

There are no rules when it comes to Cole Johnson...

GROUND RULES

A WELLINGTON PREP NOVELLA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
S.J. SYLVVIS

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A Wellington Prep Novella

SJ SYLVIS

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Ground Rules

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Ground Rules is a short, sexy, (and suspenseful) standalone novella that takes place at a fictional college. If you have read the English Prep Series, you will likely recognize the hero (it is not necessary to read the English Prep Series to understand this novella!). Please take note that this novella is intended for **MATURE** (18+) readers. **Ground Rules** has dark themes (strong language, sexual scenes, and situations) throughout. Be aware that it contains **TRIGGERS** that some readers may find bothersome. **Reader Discretion is advised.**

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PROLOGUE

MAZEY

TWO YEARS Ago - *Wellington Prep*

IT WAS hard to open my eyes. It was almost as if someone had painted my eyelashes with glue the night before. *Did I have fake lashes on?* My head shook slowly at the thought as I tried to make sense of why it seemed I was sleeping on a concrete floor instead of my comfy bed, which was pushed up against the far window in my room that had the perfect view of Cole's.

I shifted on my side and nearly whimpered at the pain in my back. My spine was stiff, and every bone in my body felt like it was seconds from snapping. *Why was I so sore?* I wiggled my toes and tried to sort through my muddy thoughts. My head was groggy, but flashes from the night slowly started to pile in. My heart picked up in speed, and it thumped harder and harder as each second ticked by. *Wait.* The morning light filtered through the far window of a room I didn't recognize, and my stomach rolled like the tide on the beach. My joints creaked, and the pounding in my head intensified. When I

finally sat up, using my hands as an anchor to the floor, I saw that my shirt was off, and my jeans weren't covering my legs.

Party. I was at a party the night before.

More flashes of the night came at me, and the memories were like lightning pounding me in the back of the skull. Someone had led me to a room. *Touches. Laughter.* But I wasn't the one laughing. *Where was Cole?* The faceless person in my vision caused chills to race down my arms, and that was when I flipped over onto my knees and began pulling myself up.

Sick.

I was going to be sick.

My watery eyes scanned the floor for my phone. *I needed my phone.* How was it possible that this had happened? Did this happen? *God, please tell me this didn't happen.*

“Stay calm, Mazey.” My voice was weak and raspy as I crawled over the soft carpet, searching for my phone. I was sore in places I shouldn't have been, but I didn't even allow the thought to fester. A looming shadow of anxiety cascaded over my back, but it disappeared the second I grasped my phone underneath the bed.

My fingers fumbled with the device like it was a live grenade, and my first thought was to call Cole. I'd always been his little secret. The girl in the servants' house that sat along his perfectly landscaped backyard. The girl he wouldn't dare touch in daylight but always at nightfall.

Cole and I were a locked box full of lingering looks and subtle touches on the front. We were like the breeze in the middle of a dark forest, wafting over the cool, dirt floor, heating it up from the inside out. We were a modern-day

Romeo and Juliet, and we both knew it. Words were hardly spoken between us in public, but alone? We were on a completely different wavelength. There was an unspoken bond between us that only he and I were aware of.

The second I hit *Call* on the screen, my anxiety lessened. Cole would help me. Cole would get me back home before anyone even realized where I was and what I'd done.

But what had I done?

Cole and I caught eyes last night.

Far too many times.

Maybe that was why this happened. I was too busy staring at Cole as he wrapped his hands around Victoria's waist. The jealous surge lit me up right smack dab in the middle of my chest.

It was the first time I'd ever been to a party that he was at, too. Our friends ran in different circles. He was part of the elite, ruling the halls of Wellington Prep, and I was part of the less fortunate—the ones at the bottom of the food chain. His parents had paid my way into Wellington Prep as a bonus to my parents, but I still ran with the scholarship bunch because my parents didn't even come close to being wealthy.

The second the phone began to ring, my heart skidded to a complete stop in my chest. I could hear his ringtone inside the bedroom I was tucked away in. My stomach fell an inch, and then another and another as I slowly stood up on shaky legs and began searching the room for him. *Why was he in here?*

Swallowing back the thought that crept inside my head, I took a step to the left, my bare feet digging into the soft carpet beneath me, and that was when I saw him hidden away in the corner. *No.*

There he was, in all his beautiful, righteous glory. Perfectly tanned skin from spending his days at the pool in his backyard this summer. Chiseled jaw that made my mouth even drier than it already was. Thick, dark eyelashes. Lush, soft, chestnut hair. *Why was he...?*

I looked down at my bare legs again, my belly tightening at the faint purple marks on my thighs. My lip wobbled, and I looked back at Cole. *Was he in on it?* He couldn't have been. He hated when other guys spared me glances in the hallway. I knew he had something to do with the fact that I always ended up dateless for school dances and football game pep rallies.

My shoulders shook as I slapped my hand over my lips, keeping myself from sobbing. *Shit.* How was it that the one person I trusted beyond everything was the one person that I was the most fearful of at the moment? *Confused. I was confused.*

Just then, my phone started to ring in my hand, and I hurriedly pushed *Accept*, not even knowing who was calling.

“Mazey?” my best friend, Kate, shouted into the phone. “Where the hell are you? Are you okay?”

I took a step away from Cole, and then another, until my back was against the wall. I scanned the room for my underwear and pants, my stomach twisting with nausea every other second. “I...I don't know,” I whispered, my voice breaking with every word that floated out of my tight throat.

“I will kill them all. I'm in the hall. Are you in a bedroom? Open the door. We need to go right now.”

“Go where?” I asked, swiping a tear away from my cheek. *Shit. How did this happen?* They warn you about things like this. Girls being alone at parties and someone slipping

something into their drink. I was not a stupid girl, but I *was* distracted. I had glanced at Cole too many times. He was like a luring dream, always pulling me in until the very last second and then pushing me to wake up.

Why was I so stupid?

The knock on the door made me jump, and I spotted my clothes laying in a heap of a mess near the edge of the dresser. I rushed over, wobbling on my legs as if I'd just spent hours in the sea, and began slipping them on, holding back a sob from the marks on my legs.

“Mazey, are you in there?” I heard Kate’s voice echo on the phone and from outside the door.

I slowly turned the knob, and when we caught eyes, I saw the devastation all over her face. “Jesus Christ, Maze. What happened?”

“I...I don’t know.” Suddenly, my throat felt even drier, and it hurt to speak. Everything ached. “I want to go home.”

“We’re going to the hospital.”

“What?” I asked, confusion still lingering. *Why did it feel like I was stuck in a cloud somewhere?*

“Maze, there’s a video from last night...you...I’m such a shitty friend. I should have never left—”

“Maze?” Cole’s voice cut through the panic that was rising, and Kate saw the way my eyes widened. She stepped to the left, and murder was clear on her pretty features.

“What did you do to her?” Her voice rose to levels that made my head pound, and she stormed farther into the room with her blonde locks swaying with fury. “I will *fucking* kill

you, Cole! Did you do this to her? How could you?! Give me your fucking phone right now!”

I glanced at Cole for a fleeting second as he blinked his eyes several times. His large hand wiped over the side of his face, and I turned around, too afraid to look him in the eye. *It couldn't have been Cole. He would have had no part in any of this.* “What are you talking about, Kate? Get out of my fucking face.”

“Did you fucking drug her? Too much of a pussy to ask her out yourself because of your dear ol’ daddy not approving? So you decided to take advantage of her?”

“Kate,” I whispered, jarring them both with the creak in my voice. “Let’s go. I feel sick.”

I wanted to stay facing the door so badly, but I had to see. I had to see the look on his face. I knew him better than he thought—years of watching and observing someone without them knowing will allow you to peek into the deepest, darkest parts of them. But the very second we caught eyes, it was like a swift punch to my already sick stomach.

His tight jaw slacked, and his lips parted. His normally scorching gaze ran slowly over my bare legs and lingered on the marks painting my thighs. “*No,*” he whispered, turning white.

I turned around quickly and pulled my pants the rest of the way up. “Kate, let’s go.”

“You better watch yourself, Cole. If they match your DNA, you are done for.”

“Mazey,” Cole’s voice hit the back of my head, but I couldn’t even look at him. There were too many things happening, and each one made the room spin a little faster.

“Mazey, you know I wouldn’t do this. Please wait. Let me help you.”

Kate’s hand landed on my arm, and I jumped at the sound of her snarl. “Fuck you, Cole.”

CHAPTER ONE

TWO YEARS Later

COLE

These parties always had a bundle of hotties swarming around, half-dressed, hoping to score one of the Noany Bay football players—or hell, maybe even the mascot or water boy. They were thirsty, high on the need to party their college years away, but fuck me if I wasn't still uncomfortable when I saw a pretty girl taking drinks from a random dude at a fucking frat party. You couldn't trust horny dudes. They were ruthless, especially those who desperately wanted to get laid but were too weak to put in the work to actually sweep a girl off her feet.

Though, I was pretty certain that most people thought that about me. The rumors from high school had followed me to Noany Bay. The rumors that were just that—*rumors*. I will admit, I never openly discussed them or tried to deny what the gossip mill of Wellington Prep, and even surrounding schools like English Prep, had started up. The only person's opinion that I truly cared about was the one who shared the same dreadful fate.

Regardless, I would never touch a girl without her permission. I may have been a bit disobedient, the ultimate bad-boy (those are not my words, I will assure you of that), but I would never stoop so low to become something so downright fucking disgusting. In fact, I liked the chase. I liked working for it. Maybe that was all because of Mazey. She had always made me work so damn hard for her attention.

Regardless of who I was now, I accepted the rumors and the label. I allowed them to brew and flourish because of *her*. Deep down, I thought I felt that I deserved the trash-talk. Maybe my dignity was just as ruined as hers was. Guilt was constantly causing me to plow my feet into the ground, gripping me to my spot whenever I'd hear her name.

It'd been almost two years since I'd seen her soft, pink cheeks burning bright when she'd catch me staring. It had been far too long since her baby blues grasped me in place from across the lush green yard that separated us on a daily basis. *I missed her*. I missed the Mazey that no longer looked at me with the slight glimmer of rebellion in her eye. I missed the tiny smile that would grace her perfect lips when she saw me from her bedroom window.

Fuck, I hated myself. Still. Even to this day.

“Scoping out the bait, my mate?”

I leaned back against the grimy wall of the frat house, holding the warm beer in my hand as if I was going to get just as fucked as everyone else at this party—Reese being one of them. His eyes were red and glossy, which meant he'd just come from the basement.

“Sure am,” I sighed, lying. I wasn't really scoping out the bait. I wasn't in the mood to deal with an overzealous girl with heavy hands as she beat my dick. I could get the job done just

fine while picturing a set of blue eyes that continued to fucking haunt me.

It didn't make matters any better that my parents reminded me of her every single time I was home visiting—thus, why I came back to school early this year.

I knew I wouldn't run into her back in our hometown. Mazey Fuller would never step foot on my property again, courtesy of my parents and their *deal* with hers. But just the fact that I could see her window in the now empty servants' house from my bedroom, and not see her face staring up at me, made me irrationally angry.

