

Surviving **ADAM MEADE**

Shannon Klare

Swoon
READS

Swoon Reads New York

A SWOON READS BOOK

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To Mom and Dad
for teaching me to go after my dreams.

And to Allen
for all those late nights along the way.

1

Water Girl

I should've negotiated better.

My shoulders burned beneath the North Carolina sun, the heat contrasting cold water at my feet. Mud stirred beneath my tennis shoes, soaking the black mesh fabric. I was supposed to be today's team manager, but I was more like a muck-covered version of Cinderella.

"Claire, we need those!" my dad called.

I lifted my attention and spotted him walking down the sideline, pointing at a pair of water bottles thrown near the field. Great, now there were two more bottles to fill. Yay. Perfect. Exactly what I hoped.

"Get them in a sec," I answered, annoyed by the never-ending water bottle shortage.

A whistle blew, stopping all movement on the field. Third

water break in an hour. It was like my dad wanted me to be miserable.

My pulse quickened as football players, their jerseys soaked with sweat, swarmed the water like mosquitoes. A hulking lineman snatched the water hose from me and let the water flow across his tanned chin. He smelled like onions and dirt, a stench strong enough to make my eyes water. This was a million times worse than the usual crusty-gym-shorts-and-soggy-cleats scent my brother, Case, wore. And the lineman wasn't the only one. I was surrounded by a crowd of guys who smelled like butt.

I tried to filter my breathing through the damp collar of my T-shirt, but there was nowhere to breathe. I could taste their odor on my tongue, drowning me with no escape.

"Claire!" my dad hollered, his voice carrying across the field. Silver keys glistened in his hand.

Oh, thank goodness. I jogged across the grass, sweat beading my forehead as I stopped in front of him. Without hesitating, I reached for the keys.

"Not so fast," he said, raising them out of reach. "I haven't told you what I need."

"Let me guess," I answered, sighing as I put my hands on my hips. "More water bottles? Towels? Air freshener for your team of guys with foul-smelling pits?"

"How did you know?!"

I glared at him, and he laughed, his teeth flashing white against tanned skin. He'd be a warm golden brown by the end of the day, and I'd look like a strawberry. Unfortunately, the tanning genes weren't ones I inherited.

"Wow," he said, maintaining a grin. "You look *just* like your mom when you do that."

"I look like Mom ninety percent of the time." I glanced at the keys again, then him. "Can I go now?"

"For a little bit," he answered. "It's your lunch break. Grab some food, don't wreck my truck, and we'll discuss the terms of our negotiation when you get back."

He handed me the keys. I took them gladly.

"The terms were already negotiated," I reminded him, spinning the key ring on my finger. "Two days grueling manual labor in exchange for a weekend trip to Baker Heights. We shook on it. It's too late to change your mind."

"We'll see."

No. There wasn't a *we'll see*. I needed a trip home like I needed air. This was a matter of survival—social survival. One way or another, I was going to Baker Heights.

"You'd better hurry before they empty all the water bottles," he commented, deflecting my attention.

"They keep flying through water bottles, and you'll be at the next city council meeting explaining how those guys drank the town out of water," I answered.

"Pader is small, but I'm pretty sure there's enough water to last us a practice," he said.

"Well, I hope you're wrong."

His mouth twitched at the corners. "If I'm wrong, I'll blame you for wasting all that high-quality h-two-o."

"You'd throw your daughter under the bus? Thanks, Dad."

"Anytime." He chuckled and pointed at a gap in the fence. My exit. "You should head out," he said. "Can't promise you'll get another opportunity to grab food. You're cranky when you're hungry."

"That's a personality trait I got from you."

“Really?” He tilted his head, the crinkled corners of his eyes barely visible beneath dark sunglasses. “Fine,” he answered. “No lunch for you.”

“No!” I tucked the keys into my pocket for safekeeping. “I have to get away from here. Those guys reek. We’re talking a five-out-of-five odor ranking. I’m nauseous just thinking about it.”

He looked at the sideline. “They can’t smell any worse than your brother.”

“Oh, but they do,” I answered.

My eyes narrowed as I glanced at the sweaty team. Most of them were squirting the contents of my freshly filled water bottles on their heads. All my hard work was going down the drain, again.

“That’s why there’s water everywhere,” I said. “Could you tell them this isn’t a shampoo commercial? The water should be in their mouths, not on their heads.”

“To be fair, it’s hot out.”

“Does it look like I’m concerned with the temperature?”

He frowned at me, but I ignored him. The summer heat didn’t give them an excuse to waste water, or my time.

“That’s a little inconsiderate,” he said.

“Doesn’t mean it isn’t true,” I answered. I tapped my tennis shoe against the grass. It squished from the water soaked through my soles. “And I’m not the only one who’s inconsiderate. One of your linemen stole the water hose from me. He was lucky he didn’t get bit.”

“Football players never bugged you before.”

“Because I used to like them,” I answered. His face softened, and I looked away. “I don’t want to talk about football players. I

want to suffer through this practice, get my trip home, and be done.”

“You could try looking on the bright side of things,” he said. I stared at him, confused, and he shrugged. “This is grade-A bonding time with your dad.”

“I’d rather be home watching TV.” I turned, spotting the opening in the fence. “I’m going to lunch. I’ll be back around one.”

“You can break until one thirty,” he replied, “but grab sunblock. I don’t want your mom griping at me when you come home sunburned. While you’re out, you can also grab a Pader High hat from my office. Should keep the sun off your face.”

“I hate hats,” I groaned.

“I hate getting in trouble with your mom.” He blew the whistle, and I jumped at its shrill cry. “Grab the hat and contribute to my happiness. Okay?”

“Give me your credit card and contribute to *my* happiness,” I replied.

“Uh, wasn’t born yesterday.” He pointed a wooden clipboard in the direction of the tackling dummies. The players dropped the water bottles and sprinted across the field. “I need to get out there. Take the hat and be thankful.”

“I have a Baker Heights hat at the house. I’ll grab that one instead.”

His smile faded to a frown. “Don’t be difficult, please.”

“I’m not, but I’m not wearing a Pader High hat, either.”

He shook his head, his shoulders stiff as he crossed the field. He could be frustrated with me, but I still had a point.

Truth was, I should’ve been in Baker Heights, enjoying the remainder of my summer and looking forward to my last year of

high school. I was supposed to be on the lake, waterskiing and slumming it up with my friends. Yet here I was—football team flunky for the day. I left practice, headed for the field house two streets over. The smell of freshly cut grass hung in the air outside the high school, while echoes of the football team mixed with the slam of car doors. Teachers hauled boxes into the school, prepping for the students' return. Week one would be here soon enough. The realization made my pulse race. This wasn't my first time at a new school, but senior year wasn't the time to start over. I wasn't ready to endure the dreaded new-girl effect, when I didn't want to be here in the first place.

