Chapter 10

TO KICK THIS NEW SCHOOL YEAR OFF RIGHT, Brad invited me to a party at his friend Reggie's house on the north side of town. He wanted to introduce me to his crew before school started in a couple of weeks. I was excited. It felt like a fresh start. I hadn't even told Mike or the others I was leaving—I doubted they'd notice. Instead, I poured all my energy into this new beginning.

Reggie's parents were out of town with his younger siblings, leaving him in charge of the house. The party was already legendary before it even started.

There must've been at least fifty kids there. I only knew Brad, his girlfriend Leah, and Kevin, a fellow baseball player I'd met at a couple of events. To the people at this party, I was just a fresh face. But to me, it felt like I'd finally found a place where I belonged.

Everyone was welcoming. Reggie and I hit it off immediately. He was funny, energetic, and loved deep conversations—right up my alley. Same height as me, but slimmer, with Kurt Cobain hair and a manic energy that paired well with my chill. Like Brad, he was the kind of guy who made you feel like you'd known him forever.

About an hour in, I was navigating the crowd, beer in hand (don't tell my parents), when I saw her.

Rachel.

She walked through the door, hand-in-hand with some Adonis—golden hair, sky-blue eyes. It was like a scene out of Can't Hardly Wait. I was Preston. And this Mike Dexter wannabe was stealing my thunder.

I didn't think anyone knew about my crush on Rachel besides Brad and Leah. I thought I was in the clear.

Until Reggie appeared behind me.

"Hey Declan, you dated Rachel, didn't you? She just got here!"

I flinched. "Uh, yeah," I mumbled, trying to sound casual. I wasn't sure how he knew.

He caught my expression. "Oh—sorry, man. Didn't know it was a sensitive subject. I'll let it go."

"No worries," I said, trying to play it cool. "We dated briefly. Didn't work out. Different schools, you know? We've mostly just kept in touch online."

I glanced at her and her new boyfriend. A pang of something I couldn't quite name hit me.

Reggie clapped me on the shoulder. "Don't sweat it, man. You'll do fine at Kathleen. You've got the 'new guy' mystique going on. I've already heard some whispers."

My head snapped up. "Whispers? About me?"

He grinned. "Yeah. The mysterious transfer student. You've got a certain… allure."

Wait. Am I *hot* at Kathleen?

This raised an interesting scenario. Maybe senior year would bring someone new—someone who'd make me forget the whole Rachel thing. But first, I had a party to rock.

I followed Reggie back inside, beer in hand, and headed into the kitchen.

And there she was. Rachel.

With her new guy.

She looked surprised to see me but smiled. "Declan! So good to see you. This is my friend Doug."

I stuck out my hand. Doug gripped it like he was trying to prove something. But my hands were like vice grips from the plumbing work. His effort was in vain. I felt a quiet surge of confidence. Hard work had paid off.

"Nice to meet you, Doug," I said. "Rachel, good to see you. I'm trying to find Brad—he said there was someone he wanted to introduce me to."

Reggie, watching the exchange, steered me away. "Come on," he said. "We've got people to meet."

As we walked off, I noticed Rachel watching me. There was a flicker in her eyes—surprise, maybe nostalgia. I decided not to dwell on it. Tonight wasn't about one girl. It was about new beginnings.

I found Brad in the dining room, holding court with a group of new friends, mid-story about the infamous cow-tipping incident (which, for the record, I'll explain another time). The crowd was laughing, and I couldn't help but join in. The warmth, the camaraderie—it felt good.

One of the girls Brad was talking to caught my eye. She was tall, with long brown hair like Rachel's, but with blue eyes and fairer skin. Their similarities made me realize I might have a type—contrary to what I'd always believed. I used to describe my dream girl as a redhead or blonde, blue-eyed, five-foot-five, athletic. Hence, the soccer girl fantasy.

Brad must've sensed me behind him. He cut off his story right before the punchline and turned to me with a grin.

"Declan," he said, "I want you to meet someone…"

"Heather, have you met my best friend Declan?" Brad began. "He's transferring to our school for senior year!"

She took my hand, and I knew instantly—this girl was intense.

The space between us vanished. She was right in my bubble, eyeing me like I was a puzzle she intended to solve. I nearly stepped back, but thought better of it. Thankfully, my guy brain overrode my caution. My pulse pounded in my ears.

