on their day off for the same reason I am.

Whether we come for business or pleasure, the Dugout Club is the only place we go when we want to grab a drink and a decent bite without getting hassled by fans.

I slide into the chair across from Carmen. "Morning."

She doesn't look up from her tablet. "Ten minutes early. Who are you, and what have you done with Nash Fontaine?"

"Today's a big day, right?" I ask, ignoring the jab.

Coach Donovan takes a long swig of his coffee and squares his shoulders. "A big day is right. All eyes are on you, Nash. You sure you're ready for this? It's a big commitment."

My jaw tightens. Great. Here we go with this again. "You don't think I am?"

"It's not that, Son. It's just... The Street Sweepers took a chance trading for you.

You may be the best in the league, but after what happened in Sacramento, you're

lucky you're not watching baseball from your living room.

You're a public figure. And if you ever expect people to treat you like a role model, you've got to learn to act the part. ”

I cringe when Coach brings up the Sacramento incident.

But how was I supposed to know the airspace above the stadium was restricted?

Apparently, my date was the only one impressed when I snuck her in after hours for a healthy round of drone racing.

Turns out my little stunt ended up flagging California's entire National Guard.

Carmen finally looks up, her southern drawl cutting through the tension. “Which means no more late-night club appearances. No more tabloid headlines. And definitely no more ‘accidentally’ showing up in places you shouldn’t be.”

Okay. Now she's playing hardball. I narrow my eyes with a smirk that's met by a pair of pursed lips.

“I mean it, Nash.” Carmen leans forward in her chair, lacing her fingers together. “You might think this kind of lifestyle is cute, and maybe even harmless. But I can assure you, it's not. Your behavior affects the entire professional baseball brand. It's not just your name on the line anymore.”

I lean back, my features falling into a neutral expression. Is it possible they're both right to question my intentions? Am I really ready for this level of commitment?

Carmen's gaze stays fixed on mine long enough for my pulse to race as an opportunity for a good old-fashioned stare-down presents itself. That is, until a crash

of shattering glass on the other side of the dining room makes me break away first.

I look up and see a waitress behind the bar with dark hair and a crisp white shirt just as she mouths something under her breath that suspiciously looks like one of my favorite four-letter words.

“Oh my gosh, Avery!” Another server with blonde hair streaked with red and orange underneath rushes over. “Are you okay? You’re not hurt, are you?”

Avery.

A warm honey color flickers in her big brown eyes, and I wish she was closer so I could get a better look.

“No, I’m fine. Shook up is all.” She looks down at the broken pieces of glass scattered across the floor. “I’ll clean this up and—“

“No. I’ve got the bar. Just... go run table seven’s order and let me deal with the mess.”

While Carmen and Coach Donovan rattle on about whether they want to order from the breakfast or lunch menu, Avery pushes through the kitchen’s swinging door and returns with a tray of plates, weaving through the crowded room like a pro.

I perk up when she approaches the table with a group of guys in Street Sweeper team gear.

“Hey there,” one says, flashing a smile that probably hasn’t worked for him since he played varsity in high school. “Those plates look heavy. Need some help?”

Avery doesn’t miss a beat. “These plates and I have been managing just fine,” she

says, setting them down with practiced precision. “Gentlemen, can I get you anything else? Perhaps a menu of conversation topics that don’t involve cheesy pickup lines?”

The burn is so quick and clean that I’m in awe when it renders them speechless. The guys exchange embarrassed glances as she turns to check on the rest of her tables. What a bunch of amateurs. I bet I could teach them a thing or two about catching a woman’s attention.

It’s only a matter of time before she makes her way around to take our order, and when she does, I’m ready with my A-game.

“What can I get for you today?” she asks. Her gaze sweeps across Coach and Carmen, then lands on me—with zero recognition, I might add. Or maybe she knows exactly who I am and is really... really ... good at her job.

Carmen orders a grilled chicken Caesar salad and a refill of her Diet Coke, then Coach orders the burger with a side of sweet potato fries. When it’s my turn, I keep it simple. “Iced tea, please.”

“Sweet or unsweet?”

“Unsweet. Thanks.” I give a curt smile I don’t expect she’ll return, then wait patiently as she repeats our order back. When the rest of the table nods in approval, Avery turns and makes her way to the nearest computer, which is conveniently located right next to the men’s bathroom. Time to pounce.

“Excuse me for a moment.” I nod to Carmen and Coach, then push out of my chair. “I’ll be right back.”

Steering toward the men’s room, I catch Avery just as she finishes sending our order to the kitchen. When she turns, our bodies collide, and it’s even better than I

imagined as I let the small object in my hand fall discreetly to the floor.

“Oh!” Her hands plant square on the broad of my chest, and I fight the urge to take them into mine as color rushes into her face. “Excuse me.”

The warm scent of vanilla in Avery’s hair is intoxicating, and I almost forget my own name when she looks up at me with those big, honey-brown eyes. I give her a clumsy smile, then pull away. “Excuse me.” I say in a mirroring tone before stepping to the side.

When she steps forward to pass, I reach down to pick up the item I dropped—a white packet of sugar I fished from the caddy back at our table—then catch her by the elbow.

“Whoa, not so fast,” I say, pulling her close.

I slip the sugar packet into her free hand and whisper in her ear. “You dropped your name tag.”

Before she replies, I disappear through the bathroom door and let the rest of the magic do its work.

Only... when I’m back at the table, it’s like she’s Drew Barrymore in *50 First Dates* and I’m the village idiot her mind won’t let her remember.

What just happened? Am I the only one who thinks we shared a moment?

Avery refills Coach’s coffee and walks away without so much as a smile.

Frown lines etch across my forehead as Carmen raises a brow. “Everything okay?”

“Fine,” I mutter, suddenly feeling less like Chicago’s finest and more like the nerdy teenager with braces and bad acne who got rejected by the captain of the cheerleading squad. “So, tell me about this kid I’ll be mentoring.”

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Chapter Two

Avery

When the lunch rush finally dies down, I grab a fresh stack of polished silverware and start rolling as Summer plops down onto the bar stool beside me—over-exaggerated sigh and all.

“So,” she drawls, ripping through the plastic wrap surrounding a fresh bundle of linen napkins, “want to tell me about that moment between you and Nash Fontaine by the bathrooms earlier?”

I roll my eyes, not bothering to look up. “What moment?”

“Oh... OH! Don’t even try playing dumb.” Summer snaps a napkin in my direction before folding it and adding it to my pile. “I saw the way he was looking at you. Girl, he was flirting with you.”

I roll another set of silverware and add it to the stack. “Giving me the ick is more like it.”

“Oh, whatever,” she scoffs. “Listen, there’s no way a guy as hot as Nash could ever give a girl the ick.

Like... she’d have to have some kind of genetic abnormality to be immune to that man’s charm.

“ She lays a napkin down in front of her with a knowing smile. “And you know I’m right. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be blushing. ”

“I am not blushing.”

She cocks her head to the side and narrows her eyes.

“Okay, fine. But so what if he’s attractive? The man thinks he’s God’s gift to women.”

“And you think he’s not?” Summer deadpans.

I roll my eyes. “He’s exactly the type I want nothing to do with. Rich, entitled, and used to women falling at his feet everywhere he goes.”

“Girl, those feet could fall at my feet any day,” she coos, wiggling her eyebrows.

“Spoken like someone who’s never had to schedule her love life around double shifts and the early morning drop-off line. Geez, I swear... I don’t know how those other moms do it.”

Summer stops rolling and frowns. “Honestly, I don’t know how you do it. Raising Benji all by yourself...? How’s he doing, anyway? School treating him okay?”

“Yeah, I guess. I mean, you saw him earlier. He’s growing up so fast that I can barely afford to keep his clothes fitting.

And he’s so smart. Always got his nose in a book.

.. even if it’s just some dumb sports biography.

But you know how middle school kids are.

They all suck. I'm sure the other kids pick on him, but he's got thick skin.

Even if he let it get to him, I doubt he'd let it show. ”

“Sounds like someone I know,” she teases.

When there's no more silverware left to roll and our last two tables clear out, Summer grabs a tray and refills the sugar caddies while I go around topping off salt and pepper shakers.

“Speaking of thick skin,” Summer says, stuffing packets of Splenda and Sweet n' Low into an empty ceramic holder, “did Salvatore mention anything about that management position opening up next month? Because if anyone deserves it—“

I grimace. “He cornered me yesterday after my shift. Said I had ‘all the right qualifications for the job’ but that my ‘interpersonal skills with high-value clientele’ could use some work.”

Summer drops her caddy on the table and mocks a feigned expression. “Whaaaaat? You... not having interpersonal skills with clientele? Inconceivable!”

“Yeah,” I scoff. “Apparently... not pandering to pigs like Nash Fontaine and the likes of him constitutes poor customer service.” I sprinkle some salt into my palm and toss it over my left shoulder—an old habit picked up from my grandmother before she passed almost a decade ago. “I can't imagine why.”

“So, what did you say?”

“What could I say? I need that position.” I move to the next table, mechanically

unscrewing the next pepper top. “The hourly bump plus benefits might actually cover what I’m still short for Benji’s tuition... assuming he gets in.”

Summer’s eyes soften. “He will . That kid’s got more natural talent than half the pros who eat here, and you know it.”

“Yeah, well, natural talent doesn’t pay for schools like St. Sebastian’s.

” I let out a sigh that feels like it’s been building all day.

“Most days, it’s all I can do to leave my stress at the door.

So when I can’t even manage that, having a boss who chalks it up to me having an attitude problem doesn’t exactly help my cause. ”

She smiles. “Okay. First of all, you do not have an attitude problem. You just—have a problem with attitudes. Big difference.”

“Thanks, but try telling that to Salvatore.”

“I’m serious, Ave.” Summer lowers her voice.

“You’ve been saving to get Benji a spot at that preparatory academy for over a year now.

And we both know what a school like that would mean for his future if he got in.

Don’t let the Nash Fontaines of the world rob you of everything you worked so hard for. ”

Summer is right. I do know what it means.

Students accepted into one of St. Sebatsian's elite athletic programs are statistically shown to have a favorable advantage when it comes to college recruiters.

And let's face it—earning a baseball scholarship right out of high school might be Benji's only shot at the kind of education we couldn't afford otherwise.

The weight of the last three days of double shifts settles into the balls of my feet as I slump beside her.

"I just wish I had more in the bank. The application deadline was last month, so if Benji gets in, I'll have until August to come up with the rest of the tuition I need.

But that still only covers his first semester, assuming I don't have any other surprise expenses—which there certainly doesn't seem to be a shortage of now that my car is on the fritz.

Honestly, I haven't even told Benji that I applied yet. "

"Wait, what? Why wouldn't you want him to know?"

"I don't know. I guess I don't want to get his hopes up.

" I say, using a dry towel to dust away spilled pepper from the table and chairs.

"He's been talking about becoming a Shooting Star since he was ten.

You've seen the way his eyes light up anytime we pass one of those billboards with their alumni. "

Summer retrieves a broom and dustpan from one of the server stations and begins sweeping under the booths against the back wall. "When do you find out if he's been

accepted?”

“They said it could take several months to process all the applications. There are only seven of these programs in the entire nation, and everyone and their dog is trying to get their kid in.” My stomach knots just thinking about it.

“I wanted it to be a surprise for his thirteenth birthday, but none of that happens if I can’t learn to smile at entitled jerks and resist the urge to dump tea over their perfectly coiffed hair. ”

“Seriously!” Summer chuckles in agreement, then pulls her phone from her apron to check the time. “Almost quitting time. And time for Benji’s mentor matching thing, too, right?”

I glance at my watch and groan. “Yeah, I think you’re right. And he left his glove in one of the booths after breakfast. He’ll go ballistic if I don’t run it down to him. Catch up with you later?”

She nods as I grab Benji’s glove from behind the hostess stand before booking it out the door and into the concourse.

Because the closest elevator is two full sections over, I take a nearby set of stairs down to the bleachers instead.

My feet cry in protest with every step, but at least the burn now creeping into my calves gives me something to focus on other than some painfully good-looking playboy with a sugar packet.

Nash Fontaine. The current bane of my existence and the only player in the league who Benji openly admits to fangirling out over.

Talk about dumb luck. It's bad enough that Benji keeps a life-sized Fat Head sticker of him plastered on his bedroom wall, but now that Nash has been traded to the Street Sweepers, something tells me I'm about to get way more of him than I bargained for.

At least with this Play It Forward Big Brother program, Benji stands a fair chance of being paired with a real role model.

I push through the door to the upper level of stands, squinting as the sun blinds me. Awkwardly sidestepping my way down the rows while several parents scattered throughout the bleachers turn to stare, I try to locate Benji in a large group gathered near the home dugout.

Suddenly, an eager voice booms through the stadium's loudspeaker, causing me to almost trip over my own two feet.

I pause to glance at the pitcher's mound, where a lanky man in a Play It Forward windbreaker and a lime green fanny pack wildly gestures as he makes his address.

Even from a distance, I can see his socks are mismatched, and the way he bounces on his toes when he talks reminds me of a dog trying to dance on its hind legs.

When I reach the railing at the bottom of the stands, Coach Donovan is just outside the dugout entrance.

"Excuse me. I'm looking for Benji Morrow?"

Coach Donovan looks up with a nod of recognition, then turns toward the dugout opening. "Benji! Someone here for you, Son."

Benji exits the dugout in a practice jersey, and his face lights up when he sees me. He sprints toward the fence.

“My glove! Where did you find it?” He reaches up as I dangle it over the railing. “I was freaking out! I looked for it everywhere.”

“Found it on the floor under a booth. You should keep a better eye on it. Can’t have Chicago’s future MVP fielding balls without his lucky glove, can we?”

” I smile as he snatches it and immediately slips it onto his left hand, pounding his fist into the pocket.

“So, how’s it going so far? Did you get matched with a mentor yet? ”

He nods, and his grin somehow widens impossibly farther. “Oh, man! You’re never gonna believe who my new Big Brother is!”

Before I can respond, a tall figure appears from the shadows, and my stomach plummets as Nash Fontaine strides toward us, casually twirling a baseball between his fingers. When his gaze meets mine, that same irritating smirk from earlier slides across his face.

“Well, look who it is,” he says, crossing his arms. “Hey there... Sugar.” He winks, and I fight the urge to throw up in my mouth.

Benji glances between us, his confused expression mixed with awe. “Wait—you guys know each other?”

Thinking this has to be some kind of sick and twisted joke, I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

Surely, the universe wouldn’t allow the most important person in my life to be assigned to the one man who makes my blood boil faster than Taylor writing her next breakup album.

Would it?

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Chapter Three

Nash

I arrive at the field a few minutes early, unable to take my mind off Avery. Women in her line of work know better than to expect anything serious from guys like me, which may make wooing her a challenge. But it also makes her a safe bet when I'm trying not to catch feelings.

Because who needs serious when you can have fun being single?

Especially when every woman I've let in wants the lifestyle, not the man behind it.

I bet none of them would've looked twice if I was some no-name rookie playing in the minors.

What's even more unsettling is how quickly they run after learning what dating a man in the constant spotlight is really like.

If there's one thing I've learned after years of failed relationships—it's that love and baseball just don't mix.

"Nash Fontaine!" a voice shouts from across the diamond before I can set my water bottle down.

A man in his mid-forties with prematurely receding blonde hair bounds toward me like I'm his long-lost son. He can't be over 5'9", though rumor around the dugout has

it he insists he's "five-eleven in cleats."

"Miles O'Donnell, Director and Chief of Play It Forward," he says, pumping my hand with a surprising strength that I imagine would make him a powerhouse in an arm-wrestling match.

"But please—call me Milo. Thrilled to have you on board! Did you know mentors who stay involved for a full season report higher career satisfaction by forty-two percent? I have charts!"

His gray eyes search around like he's tracking invisible insects, all while still somehow maintaining perfect eye contact. It's a rather disorienting talent, I must say.

I nod politely, scanning the field for the cameras I'm sure Carmen arranged to document my good deed. After all, that's the only reason we're all here, isn't it?

"Let me introduce you to your new little brother," Milo says, clapping me on the shoulder. "I hear he's been talking about you all week."

Before we can take two steps, Milo's attention is hijacked by a frantic staff member waving a clipboard. "Errr—just a minute," he says, holding up a finger in her direction before turning back to face me. "I'm so sorry, Nash, but you'll have to excuse me. Wait right here. I'll be back in a jiffy!"

He dashes off toward the woman with the clipboard, already launching into some random story about his own mentor from 1992.

With a few minutes to kill, I hang back near the entrance to the dugout as my teammates interact with their assigned little leaguers.

Martinez, our catcher, shows his freckle-faced boy the proper way to grip a fastball,

while Reynolds, our closer, listens intently as some lanky teenager recounts his first game-winning hit.

To the press, it might seem like they're all a bunch of do-gooders. But I'm smart enough to see it for what it really is.

I know all about Martinez and the tequila sponsorship he landed last season.

It's obvious what someone like him could stand to gain from this kind of family-friendly optic.

I also know about Reynolds and his current contract negotiations.

There's no telling how this mentorship stint will look on his agent's list of talking points.

Even Diaz, who I consider one of the more genuine guys on the team, is practically shoving his kid in front of every camera lens that flashes.

Smart moves, all of them. But it just goes to show that we've all got something to gain here.

I scan the group of kids still seated inside the dugout and wonder which one I'll be paired with. Most look starstruck, but I bet that's exactly what Carmen wants—a kid who'll gush to reporters about Nash Fontaine's generosity.

"Alright, Nash!" Milo's voice behind me nearly makes me jump out of my skin. Where on earth did he just come from? "Time to meet your new little brother!"

I follow him down into the dugout, mentally preparing my "honored to be here" speech for any nearby reporters, but I'm caught off guard when the kid Milo stops

beside looks like he might spontaneously combust if I come one step closer.

His height seems average compared to his peers—but hose him down, and I bet he doesn't weigh more than ninety pounds soaking wet.

That and the fact that he's sporting an unruly mop of brown hair that sticks out from under an old Street Sweepers ball cap that's probably one full size too big makes me wonder if he's filling in for an older brother or something.

“Nash, this is Benjamin Morrow, or Benji, as he likes to be called. And Benji, this is—“

“Nash Fontaine!” The kid's eyes are practically saucers. “Dude, I've been following your stats since you started with the Breakers! Your OPS last season was insane, especially against lefties.”

I blink hard, wondering if I should be the one who's starstruck.

“Twenty-seven home runs and ninety-two RBIs last season,” he goes on without missing a beat, “and that's with missing two weeks in July!”

Something about his unfiltered enthusiasm throws me for a loop.

Like how I used to recite player stats to my grandfather.

But that was back when baseball was just a game I loved.

My father was right when he said things would change the day I turned pro.

Baseball is a business like anything else, and if you ever want to get to the top, you have to start treating it that way.

Milo claps his hands, pulling me back to reality, and guides us to a nearby bench.

“Alright! Now that you two have met, let me explain how Play It Forward mentorship works. You see... our program isn’t just about fostering talent, Nash.

It’s about creating meaningful connections that transform both lives in the equation. ”

I nod on autopilot, scanning the field out of the corner of my eye for any sign of Carmen. Surely, she’s around here somewhere hunting for photographic evidence of this touching moment.

“You know,” Milo says, suddenly going all philosophical, “most people think mentorship is about what the mentor gives to the mentee. But the real magic happens when we realize that what we receive in return is often more valuable than what we give.”

While Benji may be hanging on every word, I’ve heard enough motivational speeches to recognize program rhetoric when I hear it.

“The biggest impact rarely comes from your wallet or even your talent,” Milo adds, tapping his chest. “It comes from here. From showing up consistently and seeing someone’s true potential before they see it themselves.”

Right, I think. Great PR soundbite.

“So,” I say, turning on my best media smile, “when do we start with the batting practice?”

“Benji!” Coach Donovan’s voice interrupts from outside the dugout. “Someone here for you, Son.”

Benji jumps up so fast he nearly sends Milo's clipboard flying. "Coming, Coach!" He darts toward the dugout entrance, leaving me and Milo mid-conversation.

I turn back toward the steps leading up to the field, half curious to see who's out there and half anxious to get away before Milo goes off on another tangent.

"My glove!" Benji's voice rises with excitement. "Where did you find it? I was freaking out and looking everywhere for it!"

I reach the entrance just as Benji reaches over the railing to retrieve a worn leather glove. A smile tugs at my lips when I recognize the person on the giving end.

It's her. Avery. Loose strands of dark hair cascade around her flawless skin, and she's even more beautiful than I remember.

I move forward another few feet until I'm in clear view and Benji exclaims, "Oh, man! You're never gonna believe who my new Big Brother is!"

Her gaze meets mine, and recognition dawns on her face. Has she been playing hard to get this entire time?

"Well, look who it is," I say, crossing my arms. "Hey there... Sugar."

Benji's head whips around to face me. "Wait—you guys know each other?"

"We've met," I say casually, not taking my eyes off Avery. "Your mom and I had a brief encounter at lunch today."

"Mom?" Benji sputters before erupting into laughter. "Dude, gross! She's my sister! "

His... sister? Uh oh.

I glance back up at Avery, my mind recalibrating. “Sorry about that,” I say, hoping my attempt to pick my jaw up off the floor is successful. “Honest mistake.”

Avery narrows her eyes, and if looks could kill, I’d be laid out flat right here next to the bullpen.

“Yeah, he came in earlier for lunch. So, technically, we’ve met.

” She looks back at Benji, her features growing softer until that angel face returns.

The same one that’s been stuck in my head all day.

“Look, kiddo. I’ve got a lot of work to do when we get home.

Any idea how much longer before you’re done? ”

I know the meet and greet doesn’t end for another half hour, but seeing how Benji and I have already met, I don’t think they’d mind if we left a little early. Especially if it gives me more time to watch Avery pretend the attraction isn’t mutual.

“I think we’re all set,” I say, turning to Benji. “Hey, Champ. What do you say we grab our gear? I’ll let Milo know your ride is here, then I can walk you both out.”

“Seriously?!” His eyes light up, and for reasons I can’t explain, something tugs at my chest.

“Sure. But only if it’s okay with—“ I laugh, returning my gaze to this mystery of a woman. “I’m sorry. Avery, is it?”

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Chapter Four

Nash

A very stares back at me with those big, innocent eyes, then lets out a sigh like she's already lost. "Fine, whatever."

On our way to the parking lot, I pull out every stop to impress her until I'm convinced she's playing hard to get just to drive me wild. Lucky for her, I don't give up so easily.

We cross the field toward an exit along the back gate, with Benji bouncing alongside me like his shoes are spring-loaded. Every few steps, he tosses his glove into the air and catches it with a satisfying smack against the leather.

"You know, your fielding percentage is like, crazy good for someone who's only been playing shortstop for two seasons," Benji rattles off, launching into baseball stats mode. "Did you really turn twenty-seven double plays last year? That's almost a record!"

"Twenty-nine, actually. But who's counting, right?"

"I am!" Benji laughs, tossing his glove again. "I've been tracking your stats since rookie year. Oh! And that diving catch against Detroit during the playoffs? Insane!"

The glove sails higher this time, spinning slightly as it reaches its apex. When it comes down, he misjudges the trajectory and lunges too late.