I never allowed myself to talk to her afterwards. I knew it would only make matters worse. I was in the hot seat. My parents were livid with hers for even suspecting me in the first place, and threats were shared from both parties as Mazey and I drowned in our own fucked-up version of *us*.

I was angry. I was angry at myself most of all, but maybe even a little angry at her too. Not because I blamed her for anything, but because she thought so little of me that she even had an inkling that it was me. As if I would *ever*. She knew me better than anyone, and it cut deep that there was even a tiny seed that she allowed others to water with the mere suspicion that I was the one to take advantage of her.

I knew it looked bad.

How did I end up in that room with her?

If I was in that room while something happened, why didn't I stop it?

Those are questions that continued to rattle off in my brain each time I saw a fair-skinned, sunshiny head of hair on

campus, even if she didn't attend Noany Bay like most of the graduates from Wellington Prep.

“Oh, lookie. Fresh meat.” Reese's slow, chill, surfer-type voice that belonged on the cast of *Laguna Beach* pulled me from my depressive thoughts that often made me appear broody and lethal. Not many approached me nowadays unless I approached them first, which was almost never.

“Freshman?” I asked, gripping my bottle of beer tighter. I glanced over top of the sea of half-dressed girls, their tanned and toned legs catching my eye for a brief second because, after all, I did have a dick in my pants. My gaze caught Christian Powell with his long-time girlfriend, Hayley. They had both transferred here a year ago, along with Hayley's best friend, Piper, when his little brother, Ollie, got a full-ride. Christian and Ollie were the only other guys on the football team—other than myself—that didn't really enjoy these parties. I'll admit we started off rocky during our high school years, but with the help of Hayley and my recluse state since leaving home, we came to an understanding that the past was just that: *the past*.

Except, it wasn't.

Mazey was my past, and I didn't want to let her go, even if it brought nothing but regret.

I nodded once to Christian as he wrapped his hands around his girlfriend and skidded my attention elsewhere. I scoffed at Ryan as he was trying to sweet-talk his way into a freshman's pants. We went to Wellington Prep together, so I'd known him for years, and I honestly lost count of how many girls he'd fucked. He was notorious for fucking a girl, making her think he cared, and then dumping her in front of the entire school.

He was the epitome of a fuck-boy, but to each their own. It wasn't like I had the best reputation in high school either.

"I think I'm out, man." I tipped my beer to Reese as he continued to stare out into the living room that was beginning to remind me of a rave. I knew what came next at these parties, and I wasn't in the mood.

"Why are you so down today, dude? Go downstairs and smoke or something. You're killing my mood."

"I can't smoke. We get drug tested. You know that, and you're gonna be real fuckin' sorry if they decide to test you."

Reese shrugged nonchalantly, as if he didn't care, and to be honest, at the moment, he probably didn't. But tomorrow he would, when he wasn't higher than a kite and drunk off cheap, warm booze. "That's future Reese problems."

I chuckled, placing my beer on the windowsill that some freshman trying to get a spot in the frat will clean up tomorrow, and began making my way through the party. I fist-bumped a few guys here and there on my way through, feeling antsy the longer I was there. Just as I rounded the corner, wanting nothing more than to fucking shove everyone out of my way, I shoulder-checked someone that was so small I hardly saw them standing there.

"Oh, shit. My bad. I didn't even see yo—" It was a fucking sucker punch to my tight stomach. My hands were wrapped around her slender arms, and I was rooted to the ground, as if the floorboards beneath our feet had sprouted roots and kept me in place.

Her ocean-washed eyes snagged with mine, and her pink lips parted as a sweet breath floated out and killed me right there.

Everything else vanished.

We were the only two in the house, standing right there in the middle of the entryway. My hands were on her arms, and every finger bone snapped as I refrained from pulling her into my chest.

Her eyes bounced in between mine, and I saw an entire world move behind them. A world that I wanted a part in.

“Mazey?”

CHAPTER TWO

MAZEY

THE LIGHTS around us should have flickered.

The ground beneath my shoes should have moved.

The oxygen floating inside my lungs should have disappeared.

Something catastrophic should have occurred somewhere in the world because that was what it felt like when he touched me. *Catastrophic.*

I knew it was inevitable. I couldn't avoid him forever, especially with his position at this school. Was he the most popular guy on campus? No. But he *did* have a reputation, one that had several sides to it, and they were all appealing, depending on the type of girl you were. *Dangerous, bad boy, damaged, untouchable.* Let's face it, there were girls that found those things enticing. Who didn't want to be the girl to make Cole Johnson smile? I hadn't seen his carefree smile since that night so long ago, and even then, it was fake.

"Mazey?" His fingers dug a little harder into my arms, and I hated that it made my stomach flutter. His kissable lips that I

had pictured every night before I went to sleep during my senior year—*until that night*—parted as shock painted itself along his chiseled features.

It was like the Sahara Desert inside my mouth as I stood a mere twelve inches away from him. *Beautiful*. His hair was the same warm, chestnut brown that it had always been. There was scruff along his face that made him look more like a man and less like the teenage boy I secretly gave my heart to. He was taller, too. I had to tip my head back to meet his green eyes that warmed my flesh.

There was a commotion behind us that broke the tension. I jerked my head over his right shoulder and was reminded of the reason I was even at this party in the first place. My roommate had no idea why I had dragged her here, but given the fact that I saw her with one of the football players a few minutes ago, I knew she wouldn't know the real reason. *Cole, though*.

"I have to go," I said before internally cringing at the way my voice cracked.

Cole's hands left my arms, but he didn't take a step back. I pulled my gaze away again, seeing *Ryan* half-stumbling with a girl near the landing of the steps. *Was she coherent?* The pit in my stomach grew a little bigger, and if I could remember that night two years ago clearly, I probably would have doubled over with fear. But I didn't remember it, only bits and pieces, but it was enough to make rage blossom in my core instead of fear.

"What...what are you doing here?" Cole's voice was like fanning a fire.

The stumbling, drunk football player behind him was half to blame for the way my heart was currently cracking inside

my chest, and standing this close to Cole did nothing but remind me of that.

“Getting my dignity back,” I said, fully turning away from him and rushing toward the stairs. I turned my head away from Ryan as he nibbled on the girl’s neck at the landing of the steps. I peered up the long staircase, only half-hoping Cole didn’t follow me. The half that wanted nothing more than to feel the way I had felt with him two years ago was trying to pull me backward, but the mature part of me won, remembering the entire reason I had transferred to Noany Bay in the first place.

A girl with a shattered spirit who had irrevocably pieced herself back together was not one to mess with. Ryan had no idea what was coming for him, and I wouldn’t let anyone stand in my way. Not my parents, as they disapproved of my going to Noany Bay. Not Kate, as she reminded me that most of our classmates from high school attended here. Not the rumors that would likely start up again when people began to recognize me. And not Cole Johnson, as my heart sparked back to life for the first time in a very long time.

I climbed the steps in twos, stepping over empty red cups damp with beer, and glanced behind me once to see Ryan still coaxing the girl up the stairs. I ignored the thin slice over my heart as I realized Cole wasn’t chasing after me, but why would he? Why would he even have the notion to do so after my parents threatened to publicly humiliate his family? And after his parents paid us off in an attempt to keep things hush-hush? And after all the rumors that I’d later heard he didn’t deny? There was too much between us that would never go away. Our past was written in stone.

Staring down the darkened hallway, I counted the doors on the left until I got to the third one—Ryan’s. Hearing his voice at my back did nothing but cause chills to slap up my spine as I dashed over the wooden floor and turned the knob to his room and slipped inside. It was dark and smelled of cheap cologne. There were blackout curtains blocking out the glittering stars, and panic began to settle over me as I realized my plan wasn’t as good as I thought it was.

“*Shit,*” I mumbled, standing over his bed, knowing that I was supposed to be underneath it. My phone was tucked away in my back pocket, and I was going to catch him red-handed, doing the same thing to that girl that he did to me.

Maybe.

She looked willing, but did he drug her, too? Was she so confused and disoriented that she wasn’t aware of what she was getting herself into? And was I really going to let it get to that point so I could record him in the act? The second she said no or passed out while he was on her, I was going to have to make myself known.

Shit, this wasn’t a good plan.

Would it even work?

My heart jumped to my throat as I heard his voice outside the door and the girl’s faint giggle. My feet began pulling me backward, until I was seconds from dashing under the bed, when the door to my left opened, and a hand gripped my bicep.

“What the hell?” I squealed as I was pulled into a pitch-black room seconds later.

The door slammed, and a hand was over my mouth. Panic caused me to act quickly. My hands flew up to the warm,

strong palm pressed firmly against my mouth. My nails dug into the skin, and a hiss hit my ear.

“What the fuck are you doing in here, Maze?”

Cole.

My stomach bottomed out, and butterflies flew to the top. His heart beat wildly against my back, and everything suddenly got hot. His hand slowly fell from my face, and I stepped away hastily, leaving my heart floating there in hot air between our bodies. “What are *you* doing here, Cole?” *He did follow me.* And I hated how that made my heart lurch.

My eyes dropped to the ground, even though I could hardly make anything out in the dark room. Why did it sound so comforting to say his name out loud? I hadn’t said his name in so long.

“I...” I heard a heavy sigh after the single word and felt him move farther away from me. My arms crossed over my chest, and I spun around, putting my back to him again—as if he could even see me doing such a thing.

My ear pressed against the door that he’d pulled me into, and then I saw the bright light of his phone a second later. I couldn’t even stand to look at him. I was too afraid of what I’d see on his face, or what he’d see on mine.

Two years. It had been two years since I’d been this close to him.

“Mazey, what are you doing?”

I half-rolled my eyes, proud of the fact that I was actually standing, although my knees wanted to shake at the sound of my name on his lips. *Why was everything intensified?* My body was acting completely erratically at the moment. Things

were tingling that shouldn't have been tingling just by the mere tone of his voice.

“What do you mean what am I doing? You have eyes, don't you?”

A quiet chuckle came from him that somehow rippled over my skin. “I don't mean *what are you doing with your ear pressed against that door*—although, that is very odd. I mean...what are you doing *here*? At Noany Bay? In my frat house?”

“I go here.” My answer was clipped, and the only thing that met me on the other end was silence.

I couldn't hear a single thing going on through the thick door that my ear was currently pressed to, and I wished like hell I knew what Ryan was doing with that girl. Why were they being so quiet? Why weren't there kissing noises, at the very least? Was she already passed out? And why the hell couldn't I stop jerking my eyes to Cole's shadow?

“That's not true. You go to Stanford.”

“Not anymore.” My chest felt a little too tight as the silence grew heavier, so instead of allowing my guard to fall, I put it back up even higher. “Is that okay with you, Cole? I mean, I know your parents demanded I never speak to you again, but I'm not here for you.”

The air moved at my back, and I felt his body heat crowding me. My heart skipped. My breathing quickened. “Why are you here then?”

His cell phone light had gone dim, and I was glad. I tipped my chin over my shoulder, seeing his dark and looming shadow only a few feet away. “Like I said, to gain my dignity back.”

