

Football 321

Chapter 321 Storm Brewing

[14th/July/2019, Location: Nike Headquarters, Beaverton Oregon]

"Greg, have you managed to get Rakim to resign with us yet, we can't delay this any longer as his value continues to skyrocket by the second," Jason Hart, the head of the Player Scouting Division at Nike asked his colleague as this topic came up in today's strategy meeting.

With Nike having a lot of investment in football due to it being the biggest sport on the globe they held these special meetings coinciding with the major leagues. With all the important leagues ending their season and the Premier League transfer window opening today, this meeting is of high importance. Signing the next superstar who will join a major team or simply deciding which player is worth investing more.

"We've held preliminary talks with his mother but haven't been able to secure an agreement. His commercial value is through the roof after winning his first major trophy and the success of the Titan-Fit line." Greg replied sounding a little disheartened after failing to complete this task. He had never struggled to convince an athlete from the US to sign with Nike until now and things were made harder with the fact all the higher-ups were paying attention to this issue.

"The fact that the other major brands are smelling blood and circling them doesn't make things easier. It is practically a bidding war made harder by the transfer talks," He continued with a serious tone not liking the fact he had let down his bosses since he knew just how cutthroat this business can be.

"That's indeed a concerning issue and could spell a lot of trouble for us if one of our local competitors can sign him, given the potential he has already displayed." One of the other executives noted not at all liking the prospect of seeing a player they had raised bearing fruits for another company. Usually, it was them who picked up leaks from smaller companies never the other way around.

"That bastard should just be grateful and sing on the dotted line, we are Nike, Kingmakers in any sport, he should just be grateful that he gets to join our ship." A chubby executive exclaimed not able to hold back his rage after hearing what his colleagues said.

He wasn't particularly creative or passionate when it came to the day-to-day workings of the company but when it came to money, he was the sharpest. After all, if the stock dropped the dividends he received would lessen and if that happened how would he support his lifestyle. After all, he's got two families to care for, not to mention his 7 mistresses one for each day of the week and his gambling habit also needs funds.

"Joe is right we should just teach him a lesson, The carrot has obviously not been working maybe it's time for the stick," Another spoke up having similar thoughts to that of Joe, not willing to let anything mess with income. 'You can humiliate a man but never mess with his means of earning a living' is the philosophy most members of the board lived by.

"I agree we have been too lenient regarding this issue," Another chimed in also frustrated with this situation that has been dragging on for half a year now. The media would occasionally criticize them for their shortsightedness whenever they talked about how the young winger had bounced back.

"So, we halted our cooperation after he got shot big deal that was just business, no need to take it personally. Just be grateful that we are willing to invest in you again." Another person stated with a dissatisfied expression echoing the sentiments of most at the meeting. Seeing their opponents take advantage of their situation they could no longer hold their breath and wanted to resolve this.

"Silence," a stern voice resounded through the boardroom from the head of the table where Mike Parker the current CEO of Nike Inc. He mostly focussed on the business side of things working hard to drive the company forward, far surpassing his predecessors with his achievements. Since rising to this

position in 2006 he has transformed the company to new heights with his strategic development of superstars in various sports.

Seeing the regal CEO in his mid-fifties speak up the room turned silent no one daring to even breathe too loudly. Everyone held great respect for the man and knew that they couldn't waste his time without suffering the consequences. Whilst his employees in the room were now nervous Mr Parker remained silent seemingly lost in thought as his hand rhythmically tapped the Mahogany table.

For a full minute, the situation persisted as the man's rhythmic tapping became the only thing that was audible. Some of the executives seemed to be having a conversation with their eyes but still did not dare to voice it. No matter how displeased or annoyed they were they all held their tongue.

"Jason what has the kid been up to recently?" he finally spoke his sharp gaze immediately locking in on the man who is the head of the Player Scouting Division. The man in question gulped not at all expecting to be put on the spot at this movement, but he knew he had to answer the man.

"(ahem) He's appeared at quite a few promotional events over the last two months since his season ended. However, from what I hear he is back in the States preparing for the under-17 world Cup in Brazil probably waiting to receive the official call-up from the US team." he concisely replied quickly regaining his composure as he answered his boss hoping the information he provided would be enough.

"Hmm interesting," were the only words that came out of Mike's mouth as he took in the information once again letting silence permeate the board room.

"Mrs Matthews, do we sponsor the National Soccer team's youth division?" He asked the marketing head slightly surprising the woman, but she had been much more alert than Jason.

"No sir we do not we didn't put much emphasis on this, Under Armour is currently in the process of renegotiating the youth contract as their contract expires at the start of the month," She responded not quite understanding why the boss would suddenly bother with youth sponsorship contracts.

For every other country whose national team they sponsor, they make it a rule to sponsor them from the senior team to the lowest youth division. However, the US was the exception due to the lack of enthusiasm for the sport especially in the men's side. The women's division got a preferential treatment due to their stellar performances and the fact soccer is considered a woman's sport here.

"Call Brett and intercept the deal, Bret over at Under Armour won't spend more than 50,000 on the youth soccer division. Scratch that they might go up to a quarter million as they are trying to court Rakim, double their price and secure the contract." He stated with a tone of finality surprising not only Karen Matthews but the rest of the people in attendance.

Not letting them question his decision he continued speaking, "Once we secure the contract Rakim won't appear in the squad unless he is an official Nike player and even if he does he will get the treatment we give to NBA players from rival brands." he stated already seeing the boy's frustrated expression as he was forced to sit on the bench throughout the tournament only coming on at garbage time.

"Will do boss," Mrs Matthews replied with a sombre expression feeling a little sorry for the kid who was about to face the wrath of their boss. However, that was the ruthless world of business, and it was better that he learned at a young age that there are some organisations you cannot face.

"Hahaha that's a brilliant idea boss, give him a bit of the curry treatment and he won't dare join the national team without being signed to us," the chubby Joe exclaimed clearly pleased with this decision causing some of the others to grin in excitement.

It was an unspoken thing In the US basketball team that there were only two types of players on the team. The Nike Superstars and the other people in the background, because no matter how monstrous you are in your club the moment you join the National team you fade into the background. Those players would have their presence hidden during media appearances, brand badges hidden in photoshoots and have their minutes on the court reduced to what was absolutely necessary.

That only counted for those phenomenal ones who couldn't be suppressed and had to be invited to the squad. Those names included Allstars like Kawhi Leonard, Damian Lillard, Trae Young, Anthony Edwards James Harden and even legends like Derrick Rose received this treatment. That is why most of these stars have chosen to gradually refuse to represent their country not willing to waste their off-season time that could be spent training and with their family.

"It is decided that will be it for the matter regarding Rakim,"

Chapter 322 A headache

[14th/July/2019, Location: Rose Ilse Orlando, 14:30]

Whilst Nike was making plans regarding Rakim, the player in question can be seen sitting in front of the kitchen counter hunched over an assortment of textbooks. Just because he was now a professional player who had won his first trophy at 15 didn't mean he could escape the grasp of high school. Not even the fact that he was one of the hottest prospects on the transfer market could change that, as in his mother's words, 'What's the point in all that if you can't even pass Algebra?'

Safe to say he couldn't argue with logic, especially with how temperamental she had recently been. Quick to snap at the smallest slight especially when fielding some of his transfer calls which would result in him bearing the brunt of her mood swings. It's not like the lad could argue with her as most of her complaints were valid forcing him to remain active despite being on holiday.

[You should just get a GED, and be done with it,] Eva commented from inside his head not seeing why her host was putting himself through all that torture that wouldn't help him in improving his game. Whilst she appreciated maths, especially Trigonometry everything else was just useless dribble to her.

