

**FINDING**  
*Chaz*

*Bonus Chapter*

**BY ANISA ASHABI**

# *Surprise Guest*

While I'm not sure what professional direction I'll take in life, it's pretty clear that I can cross event planning off the list. By noon today, Nick's been to the grocery store twice, the marquee blew across the yard, and the coolers needed to be sanitized, not just washed. Chaz still has no idea we're throwing him a party, and I want everything to be perfect when he walks in.

"He's a dude," Nick said last night as we went over our checklist together. "Trust me. He's not going to care."

"I care," I said. "You only come out once."

CeCe and Hanna are in the kitchen arranging cold cuts and slicing baguettes for the antipasti, while Nick agreed to bake and frost an enormous rainbow cake for the occasion. I check my phone. Chaz should be here within the next fifteen minutes. The list of attendees isn't that long: Chaz, Hanna, CeCe, Jerome, Phil, The Three Tenors, and, of course, Nick and me. But I'm thinking Blaze might stay for a bit, given he's in on the entire thing, and Frankie promised to swing by as soon as he gets done with work.

"Ready?" CeCe calls from the kitchen. "We're almost done here."

"Got it," I say, tossing the bleach wipe I was using to clean the counter into the trash can. "How's the food situation?"

**ANISA ASHABI**

“Coming,” Nick says hurriedly. “Everything is almost ready to go. But, seriously, we should’ve just ordered in Subway.”

“Chaz prefers Quiznos, actually,” Hanna interjects. “He says the low-carb menu helps keep the weight off.”

Nick raises an eyebrow. “I’m sure he couldn’t resist a footlong, though, eh?”

“Want me to take the salad out of the fridge?” CeCe asks breathlessly, wiping her hands on a dish towel. A cheetah-print apron tents over her belly bump. “It’s almost time.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Nick says. “Grab it. Roxie, we’re ready to roll.”

“Okay then.” I glance at the oven clock. “Let’s move.”

Each taking two items, we walk out to the backyard, where the tent is thankfully still standing. Placing the paper cups and plates beside the spread, Nick stands guard while the girls and I step back into the house for a last-minute sweep. After checking everything for the hundredth time, Hanna and CeCe run upstairs to my room to change while I strip off in the bathroom and pull on the summer dress I chose for today. It’s a flowy, strapless number in a shade of pale yellow that contrasts well against my hair. I run a brush through my hair a couple of times and set it into a loose braid before checking my makeup again and bending down to fasten my sandals.

“They’re here!” Hanna squeals from the landing. She’s clutching CeCe’s arm, helping her descend the stairs. I can tell Hanna’s in her element at the center of the party planning. I charge outside, and the three of us walk out to the backyard together. Once under the tent, I motion for Nick to start unwrapping the appetizers.

“Dang,” Andy calls out as The Three Tenors step into view. “You sure went all out.”

“Good thing I skipped breakfast,” Phil remarks.

“Hey, Phil,” I say as the two boys lean in for a hug. “Grab a plate.”

“Yo, Nick!” Kris hollers, emerging with Donovan a moment later. “My dude!”

## FINDING CHAZ BONUS CHAPTER

Nick smiles as the recognition sets in. “Hey, li'l man. What goes?”

“The usual,” Kris says, reaching for one of the wine coolers Hanna snagged from her house. “Where’s Chaz?”

“He’ll be here,” CeCe replies, jamming her hands into the pockets of her joggers. “Too cool to show up on time to his own party, I guess.”

Kris grins. “Sounds like Chaz, all right.”

Twenty minutes in, Chaz is still not here, and the girls and I are starting to panic. Without him, this can’t be a coming-out party because we’re all straight, and the lone pink balloon we tied to his chair earlier is looking more like a political statement than a personal one. Jerome and Frankie have arrived, and the lively chatter of minutes before is beginning to lull. Hanna and I are obsessively checking our phones every thirty seconds, but there’s been no response to the dozens of messages we’ve sent.

“What the hell is going on?” Hanna hisses to me. “Does he know anything?”

“Yeah,” I say, perplexed. “But, I mean, did he know it was kind of time-specific?”

“We just told him it was a casual hangout with a few friends,” CeCe says. “Like, we had to get him here somehow. What’s the deal?”

“Something’s wrong.” I feel a familiar pit forming in my stomach. “He’s never like this. Chaz would always let us know.”

“Chill,” Hanna says. “We don’t know that. Maybe something came up.”

“There’s no way he hasn’t gotten any of our texts,” CeCe points out. “He’s always near his phone. What gives?”

CeCe’s question is answered a moment later by the squeal of tires on pavement followed by the sound of a car door slamming. Figuring Blaze finally dropped Chaz off, I sigh with relief and turn my attention back to our guests. I’m just cracking open a can of lemon spritzer when two boys in varsity ball caps swagger into the front yard. I crane my

**ANISA ASHABI**

neck and spot a lifted Jeep parked out on the curb. My throat goes dry. Could it be...?

"I'm comin' up, so you better get this party started," Chaz croons, raising the roof with his hands. Standing beside him is none other than Blake Tisdale. "Let's party."

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"You're late."

"I know," Chaz laughs, adjusting a paper Burger King crown perched on his head. "Sorry. Just had to grab my plus one." He motions to Blake, a smile playing on the corner of his lips. "Plus, some Whoppers for the road."

Blake tilts his chin up at me. "Hey, Roxie."