He took another step closer, and I froze at the tiny voice in the back of my head begging him to touch me. *What the hell was I thinking?!* “By listening to Ryan fuck someone? You are aware that you went into Ryan’s room, right? What? Did he tell you to meet him here? Or are you trying to catch him in the act with another girl? Are you two...*dating?*” More space was erased between us, and I felt his warm, seedy breath whisper over my neck. *This was high school all over again.* Dark, tight spaces with our heat mingling and hot touches before someone came and drew the line between us. “Did you two keep in touch, Mazey? You kept in touch with Ryan, but you wouldn’t even look me in the eye while moving your shit out of the servants’ house?”

The way his voice grew tense, as if he were angry with me, had me spinning around quickly. “You didn’t look at me either, Cole. Don’t you dare try to act like this is all on me.”

His loud swallow sounded out around us, and I felt the fat tears welling in the back of my eyes. *Why was I so upset?* He took one more step closer, and suddenly, the cell phone was between us, and our faces were illuminated with the glow. I was a second too late looking away. I knew he saw the hurt lingering. I didn’t have to peer into the mirror to my left, hanging crookedly over the pedestal sink, to see that my emotions were on my sleeve. “Did he hurt you, Mazey? Is he cheating on you? Are you two dating? Is that why you’re here?” I took a step back, and my back was fully pressed against the door now. He mumbled the next sentence out of his mouth, *“How did I not know this?”*

“We’re not dating.”

“So he’s just stringing you along, then? Don’t tell me that’s why you transferred here. For *him?*”

The disgust was clear, and I felt the same. Technically, I did transfer here because of Ryan. But it wasn't for the reason Cole thought.

Seconds passed, and I could hear Ryan and the girl now. There were soft moans from both parties, and I was suddenly glad that Cole had pulled me into the bathroom, because it was evident that Ryan wasn't taking advantage of her. She was enjoying herself as much as he was. *Maybe I was wrong to come here.*

I told Cole that I had come back here to get my dignity back, but that wasn't the whole truth. The last two years had weighed on me in ways that I couldn't even verbalize. I tried to move on. I tried to ignore it. But the wonder turned to guilt, and I needed to see it for myself. I needed to know if Ryan was that same boy he was in high school, taking advantage of girls who dismissed him.

Running from that night didn't help me in the end. Running from Cole didn't either. So, I was back. I was back to amend regrets and guilt. And maybe to find out the truth.

If Ryan was the same boy he was to me, years later, he'd be sorry. I'd take him down, and it had nothing to do with revenge. Standing in front of Cole, though? It was drudging up feelings of despair that I didn't dive into often.

Cole. It was Cole. Standing in front of me. All flesh and blood. As perfect as he was before. But now, there was a hint of man to him. A range of protectiveness was evident in his posture, even in the dark. Angry but protective, and not at all the jealous possessiveness that I used to witness when someone would pay me too much attention in the halls of Wellington Prep.

But even so, I couldn't help the next words that came out of my mouth. "Stringing me along like you did, you mean? Why was it okay for you to do that but not for Ryan?" Not that Ryan and I were in that situation, but it was a valid thought.

"It wasn't okay, Mazey." My entire body tensed. My brows crowded, and when his hand landed on my chin, a trapped breath left me. "And it isn't okay for him to do it either."

Shock cut me in half, and my lips parted with the sincerity in his voice. *Did that night change him too?* Does he remember anything? I wanted to ask him in the worst way. I wanted to know. I wanted inside his head. What did he think of me now?

His thumb brushed over my bottom lip, and I shuddered. His hand on my chin gripped me a little tighter, and it was as if he was welcoming me home. *I missed him. Shit, I really did.* It was as if no time had passed at all. "Are you afraid of me, Maze?" His loud swallow intensified every one of my senses. "Do you still think it was me?"

His hand was around my heart, squeezing it until I submitted. "I—"

Suddenly, Cole's hand left my chin, and his palm collided with mine. Butterflies fluttered for a mere second before excitement turned to shock. The door to the bathroom suddenly opened, and then Cole and I were somehow smooshed together in the tiny shower. My back was to his front, and the second his arm snaked around my waist, I clenched my thighs.

Too close. We were too close.

Ryan's voice made my lip curl. "I'm getting a condom. Stay just like that, spread wide open, *baby.*"

“Now, what?” Cole’s whisper was so low I had to strain my ear even though his mouth moved right over it.

A few drawers were shut, and then there was the sound of a condom being ripped open, and the bed creaked next. I furrowed my brow, trying to ignore the electricity flooding my veins with the boy who I had given my heart to at my back, and peeked my head outside the thin shower curtain.

“*Shit,*” I whispered, pulling back. A yelp got stuck in my throat when my butt brushed over Cole’s middle.

“What?” he whispered, leaning into my space. Cole’s broad chest lingered over my shoulder as his large hand pulled back the curtain, peering out into the now only half-dark bathroom. “Ah, nice. Now we’re stuck here, unless you want to make yourself known to Ryan. There has to be a reason you’re tucked inside his bathroom right now, yeah?”

Ryan couldn’t know I was here. *Did he even remember me? Did he remember what he did?*

“We will stay here until they’re finished and passed out. Then, we’ll leave through Kellan’s door.”

Never mind the fact that I knew whose room was whose and *why* I knew. I had bigger things to worry about than Cole wondering if I was a stalker or not. I was stuck inside a tiny shower with the only person who I’d ever had true, deep, soul-shattering feelings for, and this moment, right here, told me that I wasn’t over him. Everything I felt while looking up into his window, seeing him stare back down at me from his bedroom, wasn’t just a teenage crush.

CHAPTER THREE

COLE

I ALMOST PINCHED MYSELF, wondering if I was in some lucid dream with Mazey at my front, rubbing her jean-clad ass over my dick. Not only was my heart sputtering in my chest as if it had never beat in the first place, but now heat was scorching my groin, and my fingers were twitching to touch her hot skin again.

Why was she here? Why Ryan? I wanted nothing more than to slam the door, flick on the lights, pin her to the farthest wall, and ask her every question that had burned at the back of my throat since the second she had stepped out of that bedroom two years ago.

Instead, I settled for the one question that I knew was the most important—at least at the given moment. “Maze,” I whispered again, trying to lean even further onto the tiled shower wall behind my back. “Why are you here?”

Skin against skin was like a goddamn orchestra, getting louder and sloppier with each second that passed. Mazey and I were stuck in the middle of a porno, and I was trying like hell to focus on the question I’d asked and nothing else.

Not the perfect curve of her cheek as she glanced back at me. Not the way her hair smelled of all things *her*, which I would recognize in the next life, no matter what. My heart was thumping, and my chest was getting tighter. I was in a frenzy. My thoughts were like bullets being fired from my brain. My blood was rushing. My nerve endings were fried. Everything was a tailspin.

My eyes had adjusted to the dark now, and the second her mouth parted to answer my question, she rushed at me in fear because the other door to the bathroom creaked open.

Her waist collided with my hands, and her middle pushed up against my front. I hoped like hell she couldn't tell I was sporting a half-boner just from touching her a second ago, because I was. And I hated that I was, because that meant I wasn't in control, and I had worked really fucking hard in the last two years to be in control, especially at parties.

The light flicked on, and my eyes widened as I realized I was so tall that my head was half peeking over the shower curtain. *Fuck*. My hands stayed glued to Mazey's waist as I dropped down low, hiding from Kellan. I didn't care if he saw me, but the stiffening of Mazey's spine a few minutes ago when I suggested we just leave and let Ryan know we were in his bathroom told me she wasn't all for that idea, which was interesting.

“Shut the fucking light off, Kellan!” Ryan's strained voice boomed as the slaps against skin continued. Didn't even stop fucking to yell at Kellan. *Rock on, bro*.

“How about you shut your fucking door? And did you take the last condom?!” Kellan was standing right outside of the shower curtain, and I peeked up and saw Mazey staring down at me with her baby blues, and my fingers clenched tighter on

her waist. I didn't even need to be holding onto her, but I couldn't seem to peel myself away.

I dropped my head down briefly and realized something in an instant.

My mouth.

Her pussy.

I blinked once. Then twice. Then a third time, staring at the zipper on her jeans. *Jesus Christ.* There was shuffling in the bathroom, likely Kellan looking for a condom, but I couldn't pay attention. I didn't even fear the fact that he could rip open this curtain and see me and Mazey in here. All I could pay attention to was how one pad of my finger was dipped underneath her shirt, *just barely*, but enough to feel her soft, warm skin against mine. My tongue darted out to wet my bottom lip as I trailed my gaze up to the button of her jeans, and then to the hem of her shirt, and then to her round breasts that seemed fuller than they were as teenagers. And right when I landed on her face, my stomach tightened.

The pink of her bottom lip had disappeared inside her mouth as her bright-white teeth sunk into the fullness of it. There was no longer shock or fear inside her pretty blue eyes, or even a longing or sadness that I briefly saw with my cell phone light no more than ten minutes ago. I saw something I hadn't seen in years.

My head tilted, my eyes slanted. *She still feels it.*

Two years ago, I didn't realize what I'd had right in front of me. I should have fucking worshiped her.

My mouth opened, and chills coated me, but a second later, the chills turned to burns. Her chest rocked rapidly, and a shaky breath flew from her lips, traveling down to land on

mine. She and I were used to playing the cat-and-mouse game back when we were teenagers, but I could sense something different about her.

Something strong and inviting...and downright fucking sexy.

The lights suddenly shut off, and a door was slammed. Sex was still in the air, and I had no idea how Ryan was still fucking that girl, but he was. Mazey shifted, just barely, but if I leaned forward, just an inch, my mouth would be on her jeans.

I forgot about the past.

I forgot about the threats.

And the crushing way she had looked at me in that bedroom.

Where was the guilt that I carried around on my back like a ton of bricks? *Gone.*

My fingers dug into her sides, and the softest, barely there noise left her mouth.

“You’re different,” I whispered, still aware that I was crouched down near her warmth for unnecessary reasons.

“So are you,” she whispered back.

I swallowed roughly. *Fuck, I missed her voice.*

My heart screamed with delicious agony as my fingers dipped even further underneath her shirt. “I’ve missed you, Maze.” I inhaled and dropped my head, pressing my forehead to the button on her jeans. I nearly snagged it with my teeth to pop it open. I gave absolutely zero fucks that we were in Kellan and Ryan’s shower. I didn’t care much about our past either. Didn’t care at all.

Mazey's hand dug into my hair, and I froze. "Then prove it, Cole."

CHAPTER FOUR

MAZEY

WHAT WAS I DOING? What in the ever-loving fuck was I doing? I wanted to slap myself, but I was stuck. My feet were cemented to the shower floor, and I knew that something had just shifted between us. I told him to *prove it*. Prove what? Prove that he and I still had that world-rocking, undeniable chemistry that everyone around us could *always* feel—even my parents. The number of times they found me in my room, looking out my window at Cole as he peered down at me, was downright embarrassing.

Our friends knew it, even if we never openly talked or touched in front of them. It was the way we snagged each other's attention. It was the way the burning jealousy of another guy looking in my direction made Cole lose his shit on multiple occasions, or the way I would excuse myself if I saw a girl on his lap.