It hits the ground near my feet with a dull thud, and when I reach down to retrieve it, I notice how frayed the webbing is. A few other spots are so bad that even the leather itself is starting to wear through.

“Whoa, buddy. It might be time for an upgrade, don’t you think?”

” I turn the glove over in my hands, wondering why his parents don’t just buy him a new one.

“You know, the new Wilson A2000s just dropped last month. Or if you’re more of a Rawlings guy, their Heart of the Hide series is what I used before my endorsement deal. ”

Benji’s eyes light up, but then he shrugs and takes it back when I hand it to him. “It’s okay. I don’t mind. Besides, this is my lucky glove. And Avery always says the most valuable things in life you can’t buy with money.”

Before I can respond, Avery’s shoulders tense, and I wonder if suggesting a four-hundred-dollar glove was the smartest move. But it’s not like the other parents I’ve seen around can’t afford to buy their kids decent equipment. Why should I assume that theirs are any different?

By the time we reach the gates for the employee lot, Avery is already digging into her purse.

“Alright, Benji. Time to say goodbye. It won’t take long for an Uber, and I’m sure we’ve taken up enough of Mr. Fontaine’s time.” She fishes out a cell phone, then frowns at the screen after she unlocks it. “Great. No service.”

“Please, call me Nash,” I say, as an unfamiliar sting in my palms makes my hands sweat. “Where’s your car?”

She sighs and holds her phone up higher in search of a signal. “In the shop. Transmission issues.”

“Then let me drive you,” I offer, hoping for a second chance to get in her good graces. “I’m headed out anyway.”

“Oh, that’s really not necessary. I’ll just—“

“Aw, come on, Avery! Please!?” Benji says in a pitch that comes out one full octave higher. “Then Nash could see where we live, and—“

“Benji.” Her tone carries the kind of authoritative warning you’d expect from a parent.

I clear my throat. “It’s no trouble, I swear. My car’s just right over there.” I point to my Range Rover—the only vehicle in the entire lot that gleams like it’s just been detailed. Probably because it was yesterday.

She looks between Benji and me, chewing her bottom lip. “Fine. But just this once.”

The walk to my SUV is filled with Benji’s chatter about his baseball card collection, while Avery remains noticeably silent. When we reach the car, I click a button on my fob, and the doors unlock with a soft chirp as I walk ahead to the passenger side.

“Whoa,” Benji says, running a hand along the glossy black paint. “Is this the new Range Rover Autobiography? With the supercharged V8?”

I raise an eyebrow. “You know your cars, too?”

“Just the ones in the magazines,” he says, swinging open his door before climbing into the back seat. “I’m saving up for a Ferrari.”

When Avery catches up, I open her door for her, and she makes a noise that's somewhere between a laugh and a sigh as she slides into the passenger seat. "Buckle up, Benji," she says with the same obvious immunity to my continuous efforts.

Once we're all inside, Benji takes in the leather interior and touchscreen displays with wide eyes. "This. Is. Awesome!"

"Seatbelt," Avery reminds him. She's stiff as a board—almost like she's too afraid to get comfortable in her seat.

"Where to?" I ask, starting the engine.

"Blue Island," she says. "Off 127th Street. I'll let you know when we start getting close."

The car purrs to life, and I pull out of the lot, strangely nervous about the half-hour drive ahead. I'm usually more talkative around beautiful women, but something about Avery's quiet dignity has me feeling like a rookie at his first press conference.

"So," I say, desperate to break the silence as we merge onto the highway. "How long have you been working at the club?"

"Three years," she replies, her gaze fixed on the road ahead.

"And you like it there?"

She gives me a sideways glance. "It pays the bills."

Another silence threatens to settle, but Benji leans forward between the seats just in time to break it. "Avery's gonna be the manager there soon! Right, sis?"

A smile plays on her lips, and it's the first one I've seen that seems genuine. "Maybe. If I don't strangle the next person to ask me for a player's autograph."

"Wait, hang on a minute. People ask you for autographs?" I try to hide the amusement in my voice.

"Sadly, my employment at the club also makes me an unofficial broker for signed memorabilia from entitled athletes who can't be bothered otherwise," she says dryly.

I wince, wondering if I'm included in that category. Probably.

"Avery doesn't like it when players ignore their fans," Benji says, as if I may have missed the subtext. "She says they should always be grateful for their talent because it's the only thing that makes 'em any different from the rest of us."

I nod. "A solid philosophy."

Though I'm not sure I agree. Given my family's wealth and social status, I wouldn't have to work a day in my life if I didn't want to.

But that doesn't mean I don't know how to maximize profits doing what I do.

It's a skill that requires a lot more than just raw talent.

Without knowing how to sell themselves as a brand, most professional athletes burn out long before they see a fraction of what I make in a year.

Talent is just what gets your foot in the door.

A strong business sense is what keeps you at the head of your game.

The rest of the drive passes while Benji fills the silence with a range of topics from his school's upcoming baseball tournament to his favorite Street Sweepers players, and needless to say, I'm at the top of that list. Occasionally, I catch Avery watching me when she thinks I'm not looking.

When we turn onto their street on the south side of town, there's a noticeable change in landscape.

Manicured lawns and sprawling homes from the north side fade, and modest bungalows with chain link fences and vehicles made in the nineties sprout up like weeds in an overgrown field.

And while it's not exactly the kind of rundown neighborhood you'd expect to be car-jacked in, the vibe is enough to remind me of how out of place I am in my luxury SUV.

"That's us. The blue one." Avery points to a small, ranch-style house with faded paint, an overgrown lawn, and visible cracks running through concrete steps that lead to the front door.

"Thanks for the ride," she says quickly, unbuckling her seatbelt as I pull up to the curb.

"Yeah. Thanks, Nash!" Benji chimes in, already scrambling out of the backseat. "This was the best day ever!"

They walk toward the house, with Benji recounting his day using animated hand gestures while Avery digs through her purse for a set of house keys, and something about the scene stirs an unexpected ache in my chest. Maybe it's how comfortable they are around each other.

Like the way Benji hardly seems to notice when Avery automatically adjusts his crooked backpack strap.

Or the way he casually scoops up mail that slips out of her hands, without missing a beat in his story.

It's not until they reach the front door when I notice one of Benji's books in the backseat.

"Wait!" I call, grabbing it and climbing out. "You forgot your math book." I jog up to them, holding out the textbook just as Avery pushes the door open. "Here."

"Oh! Thanks." Benji takes it, then looks up at Avery with puppy dog eyes. "Can Nash come in for a minute? Please? I want to show him my baseball cards!"

Avery, looking too tired to argue, hesitates before giving up without a fight. "Fine. You can come in. Just... excuse the mess. We weren't expecting company."

The interior is modest but cleaner than I expect, with a small living room that flows into a compact kitchen, and a narrow hallway that leads to what I assume must be their bedrooms. Family photos, mostly of Benji and Avery at various ages, line the wall, and while I spot an older woman in a few of them, I wonder why there aren't any photos with "Mom and Dad."

"My cards are in my room! I'll go get them," Benji says, dropping his bag and disappearing down the hallway.

"He'll be digging through shoe boxes for at least ten minutes," Avery says, offering a smile that nearly takes my knees out from under me.

"Can I get you something to drink while you wait? Water? Coffee? Sweet tea?" The

playful look in her eyes and the way she draws out the words “sweet tea” make me trip over my own. Is she... flirting with me?

“Wha—water would be great. Thanks.”

She moves into the kitchen, and I sneak in behind her, wiping my sweaty palms on my pants like it’s no big deal. Despite the wear, there’s something undeniably homey about the space. A feeling my very large—and very empty—multi-million-dollar mansion never quite manages to pull off.

“So,” I say, following the sound of running water until I notice the narrow staircase leading down to the basement. “I take it your parents aren’t home?”

The steps look old, with several boards visibly warped. Without thinking, I place a foot on the top step, and the wood gives an ominous creak.

“I wouldn’t,” Avery warns, appearing beside me with a glass of water. “Those stairs have seen better days. Benji’s the only one who knows where to step.”

I take the glass, suddenly aware of how close she’s standing. When her hand brushes mine, the hair on the back of my arm stands up, and I say a silent prayer that I’m the only one who notices it. “Have you had someone look at them? They don’t seem very safe.”

“It’s on the list.” Pride flickers in her eyes, effectively putting any hint of her flirting with me to bed. “And our parents don’t live here. It’s just me and Benji.”

I take a sip of water and glance back at the stairs.

No parents? There has to be a story there, but it’s not one I’m dumb enough to ask about—at least not yet.

What bothers me the most, though, is the condition of the stairs and the fact that she still lets Benji use them.

They're not just worn. They're flat-out dangerous.

"Nash! I found them!" Benji's voice cuts through the air as he barrels back into the living room with a giant shoebox. "Come look!"

"I uh... guess I better go," I say, giving a nervous laugh. I run a hand across the back of my neck as I start to turn away, then twist back to face Avery one last time before I lose my nerve. "I've got a guy I want you to call. He can help. I'll text Benji the number."

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Chapter Five

Avery

“Who the heck does this guy think he is coming into my house and implying that I can’t provide a safe environment for my little brother!?” I practically spit the words into the receiver end of my phone while Summer tries to talk me off the ledge.

“Ave, calm down. I’m sure he didn’t mean it like that. Besides, you said it yourself that those stairs were a problem.”

“That’s not the point.” I pace the kitchen, keeping my voice low so Benji can’t hear from his bedroom. “It’s the way he snooped around. Looking at me like I was some kind of charity case or something. And now he’s actually texting Benji with numbers for contractors!”

“That’s great! Maybe one of them will cut you a deal. Aren’t you even a little curious?”

“Sorry, but I’d rather take my chances. The last thing I need right now is to feel like I’m in debt to a man that morally repugnant.”

I think about Nash trying to flirt with me during my shift, and it makes me even more angry.

This is exactly why I don’t date. It’s bad enough the only men I have time for are the ones who expect me to fall at their feet when I’m trying to work.

I don't need Nash Fontaine—or anyone else—reminding me I'll never be anything more than the girl from the South Side whose parents bailed when things got hard.

Besides, even if I did give Nash the time of day, it's not like the two of us are destined to ride off into the sunset together.

Guys like him are only good for one thing: breaking a girl's heart before moving on to their next conquest.

“Avery.” Summer speaks slowly, her brows drawing together. “Please tell me you're not planning on using those stairs before having them looked at by a professional.”

I sigh, pressing my fingers against my temples. “Of course not.”

“Then swallow your pride and call someone already. If not one of Nash's guys, what about someone you already know? Don't you have a friend who owns a contracting company?”

“Mike Wagner. Oh, my gosh, yes!” I do a mental facepalm, surprised I didn't think of him sooner.

Technically, it's his dad's business, but Mike and his brothers have been servicing all their customers for years, now that Mike Sr. decided to stay home and run the office.

“I'll give him a call. Maybe he can come look at it tonight. ”

“Good girl. So... are we still on for family breakfast in the morning?”

“Wouldn't miss it for the world.”

I disconnect the call and scroll my phone for Mike's personal cell number.

One hour later, there's a loud knock at the door, and I'm greeted by Mike and one of his world-famous hugs. It's the type of hug that somehow always involves him lifting me at least one full foot off the ground and squeezing the life out of me.

"Ughhh," I groan as he lowers me back to the ground. "Good to see you, too, Big Mike!"

Mike, who stands tall at an impressive six feet six inches, smiles with that same goofy, lop-sided smile he's worn since the fourth grade. "So, I hear you got some stairs you need me to check out?"

"Yeah, right back here."

I lead him to the back, and after a thorough inspection, his face is grim.

"What's the verdict?" I ask, bracing myself for the blow of bad news.

"It's not looking good, Ave. You've got termites. Bad ones." He runs a hand over his bald head. "Look here."

He shows me where the wood is hollowed out and a few other places that practically crumble under his fingertips.

"Can you fix it?" I ask, feeling hopeful.

"Probably, but this isn't just a repair job.

You'll need to get rid of these termites first. And unfortunately, we don't handle pest management.

" He frowns and folds his massive arms across his chest. "These support beams are

completely compromised. They're not safe—especially not with Benji running around.

My advice is to call someone out to fumigate before things get any worse.”

I lean against the wall as reality sinks in. “So, what you’re saying is...”

He gives an apologetic look. “Fumigations usually don’t take more than a few days, but with a proper inspection... who knows. Either way, you’ll need to find somewhere to stay until we figure out how bad the damage is.”

I close my eyes. I have at least a few thousand set aside for any major emergencies. Certainly, that should be enough to cover fumigation costs, but paying out of pocket for any hotel and repair costs means dipping into Benji’s tuition savings.

“I know a guy who runs his own fumigation company. Works with us all the time,” Mike says, pulling his phone out of the front pocket of his overalls.

His thumbs move quickly across the screen until my phone buzzes.

“Just sent his number to your phone. Joe’s a straight shooter—won’t overcharge you.

Give him a call and tell him you’re a personal friend.”

“Thanks, Mike. I appreciate it. I’ll call him tonight.”

“Good. And let me know if there’s anything else you and Benji need in the meantime.” He gives my arm a gentle squeeze. “Promise?”

“I promise.” I say, even though I know I probably won’t.

The next morning at the club, I take another sip of coffee and watch Benji devour the mountain of pancakes on his plate. Miguel went overboard as usual, adding whipped cream, chocolate chips, and sliced strawberries arranged in a pattern that makes them look like the stitching on a baseball.

“These are so good!” Benji says through a mouthful, syrup dribbling down his chin.

“Chew first. Then talk,” I remind him with a smile. At least one of us is having a good morning.

Summer slides into the chair across from me. “So? How’d it go with the fumigation guy?”

“He’s at the house now. Says we can’t go back until Tuesday at the earliest.”

“Okay, but where are you staying until then?” She looks at Benji, then back at me.

“The Sunset Inn on Halstead,” I say under my breath.

Summer winces. “Eww. That place? Avery, listen... I wish I could offer my couch, but with my roommate’s sister staying with us—“

“It’s fine. Really,” I say, forcing a smile. “Besides, how bad can it be?”

“Honey,” she says dryly, “I’ve seen better reviews for prison cells.”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic. So what if the place looks a little sketchy? It’s only a few nights, right?”

Summer doesn’t look convinced, but lets it go when Miguel arrives with a second stack of pancakes for Benji. It’s our typical Saturday morning breakfast routine until

the time comes to check into our hotel.

The Sunset Inn looks even worse in person than it did on its barely functioning website. The parking lot is littered with trash and cigarette butts, while the neon sign flickers ominously, with the “n” in “Sunset” permanently dark.

“This place looks like a motel for Zombies.” Benji laughs and shoulders his baseball duffel as we walk toward the office.

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing you brought your bat, then. We might need it for protection if dinner rolls around and they come looking for fresh brains.” Benji knows I’m only teasing, but a part of me secretly hopes we won’t actually need protection—from zombies or otherwise.

Inside our room, cheap air freshener poorly masks the heavy smell of smoke, and two sagging double beds with faded floral comforters face a TV that’s probably older than Benji. And if that weren’t enough, Benji points out that the bathroom door doesn’t close all the way.

For eighty-nine dollars a night plus tax, you’d think they’d at least throw in a coffee maker.

“Look! We can see the highway!” Benji shouts from the window.

I cringe, my mind already crunching numbers.

Three nights at the hotel shouldn’t set us back more than \$350 after taxes and fees, but Mike says he can’t give a quote to repair any structural damages until the termite issue is resolved.

This part concerns me the most. Even with a hookup, fixing the stairs is an expense I

was hoping to put off for at least another six months.

Maybe if I pick up a few more extra shifts next week, I can make some of it back before—

“Can we order pizza tonight?”

I sigh. I hadn’t even considered the cost of food.

“Sure, buddy. Whatever you want.”

The next morning, I pour Benji a bowl of the knock-off version of Lucky Charms, then pour another for myself, balancing them carefully as I climb back onto the bed beside him.

Sunday morning cartoons play on the ancient TV, and for a moment, I give myself permission to forget about the musty odors and lumpy mattresses until everything feels almost normal.

“When can we go home?” Benji asks, milk dribbling down his chin.

“Tuesday,” I say, passing him a napkin. Reassurance comes easily, though something in my gut tells me not to count my chickens before they hatch.

“I miss my bed. I guess this is kind of like camping, huh?”

I ruffle his hair. “Exactly like camping. Only we’re trading our sleeping bags and all those bugs for questionable bedding and sub-par air conditioning.”

He laughs at my bad joke, and I smile. One thing I love about my little brother is that no matter what life throws at him, he always finds a way to bounce back. Sometimes,

I wish I could remember what it feels like to be that young and carefree.

“After this, everything goes back to normal. Just a little bump in the road.”

Benji returns to his cartoons looking satisfied, and by the third episode, my phone rings.

When I see Mike’s name flash across the screen, I step into the tiny bathroom and close the door as far as it will go before answering.

“Hey, Mike. Everything okay?”

“Not exactly.” The strain in his voice makes my stomach drop. “Joe called me earlier. Said he found more issues while they were treating the basement, so I went over to check it out.”

I grip my phone tighter. “How... bad is it?”

“Real bad, I’m afraid. And it’s not just the stairs.

We found more damage to the flooring under the kitchen and bathroom.

Your entire south wall is compromised. That’s why your stairs were giving out.

We’re looking at complete stair replacement, foundation repair, structural reinforcement— It’ll take a good month to repair once we start ripping the floor up. ”

I place a steadying hand on the cold tile that lines the countertop. “But you’re saying it can be fixed?”

“Yeah, but...” He hesitates. “It won’t be cheap.”

I close my eyes. “How much?”

“Ballpark? Fifteen—maybe twenty.”

“Thousand!?” I feel the blood drain from my face.

“It’s a lot, I know. Do you even have that kind of money?”

The room spins. Fifteen thousand. Every dollar of what I have saved for Benji’s tuition after a year of penny-pinching and working doubles.

“Mike, you know I can’t—“ I swallow hard, unable to think straight. “You can get it lower, can’t you? I mean... you’ve been able to cut deals in the past.”

“Geez, I don’t know, Avery...” His sigh carries through the phone. “Dad’s been cracking down on the books. He says he can’t afford to pay us if we keep doing work at cost. Especially for jobs this labor intensive. You know I’ll try my best, but I can’t promise anything.”

“I understand.”

“For what it’s worth, I really am sorry. Wish I had better news. Take a few days and let me know what you want to do. I’ll talk to my dad in the meantime.”

“Thanks, Mike. I’ll let you know soon.”

I hang up and stare at the phone, trying to process my options. Only... there aren’t any. Even with extra shifts, there’s no way I’d be able to rebuild what I’ve saved before the fall. Benji’s chance at St. Sebastian’s would be gone.

After dinner, I wait for Benji to fall asleep before sneaking back into the bathroom

and draping an extra bed sheet across the open space.

The fluorescent light buzzes overhead as I sit on the edge of the tub, staring at a hotel notepad filled with numbers that refuse to add up no matter how many times I rework them.

One month of hotel costs. Home repairs. No house to live in. No academy for Benji.

A tear slides down my cheek, followed by another. I wipe them away, but they keep coming. Silent tears quickly turn into muffled sobs as I press a thin hotel towel against my mouth.

Everything I've worked for is crumbling just like that stupid, termite-infested house. I've always found a way before. Always kept us afloat. But this time, I don't see a way out.

"Think, Avery," I say in a whisper. "Just think."

How are you going to dig your way out of this?

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Chapter Six

Nash

It's early Monday morning when I show up for our first day of batting drills with the Play It Forward kids.

Mentally, I congratulate myself on how this will go over with Coach.

Star player, Nash Fontaine—first to arrive for mentorship duties.

It's the type of PR gold Carmen's always harping about.

Too bad there aren't any cameras around to document the occasion.

I cross the field toward an empty dugout and check my Rolex. The other mentors won't be here for at least another twenty minutes, giving me plenty of time to review the practice lineup I had my assistant arrange.

I hear a sound near the tunnel entrance and look up to see Benji walking toward me with a baseball bag slung across his shoulder.

Something in my chest tightens. When I met him last week, this kid was bouncing off the walls like he just mainlined a case of energy drinks, but today he's moving like he's underwater.

"Hey, buddy!" I wave and jog back up onto the field to meet him. "Ready to put

some work in?”

Benji’s million-watt smile comes out at half-power as he drops his bag by the fence. Dark circles shadow his eyes, and his Street Sweepers cap sits crooked on a pile of uncombed hair. It’s a sight that bothers me more than I expect it to.

“Yeah, sure,” he says, managing a weak smile. “Just tired. Didn’t get much sleep last night.”

Before I can ask why, a few other mentors filter in with their kids, and a Play It Forward volunteer launches us into an official morning meeting to go over plans for the day.

When we split up for warm-ups, I keep one eye on the group I’m assigned to work on fielding exercises with and the other on Benji.

He stands over the plate with his bat, and my worry grows when he misses three pitches in a row—pitches I know he should be making contact with for as good as his file says he is.

He can barely keep his shoulder up, and his stance is all wrong. When he shifts his weight around like he can’t get comfortable, I know something is off.

“Time out.” I jog over to the plate and squat down so Benji’s eyes are level with mine. “Your form’s slipping, kid. You sure you’re okay? You said you didn’t get much sleep last night.”

He looks down at the plate and shrugs. “Sorry. It’s just that stupid hotel bed. It squeaked every time I’d move, and the springs kept poking me all night.”

“Hotel bed? Why are you sleeping in a hotel?”

His eyes grow wide. “Please don’t say anything. It’s just... Avery’s stressed enough already, and she’d be so mad if she knew I told anyone— especially you.” He says that last part under his breath like he doesn’t want me to hear.

“Your secret is safe with me, buddy. Tell me what’s going on. Anything I can do to help?”

“Probably not. We have termites.” He looks back down at his feet and starts digging a hole in the dirt with his cleat. “She said we could go home as soon as they fix the basement, but I heard her talking on the phone last night. I think she’s worried we don’t have enough money.”

The basement. An image of their staircase flashes through my mind, and it all makes sense.

“Hey,” I say, keeping my voice casual as I straighten his crooked hat by the bill. “Don’t worry about that right now. Just keep practicing. Remember your form and focus on your swing.”

He relaxes his shoulders but still has tension in his jaw when one of the volunteers blows his whistle, signaling that it’s time to rotate positions.

Benji jogs toward the outfield, and my mind races ahead to my next move. Time to pay Carmen a little visit.

A few hours later, I’m pacing the length of a glass wall inside one of the stadium’s many executive suites, running my hands through my hair while my agent watches with poorly concealed amusement.

“Wait,” she says, holding up a perfectly manicured hand. “You’re telling me that the same kid who was just gushing about you last week to every reporter who would

listen is now living in some sleazy motel? And you want to... I'm sorry. What exactly is it you want to do?"

"Geez, Carmen, I don't know. Help him, maybe?"

There has to be something we can do." I stop pacing to face her as Brad, our team's attorney, lets out a heavy sigh from his seat across the table.

After I texted her earlier to call an emergency meeting, she insisted we include him.

My guess is now that I'm a mentor for the Play It Forward brand, I'll have even more eyes on me, and she's worried I'll find a way to screw it up.

