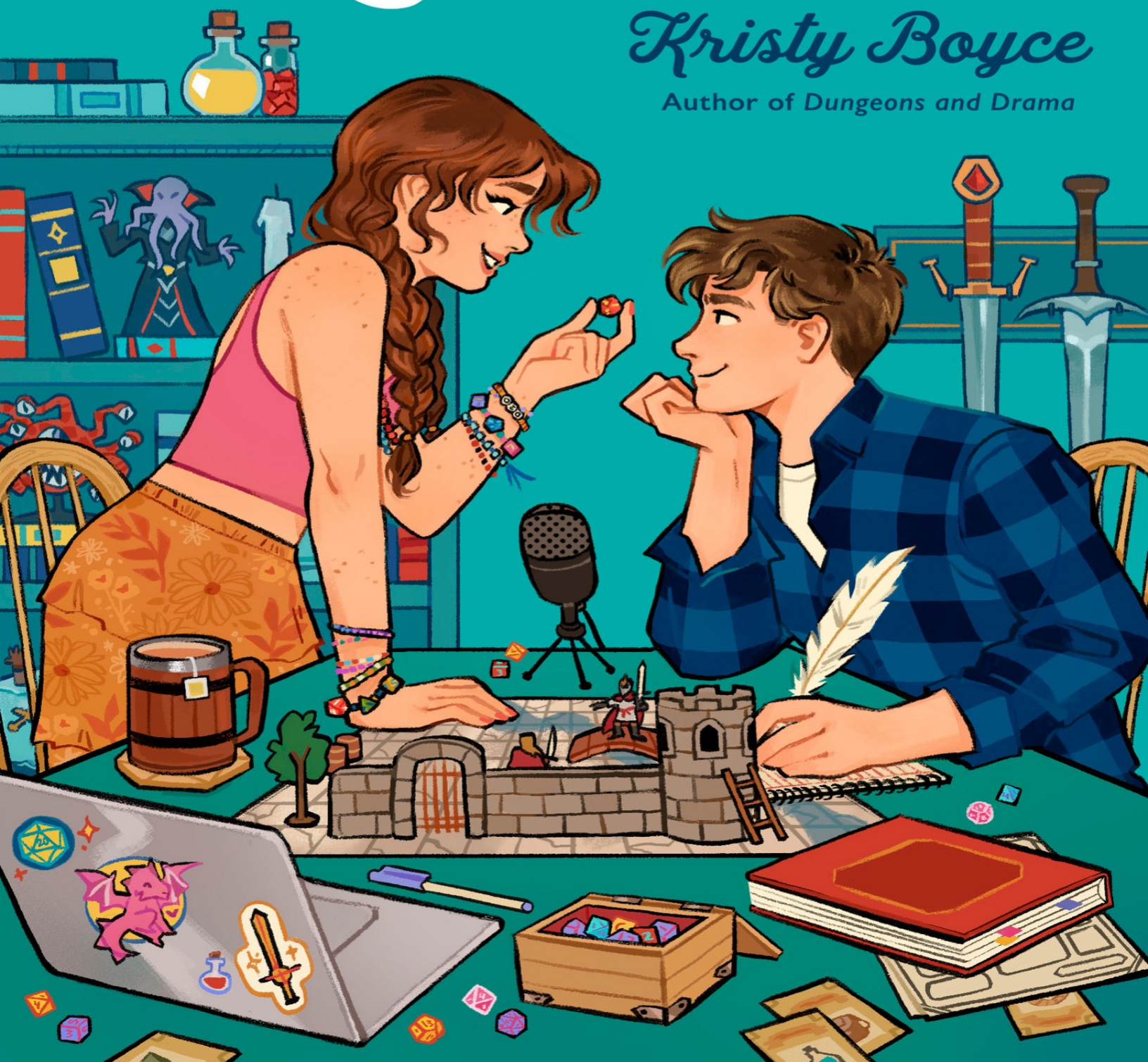
Dating and Dragons

Kristy Boyce

Author of *Dungeons and Drama*



Also by Kristy Boyce

Hot British Boyfriend

Hot Dutch Daydream

Dungeons and Drama

Dating and Dragons

Kristy Boyce

Delacorte Romance

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To Maggie, my best friend.
Thank you for encouraging me to
start writing as a child.

Chapter One

I thought I'd already experienced every "new girl at school" nightmare imaginable in the run-up to today, but I guess my brain wasn't creative enough to come up with this scenario. I'm not arriving at school naked or late for a final exam I haven't prepared for…but I am being dropped off at my new high school for my first day of junior year by my overly excited grandma, who is insisting we take first-day-of-school photos together in the parking lot.

"But it's not the first day of school," I argue for a third time.

"It's your first day at *this* school, Quinn," Grandma replies. She grips the steering wheel with both hands and leans close so her face is only a few inches away from the windshield. "It doesn't matter if it's February. Can I park here?" she asks, pointing to an open spot.

I look out the window. "No, the sign says it's for the seniors."

"Well, I'm a senior!"

I turn to the back seat. "Andrew, care to help me out at all?"

My fifteen-year-old brother lifts one shoulder without looking up from his phone.

Great, he's as engaged and useful as ever. I face Grandma more fully. "The parking lot is filling up. It's really okay—we can just get out. We can get pictures another time or we can take a selfie in the car." Or I can do everything in my power to make sure Grandma never drives us again. I grab my book bag to show her I'm ready.

"Nonsense. My only grandchildren are finally living close enough for me to see them every day, and I'm making up for lost time. I want a first-

day-of-school photo."

She frowns and adjusts her orange silk scarf. You'd think it was *Grandma's* first day of school the way she dressed up for this ten-minute drive, but then she's always prided herself on being the most elegant woman in any room. She doesn't wear stereotypical "grandma clothes"—she's always in colorful blousy tops, linen pants, and her ever-present floral scarfs. She'd fit in better on a yacht than she would in rural Ohio.

My brain flails and I glance feverishly around the parking lot for onlookers. A ton of students are still meandering into the building, so there's no way we can do this without witnesses. I begged Mom and Dad to let me drive this morning, but they needed both cars to get to their new jobs. We just moved two hours west to Laurelburg, Ohio, a week ago to be closer to Grandma. "She'll get such a kick out of it!" Mom had argued with pleading eyes. "You know how happy she is to see you two!"

Oh, she's happy, all right. To my horror, she's rolled up to a group of guys circled around a fancy red car. And if their varsity jackets are to be believed, they're athletes. I scoot down in the seat like a snake slithering into a hole.

Grandma lowers her window and waves at them. "Hey, boys, hope you aren't getting into trouble over here. What a good-looking group you are!"

A small moan comes out of me, and I squeeze my eyes shut. There's no one in the world Grandma won't talk to. Behind me a door opens and slams closed. I glance over my shoulder to see Andrew dashing through the cars toward the school building before Grandma can notice. The *traitor*! I can't believe my younger brother is smarter than me.

"Can I get you to take our picture?" Grandma says, and I slither down farther.

I hear muttering and a hoot of laughter and then Grandma drives away. "Well, *they* were very rude. Don't waste your time on them."

"I'm sure that won't be a problem," I say.

Grandma is making sure I have absolutely no chance of making new friends here. I don't need help being awkward. I've never been popular, but at least—for a while—I had close friends at my old school. Everything had been so comfortable and easy with them…until our group imploded. I take a deep breath and remind myself that this move is for the best. It's what I

wanted. I don’t miss the old school or the anxiety I felt there, always worrying about running into one of them in the halls.

Grandma continues to slowly drive down the parking lot row and my gaze catches on a group of five students chatting together. I can’t exactly explain it, but they look like my kind of people. Like under the right circumstances, I might have enough courage to walk up and say hi. And is the South Asian girl wearing sparkly green d20 earrings? My hopes lift even more.

Unfortunately, Grandma notices them as well.

“They look nice. I bet one of them will take it.” This time she powers down my passenger-side window and leans across me. “Hiya! Can I get one of you to take a photo?”

Unlike the other group, who just laughed and ignored her, these kids stop and turn toward the car. They exchange confused glances and then one of the guys steps forward. My stomach flips over. Why does he have to be cute? Like, *annoyingly* cute. His light brown hair is swept over his forehead, his blue eyes match his winter coat, and his cheeks are pink from the cold. His gaze catches mine for a second before he flashes a grin at Grandma. “Sure. In the car?”

“Not in the car, of course! We need it with the school in the background!” She puts the car in park right there and turns on the hazard lights, blocking anyone else from driving through this aisle. Then she beckons me out of my seat, and I force myself to follow, sweating profusely under my coat despite the frigid February air.

“Wait, where did Andrew go?” she exclaims.

“He ran for the building a minute ago,” I say quietly.

“That boy,” she mutters. “Well, at least I’ll have a photo with my *favorite* grandchild.”

Picture Boy chuckles and my cheeks heat. The rest of the group has shuffled a little closer so they can witness the scene. To my delight, the South Asian girl *does* have on dice earrings. I imagine someone wouldn’t wear those unless they were a gamer. I’ll have to look for her in my classes…assuming this weird situation doesn’t ruin my chances of being friends with her. Next to her stands a South Asian boy her same height, his hands in his pockets and a delighted look on his face, along with another person I can barely see beneath their puffy coat and rainbow crocheted hat.

And then there's *that* guy—you know, the one who always seems perfectly fine in sandals and cargo shorts in twenty-degree weather. His long hair is pulled back in a low ponytail and his face is tipped up to the sky.

Grandma hands her phone to Picture Boy. The phone is attached to a large fabric strap so she doesn't lose it. "I'm so glad to find a well-behaved young man here. Some of these kids are twerps." She tilts her head back toward the other group.

"Oh yeah, anyone could tell you that." He glances at me. "Do you go here?"

"Um, yeah," I mumble.

He studies me, as if he either doesn't believe me or is trying to figure out if he's seen me before. "Huh, okay. I'm ready when you two are." Then he holds up the phone and gestures for us to stand closer. I glance down at myself, feeling self-conscious. Most of my clothes are a bohemian style—lots of long, patterned skirts and cropped sweaters and beaded necklaces, which I think look cool together, but not so much when my top half is wrapped in a quilted purple coat. Grandma slips her hand around my waist, and I stand up straight.

"Say 'fuzzy pickles'!" he calls.

I smile at the odd phrase despite my current misery. He takes a few, going so far as to take pictures both vertically and horizontally.

Grandma nods approvingly as she swipes through the photos. "Oh, that's cute! Thanks so much." She pushes me closer to him. "My granddaughter is new here. Will you look out for her? She's nervous."

Can I *please* wake up from this nightmare now? But before I can respond or pull an Andrew and sprint toward freedom, Grandma has already turned her attention on the rest of the group hovering close by.

"Aren't you freezing?" she says. "Where are your *shoes*?"

Picture Boy's mouth tugs up into a smile and he shifts slightly so his back is to the rest of the group. "First-day pictures, huh?"

"I tried to talk her out of it."

"They're better than some of mine, at least. I'm straight up glaring in my fourth-grade photo—Mom keeps it on the fridge to make her laugh."

I chuckle lightly. "If I tried that, Grandma would haul me back here tomorrow morning for a reshoot."

"From my view, the photos were too good to need reshoots."

His gaze catches on mine and nerves swirl in my stomach. Is that his roundabout way of flirting with me? Or am I being egotistical and he's only complimenting his own photography abilities?

"We should get inside," someone from the group announces, clearly eager to escape Grandma's clutches.

Picture Boy rocks back on his heels. "Any chance I'll see you in French first period?"

I shake my head. "Pre-calc."

"Oof, good luck with that first thing in the morning. I'll look for you. I wouldn't want to let your grandma down." He flashes me a grin and my pulse leaps. Maybe I'm not so grumpy about Grandma stopping the car here anymore.

I grab my book bag and kiss Grandma quickly on the cheek, her skin papery and cool. Today might be a good first day after all.

Unfortunately, I don't see Picture Boy in any of my classes (and my eyes were *wide* open looking for him). I think I see the ponytail guy in chemistry and the puffy coat person in English, but I didn't talk to either of them in the parking lot, so it feels weird going up to them like we know each other. Instead, I spend my first day treading silently from class to class, pretending I know what's going on even though none of the classwork lines up with what we were doing at my old school.

The next few days aren't traumatizing, but they're lonely. Laurelburg High School isn't huge—there are about a thousand students total—but it's enough that you can get lost in the shuffle. I miss walking to classes with Paige and my other friends, and texting them after school, and seeing them on the weekends. I miss having people who already know me well enough that I don't have to explain anything about my life—they just get it.

But I don't have friends like that anymore, and that's not just because we moved. In fact, the move was a welcome relief from the last few months at my old school. Being new is rough, but it's nothing compared to being the outcast. At least here I can walk down the halls without the fear of passing my ex–best friends and having to endure their whispers and smirks.

However, by the end of my third day, I'm desperate to find some way to make friends. I pause in front of a bulletin board covered with flyers for different clubs. Maybe this is the solution—a club where I can be with my people. Unfortunately, nothing sticks out to me. I scan over Chess Club, Robotics, Drama, and Future Farmers of America. My stomach sinks. None of it looks remotely interesting.

"Really into agriculture?"

I turn to find the girl who was wearing the d20 earrings standing next to me, a small smile on her face. Her wavy black hair falls below her shoulders, and she has a tiny silver nose ring and earrings, and a tie-dye shirt and boxy cargo jeans. She is effortlessly cool.

I can't stop my smile. It's so nice to see a familiar face, even if we've never actually talked. "I don't think so," I say. "My parents once gave me an air plant for Christmas and I killed it."

She laughs. "Fair enough. I'm Kashvi."

"Quinn. I'm new here…if that wasn't glaringly obvious."

"I remember from the photo with your grandma." She points to the bulletin board. "So what kind of stuff are you into?"

I have a lot of casual interests—I read manga, I draw a little, I love making beaded bracelets and jewelry—but D&D has been one of the biggest loves in my life for the past few years. Not even my backstabbing group members can ruin my love for the game. I know it's not considered the coolest pastime, so I don't usually announce it to everyone I meet, but Kashvi owns dice earrings. That has to mean something. I decide to take the risk.

"Actually, at my last school I played a lot of D&D."

Her whole face lights up in delight. "No way!" she says. "My twin brother and I have been playing since we were in middle school."

"I noticed your earrings the first day, so I wondered," I admit.

"You did? I figured you were too busy trying to turn yourself invisible."

"Oh, believe me, if I could've had a dimension door out of there, I'd have been gone in one action."

She barks out a laugh. "I love playing sorcerers. I still miss my elf sorcerer from our last game."

I nod enthusiastically. "Totally. My first character was an elf paladin. None of us really knew what we were doing and the role-playing was

nonexistent, but I still love her.”

She studies me, an appraising expression on her face. “Actually…” She hesitates. “Do you already have a group you’re playing with?”

My stomach twists painfully. “I don’t have a group anymore.”

She can probably tell there’s more to that story, but she doesn’t push it. “Well…our group is looking for a new player. You’re welcome to come check it out. It’d be cool to have another girl in the campaign.”

I bounce on my toes before I can play it cool. “Really? I’d love that!”

She puts out a hand. “I’m not promising anything. Think of it as a trial run.”

“Sure, no problem.”

I get it. The dynamics between people in a D&D group are as important as the character builds or the campaign itself. Maybe even more important. It’s hard to find a group that gets along well and has chemistry—adding a new person could totally ruin the energy. Of course, it’s possible I won’t like the rest of them, but I can’t imagine turning down an opportunity to make some new friends. Particularly if cute Picture Boy happens to play.

“I’ll text you the details, okay?” she says after we exchange numbers.

“Absolutely. Thanks so much!”

She takes a few steps away before turning back to me. “Don’t get too excited yet. We’re an intense group—most people don’t last long with us.”

I keep a neutral expression since I don’t want to look intimidated, but inside I’m cringing. People don’t last long? What’s *that* warning all about?

Chapter Two

The next morning, Dad drops Andrew and me off at school so he can get to an early HR meeting at his new job.

"Have a good day!" he calls through the passenger window before pulling away, his chipper tone in contrast to the cold, dark morning. Because school starts so stupid early, we're here before sunrise. Andrew is gone as soon as his feet hit the pavement. I don't know where he's planning to go, since the high school looks desolate, but knowing him, he already has a whole group of friends waiting inside or a favorite teacher he can hang out with.

I shove my hands into my pockets and trudge toward the door, the day unfolding in my mind. More silent walks down the halls and pretending I'm cool not talking to anyone in my classes when really I'm too nervous to say anything.

Another lone figure comes into my peripheral view. My stomach somersaults when I realize who it is—Picture Boy. I think about saying hi, but my mouth suddenly feels like I've eaten a huge scoop of peanut butter. I don't want to make a fool of myself by saying something dumb. At the same time, he's one of the few people at this school I've actually had a conversation with. I gather my confidence and raise a hand in his direction.

"Hey?"

He looks my way, then changes course to join me. "Your grandma isn't here to take more pictures?"

I smile ruefully. "Luckily she's not documenting every day of school. Just the first one."

“Maybe you haven’t noticed, but it’s February. Not exactly the beginning of the school year.”

“Believe me, I know. Transferring midyear is not for the faint of heart. But Monday was the first day she’s ever been able to drop me off since we used to live too far away for that. I’m just happy she didn’t make me hold up one of those chalkboards where I’ve written my favorite subject and what I want to be when I grow up.”

He laughs and the sound sends electric tingles shooting through my limbs. He has a great laugh. The full-body kind that makes his eyes shine and his shoulders shake.

“Well, now I’m curious. What *is* your favorite subject?”

“Right now, it’d be Introduction to Sleep. Actually, I bet I could test into the AP version if they offered it.”

“Not a morning person. Got it.”

“I could fall asleep standing up if given a few minutes.”

“I’m tempted to walk away just so I can see if that’s true. It would be quite a talent.” He tugs on his book bag strap. “Let’s see, what else do they put on those chalkboards? Favorite color?”

“Green,” I say immediately, and gesture down to my bottom half, the only part visible with my coat. I’m wearing another one of my flowy bohemian skirts (over leggings to keep warm). This one is a green paisley that matches my green gem earrings.

He nods approvingly. “Same, actually. Favorite food?”

“Anything with sugar and carbs.”

“Wow, two for two. If it has sugar, it’s my friend. I know the best place for pancakes, by the way. It’s a secret, but I might be willing to divulge.”

“I’m really glad we met, then.”

My whole body is buzzing from this short conversation. I know I’m getting way ahead of myself, but I already have the impression that this boy is someone I could talk to for a long time.

We walk together to the entry doors but stop under the eaves before going in. A few other people walk by, but we’re at least twenty minutes early and the parking lot is mostly quiet.

He leans against the rough brick of the building. “I still don’t know the most important thing on the chalkboard. What’s your name?”

“Quinn Norton.”

“Nice to meet you, Quinn. I’m Logan Weber.”

I meet his eyes and my breath catches. I remind myself that all I know is Logan’s name and maybe four of the most basic facts you could know about a person. It’s possible he’s this friendly with everyone he meets. Who knows, maybe he’s waiting for his very serious girlfriend to arrive and then he’ll take her hand and they’ll skip into school together because they love each other so much. But I can’t help feeling that there’s *something* there. A little spark that energizes me in a way that pancakes or a healthy sleep schedule never could.

“You’re going to pre-calc now, right?” he asks.

I blink in surprise that he remembered this random detail from our last conversation. Then I mentally add another green flag next to him.

“Yeah. It’s not the best way to start my morning.”

He winces sympathetically. “I’m taking geometry just to avoid Mr. Winchester. He has a reputation.”

“Another drawback of being the new girl. I don’t know who to avoid.”

He glances at the entry door, then rocks back on his heels. “Feel free to ask me—I’m happy to give advice. Though right now I have to go meet Mrs. Andrews to talk about my history essay. But I’ll see you around?”

“Yeah, totally.”

He lopes away and I watch his back, feeling light and hopeful. Dad might deserve a hug tonight for his early work meeting.

Chapter Three

One of the most annoying things about moving is that everything needs to go someplace, but no one can agree where that place should be, or if they have decided, something else has already been put there.

"Mom, there's no space for these old DVDs!" I call down the hall. It's the first Saturday since I started school, and I was looking forward to sleeping in this weekend. Unfortunately, my parents have had me working since eight-thirty.

"Try the cabinets under the TV."

"Andrew already filled them with video games." I glare at the boxes at my feet. Mom put me in charge of clearing out the boxes in the living room, but they're filled with so much miscellaneous crap that it's impossible. Which is why she gave me the task.

"Well, I don't know," she calls. "Just find a place, honey."

I sigh and shove my sweaty bangs off my forehead. The bangs were an impulsive choice a few months ago when everything blew up with Paige, Caden, and my old D&D group and I needed a change. I grabbed a pair of scissors and started chopping—thinking I might look like a dark-haired Taylor Swift—but it turns out I'm not good at haircutting. Or making life decisions in general, apparently. They're taking forever to grow out, like they want to stick around to remind me of my past mistakes.

"Hey, Patrick's here!" my brother yells from the front door. "I'm heading out."

Andrew is a year younger than me, and it's taken him exactly five days to completely integrate into our new high school. He's been a soccer

phenom since he was seven, so all he needed to do was join the indoor winter soccer league at the rec center—the only indoor team in the area—and he had an entire built-in friend group within hours. He even had a date with a pretty sophomore last night.

I'm trying to be a good big sister, but it's hard not to loathe him.

"You're going out again?" Dad sticks his head out of his office, where he's organizing his bookshelves. His short hair is disheveled and his glasses are askew, but his blue and white button-up is pressed and tucked in as always. Button-ups are his uniform. "I thought you were going to come with me to Grandma's house later this afternoon? I want to get her garage cleaned up."

"Sorry, the guys want to condition. I already told them I would."

Dad sighs. "All right, fine. But you need to save time next week to visit her. We didn't move to the same town just for you to be too busy to spend time with her."

I turn back to my unpacking and roll my eyes. Andrew gets away with everything. But since he's into a more socially accepted hobby, his interests always take priority.

Once Andrew's gone, I leave my box and walk over to the office. Mom is there, too, wearing yoga pants and an oversized shirt from her college years. She whispers something to Dad and they start giggling. They never finished their honeymoon stage. Everyone else thinks it's sweet, but as their daughter who has to watch them mooning over each other every day, I'm over it.

"Hey, guys?"

They turn and smile in unison. "Hey, hon. How are the DVDs coming along?"

"Not well. And no one watches DVDs anymore. You should donate them."

Dad adjusts his glasses, looking appalled. "Over my dead body. I don't trust these streaming clouds. They say you own things, but what if they decide to stop streaming them? I'd never see my favorite episodes again! No, it's good to have a physical copy of everything you love." He points at me like he's imparting an important life lesson. "Physical copies."

"Right. Thanks for the advice." I swipe at my bangs again. "Don't forget I need to leave soon too."

Mom gives Dad a confused look. I love them, but they aren't the most organized people. That's one of the reasons this move has been and continues to be chaotic.

"Where are you going?" Mom asks, and tucks her short dark hair behind her ears. "You don't know anyone here yet."

I put a hand on my hip. "I know people. Kashvi invited me to that D&D game I mentioned."

Now, granted, I don't know Kashvi's last name or any other details about her, but I still technically know her.

"Can you reschedule?" Dad asks. "Grandma's going to be so disappointed if neither of her grandkids come over today."

"But you let Andrew go without grief."

"I know, I know." Mom takes Dad's hand. "Don't tell this to Andrew, but you know how much she loves you. You always make her day so much brighter."

I hesitate. For all her quirks, I do like spending time with Grandma. It's never boring with her—she always has a new hobby or a funny story from when she was younger or an idea of something we can do together. But I think even Grandma would agree I need to make new friends here.

"Kashvi was really nice to invite me today, and it would be rude to blow her off. You know how hard it is to meet people. Do you want me to be sad and alone forever?"

Dad blows out a breath and Mom puts up her hands in surrender. "You don't need to lay it on that thick," Mom replies. "We'll tell Grandma you had plans you couldn't break."

"Thank you!" I clap my hands. "Can I take the car?"

"Fine, fine," Dad says, and waves me off.

"Tell her I promise to visit soon," I call as I run upstairs to get a shower.

"You better, or she'll insist on driving you to school every morning," Mom says with a laugh.

I shouldn't pin all my hopes for future happiness on this afternoon, but you better believe I'm doing it anyway. It takes me an embarrassingly long time

to decide what to wear to the game, particularly given the fact that it shouldn't matter. That's one of the (many) great things about D&D—no one cares what you look like. You can come in wearing a ball gown, ratty pajamas, or elf ears and it would be cool…assuming you have a group that doesn't judge. I end up choosing a patterned maroon maxi skirt, cropped blue top, and my olive-green cardigan that's long enough to hit the backs of my knees. It's one of my favorite outfits, and also super comfortable. I add hoop earrings and three long necklaces because I don't feel like myself unless I'm wearing one too many pieces of jewelry. I've heard the advice about looking in the mirror and taking off one accessory before leaving the house, but I'm the opposite. I grab two lapis bracelets and head for my car.

Twenty minutes later, I take a deep breath and knock on the door at the address Kashvi gave me. Here goes nothing.

A second later it flies open, but instead of Kashvi it's the boy she was standing with in the parking lot the first day. Given how similar they look, I assume it must be her twin brother. He has short dark hair and is wearing sweatpants and a Laurelburg High Robotics shirt.

"Whatever you're selling, we don't want it."

I blink, completely thrown. "Uh…I'm not selling anything. Is Kashvi here?"

"Everyone's selling something." He cocks his head and studies me. "Even if it's themselves."

My jaw drops and I step to the side to look at the big wooden numbers screwed into the post of their porch. Welp, this is definitely the address Kashvi gave me. I shift away from him, unsure what to do.

"It's all good!" he says with a laugh. "Just messing with you."

"Sanjiv, stop antagonizing our guest! Move!" Sanjiv stumbles out of sight and Kashvi takes his place in the doorway, her hair tousled and smile tight. "Sorry about that. Come in."

I walk in hesitantly.

"Just ignore my twin. That's what I do when he's like this."

Sanjiv sidesteps a line of neatly ordered shoes in the entranceway. "No one can ignore me. And I needed to test if she was going to cut it with us." He rubs his chin. "I'm not convinced yet."

She rolls her eyes. "Go fill your face with Doritos and let us talk."

He shrugs and saunters off into the house. “I wanted to get to the door before him, but I was upstairs.” She looks over her shoulder. “He’s not usually that bad, but he’s playing an overly philosophical cleric, and it makes him unbearable when he’s in character. I’m so glad this campaign is almost done.”

She beckons me inside and we sit down in a very formal living room. Her house is amazingly clean. I mean, my house looks like a cardboard box retail store right now since we’re unpacking, but it’s cluttered even at our best. This looks like a showroom.

“How’ve you been?” Kashvi asks.

I’m embarrassed to admit that the closest I’ve gotten to a fun night in Laurelburg is watching *Wheel of Fortune* with Mom and Dad. And even they were texting with friends half the show, while I had nothing better to do than solve the “Rhyme Time” puzzle with only one of the vowels.

“Okay,” I tell her. “Happy to be here.” Somewhere in the house, guys are laughing, and it sends a tingle of nerves up my spine. Between Kashvi’s warning from before and Sanjiv’s comment, I’m starting to wonder how well I’m going to fit in. “So, did you say your campaign’s over?”

“After today. We’re wrapping up this afternoon, which is why I thought it would be a good day for you to come over. So you can experience us at full force.”

“Oh.” I try not to let my disappointment show. “Well, thanks for the invitation. It got me out of chores.”

“No problem. And don’t worry—we’re starting up a new campaign soon, so it’s the perfect time to bring in someone new. If you’re up for it.”

Her words ratchet up my nerves further. Why does she keep insinuating that I might not be “up for it”? It’s D&D—what could be so intimidating about that? Unless the other players are jerks. I have all too much experience with that and no interest in joining a new toxic group.

“Let’s gooooo. We’ve got an evil wizard to kill,” Sanjiv complains as he walks into the living room.

The guy who doesn’t like coats follows him in. Today his long hair is down and falls to his shoulders. He’s wearing a marching band shirt and carrying a two-liter of Dr Pepper. “Hey.” He nods. “You’re in my chem class, right? What’s up?”

“Hey,” I say with a wave.

“That’s Mark,” Kashvi says. “You met Sanjiv at the door, and you already know Logan from that first day.”

Ah, he does play with Kashvi! Logan comes in and I wave, trying to be nonchalant so he doesn’t realize how happy I am that he’s part of the game too. Today just got even better.

“Quinn, hey. This is a nice surprise.” His smile sends warmth rushing through me. “I didn’t realize you were friends with Kashvi.”

“It’s good to see you all again,” I say. “Kashvi was nice enough to invite me over today.”

“I thought it’d be fun to have her sit in on the game,” she explains. “She used to play at her old school. Speaking of, we better get downstairs before Sloane comes looking for us.”

I follow as the group heads through the kitchen to the basement stairs, and Logan comes up beside me. “How’s pre-calc going?”

I groan. “Not good. Our unit doesn’t line up at all with my last school, and Mr. Winchester goes over stuff so fast.”

“I’d offer to tutor you, but only if you’re hoping for lower grades than you’re already getting.”

“What an appealing offer,” I reply, though honestly I might be willing to take the low grades in exchange for more time alone with him.

Mark looks over his shoulder. “Who cares about school when there’s D&D to be played. Quinn, are you ready for the epicness you’re about to experience?”

“Um, I guess?”

“You guess.” Sanjiv snorts. “Be grateful you’re allowed to witness us firsthand.”

Mark cracks a smile. “Most mortals never get the chance.”

That’s enough to set my nerves ablaze again. Before meeting this group, I felt pretty confident about my D&D knowledge, but now I sense that I’m the newest of newbies. It’s too late, though. I’m already down the stairs, so there’s no turning back.

Chapter Four

Whatever I was expecting to see, it's not what I find at the bottom of the basement stairs. Sure, there are the usual things you find in a lot of Ohio basements. There's worn carpet, low ceilings, and a well-used couch pointed at a big TV. There's even an Ohio State sign on the wall, which looks old enough that it might have been installed by the builders in the '80s.

And, of course, they have a long table covered with D&D manuals, papers, and figurines. But there are also webcams set up on tripods and table microphones at each of the seats.

Kashvi waves to another person, who's clearly waiting for the group. "This is Sloane. They're our DM."

I wave hello, immediately recognizing Sloane from the striped rainbow hat in the parking lot that first morning. Short tufts of black hair, tinged purple and blue, stick out from under their hat, and they're wearing a black Fullmetal Alchemist T-shirt.

They wave back from behind a trifold DM screen. "Quinn, right? Welcome."

"Thanks." Everyone files in around me and sits down at their respective chairs at the table. "Um, what's with all the tech?" I ask.

In my old group, there was an unwritten rule that we wouldn't be on our tablets or phones during the session unless we were looking something up. It kind of kills the mood of role-playing when half the members are too busy on Reddit to pay attention to what's happening in the game. But I've never seen anything like this setup.

Logan shoots Kashvi a surprised look. “You didn’t tell her?”

“Didn’t tell me what?”

“I didn’t want to scare her,” she replies to him before turning to me. “We aren’t a usual D&D group. We actually livestream all our sessions.”

“Like Critical Role?”

They all smile and nod. “We’re not *quite* as popular as them yet, but yeah,” Mark replies. “They’re one of our idols. Someday we’ll get viewers like they do.”

I try to school my features, but that’s a pretty huge dream. That D&D group has had a massive online following for years. Millions of people watch the Critical Role D&D sessions and TV show. “So…do people tune in for your games?”

Sanjiv huffs. “Do you think we’d do all this if people didn’t tune in?”

He gestures at the diffused lighting and decor. I see now that bookshelves line the walls on either side of the table. They’re filled with various editions of D&D manuals, fake potion bottles, weapons, and dice, I guess so that there’s a themed backdrop behind the players. “We’re making an exception, but usually no one is allowed in this room except players,” he continues.

“If you want to watch us, you stream it,” Sloane adds, and points to a laptop to their right.

“Okay, she’s got it,” Kashvi says to them. To me she explains in a quieter voice, “They get a little defensive, sorry. We’ve had a few sessions where we got close to seventy-five viewers, but mostly it’s thirty people or less.”

“It’s growing,” Mark adds.

“Today we’ll get big numbers,” Sloane adds. “People love watching the end of a campaign.”

I nod, my eyes big. “That’s cool.”

“It’s extremely cool,” Sanjiv says.

“Well, sit back and enjoy,” Logan says with a small smile. He’s the only one who isn’t being intense about this livestream, and I appreciate it.

He turns to Sloane. “Are we about ready?”

“Ready,” they reply.

Everyone gets settled into their respective seats, swiping at their hair and messing with their dice. I tiptoe over to Sloane to check out the

livestream visuals on the laptop. Sloane is projected in a square box on the left-hand side of the screen, while the others are framed in two rectangular boxes, one above the other, on the right side. Logan and Mark are in the top rectangle because they're sitting next to each other at the table, and Kashvi and Sanjiv fill the other rectangle.

I don't have a lot of experience with livestream D&D games, though Caden and I used to listen to a D&D gaming podcast together—*The Smiling DM*. Like Critical Role, that group is also super-famous with tens of thousands of followers and a professional setup. This doesn't look as polished, but they've managed to replicate the same idea. Because Sloane is the DM, it makes sense that they have one camera only on them, while the other cameras let viewers see the rest of the players so they can watch interactions and facial expressions. And the bookshelves behind them create a nice ambiance. Kashvi and Sanjiv are lucky their parents are cool enough to allow them to take over the basement for this. My parents definitely wouldn't be.

"You haven't started streaming yet, have you?" I ask over Sloane's shoulder.

"No," they reply with a laugh, "or I'd be pushing you out of the camera frame. Our livestream runs every Saturday from two to four p.m., and we don't start until that exact time. We post the schedule online and viewers get annoyed if we start early or late. That's one of the best ways to lose viewers—inconsistency."

I nod, starting to understand why Kashvi and Sanjiv questioned if I was up for this. It's already way more serious than anything I've done.

Sloane points at the bottom of the screen where there's a chat box. "If people subscribe to our channel, then they get extra benefits like access to the chat room and unique emojis. It's too much for me to monitor the chat during the session, but it's fun to look back at it afterward and see what people were saying."

There's a notice at the top of the chat: *No rules lawyering or backseat gaming*.

"What's this?" I ask, and point to the warning.

"Ugh, some people love to get on and tell us how we're doing everything wrong. It's annoying, so we added that." They look at the clock. "Okay, it's time." They gesture for me to sit by the wall so I'm not on

camera. Luckily, if I squint, I can still see the screen. “And we’re live in three…two…one….” They click a button and everyone straightens.

As soon as the livestream opens, viewers start rolling in. My eyes widen at the numbers. Thirty, fifty, eighty. They just keep coming. To watch a D&D game run by teenagers? This is definitely not what I was expecting.

“Wow,” I say, before slapping a hand over my mouth. The others stiffen but don’t look my way. Whoops, I guess this’ll be a silent session for me.

“Welcome to all our viewers. We are *Don’t Split the Party,* and you’ve come on an auspicious day. For months, this party has battled everything from goblins to giants all in the hopes of reaching the wizard’s tower so they can recover the stolen wardstone and return safely to their homeland. It all comes down to today. Will they roll well and survive, or will today be their last?”

The others smile at each other. “I’m ready to avenge my mother’s death,” Mark says.

“And I’m ready to annihilate this wizard,” Kashvi says.

“You’ve certainly waited long enough. Let’s do this,” Logan says.

Sloane hunches forward, their face intent and voice low. “You stand in front of the massive wooden door to the wizard’s tower. The large trees surrounding the tower sway ominously and the sky is shadowy at twilight. The world is perfectly silent, as if every bird and beast is also waiting for the fight that is about to happen. How would you like to proceed?”

I notice that all the faces swivel to Logan, as if he’s the de facto leader of the group.

“What do you want to do, Hathor?” Mark asks.

“I’ll detect and dispel any magic the wizard has left,” Logan replies, but he’s not Logan anymore. He has a Scottish accent, and he sits up to make himself even larger than usual. He must be playing a magic user—probably another wizard—if he’s using spells.

“I run in first,” Sanjiv says as soon as they’ve broken down the door. “There’s no way there isn’t something else waiting to kill us in there.”

“You’re not going without me,” Kashvi replies.

“Good, because I don’t want to die today,” Sanjiv replies, and they share a grin. I couldn’t tell earlier if she got along with her twin brother, but they definitely seem to be a team now.

“You make it up a dozen steps before you hear the ear-bleeding sound of metal raking against stone.” To my amazement, Sloane pulls a rock and a small (but real-looking) sword from under the table and scrapes them together to create the sound effect. The grating noise sends shivers up my spine.

“Could it be a cage door opening? Maybe the wizard is releasing something?” Mark asks.

“Maybe.” Logan’s eyes cut to Sloane, who is smiling. Never a good sign.

“It’s a good guess,” Sloane tells the group, “but what you heard wasn’t a cage door…. It was armor. The clanking and scraping grow louder until you can barely think, and then five animated suits of armor come into view, each wielding two short swords.”

The party jumps into action again and I sit back, caught up in the role-playing. I’m blown away by how immersed each of them is in the game. It’s as if they *are* the characters and nothing can distract them. We weren’t nearly this committed in my last group. The five of us—Caden, Paige, Makayla, Travis, and myself—spent as much time joking, eating, and messing around as we did role-playing and running through encounters. Actually, it was probably closer to a 70/30 split. We barely made progress with the campaign.

But here? They joke with each other, but it’s only within the context of the game. No one’s interrupting to complain about the latest essay in Mrs. Calson’s class or bringing up the fight that broke out in the north hallway on Friday. And how can they all do accents? I don’t know any accents.

They polish off the armor and begin their search for the wardstone. I’m not sure what’s going on since this is my first time at their game, but I get the impression that Logan’s character and this evil wizard have some serious history—maybe they’re brothers?—and Logan is definitely giving it his all. The wizard sics some harpy minions on the party to distract them, and Logan half stands in his chair, screaming and sending orders. The twins work together, killing anything in sight, while Mark heals whichever party members need it. By the time they’ve defeated the wizard and the session ends, my heart is racing and I fall back against the chair. It’s almost like watching actors onstage as they improvise their lines. It’s incredibly

impressive. Especially Logan. You'd think he really had a lifelong feud with his evil wizard uncle.

I've been too caught up to watch what's happening on the screen, but I now see that the number of viewers has climbed to one hundred fifty. I take a deep breath. This is cool and all, but am I ready to have that many people watch me role-play live? What if I get confused and say something stupid? I mean, let's be real, the question is *when* I do that, not if.

When the campaign is complete, they cheer and chat for a few minutes about how great it's been before signing off. Once it's clear that the livestream has ended, they all fall back in their chairs like I did, laughing and high-fiving.

"That was epic!" Logan cries. He points at Mark. "That was inspired when you paralyzed that harpy and used it as cover."

"It just came to me!"

"And you two," Sloane says, pointing to Kashvi and Sanjiv. "Amazing teamwork."

The twins grin and elbow each other. "I can't believe this is over," Sanjiv says. The others nod sadly.

"But not forever. We're starting a new campaign, and it's going to be even better than this one," Sloane reminds everyone.

"How many viewers did we get today?" Logan asks.

"A new high—a hundred and sixty-two."

"All right, new goal, then. We're hitting two hundred and fifty with our next campaign. Maybe even five hundred!"

Everyone chuckles and shakes their heads.

Kashvi turns around in her chair to look at me. "What did you think, Quinn?"

"You all are unbelievable."

"So?" She raises an eyebrow. "Do you think you're up to joining?"

"Wait," Logan interrupts, his eyes flashing at me. "You're thinking about *joining* the group?"

"Why did you think I had her come in today?" Kashvi asks incredulously.

My stomach sinks at the change in Logan's expression. It's as if Kashvi's announced I'll be swinging by every Saturday to pour a bucket of manure on the game table.

“I don’t know,” he replies. “I thought maybe you were hanging out after or something. You play D&D?”

“Yes, I play,” I reply sharply. “Just…you know, not like this.”

“You get used to it,” Mark says, and takes a huge gulp of Dr Pepper directly from the two-liter. “The cameras are intimidating at first and you overanalyze every word you say, but eventually you forget that anyone is watching and it’s just fun. I bet you’d love it.”

“You should consider joining. It would be great to have another player,” Sloane adds.

“I know I *might* have given you a hard time before”—Sanjiv glances at his sister—“but it’d be cool to have you. It’s good to switch things up so we don’t fall into a rut. And I know it’d make Kashvi happy.”

Logan’s eyes narrow at Sanjiv, but his silence is all I need to realize that Logan does not want me here as a player. Seriously? He was so nice before—what’s so horrible about me playing with the group? Am I not good enough for them? He doesn’t know me well enough to guess what kind of player I am.

I cock my head at him. “What do you think, Logan?”

His eyes widen, like he didn’t expect me to call him out. “Uh, you should do what you want to do.”

“But what do *you* think I should do? I’d like to hear your opinion.”

He clears his throat. I’m glad to see I can make him squirm.

“Do you think I can’t cut it? Or are you hesitating because you don’t want another girl in the campaign?” I push.

His mouth drops open. “*What?* No, it’s not that at all! I don’t care about that.”

Rather than standing up for Logan, everyone waits in silence, and I feel both vindicated and slightly nauseous. So it’s not in my head—he really doesn’t want me to join.

“It’s just…well…” He looks around again. “I’m not sure if you’d be a good fit. We’re high energy when we play, and you seem kind of quiet and easily intimidated. We need personalities more like your grandma actually—take no prisoners.”

I smirk. “That’d be your funeral. She’d role-play you all under the table.”

The others laugh.

“No decisions are being made yet,” Sloane says slowly. “But we’ve wanted to add another player, and no one else we’ve talked to can commit to our guidelines.”

“We’re doing a session zero on Wednesday after school to plan our characters for the next campaign. Why don’t you come?” Kashvi asks me. “We’ll tell you about how our group works, you can think about what character you’d want to play, and we can all chat more about whether it makes sense.” She cuts her gaze to Logan.

If I’m being honest, this whole thing *is* intimidating. I love D&D, but I’m more of a casual player than an expert. I was hoping for an informal game. But today is the first time since we moved that I’ve had real hope that I can make new friends here. I don’t want to quit before giving this a shot, no matter how obnoxious Logan is about the whole thing.

“I’ll be there,” I reply confidently. “Wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

Chapter Five

My stomach is twisted with nerves when I arrive at Kashvi's house after school Wednesday for our "session zero." I remind myself that this isn't the first time I've made a character for a D&D campaign, but it's abundantly clear that this isn't going to be like my other experiences. Luckily, Kashvi is waiting for me at the door this time.

"I'm glad you made it," she says, and beckons me inside. "I was worried you might back out last minute."

"Definitely not. Though right now I'm equal parts excited and terrified."

"I'm sorry Logan was weirded out by the idea of you joining. I don't know what was going on with him. He usually isn't like that."

"Maybe I should have let Grandma run him over in the parking lot that first day," I mutter at the reminder of him and his whiplash behavior last time I was here.

"He's very into D&D. Like, I think of myself as a big gamer, but I'm nowhere close to him. He probably just got used to thinking of our group in a certain way and needed to process the idea of someone new joining. Don't worry about it." She gives me a once-over and nods appreciatively. "Nice choice of outfit for today. You're giving witchy-paladin vibes."

I look down at myself, confused about why she thinks I look like a paladin, and then remember I'm wearing sun and moon earrings and a blue shirt with a large sun on it. Since paladins can worship sun deities, I guess that makes sense.

"Thanks, I actually made these." I point to my earrings.

“Wait, you *made* those? No way, I love doing that stuff too! I made this.” She holds up her wrist to show me a bracelet made of six-sided dice interspersed with beads. I have no idea how I didn’t notice it until now—it’s so cool I’m tempted to barter my own jewelry for it. I tell her as much and she laughs loudly.

“We totally need to get together after school and make jewelry together. What do you think?”

I have to bite the inside of my cheek so I don’t scream *YES* in her face. No need to scare her off.

“Yeah,” I say in a fairly normal tone of voice. “That would be awesome.”

A small cheer goes up when I walk into the room. “You actually came!” Mark says, while both Sanjiv and Sloane wave.

I can’t stop myself from glancing over at Logan, who is looking carefully neutral as he flips through a manual. “I don’t scare easily.”

“Glad to hear that,” Sloane says.

“Session zero might be one of my favorite days,” Kashvi says. “Plus, my mom bought us pizza! Help yourself.” She points to a folding table pushed against a wall with multiple pizzas stacked on it, along with some half-opened bags of chips.

“But don’t eat all the veggie pizza. It’s my favorite,” Sanjiv adds.

At least there are snacks, so this isn’t completely unlike my other experiences. I take a slice of pepperoni and sit at the open seat at the table, which is next to Kashvi and directly across from Logan. He hasn’t made eye contact since I arrived. Maybe that’s how this whole campaign will go…assuming they’re still on board with letting me join after today. I guess it wouldn’t be horrible to have him ignore me, but it doesn’t feel great knowing someone is actively against my joining. I give him a peace offering in the form of a little smile, but rather than smiling back like a regular person, his lips press together in a line like he’s an annoyed emoji.

“Okay, we should get started,” Logan announces, and the others immediately quiet down. I guess he really is the leader here. “If we want to

increase our viewer numbers, then we need this next campaign to be even more amazing than our last one, and that means we've got to bring it with our characters. What's everyone thinking?"

"Are you ready for this? I've chosen my name…." Mark puts out his hands. "Rolo."

There's a beat of silence. "Rolo?" Sloane asks. "Um, can you give us some context here?"

Logan starts laughing, quietly at first and then louder. "That's actually perfect for you."

"Right? Because I…*roll…low*?" Mark sits back dramatically and flicks a candy with the same name into his mouth.

The others break into laughter then.

"You should have seen him last campaign," Kashvi explains to me. "It was honestly impressive how he could roll so badly every time. I swear your dice are jinxed or something."

"Don't worry, I've got some tricks up my sleeve this time to fix that."

"What class are you thinking?" Sanjiv asks him.

"I'm not sure yet. I only have the name, but the rest will come to me."

"Logan, I'm sure you've got your character all figured out," Sloane says, and Logan nods. "What are you going with?"

"A charismatic rogue elf named Adris Starcrown," Logan says. "He's the third son of a respected elven family who has always felt lesser than his older brothers. Eventually he leaves his family to explore the world and discovers that his grace and speed make theft very easy for him, particularly when he can charm the person before stealing from them. He's always wanted his family to be proud of him, but since he's done nothing but sharpen his thieving skills since abandoning them, he's afraid to go home and see their disappointment. So he just keeps pushing, hoping to finally do something that will make him worthwhile in their eyes."

