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DEEP END

ALI HAZELWOOD



SPHERE

PROLOGUE

IT ALL STARTS WHEN PENELOPE ROSS LEANS IN OVER THE restaurant's solid wooden table, lifts her index finger, and declares, "Tenth circle of hell: you find the love of your life, but the sex is intensely *meh*."

In front of the entirety of Stanford's diving roster.

At eleven fifteen in the morning.

During my twenty-first birthday brunch.

Four seconds ago we were oversharing about our digestive issues, and the whiplash is disorienting. I've been taking advantage of my newly acquired legal rights, but no amount of alcohol can prevent me from blurting out, "What?"

Not my most tactful moment. Thankfully, my incredulity is drowned out by the reactions of the rest of the team: Bree's spit take, Bella's scandalized gasp, and Victoria's skeptical "Isn't *Blomqvist* the love of your life?"

"He sure is." Pen nods.

I fill my mouth with mimosa. The taste is far worse than plain orange juice, but the buzz is *very* welcome.

"Pen. Honey." Bree wipes espresso martini off her glasses using

the shirt hem of her sister, Bella—who allows it. Twins stuff, I guess.

“How many drinks have you had?”

“Like, half of that pitcher.”

“Ah. Maybe we should—”

“But *in mimosa veritas*.” Pen leans forward even more. Her voice drops as she makes a sweeping gesture. “I am confiding in you, guys. Being vulnerable. We’re having a *moment*.”

Victoria sighs. “Pen, I love you, ride or die, would follow you into the very fires of Mordor and all that shit, but we’re not having a *moment*.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re making shit up.”

“Why?”

“Because Blomqvist *fucks*.”

I sit back in a semi-zonked state and force myself to think about Lukas Blomqvist—a rare occurrence for me. People assume that I’m fascinated with everything that goes on in a pool, but nope. The only sports I find remotely interesting are diving and land-diving (or, as the normies call it, gymnastics). The rest is out of my purview. There’s just too much stuff going on in aquatics. I can’t keep track of Stanford’s water polo teams, let alone the swimmers.

And yet, Blomqvist is hard to ignore. Because of the truckload of medals, maybe. The world records. Plus, if the captain of my team is part of an athletics power couple, it behooves me to be aware of its other half. And Pen and Blomqvist have been dating since forever. For all I know, they were betrothed at birth to cement US-Sweden diplomatic relations.

I close my eyes to resurface my spotty memories of him. Black Speedos. Tattoos. Short, choppy brown hair. Above-average wingspan. The majestic and yet improbable build of every other DI swimmer who ever lived.

Victoria is right. We can safely hazard that yes, Blomqvist *does* fuck.

“I didn’t say he doesn’t. He’s great. Just not . . .” Pen winces, and it’s such an odd break from her sparkling self-assurance, it slices right through my mimosa haze.

The thing about Pen, she’s kinda great. Aspirational. The type of person who instinctively knows how to make someone feel at ease. She’ll remind you to drink water. Offer the ponytail holder on her wrist when your hair sticks to your lips. Remember your half birthday. I could take personal development workshops till I turn fifty *and* let a team of data analysts reprogram me, but I still wouldn’t have a third of her charm, because charisma like hers sprouts from base pairs nestled in chromosomes. And now she’s biting into cuticles like she just discovered social anxiety? I don’t love it.

“Just not . . . what I want. And honestly, vice versa,” she adds in a low mumble.

“Which would be?” Bless Victoria for asking what I don’t have the courage to. The extroverted, filterless member every team needs.

“Oh my god. I just want to . . . you know, sometimes . . .” Pen groans.

I stiffen, suddenly alarmed. “Is Blomqvist forcing you to—”

“No. God *no*.” She shakes her head, but I must look unconvinced because she continues, “No. He would never.” Everyone else has dropped off the conversation—the twins, bickering over whose drink is whose, Victoria, gesturing toward the server. “Luk’s not like that. Just . . . how do you tell a guy that you need something different?”

Why is she asking *me*? Have the lines on my forehead arranged to form the words *previously asked someone to spank her*?

Honestly, it would check out. “Aren’t Scandinavians very open-minded?”

