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Peyton Corinne is a *USA Today* bestselling author of romantic fiction with high emotional vulnerability, angst, and heart. She has been telling stories since before she could read, and has never stopped pursuing a life in writing and authorship. If she's not currently dreaming up new worlds and characters, Peyton is at home making another cup of coffee, listening to new music, or reading every type of romance she can get her hands on.

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Unbound

PEYTON CORINNE



HODDER &
STOUGHTON

PROLOGUE

THREE MONTHS AGO: Senior Year, October

Bennett

It's late and the party is a little overwhelming, but the beer I've had is slowly taking the edge off.

We won our game—hard fought, but a great win. Rhys, my best friend and our captain, has already disappeared with Sadie, his new girlfriend, up the stairs, while I meander through the irritatingly messy kitchen for another one of my carefully stashed IPAs.

"She's so far gone," someone mutters, stepping up beside me in the mostly empty kitchen. "But that's usual for Paloma."

The name works down my body like an ice cube slipping across my spine.

Paloma.

I clench my fist tight, putting the beer back in the fridge and closing the door with a stiff shake of my head. I don't hear another word before I'm answering a call for help that she didn't make, shoving through sweat-damp bodies and out the back door.

"Hey, Ben—"

I ignore Holden, a kindhearted defenseman from the first line, and edge around him until I spot her. Her head is lulling into her hands. Bright blond curls cascade in a tangle to cover her face.

We don't usually do this, both accustomed to hiding our history

from those around us, but there will never be a day I'll let her hurt or suffer. The way I feel about Paloma Blake is both a leash around my heart and a noose around my throat, threatening me in every capacity.

"Hey, P," I try, dropping to my knees in front of her. "You okay?"

Brushing back tendrils of blond, I meet her half-lidded brown eyes, my stomach in knots.

"Bennett," she breathes, almost in wonder. Like seeing me before her is something divine.

"Let me take you home," I whisper, body hunched to not frighten her, but shoulders hiked to block her from view as much as I can manage.

She shakes her head slowly, her plump bottom lip sticking out in a pout.

"I don't want to go."

A sigh works from my mouth, and I start to stand back up. Paloma's hand reaches for me, scrambling fingers latching onto my belt loop.

"Don't go," she whispers, her hand flat against the fabric of my pants. Heat emanates from my face, but I bend back down to her level in the chair.

"Then let me take you upstairs."

"I thought you said I couldn't sleep with you anymore." She hiccups, eyes watery, pupils blown. Her fingers move gently, grasping at my waistband.

"I changed my mind. C'mon, P." I scoop her up and carry her inside. Halfway up the stairs, she grasps my shirt.

"Wait," she says, so quiet I almost don't hear her. "I don't wanna sleep yet."

My brow furrows. "Why not?" She shakes her head, eyes dropping. "Nightmares again?"

"Yeah." Her soft admission brushes over my skin. I seat us on

the stairs, far enough up that we're mostly covered in the shadowed lighting of the second floor.

"We can just sit for a little then. People watch." Paloma smiles gently at me, and I can't help the matching grin that slips out. "Lay down if you want, P."

She slips her head onto my lap, and my hand combs the tangles from her difficult, hair-sprayed style. Slow and attentive, I smooth the strands.

It's much later, the party finally dwindling to nothing, when I finally maneuver her up into my arms, carrying her bridal-style up the rest of the stairs and into my room. Mere seconds after I've laid her down on the bed, my black lab, Seven, is whining and pressing his nose into her hair, her shoulder, anything he can reach from his patient position on the floor.

"Shh." I bat him away slightly, but Paloma's lips move into a gentle grin as she reaches blindly for him.

"My baby," she mutters, and my mouth hitches into a bright smile. "C'mere, Seven."

He doesn't wait for my permission before hopping up into her arms to loll his head next to hers.

My dog is loyal to a fault, has protected her from the first day he met her. When I first started coming home without her, Seven whimpered and whined, echoing my own grief of it all. He still whines at least once when I show up at home without her.

