



Quarterback Crush (Sweet Crushes)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: What happens when your crush becomes your fake boyfriend

I've spent a long time crushing on Oliver Blackwell, once my next door neighbor, now the star quarterback. But most girls have. Popular, ever so cute, and muscles all over the place, he's my dream guy. But, of course, he has a girlfriend...

Until he doesn't.

Yep, Oliver and Savannah break up and in a completely unexpected proposal, Oliver asks me to fake date him to show Savannah it's over.

Needless to say, I oblige. Willingly and enthusiastically.

Dating my quarterback crush is my dream come true.

But is it?

Because the longer we carry on our charade, the more I know that it's going to end...and badly for me.

He's fake dating me to show his ex he's moved on

But what if my feelings for Oliver aren't fake at all...

Quarterback Crush is Maya and Oliver's story.

All Kylie Key books are sweet not spicy, with kisses only and no swearing

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MAYA

Oliver Blackwell was my neighbor before he was my crush. And he was my crush before he was the quarterback for Snow Ridge High's varsity football team.

And he may or may not have been the main reason for trialing for the cheer team after a random and brief encounter with him in the school hallway in my freshman year. A freak flurry of snowflakes had every kid in school rushing for a look, and in the bustle of heading outdoors, Oliver had brushed against me. His arm had knocked mine, tightly clutching my phone in preparation for taking a photo, and he'd half-turned and apologized.

"Hey, sorry," he'd said with a smile on his face, his dark brown eyes captivating, his half open mouth showing his upper row of perfect teeth. Yeah, 100 percent the smile was for the excitement of the snowfall (which, in fact, had only been hail), but in that split second, it was for me. Only me. My heart swelled, my body rejoiced and I'd suddenly recalled the notice for late cheer trials to boost low numbers.

It was a heart stopping moment of genius because being on the cheer team would not only mean close proximity to the football team, and in particular Oliver, but appeasing my parents who'd been encouraging me to participate in an extra-curricular activity for the good of my high school experience. I'd been quite content to just hang out with my friends—visiting cafes, binge watching shows, watching beauty tutorials and making our own videos all took a lot of time, but Mom, our school's English teacher, suggested I join the film club or become part of the recycling team or learn to play Pickleball.

Protesting that I had no interest in any of those things, I feared being compared to my older sister Lizzie. She'd excelled in music and choir and could talk herself to kingdom come and convince you that the moon was made of cheese, whereas I had no spectacular talents. My opportunities had been numerous—piano lessons, tee-ball, skiing, mosaics art class, ballet and gymnastics. But the only thing that shone was my extreme mediocrity. I'd endure a semester, sometimes two, but none of those activities spoke to me, caused a spark. Not like Lizzie and her love for the clarinet or her absolute passion for debate. No, I was happy to coast along with a somewhat mundane life of watching movies, crushing on boy bands, drinking cappuccinos and dreaming about the perfect boyfriend...aka Oliver Blackwell.

My major infatuation with Oliver started back when I was a tiny fifth grader. The Blackwells had lived in the white two-story house next door for as long as I could remember. He and his three older brothers were always riding their bikes down the street or kicking a ball in their yard or playing catch on the sidewalk, big, tall boisterous boys who intimidated me.

But it was the day when I'd been sledding with Lizzie on the little hill at the end of our cul-de-sac that I really opened my eyes to Oliver. Lizzie had dragged me out of the house and down the street. But when my sled collided quite violently with Nick Herman's on the Cherry Lane hill, it was Oliver Blackwell, and not Lizzie, who came to my rescue. All he did was pick up my sled and ask if I was okay, but there was something in his voice that had been gentle and full of concern, and his friendly smile had made my heart beat like crazy. And when he put his gloved hand on my shoulder to check I could stand okay, I'd looked up into his warm eyes and gone weak at the knees.

"You okay?" That's what he said, and I'd been so blown away by the fact that he'd saved me, all I could whisper was, "Yeah, I think so."

"Want me to carry your sled home for you?"

Dazed, I'd nodded, and Oliver had yelled at Nick for being a jerk and then said, "Your sister's good at sledding."

And I didn't even care that he thought Lizzie was a great sledder—which she was, but she was older than me so she should be—all that mattered was that Oliver walked me to my house. Admittedly, he dumped the sled by the gate and raced back to the hill and I took my poor bruised body inside where Mom made me hot cocoa.

But that was the day I decided Oliver Blackwell was the most wonderful person in the universe and he owned my heart. I peered out of every window in our house at every opportunity to try to catch a glimpse of my hero, my crush, my love.

Many more times Lizzie and I sledded on the hill, but I never spoke to Oliver until several years later when his family were packing up and moving to a new neighborhood across town. Mr. Blackwell had hired a moving truck and the family was carting furniture and suitcases out.

Lizzie was chatting to George, Oliver's older brother and helping him carry out cartons. I stood by the gate watching, a shy thirteen year old, in mourning because the most gorgeous boy in the world was moving away. I was lamenting the fact that I would have no purpose in life anymore, no reason to wake up early and get to the window to see Oliver leave for his morning training sessions or to see him arrive home in the evenings.

"Hey Maya," Lizzie had called me over, "can you help? Instead of standing around daydreaming." I'd dashed over to her, thankful for the chance to get closer to Oliver. "There's a sports bag in there. Can you carry it?"

"Sure," I said, hitching the duffel up over my shoulder. There must have been a bunch of bowling balls in there because it was heavy, like really heavy. But I didn't want George or Lizzie to think I was weak, so I struggled with the bag down the

driveway to the truck where I dropped it on the ground. George and Lizzie had already gone back to the house to get more stuff.

“Hey, Mia.” Oliver appeared in the back of the truck and jumped down as if the height was nothing.

“It’s My—a,” I corrected him rather indignantly, elongating my pronunciation.

“Oh, sorry,” he said as if he was genuinely surprised. “May—a.” I forgave him instantly because my name sounded magnificent coming from his lips, silky and smooth and mesmerizing. “Hey, thanks. That’s Dad’s bowling bag.”

I nodded, still heaving from its weight.

“He’d hate if that got left behind,” Oliver said.

I nodded again—it was all I could do, my lungs already at the extent of their breathing capacity. Oliver was gorgeous, he was like a greek god, a movie star with tousled hair and muscular arms. With complete ease, he single handedly hoisted the bag onto the truck. But in the next instant, Mr. Blackwell and Lance, another brother, arrived with a bookshelf and I had to scuttle out of their way.

Lizzie directed me to carry out a few smaller things, a box of recipe books and containers of kitchen gadgets. Oliver passed me by often with big items like an office chair and a stepladder, and when the truck was full, Oliver hopped in the front with his Dad and they drove off.

I left after that, but Lizzie stayed to help load up George’s car with his clothes and all his things. I danced on the front porch listening to music, waiting for the truck to come back, hoping for another sighting of Oliver before he disappeared to the other side of Snow Ridge.

But it took a long time and it was getting cold and I headed inside, jealous that Lizzie was still helping. Ages later, there was a knock on the backdoor and I rushed to answer it, but Dad got there first.

Mr. Blackwell was saying goodbye and Dad was wishing him good luck and they shook hands and I stood there, already feeling the loss of my daily sightings of Oliver from the window.

But Oliver jogged up our path, something tucked under his arm. And his eyes were directly on me.

“Oh hey, Maya,” he said. “Do you want this? I can’t really hang it out in our new house. And I’d hate to throw it out.”

Mr. Blackwell chuckled. “Oh no, it definitely won’t go down well in Maple Heights.”

As always, in the presence of Oliver, I was mute, my heart fluttering wildly as he unrolled and held up the Snow Ridge Owls football flag that had hung from his window. His three brothers had played in the team and as a freshman, Oliver played in the Junior Varsity team, but it was apparent he was destined for bigger things. “I hope you’ll be a fan next year.”

I could only nod, my eyes big and wide for several reasons: 1) that Oliver knew I’d be a freshman at Snow Ridge High next year, and 2) that he wanted me to have his flag, and 3) he wanted me to have his flag!

“For sure we’ll be at the games,” Dad answered for me, “won’t we, sweetheart?” Dad loved his football and I’d always gone to the Snow Ridge Owls’ games with him, but more because Lizzie played in the band. But now, with Oliver’s flag in my possession, I’d be a surefire fan.

“Yep,” I said, finding my voice, albeit croaky.

Oliver hesitantly stepped a little closer, holding the flag out. Our hands touched as he passed it to me and I thought I might faint. I’d actually fainted a few times, once in church at my great-uncle’s funeral service when it had been hot and stuffy and the speeches had droned on, and in gym class after we’d been running sprints and I’d gotten all dizzy.

I felt dizzy now as I said, “I’ll take good care of it.”

“Thanks,” Oliver said. He disappeared back down the path and Mr. Blackwell followed.

Oliver’s flag became a prized possession, hung on my wall above my desk so I could see it when I was lying in bed. Dad, Mom and Lizzie were the only ones who knew Oliver had given it to me.

Convincing Mom I was sincere in my quest to become a cheerleader had been met with a little skepticism, especially as my stints in anything sporty had been short-lived. Persuading Samantha, my best friend to trial with me had been in vain. She literally said she couldn’t think of anything worse. Sammy wasn’t interested in sport, and Evie wasn’t keen either, while Paige was too busy with skiing and swimming. But they did help me prepare my routines for the trials.

I’d been pleasantly surprised to know I had reasonable co-ordination and could learn cheers without too much effort, and yeah, perhaps Mom’s friendship with Mrs. Foster, the cheer coach, might have had some sway, but being named in the squad had been joyous beyond words, (even though they’d been desperate for numbers.) I was going to be a cheerleader and cheer for Oliver Blackwell and the football team!

But there was one minor detail I forgot to consider. You see, Oliver was taken. He’d

started dating Savannah Adlam only weeks after football season started. At first, I was okay with it. Of course he would have a girlfriend, he was gorgeous. And Savannah was beautiful and popular and...a cheerleader too.

But I found out my humanness had its limits, and having to witness Oliver Blackwell and Savannah Adlam up close and personal through two football seasons had become a little soul-sucking. And if it hadn't been for the fact that I absolutely adored cheer, loved learning new stunts and chants, loved the family atmosphere of the team, I probably never would have stuck it out.

You see, it was pretty much torture to see Oliver holding Savannah's hand, or with his arm folded around her shoulder in a cuddle, or kissing her perfectly glossed lips or her forehead or her cheek. Oh yes, Oliver was very much the exemplary boyfriend, dreamy beyond words, affectionate and caring, and I watched with both fascination and envy, unable to look away.

He drew me in like a spinning neutron star—the most powerful magnet in the universe. Oliver's soft brown hair with streaks of blond and honey and his intense dark brown eyes were a combination that left me pining and breathless and in a fantasy realm. And even when he was lip locked with Savannah, I watched in morbid wonder.

But today's football game against the Lincoln High Lions had been the wake up call I didn't know I needed, the day that my delusion finally manifested and I was resigned to letting my crush go. In hindsight, it probably should have happened back when Simon McAllister asked me to the Homecoming Dance or when Tarik Quaid invited me to the Halloween Bash. But no, I'd declined them both and had clung to my steadfast belief that Oliver Blackwell was the only boy for me.

The cheer team assembled alongside the bus to congratulate the boys on their victory as was our usual custom. Oliver led his team past us, high fives all around. And as he

briefly pressed palms with me, he said, “Hey, Mia!” And my stomach had sunk with a heart wrenching thud and I could feel the air being sucked out of my lungs, my cheeks draining of color as it occurred to me that after all this time in the squad, Oliver didn’t know my name.

All those years of crushing and pining, of going to football games and joining the cheer squad, all obviously pointless. Because it was now doubtful Oliver even remembered I’d once been his neighbor and that he’d picked up my sled and given me his flag, and all I could do is watch in abject misery as he swept Savannah, cheer captain, into his arms, kissing her and showing the rest of us mere mortals how perfect they were together.

I sat next to Rose, my best cheerleading friend. She was a sophomore and new to the squad this season and we’d teamed up together when learning the drills.

Everyone was talking about the Owls’ victory and the amazing pass thrown by Oliver in the final minutes which allowed Darwin Rune to score the winning touchdown. Usually I would be joining in and gushing with praise about Oliver’s skilful play, but my energy had been sucked out of me with the mispronunciation of my name. Well, it wasn’t even a mispronunciation, it was a total wrong name! Maya and Mia were two completely different names! Like Eva and Ava, or Kellie and Kylie.

And that stark reality was enough to crush me. Such irony that my crush—somebody I’d held in such esteem for years (a foolish fantasy, Sammy liked to say)—would be the one to crush me.

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OLIVER

The win against our arch rivals, the Lincoln Lions should have had me fizzing with euphoria, but the minute Savannah rushed me, throwing her arms around me and hoisting her legs around me, I froze. Stiffened like a steel rod, rigid and unmoving.

But Savannah didn't notice. Her lips peppered my cheek, my chin, my jaw—she thought I was teasing, but in reality I was shifting my head around so she wouldn't kiss my lips.

You see, I'd seen her on the sideline, blonde ponytail swinging as she kicked and danced and cheered our team to victory—but during the stoppages, her gaze had wandered across to Lincoln's wide receiver, Ben Monty. Let's just say, I know what I saw.

"Baby, that was an amazing pass," Savannah cooed into my ear. Usually it would send a delicious shiver up my spine, but I was a stone, cold and unfeeling.

I untangled her arms from around my neck, forcing her to stand on her own two feet.

"What was that with Monty?" I seethed between gritted teeth, still trying to keep a half smile on my face. I was always aware of phone cameras being aimed at me after a game and it would do my reputation no good to be caught on video having an argument.

"What?" The complete tone of surprise was so fake that I couldn't stop my eye roll and muttered, "Later," as I swiftly moved on by.

“Sure, babe,” Savannah said, smiling like she hadn’t noticed my lack of affection or my gray mood.

And that’s what bugged me. It was nothing new for Savannah not to pay attention to how I was feeling. Savannah was Savannah and over the two years that we’d dated, I’d learned a few things. She was bold and beautiful, flirty and fun, daring and dramatic, which were all qualities I loved about her.

Or thought I did. But now, not so much. Flirting with the opposition and dramatically flinging herself into my arms annoyed me—a lot. I was fuming and frustrated, but as quarterback, I was forced to smother my true feelings. Our team had beaten the Lions and I needed to project a victorious image, cheering and celebrating. I rejoined my teammates and headed to the locker room, hoping the quick cold shower would cool off my hot head, but I was still furious afterward.

It wasn’t the first time Savannah had flirted with other guys. One of the most popular girls in school and undeniably the prettiest, she thrived on attention. I’d tried to overlook the time she was chatting with the QB from Hamilton Hawks. She said she was trying to get intel on their offensive plays. When he goaded me on the field by telling me my girlfriend was a good kisser, I let it get to me. It was the first time that I got subbed out of a game.

We broke up over it, also not the first time. One time we’d split up because I’d had to do a project assignment with Lauren Stromsky. Savannah accused me of cheating on her which had been ridiculous. Lauren and I had organized to meet at the local library to do research and rumor got around that we were on a date. Yeah, as if I would take a date to the library!

To get back at me, she’d posted a pic of her and Chase Masters, son of the town’s mayor, together at a party. She admitted to kissing him and I was ready to have it out with Masters, but found out she’d only done it to make me jealous. By the end of the

week we were back together, #Olivannah again, regaining our mantle as Snow Ridge High's number one couple.

And that's how our relationship was, never smooth, more like a roller coaster ride with ups and downs, always exuding drama, yet we always gravitated back to one another, seemingly like moths to a flame, unable to be apart for long.

But when Ben Monty sidled up beside me as I was pulling on my Owls jacket, my frustrations finally came to a head.

"So, your girlfriend gave me her number," he said, arms folded across his huge chest for intimidation purposes, "so if you can't get hold of her, she'll be out with me." His teammates chuckled behind him as he held out his arm and read out numbers written on his inner forearm.

I was so livid that I neglected to listen and had no idea if he was just reciting random numbers. I'd reached boiling point and with my outstretched hand I pulled on his shirt collar.

I don't even know what I said or what he said, but the next moment I was being grabbed from behind and Coach's voice boomed loudly.

"Blackwell. Monty."

Another male voice called our names but in reverse order. My jacket bunched around my shoulders as I was jerked violently back by a large hand.

The locker room became as silent as a graveyard, my neck jarred by the sudden jolt.

"Blackwell. Over there!" Coach released my jacket and directed me to the door. Monty smirked and winked as I was ordered out.

“I expect better from you,” Coach muttered in a low voice full of disgust as he stopped me in the hallway. “You’re representing the Owls and—”

“But Sir, he said that...”

“I don’t care what he said,” Coach hissed, his minty breath spraying out at me. “I’ll deal with this back at school. Now go out there and act like you’re the quarterback of the winning team.”

I hung my head, joining my teammates out by the bus where the cheer squad were lined up, ushering us in with their waving pom poms. Adam, my offensive tackle, pulled me into the line and I morphed into auto mode, high fiving the squad before boarding the bus.

“Hey Jessie, hey Harlow, hey Rose, hey Mia...” It was a blur of faces and names, and in a fluster, I got names wrong—I called Jessa Jessie and Mia should have been Maya but I just wanted to get onto the bus as quickly as possible.

Coach Gregor was right there by the door with Assistant Coach Clarkson and, nightmare of nightmares, Savannah.

“Let’s go Owls,” she shouted, blasting my eardrums as she hugged me. I couldn’t fight it, not with Coach’s beady eyes glaring at me. I kissed Savannah like everyone would expect and then hightailed it onto the bus.

I didn’t want to talk on the way back, using the excuse that my ribs were sore. Savannah sat next to me but I couldn’t even look at her, my mind whirling to the previous times we’d split up, dang sure it was about to happen again.

“We good, babe?” Savannah smiled sweetly as she nudged me, obviously forgetting that I’d bruised my ribs, her touch sending pain radiating through my core.

I winced but restrained a yelp. I stared back at her, eyes round and bright, teeth gleaming, cheeks rosy, lips glossy. Normally I would squeeze those cheeks, gaze into those baby blue eyes and kiss her strawberry flavored lips, but a chill spread through me, a numbness seeped into my bones and there was the mind-blowing realization that I felt nothing. The most beautiful girl in school, but not a glimmer of attraction or an ounce of affection.

As Snow Ridge's High most prominent couple—the classic quarterback and cheerleader combo—everyone said the world was only right when #Olivannah was right, but maybe that was all hyped up nonsense. Hype I'd fallen for. Because, too often there had been more downs than ups...and the drama and angst which I'd come to accept as normal was draining, and in a lightbulb kind of moment, I knew I was over it. Savannah and I were not a perfect couple, simple as that.

We might have looked good together, but we weren't good together.

“Did you give your number to Monty?” I asked in a low hum, adjusting my body to create distance between us.

Savannah giggled. “It was just a joke.”

“Just a joke?” I tried to restrain my tone but the fact that Monty hadn't been lying sent a fire through my veins.

“Yeah, c'mon Ollie. I was just playing around, you know, distracting him.” She danced her eyebrows up and down. “Hey, it worked, huh. We got the win, didn't we?”

I stared out the window, refusing to look at her. We didn't win because Savannah gave Monty her number, we won because I threw the perfect spiral to our wide receiver who scored a touchdown. You know, sometimes in the past, I hadn't minded

when Savannah got attention from other guys in rival teams. I'd always been proud that she was my girl, proud to have her on my arm, to be seen kissing her.

Almost like she was a prized possession.

And maybe that's all we were to each other.

And yeah, that was a shocking revelation. Homecoming King and Queen, a show couple, nothing but a high school cliché.

I rested my head against the window, nursing my bruised ribs and looking out at the passing highway that would take us back to Snow Ridge.

"Ollie?" Savannah's voice reverberated around me, but I could only hear Ben Monty's taunt in my head. It might have been a bit of fun for Savannah but I hadn't found it funny in the slightest.

I quickly closed my eyes, pretending to be asleep, dreading the amount of energy that a breakup would bring. There would be fights and arguments and texts in the middle of the night, inevitably followed by apologies and regrets before culminating in a sweet reconciliation.

But there wouldn't be one this time.

I jerked up, ignoring the ache in my ribs. Savannah was taking selfies on her phone. She smiled and tilted the phone to include me. I didn't bother to smile. But I wouldn't do it here and cause commotion. I'd wait till we were home, when I dropped her back to her house.

For the rest of the ride, my stomach knotted. It would've been easier to snap and call it quits right now, but I was already in trouble with Coach and couldn't risk more

controversy.

I was actually walking on thin ice as it was. I was struggling in a couple of my classes and if my grades dropped, I'd be dropped. And Connor Richmond, QB2, was no doubt waiting in the wings ready to pounce on the opportunity to start.

"Smile, Ollie!" Savannah commanded, but all I did was move out of frame and rest back against the window. Unperturbed, Savannah kept taking photos of herself, her face contorting in various poses. Another hour or so and I'd be done.

No more drama, no more turmoil, no more girlfriend.

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MAYA

The rumors were rife on Monday morning and by lunch break it seemed official—#Olivannah was no more. Savannah and Oliver had broken up again.

Where once this news would've filled my heart with supreme joy, on the contrary, I had no feelings. I was blank, emotionless, because Oliver Blackwell did not even know my name. Years of wistful yearning and unrequited love pulverised in an instant when he called me Mia. He may well have stomped on my heart and let it bleed dry, such was my disappointment.

Yes, if I hadn't been on the cheer team for two years or he hadn't been my neighbor for twelve years, I might have forgiven the slip up. But the reality was that I was an unmemorable blip on Oliver Blackwell's radar and it was time for me to come to my senses and enter the real world. So if Simon or Tarik ever gave me a second chance, I wouldn't be so stupid and decline a date. I'd accept and enjoy myself and overlook Simon's corduroy jacket that he wore every single day of the week and Tarik's mullet hairstyle with the short bangs because it just proved that I was petty and shallow. Simon was one of the smartest kids in algebra and Tarik was an amazing guitar player and they were probably cool guys if I took the time to know them.

Oliver was nowhere to be seen in the cafeteria, but Savannah was hosting a small army of followers, looking forlorn and heartbroken.

My best friend, Sammy was unimpressed and rolled her eyes. "It's probably just to gain more likes. You watch, by tomorrow hashtag Olivannah will be back on again."

“Did you see anything at the game?” Paige leaned over the table in a hush. “Apparently Oliver nearly punched the rival quarterback.”

I started to shake my head, but Evie jumped in. “No, he didn’t, and it was the wide receiver. Toby heard that Savannah was flirting with one of the Lions players and Oliver lost his cool over it. But there were no fist fights.”

I devoured this information. Evie’s brother Toby was a senior like Oliver, so likely knew all the inside gossip. Of course, this was not the version the cheer squad had been told. We supported each other like sisters, and in our eyes Savannah could do no wrong. We’d been led to believe that Oliver had dumped Savannah completely out of the blue, but now it seemed she definitely did not deserve Oliver. She was insane to be flirting with other boys and not be devoted to Oliver. I know I would have given my undying...

I stopped myself, remembering that Oliver Blackwell didn’t even know my name. He had no idea who I was. I could not and should not offer him my undying loyalty. I was about as memorable as a book with no plot.

I smiled at Simon as I passed by him in algebra but he didn’t even glance up when I purposely knocked his desk. And I sought eye contact with Tarik in English class but he was engrossed in conversation with Brenna. It was like a cruel kind of payback for turning down the boys in the first place, like the universe was telling me I’d missed the romance boat.

With no cheer squad practice after school, I moped at my locker, hopeful someone might want to go to the cafe. Otherwise I’d have to hang around in the school library and wait for Mom. With Mom being Head of English, she had a department meeting which meant at least an hour to kill. Sammy, Evie, Paige and Rose all had rides or plans, so I had no choice but to study in the library. At least I could get my homework done.

The library was busier than usual, probably due to the rain. To get a table to myself, I was forced to sit back in the reference section amidst the non-fiction books. I opened up my laptop, tucking my phone deep into my backpack. I didn't want to get distracted by the #Olivannah drama.

I proceeded to work on my homework and was making good progress when I was alerted to a buzz of voices coming closer. Annoyed at losing my solitude, I pulled out my phone to see if Mom had messaged me; she hadn't. Dropping my backpack down on the floor, the empty chair next to me was suddenly occupied by a tall figure rushing in.

“Hey.”

I blinked rapidly, comprehension slow as my brain registered that Oliver Blackwell had plonked himself on the seat.

“Hey, Maya,” he said breathlessly, “how's it going?”

He said my name right!

That was the only thought stirring in my mind, the only important thing in the history of the world—that Oliver knew my name! Stunned, I sat mute, not answering his question, basking in this momentous occasion.

“Hey, thanks for the support at the game,” Oliver said.

My heartbeat was deafening, pounding in my ears like thunder, not quite believing what was happening. Oliver Blackwell was having a conversation with me! Well, that wasn't entirely true because I'd yet to utter a single word, or even a syllable, meaning he was engaged in a monologue. What a time for my brain and voice to desert me!