“Maybe? He’s definitely open-minded when it comes to—” But

she breaks off, because a small posse of out-of-tune waiters interrupt us with a string of *happy birthday to yous*, and many things happen at once.

I blow on the single candle haphazardly plonked on top of a lava cake. A team present of new stretch cords is produced. I am briefly verklempt that someone as chronically introverted as me found people who are, god, so *nice*. Victoria needs to use the restroom. Pen gets a call from her aunt. Bree wants to know which classes I'll be taking in the fall.

It's too much. In too little time. We never end up returning to the topic of Penelope Ross and Lukas Blomqvist's mysteriously imperfect sex life—which is for the best. Whatever issue they're dealing with is probably trivial, anyway. She doesn't like the brand of condoms he uses. He falls asleep without cuddling her. They're tired after practice and squabble over who should be on top. Not my circus and/or monkeys, so I let the matter slip out of my mind, smooth as a longfin eel.

Until a few weeks later, when everything changes.

CHAPTER 1

THE THING I DREAD THE MOST ABOUT JUNIOR YEAR BEGINS on a Wednesday morning, a couple of weeks before the start of the autumn quarter. It's penciled into my Google Calendar for the ten to eleven slot, a single word that weighs more than the sum of its letters.

Therapy.

"This is somewhat unconventional," Sam tells me on our first meeting, no judgment or curiosity in her tone. She appears to have mastered neutrality in all facets of life—her beige pantsuit, the medium grip of a handshake, an ageless, graceful look that could be anywhere between forty and seventy. Is it too early in our acquaintance for me to want to *be* her? "I was under the impression that Stanford Athletics had its own team of licensed sports psychologists."

"They do," I say, letting my eyes skim over the walls of her office. Diplomas outnumber personal photos, four to zero. Sam and I may *already* be the same person. "They're great. I did work with them for the past few months, but . . ." I shrug, hoping to broadcast that it's on me if it didn't work out. "I had some issues a few years ago—unrelated to diving. At the time, cognitive behavioral therapy

worked well for me. My coach and I talked it over, and since it's your specialty, I decided to try Counseling Services." I smile like I have full trust in this plan. If only.

"I see. And in the past, when you did cognitive behavioral therapy, what issues did you—"

"Nothing sports related. It was . . . family stuff. My relationship with my dad. But that's all solved now." I realize that I spoke a whit too quickly, and expect Sam to challenge what's obviously a half-baked, still-frozen-in-the-middle truth, but she just stares, assessing and hawkish.

Lots of attention, all on me, all at once. I squirm in the chair, feeling the ache that always clings to my muscles. Her presence is not particularly calming, but I'm here to be *fixed*, not *soothed*.

"I see," she says eventually. Bless CBT and its lack of bullshit. *There is this thing you do that's bad for you. I'll teach you to not do it, your insurance will give me money, and we'll each go our merry way. BYO trauma. Tissues are on me.* "And just to be clear, Scarlett, you *want* to be here?"

I nod emphatically. I may not look forward to the agony that comes with exposing the squishy bits of my soul, but I'm not some cliché detective refusing to see a shrink in an eighties crime show. Therapy is a privilege. I'm lucky to have it. Above all, I need it.

"I must admit, I don't know much about diving. It seems like a very complex discipline."

"It is." Lots of competitive sports require a delicate balance of physical and psychological strength, but diving . . . diving has trained long and hard to become the mind-fuckiest of them all.

"Would you be willing to explain?"

"Of course." I clear my throat, glancing down at my joggers and compression shirt. Black and cardinal red. *Stanford Swimming & Diving: Fear the Tree.* Whoever designs our gear clearly wants for our identity to be reduced to our athletic performance. *Never forget:*

you are what you score. "We jump off things. Plunge into pools. Do some acrobatics in between."

I mean to make her laugh, but Sam's not prone to amusement. "I'm assuming there's more?"

"Lots of regulations." But I don't want to bore her, or be a difficult client. "I'm an NCAA Division I athlete. I compete in two events. One is from the springboard, that bouncy fiberglass board that . . ." I mimic its up-and-down motion with the flat of my hand. "That's three meters high. About ten feet." *As tall as an ostrich*, the voice of my first coach reminds me.

