

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace on a lush green lawn. The man, wearing a dark shirt and red shorts, is leaning over the woman, who is wearing a red top. In the foreground, a white anchor-shaped sculpture sits on a white surface. A small, broken heart-shaped object and a yellow rope are also visible on the white surface.

IF I COULD

Love didn't need a label...

B . C E L E S T E

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If I Could

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*Dedicated to literally anything but 2020.
2020 can suck it.*

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PLAYLIST

Playlist

“Love Lies” – Khalid and Normani
“False God” – Taylor Swift
“Not Afraid” – Eminem
“Kinfolk” – Sam Hunt
“You Are the Reason” – Calum Scott
“Living Proof” – Camila Cabello
“Kryptonite” – 3 Doors Down
“Team” – Noah Cyrus & Max
“You and Me” – Lifehouse
“Marry Me” – Jason Derulo

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OTHER BOOKS BY B. CELESTE

[The Truth about Heartbreak](#)

[The Truth about Tomorrow](#)

[The Truth about Us](#)

[Underneath the Sycamore Tree](#)

[Where the Little Birds Go](#)

[Where the Little Birds Are](#)

[Into the Clear Water](#)

[Color Me Pretty](#)

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CHAPTER ONE

REN

SIX HOURS, of what should have been a four-and-a-half-hour drive, without air conditioning in the summer heat doesn't bode well for setting a successful mood the rest of the day. And the worst part is things always happen in threes. First the A/C in my relatively new Jeep Wrangler shits the bed, then Google Maps leads me through west bumfuck New York that tacks on an extra hour to my already monotonous drive, and now *this*. This being the freshly burnt siding of what is supposed to be my new rental house.

Faulty wiring, according to the silver fox fire chief. I'm not sure if it was the long drive, or the heat that made me laugh deliriously until the he gawked at me like he considered calling someone from the psych ward. Probably a combination of the two. Regardless, my gaze wanders from his cautious expression back to the small two-story family home I moved all this way to settle into. The entire right side looks like the food me and my former frat brothers used to cook—blackened and hopeless.

I barely register the faint "sorry" coming from the man in uniform before one of his crew members calls him over for something.

As soon as I blow out a long, much needed breath, I do what I always do in times like these. Think of the positives. For one, if I hadn't gotten lost, I could have been inside when the fire started. Then, I wouldn't only be

overheated from the lack of A/C, but probably covered in second- and third-degree burns. And that, well, that doesn't sound like fun.

Another solid thought is the number in my bank account. I have more than enough money to pay for my car to get fixed, a hotel for a few nights while I figure shit out and could probably get my deposit back on the house to put toward something else. It's not the end of the world. Just like the career-ending prognosis of severe arthritis in my shoulder and elbow wasn't.

Truthfully, I was relieved at the sound of the doctor's solemn words the day I got checked out after having too many problems throwing pitches. The only person who seemed torn up about me losing my chances in the MLB—Major League Baseball—was my father. The guy is a total prick, who's always been obsessed with my ability to pitch a ball like some of the best. An old coach rotated positions back when and put me where I excelled after being on the outfield for years. According to Dad, I was "wasting my potential" out there. In hindsight, all those years "wasted" was saving my arm from worse pain and inevitable surgeries. But I still love him. Breaking the news to him and Mom was difficult, and the dinner I'd done it over got quiet quick when I told them I was going to start applying for coaching gigs around the city and surrounding boroughs. I know his lackluster thoughts on coaching, but I still to this day don't care what they are. It's not his life to live.

So, yeah. Day one in Exeter, my new home for the next year, is not going as planned. But it could be worse. I could have been carted away with third-degree burns, dead, or broke and stranded in the middle of nowhere. I'm none of those things. I'm *lucky*, alive, and content.

One quick internet search later, I find the closest hotel and climb into my Jeep while coming up with a mental to-do list on the drive there. Call Mom to let her know I arrived safely, get in touch with the homeowner—a friendly old man who moved to some retirement village in Florida following his wife's passing—about a refunded deposit, and then phone my best friend Della to bitch about my day. I should also probably eat since I haven't had anything besides the stale ass breakfast sandwich I picked up at some seedy gas station early this morning. My stomach has demanded it be fed a handful of times, but all I've downed is three bottles of water that also extended my trip by the amount of piss breaks I needed along the way.

Finding a parking spot quickly once I pull into the Hilton, I grab one of my bags and lock up. I don't know what kind of place Exeter is, but it seems like there shouldn't be a lot of problems based on the crime rate search Della decided to do when I told her I accepted the job offer at the local high school. I'm not about to lug all my shit up to my room with me, so it'll have to stay in the car. All I can hope is that it's there in the morning.

I'm not in the mood to flirt with the busty blonde manning the front desk as she checks me in, accepts my credit card, and tells me all about her shift being done at eight. I'm sweaty, tired, and want nothing more than to gorge on the cheeseburger and fries I bought from McDonalds, take a shower, and crash. Shooting her a wink after subtly letting her down, I grab my bag and head toward the elevator.

It takes two hours of phone calls before I'm cleaned, changed into my typical bedtime attire, aka nothing, and dropping onto the queen mattress. Based on what Larry Kravitz, the homeowner of my would-be house, told me after he profusely apologized about the fire, I shouldn't have a problem finding another place. He agreed to a refund, gave me a couple names for some realtors in the area, and wished me luck.

Mom and I didn't talk for too long because she and Dad were going out to some dinner event. A charity gala, or some shit I don't follow along with. Not my thing. But I know how much she loves donning expensive dresses, heels, and makeup, so I tell her I'm here, exclude the fire so she won't worry, and tell her to have fun. According to Dad in the background, they were already late as is, so why drag out a conversation that's forced to begin with?

Della, on the other hand, was happy to hear from me. She wanted to hear every detail, telling me she missed me and couldn't wait to see me since the distance between us is now shortened, after she ran from the big city to be with her father's best friend. We only live a little over an hour away from each other, and she's already planning a celebratory dinner at her house for whenever I'm free.

It isn't until almost ten o'clock when realization hits me that I'm supposed to be at my new job, the whole reason I moved, first thing tomorrow morning to fill out some paperwork and meet a few of the faculty. The new school year starts in less than a month, meaning in three and a half weeks, I'll be Mr. McKinley, history teacher, and Coach McKinley, coaching the football team this fall and baseball in the spring.

Though, end of summer conditioning for the football team starts next week, which mean Coach McKinley will finally get to see what I have to work with for the season.

Really, the employment opportunity was sheer luck. I applied to quite a few places around the city, but competition is heavy. Even someone with stats like mine while I played on Bentley University's Division 1 baseball team didn't catch the interest of any potential employers. If anything, they spent more time offering me pitied responses over my inability to play, before patting my head and sending me away.

Fuckers.

Exeter is further upstate than I originally planned to move, but when I was offered the coaching gig, it'd caught my interest. My major in Secondary Education with a focus in history wouldn't go to waste, even though Dad told me countless times I was wasting my time on having a backup plan when I could have focused solely on the game. Thankfully for both of us, I didn't listen to him.

The contract with Exeter High is only for a year, a trial, according to my new boss. Since I've already enrolled in grad school to finish my education, they offered to help pay the tuition if I'm kept on. Do I need the financial help? No. I come from a stupid-rich family, so money has never been an issue. But the offer was enough to make me agree to the terms over the phone and break the news to my family and friends. I'm still not sure my father likes the choice I made, but he didn't tell me not to go either. In my mind, he's proud of me. Like Mom, he just sucks at showing it.

Thankfully, sleep doesn't take long to find me, and I drift off hoping tomorrow will be a better day.

CHAPTER TWO

REECE

EXETER'S HALLWAYS smell musty from the lack of use they've seen over the past two months, but I'd take it over body odor any day. At some point in the next couple of weeks I'm sure it'll smell like the floor wax they use to clean the tiles, and whatever else the cleaning staff uses before the start of the school year. All I know is that it takes approximately ten minutes after the automatic doors unlock at seven fifteen before everything reeks of teenage misery, and the varying extremes that delve between not enough deodorant and too much Axe body spray.

Turning the corner to my new classroom, with the last box of supplies I'll need for the year, I spot who I can only assume is a new faculty member staring at one of the many trophy cases lining the east wing with interest. At least, I can only imagine he's one of the newbies that John Richman, my boss, and Exeter's principal, told me about only a week ago during a run-in at the store. Apparently, there's a handful of new faculty members. "Fresh faces" in his words, and the one standing in front of me is definitely that.

Not that I'm old. Hell, I started at Exeter right out of grad school at a ripe twenty-five, which still feels like yesterday even though it's been almost five years. Pushing thirty feels more like pushing sixty-five after the first year of teaching English here. I love the job. There have just been times, especially that first twelve months, where I loved it a little less when the tough shit came, but that was nobody's fault but my own.

The high-pitched squeak of my shoes against the floor as I approach the possible-new guy, who probably wouldn't be wearing a nice pair of black slacks and form-fitting navy button-down otherwise, gains his attention. His body turns to me, and I'm met with something familiar. Hope, excitement, and a dash of sorrow carved onto his chiseled face, slightly squared jaw dotted with dark stubble that matches his brown hair, and a large smile that brightens his tan face. If America had a twenty-first century poster boy, he would be the face of it.

Balancing the box against one hip, I offer him a hand when I'm in reaching distance. "Hey, man. Reece Nichols. You need help with anything?"

His strong grip meets mine as he shakes like he's been trained to do so properly, his callused fingers wrapping around mine and rivaling my fair skin all thanks to the mixed English and Irish roots in my blood. "Lawrence McKinley." Letting go first, he jabs a thumb behind him at the case again. "I was just admiring the display. Richman told me the school's athletics were top in the state, but it's always impressive seeing firsthand."

I nod, knowing we've won a fair share of championships and tournaments, but athletics is far from my realm of interest or understanding. I can tell the difference between a soccer ball and football but couldn't explain how either game worked. Besides one Homecoming event that I was dragged to by a few coworkers, I haven't attended any of the other games to make conversation about it. "Yeah, Exeter's known for producing some of the best. We've had a few students go on to join a few different leagues." *I think*. I've heard a few other teachers gossip about former students, but I don't necessarily pay too much attention. A student from a few years back got drafted as a first pick to a team in the NFL I actually heard of thanks to a buddy of mine, Iverson, who knows his sports trivia.

"No shit?" Awe takes over his tone as he turns back to the case, one hand sliding into the front pocket of his slacks. "Seems like one kid won a lot of these. Don't think I've heard of him play professionally though. Kaiden Monroe?"

Shoulders stiffening, I force them to relax before his eyes, equally as dark brown as his chocolate hair, can see my tense stature. I knew he was going to say that name before it passed his lips, but it doesn't make the memories of Monroe, or anything surrounding him, less of a pain to remember. It's true that Kaiden, who graduated five years ago, is one of the

better athletes Exeter has seen. The former coach used to boast about the kid's skills, as did most of the teaching staff when they weren't complaining about his attitude or lack of academic effort. Given what he and his family went through, I always gave him the benefit of the doubt, even if a few of my coworkers told me it was a wasted sense of civility. I'd gotten my fair share of rude comments and accusations from him, but I still tried to see reason because I knew what he was going through a little too well.

Brushing it off, I ask, "Are you taking Jefferson's old position?" He seems too interested in the schools' sports stats not to be, but I know my fair share of guys who are general fanatics.

His chuckle is low, woven with amusement as he takes another look in my direction, warm eyes meeting mine with a glint in them. "Am I that obvious?"

Offering him a smile, I lift a shoulder. "It comes with the territory. I can't tell you much about the teams here, but I can bore you to death with my knowledge on Hemingway and Poe."

Understanding curls the corners of his pink lips, and maybe it's strange that I notice how much fuller the bottom one is compared to the top, or that there's a freckle above the thinner one that reminds me of Marilyn Monroe. "Ah. English, huh? I guess we're even because I don't know anything about literature."

An easy smile spreads higher at the corner of my lips. "Good thing you're not teaching it then. Need help finding anything? I can show you where you need to go after I set this down. My room is only a few doors in that direction."

Almost as if he's seeing it for the first time, he glances at the box full of marked-up books. Most hardcore book lovers, and I know a lot, would skin me alive seeing the notes I've written in the margins of each classic I'm holding, or the multi-colored highlighter and matching Post-It tabs strategically placed in the areas I'll be drawing from for each lesson plan this year. I always encourage my students to write in the books, and mark notes where they feel conversations can arise.

"I'm supposed to meet with Principal Richman to fill out some paperwork before he gives me a tour. Not quite sure where my room is yet."

Room? Isn't he the Phys Ed teacher? "I can show you his office. I'm pretty sure he'll have you in Jefferson's old space off the locker rooms near the gym."

He follows me to my assigned room, the fourth one I've been moved to since working here. This one is isolated compared to the others, in an abandoned hall that used to house the old language classes before they cut French and moved the only other option—Spanish—to a more populated wing. "I doubt it. I'm also the new World History teacher. Something about saving money by hiring a person who's qualified to do both."

Doesn't surprise me to hear. The past few years have been tough on administration and they've been looking to save money where they can. Hiring one person who's trained to do two jobs is exactly how they can save money without having to cut funding in some of the departments.

I know Michelle, my good friend who teaches art and a few music classes here, has been anxious over her program's outcome if the budget doesn't get straightened out. Her anxiety has led to many nights out at Terry's, a bar outside of town, where I watch her drink margaritas while she vents and then hits on me after one too many. It never leads anywhere and never will. She knows that. It's why I agree to go out with her whenever she needs to talk.

Lawrence looks around my barren room, in need of some serious decorating. Three out of the four walls are made of white cement blocks, leaving the only wall that's not a bland beige drywall. My very first room was painted in bright colors that represented different books—a project some art students took on for the teacher I was hired to replace after their retirement. I was lucky to be placed there, but one of the seasoned English teachers ended up taking over the space and staying, booting me to wherever they felt necessary. The desks and chairs are piled up in the middle of the room in disarray, my desk is in the farthest corner of the room instead of where I prefer it in the front, and instead of a whiteboard like I asked for, I've got two large chalk boards and an inconveniently placed Smart Board in the front where some of the students in the back would struggle to see it.

Blowing out a breath, I set the box down on the floor with the others. At least they moved the shelving I asked for in here. Currently, it stretches across one of the cement-block walls, empty, dusty, and ready to be filled with the book selections I've chosen for the year.

"This your first position?" I find myself asking, watching him glide along the boxes I've started opening to peer at the novels inside, fingering a few of the paperback covers.

The soft snicker I get in return pinches my brows, but when he clears his throat and glances at me, only a friendly smile remains. “Yeah, this is my first teaching gig.” His carefully selected words are apparent, but not as much as the mischievous glint in his eyes that makes me curious as to what he’s thinking about.

Putting my hands in the pockets of my tan pants, ones my former best friend would have certainly told me to change out of had she seen my business casual attire today, I say, “You ready to see Richman? I saw him arrive shortly after I grabbed the last box from my car. He should be in his office.”

A head nod later, we’re walking back down the hall. His eyes go along the framed pictures of previous graduating classes, from the time the school was founded in the 90’s, to last year’s small forty-something student class. It gives me a chance to scope out his confident strut, the same one I’ve seen on a few others in this school. But never first-year teachers. They’re usually too nervous and panic-stricken to be this at ease. I know I was. Lawrence doesn’t seem to be in his head about the school year. I almost envy him.

Like me, his outfit is on the casual side, but something tells me his clothes aren’t from the clearance rack at Target. I’ve been around enough designer clothes to know them when I see them, I just don’t don them. Not since—

He breaks me from my downtrodden thoughts. “What happens when they run out of space?”

I blink, realizing he’s talking about the frames. Shrugging, I stop at the one he’s staring at. The class of ‘99. Lots of denim. “They’ll find other places to display these. There are a few wings of the school that aren’t even used anymore. Back in the early 2000s, they put an extension on the school expecting more enrollment, but it didn’t happen.”

The new coach frowns. “That bites. So, it just sits empty now?”

“Most of it,” I reply casually, a smile tugging at the corners of my lips. “Some poor sucker will get moved there every now and again. The plus side is,” I dip my head at the side entrance of the lunchroom we’re passing. “It’s right next the cafeteria.”

He blinks for a moment, looks over his shoulder at the direction we just strolled from, then back at me. I startle at his abrupt laugh, loud and deep rumbling his brawny shoulders. “You’re the sucker,” he chortles. “What’d you do to piss off the wrong person?”

I grin, his amusement cresting my own need to joke back. “Or what did I do *right*? As far as I’m concerned, I’m in the quietest section of the school. None of those lockers are used, the other rooms are empty, and I’m the closest to those damn Little Debbie cinnamon rolls that they have in the vending machine in the cafeteria.”

The snort that comes from him makes me chuckle lightly. “You do know those things are basically plastic-wrapped poison, right?”

It shouldn’t surprise me that he thinks so. He’s built, clearly evident in the tight shirt he wears that stretches over broad shoulders and large biceps, and tailored pants that show off his long, lean legs. I should warn him that girls are going to eat him alive, but I’m sure Richman will fill him in on teenage hormones and how to avoid getting into sticky situations. If not, he’ll figure it out on his own. A guy like him, attractive—something I haven’t allowed myself to notice in a long, long time—confident, and seemingly down to earth, is going to attract a lot of attention from his students.

“Probably,” I agree. “But they’re still a guilty pleasure of mine. I’ve always had a sweet tooth. It’s why I keep quarters in my desk.”

“Don’t tell me that,” he muses, “I may be tempted to take some. Only if the vending machine also has Fudge Rounds, though.”

One of my eyebrows arches as I look over his profile, noting how neatly trimmed he keeps the stubble lining his jaw, and the crooked setting of his nose as if he’s broken it before. “I didn’t take you for a Little Debbie fan. You look a bit...fit for partaking in potentially poisonous vending machine snacks.”

When he looks at me, there’s a small smirk quirking half his lips. “You don’t exactly look like the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man yourself, Reece.” The way my name rolls off his tongue has me staring a little too long, but he returns the look easily, unabashed.

Before I know it, we’re standing outside the Main office, Principal Richman already inside and talking to the head of the custodial staff. Scratching my clean-shaven jaw, I give him a friendly smile and gesture toward the hall we came from. “You know where to find me if you need anything.”

As I turn on my heels to head back on the room that needs a lot of TLC, he calls out, “Does that include borrowing quarters for the vending machine?”

The smile on my lips curls higher. Without looking back, I call over my shoulder, “I don’t think it’s considered borrowing if you just take it.”

That low snicker is back, greeting my ears like the first chirps of birds in the springtime. It’s welcoming. A new beginning. “Something you’ll learn about me real fast is that I’m a man who likes to share.”

MICHELLE GRIMACES at the walls as she walks around the room and inspecting. “I can see if there’s a group of students who might be interested in doing a mural.”

I’m sitting behind my desk and watching her drag a hand across the seams of the cement blocks. “Do you think you’d get approval?”

The blonde curls tumbling down her back bounce when she turns to me. “As long as we propose to do it during a long break, I don’t see why not.” I doubt any student would be willing to give up their time to come decorate my room if it’s approved. Michelle must be thinking the same thing because she slinks over to me and hops onto the end of my desk. “I can do it. The first break is in October. I can get at least one wall done if you think of a design.”

Michelle Hastings is one of the sweetest women I know. She started working at Exeter a year before I did, and we formed a bond. There’s a lot I don’t talk to her about, which she always says is fine. The first time I admitted I’m not a fan of talking about myself, she told me, “That’s fine. I’ll talk plenty for the two of us.” And she’s done just that.

“Before you tell me I don’t have to,” she butts in, green eyes looking at me knowingly, “I want to. I never thought it was fair that you got kicked out of your old classroom just so Beth could take it. She’s never had anything good to say about the paintings before.”

I can’t help but smile at my friend’s unamused distaste for the elderly teacher occupying my very first classroom on the second floor. Her loyalty to me warms my chest, but I know she’ll go down dark roads if she keeps thinking about it. “So, we’ll find a way to make this room better. We’ll do the same theme, maybe have students vote on the books to use as inspiration.”

She tilts her head in contemplation before nodding. “Democracy. I like it.” Her bright painted pink lips, a signature color for her, tilt upward. “Beth can go screw herself.”

Snorting, I shake my head. “Better not let anyone hear you say that. Next to Harry in the custodial department, she’s the faculty member who’s been employed here the longest.” In short terms, it means Beth has pull.

There’s a reason they haven’t let her go for her less than sunny personality. Not because she has tenure, but because she gets results—high test grades, class averages, and everything in between. Even if it wouldn’t kill her to smile, though sometimes I’m not so sure, I respect her talent in teaching every student she has. She’s an asset to Exeter.

“Do you still want to go to Terry’s later? I hear they’re doing a wing special, and you know how much I love those buffalo ones and their homemade bleu cheese sauce.”

I never promised her I’d go, but I feel bad backing out by telling her it isn’t a good time. She’ll tell me there’s no time like the present, and I’d wind up at a high-top table nursing a beer while she tells me all about another failed Tinder date.

“Same time?” I prompt, absently filing a few things in my desk before closing the drawer and locking it.

When I glance up at her, she’s looking at me with bright eyes and a brighter smile. “You aren’t going to fight me on this?”

She knows me just as well as I know her, so I lean back in my chair and eye her. “Would it make a difference if I did?”

The outcome is always the same.

“Nope.” Her lips pop with the *P*.

Rolling my eyes, I stand up. “Didn’t think so. I’ll meet you there. Should we talk to Richman about the murals?”

Her eyes go back to the bland walls. “If we want approval soon, then yes. You know how long it can take. I don’t understand why some things take months when others can take days.”

She’s referring to the book club that I proposed be reinstated about four years ago. My first year, I took over Thursday night book club and had little student participation. Because of that, it was cancelled by the spring semester. I felt bad, because there were a few students who seemed genuinely interested in meeting and talking about the books we selected. One in particular that became the reason I went to the board about restarting it. I wish it’d been my idea, but when a former student came in asking that I do something about it, I couldn’t say no.

I'll never forget the look on his face, aged from things no teenager deserved to deal with, when he found me after school one day and simply said, "She would have wanted this," and I couldn't argue with him then or now. It took two months before I was told I could create a signup for the next semester, and I've managed to hold book club every Thursday, every semester since. For her *and* for him.

"...is that the athletic department can get approval in like a day flat all because of the money being donated. It's ridiculous."

It is ridiculous that Jefferson never had to wait long once he went to administration about a new proposal, but that's just how it works. The school is recognized for its athletic achievements, which means the money comes and goes where it's used most. I don't necessarily like it, but I've accepted it.

"The music room still needs updated equipment, but Richman is dragging his feet," she continues, a deep frown settled on her face.

"Have you brought it up with him again?" I ask, genuinely curious.

Her hesitation tells me the answer before she offers me a sheepish smile. "Well...no. Not yet. I was hoping I wouldn't need to. The football field was perfectly fine before Wright put money toward renovations, and don't get me started on the jerseys."

I know once she starts, she won't stop, so I decide to butt in. "If it makes you feel better, the guy taking over Jefferson's position seems down to earth. Nothing like Jefferson at all."

She perks up over the news. "You met him too? Harper saw him the other day and said he's even hotter in person."

Cringing inwardly over the fair assessment her friend—another coworker she's close to—made makes me clam up on my own thoughts. One of the many things Michelle doesn't know is the confusion I've faced since I was teenager. The one where my first crush happened to be a boy, but my first kiss was one of my best girlfriends. My past is a jumbled mess that I only made worse by trying to pretend my preferences weren't so skewed. I could have made things a lot easier by admitting what only one person knows, and here I am, almost thirty years old, still pretending.

"He's young," I say carefully, as if age makes a difference on attraction. If that were the case, there wouldn't be so many school scandals between teachers and their students. "Ambitious. I never saw somebody have so

much confidence before starting their first job, but Lawrence seems to have a strong head on his shoulders.”

Her giggle is lighthearted. “You don’t know who he is, do you?” When I blink at her in confusion, she pushes my shoulder. “Lawrence McKinley played baseball. He was all set to sign a big contract before some sort of injury took him out. Harper is a huge fan, and she used to watch the televised games he was in when he was in college.”

My eyebrows lift to my hairline, surprise coating my features. No wonder the guy is interested in the school’s sports stats. It makes me feel a little bad I didn’t know that sooner when we were talking. Grabbing the back of my neck, I shake my head. “Huh. He didn’t say anything about it.”

She shrugs. “It’s probably because the media has been giving him a hard time. Maybe he likes not being in the spotlight for once.”

“Why would the media give him a hard time about an injury?” I don’t know the first thing about sports injuries, but if the guy is good enough to be signed to a team, it seems like they’d be cheering him on no matter what.

Michelle stands up, flattening her dress out before turning back to face me. “I’m not sure. I don’t keep up with that stuff like Harper does. All I know is that he could have stayed, and he chose to walk away. Maybe people feel betrayed by that or something.”

I want to reiterate that he’s young, but it seems pointless. You’re never too young to make new choices, and never too old to carve new paths. Whatever his reasoning, I hope he doesn’t take to heart whatever it is the media is saying.

“Terry’s,” she reminds me, backing out of the room slowly until I answer.

“Seven o’clock,” I confirm.

CHAPTER THREE

REN

ROLLING my eyes for the fifth time since my mother called, I nod at the empty room as she drones on about the proper responsibilities of a homeowner. There are a few things wrong with her lecture. One, I don't own this place. Something I tried explaining twice before giving up when I realized she wasn't going to listen. Two, my parents don't manage anything in their 9,500 square foot monstrosity on the outer banks of New York City. They have people for that. And three...well, I don't have a three. Yet. Mostly because I tuned her out after she started talking about said responsibilities.

I never got around to telling her about the fire, or the fact that this house is different than the one I showed her pictures of. Admittedly, she'd like this house more. It's bigger, for one, and a lot more modern. Minus a few upgrades the outside could use, which I somehow got roped into doing for the middle-aged woman who owns the place, it's in good condition. Hardwood floors in most of the rooms, pastel walls that aren't colored too obnoxiously, and it's partially furnished with things that I don't mind. Evelyn, the owner, told me her husband passed away unexpectedly and she couldn't afford this place and the getaway one they used somewhere across state. She decided to move there and rent out this one, though she's looking to sell. Something she told me at least four times in the two and a half hours we talked.

Thankfully, she settled on renting. “For now,” as she put it with a wink before leaving the property I now *leased*. Maybe if I’m guaranteed a contract with the school, if I like working there, I’ll consider her offer. It’s a reasonable price, and she told me I can do whatever I want with it. I’m already planning on repainting a few of the rooms, specifically the lavender living room and pink bathroom—colors her daughter picked when she was five. Why anyone would let their child choose paint colors is beyond me. If I got the choice to do that when I was younger, everything would be black and depressing.

“...over the weekend. Check it out. Make sure everything is up to date —”

“Wait,” I cut her off, falling back into the conversation. “Repeat that?”

She sighs. “I knew you weren’t listening. I said, if your father isn’t busy, maybe we can come up this weekend.”

Instantly, I’m shaking my head. “That isn’t necessary, Mom. I appreciate it though. Plus, I’m going to be busy settling in. I have some plans too, so...”

“Plans?” The awareness in her voice follows with a, “Is it with a girl? You’ve always been able to charm people quickly.”

Refraining from snorting, I roll my eyes. Again. Because right. A girl. Of course that’s what she thinks. My parents have never openly said they don’t like my sexual preferences, but they tend to tune out any conversation that involves “my boyfriend”, or in my case “my ex-boyfriend”, though I haven’t had one of those in a while. Hookups? Yes. With guys *and* girls? Also, yes. I don’t discriminate. My mother, the yes woman that she is, follows in my father’s footsteps when it comes to my dating life. If he doesn’t bring it up, neither does she. They play ignorant, pretending to only remember the women in my life, as few of them as there are.

“I’m meeting up with some coworkers,” I tell her, though I don’t know why. I pretend like my mother holds some interest in my life, but most times I’m not so sure. “They invited me out to a local bar. A get to know you type thing.”

There’s a pause, then a small, disappointed sigh. “Well, maybe you’ll meet someone there.”

The absent “yeah, maybe” that I answer her with is the end of our call. She says she has to go, I tell her goodbye, and realize neither of us said we love each other when I’m shoving my phone into my back pocket. I swear,

she's still hung up on the possibility of me and Della getting together, even though she hasn't seen her in a long time. I've told her plenty of times that Della is engaged, and happy with her fiancé, but for some reason Mom holds onto pointless hope. Eye twitching, I go back to what I was doing before her call.

Boxes are scattered everywhere in the dining room. It's attached to the kitchen, separated by a rounded archway. I don't have a table or chairs, but the kitchen comes with a pretty nice wood-washed white island and a couple fabric-covered stools, so it'll do. I'm looking forward to choosing some new paint and getting to work on the place. Since everything is set with the high school, minus a few meetings, and early football practices, I have plenty of time to work on the house.

When I was invited out by a feisty little redhead at the school to join her and other coworkers at a fan favorite bar, I was tempted to say no. The list of things to-do is too long for me to be out making poor choices this soon after moving. I told myself to take a break from the hookups and partying. I'll be twenty-four in a few short months, it's about time I grew up like my father always told me to do.

Exeter and the job are my fresh starts, and I'm not going to screw it up. I'll go to the bar, make a few friends maybe, and head home early so I can get a start on housework. My furniture is set to arrive tomorrow, so I'll treat myself to a beer or two as celebration for busting ass to get everything set.

As I continue emptying the boxes for the kitchen, I can't help but wonder if Reece Nichols will be at the bar too. It doesn't make a lick of sense why the blond surfaces in my thoughts, but he does—warm smile, friendly eyes, and all. But as soon as the thought is there, I brush it away.

Not important, I decide.

TERRY'S SITS on its own right outside of town, cloaked by a large parking lot and endless patch of trees. The lot is only a third full by the time I park my Wrangler in one of the spots facing the side of the building. Glancing at the time, I wince when I realize I'm technically half an hour late, not that I promised I'd show. I said I'd try making time, but Harper, the woman who invited me, said they were meeting up at eight.

Sighing, I turn off the Jeep and head in. I don't want to be a jackass any more than I already am for being unofficially late. After all, I'll be working

with some of these people. Better to not piss them off or make a bad impression. Usually, I don't care if people like me or not, but new leaf and all. Some situations call for the necessity of civility at the least.

It takes approximately thirty seconds before my attention snaps to the far corner of the spacious room. All wood, dark, with the typical smells of alcohol and something greasy. The only reason I spot the familiar faces is because Harper calls out my name and waves me over when I catch her eye.

The huge smile on her face makes me nervous. I know that smile. It's wide and bubbly, and her plump lips are a bright shade of red that also make said smile a bit sultry. She's pretty. Hell, gorgeous. Short, with some curves that she shows off in a tight pair of jeans and revealing green blouse that makes her hair look redder somehow. Normally, I'd be flirting with her, thinking of all the ways I could get her to come home with me. But tonight, her looks do nothing for me. I convinced myself a few months after ending things with my former hookup that I was broken and decided to close for business for a while.

As enticing as the fruity scent coming off her is as she engages me in a hug, there's no way she's going to get what she wants. I could tell what that was the second she greeted me at the school with, "I loved watching your games!" in a chipper tone that told me to be careful. She seems sweet, but I know women who attach themselves to the possibility of fame, not the person earning it, and I don't want to lead her on or give her the wrong impression.

"I'm so glad you made it!" she exclaims, pulling away with those big doe eyes blinking up at me. When she steps aside, I see the others looking at me with varying degrees of greetings from smiles to head nods.

Then I see Reece, crammed at the end of a table they must have dragged over for him to sit at. There's an open seat across from him that I head toward, greeting a few of the others on my way. When I approach the empty chair, I give him a head nod. "Anyone sitting here?"

His face offers the same friendly smile he gave me the other day, the one I thought of on more than one occasion. White, straight teeth, and a good smile on an even better face—jaw not quite square or round, but defined and clean-shaven, fair-toned face. "Nah. Before you came, I was the late guy who they had to accommodate. We get the pity table."

Snorting, I sit. "I wouldn't have been late if I didn't get a last-minute call from home," I tell him, even though I doubt he cares.

He dispels that belief. "Where is home?"

"New York City."

Two thick blond brows that match the shade of his yellow hair lift. "No kidding? I barely hear an accent."

I get that a lot. "What about you?" Gesturing around me, I ask, "Are you from around here?"

His long fingers wrap around the neck of the beer bottle before he takes a swig. "Transfer. I was born in Texas but moved to Ohio and stayed there until getting a job here."

"Texas," I repeat slowly, studying him. As far as accents go, he doesn't have any southern drawl from what I can tell, making me think he's lived up north for a while. "Very conservative," I point out.

His head cocks. "I suppose."

Before I can say anything else, Harper cuts in from behind me. "Are you going to get a drink? We've already had our first round, but I can get you something."

"I think that's supposed to be my line," I tell her with a wink. Her cheeks redden, making me chuckle. "I'm good. I'll grab something in a few minutes. If you want a refill, let me know."

Her teeth dig into her bottom lip as she nods before heading back to her seat at the other end of the conjoined tables.

When I look back to Reece, he's watching me, but not saying a word. "How long have you worked at Exeter?"

"Five years. It was my first job too."

Impressed, I look to the guy sitting next to me, whose name is Jim if memory serves. I believe he teaches math. "What about you? How long have you worked here?"

Unlike Reece, he has to think about it. "It has to be going on twenty-five years now. Shit. I'm old." He's gray in the hair, but his beard is still a dark brown that only has a few streaks of white in it. If I had to guess, I'd say he's fifty, give or take a year.

The man sitting catty-corner chuckles. "I think of it as experienced," he corrects good-heartedly.

I grin. "Experienced. I like that."

He reaches his hand out. "I don't think we've met. I'm Sullivan. I teach math, like Jimmy Boy here. I'm sure when the year starts, you'll hear the kids bitching about me."

I shake his hand. "That means your memorable as far as I'm concerned. I used to give my teachers a hard time, but I liked them."

Well, most of them. One of them was a nasty old woman who insisted the only reason I'd get anywhere in life is because of sports. That was following a D I'd gotten on an exam. If only she could see me now.

After getting a beer from the bar, I fall into easy conversation with the people closest to me. Jim and Sullivan feed off each other, and I learn they started only a few years apart, so they've become friends along the way. Reece gets teased almost as much as me since we're the relatively young staff. Thanks to Harper, I learn the blond-haired man sitting across from me is going to be thirty this December, and he apparently isn't into celebrating because she has to beg him to do something with another girl named Michelle. I can't help but wonder if that's his girlfriend, but I don't ask. It's not my place.

Still, the guy interests me. He's quiet, quieter than everyone else here. All I know is what little I've gathered between my first interaction with him and what people have mentioned tonight. He's not much of a talker, which makes me think he's a steel trap when it comes to opening up, he loves teaching English based on his debate with Jim on a few authors I vaguely know, and he's not into sports. I'm surprised even Harper knows more than him on some basic team stats for the game playing on the flatscreen above the bar. I even think I see him blush when the guys hound him over it.

When nine-thirty comes around, there's only a few of us left. I'm nursing a second beer and shooting the shit with Harper and her friend Olivia, the only non-Exeter faculty member hanging out with us tonight, when I notice Reece getting up. I almost ask if he's about to leave when he walks over to the bar and lifts his empty beer bottle as if he's asking for another.

Since the others left, we all sit closer together now to preserve space for other customers flooding in and out. Harper leans over to me and says, "You and Reece seem to be getting along."

"He's an easy guy to get along with."

Harper and Olivia share a look.

"What?"

It's Olivia who lowers her voice to a whisper. "He doesn't typically stay long when we invite him to these."

Harper nods in agreement. "We usually have to bribe him if Michelle doesn't drag him out, and he barely engages in any of the conversations."

Ah. Steel trap, like I guessed. "Is Michelle his girlfriend?"

They both giggle before Harper shakes her head. "She wishes, but no. They're close, though. I think she's holding out for him, which we all keep saying is a waste of time. It's been years, and nothing has ever happened from what we know. He's too closed off for her anyway. They wouldn't last."

My lips twitch downward. I know from experience that you're not closed off without good reason to be. "Interesting," is all I say, finishing off my beer.

By the time Reece gets back, he's holding a glass of what I assume is water. I'm not sure what prompts me, but I ask him, "You any good at darts?" He looks over to the dart board hanging by the pool table that's currently in use by two heavily drunk couples.

"I'm not awful," he replies, a small smile tilting his lips.

"Play a game?"

Harper taps my shoulder. "Liv and I are going to head out. We both have an early day tomorrow. Are you two staying?"

I leave that up to Reece, looking at him with arched eyebrows. Half expecting him to bow out, I'm surprised when he says, "Yeah, we're staying."

We both say goodbye to the girls, who look equally as surprised at his answer, before they leave us as the final two.

"Last to arrive, last to leave," I remark, chuckling as we make our way to the dart board. Grabbing the set of darts, I offer them to him first. but he shakes his head. "Scared I'm going to beat you, Nichols?"

The man in questions smirks. "I can hold my own, but you were the one who suggested it. Might as well go first." His teasing tone makes me grin in return as I stand at the mark and ready my aim. It hits the bullseye.

Before I throw the next one, I say, "Your coworkers seem to think you resemble an anti-social recluse, but you've been doing all right tonight."

When I look at him, I see the casual stance he has against the wall, one ankle crossed over the other, arms crossed over his chest. "Did they now?" I don't tell him that I may have exaggerated their exact words because he probably already knows that. "They're your coworkers now too."

I throw the second dart, missing the center target by two rings. “True. Jim and Sullivan seem like a great pair. I bet they’ve had their fair share of rivalries over the years.”

“You wouldn’t believe it,” he muses, eyes dancing with distant memories. “I think Jim just about lost it when he found out Sullivan’s classes had a higher average than his last year. They made a bet to see who the better teacher was.”

Interest piques. “What was the bet?”

He’s looking at the three darts in the board, studying their placement. “The loser had to perform the winner’s choice of song on karaoke night here. Sullivan made Jim sing a Britney Spears number.”

I blink at him. “You’re shitting me, right?”

Slowly, he shakes his head.

Laughing, I study the board again before launching the next dart. Another bullseye. “I think I’m going to love it here.”

He nods toward the dart board. “I heard that you used to play sports.”

It’s not a question, but I answer him anyway. “Yep. Baseball. Was supposed to go big but things didn’t work out.”

There’s a moment of silence. Then, “I hope this doesn’t seem too nosey, but you don’t act broken up about it. I bet a lot of people would kill to make it big in any sports league.”

That’s true. Some of my old teammates stopped talking to me when they found out about the offers I was getting. It shouldn’t have been that shocking considering the amount of airtime I got. I was never one to brag, but there were always articles online tracking my stats and the probability of me being picked in the draft on local news stations. I was damn good. Other team members were happy for me, but the vast majority were envious. Mostly because they knew I didn’t want it, and I get it. I still do. I don’t hold onto their grudges against me.

It isn’t like I could help the attention. I never asked for any of it. I was good at the sport, enjoyed playing it, and the right people noticed. If anything, my former team should be happy. I opened a spot by backing down. “It was a great pastime in college, but it was never what I wanted to do as a career. It made my parents happy, my dad especially, but it didn’t make me.”

Again, he’s quiet.

Clearing my throat, I throw the last dart and it misses completely, bouncing off the wall and onto the floor. Grinning, I look at him. “Was your plan to distract me so I bombed the last shot?”

He collects the darts and takes my place, a light twinkling in his blue-green eyes, a unique mixture I noticed in the hallway at school almost instantly because of how bright they are. “Nah, but it was a nice bonus.” With that, he tosses the first dart and gets a bullseye. The second. Another bullseye. Catching my eye, I swear he winks before focusing back on the board. Same result. Ironically, it’s him who says, “You’re pretty good at this game. Play it a lot?”

Rolling my eyes, I lean against the same wall he was. “You just got four bullseyes in a row, so I’d say my ‘pretty good’ is actually ‘not awful’ in comparison to you. And yeah. My buddies and I tended to hang out at the bars quite a bit. They preferred pool, but I sucked at it. Liked darts better.” He throws the last dart. Maybe if the others weren’t in the center, it would have hit, but instead it bounced off. “I take it you spent your college days practicing?”

His smile cracks, no longer reaching his eyes. Whatever I said, it hit a nerve. Making a mental note, I wait for him to say something to break the suddenly thick atmosphere. “No, I didn’t really get out much until I moved here. Had more important things to do than party.”

I’m tempted to tell him I did too out of defensiveness, but the need is misplaced. I don’t know Reece well, but he’s not the type to say something out of judgement or maliciousness. Whatever responsibility he had is what’s making his shoulders tense right now.

So, it doesn’t surprise me when he passes me the darts and announces he should go. I could tell him to stay, maybe apologize for upsetting him. I do neither. We say goodbye and part ways, me watching him as he exits until that toned ass in his blue jeans disappears completely.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I set the darts down and decide it’s better to head home too. It seems I’ve done enough damage for one night.

CHAPTER FOUR

REECE

AFTER ANOTHER SHITTY night's sleep, the last thing I should be doing is going out for a morning run. I prefer hitting the gym and working with Rocco, one of the trainers there, but that doesn't open until this afternoon and I don't want to bother Iverson to let me in early. Even though one look at me would make him do it in a heartbeat, I can distract myself in other ways. He knows how I get when things keep me up at night—namely, the big blue eyes that taunt me whenever I close mine this time of year.

With the school year starting Monday, showing up with bags under my eyes and a thermos full of coffee in hand isn't what Richman would approve of. It always gets bad this time of year, but my boss still has to remind me—like he did during our annual faculty meeting that happens before every school year—that he needs me showing up with my game face on. As if pulling me aside after dismissing everybody wasn't enough, he gave me the typical, “You need to set an example” spiel that he always gives me, grabbing one shoulder and acting like he's a father giving his son a pep talk. Except, John can't be more than fifteen years older than me, and that's pushing it. He's gotten grayer since taking on the principal role, but he does a decent job at keeping it together. Mostly.

There are two different routes I take on my run, something to give me options. One that's more secluded, a twelve-mile trail that goes through a

historical battleground, and a second that cuts through town where I usually get stopped by a few other locals.