She couldn't be blamed in her thinking though, since if Rakim wasn't attending a private school, his education would be a waste of time. This goes especially for the rest of the country where students were being taught irrelevant things without them ever being updated. Some of it would always be relevant like the history of the country but the endless drivel and glorification of the famous presidents was just unneeded. She understood the idea behind it but still felt annoyed seeing her host working on it when he could be watching game tape instead.

'Y'know if it was up to me I would but how would I face Mum if she doesn't get to watch me walk across that stage.' Rakim replied after finishing writing another sentence in his geography paper that was supposed to be submitted on Monday which is tomorrow. He had gotten an extension given the fact he wasn't in the country but with the school year ending this month, he was completing most of his final exams in the following week.

{Fair point I wouldn't risk upsetting her in her current condition,} She replied in a thoughtful tone confusing Rakim as to what exactly she was getting at.

'Is it her time of the month or something? Now that I think about it makes sense given the extra pressure she is under, I doubt she's even had a chance to check on her gym this month,' Rakim thought to himself his conjecture making perfect sense as he switched to the philosophy paper on something he's had to overcome in his life. For some reason, he had the bright idea to work on the papers simultaneously and luckily it worked perfectly allowing him to refocus on something else when he felt himself losing focus.

Eva seeing this could only sigh and chose to remain silent as she continued to watch him work on his paper. Before she knew it half an hour passed, and he had only written his name on the philosophy paper and finished the rest of his work. This wasn't bad considering he was writing a 1000-word English essay, a Geography paper, a history paper, and a philosophy paper.

4/5 is not a bad ratio considering but to Rakim he felt annoyed whenever he reread the question not knowing what to write about. That's a lie he knew plenty of things to write about as he had overcome plenty of things in his life but he knew that the teacher wanted him to write about the shooting and his struggle to get back on the field. According to Emma, they had received a similar paper as an assignment as the schools seemed to be putting in extra effort in helping the students deal with the trauma.

"(Sigh) I need a break, maybe it'll write itself when I get back," Rakim exclaimed directly getting up from his seat and almost knocking over the glass of water on the table.

"Are you done?" He heard the sweet voice of his sister and upon turning around he watched her walk down the stairs dressed in appear of jeans and a baggy Lion King T-shirt.

"More or less, how you got something in mind?" he responded with a tired smile habitually stretching his body that felt a little tight from all the sitting.

"I'm meeting the rest of the guys at Joe's want to come along." Rakim paused, considering Emma's offer. A break was exactly what he needed, but part of him also wanted to push through the last paper. However, he knew that he wouldn't get much done even if he stayed here any longer but on the other hand, meeting his friends might be a good thing since he hadn't seen them for almost half a year.

"You know what? Yeah, why not," he said with a sigh, rubbing his eyes before standing up fully. "I need to clear my head anyway."

"Good call," Emma replied with a grin. "You've been at that kitchen counter for hours. You're gonna fry your brain if you keep going like that."

Not hesitating Rakim put on his white Titan-Fit hoodie matching the shorts he was already wearing as he pocketed his phone. Emma flashed a smile as she watched Rakim pull the hoodie over his head, the Titan-Fit logo prominently displayed on the chest. "You always have to wear your own merch, huh?" she teased.

"Might as well, from what I hear I am pretty famous these days," Rakim smirked, as he tied a black bandana on his head adjusting the loose strands of his dreadlocks to frame his face. The two of them headed out the door, the warm Orlando sun hitting their faces as they stepped onto the quiet suburban street. Hopping into Emma's white Mercedes E-Class Cabriolet E53 promptly bringing down the roof so they could bask in the gentle evening sun.

"I Still can't believe Dad actually bought you this," Rakim commented from the passenger seat as he admired the interior of the car. Emma kept her vehicle clean as she only bothered to have the surround system improved. Still, that added with the Mercedes neon light made the car look all the more appealing.

"Hmp, you don't know the half of it he would have got me Porsche, but Mum stopped him in the end something about me only needing a stable car until I learn to take some responsibility." Emma retorted in a pout half joking but also slightly upset, even though she never actually wanted an expensive car.

She much like her brother looked at the interior of the car when choosing which ones, they liked, and the brand came afterwards. However, who told her dad to be a gear head knowing almost everything there is to know about cars. The fact he restrained himself to two vehicles with his means was a wonder to the two, but they guessed it had to do with their mother.

"But you're like the most boring person I know after Lexi, come to think about it I've never seen you break the rules." He responded with a thoughtful expression knowing that his big sister was the most responsible teenager in his age group.

Matter of fact she is one of those kids who would remind the teacher about a pop quiz or homework assignment. If not for her good looks and that she treated everyone kindly with respect she would definitely be bullied. Having May with her also helps as that girl is always ready for an argument at any moment. She won't even know what it's about and she would have the other party question life in 10 minutes flat.

"I have," she was about to retort in her defence when Rakim interrupted her. "Helping May out when she gets into trouble doesn't count," Hearing his words she could only bite her tongue with a pout no longer paying attention to him as she abruptly accelerated the car. However, it didn't take her more than five seconds to drop back to below the speed limit, prompting Rakim to try his best to hold his laughter.

Annoyed at his antics she decided to channel her annoyance towards giving him a taste of his own medicine. "So, who is your girlfriend?"

Chapter 323 Sibling Talk

"So who is your girlfriend?" Hearing her question I almost choked on my saliva already feeling a headache coming on. Ever since the finals this has been the most popular story on the net as everyone seemed to be trying to guess who the mystery girl was.

Since she was wearing a hat and most of her side profile was hidden by her hair she escaped most of the media scrutiny. Which now that I considered it the media didn't mind this as they could run with whatever story they wanted using me. The fact I was topless I caught her fall only served to boost tabloids sales no matter how much I complained.

Despite them not daring to use my name explicitly since I'm still under 16, saying Celtics young phenom or wunderkind was all they needed to say. Even after taking Forrest's advice for media silence for four days after the final wasn't enough to calm the storm. That is part of the reason I decided to come back this weekend even though I had another few days of excused leave from school.

"(Sigh) I won't tell you," I replied to her causing her to suck her teeth in annoyance before focusing on the road ahead of her. "Anyways, How did your interviews go, any of them managed to changed your mind about joining Cambridge?" I asked her not willing to let the silence linger for longer and fuel her displeasure towards me.

She gave me a sidelong glance, clearly picking up on my diversion but in the end she sighed before continuing the conversation. "They were... alright, I guess. The Harvard alumni ball was great and the professors are some of the best in the world but their Business program just doesn't match with that of Cambridge." She paused, tapping her fingers on the wheel thoughtfully. "The vibe on campus was everything I had imagined, the same with Columbia they just felt homely y'know. It's like they pulled out a page out of the Gillmore girls and brought it to life,"

Listening to her gush about the two Colleges with such excitement brought a smile to my face as I haven't seen this side of her in a while. I haven't seen her in person since I left for Scotland since both of us were busy, as being a senior in a private school is not the cakewalk it is for regular schools. From having to complete community projects to impress colleges, to having to write different papers throughout the year.

That's not to mention having to take the SATs trying to improve their scores just in case the first time wasn't satisfactory. Considering the pressure she was under I only had to focus on getting better on the field and maintain my grades. "I must be the luckiest boy in the world," I inadvertently thought out loud causing Emma to stop talking and look at me.

"How you figure that," She responded clearly confused how us talking about her achievements has anything to do with me being lucky.

"Well it's simple really, Not only am I handsome extremely so that it might be a crime now that I think about it. You should probably report me to someone before you get charged with accessory." I started off but quickly lost my train of thought as that part of me where my ego lived took the wheel. After a few

more words more ouragios than that the car suddenly got chilly and i kneew I had to land quicklt before my dearest sister shot me out of teh sky.

