



# In Too Deep

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**Category:** Sport

**Description:** Lust. Envy. Scandal. Seduction.

The Olympic Games is the pinnacle of any sports career—but first, you have to get there.

My name is Lacy LaBelle, and I'm a swimmer with one goal—Olympic glory.

But my road to gold hasn't been easy. Kicked out by my father at sixteen, my dreams of standing on that podium seemed out of reach. Until my best friend's family gave me the support I desperately needed. With their help, I fought my way back, stroke by stroke.

Now, I've made it to the Olympic trials, and nothing will stop me.

Not my crippling self-doubt.

Not the rival who's hellbent on ensuring my epic failure.

And definitely not the Adonis on the swim team who gives me butterflies.

Distractions are everywhere, but the stakes couldn't be higher.

The question is, can I overcome it all to secure my place at the Games?

Or am I simply in too deep?

**Total Pages (Source):** 20

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

Lacy

Sixteen Years Old

I walk out of the marshalling area, my heart heavy, my dreams shattered.

I didn't make the cut.

No matter how hard I worked, how many hours I sacrificed, it wasn't enough.

Tuck, my coach, will be disappointed—I can already hear the frustration he'll try to hide.

My parents? They will be shattered.

But no one is as devastated as me.

Because this wasn't just a race.

This was my race.

And I lost.

Goddammit! I don't know what happened.

One minute, I was in the pool, ready to conquer it all, and the next, I froze.

My body locked up, muscles refusing to obey.

My mind swarmed with thoughts I couldn't control—you're not good enough, you're going to mess this up—and I couldn't focus. Couldn't fight.

I stuffed up.

I failed.

And I only have myself to blame.

But that won't stop my father from being furious. After all the time, the effort, and the relentless pressure he's put into my swimming, he won't see this as a one-off bad race. No, this will be my failure, and he'll make sure I know it.

Upon walking out to the holding room, I spot them. My father, arms crossed, nostrils flared, mouth set in a grim, silent line. Mum stands beside him, shaking her head, disappointment clear in her narrowed gaze.

My stomach churns.

And then there's Stacy, my little sister. She winces as soon as our eyes meet—she already knows. They have already told her.

Now, it's my turn to hear it all.

Every word of how badly I've failed.

“Lacy Hannah LaBelle... you get your pathetic arse over here right now !” Dad voice booms, cutting through the air.

Everyone stares at him.

I flinch, heat rising to my cheeks as I slump, trying to shrink into myself.

“I’m sorry, Dad. I—”

“Sorry? That’s all you’ve got?” He glares at me, his face red with frustration. “Do you have any idea how much time, how much money, we’ve poured into this? Your mother drove you to training day after day. I worked my fingers to the bone to get you here, and for what? You couldn’t even damn well qualify? How do you think that makes us feel, Lacy? How selfish can you be?”

My stomach lurches, and my heart pounds wildly as I stare at the floor. “Dad, I tried my—”

“Tried?” He cuts me off, his voice sharp and merciless. “You didn’t try at all! You’re pathetic, Lacy. I should’ve never encouraged this. You’re useless.”

I flinch, his words like a slap to the face.

“I don’t care how much you love swimming,” he continues, his tone colder now. “You’re done. Finished.”

My head jerks up, my vision blurring as tears pool in my eyes. “W-what do you mean?” I stammer, desperate for him to take it back.

“I mean exactly what I said.” His gaze is steely. “You suck at this, Lacy. It’s over. Your swimming days are done.”

“No!” The word bursts out of me, raw and desperate. “Dad, please... no! I can’t stop swimming!”

I regret yelling the moment the words leave my mouth.

Big mistake.

He yanks me toward him, his grip like iron. “If you think you have any say in this, kid, you’re wrong,” he snarls. “I pay for everything, so I decide what happens. And you—” he jabs a finger at me, “you’re finished. Done.”

He shoves me back.

I stumble, sobbing as tears stream down my face.

My best friend’s parents, Trinny and Harry rush over, Trinny’s arms wrapping around me protectively.

“Stay out of this, Trinny,” Dad growls, his tone dark and threatening.

“No, John,” she snaps, her voice shaking with anger. “You’re a fucking bully, and I won’t stand for it.” She turns to me, her touch gentle as she smooths my hair away from my tear-streaked face. “Are you okay, sweetheart?”

I shake my head, too choked up to speak.

Trinny glares at Dad, her teeth gritted. “You can’t treat her like this, John. She’s sixteen, for God’s sake.”

“She’s my daughter, and I can treat her how I see fit,” he spits, his face twisted with rage. “I pay for all of this shit, and I’m done wasting my money.”

“But Dad, it’s m-my life,” I cry, desperation cracking my voice.

“Not anymore,” he says, cold and final.

“Dad... no!” My voice rises, but it’s like screaming into a void.

“Don’t be a brat.” He lunges toward me, but I jump back, my heart pounding. “You’re coming home right now . And I swear, I’ll throw out every single one of your awards and medals just so you understand... you’re. Never. Swimming. Again .”

I press further into Trinny’s chest as she pulls me protectively away.

“Jesus, John, do you hear yourself?” Trinny shrieks, her voice cutting through his anger.

“Stay out of this,” Dad snaps.

“Dad, you can’t throw out my stuff. I want to keep swimming,” I plead, tears blurring my vision.

“Oh, you want to keep swimming ?” He laughs coldly. The sarcasm in his tone is not lost on me. “ Fine . Then leave our house and pay for it yourself. That’s the only way you’ll keep swimming, Lacy.”

Fresh tears spill down my cheeks as I whimper, “Dad?”

Mum’s glare could burn through him, but she doesn’t say a word.

Trinny steps in front of me, grabbing my shoulders and gently turning me to face her. “Lacy, listen to me. Would you like to come stay with us? We’ll pay for your swimming. You can’t give up on your dreams.”

My eyes widen, disbelief mixing with hope.

Behind me, my parents gasp.

Life at home has always been a battle. Dad's rules, his temper—it's exhausting.

But the Hughes? The Hughes' house is different.

It's fun.

It's safe.

The decision is almost too easy.

“Seriously?” I choke out, tears streaming, a spark of relief breaking through.

“Lacy, if you leave my house, you can never step foot back inside it again.”

“John!” Mum snaps, her voice trembling with disbelief.

Dad sneers, his face cold and merciless.

My eyes dart to my sister, Stacy, who's crying silently in the corner. My heart twists—I don't want to leave her with him, but I can't stay. I need to escape.

“F-fine.” My voice cracks, but I straighten my shoulders, trying to sound stronger than I feel. “Trinny, if you'll have me, I'd love to stay with you.”

Dad's face hardens even more. “You're no daughter of mine, Lacy,” he spits, his words like a dagger. He storms off without looking back.

Mum crumbles, shaking her head as tears streak her face. “I’m sorry, honey,” she whispers, but instead of coming to me, she walks away.

Stacy steps forward, her small arms wrapping around me. She hugs me so tightly like she’s trying to glue the pieces of me back together. She kisses my cheek, sniffs, and runs after our parents.

And just like that, I’m standing on the edge of everything I’ve ever known, wondering if it is safe for me to take a leap of faith.

Trinny pulls me into her arms, holding me close—so close it feels like the first real comfort I’ve ever had. “We’ll take care of you, Lacy,” she whispers, her voice soft but firm. “You don’t have to worry anymore.”

But as I bury my face in her shoulder, my sobs muffled, one thought hammers in my mind.

What happens now?

For the first time in my life, I have no idea where I belong—or what comes next.



## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

Lacy

Twenty Years Old

My lungs burn. My chest tightens like a vice. Water smothers me, its icy grip pulling me down, daring me to stop. But I don't. I can't. I push harder, slicing through the liquid cold, my muscles screaming in protest.

No matter how hard I propel, I can't seem to break through. My brain swims in a fog, my body falters. Still, I thrust, harder and harder—reaching, straining, desperate—

Just a bit further.

My hand slams into the wall.

I burst upward, my head breaking through the surface, then I gasp a deep, desperate breath. The crisp blue water trickles down my face as my legs turn to jelly at the bottom of the pool. I heave. I pant. My heart pounds like a drum in my chest.

I've pushed myself to the edge.

Glancing up at the clock, my breath catches—then a smile breaks across my face.

I've shaved 0.92 off my personal best.

A squeal escapes my lips as I throw my arm into the air, victory buzzing through me.

Someone pats my head—gentle, warm, grounding.

I giggle, feeling light, feeling alive .

“Excellent work, Lacy... a personal best. But if you want to qualify tomorrow, you need to do even better. I know you can do this. Now try again,” Tuck proclaims.

I slump and nod.

He smiles and stands as I hop out of the pool.

Every part of my body screams at me...

I need to do this.

Caroline steps up next to me and smirks. “Race ya!”

Her words are just the boost I need.

Caro isn't just my teammate—she's my housemate and my best friend. I couldn't get through a day without her. Her signature pink cap hides her chestnut-brown hair, while her goggles shield her warm brown eyes. Despite her small frame, her broad shoulders reveal the strength she carries. Her pale complexion and delicate features give her a timeless beauty, but it's her playful, childlike spirit that truly lights up a room. At nineteen, she's a mix of fun, energy, and unwavering loyalty—everything I need in a best friend.

I get into position on the starting block.

“Take your mark,” Tuck bellows, readying his timer.

The starting signal goes off.

I leap into the water. The icy liquid envelops my body, and the adrenaline kicks in. Every time I hear the starting signal, and every time the water splashes against my face, I think of my favourite quote by Mia Hamm.

And at just the right moment, I light the match inside of me. Sometimes, it's right at the start of the race. Sometimes, it's in the last fifty. But either way, during the race, that match will be lit. There's no greater rush than being one with one of the world's greatest marvels.

As I swim the butterfly stroke, I sense the same rush from the very first time I swam.

This rush will never change.

Even as my body screams in protest, the need to keep going, to improve—no matter how small—drives me forward. The wall comes up fast. A sharp turn, a powerful dive, and my legs explode, propelling me through the water. I break upward, arms slicing cleanly overhead, pushing into the depths again.

The final fifty meters is where fatigue sets in, but it's also where the fire ignites. This is the moment to light the match and burn through the finish. Teeth gritted, arms churning faster, I fight the burn in my lungs and the ache in my muscles, forcing every ounce of energy into this swim.

The wall meets my hands with a slap. My body surges upright as I suck in deep, life-saving breaths. Somehow, a second wind hits—less exhaustion than last time, more strength left in reserve. A glance at the board confirms it—another .34 seconds shaved off my personal best.

Caro follows close, just .78 behind.

“Yes!” The roar bursts out as Caro slaps my shoulder in celebration.

Tuck’s laugh echoes from behind us, light and carefree, breaking the tension. “Good work, girls. You’re ready. Now, get out of the pool, head home, and rest up. You have a massive day tomorrow. I want to see you back here bright and early. No excuses, Caro.”

“Hey! Why me?” she asks with a dirty smirk.

“Because it’s always you,” he chides, but with his usual smile.

She giggles. “True... thanks, coach. See you tomorrow.”

He walks away.

I turn to Caro, who takes off her cap and says, “You ready for tomorrow?”

With a shake of my head, I purse my lips. “I don’t think I’ll ever be ready. Olympic trials? That’s huge. Tomorrow could be the start of something massive for us, Caro.”

She tilts her head. “Just because we’re small-time girls from South Australia doesn’t mean we can’t whip everyone’s butts and make the Australian Olympic team. We’re just as good as everyone else. Don’t forget that.”

I take off my cap, letting my shoulder-length blonde hair fall down my back. Then I hoist myself out of the pool. I’m only twenty, so I’m still young to be chosen for the Olympic team. This is my second time trying out—the last time didn’t go so well, so I’m apprehensive about tomorrow.

“Let’s go get changed, I need some food.”

Caro laughs and gestures. “Yes, burgers and curly fries.”

“I wish,” I scoff.

We head to the foyer, where Caro’s parents, Trinny and Harry, wait alongside her three older brothers—Ryan, Logan, and Joshua. They’re here for both of us like they always are. The Hughes family is my surrogate family, the support I never got at home.

My mum, dad, and sister, Stacy, see my swimming dreams as just that— dreams. To them, I’ll never get anywhere, not after failing last time. They don’t believe in me, but luckily, the Hughes family does. So does my coach, Don Tucker. Their unwavering encouragement and guidance keep me grounded, focused, and pushing forward.

“Hey, hey,” Logan calls. “It’s the next two Australian Olympians coming right up.”

“Shut up, idiot! You’ll jinx us,” Caro hisses.

“It’s not jinxing. It’s called good juju. I’m making good karma.”

“Yeah, Nah. You’re just a dick,” Caro chides, rushing up to Logan and pushing his chest.

He steps back and chuckles. “You love me!”

“No... I don’t.” She smirks while he pulls her into a headlock.

She giggles as he gives her head a scruff.

“Scrag.”

“Tiny dick.”

“Okay, okay... enough, you two.” Trinny chuckles, pulling Caro from Logan’s grip into a hug. “I’m proud of you, sweetheart.”

“So am I,” her father, Harry, chimes in. “We’re proud of you too, Lacy. You got a personal best today. Well done you!”

“Thanks, Harry. Hopefully, I can keep up the good times tomorrow.”

“You will, sweetheart. You two are going to do amazing things. But for now, let’s get you both home, hey?”

We bob our heads.

Josh rushes to my side and links his arm with mine. “Great swim today, Lace. As always, you’re so beautiful in the water.”

I smile and lean my head on his shoulder. “Thanks, Josh. Let’s hope I can do these times tomorrow.”

“You’re gonna nail it.”

He leans his head against mine as we walk to their minivan.

“I made you girls kale smoothies. They’re in your fridge when you get home,” Trinny calls as we arrive at the van. “Oh, and I provided a tub of supplements on the counter to help.”

We all file inside the van.

“We can’t take supplements that aren’t approved, Mum. We can get done for that.”  
Caro chuckles.

Trinny shakes her head and giggles. “Oh shit! Right, I forgot. They are just health supplements. I’ll take them away, but drink your kale smoothies.”

“What’s in them?” Caro asks.

“Kale and water.”

“That’s it?”

“Yep.”

I cringe.

Caro catches me and sticks out her tongue. “Sounds delicious.”

“Caro... are you being sarcastic?”

We all chuckle.

“Yes, Mum.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Trinny chides.

Harry starts the van.

It’s not a long drive, but it’s loud and chaotic, as usual. When we arrive at the unit, everyone files out into our small, familiar space.

I make a beeline for the refrigerator, spotting the jug of kale smoothie. Grimacing, I take a sip— because why not?

Noise fills the room, laughter and chatter bouncing off the walls.

Then Trinny walks in. She smiles at me, but I know that look. The tilt of her head, the hand on her hip—it's a dead giveaway. A heart-to-heart is coming.

I freeze mid-sip, then gulp and flop back against the kitchen counter, bracing myself.

“Lacy, I’ve known you going on what... six years now?”

“Yeah, about that—”

“You’re nervous, sweetheart. I understand how big tomorrow is for you. Just because you didn’t make the team last time doesn’t mean you won’t this time .”

I slump into the bench. “I’m working harder than ever before, but what if I choke again? What if I freeze?”

She takes my hands gently in hers. “Lacy LaBelle, you’re a strong, confident, brave young woman. Ever since those trials, you haven’t frozen. It’s not going to happen tomorrow. Don’t let your head get in the way. Swim from the heart.”

Nodding, I smile. “It would be nice if Mum, Dad, and Stacy supported me. But knowing you guys will be there, you’re all the family I need.”

“Oh, honey, your family is, well, different to ours. But you are a part of our family. We’re there just as much for you as we are for Caro. You’re my second daughter.”

My eyes mist.



She clears her throat. “No tears, not tonight. We save them for celebratory ones tomorrow, okay?”

I giggle. “Deal.”

“Let’s have some dinner and then get you girls to bed.”

“Thanks so much. I’d be lost without you.”

“Family is here for each other... blood or not,” Trinny says softly, leaning in to kiss my forehead.

I reach out, wrapping my arms around her. “Thanks, Trinny. I love you all so much.”

“And we love you, sweetheart.” She squeezes me gently before pulling me toward the kitchen. “Come on, let’s get some dinner, hmm?”

I cuddle into her side as we walk. Her warmth steadies me, anchors me. She’s more of a mother to me than my own mum ever was, and tonight, that means everything.

For once, the ache in my chest feels just a little bit lighter.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

My body jolts suddenly from side to side, pulling me awake from a deep sleep. I'm being tussled about in bed, disoriented and unable to gather my bearings, but I sense Caro's presence. Of course, she's the source of all the commotion.

I blink to find her bouncing up and down on the mattress, grinning like the goofball she is.

Yawning and stretching, I watch as she giggles and flops onto her knees, straddling me.

“Olympic trials start today, bitch!”

Howling, I grab her waist and pull her down to the bed beside me. We both lay on our backs, staring up at the ceiling, taking in those five words. Qualifying starts today in Adelaide and lasts for eight days. By the end of it, we could both have a ticket to the Melbourne Olympic Games—we compete for Australia in Australia.

“Lacy?”

I face Caro. “Yeah?”

“This could be the beginning of our futures.”

Great minds think alike.

Sighing, I glance back up to the ceiling. “Today could be the start of our journey. The day the world acknowledges our hard work.”

“We got this, don’t we?”

“Yeah, we sure as hell got this!”

“Good, let’s go then.” She leaps up from the bed, pulling me with her and out to the kitchen. There lies our fruit, with a side of egg white omelette. She’s on the game today.

“You made breakfast?”

“Well, someone was trying out for the Sleeping Beauty contest this morning, so one of us had to step up,” Caro teases.

Rolling my eyes, I take my plate and smile. “Thank you.”

We eat quickly, get dressed and pack everything we need for the day’s events. Then we head off to the SA Aquatic and Leisure Centre at Oaklands Park. It’s our home base, so we have the advantage of knowing the pool inside out. It’s where we train and live when we’re not at the unit.

Walking in the centre it’s all a buzz. There are people everywhere, and as we step in further, we see Tuck talking to the one... the only... Kyle Watley! Australia’s four-time Olympic Champion! Order of Australia Medallist! Former record holder in three events, winner of five gold medals, four silver, and one bronze! This guy’s a legend, and our coach is talking to him.

I nudge Caro. “Can you believe that?”

Caro shakes her head. “Nup. I didn’t know Kyle would be here, let alone set my knickers on fire, then douse them out with an insatiable wetness.”

“Oh my God, Caro!”

“What? He’s hot... Oh, wait, speaking of hot...” She turns her head toward a couple of guys walking past us.

They’re both smoking hot, but one grabs my attention. He’s tall with a muscular build. His brown hair is just long enough to flop slightly on top. His eyes are the most striking blue I’ve ever gazed upon. He glances at me and smirks, sending a shiver down my spine. I break out into goose bumps. His smirk is gorgeous. My heart races. My palms sweat, and my thighs buckle as my mind wanders.

Just imagine those perfect smirking lips kissing my neck.

His friend struts past and flexes his biceps in our direction. My eyebrows curve upward, and my eyes bug out. Before I drool over his friend, I turn to Caro and pull her away.

“Awww, I was having fun with the guys. They were hot and showing off,” she coos.

“We need to concentrate on the heats, not the heat around the pool.”

Caro pouts. “You’re no fun.”

I walk us over to Tuck, who’s setting up our stuff now that Kyle has disappeared.

“Tuck, we’re here,” I call.

He turns and beams. “Good, and on time, too. Lacy must have gotten you out of bed, Caro, right?” he teases.

I giggle as Caro crosses her arms and scoffs.

“Actually, I got Miss Sleeping Beauty out of her bed this morning, Tuck. I think you’ll find I’m the committed one here today. Lacy’s too busy checking out the boys. I tried to stop her, but she’s a dog on heat. Can’t stop her from dry-humping shit.”

Tuck shakes his head as I slap her arm. “You’re a bitch.”

She wrinkles her nose. “You love me.”

“Mmm...”

“Okay, well, now you ladies have had your fun, it’s time for some serious talk. There’s a lot of veterans racing at the trials, but there’s always room for new up-and-comers. Kyle is keeping his eyes open for fresh talent, and I told him about you both, so give your all this week.”

“You mean the sexy Kyle Watley will be watching out for... moi?” Caro gushes.

Tuck guffaws. “Yes! So do your best.”

“Yes, coach!”

While Caro and Tuck chat, I’m distracted. Caro isn’t far off the mark. I am like a dog on heat. Because that guy from before, well... he’s standing over there setting up, and I can’t tear my eyes away. There’s something about him—he’s a magnet for my eyes, and I just can’t break the connection.

“Lacy, earth to Lacy?”

I snap my head back around to face Tuck and Caro. “Huh, what?”

Tuck frowns, turning from me to the guy and then back to me. “Eye on the prize only,

Miss LaBelle!”

I try to rein in my racing heart and breathing.

“A ticket to Melbourne.”

“Good. Don’t forget it. Don’t get distracted. This is too important, Lacy.”

I push away the thought of his hands running up my thighs. “Yes, coach. I’m focused. I promise.”

“Glad to hear it. Now, go get changed.”

“Okay.”

Caro links her arm with mine, and we head to the changing rooms, where we begin our preparations for the meet. The room is abuzz with swimmers from all corners of Australia. We change quickly. There’s a special address coming up soon, and we all have to be there before the first heat starts. We rush out of the change rooms and down to the marshalling area. There, we file in and squish together for the welcome address.

Caro and I link our arms. There’s no one else I’d rather have by my side.

A bunch of people speak. It’s as boring as shit, then finally, Kyle Watley steps onto the small dais. Caro and I snap back to reality.

“Hi everyone, I’d like to officially welcome you to the Australian Olympic qualifying trials. We’re all here for one reason and one reason only... a ticket to Melbourne. To get that ticket, you have to not only give it your all this week but also put your best foot forward in all aspects. Respect the sport. Respect your country. Respect your

teammates. Do Australia proud. Strive for your ticket to Melbourne. Show the world what world-class swimmers look like!”

We all cheer. Pride washes over me. I can’t believe that I’m even here with these amazing swimmers. I was in this position four years ago when I was sixteen. Back then, I was too young, and the stress was too much. But now I’m in my prime. I can take on anything.

I. Am. Ready.

“Go out there now and give this everything you’ve got, be your best, do the best. Swim hard, swim fast. Let’s see some good numbers today, people.” Kyle steps down from the dais. We scatter.

“Good luck, you’ll smash it.” Caro kisses my cheek before rushing after some hot guys.

The first round of swimmers get ready for the Multi Class Women’s 50m Free, which the men will follow. Then I’m up for the 100m Butterfly, which is the only race I’m trying out for other than the Olympic relay team. So I sit in the marshalling area to the side of the pool. It’s an enclosed seating area where I wait patiently for my time to come around. Television screens are conveniently placed on the walls, and the area is quiet enough for us to prepare mentally for a particular race.

The trials bring in huge crowds. The television stations record the heats for their highlights later that night. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the idea of being on television, but I’ll deal.

I’m sitting back, not focusing on anything but the first Multi Class race. Then my arm tingles. Furrowing my brows, I catch the hot guy from earlier. He’s wearing his swim shorts and a Playford-branded swimming shirt. Tensing as he comes into view, I

quickly turn away as my breathing rushes and my muscles clench. When he sits down next to me, I tingle even more. Chewing the side of my cheek, I slowly face him.

He's smiling so brightly it knocks my socks off. "Hey, I'm Coby Mathers. I swim for Playford... obviously. This your first time?"

His easy-going nature soothes me. "I'm Lacy. I'm with Marion, and this is my second. I didn't qualify the first time."

"Let's change that this time, hey?"

I check the information board to see the men's 400m Free after my event. "You're a Freestyler?"

He smiles. "Yeah, I try to freestyle everything."

What an odd thing to say.

I snigger. "Interesting. So this is obviously your first trials, too, then?"

He nods. "Yeah, I'm a late developer, but I'm well-developed now."

I give him an idiotic grin. "Good timing then."

He ogles through his lashes. "Couldn't have timed it better."

"What do you mean it's only just started?"

He chuckles. "'Cause I met you. That's a pretty good start to this week, wouldn't you say?"



I slump. “Distractions are a very bad idea.”

He smirks. “Well then, let’s only be distracted after hours.”

“Or not at all,” I rebut.

He chuckles. “Geez, Lacy, you’re a tough one to crack.”

I raise my shoulders. “You have to be tough in my life.”

He winces. “There’s a story there. I want to hear it one day when we’re allowed to be distracted.”

“I live down south, you live up north. So—”

“How very observant of you.”

“That’s not something on your mind?” I huff.

“What’s on my mind right now... is eels.”

Furrowing my brows, I jolt back slightly and stare at him. “Um... what?”

“Eels glide through the water. I need to be an eel.”

“Right, I see your logic.”

“Plus, if I’m an electric eel, I can blow my competition right out of the water.”

I shake my head. “Really?”

He grins. “Was it that bad ?”

“I’m thinking A-grade Dad joke, to be honest.”

He lifts his shoulders. “Shit, I need to work on my form.”

“I think you do there, eel boy.”

He bumps his shoulder into mine playfully. “Hey, a few of us are heading to a café tonight for dinner. You should come.”

“Me?”

“No, the other Lacy.”

Rolling my eyes, I click my tongue. “Smart arse. Um... can my friend Caro come?”

“That girl you were with earlier?”

I nod.

He smiles. “East thought she was smokin’.”

Furrowing my brows, I tilt my head. “East?”

“My mate Easton, the bicep guy. He’ll be there. Would be nice to get to get better acquainted without the time restraints.”

“Maybe. Let me talk to Caro, see what our plans are. I’m sure I’ll see you around more today.”

“I hope so.”

“100 Fly, please get ready,” a marshal calls.

Nerves hit me like a ton of bricks.

Coby winks. “Good luck, Lady Butterfly.”

“Thanks, Electric Eel.” I’m not sure whether I’m giddy because of my first heat or Coby.

I take my position in the lineup, adjusting my blue caps slightly. I’m wearing two, as my hair is a little longer these days.

The line starts to move. Taking a deep breath, I walk. The girl behind me trips me. I catch my footing, and then I face her. She’s short and gives me a shit-eating grin.

I recall her from the last trials.

Katie Reynolds.

“Hi, Katie,” I grumble.

“You didn’t even talk to me in the marshalling area. How rude!”

“Sorry, I was talking to Coby.”

“Yes, being a tease.”

I ignore the jab.

We arrive at our positions. Taking a deep breath, I sit on my designated chair and scan the crowd. It's huge. My nerves are getting the better of me as I jump up and down on the spot.

“Jennifer Hancock... Adelaide Swim Club.”

“Lacy LaBelle... Marion Swimming Club,” they call out next.

I rise to my feet as the crowd erupts into cheers. A grin spreads across my face—I'm lucky to have the home-crowd advantage, and I'll take every bit of support I can get.

Waving and smiling brightly, I pull off my Marion shirt and toss it aside. Then, with steady hands, I strip down, placing my clothes neatly into the provided bins.

The adrenaline kicks in—I'm ready for the race.

“Katie Reynolds... Nunawading Swimming Club,” they announce next.

I cringe.

Katie wasn't nice to be around four years ago. I doubt that she's had any sort of 'nice' transplant since then.

They announce the rest of the lineup as I swing my arms, getting the blood flowing into my shoulders. I space out before recalling my mantra.

I am building a fire, and every day I train, I add more fuel. At just the right moment, I light the match.

My goggles fit snugly around my eyes and pull taut onto my scalp—just the way I like it. They command us to step up to the starting block. I wait for the buzzer. My

heart is pumping, the adrenaline surging. My skin prickles with excitement at the thought of hitting that water and racing.

I don't need to come first—I just have to make sure I place for the semi. That's my goal—push and push hard. The buzzer sounds, so I step up onto the starting block. I try to control my breathing, I don't need to be out of breath before I hit the water.

“Take your mark.”

Bending down, I get into position and focus. Even though I'm dying to get in the water, I won't budge until I hear that gun. A false start is unacceptable. A loud bang echoes through the centre. I leap off the starting block. I dive, staying under for as long as I can before resurfacing. I take in a short breath and then throw my arms over my head. I slam them back down into the crystal blue depths.

I move quickly and effortlessly. The thrill of being one with the water soothes my nerves. Pure determination courses through me. The wall comes up. I duck, slamming against the tiles. I dive back, swaying my body up and down in a perfect rhythm before surfacing.

Taking a breath, I raise my arms and slam them back down. They say Butterfly is the most powerful of all the swimming techniques, and I feel pretty powerful in the water at this moment. I push as my lungs burn and my muscles ache. But that match is lit once more. Now, I'm propelling through the water with even more determination. I vaguely hear the crowd cheering as I surface for each stroke. They spur me on. I glide through the beautiful, clear blue liquid, then duck and slam into the wall.

My head pops up out of the water as my lungs take in short, much-needed breaths. Perusing the display board, I find out I've come in second behind Katie. She's a second off her personal best.

Panting, I smile at Katie. She tilts her head as if she knew she was going to smash me. I'm excited that I've made it through, but bummed I didn't do my own PB. But still, there's always the semis. I can do better—I still have energy reserved.

Stumbling out of the pool while taking off my caps, I mentally berate myself for not doing better.

Katie approaches me. "How's second-best?" she sneers.

Scrunching my brows, I shake my head as I step in behind her.

"Good swim, Butterfly," Coby chirps as he passes me on his way out for his Freestyle event.

"Good luck, Eel. Shock them out of the water," I tease.

Coby beams. If my bathers weren't already wet, they are now. He marches off as I stroll into the marshalling area, taking a seat. I should go and change, but I focus on Coby. Studying the television, I wait as they announce him. He takes off his shirt, revealing his well-defined abs and a strong set of shoulders. He is a spectacular vision.

They take their positions. Coby steps onto the starting block. The camera zooms in on him. I whimper. It comes out louder than I expected. I scan the room to see if anyone heard me, but luckily, everyone's too busy getting in the zone to catch me lusting over the television screen.

"Take your mark."

He bends down.

I wish they would get a behind view right now.

A small smile pulls at my lips as the starting signal goes off. He dives into the water and stays under for an extended period of time, coming out in front of the pack. His arm comes up, his stroke is flawless as his muscles ripple and glisten in the water. I lick my lips while marvelling at him.

He's a full body length in front of everyone. It's hardly a race at all. He's just that good. Coby hits the wall, flipping over and heading back down for the first hundred of the event.

Coby's an endurance swimmer, so his muscles have muscles. I have trouble breathing after a hundred metres, so I have no idea how he does it for three times longer. I smile slyly before mentally slapping myself.

The entire race is incredible. I'm on the edge of my seat as another swimmer comes closer to him. I don't think Coby's fading, but the other guy lights the match.

"C'mon, Coby," I plead as they turn for the final fifty.

Coby's still in front, but it's only by one stroke. The other guy's catching up quickly. I stand up as he slowly gains on him. Unlike me, Coby doesn't have a semi. This race qualifies you straight into the final. Yes, second place will get you there too, but first gives you a better starting lane.

"Push, Coby, push," I yell louder than I'd intended.

A couple of people stare at me, but I continue to stare at the screen. As if he heard me, he pushes harder and starts pulling out in front a little further.