My mouth drops open a little. Um, okay, so we're going to *that* level of character backstory? I've never created anything like this before. In the past, Caden used a preexisting campaign module for our game, which worked well, but he barely knew what he was doing as a DM and the rest of us didn't put a ton of effort into our characters. This time I need to be a lot more thoughtful.

I flip through the *Player's Handbook*, hoping for inspiration. Rogues can take a lot of forms—they can be tomb raiders, assassins, and Zorro. If Logan's putting his highest stat in Charisma instead of Dexterity, then he's not going with the basic character build…but looking around, I'm getting the impression that's exactly the goal. A regular Orc barbarian or human wizard isn't going to cut it.

"Kashvi and I were talking earlier and we've decided"—Sanjiv takes a huge bite of pizza—"I'm a half orc."

"I'm a half elf," Kashvi adds. "And we're half siblings—we share one parent. Our father."

"Ha, I love it," Sloane says.

"It's cool that you two are role-playing like that," I say. "I can't imagine doing this with my brother." Andrew and I can barely sit next to each other at the dinner table in peace, let alone actively choose to hang out together.

"We're not siblings—we're twins," Sanjiv says. "It's different. We may not be identical, but Kashvi is still my other half."

"They come as a package deal," Sloane adds. "We've tried getting them to role-play other characters, but one way or another, they always end up working together."

"It's more fun that way," Kashvi argues, a little sheepish. "Unless you have a real problem with it?"

Sanjiv looks ready to bean people in the forehead with dice if they complain, but no one does. "You're our power couple. I'm not breaking you up," Logan replies. "And I do mean that literally—are you two bringing the power again?"

"Absolutely. I'm going with druid for my class, but just because I'll be communing with the natural world instead of swinging a sword doesn't mean I won't bring the power," Sanjiv says.

"And I'm the fighter this time," Kashvi says. "Don't worry, we'll be able to take on whatever Sloane throws at us."

"Do you create your own home brew campaigns, or do you use something preexisting?" I ask Sloane.

"Home brew. It's so fun coming up with the whole thing myself, even if it feels like an extra part-time job."

My mind is spinning from all this info. They already have a rogue, druid, and fighter. There are plenty of other options—honestly, there's an

overwhelming number of classes, races, and specialties to choose from. This is one of the best parts of a new campaign, but it's also intimidating because if you don't choose correctly, then you're stuck with a boring or useless character to role-play for the rest of the game. And this group seems serious enough that they won't just kill me off and let me start a new character if my first build doesn't pan out.

But before I can make more progress, Mark distracts me. "I've got it! Rolo is a halfling fighter and he thinks he's related to your characters."

"Like another half brother?" Sanjiv asks.

"Exactly. He's not going to be the smartest Rolo in the package."

"We should play along," Kashvi says, glancing at Sanjiv. "Take pity on him."

"Have you got anything, Quinn?" Sloane asks me. Their voice is soft, like they're scared to pressure me.

"Um, maybe." I flip another page in the *Player's Handbook*. "I'm still thinking."

"Do you know how to build a character?" Logan asks.

My head snaps up. "Yes, I know how to build a character. This isn't my first time."

"Okay, fine, but it's your first time playing with us. If you're going to be part of this group, then your character needs to work with the party. We need a balanced group of—"

I turn to Kashvi. "Is he always like this?"

"You get used to it."

"Doubtful."

"Like what?" he asks, looking to the others.

"This classic mansplaining you're doing. You think I don't know how characters work? Or parties? I don't need everything explained to me."

"I think you need a few things explained to you," he mutters, and I want to flick him with my dice. He puts his hands out. "I was only trying to help but, please, go ahead. If we allow you to join our group, what are you planning to bring to the table?"

I smirk. "You want a balanced party? Okay, how about a ranger?" I put my chin on my fist and wait for the response I know I'll get.

He lets out an exasperated sigh just like I predicted. "Do you know how redundant that would be when we already have two fighters and a rogue?

What if we come across an enemy we can't swing a sword at?"

"Why do you think I suggested it?" I ask with a raised eyebrow.

Kashvi lets out a snort laugh.

Sloane interrupts to ask Mark about his character and it gives me a few minutes to decide in peace. An idea comes to me, and I jot some notes down so I don't forget anything. When there's a lull in the conversation, I jump in. "I want to be a hill dwarf sorcerer."

Sanjiv and Kashvi glance at each other and nod. "Sounds good to me," Kashvi says. "We need a magic user."

"Sorcerers don't have a lot of hit points," Logan adds.

I pin him with a glare. "Exactly, which is why I'm building mine to have dwarven toughness, a bonus to Constitution for a hit point bonus, plus a third hit point bonus as a sorcerer."

I know I should look around the rest of the table to gauge their feelings about these choices, but I can't pull my attention from Logan. He's being so infuriatingly obnoxious that all I can think about is shutting him up. When he hears my character build, his expression changes from skeptical to surprised to impressed, the shift as obvious as it is intoxicating.

"I'm stacking to get as many hit points as possible so I can save the rest of the party later when the others can't." I lean back and cross my arms. "Or are you going to tell me that this build won't be a help to the rest of the party? Because if so, we'll all know you're just arguing because you don't want me here."

He stares me down, but then the corner of his mouth lifts slightly, like he's fighting not to smile.

"And the build has one more bonus now that I know you're playing an elf," I continue. "Being a dwarf will give me an excuse to fight with you since our races don't naturally get along well."

"You want to fight with me?"

"No, but it seems like *you* want to fight with *me*. This way the viewers will have some reasoning behind why we treat each other this way."

I raise an eyebrow at him, although my heart is racing. I can't believe I'm being so combative when I'm simultaneously so desperate to be included in this group, but what the hell is his problem? If he's going to try to put me in my place, I have no issue doing the same to him. I don't think being polite is going to get me far with this group.

He drops his gaze to the table and messes with the dice in front of him. “You know, group dynamics are important to us. Very important. If you can’t be a team player, then you shouldn’t be here.”

Sloane snorts. “What are you talking about? We fight all the time. That’s half the reason people watch us—so they can hear you all bickering about stupid things.”

“It wasn’t stupid. Just because someone rolls a Natural 20 on a skill check doesn’t mean they should automatically succeed at the skill—it depends on what the total is,” Sanjiv argues. “I’m right and the world needs to know.”

Kashvi rolls her eyes. “The epic Nat 20 debate. Will it never end?”

“We have rules,” Logan cuts in, and looks around the table at the rest of them. “And we’ve all agreed to abide by them. It’s what’s kept us together and successful for three years now.”

This sobers them up and they all nod, as if the mention of rules has brought them back to their senses. They all turn to study me.

Rather than being put off, the idea of rules actually appeals to me. I like the idea of being with people who care about the game and take it seriously.

“I’m fine with that,” I say. “What are the rules?”

“First—and most important—we don’t skip game sessions,” Sloane says immediately. “Ever.”

I nod. It’s not like I have a bunch of other plans that will fill my Saturdays…although my parents might have something to say about this. I’ll have to explain to them how serious this is.

“And you can’t be late or leave early,” Mark says. “It’s distracting and unprofessional to have people coming and going during a livestream.”

“Our lives basically revolve around this,” Sanjiv adds. “Everything else is second priority.”

“Okay, I should be able to do that.”

“And no messing around during the livestreams either,” Logan says, and something about his tone makes me want to stick my tongue out at him. I didn’t mind the others telling me the rules, but he makes it sound like I’ve already broken one. “We don’t have side conversations, play on our phones, or do anything to pull focus from the game. We should be totally immersed so that our viewers are immersed.”

I raise an eyebrow defiantly. “What if I have to pee? Can I break character for that?”

His mouth drops open, and he looks at Sanjiv for help. I can’t help laughing at his dumbfounded expression. I’m pretty sure people don’t leave him speechless much, and I’m already envisioning a character that’s going to do just that. Hopefully Sloane is telling the truth and bickering is allowed as long as we’re in character because I plan to give him so much crap.

“We try to pee before we start the game,” Sanjiv explains with an amused expression. “But feel free to bring a bucket if you think you’ll need it.”

“You’re really winning me over on this,” I reply. “Anything else I should know?”

They all exchange glances. Kashvi clears her throat. “I’m sure this won’t even come up, so it’s not a big deal, but…we have a strict no dating rule too.”

“You aren’t allowed to date if you’re in this group?” After Caden, I’m not exactly motivated to jump back into that pool, but this seems too extreme even for me.

“No, no, you can date!” Kashvi says. “Or else we would never get Sanjiv to stay in the group.”

He waggles his eyebrows.

“We just don’t date anyone in *our* group,” Sloane says. “Too many groups have broken up or gotten weird because of dating. Remember Wyatt?” They give Kashvi a pointed look.

She rolls her eyes. “In my defense, he was very cute, and how was I supposed to know he was so scared of commitment?”

“I’m not blaming you. I’m just saying the rule is there for a reason.” Sloane grins. “But believe me, you aren’t missing out on much by not dating these losers.”

Mark huffs. “I’ll have you know it’s a *huge* sacrifice to not date me. But it’s for the greater good.”

“You’d have to get in line for me, and it’s twenty girls deep nowadays,” Sanjiv adds.

Kashvi snorts. Logan is the only one to stay silent. When I look over, his eyes are on the table.

“No snarky comments from you?” I ask.

His eyes dart up to mine and my stomach flips over. “Not this time.”

For a moment I forget the annoying know-it-all in front of me and remember the boy I first saw from the passenger side of Grandma’s car. The one with kind eyes and a ready smile that made my pulse quicken. Is it possible that this rule is the reason he’s been so rude and reluctant to have me join—because it means we could never date?

But as soon as the thought enters my mind, I push it away. Honestly, we barely know each other, so it’s wildly arrogant to assume that’s the reason. More likely he’s just annoyed that I’m coming in and disrupting the group dynamics he’s gotten used to. It was clear from the livestream that Logan is the group leader, and he probably isn’t excited about change.

I roll my shoulders and turn away from him. The charming boy I met before this D&D game is gone, and I have no interest in the one sitting across from me now. But what I *do* want is a community. Friends.

“The rules sound fine to me,” I tell the group. “When do we start?”

Chapter Six

I arrive at my English class a few minutes earlier than usual on Thursday and see Sloane in the back of the class, crocheting. The tips of their newly dyed neon-green hair poke out from under a hat—this one with purple and yellow stripes. Sloane's hunched over slightly, eyes focused entirely on their project, and I hesitate. It feels a little weird to be in a class together and not talk to them, but they're concentrating so hard it might be rude to interrupt. At the same time, if I want my D&D group members to become real friends then I need to make an effort.

"Hi?" I say, the word coming out like a question.

It takes a second, but Sloane raises their eyes. Slight irritation changes to happiness when they see me. "Hey, what's up?"

"Nothing." I shrug. "Just wanted to come say hi. What are you working on?"

They lift the crochet project slightly. "My latest hat. I've become a bit obsessed with making them—I love crocheting. It's very relaxing."

"That's cool. I've never tried it before, but I love making jewelry." I shake my wrist so that my five beaded bracelets clink together. "I also get a little obsessed."

Sloane nods approvingly. "At least the stuff you make is small enough it's easy to store. I've got an enormous pile of hats in my room, and an even bigger pile of yarn. I don't know what I'll do with them. I need three more heads to wear them all."

"I'd take one," I blurt out, and then immediately regret it. What am I doing, asking for people's stuff? It's not like Sloane and I are close. "I

mean, not that you need to give me one or anything. But I'd buy one from you if you're willing to sell them."

Sloane balks. "You don't need to give me any money. I'm happy to give you one—I figured no one would want my wonky little hats."

"If you didn't notice, it's freezing today." I gesture to the classroom window, where frost has formed on the inside—not a great sign. "I'd happily wear one."

I shift to the side as a few students push around me to get to their seats. It's clear from the noise and shuffling that class is about to start. Sloane shoves their yarn and hook back in their bag.

"I'll bring some to the game Saturday and you can choose one, okay?"

"Awesome!"

It's small, this conversation with Sloane, but it's something. Already I feel a little lighter today. Not everyone in this classroom is a stranger now.

On Saturday, I pile into the back seat of our SUV next to Andrew and his smelly bags of soccer stuff. I wish I could drive myself to the game, but my parents are getting the tires replaced on the other car, so I'm stuck back here. Mom's driving, her usual travel mug filled with coffee even though it's one-thirty in the afternoon.

"All right, listen up before I lose you to your phones," Dad calls from the passenger seat. "We need to talk about something."

I glance at Andrew nervously but he's already scrolling through his phone. I elbow him. "Dad's talking."

"What?"

"Grandma fell last night," Dad replies solemnly. There are bags under his eyes and his button-up is wrinkly. I noticed both Mom and Dad were quiet and exhausted this morning, but I figured it was just the stress of the move getting to them.

"Oh my god, is she okay?" I ask. "Why didn't you tell us earlier?"

"She's fine now. And Mom and I wanted to talk about some things first," Dad says, and pauses to glance at Mom. She gives the smallest nod,

as if giving him permission. “We think Grandma’s getting too old to live by herself.”

“Wait, are you going to move her into our house and make me and Quinn share a bedroom?” Andrew asks. “Because I can barely sit next to her on a short drive.”

“I’d rather live in the basement with the spiders than sleep next to you.”

“Stop. I don’t have the energy today,” Mom warns, glaring at us in the rearview mirror.

Guilt lodges in my ribs. She does sound especially tired—I’m not sure she’s even remembered to brush her hair.

“No, we aren’t moving her into our house. That wouldn’t help, since all of our bedrooms are on the second floor and we’re trying to get her away from stairs. We’re thinking a retirement community would be good. It wasn’t a bad fall this time, but we might not be that lucky in the future.”

I snort. Grandma move into a retirement home? With her piles of stuff and social schedule? I can’t imagine her living somewhere with mashed potatoes and removable teeth.

“No way. She’ll flip when she hears,” Andrew argues.

“Actually, for once I agree with Andrew.”

“You two aren’t being supportive at all,” Mom complains. She pats Dad on the leg. “We need to be united as a family throughout this to support your father. This isn’t going to be an easy time for anyone.”

“I’m on Grandma’s side on this one. Plus, my birthday is coming up, so I have to keep my priorities in mind.” Andrew grabs his bag from the floor of the SUV. “Right up there.” He points to the sidewalk outside the recreational center where his league has their winter practices and games.

Mom pulls over with a sigh, and Andrew climbs over me.

“We aren’t finished talking about this,” Dad calls out the door. But I’m sure we are. They hardly ever make Andrew do something he doesn’t want to do. Andrew holds up a hand to say goodbye.

“Have a good practice,” Mom calls, and pulls back onto the road to take me to Kashvi’s house. We’re having our first session—which means my first livestream—and my stomach has been churning about it all day. (And yesterday, too, honestly.) But this news about Grandma has distracted me.

I lean forward so my head is between their seats. “Is Grandma actually going to be okay?”

Dad gives me a soft smile. He is Grandma's only son and they've always been close, even though we didn't see her a lot when we lived hours away.

"Yeah, she's feeling well enough that she even went to play pickleball this morning, despite my asking her to skip it." He gives me a good-natured eye roll. "She's a trouper."

"Do you think she'll agree to move?"

"Well…not at first." He chuckles. "She's never been one to do anything if it wasn't her idea. But with time, she'll come to see it's for the best. No more stairs, no house maintenance to worry about, and she'll be surrounded by new friends. She'll love it."

I'm not as convinced. It seems pretty harsh to make Grandma move when she's not ready. She is an adult. But it sounds like one way or another, this is happening.

A few minutes later, we arrive at Kashvi's house. "Should I text when I'm done?" I ask.

"We promised Andrew we'd watch his games later today," Mom says. She takes a big sip of her coffee. "He has a doubleheader. Do you think one of your new friends could drop you off?"

I push away a flash of jealousy that they're too busy with Andrew to come pick me up. I guess if I wanted to, I could ask them to watch our livestream, but it's terrifying enough knowing that random strangers will be watching me soon. I'd completely clam up if I knew my parents were watching as well.

"Yeah, I'm sure I can get a ride. Wish Andrew luck."

"Okay, have fun!" Mom says with obvious relief.

I climb out and wave as they drive away. Logan walks toward me on the sidewalk but does nothing to acknowledge me other than bob his head in my direction. Ugh, so he's sticking with the cold demeanor.

Maybe I shouldn't let him get to me, but it irritates me that he's switched to acting so unfriendly and aloof. How are we supposed to be a real group if he won't even acknowledge my presence? And wasn't *he* the one who said group dynamics were so important?

"Hey," I say defiantly.

He stops and turns his focus entirely on me. It's warmer today than the typical gray February day in Ohio, and rather than wearing a coat, Logan is

wearing a blue flannel shirt over a T-shirt. The shirt is snug and does nothing to hide the definition in his arms and shoulders. His brown hair looks lighter in the sun, and it swoops just slightly over his left eye in a way that's almost begging for me to reach out and brush it up onto his forehead.

Basically, Logan is too hot for his own good (or mine) and I should have let him ignore me.

"How are you, Quinn?" he says softly. His gaze pins me in place like I'm an insect he's just stuck to a board for a science project.

"I'm…good. Fine." I glare at him so he can't guess the thoughts rolling around in my mind.

"Excited for this afternoon?"

"I am."

"Good. So am I."

We stand there another second, staring at each other with nothing to say, before he turns away and marches through the front door. He doesn't bother to knock, nor does he announce himself walking into their house. It feels rude to me, but I follow him anyway. Downstairs, the others are speaking in hushed tones. A nervous energy vibrates through the room, or maybe that's just vibrating out of me and filling the space.

Sanjiv looks up in surprise as we enter. "Did you two come together?"

"No," I blurt out.

"We got here at the same time," Logan explains.

"This is going to be an interesting campaign," Sloane says, looking back and forth between us.

"Can you give us any hints about what you have coming up?" Mark asks Sloane. He's already at his seat with a half-full two-liter of Mountain Dew next to him. "You're not going to try killing off Rolo in the first session, are you?"

Sloane mimes zipping their lips. "It wouldn't be a good session if you knew what was coming."

"Well, whatever you have planned, it won't work. My newest dice came in." He holds them up for the group. "Completely clear acrylic this time. No bubbles."

"Does that matter?" I ask while pulling out my manuals.

"Of course it does! My problem before was that my dice weren't weighted evenly. But with these I know there's no bias. I'm about to make

my character name obsolete!”

I chuckle and pour out my favorite dice from their velvet bag. I have so many sets at this point that it’s hard to remember them all. I love to collect them—the way some people collect snow globes or shot glasses—and I always use a different set for each character I play. Though I have enough now that I can rotate between dice sets from one session to the next, as long as the dice match the vibes of my character. Given that Nasria, my character, is a dwarf, I’m going with dice made of precious gems. They weren’t cheap, but my amethyst dice are perfect for this game. I need good rolls this afternoon and I’m betting on these.

“Ooh, those are *gorgeous*,” Kashvi says, and picks one up to inspect it. “I always judge people by their dice.”

“I love yours as well.” Hers are blood-red with gold stamped numbers.

I’m trying to stay in the moment, but being back at the game table makes it impossible to keep away memories of my old gaming group. I met Paige in Spanish freshman year and we immediately became best friends. I’d never had a best friend before her. I’d had good friends, I’d been included in parties and group costumes for Halloween, but I’d never had someone I loved and trusted enough that I’d tell them everything. Paige knew every one of my insecurities, from the amount of freckles on my face to my sadness that Mom and Dad were always more excited about Andrew’s interests than they were about mine. I knew the details of Paige’s parents’ divorce and the fact that she’d gotten drunk with her cousins the summer before freshman year and told her parents it was food poisoning. We were inseparable, so when Caden asked Paige to play D&D, I joined too.

To Paige and Caden and the others, D&D was social time. Caden was our gaming clown—he’d do anything to make us laugh, doing crazy dances, eating nasty food, even mooning us (though I was quick to close my eyes for that). I’d never laughed as much as I laughed at D&D. Caden was also a huge flirt and constantly found ways to compliment me. He said he loved my long hair even when it was frizzy and unbrushed. He loved my jewelry and that I learned the D&D rules for my character and had opinions about the game. It was easy to be taken in by it. It was easy to flirt back because it felt like that was our pattern. He flirted, I flirted back, and we forgot about it as soon as we left the gaming table.

I've told myself over and over again to stop thinking about them. To stop wondering how they could have turned on me and what they say about me now. Do they have regrets? Does Paige ever think of me when she's painting her nails or rewatching *Stranger Things*? My brain won't let the memories go, and they're as painful as ever. Losing Paige, especially, is a wound I can't stop scratching long enough for it to heal.

"Quinn," Sloane says.

I jerk upright. I must have looked like I was in a trance.

"I brought those hats with me if you want to go through and find one you like?" They hold up a large tote bag.

"Oh, you remembered!" I push away the memories and shoot up from my chair. A quick look shows that the hats are all basically the same shape, but Sloane has made them in enough cool color combinations that it's going to be hard to decide.

"What's this? You're giving away hats?" Kashvi asks.

"I guess? I've got more than enough, so take whatever you want."

"We should all wear one," I reply. I pull out a black and red hat that matches Mark's shirt. "Here, try it on."

"Sweet." He pulls it down over his low ponytail.

"What do you think? I'm partial to purple, but this red one is pretty cool," Kashvi says, holding up two options.

"I say…" I look at Sloane for confirmation.

They nod. "Both."

Kashvi beams. "Awesome!"

Sanjiv takes a black and gray one from the top, and I'm immediately drawn to one with various gradients of green. It'll go with so many of my clothes. I search deeper in the bag, not wanting to miss any, and come across one toward the bottom of the sack. It's a little misshapen and big enough that it won't fit me, which is too bad because I love the gray blue Sloane's chosen. Much to my chagrin, it reminds me of Logan's eye color. I can already imagine how much cuter he'd be with this beanie pulled low over his forehead. I bite my lip, wondering if I should shove it back to the bottom, but this little hat deserves to serve its life purpose.

"Here." I drop it in front of Logan as I walk past him and back to my seat.

He looks up in surprise but doesn't say anything.

“It’s time,” Sloane announces. “We’re good? Quinn, you’ve got this? Remember—try not to stare directly into the camera, don’t use your phone or start side conversations, and we try not to have a lot of dead air because it gets boring.”

“Dead air?”

“It’s when we’re all silent,” Kashvi explains, and puts a hand on my arm. “It’s just D&D. Play the way you have in the past and have fun. You’ve got this.”

I nod stiffly. I *so* don’t got this.

“It’s your first game with us,” Logan adds, and his expression is actually almost kind. “If you aren’t sure what to do, then it’s cool to hang back at the beginning while you get used to it. We’ll take the lead with the role-playing.”

Everyone nods. I give Sloane a nervous smile to say I’m ready.

“In three…two…one…” Sloane intones, and we all wait in silence. Then they sit up, looking more excited than they did a second ago, and I know we’re live.

My head swims and I force myself to keep a pleasant expression and focus on Sloane so that I don’t accidentally stare into the camera. The hope of the livestream is that viewers feel like they’re sitting in the room with us, experiencing the game just as we are, and if I’m calling attention to the camera or “breaking the fourth wall,” it ruins the illusion. That’s a lot easier said than done when all I want to do is check my hair and make sure I don’t suddenly have something large and green stuck in my teeth.

“Good afternoon, and welcome to *Don’t Split the Party.* Today is the first session of our newest campaign, and I can’t wait to see what this group gets into. Particularly since we have a new player joining us.” Sloane smiles devilishly.

Chapter Seven

"Because it's our first session," Sloane continues, "we always like to start by introducing each of the players and their characters in the party. Logan, do you want to go first?"

I frown and then smooth my features before anyone watching can notice. Ugh, it's going to be hard not showing every emotion I feel. But shouldn't we go around the table clockwise or something? Logan isn't sitting next to Sloane, so I'm not sure why they jumped over Mark to start with him. But no one else flinches. Clearly Logan always takes the lead on these things.

"Absolutely. My character is Adris Starcrown and he's a charismatic elf rogue." He continues his description almost verbatim from what he told us earlier, except for an extra tidbit. "He also happens to be incredibly charming and fond of the ladies"—he winks at Kashvi—"so he's usually able to charm his way into getting what he wants."

I forcibly stop my eyes from rolling since I'm on camera, but it's painful. He's playing a flirt? He better not try to flirt with my dwarf. She'll flatten him.

Sanjiv leans forward. "I am a half-orc druid named Lynx—"

"And I am a half-elf fighter named Lasla—" Kashvi adds.

"And we're half siblings," Sanjiv finishes with a grin. "We discovered each other two years ago when I was looking for my father and found Lasla following the same clues. Since then, we've bonded and traveled together, searching for him and surviving through our skills and wits."

“I’m playing Rolo!” Mark exclaims, his voice higher and cuter than in real life.

“Because of his epically bad rolls,” Logan adds with a laugh.

“*And* because of my epic choice of candy,” he continues. “I’m a halfling fighter, and I’ll be saving everybody’s butts this entire campaign like I did last time.”

“Your last character once failed a roll to walk down the stairs,” Sanjiv says, and Mark scoffs.

“I’m very small, but I’m very mighty, and I have a lot to prove.”

The group chuckles and then grows quiet, each of them turning to look at me. I sit up nervously. I’d gotten so caught up listening to them that I forgot it was my turn.

“And last, we have our newest player,” Sloane says, and raises their eyebrows at me expectantly.

My throat closes. Would everyone notice if I slid off my chair and hid under the table? But I force myself to swallow and act like this isn’t terrifying.

“My name is Quinn Norton and I’m playing Nasria, a hill dwarf sorcerer. She loves her clan but had to leave them when her magical abilities manifested, because she didn’t understand where they were coming from or how to use them. She doesn’t particularly like her magic because it feels unnatural. She’s seeking answers to understand how she gained these powers, and in the meantime is hoping her magic can be used to help others.”

“It sounds like Nasria and Adris might get along well, given that they both left their families and are alone in the world,” Kashvi says with raised eyebrows.

“Except that she doesn’t like most people.” I cut my eyes to Logan. “And she particularly dislikes elves.”

“What about half elves?” Kashvi asks.

“She can make an exception for half elves. They aren’t nearly as conceited.”

I can see Logan shaking his head in my peripheral vision, but I don’t turn to him.

“Now that we know our characters, it’s time we get started. We have an exciting party with some interesting character builds, so let’s see what

happens.” Sloane leans in. “Players, we open with each of you in a separate jail cell. Metal bars surround you, but you can easily see each other through the bars. At your backs are wooden boards, and your wrists are bound with rough rope. You’re swaying and you can hear the slosh of water close by.”

“We’re on a boat?” Sanjiv says immediately.

Mark sits back. “I never thought I’d be on a boat.”

“We’re in the brig inside a boat, I bet,” Kashvi replies. “Do we know why?”

Sloane nods. “You’ve each been accused of crimes and are being taken to the Isle of Mysteom for trial. However, the guards aren’t exactly chatty, so they’ve refused to tell you what crimes you’re accused of or who has made the accusations.”

“Is anyone else in our vicinity?” Logan asks.

“There’s a guard standing nearby. She’s been tasked with making sure no one escapes until you reach the mainland.”

“She has, has she? Well, this opening was clearly meant for me.” He leans forward, a cocky grin on his face. “I lean forward and call to her. ‘Hello, my fine lady!’ ” His voice takes on a slight British lilt. “ ‘It’s been too long since I saw someone so beautiful in front of me. Where are you from?’ ”

“The guard spins toward you,” Sloane replies, “and pins you with a glare that could melt the metal bars surrounding you. She walks over and slams her fist into the metal. ‘Keep your mouth shut or I’ll shut it for you.’ ” Sloane’s voice pitches low and menacing.

“I’d like to try sliding through the bars of my cell,” Mark says in Rolo’s excited halfling voice.

Sloane shakes their head. “No can do. You’re small, but the bars are fitted too close together to get out.”

“I wonder if that means they designed these cages especially for us,” Kashvi adds.

“I’d like to roll to persuade the guard,” Logan says. He looks around the table at the rest of us. “I’ve escaped much worse situations than this based solely on charm and a sly hand. Hold tight.”

I’m already finding Adris to be annoying, but I have to give it to Logan for immediately committing to the role.

“Roll a persuasion check,” Sloane says.

Logan rolls more dramatically than is entirely necessary, and his navy d20 lands on a 2.

He throws his head back and groans and the others do the same.

“All right, Adris,” Sloane says. “You try to persuade the guard by leaning seductively in your cell and giving her your best come-hither stare. However, your hand slips and you fall forward and smack your forehead into the bars.”

We all burst out laughing, even Logan, though his neck is flushed red.

“So much for our charismatic rogue,” says Kashvi. “Why don’t we all start by trying to get our bindings off? I’m assuming I don’t have any of my weapons on me to cut them?”

“You’ve been stripped of your weapons, and you don’t see them in the vicinity.”

We each roll our Dexterity to escape, but only Sanjiv manages to make the roll.

“I forgot what it feels like to start back at Level 1,” Kashvi complains, and slouches into her seat.

“No, this could still work,” I say, an idea coming to mind. I’ve been nervous to say much and mess up the game, but I played a druid before, so I’m really familiar with what they can do. I look past Kashvi to Sanjiv. “Lynx, there must be rats crawling around the boat. See if you can get one to chew through our rope bindings.”

“Nice,” Sanjiv says. “Thank you, Nasria.” He rolls well enough to get the rat to do just that, and with my hands free, I can finally use my magic.

“I’m going to cast the magic hand spell to try and steal the guard’s keys since charming her didn’t work so well.”

“I hope your rolling ability is better than Adris’s and mine,” Mark replies.

I pull out my d20 and shake it hard enough that no one can tell my hands are shaking of their own accord. To my delight, an 18 comes up. With that plus my bonuses, I definitely got a high enough number.

Sloane nods approvingly. “Okay, the new player coming in for the win. Your spell lifts the keys from the hook on the wall where they’re stored and they float into your hand.”

“Wait,” Logan says. “She’ll hear if you open your cell door and release us.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll convince the rat to crawl up the guard’s leg. That’ll distract her.” Sanjiv rolls a skill check.

Sloane thinks for a moment and then nods.

“ ‘Rats! Vermin!’ ” Sloane shrieks so loud that I fly out of my chair in fright. I burst out in embarrassed laughter and Kashvi follows suit, leaning toward me until our shoulders touch. Sloane grins in our direction. “It turns out the guard has been deathly scared of rats her entire life, ever since she was a young girl and woke up to find one chewing on her hair as she slept. She flails and screams, racing through the small brig before falling over an uneven piece of flooring and landing hard on the ground.”

We all wince.

“You hear the telltale steps of another guard coming down to check,” Sloane continues.

“No need to be quiet anymore,” Kashvi says. “And I’m not dying before I find my father.”

“I rush to unlock her cell with the keys and then run to the others to unlock them!” I cry, knowing we only have seconds before an angry guard is upon us.

“Thank god we have a sorceress in the party,” Mark says. “Now we need to find our weapons. I can’t take on these guards without them.”

“Me neither,” Kashvi says.

Sloane launches us into the next part of the campaign—a battle with the crew members for control of the ship—and I’m so caught up that I forget the cameras and livestream, just like Mark said I would. Finally there’s a short lull as Rolo does a skill check on whether he can steer the boat to shore, and I sit back and take a sip of water. I’ve been so nervous about the public aspect of this that I forgot how much I love playing D&D. Creating characters, building backstories, thinking on my feet when there’s a problem. I love the idea of being some fantastical person who can wield magic or turn into a bird. And most of all, I love doing all of it with a group of friends around me.

Everyone’s leaning forward, eyes bright, smiling or frowning depending on what their latest roll has been. I got burned so badly in my last D&D group that it’s scary to let myself trust others. But Kashvi catches my eye and gives me a subtle thumbs-up. A rush of hopeful exhilaration floods me. She seems really cool and supportive. My eyes flick to Logan,

who is debating with Sanjiv over which guard we need to take out first. Even he isn't as bad now that we're in the game together.

His gaze meets mine. "Nasria?" The British accent Logan does as Adris brings me back to myself. " 'I know the sight of me can be distracting, and perhaps there's a way to remedy that later, but you might want to pay more attention. You're about to be attacked.' "

My cheeks heat at the fact that he caught me staring. But I'm not letting him get the last word. " 'Excuse me, Adris. I've never seen an elf slam his own face into a set of bars. It's hard to stop myself from reliving it.' " I tilt my head as if to bow to him, then turn my attention back to Sloane.

Maybe Kashvi can be a new friend, but definitely not everyone sitting at this table.

Chapter Eight

The first live session lasts two hours, which is standard for this group, and we all sigh with relief when we're off camera.

Sloane slaps their hands on the table. "I think that was a great session. We lost some of our traction on viewers from last time, but we can build it back again."

"I love the idea of starting us on the ship. Very cool," Sanjiv says.

"I wanted to do something other than having you all meet in a tavern like usual."

"Sorry Rolo kind of…capsized the boat," Mark says. He rolled so poorly when he was trying to helm the ship that Sloane described him as finding the only rock formation in the sea and running the boat directly into it.

"Apology *not* accepted," Kashvi replies. "You lost us all of our equipment. How am I supposed to be the greatest fighter this world has ever seen if I don't have a freaking sword?"

Mark ducks his head.

"If it makes you feel any better, I was going to capsize the boat anyway, so you were always going to lose your weapons," Sloane says, and we all burst out laughing.

"Classic." Logan stretches and stands up. "Can we hang out longer or does your family have plans?"

Kashvi sighs. "We're supposed to go see our aunt as soon as the session is done. Mom's probably two minutes from coming down here to kick everyone out."

“Do you think you’d be able to drop me off at my house on your way?” I ask. “My mom and dad are watching Andrew’s game, so I don’t have a ride.”

“Usually it would be totally fine, but my parents are anxious to get on the road since my aunt is an hour away.” She looks to the others. “Can anyone else drive her?”

“Where do you live?” Logan asks.

“On the east side of town, off Chestnut Street.”

Mark, Sloane, and Logan all look at each other as if they’re having a silent conversation. Nerves rattle through me. We just spent the last two hours bonding, but I’m suddenly aware that I’m still the new person here.

“I’m the only one going in that direction,” Logan says a moment later, his voice less than excited. “I’ll take you.”

“You don’t have to.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Didn’t you just say you need a ride?”

“Yeah, but…”

I can’t really volunteer somebody else to drive me instead, especially if I’m asking them to go completely out of their way to drop me off. If my house was a little closer—and if it was a little warmer—I’d 100 percent walk home rather than ride with Logan.

“I know you aren’t thrilled, but you can’t stay here,” he mutters, and starts packing up his things.

The group chats for a few more minutes and Kashvi gives me a hug. “I’m so glad you’re playing with us—you did an awesome job today. I’ll text you later.”

“Have fun with your family.” I know I’m being a dork to care so much, but I’m excited she wants to text me. She’s not sick of me yet.

I follow Logan out of the house and down the street to his small, beat-up green Chevy S-10 truck. I climb in and hold my things on my lap. It’s so uncomfortable sitting in tight quarters with him after bickering for the last two hours.

“Thanks for doing this,” I say begrudgingly once he plugs my address into his phone’s GPS since his truck is too old to have a built-in system.

“No problem.”

We drive the next few minutes in complete silence. I guess he doesn’t like listening to the radio, and I’m not about to start playing with the dials

and annoy him more. But his cold, standoffish persona is still on full display, and I have an irrational urge to dismantle it. I wish I knew for sure why he's changed so much from those first few days when I talked to him. If it's about the group rules, then that would mean he likes me, so wouldn't he at least be pleasant around me? More likely he doesn't think I deserve to play in the campaign with them. Or maybe he's annoyed I showed him up today. Regardless, it can't continue like this. I need to win him over again, if only to make the campaign easier.

"Do you think the game went well today?" I ask in a cheery voice.

"Yeah."

"It seems like it's going to be a fun campaign. I wonder what Sloane has in store for us next time. Are they a tough DM?"

"Sometimes."

My eyes narrow on the road ahead. Seriously? He's only giving me one-word answers?

I huff and pull my bag closer to my chest. "Why do you suddenly dislike me?"

He flinches and the truck slows momentarily as his foot comes off the accelerator. "I…What? I don't dislike you."

"Well, you clearly don't like me playing D&D. You were cool when we first met, but now you can barely string two words together to answer a question. Do you think I'm ruining the game?"

He jerks his head in my direction. "No."

"But you didn't want me to join—don't try to deny it. Why?"

He shrugs and his fingers flex around the steering wheel. "Don't worry about it. It doesn't matter."

My pulse speeds and I can't stop my mind from going back to the group's rule on dating. He hasn't confirmed that's the reason…but he hasn't denied it either. I want to know, but the abject horror of asking him outright only to have him say no—or laugh in disgust—is enough to keep me silent for life. Anyway, knowing the answer won't change anything. I'm not quitting this game. For the first time in months, I have people I can call friends, and I won't jeopardize that.

I swallow and try to calm my thoughts. "It matters when we're playing in a cooperative game together. And when you're acting like the leader of the campaign," I mutter. "What's up with that, anyway?"

“The others always turn to me. I don’t ask for it.” He glances at me. “What, do you want to be the leader or something?”

“No.” That wasn’t what I was saying at all. “Though maybe I should since Adris couldn’t even get us out of our cells.”

“Nasria wouldn’t be a good leader. You said she hates people.”

“She hates elves.”

“Well, isn’t that convenient,” he replies sarcastically. “But Adris’s Charisma will win her over.”

“Not if his Charisma is anything like yours.”

He sniffs. “Maybe he won’t want to win her over if her personality is anything like yours.”

“Then thank god I gave her that personality.”

I slouch in frustration. I was hoping to get him to warm up to me, and instead we’re bickering even more.

I peek over at Logan, expecting to find him glowering. Instead, he’s… amused? Is he enjoying this? I could swear he’s fighting a smile, and *wow,* it’s not fair the way it transforms his face or the emotions roiling inside me.

“Did I say something funny?”

“Most of what you say is funny.”

“That sounds like a compliment, but since you’re the one saying it, I’m going to assume it’s not.”

This time he doesn’t fight the smile that spreads over his face. “No, it’s a compliment.”

I flush and squeeze my bag even tighter. We drive through a few more streets in silence, and I force myself not to look at him, but he doesn’t follow suit. His thumbs tap on the steering wheel as he drives, and he keeps glancing over at me. Finally, he clears his throat.

“I’ve been curious, was there a reason your grandma stopped and asked us to take a photo?”

I frown. “Um, because she wanted a photo.”

“Right. But what I mean is, there were lots of people in the parking lot that morning. She could have asked anyone, but she asked us. I was just wondering if there was a reason.”

My eyes narrow at the possible implications of his question. “Are you insinuating that I asked her to stop?”

“It had occurred to me.”

“Oh my god.” I squeeze my eyes shut. “That whole thing was completely her idea. I had nothing to do with it.”

The British GPS voice announces *“Arrived.”*

Logan pulls his truck in front of my house, puts it in park, and turns to me. “Okay, fine, if that’s what your answer is, then I believe you.”

But the casual skepticism in his tone pricks at my nerves.

“If you think I concocted some scheme just so I had an excuse to talk to you, then you’re the most egotistical person I’ve ever met,” I reply in a tone that’s more self-assured than I feel. “My grandma is the one who spotted you because she was so desperate for a photo. I was too busy fangirling over Kashvi’s d20 earrings to notice you.”

Rather than look annoyed, he only leans back against the driver’s side door and surveys me. “Well, that’s too bad,” he replies. “Because I noticed you.”

Heat zips up my spine. I stare at him for a second as I try to process his words, but my heart is beating too fast and my brain is chugging too slow. He noticed me, which means…what? That he was interested in me? Possibilities for the two of us swirl in my mind, but it’s not like I can act on any of this even if I wanted to. Which I don’t. I’m committed to the group now.

I bumble to open the passenger door. I’m completely thrown by the end of this conversation, and I need space and air to figure out how I feel. I step out—completely forgetting I’m in a truck with a higher step down—and drop onto the curb. My knees hit the grass and I twist to glare at the offending truck.

Logan jumps out and jogs around to me. “Whoa, are you all right?”

“Your stupid truck is too high off the ground. It’s impossible to get out of it.”

“This is actually a really small truck. So small it’s embarrassing to drive.”

“You’re not helping, in case you were wondering.”

I push my bangs out of my eyes, mortification growing in me with every passing second. *This* is the moment I choose to make a complete fool of myself in front of Logan? I want to get away from him, not spend more time together. I stand and force my chin up.

“I’m fine. You don’t need to stay any longer.”

I take a step back, not realizing my bag is now directly behind me, and trip *again.* I hit the ground harder this time. Oh my god, I'm one second away from bursting into tears out of sheer embarrassment.

Before I can move, Logan is crouched in front of me. His eyebrows pull down in concern and his hands wrap around my wrists. He tugs me gently to my feet and I can't ignore the charged tingle that shoots up my arms from the feel of his fingers pressed into my skin. It renders me mute for a moment.

"Quinn, what's going on with you?"

"Nothing. I'm okay, I just tripped."

"Are you sure? Do you have, like, vertigo or something?"

My all-encompassing embarrassment cranks up another notch. "No, nothing like that."

But he's looking at me with such worry and interest, his gaze almost boring into me, and I grasp for some explanation to give him. Something that makes more sense than saying I'm unsteady in his presence.

"Uh, actually, maybe I do have something going on with my ears today. Like the beginning of an ear infection?" The words keep coming, although I'm not sure what I'm saying. "I've heard it can affect your balance—you know, something with inner ear fluid?"

Inner ear fluid? All sense fell out of my brain when I tripped over my bag.

He lifts his hands to my shoulders, as if to keep me from tipping over. "That sounds serious. I'll help you to your door, but you should call the doctor when you get inside. Or I could call my mom? She's a nurse."

If we keep talking, I'm going to find myself in urgent care. I glance behind me, grab my bag, and take a step back.

"I'm okay, really. I'm already feeling better." I wave him off and start toward the sidewalk to the front door.

"You're sure?"

"I only bruised my ego."

He considers me, then nods. "Yeah, okay. But call the doctor before it gets worse."

He returns to his truck and pulls away, leaving me on the front step with a racing heart, confused thoughts, and dubious inner ear fluid.

Chapter Nine

I'm not thrilled about the possibility of more embarrassment, especially after my last conversation with Logan, but I agree to have Grandma pick me up from school on Monday.

"Are you sure it's safe for her to be driving?" I asked at the dinner table the night before. Andrew was at a late practice, so it was just Mom, Dad, and me. "I was worried she might plow over a freshman the last time she dropped me off."

"She'll be driving twenty miles an hour around town," Mom replied. "She'll be okay for that distance."

"You don't understand how much it means to her. It'll make her whole day," Dad added.

"And you don't understand how embarrassing it is when she leans out the window and yells at random kids."

He chuckles. "True. Could you just let her pick you up every once in a while?"

And here we are. I climb into Grandma's car, which smells like her floral perfume, and she smiles over at me.

"How's it going? You look tired."

"It's going," I reply.

I don't exactly want to burden her with my problems, but I'm exhausted and stressed. Switching schools in the middle of the year is hard. None of the classes match exactly with my old ones, so I'm either behind or have already covered the same material. This is week two here, but I still feel disoriented in the school and classrooms—I keep expecting to turn the

corner and be back at my old building—and I severely underestimated how difficult it would be to connect with people in my classes. No one is rude or anything; they're just…apathetic. Their eyes seem to pass right through me like I'm not even there. Thank god for Kashvi, Sloane, and the D&D game, though I wish my class schedule lined up better with theirs. I don't even have the same lunch as them.

Grandma purses her lips and takes me in. "Today is an ice cream day."

"What? It's forty-five degrees out."

"As if temperature has anything to do with it. Some days call for ice cream and this is one of them." She puts the car in reverse before I even have my seat belt buckled and then we're flying out of the parking lot. So much for twenty miles per hour.

Soon she's pulling into a local shop I've never been to before. I don't know my way around the town yet. The inside is super cute with a teal-and-white-checkered floor, pink walls, and a mural of ice cream scoop mountains and strawberry syrup rivers.

"What's your favorite flavor?" she asks.

"Peach," I say immediately. "But that's out of season. So…probably Buckeye."

"Just like your father," she says. "The boy never knew a jar of peanut butter he didn't like."

"What about you?" I glance toward the menu above the counter. Instead, my gaze falls directly on Logan.

I jolt as if the floor were electrified. He's standing behind the counter, wearing a pink polo shirt and a pink visor with ice cream cones embroidered on both. And his name tag reads: *Logan. My favorite flavor is mint chocolate chip!*

He stares back at me until Grandma exclaims, "The boy who took our picture!"

He smiles at her. "This is a surprise. Did you come in for more pictures?"

"We came in for ice cream. This one had a hard day."

He tilts his head at me. "Oh, yeah?"

My cheeks heat and I wave away Grandma's words and his concern. "No, it was fine. I'm just milking her for free food."

Logan laughs and Grandma swipes at me with her left hand. “You!” She turns to Logan. “Give me the orange sherbet.”

“And I’ll take a scoop of Buckeye in a cup,” I tell him.

He nods and gets to work. It’s so weird to see him in this context, although I guess that isn’t really fair. I don’t know anything about him other than he goes to my school and plays D&D. But still, I would never have expected to find him wearing a pink visor and scooping ice cream.

Grandma insists on paying and then points to Logan. “You should take your break so you can sit with us.”

“Oh, um…” He looks around uncomfortably. “I just got here. I can’t take—”

“Excuse me?” Grandma calls to the man lingering toward the back who is clearly the manager. “Can you let this young man have a few minutes of break? He’s a dear friend and I’d love to catch up with him.”

“Grandma!” I hiss. The heat of my embarrassment is going to melt my ice cream into soup. No wonder Andrew never wants to hang out with Grandma. He has more self-preservation than me.

“Uh, well…,” the manager says.

Grandma gives him a coy smile. I bet she was charming (or some might say conniving) in her day. “It’s quiet. I’m sure you can spare him for a few minutes. I do love coming here for ice cream. Best in the county!”

The man shrugs. “Yeah, all right. Go ahead, Logan.”

Logan cuts a quick glance at me and follows us to a small table in the back corner.

“How’d you like that?” she asks in triumph.

“You’re a miracle worker,” Logan whispers. “Mr. Avery is a stickler about breaks and lunchtimes.”

“I’ve always had a way with men. Under the right circumstances, I could have one eating out of my hand in twenty minutes flat.” She raises her eyebrows at me. “Sometimes literally.”

I cough into my ice cream and drop my eyes to the table rather than see Logan’s (probably horrified) expression. He’s occupied more of my thoughts over the last few days than I’d like to admit, but this is not how I envisioned seeing him again. That moment in his truck has been on repeat in my mind. Has he been thinking about me as well?

