

Anywhere FOR You



ALEXIS NOEL

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Birch Creek University

Alexis Noel


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*To Maci and James,
who first came to life in a place far more magical than Birch
Creek.*

*They were the first love story I ever told.
What a privilege it's been to come back to them after all these
years.*

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Chapter 1

Maci

“DAPHNE!” I scream my roommate’s name over the sound of the running shower, cursing myself for leaving my phone on my bed. When she doesn’t respond, I try again. Louder this time. “DAPHNE LANGLEY!”

A couple seconds later, the blurry outline of my roommate appears through the semi-translucent shower curtain. She props her hands on her hips, and I’m pretty sure if I could see her face, it would be pinched with annoyance.

“You know, it takes more than two seconds for me to walk from my room to your bathroom,” Daphne tells me. Yep, definitely a little annoyed.

“Sorry,” I wince.

Her outline waves her hand in dismissal. “It’s fine. What do you need?”

“Did you borrow my shampoo and conditioner?” I ask, glancing at the space where the two bottles should be. It’s not unusual for Daph and me to borrow each other’s things, but after the lipstick-geddon of 2019, we’re both good at asking first and putting whatever it is back when we’re done.

“Nope,” she says, shaking her head.

I pop my head out from around the shower curtain to peek out at her. “Where did they go then?” It’s not like the bottles grew legs and wandered off on their own accord.

As she thinks, Daphne twirls a piece of her long blonde hair around a finger. She has it when her pink lips form an “O.”

“What?” I ask impatiently. The hot water in our apartment isn’t what you’d call reliable, and the shower’s already been running for five minutes.

“A particular cousin of mine was over this morning when you were at the grocery store. I’m pretty sure he used your bathroom.”

“James!” I curse, reaching for the towel hanging on the wall.

James Langley and his roommate Chase have lived parallel to Daph and me since our first year at Birch Creek University. First in the room across the hall in our on-campus dorm and then in the apartment across from ours for the last two years. And, while they’re two of my closest friends, clearly, the concept of boundaries has completely eroded.

“Why didn’t you stop him?” I shut off the shower and wrap the towel firmly around myself.

“I was in my room when he left!” Daph steps out of my way as I climb out of the shower. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to go get my shampoo and conditioner from your cousin so I can wash my hair,” I say through gritted teeth, heading past her and straight out of our apartment without a second’s hesitation.

“Maci, I can go—” she starts, but the door slamming behind me cuts off the rest of her words.

A small, rational voice in the back of my mind tells me there’s the slightest chance I might be overreacting with some misplaced anger. But listening to that voice would mean addressing the bigger stressor of the day, which I’m not particularly eager to do. The much louder, irrational voice telling me to strangle James is easier to listen to.

Our apartment hallway only has three units, and I say a silent prayer that our other neighbor doesn’t come up the stairs and see me dripping all over the carpet. Thank God the boys never lock up when they’re home because knocking would completely ruin my dramatic entrance. I fling open the door

and storm into the main room, a mirror image of Daphne's and mine.

Chase's head whips up from where he's lounging on the couch, scrolling through his phone. His eyes widen as he takes in my appearance and the irritation burning in my eyes. I probably look like something out of one of the horror movies he's always trying to force us to watch. It's either a testament to our years of friendship or Chase's stupidity that he doesn't run for cover.

"Nice outfit, Mace," he teases, full lips twitching in a poorly disguised snicker. "You planning on wearing that to the bonfire tonight? It's a bold choice, but don't let that stop you."

I stalk towards him, clutching my towel for extra security. "Where is he?" I snap, brushing past his snark.

Chase's russet brown brow furrows in mock confusion. "Where is who?"

"I don't have time—" But I'm interrupted by the sound of running water from down the hallway. Turning my back on Chase, I take off towards James's bathroom.

"Don't kill him," he calls after me, full-on laughing. "I can't afford rent on my own."

James has left the door slightly ajar, which makes it much easier to throw it open without letting go of my towel.

"James Silas Langley!" I shout at the same time the door crashes against the wall. A muffled yelp sounds from behind the dinosaur print shower curtain. A gag gift from Daph and me when he first moved in.

There's a pause where the only sound is James's quick breaths and the water running. I contemplate wrenching back the shower curtain and taking back what's mine but decide that might be taking it a little far. Looking down at myself, still soaking wet and leaving watery footprints wherever I go, I realize I may have already done that. What the heck? My hand is inches from grabbing the closest embroidered T-Rex when James pokes his head out.

“Hey, Maci,” he says, trying to sound casual and failing miserably. “Is your hot water out again? You’re more than welcome to climb in with me. It’ll be a tight squeeze, but we can make it work.”

I purse my lips, wondering if the steam I feel coming out of my ears is visible to the naked eye. Never once in our three years of friendship have I considered climbing into the shower with James Langley, and today is certainly not the day I’ll start.

“You’re doing that thing again where you have a conversation with yourself in your head. It’s kind of endearing,” James says lightly, smiling broadly at me.

“Give me back my shampoo and conditioner.” I hold my towel with one hand and extend the other to him.

“I don’t—” The lie doesn’t leave his lips before I reach forward and tap him directly on the forehead. Not hard enough to hurt, but hard enough to get his attention. He narrows his eyes at me. “Did Chase rat me out?”

I sigh in exasperation. “It doesn’t matter. Didn’t your mother teach you it’s wrong to steal?”

“It isn’t stealing!” he protests. “I always put them back!”

“Always?” What the hell does he mean always?

James frowns, upset with himself for letting the word slip.

“Maci, while I love talking to you. I was kind of in the middle of something.” He tries to return behind the shower curtain, but I grab his hand before he can pull it back into place. He freezes, eyes flicking to my hand on his and then back to my towel-clad body. I flush, staring down at the “Get Naked” bathmat (also a gift from Daphne and me). While I may never have considered climbing into the shower with James before, I’m suddenly uncomfortably aware that we are both essentially naked. Why didn’t I just let Daphne do this?

“Here.” He disappears before coming back with two blue bottles in his hands. “I was done with them anyway,” he adds with a wink.

“On the way to the bonfire tonight, we’ll discuss the importance of boundaries.” I snatch the bottles away from him and cradle them against my chest. Out of spite, I leave the bathroom door open as I step into the hallway.

“In my defense,” he calls after me. “Your hair wash day was supposed to be tomorrow!”

When I emerge from the bathroom ten minutes later, I see James sitting in my desk chair through the open door of my room. The words’ this is why we need to talk about boundaries are on the tip of my tongue, but at the last minute, I hold them back. Tightly securing my robe, I make my way down the hallway, already dreading the apology I probably owe him. Stealing my things? Wrong. Barging in on him in the shower? Maybe, a little bit, also wrong. I pride myself on being well-tempered or—at least—keeping my temper in check. It’s not James’s fault he caught me on the wrong day.

“Hey,” he says, sitting up straighter as I enter the room.

“Here to steal something else of mine?” I tease, flashing him a smile to know I’m joking.

James chuckles and shakes his head sufficiently chastened. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry. You seemed pissed, and you know I hate it when you’re mad at me.”

“You’ve spent the last three years trying to antagonize me,” I point out.

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t be so easily baited.” He relaxes back into the chair and laces his fingers behind his head.

“Sure, blame the victim,” I grumble, puffing out my lips in a fake pout. “I’m also sorry for—” The right words for what exactly I did allude me.

“Storming into my apartment, leaving water everywhere, practically accosting me while I was in the shower, causing me bodily harm.” James ticks each thing off on his fingers, and my cheeks heat as he lays it out. It was one of those rare moments where I didn’t know I was overreacting till it was too

late. Okay, well, maybe I had a sneaking suspicion, but obviously, I didn't let that stop me.

"Bodily harm is a bit of an extreme." I tapped him on the forehead. He'll survive.

"Oh, sorry, was I overreacting?" He smirks at me, clearly pleased to have made his point.

I stick my tongue out at him, turning my back to him to pick out my outfit for the annual Langley Back to School Bonfire. Every year, James's paternal grandparents kick off the start of school with hot dogs, hamburgers, smores, and a roaring fire in their backyard. From the stories I've been told, it started when the first Langley cousin was about to start Kindergarten. It was a smaller, family-only affair back then, but as all the kids got older, it grew along with them. The cousins began inviting their friends, and when the adults realized they were becoming vastly outnumbered, they took to the same tactic. The bonfire hasn't been a constant in my life the way it has for James and Daphne—and even Chase, who has been going since middle school—but now it's hard to remember a time when the start of a new semester wasn't synonymous with Grandma Langley's blackberry cobbler. Even harder is trying to picture next year when we all have "real" jobs to go back to Monday morning rather than 8 a.m. lectures. We'll still go, but it won't be the same.

"What do you think of this?" I ask, turning back to James, holding up a worn Chris Stapelton shirt (that I'm pretty sure might be one I "borrowed from him") and a pair of denim cut-offs. I pause when I see him staring at me with a funny look.

"Look, I know I just got on you about stealing my stuff, but I've had this since sophomore year, so you can't be mad." Everyone knows if you lend someone a piece of clothing and don't ask for it back within six months, it automatically belongs to the borrower.

"Maci, I—" he begins, but before he can finish his sentence, Daphne barges into my room, blonde braids flying behind her.

“Mace, you’re not even dressed!” She says, drawing up short when she sees me still in my robe. “We’re going to be late for the second year in a row, and you know how my mother feels about being late.”

“Are you sure it’s how your mom feels about lateness or how *you* feel?” I ask, sharing a skeptical look with James, who knows well how anal Daphne is about punctuality.

She points to James and then the door. “Out so she can get dressed! Get Chase and be ready to go in fifteen.”

Chapter 2

James

WHEN WE PULL up to my grandparents' house, cars fill the driveway, spilling over the gravel and onto the front lawn. People in town have always made light-hearted jokes about my family...

Those Langleys breed like rabbits.

You can't throw a stone in this town without hitting a Langley.

The Langleys are the Weasleys of Birch Creek...

It wasn't until I hit high school that I understood why. While some of my classmates had extended family in town, there weren't any with cousins in almost every grade the Birch Creek education system had to offer.

"I always forget how many of you there are," Chase says, climbing out of the back seat and surveying the sea of vehicles.

"You've been hanging around since middle school. How can you possibly be surprised anymore?" Daph asks, taking the lead as we head up the driveway to the sprawling ranch house.

"Well, it doesn't help that y'all keep making more." He snickers at his joke, which earns him an exasperated look from Daphne.

Their bickering fades into the evening air as I fall into step beside Maci. The summer light casts a golden glow over her auburn hair, and I have to fight back the urge to brush my fingers against it. She was unusually quiet on the drive over.

Anytime she and Daph are in the car together, it's basically a concert as they sing their hearts out to whatever artist they're hyper-fixating on. Not today. Something must be bothering her between the silence and the absolute gasket she blew over the shampoo and conditioner incident. Chase and I have pilfered household necessities from her and Daph since freshman year. Sure, they still get annoyed by it, but never "run over to our apartment still dripping wet from the shower" angry.

That was a new one. Not that I particularly minded seeing Maci in a towel, but still...

"You still mad at me for stealing your hair stuff?" I ask, trying to break through whatever tension has her delicate shoulders hunched forward. She seemed to be over it when we were in her room, but maybe not.

She puffs out a breath and shakes her head. "No, it's just senior year stress, you know? All the pressure."

That makes more sense, but it's still not quite right. School's always been Maci's thing. She's at BCU because they offered her something pretty damn close to a full-ride specifically for her fancy-schmancy engineering program. She constantly tells me she's not, but she might be a certified genius. The titles of the textbooks she studies alone are enough to give me a migraine. I can't imagine having to comprehend what's inside of them. No, thank you. I'll stick to elementary education: colors, shapes, and complex child psychology.

"You're going to crush it," I reassure her, resting a hand on her shoulder. "You're the smartest girl I know."

"You think?" My heart melts when she looks up at me with that small wrinkle between her brow and fear in her bright green eyes. I don't know exactly when she started having that effect on me, but it makes direct eye contact with her increasingly difficult. Scared that if she looks for too long, she'll see everything I haven't been able to bring myself to say.

"Mhm," I say, lifting my hand to tap her square on the forehead. "It's why God made your forehead so big."

And there I go again, ruining a perfectly good moment by being a moron. Maci swats my hand away, but the wrinkle is gone, and she's smiling. At least that's a win.

"I think you're projecting." She pushes my hair back from my forehead. To reach, she has to go all the way up on her toes, and I stop breathing when her body brushes against mine. "You can hide that receding hairline under those curls, but we all know the truth."

A shout of delight from my mom saves me from thinking of a witty response. Probably for the best because it's a little hard to speak with my heart lodged so firmly in my throat. Maci steps away and races to catch up with Daph and Chase.

"You guys are late!" Mom scolds with no trace of irritation in her voice. She pulls each of us in for a hug as if she didn't see us a week ago at Sunday night dinner. When she gets to me, she holds on a little longer than the rest. Her hugs have been getting longer and longer now that my senior year is here. It's like she's trying to fit them all in before I graduate.

"Everyone is around back." She releases me, and I take the opportunity to hand her the flowers I picked up for her this morning. They're a little crumpled from the hug, but still strikingly beautiful—like all the bouquets made at her favorite flower shop, Delilha's.

Ever since I moved out, I try to bring her flowers whenever I go to any family function. She keeps dozens of vases filled with whatever blooms are in season year-round. They're her love language, I think. If flowers can be a love language. Whatever they are, even after all these years Mom lights up when she sees the delicately wrapped bundle.

"AWW, SWEETIE, THANK YOU!" Mom takes the bouquet from me, inhaling the sweet scent. "I've gotta get these in water. Boys? Can you guys grab more ice from the garage for the coolers?"

I frown, my eyes following Maci as she approaches the back gate with Daphne, their heads bent together in quiet

conversation. My chance to figure out what about senior year has her so stressed already gone.

I lean down kiss my mom's cheek. "Of course."

* * *

"IF YOU HOLD onto that cup any tighter, you're going to waste all that Bud Light on those shorts," Chase says, sidling up to me and nudging me with his shoulder.

"Huh?" I grunt, only half hearing him, my eyes fixed on the scene playing out on the other side of the bonfire.

"You're going to crush the cup." He speaks slowly, overenunciating each word, but not even the condescension is enough to make me look away. "Dude, what's going on with you?"

The question dies on his lips as he follows my gaze to where Maci laughs at whatever exceptionally douche-y thing my cousin Logan said to her. Not her fake laugh either; the one she gives her tables when she's waitressing and can't actively speak her mind. No, it's a whole body, head tilted back, laugh.

"What do you think he said?" The cup in my hand makes a crunching sound, and I quickly unclench my fingers before I end up covered in beer, as Chase warned.

"Am I answering this like Logan is one of your favorite cousins we go fishing with or like he's some rando flirting with the girl you're obsessed with?" Chase asks seriously, joining me in peering through the smoke at Logan and Maci.

"The second one."

He nods, taking a long sip from his cup. "Then I'd say he probably told her how good her legs look in those cutoffs."

His words are enough to break through the haze of jealousy, and I wheel on him. "What the hell, man!"

"You asked." He shrugs, totally unfazed. "You know, some would say this crush is starting to border on unhealthy. Some might say you should buck up and do something about it." I

glare at him. “I said some. Not me. I think it’s totally healthy for you to send your cousin murderous looks for talking to a girl he has no idea you’re into.”

“That’s not the point,” I say, even though it is precisely the point.

Logan’s known Maci as long as I have. We all started at BCU during his senior year. He was too cool to hang out with us all the time, but occasionally, he’d invite us to one of the football team’s house parties. After he left for law school, he still came home for summers. Since Maci’s family lives on the West Coast, she’s spent many of those summers at his and Daphne’s house. She and Logan have probably had plenty of head-tilting, whole-body laugh bonding moments I’ve never heard about. The thought is enough to make my blood boil, and jealousy fans a fire in my chest.

Across the fire, Maci lifts the empty bottle in her hand and leans in to say something to Logan before walking toward the coolers on the back porch. Maybe Chase has a point.

“You know what? You’re right.” In one swallow, I finish what’s left of my beer and stride toward Logan.

Chase hurries behind me, catching my arm. “Whoa, James. What are you doing?”

“Following your advice,” I say, shaking him off.

“I feel like maybe there was a miscommunication,” he mumbles but follows behind me anyway.

“James! Chase!” Logan crows when we reach him, pulling each of us in for a hug and thumping us on the back. “I haven’t seen you guys all night! You doing alright?”

My first instinct is to jump down his throat about what he and Maci were talking about, but I remind myself Logan is, in fact, one of my favorite cousins. Which is saying something because I have an army of them to choose from.

“Yeah, it’s been good. Last day of summer before school starts and all that.” I say, proud that there’s no residual anger in my tone. “Your mom told me you passed the bar? Congrats.”

Aunt Fiona called every single family member to brag about how her baby boy was going to be a full-blown lawyer. I was lucky to only lose five minutes to the conversation. My younger brother, Asher, made the mistake of asking her a question and barely managed to get away after an hour.

Logan smiles modestly, his hair—the same golden shade as Daphne’s—falling into his eyes. The whole effect is stupidly charming. No wonder Maci giggled and bit her lip for the last twenty minutes. No receding hairline there. I subconsciously run a hand through my curls, smoothing them into place on my forehead. It isn’t receding anyway. I’ve always had a high hairline.

Chase nods along as Logan tells us about the corporate law job he landed. It’s out in D.C., so he’s only home for a few weeks before moving. Great, the perfect amount of time to take Maci on a date, sweep her off her feet, and...

“Right, James?” Logan asks, looking at me expectantly, and I realize I completely checked out of the conversation.

“Of course,” I agree, hoping it works with whatever he asked me. Logan looks confused, so I think that’s a no.

“You good?” he asks.

If that’s not the perfect in, I don’t know what is. Chase takes a step back, his best friend intuition telling him I’m about to make a fool of myself.

“What were you and Maci talking about?” I force myself to sound casual even though it’s the opposite of how I feel.

“Oh.” Logan blinks, surprised at the shift in conversation. “I was telling her about this new restaurant in D.C. I was at the other week. They pick a movie every month and base their entire menu around it. They were doing Top Gun when I was there. It was—”

“Did you ask her to go with you?” I blurt out.

Chase lets out a low whistle and mumbles something suspiciously like *‘subtle’* into his cup.

Logan's eyes widen, and he lets out a bark of surprised laughter. "Nah, man."

"Oh, okay." Excellent. I made an idiot out of myself for no reason. "So, they change the menu every month?" I ask, trying hopelessly to pull back together my tattered pride.

"Uhuh," Logan confirms, looking at me curiously. "But hold on, why do you care if I ask Maci out?"

"I—I," I stutter, trying to think of an excuse that doesn't play to the tune of 'because I've fallen head over heels for one of my best friends but haven't figured out how to tell her without ruining our friendship.' "I mean, she's one of my best friends." It sounds lame even to my ears.

"Okay, sure." Logan nods slowly, clearly not believing a word of it.

"We should go find the girls," Chase says. Watching me flounder must have lost its humor, or maybe he's remembered best friends are supposed to have each other's back.

"Good idea." I start to follow Chase to where Maci and Daph sit on the back porch talking to Grandma Langley.

"James," Logan calls before I can get too far, and I turn back around.

"What's up?"

He closes the space between us and nods toward Maci. "I wasn't asking her out, but the thought crossed my mind."

"Oh." The fire of jealousy that had sputtered out starts to rekindle itself. "I mean—"

Logan holds up a hand. "I won't now, obviously." He gives me a knowing look. "But if you want some cousinly advice..." He trails off, and I jerk my head for him to continue even though I doubt I'll like whatever he says next. "Whatever's holding you back from telling her, figure it out 'cause you're not going to be able to chase away every guy who talks to her."

With that, Logan pats me on the back and walks toward the beer pong table that Asher and our cousin, Frankie, just

finished setting up. I watch him go, wanting to be irritated with him but not finding it in me.

Because he's right, I've got to figure this out.

Chapter 3

Maci

WITH EACH WORD I READ, my heart sinks until it settles somewhere near the pit of my stomach.

Dear Ms. Morton,

We are pleased to offer you an internship program with Gallagher Engineering for the duration of your Spring semester.

Per your previous inquiry, unfortunately, we cannot offer this as a paid position. However, we will provide you with a travel stipend throughout your internship.

Yours Sincerely,

Tanya Baker

Head of Human Resources

Gallagher Engineering

Unable to accept the reality check the arrival of this news brings, I pull up my calendar. Color-coded commitments fill my screen, telling me what I already know: A premier engineering firm is offering me a place in their internship program...and I have to decline.

I carefully reexamine my schedule.

Rearrange. Add. Delete. Repeat.

Eventually, I accept defeat. There's no way I can make this internship work without the promise of a paycheck. A travel stipend won't pay for the tuition my scholarship doesn't cover

or keep a roof over my head. Clicking back to the email, I read it twice as if the words might magically rearrange themselves into better news.

They don't.

There's no one to blame but myself, which makes the situation sting all the more. When I applied with Gallagher Engineering, I knew they didn't pay their interns. They didn't try to hide it. It was in the description of their amazing, life-changing, career-starting program. I applied anyway because the opportunity was too good to pass up, and somehow, I convinced myself maybe they would make an exception.

Stupid. I was so stupid. And now I'm throwing myself a pity party for a situation I engineered. No pun intended.

Shoving my laptop away, I flop back onto my bed, pick up my thickest throw pillow, and scream into it. It takes two more attempts, but eventually, I exert enough energy to ease the frustration coursing through my veins.

"Oh no, not the screaming pillow."

Slowly, I sit up and lower the suede fabric enough that I'm able to look over the top. Daphne stands in the doorway, her perfectly manicured eyebrows lifted in a mixture of concern and amusement. It's a testament to the strength of our friendship that she no longer bats an eye when she walks in on me, attempting to suffocate myself with a throw pillow.

"Leave me alone to mope." I cover my face and fall back onto the bed again.

Muffled footsteps approach, and Daphne yanks the pillow from my grasp. She peers down at me, blonde hair falling in a curtain around her face.

"You know, I'm not sure this is the healthiest coping mechanism," she says, settling onto my pale blue comforter.

"Would you prefer I not muffle my screams?"

She contemplates this for a second before shaking her head. "You could take up running or something. It's good for you and an excellent outlet for frustration."

I glare at her. “What do I always say about running?”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. You don’t run unless someone’s chasing you.” She waves her hand dismissively, rolling her eyes.

“Or...” I prompt.

“There are free tacos.”

Daph and I have never agreed on the concept of exercise. She has some sadistic fascination with workouts that make her wince with every move the following day. Whereas, if I take the stairs instead of the elevator, it’s a good day.

“It’s too early in the semester for the screaming pillow.” Her reminder only earns her a humorless laugh from me. The screaming pillow is not bound by the schedule of the school year. “You want to tell me what happened?” I gesture for her to pick up my laptop, still open to the offending email. She scans the first line, her eyes lighting up with delight. “Oh my gosh! Mace! This is amazing!”

I shake my head. “Keep reading.”

The spark in her brown eyes fades as she reads the second line. “Oh.”

“Yep,” I say, taking the opportunity her distraction provides to snatch the pillow back and cover my face again. Sharing the news with Daphne brings back all the feelings of stupidity and frustration I was trying to dispel before she came into my room. I should have known better than to get excited about something unattainable, but I need an internship for my senior spring semester. It’s a graduation requirement for all students in the engineering program, no matter their specialty.

“Well, this sucks.” This time, Daphne doesn’t try to take away the pillow. She’s been subject to countless hours of my worries over this predicament. Between the credit hours I have left to finish, and the four nights a week I work to pay my bills, there’s only one real solution: a paid internship. Which is basically like asking for a pot of gold. Coincidentally, that would also fix this problem.

“It’s fine,” I mutter, tossing the pillow back into place with the rest.

For a fleeting moment, I consider calling my parents and asking for help. The thought goes as quickly as it came. Mom would answer the phone back home in California. She’d try and listen, but inevitably we’d be interrupted by whatever chaos the twins chose that moment to cause. By the time I finally finished what I was saying, a fifteen-minute call would have turned into forty-five. Mom would tell me she’d talk to Dad and let me know. A few days later, they’d deposit the money into my account. Then the crushing guilt would come because they would have spared what little extra cash they had, and it still wouldn’t be enough to fix my situation.

They’d be happy to do it, and it’s not like we’re poor exactly. Growing up, we were decidedly lower middle class. There was always enough money to keep food in the fridge but never enough to shop for clothes anywhere besides the local thrift stores. Things have gotten a little better since Dad got promoted to management at the shipping company he’s worked at since high school. Not cover their oldest daughter’s bills “better,” though.

“Hey.” Daphne grabs ahold of my hand, pulling me back from my thoughts. “It doesn’t have to be fine. It’s allowed to suck. This internship is a big freaking deal for you.”

Her words trigger the tears I’ve refused to let fall all morning. They well in my eyes, and I hastily swipe them away. While it may not be too early in the school year for the screaming pillow, it’s definitely too early for tears.

“I’m just so frustrated,” I say, my voice coming out thick and hoarse with the effort it takes to keep myself from crying.

“That makes complete sense, babes,” she soothes, squeezing my hand. “I get it.”

I look down at our interlocked fingers—her tan ones a contrast to my creamy, freckled skin—and I can’t help the resentment that rises, leaving an acrid taste in my throat. Daph means well, but she doesn’t *‘get it.’* She can’t. She’s never worried about scholarships or making sure she makes rent. Her

parents cover it because they can. Because they want her to have all the best advantages possible. Which is fantastic, and I would never want anything else for her. But she doesn't know what it's like to live with the threat of a grade-based scholarship hanging over her head or been unable to take an internship because she has to work. Sure, she bartends with me at The Rattle & Snake, but only to build her savings and cover half of our grocery bill. It's not the same level of need.

"Hey? What's going on up there?" she asks, and I realize I've been quiet too long.

"Nothing. Trying to figure out my next move." I disentangle my hand from hers and stand from the bed. My legs protest, aching after sitting crisscross for the last hour. "I have to head to campus, though."

Daphne pouts but stands as well. "Right. Remind me how we ended up with opposite schedules this year?"

"Because all the 400-level courses for our degrees have stupid time slots that don't overlap," I remind her, scooping up my backpack. "We still riding together to work tonight?"

While our classes might not overlap, our shifts at the bar are still almost identical. Back in freshman year, she was my ride to work, which pretty much forced our manager to schedule us at the same time. Once I got my car, it may have slipped our minds to update him on the new development. That's probably for the best because my 2005 Honda CRV is not what most would call reliable.

"About that," Daphne says, following me into the living room and dropping onto the sofa. "I think I'm gonna go to Jason's and study before our shift."

"Sure, study," I tease, wiggling my eyebrows at her suggestively. Jason is one of the few guys who cycles in and out of my best friend's orbit. Her blonde hair, long, tanned legs, and sparkling personality attract boys like a magnet, but she never lets them stick around for long. Honestly, I'm kind of surprised she's still seeing Jason. If I were a betting woman, I would have put money on it fizzling out over the summer.

She rolls her eyes, used to my antics. “Hush, you.”

“Have fun,” I sing song, leaving her to enjoy her afternoon on the sofa while I head to class.

When I step into the hallway, I catch James as he closes the door to his apartment. He must have been helping with classroom setup today because he wears an orange “Birch Creek Elementary” t-shirt. Technically, his internship doesn’t start till next week, when the kids come back, but he’s always been an overachiever and a people pleaser. I’m sure he jumped at the opportunity to help his new mentor teacher decorate bulletin boards and make copies.

“Hey, Mace,” he says, flashing me a smile. “Headed to campus?”

“Yep. You?” I fall into step beside him as we make our way down the stairs. As we go, his arm brushes against mine, and a tingle spreads to my shoulder. I push the feeling away, putting it down to the month it’s been since I’ve been on a date. James is a good-looking guy. It’s bound to happen.

“Mace?” he asks.

I must have missed whatever he said in response. Damn. I wrack my brain and come up with nothing.

“Sorry,” I apologize, giving him a sheepish smile. “What did you say?”

He shakes his head, used to me disappearing into my thoughts. People who don’t know me quickly get offended or think I’m uninterested in what they’re saying, but he knows better. My brain always runs seventy-five different tabs at the same time. Sometimes, I slip between them without realizing it.

“I’ve got a meeting with my advisor,” he repeats himself, waving my rudeness off with ease. “What’s on your mind.”

“Umm.” And just like that, all seventy-five tabs freeze. “Daphne told me she couldn’t carpool with me to work right before I left. I was debating if I wanted to drive or take the campus bus.”

James looks at me aghast. “The campus bus is disgusting this time of year!”

“My car doesn’t have air-conditioning either,” I remind him. It’s one of the hazards of your primary means of transportation being almost two decades old.

“We’re both headed to campus anyway. Why don’t I drive the both of us and then I can drop you off at work after class? You can catch a ride back with Daphne,” he offers, pushing open the door for me.

I’m about to tell him that’s not necessary. His schedule will be insane as soon as his teaching internship starts, and he should enjoy what little downtime he has left...but then I step outside. As soon as I’m not in the sanctuary of the AC, the sun’s full heat beats against my skin. I’m going to wind up getting burnt walking around campus never mind waiting at the bus stop—stupid fair skin.

“Sounds great,” I agree quickly.

Chapter 4

Maci

THE WELL-GROOMED grounds of BCU blur past me as I book it out of the science building and down the main pathway that winds through campus. Despite my earlier comment to Daphne, no one is chasing me, and there are no free tacos, but I'm running. Well, running might be generous, but at the very least, I'm speed walking. They're the same thing. My last class went long, giving me even less time than before to get to work. I glance at my watch and groan, picking up the pace.

My shoulder collides with a passing student, and I go sprawling. At the last second, I catch myself on a nearby tree trunk, but my backpack isn't so lucky. It hits the ground with a crash. My heart flies into my throat.

My laptop!

I only managed to replace the beater I've used since high school this past spring. Dropping to my knees, I frantically tug open the zipper and reach into the protective pocket.

"Maci? Are you alright?" The shadow of the fellow student I crashed into falls over me. In hindsight, I probably should have made sure they were okay before diving onto the ground to rescue my laptop.

Shielding my eyes against the sun, I squint up at the boy. "Jason?" I ask, immediately confused. "What are you doing here?"

"Heading to class," he says with a slightly perplexed smile. "Well, I was until—" he gestures between us "—you alright?"

Remembering the laptop still in my hands, I flip it open. The crack-free screen lights up with a factory screensaver I haven't bothered to change. I breathe a sigh of relief.

"I'm fine," I tell him, putting it away again and getting to my feet. "I thought you and Daphne were hanging out today?"

"Um, no." He scratches the back of his neck, looking at his feet. "I haven't heard from her in a couple months, actually."

"Oh, I'm sorry." It doesn't come out as comforting as I want it to because I'm too busy trying to remember Daph's and my conversation from earlier. She definitely told me she couldn't carpool to work because she was studying with Jason. "I must have mixed you up with someone else." His face falls, and I could kick myself.

Real smooth, Mace. Real smooth.

He backs away, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "I gotta get to class, but it was nice seeing you."

Between me almost bulldozing him over and then bringing up a girl who probably ghosted him (*knowing and loving Daphne as I do*), I'm pretty sure he doesn't mean that last part.

* * *

"ALL I'M SAYING IS why would Daph lie to me?" I ask James for the tenth time since we left campus. "We don't lie to each other!"

"That's not true," he says, opening the door to the local country bar and my place of employment, The Rattle & Snake.

"Telling her that Chase used the last of her oat milk creamer this morning was a necessity," I say seriously. "She hadn't had her coffee yet. It was life or death."

James gives me a skeptical look. "The poor man was just trying to eat cereal and watch cartoons in his boxers, and she yelled at him for five straight minutes."

"Well, maybe if you two weren't always stealing basic household necessities from us, we wouldn't mind if you

borrowed something occasionally.” I poke him in the shoulder for emphasis, but he’s too fast, catching my hand in his. He looks down at me, bemused, as I try to wiggle my fingers free, squeezing just tight enough that I can’t break free.

“James,” I whine, puffing my lips in a pout. His face softens. The look in his eyes shifting to that guarded emotion I noticed the night of the bonfire. He releases me and looks away before I can puzzle it out. Glancing down the bar, I rub my hand more for dramatic effect than anything else. Daphne’s long blonde ponytail catches my eye as she disappears into the kitchen.

I frown after her, replaying the conversation with Jason again. It doesn’t make sense. Daphne knows every single detail of my life and vice-versa. Our friendship started because we got dropped into the same dorm room freshman year, but it’s so much more than that now. Moving across the country for college to a town I’d never been to, where I didn’t know a soul, was mildly terrifying, to put it lightly. From day one, Daphne took me in. She brought me to her family’s back-to-school bonfire, introduced me to James and Chase, and let me stay at her house during school breaks when I couldn’t afford the plane ticket home. She made sure I had a family out here, even if it wasn’t technically my own.

“Ask her about it already. I’m sure there’s a simple explanation.” James takes off past the tables and toward the back of the bar. He and Chase might as well have their names engraved on plaques on the last two stools. Ever since Daphne and I started working here, that’s where they sit every time they come in. Which is a lot. It’s the easiest place to distract the two of us when we’re working because we have to pass them to go into the kitchen. We can still see the whole bar, so we can’t complain about them sidetracking us too much.

“You’re staying?”

“No, I just walked you in to be a gentleman,” he deadpans with an eye roll. I start to poke at him again but think better of it. It’s hard to make a drink without one of your hands. Impossible maybe. I don’t want to find out. “Chase is here,” James adds, pointing.

Sure enough, Chase sits in his seat, eyes glued to the baseball game on the TV. He's got a half-empty beer in front of him, so he must have been here for a while. Chase is physically incapable of doing anything other than sipping beer. Our sophomore year, we learned that the hard way when James tried to teach him to shotgun. I shudder at the memory. *Disgusting.*

"What are you doing here?" I ask, circling to the other side of the bar as James takes his seat beside Chase.

"Baseball," Chase grunts, not looking away from the screen.

"Are they about to score a touchdown?" I tease, keeping my voice as serious as possible. My sports knowledge isn't quite that bad, but it irks Chase to no end when I mix up terminology.

"Maci," he groans, covering his face with his hands so only his brown curls peak over the top of his fingers. "Have I failed you so miserably?"

"She's toying with you. You should know better by now." Daphne tells him, emerging from the kitchen and coming around the bar with a buffalo chicken wrap and sweet potato fries in her hands. She places it in front of Chase, who drops his hands at the scent of food, eyes lighting up with pure happiness. Besides sports, eating is one of his favorite hobbies.

I stare at Daphne, worrying my bottom lip between my teeth. The words are on the tip of my tongue, but I'm still trying to figure out how to ask her without sounding accusing. It's not as simple as blurting...

"Maci ran into Jason on campus today, and she wants to know why you told her you guys were studying together when you apparently ghosted him months ago," James tells Daphne bluntly before I finish figuring out what to say. "What?" he asks when he notices my narrowed eyes. "You were going to drag it out all night. This is much easier. So, cousin, care to explain?" He leans his elbows on the bar and props his head in his hands, waiting expectantly.

“Did I say Jason?” Daph asks, laughing lightly and shaking her head. “I was studying with Jacob. You know? The guy I went out with a few times last spring? He’s in my poetry class this semester. Sorry, I can’t keep all the J names straight.”

James snorts and mutters a word I’m sure his mother would disapprove of under his breath. Chase jostles him with his elbow before Daphne or I can scold him. “Not cool, dude.”

“Exactly.” Daph nods approvingly. “Not cool. But are we good?” she asks, looking at me, concern turning down the corners of her lips.

“Of course.” It was a simple mistake. Daph can be kind of a ditz sometimes. It’s part of her overall charm. Honestly, I’m not sure why I didn’t think of this earlier. “I get it.”

This time, it’s Chase who snorts. “Sure, you do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask, immediately on the defensive. The spark that’s in Chase’s eyes never means anything good.

“Oh, nothing,” he says airily, biting into his wrap. James takes the opportunity to swipe a few fries. He yelps, and a few pieces of lettuce fall out of his mouth. “Bro! Get your own!”

“Focus,” I say, snapping my fingers in front of Chase’s face. My shift started five minutes ago, but luckily, the happy hour crowd hasn’t arrived yet. There’s only one other person at the bar, and glancing at him tells me he’ll be working on that cocktail for a little while longer.

“What was that supposed to mean?”

“I’d answer her,” Daph cautions him. “She has the power to cut off your beer supply.”

“And to change every TV in here to some boring, old Western. And to make sure the kitchen gets your order wrong every single time. And—” I don’t get to list my third threat because Chase is already shaking his head. Thank goodness. I was running out of ideas.

“Okay, I get it!” He shelters his food behind his arms as if scared I might take it away. “But, for the record, I think explaining myself will only make it worse.”

“I like old Westerns,” James says, still munching on his pilfered handful of fries. “Could you put those on?”

“No, it’s against policy,” I say while Daphne says, “Yeah, sure.”

“Stop trying to distract us.” If James loves old Westerns, this is my first time hearing about it. More likely, he’s trying to save Chase from getting in trouble for whatever dumb thing is running through his head.

“Appreciate the effort, man,” Chase says to James and then to me. “It’s just I don’t think you can ‘get’ not being able to keep guys’ names straight when you haven’t dated someone, let alone someones, in over a year.”

I stare at him open-mouthed. Daphne audibly gasps. James chokes on a fry. It would all be very comedic if I couldn’t feel my cheeks turning scarlet from embarrassment. Because, of course, Chase is correct, but I didn’t mean that *‘I got it’* in the literal sense. More in the symbolic, *‘I understand what you’re saying’* kind of way. Was that not obvious?

“It’s not my fault!” I sputter when the indignancy of it all fades enough that I can find my voice.

Chase tilts his head and raises his brows as if to say, *‘Oh, really?’*

“It’s not!” I insist. “It’s not like I haven’t tried! Right, Daphne?”

My best friend chooses that moment to bend down and stick her head in the beer cooler, even though I know we restocked it last night before we went home. Traitor.

“Have you downloaded dating apps? Or maybe tried texting any of the dozen guys who give you their numbers every week?” Chase’s condescending tone makes it very difficult not to smack him around the head. But I’m in uniform, so I can’t. James stares at his best friend

incredulously. Clearly concerned for his safety. Good. As he should be.

“It’s not that simple,” I say through gritted teeth. It’s not that I’m opposed to dating someone, but no one’s struck my interest since the guy I dated sporadically over a year ago. Todd...Timothy...okay maybe he didn’t strike my interest that much since I can’t remember his name. But that’s precisely my point! Birch Creek is a small town, and Birch Creek University an even smaller campus. And I love it here, but that doesn’t change the fact that the dating pool isn’t the largest.

“Wanna bet?” Chase asks. That spark is back in his eye, and there’s a gleeful smile on his face that I don’t trust at all. “If I get you a date with a reasonably attractive and interesting man by the end of your shift, you tell Daphne you’re the one who drank the rest of her oat milk creamer. If I don’t, James and I will start buying our own household necessities and stop stealing yours.”

I purse my lips, drawing my brows together in thought, but it’s purely for show. I’m tired of going to grab a paper towel and finding the roll empty. Plus, I basically live at The Rattle & Snake. Nobody coming in on a Thursday night will get my attention.

“You have a deal,” I tell Chase, sticking my hand out for him to shake.

Beside him, James falls into a fit of coughing. One hand clutches a napkin to his mouth, and the other grasps the bar. Chase smacks him on the back a couple times before he’s able to take in a deep gasp of air.

“Swallowed a fry the wrong way,” he explains, his tan cheeks tinged with embarrassment.

“Eat much?” I ask before scooping up menus and heading down the bar to where a large group of EMTs have just sat down. As I’m turning away, I can almost swear I catch James giving Chase a murderous look, but when I look back, everything seems normal.

Chapter 5

James

I'M in my own personal circle of hell crafted by my best friend. Chase, who is now dead to me, has sat at the bar for the last two hours casually sipping his beer and not as casually pointing out guys who might have "*boyfriend potential*" for Maci.

"What, and I cannot emphasize this enough, the hell do you think you're doing?" I ask him while Maci and Daphne are well out of earshot, pouring beers for a group of frat guys I vaguely recognize from around campus.

Chase doesn't look at me, gazing around the room, likely looking for his next target. "I'm trying to find Maci a boyfriend. You were sitting right there when we shook on it, remember?"

"I remember." My near-death experience when Maci agreed to his ridiculous bet has forever ingrained the memory in my mind. Choking on two fries in one night isn't a good look, but it was an inevitable result of witnessing my supposed best friend's betrayal.

"We're running out of potential candidates. Who knew Maci was so picky?" he whines, clearly frustrated by striking out with such alarming consistency. Thanks to him, we might have to buy our own paper towels now—something neither of us has done in the last three years.

"Me! I knew!" Daphne jumps in, now free of the frat guys, and scoops up Chase's and my empty pint glasses. "Another?"

We nod in unison. If I'm going to sit here and watch Chase find Maci a boyfriend, Daph might as well give me the whole

keg.

“Any luck?” Maci asks, walking past us and into the kitchen before returning with several baskets of wings balanced in her hands. “Or are you giving up?”

Chase shakes his head vehemently, his hair shifting back and forth with each move. “No way.” He turns to me, a wicked smile on his face. “James...” he begins.

Nope. No. No way. I plead with my eyes, but he ignores me.

“Do you know anyone who might make a good match for our lovely Maci?”

Yup. I’m going to kill him. A decade of friendship down the drain, but you win some, you lose some, right?

