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LILY

For the past two weeks, Mason has asked me every day if I really want to go to the state championship game. He says he understands if I'm not ready to face a big crowd or to root for the rival school. He wants me to know he would never force me to, and blah blah blah.

And every single day for the past two weeks, I've told Mason the exact same thing—That I can't wait to see him on the field again. I'm going to scream his name at the top of my lungs, louder than anyone else in the stands. And I don't give a single damn if the people from school glare or whisper or even boo me for rooting for Greendale. Let them. I'm proud of him, and nothing—not school rivalry, not the accident, not even my own nerves—will stop me from showing up for him.

Every word I said was true, but I have to admit that now that the big day is here, I am nervous as hell. What if I freeze up? What if seeing the crowd brings everything back? But at least my dad will be there with me. I can't believe it, but I'm really glad he's going with me today.

"Do you think I look okay?" I shout to my dad as I check myself out in the mirror. I'm wearing black jeans, a brand-new green sweater, boots, and perfectly curled hair.

"You look great," he answers as he enters my room, "although you're missing the face paint."

I turn around and nearly drop my mascara wand when I see Dad standing in the doorway, his face completely covered in thick green face paint. But that's not even the best part. Right across his forehead, in bold block letters, is the word "MASON."

My jaw drops. "Oh my God!" I gasp, and then burst into uncontrollable laughter. "Dad! What is on your face?"

He grins proudly and holds up the little jar of paint and a thin brush. "Your turn," he declares, as if this is some sacred rite of passage.

“No way!” I backpedal, shaking my head. “There is no chance I am doing that.”

“Oh, come on,” he urges, stepping closer with the brush poised for action. “You said you wanted to support Mason. This is peak team spirit.”

“Fine,” I groan dramatically. “But just his number on my cheek. And you have to make it cute. I’m still trying to look like a functioning human being, okay?”

“Cute, got it,” he nods solemnly. As he dabs the brush in the green paint and leans in toward my cheek, I stare at his ridiculous face in the mirror and start to giggle again.

“You’re really going all out, huh?” I tease, raising an eyebrow.

“Damn right I am,” he replies, carefully painting the number twelve on my cheek. “Gotta show up for our boy.”

“You’re supposed to love me more than him, you know,” I grumble.

Dad and Mason have become insanely close over the past two weeks. Half the time when I wake up on the weekends, Mason’s downstairs chatting away with my dad, neither of them noticing when I walk in.

“I do love you more, Lily-Pad,” Dad says with a wink as he grabs his coat and keys.

I quickly follow him out to his car and jump in the passenger seat for him to drive us to the big game. I feel nervous for Mason and myself.

Mason because he’s putting so much pressure on himself to play at his peak. He’s desperate to get a full scholarship for football.

And I’m nervous because even though Greendale is playing Westmoreland, I know there are going to be a lot of Ridgewood people there, just to watch Greendale lose. Not that they will lose, they’re clearly the best team in the state and are going to win.

Just as Dad pulls into the parking lot, Brittany sends me a text letting me know to meet her by the locker rooms. “I’ve just got to see Britt,” I tell Dad, pointing over to her waving frantically.

“Hey, Mr. Bennett,” Brittany says with a wide smile, before turning to me and shoving a green shirt into my arms without even saying hello.

“What’s this?” I ask, unfolding the shirt she just gave me. But it’s not a shirt—it’s a green football jersey, beat-up and grass-stained, with the number twelve stitched across the front and “COOPER” stamped on the back.

“It’s Mason’s practice jersey,” Brittany explains, hands on her hips, clearly proud of herself. “It’s a Greendale tradition for the girlfriends to wear their guy’s practice jersey to states. Some lady did it in the fifties or something and they won, so now it’s a whole superstition or something. It’s dumb, but also cute, and I’m not gonna have you curse my school by NOT doing it.”

“Why didn’t Mason give it to me?” I murmur.