“So, you’re feeling better now?” Logan asks me.

“What’s this?” Grandma asks.

“Quinn’s ear infection. She could barely keep herself upright the last time I saw her.”

“Infection!” Grandma cries, and puts her spoon down. “Why didn’t you tell me you were sick?”

Heat races up my neck and face. I really hoped he’d forgotten about that. “No, Grandma, everything’s fine. I’m not sick.” I glance at Logan. “It was a false alarm. I’m fine now.”

He cocks his head. “A false alarm, huh?” The corner of his mouth lifts in a smile. “Interesting.”

My cheeks get even hotter. It’s possible he’s realizing I was a big lying liar the last time I saw him.

Grandma hoots and waves at someone across the ice cream parlor. “Cheryl!” She turns to us. “That’s my hairdresser. I’ll be right back!”

She hurries off and we sit in silence across from each other. Of course Grandma immediately ran into someone she knows and abandons me. I poke at my ice cream awkwardly.

“Is it good?” he asks.

“Yeah, lots of peanut butter.” I lick my spoon and his eyes track the movement. My pulse leaps in response. I’m not remotely prepared to be alone with Logan this afternoon, especially when I can’t figure out if he wants to kiss me, kick me out of D&D, or both. I search my mind for a neutral topic to bring up.

“So, uh, do you work here a lot?”

“Only a few days a week—usually Thursdays and Sundays and then I pick up extra shifts when they need me. My parents need help at home, but they also like me to have a job. Dad thinks I spend too much time holed up alone.”

“Should I ask what you’re doing alone in your room all night, or do I not want to know?”

His laugh echoes loudly in the small space. “Actually, it’s a little shed I converted into a space for myself, not my bedroom. And I’m usually working on D&D campaigns or reading.”

“So you say.” I take a small bite. “Why are you working on campaigns? Do you DM for a different group?”

“No, but I like thinking up new character builds and storylines.”

“That sounds intimidating. I don’t know how Sloane does it.”

“I have some notebooks with ideas, but they need work. It’s all pretty generic right now.”

“Notebooks? Plural? Why haven’t I heard about this at the game?”

He shrugs. “I don’t really talk about it.”

“But…you’re talking about it now.”

“Yes.” He messes with a napkin lying on the table. “You seem to have that effect on me.”

Just then Grandma comes back to our table, startling me. “What did I miss?” she asks. “Everything good?”

“Yep.”

Grandma points her finger between the two of us. “So, you two are friends now?”

“We play in a D&D game together,” I say quickly before she can get other ideas.

“That always did sound fun. I’m sorry I never got involved with it. When I was younger, everyone was going on about it being witchcraft or the devil’s work, but I knew that was nonsense. Are you having a good time playing?”

Logan and I look at each other and then away. “Mmm-hmm,” I say. “It’s been fun.”

Logan plays with the napkin on the table.

“I see. Sounds *very* fun.” Her sarcasm is thicker than this ice cream, and I swear she’s smarter than most of the people I know. Her body might be starting to fail her, but her mind definitely is not.

“What else do you do to keep busy when you aren’t playing games with my granddaughter or serving fabulous ice cream?”

“Uh…I mean, homework, unfortunately. And I help out with my parents’ farm and Dad’s business when he needs me.”

“He owns a business in town? What’s his name?”

“Chuck Weber. He’s kind of a jack-of-all-trades. Handyman, trash removal, plus—”

“*Chuck?* Oh, you don’t need to tell me about him!” she replies. “He’s been out to my house more times than I can count to try to keep the pipes and wires from disintegrating. You’re Chuck’s son?”

“I am,” he replies, and rubs the back of his neck. Grandma isn’t trying to modulate her voice, so the whole parlor can probably hear this exchange.

“Well, isn’t that the wildest thing.” She shakes her head in amazement. “And you don’t do any other extracurriculars? Sports, band, something like that?”

He shrugs sheepishly. “No, D&D is about it.”

“You and Quinn have that in common, then. Her parents can’t get her to do much else.”

Logan and I glance at each other and there’s a spark of recognition. Maybe we have more in common than I realized. And this could be another explanation for why he seemed so protective about the game and unsure about accepting me as a new player. Maybe this really wasn’t about the dating rule at all—maybe he just wanted to make sure his favorite activity went smoothly.

“I think it’s good to follow your passions in life,” Grandma continues. “Focus on what brings you happiness.”

I nod and focus all my energy on my ice cream, which is bringing me simple happiness, mostly because each mouthful is a great excuse to not talk.

“I bet you’re pretty strong between all this ice cream scooping and helping out your dad,” Grandma continues.

I cringe. This conversation is getting more uncomfortable by the nanosecond. I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t already noticed the same thing, but there’s no way I’m looking anywhere but my ice cream.

“Sure?” he replies.

“Perfect. Tell Chuck that his favorite client, Barbara, needs you to help get some boxes out of the attic.”

I jerk my head up. “What?” I turn to Logan. “No, you don’t have to do that. I can help, plus Dad and Andrew can come over if there are things to move.”

“Nonsense. Andrew is always busy, and your dad isn’t as young as you think he is. His back is bothering him even though he doesn’t like to admit it.” She leans toward Logan. “You can come by, right?”

“Well…um…yeah, I probably could. If you need me.”

“I do. You’re a lifesaver. With a dad like yours, I know you’ll be a big help.” She grins widely and I know she’s up to something. “And you’ll need

to come, too, my dear.” She pats the top of my hand.

I slump with the realization. She’s trying to set us up. You’ve *got* to be kidding me.

Logan pulls out his phone and looks at the time. “I should probably get back. I can feel Mr. Avery’s glare burning through my back.”

“Come Wednesday. My usual pickleball game is canceled.”

“Will do.” He glances at me. “I guess I’ll see you then, Quinn?”

“Um, I guess so.”

I wait until he’s behind the counter with his back turned before swiveling to face her. “*What* are you doing? Why did you just invite him to your house?”

“For you, of course.” She takes a last bite of her sherbet, looking incredibly pleased with herself. “This really is great sherbet.”

“For *me*? I’m not looking for excuses to see Logan.”

“Maybe you are, maybe you aren’t.”

I glare at her.

“He seems like a nice boy—much better than those rude ones in the parking lot. And his best quality is that he likes you. I could tell the moment he saw you walk into the store.”

“I don’t want to date Logan. He’s too unpredictable. One minute he seems to like me, the next he wants nothing to do with me. Not that I’ve thought seriously about the idea.”

“Oh no, of course not,” she says, and readjusts her rose-covered silk scarf. “If you don’t like him, then fine. You can go through some boxes and that will be that. I just thought having a date might be nice since you’re at a new school and still getting to know people. I will say, there’s something about him that reminds me of your grandfather. He was so nervous around me that he avoided me for two months before I cornered him in the hallway and asked him to the movies.”

I snort. She and Grandpa are nothing like this situation with Logan. And now I’m going to be stuck in Grandma’s dusty attic with him.

“Why did you ask him to move boxes of all things? I’ve never heard you talk about the attic.”

“I know what your father and mother are up to. They talked to me about moving.”

“Oh.” I’ve been scared to bring it up. “So…you’re doing it? You’re starting to pack up?”

“Absolutely not. I’ve lived in that house for a quarter century and the only way I’m leaving is in a body bag.”

My eyes fly open at the horrible image.

“But I can see your father’s point about downsizing. I shouldn’t leave you all with so much to clean out after I’m gone, so I thought I’d start pitching stuff and reorganizing. And now you and Logan can help me.”

Aren’t I lucky? I shove another spoonful of ice cream into my mouth rather than respond. Between her talking about body bags and setting me up on unwanted dates, Grandma really knows how to make a girl feel better after a long day.

Chapter Ten

I pull into Grandma's driveway Wednesday after school and survey the house. She lives in the oldest part of town, the area close to the courthouse and the old train stop that hasn't been used since the early 1900s. All of the Victorian houses on this street are over a century old, and they're massive, gorgeous, and falling apart. Grandma's is especially beautiful with its huge wraparound porch, stained glass windows in the living room, and even its own *turret*. I was so excited the first time I saw it as a little girl, until I discovered the interior didn't look like Cinderella's castle—just a curved room. Still, the house does have a bit of a fantastical feel since she had it painted green and purple years ago.

Grandma doesn't answer when I walk in, so I head for the sun porch. The room gets nice light all afternoon and is her favorite place in the house, and mine as well (turret aside). I find her there with a paintbrush in her hand, a Beatles album playing. In front of her is a huge canvas that she's flicking paint onto.

"Hi," I say quietly so I don't scare her and get a brush full of paint down my shirt.

She turns, brush out like a sword. "Oh, Quinn! I lost track of time."

She beckons me deeper into the room. Her old white wicker furniture has been pushed to the edges to make space for her painting. Grandma is always starting a new hobby. I can't remember all the things she's done over the years—needlework, ceramics, stained glass, Japanese flower arranging—but nothing ever sticks.

"I didn't know you painted."

“I didn’t know either. But I watched a TikTok on it and it didn’t look that difficult, so I thought I’d try.”

“You’re on TikTok?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? I don’t make videos—I don’t like how my neck looks on camera—but I find all kinds of fun stuff on there.”

A very loud doorbell rings, interrupting our conversation. Grandma inclines her head toward the door with a self-satisfied smile. “Why don’t you get that, dear.”

I’d convinced myself that Logan wouldn’t show. Surely he’d find an excuse to get out of this. I mean, come on, *I’ve* been searching for excuses and she’s my grandmother. But when I open the door, there he is.

One look at him and my pulse quickens like the traitor it is. He’s wearing Sloane’s crocheted hat. I figured he’d throw it in the back of a closet, particularly since it’s too large and the stitches aren’t quite right. But instead of looking dorky, the hat is utterly charming on him. The gray-blue color matches his eyes perfectly, just like I thought it would, and it’s slouched so a few pieces of hair are still visible across his forehead.

He steps inside and unzips his coat to reveal his standard outfit—an unbuttoned flannel shirt over a T-shirt. This one is red and black and looks as cozy as a blanket. I bet it’s soft flannel too. My fingers twitch to feel it and I want to kick myself.

“Hey, Quinn.”

“You remembered to come.”

“Of course I did.” He tilts his head. “Were you hoping I wouldn’t?”

Luckily Grandma comes down the hall then, so I don’t have to answer. “There he is!” she exclaims.

“Happy to help.” He hands her a brown paper bag I hadn’t noticed.

“You brought me sherbet?” she cries in delight as she looks inside. “What a gentleman!”

“Did you bring me ice cream too?”

“Sorry, but I only bring ice cream to people who are happy to see me,” he replies quietly. “I wasn’t convinced you would be, and it looks like my suspicions were right.”

“All right, let me show you where the attic entrance is,” Grandma says, and leads us through the house.

Logan walks slowly, taking in the rooms as we pass through them. There's a lot to see. Grandpa died before I was born, and ever since, Grandma has traveled all over Europe, Asia, and South Africa, usually by herself. Mom and Dad were never exactly sure how she could afford it, but Grandma has a way of making friends with people who have extra bedrooms where she can stay. Now her house is chock-full of collectibles. If my parents actually get her to downsize, it's going to be a herculean effort to pack all this up.

Unfortunately, I notice that her movements are slower and less steady than they were when we'd come for visits the last few years. All this clutter means more places where she could trip and fall. She heads up the stairs, gripping the hand railing tightly. This is one of the biggest problems Dad has with the house—Grandma has to go up and down a flight of stairs throughout the day to go to the bedrooms or to use the bathroom. Plus there are basement stairs if she wants to do laundry or get something from her deep freezer. Her house is beautiful, but it was built for younger people.

"Your house is amazing," Logan says as if he's reading my thoughts. "Where did you get all this?"

"From everywhere. None of it is worth much, but I had fun collecting it. Henry—that was my husband—called me his dragon because I always liked adding to my hoard."

"He wasn't wrong," I say faintly.

"All of the boxes are up there." She points to a pull-down ladder that's recessed into the ceiling. "It's been a long time since I've been up there, so I'm not sure what you'll find, but why don't you start by bringing down anything valuable."

"Valuable?" Logan repeats with apprehension.

"There must be antiques shops or thrift shops that would buy some of it. Just sort through it and put aside anything that might be worth something. And you better behave yourselves up there. Although if you don't, no one will know since I can't climb that ladder." She raises her eyebrows in a suggestive way and my cheeks flush with heat.

Logan shoves his hands in his pockets after Grandma has made it back safely to the first floor. "Your grandma is something else."

"You can say that again," I mumble. "We should get started or this will take all night."

I let Logan climb up first because I'm wearing one of my long skirts like usual and there's no way I'm letting him watch me climb that ladder from below. He waits for me with his arms crossed. The stance only helps to show off his chest and arms, which leaves me feeling more distracted. I'd love to get through this afternoon without embarrassing myself, but I'm not sure that's possible.

The attic is dusty and disorganized. I turn in a slow circle, taking in the chaos. The house has a pitched roof, so we can only stand up straight in the center of the space. Boxes have been pushed to the edges, along with old Halloween and Christmas decorations, lamps, and side tables.

Logan says what I'm thinking. "This is impossible."

"Could anything up here be valuable at all?"

"No idea." He gingerly lifts the flap of the closest box. "Looks like that's filled with dishes."

"Well, we have to start somewhere. Let's see if anything is sellable."

"To be fair, people can sell their own saliva."

I give him a disgusted look. "I don't know how you know that, and I don't want you to tell me. Just look for the coolest stuff. And maybe we should organize too?"

"Sure, no problem."

We work separately, poking into boxes and moving them to different spaces in the attic to sort them. I'm intensely aware that Logan is a few feet from me, and I track each of his movements out of the corner of my eye. I don't want to pay attention to him, but I can't seem to stop myself. As Grandma pointed out, we're completely alone up here, and the last time we were alone he insinuated he likes me. Or at least, that he used to like me, and I don't know what to do with that information.

Logan closes the lids of two boxes, stacks them on top of each other, and easily carries them to the corner of the attic. Maybe those were two super-light boxes, but I'm pretty sure I saw the word *cookbooks* on one of them. I turn away and train my eyes on a box of quilts. I need to keep my eyes to myself.

"Whoa, look at this box," he says a minute later. "What do you think of these tiles?"

Reluctantly, I lean over his shoulder. This is a box of square tiles with a hand-painted blue and white motif on them. I pick up a few more and each

is similar in coloring, but the designs are different. They're clearly handmade.

I glance around the box to look for a label. "Portuguese tiles," I read aloud.

"Cool," Logan says. "Do you think they're actually from Portugal?"

"Yeah, I bet a lot of these boxes are filled with things from her travels." I look down at the tile. "These could be a big seller. We should definitely take them down."

He sighs. "Of course it's the heaviest box that needs to go down the shaky attic ladder." He picks it up and takes it over to the steps before opening the next box. "Hmm, this one might be good too. Do people care about lace?"

"Probably, if it's imported."

He nudges the box toward me, and I pull out the piece on top. I'm expecting something larger and rectangular—like a tablecloth—but this isn't anything like that. It's more like a scrap of lace. I hold it up in front of me. "Huh, what do you think—"

The realization comes to me too late, and my eyes unconsciously lock on Logan. Both his eyes and mouth have popped wide open.

"Oh my *god*!" I shriek, and throw the fabric as far away from me as I can. That wasn't a delicate piece of handwoven lace from a village in Europe.

That was Grandma's lingerie.

"Ahhh!" I yell again, and shake out my hands like they've been dipped in acid.

Logan rubs a hand over his mouth. "I can't believe you—"

"Don't you say it." I point at him. "*Ever.* We're both going to our graves before we talk about this."

He laughs loudly. "I'm pretty sure the whole box is…you know."

I drop my hands to my knees and do some deep breathing. "*Grandma,*" I whisper in horror. I'm scarred for life.

"Kids? Did I hear screaming?" Grandma calls from below.

I blow out a breath. "We're okay," I say. "I just saw…a mouse."

"A mouse! I thought we'd finally gotten those things under control. Logan, I'm going to need your father to come back out here with more traps."

“Uh…” Logan walks over to the ladder. “Actually, I don’t think it was a mouse. Quinn thought she saw something and freaked herself out. She’s very sensitive.”

I glare at him. “Just a false alarm,” I call to her.

“Keep an eye out anyway,” Grandma replies. “And I’ve got cake down here for when you’re done.”

He turns back to me with a smile. “Another false alarm—you seem to keep having those around me. Speaking of, did you ever figure out the reason you were so unsteady that day?”

The teasing shine in his eyes makes my heart thump.

“No, I did not, but I’m feeling perfectly steady right now, thank you.”

Luckily, he doesn’t push the subject and we work a bit more in silence before he asks how my day was. I grimace at the reminder.

“It’s a work in progress,” I reply. “Turns out that switching schools in the middle of the year isn’t easy.”

“Never would have predicted that.” He pulls another box in front of him. “I’m sure it’s hard leaving all your old friends behind.”

A heavy weight presses on me at the reminder. I shake my head. “Actually, that was probably the best thing about the move.”

“Leaving your friends?” he asks incredulously.

“I think it’d be more accurate to describe them as ex-friends.”

Logan’s kneeling on the ground, going through another box, but he swivels toward me at the words. “Were these the people you played D&D with?”

“Yeah. It was a two-for-one loss—no more friends and no more gaming group. So I’m grateful to be in Laurelburg regardless of issues.”

I expect him to ask for details about what happened, or to look uneasy at the knowledge that my last D&D group disowned me. That’s not the kind of thing that inspires confidence when you’ve just added someone to your game—especially if you weren’t happy about including them in the first place. But Logan only frowns in sympathy.

“That’s horrible. I’m sure whatever happened, it was their fault.”

I laugh in surprise. “That’s very loyal of you to say, given that you barely know me.”

“I know you. You like sugary foods and the color green and D&D.”

I push a box away (it's just old sheets) and look at the next one. "You've summed me up."

"And you love your grandmother. Enough to spend your afternoon going through her unmentionables with a guy you don't particularly like because she asked you to."

My eyes flick up to his.

"She clearly loves you too," he continues, "which means you must be a pretty great person, because I don't think she's impressed with just anyone. So, yeah, if they couldn't keep you as a friend, then that says more about them than it says about you."

I turn away from the boxes and study him. Really study him, in a way I haven't allowed myself to before. His expression is open, without a hint of sarcasm or snark. He pushes his hair away from his forehead and leans forward just slightly, easily meeting my gaze. There's no challenge in his eyes, and it makes me want to tell him everything that happened with Caden, Paige, and the others. It would be nice to tell someone the story without worrying about their judgment. But there's a lot more I need to understand about him before I'll trust him with that information.

"Logan, why did you come here today?" I pull my knees to my chest and rest my chin on them. "And don't bring up Grandma. Why did you *really* come here? Because I can't figure you out. You were so nice when we first met and then I joined the game and you turned into a totally different person."

"That's because I didn't want you to join." His gaze turns so intense that it's like a tractor beam, freezing me in place. He swallows and his Adam's apple bobs. "I hoped you would change your mind, and when you didn't, I decided the only way forward was to be as cold and distant to you as possible."

"Why?" I whisper.

"Because our group has rules."

My pulse skitters. "You don't keep your distance from Kashvi, or anyone else in the group."

"I don't need to with them." He takes a slow breath, and his gaze drops to my mouth. "But I need to keep my distance from you."

His words burn through my thoughts and scatter them like ashes in a campfire. It takes me a moment to reply. "But you're here now."

“Yeah.” He shrugs. “I’m sorry for the way I acted. I know I shouldn’t be here, but it gets hard following the rules all the time. I wanted to see you. Alone.”

My breath catches in my throat. Prior experience tells me this can only end badly. The last time I went on a date with someone from my D&D group, it blew up in my face so terribly that I’m still picking up the pieces—and that group didn’t even have a rule against dating other players like this new one does. Nothing good can come from spending time alone with Logan…but that doesn’t stop me from wanting to crawl over these dusty floors and press my lips to his just to see how we’ll both react.

His face tilts slightly and a piece of hair falls in his eyes. Maybe I’m not the only one thinking that.

A crash reverberates below us, followed by a cry from Grandma. We both shake ourselves from the bubble we’ve been in and shoot to our feet.

“Grandma?” I yell as I rush to the ladder and climb down so fast I almost fall myself. “Are you okay?”

She doesn’t reply immediately. My body, already tense from that conversation with Logan, is now shaking. I race down the flight of stairs to the first floor, Logan at my heels, to find Grandma on her hands and knees in the kitchen.

I don’t see any blood and she’s clearly alert, but my stomach still spasms and I worry I might be sick. I force myself to breathe and gently put a hand on her shoulder. That’s when I see a plate smashed into shards on the floor.

“What happened?” Logan asks, and comes to her other side. We both take her by an elbow and help her sit in one of the chairs in the breakfast nook. She stands easily with our help, thank god.

“I tripped, but I’m fine,” she says quickly. “I didn’t hurt myself.”

“Do you know if you hit your head when you fell?” I crouch in front of her, looking for any signs that she’s seriously injured. I’m no medical expert, but she doesn’t seem dazed and she’s speaking, so that bodes well.

She shoos me away. “I’m not as fragile as that plate. I said I’m fine.” She shakes her head at the plate fragments. “What a shame. I bought that in Kyoto years ago. I was going to use it for the cake today.”

“Maybe we should drive you to urgent care just in case? Or I could call Dad?”

I glance up at Logan for validation, and he nods his agreement. But Grandma's stern expression pierces me. "Don't you dare. I don't need anyone else fussing over me. What you *can* do is clean up that plate and then cut some slices of cake so we can eat."

Logan's eyebrows are furrowed in concern and possibly frustration, and I feel the exact same way. This is what my parents have been so concerned about—Grandma falling and then refusing to call for help. They're going to freak when I tell them. It looks like we got lucky today, but fear of the future keeps my heart racing.

Logan's hand on my shoulder pulls me from my thoughts. "I'll get new plates and silverware," he whispers.

His voice is more soothing than it should be. I hardly know Logan, really. But that doesn't stop me from swooning over the fact that he's concerned about Grandma and that he likes me enough that he can't stay away from me any longer. Granted, I have no idea where that leaves us, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't grateful to have him here right now.

Grandma clears her throat, and my attention fixes back on her. "I told you I had a good feeling about him," she whispers.

And if the mischievous sparkle in her eyes is any indication, she's already perfectly fine.

Chapter Eleven

"All ready?" Mom asks Friday after school.

I nod, excited, and haul my overnight bag down the stairs. Kashvi invited me to spend the night at her house before the game Saturday. My parents didn't want me driving directly there after school because then I'd have one of the cars all of Friday and Saturday, so I had to come back home to gather my stuff before heading over. I'm a little nervous since Kashvi and I haven't spent a ton of time alone together, but I'm also thrilled to get to know her better.

Mom looks up from her place on the couch, where she's snuggling with Dad. I'm surprised to see Andrew in the living room as well. He's playing on his Switch, so it's not exactly quality bonding time, but usually he doesn't hang out in the common spaces.

"I'm so happy that both you and Andrew have made such a seamless transition into your new school." Mom beams at us, and Dad looks up from his magazine to give me a quick smile.

"Seamless" might be a bold statement, but it's getting better. Even though I don't see the D&D group much at school, Kashvi and I have started texting more, and I've been added to the D&D group chat. We don't text about anything important, but hearing the others complain about school and joke around makes me feel like we're closer. It's nice to have people to text again. And then there's Logan, of course, but no one else knows about that…whatever *that* is.

"Quinn, thanks again for helping Grandma with the attic," Dad says. "I talked to her this morning and she's still feeling okay after the fall."

“I’m glad I was there when it happened.”

“This is exactly why she shouldn’t be living on her own anymore,” Mom says.

“Good luck with that,” I reply. “She’s already told me that she’s not moving under any circumstance. Except death.”

Andrew looks up at that. “Morbid much?”

“She’s told us the same,” Dad agrees. “I don’t want to fight with her, especially when we’ve just gotten here, but I’m worried. I keep my phone by the bed just in case a horrible call comes in.”

My chest tightens. I’ve never heard Dad say something so dire about Grandma. It’s easy to forget her age when she’s chatting and buying me ice cream and setting me up on weird attic hangouts. I don’t want to be reminded that she’s getting older.

Mom must feel the same, because she shakes her head and sits up straighter. “Enough of that. So, Barbara mentioned that this boy who helped is cute?”

“What?” Dad eyes me. “I hadn’t heard about that at all. Your helper friend was a boy?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, he’s a boy and he’s not cute.”

That’s a huge lie and I’m sticking to it as long as I can draw breath.

“What’s going on with him?” Mom’s eyes sparkle with amusement. “Is he just a friend or…”

“Hold on, I don’t know if we need you to be *this* social. Andrew, do you know this kid?” Dad asks. “What do you make of him?”

It takes him a second to look up, probably because he’s trying to pause his game. “Huh?”

Classic Andrew.

Dad rolls his eyes and repeats his question.

Andrew frowns at me. “What’s his name?”

“Logan Weber,” I mumble. How did this conversation get so off topic?

He shakes his head. “I don’t know him. But you’re already dating someone? How do you know he’s not a prick like the last one?”

I can’t decide if I need to swallow down a scream or thank Andrew for caring about what happens to me. I didn’t realize he paid any attention to my dating life. I drop onto the arm of the couch.

“First of all, you’re dating, too, so don’t go lecturing me,” I tell Andrew. “And second, I’m *not* dating Logan. He’s part of my new D&D group.” I look to Mom. “No dating, remember.”

I told her all about the group and the rules when I first agreed to be part of it. I needed to make sure she and Dad would be on board with me being gone every Saturday afternoon, so I explained how serious the group was.

“I do remember. What group of teenagers makes a rule *against* dating?”

“A group of dorks,” Andrew replies immediately. He’s already back to playing his game.

“The most intelligent group of kids I’ve ever heard of,” Dad argues.

I rub my hands over my eyes so hard I’m seeing stars. Thank god Kashvi invited me over because I can’t take a whole night with these three.

“We care about things other than dating. Like defeating beholders and red dragons.”

“See?” Andrew says. “Dorks.”

“Can we *please* go?” I throw an angry glare in Andrew’s direction, not that he notices. Mom stands, clearly trying to hide her grin, and I head to the car with my bag. I’ll take a freezing cold garage over my brother any day.

Kashvi’s at the door when Mom pulls into the driveway. She waves me in, and we head directly to her bedroom.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she says, “but I thought we’d both sleep in here tonight. I know its small, but if we sleep in the living room, then Sanjiv will want to hang out with us all night. I love him, but I wanted this to be a girl’s night.”

I drop my bag just inside her door. “This is great.” It is a small room, but she’s painted it purple and covered most of the walls with bulletin boards and art prints. She’s already set up a twin-sized air mattress on the floor with cute, flowered sheets. My favorite part is her chandelier that looks like a cloud. She has a remote that can change the lightbulbs to different colors. She flips until the cloud turns pink.

“Do you have people over a lot?”

“Never. I mean, when I was younger I did sometimes, but I hardly talk to those girls anymore. And Sloane’s not exactly a sleepover type of person. So it’s fun to have someone over again. It feels like middle school!”

“In a good way, I hope,” I reply as I wander around her room. “Middle school was rough.”

“True, but we can make it the best part of middle school. Movies, popcorn—I even pulled out all my nail polish. I’m pretty good.” She grins and points to her desk where a half dozen bottles sit in a row.

My stomach clenches. Paige’s big dream after school was to become a nail tech and open her own salon. She was obsessed with nails—we used to watch hours of reels to learn techniques and then Paige would use me to experiment on. She was very artistic and could pull off the coolest designs. My favorite were probably the 3D gold suns and moons she created to match one of my favorite shirts. If I scroll back far enough, half of my pictures are of my nails. Now I never paint them.

I glance past the polish on her desk to a stack of papers from Kashvi’s AP classes and a framed picture of the D&D group. I point to it. “Oh, you all look so cute.”

She comes up beside me. “That’s from a couple years ago.”

Sloane’s hair was longer and Mark’s cheeks still had a kiddy roundish quality to them. Kashvi’s hair was straight, and Logan also looked younger, but just as attractive as always. My stomach wobbles as memories of the attic rise to the surface of my mind.

“So, I’ve been wondering what led to you all deciding to make the no-dating rule for the group? Was there fighting or weirdness between you all? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“It’s because of me,” she says, and makes a face. “I liked this guy—Wyatt—and we started dating, so I invited him to be a part of our D&D group. I figured it would be another way to spend time together, and everyone else really liked him. But then we got more serious and he freaked out about it.” She rolls her eyes. “He *texted* me to break up! It was impossible to play across from him every week after that. And don’t get me started on Sanjiv—he wanted to destroy Wyatt. It got ugly when we had to kick him out, and after that we decided we couldn’t have any more dating in the group.”

“That makes sense,” I say, careful to keep my eyes off her photos in the hopes she won’t read too much from my expression. I have to admit I’m relieved that it didn’t have anything to do with Logan, but her experience sounds enough like mine that I can absolutely empathize. “I’m really sorry that happened.” I turn to her. “Guys can be the worst.”

“Seriously, the worst. But not these guys.” She points at the photo. “I really lucked out with this group.”

At Kashvi’s words, any thoughts about sharing what’s been going on with Logan fade away. I don’t want my inclusion in the group to bring any drama or problems. And it’s not even clear what Logan wants from me. He said he came to Grandma’s because he wanted to see me alone, but what now? He hasn’t texted, and he said it was a bad idea for him to come there. Maybe he doesn’t want anything else. It’s not like he said we should start dating in secret. If experience has taught me anything, it’s that boys are fickle.

What I *should* be thinking about are my friendships. Seeing them all together with their old hairstyles and goofy grins and arms slung over each other’s shoulders reminds me of how new I am. I want to be that comfortable with them—I want to think of them as friends without wondering if I actually fit in. I want us all to be close enough that I never have to think about my old friend group again.

We leave the photos behind and go downstairs to say hi to Kashvi’s parents and Sanjiv, who are all in the kitchen. Her mom points to pizza boxes on the counter.

“For tonight. I don’t have the energy to cook, and we don’t have enough leftovers for all of us.”

Sanjiv hands us both plates before taking a slice for himself. “What are you two doing tonight? We could watch *BattleBots* together.”

“What’s that?”

“Sanjiv and I have watched it together since we were young,” Kashvi says with a shrug. “Basically, teams build robots and then fight them.”

“It’s very violent and very fun,” Sanjiv explains. “It’s the reason I got into robotics.”

“Although I’m still hoping you’ll do more with your skills than build fighting robots,” their dad says with an eye roll. This is my first time

meeting him. He's quiet and adorable with his '80s-style colorful sweater stretched over his potbelly.

"There's no greater achievement than getting your robot on a reality show," Sanjiv argues. "What do you think? Do you want to check out an episode, Quinn?"

It's sweet that he'd be open to letting me join in on something that's clearly special between him and Kashvi, but she's quick to shake her head.

"I kinda wanted to just do stuff with Quinn tonight, if you don't mind?"

"Yeah, fine, I figured. I'll be playing *Baldur's Gate* with Logan, then."

"He's coming here?" I blurt out.

I'm not ready to see him tonight, even if he's already on my mind.

Sanjiv tilts his head in confusion. "No…we play online."

"Oh right. Duh."

We both fill our plates and grab drinks. "Tell Logan we said hi," Kashvi says in a cheery voice before heading upstairs. She leans her back against her door after shutting it.

"My parents don't let us have locks on the doors, but hopefully we'll hear them coming." She sits down on the rug in front of her bed and I follow.

"I like your family. Just be grateful your brother isn't annoying like mine."

"Have you met Sanjiv?" Kashvi asks.

I laugh. "He has his moments."

She nods emphatically.

"But clearly you get along or you wouldn't play D&D together."

She shrugs. "He's one of my best friends in the world…but he can also drive me insane. What's your brother like?"

"He's…popular? It's weird how different we are." I take a bite of pizza and then realize how that might be misinterpreted. "Not that I'm saying you aren't popular. Only that I'm not!"

She laughs. "It's fine. I'm not popular and I don't want to be."

"Agreed. We just got here three weeks ago and somehow he managed to find an enormous group of friends. He's always being invited out to stuff, and he's even gone out with a few different girls…. It's wild."

"Meh, I think it's easier for guys to get dates. Sanjiv never seems to have trouble." She lifts an eyebrow. "Have you seen anyone at school

you're interested in?"

To my horror, Logan immediately flashes into my mind. Dusty from the attic, grinning at me over boxes of junk, saying he needs to keep his distance from me. I shove the thoughts into a tiny closet in the back of my mind and lock the door.

"Um, I barely know anyone at school yet. And my last experience with dating was less than fun, so I'm not eager to jump back into that."

She leans forward with her elbows on her knees, pizza forgotten at her side. "Oh, what happened?"

In another context, I might worry she was just looking for some juicy gossip, but she seems genuinely interested. And it's only fair that I share since she told me about Wyatt.

"More dating and D&D drama." I shake my head and mess with the shag rug rather than look at her. "Our group had played together for over a year, and it was so fun. The campaign wasn't like ours at all—it was way less serious. For the others it was sometimes more about talking and eating and…flirting, rather than playing." I glance up quickly and Kashvi nods but doesn't say anything. "Caden was the DM, and he was funny and kind of cute, and after a while he started flirting with me during the games. It seemed harmless—I didn't think it meant anything."

I'm mildly nauseous recounting this after having tried to push away thoughts of them for so long, but I'm too far into the story to bail now. It's almost harder remembering the fun times than it is to remember the fallout at the end. If I think about how horribly they turned on me, it's easy to feel grateful we aren't talking any longer. But remembering the better times reminds me of how much I lost.

"I'm guessing it wasn't harmless?" Kashvi asks. The interest in her expression has turned to worry.

"Caden asked me out and I said yes because he was a friend and I thought maybe there could be something more between us. I'd never had a real boyfriend before. It was all exciting at first." I squirm. "But as soon as he and I were alone, I knew it wasn't going to work. We were the kind of people who worked better in a big group. When it was just the two of us, there wasn't much to say and everything felt forced and awkward. And the kiss…" I shiver. "He was *not* a good kisser. Let's just say we were meant to stay platonic."

Kashvi's hands fly to her face to cover her pained laughter. "I can imagine that revelation didn't lead to anything good."

"Oh my god, it was horrible. When I told him I thought we were better as friends, he was shocked. I guess we walked away from that first date with really different impressions of how it went. Then he accused me of being a tease. I didn't mean to do any of that, but he was so pissed and he turned the whole group against me. Especially my best friend, Paige."

Kashvi runs a hand through her hair, letting the curls fall everyplace, and looks at me with sympathy. "That's so messed up, Quinn. I'm sorry."

"Thanks. I guess we've both been through it, huh? It wasn't a big loss in terms of Caden. He showed his true colors and I was glad to be done with him. Even losing the D&D group wasn't the worst part of it. It was losing Paige." I have to take a second to swallow and make sure I'm not in danger of crying. The way she turned her back on me without a second thought… I'm not sure it'll ever hurt less. "I thought we were so close, but we weren't."

"She liked Caden, didn't she?"

I laugh in surprise. "Wow, it took me way longer than you to figure that out. It turns out she was already secretly jealous that he was interested in me instead of her, but then for me to *reject* him? It was like I was rejecting her too." I blow out a breath. "She might have taken it harder than he did. She decided he was the innocent boy with a broken heart of gold and I was the devil incarnate. It all worked out for her since she got him in the end. I guess nothing brings two people together like mutual hatred."

We sit in silence. I play with my nails rather than study her expression, wondering if I've shared too much. I wanted to be honest with her, but that's a lot of friend trauma to unpack when we haven't even finished a slice of pizza.

Kashvi jumps to her feet and puts out a hand to pull me up. "Caden sucks and Paige *really* sucks, so thank god they aren't around anymore. Now you have us, and we're a billion times better." She grins. "I think between your story and mine, we need dessert and a movie. Yeah?"

"Absolutely. Flawless plan."

We climb onto her bed with our pizza and a bag of chocolate, and she pulls up Netflix on her laptop. I sink into her copious pillows, feeling more

relaxed than I expected. No more looking back or worrying about what happened with my old friends. It’s time for something much better.

Chapter Twelve

I wake up on Saturday at ten-thirty when Kashvi's mom pounds on the door loud enough to wake up my parents at their house. I guess her family doesn't usually sleep in late. We'd stayed up until two a.m., but it was totally worth it. We watched rom-coms, and even an episode of *BattleBots* with Sanjiv, before lying in the dark and trading stories.

Kashvi gets her shower first and while I'm waiting, I look around at the jewelry on her desk. My eyes keep coming back to the dice earrings that I saw her wear the first day I met her. I hold them up to her when she comes back.

"Did you make these?"

She shakes her head. "No, I ordered them online, but I've always thought it would be fun to try to make my own."

"Yeah? 'Cause I was looking at these and thinking how many things we could do with dice other than roll them. I bet we could make some really cool stuff."

"I've seen some bracelets online."

"Yes, exactly!" I grab my bag and fish through it until I find my dice. "I have a ton of dice I never actually use. It feels kind of inappropriate to sacrifice them, but otherwise they only sit in the bottom of a bag." I hold up a four-sided die and turn it around in my fingers. "Any idea how to make the holes in these?"

She runs a hand through her wet hair and scrunches it to bring the curls out. "I don't know, but we could ask Sanjiv." She pokes her head out of the bedroom and calls down the hallway to him.

To my surprise, he comes bounding down the hallway a few seconds later. If I tried to beckon Andrew like that, I'd either be met with silence or cussing.

"What's up?" he asks.

She holds up a die to him. "Do you have any tools that could drill a small hole in the center of this?"

"Are you trying to prank Mark? Because that's just cruel. He has enough dice problems as it is."

"No," she says with an eye roll. "We're making jewelry."

He gives us an incredulous look. "I guess if you want to ruin perfectly good dice, then I'm not going to stop you. Hold on." He comes back a few seconds later with an extremely small drill. He takes the die and starts messing with it. A few minutes later, he hands it back with a smug smile on his face.

"Done and done."

"Why do you have tools like that?" I ask.

"For robotics."

Kashvi hands it to me and I take a look. The hole is small enough that it doesn't mar the look of the die, but big enough to be threaded with elastic or wire. This could actually work.

She rubs her hands together. "Okay, I'm officially excited now. Do you want to see how much we can get done before the game?"

"Yes. And let's message Sloane to ask if they want to come over early? I don't know if they're into making jewelry, but maybe they'd want to hang out and crochet hats with us?"

"Perfect."

It turns out that Sloane is *very* much open to it, and we make a little team of four around the table in the formal dining room. We form an assembly line where Sanjiv drills the holes, I thread the dice and beads onto stretchy elastic thread, and Kashvi knots the end and adds a dab of glue to keep them secure. Sloane crochets a scarf and throws in opinions on color selections for the jewelry. By the time we've finished, we already have seven bracelets, plus three sets of dangly dice earrings and one necklace. We sit back and take in our work.

"Looks pretty professional to me," Kashvi says, and holds up one in the light of the brass chandelier to inspect it.

“I’d wear it all,” I reply.

“I’m not sure that’s a ringing endorsement,” Sloane says, and gestures to my wrists and chest. Fine, I may already be wearing a half dozen amethyst and rose quartz bracelets plus two long looping beaded necklaces, but that only means I’m the target client.

“What are you going to do with all this stuff?” Sanjiv asks. “Because if you’re selling it, I want a cut of the money.”

Kashvi and I glance at each other with a shrug.

“We could try selling it,” Kashvi says. “I paid way more money for these earrings than it cost to make them.”

“So…are we doing this?” I ask. “We’re going to try selling our crafts?”

“It’s probably going to be a ton of work for no profit,” Kashvi says.

Sanjiv holds up his tiny drill. “And we still need to negotiate my cut.”

But everyone is glancing around the table with excited smiles on their faces. More and more, they feel like friends instead of people I see for two hours a week when I pretend to be a dwarf. *Real* friends who want to hang out before games, and talk about horrible first dates, and do silly crafts together. I couldn’t care less about whether we make any money.

Mark arrives a few minutes later and is both horrified and intrigued when we describe our new endeavor to him. “You’re drilling *holes* in dice?!” He picks up a twenty-sided die we didn’t get around to using today. He rolls it across the table, and it comes up as a 19. “Huh, actually, maybe you have something here. I might need to try this.”

The front door opens and shuts again. Logan strolls in and my heart hammers despite my best attempts to be nonchalant. I watch his face for signs that something has changed between us, but he appears just the same as he was during our last game. “Whoa, what’s going on in here?”

Kashvi holds up one of the bracelets to him. “We’re starting our own business.”

“That’s adventurous. But we should probably get set up downstairs, right?”

We look at the time on our phones—it’s close to two already. We were so caught up we completely lost track of time.

“I have a good feeling about today,” Mark tells us as we get settled around the game table. “I think my rolls are going to be excellent.” He pretends to shake the dice in his hands. “It’s all in the wrist.”

“Do you want to try one of my sets? I have a lot with me—no holes in these, I promise.” I hold up a few bags. After some debate, I decided on iridescent blue ones for today.

“No!” He holds his fingers in a cross in front of him like I’m offering a grenade instead of new dice. “That’s bad luck. I carefully choose all my dice.”

“But…” I look around, exasperated. Kashvi shrugs and Sanjiv shakes his head subtly.

“Don’t try to reason with him. Just accept it and be at peace,” Logan tells me. He catches my gaze for a second, but it’s hard to read him. Which Logan has come to play today? The annoying one from the last game or the one whispering to me in my grandma’s attic?

It doesn’t matter either way, I remind myself. Once the game starts, I need to focus on the campaign, not on a boy. When Sloane calls us to attention, I’m ready.

“Welcome back, everyone, to the latest livestream of our campaign,” Sloane says into the camera. “If you remember, the players got themselves into a bit of a situation last time when they distracted the ship’s crewmates so much that the boat crashed and they were thrown into the sea.”

“And we lost our weapons,” Kashvi adds sadly.

“Yes, very sad,” Sloane says, looking anything but sad about this turn of events. “Although you reached your first experience milestone and now are Level 2, so everyone has more hit points and a new ability. We pick up the game with all of you washed up on the beach. You each wake up, soaking wet and disoriented.”

“Did any of the crew members from the ship make it to shore?” Logan asks.

“Three washed up on the beach with you but they haven’t woken yet.”

We all glance around at each other.

“We need to get as far away from them as possible,” Sanjiv says, gesturing to Kashvi. “No way are we being captured again when we need to find our father.”

“But I want my weapons. They might have washed up as well,” Kashvi argues.

“I should come with you!” Mark says, using his high Rolo voice. “What if he’s my father as well?”

Kashvi and Sanjiv frown in unison. “Why…would we share a father?” Kashvi’s character asks. “We don’t know each other and we’re nothing alike. You’re…”

“A halfling. But from the looks of it, you’re a half orc and you’re a half elf. I’m a halfling—don’t you see? We might all share the same relations. We could be siblings!”

“That’d make you half siblings,” I reply as Nasria.

Logan cracks a smile. His attention flickers to me for a moment and then away. Either he’s trying very hard not to interact with me during the game, or it only feels that way because I’m too aware of him.

He clears his throat. “While this family reunion is very touching—”

“We’re not family, though—” Sanjiv argues.

“—I think we should decide on our next course of action. I agree with Lynx. I don’t think it’s wise to be here when the crew wakes up. We should search for the nearest town, get some food, and ask the locals what they might know about this ship and its owners.”

“But we have the upper hand right now,” I argue. “We should get information from the crew before we leave. I want to know why we were captured and put on the boat, and the crew will clearly know more than people living in a village.”

I expect Logan to retort immediately. Instead he lifts one shoulder in a shrug, still avoiding my eyes. Because we sit across from each other, he has to angle himself awkwardly toward Sloane and the others to do that. “If that’s what the rest of the group wants. I’ll only point out that we’re unarmed and Level 2.”

“I’m not leaving without my weapons,” Kashvi repeats fiercely. “They’re elven made and priceless.”

Sanjiv rolls his eyes. “Nothing is priceless. Especially when we’re back in prison again.”

“Then we’ll use my priceless weapons to bargain for our release.”

“While the party discusses, one of the crew members shifts and moans,” Sloane interjects, and mimics the sound.

“We can take ’em!” Mark cries. “Wait until you see how fast I can hack and slash!” Everything about Mark changes when he’s playing Rolo. Usually he seems like a pretty chill guy with sloth-like vibes. But as Rolo he practically bounces in his chair with excitement.

“Fine, I’m nonconfrontational, but I’ll agree with my half sister…and possible half brother,” Sanjiv says. “I’m casting a skill bonus on each of us so we can search for our equipment.”

There’s a flash of frustration on Sloane’s face when Kashvi’s roll is successful. “All right, Lasla, you see the chest of weapons. However, it’s far down the beach and the waves are washing it back out into the ocean. Given the distance, none of you will be able to get to it in time.”

“Then we should depart before the crew wakens,” Logan says.

Kashvi and Mark groan, but I’m busy flipping through the manual in front of me. “Wait,” I say. “I want to use my new movement spell to get me to the chest before any of the other players can.”

Sloane meets my eye, and I can see the emotions warring in their expression. Clearly they had another plan for the campaign, but they also know I’m not wrong. I should probably let it go, but I still feel like I’m proving my worth in this group. I want to get those weapons back for Kashvi.

“A hill dwarf is going to sprint down the beach faster than the rest of us?” Logan says in his haughty character voice. “I’ve never heard of a dwarf who could move that fast.”

“Just because you don’t have moves doesn’t mean I don’t.”

The others chuckle and I keep my focus on Sloane. After another moment, they shake their head. “Fine, yes, you use your spell to bolt down the beach so fast you kick sand in the faces of the rest of your party. You do reach the chest and manage to pull it out of the waves.”

“Lasla races after Nasria like she’s seeing the love of her life,” Kashvi says. “My swords! My babies, my *loves.*” She mimes hugging the nonexistent swords. I love the commitment to character.

“I’m your brother, Lasla,” Sanjiv says, “and I’ve never gotten that kind of embrace.”

“You’re my *half* brother and you don’t shine like the sun after polishing.” She rubs her hands together. “Now that we have our weapons, how about we go question a few sailors about their intentions?”

“At that moment, you all hear screaming coming from the jungle. A dozen men, dressed in matching uniforms with swords at their sides come onto the beach,” Sloane tells us. “You!” Sloane’s voice drops lower to mimic a soldier’s voice. “Stop right there, by order of King Thalun!”

“Well, that didn’t go as planned,” Kashvi mumbles after we log off.

“Not as you planned,” Logan replies, his gaze cutting to Sloane. “I think it went exactly the way Sloane was planning.”

They grin and shrug innocently. “No comment.”

