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OFF-CAMPUS

ELLE KENNEDY



PIATKUS

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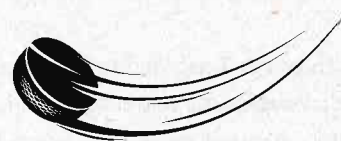


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## CHAPTER 1

### HANNAH

HE DOESN'T KNOW I'M ALIVE.

For the millionth time in forty-five minutes, I sneak a peek in Justin Kohl's direction, and he's so beautiful it makes my throat close up. Though I should probably come up with another adjective—my male friends insist that men don't like being called *beautiful*.

But holy hell, there's no other way to describe his rugged features and soulful brown eyes. He's wearing a baseball cap today, but I know what's beneath it: thick dark hair, the kind that looks silky to the touch and makes you want to run your fingers through it.

In the five years since the rape, my heart has pounded for only two guys.

The first one dumped me.

This one is just oblivious.

At the podium in the lecture hall, Professor Tolbert delivers what I've come to refer to as the Disappointment Speech. It's the third one in six weeks.

Surprise, surprise, seventy percent of the class got a C-plus or lower on the midterm.

Me? I aced it. And I'd be lying if I said the big red *A!* circled on top of my midterm hadn't come as a complete shock. All I did was

scribble down a never-ending stream of bullshit to try to fill up the booklet.

Philosophical Ethics was supposed to be a breeze. The prof who used to teach it handed out brainless multiple choice tests and a final “exam” consisting of a personal essay that posed a moral dilemma and asked how you’d react to it.

But two weeks before the semester started, Professor Lane dropped dead from a heart attack. I heard his cleaning lady found him on the bathroom floor—naked. Poor guy.

Luckily (and yep, that’s total sarcasm) Pamela Tolbert stepped in to take over Lane’s class. She’s new to Briar University, and she’s the kind of prof who wants you to make connections and “engage” with the material. If this were a movie, she’d be the young, ambitious teacher who shows up at the inner city school and inspires the fuckups, and suddenly everyone’s picking up their pencils, and the end credits scroll up to announce how all the kids got into Harvard or some shit. Instant Oscar for Jennifer Lawrence.

Except this isn’t a movie, which means that the only thing Tolbert has inspired in her students is hatred. And she honestly can’t seem to grasp why nobody is excelling in her class.

Here’s a hint—it’s because she asks the types of questions you could write a frickin’ grad school thesis on.

“I’m willing to offer a makeup exam to anyone who failed or received a C-minus or lower.” Tolbert’s nose wrinkles as if she can’t fathom why it’s even necessary.

The word she just used—*willing*? Yeah, right. I heard that a ton of students complained to their advisers about her, and I suspect the administration is forcing her to give everyone a redo. It doesn’t reflect well on Briar when more than half the students in a course are flunking, especially when it’s not just the slackers. Straight-A students like Nell, who’s sulking beside me, also bombed the midterm.

“For those of you who choose to take it again, your two grades

will be averaged. If you do worse the second time, the first grade will stand,” Tolbert finishes.

“I can’t believe you got an A,” Nell whispers to me.

She looks so upset that I feel a pang of sympathy. Nell and I aren’t best pals or anything, but we’ve been sitting next to each other since September so it’s only reasonable that we’ve gotten to know each other. She’s on the pre-med path, and I know she comes from an overachieving family who would lay into her if they found out about her midterm grade.

“I can’t believe it either,” I whisper back. “Seriously. Read my answers. They’re ramblings of nonsense.”

“Actually, can I?” She sounds eager now. “I’m curious to see what the Tyrant considers A material.”

“I’ll scan and email you a copy tonight,” I promise.

The second Tolbert dismisses us, the lecture hall echoes with let’s-get-the-hell-outta-here noises. Laptops snap shut, notebooks slide into backpacks, students shuffle out of their seats.

Justin Kohl lingers near the door to talk to someone, and my gaze locks in on him like a missile. He’s beautiful.

Have I mentioned how beautiful he is?