Now, his tail wags happily as he snuggles into her on the bed.

"Did you want a shower, P?"

She shakes her head, eyes half lidded as she gazes up at me. "Too tired."

I comb back a few strands of her hair, pressing a kiss to her forehead. Her fingers lazily graze the sides of my jaw where I've recently shaved.

"Sometimes I think you're not real," she murmurs, soft and

sleepy. “That I dreamed you up.” Her brown eyes are burning, almost distraught as she takes me in. I feel like I’m losing her in real time, so I sink into the mattress and tighten my arms around her.

As if that might keep her here.

As if that might make her *mine* again. How it’s supposed to be.

The soft glow of the lamp dances over Paloma’s face as she drifts to sleep.

Once, she’d told me she didn’t like total darkness. “*I don’t like finding my way in the dark,*” she’d admitted softly, shrinking in on herself. “*Like when I turn off the light and it’s too dark and my eyes haven’t adjusted. I just . . . I don’t like not being able to tell where I am.*”

Now, I always keep it on for her, an amber hue to everything in my simple room. It won’t be long before she rouses, usually frightened at first, and then hungry when she realizes she’s here, safe with me.

It’s our routine now. It hurts, but I worry it would hurt infinitely worse to not know if she was okay.

To always be wondering.

So, for now, this is enough. I’ll take whatever she’s willing to give—even if it’s only this, forever.

CHAPTER 1

NOW: Senior Year, January

Bennett

“*Sometimes I think you’re not real,*” she whispers, her hands tracing my jaw lightly, brown eyes burning enough that my throat catches. “*That I dreamed you up.*”

Then she opens her mouth again. She’s asking me something—begging me—but her words are silent screams and no matter how much I plead, I can’t hear her.

I feel a little like I want to cry, enough that my hand reaches up to rub at my eyes.

Water—not tears.

The harsh spray of the shower turns painful. My focus shifts to the soap suds sliding down my body to swirl into the drain, shaking me from the memory.

She’s not here. I’m alone. Again, I remind myself, a harsh but necessary mantra.

I’m in the shower. She’s not here.

I’m in the shower and she is gone. Remember.

I press my hands to the tile, breathing harshly as I try to center myself. I count the scattered black squares amongst the gray tiles again, then reach for my body wash *again*—despite how inflamed

my skin is from the steaming hot shower I've been standing in too long already.

It's the only way to make the vision of her disappear.

Today is a game day, which means I need to get back into my routines before something completely derails my focus.

I pull on gray sweats and a Waterfell athletic tee, then let Seven meander to the door as I fold down my sheets and set my hockey bag by my desk, my lucky sweatshirt folded perfectly atop it, the chewed edge of the sleeve tucked away.

As I go to turn off the lamp, a small rush of anxiety threatens, and I decide to keep it on.

Don't be ridiculous. Turn it off. No one needs the nightlight. She doesn't need it anymore, just like she doesn't need you—

I leave, the lamplight still casting an amber glow over my room.

Impulsively, I check my phone again—no new notifications. It's not surprising, but it doesn't hurt any less. I haven't heard from her, or even *seen* her, since October.

Seven nudges my leg when he realizes I've frozen—just a check, to make sure I'm okay.

My hand taps his head and I start toward the kitchen, attempting to leave the memory of her behind, safe in my room. To pretend I didn't wake up to empty, cold sheets the next morning. That I didn't worry about her so much over the months after that I started driving through downtown Waterfell over Christmas break to make sure she was okay. That she was safe.

Checking the group chat to see if anyone is up yet, I send a quick text to Holden inviting him to our "family breakfast," as Freddy has taken to calling it. His response irks me: *Is Toren invited?*

I can say yes, knowing the well-hated defenseman on our line won't show. But the word still feels like some sort of betrayal.

Toren Kane hit Rhys on the ice during our Frozen Four game last year, ending his season as he was stretchered off. My best friend,

broken and bleeding and terrified—and I couldn't do anything to help him.

Then, our coach decided to recruit Toren—despite his history with our team and his reputation on the ice.