"Hey, water girl!" a guy said, his voice coming from the direction of the field.

Confused, I turned. I wasn't the water girl, but I was the only non-faculty member outside the school.

Outfitted in white practice pants and a telltale red jersey, a football player jogged across the road. Red meant one thing—quarterback status. Despite his helmet-hidden face, I knew his name. Adam Meade. Pader High's quarterback extraordinaire. He was my dad's constant conversation topic, the player colleges were always calling about, and what I understood to be the best thing since sliced bread.

I motioned at myself as Adam stopped in front of me. "I'm Claire. I'm not the water girl."

"You get the water, therefore you're the water girl." He handed me a key and nodded toward the field house. "Coach wants you to bring the Gator when you come back. You need that to turn it on."

"Did he say why he needs it?" I asked, spotting the sports vehicle parked beside the field house.

“Nope. He just said he needs you to bring it.”

I pocketed the key, and Adam shifted the weight on his feet, his light eyes surveying me from behind the metal facemask.

“Does he need anything else?” I asked.

“He doesn’t. I do.” I quirked an eyebrow, and Adam shrugged. “We need ice. The last water girl was always good about bringing a cooler to the field, but there isn’t one out there. Get on her level, or you’ll be replaced.”

Replaced?! I stared at him, my blood boiling. I wouldn’t bring him ice. I’d bring him a special water bottle filled with the tears of my enemies.

He turned and jogged back to the field, leaving me dumbfounded as I tried to pull my jaw from the ground. Adam may be the quarterback, but I wasn’t a pushover. If he wanted to piss me off, he could deal with the consequences.

* * *

“You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

A cool breeze swept across my mom’s floral shop, carrying the smell of fresh paint and cardboard boxes. Being inside was a welcome change, but the longer I stood beneath the air-conditioner vents the more I dreaded going back to the field.

My mom moved behind the counter, her dark hair tossed into a messy ponytail and her gray T-shirt damp with sweat. The bags under her eyes and streaks of dust on her cheeks told me one thing—she was exhausted. She worked long hours trying to get this place ready to open, and it looked like she was finally making progress.

“You’ve gotten a lot done,” I said.

She leaned against the counter and smiled. “Been here since

seven. Finished painting, then started on the candle display. What do you think?"

I glanced at the long row of narrow wooden shelves near the door. They were filled floor-to-ceiling with cylindrical candles of every variety and looked like every other candle display. It wasn't bad. Mediocre.

"I like it if you like it," I told her, forcing a smile as I pushed a wayward strand of hair behind my ear. "Speaking of what I like, I'd like to borrow the car when I go to Baker Heights."

"You share the car with Case," she replied. "You need to talk to him about taking it to another state."

"But I'm the oldest! I'm immune from asking Case to borrow anything."

"Sorry. That's not how life works." She grabbed a box from the floor and hauled it onto the counter. "Will you put that up?" she asked, pointing at a vase near the register. "There's a spot over there where it'll be safe."

Vase in hand, I sulked to the far wall where the rest of the vases sat. "Can't we skip the sibling rules for once?" I said. "You purchased the car. You have final say."

She pulled a set of gift tags from the box and placed them on the counter. "If I give you permission without mentioning it to him, he'll say I played favorites. I'm not getting stuck in the middle."

"Stupid little brothers."

"You'd do the same thing." She slid the tags toward the register and lifted her gaze. "What time are you supposed to be back at practice? I doubt you're done for the day."

"One thirty," I answered.

"And how is it going?"

"Awful. The guys smell so bad flies won't even go near them."

I faked a gag, and she grinned. "Any cute ones that don't smell bad?"

"Nope." I returned to the counter and leaned against it, arms crossed. "And it doesn't really matter if they're cute. Football players are off my radar. Remember?"

"You've spent two days at the field. I thought you might have changed your mind."

"My mind isn't changing," I answered. "After today, I'm done. No Friday night games. No pep rallies. Nothing."

"What about cheerleading?"

"Nothing," I repeated. "I plan on spending the season at home. We're talking Friday nights full of reality shows and food. Who knows, maybe I'll decide to toss on a mud mask and paint my nails. The goal is total relaxation. If you want to skip the games, you're more than welcome to join me."

"I can't do that, and you won't either," she argued. "Football is in your blood. Pretending you don't care won't make it go away. Watch. You'll be on the sidelines of every game, and I'll be there to say I told you so."

"It isn't going to happen."

Her grin faded. I knew what she was thinking, and I didn't feel like having that conversation again. Once was more than enough.

"I need to head out," I said. "If I'm late, Dad will give me a more annoying job than water girl. Which, by the way, is the worst job on the planet."

"You used to like filling bottles."

"I used to like a lot of things." My chest tightened, and I swallowed emotions swelling in my throat. "I've got to go."

“Claire.”

I reached the door but didn’t make it all the way through before my mom said, “Give Pader a fair shot, and you can borrow the car for your trip to Baker Heights.”

“Excuse me?” I shifted my gaze to her, meeting eyes the same shade of blue as mine. “What do you mean give it a fair shot?”

“I mean get involved,” she answered. “Be nice to people. Find friends. You don’t have to love it here, but give it a try.”

“And I’ll get a car for my efforts?”

“You’ll get the car for your trip,” she said. “Fair?”

I crossed the shop and stopped in front of the counter. I couldn’t promise to be prom queen, but I could force a smile and fake it until my mom believed it was real.

“I’ll try to like this place, and you’ll let me borrow the car,” I said, shaking her hand. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

2

Itching for War

“This sucks.”

Freshly waxed tile squeaked beneath my tennis shoes, muffled by banging locker doors and voices of students I didn’t know. All morning I’d been a fish in a fishbowl, stared at and wondered about. It was the dreaded new-girl effect, but I was over it. The day couldn’t end soon enough.

I sipped from a water bottle as I searched for Case’s locker in Junior Hall. Today would’ve marked the first day of my final year at Baker Heights. My friends would be walking the halls with me, talking about cheer practice or making plans to hit Sonic after school. Seth would be there, too.

Seth. I sucked in a breath and tried to swallow the knot in my throat.

Where was Case? I scanned the hallway for my little brother. Before I could find him, someone backed into me. A backpack

collided with my hand, and my water bottle splashed to the floor.

"Sorry, sweetheart," a guy said, flashing me a smile as he backed away.

He was taller than Case, maybe six one or six two, with light eyes, dark hair, and a perfect face. He continued down the hall, chatting with a blond girl instead of helping me with the mess.