Today, I decide I don't want the isolation that feeds the demons. If it's quiet, they'll poke and prod and whisper in my ear until I lose it. I want to be stopped by Mr. Medina as he gets his paper from the front lawn, and Mrs. King who's out walking her snappy chihuahua. In fact, I need them, and the others that I pass along the way, to distract me for a little while.

I'm about three miles into my run, having been stopped once by my favorite elderly dog lover who tells me all about a new organic food she's trying for her fur child, when I spot a familiar face that isn't normally in my route. I do a double take just to be sure I'm seeing the tall form right that's standing beside a house I thought was still empty.

Sure enough, it's the newest addition to Exeter High, except he's standing shirtless showcasing the built muscles a lot of sports players probably have, staring at the siding with his hands on his hips. When I slow down along the sidewalk, I debate on approaching him. It's early still. Not even seven in the morning. What is he doing up? Glancing down at the paint when I get nearer, I realize he's painting. Or going to.

He must sense me staring, because he turns my way as my pace slows right at the end of his driveway. I work on catching my breath as he walks over with a lopsided smile on his face that screams trouble. I tell myself I'm imaging the way his eyes rake down the front of me, from the sleeveless shirt that clings to my torso from sweat, down to my nylon running shorts, and bright green Nikes—ones I treated myself too even though they cost more than I'd usually spend on one item. For a moment, I wonder what he thinks of my appearance. Compared to him, I'm lacking in muscle. Weight training has never been my thing, cardio has. I'm leaner, slightly taller than him by an inch or so, putting him at least six foot two I'd say, and overall, in decent shape despite my love for Little Debbie snacks.

"Didn't know you run," he remarks, finally meeting my eyes again. There's something in his that flash, curiosity.

Swiping at my forehead, I lift a shoulder and blow out another breath. "It's not an everyday thing, but I always try doing something." He nods once in appreciation at my response, not saying anything else. I shift my attention to the house. "You buy Evelyn's old place? I know she's been aiming to get it off her hands since Billy passed."

When I look back at him, his brows are lifted to his hairline. “Do you know everyone around here?” He made a similar remark at Terry’s when I was greeted by a few older locals who are regulars at the gym.

I grin. “You will too if you stick around long enough. Exeter’s not that large.” Tipping my chin toward the yellow house to the right of his, the only one that’s directly by his place besides the ones across the street, I say, “You’ll meet your neighbors soon enough. They vacation during the end of summer in Alaska to visit their kids and grandkids. Good people.”

Again, he stares.

Shrugging, I gesture toward his house as if to silently question him about it again.

When he finally answers me, it’s about what I expect, and I like his honesty. He seems like a blunt guy, not one for bullshit, which he cemented during our meetings earlier this week. Richman, though a generally good guy, sucks when it comes to disciplining certain loud-mouthed staff. Lawrence, or Ren as Harper and a few others called him the same day, had no problem calling Pete McEntire out on his inappropriate commentary. I wouldn’t be surprised if the almost baseball star standing in front of me got reprimanded by Richman, but I know better than to ask. “I’m not sure if I’m staying or not yet. Depends on how things go this year. For all I know, the kids will hate me. Some of the staff—” He chuckles. “—already do.”

He’s thinking about Pete, I’m sure. “Nah. It takes more than a few comments to get people to hate you. And as far as I’m concerned, the kids will like you. You’re down to earth. Funny.”

A hand flies to his heart. “Why, Mr. Nichols, did you just pay little old me a compliment? You’re going to make me blush.”

Feeling my own cheeks prickle with rising heat over his theatrics, which I hope he takes as nothing more than overexertion from my run, I shift on my feet and say the first thing that comes to mind. “I don’t think there’s anything little about you.” His lips part to retort something sarcastic, based on the way his eyes light up, but I cut him off before he can. “Plus, it isn’t like I haven’t complimented you before, so you shouldn’t be so surprised.”

The last part may be overdoing it a bit because I don’t remember if I’ve offered him a compliment before, but I also haven’t gone out of my way to be rude. Except the night at Terry’s when I left after he was trying to make friendly conversation. In hindsight, I owe him an apology for walking out. But the easy conversation right now, the light teasing that could be

considered flirting to some if they saw the look in his eyes, tells me he isn't even thinking about it, which makes me decide not to bring it up.

"True," is the answer he finally relents with a smile still on his face. "I'm fixing up a few things and repainting. Figured I'd get at least a few sides done before the sun comes out fully."

Explains why he's up so early.

"Then again, I don't think it gets nearly as hot here as the city." His hand waves around us before he adds, "Not as much asphalt."

A crack a smile. "Yeah, it's not awful in the summertime here. A few record-breaking heatwaves, but nothing wild."

"You live around here?"

I point behind me. "A few blocks from here. Near the Cantina restaurant that Richman ordered lunch from for us."

His lips twitch, probably recalling how Pete's comments started. Frankly, I never liked the guy. On top of being full of himself, he was known to make sexist and racist jabs with no more than a pat on the wrist as punishment. It'd take something serious for administration to do anything about him, but I guess that's what comes with being tied to Exeter's founding family. Safety. For a while, I gave the guy benefit of the doubt, but it was clear that I was wasting my time thinking he wasn't a giant asshole. Case in point, after Richman and one of the secretaries working in the Main Office brought in the food from the popular Mexican restaurant, Pete looked at Maria—a sweet thing of half-Mexican descent on her mother's side—and told her to make sure she shared "the food of her people" with others. That's what incited the first remark from Lawrence, a simple "uncalled for" with a pointed look in Pete's direction, followed by a few wide-eyed stares and hesitant nods of agreement from other people in the general vicinity who were stunned he'd speak against McEntire.

"Huh," is all he says, eyes lost in thought as he looks over my shoulder.

Glancing at the time on my watch, I blow out a breath and scratch my jaw. "I should probably get going." I don't know what prompts me to offer what I say next, but before I can think about it, I blurt, "You need help with anything? Painting the house will be faster with two people."

Even he seems taken aback, blinking at me a couple times slowly. "You want to help me paint my place?" The question is reiterated just as slowly as he blinks, inquiring with caution as he watches me shift on my feet again.

Lifting a shoulder, I say, “Yeah. Why not?” It isn’t like I have anything important going on today. Finishing my run. A shower. Breakfast. Going over some last-minute lesson plan shit before the weekend ends. I planned on starting a new book and being lazy, but it’ll be good to get out of the house that I tend to coop myself up in. Plus, I enjoy doing things like this. It reminds me of home, helping my dad and grandpa do things around the house. Fixing fences, painting, whatever they needed help on.

Eventually he says, “Okay.”

To which I reply, “Okay.”

We look at each other for a few more seconds, neither saying a word. Looking down at my watch again, I nod. “Okay, well...” Clearing my throat, I get it together. “What time are you thinking? I can pop by in an hour if you want or swing by later.”

He takes out his phone and unlocks it with a few swipes. “Come by whenever. I’ll be working on this all day. Give me your number and shoot me a text so I know when you’re coming.”

As he passes me the phone, a message pops up on the screen from a girl named Della. It’s nothing more than a few random emojis that I don’t understand. “You, uh, got a text.”

He looks at the screen. “It can wait.”

I can’t help but ask, “Girlfriend?”

“Fishing for answers, Nichols?” he teases lightly, not catching on that I am. Call it curiosity, but there’s something about his lowkey demeanor that I like. People at the bar talked to him about baseball, his stats, the interviews he’s done, but he shrugged it all off like none of that matters. I’m intrigued by him.

“Just curious.” After typing in my information, I pass it back and watch him type out something quickly before sliding the phone back into his pocket.

When I look up at the sun, I know I need to finish my run before it gets too hot. “All right then. I’ll swing by in an hour or two,” I tell him, already walking around him.

“I don’t have a girlfriend, by the way.” His voice is casual, but when I look at his face, it’s anything but. Another reason I can’t figure this guy out. There’s something about him...

Shaking the thought away, I nod.

He adds, “Don’t have a boyfriend either.”

Brows arched I watch him shoot me a wink before walking back over to the paint cans sitting on the lawn as if he didn't just say that.

Casual. Confusing. Both things to label Lawrence McKinley. As for other labels, I don't let my mind go there.

Shaking my head, I stretch my calves a few times before taking off again.

THERE ARE two missed calls by the time I'm showered, changed, fed, and walking out the door to trek back over to my coworker's house. I debate on returning them, but I know she'd leave a message if it was important, and there aren't any voicemails waiting for me. No texts either, besides the one from an unknown number that says it's Lawrence.

Fine then.

In no time, I'm pulling up to the curb outside the white, turning a pale blue, home. He's made progress in the hour and a half I've been gone. Still shirtless as he dips the roller into paint, he glances over his shoulder at me as I close the car door.

"Thought you were just being civil," he tells me, grinning when I approach.

I've always kept my word, not that he'd know that since we're barely more than acquaintances.

Looking down at the extra set of supplies in the grass, I gesture toward the opposite end and ask, "Do you want me to start over there?"

His "Wherever, Scout" leaves me blinking at him until those full lips quirk into an amused grin again, one I have a feeling will be there more times than not. "What? You going to tell me you weren't a boy scout? Man of your word, and all."

I blink again, then feel the familiar rise of heat creep up the back of my neck. I was a boy scout, but this cocky know-it-all doesn't need the satisfaction of my answer. "Plenty of people keep their word. It's human decency."

The way he looks at me, head cocked, tells me he doesn't believe that. I don't know his background or history, what his relationships with people are like, but there's something in those piercing brown hues as they take me in that gives me a hint even before he replies, "Yeah, if you say so." He

leaves the “Scout” to the wind, a silent attachment to the sentence as amusement takes over his expression.

Shaking my head, I grab what I need and head over to the other side. We work for a few minutes in silence, painting, letting the slight breeze knock into the neighbor’s wind chimes and lull a smooth melody between us.

Eventually, I decide to speak up. “You looking forward to Monday?”

He pauses for a moment. “Yeah, actually. Maybe a little nervous if I’m being honest. First gig, and all.”

“That’s normal.” I offer him a reassuring smile, one that I hope he takes seriously. “Exeter is a great place to work, especially for a first job. The kids aren’t all that bad.”

He doesn’t miss my careful wording. “I don’t suppose you’re willing to enlighten me on the ones that *are* bad,” Lawrence muses.

Lips tilting up subtly, I continue my work even though he’s stopped to watch me. “You’ll get them no matter where you go. It’s part of the job, you know? We’re warned about it all the time when we’re being trained, during meetings, you name it. It’s different seeing it firsthand.” A shoulder lifts. “Usually, it’s tolerable though. An attitude here and there, something that makes you question why you chose this career path. It’s a rite of passage.”

A chuckle comes in reply.

Hesitating only for a moment, I admit, “I do think there are some things they should have trained us more for, though.”

“What do you mean?”

Wetting my lips the same time I get more paint for the section of wood siding I’m on, I glance in his direction to see those intense eyes watching me closely. “They train us to know the basics about our focuses, how to treat a classroom, the ethics behind being the authority figure, but they don’t teach you about the hardships. The students that come in with bruises on their skin, or the ones smelling like cigarette smoke and stale food because they don’t have a good, stable home life. Sure, we learn how to report it, who to report it to, but you’re supposed to stay distant, as if seeing that isn’t meant to affect you.”

It’s the world’s worst pep talk, but I can’t seem to stop now that I’ve started. “There are going to be things that make you wish you could up and leave, I’m not going to lie. It’d be nice if the people who were readying us for this would have been more open about...things.”

He's gawking at me, no longer focused on the paint dripping from his brush onto the green grass below. I should probably apologize, tell him I'm just venting, but he doesn't give me a chance to. "Sounds like you've been through the ringer," he comments cautiously, aware that I'm not speaking hypothetically. I wish I were. Jesus, do I wish that.

The amount of times in the past five years I've had to call the hotline, make a report to Richman over a student coming in looking like they lost a fight with a flight of stairs has scarred me. And that first year? It was the only the tipping point. Stupidly, I thought it could only get better from there. I was wrong. So wrong. "You can say that," I sigh, gripping the back of my neck with my free hand. "Listen, I'm sorry for unloading that on you. You're already nervous, and I didn't make it any better. I'm just..."

"Working out some shit," he finishes for me, shrugging like it doesn't faze him. "You've got a point, as far as I'm concerned. They don't tell us the reality of some kids' situations."

I find myself nodding, still feeling bad about saying anything, but don't comment on it. At least he doesn't look like he's about to run the other way. If anything, he acts like he's willing to run right toward the problem.

After about ten minutes of comfortable silence, something that usually takes a lot longer to achieve with a practical stranger, he breaks the quietude by saying, "I've been told I'm a good listener, if you ever want to test the theory."

He doesn't push the matter, doesn't say another word after that. It isn't until after we're done with the front of the house, and one of the sides—again, in silence—that I realize he's already become a friend.

Someone I can rely on if I need to.

Nobody has accomplished that in years, and this guy did it in a matter of weeks.

CHAPTER FIVE

REN

WHEN I WAS nine years old, my little league coach told me not to show my fear. *They'll eat you alive, kid*, he'd told me. I imagined the opposing team like sharks circling a diver's cage.

What's funny about the scenario now, almost fifteen years later, is that the situation hasn't changed. Kids are still vicious little assholes who can smell your fear. So, I channeled all the pep talks I've gotten over the years and put on a brave face as my first class trickled in following the first bell.

Truth is, I'm fucking petrified. My student teaching went fine at the school I was assigned to for it, and those were a bunch of inner-city kids who could care less about being in your classroom, much less learning about all the vital wars fought over the centuries.

Thinking back to Della's text this morning, I can't help but crack a smile. All it said was *Keep a button or two open on your shirt and you'll have at least half the class's attention if they're girls*.

And were they? Glancing around the room at tired faces, I note that they are. I'd say at least two thirds of the room is. Yet, my white top is fully buttoned, the sleeves rolled up to my elbows, and the hem professional tucked into the navy pressed pants. I'm not about to mess this up by giving people, students and teachers alike, the wrong impression. The number of lectures we were given before going into our student teaching roles senior year of college told me they'd seen a lot of inappropriate behavior,

especially since my adviser made it a point to tell me that there would be “temptations” while I worked, but that I needed to “keep it clean” and “appropriate” if I wanted to succeed.

Jesus H. Christ.

It’s not all surprising, I suppose, when someone crosses a line. For those of us going into the secondary, high school setting, we’re not that much older than the senior class. Still, I’ve never been tempted like my adviser, an angry, beady-eyed old woman who never seemed to like me, thought I would be. Then again, she never had much hope, even sounding surprised that I did so well in my coursework. Apparently, she also thought I was only ever good for sports rather than academics.

Whatever.

With my name written on the whiteboard, I wait until the late bell rings before closing the door and greeting everybody. As expected, it gets about half the students groaning, a third of silence, and a few greetings back. Namely from the female department. Go figure.

The first class goes well, better than I can hope for. Nobody complains. Everyone participates, though a few are reluctant, and I don’t have to yell at anyone. Though, it came close when one of the boys in the back took out his phone and started messing around with it. One hard look and a smack from his friend sitting beside him later, he pocketed the device and sunk into his seat. No big deal.

I have two different World History classes for the tenth grade, one in the morning, the other in the afternoon. Each about twenty-five or so students. It’s small, more intimate than I’m used to, but it almost makes it easier because everybody knows everybody. I’ve also been assigned two different study hall periods, split throughout the day, a resource sharing period where students can come ask for help if they need to, and a lunchbreak. Overall, not a bad schedule.

The first half of the day flies by quicker than I expect it to. The study hall I have is a mixture of high school students, some I recognize from my class, but most I don’t. Knowing that the proper etiquette for the period is to be productive, I try to give them basic ground rules. No fooling around or disrupting classmates. They can get a pass to the library for the period so long as they’re back by the time lunch rolls around so I can get the passes back, and one person can go to the bathroom at a time. After the quick five-

minute breakdown, I got a few eye rolls, a couple more grumbled acknowledgments, before I let them do their thing.

I'm sitting behind my desk, getting ready to make my way down for some lunch, when the knock at the door comes. When I look up, I see Harper entering with an extra something in her step that I can appreciate even if it won't go anywhere. I mean, it's hard not to notice the knockout body she has wrapped in that dress, and her confidence while owning it is sexy.

"Hey, you." She gives me a bright smile before stopping at my desk. "I was just about to head to the teacher's lounge. Are you coming?"

"Need to grab some lunch first."

She makes a face, her voice sounding incredulous. "You didn't bring any?"

I have the nerve to be embarrassed, palming my cheek with a timid smile in return. "I may have forgotten in my haste of triple-checking I had everything else prepared for today."

Her eyes get big, then a "aww" escapes those painted lips. "First day jitters, huh? Well, the school food isn't *terrible* here. Their salads are pretty good, actually, mostly because they buy them premade and prepackaged."

"What about the other stuff?"

Her eyes go to my body, doing a slow perusal downward, then back up again. "Let me put it this way. You look fit enough to be okay starving for a day."

Laughing lightly, I get her gist. "Got it. I'll remember to bring lunch tomorrow then."

She waves me off. "I can share mine. I brought a sub from a local deli. If you're not vegetarian, I'll share it with you."

As we're heading out, I see Reece walking toward us. A pile of papers in one bent arm as he smiles at Harper and I. "Off to lunch?" he guesses.

"I warned him about the food," she says chipperly, earning her a chuckle.

His eyes move to me. "I should have done that over the weekend. Harper is right, you'll want to avoid the food here for the most part."

I retort, "Unless it's from the vending machine?"

Harper makes a noise. "Vending machine food is almost as bad as the cafeteria's." She pauses, exchanging glances between each of us on either side of her. "You saw each other over the weekend?" I wonder if Reece

hears the same pitch in her voice as I do. The one she tells me she's a little put off as if she wanted to be invited.

All I offer her is, "Yeah." She doesn't need to know that we ended up getting the first coat on the house done, then a second the next afternoon once it was dried. We shot the shit, and it was nice, making me feel a bit more at ease about being in a new place with nobody I knew around. He learned that I preferred watching football over baseball, even though I liked playing both and was better at the latter sport, and I learned he liked reading dystopian novels about fucked up worlds because they're "more realistic" in his eyes, only securing my belief that something happened to him that's made him so cynical.

In the two days we hung out and worked on my house, first painting, then doing some quick repairs inside, his phone rang with the same name on the screen at least four times. Donna. He never picked up once, always telling me he'd call back later. If he did, it wasn't when he was with me, and I doubted that someone would call him that much unless he was avoiding them altogether. Knowing it's none of my business, I never asked him. I doubt he'd be willing to tell anyway.

"Oh," Harper eventually replies slowly, nodding once. "Well, that's cool."

That it is. "You coming to join us?" I find myself asking Reece, who glances down at the papers he's holding.

It's Harper who cuts in. "He looks busy."

My brows go up the same time Reece's do when he hears the same insinuation I do. And I don't like it. "He's a big boy. He can decide if he's too busy to eat." I give her a challenging look that has her cheeks turning pink. What did she think would happen? She's being rude for no reason, marking her territory as if I'm not allowed to have more than one friend.

Reece shakes his head, patting the papers in his arm. "She's right. I've got a few things to do, so I'll be eating in my room. I appreciate the offer though."

When we part ways, Harper is quiet for a few feet, making it awkward. "I'm not intentionally trying to be a bitch," she murmurs, sighing. "He rarely joins any of us for lunch. Usually only if it's a meeting and everyone is required to show."

Don't they think that means they should try harder? "Why is that I wonder?"

She shrugs, moving a strand of hair behind her ear. "It isn't like we haven't tried, Ren. All of us have made sure to invite him to eat with us or go to Terry's. Like you saw, sometimes he'll accept the invitation, but it's not often. He's always been a nice guy, but there's something off about him."

I can't help but look over my shoulder to see where Reece disappeared to, but he's nowhere to be found. "I think," I finally speak up as we enter the empty teacher's lounge, "that it means we should try harder to include him. Trust me, people who are that closed off need a friend more than anybody else."

She tilts her head. "And you're going to be that friend to him?"

I simply nod.

Her tongue darts out, wetting her bottom lip as if she's contemplating her answer. She surprises me with it. "Good. I think he deserves to have somebody like that. So, do you want to split my sandwich?"

I grin, glad we're okay. "Sure."

THERE'S a Fudge Round sitting in the middle of my desk when I get back from the copy room. Lips curling upward as I pick up the single package, I chuckle to myself and look around to see if there's anything else.

From behind me, a voice says, "Figured it was a congratulations gift." The low rumble of smooth words has me turning with said gift in my hand to see a small smile gracing the smooth face of *Mr. Nichols*. His hands are in the pockets of his black pants as he strolls in. "You made it through your first day."

"Did I though?" I joke, sitting on the edge of my desk. I wave at the snack. "Thank you, by the way. I never did get a chance to check out the vending machine downstairs."

His cheek twitches. "Yeah, Harper is known to talk your ear off if you let her."

My brows raise in question. "Do you know out of personal experience? From what she tells me, you lock yourself away. Not that I blame you. Besides me, I didn't know someone could talk so much about themselves. I was looking for reasons to escape."

That cheek twitch turns into a half smile, making mine grow wider in return. "You have no shame, do you?" he asks, studying me. All I can do is

shrug as if to say, *why should I?* “Harper means well enough, even if she is a gossip.”

Interested in the topic he opened for discussion, I pry for information. “So, is the gossip true? Do you lock yourself away like a modern-day Rapunzel?”

The loud snort has me puzzled as it turns into a husky laugh, low and deep, that shakes his lean torso. “Rapunzel, huh?” Shaking his head, he smirks at me. “Technically, locking myself away would make me more of an Elsa. She had the choice to self-isolate.”

Both brows go up on my forehead over his Disney princess knowledge. “If we ever do trivia night and there’s a Disney section, I’ll know who to ask.”

His lips twitch, but the smile doesn’t wane like I think it might. Especially when those odd eyes, not really one color or another, but a mixture of greens and blues, and a hint of white, dim slightly. “I’ve had my fair share of Disney obligations.”

Knowing there isn’t a ring sitting on his finger—because I’ve checked many times like one might magically appear at some point—I can’t help but wonder, “Niece?”

Those eyes get another shade darker, and if it were possible, the room temp would have dropped. “No.”

All right then. Lifting the object that started this conversation, as derailed as it’s gotten, I offer him another “thanks again” in which he gives me a sullen “no problem”. I meant what I said to Harper earlier, I want to get him to tell me whatever he’s keeping under lock and key.

“You done for the day?” I note the bag hanging off his shoulder for the first time, a messenger one—brown leather and worn. It looks like the strap has been sewn back on somehow, like it’s been well loved over the years. Instead of button-down like I don, I admire the sweater and vest set. It’s a little dorky but oddly cute on him. Endearing, even, on the guy I know to be a mathlete after a conversation over the weekend when I asked what clubs he was in back in high school.

A fucking mathlete.

Chuckling to myself, I ignore his curious eyes as I gather my things and follow him out of my classroom. I lock up after us and stuff the keys into my pocket, waving at a few people we pass, same as Reece.

It isn't until we're in the parking lot heading toward the faculty parking off to the side, when I decide to open up. I don't expect him to do the same, not today. But maybe he'll be more inclined. I don't know what's bothering him, what's taunting his thoughts, but all I can do is tell him my truth and hope for the best. "When my parents found me in my room with a guy, I thought I was dead." It's not my fondest memory, in fact, it hurts like hell. I've never seen my father look the way he did after walking in on me and a guy I'd been crushing on, both shirtless, our bodies entangled on my bed. I was fourteen, confused, and experimenting.

"Dad's always had a temper, so it shouldn't have surprised me that he trashed my room after kicking my friend out. That's what we were, you know, friends. Two kids who were trying to figure some stuff out." I lift a shoulder like it doesn't matter anymore, and in a lot of ways it doesn't. We've moved passed that. "But that day, I thought 'my dad is going to kill me' and you know what's sad? I'm not sure my mom would have tried stopping him."

Reece's eyes widen.

"I love my parents," I tell him honestly, meaning every word. "They're family. They gave me life, gave me...well, everything. I owe a lot to them. And, obviously, my dad didn't kill me that day. Did a number on my room, told me I'd never be seeing that, uh...well, it doesn't matter what he called him. Anyway, he banned Ronny, my friend, from ever coming over again. He thought it'd cure me somehow, not thinking about how we'd see each other at school. Not that we ever did. Ron didn't speak to me again. He was terrified of what Dad would do. Not that I blame the guy.

"Anyway, my dad ended up talking to me a few weeks after that about...things. Said he didn't understand because I was always with Della, my best friend, flirting, the works. But I've always been that way with her. I couldn't really explain to him what I felt because I was confused too. I liked Della, and I liked Ronny. Those were the facts I knew. But it was hard to tell him that when his neck would get all red if I tried putting to words where my head was at. He'd make snide comments all the time, things my mom never scolded him for, but he never outright told me he was disappointed. They never disowned me. We live in..." I search for the right word. "We live in this existence, not really talking about the things they don't want to hear, but not avoiding it necessarily either. They know if I'm

seeing somebody, *who* I'm seeing, but they might not acknowledge it after. So, I learned to bottle it up when it comes to them instead of sharing."

For a long moment after I'm done talking, he doesn't say anything. I'm not sure I want him to. My parents are a sore subject that I don't like talking about if I can help it. Della will ask how they are, if I talk to them, but even she knows to avoid the topic if she can help it. I tell myself things with them could be far, far worse. I've never been hit, wasn't disowned, and I know they love me. I'm lucky, compared to some of the poor bastards I've met over the years.

Reece blows out a small breath. "That sucks to hear, Lawrence. I'm sorry."

A little disappointed that's all he has to say, I give him a grateful smile. "It is what it is. I'm only telling you because I feel like you might know what it feels like to have a lot of shit building on your shoulders. Like I said before, you don't have to talk about it. You don't have to tell me shit. But admitting what I just did eased some of the pressure. Felt damn good if I'm being honest."

He bobs his head in what I can only assume is understanding. When he looks over to a few parking spots occupied by cars, I think he's going to tell me goodbye. That he'll see me tomorrow. To have a good night. I'm prepared to say all those things back and mean them, go home, change, and work more on the house before figuring out dinner. Hell, maybe I'll call Dad and see how he's been.

Reece Nichols doesn't do any of those things though. He tugs on the collar of his sweater, something he's got to be sweating in since it's seventy-something degrees out today, before whispering, "Her name was Brea." His voice cracks when he says her name, a name that means something deep to him.

I soon find out what.

"She was my daughter."

CHAPTER SIX

REECE

BREA LYNNE NICHOLS was born at the end of my junior year of undergrad, weighing less than four pounds. I never thought of her as a mistake, even if she wasn't planned. Meeting her, holding her, hearing her cry for the first time, changed everything for me and Sophia, Brea's mother, and my best friend.

Truth is, I never wanted any sort of romantic relationship with Sophia Michelson. We'd been friends as soon I moved to Ohio, next door neighbors, and our parents got along and did double date nights, so we'd be babysat together. We grew up knowing everything there was to know about the other, even going to the same college when the time came. I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. In fact, it's the only thing I've ever known for sure about myself.

Everything else was...confusing.

Sophia knew that. She would listen to my rambling about Adam Jordan, the only openly gay kid in our high school, who also attended the same community college we did. Unlike me, Soph wasn't shy—she was the exact opposite of me. A social butterfly, an extrovert who loved to experience life. She did everything she could to make my life as fulfilling as possible with what little I offered her, played whatever role she could, but wires got crossed somewhere along the way.

I rarely talk about Sophia or Brea to anyone. How could I when they were two of my biggest losses, even after the tear-filled apology that came from my best friend? *I'm sorry, Reece. I'm so sorry.* I knew she was. But it didn't change anything.

It would never change anything.

Lawrence doesn't need to know any of that. Admitting I had a daughter is more than anyone in Exeter, aside from Iverson and Claire, knows. If people think I'm stuck up, that I'm too self-absorbed to make friends, so be it. It's better, *smarter*, not to get involved and put myself in the same situation. It's what I should have realized before accepting Sophia's ridiculous plan to pretend we were dating so people got off our backs about our lacking dating lives.

The night that shifted our entire world could have been stopped if I just told her that it wasn't worth it—the games, the pretending, the lying to everyone we loved. She knew what happened with Adam our freshman year of college, she was *there*, and it broke me. I don't want to believe she used that vulnerability against me, but the more I think about that night...

We need to make it believable, or they'll never think we're together, she'd whispered in the bed we shared on occasion. Maybe if she hadn't looked at me like I was breaking her heart by telling her no, I would have found the strength to deny her. There would have been no cuddling, no touching, no kissing, none of it. Then it wouldn't have led to the single moment of my life that turned into a domino effect of bad luck.

The gym is a welcome sight after admitting something I haven't since leaving Ohio. I can breathe easier walking into the facility, knowing two important things. One is that every day that I'm here working, living, and breathing is for Brea—to let her know that I'm doing it for her. Always for her. And the other is that I'm not broken from what I've gone through. Maybe I'm splintered with a permanent crack down the center of my heart, but I'm still standing. That counts for something. I told somebody about Brea, someone who deserves to be talked about. She'll never be a forgotten memory, and the fact that Lawrence knows she exists allows a lone suture to close the biggest gap in my beating organ.

Hearing Lawrence talk about his parents made me realize that I need to try harder with mine, so I tell myself that I'll call home once I'm done here. They've always been the ones to reach out first, to check in, to make sure I'm still alive and well and relatively happy. And I am. Not every day,

sometimes it's hard as hell and I want to throw in the towel when I let my mind wander, but I'm better. I even consider calling back Donna Michelson, who doesn't deserve the cold shoulder I've given her when she's done nothing but try playing peacekeeper between me and her daughter. Mom has told me a time or two that Donna asks about me, telling me Sophia is the reason she wants to know, as if the mother of my child actually cares.

Don't go there, Reece.

I've spent a long time, and a lot of money on therapists, to get me in the mindset that I've, for the most part, kept the past couple of years. I don't hate Sophia. I don't blame her for what happened necessarily. My parents don't. Her parents don't. What happened was fate playing a dirty hand, ending in a cruel debt that we'll never be able to pay.

What I do have is a lot of pent up frustration over how she could have handled it differently, how it could have ended differently. For that, I've always held part of the blame, even when my parents told me not to. Even her parents told me before I left that I shouldn't do that to myself. Well, Donna did. Mr. Michelson is an entirely different story, but considering he was barely in the picture, I don't care too much about his opinion of me or my role in things.

"Christ, Champ, is that you?" *Champ*. The nickname makes me smile, even if I still find it overwhelming. Still, I walk over to the owner of the gym, Iverson Evans, and clasp the hand he offers, drawing him in for a quick hug. "It's been a hot minute, son."

Feeling a little bad, I draw back. "Sorry. Had a lot going on. New school year started and all that." Plus, I'm being a moody ass, but I don't add that tidbit. He can make his own conclusions like he always has, because he knows me well enough by now.

Iverson doesn't know too much more than Lawrence, but he suspects. What he suspects is still a mystery to me. I can only guess based on the one-on-one we had the first year I started coming to the Better You gym complex. We'd built a relationship when he found out my family all lived out of state, even going as far as inviting me over for dinner with him and his wife. When I didn't take him up on it right away, he'd found me the next week and said, "You're about our son's age. Would make my wife real happy to feed a growing boy again." I found it endearing, and I was a little homesick, so I agreed and started making it a monthly occurrence.

Until, one month, two years or so later, his actual son came home from business that kept him in London and raised hell over being replaced. Even though Iverson and his sweet wife Claire had told him he was being dramatic and that I was welcome anytime, I decided not to step on any toes. Plus, they knew too much already about why I sought after their comfort. I'd brought up Brea around the anniversary of her death after a meltdown in the middle of Sunday dinner. It was embarrassing, but also freeing in some ways. It took almost three years to say Brea's name to anybody in Exeter, and both Iverson and Claire told me the loss I suffered was one I would feel a lifetime, one to never be ashamed of crying over. I needed them in that moment like I needed my parents, except I refused to let Mom and Dad see me so torn up when I always had a brave face on. I needed the homecooked meals I was more than capable of cooking for myself, and the gentle smiles and hugs goodbye that I missed getting from my own parents. It was hard letting that go, but I didn't want to get in the way of their relationship with their son Ryan.

I still see them in town, in the store, and always make sure to stop and say hi, peck Claire on the cheek, and shake Iverson's hand. But I never stay, never officially agree to another dinner, and they stopped pushing after a while.

So, yeah. It has been a hot minute considering the times I come into the gym are when Iverson is usually home with Claire. The off chances I do see him in the evenings is when he's stepping in for another trainer or doing finances for the month. He says the same thing every time, "don't be a stranger" and then I go about being exactly that.

"I understand." He squeezes my arm and gives me a quick once-over. "You look good, kid. Maybe a little scrawny, but we'll fix that right up. Rocco is teaching a class right now, but I'm sure he wouldn't mind you stepping in."

Rocco is one of their trainers, the same one who taught me how to kickbox. Iverson told me when I first started coming that it was a good way to blow off steam, work out the aggression. And it works. I used to come every other week, unless work kept me busy, and double that in the summertime. Now, I added running to the mix as much as possible because I'm too chickenshit to face Iverson for bailing on him and his wife when they've been nothing but hospitable to me.

“Sure,” I finally say, hauling my bag over my shoulder. He tells me to head to the locker and that he’d let Rocco know I’d be joining in.

An hour and a half later, sweat dripping from my face, my legs the blissful kind of overworked and numb, I feel better. Not enough to accept the dinner offer that Iverson slips me before I shake his hand again and leave for the night, even if I do feel the tug in my chest when his lips waver into a tiny frown that he recovers from quickly.

When I get home, I call my parents, knowing my mother’s relief to hear my voice is all thanks to Lawrence McKinley.

WHEN I ARRIVE to school the next morning, I’m tired after only getting about five and a half hours of sleep despite being exhausted after my gym session. My muscles hurt, coffee hasn’t helped so far, and I know today is going to be the day that students test me.

And I’m right.

Third period, Red Bowen. I suspected he’d be trouble when he showed up to my class five minutes late yesterday, but I gave him the benefit of the doubt because he’s new. Unfortunately, he also made a spectacle when I asked him to take any seat he wanted, making one kid get up and move for him because apparently specifying an empty seat was what I should have done. I talked to him after class, but he wasn’t listening, so I dismissed him and hoped it was a one-day thing.

Today, he’s on his phone. He doesn’t think I notice since he’s in the second row, but I do. It’s hard not to when I’m trying to breakdown the lesson plan for the next few weeks, introducing our first novel, while he stares down at something in his lap.

“Red,” I say slowly, “can you please put your phone away? You know it’s against school policy to have them out during class.”

His unoriginal retort is, “Maybe I’m staring at my dick, teach.” To which I have to refrain from rolling my eyes while keeping a straight face and responding with, “Well, it’s against policy to play with that during school hours as well.”

My lips waver when the class laughs, and I see the way Red glares at me, arms crossed over his chest. I get it. I’ve had a few class clowns over the years who want all the attention they can get. Sometimes, I even find them funny, but I still have to discipline them regardless.

Honestly, I don't envy these kids. High school was tough enough for me, but times have changed—even in the short time since I walked the stage for my diploma. They have it rough thanks to social media and cyber bullying, and I feel for them. Most of the time. Every kid has a story, and I'm willing to hear it if they want an ear, but I don't force it, and I don't make it my obligation if they don't want the ally. It wouldn't be the first time I tried helping students feel like they have a place.

For the most part, the rest of the period goes smoothly. Up until Red is leaving and makes sure I hear his “fucking prick” comment before fleeing with a group of friends he's clearly made in the short time he's been here. I want to be happy for him, but his attitude is going to be a problem. Pinching the bridge of my nose as I sit behind my desk, I stifle a long sigh.

“Guess it's a good thing I brought this,” a new voice interjects my circling thoughts, too deep to be a student. Then again, I know the voice speaking by now—recognize that it belongs to a man who could be playing on some famous baseball team, surrounded by men and women and fans alike, instead of my classroom doorway. I'm not sure why the thought of him getting attention from other people bothers me, but there's an itch that makes me restless when I think about it. When I finally see what he's holding, I can't help but crack a smile. “Looks like you could use it.”

He tosses a packaged cinnamon roll at me. I catch it easily, chuckling over the fact he remembered. “Thanks. Needed this today.” I had planned on grabbing one at lunch to console my exhaustion and the impatience because of it, hoping the sugar would quell my temptation to snap. I'm tired, plain and simple, and want the day to end so I can go home and sleep it off.

Peeling it open rather than waiting, I glance at the clock on the wall. “Shouldn't you be somewhere else? You have study hall or something, don't you?” He showed me his schedule, and my photogenic brain memorized each period he's busy, but more importantly, when he's free.

“There's some mandatory assembly in the auditorium this period,” he reminds me. “I think Richman said it was about drug use and the repercussions of it.”

How did I forget that? Richman had mentioned it on the morning announcements. “It never used to be a yearly event, but a couple years ago, a fire started in one of the bathrooms from a group of kids passing a blunt.” Turning my chair toward him to see his shoulder leaning against the

doorjamb casually, I add, "Then last year, a teacher caught some girls smoking under one of the staircases. No fire that time though."

His grin is slow, spreading into something mischievous based on the shine in those eyes I've begun reading so well. "Man, that's not what we used to do under the staircases in my day."

In his day. This kid. "Okay, *Junior*," I snort, rolling my eyes. That earns me a short, amused laugh from him. "Anyway, since kids have gone to vaping, they've gotten sneakier about it, but Richman still holds the assembly."

His "huh" is light. Pushing off the frame, he walks in and drops into the desk directly in front of mine. It's amusing seeing his bulky body jammed into the small space, but he fits. Barely.

"So, Mr. Nichols," he says with a shit eating grin on his face. "A little birdy told me that there's a yearly get-together among some of the staff that happens at the end of the first week."

Something tells me the 'birdy' is a redhead named Harper that's been following him around since they met. "Yeah, a few people gather to celebrate. Usually Terry's, but sometimes they'll meet up at the Cantina or some other local restaurant."

I hadn't planned to go this year. I've gone to most of them, but I'm always the first to leave. Nobody stops me either.

"So, are we going?" he quips, hands folded together on the desktop.

Are we...? "We, huh?"

He grins. "Yeah. We. You don't expect me to go alone, do you? I barely know anybody."

"I'm sure Harper will fend for you." I don't mean my response to sound short, but it does, and I'm not the only one to notice.

Lawrence counters with, "And I suppose Michelle isn't good enough to protect you from the big bad coworkers who want to socialize with you?" Eyebrows drawn in challenge, he smirks at me before leaning back in the chair. "Come on, Scout. It might be fun. Get a drink, maybe dinner, talk a few people up, and then we can leave. No big, right?"

I don't bring up the Michelle comment, or his snub at my apparent introverted nature. Yet, I can't help but wonder if Lawrence would have liked me better if he knew me before my life turned upside down. I was fun. Went out. Drank from time to time. I kicked ass at darts, pool, all the basic

drinking games. Could flip a cup and win beer pong like nobody's business. People liked me, and I, for the most part, liked them.

In hindsight, I could have lied. Made up some fake plans, maybe even bring said plans to fruition and visit Iverson and Claire. Instead, I give him a nod and say, "Let me know when and where."

He claps his hands together once. "Great. I'll pick you up."

I blink. "Uh, you—"

"I'm not giving you a chance to bow out or leave early," he informs me matter-of-factly before standing like he's done his duty. "It'll be fun, *grandpa*."

My eyes narrow at him. "I'm not that much older than you."

He's unfazed, grinning wide as he saunters to the door. "You started it."

Sighing reluctantly, I know he's right. There's no point arguing with him about it. Breaking apart a piece of my cinnamon roll, I huff out a laugh. "You're going to be a pain in my ass, aren't you, Mr. McKinley?"

And the last thing I expect him to say, the words making me choke on my damn food as his eyes roam to my lower half is, "I hope I am, Nichols. I really, *really* hope so."

Then the shithead walks away laughing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

REECE

JUNIOR: Be ready by seven.

I stare at the text for about two minutes, where I'm sitting at my kitchen table tweaking some lesson plans for next week and shaking my head. Lawrence, who insists I call him Ren like everyone else, reminded me three times since Tuesday that he'll be picking me up for a "night of fun" with some friends. Not that I want to hurt anybody's feelings, but I don't consider any of my coworkers friends besides Michelle.

And Lawrence, I suppose.

I'm not sure how he weaseled his way in, but he did. Actually, that's a lie. I've thought about this every chance I could. He's attractive, that's the first reason. Easy on the eyes, in the all-American sort of way. Arrogant because he knows it, confident because he's comfortable being in his own skin, and yet, down to earth in the way he handles himself. He's not the guy you wouldn't give a second look at, so yeah, I noticed him quickly, analyzed why he captured my attention and managed to hold it. But his looks, as appealing as they may be, aren't the only thing that has me enamored. It's his personality. His humor, his shameless sarcasm, and the way he handles himself in any situation.

He likes teaching, I can tell when a few of his students pass him in the hall and give him high fives like they're already won over. Not that I'm surprised if he's anything in his classes like he is with me—save for the

flirting. At least I hope so. Then again, maybe I'm overthinking that. It's been a long time since I've been flirted with, especially by another guy. Only this time, I'm not uncomfortable with it. A little uncertain, sure, because I have no idea where I stand when it comes to Lawrence, but not uneasy. It's almost refreshing knowing there's a chance somebody like him could be interested in someone like me.

Yesterday, a couple seniors were about to throw down in the middle of the hallway about some girl I vaguely recognize the name of, when Lawrence stepped between them. I don't know what he said, but he murmured something to both of them, eyed the other kids who were circling the show hoping for a fight, and disbanded the whole thing within seconds. He's got "the touch" as my old adviser would call it. He's a natural who seems to like his role and be the best he can be at it.

Am I surprised? I bet there's nothing he isn't good at. Baseball, football, teaching, dealing with kids—that's a lot to balance, yet he does it like it's the easiest thing in the world. He's probably the type who only ever pushes to succeed and never steps down until he does.

Which could be a good thing or bad thing when it comes to me and the friendship he's decided we have. Maybe he sees me as a project to work on, a hobby while he's here. And while part of me is okay with that, a larger piece of me isn't.