“Can I ask a favor?” Oliver had turned to me, his warm brown eyes so close that I was seeing flecks of gold and yellow, and though his face had possessed my dreams for most of my life, only now did I notice how defined the cupid’s bow of his upper lip was. And how rosy they were. Were boys’ lips usually so pink and rosy?

The library was becoming noisier, and I was all too aware that in my dumbfounded state I’d yet to answer Oliver.

“Just go with it...” Oliver’s head dipped even closer to mine, “please?”

And before I knew what was happening, Oliver pressed his lips against mine. Yes, in what I could only describe as a literally breathtaking moment, I was being kissed by Oliver Blackwell.

Now, I may have been in shock, but that did not stop me from enjoying the totally spontaneous moment. Oh no, all my senses sprung to life and I savored every delicious second of Oliver Blackwell’s kiss, intentional or not. I responded to the softness of his mouth, the minty gum taste and the rich warm scent that I found myself immersed in, knowing that any second now the fairytale was about to end.

Yep, Oliver was going to pull away realizing he’d confused me with Savannah, though considering she was blonde and my hair was plain and ordinary brown, that was a bit of a stretch. But a sudden madness hit me—maybe Oliver was in the process of losing his eyesight, going blind, meaning he was kissing me mistakenly...yet that wouldn’t explain him calling me by my name.

A sharp gasp from beyond sounded like someone was on the brink of taking their dying breath and Oliver’s attention was momentarily diverted, his lips pausing against mine, but it was the menacing cough that made him release his lips in an unhurried, almost reluctant manner.

With my senses reeling from the magnificent chaos, I did however recognize that the person with throat problems was, of course, Savannah. My cheer squad captain.

“Ollieeeeeeee,” she breathed with a dramatic squeal.

I was too scared to look up—at either Oliver or Savannah or the girls who stood behind her.

“What. On. Earth?” Savannah hissed each word with the toxicity of a black mamba’s bite. That is, deadly. Meaning I was the one about to take my last breath. Strangely, I focused on my open notebook on the table, the last thing I’d written: $y = mx + b$

Was that going to be my last memory, the last thing I remembered, a math equation?

“We’re over, Sav.” There was a crisp, authoritative tone to Oliver’s voice, commanding yet not arrogant. “I’m moving on. You need to, too. Though I think you already did.”

A tingle radiated down my spine and I realized that Oliver’s hand rested on my shoulder, strands of my hair caught between his fingers. I daredn’t move, the flutters beneath my skin causing my heart rate to increase substantially.

Savannah snorted. “Sure. Moving on. Good luck with that,” she said with a scathing laugh, her laser-focused glare burning deep into my retinas. I was sure I was going to see a light explosion but my head was suddenly tilted so that I was staring into the perfection that was Oliver Blackwell’s face.

“Yeah, thanks,” he quipped back at Savannah. “See ya round.”

And with a thumb sliding down my cheekbone, he gently steadied my chin and his lips smothered mine again. I was no more prepared for it than the first time, but I

quickly relaxed, keen to repeat the experience. With the sound of an outraged exhale and fading footsteps, I expected Oliver to pull away but as his fingers feathered my hair, every cell in my body melted against him, my wildest dreams coming true.

What had I done to deserve this? Was it because I'd stacked my breakfast bowl in the dishwasher this morning before Mom had asked me to? Was it because I'd shared my bag of Oreos with Paige? Whatever, luck was on my side and I would cherish the moment before Oliver Blackwell came to his senses.

Because it was obvious that he would, sooner rather than later. He'd realize I was Maya Shelton, junior, and not some other Maya that he'd accidentally confused me for.

Even though Savannah had clearly left, Oliver took his time in releasing his lips, followed by his arm, leaving us as two separate entities again. I missed his touch terribly, sad that the warm fuzzy feeling, the best moments of my life would now be a fading memory.

Oliver smiled as he straightened in his own chair, shifting back a little.

"Sorry about that," he said.

My eyebrows lifted, unsure of how to respond. He was sorry? Why? Because he'd kissed me, or that I'd kissed him back?

When I didn't answer, Oliver's eyes narrowed in concern. "Are you okay? Honest, I didn't mean to just jump in like that, but—"

"But Savannah was coming and you wanted to make her jealous?" The words spouted from my mouth because no matter that I'd been in some fantasy realm mere minutes ago, my brain still functioned and common sense prevailed.

“Not jealous...over,” Oliver admitted with a sheepish grin. “But here’s the favor I was about to ask.”

My brow furrowed in suspicion as I envisioned he’d want a photo of the two of us for a social media post, just to reiterate to Savannah that he’d moved on. Because that’s what he’d said to her: I’m moving on.

“Fake date me?”

I rubbed my ears, sure I had misheard. It made absolutely no sense. Oliver Blackwell was the quarterback and could date any girl he wanted—for real. “Fake date you?” My voice rose like I was auditioning for a soprano role.

“Yeah.” Oliver slumped back against the chair. “I can’t deal with Sav anymore. Just say you’ll date me. Please. It’ll keep her off of my back.”

My heart rate picked up again, beating frantically as I tried to grasp what this meant. “Why me?” I rasped out with a croaky throat.

“Why not?” he said with a smirk.

Okay, now my heart went into manic palpitations and I could only stutter, “Y...y...you...you don’t even know me.”

“Relax,” Oliver said, taking my hand in his and squeezing it lightly. “We’ll get to know one another then.”

I swallowed tightly, airways restricting, lungs fighting for oxygen.

“What’s your number?” he asked as he let go of my hand and pulled his phone from his jacket pocket.

Presuming he wouldn't know how to spell my name, I said, "M A Y A," in slow, precise disbelief.

Oliver pushed back his chair and stood like it was mission accomplished. "Okay, thanks M A Y A," he joked. "You'll hear from me soon."

I tried to say, "Okay," but no sound came out, just a choked sigh. My mind was now a chaotic mess, everything happening too fast, and I couldn't understand what I'd agreed to, how I was involved in some scheme to show Savannah Adlam she was now obsolete.

Right as I was sure he was going to bolt away, he stopped and bent down, dropping a kiss on my forehead. If I wasn't already sitting, I would have fallen over.

"You still have my Owls flag, right?" he asked with a wink.

I stared back, eyes large and wide, shocked that Oliver Blackwell did indeed remember me.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:05 am

OLIVER

Kissing Maya Shelton happened with such ease and spontaneity that I emerged from the library and made my way to the locker room wondering if it had been a dream.

But Maya's number was in my phone and that was indeed proof that it had been real.

It had been a tense day of avoiding Savannah—sitting on opposite sides of the room in the two classes we shared, going out for pizza with the boys at lunch break, and voluntarily going into the school library just so I wouldn't see her around.

Ironically, it was Mrs. Shelton, my English teacher and Maya's mother, who gave me a list of study books I should check out. Mrs. Shelton had been particularly discreet, indicating with a nod that I should approach her desk on my way out of English class. I inwardly cringed, knowing my last assignment had been basic, to say the least. There wasn't a lot of time to study, not with training, gym work, more training, and up until Friday night, spending time with my girlfriend. Now, one of those would no longer be an excuse.

Mrs. Shelton's smile had been tight and strained. She'd always been generous in allowing me extra time for homework or giving me a chance to redo less than adequate work. English had never been my strong subject, the creative side of my brain always in a fog. I'd never been able to write stories about pirates and lost treasure or flying dragons, or aliens that transformed into household appliances. And I couldn't see the point in poems or understand why we needed to read essays written back in 19th century England. I could write about throwing the football to my wide receiver and scoring a touchdown and give a detailed summary of game stats and that

was about it.

“Good win against Lincoln,” Mrs. Shelton said.

“Thanks,” I said, aware kids were filing past. “Yeah, it was. Bring on the quarterfinal.”

Mrs. Shelton smiled and waved a piece of paper in her hand, her voice dropping. “I’ve listed a couple of books. Check them out in the library. I think they’ll help with your grade...” She paused and smiled. “Why don’t you go there now?”

“I appreciate it,” I mumbled, my gratitude not specifically for the list of study guides but because she was quietly giving me a second chance. Not wanting to let her down, I zoomed to the library, knowing I’d be cutting it fine with training, but I could do it.

Not being overly familiar with the library layout, I stopped at the desk to ask the librarian where I’d find them. I would have managed with a quick direction to the back, but as Ms. Feng was writing down the exact row and shelf position of each book I could see Savannah making her way to the door which was bizarre in itself because Savannah wasn’t known for hanging out at the library. It had to mean she’d followed me.

I grabbed the paper from Ms. Feng, thanking her quickly. Scouting the signs, I moved with speed, fearing Savannah and friends were gaining ground.

As I turned into the reference aisle, I spotted Maya Shelton sitting alone at the table. I knew her from the cheer team and she’d been my next-door-neighbor way back when we lived in Cherry Lane. It seemed like some kind of bizarre coincidence, fate even, that I was here because of her mother.

I’m not sure how my brain computed all the parts of the scenario to come up with the

scheme that happened in the blink of an eye. Before I could consider my actions and the consequences, I kissed Maya and asked her to fake date me in order to send Savannah a message. It could have been the fast approaching footsteps of Savannah and entourage. Or it could have been that Maya, with her long hair floating past her shoulders and her stunning brown eyes was like an angelic vision.

From past history, breaking up with Savannah had been a drama that involved heartfelt emotion and a bunch of tears—hers, not mine—which resolved itself sometime in the following week. But it occurred to me, that I didn't want that. There's a saying Coach often told us after repeated losses: If you always do what you've always done, you'll keep getting the same result. Essentially meaning, if we didn't make major changes, we were going to keep losing games. Sometimes that meant dropping plays that we'd been working on or introducing new plays or players.

For whatever reason, that now resonated with me in my current situation. And made me ponder just how good Savannah and I were together. Oh sure, we'd exchanged our mutual love for one another—but was it love? If it was love, why did we end up fighting so much and why did it feel like our relationship was such a chore? If Savannah and I reunited after a week or ten days or whatever, nothing would actually change—it would happen again, some good times, then another fight, a breakup, a reunion—a vicious cycle.

And with our best football season in years, and with college applications looming, and my grades teetering on the brink of barely passing, I needed to make a change. I couldn't carry on like this for the rest of senior year.

Though I hadn't intended for Maya Shelton to be in the plan.

Yet, now she was—my new fake date.

As I headed to training, my brain jostled with all the insanity of the past few minutes.

It wasn't like Maya was a complete unknown. We'd been neighbors and Lizzie, Maya's older sister had briefly dated my brother George in their senior year. I could make this work, and it only needed to be temporary. Just until Savannah saw once and for all that we were never ever getting back together.

Grabbing my helmet and pads, strangely relief flooded my body, much like the way Coach made us huddle in the 'breathing circle' after a game. He said we had to let go, dispel all our negative thoughts and stay in the present moment, be thankful we could play this great sport. It was quite easy to do after a victory, not so much after defeat.

But this time it felt like I was mapping out a new direction. And though it sounded harsh to be freeing myself from the shackles of Savannah, I surged with hope, with excitement.

My bubble burst though when I arrived home and dumped my bags in the entranceway, lured into the kitchen by the smell of dinner cooking. My stomach rumbled in anticipation of some much needed food.

My phone was ringing and a glance at Savannah's name made me immediately ignore the call. Dang her for killing my joy—she'd known the exact minute I would arrive home.

"Hey, how was training?" Mom called from the pantry.

"Yeah, good. I'll just shower."

Mom came out holding a long skinny loaf of bread. "Dinner's nearly ready."

I nodded, opening the fridge and grabbing a handful of protein balls and chugging back a glass of milk.

“Everything all right?” she asked, which I knew was a euphemism for what had happened with Savannah. Coming in after game night, I hadn’t exactly been quiet about the breakup.

“Yep,” I answered, quickly realizing I never picked up those reference guides. Not good. Mrs. Shelton would probably want my assignment tomorrow or the next day. With an early morning weights session, I wouldn’t have time to fetch them until my lunch break.

Savannah phoned three times, and it took all my mental strength not to answer and hang up straight away. Hadn’t she gotten the message?

I needed to set her straight once and for all and, on impulse, dialed Maya’s number.

The voice that answered was weak and timid and I wasn’t totally sure it was Maya and panicked that it might be Mrs. Shelton. “Hello?”

“Is this Maya’s number?”

“Yes, this is Maya.”

Now recognizing her, I joked, “Maya, M A Y A?” Hearing a soft laugh, I wished I’d video called her. “Hey, I can’t thank you enough. You know, you saved my life.”

“I don’t think Savannah was about to kill you,” she said with a surprised lilt, “was she?”

I laughed. Like genuinely laughed. “Who knows? She’s already tried to call me a hundred times since.” It was an exaggeration, but it seemed like Maya had a sense of humor.

“Death by harrassment?” she queried.

“Something like that,” I said, unable to stop smiling. “So, we gotta do something about it. When are you available? How about this Saturday?”

“This Saturday?”

“We’ve got St. Martin’s game on Friday night. So that’ll be a big night.”

“This Saturday?” she repeated, sounding a little overwhelmed. “You’re really serious about this?”

“Of course.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quit asking me if I’m sure. I’m down for this, M A Y A. Totally!”

“You think Savannah will fall for it? Why don’t you ask Blanche or Pippa? Aren’t you friends with them?”

She mentioned two girls in senior year, and yeah, they were both friends, but neither of them were date material. For me, at least. “Nah. Pass,” I said. “And besides Sav already saw us kissing, so that’ll make it more believable.”

There was silence on the phone, and my heart raced in dread that she was going to pull out of the agreement, the one I’d basically forced on her. Maybe she’d had time to think about it and realized I was a jerk for suggesting it. Or...

The thought hit me like a thunderbolt out of the blue. “Hey, you don’t already have a boyfriend, do you?” I’d never seen Maya with any boy at the games, but that didn’t

mean she wasn't seeing someone. Implications of her cheating could ruin her reputation, something I had no desire to do.

"Wh...what?"

"Sorry, I didn't even ask if you're dating...are you?"

"No, no I'm not, but..."

"Whew!" I sighed in relief. "I wouldn't want to make trouble for you. Okay, that's all good then. How about I pick you up for school tomorrow?"

"Don't you have an early gym session?"

I was taken aback. "Uh, yeah, that's right, I do. Okay, how about I meet you at lunch break? I'll pick you up at your locker."

"I...I guess," she said, "but if you change your mind, that's fine."

The urge to reassure her was great and I wished I could look her in the eye, show her I was sincere about this and not going to jerk her around. "I'm not changing my mind...I promise," I said.

And I didn't intend to break it, but a meeting with Coach Gregor (yes, a harsh reprimand for the Monty episode) meant I was late and by the time I got to the hallways, there was no sign of Maya. I texted her that I'd been stuck with Coach, and preferring not to face Savannah in the cafeteria, I figured this was the only time to grab those study guides. I fished around in my pocket for the piece of paper Mrs. Shelton had given me. Could I find it? No, of course I couldn't. And could I remember the names of the books? Not a clue. And was Ms. Feng at the desk? Unfortunately not.

Luck was not on my side.

There was no reply from Maya, but I didn't panic. I'd probably see her at training. The cheer squad usually came out onto the field at some point. Yeah, that would mean Savannah too, but that would be a good thing. The whole squad would get to see me with Maya, and Savannah would have to accept that there was no hope for us.

With the quarterfinal against St. Martin's Scorpions, our focus had to be intense. Last year the Scorpions had beaten us but we were a stronger unit this year, and if we could make the semifinal it would equal the Owls best result when my oldest brother Ryan had been quarterback. In recent years we hadn't managed to make it past the first round, so the whole team was buzzed for more.

Working hard on our offensive plays, I neglected to see the cheer team out on the far side of the field until it was time for our cool down. I immediately sought out Maya.

And my, oh my...Maya drew me in as the squad performed a routine to the imaginary crowd in the empty stands. Her long hair was tied up in a ponytail and she wore those legging shorts like most of the girls did when training, and my heart raced in a way that wasn't quite normal. Especially when doing a static stretch.

I threw my hand up in a wave, sparked with enthusiasm...this fake dating thing might not be as bad as I thought.

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MAYA

I texted Sammy to meet me in Mom's car before school. With the whirlwind that had been the past twelve hours, I was dying to tell her all the juicy gossip in person. Being a teacher, Mom arrived at school early, so I always had a lot of time to kill. Usually we'd meet inside, but I wanted privacy with my earth-shattering news.

Because it was earth-shattering. It was the most amazing thing to have happened to me in all my life, even more amazing than making the cheer team or the 200 likes I'd once gotten on a social media post.

But this, this topped them both. But until I shared it with someone, it didn't seem real. And I'd been bursting to tell Sammy. I hadn't told Mom yet because she'd probably slam it as being nonsense and lecture me on how relationships weren't something to be treated frivolously.

Sammy listened in spellbound wonder as I gave a play by play of the library incident and Oliver's proposition that we fake date. But whereas I thought she'd be thrilled for me, Sammy was dubious about this arrangement.

"So, he kissed you to make Savannah jealous?" she asked.

"No, not jealous," I said, "to give Savannah a message."

"And what message is that?"

"That they're over," I said.

“Are you sure he’s not using you?” Sammy asked. “You know, you have crushed on him for some time.”

“He doesn’t know that,” I said with a half-grimace, “though, to be fair, who hasn’t crushed on Oliver Blackwell?”

“True,” Sammy conceded. “I’m just worried, you know, that you might get hurt.”

“Hurt? Aw, you’re so sweet to worry, but no way I’ll get hurt.” I squirmed with joy. “It’s Oliver Blackwell !”

“Maya,” Sammy said sternly, putting on her mom voice. I guess you could say my bestie was the more grounded of the two of us, less flighty, less awestruck than me.

“Okay, I’m under no illusions that Oliver is going to fall in love with me,” I said, “but just think...I get to kiss Oliver again. It’s like all my dreams have come true.” I smiled and batted my mascara-covered eyelashes in a slightly supercilious way, unable to stop my boasting.

Sammy sighed, seeming to appreciate how important this was to me, but only for a moment. “What about Savannah?” she asked with a scowl.

“He just wants to move on from her,” I said, mirroring Oliver’s own explanation.

“Yeah, fine,” Sammy said, “but how do you think Savannah is going to react to this?”

“Huh?”

“On. The. Cheer. Team.” Sammy spelled it out for me slowly. “You think Savannah will just accept that Oliver’s suddenly dating you? You do know that they break up and get back together as regularly as a lunar eclipse?”

I stared. I had no idea how regular lunar eclipses were, but I did know a little about #Olivannah's past history—everyone did.

"I'm just saying, what if Savannah doesn't like the idea of Oliver dating you? What if she gets upset with you?"

Sammy's words hit like a punch to the face (not that I had ever been punched in the face, but once I'd been smacked on the head by a wayward frisbee and that had hurt a lot.) It hadn't crossed my mind that Savannah could make things difficult for me.

"You mean, on the cheer team?"

"Maybe..." Sammy replied.

"She wouldn't," I snapped back. "The cheer team is like a family."

"She might. Cheer captain," Sammy held out her right hand, "and junior cheerleader." She put out her left hand as if weighing up the two. The junior cheerleader left hand went down low, way down low, clearly showing that the cheer captain would have the upper hand.

I bit down on my lower lip, my stomach knotting at the very real possibility that Savannah could make my life somewhat miserable if she wanted to. But the moment was temporary and I sprung back in joyful rapture. I couldn't let something minor like that ruin the opportunity that Oliver offered. To be his girlfriend, albeit fake, would be worth it.

"It'll be okay. I'll be okay," I said with a carefree shrug.

Sammy's lips pressed tightly and her eyes narrowed with doubt.

“It’ll be fine!” I reassured, but my confidence was fake because maybe she was right and I’d jumped too quickly, was getting in way too deep. A silly, star-struck junior who had her head in the clouds. For that reason, I decided not to tell Sammy that Oliver wanted to meet me at lunch break.

And I was pleased I hadn’t. Because no matter that I stalled at my locker and pretended I couldn’t find my books and then needed to go to the restroom, Oliver never showed.

Yep, seemed my fake boyfriend was already backing down.

I MET UP WITH ROSE before cheer practice, ensuring I had an ally before facing Savannah. But Savannah wasn’t there and the gossip spread that she was sick. There were squinty sneers from a few of the seniors, but nobody said anything so I carried on as usual. With the Owls playing for a semifinal position, we went out to the field to co-ordinate our opening cheer with the band.

As we practiced to the music, the football players started to wind up their training, some of them were stretching, others were jogging slowly, and in a move that made my heart leap, Oliver was obviously watching me.

I felt great pressure not to muck up and was relieved when Coach Foster called it a day. Oliver was quickly by my side, but because Savannah wasn’t here, I wondered why he needed to put on an act.

“Did you get my text?” he asked. “Sorry, I couldn’t meet you but I had a meeting with Coach that went way too long.”

I half-smiled and spoke through closed lips as if I was trialing for the ventriloquism club. “You know Savannah isn’t here today, so you don’t have to put on a show.”

Oliver shrugged and looked around as if he had only just noticed Savannah's absence. While he did that, I pulled down on my bike shorts, trying to make them cover a little more of my legs.

"You guys looked good," Oliver said, his smile melting me. It was possible I could spend the rest of my life staring into his warm brown eyes and those luscious lips. "Hey, I gotta go shower. Do you need a ride home?"

Had Oliver not heard what I said about Savannah? I would usually text Mom or Dad to pick me up if Mom wasn't working late at school, and today she wasn't.

"I'll get Mom..." I started to say, but Oliver butted in with ease. "Do you know my car, it's..."

"I know it," I said, nodding. Of course I knew his silver sporty SUV, its license plate embedded in my brain.

"Meet me there," he said, breaking into a run as he crossed the field ahead of me.

I gulped, uncertain as to why Oliver was taking the whole fake dating thing so seriously when Savannah wasn't here to witness it. He'd already organized our first 'date' for Saturday, so it was surprising that he wanted to take me home now.

I forgot Sammy's warning to be cautious and quickly grabbed my bag, texting Mom that I would be getting a ride. She'd assume it was with Rose because her father had dropped me home before.

I waited on the edge of the parking lot, trying to be invisible. Logic told me Oliver would come to his car eventually, but I couldn't shake the thought that he'd stand me up again, just like at lunch break. Everything seemed surreal and I was waiting for someone to jump out and say I'd been pranked.

But within minutes, Oliver was striding through the parking lot and I stepped out from the shadows.

“For a second, I thought you’d left,” Oliver said.

I smiled, not wanting to admit my insecurity. The butterflies resurfaced and swirled in my stomach as he opened the passenger door for me, his smile and scent sending me lightheaded and dizzy.

“You know, I could have called Mom for a ride home,” I reiterated as I clicked up the seat belt and positioned my backpack at my feet.

“It’s no problem,” Oliver said, starting the car. “It’s the least I can do, considering the favor you’re doing for me.”

“It’s no problem,” I echoed with a shy grin.

I’d held imaginary conversations with Oliver regularly over the years of crushing on him, but now that I was sitting next to him, my mind went blank. I focused my gaze on Oliver’s hands guiding the steering wheel.

“How did your training go?” he asked, turning down the volume of the car stereo.

“Really good,” I said. “Except Savannah wasn’t there, so we had to change a few routines.”

Oliver nodded, but didn’t mention her. “We had a good session. The team is pumped for St. Martin’s.”

“Yeah, so are we,” I said.

“Don’t forget our date on Saturday.”

“Okie-dokie!” I chirped enthusiastically, cringing as I realized I sounded like my Dad. That was his pet catchphrase, along with ‘super-duper’ whenever he was in a cheery agreeable mood. Which was most of the time. Nothing fazed my Dad, ever.

Oliver gave me a rundown on the Owls’ past record against St. Martin’s, going right back to when his oldest brother played for the team. And though I followed football, the finer details of the rules and stats went over my head when he talked about passing yards and completion ratings and turnover differentials.

I kept smiling and nodding like I understood, determined I would make more of an effort in learning the sport because Oliver’s passion was obvious. All too soon, Oliver was driving down Cherry Lane and reminiscing over the neighborhood.

Do the Stuarts still live there? Is that a new fence? Wow, that tree is massive now!

As he slowed outside his old house, he looked up to his old bedroom window. “That’s where I hung my Owls flag,” he said. “You still have it, right?”

“Yeah, it’s on my bedroom wall,” I said.

He narrowed his eyes and teased, “Really? That’s cool.”

“You can come and see if you like,” I blurted out, not thinking about how shocked Mom would be to know Oliver Blackwell had brought me home.

“Some other time?” Oliver said smoothly. “Gotta get home.”

“Of course,” I said, a wave of dejection washing over me. I needed to tamp my enthusiasm. I was acting too eager, forgetting that this wasn’t a real relationship. I

was his fake girlfriend, just an act to keep Savannah away from him. I unbuckled my seat belt and opened the car door. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Sure,” Oliver said, but as I was getting out, he reached out, grabbing hold of my arm. A warm tingly rush spread through me. “Hey, I appreciate you doing this, you know.”

I smiled tightly and forced a bubbly reply, “You’re welcome.” I closed the door and stood at the curb watching and fluttering a wave as he drove away.

I had a lot of work to do. If I was going to be Oliver’s fake girlfriend, I needed to make it as authentic as possible. And now that I knew Oliver’s passion was solely and totally football, I needed to spend the evening with Dad—learning about football.