"I was drinking that!" I said. "But it's cool. The tile looked like it needed it more than I did."

The guy gave me a thumbs-up over his shoulder and carried on.

"Jerk," I grumbled.

"Saw what you did there," Case said, coming to a stop beside me. "Congrats. Your comebacks are the stuff of legends."

"I'm already mad. Drop the sarcasm, okay?" I grabbed the water bottle and hurled it into the nearest trash can.

"That's the I'm-gonna-hurt-someone walk," Case said, following me through the hall. "Should I go to class or stay here and reel in your attitude?"

"My attitude isn't my fault."

"Right."

"It's not." I pointed at the idiot in front of us. "Blame that guy. He just left the mess. Didn't even get me a paper towel. What happens when someone falls in the puddle and breaks their leg? That's on me."

"Tell a janitor," Case answered. I scowled at him. "Okay, I'll tell a janitor."

"Thanks." I searched for the cafeteria entrance and came up empty. "I don't know about this," I said, giving up. "These people are rude, and I don't like this school. I want to go home."

Case positioned himself in front of me. He was a massive roadblock in a graphic tee and faded jeans. "Okay," he answered. "First off, you *are* home. Second, you don't like this school because you don't know it. Third, these people are nice." He gave a high five to a passing guy and shot me a pointed look. "See. Making friends already."

"Yeah, because you're an athlete and a guy. It's easier for you."

"It would be easy for you, too, if you'd try."

"I am trying." He pursed his lips, and I rubbed the back of my neck. "Okay, that was a lie," I said. "I just don't see the point. It's my last year of high school. Why waste the effort?"

"Because it's worth the effort."

"For you," I said. "You've got another year here, unless Dad decides to take a different job. Who knows, maybe you'll get to start over your senior year, too."

The bell rang, and Case glanced at the clock beside the library. "Great," he muttered. "I'm late. This is your fault."

"Well, you always make *me* late. It's time I returned the favor."

"I don't make you late."

"Right." I nodded. "You just take forty-five-minute showers and use all the hot water."

"Got to get my luscious locks fully conditioned," he answered, raking a hand through his brown hair. "It takes time."

"Well, you and your luscious locks are about to miss fifth period. Dad's going to be pissed when I tell him."

"You shouldn't threaten people who know where you sleep," he said, frowning as he shifted his weight.

"I'm not worried. I know how long you wet the bed."

Case darted a glance around the hall, panic on his face. “You can’t blurt out things like that. I have a rep to keep.”

“My bad. Forgot you were trying to be cool.”

“I’m not trying to be cool,” he said. “*I am cool.*”

Case hurried off, and I continued searching for the cafeteria. Five minutes later, with a tray in hand, I plopped into a plastic chair at an empty table. Beneath bright fluorescent lights and laminated posters, most of the students were clustered randomly. The football players were an exception. Their table was all guys, with the exception of a blond girl. She sat across from the same guy who made me drop my water, laughing with him and a few others.

I popped a french fry in my mouth and watched them. She looked at ease with the players, like she was one of them, and the sight tugged at memories I tried to bury. I was like her once, an honorary member of the team. Even before Seth, before I was dating one of them, Baker Heights’ football team had welcomed me in. Now I was just a new girl. I was the one people stared at and whispered about. I was alone.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and tried to find a distraction. I found it in pictures from the spring, pictures of Seth and me.

His dark brown eyes were caring then, warm as he looked at me. His smile was carefree, his body relaxed, and his overgrown brown hair tousled by the breeze. Things had changed between us, but the guy I knew had to be in there somewhere. I needed that guy now. I needed to talk to him.

For the first time in months, I texted him.

Claire: I miss you

The bell rang, and the room became a frenzy as students stood, discarded their trays, and filed out of the cafeteria like a herd of cattle, bound for another three periods before freedom arrived. I filed out with the rest of them, entering a hallway where the smell of burned chicken sandwiches and stale fries lingered.

Closer to Senior Hall, that smell faded. The metallic scent of lockers and the sugar-cookie aroma from home economics took over instead.

My locker was beside Mrs. Myers's math class, nestled among college posters, school memorabilia, and inspirational quotes. Most of the morning, students entering and exiting math blocked my way. This time, it was the guy who made me drop my water bottle. I sidestepped a group of people and stopped behind him, his fitted blue T-shirt, dark jeans, and messy brown hair familiar for all the wrong reasons.

"Excuse me," I said, my tone the nicest I could manage. "Can I get by?"

He ignored me.

"Hello? Excuse me," I said, trying again. When he failed to acknowledge me for the second time, I reached up and tapped him on the shoulder. "Yo. You with the hair and inability to hear."

The person he was talking to, a shorter guy with brown eyes, olive skin, and curly black hair, craned his head my way. I stared at him and pointed at the idiot in front of me.

"Adam, I think she needs you," he said.

Adam turned, the angular planes of his face tight with annoyance. He was annoyed with me? No. Not after the water girl incident *and* the water bottle mishap.

Light green eyes, framed by thick lashes, peered at me. “They all need me,” he said, addressing his friend, “and she can wait. I’m in the middle of a conversation.”

“Look here, dick for brains,” I said, squaring my shoulders. “Think it’s possible to move your ego ten steps over? I need a book. You know what those are, right? The things with words and pages?”

Adam’s eyes narrowed. “Wow. Sure there isn’t a pair of balls on you?”

“Sure there’s a pair of balls on *you*?”

The other guy stepped between us and looked from me to Adam before clearing his throat. “Well, this has been fun, but the bell’s about to ring. In case you forgot, Adam, tardies equal laps. Don’t be the lap guy. We need you on the field.”

“You ran laps yesterday, Tate,” Adam answered. “Besides, the water girl needs a lesson in social status.” He raised both hands so they were level, then slowly shifted them so one was higher. “This is me,” he said, wiggling the hand closer to his face. “This is you.” He wiggled the other one and grinned. “See the difference between us?”

“Yeah, you’re the asshole,” I answered.

Tate snorted, and Adam slugged him in the arm. Tate laughed louder.

“Fine,” Adam said, stepping away. “Be friends with the water girl. I’m the smarter, more charming one, but it’s your choice.”

“I’m not the water girl!” I replied.

“Sure you’re not.” Adam winked and turned his back on me. Tate followed close behind.

Whatever. Adam could think what he wanted. I pulled my

book from my locker and hurried to English. When I got there, Mrs. Lories was already talking to the class. She paused midsentence, and everyone stared as I ducked my head and found a seat. Great. Now I was the tardy fish in the fishbowl.