“James?” Maci echoes, propping her hands on her hips and looking at me expectantly. She’s twirled her waist-length hair into a bun that’s somehow stayed on top of her head in sheer defiance of all laws of gravity. A few pieces in the front made a bold escape, curling around her face. There’s laughter in her eyes, and I wish I could join in and share the joke. Before last year, I would have.

“I’ll be back,” I say gruffly, hopping off my barstool and making a beeline for the bathroom. When I get there, I lean over the sink and splash cold water on my face, hoping it will help wash away the miserable, longing feeling that’s living inside my stomach. Looking in the mirror, I gear myself up to go back out and play the part I’ve unwittingly found myself in. The bathroom door swings open behind me before I can convince myself.

“What, you’re following me to the bathroom now?” I snap at Chase, not feeling particularly kindly towards him at the moment.

“Jamesie.” Using my least favorite nickname is not helping his case. He leans against the wall, looking at me with pure pity. Also, not helping his case. “I’m trying to help you out here, don’t you see?”

I give him a skeptical look. “How is anything about that —” I gesture wildly to the door and the bar on the other side “—helping me.”

“Well, you could jump in, and...oh, I don’t know...ask her out yourself,” he suggests. It sounds so simple when he says it like that.

“Well damn. Why didn’t I think of that,” I say sarcastically, reaching for the door handle. “I’ll just walk out there and tell the girl who sees me as “just a friend” that I’ve been in love with her for the past year and have just been too chicken shit to tell her.”

“That’s the spirit!” Chase claps me on the back, and I briefly flash back to choking on the fry. Funnily enough, the feeling isn’t that different from the one I have now, as if all the air has disappeared.

“I was being sarcastic.”

“I know, but it’s the most sense you’ve made in a while, so I thought I’d run with it.”

I groan, dropping my head to my chest. This whole thing has gotten so far out of control. It started small. Harmless even. Things like noticing the sweet, strawberry smell of her hair. Or the little crinkle in her nose when she laughs. Then it got a little bigger. Butterflies when she walked into a room. The almost unbearable desire to reach out and brush my hand against her cheek. To pull her in and...

“Jamesie,” Chase singsongs again. “Come back to me.”

My head snaps up, and the thoughts of what it would be like to kiss Maci fall away. “Can you please drop it?” I ask him, not enjoying how close to begging the question sounds.

“No can do. We made a bet, and I don’t know about you, but it will mess up my grocery budget if I have to start buying things like toilet paper.”

Without waiting for me to respond, he yanks open the door and walks back out. Our seats are still open when we come back, and in front of them sit two fresh pints of beer with

coasters rested on top. Chase's head swivels, checking out all the guys Maci hasn't already shot down.

"How about that one?" he asks when she walks by next, pointing to a man with an unruly mullet and bulging muscles.

"You're getting desperate." She snorts with laughter as she walks away.

"You know, I think I'm going to head home." I push away my untouched beer and lift my hand to catch Maci or Daphne's attention. The last time I left with only a text promising to Venmo them the money for my tab, the tip they left themselves about equaled the bill. They explained later it was to teach me a lesson on how not to be such a douche. It worked. It takes a couple minutes, but eventually, both girls notice my raised hand.

"Giving up already?" Maci props her arms on the bar and offers Chase a fake pout that makes it impossible for me to look at anything besides her full, pink lips—thoughts of grabbing her face and kissing her flood my mind again. I have to get out of here right now.

Chase, who I now realize didn't put up the slightest protest when I announced my departure, doesn't look as disappointed as a man about to accept defeat should. He also isn't looking at Maci. Instead, his gaze is fixed on one of the guys at the nearby pool table. The guy's dark, curly hair hangs into his eyes as he bends over to line up his shot. When he stands, I see he's about my height with the same lean, muscular build. I'm pretty sure I own the flannel he's wearing, and I know for a fact I have those same shoes sitting in my closet back at the apartment.

"What are you playing at?" I whisper to Chase as quietly as possible so Maci and Daph can't hear.

"Consider it a test run. If he's hot enough for her, you're hot enough. It's a win-win," he whispers back.

"I don't think that means what you think it does." But my words are lost in the noise of the bar.

“Maci, what about him?” Chase asks, pointing toward the pool table.

She turns, and I can tell by the look on her face she’s all geared up to shoot Chase down again. But when she catches sight of the guy, she pauses. Her lips part ever so slightly as her eyebrows raise. “Oh,” she says. “I haven’t seen him in here before.”

“Good enough for me!” Chase exclaims cheerfully, and before any of us can stop him, he steps off his barstool and walks toward the pool table. Less than a minute later, he’s back with my lookalike trailing behind him. The guy wears an apprehensive expression, and I wonder what Chase told him to get him over here. Nothing good for me, that’s for sure.

“Maci, this is Devon. Devon, this is my friend Maci. The one I was telling you about,” Chase introduces them, then steps back, looking distinctly pleased with himself. All I can do is sit and watch. The longing in my chest grows as Maci smiles flirtatiously at Devon.

“Nice to meet you.” Her voice has a high pitch to it I’ve never heard before. I should get up and leave. I don’t need to see this. But for some reason, I’m fixed to the spot, unable to look away.

“The pleasure’s mine,” Devon draws. Great, he’s got a Southern accent. I’m doomed. “Chase over here was telling me about you.” The apprehension is completely gone now, replaced with a smile that even I have to admit is sexy.

Daphne walks behind Maci on her way to drop off a round of beers down the bar and does a double take when she notices Devon. Her eyes flick from me to him and back again, clocking the uncanny similarity that seems to have gone entirely over Maci’s head. Daph mouths *‘What the hell?’* to Chase, who pointedly ignores her.

“Don’t believe a word he says,” Maci warns with a laugh, though I know there’s a real caution behind the bravado.

“Mind if I stick around for a while?” Devon asks, scooting around me and dropping into the seat Chase vacated.

“I am technically working,” Maci says. “But if you want to hang around...”

She’s definitely flirting now. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Maci flirt. She certainly didn’t act this way around Todd...or was it Timothy? Curiosity mixed with pure jealousy and anger pulls in the pit of my stomach. That last one isn’t directed at Maci. No, I explicitly reserve that for Chase...and maybe a little at Devon for making her giggle like that.

“Well, my work here is done. James and I are gonna head out,” Chase dusts off his hands to signify what I’m sure he considers a job well done. “Unless you have anything you want to add, James?”

Maci and Devon both turn to me, and the three of them wait expectantly. “Nothing to add. Have fun, you two.” Storming toward the exit, I leave Chase to follow in my wake. As mad as I am at him, I’m angrier with myself. Chase is right, just like Logan was right. I’m the one to blame for this mess I’ve found myself in.

“You know, all of this could have been avoided if you just —” I put up a hand before Chase can finish his sentence.

“I know!” I snap.

“Maybe I took it too far,” he admits as we step out into the night air.

“You think?”

“For the record, I thought she’d shoot Devon down like she did the other two I brought over.”

We walk the rest of the way to my truck in silence. It’s a trend I consider keeping up for the drive home, but when I look over at Chase, he’s wearing an expression similar to that of a kicked puppy. It’s annoyingly hard to stay mad at him when he looks like that.

“It’s fine. I’ll figure it out.”

Except I have no idea how I’ll do that now that Maci’s in there flirting with a guy who might look a hell of a lot like me but decidedly isn’t.

Chapter 6

Maci

SEPTEMBER IS a deceitful month in Birch Creek. Without fail, the first week always drops to the mid-seventies, and, without fail, it always succeeds in tricking me into believing fall has finally arrived. Then, during the second week, it shoots back up to the nineties, and I'm left sweaty and disgruntled. This year is no exception.

I toss my backpack into my passenger seat, cringing as I follow it into the suffocating heat of my car. The air conditioning didn't break until mid-way through June. Once I found time to make it to the town mechanic, we were already halfway through the summer, and after I saw the bill, I convinced myself I could make do without. Last week, when I thought we finally turned the corner in the hot weather, I congratulated myself on persevering. Now, as a drop of sweat rolls down my leg, I curse myself for not sucking it up and taking the financial hit.

Rolling the windows down as soon as the car rumbles to life, I breathe in the fresh air. It isn't much cooler, but at least there's a light breeze. Somewhere deep in my backpack, my phone buzzes once, twice, then three times. After a few seconds of digging, I pull it out and see three texts from Daphne.

DAPHNE: Can you add brie to the grocery list?

And apple butter?

And puff pastry and pears or apples and maybe some french bread

DAPHNE: You know it

I swipe my thumb across my screen, bringing me back to all my texts. Before I can click away and pull up our grocery list, a text from my sister catches my attention. I noted it when I first left class, but the heat and exhaustion from my late-night shift swept it out of my mind in the five-minute walk to my car.

My family isn't as tight-knit as the Langleys. First of all, my parents are only children of only children, so there were never any cousins to play with on Christmas morning. But even then, I can't imagine going over to my parents' house for a weekly Sunday night dinner, even if I was living back home. Our family doesn't work like that.

I was my parents' "*whoopsie*" baby. Mom and Dad were both in their sophomore year of college when they found out they were pregnant with me. Dad dropped out and went full-time at the warehouse he'd worked at since high school. Mom went part-time, which eventually became "taking a break from school" after I was born. Grandma has told me more times than I can count that she wasn't sure Mom would ever go back, but she did. Instead of popping out another baby right away like everyone expected her to do, she got her Certified Nursing Assistant certificate and went back to work.

I was four by the time they had my little sister, Aspen, and unenthused by the idea of this new, small creature encroaching on my already limited time with my parents. Dad worked long days at the warehouse, and Mom spent three nights a week pulling the graveyard shift at the hospital. Aspen and I never actively disliked each other, but she was the stereotypical annoying younger sister. Always borrowing my clothes, stealing my makeup, and never returning any of it. It wasn't till the twins came along that we started bonding—strength in numbers and all that.

I click on her text even though I got the gist from the small preview I could see.

ASPEN: Chase did what?!? And you agreed?!?
Do you have a picture of this guy???? I need a
picture STAT!!!!

Laughing at her aggressive punctuation, I press the phone icon at the top of the screen. While it rings, I pull out of my parking spot, trying to remember the last time I talked to her. We text, but I don't think we've spoken since my visit home at the start of August. I cringe. I tell myself I'll call home more often every year, but it never seems to stick.

"Maci!" Aspen's chipper voice explodes out of my phone. Music plays in the background, making hearing what she says next impossible.

"I can't hear you!" I shout, remember my windows are rolled down, and wave apologetically to the biker I just startled. There's some rustling, and then the music stops abruptly. "Much better. What did you say?"

"I can't believe you're going on a date!" Aspen sounds practically giddy, and I picture her lying on her stomach in bed, kicking her feet up in the air.

"I go on dates," I say defensively. Well, I've been on dates—same thing.

"No, you don't." Even though she lives on the opposite coast, there's no bullshitting Aspen. "I'm not judging! You're picky. That's okay, but—oh my god—finally!"

"It feels like you're judging," I grumble, taking the turn onto the road that leads off campus and toward Main Street.

"Okay, maybe a little, but it doesn't matter. Tell me everything!"

In the five minutes it takes me to relay the story of how Chase conned me into going on a date (*not the most accurate narrative, but it's the one I'm sticking with*), I reach the grocery store. One of the many pluses of small town living—nothing is too far away.

"Do you have any pictures?" she asks as soon as I finish. She sounds so eager; I feel a little bad I have to disappoint her.

“No,” I say, snatching my reusable canvas bags from my backseat and sliding out of the car. It’s depressing that the air outside my car somehow feels cooler than inside, even with all the windows down. “And, before you ask, Daphne already scoured every social media platform. No dice.”

She snorts, and I can practically hear her eyes roll. “Send me his last name. I’ll have something for you within the hour.”

“That’s a little creepy.” But I do it anyway.

The automatic doors slide open, and a wave of cold air envelops my body—sweet, sweet air conditioning. Grabbing a cart, I connect my headphones, set my phone in the cup holder, and pull up Daph’s and my grocery list.

Grocery runs always take twice as long whenever I go with Daphne, James, or Chase. The sheer number of people who stop them to say hi and ask after their families is astounding. I get it occasionally, now that the locals have grown accustomed to seeing me with them, but not nearly as much.

“What do you know about him?” Aspen asks. I can hear her acrylic nails tapping against her screen through the phone, telling me she’s already started stalking.

“Are you looking for search parameters?” I tease. There’s a good chance that’s exactly what she’s after. “Not much. We talked a little bit Thursday night, but I was working, so it wasn’t anything real. He gave me his number, and we set up a date. Other than that? We haven’t talked much.”

“That’s weird,” she says, the clicking of her nails pausing. “Did he tell you he’s not a big texter? Cause that’s a red flag.”

It’s my turn to roll my eyes. “I kind of like it. People are different over text. This way, I can go into our date with no expectations.”

Or at least that’s been my experience with the limited dates I’ve been on. Freshman year, I texted this guy for two weeks before we went on a date. I expected the same sweet and funny person I’d been talking to, and instead, I spent the night asking questions and getting monosyllabic answers. Not a fun experience.

“Whatever you say.” Aspen’s back to her searching, and we stay on the call in comfortable silence for a couple minutes while I peruse the soft cheese selection in search of Daphne’s brie.

“How are things at home?” I ask, wanting to steer the conversation away from myself. My dating life has been a non-existent topic for months, and now that it’s been resurrected, the whole thing feels uncomfortable.

Aspen sighs so deeply it practically shakes my headphones. “Well, the twins started Kindergarten this week.”

“How’d Mom take that?” I already know the answer, but from my sister’s reaction, she might need the vent session.

Sure enough, she launches into an explanation of the immense amount of waterworks that preceded the twins getting their first day of school photos taken and continued until they came home. Mom might have two grown daughters, but Julian and Rhodes are her babies.

Whenever I tell people about my family, they assume my brothers were the accident not me. It would make sense. Mom got pregnant with them when Aspen and I were twelve and sixteen. It’s an unconventional age gap, but the twins were very much planned. Mom was only thirty-five after all, and... well, I’m sure there were a whole lot more reasons they told me at the time, but I was too upset to listen. Back then, all I could think about was my parents’ constant financial stress and how two more mouths would only compound that.

It’s weird being twenty-one with brothers who haven’t even started grade school. Even weirder because I’ve lived a world away from them for most of their lives. There are two versions of my family in my head. The one that went back as far as I can remember, where it was just Mom, Dad, Aspen, and me. It wasn’t perfect, but I knew where I fit in. Now, when I go home for winter break and two weeks during the summer, I’m never sure where my place is.

It’s part of the reason I was so grateful when the Langleys welcomed me with open arms. I know where I fit in their family. Mr. Franklin and Mrs. Fiona, Daphne’s parents, treat

me like a second daughter. James's mom never fails to pack my favorite salt and vinegar potato chips and energy drinks in the snack baskets she makes for James at the start of every semester.

"Mom will adjust after a couple weeks," I reassure Aspen, whose rant has ended with another dramatic sigh. "How are your college applications coming?"

Over the summer, I helped her figure out what schools she might be interested in and made all the necessary profiles so she could get a head start. I tried convincing her to apply to BCU, but she's determined to attend school in a big city. It makes sense. Aspen lives her life at full volume. She would feel stifled after one month in this small town.

"The basics are done. I have a couple essays left and—" The line goes silent, and I check to make sure the call hasn't dropped.

"Aspen," I prompt, wondering if she found something disturbing on Devon. Silence is not something my sister is usually very good at.

"The application fees," she says finally. The dread in her voice confuses me. We discussed the fees with Mom and Dad while I was home, and they promised they could cover them. "Dad's car broke down a couple weeks ago. Something with the engine. Mom told me they'd figure it out, but every time I bring it up, she tells me we'll talk about it later."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, actively trying to repress my frustration. It's not my parents' fault, but this complicates things.

"I have money saved from working at the consignment shop, so I'll probably just pull from there." Aspen keeps her tone casual and breezy, but I sense the stress underneath it. I've been where she is—trying to figure out how to pay my way while balancing school, work, and the extracurriculars you need to get into college.

"Don't worry about it," I tell her, mentally running through my budget. I've been able to put more and more money away

ever since I moved from serving to bartending after my twenty-first birthday last year. I can swing this for her. It kills my plan to live off my savings while I worked an unpaid internship next semester, but that was already a pipe dream. That money is for after college anyway, and there's no way it would cover five months of bills along with the leftover tuition my scholarship doesn't cover.

"Maci, you don't—" Aspen starts to argue, but I don't let her finish.

"Nope. No arguments. I'll Venmo you when I get home." I wish I had someone to help me like this when I was her age. Being able to be that person for her heals some part of my inner child I don't like to acknowledge is still wounded.

"Thank you," she says quietly. "I miss you, sissy."

Her childhood nickname for me pulls at my heart, and I feel a rare longing for home. "Miss you too."

"I can't find anything on Devon. Maybe he's a social media recluse. I'll keep looking, but I've gotta write this stupid essay for English class."

We say our goodbyes, and I glance down at my list. There are a few things in the frozen section I still need to grab, but I've got most of it. Winding my way down the aisle, I pluck assorted items from freezers until I end up in the ice cream section. I grab the frozen protein ice cream bar things Daphne's been obsessed with lately and pause before closing the door. On the shelf below, there's a single tub of strawberry roasted ice cream—James's favorite. It's only available in the summer—some organically sourced, ridiculously overpriced seasonal special.

I hesitate. Aspen's application fees will throw my budget for a loop this month. An eight-dollar pint of ice cream probably counts as a splurge I don't need to make, but then I think of James's face the last time I brought it home. You would have thought I got him a bar of gold from the way he lit up and the whoop of delight he let out. Before I can second guess my decision, I put it in the cart and head for checkout.

Some things are worth it.

Chapter 7

James

“REALLY, James, you don’t have to stay.” Mr. Graham—or Henry as he’s begged me to call him when the students aren’t around—says, squatting down to where I’m cutting out letters for tomorrow’s activity on the floor of his classroom. Or, I guess, our classroom for the next year. I’ve been at this for half an hour now, and bright scraps of construction paper cover the linoleum like misshapen confetti.

“I don’t mind! You’ve got a wife and kids to go home to. I have a Chase,” I tell him.

He frowns at me like he’s not quite sure he believes me. “What’s a Chase?”

“My best friend. He’ll survive without me for a while. We have a vast array of takeout menus, and I taught him his numbers last week.”

“Well, if you’re absolutely sure.” Henry chuckles, heading to his desk to pack up. “I’ve gotta be honest. I wasn’t sure about this whole teacher-mentor thing, but I could get used to this. Are all interns as helpful as you? Be honest. I need to know if it’s downhill from here.”

“Definitely downhill from here. You got lucky the first go around. I’m the best you’ll ever get,” I shrug and flash him a cocky smile. But I’m the lucky one.

The relief I felt when assigned to Henry and his first-grade class for student teaching was palpable and quickly followed by a wave of excitement. Since Henry’s new in town, he’s not taught me or any of my siblings and cousins. Most of the other teachers at Birch Creek Elementary have had at least one

Langley in their classroom, which, depending on the Langley, may not have been the greatest pleasure.

The fact that Henry's a male educator in his early thirties? Icing on the cake. Realistically, in the grand scheme of things, it didn't matter. As long as my mentor was willing to prepare me to have my own classroom next year, I would have been happy either way. Still, my teachers and advisors have told me for years what to expect from the predominantly female field I've decided to enter, but all of it's theoretical. Half of them have never seen the inside of an elementary school classroom; if they have, it was well over a decade ago. Having someone whose experience I can learn from and who I can ask practical questions of...well, grateful doesn't cover it.

"Are you sure?" Henry checks again, but he's already halfway out the door.

"Go!" I wave him off. "I'll lock up when I'm done."

He salutes me and disappears down the hallway. A lot of the other teachers still mill around, popping out of their classrooms only to go into one of their friends'. That's the first thing I noticed about this place when I came in during pre-planning to help set up—the culture here runs deep. Same as anywhere in this town. I didn't expect to feel so welcome and included by the end of my first week of student teaching, but Mrs. June next door already has my Perk Me Up order down pat. If this school was anywhere besides Birch Creek, it's the kind of place I could see myself wanting my own classroom.

But it's practically in the town center, so there's no point thinking about it.

It takes me another half an hour to get through the remaining cutouts. By the time I put the grown-up scissors back in the locked cabinet (*you can't trust six-year-olds to stay out of the places you tell them to*), the janitors have already been by to pull the trash from the cans, and every other door on the hallway is closed. I wake my laptop screen at the makeshift desk Henry set up for me the first day. The unread emails in my inbox have doubled since I last checked at the start of the day. I swipe through them, flipping past updates

about back-to-school events and basic intro information until the principal's name catches my eye. But it's the subject line that stops me in my tracks.

Discussion About Next Year

There's no way Dr. Adams is reaching out about next year because he's been impressed with my work ethic in the last week. Not without a push, at least. My finger hovers over the little trash can icon. I'm ninety-five percent sure I know what's in the email. How could it be anything else? But it's the last five percent that wins out. The *'what if I'm wrong and delete an important email from the school's principal in my first week'* of it all.

I click and skim the first lines.

Good afternoon,

Congratulations on completing the first week of your internship! I wanted to connect and see how you're enjoying your placement at Birch Creek Elementary. I spoke to your father recently, and he mentioned you might be interested in a permanent position here next—

I press delete before I read anymore. I should have never opened it in the first place. It's probably not the best move, deleting an email from the principal, but if he asks, I'll say I didn't get it. Technology fails all the time, right?

I knew it.

I drop my head into my hands, blocking out the yellowish hue of the fluorescent lights. It's not like I didn't see this coming. This summer, while my family was on our annual vacation, I casually mentioned to my parents that I didn't plan on staying in town after graduation. They both took it like they didn't remember this had been my plan since the start of high school. The only reason I'm at Birch Creek University in the first place is because I'd be crazy to turn down the tuition

discount I get with Dad being president of the school. The conversation didn't go well, to say the least. Mom cried. Dad grumbled about the importance of family sticking together. They don't get it. Somehow, even though they've spent their whole lives here, they don't understand how suffocating it can be. Everyone here knows who I am. Or they know my brother or my uncle and my grandparents. There's no escaping it.

Despite all his talk, I didn't expect Dad to go this far. Or, I guess, I hoped he would realize going this far would be way out of bounds and decide against it—my mistake. Alexander Langley is not good at taking 'no' for an answer. It's how he became *'the youngest president Birch Creek University has ever seen.'* Usually, reaching out to the principal of the school his son is placed at would be the type of political power flex he frowns upon. But desperate times apparently call for desperate measures and debased morals.

I shut my laptop more aggressively than necessary and slide it into my backpack. Once I'm out of the school and in my car, I dial Maci. It's a reflex at this point anytime my dad gets on my nerves. She gets the parent stuff better than the other two. Daphne can literally do no wrong in my aunt and uncle's eyes—perks of being their baby girl. And Chase could tell his mom and dad he wanted to quit college tomorrow and open a craft soda business, and they'd be supportive and lovely. But Maci gets it. Not in the exact same way. After all, her parents let her ride off into the sunset to a college on the other side of the country. But the pressure? Of trying to figure out how to do the right thing and be the right thing for your family? That she understands perfectly.

She picks up on the third ring. "Hey, James! What's up?"

Her voice unravels the ball of frustration tangled in my stomach, finding just the right cord and pulling so it melts away.

"Nothing, leaving school." I'm doing that thing that people do when they obviously have something to say (*they called for a reason*), but they try to lead into it softly. I hate that thing. I hate it even more because I never used to do it with Maci. Pleasantries aren't for your best friends, but the secret I've

been keeping is slowly ruining that. There's this space it holds between us, even if I'm the only one who can feel it.

"How are the little demons?" she asks. I'm about to answer when Daphne shouts something in the background that I can't make out. "Give me a second!" Maci calls back, presumably at Daph and not me. There's the creak of a door closing. "Anyways...the little demons?"

"I told you not to call them that," I chastise her without meaning it. I picture her leaning against her bedroom door. Her auburn hair pulled into a high ponytail, the end of which she twirls while she talks. I want to ask if that's what she's doing. Want to see if I'm right. If I know her as well as I think I do. But that's not a question friends ask. "They're fine," I sigh, gearing up to get to the point of the call. "But I got an email from the principal today."

"In trouble already," she teases. I close my eyes and imagine the slight quirk of her lips. The playful gleam in her eyes she gets whenever we banter.

"How little you think of me..." I trail off, the email—or what little I read—playing out in my head.

"What happened?" The softness in her voice sends a pang straight through my heart. I know if we were face to face, she'd pull me into a hug. When one of her friends is hurting, Maci has this beautiful instinct to try and soak up as much of their pain as possible.

"My dad—" but I don't get to finish the sentence because there's a loud bang from the other end of the phone.

"Daphne!" Maci shrieks, and I wince, scrambling to turn down the volume on the truck's speakers. "I was leaning against the door!"

Called it.

"Not anymore." There's a scuffling sound, and Daphne's voice grows clearer than before. She must have wrestled the phone from Maci's grasp. "Maci has a date to get ready for. Whatever this is, it can wait. We haven't even discussed wardrobe choices."

“Oh, I forgot that was tonight. My bad,” I apologize, not feeling bad in the slightest. Actually, I tried to forget it was happening at all. The thought of Maci laughing over cocktails with some other guy sends jealousy burning through my veins. Not a pleasant feeling.

“I’m giving you back to her but be quick.” Daph orders.

“Why is she like this?” Maci asks, coming back onto the line sounding a little more disgruntled than before.

“A lifetime of being treated like a princess. Blame her parents.” But my barb doesn’t pack its usual punch. A few minutes ago, all I wanted was to talk to Maci, but now I don’t think I can get far enough away from the sound of her voice.

“I’ve gotta go, but you’ll tell me what happened with your dad when I get back?”

“Sounds good.” There’s a pause, and I know this is where I’m supposed to tell her ‘*good luck*’ or ‘*have fun,*’ but I can’t do it. I don’t care if it makes me a crappy friend. “Talk to you later.”

She hangs up, and I bang my hands against the steering wheel in frustration, causing the truck to jerk to the right. The car behind me honks, and I raise my hand in apology. I need to get a grip.

I should tell her.

The thought pops into my head in a voice that sounds decidedly like Chase’s. It’s what he’s been telling me since I finally fessed up to him last New Year’s. We were all at Daphne’s parents’ house for their New Year’s Eve gala. Maci wore this deep, green gown that clung to her curves and made her eyes shine. I could hardly take my eyes off her all night, and eventually, Chase figured it out. He dragged me outside into the freezing cold and demanded I explain myself.

For a while, him knowing was enough. Now? Not so much. But it’s not the kind of thing I can blurt out on a random Wednesday night when we’re eating Chinese food on her living room floor. We’ve been friends for three years. She’s as ingrained in my life as Daphne or any of my cousins.

What if I tell her, and she doesn't feel the same way?

Would we be able to move on from that?

What would happen if we couldn't?

Isn't having her in my life as a friend better than not at all?

I don't know the answers to those questions, but I know actions have consequences. Consequences I'm not ready to face. Especially if one of them is losing her.

Chapter 8

Maci

“I STILL DON’T GET why you aren’t having him pick you up,” Daph says, tossing down the book she’s been “*reading*” while I finish getting ready for my date with Devon.

“Well, like I’ve told you already...” I pause to swipe mascara onto my lashes which I never seem to be able to do without making that ridiculous face where you suck in your top lip and widen your eyes. “You should never give a guy you barely know an opportunity to take you to a second location.”

“Isn’t the date itself a second location?” she asks skeptically, and I shoot her a look over my shoulder. She knows what I mean. “I’m just saying plenty of guys have picked me up for first dates, and I’m still here.”

“And quite frankly, that’s a miracle,” I inform her seriously. “You need to listen to those podcasts I send you. Your glasses are far too rose-colored.”

“I’m not doing this with you again. You already know how I feel about your true crime nonsense.”

We’ve had this conversation dozens of times since we first met. Eventually, I will have to accept Daph’s love for horror movies, but distaste for true crime will never make sense to me. Something about her movies being “fake” and true crime being...well, true, makes a difference to her. Or some nonsense like that.

“Agree to disagree?” I ask, beginning to put away the makeup scattered across my desk into their places in my clear, tiered organizer. Primers and foundation in the top slots, and

eye makeup in the bottom. In order of application as it should be.

“You can do that when you get back!” Daphne bounds off the bed in one fluid motion—courtesy of years of gymnastics—and grabs a hold of my hand. “It’s time to go.”

“But—” I protest, but she’s already pulling me out my bedroom door.

We reach the living room to find Chase sprawled across our velvet, green couch, eyes glued to the TV.

“Hey guys,” he greets, not looking away from whatever cop show he’s watching.

“Don’t you guys have your own TV?” Daph asks, utterly unfazed by his presence. When we first moved in, we and the boys exchanged keys for emergencies. The parameters of that word have grown extremely fluid since then.

“James changed the Netflix password,” Chase grumbles bitterly. “And he won’t tell me the new one. I figured he told you guys because you weren’t attacking him in the group chat.”

“What did you do this time?” The downside of sharing Netflix with your best friends is when you inevitably piss them off, they hold the power. Our account is in James’s name, and while I wouldn’t say he abuses that power per se, he exercises it where he sees fit. Chase mumbles something inaudible under his breath and won’t meet my eyes. Weird. “Never mind, I don’t want to know.”

“Send me one of those screenshots Aspen took of his mom’s Facebook,” Daphne reminds me, pulling my purse and keys down from their hook by the front door. “Just in case he does manage to take you to a second location.”

“Very good idea.” I take the high road and ignore her teasing. Pulling up the photos my sister sent, I select one of him and his parents on their boat on Labor Day and text it to Daphne. I don’t know what means Aspen took to get a hold of these, and honestly, I’m not sure I want to.

Her phone pings, and she checks to make sure the picture meets her standards. Her brow furrows as she examines it and shakes her head. “I still can’t get over how much—”

“How hot he is?” Chase cuts her off, his head popping up over the back of the sofa.

“No,” she huffs. “Devon looks—”

“Like a whole snack?” He intervenes again. “I know. I should start a match-making service. You could be my next client. I’ll even give you the friends and family discount.” Chase’s words tumble out of his mouth one after another, making less sense than the ones before. Being awkward-funny has always been part of his charm, but this leans heavily on the former, even for him.

“No thanks, I do fine on my own,” Daphne says haughtily, tossing her hair over her shoulder.

“Don’t I know it.” There’s something in Chase’s tone that makes me feel like I’m missing something. In fact, this whole conversation makes me feel like I’m missing something.

“Oh-kay.” Taking my purse and keys from Daphne, I reach behind me to open the door. “I’m gonna go now, but you two have fun with whatever this is.”

“Keep us updated!” Daphne calls at the same time Chase shouts, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

Alone in the hallway, the nerves that I was using Daphne’s company to fight back settle in.

“You can do this,” I whisper to myself in the reflective ceiling of the elevator. “It’s just a date. It doesn’t matter that you haven’t been on one in ages. It’s like riding a bike. Easy peasy.”

But my little pep talk does nothing to stop my hands trembling as I step out onto the ground floor.

* * *

I NEED to focus on what Devon's saying to me. It was easier when we first got to the little Italian restaurant in Silver Crest—the next town over from Birch Creek. On the walk from the parking garage, I learned he's at Birch Creek University for his Master's in Biochemistry. He has three older sisters back in Kentucky who are like second mothers to him if the dozen texts they sent him in our five-minute walk is any indication. Last week was his first in town, which explains why I didn't recognize him when he came into The Rattle and Snake. Either his mother raised him right, or his Southern manners shone through because he did everything he was supposed to. Made sure he walked on the street side. Opened the door to the restaurant for me. Was super polite to all of the staff. He even pulled out my chair for me.

He's perfect or as close to it as any person can get. So, it makes no sense why paying attention is taking so much effort when he's talking. Especially with that southern drawl. The one that—if I'm being honest—is a solid twenty-five percent of the reason I said yes to this date in the first place.

“My hands were shaking so bad, but Grandad got down on the ground beside the mare and me. He coached me through the whole thing. Twelve-year-old me felt like it took forever but totally worth it. Now, I know the miracle of life is a whole process, but back then, I was completely clueless. Anyways, we ended up with a beautiful little foal,” Devon laughs self-deprecatingly at himself, and it's adorable and charming. For the life of me, I can't remember how we ended up in this conversation. What's wrong with me? He births baby farm animals with his grandad, for Christ's sake.

“I think that's the sweetest thing I've ever heard,” I tell him earnestly despite my inattentiveness.

“It's nothing,” he waves off the compliment, scooping up a bite of his lasagna. “What made you choose engineering?”

“Oh, you don't want to hear about that. It's a boring story.”

Read: It's a story I don't love to tell. Usually, I spew some nonsense about how *I've always loved to figure out how things worked, and mechanical engineering was a natural*

choice when trying to pick a major.' but somehow, it feels disingenuous to give Devon the same, old, tired line when he's been so genuine.

"No, really, I want to know. I love boring stories!" He winks after the last bit. It's a gesture that should cause a fluttering in my chest, but my heartbeat stays disappointingly rhythmic.

I take a bite of garlic bread to stall and then curse myself because up until now, I've been determinedly ignoring the delicious basket. First dates and garlic breath aren't supposed to mix. What if he tries to kiss me, and I have garlic breath? He picked up a piece and set it on his plate, but one glance tells me it's gone untouched. My heart decides this enough to start beating erratically. A cute guy winking at me, no dice. The humiliation of a cute guy kissing me when I have garlic breath, bingo.

"Maci?" Devon prompts gently.

"Sorry," I say, setting the rest of the piece down on my side plate and pushing it away. "Growing up, the high schools around me weren't the best. Private school was out of the question, so it was pretty much a magnet school or bust. I have no artistic capabilities whatsoever, so I chose the STEM school by default. The engineering program was the only one I had any interest in. Plus, I knew there would be a lot of scholarships for women in STEM when it was time for college. And now here I am." I leave out the part where I knew college wouldn't be an option unless I found a way to score a hefty scholarship. My cheeks heat, and I stare down at my plate.

I don't have any resentment towards the way I grew up. My parents always made sure we were fed and clothed and so incredibly loved. They took us out for ice cream on the days our classes went on field trips we couldn't afford. We never missed a single Christmas, even if it meant Dad went without a new coat and Mom kept hand-washing all our dishes because the washer was broken—again. Before I left for college, I would have sworn up, and down I could care less how much money I did or didn't have. But BCU is a wealthy private

school, and the clear divide between me and most of my fellow students brings out and emphasizes that insecurity more often than I'd like to admit.

“Wow.” Devon lets out a low whistle. “So you're telling me you've always been incredibly driven and resourceful?”

Cue the butterflies...but there aren't any. What is wrong with me? Maybe it's just first date nerves. I make a mental note to ask Daphne when I get home.

“Something like that,” I say, matching his self-deprecating smile from earlier. “So, what made you decide Biochemistry was the one for you?”

Devon launches into another sweet story about a boy who loved beakers more than model trains. I swear I'm using all those active listening skills James is always prattling on about whenever he takes a child psychology course, but something isn't sitting right with me. And that thought brings me back to what I've been wondering about on and off all evening. What was James going to tell me? He sounded upset before Daphne barged through my bedroom door, sending me sprawling onto the floor, but I never got to press him further because there was an outfit to choose and hair to curl. It shouldn't matter right now. I can swing by his apartment before going across the hall to fill Daphne in on all the details of the date. Or maybe he'll already be at ours, and I can kill two birds with one stone.

I blink hard, trying to bring myself back into the moment.

“I wasn't sure I wanted to go back to school so soon after finishing my Bachelor's, but”

It works for a second, but then I'm distracted again. Something about Devon feels off. Not as a person. As a person, he's perfectly lovely, but there's something about his features as if they're shifted just enough to feel wrong. Familiar, but also not at the same time. Maybe his eyes are set too far apart. That could be it.

“Maci? You with me?” he asks, waving at me from across the table.

“Yes! Sorry!” I say quickly, forcing a laugh and hoping I come off as cute rather than rude. Probably not, but a girl can dream.

Devon surveys me with blue—no brown eyes. Not blue. I blink again; sure enough, his eyes are a deep, chocolate brown rather than sky blue. It must have been a trick of the light. The serious look they hold feels out of place on his face. Something else I don’t understand because, from what I’ve gathered on this date, he’s a fairly serious person.

“Does this have something to do with your guy friend from the other night?”

His question catches me off guard, and I snort a surprised laugh. Between that and the garlic bread, it’s startlingly evident that I don’t know how to behave on a first date.

“Who? Chase?” The thought alone is enough to make me giggle again.

“No, the other one.” Devon laughs, too, but his eyes still have that same serious look. That laugh may be the first disingenuous thing he’s done all night. “The quiet one.”

It takes me a second to realize he means James. Mainly because I’ve never heard James described as quiet before. It’s the antithesis of who he is as a person.

“The one glaring at me while we were talking,” he adds in case I need further clarification.

“He was—what? No, you must have misread that.” I wrack my brain, remembering if anything about James’s attitude stood out to me that night. Maybe he seemed a little annoyed with Chase’s enthusiastic attempts to drag any willing guy over to talk to me, but that was annoying. “The four of us—James, Daphne, Chase, and I—have been friends since the start of college. We’re close, but nothing like that. He’s like my brother. An annoying brother who lives across the hall from me and steals my shampoo and conditioner.” Somehow, I close my mouth and cut off my babbling even though my brain could have kept going for a long time.

“He steals your shampoo and conditioner?” Devon asks slowly in confusion.

“It was just the one time,” I mumble, staring at my plate.

“Oh, okay.” He doesn’t sound as if this explanation provided any of the clarity he was looking for. More like he’s desperately wishing he didn’t bring the topic up at all. “That’s good...I just wanted to make sure. I must have misread the situation, like you said.”

“It’s alright,” I say lamely, not sure how to move the conversation away from the quicksand of awkwardness we stumbled into.

When Devon asks if I want dessert, I tell him I’m too full. He glances at my half-eaten plate but doesn’t say anything. The walk back to our cars is quieter and far more awkward than the walk to the restaurant. It’s supposed to be the opposite on first dates. The way back is supposed to be full of nervous hand-holding and the ‘will they, won’t they kiss me thoughts.’ Instead, there’s a good foot of space between us until we awkwardly hug goodbye at my car.

“I’ll text you,” Devon promises as he tucks his hands into his pockets and walks off. I know he will because he’s a good guy, and I’ll respond out of courtesy. It doesn’t matter though. Both of us know this was our first and last date.

Sighing, I dig through my purse for my key fob and press the button to unlock my car, but nothing happens. What the hell? When I try again, the doors remain locked. I have a terrible feeling I know exactly what’s wrong, but I manually unlock the driver’s side door anyway. Sliding into my seat, I twist the key in the ignition. Nothing, again, because, of course, my battery would die tonight. Climbing out, I glance further down the parking lot, but Devon’s already gone. My trunk has jumper cables, but they won’t do any good without another car. While there are plenty of those around me, no one seems to be in any of them. Great.

I try Daphne first, but it goes straight to voicemail. Next up, I call Chase, and it rings all the way through before doing the same thing. When I check Find My Friends, they’re both at

the apartment complex. It's hardly 9:30. Neither of them should be asleep yet.

“Whatever, it's fine,” I say to myself, dialing my next choice.

James picks up on the first ring.

Chapter 9

James

WHEN I PICTURED SEEING Maci after her first date, this was not even remotely in the realm of possibilities. They ranged from her barging into the apartment hand in hand with Devon glowing with excitement to a piano falling from the sky and crushing him before they made it to the restaurant. Of course, I would arrive at the scene to comfort Maci. I'm not saying all of the possibilities made sense, but I had a solid two hours to stare at the ceiling of my room and let my imagination run wild. And I work with six-year-olds, so that thing has to be active and limber.

My heart skipped a beat when her contact picture—head tilted back in laughter, wearing a sparkling crown that read “*Finally 21*”—appeared on my phone. Despite my obsessive wondering about how her night was going, I didn't know what to expect when I picked up. Because somehow, even though her SUV is a hazard sign on wheels, car trouble never occurred to me.

Was I happy her battery died? No. Was I hoping her disappointed tone wasn't only because of that? Absolutely.

“Mr. Baker is going to bring a new battery over from the auto shop tomorrow morning and replace it for me,” Maci tells me, leaning into the open passenger side door.

“You called him at—” I check my watch “—10 p.m.? And he answered?” I finish incredulously. Small town courtesy is one thing, but taking a work call that late... that's taking it a little far.

“The first time I brought it to him, right after I bought it, he told me to call him anytime,” She places her hands on the sides of the door and hauls herself up and into the seat. Dusting off her hands, she seems unfazed by the fact that the state of her CRV is so dire the local auto shop owner is willing to answer calls in the middle of the night. This is why none of us ever let her drive. “What?” she snaps, whipping her head up from her phone to look at me.

She must have curled her hair earlier because it falls in loose, smooth waves over her shoulders. Her normally strawberry blonde lashes are dark, highlighting how green her eyes are. Currently, they’re emphasizing the frustration there.

“Nothing,” I say, deciding now might not be the time to critique her choice of vehicle...again.

“This wasn’t in this month’s budget. Not after Aspen...” Maci says more to herself than to me, staring at her phone.

“Not after Aspen what?” I ask, glancing at her curiously. Maci doesn’t talk about her family much. Over the years, I’ve gotten bits and pieces from her. I know they weren’t well off and how hard she had to work to get where she is now. Out of her siblings, she’s closest to Aspen, which makes sense, seeing as Julian and Rhodes are only four...maybe five? It’s not like it’s a topic she actively avoids. More like she prefers to keep that part of her separate from what she’s built here in Birch Creek.