Because I like Lawrence. As a coworker, friend, even a confidant. He's an open book, willing to share a part of him not many know about to get me to talk to him, to trust him. What he doesn't know is that I already do. I don't even know when that happened. Maybe after he told me about his parents or the first boy he ever experimented with. I won't lie. I thought about that a lot since he told me, especially in bed at night trying to picture a younger version of Lawrence as he figured things out.

More than likely, the revelation of my trust in him occurred after his speech influenced me to call my parents. They were happy to hear from me, to listen to me talking about how things have been going—the new school year, my summer, Michelle, the works.

So, yeah. I trust Lawrence McKinley, even if the flirt charms everybody. I could tell he was worried the day he admitted he was into guys, waiting for me to tell him my opinion like it'd be a bad one. I'm not sure if he thought I'd be disgusted of him or what, but I don't care about that. Hell, I'd be a hypocrite if I did, even if my personal life is lacking in that respect.

Even my parents, my own mother, asked me if I was seeing anybody, specifically if I “met a nice boy” yet.

Inhaling slowly at the question that’s been bouncing around in my head since she asked, I smile at the cell phone still in my hand. I think Mom might have cried when I said, “Yes, I have” even though I didn’t offer more information than that.

Maybe it’s been a long time coming for them, so my mother’s tears were justified, but I couldn’t help but choke on the lump in my throat when I heard Dad soothe her after my admission. When I told them that Sophia was pregnant with my baby, they’d both stared at me with blank expressions. Sure, Soph and I were both young, but we were also mature and capable of being good, stable parents. It wasn’t the reason they looked at me like I just told them chocolate milk came from brown cows though.

They held each other’s hands, shared a look, and it was Dad who said, “Son, we thought you were gay.” Simple. Straight to the point. A confused statement made by two people who loved their son no matter what. And the truth is, I regret not coming out then and there, admitting my mistake with Sophia and her plan to fake-date, especially because we couldn’t fake co-parent. We were responsible for a human being, no matter the circumstances of how it came to be, and I held onto that.

Held on until I drowned. In her. In Brea. In the life I molded but didn’t want. The thing about drowning is that it doesn’t happen by falling in the water. It happens when you stay there. And that’s exactly what I did.

Pushing the memory away for now, I thumb out a reply to the “nice boy” in question.

Me: *A bit bossy, don’t you think?*

His answer comes instantly, those three bubbles popping up mere seconds after sending my text.

Junior: *You trying to tell me you don’t like it, Scout?*

Rolling my eyes, I set my phone down and stare at the paper in front of me. His message is right there, waiting to be answered, and I can’t help but think about his question. *Do I like that?* The sudden tightness in my pants over the idea of him bossing me around should clue me in. Instead of taking that into consideration, my mind travels to Nev, Sophia’s other guy friend who I’m 99% positive is her boyfriend now based on some murmurings from Mom on our calls. Nev used to laugh at all the things I’d do for Sophia, calling me her little “bitch boy” to piss me off. Sophia never told

him to stop. If anything, she thought me trying to make her comfortable and happy was amusing, and she'd laugh with him every time.

If they are dating, good. I'm happy for her for moving on, for finding something with somebody who she deserves. Because she does. She suffered too, probably more than me. If Nev, the asshole that he is, treats her well, then I hope it works out for them.

Me, on the other hand...

Me: Where are they meeting?

It's a safe question, a redirect that pulls me out of memory lane before I crash and burn.

I force myself to make a few notes on my lesson plans instead of staring at my phone, getting a couple things jotted down before I hear the *ding* from a few inches away.

Junior: The Cantina

Junior: Don't worry, Pete won't be there

Snickering, I pick up my phone again.

Me: Good, I think Pete wouldn't fair well if you decided to fight him tonight

Junior: You are good for my ego, Scout

Me: I wish you'd call me Reece

Junior: I wish you'd call me Ren, so I guess we're both going to be disappointed

Before I get a chance to reply, he pens one last text.

Junior: Seven

When I look at the time in the corner of my screen, I sigh and realize I only have an hour or so before he shows up. I gave him my address a few days ago, sure that somebody else would have if I tried backing out. Michelle has been over to my place a few times, so has Harper and Jim for a reason I don't even remember. That was years ago. I haven't had anybody over since, minus the time my parents showed up when I wasn't returning their calls in one of my many dark periods.

By the time I hear tires pull into the driveway outside, I'm in a pair of blue jeans and a white t-shirt, nothing fancy since the Cantina isn't a formal place. Before I can even make it to the door, Lawrence's loud voice and knocking is already there.

"I'm coming!" I yell at him, undoing the locks and opening the door, staring at his crooked grin.

He announces, "I have to piss."

"You couldn't have done that at your place? It couldn't have taken you more than five minutes to get here."

"I wasn't at my place before."

A hint of jealousy over where he might have been, *who* he might have been with, rises in the pit of my stomach like something sour, and I don't like it.

When he adds, "First official practice of the season" I feel like an idiot. Right. He's Coach McKinley now too.

I step aside to let him in. "Second door on the right," I tell him gesturing toward the hallway where my bathroom and small guest bedroom are.

As he heads in that direction, he informs me, "For the record, I'm going to snoop while I'm in there. That's just who I am as a person."

I roll my eyes and do a mental checklist of everything in the half bath. There's nothing scandal worthy. No medications or embarrassing ointments. Not even the bathroom I use upstairs has anything he'd find interesting.

When I hear him opening and closing the drawers to do exactly as he said, I find myself snorting and double checking my wallet is on me before snatching up my house keys. After he comes back out, I ask, "Find anything?" There's a frown on his lips that looks disappointed as he shakes his head, which I can't help but crack up over. "You genuinely look upset over that."

All he says is, "Everybody has secrets."

I cock my head, opening the front door and watching him walk out first so I can lock up after him. Not meeting his eye, I murmur, "Not everyone locks them away in their bathrooms."

When I do look at him, there's something sparking in his eyes.

Determination.

I know then that I'm in trouble.

Didn't I already know that the second I saw him in the hall?

THE NIGHT DOESN'T GO bad. I talk with Sullivan, who's bitching Jim couldn't make it because of some other familial obligation, and chat with Michelle, Harper, and Lawrence who've formed their own little group. As promised, my driver doesn't let me bow out even though I'm tempted when a heated debate starts on the school budget, which students are on their shit

list already, and gossip begins on school scandals. Namely, who's sleeping with whom.

We only stay for a couple hours, Lawrence with a water since he's driving and a huge plate of loaded nachos that he claims he'll have to work off ten times harder this weekend, and me with a small plate of my favorite tacos and a beer. It's filling, satisfying, but I'm ready to go when we part ways with a few others who decide it's time to leave as well. Thankfully, it's easier to slip away when we go somewhere other than Terry's because there's more of an obligation not to take up space once we're done eating.

When Lawrence pulls back into my driveway, he cuts the engine and turns to me, eyebrows drawn up.

"What?" I ask.

"You going to invite me in?"

I blink. "I don't have alcohol."

"I'm not asking for a night cap," he muses lightly, his head cocking. "But noted. I'm going to file that information away for now." Before he lets me say anything, he's opening the door and climbing out, bending down to look at me still seated in the passenger side of his car in wait. "Come on. The game is on."

The game? He knows I don't watch sports, and I doubt he's forgotten. In the time we've known each other, he's asked me at least ten times how I've never watched one game that hasn't been by force. I could never give him an answer besides "it's just not my thing".

Yet, I find myself leading us inside, flicking on the lights, and watching him go toward the living room and drop onto my large sectional. He makes himself comfortable, one arm propped over the back of the couch, the other holding the TV remote, as he looks over his shoulder at me. "You coming or what?"

I blink again. "Uh..."

When the TV turns on, he types in a channel and it turns to—

"Family Feud?" I'm dumbfounded as the host walks on screen and introduces the two families playing. When I walk over, I shove my hands into the pockets of my pants. "You want to watch Family Feud?"

He smirks at me. "Well, we missed Jeopardy, so this is the next best thing." I told him I liked watching Jeopardy, which he teased me about saying his grandparents loved that show too, another jab at our six-year age

gap. I was a little surprised when I found out he's still twenty-three. He acts older, way more mature, but I know his birthday is coming up.

Still a little shaken by his choice in plans tonight, I settle on the opposite end of the couch and prop my feet up on the wooden table in front of us like he's doing. "You surprise me every day, you know that?"

His eyes find mine, the color warm, as he claims, "Don't distract me. I'm about to kick your ass in this game."

Snorting, I focus on the screen in time for the first round to start. "You wish."

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CHAPTER EIGHT

REN

THE NEXT FEW weeks pass by fairly quickly. I fall into a routine where some days are harder than others, but I always make it work. Classes are good, none of the kids seem to completely hate me, and I've only been flirted with twice by the same blonde-haired girl who I've deemed the mean girl of her grade. Thankfully, she hasn't said anything or batted those overly painted eyelashes at me in about a week, so I'm hoping my lack of attention toward her has gotten the point across.

Richman has told me I'm doing well, patting me on the shoulder once a couple weeks ago and said he's heard "nothing but good things" which would seem more like a glowing recommendation if I didn't know he's told Pete the same thing. The guy is still a douche, and frankly, he's the only thing about Exeter I dislike. Ever since I shut him down, he's made sure to make passive aggressive remarks to me whenever he sees me. If I'm with Harper, he'll talk to her like I'm not there, and on the off chance he says something to me when I am, it's something that makes me want to deck him.

I don't, obviously, no matter how tempting. I like the job, most of the kids, and the company of a certain English teacher too much to get canned because I decided to break a coworker's nose for being a dickface.

Friday afternoon, I'm lecturing two boys on the football field who started shoving each other over a shit pass. While baseball is what I excel

at, football is what I love most. I wasn't cut out for the contact sport, but coaching it is another story, even if the team is rough around the edges. And by that, I mean half of them can't stand each other. Not a great starting off point.

"If Cosmo were here—" Beckett, one of the team's offensive linemen starts for the third time since I started coaching them.

"He fucking moved!" The quarterback, Ben, says, coming at him again. I swear to God, if I have to break up one more fight, I'm going to lose my shit.

I step in between them. "Enough!" I bark, eyeing them. The Wildcats team running back tugs on Beckett's arm, drawing him away from Ben in warning. "I don't give a shit if you think somebody else could do the job better." That goes to Beckett, who's too busy glaring at his teammate to notice my glower. "He's gone. He's on a new team, at a new school, which means *this* is your team, and *these* are the people you're going to wipe the floor with. You need to stop focusing on what you think can be improved because then you're distracting yourself from your own duty. And what is that?"

Beckett's teeth grind. "To block the opposing players."

"And?" His job as an offensive lineman may be to block the rivals coming for the ball, but it's more than that. I knew the second I met Beckett Wright during our first conditioning practice that he was going to give me shit.

"Protect the QB."

"Exactly. *Not* fight with him. *Not* tell him that the former quarterback was better. Understood?" He doesn't say anything or acknowledge my pointed gaze.

Turning around to meet every single person's stares that surround me, I add, "If I hear one more person bitching, they're sitting out on next week's game. Is that understood?"

The "yes, Coach" is weak, but it'll do. Just when I think it's settled and I tell them to get back onto the field and run the play again, Beckett decides to open his mouth.

"Faggot," he grumbles, putting his helmet back on.

I step in front of him, blocking him from following the others. "What did you just say?"

From the distance, I hear someone murmur, “Dude, not cool” and feel multiple sets of eyes on us.

Beckett stills only for a minute, like he doesn’t have the balls to repeat the words. Thing is, the kid has real potential, his OL tackle position can take him far, but that attitude is going to screw him over if he doesn’t contain it. Nobody is going to want a homophobic asshole on their team to stir bad press. Been there, been on the shitty end of that. When he straightens to full height, which barely comes up to my chin because he’s five-ten, he says, “I called you a faggot.” A pause. Then, “*Coach.*”

There are a few more murmurs from behind me that I ignore as my nostrils flare at the douche standing with mock courage in front of me. He’s a coward though. Anybody who comes at someone else with any kind of slur is, and I wish I could say it doesn’t happen often, but it does. People will hate you, judge you, and say whatever the hell they want. Usually, I brush it off, but I’m not in the place of power to do that here. If I don’t put a stop to this, he won’t learn.

The little fucker doesn’t know when to shut up. “If you think girls aren’t going to search for you online, you’re an idiot. It took Kerry like an hour to find someone checked in with you at a gay bar in the city. Not everyone’s accounts are private, genius.”

If I could grind my teeth any harder I would. Hell, I’d even bite my tongue off if it meant keeping in the anger that boils over this shithead thinking he has the audacity to speak to me like this.

I’m not sure how I do it, but I ground out with as much calmness as humanly possible given the situation, “You’re out. For three games.”

His eyes widen. “What the fuck? You can’t do that! Nobody else can take a hit like I can. You’re screwed without me.”

That’s where he’s wrong. I close the distance between us, standing to my full height while glaring down at him. “Anybody can be trained to take your spot. You think you’re irreplaceable, kid? You’re wrong. We’ve got subs for bullshit like this. Three games. Four if you open your mouth again. Indefinitely if you decide to smart off to me, and don’t think you can tattle on me to get your way. I’m not Coach Jefferson. You don’t have the pull, Wright.”

I wait for him to say something, but for once, he uses his brain. He backs down, albeit angrily, and peels off his helmet before throwing it on the turf. Instead of going to the bench, he storms off the field, completely

silent like the rest of his teammates who watch him disappear into the building.

Turning on my heel, I catch the eye of the wide receiver, who seems shocked. At his teammate, at the way he spoke to me, what he said, I don't know. I can't find it in me to care. I am who I am, and I've never been ashamed of it, never felt the need to hide. Do I broadcast my interest in men? Not necessarily. But do I closet it as if it doesn't exist at all? Fuck no.

Getting caught by my father might have been the scariest experience of my life, but I'm glad it happened. Without that push, I might not have been inclined to explore and figure out what made me happy—complete even. I like women fine, enjoy their soft bodies and curves, and the way they say my name when I make them come, but a man's touch has always been my favorite. They're rougher, surer, giving me the right amount of attention that I need because they know what to do with my body the best.

I ask those remaining, "Anyone else have anything they'd like to say to me?"

Nobody says a word.

I'M FUMING when I pull into the driveway I've become well-acquainted with since we made Friday night game nights a thing. Every Friday without fail, we'd eat take out, drink a few beers, and watch Jeopardy and Family Feud together while catching up and battling it out to see who gets the most points by the time I leave.

As competitive as I am, I learned that winning anything trivial against Reece Nichols is nearly impossible. I can beat him twice over on the field, but he owns my ass off it.

Figuratively, of course.

I let myself in like I do every week since he expects me the same time, trying to hide my irritation over the day's events. I tell myself I'll drink a beer, watch some TV, mess around with my friend, and head home. Simple.

It *should* have been simple.

Homophobia is just another form of bigotry that's only purpose is to tear down a group of people and deny us our humanity. We're not lesser for who we love, or less dignified because of who we choose to spend our lives with. The people who spew hate are jealous of those who live life without

limitations. It's what I have to believe in order to extinguish the irritation rising in the pit of my stomach.

As soon as he sees me plop down onto the opposite side of the couch that he's occupying, he frowns. "What's wrong?"

How he knows something is wrong is beyond me. Dude has a sixth sense. "Bad practice," I tell him, reaching for the bag of tortilla chips.

"Want to talk about it?"

Do I? Opening the bag, I stare at the chips, smell the salt, and feel my mouth water with hunger since I haven't eaten in a while. But I can't get what Beckett said out of my head. Appetite forgotten, I blow out a sigh and pick out a chip to study it. "A kid mouthed off to me today. Said some nasty shit. I had to bench him, and he ended up leaving."

"Shit, Lawrence." I know he means business when he doesn't say junior. "If he was giving you attitude, it's good you did that though. Don't feel bad about it."

He thinks I feel bad? I shake my head. "If I should feel bad about that, then I'm doing something wrong. I know kids like him, Reece. They say whatever they want and think they can get away with it. I'm glad I benched Beckett's ass. It serves him right for saying malicious shit, making a scene in front of the team."

Slowly, he blinks, setting the remote down on the arm of the couch. "Okay, I think maybe we should back up a little here. What exactly did this kid say? Are you talking about Beckett Wright?"

My nostrils twitch hearing his name, and I feel heat rise up my neck, prickling the back of my head. I'm *angry*. When was the last time I genuinely felt like somebody had ruined my day with their words? And to have this reaction over a seventeen-year-old prick...

Leveling my breathing, I squeeze my eyes shut for a couple seconds before reopening them and dropping the chip back into the bag, depositing the bag onto my lap. "For the record," I start, feeling the need to make this clear, "I've never given a shit about what people said about me. Realistically, he's a kid. He should know better, but sometimes they don't. Hormones, life, shit gets in the way of their filter. I get it. I've been there before."

He nods in understanding, those encouraging eyes settling on mine to continue.

Why is this so embarrassing? It could have something to do with that fact I have *no clue* what vibes I'm getting from Reece. I've made him blush a time or five, got him choking over a few innuendos I've shot his way, but that was mostly me poking fun. And, sure, maybe trying to gauge his reaction. He doesn't care what I'm into, not that I've really told him what that is beyond the first, and only, conversation that led him to admitting he has—or had, because his use of the past tense isn't something I've forgotten—a daughter. It's been weeks, and he hasn't shed more light on that situation. He could be bisexual, gay, or he could be straight. But there's something about his demeanor, how I catch his eyes lingering on me, or the way he doesn't shy away from my flirting when I lay it on thick, that makes me wish, or *hope*, I have a shot. Because he's a good guy. Caring. Quiet. A bit shy, but that's something I've always liked in guys. When they're overbearing, I tend to walk away, and Reece Nichols is the opposite of that.

"He called me a faggot." The words come out as barely more than a whisper, heavy and burdened and plain sad.

For a long moment after, he doesn't say a word. When I make myself look at his face, I see wide eyes full of...anger? I've never seen him angry before. Distant, lost, withdrawn, sure. Never angry. And he's angry *for me*. "He called you a...?" He can't even repeat it, words mystified as he slowly shakes his head in disbelief.

Swiping a hand across my jaw, I nod. "I know they're just words, man, but it pissed me off. Apparently some girls found innocent shit I was tagged in online—a few places I've been with old friends back in the city and put two and two together. I've been careful about what I posted, keep my shit locked up tight, but..." Struggling to rein in the frustration bubbling, I squeeze the chip bag until I hear the crispy pieces break under my clenched fist.

"Christ, Lawrence. You have every reason to be upset, so you don't need to justify yourself to me. What he said is uncalled for." He reaches over and grabs the bag, setting it back down on the table. "Listen, kids will be kids, sure, but nobody has a right to speak like that to you or others. I know of Beckett. Haven't had him in my class before, but heard a few other teachers talk. He's got a lot of anger issues, doesn't use his filter. From what I gather, he gets it from his old man."

My "oh great" slips through my otherwise pressed lips, sarcastic as ever. Raking a hand through my hair, I inhale slowly. "Should I report that to

Richman? Do you think I'll get into trouble for benching him?"

Reece shakes his head. "Nah, Richman believes in disciplining the students if they're disrespectful."

I guess it's just Pete he'll let say whatever then.

Looking at the blank TV screen, knowing we're missing our show because of me, I shake my head and try evening my breathing. Telling him didn't help alleviate any of the tightness in my chest. It made it worse, like my mind can't let it go even though there's no other option but to.

When my leg starts bouncing, Reece stands up and says, "All right. Come on." He offers me a hand, but all I do is stare at it, looking at the coarse hairs on each finger that are a shade darker than the blond hair on his head. He wiggles them. "Get up. We're going somewhere."

I stare at the food on the table, then the TV. "But it's game night."

He shrugs. "Not tonight. I think there's somewhere more important to be. You got gym clothes to change into?" When I shake my head, he nods once. "You can borrow some of mine. They'll probably be a little small, but they'll work."

I don't have the mindset to make a quip about the small comment. Letting him pull me up, I ask, "Where are we going?"

All he says is, "To let off some steam."

THE FACILITY I follow him into is nice. New equipment, clean, spacious. The air conditioning feels great when we walk into a receptionist area where an older woman instantly stands up and greets him with a hug. I hear him call her Claire as he accepts a kiss on the cheek.

They talk quietly amongst themselves while I study the various rooms, all broken up by glass walls. To the far side of the building looks like a room strictly for cardio—bikes, treadmills, ellipticals. When I turn to glance into another room, I see benches, dumbbell racks, and a few other weight training necessities. There are a few guys around my age or older in it bench-pressing a killer amount.

When Reece slaps my shoulder, he dips his chin toward a hallway. "Come on, we're heading toward the back." I don't question him as I smile at the woman who's beaming and telling us to have fun. When we get to the back end of the gym, we walk into a room with a few boxing bags hanging from the ceiling on one side and a small, square rope ring on the other. My

brows go up when Reece goes straight to a set of gloves on the far wall and picks them up.

“You coming over or what?” he asks, not even looking at me. We’re both in black shorts and loose sleeveless workout tops. He’s right. I fill out the shirt more because I’m bulkier, and my shoulders are a hair wider than his.

Admittedly, since moving, I haven’t been as good about keeping up with my regular exercises. I’ve joined Reece a handful of times on his runs, and used my own weight set at home to do my typical rep rounds before breakfast and after work five days a week. Still, without my trainer being on my ass about food consumption and routines, it’s obvious that I’ve indulged in one too many Little Debbie snacks. It’s not all my fault. I usually find a Fudge Round on my desk at least twice a week, which is only fair since the person who gives them to me always has those nasty ass cinnamon buns on his. It’s our silent trade off that’s become tradition.

Joining him, he passes me a set of identical gloves and tells me to put them on. “I didn’t know you were into this sort of thing.”

His glances at me. “Yeah. The owner introduced me to it after I moved here. It helps you get out of your head for a while and work things out on the bag. Rocco, who’s a kickboxing instructor here, will let me into the ring sometimes with him. You actually met Iverson’s, the owner, wife Claire back at the desk. She doesn’t work here that often, only if their usual receptionist can’t come in.”

Once we’re prepped, he guides me over to the first bag and simply says, “Start hitting.”

I’m not sure why it makes me laugh, but it does. Reece doesn’t seem like the violent kind who needs to take out his aggressions, but maybe that’s why. He doesn’t blow up because he lets his shit out here. Smart.

Dad got me one of these way back when I started on my first baseball team. When I wasn’t training with everyone else at my high school, I was beating up the bag, using the treadmill to increase my cardio zone, and bulking up with the free weights he got me. I’m familiar with the stances, the hits, the way the gloves sound against the nylon lining on the bag and let out a long breath after a few starter punches. Reece is doing the same on the one next to me, his blows a lot harder, more concise and focused than mine, like he’s thinking about each strike before he lands it.

“You and Claire seem close,” I note after about ten minutes of nothing except our hits and heavy breathing sounding between us. I stop for a moment to swipe my arm across my sweaty forehead as he keeps going.

“She’s sweet,” he tells me, giving me a quick glimpse. “They both are, her and Iverson. It was a little tough transitioning here at first, but they made it easier. They’re my Exeter family, I guess you can say.”

That makes me happy for him. “I didn’t know how much I needed this,” I admit, starting up again, focusing on one spot and directing my hits there each time. My chest feels lighter than before, my arms tired but strong, and my mind less wound.

“Sometimes we don’t know how bad we need a release until we’re almost ready to combust,” he comments, not knowing that those words go straight to my dick. The briefs I’m in get tighter as I picture *my* version of release, which definitely is *not* this kind of beating.

Clearing my throat, I murmur out an agreement, trying to void my thoughts. I’d be lying if I said I haven’t let my mind go off into fantasy world where I picture myself doing dirty things to the man next to me. Like in his classroom, bent over his desk, while I—

Nope. Not happening right now.

I have to mentally talk down my boner because it’d be real awkward if anyone saw it tenting the shorts he lent me. The last thing I need is for him to think that punching shit makes me horny. I mean, a lot of weird crap does, but not this. He doesn’t need to know that side of me.

Yet.

We go at it—and by *it*, I’m not talking about the semi I’m sporting still—for about half an hour before all the agitation I felt is replaced by nothing more than eased satisfaction. By the time I tell him I’m done, he lowers his own gloves, wiping at his drenched forehead. His shirt is soaked as he walks over and sets his gloves down where he found them, rolling his shoulders.

I’m about to say something when the door opens and an older man walks through, a wide smile on his face. “Claire said you were here, Champ,” he greets, looking right at Reece.

I look at him, too, brows arched and a smirk on my face as if to ask, *Champ?* All he does is roll his eyes and then shake hands with the white-haired man who stops in front of him. When he turns to me, he holds out the

same hand and offers me an identical smile. “She said Reece brought a friend. I’m Iverson. Own the place. Hope your workout went well?”

I shake his hand, smiling back. “Lawrence, but everyone calls me Ren. Reece knew exactly what I needed today. Your gym is great. I’ll probably look into a membership before I leave.”

He squeezes my hand once before letting go, seeming pleased by my answer. “Any friend of Reece is a friend of ours. We’ll even give you a discount. You new around here?”

I confirm as much, explaining I’m from the city and get an understanding nod in return. He tells me to talk to Claire before we leave to look into the packages they offer, saying he’ll make sure she knows to give me a discounted rate that I assure him he doesn’t need to do. I’m good for the money, but he’s as stubborn as Reece made him out to be.

Iverson focuses on Reece again. “Claire has been asking about you. Said she’s been itching to make a pot roast dinner again.” His eyebrows go up the same time the corners of his mouth do, as if there’s an unspoken question in there that he doesn’t say right away. “We’d sure love it if you’d join us.” When he eyes me for a moment, he adds, “The both of you, if you’re interested.”

Reece opens his mouth, uncertainty in his eyes, and I know he’s about to turn him down. “I was just telling Reece that I’d love to meet more of the community. You know, make Exeter my home since I’ll be here for a while.”

“Are you working at the high school too?” the old man asks.

“Yes, sir. I’m the new history teacher,” I explain cheerfully, ignoring the warning look Reece is giving me. “And I coach too. Took over Jefferson’s job.”

Iverson’s eyes light up. “Good for you, son. I’d love to hear more. Does Sunday work for both of you?”

Before Reece has the chance to answer, I do it for him, “Sunday sounds perfect. Right, *Champ*?”

He blinks at me, his eyebrow twitching, before he nods at Iverson. “I guess we’ll see you Sunday.”

Iverson beams. “I know Claire will be thrilled. She’ll make sure she makes the mashed potatoes exactly how you like them. Anything you like, Ren? Are there any allergies I should tell my wife about?”

I shake my head. “I’ll eat about anything.”

He chuckles, patting my arm. “A man after my own heart. Well, boys, I’ll see you Sunday then. Same time, Reece?”

The man beside me, who’s been quietly shooting me daggers this whole time, finally speaks up. “Yeah, same time.”

When we all say goodbye, I watch him wait until the door is closed behind the owner before he shoots me a look. “Was that necessary?”

I cock my head. “Was helping a friend make plans to have dinner with two people he clearly cares about, who also care about him, necessary? Yes. Yes, it was. You can thank me later.” He opens his mouth, but I stop him. “If you tell me that you didn’t want to go, know that I’m good at detecting liars. I saw the way you looked at him. You consider him family, right?”

There’s a long pause, but he does nod.

“That’s what I thought.” I shrug, unfazed by the way he still looks upset for me inviting us along without his say so. “You’re a lot of things, Nichols, but you’re not a liar. I don’t know if you’re depriving yourself from being happy because of what you told me, but you don’t deserve that.”

His scoff turns into a disgruntled noise, like the words he’s trying to say are getting lodged in his throat. When he gets out, “What would you know about what I deserve?” I brush off the heated tone.

We have a stare off in the middle of the room, his eyes narrowed and hurting, mine never breaking eye contact no matter how much he challenges me to.

“Because even you know that we all have to forget what we’re feeling here—” I tap his chest, right above his heartbeat that’s racing under my finger. “—to remember what we deserve out of life. We can’t be ruled by the demons.”

His jaw ticks, but he doesn’t argue with me because he knows I’m right.

“And one day,” I risk adding, drawing my hand back to my side, “you’re going to tell me why you let those demons taunt you into believing you’re not a good enough person to have people who care about you. Because you know what, Reece? You’re probably the only genuine, good guy I’ve ever met.”

Disbelief coats his eyes, but still no words. No doubt. No fight. I can work with that, smiling at him and changing the topic. “So, are these Sunday dinners black tie or...?”

CHAPTER NINE

REECE

AS PROMISED, Claire made my favorite mashed potatoes—garlic herb with the skins on, even though Lawrence made a face when he served himself some. He ate it though, and two servings of her favorite pot roast and green beans, answering every question that I knew she'd ask.

Lawrence acted as a buffer, making sure the conversations never got too personal. As it turns out, Iverson already knew who he was by listing off some of his former stats on the team he played for at his old university. According to the man currently digging through my refrigerator, he was offered a full ride at Bentley U, a private college in New York City, on a full athletic scholarship playing baseball. That much I knew.

What I didn't know was that his commitment to playing in the major leagues was one he prepped for, for years leading up to his senior year when his father and old coach talked him into entering the draft. I wanted to ask him why he agreed when it was clear he never wanted to go big, but I subconsciously already knew the answer. He'd do anything for family, and his dad wanted him to succeed.

There's no doubt he would have if he didn't have problems with his throwing arm, which he told me he has medicine for these days to make the flares from his arthritis tolerable. From what Iverson said, Lawrence got a lot of recognition and awards because of that arm, and it was a "damn shame" that he had to give it up. Though, Lawrence had simply shrugged it

off like it wasn't a big deal even though he probably would have been a first pick and got a hefty contract—something I didn't know until Iverson said so. Not that money seems like it's an influence on his life, unlike me, who's a solid \$100,000 in debt from my lack of substantial scholarships. I was smart, a solid A and B student growing up, but nothing that garnered me any worthy amount to put toward college. I took out loans and made enough monthly payments to have one of them paid off already. I've never had a lot of money laying around or dressed as fancy as Lawrence does. The few times I've had designer brands hanging in my closet were when Sophia bought them for me. She always spent more money than she really had, and it only got worse when she was in her nesting stage of the pregnancy.

The only good thing about the distance between us after the wreckage is no longer needing to accept gifts and wear whatever she buys me, so she'll feel good about herself. I'm content with Walmart and Target clothing, and the off-brand food I buy at the grocery store because it's cheaper. Money doesn't define happiness, something I see in Lawrence knowing the path he could have been on but isn't.

When I look over my shoulder and see him pulling out the ingredients to make himself a sandwich, I roll my eyes. "Did you eat all the leftovers Claire sent home with you already?" Like always, she sent both of us home with a few containers of food, telling us to bring them back when we were done.

It was a ploy to make sure we kept coming, the same one she used on me so I couldn't find an excuse not to. I enjoyed myself the other night, loved being teased by Iverson and chuckled over the banter between he and Lawrence, and especially liked that nothing was about me. Nobody asked me the questions that led me to clam up or shut down, and I breathed easier when I realized they wouldn't bring up Brea since Lawrence doesn't know much about her. One day, I do plan on telling him, but I'm just not ready yet.

"Would you judge me if I said yes?" he counters, spreading some mayonnaise on a slice of bread and piling it with lettuce. I've learned his food preferences by now. He never eats two slices of bread, or more than one serving of carbs, refuses to eat deli meat, hates ketchup and tomato soup but loves tomatoes, always chooses mixed vegetables if we're at a

restaurant but picks out the peas, and yet still wolfs down Little Debbie Fudge Rounds if he's handed one.

Smirking over it, I walk around him and pour myself a glass of water from the tap. He made fun of me for spending a shitload of money on a filter, yet he always fills bottles of water up here to take home because it tastes better than his.

"Harper came to my room today," he tells me after a few minutes of quiet. I'm not sure why that's news. She always hounds him during lunch to join her and a few others in the teacher's lounge. "She wants us to go on a double date."

I choke on the water I'm sipping, using the side of my hand to wipe the droplets I dribble down my chin in the process. "Pardon me?"

He grins down at the BLT he's making. One slice of bacon cut in half, and a thin slice of tomato. Just one. He might as well be eating a lettuce sandwich. "Apparently, it was Michelle's idea. She thinks it'll be fun if you two and Harper and I have a 'night out on the town' just the four of us. I believe her exact words were 'it'll be good to get to know each other better' which I find interesting considering we've known each other for a while now."

Is she really using Lawrence to get me to agree on a date with her? I thought we had an understanding, but I guess I was wrong. *Déjà vu* hits me hard, and I refuse to think about why.

"I didn't tell her yes," he informs me, brows lifting as he finally looks at my pale expression. "But I did say I'd bring it up."

My heart squeezes with an onslaught of jealousy. Is he considering it? If he didn't turn her down, that means he's up for seeing Harper. He hasn't mentioned being interested since we've hung out, but we never really talk about work or coworkers for long before we're on each other's cases about whatever we're watching on television, the weird food combinations we eat, or some other topic of conversation.

When I realize he's waiting for my response, I set the glass down on the counter and clear my throat. "I'm not sure that's a great idea," I tread carefully, eyeing him for a reaction. "The girls are both nice, but they're a bit..."

"Demanding," he muses with a chuckle, somehow managing to fold the bread in half and take a large bite of it.

That's one way to put it. "They both know I'm not a huge fan of going out," is what I decide to reply with.

He snorts, and I narrow my eyes trying to figure out what's so funny about what I said. When he swallows his mouthful of food, I get my answer. "Harper might have mentioned Michelle's persistence in getting you to go out. Have you straight up told her you're not interested?"

I blink, the need to defend myself too strong to stop. "Who says I'm not interested?"

He blinks too. "Are you?"

Well...no. But what would he say if I said that? I'm sure he'd ask, because he hasn't pushed on a lot of things I've left wide open before. He's bound to bank on that eventually and giving a half-ass "she's not my type" won't satisfy him.

Lawrence cocks his head, studying me a little too closely. "If you want me to say yes..."

Now I'm starting to think he wants me to say yes, so he can go out with Harper. But why would he need me when she's been all over him since he showed up? They've had plenty of opportunities to go out one on one before now.

Hesitantly, I murmur, "I guess it could be fun," though I'm not very convincing even to my own ears. Lawrence doesn't say anything right away, only stares until I'm inwardly cringing.

I want him to tell me he doesn't want to go, to let me off easy because I can see the wheels turning in his head. So, when he does open his mouth, my shoulders tense at the words that pass his slowly upturning lips. "I'll talk to Harper about it. I'm sure the women will be *thrilled*."

Son of a bitch. His tone is thick with something similar to amusement, while I try forming a smile that doesn't look like I'm being held at gun point to do so. "Great."

"Awesome," he retorts.

"Fantastic," I grumble, grabbing my water and sulking out of the room.

I hear him snicker as I sit back down at the table and finish the work I started before he decided to show up at my house and raid my fridge at eight o'clock on a school night.

But instead of focusing on the papers in front of me that are scribbled on with ink and lead, all I can think about is the date I suddenly have and wonder what it'll take to get out of it.

MICHELLE TELLS me the next day how excited she is about Friday night when she comes into my room. I almost ask her why she's excited about game night, when my conversation with Lawrence hits me full force while the bubbly blonde grins at me.

Friday night. Date night. If there wasn't a cinnamon bun waiting on desk for me this morning, I would have gone to the vending machine myself to eat my weight in sugar before the day even started. I needed it.

I manage to respond halfway normal when I tell her I'm looking forward to it, even though I can think of at least three other things I'd rather do. Like deal with Red, who's currently bothering a group of girls instead of working on his packet.

"Red," I say firmly, eyeing him until he turns around to face me. "You only have fifteen minutes before the period ends. I expect you to be finished with that before the bell rings."

"Maybe I already did."

Somehow, I doubt that. "*Did* you finish?" I haven't seen him lift his pen up once since I gave them time to complete it. It's only two pages, front and back. Mostly multiple-choice questions on the reading, with a handful of short answer. If they did the reading, it shouldn't take them more than ten minutes.

He crosses his arms over his chest. "I think it's bull," he informs me.

Of course he does. "And why is that?"

"The first three questions have two solid answers to choose from. You're trying to trick us by making us select the 'better one' when they're both technically correct."

I blink, startled by his tone. He's not rude, just stating a fact. Most of the questions have two answers that give students a fifty-fifty chance at selecting right. The other two are throwaways. It's in the wording, though, to select the correct one. Again, if he read it, he'd know.

Jabbing the paper with his pointer finger, he smirks at me. "And number four has a typo in it. It says George, not Lenny, when the question itself references a scene *only* Lenny is involved in."

Picking up an empty packet that's in front of me, I examine the question he's referring to and try hiding a smile over the fact he's right. There is a typo. And, sure, while that should make me twitchy knowing I double

checked everything before printing them, I'm happy to know that means he read the book.

"Good catch," I tell him, making myself a note in the margins of the paper. "Did everybody hear that? Number four should say Lenny."

Red looks smug. "So, does this mean I don't have to do the rest then?"

"I thought you said you finished it," I challenge, holding my ground. My eyes shift back to the clock. "You now have twelve minutes. I suggest you get going."

He rolls his eyes, still not picking up his pen that's sitting by his hand. It's been a nonstop battle with him since day one. There are days he's quieter than others, but he always has something sarcastic to say. I've already sent him to the principal's office twice after he nearly got into a fight with another boy and threatened to send him on a different occasion when he mouthed off to me about my choice in reading selection. I don't want to send him a third time if I can help it.

But when the rest of the class rolls by and he doesn't do a damn thing to complete the work, I have no choice but to fill out a slip and walk it over to his desk. He stares with unblinking eyes at the paper on his desk. "You're smart," I tell him as the others filter out of the room when the bell rings. "You clearly read the book, so I don't understand why you couldn't do the work."

Grabbing his packet, I stare at all the empty fields, shaking my head. He slips out of his desk, crumpling the office slip into his palm as starts for the door.

"We're not done here," I call after him.

"I think we are, teach."

"I'm going to have to call your parents." Any student with a C average or below has to come in with their parents for a conference. He could have bumped his grade up by finishing the work today and avoided it.

He freezes at the door, his shoulders drawing back, and spine stick straight. My lips twitch downward at the corners, watching him carefully turn, his face ashen. "What?" It's barely a whisper, and I lock eyes with a boy who's suddenly looks so much younger, more vulnerable.

I raise the packet. "Your grades are dropping with every assignment. You're passing the tests but failing the quizzes and reading assignments. I'll have no choice but to set up a meeting to see them about it."

His nostrils twitch. "I'll do the packet."

“Is there a reason you don’t want your parents coming here, Red?”

His arms rest by his sides, hands clenched into fists. “Other than the fact my father threatened to send me away to boarding school if I don’t start behaving?” Walking back in, he swipes the assignment from me. “I’ll do the packet,” he repeats.

I shake my head. “I can’t let you do that. I gave you plenty of time in class, warned you about the time limits. It wouldn’t be fair to the others.”

He drops the paper, letting it fall between us on the floor. “Then what the fuck do you expect me to do to bring it up?”

His sudden determination only makes me want to meet his parents more, especially his father who seems like a piece of work. I’ve heard people threaten their kids with boarding school, but never saw it happen. The fear, the absolute panic in his eyes, tells me the threat could be a real possibility for him.

“Write me a paper on the book,” I finally offer him, sitting on the edge of my desk and crossing my arms over my chest. I’ll let his language slide for now. “Two pages minimum, five pages max. Use at least one outside source. It can be on any topic you want. Theme, character, whatever you choose. Turn it into me on Monday. That gives you the weekend.”

I expect him to argue, give me a hard time, or tell me he doesn’t want to do that. Instead, he nods. It’s slow, only one head bob, but it’s there. A silent agreement to my terms. I have no doubt it’ll be a decent paper. Probably worthy of a B or higher if it’s like the other writings he’s given me so far.

Before he leaves, I pick up his discarded packet and set it on my desk. “If there’s anything you’d like to talk to me about, my room is always open. Understood?”

His eyes go to the floor, his feet shifting weight before he gives me another terse nod. I’ve had my fair share of training on how to deal with different kinds of youth, and I know one struggling when I see it. Unfortunately, I can’t help Red unless he wants to be helped. All I know is that his anger—over his father, the move, I don’t know—will eat him alive if he doesn’t find a way to channel it.

When lunch arrives, I head to the lounge to use the microwave and see Lawrence, Harper, and Sullivan sitting around one of the tables. I give them each a nod, tuning out whatever story Sullivan is telling them, while I prepare my leftovers from last night.

“Hey, Reece,” Harper greets. I look over at her with a smile as she turns her body to face me. “Michelle and I were thinking of going to that new Italian place over in Green County tomorrow night. What do you think?”

Lawrence bites into his sandwich, but it’s clear he’s grinning. Ass.

“I hear you have a date,” Sullivan praises me. “It’s about time. Don’t think I remember you going out once since you’ve been here.”

Great. They’ve been keeping track of my sordid dating life. “I’ve been busy...”

Lawrence snorts, causing me to shoot him a warning look. He lifts a shoulder and goes back to eating, leaving me to confirm plans. I’m not sure how, but I plan on getting him back for it. I focus on Harper’s waiting expression. “Italian is fine by me. I can meet you—”

Now the person who roped us into this speaks up, still holding his half-eaten lunch. “Oh, don’t be silly. We’ve already agreed it’d be better if you and I carpool together since we’re practically neighbors. They’re going to do the same.”

“Michelle lives a block from me,” Harper confirms, smiling still. “Remember? I think you’ve been to her place before.”

Lawrence seems interested in that tidbit of information, his eyes sliding to me slowly while one brow lifts. Usually, I meet Michelle if she talks me into going to Terry’s to vent, but there was that one time she got way too drunk to drive home, so I took her there myself so she didn’t have to call a cab.

After settling the plans, the microwave goes off and I decide to grab the container and head back to my room. I’ve eaten in here with them more than I used to, hell, more than I want to, all thanks to Lawrence’s insistence. I get that I probably look like a jackass to most of my coworkers, but I’ve accepted the role of whatever they think of me.

