

Chapter Sixty-Six

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it's invalid. I will provide the chapter now.

Chapter Sixty-Six



“I HEARD YOUR DAD TRIED TO kill your mom.”

And there goes that perfect moment.

Liam and I turn to face Brody, who is grinning at me.

The police blotter.

Liam takes a step toward him, and I grab his arm. “Let’s go,” I say.

“Leighton.” Liam’s arm is tight and tense under my fingers.

“Let’s just leave.”

“But they haven’t even announced the Winter Formal Ice King and Queen,” Brody says. “I hear you two are the favorites.”

“Jesus, Brody, how much of a jackass can you be?” Liam asks.

“Ignore him,” I say. “C’mon.”

“Brody, you have to leave,” says a voice behind me. It’s Amelia. Perfect hair, perfect dress . . . perfectly cold glare in her eyes as she faces Brody. “As student council president, I’m telling you to leave the dance.”

“Whatever,” he says. “Lame-ass dance anyway.”

“Go,” she says again. Just like at the football game, I’m surprised by how forceful her voice is for someone so small.

Brody flips her off before turning away, but he does leave the gym.

“Thank you, Amelia.” My hand falls onto her arm. I’m so grateful, I don’t even know how to say it.

“Don’t let him ruin your night,” Amelia says. “Oh, damn, someone’s putting the basketball nets down. They’re going to wreck my balloon arch. I’ve gotta go.”

She waves goodbye.

Sofia is on the other side of the gym, already yelling at the kid who is lowering the basketball nets and gesturing wildly at the balloons. I laugh, but when I turn back to Liam, he’s still angry.

“Wanna get out of here?” I ask.

“Really? Where do you want to go?”

“New York City,” I say. “California. The moon.”

Finally, he laughs.

“First, the newsroom. I need to check my email.”

“Lead the way,” he says.

The newsroom is pitch-black, and we stumble our way through it, unwilling to turn on lights and attract a teacher’s attention.

“It’s gonna take a little while to warm up,” I whisper, turning on my dinosaur computer.

“Mmmhmm. Did you bring me here under false pretenses, Barnes?” Liam asks, his hands finding me in the dark.

“Maybe,” I giggle. The computer starts up, and I click on the email icon.

“You know, this takes a while to open, too,” I tell him.

He turns me in his arms and lifts me up onto my desk. He kisses me slowly, his hands tangling in the teased curls of my eighties-styled hair. I laugh when he fails for the fourth time to move my hair. “What exactly are you trying to do?” I ask, my eyes on the ceiling.

“Kiss your neck. It’s like a lion’s mane.”

“I am woman,” I say. “Hear me roar.”

He laughs, and then he is kissing me again. I can feel his smile against my lips, and there’s no place in the world I’d rather be than in the school newsroom, making out with Liam McNamara.

The rustle of my dress sends a chill across my skin. I’m glad we are alone. This feels like how really well-written words make me feel. Not like an article for the paper or an essay for lit class. More like a sonnet. My legs are parentheses around his waist. When I sigh against his neck, it’s an apostrophe—in the possessive. And every word of it is familiar already—I’ve been memorizing them for months. Liam’s arms come around me and pull me in tighter, he kisses me deeper, and I wonder where this is going—

My email dings.

He pulls back, tilts his head. “Probably not the place.”

“Definitely not the place.”

I hop off the desk and turn to check my email. I scroll through the dozens of junk emails and college emails that have cluttered my inbox in the last week. And then one catches my eyes: Early Admission Application Update.

“It’s from NYU,” I say.

“You don’t think?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper, and we both turn to look at the screen.

“Oh, look. This one’s from my ornithologist.”

I click on that email first.

“Wimp,” Liam whispers, his hands trying in vain to gather up my wild hair so he can look over my shoulder. I read the first email out loud.

“As promised, I’ve enclosed the second thermal-imaging map of the crow roosting habits in Auburn, Pennsylvania . . .” I trail off and open the attachment. Like the first thermal map he sent me a few weeks ago, another brilliantly colored map fills the screen. Yellow and orange on the outskirts of town, where there are fewer crows. Red and maroon where their concentration is higher. But this map looks different from the first. There’s a lot more dark red, and now there is one patch of black—the highest concentration—and the entire thing is shaped like a storm, with an epicenter where the most crows have gathered.

I look at the street outlines on the map, and my breath catches. The black spot falls almost perfectly over my home.

“Liam . . .” I click to enlarge the map. “What the hell do you think that means?”

“Leighton.”

“It’s strange, right?”

“Leighton,” he says again. “You opened the other one.”

He’s right. I clicked the wrong button. Instead of enlarging the map, I closed it.

And opened the email from NYU.

“Lay-TON!” Liam shouts. He lifts me up in my shiny black dress and spins me around.

I got in.