“She needed help with her college application fees. Dad’s car died, so my parents didn’t have the money.” Maci snorts. “The irony.”

“You’re a good big sister,” I tell her, hoping she takes it to heart. I might not be privy to the details of the conversation between Maci and Aspen, but I would bet money her sister didn’t have to ask for help.

Leaning over the gear shift, I peek at her screen. The spreadsheet is packed to the brim with expenses, each one meticulously color-coded.

“Why am I in your budget?” I ask, surprised when I find my name between Daphne’s and Chase’s.

“You are so nosy!” Maci turns to me with a bemused smile and a pink hue of embarrassment on her cheeks.

“Come on, you have to tell me. It’s my payment for rescuing you.” I wish I could see how much I cost her, but I wasn’t that fast. But also, why does she have a monthly cash allotment for me? My curiosity is piqued, and we won’t move until it’s satisfied. I turn the key so the truck rumbles to a stop and wait patiently.

“You’re a drama queen, you know that?” Maci teases, resting her head against the seat and rubbing her hands over her eyes.

“I prefer drama king. Go ahead. If you start talking, I’ll start driving,” I tell her, unbothered by the nickname. My younger brother, Asher, has used it for over a decade. It lost its sting somewhere around nine.

“I have one for all three of you,” Maci begins and pauses, looking pointedly at the keys in my hand. Fair enough. I turn the truck back on and pull out of the parking lot while she continues talking. “It’s for little things like sea salt dark chocolate candy bars when Daphne’s on her period. Or that humus Chase loves from the bougee grocery store. Or—”

“The roasted strawberry ice cream I can eat an entire tub of in one sitting?” I finish for her because I get it now. “So, all those little things you do every month...you budget for them?”

She twists her fingers in her lap, and I have no idea why she seems so embarrassed because it’s one of the sweetest things anyone’s ever done for me. She’s careful with her money. With how she grew up, I think a part of her craves the security of knowing where every dollar goes. The fact that she builds in room for me makes me the luckiest guy in the world. I mean, she also does it for the other two, but that tiny, irrelevant detail doesn’t need to kill my buzz.

“It’s dumb, but when I see something that makes me think of you guys, I want to be able to pick it up and not worry

about whether or not I have the extra room.” Maci sneaks a glance at me through the curtain of hair. She’s still pulling at her fingers, and it takes tremendous effort not to grab ahold of her hands and bring them peace.

“It’s not dumb. It’s one of the most thoughtful things I’ve ever heard.”

“Thanks, James.” And I can hear the smile in her voice as her hands still.

We drive in comfortable silence, and I make it almost ten minutes before remembering why I’m driving her back to the apartment. She was on a date. But the guy wasn’t still around when she realized her battery died, so maybe that’s a good sign. For me. Probably not for him...or Maci. And now I feel like a jerk. I should ask her how it went. That would be the friendly thing to do, but I don’t know if I can stand to hear all the grueling details if it went well.

“I thought dating would get easier,” Maci confesses into the silence as if she can read my mind. “In high school, I always told myself: ‘When you’re in college, it’ll be easier.’ All I had to do was hold on another couple years, but it isn’t. If anything, it’s harder. Life is so much bigger now.” She rolls down the window, letting the night air stream in. Without missing a beat, I put the other three down as well.

“Yeah,” I agree after a second. “There’s a lot more to consider.” Like what would happen if you told one of the most important people in your life that you think you’re in love with her? Much more complicated than whether that cute girl in Home Economics might actually think you’re weird.

“Why aren’t you dating?” she asks abruptly, resting against the crook of the window and turning toward me. “How come Chase is all over me for it, but you get a free pass?”

My heart beats against my chest so hard I’m worried she’ll see it through the thin fabric of my t-shirt like something out of a cartoon. Is this the moment? Is this when I say to hell with everything I have left to “consider” and tell her? I look at her in the front seat of my car in the dress she picked out to wear on a date with another guy and think of the night she’s had.

No. Not tonight. It's not that I'm mad at her. How can I be when she doesn't have a clue that I've spent all night wondering if he's making her laugh or holding her hand across the table?

But I can't lie to her either. Everything else has been a simple omission of the truth, but this? I can't do that.

"I get in my head," I begin choosing my words carefully like I'm walking a tightrope between honesty and the whole truth. "I think of all the "what ifs" and end up talking myself out of it before I ever say something." But it won't be like that this time, I promise myself, because it can't be. Because I feel the weight of keeping this from her in my bones.

Maci goes quiet, mulling my words over. I turn into a spot in front of our apartments and put the car in park. She fiddles with the door handle as if she's not ready to get out yet. Maybe some part of her wishes this moment could go on forever like I do.

"James," she says, finally popping the door open and sliding out. "Any girl would be lucky to have you. No matter the what ifs."

I wait until she closes the door before letting my head fall against the window. Her words replay in my mind, and I can't help but smile.

Maci pauses when we reach the small concrete space between our two welcome mats.

"Thank James. For coming to get me." She smiles, but it doesn't quite chase away the tiredness in her eyes. Once again, the urge to ask about her date washes over me.

"Anytime. Anywhere." I say instead.

"Really, I—" But whatever she's about to say next dies on her lips when the door to her apartment opens behind her, and Chase steps out. When he notices the two of us, his eyes widen before locking on me.

"Finally! You can tell me the Netflix password!"

“I was home for two hours earlier, but sure, let’s do this now.” I want to glare at him, but there’s no way to do it without Maci noticing.

“I’ll let you two sort whatever this is out,” she says, stepping around Chase and into the still-open doorway. “Thanks again, James. Night.”

Then the door closes behind her, and I’m left, starting at the spot where she stood. Chase is never getting that Netflix password. Not in a million years.

“You know how you’re supposed to be my best friend?” I ask him, now able to glare freely.

“Yeah,” he says, his voice full of caution.

“Do better.” I still can’t tear my eyes away from the door to Maci and Daphne’s apartment. They’re probably in there now analyzing every detail of Maci’s date.

“You know they’re probably talking about—” Chase voices my thought aloud.

“I know.” Maybe if I press my ear against the door, I could hear. With a glass or something? That’s how they do it in the movies.

“Dude, you’ve got to tell her.” It’s the same thing he’s been saying for months, but for the first time, the words feel right.

The weight I felt in the truck beside her is back, and I know one day soon, I’ll crack. What ifs be damned.

Chapter 10

Maci

SWEAT COATS my palms as I sit outside Dr. Monroe's office. I used to love meetings with my advisor. By nature, I'm a people pleaser, and—between my grades and ability to track my own progress to graduation—Dr. Monroe is always pleased with me, which leads to words of affirmation. And those make my heart go pitter-patter. Or, that's usually how it goes, but today? Probably not. Hence the sweaty palms.

The door to Dr. Monroe's office opens, and a student slips out and heads off down the hall. He might have been in one of my classes last year, but I don't have time to ponder it because Dr. Monroe sticks her head out.

“Maci, come on in!” she instructs cheerfully.

I swallow hard and stand, rubbing my palms on my jeans.

Dr. Monroe's office is narrow but long. Bookshelves span the wall in front of her desk, with a mix of textbooks, biographies, and a small section of romance novels near the bottom back corner. Those are her not-so-secret guilty pleasure. The shelves behind her desk hold dozens of complex Lego models. Most are finished, but a few works in progress are scattered here and there. Sometimes, if an advisee is having a bad day, she'll pull one out to work on with them till their problems feel a little bit smaller. She's done it for me on more than one occasion. Last fall, I single-handedly built The Hocus Pocus house.

“How are you doing?” Dr. Monroe asks, passing by her desk and heading to the two armchairs at the back of the room with the world's tiniest coffee table resting between them.

Dropping my backpack on the floor, I follow her lead and sit in the chair across from her. Normally, small talk with Dr. Monroe is one of the best parts of our meetings. She dishes what tea she can about the goings on in the department, and I tell her about James, Chase, and Daphne's antics. I asked her once if she was this candid and casual with all her students. Her answer was intentionally vague, but her small, secret smile told me everything I needed to know.

"Do you think we can jump right in?" I ask, desperately hoping I don't sound rude.

Her eyebrows raise slightly over her tortoiseshell glasses, but she nods. "I take it the internship search hasn't gotten any easier?"

The word "internship" brings sudden tears to my eyes, so that answers that. A few slip past my lashes, but I don't wipe them away. Dr. Monroe has seen me cry so many times since freshman year the embarrassment has long since faded.

"All of them are unpaid. Or if they are paid, I never hear back from them," I complain, sniffing and reaching for the tissues at the center of the coffee table. It's unhealthy the way this search has caused me to compulsively check my email anytime I have a spare second. My heart soars when the new emails load, then crashes and burns when none are the ones I want to see.

"But you've gotten offers from some companies, right?" Dr. Monroe asks, confirming the information I plugged into the form she sent this morning before our meeting.

"A few," I concede reluctantly because I know what question comes next. It's the same one everyone asks when I explain the situation.

"And you're sure you can't make it work with your current schedule?"

"I've tried to figure it out, but there's no room." The frustration I feel has nothing to do with Dr. Monroe and everything to do with the situation because the answer is: *No, no matter how hard I try or how much I want it, I can't. And I*

only have myself to blame. I knew this requirement was coming since I picked my major almost three years ago. Maybe if I budgeted better or spent less, my savings could have carried the burden of my bills. But it can't. Realistically, I'm not sure it would have been able to even if I did those things.

"Maybe it's time we talk about your third option?" She asks softly. She knows how I feel about the third option. Meaning, it's not one. "If you were to TA for a class, that would meet the requirement, and you could keep your schedule as it is now."

But being a TA doesn't give me the same connections in the industry. It's not the kind of hands-on experience companies are looking for. Your senior internship is supposed to allow you to gain practical skills and become more marketable post-graduation. In any other context, I'd love to be a TA, but not at the cost of sacrificing all that. There has to be another way.

"I'll figure something out," I promise Dr. Monroe, sounding more than a little desperate. "I need a little more time, but I'll find something."

She surveys me with pinched lips and a skeptical look in her eyes but doesn't argue. "The semester has just started, so I suppose you have a little wiggle room. But, Maci—" she holds up a finger to stop me from interrupting "—if you don't find something by Thanksgiving break, we'll need to talk more seriously about that third option. I know it isn't your first choice, but you've worked so hard the last three years. I would hate to see all of that go to waste over this one requirement."

She means the words with all the kindness in the world, but they still land like a punch in the gut.

"Okay," I agree, trying to put more confidence into the words than I feel. Thanksgiving is only a little more than two months away, which means I have sixty days to do what I've spent the last six months trying to accomplish. No pressure.

* * *

FADING sunlight seeps through the gap in my curtains, growing darker and darker as I watch from my bed. I'm supposed to be at work. I'm supposed to be pouring shots and laughing with our Wednesday night pool league. But, after I met with Dr. Monroe, I couldn't do it. When I left her office, all the energy fled my body, and the tears that threatened to fall before rose back up again. I needed to be at work in thirty minutes, and while a grumpy bartender is a vibe, a tearful one is not.

So—once I got over the heart-crushing, overwhelming guilt—I called out. Something I haven't done since I got hit with strep and the flu at the same time my sophomore year. Tommy, The Rattle and Snake's owner asked me to repeat myself twice when I told him. Not because he was mad—mainly, I think he was concerned in his gruff way. Daphne was harder to convince. I had to talk her out of calling out herself, reminding her that if neither of us were there, it would just be the barbacks. Absolute chaos.

After she left, I crawled into bed and haven't moved in the two hours since. *Friends* plays on the TV screen, and I watch halfheartedly through glazed eyes.

I grew up in a strictly “no moping” household. Dad firmly believed if something was wrong, you should “*buck up and do something about it.*” Mom frequently told me she “*did not have the luxury of laying around and being sad.*” Now that I'm older, I know what they were trying to say: Some days, life gives us a lot of things to be upset about, and all you can do is keep on going, hoping tomorrow will be better.

They meant well, but their attitudes never left room for me to learn the value of rest. It wasn't till I took Psych 101 that I realized it was okay to take a beat now and then. To regroup before tackling a problem. The guilt used to overwhelm me, but here I am on my sixth episode of *Friends* with no intention of getting up. That's personal growth if I've ever heard it.

When the knock comes, I heavily debate ignoring it. I already had to get out of bed twenty minutes ago to collect the pizza I ordered, and moving again doesn't spark any joy. Another knock, more insistent this time. It's either James or Chase. Maybe both. Daphne probably clued them into what was happening and sent them to check on me.

"Maci, I know you're in there. I heard your pizza get delivered earlier." James's voice sounds muffled from behind the door.

"Ugh," I groan into my pillows. "It's unlocked!"

Slowly, the door creaks open, and James enters. His eyes scan the room, moving from my desk to the armchair to my bed. I don't want to know what I must look like, buried under my duvet and quilt, surrounded by pillows with a discarded pizza box at my feet. James steps further into the room, more hesitantly than I expect. He's an expert at encroaching into my space. For most of freshman year, he did his homework at my desk because his university-issued chair had exposed screws. He takes a hesitant step toward the bed and then stops.

Pushing myself up on my elbows, I scoot over to make room. "Come on," I tell him, patting the space beside me. He obeys, but there's still that hint of hesitation in his eyes. Maybe I'm imagining it—just a trick of the shadows cast by the fairy lights strung across my ceiling. "Did Daphne send you?"

I wonder what she told him. Between the four of us, we have group chats with every combination you can imagine for birthdays, Christmas presents, and all other surprises we might need to pull off. I know for a fact the three of them have one without me in it.

"She hasn't said anything," James says, taking off his shoes and settling into the bed beside me. "Like I said, I heard the pizza guy in the hall. I knew both of you were supposed to be at work, so I checked your location and figured something must be up. When's the last time you called out?"

"When I got strep from sharing a water bottle with Daphne, and then you gave me the flu," I remind him with a

glare.

“You shouldn’t have put off getting your flu shot.” James shrugs. “If you think about it, you should thank me for teaching you a valuable life lesson.”

Laughter bubbles out of me, and the sound makes James smile. The fact that he’s sitting here teasing me and treating me like he would any other day causes a swell of appreciation for him to rise in my chest. Everyone else is so used to me being the capable, practical one that when I falter, they do as well. Wanting to fix whatever’s “broken” me. That’s never been James, though. He gets it. There are more similarities than people think between being the responsible one and the funny one.

James laces his hands behind his head and leans back into the pillows. I follow his lead, nestling into my blankets. For a while, we lie there watching as the end of one episode fades into the beginning of another. We’ve spent plenty of evenings like this. Sometimes, in the living room. Sometimes, with Chase lounging on the floor beside my bed, and Daphne sprawled over the armchair. Sometimes, like now, it’s just the two of us. But, tonight, James’s presence weighs more heavily on my senses. His scent—sandalwood and balsam—mixing with the vanilla of the candle lit on my desk.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asks softly after watching a couple of episodes. I tilt my head to look up at him. His dark curls are more tousled than usual, falling into his sky blue eyes, which are still bright despite the half-light. Ever since he stepped into my room, a sense of peace has chased away all the anxieties plaguing me. I don’t want to invite them back in. Not tonight.

“No,” I murmur, a yawn overtaking the end of the word. “I’m kinda tired, though.”

“I’ll let you sleep.” He stands from the bed, scooping his shoes from the floor and starting toward the door. The loss of his body next to mine makes my stomach drop in a way I haven’t felt before. My heart races, and the fear and frustration from before starting to amp back up—ready to pull me under.

Before I can second guess myself, I call after him. “James, stay?”

And when he does something in the fabric of our friendship shifts. I’m still trying to put my finger on what when my eyes fall closed, and sleep carries me away.

Chapter 11

James

“I DON’T KNOW why we have to suffer because you decided you wanted to teach small children,” Daphne complains from where she lays on the couch with her head dangling off the cushion and her legs resting up along the back.

“Amen,” Chase agrees, nodding fervently as he carefully cuts out one of the fall leaves we spent the last twenty minutes tracing onto red, yellow, and orange construction paper.

“It was all cute and sweet until I’m spending my Saturday night perfecting your craft for Monday,” Maci jumps on the bandwagon, and I toss a ball of crumpled-up paper at her in retaliation. She dives out of the way as if it’s a grenade.

Since she asked me to stay the other night when she was having her meltdown, something’s shifted between us. It’s hard to explain. Kind of like the hard line that separated friendship from something more has begun to soften. I half didn’t believe I heard her correctly when she whispered the words into the quiet of her room. The whole time I lay beside her, I thought, “I have to be dreaming.” But I wasn’t. I could feel the heat of her body a few inches from mine and hear the soft, soothing sound of her breathing as sleep carried her away. I could have stayed there all night listening, watching, existing next to her. I didn’t. Once I was sure she was asleep, I slipped off her bed and out the door, wishing for all the world I could stay, wrap her in my arms, and fall asleep beside her.

“Okay! I need snacks,” Daphne says, swinging her legs off the couch and to the ground, coming dangerously close to kicking Chase in the head. He dodges just as hard as Maci did moments ago, glaring at Daphne.

“Watch where you swing those things!”

Daph ignores him, walks into the kitchen, and then pauses as if thinking better of it. “Maci and I have no snacks, which means you two don’t have any.”

“Unless James wants to pull out that bag of salt and vinegar chips he stole from me.” Maci looks at me suspiciously, and I return it with an unfazed smile.

“If there’s no proof it didn’t happen,” I tell her, tossing another ball of crumpled paper.

“So, salt and vinegar chips for Maci. James, I’ll get you your own. God knows you two can’t share. Chase, what do—”

“I’ll come with you,” Chase says, pushing himself up and off the floor. “My hand is cramping. Plus, James and I are out of toilet paper, and you’ll notice if we steal any more of y’all’s.”

“You two are impossible,” Maci and Daphne grumble in unison before looking at each other and giggling. Girls are weird—especially those two. I spend half of every day with Chase, but we don’t do that weird psychic stuff.

“Be back in twenty,” Daph calls as the door closes behind them.

I stare at the living room floor, which looks like we let one of my students go ham with scissors and colored paper, which is why I’m doing this instead of letting them do it themselves. When I realized I wanted to teach elementary school, I wish someone would have told me how much of my money would be funneled toward construction paper. Across from me, Maci hums quietly to the Luke Combs song playing from the speaker on the kitchen counter. She’s wearing a pair of sweatpants slung low on her hips that I’m pretty sure are pilfered from my closet. It used to drive me crazy that she and Daphne took my clothes and claimed them as their own, but lately, it doesn’t bother me as much. With Maci, that is. If Daphne cuts up another one of my T-shirts, it’ll call for drastic action. My eyes trail the curve of Maci’s hip bones, which disappear underneath the rolled waistband, traveling back up

to the cropped white tank top that almost blends into her creamy skin.

“James?” Her voice startles me out of my reverie, and I hastily flick my eyes up to her face. “Do I have something on my clothes?” She tilts her head down, pulling on her top to examine it—the fabric up, exposing a larger expanse of freckled skin. Lord, help me.

“I thought I saw something, but I think it was just a reflection of the light off the paper,” I lie. Is that a thing? I have no idea. Science isn’t my thing, and I think light refraction is science. Probably.

“Oh,” she frowns, releasing her shirt and smoothing it into place. “Did you talk to your dad about the email you got from the principal?”

The day after her date, we eventually discussed the email that’s currently living rent-free in my trash folder. Maci was the appropriate level of outraged and sympathetic while she listened to me vent, but ultimately, she played her standard role: the voice of reason. I nodded along to her suggestion that I sit down and have a man-to-man with my dad about the whole thing. I told her I would think about it. Which, technically, I did. I thought about it for about ten seconds and decided against it.

“I haven’t seen them since I got the email,” I say, knowing it’s a failure of an excuse because it takes less than ten minutes to get to my parents’ house from the apartment.

“You missed Sunday night dinner?” Maci asks with wide eyes. Every Sunday, my mom hosts dinner for anyone in the family who might want to come by. In the warmer months, Dad grills, and Mom supplies many delicious side dishes. Her deviled eggs are one of the best things I’ve ever tasted. When I started college, I showed up dutifully every Sunday, usually with Maci, Daphne, and Chase right behind me—eager to eat something that didn’t come from the campus cafeterias. It’s been harder in recent years, though. Between Daphne and Maci’s schedule at the bar and the odd remodeling jobs Chase and I do for people around town—our schedules are a little

crazier. Not that any of that is why I haven't been in the last two weeks, but it's easier to tell myself that than face reality.

"It's been busy with my internship and other classes and stuff..." I trail off lamely, not looking her in the eye.

"James." Her disappointed tone might as well be a hand around my heart squeezing.

"Have you told your parents about the internship?" I counter, wanting to make the ache stop. It was the wrong thing to say. Her mouth becomes a hard line, and now she's not looking at me.

"It's not the same." Her voice is so quiet and timid that I immediately feel like a class-A jerk.

"I'm sorry," I apologize, picking up my scissors to give myself something to do with my hands. I don't have any more leaves to cut out, but I will hold her hand if I don't hold something else. "You're right."

When I look back at her face, her lips are slightly parted in what I think is surprise. Fair enough. It's not like us to apologize so quickly, but things are changing. After the other night, I've started to believe maybe she realizes that too.

"Thank you," she says softly. An awkward silence falls between us before she leans across the floor to snag my phone. "This music is killing the vibe," she mutters by way of excuse before punching in my password and switching the song to something suspiciously like Hannah Montana.

"And this is better?" I tease.

"2000s Disney is always the vibe," she tells me solemnly. My phone buzzes in her hand, and she glances down, eyes skimming the text. "It's from Chase. He says, 'It's now or never.' What does that mean?"

"Something from a TV show he's obsessed with." It's the worst lie ever, but Maci's hopefully too distracted by how I almost throw myself across the floor to grab my phone back to notice.

“You guys are weird,” she tells me, and I nod in agreement.

Another text Chase comes in as I settle back onto the ground with a new stack of leaves.

CHASE: you said you were going to do it this week, and there are about four hours left in said week

have you done it? you promised

you haven't? have you? knew I should have made you pinky promise.

I force back a groan and turn my notifications off. After Maci's date last week, Chase cornered me in the bathroom while I was brushing my teeth and made me swear that I would, at the very least, ask her on a date. And, because he didn't trust me to do it in a timely fashion, he gave me a deadline. Thankfully, in the week I've been procrastinating, I figured out a loophole: asking her out doesn't mean I necessarily have to tell her how I feel. That can come later, like on the date, or never if it goes terribly. It's not keeping with the spirit of the law, but what Chase doesn't know won't kill him.

“Hey, Mace?” All I've said is her name, and my heart already thuds in my chest. Maybe I don't need to specify that it's a date. Just dinner where only the two of us are there. It's not a good plan. I know that. But with Maci staring at me with her bright green eyes and soft smile, it's all I've got. “Do you want to go out to dinner tomorrow? That taco truck you love from Silver Crest is doing a pop-up tomorrow night for a food truck festival. I thought we could go.”

I might have procrastinated asking for the last week, but I did some research. Every sound in the world seems amplified while I wait for her response.

“Daphne works tomorrow night. And isn't Chase supposed to be in DC all day with his parents?”

Not the response I was hoping for, but one I probably should have seen coming.

“Yeah, I know...I thought it could just be the two of us,” I explain awkwardly, fighting an internal battle to maintain eye contact with her. The overwhelming urge to backtrack and rescind the offer bubbles up, making it past the defenses in my brain and reaching the tip of my tongue.

“Oh,” she thinks it over, pulling something up on her phone—probably that intensely organized calendar—before looking back to me. Her eyes have hesitation, and I wish I knew what was causing it. Does she know what I’m trying to ask? Is it because she feels what hangs between us the way I do? I want to ask more than anything, but the fear that’s held me back for the last year won’t let me. I’ve met my quota for bravery tonight.

“Tacos sound good,” she finally says, and I breathe a sigh of relief. It’s not where I want us to be, but a step closer. “It’s a date.”

Those three words stop my racing heart in my chest. She says them so casually I don’t think she means anything by them, but still...maybe...just maybe she did.

Chapter 12

James

HEY!” Maci says cheerfully, leaning into my truck’s open driver’s side window. “Did you get Daphne’s tampons?”

“Yep.” I do my best to keep all hints of frustration out of my voice as I give her the bright pink box. Do you know what screams romance? Handing over a box of tampons for your cousin to the girl you’re trying to take on a date right before said date.

“You’re a lifesaver! I’ll be right back.” She takes the box and walks toward the entrance of our apartment complex.

As soon as I’m sure she can’t see me, I drop my head onto the steering wheel and let out a groan I’ve been holding in since the grocery store. I stayed up half last night meticulously planning today, going over and over what to do and say. First thing this morning, I went to Delilah’s to pick up two bouquets—one for Maci and one for Mom. On my way home, I dropped by my parents’ house to give Mom her flowers and let her know none of us would be there for dinner. The bouquet was part apology for skipping out again and part tradition.

When I got back to the apartment, I left Maci’s bouquet on the kitchen counter before heading off to play golf with Asher and a couple of our other cousins. I returned to no flowers and a note left in their place.

Thanks for grabbing these for me - Chase

In his defense, when I went to text-yell at him, I saw his text from the night before asking me to grab his mom flowers when I picked up the other ones. At that point, Delilah’s was closed, so instead of the beautiful mixture of dahlias and

baby's breath I picked out, I had to settle for a discounted grocery store bouquet of roses. And, of course, when I was there, Maci texted me to grab tampons for Daphne while I was out. We're about thirty minutes behind schedule, which would normally not bother me—punctuality is Daph's thing—but I need tonight to go perfectly.

“You okay?” Maci's voice through the passenger side window startles me, and I quickly sit upright.

“A little tired, but I'm good.” It's true. Even after I managed to fall asleep last night, it was a restless, dream-filled few hours.

“If you want to rain check—”

“No!” I almost shout the word, and she steps back, startled by my forcefulness. “I mean, no, we can't miss tacos!”

“I do love tacos,” she sighs happily, pulling open the door. She gets halfway into the truck before she notices the flowers. “Oh, these are so pretty!”

At the smile on her face, all the frustration from the day melts away. It was silly to think she would mind a grocery store bouquet. Maci values the little things. It's one of the reasons—

“Are we dropping them off to your mom before dinner?”

“Um,” I stall, racking my brain for how to salvage the situation. It would be easy to say I got them for her, but in my head, I saw it going something more like...

Maci notices the flowers...

Maci realizes they're for her & kisses my cheek in thanks...

The flowers work to soften her to the idea of us as more than friends...

Like most everything else that's happened today, this was not in the plan. I should have seen it coming. Maci knows I give Mom flowers for Sunday night dinner. It's something I would do to stop by and drop them off even though I'm missing it—hell, it's something I did do.

“C’mon, let’s go,” Maci says, picking up the flowers so she can drop into the seat. “We gotta get there before your aunts and uncles do. Otherwise, we’ll never be able to leave. Then, no tacos, which would be crushing.”

“Yep, you’ve got it,” I agree, rubbing my jaw to try and release some of the tension there. Okay, the flowers were a flop. So glad I spent my morning running around to retrieve them, but it’s okay. It doesn’t mean the rest of the date will be a disaster.

“Are you going to start the car?” She leans forward to look me full in the face. “James, are you sure you’re okay?”

“Just peachy,” I say, putting the car in drive.

First stop on this kinda sorta maybe date? My parents’ house.

Just. Freaking. Peachy.

* * *

THERE ARE no cars besides my parents’ in the driveway when we pull up to the three-story brick house I grew up in. It should be simple—in and out. I’m not sure how I will explain to my mother why I’m bringing her two bouquets of flowers in one day without being teased for the rest of my life.

“I’m going to run in real quick. Wait here?” I ask, taking the flowers from her and opening my door.

“But I love your mom!” Maci frowns.

“And she loves you,” I reassure her. “Which is why if you go in there, we’re never leaving, and I’ve been looking forward to tacos all day.”

Putting her tacos on the line does the trick, and Maci nods, unlocking her phone and pulling up Quizlet. “I’ve got studying to do anyways.”

I’m about to make fun of her for being such a nerd, but I catch myself. Mocking isn’t the way to eventually lead her to

the conclusion that this is a date. Closing the door, I head up the stairs to the house.

I find my parents in the kitchen. Dad stands over the sink, pulling an array of meats out of their marinades and into pans for the grill while Mom hovers over the stove. Whatever she's cooking smells delicious.

"James!" Mom exclaims when she sees me standing in the doorway. Drying her hands on the apron tied around her waist, she hurries over and kisses my cheek like she did earlier today. "Another bouquet? I thought those were for Maci!"

I rub the back of my neck with my free hand, feeling heat crawl across my cheeks. "That didn't go exactly to plan," I mumble, walking over to the cabinet where Mom keeps her vases.

"Is the date off?" she asks, following me and taking vase and flowers from my hands, probably for the best. Even though I've watched her cut stems and carefully arrange each bloom for years, I'm not very good at it.

"No, she's in the car. And it's not exactly a date," I admit, the heat intensifying.

Mom gives me a quizzical look. Aside from Chase, she's the only one I've told about my feelings for Maci. She knew before Chase, though he isn't aware of that. I didn't want to deal with the headache his pompous—"What does friendship even mean anymore?"—speech would inevitably bring. It wasn't some dramatic reveal when I told Mom. We were sitting on the front porch steps, sipping our coffees the day after we got back from vacation. I'd spent two weeks away from Maci before, but this time was different. I could feel her absence in a way I'd never experienced.

"I think I love her," I told Mom so quietly it was a wonder the word didn't get lost in the birds' morning songs.

I didn't have to say who "her" was. Mom took hold of my hand and squeezed gently. "I know."

Sometimes, the most important confessions happen in the quiet of a small moment.

“What do you mean it’s not a date?” Dad asks, pulling me out of my thoughts and back to the unfortunate reality of my present. “You are going to dinner, just the two of you. That’s a date.”

“Yeah, well—” Before I can make my case, the front door opens and closes, stopping all of us in our tracks. Silently, I hope that it’s my younger sister, Lily, arriving early to dinner.

“Hey, sorry, I know you said to wait in the car, but I have to use the bathroom,” Maci’s voice carries into the kitchen before she steps into view.

“You told her to wait in the car!” Mom scolds me, swatting me on my shoulder. I have no words because all of them are now exclusively for begging God not to let my parents say anything to embarrass me or—heaven forbid—ask Maci about our “date.”

“It’s okay, Jenny,” Maci tells Mom, waving off her outrage. “It’s all in the name of tacos. Right, James?”

“Anything for tacos,” I say with a fake laugh that has everyone in the room looking at me with concern.

“Oh-kay, I’ll be quick, and then we can head out. Sorry about missing Sunday night dinner again. I’m working out a shift swap to make it next week.”

Watching her talk to my parents with such ease and familiarity causes my heart to strain against my chest. She fits into our family so well already. I can see her in five or ten years chasing around a red-headed, blue-eyed toddler while Mom laughs from the couch and—

Whoa, James. Get ahold of yourself.

As soon as Maci heads down the hall to the bathroom, my parents’ eyes are on me. I’m never living this down. Unless tonight goes terribly, and then they might feel too badly for me to mock me. But that option sounds worse than the teasing.

“It’s not as simple as you’re making it sound,” I say, circling back to Dad’s previous comment.

“She’s certainly dressed like it’s date,” Mom observes.

“Mom!”

“I don’t understand why it has to be so complicated.” Dad sets the meat down on the counter and turns to face me, crossing his arms over his chest. In the last couple years, his hair has become more salt than pepper, and the horn-rimmed glasses he used to wear when he was reading are now a permanent fixture on his face.

“I’m sorry, not all of us feel the need to force our feelings on others.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. I haven’t acknowledged the email from the school’s principal with him in any way, shape, or form. That was the strategy I planned to stick with, but the day’s emotions have me riled up. It just slipped out.

“James,” he begins in his “lecture” tone. I’m well familiar with it and in no mood to hear it today.

“Boys,” Mom scolds, stepping between us. Her blue eyes, the mirror of my own, hold a warning that’s meant for both of us. “This is not the time.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say as Dad says, “Of course, honey.”

An awkward pause falls over the three of us, and in the silence, a floorboard in the hallway creaks. I turn, expecting to see Maci. A second later, our family’s black cat, Jasper, scampers into the room. Mom scoops him up in her arms and kisses his head. I swear, she’s the only person in this family that cat likes. He glares at me accusingly from her arms, and I fight the urge to stick my tongue out at him. I’m not ten anymore. It would be weird. But that cat is antagonistic. It’s not my fault.

“You need to tell her, James. It’s been a year. It’s not good for you to hold all those feelings inside, and—quite frankly—it’s not fair to Maci. Your friendship is changing. I see it. Your father sees it. Hell, the whole family sees it. The only one who doesn’t know is her.” Mom’s tone is sympathetic but firm, her usual go-to when telling her children the hard truths about life.

“I know it’s hard,” Dad adds, crossing the room to wrap his arm around Mom’s waist and pull her to him. “But look at

your mother and me. We were friends for a decade before we fell in love. I was scared the night I told her, but I think it turned out alright.”

“I’d say so,” Mom agrees, smiling softly and staring into Dad’s face. They’re the picture of marital bliss almost twenty-four years after saying their vows.

“Okay, I can do this.” I don’t know who I’m trying to convince them or myself.

“Do what?” Maci asks, stepping back into the kitchen. I freeze, not sure what to say. In my panic, I see what Mom meant earlier about Maci dressing like this is a date. She’s not dressed like when she went out with Devon, but her hair is in the same soft waves, and she’s wearing makeup. Her jeans hug her hips, and there’s dark blue lace peaking over the top of her cream cardigan. Certainly not our usual taco outfits of stretchy pants and oversized t-shirts. And that’s just enough to give me the hope and courage to go through with tonight.

“Oh, nothing,” Mom says, laughing a tinkling giggle that’s way more convincing than my bark of laughter earlier. “Now, go you two. If Aunt Sharon catches you here, you’ll never get those tacos.”

Chapter 13

Maci

I GET BACK into James's truck with a stranger. He looks the same as the James I arrived with. Same, dark curly hair. Same sky-blue eyes. Same easy smile. But he isn't the same. Not anymore. Not to me.

Eavesdropping is wrong. I know that. My parents raised me better than to lurk in hallways listening to conversations that weren't meant for my ears. But—the thing is—I didn't mean to eavesdrop. I came back from the bathroom and practically tripped over Jasper, who was sunning himself in the light streaming through the window. He ran off toward the kitchen, and I was right behind him until I heard James's mom say, "You should tell her, James."

I thought I was interrupting a private family moment. James has over a dozen female relatives his mom could have been talking about. Maybe he'd broken something of his sister's or used the last of Daphne's oat milk creamer. She doesn't take that well. Chase and I can attest to that. But then, his mom kept talking.

"It's time. It's been a year, and—quite frankly—it's not fair to Maci. Your friendship is changing. I see it. Your father sees it. Hell, everyone sees it. The only one who doesn't know is her."

It felt like that one time in my freshman year of high school when I tried to play lacrosse for a season. I took a brutal hit to my solar plexus. All the air left my body. I was left on the ground, gasping for something that usually comes easily.

I couldn't tell you who said what after that. All I could hear was a roar in my ears as the realization crashed over me. How I managed to walk into the kitchen and act like everything was normal, I don't know. But I did it. I hugged James's dad goodbye and kissed his mom on the cheek. I followed James out the door while he talked about something that couldn't possibly matter because the only thing that mattered was the secret he'd been keeping from me for a year.

A year.

"I think I can manage eight and a half tacos. Eight isn't enough, but nine seems like too much. Plus, if we want ice cream after I have to leave room." James's voice sounds like it's coming from underwater. Warped and distorted.

I don't know what I'll say if I open my mouth right now. We've always told each other everything. Even the embarrassing, weird things you usually keep between yourself and your middle school. Every year, he caves and gives me my birthday present at least a week early because he can't keep it a secret, so how did he manage this?

"We are getting ice cream, right?" James asks, reaching over to poke me in the side. I jump at the contact and his brow furrows. "Okay, what's going on with you?"

He turns into the parking lot across from the food truck festival. Half the town must be out on the street, carrying trays of deliciousness to the open trunks of their cars, which are piled with blankets and pillows.

Part of me wants to ask him now. Get it all out in the open, but a bigger part of me fears what that would mean. Things between us would never be the same again. I guess that's probably already the case—but at least right now, I can pretend.

"I'm nervous about this test," I tell him, knowing it's not exactly a lie, but it's not the whole truth either.

"Hey." He puts the truck in park and faces me. "You'll do amazing. You always do." That look in his eyes is back. The one I couldn't decipher before. The one that made my chest

tighten and my stomach flip. It's longing. I see it now. I don't know how I didn't before. Apparently, everyone else did.

"Thanks," I say with a tight-lipped smile. "Taco time?"

"Taco time," he agrees with a nod.

We make our way to the Taco' Bout It truck, and I'm saved having to make conversation by all the people waving at James or calling out in greeting. Between his family, the home renovations he and Chase have been doing, and simply growing up here his whole life, the entire town knows him. One of the ladies in his mom's book club, Mrs. Hudson, stops us to congratulate James on starting his senior year. I've never met her before, but I used to work with her daughter, Brynn, at The Rattle and Snake before she graduated from BCU. I give her a friendly nod but leave the conversation to them.

What seems like an hour later, we arrive at our destination. I've been craving carne asada tacos all day, but now my stomach has twisted into so many knots I'm not sure I'll be able to eat. I let James order for us. He knows mine by heart anyway.

Or, maybe he knows it by heart because he has feelings for you.

Another knot twists in my stomach, and now I'm sure I won't be able to eat my share of the tacos.

"I'm surprised your mom still had Sunday night dinner with the food truck festival happening," I say, hoping that, by starting a conversation, all the questions and fears rushing through my mind will take a back seat, at least till we get home. Then I can shut myself in my room and think. Make lists. Organize all the feelings, thoughts, and questions till I have a cohesive plan for what comes next. I've never been good at reacting to big, emotional things in the moment. My feelings get the better of me, and I become so flustered I make no sense or—worse—say things I don't mean.

James digs into the bag of fresh tortilla chips he's holding and pulls one out. "You know how my family is about tradition."

“True.” Well, that wasn’t as engaging as I needed it to be.

When we reach the truck, James sets his share of the food in the front seat. I follow him, assuming we’ll spread our feast on the dash.

“Actually,” he says, touching my arm to stop me. “I thought we could eat in the truck bed.”

I wrinkle my nose, “When’s the last time you cleaned that thing out?”

“This morning.” A flush creeps onto his cheeks, and he rubs a hand over his jaw, which is clean-shaven rather than covered in the layer of stubble he allows to grow in over the weekend.

I follow him as he pulls down the back of the truck to reveal a bunch of pillows and blankets. A few of which I recognize from Daphne’s and my living room. After putting all the food onto the small sheet of plywood that will serve as our table, James extends his hand down to help me up. I hesitate because I’m only now realizing what I should have known from the moment I overheard him and his mom. The flowers. His clean-shaven jaw. My favorite food truck. The little nest he built for the two of us.

This is a date. We’re on a date, and he didn’t tell me.

“You coming?” he asks, and I take his hand. James pulls while I place one foot into the truck’s bed and push off the ground with the other. The force sends us falling into one another, and I land against his chest. My heart races, and somehow, I feel like I’m falling despite standing on solid ground. I stare up at him, trying to pick threads of feelings out of the haze that’s fallen over me.

There’s hurt. At him keeping something like this for me for so long. There’s frustration. That everyone else besides me apparently knows, yet somehow, I missed it. There’s sadness. Because I can’t imagine the weight this secret has forced upon his shoulders. And there’s something else. That same feeling from the night he stayed with me till I fell asleep. That

knowledge that something in our friendship has changed forever.

“I’m starving,” I announce, stepping away and plopping onto the blankets. Whether I’m hungry or not, it doesn’t matter because if we’re eating, we’re not talking. If we’re not talking, I can think.

James settles beside me, splitting open the bag so it serves as a plate, and we dig in. As soon as I take my first bite of the masterpiece that is Taco ‘Bout It’s carne asada tacos, I realize that I am starving. I guess my feelings have no real bearing on my ability to consume a taco...or five.

I watch James through a curtain of my hair. Listening to the country music coming from the pavilion, where a band I recognize from live music nights at the bar plays. The lead singer croons about heartbreak into the microphone, and it emphasizes the ache in my chest. Things will never be the same again. James will never be mine in the same way again. But could he be mine in a different way? I don’t know.

That thought terrifies me. All of the unknowns rising in front of me in a wave of fear. The terms and conditions of James’s and my friendship have been written in stone for three years. I know how things work. Maybe the lines blur occasionally, but they always come back into focus in the end. And those lines? They’re there for a reason. This is about more than just James and me. The Langleys are the only family I have out here, maybe not by blood, but in all the ways that count. From the moment Daphne brought me home, I knew how I fit in, but now...

“Can you believe we’re in our senior year?” James asks when only a few crumbs and scattered pieces of lettuce remain where the tacos once were.

Okay, yes. This is a topic I can handle. I push away all other thoughts and force myself into the moment.

“No,” I say, staring at the sea of cars and food trucks. The setting sun casts a golden light over them, making everything it touches look magical. It’s one of the last warm nights of the

season before the evening chill starts to settle in. “It seems like we started freshman year yesterday.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready for it to end.” His words are soft. Timid, even.

This is it. He’s about to tell me. I can see it in the firm set of his jaw and the raw hope in his eyes. I’m not ready. He may have had a year to process all the changing feelings and shifting dynamics, but I haven’t.