“Have a good day, guys,” I say before exiting, hearing a chair scrape back before footsteps follow after me.

“Wait up,” Lawrence calls, catching up with me easily, skin pinched between his brows. “What’s the hurry? Sully was just telling us about a very impressive penis drawing that one of his students left on their homework assignment. Apparently, it’s very lifelike.”

I stare at him for a second before chuckling at his enthusiasm over that. “Sully, huh? You know, the last person who called him that mysteriously vanished.” Not true, he actually got a job elsewhere that paid more. Point is

Sullivan hates being called Sully. Used to give Dan, the guy who up and left, a hard time over the nickname.

Lawrence's lips hitch up higher. "I always suspected Sully was in the mafia." He wiggles his ring finger. "He's got the bling for it. You ever wonder where that one ring came from?"

"Uh, his wedding band?"

Those milk chocolate eyes roll. "Married to the mafia maybe." A pause. "That's a great book title. Have you ever considered teaching something like that in one of your classes?"

"A book on the mafia?" I question, shaking my head at his theatrics.

"I'm just saying, the kids might be more interested in books like that than half the classic shit they're usually forced to read."

I eye him. "I *like* the 'classic shit' thank you very much."

He follows me into my room and settles down in the same desk he always does when he comes in to pester me about something. "I know you do. I've seen your home collection." He's counted each one of the books in my personal library at home, which is something not even I've done. I have over 400 books, all different genres, and I've read every single one. "You should show them a movie. I have a documentary I'll be showing them to get them to visualize what I've been teaching the past couple of weeks."

"Richman approved that?"

A head nod. "As long as I get all the parents to approve since there's some sensitive material in it. I sent a form home with them a couple days ago and told them to get their parents' signatures to me by the end of next week, so I can get the documentary ordered through the library."

Huh. That's not a bad idea. "You sure kids are going to like a documentary, though? I thought they were outdated."

"Netflix has hundreds of new ones a week. Trust me, kids are streaming them. Plus, there are actual clips from the time period. They'll like it, especially if it means not doing any work or having a class discussion for a couple days."

I don't typically watch Netflix or any of the other streaming services. Hell, up until Lawrence, I didn't watch much TV at all.

"We can watch one tomorrow night after we get back," he says.

Does that mean he doesn't plan on going home with Harper? I know she'll extend an invite, which means I'll be stuck driving Michelle home.

The back of my neck prickles when I think about him and Harper scurrying off together. “You don’t think you’ll have a longer night than me?”

He stares at me, head cocked.

I clear my throat, tugging on the collar of my crisp white button-down. “With Harper, I mean. I wouldn’t want you to feel obligated hanging out with me if you’re interested in...” Not feeling like enlightening him on my train of thought, I let my words fade.

When he starts laughing, I look up at him in confusion. “I don’t plan on going home with Harper. Tomorrow or any night.”

This time, I’m speechless.

He leans back in the chair, stretching out his long legs that are covered in gray dress pants. “When are you going to admit you don’t want to go on this date?”

My eyes widen at his casual question, wondering if I misheard him. When I realize I didn’t, a fuse blows. “What the hell, Lawrence! If you knew I didn’t want to go then why would you push it?”

A noise rises from his throat. “I didn’t push anything. You’re the one who said it’d be fun. I simply passed the message along. If you didn’t want to do it, you should have said that from the start.”

Food forgotten, I lean back until the chair creaks under my weight and rake my hands through my hair. “Well, it’s too damn late now,” I all but growl at him.

He rolls his eyes. “Clearly.”

Blowing out a breath, I wait a few moments before opening my mouth again. I mean, he knew I didn’t want to do this, yet he told the girls yes anyway. What kind of friend does that? “I can’t believe you agreed to this.”

“Why are you being so pissy about it?”

Pissy? “Now is really not a good time, Lawrence.” I already have a lot on my mind, and this conversation isn’t helping.

“It’s one night,” he presses anyway.

“Not everybody can be like you,” I snap, eyeing him until his lips snap shut. “I don’t enjoy going out, and you know that. I’ve never once talked about Michelle like I was interested.”

He has the nerve to scoff. “You never said you weren’t either,” he points out.

Even if that’s true, he’s missing the point, and I’m fed up with the day and his constant butting into my business. “That doesn’t matter. If you want

to go out and have fun with whoever, that's your life. I won't judge your choices in company or who you flirt with, but it'd be nice if you could extend the curtsey to me."

His head jerks back. "You think I'm judging you or some shit?"

I don't answer.

Lawrence doesn't let it go. "I've been *helping* you get out there because you have this notion that shutting yourself off from the world is the answer."

"Did you ever stop to think that maybe I like my life the way it is?" I bark at him. The infuriating, determined man sitting in the too-small desk in front of me doesn't let it drop, doesn't accept what everybody else has.

I'm a lost cause.

And I'm content with that.

Accepted it.

I *deserve* that. At least for now.

"Maybe I pushed because I'm trying to figure you out, Nichols." He studies me when I eye him, unsure of what to say. "I'm usually good at reading people, but you're a puzzle with one too many missing pieces." I don't know what that's supposed to mean, but it can't be good. He swipes his jaw, letting out a long exhale. "Listen, I don't want to piss you off, honest. But I like knowing what I'm getting into, and I have no clue what that is with you."

I've been revealing myself to him in pieces, as microscopic as they are, but I know there hasn't been any big picture. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize," he says instantly, shaking his head. "Agreeing to go on the date was wrong knowing you weren't into it, but that's the point. I'm trying to figure out what you *are* into for my own selfish reasons."

Understanding breaks past my wall of anger, dissolving it like a flood breaking the dam wide open. "Oh."

He blinks a few times, shifting in his seat, before dropping his hands to the desk. "Yeah. Oh. I don't expect you to say anything. It's probably a fruitless cause anyway, but that's why I did it. I didn't mean to upset you, but for all I knew you wouldn't have minded going out."

All I can do is shake my head and stare at the clutter on my desk.

"Your reluctance is because of her, right?" His voice is soft, tone quiet in case anybody might be around to hear. Not that anybody other than him

and Michelle come down this hallway during lunch.

Swallowing past the lump of emotion crammed in the back of my throat, all I'm capable of is grinding my teeth.

"She broke you," he says.

He doesn't know what he's talking about.

"You have to talk about it eventually," he keeps going, even though I want him to just shut up. Doesn't he think I have? I've hired therapists. They've helped all they can. According to the one I stopped seeing about a year ago, it was about me "finding ways to move on" as if I could.

I lost my daughter. The beautiful, sweet little girl who was half of me. Nobody who loves a human being as much as I loved her in the short fourteen months she lived would ever move on. Not really.

But I did accept her death. It took time, a lot of professionals, but I realized she was better off not suffering. I couldn't help her, and even though I still believe that Sophia could have done more if she weren't so pissed at me, I let go of that residual anger because it wasn't going to change anything.

I would never move on from losing Brea, from never being her father, but I have moved forward. I got a job. I moved to a new town. I did exactly what I always said I would. I teach. And maybe if I hadn't clung onto the thought of what my daughter would be like when she grew up, I wouldn't have set myself back my first year here. I wouldn't have gone into a downward spiral by seeing her in my students—in one student specifically who loved literature as much as me and enjoyed talking about the stories in a depth I would have taught Brea to do as well. A girl who was blonde like me and determined like Sophia, and a mixture of everything I hoped my little girl could have been had she gotten the chance to grow and live and experience life.

It's my fault for putting myself in a situation where I felt the loss all over again when I heard the news of my former student's passing. I've also accepted that. But acceptance comes in stages, with each one a little more freeing. I don't plan to be miserable forever, or sulk for eternity. I'm happy, some days more than not, but nonetheless feel the lightness in my chest from the vibrations of laughter, and the blissful stretch of a curling smile when the time calls for one. And it always seems to when Lawrence is involved.

I've held onto the words of the minister who helped Sophia and I organize the service. He'd held onto both of our hands and said, "Don't try to understand everything, because some things are not meant to be understood, only to be accepted." The woman who'd carried our baby girl for nine and a half months cried into my shirt after that, feeling his words, because neither of us could understand why somebody so small, so innocent, could have endured what she did.

Head bowing to stare at my untouched food, I clench my fist hard until my fingernails bite into the fleshy part of my palm. I ignore the sting and take a deep breath, exhaling slowly until some of the frustration building expels with the oxygen. "It isn't fair, Lawrence."

It's a moment before he says, "It rarely is, Reece." I wonder if he knows what it likes to lose somebody close to him. For his sake, I hope not.

I'm not sure what to say, how to say it, even though the words, the admission, slithers up my throat like a snake, but Lawrence doesn't give me the chance to. "I found out not too long ago that people call me the 'would have been' after news broke about my contract dropping. They said I *would have been* one of the best the league has ever seen. That I *would have been* on top. Hell, that I *would have been* offered one of the biggest contracts because of what I'd done to prove to them I was worth it. But you know what? None of them know that my injury saved me in the long run. What I *would have been* was miserable, playing a game I tolerate, but don't love, all because my old man wanted me to, and I was good at it. I don't need the money, the glory, or the fame. Shit, I don't want any of that.

"People see what they want to, but it's our perception of ourselves that will break us if we let it. I would have been the fucking best on any team I'd be drafted to, but I'm glad I'm not. They might have praised me for being good, but they would have told me to keep quiet about who I am as a person. My sexuality would have been shoved back into a closet for the sake of their image like they've done to countless other players, and I'm not exactly the type of person to keep quiet about what I want."

He pins me with his eyes as if to make sure his point comes across, and it does. I give him one single nod, jaw still tight to lock my mouth, when he sighs. "Don't be a could have been, Nichols, because you've got a lot more left in you than that. You lost somebody special, but you'll have other opportunities. Maybe tomorrow will be a chance at that." I wince before I can stop myself, and tell he picks up on quickly, not that I'm surprised by how

much I find his eyes on me. “Or if that’s not your thing,” he says cautiously, his eyes narrowing a fraction, “then you’ll find your opportunities elsewhere.”

If that’s not what you’re into, is what he means. Women. He means if women aren’t my thing.

My throat bobs as I swallow, struggling to formulate the proper response. When I lock eyes with him, mine full of everything I grapple to say, I feel a tug. The slightest grip of my heart, like it’s being pulled in the direction of the two brown eyes that stare intensely back at me.

Mouth dry and voice hoarse, I feel the twitch of my brow at the words streaming out. “I don’t want to cancel on them last minute.” The *but I want to* is left unsaid. So is the *it’s not my thing*.

He understands both silent admissions.

With a nod of his head, he pushes himself up to standing and slides his hands into the pockets of his tailored pants. Wool knit, according to him, costing a pretty penny based on the designer name I had to look up on my phone when he wasn’t paying attention because I hadn’t heard of it before.

“You’re not a would have been,” I manage to get out as he walks toward the door.

He stops, looks over his shoulder, and smiles. It’s small, nothing like the wide one I know usually occupies his face. “I know.”

When he leaves, I’m left wondering about things I haven’t let myself think of. I want to know what Sophia is doing and if she celebrates Brea’s birthday like I do, or if she mourns the anniversary of her death like me. I buy flowers every year, placing them on her grave, and always look out for anything else left, but there’s never anything there. Somebody keeps up with the stone, making sure it’s polished, that the grass shavings are brushed off the engraved teddy bear and script name after the lawn is mowed, but there’s never plants, flowers, stuffed animals, or anything like there used to be.

Blowing out a long breath, I rub my face and stare at my food absentmindedly, realizing I need to reach out to Sophia. To ask how she is. To make sure she’s okay—that she’s happy. When I pull out my phone, I look at the lone text waiting for me.

Junior: *I’ll find a way to bail.*

Before Lawrence McKinley barged into my life, I used to think I knew exactly what I wanted. But now, I’m not so sure.

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CHAPTER TEN

REN

TO SAY Harper is upset with me is an understatement, but I don't feel bad. I wish I did, even told myself I *should*, but I know there's one person who needs me, and it's not the redhead who may or may not have death-glared me until my soul quivered.

I'm cleaning up after our last practice before game day when I see Principal Richman nodding his head at me from the tunnel where the players come out. I'm the last one left, leaving me pinching my brows as I approach him. "Sir," I greet, holding my hand out to shake his. "Is everything all right?"

He dips his chin toward the field. "Not looking bad out there, Lawrence."

Pride swells in my chest. "Thank you."

My boss doesn't look the same way. "I hate to bring this up, but I got a call from a concerned parent."

Something in my chest deflates. "Oh?"

"I understand why you benched Beckett," he starts, and I know exactly where this is going before he even says it based on the hesitation in his tone. "We have a zero-tolerance policy on behavior such as his. However, his father makes hefty donations to the athletic department..."

And there it is. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but the zero-tolerance policy is for all forms of harassment protecting *both* the student and teacher." I add

a “sir” for good measure, though it’s not as audible as the rest of the sentence. “I just want to make sure I understand.”

He clears his throat, glancing out at the empty field again. “Mr. Wright is a very important man to the department you’re heading,” he explains, having the nerve to be wary. This is his school, not *Mr. Wright’s* no matter the deep pocket he has. “Beckett has been on the team since he was eligible to play, and I’ve sat here during every game. He’s good.”

“He is,” I agree easily. I can’t say everybody on the team has the talent to go pro if they wanted to, but Beckett can. That’s never been a question. “But his attitude is far from it. Forget disrespecting me. He has no respect for his fellow teammates. Do you think they’ll be able to play, and win, if one of their own is too cocky for his own good? The only reason he practiced today is so he wouldn’t get rusty when his suspension is over.”

Principal Richman scratches the back of his neck before sighing. “I can’t get you to change your mind?”

“All due respect, sir, but no. Pride is a fickle thing, and I’m a lot like my father when it comes to doling it out.”

Another sigh, this one heavier. I suspect the half ass attempt is to get me to let Beckett play comes from administration, since they’re the ones who care more about money intake. “The boys already lost the first game without him because of his substitute.”

As much as I hate losing, it is what it is, so I give him a terse one shoulder shrug. It didn’t feel good getting beat on our own turf last week, but all we can do is practice harder. “Then it looks like we’ll lose another one. The boys played better as a unit today with Beckett in the last game, but that doesn’t mean the subs can’t be trained to be just as good. I had to learn to tone down my attitude for the sake of the team when I played ball. He can too.”

Based on the look he gives me, he doesn’t buy it, which doesn’t bare much hope for me. If we lose another game, we lose. If the eldest Wright pulls funds because he’s pissed his son doesn’t get play time, then I have my way around a checkbook too. Unlike him, I use mine for worthy causes.

“Do you trust me?” I ask, knowing it’s a risky question considering he doesn’t really know me well enough. He hired me, though, and that should count for something. “Because I’ve done nothing to warrant you not to, and I believe that kids like Beckett need a chance to sit and watch what they’re

missing out on instead of being spoon-fed opportunities without consequences.”

There’s only a minor pause, before he begins shaking his head in agreement. “I sincerely hope the boys bring their A game next week. Belmont is a tough school to beat.”

Well, maybe if we get our asses handed to us, it’ll give Beckett more motivation to clean up his act and get back onto the team. He hasn’t made any more slurs since the first time, no attempt at an apology which I don’t want unless it’s sincere, but I catch his glares once in a while. As far as I’m concerned, he can be pissed all he wants at me. I won’t change my mind even if his daddy threatens me, and I doubt the administration would feel comfortable with a potential discrimination lawsuit, especially when it’s filed by somebody well known in the sports business like me if they chose to challenge my decisions given the circumstances of why I put my foot down. They don’t want a homophobia headline in the Exeter Gazette.

When it’s just me locking up after myself, I snort and shake my head. The ‘would have been’ still has some pull at least, and the only person I want to talk about my exchange with is currently waiting for me at his house like I told him to.

REECE STARES at me while I blink, waiting for him to get into the passenger seat. It’s uncomfortable leaning down for this long while he looks at me through the open window.

“You cancelled plans so we could work on your house?” he repeats slowly, trying to grasp the exact words I just said.

I nod again. “Yep. So, you getting in or what? It’s fucking cold tonight and you’re letting the warm air out.” Not true. I haven’t had to crank the heat yet because it’s only October, and the steady high-50s we’ve been having is still great tee shirt and jeans wearing weather.

More staring, then finally a quiet sigh before he opens the door and slides in. “I hope you gave the girls a better excuse as to why we couldn’t come.”

I fight a smile as he buckles in. “Would you rather me tell them the truth? I mean, I still think you should at least let Michelle down easily, but what I said is better than nothing.”

“What *did* you say?”

Leave it to him to be worried about hurting their feelings. And I won't sugarcoat it if he asks how Michelle took it because she looked upset, unlike Harper who just looked like she wanted to pop my head off like a Barbie doll. I bet she did that for fun when she was younger. "I told them this morning that there was an emergency situation at my house and only you could fix it."

"Me?"

"I may have told them that you acquired your father's skills for plumping," I answer with a shrug, backing out of his driveway and taking the same quick route I'm used to, to get back to my place.

The way he looks at me is in surprise, as if I'd forget that he told me about his father's plumping business. With what little information about himself he offers me I absorb everything I can. Like how his mom worked in a nursing home since she was twenty and eventually quit to become a stay at home mother to him and his older sister, yet another person he rarely talks about for some reason. Or how his father taught him a few tricks of the trade during a couple summers when Reece would help him out if business picked up because his dad refused to hire another man that he couldn't trust. I also know his parents are proud of him, which goes unsaid when he tells me they yelled the loudest at each of his graduations, still sent him care packages to this day that has food, socks, and gift cards to various stores, and call to make sure he's still breathing.

The last time we hung out, he was on the phone with his mother for about twenty minutes after I arrived. It was amusing to sit and watch him go back and forth with her, and it certainly didn't help when I laughed loud enough to get her attention. I didn't miss the "is there a boy with you?" followed by another ten minutes of interrogation that only fed my curiosity about Reece's dating preferences. I never asked him about it when he finally hung up, and he didn't offer me any information. But I've been wondering ever since.

Wondering what his parents thought about their son's lack of romantic and social life. Interested to hear what their opinion is on how he closes himself off to the world. They love him like my parents love me and have threatened to come see him countless times unless he calls every so often, and that means something because mine don't do that. It means they worry. They care. And I envy that a little because my mother hasn't suggested on

visiting since the week I moved here two months ago when I told her it wasn't necessary.

"Why do you think the girls both gave you the cold shoulder when you came into the lounge today?" I find it amusing he didn't even notice considering he's Exeter's fly on the wall. For someone who doesn't make a lot of connections, he observes a lot. I about choked on the apple I was eating when he told me that Jim was having an affair with one of the newer librarians, who was almost twenty years his junior. I'm usually pretty good at spotting shit like that, but it's the little things I miss. Apparently, Reece noticed the way Jim's eyes would wander toward the library, or how he'd have to make an excuse around the same time every Tuesday to leave early if we were having lunch together. Turns out, that's when they did the naked tango out in the parking lot. I'm no stranger to making poor choices in life, so I can't judge Jim for his, but I wouldn't have expected it from him. Maybe from Sully, who's a lot more open about his "younger years" which I know a little too much about at this point, but not Jim.

When the man sitting beside me shrugs and says, "They always give me the cold shoulder" I can't help but laugh.

Shaking my head, I put on my blinker before turning into my driveway and shutting off the car. "They've never given you a cold shoulder before. They just know it's a losing battle to try engaging you in anything more than a few sentences. And before you attempt to dispute that, I lost twenty-five bucks to Sullivan after he bet me that you wouldn't say more than four sentences total in the time you prepared your lunch."

His eyes bug out. "Why the hell would you bet that much on me knowing I don't like talking that much?"

I roll my eyes. Amateur. "First off, I bet five bucks five different times you left your cave. I'm not going to slap down twenty-five all at once without knowing you first. And second, I was sure I'd be able to prove him wrong since you never have any issue talking to me. I figured I could get you to say something more after the first couple of times you wandered in."

Unbuckling but not getting out, he turns his body a fraction toward me. "You do realize you don't give me much of a choice but to talk to you half the time, right?"

I grin. "I know." Popping my door open, I climb out and watch him follow suit, taking the pathway up to my front door only a foot or so behind

me. “You might as well stop pretending that bothers you, Scout. If you hated my company that much, you would have said so.”

His silence only makes me grin wider as I undo the locks and push the door open, letting him close it behind him. As I grab drinks and meet him in the living room, he looks at the freshly painted walls—a light green—that he helped me finish last week. The first room to be repainted was the god-awful pink bathroom, followed closely by the purple living room. Now all of them are tolerable with decent furniture in each one save the spare room upstairs that only has a few empty shelves lining the walls. Reece hasn’t asked again why I haven’t unpacked my old trophies and pictures yet. They sit in the boxes piled against the far side of the room, collecting dust. My mother would have a conniption if she knew I wasn’t taking care of them.

Maybe that’s why. My parents love me, but they loved me even more when they could brag about their baseball-playing son. The one going to the big leagues and getting signed to a famous team. My decision didn’t just impact me, it affected them too. I don’t know if they tell their friends I coach now, or if they find ways to change the topic when my new life is broached. I’m not sure I want to know.

“So, is there really a plumping problem?” he asks, accepting the bottle of water while I sip my Gatorade.

“The upstairs sink has a leak,” I tell him, knowing it’s not a hard fix. I could do it myself once I borrowed some tools from him or one of my neighbors, but then my white lie would be pointless, and the blond lit nerd examining my casual expression would feel guilty.

“That’s your big emergency?”

I can’t help but bust his balls. “You know, I can give Harper a call and let her know it’s all fixed. I’m sure she and Michelle would love to meet us after all tonight.”

His eye twitches. “Want to show me the problem with it?” is all he asks, but I can tell he’s thinking, *dick*.

It takes him about ten seconds to see the problem without me needing to explain it thanks to the towels piled on the floor in front of the sink. He stares at them, then looks up at me with a brow quirked. When I shrug, smile innocently, and sip my drink again, he shakes his head and gets to work.

A few minutes later, he’s on the floor with the towels pushed to the side, tightening a couple things with his hands. I sit on the ledge of the bathtub

and watch, not missing the way the muscles in his arms fill out his shirt sleeves, which are shown off in the hunter green t-shirt he's changed into since school ended. He doesn't do casual often, but he does it well.

When he abruptly stops, I wonder if he knows I'm staring. If I were anyone else, I may be embarrassed over potentially getting caught, but I don't look away. "Thank you for doing what you did today." There's a pause, and I watch his chest slowly rise and fall. "I appreciate it."

I don't point out that there will be other times when the possibility of another double date, or even a single one, will arise. Michelle has proven that she's persistent if nothing else and doesn't want to take no for an answer. And Harper? I have a feeling when she thaws, she won't be any different. Unlike Reece, I *could* picture myself considering a date with the redhead someday. At least, the old me could. I would dazzle her with my witty conversation, charm her with some drinks, and then take her home. That's where I'd really impress her.

But my insistence on not involving myself so quickly with the locals has derailed those temptations. That, and the man sprawled on my bathroom floor fixing my sink. The one I *might* have tampered with this morning. I'm also aware there's a chance that said man knows it.

"No problem."

He's back to work a few seconds later, coaxing us back into silence. I don't mind it. I never do when it's between friends because it's not uncomfortable or awkward. And he doesn't seem to mind the fact that I'm watching him either, wishing he were shirtless so I could see the lean muscles of his stomach ripple and work as he does. Eventually, he stops again, and I hear the slow withdraw of a deep breath. "There hasn't been anybody since Brea's mom."

Everything in me freezes for a microsecond before loosening back up over the name I haven't heard since the first time he spoke it. And the mother... I want to ask. There's a lot of questions that have been compiling in my head over the past couple of months that I've stored away for whenever he confided in me.

He doesn't sit up or look my way. It's probably easier for him this way. "I told myself there wouldn't be after."

He loved her. That's...something. Frankly, it's more than I expected to get, especially over a leaky pipe. Whatever the reason he chose to spill his guts, I'm grateful.

“You don’t have to tell me,” I feel the need to say, though I hope it doesn’t deter him from continuing. I’m selfish enough to admit I want more—crave it like an addict. More Reece, more of his history, more of *him*. If Della were here, she’d tell me to simmer down and stop obsessing, but I can’t help it.

With other guys, I wanted their bodies.

With Reece, I want his time. Which means everything that comes with it. His thoughts, his feelings, his emotions. I want to know what makes him tick.

Clearing his throat, he reaches for a towel and wipes off something before blowing out another breath. “It’s hard to talk about,” he admits quietly, busying his hands as if it’ll distract him from whatever he’s about to say. “But you were right. I’ll combust if I don’t say something, and she doesn’t deserve to be kept a secret. Brea was my entire world.”

He stops, emotion thickening his words and choking him up. He does another throat clear, a noise rising from it as he tinkers with the pipe that I’m almost positive is fixed by now. “She was only a little over one when she died. Cancer. It happened fast by the time it was detected. I’m not going to lie, Lawrence, I fucked up. I should have been more proactive and pushed Sophia, Brea’s mom, to take her to the doctor again sooner, but she was... Things were bad between us. She was angry at me for reasons that I deserve, I guess. Sophia wanted us to be a family, to live together, be together, but it wasn’t supposed to...”

His words fade, his hands stop moving, gripping the pipe until his knuckles are white, and I wonder what he’s thinking about in the sudden silence. Eventually, he continues, fidgeting again, the muscles in his biceps flexing under each calculated movement. “We didn’t come from money, didn’t have a lot to pay for the best doctor, and neither did our parents, but I forked over everything I had to make sure our little girl could be seen by the top pediatric oncologist near us. But by the time Sophia got past all her hatred toward me and agreed to take her to see the new specialist it was already too late. There wasn’t much they could do.”

Heart chipping in my chest, I push off the tub and walk over until I’m right beside him. Squatting, I take the towel from his vice grip and look at the glassy gaze staring back at me when he finally looks in my direction. “Sophia and I got into it at the hospital near the end. We were already on thin ice, but Brea wasn’t going to get better, and we both pointed fingers.

They had to call security at one point, threatening to kick us out if we didn't stop. Shortly after..." His eyes pinch closed. "Shortly after the inevitable, we both ended up being reported for child negligence. There was an investigation."

Holy shit. "Who would report you?"

His jaw ticks. "Nobody was named out right, but we're pretty sure it was one of the nurses at the hospital. We had to see Child Protective Services after one of our big blowouts because a few other parents were concerned for Brea. Sophia and I both agreed to stop for her, to try out best to get along, but she was still angry at me, and I was so damn frustrated at her. Losing our only common ground, on top of the investigation, was the breaking point. A lifetime of friendship gone."

I can't help but ask, "Do you talk to her now?"

He starts to shake his head, but then slowly nods. "Not until recently. Seems you gave me the idea to reach out and make sure she was okay. You do that a lot."

"Do what?"

"Make me see reason."

Pride stirs, but it doesn't last long given the circumstances of our conversation. "What happened with the investigation?"

He blinks back tears, refusing to let them fall even though now is the perfect time. "It was dropped after a few months. What happened was awful, and we both had some fault to not getting her to the doctor sooner, but there was proof we *had* taken her to be seen before the bloodwork showed anything concerning. We may not have been good for each other, but we were amazing parents to her."

Shit, I don't doubt that for a second. "You said you reached out." He nods once. "Did you figure out if she's happy?"

There's hesitation before he sits up. I give him more room to adjust so he doesn't hit his head on the sink. He scoots back, leaning against the wall, not looking at me, but absently toward the floor. "She's seeing a total asshole, but the asshole treats her well, I guess. That's the best I can ask for."

When I settle against the opposite wall, we fall to silence. He needs it more than any advice I could give him, and frankly, there isn't any worthy of the pain he's going through by telling me this. All I know is that I'd do anything to make him smile right now, to make him blush by saying the

cheesiest line, or laugh by pointing out something stupid I did, because there's always bountiful amounts of that to be shared.

But the time calls for me being a soundless extension of him right now—blended with the white tile and blue shower curtain as he sorts through his thoughts. I know a lot of people like him. The quietest ones have the loudest minds, and his is screaming right now. Aching through his glazed eyes, fighting to escape through his pale parted lips, and trying to break free from every choppy exhale as he attempts to calm his breathing.

I'm not sure how long we sit there, or when I find myself edging closer, but eventually our thighs are touching, with no room between, and the sides of our hands are brushing with my pinky trailing over his until they're locked together.

He expels another long breath, leans his head against my shoulder, and squeezes our pinkies together until I feel the cotton material of my shirt dampen under his cheek.

I let him have his moment, not saying a word, and not asking any questions, because we both just realized he gave me a huge part of himself tonight, and there's no words to describe how fucking beautiful that is.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

REECE

TWO PAIRS of legs clad in blue denim stretch out on the same coffee table as a Patrick Swayze movie plays. I'm not watching it, even though Lawrence says it's one of his favorites. I have reason to believe it's because of Swayze himself, because what little I've paid attention to doesn't seem that enticing.

Typically, we'll spend Friday night together before parting ways for the weekend unless we have dinner plans with Iverson and Claire. Which, so far, has been almost every Sunday since the first one we attended together. We have work to do, papers to grade, homework to mark up, and our own lives. But this weekend, there was a silent agreement when I left after my breakdown in his bathroom, that I'd be back. Or, in this case, he'd show up at my house at eight in the morning with a drink carrier containing two coffees, a white bag of pastries from the local bakery, and his bag so we could get some work done together.

"You shouldn't be thinking this early in the morning," he informs me, still looking at the TV instead of at my contorted face.

It's not early anymore. It's almost noon and besides eat and watch television, we haven't done anything. I'm normally almost done with all my work by now. "Who was your first celebrity crush?"

That captures his attention. Eyebrows lifted he finally peels his eyes away from the screen and toward me in amusement. "That's random."

I dip my chin toward the TV. “Well, this movie is horrible, so I figure the only reason you say it’s your favorite is because of him, which got me wondering who the first celebrity you crushed on was.”

He chuckles. “You haven’t been paying attention, so how do you know it’s horrible? And it’s only *one* of my favorites. Though, you may be on to something since my actual favorite movie is Dirty Dancing.”

I blink. It’s... “You like Dirty Dancing?”

“Are you judging me?”

“No,” I answer easily, thinking about all the times Jamie, my sister, and mom would watch the movie growing up. Honestly, I like the film too. “Surprised is all. I would have figured you’d tell me your favorite movie is Major League or something.”

Now the snort that comes from him is accompanied by an eye roll. “Did you just say the first baseball movie that popped into your head?”

Basically. “No,” I lie.

He smirks knowingly. “If we’re going down the stereotypical route, The Sandlot would be more my style. Every kid who watched that wanted to play baseball.”

Well, most kids. “Sports were never my thing.”

I think he murmurs “mathlete” under his breath before snickering, but I can’t be sure. “To answer your question, my first celebrity crush was Shakira.”

“Huh.”

His head tilts, eyes dancing over my face. “What’s the ‘huh’ for?”

“No reason. I just wasn’t expecting your first crush to be...” Wincing when I realize how that sounds, I press my lips together.

“Female?” Lawrence guesses anyway, a slow smirk crawling across his face. “Well, if you asked me who the first person I jerked off to was, it wouldn’t be the same answer.”

My face heats instantly, which only makes his amusement grow. “Christ, McKinley.” I palm the back of my neck and try cooling my warm skin by looking anywhere but at him.

“Much like Shakira’s hips,” he responds easily, probably shooting me a wink, “I don’t lie.”

No kidding.

“Who was *your* celebrity crush?”

The heat prickling my face burns the back of my neck as I grip the side of it tighter, knowing I walked right into this conversation. Telling him the truth would mean officially admitting something aloud that I've only ever hinted at before—both to myself and him.

"It can't be that weird," he tells me, shrugging like this conversation is normal. Any guy friend I ever had in the past, which were limited to begin with because I spent most of my time with Sophia, probably wouldn't think twice talking about this shit. Hell, a couple guys I hung around in college talked about how many times they jerked off in a day, and to whom, so this is tame in comparison. "My best friend had a crush on a cartoon character. You ever seen Howl's Moving Castle?" I slowly shake my head. "Well, she had a thing for Howl. Though, the American voiceover was done by Christian Bale, and she always had a thing for Batman, so I suppose it makes sense. Point is, whoever you had a thing for can't be that strange. Unless it's a cartoon. Then I may judge you a little."

Is it weird I'm jealous of his friendship? The only one I've ever known was possessive. I never thought much about it until shit hit the fan between Sophia and me. She wanted me, hated sharing my attention, and the few guys I would hang out with would always complain about her until I dropped them out of loyalty. Looking back now, I realize all the signs of how toxic we were, and wish I'd heard out my parents when they told me as much.

We were always going to crash and burn, but I could have prevented the casualties.

Before I can chicken out like I want to, I blurt, "Daniel Radcliffe."

If Lawrence is surprised he doesn't show it. But I do feel his penetrating stare as he says, "Harry Potter fan? I've always been partial to the Weasley twins."

Tapping my thumb against my leg restlessly, I look at the TV again. "I watched every movie as they came out. Read the books at least ten times each." My bottom lip is dry, so I swipe the tip of my tongue across it before letting out a tiny sigh. "My parents never asked me about my...sexuality. They *told* me they thought I was gay after I announced that I was going to be a dad."

"What did you say?"

The last thing I want to think about is that year. I was doing well in school, excited to start my student teaching, and genuinely happy to move

on to get my masters. I had a plan. Everything meticulously mapped out so I was ready. Then Sophia happened, and Brea...

Clicking my tongue, I drop my head back and roll it to face him. "I told them that Sophia and I were going to look into getting a place together. We grew up together. We spent almost every day with one another. Knew each other's secrets. She knew..." I eye him. "She knew that I wasn't into her like that. It was her idea to pretend to date because I wasn't comfortable letting the world in on my private life. Plus, she had an ex who kept trying to get back with her, so we figured fake dating would get people off our backs. Then one thing led to another, she told me she had feelings for me, and I didn't want to hurt her."

My teeth grind thinking about our one night together. How many times had we shared a bed without touching? Sometimes we'd cuddle, but it was never anything romantic. Never for me. She always told me she understood until the morning after I woke up, tangled together, completely naked, remembering what had happened. We'd been drinking, and I don't remember much besides her making the first move and laughing like it was funny to her.

We need to make it believable, or they'll never think we're together. Just pretend I'm Adam. Think about Adam.

Adam. I didn't tell anybody but Sophia about my crush on him, and the only reason she got it out of me was because she kept teasing me for staring at him whenever we saw him out. The first time I admitted I liked him, she looked a little hurt, but went along with it. She said she understood. Hell, she used to watch guys on our college campus and ask me if I was interested in the ones she pointed out to see if Adam was just a fluke thing or if guys were what I was into. Truthfully, I was too busy to focus on boys. At least, that's what I told myself. Really, I used classes as a distraction.

If she hadn't dragged me out to a party one day at a frat that Adam was a part of, I probably never would have officially found out the answer to Sophia's fluke question. He was there, we were both buzzed, and I flirted back with him. He seemed into it, invited me upstairs, and the next thing I knew we were kissing. That led to making out, clumsy fumbles of the tongue and hands on my part because it was the first time I'd ever kissed anyone, much less a guy, and I had no idea what the hell I was doing or where my thoughts were. I just remember feeling *right*, like something clicked in me in that moment.

“What’s done is done,” I murmur, more to myself than him, pushing away the memories. Sophia and I will always be tied together now, even if we don’t talk often or see each other. In fact, I don’t want either of those things. I thought it would have hurt more to admit I wanted the string cut between us because she was all I had for years, but I know I’m better off, and so is she.

Lawrence drags his feet off the table and shifts his body toward me, face serious. “Can I ask you something?”

“When have you ever asked for permission before?” I manage to tease, the smile loose on my face.

He chuckles, low and rumbling, hand swiping through his hair. “True. But you just started talking about yourself, and part of me worries that if I pry too much you’ll stop. As much as I love talking about me—” He shoots me a lazy smile. “—I prefer hearing about you.”

“Why?”

“Because I like you.” Plain and simple, said with a shrug in all his casualness. That’s where we’ll always be different. He lives in his skin without fear of judgement. His parents’ denial doesn’t even make him think twice before doing whatever he wants, with whoever he wants. I don’t just envy that. I respect him for it.

He takes my lack of reply as a go-ahead, which I guess it is, even though my hands are clammy over what might pass through those full lips. With him, you can never be sure. “*Have you* ever told them you’re gay?”

My muscles lock up on instinct, and a wave of panic washes over me. At nearly thirty years old, I’m still afraid to tell my parents that I like men, which is ridiculous because they already suspect. What’s wrong with putting them out of their misery and coming clean?

Simple. My sister.

“No,” I finally murmur, scraping the palms of my hands down my thighs, and back up to get rid of the sweatiness.

“Follow up question,” he adds. “Why?”

My jaw locks as Jamie’s face comes to mind. We look like we could be twins, same eyes, skin tone, and basic features, except she’s five years older. As far as similarities, our looks are where they stop. Our personalities couldn’t be any more different, and Mom told me she couldn’t be happier. That’s the closest thing to an admission I’ll ever get from my mother about her feeling on their first born.

Growing up, Jamie was someone I looked up to, even wanted to be like. I wanted her approval more than anything, and she ate up the attention. But she changed after moving away to college, and I'll never forget her coming back after the news of Brea broke. Instead of consoling me, telling me everything would be okay like our parents, she stopped by my childhood bedroom the night before she left and said, *Maybe it's God's way of punishing you for being gay and lying about it.*

We weren't that much of a religious family, even if we came from one. We didn't go to church regularly, pray before our meals, or hold a tight belief system. Part of me wonders now if it's because of me. Did my parents worry what their relationship with God would be like knowing they had a gay son? They used to go to church. They used to attend Sunday school growing up and taught Jamie and I how to pray if we were ever interested. But they never forced us inside a church, and never made us pay any dues. Jamie chose to worship, going more times than we did to the cobblestone Catholic church down the street from the house we grew up in after she started college. I'd listen to the bells chime when the service started at ten o'clock every Sunday, knowing my sister was sitting in the pews and praying with the other community members, feeling a twinge of guilt that I wasn't with her. I'm not sure when she started looking at me like I'm some sort of abomination, but it's the only look I ever get from her now.

I startle when his hand flattens on mine, stopping me from fidgeting. It's like when he held my pinky last night, offering me what little comfort he could through a single touch. Now, he's looking at me with encouragement, patiently waiting for me to answer his question.

"Because if I do, then it becomes real," I find myself telling him, not looking away once our eyes lock. Even if I don't want to believe in Jamie's theory, the one she dumped on me to simmer in without another word or goodbye afterwards, part of me does. People tell you not to search for reasons why things happen the way they do, but I'm human. I need answers, even if those answers tell me to hate myself.

To deny.

To punish.

To self-isolate.

"Because if I do..." My voice is raspy, barely any better after I try clearing away the emotion lodged in my throat. "If I do, I wouldn't get

another redo.”

I think about Brea. About what it felt like to hold her in my arms, and watch my parents take turns loving her. How Sophia cradled her to her chest, and her parents kissed the tiny girl’s chubby cheeks with tears rolling down their faces. In that moment, I looked around the room and thought *this is what it’s supposed to be like*. I didn’t think about who I was with at the time, or if that person made me happy, because Brea filled my chest with happiness all on her own. I didn’t need anything else.

Losing her only peeled off the temporary bandage I’d put on and let everything infect the wound that’d been festering since the day I decided it was better to keep quiet and fit the mold than break from society’s cast.

Don’t tell.

Don’t talk about it.

Don’t acknowledge it.

When Lawrence lifts his hand off mine and sticks it out to me, I can only stare in confusion and feel the loss of his warmth like a rejection deep in my chest. I can’t blame the guy for not wanting damaged goods. There’s a lot about me that I don’t even like, so why would I expect him to? *Wait*.

Do I want Lawrence to want me like that?

My eyes snap to his when he states, “My name is Lawrence McKinley and I’m bisexual.”

I blink.

Using his free hand, he lifts mine to tuck into his, wrapping our palms together in a slow, limp shake. “Labels don’t mean shit, Scout. All they do is make people feel like they can control us—check us into little boxes for the sake of their sanity. It’s all bullshit though. Being bi, gay, pan, hetero, whatever isn’t something to be ashamed of, and it isn’t something any of us have to flaunt. You don’t want to slap a sticker on your forehead that says what kind of people you’re into? Fine. But at the very least, you should let yourself be happy in your own skin because we only get one shot at life. You shouldn’t waste it caring about what everyone thinks, when very few people’s opinions matter.”

I suck in a small, long-winded breath when his piercing eyes pin me to my spot, letting oxygen expand my tight lungs. His grip tightens around mine, not letting go, not moving. He asks, “Have you ever kissed another guy before?”

Feeling my eyes glaze over as his head cocks, I know he hears the “yes” forming in the shaky exhale of my breath.

He’s suddenly closer to me, those brown eyes leisurely scoping out every inch of my face before focusing on my lips. “Have you ever thought about kissing *me*?”

The noise forming in my throat is all he needs before his lips stretch into a cocky grin. He knows that my near silence is enough of a confirmation. I don’t need to say anything for his ego to get stroked.

Who wouldn’t want to kiss Lawrence McKinley when he looks at you the way he’s looking at me right now—confident, all-knowing, and like he can change your world? My heart squeezes when he shifts, his weight dipping into the cushion between us, closing the space between our bodies until I feel his breath dancing across the skin of my cheek.

“Reece,” he breathes my name.

I swallow, Adam’s apple bobbing.

“Say it,” he commands.

Heart thumping when I feel a set of lips grazing my jawline, I find my palm sliding over until my fingers wrap above his knee that settles next to my thigh. Squeezing it, I turn my head a fraction and whisper, “I want you to kiss me.”

Not *I’ve thought about it*. I have.

Not *I think I’m gay*. I am.

The harsh thumping in my chest only intensifies when his nose grazes mine, his lips getting closer and closer until my breath catches in my throat. All he gets out is, “Good,” before he closes the gap and slants his mouth over mine.

Everything inside of me sparks to life as soon as his lips are on me, blanketing mine, one of his palms cupping my jaw and holding me to him with a tender gentleness. Neither of us moves at first, our lips melded together as if he’s giving me an out before this goes any farther.