I bounce up and down on the spot, inwardly screaming for him. "C'mon, Cobes," I

plead.

He ducks and slams his hands against the wall.

“Yes!” I call.

Everyone stares at me again, and I shrink into myself as I glance back at the screen. Coby is still in the pool, his huge smile beaming with the realisation that he’s come in first—just barely.

“Miss LaBelle, can we have a random sample, please?” an official cuts in.

I hesitate, my eyes flicking back to the water. I wanted to be here when Coby came back in, to celebrate with him, to see his face light up.

But the test is mandatory.

Clutching the kit, I turn and take off, the cheers from the pool echoing behind me—louder and louder—until they’re all I can hear.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

When I rush back to the marshalling area, I find out Coby isn't there. I'm bummed. I don't have another race until tonight, so I head to the showers to warm up. I'm quite cold from being out of the pool for so long. Even though the pools are heated to regulation requirements by FINA, they still have a chill factor from the crisp April air.

Heading into the bathroom, I step inside the cubicle and shut the door. There are girls from previous races already here. They chatter as I set up my stall.

"I can't believe she's even here again," Katie sneers over the roaring showers.

"Did you see her all over Coby? I mean... you're from the same state and everything, but you're not even in the same league." They both snicker.

I wince and take off my suit.

"I mean, with a name like LaBelle, she sounds like a hussy."

"Lacy Loose-As-A-Goose LaBelle," Katie calls. They all guffaw as anger bubbles up inside of me.

I clear my throat, but they continue.

"I bet she's either so loose everyone in this aquatic centre has had a turn, or she's so frigid her piss has trouble coming out."

"There's no way Coby Mathers is even slightly interested in her. He's sorry for the

biggest loser in this joint,” Katie cackles.

Clenching my fists, I wrap my towel around me and storm out of my cubicle to Katie’s. I bang on the door, and everyone squeals.

“What the fuck?” Katie yells.

She reluctantly opens her door to see me standing here. She chuckles and looms over me. “How much did you hear?”

“Enough...”

Katie smiles. “Good, then you know where you stand.”

I lean in close and smirk. “Where I stand... will be on your face if you don’t shut that scabby slut mouth.”

Katie gasps.

Everyone else steps out and stares at our showdown.

Katie smugly nods. “Tough words. Guess we’ll see who’s the toughest in the pool, right?”

“You’re on. And gossip all you want, but make sure I’m not here.”

Katie grins. “I’d rather stab you in the front any day. I do love it when you squirm.”

“Game on, moles,” I quip.

“What is this... Big Brother circa 2006?”

“If you stoop to unnecessary evils, people will catch you.”

“Whatever Jane Fonda .”

Furrowing my brows, I shake my head. “What does that even mean?”

“That sounds like something from a Jane Fonda movie.”

“It doesn’t.”

“Whatever. Get out of my face, LaBelle.”

“Gladly, Reynolds!” I slam her door shut and walk back to my cubicle. The noise in the changing rooms stops as I go about my peaceful shower.

After showering and changing, I head out—without any issues—up into the stands to find Caro. She’s sitting next to a hot guy I vaguely recognise and Coby. Smiling, I make my way to them.

“Hey, Lady Butterfly, you took off,” Coby calls as I slide in next to him.

“Yeah, they took me for testing, and when I got back, you were gone.”

He winks. “All good.”

“You shocked them out of the water.”

He chuckles. “I sure have. I have my final tonight, not long after your semi, so we should be in the marshalling area together again.”

“Great, we can cheer each other on.”

“No fucking way!” Caro calls, grabbing my attention. She holds her hand against the palm of—I’m assuming East, Coby’s bestie—his hand. It’s so small against his massive palm.

“See, I told you. You know what they say about big hands. Right, Caro?” East cackles.

She scoffs, focusing on his crotch. “Yeah... small brain.”

Coby and I crack up laughing as East huffs while Caro giggles. East offers a dip of his head like he’s surprised she’s giving it back to him equally. Their hands finally separate. Caro exhales like she’s in awe or something.

“So when are you up, East? I’m Lacy, by the way.”

“Hey, Lace. I’m hitting the waves tomorrow with my BAE here.” He bumps into Caro’s side, and she laughs.

“BAE? Please, you couldn’t handle me being your bestie,” Caro replies.

“True. You’ll have to settle for being my girl slave then,” East teases.

“What? No way.”

As East and Caro continue to mock fight, I turn to Coby and smile. “Well, they’re getting along.”

“Hmm... East gets along with everyone. He has that type of personality that everyone loves but would hate to have.”

I giggle. “Yeah, full of energy.”

He chuckles. “Full of something...”

Laughing, I bump his shoulder. “So you competing in anything other than 400 Free?”

He shrugs. “Relay. My coach wants me to do the 1500, but I’m not ready for that. It’s not my specialty. I want to focus on what I’m good at.”

“And what are you good at?”

“Well Free, Relay, kissing, seduction, forepla—”

“Okay!” I huff. My breathing quickens, which makes him laugh. I can’t help but squirm in my seat. I’m burning right now. “Bit of a womaniser, are you, Coby?”

“No, I like to stick it to one girl.”

I grimace. “Stick it, or stick to one girl?”

He smirks. “Sorry, Freudian slip. Stick to one girl. Once I have my eyes on that one girl, she’ll have a hard time getting out of my grip.”

“Wow! Sounds like you’re a domineering douchebag,” I tease.

He laughs. “No, not like that. I just mean I don’t stray when I’m with someone, ever... not for anything.”

“That sounds pretty intense there, Eel.”

“Am I?”

Chewing my bottom lip, I ask, “So, do you like... someone?”

He faces me. Our legs bump, sending a shockwave up my leg and straight to my pussy. I gasp as his blue eyes bore deep into mine.

“I’m still cracking the outer shell of her cocoon. I’m hoping to see my beautiful butterfly soon, though.”

“You’re a poet, too?”

“Me? Nah. Just a guy waiting for her wings to unfurl.”

Caro slides along and suddenly jumps into Coby’s lap, staring right into my eyes.

“C’mon, we gotta go.”

I jolt back. “What? Go where?”

“To get food. I’m going to implode if I don’t eat a taco. Right now.”

Coby stares at me like he’s not sure where his hands should go with Caro on his lap.

“Um... I don’t think tacos are on the menu.” I let her down gently.

“Fuck you! You could’ve let a girl dream. You guys coming?” She hops off Coby’s lap and struts away. East coughs like a maniac as he pushes past us after Caro. Coby gestures for me to move first, and as I turn, I jump slightly. Somebody slapped my arse. I glare at Coby.

“Sorry... wasn’t me. I swear,” Coby replies sheepishly.

I smile and shake my head. “No, it’s okay. I understand. Let’s get some tacos.”

He chuckles. “AKA a garden salad.”

“Yay!” I mock cheer.

He chuckles, linking his arm with mine. His warm skin sends shivers down my spine as we walk to the athletes’ cafeteria area.

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It’s eight p.m., and Coby and I are back in the marshalling area, ready for my semi and his final. If Coby makes it in the top two, he has his ticket to the Olympics. If I make it in the top two of my semi, I go through for the final, which is tomorrow night. It’s been great spending the day with Coby and East. Coby is the more serious of the two boys, but he still has a joke and laughs at everything. In contrast, East makes fun of everything. He’s a fun guy to be around—Caro, and he are the same person. It’s scary.

Coby and I are sitting in the marshalling area chatting when Katie walks in. She glances over at us and huffs, storming over to the other side of the room. I can’t help but think there’s a story between her and Coby. It can’t just be a simple crush on her end.

“Cobes... can I ask you something personal?”

“Yeah, shoot.”

Chewing my bottom lip, I turn from Katie back to Coby. “Is there a history between you and Katie Reynolds?”

He slumps. “I stayed in Victoria on scholarship for a while, but it didn’t work out. I knew Katie when we swam at Nunawading together. We had a very brief fling, like three days, before I found out she was plenty psycho. I broke it off and steered clear of her.”

Now it makes sense as to why Katie was talking about Coby.

“She was bragging about how you’d only be around me because you were sorry for me—”

“Bullshit! I like you for you, Lace. Don’t listen to anything coming out of that girl’s mouth.”

I take a deep breath and bob my head. Coby leans in, embracing me tightly, and it gives me the security I’ve been craving. I’ve known him for only a day, and yet he’s my new home.

“Now kick arse... especially hers. Use this pent-up anger to push harder, till your lungs collapse.”

Smiling, I move my head in agreement. “Till my lungs collapse...”

“100 Fly, please get ready,” the marshal calls.

Smiling at Coby, I stand. He leans in and smacks my arse. I giggle, shaking my head.

“I’ll admit... it was me that time. I can’t let East have all the fun now, can I?”

“Devil spawn,” I tease.

“Good luck, butterfly.”

“Thanks.” I walk over to the lineup. Katie’s in front of me this time. I have half a mind to trip her up, but I’m better than that. We walk out and take our places on the seats behind the pool. Removing my shirt, I slap my biceps and roll my shoulders, helping the blood flow through my muscles. Cracking my neck from side to side, I



repeat my motto over and over until they call my name. Waving to the crowd, I step forward, mentally preparing myself.

The buzzer goes off.

I step up to the starting block.

“Take your mark.”

I bend down as my stomach flips. Even though I’m nervous, I’m stronger than I’ve been in the past.

The starting signal fires.

I spring from the starting block.

The water hits my face like a wave of pure adrenaline as it sparks the fire inside of me. I swivel my body under the depths and surge through the liquid with a determination and strength that’s new to me.

Something has changed.

Something has given me new drive—new determination.

I’m not sure what it is, but I’m not complaining.

I surface and take my first breath, throwing my arms over my head and thrust them into the water with precision. My stroke is flawless. My passion for the swim is endless. I push harder and faster than I think possible as I thrust myself through the water.

Ducking, I hit the wall and turn around. I'm on my way back for the final fifty. I'm not sure where I am in the overall positioning of the race, but I feel good. I maintain my energy. My lungs are working. My muscles are building. I'm powering through, stroke after stroke. My drive and thrill for this swim are overwhelming.

I've never been more alive.

The support is awesome.

Coby's presence obviously helps.

Maybe he's my added power.

I push harder. My lungs burn. My muscles ache, but I push ahead.

I will not drop.

I will not stall.

I light the match and push harder.

Only two more strokes.

One...

Two...

...and I duck, slamming against the wall. My legs fall, and I raise my head through the tepid water, pulling off my goggles to check the scoreboard.

Pure excitement surges through me. Not only did I hit the wall first, but I smashed my

personal best, beating Katie's previous swim by .23. Which isn't a lot, but when the Australian Record is 56:23, that .23 can make a big difference.

Throwing my fist into the air, I catch Katie glaring at me. She swims over the lane ropes toward the edge of the pool. It's nice that I'll be in the middle against Katie in the finals, swimming for my ticket to Melbourne.

I hop out of the pool and head over to the commentator, who signals for me. I glance over at Tuck. He tips his head, signalling that he's fine with me chatting on camera. As soon as I get the go-ahead, I race over to Rhada Thomas, the commentator.

"Lacy, congratulations on a great swim and placing into the finals. How did it feel?"

"Hi, Rhada..." I pant, "... the swim was smooth... and comfortable... it was one of my favourite swims."

"And having the support of the home crowd is always a tremendous advantage."

Smiling, I scan the crowd, hoping to see the faces I always silently hope will one day appear to support me—but of course, they're not here. "I couldn't do this without the support of the crowd... my friends are behind me... it's always extra fuel."

"And what about your family? Are they here?"

Wincing, I huff, trying to keep my emotions in check. "My friends are my family."

Rhada nods. "Well done! You're in the finals. We'll see you tomorrow night."

"Thanks, Rhada..." I wave to the cheering crowd. Then, I try to simmer down my emotions on my ever absent family while I make my way back to the marshalling area. Even though I've just produced an amazing time, beaten my PB, including

smashing Katie and now earned my place in the finals, I'm deflated.

As I enter the marshalling area, strong, warm arms unexpectedly wrap around my waist. It's Coby. My body crumbles, melting into his embrace as he cradles me.

"Stupid fucking commentator," he murmurs.

Sniffing, I cuddle him. I take in the mixed aroma of manly deodorant and chlorine. Gulping, I glance up at him. My bottom lip trembles slightly. "Why couldn't they come? Just this once!"

He frowns. "Your family?"

I try not to tear up. "They don't believe I can go anywhere with this. As far as they're concerned, it's all a pipe dream."

He shakes his head. "Parents, hey! My dad's a difficult taskmaster. He's my coach, and he pushes too hard. Failure is not an option. If I fail... I don't even want to think about the consequences. So we both have shitty parents. Yours don't care, and mine care too much. But hey, I got you something."

Raising my brow, I smirk at him. "You did?"

He pulls his hand out from around his back, presenting me with a simple, single white daisy, twirling it between his fingers as he hands it to me.

Some may think that is a lame attempt, but to me, it means so much right now.

My shoulders slump, the brightest smile lighting my face as I take the small flower, bringing it to my nose and sniff. "You got me a daisy?" I can't help the happiness present in my tone.

He chuckles, sliding his arm around me. “Was a shit of a thing to find before you finished your interview, but I just wanted to find something to bring back that beautiful smile of yours.”

Tilting my head, I stare into his eyes. “Maybe we should run away?” I only half-joke.

He smirks. “See, I told you I’d get my grip on you.”

“I don’t believe those were your exact words.”

“It was something like that. But anyway, can we do this running away thing after my final? I mean, I’m cool to go now, but I’ve kinda worked my gorgeous arse off for this moment.”

Laughing, I shake my head. “What man refers to himself as a ‘gorgeous arse?’ ”

“A very confident one.”

“Well, Mister Confident, go blow their arses out the water.”

He dips his chin. “You got it, just one small, little thing for good luck?”

Furrowing my brows, I bow my head slightly. “Sure, what?”

He leans in, placing his hands on either side of my head and forces his lips onto mine. A spark explodes, tingling all the way from my lips throughout my entire body. My knees give way, and he catches me in his arms.

“Falling for me already?”

Straightening my legs, I stand still in his grip. I swing my head slightly, licking my

lips and stare into his eyes. “You just shocked me, is all.”

“That was nice, though, right? I’m swimming my final, so don’t hurt my feelings,” he teases.

“Yes, it was nice... electrifying even. Now, go get ’em!”

He leans in, his lips brushing softly against my forehead. The world seems to still for a moment. Then, without a word, he turns and strides toward his lineup. I didn’t even hear them call his final.

I exhale, the breath shaky as I sink into the nearest seat. My fingers drift to my lips, still tingling with the warmth of his touch. A smile breaks across my face—wide, unstoppable. I twirl my daisy between my fingers, my butterflies flurrying like mad in my stomach, and for the first time in a long time, everything feels right.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

Caro and I had gone to the café with the boys to celebrate Coby's win. He's become the first ticket holder in our group to Melbourne. It was riveting to witness him race to win his spot. He's such an incredible athlete that when Coby asked again if we would go out tonight, I couldn't say no—especially after that spine-tingling kiss. Despite Tuck's warning, we brats sneak out tonight.

It's us four and a couple more of the group from Playford. We're sensible and do not drink. We only eat salad and protein for our dinner. We can't go off track the first night into the trials.

A band plays. We don't plan to stay out too late. It's already nine-thirty. Some of the guys and girls have to swim in the morning—like Caro and East, who are shaking it on the dance floor. Coby and I sit in the corner, snickering as those two make a mockery of dancing.

“Do you wanna dance?” Coby croons.

“Sure.” We scoot out of the booth and over to the dance floor. The song changes from “Shut up and Dance” by Walk The Moon to “Love Me Like You Do” by Ellie Goulding. Smiling as Coby pulls me close, I wrap my arms around his neck. The energy buzzing between us sets my pulse racing. My stomach flutters as our foreheads meet. He stares into my eyes as we sway to the beautiful music. Moving in unison, his every muscle pushes against my torso, making me blush and my insides tingle.

He licks his lips as he edges closer. Our chemistry surges. He's no doubt one of the hottest guys I've ever met. Part of the attraction lies in his amazing personality. A

little quirkiness, a little kindness. Everything about Coby attracts me.

As I lick my lips, we inch closer together. When our lips meet, I tremble all over. I smooth his hair. My mouth opens, letting his tongue in. It dances with mine playfully. The kiss is delicate. When I move in to deepen the kiss, I burst into almighty laughter. Its echo breaks us apart.

“Geez! Didn’t take you two long to switch from swimming to playing tonsil hockey, did it?” East cries, slapping Coby on the back.

“You’re a cockhead, East. Way to ruin a moment,” Coby chides.

“Oh, you were having a moment? Shit, sorry, bro, I’ll crack out the violins and get Hugh Grant in, shall I?” East shakes his head as Coby rolls his eyes.

“Cockhead.”

“Well, this cock needs some head, but Caro isn’t budging tonight. So I’m heading back to the cabin. It’s getting late, and I gotta swim tomorrow. You coming, bro?”

Coby smiles. “Guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“For sure. Where are you staying?”

“At the caravan park down the road in a cabin. We can walk from here. How about you?”

“We’ll go back to our unit. It’s not far from the centre, but we’ll need to catch a taxi.”

“Okay, we’ll walk you out.” He takes my hand, and together, we step over to Caro.



Without warning, East scoops her up and tosses her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. She howls in protest, her laughter echoing through the room. Those two are an absolute riot.

As we head outside, East finally sets her down. She smacks his shoulder with a playful glare. “You’re such a troll,” she mutters, though there’s no real bite to it.

Grinning, he leans in to kiss her, but she giggles and tilts her head just in time, offering her cheek instead. His lips land there with an exaggerated smooch, and her laughter rings out again.

Coby and I burst out laughing as East groans.

I turn to Coby and smile. “Thanks for a beautiful day and for being there when I kind of lost it.”

“I want to support you, Lace. You’re kind of awesome.”

“The feeling’s mutual. Walk safe,” I drawl, kissing him briefly.

Then I step into the taxi. Caro follows me and shuts the door. The guys wave at us as the car takes off. Caro instructs the driver, and I recall how amazing today has been.

“God, East is a douche!” Caro cries. “He’s such an idiot, but fuck is he fun. But you and Cobes, hey? You’re getting quite cosy there.”

“Shut up! It’s just flirting.”

“Ah-huh... tell that to old permanent boner man.”

“What?” I choke.

“He’s got a hard-on for you the size of my credit card bill.”

“Right... well, that’s nice to know,” I shriek.

“Sure is, you seen what he’s packing?”

“What? No! Have you?”

“Oh my God, Lacy, you don’t stare at his crotch? Fuck, I do. He and East are seriously loaded down south, if you know what I mean.”

“How do you function?” I chuckle.

“I don’t. Get used to it.”

The taxi pulls up. Caro pays him before we slide out and head inside. It’s close to ten p.m., and we need to go to bed.

“Right, sleep tight. You have a final tomorrow, and I have my first heat in the morning—”

“More like you’re in heat ,” I murmur as I make my way to my room.

“Ha!”

“Night, Lacy!”

“Night, Caro!”

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I'm sitting in the stands with Coby, focusing on Caro as she swims her heat for the 100m Breaststroke. She's in her first fifty, and she's about to hit the wall in third. Coby and I root for her as she glides through the water, and I panic when she hits the wall and turns for the final fifty— Caro's still in third.

"C'mon, Caro, lift girl, lift," I call, bouncing up and down on my seat.

Coby chews his bottom lip as we both sit as far forward as possible. And as if she hears me, she pulls up her game, stroking harder. Her head bobs up and out of the water, performing faster and producing a more even stroke. My adrenaline piques as she overtakes Natalia. Now she's headed for first. She's neck and neck with Natalia, pushing harder. She moves out a stroke in front of Natalia when they both glide under the water and slam against the wall.

I scan the scoreboard to see who hit first.

It's Caro.

I squeal as I turn to Coby. He pulls me into his arms and smooths my hair back from my face as I gaze into his eyes. Sparks fly between us. As I stare into his luminous blues, wanting so badly to lean in and kiss him, time stands still. All the elation of Caro's victory shapes this moment while I stare into his eyes.

I vaguely hear "Easton Summers, Playford Swimming Club," over the speakers. The words break me out of my Coby-induced trance before I glance down at the pool. Not only is Caro out of the pool, but the next lot of swimmers have lined up to be announced.

I gulp as I turn from Coby to East, as he waves his biceps around like a fool.

"He's a show pony," Coby remarks.

He dips his head as I giggle. I cannot deny the chemistry surging between Coby and me.

Nonetheless, it's a distraction.

Then I focus on Easton, who jumps into the water and faces the pool's edge, waiting for the order.

“Take your mark.”

He pulls up ready to leap backward for his 100m backstroke. It's the only stroke where you start in the pool.

The gun fires. He throws himself backward into the depths. Cheers erupt around us. He has a fan club of, well, everyone here —it's his personality. He is so gregarious. So we cheer him on as he pulls up and strokes backward. I can't help but admire his toned body. His physique ripples and sparkles through the water. Then he hits the wall in second. He continues to glide through the liquid without effort, and I can see why this is his priority stroke. As he continues, he's neck and neck with a guy from Queensland.

They hit the wall at the same time.

We study the board.

East has come through in second position.

We clap and cheer—his time being good enough for him to get through to the semi.

“We should go to the athletes' area. Try and catch up with them?” Coby asks. I nod.

It dawns on me that, in a few hours, I'm going to be back in that pool. Not swimming a heat or a semi, but a final. A spot to grab my ticket to the Games. My chance to actually make the Olympic team. I've been fine all morning, but now I remind myself that today could make or break my Olympic dreams.

We stand up and make our way down to the athletes' designated area. Coby grabs my hand.

"Hey, are you okay?"

With a fake smile, I reply, "Yeah, just getting nervous."

"Don't swim with your head, Lace, swim with your heart," Coby advises.

I beam. "A very wise woman once told me that."

He smiles. "Well, it's what I live by. If you let your head get in the way, it fucks everything up. Just go with your heart. It never fails you."

Gripping his hand, I smile. "Thank you, I needed that."

"Oh my God, did you see me?" a high-pitched voice calls.

I spy Caro letting go of Coby, so I race forward, wrapping my arms around her. "Yes, I did. Well done. I'm so proud of you."

"Well, it's only the heat. I have two more swims to go, so let's not get too happy."

"You'll do great, Caro. The way you came back in that last fifty was gold," Coby enthuses.

Caro tilts her body to the side. “You think so?”

“ ’Twas epic.”

“Thanks. Sure, second wasn’t as good as Caro’s first. But still, I have to let her come first at something, right?”

“Good work, mate. You got into the semi. We’re all doing well. Now Lady Butterfly has to do exceptionally this evening, and we’ll be soaring,” Coby declares.

My stomach knots again. I tingle all over.

“Foood, I need carbs,” Caro whines.

We all turn as Katie steps into our path.

Coby turns around. “Yes, Katie?”

“Could you show me something?” she asks, fluttering her lashes.

My stomach churns as I clench my fists.

I’m actually jealous!

Coby furrows his brows and purses his lips. “I’m kinda busy right now.”

“Maybe later then?” she mewls.

“Probably not even then, Katie. Sorry,” Coby clips.

I chew my bottom lip.

Katie glares at me. "See you in the pool later, Lacy."

"You bet," I reply as nicely as I can.

She storms off while I hide my shudder.

"What was that about?" Caro muses.

"She wanted to take me away from you guys so she could weasel her way back in. It's not gonna happen," Coby replies.

He wraps his arm around my shoulders, and we head to the cafeteria.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

The time has come.

I've been nervous all afternoon.

Coby has been trying to keep me calm, but he's not here right now in the marshalling area just before my race. Luckily, East and Caro are doing a decent job at distraction.

"Did you know the female butterfly disembowels the male butterfly after they fuck?"  
Caro informs me.

"Really?"

She snickers. "No, I don't think so. But it made you laugh, right?"

Chuckling, I shake my head. "I'm not sure if I'm impressed or freaked out."

"All I'm saying is... you're the only female butterfly in the pool, and all those other competitors are the males."

I purse my lips and furrow my brows. "You want me to disembowel my competitors?"

She smiles. "Exactly!"

"You're sooo weird."

We crack up with laughter as she cuddles into my side.



I ponder what's ahead of me. This is my only chance at making this year's Olympic Team. I have to not only place first or second but also come in under the FINA Olympic qualifying time.

The thought of me freezing in the water overtakes me again, but I try to block it out.

Swim from the heart, not from the head.

I CAN do this.

"100-meter Fly, get ready," the marshal commands.

My stomach sinks through the floor as Caro wraps her arms around me tightly.

"You can do this, Lacy. I believe in you," Caro reassures.

I chuckle. "What, nothing quick-witted?"

She shakes her head. "Nope. Just good luck, and race hard. You got this. With your heart, Lace... with your heart."

East fist-bumps me. "Disembowel those fuckers, Lace. I want blood and guts all through the pool," he quips.

I giggle. "I knew I couldn't leave here without one of you being a tool."

"Happy to step up to the plate. Now kick some arse, Lace," East cheers.

Caro nods as I turn and walk over to the lineup. My heart races. I've never been so nervous—not even trying out four years ago.

Shit! Don't think like that!

Walking to the lineup, I move in front of Katie. As I step to the front of her, she slams into my back, sending me flying into a row of metal chairs. My shoulder collides with the steel. My knees hit the floor. The chair topples over. I moan as an official bends down and lifts me up by my good shoulder while my left shoulder aches and tears prick at my eyes.

“Are you okay?” the official asks.

With a quick bow, I turn back to Katie and tense up. Great, swimming with a stiff shoulder . As if I wasn't nervous enough. “Yeah, I'm fine.”

“What happened?” he demands.

Taking a deep breath, I can't say for sure it was Katie who pushed me as I didn't see. Even though I suspect her, I can't be one hundred per cent sure, so I say nothing. “I fell. Sorry to worry you.”

“Are you sure? Do you need a medic?” he asks.

I give my head a slow side-to-side motion, then roll my shoulder again as more tears form in my eyes. “I'm fine. I need to race.”

He gives a subtle dip and helps me back into the lineup. Turning around I glare at Katie, who's smirking. Fucking bitch!

The line starts moving, so I turn around and walk out, hoping that nothing else happens. I massage my left shoulder slightly, trying to ease the pain but causing more.

I better leave well enough alone.

I'm seething. If Katie has fucked up my chances at going to Melbourne, I might take that disembowelling thing seriously.

While we walk out into the centre, the crowd cheers for us. Taking in short, shallow breaths, I calm myself. I need to find a centre of gravity and hold onto it because I'm psyching myself out. The idea of not only freezing mid-swim but also my shoulder halting me from doing my best is starting to play on my mind.

With your heart.

Gulping, I stumble to my seat and scan the crowd, spying Caro's parents and brothers. Sitting in the next row over is Coby. They're all smiling, giving me the boost I need.

I CAN do this!

I'm going to use the fire from the pain, and the anger from what Katie did, to light the match. I have more drive and determination in me right now than ever before. There's so much on the line, and I'm not going to let Katie Reynolds destroy my Olympic dreams, and I'm certainly not going to let my head destroy them either.

They call my name. I wave to the sea of faces with my good arm as the home crowd cheers for me, spurring me even more. My breathing hitches slightly at the show of support from my peers. I beam, even though my shoulder is hurting, and there's that small niggle in the back of my mind telling me it's going to hinder my stroke. Taking off my Marion swim shirt and track pants, I place them in the bin and roll my shoulders. The ache is not terrible to the point of injury, just to the point of bruising. Still, it could be enough to slow me down a little.

Slapping my biceps, I crack my neck from side to side and step up to the starting block. My heart is racing so fast, it's like I've had forty Red Bulls . Either way, my blood is pumping hard and fast through my veins as my breathing is slightly rushed, but I try to control it. You can't go into a race out of breath, Lacy. Especially this one. The butterflies in my stomach are going crazy.

The buzzer sounds.

I step up onto the starting block.

Taking in long, deep breaths, I repeat my mantra over and over.

Thank you, Mia Hamm!

“Take your mark.”

Bending down, I close my eyes and breathe. Opening them again, I wait for the gun to go off. All the noise around me evaporates. My ears throb. My heart hammers before the gun fires. I grit my teeth and force my body off the starting block. I dive headfirst into the crystal-clear blue liquid. As the water hits my face, I can't stop the adrenaline from surging. A fire burns right through me as I dive. I sway up and down, moving as far as I can before I come up for my first stroke. I reach dead straight in front of me, breaking as I finally come up and take a much-needed breath. I bring my arms over my body and slam them back down into the water. My shoulder pulls, making me wince slightly. Yet I push on. This is too damn important for me—I cannot wimp out.

I continue with stroke after stroke as I wave in a perfect rhythm through the water. I'm not sure where I am in the lead of the race, but right now, all I need to concentrate on is getting to the finish. Presently, I'm about halfway through as I duck, hitting the wall and swivel, diving back down through the liquid and moving my

body for the final fifty of the swim of my life. My lungs are starting to burn. My muscles are freezing—especially my left shoulder—but I need to push. I need to hit the wall before the FINA qualifying time—that’s my sole aim. I don’t need to come first—I just need to come in before that time.

So I push, I push through the pain, through the agony of losing air, through the knowledge that I’m slowing my pace. I think of four years ago. When I froze. But something inside me flicks. I picture Coby’s face telling me to swim from my heart, not my head. So I light the match one last time, ignoring the pain, my lack of breath, and my burning lungs. Ignoring the fact that every inch of me is screaming in agony. I need this, I’ve worked so hard for this. My eyes well as I push through the agony. Every time I come up for air, I can’t get enough, but I keep pushing through.

I’m going to make it!

I slam the wall. My feet touch the bottom of the pool. I rise to the surface, water dripping from my face. I take in deep lungfuls of air. I’m practically gasping, as I roll my shoulder and study the time board. I burst into tears. I hit the wall in second behind Katie— not ideal —but the main issue is I came in .07 under the FINA qualifying time.

I’m going to the Olympics!

But only by the skin of my teeth.

Tears burn my cheeks as I pull off my caps. The crowd cheers. I’m having trouble keeping my emotions in check.

Goddammit! I nearly didn’t make it.

I calm my breathing as I try to stop myself from breaking down into full-on sobs. The

emotion is a bit much for me right now. All the odds were stacked against me. I froze last time. My shoulder wasn't at full strength this time. My family wasn't here for support. Yet I proved everyone wrong and showed them that I can do this.

I am a fighter.

I'm on my way to Melbourne.

I'm going all the way.

All the way to the top.

Olympic glory!

I get out of the pool and wipe my face. As I walk toward the marshalling area, Rhada calls Katie and me over for a joint interview. I cringe, but I always knew there could be a possibility of this.

Moving over to Rhada, Katie passes me by. She doesn't say anything but struts like she's God's gift to humanity.

"Ladies, well done on getting your tickets to Melbourne. Lacy, this will be your first Olympics. I can see by the tears you're excited to go." Rhada remarks. I berate myself for being unable to hold back my tears.

"I am. It was a tough race... I have a little niggle in my left shoulder tonight... so to pull through regardless of that... means so much to me." I can't help but dig a little at Katie as she stands by my side.