“Up until now, everything’s been laid out for us. High school was all about preparing us to get into college, and college was supposed to be about preparing us to step into the real world, but—” I pause, trying to describe what the idea of graduation feels like.

“You don’t feel prepared at all?” he asks.

“Not in the slightest.”

“Everything’s about to change.”

It already has.

“Will you go grab us ice cream?” I ask because I need a minute to regroup without him right there on the brink of making a confession that’s already been made for him.

“Yeah, of course.” He stands and hops over the side of the truck without asking what I want. He already knows.

I wish I hadn’t overheard his mom. That I went into tonight blissfully unaware like I was supposed to be. Maybe then things could have gone differently. I wouldn’t have had time to get in my head about all the ways this could go wrong. Where is Daphne’s continuous optimism when I need it?

James reappears a few minutes later with one cone of strawberry ice cream—his—and one cone of birthday cake—mine. He passes them up before climbing in and settling beside me closer than before.

“I don’t know how you eat that stuff,” he informs me. “It’s so sweet it makes my teeth hurt looking at it.”

“Your palette is just less refined than mine,” I tease, and for the first time all night, it feels genuine.

“You mean less refined than a four-year-old?” He breaks into a smile that takes over his face, and my heart skips as I take him in. His eyes are locked on mine, and I can’t look away even though I know I should. “You have...” he trails off, hand coming up to swipe at the corner of my mouth.

When his thumb brushes my lip, I stop breathing for the second time tonight, but this time it’s different. His head dips down, and his lips capture mine. Somehow, it’s a complete surprise, but also like I’ve known it was coming all the long at the same time. He cups my face in his hands, angling my chin to meet his lips. I wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. As he kisses me, all the fear and worry dull until I only feel his lips against mine.

A loud whistle followed by an even louder crack sends us reeling apart. The momentary reprieve from my emotions over. The sky above bursts into light as the fireworks cast a purple glow over the whole field. Neither of us so much as look up. Our breaths come in matching gasps.

“Maci—” he begins, but I don’t let him because I can’t.

“I know!” I tell him so quietly I don’t think he heard me over the boom of the fireworks.

“You...you what?” He gapes, mouth opening and closing, but no words coming out.

“I overheard your mom talking to you about it in the kitchen.” Tears stream down my face, and I realize I’ve been holding them back all night. “Everyone knows, James? Everyone?”

Has everyone been whispering about it behind my back for the last year? Taking bets on when he’d finally tell me? On if I’d feel the same? The thought is humiliating.

“No, no, no,” he says, jumping to explain. “I’ve only told Chase and Mom. And, of course, Mom told Dad. And maybe Logan has an idea because he was flirting with you at the bonfire, and I talked to him about it—”

“You what?”

I thought Logan was flirting with me that night. All the signs were there. When I went to get a new drink, I was trying to figure out how to let him down gently if he asked me out. But then, when I caught him later, he was back to the same old Logan: no charming smiles or low flirtatious tones.

“I just wanted to know if he asked you out,” James’s voice sounds fragile, as if at any moment he might shatter into a thousand pieces before my eyes.

“I can’t believe you would...I can’t...” I stumble over my words, unable to form my thoughts into clear sentences.

He’s had these feelings for a year and didn’t tell me. He’s been lying to me for a year. All those little moments I questioned. All those occasional butterflies or that tingling sensation when we touched. I didn’t understand it then, but he did. And now I feel so stupid for not seeing it.

“I just couldn’t stand the thought of you with anyone else,” he says as another firework goes off above us. I stare at it, watching golden sparks cascade across the sky.

This is why I wanted time to think. I knew this would happen. Everything’s too raw and new for me to communicate without hurting him.

“I want to go home,” I say quietly, and James shakes his head.

“No, let me explain.” He’s not begging. His words are forceful. This is why he brought me here tonight, after all. I know that now.

The way tonight could have gone plays before my eyes. The date would have been wonderful. He would have done all the right things. Said all the right things. And when he kissed me all the pieces would have fallen into place. It’s all so real, I could reach out and touch it. But what happens after? When we start to fight because he thinks I work too hard, and I want him to stop goofing around and grow up. We’re so intrinsically different. And it *works*, as friends. But as a couple? I don’t know.

“No, James, I want to go home. I can’t—”

“Hold on,” he cuts me off, holding up his hand. “You overheard my mom in the kitchen,” he says slowly, his eyes widening. “You’ve known all night and didn’t say anything?”

“You’ve felt this way for a year and didn’t say anything,” I counter. How dare he accuse *me* of holding something back like he hasn’t been doing the same thing for longer.

“Because I was scared!” he shouts, the light from the fireworks highlighting the tears shining in his eyes. “I didn’t want to lose you!”

His words land like a slap to the face.

James is my safe space. I might have left everything I knew behind when I moved here, but I was adrift long before that. He grounded me. Welcomed me into his family when I felt like I no longer had a place in my own. He’s become home to me as much as Birch Creek itself. How could he ever believe for a second that I would ever walk away from him?

“Maci, please.” And now he is begging. “I didn’t know how to tell you. You’re such a big part of my life, and I didn’t know what would happen if...” His adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “...if you didn’t feel the same way.”

The vulnerability in his voice takes all the fight out of me. I blink away the remaining tears, swipe at my cheeks. My mascara is probably already smeared beyond all recognition, anyway.

“Do you?” James asks, his voice so soft I can barely hear it over the last few fireworks popping in the sky.

“Do I what?” I ask even though I know. But what I don’t know is the answer to his question. Everything about tonight has been too much. All my senses feel like they’re blazing as bright as the sparks in the sky.

“Do you feel the same way?” The hope in his eyes is so apparent, and I know what I’m going to say next will kill him as much—if not more—than it’s killing me.

“I don’t know.”

Chapter 14

James

ONE OF THE pros of student teaching is that I don't have any after-school duties, unlike an actual teacher. No carline. No hallway monitoring. So, as I watch my little army of six-year-olds pack up their bags for the day, the end is blissfully in sight. Last week, when Henry told me he had a seminar at the county offices, I was beyond excited to have "my own classroom" for the day. With the oversight of the school's substitutes, of course, but still. I spent all last week studying the lesson plans Henry gave me. It's probably the most prepared I've ever been in my life.

In hindsight, deciding the night before my solo teaching debut was the best time to tell Maci about my feelings wasn't my most brilliant move. It's not like I can even say I never pictured it going as badly as it did. There were scenarios in my head that went much worse. But, even after imagining all of those, I don't think I could ever have been ready for how awful the aftermath would feel.

The whole drive to work, I replayed last night on repeat in my head. There's a golden glow over the first half, even though darkness creeps in at the edges, knowing what comes next. When I kissed Maci, it felt like the universe designed the moment for us. The small smear of ice cream at the corner of her full, pink lips. The tension crackling in the air between us. Her soft, sweet breath on my cheek. When we broke apart, there was one moment of relief and bliss mixed with the taste of her still lingering. Then all of it came crashing down.

A light knock on the classroom's open door pulls me from my thoughts, and the room before me comes back into focus.

The substitute, Mrs. Abraham, lines the kids up to walk them out to carline, and Henry stands in the doorway, surveying the scene in front of him with a bemused smile.

“Good, everyone’s alive,” he says, stepping into the room and fist-bumping several kids as he goes. His appearance has caused the previously calm (or as calm as first graders can get) line to dissolve into a frenzy of shouts of delight. You would think it’s been a month since they last saw him rather than three days.

“Yep, I managed to keep them all breathing.” There’s a little pride in my tone because, honestly, kids don’t always make that an easy task.

“I was talking about you,” Henry smirks and then looks down at the kids, still shrieking and jostling one another. “Macaroni and Cheese!” he booms, his deep baritone reverberating off the classroom walls.

“Everybody freeze!” A chorus of twenty-three voices responds. A few are still giggling, but they all stand still.

“I’ll see all of you tomorrow, but for now, follow Mrs. Abraham out to carline.” The kids fall back into a somewhat straight line at Henry’s direction. I’ve been continuously impressed by the control he has over his classroom. Maybe it’s because he looks better suited to a Navy Seal special op team than an elementary school or his ability to make the kids laugh while learning. Whatever it is...I hope I’m half as good as him one day. After the thrill of afternoon recess, they brushed aside my “macaroni and cheese” call and response.

The students begin to shuffle out the door, but one of the girls near the back, Deja, stops and turns around. Hesitation flickers across her little face before she ducks out of line and runs back to me, dark brown braids flying behind her. She collides with my legs, hugging me tight. I pat her softly on the back, exchanging a confused look with Henry.

“It’s okay if you didn’t feel like singing today, Mr. Langley,” she says, peering up at me with the sweetest look of concern I’ve ever seen. “Sometimes I don’t feel like singing

either.” With that, she promptly lets go of me and rushes to rejoin her friends in line.

Her words startle me into speechlessness as I watch her go. When I walked into school today, I thought I did an okay job locking down my outside life. Before I got out of the car, I shoved the memory of Maci’s tears and hurt into the furthest corner of my mind, but if someone as young as Deja noticed, I didn’t do a very good job.

“You didn’t sing?” Henry asks, coming further into the room and closing the door now that the kids are gone. “Today’s song was from Moana. Isn’t that one of your favorite movies ever?”

“Not ever. I think it’s a heartwarming story. That’s all. Plus, The Rock is in it. And have you seen that chicken? How could you not like it?” I say a little more defensively than necessary. Disney movies have been some of my favorites ever since I was a kid. Somehow, it’s fine for little girls never to grow out of it, but if a boy doesn’t...well then, he gets mocked mercilessly by his cousins for the rest of his life.

“My daughter loves Moana, too. I get it,” he says, laughter twinkling in his eyes.

“What are you doing here anyway?” I ask, starting my daily circle around the classroom, picking up the mess the kids left behind. “I thought you had that meeting thing today.”

“It ended a little early, and I wanted to see how your first-day flying solo went.” Henry joins me in my clean-up duty, scrunching up his nose when he finds a half-finished lollipop by the kids’ cubbies.

“Everything went fine,” Normally, I’d sit down and analyze every part of the day. Go over what I thought worked and how to fix the things that didn’t, but I don’t have the energy. I have to write a report anyway. We can go over all of it later this week.

“Well, there are no scorch marks on the ceiling, and all the desks are intact, so that seems like a fair assessment.” He stands upright, two fistfuls of trash clutched in his hands.

“I tried my best.” I try for an easy-going smile even though it feels more like a grimace. All I can think about is the quiet seclusion of my room and the reassuring beep of my Xbox turning on. Between the stress of last night and the stress of teaching today, I need an hour or three to shut off my brain.

“Okay,” Henry says, depositing his trash in the can and bringing it over for me to toss my collected treasures in. “You want to tell me what’s going on with you? Because if I’ve learned anything about you these last three weeks, you never skip out on a Disney sing-along, and you’re always smiling. It’s a little disconcerting. You’re zero for two today.”

I look away, not wanting to meet his questioning stare. No one’s asked me about last night yet. After I dropped Maci off, I drove around until Chase texted me he was going to bed and expected the full scoop the next day. When I left this morning, he was still fast asleep. Bullet dodged.

“It’s personal.” It seems like the safest answer. “Girl stuff. You don’t want to hear about it.”

“What? You think just because I’m married, I don’t understand girl stuff? Kid, I put up with more girl stuff on the daily than you can ever imagine.” Henry’s voice is lighthearted, but there’s a thread of seriousness. I’ve heard him use the same tone on the kids before, and damn if it isn’t effective.

“No, no. That’s not what I’m saying at all. It’s just—don’t you have to pick Alana up from daycare soon?” Henry doesn’t mind me being so eager to stay behind and finish up extra projects because he can grab his daughter early from the daycare down the street. From what he’s told (read: ranted) about the cost of childcare, it probably saves him a couple hundred a week.

“Nope. My mother-in-law is in town for the week. She’s got Alana all day, and Beth isn’t home from work for another hour.”

I vaguely remember Henry telling me Beth’s mom was coming to town for a week. He wasn’t excited by the prospect at the time.

“Is this a ploy to avoid one-on-one time with her?” I ask. Maybe bringing up his mother-in-law will cause one of his tangents, and I’ll be able to escape this conversation unscathed.

“Absolutely,” he agrees. “She’s already rearranged our kitchen to be more “accessible.” The woman is a nightmare.” I raise my eyebrows at his choice of words, and he lifts his hand defensively. “Hey, Beth said it first, so I can say it too. As long as Beth or her mom aren’t in earshot.”

“I won’t tell,” I promise.

“Okay, enough stalling. C’mon.” Henry waves me over to the reading corner in the back of the classroom. Settling into a bright green bean bag, he points to the neon orange one across from it. “Sit. Talk.”

I stand awkwardly over him. Seeing such a big man sitting on such a small beanbag would usually be hilarious, but I can’t find it in me to laugh.

“It’s not a big deal. I’m fine.”

“Listen, James, teaching is a hard job. When you come in here, you’ve gotta be able to give these kids your all even though life keeps going on outside your classroom. Some days, that’s harder than others. Having people on your team at school who you can talk to, that’s the one thing I’ve found that helps.” He gestures to the bean bag again. “So, please, sit.”

I sigh, finally caving and dropping into the seat. It’s comfier than I thought, and I stretch my legs out before me. “Okay, but it’s kind of a long story,” I begin in warning.

“The longer you talk, the less time I have to see my mother-in-law.” Henry follows my lead, leaning back into his seat and crossing his outstretched legs at the ankle.

“Well—” I start.

“Wait!” He hops up and opens one of the nearby cabinets. Sticking his head inside, he re-emerges with two bags of goldfish. Tossing me one, he settles back into his beanbag. “This story seems like it needs snacks. Okay, go ahead.”

I start at the very beginning: Freshman year. Because even though I only realized my feelings for Maci were changing last Fall, I'm pretty sure the shift started long before that. I take him through the highlights. Things I look back on now and wonder how I didn't realize so much earlier. Maybe she and I wouldn't be where we are right now if I had.

“The four of us were on this road trip in the Appalachian Mountains over fall break last year. One afternoon, Daphne was driving, and Maci was up front with her. Sun to Me by Zach Bryan, do you know it? Well, that's what was playing. I'll never forget it. Daph had all the windows rolled down, and Maci leaned her head out. The wind tore through her hair, tangling it into a mess, but she didn't care. Mace is always worried about something. School, work, her friends, her family. But in that moment, it was like everything fell away. Like she was breathing for the first time, and she could just let herself exist. And I got to see it happen.” I take a breath, shaking my head to clear the picture from my mind. “That's when I knew it wasn't some little crush. I loved her. I love her.”

When I look up at Henry, he's staring at me with what I'm pretty sure are tears in his eyes. “That,” he says, rubbing a hand over his face. “Is one of the sweetest things I've ever heard.”

“It's not a big deal.” My cheeks heat, and I duck my head in embarrassment. I've never told anyone that story. Not even Chase. It's been a private moment just for me until now, but it feels good to let someone in. I'd only hoped the first person I told would be Maci.

“No, seriously. You're not allowed to repeat that in front of Beth. You'll raise the bar too high. I can't compete with that,” he says earnestly.

“I won't,” I promise, though I think watching that scenario play out might be funny.

Henry crumples up his now empty bag of goldfish and tosses it into the trash can we left sitting in the center of the

room. He eyes my half-eaten bag, which I haven't touched in the last twenty minutes. "You going to finish that?"

"No," I say, passing it to him. "Go right ahead."

"Thanks. They don't feed us at those teacher seminars, and I was too focused on escaping my house to pack a solid lunch."

"I know the feeling." The only things that made it into my backpack today were a KitKat bar and a half-full container of blueberries.

"Okay, continue," Henry tells me, digging into the bag of goldfish.

The rest goes by faster because I skip through most of my year of pathetic pining. No one besides Chase ever needs to know the details of that. Finally, I get to last night. It's easier than I thought to explain it to Henry. Maybe because he doesn't have any stake in all of this. As much as he pretends he is, Chase isn't objective. Maci's as much his friend as I am. If this all goes south... I'm not sure what that means for the four of us.

"And then I asked her if she had feelings for me, and she said she didn't know." I finish the story, dropping my head into my hands and staring at the brightly colored alphabet carpet beneath my feet. The letter M stares up at me because, of course, it does.

"Damn." Henry lets out a low whistle. "That's rough, man."

I nod because what else can I say? That encompasses how I've been feeling all day. Rough.

"But, and I don't mean to sound like a jerk here, what did you expect? Her to know right then and there that she feels the same and drive off into the sunset with you?" My head jerks up, and I stare at him incredulously. "I'm serious," he says.

"I mean, I hoped," I grumble, not meeting his eyes. Of course, I played out all those worst-case scenarios, but at the end of the day...well, yeah. I hoped it would go something like that.

Henry shakes his head. “You’ve had a year to figure out all your feelings and what you want from this. She had an hour between overhearing your mom and then all of that?”

“Something like that.”

“And from everything you’ve told me about Maci, she’s a planner. Everything she does is thought out. Give her time. Let her think about it. You guys are best friends. She’ll come to you when she’s ready.”

He’s right, and if I’m honest with myself, I knew that was the truth of the situation before he said it.

“And what if she doesn’t feel the same?” I ask, the vulnerability of the question causing emotion to swell in my chest. I don’t know the answer to it. I can’t expect Henry to.

“I’ve learned it’s best not to worry about what we can’t control. You’ll cross that bridge if it comes to it, but for now, let it be,” he says not unkindly. Standing from his beanbag chair with a groan, he stretches his arms above his head. “And on that insightful note, I should get going. My phone has been buzzing nonstop for the last ten minutes, meaning Beth is alone at home with her mother, and I’m in trouble.”

I follow his lead, standing and stretching out my sore limbs. Children’s bean bag chairs weren’t made for adult men.

Chapter 15

Maci

“CLOSE THE DOOR,” I hiss at Daphne as I barge into the apartment, hands full of grocery bags.

“What?” she asks, looking at me with wide-eyed confusion. “Is everything okay? Is it that creepy guy from the first floor again?”

“No! Just close it,” I repeat more insistently this time. “And lock it behind you.” Better safe than sorry.

Daphne follows my instructions, still confused, but sure I have a good reason for my panic. And I do. She just might not see it that way. Standing at the peephole, Daph peers out into the hallway.

“Maci, it’s just James,” she sighs in pure exasperation.

“I know. He pulled into the parking lot right when I was walking in.”

I’ve been avoiding James for the last week. Hardcore, undeniably avoiding. We’ve never gone this long without talking to one another before. Until now, the biggest stretch of time was the three days he went camping with his dad and brother and didn’t have cell service. I miss him. That’s as undeniable as the avoiding. I feel the ache of his absence in my bones. And even though I know I’m the only one who can fix it, I haven’t.

Because I don’t know how. Because I still don’t have an answer to his question. How am I supposed to face him without one?

“We can’t keep doing this,” Daph tells me, hands on her hips. “First of all, it’s not healthy. Second, it’s not practical. I know he messed up, but he’s—” But I don’t get to find out what James is because a knock on the door interrupts her. She presses her eye to the hole again before looking at me over her shoulder. “It’s him.”

“Don’t answer it!” If she answers it, he will want to talk to me. What would I say? Though dozens of pros and cons lists and half-started journal entries cover my desk, none hold the right words.

“I’m going to answer it,” she warns me. “But I won’t let him in.”

“I hate you!” I tell her before diving behind the front door, so I’ll be entirely out of James’s sight line. Objectively, as I’m cowering with dust bunnies, I realize I might have let this go too far.

“Hey, James. What’s up?” Daphne says, opening the door enough that her body can fit into the space.

“Can I talk to Maci?” he asks. Through the crack where the door meets the frame, I watch him rub his stubble-covered jaw. From the glimpse I have, he looks worse for the wear. Dark half-moons rest beneath his eyes, and the last time he shaved might have been before our “date.”

“She doesn’t want to talk to you.” Daphne doesn’t beat around the bush or lie to him, which is usually something I appreciate about her, but the crestfallen look on James’s face is nothing short of heartbreaking.

“I know,” he says, the corners of his lips pulling down and his eyes falling to the floor. “I’ve been trying to give her space, but it’s been a *week*, Daph.”

I’m the worst person in the world. The brokenness in his voice breaks my heart right along with it. I want to reach out and squeeze his hand. Let him know it’s going to be okay. I don’t know how yet, but it’ll be okay. We’ll get through this. What we are on the other side, well, that’s why I can’t follow through on my impulse.

“She’s trying to figure it out.” It’s supposed to be a reassurance, but there’s a chill to Daph’s voice.

“I know.” Another jaw rub. “But a week? We’ve never gone this long without talking.”

“And you took a year,” she says. It’s an accusation, not a statement. Have they spoken since I told her what happened last Sunday? I assumed they had. They’re cousins and best friends. They were attached at the hip before me—hell, before Chase—but Daph’s hostility has me wondering.

“It’s not the same.” James steps toward her, but she closes the door ever so slightly. The message is clear: *you’re not coming in.*

“Yes, it is. She has every right to her space right now. You felt like you did.” Daph’s words grow shorter and more clipped with each breath.

“I don’t get it. Are you mad at me?” he asks her, his frown turning into one of confusion.

“Yes. I mean, no. I don’t know, James. I’m hurt, I guess.” She puffs out a breath of air. “Did you stop to think what keeping this secret meant? Beyond you, I mean? You didn’t only keep it from Maci. You kept it from me, James. You’re like a brother to me, and you kept this huge thing from me. And then you told Chase and asked him to keep it from me, too. It’s... it’s a lot to take in.”

I wish I ran to my room instead of hiding behind the door. This moment isn’t one I need to be a part of. I tilt my head to look at Daph’s face, and tears shine in her eyes. *This*. This is one of the “what ifs” that scares me when I think about the potential of James and I becoming more than friends. What would it mean for Daphne and me? If James and I broke up, where would that leave me? I could lose her too, and maybe even Chase. They’re my family. The thought is unbearable.

“Why does it matter that I asked Chase to keep it from you?” James asks but backs down at Daphne’s glare. “Alright, I get it.” He takes a step back, halfway between our two apartments. “I’m sorry, Daph. Maci’s your best friend. I didn’t

want to ask you to keep something like that from her. To put you in the middle.”

“Yeah, well, you’re my best friend too,” Daph sighs, swiping carefully at her eyes. In the brief pause, I see her counting in her head, calming herself down. “Look, she needs a little more time. You know Maci. She has to consider every angle. She’s been going over every detail of the last year, trying to figure out how she missed it. She’ll come around.”

“Has she...has she said anything about—”

“You are not about to ask me how she feels.” Daphne cuts him off. “You didn’t want to put me in the middle, so don’t. When she’s ready, she’ll tell you.”

“Okay, I’m sorry.” James hangs his head, and her shoulders, bunched and tense since she opened the door, fall.

“It’s going to be okay,” she tells him, stepping into the hallway and wrapping her arms around him.

“I know you two tell each other everything, but can you not tell Mace about this?” he murmurs into Daph’s hair, so quiet I can barely hear the request. “It feels a lot more pathetic than I thought it would.”

“Of course,” she promises him.

I wince because, while technically, she won’t have to break her promise, I don’t think James anticipated me hiding behind the door. Which, to be fair, is probably more pathetic than him begging Daphne to get me to talk to him.

I watch them through the gap, wishing I could be the one holding James right now. And I could be if only I knew how to get out of my own way. Everything is a mess, and I don’t know how to make it right again. All I want is for the four of us to go back to normal, but that’s not going to happen. Not the way it was before.

Daph lets James go and closes the door to the apartment behind her.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, staring at my shoes. “I’m trying. I’m really trying. I promise. I’m just so scared. Things are different

between the two of us. Not just because of—” I take a hiccuping breath, forcing back tears because it feels like all I’ve done this last week is cry. “Before all of this. We haven’t been just friends in a long time, and I don’t know how I didn’t see it. I feel so freaking stupid, Daphne. And if we do date, what happens if we break up? You...your family...you guys are all I have out here. And James—god, James—the idea of him ever not being in my life...I can’t risk that. If it didn’t work, and I lost you. I...I...” My words fade into a stuttering mess, and the tears flow freely. I hate word vomiting like this. Most of the time, I can hold it in. Wait till I can write it down, but in moments like these, the words keep tumbling out of my mouth, and I’m powerless to stop them.

“Maci, you’re not going to lose me. Or my family. Or James, for that matter.” She pulls me into a tight hug, softly stroking my hair. “We’re not going anywhere. No matter what happens.”

* * *

SUNLIGHT EXPLODES BEHIND MY EYELIDS, pulling me out of the half-sleep I only managed to fall back into what seems like seconds ago.

“Rise and shine,” Daphne’s voice chirps as I blink aggressively, trying to adjust to brightness.

“What the hell?” I groan, rolling over and shoving my face into my pillow. “It’s too early.”

“It’s ten o’clock,” she tells me. I hear footsteps, and my covers are brutally yanked from my body.

“We only got home from work six and a half hours ago!” I pull my knees to my chest, hand flailing out for the throw blanket that usually ends up tucked between the wall and my bed. “Why are you doing this to me?” When I can’t find the blanket, I roll over and glare daggers at her. This is criminal behavior. After we close the bar on Saturdays, we have a strict no-alarm rule the next morning. We wake up when we wake up and deal with the consequences later.

“Aunt Jenny decided to do Sunday brunch this week because so many of the kids are working tonight. C’mon, get up. You only have thirty minutes to get ready,” she says, poking at me from the safety of the edge of the bed.

“I’m not going,” I tell her, rolling away from her prodding fingers. “It’s too weird. Plus, won’t James be there? I can’t see him for the first time in front of everyone.”

Even though I’m facing away from her, I’d put money on Daphne rolling her eyes behind my back. “James and Chase are working on a home renovation project today. So, let’s go.” Giving up on the poking, she tugs on one of my arms.

“No, Daph.” I struggle against her, but she has an iron grip on my forearm. “Everyone knows! It’s too awkward. Let me go back to sleep, please. Plus, I work this afternoon,” I plead with her.

“James’s mom is the only one who might know. Look, I know gossip spreads like wildfire in my family, but no one’s talking about you and James,” she promises, and I give her a skeptical look. “Well, no one is talking about what happened last week. They don’t know. I swear.”

Giving in, I let her tug me out of bed. “And James won’t be there?” I double-check.

I’ve slowly been working up the nerve to text him. The silence between us has gone on for too long. The four of us do everything together, and now we’re fractured. Daphne and Chase have to choose who they spend time with, while the other one misses out. And, beyond that, I miss him—in a physical, painful way I never knew was possible.

“Like I said, he and Chase are doing a home reno project today.” She tosses my towel and robe from where they hang on the back of my closet. “Go, get ready!”

Catching the bundle of fabric, I make my way to the bathroom and turn on the shower. Before climbing in or stripping down, I peek into the shower to ensure my shampoo and conditioner are there. It’s become a habit ever since the first week of school. I close my eyes, and I’m standing in my

towel, dripping all over the floor of James's bathroom. I can see the bright blue of his eyes as if he's right in front of me and feel the soft pressure of his hand around my wrist. The breath catches in my throat, and goosebumps run the length of my arms when I open my eyes.

I'm a hypocrite. The thought brands me like an iron. Because I know how I feel. If I'm honest with myself, I know the answer to James's question. I'm just too scared to say it.

The shower chases away a good part of the leftover exhaustion from last night's shift, and the massive tumbler of iced coffee Daphne hands me as we walk out the door gets rid of the rest. As we climb into her car, I note both James and Chase's trucks remain in their parking spots. Good. Reassured, I lean back into my seat and take a long sip of the caramel cold brew that Perk Me Up sells by the gallon. Daph and I both swear by it, and there hasn't been a single week since Freshman year where we don't make it a point to stop in and fill up our reusable jug.

"Hey, Mace?" Daph asks once we're out of the apartment complex and onto the main road.

"Mhm," I say, still savoring the first tingling of the caffeine entering my bloodstream.

"I know you've been doing your thing this last week. Making lists, journaling, looking into your crystal ball, and all that, and I've let you because that's how you process. But do you wanna clue me in on what's going on?" Her question isn't demanding per usual Daphne style. If anything, she seems timid. Like she's scared, I'll tell her no. I might if she was anyone else, but she's my best friend. Plus, for all James's talk about not wanting to put her in the middle, she is. She has to be because she's just as much mine as his.

"I'm still trying to figure it all out," I say, knowing it's not enough to satisfy her.

"And I get that. Relationships aren't the same as friendships. I get why you can't just jump into it, but you've barely come out of your room all week. Aspen texted me this morning worried because you weren't answering her calls,"

Daph glances at me with genuine concern. “I know you aren’t close with your family, but you always make time for her.”

Guilt sours my next swallow of coffee, and I put the tumbler down. After everything happened with James, I came home, called Aspen, dragged Daphne into the living room, and told them the whole story. We talked it over for hours. But the difference between my best friend and my sister is Daphne will give me my space even if she doesn’t understand it. Even if she doesn’t want to. If I picked up one of Aspen’s calls, she would have made me explain myself, and I haven’t been ready to do that.

“I’ll call her back.” I make a reminder on my phone then and there, so I don’t have any excuses to forget. Maybe by the time Aspen’s and my schedules line up, I’ll have a satisfactory answer to all her questions.

“So, you want to tell me what you’re thinking?” Daph presses gently.

“It’s complicated,” I begin, trying to pick my words carefully. “If I’m being honest with myself, James and I have been living in this in-between space for months. Not intentionally. But when I look back, there are things—like asking him to stay with me that night after my awful meeting with my advisor—I would never think to ask Chase for.”

“I get that,” she agrees softly, nodding along as I speak.

“James is my person...well, one of my people.” I squeeze her hand, and she flashes me a smile. “Letting people in. Letting them see me when I’m vulnerable. I’m not great at that, but I don’t even have to think about it with him.”

“Do you think that’s why dating has been so tricky for you?” she asks. It’s a sign of how well she knows me because that’s one of the first questions I asked myself when I came to that realization.

“Yeah, I do. I don’t know if I could ever date someone I wasn’t close to. If I couldn’t trust them without all that history.”

My life is a precarious balancing act. Juggling school, working practically full time, and maintaining somewhat of a social life while also taking care of myself is next to impossible. Adding a boyfriend into that? Until now, I never thought it could be possible. I didn't want to get so wrapped up in a relationship that I lost sight of my goals, but on the other hand, what guy would want to date a girl who might have a spare evening for him once a week?

"Are you going to date James then?" Her voice is hopeful, and I know that's what she wants. Her best friend and her cousin together? Me locked into the Langley family for life? It wouldn't surprise me if Daph's secretly tried to scheme that one out for years.

"I don't know," I twirl one of the braids I plaited my hair into around my finger. "But I think I might be almost ready to talk to him about it?" It sounds more like a question than a statement because I'm still unsure. Then again, I wasn't sure I could talk to Daphne about all this, and here I am.

"So...you like him?" Daph turns to me with a wide smile.

"What are we? Middle schoolers?"

"You didn't answer my question," she singsongs.

I sigh dramatically, staring out my window at the passing houses. "Yeah, I think, maybe I do."

Chapter 16

Maci

AN HOUR into brunch at the Langley's, I discover my best friend is a liar. Until now, everything's gone as Daphne said it would. No one seems to know anything about what's happened between James and me. Maybe his mom hugged me tighter and longer than normal, but she didn't say anything. I've finally let myself start to relax when the sound of a car door slamming around the front shatters my peaceful reality.

"An hour late," Daphne's mom, Fiona, says, glancing down at the watch on her wrist. "Why didn't you two bring them along or wake them up at the very least? All their food will be cold now."

Daph huffs and crosses her arms. "Just because they live across the hall from us doesn't make them our responsibility, Mom."

"Well, I don't understand. You four always arrive together." Her mom purses her lips, looking toward the fence that separates the front and backyard. "You know what, I'll fix a couple plates and toss them in the microwave. James prefers waffles, right Maci?"

I nod in agreement but don't take my eyes off Daphne, who suddenly seems very interested in the hole she's digging into the grass with the toe of her sneaker. I wait until her mom is well out of earshot before grabbing Daph's arm and pulling her away from the gathered Langleys. The last thing I need is for some aunt, uncle, or cousin to overhear us and have the situation become national news before James and Chase lock the car.

“You told me they weren’t coming,” I hiss at her when we’re a safe distance away from prying ears.

“I never said that exactly,” Daph says, biting her bottom lip. “I said they had a job today, which they do. Only, it might be a little later in the day than I led you to believe.”

The back gate squeaks, and simultaneously, we turn to watch as James and Chase walk through. As if pulled by gravitational force, James’s eyes immediately find mine. Emotions flash over his face in rapid succession. *Surprise. Happiness. Longing.* Until his face settles on concern. I tear my eyes away and back to Daphne. I’m rarely angry with my roommate, but I could strangle her right now.

Here? At his family’s Sunday brunch? This is where she thought she should mastermind a resolution?

“I thought you said you didn’t want to be in the middle.” I quote her words to James from last night back to her.

“I already am in the middle!” she says defensively. “You’re like a sister to me, and James is basically my brother. And, yes, that sounded a little more incest-y than I meant it to, but you get the point. Plus, you said you were ready to talk to him!”

“I told you that after you tricked me into coming!” I exclaim in exasperation.

“Semantics.” She waves off my very valid point as if it’s a minor detail. “Chase thought it was a good plan.”

“Since when do you listen to Chase?” I ask incredulously. It’s an unwritten rule of our quartet: If Chase thinks it’s a good idea, there’s a good chance it’s not.

“Since you and James decided to lose your minds!” she snaps back. “Look, I know I can’t force you to talk to him, but now you have the opportunity if you want it.”

“Well, I don’t,” I tell her, turning on my heel and walking away.

Most of the Langleys are in the backyard or on the porch, so I decide the safest option is inside. In the kitchen, I grab

another mimosa from the counter. When I got here, I promised myself I'd only have one because going to work after day drinking is a special kind of hell, but desperate times call for desperate measures. Besides James's younger brother, Asher, the living room is empty. He sits on the sectional, flicking through his phone.

"Mind if I join you?" The question is merely a formality because I have no intention of going back outside.

"Not at all," he says, turning off his phone and tucking it into the pocket of his BCU Hockey hoodie. Even though James and Asher are Irish twins, born only nine months apart, you wouldn't know it if they stood side by side. Whereas James favors his mother with his lean build, tan skin, and blue eyes, Asher is all their father—broad shoulders, built like a linebacker, and deep brown eyes. The only thing the two have in common is their height and mop of curly hair.

"So, who are you avoiding?" I ask because there's no other reason for him to sit here when his entire family is outside. Asher's not an introvert by any means. Usually, he'd be outside starting a game of beer pong or volleyball or anything that requires athletic talent.

He sighs, staring out the window where a few of his cousins are visible. I notice Riley, who looks foreign without Asher by her side. Those two are almost as inseparable as James and Daphne. Beside Riley stands a girl who looks vaguely familiar but isn't a regular fixture at Langley gatherings. She's tiny, at least a head shorter than anyone else in the small circle, with long blonde hair and defined muscles, I can see from here.

"You're hiding from her?" I snort. She's got to be half his size, but the wary look in Asher's eyes tells me that might not matter.

"Something like that," he mutters, clearing his throat and turning back to me.

"How about you? Where's the rest of The Fantastic Four?" His familiar nickname for the four of us makes me smile briefly until I remember I can't answer his question. Asher is

James's brother. That's a no-go for spilling the truth of our current predicament.

"Pass," I say, taking a sip of my mimosa. "Next question?"

Asher laughs. "You know what? I don't want to know. How's senior year treating you?"

Oof. Easily the second worst topic he could have chosen. "It's fine. I have to find an internship for this stupid graduation requirement." The rejection email from the paid internship I applied to last week flashes before my eyes, and I grimace. The extra time my advisor gave me to sort this out is running out faster than I'd like.

"You can't find an internship?" he asks, eyebrows raising in surprise. "Aren't you some sort of genius?"

I roll my eyes. "I'm not a genius, and I've gotten a few offers. None of them are paid, and with my schedule..." I trail off because if I keep going, Asher will get way more of an information dump than he intended. "How's senior year treating you?"

Technically, Asher's supposed to be a year behind James in school, but he skipped fourth grade and ended up in the same class. If either of us is a genius, it's him. The way James tells it, having your younger brother in your class beating you out for the best grades and the best spots on the hockey team isn't exactly "fun." Back in freshman year, there was a lot of animosity between the two, but more recently, they seem to have worked past it. I think it helped that, once they started at BCU, they weren't in the same classes or majors. It killed the competition enough for them to make up.

"It's fine," Asher groans, passing a hand over his face. "Practices, classes, and studying are hard to juggle, but I'm used to it by now. It'll be easier next year when I'm getting my master's. No hockey. So, at least there's a light at the end of the tunnel."

I nod sympathetically, very familiar with the reality of an overpacked schedule. "You're staying at BCU for your master's?"

“Yeah,” he confirms. “The tuition discount is a big draw, but it’ll be easier for Mom and Dad not to lose James and me after graduation.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, frowning in confusion. Why would Mr. and Mrs. Langley lose James, or even Asher for that matter, after their senior year?

“Because he doesn’t want to stay in Birch Creek,” he explains. “He has to have told you. He’s been vocal about it since halfway through high school.”

“Oh, I knew that, but I didn’t think your parents thought about it like ‘losing’ him.” I think of the email James told me about from the school principal and the hand his dad had in it. Is this where that came from?

“My dad’s youngest brother, Anthony, left town after graduating high school. From what I know, which isn’t much because all the adults hate talking about it, there was a lot of drama surrounding the whole thing.”

“But Logan went to law school in Boston, and no one said anything,” I say, trying to remember if there was any tension in Daph’s house leading up to his departure. But, no, I don’t remember anything other than the expected tears from her mom.

“James’s father and Anthony were close, but that’s not your story to tell, Asher.” A voice from the doorway startles Asher and me, and our heads whip up simultaneously to identify the speaker. Asher’s mom stands with her hands on her hips, giving her son a disapproving look. Clearly, Anthony isn’t a welcome topic in their house.

“Sorry, Mom.” He ducks his head in embarrassment.

“No harm done,” she says, features softening as she steps into the room. “Do you mind giving Maci and I a minute? I promise it’s safe to go outside. Willow doesn’t bite. She’s perfectly lovely.”

Asher’s eyes flick over to the window where the girl from before is helping Riley set up a game of beer pong. “To you,

maybe,” he mutters darkly but follows his mom’s directive, kissing her cheek as he passes.

Alone with Jenny, my pulse picks up. I knew this moment was coming when Daphne convinced me to come today. Maybe I hoped it wouldn’t, but I know James’s mom too well to think otherwise.

“I wanted to check on you,” she says, coming to sit in the seat Asher vacated. “You’ve been quiet today. It’s not like you.”

“I’m fine,” I reassure her. “Senior year chaos is all.” It’s true, even if it isn’t the reason for my silence. Homework assignments keep piling up. With my hours at the bar, it takes most of my spare time to stay on top of them.

“It’s a big year,” she says diplomatically, but I can see she doesn’t believe me from her expression. “Listen, Maci.” Jenny leans forward and tilts her head so I’m forced to meet her eyes. They’re the same bright blue as James’s, which makes my heart ache. “James told me what happened last Sunday. He made me promise not to get involved, but...well, a mother’s entitled to some meddling now and then, don’t you think? Especially because I feel a little to blame for this whole situation.”

“It’s not your—” I start to say, but the skeptical look she gives me causes the last word to die on my tongue. “Okay, maybe a little,” I concede, my cheeks heating.

“I never meant you to overhear what I said to James, but—if I’m being honest—I’m glad everything’s out in the open.” Taking my hand in hers, she squeezes gently. “I’m not going to tell you what to do one way or another. But I will say this... the day James brought you home, I thought: *It’s only a matter of time*. You two have a beautiful friendship, of course, but I’ve always felt like there’s something more underneath all of it.”

“I...umm,” I stall, unsure of the appropriate response.

“You don’t have to say anything.” Jenny pats my hand, getting to her feet. “All I wanted was to throw my two cents in

there.”

“Thank you,” I say awkwardly. My phone chooses that moment to start buzzing in my back pocket, and I pull it out to see my reminder to head to work. *Thank God*. The idea of getting lost in the mindlessness of pouring beers and mixing drinks brings me instant relief. “I’ve gotta head to work,” I tell her, gesturing to my phone.

When I stand, she pulls me in for a hug. “You guys will figure this out,” she murmurs in my ear.

I hope she’s right.

I find Daphne sitting in one of the lawn chairs pulled up next to the beer pong tables where Riley and the girl Asher was hiding from, Willow, are playing a game opposite Asher and Riley’s boyfriend, Skyler. For their part, Riley and Skyler look like they’re having a good time, but Asher’s face is pulled into a frustrated scowl, and irritation radiates off of Willow’s every move.

“Better luck next time,” Daphne calls to Asher as he misses one of the girls’ cups by a centimeter. “Looks like you’re going to owe me dinner,” she teases Chase, who sits slouched in the lawn chair beside her.

“It’s not over yet,” Chase tells her, scowling.

“I hate to interrupt this thrilling wager,” I say. “But I gotta get to work. Daphne?”

“Oh no! Maci, I totally forgot.” If this were anyone else, I would think the surprised look on Daphne’s face is genuine. The way she arches her eyebrows and widens her eyes just so. The perfect “o” shape her lips create. But I know her too well. Plus, she’s already tricked me once today. I’m not falling for it again. “I’ve had like five mimosas, so I probably shouldn’t be driving.”