We were so young and stupid.

Or maybe I was the stupid one.

After all, I somehow had allowed myself to become so distracted two years ago, at my first ever *popular* party, that I

got date-raped...or something. I couldn't even remember all of what happened, only that Ryan gave me a drink, and the next day, I woke up throbbing in places I shouldn't have been with marks that told a silent truth.

And now, I was standing here in his shower, *two years later*, nearly combusting with sexual tension that I hadn't felt so strongly in my life before. Not even with Stanford's quarterback that I'd allowed myself to divulge in for one night—and one night only.

Ironically, that was what broke the camel's back and had me transferring here. Sex with a quarterback will do that to you, I guess.

“Maze,” Cole's whisper was like a lightning strike coming down from above and electrocuting me right there. “Don't say things you don't mean.”

“I'm not the one who lies, Cole. That's you.”

“I've never lied to you.”

My hand in his hair tightened, and it felt like I was pretending to be someone I wasn't, but with Cole, things were different. He always gave me a boost of confidence with just one fleeting glance my way. As if his eyes kissed my soul and brought me to life. “But you've never really told me the truth either. Have you?”

“Do you want the truth right now?” I peered down at him, feeling his soft whisper float over the thin sliver of skin on my belly. He was still crouched down, and I liked seeing him like that. I liked seeing him kneeling below me, looking up at me as if he realized that he had fucked up two years ago. It wasn't all his fault, though. I was the one that hid in the shadows. He was just the one who never shined the light.

Cole's nose gracefully brushed over the very top of my jeans, and my eyes widened. Heat rushed to my middle, and my lip was seconds from bleeding from the tight grip I had on it. "I can give you the truth, Maze. I'm just not sure you want it." He inhaled deeply, and I held my breath along with him. "Answer my question from earlier."

My eyes pelted back and forth as I tried to focus on my breathing instead of the sounds coming from both bedrooms. They were making this much, much hotter than it needed to be, even if some of those sounds belonged to the one guy who had started the catapult years prior.

"Are you afraid of me, Mazey? Do you still think it was me?"

I swallowed back the thundering feelings climbing from my chest and answered simply, "I never thought it was you." He inhaled again, and this time, his hot breath washed over my belly, and he rested his forehead against me in what felt like relief. "But my question for you is, why did you let everyone believe it was? You showed them the very worst part of you, and we both know that it wasn't even real."

He pulled back slightly, and I was cursing the darkness. What I would have given to see the storm brew in his luscious green eyes. But being in the dark was likely the only reason we were able to talk about these things. If it were light, I probably would have darted away at the first sign of life.

I'd planned this talk over and over again in my head, picturing us arguing and turning our backs on one another. We were always so good at arguing in the plain of day and then silently speaking with rushed touches in the dead of night. Cole and I were impossible, but for a single, fleeting moment, standing this close to him with his rough hands gracing my

hips, things seemed far from impossible—even if there was a gap of time between us full of heavy baggage.

My body still reacted to Cole's, and that shouldn't have surprised me as much as it did.

“Guilt, Mazey. *Guilt.*”

Guilt? My fingers tugged the strands of his hair, and I tipped his head up even if I couldn't fully make eye contact with him. “You weren't at fault for that night, Cole. I know it wasn't you who did it.”

The gritty, nearly silent growl vibrated my skin. “It *was* my fault.” Cole rose to his feet, and for a brief second, I was second-guessing everything I'd uncovered over the last two years. *Did he know something?* Fear should have caused me to take a step back, but this was Cole. *My Cole.* No one knew him like I did. Except, did I even know him anymore?

My heart thumped as his steady hands wrapped around my cheeks. His forehead came down to rest on mine, and I felt that same connection that I'd always felt with him. It was there, and it was alive and breathing just as much as we were. “I wasn't there when you needed me, Mazey. Someone hurt you, and I was too fucked up to even stop it. I was so fucking angry that night, because people were talking about how hot you looked in that outfit that I drowned myself in booze so I didn't do something I regretted. And then everything that came after...”

The hurt flashed within. My bruised heart ached.

“And now you're standing here in front of me, and I'm still not the man I should be when it comes to you, because all I fucking want to do is plunge my tongue inside your pretty

little mouth and erase the past, and we both know that isn't possible."

His words were dirty, and the room was an inferno. My breathing was loud, and I knew he could hear it. He had to have known that I was bundled just as tightly as he was in the moment. All I wanted to do was feel his hands on my body and for him to silence my thoughts of the past that I wasn't quite over yet.

His mouth was *right* over mine. His lips nearly brushed against mine when he repeated his question, "I want to know why you're here, Mazey."

"Why does it matter?" My voice was shaky, and my stomach was coiled with nerves and something so needy that I physically ached.

"*Why does it matter?!*" Cole's hands dropped to my waist, and he pulled me into his chest so swiftly that I blew out a breath. "It matters because I've spent two years trying to get over you and move on, and one run-in from you landed us to *this* right here." He half-chuckled, sarcastically. "I don't even deserve to fucking touch you, and yet, I can't push you away."

"Then don't." We both paused at my words. *It hurt to miss him as much as I did.*

His front pressed up against my middle, and I bit the inside of my cheek to keep myself level. What were we doing? What was *I* doing? "You don't mean that."

I stayed silent because there was a battle going on inside my head, and I didn't know which way I was supposed to go. Or what I was supposed to feel.

My body wanted his hands on me. My body wanted him to unravel the tightly tied bundle that was currently making me

burn on the inside. But I knew, deep down, that this was crossing a line that had been drawn by the past.

Hope crashed and fell when Cole's hands left my waist and landed on my shoulders. He turned me around quickly and put my back to him.

Did he really just shut me out? Shouldn't that be what I want? After everything?

"Like I said, you don't mean that."

My teeth gritted, and we were falling into our old habits. Fighting each other, and flinging out insults, and deciding what the other was thinking. "I mean everything I say, Cole. I'm not that same girl you were used to back in high school. I make my own decisions, and I don't let people sway them. I also don't allow people to put words in my mouth or hide me until it's convenient for them."

His sarcastic, half-whisper laugh irked me, and he likely knew that. "Then, why are you hiding in Ryan's bathroom?"

My mouth shut with his question, and my back straightened. I said nothing, and neither did he. The sounds outside the bedrooms were quieting down now, at least from Ryan's side, and it reminded me that there was something much bigger going on right now other than the way my body wanted to lean into him despite the huge chunk of time that sat like a giant boulder between us. We were both so different, yet still the same. I swallowed back a lump when the word *home* came to mind. Cole always felt *so* right to me. No one else had ever measured up. Not once. Every guy who had taken up space in my head didn't even come close to Cole. *And I hated that.*

The longer Cole and I stayed in that tiny shower, the more I felt myself winding up. There was so much I wanted to say to him, so many feelings coiling and blending that I felt like I was seconds from exploding. They were hot but intimate, deep but painful. My stomach dropped when I truly let his words sink in. *Guilt*. He felt guilty about that night. What would he say if he knew that I was in Ryan's shower because I knew that *he* was the one who had started it all? What would he do?

"It wasn't your fault, Cole. None of it was." My whisper was so low I wasn't even sure he'd heard me, but he did. I knew he did, because the air turned thick as he reached out and placed his steady hands on my hips again.

"Part of it was, and you won't change my mind, Maze."

Slowly, I turned around in his grasp, too worked up over my emotions to remember that we were stuck in a bathroom because both bedrooms were being occupied for sex at a frat party. My heart skipped with every breath I took, and without even seeing Cole's chiseled features, I knew that he'd been hurt over what had happened. My hand gingerly reached up and landed on the side of his cheek. My chin tipped as I tried to make out his eyes through the bleak darkness. The scruff of his facial hair felt rough against my palm, and it reminded me that he'd grown up since we last touched. "It wasn't," I whispered as he pulled me in close. "Kate told me that you changed after that night, and I'm beginning to see that she was right."

Cole's hand left my waist, and he gripped my wrist tightly. "Why are you here, Maze?"

Our bodies were flush now, and everything came to life. A rush of familiar thrill raced to my lips. "Not for this; I can assure you of that."

The husk in his tone licked over parts of me that shouldn't have been alive. "For what?"

And that was when I did it. My toes curled upward, pushing me closer to his mouth, and the very second our lips collided, I felt myself click back into place. My stomach tightened, trapping the heated butterflies inside as his mouth opened, allowing me to take control. The hand he had on my waist wrapped around my lower back, and he pulled me closer into his hard body, chasing my tongue with his. We kissed and sucked, and it was as if no time had passed at all. We were still wrapped up in one another, too blinded by what we felt to stop. I didn't want to stop. I didn't want to think about how my heart would feel after this, or how this would screw up my entire plan of coming to Noany Bay. All I cared about was how Cole broke away and hastily turned our bodies around so I was the one with my back pressed against the tiled wall, and he was the one in front.

"I'm too selfish to stop," he said over my mouth before tugging on my lip with his teeth. I burned and felt a strong need that I had only ever felt thinking of him. My leg was pulled up and wrapped around his hip, and he pushed into me, and it was so delicious that I grew delirious. *Cole was talented.* Even in high school, he knew what he was doing. But now? As a man who seemed so much more mature and aware of himself? I wasn't even sure how to take it all in.

"You tore me to pieces that day, Maze, and I don't even think I realized how badly it hurt until now."

Just as Cole dove back in to eat the words on my tongue, the light of the bathroom flicked on, and we both stiffened.

Oh, my God.

Reality shifted back into place, and the look on Cole's face had to have mirrored mine: we were shocked and completely caught up in whatever had just occurred between us. Our eyes clashed, and my heart thrashed. An entire silent conversation happened in a matter of three seconds. The look on his tight features said, *This conversation isn't over*. But I was thinking the opposite.

CHAPTER FIVE

COLE

I'D NEEDED to get out of this situation with Mazey since the very second I followed her up here. I knew it as I trailed after her hurried steps over to the stairs. It felt like I was letting quicksand fall through my fingers as I watched her disappear to the top floor where the bedrooms were. A lethal dose of jealousy flooded my veins, knowing that no one went upstairs during a frat party unless they were about to get screwed. Bathrooms were off limits, and bedrooms, too, unless you had a one-way ticket to getting fucked.

So, I followed her, knowing I should have turned around.

I stopped right outside Ryan's room after she disappeared inside and heard him at my back with another girl. Thinking fast on my feet, I went through Kellan's bedroom and went into their shared bathroom to snag her, and now we were suddenly stuck in their shower, and I still didn't have an answer as to why she was here. Instead, I had a heart that was beating too fast and a dick that was too fucking hard. *I should have left her the fuck alone.*

“Get down!” she hissed at me, allowing our intimate moment to pass.

My eye twitched, and I knew that if we stayed in this godforsaken bathroom with the lights down low and her body pressed to mine, I would do something that I shouldn't. So, instead of doing what she'd asked, I slowly turned around in the shower, pushed the curtain back slightly and stepped out onto the tiled floor.