"Yeah, I'm so proud... to have made it through... with my good friend Lacy here... on the Australian Olympic Swimming team... we're going to dominate the pool in

August,” Katie states. I want to roll my eyes, but all of Australia is watching. So, instead, I smile and nod.

“This will be your second Olympics, Katie. Are you more excited about this one being in your home country?” Rhada asks.

“I sure am... I can’t wait until they unveil the mascot... and light the torch, one hundred and six days before the start... I’m pumped, Rhada, I’m pumped.”

I cringe at her over-enthusiasm but continue to keep smiling as the tears keep rolling down my face.

“Great swim, ladies. We’ll see you on the dais a little later for your presentations.”

“Thanks, Rhada,” we both sing in unison. Then, we walk off toward the marshalling area, waving to the crowd. Katie is smiling at me and laughing like she’s my best friend. I find it utterly disturbing. Once we step in behind the marshalling area, she scoffs and storms away from me.

“You can’t break me, Reynolds,” I call.

The bitch throws me the bird, then says, “Whatever! But I can keep trying,” she retorts as she heads to the change rooms.

Taking a deep breath, I wipe my cheeks again.

Caro and East rush to me.

“My God. I got to go, but we’re taking that bitch out,” Caro declares, leaning in to kiss my temple. “Oh, and congratulations. I knew you could do it!” She rushes off for her swim.

“Good luck, Caro. Smash it!”

“Hulk smash... got it,” she calls back.

I breathe deeply and sit down next to East.

“You should report Katie for what she did.”

“What good would it do?”

“Would show her she’s not the queen of fucking everything. How’s the shoulder?”

“Sore as fuck,” I huff. “Thank God all my swimming is done for a while. I’m going to need to go to the physio.”

He curls his lip. “Fucking bitch. Wait till Coby hears about this. He’ll want to issue a complaint to the board.”

I let out a sigh. “There’s no need. She didn’t succeed. I still got my ticket.”

“Well, if you want me to swap her moisturizer for toothpaste, just give me the signal, and it’ll be done... no questions asked. Oh, and her mouthwash for coolant, that can be arranged, too. There’s no end to my trickery.”

Snickering, I shake my head. “I bet there’s not. Remind me to never get on your bad side.”

He cackles as the starting signal fires, and I immediately face the screen.

Caro dives into the water and races in front. She bobs up and down at an even tempo. Natalia is right on her. I’m holding my breath as she hits the wall and turns for their



final fifty. Natalia and Caro are stroke for stroke. East and I stare at the screen. My legs bob up and down as they race each other with precision and skill. It's close—I have no idea who's in front—it's that close.

“C'mon, Caro,” I murmur.

East chews his bottom lip.

They both duck to hit the wall.

I catch my breath as they dive at the same time.

They slam the tiles.

I study the scoreboard, but nothing lights up.

“East?”

He gestures nonchalantly as my heart races.

Then the board lights up. I gasp. The crowd erupts.

East chuckles. “Well, fuck me.”

It's a dead heat.

Natalia and Caro hit the wall at the exact same time.

That doesn't happen often.

We both shake our heads in amazement. “At least she's through to her final.”

East slumps. “Thank fuck for that.”

“Your turn, big man. Think you can smash this out?”

“Hell, yeah! I got this in the bag. I’m the up-and-coming Australian backstroker of the year.”

I furrow my brows and purse my lips. “Hmm... didn’t get the memo.”

“Well, wait and see, lady.”

Chuckling, I slap his shoulder. “Go get ’em!”

He walks off to prepare as Caro comes in. I beam as I hop on the spot, waiting for her. A slight twinge rolls down my arm, but I ignore it. She jumps on me and squeals as we embrace. “I got this!”

“Don’t jinx it!” I berate.

“Shit! Yeah, okay... but I do, though, right?”

“Yeah, girl, you got this!” I lean in, embracing her.

“100m back, please line up.”

Caro quickly releases me and races over to East, whispering something into his ear. I furrow my brows as he chuckles and winks at her. He licks his lips as he starts walking out into the centre, and Caro struts back over to me.

“So?”

“So what?”

“So, what did you say to East?”

She grins. “I said if you like wet pools, be a good boy, and you might find something else wet.”

I almost choke. “You did not!”

She giggles. “No, I didn’t, but that would have been good, right?”

I slump. “Jesus, Caro, you nearly killed me.”

“I said good luck. If he wins, he might get something special after.”

“That’s almost as slutty, Caro.”

“I meant like a chocolate, you horny bitch.”

I scoff. “Yeah, no, you didn’t.”

“Yeah, no, I didn’t.”

I chuckle and roll my eyes at my best friend. She’s always so confident with guys. I’m more reserved around them. But with Coby, I find that I’m more comfortable being myself.

Tuck walks in. “Hey, girls. Congratulations, Caro, good race. And Lacy, you’re going to Melbourne. I knew you’d do it. But what is this about your shoulder?”

Caro glances at me sideways. “Lacy, he needs to know—”

“Caro!”

“Coach, just before their swim, Katie Reynolds shoved Lace into the metal chairs, hurting her shoulder.”

I glare at Caro. She purses her lips and tilts her head. She isn’t sorry for talking at all .

Tuck raises his eyebrows. “Lacy, is that what happened?”

I slump. “Yes.”

“Okay, let me sort this. Lacy, get changed and get yourself to the physio... pronto. I don’t care if it doesn’t hurt at all. Any twinge needs taking care of. Caro, thanks for telling me. You two are like the daughters I never had, and to hear bullying is going on...” He shakes his head. “That behaviour is totally unacceptable. I won’t tolerate it, Lacy.”

“Thanks, Tuck.” I embrace him.

He pulls me back, staring into my eyes. “Sorry, I’ve not been around as much. There’s a lot going on behind the scenes. But once I know more, I will fill you in. I’m always with you one hundred per cent.”

“Thanks, Tuck.” Caro leans in for a group hug.

“Right... go get changed, both of you. I don’t want you catching the sniffles.”

“Yes, Dad,” we tease.

“Girls, if you’re trying to insult me, it’s not working. Hearing that word only fills my heart with joy.”

My chest aches, and my eyes water as I cuddle him. “You’re more of a father to me than my real dad anyway, Tuck.”

“Thanks, Lacy.” He kisses my head. “Now change before I ground you!”

“Yes, sir.” We both salute while giggling before we let go and rush off toward the change rooms. On the way, we check out the television screen. East has gotten through the semi to the final.

We’re all achieving our dreams at these trails.

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I sit in the stands with Coby, waiting for East’s final. He’s up against a great two-time Olympic champion and another up-and-comer, so there’s three potential players for a two-position place. It’s going to be tight. Caro’s on after East, so she’s in the marshalling area with him while we wait nervously. We so desperately want our two besties to come to the Olympics with us. It wouldn’t be the same without them.

East is in lane four. Coby holds my hand. I smile as I interlace our fingers. They announce East. He waves to the crowd. I giggle as I lean on Coby’s shoulder.

East steps up to the starting block and dives into the water. My stomach flutters for him. I can’t imagine going to Melbourne without him, to be honest. We’re quite the little foursome now.

“Take your mark.”

He pulls up into his starting position. I tense up in Coby’s grip. As there are three players in this race and only two spots, my nerves can’t handle the pressure.

“He’s got this, Butterfly,” Coby reassures me.

“I sure hope so. I don’t want our foursome broken up.”

He nuzzles my forehead. “Me neither, Lace, me neither.”

The starting signal sounds.

East leaps off the wall and down into the depths. I’m breathless as he waves under the water. He’s flawless as he rises to the surface, his arms flowing in a windmill effect as they cascade through the water. He’s speeding like never before. But the other two contenders are right up there with him.

My body is fidgeting with nerves as they hit the wall—the Olympic champion in first, East in second, then the other up-and-comer. But they’re all within milliseconds of each other. This could be anyone’s race. He pushes harder as he edges out slightly, but the up-and-comer surges and overtakes everyone. The up-and-comer is definitely coming first. It’s just a matter of the Olympic champion and East for the second and final spot. I grip Coby and bounce in my seat as we both cheer him on.

“C’mon East, lift, lift,” I grit. It’s so close I can hardly tell. The times are well ahead of the FINA qualifiers, so there are no worries about that. If East doesn’t hit in second, he doesn’t get a ticket and is out. He needs to push.

“Light the match, East,” I murmur.

Coby smiles at me.

“C’mon East, you can do this,” he cheers.

We’re on the edge of our seats as they approach the wall. The up-and-comer hits in

first. Moments later, East and the Olympic champion both hit the wall.

Coby and I leap from our seats with a gasp.

I spring to my feet as the board lights up.

Second place... Easton Summers.

“Yes!” we both call.

Coby turns to me. I pounce, embracing him tightly as his lips meet mine in celebration. That tingle shoots straight through me, igniting a new fire.

This is all so new to me. Sure, I’ve kissed guys before. Hell, I’m not even a virgin. Yet this level of intensity and connection is incredible, especially in such a short amount of time. Coby is something new and exciting. He makes everything that’s wrong in my life right again.

Pulling back from him, I lick my lips and smile. I glance down to see East pretending to hump a pole. I burst out laughing, making Coby turn. An official races over, grabbing East and pulling him away from the pole. East throws his hands in the air in victory, all while the crowd howls and cheers.

I shake my head. “Oh my God, he needs to reign that shit in if he’s going to represent Australia.”

Coby smirks. “He’s an uncontrollable child.”

We chuckle as the next lineup comes out, which includes Caro. I take a deep breath. Caro has to make it through. Then, our awesome foursome will be complete.

“C’mon, Caro.”

“She’s got this,” Coby assures me, taking my trembling hand. If I thought I was nervous for East, double that for Caro. She takes up her starting position while my insides quiver as my breath quickens.

“I hope so.”

“Take your mark.”

Caro bends down and gets ready to race. The starting signal goes off, and she catapults into the water. I jump in my seat, I’m so on edge. She moves effortlessly through the pool, bobbing up and down, bringing her arms to her breast and then out again, stroking evenly and purposefully. The top four fly out in front, including Caro, leaving the others behind. But again, there are only two positions available.

They duck, hitting the wall. Caro and Madeline are in first and second. The other two are very close behind them. I hate the edginess as they travel back for the final fifty. They’re headed back toward the wall. Another girl in front. Then it’s Caro and Madeline. It’s tight. Too tight. My body can’t handle the pressure, so I stand. My heart races a million miles a second as a bead of sweat rolls down my temple. Coby stands, wrapping his arm around me while I chew my nail.

“C’mon, Caro... lift, girl, lift,” I murmur. It’s so close between Caro and Madeline that I can barely breathe. It will all come down to the wall.

The other girl hits first. Caro and Madeline stroke in at the same time. I wince. Coby tightens his grip as I turn dramatically and stare at the scoreboard. But only the first position is displayed. The second and third aren’t coming up yet. I tap my foot impatiently on the concrete step as my heart races. The little digits tick over and then show up.



Caroline Hughes 1:06:07

Madeline Freeling 1:06:08.

I shriek as I jump on the spot.

Coby laughs as tears well in my eyes.

Caro beat her by one millisecond .

I lean into Coby and hug him so tightly he cannot breathe. He chuckles, rocking me back and forth as I cry happily into his chest.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!” I giggle.

“She did it, Lace. We all got through. The awesome foursome is going to the Olympics!”

I sniff, wiping my cheeks. “I can’t believe it. That was too close.”

He wipes my tears away with his thumbs. “It’s going to work out just fine,” he whispers.

“Yeah,” I whisper back, then lean forward and press my lips to his again. My insides tingle. The sparks fizzle and pop. Every inch of me fires as my tongue dances with Coby’s.

This adventure we’re about to embark on together is going to be exhilarating.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

After an amazing and eventful day, we invite the guys back to the unit. We're an unstoppable foursome. We want to hang out more, but in the comfort of a home, not in a swimming centre or café. Since none of us have to swim again, we decide to splurge and settle for beer and Chinese.

We're all sitting out the back of the unit by the shared pool, dipping our feet at the edge. It's nice that all of our swims are out of the way in the first few days of the meet. Now we can sit back at the centre.

"I need another beer," East declares.

Caro rolls her eyes. "Then go get one, lazy arse," Caro snaps.

"Why don't you come get it with me?" He waggles his eyebrows.

She giggles and stands up quickly. East does the same, and they race off together, chuckling like idiots.

Glancing at Cody, I shake my head. "Well, that was as subtle as a hooker on Hindley Street."

"That's their style, though." He chuckles.

Nodding, I wave my feet around in the cool water of the pool.

"So, according to my dad, someone's making claims about Katie. He's not saying who, but apparently, there's a lot of stink being made by the board about it."

I screw up my face. I don't know if East has told Coby about Katie pushing me or not. So I don't bring up the fact that this is about me. Instead, I sip my beer and raise a shoulder. "Let's not talk about Katie. That bitch spoils my good mood."

He chuckles. "Mine, too."

I smile and take a deep breath. "Being here with you has me in a very good mood."

Coby pushes a strand of hair behind my ear before he kisses me. I welcome his tongue, setting off those customary fireworks. Every time we kiss, something stopped us. This time, we're kissing and heating up. I deepen the kiss, fingering his hair. Our torsos meet as he gently leans over me.

He puts his hand under my head so I don't bang it against the cement. He hovers over me while my heart races.

Those butterflies are back. His caress lights an unquenchable fire between my legs. I wrap my leg around his waist, pulling him closer as our kiss deepens. He grinds into me. I moan as his erection grinds into my hip, and I run my fingers through his hair. My tongue goes rogue with his. My lips swell from the passion. As he rolls on top of me completely, the outside light flicks on, breaking my concentration.

Coby pulls back from my lips. We pant from the steamy session as he tries to hide his grin before I turn back. Mrs. Montgomery stands by the back of her unit, holding her cat, gawking at us.

"Oops," I murmur.

Coby slides off me, and we both chuckle, straightening out our clothes.

"You wanna go inside?" I whisper.

He nods before I reach out, picking up our stuff and standing. He follows. I turn toward the unit to see Mrs. Montgomery glaring at us.

“Sorry, Mrs. Montgomery,” I announce as we pass her by.

“You youngins these days... thinking you can fornicate wherever you like.”

I peek down and hurry toward the unit, stifling my laughter. Coby walks with me inside, shutting the door. I place the bag of half-eaten Chinese on the kitchen counter. He places the beer bottles beside it. Then we both burst out laughing.

“Oh my God,” I murmur.

“That was gold,” Coby replies.

“Caro would have loved that. She hates her. Her cat always pees on her car,” I chitter.

Coby smirks and scans the room. “Where are Caro and East?” he asks.

Right at that moment, a bang echoes through the unit.

I furrow my brows at Coby as another bang follows. Moans soon fill the space.

Smiling, I glance down toward Caro’s bedroom. “I think the bed is getting a workout.” I blush as I avoid Coby’s gaze.

He chuckles and pins me to the kitchen counter. My heart rate spikes as my stomach flutters. I can’t face him as the moans down the hall grow louder.

“Lace.”

My cheeks redden. Coby's moan wets my knickers. He grabs my chin and forces my face up. My eyes fail me as I gaze into his perfect blue orbs. I gasp slightly as I clench my thighs together. He leans in, pressing his body against mine. Then he kisses me.

His tongue dances as he grinds his hips against mine. Then he grabs my thigh and pulls it up around him. I'm throbbing as he presses his cock against me through his jeans. I gasp as he rubs himself up and down. Coby's setting off a need in me, an insatiable appetite that only he can fix.

His kiss is intense. I'm lost in this moment. All I want is him. As he grinds into me, he slides his other hand down to my arse. He lifts me up. I wrap both of my legs around his waist, putting my pussy right in line with his hard cock. We both moan. He pulls back slightly from my lips with a pant and eyes me.

“Which way?” he asks.

I smile and tilt my head back toward my bedroom.

He walks off, carrying me. I giggle as we make our way to my room. We stroll in, and he shuts the door behind him with his foot. He flings me onto bed—I bounce on the mattress as I chuckle. Then I shift to the top of the bed, breathless for him.

He steps to the edge of the bed, taking off his shirt. I love the sight of his toned body before me. I knew he was well-defined, but I'd never seen him up close, only on television. His abs are pure perfection. As he grabs his wallet from his back pocket, he pulls out a condom and throws it on the bed next to me.

I swoon. It's been a while, but I know I'm going to enjoy this. Reaching down, I pull off my top. He undoes his jeans, takes off his shoes, and drops his pants. Now he's just in his boxer briefs. I spy a tent in his briefs. Caro was right. He is packing some

serious heat down south, and I'm about to find out.

Shuffling out of my pants, I throw them off the side of the bed, leaving me in my underwear.

He gives me the once-over and shakes his head. "You're stunning, Butterfly."

I can't reply.

He moves to the edge of the bed and slides onto it. The mattress dips with his weight. My skin prickles. He inches toward me. I lay back on the bed as he hovers over the top of my body. He cups both sides of my head and then lowers his face in line with mine. I catch my breath at the smell of his aftershave. My heart flutters.

"God, you're beautiful," he murmurs before he leans down, pressing his lips on my collarbone. My skin litters with goose bumps as his warm lips press against my flesh. I lean into him as his body weighs down on mine slightly. His lips trail up my neck to under my ear. I sweep his naked back, from his taut muscles all the way into the back of his hair. He slides his hand from the top of my head and down to my hip. Then his fingertips trail my side, teasing me as I heave and his lips inch under my ear.

I close my eyes, taking in the sensations as he cups my breast and slowly massages. He carefully pulls down the material, exposing my nipple. He thumbs it softly at first. I chew my bottom lip as I clench my thighs together, trying to ease the throb, but it only intensifies.

He tugs a little harder. His mouth travels from under my ear across my jaw, down my collarbone toward my erect nipple. I pant as he slowly teases me. His tongue darts, the warmth trailing down my pebbled skin onto my nipple. He circles the bud. I gulp while I grab his hair.

He's an expert.

And I love every second.

My breathing is deep and heavy as he pops my nipple from his mouth with a pop and trails kisses back up my collarbone, up my jaw and finally toward my waiting lips. He kisses me, pressing his body against mine forcefully as his tongue dances with mine. The sparks shooting off between us are making me hot for him. I can't wait to see what heights he can take me to. The connection between us is something special.

His hand slides under my back, unhooking my bra effortlessly with one hand. I grin as he moves his hand back to the front. Our bodies part slightly. I shrug out of the shoulder straps. He pulls it from me without breaking our heated kiss. Cody moves back down, pressing his chest against my finally bare flesh, and I moan. There's nothing like that skin-on-skin sensitivity.

The warmth coming from him is sending my libido into overdrive as he moves to the side, shifting his weight from me slightly. I mourn the loss of his body against mine, but he continues to kiss me as he caresses my breast. He's delicate but still firm enough for it to be pleasurable. He has the perfect caress.

His hand glides from my breast down my centre, teasing slowly and circling, sending another wave of goose bumps down my skin. He fingers my pussy. I arch into his hand as it cups my mound. His fingers move up and gently pull back the top of my knicker line, and he slides his fingers down inside the material.

My back arches off the bed as his finger lines up with my clit. He pushes down firmly. My fingers dig into his hair as he kisses me, and I moan as he pushes harder. My hips move on their own, creating more friction between me and his finger as he rotates on my clit. The pressure is amazing as heat builds inside of me. My mind goes foggy as my body shudders in waves of heat. It's engulfing me, taking me over with a

ravenous need to reach my peak.

He presses harder. I moan. My kissing weakens as all my concentration goes onto the senses around my body. Flashes of light flicker behind my eyes as my muscles tighten. I shut my eyes as the pressure rises and reaches boiling point. I tense and, with one final rotation on my clit, I explode. Fireworks go off in every direction.

He pulls his mouth from mine, letting me breathe, and then trails kisses along my jaw as I bask in the afterglow.

“Oh my God, Coby.”

He chuckles. I smile, glancing down at him. I’m still coming down from my high. He leans in, grabbing the hem of my knickers and pulling on each side. I smile and shift my weight, helping him pull them off. Cody throws them to the floor and then sits up, taking off his briefs. His cock springs free. My eyes widen. I gulp. How the hell could something like that exist? I’ve only seen two cocks in my life, and neither of them were even half the size of Coby’s. This is probably going to be more painful than pleasurable.

He glances up at me and smiles slightly. “Don’t worry, I’ll go slow. You tell me if you want to stop, okay?”

I smile as he picks up the condom.

“You sure you want to do this?” he asks before he opens the packet.

It excites me that he’s asked. “I’m sure,” I reply.

He leans in, kissing me briefly. Then he pulls back and rips open the packet with his teeth. He grabs the condom and rolls it onto his dick, making sure to press the end.



He glances back at me and smiles. “Are you sure?”

I chuckle and grab the back of his head, pulling his mouth right to mine. “I’m sure. Please make love to me. Don’t make me beg.”

He grins. “Your wish is my command, Butterfly.”

Coby moves over on top of me. I part my legs, letting him nestle in between them. His blue eyes lock with mine, and something passes between us. A moment, a connection. Something that makes me think this isn’t just a one-time thing for either of us. There’s something here, a bond, something strong, a chemical attraction.

I keep it together as he lines his cock up with my opening. We continue to stare at each other, his hands on each side of me. His breathing is hitched like he’s already excited. As his tip slowly enters me, we both moan. He fills me, and our eyes remained locked. We both pant as he brings his chest down. Our faces collide, and he kisses me as he thrusts.

Moaning, finally close my eyes. I take everything in. He’s amazing. I could do this for the rest of my life with him. His kiss doesn’t falter as he cups my cheek. Coby caresses it tenderly as he slowly works up to a steady rhythm. I hold onto his taut shoulders, his muscles pull and turn with every thrust.

He knows how to push, taking me higher and higher into carnal heaven. My muscles clench as lights dance behind my eyes, everything contracts, and my breathing hitches as I gasp when it hits. My second orgasm! It smashes over me with such intensity that I stop breathing. I explode around him. Every muscle clenches and tightens as I combust.

I dig into his skin and moan as he continues to move, now at a slightly faster pace. I breathe erratically as I fall from the high, but I need air, so I break the kiss. He moves

his lips to my neck as he thrusts into me faster. Deeper. I move my hips in time with his, even though I'm well and truly spent.

He jolts slightly and then growls, moving to my neck and unloads inside the condom. I run my hands up and down his back as I ease him back down before he slumps on top of me. He struggles to breathe, but then he gently kisses my neck. I kiss the side of his face as he continues to come down.

“That... was—”

“Electrifying!”

He chuckles and rests his clammy forehead against mine. “It was.” He leans in, softly kissing my lips. Sparks surge. Thunder roars. Hearts pound.

I run my hands through his hair. He smiles as he gazes into my eyes. “You are so beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“I mean it, I'm so lucky.” Coby kisses my nose, then slowly pulls out as I release his waist. He rolls off me and onto his back.

I instinctively slide into the nook of his arm, and he wraps it around my body as I glide with him. He trails his fingers softly up and down my arm, kissing my forehead gently.

This is relaxed. No weirdness. No issues.

Just a comfortable silence.

I am the lucky one.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

It's the next morning, and I'm comfortable in Coby's arms while he gently strokes my arm up and down. Suddenly, somebody slams open my door. East runs in, wearing a pink frilly G-string. Coby and I howl as East leaps onto the bed. I pull the covers up. East towers above Coby, shaking his junk through the air and guffawing. He dry-humps the air above Coby while breaking out in a rendition of "Sexy and I Know It" by LMFAO. Coby slaps at East's naked legs as he continues to dry-hump the air above Coby's head.

"Get the fuck out, dude," Coby berates over East's woeful singing.

My belly is aching from laughing so hard.

East falls down, straddling Coby and leans in, kissing his forehead. "Love that we both got lucky last night. This is going to be the best Olympics ever."

"Get. Out," Coby yells, smacking East's forehead.

"You're lovely, Lacy," East remarks, pushing down on Coby's chest and continuing to dry-hump him.

I can't stop laughing.

"Out!"

East leans down, kissing Coby again, and jumps up. He turns around, showing us his perfectly toned arse. I snicker as East shuts the door behind him.

Coby finally chuckles. “He’s such a child.”

“And that’s why we love him.” I lean in, kissing Coby’s cheek.

He half-laughs. “Hmm... I suppose. I guess we better get to the centre. We don’t want to let the team down.”

“Nope, we’re role models now. Lead by example and all that jizz.”

He smirks. “Don’t you mean... jazz?”

Rubbing his chest, I lay a kiss on his neck. “I do, but I have other things on my mind.”

Coby chuckles, grabbing my hips and rolling on top of me. He leans in, pressing his lips to mine with passion. His tongue dances in my mouth. I take in every inch of his devotion. I run my fingers through his hair as he presses his newly formed erection into my stomach. Moaning, I grind into him. My legs instinctively wrap around his waist. His cock moves in line with my pussy. We’re panting. His tip reaches my opening. Suddenly, we’re interrupted by a loud thud on the door.

“Breakfast is ready,” Caro calls.

I’m panting, trying to calm my racing heart and flaming libido.

“Dammit,” I murmur.

“Rain check?” he asks, leaning down and kissing my forehead.

“Definitely.”

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We're back at the aquatic centre, but this time as spectators. The four of us sit together in the stands, the roar of the crowd echoing around us.

Since the moment we woke up, Coby has been different—so attentive. He holds my hand, his thumb brushing lightly against my skin, rubs my back in soothing circles, and presses the softest kisses to my temple.

It feels like this could lead somewhere, something real.

A small, cautious voice in my head whispers he's almost too good to be true—but for now, I let myself believe in him.

We've witnessed a few finals, including that of our training partner Melissa. She's coached under Tuck, too. She was racing against Katie and Melissa and came in third behind Katie, with another girl beating them both in the 200m fly. Meaning Melissa misses out. She's trained hard like us, but you have to hit the wall in the right spot, or you're out. There's nothing in between, and it's a hard lesson.

I could have put myself in for that race too. But I'm much better at the 100m than the 200m. I'm better at the quicker races than the longer ones, unlike Coby, who works better in endurance.

After witnessing the morning races, it's now lunch time, and we head down to the athletes' cafeteria to grab some food. Coby's holding my hand as we walk in.

Katie spots us and saunters over.

For fuck's sake! I roll my eyes before she even opens her mouth.

“Did you see the 200 fly, Lacy?” Katie asks.

I smile as Coby pulls me closer. “I did, congrats.”

“So, I’m in two fly events in Melbourne. Now that’s a real athlete,” she quips. Then she turns on her heels and walks off.

Caro grunts, picks up an apple and hurtles it toward Katie. I gasp as it smacks her right in the middle of her back. We all turn quickly away and chuckle as she moans and kicks the apple across the room.

“So mature,” Katie mutters.

We crack up.

“Caro, you child!” I berate.

“What? An apple a day will keep the bitch away, right?”

I chuckle as East high-fives her.

“Yeah, she deserved it. A real athlete, what a crock of shit,” East scoffs.

We chuckle again and walk with our trays.

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The guys stay at the unit rather than the caravan park. Yesterday, we witnessed our teammates race their heats. Today, we’re all a little boxed in. We’ve been at the trials for days now. Cabin fever is setting in for all of us.

“Okay, so who’s for blowing off the trials today?” Caro calls as she shovels in a mouthful of cereal.

I sit on the lounge next to Coby, eating breakfast.

East jumps up, spilling milk down his bare chest. He throws his hand in the air in obvious excitement. “Yes! I was thinking the same. You girls know this side of town. Show us around. Let’s go do something fun... or illegal, your choice.”

I chuckle as Caro rolls her eyes at him. “Well, considering what we’re all trying out for, illegal is off the cards for today. Maybe next week we can rob a bank, but today, how about we head into Marion?”

I raise my eyebrows. “The shopping centre?”

She dips her chin as the guys furrow their brows.

“Um... shopping is not my idea of fun, ladies,” East chides.

“No, but the arcade and movie cinema might be more up your alley?” I suggest. Coby smirks.

East purses his lips and wipes the milk from his chest. “Yeah, okay, movies and games could be cool. What do you think, bro?”

“I’m up for it,” Coby offers.

Caro jumps up, clapping her hands together. “Right, let’s get dressed and head out. We can go to the arcade and then to the movies.”

“Okay.” I stand up along with Coby. We take our bowls to the sink as Caro and East



race off to her room.

“This should be an interesting day,” Coby remarks. I agree.

“Those two together loose in the world. The possibilities are endless.” I grab Coby’s hand and head to my room so we can get changed.

Not long later, we head out to Caro’s car. The honey bee colour shines brightly off the small Kia Picanto.

East screws up his face while inspecting her car. “What the fuck is this?” East chides.

“What? She’s my baby,” Caro defends, hitting the unlock button on her keys.

“It’s tiny!” East exclaims.

“So’s your cock, but you don’t hear me shouting about it for the whole neighbourhood to hear.”

East gapes as Caro gives him a sly smile.

He shakes his head. “You’re gonna pay for that.”

She pouts. “I like it when you tell me off.”

He groans, rearranging his cock.

“Okay, can we go before you guys fuck against the side of the tiny car with your tiny cock?” Coby demands.

“Yes, let’s go, shotgun,” East calls.

He races to the front passenger side and jumps in. I smile at Coby, making a small, deliberate head motion.

“This day is going to be epic, isn’t it?” I ask.

He chuckles. “Either epic or tragic.”

We walk to the car and slide in the back. East is so tall he turns his head to the side at the front to fit inside.

“Jesus Christ, Caro! If we’re gonna be friends, we need to sort out this car. Put a sunroof over my head or something so I can shove my head out the top while you’re driving.”

She chuckles. “Now, where would the fun be in that? I like you suffering.”

“I’ll make you suffer.” He gropes her leg and starts sliding up her skirt. She slaps his hand away and glares at him.

“Hey, I gotta drive. Behave or get in the back.”

“Oh, I do like it when you’re bossy. Those dominatrix videos are working.”

I widen my eyes as Coby chuckles.

Caro disapproves. “You’re an arse.”

“You love my arse.”

“Shut the fuck up!” She starts the car.

Shaking my head, I turn to Coby. He wraps his arm around my shoulders, and I lean into him. Our relationship is so different to Caro and East's. While the affection is the same, Caro and East tease each other. Coby only ever tells me how beautiful I am. I don't think I've ever heard East tell Caro the same. But who knows what they're like behind closed doors?

"Don't Let Me Down" by The Chainsmokers echoes throughout the car. Caro sings along quite nicely. East dances interpretatively to the music. He flails like a ninja robot on meth. Coby and I chuckle along in the back seat as he kisses my hair.

We find a parking spot just as the song ends.

East prays.

I have no idea why East does anything he does.

Caro turns off the car and the stereo. East takes in a deep breath and nods. "My Zen is in alignment after that spiritual dance."

We all raise an eyebrow as he grins and gets out of the car, ducking to step out.

"I swear that guy shocks me every time he speaks," Caro mutters before hopping out of the car.

I grin at Coby and slide out, closing the door behind me.

East stands in front of me, stretching like he's been curled up for too long.

"So, Zen master, are you all set for some arcade fun?" I ask.

He smiles as Coby and Caro walk around, then we head toward the entrance of the

shopping centre.