I glare at her, but there’s no point in pressing the issue. If she is five deep, driving is out of the question. I turn to Chase, but he’s already shaking his head. “Sorry, James drove us here.”

I'm going to kill them both. They planned this. There's no other explanation.

"That's okay," I say with a sweet smile, extending my hand to Daphne. "Since you can't drive anyway, I'll take your car and bring it home after my shift."

"Ugh, I wish," Daph fake pouts. "But Dad's been getting so strict about me letting people drive my car. Insurance and all."

Okay, sure. It's not like I drove both of us to work last night in her car.

"James could drive you!" she adds brightly.

"No, it's fine!" I say quickly, but Daphne's already waving him over.

"What's up?" James asks, coming to stand beside me. He shoves his hands deep into his pockets, intentionally not looking at me. This is the closest to him I've been since that night in the back of his truck, and the ache of missing him threads itself through my veins until I feel it with each beat of my heart.

"I was supposed to drive Mace to work, but I've had one too many mimosas." Daphne sighs dramatically and shakes her head in mock disappointment in herself. "Would you mind taking her?"

James's eyes flick from Daphne to Chase and finally to me, no doubt coming to the same conclusion I did. There's no way this is an accident.

"Yeah, sure," he says gruffly, pulling his keys out of his pocket. "I mean, if you want me to." He doesn't look at me when he says it, and I'm not sure whether he's hoping I say yes or no.

If this was anywhere besides Birch Creek, I could Uber, but that's not a thing in this tiny town. I really might kill Daphne for this.

"Let's go," I tell him, striding off toward the front of the house and throwing one last dirty look over my shoulder at

Daph.

“Have fun, you two!” she calls, beaming after us, no doubt proud of her evil genius.

Chapter 17

Maci

THE DRIVE from brunch to work is the most awkward ten minutes of my life. Including the time my mom thought it would be a good idea to let my dad handle the birds and the bees talk with me. Silence fills the truck's cab as we pull to a stop three lights away from The Rattle and Snake. Tension presses down around me, forcing my breath into short, shallow gasps. Though he must notice, James doesn't say anything, choosing to stare firmly at the road instead.

This is the longest I've ever heard him go without talking, even at the movies. When Daphne and Chase forced us into this situation, I expected him to be relieved. He wanted to talk to me all week, but now that we're in the same space with no interruptions, talking seems to be the last thing on his mind. It's disconcerting. My mind races to fill in the gaps, imagining the worst as it tends to do.

Did I wait too long to talk to him?

Is he mad at me for everything that went down last week?

Does he want to pretend all this never happened?

Do I?

No. I don't, but more than that, I can't. I've been ignoring the change in our friendship for too long already. If I keep this up, it'll only hurt us more in the long run. Probably. Maybe. Sitting up straighter in my seat, I take my first deep breath since I got in the truck.

"James, I—" I start, but he shakes his head vehemently before I can continue.

“No,” he says firmly. “We’re not doing this now.”

“Are you serious? Last night, you begged Daphne to talk to me, and now that I’m ready, you say ‘no.’ Just like that?” It’s impossible to keep the frustration from seeping into my voice. Now that I’ve decided it’s time for us to talk this out, I don’t want to wait another second.

“Of course, I want to talk,” he snaps, still not looking at me. I wish he would. It’s impossible to gauge the emotions behind his words when all I can see is his side profile. “But not in the one minute before I drop you off. Not right before you’re about to work a ten-hour shift. It’s not fair to either of us.” His tone leaves no room for argument.

“Oh.” I slump back in my seat, the fight fleeing my body. He’s right. This isn’t the time. Obviously. Normally, I’m the one who’s aware of time and place. It’s never been James’s strong suit—for instance, his incessant need to talk in the movie theater.

“Later,” James promises. “When we have more time.”

“Of course.” Embarrassment fills the space left by my earlier frustration, and I’m sure my cheeks are stained pink.

We’re one stoplight away now, but I’m less anxious to leave than I was at the start of the drive. Briefly, I consider calling out before I snap myself out of it. That would be ridiculous. My shift starts in five minutes, and it’s football season. My managers might be lenient, but that would be a stretch even for them.

James pulls seamlessly into one of the spots right outside the doors to the bar. Grabbing my bag off the truck floor, I’m halfway out the door before I feel his eyes on me. I meet his gaze, worrying my bottom lip between my teeth. What do I say here? Do we decide when we’ll talk? Should I give him the answer to the question I couldn’t answer before? A little piece of hope for him to hold onto until we have more time.

“Thanks for the ride,” I say, deciding it’s safer than my other choices.

“Anytime.” His gaze burns into me, and I wonder what he’s thinking. I used to think I could read him like a book, but I’m not so sure anymore. Apparently, my radar has been off for the last year. “Hey, Mace?” he asks right as I’m about to close the door. “How did you know I came by last night?”

The desire to throw Daphne under the bus is incredibly tempting. Especially after her antics today, but that wouldn’t be fair. Less embarrassing, but not the right thing to do.

“I...um...well, I was hiding behind the front door.” If my cheeks were pink before, they must be scarlet now.

Judging by the strained look on James’s face, he’s upset. The apology for invading their private conversation is on the tip of my tongue, but then the smile he’s holding back breaks through.

“Have a good shift, Maci,” he tells me, barely withheld laughter filling his words.

And now I’m smiling because I can’t help it. Because when James smiles at me, it feels like the sun breaking through the clouds. Warm and oh-so lovely.

* * *

MY BRAIN IS BLISSFULLY numb by the time the football crowd dies down. There’s something about losing yourself in the rhythm of making drinks and placing orders that makes everything else fade away. Especially when all the seats at the bar and surrounding tables are filled. It would usually be Daphne and me on a Sunday night, but she took off to spend time with her family since Logan is down from D.C. for the day. Brynn, one of our old bartenders who switched to only picking up shifts after she graduated nursing school, filled the gap in the schedule, which is more than fine by me. She’s probably my favorite person to work with other than Daph. Maybe more than Daphne today.

The bar clears out after the last football game ends, even though we’re still open for a few more hours. Sundays are our early close day, which is a relief because being here till three

in the morning after doing the same thing last night sounds miserable. By the time we're thirty minutes to close, the bar is practically empty, aside from a few scattered regulars.

"Last call in fifteen minutes," Brynn sighs, coming behind me with a tray full of freshly cleaned glasses. "I swear, between this and nursing, I might die before the wedding even comes around."

I glance away from the fruit tray I'm cleaning and at the shiny new engagement ring on her finger. Her fiancée, Nate, proposed last month, and they've been in wedding planning mode ever since. I'm pretty sure Brynn had her bridesmaid proposals premade because she was at my apartment within the week with a pale pink box filled with claw clips, my favorite lip gloss, and a little bottle of champagne that had "Will you be my bridesmaid?" printed in curling cursive on the label.

I've kept my circle small since moving to Birch Creek—if you can call the Langley family small—but Brynn is one of the few people I've let in. She trained me when I started at The Rattle and Snake, and her bossy attitude with a hint of snark charmed me from the start. Daph, on the other hand, finds her abrasive. Which is funny because, personally, I think there are more similarities between the two of them than their blonde hair.

"You'll make it," I tell her, taking the glasses and passing her fruit tray to take to the back.

"Ugh, looks like we have someone new," she groans, nodding toward the door, which swings closed behind a familiar face.

James. My lips part in surprise at the sight of him.

"Oh, it's just James," Brynn's relief is palpable. If only I felt the same way. "You got him?"

I nod, still not trusting myself to speak. A couple hours ago, I texted Daphne to see if she would pick me up, but she never answered. Did she orchestrate this? It's not out of the realm of possibility after this morning.

“Hey,” I say, meeting James at his regular seat at the end of the bar. “What are you doing here? Don’t you have to teach in the morning?”

“Yeah, but I figured you’d need a ride home since I brought you here and all.” The awkwardness is back in full force, and I’m pretty sure it’s not the glow from the neon signs tinging his cheeks pink.

“Brynn was going to take me,” I tell him, but at his crestfallen look, I quickly change course. “But this is better. Silver Crest is the opposite way. Now she won’t have to backtrack.”

“Okay,” he says with a small, nervous smile.

“You want anything?” I ask, nodding toward the beer cooler.

“Nah, I have to be up early for student teaching, so I better not.” He tugs his laptop out of his backpack. “Go. Do your thing. I’m going to get some homework done.”

Following his direction, I head back to the drink well that I was closing down when he walked in. Brynn’s waiting for me, eyebrows raised and lips pulled into a concerned frown.

“What was that?” she asks, looking down the bar at James and then back to me. “Are you guys fighting or something?”

“Or something.” I fill the empty dish tray with dirty glasses, but Brynn doesn’t let it go.

“Nope,” she wags a finger at me. “Fill me in. Just because I’m not around a lot anymore doesn’t mean I want to miss out on the tea.”

“Okay, fine.” I cave because if I don’t, she’ll bug me for the rest of the night.

I give Brynn the cliff notes version of everything that’s happened in the last week, only pausing to ring the bell for last call. By the time I’m done, we’re mostly done closing, and James is the only other person left with us. He’s put his earbuds in, and his head bobs to whatever song he’s listening to.

“I just don’t know,” I tell Brynn, who’s been shockingly quiet while I explain the situation. Either she’s shocked or extremely exhausted. Maybe a little of both. “What if we try, and it doesn’t work? He’s such a big part of my life. I can’t imagine ever losing that. It might be better to let it go and wait for things to fizzle out.”

“That is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.” And there’s the Brynn I know and love. I roll my eyes, stacking the last chair and turning to her. She stands with her hand propped on her hips, looking at me like a customer who left a five percent tip on a hundred-dollar tab.

“Maci, that boy,” she points to James, and I quickly push her hand down. He has headphones in. He’s not wearing blinders, for Christ’s sake. “Is here on a Sunday night on the off chance you might need a ride home. Not to mention, he has to be up in—what—five hours? Six? To teach an army of six-year-olds.”

“That doesn’t mean—” I stop myself before saying ‘anything’ because that’s too harsh. Obviously, it means something. “We’re friends!”

Brynn snorts. “Yeah, no. I don’t think so. He’s your boyfriend. I mean, maybe not in technical terms, but he sure as hell acts like it. And, from everything you told me, he’s been acting like that for a while now.”

I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose. She has a point, but I’m scared. Most of the time, that fear is all I can see, but sometimes, like when he walked in tonight, I see through the haze of stress and worry to a future that makes my heart warm in my chest.

“I don’t know,” I murmur, looking at James. He’s staring at his computer, brow furrowed, tapping a pen against the bar top. His curls are tousled, and a small smudge of dirt—probably from the home renovation project this afternoon—is on his cheek.

“Yeah, you do.” Brynn rests a gentle hand on my arm. “I know you like to know everything before it happens, but that’s not life. You can’t plan for everything. And think about what a

waste it would be if James is your person, and you cheated yourself out of it because you're scared."

Her words hit their mark, and tears of frustration well in my eyes. I'm so tired. Constantly trying to see every outcome—preparing for the worst and not thinking of the best—it's exhausting.

"You're right. I'm scared." The admission feels vulnerable under the bright lights of the bar but like a relief all the same.

"Love is scary." Brynn shrugs as if to say, 'whatcha gonna do?' and grabs her keys from the cabinet where all the employees store all their stuff. "But it's worth it. Trust me." She holds up her left hand, engagement ring sparkling.

"I get it," I laugh, wiping away the left-over tears. "You're happy."

"Very." The dreamy smile on Brynn's face makes me long for the same feeling. "Now, this very happy girl is going home because she's also very tired."

Once Brynn's gone, I finish locking up before grabbing James.

"You ready?" he asks, popping out an earbud.

"Ready!" Butterflies flutter their wings in my chest, and for the first time all week, I feel a flush of hope spread over my body.

Brynn was right. As much as I try, I can't make life go according to my plan. I never thought this was where James and I would end up, but that doesn't mean it's a bad thing. It doesn't mean it can't work.

When James pulls out of the parking lot, he turns toward our apartments, but I put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. The contract sends familiar tingles down my arm and into my shoulder, but now I know what they mean. He glances at me, eyes widening as if that's the last thing he expected me to do.

"I'm not ready to go home. I know you have to teach tomorrow, but..." I keep my voice quiet, not wanting to break the spell that's fallen over tonight. "...late night drive?"

A smile spreads over his face, and it's as if the truck's cab has been bathed in sunlight.

“Always.”

Chapter 18

James

“LATE NIGHT DRIVE?” Maci asks, her soft voice almost lost in the cicadas’ song spilling through the open windows.

I grew up on late night drives through the backroads of Birch Creek. Blaring music with Asher while farmhouses and lamp posts rushed by. Disney singalongs with Lily. Scheming with Chase about a future that seemed so close yet so far out of reach. Heartbreak anthems with Daphne. Always going a little too fast because there’s something about breathing in the midnight air while the rest of the world sleeps that makes you feel invincible.

But my favorite late night drives? Those belong to Maci.

“Always.” As if I could tell her no. As if I would ever want to.

Her eyes light up, and she takes my phone from where it rests on the seat beside me. When her fingers brush my leg, a shiver runs down my spine. We slip seamlessly into our roles—predetermined by years of friendship. She flips through songs, curating the perfect backroad playlist while I turn down a side road that takes us away from Main Street and its surrounding neighborhoods to the outskirts of town. Classic folk music fills the car, mixing with the sounds of the night as we pass the last stoplight.

Maci hums along to the music, one hand hanging out the window. The other rests on her leg, fingers beating a slow tempo to the music. I swallow hard because, for the first time, the thought of intertwining her fingers with mine doesn’t feel like a distant, unattainable dream.

“I’ve been thinking about you a lot this week.” They’re the first words she’s spoken since we left the parking lot. Shaky and uncertain, but there’s no mistaking the determination on her face.

“I don’t think so,” I tell her. Out of my peripheral, I watch her turn to me with an adorable frown, creating a small line between her furrowed brows.

“Excuse me?” she asks, and the indignancy in her voice reminds me of the Maci I’ve missed so much this week.

“You don’t get to go first.” I keep my voice light so as not to upset her. “I never got to explain it to you last week. You never gave me the chance.”

“I know, but—”

“Which I understand,” I continue, raising my voice over hers because once she gets going, I know she won’t be able to stop. That’s how Maci works. She spends hours, days, or weeks thinking about something and keeping everything to herself until it overflows. “But I’ve spent the last year thinking about that moment. Please, let me have it?”

“Okay,” she whispers, her permission filled with tingling anticipation.

All the hoping, wishing, and praying brought me here. I’ve practiced what I would say to her when the moment finally came a hundred times—at night, lying awake dreaming of a time when she might lie beside me. As the words roll off my tongue, my heart pounds in my chest, and my hands tremble on the steering wheel.

“I’m sorry for keeping this from you because hurting you is the last thing I ever want to do. But I’m not sorry for how I feel. Because the person I’ve been lying to is myself. I tried to convince myself it wasn’t happening, and when that didn’t work, I told myself I could ride the feelings out. They’d fade eventually. I would move on. Nothing had to change. It took months before I realized that wasn’t going to happen, and then I was so damn scared to tell you. Because you’re my best friend and the idea of losing you? It hurt more than the thought

of never telling you at all.” I rake a hand through my hair, not daring to look at her because I’m scared of what I’ll see. Hope is such a fragile thing, and I’m not ready to shatter what little I have. “And, if you don’t feel the same way, I don’t know what I’ll do, but you have to know, you will never lose me. Do you understand? I’m not going anywhere.”

Silence fills the space between us, expanding until it steals the air from my lungs. I still can’t bring myself to look at her. Fear and hope intermingle with my every breath. We pass a farmhouse, a white blur in the landscape of the night, and then another, and I’m sure I’ve made everything worse. Her stolen glances from across the bar. The gentle touch on my arm. I misread it all.

“Pull over,” Maci orders me, and the shock breaks whatever spell has kept my eyes on the road. She’s clasping her hands in her lap, gripping so tightly her knuckles are ghostly white.

“Maci?” I ask tentatively, and she shakes her head.

“Just do it, James, please.” Her voice breaks, and I slow the truck, pulling onto the shoulder. She’s up and out of her seat before I shift into park. The only light out here is from the moon filtering in through the canopy of the trees overhead, so I leave the headlights on as I scramble out of my seat.

Maci’s pacing in front of the truck, one hand grasping the back of her neck and the other pushing back her auburn hair. I wait patiently, giving her time. But, when the seconds tick into minutes, and her footsteps become imprints in the grass, I can’t take it anymore. She turns to walk back toward the truck, but I catch her wrists in my hands before she can take another step. I keep my grip light, holding them in the space between our bodies.

“Maci, I’m here,” I tell her, wanting to ease the worry glinting in her green eyes. “Talk to me, or not, but I’m here. Please, let me in.”

Frustration flashes across her face, and she pulls her wrists away from me, taking a few steps backward.

“I didn’t plan for this.” The gentle voice from before is gone, and in its place is raw emotion. Illuminated by the headlights, her hair glows like a halo of fire framing her face. “I know—knew—how you fit into my life. I can call, and you’ll always answer. You’re my “date” for things because it’s convenient. I let you see me at my worst because I know you’ll never judge me. You’re my person.”

She steps toward me, and I desperately want to reach for her again.

“And now...” She makes a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. It catches on the wind, echoing off the surrounding trees. “You said you’re not going anywhere, but how do you know? What if this—” she gestures between us “—doesn’t work? How can you promise that? Because I can’t lose you. You’re my *best friend*. You’re my home, James. I can’t picture a future without you in it. Our friendship works. We know it works, so why change that? Why risk it?”

Tentatively, I move closer. We’re less than a breath apart. “But it’s not working,” I cup her cheek. “Because we’re here.”

“I know.” She closes her eyes as my fingers stroke her face, leaning into my touch. “Ask me again.”

She doesn’t have to tell me what she wants me to ask. I know.

“Maci.” Her name is a prayer leaving my lips. I desperately want to hear her answer, but at the same time, I want to freeze this moment just the way it is. “Do you feel the same way?”

Her eyes flutter open. The only place she’s ever looked at me like this before is my dreams. The ones I never dared to believe would come true. I’m not dreaming now. I can feel the heat of her skin under my hand. Hear her shallow breaths in the small space between us.

“I do.” I don’t see it coming when she closes the space between us. When she rises on her tiptoes. When she presses her lips to mine and wraps her arms around my neck. As the surprise fades, the world disappears around us. She tilts her

head, hair spilling down her back and grazing my fingers. I nip at her bottom lip, and her mouth opens to me. The breathy gasps escaping her only drive me closer to her, gripping her waist and pulling her flush against me. When the kiss ends, she's the one to lean her head to the side. If it were up to me, we'd stay in this moment forever.

"I'm scared," Maci whispers. I've seen vulnerability in her eyes before, but never like this.

"I know." I run a hand through her hair, gently twisting it between my fingers. "We'll take it slow. We don't have to rush into anything."

Breathing a sigh of relief, she lays her head against my chest. Neither of us move for a long time, the headlights of my truck illuminating the ground around us. Eventually, she pulls away, leaning back to look me up and down.

"We need to get you home," she says, and I immediately open my mouth to argue. "You have to be up in five hours." There's no arguing with her when she uses her "no-nonsense" voice, and I remind myself that we have all the time in the world.

"Fine," I grumble, holding one of her hands as I walk her to the passenger side. When I open the door, she giggles, covering her mouth with her free hand. "What?" I ask indignantly. "What's so funny?"

"Is this what you do now? Are you going to open doors for me and—"

"And make sure you never walk next to the street, and carry your backpack, and bring you flowers? Yeah, I am." I raise my eyebrows at her, offering her a hand to boost her up. She takes it, still giggling. "Have a problem with that?"

"No problem here." She pats me on the top of my head, and I roll my eyes. Closing her door, I make my way to the driver's side. The dash clock glows bright in the darkness. The numbers reminding me how tired I'm going to be tomorrow. It's late. Way later than any teacher (*or student teacher*) should be awake on a school night.

“I’m so sorry,” she apologizes when she catches sight of the clock.

Leaning across the center console, I brush a quick kiss on her lips. “Worth it.”

Chapter 19

Maci

PUT the brie in the center of the puff pastry, trim the corners, and fold it over the cheese.

“Um, Mace?” Aspen’s voice from my phone propped up on the kitchen counter breaks my focus. “Who are you talking to right now?”

“Myself,” I say, frowning at the ingredients around me.

Cooking, baking, frying...pretty much anything related to the kitchen is not in my wheelhouse. Charcuterie boards are my go-to whenever I’m responsible for food. All you need to do is assemble them—no culinary talent required. But James loved that puffed pastry brie Daphne made a few weeks ago, and I thought it would be nice to recreate it for our date night. I followed the instructions to the letter, but I must have trimmed off too much of the pastry somewhere along the line. No matter how I try to fold it, a small circle of brie remains uncovered.

“Does this look okay to you?” Picking up the phone, I flip the camera around so Aspen can see what I’m working with.

“Yes?” she says, but it sounds more like a question than an affirmation. “What is it?”

“Puffed pastry wrapped brie with pumpkin butter.” My tone is far too bitter to be talking about a block of cheese, but here we are.

“Why?”

I roll my eyes at the disgust in her tone. My sister has a lot of lovely qualities, but a diverse palette is not one of them. If

she had it her way, she would eat dino nuggets and garlic bread for the rest of her life. Setting my phone back where it was, I give the offending brie one last glare before putting it in the oven.

“It’ll be what it will be,” I say, trying to force my perfectionist nature to get a grip.

“Don’t forget to set a timer!” Aspen adds helpfully, and I turn my glare on her.

I’m not great in the kitchen but not that bad.

Before I have a chance to formulate a scathing response, the front door opens, and James steps into the apartment. A film of grime covers him from the renovation job he worked on this afternoon, but my entire body still tingles at the sight of him.

“Hey, Mace,” he says, wiping his boots on the welcome mat and dropping his bag next to the coat rack.

“I’m here too!” Aspen calls.

“Hi, Aspen.” He crosses the kitchen and reaches for me, but I step out of his grasp. Tingling or not, there’s no way he’s touching me till after he showers.

“Nope.” I hold out my hand in the universal signal for stop. “Shower first. Kiss later.” James smiles wickedly, darting forward. But I’m too fast and know him too well. By the time he takes two steps, I’ve already put the table between us. “I’m not kidding, James.”

“Fine,” he sighs dramatically. “How’d the chartreuse board coming?”

Aspen snorts. “Funny.”

“Don’t encourage him.” The last thing James needs is someone stroking his ego when it comes to his jokes. “The brie still has a bit to go, so you have plenty of time to shower.”

“If it doesn’t explode out the top,” Aspen adds helpfully.

James leans down to better look at her on my phone screen. “Explode?” he asks with concern.

“It’ll be fine,” I say, reassuring myself just as much as I am him.

“If it isn’t, we can always pick something up.” His words are meant to be comforting, but they strike a chord of unease within me.

The day after our late night drive—once we both came down from the high of emotions—we sat on Daphne’s and my patio and discussed what dating would look like. James suggested it. Even though he would have been more than happy to go with the flow and let it happen naturally, he knew I needed the security of a plan. Nothing crazy. It’s not like we had to schedule out every moment of our relationship, but I did want to know what he meant when he said we could take things slow.

“Well, one of us can go,” James amends, sensing my apprehension and immediately acting to soothe it. The butterflies flutter their wings in my stomach...maybe one kiss.

“Why can only one of you go?” Aspen asks, and I glance at my phone and then back to James. I left this part out when I filled her in on everything that’s happened. Not because I’m embarrassed but because I know my sister. She won’t understand.

“We haven’t taken things public yet,” James tells her, and I wince.

“Why not? Are you embarrassed of my sister or something?” Her tone is deceptively light, but I can tell from how her features turn to stone that the question is routed in suspicion.

“Well, I mean...” he teases, not catching on to the shift in the conversation’s tone.

I step forward, picking up the phone, and cutting James out of the video. “Ignore him. It’s nothing serious. We wanted to take some time before telling everyone.”

“I’m somewhat of a superstar in Birch Creek. Think the Kennedys.” James chuckles at his joke, and I shoot him a look that says, ‘Shut up.’

I swear, sometimes this man cannot read a room to save his life.

“Mhm,” Aspen hums, but it’s not a sound of agreement.

“He’s annoying but right. Think about it like Lorelai and Luke.”

My sister doesn’t understand small town culture. She’s only ever experienced it when she visits me in the summers. But *Gilmore Girls*? That’s a language she understands.

She nods slowly, her protective instincts satisfied. “Makes sense.”

This time, her agreement seems genuine, which is a relief. When Aspen gets something in her head, convincing her otherwise can be obnoxiously difficult, and I didn’t need her to hang on to this.

Finally realizing this isn’t some odd bit between sisters, James looks between me and my phone, frowning. But, to his credit, he doesn’t push the issue.

“I’m going to grab a quick shower and let you guys finish catching up.” Before I can stop him, he swoops in and kisses my cheek before dancing backward toward the door.

“Sorry,” Aspen apologizes when he’s gone. “It’s just—”

“I know,” I cut her off so she doesn’t have to voice what we both already understand. “I’m the one who asked if we could keep it to ourselves for a little while. The small town gossip mill can be a bit much, and James is a bit of a local superstar.”

Aspen laughs. “I’m going to tell him you said that.”

“Don’t you dare.”

* * *

THE BRIE DID NOT EXPLODE in the oven. Shockingly, it turned out pretty well. The bottom part of the pastry might not have been cooked all the way through, but a little salmonella never

killed anyone. James told me it was even better than Daphne's, which I know was a lie, but—hey—a win's a win.

We're curled together on the sofa, covered in my warmest knit blanket. The one I pull out as soon as I see the first leaf change. Between that and the pumpkin streusel candle burning on the coffee table, this might be the coziest night of my life.

"Go, go, go," James shouts at the TV, breaking the spell and jostling me as he leans forward to get a better look. I glance up from my laptop to see what he's so upset about, but the players on the screen look the same as they did two minutes ago. I love the food and atmosphere of football, but even after three years living next to James and Chase—both avid fans—I'm no closer to understanding the game.

"What happened?" I ask partially because I feel obligated to after that reaction, but also, I'm a little curious. Where I would say fall is my favorite season, James would say football is his. When we were friends, feigning basic interest was enough, but now that we're dating, I want to understand his hobbies better. Well, maybe not all of them. I draw the line at golf.

"That was freaking pass interference." He rubs his hands over his face, peering through his fingers at the game.

Individually, I understand the words he said, but put together, they lose all meaning. How do you ask a follow-up question when you don't know what you're following up on?

"Don't worry about it. It's fine. It'll all be fine."

From how he's tugging on his hair, I have a hard time believing him. "If you say so."

Having satisfied my football girlfriend duties, I go back to watching *Friends*. I like to rewatch all my favorite sitcoms during first semester. Then, during second semester, I turn to my favorite true crime documentaries. It's a comforting routine, but I'm behind this year. At this rate, I'll never get through *Friends*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *One Tree Hill* by December.

“Hey, what was going on with Aspen earlier?” James asks, muting the game and shifting his position to face me. The whole thing catches me off guard. One, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him turn the sound off on football before. Two, I didn’t know he picked up on enough of that conversation to ask about it.

“It was nothing. Sister stuff.” I try my best to brush him off without being obvious about it.

“Maci, c’mon,” he pushes. “I wouldn’t have joked around like that if I realized she was upset.”

“She wasn’t upset.” That’s not the right word for it. I hesitate, trying to figure out how to explain this in a way James will understand. “You know how Aspen goes to that fancy private school?” He nods. “And, obviously, most of her classmates...”

“Maci?” he asks when I don’t finish my thought.

“I don’t know how to explain it to you,” I tell him honestly. Or, maybe it’s that I don’t want to. James knows I grew up differently than him. That’s not something I ever tried to hide, but I don’t go out of my way to talk about it. And, for the most part, it doesn’t come up. Until the three of them want to see a concert, but I have to be able to pay rent. Or when they want to go thrifting, I bow out because it gives me flashbacks to routing through racks of jeans to find a pair that fit me and doesn’t have a massive butterfly decal on the leg. Or when I can’t take an internship because I don’t have anyone to cover my bills while I’m not working.

James takes my hand and intertwines our fingers. “Just talk to me. Don’t filter it.”

“Last year, Aspen started talking to this girl, Olivia, on the cheerleading squad. I was a little shocked because cheerleading is pretty much the antithesis of who Aspen is as a person, but she seemed happy. They started hanging out, and from everything, she told me things were going well.”

“I guess some of the other cheerleaders saw texts between the two of them and were making fun of Olivia for dating the

‘scholarship girl.’ She cut Aspen off completely after that. Stopped responding to texts or calls. Aspen tried to talk to Olivia about it at school, but—” A picture of her face, red and swollen from crying, flashes across my mind, and my heart aches a little. The residual effect of listening to your baby sister choke back sobs. “It didn’t go well.”

“That’s so messed up,” James practically growls, the older brother in him coming out.

“I knew when she started there it might be an issue. But it’s one of the best college prep schools around.” I can’t help but feel like I should have protected her from it, but I don’t know what I could have done. Maybe asked more questions? Helped her see the red flags? But at the time, I didn’t want to be the one to bring her down from the happiness of a new relationship.

James stays quiet, thinking it over, and I wait while he processes. I like it when he’s like this—knowing that he’s thinking about what he’s going to say next.

“Did anything like that ever happen to you?” he asks.

I bite my lip, pretending I’m thinking back even though I don’t have to. My high school was a little different than Aspen’s. There was a wider array of socioeconomic backgrounds, and most of the ones from well-off families never gave a second thought to how much my parents made. But there were always exceptions. They usually fell into two categories: the ones who thought it was beneath them to hang out with me or those who thought I would be their next project.

“Nothing that extreme,” I say, and James squeezes my hand in sympathy. “It doesn’t matter. All of that was a million years ago. Growing up, I used to wish we had more money all the time, but now? I had to work to get where I am. I’m proud of that.”

“You should be.” He closes my laptop with his free hand and sets it on the ground.

Climbing onto his lap, I snuggle against his chest. “Plus, if I didn’t apply for that scholarship to Birch Creek, I never would have met you.”

“That would have been a damn shame.”

James strokes my hair, and we sit silently for a couple minutes before he unmutes the football game. I’m not sure when I drift off, but the sound of the front door opening wakes me up. Startled, I almost fall off James’s lap. He catches me, shifting me back onto the sofa beside him.

“You guys are still up?” Daphne asks, still standing in the open doorway with something akin to shock on her face.

“It’s only...” I trail off, glancing at the clock on the stove. “It’s twelve? Why didn’t you wake me up so you could go to bed?” I turn to James, swatting him on the arm. “You have to get up to teach tomorrow!”

“Don’t hit me! You looked so peaceful. I didn’t want to wake you.” He scoots away from me with a reproachful look. In the moment of silence that follows, I hear what sounds like one of the doors in the hallway opening and closing. Odd. Our other neighbor is eighty-five and doesn’t leave her house after five p.m. as a rule.

“How was D.C. with Logan?” I ask Daph, rising from the sofa and stretching my aching limbs.

“Fine. His new apartment is already a disaster, but what’s new.” She laughs, and it doesn’t sound quite right. I’m too groggy to worry about it now, though.

“I’ll have to go check it out soon,” James says, standing and pulling me against him for a goodnight kiss. “See you tomorrow?”

“See you then.” I go in for a second kiss and then gently push him toward his apartment and waiting bed.

“You looked so peaceful,” Daphne says in her best James impression after she closes the door behind him.

“Shut up.” She can tease me all she wants. It’s not going to burst my bubble.

“I couldn’t bear to move you,” she continues, still playing at James and crooning like some lovesick fool out of a cheesy romantic comedy.

“I’m going to bed,” I tell her, waving as I head down the hallway, dragging my blanket behind me.

“Dream of me, my love,” she calls after me.

Chapter 20

Maci

“YOU ALMOST—OH my gosh, Maci! What happened in here?” Daphne swings my bedroom door open, stepping into the room and surveying the damage. Her eyes finally settle on me, sitting on the floor in my underwear, surrounded by the entire contents of my closet.

“I don’t have anything to wear,” I say, staring despondently at the sea of clothes. A pile of dresses lay discarded beside me, and I’m pretty sure all the skirts I own cover the surface of my bed.

“I don’t think that’s necessarily the problem.” Daphne picks her way through the minefield to remove a shirt that somehow ended up tossed over top of my lamp. It’s a fire hazard for sure, but I can’t bring myself to care. “You were fine when I left fifteen minutes ago! What happened?” Tossing the shirt onto the bed, Daph sits beside me on the floor.

“I don’t know.” And I don’t because I felt fine when Daphne left after helping me curl my hair into the loose waves I could never accomplish alone. Better than fine. Then I opened my closet. I must have tried on half of everything I own. The other half I picked up and threw aside out of pure frustration. “Everything either feels like too much or too little. I should have bought something new.” Dropping my head back into my hands, I stare down at the silky fabric of a blue slip skirt I thought would be perfect for tonight...until I put it on and couldn’t find a single top that went with it.

“I’m not going to say I told you so right now because you seem very emotionally fragile, but I will be shelving the

comment for later,” she teases, leaning into me so we both sway precariously to the side.

“I want everything to be perfect tonight,” I tell her, hating how my voice grows thick with emotion.

“You can’t put that kind of pressure on yourself or James,” Daphne says, gathering the clothes in her immediate vicinity, smoothing each piece out before stacking them into neat piles.

“I know.” She’s right. It’s what I’ve been telling myself all day, but the sentiment has yet to sink in. “It’s just... we’ve been living in this bubble for the last two weeks, you know? Like we have something that’s only ours, which is so nice because we’re still figuring it out.”

Daphne and Chase are still the only two who know what happened on James’s and my late night drive. Somehow, we’ve kept the whole thing blissfully quiet. Little things have changed, of course. James pulling me against his chest while we’re watching a movie on the couch. Taking his hand when we walk up the stairs to our apartments. The kisses he presses to my lips before I run out the door for work. And, I guess, they’re not little things, but when it’s just the two of us, it feels like things have hardly changed at all. Like they could have been this way all the long.

“And that makes total sense,” Daphne agrees. “But it’s not like he’s taking you out in Birch Creek tonight. D.C. is an hour away, which is a little bit of overkill if you ask me, but I get it. The Langley’s are a nosy people.”

I giggle because that was exactly our thought process when James picked the restaurant in D.C. Sure, we could have gone to Silver Crest, but that’s basically an extension of Birch Creek. The chances of avoiding anyone we know are marginally better, but not enough to make me comfortable.

“I don’t feel ready to be the talk of the town yet,” I say, thinking of all the times I’ve wanted to reach for James’s hand on campus and held back. “Once everyone knows, they start having expectations and asking questions, and we’re not ready for that yet. It’s still so new.”

“Mhm,” Daph hums her agreement less than enthusiastically. Standing, she takes the stack of clothes she’s gathered over to the bed. I twist around to watch as she finds the one empty spot where the comforter peeks through to set the pile down.

“Spit it out,” I tell her, rising to join her in organizing the jumbled mess. If I sort through it all, maybe I’ll find something to wear. James will be over to pick me up in ten minutes, and I can’t go in my underwear.

“The bubble is nice. I’m not saying it’s not.” Daphne purses her lips as if she’s unsure of her next words. “But don’t stay in it too long. It’s easy to say, ‘we’re holding off until we figure out what this is.’ And, maybe at first, that’s what you’re doing, but then you get comfortable. And suddenly, the not telling gets a whole lot easier than the telling.”

I nod along with her words because I can see that so clearly. The idea of staying in this perfect, peaceful sanctuary James and I have built is tempting, but it’s not a reality. Not if we want this to go anywhere real. Which we do. I do.

“Okay, enough of this!” she announces, shaking off the heaviness of her advice and taking my hand. “Let’s go find something in my closet for you to wear.”

Exactly seven minutes later, I emerge from Daphne’s room—now fully clothed—as James opens the door to our apartment.

“Wow.” He lets out a low whistle, eyes skimming from the knee-high camel-colored boots up my body to the loose white sweater dress I borrowed from Daph. Scratch that. The sweater dress I stole because if this is how James looks at me when I wear it, I’m never giving it back. “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks,” I say, flushing under the heat of his stare. As he crosses the room to me, I take in his tailored blue pants and the rolled-up sleeves of his white button-down, which expose the corded veins of his tan forearms. He takes hold of me, one hand gripping my waist and the other wrapping gently around the back of my neck to pull me to him. He presses his lips against mine, and I tilt my chin to grant him better access.

When he releases me, his eyes are hooded, pupils dilated, and he takes a step back, shaking his head. “So,” he sighs, running a hand through his unruly curls. “I have some bad news.”

“What?” I ask the flushed sensation our kisses always fill me with fading as I take in his crestfallen expression.

“Henry called right before I came over. You remember how I told you the elementary school book fair was tonight?”

I nod. They asked him to volunteer, but we’d already planned our date. I tried to convince him that we could postpone, but he wouldn’t hear it.

“And you remember how I also told you a stomach bug has been going around all the grades?” he asks, a pinched expression on his face.

“Yes,” I say slowly, ready for him to get to the point already.

“Well, apparently, five of the teacher volunteers are down for the count, and they need someone to come fill the gap,” James says, the apology already written all over his face. “And I know tonight’s our first official date, so if you don’t want me to go, I won’t. But Henry wouldn’t have called unless they needed the help, and I feel like...” he swallows, looking up and away from me.

“Hey,” I say, resting my palm against his cheek and pulling his gaze back down. “It’s okay. I’ll see if I can switch to the morning shift tomorrow, and we can go after I get off.”

“Really?” he asks hopefully. “Because I’m serious, if you don’t want me to go, I won’t.”

“I’m sure,” I reassure him, going up on my toes to kiss his forehead. James wraps me tightly in his arms, and I settle into the hug, tucking my head under his chin.

“I won’t be back too late. Maybe we can watch a movie or something,” he says, letting me go and stepping towards the door.

“You mean we won’t be back too late,” I correct him, lifting my purse off the coat rack. “You think I got all dressed up to sit on the sofa with Daphne all night?”

James’s face lights up, and the adoration in his eyes makes butterflies erupt in my stomach.

“You know, this event is in Birch Creek, right?” Even though he sounds like he’s teasing, his voice has an undertone of seriousness. This is not the “ease people into it” approach we discussed, and I falter for a second. But Daphne’s words from earlier rang true. The longer we stay in this bubble—as wonderful and perfect as it is—the harder it will be to leave.

“Yeah, I know,” I say, lacing my fingers through his and opening the door.

* * *

BOOTHS FILL Birch Creek Elementary’s gymnasium, each overflowing with a vast array of books. Every grade seems to have a station, with the lowest starting to the left of the entrance and wrapping all the way around to the highest on the right of the doors. In the parking lot, parent volunteers stand behind rented ice cream carts and hot dog stands, passing out delicious goodies to excited children. Neither James nor I bothered changing before running out the door, which feels like a gross oversight as I look around at all the much more casually dressed bookfair goers. Some people say they’d rather be overdressed than underdressed. I’d prefer to be neither. It’s why I religiously stalked the location tag on Instagram for the restaurant in D.C. we were planning to go to. I didn’t want to leave any margin for error, except I didn’t plan for my romantic dinner date to end up in a school gymnasium.

As I’m about to lean over to James and share the sinking feeling in my gut, a hulking man who looks like he belongs on one of Chase’s cop shows rather than in a bright orange “Volunteer” shirt rushes up to us.

“Thank god you’re here,” the man, who must be Henry, says, clasping James on his shoulder. “I know you had the big

date tonight, but we're dying out here."

"It's no problem," James tells him, brushing off the words and looking around the room. "Where do you need me?"

"Us!" I add, sticking out my hand. "I'm Maci, by the way."

"Oh, I know," he says, taking my offered hand and almost crushing my fingers. "Henry."

I raise my eyebrows, looking between Henry and James. "You know, huh?"

James shoots him a death glare, but it doesn't seem to faze the older man who presses on. "Thanks for putting him out of his misery. Even the students were starting to notice his pining," he whispers conspiratorially. I giggle, grinning gleefully at James, who turns a fantastic shade of scarlet.

"Wasn't there some emergency volunteer shortage you sent out the bat signal for?" James crosses his arms, glaring at both of us disapprovingly.

"We'll talk later," Henry promises me before clapping his hands together. "Right! James, if you could take over for me at the first-grade booth? They'll be excited to see you, and hopefully, that encourages their parents to buy more books."

"Sir, yes, sir!" James mockingly salutes his mentor teacher and starts to dash off. Before he can get far, he turns around just as quickly to press a kiss on the top of my head. "If you need me, you know where to find me. Thanks again for doing this."

"Hush!" I tell him, pushing him toward his waiting students. "Go, do your thing. I'll be okay!"

"Sorry for ruining y'all's date," Henry apologizes with a wince. "I didn't want to, but..."

"You were out of options. We can have dinner anytime." I wave off his apology. Any disappointment I felt left the second I watched James come to life once we stepped through the gymnasium doors. I've never seen him in his element like this before. "Now, where do you need me?"

Henry pulls a folded sheet of paper out of his back pocket and frowns as he consults it. “The kindergarten booth needs someone else for the next hour,” he says, gesturing to the nearest set up of shelves and tables of books. “I’ve been holding it down, but it’s hard to do that while managing the first-grade booth and putting out fires. All you have to do is stand there and check parents out when they come up. I doubt you’ll have many people. Most of the little ones came through earlier.”

“On it,” I say, mimicking James’s salute from earlier.

Henry settles me into the booth before dashing off, presumably to put out another fire. Who knew a children’s book fair could be so tumultuous?