I was fully prepared to hate the guy when he was announced, to follow my captain and best friend's lead and do what needed to be done to get him off Rhys's line.

But since then, Toren has started making my job easier. He is easily the *best* defenseman that I've ever played with. That was hard to ignore, but I did, because my loyalty will always be to Rhys.

But then I saw him defend Ro—Freddy's tutor-turned-girlfriend and Sadie's best friend. He didn't know the girl, didn't care about anything other than stopping an asshole from hurting a defenseless person. After that, it became harder *not* to like him.

But I'm a good secret keeper, even if I don't have many myself.

Though, I have one secret I keep above all else. The most important one.

"You're the only thing I've ever cared about. Ever. And I—"

Shaking away the sound of her voice—though it's far away and swimming in a sea of painful memories—I start to work on our usual pregame breakfast, turning my music on and letting "World Spins Madly On" by the Weepies play through our speakers in the kitchen. I check the group thread again—no one has answered Holden's question, so I don't either. When it comes to Toren Kane, I'll follow Rhys's lead.

I gather eggs for omelets, mix and buttermilk for pancakes. Plenty of meat and carbs for a late-afternoon game. A full menu spread for our very full house. It's warm and loud with love, but it doesn't do much to stop the constant hollow ache in my chest. A permanent scar of something missing.

A high-pitched giggle signals the end of my slower morning ritual; Liam appears first, followed by Rhys dressed only in his boxers

as he scoops the seven-year-old up off the hardwood and over his shoulder.

“Morning, Bennett,” my best friend says with a smirk, speaking over the loudly screeching child. “Sorry about that.”

Rhys’s girlfriend Sadie, a figure skater at our school, rounds the corner after them, face burning red. Last summer the two struck up a secret friendship that inevitably turned into more. She was able to fix the things that were broken in my best friend more than I ever had—for that, she has my unending loyalty. She and her little brothers—both of whom stay with us now and again. Usually, they stay with Rhys’s parents—Max and Anna Koteskiy—but when they miss their sister and the timing works out, they stay in our spare room.

“All good. I’m making breakfast. For everyone.”

Rhys nods. “I’ll inform the lazy ones.”

“Put me down—”

“I told you, Liam, no more coming into our room without knocking or we’ll have to lock the door,” Sadie grumbles, eyes wide awake at an earlier hour for her than I’m used to.

“Oh? Did the little man see more of my captain than he should?” Freddy yawns through his joke, smacking a shoulder into the doorframe as he stumbles into the kitchen in only a pair of boxer briefs.

“He’s currently seeing more of *you* than anyone ever should,” Sadie snaps. “Put some fucking clothes on.”

Liam laughs louder now, face red from lack of breath because he’s so tickled. “You said a bad word, Sissy.”

“Yeah, *Sissy*,” Freddy laughs, hip checking the much smaller girl as he passes her. “Besides, I’m literally wearing the exact same thing as your boyfriend!”

“It’s different.” Sadie fakes a gag and covers her eyes.

“If Ro were here, she’d be very mad at you.”

Rosalie Shariff has been dating our left winger Freddy for who knows how long—though my suspicions are for far longer than

they’ll admit to. She tutored him last semester, came to nearly every one of our games as his *friend*—since then, they’ve been inseparable. And unbearable to be around with their intense flirting and never-quite-hidden intimacy all over our house.

“Where exactly is my roommate?” Sadie asks.

It is strange. Ro is usually the first one up with me.

Freddy is beaming ear to ear as he starts to open his mouth—leaving both Rhys and me to groan before he’s said anything.

“Let’s just say it’s a good thing we lock our door. Your roommate is a menace, Brown. She kept me up all night—I’m exhausted—”

“All right.” Rhys cuts him off. Liam is repositioned onto his hip now, *Star Wars* pajama shirt stretched out nearly off his shoulder. Both of them have bedhead, messy locks brushing each other as Liam leans to rest his head on Rhys’s shoulder, like it might soften him out of trouble with his sister. “Everyone get dressed for family breakfast. Freddy—boxers do not count. You need a shirt. Liam—”

“Please don’t lock the door. How do I come in if I have a nightmare?”