“You have no idea. I will ‘Outplay, Outwit, Outlast’ all of you.”

Caro chuckles. “Are you a Survivor? You not gon’ give up? You not gon’ stop? You gon’ work harder?”

“Oh, oh. Oh, oh. Oh oh. Oh, no, no, you didn’t, girlfriend.” East waves his hands from side to side like she should’ve “Put a ring on It.”

I burst out laughing at his tone. Coby screws up his face in confusion. Caro smiles. “Well played, Mr. Summers, well played.” She puts up her hand, and he high-fives her. I shake my head and laugh at them all while Coby stares ahead.

“What just happened?” he asks.

“East just out Beyonce’d Caro.”

He raises his eyebrow and winces. “And that’s a good thing?”

Giggling, I wrap myself around him and bob my head. “Not up with your pop or R&B music, then? Never mind, just understand Caro got nailed.”

We walk inside. The guys gawp at the centre. “Wow! This place is huge,” East exclaims. “And no mention about cock size, please, Caro, unless it’s about how ginormous it is.”

“Yeah, and this is only the start of it,” I reply as we head up the white stairs toward the cinema.

Coby takes hold of my hand and interlaces our fingers. I smile up at him. He winks as

we step to the top and turn right, heading toward the giant arcade. East's face lights up—I swear he's like a kid in a candy shop.

“Oh my God! Such cool shit,” he howls, rushing ahead of us like a five-year-old.

Coby, Caro, and I walk inside to the dingy bells and crazy music. Then we spot East already buying tokens for all the machines. Coby walks me up to the counter, and we purchase some tokens. Caro grabs some too.

“Caro, come play with me,” East calls, waggling his eyebrows up and down suggestively. Luckily, it's in the middle of the day, so there are no kids—they're all at school. She giggles, grabs her tokens, and walks over to the basketball hoops with him.

“You wanna play something or watch them?” I ask.

“I think watching them will be fun,” Coby replies.

We walk over and East grabs a ball, aiming for the hoops.

“Now watch me whip. Now watch me net.” East throws the ball. It hits the rim, circles it, and then falls to the left of the ring. It goes right into the catchment below, rolling down toward him. “Dammit,” he cries. Caro laughs.

Coby moves in behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. His chin graces my shoulder. I nuzzle him. It's nice to be here in his arms. It's like this is where I'm meant to be. That sparkle is flittering through me, and I can't help but think about turning around and making out with him. But we're in public, and public displays of passion are not my thing. So I clench my thighs together and try to focus on the chaos playing out in front of me.

“This is how you get a ball in the net, East,” Caro teases, throwing the ball. It flies through the air and swoops down straight through the net. Three tickets pop out, and East scoffs.

“Lucky... you got lucky,” he murmurs. She chuckles, and he rotates the ball like a professional. “Nothing but net, baby.” He throws his whole body into this one, jumping with the force. The ball flings through the air, slamming the backing board. The board springs back toward East and smacks him right in the face.

“He shoots, he scores.” Caro bends over laughing as East shakes off the hit.

I’m trying not to laugh, but my chest jiggles, giving me away as Coby grazes my arms. I break out into goose bumps. My breath hitches. I chew my bottom lip as East throws the ball into the bottom of the display.

“This game sucks, let’s try air hockey!” East bellows.

Caro grabs her tickets and walks off with East toward the air hockey table. I go to follow when Coby turns me in his grip. My eyes meet his, and instantly, a fire blazes inside of me. I wasn’t the only one turned on by his caress. His eyes tell me that he wants me too. But right now we’re in public and with our friends. He moves a strand of hair from my face and pulls my body close to his.

“Coby,” I murmur.

He licks his lips and turns to the left. He pulls me with him. I squeal at his sudden movements. Then he drags me to the side of the basketball stand—there, no one can see us. He pushes me up against the wall. I gasp as he traps my head. I bite my bottom lip as my breathing hitches. The manager of this place could find us at any moment, but I just need to taste him. I run my fingers through his hair while he presses his body against mine forcefully.

“Lacy,” he whispers.

“Mmm...”

“I’m going to kiss you now,” he tells me. I smile, and he leans forward, pressing his lips to mine. That spark soars through me, and every inch of me explodes in a fiery passion. I open my mouth to let his tongue in. Our tongues move together in a perfect rhythm. Kissing Coby is the best. Add to it the endorphins of possibly getting caught, and this is one exhilarating experience.

He caresses my cheek as his hard cock presses against my stomach. I want him even more. I wish I could go further than kissing him, but I’m not that game in public, especially in a children’s area. I raise my leg and wrap it around his waist. He rubs my thigh, holding it in place, as his cock presses against my pussy through my skirt. Only the thin fabric of my knickers and his jeans is between us. As he moves slightly, our hips grind against each other as we kiss frantically.

I moan.

Oh God, I’m getting quite worked up as my body flushes.

“Excuse me,” someone chimes in from behind us.

I drop my leg as Coby breaks away from me. We spot the teenage manager gawking at us. My cheeks flush as I bury myself into Coby’s chest.

“Um... sorry, but you can’t do that here,” he chides.

Coby nods, holding onto me. “We’ll, um... just go back out there,” Coby answers. He wraps his arm around me, and we walk past the manager back out to the arcade. There, East runs around the air hockey table with his hands in the air, laughing. He

must've won.

“In your face!” East chirps.

“So you won this one. Big whoop, you still have a small cock,” Caro booms.

The manager flushes and walks behind his desk while trying to appear busy.

“A cock that can make you scream my name in mind-shattering orgasms three times in one go, thank you very much,” East bellows.

I smirk as Caro shakes her head, and then turns to us.

“And where did you two go to? You're mighty flushed there, Miss LaBelle. You're clinging to your man quite unashamedly,” Caro observes.

I wince as Coby pulls me to him tighter and smiles. “We got caught by the manager making out by the basketball game.”

East smiles brightly as Caro chuckles.

“Making out or making whoopie?” East asks, wagging his eyebrows.

“Kinda in between the two,” Coby replies. East guffaws. People outside the arcade turn to stare as my cheeks redden. I bury myself deeper into Coby.

“Oh my God, I would've loved to have seen your faces,” East quips as Caro bumps his shoulder.

“Shut up! You're embarrassing, Lacy,” Caro chides.



“She should be embarrassed. Fornicating in a child’s arcade centre. Oh, the shame, Lacy, the shame!”

I finally crack a smile, and East slaps my arm while Coby shakes his head. “I just want to be more like you, East.”

He’s impressed. “Outgoing and impulsive?”

“No horny and childish,” I tease.

He scoffs and throws his hand over his heart as Caro and Coby chuckle.

“Okay, let’s go to the movies?” Caro asks.

Coby tightens his arm around my shoulder, and we begin to walk out.

“Wait! We need to cash in the prize for our tickets,” East cries, grabbing Caro’s tickets and rushing over to the desk.

We all stand back, pondering what piece of shit she’ll get, but he comes back over with a unicorn stuffed toy and hands it to Caro.

She smiles, her shoulders relaxing as she clutches the gift. “You got this for me?”

He shrugs, feigning indifference. “Not because I like you or anything.”

She scoffs, rolling her eyes before smacking him with it. His laugh is warm, unguarded, as he pulls her into a hug and kisses the top of her head.

I glance up at Coby, and he catches my eye, his smile as soft as the moment.

Together, we head toward the cinema, laughter and teasing trailing behind us like a thread pulling us closer.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

The last two days have shot past so quickly, and our awesome foursome has formed a formidable friendship. We're inseparable. The guys have stayed with us the whole time, and it's been nice spending quality time with Coby. My body is sore, and not from swimming, if you catch my drift. It's nice to have a connection with someone so strong and sturdy. But today is the last day of the trials. Coby will be heading back home, so we won't be seeing each other all the time. We've promised to keep in contact every day, and to make time for each other at least once a week through our busy training schedules.

We're not going to let this slide.

We're in too deep.

The morning is filled with functions, speeches, and athlete selection. It's about half an hour before the finals of the night and the ceremony. Everyone's in a cheerful mood as we sit in the marshalling area. It's good to all finally be here at the same time.

Tuck comes into the room with two officials escorting him. Caro and I stand up as he approaches with a stern expression. His brows crease, and he is sporting a frown the size of Tasmania.

"Tuck? What's going on?"

He stops in front of us and huffs. "Girls, I'm under investigation. While that's happening, I have to step down as coach. I have a hearing to go to right now, so I'm going to miss the ceremony."

My stomach knots as I breathlessly take in his words.

“Huh? Investigation for what?” Caro asks.

“It’s complicated. I put in that complaint. Coach Mathers disputes it. He claims I’m only doing it so that Katie will be disqualified, and Melissa can take her place in the 200m fly lineup.”

“What! That’s crazy,” I yell. People stare at us.

“Don’t worry, there’s more to this drama. Mathers has it out for me. He won’t stop till I’m gone.”

Furrowing my brows, I turn to Coby. It suddenly clicks. “Mathers, as in Coby’s dad?”

He nods. I gasp.

“I’ll go see what the deal is.” Coby races off.

Tuck slumps. “Don’t worry, girls, I’m gonna sort this out.”

“Your hearing is about to start, Coach Tucker. We need to go,” the official tells Tuck. He acknowledges and hugs us both.

I hold onto him tightly as I cry. “Is it going to be okay, Tuck?”

He plants a kiss on both our heads. “I’ll make sure of it. I won’t let you down. I gotta go. Good luck and have fun. Don’t worry about me.” He walks off with the two bodyguards, and I turn to Caro, who’s shaking her head.

“He’s like my father. What the fuck am I going to do without him?” I cry.

She reaches out, grabbing and pulling me to her in an embrace. “Don’t worry, I’m sure he’ll fix it.”

East slumps and sighs. “Phil Mathers is driven. If he wants something, he usually gets it. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news, girls, but Tuck might actually be in trouble.”

I hug Caro as Coby rushes back and slumps into the seat next to East.

He slowly turns to us and winces. “So they want to remove Tuck’s coaching license for frauding the system. They’re saying he’s trying to falsify information to have Katie disqualified so Melissa can take her place in Melbourne.”

“Right, and who’s saying his information is false? Your dad?” I demand.

Coby tilts his head. “Well, yeah.”

I scoff, letting go of Caro and folding my arms. “And you believe him?”

He furrows his brows, sitting up a bit taller in his chair. “He is my dad. Tuck may be your coach, but they do anything for their athletes. Even cheating. Why would Tuck be any different?”

I groan. “You don’t know him. You don’t understand the situation. How can you be so goddamned judgmental?”

He slumps. “Lacy... c’mon.”

“No, you c’mon! Tuck is like my father. He’s a good, decent man, unlike yours. You take the word of your father over mine, that’s fine. Honestly, I hardly know you, but this thing we had, whatever it was... is done!” I scream. My blood boils.

“Lacy!” Coby booms, standing up and reaching out.

I back away. “No, don’t talk to me.” Sniffling, I storm away to the other side of the room. I practically run, heaving as I process what’s just happened.

I’ve just lost my father figure, my coach, and my boyfriend in mere minutes.

I pace the floor and reign in my breathing. A hand on my shoulder startles me, and I turn to Caro. Hot tears fill my eyes. Trying my hardest to fight them back, I sniff.

She sighs. “I thought he was nice. I figured he was someone I could grow to lean on. I was so wrong.”

Caro pats my arm and wipes the stray tear that I couldn’t help but let fall down my cheek. “Hey, tensions are high. Let’s just get through this ceremony with fake smiles, and we can figure this all out after. Okay?”

I exhale. “All right...”

“Athletes, please line up for your tickets,” an official calls.

I wipe my face as Caro smiles.

“Fake smiles.”

I take in a deep breath. “Fake smiles.”

They call the swimmers out in alphabetical order, so I take up my position in the queue as Caro heads out. I’m not far after her. When they call my name, I take a deep breath and steady my shoulders. Then I walk out into the main room, wearing my fake smile, and wave to the crowd. Strolling up to the official, I receive my enlarged

plane ticket to Melbourne. I kinda wish my first Olympics were in another country like England or Brazil, but I'm happy to be going to the Olympics at all. I smile, shaking the official's hand.

“Welcome to Melbourne, Lacy,” she chirps.

“Thank you so much,” I reply. Then I walk along to the line of previous Olympic swimmers and the families of the athletes who will be attending. I wander along the line, high-fiving them all as I go. It should be amazing. I should be empowered and euphoric. I'm going to the Olympics for the first time, so why do I want to run and hide in a corner? Getting to the end of the line, they call the next name, and I'm soon forgotten as I amble out to the back room to greet Caro. She smiles, waving her giant ticket in the air.

“We're going to Melbourne,” she gushes.

My smile isn't fake this time as she jumps up and down in front of me. “Yeah, we are! Four months and we'll be at the Olympics. But maybe without a coach...” I drift off and take a deep breath as my shoulders slump. I shake my head in utter disappointment at how the end has gone.

The start of the week was great.

The end of the week should be amazing— I'm going to the Olympics—but now my coach and a boyfriend are both slipping away from me.

This is not how this week was supposed to play out. At all.

“We should find Tuck,” I murmur.

Caro frowns but quickly bows before we avoid the celebrations in the room and head

out to the hall to search for our coach. We move into the meeting room and see him sitting there all on his own, just staring out the window into the dark blue hues of the night sky.

“Tuck?” I call.

He turns to face us and frowns. “Girls, you should be at the after-party. Why aren’t you off celebrating?” He stands to walk toward us, and we tread over to him with heavy feet. My eyes fill with tears at his sombre expression.

“What’s the verdict?” I ask.

“Well, I haven’t been sacked as a coach, but the matter is still under investigation.”

“There’s a celebratory function on, and you two should most definitely go. You have earned a night of fun.”

I huff. “I might head home.”

Caro catches me frowning and wraps her arm around my shoulders. “If you’re sulking at home, I’m with you, sister.”

“I don’t want to upset you girls,” Tuck murmurs.

“I think Lace is a bit upset about Coby, too. It’s a buildup, and it’s been an emotional day for her. I think we need to go home and have some girl time.”

Tuck sighs. “I’m sorry, Lacy. I’m trying my best to sort everything out for you both.”

I nod as a tear falls down my cheek.

Tuck pulls me to him for a tight hug and leans down, kissing my head. Caro rushes in



behind me. We have a group hug, making me chuckle slightly.

“Okay, head home and get some rest. Training’s going to be tough over the next four months,” Tuck advises.

“Take care of yourself. If you need us, we’re only a phone call away,” I tell him.

“Thank you, sweetheart. Now go... enjoy your night.” He turns me around and pushes me forward.

Chuckling, I start striding out with Caro next to me. As I walk out the door, I turn back to Tuck one last time. He’s back on the seat, staring out at the sky again. I hope he’s okay.

We head out of the hall toward the exit, and as we do, we see East and Coby standing with Phil Mathers. I grit my teeth as a shudder runs down my spine. Caro waves hesitantly at the boys, and I grab her hand and pull her with me as I storm toward the exit.

Caro huffs and shakes her head. “Do we have to leave without at least saying goodbye to them?” Caro asks.

“Yes, they’re traitors, Caro. We don’t need that kind of negativity in our lives.” Pain promptly sweeps through my chest as I imagine not seeing Coby again until Melbourne. Then the idea of seeing him at the Olympics terrifies me. I have no idea how I will handle that.

“But East’s so good in bed.”

“Caro!”

She smirks. “Okay, I’m being serious. Let’s get you home.” She links her arm with mine, and we head for her car.

The one that smells like Mrs. Montgomery’s cat’s pee.

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Caro wanted to stay up for trashy movies, but it’s already ten-thirty, and I’m completely wiped. I just want to go to bed, so I traipse into my room, closing the door behind me. But what I didn’t expect to see was the bed all messed up from this morning. Reminding me completely of Coby. My chest tightens. Betrayal washes over me.

I pull off my pants and head over to the bed, crawling in and pulling the sheets over me. The pillow still smells like him , and my insides quiver. Yet, I was wrong about him.

My door creeps open, and Caro slides in. She doesn’t say anything, just walks over to my bed, climbs over the top, and cuddles in behind me, practically spooning me. Taking a deep breath, I cuddle back into her needing the affection. I didn’t understand how much Coby had gotten under my skin until now.

“It’s going to be okay. Tuck’s still our coach,” Caro murmurs behind me.

“Yeah, but Coby defended his dad without knowing the truth.”

She huffs. “Maybe before storming off, you should’ve told him about what Katie did to you, and that’s why Tuck reported her.”

“Maybe Coby should have asked what it was Tuck reported Katie for. Before he jumped to conclusions that Tuck was crooked.”

Caro sighs and holds me tighter. “Lacy. Phil is his dad. He’s going to trust him.”

Sighing, I slump. “I should’ve told him. But his reluctance to believe Tuck did my head in. I can’t believe he acted like that so quickly. He’s not who I thought he was.”

“Don’t let it get you down. We made the fucking Olympic team, baby. This is what dreams are made of.”

Half smiling, I reply, “Yeah, you’re right. We made the team... finally , and we’re doing it together.”

“Hell, yeah!”

“Now I just have to prepare myself to see Coby again in four months.”

She cuddles me tighter again. “This will blow over. By then, you won’t even remember his name.”

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It’s been a week, and I still remember his damn name, his caress, his smell, and everything about him, including the hurt and betrayal. That fuels me as I push through the water. Stroke by stroke, my shoulder is still niggling, but it’s recovering thanks to my physio.

Today, they announce the leaders of the Australian Athletics Program, revealing the athletes’ uniforms. I’m obviously not chosen. Otherwise, I would have been contacted by now. As I make my final stroke and hit the wall, I come up for air and pant. I wasn’t pushing it, just letting off steam.

Hopping out of the pool, I wrap a towel around myself and head back indoors to the

smell of eggs wafting through the kitchen as I make my way inside.

“I’m making egg white omelettes for breakfast. You’re cutting it fine. They’re about to announce the leaders,” Caro calls. I walk over to the television and turn up the volume. I spot the Sydney Opera House in the background and a podium where the athletes will display the Olympic uniforms. Caro jumps over the back of the seat and plonks down on the cushions. I give her a broad smile as she bumps into my side.

“Your arse is gonna wet the lounge,” she murmurs.

“Your arse is gonna break it,” I murmur back, and she laughs, tilting her head.

“Bitch.”

“You love me.”

She screws up her face and shakes her head. “Do not. Now shush, they’re about to announce.”

They announce the runner, the equestrian, the hurdler, the rower, the gymnast, and the hockey player. They all wear different versions of pretty cool uniforms.

“And the swimmer of the team... Coby Mathers,” the announcer calls.

My heart leaps into my throat as he steps onto the podium.

He’s wearing a yellow tracksuit jacket and green shorts that fit him perfectly. The air leaves my lungs—I forgot just how gorgeous he actually is.

Caro rests her hand on my knee and squeezes as I tune out everything they’re saying and just stare at him . I didn’t quite comprehend the impact he had made on me in

such a short amount of time, but now ... I miss him.

A giant echidna comes up on the screen.

“Can’t they come up with something more original than bloody Australian animals for the mascots?” I huff.

Caro chews her bottom lip. “You should phone him. He probably misses you, too.”

“Who? The echidna?” I try to avoid the damn topic I know she won’t let go of.

“Don’t play dumb, Lace.”

Shaking my head, I exhale. “The damage is done, so there’s nothing more to say, right?”

“You should tell him!”

“There’s no point. Anyway, he’s probably moved on with Katie or someone equally as vulgar.”

Caro scoffs. “I doubt that.”

Standing, I start walking toward the kitchen. “Let’s have breakfast.”

Caro stands and frowns. “Sure.” She hesitates, glancing back at the television and then at me.

She almost speaks but doesn’t and walks into the kitchen with me for our breakfast.

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Two weeks post Coby, and I'm down in the dumps.

Tuck has been pushing us hard.

The distraction is good while training, but being here at the unit is only a reminder of the fun Coby and I shared while we were... together ?

Caro has been on her phone a lot more lately. Even tonight, she's been texting someone endlessly. I know who, but thinking about that leads me back to Coby. Then, the cycle of depression repeats. So I try not to think of anything related to swimming trials.

Caro and I are having a girls' night. We're on the lounge watching chick flicks, eating popcorn—the healthy type—and vegging. The muted hum of a car engine pulling up outside doesn't alarm me, but does make me glance up. Cars come and go from the unit complex all the time, but it's nine at night, and it's a little unusual. Suddenly, there's a knock on our front door, and I tense up as Caro smiles brightly.

“What the fuck?” I murmur.

Caro jumps up excitedly, spilling some popcorn.

“Caro?” I state as she reaches the door and then turns to face me.

“Don't hate me. Just 'cause you and Coby are out of action doesn't mean I need to continue to be, right?” she asks, and I furrow my brows.

“What?”

She grins, chewing on her bottom lip and opens the door. Furrowing my brows, I tilt my head back to see what she's talking about when East steps through the door

holding a six-pack of beer. “Cheers bitches.”

“Hey, Stud,” Caro purrs.

I’m instantly bombarded with memories of Coby.

“Hey, hot stuff, and Caro,” East drawls, smirking at me, then slapping Caro’s arse.

I can’t help but chuckle as Caro slaps his chest and he grins at me in greeting.

“Hey East, long time no see. You drive all the way down here just to see Caro?” I ask.

He mock frowns and comes in, closing the door. “Oh, hey now, I came for you, too. But mainly Caro and her sweet—” Caro slaps his face softly, stopping him mid-sentence, and he chuckles. “How you holding up?” he asks, walking in and placing the beer on the kitchen counter.

With a quick shrug, I answer, “I’m okay.”

He purses his lips. “Really? ’Cause no offence, but you look like shit.”

“Shut up, arse stain,” Caro hollers as they both come over to the lounge.

“Sooo... I’m just going to say it—”

“Please don’t,” I interrupt him.

“He misses you,” East shoots back.

The hot tears well in my eyes, and I take a deep breath.

I didn't need to hear that.

It just makes it that much harder.

"I'm going to bed. Please don't keep me awake all night with your moaning."

They chuckle as Caro slides into his lap. "No promises."

I fake a smile, stand and walk to my room. Moving inside, I close the door and lean against it, sighing hard. I hear Caro and East chuckling in the lounge room, and I stroll over to my bed and pick up my pyjamas, slowly putting them on. My eyes well with tears. Just two weeks ago, he was in here with me, taking my clothes off and exciting me. And now? Now I'm here all alone, completely miserable.

I miss him.

I only spent a small amount of time with Coby, but the time I spent with him was the best of my life. I wish I could have that back. But he doesn't understand the situation, and I don't understand how he can back his dad before hearing the full story.

Crawling into bed, I cuddle into myself and snuggle into my pillow. His smell is practically gone now. My stomach knots, listening to East and Caro giggle in the other room.

It was good to see East, but he's a reminder of something I don't have, something I so desperately want and is just out of reach.

Four Months Later

East has been visiting Caro weekly, and they're becoming close. It's nice to watch, but seeing him only makes me think of Coby, and thinking of Coby still hurts. East



often talks about how Coby misses me and wants to see me, but I always say no. The damage is done, and it's been too long now to fix anything.

It's three days before the start of the Olympics, and the Adelaide swim team is flying out to Melbourne for a meeting. All of Caro's family are coming and are on the plane with us, which is great. It's nice to have family there as a support, even if they're not my blood family. We made the decision not to go earlier and train there, as the weather in Adelaide is very similar to Melbourne in all aspects, so no acclimatisation will be required. Tuck wants everything to be as normal as possible, and being in our familiar surroundings was easier on us as well.

I would have thought I proved my real family wrong. If I had actually made the Olympic team, they would have supported me. But I received a text message from my sister, Stacy, congratulating me. She claimed Mum and Dad witnessed the swimming trials and that they were happy for me.

That was it.

Nothing from Mum or Dad.

So I didn't bother messaging them.

It's bullshit.

But the Hughes are way more family to me now than my blood family, anyway.

Trinny and Harry are in the seats in front of Caro and me. Caro's brothers Logan and Joshua sit to our left. Ryan sits in front next to a businessman. It's so good to be all together.

"This is so exciting. I love planes," Caro chirps beside me.

I face her and sigh. “I hate them. I always get a little anxious.”

“Is that why you’re quiet?” she asks. “Or because in a few hours, you’ll be seeing... you-know-who?”

Tensing up and rolling my neck, I exhale. “Probably both.”

Caro’s eyes suddenly dart past me, and she pulls her bottom lip in with her teeth. I furrow my brows at her reaction, so I turn to see East and Coby walking down the aisle of the plane.

Coby hasn’t changed at all. His hair’s still slightly floppy on top, his broad shoulders showing off his perfectly sculptured body. A shiver runs down my spine and I break out into goose bumps as our eyes meet. A surge flows through me, igniting a fire inside my core and forming an ache that’s a direct result of his proximity. Coby smiles but continues to walk down the plane and away from me. A hot wave washes over me. I take a deep breath as Caro giggles, bumping into my shoulder.

“He still wants you.”

“No, he doesn’t!”

“Yes, he does!”

I huff. “This conversation is pointless.”

“You’re going to have to talk to him sooner or later. The swimming goes for eight days. The closing ceremony is eight days after that. So that’s a total of sixteen days being around... Coby .”

“I can be around him. Doesn’t mean I have to like it,” I murmur.

“You’re going to like it. I’m sure you’re going to love it.”

“Cabin crew, prepare for takeoff,” the pilot booms over the speakers, and I death-grip the handrest.

“This is going to be one long flight.”

Caro tilts her head. “It’s like an hour and a half...”

“You know what I mean!”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

As soon as the plane lands, I bolt, eager to slip away before Coby and East catch up. Luckily, Caro and the Hughes manage to keep pace.

Caro and I are taken to the Olympic Village while the Hughes head to their hotel. Now, we're getting the grand tour.

The Village is a series of blocks, with two athletes assigned per unit. I can't imagine staying here alone—I'd drive myself crazy with just my thoughts for company.

We're guided to the swimmers' section, divided by sport and then by gender. Relief floods me when we find out Caro and I are sharing a unit—I'm sure Tuck had a hand in arranging that.

Our unit is cozy—a small lounge, two bedrooms, and a cramped bathroom. Caro and I step inside, buzzing with excitement. It's a scaled-down version of our place back home. I drop my luggage in my room and quickly unpack because there's not much time before we head to the meeting in the Athletes' Services Area.

The services area doubles as a hub where we can watch events and connect with family since they're not allowed inside the Village itself. It's comforting to know we'll have a space to spend time with them amidst all the chaos.

“You ready to head down?” Caro comes rushing into the room and asks.

Chuckling, I tilt my head slightly. “Sure, let's go.”

Turning, I grab my phone and head out with her to walk down to the services area.

It's not far, but my nerves are wreaking havoc inside me. Coby will be at this meeting, but I have to get used to him. Hell, I'll probably be in the marshalling area with him at the pool, so I need to pick up my big girl panties and stop hoping things will get better.

We arrive at the services area lounge, and pretty much everyone from the Australian swim team is here. I catch East and Coby off in the corner and take a deep breath. Caro wraps her arm around mine, and we stand with the mass of swimmers. Then, we turn to the front, where Kyle Watley is standing, waiting to talk.

"If I can have your attention, Australian swimming team," he begins.

The chatter dies down.

"I'd like to officially welcome the thirty-four Australian swimmers to the Melbourne Olympic Games. Remember, you're representing your country, in your country, so keep things professional at all times. Now for the announcement of the swim team's Head Coach. There's been some drama around this, but we've gotten to the bottom of it all, and we believe we have the right man for the position. Everyone welcome your team's Head Coach, Don Tucker."

I gasp along with Caro as we both watch Tuck walk out in front of everyone. My heart races while a smile spreads across my face, and I glance at Caro with raised brows. She blinks twice in apparent shock.

"What the hell?" I whisper to no one in particular.

He takes up the front position and acknowledges the swimmers with a subtle gesture. Then he turns to us and winks. "It's an honour and a privilege to be your advisor, your strength, your coach. What an amazing team of swimmers we have for Melbourne this year. I'm here for each and every one of you. My team is my family,

and we must stick together. My sub-coaches are Trevor Packer, Lauren Schipper, and Skipp Malone. We will bring you to your best and help to boost the medal tally for Australia. Do your best. Each stroke your finest. Swim like you've never swum before. Do yourselves proud. Do Australia proud. Because they will be watching."

Furrowing my brows, I face Caro and shake my head slightly. "Phil Mathers isn't a sub-coach?" I whisper.

She shrugs and pouts. "Yeah, I find that weird, too."

Kyle Watley steps back up and pats Tuck on the shoulder. "So that's the announcement we wanted to make. Make sure if you need anything to come to either Tuck or me. We'll help in any way we can. You're free to check out the Village. Have fun and swim hard."

I turn to Caro as everyone starts to disburse and grab her, pulling her with me toward Tuck. He smiles, watching us race over to him. I don't hold back, throwing my arms around his large body. He laughs and hugs me back.

"Congratulations, Tuck! I had no idea."

"Thanks, Lacy. It's been a long process. Once the investigation into Katie began, Phil saw his chance to take me out of the running for Head Coach. He told the Board I fabricated the story about Katie just to get Melissa through.

"But that was never my intention. I didn't want Katie disqualified, just reprimanded. When the video footage surfaced, showing her pushing you into the chairs in the marshalling area, it was clear evidence against her. She was brought in, and her chance to compete in Melbourne was nearly revoked.

"I made it clear I didn't want her banned, just firmly reprimanded. My priority was to

protect my girls and ensure she kept to herself during the Games. However, I did insist that if any future incidents occurred, immediate consequences would follow.”

Smiling, I hug him again. “You’re so nice, Tuck. But how come I wasn’t brought in for questioning?”

“I didn’t want that. You didn’t need to be dragged into that mess when you were concentrating on practice. The video showed it more than clearly enough, and the Board was happy for me to be your proxy.”

Sighing in relief. “I love you, Tuck.”

He smiles and pulls me to him. “Love you too, kiddo.”

“What happened to Phil Mathers?” I ask.

Tuck frowns as he lets me go. “He’s been sacked as a coach. They claim he tried to manipulate how the Board would vote on the Head Coach position, so they had to let him go.”

“So he can’t coach anymore?”

Tuck shakes his head. “No.”

My heart sinks through the floor. “Poor Coby.”

“He’s taken on an interim coach. But he’s here with no coach, no family, and no support,” Tuck tells us, and I frown.

Caro wraps her arm around my shoulders as I glance over at him. Now I can see that the happy, cheerful persona he usually gives off isn’t there. East stands with him.

“Talk to him?” Caro suggests.

“What do I say? Sorry, your dad’s a dick?”

“Lacy!”

“I’m never good at making lifting people’s spirits.”

“Just let him know that you’re there for him,” Caro suggests.

“Am I?”

“You should be. He has no one. And you’re probably the someone he needs right now.”

Huffing, I exhale, and step one foot in front of the other, heading toward him. But as I do, Katie embraces him. He hesitates but hugs her back while my chest aches.

“Right, well, he obviously doesn’t miss me too much then,” I huff.

If there’s one thing I don’t want to see, it’s Coby with Katie.