"Hi, Declan. It's nice to meet you."

Our handshake lingered. Her fingers grazed my skin, deliberate. She had a great smile, perfect teeth. Her nose was slightly bent, but in a way that added character. Her gaze? Almost… sinful.

"It's nice to meet you too, Heather. I see Brad was telling you the story of the time he visited the Matrix."

It was a dumb line, but she laughed anyway. Okay—this was going to be one of THOSE nights.

"I'm excited to start at a new school this year."

"Where were you before?"

"Lakeland. It wasn't ideal, so I decided to come to Kathleen and end high school with a bang."

"A bang, huh? I'm sure we can arrange that." She winked, tongue flicking out playfully.

This was new territory. I said the first thing that came to mind.

"I've never really enjoyed fireworks all that much."

She threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, you," she teased. "You're funnier than you look."

Wait—am I witty *and* hot at Kathleen?

The night was getting interesting.

"You seem like a lot of fun," I said. "Can I get your number? Maybe grab dinner sometime?"

"Sure, that'd be cool. But what's the rush? This night isn't over yet."

Then came the look.

Head tilted slightly down and to the side. Tongue tracing her lips in a slow, deliberate motion. Her eyes lingered on my mouth a beat too long. A predatory smile curled at the edges. She was a femme fatale, like straight out of a noir film—every inch of her radiating seductive danger.

Her gaze threatened to burn through my skin.

And I knew—I was about to get scorched.

The party erupted. More people poured in. Music blared, drinks spilled, arguments flared. Reggie tried to maintain order, but the chaos was contagious.

I found myself on the dance floor—my natural habitat.

Heather was with me. Her body pressed against mine, arms around my neck, breath hot in my face. She smelled like fruit and vodka. This was different from dancing with Rachel. The energy was raw, electric.

She was all over me—staking her claim.

I was a sweet summer child, all aboard for whatever this was. But I wasn't quite sure how to reciprocate.

Feeling my hesitation, Heather leaned in and murmured, "Put your hands on my ass and sway with me."

Oh my.

I appreciated her boldness, but my anxiety started creeping in—the kind that paralyzes my decision-making. I'd been here before. Like with the movie on my first date with Rachel. The beer was helping.

I did as instructed. For the first time ever, I put my hands on a girl's ass—at her request, no less. Primal instinct kicked in. I gave it a squeeze.

She giggled, then kissed my neck gently. My anxiety melted away. I'd climbed the hill and was sliding down the other side.

She turned around mid-song, hooked her arm backward around my neck, and pulled my face into her own neck, grinding against me. *Yay*, I thought, taking the hint. I kissed her neck, hands roaming her stomach and hips. We moved in sync, lost in the music. I don't know how many songs we danced to—it felt like forever.

My heart raced. My brain fogged. But one part of me was wide awake.

Down boy! Play it cool!

Eventually, Heather broke away. She must've felt my… enthusiasm.

"I need to go to the restroom," she said. "Don't run away on me, okay?"

I smiled. "Alright. I'll be around."

I stepped off the dance floor and headed to the back porch for another beer. The night air was cool, laughter and conversation filling the backyard.

That's when I saw Rachel—sitting with Doug and a few others. She noticed me at the keg and got up to talk.

"Hey, Declan. Are you having fun?" she asked, eyes searching mine.

"Heck yeah! I should've transferred sooner. The people here are great. How are you?"

"I'm doing okay, I guess. Listen… about that girl you were dancing with. Heather."

"Yeah, she's something else, isn't she? Yikes. At this pace, I'm in trouble."

Calling Heather "something else" seemed to sting Rachel. It reminded me of our first date, that moment in the car. Not my intention, but it landed.

"Is there something about her I should know?"

Rachel crossed her arms, debating whether to burst my bubble.

"She's… wild. Has a reputation. That's all I'll say. You'll have to make your own choices. But please—make a good one."

Her eyes held a longing look, like my interest in Heather was making her second-guess where we stood. I wasn't sure how to respond.

I finished filling my beer and said, with more edge than I intended, "Rachel, I appreciate your concern. Really. But can I be honest?"

She nodded softly.