The first empty desk I found was beside a girl with long blond hair. She wore a Pader High cheer hoodie and dark blue skinny jeans, and I'd seen her before. She was the girl I'd watched in the cafeteria. She might be the nicest person on earth, but she was too relatable to be around. Tomorrow I'd find a different desk.

I slid into the seat and placed my book in front of me.

"Claire," she whispered as I grabbed a pencil from my bag. "Claaaaaire."

I straightened and kept my eyes on the board. I didn't know her, and I didn't want to get in trouble when I'd already made a bad impression.

"Claire," she whispered again. When I still didn't answer, she paused and sat back in her chair. Her pencil rose to her lips, and she gnawed on the end. "Is her name Claire?" she murmured to herself. "I thought it was Claire, but what if her name was Mare or Cher? Crap. Never mind." She leaned forward, smiling as she tapped her pencil against the edge of my desk. I looked at her, and her smile widened. "Hi," she said. "We're on page five."

"Thanks," I answered.

I flipped to page five, and she relaxed, her blue eyes burning holes in my profile. When the bell rang, she was the first to stand.

"I'm Riley," she offered, slinging the strap of her messenger bag over her shoulder. "Pader High cheer captain and Luke Bryan fangirl."

“Claire,” I replied. I grabbed my backpack and followed the rest of the students into the hall. Riley kept pace.

“I thought I recognized you,” she said. “You’re Case’s sister, right? You two look the same—same nose, same hair color, same pale complexion.”

I glanced at my bare arms. I was porcelain, not pale. There was a difference. “I’m not his sister,” I answered. “He’s my brother. On bad days, he’s a stranger who shares my house.”

She arched an eyebrow but paused to talk to a group of girls who passed us. One mentioned something cheer related, and Riley answered before catching up with me. “So,” she continued. “Case is your brother? That’s cool.”

“Yep.” I stopped and tried to find my way to Senior Hall. Riley kept talking.

“You moved into the Wilsons’ old house, right? The one on Cheshire Lane?” I nodded, and she squealed. “Totally thought that was you! I’m two houses down. We should hang out sometime!”

We entered Senior Hall and Adam’s friend Tate met us as we passed the first set of lockers. He wrapped an arm around Riley’s shoulders, kissed her cheek, then glanced at me. “I don’t think we’ve formally met,” he said, extending a hand. “Tate Mack. Nice to meet you.”

“Claire Collins. Nice to meet you, too.”

Tate’s brow furrowed as he whispered something to Riley.

“Yes,” she answered, her voice loud. “This is Coach Collins’s daughter. Case is her brother.”

“I whispered it for a reason,” Tate said, his eyes wide.

“Oops,” she answered, shrugging.

Tate looked at me, his cheeks pinker than before. “Guess I’ll go

ahead and say sorry about Adam,” he said, scratching his pointed jaw. “We didn’t know who you were.”

“And who am I?” I asked.

“The coach’s daughter,” Tate answered, grimacing. “As soon as Adam finds out your last name, he’ll track you down and apologize. Don’t want drama interfering with football, you know?”

I shifted my backpack and shook my head. “Actually, no. Apologies are apologies. If it isn’t sincere, what’s the point?”

“Um, good question.” Tate cleared his throat and took a step in the opposite direction. He looked at Riley, cringing. “I’m going to class now,” he said. “Riley, catch you later?”

“Bye, Tate,” she answered.

Tate hurried away, and I stopped in front of my locker. Riley stayed at my side, scrolling through her phone while I traded out my books. When I was done, she crammed the phone in her pocket and smiled.

“I’m in computer science,” she commented, motioning down the hall. “We should hang out, though. The rest of the people in our neighborhood are old. It’ll be nice having someone my age within walking distance.”

“Sounds great.”

“Yay! See you later.”

She pivoted, and I walked to government, eyeing my watch along the way. The ITV Lab, the largest classroom in the school, was luckily not too far from my locker. It was set up like a theater, with rectangular tables stretching from the middle of the room to staircases on either side. A massive flat-screen television covered the room’s front wall, with individual speakers placed in every corner.

The room was colder than my other classrooms, and my short-sleeved T-shirt did nothing to ward off the chill. I rubbed my bare arms and found a table near the middle of the room. After unloading my textbook, notebook, and a pencil, I went back to rubbing my arms and checked my cell phone for a text from Seth. Nothing. My pulse raced and my frozen cheeks heated with embarrassment.

Why had I texted him? Now I was the clingy ex.

"Hello, sweetheart."

Adam's voice drew my attention to the bottom of the stairs. He was smiling, his eyes focused on me, and I groaned. This wasn't happening. Why was this happening?

"Miss me?" he asked.

"Not even a little."

He passed my table and knocked the book off my desk. A *bam* echoed around the room, making the entire class jump and look my way. I ducked my head, but Adam pointed at me.

"Blame the new girl," he said. "Had to find attention somehow."

He tried to continue up the stairs, but I stretched my foot out and sent him flailing into the table behind me.

"I'm not the only one seeking attention," I replied.

Adam straightened, his jaw set and his eyes narrowed. "Are you sure you want to mess with me?" he hissed, towering over me like I'd be intimidated. "Because I don't care if your dad is the coach. This ends one way: You'll lose."

"I never lose," I answered.

"That was before you met me." He plopped into a chair at the table behind me, his face tight as he leaned against the edge. "Don't say I didn't warn you, Collins."

“Don’t say I didn’t warn *you*.”

Whether Adam believed me or not, I’d been in enough schools and dealt with enough people to handle myself. He was messing with the wrong girl. If he wasn’t careful, he’d learn his lesson the hard way.

3

Four-Wheeling

“Okay, Claire. Which one is blue?”

Case stood in the hall, two blue button-downs in his hands. They were a shade apart, but they were both blue.

“You’re good either way,” I answered, returning my attention to unpacking. “Why?”

“Because Riley Cross is hot, and I’m trying to score a date.” He frowned at the shirts, then combined the hangers in one hand. “I need to make sure my outfit is on point. Figured one of these shirts would do the trick.”

I laughed at him. Case had as much chance with Riley as I had with a prince. It wasn’t going to happen, regardless of his wardrobe.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, entering my room. “I saw her watching me mow the other day. She wants my bod.”

“Right, because a riding lawn mower screams sex appeal.” I

shook my head and placed a pair of books on my computer desk. "You should try someone else," I urged. "She's with Tate. Might be a while before you get a shot."

"I give it to the end of the semester," Case answered. "She wants to let go but is too afraid to try something new."

"You're delusional."

"Yeah? Well, you're a dream crusher."

My phone beeped, and I crossed the fluffy teal rug in the center of the room. On my nightstand, the phone glowed. I frowned at the reminder about our monthly data usage. Almost two weeks and still nothing from Seth. My emotions were shot. I never should've sent the text.