Footsteps follow me, and soon, Caro is by my side. “It’s probably just a friendship thing. News would be travelling about his dad, Lace.”

“Doesn’t matter. He can hug whoever he wants. It’s not like we were ever official or anything.”

Caro sighs and wraps her arm around me as we walk back toward our unit.

Thunderous footsteps from behind make us turn around to see East bounding toward



us. He beams as he picks Caro up, spinning her around in a circle. She giggles, and I smile as he leans up and kisses her. “I missed you,” he murmurs against her lips.

She laughs. “Careful... anyone would think you care.”

He pretends to gasp. “Yeah. Nah. Just missed the sweet taste of your puss—”

She presses her lips to his, halting his words— thank God —as I shake my head and chuckle.

“Right, I’m going back to my room. See you in... well, when you come up for air.”

Caro waves at me.

All I can do is roll my eyes and start walking off toward the Village. Some of the other countries are turning up, which is cool, so we can meet our competitors before the actual events take place.

I make it back to the Village alone. The English team arrives, and I’m so excited to meet them all.

Walking in, I catch a girl bossing another around about carrying her bags into the unit. Squishing my brows, I smirk slightly at just how incredibly rude she is. Her overly posh accent gives away that she’s from wealth and isn’t afraid to show it. But I figure I should go and say hi to my neighbour anyway.

“Anna, don’t be so daft. Lift with your knees... not your back, you silly little girl,” she snaps.

Anna picks up the last of the luggage.

Shaking my head slightly, I step up behind her, her short blonde bob framing her perfectly round face beautifully. “Um... hi,” I say.

She slowly turns to face me and curls her lip, eyeing me up and down. “Oh golly, you’re a convict.”

My eyes open wide, and I huff. “Excuse me?”

“You’re Australian, yes?”

“Right?”

“Right, so you’re a convict... below standard. Please remove yourself... you’re blocking my flow of pure oxygen.”

I’ve been called many things in my time, but never a convict. Sure, the first Australians sent from Britain were convicts, but that doesn’t mean we’re all criminals and heathens now.

And I thought Katie was bad!

Turning toward my unit, her screechy voice rings out through the Village. “Anna, get me a non-fat decaf soy latte.”

Anna rushes out of their unit and scurries off.

Sighing deeply as I let myself into my unit, I walk inside and make my way to my room. Moving to my bed, I sink down onto it.

My phone beeps. I roll on my side, pulling it from my pants pocket, and bring it up to view the message. My heart races and my chest tightens at Coby’s name on my

screen. I swipe the lock and take a deep breath while opening the message.

Coby: Hey Lace. We're going to be here for a while, and I don't want to have to avoid you. So I think we need to sort this out. Can we meet up?

My throat dries, and my stomach flutters. It's as if crazy butterflies dance the polka down there. I have to admit, I am a bit reluctant. I'm at the Olympics, and I have to keep my mind on the prize. But he's hurting, I'm hurting, and maybe we will focus better if we're both on the same side.

Me: Okay. When and where?

I hit send and sit up on my bed nervously. I'm agreeing to meet with Coby, and it has me in all kinds of knots. I haven't seen him properly for over four months, and I have no idea how to be around him.

Coby: Athletes' lounge. Now?

Taking a deep breath, I lick my lips and reply.

Me: See you soon.

Standing, I shake my hands out like it's giving me the courage I need. I wish Caro were here to give me a pep talk, but she isn't, so I need to face this on my own.

I can do this.

Walking out of my unit, I head down to the services area lounge and fidget the entire way with the zip on my shirt. I'm a bubbling mess right now as I chew nervously on my bottom lip.

Stepping in, I catch him already sitting in the lounge. I take a moment to centre myself as I stare at his back. He's still so perfect even from behind, and that doesn't make this easier.

Shifting forward, I step around the lounge as he glances up at me and hands me a takeaway coffee cup.

“Thank you.”

Coby smiles and stares as I stand here. “You haven't changed.”

“Can someone really change much in four months?”

“I think I have. I relied on my dad. I thought he was always right...” He gulps. “I'm an idiot, and in the process of being pigheaded...” he sighs, “... I lost you.”

Pursing my lips, I lift my shoulders. “You never technically had me.”

“But I might have. We were headed that way, I think.”

Huffing, I sit down next to him. “Coby, I'm sorry about your dad—”

“I'm sorry I didn't trust you. But I wish you'd have told me what Katie did to you.”

With a heavy sigh, I bow my head. “I should've told you. But the way you defended your dad without asking what happened irked me, so all my defences came up, and I gave up on you.”

He exhales and examines his hands. “That's on me. I'm truly sorry, and I want us to be friends again. I've missed seeing you.”

“I’ve missed seeing you, too...” I can’t hold back my smile. “So, friends?”

“Friends.” Coby sticks out his hand, and I push it aside, leaning forward and hugging him tightly. He hesitates for a millisecond, then wraps his arms around me.

I’m warm and safe. This is where I was meant to have been for the past four months.

But I try not to let that affect me too much.

Friends, Lacy. Friends!

“So, Eel, how’s your times been?” I ask reluctantly, pulling back from him.

“Good. Might do a record if I’m lucky.”

“Well, I’ll be cheering you on.”

He smiles, resting his hand on my knee. “Thanks, that means so much.”

“Thank you for messaging me. I’m glad this isn’t going to be weird for us both.”

“Yes, me too. I was thinking you were going to avoid me the entire time.”

Chuckling, I shrug. “I might have, but you’re just too adorable.”

“And you’re still too beautiful.” His hand comes up and gently caresses my cheek.

My heart races, and my mouth dries. We’re just friends. This kind of electrical charge is not what we want. So I slowly back away.

“Cobes,” I warn.

He breathes in quickly and nods. “Too soon? It’s okay, I get it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t be. I fucked up. I have to earn your trust, and I’m okay with that.”

“Oh my God, are you two talking?” Caro cries.

We turn to her. East rushes toward us.

I giggle. “Yes, we’re friends again.”

“Oh, it’s about fucking time. The awesome foursome is back, baby,” East booms.

We laugh as they both sit with us, and I take in a deep breath. The awesome foursome is finally back in town. We should have never parted. I was being stubborn. The last four months were wasted energy. I have to make up for the damage I’ve done to my relationship with Coby, but by being friends first because right now I have to concentrate on the Games.

East and Caro are raving on and on, but I can’t stop staring at Coby, thinking about how much I missed him and how good it is to finally have him back in my life.

Even if it is just as a friend.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

It's opening ceremony night, but the Australian swimmers sit out the ceremony together so we can concentrate on our heats tomorrow. Spending hours in a lineup and then on the oval standing around while taking in the atmosphere would be a lot of fun. Yet we need to rest and prepare for our heats as they start first thing in the morning. So we're all just watching the ceremony in the Athletes' Services Area lounge.

The awesome foursome is set up on a lounge in front of a television, surrounded by the rest of the Australian swimmers. We're all here, and it's nice to sit as a team and just hang out for a while.

The ceremony began a while ago. Everyone's enthralled. My eyes keep shifting from the screens to Coby as I sit next to him. That pull toward him hasn't shifted. Being with him for the last three days has been great, but the attraction is only becoming stronger. My eyes flick down to his hand on his knees, and I'm so conflicted about my emotions right now. I need to focus on my swimming. Coby and I both have heats, and Coby has his final tomorrow. I need to focus my energy on a medal, not getting the man. But I still can't stop staring at his strong hand.

Everyone starts laughing, and it pulls me from my thoughts as I spy men dressed as kangaroos on stilts, jumping around like they're boxing each other. I turn to Coby, who's smiling brightly.

Dammit. I can't hold back any longer. My hand moves almost on its own, reaching for his. The moment our skin touches, a spark ignites, sending a jolt straight to my chest. He turns to me, his gaze locking onto mine as I lace our fingers together.

His smile falters, his expression softening as he studies me. A flicker of vulnerability crosses his face. He swallows hard, his Adam's apple bobbing, and I nod—a silent agreement, a truce, a surrender.

Coby's lips twitch into a sly smile before he winks, pulling my hand gently onto his lap. Then, as if nothing monumental just happened, he shifts his attention back to the ceremony.

No words pass between us. We don't need them. The connection is there, strong and undeniable. It never left. But now, more than ever, we know we need to find a way to make it work—to find a balance that won't break us again.

I chew my bottom lip, my nerves tangling with anticipation. Coby's thumb brushes over my hand, a comforting gesture that steadies me. I glance at him briefly before turning back to the screen just in time to see Kyle Watley entering the stadium.

He's perched on a float shaped like a massive, curling wave, its shimmering surface reflecting the stadium lights. The float glides gracefully, circling the Olympic Stadium in a spectacle of artistry and engineering.

Kyle grabs a hose and pulls a lever. A stream of liquid shoots skyward, but halfway up, it transforms—igniting into a cascade of flames. Gasps ripple through the crowd, the awe palpable even through the screen.

The fiery stream arcs magnificently before striking the Cauldron, igniting the Olympic Flame in a blaze of glory. The crowd erupts into cheers, the stadium alive with wonder.

I blink, amazed. Technology has come so far, blending creativity and innovation into a moment that feels nothing short of magical.



Everyone cheers—the Olympics have arrived.

This is actually happening.

I'm here, and tomorrow, I will start my race for gold.

The energy surging from Coby's hand is making my stomach flutter. My spine is tingling, and my heart is pounding. My mind races to all the possibilities that could happen over the days that we're here, and my temperature spikes as I flush. My breathing hitches as his thumb continues to graze over my clammy skin. This is becoming a little too much energy overload. The chemistry oozing between us is buzzing, and as they start the march of the athletes on the screen, I can't stand the sizzling anymore. So I pull my hand from Coby's and stand. I mouth, bathroom, and Coby tilts his head as I dash off. Bursting inside, I slam the door behind me with a resounding bang, desperate for water.

I need to cool down.

I'm boiling hot, and it's all because of Coby.

Thoughts a friend shouldn't be having.

Moving to the sink, I force on the cold water tap and splash the liquid on my face as I lean over the sink. The refreshing coolness hits my skin, and it eases the heat slightly as I take in deep breaths while trying to regain some strength. I run the water up my arms and close my eyes, just breathing.

“Get a grip, Lacy!” I murmur to myself.

Opening my eyes, I grab some paper towel and dry myself off, throw it in the bin, and take one last breath before heading back out. As I exit the bathroom, I note Coby

waiting in the hall, and I break out into goose bumps.

Shit!

My breaths come fast as he inspects me.

He furrows his brows. “Are you okay?”

“Fine .” It comes out at a higher pitch than I meant it to. Geez, get a grip, girl!

He steps closer, and I step backward. I hit the wall. He zeroes in, placing his hands on either side of my face. I stutter as he gazes upon my lips and inches closer. That spark fires off in every direction, and everything tells me to lean forward, but I have one thought. Focus.

“I’ve missed you,” he murmurs, still staring at my lips.

My breathing hitches as his body connects with mine, and I gasp. His hard muscles push against me, stirring something much larger than I like inside me. “Coby... we have to keep focused. You have a possible final tomorrow.”

He smirks. “I only need one thing for good luck.”

“What’s that?” I whisper as he inches closer and closer.

“The taste of your lips.” He crashes his lips to mine, pressing his body into me firmly. It’s everything.

I run my fingers through his hair as his tongue syncs with mine. My heart flutters, and my body tingles as I hear fireworks going off at Olympic Stadium . Or is that inside my head?

Coby grinds his hips into me as he kisses me passionately against the wall. This is what's been missing from my life—Coby kissing me. Why did I stop this from happening? I run my hands through his hair and pull him to me as he fingers the back of my top. His warm skin sets my back on fire. Instinctively, I wrap my leg around him while he pushes his hips in closer, grinding his erection against my pussy.

I moan. Our tongues go rogue, kissing frantically. I don't even care who's around. I'm losing myself in him. I've never been more right about anything in my life.

“Ahem...” Someone clears their throat, making me pull back. Coby turns to the side, and I drop my leg in embarrassment. I catch Addison gawking at us. We pull apart completely while Addi bites her lip and walks past us to the bathroom door.

“Sorry.” She rushes through.

Coby starts to chuckle, rearranging his cock in his pants.

“That's not funny. We can get in trouble if she says anything,” I scold.

Coby steps back to me and grabs my hand. “Who? Addi? No way, she's awesome. It was worth it.” His thumb grazes over my skin again in an attempt to calm my nerves. It does, but only slightly.

Coby pulls me to his side. “We can't get involved right now. We have to be focused. But after our events, I want to make this up to you,” he croons, gazing into my eyes. They portray nothing but pure honesty.

I smile. “You do?”

He nods. “I do. But fuck is it going to be hard keeping my hands off you for eight days.”

Giggling, I tilt my head. “Who says I’ll let you put your hands on me after eight days?”

“Something about your expression is betraying you. I know you want to rip all my clothes off.”

I shake my head. “You’re too confident.”

“Only with you. C’mon, we better get back, or East and Caro will spread rumours.”

“True story.”

He takes my hand, and we step back toward the lounge while I try to calm my breathing.

That Coby envisions a future for us excites me, but we have to get through the Games first.

Caro looks up at us and then down to our linked hands. She grins up at me but doesn’t make a fuss about it for a change, for which I’m grateful. Instead, Caro turns back to face the television with a great big cheeky grin on her face as Coby and I sit back down on the lounge.

We spend the next couple of hours joking around. Coby finds a way to touch me, as usual. Not that I mind because every time he caresses me, I burn.

The guys walk us back to our unit at the end of the evening. I guess I’m not surprised. East and Caro are obviously a thing, and Coby and I are... whatever we are. It was the natural course.

East and Caro are down the hall saying their goodbyes while Coby and I are standing

by the door. Guys technically aren't allowed, but Coby tends to like to bend the rules.

"So, I had a great time tonight," he begins.

I lean against the wall. "Me too. It's good to be on the same page again."

He licks his lips and smiles leaning in toward me. "We have to focus, but just one more," he murmurs and presses his lips to mine. Smiling against his lips, I kiss him back, and that spark doesn't disappoint. My hand runs up through his hair as we kiss—it's full of passion, but it's not as heated as our previous kiss. This one is delicate and calm. Coby pulls back, his forehead leaning against mine. Even though it was a gentle kiss, we're still breathless.

"I'll never get sick of that."

Smiling, I lick my lips, wanting to savour his taste. "Me neither."

"Have a good night, Butterfly. I'll see you bright and early tomorrow morning."

I lean forward, pecking his lips quickly one more time, and he smiles against my lips. East and Caro come down, chuckling but doing their best to be quiet.

"Mate, we better go. If we get caught, we could get in the shit," East whines.

Coby pulls away from me reluctantly and then lets me go, nodding toward East.

"Yeah, okay. See you tomorrow. Night girls," Coby chirps.

As I wrap my arms around myself, he and East turn and race off out of sight.

Caro opens our unit, and we walk inside. I close the door behind me as she continues

into the unit, and I lean against the door and just breathe.

“Whore,” Caro mutters.

I chuckle. “Shut up...”

She turns and rushes back over to me, opening her arms and pulling me to her in a tight hug.

“My God, I’m so glad you’ve seen the light,” Caro murmurs in my ear as she swirls me from side to side.

“Me too. Kissing him is so... so perfect.”

She giggles and pulls back from me. “I’m proud of you.” She gives me a quick smile, then turns me, slapping my arse and pushing me forward toward my room. “But we have got to go to bed. You have a race tomorrow!”

Chuckling to myself, I fake a salute. “Yes, Mum.”

“Well, one of us has to be an adult in this relationship.”

I scoff. “And that certainly isn’t you.”

She laughs. “Hashtag truth.”

I turn back to face her. “Did you just say hashtag?”

“Yeah?”

“Yep, you’re so not the adult.”

“Go to bed and have wet dreams about Coby,” she teases.

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After having breakfast in the cafeteria with Caro and her trying to settle my nerves, I’m now in the marshalling area with all the other girls, including the English swimmer from the unit next door and her roommate slash slave Anna. I am going to try to speak with her again. You never know, the first time may have been nerves or something. The benefit of the doubt and all!

Walking up to her, I stand tall.

She scowls. “Oh, it’s the convict.”

Guess not!

Tilting my head, I try to shrug it off and plaster on a fake smile. “Actually, the name’s Lacy. It’s nice to meet you...” I pause.

She raises her eyebrow and chortles. “Oh, you actually don’t know who I am. Wow! You do have a small mind. I’m Marta Botwright, and you’ll be the convict swimming in my wake.”

A surprised laugh escapes me. “Right, well, nice to see that frosty weather over in England has frozen your soul.”

I turn, hearing Marta scoff as I walk away. “Did you hear that wretched girl, Anna? She can’t talk to me like that?”

“I think I just did,” I call.

Katie walks up to me as I sigh, awaiting another round of abuse.

“That Marta’s a real uptight bitch, hey?” Katie offers out of nowhere.

“Yeah, she’s certainly got something shoved up her tight arse.”

“Well, us Aussies have to knock her out of the running, okay? We may not see eye to eye, but let’s play this out as two enemies coming together to face a bigger foe.”

I chuckle slightly. “Are you a fan of Sci-Fi or something?”

“Lacy, I’m serious! We have to knock her out.”

“Agreed. Let’s out swim the snobby bitch.”

She smiles, and a marshal walks in, telling us to line up.

Marta’s in lane five, I’m in four, and Katie’s in six.

We walk out to the poolside and take our positions by the seats. The crowd is huge, and not only will I have my home team cheering for me, but all of Australia. Even though I have all this support, it doesn’t stop me from being super nervous. This is the fucking Olympics we’re talking about, and now that I’m here in the Olympic Swimming Centre taking in the atmosphere, my stomach is churning.

I glance up into the stadium to see Caro, East, and the Hughes all there to cheer me on. I watch as they announce Marta. She works up the crowd, smiling and waving like she owns the swimming stadium. She makes a fool of herself, but the crowd eats it up.

I turn to Katie, who rolls her eyes, making me giggle. I wish Coby were here to give



me the extra endorphins I need, but he's up after me, so he'll be in the marshalling area right now watching on the screen.

My name's called out, distracting me from my racing thoughts. The stadium erupts in cheers. Turning back, I take off my outer clothes, leaving me in my swimwear, and adjust my blue goggles and caps. Swinging my arms around in big circles, I want to make sure I have the right blood flow through my joints and muscles for this swim. My shoulder is back to one hundred per cent since Katie pushed me into the chairs, thank God. But I still need to make an effort to have every bit of blood pumping in the right spots before I hit the water. My stomach flutters, but I have to push through. I can't let my nerves unsettle me. This is only the first hurdle, and I have so many more to jump while I'm here.

Wiping my sweaty palms on my suit, I step up to the starting block before the start signal goes off. My heart is racing so fast I can hardly think, but I keep my mind in check by thinking the same thing. Swim from the heart. Calming myself down, I step up on the starting block. As the ringing in my ears grows louder, I push it aside and breathe.

“Take your mark.”

Bending down, a lump forms in my throat. I swallow it down and focus all my thoughts on hearing that starting signal. It sounds, and I use all my strength to leap off the block and dive headfirst into the water. It hits my face like a breath of fresh air, and instantly, I light that match. Staying under for as long as I can, I swivel my body up and down like a dolphin gliding through the water.

When the need for air becomes too much, I rise to the top and take in a lung full of much-needed oxygen. I pull my arms over my body and slam them back down into the clear blue water. I'm pushing it. I need to push as hard as I can to qualify because I'm up against the best. The top swimmers in the world are here, so I need to pull out

all the stops. I swim hard, so hard my body is already aching, but I don't take in what's happening around me. I don't want to become distracted.

I dive down, hitting the wall and turn, swimming for the final fifty. My lungs are burning, but I'm giving it all I've got. Stroke for stroke through the water. My muscles freeze, but I push through the pain. I gasp every time I bob up through the water. The end is just in sight. I dive down, giving it my all as I lunge for the wall then slam the tiles. I bob up through the liquid, taking in much-needed air before I scan the board—Marta first, then me, then Katie.

I glance over at Katie, still trying to catch my breath. Marta celebrates as if she's won the gold already, and I huff as Katie and I climb out of the pool. At least we both made it to the semis. Katie comes to my side and rolls her eyes before we walk back to the marshalling area. Suddenly, Katie and I are knocked apart as Marta pushes right between us, causing us both to nearly topple over. Luckily, we both caught our footing as we stare while watching Marta as she storms off.

“What a class act,” I say.

“I have a much stronger word to describe that. It too starts with c and ends in t,” Katie quips.

I gasp out a laugh as Katie turns and smiles at me.

We continue on our way to the marshalling area where Coby is lining up, so I quickly rush over to him, and he smiles at me. “Great swim, Butterfly.”

Shrugging, I purse my lips. “I can do better. But you smash it right now, okay?”

“Yes, ma'am, give me some good luck?”

Glancing around, I note the officials turning the other way, so I quickly peck his lips.

Coby smiles at me and exhales. “Just what I’ve needed all morning.”

“Electrify them, Eel!”

“Just for you.”

“400 Free, let’s go!” a marshal calls.

I raise my eyebrows. “You got this! I’ll be watching.”

“Cheer for me.”

I smile. “With everything I have.”

He winks and walks out. I turn and grab a seat right by the television in the marshalling area. 400m is an endurance race which you compete by swimming eight laps of the pool. It’s no wonder Coby is so fit. I watch as they summon him to the blocks. He waves to the home crowd. They cheer for him just like they did for me, and I smile as he takes off his shirt and reveals his well-defined stomach. I could seriously stand him in a corner and just stare at him all day.

My stomach flutters as his race is always a little different—he doesn’t have a semi like the rest of us. You have to qualify in this one to get through to the final. If he gets through, he’s in with a chance for a medal. And if you win a medal, then all sorts of things can happen, not just the glory of being an Olympic Champion, but contracts, sponsorship deals, you name it. All sorts of things come from winning a medal at the Olympic Games. It opens up doors to a whole new world, a completely amazing world. An elite club if you like. This race could mean so much for Coby.

He steps up to the starting block, and my stomach flips as I lean forward on my chair. This race is long, and so much can happen in just under four minutes and eight laps. The lead can change so many times—swimmers fade, then light the match. It's all about who has the best endurance. And Coby has stamina. My cheeks heat at the memory as he bends down, taking his mark.

The room shifts to silence as the starting signal goes off, and he dives into the pool. My heart leaps into my throat as he stays under the water as is customary, but then he cuts through the water like a blade, finally coming up for air and turning his head to the right. He starts the windmill motion. His muscles flex and stretch with every movement—his body is built for swimming. His broad shoulders, his height, and his toned body—he's the perfect specimen for an athlete.

He hits the wall in second place. I'm not worried. At this point, it's only the first fifty. There's another seven laps to go. I hate when the screen focuses in on one swimmer and not the whole bunch because then I can't see Coby, and it makes me anxious, but soon the camera shot goes wide angle again, and I can see him. Taking a deep breath, I relax, watching as his perfect form and ease of stroke help him glide through the water effortlessly. He's such a pro—there was never any doubt he'd make it here.

I get lost watching his muscles, stroke after stroke, turn after turn. He's doing well, and I'm almost in a dazed state when the crowd fires up. I snap out of staring at his body, and scan the screen. He's halfway back on his last fifty, and he's neck and neck with another swimmer. Opening my eyes wide, I sit on the edge of my seat. He's already made the final because, either way, he's coming in first or second, but it would be great for him to qualify in first.

“C'mon, Cobes,” I murmur. He pulls away just slightly, just enough to be an arm's length in front of the other swimmer while I bounce on my seat. He reaches under and slams against the wall, coming in first at 3:41:07. I jump out of my seat and clap—he was so close to beating the Commonwealth Record.

I pace the floor, waiting for him. I want to be here when he comes in, so I watch him approach and bounce on my toes as he races up to me, pulling me in for a tight hug. I pull back and kiss him quickly, very quickly—we don't want to be seen fraternising, or we could get in trouble.

“I'm so proud of you,” I say.

He lets me go, and we walk to the back of the room. “It was all that good luck you gave me beforehand.”

I scoff, shaking my head. “It's all your hard work and determination, Coby. You earned this.”

His hands slide up and down my arms, sending warmth through my chilled skin. “You're freezing,” he murmurs, concern lacing his voice. “Let's get changed. Meet me in the athletes' area after you've had a hot shower. Warm up, okay? Your arms feel like ice.”

A small laugh escapes me as I nod. “Okay. I'll see you soon.”

Coby leans in, resting his forehead gently against mine. His smile is soft, unspoken words lingering in the moment between us.

Then, as if reluctant to let go, he steps back, releasing me. We head to our respective change rooms, the warmth of his touch still lingering on my skin—a comfort in the stillness of the moment.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

I'm in the marshalling area with Coby as we ready ourselves to swim again today. Me for my semi, he for his final. He's on just after me again, and we sit together as my knee bobs up and down in nerves for the both of us.

"Be confident and swim hard. You're in the final. You can get this gold not just for you but for Australia," I say, trying to give him some confidence.

He appears a hell of a lot calmer than I am right now. "I got this, Butterfly. But I should be pep-talking you, you're up first—"

"Mine's only a semi, yours is the real deal, Coby."

He smiles, and it's as if it has finally sunk in. "I'm going for gold, Lacy."

I chew my bottom lip and grab his hands. "Yeah, you are."

"100 Fly line up, please."

Taking a deep breath, Coby smiles as he squeezes my hands. "You've got this, Butterfly."

I dip my chin, and he brings my hand up, kissing the back of it, seeing as the room is full of marshals and officials. He lets my hands go, and I take a deep breath and walk over to my line. There are a couple of girls, and then Marta is next to Katie, and I am on the other side, then there are a couple more after Katie. The lineup has some awesome swimmers, and I'm not sure how this is going to go, but I'm going to swim my hardest. I turn to Katie, and she smiles at me. I have to admit, I'm a little confused

by the turn in Katie—I'm almost a little suspicious of it, seeing as how she was so horrible at the trials. But then again, I guess being pulled in by the Board might change a person . Who knows?

We walk out. I turn back one last time to Coby for that final boost of confidence. He smiles, giving me two thumbs up. I smile back before facing the front and walk out with a renewed boost in my step. We take our positions and wave to the crowd as our names are called.

I need to get through this race to qualify for my spot in the final.

I need to be that step closer to gold.

The buzzer sounds, and we step up to the starting block.

I focus all my thoughts on my mantra and nothing else, reciting it over and over. I need to light the match as soon as possible and maybe stoke the fire again in the last fifty.

“Take your mark.”

We all bend down, and I'm focused so hard on hearing the starting signal when I faintly hear someone murmur bang. Not loudly, just enough to unsettle me. I almost jump into the water but stop myself. The girl next to Marta falls for it and dives into the water. My heart sinks for her.

The buzzer goes off, making the rest of us stand back up.

We witness that girl's Olympic dreams shatter, and my shoulders slump.

What's going to happen now?

Meanwhile, the Chinese swimmer gets out of the pool, tears streaming down her face. She takes her seat. I check if anyone's going to say anything. Was the bang in my head? Did the Chinese girl hear it too? It could have only come from one place...  
Marta.

I'm not sure if I should say something or not. It won't help the Chinese girl anyway—she false started. There's no bending the rules. She's disqualified. But if Marta is being sneaky and trying to psyche out her competitors, she needs to be caught. The only problem is, I can't be sure it was her. I have nothing to go on other than my gut. So I keep my mouth shut as they sound the buzzer so we can step back up to the starter blocks.

The tension in the air is rife.

All the swimmers' shoulders are tense.

No one else wants a false start, so everyone will be paying extra attention now. And if it was Marta, I could be next on her target list, so I need to keep my ears open.

“Take your mark.”

I bend down and shudder at the thought of false starting. I keep my ears pinned, waiting for Marta to say something, but there's nothing. When the starting signal fires, I delay for a nanosecond and then jump with everything I have into the water. As I dive, I glance slightly to my right. All the other swimmers are in the water. Relief floods me as I focus on the task at hand, which is my stroke and coming up occasionally for oxygen. My arms crash over my body before I slam down into the depths. I start my stroke strong and hard. There's no buildup this time so I push with steely determination. I hit the wall and turn quickly, pushing myself as hard as I can.

My muscles clench, my lungs burn, and everything's screaming at me to slow down,



but my pure adrenaline and hatred for Marta is spurring me on. I dive down and hit the wall, then force my body out of the water with a gasp of air.

I finally scan the scoreboard—first place, then Marta, then Katie. I throw my hands up in the air and squeal. Marta scowls as Katie approaches me and pats my shoulder.

“Good job, Lacy,” she pants as we take off our caps and swim over the lane dividers.

We hop out of the pool and make our way to the marshalling area. Coby is hopping from one foot to the other as I approach, and I race forward to see him. He lunges and pulls me to him in a tight as fuck hug. I giggle as he nuzzles my neck and gently kisses my skin. “I’m so proud of you,” he murmurs.

“400 Free, let’s go.”

We pull apart, and I smile at him. “Now you go and win that gold, Eel.”

“If you can come in first, I can too. You’ve spurred me on.”

“Go get ’em. Show the world what us convicts are made of.”

He furrows his brows. “Huh?”

Laughing, I shake my head. “Never mind, good luck.” Leaning in, I kiss his cheek, and he smiles before rushing off into his lineup.

I walk over to take up my seat. There’s nothing that could stop me from watching this race. He takes his position. The starting signal fires. Coby lands in the water. He’s lagging behind the American, who is already an Olympic champion from previous years. Admittedly, he does have another seven laps to catch him. Coby always comes home strong. I’m hoping he lifts in the last hundred but also doesn’t let the American

get in too much of a lead. But then again, a silver medal is amazing. Hell, even a bronze is great.

Chewing my bottom lip, I watch as Coby and the American race out ahead of the pack. Coby trails him. His muscles rippling in the water send a chill down my spine as I watch him. I'm on the edge of my seat as we come to the final hundred.

Coby is closing in. He's lighting the match, and the American is fading, but he's still in front. My knee bounces up and down on the seat as I wring my hands together, watching and hoping for Coby to lift just that little bit more. He does, and as they hit the wall, there's only now half a body length between them. I can't stand the nerves, so I stand and move closer to the screen—like that's going to help—and I chant for him. The crowd in the stadium is roaring at a critical level. Coby comes up to a hand's length behind him, and they're only about ten metres away from the wall. I begin bouncing on the spot as my eyes well from pure adrenalin.

“C'mon, Coby, c'mon!” I can't hold back and scream at the television. The people in the room stare at me, but I don't care.

Coby's caught him.

But they're so close together that I can't tell who has the edge.

I can't stand the tension as my eyes well up and my breathing hitches.

The line comes up on the television, showing the Olympic record. Coby and the American are both under it.

“Oh shit! C'mon, Coby, c'mon.”

They both dive at the same time, and I gulp as they slam against the wall.

I hold my breath.

On the screen, Coby's lane lights up first.

I scream as the tears flow.

The board lights up, showing a time of 3:39:82—he's not only won the gold but has also broken the Olympic Record previously held by China.

My body reacts before I can contain it, and I jump up and down on the spot before the tension ebbs and tears continue to stream down my face. I'm so proud of him. He beat the odds—no coach, no family—and he did it all on his own merits.