It turns out Logan/Adris *might* have been correct about escaping while we could. Our group put up quite a fight, but we were no match for the soldiers. Now we’ve been arrested *again* and taken to this king’s palace for sentencing. I was twitchy with guilt by the time the game ended since I was the one who insisted we interrogate the crew. Plus, I went against Sloane to get our equipment back. I wouldn’t blame the others for being pissed, but everyone seems surprisingly chill about it.

“Remember that Natural 20 I rolled before they got me?” Kashvi asks the group with a self-satisfied grin. “One hit and I sent that soldier flying into the ocean!”

“Hey, don’t forget me,” Mark says. “Halfling fighters are no joke.”

“Your character is so weird,” Sanjiv says.

“People don’t watch us for boring characters.”

He shrugs. “Do you all have to get home or can you stay longer?” Sanjiv asks. “We don’t have anyplace to be today, and we still have some pizza in the fridge.”

I glance around to see what the others are thinking. Personally, I’d love to hang out more. I know if I go home right now, I’ll be put on packing, painting, or cleaning duty. Mom and Dad didn’t have any plan when we got here, so there’s still plenty to do at the house despite being moved in for three weeks.

“I can stay longer,” I reply.

“Maybe we could make a list of shops in town where we might be able to sell our stuff?” Kashvi asks.

“I’m good to stay,” Sloane says.

“I gotta go, but definitely next time,” Mark says.

“Me too,” Logan says. “Dad wants me back to help with some chores at home.”

We all walk upstairs together, partially to see Mark and Logan out and partially because we want to raid the kitchen for more snacks. Kashvi's parents are saints to let so many teenagers into their house every weekend. The others get caught up debating whether to make butter or cheddar popcorn, and I notice Logan hovering in the hall by the front door. I need to leave him alone, but that's harder than it should be.

"Sorry your dad is making you work this afternoon."

He glances down at his shoes and then back up at me with a rueful smile. "Don't tell the others, but I made that up. Though I'm sure he'll find something for me to do around the farm when I get home."

"You made it up?" I ask with a frown. "Why?"

"Well, you know, the rules. Even if sometimes I slip and don't follow them."

I shake my head, at a loss for words. He's making up excuses to stay away from me?

"You don't need to do that. These are your friends—you can stay and hang out with them if you want."

He takes a step back from me. "It's really okay, Quinn. Don't worry about it. I see them every day at school, and you don't."

"But—"

"It's just an afternoon." He reaches for one of the dice bracelets I'm wearing from this afternoon, his fingers grazing the skin on the inside of my wrist as he does. I suck in a breath, and he pulls his hand away. "The bracelets are a good idea."

Then he turns and walks out the door.

Chapter Thirteen

I'm in my room Tuesday evening, half-heartedly trying to review my pre-calc notes for an exam tomorrow, when Mom knocks on my door.

"Hey, I was unpacking a box of clothes and found something of yours. I swear we tried to keep things separate, but I keep finding the craziest stuff in these boxes."

I'm not surprised—toward the end we were throwing stuff into any box with space. I close my laptop and turn to Mom. She drops a pink sweatshirt on my bed with a shrug.

"I don't recognize it, but I know it isn't mine since it's cropped." She laughs. "Dinner's ready in a few minutes."

She leaves but my eyes stay glued to the sweatshirt. Bright pink cropped sweatshirts aren't exactly my aesthetic either—that was always Paige. I've seen her wear this sweatshirt on countless occasions, and I'm not proud of the bitter pleasure I feel knowing she's never getting it back. But more than that, an overwhelming wave of sadness falls on me, like a weighted blanket that's smothering me.

So many memories are attached to that one item of clothing—us laughing over smoothies and trying on clothes and learning TikTok dances in my living room. Mostly what I remember is laughing. And I hate that it's all gone because of a boy who doesn't deserve either of us. Sometimes I imagine what I would say to her if I saw her again. *He doesn't deserve you and you never deserved me.* Or maybe I'd only ask, *Was it worth it?*

But I'm not ready for that answer.

I steel myself, then pick up the sweatshirt and throw it on top of the tote that holds all the other memories I don't want to deal with. It's full of pictures and mementos I can't look at, but also can't bring myself to throw away. It feels like throwing away years of my own life. But then, losing her feels a lot like that too.

I know Mom will come back up if I don't go downstairs for dinner, so I make myself go even though I don't feel like talking to anyone right now. I help myself to lasagna and salad and sit down.

"I think the house is coming along pretty well," Dad says cheerfully as he comes to the table. He holds up his plate to the rest of us. "We can eat off actual plates and we know where to put them once they're clean."

Mom puts a hand on her hip and looks around. "I'd say it's a work in progress."

It's true that there are fewer boxes than last week. But framed art and pictures still lean against the walls because we haven't had time to hang them, and there are piles of miscellaneous things in each room when we give up on organizing.

"So, tell me what you've been up to at school," Dad says to me and Andrew. Ugh, he's in one of his overly attentive moods.

As usual, Andrew shrugs one shoulder and keeps chewing. "Nothing much. It's school."

"Do you like your teachers?" Dad persists.

Andrew decided last year when he turned fifteen that he was done talking to anybody older than his friends. I feel like I know more about the fictional characters in our D&D game than I do about him.

"Not really, they're teachers. But they could be worse." He shovels another piece of lasagna into his mouth.

Dad and Mom share a smirk. "Glad for the clarification. How about you, Quinn?"

"Things are good." I'm ready with my answer. I need to give details, but just enough so they're satisfied without needing to ask more questions. "I really like my English teacher. She's young and the system hasn't completely burned her out yet."

Mom takes a drink of water and eyes me. "Have you thought any more about how you might want to get involved at school? Like some clubs you

could get involved with or maybe even a sport? It's too late for winter sports now, but what about something for spring like softball or tennis?"

I shake my head in exasperation. "You know I'm not into sports."

"But you've never tried," she argues. "You don't know if you haven't tried."

"I think my abject lack of interest is a pretty good hint." My tone is sharper than I intend and even Andrew lifts his eyes briefly to mine before looking away.

"Mom, you can't just pick up a sport like that in high school," Andrew adds. "Especially if you're like Quinn."

I jab at my salad rather than say something snarky to Andrew. I know I should be grateful that he's standing up for me, but he has a real talent for supporting me through insults.

Mom puts her hands up in surrender. "Okay, fine, I was just wondering. This is a good time to make new friends and get involved. That's all I'm saying."

"D&D is going well," I reply. "We got more followers on our last livestream than the one previous."

"I'm still not sure I understand what this all is. So, you and these other kids play D&D and videotape yourselves and then put it online?" Dad looks more than skeptical.

"People log in to watch us play live."

Dad shakes his head. "But…why?"

Andrew snorts into his food and I sink deeper into my chair. "Because it's fun and interesting and our DM comes up with cool ideas for our campaign. In case you haven't realized, D&D is actually a really big deal."

"Sure, of course," Dad says quickly, and glances at Mom for help. "It's been around since I was in school."

"We have people watching from around the world."

Okay, we have three Germans but *still*.

"Well, maybe we should start watching, too, then," Mom says pointedly. "What's the name of this? How do we do it?"

I can tell from her big eyes and eager nod that she's trying really hard to be supportive. And I guess it isn't fair to be annoyed since I don't like it when they support Andrew's interests and not mine, but the idea of my parents hovering around their old laptop and watching the livestream is so

cringy. Just the possibility of it sucks the joy out of the game. The only way I'm able to enjoy playing is by telling myself that everyone watching is a faceless stranger I'll never have to interact with. But if I refuse to give them the info, then they'll probably get suspicious about what exactly I'm livestreaming to the masses.

I push down a sigh and give them the details of how to log onto the livestream and how to rewatch old sessions. Then I have to write down the instructions because it's too confusing for them. By the time I'm finished, Andrew's done eating. He sits back and shakes his head.

"I still can't believe people watch you talking in someone's basement."

"At least it's more interesting than watching people run around a field trying to kick a ball," I reply.

"All right, all right," Dad says. "Let's not ruin dinner with you two sniping at each other. Now, speaking of soccer, when is your next game, Andrew?"

"Friday."

"You know what would be great?" Mom asks, and I'm already sure this will be the opposite of great. "If all of us had a family night together at Andrew's game." She turns to me. "You don't have anything going on Friday. Let's all go and we'll cheer him on. We can get ice cream afterward."

Now I'm the one snorting into my lasagna. There's no way Andrew's going to get ice cream with his parents and dorky older sister when he has cool friends to hang out with. I wish I had a good excuse, but there's no reason I can't go. I just don't want to.

"I guess?"

"You could be a little more enthusiastic to cheer on your brother. It's pretty amazing what he's doing."

He's in sports and making friends and being the quintessential high school success, as opposed to me, the loser, who plays games with her nerdy friends in the basement. But the idea of sitting and watching Andrew play for multiple hours makes me want to curl into the fetal position. Although, one thing could make it more tolerable.

"Can I bring a friend?" I ask.

"That requires you to *have* one," Andrew mutters.

Mom furrows her brow. “Well, it’s not exactly a family outing if you bring someone along, but I do love the idea of meeting your new friend.”

“Who would you bring?” Andrew asks.

“Kashvi Anand.”

His eyes light up. “Oh yeah, never mind, you should definitely bring her.”

“How do you know Kashvi?”

“She helps out Mrs. Carmichael in my bio lab, like as an assistant. I guess she’s really smart.” He shrugs. “She’s cool. I’m surprised she’s friends with you.”

If my parents weren’t here, I’d dump the rest of my food on his head.

“She *is* cool. And guess what else she is? Part of my livestream D&D group.” I raise my eyebrows. “Now what do you have to say?”

“Nothing. I never said D&D was dumb. Just that you are.”

“Andrew,” Mom says with a sigh.

“I won’t ask her to come if you’re going to be a jerk.”

“But then you won’t get to hang out with her either.” He grins, knowing he has me. “Or maybe I’ll just ask her to come myself.”

Ugh, I can’t believe my gross little brother has a thing for Kashvi.

I bite my lip, debating. I want to refuse to bring her just to annoy Andrew, but I also don’t want to punish myself. This soccer game will be infinitely more fun with her there.

“*Fine*, I’ll ask her.” I point at him. “But stay far away from us. We haven’t been friends for long, and she’ll lose all respect for me if she knows we’re related.”

Chapter Fourteen

"I'm not sure I've ever watched an indoor soccer game," Kashvi says as we shuffle along the narrow metal bleachers that line one wall of the indoor sports complex where Andrew is playing. Since it's the last week of February in Ohio, it's way too cold to play outside. This place is huge and there aren't many spectators other than parents.

"I'm so glad you're here," I whisper. "I would be miserable without you."

We all sit down, and Dad leans forward to talk to Kashvi and me. "Isn't this fun!"

We nod politely, although nothing has happened yet that would make it fun. "Thanks for letting me tag along tonight," Kashvi says.

"Of course," Mom replies. "We're thrilled that both of our kids are making friends here. We really appreciate you taking Quinn into your group."

Her wording is mildly insulting, like I'm some tragic case that needs rescuing, but Mom isn't entirely wrong. If Kashvi hadn't invited me to their game when we first met, I don't know what I'd be doing right now.

"Which number is your brother?" Kashvi asks.

"No idea," I whisper. "But they're wearing green jerseys. Just cheer when that team scores and we should be covered."

A moment later Dad stands and bellows, "Let's go, Andrew!" like this is the World Cup instead of a sparsely attended match in the Midwest.

Andrew swivels and waves warily at Dad. I see he's number 11—good to know, I guess. He spots Kashvi and his whole body perks up a bit as he

waves more enthusiastically.

Her eyes widen and she looks over her shoulder like he's waving at someone else. When she realizes he isn't, she waves back hesitantly.

"Well, I guess we know which number he's wearing now," she says.

The game begins and we spend the first half dutifully cheering on Andrew and chatting with my parents. They seem determined to include Kashvi as much as possible, which means asking her a thousand questions. It's embarrassing, but I also learn things about her parents and family that I never thought to ask before.

Andrew's team scores another goal and Kashvi shoots up to her feet to cheer, along with my parents. I stand before Mom can glare at me for being a bad sport.

"Wow, that was a great play," Kashvi says, and gives a little yell.

"Yeah."

"Your brother must be really good if he's playing forward."

I study her profile. How does she know what position he plays? *I* don't know that, and I've watched countless games over the years. I follow her gaze back down to the field and try to really pay attention. It still looks like a lot of guys running randomly around a field, but Andrew does stand out from the others. I bet he'll make varsity next fall.

Andrew kicks toward the goal, but another player is quick to knock it away. Kashvi groans and sits back down.

"I didn't realize you were so into soccer."

She shrugs. "My dad is a huge fan. I grew up watching it on TV."

By the time the second half begins, it's hard for me to focus on the game. Especially when Andrew's team is up 5–0. Kashvi hands me a small bag of peanuts Mom brought with her. "Do you come to a lot of these games?" she asks. "This one is—"

"Boring?"

She laughs. "I was going to say a blowout, but sure."

My phone vibrates and I pull it out to see a text from Logan. It's not to the group chat, but just to me. My stomach jumps into my throat.

Logan: *I was going through my dice tonight and thought you might be able to do something with these.*

He sends a photo of a set of seven glittery green dice. My heart swells at the same time that I laugh.

Quinn: *Those are some sparkly dice you have there.*

Logan: *They were for a character, don't ask.*

I stare down at the photo, trying to puzzle out what to make of it. He made it clear that he left Kashvi's early because of me, but now he's texting me? Although I guess texting is very different from hanging out together. Or, who knows, maybe he just really doesn't want these dice anymore.

"Those are cute," Kashvi says, glancing at the photo on my phone.

I startle and sit up straight. "Logan just sent this. It sounds like he wants to give them to me."

"He does?" Kashvi's eyebrows furrow. "He's always been weirdly protective over his dice. Almost as bad as Mark."

"He noticed the bracelets we made—our *awesome* bracelets, that is"—I jangle the bracelets on my wrist for effect—"and must have decided to help out the cause."

"Huh…well, that's cool of him because those are beautiful dice." She checks her phone. "I'm surprised he didn't text us both about it, though."

There's a flash of something in her expression. Maybe it's surprise. Or could it be jealousy? Immediately the gnawing hurt over losing Paige returns. Even before my infamous bad date with Caden, Paige was always bothered if I talked too much to Caden at the games or had jokes or conversations with the others that she wasn't part of. I didn't mind it at the time. It almost made me feel special, as if Paige considered me such a good friend that she couldn't share me with anyone. Of course, looking back, I see that it was completely one-sided. She was happy to chat and flirt without including me; I just wasn't supposed to do the same. Then I went out with Caden and all hell broke loose.

I glance at the field and slide my hands under my thighs so I don't fidget. Could Kashvi be similar? Maybe I should be a little more cautious with what I tell her. I really like her—I want us to be the kind of friends who can share all the details of our lives without judgment—but I'm also scared. I'm not sure if we're there yet.

My phone vibrates, but I don't look at it on the off chance that Logan has texted again.

"Mark texted us," Kashvi tells me, and holds up her phone. "He's hanging out tonight at the diner where Sloane works. It would be fun for you to see it. Do you think your parents would let us go after the game?"

“Maybe?” My parents usually don’t like us to be out late, but a small-town diner isn’t exactly worrisome.

“Hey, Mom?” I touch her arm to get her attention—she’s so transfixed by the game that I’m not sure she can hear me.

“Hmm?”

“Would it be okay if Kashvi and I meet our other friends after the game?”

It takes a second for the words to sink in, but she frowns and turns to me. “Where?”

“The Elm Street Diner,” Kashvi jumps in. “Our friend Sloane works there, and it’s always so quiet we use it like a library to get work done.”

She’s laying it on a bit thick in my opinion, but Mom’s frown fades. “That sounds like it could be fun for y—”

“*Yes!* Go, Andrew!” Dad cheers next to her. Mom’s attention flips back to the game, and Kashvi gives me a thumbs-up.

“I’ll text the others to see if they can make it. Sanjiv will come for sure. He never turns down a hangout or food.”

“Well done. You’re a parent-whisperer.”

“I have overprotective parents, so I have lots of practice,” she replies. “Why do you think we have all our games at my house?”

I laugh and clap for Andrew even though I’m not sure what’s happening in the game. Despite my worries before, I’m glad I asked her to come with me. The best way to become better friends is by doing stuff like this together. And now I’ll get a chance to hang out with the others outside of the game too. Well, everyone except for Logan, since I’m sure he’ll come up with an excuse to avoid me.

I try to keep my thoughts from him, but my self-control is quickly slipping where Logan is concerned. I’d like to truly be friends with him, but in order for that to happen, I need to banish any *other* thoughts about him. It’s hard to forget the way my pulse sped when he touched my wrist after the game on Saturday, or how I was tempted to kiss him for a moment in the attic. That’s not how friends think or act around each other.

Beside me, Mom jumps to her feet, and Kashvi yells on my other side. I’m so out of it that I’ve completely lost track of what’s happening around me. I stand and cheer without knowing why.

“What happened?” I ask Kashvi.

“Your brother just scored another goal with only a minute left.” She glances at me with a smirk. “You’re really not into soccer, huh?”

“I guess not.”

Better to agree than explain where my thoughts have truly been focused.

After the game, Kashvi drives us to the diner. I shove my hands into my pockets to keep them warm and take in the sight. It’s not the nicest place I’ve ever seen. The yellow building has a rusted metal awning and a mostly empty parking lot that’s so run-down that it’s hard not to hit a pothole. Even the Open sign is flickering, as if the diner isn’t sure how much longer it can hold on. I raise an eyebrow at Kashvi.

She slips her arm into mine. “I know it’s not much to look at, but don’t judge a diner by its exterior. Judge it by its pancakes.”

She tugs me along through the glass doors and into a dingy dining area made up of yellow pleather booths and a string of stools by the counter. One older man sits in the far corner, hunched over a big plate of food with a newspaper open at his side. Mark waves us over to a booth. His shoulder-length hair is pulled back in a ponytail and he’s wearing a Ningen Isu T-shirt for his favorite Japanese metal band. He’s hunched over his Chromebook.

I point to the laptop as I slide into the booth next to Kashvi. “Wait, you guys *actually* do homework here? I thought you were making that up for my parents’ benefit.”

“Only if I’m here alone.” He closes it and shoves it into a bag. “How was the game?”

“It was a game,” I reply with a shrug.

“Her brother’s team was so good that it was actually boring.”

The bell at the front entrance chimes.

“Finally! You’re late,” Mark yells. He’s facing the entrance, so I have to turn to see who it is. My gaze slides right past Sanjiv and lands on Logan.

He came.

My heart jumps into my throat. I was sure he’d find an excuse not to come. His eyes cut to mine and heat flows through me. He’s as gorgeous now as he was in the attic when he was telling me he needed to keep his distance from me—advice he’s clearly forgotten tonight. His cheeks are

pink from the cold and his hair falls over his eyes as he pulls off Sloane's crocheted hat. I love that he wears the hat everywhere.

Sanjiv slides in next to me so I'm between the twins. Logan sits across the table next to Mark. "Hey, all," he says. He glances around the table, looking at me for only a moment before turning to Kashvi. "This is unexpected."

"I realized we hadn't introduced Quinn to this place," Kashvi says. "We couldn't hold out on her."

"Do you like pancakes?" Sanjiv asks me.

I look around the group, sensing this might be an important question. "Absolutely. Pancakes, waffles, French toast—they're all awesome."

"Carbs and sugar," Logan says almost to himself.

"But you can't equate waffles to pancakes," Sanjiv says. "And French toast is a totally different category."

"She doesn't know. She hasn't had the pancakes yet," Mark explains, almost like he's making an excuse for me after I've been rude.

"You're ordering them," Sanjiv says, stern.

"Plus, the cook likes Sloane, so he always adds extra pancakes to our orders."

"We've already made them promise to be nice to him indefinitely because I'm not going back to the three-pancake stack when I've grown accustomed to five," Mark says.

A swinging door to the kitchen flies open and Sloane walks over, carrying water glasses. I don't know why I thought they might be in a hair net or wearing a white apron, but they look just the same as always. Dark ripped jeans, gray shirt, and their striped rainbow hat. To my surprise, they're also wearing one of the d20 necklaces Kashvi and I made before the last game. We'd given it to them, but Sloane doesn't usually wear jewelry.

"The whole crowd made it," Sloane announces as they pass out the waters. "I see you've been pulled over to the dark side, Quinn."

"And I've been told—without exception—that I'll be ordering the pancakes."

"You can't go wrong with those." Sloane looks around the table. "Same for everyone?"

They all agree.

"You won't have to stay in the back long, right?" Kashvi asks.

Sloane looks around the empty restaurant. “No, I’ll be back in a second. But I’m on silverware duty while it’s dead so you’ll be helping.”

They come back a few moments later with a huge stack of paper napkins and a tray of silverware. “Okay, so just take a napkin and wrap it around a knife and fork, tucking in the edges as you go.” Sloane demonstrates. “It doesn’t have to be perfect, as long as you don’t lick the silverware.”

We all grab napkins and get to work.

“Hey, did you hear about the event the comic book store in Zanesville is putting on next Sunday?” Sanjiv asks.

We all shake our heads.

“They’re bringing in a few big comic book writers and artists and they’re doing a full-day event. Costume contests, signings, sales, tournaments, food trucks. What do you think? Should we try to go?”

“Hell yes,” Mark says immediately. Logan and Sloane nod enthusiastically, and I assume Kashvi’s already on board since Sanjiv’s relaying the info.

My mouth is clamped shut. Zanesville is only about twenty minutes from where I used to live. Would Caden show up at something like this? Would he bring Paige with him? Even the remote possibility of being face to face with them again has my stomach rioting.

“Quinn?” Sanjiv asks. “You in?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. There’s no way to know if Caden and Paige will be there. But I don’t remember Caden being into comics. Maybe I’m being paranoid.

Sloane and Mark nod encouragingly and Kashvi shakes my arm. “It’ll be so fun!”

“You should come,” Logan says quietly.

I’m incapable of fighting them all. I shouldn’t *have* to be worried about this. I don’t want to live my life hiding from my ex-friends.

“Let’s do it,” I announce with a smile.

“Awesome! Maybe my parents will let me drive their van,” Mark says. “Then we can all go together.”

A bell rings in the kitchen. “Orders up!” the cook calls from a little window.

“Hand ’em over.” Sloane takes the silverware from us. “Technique could use some work, but I appreciate the effort.”

My eyes widen when Sloane places my plate on the table a few moments later. The stack is enormous. There’s no way I can eat all this.

Mark gives me a knowing smile. “Just wait and see.”

Everyone dives in without another word and the table is silent as we add butter and syrup to our stacks. I lift the first bite to my mouth. They’re *glorious.* I’m in pancake heaven, frolicking through soft clouds of pancake pillows. If I were smaller, I’d make myself a pancake bed to sleep in and then wake up and nibble them for breakfast. I moan in bliss.

The rest of the table laughs, and I open my eyes to all five of them staring and grinning at me.

“She doubted us,” Mark says to the group.

“Last time she’ll do that,” Sanjiv says.

“How are they so good?” I ask Sloane, and they shrug, pulling over a chair and sitting down at the end of the booth. “Don’t look at me, I don’t make them.”

“Oh my god, I’m only eating these for the rest of my life. Every meal, right here. Pancakes.”

“I tried that,” Logan says. “I wouldn’t recommend it. I almost had to miss school my stomach hurt so bad.”

“Sounds like a bonus to me.”

I peek up at him, but eye contact is not a good idea. Best to keep my eyes down on my new favorite thing in the world.

We don’t stay too long after we’ve scraped our plates clean. We pay and pitch in to tip Sloane, then head for the parking lot.

Kashvi, Sanjiv, and Mark huddle at the door, finishing up a discussion about their upcoming history test, but I drift back toward Kashvi’s car.

“Quinn.”

It’s honestly distressing the way his voice affects me. I turn and Logan holds up a finger.

“Just a sec.” He opens his truck door, grabs something, and walks to me. “I think you can use these more than I can.” He holds up a quart-sized plastic bag filled with dice.

I take the bag and hold it up so I can see the dice better in the dim light of the parking lot. The bag is bulging with dice of all kinds—mostly simple

primary colors, but I see a few other types, along with the glittery ones he sent the picture of.

I shake my head. “You don’t need to give all these to me. That’s really nice, but I’m sure we can order dice online for the jewelry.”

“Yeah, but I’m not using these and they’re weighing down my bag.”

“Are you vying for a cut of our profits like Sanjiv?” I ask, because I’m not really sure how to respond.

“Pancakes are on you next time.”

“Fair.” I smile shyly. I truly have no idea how to act around Logan now, but I also don’t want him to drive away yet. “Is this the pancake place you mentioned before?”

His expression lights up. “You remember? Yeah, this is it. The secret is ruined now.”

Wind gusts around us, whipping my hair into my face and sending shivers through me.

“You should be wearing your hat.” Logan points to my coat pocket where I shoved it.

I pull it out, but it’s hard to put it on with one hand since I’m holding the dice.

“Let me.”

I expect him to take the bag, but instead he takes the green hat and steps closer. He gingerly tugs it over my forehead, flattening my bangs over my eyes and making the back of the hat rise up to the crown of my head. I giggle and he gives an apologetic smile.

“Sorry, this is harder to do than I thought it’d be.”

“Here, I can do it.” I hand him the dice, shake out my hair, and pull the hat down so it covers my ears. “How’s that?”

He tilts his head and the look in his eyes makes my bones go soft. “Perfect,” he whispers.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He clears his throat. “Sloane makes really good hats, huh?”

I return his gaze. Something about the darkness makes it easier to meet his eye. “The best.”

“Ready to go?” Kashvi calls, and comes around the driver’s side.

“Yep,” I say, shaking myself, and take the dice back. “Look what Logan brought.”

Her eyes widen. “Whoa. That’s generous.”

“It’s my contribution to the project.”

“You’re always such a gentleman.” She cuts her eyes to me. “He’s trying to get a cut of our profits.”

“That’s what I said!” I cry.

Logan groans and throws his hands in the air. “I try to do a nice thing, and this is what I get. I’m going home!”

“Sorry, Logan!” Kashvi calls at his back. “We’ll have our people call your people!”

I climb into the car, smiling, but the weight of the dice on my lap isn’t as heavy as the weight of my thoughts. I want more of whatever’s going on between Logan and me, even if I shouldn’t.

Chapter Fifteen

I don't even knock on Kashvi's door when I arrive at her house for the game Saturday. I've only been coming here for a few weeks now, but it's starting to feel like a second home. I push the door open—my hands full of jewelry-making supplies for after the game—and say a quick hello to Kashvi's mom before heading to the basement.

The rest of the group is already there, and they let out a cheer when I arrive.

"Yay, you're here!" Kashvi exclaims. "We were just talking about costumes—Sanjiv came up with the perfect idea."

"We came up with it together," he says.

Ideas for the costume contest at the comic store took over the group chat as soon as we left the diner last night, and it's been a constant debate since I woke up this morning. We quickly decided we wanted to do a group costume instead of dressing individually, which is great for me since I don't have any ideas. I'm shocked to hear that we might already have a concept, because this group is seriously picky. By ten a.m. they'd already dismissed all superhero and video game characters.

"Okay." Kashvi puts her hands out to me like she's about to announce huge news. "Have you ever heard of the '80s D&D cartoon?"

I glance around the room in confusion. I don't know current cartoons, let alone ones from decades before I was born.

"Don't worry about it," Mark tells me. "I hadn't either since it's ancient."

“That’s no excuse. We should all know our history,” Sloane says seriously.

“Here, look at this,” Kashvi says, and holds up her phone to a still shot of an animated series. There’s a party of six people dressed vaguely like wizards, barbarians, and fighters. There’s even a baby unicorn. “Wouldn’t it be great if we each chose one character and dressed up together? It would be so meta to have our group go as the original cartoon party!”

“I’d like to point out that no one is going to understand this costume idea. We’re going to look like six people in miscellaneous fantasy costumes,” Logan says.

“The judges will be old and they’ll get the reference. That’s all that matters,” Sanjiv argues. “It’s perfect—we can dress up as the entire party and no one is left out.”

“I already called the little kid barbarian,” Sloane says. “I have an old unicorn stuffed toy I can bring to complete the look.”

I nod and scan the picture. With that character gone, there are three male characters and two female characters left…which does work out perfectly for our group. There’s just one problem.

I point to the two female characters. “These are the costumes we’d need to wear? It’s forty degrees out!” One of the characters has on a very short tunic and thigh-high boots, while the other is basically wearing a fur bikini.

Kashvi grimaces. “I know, it’s totally sexist. Of course the women are wearing the most impractical costumes possible. If you want, I can be Diana.” She points to the one in the bikini. “Assuming my parents let me out of the house.”

“Is that the character you wanted, though?”

“I mean, I had my eye on the thief, but I can do whatever. Or we can scrap this and choose a different costume idea.”

“You can change your costume,” Mark tells me. “We won’t care.”

“You’ll look hot no matter what you do, Quinn,” Sanjiv says.

Kashvi slaps him on the shoulder. “Eww, don’t call her hot!”

He throws up his arms. “I was trying to be reassuring! Come on, am I wrong?”

He glances around the room, looking for support, and my disobedient eyes head straight for Logan even though my brain screams, *Don’t look at him!*

His eyes are already on me, pupils dark and Adam's apple bobbing. I flush at his expression. If this is his response to only the idea of the costume, then I'd be better off claiming the character who wears the huge billowing cloak. Although…I pull my lip between my teeth and glance back at the picture of Diana. I'm not walking around a comic store in a glorified swimsuit, but I bet I *could* make it my own. I have a few pieces that could work, and Grandma might have something in the attic.

Even with my changes, it would still be completely out of my comfort zone. A costume like this draws attention. That's not something I'm usually up for, but if I'm surrounded by the rest of my party, then it sounds fun. Maybe even empowering.

"Actually, I love this," I tell the others. "I'll be Diana."

"Are you sure?" Kashvi asks. "I don't want you feeling bullied into it as the newest member."

The fact that she'd be worried about that only makes me feel better.

"I'm absolutely sure." I smile reassuringly.

We start the session right on time, to make sure we don't lose any impatient viewers, and Sloane uses their gravelly voice to remind us of where we left off, having been captured and taken to a palace.

"The five of you are brought into a palatial throne room in chains. The ceiling soars above you and elaborate mosaic art along the walls tells the story of a brave man who has defeated every foe in his path," Sloane tells us.

"Is it me?" Rolo asks excitedly.

We all laugh and roll our eyes.

"No, it is not, Rolo. The art depicts King Thalun, who sits on the throne on a dais above you. As the guards bring you in front of him, he stands and looks down at you with a haughty expression. His clothes are regal, but his face is haggard and there are dark circles under his eyes." Sloane clears their voice. "I see my guards have finally brought you to me, though not without trouble. I had not anticipated such a fight from you five."

I glance around at the others. It's clear that someone needs to speak to the king on behalf of the group. To my surprise, the others are looking to me. Sure, I was able to get the equipment back last time, but I'm also the reason we're standing here.

I wait another second, but when it's clear no one else is going to speak, I sit up and look directly at Sloane. "Sir—"

"Your Majesty."

So it's going to be like that. I'm not off to a great start.

"Your Majesty, we request to know on what grounds you have taken us prisoner. We have done you no wrong, and only wish to be free to pursue our own endeavors."

"It is true that not all of you have brought harm to me. But one of you has and is in my service." Sloane turns to Logan. "Adris Starcrown, known rogue and thief, you stole a locket that was very precious to me years ago. You eluded my escape before, but now you will pay for your crimes."

My eyes widen, as do the others around the table.

"And…if I may ask," I continue, "why have the rest of us been brought before you?"

"I had you captured because I need a magic user, and the fact that you are a dwarf will serve my purposes even better." Sloane's focus slides to the twins, then to Mark. "As for you two, do you not recognize your own father?"

We all gasp, then exchange excited looks with each other. Sometimes I *really* love D&D.

"Daddy?!" Rolo cries, and we all burst out laughing.

Sloane tries to keep a grim expression, though I can tell they want to laugh too. "Your Majesty."

"Not to be rude, *Your Majesty,*" Lasla/Kashvi says, with a tone that's anything but daughterly, "but if we're truly your children, then why would you need to capture us and chain us? We've been searching for you and would have gladly come on our own."

"Because I have learned I cannot trust anyone in this world, even my own children. I had heard you were searching for me, but many want me for my riches or what I can provide for them."

Sloane is doing such a good job as the king that I barely even register their voice anymore. I only hear the deep arrogant tone of King Thalun and

can imagine him looming above us, his thick brows furrowed in distrust.

“Are you open to providing for us? Because I’d love an actual mattress and a warm dinner tonight,” Lynx/Sanjiv asks.

“I’ll take the gold,” Rolo adds. “I’m used to sleeping on the ground.”

“The only thing I’m prepared to give you is a proposal. I have a mortal enemy and I need you to dispose of it.”

We shift in our seats. I’ve only played in a few campaigns but it’s clear that we’re about to get our first big quest.

“And what is this enemy?” I ask.

“A dragon. It has been plaguing my kingdom and killing my soldiers, and it cannot continue.”

We all look at each other in concern. Killing a dragon is a pretty cliché D&D quest, but that doesn’t make it easy. We’re only Level 2. There’s absolutely no way we can kill a dragon without more experience.

“But surely you couldn’t expect us to defeat a dragon that your own men cannot defeat?” Adris/Logan asks.

“That is why I chose you five. Each of you has particular skills that make you more valuable than a foot soldier, and my children must be eager to prove themselves to me. If you are able to defeat this dragon, you will be richly compensated.”

“Give us a moment to discuss, dearest Papa,” Rolo says, and we all chuckle.

“Don’t anger him further,” Logan warns. “He’s already sending us on a doomed quest as it is.”

“Should we try to negotiate with him?” Sanjiv asks. “Or use our relationship as children to get him to soften? He can’t really want to send his own children to their deaths.”

Kashvi glances at Sloane. “How many other soldiers are in this throne room with us and the king?”

“There are only two, one on either side of the king,” Sloane replies.

“I say we try to get out of these chains and attack them,” Kashvi tells us. “This might be our best chance.”

“No way,” I reply. “We’ve already tried that and we know what’s going to happen. There might only be two here now, but they probably have a whole battalion outside those doors waiting for us. I think we should agree with his request.”

“Agree?” Logan asks. “But Nasria doesn’t trust anyone or anything.”

It isn’t lost on me that Logan and his character are interacting more with me this session. I have to say, it makes the game much more fun.

“True, I don’t trust the king at all,” I reply. “But if we agree, he’ll have to let us go in order to track the dragon, and then we can decide what we’re actually going to do.”

Mark nods approvingly. “Sneaky.”

“Makes sense to me,” Sanjiv replies.

Logan turns to me. “I half expected you to try negotiating with him to save yourself since you aren’t actually in his debt like I am.”

“That’s harsh even for me. You’re one of my party members.”

He cocks his head and gives me a small smile. “Does that mean you’re beginning to trust me?”

“I…I’m not sure yet.” A jolt of adrenaline shoots through me at his expression. “I’m possibly beginning to think about trusting you.”

“Good to know I’ve made a small amount of progress, then.” His gaze is warm, without a hint of sarcasm. “For what it’s worth, I’d trust you with my life.”

I make a strangled sound before I can stop myself. He raises an eyebrow and returns his focus to the others.

Trying to figure out Logan is hard enough when it’s just the two of us, but it’s impossible when we’re sitting at this table. I know I shouldn’t trust anything he says or does here because it’s not him, it’s Adris, a character he especially designed to be charismatic. But it’s still *him* playing his character, right? So if he’s dismissive of me, is that only because our characters don’t get along? If he flirts, is it only his character saying the words? More and more, I’m understanding why it’s important to keep romance away from this livestream. It makes everything a million times more confusing.

We agree to the king’s request and are released to begin tracking down the dragon, though we all agree that we’ll be no match for it. We make our way back into the dense woods only to run into a wyvern. Rolo loses so many

hit points that we almost lose *him,* but by the end of the session everyone is still alive, so I guess that's saying something.

I rub my eyes and slump back into my chair when the cameras turn off. That was exhilarating and draining at the same time.

"Fun session." Sloane chuckles. "Looks like the chat has a new favorite."

"I told you Rolo was a winner. Everyone loves an underdog," Mark says, and puffs up a bit.

"Not you, although they do love you too. There were some concerned comments when you almost died. No, they can't stop talking about our dwarf sorcerer."

I blink, then sit up and look from side to side. "What? Me?"

"One viewer is requesting I bring in another wyvern next time so they can watch you demolish it."

"Do *not* listen to them," Sanjiv says wearily. "We were fighting for our lives out there. I don't know how you expect us to take on a dragon."

"Can you tell who the people in the chat are?" I ask.

Sloane inspects the screen and shakes their head. "No, not really. I mean, my parents watch every game, but I know their usernames. And there's a few friends from school who log on. But otherwise none of the usernames are recognizable." They lean a little closer. "Actually, it looks like you have a fan, too, Kashvi."

"Everyone likes a girl with a sword," she says. "But I'm glad the chat isn't full of haters. And to think there was ever a question of whether we should add Quinn to the group." She raises a playful eyebrow at Logan. "She's our MVP now."

He raises his hands in defense. "I'm happy to admit when I'm wrong. I can't imagine the game now without Quinn—and Nasria—in it."

There's an intimacy in his eyes that makes me jittery. I busy myself with stacking my game books because one look at my face and the group will know my feelings for Logan are quickly becoming less and less platonic.

"That's good," Sloane continues, "because they particularly love listening to your characters bicker. And flirt."

The others look a bit uncomfortable at that news, but Logan only laughs. "I guess we'll have to keep it up, then."

Chapter Sixteen

I'm a swirled-up mess of excitement and nerves when Mom drops me off at Mark's house the following Sunday. Today is the comic book event an hour away, and all of us are commuting together in his van. I can't wait to spend today hanging out with everyone, chatting, eating food, and dressing up. However, an entire day with the group means an entire day with Logan, which is going to add a whole new level of complications.

Luckily, Kashvi and Sanjiv are already in Mark's garage when I arrive, so I'm distracted from these stupid and confusing thoughts.

"Quinn, I'm sorry, *what*?!" Kashvi exclaims as soon as she sees me. "Your costume is whoa!"

I look down with a self-conscious smile. It was hard to find a way to make the "Diana the Acrobat" costume work when it's only forty-five degrees. The original costume was basically a brown fur bikini and knee-high boots with gold accents. Not exactly winter weather appropriate, plus my parents would have had an aneurysm. Instead, I found a short brown skirt at the local thrift shop, which I paired with thick tights and boots I already owned. For the top, I had to get more creative. I ended up deciding on a brown long-sleeved crop top, then added a gold belt and accessories from Grandma's attic boxes. It's an…*abstract* version of the original—more "if you know you know" than the others—but it was the best I could do. And even with all my modifications, I'm still wearing a crop top and miniskirt in the freezing cold.

"Thanks, I tried my best," I say with a shrug. "I didn't want to let the group down. You look awesome. I love how that tunic fits you!"

Kashvi didn't own anything similar to "Sheila the Thief," but I loaned her a patterned purple dress that matches fairly well. It's longer than the tunic from the show, but the color is similar, and it looks great with her blue cape.

Sanjiv steps next to Kashvi to inspect my costume. He's going as "Hank," a ranger and the leader of the party, but honestly, he looks a little goofy in his green bodysuit and tunic. At least his bow is impressive. He nods approvingly. "Wow, nicely done, Quinn."

"You better take your eyes off her, or Mark's staff is going to be in a very inappropriate place in a second," Kashvi threatens.

He jerks his gaze back to the van. "Sorry."

"No problem," I say with a laugh, though my cheeks are pink. I really should have fought to be the wizard, so I'd be completely covered in a billowing green tarp. Instead Mark has it. I hope all that fabric doesn't hinder his driving.

Mark pops out of the van just then and only stares for a second before turning to the others. "I had to clean out the junk and toys, but everyone should be able to fit now."

Sloane is next to arrive, dressed as Bobby the Barbarian. They look adorable in the full costume with a real horned helmet and stuffed unicorn under their arm.

I clap. "You look perfect."

"The helmet keeps falling down, but otherwise I think it came together pretty well. You all look great too."

"They better have a big prize for group costume," Sanjiv says. "This was more work than any of my Halloween costumes."

Mark, Sanjiv, and Kashvi are debating a playlist for the drive when Logan's truck pulls up in front of the house. I fight to keep my expression bland. He's only another friend, I remind myself. It doesn't matter what he's wearing or what he thinks of my costume. This is all just for fun (and the potential for winning free stuff).

Unfortunately, my body takes no notice of my calm and rational thoughts. My heart stutters at the sight of him. I was wrong before—*he* should be the wizard instead of the cavalier because how am I going to keep my eyes off him all day? His costume clings to every muscle and line in his body in a way that jeans and hoodies never could. A breeze whips his long

red cloak behind him and the effect has me swooning for him like I'm in a Regency romance. It's only a costume—and not even a well-designed one—and yet I can't stop staring as he comes around the truck toward us.

Our eyes lock and he misses the step onto the curb. He falls forward to his knees, his cloak getting caught on his boot.

"Oh!" I rush forward to help, but he scrambles and jumps back to his feet.

"I'm fine!" His cheeks are adorably pink. His gaze lingers on me.

"Having inner ear problems?" I ask.

"I think I might be."

Most of the others are too caught up in their conversation to notice anything, but I'm not sure Sloane is fooled. "Nice cloak," Sloane calls to him. "Bit of a tripping hazard, though."

He shakes his head, looking thoroughly embarrassed. "Thanks. Glad to see I'm not the only one who brought it."

"When it comes to D&D, I take everything seriously," Sloane replies.

Why do I hear a warning buried within their words? It must be my nerves making everything seem like a bigger deal than it is. Sloane walks into the garage to join the others and Logan steps closer to me.

"You're going to be cold," he says quietly. His eyes trail down me again and I'm anything but cold with the heat rushing through my veins.

I tug on my tights. "I'm warmer than you'd imagine. These look sheer but they're actually lined with faux fur."

He swallows. "Ah. Smart." His voice is thick.

"Are we ready to go?" Mark asks. "We should have just enough space, but you'll have to fight over seats. The back row might make people carsick."

"I call passenger seat," Sloane yells, and dashes toward the door.

"Fine, but then Kashvi and I should take the center seat," Sanjiv says. "We both get nauseous."

Kashvi makes a face. "We've had some very rough car trips over the years."

My heart thumps knowingly. I guess that leaves…

"Okay, Quinn and I in the back, then," Logan says. "Unless you also get sick?"

"No, I'll be good."

“Me too. Well…” He gestures to the van. “Ladies first, I guess.”

I climb to the very back row and am grateful to see that there’s some space between Logan and me. This ride is going to be tough enough without having my body pressed against his for an hour straight.

The others climb in and Mark puts on some indie rock that’s loud enough to make it difficult to talk.

“How’s the jewelry-making going?” Logan asks once we’re on the road.

“We haven’t had time to do much, but it’s been fun so far. Thanks again for all the dice. That might have beaten out the pancakes as my favorite part of the diner.”

“Don’t let anyone else hear you say that. They’ll think it’s blasphemous that it’s even a question.”

“To be fair, I *know* I love fun dice and making jewelry, but I’ve only had the pancakes once. I’ll need to go back to the diner a few more times first—you know, to make sure they’re consistently good.”

“For science?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, I’m happy to join the experiment, too, then; just tell me next time you’re going. It’ll give me another excuse to hang out with you.”

I turn to him. “Are you looking for excuses?”

“Always. I never want to avoid you, Quinn. But sometimes it feels like I need to, for both our sakes.”

The highway is perfectly flat, but my stomach flips like we just drove over a steep drop in the road. I don’t know how to respond, and I’m grateful that Sanjiv chooses this moment to yell a request for the next song.

“How are those campaigns coming along that you mentioned at the ice cream parlor?” I ask. “Are you still working on them?”

“Yeah. They’re okay.”

He’s clearly uneasy, but for some reason that makes him even cuter. “Will you tell me about them?”

“It’s just…” He looks out the van window and back to me. “My ideas aren’t very creative.”

“I doubt that. You’re probably being too hard on yourself.” I lean closer. “I promise I won’t judge.”

His eyes narrow, like he's assuming I'm going to do exactly the opposite, but then he relents. "My parents and I watch a lot of movies together, and Dad especially loves thrillers. A few months ago, he put on *The Bourne Identity* and it got me thinking that it could be really cool to run a game that has that kind of feel. You know, something where it feels less like the party has a clear quest and more like their mission is to escape before they're killed."

"A campaign that runs like a thriller sounds interesting. Although it feels like escaping is the goal with most of the encounters we run through—like on the ship."

"True. But I want this to be less obvious and more suspenseful."

"So…" I think for a moment. "Something where the party knows they're in danger, but they don't know where the danger's coming from?"

His eyes widen. "Yes. Exactly that! Instead of running into a monster and having to kill it, I want them to feel safe and then realize they're being picked off one by one. That probably makes me sound like the evilest DM ever."

"Not in the least. If the game is fun, people will love it. Have you worked out any of the details yet?"

"Not a whole lot," he says, and rubs the back of his neck. "I do a lot of thinking, but my ideas tend to go in circles. But maybe something where the party is being tracked? Like by an assassin?"

I nod encouragingly before he can second-guess himself, and his words come faster. He might not have everything figured out, but what he has sounds awesome. I can already imagine how the others would freak out if he ran this game with us.

"If I can pull everything together, I'd like to try putting it online for other players to use," he tells me. "It'd be really cool to know that strangers were playing my modules."

"Absolutely. But it'd be even better if *we* could play it." I give him a pointed look. "We should do it after our current campaign. I know the others would be up for it. You could give Sloane a break."

"I don't know. It'll need a lot more work before that. And there's so much pressure knowing that other people will be watching and judging online." He pauses and regards me for a second. "But thanks for being into it. You're the first person I've told, so I'm glad you didn't hate it."

I cock my head. “Of course I didn’t hate it. Thanks for telling me.”

“I have more notes on it back at the house. I could show you over pancakes sometime. Or”—he pauses, his jaw working back and forth—“maybe you could even swing by my place. If you were interested.”

I nod. I am interested—more than I want to admit.

At that moment, Mark blasts “Bohemian Rhapsody” through the van’s speakers, which means that (by law) we’re all required to sing the lyrics at the top of our lungs. But even if we aren’t talking anymore, it doesn’t mean I’m not fully aware of Logan’s presence inches from me. It’s like my entire body has become attuned to him, picking up on the slightest changes that no one else would notice. The small shift in his positioning that brings his knee closer to mine, his hand resting on the seat next to me. What would happen if I put my hand close to his and slightly brushed it? Or if I laced our fingers together like it wasn’t completely weird for us to hold hands? Would he pull away like I’d burned him? Or would he squeeze mine and whisper, *Thank god. I’ve been waiting for you to do that.*

It feels like getting a second life when I finally climb out of that van and into the bright March sunlight. I’m surprised by the crowds around the smallish stand-alone comic shop. It’s not a mob scene, but the parking lot is almost full, and more cars are pulling in. I scan the crowd, but I don’t see Caden, Paige, or any cars I recognize. I take a deep breath and reset my thoughts. No more obsessive thoughts about ex-friends or an off-limits boy. Today is about friendship.