She rolls her eyes and taps her Mont Blanc pen against a stack of contracts. "So, write them a check and be done with it. Isn't that your usual move?"

I'm about to argue when Brad chimes in. "I'm afraid it's not that simple, Carmen," he says, pushing back in his chair.

"Any direct financial assistance like that could be viewed as... preferential treatment. Remember, Nash's name is tied to that organization, now.

We have to think about the precedence this would set for other families in the program. "

"Okay. So no financial help, then. I'm sorry, Nash, but I don't know what you want me to do here.

Unless you're willing to offer up a room in that private mansion of yours, I think you may be out of moves.

” She smirks, clearly meaning it as a joke, then looks up, my expression stopping her in her tracks. “You can’t be serious.”

But it’s perfect. The solution hits me with the same certainty I feel every time I connect with a fastball. “Well, why not? Think about it for a minute. I’ll be gone for away games half the time, so the place is practically empty anyway.”

Brad’s face pinches with concern. “Maybe you should listen to Carmen. The optics alone—“

“Are perfect!” I place my palms down on the table across from him and lean in.

“It’s discrete assistance through an approved mentor.

No money changing hands. No public attention.

No accusations of special treatment. Just a temporary solution while their house gets fixed.

Besides, how long could it possibly take?

No one outside this room would even have to know. ”

Carmen looks up from her phone, shooting me one of her signature “you can’t be this stupid” stares.

“Right. And next, I suppose you’ll try telling me that his sister—the same cocktail waitress you were ogling over just last week—has absolutely nothing to do with your decision to be charitable all of a sudden. ”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I say, ignoring the weird flutter I feel in my stomach when she

brings up Avery. “If anything, her being an employee here should make it even more appropriate, right? Think of it as one colleague helping out another.”

I attribute the rebuttal to my ability to think quickly on my feet but wonder if Carmen makes a valid point.

What if inviting the same woman I’ve been trying to flirt with all week to move into my house is a bad idea?

Even if she’s impossibly gorgeous, I hardly know anything about her.

Besides, I’ve had my heart broken enough to know that I never want to fall in love again.

The last thing I need is to get attached to another woman who’ll take advantage of me, then drag my name through the mud the minute she doesn’t get her way.

But if I don’t help... What happens to Benji?

Carmen scoffs. “Colleague? Wow. Is that what we’re calling her now?”

Brad pinches his lips together, as if considering what I’m suggesting.

“Listen, even if we could pull this off—and that’s a big if—what makes you think she’d even consider it?

I’ve looked into Ms. Morrow’s background, and she hardly seems like the type to accept the kind of help you’re willing to offer. ”

I think back to the first time I heard Benji’s infectious laugh and how it made me wish I had a little brother just like him. “She’ll accept,” I say with confidence. “She’ll

do it for the kid.”

Twenty minutes later, I’m sitting in my Range Rover with sweaty palms, practicing different versions of my pitch to Avery in the rearview mirror when the gravity of it all hits me. Since when does Nash Fontaine have to rehearse a conversation with an attractive woman?

“Look, I know this might seem...” I trail off, shaking my head at how pathetic I must sound.

Grabbing my phone, I scroll through my contacts until I find my realtor.

“Linda? Hey! Remember that cleaning service you recommended? I need them. Today,” I say, anxiously drumming my fingers on the steering wheel.

“Yeah, the whole house. And maybe see about finding someone to make the guest bedrooms look a little less, uh...”

“Like storage units?” She laughs. “I’ll call Maria. She has a cousin not far from you who does home staging. But Nash—you do realize that same-day services like this won’t come free.”

“Spare no expense. Use your code to get in and tell them to move any boxes they need out of the way into the garage. I’ll need two of them sleep-ready for a few last-minute guests. And be discreet. I don’t want this drawing any unnecessary attention.”

“You got it. I’ll have my girls sign an NDA before any work begins.”

“You’re the best! Thanks for helping an old friend, even if I’m not always the greatest. It’s been nice having a familiar face around.”

“Any time. I know it’s been a rough transition, but hang in there. Chicago will feel like home in no time. You take care, and I’ll keep you updated on the progress.”

“Sounds good. Oh, and one more thing,” I say, remembering the current state of my kitchen. “Think you can have someone go in and stock the fridge and pantries with real food. I don’t want my guests knowing that the only things I keep stocked are light beer and protein shakes.”

“I’ll take care of it. Bye, Nash,” Linda chuckles, and the line goes dead.

Ending the call, my mind goes back to what it might look like if she actually says yes. Avery and Benji. In my house. The same Avery who’s been living rent-free in my head for the last seventy-two hours. The same Benji I’m supposed to be mentoring. What if my plan backfires?

“It won’t,” I argue with my reflection in the rearview. “Strictly professional. No more mixing business with pleasure, remember?”

Suddenly, a loud knock on my passenger window nearly gives me a heart attack, and the heel of my palm inadvertently grips the part of my steering wheel that activates the horn.

Hooooooooooooooooonk.

I let go of the wheel to make it stop and look up to see Benji peering at me through the window with wild eyes. And, as luck would have it, Avery is standing not too far behind him with an unamused look on her face.

“Nash! Guess what?!” His voice is muffled until I turn over the key and roll down the window. “Summer let me have a chocolate milkshake while I waited for Avery to finish her shift! With extra whipped cream! And sprinkles! ”

I smile, feeling a little less tense than before. Sugar. I guess this explains the renewed pep in his step after dragging his feet all morning. I'll admit, seeing him back to his old, cheerful self sparks something in my chest that instantly puts me at ease.

"Hey, Benji. That's awesome, Bud." I clear my throat, feeling parched as my gaze drifts toward Avery. "Listen, I'm glad you're here. Think I could, uh, talk to your sister for a minute?"

"Oh. Um... Okay." He shrugs and turns toward Avery. "Nash says he wants to talk to you."

I watch in anticipation as she narrows her eyes and squares her shoulders. Clearly, she's not going to make this easy for me or my ego.

"Okay, why don't you go start the car and get buckled up? I'll make it quick." She tosses a set of keys toward Benji, and he reflexively catches them in his chest before turning back to me with a look of disappointment.

"Fine. See you, Nash," he says, giving a quick wave goodbye.

I nod, waving back at him, and when his back is facing me, I turn to Avery and her death glare.

"What's this about?" she asks coldly.

"I, uh..." All my rehearsed lines vanish, and in my stupor, a string of words I hadn't considered comes tumbling out. "I think you and Benji should come live with me."

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Chapter Seven

Avery

A re. You. Freaking. Kidding me?

I bite down, trying to control the quiver in my bottom lip. I glance ahead at Benji, who's now clear on the other side of the lot. How much did that little traitor tell Nash about our living situation?

I'm praying Nash doesn't know about the termites or about how we're shackled up at the Roach Coach Inn for the unforeseeable future.

But judging by the pitiful look in his eyes—along with his incredibly indecent proposal—I'd say he knows enough for me to secretly will the ground beneath my feet to open up and swallow me whole.

"I'm sorry. That came out wrong." Nash blabbers on, but it's hard to concentrate on anything he says when the fingernails digging into my palms are deep enough to break skin.

"Listen, Benji told me about the hotel. I mean... he didn't mean to tell me. But he seemed off this morning, and I was worried. So, I thought maybe—"

"Worried?" I cut in. "So what? You think I'm some damsel in distress, and you're the knight in shining armor who swoops in to save the day?"

Look, I don't know what Benji told you, but just because we've been on our own for the past five years doesn't make us a charity case.

How about you spare me the lecture on good parenting and let me worry about my little brother. ”

“Whoa, Avery. You're the last person I'd ever lecture about parenting.

Heck, if it were me, I wouldn't last a day in your shoes.

I mean, come on. I can't even keep a houseplant alive.

True story.” Nash holds his hands up in surrender with a stone-cold sober look on his face, and something in his eyes completely disarms me. Have they always been this green?

I hold his gaze long enough to feel the heat creeping into my cheeks, painfully aware of the deep dimple forming at the corner of his mouth as his lips curl into a smile. Is it wrong to wonder if he's a good kisser?

No! I am not the kind of girl who gets to go around dreaming about kissing Nash Fontaine. Besides, I have way too much going on right now to waste time pretending I'm another one of his fangirls.

Certain my face must be cherry tomato red at this point, I tear my eyes away from his and—not knowing where else to look—decide to focus on my feet instead. Right. Like that's not obvious.

“Okay.” I take in a slow breath, mustering the nerve to look up again. “So, let's pretend for a minute this wasn't just another attempt to stroke your own ego. What's in it for you?” I ask, crossing my arms indignantly.

When I finally look up, his gaze doesn't meet mine. He grips the steering wheel, staring out at the parking lot like suddenly he's the one being put on the spot.

"Who says there's anything in it for me?" he asks with fixed eyes. "Not trying to brag, but have you seen my house? It's not like I don't have the room to spare. Besides, I'll be on the road half the time. Thought maybe you and Benji could look after the place when I'm gone."

I blink hard, suppressing a laugh. "You think by coming to live with you, Benji and I would be doing you a favor?" I blink again. Man, this guy is good.

"I do. The neighborhood is safe, and it's close to the stadium. No one would even have to know."

"And what about when you're not traveling?" I ask as if I'd even consider such an insane idea, but then I think about Benji, and I wonder if what's really insane is me not considering it.

"Like I said, I have a lot of extra room." Nash finally looks back at me and I swear his eyes grow three shades darker.

Or maybe it's just his smolder. Whatever it is, it should be a crime for a man to have that much power over another human being.

Geez, if this is any indication of what it feels like to be one of the Fontaine fangirls, maybe I shouldn't be so quick to count myself out.

"I don't know. It sounds..." Too good to be true is what I want to say. A million thoughts race through my mind, and a part of me aches, wishing life would throw me a bone for once. And while Nash's offer certainly feels like a bone, I'm not so sure it's one I should be chasing.

What if we moved in, and Nash realized what a handful Benji can be? Benji would be heartbroken if the man he idolizes the most suddenly saw him as a burden. The last thing that poor kid needs right now is another adult letting him down.

And besides, who even knows what kind of bachelor pad a man like Nash would have?

I imagine him owning some bougie penthouse suite on the top floor of one of downtown Chicago's premier luxury high-rises.

One where all four walls are made of glass, giving him a 360-degree panoramic view of the city.

And, of course, he'd have to have a giant hot tub in the center of it all.

You know—to keep the fangirls satisfied.

Probably one with a stripper pole pre-installed.

Okay. So maybe not a stripper pole... but I digress.

All I'm trying to say is that anyone who knows anything about Nash Fontaine will tell you he's a man who comes from money and isn't afraid to flaunt it.

Nash is a walking definition of the word vanity.

He may be Benji's mentor, but that doesn't mean I want Benji exposed to that part of Nash's lifestyle all because I failed to keep a roof over his head.

"Sounds... what?" Nash asks, snapping me back from my freight train of thoughts.

I take in another deep breath, then let it all out in a huff. “I’ll think about it, okay?”

“Really? Great!” The way he perks up in his seat reminds me of a dog realizing he’s about to get a treat, even though I haven’t agreed to anything.

”I said ... I’ll think about it.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t say no.” He flashes another stupid smile, almost blinding me with his perfectly white teeth, and I resent him even more. He probably has some unheard-of premium insurance plan that includes dental.

Back at the hotel, I return to our room after a visit to one very sad—and very overpriced—vending machine I found three flights down from our floor, and the room key sticks three times before the green light finally blinks.

Inside, Benji is sprawled across one of the double beds with his math book propped against his knees, trying to balance his notebook on a pillow while the AC unit rattles like it’s on its last leg.

But hey, at least it’s working, right? Unlike yesterday.

“I’m never gonna finish like this,” he groans, erasing so hard his paper tears. “Can we go to the library?”

I check my watch. Almost eight. “Sorry, B. The library closed an hour ago.” The closest twenty-four-hour diner is only a few blocks over, but after working my third double in a row and my feet now burning like they’re on fire, I feel guilty for not offering to take him.

“Maybe you can use the dresser as a desk.”

He slides off the bed and tries to position himself in front of the dresser, but the chair I move from the corner of the room is too short, causing him to work standing. After watching him hunch over for the longest minute and a half of my life, I can't take it anymore.

"That's it. Homework can wait until morning. Let's get ready for bed."

"But it's due tomorrow!"

"I'll write your teacher a note." I ruffle his hair, trying to ignore the knot forming in my stomach as Nash's offer echoes in my head.

It's fine, I tell myself. We're fine.

Everything is fine.

"He offered you what?" Summer nearly drops the entire tray of champagne flutes she's loading. We're prepping for the lunch rush in an empty club, and I immediately regret telling her about Nash's proposal.

"Keep your voice down," I hiss, even though there's no one around to hear except Miguel in the kitchen. "And it's not happening, so can we drop it?"

"Girl, are you insane?" She sets down her tray and plants both hands on her hips.

"You're telling me that the same week Salvatore says he's considering you for the management job, Nash Fontaine—who, by the way, tips better than any one of these so-called trust fund babies—offers a perfect solution to all your housing problems, and you're too proud to take it?"

Come on, Ave. Good things are finally coming your way.

And aren't you even a little curious about what the inside of his house looks like? ”

“No, as a matter of fact. I'm not,” I lie. “And it's not about pride.” I focus on polishing already-clean silverware. “It's about—“

“About what? Teaching Benji that it's better to suffer silently than to ask for help?” Her voice softens. “Avery, I get it. You're scared of owing anyone anything. But maybe this isn't about you.”

I barely have time to process her words before the first group of guests enters through a heavy set of swinging doors on the wall across from us. Mrs. Henderson's voice cuts through the silence as she complains about her “unbearable” weekend at her summer cabin on Lake Geneva.

I hide my smile as Summer shoves a finger toward the back of her throat in a mock gag. Then, my mind wanders to thoughts of Benji... hunched over that stupid dresser.

The final straw comes at three in the morning when a fire alarm starts blaring and wakes up the entire hotel.

I grab Benji's baseball bag—the only thing he refuses to leave behind—and hurry him down six flights of emergency stairs, only to learn some drunk college kid on the floor above us thought it'd be a good idea to microwave aluminum foil.

I don't know which one upsets me more: The fact that someone so incompetent has access to a credit card—or the fact that his room has a microwave.

It's not until I'm standing in the parking lot in my pajamas, watching Benji shiver, that something inside me breaks.

Two hours later, we're back in our room, and he's finally asleep again. But not me.

I'm wide awake, staring at the water stain on the ceiling that looks suspiciously bigger than it did yesterday.

I glance at my phone and there's a new text from Summer.

Stop being stubborn. Your brother needs a real bed.

I look over at Benji, twisted up in bed sheets on a lumpy mattress with his lucky glove clutched to his chest. Some luck it's bringing him, though. Tomorrow, he has another early morning practice, and the kid can barely keep his eyes open during regular school hours.

That's it. No amount of pride is worth watching my brother suffer any more than he already has. Maybe Summer was right. Maybe this isn't about me anymore.

I grab my phone and start typing before I can change my mind.

This is Avery. About your offer. Can we talk?

Chapter Eight

Nash

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, and I reach over to snooze the alarm with half-closed eyes. There's a text notification. I expect it to be a message from Carmen following up on a new endorsement deal she's been working on, but when I unlock the screen, Avery's name jolts me awake.

This is Avery. About your offer... Can we talk?

She must have gotten my number from Benji. Does this mean what I think it does?

I reread the message three times, trying to guess what "can we talk" really means in girl code. In my experience, words like that usually precede something bad. But in this case... maybe it's good news.

I check the time on the thread before typing out a reply. 5:47 AM. Who texts that early? Her shifts at the club don't usually start until 9:00 am, but that was only a half hour ago. She must've sent it before taking Benji to school.

I type: Absolutely! I'm free now , then delete it. Too eager. I try: Call me when you get a break, but that sounds demanding. Finally, I settle on what feels like the perfect response—simple, casual, and to the point.

Sure. You in?

I shower, make my bed, dress for the day, then check the time.

It's almost 10:15 and still no word from Avery.

She's probably in the thick of the club's breakfast rush, which means I'm stuck waiting for a reply like some lovestruck rookie.

Since when does Nash Fontaine wait around for a woman's text?

I slide my phone into my pocket and start down the hall, my father's voice ringing in my head.

"Fortune favors the prepared, Nash."

My dad, William Fontaine, is known as much for being a shrewd businessman as he is for being a proud father. And if there's one thing I've learned from being his son, it's that preparation beats hesitation every time.

If Avery and Benji decide they're moving in, everything has to be perfect.

Yesterday was my first night game of the season, so I was too tired to look around when I got home. But from what I'm seeing now, Linda's team worked some serious magic.

I pause at the entrance to the first guest room, noticing the difference immediately.

The space that once served as a glorified dumping ground for unopened Amazon boxes and neglected gym equipment has been completely transformed.

Against the far wall, there's a modern, four-post bed, made up with crisp white linens and a navy blue comforter.

To the side, a new desk overlooks the window, and there's even a bookshelf stocked with all my old baseball encyclopedias.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know this room is perfect for Benji.

I check out the second bedroom to find it's gotten the same treatment, only the color scheme is less masculine.

The bed is made up with the same white sheets, but instead of navy blue, the comforter is cream-colored and filled with down.

I pass by a vase of fresh white flowers on the dresser, hoping they won't be too much for Avery, then inspect the adjoining bathroom with the same satisfaction.

In the kitchen, the refrigerator is packed with actual food, and my once-empty pantry is now fully stocked and ready to feed an army.

I pull out my phone and text Linda.

Looks amazing! Thanks for everything. I owe you.

That's why you pay me the big bucks. Good luck today!

I smile and slide my phone into my back pocket before suddenly second-guessing everything. Did I do enough? Or even worse... What if I did too much? Am I forgetting something obvious? And what if Avery might think I'm trying to—

The doorbell rings, interrupting my thoughts.

When I open the door, the sight of Milo O'Donnell standing on my porch with a plate of cookies makes me jump.

“Nash! Perfect timing!”

“Milo? What, uh.... what are you... doing here?” I ask, forcing a smile.

“Well, funny story,” he says, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“I was meeting with an urban beekeeping association about a potential sponsorship—did you know honey production in Chicago increased thirty-seven percent last year?—and their treasurer’s cousin happens to be a real estate developer who mentioned a property three blocks from here.

And when I remembered you lived in the area, I thought, ‘What kind of Play It Forward Director would I be if I didn’t check in on my star mentor?’ ”

He thrusts the plate toward me. “Chocolate chip cookie? I made them myself.”

“Thanks, but I’m kind of in the middle of something,” I say, running a hand across the back of my neck.

“Ah?” Milo’s curious eyes peer over my shoulder and down the hallway. “Not expecting company, are you?”

I think about the fact that Avery hasn’t even texted me back and shrug, letting out a defeated sigh as my shoulders fall. “No. I guess not. Would you... like to come in?” I take the plate of cookies, and his eyes light up when I push the door open.

“I hope you don’t mind the impromptu visit,” Milo says, trailing me until we reach the kitchen. “Martha always says my timing is either perfect or perfectly awful. I’ve never quite figured out which is which.”

I set the plate of cookies on the counter, checking my watch for the time. “These look

great, but you really didn't have to—"

"The secret," Milo continues, "is brown butter. Most people don't realize how transformative it can be.

Like mentorship, really. Simple ingredients, thoughtfully combined, can create something so much greater than the sum of their parts.

That's why I'm so glad to have you on board.

A single bachelor like yourself could gain a lot from working with youth. "

I nod absently, unsure of where he's going with this.

"You've got a really nice place here, you know?

Lots of nice things. Not much different from what I'd expect.

But you know—a house never quite becomes a home until it holds more than just possessions.

" His voice shifts, and the intensity in his eyes makes me think that maybe there's more to him than his quirky persona suggests.

"It's the people and their connections that transform a space, Nash.

My mentor showed me that after I'd spent years thinking success meant buying a house in the Hamptons and having my own personal butler.

Maybe one day you'll know just what I mean," he smiles like he's in a daze, then snaps out of it after glancing at his wristwatch.

“Oh, goodness! Look at the time! I suppose that’s enough nostalgia for one day, don’t you? Enjoy the cookies.”

I see Milo out, relieved to no longer be listening while he drives home the fact that I’m twenty-eight and still haven’t settled down with someone. I get that enough from my mother.

I’m about to turn it to ESPN on the flatscreen when my phone buzzes. I pull it out of my back pocket, and my heart races as a message from Avery lights up the screen.

She’s in.

“And this,” I say, pushing open the door to Benji’s room, “is where you’ll be sleeping.”

Benji’s jaw drops as he steps inside. “This is all for me?” He glances back at Avery as if needing her permission before setting down his bags.

“Yep. All yours, Champ.” I lean against the doorframe, trying not to look too pleased with myself.

“There’s a desk! And baseball books!” He drops his baseball bag onto the floor and stretches his arms out before falling back onto the mattress. “Oh, man! This is the best bed ever! Thanks, Nash!”

“You’re welcome. You’ll have to let me know how she sleeps.” I turn to find Avery standing in the hallway, arms crossed tightly over her chest. The dark circles under her eyes tell me her time at the hotel was even worse than I thought. “Ready to see yours?”

Avery follows me down the hall with a neutral expression, but it’s clear by the look

in her eyes that she's relieved to finally be settling in—even if she won't let her guard down long enough to admit it. “Bathroom's through there. Fresh towels and toiletries are in the cabinet.”

She steps inside the giant room, looking around cautiously. “This is... really nice.” Her voice is measured—polite even—and for the first time, I think she's about to smile. But she doesn't.

“Like I said, you and Benji are welcome to stay for as long as you need. No strings attached.”

Something flashes in her eyes. Doubt? Or maybe it's suspicion. “Thank you.”

She nods, and I clear my throat. “The kitchen's fully stocked, and the Wi-Fi password is on the fridge. Help yourself to whatever. I leave tomorrow for a two-week road trip, but I left my backup cell number and Linda—my realtor's—on the counter in case you need anything.”

Benji appears in the doorway, already wearing the new baseball cap I left on his desk backward. “Can I put posters up?”

“Sure,” I shrug. “Mi casa es su casa.”

“What?” he deadpans.

“It means make yourself at home,” Avery says, the ghost of a smile finally playing on her perfectly kissable lips.

Knowing how wrong it is on so many levels to even think about kissing Avery right now, I back away to give them their space. “Guess I'll let you two get settled in. Let me know if you're hungry and I'll order a pizza or something.”

I head downstairs, and the sound of Benji's excited voice echoing through the hallway hits in an unexpected way.

Aside from the occasional cleaner or repairman, I'm not used to having other people in my space.

It may not be what I expected when I woke up this morning, but something tells me it's a sound I could get used to.

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Chapter Nine

Avery

My eyes flutter open to sunlight streaming through an unfamiliar set of bay windows, and for a moment, I'm completely disoriented by the cloud-like comfort surrounding me.

I have to pinch myself to be sure I'm not dreaming and that I'm not moments away from waking up in that ratty old hotel bed. But when I do, nothing happens. Nothing but my desire to crawl into a hole and die when I remember how only yesterday, I agreed to share a roof with Nash Fontaine. Ugh!