He races over to the commentator to give his interview, and I take in some much-needed deep breaths. I can only imagine how excited he is right now. Pacing the marshalling area, waiting for him to come back, I try to rein in my tears before he arrives. He doesn't need to see me as a blubbering mess.

After he has finished all his obligations, I turn and watch him coming into the marshalling area. Smiling when he finally reaches me, I grab and pull him behind the partition, pushing him against the wall and kissing him hard. He chuckles against my lips but kisses me back as he runs his fingers through my wet hair. He holds me while our tongues collide in a passionate, all-encompassing kiss. I can't stop the tears from running down my cheeks again as a wave of emotion flows over me.

I'm so proud of him .

So happy for him .

So honoured that he wants me like I want him .

Coby pulls back and brings his hand up to my cheek, wiping away the tears.

“I’m so proud of you.”

He smiles, his forehead leaning against mine. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

I scoff. “Bullshit! It was all your hard work that got you there.”

“But I’ve been off my game with this shit with my dad, and since you came back into my life, everything’s fallen back into place.”

Smiling, I lean forward, kissing him again. The fire inside me ignites, and I clench my thighs together to dull the ache between my legs as I push my body against his. His arm slips around my waist, pulling me closer as his thumb traces slow, gentle circles on my cheek. Kissing him feels like stepping into the pages of a romance novel—like living a moment straight out of a timeless epic. It’s the kind of kiss that makes you believe in fairy tales, makes you wonder if they aren’t just fanciful stories but glimpses of something real. True happiness exists. You just have to find the one person who makes it feel possible.

We finally pull apart. I take a deep breath, gazing into his deep blue eyes. “You should probably go and get ready for your ceremony. You’re getting a freaking gold medal !”

He laughs. “Be waiting for me when I get back, understand?”

Nodding, I pull away, and he smirks.

“Oh, and pushing me against the wall... totally hot,” he quips, throwing a wink over his shoulder as he saunters away.

I can't help it—a laugh bubbles out of me, light and carefree. As his footsteps fade, I let out a long, shaky breath, the tension of the moment unravelling. My smile lingers for a heartbeat, but then I slump against the wall, the weight of everything catching up to me.

Shaking my head, I close my eyes for a moment, trying to ground myself. My pulse is still racing, my thoughts a tangled mess of exhilaration and uncertainty.

Then, with a final deep breath, I straighten up, brushing my hands down my sides.

Time to pull it together.

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There's a small party for the swimmers being held in the Athletes' Services Area Lounge after today's competition is complete. We'd head there as a foursome to meet some of the other swimmers and to celebrate Coby's gold and win for Australia.

We arrive at the lounge, and it's not a party as such, it's just more of drinks and nibbles while we watch the highlights of the day's events on the large screens. The swimmers from other countries are here too. In fact, the entire swimming syndicate is here to celebrate tonight.

It's great for us all to be together. We're having fun. The guys were dragged off a little while ago by some other swimmers, leaving Caro and me to fend for ourselves, but we don't mind because we love hanging together. Anna and Marta, the English swimmers, start handing out cups of soda to random people. I guess they're trying to make up for being arseholes. Marta gives a cup to Caro and me and smiles as she waltzes off without saying anything.

“Weird! They're actually trying to be nice now?” I ask as Caro takes a big sip from

her cup just as the guys come back with some unopened bottles of water.

“Hey, where did you get the drinks from?” East asks.

“The Brits, they’re handing them out,” Caro tells him.

Coby and East glance at each other before snatching our cups and throwing them into the nearest bin.

Caro furrows her brows. “Um... what’s that about?”

“As much as I like to trust people, I don’t. And you girls shouldn’t either,” East warns us.

“What?” I ask.

Coby shrugs. “I doubt they’d do anything, but this is the Olympics. It tends to make people competitive .”

Caro gasps and shakes her head. “Shit! I drank some.”

East wraps his arm around her shoulders. “It’s just a precaution. I doubt it’s even anything to think about, babe.”

She cuddles East as I turn to Coby.

The American swimmers come over—I can tell from their uniforms.

“Hey, Heath. Heath, this is Lacy and Caro, and you know East. Guys, this is Heath Carson from the States. He’s competing in the 100m Fly and 200m Free.”

“Hey, Heath, pleased to meet you. You’re racing tomorrow, then?” I ask.

He lifts his shoulders. “Yeah, got my first heat in the morning.”

“What do you think of Australia?” Caro asks.

“People are great. The food’s a little different, but it’s great to actually be here, even though I miss Kings Crescent a fair bit.”

“That’s where you’re from?” I ask.

“Yeah, back home in California.”

“I’d love to go to America,” I admit.

“It’s a cool place. You guys should come for a holiday. Fable would love to meet some of my peers.”

“Fable?” Caro asks.

“My girl.”

“Odd name.” Caro chuckles.

“It’s a long story, but the name suits her. I couldn’t imagine her any other way.”

I can see the adoration pouring from his eyes as he talks about Fable and I hope I get to meet her one day. “You love her.”

He smiles for the first time. “Yeah... I do.”

“Well, how ’bout us Aussies show you Yanks how to party?” East asks, and everyone opens their eyes wide in shock.

“We all have to swim tomorrow, East,” Caro berates.

“I’m not talking about drinking. I’m talking about tag team table tennis. You game, Yankee boys?”

I crack up laughing as Caro and Coby shake their heads.

“Is that such a thing?” Heath asks.

“It is now, c’mon, let’s go,” East demands and starts walking off to the ping pong tables.

It’s going to be an interesting night.



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

It's nice to finally have Caro in the marshalling area with me just before a race. Coby isn't here, but East is, and for the lack of affection I get from Coby, East makes up for in humour. Caro is going to race her heat first, then East will have his heat, and then I'll be up for my final. We're all sitting together, just chatting, as I hear Caro's name over the loudspeaker announcing her name for her heat.

"You can do it, Caro," I call.

"Just think of the sweet treat you'll get if you get through, babe," East chimes in. Everyone glances around. Caro glares at him while I chuckle slightly. "What?" He shrugs as I bump into his shoulder and shake my head.

She walks out.

East and I watch the screen.

"She's gonna get through," East murmurs, more like he's trying to convince himself.

He's nervous for her, and that's sweet.

"She will, Caro's got this." I try to ease his nerves.

He takes a deep breath.

"She's worked so hard for this."

He watches her intently. For the first time, I don't see a joker or a tween. I see the

man who's falling for my best friend. The man who cares for Caro and wants to see her do well and achieve her goals. I see the man inside of East. I'm glad that he's in there somewhere, beneath all the jokes and bravado, beneath the sexual innuendo and childlike behaviour. That man does care for her. It's not just a sexual thing for him.

The starting signal fires, breaking me from my trance, so I turn to the screen. Caro races. I regret missing the start, but I'm right here with her now. She bobs up, takes her first breath, and strokes smoothly and proficiently. She glides through the water and is in the lead of the pack. I beam as she hits the wall in first. She ducks, heading back for the final fifty of her race. She's fading slightly as the girl next to her is lighting the match. It is only a heat, so she doesn't have to hit first to go through to the semi. But she'll be disappointed if she isn't in the top two. She fades a little more as the other girl powers through, taking the lead.

"Shit! C'mon, Caro. Lift, babe," East whispers as he stands and stares at the screen.

I stand next to him, watching as I chew the side of my cheek. But she isn't lifting. She's fading. As they duck to hit the wall, the other girl hits first. Caro comes in second. Still, not a bad effort. It's only a heat, so she can improve.

"Dammit," East curses. "She's gonna be hard on herself."

I rub his back for comfort. "But she can do better in the semis. At least she got through." I turn him to face me. "Now, don't let this faze you, okay? You go out there, and you swim your heart out. Don't worry about Caro, leave her to me. Focus on you right now."

He's not taking anything in, and it makes me worry for him.

"100 Back, please line up."

“Make sure she’s okay,” he tells me.

“I will. Just focus! Get your spot in the semi, East.”

He takes a deep lung full of air, turns, and steps over to the lineup area, where he will take his place. He’s nervous. Unsettled even. But he walks out smiling at Caro as she strolls in, giving him two thumbs up. He tilts his head. She moves in and sits next to me as I wrap my arms around her. I’m trying to judge the situation because I was expecting her to be upset, but she’s smiling.

“I did okay, right?” she asks as she hugs me back.

“You did great. You qualified, which is what matters. You need to save your full strength for the finals.”

“Exactly.” She gulps, but her brave face is only going to last so long.

“Caro, you did amazing, that’s all that matters. It wasn’t the final, so there’s definitely time to improve. Don’t beat yourself up, okay?”

She glances at me and offers a subtle gesture of agreement. “You’re right. It wasn’t the final. I don’t need to win every race. Only the one that counts, right?”

“ Exactly . I didn’t win my first heat either, remember?”

She smiles. “That’s right, you didn’t. But you’re gonna win this next one.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice?”

The starting signal goes off again, and I jump slightly at the shock of the sound. Caro and I both turn to spot East hurtling through the water. His stroke is sloppy and slow.

Something is off. I'm not sure whether the Caro thing has him rattled or whether nerves are getting to him, but something is messing with his performance.

"What's going on with him?" Caro murmurs as he hits the wall in fourth position. He needs to pull up, or he isn't going to qualify.

"I think he was nervous," I reply.

We watch his muscles tense up as he pulls more forcefully through the water, gaining speed.

"Oh, thank fuck. Lift, East. C'mon," Caro calls as we both stand up.

He slips into third place. Getting any higher is near on impossible, as the first place hits the wall, then the second. He dives, hitting the wall just in time to be in third place.

Caro and I slump and shake our heads. "What do I say to him?"

I lift my shoulders briefly. "You know him better than I do. He qualified, that's all that matters. He can go for a better time in the semi."

She nods and pulls me to her for a hug. "Don't let our swims get to you. This is a huge race for you, Lace. This is what you came here for. If you hit the wall in the top three, you get a medal. Just remember that. Top three, okay? Doesn't matter which one. Just. Get. Top. Three."

I'm up next.

The stomach butterflies hit full force like never before. It's like the can is open, and they all flutter out at the same time, flurrying about in a whirl of excitement and

nerves. This is what my life has been pointing to. Every day, a step toward this moment. If I win this, I'll become an Olympic Champion.

Marta walks over and stands right next to Caro and me.

I glare at her.

Why is she standing in our personal space?

We stare at each other in silence.

The tension thickens.

Our shoulders stiffen.

Marta smiles and finally faces me.

“See this...” She waves her hands over her body. “You’ve just been standing in the presence of greatness. Remember that. It will prepare you for your loss.” She smirks and marches off to get ready for the lineup.

“Was that supposed to be intimidating?” Caro scoffs.

“Nope, it was laughable. If anything, I’m even more determined for this convict to kick her pommie arse.”

“That a girl! Go get her!”

Checking around, I cannot find Katie. I furrow my brows. “Where’s Katie?”

Caro swivels and checks—we can’t see her anywhere.

There's a few minutes before my lineup, so I figure we should search for her. I need all the support out there I can get. "We should try to find her."

"Okay, let's check the bathrooms," Caro suggests.

I bob my head in answer, figuring that's probably the first place we should search. We race off, and as we push through the door, the echoes of a girl crying are loud and clear. I turn to Caro and furrow my brows as we slowly edge further into the bathroom.

"Katie?" I call.

"Leave me alone," she cries.

Giving a slight head shake, I race toward the stall where her voice came from. "Katie, we gotta go. Our race is up."

"I can't," she replies.

"What? Why? Open the door."

There's a pause, and then the latch unhooks, and the door opens. We peek inside to see Katie standing there with her bathing suit on, but it has slashes all the way through it, showing her bare skin.

We both gasp, and heat boils inside of me as anger rages through every vein in my body. "Who did this?"

"I don't know. I put it on, and it fell apart."

"Here," Caro cuts in and starts to strip.

“What are you doing?” Katie asks, opening her eyes wide at Caro’s naked body.

“I’m not letting Marta win. Now stop ogling my tits and get my suit on.”

Smiling at Caro, she nods at me as Katie grabs the suit from her and hands her bag to Caro, which I’m assuming has her uniform in it for Caro to change into. I turn around and let them both get changed and then we quickly run out to the marshalling area just in time for the lineup.

Marta spots Katie wearing a full suit and huffs.

“Thank you for coming to find me,” Katie whispers.

“No worries. We’re teammates. Us Aussies gotta stick together, right?”

She tips her head as we line up and walk out into the stadium. The crowd cheers. They’re always so much louder for finals. I scan the crowd and spot the Hughes family. I smile. Trinny waves then places her hand over her heart. I give a small affirmative motion at her message. Swim from the heart.

My stomach is somersaulting.

My entire body is shaking.

This is it.

My time to shine.

No one can win this medal except for me.

I step up to the starting block, my insides quivering as I try to calm my breathing,

which is currently completely out of control. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, thinking about Coby's face, his caress, and the way he ignites a fire inside of me. My nerves settle slightly. I open my eyes again as peace washes over me.

With Coby and my friends by my side, I can do anything.

I can be anything.

I can live the dream.

I am the dream.

I can do this!

“Take your mark.”

Bending down, my nerves wash away, and a sense of Zen washes over me. My stomach butterflies stop. My panic fades, and all I can think about is the job at hand. Determination grips me. The need to beat Marta overpowers my nervousness. The way she's carried herself through these Games is unacceptable. I have to stop her from getting a medal.

A grin crosses my face as my heart pumps faster and adrenaline spikes. My need to be in the water almost overpowers me. The starting signal blasts, quenching my desire, and I fire like a rocket into the water at lightning speed.

The warm liquid hits my face, and it's like the drug I've been needing, which only fuels the flame inside of me. It spurs me on, and as I come up for air and pull my arms over my body, the surge to power through the water and keep moving through it is the fuel I need to survive. A fuel that's cascading through my veins. My inner strength has erupted, no longer a flickering spark but a blazing inferno, consuming



everything in its path. I'm not just striking the match—I'm fueling a wildfire, unstoppable and all-encompassing. Every molecule, every fibre of my being, is ablaze, feeding the relentless surge of my desire to win.

As I hit the wall, I turn and push off even harder for the final fifty.

I've never had this drive before.

My muscles clench, they ache and tear in every direction possible, but my drug, my fuel, is pushing me even harder. My lungs nearly collapse, but I won't give in as I strive to beat Marta. I don't even care about the gold at this point as long as I'm in front of that bitch—it's all I care about. The roar of the crowd only adds more fuel as it pumps through my system, overloading me with a need... a need to get through this race.

I will not falter.

I will not slow down.

I will not give in.

I will ignite the match once more.

I will race from the heart.

My body pushes through the agony.

The wall is within my grasp.

Relief floods my veins as I duck and slam into the tiles.

My body falls to the depths of the pool as my head rises up through the clear blue liquid for the last time of the 100m Fly. I tear off my goggles to get a better look at the scoreboard as the Australian home crowd is screaming out in applause and celebration.

My eyes can't focus while my body fights against exhaustion.

I rub my eyes and study the board.

Lacy LaBelle 54:03.

I cry in utter shock.

This time, I understand what's happened. Not only have I hit the wall first, but I've also smashed the Olympic record previously held by the USA. My hands throw into the air as I scan the stand and find Coby and the Hughes family jumping and screaming.

I pull off my caps.

Tears run down my face.

I did it...

All my hard work.

Years and years of training...

It all came down to this one moment.

Gold.

I've won gold.

I. Fucking. Won. Gold!

Katie rushes to my side, pulling me to her, and I cry into her shoulder as she screams in my ear. "Oh my God, we did it, Lacy. We both did it!" she cheers.

I pull back and furrow my brows. What does she mean? Quickly, I glance at the scoreboard once more to see that Katie came in second to win silver, and Marta came in third for bronze.

"Oh my God, Katie. Gold and silver for Australia. We did it. We actually did it!" I cry, and she bursts into tears as we embrace each other in the water.

Marta grunts behind us, throwing her cap in disgust.

We hug once more and then make our way out of the pool. The liquid swirling around me, washing over my heated skin, giving me a sense of calm in my heightened state of emotion.

The commentator calls us over. "Well done, girls. Gold and silver for Australia. We're so proud of you."

We both giggle and I wrap my arm around Katie and smile. "Thanks so much, Grant. It's so nice... to bring gold... home for Australia in my first Olympics. It's been a rough road here... but we got there in the end," I say through staggered breaths, still trying to catch them from my epic swim.

"And you broke the Olympic record, too, Lacy. Well done!"

Katie nudges me and laughs. "She's amazing!"

“Thanks... I pushed as hard as I could... I’m just so happy with the results... but I couldn’t have done it... without my support group... they know who they are... including Katie here... and especially my coach, Tuck... who forced me to believe in myself... when no one else did...” My eyes well up again, and Katie cuddles into me.

“Well, the whole of the world believes in you now, Lacy. And Katie, a wonderful silver swim from you, too. Congratulations, you must be so happy.”

She smiles. “You have no idea what it means for Australia... to get the gold and silver medals in this event.... To get the silver is a dream I couldn’t even imagine... and to be doing it with Lacy by my side... is such an honour.”

I smile at her and think about how far we’ve come, from her pushing me over at the trials to Caro handing her the silver medal by giving her, her suit. Our relationship is a strange one, but it’s come full circle now, and I’m glad we’re finally on the same side.

“Well, congratulations again, ladies. Great swimming, and we’ll see you on the podium for your medal presentation.”

“Thanks, Grant!” we both reply in unison. I link my arm with Katie’s, and we rush toward the marshalling area. As I step toward it, I see Caro, East, and Coby. They jump from foot to foot, waiting for me to get to them. I glance at Katie. She smiles, letting my arm go. I give her a broad grin and then run off toward my foursome and into their waiting arms. A giant group hug—their warmth encases me and we all laugh.

“Oh my God, you did it!” Caro chimes in.

“I did it!” I repeat as they all let me go, and then Coby takes me in his arms, holding me so tightly. I wrap my arms around him and nuzzle his chest.

He leans in, kissing my head. "I'm so proud of you."

Sniffing, trying to hold back the emotion, I glance up at him and smile. "I never thought I could do it. Honestly, I thought silver maybe, bronze quite possibly, but gold?"

Marta walks in, pushing her way through the crowd. "Cheaters never prosper, love," she sneers before storming away.

We all furrow our brows and shake our heads. "What the hell is that about?"

"She's just trying to pull an excuse as to why she sucked so badly," East quips.

We all chuckle.

"Miss LaBelle, Miss Reynolds, could we have a sample, please?" an official cuts in.

I nod and let go of Coby as he smiles and winks. Moving over to the official, I grab the test container and walk with Katie toward the bathroom. She smiles, and I raise an brow.

"What?"

She tilts her head. "Coby likes you."

Wincing, I take a deep breath. "Sorry, that must be weird for you."

She raises her shoulders. "It's fine. We would never have worked anyway. He moved back to South Australia, and I'm still in Victoria, so long distance isn't my thing. Plus, he never liked me anyway. I can be kinda... intense."

I smile and push open the bathroom door. “I think you just like to get your way.”

She giggles. “True. But I learned that there’s a way to go about getting it, and I was doing it all wrong. Pushing you into those chairs and treating you the way I did...” She shakes her head and glances down. “I’m sorry. I was super jealous... of Coby, of you—”

“Of me?”

“Yeah. You’re super talented and drop-dead gorgeous. You’re everything I want to be, and I was threatened and took it out on you. Not cool. I am sorry.”

I slump and sigh. “Water under the bridge.”

She shakes her head. “This is what I mean... you’re so nice. I treated you like shit. Even after everything, you still came to find me for the final and you still chose to help me. That just shows what type of person you are. You’re an amazing woman, Lacy.”

I shrug and smile. “Thanks, but you’re a good person too, Katie. Swallowing your pride isn’t an easy task and most people can’t do it as well as you have. I’m glad we can be friends.”

She smiles. “Me too.”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

I've given my sample to the officials, and I'm changed and lining up, ready to walk out to receive my medal. I've never done this before, but this rush is exhilarating.

Standing in the middle of Katie and Marta is awesome. The fact that I beat them both to win the gold, not just for me but for my country, is something I will never lose sight of.

I hope my family is watching.

Then I can prove to them once and for all how worthy I am.

I'm lining up to walk out and just as we step off, Marta shoves me. I trip. Luckily, catching myself. Turning, I glare at Marta and she smirks.

"You know why bullies pick on people like me?"

She offers a faint shoulder lift. "Oh, this should be peachy."

"Because you wish you were me. You're so down about your own sad, fucked-up life that you belittle those around you. It might work on Anna, but you have your work cut out for you with me, you conceited bitch. I can handle anything you throw at me!"

She grins mischievously and straightens her posture. "I can't wait till you see what I've thrown at you!"

Furrowing my brows, I open my mouth to ask what that means, but the officials start leading us out. We make our way to the dais and stand behind it as the music plays.

You can't wipe the smile from my face. Katie has the same reaction. I turn to Marta, and she's frowning beyond belief, so I try to hold in my giggle—it sucks to be her.

They announce all the formalities, and I'm not paying attention as the butterflies flutter about in my tummy.

“The bronze medal, representing England... Marta Botwright,” they announce over the microphone. The crowd cheers as Marta steps up onto the dais and half waves to the crowd. She isn't showing much enthusiasm at all. I glance at Katie and she smirks as the official places the bronze medal around her neck, shakes her hand, and hands her the stuffed echidna mascot.

She stands back up straight, half waves again, and I glance back at Katie and smile brightly at her.

“The silver medal, representing Australia... Katie Reynolds.”

I cheer as she steps up onto her dais and waves to the roar of the home crowd. I'm so proud of how far she's come, as a swimmer and as a person. It's awesome when people see the light.

I wish Marta would step down from her high horse as she practically turns her back to Katie. Shaking my head slightly, I turn my attention back to Katie. The official places the silver medal around her neck, shakes her hand, and hands her the stuffed mascot.

My muscles tense. I take in a deep breath and try to control my erratically beating heart.

This is it! The moment it all becomes a reality.

“The gold medal, representing Australia... Lacy LaBelle.” The announcement is



called.

I run out of air.

Even though I knew I had won, I'd had forty-five minutes to process the win. And even with that much time, it hadn't truly hit me till this second.

My eyes water.

I can't breathe.

Katie glances back at me and smiles.

And that's just the push I need to help me up the step.

Standing atop the dais, the crowd erupts into a loud roar of jubilation as the tears free flow down my cheeks. I scan the mass of people to see Tuck, and he's wiping tears from his face as he smiles at me so widely his smile is all I can see on his face. I bow my head to him, and he waves to me. Then I blow him a kiss, and he places his hand over his heart. Sniffing, I spot Caro, East, and the Hughes all cheering and jumping up and down. For me. The excitement in their eyes overwhelms me to the point of tears. Then I see Coby—he's gazing at me and smiling as he blows me a kiss. I chew my bottom lip and gesture in understanding. Then I bend down while the official places my gold medal around my neck.

“Congratulations, Miss LaBelle.”

“Thank you,” I reply and shake his hand as he passes me the stuffed echidna. I stand back up straight and thrust my arms into the air in celebration, and the crowd roars to life once more. I take it all in—the flashing lights of the cameras, the music filling the stadium, the atmosphere surrounding me.

This is my first Olympic gold medal!

The Australian National Anthem starts to play, and an overwhelming sense of pride washes over me. I now understand what an achievement this is for not only me but for my country. I've done not only Tuck, my friends, and family proud, but Australia as well. That makes me pretty damn proud of myself.

I'm on cloud fucking nine!

The Anthem ends.

I glance down to Katie as the cheering starts again. I grab her arm, pulling her up onto the dais with me. She laughs as we hug, and the photographers take photographs of us together, biting our medals. They're hard and don't taste very good, but the aftertaste of gold is sweet.

Marta storms off on her own.

After showing off our medals and taking pictures for the Australian papers, Katie and I head back to the athletes' area.

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After going through all the formalities, I'm pretty wiped. I honestly just want to return to my unit and chill for a while.

I make my way back toward the athletes' village, thinking everyone will know where to find me. Plus, the walk alone will give me time to reflect and take in what's just happened. I stroll to the edge of the Village, and Coby steps out in front of me, breaking me from my inner thoughts. I jump slightly as he gives me a wide smile. He doesn't say anything just grabs my hand and pulls me along with him.

I giggle. “Cobes?”

He smirks. “Shhh... I found a nook,” he whispers.

I furrow my brows. “A nook?”

He nods. “Yeah... look.” He drags me around a corner to where two walls intersect, creating a kind of hidden area. It’s not big, just enough for a couple of people to go into and hide away from the world—like a little sanctuary to conceal us.

And laying perfectly on the ground, as we walk in toward the back, where it’s dark and no one can see us, is a small bouquet of daisies. I turn back to face him, a bright smile on my face. “You continue to surprise me, sir.”

He smirks, backing me up against the brick wall and moving in front of me in the sexiest damn way. “Is that a good thing?” he asks, placing a hand on either side of my head, just like that time in the services lounge by the bathroom.

Chewing my bottom lip as those pesky butterflies dance in my stomach all over again, I smile and shrug.

“I mean, I guess,” I reply nonchalantly.

He chuckles at my sarcasm. “We can leave if you want?” he teases, moving to exit, but I wrap my arms around his waist, pulling him back to me.

“How did you find this place anyway, you creeper?”

“I went searching for a nook I could take you. Somewhere where we could be away from prying eyes. I think I’ve found it.” He leans in, rubbing his nose into my neck. My breathing hitches. His body is close to mine but not quite yet pressing against it.

“I think you might have, you sneak.”

He chuckles, running his nose up my neck and trails a light kiss on my jaw. My lips part. “We’ve both done so well and don’t have to swim now for another five days. What will we do to fill the time?” he asks suggestively.

Laughing, I run my hands up his back, sneaking under his shirt, fingering his taut muscles. My insides quiver as he trails featherlight kisses along my jaw. “We need to watch East and Caro.”

“Yes... but what about the rest of the time?”

“I’m sure we can find something to occupy our time.” I dig into his skin slightly, and he groans.

“Now you’re talking.” His kisses move closer to my mouth as my breathing increases faster and faster. My knickers are now soaking wet from him teasing me.

“But if we get caught, we could get in a shit load of trouble.”

“Then we don’t get caught.” He presses his lips to mine. Every one of his muscles clenches and moves in a perfect rhythm as he grinds against me. He fondles my cheek and grabs my hair. I dig my nails into his back, pulling him closer to me. Our tongues dance passionately and frantically. Kissing Coby is a high that I have grown to love. I could kiss him every day for the rest of my life.

My leg instinctively moves up around him, wrapping around his waist so he can move in closer. His erection presses right into my pussy as I moan slightly at the friction.

I understand we’re on the outskirts of the Village, but Coby is turning me on, and

right now, I want nothing more than him. I pull his shorts down.

He pushes back from me and raises an eyebrow. “Here?”

“This is our place. It’s only right to christen it.”

He chuckles. “What happened to all that... what if we get caught crap?”

I shrug. “The nook is safe. I deem it so.”

“Well, if Lady Butterfly deems it so, who am I to argue? Just try to keep it quiet.”

Giggling, I nod and lean back in, kissing him as I shuffle out of my pants and knickers, stepping out of them as his shorts fall to his ankles. He moves in, placing his hands on my arse, and then he hoists me up against the wall. My shirt rides up as his rock-hard cock moves into place. We kiss frantically, my hands rummaging through his hair when he quickly pulls back.

“Shit, I’m not wearing a condom.” The disappointment in his voice breaks through as I smile and shake my head.

“It’s fine. I’m on the pill,” I inform him.

He grins and smiles. “You sure?” He pants, and I shift my hips forward, taking the tip of his cock inside me slightly.

Coby chuckles and presses his lips to mine, leaning me back against the wall and thrusting forward inside of me. I moan quietly, and his fingers dig into my arse cheeks, which only turns me on more if that’s possible. He thrusts into me, back and forth at a steady tempo. This isn’t soft lovemaking, this is quick and dirty fucking. To be honest, I’ve missed being with Coby, so I will take him any way I can get him.

We move in harmony, fucking against the wall. Hard. Fast. One hand in his hair, the other reaches up above me, holding on to the rail. Our passionate kisses block our breaths. So much frantic skin-on-skin contact. We're both trying to keep our moans and groans to a minimum, as anyone walking past might hear. So we stay quiet, even though it's incredibly hard.

Coby thrusts inside of me, rotating his hips slightly on the entrance, hitting just the right spot. He works me up so well. He's a master, and I've missed being intimate with him.

He pushes up inside me again, and everything starts to shatter around me. My body trembles, breaking out in a fine mist of sweat. My breathing hitches, my eyes clench tightly as goose bumps litter my skin and a wave of undeniable heat washes over me. I shudder as my muscles clench.

With one more thrust, I lose myself, exploding around him.

He grips onto me tighter, pushing me back into the wall and thrusting up into me only to release himself as he groans into my mouth quietly. He explodes inside me as he pumps out his load. We break our kiss to get some much-needed air, and I rest my head in the nook of his neck as he sags against me.

As we both catch our breath, I check if anyone's around. There's no one, so I sag back into Coby, and he gently lowers me to the ground, pulling out of me. I rest back against the wall, and he smiles, shifting some hair carefully behind my ear.

"I've been waiting a long time for that."

With a smile, I reply, "I have, too."

He shakes his head. "God, you're beautiful."

I shake my head, reaching down for my knickers and shorts. He leans down, pulling his pants back into position as I turn and sit on the ground. Coby grins and sits next to me, placing his arm around my shoulders, and we cuddle.

“Marta said something strange, almost ominous. Like she’s going to throw shit my way.”

Coby cuddles into me further and rests his head against mine. “I wouldn’t worry. She’s all talk, and you’re done swimming now, bar the relay, so there’s not much she can do.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” I snuggle back into him, loving our little nook.

I think we’ll be visiting this place a lot more often.

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

It's the next day, and Coby and I are in the stands waiting for East and Caro's finals. They both got through their semis and are now waiting for their respective finals to begin. East will be first, and he's still a little off his game. I just hope he settles down in the marshalling area. I am sure Caro will give him a nice big pep talk.

East's division walks out, and I clap for them as they take up their positions behind their starting blocks.

"Do you think he will have put his nerves aside?" I ask Coby as he entwines his fingers with mine.

"I sure hope so because the American he's up against is one of the best."

As they dive into the water and take their mark up against the wall, I take in a deep breath and send out a silent cheer for East. I hope he can pull something out of the bag for this race.

The starting signal fires and they all leap off the wall and back into the pool. I beam as he starts off strong, gliding under the water. His muscles are all working in unison for the perfect stroke as he comes up and windmills along the lane. He appears in much better form than the heat and semi. Whatever Caro told him must have worked. He soars through the water at the same pace as the American.

I bounce in my seat as he ducks and hits the wall.

My head shifts, and I focus on the board.



He's just in front of the American.

I squeal as I turn to Coby, who beams. We both bounce in our seats with excitement.

East pushes hard, but the American is gaining, and they're neck and neck.

"C'mon, East," Coby chimes and grips my hand a little tighter.

