

From Chapter 14, Centerfield

Brandi's eyelids fell shut as the cooling afternoon air penetrated through her cotton socks. Her voice became feather-soft. "I was horrible to you last night — cruel and selfish."

Cody shrugged her off. "Nah, you weren't. Of course, you might've been a little mean and ornery. Waspish and petulant, maybe."

She tried to smile, but her chin softened and tremored. "They *meant* to bruise me, shame me, make me a public example." She placed her hand over her lips.

"It's okay," his words like a quiet breath. "Nobody can hear us."

"Afterward, I wanted to scrub every place they touched me. If you hadn't been there — I mean that's what they do. It's a warning to anyone else that...anyone else that..."

"Anyone else that stands up to 'em?"

She wrung her hands and looked away. "I was so angry. Shamed in public. I didn't need your understanding or your pity. I just had to show how tough I was, but all I did was take out my humiliation on you."

"So how do you feel now?"

"Violated. I can't help it, Cody. I didn't want you or my parents to know. I feel so exposed, helpless, ugly. I can't get it out of my mind. I hate that."

He nodded.

"Yesterday, I could never have dreamed of sitting here now with Cody Musket next to the bullpen in the middle of this huge stadium, but after last night, I wonder how much future any of us has."

"Are you scared?"

"I'd be lying if I said no." A tear rolled from the corner of her eye. "I've drawn you into my trouble. You have enough of your own. I'm a target. Maybe you should stay as far away from me as you can get."

"Right now, that wouldn't be very far." He brushed her tear with his thumb.

Her pulse raced like a little girl lost in the dark who had just found the porch light.