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OLIVER

I heard my name called the moment I stepped inside the front entrance, and the tone was not a happy one. My first thought was that Mom had found out about my less than stellar grades, so I poked my head into the kitchen and said cheerily, “Hi Mom, I’m back.”

“You haven’t made things up with Savannah?” Mom clipped, picking up her glass of wine.

“What?”

“Savannah? You haven’t made up with her yet?”

“I told you we’re over for good this time,” I said, bustling over to the fridge. I scanned the shelves and grabbed my container of homemade protein balls and the bottle of milk. Mom tutted and handed me a glass before I drank from the bottle.

“You always get back together,” Mom stated. “Penny is worried.”

My stomach clenched in dread. If Mom had spoken to Savannah’s mother, it meant that Savannah wasn’t going to give up on us so easily.

“Hmphh.” I let out an agitated sigh. “I told her this is it. For good. And I mean it.”

“Okay, okay, calm down,” Mom said, though I hadn’t realized I’d raised my voice. “It’s just that you say it every time and you always get back together.”

“I’m done,” I said forcefully. “I’m sick and tired of all the drama.”

“But you two are so cute together,” Mom drawled with a cheesy smile.

“Cute?” I mocked. “You think being cute is a good reason to stay together?” I shook my head in disappointment and popped a peanut butter protein ball into mouth.

Mom cleared her throat and looked a little sheepish. “I’m sorry, Ollie, I just thought you two were the perfect match. What’s it been? Two and a half years?”

“Feels like twenty,” I muttered, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. “It’s time to move on.”

“All relationships have ups and downs,” Mom said, sipping her wine.

“Sure, but ours feels like more downs than ups,” I said.

“You looked so great together at Homecoming though,” Mom said.

I huffed with thick sarcasm. “That’s the second time you’ve said how good we look together.” I put the milk back into the fridge and stood with my fists clenched by my side. My relationship wasn’t something I talked to Mom about—ever, but I felt the need to open up especially as it seemed there was a bias against me and I’d been deemed the bad guy. “Do you know what really happened?” I didn’t give Mom a chance to reply. “Savannah was flirting with the wide receiver from Lincoln. And it’s not the first time. And I’m over it.” I didn’t flinch, my stance intimidating. “I’m just over it.”

Mom’s mouth gaped in surprise. It took her a moment to find her words. “I didn’t know,” she said softly, taking another sip of drink. “Penny said Savannah was shocked that you’d broken up with her, that she couldn’t understand why you had.”

I shook my head. “Lies, Mom. I talked to Sav about it. She laughed it off and said she was just...” I held my hands up for air quotes, “...distracting him.” I rolled my eyes.

“Well, Penny believes you’ve broken up for no good reason. She said Savannah’s devastated.” She set her empty wine glass down and gave me a hard stare. “And apparently she was too upset to go to school today.”

Knowing I was on the verge of losing it, I closed my eyes to reset. Savannah was not going to take ownership of the breakup and would likely play the role of innocent victim. I had a small pang of regret that starting the new fake relationship with Maya might have been a little hasty. But then I remembered the kiss, and there was no regret over that. Besides, there was nothing I could do about it now—I was taking Maya on a date on Saturday, and I was looking forward to it. Like really looking forward to it.

“Do you want me to start dinner?” I said, noticing nothing had been prepared. I didn’t mind cooking and it would certainly get my mind off of Savannah.

“No, you go and do your homework,” Mom said. “I’m just about to get started.”

In my room, I pulled out my English assignment, taking a glance of it, but without the reference guides it would be a struggle. Still, I had to make a start. As I clicked on my assignment to see where it needed improvement, Dad poked his head in my doorway.

“Whatcha up to? Rewatching the Scorpions game?”

There was so much expectation in his voice, that without thinking, I answered, “Yep.” Meaning I had to click on St. Martin’s last game, even though I’d already seen it.

“That’s my boy,” Dad said with a satisfied chuckle. “There’s always something new

to see, a pattern of play or a defense strategy to analyze.”

He sat beside me and I restarted the video. “Look how early Hatton throws the ball,” I said with a mix of both awe and despondency, “way before his receiver is out of his break.”

“Hatton is good,” Dad stated, nudging my shoulder, “but so are you .”

We watched the replay until Mom called us to dinner and after eating, we spent the rest of the evening reviewing games. Dad had played college football and was now an avid fan and supporter, and though my brothers had played for the Snow Ridge Owls, none of them had won a championship. And he made no secret of the fact that he would be thrilled if I’d be the one son to follow in his footsteps and get a scholarship and play college football. Just like him. My brothers had gone on to study Architecture, Computers and Business at college.

All too soon, hours had passed and Mom was shooing me off to bed, telling me I needed my rest, but also pestering me about Savannah again.

“I think it might be a good idea to talk to her,” she said. “Let her know that it’s definitely over because Penny doesn’t seem to think it is.”

I’d had enough of the Penny and Savannah issue and mumbled, “Yeah, whatever.” I suddenly remembered I had an English assignment to resubmit.

I checked a text from my brother Lance, asking me how training had gone. He’d been a linebacker for the Owls but was in his third year of college, studying computer engineering. He’d been a top student at Snow Ridge High with a 4.0 GPA and...

I was struck with a heart stopping idea, one I should have ignored, but the more I thought about it, the deeper it embedded into my brain...

My brothers still had their bedrooms for when they came home for holidays or summer and winter breaks. Sure, they'd taken their clothes and stuff with them, but Lance's trophies and childhood knickknacks were still lined up on shelves and his desk and bookshelf were stuffed with his old school books. I padded across to his room, nervous yet excited. The answer to my dilemma might be right here in Lance's room. Surely he took English Language and if he didn't, Ryan or George must have. Hopefully there were written assignments on paper, rather than his computer.

I opened his desk, then his closet. On the top shelf was a bunch of folders, all well labeled with subjects and grades.

"Thank you Lance," I breathed as I easily found the AP English Lang folder.

I hadn't wanted to take any Advanced Placement classes, but everyone said I needed them. Colleges would be more favorable to my average grade for an AP class than my great grade for a regular class. Or so I was told. As I was struggling with AP Biology too, I wasn't so sure it had been the right advice for me.

I checked the hallway before quietly closing the door and slipping back into my room. I wasn't going to copy Lance's assignment outright, maybe just use it as a guide, get some inspiration from it.

With a weight training session early tomorrow morning, I flicked through the folder, my heart racing as I considered the goldmine in front of me. I needed to take notes quickly because then I could resubmit to Mrs. Shelton and concentrate solely on the game.

It was well after midnight when I finished typing up my assignment. I didn't bother to proofread it, already bored by it. Lance had gotten an A, but I'd be more than happy if my version got a B.

I grabbed my phone and though it was way too late, I sent Maya a goodnight text. I wasn't expecting a response—and didn't get one. But that was okay. I was feeling good about things. Assignment done, big game on Friday and my first date with Maya on Saturday night.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 7:05 am

MAYA

“Dad? Are you busy?”

I walked into the living room where Dad was stretched out in his recliner watching television, but also with his phone in his hand.

“Depends,” Dad said with a stupid grin. “What do you want?”

I’d already thought up a fake reason why I needed to learn about football, so I answered with supreme confidence. “I’m helping with an article about the quarterfinal so I need to know a bit more about actual football.”

Dad brought his armchair into an upright position and put his phone down. “Super duper. What do you need to know?” He rubbed his hands together as if I’d just announced he was a contestant on Who wants to be a millionaire?

“Uh, about the rules and the plays,” I said, opening my laptop and setting it on his lap. “You know, like what the quarterback does and stuff.”

Dad pulled up the Owls’ quarterfinal game on screen and I brought the ottoman closer so I could sit next to him. And I proceeded to take notes in my journal about all the things the quarterback—aka Oliver Blackwell, my new fake boyfriend—was doing. Gets the play from the Coach, calls the cadence, signals to his center to snap the ball, hands off to the running back or throws the ball to the receiver.

“Wait, what, so...say that again,” I said, jotting down the words I’d heard in

nonsensical order. “The quarterback calls the what?”

“Cadence. It’s the code, like what the team is gonna do,” Dad said. “You hear Oliver call Green 80 or something like that. That’s him telling his offense what’s going to happen.”

“You mean when he yells out random colors and numbers?”

“Nothing random about it,” Dad said with a kind of smug glee. “It all means something. The quarterback will have his own special code or signals for when the snap will happen, whether it’s a pass play or a run play.”

I let out a frustrated sigh, my ears and fingers not in sync. “Pass, run or what?”

Dad slowed down, iterating as if I was a five year old learning my spelling words. I wrote quickly, hoping it might make more sense when I reread it later.

“Now you notice when Oliver lifts his left leg?”

“Huh?” Heat flushed across my cheeks as though Dad knew my most intimate thoughts and how closely I had watched Oliver’s every movement.

“If you’ve ever watched Oliver, you’ll notice he’ll use a leg lift to let his center know he wants the ball right now. Just a rise of the leg.”

“He’s not just stretching his leg?”

Dad laughed. “No, it’ll be a signal to say he’s ready for the ball. Sometimes if the crowd is particularly loud, the players can’t hear the verbal call. So a signal, like a leg lift, or it could be a hand motion like a clap or a tap to his helmet, any of those things means something.”

“He doesn’t just have an itchy head?” I said.

“Every movement is precise and particular,” Dad said in an impatient and impassioned tone.

“How do you know so much about this?” I asked as I wrote down ‘lifts leg and hand tap means QB wants the ball.’

Dad inhaled through his nose and puffed his chest. “Bourkeville High Buccaneers’ junior varsity quarterback here,” he said.

“ You were quarterback?” I didn’t mean to sound shocked but Dad wasn’t exactly a prime athletic specimen. He’d affectionately pat his protruding belly and laugh about it, but get grumpy if Mom told him he needed to go on a diet. Dad loved football but I hadn’t known he’d played. It was an ancient high school trophy for discus champion that held pride of place on the bookshelf in the living room.

“Yes, in my freshman year I was starting quarterback, but unfortunately I only played four games.”

“Why?”

“I got a concussion against Sun Valley High, got knocked down pretty bad. I had terrible headaches after that. Doc wouldn’t let me play again,” Dad said, sheepishly adding, “Neither would your Grandma.”

“I didn’t know that. Is the quarterback a dangerous position?” It had never occurred to me that Oliver could get injured.

“Generally no, but I got clobbered by a hit I didn’t see coming. It happens.” Dad grimaced, his voice deflating.

“Is that why your memory’s so bad? The concussion?” I joked.

Dad shot me a cheesy smile. “I’ll have you know I once threw a 30 yard pass straight to my receiver who scored a touchdown. I had a good arm.”

“Thirty yards? Is that good?”

“Good? It was exceptional!” Dad wasn’t holding back on his self-acclaim. “It wasn’t just the distance, it was the accuracy. It was all anyone talked about for weeks. Me and Danny Iversen were heroes!”

I sucked on the end of my pen. “Ah...so can Oliver throw thirty yards?”

“Thirty yards and then some. He’s got a super arm for sure. But most importantly, he’s accurate and a smart player.”

My heart skipped a beat, my chest swelling with pride. My Dad just called Oliver smart, my new boyfriend, okay, my new fake boyfriend. That meant Dad would approve of us dating. That was one hurdle out of the way. Now, only Mom to convince, though there was no reason she’d not let me date—Lizzie had paved the path before me. My older sister had been a social butterfly and George Blackwell had been one of the many boys she dated.

“A smart player?” I croaked out in a feeble voice. “What does that mean?”

“The quarterback has to be able to lead his team, read the play, be aware of what’s happening on the field. He has to make decisions and direct his team. And he needs athletic ability, he’s got to have the arm strength, but also the accuracy.”

“Oliver has all that?” I asked in wide-eyed wonder.

“He has an incredible football IQ. Reads the game better than any quarterback I can remember. James Hastings, he was good back in Lizzie’s day, but I’d rate Oliver over him.”

“So, you’d say he’s an excellent quarterback?” I was no longer writing anything down, pretty sure I’d remember Dad’s words of praise forever.

“Absolutely. I’m guessing he has plenty of college options? Guess your mother will know.”

The mention of Mom made me close my notebook. Being a teacher, Mom might overhear about Oliver and me dating before I had a chance to tell her. “Thanks Dad. I think I can work with this,” I said, quickly getting up.

“Make sure you let me have a read of it,” he said cheerily.

I nodded, but departed like a hurricane, guilty that there would be no essay. I retreated to my room, trying to figure out the best time to tell Mom about this new development in my life. Preferably sooner rather than later because it might be awkward if she heard about it from someone else.

There were advantages to having Mom on the teaching staff at school. All of the teachers were nice to me and I assumed it was because they were friends with Mom. But on the downside, Mom got to hear all the gossip. No drama escaped her ears. And some kids blamed you if she gave them a low or failing grade.

From my bedroom window, I saw the lights of Mom’s car arriving home. Coming from her yoga class, I figured she’d be in a calm and relaxed state of mind. Perfect for telling her about my first boyfriend.

Giving her a few minutes to hang her coat and put her bag away, I made my way into

the kitchen in a casual way, pretending I needed a drink.

“Do you want me to heat up your dinner?” I asked. “Dad made nachos, they’re real good.”

Mom looked a little startled at my offer. “I might shower first,” she said. “How was cheer practice?”

“Yeah, good,” I said, carefully pouring water into a glass. It had been a good training session because for the second day in a row Savannah hadn’t been there and Coach Foster said she had the flu which meant it had nothing to do with breaking up with Oliver. Realizing it was now or never, I blurted out, “Uhh, something exciting has happened.”

“Has it?” Mom bent down and opened the oven door and peeped in at her meal.

“Yeah...” I sucked in a sharp breath. “Um, I have a date for Saturday night.”

Mom let the oven door close and stood up tall, her eyebrows raising in curiosity. “A date?” She was immediately interested. “Oooh, how exciting!” I nodded vigorously. “Well,” Mom urged, “don’t keep me hanging, tell me who with?”

My throat tightened and it felt like I was trying to swallow a lump of coal.

“Is it Simon McAllister?” Mom probed. “I don’t know why you didn’t go to Homecoming with him. He’s a nice boy.” To Mom, nice boy likely equated to top student. She probably hadn’t noticed Simon’s fashion sense—or lack of it.

“It was too last minute,” I said in my defense. “I’d already organized to go with the girls.” Sammy, Paige, Evie and I had all gone together, none of us having dates. “And no, it’s not Simon.” A smirk was creeping onto my face, and unable to hold back the

rush of adrenaline, gushed, “It’s Oliver, Oliver Blackwell. Oliver asked me out!”

There was no denying the utter shock on Mom’s face as it contorted like someone in a cheesy cereal advertisement, eyes widening, eyebrows rising and mouth gaping. A pang of hurt hit my heart as it seemed my mother could not fathom the thought of Oliver Blackwell asking me out.

Her voice fluttered in disbelief. “Oliver? Oliver Blackwell? But...isn’t he...doesn’t he go out with Savannah?”

“They broke up,” I said, mimicking an authoritative teacher voice. “And he asked me out.”

Mom was flabbergasted. “I didn’t know you talked to him.”

“I am on the cheer squad,” I stated. “I practically see him everyday. And remember, he gave me his Owls flag.” And not giving her a chance to respond, I carried on. “So, it’s okay? I’m not sure where we’re going, but I’ll let you know.”

Mom blinked. “I have to admit I’m a bit surprised,” she said. “Oliver’s a senior.”

I’d already anticipated that she’d bring that up. “Remember when Lizzie dated Zack Wilson? She went to his senior prom when she was a junior.”

Unable to dispute that, Mom nodded in a slow, deliberate way. “Yes. That’s true, but...”

“I really like Oliver,” I jumped in, grinning widely in case she was about to crush all my hopes and dreams.

“But...I’m just worried that he’s come out of a long term relationship and is jumping

into another one so quickly,” Mom said with all the rationality of a parent. “I’d hate to see you get hurt, honey.”

I had a sudden urge to tell her the truth—to say it was fake dating—but had a hunch she’d disapprove, like Sammy. “Well, it’s just one date,” I said, wincing as it occurred to me that one date might be all Oliver intended.

Fake date me, he’d said. That was no guarantee of more than one date. Maybe one would be enough to convince Savannah that it was all over.

Mom was beside me, hand on my shoulder. “I do like Oliver,” she said, adding with a playful smile, “But I’d like him better if he put more effort into his schoolwork.”

I rolled my eyes, typical of Mom to judge a prospective date by his grades. “So, that’s a yes? I can go?”

Mom squeezed my shoulder. “My little girl going on her first date. Wait till I tell Lizzie.”

“What? First date? Who’s going on a date?” Dad was looming in the doorway, carrying his empty mug.

“Well, it’s not me,” Mom joked.

“Maya? What’s this? What are you keeping from me?”

“She’s going on a date. With Oliver Blackwell .”

I tell you, it was impossible for me to get a word in, Mom and Dad continuing the conversation as if I wasn’t standing right there.

“Oliver? From next door?”

“Yes, Oliver Blackwell.”

“Quarterback for the Owls?”

“The one and only.”

“Hmmm, is that right?” Dad’s silly smirk sent a rush of blood to my cheeks.

I nodded, not quite looking him in the eye. For sure he’d be putting two and two together about why I’d been so interested in the quarterback position.

“Well, make sure he comes in when he picks you up,” Dad said. “I’ll need to lay down the ground rules.”

“What? No, don’t be stupid!” I said.

“If someone’s taking out my daughter, I need to know his intentions,” Dad said with a stern face.

“Intentions? What?” I was on the verge of pleading. Oliver would run a mile if he knew fake dating me involved meeting an overzealous, crazed father. “No way, we’re not living in the dark ages, you know.”

Mom put her arm around me. “Dad’s kidding,” she said, squeezing her cheek next to mine. “Don’t you worry about him.” Then her eyes flashed as she eyeballed Dad. “If anyone will be asking the questions, it’ll be me!”

My parents cackled like they were the funniest people on the planet. The laughter eventually died down and Dad returned to the living room, Mom went off to shower

and I headed to my bedroom, keen to read over my notes and learn more about the quarterback's role which was way more important than my algebra or history homework.

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OLIVER

Gym workouts were always my favorite. There were three of us guys who liked to motivate and push each other. In between lifting weights, we were constantly comparing physiques, flexing our muscles in front of the mirror and practicing bodybuilding poses. Yeah, we got a kick out of parading around shirtless, boasting about our new personal bests and drinking our high protein shakes.

Until Coach would come in and tell us to put our shirts back on.

The gym, along with the football field was my sanctuary. It's where I shone, where my confidence rose. But today, gossip ruled the roost.

Wendall Slight, the linebacker was setting himself up on the squat machine and motioned over to me with an eyebrow raise. "Blackwell," he called as I sat on the bench pushing fifty pound dumbbells above my head, "what's the deal with Savannah?"

I glowered at him through the mirror, but it was Adam, my best friend, who butted in. "We don't speak that name out loud. Not here," Adam joked, before resuming personal trainer mode, counting, "Four...five...come on Ollie, one more!"

I groaned as I lifted my last rep, dropping the dumbbells to the floor with an unwarranted clank. It wasn't good etiquette to drop weights, but the mention of Savannah had sent my blood boiling. I wanted to erase her from my memory, not be reminded of her every hour.

“She’s saying you cheated on her,” Wendall said. “That you were two timing her.”

“You believe that?” Adam answered for me. “You can’t believe that?”

“She says you kissed Maya Shelton.”

“Yeah, I kissed Maya Shelton after I broke up with Sav,” I said trying hard to hold back my irritation, “but that’s nobody’s business.”

It was a complete contradiction because I’d kissed Maya right in front of Savannah precisely to announce that I was moving on, essentially making it her business.

“But Maya Shelton? She’s a junior,” Wendall said as if it was a totally unconvincing matchup.

I stood up, shaking out my arms, leaving the seat for Adam to do his set. “Maya’s cute, she’s fun and she sure can kiss,” I said, and though I laughed, deep in my heart I meant every word. “Plus we used to be neighbors,” I added, just to consolidate my new unlikely relationship. “We go way back.” I nonchalantly crossed my arms over my chest and leaned against the rack, hoping Wendall would be bored of the conversation. “How much is that?” I asked of the weight he was about to squat.

And just like that the focus returned to lifting weights and our upcoming game. Priorities, of course.

Though, strangely, thoughts of Maya kept invading my head, memories of that kiss, her bubblyness and her willingness to play the fake dating game for my sake. That was something to appreciate and I was determined to show her that it meant the world to me.

Savannah wasn’t in school for the second day in a row. Her cousin and friend, Reece,

made a point of letting me know as I stood at my locker, nervous about my upcoming English class. I wondered if Mrs. Shelton had graded the assignments yet.

“Sav’s sick,” Reece said.

“Sorry to hear that,” I muttered, “but what do you want me to do about it?”

“I just thought you should know,” she said pointedly. “It all started when you broke up with her.”

Now, something about being blamed for Savannah’s illness filled me with fury, and I grabbed Reece’s elbow as she was walking away. “Hey,” I said, anger rising, “she gave her number to Ben Monty, remember? She’s the one who caused the breakup.”

Reece glared at me with narrowed eyes, like I was the devil incarnate. The slow shake of her head and tight lips were an indicator that this was all on me and Savannah was blameless. That Savannah could do no wrong.

Knowing Reece’s loyalty would be unshakeable, I huffed and stormed down the hallway to class. It would be useless to try to defend myself, Reece and Savannah were close. Reece wasn’t a cheerleader but she played one of those trumpet type instruments in the marching band so was always at the games.

I sat in Mrs. Shelton’s class a bundle of nerves, on edge wondering if she’d read my assignment and was suspecting it wasn’t entirely my own work. As class ended, someone asked if she’d graded our papers yet and Mrs. Shelton said she was halfway through and would give out the grades on Monday. Whew! Immediate relief—well, for one second. As she dismissed the class, her eyes found mine and with a narrowed gaze and subtle nod, she gestured for me to approach her desk.

My heartbeat raged in my chest as I had visions of her knowing exactly what I’d done

and telling Coach who'd then sideline me for the quarterfinal. My football career would be over and Dad would go ballistic. I wouldn't graduate high school and would end up packing groceries for the rest of my life.

I moved at a snail's pace, making sure everyone had departed the room so that there was no audience to witness Mrs. Shelton destroying my whole life.

"Oliver," she said, clearing her throat.

I couldn't look her in the eye, imagining my parents' disappointment when they found out their youngest son was letting them down. They'd regret having that fourth child.

As I opened my mouth to speak, nothing came out. I was an empty vessel and my stomach churned worse than first game nerves. I did get nervous before a game, but they were good nerves, the pumped-up-adrenaline-inducing nerves. But these were the type that made you puke on your shoes.

"It's come to my knowledge—"

It was better to confess, right? Admit I used Lance's assignment as a guide and take the punishment, yeah? On the verge of telling all, I lifted my eyes.

But Mrs. Shelton was still talking and if anything, her tone was amused, "...that you asked my daughter out on a date?"

Relief rushed through me and in the next instant, I was bubbling and babbling. "Yep. Maya. Yep, that's right. That's okay, isn't it? This Saturday. If you're good with it, of course."

Mrs. Shelton cocked her head like she was suddenly suspicious of my enthusiasm.

“I promise I’ll bring her home on time. That’s if she has a curfew. Yeah, of course I will.” I was rambling at this stage, barely making sense.

“Uh huh,” Mrs. Shelton said coolly. “And how are you going on your assignment? Are you managing?”

“Yep. Good. I sent it to you last night,” I said.

Mrs. Shelton’s eyebrows shot up. “Oh. Did you? I haven’t checked yet.”

“Well, with the game on Friday, I wanted to make sure I was up to date on all my schoolwork. You know, no distractions for the quarterfinal.”

Mrs. Shelton’s face lit up. “Well, good for you, Oliver. We’ll certainly all be cheering for the Owls.”

“Thank you, ma’am. The team appreciates it,” I said somewhat smugly. I excused myself with a profusion of politeness, sensing I’d won Mrs. Shelton over and was now in her good books. Maybe things really were turning around for me. For the first time in ages, I felt light and free as if I’d been unchained from my shackles.

I’m not sure when the weight of expectation had taken over my life. Maybe it was since being named Player of the Year for the Western Conference last year—a title that was an honor, but came with a whole truckload of pressure. Or it could have been the whole #Olivannah hashtag going viral. No longer could we take a random selfie and post it online, no, Savannah insisted on photoshopping my wayward hair, frown lines, bruises and blemishes, like anybody actually cared. She’d even started dressing me—yep, telling me what to wear. My favorite Green Bay Packers jersey, gray sweatpants, slides and socks and a host of other clothes had been deemed not suitable to be worn in public.

I scanned the cafeteria with a spring in my step, my eyes targeting only one person. I zoned in on Maya sitting at one of the round junior tables, surrounded by a bunch of friends.

A girl wearing a pink beanie saw me first, nudging Evie, Toby's kid sister, and the next thing the whole table had turned in my direction, wide eyed and giggly. I slowed, wondering if I was being too brazen. Already Maya had been a good sport about fake dating me, but was I being too intrusive—barging in on her friend group? But it was too late. I was steps away from her table.