I slide my arm into Kashvi’s. “This is fun!”

“We haven’t done anything yet.” She chuckles.

“I know, but still. It’s fun to be out together.”

The comic fest is an all-day event, including panels of comic writers and illustrators, meet and greets, giveaways, and even a “draw-off,” where people are given a prompt and asked to draw the best cover they can in three minutes. I definitely won’t be doing *that*, but we do sit in on the first panel. When we make it up to the signing table after, the gray-haired writer leans back, his mouth dropping open, and then points to us excitedly.

“Holy hell, are you Hank the Ranger?” He points to Sanjiv. “And Bobby, and Sheila, and even Presto! You’ve got the whole group!” He elbows the illustrator next to him, who is busy signing. “Did you see this?”

The illustrator hands the signed comic to the kid in his line and then glances up. “Going *real* old school, I see. I’m impressed.”

“This is one of my favorite cartoons—such good memories,” the writer says. “I love your attention to detail.” He points to Sloane’s unicorn.

“We play D&D, so it only seemed appropriate,” they explain.

“Are any of you comic fans or did you just come today to blow the others out of the water with your group costume?” the other man asks with a laugh.

“Mostly that last part, but we like comics well enough,” Sanjiv jokes.

“Better head to the back to get registered, then.”

We follow his advice, waiting in line to register for the costume contest and then having our picture taken. A panel of judges is going to compare all the photos before announcing the winners this afternoon. After that, we wander around. The store is larger than I was imagining, with multiple floors, and we quickly get separated. The boys elbow their way through the rows and rows of comics, while Sloane and Kashvi get caught up looking at their modest D&D novel selection.

Everywhere I go, customers stare at me. Lots of other people are in costume, but mostly they wear the standards—Spider-Man, Batman, a few Avengers, and plenty of Star Wars characters. And without the rest of my group around me, it’s probably not even clear that I’m wearing a costume since mine doesn’t have a cloak, wizard hat, or unicorn accompanying it.

The basement holds about five hundred Funko Pops, much to my delight. I’m so busy studying the selection that I don’t notice someone come into my peripheral view until it’s too late.

“That’s quite the outfit.”

My blood turns to ice. Paige stands to my left, her head cocked and her eyes narrowed. I can’t breathe, but I also can’t stop myself from turning to face her. I haven’t seen her since the last day before Christmas break, when she and Makayla breezed past me in the hall of my old high school like I didn’t even exist.

She looks *just* the same. I recognize her leggings from our annual back-to-school shopping trip. She’d been worried they weren’t flattering, and I’d been quick to argue they made her butt look great. Her blond hair is pulled into the same ponytail, her nails are long and bright, and her earrings are the

ones she always wears—tiny hearts given to her by her grandfather before he passed away. And how could I not recognize the hoodie she's wearing?

It's Caden's.

I force air into my lungs and keep my eyes on her, even though I'm desperate to spin around in case Caden is steps from me. I don't want Paige to realize how freaked out I am to see her.

"It's part of a group costume," I explain.

My words come out defensive and her lips lift in a little smirk. "What kind of group has you wearing a skirt like that?"

"My new D&D group—we're going as classic D&D characters."

She laughs humorlessly. "You've already infiltrated a new group?"

"I haven't infiltrated anything. A friend invited me to be part of an extremely fun livestream group, and they've all been really welcoming."

"Oh, so you haven't started ripping them apart, then? It's probably smart to wait a few months so they don't suspect anything." She taps a finger on her chin. "Do you think they're starting to see through you yet, or do I need to fill them in on any details you might have forgotten to mention?"

Her words snap me out of my frozen state. I cross my arms over my chest so she can't see that my hands are shaking. "I didn't do anything but tell Caden we were better as friends. You all destroyed our group without any help from me."

"Quinn, stop pretending you're the victim. You toyed with him while it was fun and then you crushed him. We all saw it. You're just mad because we called you out on it."

My jaw drops open, and my eyes grow scratchy with tears. How did I ever call Paige my best friend? In retrospect, I should have known who she was from her quick judgments and cutting sarcastic words. But she never aimed her cruelty at me, so I brushed it off. Or worse, thought it was funny.

I turn and walk away from her. There's nothing I can do to change her mind or make this better. But I refuse to cry in front of her.

Chapter Seventeen

I race up the stairs and find a corner where I can pull myself together. I study each person in view, but Caden is nowhere to be seen. I'd be shocked if Paige came here on her own, though. I drop my chin to my chest and squeeze my eyes shut. Where were all the words I carefully prepared for her? Where was the pink sweatshirt thrown in her face and the biting *you never deserved me*? But no amount of mental rehearsal could have prepared me for the pain of seeing her face to face. I'd imagined her being taken aback by how badass I looked in my costume—instead, it was one more example of how I'm a tease. And I just stood there and took it before running away like a coward.

Tears threaten to come, and I squeeze my eyes shut and will them away. No crying. It's over. Instead I need to think about what I'm going to do now. I can't stay here since Paige is liable to come upstairs any moment and run into me again, and I can't hide in the bathroom since it's downstairs, where she is right now. There's a grilled cheese food truck outside. It's the perfect excuse to be away from the store.

I find Kashvi and Sloane in the corner looking at mini figures for D&D. "Hey, I'm going to put an order in at the food truck. I'll find you in a bit."

I hurry away before they can ask questions, careful to peek outside to make sure I don't recognize anyone. Once I know the coast is clear, I'm able to breathe properly and order a grilled cheese with tomato and bacon. Unfortunately, there are half a dozen people already waiting, which doesn't bode well for a quick turnaround. I rub my hands up and down my arms to

try to keep warm. At least the cold distracts from everything else in my mind.

A guy dressed as Iron Spider walks over to me, his expression more leering than friendly. He isn't old, but he's definitely out of high school. "Nice costume. Who are you supposed to be?"

"Diana the Acrobat," I mumble.

"I don't know who that is, but I'd love to know who you are."

I shiver and step away. This is the last thing I need right now. "No thanks."

"Sure? You must be cold—we could go inside and wait for our food together."

Someone else steps next to me and I jump away, thinking it might be one of his friends, before realizing its Logan. "Hey." His eyebrows are furrowed. "You okay?"

"It's taking *forever.*" I hope he picks up on the desperation in my voice.

The gross dude eyes Logan. "You with this guy?"

Logan glances at me, as if looking for permission, and I immediately lean into him. He steps closer and puts his arm around my shoulder, pulling me tight to his side. His cloak wraps around my back and it's like I'm being entirely cocooned by him.

"Yeah, she's with me. Why does it matter to you?"

The guy's jaw flexes, but Logan only pulls me tighter to him. I know I don't need a guy to take care of me, but in this moment I'm so grateful to have him here that I practically melt into him.

"Doesn't matter to me in the least," the guy says, and throws me a disgusted look before turning back to his friends.

"Wow. I wasn't expecting pervy guys at the comic event," Logan whispers, and takes his arm from my shoulder.

"Believe me, they're everywhere. Sorry to put you in that position, though."

"Hell no, don't apologize. You shouldn't have to deal with guys like that. I would've been happy to send him packing if he didn't leave on his own. Though he does have a few years on me."

"You could've taken him," I say with a real smile. Everything that's happened in the last fifteen minutes feels less devastating now that Logan is here.

“Oh yeah?” He returns the smile. “Does the armor give me a leg up? Because I should probably be honest—this six-pack is molded into the plastic.”

I laugh and rub my hands up and down my arms again. Food trucks aren’t so fun when you have to stand outside in early March for the food.

“You’re shivering, Quinn.”

“I’m aware. I really didn’t think through this costume.”

“Well, we kind of forced you into it. Here…” He messes with something at his throat and then pulls his cloak off. “Wear this. It won’t be great, but it might help block the breeze.” Instead of handing it to me, he wraps it around me himself, fussing with it so it covers my shoulders and securing it around my throat.

Keep it together, I repeat to myself, and practically lunge for my food when they call my name. A moment later they call Logan. There’s a small parking lot at the back of the store, and they’ve set out a few picnic tables next to outdoor heaters. It’s not the nicest place I’ve ever had a meal, especially with a dumpster in sight, but the heater keeps me from freezing and the grilled cheese is the perfect combination of crispy and melty.

We take a few bites in companionable silence. It’s nice to sit here with Logan and regroup without feeling like I need to force conversation or keep him entertained. After a bit, he pulls up a schedule for the event on his phone.

“Are you having a good time?” I ask.

“Yeah.” He glares at something behind me. “Though it might be more fun with fewer people around.”

“Why?”

He grumbles something that’s more growl than words. “More guys staring at you. Not that I should be surprised when you look like you just walked out of their dreams.”

My bite of grilled cheese lodges in my throat. I glance over my shoulder and the shock of what I see sends that grilled cheese flying out of my mouth. Caden is as recognizable to me as my mom, even though I only see him in profile. I hack and pound my chest, then shoot to my feet. Another guy I don’t recognize catches my eye and I spin back to face Logan.

“I need to go.”

“What?” Logan stands with me. “Why?”

“I’ve got to go. I can’t be here.” I toss the last of my sandwich in the trash and sprint through the parking lot. I have no thoughts other than *escape*. I don’t think Caden noticed me yet, but I can’t be sure. I catch sight of a stairwell that leads down to the basement of the comic shop, partially blocked by the dumpster. I race down the few steps until I’m hidden from view.

Logan stands at street level, his eyes wide and worried. He crosses his arms over his chest.

“Quinn, what the hell is going on? Are you hiding from someone?”

“Just—” I wave for him to come down. “Don’t stand there calling attention to yourself.”

He looks around in confusion and then comes to stand next to me. It’s tight quarters, the space just wide enough for a doorway. I step back to give him some room and squeeze my eyes shut with embarrassment.

“Why are we standing in a dirty doorway right now?”

I sniffle and drop my head into my hands. Why did Caden and Paige have to come here today? She’s probably already told him about our conversation. They laughed about it and texted the others to tell them, unless Travis and Makayla are somewhere around here too.

Logan takes my elbow. “Okay, I’m not sure what’s happening, but this is weird and we should go.”

I pull away. “I can’t see him right now.”

“See *who*?”

“Caden—one of the ex-friends from my old school.”

“He’s here?” Logan moves like he’s going to climb up the stairs to look around.

I jerk him back. “Don’t call attention to us. The last thing I need is to hear his opinions about this costume after already running into Paige.”

“What could he possibly say other than you’re gorgeous?”

Logan’s expression is confused, almost naïve. I rub my eyes with the backs of my hands.

“He could say a lot, Logan. He already thinks I’m a tease, so seeing me walking around wearing *this* would definitely bring out more observations about how I encouraged his feelings for me and then laid waste to him and

the group.” I rub my hands down my thighs. “I shouldn’t have worn this stupid costume. It’s too tight. It calls attention to me like a bullhorn.”

“No, stop.” Logan steps closer and takes hold of my arms. “Listen to me. I don’t know what this guy’s problem is, but it’s *his* problem. Not yours. You don’t need to change your clothes or what you say or how you act because of him. You’re not doing anything wrong.”

“And would you say the same thing if I kissed you and then told you I wasn’t interested?” My gaze collides with his, defiance and fear swirling through me.

“Yes.” He studies me. “You don’t owe me anything, Quinn. Not now. Not ever.”

I squeeze my eyes shut to keep the tears away.

“You shouldn’t be the one hiding behind the trash.”

His words make me shake. I’ve been trying so hard to forget everything and start fresh, but I can’t forget it all. And I don’t want to march up to Caden and tell him off either. I don’t want to interact with any of them ever again.

But rather than say all that, I only take a step toward the basement door.

“Okay.” Logan’s voice is just a whisper now. He pulls his cloak tightly around me like it’s a blanket he can wrap me in. “It’s fine. We’ll do whatever you want.”

“I know I look like such a loser, hiding behind a dumpster like this. You don’t have to stay with me.”

His nostrils flare. “I’m not leaving you. The only place I want to be is next to you.”

“Logan…you shouldn’t say things like that.” I shake my head. “What happened to the group rules? And you saying you shouldn’t be around me? I can’t figure out what’s going on with us.”

“I can’t either.”

I look up to the sky and blow out a frustrated breath. “Then that’s even worse.”

“Believe me, I know what I want. But I also know I’m not allowed to have it.” The heat of his expression jolts me.

“This will only lead to trouble,” I whisper.

His eyes darken and he steps closer. “Sometimes trouble can be good. I’ll take whatever trouble you want to give me.”

Fire dances up my spine and through every nerve in my body.

He raises a hand to my face and brushes his fingers through my hair. “You wouldn’t believe how long I’ve wanted to do that.”

I can’t help it. I lean into his hand. His touch feels so good—comforting and relaxing and right—but my heart is thundering with anticipation and fear of what this means.

“I know I was a jerk to you when you were debating joining the game and I’m sorry,” he continues. “I thought maybe if I was rude enough, then you’d decide the game wasn’t worth it. Which, I admit, was a really selfish plan. And once it was clear that wouldn’t work, I tried ignoring you. I tried staying away. But it turns out ignoring you is almost impossible.”

His fingers skim down my cheek to my neck. “You’re addicting, Quinn. I talk to you for a minute, and it makes me want to talk for an hour. I touch you for a second…” He brings his other hand up so I’m perfectly positioned to kiss him. “And I’m going to want more.”

I’m putty in his hands. I’m seconds from lifting onto my toes to kiss him and ending the misery building inside me. But a tiny voice of self-preservation shouts at me from the back of my mind. The worst experience of my life happened because I got involved with someone in my game. I lost my best friend. I lost my entire circle of friends. It wasn’t my fault, and it shouldn’t have happened that way, but that doesn’t change the fact that it *did* happen. And maybe, if I’d never gone on that date with Caden, everything would be different now. I don’t want to repeat the same mistakes.

“Logan…” I pull away and rub my hands over my eyes like I can rub some common sense into my brain. “I don’t know.”

He pulls his hands from me. “That’s fine. I meant what I said—you don’t owe me anything. But I promise, I would never treat you the way he did. You deserve so much better than that.”

“It’s not just that. Things like this can ruin friend groups. And D&D groups. You said it yourself when I first joined—there’s a rule against dating party members for a reason. It makes everything *messy.* You love being part of this group and so do I. I love hanging out with everyone—they’re all so tight-knit and I’m grateful they’ve included me. I can’t lie to them.”

“Right, yes. I did say that. I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize the group either.” He might be agreeing with me, but his eyes are still on my lips.

“Friends don’t look at each other like this.” I swallow. “And they don’t touch each other.”

“I’m well aware.” He takes a step away and puts his hands behind his back. “You have no idea how much self-control I’ve had to build up since meeting you.”

“I might have some idea. And you seem determined to tear down the thin layer of self-control I have left.”

“Thin?” he says hopefully.

“Thinner than the flimsy pages in the comics you just bought.”

He leans toward me again and then pulls away. We probably both look drunk, swaying into each other like this.

“But we’ve decided?” I whisper.

“It’s decided. Totally platonic. Nothing more.”

I nod. “And just out of morbid curiosity, if that self-control of yours had dropped a moment ago?”

“Then I’d have pressed you against that door and kissed you until the sun went down and I was your only source of heat.”

“Oh.” I try to swallow. “That’s, um, good to know.”

“Logan?” Kashvi’s voice calls from far away. *“Quinn?”*

I jolt back to reality. Holy hell, I’d forgotten anyone else was around. From the dazed look in Logan’s eyes, I’m pretty sure I’m not the only one.

Guilt swirls in me as we climb the steps. That was so close. What if Kashvi had found us hidden away like that? Or doing something more than talking?

“Quinn, are— Oh! Hey!” Kashvi hurries over. She looks between us and the small doorway we just came from. Her eyebrows lower and I know her mind is whirling, trying to understand what we possibly could have been doing down there together.

“Hey!” I wave too enthusiastically. “I missed you.”

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you. What were…”

I glance around, but Caden is nowhere to be seen, thank god. “People from my old group showed up here—the ones I told you about. I didn’t want to talk to them so, well, I ran off and hid.” Another wave of

embarrassment washes over me. “Not my proudest moment, but Logan was nice enough to hide with me.”

Any confusion or worry drops from her face. “Are you freaking kidding me? They’re *here*?” She whips her head around. “Point me in the right direction so I can tell them off!”

“My thoughts exactly,” Logan mutters.

“They’re gone now—don’t worry about it. I’ve already gotten the best revenge, which is you all.”

Kashvi, Logan, the whole group—they’re all so good. I can’t lose them. Even if it means I can never have him.

Chapter Eighteen

It turns out Kashvi was looking for us because we won group costume. Winning means matching winner buttons, a lot of photos for the store's social media, and gift certificates for store merchandise. We've pretty much done everything there is to do, so we head out after that. I'm already anticipating a potentially torturous ride back next to Logan, but he calls Sanjiv to the back with him to look at comics, so I ride next to Kashvi instead. I'm both relieved and disappointed. I'm the worst hypocrite, but I can't help wanting to spend every second I can get next to Logan.

I recommend us listening to my favorite D&D podcast—*The Smiling DM*—rather than have everyone fight over music choices, and soon the whole car is laughing along with Stephanie and the zany campaign she's put together. I'm glad they all like it as much as I do, but it's hard to fully concentrate when I know Logan is right behind me. His words echo through my mind.

Then I'd have pressed you against that door and kissed you until the sun went down and I was your only source of heat.

How can a person have a logical thought when that sentence is on their mind?

"Does anyone want to hang out?" Mark asks when we're back at his house. "Maybe a frozen pizza and a game of *Catan*?"

"I'm in," Sanjiv replies. He's always up for everything.

Sloane and Logan both shake their heads. "Work," Sloane explains. "But come by if you want more pancakes."

"Same," Logan says. "I'm closing tonight."

“Who buys ice cream in the middle of winter?” Sanjiv asks.

“You’d be surprised.” Logan rolls his eyes.

Another gust of cold air hits my back and I shiver. “Sorry, I want to get home and into something soft and warm.”

“I can drive you,” Logan says immediately.

My heart leaps in my chest. That sounds simultaneously like the best and worst decision.

“You just said you have to work,” I argue. “It’ll be out of your way.”

“Your house isn’t that far from the shop.”

Can everyone else feel the heat of his words? It’s like they’re pressing into my skin.

“I’m happy to drive you, too, if you need a ride,” Kashvi says.

“If you don’t mind,” I tell her, and give Logan a small smile—careful not to meet his eye for more than a moment—before saying goodbye to everyone.

Kashvi and I spend the first few minutes of the drive rehashing the day, particularly our favorite costumes from the other customers. Mine was probably the blond girl dressed as a brightly colored bard complete with her own lute.

“How are you feeling after your run-in?” Kashvi asks. “It must have been horrible seeing your old friends again like that.”

I slump into the seat a bit more. “Yeah, it was. I didn’t talk to Caden, thank god. But I couldn’t avoid Paige.”

“Did she sound apologetic at all?”

“The exact opposite, actually.”

I kick myself again for the missed opportunity to say everything I’ve wanted to. I could have told her how grateful I am now that she’s out of my life. That it felt like cutting out a sore that was rotting me from the inside. That nothing had changed for me without her, except I was happier. Although, given the fact that I was practically hyperventilating in the corner after talking to her for a few minutes, she clearly still has an effect on me.

“I wish I’d been there,” Kashvi practically growls. “I’d have told her what a selfish, two-faced ex-friend she is. But at least you had Logan with you for moral support.”

“Mmm, yes.” My heart races at the memory. Yep, Logan was *definitely* up for supporting me in whatever way I wanted him to.

In my mind, he lifts his hand to my cheek again and I imagine what it might have been like had I leaned forward and kissed him. Maybe it wouldn't have been a good kiss and I'd have put everything in jeopardy for nothing. Maybe I would have kissed him and realized there was nothing between us, like what happened with Caden. But I never swayed in Caden's presence the way I do with Logan. I never even particularly liked talking to him when the rest of the group wasn't around, but I'd happily spend hours talking to Logan about D&D campaigns, or possibly anything at all.

"It was nice of him to give you this." Kashvi tugs on the cloak that's spread across the seat, and my stomach twists with guilt. I've got to get my mind off him.

"It wasn't a big deal—I got cold waiting for food outside."

"That sounds like Logan. As kind as he is cute." Kashvi raises her eyebrows at me as she parks in front of my house. Oh god, my emotions must be so obvious it's like they're written across my forehead for anyone to read.

I jump out of the car, feeling jittery. "Thanks for the ride. I'd invite you in, but my parents are scraping wallpaper off the hallway walls and it's a total mess in there."

"No problem, I'm ready to get into pajamas and curl under at least three blankets. It was fun hanging out today, though!"

"Absolutely. See you soon."

I wait until she's driven down the street and take a deep breath. Well, I don't *think* she suspected anything. Not really. Now I just need to make sure that continues…forever…and everything will be good. No big deal.

I pull out my phone, debating if I should text Logan to tell him I still have his cloak or if that's asking for trouble, only to find that he's already texted me.

Logan: *I wish you had let me drive you home*

I tip my head up to the sky and moan. As much as I wish I could shove my phone back in my bag and forget him or tell him to stop texting me…I wish he'd driven me home too.

"Why are you moaning?"

I spin to find Andrew outside holding a trash bag. He's wearing sweatpants and an old soccer T-shirt with some paint splatters. Looks like I missed out on a big workday.

“And why are you wearing *that*?” His expression is a mixture of shock and disgust as he takes in my revealing costume.

“We all dressed up in costumes. Stop spying on me.”

“Are you supposed to be a Kardashian or something?”

I groan. “Never mind, it doesn’t matter.”

“Was that Kashvi in the car?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“You should have invited her in.” He stares down the street even though she’s already long gone.

“What’s with you and Kashvi anyway?” I ask. My tone comes out more accusatory than I mean for it to, but I’m at my emotional limit. “You were acting weird at the soccer game too.”

“She’s cute, she’s cool, she helps me in biology. She isn’t dating anyone, right?”

“No, but she’s also older than you *and* she’s my friend.”

He grins at me. “I have no problem dating older women. And I’ll try not to hold your friendship against her—her judgment in friends clearly isn’t flawless, but she can’t be perfect.”

“In your dreams, Andrew.”

He only grins wider. “You don’t want to know what’s in my dreams.”

“Oh my god, get *out* of here, you perv!” I pick up a rock from the driveway and throw it at him.

He easily dodges, shoves the bag into the trash can, and jogs back into the house. I know I only have moments until he announces to my parents that I’m home, but my fingers hover over the phone screen as I reread Logan’s text.

Quinn: *I accidentally kept your cloak*

Logan: *Keep it. Or you could bring it by the shop tonight if you have time. I’ll have a break around six*

My paper-thin self-control flutters. My parents would understand if I needed to return something—it would be an easy excuse to see him again. But each time we’re alone together, it only amps up the temptation to act on things we agreed to forget.

Quinn: *I’ll bring it to the game next Saturday*

My phone buzzes with a new text, but this one isn’t from Logan.

Grandma: *One of my usual pickleball opponents broke her hip. Can I count on you to fill in for her tomorrow after school?*

I'm not entirely sure what pickleball is, but isn't it something physical? Why is Grandma playing any type of physical game at all? That sounds dangerous.

Quinn: *Maybe this is a sign to take a rest from it. It sounds intense*

Grandma: *Absolutely not. She didn't break her hip while playing*

She sends another text with an address for the same sports complex where Andrew plays indoor soccer.

Logan: *Your grandma just invited me to play pickleball*

I cuss under my breath. I'll give her this—Grandma has impeccable timing.

Quinn: *I'm sorry. You don't have to go*

Logan: *If you havent noticed, your grandma doesnt understand the word no*

Quinn: *She texted me too. I guess we're supposed to fill in for someone who broke her hip??*

Logan: *I don't even know what pickleball is. Do we throw pickles at each other?*

Quinn: *That sounds like a real waste of pickles.*

Logan: *I hate the things so I'm happy to throw them at you.*

I shake my head, the image making me laugh.

Logan: *I'm in if you are. But I need to get my truck into the shop this week, so I doubt I can drive myself*

My breath catches. He's really willing to do this? What boy would *ever* be interested in playing sports with elderly women, even if it also means hanging out with someone his own age?

Quinn: *You really don't have to. I'll make an excuse for you*

Logan: *I don't want an excuse. Unless you don't want me to come*

Quinn: *I didn't say that. Though maybe it's safest if you don't?*

A text bubble hovers on my screen for too long, as if he's debating what to say. Finally another message pops up.

Logan: *Playing geriatric sports is the safest thing we can possibly do together. It's like putting in volunteer hours. I should add it to my college applications.*

I snort with laughter, feeling more relieved and excited than I probably should. It would be a bald-faced lie to say I don't want to hang out with Logan again.

Quinn: *Pickleball it is then. Grandma's going to be thrilled*

I'll be fine. Logan's right—there can't be sexual tension when we're playing geriatric sports. It'll just be fun. And a college app padder.

Chapter Nineteen

Logan strides through the parking lot after school Monday and comes around to the passenger side of my car. It's quite the reversal to be driving someone else around, but my parents were so thrilled when they heard we were playing with Grandma that they readily agreed to carpool and let me take the second car.

"Are you ready for this?" I ask, and try to ignore how heat floods my veins as he sits down.

Logan grins. "You mean, am I ready to have my life changed forever?"

"You betcha." I put the car in reverse. I'm not sure how this afternoon is going to go, but if the way my body is jangling from his mere presence is any indication, I'll be tripping over my own feet and crashing into the net.

"Did you Google this weird game to figure out what we're in for?"

I shake my head. "I didn't have time. I figure it can't be too intense if Grandma does it. I'm sure we can pick it up."

"I have pretty good hand-eye coordination, so I'm giving her a run for her money." He winks. "I can't let her off too easy."

A short while later, we pull into the parking lot of the sports complex where the indoor pickleball courts are located. Grandma is standing by the entrance next to a man who must be ten years her senior. He's wearing a Marines Veteran baseball cap and a tight white shirt with a gold chain. Logan and I quickly glance at each other in concern. This really does not seem like a good idea, but they certainly look serious. Grandma is even wearing workout clothes—lavender joggers, a long-sleeved black shirt, and tennis shoes—which is wild when I'm used to seeing her in vibrant dress

clothes and pearls. I traded out my usual sweaters and skirts for a pair of embroidered jeans and a long-sleeved shirt covered with constellations, but that's as close as I've gotten to workout clothes. Logan's wearing the same things he always does. That's a relief because he's distracting enough when he's wearing jeans and a long-sleeve shirt. I couldn't keep my eyes to myself if he was wearing tight athletic gear.

"You made it!" she calls. "See, I knew you kids wouldn't blow us off. You're too good to do that." She turns to the man. "You shouldn't have second-guessed them, Jim."

"I was just worried we wouldn't be able to play today. It's the highlight of my week."

I inwardly groan. I have to play a weird game *and* watch an old man flirt with my grandma? No thank you.

They sign us in and walk us back to the courts. I was nervous about hanging out with Logan after yesterday, but this is the opposite of awkward—it's easy and laid-back. This is exactly the kind of thing I should be doing with him, where there's no tension and we can just have fun. Plus, I like seeing this playful side of him.

"Do you need to get changed?" she asks.

"We'll be fine."

"Suit yourself." She hands us two large paddles that look like oversized Ping-Pong paddles. At first glance, our court appears to be a shrunken tennis court with lines drawn a little differently. The realization makes me even less worried about the whole thing. I'm not a tennis pro by any means, but I've played before, so I feel pretty comfortable. Logan also looks unbothered.

"Are you kids ready to get your butts handed to you?" Grandma asks.

Logan hoots with laughter. "I see the trash talk starts immediately. I wouldn't be too confident, though. We've got this." Logan and I high-five in early celebration. Grandma serves and my first impression is that you need to be fast with pickleball. In tennis, the court is big enough that you can often get a moment of lag time to assess where the ball is going to land and then ready your swing for it, but with this small court, there's hardly time to think. Logan manages to return the serve, but then Jim's volleying it at me and I completely miss it. I groan and run to get the ball.

"That's okay, we're just warming up," Logan calls behind me.

Ugh, I don’t want to make a fool of myself. Logan serves this time and Grandma easily returns it. I hit it back, but then Jim returns it hard enough that Logan has to lunge to get it. He misses and Grandma and Jim high-five in delight.

“This is already more fun than playing Elaine and Harvey,” Grandma tells him. “Those two were hard.”

I put a hand on my hip. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

“We haven’t seen anything at all so far,” Jim replies.

“Elderly people are vicious,” Logan whispers.

I smirk and train my eyes across the net before I get distracted by him and miss another point. We do a bit better with the next few serves, even managing to score a few points, but Grandma and Jim are way better at this than I was imagining. Grandma doesn’t even need to move much and she’s still able to hit most of the balls that come her way. Jim is quick to get the others. This time, when Jim serves, Logan lunges forward immediately and hits the ball into Grandma’s court. She’s not ready and lets the ball bounce twice.

“Woot!” Logan yells, and does a butt-shaking victory dance. Of course he has to be adorable even when he’s being a dork. “That’s what I’m talking about!”

“No way, that doesn’t count!” Grandma yells. “You were in the kitchen.”

“In the what?” Logan says.

“You can’t be in the kitchen like that. You have to wait for the ball to bounce.”

My eyebrows furrow in confusion. Why is she talking about kitchens in the middle of our game?

“Grandma? We’re playing pickleball. There’s no kitchen here.”

Grandma and Jim burst out laughing. They’re so loud that the basketball game happening a few courts over pauses to see what’s so funny. What the hell is going on?

“Oh, that’s a good one!” Jim wipes at his eyes. “Have you kids looked up nothing about this game?”

I slowly shake my head, fighting annoyance that they’re laughing so hard at me.

“You’re standing in the kitchen right now.” He points to the section of the court closest to the net and painted a different color. “Now back up so I can get another point.”

I do as he says, having no idea what’s going on.

Fifteen minutes later, Logan is at my side with a wild expression. The score is nine to eight, and we’re still losing to them. We only play to eleven points, so it’s now or never.

“Quinn, we’ve got to beat them. No more Miss Nice Granddaughter. You need to smash that ball at your grandma as hard as you can.”

“Logan! She’s seventy-five—I’m not going to do that!”

Although…I’m tempted.

“We have to! It’s not like they’re taking it easy on us. They’re clearly pickleball prodigies or something!”

“I’m pretty sure prodigies are supposed to be young.” I bite my lip. His hair is tousled from running his hands through it and his cheeks are flushed. He leans farther forward until our faces are only inches apart and my heart speeds at his nearness.

“Call it out when you’re going for the ball so there’s no confusion,” he whispers. “And try to hit toward Jim’s left side. He seems weaker there. I bet he’s got a trick hip or something.”

A giggle escapes my lips. “What have we gotten ourselves into?”

“War, Quinn. This is pickleball war. And I’m not losing.”

I salute him. “Yes, sir.”

We actually get a point on the next round—tying us for the first time at nine points each—but we’re fighting for our lives out here on this tiny court. The volleying back and forth is insane. It’s amazing how Grandma and Jim can keep the ball from hitting the ground without having to move much at all.

“Next point.” Jim returns the ball in an arcing downward motion, and I completely miss it. Why is this game deceptively hard? Or am I just too distracted by my partner to play well?

“Ten to nine. Nice dink, Jim!” Grandma yells, and gives him a thumbs-up.

He bows.

“What’d you say?” I ask, readying my serve.

“A dink! Jim is great with dinks.”

I turn to Logan. He mouths, *What the hell?* and we burst out laughing.

"Stop flirting and start serving," Jim calls.

That sobers me right up. Logan puts up a hand to stop me and comes to my side. "If they get one more point, then they win," he tells me, like I'm not already fully aware. He takes two fingers and points back and forth between my eyes and his. "We've got like sixty-five years on these two. We *will* win this game. Team Dink!"

"I still don't know what that is!" I reply as he returns to his side.

"No one does," he cries, bouncing on the balls of his feet. "It's gibberish to confuse us!"

I serve the pickleball and Grandma returns the serve easily. Logan lunges for it.

"Dink it!" I cry out randomly, and Logan laughs as the ball connects with his paddle. This may be the weirdest game in the world, but it's pretty good exercise. My legs are getting sore, I'm sweating in my jeans (which I'm highly regretting wearing), and my heart is working double time—although there's likely a secondary cause for that.

Grandma returns the ball right down the midline that separates my side of the court from Logan's. I don't think; I only lunge for the ball. Unfortunately, Logan does the same thing. We both realize and try to slow our momentum, but it's too late. The ball goes flying past us and we knock into each other—a tangle of arms and legs and pickleball paddles—and drop like a heavy sack of trash. The air is knocked out of my lungs and Logan lands half on top of me.

We both groan and suck in a breath. "I think I broke a hip," he whispers, and rolls onto his back.

Grandma calls out to us in concern, and I give her a thumbs-up to show I'm not dead. We've officially gotten schooled by elderly pickleball ringers on social security.

"This is humbling," I whisper back. I turn my head to look over at him and he does the same. Fire races through me. I'd happily be embarrassed by my grandma every day if I could lie like this with Logan.

He leans up on an elbow and his eyes trail up and down my body. "Are you actually hurt?" A wrinkle shows in his forehead.

"Physically, I'm fine. Emotionally…"

“Same.” He gets to his feet and reaches his hand out to me. I take it, loving the way his warm fingers wrap around my palm, and stand up. I land just a little too close to him, but I don’t step away immediately and neither does he.

“You two okay?” Grandma calls, mischief in her voice. “Looks like you’re swaying a bit there, Quinn.”

My cheeks heat even more. I step back from Logan. “Just catching my breath.”

“No need,” Jim says with a hoot. “That was game point. You’re welcome to play with us as often as you’d like, though. I love winning.”

“We might have scared them away,” Grandma says. “We should have taken it easier on them.”

I’m out of breath, I’m sore, and I still don’t know how this game works. But that does nothing to dim the grin on my face. I point at Grandma.

“Don’t speak so fast, old lady. We’re taking you down next time.”

“What your granddaughter said,” Logan replies, and we high-five again. “Happy to be your partner anytime.”

I could get used to this.

Chapter Twenty

"Soooooo, that was intense," Logan says as I drive down the country road to his house.

When I told him I would drive him to pickleball because of his truck, I hadn't fully thought through the details of driving him home. Not that I mind, but it's a long drive since he lives out in the country, and the sun is already setting. It's a lot of time to be alone with someone I probably shouldn't be alone with.

"Extremely intense," I reply, happy for a neutral conversation topic. "At least Grandma had a good time."

"Oh, she had a *great* time. It looks like she might have a boyfriend too."

I shudder. I don't want to think about Grandma and boyfriends.

"Don't be a hater. Everyone deserves to have someone in their life who loves them, no matter their age," he says.

I feel his eyes on the side of my face, but I keep my focus on the road and tighten my grip on the steering wheel. So much for neutral conversations. When we pull up to his house, I slow down to take it all in.

"Whoa. So you're, like, a *farmer.*"

He waves dismissively at the house and land. "That's my dad, not me. And this is nothing—you should see a real farm. My dad always wanted to live in the country with a bunch of animals since he grew up in Cleveland, so my parents bought this place as soon as they could afford it. Now Dad spends every free minute taking care of it."

I bet. There are probably lots of larger farms around here, but what I'm looking at seems pretty impressive. In front of me stands an old farmhouse with white siding, blue shutters, and a front porch with some paint missing. Behind it is a large barn with a tractor parked outside. It's even red with a huge quilt block painted on it like something out of a "country life" calendar.

"It's nice to see where you live," I reply hesitantly. I'm not sure what the etiquette is here. Should I say goodbye and drive away? Or is he going to invite me in? This is worlds apart from when he drove me home in February.

He opens his passenger side door. "Do you want to meet the calf that my mom is bottle-feeding?" His voice is a little unsure.

"Do I want to meet an animal so small it needs to be fed with a bottle? Um, *yeah.* Very much so."

I follow him to the barn, excited and nervous. He pulls open the sliding door and ushers me inside. The ground is packed dirt and on either side are horse stalls. Each is closed by a wooden half door at the bottom, while the top half is open. None of them seem to be occupied, though a few have stacks of tools and supplies.

"No horses?"

"No, Dad says they're too expensive. Mom keeps begging him, though, so I think it's only a matter of time. But we're keeping the calf over here. It's too cold to have her outside all the time."

He motions me over to a stall and I peek down to find a tiny brown cow with the largest round eyes and eyelashes. She's only as large as a golden retriever and is practically the same color. She trots over and I immediately put out my hand to pet her.

"Logan, ahhh!" I squeak with joy. "She's adorable!"

He opens the stall door so we can walk inside.

"Is it okay for us to be in here with her?"

He nods. "Oh yeah, she's used to humans. Mom is absolutely babying her. She treats her like the youngest member of the family."

"I don't blame your mom." I pet her again and debate throwing my arms around her neck in a huge hug. "I'm already in love with her."

"She's pretty cute," he says begrudgingly, but his expression is warm when he looks between us. "Dad was hoping to fatten her up and put her on

the market, but I'm pretty sure she's going to become a pet."

I turn to him with wide eyes. "The market? You don't mean…"

"Dad doesn't do this just for the fun of it," he says with a shrug. "That's how he makes money."

The calf pushes her nose into my hand, and I pet her more vigorously. She rubs her body up against me, and even though she's little, she's still heavy enough to push me off balance. Logan's hand touches the small of my back to center me.

"You can't sell her. She's just a precious little baby."

He groans. "Oh boy, you're just like Mom."

"Her floppy ears are so soft."

"She likes you." His voice is uneven. "She's usually only like this with Mom."

"That *could* be because you and your dad are planning on killing her."

He winces. "Shhh, don't say that in front of her."

"I think she likes me because she has good taste."

He leans up against the side of the stall with a lopsided grin. "The only thing she cares about tasting is milk. Otherwise, she has no taste."

"That's both rude and untrue," I retort with a smile so he knows I'm not actually mad.

Someone clears their throat behind us. We both jump and turn to find an older man in faded jeans and a Carhartt jacket. He has his arms crossed over his chest and his expression isn't exactly welcoming, more like he's sizing up the situation.

"It's a little hard to get your chores done when you're standing around."

Logan straightens and rubs the back of his neck. "Hey, Dad. Sorry, Quinn drove me home, so I thought I'd introduce her to the calf."

"Introduce her to animals before you introduce her to people?" Logan's dad chuckles slightly and it softens the lines of his face. "Maybe that was a good choice, actually." He walks forward and sticks out his hand. "I'm Chuck, Logan's dad. I hear you're Barbara's granddaughter. You don't find many people better than her."

"She'll love to hear that." I shake his hand and ignore the swell of nerves at the fact that I'm meeting one of Logan's parents. "It's nice to meet you. Your farm is amazing."

He smiles broadly. “One of the joys of my life. I see you’re getting along with Susie Q?”

“Is that her name?”

“That’s what Mom named her,” Logan says, and he and his dad share an eye roll.

“As soon as she names an animal, I know they’re off-limits,” Chuck says conspiratorially.

“It sounds like she and I need to go around and name every animal on the farm, then.”

Chuck groans. “Oh no, I can’t have two of you roaming around. Are you staying for dinner?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t. My parents are anxiously awaiting all the details of the pickleball game today.” I give a final pat to Susie Q and step out of the stall.

“Bring your boots next time and I’ll put you to work,” Chuck tells me. “As long as you don’t name the animals.”

Logan groans. “We’re not putting Quinn to work on the farm.”

“Isn’t that what she did with you, having you help at Barbara’s? Or was that just an excuse to spend more time with your girlfriend?”

Logan’s cheeks redden and mine do the same. *Girlfriend?* God, our group would freak out if they heard Logan’s dad say that.

“She’s not my girlfriend and it’s not an excuse.”

“Well, you’re always welcome,” Chuck says to me. It’s easy to be intimidated by him, with his gruff voice and stern expression, but the twinkle in his eyes tells me I haven’t made a terrible first impression. He nods to his son. “I’ll see you inside. Don’t linger, food’s almost on the table.”

Logan walks me back down the gravel driveway to the car. “I know Dad seems crotchety, but he’s all right. He means well.”

“He can’t scare me away from Susie Q. And I won’t make promises about the names either.”

We walk past a little shed on the way back to the car. “That’s *so* cute.” This one is made of stacked stone and the roof is covered in moss. I’m immediately drawn to it.

Logan pauses, looking between me and the shed. “Dad gathered all those stones when he was putting in the vegetable garden a few years ago. It

was supposed to be for tools, but then Mom claimed it as a she-shed. But it turned out to be a little rustic for her, so now it's mine."

"It's yours?" I lean a little closer, but I can't see inside through the small window.

"My bedroom is cramped, so I keep a lot of my books and D&D stuff out there. It's a great place to work."

"Oh, this is the place you mentioned before? Wow, I love it. Actually, I was thinking more about your campaign idea." We walk slowly toward my car again. "I had some inspiration but feel free to shoot me down if you don't like it."

"You're still thinking about that?"

"Is that okay? I wasn't lying when I said I thought it sounded fun."

"No, I don't mind. I'm just surprised. So what were you thinking?"

"What if you gave the group a quest where they need to protect someone and deliver them…somewhere, I don't know the details. But there's a character—like a prince or something—and the group is acting as his bodyguards and they're having regular encounters, but then they realize they're also being followed."

He twists to face me. "By the assassin? That could work. And maybe at first it seems like the assassin is trying to kill the guy they're protecting—"

"But then they realize the assassin is trying to kill them all. Wait, Logan, oh my god!" I throw my hands in the air. "What if it turns out that the prince guy *hired* the assassin? The group thinks they're protecting this guy and really this has been a long con to kill them all over some sort of vendetta! The assassin and prince could be secretly working together to destroy the group and they have to fight them both."

His eyes light up. "Wow. Quinn, you're an absolute genius."

"Yeah? Awesome, I'm glad you like the idea!"

"I love it."

We pause in front of my car. The sun has gone down in the time it's taken to drive and meet Susie Q. It's especially dark here with no streetlights or ambient lighting from other houses or businesses. I can even see a few stars above us. A blast of wind cuts right through my jacket and down my neck. I shiver and wrap my arms around myself.

Logan frowns and his hands rub up and down my upper arms. "Every time I see you, you're cold. You should get going." But rather than releasing

me, his hands slow and he pulls me slightly closer to him. “I was thinking…I know we agreed to just be friends, but maybe before we decide that for sure, we should talk to the others? About…*us*?”

Us.

A thrill goes through me at the single word and all that it implies. But fear rushes in and pushes away the excitement. What if I start something with Logan and it ruins everything like last time?

“I don’t know. It’ll change the dynamic of the group—it could change everything.”

“And you don’t want things to change?” His voice is impossibly low.

“I’d like some things to change. But not everything—not the group. I’m just starting to feel like they’re truly my friends. I’m sorry.” I bite my lower lip, and Logan’s gaze drops to it.

“I get it,” he continues. “But just as a warning, calling attention to your mouth around me right now is a very risky idea.”

I’m already anticipating the way it would feel if he drew me to him to keep me warm. Or if he came even closer and kissed me. His fingers tighten on my arms and his eyes drop to my mouth again.

A bell clangs in the distance, and we both flinch.

“The dinner bell,” he explains with a wince.

I laugh nervously and step away. “Sounds like they’re waiting for you.”

“Thanks for driving and meeting Susie Q.”

“Thanks for playing pickleball.”

I raise a hand in goodbye and head over to my car. There’s a lot more I want to say, but right now silence seems to be the safest choice.

Chapter Twenty-One

The next morning, I wake up to a photo of Susie Q, along with a text from Logan.

Logan: *She misses you*

My grogginess fades as I read the words. I zoom in on the adorable photo—she's drinking from a bottle, which I didn't get to see last night.

Quinn: *That's because she has good taste, and not just for milk*

Logan: *You might be right about that*

Quinn: *Is this an old photo? Please tell me you weren't up early enough this morning to take this.*

Logan: *5:30*

Quinn: *I just died and came back to life at the idea*

Logan: *I'm used to it*

Quinn: *Well I'm not and I still need to get ready*

Logan: *I'll text with any farm updates*

And he does. Not exactly about farm stuff, or at least not only about that. He texts to complain about his English teacher and I reply back about pre-calc. In the evening, I send him a photo of the bracelet I made with his dice, and in the morning I find a series of texts about the novel he's reading. The following day, there are more texts than the day before. Nothing about them is romantic—I could hand my phone to my mom or Kashvi and there'd be nothing to raise an eyebrow over.

And yet.

I like seeing how he starts his mornings by checking on Susie Q and feeding their goats. I like updating him on the (honestly boring) details of

my school day. I find myself wanting to know the funny meme he just found, and his opinions on the latest Marvel trailer, and which novel he's going to read next. It's all mundane, but it doesn't feel that way. Each text is like a secret present just for me.

I almost wish it wasn't so fun. If he proved himself to be a jerk, then I wouldn't need to worry about where all this is leading, but he can't even do me that courtesy. Instead, he's cool and kind and funny, and it's maddening.

Thoughts of Logan aren't the only things plaguing my mind. Ever since I ran away from Paige at the comic book fest, I haven't stopped thinking about what I told her. Why did I have to mention the livestream campaign? I know why I did it in the moment—because I was desperate for her to know I was fine and nothing she'd done had permanently hurt me—but what if she searches for our livestream? It's not exactly popular, so a quick Google search won't turn it up, but if she cared and did a little digging, she could find it. The recordings of our sessions are there for all to see.

I wish they didn't have this power over me, but I can't shake the worries. And, for better or worse, there's one person in particular I want to talk to about it. I pace across my bedroom floor Thursday night, trying to decide how much to say to him. So far our texts haven't gotten very deep, so I start simple.

Quinn: *Busy?*

Logan: *Watching tv with my parents. It's their way of bonding*

Quinn: *I thought you bonded over cow poop?*

Logan: *No, that's how WE bond*

Quinn: *I remember no cow poop. Only her long eyelashes*

Logan: *Come back over and I'll give you a better tour of the farm*

I snort-laugh. I want to launch into all my worries, but it's bad timing if he's with his parents. I stop pacing to text him back.

Quinn: *Have fun watching tv*

Logan: *Are you ok? You sound off*

Quinn: *You can't hear me*

Logan: *I don't need to hear you. Your texts are different*

My stomach flutters. He knows that?

Quinn: *Just thinking about the comic fest again*

I immediately realize how that must sound—that I'm thinking about him and me at the comic fest. Which I absolutely have been, particularly

right before I fall asleep each night, but I don't want to give the wrong impression.