The puppy eyes Liam is sending Rhys are practiced, but my captain is soft as butter when it comes to the entire Brown family. Sadie has always played parent to her brothers when she needs to, but Rhys isn’t used to being anything but a gentle friend.

“You *have* to knock,” he finally says, but the words are accompanied by a tight hug before he sweeps Liam up onto his shoulder.

“He must’ve walked in on something *good*,” Freddy murmurs beneath his breath, tapping me on the shoulder as he passes to go back upstairs.

Rhys blushed again at Freddy’s words and a chuckle works its way through my lips.

“Do I want to know?” I ask Sadie quietly, arms crossed. She looks up at me and shakes her head.

“Nope.”

They all exit to properly dress while I start on pancakes, waffles, eggs, and everything any of them has ever requested for breakfast. Once the table is full with both food and my friends, we all settle in.

Mornings are loud now, where they used to be quiet. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

But that doesn't mean it isn't hard. It's hard not to notice where I sit: at the head of the table, alone. That while Rhys watches over Sadie at his side, and Ro watches over Freddy, the one person I want to take care of most isn't here, letting me watch over her. I worry she never will be.

It's easy to imagine Paloma here, sitting at a chair pulled up beside me. Eating the food I made for her, warm feet tucked under my thigh, bundled up in a sweatshirt with a messy braid. Maybe she'd let me feed her. Maybe she'd talk with everyone—or she'd be like me. Quiet, just taking it all in.

But she's not here.

"Sometimes I think you're not real. That I dreamed you—"

I shake my head, shoulder twitching to my ear.

Everyone thinks Paloma is the party girl. A good time, fun and drunk and smiling. They think she thrives under burning strobes and a moshing sea of bodies.

But I know her.

I know she likes quiet most, or an early morning when only the distant noise of birds chirping fills the space. I know she plays ocean sounds to fall asleep, that she's at peace when she's in the water. I know that she would rather sit in complete silence, in my clothes, in my room, than attend another party.

But I also know she'd willingly choose to cause herself more pain than ever allow herself to have those things.

I really know her. I might be the only one who does.

My Paloma Blake is a secret I will always keep safe, closest to my heart.

CHAPTER 2

NOW

Paloma

The cold night air bites at my cheeks harshly instead of relieving my overheated skin like I'd hoped it might.

"You sure you don't need a ride?"

I'd rather gouge my eyes out with my dull kitten heels.

"I'm fine, thanks," I say, pretending to search for my keys while keeping a close eye on the man just feet away. Saying I'm scared wouldn't be correct. I'm just cautious. Aware. I've seen enough of the malice of ordinary men that I don't underestimate any of them.

"You did well, Ms. Blake," he praises me. I let it bounce off me easily. He might as well have said, *You didn't scream when I put my hand on your thigh beneath the table.* This was supposed to be a job interview, not an hour for him to openly leer at me. "We'll be in touch."

"Great."

I hope I never see him again.

Frustrated and still a bit shaken up by the whole thing, I pretend to text on my phone and walk into the still-open Thai place next door, just to wait for my rideshare away from him.

The low ambient lighting of the modern interior is warm and comforting. The place is mostly empty this late—except for one booth near the back filled with two couples I recognize.

Sadie Brown and Rhys Koteskiy, across from Ro Shariff and Matt Fredderic.

You have got to be kidding me.

I don't chance asking myself if this night could get worse—there's always room enough for that to happen—but instead duck down a little ridiculously, hoping they haven't seen me as I squeeze back out into the frigid air.

My stomach rolls. Maybe from the constant tossing as I tried to nibble on bread through the interview, desperate to get out of there. The meeting was supposed to be a dinner with *several* of the hiring committee, but that didn't happen; now I'm starving and cold.

But it's most likely the sight of the two happy couples sharing warm food and laughing without a care in the world.

Why does she get to move on? Why can't that be me?

I attempt to shut down the ridiculous whiny train of thought before it can devour me or send me spiraling out of the controlled existence I've been working toward.