A few parents wander through with their kids trailing behind them, sticky and excited from too much ice cream, but—like Henry said—it’s fairly quiet. I don’t mind. From where I stand, I have the perfect view of the first graders’ booth. Unlike me, James has been flooded with a constant stream of students and parents. I’ve seen him around kids before. Some of his older cousins started having babies right around the time we started college, but this is different. He pays special attention to each one, leaning in and genuinely listening to everything they tell him.

One kid, in particular, has seated herself on the gymnasium floor surrounded by an impressive spread of books for someone who could have only started reading recently. Her dark brow furrows in concentration as she sorts her choices into piles, trying to pick the best ones. James finishes checking out the people in line and walks over to the little girl. They talk briefly before he kneels beside her, nodding as she lifts each book, gesturing adamantly. A bemused smile plays across James’s lips, and the warmth in his eyes melts my heart.

* * *

DESPITE JAMES’S earlier assumption that we wouldn’t get home too late, it’s well after midnight when we pull out of the

parking lot. He holds my hand as we drive home, drawing mindless circles across my skin.

“Thank you for coming tonight,” he says, facing me when we stop at a red light. “I’m sorry I ruined our date.”

Leaning closer, I tuck one of the curls that’s fallen across his forehead back into place. “You didn’t ruin anything,” I murmur. “Seeing you in your element like that? Better than any dinner.”

I always knew James would be a part of my kids’ lives one way or another in some distant future. The fun uncle who shows them silly magic tricks and makes them laugh till their stomach hurts. But now? Now, I think he might play a much bigger role than the fun uncle—one day.

Chapter 21

James

“DO YOU HAVE TO GO?” Maci asks, leaning against the doorway to her apartment, pouting at me. Clad in her fuzzy, purple Halloween pajama bottoms with her hair in two twin braids, she looks like a disappointed toddler whose mom told her no more cartoons. It’s hard not to laugh, especially because she’s jutting out her bottom lip.

“I’ll be back in a few hours,” I promise, catching her bottom lip between my thumb and forefinger. “No more of this.”

She rolls her eyes, but when I lean in to kiss her, she melts into me seamlessly, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“My eyes!” A disgruntled voice behind us cries, and we break apart to find Chase holding a bowl of cereal. He wrinkles his nose in disgust but smirks, pleased to ruin the moment. “Sorry. Still getting used to this whole thing. I’m sure I’ll get there.”

“If you could get there a little faster,” I grumble.

“Are we watching *Scooby Doo* or not?” Daphne shouts from inside the apartment. Over the top of Maci’s head, I can just barely see Daphne lounging in their armchair, TV remote in hand. Chase pushes past Maci and me and collapses onto the sofa, swiping the remote from Daph, who squeals in protest.

“You always pick the worst episodes,” he says, earning a pillow to the face.

“There are no bad episodes of *Scooby Doo*.” Daphne emphasizes her point with another pillow smack.

“I should go sort that out.” Maci kisses my cheek. “Have fun golfing. Tell your dad and Asher I say hi.”

“Will do.” I walk backward down the hallway, watching her right up until she retreats into the apartment, closing the door behind her.

This is one of those moments I’ve been thinking about for the last year. Somedays, I’m not sure it’s real. Then Maci will come up behind me and wrap her arms around my waist or slip her hand into mine as we walk through campus, and it feels like the most real thing I’ve ever experienced. Those small gestures leave me kicking myself for waiting so long to tell her how I felt, but they also make all the months of pining worth it.

I’m halfway down the stairs, picturing Maci’s sleepy face when I woke her up this morning with a fresh cup of coffee and her favorite cereal for her cartoon marathon with Daphne and Chase when my phone rings. Glancing at the screen as I answer the call, I see Asher’s contact photo. Did I put our start time in my calendar wrong again? I could have sworn Dad said 10 a.m., but maybe it was earlier?

“Hey, what’s up?” I answer, tucking the phone into the crook of my neck as I fish my keys out of my back pocket. “Am I late?”

“What? Tee off isn’t for another twenty minutes,” Asher says in a voice barely above a whisper. “No, I’m calling ’cause I slept at Mom and Dad’s last night after the game, and I just overheard them talking in the kitchen.”

“Okay.” I unlock the truck and toss my clubs into the back. “And?” I press when he doesn’t immediately explain himself.

“Listen, I don’t want to get in the middle of whatever you and Dad have going on right now, but—”

“Dad and I don’t have anything going on.” I mean, sure, we still haven’t addressed the whole *‘overstepping doesn’t even cover emailing the principal of the school I’m interning*

at to get me a job I don't even want. And—yes—things might be tense, and I might be avoiding family gatherings, so I don't have to deal with it. But technically, that doesn't mean anything's going on. Because if you avoid it, it means it's not happening. That's what everyone says, right?

"Can you listen?" Asher snaps. "I only have a couple minutes before Dad comes to the car."

"Sorry. Listening."

"Anyways, I overheard Mom and Dad talking when I was coming down for breakfast.

Mom asked Dad if Dr. Adams had gotten back to him about coming with the three of us today." Dad must almost be to the car because Asher picks up speed, the words coming through the phone so quickly it's hard to make sense of them. "And I can't think of another reason for Dad to invite the elementary school principal to golf with us except to ambush you."

"I can't believe him," I grit out, thumping my palms against the steering wheel in frustration. Okay, so maybe avoiding the problem doesn't make it go away.

"Like I said, I don't want to get in the middle, but it's bullshit how he's handling this. I thought you should know."

I don't blame Asher for wanting to stay out of this as much as he can. He's already talking about getting his master's at BCU, and I'm not stupid enough to think that my plans to leave don't have some bearing on that. Guilt causes my chest to tighten, but I push it away. This is not my fault. Kids leave their hometowns all the time. It shouldn't be this big of a deal. Dad's the one sneaking around and pulling strings like... like...like this is some freaking Scooby Doo villain.

The sound of a car door opening on the other end of the phone pulls me back to the moment. I hear Dad's muffled voice, but I can't make out his words or Asher's response.

"James?" Asher asks. "You still there?"

"Can you tell him I'm not going?" I should man up and text Dad, but I don't want to, and Asher's right there. It's

convenient even if it's not fair. "Something came up."

"No problem. Talk to you later."

The line goes dead, and I stare at my phone. This is not how I'm supposed to be feeling right now. I just started dating the girl of my dreams. I'm supposed to be permanently floating on cloud nine. I know that's not how things work. Real life doesn't come to a stop because you fall in love, but it would be nice if it did.

On the bright side, which I'm determined to find because if I spend another minute thinking about Dad's latest manipulative stunt, I'll implode, this means I now have a free Sunday. Which is the mindset I cling to as I walk back up the stairs and chuck my golf clubs into my closet.

"Get up. We're going pumpkin picking," I announce as I barge into Maci and Daphne's apartment two minutes later. All three jump at the sound of my voice, turning simultaneously to stare at me.

"Don't ever do that again," Daphne says, pressing a hand to her chest.

"Sorry." I grimace, crossing to the living room and standing in front of the TV to block their view. "But seriously, go get dressed. I checked, and the pumpkin farm started their Fall Fest last weekend. Let's go."

"I thought you were golfing," Maci says, frowning at me over her cereal bowl.

"Something came up," I repeat the same excuse I gave Asher a few minutes ago, and her frown deepens. 'I'll tell you later,' I mouth because I don't feel like hashing the whole thing out right now.

"We can see you too, you know, and Maci's not the only one who can read lips," Chase tells me, setting his bowl on an end table and getting to his feet. "But sure. I'm up for some pumpkin picking and a classic corn maze. Give me five minutes."

"I need more than five minutes," Daphne says, also standing. "You—" she points to Chase and then to his bowl

“—better take that back to your apartment. I’m tired of finding your dirty dishes scattered around my apartment.”

Chase sticks his tongue out at her but takes the bowl with him as he leaves anyway. My eyes flick to the spoon he left behind, and Daphne doesn’t miss it either, picking it up and starting after him.

“Leave it, Daph,” Maci tells her. “It’s probably one of ours they stole anyway.”

Daphne huffs and sets the spoon down on the counter. “One of these days…” she mutters, but the rest of her threat is lost to the hallway as she heads toward her room.

“So, what happened?” Maci asks, crossing her arms and staring at me from the couch.

“Dad invited Dr. Adams to go golfing with us this morning. Asher called to tell me,” I tell her, using all my willpower to shove away the irritation that rises back up. We’re going to a pumpkin patch, and I’m going to have fun, damnit.

“To talk to you about next year again?”

“Probably, but we’ll never know because we are going pumpkin picking.” I extend my hands to her, and she takes them, letting me tug her off the sofa. Pressing a kiss to the top of her head, I spin her in the direction of her room and gently nudge her forward. “Now, go get ready. We need to start strategizing how to beat Chase and Daphne in the corn maze race.”

At the mention of our annual competition, Maci’s eyes light up. “I’ll be ready in five,” she promises, and I snort.

I can count on one hand the number of times Maci has gotten ready in five minutes in the last three years.

* * *

“ALRIGHT, EVERYONE,” Daphne claps her hands to get our attention, which is pointless because Chase, Maci, and I are

already looking at her. “Everyone has their apple cider?” The three of us nod, lifting our steaming cups. “Everyone has thrown their maps away?”

“Hold on!” Chase exclaims, pulling the folded pamphlet we were all handed when we arrived at the pumpkin farm and tossing it into the nearby trashcan. “After being accused—falsely, I might add—last year of cheating, I didn’t want to leave any room for argument.”

“There’s no way you and Daph made it through the maze that fast without a map.” Maci narrows her eyes at him, and I wrap my arm around her shoulder, pulling her to my side.

“I thought we were keeping things friendly this year?” I tease, twirling a piece of her hair around my finger.

“Can we please focus?” Daphne claps again. “I’m craving some pumpkin donuts, and they’ll taste so much better when you two losers buy them for me.”

Chase sidles up to stand next to Daph, turning his left hand into an “L” and smirking at Maci and me. I have to tighten my grip on Maci’s shoulder when she starts toward him—my competitive girl.

The corn maze race has been around for years. Before the three of us met Maci, we played with my cousins throughout middle and high school. We would get into teams of two and race to see who could get through the corn maze the fastest without a map. Meanwhile, the adults would sip on spiked apple cider, occasionally getting called to referee a dispute or find a pair that got too turned around.

As we got older, getting everyone together on the same weekend every October became harder. By the time we reached freshman year, it was just Chase, Daphne, me, and Maci. Even though she was new to our group then, her competitive streak fit right in. We drew straws to decide teams that first year. Maci and I both drew the short straws. We’ve been a team ever since. Looking back now, I wonder if, even then, some invisible force was nudging us together.

“As the score stands,” Daphne begins.

“We all know where the score stands,” Chase groans, pushing her toward the maze’s opening. “Can we get this show on the road already?”

“As the score stands,” she repeats, louder this time, digging the heels of boots in to keep him from moving her any farther. “The teams are tied thanks to someone’s genius idea to play twice last year.” She levels a glare at me, and I raise my hands defensively.

“Don’t look at me like that! If you wanted to keep the upper hand, you should have stopped your partner from downing three spiked ciders before you went in.”

Plus, if we didn’t play twice last year, there would have been no chance of Maci and I redeeming ourselves this year. Daphne and Chase were up by one, which meant the most Maci and I would have been able to do was tie with them, and that was simply unacceptable. Now, the playing field is equal. And so what if Chase thought that the last apple cider was virgin? It’s not my fault he trusted the enemy.

“Ready for the coin toss?” Maci asks, tossing a quarter in her hand. “Chase, I believe it’s your turn to call it.”

He steps forward, eyes locked onto the quarter, flicking between her fingers. “Heads, Daph and I go right, and you guys go left.” She flips the quarter in the air, and it lands in her palm heads up. Daphne and Chase cheer. “I have a good feeling about right this year,” he says, sprinting toward the maze with Daph on his heels.

“See you later, suckers,” Daphne calls over her shoulder before they disappear around the bend.

“Shall we?” I ask, taking Maci’s hand and tugging her in the opposite direction.

We wander in silence for a couple minutes, getting our bearings. Even though none of us will admit it, getting through the maze without the map is genuinely pure luck. There’s some memory to it, but at the end of the day, we’re surrounded by cornstalks more than a head taller than us.

“You want to talk about what’s happening with your dad?” Maci asks as we hit another dead end.

“Nope.” I turn on my heel and start back the way we came. “If we took a left when we were facing toward the dead end, that means we take a right now, right?”

“Um,” she hesitates, head swiveling between the two paths. “Yes...I think, but don’t try and change the topic.”

“Mace,” I groan, squeezing her hand. “All I want right now is to enjoy this incredibly confusing corn maze with my gorgeous girlfriend.”

“Okay, but later?” she presses, the compliment having no bearing on her determination.

“Later, I want to enjoy my victory pumpkin donuts, drink too much spiked apple cider, and pick a handsome pumpkin to deface.” My pumpkin carving skills are terrible, at best, but it’s tradition.

“James.” There’s a warning in Maci’s voice that draws me up short.

I pull us off to the side of the walkway. Looking at her, I wonder again if I’m dreaming. This time last year, I only just began to realize how my feelings toward her were changing. The memory of her taking my hand as the sun set over the stalks and tugging me through the twists and turns brings a smile to my lips. The way she shivered in the early October air and how my heart tightened in my chest when she pulled my hoodie over her head.

“Are you listening to me?” she asks, poking me in the cheek.

“Sorry, no.” I didn’t realize she kept talking. She opens her mouth to object, but I keep talking. “I promise we will talk about what’s going on with my dad, but not today. This is our last Fall Fest before college ends.”

Her face falls, and I wish I hadn’t said it, even though I’m sure it’s what all four of us have been thinking since we arrived. Senior year promises new beginnings and fresh starts

but before that? You have to go through a whole lot of “lasts” to get to all the “firsts.”

“We’ll be back,” Maci says quietly, staring at the stalks of corn shifting in the autumn breeze.

“Of course we will,” I tell her, gently stroking her hair.

“But it won’t be the same.” The nostalgia in her voice makes my heart ache, and I’m overwhelmed by the desire to protect her from every hard thing life has to offer.

But that’s not how life works, so all I can do is promise her, “But we’ll be together, and that’s all that matters.”

Her features soften into a smile, which I take as permission to bend down and kiss her. I sweep my tongue across her bottom lip, and she sighs into my mouth. The sound of feet pounding against the dirt path pulls us apart, and we look up just in time to see a group of shrieking kids rush by.

“Okay.” Maci places a hand firmly on my chest, pushing me away. “Enough of this mushy stuff. We need to get our heads in the game to beat Chase and Daphne.”

“Eh, I don’t know. I feel like I’ve already won,” I say, giving her my mushiest, sappiest smile.

“Oh my god, James.” She lifts her eyes heavenward before tossing her hair over her shoulder and flashing me a sneaky smile. “Stop being so corny.”

Chapter 22

Maci

MACI: Daphne's at a study group tonight.

JAMES: Chase has been with his parents all day

MACI: Wanna come over for dinner and a study session?

JAMES: Are you cooking?

MACI: Absolutely not

JAMES: Be there in one sec

ONE MINUTE—RATHER than one second—later, the front door opens, and I twist myself around on the couch to see James pushing it closed behind him with his foot. He balances a thick stack of papers, a bottle of wine, his trademark comfort water bottle, and a clear case full of colorful pens in his hands.

“You’re late,” I tease, tapping my wrist for emphasis. “By a whole fifty-nine seconds.”

“My deepest apologies,” he says, bowing his head dramatically in shame.

Setting the wine on the coffee table, James drops onto the sofa beside me, a few papers fluttering onto the floor. I bend, trying to rescue them without getting up, but they’re out of reach. He catches me around the waist, effortlessly lifting me onto his lap.

“Leave them,” he says, not sparing the papers a second glance, not to mention the ones I’m now crumpling.

“Don’t you have to give them back to your students?” I ask, giggling as he trails his fingers up my sides.

“They’re six. These papers will be crumpled at the bottom of their bookbags by the end of the day anyway.” His hands are in my hair now, gently twisting it into two pigtails and tugging on them to bring my face centimeters from his. “How’s it going?”

The corners of his bright blue eyes are crinkled in a soft smile that I’m too close to see on his lips.

“Better now,” I say, brushing a kiss to his forehead. With another tug of the makeshift pigtails, James’s lips move firmly against mine. I nip at his bottom lip and feel him smile against my cheeks.

“Hey, that’s my move.” He pulls away just enough to shoot me an accusing pout.

“It’s a good one,” I reassure him, scooting back into my previous spot on the couch. One swipe across the keypad wakes my laptop to the Order Confirmed screen with a tiny, spinning pizza at its center. “Pizza should be here in thirty minutes.”

At the mention of food, James’s stomach growls. “Sorry,” he grimaces. “All I’ve had today was my protein shake before the gym and a PB&J I swiped off Henry at lunch.”

“I figured things were pretty sparse when Chase snuck into the apartment this morning for a bowl of cereal at the crack of dawn. Don’t worry. I ordered you your own pizza.” I’ve come to recognize a couple of telltale signs over the years that signal when James and Chase desperately need to go grocery shopping. Breaking and entering in the early hours of the morning is one of them. Why they don’t come over at a normal time, I don’t know. It’s not like Daph and I have ever refused to share our food. Well, not seriously, at least. It’s probably some Mission Impossible, spy shit, guy thing.

“You know me so well,” James says, leaning over to try and kiss me again.

I dodge, leaning back so I’m out of range of his lips. “Nope. No more shenanigans.”

“But I love shenanigans,” he says, with a wink and devilish smile that almost gets me to cave.

“Dinner and study session, remember?” I remind him, pointing at his now crumpled papers with my free hand.

He groans, flopping into the cushions, his pout from earlier back in full force. “I was hoping studying was code for make out.”

“Not tonight,” I say, twisting my hair into a messy bun and securing it with a claw clip I found tucked between the cushions on the sofa earlier in the day. I’m sure it’s Daphne’s, but finders’ keepers. “maybe after we study.”

“Works for me.” James’s face brightens, and he goes about organizing the papers spread across his lap and picking up the ones knocked to the floor.

The silence that follows is only broken by the click-clack of my keyboard and the scratch of James’s flair pens as we try to put a dent in the schoolwork that never seems to end. I always knew senior year was going to be grueling. I put some protective measures into place—gen ed requirements I waited to take to balance out the complex 400-level classes for my major—but I don’t feel the difference right now. Between readings, projects, pop quizzes, and scheduled tests, my school calendar is full to bursting, and that’s before I add in work and time with James. I’m convinced that if we didn’t live across the hall from one another, we’d never see each other.

“Done,” James announces, tossing the spelling tests he was grading aside and sighing with relief.

“That’s all you had to do?” I ask incredulously. My checklist barely fits onto its designated post-it note, and I’ve already resigned myself to pushing a few things till tomorrow.

He laughs, shaking his head and holding up a folder I hadn’t noticed earlier. It’s packed to bursting with papers

spilling out the sides and over the top. “**GRADING**” is written on it in James’s thick, blocked handwriting. “Oh, sweet Maci, not even a little bit. Henry’s wife and kid are down with that stomach bug, so I volunteered to hold down the fort on the grading front.” The pained look on his face when he opens the folder and papers tumble out makes me wonder if he’s regretting that decision now.

“How sweet of you,” I say, leaning into him and resting my head on his shoulder.

“Nope. No more shenanigans,” he echoes my words from earlier, pushing me off. “Remember?”

I roll my eyes but return to my list. My chest tightens as I cross White Hawk Engineering off my list. Yet another company that’s sent me a form rejection letter from their paid internship program. I went over the numbers again last night, weighing my savings against a semester’s worth of expenses. It was pointless. It’s not like the numbers changed since the last dozen times I’d run them. There are only two more internships left to get back to me before I have to resign myself to being a TA next semester. Daph keeps telling me to hold on to hope, but with each passing day, that hope dwindles.

“The internship?” James asks, peeking over my shoulder at my notebook.

“Yeah,” I sigh, shoving aside the offending list and picking up my laptop, which is open to Quizlet, so that I can study for the test I have first thing in the morning.

“You wanna talk about it?”

“No,” I say firmly. Talking will distract me, and if I want to keep the straight A’s I have at the moment, I can’t screw up this test. If I’m not going to have an internship on my resume, I’m going to need them.

“Mhm,” James hums disapprovingly, and I glance up at him questioningly. “I’m just saying—” He raises his hands as if to say, ‘don’t blame me’ “—you’ve been trying to get me to talk about my dad all week.”

“Are you offering a trade?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. “Because I could be convinced.”

I’ve been bugging him for over a week to sort through what’s happening with his dad. Not even with me. With Chase or Asher or Daphne or literally anyone. James has been avoiding his dad left and right. Scheduling home renovation jobs to conflict with family events purposefully. Visiting me at the bar rather than going to Sunday night dinners. He says he’s fine, but it’s not like him. It’s odd going to Langley events with only Daphne by my side, especially now that James and I are dating. Everyone’s always asking me about him, assuming that—since I’m his girlfriend—I’ll be able to explain his absence.

“You talk to me about the internship, and I’ll talk about my dad.”

“Deal.”

“You first,” we say at the same time.

I open my mouth to argue, but James holds up a finger. “I asked first.”

“Fine,” I agree halfheartedly, looking at my discarded notebook and its list of rejections. “I heard back from another paid internship today. I didn’t get the spot. It was a long shot, anyway. The application says they prefer master’s students, but I was hoping maybe I’d make it through.”

James frowns but doesn’t say anything, so I keep going.

“There are two left, and if I don’t get those, I’ll have to TA next semester, which I don’t want to do. It doesn’t look as good on job applications. The internship was supposed to give me a leg up, but since I can’t take an unpaid position...well, I’m screwed, which I knew. Objectively, I always knew a paid internship was a long shot, but I wanted it. And—this is going to sound stupid—but I’ve always been able to get what I wanted as long as I worked hard enough. At least academically. So, I don’t know, this feels like a failure.” When the words finally stop, I peek up at James. My cheeks are warm from the flood of emotions and frustration I released on

him, but the weight on my chest feels lighter. Not gone, but it's easier to carry now that I've shared it.

"I know you're frustrated." James intertwines my fingers through his and squeezes gently. "But this isn't because you didn't work hard enough. You're the hardest working person I know."

I break into a smile, laying my head on his shoulder. This time, he doesn't push me off, instead wrapping his free arm around my shoulder.

"It'll be okay." I'm not sure if I believe the words, but they're soothing all the same. The plan used to be: get a paid internship my senior year, wildly impress my bosses, graduate, escape the service industry, and land myself a job at a reputable engineering firm. Now it's looking more like: TA my senior year, get good recommendations from my professors, graduate, find a job at a start-up engineering firm, and bartend on the weekends. It's not what I expected, but then again, I didn't expect to fall for James, and that's turning out okay—more than okay. So, maybe this isn't the end of the world.

"I could ask my dad, you know," James says, and my shoulders immediately tighten.

Breathing through the feeling, I force myself to relax again. The Langley's have connections all over Birch Creek and outside. It's impossible to be such a large family, so ingrained in this town, without them. A part of me would love to accept James's offer, but I've gotten this far. I want to see it through on my own. Like I started it. When I walk across that stage and accept my diploma, I want to know I did it all by myself. But I can't say that to him. I don't want to insinuate that he's gotten where he is because of his family because it's not true. Well, maybe a little. But that doesn't mean he's not a hard worker. Money and influence make things so much more complicated than they need to be. I don't want to bring that into our relationship. Especially not this early, when everything seems so new.

"I need to figure this out on my own. It's alright. Don't worry," I tell him, turning my head down when he tries to lean

back and catch my eye. “Okay, enough about me. Your turn.”

“Do I have to?”

“That was the deal.”

Whatever he’s going to say next is cut off as the box next to our front door buzzes, signaling the arrival of the pizza. He hops up, toppling me over in the process.

“Saved by the bell,” he crows, sprinting out the front door to retrieve our dinner before I can stop him.

While he’s gone, I move our school stuff from the coffee table onto the armchair to make room for dinner. James returns as I’m uncorking the wine and pouring each of us a glass.

“Plates?” he asks, pausing in the kitchen.

“I’m too hungry for plates,” I say, snagging the box marked “Veggie” from his hands and settling onto the floor.

Once James has scarfed down two pieces of pizza, he leans back on his hands and brow pulled together. It’s an expression I’ve never seen him wear when he’s eating pizza, and it’s enough to make me pause mid-bite.

“I know I should talk to my dad about...” He gestures at the air, trying to find the right word to fit the situation. “...all of it, but I don’t know how. He wants me to stay in Birch Creek. I already know that. He’s made it very clear, but I’ve made it clear I don’t want to stay. I don’t think talking to him will fix that.”

I nod, taking in his words and giving him the same space he did for me. He’s not done talking. I can tell by how his lips remain slightly parted and the firm set of his jaw.

“Maybe if he went about differently, that would change things. Not about staying. That’s not going to happen. But if he sat down with me and talked about it instead of pulling all these strings...” James tugs a hand through his hair and sighs. “I’m not making sense. I’m sorry.”

“No,” I tell him firmly. “It makes perfect sense. No one likes to feel manipulated. But that’s the thing—this isn’t like your dad. You know that. He isn’t the kind of person to throw

his weight around. Maybe there's something else going on? Asher mentioned something about your uncle...the one that left?"

James frowns. "Uncle Anthony? When were you guys talking about him?"

I wave off the question because I have no plans to tell James how I hid from him during that Sunday morning brunch. "My point is, obviously, the idea of you leaving has upset your dad. I know it's easy to be mad at him for how he's handling it, but maybe if you sit down with him, you could understand why."

"I'll think about it," he agrees, but I can't tell if he's changed his mind or if he's placating me. The Langleys may be extremely close, but if I've learned anything over the last three years, they're equally as stubborn.

"You'll make the right decision." It's hard to choose to reassure him rather than keep pushing, but I can't fix this for him.

Chapter 23

James

“HOW’S IT GOING OVER THERE?”

“No peaking!” Maci scolds, swatting me away as I lean over the sea of pumpkin guts and various carving tools to look at what she’s carving. “Keep your eyes on your own pumpkin.”

I drop back into my seat and stick my tongue out at her. Keeping my eyes on my pumpkin is the last thing I want to do, and not just because I prefer to keep them on Maci whenever she’s in the room. My artistic skills begin and end with stick figures. Usually, I play it safe. Triangles for the eyes and nose and a circle for the mouth. It means my jack-o-lantern has a permanent surprised look, but it’s better than being caved in and disfigured. Which is what I’m dealing with right now. This year, Maci convinced me to *‘try something new.’* One of her worst ideas to date.

“I don’t understand why you made me do this,” I grumble. All the designs Maci pulled up on Pinterest were far too complicated for me to attempt, so I settled on trying my hand at carving my truck. Maybe it’s some manly cliché, but it has a simple shape. A little too simple because when I realized how boring it looked, I thought I should add some details. Big mistake.

“It’s good to expand your horizons now and then. Stop complaining and get back to work.” Maci blows a piece of hair out of her face that’s escaped her dark blue bandana. When I teased her about the accessory earlier, she told me it made her feel “artsy.” Hopefully, it’s working because she has as much artistic skill as I do. She purses her lips, leaning back to take in

her pumpkin. When the new perspective doesn't make her any happier, she pokes her tongue out of the corner of her mouth and continues carving.

I'm about to suggest we cut our losses and move to the couch for something we're both significantly better at when her phone buzzes on the table. We both glance at the little email icon that's popped up on the notification bar. Maci's looking at the phone like it might burn her if she picks it up. It's the same look she's had all week whenever an email hits her inbox. The last internship left on her list was supposed to send acceptance emails any day now, and I think the anticipation might be killing her. It's definitely killing me. Mace deserves this more than anyone. She says she's coming to terms with the idea of TA'ing, but we both know it would be settling. And I never want her to settle for anything less than her dreams.

She skims the email, and I watch the light leave her eyes.

"I didn't get it," she tells me, dropping her phone onto the table, where it bounces and clatters to the floor. "Shit!" Tears fill her eyes, but she doesn't move to pick it up.

I'm up and around the table before the first one can fall. Standing behind her, I wrap my arms around her shoulders and press my cheek against her head. I don't tell her it will be okay or that she'll figure it out. I don't know if either is true; false platitudes won't make her feel better. Instead, I hold her a little tighter and stroke her hair.

"They said no." Her voice is quiet and hollow, like she's a million miles away.

"I'm so sorry, baby," I tell her, wiping away the leftover tears clinging to her cheek with my thumb. "They're idiots."

She nods, but I don't feel like she heard me. The distance in her eyes makes my heart ache. I know she's looking down the road to her TA position next semester. To the impact not having an internship on her resume will have on her job search. The fear of a failed future she has yet to even step into is written in the delicate lines of her frown.

My Maci's a worrier. I've known that for as long as I've known her. All I want is to fix this for her. She's worked too hard and sacrificed too much not to have this opportunity. But I can't because she asked me not to. A month ago, things would have been different. If I'd known how dire the situation looked, I wouldn't have even asked before going to my dad.

But now? I asked. She said no. I have to respect that... right?

When Maci looks up, there's a smile pasted onto her face. It's tight around the corners and doesn't reach her eyes, but I know—if she's putting on a front for me—it means she isn't ready to talk about it. I press one last kiss to the top of her head before stepping away. As I do, my gaze skims over her pumpkin, and I quickly squeeze them closed. Maci doesn't miss it, though.

“You peaked!” she practically shrieks at me. There might be a little wobble to her voice, but some of the laughter from before the stupid email is back.

I shake my head vehemently. “I promise I didn't!” Turning away, I feel my way back to my seat before opening my eyes again.

“Sure,” she says, still looking at me suspiciously. “Just get back to work, mister. I have to leave for work soon.”

Hesitantly, I prod at the window I tried to carve into the truck—wrong choice. My pumpkin's already compromised structural integrity gives up the ghost, collapsing in on itself. This is about to be the ugliest jack-o-lantern in the hall. As I go about trying to clean up the edges to maybe somewhat redeem myself, I can't help but notice the way Maci's eyes flicker from her pumpkin to her phone and back again.

“You almost done?” I ask, setting down my tools and pushing them out of immediate reach. If I keep going, it's only going to make things worse, if that's possible.

“Mhm,” she hums, furrowing her brow and switching to a smaller knife.

Unlocking my phone, I respond to Henry's text about next week's lesson plans. There's another unanswered text only a few below Henry's, and my thumb hesitates over it.

DAD: Do you have time for dinner this week?

I've been avoiding answering it, but after watching Maci crack like that...I click on our text thread. She told me not to, but it couldn't hurt to ask. There's a chance Dad won't have any connections that could help.

I shouldn't. But it's not fair. She's worked so hard. This way, at least, she'll have an option. She doesn't have to take it, but she deserves a choice.

JAMES: How's tomorrow?

I swallow hard as soon as I hit send.

It doesn't hurt to ask. I reassure myself, pushing away the gnawing feeling in my stomach.

"Ready?" Maci asks.

One look at the faint mascara tear tracks on her cheeks, and any guilt I feel disappears. She deserves this. Maci's always had a hard time asking for help. Her pride gets in the way, which is fine because she always figures it out. But this isn't something she can fix on her own.

"One, two, three," I count us down. Simultaneously, we spin our pumpkins to face the other.

"Cheater!" I shout, jumping up and pointing an accusing finger at her. "You said we had to try something new!"

"This is new! I usually do the oxygen symbol. This is the symbol for boron." Her voice has no remorse or guilt, even though that is obviously a technicality.

"That's cheating, and you—"

"What is that supposed to be?" she asks, knowing she's in the wrong and unwilling to acknowledge it. The distraction works, though, because I thought, at the very least, you could tell the misshapen hole was a truck.

“It’s my truck.” I rub the back of my neck self-consciously. This is why I stick to the classics. “You can tell, right?”

“Um. Yes. For sure.” Her barely contained giggles don’t help her credibility.

“You little liar.” I hop out of my chair and dart towards her. Realizing my intentions, a second too late, Maci barely makes it two steps before I scoop her up.

“Let me down, James,” she shrieks as my fingers find that one ticklish spot just under her ribs.

“Never gonna happen.” I toss her onto the couch and follow her so she’s lying between my knees. Pressing a kiss to her temple and then to her cheek before I brush my lips softly over hers. “Now, can we please do something I’m good at?”

* * *

I TUG at the collar of my shirt as I approach Franco’s Italian Bistro. It’s a tiny restaurant just off Birch Creek’s main street, tucked between a gym and an ever-changing clothing store. As a kid, it was my favorite place. Growing up in such a big family, we crammed birthdays into a massive celebration with anniversaries, promotions, and every other milestone. So, my parents started a tradition. Each year, the day after one of our birthdays, we’d go out, just the five of us. The birthday boy or girl got to pick one activity and where we went for dinner. I always chose this place.

It makes sense Dad suggested we have dinner here. His motives are so transparent it’s almost insulting. Does he think I’m too stupid to realize what he’s doing? Or maybe he’s hoping the nostalgia of the red vinyl booths and bottomless garlic knots will soften me up? It doesn’t matter. It won’t work. I’m not here for me.

“James.” Dad rises from his seat when he sees me walk through the door.

“Hey,” I say, giving him a tight-lipped smile. He steps toward me, but I slide into the booth before he can offer up a

hug. “Thanks for making time. I know it was short notice.”

“Of course. I always have time for you.” He takes his seat, seemingly unfazed by my less than warm greeting. “You, however, have been hard to pin down lately. Your mother wanted me to tell you that if you miss another Sunday night dinner, she’ll host the next one at your apartment.”

“I’ll be there next week,” I tell him, wincing internally. This whole thing isn’t fair to Mom.

The waiter comes over, and we place our orders even though the menus remain untouched on the tabletop. I don’t think Franco’s has changed its food selection once in the thirty years they’ve been open. It’s the same with every restaurant in Birch Creek. After twenty-one years, I know their menus like the back of my hand. Maybe I should find the familiarity comforting, but lately, it’s felt as constricting as the collar of this damn shirt. I tug on it again, but the gesture does nothing to clear up the tightness in my throat.

“Listen, James—” Dad starts, but I won’t let him get going.

“I have a favor to ask.” I move on like he never spoke. He blinks slowly, steepling his fingers in front of him. I half expect him to scold me for my rudeness, but he nods, signaling me to continue. “There’s this requirement for Maci’s major—an internship, and she needs some help.”

Dad frowns, the wrinkles in his forehead, which have become ever present in recent years, deepening. “Really? She’s struggling to find one? I would have thought with her grades and stellar track record, she’d have no trouble.”

“She’s had offers,” I say, unable to stop the small, proud smile from curving across my lips. “But none of them are paid.”

“And between paying for school, covering her bills, and her class load, there’s no way for her to make an unpaid position work.” It’s not a question because Dad already knows. He’s had a front row seat to how hard Maci works for the last three years. On many occasions, he’s used her as an example

for Asher, Lily, and me to look up to. It would be annoying if he weren't right.

“Exactly. She deserves this more than anyone, but she needs an in.”

“And you were wondering if I know anyone who could help?” He nods, mulling it over. His following silence provides me with an unwelcome opportunity to think. The distance I've put between us has made it easier to pretend like I'm not angry with him, but I am. So much so that I can feel it twisting knots into my stomach. I do my best to push it down and away. I'm not here for me. I'm here for Maci. After all her sacrifices to get where she is, I can make this one for her.

The waiter comes by with our food while Dad's skimming through contacts on his phone. Usually, even the slightest whiff of Franco's lasagna makes my mouth water, but today, I'm not sure I'll manage a single bite.

“Got it!” Dad sets his phone down and grins at me. “I knew there was someone, but I couldn't remember their name. One of my old colleagues, Javier Castro, works in the recruiting department over at White Hawk Engineering. Have you heard of it?”

“They turned Maci down a couple weeks ago. Something about their paid internship program only being for grad students.”

Dad waves off my concern. “I'll give Javier a call and see what I can do. I'll let Maci know by the end of the week.”

“Actually,” I say slowly, twirling my fork around in the center of the lasagna I have no intention of eating. “If it works out, could you let the company reach out to Maci?”

“She doesn't know you asked for my help?” He phrases it as a question, but his knowing expression tells me he already has his answer.

“She asked me not to,” I admit, not meeting his eyes. The guilt of keeping this from her and going directly against her wishes already eats away at me. I don't need Dad to add to it.

“James...”

“I know what you’re going to say,” I cut him off again, and he huffs in frustration this time. “She thinks she can do everything herself, but not this time. And I won’t let her stubbornness ruin an opportunity that could affect her future.”

I risk a look at him, and instead of the disappointment I expect to see, he smiles softly at me.

“It’s a hard position to be in,” he says reasonably. “Knowing what’s best for someone even though they refuse to accept it themselves.”

And just like that, the anger I’ve been swallowing down rises in a brutal tidal wave that turns my vision red. His smile wasn’t understanding. It was condescending. Of course, it was. He’s found a way to turn this conversation around on me, and I lead him to it.

“Dad.” There’s a clear warning in my voice, but he pushes past it.

“I let you say what you came here to say. Now let me do the same.” The diplomacy in his voice eggs me on.

My throat is so tight it’s a wonder I can still breathe, but I’ll be damned if I let him tell me all the ways I’m refusing to accept “what’s best” for me.

“I can’t stay here, Dad.” I hate how desperate I sound. But I am. He needs to understand nothing he does will change my mind. I need him to understand. If we keep going round and round like this, all he’ll do is push me away, and I don’t want that. I want things to go back to the way they were before.

“I know you feel that way, and I’m not saying you have to stay forever. But there’s already a job waiting for you at Birch Creek Elementary next year. You know the school. The other teachers. It makes sense.”

“Except I don’t want it. I didn’t earn that job.” It takes everything in me to keep my voice even. To stop it from rising or breaking because weakness is the last thing I want to show right now. “From the second I was born, everyone in this town knew who I was. My whole life, I’ve been someone’s son. Someone’s nephew. Someone’s cousin. I’ve never had the

chance just to be James because I've always been James Langley. It's exhausting, Dad."

"Well, I'm sorry growing up surrounded by a family who loves you, who's provided countless opportunities for you, is so tiring." There's anger in his eyes, but his voice stays infuriatingly patient. Because it has to be. Because he's president of the University. Because an upstanding town council member can't be seen having a public shouting match with his son. That's how I know he won't stop me when I storm out of the restaurant.

Because as much as I'm James Langley, he's *Alexander Langley*.

Chapter 24

Maci

IF I'M GOING to be woken up at the crack of dawn three hours before my alarm is set, at least it's with the smell of something warm and buttery in the air. Shooting a murderous look at my curtains and the still dark sky behind them, I drag myself from bed. Free of the comforter's warmth, I'm quickly reminded that autumn has finally arrived in Birch Creek. The chill seeps through the walls and nips at my exposed skin as I search my towering laundry pile for something suitably warm. Tugging one of James's hoodies free, I sniff it before deeming it clean enough to pull over my head.

Quiet voices carry down the hallway from the kitchen as I make my way to the source of the delicious smell. When I step into the living room, I'm greeted by the sight of Chase and Daphne slumped over mugs of coffee at the dining table. Meanwhile, James stands at the counter whistling to himself while pouring batter into a waffle machine. Originally, it belonged to Daphne (*a graduation present from one of her aunts*), but she's more of a protein shake and avocado toast kind of breakfast girl, so James adopted it. And thank God for that because his pecan waffles are truly one of a kind. It's a miracle I didn't fall in love with him the first time he made them for us freshman year.

"Mace? What are you doing up?" Daph is the first one to catch sight of me.

"Oh no. We woke it up." Chase leans back in his seat to try to put distance between the two of us.

I scowl at him, but James comes to my defense.

“Please do not refer to my girlfriend as it, Chase,” he says lightly, flashing a smile over his shoulder. “Sorry, didn’t mean to wake you, babe.”

I wrap my arms around myself, his hoodie—already oversized on him—brushing my knees as I walk toward him. “Were you going to let me miss out on your waffles?” I ask accusingly, peering over his shoulder at the small stack he’s piled onto a cooling rack.

“Yes,” Chase and Daph say perfectly in synch.

“These waffles are coming very close to becoming only for Maci and me,” James threatens, pointing the spatula at them. Chase and Daphne stop their snickering, sharing a somber look. “Much better.” Wrapping his free arm around my waist, he kisses the top of my head. “I was going to save you a bunch and leave them for you next to a sticky note with an adorable pun about waffles and syrup that I have yet to come up with.”

“That’s sickeningly adorable.” I cringe and then dance out of James’s reach before he can poke me in the side. Grabbing a mug from the cabinet above the Keurig, I set a cup of coffee to brew and sit beside Daphne at the table. “Why are you two up?”

Until the start of this school year, James could probably count the number of times he’d seen the sunrise on one hand. However, now that he’s in the classroom most of the week, he’s found a new appreciation for the early hours. Apparently, his brain doesn’t function sufficiently to do homework after corralling six-year-olds all day, so five a.m. has become the best time to get things done. Yet another reason I could never be an education major or a teacher, for that matter.

“Gym—” Daph gestures to her leggings and sports bra, a yawn interrupting her sentence “—before classes.”

I grimace but nod. She’s tried and failed countless times to get me to join her for these early morning gym sessions.

I turn to Chase, waiting expectantly for his explanation, but he decidedly avoids my gaze.

“Chase?” I prompt.