My palms go clammy as I stare at his handsome profile. He’s new to Briar this year, but I’m not sure which college he transferred from, and although he wasted no time becoming the star wide receiver on the football team, he’s not like the other athletes at this school. He doesn’t strut through the quad with one of those I’m-God’s-gift-to-the-world smirks or show up with a new girl on his arm every day. I’ve seen him laugh and joke with his teammates, but he gives off an intelligent, intense vibe that makes me think there are hidden depths to him. Which just makes me all the more desperate to get to know him.

I’m not usually into jocks, but something about this one has turned me into a mindless pile of mush.

“You’re staring again.”

Nell's teasing voice brings a blush to my cheeks. She's caught me drooling over Justin on more than one occasion, and she's one of the few people I've admitted the crush to.

My roommate Allie also knows, but my other friends? Hell no. Most of them are music or drama majors, so I guess that makes us the artsy crowd. Or maybe emo. Aside from Allie, who's had an on-again/off-again relationship with a frat boy since freshman year, my friends get a kick out of trashing Briar's elite. I don't usually join in (I like to think gossiping is beneath me) but...let's face it. Most of the popular kids are total douchebags.

Case in point—Garrett Graham, the other star athlete in this class. Dude walks around like he owns the place. I guess he kind of does. All he has to do is snap his fingers and an eager girl appears at his side. Or jumps into his lap. Or sticks her tongue down his throat.

He doesn't look like the BMOC today, though. Almost everyone else has gone, including Tolbert, but Garrett remains in his seat, his fists curled tightly around the edges of his booklet.

He must have failed too, but I don't feel much sympathy for the guy. Briar is known for two things—hockey and football, which isn't much of a shocker considering Massachusetts is home to both the Patriots and the Bruins. The athletes who play for Briar almost always end up in the pros, and during their years here they get everything handed to them on a silver platter—including grades.

So yeah, maybe it makes me a teeny bit vindictive, but I get a sense of triumph from knowing that Tolbert is failing the captain of our championship-winning hockey team right along with everyone else.

"Wanna grab something from the Coffee Hut?" Nell asks as she gathers her books.

"Can't. I've got rehearsal in twenty minutes." I get up, but I don't follow her to the door. "Go on ahead. I need to check the schedule before I go. Can't remember when my next tutorial is."

Another "perk" of being in Tolbert's class—along with our weekly lecture, we're forced to attend two thirty-minute tutorials a

week. On the bright side, Dana the TA runs those, and she has all the qualities Tolbert lacks. Like a sense of humor.

"Kay," Nell says. "I'll see you later."

"Later," I call after her.

At the sound of my voice, Justin pauses in the doorway and turns his head.

Oh. My. God.

It's impossible to stop the flush that rises in my cheeks. This is the first time we've ever made eye contact, and I don't know how to respond. Say hi? Wave? Smile?

In the end, I settle for a small nod of greeting. *There*. Cool and casual, befitting of a sophisticated college junior.

My heart skips a beat when the corner of his mouth lifts in a faint grin. He nods back, and then he's gone.

I stare at the empty doorway. My pulse explodes in a gallop because *holy shit*. After six weeks of breathing the same air in this stuffy lecture hall, he's finally noticed me.

*I wish I were brave enough to go after him. Maybe ask him to grab a coffee. Or dinner. Or brunch—wait, do people our age even have brunch?*

But my feet stay rooted to the shiny laminate floor.

Because I'm a coward. Yep, a total chicken-shit coward. I'm terrified that he'll say no, but I'm even more terrified he'll say *yes*.

I was in a good place when I started college. My issues solidly behind me, my guard lowered. I was ready to date again, and I did. I dated several guys, but other than my ex, Devon, none of them made my body tingle the way Justin Kohl does, and that freaks me out.

*Baby steps.*

Right. Baby steps. That was my therapist's favorite piece of advice, and I can't deny that the strategy helped me a lot. Focus on the small victories, Carole always advised.

So...today's victory...I nodded at Justin and he smiled at me. Next class, maybe I'll smile back. And the one after that, maybe I'll bring up the coffee, dinner, or brunch idea.

I take a breath as I head down the aisle, clinging to that feeling of victory, however teeny it may be.

Baby steps.

## GARRETT

I FAILED.

I fucking failed.

For fifteen years, Timothy Lane handed out A's like mints. The year I take the class? Lane's ticker quits ticking, and I get stuck with Pamela Tolbert.