Sadie was the other half to my bad decisions junior year. I'd seen her before, at parties or in passing: a figure skater by day and a girl with a bit of a reputation by night. She had a penchant for athletes as much as I did, which meant we often ran in the same circles on accident. It wasn't hard to switch to on purpose.

It was less lonely, for both of us.

I heard what people called us. Cleat or jersey chasers, puck bunnies . . . endless names for both Sadie and me. We didn't let it bother us.

Though I did punch someone once for calling her a whore.

Once upon a time, we'd been close, thick as thieves, flouncing through frat house parties side by side. Sadie had my back, even if we'd never been actual friends.

But then, last semester, she and Rhys Koteskiy found each other. I figured it would be brief—the girl never did much beyond quick

hookups or friends with benefits—but . . . they just stayed. Together. Happy. And despite all her usual hang-ups concerning relationships, she seems content.

There's a flash then, of tangled wet hair, of calloused hands carefully scrubbing every piece of sand off my skin. A big, warm sweat-shirt and a handful of cheese crackers pressed to my lips as I doze off slowly on a soft chest.

Stop it. I shake my head, refocusing on the couples in the window.

Rhys tucks an arm around Sadie's shoulders and brings her closer, pressing a soft kiss to her temple before grasping her chin to direct her eyes to his. She softens for him, the angry figure skater I'm so used to gone beneath the care of the campus golden boy.

Jealousy wriggles in my gut like a fish out of water.

Sadie was stressed. She just needed help. You can't be fixed.

The reminder strikes between my ribs, but I find my balance and force myself to the car now waiting for me outside in the cold, alone.

CHAPTER 3

THEN: Freshman Year, August

Paloma

Most people have difficulty sleeping in new places. I struggle with familiar places—a mattress in the corner of a princess-themed room, a stained floral sofa, a crowded queen bed—which might explain why sleeping in my new, empty dorm room was so peaceful.

I didn't even set an alarm, ready to take advantage of the early move-in silence in the otherwise empty dorm.

Waterfell University. My new home.

I'd applied for other schools that were farther away from my hometown, but this was the only one that offered me a full ride, room and board, and a stipend for textbooks. Which meant it was the one I could afford.

It helps that I'm already half in love with it. The lush trees and well-kept landscape of campus, the ivy-covered red brick buildings, the quaint feel of the entire place, as if they dropped a big university into the middle of a small town. Only three hours away from where I grew up, and it feels like I've entered a new planet.

Which is exactly what I wanted.

I can do this.

Renewed energy courses through my veins as I toss on shoes and head out—still in my boxer shorts and oversized tee—to my car in

the slightly-too-far dorm parking lot. The sun is hot on my skin, vibrant despite the early hour, and I drive around the empty campus with the windows down.

It feels like a movie.

A little too good to be true, huh, Polly? A darker voice threatens.

I shiver, closing my eyes and tossing my hair into a messy ponytail after parking in front of the school athletics complex. Once I've signed in and scanned my brand new Waterfell ID, smiling at the chipper girl who greets me, I turn toward the nearly empty lap pool.

My stomach bubbles with happiness.

I'm used to sneaking in in the middle of the night, to swim in the light of the moon. I didn't have money for a membership to any local pools and my dingy public school didn't have anything like this.

Taking a moment in the locker room to change into my swimsuit, I put on my new swim cap, careful to tuck all my recently dyed hair under the tight blue latex. Dyeing my hair over a bathroom sink on my own was hard, and it's not perfect, but I'm trying to make it last as long as I can.

Before I jump in, I shoot a picture and text it to Alessia, the woman who made this all happen. Six months ago, she'd become my lifeline, my way out of the darkness that still tried to haunt me.

PALOMA

Off to a good start!

I wait for her excited, approving text back before hiding my phone in my bag and diving in.

The water is an arctic blast against my heated skin, all at once refreshing and soothing.

Swimming has always been soothing to me. I learned on my own, accidentally, when a few older kids pushed me into someone's