"What's the other event?"

"The platform. That's ten meters high." Thirty-three feet. Two giraffes.

"No bounce?"

"Static."

She hums. "Does the scoring work like gymnastics?"

"Pretty much. A panel of judges looks for mistakes and subtracts points accordingly."

"And how many dives do you perform per competition?"

"That depends. And it's not . . . it's not really about how many." I bite the inside of my cheek. She lets me take my time, but stays engaged. "It's the group."

"The group?"

"The . . . type of dive, if you will."

"And how many groups are there?"

"Six in total." I fidget with the tip of my ponytail. "Forward. Backward. Reverse. Twist. Armstand."

"I see. And in your email, you mentioned that you've been recovering from an injury?"

Therapy *is* a privilege. I don't like it, though. "Correct."

"When was that?"

"About fifteen months ago. At the end of freshman year." I

clench my fists under my thighs, wait for her to demand the gory details, ready to recite my list.

Sam, though, spares me. “Did you say that there are six groups of dives?”

“Yes.” I’m surprised at the topic shift, and let my guard down.

It’s a misstep of catastrophic proportions.

“And this injury of yours, Scarlett . . . does it have anything to do with the fact that you only listed five?”

CHAPTER 2

YOU FUCKED UP,” MARYAM SAYS DURING THE FIRST WEEK OF classes, and all I can think past the despair droning in my ears is that I deserve better from my roommate. I’ve helped her clean bloodstains off countless wrestling singlets—am I really not to be afforded compassion? Or at least disapproval of the more tacit variety?

“I am one whole fourth German,” I counter. “My mom was born there. I should be good at this.”

“Your mother died when you were two, Vandy. Your stepmommy, who *raised* you, is from Bumfuck, Mississippi.”

Harsh. But fair. “My genetic makeup—”

“Is irrelevant and does not predispose you to a passing grade in German,” she says with the contempt of someone who grew up bilingual. I can’t presently recall what part of the brain controls the ability to learn languages, but hers spins beautifully and turbine-like. An excellent source of renewable energy ready to power a small European country.

Meanwhile: “I’m not good at this stuff,” I whine. Why *should* I be, though? “It’s ridiculous that med schools have foreign language requirements.”

"It's not. What if you decide to do Doctors Without Borders, and your ability to save a life depends on knowing whether 'the scalpel' is male or female?"

I scratch my neck. "*Die skalpellen?*"

"Bam, patient's dead." Maryam shakes her head. "You fucked up, my dude."

With a little help from my academic adviser. *Take the premed courses first*, he said. *You'll need the knowledge to pass the Medical College Admission Test*, he added. *It's the right move*, he concluded.

And I listened. Because all I ever wanted was to be *on top of shit*. Because I'm a student athlete, and my schedule is a crossover between a Jenga tower and a shibari tutorial. Spontaneity? Only if prearranged. I made a fifteen-year plan the day I graduated from high school, and always intended to stick to it: upwards of one NCAA title, med school, orthopedics, engagement and marriage, compulsory happiness.

Of course, I screwed up that plan by stuffing chem and bio sequences into my freshman and sophomore years—without considering that science classes were never my weakness. Enter junior year, and my GPA quakes in its boots. Psychology is distressingly vague. The German dative haunts my goriest nightmares. English composition wants me to construct cogent arguments on elusive, slippery topics—poetry, the ethics of pest control, maximum mandates for government officials, do people exist when we cannot see them?

It's easier for me when balls fall neatly into their intended buckets. Black and white, right and wrong, carbon based and inorganic. This year is shades of grays and marbles scattered all over the floor, a German Language 1 oil puddle spilled underneath.

I used to be a straight A student athlete. Used to be in control. Used to live in pursuit of excellence. At this point, I'm just trying to

avoid explosive failures. Wouldn't it be lovely if I could manage not to constantly let down the people around me?

"Switch to another language," Maryam suggests, like I haven't already explored every escape route.

"Can't. It's like shingled roofing—they all overlap with something." Such as morning drills. Afternoon practice. Any of the other million activities for which Stanford recruited me. And this is supposed to be the year I fulfill my athletic potential. If I still have it, anyway. If it was ever there.