Instead, my hand raises to mimic his own movement, taking his face in my palm and feeling the prickle of his stubble against my skin. He shudders when my thumb brushes across his cheek, taking it as invitation to keep going, tasting my lips slowly, until his tongue sweeps the seams of my lips and encourages me to open for him. He wastes no time showing me how skilled he is when I part for him, his tongue caressing mine as his other hand grips the back of my head and presses me closer.

He takes his time, never rushing, kissing me one way, then another, tasting me in every direction he can with tiny pecks, eventually turning deeper and more intense with every brush of our mouths. Our heavy breaths mix as his hand lowers from my face until it's sliding down my neck and collarbone and kneading my shoulder to loosen the tense muscles that I don't realize are keyed up. "Relax," he murmurs against my lips, pecking them once, twice, a third time before he deepens it again, gripping the back of my neck tightly with one hand.

He sucks my tongue like I imagine he would my cock, and the instant hard on gives me the courage to kiss him back, gripping his face and mirroring every, swipe, suck, and nip he gives me until we're both frantic.

Lawrence bites into my bottom lip until a sting of pain shoots straight to my dick, which aches to be taken out, and a low groan rises up my throat. He does it again, this time changing positions so he's kneeling on the couch with one leg, and standing on the floor with the other, towering over me. His other hand tips my chin up to meet his lips as he continues his exploration from a new, dominate vantage point.

My hand itches to slide between our bodies and stroke myself, easing the painful steel erection, especially when his fingers begin gliding up and down my chest in teasing motions. As if he knows what I'm thinking, he looks down at me and says, "How many guys have you fooled around with?"

Embarrassment heats my face, changing the flush from our make out session to reddening from my lack of experience. "One," I croak, having no choice but to look him in the eye because of how he holds my face. "But we didn't do that much."

His nose skates down my face, his breath warming my skin before he peppers a few kisses to my jawline. "You have no idea how much it turns me on knowing I'll be the guy to show you exactly how to feel good." Continuing his journey of kisses down my neck, he gently bites the base of my throat before licking the same spot. "But not today. Today, you're going to take out your cock and get yourself off."

Jesus Christ.

His lips find my ear, his teeth tugging on the lobe as he adds, "And I'm going to watch."

I groan again and reach for my jeans because I'm too turned on to think twice about his bossy commands, popping open the button and pulling

down the zipper. I'm so fucking hard it hurts and the nerves building from his curious eyes watching my every move makes me fumble as I pull the denim down far enough to take myself out.

Lawrence's breath catches when I pull my length free, and I could come on the spot just from his eyes on me alone. He sputters out, "Fuck me, Reece. I can't wait until I get to wrap my lips around you."

My back bows up from the couch, where I'm partially laying under him, as my hand grips my dick harder and begins stroking up and down and working every nerve ending. Eyelids heavy, I watch him watch me, his lips parted, and eyes hooded as mine trail down to the bulge in his pants that he does nothing about.

His eyes meet mine again, lust darkening the usual warm brown color until they're nearly black and leans forward to kiss me. It's hard, hungry, and quick before he pulls away. "Picture my hand there, helping you jerk off," he says, voice husky and as turned on as me as I close my eyes and picture his words. "I'm leaning over you and worshipping that pretty cock of yours, loving the way it twitches and grows in my hand as I work it in my palm."

Fuckfuckfuck. My pace quickens, imagination replacing my hand for his as I twist my palm over the sensitive underside of the head and apply the right amount of pressure before feeling precum leak from the tip.

"I'm marking your neck at the same time, loving the way your skin tastes salty against my tongue, and wondering what you would taste like when you shoot down my throat the first time I suck you off." A heady groan escapes me, neck tensing when my mind conjures an image of his dark head of hair bobbing up and down my shaft. "Have you ever been deep-throated?"

"No." It's a choked response, barely audible because I'm so far gone moving my palm up and down getting myself closer and closer to shooting my load with every sexy thing he says.

His lips ghost over mine, not touching until he speaks again. "Baby, there's so much I get to help you experience. Like the first time my hand wraps around you. The moment I get to suck you off until my mouth milks you of your cum..." He kisses me gingerly, torturously slow as the sound of my hand jerking me between us becomes louder, more frequent. Sucking my bottom lip into his mouth, he drags his teeth across it, before letting it *pop* free. "And I can't wait to play with that perfect peach ass of yours. I've

fantasized about it. Touched myself thinking about getting to put my fingers in it and stroke you until I sink into it with my big, fat—”

I can’t hold on anymore, his words building me to the brink as I imagine everything he’s wanted to do to me. I jackknife up, my back arching off the couch as he covers my mouth with his and absorbs the cry of my orgasm. Hot streams of cum hit my hand and chest, still covered by my t-shirt, as I ride out the wave until my lower half falls back onto the couch.

My heart thumps as Lawrence kisses me one more time before he kneels in front of me, eyes sliding over the mess I made of myself. His dark eyes appraise my shirt before he reaches forward dips his fingers into the remnants of my orgasm and sucks them into his mouth. Popping his fingers out, he palms himself to readjust before studying my face with a curious softness.

One of my arms is bent over my eyes, giving me just enough room to peek at his wandering gaze. “How are you feeling?”

Honestly? “Better than I ever have.”

His cockiness is back. “Good.”

After I catch my breath, I manage to sit up and look down at my ruined shirt. My mind wanders back to the conversation that led to this as I tuck myself back into my pants, zipping up my jeans. “I don’t want to be ashamed of who I am,” I tell him quietly.

“You don’t have to.”

We lock eyes again. I take a deep breath, swallowing past the doubt, fear, and an array of other feelings that have forced me to put aside my happiness for all these years. “I’m gay.”

His hand finds mine, interweaving our fingers and squeezing once. No words have to be said beyond that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

REN

“HAVE YOU HEARD FROM TIFFANY?” my best friend asks like she always does when we talk. Why she feels the need to be the mediator in what she calls the ‘friend debacle’ is beyond me. Tiffany Anderson and I have been on civil terms since we parted ways after graduating from Bentley University. She had a crush on me that I didn’t reciprocate, and sure, I *could* have handled it differently, but I didn’t. Some time passed, feelings were hurt, but last I knew, we were okay.

However, ‘okay’ in Della Saint James terms is not the same as mine. “I commented on her Facebook post about the European tour with a cute gif of a cat in a tutu,” I tell her, grinning when she makes a disapproving noise like I knew she would.

I grab a button-down from my closet and hang it on the door before looking for a pair of pants, preparing for the new school week tomorrow. Following what happened on the couch, I told Reece I’d give him some space to think. He would never ask for it, but it was all over his face. As soon as those two words were out of his mouth, he was in freak out mode.

“Posting a gif of a cat is not considered talking, Ren! That’s not even the proper way to congratulate her for working hard enough to be invited to compete there. It takes serious talent. When was the last time you had an *actual* conversation with her?”

I love Del, but I'll never understand why she worries so much about all her friends staying in touch. Tiff and I have always had more of a bantering friendship online than in person. We'd only hang out if Della were with us, especially when I realized she was into me. "You know I love you, right?"

There's a brief pause. "Yes."

"And I love how much you want everybody to get along," I continue, hoping she'll catch onto where I'm taking this. "But you shouldn't expect us to. Tiffany is doing her own thing and I'm doing mine. We *practically* had a conversation in the form of a gif exchange last week. I made sure to congratulate her with words and even told her good luck. For us, that's impressive." And it is, I'm not lying. Whereas Della is all about talking on the phone, like we try making time to do every other Sunday night to catch up, Tiffany and I are prone to exchanging a few comments on Facebook. I know based on her relationship status that she's in "a complicated" relationship with some California surfer-type dude, and she looks happy and healthy. What more is there to know?

It takes a few minutes before she relents, her sigh gradual and reluctant. "Fine. So, everything has been good with you? You've barely texted me even though you said you'd share all the juicy details."

I didn't say that she just assumed I would. "It's good." My mind flashes to yesterday's activities, and a stupid smile spreads across my face that I'm glad she can't see or else she'd be asking way more questions. "There's a kid giving me some shit on the field, but I'm handling it."

"Is it the same kid from before?" When Beckett first started acting up, I vented to Della about his attitude. It was little things—not following instructions, not passing when he should have, making comments about his other teammates as if they couldn't get the job done without him. I'm convinced he even let the quarterback get sacked on purpose. Then after his remark, I blew up during our call and listened to her apologize like it was somehow her fault, only making me angrier knowing I'd never get an apology out of the little fuck who I deserved one from.

Even though Richman told me I did the right thing by benching Beckett, he still lectured me on social media practices. That night, I reached out to a few old buddies who tagged me in some stuff and had them remove me from their pictures and outing posts, which they did without hassle. I don't mind erasing myself from online. Now that I don't have "fans" to impress, I don't worry about keeping a steady media presence like the old PR people

insisted who worked with our college team. She was all about building our futures through our fans, but I hated it. I go on to check in with people, poke fun at a few friends, and then don't go on again for a while. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Thinking of Beckett only makes me wish I could tell Reece that things will be easy for him now that he's fully accepted himself, but it isn't. There will always be people who want to tear us down because they won't accept that love has no gender.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, I sit on the edge of my bed and examine my closet. "It is," I confirm, more of a grumble than anything. "He's smartened up and shut up, but his eyes are always on me like he's waiting for me to explode. I let him practice this week hoping he'd pull his head out of his ass but he's still playing like he's the only one on the team."

"What are you going to do?"

I have no idea. When I brought up the conversation I had with Richman to Reece after our escapades, it was more than just a distraction tactic for Scout to get what happened off his mind. I want us to be normal, to talk like nothing really has to change, because it doesn't. We're still us, even if I wouldn't mind being more, something I've never truly wanted with anyone. He ended up telling me what I already guessed—that Richman's strings are pulled by some of the administration and board members who control funding decisions. Since Mr. Wright is a big part of the school's wallet, it's not surprising he'd want me to end Beckett's punishment early and get him field time with his team.

But I won't do that. After filling Della in on what happened, I fall back on the bed and stare up at the ceiling. "It's not the end of the world, Del. It just pisses me off. I thought getting out of the city would mean the end of money controlling everybody, you know?" It's a wasted thought though, I see that now. "But it makes sense that it's not. Money drives everything."

"How much does his dad donate?"

Knowing that they revamped the football field and got all new jerseys for each of the sports teams *and* equipment for the weight room? A lot. But not more than I have in my own account, I'm sure of it. "Don't know. If worst comes to worst, I'll donate what I can. I've been careful not to touch my trust fund since I got access to it a few years ago."

Money always made me itch. I've seen what it does to people. It makes them selfish and overpowered. I have way more than I need just sitting in a

bank account. I planned on using it for college before getting a full ride, and barely dipped into it to rent the house and get some necessities here. I told myself I wouldn't use the money unless it was important.

We go back and forth on a few other things, but I never bring up Reece. His story isn't mine to tell, and I respect that. Maybe one day, I can talk about him like she talks to me about Theo—with a smile in her voice. And even though I don't want to, I let her go when I hear his voice in the background paired with their tiny dog's bark demanding her attention.

"We should get together soon," she tells me before we hang up, since our last visit seems like forever ago. "Maybe we can drive there and check out the new digs and celebrate your birthday coming up."

"Sounds good to me. Text me a few dates when you're free."

"Will do. Call me whenever, okay?" I'll call her on Sunday like I always do. We're both busy, her with her painting business that she's been dominating, and me with things here.

"Love you, Del."

When we hang up, I stare at the ceiling a little while longer before shaking my head and pulling up my messaging app to see a text from my former coach. A guy who I considered a father figure for a long time.

Coach R: Making sure you're still alive

Coach Riley is a man of few words, so I know all he wants is confirmation since I haven't checked in with him. I wasn't sure he'd want me to after the last conversation we had in person. *You're making a mistake, son. There's physical therapy you could do, doctors to make sure the pain is managed during the season.*

When I told him that my mind was made up, he didn't bother masking his disappointment. He worked his ass off to get me where he did, and I wasted all that energy for nothing. No contract. No leagues. I walked away from everything, including him.

The last thing I told him was "sorry, Coach" before walking out of his office. I'd already had my interview with Exeter and a few other schools lined up, not knowing where I'd wind up in the long haul.

Me: Alive and well

I expect a lack of response from him, so I slide my phone into my pocket and try not to think about all the different reactions I got from people when they found out I was done.

Are you fucking crazy, kid?

You're just going to throw it all away?

Your arm can be monitored.

Why would you do this to your mother and I after everything we've done for you?

I won't lie. Dad's response stung the worst, but we'd been through worse together. If he could accept that his son was bisexual, even if he didn't advertise it to the world, then he would get past the same son giving up baseball. Maybe he'd even see that I would have been way more miserable if I'd stuck it out by being shoved back into the closet with the door locked during the duration of my contract. After spending so many years out, living freely how I wanted, with who I wanted, I couldn't stand the possibility of not having that anymore—holding a guy's hand if that was who I was with, or taking him out to dinner instead of dating in the dark. No thanks. I may not be the world's best dater, but I know I'd want more for anybody I'm with than to be kept a secret.

I won't be the person who holds their breath while waiting for anyone's approval, because I know the chances of ever fully having it is slim. My father is always going to wish that his son was straight, playing in the big leagues, with a pocketful of money and then some so that he can tell all his work buddies about. If he can't do that just because I chose a different route, then so be it. I let it upset me for a while before I brushed it off, knowing I couldn't get anywhere in life if that weighed me down.

I'm happy. I appreciate the money I have, the opportunities I've been given, and the people who've fallen into my path along the way. Specifically, the blond-haired book nerd who may or may not be a common feature in my dreams at night.

I'll be damned if the short couple of months knowing him hasn't changed everything about my perception of life, because I want to be him when I grow up. Strong, even if he thinks he isn't. Brave, even if he feels weak. And willing to love, even if he thinks he doesn't deserve it.

I'll do everything in my power to prove that he does.

It's mid-morning when I'm pouring myself another cup of coffee in the teacher's lounge and Harper walks in with Michelle tucked into her side. I start to smile until I see the red-rimmed gaze Michelle gives me while trying to smile, followed by her friend's less than stellar stare.

“Are you okay?” I’ve never done well with people crying, in fact my level of comfort for situations like this is equal to that gif of a man patting a woman’s back with a broomstick from a distance while saying “there, there”, but my concern is genuine. Even if my first instinct is to cringe, I manage to smile despite the glowering and take a step toward the woman who’s obviously upset.

“If you must know,” Harper says, passing her friend a tissue, “Your friend decided to *finally* be up front with Michelle and stop leading her on. I kept telling her not to get her hopes up.”

Said woman scowls. “I’m sitting right here, Harper.” Her cheeks pinken when she turns to me. “Reece is a good guy. You know that more than anyone since you’re the only one he seems to let in. So, just ignore us.” I feel a little bad about how rejected her statement sounds, but I’m glad Reece was honest with her about where they stand, though I’m curious how their conversation went down.

My mind goes to Tiffany, wishing I would have taken my own advice. Della told me to tell her I wasn’t interested, and I took the ‘ignore the situation until it goes away’ path, which only made things worse. It made me a huge asshole, and I’ve since apologized for it.

Feeling like I need to say something, I conjure up the first thing that sounds halfway decent. “You seem like a sweet person,” I tell her, honestly, getting a small smile in return. “Which means you won’t have any trouble finding a guy who will pay plenty of attention to you.” My eyes trail toward Harper, who’s looking at me with wary eyes. “Both of you.”

She cringes slightly, her lips pressing together before she nods once. “I guess I saw that one coming.”

All I can do is lift a shoulder. “I don’t want to lead anybody on. Neither does Reece, I’m sure. Not that I don’t appreciate you talking baseball with me—” I wink at her, even though I found it a little tiring that she would constantly bring up my old stats, interviews, and articles and say how sad she was I didn’t go big after all. I’m not unused to that kind of attention from people, women especially. An old college teammate tied up with a girl who still uses him for his money, and now that he’s signed to a minor league team, she’s probably test-driving him for more. It comes with the territory. We had to be cautious, something Coach Riley told me from the get-go when reporters were always bugging me with questions and pictures.

“—but you should put your effort in somebody who’s worth your time. It’s not me.”

Her lips weigh down at the corners, but she nods slowly. “It was nice to flirt with a celebrity while it lasted.”

Eyeblink twitching, I say the only thing I can think that won’t make me sound like a total dick. “I’m far from a celebrity.” I have sports blogs still talk about me, but I don’t want them to. In fact, I hate it. Sometimes old teammates will send me links to some that they think are hilarious, but most tear me apart for not ‘being a man’ and ‘dealing with my injury’ like hundreds of others have done before me. I’ve learned to ignore the jabs because I don’t regret my decision, even if other people do. It’s not their lives, and I’m happier now that I don’t have to get up at the ass crack of dawn to train, or stick to a special diet, or get an earful from the team because they’re bitching about everyone and everything in the locker room. Screw that.

“Around here you are,” she counters, giving me a shrug knowing she’s right. I haven’t felt like one, and I appreciate that. Minus a few people bringing up televised games from the past year or so, I don’t get recognized. I told Richman when I accepted the job that I was here to start fresh. I’d put 110% into everything I did, both teaching and coaching, but wanted my personal life—or rather the old life I lived—to stay far away from the one I’m living here. He agreed, even said it may be better in the long run.

A few people like Jim and Sullivan have mentioned the clips of me they’d seen before, or articles they read in passing, but never made a big fuss over it. A couple boys on the football team asked why I’d give being famous up for coaching at a ‘middle of nowhere school’ that has ‘little to no potential’ but that’s where they’re wrong. Everybody has the potential to be great if they believe it hard enough. If they practice. Train. Focus.

I could have chosen a different path for myself and got drafted on a team clear across the country, packed up, and moved if I really wanted to. But there isn’t one thing I’d change since stepping away from that world if I could go back.

Because if I could, then I wouldn’t have met the man who I’m fairly certain fate sent me on my way to find and help, and that’d be a damn shame.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

REN

THE SCHOOL IS NEARLY vacant minus a few custodial staff doing end of day cleaning as I head out of the small office once belonging to the former Coach Jefferson. They stripped it of everything except a desk and a few filing cabinets that still have records of former students and old stats that I studied up on before the season started, leaving empty built-in shelves that I imagine held a lot of trophies, awards, and pictures. Jefferson's winning streak with every team he coached is well known, which leaves a few faculty giving me doubtful looks since the Wildcats have only won two out of the four games played this season.

We got annihilated by Belmont, won against Lincoln and Beverly, and got beat hard by Memorial, and after that game there was a lot of words to be said in the locker room when fingers started getting pointed as to whose fault it was. I was getting ready to tell them it was all their faults, because a team wins *and* loses together, myself included, when Conner Wright, Beckett's father, walked in and excused the boys like he had a right to. His son was grinning at me like he knew what was coming, and all I could do was strand my ground as I got my head chewed off.

The one-sided conversation left a lot to be desired, and none of it particularly surprised me, especially when he said he'd refuse to give any future donations if he didn't see his son play the next game. Truth is, Beckett *should* have played in the last game, but he decided to go after

another teammate and get an extra game out. It's like he doesn't want to play.

When I shrugged Mr. Wright's words off like a brush to my shoulder, the tell-tale signs of frustration reddened his face—his neck straining much like my own father's in anger, as he made idle threats about my inability to coach. I simply told him, "It would be a lot easier to coach kids who were willing to listen in the first place" which is how I ended up with an email from John Richman the following morning about a meeting with him and a few administrative members *concerned* about reports from a parent.

Since some of the administration can only meet during evenings, I'm scheduled to speak with them tomorrow night since Thursday will be spent prepping and conditioning for our next game against a school who's track record is even worse than ours this year. It gives me some hope that we'll have another win under us to get people off my back.

I wave to a few cleaners sweeping the hallway floors of candy wrappers and god knows what else, who give me no more than a couple nods and empty waves back as I exit the building. My phone rings halfway to the staff parking, and I half expect it to be Della since she still hasn't given me dates when we can schedule time to hang out, but stop dead in my tracks when I see my father's name on the screen.

Nerves prickling my fingers as I hit ACCEPT, I lift the phone to my ear. "Everything okay, pops?" He's never liked it when I called him that, yet it's fitting, and I'm more worried that something might have happened considering I rarely hear from him, than I am about him being irritated over the title.

He grunts, grumbling something under his breath. "Am I not allowed to check in with my son?"

I want to point out that it's not a common occurrence, but I bite my tongue. Giving him the benefit of the doubt considering he's always waited to make conversation, case in point our one-on-one following the Ronny incident almost an entire month after it happened when I was fourteen, I let loose a small sigh. "I suppose not."

I'm picturing him in his office, a tumbler of scotch probably swirling in his hands. "I ran into Coach Riley the other day. He mentioned that he reached out. Said you were doing well."

You'd know that too if you did the same, the bitter voice in my head says as I head toward my Wrangler, feet finally working after the shock over the

man on the other end wearing off. “I told him I was alive,” I state, fumbling with my keys to unlock the back and drop my things into the seat. “Hardly an in-depth conversation.”

If he hears the bite in my tone, he doesn’t bring it up. I don’t like obligatory calls because he doesn’t like that my old coach reached out before he did. Niall McKinley isn’t a man who likes being upstaged. “Are things well then?”

The fact he’s asking is something I should spend more time being thankful for, because no matter his intentions, he still called. I know my father is a workaholic and always has a million things he could be doing, but instead, he called me. That has to count for something.

“Actually, I have a meeting with administration tomorrow over a ‘concerned parent’ because I benched his kid.” Thinking about the meeting grinds on me, but I don’t let it build because it’s not worth it. “If the guy didn’t put money toward athletics, it wouldn’t be such a big deal considering they would have scolded me for not enforcing the zero-tolerance policy.” My need to explain is fueled the impending *what did you do* that I was certain my father would ask me otherwise.

Instead, he asks, “What happened?”

I have two options. I could be upfront and tell him what Beckett called me and move forward before he can say a word about it, or I could beat around the bush knowing the conversation might not end well. Knowing my father, he’d push for details rather than being kept in the dark. “He called me a derogative name at practice after students found some things online about me. It’s not a big deal. What is, is that his father thinks he can toss around money to intimidate me, and it may just be working if I’m supposed to meet with administration.”

No matter how many times I tell myself they can’t fire me, it doesn’t make me feel any better. The tight knot of nerves over the conversation I can’t control has me on edge and talking it out with my father won’t help any.

“Lawrence,” my father replies in the voice I recognize as his intimidating one. It’s laced with demand and profession, a tone he takes with his clients often. I used to hear that voice when I’d eavesdrop on his phone calls when I was younger, always interested in what they were about. Usually, I’d get bored five minutes in and walk away, but I would always be impressed by how astute he is in almost every situation, no matter the

bullshit people on the other end of the phone would try to feed him. “Tell me what he said.”

He’s a man of logic for the most part. As far back as I can remember, leading up to the Ronny incident, he’s always picked apart a situation with me, making me find a way through it until a solution is found. The last time we did that was when I wanted to drop baseball for football, putting all my effort into training for the fall season. Clearly, he tilted the solution in his favor because I decided he was right when he told me I wasn’t built for contact sports, and even though I wish I’d tried, I know he isn’t wrong. I’ve never been able to bulk up to take a hit, and even though I’m fast, I’m not fast enough to avoid an inevitable injury that being chased by two hundred-eighty-pound men would produce.

It makes me wonder why he’s choosing now to play the role he used to back then, but I decide not to dwell. “Do you remember what you called Ronny when you told me I was never allowed to see him again?” My voice is hesitant, afraid of what he might say, if he even remembers that day as clearly as I do. The fear of being discovered, the pure rage on his face mixed with the confusion on mine. It was...bad. Just bad. “That’s what he called me.”

There’s a small intake of startled breath, one I’ve never heard from him before. And when he doesn’t make a move to say anything right away, I assume I get my answer. “Like I said, Dad, it doesn’t matter. I’m a grown man, I can handle a few words being tossed my way.” The *I’m used to it* goes unsaid, but I wonder if he hears it in my voice.

Jaw ticking, I think of the would have been articles and shake my head. Not the place or time.

“Son,” his strangled voice comes through after a long beat of silence. I prepare for the worst, planting my feet on the pavement as I straighten my spine like I’m about to take a hit to the gut. Though never physical, I’m used to it from him. “I can’t tell you how much I wish I could take back what I said that day.”

I blink. “You...?” Shock coats my trailed off words as I slowly shake my head.

There’s a moment of ruffled papers and creaky noises, and I can only imagine he’s repositioning. “Lawrence, I’m sorry for what I said that day. I should have said that sooner, but I never found the right words, and I know what happened changed us. It made you fear me.”

Fear him? “Dad, I was never afraid of you. Okay, maybe I was a little bit that day after you destroyed my room, but not since then.”

A sharp breath exhales on his end. “I should have never done that.” Well, I agree, but I’m not about to tell him that. Plus, he more than made up for it by buying me ten times nicer stuff than I already had. “You rarely stayed home after that. I thought you were afraid to, so I let it be.”

Even though he can’t see my head shake, I do it anyway, a hand scraping up and down my cheek as I try collecting my response. “I stayed at Della’s a lot, but that was because I was confused and trying to figure things out. Listen, we don’t have to talk about this—”

“We should,” he argues.

“Last time we did, it didn’t go over well.”

“Because of my ignorance, son.”

I’m...speechless. Literally no words leave my parted lips.

“Your mother reprimanded me, you know. I know you aren’t particularly close to either of us and that’s our fault, but she did tell me I was out of line. Even suggested I attend anger management.”

A choked laugh escapes me. Picturing Dad at one of those meetings is something I can’t begin to imagine. “She did?”

“She did,” he confirms quietly. “There’s a lot of things we’ve done wrong. Having you gone and living your own life there, hearing what happened, it makes me realize how late I am having this conversation.”

Nostrils twitching slightly with emotion, I lean against my Jeep and expel a small breath. “I don’t expect you guys to accept how I live my life,” I tell him cautiously. “And I’ve come to terms with the fact that you might never, so if it’s too much to talk about—”

“Son.” His voice is pained, garbled with hoarse emotion that thickens his words. “Hell, if that’s how we made you feel, then I’m truly sorry. It isn’t that we don’t accept your lifestyle, we just thought it was better not to ask.”

Better not to ask? “Why would you think that? Whenever Mom brought up someone I was seeing, she always asked if it was a girl. You guys never once seem to acknowledge the possibility that I’m dating a man. How else do you expect me to interpret that?”

His pause doesn’t bode well for me.

“Look, we don’t have to do this,” I offer him, giving him an out to preserve what little relationship we have left. I’ve already told myself I

don't need his, or Mom's, approval. "But, for the record, I've met a man who means a lot to me. I don't know what's going on between us, it might not turn out to be anything, but I like him. Way more than I should, pops. He makes me happy."

More silence.

Sucking in a breath, I nod once. "That's all I have to say. Maybe one day, you'd like to meet the person I wind up with." I tell myself not to picture Reece in that roll, shaking my father's hand or pecking my mother's cheek like he does with Claire, but it's hard not to. My throat bobs thinking of him *not* in my life, and that's when I realize how fucking far gone I am for him already, and I won't pretend that doesn't scare me shitless.

Blowing out a shaky breath, I clear my throat and open the driver door. "Dad, I got to go. I'll...talk to you later though."

It takes him a short moment, but eventually he says, "Love you, son," and a little piece of my doubt crumbles over the soft-spoken words from a man I've only known to have hard edges.

Before I can climb in my Jeep to leave, I see two kids in the distance throwing a football and playing one on one. It's well past the time for late bus according to the clock on my phone, so I deposit it in my pocket and head closer to their game. When I see Tommy, the sub for Beckett, playing with a guy not on the team, I can't help but watch how he dodges Tommy's moves effortlessly, running faster than half the boys I've been coaching until he makes it to what I assume is their invisible end zone.

"Bradley," I yell, grabbing the attention of Tommy as his friend jogs back over. My offensive lineman is red-faced and out of breath, so I imagine they've been at this for a while.

"Hey, Coach," he greets, walking over with a sheepish look on his face.

"What's going on? It's late."

His friend butts in, walking over to us with a hard look on his face. "It's not even five-thirty."

My brows go up. As someone who never liked being at school longer than I had to, I can confirm that's late. "Well past school hours," I tell him. "Mister..."

It's Tommy who introduces us. "Coach, this is my friend Red Bowen. He's been helping me get some extra practice in."

Admittedly, Tommy has gotten better over the past few weeks. It's how we scraped by our last win, but barely. I assess his friend, Red, whose name

sounds familiar. It can't be a coincidence that this kid shares the same name as Reece's heckler. He stands tall, rigid, as if he's on guard. I hold out my hand. "It's nice to meet you, Red."

He stares at my hand for a few seconds before shaking it, grip firm and cautious before he takes his arm back and crosses both of them over his chest. "You've been helping Tommy?"

I get a single head nod.

Tommy shifts on his feet. "I know we're not allowed to share the playbook, but I've only asked if he could help me get better at reading the opponents moves."

That catches my attention. To his friend, I inquire, "You play before?" He's taller than Tommy, but not as tall as me. I'd peg him at six foot, six-one, with solid muscle that he's definitely worked toward. If he doesn't play football, he's played something.

"At my old school," he confirms, not offering me more than that. Reece is right, the kid is as much of steel trap as he is.

"You're fast," I note, tipping my head at what I just saw him do. "And you know how to block. What position did you play?"

"Fullback, sir." I'm tempted to snort at his 'sir', something I haven't been called before. I made sure the boys on the team called me coach.

I mimic his stance, crossing my arms, not threatened by the way he eyes me. "You think about trying out for Exeter's team?"

Tommy perks up, beaming between me and his friend. Out of everyone, he's probably the nicest. It's not always the best thing because I can tell his team's jeers get to him too quickly. "He'd be able to do that?"

"It's mid-season, so it wouldn't be customary unless there was a reason to add a new member." The handbook doesn't say we can't, though. If this kid knows his plays and listens, we wouldn't be forced to forfeit if he subbed or even started by switching the players. Honestly, our last loss had to do with Sammy, one of the running backs, getting hurt in the last quarter. He limped off the field even though he insisted on being fine. "But it's not impossible." My eyes slide to Red, brows drawn. "If you're interested."

Tommy elbows his friend in the ribs, whose mask slips just enough to show surprise that I'd offer him something like that. He fits it back in place, expression impassive, as he shrugs at my suggestion. "I guess so."

He guesses so. There's no doubt, based on the way his eyes shine a little brighter, that he wants the opportunity to try out, if nothing else. I'll give it

to him. “You know some of the plays?” I ask next, hoping Tommy broke a few rules and just won’t admit it.

“Yes, sir,” he answers, eyes going to Tommy for a moment before back to mine. “I’ve been to every game. I’ve watched.”

I dip my chin. “Tomorrow at 3. Show up at my office and don’t be late. If you don’t show, I’ll assume you’re not interested after all. Understand?”

There’s no hesitation this time. “Understood.”

Nodding at the two of them, I stuff a hand into my pants pocket. “And enough of that sir bullshit. Call me coach like the rest of them.” A hint of a small smile appears on his lips, but it’s gone before I can read into it. “You boys need a lift home?”

They share a look, Tommy shrugging.

It’s Red who says, “Yes...Coach.”

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

REECE

GUZZLING the rest of the water before grabbing a towel, I find myself nodding at what Lawrence is saying. I wipe my face off. “I’ve heard Red talk about football before in class with some other students.”

Granted, it was when they were supposed to be working, so I always quieted them. For the most part, they listened. Ever since Red turned in his extra credit paper, which was an A+ piece of work that raised his grade significantly, he hasn’t gone out of his way to act out. He still plays the class clown role when he can, but it’s usually in his answers when I call on him, and I’m fine with that since he’s still doing the work. Hell, I chuckle at a few remarks myself.

“So, you think he’ll show?”

I lift a shoulder, setting my empty bottle back down on the floor. We started late at the gym after he texted me saying he had to make a couple pit stops, so I caught up with Rocco and another regular trainer until he arrived. “I don’t see why he wouldn’t. Seems like his father would want him to be part of something like this, especially if he was at his old school.”

Red hasn’t mentioned much more about his parents, only that his father is strict. A former marine who moved his family here after being medically discharged following an accident at the base he was stationed at out of state. I don’t know what he does now and have no interest in prying if it’ll shut

Red down since he's only offered up limited information. I want him to trust me when I say he can talk to me about anything.

When I see Lawrence lift the hem of his muscle shirt to wipe the sweat from his forehead, I can't look away. It isn't the first time I've seen him shirtless, but the sight of rippling abs leading to a tapered waist is captivating. He told me once that he used to be more trimmed from all training he'd gone through, but I can't imagine that being true staring at every damp valley of muscle on his defined torso right now.

"Like what you see, Scout?" he teases, keeping his shirt lifted a few more seconds, probably for my benefit more than the sake of cooling down.

Monday morning, I stopped by his room shortly after he got in with his favorite coffee from the bakery, and a box of Fudge Rounds. He took one look at the items, eyes roaming back and forth between the two, before his lips cracked into a smooth grin. All I said was, "I don't need space," and he nodded once in understanding before accepting the piss poor breakfast I brought him.

Standing in front of me now, he pats his rock-hard stomach a few times. "If you keep feeding me snacks, you won't have anything but a gut to ogle. You might lose interest."

My first thought is *as if* because I know his workout routine. If he's not on a run or at the gym with me, he's working out at home, and anytime I see him order takeout, he's always eating lean meats and a shit ton of vegetables instead of the pizza I can pack away on my own if I wanted to. "You think the only reason I'm interested in you is for your looks?" Noting his attractiveness might have been the first thing that I saw, but it was his personality that sunk its nails in and wouldn't let go. It's him who I think about at night when I wrap my hand around my shaft, and him who I think of first thing in the morning when I have to talk down my morning wood. I look forward to our banter, our game nights, and our run-ins at Exeter.

Surprise flashes in his eyes, those two perfectly round shapes widening. "I'm not sure. This is the first time you've openly said you're interested in me."

Fighting the urge to wince, I murmur, "I thought the weekend might have given you a hint otherwise." Obviously my level of experience is nothing compared to his, though we've never officially had that conversation, but I'd like to think that doing what I did—*saying* what I did proved to him that he meant something to me.

Knowing that I may have read it wrong...

"Hey," he says quietly, suddenly in front of me, tilting my chin up with his fingers with a serious expression coating his previously playful face. "I'm teasing you. I know you're interested." My cheeks warm despite my best attempt to fight the flame from settling under my skin. "And just so we're clear, I'm interested in you too. I meant what I said the other day. It's a turn on knowing I get to show you the ropes and watch you figure out what you're into and what you're not."

My mind has been playing what happened on the couch on repeat, making me harder than steel at the most inconvenient times. During a study hall this week, I had to remain behind my desk because the quiet in the room suddenly made my mind wander to the way it felt having Lawrence's looming stature, hard and demanding, watch me tug myself while he dirty talked me through an orgasm.

I'm about to reply when the door opens, and Iverson and Rocco walk in. I could tell Lawrence was surprised when Iverson told him he was missed at Sunday dinner. I'd originally told the man standing next to me that I wasn't sure I'd go, but he encouraged me to, even without him. He thought I'd chicken out.

All Lawrence said was, "Next time," and sounded like he meant it.

Rocco calls out, "You two finally done?"

I turn away from Lawrence, rolling my eyes at the half-American, half-German six-four figure approaching us, still shirtless and in black sweats from the class he taught. He's bulkier than Lawrence from the years of boxing he did, and still keeps up with similar training. "Don't act like you need the room. I know your schedule by heart now."

He winks and tips his chin at Lawrence before focusing back on me. "I was telling Iverson that I wanted to add a few more classes since all my others have been full the past few months. Maybe extend into a different room so we can accommodate more people."

He deserves to see success. From what I know about Rocco, he's worked his ass off to get where he is now. As a former professional boxer with at least two championships under his belt, he knows his shit. In a lot of ways, he and Lawrence are similar. Both gave up professional sports to teach—except Rocco would probably still be boxing if he hadn't sustained the amount of hard hits that caused one too many concussions that made him hang up his gloves.

“That’s great, man.” I offer him a hand, which he grabs and squeezes, grinning ear to ear like he always does when something good happens. I’ve always liked Rocco. He’s been helping me since the day Iverson introduced us and never asked questions that delved into why hitting a bag, or sometimes an opponent in the ring, made me feel better. He told me it wasn’t his place to ask, just to teach, and I knew from that day on that we’d get along.

When I look at Lawrence, his lips are wavering upward as he exchanges a quick glance between me and Rocco before Iverson tells us more about the different schedule and room setup based on Rocco’s proposal.

After throwing our towels into the hamper in the locker room, Lawrence saddles up beside me, still in his drenched workout outfit, and leans a shoulder against the locker beside mine with a grin on his face.

I start peeling my shirt off. “What?”

“He was flirting with you.”

He who?

He chuckles over my lost expression. “I think it’s cute you’re oblivious, Scout. Rocco was flirting with you back there.”

I sputter out a, “No, he wasn’t.” It only makes the smugness grow on his face, *tsking* like I’m missing something big. “He’s straight,” I add, tossing my dirty shirt onto the bench and grabbing clean clothes out.

“You sure about that?” he questions, swiping a palm over his lips when I eye his smirk, as if hiding it doesn’t make it obvious he finds this exchange amusing.

“Positive. He’s got a girlfriend.” Hell, he’s had the same girlfriend since I’ve known him, and not once have I seen his eyes wander when people in his classes have tried getting his attention more than professionally. It happens all the time, but he’s never crossed that line. He loves Lonnie.

Lawrence laughs lightly again. “Nobody is an expert on what people really like if that person is secretive enough.” I watch him warily as he pushes off the locker. “Case in point, you thought I was into Harper.”

“I didn’t think that,” I argue too quickly, giving away the fact that, yeah, I did.

“No?” His eyes dance with amusement, clearly hearing my bullshit. “So, all those times you passive aggressively noted how often Harper and I talked was just a friendly observation?”

All I do is lick my dry lips. In my defense, he never made it clear that he wasn't into her. I'd find her in his room, brushing a hand down his arm, and couldn't help but see green over him not turning her down every time she flirted. Instead of telling him that pre-mind blowing orgasm, I *may have* pointed out that they spent a lot of alone time together. In which case he always fired back with, "And how's Michelle?"

"Or," he theorizes, "could it be that you *might have* misread the situation and been jealous that Harper liked spending time with me?"

Again, I don't trust myself to speak. I doubt it'd be the first time someone misinterpreted another person's interest, but can he blame me? He's a flirty guy with the charm to capture anybody, even if it's not romantic. Hell, Sullivan never corrects Lawrence whenever he calls him Sully, so why wouldn't I think there's something going on between him and Harper. She's a pretty girl who can hold her own, anyone would assume she's his type.

A heavy feeling settles in the pit of my stomach, weighing me down as he stares at me with sudden concern. I know how he feels about my ability to read his emotions, because he's doing the same thing right now by recognizing the wave of nausea rolling through me. "What's on your mind, Scout?"

My lips twitch over his nickname for me. Even if it's still annoying, it's grown on me, and his jab at my former life as a boy scout, which I came clean about not that long ago, makes me feel a little better. Still, I'm not sure I can admit what I'm thinking, because he may take it the wrong way. Then again, Lawrence isn't the kind of guy to back down until he gets what he wants, so staying silent isn't an option.

"You do realize you can tell me anything, right? I feel like we've been through this." His reminder comes in a gentle tone that should loosen my tense muscles, but it doesn't.

"It's just that..." *Christ*. "I don't know what your type is. It could change based on the person. Man. Woman." Blowing out a breath, I try avoiding the intense look he gives me as he tries figuring out what I'm saying. "I know that probably makes me sound like an insecure idiot, but I have no idea what to expect from any of this." *From you*, I don't add.

It's better to tell him that now before I get too invested. I think about Adam, how it seemed like there was some big buildup in my head as to how we'd play it, before nothing ever happened past the party, and about all the

shit that went down between me and Sophia. I can't be put through more disappointment, walking down the same path that leads me nowhere but rock bottom, when I barely escaped those depths already. The next time I take a plunge, I need to know it's going to be worth it.

He's in my space, reaching out and turning my head toward his, eyes fierce as they pin me to my spot. "My type is simple. I like people who care, who are passionate, and who are kind. Specifically, I like people who can take my shit and dish it back, and who can survive anything despite their past." His brows go up. "I like *you*. Not Harper. Not some other guy. There's no reason for you to feel insecure. Not with me."

Easier said than done, I think, teeth grinding in frustration over myself. "You haven't done anything to make me feel like I have to worry, but it's not that easy for me to sort out all my thoughts."

His chin dips, understanding softening his features. "You're new to this. I've had eight years to get used to the feeling."

"The feeling?" I repeat in confusion, voice no more than a whisper.

That smirk is back, going to his eyes this time. "The feeling you get when the guy you like, likes you back. Giddiness. Disbelief. Doubt. It's a swarm, right?" I nod in confirmation, feeling my tense muscles finally ease over his words. "It's the best feeling when all you want to do is scream at anyone who will listen that you've got the guy because the last thing you want is to keep them a secret. But it's intense too, especially when you're just accepting that you like guys to begin with. I don't want you losing that high you're feeling because you're worried about me or what I'll do. To me, you're worth the wait."

He steps closer, cradling my cheek in his large palm like he did over the weekend. "And I want you to talk to me about things, okay? Don't shut me out. You've made too much progress to close yourself off from being happy, even if it's not me you choose to be happy with."

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. How could he think I'd want to experience things with anybody else? When his thumb strokes my cheek, I choke on the oxygen. Cracking my eyes open, I see the blaze in his as he stares at me. The brown color always turns russet when he's visibly turned on, and knowing he is just from staring at me is...it's an overwhelming feeling of pride that's worthy of celebrating.

He lets out a steady breath. "I don't want to pressure you into anything..."

Placing a hand over his, I whisper the same reminder I gave him earlier this week. “I don’t need space.”

He’s being noble, trying to let me process what happened, but I don’t need him to do that. What I *need* is him, and the way my chest balloons over that realization hits me hard. I’ve never felt that way about anybody, and it’s consuming—brutally so.

I push forward, our chests nearly touching, and I wish he were shirtless too. “Can I touch you?”