Kellan turned around in a flash, he used the condom in his hand as he went to throw it in the trash. “What the fuck are you doing, Johnson? *Jesus!*”

The curtain was in its rightful place so that Mazey was still half-hidden, and I hoped that she could read my play as I called it, like she always did in the past. After all, this wasn't the first time one of us had to sneak away while the other distracted someone—*someone* usually being my parents or hers. “I came in here to use the pisser. Reese was in mine, and downstairs had a line. Then, all of a sudden, Ryan's fucking someone, and you are, too. So I just stayed in here until you both got the job done. Took you long enough. What? Got a little whiskey dick?”

Kellan dropped the cum-filled condom in the trash and scoffed. “I like to take my time. Unlike you. You fuck just to get off and then push the girl out the door. I fuck because I like the build-up, plus I like to please them so well that they keep coming back.”

Annoyance filtered in with him talking about me fucking girls with Mazey in the room. As if it would really do more harm to our already strained...whatever the fuck this was. *What was with her kissing me?* Mazey had taken control, and I absolutely ate it up. If Kellan hadn't walked in here, I would

have had my face in her pussy at this very second, and I'd pretend like I regretted it when it was all said and done, because I knew that there was so much more to Mazey and me than a heated fuck, but I wouldn't regret it even in the slightest.

I rolled my eyes at Kellan and let out a faint chuckle. He stared at me questioningly before flicking his eyes to the shower. "Why were you in the shower? Didn't you hear me come in a few minutes ago?"

Shit.

I shrugged. "Maybe I was beating my dick from the constant sound of fucking going on."

Kellan threw his head back and laughed loudly. "Bro, you need to get fucking laid." His laughing stopped, and his face told me that he was about to say something stupid. "Want my sloppy seconds? I can guarantee that she'll let us play with her a little longer."

Fucking shit.

It wasn't uncommon for other guys in the house to share girls or to have threesomes, but with the fact that Mazey was listening to this conversation, and that I was going to have to go along with it so she could sneak out, it felt like there was a knife cutting up my insides.

But why did it matter? It wasn't like Mazey had come here for me. It wasn't like there could ever be anything between us.

I'd told her how guilty I felt. Now maybe I could move the fuck on.

"A threesome?" I tsked my tongue. "You know I don't like to share."

Kellan shrugged again. “Offer’s there. Take it or leave it. I’m going back in.”

I shot my eyes over my shoulder, knowing that Mazey needed to get out of this bathroom. I still had no fucking clue what she was doing in Ryan’s room, but if she didn’t get out now, it would be hours until Ryan or Kellan left again. There were only two ways out of this bathroom, and she needed to go through one of their rooms to get back into the hall.

“Ask if she’s cool with it, and I’ll be in.”

A sick part of me wanted to know if Mazey was burning with jealousy from hearing me say that. If the situation were reversed, I would go absolutely ballistic and rip the shower curtain in half and fling her over my shoulder so no one else could touch her, which told me just how out of control I still was when it came to her. *Two years of creating a version of myself that didn’t lose control, only for one touch from Mazey to destroy it all in the end.*

“She’ll be down. Hurry up.”

Kellan flicked the lights off, and I dropped my head, hearing the shower curtain rustle. *Here we go.*

“Come here,” I demanded. Annoyance over the situation made my voice rattle with irritation.

“Excuse me?” she half-hissed. “I will not *come here.*” Her mocking my tone made my lip twitch for a millisecond.

I turned around quickly, making out her body in the dark bathroom. She had no time to back away as I stormed her, wrapped my hands around her waist, and breathed into her space. “Stay glued to my front. We’ll walk to Kellan’s bedroom door, I’ll make an excuse that I’m going to get a

condom out of my room, and you can dip out. Unless you'd like to stay in this bathroom and listen to sex all night?"

Her heat intensified along my front. "I would rather lick that toilet seat than listen to you have a threesome. Let's go."

Her whisper was filled with rage, and my lips nearly curled at the sound of it. *Was she jealous?* I hoped she was jealous, and that was because I would never truly be a good guy.

I followed her quiet steps, letting her fester in her jealousy for a bit longer. As soon as we were outside Kellan's door, I'd tell her that I had no intention of getting my rocks off tonight, not unless it was with her.

Wait. Don't fucking say that. I'd leave the last part out.

Mazey, in all her 5'2" glory, stood a few feet away from the door of the bathroom, waiting for me. I wrapped my hands around her waist, and her back stiffened. "Stay pressed against me," I whispered into her ear, and I swore I felt her tremble against my palms. Heat sliced right down to my groin.

"She's down, Cole," Kellan's voice was muffled as he sucked on something near his bed. "And I'm winding her up for you right now, isn't that right, you little slut?"

I rolled my eyes. *Jesus, Kellan.* Mazey stiffened in my arms for a second, and it killed me not to know why. Did she like dirty talk? Was she... Did she... I couldn't even *think* the words. Even picturing someone else fucking her made me tighten up with rage.

A harsh swallow worked itself down my throat as I called over my shoulder, still walking Mazey and myself to his door. "I'm going to get a condom out of my room. Keep her warm for me, bro."

“I’m warm alright,” the girl said, voice full of lazy ecstasy.

My teeth clenched, and my temples burned. Mazey huffed, and my fingers dug into her hips. The second my hand landed on the doorknob, I threw the door open and pushed us both into the hallway, slamming it behind me. My hand was on hers next, and I rushed us down the hall until she stopped us right outside my door. Her hand was gone, and mine was instantly cold from losing her touch.

The tiniest crease etched itself in between her perfectly arched eyebrows. The pink on her lips had my mouth drying up, and when I snagged my eyes with her baby blues, I felt my heart spark. “You’re disgusting,” she spat, crossing her arms and taking a hefty step away from me.

My head tilted as I leaned my shoulder on my closed door. The hallway smelled of sweat, half-covered in men’s cologne, and I almost leaned forward so I could smell her again. “Jealous, Maze?”

I knew I was toying with her, and like always, I was pushing all of her buttons. Some habits just couldn’t die off. I loved her reactions. Always had. Always will.

“Two years ago, I would have been,” she said, taking another step away. My chest grew tight as I kept my feet planted. “There is no denying that.”

I swallowed. “And now?”

Her pretty, bow-shaped mouth scowled even tighter. “I lied earlier,” she admitted. “You haven’t changed at all.” She rolled her eyes. “Goodbye, Cole.”

“Wait.” I rushed forward, snagging her arm in my tight grip. Her fierce blue eyes were watery, and I instantly hated

myself. We were not on joking terms. What the fuck was I doing? “I’m not going back to that room. I was just trying to get a reaction out of you. I’m sorry.”

She paused for a quick second, bouncing her blue eyes in between mine. Hope filled me up, and I was about to pull her into my room so we could talk, with a safe distance in between us, with the light bright over our heads, but her arm was snatched away, and she backed up. “Do whatever you want, Cole. Like I said, I didn’t come back here for you.”

It was as if my world was beginning to crumble again, just like it did that morning, two years ago. “Why did you come here?” I called out, staring at her tight hips swaying as she continued to rush down the hall. The farther away she got, the worse I felt. I was sick with desperation. *Why was she here?*

“Mazey!” I called out once more, clenching my fists together so tightly they ached.

No matter the urgency that I *knew* she heard in my voice, she still didn’t turn around.

CHAPTER SIX

MAZEY

THE CLOCK WAS TICKING. One minute turned to twenty, and twenty turned to an hour, and I still hadn't heard a single word the professor had said.

My back rested rigidly along the hard plastic of the chair, tucked all the way in the corner of the lecture hall so no one would notice me. My blue ball cap was pulled down to cover most of my hair with my blonde locks spilling out over my shoulders. My t-shirt was nothing remarkable as I paired it with my comfiest pair of jeans, and that was because I didn't want him to notice me.

Him, as in Ryan.

Cole's face flashed within, and my heart lurched for a split second before I shook away the thought. I rubbed my finger over my lips, as if I could still feel his along mine, and cursed under my breath.

Focus. Focus on why you're here.

Ryan sat in the middle of the lecture hall with a few of his friends, none of which I recognized, *thank God*. They weren't

from Wellington Prep, from what I could remember, so that meant they wouldn't recognize me.

Not that anyone would really notice me anyway. I wasn't super popular back in high school or what they called a hopper. Hoppers were girls who hopped into the football players' beds after a game.

"Are you going to write any of this down, Mazey?" I jumped in my seat, my thoughts of Wellington Prep and that stupid freaking boy that wasn't so much a boy anymore suddenly vanishing. Sutton was staring at me with one raised eyebrow. "Do you have a crush on that guy or something?"

I sat up a little taller, moving my attention back to our professor who looked as if he was seconds from sleeping on the podium. "What guy?"

"Ryan."

My pulse raced. "How do you know Ryan?"

Sutton leaned in closer to me, her brown braid tickling my arm. "Everyone knows Ryan. He's, like, the star of the football team. He even won some kind of award last year."

Great.

"Oh."

Sutton pulled back and placed her eyes toward the front of the lecture hall. "So, do you?"

"Do I what?" My nerves were spilling over just with the fact that we were talking about Ryan. *She doesn't know, Maze. Calm down.*

"Do you have a crush on him? Is that who you disappeared with on Friday?"

“No!” My voice was louder than I meant, and my face burned. The professor cleared his throat, and I instantly dropped my gaze. “Is he looking over here?”

“The professor? Not anymore.”

No. I didn't give two shits about the professor. “Ryan. Did Ryan look over here?”

Sutton half-laughed. “No, I don't think so. Jeez. You're acting like a freshman in high school who has a crush on the senior football player.” Her shoulder collided with mine, and I bopped a little in my seat. “Don't be so nervous. Boys like confident girls, not girls who are afraid to talk to them.” She paused, waiting a few seconds. “Although, I heard from a few other girls that Ryan likes to get kinky in bed and likes to...”

My eyes bounced all over my blank piece of paper. “Likes to what?”

The professor's voice boomed as he ended class, yelling out what our assignment was for the week and some threat about how hard his grading system was, when Sutton finished her statement. “I heard he likes to role play a little.”

An unease settled deep in my core along with curiosity. “Role play?”

Sutton and I both began packing our things, and I kept my back turned toward the rest of the students piling out the door. “Yeah. Well, I don't know exactly, but I heard he likes them to struggle. He tied up one of my friends a while back. She said it was kind of weird, but he fucked her hard and made her come several times, so...” She shrugged. “Whatever.”

Vomit burned the back of my throat. *Did he tie me up that night?*

“Hey, I’ll meet up with you later, okay? I gotta ask the professor something.”

“Okay, girl. See you in our room in a few.”

I forced out a smile as Sutton and her two messy braids disappeared through the door before taking several deep breaths with my back pressed against the lecture hall wall. The professor left through the back door with his briefcase and coffee glued to his hand, and I allowed the sweat to pour down my back.

What was I doing here? I shouldn’t have come here. I should have just stuck with my therapist, continued on with my self-defense training, and stayed where I had friends who knew nothing about my past.

“Mazey.” I gasped as I pushed off the back wall of the lecture hall and locked onto Cole’s conflicted face. “What are you doing?”