It sure felt like it, back at Bumfuck High School (Missouri, but I've given up on correcting Maryam). Half a dozen DI coaches aggressively elbowed each other to lure me to their schools, because I was a former junior Olympian, national team member, junior world medalist. Top recruit. Every club coach I'd had since age six had blown smoke up my butt: *You're excellent at this, Vandy. You'll do great things, Vandy. Promising young diver, Vandy.* I frolicked in that smoke like a blissed-out prairie vole—until college, when I finally stood corrected.

In fact, I barely even stood.

My brain must have decided to do me a solid, because I have no memories of the thirty seconds that changed my life. Lucky me, the whole thing is on tape for anyone to watch, because it happened at the NCAA diving finals. It even comes pre-commentated.

"And that was Scarlett Vandermeer of Stanford University, Junior Olympic bronze. Definitely the big breakout of the season, and on the verge of a new platform record. Before this dive, that is."

"Yeah, she was attempting an inward dive with two and a half somersaults in pike position that she managed flawlessly this morning at the prelims. In fact, it got her eights and nines. But this time something went poorly from takeoff."

It's always those you trust the most.

"Yeah. That was definitely a failed dive—that's going to be a zero from the judges in terms of scoring. But she also entered the water at the wrong angle, so here's hoping that she isn't hurt."

To which my body said, *Fuck hoping.*

It's funny, in a remarkably unfunny way. I clearly remember the anger—at the water, at myself, at my own body—but I have no recollection of the pain. In the video, the girl limping out of the pool is a doppelgänger who stole my body. The long braid roping down her red swimsuit belongs to an impostor. The dimples as she strains her lips into a smile? Uncanny. And why does the little gap between her front teeth look exactly like mine? The camera follows her woozy gait mercilessly, gawking even as Coach Sima and his assistants run to help.

"Vandy—are you okay?"

The answer is unintelligible, but Coach loves to recount the story of how the girl said, *Yeah, but I'm going to need an Advil before my next dive.*

Turns out, she was right. She *would* need an Advil before her next dive. And surgeries. And rehab. Her final tally?

Concussion.

Ruptured eardrum.

Twisted neck.

Labral tear of the left shoulder.

Pulmonary contusion.

Sprained wrist.

Sprained ankle.

A heavy, viscous weight lodges in my chest cavity whenever I watch the video and imagine what she must have gone through—till I remember that the girl is *me*.

There isn't a single guy I've matched with on dating apps who hasn't asked me, *Diving is pretty much the same thing as swimming, right?* But much like boxing, ice hockey, and lacrosse, diving is a

contact sport. Every time we enter the water, the impact beats through our skeletons, muscles, internal organs.

Eat your heart out, NFL.

"You need to prepare for the very real possibility that you won't be able to dive again," Barb told me before my surgery. So difficult to dismiss what your stepmom says as pessimistic drivel when said stepmom is a brilliant orthopedic surgeon. "We just want your shoulder to regain full mobility."

"I know," I said, and cried like a baby, first in her arms, then alone in my bed.

But Barb was overcautious—and I was lucky. Recovery turned out to be within the realm of possibility. I redshirted during my sophomore year. Rested. Took the meds. Stuck to the anti-inflammatory diet. Focused on the PT and the stretches and the rehab, as zealously as a nun saying her nighttime prayers. I visualized my dives, cradled my aches, showed up for practice anyway, watching the rest of the team train, the smell of the chlorine clinging to my nose, the shimmering blue of the pool just feet away, yet impossibly far.

Then, two months ago, I was cleared for training. And it has been . . .

Well. There's a reason I'm seeing a therapist.

"I think I have an idea to fix your foreign language problem."

I glance suspiciously at Maryam—and yet lean forward, all ears and eyes and hope.

"You're going to tell me to take an acid bath, aren't you?"

"Hear me out: Latin 201."

I push to my feet. "I have to go."

"Think how helpful it'll be when Doctors Without Borders sends you to ancient Rome!"

I slam the door behind me and leave for practice forty minutes early, just to avoid garroting my roommate.

We were paired up during freshman year, and despite Maryam's