"Is it Riley?" Case asked.

"Nope." I tossed the phone on my comforter and went back to my box.

He watched me, quiet as he fidgeted with the twinkling white lights I had strung across the top of my dresser. He was only this quiet when he wanted something. "So," he started, his tone too neutral to be good, "Mom told me you wanted to borrow the car. Baker Heights?"

"Is that a real question?" I pulled out a pair of picture frames and caught his judgmental stare. "What? You know how I feel. It's not like I've bottled it up."

"I get it, but I thought you were making friends."

"Riley can't replace my old friends," I said. "I had a life there, one Mom and Dad ripped away without considering how it would affect me. Nothing makes that okay." I placed the pictures face-down on my desk. They clanked together, scratching memories of people I'd left behind.

"Claire, I know you want to see him, but I really think—"

“Don’t,” I interrupted. “I know you’re trying to pull the protective little brother card, but I made a deal with Mom and Dad. I’m visiting Baker Heights as soon as I can. If I’m there and I see Seth, I’ll handle it the way *I* want to handle it.”

“Fine,” he answered, sounding like it was anything but fine. “I think you’re making a mistake, but you do whatever you want.”

His footsteps echoed down the hall. I closed the bedroom door behind him. All I wanted was one more year at Baker Heights. Case didn’t understand. No one did. I lay across my bed, lost in thought.

“Claire!” my mom hollered.

I swiped the back of my hand across my cheeks and cleared my throat. “I’m sleeping!” I replied. My voice left me in a croak, so I cleared my throat again.

“Claire, company!” she said.

“Who?”

Silence.

“Who?” I repeated.

“Claire, company!” she yelled again.

I groaned and dragged myself from the mattress. My reflection stared at me from the large mirror on the far side of my room. My eyes were red and puffy, complemented by tear-stained cheeks. My hair was a mess of brown waves, tangled from being thrown into a ponytail, and my shirt was riddled with paint stains and dust. The shorts I’d stolen from Case were baggy around my waist, doing nothing to improve my appearance. I was a hot mess and in no shape for company.

“Claire!”

“Coming!” I yelled, hauling myself across the room.

Concealer sat inside a small makeup bag on my vanity. I slapped enough under my eyes to cover the puffiness, ran a brush through my hair, and inhaled. When I opened my door, Case sprinted by. He wore one of the blue button-downs and was frantically fastening the buttons.

"She's here," he whisper-yelled.

"Who's here?"

"Riley." His bedroom door slammed behind him.

I took the stairs to the bottom, hearing Riley's laugh as I reached the landing. She stood in the foyer with my mom, dressed in shorts, a plaid shirt with sleeves rolled to her elbows, and a pair of brown gladiator sandals. Her blond hair was curled in loose waves that were swept to one shoulder.

"Hey!" she said. "Sorry to barge in. I was in the neighborhood."

"You're two houses down," I answered. "You're always in the neighborhood."

"True." She pointed at the folded shirts in my mom's hands. "I was delivering this year's spirit shirts, and your house was the last stop. Since it's Saturday and I'm free the rest of the day, I thought you might want to hang out. We can do whatever, as long as it isn't English."

"Thanks," I started, "but I'm not feeling too well. Maybe a different—"

"Nonsense," my mom cut in.

I gawked at her, but she smiled at me with a shameless look of encouragement.

"Go hang out with your friend," she said. "Unpacking can wait. Those boxes will still be here when you get back."

I sucked in a breath and shook my head. My mind was on

Seth, and I didn't want to be a pessimistic stick-in-the-mud. Any other day? Okay. Today I couldn't do it. "I'll even let you two borrow the car," my mom said. "Case is here for the day, so it's not like he'll need it." I shot her a look that read *stop it*, but she ignored me and moved to the hall. "I'll get you girls the keys. Be right back."

"Awesome! Thanks, Mrs. Collins." Riley looked at me, excited. "Meet you outside in ten?"

"Sure," I answered, not even bothering to sound chipper.

Riley disappeared outside, letting in the afternoon heat through the doorway. My mom returned a few seconds later, almost colliding with Case as he jumped off the bottom of the stairs.

"Point me in her direction," Case said, smoothing his hair.

"You're too late." I snatched the keys from my mom and stalked up the stairs to change.

"Where did she go?!" my mom asked, turning to me.

"She's outside," I griped. "And congratulations on meddling mother of the year. You can expect your certificate by the end of the week."

She frowned, her hands finding her hips. "Claire."

"Bye, Mom."

* * *

"We're here!" Riley said, closing the car door. "Sorry, we stopped and grabbed Sonic."

The smell of livestock carried on the breeze slanting the overgrown blades of grass around us. The grass scratched my bare ankles as I followed Riley across the yard. Tate stood in front of a crimson-colored barn, with white trim along the doors and

a metal roof that gleamed beneath the sweltering sun. He crossed his arms as Riley stopped in front of him.

"I brought Claire," she pointed out. "Hope that's okay."

His brown eyes settled on me, and he shrugged. "I'm cool with it, but I'm not the only one that matters."

"Adam can get over it," Riley answered. "If he doesn't, he can leave."

"Adam?" I repeated.

"The one and only," Riley said, motioning at a black Chevy as it rolled through the steel gates at the front of the property. Four-door and streaked with dirt, the truck pulled up to the barn with music so loud it shook the truck from the inside out.

"Speaking of which," Riley said. "I need to talk to him. He was supposed to let me know which players are helping with Friday's pep rally and he didn't."

"He's busy."

"So am I." She waited until Adam's dark tennis shoes hit the grass, then asked, "Hey, who's giving the pep talk at Friday's pep rally?"

"Hey to you, too."

He closed the door and crammed the keys in his pocket. He wore black athletic shorts, a gray Pader High practice shirt, and a matching black cap tugged so low it hit the brim of his sunglasses. His jaw clenched as his face tilted my direction.

"Thought it was the three of us," he said, returning his attention to Riley. "What changed?"

"I was tired of being the only girl," she answered.

He frowned. "Tate, you okay with this?"

"I don't care either way," Tate said. He grabbed one of the barn's doors and tried to tug it open. When it didn't budge, he

looked at Adam, who hadn't moved an inch. "Going to stand there and watch me do this, or you feel like making yourself useful?"

"That depends," Adam snapped. "Are you going to pretend like you forgot to mention her being here?"

Tate straightened. "I didn't know she was coming. Now, quit being an ass and help me with the damn door."

I felt like the awkward duck who intruded on a planned event. "I can head out," I said, turning toward the car. "I need to finish unpacking. Riley, can you catch a ride home with Tate?"