"Anyway I'm also one of the top five attakers under the age of 18." I finished my self prais taking a sip of my getorade before continuing. "Even after all that God blessed me with the cutest, smartest and most generouse older sister a boy could ask for."

Emma gave me a look that was equal parts amusement and disbelief, her lips twitching as she tried not to smile. "Generous, huh? is that waht you call it when you have me drive you at ungodly hours just so you can train." she responded choosing to focuss on the part o my words she could first form a response too.

I chuckled, leaning back in my seat. "I was getting to that! But you keep interrupting my beautiful speech." I waved my hand dismissively, trying to look offended. "Anyway, you and I both know that my very presence is payment enough. Just think, you get to tell your friends you have an actual superstar in your passenger seat."

Emma rolled her eyes, but I could see the corners of her mouth twitching. "You're something, all right. Honestly, I don't know what would happen to your head if you actually were that big-time yet."

"Ha, don't let the Rex Nation hear you saying that," I said, half-joking already seeing the waves of comments from the more crazy fnas floading whoever dared to disrespect their effort. "Speaking of which, since you're so generous, any chance I could convince you to drive me to the academy later? Just to show my face, let the guys know I'm not too famous to come around anymore."

Emma scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Right, because you wouldn't want to be seen alone." she teased arching an eyebrow as she turned onto the parking lot of Joes bowling alley. It was a mixture of a diner and a bowling alley mainly used as a date spot but also good for birthdays and that sort.

"Anyway, I'm still recovering from the cringe of you calling yourself 'extremely handsome.' You really have no shame, do you?" she continued picking a parking spot not at all bothering to give an answer to my question. I grinned at her words, knowing she what she was doing but pretended and just followed the flow. "Hey, just stating facts. Can't argue with those, can you?"

"Uh-huh, whatever helps you sleep at night," she replied, but I caught the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "Don't worry I sleep great at night knowing that I have a skill to support myself, after all my singing voice is pretty unique"

"Lets just be thankful your good at football younger brother," She responded with a piti field smile before imediatly exiting the car heading to wards the Diners doors. I laughed, stepping out of the car and jogging a few steps to catch up with her. "Wait, are you telling me you don't believe in my musical talents? I bet you I could serenade the entire diner right now, make everyone cry with joy."

Emma glanced at me, raising an eyebrow as she held the door open. "Please don't. Some of us would like to eat in peace, and I'd hate to see you kicked out before we even order."

I smirked, putting on my best wounded look as I stepped inside. "Your lack of faith is honestly disappointing. Who wouldn't want a celebrity to sing to them while they're eating burgers and fries?"

Emma rolled her eyes, but I saw the small smile she tried to hide. "Let's just sit down, oh 'handsome' one. I'm starving."

Chapter 324 Friends

A wave of nostalgia hit the moment we walked inside as the familiar scents of the place filled my nostrils. Joe's Bowling Alley was buzzing with the usual crowd: a few families, some teenagers hanging

around the arcade machines, and a couple of older guys grumbling over coffee in the corner. The scent of greasy fries and freshly waxed bowling lanes hit me like a warm, comforting blanket.

As we stepped further inside, I scanned the room, looking for our friends. For some reason I felt nervous, my heart racing a little at the thought of seeing them after half a year away. The last time I saw them in person was the ski trip we took in the Aspin mountains after I had recovered. After that, it was mostly online and even then, our schedules never synced up since they are 5 hours behind the UK here.

The chatter and laughter in the place helped calm my mind though as I had spent many of days here, good and bad ones. "You're back Mr superstar, missed my burgers from across the pond or something?" Old man Joe exclaimed from behind the counter instantly capturing my and a few other's attention.

"Old Joe they appear in my dreams, don't let my sister know but they are the true reason I came back early," I replied with an excited smile whispering the latter half of my sentence just loud enough for Emma and Joe to hear.

Joe laughed, a deep, hearty sound that echoed throughout the diner. "You're a character, kid! Now go grab a seat I'll throw your usual on the green, get a milkshake on the house kids," he replied before turning around to head towards the kitchen as he hummed a country tune.

"You know he treats you better than his own grandkids," Emma commented from nudging my side as she pulled me along with her having already spotted our friends. "Naw old man Joe is nice to everyone, he just loves football, the real kind," I replied with a smile knowing full well how much the man loves the sport. I've visited his house once and he practically has a room dedicated to memorabilia from his favourite players and iconic moments in the sport.

Turning to look to see where she was leading me, I spotted a familiar back with wavy peach blond hair cascading down her back. She was standing in front of a pool table watching as two boys were engaged

in a game, whom I now recognise as Reece and Bennett. Reece stood tall at around 6'4-6'6 with his dirty blond hair cut in a fade, matched by his stocky build which seemed to have gained more muscles since I last saw him.

Bennet on the other hand was a few heads shorter than him reaching around 5'9 at most. However, from the little I could tell from the joggers he was wearing he didn't lack in the muscles department either. 'Guess Varsity Football is treating them well,' I thought to myself as my eyes wandered to the next two people with them.

They were the figures of Olivia and Lexi seated in a booth close by engrossed in a conversation as they nursed a milkshake. Both of them were dressed fashionably with Lexi wearing a green skirt and a white sleeveless top giving her an effortless cute look. Olivia on the other hand wore a dark grey tank top with matching joggers showcasing her athletic figure.

Despite both of them looking beautiful my eyes inadvertently drifted back to the peach-blond girl who had her back towards me. She stood as tall as ever easily 6'0 dressed in a floral long skirt with a matching crop top drawing my eyes to her beautiful figure. 'This is the second time this has happened this month, Eva I think I might have caught something,' I thought inwardly not understanding why my body seemed to suddenly do its own thing in these moments.

It's not like it did this to every beautiful girl I saw, that would just be ridiculous since if you took a second to really look around you, you would notice all the beautiful girls around you. Who you are attracted to can change at a moment's notice instantly changing what you consider as beautiful, and I knew this. What I didn't get was why I was feeling this feeling of attraction that I hadn't felt in both of my lives.

{Maybe you really are coming down with something,} Eva commented sounding genuinely thoughtful but again I didn't get to focus on it as the moment May turned around the feeling intensified. Like a bad rom-com my world stood still for a second colours became more vibrant almost like when I entered the zone in one of my dribbles. However, this time I took a second to appreciate it and the source of it all was the emerald green eyes gazing at me and her face that lit up with a bright smile.

{yep, you've definitely caught something,} Eva's voice once again fell on deaf ears as my entire focus was on the figure that continued to get closer. "Look who's finally back in town!" she called, loud enough to draw the attention of Reece and Bennett, who were mid-shot in their pool game. As a result, Reece sent the ball flying into the air sending it flying off the pool table and rolling on the ground.

As if fate decided to do its thing the ball that flew to the ground landed exactly where my left foot was about to step. What happened next was a scene straight out of Tom and Jerry as I lost my footing and before I knew it, I was stumbling forward, arms flailing. My fall was only stopped when my face hit something soft and bouncy, and someone embraced me.

At first, I felt a feeling of comfort so heavenly that even Joe's Burger didn't enter my mind. However, from that heavenly feeling realisation soon dawned on me as my brain started to piece together what it could possibly be. Realising that my face was most likely resting on Mays mounds my cheeks instantly flushed as I slowly lifted my head.

Coming face to face with May's blushing face I didn't know whether to thank my lucky stars or be angry at them for what was about to be an awkward situation. Looking into her eyes I didn't know what to say for a moment but lucky for me my dearest sister came in clutch. "(Ahem) You two need a room or something?" Her voice sounded behind me instantly breaking whatever moment that lingered between us.