My mouth went dry. I was in shock. Even if Cole had been tucked away in the back of my mind every single second of every day since Friday, I still wasn’t prepared to see him again. Our last encounter made me feel uneasy but also left me hungry. It was kind of like going on a binge with your friends for homecoming week. You knew the extra shot of tequila was going to make you feel sick, yet you did it anyway. Although, I never let myself get too drunk. I wouldn’t make that mistake again. Hence, why I was labeled as *The Lightweight* last year.

“Maze...?” Cole’s bright eyes slanted as he took a step toward me. *Could he see my panic?* I internally shook myself.

“What?” I asked, straightening my back. *God, he looked good.* He was so tall and handsome. His warm chestnut hair was styled with the mere intention of making me want to run

my hands through the thick ends. The green color of his eyes set me a degree warmer, and the white t-shirt he was wearing hugged his ripped biceps.

Wait. I took a hefty step forward out of shock, and my hands somehow landed on his strong forearm. “When did you get a tattoo?” Cole swallowed roughly as other students began filling in the lecture hall. He allowed me to angle his arm so I could take a peek of the ink displayed on the inside of his bicep, hanging out just below the hem of his shirt. The words were in cursive, and they spelled: *paenitet*.

“*Paenitet?*” I whispered, running my finger over the word. Something hot raced down to my fingertips when our skin touched, and the second I saw goosebumps raise on Cole’s arms, I let my arm fall quickly.

“Yes.” His answer was husky, and when he cleared his throat, he reached up and grabbed the strap of his backpack. “It means regret, or I’m sorry, in Latin.”

My breaths were shaky, and I was blaming it on the fact that I had slipped into a panic from talking about Ryan with Sutton, instead of the fact that I was getting all worked up over Cole.

“I gotta go,” I said quickly, trying to dash out of the lecture hall. I didn’t have anywhere to be. I was through with classes for the day, and unless I wanted to go stalk Ryan to make sure he wasn’t randomly date-raping girls in the middle of a Tuesday, I was going right back to my dorm room.

“Mazey, wait.” Cole was at my back within a flash, and my heart jumped to my throat. His hand was around my arm, and he pulled me back so fast my hat blew off my head. We both bent down to grab it, our hands brushing along one another. He was quicker than me, though, and he snatched my

ball cap up in a single whoosh. When I stood up, I peered around to see if anyone I knew was looking.

“Give it back,” I snapped, dashing forward to grab it.

Cole held it up high, just enough that I would have to jump up if I wanted to grab it. There was a glint of the old Cole lurking within the twinkle of his eye, and part of me liked it. “Not so fast, *Amaze*.”

Amaze. My mouth parted at the sound of my nickname floating off his lips. He was the only person who called me that, and I was the only one who knew it.

“Cole,” I said, crossing my arms over my t-shirt. “What are you? Five? Give me back my freaking hat.”

My cheeks heated when Cole’s lips curved into that delicious bad-boy grin that used to make my knees weak. “Are you ever going to answer my question?”

I huffed in annoyance, feigning confusion. “What question?”

His eyebrow raised, and his grin turned into a scowl. “Why are you here? At my school...?”

The way he trailed off at the end and looked away for a split second told me he wanted to say something else. It was as if he didn’t finish his sentence.

“None of your business,” I answered, glancing around us to see if anyone was watching. Cole did the same, and that was when I jumped up and snatched my hat out of his large grasp.

“Ha!” I yelled, forgetting that there was a huge pile of shit between us that still wasn’t sorted and probably would never be. I slipped into my old self for a second, flirting with the devil and playing his wicked little games. The number of times

he would steal my books, or my backpack, only to make me chase after him and end up behind the pool house or the large oak tree in his yard so he could kiss me senseless...

Cole's grin reappeared as he glanced down at me, and *there he was*. Cole. The boy who only ever showed his heart to me. The boy who only smiled with a light in his eye when we were alone. The boy who warmed me up on the inside with one single touch.

"Hmm," he hummed. "You're quicker nowadays. You used to chase me."

My tongue darted out to wet my lips as I adjusted the hat on my head. "I've always been quick, Cole. I just liked the chase."

And with that, I turned around and walked in the opposite direction of Cole, gripping my backpack straps tightly so I wouldn't buckle at the knees.

CHAPTER SEVEN

COLE

I DIDN'T LIKE IT. I didn't fucking like the way she looked tonight. Beautiful blonde hair falling flawlessly down her back. Tight jeans with holes in the knees that you could only buy at a fashion-savvy store paired with a tiny, blue—*school pride, baby*—crop-top shirt that showed off her flat belly. She looked fucking good. She looked hot and confident, and if she was trying to hide from Ryan, this was *not* the way to do it. Everyone was staring at her.

Granted, most of the girls were dressed the same, but there was a light around Mazey. There always had been. Back in high school, she was like this sweet little angel that no one dared to touch—*because of me*—but wanted to in every single way. They all wanted a taste of sweet, little Mazey, Cole's little plaything that lived in his backyard.

Only now, she wasn't my little plaything, and she didn't live in my backyard.

I shifted my gaze away from Mazey and her small group of friends as they chatted away in the kitchen and searched for Ryan.

I'd been watching him closely and counting the number of girls he'd brought into the house since last week. It was physically making me ill with the fact that I still had no clue why Mazey was here at Noany Bay and what it had to do with Ryan. I'd even searched on IG, and I *hated* social media.

Ryan had his back turned to the girls in the kitchen, too busy watching the less-than-entertaining strip beer pong game that was occurring in the living room. The couches were pushed to the far wall, and a long table with cups filled the middle. Clothing was spewed around everywhere, and girls with way too much tequila in their systems were laughing about nothing in their bras and panties.

I cracked my neck, pushing myself farther into the wall, and found Mazey again. She hadn't looked at me once, and it was driving me absolutely nuts. What was worse was that she was looking at Ryan every few seconds, it seemed. *What the fuck?*

My heart perked when I saw her whisper something into her friend's ear and shake her head no. She began making her way through the party, and it felt as if my soul was chasing after hers. I stood straight and made my way toward her like I was a stalker, not making eye contact with a single person because I was too afraid I'd lose sight of her.

"Mazey," I called out, passing by the beer pong table.

Her back stiffened, and my eyes immediately traveled down to her tight ass. A breath got lodged in my throat, but I quickly recovered as her short strides picked up, and she darted up the stairs.

Some chick near the bathroom called out, "Hey! You're not allowed up there unless you're with one of the guys. Get in the line like the rest of us."

Mazey's blue eyes widened as attention flung to her, and I was quick to save the day. "She's with me," I answered coolly, staring the girl dead in the face. *Call out Mazey again. I dare you.*

And there I went, acting all caveman when it came to her.

The girl flicked her hair over her shoulder and turned away from my scowl, and as soon as I rounded the steps, I found Mazey running up them.

"Mazey, wait up!" I shouted.

One guess as to if she waited for me. I sighed with irritation and ran after her. She stopped in the middle of the hallway as soon as I stepped onto the landing, and she flung around so quickly her light hair whizzed across her face. "Why did you say my name?!"

I didn't even blink as she charged toward me. "Because I wanted you to stop, obviously."

Her little button nose scrunched, and her hands flew to her hips. "You yelled my name *right* behind Ryan!"

My brows creased, and I felt blood rush to a place that only anger festered in. "And why does that matter, Mazey?"

Her hands flew up quickly, and her cheeks heated. "It's none of your business, Cole! You can't just act all protective of me now, after two years of not speaking!"

I took a step closer and lowered my voice. "I've always been protective of you, Mazey."

"No! No, you haven't."

My eyes fell to her trembling lip, and panic rushed through me. *No*. I was quick to say, "You're right," before grabbing onto her hand and pulling her to my bedroom. "I didn't protect

you when it was the most important.” Her palm shook against mine, and I couldn’t breathe.

The second we were inside my bedroom, I shut the door and flipped on the light. Mazey’s hand left mine, and her moment of weakness was gone. Her mighty little chin was pulled up high, and the tears in her eyes were long gone. “That wasn’t what I was referring to.” Her thick lashes fluttered as she glanced at my bed. “I just meant that you were jealous back in high school. You weren’t protective. You were selfish. You didn’t want anyone else to touch me.”

I stepped forward. “You’re right.” My lungs ached to breathe her in, but I tried my hardest to keep a safe distance. “I was a coward. Too afraid to stand up to my parents. Too afraid to disappoint them with my decision to be with someone they didn’t approve of, and too afraid of rejection to try it anyway, knowing your parents hated me.”

Her loud breaths full of hurt—or maybe something else—echoed around my room. Each step I took toward her, she would take one back. “Mazey,” I said, my voice straining. “Please tell me why you’re here. Why are you fucking hiding from a guy like Ryan?”

“Cole...” My name was like an earthquake coming from her. I wasn’t certain, but she looked like she was trembling.

Seconds turned to minutes as she stood beside my bed, staring down at the bundled-up covers. *What the fuck was going on?* My patience was running thin, and the longer I thought about Ryan, the more frustrated I grew. Was I jealous? Concerned? Both? “Mazey. Tell me what is going on.”

Her baby blues sliced to mine, and her arms crossed over her chest. “No. It doesn’t concern you, Cole. And I can’t trust you.”

Ouch. I knew I deserved it, but fuck if that didn't burn. My head tilted, and my lips flattened. "I've changed. I'm not the same stupid fuck I was in high school."

Another shaky sigh left her pretty lips, and I wanted nothing more than to swallow it whole. She wasn't budging, though. I could tell she was set in her decision. She had that *I'm determined* face on that I'd seen a time or two.

"I could just go ask him."

Her eyes grew wide. "Cole, no!"

The panic I heard did not sit well with me, and that was how I knew I wasn't necessarily jealous of her and Ryan any longer, but more so etched with worry. "Mazey, did he hurt you?"

She bounced her gaze all over the room, nibbling on her lip, and that was when I froze. I felt my heart pick up pace. The thumping of my pulse pounded against my skin. *No. Fuck no.* "I hope to God that what I'm thinking right now isn't true."

Mazey didn't even bother to look at me, and my head screamed with memories of that night. Memories that I tried like hell to sort through since the moment she left.

I leveled my voice, but I was anything *but* leveled. "Was it him?"

The hole that Mazey was burning into my floor with her gaze ceased to exist as her fearful eyes climbed to mine. *He was dead.*

Something that had been dormant for so fucking long woke right up. Hot, angry blood rushed to my fingers. "I will fucking kill him." My back was turned to her as I tried to reel

in my choppy breaths. My teeth sunk into my closed fist as I stood, shaking inside my bedroom. *Control. Control. Control.*

“Goddamnit, tell me it’s not true.” I spun around quickly, and the truth on her face was plain as day.

“Cole.” Her hands went up with caution as she moved a tiny step toward me. “Don’t do something stupid, please.”

My head shook, and all I could think about was her face that morning when her gaze met mine from across the room. And the marks on her legs. The sickening feeling that burrowed deep into my core, which had yet to leave, even now, standing here looking at her.

“Was it him?” My temples were throbbing, and the room began to close in.

“Cole.”

“Answer me!” I shouted, and her eyes shut the second my voice grew loud.