I stretch out my legs, not ready to leave what might be the world's most comfortable bed.

I suppose living in the man's house does have its perks.

The sheets are impossibly soft against my skin, thanks to their 800-thread-count Egyptian cotton—which I only know because I checked the label last night before climbing in.

But seriously, who spends that kind of money on sheets for a guest bed?

My guess is someone who also has enough money to hire someone else to wash them.

Down the hall, Benji's bathroom door closes. Of course he's already up and getting

ready for school. That kid never misses a chance to be on time when he knows the school cafeteria is serving pizza for breakfast.

With a groan, I finally force myself up.

I guess I should go downstairs to see if Nash at least has a bag of bread lying around so I can make a slice of toast for the road.

Man-child that he is, I wouldn't be surprised if all I found were protein shakes and energy bars.

Though, even a protein shake would be a step up from the junk they served at The Sunset Inn.

I pad down the stairs in a pair of worn-out slippers, mentally preparing myself for disappointment.

What I don't expect is the full spread that greets me in the kitchen when I round the corner.

Laid out across the bar is a platter of fresh-cut fruit, a heaping stack of pancakes, bacon, sausages, and a plate of scrambled eggs that somehow still look fresh despite sitting out.

"What on Earth..." I look around the room like I'm being punked, half expecting Ashton Kutcher to pop out of the walk-in pantry at any moment.

My initial thought is that Nash made this himself before leaving this morning, which seems both wildly out of character and annoyingly thoughtful. Then, I spot a folded piece of paper propped against a bottle of maple syrup.

I unfold the note to find Nash's surprisingly neat handwriting:

Morning Avery & Benji,

Didn't want your first day to start on an empty stomach, so I had Jorge come by early to make breakfast. Help yourself to anything you see in the kitchen. I'm just a text away if you need anything.

Have a great day! Nash

P.S. Sorry I didn't cook for you myself. Didn't think you and Benji would want burnt toast for breakfast.

I roll my eyes, but it does little to stop the corners of my mouth from twitching upward. Why am I not surprised that a man like Nash would have a personal chef?

"Benji!" I call upstairs. "Breakfast!"

His thundering footsteps follow immediately. "Coming!"

I pour myself a cup of coffee from the carafe, the only thing still piping hot at this point, and try to sort out my feelings.

While this is exactly what I dislike about guys like Nash—throwing money at people to take care of basic life skills—having breakfast waiting for us was one of the most thoughtful things he could have done after the week we've been having.

Benji skids into the kitchen and his eyes go wide. "Whoa! Did you make all this?"

"No, Nash's chef did."

“Nash has a chef ?” Benji’s voice rises in awe, and I sigh. This living arrangement might be more complicated than I thought.

“Eat. We don’t want to be late for drop off.”

Benji piles his plate high with pancakes, drenching them in so much syrup that I’m convinced he’s consumed his daily sugar allowance before taking a bite.

“Easy on the sugar,” I warn. “And sit at the table, please. I’m sure Nash doesn’t need us ruining his expensive hardwood floors.”

“This is awesome,” he says through a mouthful of pancakes. “Way better than the cereal bars at the hotel.”

I snort in agreement, using a wet paper towel to wipe any syrup splatters from the granite countertop.

I grab a perfectly crisp slice of thick-cut bacon and take a bite, moaning at how annoyingly delicious it is.

Then, when curiosity gets the best of me, I randomly start going through Nash’s cupboards and drawers.

His kitchen is immaculate, with each drawer having its purpose—utensils in one, spatulas and cooking tools in another, measuring cups and spoons neatly arranged in a third. It’s all so perfect that, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say he paid someone to come in and stage the place.

I open the refrigerator, expecting to find it empty except for sports drinks and takeout containers.

Instead, I'm greeted by shelves fully stocked with milk, eggs, butter, fresh vegetables, deli meats, and yes—even protein shakes.

But at least they're tucked away on a bottom shelf rather than front and center next to a half-empty six-pack of Michelob Ultra, right?

The only thing I don't see is coffee creamer. I'll have to remember to pick some up on my way home from work later.

The pantry surprises me even more. Its shelves are lined with snacks, miscellaneous baking goods, and clear canisters filled with different kinds of pasta and rice.

Below the canisters, there's an impressive variety of soups and other canned goods, along with an entire shelf of nothing but cereal.

The good, name-brand kind, too—not like the generic stuff I always buy for Benji.

It's hardly what I'd expect for a bachelor pad, especially now that I know Nash doesn't cook.

The next few days take some getting used to, but by day three, Benji and I find our stride.

I drop him off at school before my morning shifts, pick him up after baseball practice, drop him back at the house for dinner and homework, and then drive the four-and-a-half miles it takes me to get from Nash's house to the stadium for my second shift.

It's not so different from our old routine, only now, with Nash living in such a safe neighborhood and having a state-of-the-art alarm system, I don't have to keep dragging Benji to the club with me anytime I can't find a sitter.

Which is especially helpful now that Salvatore has me training for the new management position.

“You realize this bathtub is bigger than our entire bathroom back home, right?” I gush to Summer over the phone while drawing my nightly bubble bath. “I mean, seriously... Who needs this much space just to get clean?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe someone who might want some company in there to help them get clean?” She laughs, and I respond by hanging up on her.

All teasing aside, I can’t deny the many perks of our temporary living arrangement. Benji having his own separate bathroom means no more negotiating morning schedules or finding his wet towels on my floor. And the water pressure here makes our shower at home feel like a leaky faucet by comparison.

With each day that goes by, Benji and I find something new that makes this place feel even more like home.

Like the kitchen drawer I came across yesterday, stocked with miniature bags of sunflower seeds and individually wrapped Reese’s peanut butter eggs—two of Benji’s favorite snacks.

Or the hall closet Benji found that was full of jigsaw puzzles and a few other board games he told Nash he liked.

On the surface level, they might seem like simple things. But to a kid like Benji, I don’t think Nash realizes the impact he’s making.

Not to say I’m planning on cutting the man any slack. Even if his daily texts distract me so much that he’s all I can think about, I’d rather die a slow and painful death than admit how much I’ve started looking forward to them.

Day 1:

Just checking in. Jorge wants to know if Benji liked the pancakes.

He ate five and packed two more in his lunch box. Tell Jorge thank you.

Day 2:

How's your bed? Sleeping alright? First game is tonight at 7. You and Benji should watch on the big screen.

Sleep was fine. I'll let him know.

Day 3:

Got another game tomorrow night. You'll be watching, right? Need to know if I should wave to the camera.

Benji will definitely be watching. Don't embarrass yourself on national TV.

Day 4:

How's the water pressure in your shower? The plumber said he fixed the issue in the guest bath.

It's fine. Stop checking in on us like we're children.

Just being a good host, Ave.

You're being annoying. And don't call me Ave.

Day 5:

Do anything exciting over the weekend? Only one more week til I'm home. Miss me yet?

NO. I'm working. Leave me alone.

It's been exactly one week since Nash left, and I've got my new nightly routine right where I want it. After I get home from work and Benji's in bed, I sit at the kitchen table with my laptop and hunt for scholarships or any other financial aid that might help cover costs for St. Sebastian's.

With most of my savings now earmarked for home repairs, I'm back to square one on the tuition front.

"Applications received after March 15th will not be considered," I mutter, closing the browser tab on yet another missed deadline. I let my exhausted head fall into my hands just as my phone vibrates on the table in front of me.

Long day?

I stare at Nash's text, debating whether I should ignore it. Then, against my better judgment, I hit reply.

The longest.

Want to talk about it?

Not really.

OK. Let me know if you change your mind. I'm a good listener.

By the start of week two, our exchanges fall into a strange rhythm where neither of us is willing to acknowledge what it is we're actually doing.

I forgot to ask... How are the flowers in your room holding up? Are they still fresh? I can have new ones delivered if you'd like.

I don't need fresh flowers.

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Are you sure? Because it's no trouble. My florist says lilies are in season right now.

I'm not the kind of girl who needs an endless supply of flowers. It's wasteful.

And what makes you think I even like lilies?

Wait... You don't? [sad emoji]

Not that it matters, but no. I don't.

Well then what DO you like?

I pause, my finger hovering over the keyboard, and let out a low groan. "Ugh! Why am I even entertaining this right now?"

I like roses.

But NOT the kind that comes in some big obnoxious bouquet with baby's breath and obscene amounts of tissue paper. So don't even THINK about it!

Boo. You're no fun.

Who said I was fun?

So... no bouquets of lilies. Or roses. Got it.

Goodnight, Nash.

[kissy face emoji] [single rose emoji]

By the time his two weeks are almost up, I find myself nervous about seeing Nash in person again. Summer must pick up on this when she offers to bring over my favorite Chicago-style deep-dish pizza and a tub of Benji's favorite ice cream the night of his last away game.

"Nash's batting average is up almost fifteen points since he joined the Sweepers," Benji announces, not taking his eyes off the massive TV screen. "And his fielding percentage is the best on the team. Look how fast he moves!"

Summer takes a large bite of pizza and grins. "The only stats I'm measuring are how good number thirty-two looks in those pants. Seriously, baseball uniforms must have been designed by a woman."

I roll my eyes at her, but my gaze drifts back to the screen where Nash is positioning himself at shortstop, knees bent and completely focused on the next play.

Something about his intensity makes my mouth go dry.

"What do you think, Ave? Those baseball pants doing anything for you yet?" Summer nudges me with her elbow.

"I'm watching the game, not rating the players." I take a long sip of Diet Coke, hoping to hide the fact that I'm practically melting from the inside out.

The truth is, while I couldn't care less about any of the other players, I can't take my eyes off Nash. The way he moves with confidence. His smile every time he makes a good play... And it's infuriating how good he looks in his pants. Especially in high definition.

What's even more infuriating is how I can't ignore my growing attraction after all the back-and-forth texting that's been going on between us.

"Yeah, you're totally watching the game," Summer whispers so Benji can't hear. "That's why you haven't blinked since Nash came on screen."

I throw a couch pillow at her head and spend the last three innings pretending not to be interested—even though we both know nothing could be farther from the truth.

The next day, I'm straining a pot of spaghetti into the sink when I get another text from Nash.

Plane just landed. See you soon.

My heart does an annoying little flip as I dump the noodles back into the pot.

I glance at the meat sauce simmering on the stove and suddenly feel ridiculous.

He's probably used to Jorge making four-course dinners with pasta from scratch, and here I am with jarred sauce and boxed noodles like I'm hosting a college potluck.

What if Nash hates it?

I'm stirring the sauce when several quick honks sound from the driveway, and Benji leaps from the couch where he's been glued in front of the TV all afternoon.

"Nash is back!" he shouts, sprinting toward the entryway.

"Wait—Benji!" But he's already gone, the front door slamming behind him.

I hurry to turn off the burner and wipe my hands on a dish towel before following

him outside. By the time I step onto the porch, Benji is halfway across the lawn.

Nash drops his duffel bag just in time to catch Benji, who propels himself forward at an impressive speed.

Nash lifts Benji into a bear hug and spins him around before setting him back on his feet. It's a sight that makes my heart squeeze.

"I got something for you," Nash says, reaching into his bag. He pulls out a baseball and tosses it to Benji. "It's the game-winner from last night. Thought you might want it for your collection."

Benji's eyes grow impossibly wide as he catches the ball in his chest. "Your home run ball! And you're giving it to me? For real? "

Nash nods and ruffles Benji's hair. "Who else would I give it to?"

"Wow! Thanks, Nash!" Benji clutches the ball like it's made of gold. "I'm gonna' put it somewhere extra safe where no one can find it." He races past me into the house, not even acknowledging my existence.

Nash turns to his driver, an older man in a dark suit. "James, can you take the rest of my bags in through the garage? Thanks."

James nods, and as he disappears into the garage, Nash turns and begins walking toward me.

I freeze, suddenly unsure how much eye contact to make or where to put my hands. Then, in a panic, I glance down to check my shirt for spaghetti sauce splatters.

When I look back up, Nash is much closer. Close enough to smell his Tom Ford

cologne and to see the flecks of gold in his green eyes.

There's something noticeably different about his expression this time, but with it comes the same smolder that makes my pulse race.

He reaches up, and I hold my breath as his fingers gently brush a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"You look amazing," he says softly.

"I—I'm making spaghetti," I blurt out, immediately wanting to smack myself for being such a spaz.

His mouth curves into that infuriating half-smile. "Sounds perfect."

He looks down at my mouth and for a moment, I think he's going to kiss me. Instead, He opens the lapel of his sport coat and pulls out a single, long-stemmed rose.

"I know you said no bouquets, so..."

He looks me deep in the eyes, and suddenly, I feel like I'm on some bizarre episode of *The Bachelor*, waiting for the coveted one-on-one date rose.

Feeling equal parts mortified by the comparison and terrified by how accurate it feels, I accept the rose. My fingers brush against his, and the contact sends an electric current that shoots up my arms and travels all the way to my toes.

Is it crazy that I might actually want to throw my name into the dating hat for a change?

Because—like always—Summer makes a good point. Maybe it won't kill me to

make a little room in my life for something other than work and worry. And as I stare into the eyes of Chicago's most eligible bachelor, I think I know exactly where I want to start.

Chapter Ten

Nash

I stretch out on the couch, flipping through channels until I find SportsCenter . The house is quiet except for the muffled sounds of Avery helping Benji get ready for bed upstairs. It's been a week since I returned from that road trip, and I still can't believe how different everything feels.

When I pulled up last Friday and Benji greeted me with a hug, something inside me shifted.

And with Avery waiting there on the porch—it's like she's everything I ever wanted but didn't know I needed, and I've spent every night since then thinking about how badly I wanted to kiss her.

And still do, if I'm being honest with myself.

“A house becomes a home when it holds more than just possessions.” Milo's words pop into my head.

At first, I thought he was full of it, but maybe he was onto something.

Coming home to Benji's cleats by the front door, homework spread across the kitchen table, and the smell of a meal cooked by this beautiful woman who, somehow, no longer looks at me like she wants to run me over with her car, are all signs of a life I never realized I was missing.

The weirdest part? I don't miss the life I had before them at all.

The clubs after games, the endless parade of women whose names I barely remembered—it all seems so shallow now.

During that last away series, when the guys would go out to hit the town, I'd head back to the hotel early.

I told them I needed rest, but really, I just wanted to text Avery. Sounds pathetic, right?

But there's something different about her.

Like the way she rolls her eyes any time I mention my contract numbers, or how she insists on cooking every meal, even when she knows I have Jorge on my payroll.

It's like she's completely immune to my fame and my money.

And somehow, that makes me want her to notice me even more.

My phone buzzes on the coffee table with a text from Carmen.

Good news, superstar. Don't know how you're doing it, but keep up the good work. Morrison Athletic just sent over an endorsement offer. TWO MILLION for a three-year deal. Call me tomorrow.

I stare at the message, expecting to feel a rush of satisfaction. But instead, I feel... nothing. Last month, two million would've had me out buying rounds for the house to celebrate. Now, I'm wondering if Avery would think it's stupid for a company to pay me that much money just to rep their brand.

From upstairs, I hear Benji laugh, followed by Avery's stern voice telling him he didn't brush long enough. It's a sound that makes me smile like no endorsement deal ever could.

Maybe it's time I do something more meaningful with my life besides being just another insanely rich jerk who knows how to hit a baseball. Something that would make Avery look at me like she did the day I gave her that rose. Like maybe there was more to me than just what the world sees.

The next morning, I'm leaning against the dugout fence at Clearway Park, watching Benji practice batting.

With a little elbow grease, his form has improved by a mile in the last month.

And that's not just my own biased opinion either.

Benji mentioned yesterday that his Little League coach nominated him for the All-Star team.

As Benji connects with the next fastball and sends it sailing into right field, something catches my eye.

His glove, tucked under the bench beside me, looks worse than ever.

I pick it up to examine it and feel my chest tighten.

The leather is cracked along the pocket, and there's a fresh strip of silver duct tape wrapped around a new hole in the webbing.

When Benji jogs back to the dugout, I casually hand him the glove.

“Nice hit, Champ, but what happened here?”

Benji shrugs and reaches for his water bottle. “The webbing started coming apart during practice last week. Avery tried to fix it, but we didn’t have any leather strips, so...” He trails off, suddenly looking embarrassed.

“And this is your only glove, right?”

He nods. “Avery says I’ll get a new one for my birthday.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good news. When’s your birthday?”

“August.” He takes a swig of water, eyes fixed on the next batter stepping up to the plate.

Across the field, I notice Justin Banks, another mentor in the program, handing his mentee what looks like a brand-new bat.

The boy barely glances at it before adding it to his collection of top-of-the-line equipment.

I remember being that kid—privileged, oblivious, and always thinking that I deserved the best of everything.

My father never missed an opportunity to remind people how much my first “professional quality” glove cost.

What did I learn from it? That money solves problems. That value equals price tag.

August is still three months away. I know I could buy Benji the best glove on the market right now—ten of them, in fact—and never miss the money. But I’ve also

been around Avery long enough to know she would never let him keep it.

When Benji finally returns to the batting lineup, I stare at his taped glove as a new idea takes shape.

What if there was a way to help kids like Benji without just throwing money at them?

A way to preserve their dignity while still providing opportunity?

It may be the first time in my life I've wondered how my privilege could be used for something other than my own comfort, but better late than never.

By noon, storm clouds are rolling in fast, and Benji and I have to make a mad dash to the parking lot after they call it a day.

We're both soaked by the time we slide onto the leather seats of my Range Rover, rain hammering against the roof as I blast the heat to stop Benji's shivering.

"That was awesome!" he says through chattering teeth. "Did you see how far I hit that last one?"

I laugh, handing him an extra towel from my bag to dry his wet hair. "Sure did, All-Star."

Twenty minutes later, we're both laughing as we burst through the front door and start tracking puddles across the hardwood.

At the sound of the commotion, Avery looks up from her laptop at the kitchen table.

"Oh my gosh, you guys are soaked!" Her eyes are wide as she jumps out of her chair and grabs a stack of dish towels from a nearby drawer. "Wait! Just... don't move!"

You're dripping water everywhere."

"Relax, Ave. It's just water," I say, flashing a grin as I take one of the towels and run it over my hair.

She narrows her eyes, and the way her cute little nose scrunches up when she's irritated makes the urge to kiss her even more unbearable.

"Upstairs. Shower. Now," she says to Benji. "You too," she adds, pointing at me with a stern look that makes my stomach flip. "You're going to track mud all over the place."

"Yes, ma'am," I say with a mock salute. This earns me another one of her adorable eye rolls. Only this time, I swear I see her blush when I smile and wink.

By the time I come back downstairs in dry clothes, Avery is setting the table for dinner, and the normalcy of it all hits me at once.

Coming home to home-cooked meals every night.

Benji chattering about his day between bites at the dinner table.

Avery asking questions about my day and actually caring about the answers.

All of it makes me wish it didn't have to end so soon. Then again, maybe it doesn't.

After dinner, Benji heads upstairs to finish his homework, leaving Avery and me alone to clean up. She loads the dishwasher while I clear the table, and for a moment, it feels like we've been doing this dance for years.

"Benji's really improving," I say, setting a stack of plates by the sink. "His coach

nominated him for the All-Star team.”

Her face lights up. “Really? Well, why didn’t he say anything!?”

“Probably too busy stuffing his face. Jorge might quit on me after I tell him I like your lasagna better.”

“Oh, now I know you’re full of it!” She laughs out loud and snaps at me with a kitchen towel. Her smile is so big, it makes my heart hammer against my chest. “But seriously, thank you. For working with him.” She places a hand on my arm, and I lean into her touch.

“He’s a great kid. You’ve done an amazing job with him, you know.”

I watch a flush creep up her neck as she turns back to the sink. “He’s the one person I can’t afford to fail.”

Something in her voice lures me in, and before I can stop myself, I reach out and run a hand over her shoulder. “You’re not failing him, Avery. Not even close.”

She looks up, and when our eyes meet, she doesn’t pull away. The moment that stretches between us is charged with something neither of us is ready for.

Then, without warning, she flicks on the sink sprayer and aims it directly at my chest.

“Hey—!” I splutter as cold water soaks my clean shirt. “You did not just do that!”

She’s laughing now, a full, uninhibited sound I’ve never heard before. “Your face!”

I lunge for the nozzle, but she dances away, keeping it trained on me. Water shoots across the kitchen as we struggle for control, both of us laughing like a couple of

teenagers. Finally, I'm able to grab her wrist and pin her against the counter with my body to stop the assault.

We're both breathing hard now, our faces only inches apart. Water drips from my shirt onto her, and somehow, my hands find their way to her waist. Her laughter fades, and intensity fills her eyes.

"Nash." Her voice is quiet, and I swear it's the first time I've ever heard my name sound like a prayer.

I don't remember which of us moves first, but suddenly my lips are on hers, and everything else fades away.

Her mouth is soft, hesitant at first, then increasingly confident as her hands slide up my chest. I cup her face, brushing my thumb across her cheek and marveling at how perfectly she fits against me.

When we break apart, her eyes are dark. Questioning. I kiss her again, slower this time, my heart hammering against my ribs. I know I've kissed plenty of girls before, but Avery is the first ever to make me feel like I'm flying and falling at the same time.

"I've been wanting to do that since the day I gave you that rose," I whisper against her lips.

"Certainly took you long enough," she says with a sly smile.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, but I ignore it, losing myself in another kiss. When it buzzes again, Avery pulls back slightly.

"You should probably get that," she says.

I step back and reluctantly pull out my phone, the smile on my face dying as soon as I read the text from my mother.

In town for a few days. Dinner tomorrow night. Non-negotiable. —Mom and Dad

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Chapter Eleven

Avery

The moment my lips touch Nash's, my entire body goes electric. Sure, I've been kissed before, but never with a rush of heat that starts at my mouth and races down to my toes. His hands are firm at my waist—which is probably a good thing, considering my knees might buckle at any moment.

When he pulls back, his green eyes search mine, like he's trying to memorize every detail. I should say something witty or causal to cut through the heaviness of the situation, but all I can think is...

Oh!

He kisses me again, and thinking becomes impossible. His hand caresses my face with unexpected tenderness as I rest my hands on his chest. I can feel his heart pounding beneath my palms.

"I've been wanting to do that since the day I gave you that rose," he whispers against my lips.

The confession catches me off guard, melting something inside me that's been frozen for far too long. "Certainly took you long enough," I manage, surprising even myself with the playfulness in my voice.

His answering smile is enough to make me forget every reason I had for keeping him

at arm's length. For this one perfect moment, I allow myself to believe that this— us —could actually work.

His phone buzzes—once, twice. He doesn't move, just kisses me again. But I can feel a slight, undeniable shift in his focus.

“You should probably get that,” I say, pulling back.

Nash steps away and pulls out his phone. His smile vanishes, replaced by a tension around his eyes that sends chills down my spine. I've never seen him look so... distant.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, suddenly aware of the water soaking through our shirts and the mess we've made of the kitchen.

“Yeah, it's just... my parents. They're in town.” His voice is carefully neutral, but I don't miss the tension beneath it.

“Oh.” I frown, trying to wrap my head around what he is saying. “ Oh ! Look, if this is going to be a problem... We can go.”