My cheeks felt like they were on fire as I scrambled to my feet, trying to regain my composure. May's bright smile turned into a playful smirk, but I could still see the tint of red on her cheeks as she tried to appear composed. "Way to make an entrance, Rakim," Liv said from the side before pulling me into a quick hug, having jumped up from her seat when she saw us.

"Maybe I'm still jet lagged," I responded before being pulled into another hug by Lexi who was as energetic as I remembered her. "Did you grow taller or something?" She commented trying the moment

she released me before going ahead to check me from head to toe. Although she was quite tall at around 5'10 she still had to tilt her head to make eye contact with me.

"Sup guys, how you getting on?" I asked the rest of them the moment she released me taking a second to look over them.

Chapter 325 Date

The warm, buzzing ambience of Joe's Diner was filled with the clinking of dishes, bursts of laughter, and the hum of quiet conversations. Sitting in one of the red leather booths under the soft glow of hanging lights, Emma and Rakim leaned forward, listening intently to their friends. Rakim had spent most of the conversation just catching up, content to listen and let their stories wash over him.

He used to have a sort of cold war with Reece and Bennet, but all that was forgotten as they became much closer. Often times they would all train together incorporating some of their drills to help each other improve in their sports. Their excitement over their first season in the varsity squad was contagious making him regret not having seen them live.

The match they had against the Miami Tigers in the state semi-final was especially wild. Even though they lost from the retelling of the boys it was something straight out of Friday night lights. Halfway through the season, Reece broke into the first string as a wide receiver putting his tall frame and wingspan to good use to pluck passes from the air. Bennet on the other hand was still floating in-between the second team as a running back and first in special teams.

Leaning back with a satisfied grin, his eyes bright with ambition. "Man, we're already putting up some killer stats, and we barely got going this season just imagine when we get a full season!"

"Don't forget who you're talking to," Rakim added with a light smirk taking another bite out of his burger. "You better reach the top 20 in the state, or I'll be embarrassed to tell people we trained together." He laughed, shaking his head as if to say they better give it their all.

"You're just lucky we can't go pro at 16 otherwise we'd also be putting up numbers on TV," Bennett retorted with a light smile. "Don't worry though after I hit my growth spurt this summer, I'm gonna be a beast like Barry Sanders,"

"Sorry to tell you but this is as tall as you are gonna get pipsqueak," May retorted from across the table instantly causing the rest of the guys to burst out laughing. Bennet was only an inch shorter than her at 5'9 but the girl took pride in making him remember that.

Bennett rolled his eyes, feigning exasperation. "Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. You just wait till next season when I'm towering over all of you," he shot back, smirking. "Then you'll be looking up to me, literally."

"Sure, just don't go wearing your platforms on the field, you haven't mastered the art of sprinting in high heels," Reece chimed in before proceeding to mess with his hair instantly igniting a bout of wrestling between the two as they got up from the booth.

Seeing this the rest of the group simply ignored them already used to this, May had explained it as having something to do with too much testosterone. "Now while the Neanderthals are busy doing Neanderthal things we should get down to business senior Prom," Liv stated placing her phone down on the table as she rejoined the conversation.

"Oh, look who can get off the phone long enough from Spencer to talk to us," Lexi teased only with a wide grin only to regret it the next second, as Liv threw a wadded-up napkin at Lexi with a mock glare, but a smile broke through almost immediately. "You can tease all you want, Lex, but time is running out and I already have a date."

"Wait you have a date for prom, I thought we were all going as friend's" Emma exclaimed not understanding how things had suddenly ended up this way. Liv shrugged, her lips curling up in a secretive smile. "Well, we were, but plans change, and Spencer's, like, really sweet when he wants to be. Besides, we can all still go together, just with a little...extra company."

Lexi scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Sure, sure. But when you're lost in Spencer's eyes, don't expect us to wait around like third wheels."

"Hey, come on, it'll be fun! I swear, and It's not like any of you would struggle to find a date, I mean have you looked in the mirror lately," Liv protested, leaning forward with that hopeful look that none of them could really resist.

"Y'know she's not wrong, plus Spencer is cool just don't let him start talking about WWE," Rakim commented from the side after finally remembering who Liv's boyfriend was. Although he wasn't close with the boy, they had an amicable relationship never really crossing paths. It was the type of relationship you have with someone you only know second-hand. Culminating in respectful head nods in the hallway and the occasional dap when the other's name gets mentioned in the intercom when achieving something special.

"See at least one of you is supportive," Liv stated as she shot Rakim a grateful look. She crossed her arms with a mock pout, trying to look annoyed but failing miserably.

"Supportive or scared of getting napkin thrown at him," Lexi chimed in giggling lightly as she took another sip of her soda.

"Well, as long as we're talking prom dates, who else has a date lined up? Hurry up and confess," May asked raising an eyebrow already realising that her friends were crumbling under the pressure to find a Date. There was a moment of silence as no one spoke not willing to be the first to answer.

It was her brother Reece who was first to speak up after managing to put Bennett in a headlock "Bennett's got a date with Madison and so do I, didn't think it would be a big deal." He calmly responded before the boy in question broke out of the headlock initiating a chase.

"I haven't said yes to being your Date," Lexi loudly retorted but the boys were already gone heading towards the arcade area. "So, you and Reece 'huh'," Rakim commented from across the table causing the girl to realise her slip-up.

"Wait are you the girl Reece keeps having hour-long conversations with at 1 in the morning," May questioned after seemingly having a Eureka moment. Lexi's blushing expression was the only confirmation she needed as a question she had been trying to figure out for some time had been answered.

Lexi's cheeks flushed even redder, and she tried to brush it off with a casual wave. "Oh, please! It's not like that," she said, laughing nervously. "We just... have talks, you know?"

But May wasn't having it, and neither were the others. "Oh, trust me I know," she teased, leaning in with a mischievous grin. "I mean I can't even count the amount of times I've caught him just grinning dumbly whilst staring at his phone."

"Dang, I leave for a minute and you're all out here starting families," Rakim commented causing Lexi to blush more and Reece who caught the tail end of the conversation decided to make a U-turn. He was unwilling to answer any question only sending Lexi a look that seemed to say your sacrifice will be remembered.

Lexi groaned, sinking back into her seat, realizing there was no way she'd escape without a little roasting. But before she could even fight back the girls proceeded to assault her with more teasing remarks not stopping until the girl's face was beet red. Following that they didn't show mercy as she was forced to explain how things between her and Reece had started.

"We're not dating, we are just talking," she clarified sending a subtle glance towards Rakim, who was caught off guard not sure what that look meant. When they first met in PE class, she developed a crush on the boy who seemed to make everything look effortless.

However, things never developed in a romantic direction which at first, she thought of as a bummer until they actually became good friends. Over time she realised that her crush steamed from infatuation of his abilities and the fact he worked hard. It didn't help her poor heart that the boy had quite literally taken a bullet for her saving her from that maniac.

"He can be quite caring when he wants to,"

Chapter 326 Internal Thoughts

"He can be quite caring when he wants to," Lexi stated brushing away her internal introspection as she told the girls how Reece had picked her interest.

"Y'know when we had to return to school after the D Day, I struggled quite a bit. In every corner I saw Danger, loud noises would bring me back straight back to that day," Lexi started causing the atmosphere to turn sombre and as if sensing the perfect timing Reece happened to return to the group with Bennett in tail.

"It was stupid really now that I think about but then I felt so alone even though most people treated me with kid gloves." She continued before continuing out a light chuckle. "Only this knucklehead continued to annoy me every chance he got."

Lexi shook her head, a nostalgic smile softening her expression. "Honestly, he never gave me a moment of peace. I'd be minding my business in the cafeteria, and then—bam! Reece would just plop down, toss some fries on my tray, and start talking about the most random things."