We can both see he's falling behind. Chewing my bottom lip, I bounce on my seat. The crowd cheers for East. He and the American dive, aiming for that elusive wall. I hold my breath, and the screen lights up.

The American gold and East silver.

I slump.

Coby sighs.

"Silver is amazing," I say.

"Hey, any medal is fantastic at the Olympics. I just hope East sees it that way."

Nodding, I gaze down at the pool to see East climbing out and patting the American on the back. At least he's being a good sportsman about it.

They clear the pool deck, and Caro's lineup walks out. I'm even more nervous than I was for East. I hope Caro can pull out something spectacular because she's competing against Marta and Anna from England.

"Let's hope Caro can smash Marta out of the water."

“Fingers crossed. Let’s hope Anna beats Marta, too. That would certainly rub it in.”

Laughing, I cuddle into Coby’s side.

Caro takes her mark on the starting block, and my stomach twists. I hope Marta didn’t try any of her scare tactics on Caro before the race. But from the lack of black eyes on Marta, I’m assuming she didn’t. Caro isn’t like me. She will fight back, but more with her fists than with her mouth. God love her.

The starting signal sounds, and they all dive into the water.

My muscles stiffen and clench with anxiety as Caro stays under the water longer than anyone else. My knee agitates up and down on the spot as I watch her finally come up for air, taking a breath and stroking out from her chest into a perfect breaststroke. Her legs kick out like a frog, and her form is flawless. Tuck will be so proud.

She races ahead of Marta and Anna, and I jump up and down on my seat as she’s out by half a body length. If she can keep this up, she will have it in the bag. They push to the wall, and Caro turns a second before Marta to continue with her great lead.

I can’t stand the pressure, so I stand up, and Coby follows me as we continue to hold hands and move from our toes to our heels in excitement. “C’mon, Caro, don’t fall behind,” I shout without caring who hears me. Trinny, Harry, and the boys are here somewhere, cheering just as loud.

“C’mon, Caro.” Coby grips my hand.

“She’s gonna do it, Cobes,” I murmur, and he chuckles.

“I think she is.”

My stomach somersaults as she approaches the wall, Marta still half a body length behind her and Anna behind Marta. Tears fill my eyes as I hold my breath. She dives into the water, her hands hitting the wall and the screen lighting up.

Caro wins Gold!

“Oh my God!” I scream as I skip on the spot, and Coby turns, wrapping me in his arms. “She did it. She actually did it!”

He pulls back as I cry. “C’mon, let’s go down to the athletes’ area to celebrate with them.”

Coby takes my hand, and we race off through the crowd, down toward the athletes’ area to find East, and to wait for Caro. Finding East is easy—he’s the one dry-humping the pole.

Laughing as we approach him, Coby shakes his head. “Congrats, mate!”

East stops humping the pole and turns to face us. “Not a bad effort for a pole fucker, huh?” he quips, and I shake my head.

“You’re weird,” I tease.

He purses his lips. “That’s why the bitches love me.”

Rolling my eyes, I chuckle. “I’m gonna tell Caro you called her a bitch.”

He opens his eyes wide. His face turns serious. “Caro loves me?”

I jolt my head back in shock. “What?”

“The bitches love me, and you claimed Caro was a bitch. So she loves me, right?”

I glance at Coby. “Um... that’s not what I meant. And I don’t know... that’s something you need to ask her. ”

He beams. “Caro loves me,” he murmurs.

I wince and turn to Coby, who’s trying not to laugh.

“So you love her?” I ask.

He scoffs. “Fuck, of course. I just can’t tell her ’cause it’ll scare her off.”

Beaming, I shake my head. “No, you should tell her.”

“Seriously? She won’t think I’m a pussy?”

Laughing, I tilt my head. “Well, she will think you’re a pussy, but then she will give you some pussy.”

East laughs, and Coby beams. “I’ve never heard you talk like that. Caro, yes, but you, no. It’s kinda... hot.” Coby pulls me to him and wraps his arms around my waist.

“Oh, really? What? You like me saying... pussy ?” I utter the last word seductively, and he chuckles.

“Oh, please, don’t you two start getting all googly-eyed at each other,” East berates.

A loud squeal echoes through the area.

We all turn to spot Caro racing for us.

Gathering around for another foursome group hug, she collides with us all, and we laugh as she squeals.

“Oh my God! Did you see, did you see?” she asks, pulling back from us and jumping into East’s arms.

“Babe, you did amazing.”

She leans in, kissing him and I smile at Coby.

Caro pulls back and shakes her head. “I don’t win gold... ever . What the fuck is with that? But you, Mr. Awesome, getting a silver behind that unstoppable American, I’m so proud of you,” she chimes, smiling up at East. He smiles back, moving some wet hair away from her face and behind her ear.

He stares into her eyes and gulps. “I love you,” he blurts.

Opening my eyes wide, I turn to Coby.

I am unsure of how Caro will take this. We haven’t discussed this possibility at all, so I’m not sure where she sits with this idea.

She’s quiet for a second, and then she sniffs. “Really?” she whispers. I grab Coby and walk off when she leaps into East’s arms with an excited squeal. “I love you, too, you big crazy buffoon.”

My stomach flips as they kiss each other, and I spot an official walking over.

“Official, guys,” I whisper.

Caro pulls her lips from East and jumps down from him but gazes at him like he’s the

best thing in her world.

The official walks over. I'm gathering that he didn't witness the kiss between East and Caro, as he doesn't mention it. "Miss Hughes, can we have your sample, please?"

"Sure." She takes the container and skips off toward the bathroom.

"Did you hear that? She loves me," East whispers after she's out of hearing distance. "This is better than the silver medal, I swear."

I shuffle forward and hug him tightly. He wraps his arms around me and swirls me from side to side, making me laugh.

"I'm so happy for you guys."

He pulls me back and turns from me to Coby. "You two need to sort your shit out, so you can be as happy as Caro and me. Think of all the time you two wasted being apart. You could be where we are now. Don't let each other slip through the cracks again," East states categorically, and I smile.

"How romantic of you, East."

He frowns. "I'm serious. You two are perfect for each other. Wake up and see that, will you?" He pats my shoulder before walking away, leaving me with Coby.

I take a deep breath. "Once the Games are over, we can figure out where we stand. Okay?" I ask, and he nods.

"I'd like that. I need you in my life, Lacy."

Smiling, I reach out and take his hand. We head for the athletes' area to find a spot

for us to sit and relax and celebrate.

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The finals are over.

We're relaxing in the athletes' area when two officials approach our table.

"Miss Hughes, can we talk to you, please?" one of them asks.

We all sit up a little straighter as Caro furrows her eyebrows. "Um... sure. Is there a problem?"

"There is an issue, yes. Please come with us to discuss with the Board."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, and my muscles clench. "What's going on?" I ask, standing up.

"We will discuss that with Miss Hughes. If you will, please?" He waves his hand for Caro to walk, so she stands up, looking at East, who gives a slight dip of the chin, encouraging her as she walks off with them.

I glance at Coby, who shakes his head, as East runs his hands over his short-haired scalp.

"This is bad. If the Board is involved, it's something to do with the medal," East informs me.

"Jesus Christ," I murmur.

We all move toward the boardroom. We want to be there when Caro comes out to

support her, and we want to know what's going on. We all pace frantically in silence, not understanding what the hell this is about but knowing it's not good.

“What the fuck is taking so long?” I blurt out.

“Lace, I'm sure whatever it is, it's being sorted correctly,” Coby tries to reassure me.

The doors finally swing open, and Tuck steps out, holding an inconsolable Caro while she sobs uncontrollably.

“Shit!” I say, racing over to her. “What's going on, Tuck?” I pull Caro into my arms, and she sobs into my neck as her body flops onto me like jelly.

“Caroline's been disqualified.”

“What!” East cries.

“Why?” I ask as she cries harder into my shoulder.

“Her drug test came back with traces of Adrafinil.”

Shaking my head as I furrow my brows, I huff. “I don't understand.”

“I didn't take it,” Caro blurts out.

“Three more swimmers have been found with the stimulant in their systems, too,” Tuck adds.

East sags his body and shakes his head. “The drinks at the damn party...”

I gasp.



“Are you saying someone’s slipping banned substances to the opposition?” Tuck asks.

“Yes, Marta Botwright,” I say, rubbing up and down Caro’s arms.

“Okay, leave this with me. If I can find proof, I’ll have her wiped out.”

“What does this mean for Caro?” I ask.

Tuck huffs as Caro cries harder and moves from me to East. He pulls her into his arms, embracing her tightly.

“It means... unfortunately, she has a banned substance in her system. She’s removed from the relay team and...” he takes a deep breath, “... loses her gold medal.”

Gasping, I go weak in my knees.

Coby catches me as my eyes flood with tears. My heart tightens for my best friend, my housemate, my teammate, my family. I can’t even imagine going through all of this—to win, then to have it stripped because you drank some tainted soda. This is so far into the realm of not fair it’s not funny.

“Can I let you guys take care of her? I need to sort this out,” Tuck asks.

I nod.

East continues to hold onto Caro tightly.

“Yes, go Tuck and please... bring her down.”

“I’ll do my best.” He walks off.

I turn to Coby, who shakes his head.

East leans in, kissing Caro's head. "C'mon, let's get out of here and go to the lounge. I think I should tell your parents, Caro," I suggest, and she signals agreement silently through her tears.

Pulling out my phone, I send a quick text to Trinny to meet us in the lounge, saying there's been a development and Caro needs her family. We take Caro to the lounge, and by the time we arrive, her family's already there. They see the mess Caro's in, and East tells them what's going on while I stand back with Coby holding me for support. I can't stand to see this happening to her. And when the news gets out that she has drugs in her system and her medal is stripped, everyone will think she's a drug cheat, and it will not only tarnish her but the Australian team name as well.

This is bad.

This is so bad.

Tears trickle down my face as I stand back, watching Trinny comfort Caro. Her brothers try to calm East down. This whole thing is crazy and ridiculous, and I can't stop my head from spinning.

Coby grabs my hand and pulls me aside as the tears fall down my cheeks. He pulls me to him in an embrace, and I snuggle completely into him, needing the comfort right now.

"Are you okay?" Coby whispers.

Shaking my head against his chest, I sniff. "I'm so glad I didn't drink the damn soda."

He rubs the back of my head for comfort. “What do you think Caro will do?”

“Probably go home and be with her parents for a while. Being here would only be a harsh reminder, I would imagine.”

“Yeah, it puts a dampener on the whole damn thing, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, sure does, because even if they find that Marta planted the drugs, they’re still a banned substance and in Caro’s system, so the disqualification can’t be overturned, can it?”

He shakes his head. “I doubt it. If you have drugs in your system, no matter how they got there, they’re there. That’s a disqualification no matter how sad the story is.”

“This is bullshit.”

He sighs. “I know, trust me, I know.”

Caro walks over to me, and I pull myself from Coby to hug her. Wrapping my arms around her, she clings to me tightly. “How are you doing?”

She sniffs. “I can’t be here.”

I exhale. “I understand. Do you want me to come home with you?”

“No! You stay for the relay. Australia needs you.”

Tilting my head, I slump. “Caro, you need me more.”

“No, I’m fine. I just want to spend some time with Mum and Dad at home, away from everything and anything swimming right now.”

That includes me.

I'm just as much a reminder of swimming as anything else, but I understand. "Okay, but if in the next few days, you need me, you tell me, and I'll be on the first flight back to you."

"Thanks, but I mean it. You stay for the relay and kick some goddamn arse."

Half smiling, I gesture in understanding. "I promise."

Trinny walks over and leans in, embracing me tightly. "Good luck, darling, we'll be watching at home. You can phone anytime you need us, okay?"

I smile. "Okay, thanks for being here, but take care of my girl."

"Will do."

Trinny grabs Caro, pulling her into her side, and they walk off with her family.

Coby moves back in to hold me. I can't help a wave of emotion that washes over me, and I begin to cry. Suddenly, my support here has evaporated. Caro and her family are like my family, and now they're leaving, all I have is Coby and East. And while they're great... nothing beats actual family supporting you and being by your side.

"C'mon, let's go find somewhere quiet where we can let you gather yourself," Coby offers.

I nod, and we head to our nook.

Taking the short walk, we set up on the ground, and Coby rests his back against the wall. I sit in between his legs, leaning against his front. I rest my head on his

shoulder. He wraps his arms around my waist and holds onto me as I whimper.

“It’s okay to be upset, Lace.”

I wipe the tears from my cheeks. “I can’t even imagine what she’s going through right now.”

“It’s probably best for your sanity if you don’t try too hard to think about it. Just be there for her when she messages or calls, and when she gives herself space, let her have it. She’s going to need time to get her head around this.”

“Yeah. I just wish there was more I could do.”

“I don’t think there’s anything anyone can do... except to seek justice. If Tuck can find a way to bring Marta down, we have to help him.”

“Agreed.” I cuddle back into him and sigh, just needing to be near him right now.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

After spending about two hours with Coby in our nook, just cuddling and talking, I come back to the unit. It's getting late, I'm dog tired, and all I want to do is sleep. As I walk inside, an eerie sensation washes over me.

All of Caro's things are gone.

I'm isolated.

Walking into Caro's room, her bed is made, but there is nothing left—her photos, her clothes, her stupid toy unicorn that goes everywhere with her.

All gone.

Plonking down on her bed, I exhale and scan the hall. It's dim, dark, and depressing, like my mood. I have no idea how I'm going to cope. I pat her pillow and wander back out into the lounge area, where I pick up my phone and open the messaging app.

Me: I'm so alone here...

I hit send and slump. I scan the suddenly not-so-small unit. My phone beeps, and I peek down.

Coby: I'll be right over.

Half smiling, I reply.

Me : It's not allowed, rules and all :-(

Coby: I don't care about the rules. What number are you?

Smiling, I can't be bothered fighting him on this. To be honest, I want him here. I just hope he doesn't get caught.

Me: Unit seven, swimming section, female dorms.

Coby: I should hope you're in the female dorms. lol. See you soon. xo

Half smiling, I shake my head. Obviously, I'm not thinking, where else would I be other than the swimming section in the female dorms? My head's not in the game right now. Taking a deep breath, I wait about ten minutes. Was Coby actually coming? Then I hear a gentle knock at my door. I rush over and open it to him standing there, wearing a hoodie. I quickly grab and pull him inside, then peek out the door to see if anyone's out there. There isn't.

"You're being silly. We can get into so much trouble if you're caught here." I giggle, shutting the door behind me.

Coby pulls me to him, giving me a slight head shake. "I'm not letting you be alone tonight. Fuck the consequences."

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I smile up at him. "You're a bad, bad boy, Coby Mathers," I tease.

He smirks, leaning his forehead against mine. "Can I show you just how nice this bad boy can be?"

Chuckling, I roll my eyes. "Please, lead the way," I reply, and he lets go of me, grabbing my hand. I lead him to my bedroom and turn around as I reach the bed. "Take the hurt away," I murmur.

He pushes me, so I fall back onto the bed, bouncing slightly with the weight as I fall. He moves on top of me and kisses me passionately. I'm hurting—he can take my pain away, if only for a moment. He sits up, pulls his shirt off, and shuffles out of his shorts. I follow and make short work of removing the top half of my clothes.

Coby moves back over me, grabs the hem of my pants and pulls them down, taking my knickers with them, leaving me naked. His briefs go next, springing his giant cock free. I beam. He moves in between my legs and spreads them apart, nestling down in between.

Closing my eyes, I rest, trying to relax, get in the moment, and let my worries wash away. His lips trail up my thigh toward my pussy, and I chew my bottom lip as he teases me. His tongue darts out and runs warmth up my leg toward my pussy, and it connects with my clit, making my hips rise up to meet him as he circles it firmly.

My hands claw at the bed sheets as I finally let go and take in the sensations. His tongue swirls and rotates on my clit, my breath hitches slightly as his hand comes in, and he moves two fingers up to my opening. He swirls his fingers around, gathering my slickness and then slides in with a flick of his tongue.

My body arches off the bed as his fingers stroke my front wall, and I moan as my head flops to the side in pleasure. His fingers move in and out of me in a steady rhythm while his tongue continues to assault me with purpose and poise. His fingers move a little faster, working me up higher and higher. I'm sweaty. My back arches again as he thrusts deeper and flicks his tongue.

A wave of heat washes over my entire body, illuminating flashes of light behind my eyes. My muscles constrict. I detonate. My pent-up frustrations all come crumbling down. I moan and gasp while he flicks his tongue, making me jerk one last time. Then he pulls his fingers from me and slowly crawls up the bed over me. Coby leans down, pressing his lips to mine. His lips taste salty, but I don't mind. Kissing him is



the best part of any day. He moves his hands over my head to shift into position, but I place my hands on his chest, and he furrows his brows.

“You okay?”

I smirk and push him, forcing him to turn and roll over onto his back.

Coby watches me as I climb over, straddling him, and place my hands on his chest.

“Can I lead this time?”

He smiles, positioning his hands on my hips and hoisting me up slightly, pulling me in line with his rock-hard cock. “Absolutely.”

I nestle down, placing my pussy in line with his cock and sliding down slightly. We both moan as I slip down on him, enveloping him completely. My head falls back—I haven’t buried myself this deep into him before. He’s panting. I rise and slowly cover him again and dig into his chest as his finger moves in line with my clit, and he presses on it, instantly making me gasp as I steadily ride him. The pleasure engulfing both of us is obvious from the way we’re both moaning as he moves his hips in time with mine.

Thrust after thrust, I slide up and down on him perfectly. The synchronization as we move together as one is perfect, with our bodies sliding together.

I move my head back looking down at him, and he’s staring at me. As he rotates on my clit again, it sends a shockwave right through me. His expression is one of pure lust and adoration.

This man cares about me as I do him.

He swirls on my clit again, and the heat washes over me once more as he thrusts into

me. My body quivers and tenses as I squeeze my eyes shut and ride him hard. He presses firmly, and everything around me starts to spin as I catch my breath, arching my back. My muscles tighten, and I moan out as I orgasm on top of him. My fingers dig into his chest, but I'm careful not to leave marks as I come down. I continue to ride him as I attempt to catch my breath and fall back down to earth.

He thrusts inside of me, and I need to kiss him, so I inch down, pressing our chests together and kiss him tenderly. He yanks my hair as I ride him. My hands grip either side of his shoulders as we continue to move at a rhythmic pace. The angle is different, and it's hitting a different spot than before, which, in turn, is working me back up. I didn't think I could go again, but I'm thinking I might if it keeps going this way.

Coby thrusts inside of me as I drive down on top of him. His hand gripping my hair in a dominant way is only turning me on more as his other moves to my arse and grips my cheek. I moan as he moves with me.

We slide together, both our bodies glistening with sweat. The heat rises and washes over me, and my back curves as lights sparkle and dance behind my eyes. My breath stops as my muscles seize, he tenses his, and we both moan as he unloads inside of me.

My climax has me contracting around his cock right as he blows his load. I bury myself in him as we both pause and break the kiss, panting from our joint orgasm.

We've never done that before, but fuck that was incredible.

My head rests in the crook of his neck, and he rubs up and down my back as we both pant.

"I can't believe we have sex like this," he murmurs, and I chuckle.

“We’re so good at it,” I reply and stay on him for a few minutes in an easy silence as we both come down from our lofty heights, his hands stroking and caressing me in every way until I become too cold and have to slide in under the covers.

It’s great to have him here.

To rely on him.

He’s shaping up to be an amazing man.

And as I drift off to sleep, I dream of him rather than the nightmare of my real life.

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Opening the door, I turn to my left and then right to check if anyone is nearby. No one’s around, so I grab Coby, and we hightail it out of my unit and down toward the stadium.

As we arrive, a crowd gathers around the televisions, and I furrow my brows at Coby, who shakes his head. We walk up to the monitor to spot reporters going nuts over something. Then the headline flashes all over the screen—Australia’s first drug cheat shames our Olympic Games. Caro and the Hughes are seen to race off in the background, being swarmed by reporters.

Gasping as Coby wraps his arms around me, I blush.

“Jesus Christ,” I murmur as the reporters run up to Caro and the Hughes. One knocks forcefully into Trinny, making her fall over. My stomach lurches as I watch the horror unfold on the television screen in front of me.

“Fucking hell,” Coby whispers.

Anger surges like adrenaline flowing through my veins. Pulling out of Coby's grip, I grab a flyer stand nearby and throw it across the room. I groan as Marta walks in, and her smirk irks me to the very core.

"Lacy!" Coby calls.

It's all white noise.

My feet don't fail me.

I hit the ground running.

I storm up to Marta and shove her.

She tumbles backward into the bench.

"Are you happy now?" I scream in her face.

She smirks. "Blissfully... my silver has been upgraded to gold. Why wouldn't I be happy? I'm just sad you're not a drug cheat like your friend."

My blood boils. "You pompous bitch!" I lunge forward, but Coby grabs me around my waist, holding me back as my hands and legs flail about, trying to get to Marta at all costs. I'm moaning and groaning as I kick and thrash, attempting to do as much damage as possible, but Coby has me tight as she snickers and walks away.

"Lacy... stop !" Coby demands, dropping and turning me to face him.

My breaths are coming firm and rapid from my nose as I try to calm down. I gaze into his eyes, and he furrows his brows. "You can't attack her. She's looking for a way to remove you from the relay team. Don't let her win... again . Please, stop and

think.”

Taking a deep breath and deflate. “You’re right. God! She’s so... so damn aggravating.”

“Try not to let her get to you. Now, how about we get out of here for a while? Maybe go to the Olympic Stadium and watch something else? Get our minds off swimming till Friday?”

“Sounds good to me. What about East?”

“Yeah, let’s go find him.”

Four Days Later

The three of us have spent the last few days checking out the sights and having as much fun as we can with such a big, dark cloud hanging over us. I’ve checked in with Caro every day, and she’s miserable but getting there.

The investigation into Marta proved nothing.

There was no evidence anywhere linking her to the drug scandal, even though all four swimmers connected weren’t known to each other but had the exact same drug in their system. Which points to them taking it at the same time, but again, nothing could be proven. I just wish I’d thought about keeping one of those cups, but then again, what good would that have done?

It’s my word against hers?

And so far, she’s untouchable.

The only saving grace is that word has spread throughout the swim team about Marta, and everyone thinks she should be investigated. But no one will touch her. It's like she is invincible. I'm sure Karma exists somewhere, but it sure is lacking right here, right now.

It's the day of the relays, and I'm on the team with Katie, Hayley, and Laura. We're all on tenterhooks, not comprehending what Marta has in store for us today. I shared my thoughts with Katie about Marta, the false start incident, and the poor Chinese girl who fell prey to her as well. She thinks Marta is perfectly capable of doing it and that I didn't imagine it at all. So we're worried that she might pull the same trick again today, especially because she and I will be on the starting blocks together.

As we line up for the walk out, I turn to Katie. "Just watch your back out there, okay? Who knows what she has planned for us," I whisper.

She exhales. "It's pretty shit that we have to watch ourselves. I'm sure it's not supposed to be like this. It wasn't at the last Games I was at. Everyone supported each other. Marta is in a class of her own. I'll never understand what she gains from cheating her way to victory."

As we walk out, we all wave and smile at the cheering crowd. I'm despondent and lonely because the Hughes aren't here to support me. But I know they're watching at home.

The announcements start, and I roll my shoulders and slap my biceps, releasing the blood flow through my muscles. I need to be on my A-game for this race.

"Australia," they announce.

I step forward, holding Katie's hand, and we throw them up in the air as a team. The home crowd cheers and erupts in applause. I have to admit that having a home

Olympics as your first one is pretty special. Having the home crowd advantage is proving to be something amazing.

The buzzer sounds, and Laura moves up to the starting block. My nerves aren't as bad as they were for my gold medal race, but they're definitely there. This is more of a team effort—we all need to work toward this goal. We can do it. The buzzer sounds, and Laura drops into the pool to get ready for her backstroke.

“Take your mark.”

Laura positions herself on the wall, crouching up into it and the starting signal fires. She leaps from the wall backward into the clear water. Katie grabs my hand and we jump up and down in excitement as she takes off into the lane perfectly. She's out in front, right alongside the English swimmer. There's not much space between them. This is going to be a tight race. Hayley steps up to the starting block, ready to take her place and jump in when Laura hits the wall.

Laura turns down the other end and is still in line with the English and the Americans, with the Chinese tight on our tails. We all need to put in our best efforts to win this relay. Katie and I cheer as Hayley positions herself ready to jump in. Laura glides toward the wall, and I hate this part—anything can go wrong—so my breath holds, and I grit my teeth as Laura slams against the wall and Hayley dives in. My stomach settles. Katie glances at me and beams as Hayley takes off doing the breaststroke in her perfect form.

I'm up next, so I turn to Katie and nod.

She grins at me, squeezing my hand. “You can do this.”

I offer a small smile. “Yeah, we both can.”

She turns to leer at Marta, who I'm going to be racing against, and then she turns to face me. "Whoop her damn arse."

With a chuckle, I step up to the starting block. My nerves are out of control as I catch Marta staring at me. I glance ahead to watch Hayley and the English girl in a direct line—I can't tell who's in front. I need to push to get us a healthy lead, and my God, I am going to push hard to get ahead of Marta.

Hayley swims, and as she gets closer and closer, my stomach flips. I'm nervous, but I can do this. Hayley slams against the wall and I leap off the starting block and dive straight into the water. A slight smile crosses my face as I hit the pool. I've missed this, the adrenalin of the race, the thrill of the chase, the speed of the hunt. I live for this. As I come up for air, I raise my arms over my head. Then slam back down into the water. I love freedom in the water. All my cares all my worries disappear. Right now, all I can think about is getting in front so I can kick Marta's scrawny, pale arse.

I reach out for the wall and turn, and as I come back up, an almighty smack crashes up into my face. My eyes roll around as the sharp pain radiates through my nose. I stop swimming and push myself to the edge of the pool, grasping at my nose. A buzzer sounds as arms reach down to lift me out of the pool as my head fades in and out of blackness.



## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

My head is pounding as the fuzz clears and the blackness lifts, showing the stadium and all the people surrounding me. My head is hazy as I try to gain my bearings.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I got too close to the lane ropes, and my arm came under and hit her nose. I’m so terribly, terribly sorry,” I hear Marta say in a sickly sweet voice as I lay on the edge of the pool deck, zoning in and out.

“Lacy, Lacy, can you hear me?” Tuck asks while a medic takes my blood pressure.

I dip my chin, trying to take in everything around me. There’s some yelling and I catch security holding Coby back as he struggles to get to me.

I sit up dramatically.

Tuck pats my back. “Lacy... say something.”

“What happened?” I gurgle.

Everyone around sighs with relief.

“Marta’s hand came under the lane and hit your face. She hit you pretty hard.”

I huff and glance at Tuck. This wasn’t an accident. “Okay. What happened to the race?”

“They stopped it. It’s going to be re-run at another time. Once we can find another fly swim—”

“No! I’ll do it. Just give me five minutes to get my bearings.”

“Lacy, you could have drowned. You nearly passed out.”

I cough slightly. “Tuck, I’m not... not racing in this event.”

“Let.. me... through ,” Coby yells and somehow bursts through security. He rushes to my side and pulls me to him. “Jesus Christ, Butterfly, scare a man half to death, why don’t you?”

“Sorry.”

He caresses my cheek. “You okay? How’s the nose?”

“A bit sore, but I’ll be fine. I just need to win this relay.”

He scoffs. “You’re not going back in that pool—”

“Coby don’t—”

“No, Lacy, you practically drowned. You probably have a concussion. Be smart.”

I slump and soften my gaze on him. “Coby... I love you for caring, but I didn’t even swallow any water before someone pulled me out. Australia needs to kick Marta’s arse, and I want to help do that.”

“What if it happens again?”

“She’d be stupid to try it twice. Plus, she did it so I would bow out. If I don’t race, I give her what she wants. She will win.”

“She’s right, Cobes,” Katie chimes in from behind me.

“Shit!” Coby huffs.

“So, how long can they delay the race for Tuck?” Coby asks.

“They’re thinking of re-running it after yours.”

Coby winces. “Okay, but you stay by my side until then. Katie, while I’m out racing, don’t let her out of your sight!”

“Agreed,” Katie replies.

“Let’s get you off the floor,” Tuck advises.

I nod as Coby stands up, taking me with him in his arms. I stumble slightly, but he catches me as I take in a deep breath, and the crowd cheers. I wave to them. Coby wraps his arm around my waist and walks with me, Katie, and Tuck to the marshalling area. I sit with Katie while Coby gets ready for his relay race, and we watch on the screen as I try to get my breathing back to normal.

Coby swims last for the relay team and brings home a silver for Australia, being narrowly beaten by the Americans.

I’m super happy for him, though.

By now, I’m much better.

Tuck walks up and squats down in front of me. “Are you okay to race? It’s fine if you’re not, we can withdraw and no one—”

“No way, we are racing. I’m good to go. I promise, Tuck. I’m fine, nothing but a little bump to the nose. Let’s do this.” Standing up, I move over to the lineup. I spot Marta and raise my eyebrow in a gesture of ‘ you can’t beat me. ’ She grunts. Then I face Katie, who bumps my shoulder. We walk out, taking our positions again, and I must admit I’m nervous. I’m not up to my full potential, and it could be critical to the team. But I am going to power through, and if I struggle, hopefully, Katie can pick up my slack.

The buzzer sounds, and Laura steps up to the block, and she jumps into the pool.

My nose hurts.

I’m still a little dazed, but I hope I’ll be fine.

And I’m not putting it past Marta to try something else. She’s obviously so threatened by us that she’s willing to attempt anything to get us out of the way rather than win on her own merits.

What a loser!

Laura pulls up as she takes her mark, and then the starting signal fires. A sense of thrill and excitement fills the air as the crowd cheers and stomps their feet. It’s hardly ever that a race is run twice. So, this is a rare occurrence.

Laura launches herself into the water. I smile. Hopefully, we can pull through at our second chance at Gold. This time without that idiot interfering. She’d be stupid to try it twice. Katie and I huddle together as Hayley takes her place and Laura swims solid and fast. She pushes hard, and we are second behind England at the moment, with America quickly catching up behind us.

Laura slams against the wall, and Hayley dives in. My muscles tense up slightly at

the thought of being next and of what Marta could have planned, but Katie grabs me, turning me to face her.

“Don’t think, just swim.”

I smile and take a deep breath. “I can do this.”

“Yes, you can, now go.” Katie turns me and slaps my arse as I walk up to the starting block.

Marta turns to me and grins maniacally, which unsettles me slightly, but I push all my fears aside as I take my mark.

My stomach flutters as I take a calming breath. “From the heart,” I murmur as Hayley hits the wall, and I jump in. The water soothes me. Although I struggle, I push through. I come up for a breath and throw my arms over my body, slamming into the water slower than usual, but I continue my strokes as powerfully as I can.

In the words of Dory, ‘Just keep swimming.’

I’m fatigued already, but I hit the wall and sluggishly turn around. My face is aching, my lungs are burning. It scares me. But I need to push through this final fifty for my team. I’m almost there, just a little more.

Just a little more.

I dive and hit the wall.

Relief floods me as I come up, taking a much-needed breath, and it’s then that I understand nothing’s gone wrong—no dramas, no interference, nothing happened—and as I glance down my lane, I see Katie has already jumped in to do her

portion of the race.