“Hey, Maya,” I said, smiling as her cheeks flushed pink.

“Hi. Oliver.” Her reply was stilted. Not exactly pleased to see me.

“Uh, have you got a minute?”

“A minute?” Her gaze flitted to each of the girls as if seeking their permission.

“Yeah, a minute.”

Prodded by the two girls either side, she stood and I reached out and pulled her away from the table. She whispered, “Is everything okay? Have you changed your mind?”

I frowned. “Changed my mind? About what?”

“The date. On Saturday?”

“No. No way. I just wondered if you wanted a ride home after practice. And maybe decide what we want to do on Saturday night.”

“Oh. Okay,” she said, her lips twitching in an adorable way. “Sure. Sounds good.”

“Cool,” I said, my heart fluttering in my chest like a caged animal looking to escape.

“Cool,” she repeated, but her eyes wandered around the room.

“Is it okay if I kiss you?” I murmured, the question bursting from my mouth unrehearsed. “Just on your forehead.”

Maya looked up at me, tilting her neck as she whispered. “I don’t think Savannah’s here today. I think she’s sick again.”

It wasn’t what I wanted to hear—the mention of my ex’s name, but kissing Maya was all I wanted to do. The distance between us was already unbearable and I brought my lips down to brush against her warm skin. Well, brush was the intention, but it was as if I’d been superglued to her.

“Ol—lie?” Maya’s voice lilted after a few seconds and I reluctantly removed my lips from her skin.

And I grinned. “That felt good,” I said.

Maya nodded but her expression was uncertain, causing me to look over my shoulder. Mrs. Harkness, a math teacher was gawking our way. “She might tell Mom,” Maya said through gritted teeth.

“Okay,” I said, “catch you later.”

It’s like I bounced through the next few classes with an air of invincibility, which was definitely weird because schoolwork was not my favorite thing. But the anticipation of meeting Maya after training somehow had me floating in the clouds. And that was something totally unexpected.

And new.

Because I couldn't remember a time when I was ever this excited to meet up with Savannah. Oh, maybe our very first date back in sophomore year after we'd started hanging out in the same friend group, but in recent months the relationship had become more of a chore than anything. Just going through the motions, showing up, putting on an act.

And yet, the irony was that this thing with Maya totally was an act. I'd asked her to be my fake girlfriend, but for something that wasn't supposed to be real, I was hyped to the max. How did that work? I had no idea, but my adrenaline was soaring like it does during the national anthem before a game. Yeah, I couldn't understand it. Was it the thrill of doing something deceitful, the act of revenge that had me pumped? That had to be it—what else could it be?

Our training session was one of the best we'd ever had. Coach Gregor had us in the zone—every single team member giving it a hundred percent. Beating St. Martin's would keep our championship title dreams alive and no one wanted that title more than me. Except maybe Coach Gregor. He was retiring at the end of the season and wanted to end his career on a high note.

The cheer squad finished before us, and I became impatient for Coach to wind up practice. I didn't want Maya getting bored while waiting for me. My heart rate escalated as Coach prolonged his closing talk, all stuff we'd heard a thousand times before.

I inadvertently sighed, causing Coach to pause and stare in my direction.

“Am I boring you, Blackwell?”

I had to think quickly. “No sir,” I said, “but you hammered us hard today and I

think”—I scrunched up my nose as I sniffed the air—“everyone could do with a shower.”

“Make it ice cold,” Coach snapped back with a smirk while the team laughed.

“Of course,” I said with a nod, knowing I wouldn’t bother till I got home—a blast of body spray would have to do. The anticipation of seeing Maya, of driving her home had me speeding to the locker room, then out to my car where I hoped she’d be waiting.

Maya was standing with Rose, another cheerleader. “Hello ladies,” I said with a swagger of confidence. Maya turned pink while Rose smiled shyly. “Do you need a ride, Rose?”

“Oh no. No. Not at all. My Dad’s on his way. Thanks for asking though,” she said, her cheeks also turning red.

“Of course,” I said, secretly happy, but I would have given her a lift if she needed one.

“See you tomorrow, Maya,” Rose called as she moved over to the pick-up zone.

Maya waved and picked up her tote bag. “How was training?”

“Great,” I said. “Sorry you had to wait. Coach wouldn’t stop talking. How was your training?”

“It was good,” she said, grinning as she buckled herself in.

“Awesome.”

We chatted about Friday's schedule, the game being played at a neutral ground which meant we would stay after school for a pre-game meal before taking the bus to Naperville Stadium, thirty minutes away.

"Is the team pumped?" Maya asked.

"Sure is."

"My Dad says you're the best quarterback the Owls have had in years."

I took my eyes off of the road ahead to glance at Maya. "Yeah? He said that?"

"Uh huh."

"You talk to your Dad about football?"

She smiled and nodded. "Dad used to be quarterback in junior high. But he got a concussion and then couldn't play again. His football career was basically over before it begun."

"That sucks," I said.

"But it's okay," Maya said. "Because of that injury, he took up track and field and he became the discus champion of Bourkeville High. A fact he likes to remind us of regularly."

I chuckled. "That's pretty cool."

"Yeah, it is," Maya said, flashing me a smile that sent my heart rate accelerating.

"Hey, have you thought any more about our date? Like, what you want to do?"

Maya shrugged. “No, just whatever you want. I don’t mind.”

I was momentarily lost for words, disappointed that she hadn’t given it some thought. “But...you, you must have an idea?”

“Well, I guess you want to go somewhere where Savannah will see us. Maybe a movie? Or The Diner?”

Yeah, I’d had a lapse in memory, forgetting that this was a fake date, just for show. But Maya obviously hadn’t.

“Uh, sure, yeah,” I said, though sitting next to Maya in a dark cinema and not talking was possibly the worst date I could envision—I actually wanted to get to know Maya better. “Of course.”

She nodded, smiled and looked ahead and reality hit that I’d gotten excited for the wrong reason—this wasn’t a date for Maya—this was a fake date—and there was a huge difference.

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MAYA

Waiting nervously at the kitchen table and with eight minutes until the scheduled pick up time, it had crossed my mind a hundred times that this was all a hoax, a prank, a fake ‘fake dating’ scenario.

That Oliver was going to ditch and say the act was off, that it was completely unnecessary and either Savannah had accepted the breakup or they were reuniting. The latter seemed most likely. After all, #Olivannah.

“Gosh, where’s he taking you? The Velvet Vines?” Dad snorted with laughter as he appeared in the doorway wearing the ugliest sweater known to mankind—a chunky brown knitted crew neck with a weird padded moose head on it.

“What?” The Velvet Vines was the fanciest and most expensive restaurant in Snow Ridge. “Am I overdressed?” I leapt off the chair and despaired at the short green floral dress I was wearing. “Should I change?”

“Don’t be silly,” Mom said at the same time that Dad was saying, “No. What? No, I think you look lovely.”

“But you said I look too posh,” I fired at Dad. “We’re just going to the movies and The Diner. Is this too much? Maybe I should wear jeans?”

“No!” Mom interjected. “Since when do you take your father’s advice on fashion?”

“I don’t wanna look out of place.”

“Your father is wearing a moose head sweater!” Mom cried. “You can’t take anything he says seriously. Sweetie, that dress is pretty. Oliver’s going to—”

“What do you mean?” Dad scowled, his eyes fixed on Mom. “I thought you liked this sweater. You know it’s my favorite but now you’re mocking it?”

Mom rolled her eyes. “The moose is fine,” she said, suddenly falling into fits of laughter. “As long as it doesn’t leave the house or is seen by anyone outside the family.”

Dad’s mouth gaped wide like a goldfish. “But I thought...”

“It’s hideous Dad,” I chimed in while Mom gasped for air.

“You said it was a good buy,” Dad pouted, staring at Mom. “I thought it—”

We were all stunned into silence at the ringing of the doorbell. Mom quit laughing and straightened up while my heart rate revved up as I drew in a nervous breath. Oliver was here—I glanced at the kitchen clock—four minutes early. He hadn’t canceled.

“Am I allowed to get that? Or will I be an embarrassment?” Dad said, already stomping to the front door. He tapped the padded antlers of his moose head sweater.

Mum and I looked at each other and giggled.

“Great win,” Dad was saying moments later as he led Oliver into our kitchen. “Really trounced St. Martin’s.”

I smoothed down my dress and gulped. Oliver was really here and the fake date was about to happen.

“Yeah, the team was stoked, Coach was—” Oliver stopped mid sentence and his eyes widened as he noticed me beside the counter. “Oh wow, Maya. You look amazing.”

I smiled in a shell-shocked daze, Oliver’s compliment sounding so genuine. He was really playing the fake boyfriend role to the hilt.

“Thanks,” I started to say, but was drowned out by Mom, “Yes, doesn’t she look fabulous?” But without waiting for Oliver’s reply, her nosiness took over. “So, you’re going to the cinema? What are you going to see?”

“It’s the latest Marvel movie, Mrs. Shelton,” Oliver said, his eyes flitting to Mom only momentarily. They landed back on me with a soft gaze, one that made my heart swell. Seemed the thirty minutes spent cursing my curling iron had been well worth the effort.

What a shame this was all an act.

Mom was saying something about an 11:00 pm curfew, but Dad contradicted and suggested 11:30 and while they indulged in their own little discussion, Oliver winked. My heart fluttered in complete oblivion. Stupid thing didn’t know this was fake, that none of this was real.

Oliver cleared his throat to alert Mom and Dad, and when he had their attention, he slipped his hand in mine. “We really should be going. Don’t wanna miss the start of the movie,” he said, oozing complete confidence—almost like when he was with Savannah. Oh yeah, I’d seen them together cuddling and cozying up and... kissing. Yep, Oliver had all the moves and I needed to remember I was just a temporary replacement to prove a point to Savannah.

“No,” I said, not making eye contact with either of my parents. “We don’t wanna be late.”

“Of course not,” Mom said.

“Super duper. You kids have fun,” Dad cackled as I led Oliver to the front door.

Pausing to grab my jacket from the coatrack, Oliver smirked. “Nice sweater, Mr. Shelton.”

Dad, who for some reason had followed us, beamed with pride from ear to ear, pointing to the horrible head. “Isn’t it great? I love it!”

“Whatever, Dad,” I groaned, making Oliver laugh.

Mom and Dad waved us off like I was going on some great adventure, which in their eyes, it was—my supposed first date.

Oliver opened the passenger door and closed it once I was inside, probably putting on a show for Mom and Dad who were still lingering on the front porch being totally embarrassing. Oliver buckled himself in, started the car and glanced back to the house, signaling with a flick of his finger on the steering wheel.

“Sorry, they’re a bit much,” I said with a grimace.

Oliver chuckled. “They’re cool.”

“Have you recovered from the game?” I asked, the question one of many prepared beforehand, all stored in my memory bank.

“Yeah, I feel pretty good,” Oliver said, flexing his right shoulder. “Just got a few knocks, nothing too bad.”

I smiled and nodded, ready with my next observation, thanks to Dad. “Um, you threw

great. Like over 140 yards?”

Oliver dipped his head, his mumble quite humble, “Yeah, it was okay.”

“You must have one of the highest passing yards per game in the—”

“Hey, you were awesome out there too, you know?” Oliver cut in.

“Me? Oh. Well, the whole squad was pumped,” I said.

“I only noticed you,” Oliver said.

A gentle heat swept across my cheeks, unsure of why Oliver was playing the fake boyfriend role when there was nobody to witness it. Probably he was putting himself into character, ready for when kids saw us at The Diner.

Sure enough, as soon as we entered the 90s inspired diner—complete with a CD covered wall—Oliver greeted and high fived two boys from the football team and two other seniors I recognized, but didn’t know. And each time, there were congratulations for the quarterfinal win and the impending semifinal.

“Hey Pippa,” Oliver said as the server came to take our order.

“What can I get y’all?” Pippa replied, running through the menu highlights with a friendliness that was a little eager, like she couldn’t wait to report this sighting of Oliver and me.

Oliver ordered us sodas and when Pippa returned with them, he was clutching my hand across the table.

“You guys heading out to the movies later?” Pippa asked.

“That’s the plan,” Oliver said, slowly running his thumb across my knuckles. I guessed it was all a show for Pippa, but geez, did he realize it was giving me tingles. “Right, Maya?”

“Uh huh,” I murmured with a nod, reveling in the warmth spreading over my skin, the small movement affecting my ability to speak proper words.

As we waited for our food to arrive, two more football boys came in and hung around our table. Of course I recognized both Darwin and Troy, but I was surprised when after a couple of minutes Oliver got a bit annoyed with them.

“Hey, c’mon guys,” he said as Darwin wanted to relive his three touchdowns yet again, “we can go over all that tomorrow at Coach’s. You can see I’m on a date.”

Oliver smiled at me with a wink and Darwin immediately patted Oliver’s shoulder and said, “Gotcha, boss.” And they retreated with a laugh.

Huffing out a sigh, Oliver rolled his eyes. “I thought they’d never leave.”

“Well, I guess this was the plan, you know, to be seen,” I said.

Oliver pressed his lips together, conceding with a nod. With our food delivered, Oliver seemed to have no interest in conversation, only scoffing down his burger and fries as fast as he could. I presumed that he’d decided we’d been seen by enough people, that Pippa had probably spread the word back to Savannah and he was now in a rush to end the date. I tried to hurry with my macaroni and cheese but the sticky, creamy pasta refused to digest quickly.

Shifting in his seat with impatience, Oliver scanned the room before glancing down at my half eaten plate of food. I swallowed a clump of pasta and pushed the plate aside.

“You’re done?” he asked with a look of sheer joy.

My mouth twitched as I noticed the large diner clock on the wall. The movie didn’t start for another hour, so was Oliver abandoning the date early? Was this a world record for the shortest date ever? Would I have to sit in the movie theater on my own to avoid the embarrassment of being home hours before my curfew?

“Sure,” I muttered as the humiliation of a failed first date loomed. With Oliver pushing back his chair, I excused myself for the restroom. It might add a few minutes to the date at least.

Thankfully the restroom was empty, so I fluffed at my hair and inspected my face, willing myself not to cry, Sammy’s words haunting me. She’d warned me about getting hurt—but I wouldn’t let her be right. I couldn’t get all sentimental over this.

You’re fake dating him, Maya, that means it’s not real. You knew the deal!

With a smile plastered on my face, I walked out, finding Oliver at the counter talking to Pippa.

“All good?” He unexpectedly swept his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close.

Assuming Pippa’s narrowed gaze was one of suspicion, I played my role to the max, resting my head against Oliver’s chest. “Yep,” I squeaked, inhaling the fresh scent of his hoodie and savoring the closeness. Real or fake, it was happening, yep, beyond my wildest dreams, Oliver was cuddling me so I may as well enjoy it.

Oliver walked me out to his truck, his arm still around me even when we were out of sight of the restaurant and in the outer corner of the parking lot.

“I guess that did the trick,” I said.

“The trick?” Oliver asked as we buckled up our seat belts.

“I’m pretty sure I saw Pippa take a photo of us just now. I’m sure she’ll show Savannah.”

Oliver gripped the steering wheel, making no attempt to start the car. “Hey,” he said, turning to me, “would you be disappointed if we didn’t go to the movie?”

My chin involuntarily wobbled. How quickly one could go from cloud nine to rock bottom.

“No, of course not,” I said, knowing there was no other answer. I couldn’t demand that he take me to the movies! I was already thinking that I might save face if I asked him to drop me off at the corner to our street and walked around the block a couple of times before going inside and telling my parents that tickets were sold out.

“I just don’t feel like sitting in a movie theater with a bunch of other people,” Oliver said. “Would you mind if we took a drive instead?”

“A drive?”

“Sometimes I just wanna get away from it all,” Oliver said, his gaze pensive for a moment, before he flashed me a grin. “I brought a blanket and some snacks.” Leaning over, he popped the glovebox compartment and the sight of a bright yellow bag of M&Ms sent a wave of relief and pure joy washing over me. And it wasn’t because I was a candy lover, no, it occurred to me that Oliver didn’t want to end the date just yet.

“That’s a yes?” Oliver asked, his grin widening.

“I am an M&M fan,” I stated. “Peanut ones especially.”

“Whew, what a relief.” Oliver laughed.

“Isn’t everyone?” I asked.

“Uh, no, not everyone,” Oliver said, wrinkling up his nose.

Oliver drove up to the viewpoint at Paradise Peak and parked the car. He dragged the blanket and a black puffer jacket from the backseat and we sat down at a picnic table. Only one other vehicle, a camper van, was there, the area more popular in spring and summer and on cloudless days rather than on the gray overcast skies of November.

He gave me his jacket to put on, my jacket doing little to shield me from the cool evening air. I hugged it around me, the scent of it like being wrapped in his arms. I was dying to ask why we’d come to an isolated spot when it contradicted the whole point of fake dating.

Oliver opened the bag of candy and popped it on the table, blowing out a heavy sigh. “It gets a lot, you know.” There was the faintest crack in his voice. “Football, the championship title, Sav and the whole social media circus. I’m over it.”

Surprised by the sudden mood change, I sensed this was not a casual conversation but a baring of his soul to me. My immediate response was to be positive. “You are hugely popular, you know,” I said, “your own hashtag and all.”

“It means nothing,” he said, shrugging as if he had the whole wretched weight of the world on his shoulders.

“Well, being the star quarterback and getting the team to the semifinal isn’t nothing,” I said, conjuring up as much joy as I could muster. “That’s pretty dang amazing, you know.”

Oliver's perfect features distorted into a sneer as if he was unwilling to believe it. My heart started to beat with force, trying to break out of its rib cage. There was an incredible desire to take Oliver in my arms and soothe and comfort and make it all better.

A real girlfriend would do that, but that wasn't what I was.

"Hey, what's your favorite color?" I picked up the bag, plucked out an orange candy and held it up. I needed to lighten the moment.

"Mine too," Oliver said, his smile returning.

I popped it into my mouth. "Second?" I delved into the bag again, bringing out a green one.

"Hey, same!" Oliver stole it from me and popped it in his mouth.

Relieved to see his smile back, I searched the bag for another green one. Holding it up, I teased him by holding it higher, and before he could snatch it from me, I tossed it and caught it in my mouth.

His eyes widened in surprise and I smirked and grabbed another one and tossed it up, making him lean forward to catch it in his mouth. Oliver carried it on, throwing one up so we competed for our favorite candy. It was fun and silly but he was laughing and that was all that mattered. We bumped noses and smacked faces as we fought for each one. Until we collided over a red M&M. I leaned forward to reach it first, but Oliver knocked me and the piece of candy fell onto the table—and the silliness stopped.

Oliver straightened, his eyes turning upward and his laugh sounding nervous. "Sorry the stars and moon aren't out tonight."

“I don’t think that’s your fault,” I said with a light smile.

“Well, just know, if I had any kind of control, I’d have had a full moon shining over there,”—he pointed off to the horizon—“and the stars would be, you know, up there twinkling too.” The softness of his words robbed me of breath, and it would have been easy to take things out of context, to think the words were meant for me. But it wasn’t the case.

“Twinkle twinkle little star,” I jokingly sang the nursery rhyme.

“How I wonder what you are,” Oliver finished, more tuneful than me.

“I didn’t know you were so...” I stopped myself suddenly, swallowing back the word about to recklessly roll off my tongue. Romantic. This date was not about romance, not in the slightest.

Oliver’s eyes narrowed at my unfinished sentence. “You didn’t know I was so...?”

“Um, so...so into astronomy,” I said, my improvisation lame, “or nursery rhymes.”

“You think I’m just all about football?” Oliver said with genuine curiosity.

“Well, you did get Player of the Year, didn’t you? And everyone says you’ve got a bunch of scholarships on offer?”

Oliver nodded but he didn’t say anything, his eyes drawn back to the vast sky, dark and empty, almost like he was contemplating the mysteries of the universe.

“So...” I paused, wondering if I was overstepping the fake girlfriend role, “uh, so tell me more about Oliver Blackwell, not the quarterback or half of hashtag Olivannah but the one who likes orange and green M&Ms.”

Oliver's gaze roamed my face, and I worried that I'd totally violated the fake dating rules.

"Sorry," I corrected, "I don't mean to..."

"Oliver Blackwell..." He cleared his throat. "Oliver Blackwell likes..." He turned to me, eyes dull, voice barely audible. "I'm not sure. I like football, but I don't want it to be my whole life. But it is my whole life. Dad wants me to play college football because none of my brothers did. I'm his last hope. I'm Coach Gregor's last hope too, he wants a championship title before he retires. My Mom is mad that I broke up with Savannah because she thinks we're the perfect couple. But it hadn't been good, not for a while." He fidgeted, pulling on his fingers and I leaned forward to take his hand in mine.

"But that didn't answer the question—what does Oliver Blackwell like?" I said gently.

Oliver released a breath and took a moment. "I like the Green Bay Packers and wearing old sweatpants. I like listening to true crime podcasts and cooking and I make my own protein balls."

"Protein balls?" I raised my eyebrows. "Tell me more."

Oliver's laugh rumbled from deep in his belly. His dark eyes twinkled like the stars that were in hiding. "I make these peanut butter chocolate chia seed balls that have seven grams of protein each."

"Oh wow!" I said, picking up on his passion. "You make your own recipes?"

"Yep. I like playing around with ingredients. I make a vanilla coconut almond one that's pretty good too."

“I’m impressed,” I said. “So, do you bake these balls or what?”

“Some recipes are baked, but if I’m in a rush I can whip some up in about five minutes and just refrigerate them.”

“Oliver Blackwell, the baker,” I said with a jesting smirk. “Who knew? That’s pretty awesome.”

“Really?” He seemed skeptical.

“Yes, really! It sounds amazing.”

“Thank you,” he said, quite bashfully.

“And yet you didn’t bring any for a snack?”

“Uhh, I just give them out to my gym buddies,” he said. “You know, after training.”

“Well, just remember I’m a huge peanut butter and chocolate and coconut fan.”

“Gotcha.” Oliver grinned. “And what else, Maya Shelton? What else do you like?”

“Me?” I gasped, shrugging awkwardly . “Oh, you know, orange and green M&Ms. Candy in general, I guess.”

“That’s all? There must be more,” Oliver said, his confidence returning. “I remember you used to dance and read on your front porch. In all weather, rain or shine.”

Yeah, trying to get a glimpse of you, my crush.

“And you used to go sledding,” Oliver continued.

“Goodness, I haven’t sled in ages. In years,” I said.

“We should do it then. This winter.”

I smiled, speechless, because 1) Oliver remembered me all those years ago, and 2) the snow didn’t fall for another month, maybe two. Surely the fake dating arrangement would be history by then.

“Yeah, maybe,” I murmured because Oliver was looking at me expectantly.

“Hey, we don’t want to waste this date,” he said.

“Huh?” I was clueless to what he meant.

But before I knew what was happening, Oliver’s lips were next to mine, in such close proximity that there was only one possible outcome. The kiss took me by surprise. After all, there was no need for it, no one around to take a photo or create more buzz. And I didn’t want to resist, not at all, but common sense and Sammy’s words popped into my head.

“But there’s no one here,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s good,” Oliver said.

“It is? But no one will see us.”

“It’s all good practice,” he said smoothly. “You know, so when people do see us, it looks real.”

“Oh,” I said, not in the mood to argue that logic. If he thought I needed kissing practice, I was happy to accept his tutelage.

Oliver drew me in closer, his hand sweeping around my back and entangling in my hair. The chill of the night air was forgotten as his kiss deepened and warmth radiated through my body. Caught up in the moment, my fingers caressed the back of his neck, willing to learn everything Oliver's lips had to teach me.

OLIVER

Going to school on Sunday sucked, but coach had scheduled the game review for one o'clock. And even though we'd beaten St. Martin's easily with a 28-7 win, there was a lot to go over.

Dad and I spent the morning watching the video of the other quarterfinal, Bowen vs Winchester County, already analyzing Bowen's patterns of play, who'd taken the victory in a hard fought battle, 32-28.

Mom came in with a box of pastries and coffees, talking too loud and getting in the way of the screen. Dad and I shushed her as we focused on the game.

"Who's winning?" Mom asked, taking a seat beside me. She supported my football but her knowledge of the sport was basic, like, "That was a good throw to Darwin."

"Bowen," I replied curtly.

"Their defensive line is fast," Dad noted.

"I saw Penny and Savannah at the cafe," Mom said, handing me an apple danish, my favorite.

"Thanks," I muttered.

"Savannah said you went on a date last night."

I kept my eyes on the television, ignoring Mom's comment and saying, "Look at Rodgers. He's strong."

"You never said anything about a date?" Mom's curiosity was piqued though and I knew she wouldn't stop until she had answers. "I thought you said you were going to the movies."

"I took Maya to The Diner," I said. "We decided to give the movie a miss."

Mom's eyelids fluttered. "Maya?"

"Shelton," I said. "You know, our old neighbors."

"You're dating Maya?" Mom's eyes widened in disbelief and Dad's head jerked.

"Yeah," I said, trying to keep my tone impassive. "I told you it's over with Savannah."