"It was just too depressing watching you sulk all day, plus I gave you free fries so you should thank me," Reece retorted before reaching over to ruffle her hair earning a look of annoyance from the girl.

Lexi rolled her eyes. "You're missing the point, dummy," she shot back, but the smile stayed. "At some point, I realized... I actually looked forward to it. Having you around made things feel normal again like not everything was just broken pieces waiting to fall apart."

Following her words the mood seemed to change slightly as Reece's grin softened as he looked down at Lexi, and for a moment, there was a flicker of something. However, like the true friend he is Bennette came in clutch interrupting their moment. "So, it's really just you 3 who don't have Dates for prom. I get why you don't have one Rakim since u ain't been around but the two of you really don't have an excuse,"

His statement caused the flowery atmosphere between the two to instantly shatter as both Emma and May proceeded to glare at the boy. Emma raised an eyebrow, crossing her arms as she gave Bennett a look of mock exasperation. "Excuse me? Just because I don't have a date lined up doesn't mean I'm desperate, Bennie," she teased before proceeding to launch one of her chips at the boy.

He took it in stride catching the chip in his mouth, "thanks for the meal," he responded before ducking to avoid the handbag that came flying towards him. He had made the mistake of getting hit by a handbag once and would never do so again, as he came to the Cruel realisation that woman put anything in their handbag. The one that had hit him contained a full-blown makeup kit a taser and for some reason 2.5kg weight.

Bennett's laugh boomed across the diner, drawing a few curious glances from nearby tables as he ducked to avoid Emma's follow-up attempt to hit him with a napkin holder. "See? I'm not wrong, though. You two are picky as hell!" he grinned, unabashed. "Maybe if you'd stop scaring off every guy that even tries to ask you to prom, we wouldn't be having this conversation." hearing his words Emma simply huffed, crossing her arms but didn't bother to retort knowing the boy's words were true.

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[Rex Family Home, 22:30]

laying on a large white Hammock big enough to fit 3 people comfortably Rakim Looked up into the sky watching the last rays of the sun disappear on the horizon. They had decided to come and chill at their place after spending the afternoon at Joe's Bowling Alley. After a few arcade games and a lot of conversation, Rakim felt content with how he spent the day.

Although he hadn't seen his friends in a while he fit right back into their group dynamic despite noticing the changes. The saying life moves on whether u live it or not proved to be true in this case as he realised that he wasn't the only one who had grown over the past 6 months. The fact Lexi got together with Reece surprised him, but he didn't linger on that too long as he had never seen her in that light, preferring to keep their relationship plutonic.

"Can I Join you?" The soft voice of May sounded from his side catching his attention. Her figure practically glowed from that angle as both the setting sun and stakes of fire strewn about in the garden illuminated her. "Sure, just don't start swinging,"

May chuckled softly, settling herself beside Rakim on the wide hammock, which swayed a little as she adjusted her weight. She stretched out, turning sideways to face the boy taking in his side profile as

silence descended between them. Unlike other times when such a situation would be uncomfortable the silence between them was warm and comfortable, filled only by the soft rustle of the nearby trees and the faint laughter coming from the house, where the others were still engaged in a game of poker.

"Hard to believe it's been so long since we all just hung out like this," May said quietly, her voice barely above a whisper. "Feels like everyone's been on their own mission these past months."

Rakim nodded, keeping his gaze on the fading colours of the sky. "Yeah, kinda sped up. Things got real too quick. Sometimes I can barely remember what I did today's ago as I'm too busy trying to reach the next goal. He paused, thoughtful. "Guess that's just how it goes. Reece, Bennett, Lexi, Liv and you, heck even my dear sister... you're all so different from what I remember."

May tilted her head toward him, studying his profile, inwardly trying to figure out what was running through his head. "You're one to talk, you are practically all over my social media feed for one thing or another." She said, her tone teasing but her eyes soft. "It's funny to think that you used to complain about the media training but you're such a natural at it."

Rakim chuckled a hint of self-deprecation in his laughter. "Yeah, well I think of it as playing the part of Rakim the famous footballer whenever I have to deal with the media. It gets fun when you play a role whilst answering the same boring or intrusive questions," he replied, allowing a small smile to slip through.

May's eyes sparkled with warmth as she watched the genuine smile on his face one, she had honestly missed seeing. "At least you're still you," She half whispered her words trailing into Rakim's ear causing him to turn in her direction.

"You've changed a lot too tho," he told her as he looked into her green eyes almost getting lost in them. Despite both of them having the same eye colour his was a light green that changed with the shine of

the sun. Whereas May has deep green eyes allowing him to discover new details within her Iris whenever he took the time to look into them.

For a moment, their gazes lingered, and the quiet seemed to grow warmer like they were the only two people in the world. Rakim could feel the energy between them shifting slightly, but just as he was about to say something, May's lips curved into a soft smile, breaking the tension.

"Oh, is it a good change?" She questioned breaking whatever moment that was between them as she felt herself heating up. Rakim took the chance to let out a low sigh of relief, "Yeah, it's a good change," he admitted, his tone softening. "You just... seem surer of yourself now. You seem freer not like before."

Her eyes widened upon hearing his words knowing he was referring to her partying phase as a sophomore that almost ended badly for her. However, hearing his observation of her change instantly banished all those negative thoughts from her mind. "You're far too nice to me, it's not fair," She responded with a light pout causing Rakim to chuckle as her expression reminded him of an upset baby cat. As if on instinct Rakim found himself petting her head enjoying the softness of her hair on his palm.

"So, why haven't you asked me to prom yet?"

Chapter 327 An Old Man's Wisdom

[Monday 13:20, Red Oak Preparatory]

Rakim first day back to school had gone by in a blast as he did his best to get back into the swing of normal school. After this year he would do his senior year mostly online, so he felt like he was also closing a chapter in his life. Walking down one of the many corridors he watched the hustle and bustle of students excitedly enamoured in conversations.

The students who belonged to the Prom committee were already hard at work building decorations and setting things up for Fridays prom. They somehow managed to trick underclassmen's into helping them with their job as Rakim spotted quite a few of them with paint brushes. Smiling at this scene he turned a corner only to suddenly halt in his step realising where exactly he was.

The corridor looked like any other if one didn't pay attention, but to him it still looked as messy as that day. He could practically smell the scent of blood on the walls and see the lifeless bodies of students whom he used to share the halls with. When they were alive, he never knew them personally but after that day their names became Ingrande in his mind.

"Ben, Finn, Catharine, Harper, Bruce, and Jenifer," Rakim muttered to himself not just remembering their names but also spotted the Mural made in their dedication at the end of the hall. A red mosaic tree was created with the images of the fallen students standing in front of it.

Before even realising Rakim was standing in front of that wall were the mural now stood. It looked incomprehensibly beautiful now completely hiding the bloody scene that painted the wall before. 'Ben a good friend, an excellent student, a beloved son taken from us too soon,' He read one of the sentences next to the figure of the boy who was but a sophomore when he was killed on this very corridor.

There were many more sentences about the six written round them by students' parents siblings and friends. Rakim barely read half of it when he felt his eyes tear up swept up by the sombre emotions for a reason he couldn't explain. It's not like he knew them personally though he reckons he passed them on the corridors quite a few time's. In fact, he wouldn't be surprised if he had shared a class with one or two of them or even attended some of the same functions.

"A shame, isn't it?" an aged voice spoke up from his side, but he didn't respond as his head seemed to be replaying images of where he might have seen the fallen Six. "I know you kids feel like you know the world by the time you reach high school but they barley even got to truly live. So much potential was snuffed out in such a senseless way, we will never know how their lives could have helped shape our world."