He chokes out a startled laugh. “Baby, you can do whatever you want to me.”

Heart thumping, I reach for the hem of his shirt and slowly peel it up, waiting until he lifts his arms before discarding the fabric with mine on the bench. My fingers itch to trace every defined muscle on his body, starting with the outline of the six pack staring back at me, but before I do, I brush our lips in a barely-there kiss before pulling away enough to tell him, “There aren’t any cameras in here.”

Groaning over the insinuation, he grabs ahold of the back of my neck and flexes his fingers against my overheated skin. “You can’t say shit like that to me. I’m about to bust out of my fucking shorts.”

Smiling to myself, I reach between us and gently drag my knuckles down his covered hard length, causing him to suck in a breath. His grip on my neck tightens as he curses, pulling me back in for a kiss that’s a mixture of need and want, our mouths fusing together in a silent battle as I start stroking him over his shorts. It’s risky considering we’re out in the open. Anyone can walk in, but somehow that only gets me harder as I trace my fingertips up to the waistband of his shorts before dipping inside and making the same teasing hand movements there with my fingertips—a featherlight touch up and down the outline of his cock in his underwear.

With my free hand, I massage his firm ass, loving the feel of the toned glute filling my palm. I’m aware my body isn’t as cut as his, and nowhere near as muscular, yet I can’t help but anticipate the feel of his hands—callused yet soft at the same time—on me. All over. Everywhere they want to go. That thought makes my dick twitch, and I decide to stop teasing him.

“*Fuuuck*,” he drags out, breath heavy as I take him out of his briefs and into my palm, squeezing. He’s big, thick, and smooth in my hand as I move up and slowly back down his shaft. His breath catches as he leans his forehead against mine, noises coming from his throat that embolden me to

work faster. He helps me lower his shorts and boxers until he springs free, and I curse under my breath when I see the solid eight inches in my hand.

“The longer you stare at it, the more likely I am to come embarrassingly fast,” he rasps, tipping my chin up and pecking my lips before his kisses become more urgent—longer, deeper, needier, like each of my strokes on his erection. “Yeah, just like that. Right—” His lips form an O when the pad of my thumb finds the precum seeping from the head of his cock and slowly spreads it along the seam.

He leans forward and sinks his teeth into my shoulder hard as I continue to jack him, more precum helping lubricate my movements as he starts thrusting into my hold and twitching with every pump.

“Christ, Reece.” The way he says my name goes straight to my dick, hardening it until I crave release too. Feeling bold, I push him backwards until his back hits the lockers, and deepen the kiss, playing with the wet, fat tip of his dick with my fingers, while grinding against him to get friction on mine.

He reaches down and starts playing with me over my shorts, enacting the same torture I give him, and making me falter in my movements. I groan into his mouth as his tongue probes mine, my hips bucking into him to chase release. In the distance, I hear voices talking, shoes scoffing against the floors, but nothing fully breaks the concentration of getting Lawrence off.

I feel his lower abs contract against me as he jolts forward into my hand when I hit the right nerve endings. “I’m going to fucking come,” he tells me breathless as I seize the base of his shaft with one hand and use my other to reach down and fondle his balls like I like.

“*Oh shit. Fuck. Gonna—*” He doesn’t get to finish that sentence before I cut off the loud sound of his garbled release with an intense kiss to drown out the noise as he thrusts into my hand, cock twitching as he orgasms into it. I taste blood when his teeth bite into my bottom lip like they did my shoulder, and when he releases it, his chest is rising and falling heavily against mine.

He looks down at my lip, his fingers gently brushing it. “Shit. Sorry.” There’s a sting of pain as he rolls it with his finger, blood slightly coating the pad of skin that he draws away.

“Don’t be.” Despite what we did, his warm, sticky cum on both our stomachs, I feel the need to be embarrassed when I quietly admit, “I liked

it.”

His eyes flash with a heat that burns me as he takes my face in his hands and kisses me hard, surprise causing my lips to part which he instantly takes advantage of and tastes my tongue, my lips, drags his teeth along the sensitive cut he gave me, before pulling back again only enough to say, “I want you in my mouth. I want to taste you,” which makes me nearly lose my load in my shorts.

I know he’s asking for my permission, which only makes the drum of my heartbeat that much harder in my chest as I nod. He looks around the room, glancing at the showers before he tugs me along after covering himself.

Confusion sweeps through me only long enough for Lawrence to back me into the furthest stall and close the door behind him, prowling toward me like a predator. When he drops to his knees and reaches for my shorts, my neck muscles strain as I lean back with anticipation. “I don’t think I’ll last long,” I admit, groaning when my shorts and briefs are pulled halfway down my thighs until my dick stands to attention face-level with him.

I’m not sure what I expect as his answer, but all I get is “Good,” before his lips are on me.

The loud, drawn-out noise escaping my lips is involuntary as his mouth glides over my cock, filling his mouth with me. His tongue drags along the bottom, tasting me, sucking, and I all I can do is shake my head back and forth along the cool tile behind me and press my lips closed to keep quiet.

There’s no denying he’s mastered giving head because he deep throats like a pro, applying just the right pressure, in the perfect fucking places, and I’m gone. His lips slide up and down, his free hand rolling my balls in his hand, tugging them gently, before repeating the motion and making me thrust forward until he works past his gag to swallow me deeper.

“Not going to last much longer,” I warn him, feeling the familiar tingle of arousal shoot up my spine as a hand goes to his hair and threads into his thick locks as he bobs up and down between my thighs faster, making the kind of wet, slurping noises that send me overboard. I try to warn him I’m about to come, but he simply holds onto my quivering thighs tightly and continues sucking me off until I shoot down his throat, a satisfied noise radiating from him as he swallows every drop before pulling away slowly. He kisses the head of my cock again before I draw him up to standing and tug him into me.

He cradles the back of my head and neck as I rest my forehead against his shoulder, catching my breath. There are so many things I want to tell him as he strokes my hair, but words don't seem like enough right now. When I look him in the eyes, his seem to mirror the same glaze mine do, one hand going to my face as he strokes my sore bottom lip. "I know," he tells me softly, meeting me halfway for a soft, sensual kiss that drags out.

We taste each other slowly, the tanginess of me on his tongue sending waves of arousal back down to my softening dick. I hold onto him like my life depends on it, my fingertips digging into one of his biceps like if I let go, that's it, and I can't help but let out a choked sound as he hugs me closer as the emotion takes over.

Lawrence repeats, "I know," stroking the back of my head, and somehow that makes everything better.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

REN

Scout: You have nothing to worry about.

Easy for you to say, is what I want to text back but don't get a chance to before there are two quick raps at the door. Red stands next to Tommy, my offensive linemen nudging him forward and making my lips waver slightly before I collect myself. For someone who wants people to think he's intimidating, he doesn't hide his nerves well.

"Glad you showed up," I greet him honestly, having read his stats from his previous team. I'm more than impressed with what I saw. He wasn't just the running back for their football team, he was undoubtedly the star. From what I could gather, if his father hadn't been injured and needed to move off base, he probably would have still been there getting scouted by college reps.

Anthony Red Bowen is only 17, but he has the potential to be the next Barry Sanders if he wants to be. He's got the skill, the build, and the determination to train hard and get picked up by some of the best colleges in the country. Not being part of the Wildcats would be a disservice to him if his goals involved pro ball.

He refuses to sit when I gesture toward the seat I dragged in only ten minutes earlier to prepare for this. Tommy must have left us to it because I don't see him lurking in the hall, and I appreciate the privacy. "Let me ask

you something. You're good at the game, there's no doubt about it, but do you *like* it?"

His face scrunches from where he leans against one of the empty shelves. "That seems like a stupid question."

"Is it though?" Challenge coats my tone as I lean back in my chair. "I played baseball but only tolerated it."

I can tell interest piques in his eyes, but he doesn't ask, so I give him what he wants to know. "Going pro was never the goal for me. Some people do it because they love it, some do it out of obligation because they're good. The people who love it *and* have the skill will be hard to beat on any field, but that's only if they're willing to give it their all. So, do you like the sport, or are you just good at it?"

"I'm better than good." He isn't cocky about the statement, and I can't help but chuckle over the sure statement. "It's the only thing I enjoy out of high school."

Figured as much. "School is important too though. Can't play if you don't have the required grade point average."

The slightest shift of his feet over the common knowledge tells me he's well aware of that fact. Thing is, he's on the border of what the school would accept for an athlete to join a team. Being mid-season won't help his odds with the low average he's pulling. From what Reece said, he's a smart kid. He does better in some classes than others, and some of the core courses are downright cringeworthy to look at. Whether it's because he doesn't apply himself or generally struggles, I don't know. What I do know is that it'll be a hard sell to get him on the team without a tutor to draw his grades up enough for some breathing room.

"But you already knew that, didn't you?"

His head dips. "Yes, si—*coach*."

"Look, kid. I'm going to be real with you. I want you on the team. Based on what I read, you've got what the Wildcats need to win without some divine intervention out on that field."

Red's lips tilt slightly at the corners, his cheeky smile confident like mine was at one point when I heard similar accolades. "That's because your current tackle offensive linemen are only 150 max and can't bench press more than like 90 pounds, and your running back and quarterback have a hard time playing off each other because the RB's not fast enough."

He's noticed everything I have, a reason why I've pushed for agility to train for speed where it's needed. "You really have been to every game, haven't you?"

Another head nod.

"If you do get on the team, would you expect to be the fullback like your old school? I saw you used to be a lineman at one point."

"Our old lineman got injured and I subbed for him because there was another running back who was *almost* as good as me."

"Cockiness will get you screwed real quick if you're not careful," I warn him.

"All due respect, but it's not cockiness if you're stating facts. I heard what they said about me at my old school, and it made me want to prove I was worth every word, to be better. Stronger than everyone, faster than them, because I do want to go pro someday, and I know it's a competitive field. I could play more than one position if needed because I trained for it. I prefer being running back if I get a choice, but I'd be willing to do anything to get back on a team again. The only reason I didn't in the first place is because..." He looks away, jaw tight before his shoulders square back. "My grades turned to shit after my dad's accident. I was trying to be a good son and help around the house, but head trauma makes people irritable and his mood swings would get in the way of focusing on homework."

Reece suspected that his home life was less than stellar, so I have to ask. "Does he hit you?"

His eyes widen. "No, never." When he sees the hesitation in my eyes to believe him, there's a new conviction in his voice. "I'm being honest. Neither of my parents has ever laid a hand on me, even when I deserved it."

Maybe if not for his last remark, I would still question him. But I can tell he's being honest. He wants this—to be part of the Wildcats, and I'd bet my money that he'd do anything. "If I get you on the team, you'll have to keep your grades up. Think you can manage that?"

His nod is quick. "Absolutely."

"If you want this, you'll have to prove it to me. The team has gotten better, but we already suffered more losses than the school has seen, and as much as I think you could be the person to help us break that streak, I need to know I can depend on you."

"You can."

“You’ve got teachers here who think you can do a lot better,” I say, eyeing him.

This time, there’s a brief pause. His worn boot scuffs the floor. “Are you talking about Mr. Nichols? I’ve seen you two talk a lot.”

Not confirming my status with Reece, all I say is, “He believes in his students, especially those who he knows can do more. That’s all I’m saying. Invest in yourself, kid, if you want to make something of yourself in the future.”

He stares at the floor, nodding. After a few quiet seconds, he murmurs, “He’s a good teacher. I like him.” I don’t let the smile spread like it threatens to. Red looks up again, lips pressed flat. “Don’t tell him I said that though, or I’ll deny it.”

Refraining from rolling my eyes, I chuckle and give him a nod of reassurance. “You got it. You ready to show me what you got?”

“Can I ask you something first?”

“Shoot.”

He looks around the room, noting the empty walls and lack of knickknacks that litter the desk. “Why did you even do it if you didn’t like it? You could have stopped way before people were rooting for you.”

People say you should be happy with what you have while you’re pursuing what you want, but I wasn’t happy with either of those things while working past the burning ache in my right arm every time I geared up and ran out with my team. All I could think about was the pressure when I asked myself one day, *is this really it for me?*

I had more fun in the classroom learning about the different kinds of teaching methods than I did on the field with my boys. I preferred planning a future where I could decorate a room with my dorky historical posters than a shelf with recognition people drooled over. Most of all, I wanted a simple life.

Someone to love.

A place to share with them.

And a job I looked forward to.

Good sex is on the list too, but I’m not about to share that with a seventeen-year-old.

“It’s about finding the right people to root for you no matter what path you’re on, kid. Those people are who matter in the long run.” He studies me as I stand, grabbing my clipboard and gesturing toward the door. “We going

to get this show on the road or do you want to ask me what the secret to life is.”

He rolls his eyes, a playful smile tugging the corners of his lips. “Let’s do this.”

I HAVE no idea what happened between the time I confirmed my five forty-five meeting with the business office’s secretary to the time I walked into the office for said meeting, but something changed. Glancing at my clock to make sure I have the right time I look around the empty conference room in confusion. I triple checked the email to be sure I had the right room, knowing Connor Wright would use tardiness against me.

My clock says 5:43.

Popping my head out at the secretary’s desk, I notice it packed up with the sweet elderly woman Sandy already gone for the day. I’m about to type a quick email to make sure I’m not missing something when I hear heavy footsteps heading in my direction.

Principal Richman looks as tired as I feel. Between anxiety keeping me up last night, and distracted throughout the day, I’ve teetered on delirium only made slightly better by three Fudge Rounds, a large burnt coffee from the teacher’s lounge, and watching Red tear up the field this afternoon. “There you are. I was wondering if anyone gave you the message, but I see they were in too much of a hurry to get home.”

“Was the meeting postponed?”

Slightly red in the cheeks as he shakes his head, he guides me into the conference room. “I have good news for you. Mr. Wright decided not to pursue the issue any further.”

Just like that? And what the hell exactly *was* the issue? “How is that possible?” I’ve been fretting all day—hell, ever since I knew this meeting was happening. I gave Reece an earful after he came back to my place last night and put on a movie. I still have no clue what it was about because we spent the whole time holding hands on the couch while he tried to calm me down.

It’s going to be okay.

You did nothing wrong.

He has no grounds.

“Circumstances changed,” he offers vaguely, giving me a smile that tells me not to dig too deeply into it. “Sometimes it’s best to take it as it is when you’re dealing with people like Wright. Trust me on this.”

My head can’t wrap around that. “Pardon me for pushing, sir, because I’m grateful nothing came of this. But I’m still not grasping how that is. He’s threatened on more than one occasion to pull his funds and based on what I hear from the budget talks at the last board meeting, that money is necessary.”

I’ve learned to read body language well over the years. My mother’s eyes veer to the left when she lies, and the right side of her lips kick upward in the slightest twitch when she’s uncomfortable. I know this because I tested the theory after one too many coincidences. When I was little, I asked her if Santa was real even though I’d learned from boys at school he wasn’t. I’d caught my parents unloading the presents marked with his name under the Christmas tree that was written out in my mother’s very neat script handwriting. She told he was, and her eyes careened to the left. When I was seventeen, I told her that I met a boy and wanted to invite him over for dinner, and the tiniest uplift of the right corner of her lips told me all I needed to know before telling Misha—the boy—that our plans were changing. We’d gone out to dinner the two of us instead, which I think he preferred too.

It’s like Reece’s need to tap his thumb whenever he’s lost in thought or stare off with a wrinkled brow when he’s overthinking. I notice things like that, always figuring out when he’s reverting into himself instead of embracing whatever he’s feeling. And half the time since I watched him jack off, what he’s feeling is the need to touch me—my hand, my leg, our pinkies, it’s like touching some part of me grounds the thoughts that are running rampant in his mind, and I love being his anchor. That’s only become tenfold since the locker room.

“The school’s funding is no longer a dire concern. Administration has since come up with a plan that will ensure all departments have what’s necessary to run smoothly. You don’t need to concern yourself with the matter.” I’m about to reply, but my parted lips close when he shakes his head. “Go home, son. With October break starting next week, tomorrow will be a busy day for all of us trying to keep students’ attention. Rest up.”

The dismissal is clear, so I nod my head and wave him goodbye before double checking I have everything. Pulling my phone out, I see a string of

new texts.

Della: *Good luck!!!!*

Della: *NOT THAT YOU NEED IT*

Scout: *Let me know how it goes*

Della: *Theo also says good luck*

Somehow, I doubt that one.

Della: *Oh! And here are some dates I'm free if you are. I know they're last minute.*

I've been wondering if she was going to send me these considering she wanted to do something for my birthday, and considering that's on Sunday, a whopping three days from now, I'd say last minute is an understatement. Lucky for her, I have no cemented plans besides a possible dinner with Reece, Iverson, and Claire, though I left confirming that up to him because I didn't want to intrude on their time. It's obvious from their interactions that they know more than me when it comes to Brea and even his family, and as happy as I am he has people to talk to about those things, I can't help but feel a little jealous.

I'm not usually that kind of person. There have been very few times when I've felt envy branch out with people I've been with. Hell, I wasn't even jealous when my last hookup tried making me jealous by flirting with another guy right in front of me. Frankly, it's how I knew he wasn't worth holding onto. He didn't like how busy I was with ball at the time, but really, I think he didn't like my talk of quitting. He, like the rest of the people I've gotten with, isn't important enough to dwell on.

Reece on the other hand is.

I want to know about his family. What his parents are like with him beyond what I've gathered when he's talked to them over the phone, and why he never talks about his older sister Jamie. I want to see embarrassing pictures of him from when he was little and learn all the cringeworthy stories that significant others, or whatever the hell we are, should. But I want to do all of that on *his* terms.

Coming out for the first time is a sensitive experience, and I know what it feels like to try grappling with all the emotions that come with it. And while I have no doubt that he's positive in his sexuality, I don't want to lose sight of the possibility he could change his mind about me even when I tell him he doesn't have to worry where I'm concerned.

The two words I've never heard from people in my past are the ones I want cemented into his mind if nothing else.

I'll wait.

I've always believed that the best things in life are worth waiting for, fighting for, and never letting go of. And I hope he feels the same way, because I'm not sure he knows the vice grip he has on my heart or just how much control that gives him over me.

Me: *Already done. You free?*

The bubbles dance along the bottom of the screen before I can even start my car.

Scout: *That was fast. Come over?*

Like he even needs to ask.

Me: *Be there in 10*

The drive is short as I bob my head along to a pop band that Reece once groaned over when I was driving. Our conversation went something like, "This music is for thirteen-year-old girls, Lawrence" while he tried changing the station to no avail. I'd grinned at him after smacking his hand and said, "Guess there's a reason you call me Junior then, huh?" and we both cracked up. I don't think he even minded the song by Violet Wonders because I saw him mouthing along with the lyrics by the end.

He's already waiting for me in the kitchen when I announce, "Honey, I'm home." I hear his light chuckle as he smiles when I walk into the kitchen, smelling the sweet, acidic scent of tomato sauce and look in the pot he's stirring. "Spaghetti?"

I drop down in the chair I dragged over to the counter, watching him watch me with amusement in a cute ass apron that has something written across the front. "Is that your way of saying you want me to make you spaghetti?"

"Is that not what you're making?"

His lips lift higher as he turns back to the stovetop. "I made mushroom ravioli from scratch, and I'm experimenting with two different sauces for it."

I blink, leaning forward. "But you hate mushrooms." It's a known fact I learned after ordering a mushroom pizza and watched him physically cringe while I downed three pieces.

Reece's weight shifts from one foot to another, his pointer finger scratching at his cheek. "Yeah, but you don't."

There's no stopping the slow smile creeping up my face as a warmth crawls into every crevice of my ribcage. "Is that so?"

"My mom taught me how to make homemade ravioli when I was little because it's my father's favorite. I wanted to surprise him for Father's Day with a homecooked meal."

"Shit, Scout. That's sweet."

His stirring slows. "Mom asked me why I needed the recipe since I haven't asked her for any in a long time..." Clearing his throat when I suck in a small breath in preparation, he sneaks a peek in my direction. "I mentioned that I wanted to cook something special for a special person."

My eyes widen. "You did?"

A head nod.

"For clarification purposes, you're talking about me, right?" My inquiry makes him roll his eyes, but he chuckles good heartedly and nods in confirmation. Itching to know more, I cautiously ask, "What did she say?"

We've broached the parental topic on more than one occasion. From the pictures he's shown me, he's a mixture of both his mom and dad—the same complexion and soft eyes as his mother, but nearly identical features of his father. According to him, his sister Jamie could be their mother's twin, and the fact his mom doesn't look a day over thirty, I wasn't surprised when he told me people often mistake them for siblings. But the few times I've asked about his sister in hopes I'd get *something* he would tell me they're not close and change the subject.

All of that is forgotten though, knowing he told Mrs. Nichols—or Elaine after her own grandmother, according to her when she found out I was there and listening to their call—about me. I don't know *what* he told her specifically, or *if* my name or gender was even brought up, but it seems like a monumental step.

"She told me not to burn the food like she did on her first date with my father when she tried wooing him with her cooking skills." The amusement laced in his tone tugs at my heartstrings as I smile. He's still facing the sauce, almost too focused on the liquid.

"Are you trying to woo me, Nichols?"

His teeth scrape against his bottom lip before he finally looks in my direction. "That depends. Is it working?"

You've done more than woo me, I almost tell him, but decide against it. "Yes." Not wanting to let it go, I decide to bring up weekend plans.

“Speaking of people that we care about, Della got back to me about when she’s free. Her and her fiancé are planning to come up this weekend to celebrate my birthday. I was wondering if you’d like to join us if you don’t think you’d be uncomfortable.”

When he pales over the invite, I instantly go into panic mode. Is it too much too soon? I try finding ways to back track or tell him it’s okay if he’s not interested when he breathes, “Holy shit”, the spoon falling against the side of the pan with a loud *clank*.

“What?” I check him over to make sure he didn’t burn himself or something, but he just looks remorseful. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Your birthday.”

I blink. “What about it?”

“It’s *this weekend* and I completely forgot. I’m the fucking worst.”

As amusing as it is hearing him swear while he’s wearing that cute ass apron that I only now just realize says *Your opinion is not in my recipe*, I shake my head. “Quit it, or you’ll make my virgin ears bleed with all that dirty talk. And no, you’re not. Why are you freaking out about this?”

His palm swipes over his jaw. “Because I’m your...I’m...” I swear I see a dusting of pink sweep over the apples of his cheekbones as he tries finishing that sentence.

A sentence I’m very intrigued over. “I’d like to know how you’re going to finish that. What exactly are you to me?” There’s no Scout or Nichols attached even though my tone is playful because I genuinely want to know but don’t want to pressure him. My insides scream *tell me!* but logic forces myself to remain calm. The longer he waits to respond, the quicker my heart picks up as he sorts through his head.

Dragging a hand down the front of the apron, he tugs on the hem and clears his throat once. “Well, I was hoping I was your boyfriend.”

For the very first time, that single, two-syllable word goes straight to my cock. “Boyfriend, huh?”

Alarm creeps into his blue-green eyes as they shoot to mine, lips parting and flailing for a moment before he says, “Unless you don’t want that. I just assumed since we spend almost every day together that—”

“Take a breath,” I tell him, pushing off the chair and walking over to him. So the food doesn’t burn, I reach over and turn the burner on low before facing him, hands holding his biceps and squeezing. “Are you sure that’s what you want? I don’t want to force you to put a label on this,

though I'm not going to lie. I like it." To prove a point, I grab his hand and settle it over the growing bulge pressing against the zipper of my slacks. "I like it a whole hell of a lot."

His sharp breath makes me smile. "I can see that." Clearing his throat again as his eyes lift from where his hand rests, he meets my eyes with a swift nod. "I've been thinking a lot about it, and I want that. The label. The ability to say that I'm dating you. That you're mine."

Yep. Instant boner.

I lean my forehead against his, our free hands interlocking until our fingers thread together, palm to palm. "Well, then, I guess I better take you out on a proper date."

His nose grazes the column of my throat before he presses a kiss there. "Do you really want me to meet your friends? I know you and Della are close and you haven't been able to talk about me with her."

If that's his way of making sure I'm not upset over the matter, I shake my head. "I'm not going to force you to come out when you're not ready, especially to strangers. It needs to be on your own terms, in your own time. We've been over this, babe."

He shivers in my hold, his arms wrapping around my middle as mine wind around his shoulders. "I like it when you call me that."

"Yeah?"

He sighs against my neck. "Yeah."

"And to answer your question," I tell him, fingers trailing over the hair on the back of his neck, massaging the skin there, "I'd love for you to meet Della. She's been my best friend since forever, and I know she'll love you. I don't have to introduce you as my boyfriend if you're not comfortable with it, we can hangout as friends." Though, it'll be hard to keep my hands off him when I've gotten used to stolen touches. When I visit him in his classroom during our free periods, I have to remember that bending him over his desk is not up to par with school policies. Damn shame too.

When he's quiet, I peel away slightly, and cup the back of his head. "What are your thoughts on this?"

His gaze meets mine, his eyes wary and alarming. "Do you not want to introduce me as your boyfriend. Or...?"

My hands move to gently hold his face, locking our gazes so he can't look away. "Reece, if I could tell every single person I pass that you're my man, I would. But, like I said, I'm not putting that pressure on you. What do

you want because I've been out for a long time? Della knows a lot about my past, about the people who I've spent time with, but she won't suspect anything unless we give her reason to. If you're nervous about it—"

"I want to tell them we're dating," he cuts me off, certainty in his words even if his lips are saying otherwise as they curve downward. Why is he frowning when he says that then? "If anything, coming out to a stranger is going to be easier than people I know."

Ah. Understanding quenches my curiosity as I wet my lips. "You're afraid people will see us out together and make assumptions."

Pain deepens the color of the orbs staring back at me, like he wants to deny it but can't. "I know that makes me a shitty boyfriend, but I've never done this before. I don't know the rules or the timeline."

"There is no timeline." I run the pad of my thumb over his cheek before dropping my hands and stepping away to give him some breathing room. "You've already done what a lot of people in your situation are afraid to. You don't give yourself enough credit."

"I'm twenty-nine, Lawrence." He palms his closed eyelids with the heels of his hands, a frustrated noise rising from his throat. "I'm going to be thirty years old soon, and I'm only now letting myself accept what I've known for years. I'm behind the curve."

"You are not." I want to shake him until he understands, but I settle with shaking my head instead. "Look at me. You need to ditch this preconceived notion that there's a timeline for everything and let things happen when they do. None of what you're going through is easy, and we've all been in your shoes. *I* understand. *I* am willing to wait however long you need until you're comfortable going public, and I meant what I said before. We don't have to do PDA, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to hold your hand in public, or kiss you just because I want to, wherever the hell I want to. But that's not just up to me. We're in this together."

His eyes soften as he tilts his head, awe absorbing into me as he lets out a frazzled breath and wavering smile. "What if—"

"Nope." I press a finger to his lips to silence him, not having any of his doubt cloud what's between us. "I won't let you do that to us. Do you want to know the first thing I thought when you came up to me in the hallway that day? I thought 'Damn, he looks like he's going to be *mine*.'"

He closes his eyes, stopping the slight gloss from escaping the tear ducts.

My lips press against his cheek. “That’s why I always flirted with you. Seeing you blush, hearing you dish it back sometimes, it made me react in ways I never have before with anybody. Not one man or woman has made me feel what you have in the short few months I’ve known you. That means something to me.”

Another sharp exhale as I trail my lips over to the other side of his face, pressing another kiss on the opposite cheek. “It means everything to me,” I whisper against the skin that smells like the Irish Spring soap I know he uses from all my snooping.

“Christ, Ren,” he whispers, fingers raising to my shoulders before digging in.

My smile is so wide it physically hurts my face. “You called me Ren.”

A short bubble of laughter escapes him. “It’s better than Junior. It makes me feel like I’m coming onto a student.”

An eyebrow lifts in interest. “Is that a fantasy of yours?”

He blanches. “No.” Drawing his bottom lip into his mouth, he winces a little. “But there were rumors that I was involved with one my first year here. It wasn’t precedented and nothing ever came of it, but I want you to know.”

I kiss him softly, just a quick peck before resting my forehead against his. “Thank you for telling me.”

“There’s a lot I have to tell you still,” he admits quietly, chin tilting toward me until our lips ghost over each other. “But I’d really like to touch you now instead.”

“Mmm.” My lips steal a kiss. He turns the burner off carefully, food forgotten, as his hands wander. His bold touch finds its way back to my hard cock begging to be let out, earning a needy groan from me. “My body is yours,” I tell him.

And he shows me with his hands exactly what that means to him.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

REECE

AT THREE O'CLOCK SHARP on Friday afternoon, I'm gathering my things when there's a soft knock at the door. "Hey, stranger," Michelle greets, walking in with her blonde curls contained in a loose braid.

It's been a while since her and I talked one on one. The last time was when I apologized about the cancelled date and told her I couldn't go out with her because it wouldn't be right. Even though she told me she understood, she was clearly upset and hadn't done more than smile at me in passing. This is the first time she's come to my room, and I can't hide the smile when I see the Little Debbie snack she's holding in her hand.

"Peace offering," she says once she realizes what's captured my attention. Passing it to me, she gives me a timid smile. "I know it's usually Ren's thing, but I thought..." Her shoulders lift, before she turns to the bland walls of my room once more. "Um, so anyway, you remember my niece right?"

My brows lift slightly. "Ruby, right?"

"Yes. I brought up the painting project to her since Richman approved it, and she's interested in helping me start it over break."

Lips parting in surprise, I study her profile as she examines the wall closest. "You're still interested in helping?"

When her shoulders drop a fraction, caution creeps into my rigid stance. "I never meant to make things weird between us, you know. I let my

thoughts run a little too wild, and that's on me. You—" She gives me a warm smile, one that tells me she's all right. "You never led me on or gave me any sort of reason to believe that our friendship was more than what it was, so yes. I still want to help you."

Sitting on the edge of my desk with my ankle draped over my bent knee, I focus on the four walls. "I have the books students voted for, with the exception of one that I'd like to substitute. The designs are up to you and Ruby though since you're the artists."

She asks me to show her the books they'll be basing their paintings on, and her eyes roam over the subbed one that I decided on after the last vote. I want my classroom to be a safe space for all, where everybody is represented. Her fingers run along the cover of *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin. "In an interview Baldwin did, he said the book isn't about homosexuality, but about what happens when you're afraid to be in love with somebody." My tone is soft, full of caution but little hesitation as her gaze lifts upward to meet mine.

"I remember you...telling me about this book once." She blinks, eyes going back down to the worn classic in my hands, the yellowing pages dog-eared and torn and written on.

Our conversation about the novel is vaguely familiar to me. It was a night we spent at Terry's. She asked me what I had planned for the weekend, and I told her there was a book I'd been wanting to reread, so she listened to me talk about the plot with apt attention. "You're one of the few people who will listen to me ramble about literature without getting a glaze in your eyes," I muse, lips tugging up at the corners as I stare at the slightly ripped cover. "Lawrence tries, but he's about as interested in Baldwin's heartbreaking story as I am with anything sports related, so it seems fair."

I know the moment it clicks with her, her big green eyes lighting as she scopes out my face with wonder.

Taking a deep breath, I set the book down on my desk. "Lawrence isn't just my friend."

There's no sadness in the smile, or rejection in her eyes when she answers, "I'm getting that. And that...that makes me really happy for you, Reece. Can I be honest?"

Feeling the steady rise of emotion that I know will choke me up unless I say something, I clear my throat. "Of course."

Her tongue dips past the corner of her lips for a split second, her brain formulating her response carefully. “I think I always sort of guessed, but I never fully knew for sure. It’s not something you can just ask, even a friend. Although, I won’t lie, I always *thought* about asking if you were...”

“Gay,” I interject, smiling softly. “I’m learning it’s not a bad word.”

“Gay,” she breathes, slowly nodding.

“Somebody told me that labels don’t define a person, and I’m slowly understanding that too.”

“Would that somebody happen to be an ex-baseball player?” she teases easily.

I chuckle. “Perhaps.”

Her hand brushes mine. “I’m happy for you, Reece. Ren is a good guy.”

Something in my chest shifts, a strong sense of belonging and exuberance taking over, easing every tight muscle in my body that froze the second she looked at me with knowing eyes. I’m not naïve enough to think all conversations about this will go as well as this one, but it’s an encouraging start. “Yeah, he really is.”

Michelle’s fingers squeeze mine before she lets go, and I can tell she means what she said when I see the genuine shine in her eyes as she picks up the book. “I’m going to read this to make sure I get the best visual for what we want to do for the wall.”

A playful smile quirks my lips. “I thought you told me you read it already?”

Unabashed, she shrugs. “I lied to impress you.” Her shoulder bumps mine in a joking manner as she tucks the book into her bag. “I guess it wasn’t going to work anyway.”

All I can do is chuckle when she waves and leaves me to my thoughts, and all I can think is, *one down, the world to go*.

Yet, in that instance, the only person I want to share any news with is already walking into my classroom with a sexy swagger that I’m finally letting myself appreciate in a pair of pants that I happen to know hug his ass perfectly.

He does a double take when he sees me, stopping halfway in the door. “Since when do you wear glasses?”

I push the nose piece up for the third time since sliding them on to do a little work before I called it quits for the day. I don’t wear them all the time,

but if a student decides to write in microscopic letters, they're a necessity. "Since always."

Ren gives me an appreciative once over again before a slow, sensual smile stretches over half his lips. "Is it weird I'm hard right now?"

Choking on my laughter, I shake my head at his bluntness.

"Come on," he says, pulling my gaze away from where it drifted on the tiniest uplift in his slacks. "I have our first date planned out, and I'd rather not be late. Got to make a good impression, after all."

"Is that so?" I play along, trying hard not to smile at his theatrics. When Lawrence told me that he wanted a formal date just the two of us before I met Della, I was a combination of ecstatic and nervous, even though we spend most of our time together already.

It's different when the world can see you consumed in another person, unable to hide lingering eyes and yearning smiles and desperate hands that want to hold, caress, and touch another person. One single look can show everybody what I haven't verbally said already. That I'm lost in a man who walked into my life so unexpectedly, and confidently took my heart as his.

So, softly with the temptation of curling a hand behind his head and drawing him to my lips, I say, "You've impressed me enough for three lifetimes by now."

His throat bobs. "Good to know."

I NEVER THOUGHT I'd see the day when *Ren* is more nervous than I am, but his knee has been bouncing under the table ever since we were seated, and his eyes dart around the room like he's trying to take it all in. Admittedly, it's nice.

Preparing for our first official date had me reverting back to my teen years when I had to watch my older sister try on clothes for hours leading up to one of her casual summer flings, and I never understood why until now. I tried on four different outfits needing to look my best before settling on a pair of navy pants and a white button down that Lawrence complimented me many times on for 'showing off my toned body.' I don't look that different compared to school days, but I put effort into styling my messy blond hair that's in need of a trim, put on some cologne that my mother gave me for Christmas last year, and rolled the sleeves of my shirt to my elbows and left the top three buttons undone.

It's only been a day since we fooled around in the kitchen after my proclamation, ate slightly burnt mushroom ravioli with wine, and then went to my bedroom and fooled around some more before talking about school, the upcoming break, my classroom mural, and our plans with Della and her fiancé this weekend. Not once does he bring up the fact that I haven't gone down on him yet, or how I freeze up whenever his fingers linger to my backside when he's kneading and massaging my ass as he sucks me off. It isn't because I don't want to go farther, I'm just afraid to, and admitting that still feels embarrassing enough where I clam up instead.

I had every intention of telling him about Adam after he swallowed my cum, kissed me, and cuddled me into his very naked side in bed, but the words were jammed in my throat. Bringing up how the only other experience I had with a guy lasted approximately ten minutes, and only included dry humping, making out, and over the clothes heavy petting on my behalf didn't seem like the best after-orgasm conversation and having it now in the middle of a busy restaurant seems even less appropriate.

Deciding to lighten the mood, I say, "The last time I came here, it was when I took my parents out when they visited for Mother's Day. We had brunch." It's Mom's favorite meal. Growing up, we'd have breakfast for every meal if we wanted it—Dad made the best omelets and Mom was the best at cooking chocolate chip pancakes on the griddle.

"That sounds nice." Even though I can tell it's a genuine statement, paired with the stretch of a warm smile across his tan face, I can tell something else is on his mind.

"What's wrong?" When he starts looking around again, I shift in my chair and tug on my collar thinking it's about me. *What if he regrets taking me out? What if he changes his mind? What if—*

"This is the first time I've done something like this," the sheepish admission cuts off my derailing thoughts, one that has his attention fully on me.

"I thought you dated...?"

He wets his lips slowly, wrapping his fingers around the glass of water to stall. "I did, but it was usually to a bar or club or something. Never dinner. Dinners were too intimate, and I didn't want that with anybody else, which—" Cringing, he shakes his head. "I sound like a tool, huh? I don't know, Reece, I just couldn't picture myself sitting across from somebody and having anything to share with them that they'd want to hear."

Head slanting, I study him as he sips his water, wondering how someone couldn't be interested in hearing about him. Hell, I know a lot already, and I crave more. Like what his favorite childhood memory is, and why his favorite subject is history. There isn't anything I *wouldn't* want to know about him, and the glorious thing about the chiseled man wrapped in lean, tan skin, is that every day is a new chance to figure out another piece of who he is. And that's...it's exciting to me, an adventure I'm looking forward to taking. "Why wouldn't they want to hear about you?"

I'm no longer nervous over his thoughts when I see him glance down at the white tablecloth and grind his teeth, agitation clear in the sudden strain of his posture. If anything, I'm worried I opened something I shouldn't have.

"There have been more people that I can count who only wanted me around because they knew I was moving forward with a professional baseball career. Women would crowd themselves around me, and I'd flirt and have fun when the time seemed fitting for it, but the groupies got old fast. They didn't want to know why my favorite color is silver, or why I believe in conspiracy theories that are all probably bogus but still interesting as hell to me—" He lifts a knowing brow at my growing smirk over our familiar conversations about the death of Marilyn Monroe, the likelihood of UFOs existing at Area 51, and how Shakespeare might not have written the classic literature he's known for. "—or why I loved spending time learning my best craft in the classroom and how to be a good teacher.

"All they really cared about was when I was going to be entered in the draft, what my pick would be, and how much money would be on the contract presented when the time came. Did you know that I started having problems with my arm when I was eighteen?" When I shake my head, he nods tersely. "I went to the doctor and they didn't find anything wrong with it at first—told me the basics on how to stretch, ice it, heat it, and to keep going. By the time I turned twenty-one, I'd wake up in the mornings barely able to move it. My right shoulder would be so stiff that trying to bend it or do anything felt nearly impossible. Pain would shoot down my arm and settle into my elbow and wrist, and by the time I got in to see a specialist they'd determined it was 'mild arthritis' but I'd be fine as long as I did physical therapy. Except, I knew that was more or less bullshit because only I could tell people how bad it was getting. I knew it was going to get worse

no matter how much PT I did, or Motrin I popped, but I kept going for another two years because people kept pressuring me to push past it.”

The long, defeated sigh turns his frustrated expression into sullen defeat. “You know, Red asked me why I didn’t stop long before I did, and it made me think about all the people I was trying to impress and get approval from by living a life that I didn’t want. I beat myself up for doing shit to my arm when I knew I needed to take it easier, but easier ‘wasn’t going to get me an \$80 mill contract’ according to my father. And he was right...but he was also wrong. I think the biggest reason why I kept going was because I *knew* my arm would give out, and that would be the only viable reason people would accept my choice in leaving the sport. If I’d gotten to the point I’d need surgery on it—which is still on the table even though the meds are helping and I’m taking better care of it—there’d be too much damage and I wouldn’t be able to have so much expectation put on me. I basically hurt myself, *continued* to hurt myself, until I couldn’t play.” He stares at his water, gliding his fingertip up and down the condensation. “Screwed up, right? I guess what I’m trying to say is that I’m used to people not wanting to know about the personal things I like to do in my free time because I’ve spent most of my life focusing on other things that I didn’t care so much about. Going out to dinner with people who only wanted to sleep with me or try getting a chunk of money somehow weren’t worth my time. Not...not a lot of it anyway.” I know what he means when his cheeks tinge red and he won’t look me in the eye.

Looking around as I twiddle anxiously with my thumbs to make sure nobody is in earshot, I admit, “I only messed around with two people in my life. Adam and Sophia.” His eyes widen a fraction in interest. “Adam was my first crush, and Sophia helped me get his attention before she got weird about everything. And the only time I ever did anything with him was at a frat party Sophia dragged me to. He and I stumbled up to his bedroom, locked the door, and...well, it’s not really worth going into detail over. Let’s just say I’ve done more with you than I did with him, but it wasn’t because I didn’t want to. He sort of...” *God*, the sting shouldn’t still be here all these years later, but the rejection that sent me walking away embarrassed still gets to me.

“He was a player. I always knew it, but I still liked him. Still wanted him. When he seemed interested that night, I couldn’t believe it. He acted sweet at first, telling me he always had a thing for me when we were in high

school, but he wasn't sure about what I wanted, and when I admitted he would be the first guy I ever did anything with, he got...I don't know, cocky?"

The look of understanding on Lawrence's face tells me he knows the type well.

"After he got what he wanted, he pretty much brushed me off. His exact words after he zipped his pants were 'thanks for coming to the party' like he didn't care that he was my first kiss, or that something huge happened. Up until that night, I was considering coming out to my family. I always...knew who I was, and who I liked. When guys talked about girls' asses and boobs at school, I was too busy thinking about *their* asses and—" Realizing I'm still in public, I try keeping it PG. "Well, you know. And when I watched, uh, *videos* after hearing about some of my classmates watching them, it wasn't the 'traditional' kind that got a reaction out of me.

"Point is, I knew. Sophia knew. My parents pretty much knew even if they never pushed me to admit it. But that night, when I did the walk of shame out of the frat house, I felt...he made me feel like..." Words escape me in the moment, because what I feel over that night is too much, even now.

"He made you feel ashamed," Ren murmurs, a mixture of anger and sadness weighing his words down.