Quinn: *About running into Paige there, I mean*

Logan: *Hold on*

I frown and sink onto my bed, staring at my phone in the hopes of making more texts come. A minute later they do.

Logan: *I told my parents I had to go to the bathroom. Mom was giving me serious side-eye for texting. What happened with all of that? You never really told me*

Quinn: *You mean at the comic store?*

Logan: *I mean all of it*

A tingle runs up my spine. I take a breath and then my fingers start flying over the keys. My usual short texts are replaced by paragraphs as I tell him the whole story, both what happened before with Caden and my run-in with Paige. I don't give every single detail, but enough for him to get the full picture. Logan doesn't reply immediately—which is fair since there's a lot to process—but it only makes me clutch my phone tighter with nerves. Hopefully I didn't overwhelm him.

Logan: *Give me their addresses and I'll go have a word with them*

I laugh and lean against my headboard.

Quinn: *Thanks but that's probably a bad idea*

Logan: *They should have thought about that before messing with you. It's so shitty, Quinn. You shouldn't have to deal with any of this*

Quinn: *I don't want to spend my life avoiding them or being scared of them*

Logan: *I want to talk more but if I spend too long in the bathroom my mom is going to think I have food poisoning*

I laugh again.

Quinn: *No prob, I'll text tomorrow*

Logan: *Come by the store. I picked up a Friday shift and I take my break at 5—tell your parents you're getting your grandma sherbet.*

There's no denying the jittery excitement that floods me at the idea. I also can't deny the worries that pop into my head about whether it would cross some invisible friendship line if I meet him after school. But it's only ice cream, and it's not like we'll have much time together—fifteen minutes at the most.

Quinn: *ok, I'll be there*

The hours on Friday can't pass quick enough. When I finally open the door to the ice cream parlor and see Logan's smile, I relax.

"Taking my break," Logan calls to someone I can't see, and comes out from behind holding two dishes of ice cream. We sit in the far corner, not that we're hidden away given how small the space is, and I smile down at my Buckeye ice cream.

"You remembered."

"Nah, it's just our most popular flavor, so I took a guess," he replies. But the amused gleam in his eyes tells me he's joking.

I pick up my spoon and point to his ice cream with it. "So you weren't being sarcastic on your name tag? You actually like mint chocolate chip?"

"How can anyone be sarcastic when it comes to ice cream?" He takes a bite. "This is the combination dreams are made of. The refreshing mint plus the rich dark chocolate? The best of both worlds."

"There's only one ice cream combo worth eating and it's sitting in front of me." I take a big bite.

"I can think of other combos I like pretty well." He cocks his head at me. "So," he continues. "How are you feeling now about Paige?"

I sigh. I know I didn't come here to flirtatiously fight about ice cream flavors, but that's a lot more fun than talking about her. "I don't know. Most of the time I can convince myself that this is all in my head, but then I get worried that they're going to ruin our game somehow."

"How could they do that?"

"I don't know. What if…" I shake my head. "They might say something and turn you all against me."

His eyebrows rise. "Okay, *that* you don't need to be worried about."

"No?"

"I can speak for everyone when I say that we don't care about these people in the least. There's nothing they could say that would change my feelings about you."

My heart swells. "You might be slightly biased, though."

“Maybe.” He grins. “But it doesn’t matter. If I’m biased, then so are the others. Nothing Paige, Caden, or anyone else says has any power over us. And they shouldn’t have power over you either.”

I take a bite of ice cream and nod. He’s right, absolutely. All of this is in the past, and it’s time I leave it there.

“Thank you. It’s good to talk about it. Oh—” I pull his cloak out of the tote bag I brought with me. “I almost forgot.”

“You didn’t need to. It looked better on you anyway.”

His gaze heats my skin. It’s so easy to fall back into the memory of how he tugged the cloak around me to keep me warm. His expression makes me wonder if he’s thinking about that afternoon as well.

“I have to get back to work before Mr. Avery complains.”

I take my last bite and stand. I’m sad to go, but I do feel happier now. And I’ll see Logan and the whole group tomorrow for the game, which is something else to look forward to. Logan follows me out the door and we hover by the entrance. The tension between us pulls tight enough that I’m stretching out of my skin.

“So…just wondering, have your feelings changed at all since Monday?” he asks. “They’re our friends. I bet we could make them understand.”

I bite my lip and look down at the ground. Maybe they’ll understand… or maybe they’ll be pissed we’ve been sneaking around and breaking one of the carefully designed rules we agreed on to keep the group together.

“Once we do it, there’s no going back.”

“That’s true. And we don’t need to say anything if you aren’t ready.” His gaze rakes over my face. “In the meantime, I’ll try to get used to watching you bite your lower lip without wishing it was me doing that instead.”

Fire flows through me at his words. This situation is *impossible.*

“What if we feel them out tomorrow after the game?” I ask. “We can bring up the idea very generally and see how they react. Hopefully they won’t care.”

“I like that plan.”

My chest aches with the treacherous wish for him to step closer and kiss me. I shove the feelings away and shake my head to clear it. “And if they aren’t cool with the idea?”

“Then I guess I’m going to get very accustomed to pain.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

It's taken my family six weeks to unpack and organize our new house, but it's finally in a state where I'm not embarrassed to have people over. I asked Kashvi and Sloane to come before our game Saturday because I knew we'd have the house to ourselves. Mom and Dad are spending the morning with Grandma, and Andrew is with his soccer team all day, which is perfect so I don't have to worry about him hitting on Kashvi the entire time.

Sloane is curled on the couch with their feet tucked up under them, crocheting away. They're wearing their usual dark jeans and T-shirt, but they've started on a new hat design—hats that look like fruit. The lemon hat is adorable, and I've already claimed a strawberry one.

Kashvi and I are on the floor on either side of the coffee table, beads and dice spread out all around us. I'm wearing my embroidered jeans again because it's easier to sit on the ground in pants, and it's finally warm enough for one of my favorite shirts—a black shirt with mushrooms and the phases of the moon screen-printed in gold.

"Is Sanjiv sad not to be here?" I ask as I string a few orange beads for a bracelet.

"Not in the least. He's too busy sleeping," Kashvi replies with a smirk. "And we already have plenty of dice pre-drilled, so there's nothing for him to do."

"How much more do you still need to make?" Sloane asks.

"You'll need to ask Quinn," Kashvi replies. "It depends entirely on how many more pieces she decides to keep for herself." She raises an eyebrow at

me.

I duck my head in shame. “I’m sorry! But that necklace with the rose quartz and iridescent dice? It was too beautiful to sell!”

“And the d20 earrings? And those three matching bracelets?” Kashvi points to my wrist.

“I know, I know. I’ll stop! I promise I’ll stop—just quit making such cute stuff.”

“As if that’s possible. Oh!” Kashvi puts down the crimping tool she’s holding and claps her hands. “I can’t believe I almost forgot. Look what I found!” She rummages around her supplies and pulls a tiny plastic bag out with a flourish. It’s so small that I have to lean closer to get a good look.

“They’re halfling dice.”

I squeal and pick them up, holding them so Sloane can see as well. They are the tiniest, cutest set of miniature dice I’ve ever seen. These are plum with gold numbering, each no bigger than one of my fingernails.

“Aww! Kashvi, these are perfect!”

“I know, right? Not that I don’t love what we’ve been making, but this would open up so many possibilities we couldn’t do with the standard dice.”

I do a little dance, which basically means I scoot my butt around on the hardwood floors.

Sloane chuckles. “I love dice, don’t get me wrong, but this level of excitement might be over-the-top even for me.”

“But”—Kashvi points at me—“you can’t claim every piece with the miniature dice. I know we’ve had pretty good luck selling at the thrift store downtown, but we’ll never recoup our expenses if we keep everything we make.”

“Fine.” I glance down at my wrists, where I’m wearing a good amount of our merchandise. “They really are gorgeous.”

“Two different people stopped me at the comic fest the other weekend to compliment me,” Kashvi says, and starts working again. “I’m thinking we should drive back to that store to see if they’d be willing to sell our stuff on consignment. That would bring us up to three stores.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.” I can’t quite muster the enthusiasm I should have, though. I know the likelihood of running into Paige or Caden there a second time is extremely unlikely, but the probability isn’t zero.

“How are you feeling now about everything that happened?” Kashvi asks.

“What happened?” Sloane asks, and puts down their yarn and crochet hook. “I heard something about a run-in with someone from your old school, but I never got the full story.”

I sigh. I should have written a press release afterward and sent it to the whole friend group instead of regurgitating these horrible memories.

“I ran into my ex–best friend there. She had some pretty snide comments to make about my costume, and…” I don’t want to repeat the rest of what she said. That I was responsible for breaking up the last group and that I’d break up this one too. “She said she doubted I’d be able to make new friends here.”

“She’s lucky I wasn’t there,” Kashvi says, her expression vicious. “She would’ve been cowering by the time I was done with her.”

“I had so much I wanted to say, too, but as soon as I saw her, it all disappeared from my brain.”

“It always happens like that,” Sloane says. “I hope she didn’t ruin the trip for you. You did seem a little off.”

Sloane is definitely the quietest one in the group, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t picking up on way more than we realize. I still remember the way they watched Logan when he first saw me in my costume. I wonder what else Sloane has noticed.

I shake my head. “No, I had a great time. It was fun.”

“Good,” Sloane says with a nod, and goes back to crocheting.

“That girl clearly doesn’t know a thing if she thought you couldn’t make new friends here,” Kashvi adds, and picks up her crimping tool again. “Now let’s get back to work. We need to make at least twenty bracelets and ten necklaces to restock the stores this week.”

I focus on my bracelet, hoping Sloane and Kashvi will still be on my side after they hear what Logan and I have to say today.

“Quinn!” Sanjiv cries as I walk into the basement later with Sloane and Kashvi. “Who is your favorite Spider-Man? We’re debating.”

“Tom Holland’s, of course,” I say immediately, and lay my bag at my seat at the table. “But at least half of that is because of Zendaya.”

Mark huffs. “Have you seen the Toby Maguire dance, though?”

“No way, the correct answer is Miles Morales, and I won’t be taking questions,” Sloane argues.

I take a breath and let myself look to Logan. He lifts his gaze to mine and my body flares with heat. All the things that almost happened between us come back to me, and I see them reflected in his eyes. I don’t know how I’m going to sit at the table across from him and pretend everything is normal.

“Everyone ready?” Sloane asks, and the other conversations and chip eating stop immediately. I’m grateful for something else to think about. Unfortunately, Sloane doesn’t look nearly as happy as they usually do at the start of the session. Usually they’re vibrating with excited energy, but instead their eyes narrow on the laptop screen like it’s being personally offensive.

“Welcome back to our loyal viewers,” Sloane says, and I turn my attention to the end of the table. “We are *Don’t Split the Party.* If this is your first time streaming our channel, I’m your DM, Sloane, and we also have __”

They gesture to the right and go through quick introductions for each of us. “And finally our latest addition to the group, Quinn, playing Nasria, her intrepid and somewhat grumpy hill dwarf sorcerer. We’re so happy to have her gaming with us each week. I can speak for all of us when I say how much fun we’re having now that she’s joined.”

I blink and glance around the table. Huh? The others bob their heads enthusiastically, but something…doesn’t feel right. Why would Sloane mention that out of the blue?

“Uh, thanks, everyone. I’m loving it and so glad to be here.”

Sloane’s lips flatten into a line before they launch into their usual overview of what happened last time for any viewers who might have missed that game or someone who is new to watching. I try to focus on their words. It’s easier to sink back down into this world and character if I can push everything in the real world from my mind, but I’m struggling. Between the ever-present knowledge of this upcoming dating discussion with the group and Sloane’s weird behavior, I’m jittery with nerves. I want

to interrupt and ask what's happening, but I know the rules. We only talk about the game—everything else will have to wait until the livestream ends.

"As a reminder to the audience," Sloane continues, "in our last session the party secured an agreement with King Thalun to hunt down and kill the dragon that is plaguing his lands. Thus far they have explored the nearby town to learn what they could about the dragon but were unable to persuade any townspeople to help on their mission. You've now decided to search the wilderness at the edges of the kingdom for any hints of where the dragon may be living."

"Without more information, I don't know how we'll ever find this dragon's lair. We could be searching for weeks," Logan complains in Adris's pouty accent.

I shake my thoughts away and focus on the game. "I bet you wish I'd chose the ranger class now."

He laughs before pressing his lips into a more serious expression to mimic his elf character. "I'm more than happy to have a sorcerer in the party even if tracking isn't one of your skills."

"I'll do my best to help."

"Anyone who's searching should roll a perception check for me," Sloane tells us.

Kashvi rolls highest, at a 15.

"Okay, Lasla, as you come into a clearing, you discover a bloody and mangled mass in front of you. You also find long, thick gashes in the side of a tree. In the distance, the forest floor is trampled, and other smaller trees have been knocked down. Something shimmers silver in the distance."

"We should all be *very* quiet," Logan warns us.

"Could the shimmering be water?" Kashvi asks.

"I doubt you're seeing an oasis," Sanjiv replies.

"Lasla, can you take us all there so we can see more closely?" I ask Kashvi.

Sloane pauses, clearly milking the suspense. "As you all get closer, you find an object lying on the ground. It's a flat disk, as large as your head and oval-shaped. It's rock hard."

"A dragon scale," a few of us say together, as if we rehearsed it, and share nervous glances.

“We should go,” I tell the group. “This is plenty of evidence that the dragon must be nearby, but we’re in no state to encounter it right now.”

Sloane grabs the table and shakes it. We all jump. “Suddenly, the ground begins to quake. The trees tremble and birds take flight. Then an enormous silver dragon comes into view.”

“Oh, we’re screwed,” Sanjiv croaks.

“Hide!” Kashvi yells.

“Is there anything to hide behind?” Mark asks Sloane.

“There’s not a lot, but there is a clump of trees you could try. But everybody needs to roll a stealth check.”

We all hide behind the trees. Sanjiv shakes his head. “What do we do? Even at Level 4, I don’t see how we can take on a dragon and be alive at the end of it.”

“What if you tried speaking to the other animals in the vicinity?” Mark replies. “Maybe if we can gather enough animal allies, they could help?”

Kashvi nods. “And if we can escape alive, then maybe we can find people who live in the area and have been hurt by the dragon—they could join forces with us.”

“Um…what if we just talk to it?” I ask.

They all gawk at me.

“One wrong move and that dragon will decimate you, Nasria,” Kashvi says. “I’m craving another battle, but I only like the ones we can all walk away from.”

“I may have peed myself a little, but I don’t think the dragon will notice,” Mark says, making us all laugh.

“Dragons have an impressive sense of smell, so it just might,” Logan replies.

“Dragons are also intelligent,” I argue. “They can hold conversations. Why don’t we try to figure out what it wants or if there’s some way we can get it to move from this area? If it doesn’t work, then we can focus on gathering allies and killing it.”

“Unless it burns you to a crisp when you open your mouth,” Sanjiv says.

I frown. “Don’t you think there’s something not right about all this? Granted, I’m not the trusting sort, but I don’t trust this king. He’s up to

something and I want to know what. It's very possible the king is trying to get us killed."

"You know," Sloane says, and their voice is now deep and gravelly to mimic a dragon. "I am not blind. I can see you all hiding behind those trees like cowards."

We all freeze like we're actually standing in front of a dragon instead of sitting in a basement in Ohio.

"Welp, I guess we failed our stealth checks," Sanjiv whispers.

"Adris," I say quietly, turning to Logan. "Will you come with me to talk to the dragon?"

"Why me?"

"You're the most charming and persuasive in the group, aren't you? I'm not sure we want only the grumpy dwarf talking to the creature that can kill us in two nanoseconds." I give him a small smile. "And didn't you tell me that you'd trust me with your life?"

His expression warms, and this time I can tell it's not just Adris looking at me like that. "I didn't realize that comment would be tested so quickly, but I won't rescind it. All right, let's go have a polite chat with a dragon."

The session ends with a fun twist—the dragon making a counterproposal for us to join with it and overthrow the king instead. Our group hasn't decided what to do—especially since that would mean two characters would have to backstab their own father—but the twist certainly keeps us focused during the session. However, it's hard to be 100 percent absorbed in that when Sloane is acting so weird.

As soon as the livestream is over, Logan turns his attention to Sloane. "Is everything okay?"

It looks like I wasn't the only one to notice.

"Yeah, seriously," Sanjiv says. "I know they say to be scared of a smiling DM, but your angry face is pretty terrifying. At one point I thought you really were going to have that dragon kill us."

Sloane sits back and plays with their hair. "The good news is we've had more new viewers these past few weeks than we have since the end of the

last campaign. We're up to fifty-five. It's just…" They look at me and I wring my hands with worry. Did I mess up the game somehow? Another thought rises—were my worries about Paige and Caden justified? My eyes cut to Logan, even though I know he's the last person I should be looking at.

Kashvi sits up. "What's going on?"

"We have trolls in the chat room."

Kashvi rolls her eyes. "Oh, that. I'm surprised it took so long for them to find us. What are they saying? Critiquing our role-playing skills?" She glances at me. "Or are they just annoyed that teenage girls are playing D&D?"

"It could be a bit of that."

We all wait for Sloane to say more but they only shake their head.

"Well, what are they saying?" Mark asks.

Sloane sighs heavily. "Mostly they don't seem to be big fans of yours, Quinn."

My heart plummets. I have a very bad feeling about this. "Can you tell who they are?"

"I don't recognize any of the usernames." Sloane crosses their arms over their chest. "Let's forget it. I'm sorry I let it affect the game. That wasn't professional of me."

"No, I want to know what they're saying first."

They sigh. "They don't deserve a second of your time, but…it's mostly about your role-playing. That it was kind of lazy and they didn't like your character build. And some other stupid comments."

"They don't know what they're talking about," Logan says gruffly. "Can we block them?"

"I don't know, I've never had to block anyone before, but I should be able to. I'll figure it out."

Kashvi reaches out and touches my arm. "Don't pay attention to it, Quinn. You've been awesome in the campaign."

I smile at her, but my eyes are watery. "Has this ever happened before to the group?"

Everyone exchanges awkward glances, and the answer is clear.

"Can I see the comments?" I ask.

Sloane hesitates. “That’s not a good idea. Everybody says ‘don’t read the comments’ for a reason.”

But I’m already standing up. I know they’re probably right, but I want to see if I recognize the usernames or if these really are strangers trolling me. Both options are horrible. I stand over Sloane’s shoulder and scroll back through the chat. There aren’t a lot of comments, so the bad ones are easy to find.

@Tr_xp50: *Some of this is cool, but the dwarf is the weakest link.*

@dicehaven: *The dwarf’s role-playing is the worst.*

I scroll to the top of the chat.

@PLynn_: *BEWARE of your dwarf. She’s Poison for DND.*

@Fighter_CM64: *I see she’s found a new group to destroy. Good luck to you all.*

I suck in a breath and step back. My eyes meet Logan’s and he jumps to his feet. He strides around the table to read over my shoulder.

“I don’t think we—” Sloane begins, but it’s too late; he’s already seen.

He makes an angry growling sound in the back of his throat. “What the actual f—”

“They aren’t trolls,” I whisper to him, more tears threatening to come, and his face falls with understanding. He reaches for my hand, but I pull away. The last thing I need is for the others to figure us out at the same moment they’re reading these comments about me being a group killer.

Kashvi pushes her chair back, ready to stand as well, and Mark and Sanjiv are leaning forward with agitation. “What’s going on?” Sanjiv asks.

Everyone stares at me. It’s not hard to figure out the usernames. @Fighter_CM64 is definitely Caden. Fighter is his favorite class, those are his initials, and 64 is his favorite number. He didn’t even try to be creative or sneaky. Paige’s middle name is Lynn, so it isn’t hard to figure out who @PLynn_ is. The other two aren’t quite as obvious, but I’m guessing @Tr_xp50 is Travis, and maybe Makayla is @dicehaven.

Logan takes a small step closer, as if he can protect me, but I walk back to my side of the table. “The trolls are people from my old school. The ones I used to play with.”

Mark’s and Sanjiv’s eyes bug out since they haven’t heard about this before, while the others only look sad. I quickly catch the guys up, praying I never *ever* have to tell this story again. I’m tempted to make some edits, but

I repeat all the details, including how Caden and I would flirt at the games and how they all turned against me.

"When I ran into Paige last Sunday, I blurted out that I was in a livestreaming game now. I've been scared this would happen, though I'm a little surprised they cared enough to go to this effort." I push my unruly bangs from my face. "I'm sorry I brought all this to the group."

"*Don't* apologize," Sloane says firmly. "Those comments are clearly from an impotent, bitter ex and his lackeys."

"He's hardly even an ex. But he's definitely bitter."

"I'm so glad you got out of that toxic group," Kashvi says. Her eyes shine with rage.

Mark takes a swig from his two-liter of Mountain Dew. "They're jealous that their group will never be as amazing as we are. Ignore them."

"Absolutely. And you don't have to worry about anything like that ever happening with us," Sanjiv assures me, and looks to Mark and Logan for confirmation. "This is exactly why we have our group set up the way we do—so none of this becomes an issue."

Mark burps as if that helps to make his point. "I love not caring how I look or act around you. I'm not worried about impressing any of you."

"That's good, because you definitely aren't," Kashvi says, and everyone laughs. "But I'll agree that I like keeping this one part of life simple."

Logan's gaze burns into the side of my face. I can feel it as easily as if he was touching me, but I can't look at him.

"I don't know," I say. My voice is weak. "Caden turned out to be a jerk, but it's not always like that. I just had bad luck with him."

"I don't know, this one can be a jerk sometimes," Kashvi jokes, and wiggles her twin's arm. He groans in response.

"The important thing is that we have a group where everyone's comfortable enough to hang out and role-play without being self-conscious," Logan says. I play with one of my dice bracelets to keep my eyes from his. "Whether people are dating or friends doesn't matter—the end of any relationship can be hard."

"Sure, but dating *always* makes stuff worse. All those feelings and hormones and jealousy," Sloane argues with a disgusted eye roll.

“None of which we have to worry about, thank god. I’m hungry.” Sanjiv pushes his chair out from the table like the conversation is over. “Quinn, forget it ever happened.”

Mark stands and Kashvi follows suit. They start chatting about *Spider-Man* movies again like it’s the most important thing happening in the world, and I glance around the table anxiously. Is that it? We’re done with the conversation?

There’s so much more I want to say—so many more arguments I want to give them for why dating someone at the gaming table doesn’t have to be a disaster—but they’ve moved on. If anything, the chat comments have only further convinced them that their original stance was correct. Caden and Paige couldn’t have chosen a worse time to pop back into my life.

“I’m feeling nostalgic,” Sanjiv announces. “Who wants to play *Mario Kart*?”

Mark hoots and pushes his chair back so fast it flips over.

“Calm down, killer,” Sloane says. “And save me a controller.”

I finally let myself look at Logan and find his eyes are already on me. His jaw clenches.

“Do you have to go?” he asks me quietly.

I can tell he wants to talk, but there’s nothing more to say. I want him, but I can’t give up this group. And the more I talk about it, the more it’s going to break my heart.

“I should go home.”

“Then I’ll drive you.”

“I drove myself,” I reply. “But thanks.”

I pack my things up quickly and shove them into the bag. I need to get out of here and spend a few hours rotting my brain with reality TV.

I say some quick goodbyes and take the basement steps two at a time. Footsteps run up behind me as I get to the first floor, and I gather my strength to face him.

“There’s nothing more—”

But it’s not Logan who’s running up behind me; it’s Kashvi.

“Hey, can we talk before you leave?” she asks.

“Um, of course.”

She pulls me into the living room, which luckily is empty. “Are you okay? You practically ran out of the basement.”

I’m tempted to word-vomit the entire situation with me and Logan. Kashvi’s been so great, and she doesn’t deserve a friend who isn’t completely truthful. But I’m too scared of her reaction to say any more. So instead I only smile and say, “I’m all right. Just a little shook up.”

“I’m so glad I met you. I love the others”—she lowers her voice—“but it’s so much better now that you’re here.” She wraps her arms around me and pulls me into a big hug.

I squeeze her back, grateful she can’t see my face.

Chapter Twenty-Three

My house is quiet and empty when I get back home. I'm grateful for the time by myself. I mess around in the kitchen, debating which snacks I might want, before ultimately deciding on nothing. The conversation from the game still circles in my mind, and my stomach is too filled with knots to want food.

The doorbell rings, but I ignore it. My parents barely answer the door, and I'm definitely not going to talk to strangers about switching internet providers. Instead, I grab my phone and head up to my room. Halfway up, my phone buzzes with a text.

Logan: *I'm at the door.*

My heart lodges in my throat. He's here? I almost don't want to see him, but my feet fly down the stairs nonetheless.

I find him hunched in the doorway. I back up so he can come in, my eyes raking over him even though I know I should stop. Especially after the conversation we all just had, I should be careful how I react to him, and yet I can't stop the jump in my pulse when his eyes catch on mine.

He glances around. "Your house is nice. I wouldn't know you just moved in."

"Mom and Dad have done a ton of work since we got here. It's coming together."

"Are they here?"

"No. It's just me." I walk deeper into the house. "They must be with Grandma. They're still trying to get her to agree to move, so they've set up a tour at a local retirement community."

When he doesn't follow, I glance over my shoulder to find him still and silent at the edge of the kitchen. He swallows and my eyes track his Adam's apple. The weight of the knowledge that we're alone in the house makes my skin hot and tight. We keep finding ourselves in these situations.

Well, more truthfully, we keep putting ourselves in them.

I rock on my heels. "So…what are you doing here, Logan?"

He pulls his beanie off his head and runs his fingers through his hair. I wish my hair looked like that after wearing Sloane's hat. Mine is always a flat, staticky mess, but his falls in perfect, soft waves around his eyes.

"I don't know exactly," he says. "I was driving home, and I kept thinking about the game and, yeah, I wanted to talk to you. How are you feeling about it?"

I lean against the counter. "I mean, not great. It certainly didn't go the way we were hoping."

He grimaces and walks over. "No, it did not. I really hoped they'd be more flexible."

I shrug. "It was bad timing with the chat."

His expression tightens in anger. "If I ever run into Caden again—"

"You won't do a thing." I put my hand on his chest. "He's not worth it. He's just bitter. There's no point talking to him."

"I have no intentions of talking. Other things are still on the table."

I shake my head, but secretly I love that he's angry on my behalf. I like this protective side of Logan, even though I know it's just making it harder.

"Did you know immediately that it wasn't going to work out with him? Or did it take a while to realize?"

"Immediately—by the middle of the date I already had a sinking feeling. And by the end I was sure we had no future."

"How'd you know so quickly?"

I bite the inside of my cheek, debating how much to say. I've told him a lot about Caden, but not this detail. This isn't exactly the conversation I want to be having with him right now, but given everything going on between us, I guess he deserves to know.

"Because we kissed, and I felt nothing."

Logan's jaw works back and forth, and he nods gruffly.

I grin, surprised by his reaction. "What's that face?"

"Nothing."

“Are you jealous?”

His eyes flash at mine. “Would you blame me if I was?”

“Seriously, there’s nothing to be jealous of. That’s kind of the whole point.”

“He went on a date with you.” Logan steps closer to me. “He kissed you. I’d say there’s plenty to be jealous about.”

“Well, if you’re going to be jealous, then I’m allowed to be as well.” I lift my chin to him. We’re so close now that I’m practically vibrating. “Don’t pretend like you haven’t kissed other girls.”

Suddenly, his hands are on my hips and he’s lifting me so I’m sitting on the counter. He steps between my legs so that we’re only inches apart. “I haven’t kissed anyone in a long time. And I have no intention of changing that.”

“Not with anyone?” I whisper.

He puts a strand of hair behind my ear. “No one but you.”

My heart soars for a moment before crashing back down. “Logan, you know this is impossible. I want…” My eyes graze over his face and I swallow. “I want *this*, whatever it is, but I don’t want to be the girl who puts our group or friendships in jeopardy.”

“I know.” He lays his hands on my knees and heat licks up my spine. “I don’t want to hurt the group either. But I also don’t want to give you up.”

I shake my head. “Impossible,” I whisper.

“Not forever,” he says. “They’ll come around. I know they will. We’ll just wait longer. Give the campaign another few months and then we’ll bring it back up.”

I shake my head. A few *months*? That sounds like torture. And even then, there’s no guarantee the group will change their minds. Some people might get over it. I can’t imagine Mark will care too much. But Sanjiv seems to like the rule, and Sloane definitely does. I bite my lip, trying to think of an argument that could sway them.

Logan’s fingers tighten on my thighs. “What did I tell you about biting your lip when I’m with you? It’s like you *want* me to kiss you.”

Oh Lord, this boy. One word from him and every good intention flees my mind.

“It is very much like that, isn’t it?” I say softly.

He leans closer—dangerously close—and I can't bring myself to pull away or stop him. Everything inside me wants to grab him by the collar of his flannel shirt and draw him to me. His eyes darken, but then he clenches his jaw, lifts his hands in surrender, and pulls away from me.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come."

"I'm glad you did."

He puts a hand gently back on my knee. "We'll figure it out," he says, his thumb rubbing small circles.

"What the hell is going on?"

Logan and I both jump. Andrew stands at the foot of the stairs, glaring daggers at Logan.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, and drop down from the counter.

"Coach got sick and canceled so I came home early." He raises an eyebrow. "Guess you thought you'd have a little fun while the house is empty?"

I roll my eyes. "Not that it's any of your business, but Logan just came over to talk for a second." I gesture to my brother. "You remember Andrew?"

"What's up, man?" Logan says.

Andrew doesn't return the greeting. "It sure looked like you two were doing a lot of talking." He side-eyes Logan.

What exactly is happening right now? Andrew never cared before if I was dating someone.

He leans against the pantry door and crosses his arms over his chest. "How was your D&D game?"

Logan and I exchange a glance. "Um, it was fine."

His expression grows harder. "I saw the chat comments."

My mouth drops open. Am I having an elaborate fever dream right now? *"What?"*

"Don't play dumb. I read what they were saying about you. And now you're dating another D&D loser like the last one?" His eyes flick to Logan with disdain.

"I'm nothing like him," Logan argues, but I can only focus on Andrew. I take a step toward him.

"How could you have seen those comments?" My stomach bottoms out. "You're watching the livestream?"

“Maybe.” He shrugs.

“I…You…”

I’m too dumbfounded to string words together. *Andrew* is watching our games? Andrew, whose been too caught up with his own life to hang out with me for years? Andrew, who never misses a chance to make fun of my interests? I’m in the upside down for real.

“Why would you watch? You hate D&D. I remember one time you said it was a make-believe game for people with no actual talent.”

He chuckles. “That was a good line. But, I don’t know, I was bored and curious. You mentioned the group before to Mom and Dad, so it wasn’t that hard to find it online.”

His explanation still doesn’t make sense. If he was home alone, there are a billion things he’d have more fun doing. I guess it’s sweet that he’d care enough to watch, but mostly I’m just suspicious.

I put a hand on my hip. “Well, whatever this protective act is, you can stop it now. Logan is a friend.”

“A friend with benefits,” he mutters. “You thought your old friends were cool too—”

“Listen, I know you don’t know me,” Logan interrupts, stepping forward as if he thinks we’re about to lunge at each other’s throats. “But all of us care way too much about Quinn to ever act like that.”

“Yeah, I saw how much you *care* a few seconds ago. Do you have any idea what she went through with her last group?”

Now I’m the one who might need to break up a fight. “Andrew, *stop*.” I hold out a hand to keep him back and turn to Logan.

“I’m fine,” Logan reassures me before I can say anything. To my surprise, he doesn’t look angry. “I’ll go.” He nods to Andrew and walks to the door. When it clicks shut at his back, I whirl on Andrew.

“What the hell has gotten into you? Logan is a good guy—you didn’t need to act like that with him. Or like you’re my big protector when we both know you couldn’t care less what’s going on with me.”

“That’s not true,” he argues, and pulls a Gatorade from the refrigerator like we’re having a casual chat about the weather.

“That’s a surprise to me.”

“I like it here,” he replies, as if that makes any sense given the context of the conversation.

“Um, okay?”

“What they did really messed you up, and I don’t want to move again.”

“What are you talking about? We didn’t move because of me. We moved because Grandma needed help.”

“But the fact that you were so miserable certainly motivated Mom and Dad.”

I tilt my head. Did it? It didn’t seem like anyone took much notice of what was happening with me at the end of last year. I didn’t necessarily mind, since I wanted as much space as possible.

“It wasn’t fun living with you after that,” Andrew continues. His shoulders slump. “I didn’t like seeing you that way.”

Some of the sharpness in my chest softens. I guess there are worse things in life than having an overprotective little brother. Although his timing could be a lot better.

I take a Diet Coke from the fridge and scrub a hand over my face. “Thank you for worrying, I guess, but it’s not necessary. I’m happy here too. And this new group really is great.”

He sniffs.

“You certainly seemed interested in Kashvi before,” I say with a raised eyebrow.

He shrugs me off. “She doesn’t count.”

“Hmm.” The solution to the riddle from before comes to me. I bet *that’s* why he was logging into our game. He wasn’t doing it to see me; he was doing it for Kashvi. I’d almost be impressed that he was trying to learn about her interests if I weren’t absolutely horrified at the idea of my little brother wanting to make out with my closest friend.

“The game wasn’t *as* boring as I thought it would be,” he says begrudgingly.

“You’re full of surprises today.”

I take him in, an idea coming to me. He did watch my livestream, which is more than I’d ever expect of him. Maybe I should make more of an effort to do things with him too.

“Would you want to try hanging out sometime?” I ask. “Maybe playing a game of pickleball at the rec center? I promise you’ll crush me at it.”

“The weird sport *Grandma* plays? Yeah, no. You aren’t the worst sister in the world, but I have my limits.” He pushes away from the counter and

heads upstairs without a backward glance.

Good to know he’s still my charming little brother.

Chapter Twenty-Four

"Wow, that went so well!" Kashvi says on Monday when we get back into her car. I haven't shaken off the disaster of this weekend, but I'm still glad to be hanging out with Kashvi again so soon. Today we're taking our newly finished jewelry—including multiple pieces with the halfling dice—to a few different stores around town. To our surprise, the stores have been eager to stock more of our pieces on consignment. We celebrated by using our newly earned money to buy expensive iced coffees. Not exactly financially responsible, but very tasty.

"We're going to need to get back to work if our stuff is moving this quickly," Kashvi continues, and puts on her seat belt. "Unless you'd be willing to part with a few of those pieces?"

"Not a chance." I play with my bracelets—spinning them around my wrist until my favorite stones and dice are on top. This particular combo pulls together all the earth tones from my skirt, and if I get rid of any bracelets, then it won't tie together. I glance down at my phone and find a text from Logan.

Logan: *Do you have time to come by my work? I can offer free ice cream as a bribe, but only mint chocolate chip. It's time I win you over.*

A zip of electricity runs through me. As if it's possible for Logan to win me over more than he already has. But I can't respond right now, so I turn my phone over and focus on Kashvi.

"Luckily we still have tons of dice from Logan, so that'll help," I say.

"I still can't believe he gave us all of those. He's always been such a great guy. It's annoying, actually."

“Annoying?”

“It’s not fair for him to be hot *and* kind. It’s always the unattainable guys who’re like that.”

My throat closes and I turn to her, hoping her expression will make it clear she’s joking. But she looks dead serious.

“You think Logan is hot?”

“Oh, come on.” She glances at me with an almost disgruntled expression. “It’s no secret. I mean, unless you’re not into beautiful boys.”

“I’m into them,” I say faintly, and take a sip of my coffee.

“I figured. Be honest, what was your first thought when you saw him in that costume at the comic fest?” She grins at me before looking in the rearview mirror and backing out of the space. “I practically had to wipe the drool off my chin.”

I swallow my coffee wrong and start hacking. “Whoa.” I cough a few more times. “Um, I didn’t know you thought about Logan like that.”

Kashvi pulls onto the road with a dreamy sigh. “I have lots of thoughts about Logan.”

“Have you…said anything to him about it?”

She bolts upright in her seat. “Oh god no!” She looks horrified at the very idea. “He better never know. It’s not like I’m planning on acting on any of it. Can you imagine?”

My stomach roils with nausea. “Right. Totally weird.”

“I know he’s just a friend—I gave up on all that long ago. And it’s not like I’m in love with him or something.” She turns and grins at me. “But I wouldn’t mind a few minutes alone in the dark with him.”

One look at my expression has her cackling. She turns down my street. “Calm down, Quinn, I’m just kidding!”

“I’m surprised, that’s all.” I take a slow breath and try to calm myself enough that my voice doesn’t quake. “I knew you really liked him as a friend, but I had no idea about this.”

“Good, that was the plan. Did I ever tell you that we tried to recruit another girl from my French class to the group before you transferred, and Sloane nixed her? It turned out Mark had had a crush on her for years and Sloane could see the writing on the wall.” She shrugs. “At least a girl can daydream.”

She pulls into my driveway, and I surge out of the car before she can say one more thing about Logan. I fight to keep my expression as normal as possible, but I need to get far away from this conversation ASAP. I thought things were already a mess with him, but that was nothing compared to Kashvi having feelings for him.

"I'll text you to figure out a time to get together and work on more pieces, okay?" She leans over the passenger seat and gives me the brightest smile, like she doesn't have a care in the world. "We're gonna take over the world!"

She drives away and my vision goes hazy as I watch her car in the distance, feeling like I just got punched in the head. Kashvi likes Logan? Kashvi has secretly liked Logan this *whole* time? How could this situation get any worse? I reconsider all the times we've talked about Logan. She's always been complimentary about him, saying how he's a good guy or kind or a gentleman, but I never thought anything of it. And she said he was cute the evening after the comic fest, but I was so caught up in myself that I assumed she was only picking up on my emotions. I think I might be sick.

It's happening all over again, just like it happened with Paige. Kashvi's going to hate me if she finds out about Logan and me. It will affect not only the game but also our friendship. No more jewelry-making, no more sleepovers. Maybe no more friendship at all. Something has to give. I can't lose any more friends.

I walk into the house to find it in chaos. Andrew is racing down the stairs, Dad is putting two different shoes on his feet, and Mom is glaring down at her phone.

"Uh, hi?" I say.

Mom glances up and sighs with relief. "Thank *god*, I was calling you right now. Your grandma fell again—we're heading to the hospital."

The rest of the evening only gets worse, and that's *really* saying something. It turns out Grandma fell in the bathroom and didn't have the strength to get back up. Luckily her phone was close enough for her to call Dad in the hopes he'd come over to help. Much to her annoyance, he called the ambulance instead.

Trips to the ER are never fun, but add in a feisty old woman who doesn't want to be there and things get much rougher. I was scared Dad

would need to be admitted by the end, he was so frazzled and exhausted. Luckily, Grandma didn't break any bones. I thought the drama was finished by the time my parents dropped Andrew and me off at the house that evening, but I guess they had "a talk" with her when they got her home. I woke up Tuesday to the news that she'd officially agreed to move out of her house but was *not* happy about it.

So now we're all here Tuesday evening to check on her and start packing. Describing the mood as *uncomfortable* doesn't do it justice. I know my parents could use the moral support, but honestly, I can't keep my thoughts focused solely on family. As soon as I found out Grandma needed to go to the hospital, I texted Logan. It wasn't even a conscious decision. I got the news, climbed in the back of the car, and texted him like it was the most natural thing in the world. But should it be? I should've texted the whole group, but I didn't want to hear from all of them. I only wanted to hear from him.

Of course it's easy to rationalize it—Logan is the only one who has spent time with Grandma, so he deserved to hear it from me. But I know it's more than that. It's *much* more, and with the knowledge that Kashvi also has a long-simmering crush on him, my thoughts are spinning like pinwheels as I try to decide how to handle everything.

"This is entirely too much fussing," Grandma says from her armchair. "You don't all need to be here checking on me."

"Barbara, why don't you just rest?" Mom says in her softest voice. "I'll make you a cup of tea and we can put some music on."

Grandma glares at her. "Oh please, you just want me to be quiet."

Andrew raises his eyebrows at me as if to say *no argument there.* I muffle a smile. This evening it's "all hands on deck," as Dad likes to call it, so both Andrew and I were required to come to Grandma's right after school. I figured Andrew would be his usual brooding self, but he hasn't complained at all. And it's nice to have another person here to lighten up the bickering.

"Eric, put down that vase," Grandma snaps. "I got it in Barcelona and it's one of a kind."

Dad heaves a sigh and presses his fingers to the bridge of his nose. "Mom, it's okay. We'll be sure to carefully pack everything you want to take with you to your new place."

She huffs. “I’ve fallen once. I’m sure you’ve fallen too. Everyone slips once in a while!”

“But when we slip, we don’t break a hip,” Andrew says super helpfully.

“You shut it with your rhyming, young man.”

“Andrew’s not wrong, though,” Dad continues. “And you know this isn’t the first time. You don’t have the balance you once did. Quinn told us how you fell and dropped plates while she was here—”

“Quinn!” Grandma turns to me, her mouth agape. “You didn’t! I thought that was our secret.”

“We didn’t agree to that,” I mumble.

“I can’t trust the lot of you,” she says, and throws up her hands.

“We only want you to have the best life you can,” Mom says. “Eric’s done a lot of research on this. You saw how exceptional the retirement community is.”

“You mean the old folks’ home where people go to die.”

“Mom, if you’d just listen, then I think you’d see how great this can be. We’re not sending you there to die—we’re sending you there to *live*.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Dad sounds like a paid spokesman.

“They have maintenance on staff so if something is broken, you can get it fixed right away—imagine how much time that’ll save. And they have a common building with all kinds of activities for the residents. Game nights and movie nights and art classes. They even have a pickleball court!” Dad gestures at me. “You can still play pickleball with Quinn.”

“You can show everyone how you kick my butt.”

“Well, that part would be fun.” She sniffs. “You all deserve to be kicked in the butt.”

Mom chuckles and Grandma seems temporarily mollified, but I’m sure it won’t last. Dad has been working toward this for a while, but Grandma is going to fight us every inch of the way. Which is why he wanted both Andrew and I over here to start putting things in boxes and sorting things for donations as soon as possible. He’s lucky she’s supposed to stay off her feet for now, or she’d probably come after him with a broom.

Grandma takes a sip of her water. “You know, I texted somebody else to come by—someone who I’m sure will take my side. He’ll be here soon.”

Dad blows out a breath. “Please tell me you didn’t call your lawyer.”

But I think I know who she's talking about. Sure enough, there's a gleam in her eye when she gestures at me. *Oh no.*

"It's Quinn's friend. Logan."

My mouth drops open as the others turn to stare at me. Grandma texted him and he didn't tell me? I pull out my phone just in case, but there are no new messages. That little double-crosser. Choosing my sherbet-loving grandmother over me.

"Are you talking about the boy who helped clean out the attic?" Dad asks.

"Yes. He always does what I ask of him, unlike *some* of you." She nods confidently.

Oh dear Lord, Logan is coming here. *Now.* With my parents and brother here. Grandma really knows how to get back at me for tattling.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sure enough, the doorbell rings a few minutes later. I drop the novels I was boxing up and sprint for the door. “I’ll get it!”

I yank it open to find Logan in his winter coat with Sloane’s beanie pulled down low on his forehead. Ohio weather is so unpredictable and today has been especially cold. He gives me a lopsided grin and I melt like snow in the heat of the sun. He shouldn’t be allowed to have this kind of effect on me when I’m trying to be annoyed.

“What are you doing here?” I whisper.

“Barbara texted,” he says simply. “When your grandma texts, I come.”

I roll my eyes. He’s too cute. No wonder he’s usurped me and Andrew to become her favorite grandchild.

“Plus, I wanted to see how you were doing,” he continues.

I shake my head. “I appreciate it, but now isn’t the time. We’re all here cleaning out the house. Like, *Mom* and *Dad* are here. And Grandma is out for blood. I don’t think you should be meeting my family for the first time right now.”

“But I brought her a pint of sherbet.” He holds up a small bag.

“Wow, you’re a suck-up. Are you trying to get in the will or something?”

“Are *you* trying to waste my future inheritance on heating bills?” He gestures to the doorframe. “It’s freezing out here.”

“Fine.” I step aside and let him walk in. I try to keep my annoyance in the forefront of my mind. If I’m annoyed, it’s easier to ignore how adorable

he looks with his hair sticking out of his beanie. Or how his thoughtfulness for Grandma makes my insides turn to goo.

His hand slips into mine and he squeezes. “I’m glad to see you, despite your dessert-related hostility.”

“Hello?” Dad’s voice issues from the living room and I pull my hand away.

Logan turns as Dad comes down the hall. “Mr. Norton? Nice to meet you. I’m Logan.” Logan puts his hand out, a smile on his face.

Dad does a stutter step, clearly surprised by Logan’s formal demeanor. He’s acting like he’s about to walk into a job interview. “Hi, it’s nice to meet you as well. I heard my mother has been recruiting you to help her around the house.”

“Yes, some, but I’m happy to help.”

“Right, well, I appreciate that.” Dad’s eyes flick to me for a second. “And you play games with Quinn?”

“D&D.” Logan glances at me, but there’s no spark like there was a moment ago when we were alone. He might as well be smiling at a mildly amusing cereal ad on TV. “Quinn’s been a great addition to our group.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear that. Well, it’s kind of you to come, but it really isn’t necessary. We’ve got it handled.”

“Sure, I don’t want to interrupt,” Logan replies easily. He holds up the bag in his hands. “I brought some orange sherbet for Barbara. I know it’s her favorite.”

“Did I hear sherbet?” Mom says, and joins us at Dad’s side. “My goodness, what a nice gesture.” She lays a hand on Dad’s arm. “I’m so glad you’re here. It’ll perk her up to see you. Come in.”

Dad’s mouth pinches at the corners, but he never argues with Mom, and he clearly isn’t going to start today. Logan and I follow my parents into the living room. He raises his eyebrows at me as if to say, *Impressed?*

“You’re good, I’ll give you that,” I whisper back.

Grandma hoots and tries to stand as soon as Logan walks into the room, but he gestures for her to stay seated. “No need to get up for me. How are you? I heard you took a tumble.”

“Not as bad as you did when you tried playing pickleball.”

He laughs loudly and the rest of us join in. “And I see you’re not going to let me forget it,” he admits. “I brought you your favorite flavor.”

A wide smile takes over her face, showing every laugh line and wrinkle. She looks beautiful and it makes my heart tug to see Logan's effect on her. What is he doing to me? I'm trying my very best not to fall for him and he returns the favor by giving my grandma *sherbet* and making her smile like she's a teenager again? No one can win that war.

Grandma whips her head to the rest of us. "I don't see you all bringing dessert. Just empty boxes."