"Blake," I say, my voice sounding far away. "Welcome."

"That's Corey and Austin." Chaz gestures to two other boys they arrived with, who've huddled by the cooler. "We all know each other from drama. The baseball team helped us move a bunch of heavy equipment one afternoon, and we kind of all got to talking, so..."

"Plus he's Coach Humbert's kid," Blake says, nodding at Chaz. He chuckles. "We all know Coach."

"Coach knows you, all right," Chaz laughs, mouthing "Cousin James!" at me when Blake's back is turned. "Everyone here?"

"Yup," I reply. "Jerome. Nick's best friend, Frankie. But we didn't really want to start without you."

"Well, start!" Chaz says. "Please. I'm guessing that's my seat?" He points to the captain's chair with the pink balloon.

I giggle. "All yours, Queen."

"I've got to greet my subjects," Chaz says, rubbing his hands together. "And I know you two already know each other, so I'll be leaving now." He shoots me a covert wink.

"We're good," Blake says pleasantly. "You go on and get out there, party boy."

## FINDING CHAZ BONUS CHAPTER

I wait until Chaz is under the tent before turning to face Blake. An army of butterflies seems to have taken up residence in my abdomen. I try to keep from fidgeting, but it's impossible. Blake appears exponentially better-looking every time I see him, and today is no exception. His face is tanned from spring training, and his hair seems lighter than it was in the fall. I notice this because Nick's hair is the same way, but also because it's Blake, and I tend to notice every minute detail of his existence.

"So, Chaz," Blake says. "He's something, isn't he?"

"Oh, Lord," I say, rolling my eyes. "Things will never be the same once Chaz Humbert is in your life."

Blake smiles. "I kind of sensed that. Like, I don't know him that well. We just got to talking that one afternoon when we were helping move stuff, and he was funny as hell. Cracking jokes the whole time."

"Sounds about right," I chuckle, trying to retain eye contact with Blake. It shouldn't be difficult; they're like pools of molten honey. Nevertheless, it's like staring into the sun, and I have to pry my gaze away for fear of looking creepy or obsessed.

"He kind of just befriended me out of the blue and stuff," Blake continues, oblivious to my struggle. "Way different from how he was before."

"Yeah, he's a whole new person," I say. "And I don't know if you know, like, what this party's for, but..."

"Oh yeah," Blake cuts in. "Everyone knows. Like, it was unexpected at first. But it makes sense. No dude is surrounded by that many good-looking girls unless he's gay. Or rich." He laughs. "It just doesn't work that way."

I feel my face warm at the indirect compliment. "You're not the first to point that out."

"But hey," Blake says. "Kudos to him. Dude's brave. I'll give him that."

"So you know, then," I say, lowering my gaze.

Blake frowns. "Know what?"

**ANISA ASHABI**

I take a breath. “That we were never together.” I wait for his reaction. “That night, at the party.”

“I thought you were at the time,” Blake says, taking a sudden interest in his sneakers. “Like, I just figured it was some freshman bullshit and left it alone. Seemed like drama. But after a few weeks, I began to wonder if you really were. When I would see you and him and Hanna all together, I kinda suspected. I just didn’t want to say anything.”

“He dated Reece Margolis,” I tell him. “For a few weeks, anyway.”

“I did, too.” Blake laughs. “Fifth grade. We used to hold hands on the bus and everything.”

“Wow.” I shake my head. “Fifth-grade player, huh?”

“Hardly.” He chuckles. “She wanted me to kiss her, but I said I couldn’t because I had to go to baseball practice. We kind of fell apart after that.”

“Damn. The boys couldn’t wait?”

“Bro Code,” Blake replies. “Can’t leave my dawgs in the dugout.”

“Can I get you something to drink?” I ask, gesturing to the cooler. “Coke? Sprite? Some food, maybe?”

“I’ll take a Sprite for now,” Blake says. “Thanks.”

“Ice or no ice?” I inquire as we walk in step toward the tent.

“Uh, they’re in the cooler, right?” he asks, looking at the ground and smiling. A wave of embarrassment floods through me.

“Yup,” I say, hoping my face isn’t as red as it feels. “Sans ice.”

“I used to think Coca-Cola and Coke were two different beverages,” Blake offers. “If that helps.”

I hand him his soda. “Great minds think alike.”

“Well, thanks,” Blake says. He shoots me a dazzling smile. “I’ll save a spot for you over on the porch.”

At one side of the tent, Hanna and CeCe are macking down medianoches, their eyes darting from Blake to me to Blake again. I pray that after today, there will be some sort of development that I can fill them in on later. On the far end of the table, Nick, Frankie, and

## FINDING CHAZ BONUS CHAPTER

Chaz are hunched over a backgammon board, passing a bag of Ruffles between the three of them. Jerome is spectating, and I'm pleased to see he and Nick appear to have buried the hatchet and are on speaking terms again. By the firepit, I overhear Blake's friends talking sports with The Three Tenors, effectively leaving Blake and me on our own. Blake is lounging under the porch umbrella with his cap off, his cheeks rosy in the afternoon warmth. I feel a ripple of nervousness course through me. If I thought time, distance, or Tiffany would diminish my feelings for him, I was dead wrong. I grab a Sprite out of the cooler, shake the water droplets off my hands, and make my way toward him. I catch Chaz in my peripheral vision, smiling in a self-satisfied sort of way.

"Thank you," I mouth to him over my shoulder. He nods and tips his crown.