The offer to leave comes automatically, with self-preservation kicking in before I can even process the disappointment blooming in my chest. Of course his parents would complicate things. What was I thinking?

“No,” Nash says quickly. “I mean... maybe. I don't know. But I know I don't want you to go.” He steps closer, leaning in and kissing me again. “Stay? Let me handle my parents.”

I nod, despite the warning bells ringing in my head. “Yeah. Okay. We'll stay. But promise you'll tell me if you change your mind. I don't want to be a burden.”

“I promise.” Nash pulls me into his arms, pressing a kiss to my forehead, and I allow myself to sink into the embrace. “You couldn’t be a burden even if you tried.”

I want to believe him. And for this moment, wrapped in his arms with the taste of him still on my lips, I almost do.

The next morning, I’m stirring a pot of oatmeal when Nash walks into the kitchen, freshly showered and looking unfairly good for someone who was up texting his parents until midnight. My stomach does a little flip as memories of last night’s kisses rush back with unexpected force.

“Morning.” His voice is still rough with sleep.

“Morning, sleepy head. Coffee’s fresh.”

“Thanks.” He moves around me carefully, maintaining a distance that wasn’t there yesterday. When his arm brushes mine, we both jump like we’ve been shocked.

Benji bursts in before the awkward silence can stretch any further. “You guys will never believe what my coach sent last night!” He plops his phone on the counter, showing us a video of last weekend’s game highlights. “Look! They put my homerun on their Facebook page!”

Nash leans over the phone. “That’s awesome, Buddy! Great form on that swing.”

“I know, right? Coach says if I keep it up, they might put me in a feature.”

I set a bowl of oatmeal in front of Benji, silently grateful for his complete obliviousness to the tension crackling between Nash and me. He chatters on about batting averages and fielding positions while I pretend not to notice how Nash refuses to make eye contact.

“Oh, by the way,” Nash says, pouring coffee into his mug, “I need to meet my parents for dinner tonight. At Morton’s.”

“The steakhouse?” Benji asks around a mouthful of oatmeal.

“Yeah. Downtown.” Nash finally glances up, his eyes meeting mine briefly before sliding away. “I should be back around ten, but don’t wait up or anything.”

Something cold settles in my stomach. Maybe it’s his politeness or the careful way he’s navigating the kitchen. Whatever it is, it all screams regret. Did he wake up regretting what happened between us? Or is he just nervous about his parents?

“Sounds good,” I say, my voice coming out more brittle than I intend. “Benji and I will just hang out here. Maybe watch a movie or something.”

“Perfect.” Nash’s smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Feel free to order takeout. My treat.”

And there it is again—the billionaire solving problems with his wallet. Last night I was kissing Nash, the man who makes my heart race. This morning I’m talking to Nash Fontaine, the pro baseball player who buys his way out of awkward situations.

“We’ll be fine,” I say casually, even though my stomach feels like it’s full of lead. “You’re already putting us up. You don’t need to feed us, too.”

Nash’s face flickers with something that might be hurt before his expression smooths back into polite neutrality.

“Of course. I didn’t mean—“

“Benji, hurry up and finish. We’re going to be late.” I grab my bag from the counter,

suddenly desperate to escape this kitchen and the mistake that happened in it.

Benji shovels the last few bites into his mouth while I busy myself rinsing dishes, and by the time we're heading out the door, the knot of doubt in my chest has grown into something I can't ignore.

What was I thinking? Nash Fontaine and Avery Morrow?

It sounds like a bad rom-com. The kind where the working-class girl somehow gets the billionaire before the credits roll.

Except in real life, those stories never end well.

And besides, I can't afford the kind of heartbreak that comes with believing in fairy tales.

"What did you do?" Summer pounces the minute I walk into the break room, her eyes wide with suspicion.

"Good morning to you too," I say, hanging my bag in my locker. "Why would you assume I did anything?"

"Because you've got that look." She narrows her eyes, following me as I pour myself a fresh cup of coffee. "The one where you're trying way too hard to act normal. Which means something definitely happened. You just don't want to admit it."

I take a long sip, avoiding her gaze. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, no!" She grabs my arm, nearly making me spill my coffee. "You kissed him!?"

"Shhh!" I glance around frantically. "Summer—!"

Summer's face splits into a triumphant grin. "I knew it! How was it? Wait, don't tell me—it was amazing, and now you're freaking out because you actually like him."

"I'm not freaking out," I say, straightening the already-perfect stack of napkins on the counter.

"Please. You're color-coding the napkins again. It's your stress tell." She hops onto the counter, blocking my escape route. "Spill. All of it."

I sigh, knowing resistance is futile. "Fine. We kissed last night. It was... nice."

"Nice? You're describing Nash Fontaine's kiss as 'nice'? The man who makes half the women in Chicago hyperventilate just by walking through the door?"

"Okay, it was more than nice," I admit, feeling heat creep up my neck. "But it doesn't matter because obviously, it was a mistake."

"Why? Because he's rich and famous, and you're determined to be miserable?"

"Because his parents are in town, and this morning he could barely look at me." The words come out in a rush. "He's taking them to dinner tonight, and I just—I know how this goes, Summer. Guys like him don't end up with girls like me."

Summer's expression softens. "Have you considered that maybe he's nervous? Not everyone has your talent for assuming the worst."

"I don't assume the worst," I protest, but my voice lacks conviction.

"Yes, you do. It's your superpower." She jumps down from the counter and places her hands on my shoulders.

“What if—and I know this is a radical thought—he genuinely likes you? What if the man who’s been texting you every day and looks at you like you hung the moon, actually does want to be with you? ”

“Then he’d be the first,” I mutter.

“You shouldn’t be so hard on him,” she says gently. “Not everyone is looking for an exit strategy the way you are.”

I shrug off her hands, uncomfortable with how close to home her words hit. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I’ve got more important things to focus on.”

“Like what?”

“Like this Willow Grant scholarship essay that’s due on Monday, for starters. It’s an extra five thousand dollars toward Benji’s tuition if I get it, but I can’t write if I’m distracted by this thing between me and Nash. Benji has to come first. You know that.”

Summer’s eyebrows rise. “And if you don’t get it?”

“Not an option,” I say firmly. “I can’t let him down, Summer.”

“Ok. But have you ever considered what might happen if things don’t work out with the academy? Would that really make you a failure?”

The question hits me like a slap. “Of course it would. After everything Benji’s been through... he deserves this chance.”

“Benji deserves a sister who doesn’t destroy herself trying to be perfect,” Summer says quietly. “Some things in life you can’t control, Ave. But none of it will ever be

enough to make the people who love you think less of you.”

I blink against the sudden burn in my eyes. Before I can respond, the door swings open, and Miguel pokes his head in.

“Ladies, we’ve got a twelve-top coming in. Let’s move!”

Summer squeezes my hand quickly before grabbing her apron. “Just don’t overthink it, okay? Give him time to show you the man he really is.”

As I follow her out, I can’t help wondering if she’s right. About Nash. About me. About everything. But I’ve spent too many years building walls to suddenly convince myself they’re no longer necessary.

Maybe Nash showing me the man he really is... is exactly what I’m afraid of.

Chapter Twelve

Nash

I straighten my tie in the bedroom mirror, already dreading meeting my parents for dinner. After last night's kiss with Avery, the last thing I want is to spend an evening listening to my mother's thinly veiled judgments about my life choices.

"The blue one looks better."

I turn to find Avery leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed. Even in simple jeans and a T-shirt, she's stunning.

"Thanks," I say, switching ties.

"You're welcome." She smiles, but I can tell things are different between us.

I finish up and follow her downstairs, where Benji is sprawled out on the couch scrolling through Netflix.

"Can we watch a movie when you get home?" he asks.

Sorry, Champ," I say, checking my watch, "I might not make it before bedtime. How about a rain check?"

Avery settles onto the couch beside Benji. "We'll be fine. You go charm your parents."

“Trust me, with my mother, charm is useless.” I go to grab my keys from the counter when

the doorbell rings. I look up at Avery. “Did you order takeout?”

“No.” She shrugs, and confusion washes over me as I walk toward the front door.

I’m not sure what—or who—I expect to be on the other side when I open it, but to say I’m shocked to see my mother standing there with a bag of groceries would be an understatement of massive proportions.

“Nash, darling! Surprise!”

“Mom?” I try to hide the panic in my voice. “I thought we were meeting at Morton’s.”

“Change of plans, dear. I told your father it was silly to meet at some stuffy steakhouse when I could just as easily cook for you here.” My mother bustles past me without a care in the world. “Besides, I’ve been dying to see this new house of yours. The realtor’s photos hardly do it justice.”

My father steps inside behind her, offering me a firm handshake and a pat on the back. “Good to see you, Son.”

His eyes immediately scan the living room, taking in Benji, who’s frozen mid-bite with a handful of popcorn, and Avery, who’s risen from the couch with a panicked deer-in-headlights expression.

Could this night get any worse?

“I hope we’re not interrupting,” my father says, giving me a measured look.

“No, it’s fine,” I say, desperate to salvage the situation. “Mom, Dad, this is Avery and her brother Benji. Remember I mentioned my mentorship with the Play It Forward program? Benji is the one I told you I’m mentoring.”

My mother pauses her inspection of my kitchen to turn and assess them. An awkward silence fills the room as she presses her lips together in a thin smile. “Oh, yes. The little baseball prodigy and his sister. How unexpected to find you... here .”

Avery shoots me an accusing glance, then straightens her spine and smiles. “Mrs. Fontaine, how nice to finally meet you. Benji and I were about to put on a movie, but don’t worry. We can go.”

“Oh, please,” my mother scoffs, already unpacking her grocery bag. “It’s Elizabeth. And don’t be silly. You’ll both stay and join us for dinner. I insist.”

The next hour and a half of my life is spent wondering what I must have done in my previous life to deserve such lousy luck. The air around the dinner table is so charged that it’s a wonder how we’re not all struck down by lightning.

“So, Avery, tell us about yourself. What is it that you do for work?”

Avery takes a slow sip from her water glass, then sets it down in front of her. “I work at the stadium. At The Dugout Club.”

“Oh?” My mother dabs the corner of her mouth with a napkin and raises a brow. “And are you a manager there?”

“Technically, no. I’m a server,” Avery says, lifting her chin. “But I’ve applied for a position in management.”

“How nice. And your parents? What do they do?” Mom’s smile is polite, but I’m not

buying it. And from the looks of it, neither is Avery.

Avery's fingers tighten around her fork. "They're... not in the picture. It's just me and Benji."

"Oh, dear. For how long?" my mother presses.

"Mom," I interject, "maybe we could talk about—"

"No. It's fine, Nash," Avery cuts me off. "I've been Benji's legal guardian going on five years now."

Mom's reply comes with even more fake pity. "My goodness. That's quite a responsibility for someone so young. How ever do you manage?"

Her condescending tone makes me cringe. I want to say something to defend Avery, but my words get stuck in my throat. Besides, I know better than to wage war with my mother. Especially in the presence of guests.

"We get by." Avery's voice is steady despite the flush creeping up her neck.

"And how long has this... arrangement been going on?" My father speaks for the first time since sitting down, his analytical gaze shifting between me and Avery.

Before I can answer, Benji pipes up, "Our house has termites! Nash said we could stay here until it's fixed."

My father nods with an unreadable expression. "I see. Quite the charitable host."

"It's not charity, Dad." I try to keep the defensiveness from my voice. "I told you, I'm his mentor. Besides, Benji here's got real talent. His coach even nominated him

for the All-Star team.”

“Really?” Mom says, turning her attention to Benji. “Well, you must be special to have caught Nash’s attention. He’s always had incredibly high standards.”

Benji beams, oblivious to all the backhanded comments going around. “Last week he taught me how to switch-hit!”

As Benji launches into a detailed explanation of our last practice session, my father studies Avery with the same calculating look I’ve seen a hundred times before. It’s the same one he uses whenever he’s trying to assess a new business venture—or a potential threat.

The rest of the dinner passes in a similar pattern. Mom probes with more invasive questions while Avery continues to respond with straightforward answers, and I fail miserably to intervene, all while Dad sits back and quietly observes.

Benji’s bedtime can’t come fast enough, and when it finally does, I volunteer to clean up just so Avery and Benji can make their break.

When the coast is clear, I ask my parents to join me in the study, knowing I’m about to get an earful from both of them.

Dad finds my crystal decanter on the table by the bookshelf and pours himself a tumbler of single malt over ice, while Mom busies herself with brewing tea in the adjoining kitchenette.

“Interesting living arrangement you’ve found yourself in.” He sinks into one of the leather armchairs, swirling the amber liquid in his glass before taking a sip.

“It’s only temporary,” I say, taking the chair opposite.

“Is it?” Mom returns with her teacup, perching on the edge of the sofa. “Because it certainly didn’t look temporary from where I was sitting.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” she says, stirring her tea, “that I recognize that look, Nash. The way you were watching her all through dinner.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t play dumb, darling. It doesn’t suit you.” She sets her spoon down on the saucer with a clink. “I’m concerned about your involvement with this woman.”

“Her name is Avery. And there’s no ‘involvement’ to be concerned about.”

“Please. I raised you. I know when you’re interested in someone.

” She takes another sip of tea, then sets her cup and saucer down on one of the glass end tables.

“Women like her, they see opportunity, Nash. Using a vulnerable child as leverage to get close to a wealthy bachelor like yourself... it’s a tale as old as time. ”

Every fiber of my being wants to tell my mother how wrong she is, but for some strange reason, I don’t. At first, I think it’s because of all the years I’ve spent conditioning myself to never question my parents’ better judgment, but I know it’s not that simple.

“Your mother’s concerns aside,” my father adds, “there are practical matters to consider. You’re a public figure—a professional athlete with endorsement deals and a reputation to maintain.”

“Okay, but why should who I choose to spend time with be anyone else’s business?”

“You’re the child’s mentor, Nash. Can you honestly say you haven’t considered how a relationship with his entrusted guardian would appear to the public?

To your team? To your sponsors? After that stunt you pulled in Sacramento, your focus should be less on playing house and more on how you plan to rebuild your image.

Face it, Son. Baseball is a business. And women like Ms. Morrow are bad for business.”

“Where’s your head at Fontaine?! Don’t think I won’t give your starting position to Reyes!” Coach Donovan shouts after I miss my third ground ball. It’s the morning after that nightmare of a dinner with my parents, and I know now is not the time to be distracted.

Tonight, we’re facing the Milwaukee Cheese Heads— one of Chicago’s biggest rivals—but all I can think about is Avery while my father’s lecture from last night plays on repeat in my mind. When Coach finally blows the whistle, I try stopping by the Dugout Club to see her.

“Not a good time, Nash.”

She’s standing behind the hostess stand, holding a dry-erase marker, and only looks up long enough to see me walk through the door before avoiding eye contact completely.

“Can we just talk for a minute?” I try reaching for her hand, and she pulls away.

“You can’t keep coming around when I’m working. I’ve got customers.”

Her voice is flat. Distant. Before I can ask if she's okay after last night's ambush, she turns and walks away, disappearing through the door to the kitchen. So much for asking for a good luck kiss before my big game.

On my way out, I get a text from Carmen.

Emergency meeting. My office. NOW.

Twenty minutes later, I'm staring at the string of photos splashed across Carmen's tablet. Photos of me and Avery looking cozy outside the clubhouse.

"Nash Fontaine Settling Down with a Stadium Employee?" Carmen reads the headline. "This is exactly what I was talking about, Nash. I warned you, but you didn't want to listen. I'm not gonna lie. This is bad. Really bad."

I snatch the tablet off the desk and scroll through the article. "It's a reach is what it is. This whole article is trash. They've got nothing to back up their claims other than a few photos."

"Come on, Nash. You know as well as I do that a picture's worth a thousand words.

And even if it weren't, you're still living with her.

They may not have put two and two together, but you know they will eventually.

You need to think long and hard about how much of your reputation are you willing to throw away trying to help her. "

I know Carmen is right to worry, but despite what her, or my dad, or anyone else seems to think, I couldn't care less how a bunch of stupid photos of the two of us hanging out might affect my reputation.

What I am concerned with is how it affects Avery's. Does she even know these pictures exist?

I think about her blowing me off at the restaurant, and a knot forms in my stomach. Of course she does. First my parents. Now this. It's no wonder she didn't want me hanging around.

"How do we make this go away?" I ask, worried about what might happen if the press starts digging and learns the truth. Avery's big promotion aside, would Milo still allow me, his star mentor, to work with Benji if it meant a PR nightmare for his foundation?

"The only way we know how," Carmen replies with a frown. "Avery and Benji have got to go."

Chapter Thirteen

Avery

“Benji?” I call, making my way down the hall.

When I reach the bottom of the staircase, I hear voices and find Benji in the kitchen alone, hoovering down an oversized bowl of cereal and scrolling through his phone with baseball highlights playing at full volume.

“Morning,” he sputters between bites. “Did you see Nash’s hit last night? Three-run homer in the ninth!” He tilts his screen toward me, showing Nash rounding the bases as the crowd erupts.

“No, I went to bed early,” I say, pouring coffee into one of Nash’s stainless steel travel mugs. Truth be told, I wanted to see him play. But after all the drama at work, all I could do was come home, shower, and fall into bed, hoping to sleep it off.

“Where is he, anyway? I thought he’d be up by now.”

Benji shrugs. “I don’t think he came home last night. His car’s not in the driveway.”

“It’s not?” I ask, trying to sound casual as I glance out the window. “Did you see it in the garage when you took out the trash?”

“Nope.” Benji looks up and studies my face. “Did you have a fight or something?”

Guilt pools in my stomach when I think about running Nash off yesterday. “Of course not. Why would you even think that?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugs again, returning to his cereal. “You guys have been acting weird ever since his parents showed up. I thought maybe you were mad at him.”

I busy myself by making toast, hoping Benji doesn’t notice the heat creeping into my face.

“Well, I’m not. Now, hurry up and finish your breakfast,” I say, checking the time. “We need to be out the door in ten.”

While Benji polishes off the rest of his Captain Crunch, my brain runs wild with theories about where Nash is and why he never texted.

Was it his parents? What if they didn’t approve, and deep down he knows they’re right but is too afraid to face me?

Or what if he finally gave in to one of his fangirls after the game?

Could he have gone out with the guys to celebrate their big win and passed out on one of their couches after a long night of drinking too much?

Or worse—what if Nash is mad at me? After all, I’m the one who put off getting those stairs fixed.

Falling for Nash was a mistake that never would have happened if I hadn’t let him talk me into moving in with him. Maybe it’s time I start thinking about other alternatives.

After dropping Benji at school, I pull over and make the call I’ve been putting off.

“Mike Wagner,” he answers with a gruff voice.

“Mike, it’s Avery. Just checking the progress.”

“Avery, hey! Perfect timing! We just got the water turned back on this morning. Still working on the floors, but I’m thinking we should have those finished by the end of the day.”

I grip the steering wheel tighter. “Okay. So... when can we move back in?”

“Technically? Whenever you want, if you don’t mind the noise while we wrap things up this week. I’d give it another seven days before the basement’s ready, though. Washer and dryer won’t be hooked up till then.”

I close my eyes, relief washing over me. “That’s fine. We can make it work.”

“Everything okay where you’re at now?” Mike asks. “Guy’s not giving you any trouble, is he?”

“No. No trouble at all. Just ready to get back to our own space.”

I end the call, a part of me wondering if Benji and I would’ve been better off sleeping in my car. At least then I wouldn’t be nursing an ache in my chest the size of Montana.

So much for fairy tales , I think, pulling back onto the road. I’ve always known better than to believe in happily ever afters.

I try to focus on my drive to work, but my thoughts keep circling back to this last month with Nash. By the time I pull into the employee lot, I’m convinced that last night was the wake- up call I needed. Whatever I thought was happening between us

was clearly an error in judgement.

When I walk into the break room, Summer's standing by the coffee machine, her eyes glued to her phone.

"Geez, have you seen these new articles? Brutal!" She thrusts the device at me before I can even set my bag down.

"After yesterday's media frenzy? I think I'll pass." I grab a clean apron from my locker, but Summer follows, shoving the screen in front of my face.

"Oh, I think you need to see this. It's worse, Ave. Way worse."

"Fine. Whatever." I take the phone and slowly start scrolling.

The first article shows pictures of Nash's parents at last night's game, highlighting William Fontaine as "the billionaire tech mogul making a rare appearance to support his son."

But it's the second article that makes my blood run cold. "Fontaine Family Dynasty: Is Nash's Stadium Fling Hurting His Family Name?"

There are two new photos below it. The first shows Nash walking Benji and me to my car after one of his skill camps. The second was taken on the field, with Nash leaning in a little too close as he whispers something in my ear by the dugout.

My stomach drops when I notice that stupid smile again. How would one even argue there's nothing going on when he's looking at me like... that?

And if this doesn't humiliate me enough, I decide it's a good idea to read the comment section out loud.

“Probably another gold digger. Why am I not surprised?”

“Aw, how cute. Looks like Nash is playing house now.”

“Another casualty of Nash Fontaine’s devastating charm. Poor girl.”

“Hey!” Summer snatches her phone back. “Forget about what people are saying. The press is nothing but a bunch of hungry vultures looking to make a quick buck. In a week, they’ll move on to a new story and none of these people will even remember your name. No offense,” she adds.

“Avery?” Salvatore, the Dugout Club’s operations manager and also my boss, appears in the doorway. “My office, please.

Summer gives me a sympathetic look as I follow him down the hall, my heart hammering against my ribs.

“Close the door,” he says, settling behind his desk.

I sink into the chair across from him, and I already know what’s coming.

“I’ll be honest, Avery. I’m concerned about this escalating publicity.” He taps his computer screen at one of the articles Summer just showed me. “When I recommended you for the management position, I did so because of your professionalism and dedication.”

“About that, I can explain—“

“Please do.” He leans back and steeples his fingers.

“None of this is what it looks like. Nash was assigned to be Benji’s mentor,” I say

cautiously. “And the only reason I have anything to do with him is because he offered to help us out while our house gets repaired.”

Salvatore’s eyebrows rise. “You’re living with him?”

“Temporarily,” I add quickly. “But it’s okay. It was just until our place was fixed. We’re actually moving home today.”

He pauses, letting his face relax. “Look, I like you, Avery. You may be one of my hardest workers, but this management position comes with higher expectations. Our clientele includes athletes, team owners, sponsors—all people who expect absolute discretion.”

“I understand.”

“Do you? Because if the press found out one of our staff was living with Nash Fontaine, it wouldn’t just reflect poorly on you.”

“It won’t be a problem, I promise. Like I said, we’re moving out today. This whole situation will be over before anyone else even notices.”

He studies me for a moment. “I hope so. Because I’d hate to have to reconsider my recommendation.”

I fold another shirt and add it to my suitcase, trying to ignore the weight in my chest. The look on Benji’s face when I picked him up from school and told him we were moving back home was devastating.

His immediate “why?” was so much harder to answer than I expected it to be, even after hours of rehearsal earlier in the day.

I tried to explain that it was complicated, but when he kept pressing, I was forced to tell him the truth.

I told him all about the articles circulating and how they could hurt not only my job but damage Nash's reputation as a mentor.

