

# THE LAST LAP by Christy Hayes

## EXCERPT

He inched the door open a crack and his heart jammed into his throat. Instead of a beefy henchman, a willowy redhead stood fuming on his doorstep. He swung the door open wide and gawked at Amanda Holloway's sister, tapping her sandaled foot on the mat.

"Stay away from us." Her velvet voice quivered with rage. "Do you understand me?"

"Uh ..." Bryan couldn't organize his thoughts into anything resembling words. Seeing her in the store had been like a punch to the gut. Standing inches away on his doorstep where he could count the freckles across her nose and smell the perfume on her skin left him senseless. The woman didn't need a baseball bat. She wielded a punch with her presence.

"You've got nothing to say?"

He extended his hand. "I'm Bryan Westfall. It's nice to officially meet you."

"Nice?" She gave his hand a death stare and her tone pitched higher. "You think this is a social call?"

Bryan dropped his hand. "I don't have a clue what this is."

"This is a warning." She aimed a finger in his face. "Do not come near me, my niece, or our store, ever again. I don't know what you're doing here, but you're not going to weasel your way into our lives like your brother did. He did enough damage, thank you very much."

Whatever evidence Bryan had been searching for landed squarely at his feet with her threat. Corey's presence in this woman's life had changed it for the worse. "Listen ..."

"Meg."

"I'm sorry for your loss, Meg."

His simple statement and quiet tone stopped her cold. She straightened her stance and folded her arms across her V-necked white t-shirt, an apostrophe forming between her brows. "What do you want from us? Why are you here?"

Bryan stepped back. "Why don't you come in and I'll explain."

The crevice between her brows deepened and she shook her head. "I don't think so."

Of course she didn't trust him. He was a stranger. His brother had slithered into her sister's life and torn it to shreds. Meg was the living, breathing, reminder of what happened when people let Corey and his devil-may-care outlook into their orbit. "I'm cleaning out Corey's apartment. Trying to piece together his last few months."

"You're his brother." It wasn't so much a statement as an accusation.

"You and your sister were close?"

The sadness in her eyes said as much as her choked agreement. Grief sat just below the surface. One tiny shift was all it took to uncover her pain. "Very close."

"Corey and I..." How could he explain their complicated relationship? He couldn't, not without a history lesson she didn't care to hear. "We had a falling out."

She snorted. "Of course you did." She stared past him into the apartment filled with boxes labeled for charity. "That must make this pretty easy for you, huh? Boxing up his stuff, giving it away as if he never existed. You're probably relieved he's gone. No more fighting, no more messy feelings about your flesh and blood."

Shame heated the skin of his neck, giving his voice a dangerous edge. "Nothing about this is easy."

"My sister and I lived and worked together." She raised her chin in the air, determined to drive her point home. "We raised her daughter together. Nothing about losing her was easy on any of us. I'm sorry for your loss, Bryan, but you can look for answers elsewhere. We've been through enough. The last thing we need is another slick-talking Westfall poking around where he doesn't belong."

Would she feel better or worse to know they shared the same impression of Corey? He decided not to find out. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to trouble you."

"It's too late for that. Just hear me loud and clear—leave us alone. Pack your stuff and go back where you came from. Whatever Corey was up to before he died doesn't change the outcome. He's dead and he dragged Amanda down with him. If you care at all about those of us left behind, you'll go and never come back."

She turned to leave, and a panicked surge of impatience had him stepping toward her, had him saying something he should have thought through. "I know you feel—"

She turned back so quickly her hair tangled in her teeth. She pulled the strands free and speared him with an angry scowl. “You don’t have a clue how I feel.”

He didn’t, not really, but neither did she. “I lost my brother, too.”

She closed her mouth and stared at him, the heat coloring her cheeks dimmed.

“Maybe we weren’t close. Maybe I couldn’t have changed the outcome, but you’re not the only one grieving. He may be the villain, but he was my brother. He was a man—a flawed man—with a family who cared. I’m not here to get you all worked up, but I need answers. My family needs answers.”

She watched him with wary, grass-green eyes. “Your answers don’t involve us.”

“Your sister knew him better than anyone.”

She shook her head and the red strands caught fire in the sunlight. “That’s not saying a lot.”

He had no other option but to beg. “Please, Meg. I don’t know where else to turn.”

She stared at him, grasping the strap of the leather bag slung over her shoulder in a chokehold. “Then I guess you’re out of luck.” She pivoted and strode away, eating up ground with her long, slender legs.

Bryan watched the sway of her miniskirt as she stormed off, then closed the door and turned to face Corey’s apartment. He rubbed the ache in his gut. He may have needed answers, but finding them just got a whole lot harder.