He's the only one of us willing to accompany Daph to the gym now and then—this year in particular he's been on some sort of fitness kick—but he's not going with her today. At least not based on his crisp, white button-down shirt and deep purple slacks. What looks like the sleeve of a matching jacket pokes out from behind his back, and his standard contacts have been exchanged for circular, thin, gold-rimmed glasses. He mumbles something unintelligible into his coffee mug, and I narrow my eyes at him.

“What is it?” I ask, looking to Daphne and James for clarification, but they duck their heads to avoid eye contact. “Why are you guys being so weird?”

Chase puffs out his cheeks and looks between Daphne and James, who wear matching apprehensive expressions. The three of them share the slightest of nods before Chase faces me, hands folded on the table in front of him.

“Today's the first day of my internship.” His face is unreadable, but there's a nervous wobble to his voice. I suddenly understand the stalling and shifty looks. And the waffles. James only makes his waffles on special occasions like the end of finals, the first snow of the season, or...when we have something to celebrate.

“That's why you didn't wake me up?” I ask, looking between the three of them.

“Not the whole reason. You do have the tiniest tendency to be the slightest bit grumpy in the morning.” Daphne says, but her teasing falls flat in the resounding guilty silence from the other two.

I ignore her. “Did you think I'd be mad?”

“Not mad exactly.” Chase's eyes flick to his lap, then back to me. “I know I'm really lucky not to have to worry about juggling an internship with a job, but I've worked hard for this...I don't know...”

“I know how hard you've worked. I've been here for the last three years, remember? You deserve this. I'm so frickin' happy for you.”

And a little jealous, but that's not the point.

“You’re okay?” He doesn’t look like he believes me, so I widen my smile in hopes of convincing him.

“Really. I’ve gone through all the stages of grief, and I’m officially at acceptance. Being a TA will fit my schedule better anyway.” Even as the words come out of my mouth, my heart pangs, and I know they aren’t wholly accurate. But they will be.

It takes a second for him to come around, but eventually, Chase returns my smile. “The suit is pretty awesome, right? Daph keeps telling me to change, but it’s not too much for my first day. Is it?”

“Not this again,” Daphne groans, tilting her head back and staring despondently at the ceiling.

“It is ridiculously awesome,” I agree. “You’ll stand out, but it’s not too garish.”

“That’s what I said!”

As James serves us waffles, Chase fills me in on the accounting firm in Silver Crest he’s interning with for the Fall. I nod along, adding appreciative sounds of affirmation now and then. Daphne passes me the syrup, and I carefully pour the perfect amount over my plate before digging into the culinary masterpiece before me. As if I could be mad at Chase for giving James a reason to break out the waffle iron. The second the first bite hits my tongue, I close my eyes with a quiet groan. The light spice of cinnamon mixes beautifully with the bitterness of the chopped pecans, all of it swirling together to combine with the sweetness of the syrup. When I open my eyes, James grins at me from across the table, his first bite still halfway to his mouth. He winks, and I feel my cheeks heat despite the chill of the morning.

“I’m going to ignore that,” Daphne says, nose wrinkling as she fixes her focus on cutting her waffle into even squares.

“You do that.” James lifts himself halfway out of his chair and leans across the plate of unclaimed waffles to swipe a

thumb across the corner of my lips. “Syrup,” he says by way of explanation.

“Is this hell?” Chase asks Daphne, looking at James and I with disgust.

“If not, it’s pretty damn close.”

“You two wanted this,” I remind them, pointing my fork at each of them. “You reap what you sow.”

“Don’t quote my grandmother to me.” Daphne points her fork right back at me.

“Speaking of Grandma Langley,” James cuts in, putting his fork between Daphne’s and mine before we can battle it out and send syrup droplets flying everywhere. “Okay, not speaking of Grandma Langley at all, but more the Langley family in general...well, kind of...”

“Excellent segway, Jamesie.” Daph takes a big bite of a waffle, rolling her eyes. “Could you get on with it though?”

He shoots her one of those looks usually reserved for siblings but seems to work just as well on cousins in the Langley family. “The annual Harvest Ball is coming up, and since my parents’ are hosting this year, I have to show face.” He grimaces as if the idea of doing so causes him physical pain. “I tried to talk my way out of it, but Mom didn’t give me a choice.”

“I’m failing to see what you getting dressed up in a penguin suit has to do with us,” Chase says, pushing his now spotless plate away and leaning back in his chair.

“Being the generous friend I am,” James says, with a benevolent smile that makes the three of us exchange a nervous look. “I secured all three of you invites.”

“Oh, you got me an invite?” I ask, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Not you. You’re going to be my plus one.” He blows me a kiss, and I giggle but bite back my smile when I see Chase and Daphne glaring at me.

Clearly, we aren't supposed to be pro-penguin suit events. I've heard of the Harvest Ball, but only in passing. It's a fundraising event for the town council that allows them to... Okay, I'm not sure what it allows them to do, but the point is it's a fundraiser. The fancy kind with servers who walk around with plates of appetizers, a live band, and lots of dancing.

"It seems like it's just you and me then, Daph. What do you say? Will you be my date?" Chase shoots Daphne a wink.

She rolls her eyes, but a small smile tugs at the corners of her lips. "I suppose so."

"And ladies and gentlemen, with that ringing endorsement, I better head out." He pushes away from the table and rises to his feet, folding his jacket over his arm as he does so. "Wish me luck!"

"Luck!" James and I both call out as the front door swings closed after him.

"I better get going, too." Daphne hops up, darting out of the room and down the hallway before reappearing with her backpack tossed over one shoulder. "See you guys later."

The door closes with a thud for a second time in just as many minutes. James gets to his feet as well, picking up the empty plates Daphne and Chase have so thoughtfully left on the table and setting them in the sink with his own.

"Are you actually okay?" he asks, turning on the water to rinse off the dishes before putting them in the washer.

"With being woken up at the crack of dawn? With Chase's internship? With the Harvest Ball?" I list off the many things this morning has already given me not to be okay with.

"All of the above?"

"Perfectly fine." It's easy to sound convincing when I am genuinely okay with two of the three. And it is more than okay that Chase found an internship. It just maybe sucks a little that I haven't been able to do the same, but it doesn't matter because I'm moving towards acceptance. I'm going to love being a TA. It won't disrupt my schedule. I'll learn new skills.

Sure, not the skills I was hoping to learn, but skills all the same. It is completely, definitely, a-okay.

“I know you said you’re fine with being a TA.” He closes the dishwasher, coming up behind my chair and resting his hands on my shoulders. “But don’t give up just yet. There’s still a little time before you officially make the call, right?”

“I guess.” Suddenly, the last few bites of waffles look far less appetizing. Pushing the plate away, I lean back into James’s touch. “But I think I should cut my losses and get a jump on talking to professors in the department.”

“I don’t think you should give up yet.”

James’s words are so kind and encouraging I don’t have the energy to argue with him. A yawn catches me by surprise, and I try to stifle it before he can see. I’m not fast enough, and he pulls my chair away from the table. “Come on. You can still get a couple more hours before your alarm goes off.”

Effortlessly, James scoops me into his arms.

“I’m awake. I should...should...” But another yawn takes over before I can say ‘study.’

“Nope. Even nocturnal bartenders need their sleep.” His tone doesn’t leave any room for argument, which is fine because the sleepiness has already begun to weigh heavily on my eyelids. Nestling my head into his shoulder, I wrap my arms around his neck as he carries me back to my room.

Chapter 25

James

I WOULD BE FASCINATED to see a checklist of what women have to do to “get ready” for a night out. Maybe Maci can make me a slideshow because I must be missing something. It makes no sense to me how I can get a text from her at three p.m. letting me know she and Daph have started the process, yet when Chase and I arrive two hours later, we have to wait in the living room because they’re not done.

“We should have waited till they texted us,” Chase says, dropping onto the girls’ sofa.

“They said they were almost done!” Defensive? Maybe, but I am the one who made us shut off the Xbox and head over despite his prediction of this exact situation.

“*Almost* means something completely different to them than it does to us. You should know this by now.”

I can’t argue with him on either count, so I take the mature route and ignore the comment entirely. Stomach grumbling, I make my way to the fridge. If they’re going to keep us waiting, they might as well feed us. The contents are sparse, but I find one of Daphne’s protein cookie dough bars tucked behind a jar of pickles.

I eye the packaging skeptically. Cookie dough isn’t supposed to be healthy. It goes against its very nature, but I might be too hungry to care. The cheese stick and wheat thins I stole from Henry at lunch won’t cut it much longer. Carefully, I peel away the foil and sniff the bar.

“What on earth are you doing?” Chase asks, looking at me over the back of the sofa with concern.

“I’ve never had one before!”

“It’s just a protein bar, bro. It won’t kill you.”

I decide Chase’s annoyance is more likely due to his game time being interrupted than my very reasonable caution over biting into something I found in the back of the fridge. The bar is halfway to my mouth when a scream echoes through the apartment.

“Maci?” I call, dropping the faux cookie dough and dashing down the hallway, Chase on my heels. Maci’s door is closed when I get there, and I draw up short, causing Chase to collide with the wall to avoid running into me. “Is everything okay?”

The door swings open, revealing a beaming Maci who flies toward me so quickly I hardly have time to catch her in my arms. She collides against my chest with a thud and squeals, something I can’t make out. Over her head, Chase and I exchange a confused look.

“What the hell is going on out here?” Daph asks, poking her head out of her room. “Did you burn yourself with the curling iron again?”

“No,” Maci says, taking a couple small steps back. “But I did get an internship! A paid internship!” She’s still smiling from ear to ear. At her words, Chase and Daphne both let out whoops of excitement. I match their joy with a wide grin of my own, pulling her back to me and hugging her tightly.

Dad’s friend must have come through. The thought sends a pang through my chest. Of relief in part, but it’s intermixed with guilt. Going behind Maci’s back to Dad was the right choice. It was the only choice to get her where she needed to be. Where she deserves to be, I thought the twisted, guilty feeling would improve after she heard from the company.

Apparently not.

The desire to tell her burns in my throat, but I swallow it. I’m not going to take this moment away from her. Plus, we’re running late. Now is not the time. Later. After the party when it’s just the two of us.

“I am so proud of you,” I tell Maci, kissing her lightly. “I knew you could do it.”

And she did do it. She’s more than qualified. She needed a little extra boost, that’s all. We all do from time to time. She’ll understand that when I tell her. It was for the best. She’ll get it. What matters is she has the internship. That’s the important thing.

“James?” Maci lifts her hand to my cheek, fingers gently brushing against the stubble there. “You listening?”

Definitely not. I clear my throat to stall.

“Something’s wrong with your face,” Chase says, stepping close to Daphne and angling his head down to get a better look at her.

“Excuse me?” Daphne asks, eyebrows shooting up and irritation flaring in her eyes. Maci turns toward them, resting her back against my chest and saving me from admitting I wasn’t listening. Or, God forbid, why I wasn’t listening.

Chase moves even closer, a deep frown creasing his dark brow. “Where are your eyelashes?”

“Oh my god! Shut up, Chase!” Daphne’s hand flies to her eyes, shielding them from our view. She disappears back into her room door, slamming behind her.

“Dude, really?” Maci gives Chase a look that I think is meant to be scolding, but the effect is ruined by the amused light dancing in her eyes.

* * *

CHASE AND DAPHNE drive separately to the old farmhouse turned event venue Mom rented for the Harvest Ball. Just in case they want to escape before I finish fulfilling my son-ly duties. Normally, it wouldn’t bother me, but my pulse quickens the second they leave me alone with Maci. I’ve never lied to her before. Sure, I kept my feelings for her a secret for a year, but this is different. It doesn’t help that she begins reading the email from White Hawk Engineering aloud as

soon as we're on the road. And then she rereads it. And then she mumbles it to herself so quietly I only catch a word here and there. It doesn't matter. I've already committed it to memory.

Dear Ms. Morton,

I'm reaching out because we have had an unforeseen opening in our internship program. We are pleased to offer you a position for the duration of your spring semester. If you are still interested, please contact us to discuss the details further.

Yours Sincerely,

Javier Castro

Head of Human Resources

White Hawk Engineering

By the fourth read through, her eyes are still wide with surprise and joy. I rest a hand on her thigh, squeezing it.

“Hey, Mace? Take a breath, okay?”

She clicks off her phone and tucks it into her small gold purse. “I can't believe it,” she murmurs, staring out the windshield with a dreamy expression. It's a relief to see her this happy, and for a second, it eases the apprehension that's turned my stomach since she burst out of her bedroom thirty minutes ago.

I made the right choice. She'll see that now that she has an internship. All I have to do is keep reminding myself of that until the night ends.

The parking lot outside the farmhouse is already halfway full by the time we arrive, and the attendants direct us to a spot near the back. Maci reaches for her door handle when I put the car into park.

“Don't you dare.” I stop her in her tracks.

“James, it's literally so impractical for you to—” she starts, but I'm already out of the car and dashing around before she

can finish her sentence. From the bemused smile she sports when I open her door, I can't help but think she liked the gesture, no matter how impractical. Maci takes my offered hand, gathering the skirt of her midnight blue dress in the other and carefully climbing out. The points of her gold heels sink into the grass, and she clutches at my shoulder, trying to gain her footing.

"I could carry you," I offer, making to scoop her up bridal style in my arms.

"Just let me hold onto your arm." She bats me away with her clutch, which packs more punch than you would expect from such a small bag.

"Anytime." I offer her my elbow, and she grips it tightly as we make our way toward the steps.

We approach my parents, who stand in the doorway, backlit by the warm glow from inside. They're the perfect pair, smiling brightly and greeting each person as they pass by. Not your standard hellos either. Brief but intentional conversations.

"James!" Mom exclaims, her polite smile turning genuine as she sees Maci and me. "And, oh, Maci, don't you look lovely?"

She grabs Maci's hands and steps back to take her in. I take the opportunity to admire her again as well—the cream of her skin against the dark blue of the dress. The slight peek-a-boo of cleavage where the neckline dips. The curve of her hips beneath the silk. I lick my lips, gripping Maci's hip and pulling her away from Mom and back to my side.

"You two make such a lovely couple." Mom's eyes shine with joy as she looks at us, leaning her head against Dad's shoulder.

"Yes, they do," Dad agrees. He's been trying to catch my eye since we walked up, but I'm studiously dodging him. We haven't spoken since that day in the restaurant, and this is not the place for us to make amends. That's another thing that can wait till the night's over. Or longer.

“The party looks lovely. I don’t know how you pull these things off,” Maci tells Mom, who blushes under the praise.

We say our goodbyes and head inside to find Chase, Daphne, and some of those appetizers I was promised when Mom roped me into this thing. The farmhouse’s first floor has been opened into one large room. There’s a stage to our right where the band plays soft folk music. A few couples sway on the floor, but most people mingle on the outskirts of the room. Servers come in and out of the double doors carrying trays laden with mac and cheese bites and what look to be tiny cups of tomato soup topped with miniature grilled cheeses.

“I need that like ten minutes ago,” I say, making a beeline toward the nearest tray. My stomach lets out a gurgle of agreement, and Maci barely manages to stifle her giggle before it escapes her lips. “Don’t judge me!”

“I would never.” She pats me reassuringly on the shoulder even though she doesn’t mean a word of it.

We acquire our miniature appetizers, which taste just as delicious as their full-sized counterparts. Unfortunately, they’re not nearly as filling. Maci about dies of embarrassment when I grab two more from a passing waiter.

“Have some decorum.” She looks around, wide eyed, to see if anyone noticed my glutinous transgression. When no one seems to be paying us attention, she swipes a mini grilled cheese from me.

Chase and Daphne don’t find us till we’re at the spiked apple cider station.

“Good to see you found your eyelashes,” I tease Daphne, ducking to the side to dodge the smack she tries to land on my shoulder.

“What took you two so long?” Maci asks, passing glasses of cider to everyone in turn. It’s a habit she picked up after she started bartending. No matter where we are, you can bet she’ll find a way to serve someone a drink.

“Daphne *had* to change her shoes, so we turned around.” At Chase’s words, Maci and I glance at Daph’s shoes. I don’t

get what the big deal was because they look like every other pair of tan heels I've ever seen.

"Girls and their shoes." This is one of those things I have to take Chase's side on regardless of the consequences the generalization might come with. I expect Maci to come back with something snarky, but she's still frowning at Daphne's feet.

"Did you email the internship people back?" Daph asks, and Maci's head snaps up.

"No." She wrings her hands. "I drafted a couple responses on the drive, but I don't know which to send."

Two sides of me argue with themselves as Maci and Daph discuss the pros and cons of each of Maci's responses. On one hand, I want her to take the job before I tell her what part I played in the whole thing. She won't back out if she's already agreed to it. When Maci commits to something, she sticks with it no matter what. But, on the other hand, how much angrier will she be if I tell her and she doesn't understand? What if she doesn't want the internship anymore, but she's already committed?

"Let's dance," I say as soon as there's a break in the conversation. With one hand resting on the curve of Maci's hip, I guide her toward the dance floor, which has acquired a few more couples since we came in. She turns to me, placing her hand on my shoulder. As I look into her emerald eyes, I put all thoughts of the internship out of my mind. They can wait. There's no need to worry. This is me and Maci. She's my best friend. We always forgive each other. We always figure it out.

We sway on the spot, enjoying the soft lull of the music and the feeling of our bodies moving against each other. She tilts her head to look at me as one song ends and another begins. I trail my fingers up her back to the base of her neck, gently gripping it and bringing my lips to hers. She melts into me, still moving slowly to the beat of the music. The rest of the room fades away, and I can almost convince myself it's just the two of us here.

“Excuse me.”

Almost.

Maci and I pull apart to see Asher standing a few feet away, looking decidedly amused.

“Can I help you?” I narrow my eyes at my little brother so he knows exactly how I feel about his interruption.

“Making out in the middle of the dance floor? Apparently, it’s not good for the family image Mom and Dad are going for. So, I’ve been sent to steal Maci for this next one.”

I glare at him and then catch Mom waving at us over his shoulder. My cheeks burn as I realize she did send Asher over. Even though I’m an adult and perfectly able to kiss my girlfriend whenever I want, wherever I want, I suddenly feel like a sixteen-year-old who got caught with a girl in his bedroom with the door closed.

“Go right ahead.” I pass Maci’s hand to Asher, kissing her cheek as I go. “Find me after.”

Stepping off the dance floor, I watch as Asher whisks her away. Dinner is about to begin, so most of the servers have retreated to the kitchen, but I spot one with a few mac and cheese bites left on his tray. I almost make it to him before Dad steps into my path with Dr. Adams right behind him.

I close my eyes for a fraction of a second, praying for patience. I will not ruin the party Mom’s spent the last six months planning. This is my boss. I will be polite. I coach myself, trying and failing to smile. Instead, I fix my face into what I hope is a pleasantly neutral expression.

“James, we were just looking for you,” Dad says, clapping me on the shoulder. “We’ve been talking about next year.”

“Have you?” I ask, the words coming out more strained than I mean them to.

“Your dad mentioned you might be reconsidering that position I reached out to you about at the start of the year,” Dr. Adams says, seemingly none the wiser to the tension between my dad and me.

“Did he?” Maybe if I keep asking questions, I can stay calm.

“Well, I figured, what with Maci’s internship, you’d want to keep your options open?”

“Maci’s internship?” I ask, now genuinely confused. If he was going to use the help he offered as leverage to get me to stay in Birch Creek, I can’t imagine he would do it so blatantly.

“Because it’s a two-year program,” Dad says as if it’s the most obvious answer in the world. “And with Maci staying around for another year, I assumed you’d also be exploring your options.”

“Two years?” I know I’m processing things too slowly. My brain scrambles, trying to remember everything Maci’s said about White Hawk Engineering.

“That’s why they typically offer it to master’s students,” Dad says, brow furrowed as if he feels genuinely bad for the misunderstanding. As if he didn’t plan it this way all the long. “I thought you knew.”

“It wasn’t in the email,” I mumble more to myself than either of them. “Will you excuse me?”

Without waiting for their response, I push past them and head toward the door.

Chapter 26

Maci

“WELL, SHIT. THAT’S NOT GOOD,” Asher says less than thirty seconds into his stolen dance. I’m unsure if he meant to say the words aloud because he doesn’t follow up. While I needed to tilt my head a little to see James’s face when we were dancing, I have to crane my neck to get a good look at Asher’s expression. He fixes his gaze on something behind us, and worry draws his brow together.

“What is it?” I twist in his arms to look at what’s upset him, which almost causes a collision with the couple dancing closest to us.

“Whoa.” Asher braces his hand against my back, shifting us a safe distance away from the other dancers. “It’s nothing. Dad’s over there with Dr. Adams talking to James. I’m sure it’s fine.” From the tense set of Asher’s shoulder, he definitely does not think it’s fine.

“Neither of them will do anything to mess with tonight.” There’s no confidence behind my words, which makes them sound uncertain rather than reassuring.

James doesn’t make scenes. Well, he doesn’t make dramatic, angry scenes. There’s the occasional *‘I was trying to be funny’* or *‘I probably shouldn’t have had that last beer’* scene where he’s concerned, but a public family fight? He would never.

“I don’t have the energy to play peacemaker tonight, and Mom would be devastated.” Asher sighs wearily, shaking his head and looking down at me. I appreciate the gesture. My neck was starting to cramp. “I thought they would have gotten

over this by now, but they both have their heads to far up their asses to see the others' side."

I blink at him, not sure what to say. Asher's never been the most even-keeled person. He's hot headed and competitive. It's the reason he's one of the best players on BCU's hockey team. But that side of him never boils over where his family is concerned. I've watched him slam a guy into the glass, then, ten minutes later, victory dance with James and their sister, Lily. But there's tension simmering under his words. James's absence from family gatherings has taken a toll on him, and I know it's taking one on his parents. His mom practically cried when she saw us tonight. Until now, I haven't thought about how the situation might affect the rest of the family. They're a tight-knit group. Usually, we'd have an extra Langley in our apartments at least once a week, but I can't remember the last time James did something with them.

"They'll work it out soon." This time, the words come out how they're meant to be comforting and confident. Because they will. Even if I have to drag James over to his parents' house and mediate the discussion myself.

"Yeah, I'm not so sure."

Asher looks at something over my shoulder again, and I'm about to ask what's happening when James comes into my sightline. He left his dad and Dr. Adams behind, making a beeline for the door. Mrs. Langley catches sight of him and excuses herself from a conversation to hurry after him. Her hand brushes James's shoulder, but he shakes her off. As he faces his mom, I get my first clear look at his face.

I can count on one hand the times I've seen James well and truly angry. It's not in his nature, but right now, he looks furious. Mouth pulled down into a deep frown. Eyes narrowed. Brows furrowed so deeply they almost become one. Whatever his mom tried to say to him, it didn't work. James turns on his heel, heading for the door again.

I step out of Asher's grasp, only concerned with reaching James and finding out what his dad could have done to upset him so deeply in the last two minutes. Asher catches my wrist.

“Let him cool off,” he warns, loosening his grip as soon as he has my attention. I take the opportunity to tug away, ignoring his warning and following James as quickly as I can without running into any of the dancing couples. As I go, I scan the room for Daphne and Chase to see if they also saw what went down. No luck.

I push through the door to the farmhouse and onto the front porch. At first, I can't see James. The light spilling out from the windows illuminates a small space around the house, but everything inky black covers everything beyond that. When I spot him, he's not walking toward his truck, which I take as a good sign. Instead, he passes under the iron arch leading to the garden patio around the side of the house.

I walk quickly, heels teetering on the uneven stone path. My ankle twists dangerously to the side, and I wince. I want to shout at James to stop, but I don't want to risk anyone inside hearing. After the second time, I almost fall into the shrubbery, I tug off the shoes. Holding them in one hand and the skirt of my dress in the other, I step into the small garden.

James stands at the center in front of a large fountain. It's been shut off for the season, and fallen leaves already fill the basin. He stares at the sky before bowing his head and shoving his hands in his pocket. I'm unsure whether to reach out and rest a hand on his shoulder or call his name first. That feeling of being horribly under-prepared for an important moment washes over me, freezing me in place. I've seen him angry before, but I've never been the one to help him through it. Not in the moment. That's always fallen to Chase and Daphne because—as close as we all are—they've known him longer.

“James,” I say softly, brushing my fingers against the sleeve of his suit jacket. “What's going on?”

Silence follows my question. When I reach for him again, he steps away. My hand falls to my side, and I have to work to keep the surprise off my face.

“James?” I repeat his name because it's all I can think to say. More questions don't seem right, and he obviously

doesn't want my comfort. Maybe Asher was right. Maybe I should have let him cool off.

"I can't believe him." The words come strangled from James's throat in a voice I hardly recognize. "Asking him was the last thing...and now...I can't believe he'd...he twisted it into..." he mumbles the words quickly and quietly, not stopping to finish a thought before another begins. He's not talking to me. He's not even looking at me. His eyes remain fixed on the ground as he paces in front of the skeletal fountain. "All I wanted was his help, and now..."

He turns to me again, still not looking up from the ground. This time, I don't let him put his back on me. I take hold of his arm, tugging him toward me. It's a feeble attempt. If he wanted to, he could pull away, but he doesn't. James lifts his face to me, a dark curl falling across his forehead.

"I don't know what your dad did, but—" At the mention of his dad, he pulls away again.

"The internship with White Hawk? It's for a semester?" Each syllable comes out stilted and disjointed, making the abrupt shift in conversation more difficult to reconcile.

"No," I say slowly. What does the internship have to do with this? We spent the entire car ride here practically giddy over the opportunity. Well, I was practically giddy. James was, of course, incredibly supportive. "It's a two-year program. That's why they usually offer it to master's students."

"Shit!" James curses, taking several more steps back and tugging a hand through his hair. His curls, previously held in place by the sheer power of gel, break free, returning to their messy standard. "I can't believe he would manipulate me like that." His voice breaks, and I want to break right along with him, but my mind's still racing. Trying to catch up with James's fractured sentences. The puzzle pieces start falling into place, but the picture they paint makes less sense than before.

My struggle to find an internship.

James's offer to ask his dad for help.

I told him no. He wouldn't have gone behind my back. Not when we were only friends, and certainly not now that we're so much more. We don't do that...*right?*

But if he didn't ask, then none of the rest of the pieces fit. Why else would he ask about my internship right after his dad so obviously upset him?

"James." His name is like a prayer on my lips because I need it not to be true. I need him to tell me I'm wrong. "Did you go to your dad about the internship?"

I have my answer before he speaks. From the way, his eyes drop to his feet. From the way, his entire body freezes as if he's not even breathing anymore. I take in a rattling breath, trying to maintain composure. The joy that's run warm and tingling through my veins since I opened the email from the engineering firm earlier this evening turns to ice. Without its warmth, I'm left shivering in the crisp night air.

"You needed help, Mace." James puffs out of his cheeks, blowing out a breath. "I know you wanted to figure it out on your own, but you couldn't."

"I had a plan!" I snap at him. There's an echo in his words that only I can hear. *You wanted to figure it out on your own, but you weren't good enough.* James would never say it, but that's the hidden meaning beneath his careful words. I did all the research. Worked tirelessly on my resume and cover letters. Did everything I was supposed to do, and it wasn't enough.

"You were giving up! All you needed to do was ask for help, but you couldn't do that. You *had* to figure it out for yourself even if it meant losing out on the kinds of opportunities that kick start the career you've poured the last eight years into." Frustration flashes in his eyes, which only serves to infuriate me more. Where does he get off being upset with me? He's the one who went behind *my* back to do something I specifically asked him not to and then didn't tell me.

"Exactly, *I've* spent the last eight years working toward this. I wanted to know that I earned it. I didn't want it because

my boyfriend's dad pulled strings for me!"

"It's a recommendation, Maci! For Christ's sake, it's not like he frickin' bribed them into letting you in!" James starts to step toward me but second guesses himself and ends up back where he started.

"That's not the point! You went behind my back. You lied to me, and don't tell me you didn't because a lie of omission is still a lie. God—you let me get so excited all night, and now..." Looking at his face is too much. I close my eyes, trying to force myself to calm down. We're supposed to be here representing James's parents tonight—one of whom I apparently owe a huge thank you to now.

"What else was I supposed to do? I couldn't sit back and watch you TA all semester pretending like you weren't crushed." There's no apology in his voice. Does he not understand that wanting to help doesn't justify his choices? He didn't mean to hurt me, but that doesn't take away the sting.

"When were you going to tell me? Were you going to wait until I accepted the internship? Till I started, so I couldn't back out?" His answer won't do anything to soften the blow, but I need to know. Was he ever going to tell me? I can't bring myself to ask that because if the answer is no, I don't know what I'll do.

"I was going to tell you tonight! I wanted to wait until after the Harvest Ball to have an actual conversation. But then Dad came over with Dr. Adams, and they were talking about how I should reconsider the teaching position for next year because your internship is two years long." The anger is back in his eyes, but I don't care anymore. I'm too lost in my own. "I messed up. I shouldn't have gone to him. I should have known he couldn't be objective. That he would twist the situation to his advantage. All he's been focused on is me staying close to home, and I handed him—"

"Stop!" I shout, throwing up my hands. "That's why you think you shouldn't have gone to him? I can't...God, James, I can't believe you."

I turn on my heel and take off at a run, thankful I've already taken off my heels. He doesn't follow me, and even though I don't want him to, it still breaks my heart a little. I don't want to go back into the farmhouse. There's no way I can play the part of the happy girlfriend anymore. I fumble with the latch of my clutch, digging my phone out and finding Daphne's name in my contacts.

She answers on the second ring. "Where are you and James? Dinner's about to start."

"Daph." My voice cracks open when I say her name, tears spilling down my face. "I need to go home...please. Can you take me home?"

Chapter 27

Maci

“TIME TO TALK,” Daphne says as soon she puts Chase’s car into park back at the apartment complex.

I look up from my lap, where I’ve been staring at my phone, reading and rereading the email from White Hawk Engineering. It’s ironic the way this car ride so closely mirrors the one I took on the way to the Harvest Ball. Except now, numb disappointment replaces the overwhelming relief and happiness. The opportunity now tainted by the knowledge that I didn’t earn this and James’s betrayal. Is that the right word? It feels like it, but as the thought crosses my mind, I wonder if it’s too dramatic.

Did I overreact? New horror washes over me. I start to replay our conversation over again in my mind.

“Maci!” The sharpness in Daphne’s voice jars me out of my thoughts, bringing me into the moment. “You’re scaring me,” she says quietly, worrying her bottom lip between her front teeth.

“Sorry...I...I was thinking.” The draw of sinking back into the memory of the garden tugs at me, threatening to pull me away.

“I know, and that’s fine. But I gave you the car ride. Now, I’m going to need an explanation as to why you were shoeless in the parking lot with mascara streaked down your face. Because I’m assuming it has to do with why you couldn’t ask James to take you home.” Her tone is far from harsh, but the words sting regardless.

I open my mouth, trying to figure out where to start, but doubts overwhelm me. Daphne might be my best friend, but she's James's cousin. She hated being in the middle before, and I'm about to put her right back there. And whose side will she choose if that's what it comes to? His, of course. She has to. Friends come and go, but family is forever. I couldn't even be mad because—

“Stop it!” Daph grabs my hand, tugging it as if trying to physically pull me out of my thoughts. “Stop spiraling. Just talk to me, Mace, okay? What happened?”

“I don't want you to be mad at me,” I whisper. I chased after James because he was hurting, and I ended up hurting him more. ‘*He hurt you first,*’ a small voice inside me tries to remind me, but I can hardly hear it over the fear pulsing through my veins.

“What did he do?” The ice that flashes over Daphne's face loosens the grip of my worry.

At first, the story comes in fits and starts as I try to figure out how best to tell it. The conversation we had during our study sessions a couple weeks ago. James going to his dad even though he *knew* I didn't want him to. I falter when I get to the garden, realizing I don't know what Mr. Langley said to make James so angry. I know it had to do with the internship, but he never told me what was said. I never asked. When I'm done, I feel like I should breathe a sigh of relief, but the ache that's been present since I turned my back on James still presses down on my chest.

“Damn,” Daphne says, staring at the steering wheel, lips parted in surprise. Somewhere during my story, we leaned our seats back. We're not looking at one another, but one of her fingers hooks through one of mine on the armrest. She turns to me, her cheek pressing against the slight curve of the seat. “I know he did it. Like, obviously, I believe you. But it's just...I can't believe James lied to you.”

“I know.”

It's so unlike him. That's what hurts the most—being completely blindsided. My James is honest to a fault. He

chronically overshares and wears his intentions on his sleeve for the world to see. Finding out he kept his feelings from me for a year was a shock, but that was different. The unknown of what would come next scared him, and I understood that after I had some time. But this? This is different. The person who deliberately decided to go behind my back and do something I specifically asked them not to do? That person doesn't feel like my James.

"I would be furious if—" Daph stops midsentence, hesitation flickering across her face before she starts over. "I *am* furious with him. I can't imagine how you feel."

"I was—I *am*—furious." I close my eyes, picturing the hurt and anger that raged against one another on James's face when we argued. "But..." I'm still angry, but it's different than when I first found out. Less white hot. More dull and aching.

"But?"

"I don't know," I sigh, covering my face with my hands. "He wanted to help, and I wouldn't let him. I don't think he felt like he had any other choice."

Daphne sits up in her seat, shaking her head vehemently. A few pieces of her carefully curled blonde hair escape from the intricate bun she pinned them into. "You guys had one conversation about it when you still had another internship to hear back from. He could have come to you again and had a real conversation. Expressed his concerns. It wasn't his *only* option."

It wasn't. I don't say the words aloud because I don't want to deal with it. I left the apartment today feeling like everything in my life finally fell into place. An internship. A boyfriend. Senior year stretching out in front of me, full of endless possibilities. I still have all those things, but now they're so much more complicated.

"Do I take the internship?" I ask Daphne, hating the question even as I ask it. There's a part of me that doesn't want to. That wants to stick to her guns about doing this for herself. But the more logical part knows I can't pass on an opportunity like this, not now that it's right in front of me,

which makes my anger at James flare again. Because that instinct is precisely what he was relying on. Even after he told me he knew there would be no way I could say no. Not to this.

“Yes.” Daphne’s answer comes like a breath of relief. Sometimes, your best friend’s affirmation is all you need. “But that doesn’t mean James is off the hook for this.”

“I know.” It would be so much simpler if it did.

“And you don’t know what his dad said?”

I shake my head. “He gave me bits and pieces. He said his dad manipulated the situation, but no...not really.”

“I’m sure he’ll tell Chase,” she frowns, looking at her phone resting in her lap as if expecting a text from Chase to arrive right then. “I’ll ask when they get home unless you want to...” She looks at me questioningly. Not pressuring me either way. I don’t know how I ever thought she wouldn’t have my back.

“I need some space...again.” The last word comes out in a bark of humorless laughter. Because here we are right back where we started.

“It’s different this time,” Daph reassures me. “You’re not running from it, right?”

“No.” I shake my head because—as much as I want to—I won’t. James and I will figure it out.

“Good. I think a little space is more than fair.” She sits her chair up, reaching for the door handle. “And that space starts with no more thinking about James or the internship for the rest of the night. You’re going to give your brain and your heart a break.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask. Daph knows my brain doesn’t shut off easily. It’s one of the problems with being an overthinker. “And how do you propose I do that?”

“One.” She holds up four fingers, immediately putting the first one down. “We go get out of these ridiculously uncomfortable strapless bras. Two, make some hot apple

toddies. Three, watch Gilmore Girls in our pajamas while—
four—consuming an alarming amount of caramel popcorn.”

That just might do it.

Chapter 28

James

“ALRIGHT, kiddos, it’s time to line up at the door for recess!” At Henry’s direction, the classroom fills with the sounds of scraping chairs and tiny, excited voices. My head throbs as the tension headache I woke up with this morning protests the noise. It takes all my self-restraint not to collapse into my desk chair. I thought about skipping today. Calling Henry, making up some story about a violent stomach bug, and spending the entire day on the sofa binging *The League* and looking at my Fantasy Football stats.

But that would have been lying, and if I learned anything from Saturday night, lies always come back to bite you in the ass. And that lying is wrong. But I should have already known that. I *did* know that, but I did it anyway because I’m an idiot. The thoughts cycle through my mind, already familiar, because they’re the same ones I’ve been thinking since the Harvest Ball.

The kids fall into line, and I force a smile onto my face as I take my place at the back. The idea of refereeing playground squabbles seems impossibly exhausting, but this is the gig. I want to be a teacher, so I’ve got to figure out how to put my personal life on hold and show up for these kids no matter what.

“James.” Henry beckons me over to his desk, where he’s gathering papers to take to the playground. “I’m going to have you stay back today, alright?”

I haven’t told Henry what happened, but the knowing look in his eyes tells me he figured out something was up on his

own. How he did it, I don't know. Unlike last time, I participated energetically in the Frozen 2 sing-along.

"It's fine," I protest, but he shakes his head before I get the last word out.

"I made a deal with Deja that if she stopped reading during class time, she could spend recess in the reading nook." He nods over my shoulder to the back of the room. When I glance over my shoulder, Deja sits curled into the bright orange beanbag, book open on her lap. "You don't mind, do you?"

Mind? This is the first good thing that's happened in the last forty-eight hours.

"Not at all. You had to take away her book?"

"I had to take three books away. She brought backups," Henry chuckles, smiling proudly. First graders don't like sitting still for more than ten minutes at a time, so getting them to stay in one place long enough to read a book no matter how short? Next to impossible.

"I'll hang back with her," I agree, trying to temper my relief so it doesn't register in my voice. "I've got homework to do anyway."

"Mhm." Henry looks more than skeptical, but the rest of our students are growing antsy with the promise of recess dangling in front of them.

As soon as the classroom clears, I drop into my chair, resting my head in my hands. I've spent the whole day wishing for quiet, but now that I finally have it, I miss the distraction of little voices. My thoughts are too loud and jumbled to be left alone with them. At first, right after Dad told me Maci's internship was a two-year commitment, there was only a loud rushing in my ears. Nothing else could break through. Mom stopped me on my way out of the party, but if someone put a gun to my head and asked me what she said, I'd be dead on the spot. Once Maci found me in the garden, the fog started to clear, but even then, my words couldn't keep up with the thoughts running through my head.

Maci. Her name sends a pang through my heart. Looking up from my hands, I check to see if Deja is where I left her before reaching for my phone. I don't have to look for the texts from Sunday; they're the first thing my screen opens to.

MACI: Hey, did you make it home okay last night?

JAMES: We just got back. Can we talk?

MACI: Daph and I have to leave for work in a couple minutes. After my shift?

JAMES: I have a group project thing tonight. Tomorrow?

MACI: I'll be at work when you're home from school. You'll be in bed before I get home.

JAMES: I could stay up till you're off

Her first two responses came instantaneously, but the third time, I sat staring at my phone for ten minutes before she responded.

MACI: It's probably for the best. I think I need a day or two before I can talk about all of this.

I typed out ten answers before I settled on one.

JAMES: I'll be here when you're ready

It's not what I wanted to say. I wanted to tell her I didn't care if I was exhausted on Tuesday. Two hours of sleep would be worth it if we could work through this. That hurting her was the last thing I meant to do.

I wanted to tell her that I love her. But I didn't because I couldn't force her to be ready to talk to me as much as I wish I could.

"Mr. Langley." The small voice and corresponding tug on my sleeve startles me, and I drop my phone in my haste to

look up. It clatters to the table at the same time I realize Deja has gotten up from the reading corner and stands beside me.

“What can I do for you, Deja?” I ask, embarrassed at the rawness of my voice. Swallowing hard, I give her my best teacher smile.

“Are you okay? You looked really sad.” A concerned look wrinkles her small face, and the worry in her eyes makes her look far older than her six years.

“Oh,” I say, taken aback by her perceptiveness. Then again, maybe I shouldn’t be surprised. Deja’s usually more aware of her surroundings and other people’s feelings than the rest of her classmates. I started noticing it more and more after she outed me to Henry for skipping out on the Moana sing-along. “I’m alright, but thank you for asking, Deja. That was very kind of you.”

I’ve been practicing reinforcing positive behavior as often as I have to call out the negative. The kids light up at the slightest compliment. It doesn’t mean they’ll be angels for the rest of the day, but they usually try harder to behave afterward. At first, I think I’ve convinced Deja because she hurries off toward the reading corner. But, instead of picking up her book, she goes to the shelf. Reaching up, she feels around on the top. It takes her a couple tries to find what she’s searching for because the crown of her head only comes level with the top shelf, so she’s looking purely based on touch. Eventually, she pulls a stack of laminated papers bound with a rubber band down.

“Come here,” she orders me in a tone I think is supposed to be stern but is so adorable I have to bite back a laugh.

Standing from my chair, I join her in the reading corner, where she directs me to sit beside her on the alphabet rug. Deja starts laying out the laminated cards in front of us, and I realize she grabbed Henry’s Feeling Flash Cards. There’s another set stuck to the wall at the front of the room right by the door. We spent the first week reviewing each emotion, and now our students can point to whichever card they identify with when Henry or I greet them in the mornings. Henry keeps

a spare set to help the kids decide what characters feel during story time.

“Okay!” Deja announces, sitting back and looking at her work critically. When she decides she appropriately organized the cards, she turns to me. “Can you point to the card that shows what you’re feeling?”

They’re the exact words that Henry and I say to kids. I can’t help chuckling a little this time, but one look at Deja tells me she’s not joking around. I contemplate the first two lines of cards: *happy*, *jealous*, *angry*, *calm*, *brave*, *proud*. They keep going, but I’m not about to spill my guts to this six-year-old, no matter how sweet and bright she may be.

“This one.” I point to *happy*. When she doesn’t look convinced, I also point to *tired*. “And a little bit of this one.”