It's official. The woman is my archenemy. Just the sight of her flowery handwriting—which fills up every inch of available space in the margins of my midterm—makes me want to go Incredible Hulk on the booklet and rip it to shreds.

I'm rocking A's in most of my other courses, but as of right now, I'm getting an F in Philosophical Ethics. Combined with the C-plus in Spanish history, my average has dropped to a C-minus.

I need a C-plus average to play hockey.

Normally I have no problem keeping my GPA up. Despite what a lot of folks believe, I'm not a dumb jock. But hey, I don't mind letting people think I am. Women, in particular. I guess they're turned on by the idea of screwing the big brawny caveman who's only good for one thing, but since I'm not looking for anything serious, casual hookups with chicks that only want my dick suit me just fine. Gives me more time to focus on hockey.

But there won't *be* any more hockey if I don't bring up this grade. The worst thing about Briar? Our dean demands excellence—academically *and* athletically. While other schools might be more lenient toward athletes, Briar has a zero-tolerance policy.

Fuckin' Tolbert. When I spoke to her before class asking for extra credit, she told me in that nasally voice of hers to attend the tutorials and meet with the study group. I already do both. So yeah,

unless I hire some whiz kid to wear a mask of my face and take the makeup midterm for me...I'm screwed.

My frustration manifests itself in the form of an audible groan, and from the corner of my eye I see someone jerk in surprise.

I jerk too, because here I thought I was wallowing in my misery alone. But the girl who sits in the back row has stuck around, and she's making her way down the aisle toward Tolbert's desk.

Mandy?

Marty?

I can't remember her name. Probably because I've never bothered to ask for it. She's cute, though. A helluva lot cuter than I realized. Pretty face, dark hair, smokin' body—shit, how have I never noticed that body before?

But I'm noticing now. Skinny jeans cling to a round, perky ass that just screams "squeeze me," and her V-neck sweater hugs a seriously impressive rack. I don't have time to admire either of those appealing visuals because she catches me staring and a frown touches her mouth.

"Everything okay?" she asks with a pointed look.

I grumble something under my breath. I'm not in the mood to talk to anyone at the moment.

One dark eyebrow rises in my direction. "Sorry, was that English?"

I ball up my midterm and scrape my chair back. "I said everything's fine."

"Okay, then." She shrugs and continues down the steps.

As she picks up the clipboard that contains our tutorial schedule, I fling my Briar Hockey jacket on, then shove my pathetic midterm into my backpack and zip it up.

The dark-haired girl heads back to the aisle. Mona? Molly? The M sounds right, but the rest is a mystery. She has her midterm in hand, but I don't sneak a peek because I assume she failed just like everyone else.

I let her pass before I step into the aisle. I suppose I can say it's the gentleman in me, but that would be a lie. I want to check out her ass again, because it's a damn sexy ass, and now that I've seen it I wouldn't mind another look. I follow her up to the exit, suddenly realizing how frickin' tiny she is—I'm one step below her yet I can see the top of her head.

Just as we reach the door, she stumbles on absolutely nothing and the books in her hand clatter to the floor.

"Shit. I'm such a klutz."

She drops to her knees and so do I, because contrary to my previous statement, I *can* be a gentleman when I want to be, and the gentlemanly thing to do is help her gather her books.

"Oh, you don't have to do that. I'm fine," she insists.

But my hand has already connected with her midterm, and my jaw drops when I see her grade.

"Fucking hell. You aced it?" I demand.

She gives a self-deprecating smile. "I know, right? I thought I failed for sure."

"Holy shit." I feel like I've just bumped into Stephen fuckin' Hawking and he's dangling the secrets to the universe under my nose. "Can I read your answers?"

Her brows quirk up again. "That's rather forward of you, don't you think? We don't even know each other."

I roll my eyes. "I'm not asking you to take your clothes off, baby. I just want to peek at your midterm."

"*Baby?* Goodbye forward, hello presumptuous."

"Would you prefer *miss?* *Ma'am* maybe? I'd use your name but I don't know it."

"Of course you don't." She sighs. "It's Hannah." Then she pauses meaningfully. "*Garrett.*"

Okay, I was waaaay off on the M thing.