Rakim took a deep breath, finally turning to see former Dean Oak, who had stepped down from his role after the shooting. Last he heard the elderly man worked as the cultural head of the school, organising school trips, hosting mental health classes and genuinely making efforts to beautify the school both externally and internally. The pictures of him on the forums visiting different school clubs in competition and interacting with students are quite wholesome.

Rakim let out a slow breath, gathering his thoughts as he met Dean Oak's weary gaze. "I didn't even know them y'know?" he said quietly, almost as if confessing something. "But somehow that makes it all the more sad..." he continued leaving his sentence unfinished not knowing exactly what to say.

Dean Oak gave a small nod, his expression gentle but knowing. "That feeling you have, it's something a lot of people carry after a tragedy, especially one as close as this was for all of you. "He took a step closer to the mural, his eyes following the contours of each face etched into the red tree. "You all lost something precious that day, Rakim. Even those who didn't know them personally carry their absence in ways they might not realize."

Rakim looked back at the mural, feeling the weight of that truth settle over him. "It's like the whole school changed after that day. The hallways felt so lonely for the first weeks back, but we are slowly getting back to a normal, different from before but normal nonetheless." Dean Oak continued speaking not at all minding the contemplative look in the boy's eyes.

He gave a sad smile as he placed a hand on the mural where an image of an eagle rested on the branch with its head dropped. "That's part of why it's here. We want to honour them, but we also want to remind everyone of what's been lost, even as we move forward. It's not easy—healing rarely is." He paused, considering his next words carefully. "I don't think it's talked about enough, but there's no right or wrong way to deal with grief. Even if you didn't know them, it's okay to feel their loss, to feel the impact they've left behind."

Rakim nodded, his gaze still locked on the mural. "I've been so focused on getting better physically and mentally so I could perform to my best. But being back here, it's like I'm right back to that day and all those thoughts I brushed aside are right back to the forefront."

Dean Oak gave a slow, understanding nod, his eyes softening as he took in Rakim's words. "You know, Rakim," he began gently, "sometimes we focus so much on moving forward, on 'being strong,' that we forget to process everything we went through in the first place. But there's no timeline for healing. Sometimes, coming back to places like these—places that hold memories, good or bad—is part of that journey."

Rakim pressed his lips together, knowing just how truthful those words are and how bad he is at truly dealing with death. Since most memories of his past life which were related to death and gore were mostly blocked by the system or God himself, he managed to have quite the happy childhood. As a matter of fact, he felt like he was given a blank slate allowing him to grow up naturally for the first time in two lives.

Thus, he wasn't too surprised that after his shooting his bodies instinct was to get better as fast as possible reverting to a familiar mindset to that from his past life. "(sigh) Survivors guilt is such fucked up emotion," he found himself saying as he finally put to word the emotions he was feeling. "Oh, sorry sir," he immediately said afterwards realising that he had just cursed in front of his former Dean.

Despite the man no longer holding the role as principle he the air of authority he carried was ingrained in his bones. Plus, Rakim respect the old man too much to even think of disrespecting and that would go against the teachings of his parents. "Hahaha you right, it's a F'ed up emotion to be feeling, you feel happy for being safe, angry at what happened and guilty for not being the one to have died. I felt a similar emotion in September 2001, but this one was made me feel a particular sense of helplessness."

Rakim listened intently as Dean Oak shared his own experiences with survivor's guilt, a solemn weight settling over their conversation. The old man's voice was steady yet tinged with the depth of memories that shaped his perspective. "That helplessness is a heavy burden," he continued, looking thoughtfully at

the mural. "You picked yourself up quite well but if you don't face this head on you might find yourself waking up one day not recognising the person you have become."

Rakim absorbed Dean Oak's words, feeling a strange mixture of comfort and apprehension. The old man was right; he had been so focused on getting his career back on track that he'd neglected the emotional toll that was bottling up. "Thanks, I really need to hear that Dean," he finally responded vowing to make genuine strides to address his emotional health in the future.

"No problem kid, now get out of here and get into some good trouble, you kids nowadays are too serious." Dean Oak replied with a smile before lightly pushing Rakim's shoulder sending him on his way. "Okay, see you on the dance floor on Friday night and you can show me how they got down in your age." Rakim replied before bolting down the corridor now in a much better mood than before barely hearing the old deans annoyed shouts.

Chapter 328 Lost In Translation

[Mon,15th/July/2019, Red Oak Preparatory 14:30]

(driiiing) The last bell of the day sounded causing the eager students to immediately jump up from their desks hell-bent on regaining their freedom. Some teachers tried to regain control with words like 'The bell doesn't excuse you I do,' but they were quickly ignored by the students who flooded out of the room.

Everyone seemed to embody the mob mentality Idea of not making eye contact as if simply ignoring the teachers would land them in less trouble. In this chaos, the bodies of teenagers maxed out with angst and youthful spirit flooded the hallways making a Bline for the exit. It was mostly the younger students ready to head out for clubs and those seniors/juniors who still had to go shopping for prom.

In the end, none of the teachers were able to stop everyone only managing to catch the unlucky few who hesitated too in their actions. Even then they decided to scold them for a few moments before sending them on their way. None of them had any plans of staying behind to supervise detention especially so close to the end of the school year.

May was one of the students who was now walking in the corridors of Red Oak Prep holding a stack of books as she headed for her locker. Despite the chaos around the corridor her mind kept replaying the conversation she had with Rakim last night. "What an Idiot," She found herself muttering as she reached her locker not at all realising that a boy named Brett was having a conversation with her.

It's not that she was ignoring him it was just that she barely noticed his presence as the feeling of annoyance continued to rise within her. 'I want to ask you to prom, but I don't know if we are ready for what comes after,' his clear voice replayed in her head as she once again felt the same roller-coaster emotions, annoyance, happiness and confusion.

"So, if you don't have any plans maybe you.... and maybe I would be there too," Barely catching the last part of Brett's words she abruptly shut her locker with a loud clang causing the boy to jump in fright. Sending him an intense look she seemed to be trying to figure out who the person in front of her was.

Her gaze lingered on the letterman jacket for the baseball team but still couldn't seem to remember the boy's name. "You, can I ask you something?" She asked the boy who despite his athletic stature seemed to be ready to piss himself any moment now. "Uhu...Yes sure," the boy stammered trying his best to quickly compose himself.

Hearing a positive response from the boy who for some reason brightened upon hearing her speak to him a satisfied smile made its way on her face. This instantly caused critical damage to the boy who was now standing in a daze in front of her barely able to stand upright. As a matter of fact, if one looked closer they would notice a bit of drool forming at the corner of his mouth.

"If you like someone you would show it with actions, right?" Brett blinked, trying to shake off the shock of May actually speaking to him. His cheeks were turning pink, and he could feel the faint hint of a smile creeping up his face as he struggled to come up with a coherent answer. But just as he opened his mouth, May continued, not really expecting—or waiting for—a response.

"I mean, think about it," she said, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully as if she were processing the thought out loud for herself rather than for him. "If you have feelings for someone, you'd be clear, right? Not leaving them guessing, or letting another person get in your way no matter how valid an excuse that is." She gave a short, frustrated sigh, her gaze momentarily focused on the scuffed floor.

Brett's mouth hung open, his mind racing to figure out if she was talking about him, or if he was just a convenient audience. His mind didn't linger on the latter part of his conclusion as his love-sick brain immediately thought she was trying to send him a subtle message. 'Be a man and prove your feelings with actions,' is all he managed to process from her words. Pumped up by the motivation his love-sick brain was sending throughout his body, he was about to respond when she spoke up again.

"And let's be honest," May went on, her voice firm, "if someone is interested, they'd make it known, wouldn't they? No games, no 'I don't know if we're ready for what comes after,' nonsense." She rolled her eyes, clearly exasperated by her own recounting of Rakim's words. "I mean, it's not that complicated, right?"