"No."

Adam joined Tate at the door, still looking pissed. "It's fine," he grumbled. "If you leave, Riley will nag us the rest of the afternoon. Not dealing with it."

"It's true," Riley agreed. "You leave, and he'll wish you would've stayed."

The barn doors slid open, and the boys stepped inside. The smell of hay filled the dry air, but I didn't see any. There was nothing but a vacant concrete floor, lit by sunlight that streamed through the doors.

"This is where we hold parties," Riley said, spinning a circle in the middle of the room.

"Victory parties," Tate added.

He pulled the handle on a door at the back, and it opened onto a storage room with four-wheelers inside. They were lined up in three rows of three. Tate grabbed the keys before pointing at the corresponding vehicles.

"Helmets are one size fits all," he said. "Don't get on a four-wheeler without one."

"Afraid I'll damage my pretty face?" Adam teased.

"Afraid I'll damage the coach's daughter," Tate replied. He winked at me and found the last four-wheeler in my line.

Adam pulled the shades from his eyes. He stared at me, skeptical. "Doubt she can even work one," he said. "Collins, need a diagram and step-by-step directions on how to make it go?"

I flipped him off before I realized what I'd done.

"Someone needs to learn manners!" he said, laughing.

"Someone needs to learn to be nice," I answered.

"Probably." He traded his hat for a helmet and steered the vehicle toward the door. Riley followed close behind.

Tate looked at me as I mounted the four-wheeler. My hands ran across uneven rubber handles, trying to decide which of two handles was the clutch. "You can ride with Riley," he offered, tugging a helmet over his curly hair.

"I've got it." I chose a lever, and the four-wheeler thrust forward. "See. No biggie."

"Suit yourself."

The four-wheeler hummed to life, the sound of the engine resonating off the barn's metal walls as I drove toward the front. Riley sat outside the doors, idling as she snapped selfies. She crammed her phone in her back pocket, then pointed at an overgrown field of grass.

A rusted gate, closed with a thick piece of chain, sat between us and the pasture. Adam had rehitched it from the inside. He was already back on his four-wheeler, jumping over mounds in the distance. Tate sped past us and unhitched the gate. Once we were through, he secured the chain and joined Adam.

Riley stared at me behind her helmet. "Think we can speed this up?" she asked. "I can stay with you, but at this rate I'll be ninety before we make it to the jumps."

I nodded, and she raced away, throwing up bits of grass as she crossed the field. I was stuck on turtle pace, with no idea how to change the speed. I messed with the clutch, sending the four-wheeler forward in a lurch.

“Hey!” I heard Adam yell.

I turned and spotted Adam’s four-wheeler racing toward me. When he got within a few feet, he turned his vehicle sharp, spraying mud over my helmet, shirt, shorts, and bare legs. I sat on the leather seat, drenched, as I stared at him.

“Geez, Claire. What happened to you?” he asked, coming to a stop. His whole body shook with laughter, making me want to strangle him. “Oh, wait. I know. Me.”

My hands curled around my knees, and my fingernails dug into my skin. He had to be kidding me! “Why did you throw mud on me?! This was a cute outfit!”

“It’s horse water,” Adam clarified, pulling his helmet off and resting it on his lap. He pointed at the large metal trough to our right. My stomach rolled as I took in the frothy puddle around it. “It’s not my fault you were sitting in the spray zone,” he continued. “I needed to turn, and there you were. Oops.”

“Is that what’s on me?” I asked, bile rising in my throat as a bubble popped in the mud. “Tell me you’re joking. You are joking, right?”

“Nope.”

I pulled my helmet off and threw it at him. “You’re such an asshole, Adam! That’s full of bacteria and—”

“You’re covered in it?”

“Yes!” I stared at my dirty legs and cringed. “I can’t handle this. I’m going to vomit.”

“Are you serious?”

I gagged and held up a hand to halt him.

He crammed his helmet on his head and motioned toward the gate. “Ew. Do it out there. I don’t want to drive through your nastiness.”

I inhaled and slowly released my breath. “I’ll get you back,” I said. “This will bite you in the butt, and you’ll be begging for my forgiveness.”

“Really, sweetheart? I’d love to see you try.”

He sped off, and I gagged again. I didn’t know much about Pader, but I was positive about one thing. Adam Meade was a pest. Eventually, I’d squash him.

4

Revenge

“Plans for Friday?”

I glanced at Riley and crammed two oversized books in my locker. “School,” I answered. “More specifically, a test in English and a study guide for government.”

“Oh! Right. About that English test . . .”

I knew what she was getting at. “We can study at my house,” I volunteered. “Let me know when you want to meet. I’ll order pizza.”

“Have I said you’re the best?”

I nodded and glanced around her, catching sight of Adam as he approached his locker. He had a girl with him, poor thing. He leaned against the metal with his arms crossed, smiling at her as she talked. If he wasn’t such a dick, he would’ve been attractive. His good looks faded the moment he splattered horse water all over me.

I tossed my backpack over my shoulder and shut the locker. Adam glanced at Riley and me as we passed.

"Headed to study hall?" Riley asked, turning so she walked backward. Her eyes were on Adam as she pointed at the girl, then shook her head. "Wish I had study hall," she continued. "Sounds fun."

"Get the rest of your class credits this semester. They might switch your schedule after Christmas." She was still walking backward, so I turned and walked backward, too. "Is this a new thing?" I asked. "Did I somehow miss out on a trend?"

"No," Riley answered, frowning. "Just trying to keep Adam from going for the wrong girl yet again. Dude thinks with the wrong head, and he doesn't get how his actions affect me. Every time he breaks a heart, the girl wants to hang out with me to get him back. I can't do it anymore. I'm tired of avoiding half the school's female population. That includes some pretty pissed-off cheerleaders I have to be on a team with."

"Tell him to keep it in his pants." I turned toward the library. "Or set him up with someone he likes. There has to be someone."

"Adam doesn't like anyone. That's the problem."

I shrugged. "Can't change people who don't want to be changed."

"But what if they want to be changed and don't know how?"

"Deep thoughts by Riley Cross," I said. "Will think about it and get back to you."

"Please do," she answered, splitting off toward another hall.

The smell of aged books and lemon-scented wood polish hit me as I stepped through the library doors. Mrs. Jenkins, the librarian, stood behind her desk, fiddling with computer keys.

I took a seat at one of the tables and tossed my backpack on the ground. Adam jogged by a few seconds later, followed by the bell. He was late to ag class, but my dad's running punishment would pale in comparison to my special treat.

"Mrs. Jenkins," I said, moping toward her desk. "I think I forgot my government book in the bathroom. Can I go check? If someone takes it, I don't want to have to buy the school a replacement."