Fuck. Control, Cole. Fucking get it together.

My chest was climbing in speed, and I needed something to snap me the fuck out of it.

“Mazey!” I yelled again, my fists tight balls beside my legs.

A sweet, shaky breath climbed from her lungs. “Yes.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

MAZEY

SHIT. Shit. Shit. This was bad. This was *so* bad. I'd seen that look before. The look of thunderous, burning-red rage on Cole's face. He had been labeled the bad boy of Wellington Prep well before the rumors of us started. Before he took the blame for something he didn't do. He had been known to have a temper, and most of the time, it had to do with me and the fact that his parents were like looming nightmares constantly towering over him.

He always used to tell me that I was the only one who was able to get inside his head to make him calm down. But standing here right now, with his rage bubbling over because of Ryan, I wasn't sure that I still had that skill.

"I'm going to strangle him."

The steady tone of his voice was laced with venom, and I saw my plans crash and burn right there in between us.

"You can't!" I shouted, jumping toward him. His breathing was fast, and the way his chest climbed looked as if he spent hours in the gym perfecting those pec muscles. "You cannot do anything, Cole!"

“I can, and I fucking will, Mazey!” he shouted before turning around and putting his back to me again. His shoulders were bunched up, and part of me wanted to wrap my arms around his middle to help him breathe. “You have to be fucking kidding me.” Cole whirled around again, and I almost yelped. “Tell me everything right now.”

“Cole,” I said with urgency. “Calm down.”

“Calm the fuck down?” He looked at me as if I had three heads. “He fucking touched you and...and...” He gasped for air. “And ruined us!”

I shook my head quickly. “He did not ruin us.” *That was only partly true.* “We ruined us.” I sighed and glanced away for a second. “There wasn’t even an us, Cole.”

His scoff rippled off his lips. “If you believe that, then you’re lying to yourself.” He stepped in close, but this time, I didn’t step away. “There will always be an us.”

The tiniest little butterfly escaped from my belly and flew up to my heart.

His hand was around my cheek, and although it was a tight hold, it didn’t hurt. Cole’s deep eyes burned with intensity, and his jaw clenched as his chest danced against mine. “I’m going to rip his fucking hands from his arms for touching you.”

One second, he was there, and the next, he was gone.

I was shocked at first. Shocked that his touch was so prominent that it took my breath away. Shocked that his threat of hurting Ryan did nothing but make me want to kiss him. But the shock wore off quickly as his door clamored open so quickly it hit the backside of his wall, making a book tumble off the nearby shelf to the floor.

He was halfway down the hall when I regained my ability to move again.

“Cole!” I shouted, running after him. “Please stop.”

The glare over his shoulder *almost* made me pause, but if I didn’t fix this now, everything would be ruined. “Go back to my room and stay there.”

“Stop it, Cole!” I gritted through clenched teeth. My hand clamped onto his forearm right before he descended down the stairs. “Do you want to go to jail?”

He scoffed again, his handsome face scrunching with irritation. “I don’t give a fuck. I’d go to hell for you, Maze.”

My heart slipped.

“Cole, please don’t do this. I’m begging you.”

His fingers landed on mine as he peeled them from his hard bicep. “No one fucking hurts you and gets away with it. Not even me.”

Ugh, Jesus! I thought fast on my feet, and before I could register what I was doing, I was placing my lips to his and sliding my tongue into his warm mouth. He stilled and gazed into my eyes as we were tongue-locked and frozen right there at the top of the stairs. Instead of saying anything or getting him to take a breath so I could explain things like I’d meant to do with this kiss, I deepened it and allowed myself to put a pause on the situation for a single second.

Kissing him felt like home. It was all things strong, and comforting, and enticing in one single swoosh.

My eyes shut when his hands landed on my hips, and I fell into him—and I didn’t just mean physically. My heart climbed right out of my chest.

My back was pressed against the wall as his mouth moved in hungry strokes. My hands traveled to his chiseled cheeks as he moved his face against mine, and I couldn't stop. I couldn't stop myself. It was like I came to Noany Bay for him, and I couldn't remember anything beyond that.

“Fuck, Mazey. I know what you're doing,” he said in between the fluttering kisses against my neck.

I said nothing and pushed myself off the wall and pulled us toward his bedroom.

“Mazey, I'm not doing this with you so you can distract me from killing R—”

“Don't say his name. Not right now.”

The anger on Cole's face began melting away the second the words left my mouth, and as soon as his bedroom door shut, he spun me around and placed his hand at the small of my back as he pulled me into his chest. “I guess it still works, huh?”

“What?” The word was like a soft breath coming from my lips, and all I could do was stare at his. I wanted him to kiss me again. *I missed it.*

“You were the only one who could climb inside my head and calm me down.”

“Are you calm now?” I asked, feelings of hope crashing and falling as I knew I needed to step away and explain everything to him.

His grip on me tightened, and I was suddenly pressed harder into his front. “If I say yes, does that mean I have to let you go?”

Step away, Mazey. This is not why you're here. This is Cole...and... I gulped, all thoughts scattering as Cole's thumb began brushing over my bare skin. "Don't," I said, and his fingers stilled. I bit my lip. "I meant...don't let me go."

I watched as his pupils dilated, and the room suddenly grew hot. "Mazey..."

I pushed my mouth closer to his, knowing that I was going to regret this in the morning. "I've missed you, Cole. Even when I pretended I didn't." *What was I saying?!* My nostrils flared as I kept my tears at bay. Cole's eyes drove into mine, and I was drowning. I was drowning in his touch, his presence, his *smell*.

"And you have no fucking idea how much I've missed you." I felt his words. I felt the hurt and regret and anguish with every breath that lingered between us.

A gulp left my throat, and we both stood there for a few moments, unmoving. The thoughts of why we were even in his room in the first place had disappeared, and all I could think about was how being with Cole made my entire world spin. So, I did what I wanted to do and didn't think twice about it.

I kissed him.

And he kissed me back.

Emotions pulled from my soul and mingled with his, and the only time we parted lips was when he tore his shirt from his back and flung it to the ground. I ran my fingers over his bare skin, feeling it bubble beneath with goosebumps that blanketed mine as well. His hands dove underneath my shirt, and he pulled it up and over my head, glancing down at my bra before clenching his eyes and kissing me harder.

Cole pulled me over to his bed with the bundled-up covers without breaking away, and the second he sat us down, I straddled his lap. His head went to my chest, and he inhaled me like he wanted to stay there forever.

“We shouldn’t do this, Maze,” he whispered, and I froze. “Not under these circumstances. There’s too much shit between us, and I’m trying to do right by you—for the first fucking time in my life.”

A light laugh floated out of me as I ran my fingers down his bare chest. I nearly licked my lips. “It’s funny that you think I’m that same innocent girl I was back in high school, Cole.”

There was a cloud of jealousy that covered him with the small divot in between his eyebrows and the flicking of his jaw as he peered up at me. “What does that mean?” he asked, sliding his hand up my spine.

“It means I want you to touch me, and I’m not going to be shy about it, despite the ugly past that’s hanging over us.”

Cole’s eyes shut, and the intensity that burned within them moved to his fingers as he unhooked my bra and clamped onto the fabric with his teeth. He pulled the thin cotton away from my breasts and let the straps fall slowly down my arms as he watched with bated breath. “*Fuck me,*” he whispered, cupping me around the waist and putting his hot mouth on my nipple. I threw my head back, allowing the past to disappear and enjoying the moment with his hands on me, even though what I said was true: we had an ugly past. The only problem was that it didn’t seem to matter at the moment.

My panting filled the room, and Cole’s mouth moved to the other breast, and I was throbbing so hard that I wasn’t sure

if it was because it had been a few months since I'd had sex, or if it was simply because of *him*.

"Cole," I said, gripping his hair tightly.

"Say my name again." His teeth clamped down gently on my nipple, and I cried out. "I like hearing it on your lips."

"Cole," I repeated, not because he asked me to, but because I was a chaotic mess of want and need.

His mouth left me, and his eyes snagged with mine. "Fuck," he muttered, laying me on my back a half a second later. The button of my jeans was shoved through the hole as Cole pushed me further onto his bed. "I'm going to lose myself in you. Tell me to stop if you need me to, otherwise I'm going to fucking devour every inch of your skin, because goddamn, I feel starved without you."

A thrill raced down my body, and he caught my half-smile. "There's my girl," he whispered, pulling my jeans down my legs quickly. His face disappeared, and his warm breath was at my center next. I gasped, my back arching as his hand came down and covered my panties. "Goddamn, Mazey. It's better than I remember."

"Ah," I moaned as his mouth covered me through the thinness of my panties. "Cole."

"Keep saying my name like that, and I'll make you come harder and harder, Mazey."

When did he start the dirty talk?

My panties were off my legs with a single movement, and Cole's strong hands pushed my thighs up high. "Can I taste you?"

“You don’t have to ask me. I trust you, Cole. Always have.”

Wait, I did? Cole’s eyes shut, and his breathing stopped. When they opened up again, I swore I saw them glistening before he dipped his head down and made my world spin. His tongue ran over my seam, and my vision grew blurry. “So good,” he mumbled, his words vibrating over me and sending tingles down to my toes.

“Cole,” I said again, but this time, it was because he was bringing me to the edge. “It feels too good.”

He stopped moving his mouth for a single second to replace his tongue with a finger. My legs spread wider, and he stared down at me like he was drunk. “I need you,” he admitted, flicking his eyes to mine. I could see his hard pulse beating against the side of his flushed neck, and my back bowed as he curled his finger. “I might come just watching you. You’re...fuck.” He looked away.

“Fuck me, then,” I said, grabbing onto his hand that was pumping into me. We locked gazes, and my body heated even more.

His head shook back and forth, his sweaty hair flopping. “Who the hell are you?” he asked. “It’s like you’re you... but...”

“I told you I wasn’t that same innocent girl that you used to hide away in the pool house with, Cole.”

Cole pulled his finger out of me, and I whimpered. The devilish grin that I used to look for on a daily basis appeared, and I knew what he meant. It was like we were us...but we weren’t. My jaw dropped when he placed his finger inside his mouth and sucked on it, licking the very tip of it when he

pulled it back out. “I don’t know if I like that you aren’t my innocent Mazey girl anymore, but don’t worry, I’ll make you forget every other guy you’ve been with after this.”

I didn’t even have the guts to tell him that I already had.

CHAPTER NINE

COLE

SHE WOULD REGRET THIS. I knew it deep down that she was just as caught up in the moment as I was, but I couldn't stop. She knew what she was doing when she kissed me minutes ago, and fuck me, I knew it, too. But I let her do it, and I grew hungrier with each kiss she gave me. Mazey had always been my soft spot, the one constant I had in my life to calm me but excite me at the same time, and now that she was back, I was going to make damn sure I didn't fuck it up again.

My pants were halfway across the room, and Mazey watched with a flushed face as I pushed my boxers down my legs. I was already so fucking hard that it nearly hurt when I gripped myself. Her pretty blue eyes that didn't hold an ounce of innocence any longer widened, and her lip was captured between her white teeth.

“You look too fucking good lying in my bed naked, Maze.”