I told him to trust me and that moving out was the best thing for all of us, but I'll admit—I haven't seen him look this upset since the day our parents left.

I zip the suitcase closed and sit on the edge of the bed feeling exhausted. Too bad there's no time for one last spin in the jacuzzi tub. My frazzled nerves sure could use the distraction.

Benji's soft knock interrupts my thoughts.

"You can come in."

"I'm done packing." He pokes his head through the door, his sad eyes making me feel even worse.

"That was fast," I say, trying to lighten the mood.

He shrugs. "Didn't bring much." He lingers in the doorway, head hung low. "It just sucks we have to leave without saying goodbye."

"I know, Buddy." I pat the spot beside me, and he trudges over to sit down. "But Nash will understand. We all knew this was only temporary."

"But what if he thinks we're mad at him? What if he thinks I don't want him to be my mentor anymore?"

I put an arm around his shoulder, pulling him in close. “Nash cares about you, Benji. That won’t change because we’re back home.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.” I squeeze his arm. “What if you write him a letter, instead? You can tell him how you made lead-off hitter and say thank you for letting us stay here. I bet he’d like that.”

“Yeah, I guess. But can I still call him in the morning?”

“Of course. He’s still your mentor.”

Benji gives a small smile and heads off to his room, leaving me alone again with my thoughts.

I’ve spent my whole life learning that people leave. My parents taught me that lesson so thoroughly that I’ve never fully trusted anyone else I let in would stay. Yet, here I’m the one running.

But something about this feels different. This isn’t about me running away—it’s about protecting what matters. My job. Benji’s future. Our independence. Even Nash himself stands to benefit from us moving out.

It’s this last thought that has me feeling like maybe I should write Nash a letter of my own.

Sitting at a vanity in the corner of the room, I carefully tear a sheet of paper from one of the spiral notebooks in my bag and begin writing.

Nash,

My pen hovers over the page, unsure of what to say—until I remember what happened the last time I let myself be vulnerable with him. What am I supposed to say?

Thank you for making me believe in something that was never going to work? Sorry for the mess I brought into your perfectly ordered life?

I spend the next few minutes feeling disappointed all over again, then crumple up the paper and toss it in the trash—not because I have nothing to say, but because maybe some things are better left unsaid.

Chapter Fourteen

Nash

After yesterday's meeting with Carmen, I thought taking time away to think while giving Avery her space would give me the clarity I needed, but now I'm more confused than ever.

I know Carmen is right. With the press sniffing around, every day I come home to Avery and Benji is another opportunity for some tabloid to dig up dirt on us. But that doesn't mean I'm ready to go down without a fight.

I need Avery to know how sorry I am for everything they're saying about her. And even if it means laying low until this mess blows over, I want her to know that—no matter what happens—we can figure it out. Together.

I pull into the drive, fresh off our second win against Milwaukee. The house is dark as I kill the engine, and Avery's car is gone—which is strange because the Dugout Club closed over an hour ago, and I didn't think she was even scheduled to work tonight.

I unlock the front door, feeling breathless. "Benji? Avery?"

I flip on the lights and move through the empty space, my heart racing as I go upstairs to check their rooms. Empty. Besides the original bedding, each one is stripped bare, and all that's left is a folded piece of paper with my name scrawled across it on Benji's desk.

I pick it up and start reading, swallowing hard against the lump rising in the back of my throat.

Dear Nash,

Avery says it's time to go home. Thank you for letting us stay at your house. It was really cool. Thank you for teaching me how to switch-hit and for taking me to the batting cages. I made lead-off hitter at practice today! I'm going to watch your game when I get home. I will call you tomorrow.

Your friend,

Benji

P.S. I'm so glad you're my mentor.

I read it twice, then look around for a second note. There has to be something from Avery. An explanation. A goodbye, anything. But there's nothing.

She left without saying goodbye? Not even a text?

I sink onto the bed and heave a sigh. Everything is too quiet. Too empty. I don't know when I let myself get so used to Benji's running commentary on baseball stats or coming home to Avery curled up on the couch with her laptop, but I do know how wrong the house feels without them right now.

My phone feels heavy in my hand as I pull it out to send Avery a text.

Can we talk?

Three minutes later, it buzzes with her reply.

There's nothing to talk about. As much fun as it was playing house, it's time to get back to the real world. I'll have Benji call you tomorrow to go over next week's schedule.

Her words hit like a fastball to the chest, and there's that saying again. Playing house. Only, when Avery says it, it's like this last month meant nothing to her. Or like the way she looked at me—the way she kissed me even—wasn't real.

I stare at her reply until the screen goes dark.

Maybe everyone was right, and I was just fooling myself into thinking otherwise.

Avery and I come from two very different worlds.

And mine is a world where baseball and relationships never did mix.

What was I thinking, believing that a woman like Avery would put up with the scrutiny that comes with my life?

Or that she'd risk everything she's worked for all because I caught feelings?

I wander through the house, stopping at the spot in the kitchen where we shared our first kiss. It's a memory that feels like it happened to someone else. Someone naive enough to believe that mutual attraction and a few weeks of late-night texts are enough to build a foundation for something real.

It turns out Avery is just like the others. The minute things get complicated, she runs.

And I'm the fool who gets left every time.

It's been almost a week since Benji and Avery left, and I'm a wreck waiting to meet

him for the first time at Clearway's batting cages.

When he finally arrives, he jogs across the field with his equipment bag bouncing against his side.

"Hey," he says, dropping his bag and giving an awkward wave.

"Hey, Champ." I toss him a ball, which he instinctively catches with one hand. "Ready to work on that swing?"

"Yeah." He nods as a familiar smile washes over his face.

We fall into a natural rhythm, both of us carefully avoiding any mention of the past month. No talk about movie nights or breakfast conversations. And definitely no mention of Avery. Just baseball.

It's not until we start fielding drills that I notice Benji's new glove.

"What, no lucky glove today?" I nod at Benji's hand, and his face lights up.

"Yeah! Avery surprised me with this one yesterday. She said she finally got her promotion. She's a manager now!"

And there it is. Avery. The white elephant in the room.

She did it. Just like I knew she would. Pride washes over me, and before I can stop it, something warm and unexpected fills my chest.

"That's great. She deserves it," I say with an earnest smile.

Benji nods enthusiastically. "She has to work more hours, but she says it's worth it.

We might even be able to fix the AC in her car now.”

I swallow hard, suddenly too aware of how much I still care. “Sounds like things are looking up for you guys.”

“Yeah.” His smile falters slightly. “It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“Nothing.” He shrugs. “Think you can show me that grip adjustment again?”

I take a step back, mentally and physically. It’s better this way. More professional. I have to remember why I started this mentorship in the first place. I need to show Coach I’m a changed man if I want him to start taking me seriously.

We spend the last hour drilling fundamentals, and I find slipping into coach mode easier than ever.

This is what the press should be writing about—Nash Fontaine, reformed playboy, responsibly mentoring Chicago’s youth.

No blurred boundaries. No messy emotions.

Even though nothing about this kid makes keeping my emotions in check an easy task.

When it’s time to wrap up, Benji starts packing his gear while I collect the stray balls scattered around the field.

“Same time next Thursday?” he asks, slinging his bag over his shoulder.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

He jogs back toward the parking lot where Avery is probably waiting, and I realize with unsettling clarity that no matter how hard I try to revert to seeing this mentorship as just another PR obligation, Benji really is like a little brother to me.

And this city, with its gritty diamonds and determined kids just like him, is starting to feel like something even more unexpected.

Home.

Another week passes, and I’m sitting in Coach Donovan’s office with Carmen, surrounded by the scent of leather and Pine-Sol that seems to permeate every baseball facility I’ve ever been in.

I’ve arranged my face into what I hope passes for professional interest as Coach flips through a file folder on his desk.

“These polling numbers are impressive, Nash,” he says, sliding a page across the table. “Your approval rating with fans is up fifteen points since last month.”

Carmen smiles and nods. “Whatever you’ve been doing these past few weeks, it’s working. That tabloid mess has completely blown over. Almost like it never happened.”

“Just focusing on my game and being the best mentor I can be,” I say, leaning back in my chair.

“Speaking of which,” Carmen adds, “tell Coach about those outreach ideas you mentioned yesterday.”

I sit forward, a surge of excitement rushing through my veins as I explain the new project I've been working on to Coach Donovan.

"It started with noticing how a lot of kids in Benji's league are playing with hand-me-down equipment.

Until about a week ago, he was playing with a glove held together by duct tape. "

Coach raises an eyebrow. "The kid you're mentoring?"

"Yeah." I pull out my phone, scrolling through notes I'd jotted down after our last practice.

"Since the Street Sweepers' contract with Play It Forward only has us volunteering on a short-term basis, I was thinking about setting up something more permanent for the off season.

Only, the idea is to offer a program where underprivileged youth have access to quality equipment—in addition to mentorship, of course.

I thought maybe if there were a system in place where they could earn points toward their gear of choice, they'd have a better chance of excelling in the long run.

Think community service, academic achievements—the sky's the limit.

I just hate the idea of other kids from more affluent families having a leg up because of what their parents can afford, you know? "

I continue outlining each aspect of the program, from how local businesses could sponsor equipment banks to how high school players could volunteer as long-term mentors, and by the end of my pitch, I'm practically salivating.

“This is solid, Fontaine. I’m impressed,” Coach says with a chuckle. “It’s nice to see you’re investing in something other than your own stats for a change.”

“Absolutely,” Carmen agrees. “The PR benefits alone would be worth it, but something about this feels different. More... authentic.”

They’re both looking at me with something that feels uncomfortably like respect. The same kind I used to chase through home runs and headline-grabbing plays. It should feel good. It does feel good.

But why does my chest still have this hollow feeling?

“This kid must be something special,” Coach says.

I smile. “Benji? Yeah, he’s a real diamond in the rough. Just needs the right opportunities.”

“Given your platform, I see real potential. I have contacts at several sporting goods companies who would jump at the chance to partner with you on something like this.”

Carmen pulls out her laptop, and for the next thirty minutes, we hash out preliminary details, including potential sponsors, logistical challenges, and roll-out plans. Aside from helping Benji, it’s the first time in my life I’ve found purpose.

I never thought being Benji’s mentor would result in doing something that made me feel so alive. But later that night, when I pull into my empty driveway and walk into my empty house, the reality I’ve been trying to avoid crashes down around me.

The truth is... there’s an Avery-shaped hole in my life that no community outreach program can fill, and I don’t like it.

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Chapter Fifteen

Avery

The whine of the electric drill downstairs barely registers as I drag a brush through my tangled hair.

It's been a week since we moved back home, and I should be thrilled.

No more walking on eggshells in someone else's space.

No more worrying about tabloid photographers popping up out of Nash's perfectly manicured hydrangea bushes.

Just me and Benji, back to our normal routine.

So why does our house feel so foreign all of a sudden?

I toss the brush onto my dresser and glance around the room.

Everything is exactly where it's supposed to be with my beat-up dresser, mismatched nightstands, and a sagging mattress I've been meaning to replace for years.

I guess after a month of sleeping in Nash's guest bed, it's no wonder why my bed now feels like a slab of concrete.

That's all it is, I tell myself. Material comforts. I just got spoiled a little.

A loud thud followed by laughter drifts up from downstairs, but I don't hear Benji joining in.

Since we've been back, he's been uncharacteristically quiet, disappearing into his room after school instead of practicing in the backyard or planting himself in front of the TV like he normally does.

When I asked him about it yesterday, he just shrugged and mumbled something about homework.

I head downstairs, and Mike is measuring the newly installed banister for the staircase while two of his crew members pack up tools.

His crooked smile greets me. "Morning, Ave. Looking good down here, huh?"

I nod, running my hand over the smooth railing. "Yeah. I can't believe how fast you guys got everything done."

"Not hard to do with my dad breathing down our necks." He chuckles. "Speaking of which, I've got your final invoice."

My stomach tightens as he leads me to the kitchen and retrieves a bill from the counter. This is the moment I've been dreading—finding out exactly how much of Benji's tuition fund has been sacrificed to termites.

He hands me the sheet of paper, and I blink twice at the figure. "Mike, this can't be right. It's nearly six thousand less than your estimate."

He shrugs, rubbing the back of his neck. "Dad says consider it the 'Mildred Morrow' discount."

“The... what? ”

“I don’t know. Something about your grandma helping him out back when he was just starting the business?

Says she loaned him some money once when the bank wouldn’t.

Guess he wanted to repay the favor.” Mike leans against the counter.

“It’s funny because he was dead set against going down on the price until I told him who it was for.

”My throat tightens. “I don’t know what to say. ”

“I didn’t either at first. But he said it was the least he could do for Millie’s granddaughter. Just keep looking out for that kid brother of yours. That’s all Dad asked.” He gestures toward Benji’s room. “Speaking of... he’s been awfully quiet this morning. Everything okay?”

“Yeah. I think he just misses living with Nash.”

Mike nods. “Oh, right. The baseball player.”

As if on cue, Benji’s door creaks open, and he shuffles into the kitchen, still in his pajamas even though it’s almost noon.

“Hey, buddy,” Mike greets him. “What do you think of the new staircase?”

Benji shrugs. “It’s alright.” His gaze drops to his phone, and I catch a glimpse of what looks like the Chicago Street Sweepers’ game schedule before he tucks it away in his pocket.

Mike gives me a knowing look before turning back to Benji. “You know, my nephew Davey’s about your age. He’s got a batting cage set up in his backyard. I bet he’d love to practice with you sometime.”

“Thanks,” Benji mumbles, “but we already have batting cages at my school.”

The words hang in the air as he grabs a can of Coke from the fridge and retreats back into his room.

“Kids,” Mike says, packing up the rest of his tools. “Give him some time. He’ll come around.”

I nod, but I’m not so sure. As I watch Mike and his crew leave, I realize that fixing the house was the easy part. It’s the look in Benji’s eyes—that mixture of disappointment and resignation—that I have no idea how to repair.

And the strange emptiness in my chest? That’s just readjustment, I tell myself. I’m sure it has nothing to do with missing a certain arrogant shortstop or his devastating smile. Nothing at all.

When Monday rolls around, I’m straightening my blazer outside Salvatore’s office as Summer appears beside me with two fresh cups of coffee.

“Nervous?” she asks, offering me one.

“Should I be?” I accept the cup, trying to ignore the butterflies in my stomach.

“Please. We both know why he called you in.” She nudges my shoulder. “He’s not exactly subtle. I saw him with the paperwork yesterday.”

Before I can respond, Salvatore’s door swings open. “Avery! Come in, come in.”

I shoot Summer a quick smile as she gives me a thumbs-up and mouths “You got this.”

Salvatore’s office is impeccably organized, with framed photos of celebrities who’ve visited the Dugout Club lining the walls. He gestures for me to sit as he settles behind his desk.

“Avery, I’ll get right to the point. Your work ethic, your attention to detail, and even your ability to handle difficult clientele have finally paid off.

” He slides a folder across his desk and nods.

“Now that your training is complete, what do you say we make your position as our new General Manager official?”

Even though I’ve been expecting it, hearing the words sends a wave of relief. I open the folder to find a freshly printed contract, and my eyes are immediately drawn to the salary figure on the first page. It’s nearly double what I’m making now.

“The position comes with full benefits, including health and dental insurance,” Salvatore continues. “And there’s a three-thousand-dollar sign-on bonus once you finish filling out all the paperwork.”

“Three thousand?” I mouth the words with shaky hands. “Thank you, Sir. I promise I won’t let you down.”

“I know you won’t.” He stands and reaches out his hand. “Despite all the recent distractions, I’d say you’ve earned it.”

The subtle reminder of Nash and the tabloid fiasco isn’t lost on me, but today, I give myself permission to push it out of my mind as I shake his hand.

Outside the office, Summer waits with a knowing smile. “Well?”

“I got it! Full benefits, a sign-on bonus... and dental!”

She squeals and throws her arms around me, pulling me in for a hug. “I knew it! We’re celebrating tonight. Drinks at O’Malley’s after our shift?”

“I can’t. I promised Benji I’d be home early.” I say, even though what I really want to do is surprise Benji with something special when he gets home from school. Something that will hopefully make up for us leaving things with Nash the way we did.

“Fine, but I’m not taking no for an answer this weekend,” she warns, heading back toward the kitchen.

On the way to inspect my new office, I pull out my phone, and before I realize what I’m doing, I scroll to Nash’s contact. My thumb hovers over the message field, and I begin typing: I did it. I got the job!

The urge to hit send comes with an unexpected force as I imagine Nash actually being happy for me.

I even let myself believe that he’d insist on taking me and Benji out to celebrate at some ridiculously expensive restaurant if things were how they used to be.

But I know they’re not. That chapter of my life is closed.

Deleting the draft, I tuck my phone away and quickly lose myself in the pages of my new contract.

Standing in the middle of Big Al’s Sports Emporium, I stare at a wall of baseball

gloves that all look functionally identical to my untrained eyes. I pick one up that has a \$59.99 price tag and examine the leather.

“That’s our entry-level model.” A salesman with a nametag that reads Derrick says, after appearing out of nowhere. “Good for beginners, but if your son’s serious about baseball, I’d recommend something more like this.” He reaches for a glove with a \$149.99 tag.

“My brother,” I correct automatically. “And he’s pretty serious.”

I turn the more expensive glove over in my hands, noting the difference in quality.

With the sign-on bonus, I could easily afford it.

But Benji’s birthday is only a few months away, and I’d planned to get him a nicer one then.

Plus, I’m still on the line to come up with the rest of the money for Benji’s tuition.

My mind drifts to Nash, who would probably buy Benji the professional model locked in the display case without batting an eye. You know? The one with the \$400 price tag that probably costs more than my first car payment.

“The sixty-dollar one will be fine for now,” I say, handing it back to Derrick. “He has another one at home. This is just to get him by until his birthday.”

At the checkout counter, while one of the younger female associates checks me out, I can’t shake the feeling that I’m somehow letting Benji down—which I know makes no sense at all.

A few months back, I would have been thrilled to find a glove like this on sale.

So why, all of a sudden, do I feel like it's not good enough?

Back in the car, I tuck the bag under the back seat so it's out of sight.

I'll give it to him tonight after dinner and make it clear that a better one is coming for his birthday.

Then, as I'm sliding my key into the ignition, I make sure and scold myself for measuring my worth as Benji's guardian against the standard of a billionaire baseball player.

"Cheers to being your boss and finally having health insurance!" I say, clinking glasses with Summer. It's Friday night at O'Malley's, Benji's sleeping over at a friend's house, and the bar is buzzing with an energy I can't match despite my best efforts.

"To the new boss lady," Summer grins. "How's Benji liking his new glove?"

"He says he loves it." I take a sip of my drink. "Even though he refuses to get rid of his old one."

"Probably wants to hold on to it until he's all big and famous, then sell it for a fortune. That's what I'd do, at least." Summer takes another sip and sets her martini glass down on the table. "So, with all this luck coming your way, Benji's academy fund should be looking pretty hefty, huh?"

My smile fades as I reach for my phone. "It was, until this morning," I say, pulling up the email I've read at least a dozen times. "The Willow Grant Foundation regrets to inform you..."

Summer's face falls as she takes my phone and starts reading. "Oh, no! That was the

big scholarship you were applying for, wasn't it? Sweetie, I'm so sorry."

"Yep. That's five grand off the table."

She winces. "Geez, I bet that one hurt."

"You wouldn't be wrong." I drain half my glass in one go. "But it's okay. I've worked out the numbers, and with my new salary, I should be able to qualify for a loan to cover whatever's left. So technically, I'm still on track."

"That's great but... if that's the case, mind explaining why the long face?"

"What? I don't have a—"

"Ave, come on. You got your promotion. Your house is fixed. You even have a plan to pay for Benji's school. You should be ecstatic right now—not looking like you're dragging a hundred-pound weight around."

"I'm fine," I insist. "Just tired from all the extra hours at the club."

"Bull." Summer leans in, challenging me with narrowed eyes. "You want to know what I think? I think you're throwing yourself into all these practical problems because it's easier than admitting you made a mistake with Nash."

Heat rises to my face. "That's ridiculous. My problems have nothing to do with Nash."

"Funny. I think they have everything to do with Nash. Every time his name comes up in conversation, you get that same sad look in your eyes. And don't think I haven't noticed how you're always glued to your phone anytime the Sweepers are playing."

“Oh, please.” I scoff, diverting my attention to the server passing by with a tray full of desserts.

“Face it. You left his house like it was on fire, and you’ve been running ever since. Benji, work, your basement—all ways of distracting yourself so you don’t have to admit how miserable you are without him.”

While finding ways to prove that she knows me better than I know myself may be her superpower, it doesn’t make it any less infuriating every time Summer’s right.

“Ok, fine. But assuming you’re right, what else was I supposed to do? Stay and risk losing everything I’ve worked for? You saw the tabloids. Besides, he left first... remember? ”

“What I remember is a guy who cared enough to check on you at work the day after his mother insulted you at the dinner table and you telling him to get lost.”

My last defense finally crumbles. “So? What does it even matter anymore?” I ask, sinking into my stool. “I’ve said it a thousand times. Nash and I are from two completely different universes. We don’t belong together.”

“That’s just an excuse, and you know it.” Summer’s voice softens as she reaches out and covers my hand. “You’re allowed to be happy, Ave. Even if you’re too afraid to admit it.”

I stare down at my glass for a long moment, unable to fight the sting of tears I’ve been holding back another second longer.

“I really am an idiot, aren’t I?” I finally say, choking out a laugh.

I wipe my face with the back of my hand while Summer reaches out and squeezes the

other. “The biggest. But that’s why I love you.”

I squeeze back, another tear sliding down my cheek.

I wish I could take back the way I handled things that morning.

I should’ve given Nash a chance to explain why he didn’t come home.

It might not have changed my decision to leave, but at least I wouldn’t hate myself so much right now for being too afraid to face him.

It’s a cruel world when fear drives people to do crazy things—and the cruelest part is realizing I’m the architect of my own misery.

Chapter Sixteen

Nash

Two weeks. It's pathetic that I'm keeping track, but that's how long it's been since Avery and Benji left. And what's even more pathetic is how I still reach for my phone every morning expecting a text from her.

The doorbell rings, dragging me away from the business plans I've been reviewing all morning. When I finally open the door, Linda's standing on my porch, clutching a briefcase and wearing that no-nonsense realtor smile of hers.

"Good news," she says, breezing past me. "I found three potential spaces that would be a perfect fit. Each one has the square footage you asked for, decent parking, and they're all in neighborhoods that could benefit from a new youth program."

I follow her into the kitchen, where she spreads several pages of listings across my counter.

"This one's my favorite," she says, tapping a photo of a brick building with high windows.

"Former community center that closed due to budget cuts. Already has locker rooms and enough space for batting cages."

"Looks like it could work." I lean over the photos, glad to have something concrete to focus on. The Diamond in the Rough Initiative has consumed most of my waking

hours since... well, since I needed something to consume them.

“Coffee?” I offer.

“Is that a trick question? When have I ever said no to a cup of coffee?” Linda laughs and settles onto a barstool. “You’ve been so busy with meetings that I hardly see or hear from you anymore. Seems like you’re really giving it your all.”

