

# Unbound

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## PROLOGUE

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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, showing 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.