"Sophia told me that maybe it was a sign, and that's where things really shifted with us. I think, looking back at it now, she thought that experience would change how I felt, and in a lot of ways it did. I was afraid to...be with the people I wanted to be with, or even look at a guy a certain way like I was doing something wrong. I've always been a big believer of signs. Adam's embarrassing rejection, Sophia's manipulation, Brea being born, it all felt like it was pulling me in the direction I always thought I should go. The wife, kids, and everything in between. I'm not a religious person, but it felt like..."

"Like fate was telling you to be somebody else," he finishes for me.

My shoulders lift limply, my hand curving around the back of my neck. "I sucked the fun out of the date, huh?"

He shakes his head slowly. "We're doing exactly what we're supposed to. Getting to know each other. That's more than surface-level things like our favorite bands and pastimes. Knowing that *To Kill a Mockingbird* is your favorite book is nothing in comparison to knowing that your heart was

misplaced by people who should have been looking out for it a long time ago. And it helps me understand better how I can be there for you if you'd let me. I promise, I'm not Adam or Sophia."

A small puff of air escapes my lips as I slide my hand over the soft cotton to his, my pinky gently curving around his own like he's done with me. The tentative touch is so much more than a comforting hand, it's everything. "You don't need to remind me that you're not them," I tell him quietly, staring at where our fingers are linked on the tabletop, for anybody to see if they paid enough attention. "I'm terrified, Ren, because the crush I had on Adam is nothing like the one I have on you. It's so far beyond that I can't think straight, see straight, do anything without you coming to mind."

There's no cockiness or air of arrogance when we lock eyes. The smile I'm met with is nothing more than relief and awe and something that should scare us both. It's almost...loving. "I feel like I should give you a full disclosure by saying, first, that I want to track down this Adam guy and throat punch him and then thank him for being a jackass and letting you walk." I roll my eyes at his need for violence. "And second, that I'm currently struggling with a raging boner under the table thanks to you."

I choke on the lemonade I decide to drink in that moment, feeling the droplets slide down my chin as he grins at me. "I can't believe you just said that." When his head cocks and brows lift, I see the *really?* in his eyes. "Okay, maybe I can believe it."

His grin grows. And knowing that he has a hard on right now, my dick does too. Trying to change the topic to something that won't get us charged with indecent exposure, I joke, "So, who do you think really wrote Shakespeare's stuff if he didn't himself?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

REN

I GIVE my oldest friend a tight hug that she reciprocates almost immediately, winding her arms around my waist and squeezing as hard as she can. “Happy birthday! I’ve missed you.”

When she pulls back, I flick a few strands of her brown hair, grinning at the natural color she hasn’t had in a long time. “Looking good, Del.”

She beams. “It was time to go back. Trying to make time to get the roots touched up was too annoying and bothering Tiffany to do it when she visited made me feel bad. She usually doesn’t have long when she visits. Only the time to see her family and stop by our place. Oh! And she mentioned considering auditioning for some upcoming musical on Broadway that’s looking for contemporary dancers. How cool is that?”

She keeps rambling for a few while I slip away to my thoughts. Even though I’d heard Tiffany had visited Della since we all parted ways, it still kind of sucks being reminded I was such a tool that I couldn’t preserve what little friendship we had beyond internet conversations. That’s on me though. “I bet the new ‘do easier to maintain since business has picked up too. I saw one of your pieces featured in The New York Times. That’s fucking huge!”

Theo finally joins us, an arm going around her shoulders and drawing her into him. Normally, I roll my eyes when he presses a kiss to the top of her head and looks at me like he’s making a point, but now...I get it. “Hey,

man,” I greet, sticking my hand out and shaking his before looking between the two. “Good to see you again.” Not a *total* lie.

Del wraps an arm around her fiancé’s waist and smiles at me. “I almost couldn’t believe it when Theo told me about the review.”

Said man deadpans. “She asked me if I paid the reviewer to rave about her work to drum up more business.”

I snicker when she looks up at him with a frown. “It’s something you’d do if it made me happy, you can’t deny it.”

She’s got him there. He’s done a lot for her over the years. But I’ve seen her artwork. It’s beautiful, unique, and completely her, so I’m not surprised a huge art critic gave her critical acclaim in a famous publication.

His answering frown has me shaking my head at them. “Why would I want to make you busier than you already are. Especially now?”

When her cheeks turn pink, I almost ask what he’s insinuating before the doorbell rings. I know Reece is the one standing behind the door, because he’s right on time. And by that, I mean he’s eighteen minutes early, per his usual. He told me after our date last night, which I dropped him off from, giving him no more than a kiss goodbye at his doorstep because I’m a gentleman like that, that he was nervous about today. Reassuring him that he has no reason to be does nothing when he’ll get in his head anyway—I know him. He’ll sweat it out and overthink, and I guarantee when I open this door he’ll be overdressed too because he panicked when I told him Theo is usually wearing Tom Ford designer clothes.

Sure enough, when I’m greeted by his favorite white button-down with a sleeveless vest over top and a pair of dark slacks, I can’t help but grin at the dork. “I’m late,” he whispers, eyes darting in the house when he hears Della’s laugh.

I roll my eyes. “You’re early by normal people’s standards, *and* you’re overdressed. The rest of us are wearing jeans.” Wiggling my socked feet, I add, “And no shoes. Did you get those shined?”

He tugs on his vest. “You said Theo was always dressed up, so I figured...” Blowing out a breath, he slashes his thumb behind him. “Maybe I should go change? It won’t take me long.”

Oh my God. I think I love him.

The thought crashes into me out of nowhere before I can process it, and I know it’ll be in the forefront of my mind all night. He wants to impress Theo because he knows that Theo means the world to Della, and Della

means the world to me. “You look fine.” I peck him on the lips and pull him inside. “Better than.”

“Are you sure, because—” It’s too late for him to escape because Della is already walking toward us with a huge smile on her face as she looks between me and our new guest. He straightens beside me, and I swear he nudges himself closer until I feel the brush of our hands.

When Theo follows behind her, I look at Reece to see him give a gentle nod before he links our pinkies together between us. My best friend knows about Reece in terms of our working relationship, and how I attempt to kick his ass at game shows, but I haven’t told her about the date we went on yesterday, or how much I want to slap a sign on his forehead claiming him as mine and then show him off to the world like he’s my own personal Commissioner’s Trophy from the World Series. “Della, this is Reece Nichols. He teaches English at Exeter. Reece, this is Della Saint James and her fiancé Theodore West.”

Della quickly takes Reece’s outstretched hand and shakes. “It’s so nice to meet you. We’ve heard a lot about you from Ren.”

The man I very possibly love slowly turns to me, half his lips wavering upward in a bemused smile.

I clear my throat. “I didn’t tell them *that* much. Della tends to exaggerate to try embarrassing me.”

He grins. “And here I thought you were boasting about me. Now I’m a little hurt.” Before I can comment, he extends a hand to Theo, shaking before dropping his arm back between our bodies. “It’s nice to meet you. *Both* of you. For the record, Ren has told me a lot about you as well.”

It’s Theo who notices our interwoven pinky fingers, giving me the tiniest smile that I think I might be imagining before I say, “Reece and I are together.”

“I knew it!” Della explodes, smacking Theo’s chest. “Didn’t I tell you? Ren has never introduced us to somebody before.”

Again, Reece looks at me with arched brows as if to say, *oversight, much?* And, well, yeah. Maybe it was. But Della’s statement also isn’t completely true, I’m just not about to bring up that she’s met plenty of my old flings over the years. I’ve had that conversation with Reece before, but it doesn’t bare repeating given that we’re still so new.

Della gives me a side hug. “This is so exciting! Is this new? How long have you been dating? Where—”

“Della,” Theo chuckles, pulling her back into his side with an amused smile on his face. “I think you should give them a chance to answer one question before rattling off more.”

Her shoulders droop. “Fine. So...?”

It’s Reece who takes lead, making me feel confident when I interweave our fingers together and squeeze. “There’s always been something, but we technically only made it official this week.”

“Our first date was last night.”

“Oh my God! I need all the details. I can’t believe you’ve been holding out on me.” Her eyes narrow at me but lighten when they turn to Reece. “I feel like this is the part where I’m supposed to threaten you and make sure you don’t hurt Lawrence, but I already like you. He told us that you’re not into sports, so I feel like we’ve already bonded.”

“You went to all of my games,” I point out, eyeing her.

She pats my shoulder. “Just because I support somebody doesn’t mean I have to like it. And, honestly, half the time Tiffany had to tell me what was going on because I was texting with Theo.”

He lifts his hands. “Hey, don’t bring me into this.”

I sigh. “I can’t believe you weren’t paying attention to my games. I feel like I don’t even know you.”

“Stop being so dramatic,” she retorts, not taking my bogus hurt feelings into consideration. “It isn’t like you even cared about baseball that much. You were always ready to be done with it.”

She has me there.

It’s Reece who’s clenching my hand once before gesturing toward the living room. “We were going to do game night, right?”

“Yep,” I pipe up. “I ordered the food, and it’s supposed to be delivered in about twenty minutes. You all still good with that?”

Everybody nods, and I’m thankful. I know Reece would prefer staying in, even though he told me this morning when we were texting that he’d be fine with dining out if that’s what I wanted to do. His exact words were, “you’re the birthday boy” but even through the phone, I could sense his relief when I told him as the birthday boy, I wanted to stay in with the people I cared about and do a game night. Board games. TV trivia. Takeout. The works.

As we head into the living room, Reece and I fall back so he can lean in and whisper, “I like your friends,” as if it’s some secret.

I peck his cheek. "I knew you would."

After Reece and Theo kick our asses in a round of Scrabble, we sit around eating subs and salads while shouting at the television screen.

"What kind of answer is that?" Della asks me in exasperation, throwing her hands up. She's always heated at games. When we used to play Monopoly, she'd get agitated every time I bought property because she'd always land on it. It never failed.

"He said to name something that goes up and down and last time I checked, dicks do that depending on the mood, Del." I mean, really, how could she be so doubtful that somebody would answer that on this show?

Her scoff causes Theo and Reece to chuckle from the sidelines. "A penis was not going to be on the board! You would have just given that to the other team if we were actually playing."

"But we're not," I roll my eyes. "I can't believe that Merry-go-round horses was up there. I mean, who the hell thinks of that? And balls? You can't tell me someone wasn't being perverted when they guessed that."

She blinks. "The guy said a *basketball*, Ren. Good lord, how can you even call yourself an athlete?"

"I played baseball."

"You should have known."

"You're ridiculous."

"But you missed me," she states confidently, grinning as she pops a cookie from the bakery into her mouth. It's her third one, an uncommon occurrence given her past, and I can't help but smile. "Damn these are good. The macadamia nut ones are my favorite though. You need to ship me some of these."

On top of the six-inch sub she ate, she nibbled on half a salad, the cookies, and drank a bottle of pink lemonade. She used to hate lemonade. "I'm glad to see you're enjoying them," I tell her honestly, game night rivalry forgotten.

She blushes. "Well..." Her eyes dart to Theo for a moment, her bottom lip between her teeth before a smile blossoms. "We actually have some pretty exciting news. I wasn't sure if I was going to share tonight but..." *Holy shit*. "We're having a baby!"

Instantly, my arms are around her in a huge hug, a smile stretched so wide on my face that it stings. "Christ, Del. That's amazing!"

Reece says, "Congratulations." Since Della and Theo don't know him well enough, they can't detect the tiniest crack. All they hear is the genuine well wish in his tone. When I look over at him, I reach out and take his hand knowing where, and who, his mind is going to. His smile eventually reaches his eyes as he nods once at me in reassurance.

Della walks over to Theo and drops into his lap, his arm instantly going around her waist as she nuzzles in. "We're excited. I'm a bit nervous because I'm afraid of what it'll do to my mindset with everything, but the group I've been going to not far from our house has been really great. I know they'll help me through it."

"And me," Theo says quietly, kissing her cheek and resting his forehead against her temple.

"Always," she agrees softly.

Their love has had its up and downs, but they've always had each other's backs. I have no doubt they'll get through anything together. And a baby? I let out a choked-up laugh. "Does this mean I'm going to be an uncle?"

Della mulls it over, her head bobbing up and down. "Uncle Ren. It has a really nice ring to it."

While the lovebirds whisper to one another, I turn to Reece. "You okay?"

He nods. "I am. I really am. It's always hard at first, but I'm happy for them. For anyone who gets to experience parenthood."

The way he talks about being a father makes something in me burst to life. I've never thought about settling down or starting a family, but I haven't dismissed the idea. "Is that something you'd want again someday?" I haven't forgotten about him saying that accepting who he was means not having another shot at a family, and it cracked my heart more than I let myself believe. With him, I could picture settling down, buying a house, moving in together, and starting a family. I want all of that, but if he doesn't...

One tiny exhale later, he nods. "I don't want to be a could have been." His eyes dance over mine, my left one, my right one, then down to my lips. "I want to be a father, Ren."

It's hard to swallow past the sense of belonging that cements itself in my throat, because those words make me realize how much I do too. "You'll make a great one."

We sit and hold each other's hands, staring, smiling, before I ask,
"Spend the night?"

And I'm not surprised he nods yes.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

REN

THE BEGINNING of November comes with cool temperatures, snow flurries, and a big shift on the football roster thanks to some partygoers who decided to drink, smoke weed, and post pictures of it online. Beckett Wright was featured in almost every picture, and not even his father could get him out of trouble, meaning he was out for the remainder of the season, and Red is in. Ironical, considering his need to lecture me on social media ethics.

I don't even bother hiding my relief over the kid being gone because the Wildcats have been playing better now that each player does their job. Only two additional games were lost the rest of the season, proving Red's skills on more than one occasion, in both his contribution to the team and his extra practice with Tommy, and from what Reece tells me, his success on the field is motivation to stay out of trouble off of it. It probably helps that his father and I talked over the phone the second our new running back made the team. We both agreed that he'd be pulled if he were sent to the office for anything else, so his record has been exceptional. Frankly, his dad sounds like a tool, but Red has been a hell of a lot happier since being part of the team, so I hope that means homelife is better too.

By the time the season comes to its official close, even Principal Richman remarked on how well the team managed to make a comeback. Winning only a little over half of the games we played may not have been the best track record for my first season coaching, but given what I had to

work with the first few months, Richman's compliment meant that I'll be seeing a second season.

When December strikes, so does a Northeastern blizzard that cancels school for a few days. Snow days mean stay-ins, minus the hour it takes to shovel my driveway and pathway back to the house, then the other forty minutes to help Reece with his. The good thing about that? Stripping out of our cold clothes and cuddling on the couch after.

Hand brushing through his hair, I murmur, "This is nice." We're both laying on our sides, him curled into my front, one of my arms around his waist while the other plays with grown out blond locks, in only our underwear. "I think I could get used to more of these storms."

He groans. "Don't say that." Turning so we're facing one another, he presses a soft kiss to my lips and sighs. "This is nice, I'm just not sure how much more snow I can take. They're saying we're supposed to get another six inches."

I let my lips linger on his for a moment, the soft chuckle vibrating his mouth before I pull away. "Based on the other night, I'd say you can handle six inches and then some."

His eyes grow lusty. After almost two months of dating, he went down on me for the first time. It wasn't rushed or sloppy like he was worried, but pure, beautiful torture. He asked me to help him set a pace, tell him what I liked, but he could have done anything and got me off just the same. Still, I guided his movements with encouraging groans and grunts as he took me deeper, gagging on my cock before opening his throat and letting me fuck his mouth.

There's no way he misses my hard on right now, practically asking to sword fight his.

"I've been thinking," he says after a moment of gentle petting, my hand lowering closer and closer to where I want to be wrapped around.

"Should I be scared?" I tease, fingers tracing the elastic band of his briefs, moving back and forth slowly.

His brows pinch. "Out of the two of us, my thoughts are far less scary than yours."

I chuckle. "Let's agree to disagree, babe. I'm more interested in what you're thinking than I am scared."

Rolling his eyes, his fingers do their own explorations, landing on my chest, fingering some of the hair there before circling my nipple in teasing

motions. "It's about my birthday present. I think I know what I want."

Teeth biting into my bottom lip when he tweaks my nipple before leaning forward and dragging his tongue across the bud, I manage to croak out, "I take it you didn't like the present I got you?"

I'm pretty sure he chuckles against me thinking about the new apron I bought him that says *once you put your meat in my mouth, you're gonna want to swallow* and besides his hatred over the word 'gonna' he said he loved it. "I plan to wear it proudly, like a badge of honor."

"What is it that you want for your birthday?"

His mouth ascends up my chest, peppering kisses along the side of my neck, nipping, sucking, licking, before they stop at the underside of my jaw. "I want you."

I move my head a fraction so I can meet his eyes. "You have me, babe."

"All of you." When his words catch, I understand exactly what he's asking for. We haven't talked about it because I could tell it's something that freaks him out a little. At least, it did. The first time I ever bottomed with a guy, it hurt like hell because he didn't use enough lube or prepare me enough and hurting Reece like that is the last thing I want to do.

"Are you asking what I think you are?"

His nod slowly moves up and down. "I've been thinking about it for a while. Ever since you started..." The sexiest pink takes over his face, and I fucking love it. "Ever since you played with my ass the first time, I've been wanting to do more."

It took time, time I happily, and agonizingly waited for, before one of our many nights of hand jobs led to rimming. I perched him on all fours while I jerked him off and started kissing down his back until my teeth bit into his ass cheek while one of my free fingers teased his tight hole and probed it with my tongue. He loved being marked by me, and I loved marking him, making sure everywhere I left my claim could be hidden on school days. That night he'd made me so fucking hard just by asking what team I'd be rooting for during the Superbowl. One simple question had my dick straining painfully against the zipper of my jeans, but the next one? It'd made the need to feel him squeezing my finger that much stronger. "*I looked it up online and think we should root for the underdogs. It seems like the Patriots get enough attention, don't you think?*"

The underdog. I almost told him I loved him then and there, but instead showed it through every kiss, over every single inch of his body. And when

I asked him if I could play with his ass, guiding my every move along the way, it was undoubtedly the hottest experience of my life. Watching a man's ass in the air as he writhed for me, hearing him moan and beg for more, watching spurts of cum shoot from him and onto my hand when I hit his G-spot with every thrust of my fingers.

He'd been thinking about it since then. "I know we never discussed it before," he keeps going, as if he needs to convince me, "but it's something I want to do. I want—no, I *need* to feel you inside of me. All of you. Your cock."

Jesus Christ, I could feel the precum leaking from my cock just hearing him say that, and I know the second I sink into that pretty ass of his, I won't last long. "You're sure?"

"Positive."

"You want me to top?"

"Yes." No hesitation.

My throat bobs, a heavy onslaught of emotion brimming my eyes that I try blinking away before he misinterprets them. "There's something I want you to know before we go that far, okay?" He doesn't say anything, just nods against the arm he uses as a pillow and holds my neck gently. "I love you. I've loved you for a while. And I don't expect you to say it back to me right now, or anytime soon, but it needed to be said before you thought that I only told you because of what you're letting me do. I would happily go without that kind of sex if it means being with you in other ways."

His eyes match mine, a light glaze coating the beautiful colors. "So, I guess it's a bonus that we're going to have sex then?"

I can't help but laugh. "Yeah, definitely a bonus. Opening yourself up to me like that is...it's a lot. It's everything. I want you to know that. I'll try to make it hurt as little as possible, but I can't promise it won't."

"I know. I read about it online."

My brows jump. "You read about anal online without me?"

"I wanted to know things without having to ask you. It made me feel... more in control, I suppose. But I want to do it, there's no question."

God, I love him.

Cupping his cheek, I breathe him in and close my eyes. "Name the time and place, and I'm there, babe."

"Well, I was thinking today."

My eyes pop open.

“Right now, preferably.”

They widen.

“Because I love you too, and that scares me to hell, but it’s the truth.”

And I’m dead.

He doesn’t expect the brutal kiss that I deliver, or the sheer hunger as I taste his mouth in every way possible. After the shock wears off, he returns it, meeting my lips each time and battling it out with my tongue as I swiftly roll over him and grind down to show him how fucking hard he’s made me. “Before today, I was trying to figure out when to tell you how I felt, but I wasn’t sure if you’d run the other way, if you felt the same. It scared me shitless thinking I fell for somebody who might not want to be with me.” Another kiss. “Hearing that you do, there’s no other feeling like it. I’ve never loved anybody like I love you, and it feels damn good to admit that out loud.”

His fingers grip my ass, rolling me into him with a shuddered groan. “I tried figuring out my feelings a long time ago, and you know what I came up with?” I shake my head at his inquiry, too worked up feeling our cocks rubbing against each other with only thin fabric as a barrier between us. “When I wondered to myself why you were always on my mind, I realized you’d never left it to begin with. I lived for every flirty thing you said because it meant you were paying attention to me, and I craved you bringing me my favorite snacks even though you hate them, and I loved how much you teased me even if it was embarrassing at times.

“All of those little moments have built up to be the best ones of my life, because each one has been shared with you. The only thing I want for my birthday, for a lot of birthdays, Christmases, and other holidays to come, is the chance to make more with you.”

Blowing out a labored breath, I press my lips to his and don’t move them an inch. I need his warmth, his longing, his moments, his everything. Knowing he wants that too? Mentally, I’m shaking my head, wrapping up his speech and tucking it away for safe keeping. “You would really want that with me? Sounds like a long time of putting up with my bullshit. There will be sports talk.” My lips are still brushing his with every word as his curl up into a responding smile.

“I happen to love your bullshit.”

Tracing my tongue along his bottom lip, I suck it into my mouth and hear the sharp breath escape him as his hips arch for more friction. Popping

his lip out of my mouth, I say, “We need to take this into the bedroom. I need more space to work if I’m going to slide my cock inside you.”

Another drawn out, throaty groan releases from him and makes me grin as I roll off him gracefully, erection tenting my boxers that captures his attention. By the time we make it to his bedroom, everything moves quickly and slowly at the same time—moving at the best and worst pace to draw out the torment. I’m kissing him and touching him and slowly peeling off his underwear while dropping to my knees, and the second I wrap my lips around him, I can taste the precum on my tongue.

“Not yet, Ren.” He tugs on my hair, and I release him and stand again, letting him take off the last piece of clothing between us before we’re both stark naked. I grab my shaft and work it slowly, playing with the sensitive nerve endings, rolling the tip in my fingers while he watches with hungry eyes.

Closing the distance between us, I latch my lips onto his and feel his hand cover mine to help jerk me, our grip tightening as he tugs and pulls until I’m thrusting forward and fucking his mouth with my tongue to swallow the sounds I make.

“Bed,” I breathe into him, walking him backwards until the back of his knees hit the bed. With a gentle push backwards, he bounces onto the queen-size mattress before I climb over him. Straddling his hips, I coast over his naked chest, up his shoulders, and back down his arms before linking our hands. My dick is harder than a rock, and I want nothing more than to fuck him until we’re both exhausted, but he needs slow and steady, to feel the way I stretch his tight passage and claim it. I want him to feel me for days, thinking about every time I slide into him while whispering dirty nothings into his ear.

Fuck. These thoughts aren’t helping me control the need to release. “Condoms and lube?” He gestures toward the nightstand, watching as I reach over and discover the holy grail waiting for me. “You got my favorite.” Smirking over the silicone-based lubricant, I grab the bottle and a condom, tossing both on the bed next to his body. We’ve had this discussion. After years of using water-based lube, I learned silicone works better, and is safe with condoms.

His blush is subtle, but I still caress the warm skin with my thumb as I rock into him. “I bought it for this,” he admits sheepishly, holding onto my

thighs, then rubbing them up, up, up until he teases the organ that wants nothing more than to be inside him.

“Good choice.” Bending down, I kiss him softly, letting my lips linger and explore while my hand coasts between us and started playing with his length. It twitches in my hand greedily, and I have to smack his palm away when it tries grabbing a handful of me. “If you touch me right now, I’m going to blow, and I really want to do that while I’m inside you.”

His neck bows backward when I pay special attention to the area just under his mushroom-shaped tip until his breath comes out in rugged, desperate pants. “Please, Lawrence, I need you.” Not *this*. Not my *cock*. Me. I give him one more peck before retracting, grabbing the condom and sheathing myself with it before lubing my finger. “Bend your knees for me, baby.” He obeys, bending his knees toward his chest while I use my free hand to stroke his erection while my lubed digit circles his puckered hole. His body stiffens only a second or two when I ease my finger in, working him slowly, stretching him, and hooking inside in a come-hither motion that has his breath hitching.

Sliding in and out of him, I lube another finger and let it join the first, stretching him farther until he softly curses under his breath. “You doing okay?”

Adam’s apple bobbing, he nods. “It’s good, you feel so good.” Working my two fingers in farther, I know when I hit his prostate because of his garbled response. I repeat the motion before he’s rolling his head back and forth on the mattress. “Need you inside me now. *Now*.”

Pulling out my fingers, I grab the bottle of lube and coat the condom. Bending forward, I suck the tip of him into my mouth, lapping up the salty beads of precum like its water in a desert. He wraps a fistful of my hair in his hand and tugs, but I don’t budge as I drag my tongue along the seam of his seeping cock the same moment I hedge toward his entrance and work myself in.

“Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck,” he hisses, fists going to the sheets and grabbing ahold of them.

I stop moving with only my tip in, giving him another suck. “Try to relax. Take a deep breath. If you need me to stop, tell me. Okay?”

His head bobs once. “Keep going.”

Licking the underside of his shift once, I straighten up on my knees and work myself in farther. Another inch and I give him time to adjust, and the

way he clenches me is pure agony that I want to endure for a lifetime. As I slide in another inch, he begins relaxing, consumed in how I start playing with his balls to loosen him up enough to fully seat myself inside him. “You feel so amazing, so tight, *so fucking mine*. I never want this to end.” I claim his lips in a languid kiss, my tongue dancing alongside his, our teeth clattering as I begin moving, sliding halfway out, then back in. His hands release the sheets and fall to my sides, holding on as I begin riding him.

“Grab ahold of your knees,” I rasp, helping him bend them forward more to get a deeper angle. Need washes over me, urging me to move quicker. I pick up speed, listening to our skin slapping and groan every time my sack hits his ass, giving it the perfect amount of pressure as his tightness suction cups my dick until it begs for release.

“Fuck,” I grunt, thrusting into him harder as I start jerking him in my hand at the same time. He struggles to stay in the position the nearer he is to release, and I love that. I love how I make him come undone as I fuck his ass, watching the bliss wash over his features, and the sweat dot his body as I shift my hips to get a new angle until my cock hits his prostate every single time.

“*Oh my fucking God, Lawrence.*” His ass voluntarily meets mine, fucking me back, making white spots dot my eyes, and I know I’m close, so close.

“Shit, baby, I need you to come, so I can.” I refuse to repeat my first experience, where only the guy who took my ass got off. Reece means too much to me not to see him coated in his orgasm, which I have every intention of licking off his body after.

And that thought—

“*Fuuuuck.*” Our grunts fill the bedroom, the mattress creaking, the headboard smacking the wall, with every slap of my entry. His body bows and lips part wide into a silent moan before white hot cum shoots from his cock all over his stomach—the most I’ve ever seen him release in our time together. It drives me mad, my hips jackknifing into him as his hands cup my ass and pushes me into him harder as I bottom out and come just as hard as him, filling the condom before collapsing onto his body.

“Holy shit,” he breathes, wrapping my body in his arms and letting the rise and fall of his chest coax me into his warmth. Nestling his face into the crook of my neck, he presses a kiss there and takes a deep breath. “I don’t think I can feel my legs after that.”

I chuckle.

“Happy birthday to me,” he murmurs, more to himself than me I think. I slowly pull out, watching him wince a little before I kiss him and carefully pull the condom off. Tying and disposing of it, I come back in with a washcloth, hovering over his sated body spread across his duvet, before doing exactly what I said I would. First, dragging my tongue along the cum left over on his body, then washing the rest of it off with the cloth and throwing it into the hamper.

When I crawl back in bed, I pull him into me until we’re spooning in peaceful silence. It’s how we fall asleep when spend the night at each other’s houses, and when we wake up, we’re a tangle of limbs, his foot caressing the coarse hair of my leg, my hand stroking his morning wood, our mouths eventually finding each other in a kiss that probably shouldn’t happen until our teeth are brushed. It never matters because I want him in any way, shape, or form. Stinky breath, bed head, and all. None of that matters when you get to crack your eyes open to see the person you love sharing your space, your heart, and your mind.

I whisper, “I think about you all the time too,” smiling into his neck when I recall what he told me.

“Mmm. I know.”

I nip the skin closest to my mouth. “Did you also know that I used some of your own quarters from your desk stash to buy your cinnamon buns?”

His body shakes in gentle laughter, causing me to squeeze him tighter. “Well, I figured it was that or a student was picking the lock of the drawer and helping themselves.”

I grumble out a, “Know it all” before releasing a content sigh.

Reece’s response is so soft I nearly miss it, but the words dance in my head the rest of the night and the many, many more that follow. “I love you, and I’m glad you’re both my first and last.”

I could say *I know* and even the scoreboard, but I don’t, because part of me had doubts about where we’d be a month from now, a year from now, hell, five years from now. He could decide that his love for me has faded and find somebody else to experiment with. I hope that day never comes, so I hold onto the moment now, onto the pure happiness of tonight and all the days that have involved Reece Nichols and leave an open-mouthed kiss to his shoulder blade. “I love too.”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

REECE

I DON'T KNOW if thirty is a good age for wisdom, or if I'm just more inclined to believe in things now that I do in myself, but everything has changed. My perspective on life, on other people, is no longer filtered with hesitation or cynicism, and I know a large part of that has to do with the man currently sleeping beside me.

With Christmas less than a week from now, we've talked holiday plans since our families both live out of town. He told me his are going on their yearly cruise to the Caribbean, one they haven't missed in ten years, while mine are throwing their usual intimate get-together. Our traditions couldn't be any more different. Mine involve watching *A Christmas Story* on TBS all day while we open presents and argue over what the best holiday movie is, and his have always been isolated minus the few times Della or his former coach on the Bentley U team invited him to join them.

Asking him to come with me to meet my family is hard despite everything we've been through together. I'm not scared they won't like him, because Lawrence McKinley is impossible not to love. My mother won't be immune to his charm, and I doubt my father will be either. Jamie is a different story, and if we see Donna, whose phone calls have eased after the anniversary of Brea's death, I don't know what she'll say.

Ren and I spoke about him tagging along, but the conversation veered to touching, more touching, and eventually sex. Not that I'm complaining.

There is nothing better than the sting of pain-turned-pleasure Lawrence gives me when he positions himself over me, behind me, *in me*. Still, I plan to bribe him with a big breakfast to agree since he's yet to give me a firm answer. Getting a 'yes' out of him when he was coming didn't really count in my book, because I could get him to do anything. Hell, commit murder if I wanted. Maybe he's nervous to agree, maybe I'm pushing too far to take this step, but I don't want to leave him in Exeter when there's somewhere he can go to celebrate.

It could have been an overshoot, but I called my mother yesterday asking if it'd be all right if a guest joined me, and the joy in her voice told me it was more than fine before she said so herself. The last thing I want is my mother getting her hopes up only for me to dash them. Again. I want Ren there, around my family, laughing at the jokes Dad makes that aren't that funny, and teasing me over all the awkward photos Mom has hanging on nearly every wall of me and Jamie. Hell, despite the lack of communication I have with my older sister, I want them to meet too. I'm done wondering what I did, done blaming myself for why things went wrong.

After everything with Sophia, I learned that it's best not to cast blame. It's too draining on the mind and soul. Grandpa Owen used to say the good people in your life will give you happiness, the worst ones will give you lessons, and the best ones will give you memories. I hold onto that instead of everything else. I don't consider Jamie a bad person no matter what she said, and I want her to meet Ren and see that I'm happy regardless of her thoughts. Whether she accepts it is another story altogether, but I won't dwell if she doesn't. It'll be a chapter of a book I can finally flip through until the covers are closed.

Shaking myself out of the thought, I quietly climb out of his bed. We've created a routine. Whoever is up first has to make the coffee and breakfast, though I've learned Ren's cooking skills are limited. If he could live on eggs, toast, seasoned chicken breast, and steamed vegetables he would. Anything else? Not so much. Not for his sake of trying either. He attempted to make healthier, homemade pizza and forgot about it until the crust was charred and the cheese and other toppings were dried up and burnt.

I've showed him how to make a few simple recipes that my mother showed me, namely one-pan pasta dishes and some lean chicken meals that he's made on days when I stay late for Thursday book club. I'll walk into the house and smell something cooking, get greeted with a kiss, and then

we spend the night having dinner and catching up on our days like we didn't sneak away any chance we could during our free periods to steal a kiss...or three.

I'm smiling like a fool while scrambling eggs and heating a pan for the turkey sausage when I hear three loud knocks at the front door. Pinching my brows, I glance at the watch on my wrist and note the early morning hour. Ren never mentioned anybody coming over, and the weather is too chilly for Jehovah witnesses to be out and about talking about our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, which I've been caught in conversation about one too many times. The last time it happened, Lawrence was taking up residence on my couch and forcing me to watch John Wick movies. After ten minutes of the suited men giving me their spiel, Ren stepped up to the door, told them to go "waste other people's time with their bullshit" before closing the door in their faces. When I blinked at him as if to say *was that necessary?*, he shrugged and said, "You're too nice for your own good, Scout."

Debating on waking him up to see if he wanted to answer it, I choose to let him sleep in. He almost never does. After football season ended, Richman met with him about training for baseball in the spring. He hasn't been staying as late after school, but he's been staying up late here studying last years' team and what Jefferson left him. He doesn't want to repeat the football season because he thinks his chances of being asked back depends on the number of wins under his belt. I doubt it, because I know his students love him and he's boasted about how smart they are when he talks about the grades in each of his classes. What he fails to realize is that's all because of the teacher, not that he'd ever give himself that kind of credit.

Turning the burner off, I set the bowl of eggs down onto the counter and walk over to the door. It's probably one of the neighbors, but when I open it with a smile thinking I'll see Kyler Lancaster on the other side, I'm instead greeted by a much older version of Lawrence and a smaller woman beside him.

Oh, shit. "Uh..." is the best thing I can say, realizing I'm opening their son's door. We haven't talked about his parents often. He says they text more often, sometimes his mother will call and tell him about some dinner or gala they're going to for charity, but it's a distant relationship.

The woman looks at me with startled eyes, eyes that are identical in the shape and color of ones I'm used to seeing every day on my boyfriend. His father gives me a once over, and that's when I realize I'm in the apron Ren

gave me for my birthday, with only a white t-shirt and pair of boxers on underneath.

Wonderful.

Clearing my throat, I say, "You must be Lawrence's parents." It doesn't come out as strangled as I worried it would, and they even give me a small smile and nod each despite looking stricken over my presence. I have no idea what he told them, so I'm itching to get dressed and hightail it out of here so they can talk.

Lawrence's father sticks his hand out first, which I accept quickly. His shake is firm, rough, as he appraises me. "Niall. Nice to meet you..."

Oh. "Reece. I'm uh..."

"My boyfriend," a tired, confused voice says from close behind before Lawrence pads over. He glances between his parents. "What are you guys doing here? Shouldn't you be on your way to the Bahamas or something by now?"

"We're not going this year," the gruff voice of his father states. "Can we come in? It's cold out here, son."

Blowing out a breath, he steps aside and gestures toward the entryway. His parents slip in, giving me another look quickly before glimpsing at their son's lack of attire. He's wearing tight black briefs that leave little to the imagination, which is more than he fell asleep in last night.

When Ren looks at me, his eyes skirt down my apron. An entertained smirk quirks his lips that I glare at. "It's not funny," I grumble, closing the door.

"It's kind of funny."

I sigh. "I'm wearing an apron that basically alludes to a blowjob. In front of your parents. For the first time I'm meeting them. It's *not* funny."

Said people are too busy wandering around the living room to notice our murmured conversation thankfully. Ren pecks my cheek. "I still think it's pretty funny. Hate to break it to you, babe, but they know I'm into guys, and the fact I said you're my boyfriend probably gives them an idea of what we do together."

My face heats.

He pats my shoulder. "Stop freaking out. If anything, be thankful they didn't stop in last night when I distracted you from grading papers by getting on my knees under the table and—"

“Stop,” I groan, not wanting to recall the very amazing things he did to my body the night before. He laughs lightly as I untie the apron from my waist. “I’m going to put on actual clothes. I’ll let you guys talk.”

He nods and I have to eye him in warning not to smack my ass when I walk out, because that’s what he usually does when I make an exit. I’d prefer keeping it PG with his parents around since I know nothing about them. At least neither of them are glaring or openly disgusted with the premise of me and their son dating. It seems like a good step, miniscule maybe, but good, nonetheless.

It doesn’t take long before I’m walking out of the bedroom in a pair of jeans and a long sleeve shirt, clothes that I seem to be stock piling here more and more often. Ren jokes about giving me my own personal dresser drawer, but he insists on negotiating percentage of closet space beyond that. Even though his tone is always joking, his eyes say something else. The idea of moving in together has been on my mind since then, but it’s not what I want to think about right now or I’ll be ten times more flustered.

Slinking back out, I stop at the corner and eavesdrop on the low conversation. “...nice if you called ahead. That’s all I’m saying. Plus, the weather has been unpredictable. You could have gotten hurt if you were in an accident.”

“As your mother said, we wanted to surprise you for Christmas. We thought it’d be good to spend it together early, because we weren’t sure if you had plans already since you’d mentioned you were seeing someone.”

He mentioned me? The small smile curling on my lips is so faint, I have to touch them to make sure it’s there. Ren never said he told his parents about me, and even if what he did share was limited based on his father’s fishing for my name, it’s still something.

“I think I have plans to see Reece’s family since you two are normally gone,” he admits, further growing my smile. I’m not sure if he’s only telling them that to get out of plans with his folks, but I’m going to take advantage where I can. “If I’d known you weren’t doing the cruise, I would have tried setting something up. Maybe brought Reece to the city.”

Happiness unfurls itself in my chest when I hear how sincere he sounds—like he’d actually consider bringing me into his domain. I’ve never been to New York City. Always hated how congested it looked in pictures. I prefer quiet, more serene landscapes. But seeing where he grew up?

Visiting all the places he loved? I'd do that in a heartbeat if he wanted me to.

Pushing off the wall, I decide to walk back in with a bright smile on my face like I haven't been eavesdropping. "I was making breakfast. Would everyone like some?"

His parents exchange a look, before glancing at their son for direction. Ren is stiff for a moment, but he reaches out and captures my hand before nodding. "I think it'd be nice to sit down together. Reece makes the best omelets."

I beam. "That's because I put extra of those nasty mushrooms you like so much in them so they don't stay in my fridge long."

Mrs. McKinley laughs. "He's always been obsessed with mushrooms. Every year when he was a teenager, he'd ask for mushroom pizza as his birthday dinner, and he'd always have it to himself because nobody else wanted to eat it."

Grinning, I turn to him. "Now I see why you did it." He shrugs innocently. Clearing my throat, I nod at the kitchen. "Any requests? I have different vegetables, cheeses..."

Ren shakes his head. "Don't play chef. They'll take scrambled or sunny side up eggs and wheat toast. Otherwise, they'll be requesting a mile-long personalized omelet like they did with our old cook Raymond. Poor guy."

His father rolls his eyes. "We paid him to cook for us. He was doing his job. That being said," his eyes shift to me, and I stand to attention feeling the need to impress him somehow, even if that means running to the store for things he likes in his omelets. "Whatever you have is fine. We're not as bad as our son insists."

Ren cocks his head as if to say, *debatable*.

Eventually, I get to work in the kitchen again, adding extra eggs to the bowl and whisking them while Ren gives his parents a tour. I can hear them talking upstairs, probably at the spare room that still has empty shelves and taped up boxes of all his accomplishments. He doesn't want to be defined by them anymore, just like he doesn't want to let the media outlets get to him with their coverage. A lot of them have moved on, but there are still a few sites that go after him on giving up before he even had the chance to prove himself.

If they knew Ren like I do, they'd know he hasn't given up at all. He's working harder than ever to get what he wants. They just don't want to

accept that somebody with talent like his could want anything other than baseball.

The table that I helped Ren pick out at a garage sale earlier in the fall is almost never used. It's small and square and doesn't fit all of us and the food easily, but we make do. Conversation is awkward, some of it forced, some of it sounding more obligatory than anything, but eventually everyone finds their flow.

"So, Reece," Patricia says, turning from her eggs to me. "How did you and my son meet?"

I'm not sure why I look to Ren for an answer knowing the story myself, but I'm taken by surprise that she wants to know. He gives me an encouraging smile, and it's all I need to glance back at his mother. "We both work at Exeter High. I met him over the summer and showed him around a bit when he first started."

Ren feels the need to add, "He hates sports."

His father's brows lift. "You hate sports?"

Willing myself not to glare at their son, I poke at my scrambled eggs with the fork tight in my grasp and fight off the need to blush. "I wouldn't say 'hate' exactly. I've never followed along with any."

"He's into books," Ren tells them.

Niall studies me for a moment before slowly nodding at the answer. "What kind of books?"

I'm about to reply when Ren jumps back in. "Not the sports related ones."

"Christ, son," Niall chastises, narrowing his gaze in the direction next to me. "I got that the first time. I'm trying to get to know your boyfriend."

Diffusing the tension, I say, "I read a little bit of everything. Classic literature is my favorite to teach in class, but personal reads vary in the fictional realm. Anything I can get lost in."

The eldest McKinley chooses to ignore his son's scathing look, which I have to nudge his foot under the table to stop shooting him, before focusing back on me.

Putting my fork down, I wipe my mouth on the napkin and reach for my coffee. "As for sports, I'll watch games with Ren, but he'll typically have to explain what's going on. I never played in high school, and almost never go to the home games held at Exeter when one of the teams play. The only games I'm good at are trivia."

Patricia blinks. “Trivia?”

“He kicks my ass at Jeopardy,” Ren admits, sounding both impressed and sad about the fact. I nudge him again, this time earning a small smile from him when we exchange looks.

The table goes back to silence, air thick with discomfort. Nothing but silverware scraping against ceramic. Drinks being sipped. Food being chewed.

It’s Niall who breaks it. “How is the school doing? With their financials stabilized, I’m sure there’s room for improvement there.”