Brittany rolls her eyes. “Because he didn’t want to pressure you. He was worried it would make you uncomfortable—you know, in case some Ridgewood people saw and decided to talk shit. He’s, like, annoyingly considerate.”

I laugh. He totally is.

“But that’s stupid,” Brittany continues, waving a dismissive hand. “So I made Liam break into his locker and steal it. Now put it on.”

I slip the jersey over my head. It smells like Mason and it gives me goosebumps.

My smile grows wider as I look down at the number twelve. I’m proud to wear my man’s jersey on his big day, supporting him the same way he’s supported me through everything. We shouldn’t be together. I shouldn’t be alive. But fate had other ideas and here we are!

“Girl, green suits you so good!” she exclaims, pulling me into a bear hug.

Then Brittany sees her mom stomping toward her and hisses under her breath, “Gotta go. Tayla and Gemma saved you seats.” She jogs off toward her mom.

Dad and I make our way through the many people and find Tayla and Gemma sitting side by side at the very front.

“Lily!” Tayla exclaims, jumping up and pulling me into a hug before I even get a chance to say hi. “Oh my God, are you actually wearing Mason’s jersey?”

Gemma lets out a gasp of delight. “You’re a traitor to Ridgewood, and I LOVE IT!”

“It was a surprise delivery,” I laugh, hugging them both, “but I’m so happy to be a Cooper for the day!”

Tayla grins. “Keep this up and one day you might be a Cooper permanently.”

“Oh my god, I hope, new sister!” Gemma shrieks and I laugh.

My Dad rolls his eyes and says, “I love Mason, but let’s slow down on that...”

Another girl wearing a Greendale jersey with sixty-two on the chest walks up—it’s Sky.

“Hey, girl,” she says with a smile, “You look great!”

“Thanks. I like your jersey.” I wink.

“Oh my god, Ryder was ridiculously happy when he gave it to me. I can’t wait to see his face when he sees it.” She smiles even wider, looking down at the top.

“Teenagers are so extra,” Dad mutters to himself.

“Did you just say EXTRA?” I ask with a laugh. “Ew, no, don’t ever do that again.”

“Look!” Sky squeals as the Greendale players all pile out of the locker room together.

I scan the players and easily spot Mason jogging right next to Liam. They look like they’re talking and laughing.

Mason turns around and his eyes scan the bleachers. I wave my arm enthusiastically so he can see me. Once a smile breaks out onto his face and he starts waving back, I know he’s spotted me too.

Then he notices something. He squints, then points at his jersey, then back at me. I grab the front of my jersey and hold up the 12. His smile gets so big and

he makes a heart with his hands and I just about melt into the bleachers. I love him so much.

Then Mason's coach grabs his shoulder pads. His expression shifts instantly. Gone is the wide grin, replaced with a sharp, laser-focused look—what he calls *game mode*. It's intense. Fierce. And honestly? Incredibly hot. My stomach flutters just watching him lock into what he was born to do. I bite my lip and blow him a kiss as he gets dragged away by his coach. I see a flash of a grin—he saw the kiss! I broke through *game mode*!

"That was a bit cute," Tayla smirks, waggling her eyebrows.

"So cute," Gemma agrees, making my cheeks heat up.

Sky nudges my side, and says, "Ryder asked me if I'd be mad if he hurt any of the players tonight."

"And you said..." I ask, just now wondering if Mason is still angry and would start a fight.

"I told him if it was intentional I would be," she sighs as her shoulders drop.

"They'd be stupid to try anything. There are a lot of scouts here," my dad interrupts, nodding behind us toward at least ten men dressed in suits with different college caps on.

"How'd you know that?" I ask, looking back at my dad as he waves to someone behind us.

"I used to play football," he says.

"You did? But you're so out of shape—" I then cut myself off.

"I guess I let myself go after college," he chuckles, looking down at his small frame.

I shake my head slightly, not being able to picture my dad playing football.

He's always been such an...office type of person.

"It's starting!" Sky squeals, grabbing a hold of my hand and squeezing it tightly.

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