Mom sniffed, took her phone and left the room. Dad glanced over and we resumed our breakdown of the game.

"Is that Lizzie's little sister?" Dad asked later.

"Yeah. Maya's a cheerleader."

"I've seen her at the games," Dad said, and clearing his throat, he lowered his voice. "You don't want distractions now, Ollie."

"I'm good, Dad. The only distraction is Savannah."

"Well, your mother and Penny are friends so you're going to have to deal with it."

“I am,” I said, remembering how good the date with Maya had been. They’d been no drama, no photos, no phones, no pressure. Maya had been happy to sit outside in the cool night air, eat candy and talk. Yeah, talk. Like ordinary people. For once, I didn’t feel like I was under the spotlight which dating Savannah had gotten to feel like.

Our relationship had turned into a circus, especially since #Olivannah had randomly taken off. Everyone seemed to love that the quarterback and the cheerleader dated and she had become obsessed with creating content. She’d post all the pics of us holding hands, kissing, snuggling on the couch—but most of it staged. A kiss was no longer a kiss, our hair had to be right, her lips had to be colored and shiny, our heads angled, sometimes painfully, to get the ideal shot. Nothing had felt real anymore, it was all for the camera, all trying to gain likes. I guess you could say we’d become fake.

Online we looked adorable and perfect, but in reality I’d become jaded as Savannah’s desperation for social media glory, her constant craving for attention, her so-called harmless flirting had become too much. And the reason we’d broken up so often.

Broken up and reunited.

But not this time. My date with Maya had given me a glimpse of what a real relationship might be like. Ironic, considering it was fake. But this time I was ready to move on—for good.

Following the game review, Adam had invited a bunch of kids back to his house. After the overload of football, it was fun to chill out and play video games. Hanging out with the boys, eating potato chips and sticky barbecue ribs and blasting a few orcs and trolls was the perfect way to end what had essentially been the perfect weekend.

SAVANNAH’S RETURN TO school on Monday caused a commotion, the queen back to reign over her kingdom. But I was determined to keep my focus singular, the

buzz of the semifinal overriding everything. As I stopped by my locker after English class, Savannah appeared, seemingly out of thin air, deflating the high I'd just gotten from the A I'd gotten for my resubmitted English assignment, a shock to say the least.

"Hi Ollie," she said, her hoarse voice the first thing I noticed.

"Hi, hear you had the flu. You good now?" I mumbled back out of politeness, head in my locker grabbing my pre-training drink and post-training protein balls.

"It was a throat infection," she said woefully before adding a sarcastic, "and yeah, I am. Thanks for asking."

"Glad to hear it," I said, in a rush to get away. There could be nothing good gained from getting involved in a conversation.

"So I hear you went out with Maya Shelton." Savannah tried, but failed, to hide her bitterness as I closed my locker door.

"Yeah, I did," I answered coolly.

"And coincidentally you just got an A from Mrs. Shelton's class. After your first date with Maya? Hmmm," she mused, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I snapped, but there was a knot forming deep in my belly at her insinuation.

"Oh, nothing," Savannah breezed, "just maybe Mrs. Shelton has a new favorite student?"

"I stayed up past midnight working on that paper," I said, feeling the need to justify

myself, “and you should know I handed it in last week, before our date.”

Savannah smiled sweetly. “Oooh, no need to get defensive, Ollie.”

I frowned at the absurdity of her connecting a date with Maya and getting an A from Mrs. Shelton. “So, has Monty asked you out yet?”

Now Savannah was the one to look offended. “I told you I’ve been sick,” she rasped as if to demonstrate a real illness. “Though we might have something planned for this weekend.”

“You really want to date a Lincoln Loser?” I jeered.

Savannah’s eyebrows bounced up in triumph as she smirked, “Are you jealous, Ollie?”

I scowled, annoyed at myself for even asking the question. I didn’t need to know about Savannah’s dating life. We were done. She could do whatever she wanted.

Coach Gregor elevated our training intensity another notch. And strangely, the buzz I usually got after a solid session wasn’t enough; something was missing, something was lacking...Maya. Yeah, I missed seeing her. Was that crazy?

Our date had been epic, and upskilling Maya in the kissing department was something I’d done with enthusiasm. But it wasn’t just that. I’d connected with Maya. She saw me as more than the star quarterback. She’d wanted to know the real me, what I liked, and no one had asked me that before. I drove home, my stomach twisting with a weird sensation, almost an ache. Yet, a day without seeing Maya, my fake girlfriend, shouldn’t affect me that much.

Convincing myself that I had nerves due to the semifinal looming, I made it a priority

to text Maya as soon as I got home from training: Hey, missed you today. I can give you a ride home tomorrow.

With no instant reply, I showered and ate dinner while filling Dad in on our session. Mom interrupted our discussion, asking, “Does anyone want more lasagna?”

Dad shook his head. “I’m good,” he said, adding, “This is great, by the way.”

“Ollie?” Her brusque tone told me she was still upset over the Savannah affair.

Hoping a second helping might appease her somewhat, I scooped more onto my plate, suddenly remembering, “Hey, I got an A on my English assignment today.”

Both parents were simultaneously shocked.

“An A?”

“Really?”

“Yep,” I said, stuffing food into my mouth to avoid their questions.

“Congratulations,” Dad said. “Well done.”

“Thank you,” I managed to say between swallowing and shoveling in another forkful.

“Yes, that’s great, Ollie,” Mom noticeably brightened. “I’d like to see it.”

“I think I left it in my locker,” I muttered, knowing full well I hadn’t, but a shudder caused every follicle on my body to resurrect. What if my assignment seemed familiar, what if she’d read Lance’s original one?

I excused myself after dinner, bolting upstairs to check my phone, my heart racing to see Maya's text: Ok, sounds cool

I could have left it at that, but Maya was on her phone now and I was in the mood to banter.

Me: It's what boyfriends do

Maya: Even fake ones?

My heart dipped unexpectedly, the fact that she saw me as her fake boyfriend hitting deep. But why? That's what I was.

I'd never stopped to wonder why Maya agreed to fake date me. In hindsight, I'd barged into her life, basically demanded a favor which she'd agreed to without hesitation. Yeah, we had some old history together being ex-neighbors, but in reality she owed me nothing. Her sister Lizzie had dated my brother George for a short while, but that had ended amicably as far as I remembered.

Perhaps she had a grudge against Savannah? But that seemed highly unlikely because they were on the cheer team together, and cheer was one big happy family.

Maybe I'd been more forceful than I thought in asking her for a favor. Being a junior, she might have felt pressured to say yes, but I wasn't intimidating—or was I? I had nearly punched Ben Monty in the face.

I read Maya's text again and remembered we were fake: Yeah, Savannah's back and we should be seen together.

MAYA

O n Sunday, having no plans, I slept late, lying in bed in a kind of surreal haze, reliving the most remarkable night of my life. Yet, there wasn't complete joy like you'd expect after a date with the star quarterback.

No, something was missing. Yes, it had happened, the date, the kisses—but it felt like a hollow victory.

Because it was all fake—it meant nothing.

Zero, zilch, just an act.

So, who was I fooling? No one but myself. That's who.

Because by mid-afternoon, when I dragged myself to the kitchen, my stomach in a churn, there had been nothing from Oliver. Not a text or a message or a call, anything to acknowledge my existence. A hey or a hi, or thanks for the date, anything would have been nice.

Thinking a toasted bagel might fix my issue, I spread a thick layer of peanut butter, my favorite topping. Yet the bagel sat on the plate, unappealing, and I realized the ache wasn't caused by hunger. When my phone pinged on the counter a minute later, I hurtled across the room like a girl on a mission only to see a message from Sammy. My heart sunk, even though seeing a photo of Sammy and her little sister Tessa in their backyard was cute. But I'd so hoped for Oliver to text me...

Sure, I knew the football team had a meeting with Coach, but that was unlikely to last all afternoon. And as evening fell and there was an excruciating silence on my phone, I was forced to reconsider the true meaning of fake dating. Pretending to be in a relationship. That's what Oliver and I were doing. Playing pretend. He'd talked and opened up to me, but that didn't mean anything. People did that on dates—they talked, and the kissing had been for practice, to add a touch of realism in the future, that's what he said. And though I might have been buzzing with joy and curling my toes from his heavenly kisses, he'd obviously taken it all in his stride, playing his role and nothing more. While I was here pining and yearning, he was likely back in football mode, strategizing the team's rise to championship status.

I hadn't hesitated in agreeing to Oliver's outlandish plan of fake dating—the perks of kissing my long-time crush was a no-brainer. But what if I was falling...for real? Because now Oliver was more than just the cute boy next door and the star quarterback. He was sweet, he was silly, he was fun—and he was trapped in a life of expectations. Living out dreams for everyone else, his parents, his coach, his team, his school, his ex-girlfriend.

Monday was the slowest day in the history of mankind. With still no contact from Oliver, Sammy was quick to remind me that fake relationships were tenuous and unpredictable and came with no guarantees. Oliver would make contact if and when he needed me. No more, no less. Cutesy texts weren't part of the deal.

She was right, but I moped anyway.

But that evening, I bounced back when he messaged me: Hey, missed you today. I can give you a ride home tomorrow.

Like I'd been resuscitated, I was once again full of life.

He missed me! Or did he mean he missed seeing me today, like I wasn't around.

And offering to give me a ride home? That was because Savannah had returned to school, announcing it with her usual aesthetically pleasing social media posts, the most recent a pose in front of her racy red truck, sipping from a juice box. She'd be at cheer practice and Oliver would want her to see us together.

My stomach was in flutters all day. Though I wasn't sure if it was because Oliver was taking me home or coming face to face with Savannah. Changing into my cheer outfit, I slathered body lotion on my legs and arms to keep them from drying out when we went outdoors, then I stood in front of the locker room mirror brushing my hair and styling it into a high ponytail.

Rose, who was retying her bun, poked my elbow. In the reflection, Savannah and Kelsie were approaching.

"Ewww," Savannah said loudly, "what's that?" She sniffed the air, her nose scrunching in disapproval. "Smells like old lady scent."

Kelsie laughed. "Ick! Someone borrowed their grandma's lotion."

I lowered my head, discreetly inhaling my skin. It was a soft floral fragrance, hardly offensive to anyone. Though it had been a gift from my grandmother on my last birthday.

"Oh, hey, hi Rose," Savannah said as if she'd just noticed us, "Hi Maya."

"Hi Savannah," Rose said. "How are you feeling?"

"Much better, thanks." Savannah smile dissipated as her gaze flitted from Rose to me. Her stunning blue eyes roamed across my face like she was conducting an inspection.

"Yeah, welcome back," I said, forcing my lips to curl up. "Uh, the squad missed

you.”

I was genuine in my sentiment—as captain, Savannah inspired all of us—but her glossy lips glowered at me as she said, “You know, your hair would look better in a bun. The ends look a little dry .”

For a split second I was lost for words, my mouth gaping before I reached up to touch the ponytail I thought I’d tied to cheerleader perfection. “Oh.”

“Maybe use a concentrated bond builder,” she said, showing me all of her gleaming white teeth.

My throat tightened as I had no idea what a concentrated bond builder was. “Oh, yeah, sure.”

“It helps dull and damaged hair,” she said, tripling her volume so everyone in the locker room could hear, before breezing away, saying, “You’re welcome.”

My fingers worked quickly as I tore the scrunchie from my ponytail and gathered my hair into a tight bun, all the while sniffing my arms. No one had ever complained how I smelled and I’d worn that lotion all season.

My timing was a little off, or so Savannah pointed out on several occasions. Well, yes, I was rather distracted, self-conscious that my scent was possibly repulsing everyone and my hair was in lackluster condition. I now dreaded getting a ride with Oliver. What if he thought I smelled bad too?

Our session wrapped up with Savannah taking the stretches. My flexibility had never been questioned previously, but Savannah urged me to go deeper with my splits, even though I was lower than most of the girls.

“Okay, great work everyone,” she said finally. “See you all tomorrow.”

Before being dismissed, we huddled into our compliment circle, the usual way to end our training. Everyone had to give a quick compliment to the person next to them about their efforts. It was just a simple thing to end on a positive note: great leaps, awesome chant, full of enthusiasm, cool hair.

Today, I was between Harlow and Rose, but as we were about to start, Savannah barged in the middle of me and Rose. Meaning she would be complimenting me.

“Um, Savannah’s flexibility is amazing,” Rose said when it was her turn.

“Thank you,” Savannah said, before nudging me. My chest tightened as she hesitated, seeming to struggle to find something nice to say.

“Uh, um,” Savannah faltered, “um...I know...Maya has good taste in boys...”—she flashed a sarcastic smile at me—“she’s dating my ex.”

My lungs seized. Okay, granted we weren’t friends, but as fellow cheerleaders, we treated each other with respect, and that certainly wasn’t a compliment. Savannah had mocked me and now everyone was laughing at me.

I had to laugh too, pretend it was funny, that I was fine with it. And as Mrs. Foster had wandered away, there was nothing I could say.

“Harlow, your tumbling was awesome,” I squeaked out in haste, my face red hot and my chin trembling, wanting the circle to hurry up and finish. Already, Sammy’s words were reverberating in my head.

“What if Savannah doesn’t like the idea of Oliver dating you? What if she gets upset with you?”

Oh yes, it seemed my friend was 100% right. Savannah was obviously not happy that I was dating Oliver.

Feeling dazed and confused over this development, I didn't register Oliver looming behind me after the circle broke up.

"Hey, Maya!" Only when he called my name did I stop, looking over my shoulder to see him thundering toward me like a bull on a rampage. "I was calling for you to wait up."

"Sorry, I didn't hear you," I said.

He grabbed my hand. "Hey, what's wrong?" His brow furrowed as he leaned down, bringing his forehead close to mine.

"Nothing. I just didn't hear you." I manifested brightness, frantically trying to slow my breathing which was fast and furious. It was silly to be affected by Savannah, especially when the whole arrangement with Oliver was fake. And yet, her words hit hard. I mean, according to her I smelled like an old lady and my hair was a mess. And was her so-called compliment an attempt to make me look stupid or just plain nastiness?

Oliver squeezed my hand and a calm descended over me, surrendering to his gentle touch—but only for a second as I remembered I supposedly stunk.

"How was training?"

"Good," I said, not a lie. The training part had been fun, adapting chants for the semifinal and learning a new stunt in anticipation of victory. "How about you?"

"Awesome," Oliver said, leading me by the hand, a gesture that should've had me

swooning, but I released from his grip, full of insecurity. Just in case the lotion was bad. But Oliver didn't seem to mind, reclaiming my hand and leaning down to whisper, "Savannah's over there, she's watching us. Let's go."

Oliver's breath against my ear sent an unexpected tingle up and down my spine, so much that I wondered if ears had other purposes than hearing and holding glasses on one's face. Remembering our charade, I walked alongside him to the locker room, cocooned in a dreaminess that didn't deserve to be fake. Reacting to Oliver's touch required no acting whatsoever.

Oliver continued to hold my hand when we walked to the parking lot, even though Savannah was no longer around. I didn't query it because it was the best feeling in the world, and if I was going to suffer through Savannah's mean-girl jibes, I should at least get some perks. Like kissing practice, if Oliver thought it was required.

"Did you see Savannah's face?" Oliver asked as he started the car. He was glancing around the remaining cars but Savannah's truck was nowhere to be seen.

Shaking my head, I debated whether I should say anything about Savannah's snarky comments, but Oliver carried on, "I think she's getting the message."

I pressed my lips together and nodded grimly. If Savannah was getting the message, my job would be done. I'd be obsolete and Oliver would end it. "Mmm," I said. "Mission accomplished, I guess?"

Oliver turned out of the school gates, his attention on the road for several blocks before he lowered the volume of the radio. "Actually, I think we should keep this going for a bit longer." He gestured his hand between us. "Would you mind?"

I frowned, though my heart beat had risen rapidly and I wasn't sure I'd heard right. "Keep this going?" I parroted.

“Sav will hold out hope that we’ll get back together if we...”—he waved his hand again to indicate that ‘we’ meant me and him—“...break up too soon. Would you be okay with it?”

I could hardly hold my smile in. Oliver wanted to prolong this fake relationship! “I’m in,” I said, probably with too much exuberance. Toning it down, I added in a mumble, “You know, because you need me.”

Oliver’s face was serious, but his words sent my pulse racing. “I do,” he said. “I do need you.”

Oliver stopped his car outside his old house. At first I thought it was to get a good look at the place which the O’Connell’s had repainted since he’d lived there. But when he leaned across the console to kiss me, I wondered if it was so Mom and Dad wouldn’t be able to see us kissing. The adage of ‘practice makes perfect’ crossed my mind as our lips danced together. Oliver seemed to have time to devote more than just a fleeting peck, indicating that he was either a dedicated tutor or I was an inexperienced kisser. Whatever, I didn’t mind. He wanted to carry on with this and I was happy to oblige, even if Savannah was going to make it uncomfortable.

To avoid going over the details of training and my ride home with Oliver, I spouted on to Mom about all my homework and escaped to my room where I was on speed dial to Sammy.

“Savannah was mean to me at cheer, but Oliver wants to keep fake dating,” I gushed as soon as she appeared on the screen. “He doesn’t want to quit yet because he thinks Savannah will try to get back together.”

“Wait, what?” Sammy screeched. “What do you mean, Savannah was mean to you?”

“She just said something embarrassing,” I said, glossing over her circle comment,

“didn’t you hear me? Oliver wants to keeps dating!”

“I’m worried for you, Maya,” Sammy said.

“You don’t need to be,” I said, “You know, he’s such a good kisser.”

Bringing me down to earth with a thud, she asked, “Compared to who? Jayden in sixth grade?”

I wrinkled my nose and sneered. “Did you notice I said kisses? More than one?”

But Sammy didn’t sound impressed. “Didn’t I warn you about Savannah. You should be careful, Maya.”

“I think it’s fine,” I said with a shrug. “I’m sure it’s natural for her to be a bit upset, yeah?”

“You mean when her boyfriend started to date someone the very next week after they broke up?” Sammy stated with a sarcasm that stung. “Yeah, I kinda think that would be upsetting.”

“She flirted with a Lions player,” I defended Oliver’s action wholeheartedly. “And anyway, it’s fake dating.”

“So, is it fake kissing, then?” Sammy said.

I pouted and scowled, and Sammy’s voice softened, “I’m sorry, Maya, but you know I’m just looking out for you, watch your back, okay?”

“I will,” I said, knowing my best friend’s concern came from her heart. And yes, she was the grounded one while my head was up in the clouds. Sammy was practical,

someone who would check the weather forecast before dressing in the morning, while I'd been known to melt in a sweater and jeans after being fooled by an early morning chill.

"See you tomorrow," Sammy said. "And hey, don't forget we've got an algebra test."

"I haven't forgotten," I said. "See ya."

But I wasn't concerned with study—no the only thing on my mind was whether Oliver's kisses were fake.

OLIVER

After taking Maya home, I was on a high. Savannah had seen me walking Maya to the locker room and though she hadn't seen us kissing, that didn't matter. And now, not even the thought of starting on my senior project could dampen my spirits. I reached for my laptop, once again clicking on my English assignment. The A grade caused another smile, and Mrs. Shelton's feedback was all positive. My chest filled with pride, kind of strange because I hadn't known good grades could bring that sort of satisfaction. It was passing yards, touchdown passes, completions and how much I could bench press that people wanted to know about, where I got my glory.

I opened the handbook on Senior Project requirements, something I was already behind with. I'd already asked for an extension on my submission because of football commitments, but suddenly that two week window had dwindled down to two days and I was no closer to choosing a topic. The Senior Project was supposed to be a passion project, and it could be anything from designing an app, sewing a quilt or creating a podcast. Savannah was doing a video series of makeup and hair tutorials. She'd not offered me any ideas, telling me to do something about football. But football wasn't my number one passion. Lance had done his project on the impact of AI in the future—all now totally out-of-date, Ryan's had been a photography exhibit on historic buildings in the district, and George had developed and taught a class on financial literacy. There was no way I could even use their ideas—or want to. None of those things interested me in the slightest.

Taking a sheet of paper, I titled it 'Brainstorming' as per the guidelines: Write down all the things you are passionate about. My pen doodled on the page as my mind struggled to think of anything. It would be obvious to write football, but only because

that's what everyone else expected.

Maya.

Her face appeared in my head. No, I couldn't do my senior project on Maya Shelton, but what had Maya asked me: What does Oliver Blackwell like?

I liked M he would insist I coach tag football. From the corner of my eye, I could see her scribble her name.

She held the paper out to me. "You'll need to find a mentor."

"Thanks." I snatched it out of her hands. "I might ask Matt at the gym. He's a body builder and knows all about nutrition," I said.

"Or Penny Adlam is a chef."

My head jerked back as I glared at Mom, my words outright hostile. "Savannah's mom?"

"Listen," Mom soothed. "If you're creating new recipes, Penny would be fantastic. She's written several cookbooks, you know."

It was true, Savannah's mom had published a book called Comfort Desserts that had done pretty well. But I wasn't falling for it.

"You just want me to get back with Savannah." I crossed my arms over my chest in defiance. "Not happening, Mom."

Mom sighed. "Actually, Ollie, I'm not. But this idea of yours is intriguing. And fabulous. I'd love for you to do well. Penny would be an excellent mentor."

My throat tightened. Savannah's mom owned a successful restaurant and her food was delicious. But having to deal with Savannah would be a nightmare, and that would be inescapable if Penny mentored me.

But wait—if Penny Adlam mentored me then I'd cross paths with Savannah more—which meant I'd have to keep dating Maya. And that was a prospect I didn't mind at all.

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay?” Mom eyed me with suspicion.

“Yeah, can you ask Penny? I really want to do well in this project.”

Mom's smile beamed brightly and she patted my shoulder. “Sure, Ollie. I'll ask her.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

And for once, I was keen to get back to my school work. And I couldn't wait to see Maya again.

I'M THINKING IT WAS desperation that caused Coach Gregor's superstitions to resurface. Yes, Coach was a creature of routine, but in the final training sessions he became a little crazy. He wanted us to reenact the previous week in every aspect. Every player had to do exactly what he did last week when we got the win against St. Martin's. If we could replicate the same training, eating and sleeping patterns, we would take the win. Oh yeah, same clothes too.

“Wear your lucky underwear!” He sounded like a madman with his irrational orders. And he was making a lot of kids nervous.

“Mom hasn’t done the laundry this week,” Jon said, to which Coach growled, “Do it yourself then!”

“And I ate nachos last night at my grandma’s house,” Darwin said. “I didn’t do that last week.”

“I missed yesterday’s gym session because I went to the dentist,” Troy bemoaned. “Have I jinxed us?”

“Hey, I’m sure it’s fine,” I said, trying to calm the boys. “I’m sure a pair of boxer shorts isn’t going to lose us the game.”

“I always wear my Spiderman ones,” Darwin said, playfully raising his eyebrows, “they’re my lucky ones.”

“Didn’t need to know that,” I quipped. “Hey, whatever works for you, but just make sure your hands are in good form.”

“You throw it, I’ll catch it,” Darwin said.

“That’s what I wanna hear,” I said, slapping his back. “We don’t need any superstitious babble. It’s not luck that wins the game. It’s skill, hard work, determination.”

“Definitely.” A chorus of boys chimed in. “Absolutely!”

As the team’s offensive captain, I couldn’t let Coach’s bizarre beliefs jeopardize the team’s chances. That nonsense could filter through the team and take away the belief we had in ourselves. Yeah, blaming someone’s underwear or Grandma’s cooking could take away the focus of how we played the game.

On Friday, the whole school was pumped and the pressure was building. I embraced it, but for some it was anxiety inducing, and I sympathized with Hendrix who puked in the locker room before we headed out.

As we loaded our bags onto the bus, I searched around for Maya. I hadn't seen her since I'd given her a ride home on Tuesday. And that had nothing to do with Coach Gregor trying to make us replicate the previous week. Maya had met up with her friends on Wednesday and on Thursday, her mom had waited for her. I'd texted but it had only been to say hello and ask about training.

Ignoring the call for everyone to jump on the bus, I hustled through the crowd of kids, spotting Maya thankfully standing far away from Savannah. Knowing I didn't have much time, I strode straight up to her.

"Hey."

"Hey," she said, looking a little surprised. Her eyes darted around, like she was nervous or uncertain. "Shouldn't you be on the bus already?"

"I don't think they'll leave without me," I said with a laugh. "Just wanted to say hi and hope you have fun out there."

"You too," she said. "I know you'll do great."

"Thanks, it means a lot," I said, holding out my fist which she bumped lightly. I smiled at her delicate, fairy-like action. "Let's hope we'll be celebrating in a few hours."

"For sure," she said. "Good luck out there."

"Hey..." I paused but her mouth was irresistible and I kissed her. I felt an initial

hesitation, but then her lips melted against mine and what I intended to be a quick good luck peck turned into more. Turned into Coach Gregor clearing his throat behind me.

“Ahem, Blackwell.”

Maya pulled away with the speed of a cornerback covering a receiver. Not just from the kiss, but she scuttled away and left me to face Coach alone.

“On the bus. Now.” Coach’s head nodded toward the bus.