"Sure, but try not to dally."

"Yes, ma'am."

I grabbed my backpack and hurried through the door, stepping into the breezeway, where the aroma of greasy cafeteria food made my stomach grumble. The hall was clear, and the only noise was the clanking of spoons from the lunchroom ladies.

My time was limited, so I scuttled down the hall and quietly found the back doors. With one swift movement, I was outside and running down the sidewalk.

Humidity clung to my arms as I weaved between rows of cars. Adam's Chevy sat in the third row. It gleamed like a ray of sunshine, freshly washed and waxed. I glanced around for any lingering students. The coast was clear. I took a breath to steady my rapid pulse, then curled my fingers around the tailgate and hoisted myself up.

With my body flush against the bed, I unzipped my bag and retrieved two tubes of shoe polish. The black one, the larger of the two, smelled like chemicals. I scrunched my nose and slunk forward, raising my hand to smear the polish against the glass. Top to bottom, side to side, the window was blacked out. Nothing could be seen in or out.

Sweat coated my neck as I hurdled the tailgate and landed on the gravel. I took another look around the parking lot, then blacked out the windows on the driver's side. Like a ninja, I moved to the passenger side and repeated the process.

When everything, including the side mirrors, was coated in black, I slid around the trunk and scrawled *#winning* in white polish against Adam's driver's side door. My breath left me in short spurts as I ran to my car, dropped the evidence in my trunk, and hurried back into the school.

I was still hyped on adrenaline when I found Riley in the cafeteria the period after. I sat across from her and Tate, studying my chicken strips as the pair talked with the rest of the table. Adam was gone. I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad one.

"We need to talk about Thursday's pregame plans," Riley said. "We doing the usual? Burgers at Big Sal's, then the game?"

"I'm down," Tate agreed. "Claire, you in?"

"That's nice of you," I started. "But I—" A cafeteria door slammed open, and Adam stormed across the tile, his cheeks red and his jaw clenched. Oh crap.

"But you what?" Riley said.

"D-don't eat meat."

Adam found our table, green eyes blazing as he dropped into the chair across from me. The intensity behind his glare made me wriggle. If looks could kill, I'd be dead on the floor.

"What are you talking about?" he muttered through clenched teeth.

"Big Sal's," Riley answered. She bit into her pizza and shrugged. "I was asking Claire if she wanted to go with us on Thursday, but she doesn't eat meat. Kudos to you, by the way. Tried to go

vegetarian a while back, but only lasted a week. Chicken did me in."

"Funny," Adam stated, pointing at my food. "Claire's eating chicken right now. Care to explain?"

Confused, I looked at Riley. "I'm a vegetarian?"

"Seems like it," Adam answered. "Which means you won't mind if I have a few of these." He slid my tray across the table, offering Tate a couple of chicken strips while he finished off the rest. "Question," he said, swallowing as he stared at me. "Someone messed with my truck."

"That isn't a question. Usually, questions have a question in them. Try something with who, why, or what."

He chuckled, his senior ring catching the light as he scratched his jaw. "Okay," he said. "What happened to my truck?"

"Oh, that? Not sure. Heard it was a girl you pissed off, but I didn't catch her name. I'm sure there's plenty of options."

"You think you're funny," he hissed, "but I take a class with you. I recognize your handwriting."

"No proof," I said, smiling.

"I don't need proof." He leaned over the table and arched a brow. "I do find it funny, though. You can't get my attention another way, so you have to resort to stupid little games like screwing with my truck. It's pathetic, Collins."

"Pathetic?" I repeated, my heart pounding out of my chest. "Hate to break it to you, but you're nothing special. You're a mediocre quarterback with his head shoved so far up his ass it's a wonder you can see a football at all. There's tons of guys like you, Meade. I've seen better. I've *dated* better."

The table grew silent, and the rest of the room followed.

"That sounds like the bitter ramblings of a lonely, unwanted

girl,” Adam stated, his voice a whisper. “Have you always been like this, or is it because I hurt your feelings? Is it because you’re stuck in Pader and you hate it? Is it because my friends are the only ones who have gone out of their way to be nice to you? Or, more likely, is it because everyone likes your brother, but they don’t like you?”

My blood heated as I sat there, slack jawed at the harshness in his words. He’d picked me apart in front of the entire senior class. By the smugness on his face, he didn’t even care.

The sound of my chair sliding against the tile was deafening. “Claire—”

I ignored Riley and stormed out of the cafeteria. My walls were cracked, and I needed to get out of the storm before Hurricane Adam rolled through and shattered my windows.

I spent the rest of the lunch period in my car. Riley was waiting for me when I got to English. She sat at her desk, her chin in her hands, as I moved through the aisle and found my seat beside her.

Adam crossed a line. No amount of talking to Riley would remedy what he broke.

When the bell rang for dismissal, I grabbed my backpack and exited the room. The trek down Senior Hall was made in record speed, and I ducked into government without stopping to drop my English books at my locker. I was first in class, so I sifted through social media while the rest of the students filed through the door. That was a mistake.

Tonight was Senior Welcome Night at Baker Heights—one of the most talked-about events of the year. The bonfire, held on the outskirts of town, was put on by Student Council and the Booster Club. All my old friends would be there; Seth would be

there; and it would be plastered all over Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter like a flashing neon sign for everything I was missing.

My heart ached for company; my soul sought comfort; and I was hours away with no possibility of getting there. It was like knowing Ed Sheeran would be in town, but the tickets were sold out. I'd see the pictures everywhere, unable to rein in my jealousy. I couldn't handle it, and the event hadn't even happened.

Adam entered with the bell. I heard his voice as he ascended the steps, but I couldn't look at him. He dropped a folded piece of notebook paper beside my book. My name was scrawled across the top in slanted letters. I avoided it like the plague. Who knew what horrible things he'd put inside?

When the bell rang, I stood. Adam's exaggerated sigh came from behind me as he hoisted his backpack over his shoulder, closed the distance, and stopped beside my table. His jaw was tight as he pulled the paper from the desk, unfolded it, and pointed at the words.

"I'm sorry," he read, lifting his gaze. "I didn't mean to take it that far."

"Thanks," I answered, busying myself with my backpack. It was an apology, but a forced one.

"So, we're good?" he asked.

"What do you think?" I slid the backpack over my shoulder and pushed in my chair. Adam blocked my path. "Can I go now?" I continued with a frown. "I've got another class. I can't get there if you don't move."

"We didn't get off on the best foot," he answered.

"No, we didn't," I agreed. "The first time you met me, you ordered me to bring you ice. The last time I checked, that isn't the best way to introduce yourself."