Ren tells him about Richman’s plans to use funds for school equipment—technology in the labs, system updates for all school computers, even new instruments for the music room, according to one very ecstatic Michelle when she flounced into my room after finding out. She hasn’t treated me any differently since finding out I’m gay, and since telling her, I’ve debated on coming clean to the others. It’s not like I want to make a special announcement on the loudspeaker, just find gentle ways to clue people in. Because, like Ren, I want to be able to hold hands in public and kiss him whenever I feel like it. Well, maybe not wherever, because Ren gave me a very detailed description of what he wanted to do to me in my classroom, the janitors closet, the men’s bathroom near my room, you name it. We’d definitely be fired by the time he was done living out those fantasies.

Pulling myself back into their conversation, I realize something that has me studying his father’s stoic demeanor. I’m not sure Lawrence picks up on the fact that budget funding isn’t public knowledge when the money is donated unless the donator wants it to be. Conner Wright wanted the gratitude and attention, so the school’s budget-themed newsletter always highlighted his generous donations every year. But whoever administration received funding from is a third-party source that remained anonymous based on our last faculty meeting where we found out no departments would be cut, leaving a lot of my coworkers breathing easier.

After breakfast, Ren and his mom are talking in quiet voices at the table while his father and I bring dishes to the kitchen. I tried telling him not to worry about it, gave him the same guest speech my mom would always give people who were visiting our home growing up about not laying a land on anything, but he insisted.

Setting the last dish on the counter while the sink fills up with sudsy water, I turn to him. "Can I ask you something?"

His chin dips.

"Did you donate money to Exeter so Conner Wright wouldn't have a hold over administration and Ren?"

The slight wavering of his lips tells me what I need to know. "I'd do anything for my son, even if he doesn't believe that."

Understanding, I nod once. "Are you going to tell him? It's not my place to, but I still think you should. He'd appreciate it."

"He'd think I'm doing it as a favor he has to pay back someday. I know my son. He's hard-headed and doesn't trust easily. Gets it from me, I'm afraid." A shrug. "I think it's best he thinks it's an anonymous donor."

Message received. "Like I said, I won't say a word," I promise lightly.

There's a small pause while I switch the faucet to the other side of the sink for rinsing water. Ren mentioned getting somebody in here about installing a dishwasher, but he still hasn't made the call. Mr. McKinley asks, "Is he really going to meet your family for the holidays?"

My smile returns, though I point it downward at the sink, looking at nothing in particular. "I hope so. I asked him if he would because I'd like him to meet my parents."

"He'll go then." I lift my gaze to him, brows arched in curiosity at his sure statement. The man standing in front of me is aged but certain, poised, and confident. I suddenly know exactly where his son gets it from. "My son will do anything for the people he loves, and considering he rarely mentions how special somebody is to him to his mother and me, it means that what you two have will last."

While I don't know Niall well, I can only assume that his words are meant as ones of approval. He hasn't said or done anything that's told me he doesn't accept his son, or me for him. I can tell he and his wife are a bit uncomfortable still, but I hope that changes with time because I'd like to be with Lawrence for a long time coming.

"Thank you for saying that," I tell him quietly, both our attention drawn to the open archway where two different laughs—one light, one deep—fill the room.

"Thank *you*," he responds, confusion marring my face over his gratitude. Picking up a dish towel to help me, he clears his throat. "I want

what's best for my son. His happiness, for him to find a love like I have with his mother. He deserves it, and I can tell that you're good for him."

My hands falter in the soapy water as I scrub a plate. "You don't have to thank me for loving him, sir. It's no trouble to me."

His chuckle is light. "I'm sure it's not."

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CHAPTER TWENTY

REN

WHY THE HELL am I so sweaty? I almost voice the question as we pull up to the small white bungalow with a pale blue door surrounded by fluffy white snow from the last snowfall that rocked the east coast. It's only fifteen degrees out, and I have pit stains. I'm certain of it.

When Reece puts his car in park, he turns to me with a tickled look on his face. "Take a deep breath. This is almost definitely going to go smoother than my version of meet-the-parents."

He's still hung up on how my parents met him, but I tell him the same thing each time. "At least you weren't buck ass naked under the apron. It could have gone far worse." And, like always, he simply rolls his eyes at my response. "Even though you've told your mom about me, I still can't help but worry. What if she doesn't like me? What if you're father disapproves? You said he likes baseball, but that's still not reassuring enough."

I pale, racking my brain with what-if scenarios. "Jesus Christ. What if I forget his name and look like a dumbass?"

He reaches for my hand and puts it between his, pressing kisses to each of my knuckles hiding a smile. "You made me test you the whole drive here. You know my parents' names, my sister's name, hell, Ren. You know the name to my first childhood pet, and that was from when I was three. You're going to be *fine*."

Elaine.

Jack.

Jamie.

Patches. He was a cocker spaniel.

Check, check, check, and check.

For bonus points, his favorite teacher in school was Mr. Demarcus because he used to let them use their notes for tests, but I have a working theory it was because the guy was cute. A theory that Reece turned down many times, exclaiming the guy was seventy, wrinkled, with a huge beak nose that was hard to miss. Still.

He doesn't turn the car off until I tell him I'm good. When he surveys the double driveway, his eyes narrow in on the old Honda parked catty-corner to us. His murmured, "Shit," isn't lost on me, so I wait for him to explain. "That's Donna's car."

Donna. Sophia's mother. "Ah. Do you think Sophia is with her?"

He rubs his neck, eyes still trained on the civic before he eventually shakes his head. "It's unlikely. Sophia stopped coming to my house after things happened. Mom's invited her, but she didn't feel comfortable."

Understandable, I suppose. "Do you talk to Donna?"

He wets his lips. "Only when I have to," he murmurs more to himself than me. Something pulls his attention down, before he slips his phone out of the front pocket of his jeans. Lips pressing together as he stares at whatever is on the screen, his free hand drums against his opposite leg.

"What's wrong?" I ask knowingly.

Again, he shakes his head. "It's nothing..."

It's something. "Reece."

He turns the phone to me.

Jamie: *Can we talk?*

Damn. Now I know why anxiety is inked onto his pinched expression. "When was the last time you heard from her?"

He makes a face. "That's the thing." His head rests against the headrest as he lets out a heavy sigh. "I wasn't even sure she had my number, and I've had it for years."

I wince. "Shit. You going to talk to her?"

He hesitates, biting down on his inner cheek based on how it caves into his mouth. "She's family," he decides quietly. "Plus, it might be good to clear the air. To get some closure."

Is that what he thinks will happen? “Is closure what you want from her?” I know him well. He loves his family. They’re a tight-knit group, always calling and checking in on one another. It’s refreshing as hell, and I doubt the only thing he wants from his big sister is a reason for the silence.

Loosely, he lifts a shoulder. “I think it’s best if that’s all I expect. Jamie and I haven’t ever been particularly close even though I idolized her at one point, but it was nothing like this. And we had our reasons, namely the fact that she’s a handful of years older than me and always had her own friends and life, but it never explained why she got so cold.”

This time, it’s me taking his hand and squeezing it in comfort. “You should definitely talk to her then. Is she coming to the dinner?”

He nods. “She almost never misses it. Her husband had to go away for a conference one year and didn’t get back in time because of flight delays. That’s the only time she hasn’t attended.”

I can’t tell if he’s glad she’ll be here or not, but I have a feeling it’s the former. If he couldn’t hold onto his grudge over his old friend’s manipulation that upended their lives, holding one over his sister isn’t something he’d do. It’s not in his nature. “Text her back.”

His eyes go down to the phone, almost as if he forgot he’s holding it. With a feeble nod, he thumbs a message back before sliding it into his pocket. “You ready? It’s too cold to hide in the car the whole day. Plus, Mom probably already noticed the car, so we can’t run now.”

Unbuckling, I point out, “We’re not hiding or running. I don’t do either of those things, no matter how tempting right now.” That earns me a snort, which I choose to ignore. “In fact, I think your family is going to love me.” *At least I hope so.* Fake it ‘til you make it, that’s my motto of the day. Hopefully, the charm Reece insists I have will work easily on his family, because my confidence is wavering with every step toward the front door that swings open before we can even knock.

“My baby boy is finally home!” a short, blonde-haired woman squeals, launching herself at Reece and wrapping him up in her arms. “I know we just talked a few days ago, but nothing beats seeing the beautiful specimen I created in person.” She peels back and pinches his pink cheek, probably not caused by the cold air but by his humble embarrassment, before her eyes shift to where I stand a few inches behind him. “Oh my God.”

I’m about to greet her when her arms tighten around me in a breath-stealing hug. Honest to God, for someone who can’t be more than five-foot

even, she has one hell of a grip.

“It is so, so nice to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you, I feel like I already know you.” When she peels herself away, her eyes, a pure green unlike the mixture I love waking up to see staring at me almost every morning, are glazed over like she’s seconds from crying. “It’s Lawrence, right?”

“It is,” I say with a smile. “But most people call me Ren.”

Reece reaches for my hand and threads our fingers as we follow his mother inside. She looks down at our entwined hands, beaming even wider than before, and calls out for her husband to join us. “Jack has been helping me with some last-minute dinner items, but everything will be set before it’s time to eat. Don’t you worry.”

When the man I know to be Jack Nichols walks into the foyer, he looks between his son and me, down to our hands, before smiling to himself and draping an arm around his wife’s shoulder. He sticks a hand out to me. “Jack. I hope the drive here wasn’t too bad.”

“Lawrence—”

“Or Ren,” Elaine chips in.

I smile at her. “And the drive was fine. Minimal traffic. All the roads were cleared, especially the closer we got to town.”

Mrs. Nichols nods. “The town boys are good about keeping roadways cleaned off. You can always tell where the town limits are.”

Reece mentioned the same thing on the way when we hit a section of road covered in slick, melted snow and ice that made the tires spin in a few spots. As soon as we hit the town border, it was smooth cruising. “You have a lovely home,” I compliment. The space is warm and cozy, all bright colors and matching furniture sets. The brick fireplace is on and toasting the foyer, which is attached to the open living room that’s playing *A Christmas Story*.

“Thank you, dear.”

Jack looks to his son. “Donna stopped by to drop off her famous apple pie.”

Reece involuntarily clenches my hand for a moment. Or maybe it grounds him. Either way, I hold onto him as he answers. “I saw her vehicle out front. We’ll go say hi.”

We. I nod when he looks to me, making sure that’s okay. I want to be here for him no matter what. It seems like this is big for him, his footsteps heavy and hesitant as we make our way across the carpeted floors until

we're turning into a bright white room filled with wooden cabinets and a large matching island that I know Jack built for Elaine for their anniversary a few years back after she told him they didn't have enough counterspace. Reece told me their love was something he wanted—the kind where somebody learns a trade for the person they care about, just to make them happy.

There's an older woman with dark hair standing by the sink and rinsing a glass when we stop at the entryway of the kitchen. Her hands freeze as she looks over her shoulder at us, her eyes trailing downward and locking on our embrace. I think her throat bobs, and I have no idea what's going through her mind. Anger? Sadness? A mixture of the two?

Her slow perusal upwards lands her eyes solely on Reece, who's back is stiff straight. I want to rub it, to massage his shoulders like he's done for me on my bad days, but I let him have his moment, his eyes locking with hers as silence takes over the room.

Eventually, thankfully, a small breath releases from her as she wipes her hands off on a dish towel. "Oh, Reece. I..." Her voice is hoarse, so she clears it, her eyes darting back down to where I hold his hand before returning upwards again. "I'm so..."

I prepare to defend him, to tell this virtual stranger off if it means protecting Reece, when she opens her mouth and surprises both of us with her answer. "I'm so *relieved*. When Elaine told me you were seeing somebody, I couldn't have been happier for you. I hoped you would, that what happened..." Her eyes go to me, as if unsure how much I knew. "Well, I hoped you'd find happiness."

Reece's thumb strokes the back of my hand in a lulled caress. "I did. And Lawrence knows everything." His emphasis on 'everything' doesn't seem lost on Donna. "Ren, this is Donna. She's Sophia's mother. Mrs. Michelson, this is my boyfriend Lawrence McKinley. We both teach at Exeter High."

The woman's eyes rake down me, a soft smile growing on her face. "It's very nice to meet you, Lawrence. You take good care of this boy, do you hear me?"

Her protection over him warms my heart a little, even if I don't want it to. I have nothing against her, it's her daughter I wouldn't get along with if I ever met her. What Sophia did by using Reece makes me sick, and even if he can forgive her and move on, I'll always hold a sense of resentment

toward the woman who was too selfish to let her so-called best friend be truly happy in his own skin.

"I will," I tell her, almost too gruffly. Reece chuckles under his breath, probably at my tight tone, but doesn't say anything. "If anybody deserves it most, it's Reece."

She nods in agreement. "Well, I'll leave you to your family. I made apple pie for you and Jamie. I know it's your favorite." Her eyes turn back to me, hesitation in them. "Do you have a favorite? If it's not too forward, maybe next time I can make something for you as well."

She makes her daughter's ex a pie?

It's Reece who answers for me. "He isn't a pie fan, but it's a kind gesture." He's right, and the sincerity in his tone for her even offering tells me whatever happened in the past will be left there from here on out.

My mind wraps around one thing, nestling it in its hold like a kitten cuddling its new owner. She said *next time*, and my need for there to be one, to have many next times, is strong. I want to implant myself in Reece's life for good, to make sure he never shares these moments with anybody else. Because the thought of a family friend offering to bake a pie to anybody else he dates gives me a primal need to mark my territory, and I don't even fucking like pie to begin with.

When she says her goodbyes to us, I turn to him. "That went well," I note, looking over my shoulder where she disappeared.

He's quiet for a moment. "Better than I expected. I knew she didn't hate me, but..." His eyes meet mine, sadness creeping into his colors and dulling them. I hate it. I want to do anything to brighten them, to make him smile and laugh. "I think I expected her to be upset with me for moving on, even though Sophia did. Maybe I even *wanted* her to be."

His admission startles me. "Why would you want her to be upset?"

Reece looks down to our joined hands and keeps his gaze there. "It was easier not to move on when I believed there were people who didn't want me to."

"I thought you were done punishing yourself over what couldn't be stopped."

He nods once. "I am." When his head lifts, sincerity is in his eyes. "I *have*. Seeing Donna just made me realize why I refused to open up all these years. If Sophia can move on, why not me? I let myself believe a lot of bullshit over the years for no good reason."

I move closer, cradling his face in my hand, tipping his head back slightly so he keeps his eyes on me. “You’ve come so far, baby, and I am so damn proud of you. You are the strongest person I know, and I meant what I said. There is not one other person who deserves happiness more than you do. You sacrifice yourself for so many people, but it’s your turn now. You know how they tell people on airplanes to put their oxygen mask on first before the people they’re traveling with? That’s what you need to do.”

He blinks. “Uh, I’ve never flown before.”

I blanch, losing momentum on the spontaneous but bomb ass speech I’m trying to make. “Wait, what? Okay, that’s being remedied. Name a place, and we’ll fly there. Maybe a vacation in the summer.”

Reece’s eyes widen at me. “You’re crazy if you think I’m letting you take me on an expensive vacation somewhere.”

Now I’m rolling my eyes. “Babe, if you think the only gifts I get you are going to be cheap aprons from Amazon, you’re mistaken. If you’re in this for the long haul with me, then you’re going to have to get used to being spoiled. I spend money on people I love, and I happen to enjoy popping your cherry. Never flown? We’re doing it. Haven’t been to the Grand Canyon? We’ll go. I want to experience all your firsts with you, and I won’t let you take no for an answer.”

His cheek twitches as he fights a wavering smile. “I’m afraid of heights, that’s why I haven’t flown. It’s also a reason I’ll never choose a giant canyon as a travel destination.”

“Noted.” I grin. “Then we’ll choose somewhere else. You should know by now I’m persistent. But we’re getting off track. I’m trying to tell you to be selfish for once. Choose you.”

His arm goes around my waist, pulling me into him. “What if I want to choose *us*?”

Leaning in, I brush my lips across his tenderly, taking in his scent and smiling. “Then we’ll be selfish together. Sadly, I’m pretty great at it already.”

Hold tightening onto my waist, he expels a breath before pecking me on the lips and rests his cheek against mine. “You’re not as selfish as you make yourself out to be. You’re a good person, Lawrence. It’s why I love you.”

I’ll never get used to hearing those words come from his mouth, or the reaction my body has to them. Three little words. Three syllables. But the meaning sparks in the deepest, darkest part of me and ignites a fire. “Does

that mean you'll let me take you on vacation over the summer? We have plenty of time to plan."

"Like you said," he muses, looking at me with amusement dancing in his eyes. "I don't have much of a choice in the matter."

We share a brief kiss before I pull away abruptly like I'm getting caught by my father again the second his mother pops up in the kitchen. Except, instead of a strained neck and yelling, she's smiling so wide that I'm afraid her face will physically break in two. But that smile...that smile is all Reece.

"Elaine?" I say casually, still embracing her son and not breaking eye contact with him.

"Yes, dear."

"I'm in so much fucking love with your son. I just felt like you needed to know that."

The moment her eyes well with tears, I know I don't need to charm her at all. My love for Reece is all she ever needed to hear in order to accept me. "I can't tell you how happy that makes me, sweetie. Is it too early to welcome you to the family?"

I look back at Reece, who's blushing wildly. "I'd like to think not," I whisper, seeing my future with him in it. "But I'll leave that up to Reece."

His lips curl up as he releases a shaky breath. "You already know my answer, Junior."

I snort unattractively. "Okay, Scout."

His mom coos.

He rolls his eyes.

And then I give him the biggest, loudest kiss right as his father walks in. Unabashed. Unashamed. Everything is perfect until another set of footsteps walks in and there's a soft, "Oh," that has Reece stiffening in my hold, and not in a sexy way either.

His lips peel back, and we look at the dark-haired version of Reece at the same time where she stands between their parents like the pictures Reece has shown me.

Jamie.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

REECE

THE DAY IS tense after my sister walked in on Ren's very public display of affection. As always, Mom does what she can to try dispelling the awkwardness. Her and Dad banter, they ask Jamie how everything is at work, a law firm downstate, and they say how sad it is that Jake, her husband, couldn't make it.

Whenever Jamie's eyes wander in my direction, they skirt down to my hand in Ren's, placed on my lap where we occupy the love seat across from her. Cycle number I-don't-know-what of A Christmas Story plays, cookies have been eaten, presents have been opened, and the various smells of dinner permeate the air.

My text back to Jamie earlier was simple and to the point.

***Me:** I think that's a good idea*

She never responded on the day or time, but I assumed Mom told her I'd only be in town until tomorrow morning. Ren and I rented a hotel room even though my parents said we're welcome to stay here, but I didn't feel like occupying my childhood bedroom, which still has a measly twin mattress in it, with my boyfriend. Plus, with Jamie probably staying, I thought it'd be best if I distanced myself.

My sister and I have another stare off. We've been doing it since everyone else got quiet and there was nothing else to distract ourselves. Ren fidgets with a pair of knitted socks my mom made for him, Dad swirls

around his glass of milk, and Mom clears her throat every few minutes. None of us really watch the movie because the tension is too thick to focus on the ageless classic.

Mom scoots to the edge of the couch, tapping Dad's leg in the process. "I could use your help in kitchen, darling. We need to check the turkey and make sure the lasagna is almost done. You'll have to get it out for me."

I know my mother is perfectly capable of lifting the stoneware lasagna dish, though heavy, out of the oven herself to check it. I've seen her do it a hundred times before, even though someone always offers to help. So, it's not lost on me when she and Dad scurry away without so much as a look between their two children.

Ren catches on too. He clears his throat, squeezes my fingers, and announces, "I, uh, have to use the bathroom."

I want to roll my eyes at his poor excuse, but I play along. He wants me to talk to Jamie because he knows I want closure. "It's upstairs, first door —"

"On the left," he finishes for me. "Your mom already told me." He bends down and pecks my cheek, giving me a good luck wink before heading toward the stairs on the other side of the foyer.

Jamie and I remain.

More silence.

Then, I sigh. "You wanted to talk," I tell her, hands resting tightly on my lap. "Everyone just gave us the opportunity."

Her own hands are wringing together, her face darting around the room before she finally nods. I have no idea what to expect after the last time we talked face to face, so I have to prepare for the worst. With Jamie, I can never be—

"I'm sorry," she blurts, eyes wide and body tense as she finally meets my gaze.

"You're..." I blink. Then blink again. My older sister, after all this time, is sorry. Clearly, it's not what I was expecting.

"I'm sorry," she repeats, slowly inhaling, her throat bobbing as she tries forming more words than those. "God, I don't expect you to forgive me. If I were in your shoes, I wouldn't. What I said to you was so, so awful and there's nothing I can do to make it better."

My lips part, but only air passes through them as I stare at my sister. She looks...genuine, human emotion saturating her eyes which is more than

I've seen in I don't know how long. How sad is that? Whenever I saw my sister before the blowout, all I saw was a robot. Emotionless yet angry at the same time, like I've been the reason of her bitterness at the world.

I asked Mom why, but she'd never say.

I asked Dad, and he'd just sigh.

They hated that we stopped getting along. Holidays we both showed up to were awful. Birthdays were tense. We both stewed in our past for so long, I don't remember what it's like to be on civil ground with her.

"The real reason Jake isn't here is because we're separated at the moment. One too many fights." She blows out a breath, her eyes keeping a focal point on the ground in front of her socked feet. "It's been bad for a while, but I don't think we'll make it past this bump in the road. Not like... not like Mom and Dad have done when they've argued. Jake and I don't have that kind of love."

"Jamie, why are you telling me this?" I highly doubt she wants to discuss her marriage issues with me.

She waves a flustered hand, raking it through her otherwise pristine hair. She's always kept up with appearances, I remember that much. Perfect hair, neat presentation, groomed. Jamie makes good money doing what she does and spends it on herself. Good for her. "You're right, sorry. The point is, Jake and I have tried for years to have kids. Even before we got engaged. We just knew it was what we wanted." Her tongue darts out and wets her lips, her hand tapping against her leg, something Ren always points out when I do it. "I was so...*angry* with you when you told me that Sophia was pregnant."

My eyes widen at that. What?

"I know it's wrong," she continues quickly, looking as ashamed as she sounds. "My little brother was going to be a dad, so I should have been happy. But I knew you didn't want that. I knew...you weren't into her. I've always known. All I could think is 'why him?' It didn't make any sense why you got something so easily when I couldn't. What I told you after Brea..." Her words are cut off by a choked nose, a hand fisting at her chest. "I've hated myself for so long when I realized what I'd done. I let my anger get the better of me. I was jealous of you, and it was so screwed up because you lost your daughter. I know that, Reece. I've talked to people about it. Had a lot of arguments with Jake about it too."

Dark pieces of her hair tumble over her face when she drops her head down, shaking it. “If I could go back, and take back what I said, I would in a heartbeat. I would pray harder for Brea to get better, and for me to get answers sooner. I thought, for a long time, that if I went to church, if I prayed, if I worshipped, maybe God would answer my prayers. All I’ve wanted to be is a mother, Reece. Knowing I couldn’t be?” A defeated shrug lifts her shoulders. “It was a kick to the gut, but not like what happened to you. We may not have ever been best friends, but I should have never, ever talked to you the way I did. What I learned in church, in the groups I went to, should have taught me to comfort you and be there for you. Instead, I pushed you away because of my own selfishness. That was wrong.”

I’d always wondered why Jamie devoted herself so suddenly to church. I questioned why she used God as a punishment against me. I told myself it made sense. The reason my daughter left me, why she was punished in my place. I let myself believe the worst in a God so many people worship because it gave me a reason to hate myself, even though I don’t share that same faith.

Like Ren did with his arm, I continued to hurt myself with other people’s criticism until I couldn’t take it anymore.

Jamie’s voice is no more than a broken whisper when she speaks again. “I’m so sorry. So, so sorry. I wanted to say something sooner, but I didn’t know if you’d even respond to my calls if I tried. Jake told me to try anyway, but...”

But she didn’t. I don’t know if I want to know the reason or not. “Do you believe it?”

She blinks up at me, tears in the eyes that look just like mine.

“Do you believe what you said?”

“No,” she rasps.

“You don’t believe God is punishing me for being gay?” I clarify because I need to hear her say it. I need the last demon on my shoulder to finally leave me alone. I know that her beliefs aren’t my own. I know that nobody can actually force their beliefs on me. But she’s my sister, the woman I looked up to, the sibling I wanted to be like from ages five to thirteen.

I don’t fault those who believe that love should be shared between a man and a woman only, because I know—at least to me—that isn’t true. I’ve always thought that one’s beliefs either pave a way to success or

obstruction with little in between, and the ability to change your beliefs is the path to personal breakthroughs, like the one I've had this year.

Ren said it best once during a heart to heart in bed a while ago. Love has no gender. It has no ethnicity. It has no *restrictions*. If people want to think otherwise, then so be it. As long as I don't have to be the ridicule of the joke, the person they point at and shun. And if they do, part of me still wouldn't care, because strangers don't know me. They don't know my past, my struggles, the things I've had to say goodbye to. They don't know the strength of my love for Ren or my family.

They don't know me and never will.

But my sister? She's another story.

She's the family I love.

The one I *want* to have faith in.

So when she says, "I don't believe that God is punishing you. I think...I believe that, as humans, we punish each other for Him. We punish ourselves. We do the wrong things and face the consequences all on our own. Do I believe that there's a reason for everything? Yes. But I never, and will never, believe that Brea was taken from you for being who you are. It was a cheap shot, and I know it hurt you."

Hurt me. It did more than that. I want to list the ways I let it boil under my skin, simmering a little more every day and reminding me what I *should* be like. And as much as I want to believe what she's saying—because part of me does, giving her the benefit of the doubt that pushes me toward forgiveness—I think of a Ren's favorite Gandhi quote that's displayed on a poster in his classroom.

Your beliefs become your thoughts, your thoughts become your words, your words become your actions, your actions become your habits, your habits become your values, and your values become your destiny.

Maybe Jamie doesn't believe what she told me now, but at one point she did. She latched onto hatred, judgement, and jealousy until they took her over. She lashed out and broke a part of me that didn't need any more damage.

I changed.

I loathed.

I sulked.

One day, I'll forgive her.

Because she's family.

Because I love her.

But today... “I’ll need time.” My voice is quiet, not soft but not hard. It’s as much as I can offer considering how many years I’ve spent waiting for this moment, thinking I’d never get it. When she nods, I find relief in it, her acceptance. It’s the least she can offer me. Time. Space. A chance to work toward forgiving her.

From the corner of my eye, I see our parents hovering at the corner of the room, Ren behind them with a small smile on his face that silently says, *I’m here and I love you.*

Later that night when Ren and I are back at our hotel, I think about the way Jamie hugged me. Tight like she expects it to be the last one, silent because nothing more can be said, and relieved knowing it’s out in the open.

I want her and Jake to work out their problems, to have a family, and be part of ours again. It’ll happen gradually, with time, when old wounds have healed over, and when I can trust her again.

Ren holds me in bed, his lips peppering kisses down my neck, holding my hand, and not expecting me to say a word after the trying day. In our silence, there’s so much said.

His warmth cocoons me.

His lips love me.

His touch grounds me.

I don’t know how long we lay like that, the early morning hours passing with nothing but our quiet breathing, but I eventually turn onto my side to face him, my hand going to his face in a gentle embrace. His eyes are already on me, smiling in their own way, subtle and beautiful, warm and caring, everything that encompasses the man spread out beside me.

“Is that offer for the dresser drawer still open?”

His chest rumbles with soft laughter, his lips pressing against my cheek. “Baby, you can have the whole damn thing if that’s your way of asking if you can move in.”

“And the closet?”

“Fifty percent.”

It’s more than I expect him to say. “And the spare room?”

There’s a pause. “I can rearrange the shelves so your book collection can fit there. Mom and I emptied all the boxes onto it already, but we’ll make do. Hell, I’ll buy you more bookcases.”

“Even though you say I own too many books when I force you to help me organize my shelves?”

His lopsided grin is back. “If they make you happy, I’m happy.” I blink, staring at him for a long time. “What?”

Shaking my head, I simply smile. “Can’t I admire my boyfriend-slash-future roommate?”

“Mmm.” He presses a kiss to the tip of my nose. “I like the sound of that. Although, roommate implies we’ll be in separate rooms. I prefer bed mate.”

“Semantics,” I muse.

“We can christen the house together.”

A brow quirks. “Isn’t that only for new houses? Plus, haven’t we practically done that already?” There’s no point in being anything but blunt with Ren. I’m learning.

He cuddles in closer, his lips skating across every inch of my face. “Are you saying you don’t want me to fuck your ass so hard you see stars on every surface of my house?”

Groaning, I tilt my head back while he bites my exposed neck. “You play dirty.”

“And love dirtier.”

Ain’t that the truth.

When I look at him again, his head is resting against his pillow, eyes locked on mine as they study my relaxed features. “You’re a good man. If I were you, I probably wouldn’t even consider forgiving Jamie.”

I could have told her I never would, but where would I be then? Resentment gets you nowhere, it only festers and turns to hate, and hatred is an emotion I refuse to have. I’ve never hated anybody in my life.

Not Sophia.

Not the doctor who couldn’t save Brea.

Not even my sister for making me think I had something to be ashamed of.

“No matter what, she’s my family,” I tell him, heaving a sigh. “The pain I’ve felt, the uncertainty, all of it feels so much lighter now that I know the truth. I’ll always be hurt by what she said, I’ll never forget it, but with time, I’ll forgive her.”

Leaning into me, he inhales slowly, smelling the generic hotel body wash and shampoo I used after my long shower once we locked ourselves

in for the night. Tomorrow, we see my parents one last time before taking the long drive home before the weather shifts.

“If I could,” he whispers, brushing his fingers through my hair, “I would take away that pain. But then you wouldn’t be the man I fell in love with.”

Something I learned a long time ago is that pain will show up one way or another in our lives. We can either run from it or grow from it.

I’m nervous when I find his hand and rest it in mine between our bodies. “I want you to meet my daughter before we leave. The graveyard... it’s outside of town. I always bring her something and leave it at the stone.”

“I’d love to meet her.” His sincerity melts any doubt I felt. And when he asks what he thinks we should bring that’ll survive the harsh winter conditions, I fall for him that much harder.

“And I want to build an island,” I blurt after a few minutes of silence.

He blinks. “Is this a Dolly Parton thing? You know I don’t do country.”

I manage to chuckle. “Dad built Mom an island. He knew nothing about carpentry, but he learned for her. I want that. I want to build a metaphorical island.”

“Okay...”

I kiss his jawline and murmur, “I want to sit in on your games this spring.” Another kiss to his chin. “And learn baseball so I don’t look like a total idiot when the kids are out on the field and I’m somehow accidentally cheering for the other team.”

He laughs. “You want to learn baseball?”

“And football. Whatever sport you’re into, I want to be into too. Baseball was a huge part of your life, and you’ve been excited to start coaching it. It means a lot to you, so I want to support you.”

There’s a pause. “You really mean that, don’t you? It’s not too hard to learn if you’re being taught by the best.”

“And I suppose that’s you?”

Our lips find each other. “I am the one you always make answer the Trivia Crack sports questions whenever your turn lands on that dial.”

I smile against his mouth. “True.”

“And I always get them right.”

“Also true.”

“I love you, Scout.”

“Not as much as I love you, Junior.”

I claim his mouth with a kiss before he can argue, the noise he makes encouraging me to roll him over until I'm on top, straddling his waist, our lips never breaking as I taste him, absorb his hands roaming over my body, and let go of all the thoughts from today.

After our bodies are sweaty and spent in the rumpled sheets, the air smelling like sex, we lay side by side with our fingers threaded between us, completely sated.

When he starts chuckling, I peel my face off where it rests on his shoulder. "What's so funny?"

His eyes are closed and his lips curl upward into a sated but amused smile. "I was thinking about our conversation at Sunday dinner last week."

I can't help but bury my face into his neck and laugh along with him. Iverson and Claire, who practically adopted Ren as their other Exeter child, looked between us when we arrived holding hands and shared a look. All Iverson told his wife was, "Well, I guess you can't ask Melanie about setting up her daughter with Reece," before looking between us again where we stood at his door and added, "The girl is a bit of a dog anyway. You're better off with this one."

Claire smacked him.

I laughed.

Ren grinned.

Now, laying together in bed, he wraps me in his arms and presses a kiss to my cheek. "I've been called many things but saying you're better off with 'that one' is new to me."

"It was a compliment."

"Is it wrong that I want to see what Melanie's daughter looks like so I can figure out what the hell Iverson constitutes as a dog?"

We start laughing lightly again.

His fingers trace up and down my back after a long stretch of silence, the featherlight touch making me shiver.

"If I could, I wouldn't change a thing," I tell him in mumbled exhaustion, eyelids drooping in a losing battle against the night. "Because then we wouldn't have met, and I have no clue who I'd be, or where I'd wind up."

For a moment, I think he's fallen asleep. His even breathing telling me as much. But then his voice fills the room, coaxing me into a blissful state of exhaustion that I give into once his words fill the holes my pain has

ripped open. “We would have met eventually, and I would have fallen in love with you all the same.”

I don’t know where we’ll be five years from now, but I’d like to think Lawrence will be right by my side wherever it is.

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EPILOGUE

The following year

REN

“WHERE’S GOOD OLD PETEY BOY?” I ask, slapping Sully on the shoulder as I drop down onto one of the few seats left beside him as I look around the conference room we’re having our staff meeting in. With Reece being out sick thanks to the stomach bug going around, and Jim out on vacation, Sully’s all on his lonesome since he doesn’t talk with many other staffers.

His arms are crossed over his stomach covered in a blue striped button-down. “You didn’t hear?”

Considering my main source of gossip has been best buddies with our toilet for the past two days, I’m going with no.

It’s Michelle who leans forward and whispers, “He got caught doing it with a student in his classroom. Seriously, how did you not hear about this? It was all over school yesterday.”

Sully nods. “They escorted him out.”

My eyes widen. “The police?”

Michelle giggles. “No, but that would have been awesome, wouldn’t it? Pete deserved it after everything he got away with here.”

True. “It’d only be awesome if I got to see it,” I decide on, causing her to laugh.

The man sitting between her and I rolls his eyes at us. “The reason he didn’t know about it because he was busy hightailing it to play house with his hubby.”

Well, not hubby yet. “You jealous, Sully? I still have a lot of love left to give you too.” Making kissing noises at him, he shoves my shoulder with a low chuckle.

Michelle lets out a soft sigh. “I can’t believe you’re going to propose,” she tells me dreamily, hand resting on her chin. “He’s totally going to say yes.”

I showed them the ring yesterday, having every intention of making a spectacle at the Homecoming game this Friday. But with Reece sick, I doubt he’ll be up to attending. I’d rather he be conscious and not at risk for blowing chunks on the home turf after I ask him to be mine forever.

His mother helped me pick out the ring after I asked both her and her husband for their permission to marry their son. It’s been on my mind for a long time, and Reece and I have only gotten stronger after he moved into my house. Both they, and Jamie because I know she means a lot to Reece, all gave me their blessing. Good thing too, because I planned on marrying him without it and then I’d be in an awkward place during the holidays.

“I sure hope so,” I sigh, feeling the pressure building every second the ring sits in my pocket. I’ve been terrified of leaving it home, even though he’s not the one who snoops. I’m still that person, curiosity my biggest flaw. Sue me.

Michelle’s lips stretch upward. “Trust me, Ren, he’s going to say yes.” Considering she’s his only other friend here, someone he trusts, I take her word for it.

So why do I feel so nervous about asking?

When Richman finally walks into the room, he’s grouchy within seconds, barking at someone to close the door. My eyebrows go up when he snaps at a newer employee, who replaced Harper when she left, for having their feet perched on a chair.

“What crawled up his ass?” I murmur to Sully, who snickers.

“It was his niece Pete was sleeping with.”

I have to bite my knuckle not to let the laugh out that so desperately wants to escape. He just nods, Michelle’s eyes shimmer with amusement, and we all collect ourselves as the meeting starts.

What a dumbass.

MY EYES DART to the scoreboard. We're ahead by three points, but Freemont has strong players this year. Their linebacker is twice the size of ours and looks like he could break a body if it gets in his way. I'm not nervous though. Red has been stronger and faster than ever, even bulked up by fifteen pounds of solid muscle over the summer, shot up well past my height, and currently has three different college scouts watching him like hawks. He's bringing us to a win tonight.

My eyes dart to the man standing next to me, watching my boys out on the field kick ass. When he sees me staring, he smiles. "What?"

"Are you sure you're okay?" He still looks somewhat ashen, but his eyes aren't as glazed as they have been, and he's managed to keep everything he's eaten down since last night.

He laughs. "I feel like I should be asking you that. You keep looking at the board like you're about to pass out, but the boys are killing it. Did you see Bowen take out 63?" The way his eyes light up when he says that makes me want to lay one on him right here and now. He's as proud of the Wildcats as I am, especially Red.

"Tony's doing great," I agree, getting him to narrow his eyes at me. I roll mine. "Red hates his first name because it's his father's. And, to answer your question, I'm fine. Better than."

"You look like you want to get sick."

When the buzzer goes off, my palms are slick with sweat as the team runs in. I pat each one on the back, stopping Tony-slash-Red and squeezing his shoulder. "Good play. 24 is out to get you tonight. He's been keeping tabs on every move you make. Expect the next quarter to be worse. They'll try taking you out because you're the strongest."

His head tips, eyes going to Reece for a moment, then back at me. "Is that it, Coach?"

"I heard the scout from Notre Dame is going to fight for you after seeing your footwork tonight. Your passes could use a little work, though."

His face twists into a scowl. "Walker wasn't paying attention when I made the throw. He was too focused on—"

"The opposing players, I know," I finish for him with a head nod. "We'll work on it during practice. Keep doing what you're doing, kid. I

wouldn't be surprised if you get three different offers by the end of the night."

His eyes go to the seats reserved for the scouts, all who are looking our way. When he turns back to me, he grumbles, "I don't want to go to Notre Dame."

I shrug. "So, don't. Show 'em what they'll be missing out on anyway."

The grin in response is wide. "You got it, Coach." I pat his shoulder pads again before he runs past us, the cheerleaders taking the center of the field for their routine.

Reece clears his throat. "Are you sure you're all right? I've never seen you this nervous over a game before."

When the head cheerleader, Brittney something or other, takes the microphone and faces the crowd, I blow out a breath. "I'm great."

The young brunette smiles at the crowd, a hand on her hip with the others in formation behind her. "Our very own Coach McKinley would like to use this time to ask a very important question to somebody."

From beside me, Reece's sharp inhale sounds. When I look at him, his eyes are wide on me as the crowd gets loud. I offer him a nervous smile before I walk over to the cheerleader and accept the microphone, tugging him along and positioning him in front of me. Clearing my throat, I stare at the only person who matters in this moment despite the hundreds watching. His face is stricken with shock, eyes wide, lips parted, and I hope to God it's in a good way or this is about to get really embarrassing.

"When I first started dating the wonderful man standing in front of me, I knew nothing was ever going to be the same. I knew, without a doubt, that he'd be the one I spent the rest of my life with."

The crowd coos, my eyes locking on the watery gaze of his. "I told you a long time ago that I couldn't wait to tell the world that you're mine, and I thought, what better way to do that than to ask you to marry me at the Homecoming game?"

The stadium gets *louder*, feeding my courage to drop to a knee while he stares down at me, a hand instantly finding mine and squeezing while I reach into my pocket and pull out the box that's felt like lead in my pocket all day.

"Reece Michael Nichols," I begin, opening the box and showing him the plain gold band in the velvet carrier. "Would you make me the happiest guy in the world and be my husband?"

It gets so quiet as Reece stares at me, then the ring, then back at me. My heart races wildly in my chest, aching over his hesitation. He reaches into his pocket and produces...a box. Instead of saying yes, he opens it with a choked laugh, and I'm struck stupid when I stare at the gold band that's almost identical to the one I'm offering him. "*I was going to ask you to marry me tonight,*" he tells me, watery smile barely able to stay on his face as he laughs.

I blink at the ring. "You're asking me to marry you?"

"*You're asking me to marry you.*"

More blinking, then I grin at him once the awe wears off. "Did we invite each other's families to come here so we can propose to each other without knowing it?"

He nods. "I think we did." His eyes go to the section where, sure enough, our families are eagerly waiting the response. Even Jamie is there, her husband Jake beside her along with his parents and mine. Della, Theo, and their son Sebastian, or Seb as I like to call him, are all standing watch as well with huge smiles on their faces. "While we're confessing things, I didn't really have a stomach bug. I was so nervous about asking you to marry me that I couldn't stop puking."

I snort. "Your love for me makes you sick, huh?"

Before either of us can say a thing, I hear Red yell from the sidelines, "You going to put the ring on his finger or what, Coach? We got a fucking game to win!"

The crowd laughs as Reece and I roll our eyes. I'll have to talk to him about his language, but at the moment, I don't care.

"The answer is yes," Reece whispers, cupping my cheek with his freehand.

I stand quickly, almost knocking him off balance before grabbing the ring and sliding it onto his finger. My voice is raspy, throat thick when I stare at the gold against his light skin tone. "We're getting married, baby."

A tear slides down his cheek. "So, that's a yes, too?"

Is he fucking kidding me? "Put a ring on it, babe. I'm all yours."

He does, and closes the gap between us for a kiss, and even though the crowd roars from the obvious answer we gave each other, I drown them out.

On this field, in this moment, it's just us.

Not the Wildcats.

Not the Freemont Patriots.

Not the fans in the audience.

“I love you so much,” I say against his lips, emotion taking over. I swipe at his wet cheeks as I pull back, laughing at what a mess we probably look like. “I can’t believe you were going to propose.”

He shrugs. “I wanted you to be sure that I’m in this for the long haul. Because I am. All day, every day.”

I definitely like the sound of that.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Let's keep this short and sweet. This is a shoutout to every single person who reads my books. Without you, I'd just be a crazy lady who basically talks to herself in thousands of different voices. Awkward.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B. Celeste's obsession with all things forbidden and taboo enabled her to pave a path into a new world of raw, real, emotional romance.

Her debut novel is *The Truth about Heartbreak*.

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