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FIRST EDITION

Interior text design by Diahann Sturge-Campbell

Feathers illustration © Yuliia Borovyk/Stock.Adobe.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data has been applied for.

ISBN 978-0-06-338088-2

ISBN 978-0-06-338087-5 (simultaneous hardcover edition)

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

**CATCH HER
IF YOU CAN**

HarperCollins Publishers



CHAPTER ONE

Eight Years Earlier

Boys smelled like goat cheese.

Thus, fourteen-year-old Eve Keller had put them into one category: NOPE.

No, thanks. They were *all* the same. Not for her.

That opinion changed on a brisk autumn day in late November.

Eve held the snack-size bag of Fritos between her teeth. She needed her hands free to unload her school iPad and science notes, but before she managed to unzip her backpack, the two guys throwing a baseball in her friend Skylar's backyard caught her eye. One of them she recognized. One of them she didn't. In their smallish Rhode Island town of Cumberland, coming across an unfamiliar face wasn't typical.

If she'd seen this newcomer before, she would have remembered.

He had a different way of standing. Braced for a blow. Chin up, hands half curled at his sides. Eyes narrowed as if suspicious of his surroundings, his demeanor very still and observant, while conversely, his black hair moved every which way with the wind. Something else that marked him as an outsider? He wore a jacket, instead of a hoodie, as was the custom with the local boys, even when temperatures dipped to the twenties.

As if sensing her curious gaze, the young man's head turned and caught her staring from the kitchen window. Apart from a slight widening of his eyes—what *color* were they?—his expression didn't change. But those hands completed their curl at his sides.

Quickly, Eve looked away, surprised to feel goose bumps lifting on her arms inside her sweater sleeves, no idea she'd spend the next eight years holding back four words from being said aloud. Four words that would keep her awake at night, choking her at times.

I saw him first.

"Who is that?" Eve asked her best friend, Skylar, who was the only freshman at Cumberland High with an At-a-Glance business planner—and she had her nose buried in it now.

"Who is who?" Skylar asked, distracted by her color-coded to-do list.

"That big dude with your brother."

Skylar's brunette head popped up. "Huh?" She turned in her chair to follow Eve's line of sight out the window. "I have no idea. Wait. Why is he kind of hot?"

Eve snorted and sat, ripping open her chip bag. "The hot ones are always the biggest assholes."

The other girl snorted too. "If he's hanging out with my stepbrother, that definitely tracks."

Eve woke up the home screen of her iPad.

"Maybe he's on Elton's travel team," she murmured, once more glancing out the window.

"Uh, yeah. No. Look at his form. Is this, like, the first time he's ever thrown a baseball?"

"Maybe he's a cousin on your stepdad's side," Eve suggested, refusing to be caught staring again. Although keeping her attention

glued to her iPad screen was annoyingly difficult. “Imagine you just called your new cousin hot.”

“Stop.”

“Stop being a pervert.”

They ducked their heads to muffle the sound of their laughter, though Eve put an end to her mirth a lot sooner than Skylar, not wanting to make it weird. Or make it seem like she was too invested. Their friendship was still new, right? Skylar might welcome Eve at her kitchen table to do homework today, but girls their age were fickle. They switched up friend groups as often as they changed their nail polish color. Skylar was already getting teased for hanging out with Eve and it was only a matter of time before that got old.

Ignoring the dread that sank low in her stomach, Eve fished out another Frito curl and popped the chip into her mouth. “What do you think is going to be on the quiz tomo—”

“Oh my god, they’re coming in here.”

“What? Oh.” Eve clapped her hands together to get rid of the Frito salt, then ran what she hoped were five nonchalant fingers through her chin-length blond hair, surprised to find her pulse being weird. “Whatever.”

“Yeah,” Skylar breathed, her casual shrug looking more like a flinch. “Whatever.”

Both girls kept their heads down when the two boys came in through the back door into the kitchen, though Eve would admit to sliding a quick sideways glance at the new guy’s footwear. Lace-up boots, not sneakers. Definitely not from here.

Elton greeted Skylar the same way he had since their parents got married two years earlier. “Oh god, you’re *still* here?”

Skylar’s middle finger was already up. “Die, Elton.”

He stomped into the kitchen and yanked open the first cabinet. "Did you eat all the good snacks?" Foil packaging rustled. "What the hell. All that's left is your mom's health food shit."

"You're not looking hard enough." Skylar spoke to her step-brother like she was communicating with a toddler. "Move the granola bars to one side. See beyond the front row, genius." His cry of good fortune had Skylar sending Eve a smirk. "Pathetic."

Eve rolled her lips inward to stifle a laugh. It would probably sound too breathless if she let it out, because her entire right side was on fire under the new boy's scrutiny. He stood without moving at the entrance to the kitchen, hands in the pockets of his worn jeans, eyes quietly amused. Until they rested on Eve and that sparkle turned . . . serious?

"This is Madden," Elton said around a mouthful of whatever he'd taken from the snack cabinet. "Ms. Donahue next door? That's his aunt. He's visiting."

"Oh." Skylar's face was the color of pizza sauce as she fidgeted to face the tall, silent new guy. "Are you here early for Thanksgiving break, or something?"

Madden cleared his throat. "We don't celebrate Thanksgiving in Ireland."