"I didn't order you," he defended. "I asked in my own special way."

"You ordered."

He moved and descended the stairs behind me. "It was a small request, on a hot day, and I was already tired," he explained. "Sorry if I didn't add a 'please' to the end."

"'Please' would've made you less of a jerk. Next time, add it."

His left cheek dimpled. "Noted."

He followed me into the hall, thick crowds of students parting for him like they'd burn at his touch. When I found my locker a minute later, he was still by my side.

"If you think stalking is a good way to apologize, you're wrong." I hung my backpack on the hook and unzipped it. "It's creepy and desperate."

"Oh?" He took a step back, his hands outstretched in front of him. "Well, I guess I'll take my creepy and desperate self over there."

"You and yourself have fun."

"Trust me, we will."

He winked and sauntered across the tile, girls watching him as he walked. Why were the hot ones always evil? It was like the universe needed their personality to be ugly so it balanced out their handsome exterior.

I was still stewing on that question when I got home. Thankfully, the gorgeous bachelor on TV disproved my theory. He was one part adventurous, one part emotional, one part honest, and one part rugged stud. It was a vast improvement from what Pader High had to offer.

Nestled on the couch in my pajamas, I crammed a handful of popcorn in my mouth and swooned. Movement on the porch

drew my attention. Case pushed his way in, interrupting the rose ceremony halfway through one girl's meltdown.

"Wow, sis, you look hideous."

"Wow, Case, you smell like ass." My nose crinkled, and I stared at the television. "They make these things called showers. I'm sure there's a few in the field house. You should use them."

"Fine, no present for you," he answered, rounding the couch with a Sonic cup in his hand.

I smiled and greedily outstretched my hand. "You don't even know how bad I need a limeade. Thanks, Case."

He took a sip, dashing my hopes and dreams. "My limeade, not yours. The present is your math binder. You left it in Dad's office. Adam said you had homework, so I grabbed it on our way out."

"Adam is the root of all evil."

"Most girls think I'm the opposite. Nice to have a fresh point of view," Adam said as he walked through the front door, hauling a box. He dropped it on the wood and brushed his hands against dark jeans. "By the way, there's an overly aggressive squirrel on your front porch. I thought those things were day creatures, but this one tried to claw my face off!"

"Meeko is a good judge of character," I replied.

"Claire named the squirrel," Case added, looking at Adam. "It's a weird thing she does. Just go with it."

"Okay," Adam answered, drawing out the word. "Name the tree, too?"

I pulled a blanket from the back of the couch and tugged it over my head. If I pretended not to exist, maybe he'd leave me

alone. The blanket was immediately tugged off, replaced with Adam's face. So much for my peaceful night with the nation's most tantalizing bachelor.

"Is there something you need?" I asked. "I assume you gave Case a ride home. Thanks. He's home now. You can leave."

"Adam's staying for dinner," Case said.

My face paled as I stared at my brother. "Adam's not staying for dinner," I replied. "Adam has a perfectly delicious dinner waiting at his own house. Don't you, Adam?"

"My grandma's out tonight. My schedule is wide open."

My eyes narrowed. If this was their idea of a prank, their sense of humor sucked.

"Really, why are you here?" I asked, staring at him.

"Dinner," he replied. "Ran into your mom outside the field house. She was carrying a box—"

"Window decals for the team," Case interjected.

"—and I helped her," Adam said. "In return, your dad invited me to dinner. Wanted to talk about football scholarships, anyway. He has scouts calling. Who was I to turn him down?"

I groaned and stood, pulling the blanket around my shoulders as I marched toward the stairs. My dad and I would be having an enlightening conversation after the meal. He needed to know the boundaries between football and Claire's personal space.

"Also," Adam added as I reached the stairs, "your dad mentioned steaks on the menu. Wasn't aware you ate steak."

"It's her favorite," Case commented, stealing a handful of my popcorn. "Every time Dad grills, Claire is first in line. She'll finish off two, easy."

Adam cocked his head to the side and my cheeks heated. "Really? That's interesting," he answered. "Tell me, are you a rare, medium-well, or well-done kind of girl?"

I scowled at Adam over the rail. "I hate you."

"Get in line."

* * *

As fate would have it, not only was Adam a huge suck-up when he needed to be, but he was also a great liar. Mom was tonight's griller. He ate my mom's steak without gagging once. That was a feat by all standards, given that my mom charbroiled all steaks until they were almost inedible.

"Dinner was delicious, Mrs. Collins."

Adam stood and pushed in his chair while my mom watched with an adoring look she never gave me.

I mimicked the movement and followed him to our kitchen. My dad stood inside, leaning against the marble counter while gnawing on a burnt crescent roll.

"Heard from the scouts today," he said, addressing Adam as we put our plates in the sink. "They're coming to the game on Friday, and they want to see how you run the ball. We'll discuss it more tomorrow, but I wanted to keep you in the loop."

"Awesome. Thanks, Coach." Adam's gaze flitted to me, and he withdrew his keys from his pocket. He looked hesitant, but he cleared his throat and wiped the emotion from his face. "I need to get going. Thank you for the meal. I appreciate it."

"You're welcome anytime," my dad answered.

He grabbed a dish from my mom as she entered behind us.

I took that as the prime moment to nudge Adam away from them. It was no easy feat considering his size and ability to withstand the force of my biceps. Thankfully, though, he gave up resisting and let me push him out the door.

“Okay!” I said. “Have a good night.”

“Walk me to the truck.”

“Um, no.”

I moved to shut the door, but he caught it. “Walk me to the truck,” he repeated.

“Why? Want to berate me more?”

“I already apologized,” he answered, heading down the sidewalk. His truck windows were clear of polish, and the driver’s side gleamed once more. “Besides, you screwed up my stuff. I was allowed to be pissed.”

“Being pissed and crossing a line are two different things,” I said, trailing behind him.

Once we reached his truck, he turned and leaned his back against it. “Again, already apologized for what I said. Can’t do much more than that.”

“You could be nicer in general.”

“I’m not a nice guy. Think that’s a little out of the question.” Adam opened the door and slid inside. He cranked the truck, and the dull hum of classic rock played from the speakers, breaking through the quiet night. “Tell your parents thanks again for the dinner,” he said. “It was great. I had fun.”

“We both know family dinners aren’t fun,” I replied.

“Or maybe you don’t appreciate them,” he returned.

The comment struck me as he closed the door and pulled away from the curb. His taillights disappeared down another

road, leaving me beneath the streetlight with nothing but dread settling in the pit of my stomach.

Adam was the epitome of annoying and the poster child for arrogant football player, but I seemed to be the only one who felt that way. Either I was missing something, or the problem lay with me.