We look around sheepishly.

"I could run out and get something?" Andrew says.

"Oh, never mind now." She waves a dismissive hand at him.

"We'll work on him," Logan says conspiratorially. "And I see they're making your living room all cluttered too. How about I get some of these boxes out of here so they aren't an eyesore."

"Thank you, dear. At least one person around here has some sense." She pats his cheek fondly and settles herself back into her chair.

Logan turns around and gives me a wink. "Quinn, how about we clean this stuff out?"

"Um, sure."

Mom hands me my coat from the side of the couch with a knowing smirk on her face. I'm so busted.

I grab the closest box and carry it outside to Dad's trunk. "So let me get this straight," I say as I come up beside Logan. "She can't stop complaining about us being in her house, but then you show up, woo her with a gift, and convince her that it's her idea for us to take everything out of her house? Like, how?"

"The word you're looking for is *charm.*" He puts the box in the trunk and steps closer to me. "Or haven't you noticed?"

"Oh, I've noticed," I say softly.

We go back into the house and collect the next set of boxes to bring out to the car. Andrew eyes us suspiciously—like he thinks I'm getting away with something by having a friend here to help with Grandma—but he doesn't complain. I half expect my dad to follow us out, maybe throw out a few intimidating questions to Logan just for the fun of it, but Grandma is keeping him and Mom busy. And I think I catch her wink at Logan as we walk out of the house together. She's always up to something.

We set our boxes in the trunk and Logan stops me before we can go back inside. “I’m happy to see you, even under these conditions.” He brushes a strand of hair away from my face. “Your cheeks are pink from the cold. It makes you look even prettier than usual.”

“Logan.”

“I know, I know.” He steps back and tugs his beanie down. “I promised myself I wouldn’t say anything today. But then I see you and I can’t stop myself.”

“I know the feeling.”

“Do you? I keep wondering if it’s just me.”

The heat simmering under my skin is proof that’s not true. Each time we see each other, the risks grow bigger. There’s so much at stake. For the D&D group, yes, but for me personally too. What if I lose Kashvi over this? Or what if I pursue things with Logan and it all ends up imploding? If we started anything in earnest and it fell apart, it would decimate my heart. The way I feel about him, the level of trust I have in him already, it’s beyond anything I’ve felt before. I don’t know if I can open myself up to the possibility of that pain.

But maybe if we stop right now before things go further, there’s a chance we can preserve the game and our friendships. I groan and rub my hands over my face.

“Are you okay?”

“Not really. I don’t know.” I shake my head, heavy with the knowledge of what we need to do. “We can’t keep going like this, Logan. This…this in-between where we’re not together but we’re not just friends either. It’s too hard.”

“What should we do instead?”

“We should stop seeing each other.”

“But what would we do about Saturdays?” He steps closer, almost like he can’t stop himself. “We can’t avoid each other forever.”

“We can avoid being alone together,” I say. “It’s only a problem when we’re alone.”

“I’m not sure I’d agree this is a *problem.*” He lifts his hand and trails the pad of his thumb down my jawline. His fingers are cold, but that’s not why I shiver.

“You’re doing it again.”

He tilts his head up to the sky. “Yeah, I am. I’m not sure I can stop.”

“This is what I’m talking about.”

I hate this so much that I’m tempted to swallow my words and change the subject. But then I remember Kashvi and her comments about Logan. They’re burned into my mind. How could she not feel betrayed if I moved forward with him knowing she’s liked him and done nothing because of her loyalty to the group? I want to explain all this so he’ll understand why I’m so concerned. The problem is that Kashvi’s secret isn’t mine to tell. I could never break her confidence by saying something to him about it.

The reminder cements my feelings like nothing else could.

“We shouldn’t be alone together anymore,” I state with the least emotion possible.

“Can I be honest?”

“Probably a bad choice, but yeah.”

“It won’t be enough.” Logan glances back at the house to make sure we’re still alone and ducks his head toward me. “Even if I can’t see you, I’ll still want to talk to you. I want your opinions on my assassin campaign. I want to tell you how Susie Q is doing—total manipulator, by the way. She has Mom wrapped around her tail. I want to see pictures of your latest jewelry and get updates on how Barbara is doing.”

“Don’t worry about that. She’ll text you without telling me and then you’ll show up at her house again unannounced.”

“I couldn’t turn her down.”

“And when she sends us back up to the attic alone again?”

His eyes glitter and I know he’s imagining what we could do up there alone. He blows out a breath. “I’m starting to understand your point better. We really have gotten ourselves into a mess, haven’t we?”

“A colossal mess.”

“So…okay, maybe you have the right idea,” he says. “We go cold turkey for a while. See each other on Saturdays for the game, and otherwise…”

“We’re strangers.”

We both nod in silent agreement, and I swallow past the sadness threatening to overtake me. I know why we’re doing this, but it doesn’t change the fact that I just lost one of the best things in my life.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"That's the last of it," I call the following Friday afternoon as I make it down the stairs with the last box from Grandma's attic.

It's been ten long days since Logan and I decided to keep our distance (not that I've been obsessively counting or anything). The only time I've heard from or seen him was at the game last Saturday, and even then he snuck in right before the livestream started, our characters barely interacted in the game, and I left immediately after. If the others felt the strain between us, they didn't say anything. I'm betting it'll get easier to stay away with time.

It can't get harder.

At least Grandma's agreement to move has come at a good time, because it's given me something to do each day after school. My parents have met us here after work every day to pack boxes and clean. Even Andrew has been over a few times. We've managed to completely clear the attic, the second-floor closets, and the extra bedrooms. There's still lots more work to be done, but Dad is hoping to get it staged to sell by next month.

I deposit the last box by the door and check on Grandma in the sun porch, where she's sipping a cup of coffee and working on a 3D puzzle, her latest hobby.

"Your dad will be pleased."

"Are you feeling any better about the retirement community?" I ask, and sit down across from her.

"It's fine." She glares at me. "It's…nice."

“It’s very nice.”

While Grandma’s new home isn’t nearly as large as this house, it’s new, clean, and bright. We’re bringing in lots of shelves for her to display her things, along with as much furniture as we can from here. There’s even a corner where she can paint or do puzzles, and a patio where she can drink her coffee. I really think she’s going to be happy—but not before being obstinate until the bittersweet end.

“You never know what might happen after the move,” I tell her. “I was nervous about coming here and going to a new school—really nervous. But sometimes change is a good thing.”

She nods and glances around the sun porch, which has been completely emptied other than the wicker furniture we’re using. It wasn’t long ago that the space was filled with paints and easels, and before that with houseplants when she got on a gardening kick. A wave of sadness and nostalgia washes over me. Soon someone new will own this house and all those times will be distant memories.

My emotions are reflected in her expression, but then she claps her hands together and gives me a sharp look.

“No more packing, no more complaining. Let’s get out of here and go for a drive.”

“A drive?” I repeat.

“Yes, a drive. We’re going to have some fun—I’m sure you’ve heard of the concept.”

“I have.” I chuckle. I follow her to the front door and pick up the keys to Mom’s car. Grandma immediately plucks them out of my hand and places them back down.

“No need. *I’m* going to drive.” She takes her jacket.

Unease settles in my chest. There’s something in the determined glimmer in her eye that tells me this trip is going to be trouble.

“Um…where do you want to go? Someplace in town?”

Her happy expression drops immediately. “I still have my license, thank you very much. If the state says I can drive, that means I can drive anywhere.”

“But Dad would rather—”

“What your father doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” She tugs me along outside. “Come on, I think we could *both* use a long drive.”

She’s right, it does sound great. I bite my lip and walk to the passenger door. I know my parents won’t be happy to hear she drove someplace other than the usual roads she’s used to, but what else am I supposed to do? Physically drag her back into the house? Sit on the sidewalk in protest until she decides to give in? I can only imagine her reaction to that. When Grandma is in this mood, there’s nothing I can do to sway her.

“So, where are we going?” I ask as she pulls out of the driveway.

“Jim told me about these amazing Amish shops about an hour away from here. Everything is handcrafted, and they have the most beautiful quilts.” She turns to me with a devilish smile on her face. “I thought we could do a little shopping, pick up a few things, and then have dinner at the restaurant up there. I want to get their chicken and noodles.”

While a bowl of warm carbs on this chilly spring day sounds comforting—maybe eaten while wrapped in a big quilt—this is a horrible plan. And knowing Grandma, she isn’t ignorant of that fact either. Driving on back country roads for hours? Buying a bunch of stuff when we’ve just decluttered the house? This is Grandma rebelling. It would almost be cute if I wasn’t in the middle of it.

“I don’t know if this is the best idea. Why don’t we check out one of the little shops on Main Street? Or we could go get lasagna at that new restaurant a few blocks from here?”

She looks at me long enough that I point at the road to make sure she’s watching.

“Are you going to be a spoilsport who tries to stop me, or would you like a slice of homemade Dutch apple pie from the Amish restaurant?”

I huff. “Fine, I won’t stop you.” I settle back into the seat. “But I’m also not defending you when Dad goes ballistic.”

“I can handle your father.”

Grandma’s tone is confident enough that I almost let go of my nerves and enjoy the ride—though the landscape isn’t at its most beautiful right now. Soon spring will truly be here and we can look forward to green grass and daffodils, but right now it’s all gray skies and leafless trees—like a grayscale painting. The first ten minutes are uneventful as we make our way out of town. It’s lucky there’s never much traffic. But then we get out onto the two-lane road that leads us to Amish country, and it quickly becomes

clear that the route is both hilly and windy. I grip the door as she takes a curve way too fast.

“You should slow down,” I say, my voice tight. It’s hard to anticipate what’s coming next with these roads. One moment you’re cresting a hill and the next you could be hitting another curve…or a car if you aren’t careful. This driving isn’t for the faint of heart.

She hits the brakes for a second but barely slows down. “I don’t remember it being like this out here.”

“We’re not in a rush.”

“Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing.”

We come up over the next hill and my heart lodges in my throat. We drop to the other side, and thank goodness there’s no tractor, Amish buggy, or deer. I’m worried, but I do like that she wants to hang out with me like this. I always loved visiting her, but it’s been different these past two months. Her house was starting to feel like a second home to me—until we packed it all up—and I’m going to miss it. I hope it’ll be just as fun visiting at her new place.

“I can’t believe you have an indoor pool at your new retirement community. You’re so lucky. Do you think they’ll let me swim there too?”

“You can take my place. I don’t like getting my hair wet.” Her face twists in a scowl.

“Grandma,” I say, half frustrated, half amused. “There has to be *something* you’re looking forward to there.”

“No, there’s—” She grins. “Never mind, I take that back. There *is* something I want to do when I get there.”

“Yeah?” She takes another curve too quick, but it’s easier to ignore when we’re talking.

“I want to gather some of the other folks and have you teach us all to play D&D!”

My eyes bug out. “Are you serious? Why?”

“You all seem to have so much fun with it. I can’t follow half of what you’re talking about or why you’re always rolling dice, but I’d like to pretend to be an elf or a dragon or something. Henry always did call me his dragon.”

“You could play a dragonborn character,” I reply, but my mind is still reeling at the idea of playing D&D with Grandma’s elderly friends. “I’m

surprised you're so interested. I didn't—" My brain finally catches up and processes her words. "*You've* been watching the livestreams?"

"I have a computer," she says defensively. "Andrew had to show me how to find it, but I wrote down the directions and now it's my latest Saturday activity."

I rub my hands down my face. "Are my parents watching too?"

"My understanding is they like to drink tea while they listen."

I groan, utterly mortified to discover my entire family has been watching the games, but also a little…touched. I didn't think they cared.

"Why didn't anyone ever tell me?"

Grandma accelerates on an open stretch of road and I clench my jaw.

"We knew you'd be embarrassed. But we wanted to be involved."

I swallow down a lump in my throat. "That's both mortifying and very sweet. And—if you really want—I guess I can try to teach you? The rules can be complicated, though."

I'm about to launch into more explanation, but yellow road signs catch my attention. They line the edge, warning that a big curve is coming up… like a ninety-degree curve that you need to take at twenty miles an hour or slower. But Grandma is going double that.

"Grandma?" I say, my voice rising and my right foot pressing into the carpet of the car as if I can press on a secondary brake pedal and slow us down. "*Grandma*, the curve!"

But it's too late. Her reflexes are slow, and the car is already going much too fast when she slams on the brakes. The tires squeal and the back end of the car fishtails. We both scream as the car spins and slams into one of the signs. I'm jolted forward, then back into my seat as we come to a complete stop.

I sit frozen, my heart beating painfully fast in my chest and my hands braced on the door and driver's seat. Slowly, like I'm moving through water, I turn to Grandma. Her hands are gripping the steering wheel, her head is against the headrest, and her eyes are wide with fright.

But she's alive and that's the only thing I need to know.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"Are you all right?" she whispers without moving a muscle.

Her voice unlocks something in me, and I shake out my arms before swiveling to her. I take a second to move each part of my body, but luckily I don't feel any pain.

"I'm fine, just shook up. Are you okay?"

My mind runs wild with possible horrible outcomes. The impact of the car could have given her whiplash, a spinal injury, who even knows all the terrifying possibilities.

"I'm okay," she whispers. "I…think I'm okay. That curve came out of nowhere." Her voice is wobbly.

I put a hand gently on her arm. At least she's breathing and talking and not moaning in pain.

"Do you want to try to get out of the car?" I ask. "See if you can walk around?"

She nods and we both unbuckle and gingerly get out. My legs are shaking enough that I'm not sure they'll hold my weight. But there's no pain, and I'm intensely grateful to see she isn't limping or wincing. I take a deep breath.

"Oh my," she whispers, and bends down to look at the car. The back right side hit one of the signs and…it's bad. The sign is mangled, as is her car. The back is crunched and the tire is wonky.

We stare at the car in silence for a moment. "How are you, Grandma?" I ask quietly.

"I already told you, I'm fine."

I shake my head and turn toward her. “No, I mean, how are you *actually* doing? With…everything. Because if I didn’t know better, I’d think maybe you were…running from something. And taking me along for the ride.”

She purses her lips, which makes the small wrinkles around her lips more apparent. “Someone thinks they’re a therapist today.”

I cross my arms over my chest.

She rolls her eyes and does the same. “It’s hard getting old, that’s all, especially when I still feel like I’m thirty. It’s hard not being able to do all the things you want, not being able to plan as far into the future because you don’t know what’s coming. And whatever is coming, it’s usually not going to be good.”

“We moved here and that was pretty good.”

“Yes, that was the best.”

“So maybe there’s more good stuff on the horizon. You might be getting older, but you’re still…I don’t know, young-old to me. You can make new friends, start new hobbies. Life doesn’t have to stop when you move in.”

“It’ll be a different life, though.”

“Yeah. But different doesn’t mean bad.” I stare at the contorted car, but I’m thinking about my new school and friends. “Sometimes different is better.”

“Particularly when you’re sixteen.” She squeezes my hand. “Life’s so short. It doesn’t feel that way all the time, I know, but even after living for seventy-five years it feels short. I want so many more years than I’ll ever get.”

I want to argue with her, but I don’t know what else to say. I’m not sure I can fix this for her. Instead, we hold hands and stand together in silence. Birds chirp around us, getting ready for spring. There’s the distant hum of a car engine. She shakes herself.

“All we can do is live it.” She looks straight in my eyes, her expression almost stern. “Live your life, Quinn. Every minute of it. Don’t drift through it—*live* it.”

Her eyes are wet, and it absolutely breaks my heart to see her upset. I pull her into a gentle hug. “I will,” I whisper.

We step apart and she pats the car with a little moan. “This poor thing.”

“I don’t think you can drive it home.”

Her shoulders hunch. “No, you’re probably right.”

“I’ll call Dad.” I reach in my pocket for my phone.

“No.” She puts her hand on my arm. “Don’t call him.”

I hesitate, and something about the ridiculousness of this situation makes me laugh. Our roles should be reversed. I should be the one breaking rules, driving recklessly, getting into accidents and then begging people not to call my parents. But instead, it’s my feisty, gray-haired grandmother. I laugh again and she cocks her head at me.

“Did you hit your head, hon?”

“No, it’s just…” I shrug. “Were you this bad as a teenager?”

That does make her laugh. “Oh no. I’m *much* worse now.”

Grandma isn’t happy about it, but I call Dad, who promptly calls the police and a tow truck. Dad pulls up behind us just slightly after the police officer arrives, but I don’t ask how much he was speeding to get here.

“Thank god you’re both all right.” He pulls me into a hug and then Grandma.

I almost joke about him cracking one of my ribs because his hug is too tight, but his twitching eye tells me he’s not ready to see the humor in this yet.

The next half hour is a blur as we explain what happened first to the police officer and then again to Dad. When there’s finally a lull, Grandma tugs me away from the others. “Why don’t you see if one of your friends can pick you up? It’s going to be a while until the tow truck driver gets here and finishes with the car. Your dad can take me home.” She raises an eyebrow. “Maybe Logan would give you a ride?”

My stomach tenses. I don’t know the road we’re on, but we were driving in the general direction of his house before the crash. He might not live far from here.

If I call him, I know he’ll come. He’d come even if we were on the other side of town. Or the state. But it feels wrong to tell him we shouldn’t be in contact and then turn around and ask him to drop everything for me.

“He’d want to know you’re okay,” she adds.

I stare at my screen and then text before I second-guess it. Today has been a lot, and he’s the one I want by my side.

His reply is almost immediate, saying he’ll come.

“Eric,” Grandma says to Dad. “One of Quinn’s friends is going to pick her up so she’s not stuck here with us.”

Dad turns from the officer and blinks—clearly too overwhelmed to take in more information. “Do I know the person? Are they going to drive safely?”

“It’s Logan, and yes, he’ll drive safely,” I reply.

He purses his lips. “Okay. That’s probably for the best.” He kisses the top of my head and returns to his conversation.

“Thanks,” I tell her. “But please try not to say anything embarrassing when Logan gets here.”

“When have I ever done that?”

I start ticking off examples on my fingers and she cackles.

Logan arrives before the tow truck, which means he must live even closer than I thought. My heart stutters as he steps down from the cab of his truck and strides toward me, his hands shoved deep in his pockets and his blue eyes warm against the gray surroundings. He’s so handsome that he makes it hard to breathe. Ridiculous wishes come to mind. I want to snuggle up so tightly against his chest that he can zip up his coat with both of us inside it. I want him to kiss me until I can’t form sentences anymore. I want him to keep driving until we’re in a new area code, a new state, a new time zone.

He says hello to my dad and the officer but gasps when he sees the car. “Are you sure you’re both okay?” He grabs my hands and squeezes hard, his eyes wide. My heart does a flip.

“I’m okay. The car looks worse than it was.”

Grandma walks over to us slowly, and Logan takes her elbow to steady her. “How about you? Are you in pain? How’s your head?”

“I’m fine—stop fretting. I suggested you come over to rescue Quinn from all this paperwork, not to worry about me.”

Logan glances at me for help.

“It’s okay,” I say with an eye roll. “She’s in her rebellious teenager stage.”

The tow truck arrives then. “Are you sure it’s okay for us to go?” Logan asks. “Will your dad be upset if we leave?”

“He’s too busy to notice.”

“Escape while you can,” Grandma says, and shoos us toward the truck.

I hug Grandma and Dad, then climb into the truck with Logan. Only when we’re far enough away that I can’t see the accident any longer do I take a deep breath. “Wow, a lot has happened in the last hour.”

“It sounds like you’ve had a crazy day.”

“Grandma wanted a taste of freedom. She’s been unhappy about the move.” I lean back and close my eyes. “My family has been there every night packing and cleaning. It’s been stressful.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “I’m really sorry. Have I missed anything else? How was your week?”

“It wasn’t the best.”

“Yeah, me neither. Though I did have one interesting conversation a few days ago. Your brother found me in the hall after lunch and threatened to tear me limb from limb if I did anything to hurt you.”

My eyes fly open, and I sit straight up. “He did what?”

“He’s protective, but I can respect it.” Rather than looking angry or defensive, Logan’s expression is thoughtful. “I promised him I’d make sure you were safe. Hopefully this counts since I can’t exactly control your grandma.”

“Wow. I had no idea. I knew he was worried about me, but that’s next level.”

“I wanted to text you so badly to tell you.” His fingers graze my knee.

I hold my breath, wondering how long he’ll keep his hand there. I don’t want him to move, but every second he’s touching me is a sweet form of torture.

“We’re going to drive by the farm. Do you want to stop for a few minutes? I could finally show you the shed. And, of course, Susie Q misses you too.” His eyes cut to me. “Or is that a really bad choice?”

“Today feels like a good day for bad choices.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

He doesn't move his hand the entire drive and when he parks at his house, he's at my side the moment we're out of the truck, taking my hand. I stare at him in surprise, but he doesn't explain and I don't pull away. I can't. The last two weeks since Grandma's ER visit have been exhausting and today stole my last fragment of willpower. Logan is next to me, and I've *missed him*, and if he wants to hold my hand, then I won't stop him.

Logan glances to his right and mutters under his breath. A woman who I assume is his mom walks toward us. Her long blond hair is pulled into a ponytail, and she's wearing jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, and a black puffer vest. She has a steaming mug in each hand.

"You must be Quinn?" she asks with a wide smile.

I pull my hand away from Logan, feeling suddenly self-conscious, and wave to her. "Yes, I'm Quinn. You're Mrs. Weber?"

"Emily," she says. "Is everything okay? I was so worried when I heard what happened."

"Yes, my dad is with Grandma and the police, and the tow truck just arrived so…" I trail off, not sure how to explain why we're at her house. But she doesn't question or seem concerned.

"I made you both hot chocolate. I always find a hot drink is comforting when I'm shaken up."

This isn't some little cup of brown liquid. Mine is a gigantic ceramic mug in the shape of a sleeping cat, the drink topped with a swirling mountain of whipped cream and a dousing of red sprinkles. I glance at

Logan, who gives me an embarrassed half-smile. His mug is a fluffy white sheep. Two seconds in and I already *really* like his mom.

"Thank you so much," I murmur, and take a small sip. My eyes pop. Whoa, that's sweet hot chocolate.

"A specialty of mine." She smiles.

"Thanks, Mom, but, uh, I was just going to show Quinn the shed for a few minutes. She's never seen inside."

I glance at the shed, which I still find utterly charming. It also looks very small and very secluded. Probably not the kind of place parents would want two teenagers to hang out alone.

Her expression says the same thing. "The shed, you say?" She gives us an appraising look. "It'll be cold in there."

"We won't be there long. I have to get her back to town."

She nods. "Okay. Glad you and your grandma are okay." She retreats into the house and Logan steers me to the shed. He opens the door and ushers me inside.

"Your mom wasn't wrong," I say, and take a drink of the hot chocolate. The inside of the shed is just as cold as outside.

"It'll warm up quickly." Logan puts his mug on a desk, flicks on the overhead light, and plugs in a large space heater.

I walk the space slowly, taking in all the details while I hold my mug in two hands. The walls are simple stacked stone. Some still have dried lichen on them. There isn't much furniture. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves cover the left-hand wall, there's a beat-up desk pushed up against the right-side wall, and there's a love seat under a window in between. Logan has found a way to tack posters to the stone, so much of the space is covered in maps of various D&D lands and characters.

"I see you and Grandma have another thing in common," I say as I check out his things. "You hoard your collections like a dragon, too, except you have fewer Portuguese tiles and more fantasy novels."

It's not exactly the curated stone cottage that would send cottage-core Instagrammers into a tizzy, but to my eyes it's glorious. Absolutely perfect. I forget the cold and the accident and every other thing except the outstanding hot chocolate in my hands and this treasure of a space around me. I circle the room slowly, studying the details in the maps and reading

the titles on the spines of the books. If that love seat is comfortable, I might try renting the space like an Airbnb.

I turn around. “Loga—” I pause. The heat of his gaze pulls the words from my mouth like a tornado sucking a tree out of the ground. “Are…you okay?”

“You were making little humming sounds.” His voice is rough.

I duck my head in embarrassment. “Was I? I didn’t realize.” I glance around the room again. “It’s just this space…it’s like heaven.”

“Really, you like it?”

“Are you kidding me? You have, like, a little stone cave where you can hide from the world and read and build campaigns. I’d spend every waking hour here if I could.” I point to a map on the wall. “Is this the map for the assassin campaign? I’ve never seen this one.”

He jumps into action, pointing to a few of the locations where he’s thinking the assassin could hide and rattling off some backstory about why the child prince might be in league with an assassin. We sit down on the love seat, and I swear under my breath.

“What?” Logan asks.

“The love seat is so comfortable.”

He frowns. “Is that a bad thing?”

“It is for you. I’m not leaving—this place is officially mine now.” I set my mug down and put both arms along the back of the love seat to claim it as my own. “I’m willing to negotiate on rent, but I’ll warn you that I’m broke.”

“You’re trying to evict me? That was quick. And after my mom gave you her famous hot chocolate.”

I pretend to consider. “You could probably stay—I might get a little lonely all by myself. But I’m claiming the love seat.”

“You’re welcome anytime.” His teasing tone shifts to more serious. “Although I should probably remind you that we agreed to stop being alone together and this place is…very alone.”

He gestures around the space and out the window. His house is in the distance, but it’s far enough away that I can’t see in the windows…which probably means they can’t see in here either. The love seat is suddenly extra small with him next to me, the air heavy with the realization that almost

anything could happen here and no one would know. I understand now why Logan's mom was hesitant to let us come out here together.

"I'm sorry I texted you," I say. "It wasn't fair to do that after we agreed to keep away. I could have waited with Grandma and Dad."

"No." His tone is vehement. "Don't apologize. You should always text me if you need something. I want to be the one you text."

There isn't enough oxygen in this shed. Words and thoughts scatter in my mind. What would one kiss matter? Just a kiss to get it out of my system. To get it out of both our systems. It would be the smart thing to do…the logical thing…

Logan stands abruptly and runs a hand through his hair. "Wow, this is even harder than I thought it would be."

"What is?"

"You. Us. This." He gestures between us. "Having you here, and watching your lips move as you read the book titles on my shelves, and listening to you make those happy humming sounds, and sitting next to you when I've spent way too much time imagining what it would be like to kiss you in that exact spot." He takes a step back and restlessly messes with his hair again. "I don't know how to do this with you."

I hate how agitated he is in my presence, but I love it at the same time. I'm not proud of it, but it's true. "We'll go." I stand and walk to the door. "At some point my mom will start wondering why I'm not home yet."

"I don't just mean right now, Quinn. I don't know how to be around you at all. I'm not sure how many more times I can sit across that D&D table from you and hold myself back from kissing you."

His words are edged with such anxiety that I want to smooth them. I try for a lighthearted comment to break the tension. "I actually remember you glaring at me a lot across that table."

"That's because I already knew this was going to happen. I knew it from that first morning when I took your picture. And it didn't help that you were totally unaffected at the games while I was a mess."

"Are you kidding? I was a mess too. Maybe I was better at hiding it."

This shed is small enough that he's next to me with one large step. His gaze burns a line of fire on every place it trails over. "Do you know how happy I was when your text came in earlier? And how guilty and horrible I felt when I figured out *why* you were texting? Not being with you is driving

me crazy.” His hand encircles my own. He turns my palm up and lifts it to his mouth, his lips pressing gently on the soft skin on the inside of my wrist.

“Logan,” I whisper.

“I’ll listen if you tell me to step away,” he whispers.

He’s asking for the impossible.

My arms wrap around his neck, and my heart beats out of my chest. I tilt my head and his breathing changes. His hands grip my waist tightly.

I close my eyes and lift my mouth to his, every nerve ending inside me igniting at the feel of his lips on mine. He’s in motion immediately, his hands rising up my back, turning to press me up against the nearest wall. His hand cradles my head, protecting me from the rough stone, as his mouth presses hard against mine. I liquify at his touch. Nothing could prepare me for how much better he feels than I ever expected.

My body thrums with electricity. His hand wraps around my lower back, bringing me even closer to him, and I slide my hands over the soft flannel of his shirt and into his hair. His lips are soft as he deepens the kiss, and sparks lick up and down my spine. My awareness narrows to the feel of his mouth and body. There’s no space left for thoughts or worries—there’s only this moment. Only Logan.

He pulls away and we both suck in a breath. His eyes are wild, his hair mussed and cheeks pink, and I must look the same. This is so much more dangerous than I imagined. Before I could tell myself that it was all in my head. That kissing him couldn’t possibly be as great as I’d let myself imagine it to be. But the truth is kissing Logan is a thousand times better than that.

He takes a step back, then another, and bumps into the desk chair. “Oh, that was a bad idea.” He grips the edge of the desk. “How am I going to stop kissing you after that?” His gaze drops back to my mouth, and I heat all over again.

I put my hands on my knees and bend over at the waist. “We can’t hide this from the others.”

“No, we can’t.”

I groan. “I’m going to end up breaking apart another group,” I say to the floor.

He steps closer and touches my back. “No, you aren’t. If anything, this is my fault.”

“It’s equally our faults. But I know how this is going to go. I’m the girl—the *new* girl—and you’re their long-beloved friend. They’ll blame me.”

“They won’t. I won’t let them.”

My thoughts spin, possibly from my position, but mostly from the memories filling my mind. Of Paige’s and Makayla’s bitter comments, the cold shoulder I got from Travis, and Caden’s insinuations. “You can’t control how they’ll react.”

“If it comes to that, then I’ll quit.”

“What?” I straighten so quickly the room spins. “You can’t do that. D&D is your favorite thing in the world.”

His hands come to my waist to steady me. “Not anymore, Quinn.”

I swoon, somewhat literally because I’m dizzy, and then right myself. “No, Logan, that’s noble of you, but if anyone’s going to quit, it should be me.” I feel resolved as soon as I say it. My expression brightens. I’ll just quit. It won’t solve Kashvi’s reaction to this, but at least it’ll keep the group intact. And if I miss it too much, I can play with Grandma instead. “It’s okay, that’s the solution. You all livestreamed before me. You can do it again without me.”

His expression darkens. “That’s *not* a solution. I want us to be able to play together. I want to look across the table and catch your eye, and listen to your character voices, and watch you be a total badass.”

He brushes his lips against mine and it takes everything in me not to grab him and make him stay.

“The game is tomorrow afternoon,” he says. “Let’s text everyone right now that they need to meet us early. We’ll tell them together and see what they say.”

My thoughts rush to Kashvi. She can’t find out at the same time as everyone else. I’ve already kept so much from her—the very least I can do is tell her about this in private so she can process it at her own speed. It just feels cruel to throw it in her face with Logan at my side, pleading with her to be cool about it.

I shake my head. “No, I can’t. I need to te—” I clamp my mouth shut before I blurt out Kashvi’s name. I may lose her as a friend when I tell her, but it won’t be because I spilled all her secrets. “It’s just…I need to do something before we tell everyone.”

He frowns. “Do what?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“That sounds…very suspicious.”

“Just wait before texting,” I plead. “I have to do this first and then we’ll talk again and come up with a plan to tell everyone. Okay?”

His eyes flicker over my face and I can see the worry in his expression. “Are you hesitating because this is all happening too fast? Are you secretly freaking out right now?”

I can’t help but laugh. “Logan, this has been *anything* but too fast. Are you freaking out?”

His arms come around my waist. “Only that I’m going to lose you. I wish you would tell me what you need to do so I can help.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’ll all work out,” he whispers. He pulls me closer. “I’m going to make it work out.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

I'm so exhausted from the insanity of yesterday that I sleep in longer than usual on Saturday morning. But as soon as I'm coherent, I force myself to text Kashvi to ask if I can come over to talk.

Kashvi: *I'm out right now, but can you stay after the game?*

Quinn: *I really need to talk to you before. It might not take long.*

There's a pause as a text bubble pops up to let me know she's writing back.

Kashvi: *I should be done in an hour or two. I'll text you when I'm home.* There's a pause and then another text pops up. *Is everything okay?*

I bite the inside of my cheek.

Quinn: *Yeah. See you soon.*

I take my time getting ready and finally go downstairs to find my parents still in their pajamas, whispering over their coffee cups.

"Late night?" I ask, surprised. Usually they're up early.

Dad takes a long sip of coffee. "Yesterday was a rough one."

"Yeah, I slept like death," I reply. "Have you talked to Grandma this morning?"

"I called when I got up," Dad says. "She sounded good. Almost contrite, though that won't last long, knowing my mother. How are you feeling?"

"No pain if that's what you mean." I sit down on the couch.

"Are you heading out immediately?"

I check my phone, but there's still no word from Kashvi that she's ready. "No."

“Would you mind picking Andrew up from Brennans Cafe?” Mom asks. “I dropped him off this morning, but I have some work I need to catch up on. It would be a big help.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. What’s he doing there? Is it a fundraiser for soccer or something?”

Dad and Mom exchange an amused glance. “Andrew’s on a coffee date.”

I laugh. “A coffee date? He’s *fifteen.*”

“I guess the girl was hesitant and this is all she’d agree to,” Dad says with a chuckle.

Interesting. Andrew has to put some work in with this girl. I like her already.

I grab my keys. “Well, you’ve piqued my interest now.”

“Hey, Quinn?”

I turn to find Mom studying me. “We’ve watched a few of your livestreams. I hope you don’t mind.”

My shoulders hunch forward. Ugh, there’s too much on my mind right now to get into a big discussion about this, particularly if they’re about to remind me of other extracurriculars I could be doing on the weekends or that they “don’t get” why I spend my time on D&D.

Dad puts his mug on the coffee table. “I can’t say I understand it—”

My shoulders slump.

“—but you certainly seem happy doing it. It’s pretty funny watching your group fight monsters.”

“Yeah?” I shuffle my feet hesitantly. “You didn’t hate it?”

“Of course not,” Mom says. “How could we hate it when you love it so much?”

I glance back and forth between them as the tension drains from my body. “Um, well, thanks for watching. Though it’s kind of mortifying too.”

They smile and shoo me away. “Try not to tease Andrew too much when you pick him up!” Mom calls as I head out the door.

I spend the drive trying to imagine who this girl might be. I don't know many people in Andrew's year, so I doubt I'll recognize her, but regardless of what my parents say, I'm totally teasing him on the way home. He doesn't even like coffee. I bet he got the sweetest mocha whipped cream concoction they serve.

When I pull into the crowded parking lot at the coffee shop, my stomach does a flip-flop. I recognize one of the cars. But I push the suspicions from my head. There's no way.

Absolutely zero way.

I jump out of my car and hurry to look in the cafe window.

Omigod, it *is* Andrew and Kashvi.

I gasp so loud that the harried middle-aged woman walking into the shop flinches as she passes me. The two of them are at a booth, each with a drink and a smile on their face. They aren't holding hands or kissing, but the way they're leaning over the table toward each other looks more than friendly.

Another customer walks in, but I stay in place staring at them like a stalker. How is this possible? Is Andrew actually on a *date* with Kashvi right now? This is where she was this morning when I texted? The rational part of me says that I need to calm down and not jump to conclusions. Maybe his date fled after two words with him, and Kashvi happened to be here and came over to comfort him? Maybe Dad misunderstood and this isn't a date, just a…weird, secret friendship hangout?

I step closer to the window. Oh no, he just laid his hand palm-up on the table. And—it's like watching a train wreck—she's putting her hand in his with a shy smile.

Knock, knock.

I lurch away from the window. The guy on the other side of the glass shakes his head and gives me a hard look. I wince with embarrassment. I practically had my face pressed into the glass. I'm such a creeper.

I march into the coffee shop, mindless and freaking out.

"Andrew?"

I stand at their booth, hands on hips, and wait for his reaction. Dimly, it occurs to me that I'm acting a bit like he did when he found Logan and me in the kitchen, but this is totally different. This is *Kashvi.*

Andrew's face morphs into an almost comical horrified expression. "What are you doing here, Quinn?" he asks. "Did you tell her about us?" he asks Kashvi.

Kashvi's eyes grow round. She looks busted.

"Mom sent me to pick you up." I look between them. "Are you two… together?"

"I—"

"We—"

They both stop and stare at each other. "Maybe you should sit down."

I don't know who to sit next to, and I want to be able to see the expressions on both of their faces, so I pull an empty chair over to their booth. We all sit in silence for a few seconds, and then Andrew chuckles. "This is awkward."

"I mean, I knew you liked her, but—"

"Quinn," Andrew says sharply.

"You told her you liked me?" Kashvi asks in a soft voice.

Andrew's neck is pink and blotchy. "It wasn't that hard to figure out."

I glance between them, dumbfounded. My stomach feels like it's been tossed around in the dryer for a few hours, but I guess I have no right to be angry given the confession I need to make to Kashvi. The way they're looking at each other…Oh wow. I don't think this is going to be over after a coffee.

Kashvi turns to me. "This is our first time hanging out. I know I should have said something to you before, but I wasn't sure how this was going to go. I decided it was better to wait and tell you everything after today."

"And how's it going so far?" Andrew asks with a cocky smile. His eyes are sparkling in a way that some girls (who are *not* related to him) might find, well, charming.

"I'm still here, aren't I?" Kashvi replies, returning the smirk. "But let's see how the next twenty minutes go." She turns to me, her expression changing to worry. "Are you mad? I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

"I'm not mad. I'm…trying to process."

Honestly, I want to be angry. I can almost see the red at the edges of my vision—because how could she meet my *brother* like this and say nothing—except I don't have a leg to stand on. Kashvi and I are more similar than I

ever realized. We've both been silent when we should have talked to each other, but my behavior has gone way beyond an overpriced coffee.

"Cool," Andrew says. "Can you give us another twenty minutes, then? Or forty-five?"

"Nice try. I need to talk to Kashvi. *Now.* Go kill time in Walmart until we're done."

"So you can talk her out of going out with me?" Everything in Andrew slumps. His expression is so dejected that it cuts right through me.

"No. I'm not going to do that. You two shocked me, but…*maybe* you're a little bit cute together."

They both look surprised, and it makes me laugh.

"Are you serious right now?" he asks. "You aren't trying to lull me into a false sense of security just to get Kashvi alone and tell her how I drew horns on your Calico Critters when I was six?"

"Oh, believe me, if this situation between the two of you goes anyplace, then Kashvi will be hearing *every* childhood horror story I have to share. I need to watch her back. But I won't go there today."

He studies me for a moment and then stands. "I'm trusting you." His expression softens as soon as he looks at Kashvi. "I'll go see if I can find those cookies."

I frown in confusion as he walks out the door, then take his place in the booth.

"I mentioned those dark chocolate cookies I like that Mom never buys," Kashvi says, her voice tinged with surprise. "Please don't hate me, but your brother is pretty cool. And hot."

I shiver in disgust. "Those words are never to come out of your mouth again."

"All right, let me have it. What makes Andrew such a monster that I should never speak to him again?"

"I was serious before—I'm not here about that. Andrew can be good when he wants to be. There's something else I want to talk about."

She waits expectantly.

"Okay." But the words don't come. I lick my dry lips and clear my throat. "So, I'm not sure how this thing with Andrew might change what I'm about to say, but either way I want to start by saying that I'm sorry it took me so long to talk to you about this. I love having you as a friend and I

didn’t want to jeopardize that, but that’s no excuse. I’ll never forget the way you welcomed me that first week.”

She grows still. “Quinn, you’re scaring me. What’s going on?”

“Logan and I kissed last night.”

She blinks, but otherwise there’s no reaction. It’s as if we’re in a TV show and someone hit pause. I want to fill the silence with all my rationales and explanations, but I hold back. I owe her time to process too.

“You kissed?” she whispers finally. “How? I mean I know *how,* but why?” She shakes her head. “Sorry, I’m not making sense. I guess I know why—because you wanted to—but I’m just…”

“Kashvi, I’m sorry. All this stuff with Andrew aside, I know you like Logan. You told me that and I kissed him anyway. Not to mention that we all agreed we wouldn’t get together with anyone in our group, and I broke that trust.”

“Give me a second….” She leans back onto the booth cushion. “I knew you were friends, obviously. And I knew you’d spent some time together helping your grandma, but…did this just come out of nowhere?”

I hesitate. She might be more empathetic if I softened the truth a bit, but I’m tired of keeping secrets. She needs to know what’s really been happening if there’s a chance for us to move past this.

“No, there’s been something growing between us for a long time now. I promise I’ve been trying to fight it—we both have—but Grandma and I got into a car accident last night, and—”

“Wait, you got into an *accident*? You should have led with that! Are you okay?”

“We’re both okay. It was scary, but neither of us is hurt. It happened close to Logan’s farm, so I called him to pick me up, and…well, things happened.” I avert my eyes like a coward.

“Things like him kissing you.”

“I actually kissed him. But I’m pretty sure he would have done it if I hadn’t.”

I expect her face to contort with shock and anger. But she only sits there, her head cocked to the side, studying me. Then the corner of her mouth quirks up and she leans forward. “Is he a good kisser?”

My mouth drops open. “*That’s* what you want to know?”

Her grin spreads. “I have to say, I’ve always been curious. He seems like he would be.”

I blink and look around the cafe in case a group of choreographed actors is about to jump out and scream, *“Psych! You’re the worst friend to ever exist!”*

“Why aren’t you mad right now?”

She laughs and shakes her head.

“But I broke all the rules! I kissed someone you had a crush on?”

“Did you do it to hurt me? Or mess with the group?”

“*No*. Of course not. We decided we’d stop being alone together, we made promises, but…”

“You couldn’t stay away from each other.”

I nod slowly.

“It sounds to me like you might be falling for him.”

I freeze. I’m scared to admit it aloud, but that’s exactly what it feels like. She must be able to read my expression, because she raises one eyebrow and gives me a knowing look.

“Quinn, how could I be mad about the fact that you’re head over heels for one of my closest friends? You may be trying to hide it right now, but everything about you is screaming it. It’s in your expressions and your voice and the way you talk about him. I wouldn’t deny you that…no real friend would.” Her curls are falling in her face, and there’s such sympathy in her expression that tears prick at my eyes.

“But what about all the things you said before about Logan? You have every right to hate me.”

“Logan is cute, and he’s crossed my mind on occasion, but it’s not like I was dating him. It was only a crush. But I am hurt that you didn’t tell me sooner.”

Now it’s my turn to lift an incredulous eyebrow. “You are literally on a secret date with my *brother* right now.”

She laughs and holds up her hands in surrender. “Okay, okay, you have a point. In my defense it was only coffee, but all right, we’ve clearly both been keeping some secrets. Although my secret is like two days old. How long have you been holding yours in?”

“Since maybe the first day I met you all?”

“Quinn! You liked him all this time and never told me? I thought we were friends!”

“We were! We are, hopefully! That’s why I didn’t want to tell you—I was scared of losing you.”

She blows out an exasperated breath. “That last group really messed you up. You’re lucky you found us.”

My heart soars. “So you really aren’t mad?”

“I’m not mad.”

I take a deep breath. I feel better than I have in months. I could run a marathon. I could bench-press this entire coffee shop.

“Thank god. Logan and I are planning to tell everyone else today at the game. What do you think they’ll say? Because I’m willing to step down if it makes things easier.”

“You absolutely will not do that! Where did you get that idea? Did Logan suggest it?”

“No, he reacted about the same as you.”

“Good,” she huffs, “or I was about to lose all respect for him.” She gives me an encouraging smile when she sees my worried expression. “No one is quitting. They love you and they love Logan—it’ll be fine.”

I’ve tried giving myself the same pep talk, but I never believed it until this second. I think everything is actually going to be okay. We’ll win them over.

I come around to the other side of the booth and pull her into a hug. “You’re the best.”

She has the audacity to laugh. “And *you* have too low of expectations. Though I’m going to need details now. One of the biggest benefits of best friendhood is getting all the gossip about people the other person dates.”

My heart clenches. “Best friends?”

“Is that too much, too soon?”

“*Definitely* not.” I sit back on my side. “Although this is going to be a one-sided conversation, because I don’t want to hear *anything* about Andrew. How mad do you think he’d be if we abandoned him in this shopping center so we can go do fun best friend things?”

“We’re already doing best friend things. Speaking of which…” Kashvi takes a sip of her iced coffee and puts her chin on her hand with a devilish smile. “You never told me if Logan is a good kisser.”

I can’t help the way I grin and collapse into myself. One thought back to the way he spun me and pressed me against the wall in the shed and I’m a ball of goo with very pink cheeks.

She whistles. “Oh, it’s like *that*, huh? Then if things go well with Andrew, I might need Logan to share a few tips.”

“I know the rules didn’t work out for us before, but I’m instituting a new best friend rule: Thou shall never—*ever*—talk about kissing my brother.”

Chapter Thirty

Because I'm a nice sister and friend, I wait in the car to give Kashvi and Andrew some time to say goodbye. When Andrew sits down in the passenger seat, his smile tells me that this won't be the last time he sees her.

"You and Kashvi, huh?" I ask, and pull out of the parking lot.

"We're going to hang out again in a few days. And she said she'd come see me after practice too. It turns out she's really into soccer."

That's true. I remember her saying the same thing to me. I still don't love the idea of him dating Kashvi—it's hard not to see Andrew as my annoying little brother—but they do have some similar interests and it's not my place to dictate who she spends time with. Although, for my sanity, I'm going to imagine them as completely platonic friends.

"Sorry if I ruined this morning," I tell him.

"Actually, I think you showing up like that worked out well. Now that you know about us, she seems more relaxed. So thanks, I guess."

"You're welcome. But you better not do anything stupid and hurt her."

"I won't." He slouches down in his seat. "So if you weren't talking her out of dating me, what was so important that you had to kick me out of the coffee shop?"

"Nothing."

He sits up. "Oh no, if your voice sounds like that, then I need to hear this. Unless it's some weird girl thing I don't want to know about."

"It's not a *weird girl thing*," I say, rolling my eyes. "I needed to talk to her about Logan."

"Ugh, him."

“You don’t get to say any of that now. I’m not going to be cool with your relationship just to have you crap on mine at every turn.” Assuming Logan and I still have a relationship after the conversation this afternoon at D&D.

“Kashvi is already your friend and I’m your brother. There’s nothing to get over—we’re both awesome. But that dude—”

“Logan.”

“Logan is…” He shakes his head. “I don’t like guys looking at my sister like that. You can’t trust guys.”

I laugh. “So I *should* tell Kashvi to stay away from you since you’re a guy?”

“You know what I mean. I don’t count.”

“Uh, yeah you do. And I heard about that little conversation you had with Logan. That was over-the-top.”

“It’ll keep him on his toes.”

“Oh my god, Andrew.” I shake my head and turn onto our street. I don’t want to tell him this, but it’s actually sweet that he’s being so protective. “How about we agree to be generally supportive of each other? Kashvi is amazing, so—if you’re lucky enough to have her attention—I’m happy for you. I can’t think of a better person for you to be with.”

“Thanks. And I guess Logan isn’t the worst guy I’ve ever met.”