I shrug, pulling a few ceramic mugs from the cabinet. “I guess so. Anything to get my mind on something other than batting averages, right?”

“And certain people who shall remain nameless?” she adds, with a knowing look that I ignore.

When I open the refrigerator to offer her milk, her gasp is almost comical.

“Nash Fontaine. Is that caramel coffee creamer I see in your fridge? You, the same guy who once gave me a twenty-minute TED Talk about how real coffee drinkers only take it black?”

I grab the almost empty bottle and set it on the counter. “Whatever. It’s just creamer.”

“It’s taking up half your door shelf.” She picks up the bottle and examines the label like it’s evidence from a crime scene. “French Vanilla Caramel Swirl, huh? You’re not going all soft on me now, are you?”

“It’s Avery’s,” I admit, scratching the back of my neck when saying her name out loud makes my hair stand on end. “Guess I never got around to throwing it out.”

Linda gives me a look that’s equal parts sympathy and amusement.

“Interesting. Especially considering how, in the past, you couldn’t get rid of any traces of other women fast enough when things went south.

There’s a simple cure for this, you know.

Why don’t you just call up that Victoria’s Secret model you met at the charity gala last week?

Or maybe that PR exec from Adidas. I’d bet you’d bounce back quicker if you had someone new to focus on. ”

“Yeah, maybe,” I say, pouring coffee into each mug.

But the truth is, I don’t want someone new.

Don’t get me wrong—I’ve had plenty of offers since Avery left.

All from beautiful, accomplished women who’d be happy to spend time with Chicago’s star shortstop.

Still, the thought of taking any of them up on it feels shallow, like I’d just be going through the same motions I spent years trying to perfect.

Linda pours the last of the coffee creamer into her mug, and a strange lump forms in the back of my throat as I throw away the empty bottle.

“I just want you to be happy. You know that, right?” she says, with a concerned look.

“Linda, I’m happy. See?” I flash a playful smile as she stirs her coffee, but deep down, an ache burrows its way into the pit of my stomach.

An ache reminding me that no matter who I date, no amount of connections will ever add up to the one I built with Avery.

“Better!” I call out as Benji connects with another pitch. “Way to keep that elbow up.”

Benji smiles and readjusts his cap before stepping back up to the plate. “Coach says he wants to start me at pitcher the next few games.”

“You should give it a try. That arm’s looking major league already.”

I’m leaning against the fence outside the batting cages, watching him work on his swing, when I notice a weight settle in my chest. Next week marks the end of the Street Sweeper’s contract with Play It Forward , meaning my official role as Benji’s mentor will be over, too.

It’s a thought that feels wrong on so many levels, even though I know we’ll stay in touch.

“So,” I say when Benji stops for a water break, “how are things at home? House all fixed up now?”

“Yeah, finally.” He pauses to take a swig from his water bottle. “Now that the basement’s done, Avery says she’ll think about letting me turn it into a game room.”

“That’s great. How’s she been doing? With the new job and all, I mean?” I know it’s wrong trying to dig up information on Avery through her little brother, but it’s not like I can text her every time I want to hear about her day like I used to.

Benji shrugs. “She works a lot, and she’s always coming home late. Even had to hire some dumb babysitter to come over and watch me after school since she can’t always

pick me up and bring me to the club to hang out like she used to. But she's happy, I guess."

Both of my palms prickle, and the next question slips out before I can stop it. "Do you know if she's seeing anyone? A new boyfriend, maybe?"

Great, Nash. Just great. Why not advertise on the jumbotron how you're still hung up on the poor kid's sister?

Benji gives me a funny look. "Avery doesn't... have boyfriends."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know." He fidgets and adjusts the strap on his batting glove before returning to the box. "She just doesn't date. Never has. Always said it was a waste of time."

As Benji makes contact with the next ball, sending it flying off into the corner of the net,, the thought of Avery never dating lands with the same cracking force.

All this time, I'd imagined her life before me was filled with guys who never appreciated her and were the reason she had so many walls up in the first place.

I never considered the idea that they might only exist to protect her from the possibility of being hurt.

Thunder rumbles in the distance, and a volunteer blows his whistle.

"Alright, pack it up!" he shouts. "Storm's coming in fast."

"Already? But we just got started." Benji looks disappointed but starts gathering his gear while the other kids scattered around the batting cage do the same.

“Safety first, Champ,” I say, offering to help him collect the stray balls. “Tell you what, we’ll make up for it next time.”

While Benji texts Avery about our early dismissal, I stand near an entrance that leads to the field as the first fat raindrops fall. By the time we reach the tunnel, it’s coming down in sheets.

“Avery says to meet her at the club for dinner,” he says, huddling beside me under the overhang.

“Need me to walk you up?”

He shakes his head and laughs. “It’s okay. I got it. See you next week?”

After Benji disappears through the set of doors that leads to the locker room, I jog the rest of the way out to the parking lot.

Rain plasters my shirt to my back, reminding me of another night, not too long ago—standing in my kitchen with water everywhere, and Avery looking up at me with mischievous eyes.

It was the night everything changed between us and a look that still haunts me to this day.

The next week rolls by way too fast, and before I know it, I’m sitting in my Range Rover outside a local community center, staring at my phone. I’ve typed and deleted the same message at least a dozen times: Heard about your promotion. Congratulations. You deserve it.

I read the message again, just to be sure I’m giving off cool and friendly vibes, rather than the “I miss you so much it physically hurts” vibes that I really feel.

I add: Would you and Benji want to grab dinner later? Last official day as his mentor.

My thumb hovers over the send button, and I sigh. This is stupid. Avery and I used to text for hours on end. Yet here I am, sweating over my words like they're my last shot at negotiating a multi-million-dollar contract.

A knock on my window makes me jump. I look up to see Coach standing at my door, balancing a box of trophies in his hand.

I delete the draft, then pocket my phone as I open the door to greet him.

“You coming inside, or are you just planning to sit out here and melt?”

Before I can answer, he hands me the box of trophies. “Take these inside for me, will you? I think I left my phone in my truck. He turns and jogs back the way he came, and I walk the rest of the way to the main entrance by myself.

Inside, the community center's gymnasium is decorated with Street Sweeper banners, streamers, and colored balloons to match.

Mentors from the team, along with their “little brothers” mill around, getting their fill on punch and cookies while the parents gush about how honored they are to have their children picked to be mentored by a bunch of professional athletes.

I spot Benji, deep in conversation with another boy his age, but there's no sign of Avery. She must still be working.

Our closing ceremony is mercifully brief.

Because it's not one of Play It Forward's sanctioned events, Milo isn't here to make another one of his heart-felt speeches, but Coach does a good enough job thanking

me and the rest of the team for our willingness to serve.

After he thanks parents and volunteers, trophies are handed out, and one of the parents orchestrates a group photo.

Throughout it all, I find myself watching the door, half-expecting—hoping even—to see Avery walk in.

“And in the words of Miles O’Donnel,” Coach says at the end of his speech, “I just want to emphasize that while the Street Sweeper’s Summer Tour with Play It Forward may be officially ending, the connections you’ve made don’t have to.”

I think about the short time I spent getting to know Milo, remembering his words and how differently they hit now that I’ve had three months to let them sink in.

What started as a PR obligation quickly turned into something that’s changed my life in ways I never could’ve imagined.

Benji isn’t just some kid I was assigned to mentor.

He’s become like family to me. And so has his sister.

After the ceremony ends, I’m walking Benji to the parking lot when I see her.

Avery is standing on the other side of the lot, leaning against her car.

Even though her hair’s pulled back into a simple ponytail, and she’s still in her Dugout Club uniform despite the ninety-degree heat, she still looks radiant.

My heart skips with anticipation.

“There’s Avery,” Benji says, waving.

We approach her car, and for a moment, none of us seem to know what to say. The distance between us feels both infinite and paper-thin.

“Hey,” I finally manage.

“Hey, yourself,” she says, with the hint of a smile.

“How’s the new job?”

“Good. Busy.” She tucks a longer strand of hair from her bangs behind her ear, and all I can think about is how the soft lines of her neck might feel if I were kissing them right now. “Congratulations on your big win last night. Benji’s been talking about it all day.”

“It was nothing, really.” I shrug, hyperaware of Benji watching our awkward encounter. “But thanks.”

When he finally starts loading his trophy and backpack into the car, I search for something else to say to Avery that won’t reveal how desperately I’ve missed her.

“So,” I say under my breath as Benji climbs into the passenger seat, “do you two have any plans for tonight?”

Avery seems surprised by the question. “Ice cream. I, um... promised him we’d go for ice cream. To celebrate.”

“Oh. Right. Well, have fun... celebrating.”

I reach out to open her car door, and she reaches for the handle at the same time.

Our hands brush, the brief contact sending electricity up my arm.

When our eyes lock, she must notice the way my gaze falls to her perfect lips, because as soon as it does, she slips between me and the car door and into the driver's seat just as fast.

"See you around, Nash," she says.

"Yeah. See you."

She puts on her seatbelt, and I close her door. Then, like some kind of lovesick puppy, I watch her drive away until her taillights disappear around the corner.

There was your shot, Nash. And just like always, you blew it.

Chapter Seventeen

Avery

I'm already half an hour late when I pull into the community center parking lot. The "General Manager" title on my new business cards might look impressive, but it also means I couldn't get out of today's last-minute budget meeting—even if it meant missing my brother's closing day ceremony.

Guilt twists in my stomach as I park. This was Benji's big day, and I missed it. Another item on the growing list of ways I've been failing him lately.

I spot them immediately. Benji is talking, using wild hand gestures, while Nash nods with a megawatt smile that makes my chest ache. They look so comfortable together that, for a moment, I consider staying in the car to give them a little more time together until Benji sees me and waves.

"There's Avery," he calls out.

I watch Nash's expression shift from relaxed to guarded in an instant, then straighten my uniform skirt and smooth my ponytail, suddenly conscious of how I must look after today's insane lunch rush. Not that it matters. I know better than to care about what Nash Fontaine thinks of me.

Except I do care. Heaven help me, I really do.

"Hey," Nash says, the single syllable sending a ridiculous flutter of butterflies

through my stomach as he and Benji approach.

“Hey, yourself,” I reply, hating the way my voice betrays me. The last thing I need is for Nash to think I’m flirting, but it’s pretty hard to do when the words come out sounding more like a sultry moan than a casual greeting.

“How’s the new job?” His eyes study my face like he’s searching for something.

“Good. Busy.” I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear, hyperaware of his gaze tracking my every move. “Congratulations on your big win last night. Benji was talking about it all morning.”

“It was nothing, really.” He shrugs, his expression remaining carefully neutral. “But thanks.”

Benji loads his gear into the car, and I secretly hope he hasn’t picked up on the current of tension running between Nash and me.

As Benji climbs into the passenger seat, Nash leans closer. “So, do you two have any plans for tonight?”

The question catches me off guard. “Ice cream,” I blurt out. “I um... promised him we’d go for ice cream. To celebrate.”

“Oh. Right. Well, have fun... celebrating.”

I reach for my door handle and immediately start second-guessing myself. Was there an invitation hidden somewhere behind Nash’s question? Our fingers touch, and the contact sends a jolt through me that has nothing to do with static electricity.

His gaze meets mine, and his focus drops to my lips. Suddenly, everything feels too

intense, and I'm afraid I might do something stupid like beg him to forgive me. Or... let him kiss me.

"See you around, Nash," I manage to say as I quickly duck under his arm and slide into my car seat.

"Yeah. See you."

He closes my door, and as we drive away, I watch him in the rearview mirror, growing smaller with distance.

"You should have invited him."

The sound of Benji's voice breaks my train of thought, and I grip the steering wheel tighter. "What?"

"For ice cream." He gives me a knowing look. "He would have said yes."

I don't answer, silently cursing myself for not thinking of the idea first. Although, in my defense, how was I supposed to think clearly with Nash looking at me the way he was? I'm surprised I managed to form words at all, let alone entire sentences.

Just another missed opportunity to fix what I broke. Surprise, surprise.

"You sure you don't want the last bite?" I hold out the half-melted remains of my hot fudge sundae, but Benji shakes his head.

"I'm good."

We're sitting in a corner booth at The Scoop Shoppe, winding down, with Benji growing suspiciously quiet now that the initial excitement's worn off. He's been

pushing the same sprinkle around his bowl for the last five minutes.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” I ask, setting my spoon down. “You finally crashing from a sugar rush, or is there something else on your mind?”

He shrugs, the universal preteen response to any question that involves emotions.

“Come on, Benji. Talk to me.” I reach across the table to touch his hand. “Is it about the mentorship ending? Because you know Nash said you guys can still hang out.”

“It’s not that.” He hesitates, fidgeting with his spoon. “Well, not just that.”

“Then what is it?”

Benji looks up with a more serious expression. “Do you ever miss it? Living at Nash’s house?”

The question catches me off guard. “I... sometimes. Why?”

“I miss it. All the time,” he admits quietly. “And not just because of how much nicer it was compared to our house. Things felt different when we lived there. Like we were a...” His voice trails off, and he looks at me like he’s too afraid to finish.

“Like we were what?”

“Nothing. It’s stupid.”

I squeeze his hand. “Hey. Nothing you feel is stupid.”

He takes a deep breath. “Like we were a family.”

The words hit me like a physical blow. I've been so focused on trying to give Benji stability and protecting him from disappointment, that I hadn't realized what he'd found with Nash—what we'd both found.

"Benji, about that night we left..." I start, unsure how to explain my fears in a way that would make sense to a twelve-year-old.

"I already know why you wanted to leave," he interrupts, "but you didn't even ask Nash why he didn't come home that night. So, I did."

I freeze. "What? Benji...when?"

"At practice. Last week." Benji's eyes meet mine, and suddenly my baby brother is all grown up.

Only, I'm not so sure I'm ready for what him being all grown up looks like.

"He said there were photographers following him after that article came out. He was afraid they'd follow him home, and it would make things worse for your job. "

"He told you that?"

Benji nods. "He said sometimes the best way to protect people you care about is to stay away, even when it's the last thing you want to do."

My chest tightens. Summer tried to tell me I had overreacted, but with Salvatore breathing down my neck, what was I supposed to do?

Even if Nash was trying to protect me, he would've only been delaying the inevitable.

I just wish I'd given him a chance to explain instead of packing up and running at the

first sign of smoke.

It was a cruel thing to do. And Nash didn't deserve it.

"Did he say anything else?"

"Just that he was sorry everything got so complicated." Benji studies my face. "He really liked us living there, Ave. And I liked it, too."

I swallow hard as my heart sinks. "So did I."

"Then why did we leave like that? Why didn't you just talk to him?"

The honest question deserves an honest answer. "Because I was scared. And when I get scared, I run. It's easier than risking getting hurt."

"Like Mom and Dad did to us?" Benji asks quietly.

I nod, unable to speak as tears fill my eyes. I've spent years judging my parents for taking the easy way out and walking away when things got hard. And then I did the exact same thing to Nash.

"Do you think it's too late?" Benji asks with a hopeful voice. "To fix it?"

I stare at my melted ice cream, wondering the same thing. I'm not sure if there's a road back after the way I left things, or if Nash would even have me if there was.

But that doesn't mean I'm not willing to try.

"Pepperoni or cheese?" I ask, scrolling through the menu for Mr. Guy's Pizza in my Door Dash app.

“Both!” Benji calls from the living room where he’s already flipped on the game.
“Nash is up to bat!”

Excitement courses through me as I hurry and place our order, then rush to join Benji on the couch.

The pizza arrives half an hour later, and Benji and I stuff ourselves while Nash’s team dominates the field. Or at least, I would be stuffing myself—if I wasn’t so fixated on the ache in my chest that grows by the inning. There must be some way to win back the heart of number fifty-five.

When the game ends with another Chicago victory, Benji’s phone buzzes.

“It’s a text from Nash!” His eyes widen. “He says turn it to Channel 8!”

I grab the remote and quickly change the channel. My heart flips when Nash’s face appears on screen. He’s standing at a podium covered in microphones, and I immediately recognize the space as the inside of Clearway Park’s press center.

“Thank you all for coming.” Nash’s familiar voice fills our living room, making my skin tingle.

“I’m here tonight to announce something that’s been in development for quite some time now.

It’s called the Diamond in the Rough Initiative—a program designed to provide quality baseball equipment and mentorship to underprivileged youth in Chicago.”

My breath catches, and I listen intently as he goes on to explain details for a new outreach program.

“Benji, do you know anything about this?”

He shakes his head, eyes still glued to the TV. “No, but it sounds really cool!”

I look back at the screen in time to catch Nash’s green eyes smoldering as he stares into the camera.

“Someone very special once told me that the most valuable things in life... you can’t buy with money,” he says.

My heart stops. Those are... my words. “It took me longer than it should have to understand what she meant, but I get it now. The value of a baseball glove isn’t in its price tag.

It’s in the dreams it helps our young athletes chase. ”

Benji elbows me with his arm while bouncing in his seat. “Avery! He’s talking about us!”

Tears blur my vision as Nash describes how mentoring with Play It Forward changed his perspective on what it means to be a role model. He never mentions Benji by name, but I know this change is because of him. Because of us.

Realization hits me like a bolt of lightning. “I have to tell him,” I say in a whisper.

Benji’s already jumping off the couch. “Tell him what?”

“That I’m sorry. And I was wrong. And that I—“

“That you love him?” Benji grins and starts making kissing sounds.

I grab a pillow from the couch to hit him with, but I'm distracted when a reporter asks Nash about his upcoming road trip. My stomach drops.

"We leave tomorrow morning for a two-week stretch," Nash confirms. "First stop, Cincinnati."

"We have to go tell him. Now!" Benji shouts, already running toward the door.

"Whoa, hold on a minute. I can't go like this!" I glance in the hallway mirror—hair still damp from my pre-pizza shower, no makeup, and sporting a pair of old sweatpants and a Chicago Street Sweepers T-shirt I may or may not have stolen from Nash's laundry room. "Besides... what would I even say?"

Benji stops, and his face lights up. "I have an idea!"

He dashes to his room and returns seconds later with something in his hand—a red paper rose crafted from an origami kit I bought for him last Christmas.

"You can give him this," he says, pressing the flower into my palm. "You know... to say you're sorry."

I stare at the rose, amazed by how tender Benji's heart is. "Since when did you become so grown up?"

He rolls his eyes and grabs my hand, tugging me toward the door with an infectious smile. "Come on, Avery! Let's go already!"

Halfway to the stadium, the skies open, and rain pounds against the windshield as I drive. My heart races to the rhythm of the wipers, and I tuck the paper rose safely into my coat pocket, praying it survives the storm.

Twenty minutes later, we're splashing through puddles in the employee parking lot, both of us completely soaked as I try not to think about how ridiculous we must look.

My makeup-free face is dripping wet, hair plastered to my head, and Benji's dinosaur pajama pants are now completely stuck to his skin.

But none of that matters now that we're here.

"This way!" I shout over the rain, pulling him toward the back entrance.

We finally burst through the doors, dripping water everywhere, and my determination to see Nash before he leaves is stronger than ever. Everything depends on this moment.

I just hope we're not too late.

Chapter Eighteen

Nash

The adrenaline rush from tonight's win pumps through my veins as I jog down the corridor toward the press room. Outside, lightning flashes against the stadium windows, illuminating the storm clouds that rolled in during the ninth inning.

"Ten minutes, Fontaine!" Coach Donovan calls after me. "Skip the shower if you have to!"

I nod, ducking into the locker room just long enough to towel off and throw on a clean Street Sweepers pullover on top of my uniform.

On my way out, I stop in front of a full-length mirror and run a hand through my hair to smooth it back.

It's not my best look, but it'll have to do.

Besides, tonight isn't about looking perfect.

It's about finally announcing the Diamond in the Rough Initiative to the public.

When I reach the press room, Carmen is pacing by the entrance, phone pressed to her ear.

"There you are," she whispers, covering the mouthpiece. "Local news just confirmed

they're sending a crew. This is getting bigger than we expected."

My stomach tightens with anticipation. It's one thing to face the press about baseball—I've been doing that since college—but tonight is different. I'll be revealing a side of myself the cameras have never seen.

While Carmen wraps up her call, I pull out my phone and type up a quick text to Benji.

Turn on the TV to Channel 8. I've got a surprise for you.

I think about sending another text to Avery, but I don't want her to think this is all just some ploy to win her back. Not that I'd mind if it worked, but Benji needs to know how important he is to me, even if I screwed things up with his sister.

A production assistant signals it's time to start, and Carmen turns to me. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

The press room is more crowded than I expect for a post-game conference. Cameras flash as I take my place at the podium, and I spot Coach giving me an encouraging nod from the back of the room.

"Thank you all for coming," I say, keeping my voice steady.

"I'm here tonight to announce something that's been in development for quite some time now.

It's called the Diamond in the Rough Initiative—a program designed to provide quality baseball equipment and mentorship to underprivileged youth in Chicago."

As I outline the program details—the equipment banks, the merit system, the local business partnerships—the room buzzes with excitement. I just hope Benji and Avery are watching for this next part.

“Someone very special once told me that the most valuable things in life... you can’t buy with money,” I continue, letting Avery’s words flow through me.

“It took me longer than it should have to understand what she meant, but I get it now. The value of a baseball glove isn’t in its price tag.

It’s in the dreams it helps our young athletes chase. ”

The questions begin immediately. Most focus on the program itself, but eventually, a reporter from the Tribune raises her hand.

“Nash,” she says, “This is an impressive initiative. Given the Street Sweepers’ travel schedule, when do you plan to officially launch the program? I understand the team has another lengthy road trip coming up.”

I nod, leaning into the microphone. “You’re right. We leave tomorrow morning for a two-week stretch. First stop, Cincinnati. The official rollout won’t be until after we wrap up our current season,” I explain. “We’re announcing it now to begin building partnerships and securing resources.”

As questions pour in about whether I think Chicago is strong enough to make this year’s playoffs, I find myself wanting to stop by and see Benji and Avery on the way home.

I want to tell them how much this program means to me—how much they mean to me.

But without knowing if they even saw the broadcast, stopping by this late would be a risky move.

The last thing I want is to push myself back into Avery's life uninvited.

Coach steps in to field any other questions about playoff prospects when a commotion near the back door interrupts the interview.

That's when I see them.

Several reporters turn their heads, and the flash of cameras redirects toward Avery and Benji, who are now standing in the doorway, drenched from head to toe. What's even more unexpected is how they are dressed.

Benji is wearing a blue hoodie over a pair of bright green pajama pants covered with dinosaurs, and Avery's outfit isn't much better.

Her white tennis shoes are soaked, and under her raincoat is an oversized Sweeper's shirt that looks an awful lot like one that went missing from my laundry.

Strands of hair are still stuck to her face, and even without makeup, I think she's the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on.

For a moment, I'm frozen in the corner, certain I'm hallucinating. But then Avery's eyes lock with mine, and everything else fades away.

The spell breaks when reporters swarm toward them, questions flying fast.

"Excuse me, are you Avery Morrow?"

"Is this the boy Nash was mentoring?"

“What’s your relationship with Nash Fontaine?”

“Why are you here tonight?”

Avery hovers like a deer in headlights with Benji clinging to her side while reporters shove microphones toward her face.