"I put myself out there, suggesting we try again. You shot me down. That hurt. I'm not a fan of sitting on my hands, hoping you'll change your mind. I still like you. You're special to me. But you've got the golden boy now. What else am I supposed to do but move on?"

Her eyes locked onto mine. I could see the wheels turning. She looked sad, like I was scolding her. She started to turn away, and I thought I saw a tear.

My heart ached, but I had to stand my ground.

I softened my tone, touched her arm gently. "Hey, I'm not trying to hurt your feelings. If things were different, I'd still want to try again. But right now… it doesn't seem like that's gonna happen."

Doug stood up as I touched her arm. I took a step back. The last thing I wanted was trouble with the quarterback of my new school. Not because I feared the fight—but the fallout.

I turned to leave, but added, "Enjoy the rest of your night, Rachel. I mean that."

Doug approached her as I walked away. He didn't come after me, so I assumed she was okay. I didn't interact with them again that night.

As I turned to head inside, I noticed an audience—Kevin and Aaron, grinning like goats.

I opened the sliding door. "What's up, guys? Why are you staring at me like that?"

Kevin said, "Dude, you haven't even started at our school yet, and you've already got a reputation. You dated the future homecoming queen, and now you're grinding with Heather? You're shaping up to be a legend."

I smiled, rolling my eyes. That's not how I saw it at all. It's wild how others perceive you without trying.

Wait… am I witty, hot, *and* slutty at Kathleen?

I didn't have time to think about it.

"Speaking of Heather," I asked, "have you seen her?"

Aaron motioned over his shoulder. "She saw you talking to Rachel and asked Reggie about it. That's what started everyone talking about you two dating. It made her kind of jealous. A girl like Heather… who knows how she'll react."

I was frustrated by the drama, but I still wanted to find her.

I walked past Aaron and found Reggie. He pointed toward the front door.

I stepped outside and saw Heather on the porch, talking to a girl I hadn't met—short, long black hair, giant brown eyes, and a slight tan. They both turned as I approached. Heather smiled. Her friend waved and headed to her car.

"I don't get to meet your friend?" I said, half-joking.

"That's my best friend Bethany. She's having a rough night, so she just wanted to go home."

"Happens to the best of us. I hope she's alright."

My concern seemed to catch Heather off guard. She set down her cup, walked over, wrapped her arms around my neck—and kissed me.

I wasn't expecting it, but I didn't hesitate. I slid my hands up her back and leaned into the kiss.

The front door creaked open. I didn't stop. Then Reggie's voice: "Oh good, you found her!"

The door shut again. Laughter erupted on the other side, and I couldn't help but laugh too, still kissing Heather.

We stood there for a few minutes, lost in it, until she pulled back and looked at me.

"Who are you?" she asked, eyes searching mine. "You come out of nowhere, and for some reason, I'm completely into you."

I grinned. "I'm Declan. And I'm awesome. It's perfectly understandable."

She laughed, then looked around, her gaze settling back on me.

"Listen," she said, pausing. "I'd really like to see you again. Here's my number—you asked for it, remember?" She handed me a sticky note with her number scrawled across it. "Use it."

"I will," I said, still a little stunned.

"I've gotta get home, but this was fun. I'll see you around school, right?"

I nodded. She leaned in, kissed me one more time, then turned and walked to her car.

I stood there for a moment, dazed, a crooked smile spreading across my face. I slipped the note into my pocket and headed back inside.

Brad, a few others, and I decided to crash at Reggie's—none of us were in any shape to drive. The next morning, we stuck around to help clean up, as good friends do.

You don't usually get to see the aftermath of a party like that. It was… something.

There was flour in the aquarium and on the couch—someone had clearly been "antiqued." A lamp had been broken and tossed into the pool. The keg was tapped. Chairs overturned. Red Solo cups everywhere.

Brad and I started collecting trash. Reggie grabbed the pool net and fished out glass. Everyone pitched in. It took a couple of hours, but we got it done.

The house was almost back to normal. As a thank-you, Reggie took us out for pizza at a spot around the corner. We sat there for an hour, laughing, swapping stories, and soaking in the last bits of summer.

After lunch, we returned to the house, made sure everything was in order, then went our separate ways.

In just a couple of weeks, a new chapter would begin.

And I was stoked for it.