Glancing up, I find out that I've hit the wall in third. That means Katie has to pick up my poor performance. I just hope I haven't stuffed this up by being stubborn and wanting to swim.

Laura nods. "Good job."

"Thanks," I reply through staggered breaths.

Katie strokes up into first place, and Laura, Hayley, and I cheer for Katie as she speeds up to half a body length in front.

Katie is killing it!

Hayley, Laura and I jump up and down in excitement as Katie freestyles into a full body length in front of Anna. She hits the wall, turns back, continues her powerful stroke and leads all the way to the wall. As she slams against the tiles, we all scream in celebration.

We scan the scoreboard.

Shit!

There's a DQ sign coming up.

We all stop celebrating immediately.

Who could it be?

England came in second, followed by China in third.

Katie jumps out of the pool and studies the board.

My heart is frantically racing as we all stand there, holding our breaths. The board flashes, and the DQ lights up next to England. I scream along with Katie, and jump up and down in euphoria.

We won the gold.

England is, therefore disqualified.

Katie races to me, and we jump around in a circle as the microphone turns on, so we stop so we can hear the announcement.

“Swimmer three for England left the blocks before swimmer two hit the wall—England are therefore disqualified.”

Marta groans, throwing her cap on the floor. She storms off. I can’t help but laugh along with Katie.

“Maybe Karma does exist?” Katie suggests.

I give Katie a hug and she hugs me back.

“Again, I am sorry for everything that happened at the trials. I was just jealous of you and Coby. But I can picture you two together, just from the way he eyes you. He never looked at me like that. Be good to him. He is an amazing man, and you deserve to be happy.”

“Thank you. I like him... like a lot, and I wanna give this a go with him.”

“Does he know that?”

I smile. “I’m not sure, but I’m going to tell him.”

I link my arm with hers, and we head off toward the marshalling area, where Coby waits impatiently for me to return. I let go of Katie, and she smiles at me.

“Go get him,” she whispers and walks off as I race toward Coby.

He picks me up into a giant bear hug and kisses me in front of everyone. I break out into goose bumps as sparks fly between us.

“No fraternization!” an official yells.

He slides me down his body and gazes into my eyes. “I’m proud of you.”

My shoulders lift and fall. “It was a team effort.”

“Yes, but you didn’t have to swim—”

“Yes, I did.”

He smiles a full-on ear-to-ear grin. “Okay, go get ready for your medal presentation. It’ll be after mine, then I want you all to myself.”

“Sure thing,” I beam.



## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

After changing for the medal ceremony and leaving Coby in the marshalling area, I'm heading back toward the athletes' area at the back of the pool deck, where I prepare to receive my medal. My pride and elation for myself and my country is still incredible. To have done this not once but twice, is something I could never have dreamed of.

Smiling to myself as I walk with a spring in my step, I see a couple hugging over in the corner. I smile at the love people show around here. It's amazing the support you have when you have the right people by your side. Even though the Hughes aren't here right now, I still have Coby, and he's all the support I need.

I continue to stare at the couple—I vaguely recognise the girl as Katie. Opening my eyes wider—as I had no idea she had a boyfriend—I stop on the spot when they separate and stare at each other. My heart leaps into my throat when I see the guy she was hugging so tenderly is none other than...

... Coby.

My stomach flips.

He leans in, kissing her cheek.

Bile creeps up my throat as I watch them interact.

My heart sinks.

I'm shattered.

How could he do this to me?

After everything we've been through.

We're not officially a couple, but I thought we meant more to each other than this.  
My eyes fill with tears as my heart thumps.

His eyes shoot up as if he senses me, and my chest tightens at his expression. He frowns while he shakes his head slightly.

Katie turns to me, and her eyes widen.

"Lacy!" Coby calls.

That's just the kick I need to knock me back into gear.

I turn, my feet hitting the concrete.

Tears cascade as the betrayal sinks in.

Coby saw Katie behind my back?

Is that why she was so nice to me?

Because she didn't want to let me in on their secret affair?

How could I have been so stupid?

"Lacy, Lacy, wait!" Coby calls but I keep running.

Suddenly, arms wrap around me, pulling me up.

I spin around to face him, slapping at his chest as he grabs my flailing hands.

“Jesus, Lacy, stop! Stop and listen.” His harsh tone halts my breakdown but doesn’t change my mind. I don’t know if I’m strong enough to continue after everything that’s happened to me lately. I struggle in his grip, but he pulls me in, encasing me completely. “Lacy, baby, please just stop! It’s not what you think.”

“It’s exactly what I think. You and Katie are back on, and you’re doing it behind my back.”

He exhales slowly, closes his eyes, and then reopens them. “No, we’re not. It was not what you think it was. Katie and me mean nothing to each other... other than friendship.”

“It didn’t look like nothing, Coby. You were hugging, then you kissed her.”

Katie steps up, and I glare at her as the tears flow down my cheeks. “ You ! I thought you were my friend, but all this time, you were stabbing me in the back.”

Katie sighs and shakes her head. “Lacy, you’ve been through a lot, and that knock to the head has apparently damaged your thought processes. Coby would never go for me—”

“Then why the hell were you hugging like that?” I yell as I struggle against Coby’s grip but fail as he holds onto me even tighter.

“I was thanking Katie for being your friend, and realising just how awesome you are. She told me you were amazing and that she had no choice but to be on team Lacy. She was sorry for everything she’d done. All she wanted to tell me was that she was happy for us and that she was glad I was moving on with you. She’s happy for us, and she wishes us the best of luck. And that I have to take care of you, or she’ll kick my

arse,” he yammers.

My breathing hitches, and I stop fighting.

I gasp and turn to Coby.

He gives me a small smile. “That’s the truth, Lace. We talked about how fabulous you are and that we’re happy for each other. That’s all. It was a... thanks for being there kind of thing, and that was it. There was nothing romantic about it at all, baby. I promise.”

I gulp and glance at Katie.

She purses her lips and nods. “I’m sorry you caught us hugging, Lacy. I know that would have been weird to witness, and in hindsight, I guess we didn’t need to do that. But we’d just shared a nice chat, and we were both on such a high and so happy about you, it was just two old friends being, well... friendly. I promise, Lacy, that’s all it was. You have nothing to worry about. I’m not after Coby. He’s far too sappy for me anyway,” Katie quips.

Finally, it clicks, and I break a smile.

Coby lets my arms go.

I take a deep breath. “Well... shit! I’m sorry.”

They shake their heads and smile. “No, don’t be. I can see how it would have looked. And if I caught you hugging and kissing your ex on the cheek, I probably would have flipped, too. But I swear, there’s nothing to worry about. I only have eyes for you.” Coby grabs my hands and rubs his thumbs over my skin, setting a fire running through my body that only he can ignite. “You’ve been through a lot. I understand

your reaction. But you have to trust... trust that I will do everything in my power to never hurt you like that.”

I clench my eyes tight and sigh. “I am sorry. I should have trusted you.” I open them again and smile.

“It’s already forgotten. Just promise we can still be friends?” Katie asks.

I reach out and pull her in for a hug. “Of course. I think I’m expecting everything to go pear-shaped at any minute because that’s my life . My life is one big disappointment after another, and now it’s awesome, and I’m waiting for the rug to be pulled out from under me again. It’s no excuse for how I acted, though. I’m sorry.”

“Lacy?” I hear my name being called out, and the voice is familiar, but it’s way off in the distance, so it doesn’t register straight away as I pull back from Katie.

When I turn around, my heart leaps into my throat.

I’m not sure if it’s in a good or a bad way.

“Mum? Dad?” I holler as they, along with Stacy, run toward me. “W-What are you doing here?”

They pull up just in front of us.

Coby yanks me into his side.

“Is that any way to greet your family?” Dad asks and reaches out, pulling me to him in a hug. I leave my hands down at my sides as he yanks me to his chest. He chuckles and shakes his head. “Oh c’mon, Lacy, you haven’t seen me in so long. The least you can do is give your father a hug.”

I scoff and pull back, rushing into the arms of Coby. “The least I can do? How about I haven’t seen you in so long because... I’m the daughter who couldn’t give you anything useful, so you abandoned me, and therefore, you don’t deserve a fucking hug?”

He flares his nostrils as Mum exhales and steps closer. “Lacy, honey... we’re here to celebrate with you. Let’s be happy and not bring up the past. We want to take you back. We miss you.”

Scoffing, I purse my lips. “So, Dad got you to say that because it’d sound like utter bullshit coming from him, right? Well, sorry, Mum, but you can’t pull it off either. And yes, I’m going to celebrate with my family. But I’ll tell you something... family is not necessarily blood. Family is those who are there to support you. Not those who come back when the timing is... how shall I say this... right.”

“Lacy, don’t be so absurd. Are you suggesting we only want you back in our lives because you made it to the Olympics and won gold?” Mum demands.

Dad looms over me and puffs out his chest.

“Dad?”

He huffs and points his finger right in my face. “Lacy, you’ve won gold. That’s a huge honour. We should have believed in you, yes. But you must do the right thing and come back to our family. You need to share your fame and bring all the benefits that come with it back to your family. You owe us that much. We gave you life, Lacy. Don’t take that for granted.”

“Oh my God, do you actually hear yourself? You gave me life... so I owe you everything? Well, I’ll tell you, Dad... I didn’t start living until I left your clutches. I never knew life could be so good away from you and your rules and restrictions. I’m

better off without you. I made something of myself without you . If you want fame and fortune, you'll need to find it some other way. You're not coming anywhere near my gold or the rewards that come with it."

"You think just because you've lived a small percentage of your life with that drug cheat family that you're living a full life, Lacy? We have money. We have connections. Think of how far we could move your career along if you come back to us. If you stay with the drug cheats, you'll be tainted with the same brush. Hell, you probably are a drug cheat yourself!" Dad sneers as Mum winces. Stacy starts to cry.

Anger surges through me. My blood boils as my face burns. I clench my fists and lunge forward, screaming at the top of my lungs as I reach for my father's neck. Coby grabs my waist and holds me back as I try to kick him. My hands flail about, but Dad smirks as I scream while Mum holds onto Stacy.

"Leave !" Coby yells.

Dad curls up his lip as I calm down slightly in Coby's grip. Huffing, I glare at Dad with such ferocity that, if staring could kill, he'd be keeling over right about now.

If only.

"And who the hell are you? Her bodyguard?" Dad snarls.

I stare right into his eyes. "No, Dad. He's the guy I'm having mind-blowing sex with. Now leave and don't ever ... and I mean ever ... try to see me again."

Coby stiffens against me as Dad stares down Coby, his chest heaving and his nostrils flaring.

Mum puts her hand on his chest to stop him from inching forward.

“She wants nothing to do with you, jerk face. So I suggest you fuck off before I call security and have you escorted from the premises,” Katie pipes up.

“You’ll regret this, Lacy. You...” he points to me, “... and this family... we’re done.” He storms off.

“We were done when you kicked me out at sixteen. This is your doing. You suffer the consequences,” I thunder.

Mum sniffles. “I love you, Lacy. I never meant for this. He’s just so...”

I squeeze Coby’s hand, and then I step over to Mum. She regards me with watery eyes, and I open my arms. She immediately pulls me in for a hug.

“Yes, Mum. But just because he and I are done doesn’t mean we have to be.”

She hugs me tightly.

I glance at Stacy. “And that goes for you, too, Stacy. You’ll always be my sister.”

“We love you, Lacy. It’s so different with you gone.” Mum sobs.

“Yeah, Dad’s so mean... to both of us,” Stacy states.

I try not to cry in front of them.

“Mum, you need to leave... take Stace and leave. You’re strong enough. You can do it. Stace would do so much better without him, and you would, too.”

Mum’s bottom lip trembles when she pulls Stacy to her side. “Would you like that, Stace... to just live with me?”



“Mum, we need to get away from him . He’s awful to you. He stifles me. He kicked his eldest daughter out. He’s not a good man, Mum, and you deserve a better life without him .”

“Amen, sister!” Katie shouts from behind us, making us all chuckle.

Mum turns from me to Coby. “So... he’s cute, hey,” she whispers.

I roll my eyes. “Oh my God, Mum.”

She gives me a wink. “We better go. John will be waiting for us. But I’ll keep you informed. Maybe once we’ve left and settled into a new place, you can come over for a visit?”

“I’d love that, Mum.” I lean in and kiss her cheek, squeezing her in a tight hug, and then I reach out, pulling Stacy into a family group hug. “I love you, guys,” I whisper.

We let go, and they turn and walk off toward the exit where my dad will inevitably be waiting for them.

“I hope they’ll be okay,” I murmur as Coby pulls me to him.

He cuddles into my back and kisses behind my ear. “They will be now you’ve given them the strength to do what you did. You’re amazing, Lacy. You show people how life can be better, how people can live their dreams. You astound me at every turn.”

“Oh, geez... see you are a sappy shit.” Katie chuckles and then smiles as she walks off. “That was badass, Lacy. You sure told him!” She continues to stride away from us, and finally, we are alone.

Coby turns me to face him, and I wrap my arms around his neck, smiling with a sigh.

“Wow! That was an intense few minutes. Finding my man in the arms of another woman and having a battle with the ex-family. I don’t know which one was worse?”

He rests his forehead against mine and shakes his head. “I’m sorry you had to go through both. But you’ve come through them equally as strong, and to me, it just shows how resilient and brave you truly are.”

Smiling, I take in a deep breath. “I couldn’t have stood up to Dad if you weren’t behind me, keeping me grounded.”

He leans in, kissing my lips briefly before pulling away. “I will always be here to keep you grounded. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I can think of somewhere you can go.”

He raises his eyebrow and purses his lips. “And where’s that?”

I gaze into his dazzling blue eyes. “Our nook.”

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

We head off toward our nook when Anna steps in front of us. Her frown, slouch, and pale face tell me that she isn't in a good place. She glances from Coby to me and exhales.

“Lacy, can I talk to you?” she whispers.

Glancing at Coby, he furrows his brows.

What could this English athlete want with us?

“Sure, Anna, what's up?”

She checks that nobody is watching, then grabs my arm.

“Hey!” Coby calls, stepping up so he's next to Anna and me.

“Sorry, I just don't want anyone overhearing,” she tells us, and my interest piques straight away. Her breathing is harsh and rushed, like she's concerned for her welfare. Something's definitely not right with Anna.

“Anna, tell me what's going on? You're freaking me out,” I say, pulling my arm from her grip.

She takes a deep breath. Her chest is heaving. Her eyes glisten. “Okay, I'm going to tell you this only because my guilt is weighing me down. Watching Caro and the others suffering because of what happened is eating me alive. I'm better than this shit.”

My skin prickles with goose bumps, and I stand up taller, taking in what she's saying. "Anna?" I question.

She sighs and leans in closer as Coby gulps. "Marta spiked the drinks at the party... then she handed them out. I knew about it, and I did nothing to stop—"

"I knew it!"

My blood boils.

I want to pass out.

A bead of sweat trickles down my forehead as I turn and start pacing the floor. My hands clench at my sides so tightly my nails are digging into my palms.

"Anna, you have to tell the officials," Coby demands, gently placing a hand on my back to try and placate me, but it doesn't help. I knew, in my bones, it was Marta who destroyed Caro, but I had no proof. All I want to do is scream but also internally combust all at the same time. I heave in breaths and grow lightheaded as Anna slowly starts to cry.

"I never meant to be this way. I was always so strong and passionate... but Marta, she's evil. She's so vengeful and horrible. When things don't go her way, she lashes out, usually at me. She's a dreadful person. I can't believe that I was part of something so heinous."

I face her dramatically as I pant. "Then do something, Anna! Tell the authorities. Step up and be the brave girl you once were. Tell them what Marta did. Show them the proof and have her punished for her actions. Caro is facing a ban of eighteen months for this, all because of Marta. With a few words, you can get some justice for Caro and the others. You can make a difference, Anna... please," I beg, and she wipes her

cheek and tilts her head slightly.

“What if it backfires and Marta gets away with it? Then she will turn on me, and I’ll suffer the same fate as Caro. I can’t lose swimming, Lacy. It’s what I live for.”

I shake my head. “Anna, Marta won’t get away with it. How can she? Spiking other athlete’s drinks is illegal. She will be excluded from the team, stripped of her medals, and possibly banned for life from the sport. Just think of how amazing swimming will be without her in it.”

Anna stands a little taller as that information slowly sinks in. She half smiles and nods while Coby grins at me.

“You can do this, Anna. Please . If not for yourself, then for Caro, who’s back home dealing with the media frenzy of being a drug cheat when she’s not one. Clear her name, clear our country and make this right.”

She acknowledges with her head before leaning forward and pulling me into a hug. I open my eyes wide in surprise but hug her back.

“Thank you, Lacy. I wouldn’t have had the strength to do this without your help.”

“So you’re going to report her then?” I confirm.

She takes a deep breath, relaxing her shoulders. “I’ll go to the Board now. Hopefully, in a couple of hours, we will clear Caro’s name.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much, Anna. You have no idea what this means to me or what it will mean to Caro, her family, and Australia. You are so brave, and you are a real hero.”

She smiles before glancing over to an official and stands taller. “Here I go.”

I grin at Coby as he pulls me into his arms. “This is unbelievable. She better pull through and not chicken out. Maybe I should go with her?” I glance over to her, talking to the official.

Coby shakes his head. “No. This is something she needs to do on her own. She needs to know she can stand on her own two feet again. You gave her the boost in confidence she needed. Now, she just has to follow through.”

“I should call Caro.”

Coby shakes his head. “No, not yet. Wait till she’s reported it, and we find out more. Don’t get her hopes up, just in case.”

With a heavy sigh, I agree. “Yeah, you’re right. But holy hell, if Marta gets some sort of punishment for this, I’m going to be so fucking happy.”

Coby grins and chuckles. “I think the whole of the swimming faculty will be happy if something appropriate happens to that girl.”

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After the medal ceremonies and everything had taken place, a press conference was called, and Tuck ensured that Coby, East and I were summoned to the room while they held it. I’m pretty sure I know what it’s about after seeing Anna again a few hours ago, but my heart is racing so frantically at the thought that something’s going down. I just wish Tuck had told me rather than leaving me to find out this way. Something serious is happening.

East, Coby and I are sitting at the back of the small room that’s littered with reporters.

A long desk is stationed at the front with three chairs and a multitude of microphones from countries all over the world. We're not sure who will be speaking. The conference will start at any moment.

The side door slides open, and cameras begin to flash as reporters fling questions. Tuck, the Head Coach of the Australian Olympic Team and a FINA representative, steps out to the table and sit down. The camera flashes are crazy as I sit up taller, and Coby takes my hand.

“Welcome, everyone. I'm Don Tucker, and I'll be doing most of the talking for this conference tonight. These Games, mainly the swim team, have been tainted this year with drug cheating offences. Four competitors, Caroline Hughes... Australia, Bik Chang... China, Malena Smirnov... Russia and Jessica Holmes... USA, were stripped of their medals and banned from the sport for eighteen months when their tests returned positive for Adrafinil. These four women were not known to each other, other than they were all connected by swimming. We did find it odd they all tested positive to the same banned substance.

“It has come to our attention that another athlete, Marta Botwright... England, was handing out drinks at an event where all the swimmers congregated. Contained in those drinks was the banned substance Adrafinil. Upon talking with Miss Botwright, we can confirm it was her intention to purposely drug her fellow competitors so their results would come back as positive with the result that they would, therefore, be banned, stripped of any medals, and be out of the running in this Olympic Games.

“To say we are appalled by Miss Botwright's actions is a tremendous understatement. Never in the history of the games have we seen such un-sportsman-like behaviour, and furthermore, it will not be tolerated.

“It's almost unbelievable that such a heinous act could bring about the downfall of these four unsuspecting victims. The fact that four swimmers lost their chance at

Olympic glory because of the actions of one person is unfathomable. Unfortunately, because the banned substance was found in their systems, the ruling must stand regarding the loss of their medals and their eighteen-month ban. But the stigma of them being drug cheats most certainly should not.

“These four athletes did not willingly subject themselves to this drug. It was slipped to them, and therefore, all harassment and negativity toward them and their countries should be halted immediately. They are not drug cheats. They did not take the drugs purposely. I will reiterate it was forced on them unbeknownst to them. All drama and negative publicity toward the four athletes must now cease. Turn your anger toward the person who deserves it.

“Marta Botwright’s punishment isn’t enough in my eyes, but she has been stripped of every medal won at these Games. Furthermore, she has been sentenced to a life ban from swimming. For the actions of trying to force out her competitors, she has forced herself out for good. Let this be a lesson to all those competing, all those who will compete, and all those thinking of competing. Win on your own merits. Not because you have to take others out of the race.

“Marta will also face a fine which is yet to be determined...” Tuck pauses to take a breath as he rubs his chin.

The questions from the reporters start firing at lightning speed. He shakes his head, putting his hands up and halts their voices.

“I will be taking no questions at this point. There will be further conferences on this matter as more information comes to light, but for now, I think I have given you everything you need to know. Marta is currently with the Board and is also being questioned by the Australian Federal Police. She is in a lot of trouble, and she will pay for her crimes. This in no way should reflect on the incredible results of the English swim team. Marta acted on her own, and should be treated in isolation.



“Thank you, that is all for now. Have a good day.” Tuck stands up from the desk.

The other men follow him as the reporters fire questions but get no replies.

I turn to Coby, relief washing over me as my eyes begin to prick with tears.

East bumps into my shoulder with a great big grin on his face.

“Caro will be so happy when she hears this,” East enthuses.

“She will. This is the best thing I’ve heard all day. What if the police arrest Marta?” I ask.

East wiggles from side to side as Coby chuckles.

“Let’s not get too ahead of ourselves. How about we just be glad that it’s all out in the open, and Caro can relax for now.” Coby tightens his grip on my hand.

Standing, I turn toward the door to spot Tuck walking past. “Let’s go talk to Tuck.” I don’t give the guys a moment to answer before I sprint out of the doors toward my coach and father figure.

“Tuck!” I cry, and he turns to face me, his lips turning up into a smile.

“Lacy, were you in there?” he asks.

I rush up to him, wrapping my arms around his rotund waist and smothering my face into his chest. “Yes, I’m so happy. Everything is going how it should.”

He chuckles and pats my back. “Yes, I’m glad Anna came forward. The poor girl was a wreck when she was talking to us. She’s in some serious trouble, too, for not

coming forward sooner. I'm not sure what her punishment will be, but at least she came forward, and now we understand what actually happened. I mean, we always suspected there was more to it, but at least now we have the truth."

"Have you talked to Caro?" I ask.

He smiles. "Yes. I rang before the press conference to inform her of what was happening. She was so relieved. The poor girl broke down, and I had to finish the rest of the conversation with Trinny. I think Caro could do with a friendly ear or two right now."

I turn to East. He grins.

"Okay, we'll phone her now. And Tuck... thank you... for everything. You've been amazing. Caro and I couldn't have done this without you."

He tightens his grip on me and leans down kissing my hair. "Hey, kiddo, you girls are my life. Watching Caro go through this nearly killed me. So getting some justice for Marta's bullshit actions is all that matters."

"Thank God that's happened. That Marta was getting away with it ate me up."

"Well, she will get hers, Lacy, don't you worry about that!" Tuck lets me go.

Coby pulls me to him as someone calls Tuck. Then he's whisked away to another meeting, no doubt.

"This is incredible. I mean, it sucks that her medals are stripped and her ban is still in place, but even so, at least now the world understands that my girl isn't a drug cheat. I can't wait to get home to her, to be honest," East remarks.

I smile and bow my head. “I’m so happy. Now, everyone will stop hounding her for the wrong reasons, and hopefully, she’ll have some publicity for the right reasons. Seeing her on the television with all those reporters following her and them accusing her ate me up. I can only imagine what she’s been going through. I wish I was there for her... I should have been there for her.”

Coby shakes his head and pulls me to face him. “Lacy, if you weren’t here to talk to Anna, she might never have come forward. You needed to be here so this could all come out. Sure, you weren’t by Caro’s side helping her, but instead, you helped her here. She will be eternally grateful for that.”

East pats my back. “For sure, Lace. If it weren’t for you, Anna wouldn’t have said anything. You made this happen. Caro’s innocence is on you.”

Smiling, I take in a deep breath and scan the place. There are hardly any people. Since the conference, there have been people everywhere. I grab the guys, pull them over to the empty area, and yank out my phone. “Let’s make a phone call?”

They nod, and I dial Caro’s number. It rings a few times, and I think maybe she isn’t going to answer when she picks up.

“Oh, hey, it’s you. I thought it was another fucking reporter.”

Wincing, I sigh and hold the phone in between us so we can all hear. “No, not a reporter... but it is me, East, and Cobes. You’re on speaker.”

“Hey, babe!” East calls.

“Hey, Caro,” Coby chirps.

“Hey, guys, it’s sooo good to hear some normal vices for once. If I answer the phone

to another reporter, I might actually tear my hair out, and me bald, mmm... it's not a good look."

I wince.

East smirks. "I think you with a bald head could be sexy as fuck, babe," he quips.

She giggles down the line.

The poor girl hasn't laughed since this shitstorm happened.

"Really? You think so?" she asks as Coby rolls his eyes and East smirks again.

"Hey, you'd rock any look 'cause your face is the sexiest thing."

Opening my eyes wide, I grin at East. He shrugs.

"Ah-huh... so you're talking nice 'cause you miss me or 'cause you miss my pussy, big man?" Caro asks, and I burst out laughing.

"Both, but mainly your puss—"

"Okay, serious talk now. Did you see the conference? I mean, by your attitude, it's obvious you did, but—" I ask as she giggles down the line interrupting me.

"Yeah, it was freaking awesome. I'm so glad that she's gonna get what's coming to her. Stupid bitch ..." she trails the last words off under her breath.

"They're saying she may even be in trouble with the police. How cool is that?" I ask, and Caro laughs.

“Sooo freaking cool. I hope she gets arrested, goes to jail and is in cell block nine with big Bertha. She’ll help show her the ropes... if you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, girl!” East encourages, and Coby and I chuckle.

“So you sound okay. Are you... okay?” I question.

She exhales and is quiet for a moment. “I’m okay. I’m not great. I’m not doing cartwheels through the lounge room, but I’m okay. Better now Marta will hang. Having an eighteen-month ban sucks, but I’m determined to come back to it stronger than ever. I’ll be back you wait and see. I’ve wallowed enough, so it’s straight back to training for me. It will be gold all the way. No one will get in my path next time. No one.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” My heart fills with pride as I think of my best friend, my roommate, my sister. She has lost so much, but it has only made her drive stronger, more determined. She’s a fighter, and even through the haze of crap thrown at her, she’s pulled herself through to be a better version of herself.

She is truly amazing .

“Okay, well, keep your chin up and be strong.”

She sighs. “I wasn’t for a while there... I wasn’t strong. I kinda lost myself. But I’m getting stronger day by day. Having you guys and Tuck as my backbone, I can do anything, I can be anything, and fucking hell if I’m not going to show the world what Caro fucking Hughes is made of.”

“Fuck, yeah, baby!” East chirps, and I smile so wide, loving her determination.

“I love you, Caro,” I tell her.

“I love you, too. All of you. Even you, Coby,” she quips, and he chuckles.

“We love you right back,” Coby beams.

“Okay, I gotta go... apparently, there are reporters at the front door now. Fucking hell, I swear I’m gonna just flash them, give them something real to talk about.”

Rolling my eyes, I shake my head. “Caro—”

“Don’t worry, little miss goody-two-shoes, I won’t actually flash them, but I gotta go. East your cock is my jam, peace out fuckers.” And the line goes dead.

We all chuckle as I place my phone back in my pocket.

“She’s in much better spirits.” Coby smirks.

East stands taller. “My cock is her jam.”

Pursing my lips at him, I huff and shake my head. “That’s all you got from that conversation? Really?”

He chuckles. “Hey, I can’t help it if she thinks my cock is the best thing in her world, Lacy. I mean, you had the opportunity to go for all this...” he waves his hands up and down his body, “... but you went for that instead.” He points to Coby, who scoffs and punches his arm.

“Hey!” Coby defends.

“Coby’s all the man I need. I don’t think I could handle... all that .” I scowl as he chuckles.

“Whatever... you love my man meat.”

Pursing my lips, I flare my nostrils slightly. “Yeah... I really don’t.”

He chuckles as Coby kisses my hair. “You guys suck. You could at least pretend that you love me.”

“Oh, East... oh, East... sweep me off my feet and pleasure me with your love rod,” I say in a sickly -sweet voice as Coby and East burst out laughing.

“Oh God, Lacy, that was terrible... love rod? Dude, does she talk to you like that?” East asks.

“Nope, definitely not. That’s reserved for you, my friend,” he answers.

I smile and shake my head.

“Okay, well, that’s enough to scar me for life. Lacy, I’m sorry, but can we just be friends?” East jokes, and I offer a fake frown before laughing.

“Okay, it hurts, but okay.”

“Right, I’m off, got things to do, burgers to eat.” East walks off, leaving Coby and I to cuddle in the corner.

Chuckling to myself, I gaze into Coby’s beautiful blue eyes. “How did I get so lucky?”

He furrows his brows and tilts his head slightly. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I have two amazing friends and a guy who takes my breath away.”

Coby smirks, pressing his forehead against mine. “So this guy? Do I know him?”

Giggling, I lean up, pressing my lips to his softly. That spark, that tingle that’s always there, doesn’t fail me, and it sets off a blaze inside me. Coby is the fire that burns deep inside my soul. I just have to tell him that I want to be with him. We’re both at a crossroads where we can either be together or keep this as just a casual thing. But I need more from him and I know he wants this too.

“Can we go to the nook? There’s something I want to talk to you about?” he asks.

I smile. “Sure.”



*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:44 am*

The nook is our perfect spot, and it has been ever since the first time he brought me here. Now that all the swimming is done, this is the last time we'll be here together, so we'll make the most of it. We're sitting in our spot, cuddling on the ground.

We are at the Olympics.

We both won gold in our events.

And now we are Olympic Champions.

Sure, there were some significant hurdles along the way. But wishing never changes anything. We can only learn and move on.

I face him. "So, I've been thinking about what happens when we get back home."

"Me too. Actually, I want to run something by you."

"Oh, yeah?"

He pauses. "What would you think about me moving down south, closer to Marion?"

Furrowing my brows, I tilt my head. "But what about your team?"

"Well, the thing is, I technically don't have a coach. But Tuck has offered to coach me if you're okay with it. The only problem is I will have to swap teams and move."

"So you'd be a lot closer to me?"

He smiles. “A lot.”

A grin slowly covers my face. “I’d like that.”

“East wants to move, too. We’re gonna get a unit together.”

“Oh, there goes the neighborhood.”

He chuckles and caresses my cheek. “So what do you think? Can we make a go of this... you and me?”

“Definitely.” I lean in, kissing him passionately. Sparks fizzle through the air.

Coby is my true north. The man I’m meant to have swimming in the lane next to me for the rest of my life.

We have a long journey ahead of us.

Nevertheless, we will swim with our hearts and wade through the wakes coming through the waves, united and together.

THE END