“Yessir,” I said, but I didn’t move. No, I watched Maya join her friend and head toward the second bus that the cheer and band were traveling on.

“Now, Blackwell,” Coach hollered, probably thinking I was being arrogant, but I couldn’t take my eyes off of Maya, smiling as she backpedaled, being pulled along by Rose.

“A good luck kiss,” I said to Coach. “Can’t begrudge me that.” Coach grumbled something under his breath. “Thought you were all about superstitions,” I countered with a laugh.

Coach shook his head with a deep frown and I jogged ahead to the bus, my heart racing with a perfect combination of excitement from kissing Maya and pre-game nerves.

For all of Coach’s attention to detail, the one thing he couldn’t control was the weather. The drizzling rain had been forecast, but it came earlier than expected. With the slippery ball and unstable footing making it a challenge, we adjusted our game plan. We set up some pretty good run plays, focusing on ball security and minimizing fumbles. It was a low scoring game—but we got there with a 14-7 win.

With the team celebrating, strangely Coach was the calmest I'd ever seen him, like he was in a trance, in disbelief.

"We did it!" I threw up my hand for a high five. "We're going to the finals!"

Coach dismissed my raised hand and squeezed me in a lung busting hug. "Marvelous performance," he said, his voice cracking, "marvelous, Blackwell."

"It was a great game," I babbled, "team played awesome," while awkwardly patting his back. This kind of emotion wasn't one Coach displayed at all.

"We can do it Blackwell. I believe in you. This championship is ours."

"Must've been the good luck kiss, sir," I said, trying to lighten the moment, fearing he was about to sob on my shoulder.

Coach pulled back and chuckled, of which I was grateful. "You have my permission to kiss her again."

"Thank you sir," I said, resisting the urge to roll my eyes. As if I needed his permission!

Freed from his embrace, I scanned the crowd, seeking out Maya. I hadn't watched any of the cheering, though I was aware of their presence. It was remarkable how they carried on, at one stage wearing clear ponchos with the rain beating down on them. If it was slippery for us, they were also under testing conditions. I hoped no one had fallen or hurt themselves.

After the handshakes and post-game interviews, I pushed my way through, catching a glimpse of Savannah standing under an umbrella. Her hair looked perfect like she hadn't gotten wet. She took a step toward me, virtually blocking my way.

“Wow! What a game, Ollie,” she said, holding the umbrella higher to shelter me. “You were amazing.”

“Thanks,” I said, and knowing phones were being aimed at us, smiled. “Great effort by the squad. Thanks for the support.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, grabbing my arm with her free hand. “We’re in the finals!”

“Thanks,” I said again. I didn’t want to forcefully withdraw her grip and continued to smile pleasantly. “One to go.”

“It’ll be massive,” Savannah said, and then she cocked her head, baring her too-white teeth. “Ahhh, such a shame Maya won’t be there.”

“What?” I jerked away from her.

“Such a shame she fell. I don’t think it’s broken, but it’s a nasty sprain.”

“What? Where is she?”

“Hey guys, photos please.” A teacher and a kid with a proper camera pushed us together, and Darwin and Adam and several other cheerleaders huddled around us. I was obligated to smile and hold my fingers up in a V sign like everyone else. The school photographer snapped away.

“What happened?” I seethed through clenched teeth while trying to maintain a smile.

“I dunno. She lost control in the pyramid.”

“Why the heck are you doing a pyramid in the rain?”

Savannah huffed out a haughty snort, yet was somehow smiling in the process “It was hardly raining. And besides the other flyers didn’t fall.”

That was it. I disentangled from the arms surrounding me. “Thanks,” I said firmly, signaling to the photographer that I was out of there. I frantically scoped the area, couldn’t see Maya anywhere, but dashed over to Rose.

“Hey, Rose.” Rose’s eyes popped in surprise. “Where’s Maya? Is she okay?”

“Her mom took her to the ER.”

“Was she okay?”

“Her ankle swelled pretty quickly. I really hope it’s not broken.”

“Thanks.” There was essentially nothing I could do until we got back to school. I texted her as soon as we were on the bus, but there was no reply so I had to assume she was having an x-ray or with the doctor.

Fuming, and with the glory of victory marred, I asked around the team to see if anyone had seen the fall. With the intensity of the game and the reduced visibility, no one knew anything about it. I hoped it meant it had been a minor accident and Maya would be okay.

“Hey, you’re really worried about her,” Adam said.

“Yeah. Of course,” I answered more gruffly than intended.

“But I mean you guys have only been on, you know, one date,” he said.

I was quiet, pondering his reply. Yeah, one date. And supposedly she was my fake

girlfriend, yet, I was mad with worry.

“Hey, man, we’re in the finals!” Adam reminded me with a thump to my shoulder. “We’re in the freaking finals, man!”

My chest tightened with a heaviness that had nothing to do with the game. And though I joined in with the singing on the ride back, my heart wasn’t in it. The victory seemed insignificant with Maya injured. I needed to see her.

Our arrival back at school was met with plenty of hoopla, Mom and Dad already there with all the other families. “History in the making,” and “Owl’s best team ever,” and “One for the record books” and a host of other wild statements were tossed around, everyone already calling us champions.

But I couldn’t enjoy it. Not knowing where or how Maya was.

“So proud,” Dad said, shaking Coach Gregor’s hand, then Assistant Coach Clarkson’s hand, then the Principal’s. I felt the vibration of my phone in my pocket but I knew better than to check it right at that moment. I suffered through the hobnobbing, waiting for the opportune time to escape. Weirdly, it was Savannah who saved me.

Calling me over, she gestured that we were needed for another photo. I quickly excused myself from the adults.

“It’s for the yearbook,” Reece said, when I protested I’d had photos earlier. She adjusted the lens on her camera. I stood next to Sav, hands clasped in front of me. “Actually, the backdrop is wrong. Let’s go over there.”

I followed Reece to what I thought would be a few feet away from the crowd, but she led me over to the gate and the Snow Ridge High entry sign.

“Okay, here,” she said, posing us beneath it. She stepped back and clicked away, before switching up and taking a few with her phone, all the time Savannah directing me in that bossy way that brought back awful memories. “Closer, Ollie. Look alive. Put your arm here, Ollie. Don’t look so stiff. Remember, we’re champions!”

“Did you hear how Maya is?” I asked, cringing as her arm snaked around my waist.

“Not yet,” she said, her wide smile dazzling to the point of annoyance.

“Why’d you do a pyramid in the rain? Aren’t you captain? Shouldn’t it be safety first?”

“I can’t help it if Maya’s inadequate. It’s not my fault she lost her balance,” Savannah said, tutting as she reached for my chin as if wiping away a crumb. Which was weird because I’d drunk a carton of chocolate milk and eaten a few protein balls, which I’d swallowed whole.

I turned to Reece. “We done here?”

“Um, sure,” she said, “thanks Oliver. These will be great for yearbook.”

I huffed and stormed away, finally taking out my phone. My heart surged as I read the text from Maya: I’m okay, just waiting for x-ray results.

Heading to my car, I dialed her number, surprised that she wasn’t picking up. Unless she was talking to the doctor now. I was in two minds, unsure whether I should drive home to eat before heading to Adam’s house to celebrate, or go to the hospital. I wanted to be with the team, but the lure of seeing Maya was too strong.

The good thing about Snow Ridge was that it was small and going to the hospital, although across town, was only a ten minute drive. I’d check on Maya and then join

the team.

I'd been to the ER numerous times, if not for my own injuries then that of my teammates. Spencer had twisted his knee tonight, but he'd iced and braced it, and Jon had reinjured his wrist, but neither of them had been serious enough for a hospital visit.

Striding up to the doors, I broke into a fast walk when I saw Maya and her mother coming down the corridor. Maya was wearing a walking boot and using crutches.

"Maya," I said. "Are you okay?"

"What are you doing here?" Shock was written all over her face. "Were you hurt?"

"What? No, I'm fine," I said. "I'm here to see if you're okay."

"Congratulations! I hear it was a great win," chimed in Mrs. Shelton.

"Thanks," I said, turning back to Maya, "I'm so sorry you had a fall. I didn't find out till after the game."

"I'll go bring the car up to the door," Mrs. Shelton said, nodding at us.

Maya nodded back but didn't say anything until her mom had left. "You don't have to be here, you know. You should be with the team."

"The team can wait," I said. "I'm your boyfriend...I wanted to check on you. What did the doctor say?"

"Fake boyfriend," she clarified with a little giggle. "It's just a sprain. Nothing's broken."

“That’s a relief, but what actually happened?”

“Emily slipped on the field and I landed wrong.”

“Why were you guys even doing a pyramid? In the rain?” It was the same question I’d asked Savannah.

Maya shrugged and she paused and adjusted her crutches. “I wish I hadn’t missed the game.”

“I wish you hadn’t either,” I said, standing aside to let her through the automatic opening door. “How long do you have to wear the boot?”

“At least two weeks,” she said, and there was genuine regret in her voice. “I’ll miss the final.”

We stopped on the curb and I gently touched her shoulder. “But you’ll still be there, right?”

“Of course,” she said. “Hey, you should go be with the team.”

“Yeah.”

A small blue hatchback slowed and I was a little surprised by Mrs. Shelton’s choice of car. It looked like a typical high school girl’s car. I opened the passenger door and taking her crutches, I steadied her.

“Hey, take it easy,” I whispered, bending to kiss her softly on the lips. For the second time, Maya looked shocked, and I murmured, “Boyfriend stuff. Your mom’s watching.”

But as I said, “Call you later,” and closed her door, the tingle lingering on my lips revealed one thing—I might be her fake boyfriend but there was nothing fake about our kisses.

MAYA

Limping along on crutches, I thought I was hallucinating when I saw Oliver striding down the hallway because there could be no way he'd be at the hospital after such a momentous victory. Unless he was injured. But at the pace he was moving, it didn't appear he was.

Dad's frequent commentary texts had kept me in the loop when Mom insisted on bringing me to the hospital. Mrs. Foster's instructions had been clear before the game—no pyramids, no basket tosses, no tumbling maneuvers because of the slippery field. The rain, though not drenching, was incessant and annoying, especially for our hair and makeup.

Bowen's cheers were loud, and I mean loud. They had their supporters chanting and on their feet. That's the only reason I can think that Savannah called us to do the pyramid.

"Shall we do it? Let's do it," she said and no one dared say we shouldn't. We moved into formation quickly, a stunt we'd done over and over—but not in wet weather.

All was going well. As the flyer, I was standing firmly, performing my arabesque, but Emily, one of my bases, slipped and I went down with her, my ankle buckling beneath me when I landed. We both jumped up in a flash, but pain seared through my right foot and I couldn't put any weight on it. I had to wait till the end of the chant before I could hobble away. Savannah's glare was icy enough to start another ice age, Emily was in tears, shaken though uninjured, and Mrs. Foster reappeared with an umbrella.

The walk to the locker room seemed like a marathon, my ankle ballooning with every step. When Mom arrived, she examined my elevated foot wrapped in an ice pack, and without hesitation said we were going to the emergency room. There was no option; it might be broken. Yes, I would miss the end of the game but I could watch a replay later. Dad assisted me to the car, but Mom told him to stay; there was no need for all of us to wait.

Hence the updates from Dad, but it was still bittersweet when the Owls stole a 14-7 victory in the fourth quarter because I'd missed Oliver's biggest sporting moment. Knowing the team would be celebrating, my heart flipped when Oliver's text came through and the pain seemed to ease after that. It was a relief to be informed that there was no fracture, just a grade 2 sprain. I was taken to a room for strapping. I'd have to keep the weight off of the foot, ice and elevate for the next 48 hours—not a fun way to spend my weekend.

But somehow Oliver was here in the hospital, going above and beyond the fake boyfriend duty, showing true concern. He should've been with the team, unless he was putting in an extra effort for Savannah's sake. If she knew that he had come to see me, it would seem more convincing that we were in a relationship.

Whatever, I was beyond amazed and when he kissed me while my mother waited in the car, I could only applaud his dedication to the role. I mean, I'm not sure why he kissed me as it wasn't Mom we were putting on an act for.

"Oh," she said, when Oliver closed my door. "He was really worried about you."

"Yeah." For some reason, I couldn't stop smiling. Even though my ankle throbbed and I was going to be immobile for days and miss cheering the final, I was deliriously happy. "I thought he might've been injured since he'd come to the hospital."

"It was thoughtful of him to check on you," Mom said with a smug smile.

“He’ll be celebrating with the team now,” I said, trying to downplay it, hard when my whole body was buzzing with an electric energy.

Mom set me up on the couch, pillows under my foot, waiting on me hand and foot. That part was okay, but it was excruciating to follow the Cheer Chat and see the celebrations happening without me. I sent a photo of my leg and all the girls wished me a speedy recovery. Even Savannah reacted with a ‘care’ emoji. Unfortunately, the only thing I could do was wallow in self-pity and munch on the bowl of buttered popcorn that Mom had provided.

Dad arrived home with a full and detailed report of the game, and up in my room, I video called Sammy, who’d been surprised that Oliver had shown up at the hospital.

“That’s kind of weird, isn’t it?” Sammy asked.

“I’m guessing he did it to let Savannah know,” I said. “You know, be the supportive boyfriend.”

“I didn’t even see you fall,” Sammy said. “We had no idea.”

“Thank goodness,” I said. “It happened in just a split second. Poor Emily. She was really upset.”

“I bet,” Sammy said. “But why do those stunts when it’s raining?”

“Bowen were crushing it. Savannah said we needed to up our game.”

“Savannah?”

“Yeah. Coach had said not to.”

“Savannah knows you’re a flyer.” Sammy took a thoughtful pause. “And she knew it could be potentially dangerous...”

“What?” I frowned at her insinuation. “You think she wanted me to fall?”

“She put you in danger!” Sammy shrieked.

“It was an accident,” I said. “She couldn’t have known that Emily would slip.”

“No, but she put you in the position to fall,” Sammy retorted.

“Harlow and Jessa were in the same position,” I said in fierce defense of Savannah. As cheer captain, I couldn’t believe that she would want any of her girls hurt.

“I think your loyalty is misguided,” Sammy muttered. “Remember, I told you to watch your back.”

“Well, I’m going to be fine,” I said sulkily, refusing to believe there was any truth in Sammy’s accusations. The cheer squad was like a sisterhood; we all looked out for one another. Telling Sammy I was tired, we said goodnight, but my stomach was in a knot. Because I hadn’t told her how Savannah had glared and hissed at me after I’d fallen, like I’d embarrassed the squad and let everyone down.

I had a restless night, not only from the pain but the seed of doubt that Sammy had planted in my mind. Yes, I conceded that quite possibly Savannah was peeved that I was dating Oliver, but surely not to the extent she’d want me injured. Their breakup had nothing to do with me, I hadn’t caused it, so I shouldn’t be the one she was angry with.

I woke up the next morning to find a clear but crisp day. Typical. The weather had been a bust yesterday, but today was a glorious fall day and I’d be stuck inside. My

agenda looked to be movies, movies and more movies with a copious amount of popcorn. Dad had to work and Mom retreated to the spare room/office to do marking. And Sammy said she'd be over after her shift at the grocery store.

I must have dozed because the next thing I knew, Mom was calling my name and tapping me. "Maya? Maya, darling, you have a visitor." She leaned closer and whispered. "Oliver's here."

At the mention of his name, I was instantly awake, pulling myself up from my slouched position. I rubbed my eyes and could only pray that my hair didn't resemble a bird's nest.

"Come in," Mom was saying as I pushed aside the blanket and Mom moved the ottoman in position so I could elevate my foot.

"Hi Maya," Oliver said, stepping forward.

I drew in an audible gasp to see Oliver with a bunch of flowers and a gift bag in his hand. Surely this was over the top. A simple card would have been sufficient, but even that was unnecessary.

"Oliver, you didn't need to bring me anything," I said.

"I wanted to," Oliver said, moving the pillow my foot had been on and taking a seat at the end of the couch. I took the bunch and sniffed at them, but in such a fluster, I couldn't tell if they were scented.

"Thanks, they're gorgeous." I didn't want to tell him, but they were the first flowers I'd ever been given. "I love them."

"You're welcome," Oliver said, handing me the silver gift bag, "And this is for you

too.”

“A gift? Aww.” I smiled, feeling a little guilty. Fake dating didn’t require real gifts. “You shouldn’t have.”

I opened the bag and peered in. I pulled out a small plastic container and opened it. Nestled in a kitchen paper towel were four small truffle-like balls. They looked home-made. And that’s when it clicked.

“You made these? These are your protein balls?”

“Yep,” Oliver said, lowering his eyes shyly and pointing in the container. “The white ones are coconut and almond and those are peanut butter and chia seed. Your favorite flavors.”

“Oh, wow!” I was touched he’d remembered.

“Try one,” he said, and I delicately picked up the peanut butter one and popped the whole thing in my mouth. The flavors swirled around my tastebuds, tantalizing my tongue. “There’s seven grams of protein in each one. I eat them after training for a recovery snack, but who knows, maybe they can help with your recovery.”

“They are seriously good,” I said, licking my lips together.

“There’s more,” Oliver said, pointing to the gift bag.

A smile swallowed my whole face as I brought out a Mason jar filled with M&Ms. The candy had been layered so that at the bottom there was an orange layer, then a green one, followed by the other colors, with brown on top.

“It’s in order from worst to best,” Oliver said, “so you get to eat your favorites last.”

Staggered that he'd remembered the order in which I'd ranked the different colors on our first date, I could only gasp and said, "Well, I don't like to call any M&M the worst, more like least preferred."

"You're right. There's no bad M&M."

I held the jar up, in complete awe. "How many bags did you have to buy to do this?"

"Never you mind," Oliver said, raising his eyebrows mischievously. "Let's just say I had to eat quite a few blue ones to make things even."

I giggled. "That's the sweetest thing anyone's ever done for me," I said. And then I bit down on my lower lip because that sounded...too real.

And none of this was real. Well, not for him.

"Hey, do you want a drink? A juice or soda?" I asked quickly, heat rising up my neck. "But you'll have to get it yourself, sorry." I pointed apologetically to my foot.

"Sure," Oliver said, standing up. "Can I get you something too?"

"Yeah, juice would be good. Thanks." I wasn't thirsty but I needed a moment to absorb Oliver's gesture.

The open plan layout of our kitchen, dining and living rooms meant I could call out directions to where the glasses were kept and I could hear the opening of the fridge and the banging of cupboard doors. Meantime, feeling like an undercover agent, I took snaps of Oliver's candy jar and sent it to my friends. Sammy would be working but Paige and Evie immediately replied with a range of emojis from shocked and wide-eyed to heart eyes. My cheeks had cooled down by the time Oliver returned with two glasses of orange juice and I'd opened the jar of candy, though it felt

criminal to spoil it.

He sat down, not at the end of the couch, but closer, right next to me. I gulped as he handed me the glass, our fingers brushing together. As he leaned back, his elbow touched mine, not accidentally but like he was nestling next to me, acting like my boyfriend. And yet there was no one to witness it. Mom had gone back to her desk and Dad still wasn't home.

"How did the party go?" I asked, taking a small sip of juice.

"It was good, but I didn't stay late," Oliver said, taking my glass and setting it down on the coffee table.

"Why not?"

"I was pretty beat after the game. I got hit pretty decent a few times."

I immediately sat straighter, full of concern "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm good, I'll survive." And with a grin and a nudge, "I came out better than you did."

I gaped, slowing nodding as I said, "Uh huh, you're rubbing it in, aren't you?" I tried to suppress my giggle and project utter exasperation. "You played a full game and you're fine, and I had one stupid fall and I'm a mess." I pulled the blanket off of my extended leg to reveal the ice pack on my foot. " And I'm going to miss the final."

Oliver's smile was apologetic and adorable at the same time and I wanted to grab his cheeks and kiss that smirking face of his. Oh boy, I really did. I wanted to run my hands through his hair and taste his lips and tell him how amazing he was—for real.

But I didn't because I remembered he was my fake boyfriend.

My heart thumped hard and fast in my chest, paralyzing me for a second. For a moment I was lost in my own insanity, and then Oliver's fingers grazed my chin, a whisper of a touch that triggered every nerve ending in my body, bringing me to my senses while making me senseless.

"You'll be there," he said in a soft voice, his breath a feather across my cheeks. "I need you there. You're my good luck charm, Maya." His lips pressed against mine lightly, nothing more than a tease.

"I am?" I was reduced to a quivering, trembling wreck, my ankle pain forgotten, my role of fake girlfriend also forgotten as I leaned into Oliver, defying him to end the kiss.

Oliver needed no further encouragement. In a split second, his arm was around me and we were holding one another, Rose and Jack on the bow of the Titanic (yes, I'd rewatched that movie earlier that morning.) I was firmly seated on our beige colored couch with my leg up on the ottoman, but I was flying!

I was flying, dreaming, in heaven.

The rattle of the front door brought me back to earth, Oliver too if the speed in which his arms and his lips abandoned me was anything to go by. The heavy footsteps could only belong to Dad and when he appeared in the living room, Oliver and I were sitting ramrod straight as if we were practicing a yoga pose.

"Oh! Hello Oliver!" Dad chirped. "I wondered whose car that was out the front. Great game last night."

"Thanks, Mr. Shelton." Oliver rose to his feet and Dad shook his hand heartily before

putting a hand on his shoulder, like he wanted to give him a bro hug.

“Super game, I tell you, they were tricky conditions.” Dad rambled on, praising Oliver for his leadership, skill and smart gameplay. Like he was his number one fan.

“Thank you, Mr. Shelton,” Oliver said numerous times.

The conversation continued and it wasn't long till Dad said the words that struck horror in my heart. “Now, back in junior high when I was quarterback...”

To his credit, Oliver listened and commented without sounding bored and when Dad mentioned his high school discus record, Oliver winked at me.

“That's amazing, Mr. Shelton. Totally cool.”

“Look, here it is,” Dad said, nearly tripping over the coffee table to get to the bookshelf. He proudly handed Oliver the trophy, the small plaque barely hanging on.

“Dad, it's an ancient relic,” I cried in embarrassment. “What do you want Oliver to do, dust it for you?”

Oliver gently blew on it and a layer of dust floated into the air. We all laughed and Dad sheepishly took the trophy back.

But he was undeterred. “How about we watch a replay of the game? Sweetie, you wanted to see it, Ollie, you in?”

I cringed. Dad was now calling him Ollie and suggesting we all hang out and watch the game!

Sure Oliver would make an excuse to leave, he instead plonked himself back down

on the couch next to me and said, “Sounds good, Mr. S, I’m in.” And he squeezed my knee and grinned.

And I had no clue what game my fake boyfriend was playing. But I was loving every minute of it.

OLIVER

I hadn't intended to spend all afternoon at Maya's house, but I really didn't want to leave her side. Mr. Shelton wasn't batting an eyelid as I snuggled next to Maya. She seemed happy to play the fake relationship for her parents and was extra grateful when I replaced her icepack and brought her another drink—almost like I was in my own house.

But that's how the Shelton house was—comfortable, homely. Mr. Shelton's commentary was spot-on and I could tell he loved the game for the sake of the game. Not like Dad—for him there had to be an end result—a championship title or a college scholarship. That pressure took the fun out of the sport, when you just wanted to play with your friends, for your school, for the sheer joy of it, and where the stakes weren't always hanging over your head.

When the game finished, the doorbell rang and with the arrival of Maya's friend, Sammy, I detected a frostiness that sent the indoor temperature plummet despite the heating.

“Oliver.” She said my name curtly, like a teacher about to give out a failing grade, and her dark hair tied up in a severe knot matched the stern vibe.

“Yeah.” I said, somewhat terrified of her. “Sammy? Nice to formally...finally...meet you.” I didn't know what I was saying, only that it was blatantly clear she wasn't a fan of me. Which was something I'd never encountered before.

“Look at this,” Maya said, showing Sammy the M&M jar, “isn't this just the cutest?”

“Yeah,” Sammy said with a nod but no emotion, “it is.” She presented Maya with a gift bag, and Maya gushed in thanks as she pulled out bags of popcorn, gummy bears, peanut butter cups, nail polish, face masks and other beauty stuff.

“Uh, I think I should leave you girls to it,” I said, standing up and stretching my shoulders. I had been sitting for a while and there was some stiffness in my upper back.

“Yeah, we’ve got real stuff to do,” Sammy said with a complete lack of subtlety, her fierce expression confirming that I wasn’t welcome.

“Um, hey, you don’t need to walk me out.” I motioned to Maya who was trying to get up.

“I need to use the bathroom,” she said with a giggle.

I willingly helped her up, though noticed Sammy keeping an eagle eye out. When I was about to grab her crutches, Maya shook her head. “I can hobble,” she said, “it’s not far.”

“We’ve got game review tomorrow and it’s bound to be a long one, but I’ll call you, okay?”

“Yeah, thanks for the flowers and my favorite thing ever,” she said, glancing down at the candy jar with a smile.

“You’re very welcome.” I wanted to kiss Maya but I hesitated, Sammy standing protectively to the side, like she was guarding her from me. “Uh, um...I’ll see you later?” And despite Sammy’s intimidating glare, I gently wrapped my arm around Maya’s back and pulled her close for a soft and swift kiss on the lips.