Deja frowns, leaning over the cards and closely examining them in turn. “I think,” she begins, fingers hovering as she decides, “it’s this one and this one.” She picks up the *distracted* and *sad* cards.

Well, she hit the nail on the head. Toss in *worried*, and that about sums it up.

“Maybe a little,” I say, gathering the cards again to put them away. This is one of those situations I have no idea how to handle. It’s happened a few times, like when Bobby Turner asked me where babies come from flat out. Somehow, this feels worse. Henry’s big on making sure the kids know it’s okay to feel their feelings, but it’s equally important that they know how to manage them. Lying about said feelings is definitely not on his list of appropriate solutions.

“Did someone make you sad?” Deja asks, scrambling back onto her beanbag and sitting crisscross applesauce. I guess I am, in fact, about to have a heart-to-heart with a six-year-old.

“It’s a little complicated,” I tell her, trying to figure out how to get myself out of this situation. It doesn’t seem like she’ll let this go till I satisfy her curiosity.

“Momma says things are “complicated” all the time.” She huffs as if the word itself offends her. “Did you make someone

sad?”

My heart clenches at the question, and I see a flash of Maci from the garden in my mind’s eye. The defeated curl of her shoulders and the crushing disappointment in her eyes. “Yeah.” I swallow away the lump that’s risen in my throat. “I did.”

Deja nods sagely, frowning as she thinks this over. “Did you say sorry?”

“Um.” I reach up and rub the back of my neck, cheeks growing warm as I think through the many things I said to Maci that night. Sorry wasn’t one of them. “No, I didn’t,” I admit.

“My momma says that if you make someone sad, you’re supposed to say sorry.” She picked up her book again, signaling that her attention span for this conversation is ending.

“I didn’t mean to make her sad,” I murmur more to myself than to her. It doesn’t matter though. All the justifications in the world don’t change the fact that I lied to her.

“Just tell her that.” Deja pats me softly on the arm. “Say, ‘I’m really, really, really sorry I made you sad. I won’t do it again. Promise.’ And then it’ll all be okay again.”

“Thank you, Deja. That was very sweet.” I smile as her eyes light up at the compliment. She looks exceptionally pleased with herself as she opens her book and nestles into the beanbag chair.

I go back to my desk, intent on getting some work done. The homework I told Henry I needed to get done wasn’t fictional. With midterms around the corner, my professors seem to be piling our work higher and higher. Sitting at my desk, I pick up my phone to look at my to-do list. Before I can get there, a text from Maci catches my attention.

MACI: I got someone to cover the first few hours of my shift tonight. Space is overrated. I want to talk this out. Meet at your apartment after my classes?

I need to read the text twice to absorb its meaning fully. When it finally settles in, I feel lighter than I have all day. We're going to figure this out.

JAMES: See you then <3

Chapter 29

Maci

I'M A COMPULSIVE NOTETAKER. During syllabus week, I fill at least two pages per class. The highlight of every back-to-school season is restocking my favorite pens and cracking open a fresh notebook. But, the Monday after James's and my fight, I left my first morning class with only the date written at the top of the page. No matter how hard I tried, my mind kept wandering to the internship, to what I was going to do next, to James. Always back to James.

When we texted Saturday night, I was a little relieved that our schedules didn't line up for a couple days. Even after an obscene amount of apple cider and Gilmore Girls, my heart still ached, and if I thought about the stunt James pulled for too long, it began pounding. Time and space seemed like the right call. After all, they've been my fallbacks for as long as I can remember, and in times of crisis, you should rely on what works.

Except they're not working.

Before any big conversation, I sit down with my notebook and a cup of coffee and weigh the pros and cons. I like to think through how the other person might react and prepare myself mentally and emotionally for every possible outcome. That way, there are no surprises. I have the control. When I sat down to do just that this morning, all I could think of was how much I wanted to hear James's voice. Both literally and metaphorically. As upset with him as I was, I didn't want to guess why he did what he did. I wanted to know. I wanted him to tell me.

Before leaving the house, I texted Brynn to see if she could stay a couple hours after her morning shift technically ended. After she made me promise to fill her in on everything as soon as I got to work, she agreed. It took me till the end of my second class to work up the nerve to text James. It shouldn't have been that hard. The last thing he said to me was: *'I'll be here when you're ready.'* Still, a part of me worried between then and he changed his mind.

MACI: I got someone to cover the first few hours of my shift tonight. Space is overrated. I want to talk this out with you. Meet at your apartment after my afternoon classes?

Normally, I'm a stickler for keeping my phone in my bag during class, but I couldn't stomach the idea of not seeing his response as soon as it came through. I rested it on my thigh beneath the table and waited. When the screen lit up with his name, I was nervous the rest of the class would be able to hear my heart thudding against my rib cage, but no one seemed any the wiser.

JAMES: See you then <3

I think of his text again as I pull into my spot outside the apartment complex. One look down the lot tells me James is already home. My hands shake, causing my keys to jangle as I make my way inside. Part of me wants to go to my apartment first. To get one last pep talk from Daphne before heading into this, but Daph and I already covered our bases. The rest is between James and I.

I hesitate in front of his door, hand half raised to knock. There's never been a time when I haven't simply walked into his apartment. I've seen things I can never unsee. Then again, James and I have never had a fight. Not a real one. Not like this. Does that change the rules?

Before I can decide, Chase swings open the door, almost walking into me on his way out.

"Maci," he yelps as he draws up short, and I stumble back to avoid getting run over.

“Hey,” I say, giving him an awkward wave. “Is James in there?”

“Yeah, and he’s looking as nauseous as you are. I’ll graciously assume it’s not because of my presence, but—just in case—I’m going to go eat pumpkin pie and weather out the storm with Daph.” He salutes before dodging around me and opening the door to my apartment. “This is how you enter an apartment.” Exaggeratedly, he steps through the opening one leg at a time before turning around robotically and closing the door.

I stare after him, mouth slightly parted in awe of his audacity.

“He’s the worst,” a deep voice behind me says with a nervous chuckle.

Slowly, I turn to face James. Emotions flash through me so quickly I don’t bother trying to identify them. Without thinking, I wrap my arms around him in a tight hug. My heart starts to slow. It becomes easier to breathe. Maybe I should have waited till we talked things out, but—screw that. I need to feel like it will all be okay and there’s no place in the world safer than James’s arms. He lets out an ‘oof’ of surprise, standing unmoving for half a second before pulling me closer.

“I’m—” he begins, but I hush him.

“In a second.” I snuggle into his chest, inhaling the sweet spice of his cologne and preparing myself for the conversation.

When we pull apart, James steps aside so I can step into the apartment. I drop my backpack onto one of the uneven dining room chairs. It wobbles dangerously before staying miraculously upright. Picking my way past an overflowing laundry basket and a skewed stack of what looks to be all the art projects James’s students have ever done, I somehow make it to the sofa without tripping over anything. This is why we spend our time at my apartment. It’s a girl’s apartment. It’s pretty and clean. This place is a boys’ apartment. Dirty, and there’s always some unidentifiable smell.

It takes me a second to notice James hasn't followed me. I twist in my seat to see him standing in the kitchen, bent over the counter, and I realize today's smell is one I recognize. The slight spice of cinnamon mixed with the sweetness of brown sugar.

"Are you making me waffles?" I ask, leaving the sofa and standing behind him in the kitchen. Sure enough, ingredients (*likely pilfered from Daphne's and my kitchen*) fill the counter space, and waffles tower in a high pile on an overflowing dinner plate.

"They're your favorite, and I wanted to do something to make up for...well, you know." James looks away, his cheeks taking on a red tinge. "Plus, I know you never plan to have dinner at home when you bartend because you like to snack on tater tots all night, so I figured you'd be hungry."

"Tater tots dipped in buffalo ranch," I agree, his thoughtfulness easing some of the tension coursing through my body all day.

"Look, Mace." He turns his back on the counter, leaning against it with one ankle crossed over the other. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for lying to you and for going behind your back. I was wrong. It doesn't matter that I felt like I had a good reason. I should have listened to you."

His apology catches me off guard. After how he reacted before, I wasn't expecting him to admit his wrongdoing so readily.

"Can we sit?" Preferably in the living room, I don't trust the dining chairs to hold our weight. Maybe I should have acknowledged his apology, but forgiving him now would feel disingenuous. Not when I don't know the whole story. "Everything was so...we were both really upset that night. I want to understand what happened."

"Of course. Do you want me to make you a plate first?" He gestures to the waffles, which look exceptionally tempting.

"Afterwards," I say reluctantly.

Following him to the couch, I sit on the opposite end.

“What do you want to know?” He leans back into the cushions before shifting position to sit up straight. Crosses and uncrosses his arms. Bounces one knee and then the other. His anxiety is palpable.

“James, breathe,” I say, and it feels good for the roles to be reversed for once. “Just talk to me. It’s okay. Promise.”

He inhales a deep breath, staring at the ceiling as he releases it. The words take a few seconds to start, but when they do, it’s like he can’t stop. Sentences tumble out one on top of the other, but—unlike the other night—he finishes every one of them. Slowly, the picture he paints starts to take form. How, when we first talked about it, he had no intention of going to his dad after I asked him not to. How hard it was for him to watch me break a little more with each rejection. How he convinced himself he was only going to meet his dad to see if he could even help.

“Then I got there and realized I was kidding myself. If there was a way he could help you, I wanted him to do it. I should have told you right after that dinner, but I wasn’t sure you’d take the internship if you knew. At first, I figured I’d just wait until after you accepted, but then the moment came, and I felt so damn guilty.” James runs a hand through his hair, closing his eyes.

“Because you lied to me?” I prompt when the pause drags on too long. It’s easier than I thought it would be to process what he’s saying while he’s saying it. Most of it, I guessed. Knowing James. Knowing the situation. It wasn’t too hard. But there are still pieces that don’t fit. How was his dad manipulating the situation? It doesn’t sound like he made James agree to stay in Birch Creek in exchange for his help—Daphne’s theory. But obviously, it’s all somehow connected.

“Because I still felt like I made the right choice even though I knew you would disagree. You needed help, Mace. I know I went about it wrong, but you’re so damn independent, I didn’t feel like I had another choice.” He holds up his hands to stop me from interrupting, which was the right call because that’s exactly what I was about to do. “That doesn’t make it right. I know that.”

“Okay.” I nod, taking it in. There are so many things I want to say, but not till he finishes the rest of the story. Not till I have all the facts. “And your dad? What did he say to you.”

A shadow falls over James’s face, and I see a flash of the wounded and angry man from two nights ago. Scooting closer to him, I take his hand. It doesn’t matter that I’m still upset at his choices. We’re a team. We were one long before we became anything more than friends, and after...well, now it’s more important than ever. The physical touch seems to be all the encouragement he needs.

“Dad came over with Dr. Adams when you were dancing with Asher. They started talking about me reconsidering that teaching position for next year. I didn’t get it at first, but then Dad brought up the internship. In the moment, I was sure he handpicked that specific one when I told him I needed his help. Turns out White Hawk Engineering is actually the only firm he had a contact with. Mom texted me this morning to explain because I’ve been ignoring his calls.”

“But what about White Hawk did he say?” I push, still confused.

James frowns. “It’s a two-year program, right?”

“Yes.” We’ve been over this, and I still don’t understand.

“And they’re based right outside of Birch Creek?”

“Yes.” I blink at him, starting to get frustrated while also trying to temper the emotion. I can’t help but feel like I’m missing something that’s incredibly obvious to James. He stares at me, waiting for me to get it, and that fact that I don’t only reinforces that feeling.

“Maci, you’ll have to stay in Birch Creek for an extra year and a half.”

That’s when it finally clicks; suddenly, it all feels so obvious. I’m an idiot. James’s words from Saturday night come back to me, their meaning clear now.

He couldn’t be objective...

Twist the situation to his advantage...

Of course, he felt like his dad was trying to manipulate the situation into getting him to stay in town. Maybe his dad knew how long the internship was when he reached out to his friend, or maybe he didn't, but it makes sense James would assume the former. After everything they've been through the last few months, I would too.

But I would never force—I stop my thoughts in their tracks. The whole point of coming here was to talk all this through with James. Not dwell in my thoughts and leave him guessing until I'm ready to share.

“I didn't think about it like that,” I admit, feeling slightly embarrassed that seeing his perspective took me so long.

“How could you not?” he asks. His tone isn't hostile, but there's a hint of disbelief.

“James, my entire family lives on the other side of the country. I've spent the last three years figuring out how to have relationships with people when they aren't a five-minute drive down the road anymore. I would never ask you to stay in Birch Creek for me. You're ready to leave, and you should leave.” It hurts a little even as I say the words, but I mean them. He dreamed of getting out of this town long before I met him. It would be so incredibly selfish to hold him back.

“What about us?” There's fear in James's eyes, and I move closer, leaning over him to rest my hand against his face.

“We'll make it work. You'll be here at least till graduation. Probably a little while after that. Once you leave, we'll visit one another whenever we can.” I press a gentle kiss to his lips. He goes to draw me closer, but I pull away because now that he's said his peace, it's my turn. “I don't make decisions lightly, and this—” I gesture between us “—is maybe the scariest one I've ever made. I'm in this, James. I'm in this whether you live across the hallway or states away. But you—we—have to be honest with one another. You need to come to me when you disagree with me.”

“I'm sorry. It won't happen again,” he promises, fingers trailing up and down my arm. He hesitates, and I nod for him

to go on. “You’re so wildly independent, and it’s one of the things I love most about you, but...”

He doesn’t want to upset me with what he has to say next, so I say it for him. “But I can be incredibly stubborn, and that makes it hard to approach me sometimes?” I can’t claim complete credit for the self-awareness. Daphne may or may not have said something similar to me yesterday. He gives the tiniest of nods as if scared to agree wholeheartedly. “I know. I’m going to start working on it.”

“So, we’re okay?” he asks hopefully.

“We’re more than okay.” I lift myself off the sofa, ignoring James’s noise of complaint, and settle back down onto his lap. Resting my head on his shoulder, I trace the sharp line of his jaw with soft kisses.

“And the internship?” he whispers the words, maybe because he’s enjoying the sensation of my lips on his skin. Maybe it’s because he’s scared to hear the answer.

“I’m going to take it,” I say, pulling away a little to take in the happiness in his blue eyes. “You were right. I needed help, even if the way you went about it was wrong. I’d be crazy to turn it down.”

“And we’ll figure it out?”

“We’ll figure it out?”

“Even if I end up teaching in Alaska?” A teasing smile turns up the corners of his mouth.

I roll my eyes but play along anyway. “I’ll go anywhere for you. Even Alaska.”

Chapter 30

James

CARS FILL MY GRANDPARENTS' driveway, spilling onto the lawn, as Maci, Chase, Daphne, and I pull into a space at the bottom of the hill. Leaves crunch underneath our feet as we pile out. I take Maci's hand, smiling at her or what little of her I can see. Even though she's lived here for three years, she's never quite gotten used to the cold. While the rest of us wear hoodies, she added a scarf and puffer coat to the ensemble.

"You look like the world's cutest marshmallow," I tell her, bending down to kiss her exposed nose.

"I don't feel like that was a compliment," she grumbles, but her pout gives way to a smile as I pull her against me.

We make our way up to the house, the smell of the bonfire already sharp in the cool breeze. I haven't been to a family function since the Harvest Ball, and the time before that must have been the Sunday brunch, the day Maci and I got together. Regret tugs at me as I think about how few months I have left of being able to see my family whenever I want. Not enough to change my mind, but enough to make me remember how important it is to soak it all in.

"You don't have to do this here if you don't want to," Maci says quietly so Daphne and Chase can't hear.

"It's okay." My eyes flick to the porch, half expecting to see my dad waiting for us. He's not. "I need to figure this out, and at least here, there won't be any surprise appearances from my boss."

Not that I think Dad would go as far as to drag Dr. Adams out to a Langley family bonfire to ambush me. Or maybe he

would. I don't know anymore. Partially because I haven't asked, and I should have. I realized last night when Maci and I were on her balcony, wrapped in a massive blanket and drinking hot cocoa. Practical Magic played in the background, but neither of us was watching. She filled out paperwork for her internship while I researched places I might want to go after graduation. Looking at salaries and pricing out apartments made it all sink in.

I'm leaving. As much as my dad might not like it, it's happening, and I don't want to spend the rest of the time I have left in Birch Creek avoiding him.

"C'mon, you two," Chase calls back, holding the back gate open for us.

The bonfire blazes at the center of the yard, and most of the family gathers around it. I spot Asher and Lily by the drink table and make my way toward them with Maci at my side.

"James!" Lily shouts when she sees me, practically tackling me in a hug. "You're alive!"

My sister the drama queen. Still, her words cause me to cringe with guilt. She's a freshman at BCU this year, and somehow, I've managed to see her less now that we're on the same campus than when she was in high school. We've texted here and there and grabbed a couple cups of coffee when our schedules lined up, but I haven't been as present as I should have been.

"Very funny, Lilypad," I say, tightening my grip and leaning backward so her feet dangle a few inches off the grass.

"Put me down!" She lets go, swatting at me until I return her safely to solid ground. Giving me one more solid smack to the arm, she turns to Maci and pulls her in for a much more civilized hug.

"Didn't know if we'd see you tonight or not." Asher tosses me a can of beer with an appraising look. "Mom was pretty pissed you skipped out on the rest of the Harvest Ball."

I nod uncomfortably, cracking open the can. "Yeah. I know. I swung by a few days later to apologize."

“Good, I kind of figured when a massive bouquet from Delilah’s appeared in the kitchen.”

“You know where Dad is?” Maci and I debated last night whether it would be best to wait till the end of the night when people started to disperse. In case things went south. But I don’t want to spend the whole night with a proverbial sword hanging over my head.

“Last I saw, he was walking into the house to take a call.” Asher jerks his chin towards the steps that lead up to the back porch. “Look, if you’re gonna go in there to start—”

“All I want to do is talk,” I say before he can get the rest of the sentence out. “I’m tired of fighting with him.”

“Yeah, well, we’re all tired of it too.” There’s no judgment in Asher’s tone but a certain gruffness that I can’t quite put an emotion to.

The two of us haven’t always seen eye to eye. It’s not easy having your baby in the same grade as you. Especially when he’s basically an academic genius and an athletic god, and you’re what everyone refers to as ‘the nice one.’

“Plus, I miss my beer pong partner. Skyler’s useless, and I’m tired of losing to Riley and Willow.” He cracks a smile and the tension breaks. We’re a long way past petty competitions and childish jealousy.

“I got you,” I chuckle. “I’ll catch you later, and we can remind them who the reigning champions are.”

We clasp hands, pulling one another in for a quick hug before he heads off closer to the bonfire where Skyler and Riley roast predinner marshmallows. Maci and Lily are deep in conversation a few steps away, heads bent together and giggling. Coming up behind Maci, I wrap my arms around her waist and bury my head in her hair. She’s switched to her autumn perfume, and the sweet spice intermixes with the light apple scent left over from her shampoo. I breathe her in, trying to pull my nerves back into check. There’ve been too many hard conversations in the last two weeks for my liking, but I guess that’s a part of growing up.

“I’m gonna go find my dad. You’ll be alright?” I pull back slightly as she turns in my arms.

“No, don’t leave me. I’m terrified of your family,” she deadpans, and I dig my fingers into her side until she erupts in laughter. “Okay, now I want you to go away.”

“Hurtful,” I say with a pout.

“Go.” Maci rises on her toes to kiss my lips. “Good luck.”

I leave her and Lily to return to their conversation and weave my way through groups of aunts, uncles, and cousins until I get to the back porch steps. Looking up at the house, nervousness prickles at the back of my neck.

Dad and I could have had this conversation weeks or months ago, but I didn’t want to hear his side. I was so concerned with feeling like I was right that I didn’t care to know why he was doing what he was doing. I’ve been so mad at him for how childish he’s been throughout this situation, but I haven’t been acting much better.

I find him in the den, sitting in a threadbare armchair with his head bent over his phone. His brow is furrowed in concentration, and for a second, I consider waiting till another time. It would be rude to interrupt him, wouldn’t it? But all I’m doing is looking for a way to chicken out, so I clear my throat before I lose the nerve. He glances up and does a double take when he sees me in the doorway.

“James,” he says, half rising from his seat. “I didn’t think you were coming tonight.”

“How could I miss a Langley family bonfire?” I step further into the room, coming to sit on the sofa across from him. He settles back into his chair when he realizes I’m staying, looking at me warily. “Do you have a minute to talk?” I ask, folding my hands before me and forcing myself to maintain eye contact.

“Always.” Dad leans back into the cushions, crossing one leg over the other and opening his hands in a signal for me to go ahead.

“I’m tired of fighting with you,” I begin, holding up my hand when he opens his mouth to argue. It proves my point, but I decide against saying that. “You’re not happy with my plans to leave after graduation. I’ve got that loud and clear. But I am going to leave, Dad. I’ve spent my entire life in Birch Creek. I’m ready to experience somewhere new. That’s not changing.”

“You have a job here, James. Maci’s going to be here. Your *family* is here.” They’re the words I knew he would say, but they don’t change anything. I need him to see that.

“I don’t want the job at Birch Creek Elementary. I think I’ve made that pretty clear. Maci and I talked about it, and we’ll figure out how to make it work. As for our family, you guys will still be here. I’ll still be able to visit for holidays and long weekends. And you can come stay with me whenever you want.”

Abruptly, he rises to his feet as if he’s going to leave the room. He doesn’t. Instead, he starts pacing. I get it. That moment when the nervous energy becomes too much, and you can’t stand still.

“Why is this so hard for you?” I ask when he’s quiet for too long.

“Growing up, all Anthony—your Uncle Anthony—wanted was to get the hell out of Birch Creek.” Dad’s facing away from me, looking out the floor to ceiling window that overlooks the backyard. Outside, our family moves around, illuminated by the soft light of the string lights and the warm blaze of the bonfire. “I never understood it. Our family had its problems, everyone does, but we had a good childhood with parents who loved us. Honestly, I never thought he’d go through with it. But he did.” Dad turns toward me, and there’s hurt in his dark eyes. “He didn’t go on bad terms or anything like that. There was no big fight, and no one tried to stop him.” He chuckles, but there’s no humor there. “Well, I did, but it didn’t change his mind. He left three days after his high school graduation.”

He pauses, but I can't tell if he's finished, so I simply wait. Dad comes to sit beside me.

"Those first years, we saw him every few months, but then he settled down. Had a wife and kids. And, well, you know, we see them—what? Maybe once a year. Twice if we're lucky. We text occasionally and call if something important comes up, but we're not close anymore. I couldn't tell you what he does on weekends or if he likes his job or hates it. Hell, I don't know if I could tell you which sports his girls play." I'm shocked to see tears forming in the corners of his eyes. My dad isn't what you would call stoic, but he usually leaves waterworks to Mom. "I'm sure he didn't mean for it to happen, but life gets in the way."

"Dad," I start but have no idea how to finish my sentence. No clue how to reassure him that I would never let that happen when I've just barely begun to navigate adulthood. "I didn't even think. I had no idea."

Uncle Anthony was never a present figure in my life, and it didn't even cross my mind that—for my dad—he was. For eighteen years.

"I don't want to lose someone else like that," he admits. "I've gotten used to having all you kids close by, and the idea of you leaving...well, it brought a lot of things up for me."

"It won't be the same, Dad." I rest a comforting hand on his back, but he shakes his head.

"Life happens, son. Faster than you know." He sighs and passes a hand over his face. "But that doesn't make what I did right. I shouldn't have gone about it like that. I've—I've never been good at talking about these things. Your mother gets on me about it all the time. I'm sorry, son."

His apology lifts a weight from my shoulders that I've grown so used to carrying the last few months I almost forgot it was there.

"I forgive you."

Growing up, Dad made it a point to teach me that when someone apologizes to you, not to say, 'It's okay' or 'Don't

worry about it.' If you mean it, when you're ready, you tell them you forgive them. Then you put it in the past where it belongs and figure out what comes next together.

I'm ready to do that now.

Chapter 31

Maci

“IS THIS NECESSARY?” James asks, hand hovering over his nose and mouth to protect himself from the fumes. “This stuff can’t be good for you to inhale.”

“It’s called authenticity.” I take the last layer of my hair from its claw clip and spray it with temporary hair dye.

“But your hair is already red.” Giving up on shielding himself from the smell, he jumps off my bed and makes a beeline for the window. As soon as he opens it, cold air fills the room, diluting the chemical smell to something more breathable.

“Lava Girl has pink hair. Not red. How do you not know that?” I resist the urge to roll my eyes. At this point, he should know I don’t do my Halloween costumes in halves. Last year, when the four of us went as the Scooby Gang, I bullied Daphne into a wig to complete her Velma look. It wasn’t easy, but when she left the house, you bet your ass she was a bespectacled brunette with a bob.

“Same thing.”

“What was that?” I turn on him, can of hair dye ready to fire, and he holds up his hands in defense.

“Makes sense. That’s what I said. Pink and red. Very different.” His eyes flick to my makeshift weapon nervously. As if I would ruin his Shark Boy costume. Not after I spent hours scouring the internet for the most affordable yet authentic option.

“That’s what I thought,” I say with a devilish smile.

Combing through my hair, I double check that I didn't miss any pieces. When I'm satisfied with my work, I toss the can into the trashcan, which lands with a clatter against the other two canisters. Long hair is all fun and games until you have to do anything with it.

"Done!" I pull off the sweatshirt I wore to protect my costume from any stray dye, stepping back to examine myself in the mirror. It's not a replica of Lava Girl's costume from the movie. Rather than a full body morph suit, I opted for a leotard option with a skirt and added a pair of thigh high bright pink boots to finish the look. Screw James's complaining. The pink hair pulls it all together.

"Mhm, yep, I like this a lot." He comes up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. Unlike me, he was not lucky enough to escape the full body morph suit. Some options came in two-piece sets, but I couldn't pass up the opportunity to see him in full body spandex.

"Me too," I agree, tracing the outline on his bicep through his sleeve.

"Am I going to mess up your makeup if I kiss you right now?"

"Try it and find out."

Spinning me in his arms, James kisses me. Hands gripping my waist, pulling me closer. I wrap my arms around his neck, pressing myself against him. Neither of us register the sound of my bedroom door opening until the intruder clears their throat. We break apart, turning to see Chase hovering in the doorway with a vaguely disgruntled look.

"Sorry to interrupt," he says, looking at a spot over the two of our heads. He, however, is the only thing I can look at. I've never seen Chase in overalls before, and it's an amusing sight. Add in the bright red long sleeve shirt and a large red hat, and it's hard to keep a straight face.

"It's fine." I wave him off, gingerly messing with my hair to put it back into place without covering my hand in a pink film. "What's up?"

“I’m sorry for myself,” he clarifies, deciding it’s safe to refocus his gaze on James and me. “Can you guys come out here for a second?”

Without waiting for our response, he heads down the hallway toward the living room. We exchange confused looks but follow along behind him.

“Is he going as Mario by himself?” I whisper to James so Chase can’t hear. Usually, the four of us do a group costume, but James and I decided to do our own thing this year. When we told them, I thought the other two would have kicked up more of a fit, but they were remarkably okay with it. Well, if you count Daphne refusing to tell me anything about her costume as “okay.”

“I guess.” James looks wistfully at Chase’s overalls and long sleeved t-shirt. “I feel kind of bad. Maybe I should change? I’m sure I have something in my closet that would work for Luigi.”

“No chance. You just want out of that spandex.” Did he think I wouldn’t see right through his ruse?

We follow Chase into the living room, where Daphne stands in front of the TV facing the sofa. It’s the first time I’ve seen her costume, and I look between her and Chase, a tingling realization falling over me.

“Are you...” James squints at Daphne as if he can’t see her clearly from a few feet away.

“Princess Peach?” she asks, straightening the skirt to her hot pink mini dress with a white gloved hand. “At your service.”

“Sit.” Chase points to the sofa, going to stand beside Daphne.

“You guys didn’t have to match because Maci and I did,” James says, dropping onto the sofa and pulling me onto his lap. “I mean, I guess it’s less sad than being Mario all by yourself. But you could have been something cool, like Batman, you didn’t—”

“We need to tell you guys something,” Daphne interrupts him, ignoring the glare James shoots her.

“And you can’t freak out till we’re done talking.” Chase gives both of us a stern look, the fake mustache glued to his upper lip, slightly ruining its overall effect.

“What’s going on?” James turns to me as if I might have the answer, but I’m not paying him any attention. The gears turn in my head as I look between Chase and Daphne. Picking details out of memories and adding them to a mental picture that’s becoming clearer by the second.

“Cut it out, Mace,” Daph tells me. “I know you’re trying to figure it out.”

Guilty.

Daph and Chase share a look before doing something that would have been unthinkable until thirty seconds ago. Chase laces his fingers through Daph’s, gently pulling her to his side.

“What the—” James starts, only to get cut off again by a death glare from his cousin.

“I’m going to come right out and say it because if we try to start with the story, you two will have a question every two seconds... We’re dating.” The last two words come out so quickly they barely make sense. But maybe that has less to do with the words themselves and more to do with their meaning.

“Dating?” James repeats slowly as if he’s never heard the word before.

“I knew those were the same shoes you showed me when we picked out our outfits for the Harvest Ball!” I thought it was weird when Chase said they were late because Daphne needed to change her shoes. She only owns one pair of nude heels. I planned to follow up with her once we got home, but everything happened with James and me. It completely slipped my mind until now.

“You let her drive your car!” James exclaims, coming to his own realization. “You never let me drive your car.” He shoots Chase a reproachful look.

“When? How? Why?” I fire off questions one after another, still too in shock to form sentences.

The two of them share a knowing look. There’s a tenderness in their gaze that warms my heart and astonishes me all at once. Chase inclines his head toward Daph, signaling her to tell the story.

“You remember the two weeks you were home with your family, and James was on vacation with his family? We spent a lot of time together. Watching movies. Going to the beach. All the stuff we normally do when you guys are gone, but this year...something was different.”

I nod along as Daphne speaks, and then her words register.

“Since August?” It comes out shriller than I meant for it to. James winces beneath me, shifting me so I sit beside him rather than on his lap. He stares at Chase and Daphne as if they’re an alien species. His lips move, but no words come out.

Daphne lets go of Chase’s hand and sits beside me on the sofa. The look of resolve she wore when we walked into the living room replaced with one of guilt and worry.

“It wasn’t a real thing at first,” she says, rushing to explain herself. “Neither of us thought it was going to go anywhere, and then—” She looks over her shoulder at Chase with a fondness I’ve never seen in her eyes before “—when we realized it might be something more, we wanted a chance to figure things out for ourselves before telling you and James. We didn’t want to change everything if it fizzled out.”

She falters, and I notice her hands shaking before she folds them in her lap. My brain feels like it’s short circuited. Never in a million years would I have thought...Chase and Daphne? But now I think back to all their early morning gym sessions this year and how Daph’s study groups always seem to line up with the nights Chase visits his parents in D.C.

“Okay, okay, okay,” James says as if trying to convince himself that this is, in fact, okay. “But it’s October. What happened?”

“Uh.” Chase scratches the back of his neck, looking to Daph as if for permission. She gives him an almost imperceptible nod, and he sighs. “You guys were figuring out your own stuff, and—honestly, Mace—you didn’t take it too well when you first found out about James’s feelings. It made us a little nervous.”

“It made me nervous,” Daphne corrects him. “I wanted to tell you, I swear, but I was so confused. I never thought I’d look at Chase as anything more than a friend.”

“Gee, thanks, babe,” Chase grumbles.

I feel lightheaded at his use of the word ‘babe.’ Too much too soon.

“Then everything happened with James, and I couldn’t stand the idea of you being mad at me. After that, we’d already kept it a secret for so long, it wasn’t hard to keep it going.” Daph bites her lip, avoiding eye contact. “And if we didn’t tell anyone, it wasn’t real, and that made it less scary.”

“But it is real.” Chase comes over to the three of us, standing behind Daph and resting his hands on her shoulders. I don’t miss the way his thumb rubs soothing circles onto the bare skin of her shoulder or the way her breathing evens out at his touch. “And now that you guys have sorted your shit out, we thought it was the right time to tell you.”

“Please don’t be mad at me,” Daphne whispers, her voice wavering.

“Daph.” I lean forward, pulling her away from Chase and wrapping her in a hug. “I’m not mad. Promise.”

“Really?” she asks, voice muffled by my hair.

“Really.”

Do I wish she would have told me sooner? Absolutely. But I get it. If the roles were reversed. If I saw her completely spiral out like I did when James told me about his feelings...I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same thing.

“Even best friends are entitled to secrets every now and then.” I release her, offering up a small smile.

“Strong disagree.” It’s the first time James has spoken in a while. His face still has the expression of someone who’s come out of a terrifying haunted house. Paralyzed with shock. “My cousin?” he asks Chase. “C’mon, man! Out of all the girls you could have picked?”

“None of them come even close to Daph.” Chase smiles sappily at Daphne, who blows him a kiss.

“We are very happy for you guys.” I take James’s hand, squeezing until he reluctantly nods in agreement. “But I still have a lot of questions.”

“I don’t. The less I know, the better. We should get going anyway. Wouldn’t want to be late!” James hops off the sofa, reaching to dig his keys out of his pocket before remembering there’s no such thing as pockets in spandex superhero costumes. “I think I left them in your room, Mace. Hold on.” He dashes down the hall.

Chase looks after him and shakes his head. “I’ll go talk to him.”

“He’ll be fine.” Daphne rolls her eyes, but Chase follows him anyway. “I’m sorry,” she apologizes again when both the boys are gone.

“It’s okay, but now you’ll have to fill me in on everything tonight.” I poke her gently in the side, and she giggles, finally starting to relax.

“As long as it’s over tequila shots, I’m okay with that.”

* * *

THE CRISP OCTOBER air feels far less cold than when we first arrived at Asher’s house for his annual Halloween party. I’m sure the vast amount of tequila Daph and I consumed has something to do with that. Tomorrow morning, I’ll regret those last two shots in the morning, but right now, I’m grateful for the warmth they’re bringing me.

“Hey, I was looking for you.” The front door opens and closes, and James takes a seat on the step beside me.

“It’s loud in there. I needed a break.” I lean into him, resting my head on his shoulder.

“You’re getting old,” he teases.

“Something like that.”

“Can you believe...Chase and Daphne?” he asks, and I chuckle.

I don’t know what Chase said to him, but when they returned to the living room, James seemed to have come to terms with his best friend dating his cousin. He only requested that they keep the PDA to a minimum in front of him. To which Daphne countered that she would if he did. And that was the end of that.

“Everything’s changing,” I say, echoing his words from the night of the food truck festival. It feels like a million years ago now.

“It is.” James wraps an arm around my shoulder, and I lean against him. “But is that so bad?”

I think about it for a second. For as long as I can remember, ‘change’ and ‘fear’ have been inexplicitly linked in my mind—the desire to control every aspect of my life so nothing can catch me off guard. But, as I think about the future, for the first time, I’m not afraid. I don’t know what’s to come, but I know James and I will face it together.

“No, it’s not.”

Chapter 32

James

WHEN WE STEP out of the restaurant, the sun has long since sunk below the horizon, but the streets are still bright with the lights of the surrounding buildings. People hustle around us, walking quickly down sidewalks, still busy even this late into the evening. Maci shivers, pulling her scarf tighter around her.

“You alright?” I ask, linking my arm through hers as we approach the parking garage.

“Perfect.” She smiles up at me, and my heart skips in my chest. I hope her smile never stops having that effect on me. “Thanks for dinner.”

“I’m sorry it was two months late.” I laugh, thinking of when we tried to make it out to D.C. for our first date. Somehow, it feels like just a moment ago, but also as if a lifetime has passed. This semester has embodied the old saying, “The days are long, but the years are short.” There’s only a month and a half before winter break, and then graduation waits right around the corner.

“Freshman year, would you have ever guessed this is how we’d end up?” I ask Maci.

“Definitely not, you were really annoying back then,” she teases, bumping her hip against mine and pushing us sideways.

“Funny,” I say, rolling my eyes but unable to keep the smile off my face.

“It feels like a lifetime ago,” she adds, wistful nostalgia in her voice. “Do you remember that first day of orientation?”

If I close my eyes, I can picture it like yesterday. Mom and Dad tried to convince me to live at home since our house is only five minutes from campus, but Chase and I had spent all senior year talking about being roommates. I was sweaty and disgusting from lugging suitcases and boxes up four flights of stairs since our building's only elevator had a mile-long line. That was the first time I saw Maci, arms piled high with books and clothes, trying to open the door to her room with her foot. When I dropped what was in my hands to help her, I didn't even know she was Daphne's roommate.

And I couldn't possibly have known how important she would become to me over the next three years.

"I still will never understand how you and Daph unpacked your room so quickly. By the time Chase and I finished unloading our cars, you guys had already hung fairy lights, made your beds, and color coded your closets." I'm still not convinced there wasn't some sort of magic involved.

"I loved that room." A crease forms between her brows, and the happiness she's radiated all evening fades a little. "I can't believe we're not going to live across from each other next year."

"Me too." It's something I've been avoiding thinking about. I'm not scared we'll break up anymore, like when I first found out she'd have to stay in Birch Creek another year. Still, the idea of not being able to walk across the hall whenever I want to see her makes my heart sink. One look at Maci tells me she's right there with me.

"But we'll video call every day. Maybe you can start teaching me how to cook," she says, a forced cheerfulness in her voice. We both know it won't be the same.

"I've seen you in the kitchen," I tease. "I don't think I can provide proper supervision over the phone."

She smacks me lightly on the shoulder but doesn't argue. Up ahead the lights guiding cars into the garage where we left my truck blink in the darkness of the night. I stop, not ready for our date to be over.

“You wanna find somewhere to grab a drink?” I ask, and Maci lights up, the sadness falling away.

“I saw a bar a couple of buildings back. Let’s check it out?”

Five minutes later, we weave through crowded tables, beers secured in our hands. Near the back of the bar, we get lucky and snag a booth just as the couple before us gets up to leave. Maci starts to sit across from me, but I catch her hand, tugging her to my side.

“It’s so gross when couples sit on the same side of the booth,” she says, wrinkling her nose but humors me anyway.

We sip our beers in comfortable silence while we people watch. A bachelorette party in the far corner is well on their way to being drunk even though the clock hasn’t hit nine o’clock yet. A couple at the bar argues in voices I’m sure they think are quiet, but they’re wrong. I can’t get over how full of life the city is on a Thursday night.

An idea has been bouncing around my head since halfway through dinner. I wasn’t sure at first, but now I’m certain. Everything’s about to change, but some things can still stay the same.

“I’ve been thinking about where I might want to live next year,” I say, turning in the booth to face her. Reluctantly, she pulls her gaze away from the guy at the bar arguing over his tab.

“Oh yeah?”

We’ve talked about a couple places. When you can go anywhere, there are so many choices. I’ve done all the research on salaries and cost of living, but until tonight, the list has been a mile long. But looking at Maci, her cheeks still flushed from the cold outside and her green eyes sparkling, there’s only one place I want to be.

“You know, D.C. is only an hour from Birch Creek. Probably, what, forty-five minutes from your internship?” I make it sound like I’m guessing, but I already looked up the

route from the city to White Hawk Engineering while she was in the bathroom when we arrived.

“Really?” Maci asks, and I can tell she’s not sure where I’m going with this.

“There are plenty of schools in the area. I don’t think finding someplace I like would be too difficult.” I may have also quickly searched to see the nearby job openings. They’ll change by the time I’m ready to apply, but there were so many I have no doubt more will pop up around the end of the school year.

“You want to move to D.C.?” she asks slowly, mulling the idea over.

“I want *us* to move here. I want to be close to *you*.” I correct her. D.C. has nothing to do with it. I’ve always liked the city, but if Maci were moving back to California, I would have been happy to follow her across the country.

She breaks into a smile, but just as quickly, a shadow falls across her face. “Are you sure it’s not too close to Birch Creek?”

“It’s far enough,” I say, wrapping my arm around her shoulders. She rests her head on my chest. Her body fits against mine as if we were made for one another. “I meant it when I said we could make long distance work, but we don’t have to. We can stay here at least until your internship ends, and then...”

“We can go anywhere,” she says quietly, and in her voice, I hear the promise of decades to come.

“Hey Mace?” I cradle her face in my hand, tilting it up toward mine. “I love you.” When the time came, I thought I’d be nervous to say it, but now that it’s here it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

She bites back the smile threatening to overwhelm her face. “I love you too.”

She barely finishes speaking before I kiss her. Slow and gentle because we have all the time in the world. When we break apart, she snuggles back against me with a contented

sigh, hand absently tracing patterns in the condensation on the table. Everything feels as it should be.

Looking at the bright lights of the city outside the bar's windows, a thrill of excitement shoots through me. I picture us here this time next year. In a tiny apartment because God knows that's all we'll be able to afford. Carrying boxes up a narrow staircase. Picking out furniture. Deciding where to hang the TV. Eating ramen on the floor while we dream about what the future holds.

It won't be perfect. We might not have a lot, but I know we'll figure it out as long as we have each other.

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Last, but certainly not least, thank you dear reader for coming along on this journey with Maci, James, and me. Though their story has ended, I hope we will meet again soon in Birch Creek.

About the Author

Alexis Noel was once a high school English teacher, but now she spends her days writing romance novels. When she's not writing, she can be found cooking, painting, reading, or binge watching one of her favorite TV shows. Though Alexis is currently located in Maryland, she plans to relocate to England in the upcoming year to be with her fiancé.

Follow Alexis Noel on Amazon to stay up to date on all her upcoming releases.

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