Brett caught up in her intensity, quickly nodded along, his heart pounding as he tried to keep up. He was practically glowing with the thought that she might be talking about him, that maybe she was testing his resolve. Just as he inhaled, ready to spill out some grand, heartfelt response, May's words surged forward again, cutting him off effortlessly.

"And if you really care about someone, you'd be willing to face whatever comes after, wouldn't you?" She shook her head, more to herself than him, eyes narrowing with renewed conviction. "You wouldn't be standing there, stuck in your own head, wondering if things are 'right' or not. You'd just... do something about it."

Brett nodded again, caught in the whirlwind of her voice, his mouth opening and closing in helpless silence. He could feel a sweat forming on the back of his neck, every nerve in his body aching to say something, anything, to agree or reassure her. But before he could even muster a word, May continued.

"Honestly, what's the point of saying you're interested if you're not going to act on it?" she huffed, her gaze drifting into the distance. "I mean, at least have the guts to try. Or tell me what you expect me to do about these feelings you stirred up" she complained before looking up at Brett searching for an answer in his expression, or body language. Seeing him nod in what she assumed was confidence and maybe determination she got her answer.

"You think I should do something since he wants to protect his sister's feelings?" She asked Brett who continued to nod on reflex without fully understanding what the girl of his dreams was saying. "You're right I can also be brave and make the first step after all this isn't eighty's anymore."

May's eyes sparkled with newfound resolve as she looked past Brett, already thinking about what she would say to Rakim the next time she saw him. She wouldn't wait any longer to tell him how she felt, she had already kept her crush hidden for years only for it to grow into a wildfire. It wasn't for the fact he was handsome talented or was gaining fame as she had expected no less from him.

It was the little moments when he would be vulnerable and let her into what he was truly thinking that did it for her. When he would drop things on a dime to protect her whenever she was in trouble or simply needed help. He was her best friend when she needed someone to give her a kick or simply wanted to vent.

Often times he would tell her when he thought she was full of shit but would still let her vent for as long as she need. He wasn't all tough though as she could still remember him skipping both school and training just to take care of her when she got chicken pox. The idiot caught the disease just so she wouldn't be lonely and tried to play it off as needing a break from football, not at all realising that she spotted him watching game tape on his phone.

May's heart pounded as her thoughts wandered through those memories of Rakim. She didn't notice that Brett was still standing there. Of course, she still couldn't remember his name simply thinking of him as a random schoolmate she could vent to. But his flushed face and his nervous side-to-side hopping caught her attention causing her to believe he might need to relieve himself. Just as she was about to suggest just that he spoke up first surprising her as it was the first time, she heard his voice.

"May," he blurted, his voice loud enough to snap her out of her daze. "I, uh—I like you."

Chapter 329 Conversations

"May," he yelled, his voice loud enough to snap her out of her daze. "I, uh—I like you."

Brett's words seemed to hang in the air, catching May completely off guard. Her wide-eyed gaze met his, and she blinked, processing the confession that had just burst out of him like a sudden storm. She stared at him, her mind taking a moment to switch gears from the whirlwind of emotions she'd just been unravelling to the boy in front of her, suddenly laying his heart bare. For a beat, neither of them spoke, Brett, looking hopeful and terrified all at once.

She opened her mouth, then hesitated, the chaos of emotions swirling inside her settling into something awkwardly clear. She studied the boy in front of her and as if her brain was cleared from the fog of Rakim the name Brett popped into her mind. He was the ace pitcher for the varsity team ranked 7th in the state of Florida and was quite popular within the school.

"Oh," she started softly, trying her best to choose her following words carefully, not wanting to hurt the boy who had been so brave to confess to her. "Thank you for telling me, I really, truly appreciate it, but you should take the words back I don't deserve them from you." Her gaze fell briefly to the floor, struggling to find a way to soften the blow she was about to deliver. "But, I just... I'm not the right person for you. You deserve someone who is crazy about you and knows what a special person you truly are. I'm sorry,"

Brett's face fell, his hopeful expression fading as he absorbed her words. His shoulders sagged slightly, and for a moment, he just stood there, as if her response had robbed him of the energy to react. He forced a small, shaky smile, nodding a bit too quickly.

"Oh," he managed, his voice almost a whisper. "No, yeah, I... I get it. I just thought—" His words faltered, and he let out a quiet, embarrassed chuckle. "I thought maybe there was a chance. But, hey, thanks for... being honest, I guess."

May bit her lip, hating how crestfallen he looked. She hadn't wanted to hurt him, and she reached out a hand only to stop midway, knowing any words she could offer wouldn't help him. Good thing for her the awkward situation didn't persist as one of his mates who had been watching the interaction swooped in.

"C'mon bro I'll drive you home lest you hand the wheel to Jesus. Why u sad you should be celebrating that you had the courage to act. Not even Greg Maddux has pitched a perfect game," she heard the boy say not understanding whether he was trying to cheer his friend up or trying to antagonise him into getting over his emotions. She watched as Brett let out a forced laugh, his shoulders lifting a little as his friend threw an arm around him, pulling him along the hallway.

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'You think the song is, okay?' Rakim inwardly asked Eva already feeling nervous at what he was about to do. He had been preparing this for months after his mate Weah in the Celtic squad told him how he asked his high school sweetheart to prom.

He had managed to convince his friends in a band to help him write a song and perform it in front of his girl. The confession didn't end well with the girl rejecting him outright as it turned out she had a crush

on his best friend. The moral of the story is that he was brave enough to do something and that he got rejected for it.

Given that example, Rakim was having a bit of pre-show jitters similar to when he first participated in the school play. {You are gonna do it anyway, so why the hesitation,} Eva replied in a disinterested tone not at all trying to placate the nerves of her host. Knowing she was right Rakim simply nodded as he walked towards Reece who was pulling into the student parking lot.

He was driving his matt black Ford Raptor taking up the entire lane with its massive body and custom wheels the boy had bought. He had gotten the car as his birthday present upon turning 16 but if you asked his older sister the only reason, he got the car is his ability to catch a pigskin. Her father loved the sport and having a son who was so talented in the game and genuinely took it seriously was a point of pride for him.

Reece was all too happy to accept the gift especially since he had been salivating over the car for months dropping not-so-subtle hints like 'I would love to have a Raptor as my first car.' That was beside the point as what really mattered to Rakim was the trailer that was being pulled by him. On it was a black piano that the boys had liberated from Bennett's home without his mother finding out.

"Special delivery," Reece exclaimed after coming to a stop next to the curb, smack dab in front of a walkway that students would have to pass to get to their cars or head to the club areas. "You can still cop out of this, no one would blame you that girls got the crazy eyes," Bennet exclaimed from the passenger seat with a worried look plastered on his face.

"I know she is my sister but even I agree that she is a handful," Reece added not even thinking of defending his sister as he seemed to agree with his best friend's analogy. "It's like the start of a horror movie, this is your chance to turn around before shit gets real."

"Are you both still mad that she beat you up in the taekwondo tournament?" Rakim questioned not at all taking their warning seriously knowing they were just joking or trying to get him to mess up later. After all, it would be much funnier for everyone if the boy got so nervous that he started forgetting his words. They had no malicious intentions but simply wanted to take any chance at enjoyment they could.

"Hey she used an illegal move, the ref was blind not to catch that," Bennett retorted with indignation immediately going on the defensive. "Yeah, I was distracted by Stacy who was flirting with me in the spectator's seat." Reece also defended himself to what he deemed was a good enough defence only to feel a cold stare locking in on him.