Maya looked up at me with bright eyes, her smile radiant and so full of joy that my heart skipped a beat, and a shiver raced through me, the hairs on the back of my neck standing to attention.

And it hit me—this was real. This feeling couldn't be faked, it wasn't pretend. I wasn't acting. I could've bought Maya a bag of candy, but no, I'd come up with the idea to divide the candy into colors because I wanted to impress her.

And there's only one reason you want to impress a girl—and that's when you really like her, when you really care about her.

IT TOOK MOM NO TIME at all to set up Penny Adlam as my mentor for the Senior Project. She signed all the paperwork and arranged to have our first meeting within a couple of days. I was kind of pleased to be meeting Penny—as she'd always insisted I call her—racing there straight after football training on Wednesday because the nightly pep talks from Dad about the final were bugging me.

“You have the chance to be legends, to write your name in the history books,” Dad said, mirroring what Coach Gregor had been saying all week. “This game is the final assignment, Ollie, and nothing less than an A will be acceptable. Colleges will be fighting for you, I know it. Your future depends on this.”

I nodded agreeably because there was no sense, at this late stage, to fuel a fire. And besides, I wanted to enjoy the week, the hype, the camaraderie within the team. Savor my last high school football game.

Meeting Penny and getting started on my project would give me some relief from Dad's constant harping on about this game being everything, if not the reason for life itself. It was grating on me and only the memory of spending time with Maya and wrestling these new, not-so-fake feelings was stopping me from lashing out at him. Yeah, I loved football but that didn't mean I had to play it in college, right? Why

couldn't I be like my brothers and study a career I wanted? Why did a football scholarship have to be the be-all and end-all of everything?

Penny's restaurant was part of the Snow Ridge Golf Course complex. With indoor and outdoor seating and a wrap-around terrace offering views of the 18th hole and the mountains, it made for a popular lunch spot by day, and the bar and four large screen tvs made it lively at night. Mom and Dad were regulars on the weekend.

"Hi Penny," I greeted her brightly, hoping she wouldn't mention the breakup.

"Hi, Ollie, how are you? I haven't seen you since you and Savvy..." Her lips pressed as if it was an accidental slip of the tongue.

I drew in a deep breath, trying to maintain composure. "If this is going to be awkward—"

Penny brought her hand up to her mouth, signaling a zipping motion and shook her head. "Absolutely not. I'm sorry. I'm not going to interfere in my daughter's love life, and your mom was so enthusiastic about your project that I jumped at the chance to help."

"I really appreciate it."

"Your mom says your protein balls are pretty tasty."

"Huh?" I frowned. I'd never given Mom any of my protein balls to eat.

"Oops," Penny said with a chuckle. "Apparently she sneaks them from the fridge. Guess I shouldn't have said that."

There was a surge in my chest, a swelling, amazement that Mom had tried my protein

balls and raved about them to Penny. She'd never said anything to me. If anything, she'd tell me off about not cleaning up the kitchen after I made a batch. Washing up the food processor could be such a pain.

After putting on a cap and an apron, Penny showed me how a commercial kitchen worked. She had set up a workspace where she was getting her desserts ready for the dinner menu. She worked meticulously and efficiently, measuring and mixing ingredients—and yes, I learned that vanilla doesn't come from a jar at the grocery store, but a vanilla pod that you cut and scrape the seeds out of. Penny whisked up a French Vanilla ice cream which she covered in clingfilm to refrigerate before putting it in the ice cream maker. I was disappointed that I wouldn't taste the finished product, but I was already inspired to make my vanilla coconut balls more authentic by using the real thing.

“You know, I can't believe Savannah never brought me here, to the kitchen,” I said. “It's been awesome.”

Penny smiled. “I can see you enjoyed it.” And with a wink, she said, “Savvy only comes here to eat. Not to work.”

But I wasn't here to diss Savannah. “Thanks so much, Penny. It's been fun.”

“Well, after the big game, you must come for dinner. I don't want to ruin your routines before game day. Your mom said Coach is a little superstitious.”

“Yeah, he's going a bit overboard,” I said. “So, what will we do next time?”

“I thought we'd look at different flavor combinations and if possible, can you bring in a few samples? Let's see what Nicole's raving about.”

“Yeah, of course,” I said. My smile was wide and I was buzzing—until I went out to

my car. Savannah's truck was parked next to it and she jumped out as soon as she saw me coming.

"I heard you were doing your senior project on cooking," she said, leaning against the door of my car.

"Yeah, your Mom is mentoring me."

"If you wanna get back together, just say it," she said, fluttering her eyelashes.

"Excuse me?"

"If you wanna get back together, you could just say so," she repeated, curling the end of her hair around her finger. "You don't have to use Mom as an excuse."

My first instinct was to lash out and tell her she was crazy but I took a breath to calm myself.

"I mean, since when have you ever wanted to be a chef?"

I inhaled deeply again, not wanting to start an argument, but Savannah seemed intent on pressing.

"You can pretend you don't miss me, but I see through your game, Ollie. You chose a project so Mom could be your mentor. And so you can be close to me."

I didn't want to jeopardize my mentorship with Penny by insulting Savannah, but she had to know we were never getting back together.

"I'm with Maya now," I said softly, raising my eyebrows to indicate she should move away from my door. "You know that."

“Ha!” Savannah rolled her eyes with an evil sarcastic laugh. “That’s just some little fling to make me jealous,” she sneered. “It’s pretty obvious.”

“It is?” I asked.

“Of course it is. Everyone knows you’re just using Maya to get back at me.” And with a flick of her hair, she fake smiled, and took a photo with her phone. “Good choice though. I mean, you’re getting A’s in AP English now.”

My throat tightened and my chest heaved over Savannah’s inference. Did everyone think that I was fake dating Maya as payback to Savannah and using her to get better grades? I felt sick to my bones.

“You’re wrong,” I said.

“Am I?” she said with a condescending pout. “You mean you have real feelings for little Maya Shelton?” She laughed as if it was the most outrageous thing.

I glared at her, signaling that she should step away from my car. I wrenched the door open and revved my engine, screeching out of the parking lot.

My blood was boiling, anger rising, totally furious—but at who? Savannah...or myself? Savannah had spoken a truth I couldn’t deny—yeah, I’d used Maya. In the heat of the moment, an impulsive decision, I’d put Maya on the spot, practically pleading that she fake date me.

And she had...but why?

Had she felt threatened, manipulated, bullied?

My heart beat roared in my ears as I hated that I might have pressured her into fake

dating me. And added to that, my actions hadn't fooled anyone, least of all Savannah. And the nerve of her thinking I wanted us to get back together.

This was all a shambles, messier than I had ever intended. I needed to sort this out. I'd taken it too far. I didn't want Maya to be a joke, or even a talking point and Savannah was turning her into one. And it was obvious Sammy disapproved. I had to apologize to Maya...and admit that my feelings were no longer fake.

And there was no time like the present.

I'd drive straight there now, open up and tell her how I really felt.

MAYA

By the fifth day, the swelling had subsided and a nice shade of purple surrounded my ankle. I'd ditched my crutches at school because they were such a nuisance, and with a pep rally everyday in preparation for the final, I was holding people up in the hallways. I'd learned on the first day back that kids did not like to be stuck behind someone limping along on crutches.

I was excused from Tuesday's cheer practice because I had a physical therapy appointment, getting some exercises for recovery. It was all basic stuff of foot rotations and stretches for range of motion and flexibility. But on Wednesday, I was back, keen to join the squad. I knew my participation could only be a sideline role, but at least I could carry my pom poms and hold the banner and shout out the cheers.

Savannah was all business, thriving in her captaincy role. Twice she asked me to move, saying I was blocking her way and then she called me over.

"It might be better if you help with the banners. You're kind of just a nuisance here," she said, sounding sweet but her face was sour. "Miss Collins and the art club are doing them now. She'd be grateful for more hands."

"Oh," I muttered, unable to hide my disappointment of not being with the team.

"And if you're thinking of waiting around for Oliver after training, don't bother. He's coming to my mom's restaurant," she said with a smug and supercilious smile. "And hey, wasn't it nice that dating you got his grades up?"

“What?” My ears pricked at her totally absurd statement.

“You know your Mom gave him an A in his last assignment? I mean Ollie never gets an A in English.” Her breathy laugh was edged with malice. “That can’t be a coincidence, can it?”

I was literally dumbstruck, Savannah’s allegation too insane for a response. I hobbled my way up to the art room where Miss Collins and a couple of students were painting the posters, and I went through the motions of slapping paint on paper, but completely caught up in my own head, reeling over the claim that Oliver had used me for his grades. Could that be possible? Was the fake dating only a ploy to cover the real reason? And was he really meeting Savannah tonight—because he certainly hadn’t made plans with me, or even messaged me.

When Miss Collins called it a day, I texted Mom that I’d meet her at the car. My phone pinged with messages in the Cheer Chat, Savannah posting photos of a pyramid—Emily, Rose and Anna holding up Kelsie. Yes, it sent a stab to my confused heart, knowing it should have been me and that I was going to miss the biggest game of the year. More photos came through of the training session, and then there was one of Savannah and Oliver, more pointedly, Oliver with his arm around Savannah in front of the goal post.

The caption read: A winning team! #Olivannah

If it was bad enough that Kelsie was replacing me as flyer, seeing Savannah and Oliver together made my heart plummet. Was everything she said true?

I knew this week was going to be a busy one for him—there were interviews with radio stations, podcasts and local newspapers—so I’d had low expectations that we’d get together, but I at least thought he’d talk to me today. Seems not.

“All good?” Mom asked brightly, flinging her satchel into the back of the car.

“I helped with painting the banner today,” I mumbled.

“Oh, I’m glad you weren’t on your feet,” she said. “How is the ankle?”

“It’s fine,” I said, sucking in a tight breath.

“You okay?” She looked over in concern.

I nodded, but my head was spinning. The whole fake dating scenario—the best two weeks of my life—was about to come to a crashing end. My phone pinged again—another photo, this time Savannah had her hand touching Oliver’s face, or more precisely, his lips. The caption read: Nothing fake about this! My blood froze in a heart-stopping moment. Obviously, our fake dating hadn’t fooled Savannah.

“Argggh,” I groaned, closing the app.

“Something wrong?” Mom asked.

I shook my head which was hurting, just like my heart. He’d wanted me to be his lucky charm for the game, but it looked like he didn’t need me now.

Fake date me , he’d said, and I’d jumped in boots and all. But Sammy was right, wasn’t she? I’d played my part—poorly, it seemed—and I was the one who was about to get hurt.

But it was my fault totally—because I blurred the line between what’s fake and what’s real.

I POKED AT THE CHICKEN pasta bake that Dad had made, eating one rigatoni at a

time and without enthusiasm.

“What’s wrong with my cooking?” Dad asked.

“Nothing,” I muttered, “just lost my appetite.”

“We can’t have that. You need all the energy for Friday’s game.”

“Savannah will probably have me counting pom poms,” I said.

Dad quirked his eyebrow. “Why’s that?”

“Today she made me go and help the art club with the banner. She didn’t want me with the team.”

“Well, it’s important to get all the banners made. Owls are going big,” Dad said.

I looked at my phone, upside down on the table, playing dumb. Nothing from Oliver, though why would there be if he was with Savannah.

It was my job to clear the table and stack the dishwasher, and I did it without complaining, hoping that menial chores would keep me from thinking about Oliver and Savannah. I put all my focus into making sure the plates and bowls and cutlery were put in their proper places.

Across the kitchen counter, my phone pinged and my heart surged in the hope it was Oliver. But it was another photo in the Cheer Chat, one of half of Oliver by his car. The background looked like the Golf Club, where Savannah’s mother owned the restaurant. My heart sunk as it was labeled #Olivannah again. So, it was true that they were having dinner together. I felt sick to my stomach.

I grabbed the spray bottle and dishrag and wiped down the counter top and the fridge and the cabinet doors.

It was never meant to last, I knew that. In fact, it was laughable to think that it would. It was a temporary fake dating arrangement. I was supposed to enjoy it while it lasted, but dang it, I'd gotten swept up and fallen for real. Yeah, my bad.

And for that I would suffer the consequences—a broken heart.

“What are you doing?”

I eased myself up from my crouched position where I was wiping the lower cupboards to see Mom with her hands on her hips and a look of confusion on her face—like she'd entered a parallel dimension.

I shrugged, offering a weak, “Cleaning?”

And then my chin quivered. “Savannah and Oliver are back together,” I said. “She said you gave him an A on his assignment because he was dating me.”

“What?” Mom gasped and gaped. “Who said that?”

“Savannah,” I sniffled, rubbing my eyes, tears on the verge of trickling out.

“Well, there's no truth to that,” Mom said with outrage. “I don't grade on who you are or who you go out with. If Oliver got an A, he deserved it. It wasn't because he asked you on a date!”

I sniffed again in an attempt to hold back the tears, but it was futile, my resolve cracking open. “We weren't really dating,” I spluttered, “Oliver wanted to show Savannah that it was over between them. And I agreed to be his fake girlfriend.”

Mom was beside me, hand on my shoulder in comfort. “Oh, Maya,” she sympathized.

“But now I think he’s back with Savannah,” I cried, burying my face in her chest. “She’s posting photos of them together.”

“Ahh, sweetie, I know it can be hard,” Mom cooed, stroking the top of my head.

“But I like Oliver. For real. It’s not fake for me.” With every heart wrenching sob, I sunk deeper into Mom’s embrace. “Sammy said I shouldn’t, that I’d get hurt, but I couldn’t help it. I like him, Mom, I really do.”

Mom didn’t say anything, but her hug was all I needed, and I wanted to stay there forever, wrapped up in her arms.

“Ahem.” Dad’s fake cough caused me to lift my eyes. “Everything all right in here?”

“It will be,” Mom whispered, “it will be.”

Dad came and hugged us both, a safe cocoon where my ludicrous situation was forgotten, if only for a minute. Mom took the cleaning products and told me she’d run a nice warm bath. She didn’t say anything about my stupidity in fake dating Oliver, but as I limped off to my bedroom I could hear her and Dad murmuring.

As the bath filled, I tortured myself with one last look at Savannah’s photos before closing my eyes to stop more tears.

I’d send Oliver one last text and let Sammy gloat on how she’d been right all along.

I typed: So, that’s it, you got your A and we’re over?

Too harsh, so I deleted and retyped: It was fun while it lasted

Not harsh enough, so I deleted again and retyped: Good luck with #Olivannah

“Maya,” Mom called, “your bath is ready.”

“Coming,” I yelled back, quickly deleting that last text which was too sarcastic. Better just to leave it and try to forget the whole thing.

THE LAVENDER BATH SALTS—YES , another gift from my grandma—must have done the trick because I slept deeply and restfully, the first time in days. Or it could have been because my ankle wasn’t so sore anymore. Or that crying into my pillow had exhausted me.

Bleary-eyed, I grabbed my phone to check my texts and pretended not to be sad or disappointed that Oliver hadn’t messaged, not even a breakup text. Though did fake dating require a breakup? Well, duh, probably he’d been too busy reuniting with Savannah.

There were a bunch of messages from Rose though, but Mom was hollering from the kitchen to get a move on. I’d check them later.

“How are you?” Mom hugged me and handed me a smoothie in a travel mug. “You forgot I’ve got a department meeting this morning. We have to leave now.”

“Yeah, sorry. I’ll just grab my cheer bag and get my shoes. I mean, shoe.”

Mom nodded and headed out to the garage. In the car, I texted Sammy to meet me in the parking lot. It wasn’t a conversation I wanted to have, but I preferred to do it in person than by phone. And I didn’t want to deny my best friend the privilege of saying, ‘I told you so’ straight to my face.

I used the time waiting for Sammy to apply my makeup, going all out with concealer,

color corrector, primer, highlighter, mascara and liner to hide my puffy eyes.

“Wow, is it photos day for the cheer squad?” Sammy asked, pushing back Mom’s seat to allow room for her long legs.

I frowned, steadily applying a rose colored lip blush. “No, just making myself pretty so that when you say ‘I told you so’ I won’t be tempted to cry.”

Sammy’s jaw dropped. “What?” Then something must’ve clicked because she said, “I told you so? Does this mean the fake dating is over?”

I clamped my trembling lips together, annoyed that the tears hadn’t dried up yet. “Yep, you were right,” I said, my voice squeaky and shaky. “Savannah posted that #Olivannah is back on and put up photos of them together. And they were out at the Golf Club for dinner last night.”

“Awww, Maya, I’m sorry.” Sammy leaned across the console to give me a brief hug, difficult to do with my large makeup bag on my lap. I fluttered my eyelashes to blink back the tears. “They’re back together?”

I nodded, pulling out a tissue to blot my eyes.

“I didn’t see anything online.”

“She posted in the Cheer Chat.”

Sammy pouted. “I don’t want to say I told you so. ”

“Say it,” I commanded. “You deserve to. You told me and I didn’t listen. And now I’m a blubbery mess.” I laugh-cried, grabbing another tissue to dab my nose.

Sammy shook her head. “That really sucks. I thought he was adamant he and Savannah were over.”

I shrugged, my voice flat. “Yeah, and I’m the fool who believed him.”

“Hey, I’m sorry Maya. I really am. You don’t deserve this, bestie.” She squeezed my hand. “You know, when I saw him at your house on Sunday, I could have sworn he had it bad for you.”

“He was acting,” I said.

“Well, he’s definitely Oscar material then.”

My phone rang and picking it off my lap, I saw Mom’s name on screen. “Yeah?” I said, expecting she’d say she left a folder in the backseat and could I bring it to her office.

“Where are you?”

“In the car. With Sammy.”

“Okay, stay right there. I’m coming now.” There was an urgency to her tone, one that made my heart rate soar. My thoughts immediately raced to Dad and Lizzie.

“Why?” But she’d hung up already. “Mom’s coming,” I said. “Something’s wrong.”

“What?”

“I dunno. But she sounded stressed.” I flung my makeup back into its purse and zipped it up. “Something must be wrong. I hope it’s not Dad.” Dad was a roofer. Mom was always worried that one day he’d fall off a roof, even though he never

compromised his safety standards.

“I hope not,” Sammy said, clutching my hands and offering up a quick prayer, “Please let Mr. Shelton be okay.”

As Mom came into view, my heart clenched. Her walking was definitely at a fast pace and she carried a tote bag over her shoulder. Visualizing that Dad was lying on the ground somewhere, I got out of the car, as did Sammy, and we met her on the curb. Only then did I realize that I hadn’t put my shoe on yet.

I was frantic. “Mom, what’s wrong? Is Dad okay?”

Mom nodded, greeting Sammy. “Your dad is fine. I just had a phone call from Mrs. Blackwell.” Her brief pause sent my mind into overdrive and in that millisecond I pictured an angry Mrs. Blackwell (who I’d only seen from a distance at football games) blaming me for coming between Savannah and Oliver. But then Mom said, “Oliver’s in hospital.”

“In hospital?” I parroted back.

“He had a car accident last night.”

“Is he hurt?” I said at the same time that Sammy asked, “What happened?”

“I don’t know all the details, but it was a collision near town. It seems a car went through the stop light without stopping.”

I gasped and my eyes brimmed with tears as I pictured Oliver injured and unable to play in the final. “Is he hurt bad?”

“He has a broken leg.”

I gasped again, covering my hand over my mouth. Oliver would definitely not be playing football on Friday night.

“Maya,” Mom said, placing her arm around my shoulder, “Mrs. Blackwell called to say that Oliver wants to see me.”

“Me?” My first thought was that he had amnesia. Perhaps he’d lost his memory and had forgotten that he was back with Savannah. “Why me?”

“I’ll take you,” Mom said calmly. “I’ve already signed you out.”

Sammy waved as Mom drove off and I held my knees together to stop them from shaking. “I don’t know why he wants to see me,” I rambled, once again fighting back tears. But now they were due to genuine anguish over Oliver’s condition. I didn’t want him to have a broken leg or amnesia or to be suffering in any way. “He’s going to be devastated he can’t play in the final. He’s worked so hard and he wants this for Coach Gregor and his dad. And I don’t know why he wants to see me. Where’s Savannah? Unless he wants to tell me our fake relationship is over. But he could just text me that.”

“Maya?” I turned to Mom. “Just shush,” she said with a small turned-up smile.

I pulled on my sneaker and as we walked through the main hospital doors, I lamented not having something for him. “I should buy him some candy,” I said, but Mom walked straight past the gift shop.

“Maybe later. I only signed you out for first period.”

“I should’ve brought my crutches back,” I said, “I’m not using them now.”

“Maybe Oliver will need them,” Mom said, walking with authority like she knew

exactly where to go.

She tapped on the half open door of Room 16, and I could see Mrs. Blackwell rise from a chair.

“Come in. Hello Nicole. Maya.”

Oliver laid in bed, his left leg in a cast. Several bandages dotted his face, one on his forehead, another on his cheek and chin. But upon seeing me, he broke into a wide smile and adjusted his bed into an upright position.

“Oliver,” I breathed, barging through to his bedside, forgetting that he’d dumped me to go back to Savannah. “Are you okay?”

“I am now,” he said, holding his hand up, indicating he wanted to hold mine.

“This is terrible. What happened?”

Mrs. Blackwell jumped in. “He was in town, on the corner of Third and Russett when a car went through a red light and smashed into him.”

“Oh no!” I cried.

“He had surgery last night, a metal rod was inserted into his tibia,” Mrs. Blackwell said, her tone turning into frustration. “It’s quite the blow. Jed is furious, naturally.”

“But at least you’re going to be all right,” I said, and Mom echoed my sentiments, gratitude that it wasn’t worse.

“Yeah, I’ll survive,” Oliver said, squeezing my hand. “I guess you and me will be watching the game from the sideline.”

I blinked in surprise. “You mean because we’re both injured?”

Mrs. Blackwell stepped in again, sounding a little accusatory. “I asked Oliver why he was even driving through town. He said he was on his way to see you, Maya.”

“Oh,” I mumbled, releasing my hand from his. “You were coming to tell me you’re back together with Savannah and it’s my fault you had an accident and now you’re going to miss the most important game of the season because of me. I’m sorry, truly I am.”

Mrs. Blackwell cleared her throat. “Excuse me?”

“You should’ve just texted,” I said to Oliver, surprised at how clinical I sounded. Maybe I had cried out all my emotion last night. “I would have understood.”

“Wait! What are you talking about? Back together with Savannah? Who told you that?”

“It’s all over our Cheer Chat,” I said. “#Olivannah is back. She posted photos of you two together. And one having dinner at the Golf Club.”

“Let me see,” Oliver demanded.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and opened up our group chat. Oliver snatched the phone from me. “What the heck? These were taken last week. Reece took them,” he said, trying but failing to restrain his anger. “And I was at the Golf Club for my senior project, not to see her.”

“That’s right,” Mrs. Blackwell said, calmly removing the phone from Oliver’s grip so she could scroll. Anyone taking my phone into their possession would usually cause me great alarm, but I daredn’t question Mrs. Blackwell. “Penny Adlam is Ollie’s

mentor for his senior project.”

“Maya,” Oliver said, and the room fell quiet. “I was coming to see you...to tell you that...that I don’t want to fake date you anymore.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said, trying to be the bigger person and showing maturity in front of Mrs. Blackwell. “It’s fine, I knew it was only temporary.”

“Maya,” he said, so loud that I clamped my mouth shut by biting down on my lower lip. “I don’t want to fake date you, I want to real date you. That’s why I was driving to your house.”

“Oh.” Wide-eyed, I turned to Mom and Mrs. Blackwell to see if they’d heard what I heard. Their gentle smiles confirmed it. I looked back at Oliver, his dark brown eyes drilling into me with an intensity that took my breath away.

“Yeah, somewhere along the way, this stopped being fake.” He paused. “But I’m sorry I put you through this. I shouldn’t have forced you to date me. That wasn’t fair to you.”

Okay, the tears were back. My chin crumpled and I could feel an ugly cry coming on. “Well, dating you wasn’t exactly horrible,” I blubbered, trying to pull myself together.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Oliver said with a grin, “but I know some stuff was being said and I didn’t like it.” He looked over my shoulder to Mom. “Mrs. Shelton, I swear my assignment was my own work. I did read one of my brother’s old assignments as a guide, but I wrote it all myself.”

“I appreciate you telling me that, Oliver, but I’ve been teaching long enough to know when someone’s work isn’t their own,” she said, winking at him. “Though I was a bit

shocked to hear Savannah's accusation that I was giving you an A because you were dating Maya."

"Yeah, she was way out of line," Oliver said. "I'm sorry about that."

"Coffee, Nicole?" I heard Mrs. Blackwell say.

"Coffee sounds good," Mom answered, and with the sound of their footsteps fading down the corridor, I dabbed my eyes before hopping up onto the side of Oliver's bed, my heart pounding in my chest.

"It stopped being fake for me, too," I whispered.

"Oh yeah?" Oliver dipped his head, giving me a close-up of his grazes and stitched forehead. "When was that?"

I rolled my eyes and teased, "Oh, you know, that first kiss."