“So kind of you.” I pull into our driveway and turn to him. “I appreciate you being worried about me. It was unnecessary and a little embarrassing, but it means a lot that you care.” I squeeze his hand.

He pulls away and ducks his head in embarrassment. We don’t share emotions with each other. “Any brother would do it. It’s part of the code.”

“Maybe. But I’m glad you’re *my* brother.”

He gags dramatically. “Ugh, stop, I’m going to puke.”

I get out of the car, laughing. His words only egg me on more. “But I *loooove* you. And now we get to spend all our time together. We can go on double dates, talk about our feelings, share our hopes and dreams. We can play couples pickleball together!” I clap my hands. “It’ll be so fun!”

He glares over the top of the car at me. “You’re describing my nightmares, but you aren’t talking me out of dating Kashvi.”

“I’m not trying to. I love the idea,” I tease. “We can finally get to know each other again, like we did when we were little.”

“One car ride is enough time together for now.” He shakes his head and hurries into the house, closing the door behind him.

I roll my eyes. He’s still my twerpy little brother. I pocket my phone and head toward the house, only to have him open the door again and poke his head out.

“My favorite movie is *Deadpool*, and my lucky number is eleven.”

“Your jersey number?”

His eyes widen. “Yeah. I’m surprised you know that.”

“Not as surprised as I am that you’re rattling off random information all of a sudden.”

He shrugs. “Just feels like that’s the kind of stuff a sister should know about her brother. You know, if we’re sharing.”

“Oh. Um, thanks.”

He walks back inside, and I stand in the cool March sunlight, dumbfounded once again by him. Huh. This might be the start of a new world with Andrew.

I text Logan to tell him that I’m leaving for the game soon and that we should talk before getting there. I expect an immediate response, but nothing comes. Tension coils through me even though I know it doesn’t mean anything. He could be busy with the farm or driving to the game right now. Except when I pull up in front of Kashvi’s house, Logan’s truck is already here.

What the hell?

He had time to come here early but not to text me back? A sinking feeling fills me. Something isn’t right.

“Logan’s already here?” I ask Kashvi as soon as I walk in the door.

She nods and beckons me to the basement stairs. “Looks like it. I just got home a few minutes ago, so I haven’t been downstairs.”

I hesitate. All my confidence about talking to the others falls away as I see the now-familiar worn gray carpet on the stairs. What’s going on with Logan? And what will the others say when they find out about us?

Kashvi pauses. “Have you talked to him?”

“No, that’s the issue. I texted him and he hasn’t replied.”

She bites her lip. “Maybe he didn’t see it? Or his phone is dead?”

Maybe. But highly unlikely.

She tugs me down the stairs. “No more stressing. And remember, I’ve got your back.” But then we both pause again when harried voices come from the basement. She hurries down the stairs, with me in her wake.

Logan *is* here, and he’s leaning over the game table toward Mark and Sanjiv, his palms flat against the surface, like he’s a CEO of a corporation trying to convince the board to approve a merger. Sloane stands in the far corner of the room looking worried. They all swivel to watch me as I walk in. My eyes go to Logan, but rather than him looking happy or relieved, his face falls in frustration and he runs a hand through his hair.

“What’s going on?” Kashvi asks. “And why is everyone here so early?”

“Sanjiv texted that the router wasn’t working, so I came over to help while you were out,” Mark explains. “We got that fixed, but then Sloane was still having issues with the livestream, and we wanted to make sure everything went perfectly today—”

“That doesn’t matter right now,” Sanjiv interrupts. “Quinn, you’re thinking about quitting D&D? Why would you want to do that?”

My eyes flare wide in shock. What’s going on?

“No, that’s not what I said.” Logan waves his hands frantically.

I spin to him. “Then what were you saying? And why didn’t you text me back?”

“Logan didn’t say you were quitting,” Sloane says, and takes a seat at the opposite end of the table from where they usually sit as DM so that they’re between Logan and me. Their voice is low and cautious, like they know things are about to get out of control and they’re trying to talk us all down. “He said that *if* you brought up quitting today, then we had to promise we wouldn’t let you no matter what. Though he wouldn’t explain why you’d be thinking about it.” Sloane shoots him an accusatory glance. “I thought you were happy playing with us?”

“I am happy—*so* happy to be part of this and to be friends with you all.” I slide into my seat and Kashvi does the same. I make sure to look at each person so they can see that what I’m saying is genuine. “I don’t want to quit.”

“That’s great,” Sanjiv says, “but then why are you freaking out, Logan? She’s fine.”

I pin a glare at him. “Why would you sneak over here early when we agreed we were going to talk ahead of time?”

“I don’t know.” Logan rubs both hands over his face and through his hair again. “I guess because I thought you were going to do the same thing and I wanted to beat you to it? The way you were talking last night about how you had to do something…I started thinking you were going to come here early and quit before I could stop you. Yesterday you said that was the solution.”

“Wait, so there *is* talk of quitting?” Mark asks.

“You should have waited.” My voice is low and my words are only for Logan.

“I know,” he replies, though he doesn’t look remorseful. “But I wanted to take quitting off the table since that was the first place your mind went. And I knew if I said it while you were here, you’d fight me on it, so…”

“So you went behind my back?”

He leans forward, his eyes sharp. “Only because I refuse to let you quitting the group be a possible solution. That is not how we’re solving this.”

“Solving *what*?” Sanjiv cries, and throws his hands up in the air.

“And did you ever stop to think that maybe we should be coming up with these solutions together?” I snap.

“I would if you’d tell me what was going on inside your head instead of keeping secrets.”

“Okay, someone needs to stop and explain why you’re fighting,” Mark commands.

“We’re not fighting,” we say simultaneously.

“You’d better start making sense or I’m going to make you *both* quit,” Sloane says, their annoyance sharp enough to cut.

My heart is racing, and I clamp my mouth shut. Thoughts spin as I try to decide the best way to explain things without saying anything I shouldn’t.

“It’s me,” Kashvi says matter-of-factly. “I’m the reason she was acting that way. She wanted to talk to me first.”

Logan squints in confusion and the others look bewildered as well, but that's their natural state at this point. I turn to her and shake my head to tell her she doesn't have to do this. She only shrugs.

Kashvi lifts her chin to Logan. "You're cute. I had a crush on you, and I told Quinn, and she didn't want to tell you my personal business."

"Oh, I…um," Logan bumbles, looking deeply uncomfortable, but Kashvi laughs it off.

"It's okay. It's not that deep. I already have my eye on someone else." She winks at me.

"You had a crush on *Logan*?" Sanjiv cries. "Kashvi, ew, that's disgusting! You know we don't date each other. That would be like me dating Sloane or Quinn or Mark." He looks like he might be sick.

"Nice," Sloane says bitterly. But they give me a significant look and I get the impression they might have already caught on.

"Okay, so here's the thing," I start.

Logan catches my eye, and my frustration from a few seconds ago disappears. It's now or never. He opens his mouth, but I put up a hand. I need to be the one to say it.

"Logan and I kissed. I know it shouldn't have happened, I know we promised we would never get involved with someone else in the group, but it happened."

Sanjiv and Mark look thunderstruck, but not Sloane. "I'm absolutely shocked," they say in a deadpan.

"You knew?" I ask.

"I wasn't sure, but this explains a lot. You two have had vibes since the beginning."

"Dude," Mark mutters, and side-eyes Logan.

"So…what does this mean?" Sloane asks. They were quiet while we were bickering, but now that this relates to the game, they seem much more invested. "Is this why you two were talking about quitting?"

"It doesn't need to go that far, does it?" Sanjiv looks around the table. "You already said you two know it shouldn't have happened, so let's just forget it and move on. We don't need to make it a big deal."

"Unless it is?" Sloane adds.

Kashvi's eyes are on me, urging me to contradict her brother, but I don't. Technically, Sanjiv is right. The kiss *doesn't* have to change things.

Logan and I could play it off as nothing and the group could stay exactly as it is. That certainly would be the easiest way out of this conversation. Until the next time I'm alone with Logan, of course. But one more word and our group changes forever.

I steel myself before making eye contact with Logan. In the split second before I do, I decide it's okay if his expression is hesitant. Of course he'd be unsure—he's putting all his friendships on the line for me. I'll be okay if he wants to downplay what's happened, despite his big talk last night.

But when our eyes meet, his expression is so full of reverence that my throat grows tight. No one has ever looked at me the way Logan is looking at me right now. Like I'm the most precious, beautiful thing he's ever seen.

He nods, and the small gesture is all it takes to calm my fears.

"I'm in love with Quinn," he announces calmly. "It wasn't just a kiss—not to me—and I'm not getting over it and I'm not giving her up, so don't even try." He turns to me, his eyes studying my expression. "I love you. And I'm with you for as long as you want me to be."

My heart might just pop out of my chest and hop across the table to him. It would only be fair since it's his now.

"I love you too," I whisper.

He turns back to the others. "We really botched this whole thing. I'm sorry we lied to you and went against the agreement and told you in this ridiculous, chaotic way, but the end result is the same. I love her, and if you say she has to leave, then I'm leaving with her."

Everyone sits in utter silence at his proclamation. Whatever Sloane thought they knew, it clearly wasn't this. Even Kashvi looks taken aback, and Sanjiv might as well have smoke pouring out of his ears from all the new info.

My phone buzzes, but that's the only sound in the room.

"I hope we can find a way to make this work," I say. "I love Logan, but I also love all of you."

"Well, *I* think it's amazing," Kashvi says loudly. She lays a hand on my arm. "The best news I've heard in forever."

I hope the others will jump in immediately, reassuring us that it's all going to be fine, but that doesn't happen. Fear surges through me. Is this really their reaction? Silence?

The others blink and glance around at each other.

“Um…well…it’s definitely not how I thought today was going to go,” Mark says slowly. “But I’m cool with it.”

“I guess it’s time we reevaluate the rules if they’re causing this much chaos,” Sloane adds.

“We aren’t a group without you,” Kashvi tells me fiercely. “Or you, Logan.”

Sanjiv nods. “Honestly, I don’t care what you two do. I only agreed to that rule so none of you derelicts could date my sister. That’s all I care about.”

Kashvi gives me a quick, panicked look and I smirk. Good luck getting Sanjiv on board with Andrew.

“Just don’t make your characters turn all gushy and lovey in the game,” Mark adds. “You’re way more fun when you’re bickering.”

“Actually, if this is confession time, then Mark and I have something to tell you,” Sloane says.

My mouth drops open, but Sloane waves away my shock.

“Not *that*, dear god. Mark and I aren’t dating. Quinn, we know you were upset about your ex-friends trolling you in the chat and we wanted to do something to make you feel better. Mark and I started talking and decided it would be great if we could fill the chat with something positive. So we found the contact info for Stephanie from *The Smiling DM* podcast and asked her if she’d be willing to watch one of our sessions.”

“She never confirmed, but that’s why we were double-checking the internet connection when you got here,” Mark explains. “We didn’t want her to log in and then have our livestream go down.”

I sit back in shock. A quick glance at Logan’s surprised expression tells me that he didn’t know about this either. “You actually did that for me?”

“What do you mean *actually*? Of course we did. Not that it came to much, but we thought it would be a fun surprise if we could pull it off.” Sloane smiles and tugs on their crocheted hat.

I’d throw my arms around them, but they’re not one for physical contact. “That’s amazing. Thank you so much for caring enough to try. But I don’t care about the chat or anything they have to say anymore. They’re just bitter with nothing else to do.”

“The worst,” Mark agrees.

“And the guy’s a horrible kisser, from what you said,” Kashvi adds with a laugh.

My cheeks heat, but I can’t help smiling. “It was like he was trying to suction my lips off with his mouth.”

The others burst out laughing, though Sloane pushes away from the table with a shiver. “He’s a loser, no doubt, but that’s more info than I need.”

“You can only go up from there,” Sanjiv tells Logan.

“All right, can we *please* get back to D&D now?” Mark asks. “This is a game table, not a feelings table, and I still need to figure out how to use this salt water to test the balance of my dice.”

Logan stands and I follow him. Sure, I love the group, but after the things he just said, I don’t want to wait one more second without kissing hi—

“It’s two-ten!” Kashvi’s voice is an octave higher than usual.

“The livestream should have started ten minutes ago!” Sanjiv cries. “Now we’ve lost our audience for today!”

“Ummmm.” Kashvi’s face is panicked as she holds up her phone to the group. “Andrew just texted—”

“No time, get in your chairs. It might not be too late,” Sloane commands. They rush to the other end of the table where their laptop is. “I bet some viewers will wait around for us. I’ll just…”

Sloane’s voice trails off. The blood drains from their face. Something is clearly very wrong.

“Please don’t kill me,” they whisper.

Chapter Thirty-One

"Sloane?" Mark asks.

Sloane frantically messes with something on the laptop and lets out a strangled scream. Then they step away from the table and start pacing, hands wrapped around the back of their neck.

"Are we not playing, then?" I ask gently.

"Yeah, no, that's canceled. Like, for sure."

We look to each other in confusion. Sloane is canceling the game? How much weirder can today get?

"*Please* don't kill me," Sloane repeats, and turns to face the table. "But you know how we were having issues with the livestream earlier? And how we were troubleshooting before you all came barreling in and started fighting and declaring your undying love for each other?" Sloane's eyes flicker to Logan and me apologetically. "Yeah, so…I kind of forgot to shut down the livestream when the mayhem began."

"Wait. Do you mean…?" Logan glances at the camera set up in front of him.

Horror creeps through me at the possible implications of what Sloane is saying. It isn't possible.

"The livestream is off now," Sloane reassures us. "But, um, I just turned it off."

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god." I sink down into my chair and begin rocking like I'm possessed.

"Tell me that conversation wasn't public for the entire internet to witness," Logan says.

“I can tell you that or I can tell you the truth, but I can’t tell you both.”

The room fills with cussing and moaning, and I clap my hands over my face. Did I just tell Logan I love him for the first time in front of a live audience?

Kashvi holds up her phone. “Yeaaaaah, FYI, Andrew watched the whole thing. He texted to tell me what was happening, but I was too caught up to notice it.”

My mortification ramps up another notch, and I feel like I might be sick. My little brother heard everything? I guess I’m moving out of the house because he is never *ever* letting me live this down. I’ll be at my eightieth birthday party, and he’ll still be telling this story with gleeful abandon.

Kashvi hurries over to the laptop. “It’s okay, don’t freak out! He’s just one person, and he had a reason to stay logged in. I bet no one else saw it. They probably logged out as soon as they saw we weren’t playing.” Her voice is overly chipper. Sloane pulls up the session stats and I drag myself from my chair to look over their shoulder.

“Am I reading this wrong?” I whisper. “Does that say five hundred viewers?”

“Hey, that’s some good news, Logan! You finally got the five hundred viewers you were hoping for when we started the new campaign!” Sanjiv says with a laugh.

Logan drops his head into his hands.

“We more than quadrupled our usual viewership,” Sloane says. “And the chat blew up too.” They scroll through the chat and then freeze.

“Um, yeah, so one other thing…”

“Sloane, I can take *no* other things!” I practically screech.

“Remember how I mentioned that we invited Stephanie…”

“Noooooooo!”

Sloane leans forward and quickly skims the chat. “If it’s any consolation, it looks like she ships you two. And she says congratulations.”

I moan again and a hand touches my waist. Logan stands behind me, and I lean back against his chest without thinking.

“Whoa, the chat is *insane*,” Kashvi says. She keeps scrolling but never gets to the bottom. There are so many comments. Memories of the last time I was standing here, reading the chat, are way too vivid in my mind.

Logan wraps his arms around my waist and squeezes. “I know this is basically the most embarrassing thing that could possibly happen, but I don’t regret what I said,” he whispers in my ear.

I look back at him, his voice instantly tamping down my anxiety. “I don’t either.”

“Then it doesn’t matter what anyone else says. Don’t let the comments get to you.”

“Actually,” Kashvi interrupts with a chuckle. “The chat is pretty cute. They like you two together.” She scrolls more. “There are a few trolls and some snarky comments asking why we replaced the game with a soap opera, but overall…yeah, really positive.”

I glance up at Logan, a question in my eyes. “Do we dare to look?”

“I’m not sure we have much to lose, but it’s up to you. I don’t care what a single person has to say about us.” He looks to the others. “No offense.”

Kashvi and Sloane move out of the way so Logan and I can read the comments. Most of them are just as Kashvi described—nice or at least neutral. However, one username sticks out to me. Their comments are dispersed among the others, but I see them as if they were neon yellow.

@64CMscores: *She’s ruining another one*

@64CMscores: *I TOLD YOU*

@64CMscores: *trainwreck*

My stomach sinks. It’s Caden—he streamed the entire thing. He changed his username from last time, probably because he got blocked, but his initials and number are the same, so there’s no question it’s him.

Then I notice a reply to one of his comments.

@SmilingDM: *Hey @64CMscores, go back to your cave with the rest of the trolls. No one wants you here.*

I chuckle and point out the comment to Logan. “I think I might be loving the chat now. Is that actually *the* Smiling DM telling off Caden?”

Mark and Sanjiv come closer so all six of us hover around the screen to read.

“Yesss, I’m so glad you invited Stephanie.” Kashvi high-fives Sloane and Mark. “Wait! Quinn, oh my god, do you remember what we said at the end?” She grabs my arm and shakes it wildly.

I glance around in confusion. Everything is a blur. Then I remember and slap my hand over my mouth.

And the guy's a horrible kisser, from what you said.

It was like he was trying to suction my lips off with his mouth.

Kashvi repeats it, laughing so hard she can barely stand. "I can't believe he heard that!"

"Not just him," I reply. "*Everyone* heard that."

Sanjiv whistles low. "That'll shut him up."

"He's a coward coming into our chat like that," Logan says. He tugs me closer and kisses the top of my head. "He deserves whatever he gets."

I can't argue with that, but also…I realize I don't care either way. It doesn't matter what Caden thinks or what snarky comment Paige has. It doesn't matter if I run into them next week or if I never see them again for as long as I live. They're in my past, and that's where I'm going to keep them.

"Can we close the chat now?" I ask. "I'm good for a lifetime."

"Good call," Sloane says. "Some of these comments are moving into borderline creepy."

Logan steps closer to read. Sanjiv scrolls and points out a few. "There's one viewer who is weirdly adamant that you kiss."

Logan freezes and then bursts out laughing. "Quinn, you've *got* to come see this."

Hesitantly, I read the username and immediately shriek-laugh.

@Barbara.Clarice.Norton: *Will you two get on with it and kiss already! Not all of us have the entire day to wait around.*

"That's your grandma, right?" he asks.

I put my face in my hands. *Of course* Grandma would use her complete legal name as her username. I pull out my phone to see multiple messages from her, all saying some version of "I told you so" or "kiss him before I get bored."

I can't stop laughing at this point. I think I'm getting a little punchy from this whirlwind of insanity.

"I guess that's *slightly* less weird if the comments are from your grandma?" Sanjiv asks, though he doesn't look convinced.

Logan kisses me on the temple. It feels amazing to have him do that in front of all our friends, but it's also weird after all the hiding we've been doing. I look around to the group, who have dazed expressions. This was not how any of us thought this afternoon would go.

“So…I guess this is the type of thing you were hoping to avoid when you made that rule, huh?” I ask with a smirk.

“We couldn’t have even imagined this,” Sloane whispers.

“I don’t know, with viewer numbers like that, I think you two are on to something. Maybe we should brainstorm a fight for next week?” Sanjiv asks. “Quinn, you can tell Logan how annoying the voice is that he uses for Adris and—”

“What?” Logan interrupts.

“Someone had to say it.” Sanjiv gestures to Sloane. “Get the stream back up, this should be good.”

I put up a hand. “That’s very helpful, but we’re good on livestreaming drama for a while. And I think I can speak for Logan when I say we both want to get back to our regular gaming. All together.”

The group all nods in agreement, and I never want this feeling to go away.

“And we’re cool, Kashvi?” Logan asks. “No weirdness?”

“None, I swear. I can’t think of you like that after seeing how insanely adorable you two are together. In fact, since this session is clearly over, why don’t we give you a few minutes of privacy?” Kashvi winks at me and ushers the others toward the door. A moment later it closes, and Logan and I are finally, blissfully, alone.

He puts his hands out in defense. “Okay, listen, I know I shouldn’t have come here early like that, but I—”

I take him by the shoulders and kiss him, hard. Logan stills for a second, like he’s in shock, and then his hands are on me, fingers combing into my hair and wrapping around my back. Kissing him without the sting of guilt feels *incredible*.

I smile into his lips, and he pulls back just enough to say, “You’re smiling.” His voice is ragged.

“There’s a lot to smile about.”

He kisses me again. I could live forever in the electric buzz vibrating through my skin.

“Hold on.” His smile is mischievous, and it makes my heart stumble. “Before they come back, I need to get a few things straight. You’re telling me I’m allowed to kiss you like this?” He brushes kisses over my freckles.

“Mmm, yes.”

“And here?” His mouth moves to mine, and I about collapse at the feel of his tongue against my own.

“Absolutely yes. *All* the time.”

“How about this?” He takes my face in both his hands and gazes into my eyes. “Am I allowed to tell you how much I’ve fallen for you?”

I’m having a hard time breathing, but I manage to nod. “Only if I’m allowed to say it back.”

He smiles, his eyes shining. “I like this new world with no rules.”

Pounding on the door makes us freeze. “We know better than to come in there,” Mark calls, “but don’t go messing up our gaming table and desecrating the dice. I think my latest set might finally be perfect.”

“*Anyway*, we’re going for pancakes,” Kashvi yells. “You should come with us…or not. But fair warning, Andrew is meeting us there and he has some opinions about what just went down.”

There’s a moment of silence as Logan and I look at each other before their steps thump back up the stairs. He cocks his head at me when the sounds fade. “Do you want to go?”

“Maybe in a few minutes?” I kiss him on his jawline.

He gives me a heated look. “No promises.”

Significantly more than a few minutes later, we head for my car. We beam at each other so brightly we probably look out of our minds.

“Actually, let’s stop at my work first,” he says as I pull onto the road.

I frown. “Why?”

“We need to get a few gallons of orange sherbet for your grandmother. I owe her one for asking me to take your picture.”

“How about pancakes first, sherbet delivery second, and then we go back to your farm so you can show me around your shed in *much* more detail?”

His hand squeezes my knee. “The best plan I’ve ever heard.”

I accelerate down the street. It’s hard to slow down when I’ve got the D&D campaign, good friends, and delicious pancakes waiting in my future.

And, most importantly, Logan.

Epilogue

Three Months Later

"Are you ready for this?" I ask Logan. Our hands are tightly clasped, and we have heavy bags slung over our shoulders.

"This is the most intimidated I've ever been," he replies. "I hope they take it easy on us."

"Don't worry. I'll be by your side the entire time."

I squeeze his hand for reassurance and then march us through the front doors of the Sunny Valley retirement community center.

Grandma is there waiting for us, looking as elegant as always in a pink blouse and scarf. "There are two of my favorite people!" she exclaims, and gives us both a hug. "I'm so excited for this—I've been telling everybody I meet that they need to come and spend the afternoon with my clever granddaughter and her handsome boyfriend."

She ushers us toward a meeting room in the back. I wave to a few of the residents and staff I recognize as we walk by. My family visits Grandma here a lot, but we're often in the community center instead of her residence because she's too social to be home alone. Now we have a calendar on the fridge so we know when she'll be in water aerobics, craft classes, or weekly pickleball games.

"I hope you don't mind," she says over her shoulder, "but a few more people said they were interested, and I told them they could join us. They don't have a lot going on, so I hated to say no."

She stops at the entrance to the room. Logan and I both freeze at the sight. Around the oval table, which was clearly made for card games or crafts—as opposed to fantasy role-playing—are no fewer than seven elderly people staring expectantly at us. I recognize some as Grandma's newest friends—Janet's wearing a sweatshirt with embroidered kittens on it and Carol's crocheting at her seat, while Mitch is in a wheelchair with an oxygen tank. And then there's Jim, Grandma's flirtatious pickleball friend. He's sitting ramrod straight with narrowed eyes, like he's ready to take down whatever fantastical foe we throw his way.

Logan squeezes my hand tighter.

"Oh! Um, hi, everyone," I say, and give a little wave.

"Hello, dear!" Winfred says. "I love that color purple on you. Very flattering. And who is *this*?"

"That's the twerp who can't play pickleball," Jim is quick to say. "Are you up for a rematch?"

Logan sets his bag on the table. "I've had some practice since last time. I think I could take you on."

"I'd like to see you try." Jim sniffs, but his eyes are sparkling. "Did you play anybody good? Other than Barbara and me?"

Logan and I both snicker. We've forced our friends to play a few games with us…and they beat us handily. But that might be because Logan and I kept getting distracted by each other.

"So, we're actually still waiting on a few more people. We'll be right back!" I say, and tug Logan back toward the hall.

"Don't take long!" Carol says. "My daughter is tickled pink about this. She lives across the country, so she wants us to put it on the internet like you do with your game."

"You know about that?" I ask while backing out of the room.

"Very entertaining way to spend a Saturday," Mitch says. "Unless there's golf on. I don't miss golf."

"Great, great. Logan and I are just going to…"

We duck out of the room and sprint down the hall until we're sure we're alone. We turn to each other with a mixture of horror and laughter.

"What have we gotten ourselves *into*?" Logan moans.

"And where are Kashvi and Sanjiv?" I pull out my phone. "I'm texting the group chat. We need Mark and Sloane to come for more backup."

Quinn: *SOS we need help. Free pancakes to all who can come.*

Logan leans against the wall and pulls me into his chest. “I can’t believe we agreed to this. Maybe we should hide out here until the others arrive.”

I wrap my arms around his waist and relax into him. I can’t argue with more time alone with Logan. Over the past three months he and I have spent countless hours in his shed, working on this campaign and another we came up with, drinking hot chocolate, and (of course) taking breaks to visit Susie Q. She’s getting so big now. Between hanging out at his farm, at my house, and with our friends, we’ve spent more time together than I thought possible, but it’s still never enough. I don’t think it’s possible to get too much time with him.

I lay my cheek on the soft cotton of his shirt. “No, we can make this work. We’ll just…well, I guess we start by helping them create characters. And then maybe you run enough of the campaign today to allow the characters to meet each other?”

“Quinn, I can’t run this campaign.”

I pull away just enough to look up at him. “Oh no,” I reply. “You’re not getting out of this. I finally got you to agree to run the assassin campaign, and we put too much work into it for you to bail.”

“But working on it with you was the best part. Besides, I bet it could still use more tweaking. I think we need a few more brainstorming sessions at my place.” He kisses my temple. “You know, to go over details, workshopping.” His lips slide to the corner of my mouth. “It’s important we put the time in to get it just right.”

“Hmm, you do make some very valid points,” I murmur. “We definitely want to get it right.” I lift my arms around his neck and angle my mouth slightly to kiss him.

“Argh!”

The sound of someone pretend-vomiting jolts us away from each other. I twist to find Andrew at the end of the hall, hand in hand with Kashvi and next to Sanjiv. Andrew’s expression is pure disgust.

“In Grandma’s *community center*? Really? You have no shame?”

I raise an eyebrow at him. That’s a bold stance to take after what I saw him and Kashvi doing in her car outside my house. I’m glad they’re happy, but enough is enough. I’m about to say as much, but Logan speaks first.

“We were waiting on you all. It turns out we have *eight* volunteers for the game.”

“And you were planning to build characters and run the first session today?” Sanjiv asks skeptically. “I don’t know.”

“We’re going to earn our pancakes today,” Kashvi says, and gives me a quick hug. “Mark and Sloane are on their way.”

“Good, because we’re going to need them.” We return to the room where the residents are patiently waiting. They all look so excited, their eyes twinkling, and it makes my heart fill with joy.

“Andrew! What a surprise!” Grandma exclaims.

“Hi, Grandma. I’m just here for moral support.”

Andrew hasn’t become overly interested in D&D in the last few months, but sometimes he hangs out in the basement while we’re livestreaming. I think he’s picked up more than he’s letting on. He sits down next to Kashvi, and Sanjiv takes a seat across the table between Janet and Carol. I sit between Grandma and Jim. Someone needs to keep an eye on these two.

“Okay, first things first,” Logan says from the head of the table. “We should learn about dice.” He pours out the set of seven onto the table and picks up a d20. “This is your twenty-sided die. You’ll be using that a lot today, especially as you build your characters.”

“Can I be a cat?” Janet interrupts. “I’ve always wanted to be a cat.”

“Um, well—”

“I’d like to be an elf,” Carol adds. “I’ve had my eye on elves ever since I saw that blond one in *Lord of the Rings*. He was *very* good-looking.”

The others nod in agreement and Logan’s eyes cut to mine. He’s clearly panicking, and I should be empathetic, but he’s so adorable that I’d like this conversation to go on indefinitely.

“So, uh, we brought our copies of the *Player’s Handbook* for you,” he continues. “You can start flipping through to see your character options and we can help to—”

“This print is much too small,” Winfred complains. “I didn’t know I’d need my reading glasses.”

“I want *that* sword.” Jim jabs at an illustration of a greatsword.

Grandma lays her hand on top of mine. “Thank you for coming, dear. This is such a treat for all of us.” She winks. “Now, go rescue that boy of

yours.”

I give her a quick kiss on the cheek and take my place next to Logan. I nudge his shoulder with my own. “We’ve got this,” I whisper.

Mark and Sloane poke their heads in right then, and we gratefully gesture for them to take seats next to the other residents.

“You really want my assassin to kill off all their characters one by one?” Logan whispers.

I glance at Jim, who’s flipping through the weapons section with Grandma. He looks gleeful.

“You should at least give it a try, but don’t be surprised if it’s your assassin who ends up dead. Never forget, elderly people can be vicious.”

He laughs and kisses me quickly before calling the group to attention once again.

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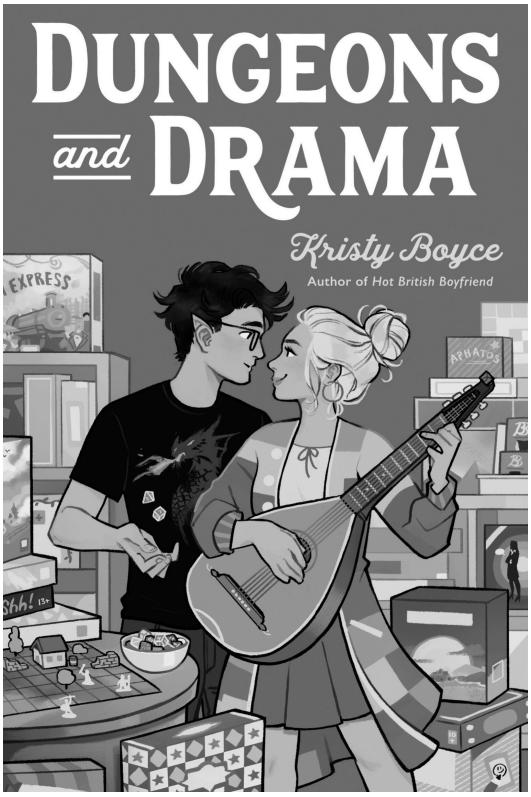
Liam, I love you very much. Thank you for being my travel, reading, and sushi buddy. Mike, my life is infinitely better because you're in it. I write romance because of you.

ROLL THE DICE ON LOVE....



TURN THE PAGE FOR A SNEAK PEEK

Chapter One

Of all the punishments my parents could have chosen, I can't believe they went with this one.

"Riley," Mom says from the driver's seat of our SUV, "I don't want to see you sulking today. You brought this on yourself, and part of the agreement is that you're going to have a good attitude."

I sink farther into my seat, the memory of myself and my best friend, Hoshiko, in these very seats still strong in my mind. Only a few days ago we were blasting the original Broadway cast recording of *Waitress,* laughing and debating whether the actors would come out for autographs after the show. And now…

"Are you sure we can't rethink this, Mom?"

"No." She glances at me and back at the road. "I still don't think you're understanding what a dangerous decision you made Friday night. How are your father and I supposed to trust you at home alone after this?"

Okay, it wasn't the *best* decision to take Mom's car without her permission while she was out of town on business. And yes, I drove multiple hours on the highway at night to get to Columbus, with Hoshiko… and without a driver's license. But we didn't get pulled over or get in an accident! In fact, you could argue that I should've driven faster because then I would've beaten Mom home and I wouldn't be getting this lecture right now. I don't think I'm going to use that argument on her any time soon, though.

“But working at Dad’s *store*?” I whisper.

She presses her lips together like she wants to sympathize but is fighting it. “Your father suggested you spend the afternoons with him since I’m too busy at work to be home after school with you. It’s not my fault he’s so attached to this store of his.”

The tinge of bitterness when she mentions Dad’s store only adds to my frustration. Mom has never liked the store. It was one of the main reasons for their divorce, and I’ve always been firmly on Mom’s side about the whole thing. It never even occurred to me that she’d agree to have me work there as a punishment. I really figured Mom would understand about my love for musical theater outweighing my logical decision-making (and state driving laws). Where Sara Bareilles is concerned, there is no line I’m unwilling to cross.

I’m about to argue more when she pulls into the parking lot. We both sit for a second, taking in the store. It’s not a particularly pleasant sight, despite the blue skies and sunny September weather. His store is in a run-down shopping plaza in Scottsville, my rural Ohio hometown, which has more than its fair share of run-down plazas. Quite a few of the other storefronts here are empty, though there is a local pizza place next door, and some of the letters have fallen off the signage. It’s not inspiring me to be in a better mood.

“Your father’s waiting,” she says.

I haven’t been in this parking lot since we drove by five years ago when Dad first scouted the location and they were still married. A dark, sinking feeling falls over me as my feet hit the concrete.

“Shannon.” Dad nods to her as she steps onto the sidewalk.

She nods back, though she keeps more of a distance than is strictly necessary. “Hey, Joel.”

They couldn’t be more different. Mom is as stylish as ever, with her blond hair pulled back in a low bun, wearing a blouse, wide-legged trousers, and heels that are too high for most people to pull off. Dad, on the other hand, has on ill-fitting jeans and a T-shirt with Deadpool riding a unicorn. I have no idea what brought them together to begin with, but it certainly wasn’t a similarity in looks—or interests either.

“And how’s my pumpkin?” Dad asks, his big smile reserved for me.

Hesitantly, I walk over and give him a hug. “Hey, Dad.”

“Ready for your first day as the newest employee at Sword and Board Games?”

He grins broadly at the idea, as if I’m joining him for summer camp instead of spending the next eight weeks working here as “probation,” grounded from extracurriculars and friends. I can only grimace and stare at the cracked concrete sidewalk.

“Sure you’re up for this?” Mom asks Dad, and juts her chin at me like I’m a convicted criminal ready to dig my way out of prison with a rusty spoon.

“I’ve been trying to get Riley to come here for years. I was hoping it wouldn’t take a rap sheet to make it happen, but I’ll take what I can get.”

I groan. “Okay, for the last time, I didn’t *steal* Mom’s car! I just… borrowed it for one evening. It was more like joyriding, not grand theft auto or something.”

“Are you certain about that?” Dad asks with a raised eyebrow.

I am, actually. Hoshiko Googled it once we were on the highway and headed for the show.

“Well, you won’t be doing any joyriding for the next two months, young lady,” Mom says with a shake of her head. “Or having much *joy* at all.”

“I’m choosing to think of this as a twisted type of blessing,” Dad says, careful to look at me rather than at Mom. They almost never make eye contact. “I get to spend quality time with my daughter, and you can broaden your interests while you’re here.”

I sigh and hunch my shoulders. Half of me wants to kneel on this sidewalk next to the discarded napkins and cigarette butts and beg them to rethink this, but I bite my tongue. The other, rational half knows my punishment could’ve been worse. But the thing is, I don’t want to spend more time with Dad, and I don’t want to work at his game store. For the past five years I’ve spent every other weekend at his apartment—watching TV, eating frozen pizza, and barely talking—and that’s all the bonding time I’m up for. He made his priorities known when he chose this store over Mom and me. He shouldn’t be allowed to have his cake and eat it too. But it’s clear that the time for debating this is over.

“Well…” Mom rocks back on her heels. “Have a good first shift. I’ll be back at nine to pick you up.”

I wave goodbye and try to keep a neutral expression as I follow Dad to the entrance. In the grand scheme of things, eight weeks is nothing. A blip in time. And luckily, preparations for our high school's annual spring musical won't start until late fall, so—if I'm on my best behavior and win back their trust these next few months—I should be ready to earn my place as the show's student director before Starbucks stops selling PSLs.

"Here we are!" Dad says loudly, making me jump.

I peek over his shoulder. The store is dim and quiet, though it's bigger than I thought it would be. It kind of looks like a hole-in-the-wall from the outside, but the interior is actually spacious…or it would be if it wasn't absolutely crammed with stuff. There's a long checkout counter to the left that's up on a platform, maybe so the employees can see the entire floor. The rest of the space is filled with wooden shelving units. They don't look professional, so maybe Dad built them himself. I vaguely recognize some of the games, like Warhammer, from Dad's apartment. There are tons of D&D manuals and figurines, boxes of Pokémon and Magic cards, and displays of brushes and paints in every color for the tabletop game models Dad loves to collect.

I try to conjure a smile on my face, but I'm struggling. For years, Dad's been asking me to come to this store. He's obsessed with gaming. Board games, role-playing games, video games, it doesn't matter. I don't mind a round of Monopoly during the holidays, but that's about as far as my interest goes. Over the years, it's led to lots of frustration and disappointment for both him and me.

Dad walks me through the store, pointing to all the products and telling me a bit about each. I'm dizzy from it. How am I supposed to learn all this stuff? What if someone comes in asking me for a board game? He doesn't exactly sell Candy Land here.

"Hey, Joel? Which of these would you recommend for a twelve-year-old?" calls a skinny man in his late twenties from across the store. "Forbidden Island or Ticket to Ride?" He holds up two board games I've never seen before and gestures for my dad to join him and a middle-aged woman who stands next to him. A little boy, probably no older than five, is with her. The woman looks as bewildered by the shelves as I do.

"Just a sec, Riley," Dad says, and walks over. I shove my hands in my pockets and follow behind. "Well, Forbidden Island is great if you like

cooperative play, but if you're looking for something more competitive, I'd recommend the other." The woman nods, but I recognize that expression. It's the same one I make when Dad spouts off facts about 40K armies.

"Um, what do you mean by *cooperative*?" she asks.

Dad and the younger man share the slightest of looks before Dad launches into an explanation. In her concentration, she's let go of her son's hand and he wanders away. I take a few steps in his direction. There's merchandise precariously stacked on the shelves, and a little kid could do a lot of damage very quickly. I'm not interested in reshelving on my first day here.

"Pikachu!" he cries, and grabs a box of cards sitting on the checkout counter.

I step up to him, not sure what I'm supposed to do but knowing that I need to do something. He stares at me. "You're bright."

I look down at myself. Today's OOTD isn't even one of my bolder styles—I was mostly going for comfort after a rough few days. I'm wearing orange jeans with a cobalt-blue ruffled shirt, chunky jewelry, and my favorite purple checkerboard Vans. I know my style isn't like most people's, but I decided long ago that I want to wear clothes others will notice. No black, beige, tan, or navy for me. I don't like blending in.

"Well, thank you." I point at the cards. "Do you play Pokémon?"

"No, but I watch the cartoon."

I smile and nod. I did too when I was younger. You don't grow up as the daughter of a serious gamer without being introduced to a lot of IPs.

"My favorite was always Jigglypuff."

He squints at me. "What's Jigglypuff?"

I feign shock. "Only the cutest Pokémon ever! It's pink and round and loves to sing, but whenever it does, it puts people to sleep. And then it gets grumpy and puffs up its cheeks like this." I puff out my cheeks like I'm a squirrel with too many nuts in my mouth. Then I hit my cheeks with my hands so all the air blows out. I smile to myself, remembering how I would do that with Dad when I was little. Those were better times between us.

The little boy giggles and pulls my attention back. "You're making that up."

I'm really not, but there's no time to argue because he's already wandering off again. I remember a candy bowl I saw behind the counter.

“Do you want a lollipop?”

His eyes shine. “Um, yeah!”

“Excuse me, is it okay if he gets a sucker?” I call to his mom.

She nods thankfully. “That would be great.”

I lead him over to the checkout counter to grab the candy bowl but jump when someone else squeezes behind me. It’s a white kid from my high school—Nathan Wheeler. He’s got on a black T-shirt and jeans, his dark hair is flipping in different directions like he’s run his fingers through it too many times, and his wide black glasses are falling down his nose. We’ve been in school together since junior high, but I barely see him around. I don’t think he’s involved in much—definitely not in the music or theater programs where I spend all my time.

He quickly grabs a sealed pack of cards from behind the counter and slides them into his back pocket. He nods when he sees I’m staring, then grabs a lollipop from the bowl.

“Root beer’s my favorite.” Then he takes off toward the back of the store.

I’m dumbfounded. Did he actually come behind the register without asking? And take something? I look at Dad, hoping he saw that, too, but he’s still with the customer. I can’t believe someone stole from him in my first five minutes of being here.

“Just a second,” I say to the boy, and walk toward Dad.

“What about my lollipop?”

“What?” I turn back to the boy, who is pointing at the counter. “Oh, um, sure.” I grab the bowl and lower it to him, keeping my eyes on Dad while also making sure Nathan hasn’t snuck out of the store yet.

The man with Dad gestures for the woman to follow him to the register, and Dad waves me toward a door at the back of the store. I frown and follow him.

“This is the game room, where we hold events during evenings and weekends and where people can come to play with the products,” Dad explains as soon as I’m close enough to hear him. We walk into an open room filled with large tables and chairs. A gigantic dragon head is mounted to the wall. “We have a lot of regulars who use the space.” He gestures to two men standing by a table in the back corner.

“You finally got a new girlfriend?” one of them calls, and waves at me. He’s got thinning gray hair and an Ohio State sweatshirt on. My eyes fly open in horror at his words.

“Behave yourself, Fred. This is my daughter.”

“Nice to see a new face here. I’m used to staring at this old fart all the time,” the other man says, and points to his table mate. He’s shorter and round with an old Batman shirt on.

Dad chuckles and lowers his voice. “That’s Fred and Arthur. They’re both retired, so they’re here almost every day playing Flames of War.”

I shake my head in confusion. I can’t keep up with the names for all the games, particularly when I’m distracted by what happened with Nathan. Should I interrupt Dad now to tell him or wait to find someplace away from customers?

“That’s a tabletop game where they reenact war battles,” Dad explains, completely oblivious to my uncertainty. He’s clearly excited to show off his store after I’ve avoided it for so long. “Personally, it’s not my favorite. I’ve always liked a little fantasy element in there myself. Anyway, terrain for the tabletop games is in the back, and we have a little vending situation. It’s on the honor system.” He points to open boxes of chips and candy and a cooler of sodas along the back wall before turning his attention to a group of boys huddled around a table. “Look who’s here. Nathan, come over a second.”

My eyes widen—I’ve been too caught up in my thoughts to notice him.

He trots over. “Is everything okay?”

“Better than okay!” Dad exclaims, and claps him on the back like they’re old friends. “Riley is joining us at the store.” He turns to me. “And I’m sure you already know Nathan from school?”

My mouth opens a bit and I look from Dad to Nathan. Oh no, this just got so much worse. Dad’s friendly with this jerky kid who steals from him, and now *I* have to be the one to break the news?

I narrow my eyes at Nathan, who’s standing serenely next to Dad like he doesn’t have a care in the world. I might not be on the best of terms with Dad, but that doesn’t mean I think it’s cool to watch other people blatantly take his products and hurt his business.

“Hey, actually, I need to go talk to Curtis about the latest Warhammer shipment,” Dad tells us. “Nathan, maybe you can help Riley get settled?”

Dad heads for the front before either of us can respond, looking weirdly pleased with himself, and I put a hand on my hip. “Look,” I whisper. “I don’t know what’s going on with you and my dad, but just give me what you took and maybe I won’t tell him what happened.”

Nathan blinks slowly behind his glasses, looks back at the table where his friends are ignoring us, and then pats the front pocket of his jeans. “Hmm, I still have this. Will that do?” He holds out his lollipop wrapper to me.

“Very funny. You know I’m talking about those cards from behind the counter.”

Now he laughs, and I might have been charmed by the way he throws his head back if it weren’t for the fact that the action makes me feel as small as one of the miniature models Fred and Arthur are playing with on the other side of the room.

“Wow,” he continues. “Way to jump to absolutely bizarre conclusions without asking a single question. You do realize I work here, right? And that I bought those cards with my own money? Or did you seriously think I stole them in front of you and then *stayed in the store*? What kind of petty thief do you take me for?”

“I…well…” He’s an *employee*? I glance around frantically, desperate for anything to save me from this exchange. “A pretty bad thief, I guess?”

“The worst thief to ever walk this earth.”

I gather the fraying threads of my dignity and point at him. “Now, wait a second, don’t turn this around on me. How was I supposed to know what was going on? I didn’t see you pulling out any money. I come in and two minutes later you’re walking behind the counter and taking something without a word!”

He waves away my argument like there’s nothing to be explained. “Joel said you’re joining us at the store—please tell me he meant you’re visiting for the next five minutes before leaving forever and not, you know, *working* here.”

“Say hello to your newest colleague.” I grin spitefully and put my hands out to my sides.

“Seriously? But you play, at least, right? Board games, tabletop, cards, something?”

“Nada.”

He groans. “Ugh, not one of those. Of course you don’t play.”

“Excuse me?”

“You can’t work at a game store and not play. Or worse, be *disdainful* of games,” he replies.

“I’m not disdainful.”

But my tone gives me away. It’s not about the games themselves. I’m sure this stuff can be fun; otherwise Dad couldn’t afford to live on his own, even if it is in a small apartment. But whenever I think of this store, I think of my parents’ divorce. I’m sure they must’ve been happy at some point, but what I remember is Dad getting it into his head that he wanted to start his own store and Mom trying to talk him out of it because of the expense and time commitment. He had a good job in IT before that. But he was so obsessed with the idea that it tore them apart. I always wished that Dad would just give up the games. How much could they matter? More than Mom? More than me? The answer was pretty clear.

I look up defiantly. “It’s not my thing. I guess I didn’t inherit the gene.”

“Great. Well, I’m absolutely thrilled to work together, then.”

He stalks away and I have the urge to bolt out the front door and into oncoming traffic.

About the Author

KRISTY BOYCE played her first role-playing game in high school and has been friends with that group ever since. In fact, she married the DM. Nowadays, she teaches psychology as a senior lecturer at the Ohio State University. When she's not spending time with her husband and son, she's usually writing, reading, or watching happy reality TV. Kristy is the author of *Dating and Dragons*, *Dungeons and Drama*, *Hot British Boyfriend*, and *Hot Dutch Daydream* and lives in Pickerington, Ohio.

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