Turning towards the direction of the gaze he spotted the figure of Lexi and her volleyball girls just a few yards away from their location. They had been heading towards them and had clearly overheard the boy's conversation causing both Him and Bennett to sweat. That was due to Madison Bennett's date also being a part of the group of girls and she was also a loyal subscriber of the girl code. The Old Testament of that code, which dictates in chapter 1 of the book of Boyfriends, that if my friend is mad at you then we all are also mad at you along with everyone close to you.

Before Rakim even realised what was going on the two girls stormed off with their friends with the two boys following in toe trying to explain themselves. "(sigh) Guess I gotta do this myself," Rakim muttered as he watched this scene play out only to be startled by the figure of his sister behind him.

"I could lend you a hand if you ask nicely," she said from behind him almost scaring the be-Jesus out of him. Seeing her brother's shocked reaction Emma burst out with a soft laugh fully enjoying the unexpected scare she had caused him.

"(whoosh) always knew you'd be the death of me," Rakim responded quickly regaining his composure, "You sure you're ok helping me.... I know you said you're ok with this but...."

"No buts, she likes you and you hardly like anyone outside our family. Besides what is a big sister for if not for this type of situation," She replied with a bright smile before proceeding to head towards the trailer where the piano rested and started connecting the four speakers meant to enhance the sound.

Chapter 330 Promposal

The sun hung low in the sky, casting a warm golden glow over the school's parking lot. Rakim stood in front of the piano, a polished black instrument resting on a trailer hitched to his friend's Ford Raptor. The speakers were plugged in, ready to amplify whatever performance he was about to give attracting quite a few students who were passing by.

They recognised him not just due to the fame he had gained in Scotland but simply because he was genuinely popular in the school. He participated in quite a few school activities and his natural charisma shone through gaining him quite the popularity. However, most simply realised that they would probably get a lot of clicks on their post if the young wunderkind was in it. Even if he was doing something mundane, his fans and haters would it up like nicotine.

As Rakim took a deep breath, he could feel the thrill of anticipation bubbling inside him. He glanced around, spotting familiar faces among the crowd forming around him, phones already raised to capture the moment. The hum of chatter subsided as he positioned his fingers above the keys. He had learned to play the piano as part of his music class and had practiced it to an average level as his dad had assured him it's a useful skill to have in the future.

At that point, he wasn't sure what he meant but at this very moment, he was happy at having his father's guidance in this life. Having a father figure that could help shape the man he was going to become is something he appreciated. These thoughts quickly passed through his head as his hands hovered over the keys. Sending a quick glance to his sister beside the car she gave him a thumbs up indicating that May was on the way to the parking lot.

Adjusting the mice one last time he started to play, his fingers gliding effortlessly across the keys. The notes floated into the air, wrapping around the departing students like a melodic embrace. The first verse spilled forth, a heartfelt confession of his emotions towards the girl whom he had developed feelings for.

"But nobody's gonna make you change what you probably don't like anyway 'bout you, darlin'," he sang, his voice raspy voice resonating with a magnetic feeling enhanced by his natural charm. He closed his eyes imagining May's face as he continued, "So you might as well, hmm-mmm, be somebody..."

Gradually, students began to notice. Heads turned, curious glances exchanged. A few of his classmates paused mid-step, intrigued by the weirdly enchanting sound despite it not sounding professional. They assumed it was maybe someone trying to shoot a video for their YouTube or TikTok but were quickly surprised when they recognised who it was.

Some pulled out their phones, capturing the moment, while others moved closer, drawn in by the magic of Rakim's performance. As he continued, the lyrics poured from him like a river of emotion. "Yeah, I'm on the stage right now, singing your favourite song," he crooned, his heart racing. "Look in the crowd and you're nowhere to be found as they sing along..."

In the distance, May emerged from the school building, her expression one of confusion as she noticed the gathering crowd. She squinted against the sun, trying to figure out what was happening. Because she could clearly recognise the voice that by now is ingrained in her head but couldn't figure out what was happening.

After all, despite Rakim being outgoing he was not one to sing in front of crowds. She had to practically beg him to sing a song during karaoke nights and that was in front of people he knew. Never mind now that he was dealing with random people from school thus her logical brain couldn't associate the person singing with him as she continued forward.

Pushing past quite a few students she arrived a couple yards in front of her brother's monstrosity of a pick-up truck. She never liked that ugly thing, not because it's a bad car but for the simple fact it made no sense. They lived in Florida, not Texas and her brother wasn't a cowboy who would need such a

strong muscle car. Her brother's car is what got her attention, but her gaze quickly locked onto the figure playing the piano at the back of the trailer.

He had his eyes closed but as if feeling her gaze his eyes shot open immediately locking onto her as a bright smile appeared on his face. It was a smile that she knew all too well, it was his I'm all that and I know it smile he used whenever he would tease her. Usually, he would stop before he went too far never letting things get too serious but by the rapid beating of her heart, she knew he wouldn't stop this time.

She felt all tingly inside as butterflies were doing backflips in her stomach as she waited for his next words, she didn't have to wait long as his voice drifted into her mind now sounding as if she was the only person who was present. "I see the look on your face, I see ya hiding the hate, I see ya looking for someone to scoop you right off of your feet,"

As Rakim's fingers danced across the piano keys, the crowd around him swelled with energy but his entire focus was on one peach blond girl in the crowd. The notes floated like petals in the wind, captivating everyone's attention as each lyric he sang echoed his feelings. Even the slight mistakes he made when playing the piano were ignored by his sheer stage presence which seemed to overwhelm everyone's senses.

He wasn't a born musician, but he had stage presence for days honed from his composure entertaining stadium full of spectators. May who heard him sing looked into the light green eyes that seemed to sparkle in the sun as each word tugged at her heartstrings. "You wanna ride in a Wraith, you wanna go out on dates," he continued, his voice rising with passion.

The way he sang made it clear to her that the lyrics were meant just for her, without even understanding why he was performing in the first place. Each of his words stirred something within that she didn't have the time to process. "You want somebody to come bring you flowers, someone to talk to for hours, wash your back while y'all sit in the shower," he sang, as she started walking towards the front wanting to get closer to him completely ignoring the odd looks some of the students gave her.

[Someone to tell you "you're beautiful"

Someone to tell you and mean it

Someone to tell you I love you everyday

And don't got a reason

You want someone to bring you peace

Someone to help you sleep

Someone to pick you up when you feeling down feeling lonely]

May's heart raced, she could feel the warmth of the sun on her skin, but all she could focus on was Rakim wanting to save this moment in her memories forever. She didn't even pay attention to some of the sharp-eyed students who realised that the performance was for her and started putting her in their videos. She simply didn't care about them as all their faces were a blur to her not at all worth paying attention to.

For May, the world around them faded. The crowd was just a distant echo; all that mattered was Rakim. "Somebody, Who can open up those gates, Open up those gates to your heart, Only if you'll let me,..." His voice dipped low, almost intimate, and she could feel the weight of his words pressing against her chest. She finally stood at the edge of the gathering, just a few feet away. The realization of what was happening washed over her. He was finally making a move and knowing him he was fully serious about his intentions.

The song continued, and the crowd responded with enthusiasm, their cheers amplifying the moment as they enjoyed the performance. This was despite the fact most of them didn't understand what brought this on and others simply choked it up to a last-minute promposal. However, Emma who was also filming from the side knew that her brother meant much more than asking her friend to a simple dance.

[I say

You look good without no makeup

No lashes even better when you wake up

Uh-uh-uh

I see the look on you face

I see ya looking for peace

I see ya tired of the hurt

Tired of the pain

Tired of the nights where you can't get no sleep]

The performance reached its climax, and as he finished the song, he looked straight at her with an expression that was a mixture of hope and uncertainty. The crowd watching from the side erupted with loud cheers and applause having enjoyed the impromptu concert. However, what caught her attention was the plaque yellow A1 poster with the words.