Eve's fingertips started to tingle. It wasn't *just* that he had an accent. A gorgeous one with inflections in unexpected places and lilts in others. No, it was deep. Deep as the black sky she stared into at night, focusing on the vast, bottomless well of ink until the stars disappeared in her periphery. There was some hesitance in his tone, as well, that she understood. Most of Elton's friends would already be digging in the refrigerator, entitled to whatever they got their hands on, but this guy would barely enter the kitchen.

Please don't be an asshole, Eve found herself wishing.

A ridiculous wish that wouldn't come true. And who cared, anyway?

She refocused on her work.

"Are you going to tell me their names, or should I guess?" Madden asked, with the barest touch of humor.

He's still looking at me.

Eve could feel it. And a quick peek confirmed she was right.

Maybe . . .

Maybe Elton had already told him about her father.

That would explain why he continued to stare at Eve.

"Fine." Elton sighed. "This clown is my stepsister, Skylar. She's a decent pitcher or I would have thrown her annoying ass out by now."

"Decent?" sputtered Skylar. "I could strike you out in my sleep—"

"And that's her friend Eve," Elton said loudly, throwing an empty Fritos bag at Skylar.

Eve gave a tight smile without looking up from her work.

"Hi, Skylar." Then, in a rumble, he added, "Hello, Eve."

A ripple moved upward from Eve's toes, culminating in a feathery sensation in her belly. Suddenly, she needed to get *out* of there. She'd learned very early not to expect too much good from people, but if this guy was giving her extra attention for the reason she suspected, she didn't want it. So ridiculous to be disappointed in someone with whom she could barely make eye contact, right?

Right.

Eve started to gather her things. "Oh, um. I just remembered . . ." Might as well beat him to the punch. "My dad needs me to line up the music for tonight."

Skylar nodded, her expression giving nothing away. "Okay."

"Eve's dad owns Cat Fight. That strip club just off Pendleton Street at the edge of town," Elton said absently, his head buried in the fridge, rooting around for a soda. "She very rudely refuses to sneak me in."

"Elton . . ." Skylar sighed, witheringly. "Can you not?"

"Can I not, what? I'm sixteen. Her dad owns a place where women get naked. I'm not supposed to think about it twenty-four hours a day?" He took a swig of his all-natural soda and winced, looking at the label. "Back me up on this, Madden."

Eve tucked her hair behind one ear and continued to gather up her things. "Go ahead," she murmured. "Ask me if I'm going to work the pole one day. I'm sure you're dying to know." The ensuing silence caused her to add, "Everyone asks. It's fine, really."

Liar. It wasn't fine. It's why she dreaded going to school every morning.

Madden's brow knit together, but he said nothing.

Blue.

His eyes were a deep, sapphire blue.

"Eve?" Elton steepled his fingers in prayer. "I'm also willing to do part-time work, if your dad needs a busboy."

"He doesn't," she breezed.

"Boobs."

Skylar threw a stylus at her stepbrother's head, hitting her target. "Dude. Shut *up*." She pushed back her chair. Then to Eve, "I'll walk you to the end of the driveway."

"You really don't have to."

Her friend was already moving in her purposeful bounce toward the archway that separated the kitchen from the front of the house. "Nice to meet you, Madden," Skylar said. "Don't let him and his douchey friends rub off on you."

Instead of responding to Skylar, Madden looked Eve in the eye as she passed. "I won't."

The weirdest thing happened. Eve believed him.

Walking by Madden on her way out was like journeying past an open doorway that led to a babbling brook and fallen, moss-covered logs. A nighttime sky overhead. The chirping of crickets. Peace and mystery embodied in a human being. Eve couldn't tell if her steps slowed as she brushed by his sturdy frame or if she imagined time turning lethargic, her skin growing hot and feverish when those blue eyes studied her. Studied her throat and cheeks and the fist around her backpack strap.

A moment later, when Eve emerged from the house in front of Skylar, she had to stop herself from gasping for air out loud.

"Holy shit. Holy shit," said Skylar, speed walking up beside her. "I can't believe there is a fine-ass *Irish* guy in my house. What planet is this? Did I act okay? Did I say anything dumb?" She fanned herself furiously, even though the outside temperature was in the forties. "Do you think he would go for me, even though I'm a freshman?"

I saw him first.

I saw him first.

Those four selfish words clogged Eve's windpipe momentarily, memories of Madden's blue eyes and safe, babbling brook presence distracting her from more important thoughts. Such as, Skylar was her only friend. A *true* friend. The only person who'd ever stood up for her at school against the boys who hounded her constantly about the club, asking uncomfortable questions that made Elton's jokes sound like a lullaby. If Skylar had a crush on the new guy, she wouldn't get in the way of that.

Anyway, he'd probably be gone in a week.

Their friendship, she really, really hoped, would last a lot longer than that.

"Um, yeah," Eve forced out, feeling winded. "Who wouldn't go for you?"

"Really?" Skylar looked back at the house. "I can't go back in there. Wait. Yes, I can. What should I say? Maybe I should just practice pitching. That'll impress him."

Eve smiled with as much warmth as she could muster. "Show him your breaking ball, babe. He'll be putty in your hand."

Put him out of your head.

He'll be gone soon enough.

But time was determined to prove her wrong.