Oliver laughed. "You're funny." But his face straightened and his gaze held mine, eyes shining and bright and sparkling with clarity, despite the injuries. And he leaned closer and said, "Best decision I ever made was going to the library that day."

I smiled, my chest swelling with warmth as I moved closer. "I hope this doesn't hurt," I whispered before our lips joined in the sweetest of touches. No sprained ankle or broken leg or abrasions could hold us back as our true feelings unleashed, and I floated on cloud nine knowing he felt the same way about me.

"Okay," I said, pulling back as I remembered he did indeed have a broken leg, "that's probably enough for now. You need rest."

"Hmphh! Spoilsport," he grumbled.

I laughed, carefully standing and fussing over the sheet I'd rumpled and straightening the blanket over his cast. "Hey, I'm sorry you get to miss the final."

"Yeah, I was looking forward to playing my last high school game," Oliver said, looking pensive. "And my brothers were all coming to watch, so that kinda sucks. And of course Dad is cut up about the whole thing. But here's the good part." He flashed a smile. "You and me will be able to cheer the Owls on together."

"Ah yeah, we'll both hobble along on our crutches."

"Actually I was thinking you could push me in a wheelchair," he joked.

"Okay, we might need to talk about that," I said sternly, "but right now, you need to rest."

OLIVER

Coach Gregor's voice was low, almost reverent. "Boys, we are but a game away from creating Owl's history. Let us remain humble, dedicated and focused on the goal. Let's get the job done. Now is our time." He pumped his fist in the air and everyone copied and shouted, "Now is our time!"

I yelled it out with my team even though I was reduced to a spectator.

The events of the past few days had spun my world around. My reactions hadn't been as quick as they needed to be when, too late, I saw the car coming toward me. No time to swerve or even adjust the steering wheel and when my door was rammed, I worried more about the damage to my car than my injury. But when it hit me that the pain in my leg was quite bad, my first thought was whether Dad would still make me play in the final. And even when the paramedics said it was probably broken, apparently I asked if it would heal by Friday.

I didn't remember much, not after the pain meds kicked in but I do know Dad had been distraught—on the phone to Coach Gregor in a flash. Even before calling my brothers or grandparents.

Mom had been there when I woke up after surgery, explaining that a rod and screws now held my tibia together and I would be in a cast for up to twelve weeks with full healing taking as long as four to six months. I'd been weirdly calm, so I presumed I hadn't completely registered that I'd miss the game for the championship title.

Dad came in early the next morning, his level of agitation as great, if not greater than

the night before. The driver of the other vehicle—they were going to pay, he ranted and raved to me and Mom. He'd sue them for all they were worth, make sure there was a reckless driving conviction and hoped they'd get prison time. Didn't they know they'd ruined a young man's opportunity for greatness?

"You were on the cusp of legendary status for the Owls and now, now you're nothing, you've lost it...it's gone, it's been snatched away from you," he blustered, his cheeks red and his face ugly.

"Jed," Mom stormed. "Jed, stop it! How dare you tell Oliver he's nothing. He's done everything for the team, now it's up to them to finish the job. You need to leave."

"You don't know the impact this will have on his future," Dad wasn't backing down, his voice booming. "The football scholarships will dry up now. No one wants an injured quarterback."

I didn't know if it was the after-effects of the anesthetic or the pain medication or the general shock of the past twelve hours, but Dad's words passed by me in a haze. I should've been upset over what he'd said, or full of rage that this driver had altered the course of my life, but the calmness remained. Or was it numbness?

You see, although I'd been working hard toward this goal and the Owls had reached the pinnacle, I somehow wasn't fazed or rattled or bitterly disappointed that I was about to miss the game. Instead, a mantle of pressure was stripped off of me and it's like I could breathe freely.

And up until that point, I hadn't realized just how much stress I'd been under. The pressure to perform, to focus on an outcome, to make Dad proud, to win a trophy for Coach Gregor had overridden my love for the game itself.

Maya had asked me who I was aside from a football player—and I'd barely known. A

peculiar feeling of excitement stirred deep down as I wondered just who I was without the quarterback jersey.

It was Mr. Shelton who had said something while we'd watched the game replay: Remember it's the journey, football is more than just the destination. A championship title is the icing on the cake, but it's how you get there that counts.

"Wow, you sound so wise, Dad," Maya had joked at the time.

But that's what I was thinking about now, my teammates were all dressed up and ready to go out and play, but my physical journey had ended, yet I was still here, part of the team.

"Okay, last words," Coach Gregor said, and he gestured to me, "We're mighty sorry you aren't playing tonight, Oliver, and we'll miss you out there, now..."

I cut Coach off, knowing he'd babble for too long. "Hey, guys, we got this. All the way now! Owls play with heart..."—I thumped my fist against my chest—, "play with pride, play fair. That's how we do it. Let me hear it!"

The boys shouted along with me, "Owls play with heart, play with pride, play fair!"

And for a moment, my heart was heavy—yeah it sucked that I couldn't be there facing Preston Park in the final, but my disappointment evaporated when Connor Richmond, the new starting quarterback came up to me.

"You got this," I said, bumping his fist.

"Thanks man, I won't let you down."

"The team," I said, "don't let the team down."

Maya and I had joked about sitting together on the sideline, but I really did need a wheelchair. The doctors preferred I stayed in the hospital another night, but there was no way I could watch a livestream from the hospital bed. George pushed me down to the sideline and though I couldn't move, I could cheer and motivate. And look across the field to where Maya was with the cheer squad. She'd ditched her crutches but was still wearing a boot, and she was waving a placard while sitting down.

For the first time, I got to view the game from the sideline. It was so different from being on the field and now I understood how Coach got so frustrated. The first half was a hard watch, with error upon error. I wanted to scream at Connor, at the offensive line, at the defense. Yet, we'd always prided ourselves on the second half, and being only seven points down, I hoped the boys could keep their composure and not panic.

"Stay together, play together, play fast and good things will happen," Coach said, trying to rev up Connor, who had been kinda shell shocked for the first half.

"Yeah, boys we've done the prep, we've done the hard work. We got this!" I chipped in.

But it wasn't until the fourth quarter that we broke through to tie the score at 7-7 with Connor's pass falling beautifully into the hands of CJ, our wide receiver. From then, we seized momentum. Our defensive line made some big tackles, and with only five minutes on the clock, Connor stepped up again and we took the lead with a 6-yard touchdown pass to a leaping Darwin in the back corner of the end zone.

It was then a matter of everyone on the sideline crossing their fingers and counting down, waiting for the final whistle to blow.

Total chaos ensued as everyone celebrated. Connor, Darwin and CJ were hoisted in the air, heroes of the day. From my wheelchair, I couldn't do much more than yell

and clap and beam with pride.

“Would’ve annihilated them if you’d been out there.” Dad appeared at my side with a clap to my shoulder.

“I think Connor did a great job,” I said.

Dad snorted. “We should’ve gotten at least three more touchdowns.”

“We didn’t need them,” I said, my hackles rising.

“It should be you out there getting the glory,” he scoffed, his voice a tad too loud. “Owls wouldn’t even be in the final if it wasn’t for you.”

“Dad, we’re a team,” I said, rueing the fact that I couldn’t hurry away. I wanted to tell him there was no ‘I’ in team, but figured it was pointless—he didn’t want to hear it. He was still in the mindset that I was a victim of a hapless tragedy and the perpetrator deserved no less than some form of medieval torture. Hung, drawn and quartered was mentioned.

“It’s an outrage,” Dad muttered, his eyes set on Connor who was being paraded around like a hero.

“Shut it, Dad,” I hissed, looking around for George, wishing he could take me away, but he was off catching up with old friends. But across the way, I saw Maya watching me, and without hesitation, I beckoned her over.

“Hey, you doing okay?” she asked shyly, glancing at my Dad who was striding around with his hands in his coat pockets.

“I am now,” I said, holding out my hand for a high five. “Can you get me out of

here?”

“Where do you wanna go?”

I gestured to my Dad, who’d cornered Assistant Coach Clarkson and was waving his arms around, “Away from him.” I released the brake on the chair. “Ah, can you push it? How’s your ankle?”

“It’s fine, I can do it,” she said and she directed the chair away from the grass and onto the track where it was easier to push.

“Great game, huh?” I said.

“I think it was all due to me waving my placard, right?” She stopped the wheelchair on the track, some distance from my father and stood beside me.

“Absolutely,” I said. “I barely watched the game, too distracted by you.”

She scrunched her nose up and sneered in a cute way. But then her voice softened as she crouched down to my level, “Are you okay, Oliver? I know it’s hard that you weren’t out there today.”

I reached for her hand and squeezed it. “You know what? It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. I really didn’t mind. You know, I’m proud of the boys, they deserve the win. But I realized that I truly don’t wanna play college football.” Maya squeezed my hand harder. “The only thing I regret is kind of not knowing that last week was my last high school football game. I might’ve gone out with a bit of a bang if I’d known.” I attempted a smile but it was more a grimace. “So, now I have to tell my Dad. And he’s already livid.”

“I hope he understands,” Maya said and she kissed me gently on the cheek. “I’m here

for you.”

“Hey,” I teased, “you can do better than that, can’t you?” I pouted my lips. “State champions, I think I deserve a real kiss?”

Maya frowned, like I was being a jerk, but in my peripheral vision I could see Savannah and a bunch of cheerleaders. I guessed she could see them too.

Savannah hesitated, but left the squad to approach us. Maya tensed and removed her hand from mine and held the back of the wheelchair like she was ready to push me somewhere.

“Hey, Ollie,” Savannah said, her eyes flitting to Maya. “Hi Maya. Uh, thanks for helping the squad today. I know it can’t have been easy with your sprained ankle, but we appreciate your contribution.”

It sounded like a rehearsed statement, but Maya, gracious as ever, replied with a bright, “You’re welcome. It was a great result.”

I wasn’t quite so accommodating, my hostility rampant. “You tried to sabotage our relationship.” I wasn’t holding back. “You made it look like we were together again after I told you we were done.”

Maya’s fingers brushed the side of my neck, a subtle motion that immediately calmed me. Here and now wasn’t the time to have a go at Savannah.

It was Rose who had told Maya that Savannah had doctored the pictures of us to make it look like we were together. She’d taken the photos from the week before, changed the background, used the Olivannah hashtag and made it look as if we were hanging out, making Maya and the whole cheer squad believe we were back together.

I doubted I could ever forgive her for that.

“I...I...I’m sorry,” Savannah said, unable to make eye contact with me. She shrugged, for once in her life not full of confidence. “I didn’t mean to...”—she broke into a mumble—“and I’m sorry you couldn’t play today.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said in a dismissive way. I was done with Savannah and I didn’t want to dwell on the past anymore. I wanted to move forward. The trajectory of my life had changed and I was filled with the raw energy of facing the unknown, though aware that I had to weather a storm first—the rage that was my father. It was not something I was looking forward to, but I hoped with my brothers around, it might be easier.

“Oh, you’ve gotta be kidding me!” George came bounding toward the wheelchair, but his eyes were fixed on Maya. “Maya Shelton? Lizzie’s little sister? Hey! Wow!”

George ignored me and hugged Maya like she was a long lost friend. “Haven’t seen you in years. When we moved from Cherry Lane? When was that? Four or five years?”

“Four,” I piped up, feeling invisible and overlooked in my seated position.

George interrogated Maya on all things Lizzie, disappointed to hear she hadn’t come back for the game and was dating a guy called Keiran.

That’s when he turned to me. “You must be tired, Ollie? You ready to go?”

“Yeah, my leg is sore,” I said, pain and fatigue settling in. It had been a long day and I was starting to think I should’ve listened to the doctor. “Maya, do you need a ride, or are you going back on the bus?”

“Yeah, I came on the bus. It looks like I should get back to the team,” she said.

“You guys have fun,” I said. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Maya nodded and we smiled at each other, and I wanted to kiss her but with George standing right there, I knew he’d be a jerk and make fun of me. Maybe it was just as well Rose came over and whisked Maya away.

“So? Maya Shelton?” George grinned before he started pushing me. “Who would’ve thought?”

“She’s pretty great,” I said, my heart swelling with pride, though everything about my leg was hurting.

“Yeah, well, gotta admit I was pretty surprised when Mom told me,” George said, turning pensive. “I miss that house in Cherry Lane. It was cool living there. The stark white walls of Maple Heights just don’t have that homely feel.”

“But the granite kitchen counter top is pretty amazing,” I said.

“If cooking’s your thing, I guess it is,” he said.

And with a remark that was both rushed and random, I said, “I think I wanna be a chef.”

“I don’t think a broken leg is necessarily an end to your football career,” George said with a laugh. “You’ll be fully healed before you know it.”

“I don’t want a football career,” I said.

“Huh?” George stopped pushing and I tilted my head to try to look behind at him.

“I’ve never wanted a football career.”

“But you—”

“Dad wants it. I don’t.” The words came off of my tongue with a brutality not meant for George, but he copped it nonetheless.

“Dude?” George abandoned the chair and stood in front of me, startled.

“I love football but it’s not what I want to do,” I said.

“But...Dad is always saying how great you’re doing and how many colleges are interested.”

“Yeah, it’s his dream, George. It’s never been mine. It’s just that you, Ryan and Lance never took that path so he pushed it onto me.” It was a relief and a release to have gotten it off of my chest, like I’d been dying to say it out loud.

“Okay, okay,” George placated, spreading his hands in a gesture for me to calm down.

“It might sound crazy but I’m almost glad I broke my leg,” I said. “You don’t know the sort of pressure I’ve been under.”

“Ollie, why didn’t you say something?” George squatted down, his face in a frown.

I shrugged. It had been one of those situations where the longer you left it, the harder it was to say or do something about it. Sort of like dating Savannah—an on-off relationship because I lacked the courage to leave it. Yeah, that was my problem—I was a coward, scared to stand up for myself.

But because of Maya, I now had some belief in myself, wanted to find my passion—and I was pretty sure it was food.

“Bro, I’m here for you,” George said, holding out his clenched fist. “We’re all here for you.”

“You’ll be there when I tell Dad?” (Yep, I wasn’t that brave.)

“Of course,” George said. “I mean, we’re the Blackwell Brothers, right? We stick together.”

I nodded, a relieved breath whooshing out of me.

“Hey,” said George, returning to push me. “So, Maya Shelton...you guys hit first base yet?”

“Shut it, George. Not telling!”

George chuckled, a satisfied smirk on his face. “Ahh, so you have then.”

MOM HAD BORROWED PENNY Adlam’s van to drive us to the game because I’d been able to extend my leg which was a hundred times more comfortable than bending it. George and Lance drove back with us, while Ryan went with Dad.

I fell asleep as soon as we started moving and Mom and George helped me to bed when we got home. The next morning Mom was the first in my room to open the curtains and to give me my pain medication.

“You sleep well?” she asked.

“Yeah, pretty good,” I said, “but I kept waking.”

“Still sore?” I nodded and she tutted. “It might have been a little over ambitious to go to the game yesterday.”

“Yeah, but I had to be there.”

“Rest is more important. You don’t want to compromise the healing process.”

“Well, I’ll happily stay home from school all week,” I said.

Mom smiled and rolled her eyes. “I’ll bring up breakfast, shall I?”

“Sure,” I said, reaching for my phone and scrolling through the many texts and posts congratulating the Owls.

Hearing footsteps coming, I wriggled myself to a more upright position in anticipation of breakfast, surprised to see Dad carrying the tray, followed by George with the coffee pot and Mom with a mug. My heart rate increased substantially, knowing there was some sort of discussion about to take place. It didn’t really take three people to bring me breakfast.

“Good morning,” Dad said, arranging the wooden tray stand in front of me.

“Good morning,” I said chirpily, faking calmness. But I had an instinct that the coffee wasn’t the only thing that would be heated. “Thanks.”

“How’s the leg?” Dad asked.

“Not too bad,” I said, even though it was hurting. Dad wouldn’t like weak.

“You can tell me the truth. Is it sore?” I detected this was a leading question and his supposed serenity was ready to explode.

“Yeah, but I just took some meds,” I said, grateful that Mom and George were witnesses. Well, that’s if they survived, too.

“Your brothers were talking last night,” Dad said, his tone merciless and unforgiving, “and seems I’ve been putting too much pressure on you.”

“You’ve been steering his pathway in a direction he doesn’t want to go,” Mom piped up.

“You don’t want to play college football?” He couldn’t have been gruffer if he tried and there was that split second when I wanted to deny it and comply, fulfil his wish.

George answered for me. “That was your dream, Dad. Not Ollie’s.”

His words stunned us all into seconds of silence, frank and to the point, no rambling but said with kindness.

Dad’s throat tightened, his lips pressed into a thin line, and I stared down at my bowl of oatmeal and the chunky banana slices.

“Is that right, Ollie?” Dad asked, his voice wavering, on the verge of losing composure. “Have I been pressuring you?”

I didn’t want to break his heart, destroy his dreams, be unfulfilled potential...but I also wanted to be me, ordinary Oliver Blackwell who liked orange and green M&Ms and experimenting with flavors and learning about food and making cute candy jars for Maya, and finding my own way in the world.

“Yeah,” I said. “I have felt pressured. Like, I love playing football, but...but I don’t want it to be my whole life.”

Dad's head bobbed in slow successive nods. And then he ran his fingers through his hair. "I wish you'd told me earlier. More than anything I wanted you to love the game."

"I do love it," I countered, "but it's not my dream to play in college."

"You have such a talent," Dad said, "you read the ball better than—"

"Jed," Mom interrupted, "Oliver has a ton of talents. He's more than just the quarterback. He has such a way with flavors and his peanut butter protein balls are the best."

"Wait, what?" George said. "You made those balls in the fridge?"

"Who said you could eat them? My name's on that container!"

"You mean those balls with the seedy things in them?" Dad asked. "I thought your mother bought them from the grocery store. I ate three the other day. I didn't think anyone noticed."

"Well, I did," Mom said, glaring at Dad. "Oliver makes them for his post training snacks. He's very talented and Penny says he has a real flair for food."

"Well, maybe he can show that talent around the house a bit more," Dad said with a wink and a slap to my shoulder.

"Yes, I'm more than happy to have him spend more time in the kitchen," Mom said. "Now, let's leave him in peace to eat his breakfast."

George smirked and in return I pumped my fist as he left. My brothers had come through for me, Mom too.

Dad hesitated, waiting for Mom to leave. He sat on the side of the bed and sighed. “I feel bad that you could never tell me, son,” he said, the threat of tears stinging his eyes. “And I’m sorry that I put that pressure on you. Whatever you decide to study, whatever college you choose to attend, I’m backing you a hundred percent. Like I did with your brothers.”

“I didn’t want to disappoint you,” I mumbled.

“You’ll never be a disappointment, Oliver. In fact, I couldn’t be prouder of you.”

“Thanks, Dad.” We both pretended our eyes weren’t watering.

He rose and stood at the door. “Hurry up and get well. I think there’s only about half a dozen protein balls left. We need you to get back on your feet and make some more!”

I waved as he left and picked up my phone and texted Maya: Just so you know, I’ll be home all day, hint, hint.

MAYA DROPPED BY AFTER lunch. By that time, Mom had assisted me into the shower by wrapping up my cast in a waterproof liner. It wasn’t fun, but I felt much better afterward.

Maya brought a bunch of flowers, a card and a gift bag.

“Hey, this is original,” I joked.

She smiled and I opened the bag. In it was a Mason jar filled with M&Ms, layered in colors, but in reverse from what I’d done for her.

“Okay, so I did favorite colors on top because I’m nice,” she said sweetly, opening

the jar. “I’m not being mean and making you wait till the bottom of the jar to get your favorites.”

“Yeah, but after I eat the orange and green ones, I have to force myself to keep eating down to the brown layer.”

“Such hardship,” she stated with a sarcastic smile. “But if you are struggling, remember I’m willing to help.”

“Oh, you are, are you?” I teased, popping the candy into her mouth.

“Absolutely.”

“I appreciate that,” I said, swallowing one myself before touching her chin and facing her toward me. “You really are the real deal, aren’t you?”

“You betcha,” she said, our noses nuzzling together, the tips teasing as my fingers fluttered across the nape of her neck. Our eyes locked as we were so ridiculously close to one another, and her hand threaded through the back of my hair and down to my shoulders like a caress. Our smiles joined, a cackle of laughter escaping before our lips pressed together, soft and sweet and tasting of chocolate, hearts beating as one, our true authentic selves.

OLIVER

6 months later

I 'm at Maya's house, practicing my presentation for my Senior Project. My portfolio is done, I've got my cover page, research essay, documented my timeline, written my summary and now I'm just rehearsing the speech to align with my video. I'm presenting to the evaluating committee on Monday.

My leg healed ahead of schedule. My cast was off in eight weeks and I was walking normally a month later. Apparently my superior fitness and my dedicated physical therapy did that. Plus, I've ben spending a lot of time in the gym. These days you wouldn't know my leg had been broken, well, apart from the scar.

Penny Adlam's mentorship has been incredible in more ways than one. Apart from helping me with my project, she's been guiding me on my little business enterprise, Protein Boost Balls. I've created a base of four flavors and have been experimenting with ingredients and learning about nutrition, and George is assisting with the groundwork for branding and marketing, which is his expertize. So far, I'm just making them for friends (and Mom and Dad) but once school's out, I'm going to kick into production (using Penny's commercial kitchen) and see where it takes me. I'm keen to travel to farmers markets around our area.

And I'm holding off on college for now and will work at Penny's restaurant to get experience and see if a culinary career is the path I want to take. That will keep me in Snow Ridge, which I don't mind—it keeps me close to Maya while she finishes high school.

Maya's lying down on her bed, a captive audience, while I'm standing on the other side of the room.

"How was that?"

"Yeah, good, just remember, strong, clear and confident," she says, reading from the evaluation rubric. "And express your enthusiasm."

"I'm out of enthusiasm," I say, having gone through it twice already, bored of hearing the sound of my own voice.

"What are you wearing? It says dress and grooming must be professional."

"What? I don't have a dress," I say, acting shocked. "Am I going to have to borrow one of yours?"

"Ha, ha," Maya says. "You're so funny. Hey, I know." She jumps off of the bed and heads to her closet. She pulls out a pale blue dress and holds it in front of me. "How about this?"

I flick through the row of hangers and laugh as I bring out the pink maxi dress that she wore to the Spring Fling. She looked incredible. "Is this my color?"

She shoves me and I fall back onto her bed, making myself comfortable against her pillows. She takes the dresses and hangs them back in the closet. I'm staring at her wall, at the Snow Ridge Owls state championship title flag that's hanging there, but I glimpse another flag drooping behind it.

"Hey, is that my old Owls flag that I gave you?" I slide off of the bed and walk over to it, carefully taking it down. "I used to hang it out of my window. It's a wonder it hasn't fallen apart."

The ends are frayed and I examine it and turn it over. I read the back and frown.

“Hey, Maya...what’s this?”

“What?” She pulls the closet door shut and looks at me, or rather the flag in my hand.

I hold it up so she can see her own handwriting: FROM OB, MY QB CRUSH.

She stares, her eyes widening in horror as if she’s just realizing what she’s reading.

“No!” she shouts, trying to snatch the flag. I hold it above my head. “No, give it to me! Oliver!”

I race around the room, jumping over the bed, keeping the flag out of her reach.

“What’s it mean?” I ask, highly amused. “From OB, my QB crush? Am I OB?”

“Um...no, it’s Obi-wan Kenobi,” she says with a surprisingly straight face.

“The Jedi Master? From Star Wars? You’re a fan?” I say, blatantly scanning the room that offers no proof of any fandom.

“Sure,” she says, her cheeks pink. “I love Star Wars.”

“And QB? Who’s that?”

“Ummmm...”

I approach her, waving the flag in her face, a smirk on mine.

“Okay! Yes!” she cries, “You’re OB, Oliver Blackwell, and you were my quarterback crush, back when I was 12!”

“Really?” Her admission is like music to my ears and sends a shiver up my spine. “You crushed on me back then?”

“Truth?” She looks up at me and her eyelashes flutter. “Actually, before that. Once you helped me when I fell off my sled. You walked me home and carried my sled for me.”

“Nick Herman crashed into you. I remember. He was a total jerk!”

She looks shook. “You remember that? How do you remember that? That was so long ago!”

“I’d seen you with your sister. And Nick was doing crazy stuff, slamming into kids. I was just sorry I couldn’t stop him before he smashed into you.”

“Oh.”

“I left a flower on your front porch.”

“What?” She eyes me suspiciously.

“I left a flower on your porch. A dried one. I took it from Mom’s vase.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“Well, I didn’t leave a note. I just left it on the chair. You probably didn’t even see it.”

“Aww, I wish I had. You should have told me.”

“I think I had a crush on you too,” I say, placing my hand on her cheek. “I used to ride my bike just to watch you dance on your front porch.”

“I was just dancing out there so I could see you,” she says with a laugh.

“Hmmm,” I murmur, pressing my lips onto her forehead, “my sweet Maya.”

“Ahhh,” she sighs, leaning into me, “my quarterback crush.”

“Um, I think you mean quarterback boyfriend,” I say, hugging my girl and squeezing her as tight as I can.

THE END

THANK YOU FOR READING Maya and Oliver’s story.