Before I can register anything else, I cut through the crowd with Carmen calling after me, instinctively placing myself between Avery and the press.

“That’s enough,” I say, leaving no room for argument. “These are my personal guests. They’re not part of the press conference.”

A photographer pushes forward. “Just one photo—“

“I said that’s enough.” My voice drops lower. “Find something more exciting to report on.”

I place a hand on Avery’s back, guiding her and Benji toward a private elevator near the administrative offices. The three of us slip inside, and as the doors close, everything is finally quiet.

For a moment, none of us speak. Water drips from Avery’s clothes onto the elevator floor, Benji’s teeth are chattering, and I’m still trying to process the fact that they’re actually here.

“We saw you on TV,” Benji blurts out, finally. “Your program sounds awesome! Like, really, really awesome!”

I smile, my eyes drifting to Avery’s. “Thanks, Champ. But you know you didn’t have to come all this way when you could’ve just called.”

“We, uh—“ Avery stammers, tucking a wet strand of hair behind her ear. “We heard you were leaving tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” I say, studying her face. “Early flight to Cincinnati.”

She gives a nervous laugh. “Right.”

“So, you came here tonight because...?” The question hangs in the air, heavy with hope and uncertainty.

Avery shifts her weight, looking everywhere but at me. “Your program. It sounds great. We wanted to say congratulations. And thank you—for mentioning that part about value.”

“Is that the only reason you came?” I press, cautiously closing the distance between us.

Her eyes flicker to mine, then away again. Something in her expression makes my heart race.

Benji tugs at her sleeve. “Avery, the rose.”

Avery’s cheeks flush pink. She glares at Benji as he steps back into the corner, then reaches into her coat pocket and pulls out a slightly crumpled red paper rose. She holds it between us like an offering.

“Not... the only reason,” she admits with a shaky smile. “Nash, I’m sorry. I should’ve never left like I did, but I guess I was so afraid of letting myself fall for a guy like you that I ran.”

“A guy... like me?”

“Sorry. That came out wrong.” Avery looks up, flustered.

“Before I met you, I thought you were just another jerk ballplayer with tons of money who loved to show off. But you’re so much more than that, Nash.

You’re kind, and you actually care about people.

When you started working with Benji, I knew it would be love at first sight for you two.

But then I thought—why me, you know? You’re the kind of guy who women throw themselves at. You could have any girl you want.”

The vulnerability in her eyes is enough to do me in.

“And what if you’re the only girl I want?”

Her eyes widen, and something electric passes between us. I take another step closer, drawn in by an invisible force, and her breath catches as I reach to brush her cheek.

“Ummmm... you guys.” Benji’s voice from behind me cuts through the air. “If you’re gonna kiss, can I at least get off the elevator first?”

“My bad, Champ. Almost forgot you were there.” I turn and reach out, pulling him in for a side hug.

“Yeah, yeah,” he says, rolling his eyes as he wraps an arm around my back.

I pull away at the ground floor when the elevator dings and the door opens. “Give us a minute?”

“Fine, but don’t take forever. It’s cold, and I’m still soaking wet, you know.”

When he steps out, I reach over and press the “door close” button, never taking my eyes off Avery. The moment the doors slide shut, I pull her into my arms.

“I’ve missed you,” I whisper into her hair.

“I missed you too,” she confesses, looking up at me with those honey-brown eyes.

When our lips finally meet, it’s like coming home. The kiss deepens, and I feel her melting against me, the paper rose still clutched in her hand as her arms wrap around my neck. Nothing in my life—not winning the championship, not signing my first contract—has ever felt this right.

When we finally break apart, both breathless, I rest my forehead against hers.

“So,” I murmur, “does this mean you’re willing to give us a real shot?”

She nods, a smile spreading across her face. “I’m all in if you are.”

“I’ve been all in since the night you kissed me,” I admit.

“Hey! You kissed me first.”

She looks at me with narrowed eyes.

We both laugh, and I kiss her again, amazed by how quickly life can change. Less than an hour ago, I was announcing a program inspired by a relationship I thought I’d lost. Now I’m holding the future in my arms—a future that includes not just Avery, but Benji, too.

The reporters are gonna have a field day with this, I can see it already. The tabloids will run wild, my parents will have their opinions, the team management and even Avery's boss might raise their eyebrows...

But you know what? They can all just get over it.

Because some things are worth fighting for, and I'm never letting this one go again.

Avery

Two months later

The kitchen smells like vanilla frosting and birthday candles as I watch Benji unwrap presents at my grandmother's vintage dining table, surrounded by all the people who have somehow become the center of our world.

It's strange how little has changed since the summer started—same house, same job, same stubborn little brother. And yet everything is different now that I'm officially dating a brutally handsome billionaire.

A billionaire who insists on doing the dishes when he stays over and knows exactly how I take my coffee. One who looks at me like he's the lucky one.

Nash was right. The tabloids had a field day with us for about two weeks, then moved on to the next juicy piece of gossip like he and I taking our relationship public never happened.

I'll admit, as much as I hated being in the spotlight, it was nice knowing there were women out there who wished they were me for a change.

"Open mine next!" Summer pushes a small envelope toward Benji, who tears into it like a hungry raccoon on trash day.

His eyes widen as he pulls out the card and opens it. "Fifty bucks? Seriously?"

“And,” Summer adds with a flourish, “your first issue of Sports Illustrated should arrive any day now. Full-year subscription.”

“Let’s hope it’s the swimsuit edition.” Nash’s joke lands him a threatening look, and he playfully ducks behind Benji.

Summer holds up her hands. “Relax, mama bear. I made sure it was the kid’s edition before I ordered.”

“Aw, man,” Benji whines, tucking the money into his pocket carefully before reaching for Nash’s gift—a large, square box wrapped in silver paper. He glances at me with a sheepish grin, and I wonder if he has any clue what’s inside.

When the wrapping paper comes off and the box opens, Benji’s mouth forms a perfect O.

It’s a new glove, but not just any new glove.

It’s the professional model from the display case that I’d deemed ridiculously overpriced at \$400.

The same one Nash and I had privately discussed last week when he asked my permission to buy it for Benji.

“No. Way.” Benji lifts it in the air and slides his hand inside like he’s Thanos and it’s the Infinity Gauntlet. “This is it! The Wilson A2000!”

“Happy birthday, Champ,” Nash says, ruffling Benji’s hair.

A few months ago, I would have seen this as an extravagant display meant to upstage me. But now? Let’s just say Nash isn’t the only one who’s changed for the better.

I know the look on Benji's face isn't just about being gifted something this expensive.

It's about believing it's okay for families like ours to want more for ourselves.

After years of teaching Benji that we make do with what we have, I'm learning there's also value in showing him how hard work can lead to good things and that it's okay to reach higher.

"My turn," I say, handing over a package wrapped in baseball-patterned paper.

Benji tears into this one more carefully than the others, revealing a leather-bound scrapbook I spent weeks assembling.

Every baseball card with Benji's picture and stats, every ribbon, every ticket stub, and even the years of team photos he's kept shoved in random shoeboxes under his bed—all now carefully arranged and preserved with plenty of empty pages to fill as he grows.

He goes quiet as he turns the pages, tracing his fingers over each memento. When he reaches the last page, his eyes shine with tears at a photo of him with Nash at his first Street Sweepers game.

"Avery..." His voice cracks. "This is the best gift ever. Thank you."

He launches himself into my arms and I hold him tight, remembering the scared seven-year-old he was when our parents left. Looking at him now, you'd hardly know he was the same person.

"I'm really glad you're my sister," he whispers in my ear.

My eyes fill with tears. “I’m really glad you’re my brother.”

Over Benji’s shoulder, I catch Nash watching us with an expression so full of affection that it makes my heart ache in the best possible way.

I finally pull away from Benji’s hug and wipe my eyes with a snuffle. “I think it’s cake time.”

Nash helps me light the thirteen candles while Summer dims the lights, and a warm glow lights Benji’s face as we sing “Happy Birthday” with varying degrees of musical talent.

“Make a wish,” I say when the song is over.

Benji closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and blows out all thirteen candles in one go. Nash and I cheer and clap as Summer removes the melted candles, then starts cutting.

“What did you wish for?” Nash asks.

Summer smacks Nash on the arm. “Don’t ask him that! It’s bad luck.”

“It’s okay,” Benji shrugs, taking the plate with the biggest slice. “I don’t mind telling. Besides, I’ve got all the luck I need already.”

He looks up at Nash, and before he takes his first bite, says, “I wished to start the seventh grade as a Shooting Star.”

My smile falls. Here we go again. The prestigious St. Sebastian’s Preparatory Academy and their elite “Shooting Star” program.

It was everything I could do to scrape together the rest of Benji's tuition money these past six months, but even when I did, it still wasn't enough.

The waitlist letter that arrived a few weeks ago was a major slap in the face for all my efforts.

"Benji," I start gently, "I know you think there's still a chance, but I don't want you getting your hopes up if things don't work out."

"Actually, there's a second part of my gift that I didn't tell you about," Nash says.

I turn to him, confused. "What?"

He runs a hand over the back of his neck and gives a nervous smile. "I was going to wait until after cake, but... Benji, I think your wish just might come true."

"What do you mean?" Benji says, spitting bits of vanilla cake as he talks with a full mouth.

"Well... my dad may have written a letter of recommendation to the headmaster at St. Sebastian's." Nash looks up, his gaze meeting mine before it returns to Benji. "The paperwork isn't final yet, but he told me last week that they've secured you a spot for the upcoming semester."

Summer and I go silent, and Benji's eyes grow impossibly wide.

"No way! Seriously!?" Benji squeals.

"Yeah, Nash... Are you serious?" I say, placing my hand on the table to steady me.

He nods. "Dead serious. Dad's been helping out with The Diamond in the Rough

Initiative, and he's gotten to know Benji pretty well. So, when I mentioned the waitlist situation, he said it was the least he could do to help."

I can hardly believe it. Nash's parents—especially his father—had been so dismissive when we first met.

But everything changed the day Nash announced his initiative.

His father started flying in to help with the business side of things, and after a few weekends of Benji tagging along to their meetings, Will Fontaine fell under the same spell as everyone else who spent time with my brother had.

I flash back to a conversation I'd had with Mr. Fontaine last Monday when he stopped by to drop off some contracts for Nash to sign.

"Avery," he'd said, "I want you to know I've been speaking to Elizabeth about you and Benjamin. It might take some time, but let me handle my wife. She'll come around, eventually."

"Let me handle my parents." The echo of Nash's words from a few months back wasn't entirely lost on me at that moment. And if it weren't for Mr. Fontaine's kind words that day, I'm not sure I ever would've believed having their approval was possible.

"Thank you," I say, blinking back another round of tears. "This means everything to him. And to me, too."

Nash takes my hand and squeezes it. "To all of us."

I smile as Summer and Benji argue about who gets the last corner piece of cake, taking a moment to appreciate how much I've grown.

Six months ago, I was certain my carefully constructed life was falling apart because I didn't have it all figured out.

Now, watching the people I love most gathered around my kitchen table, I realize it wasn't falling apart. It was falling into place.

Nash catches me staring and winks, sending a flutter through my chest that I hope never gets old.

Sometimes I have to remind myself this is real—that Chicago's star shortstop just signed a three-year, eighty-seven million dollar contract extension but still chooses to spend his free time with me and Benji in our modest, Blue Island home.

That number—eighty-seven million—still makes my head spin. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to comprehend what that kind of money means. But Nash treats it like it's just another detail, less important than remembering how I take my coffee or which of Benji's games he can make between road trips.

The Diamond in the Rough Initiative has taken off beyond anyone's expectations.

Sponsors are practically beating down Nash's door with endorsement deals now that word has spread about the program.

The first equipment drive is scheduled for next month, and Nash insists Benji and I should be front and center when they cut the ribbon.

And I still can't believe I kept my job after that rainy night at the stadium. When those reporters turned their cameras on me, I was certain my management career was over. But instead of firing me, Salvatore seemed almost amused by the whole situation. At least, that's what I thought.

It turns out Nash had visited him the very next day, inviting The Dugout Club to become one of the initiative's first ever corporate partners.

I'm pretty sure that's why Salvatore suddenly had no problem with me dating a player, but I don't care.

Even though balancing my late hours with Nash's crazy schedule sometimes feels like we're both trying to juggle flaming torches, our jobs are the cherry on top of the life we'd always hoped for.

And, as an added bonus, I still get to see Summer every day—even though she's been relentless about me and Nash fixing her up with one of his teammates.

Just last Sunday, she cornered us over breakfast with social media profiles of her top three picks, as if we were running some sort of dating service.

"Earth to Avery." Nash's voice pulls me from my thoughts. "Where'd you go just now?"

"Just thinking about how lucky I am," I admit, leaning into his side as he slips an arm around my waist.

It's still strange watching Nash with Benji and how naturally they've fallen into a brotherly relationship.

Initially, I was afraid Benji would see Nash as some sort of replacement father figure, but instead, they've formed a bond that's uniquely its own.

I still catch them in surprising moments of tenderness with Nash explaining fielding strategies or Benji showing off his latest school project.

Even their secret handshakes are getting more elaborate by the week.

As for me, I'm slowly getting used to Nash's insistence on showering me with lavish gifts, while the idea of us moving in together comes up more frequently in conversation—even though neither of us is rushing.

And if I've noticed him casually asking Summer about my ring preferences, I simply pretend not to notice.

We still have plenty to figure out. His world of luxury and mine of careful budgeting sometimes collide in ways that leave us both frustrated. But after everything we've overcome to be together, we're both convinced that a love like ours is one worth fighting for.

In the world of Fontaine fangirls, I may be the most unlikely candidate. But I'm certainly Nash's biggest fan—and always will be.

The End

I hope you fell in love with Nash and Avery. I had so much fun writing their story!

Don't miss out on the rest of the Sweet Sports Kisses Series!

You can find all eight standalone kisses-only romance stories on Amazon...

Chapter One

Caroline

I nstead of ending my wedding with thunderous applause and a romantic kiss, I bring my beautiful, whimsical-themed ceremony to an end by fleeing the chapel before we even reach our vows.

“Caroline!”

With my white gown bunched in my hands, I kick off my heels and hurry down the sidewalk.

I hear the voice of my ex-fiancé sounding from behind, but I keep running as my veil flies off my head and strands of wavy, blonde hair unravel.

I don’t worry about comforting him. He probably has no clue I’ve caught on to him and all his lies.

I wonder if he even realizes the perfume I smelled on his jacket this morning when we met with our photographer isn’t mine—poor guy.

But I digress. All I can think about right now is how long it will take me to run home, take off this silly dress, and eat Chinese takeout until I pass out.

Maybe it’s not how I pictured my night going, but I’d much rather end my wedding day single than with the wrong guy. And somewhere, the right man is out there. I

just—!

“Oof!” I gasp as I turn the corner and collide with something solid. I stumble backward, thinking I’ve somehow hit a wall, but the wall suddenly has hands that grab my waist.

“Caroline?”

Ugh... it can’t be . I steady myself and look up into the familiar green eyes of none other than Aiden Reeves, who pitches me the same stern look he’s given me since we were kids. He’s my older brother Max’s best friend, which wouldn’t be an issue if he wasn’t as handsome as he is a total grump.

“What are you doing here?” I question him as I lift an eyebrow.

It takes only a second to realize my hands are resting on the bulging pec muscles that protrude from his dark blue Sweet Water Fire Department T-shirt.

I try to be stealthy as I remove them, but I can’t help but look away with a dumb deer in headlights expression on my face.

“Jogging before my shift. I should be asking you the same,” Aiden says, letting go of me and eyeing me up and down with an annoyingly amused smirk. “Aren’t you supposed to be getting married right now?”

Since the fire station is right around the corner, I suppose I am the one out of place. His words hit me like a punch to the gut, but I straighten up and try my best to play it cool.

“Aren’t you supposed to be rescuing people from fires right now?”

“ I pitch back, not wanting to get into the truth with him. Who knows what he’ll chastise me about this time?

When we were younger, Aiden and I always butted heads.

He thinks I’m too carefree and, therefore, reckless.

And I think he’s a total stick in the mud who wouldn’t know fun if it jumped out of a cake and yelled, “Surprise!”

But such is my luck that Max would choose him, of all people, to form a lifelong bromance with.

Aiden gives me a pointed look as he crosses his arms over his chest, and I feel my face grow hot again.

His muscles are noticeably bigger than they were the last time I saw him, and the sandy blonde hair I teased him for wearing in a ‘man-bun’ is now much shorter and compliments his neatly trimmed beard. I can’t help my mind as it wanders.

I know he’s a single dad, but I don’t know if he’s still... single. Not that it matters to me, but even without him looking like a shaggy beach bum, it would take a special kind of woman to deal with all his moody angst.

“Why do I always find you in some sort of trouble, Caroline?”

I wrinkle my nose at him, not liking his tone. He always acts like I’m some troublemaker when it’s usually quite the opposite.

“Says the man who got detention three times in one week,” I say, shooting his pointed look right back at him.

Aiden scoffs and shakes his head. “Now, you know that wasn’t my fault. That was—“

“Caroline!”

Speaking of troublemakers, I hear Max calling out from behind us. I whirl around and see him jogging toward me in his black suit, and a sheepish look fills my face.

“What in the world are you doing?” Max asks, leaning over to catch his breath. “Who runs from their own wedding?”

“I was just wondering the same thing,” Aiden says, drawing my attention back to him. His presence is so... demanding—like nothing else can be the center of attention. Or maybe it’s just hard for me to ignore him. His stern attitude definitely makes him hard to ignore.

I look between the two of them as the magnitude of the current situation hits me like a Mack truck. Did I actually run from my own wedding and leave all my friends and family sitting in their pews with no explanation? They must think I’m a total basket case!

“I’ll talk to you, but I’m not going back to that chapel,” I murmur to Max, not wanting to give Aiden any more arsenal than he already has.

My sheer lack of luck when it comes to love is none of his business.

Besides, what happened wasn’t entirely my fault.

But I’m still the one who crashed the wedding by abruptly running away from it, and I know I will have to face the music eventually... just not today.

Max nods and bumps the side of his fist against Aiden's. "I'm going to sort this out. I'll see you at the bonfire?" Max asks.

He's referring to the town's biweekly bonfires down on the beach. They kick off at the start of every summer and usually run through the end of Sweet Water High's football season.

"Yeah, my shift is about to start, but I'll be there," Aiden says before looking over at me.

My heart beats heavily in my chest as our eyes briefly meet.

I hardly ever miss a bonfire, but I don't recall the last time I saw Aiden show up for one. My initial reaction is a confused, conflicting web of feelings when I think about running into him again so soon.

Am I looking forward to it or dreading it?

Why can't I settle on an answer?

Aiden's eyes sweep over my wedding dress one more time. "You look nice," he says and continues his jog toward the fire station.

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise. Wow. Did Aiden compliment me? Baffled, I turn to Max, who crosses his arms and gives me an expectant look.

"What happened, Caroline?" Max asks. "You were head over heels for Eric when I saw you this morning."

He's right. I was. It's crazy how quickly things changed, though. I went from being a happy bride-to-be to a bitter ex-fiance in what feels like a snap of the fingers.

“Eric isn’t in love with me,” I blurt out the words with clenched fists. “He—He’s in love with someone else.” I look down as the weight of my words sinks to the bottom of my stomach. How embarrassing.

But I suppose being left at the altar is pretty humiliating, too.

Max’s eyes grow wide in surprise. “Care.... How do you know? I mean—Are you sure?”

A cold laugh leaves me as I look down at the dress I spent hundreds of dollars on. You best believe it’ll be returned tomorrow.

“Oh, I’m sure,” I scoff, and my chest tightens.

The realization that I’ll have to start over again is almost more than I can bear.

This was supposed to be it for me. Eric was supposed to be the one .

I blink back the surge of tears. “I’ll explain later, I promise, but I just need some time right now. ”

Max sighs as he glances back in the direction of the chapel. “Well, go on and make a run for it, then. It might be DEFCON 1 by the time I get back there, but I’ll take care of it,” Max says.

I throw my arms around him and hug him so tight it knocks the breath out of him. “Thanks, Max. I owe you one!”

I just hope he knows how much I mean it. Explaining my sudden case of cold feet five million times is not what I need to be doing right now. Orange chicken, my cat, and my couch are all calling my name, and I want nothing more than to escape this

awful day.

Max squirms out of my death grip. He pushes back and gently places his hands on my shoulders. “I really am sorry, Care,” he says, looking deep into my eyes. “You know I’m always here for you. Call me whenever you’re ready to talk about it.”

My face softens, and I give him a look of gratitude. I have the best older brother in the world. Max still has a hard time with it, so we hardly ever talk about it, but our parents died in a plane crash when we were away at college, and he’s been my rock ever since.

“It’s for the best,” I say, smiling.

I give his cheek a light pat before turning and continuing down Main Street toward my neighborhood, where my small but cozy beach bungalow awaits.

I don’t get far before a fire truck pulls out of the station with its lights and sirens blaring.

It stops me dead in my tracks, and my eyes trail the large vehicle as it turns and drives in my direction, blowing past me and giving my dress and hair a little ruffle.

With a lazy smile, I imagine Aiden inside with his gear on.

My heart skips a beat, and I snap myself out of my thoughts before picking up my pace. Now is not the time to be ogling over Aiden Reeves and his perfectly chiseled bod.

Tomorrow is a new day, and it’s time to start thinking about my happily ever after—Version 2.0.

Chapter Two

Aiden

“Daddy, can we get ice cream?”

My eyes shift to the rearview mirror, and Kaylee, my seven-year-old daughter, looks at me with the cutest toothy smile as she hugs the giant stuffed unicorn she’s had since birth.

She has long, chestnut brown hair that she wears in a side braid and hates cutting, and I’m pretty sure she’d let it grow to her feet if I allowed it.

I think about the possibility of her looking like Cousin Itt one day and smile.

“We still have a few more stops, but we can swing by Third Coast Creamery on the way home,” I say, looking back at the road ahead.

The beach runs for miles, but Sweet Water only gets a small piece.

It amazes me how much there is to do for such a small town.

Aside from epic surf and year-round fishing, there’s always some festival or farmer’s market on the weekend.

“Sweet!” Kaylee shouts and pumps a fist before returning her gaze to the tankers in the distance.

The side of my mouth curls up a little. She's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

She's so smart and funny, but she also has a heart of gold.

Of course, she gets most of her good traits from her mom, who we lost three years ago to brain cancer.

But I'm proud to announce that the apple didn't fall too far from the tree.

She gets her dry sarcasm from me, and I couldn't be prouder.

I'll admit, the last few years have worn me down. Finding my footing as a single dad has been a challenge, but that little ball of sunshine in the backseat helps me forge forward.

Kaylee jumps as my phone rings and starts vibrating on my center console. I grab it and answer. "Hello?"

"Um... hey, Aiden."

It's a voice I'd recognize from anywhere.

"Caroline? Hey. What's... going on?" I'm surprised by the call.

Caroline and I don't exactly have the best track record.

She's impulsive and makes decisions based on emotions.

She's never logical, and it drives me up the wall worrying about what kind of trouble she will get into next.

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