And I don't miss the way she emphasizes my name as if to say, *Ha! I know yours, asshole!*

She collects the rest of her books and stands up, but I don't hand over her midterm. Instead, I hop to my feet and start flipping through it. As I skim her answers, my spirits plummet even lower, because if this is the kind of analysis Tolbert is looking for, I'm screwed. There's a reason I'm a history major, for chrissake—I deal in facts. Black and white. This happened at this time to this person and here's the result.

Hannah's answers focus on theoretical shit and how the philosophers would respond to the various moral dilemmas.

"Thanks." I give her the booklet, then hook my thumbs in the belt loops of my jeans. "Hey, listen. Do you...would you consider..." I shrug. "You know..."

Her lips twitch as if she's trying not to laugh. "Actually, I *don't* know."

I let out a breath. "Will you tutor me?"

Her green eyes—the darkest shade of green I've ever seen and surrounded by thick black eyelashes—go from surprised to skeptical in a matter of seconds.

"I'll pay you," I add hastily.

"Oh. Um. Well, yeah, of course I'd expect you to pay me. But..." She shakes her head. "I'm sorry. I can't."

I bite back my disappointment. "C'mon, do me a solid. If I fail this makeup, my GPA will implode. Please?" I flash a smile, the one that makes my dimples pop out and never fails to make girls melt.

"Does that usually work?" she asks curiously.

"What?"

"The aw-shucks little boy grin... Does it help you get your way?"

"Always," I answer without hesitation.

"*Almost* always," she corrects. "Look, I'm sorry, but I really don't have time. I'm already juggling school and work, and with the winter showcase coming up, I'll have even less time."

"Winter showcase?" I say blankly.

"Right, I forgot. If it's not about hockey, then it's not on your radar."

"Now who's being presumptuous? You don't even know me."

There's a beat, and then she sighs. "I'm a music major, okay? And the arts faculty puts on two major performances every year, the winter showcase and the spring one. The winner gets a five-thousand-dollar scholarship. It's kind of a huge deal, actually. Important industry people fly in from all over the country to see it. Agents, record producers, talent scouts... So, as much as I'd love to help you—"

"You would not," I grumble. "You look like you don't even want to *talk* to me right now."

Her little you-got-me shrug is grating as hell. "I have to get to rehearsal. I'm sorry you're failing this course, but if it makes you feel better, so is everyone else."

I narrow my eyes. "Not *you*."

"I can't help it. Tolbert seems to respond to my brand of bullshit. It's a gift."

"Well, I want your gift. Please, master, teach me how to bullshit."

I'm two seconds from dropping to my knees and begging her, but she edges to the door. "You know there's a study group, right? I can give you the number for—"

"I'm already in it," I mutter.

"Oh. Well, then there's not much else I can do for you. Good luck on the makeup test. *Baby*."

She darts out the door, leaving me staring after her in frustration. Unbelievable. Every girl at this college would cut her frickin' arm off to help me out. But this one? Runs away like I just asked her to murder a cat so we could sacrifice it to Satan.

And now I'm right back to where I was before Hannah-not-with-an-M gave me that faintest flicker of hope.

Royally screwed.



## CHAPTER 2

### GARRETT

MY ROOMMATES ARE PISS DRUNK WHEN I WALK INTO THE LIVING room after study group. The coffee table is overflowing with empty beer cans, along with a nearly depleted bottle of Jack that I know belongs to Logan because he subscribes to the *beer is for pussies* philosophy. His words, not mine.

At the moment, Logan and Tucker are battling each other in a heated game of *Ice Pro*, their gazes glued to the flat screen as they furiously click their controllers. Logan's gaze shifts slightly when he notices me in the doorway, and his split second of distraction costs him.

"Hell to the yeah!" Tuck crows as his defenseman flicks a wrist shot past Logan's goalie and the scoreboard lights up.

"Aw, for fuck's sake!" Logan pauses the game and levels a dark glare at me. "What the hell, G? I just got deked out because of you."

I don't answer, because now *I'm* distracted—by the half-naked make-out session happening in the corner of the room. Dean's at it again. Bare-chested and barefoot, he's sprawled in the armchair while a blond in nothing but a lacy black bra and booty shorts sits astride him and grinds against his crotch.

Dark green eyes peer over the chick's shoulder, and Dean smirks in my direction. "Graham! Where've you been, man?" he slurs.