There was a slip of a smile before I crawled on top of her, condom in hand. I slipped it on quickly as she spread herself before reaching down and gripping me tightly. Heat rushed to

my groin, and I gritted my teeth, refraining from my usual go-to, which was to be in full control.

“You want to be in control?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. I didn’t allow myself to think about what had happened to her two years ago. Instead, I relished in this new, sexy-as-sin, confident girl that I didn’t know inside and out any longer.

“You’re probably the only guy I would ever let be in control, Cole. But yeah, I like to do things my way.”

My balls pulsed, and I had to look away from the hot glint in her eye. “And you’re probably the only girl I would ever let be in control, Mazey. So have at it.”

Her lips were wet and swollen as I sliced my gaze down to them. I had no idea who we were in this moment, but I loved every fucking second of it. I loved how Mazey sat up and crawled on top of me. I loved that her perfect little pussy was still wet from my mouth. And I loved how she gripped me tightly and positioned herself over my cock.

“Hands around my waist, Cole.”

The rebellious bad boy that I hadn’t been in years came to life with her demand. I didn’t like to take orders, and she knew that. “Pussy on my cock, then, *Maze.*” *Jesus, who were we right now?*

Her mouth parted, and I watched her tongue run over her teeth before she sank down onto me quickly. I gasped loudly, my face burrowing into her soft chest. “Fuck, Mazey. Is this what I’ve been missing out on for two fucking years?”

“Mmm,” she said, moving back and forth, chasing her own high as she built mine. We fucked fast and sloppy, our kisses hungry and fueled by two years of radio silence and a fuck-ton

of baggage that definitely hurt both of us more than we'd like to admit.

"I haven't been the same since you left," I whispered, biting her ear lobe as she moved faster.

She said nothing as her nipples tightened, and I could sense that she liked me talking to her while she rode me. My hands gripped her again, my fingers digging into her hips. I moved one over to her ass as she came up for a second and grabbed her so tightly she whimpered. "Yes," she moaned, crying out.

"You like that?" I huskily asked. *I did, too.* "What else does my little Mazey like?"

I reached my hand up and gripped her blonde locks, wrapping the soft strands around my hand. She cried out as I brought her mouth down to mine and swallowed each one of her moans. Her body quaked, her pussy sucking the life out of me, and that was when I squeezed my eyes shut, feeling her break and bend in every single way around my cock, bringing me to the edge right there with her.

It took entirely too long for our breathing to even out and for us to break apart. She lay on my chest for so long our sweat had long since dried. I eventually pulled out of her, keeping my lips shut because I wasn't man enough to say what I wanted to say, which was something that was buried so deep inside my chest that even *I* was afraid of it. I wrapped my blankets around her and left to go dispose of the condom, and by the time I came back, her eyes were shut, and her breathing was quiet.

Thoughts of Ryan and the past began to filter through as I lay beside her, watching her sweet, bow-like mouth part as her breathing slowed even further. I had no idea what this meant

or if it even meant as much to her as it did to me, but I had every intention of finding out, just like I had every intention of finding out what exactly happened that night two years ago and what she was planning on doing about it.

CHAPTER TEN

MAZEY

A PRETTY GLOW came through the window when my eyes began to flutter open. It wasn't bright enough to hurt my eyes, but bright enough to know that I wasn't in my room. It only took me .2 seconds for the memories of my night to come at me in crashing, thundering waves. *Cole*. Oh, shit. My cheeks flamed at the things I had said to him and the things that we did.

I wasn't a saint. I'd had sex, and I'd worked through the emotions of what had happened to me my senior year with the help of my cat-loving therapist, but I truly lost myself in Cole last night. *What did that mean?* Better yet, what did Cole think of me now? What was *he* thinking?

"Good morning." His morning voice was scratchy and all things man, which caused my belly to bottom out. I slowly peeked at him lying entirely too close to me. His chestnut hair laid over his forehead as he rested the side of his cheek on his hand nonchalantly. He was shirtless, and probably still naked. *Oh my God. I was naked!*

I restrained the urge to pull the covers up higher and kept the shock to a minimum on my face. It wasn't like I had been drunk last night—at least, not on alcohol. So, I remembered everything *very* clearly. I cleared my throat. “Um, hi.”

“Did you sleep good?”

Are we pretending that we aren't naked in his bed right now and that we didn't fuck like savages last night?

I rolled my lips together and stared at the ceiling. “Mhm.”

Silence stretched around us, and it was like a rope being pulled too tight. Pressure. There was pressure in my chest, and things wanted to climb out that I wasn't ready to say yet.

His voice startled me, and I jumped. “Why won't you look at me?”

My fingers played with the blanket edge as I *did* finally pull it up higher. “I...I don't know.”

“You don't know?” He paused and shifted a little on the bed. *Did he just get closer to me?* “Ah. You're regretting last night.”

My brows dipped. “No.”

“No?”

I swallowed and finally allowed myself to glance over at him. His vibrant eyes were bright and alive with the morning sun cascading through the window behind him. The shadows dipped over his strong muscles and every plane of his chest. He was a man now, strong and sturdy and more defined than I'd ever seen. “I don't regret it. But...” I shut my eyes so I couldn't see his face. “I know you have questions.”

“And you can give me the answers when you're ready.”

I opened my eyes and landed on the truth inside his. “It’s not that I’m not ready. I just don’t know if *you’re* ready. Last night...”

“I know.” He flopped onto his back and ran a feeble hand down the scruff on his cheek. “I’ve spent two years controlling my actions, and my anger, and all it took was for you to come into my sight again for me to lose my grip.” His head turned to mine in a sharp movement, and I stilled my breathing. “I’m sorry, Mazey. It’s just... Two years is a long time to have regret, and the first chance I got to save you...I jumped on it.”

“I don’t need saving, Cole. I’m not here to be saved.” I flopped onto my back, too, our hands brushing as mine came down beside his. “I’m not even here for revenge.”

“You’re not here for me, and you’re not here for revenge. Then, what are you here for?”

I inhaled a huge gulp of breath before letting it out. “I’m here to make sure Ryan isn’t continuing with his little games.”

Cole’s body heat kicked up a notch, and the covers moved as his breathing sky-rocketed. “So, he’s the one who did it? You remember?”

I shook my head, and I could tell that Cole was looking at me. My eyes shut as vulnerability reared its fragile head. “I didn’t remember anything at first. I just knew something had happened. I mean...” I swallowed and fought through the overbearing silence that seemed to grow heavier with Cole listening. “You were there. I’m sure you remember how confused I was that morning. And sick. I vomited in Kate’s car on the way home.

I didn’t allow myself to think about that night until everything with you and your parents went down. My parents

took one look at me and rushed me to the hospital. They confirmed that I'd been sexually assaulted and that I had GHB...the date-rape drug...in my system."

"And that was when everyone assumed it was me."

I turned toward him, and the anguish I saw hurt. My hand gripped his. "Not me, Cole. I knew you didn't do it."

A sarcastic laugh left his lips. "But I could have stopped it."

I gripped his hand harder. "Nothing was your fault. Stop thinking that, or it'll make me feel worse."

He said nothing, but he gave me a slight tip of his chin. The muscles along his temples knocked back and forth, but I turned my gaze away, digging into my own thoughts. "Anyway, after everything calmed down and we moved, I started therapy and had to relive that night until I could make sense of what had happened." My stomach felt uneasy as I continued on with my revelations. I hadn't told the whole story to anyone in so long, and the fact that it was Cole, and that Ryan was somewhere in this house, made my skin prickle.

"You were mad at me."

"That night?" I sighed. "Yes. I was. I was tired of being your secret and wanted you to lash out and storm across that party..." I stilled, closing down that conversation. "That isn't important. But yes, I was angry with you. So, I started to drink."

"I remember."

"I never took drinks from anyone I didn't trust, because I wasn't stupid. Except..."

Cole blew out a breath. "Ryan?"

“Yeah,” I answered. “He was the only person to give me a drink, and there are snippets I remember. Sounds of laughter, and kissing, and being dizzy. His voice. I remember his voice, and once I put two and two together that he had been the one to give me the drink, it wasn’t hard to make out the rest of the story.”

Cole’s finger started to move over my thumb, and it canceled out the cold feeling of disgust that I always seemed to feel when talking about Ryan or that night. It had been two years, and I’d come to terms with it, *but* in order to fully move on, I just had to know if he was still doing it. What if he was? What if he was hurting other girls like he hurt me?

“I could kill him right now.”

Cole’s skin was hot against mine, and I began rubbing my finger along his just like he was doing to me. “I’m not here for revenge, though. Not really. I just have to make sure he isn’t hurting other girls like he did to me.” I turned on my side, and Cole was staring at me. I wished I could hear his thoughts. I wanted to know what he was thinking, or what he’d do with the information I’d given him, or what this even meant for us.

Cole’s other hand came up, and I paused at the sight of his fingers shaking. His thumb brushed gently over my lip. “I want to help you.”

“Wh...what?”

“Let me help you, Mazey. If it takes catching him in that act, then we’ll do that. If it takes interviewing every fucking girl at the school, then so be it. If it takes me torturing him until he admits his wrongdoing and dragging him to the fucking police, I will do it.”

I half-laughed. “I already tried to catch him, and we see how that worked out.”

“That’s what you were doing in his room? Trying to catch him raping someone?”

I looked away as chills covered my skin. “Yeah, and I know. It’s a stupid plan.”

“We will come up with a better plan, then.”

I sighed, hating what I was about to say. “You can’t help me, Cole.”

“Why’s that?”

Our gazes crashed. “Because!” my voice raised. “You’re...” My mouth clamped shut.

“I’m what? Do you not trust me? I won’t kill him—*yet*. Not unless you want me to.”

I half-smiled. “Stop it. I just mean... You’re...you’re a distraction to me. There. I said it. Everything between us is just...a lot.”

“What if I promise to keep my hands off of you and to keep this...completely platonic...until we can deal with whatever this is? We focus on Ryan, you let me help you catch him and burn him to the fucking ground, and then we will deal with us.”

“Us?” I said.

He gave me a look that made me burn. “Yes. *Us*. Because there is an us, Mazey.”

I said nothing because I knew it was a terrible idea. When his hands wrapped around my face and he brought his forehead to mine, my heart shattered but somehow pieced

back together in the same second. *Why did I still feel this way for him?* “I couldn’t save you two years ago, and I’ve been beating myself up since. I regret every single thing. Every time I hid you away. Every time I did something to make you jealous. Every time I broke someone’s nose for looking at you. And most of all, not being there when you needed me the most.” My nostrils flared with unshed emotion, and my eyes filled just as quickly as his did. “Please. I may need this more than you do.”

I bit down on my lip, and his eyes zeroed in on it. The second it plopped from my teeth, I rushed out, “Fine.” I glanced away because there was a hidden part of me that felt whole with him on my side. I never meant to fill him in on everything. I hadn’t told anyone of my plan—not even Kate. Yet, two years later, here I was...sharing my secrets with the boy who held my heart and was stupid enough to break it.

“Fine?” The hope in his tone had me rolling over to hide my smile.

“Yes, you can...help me. But I swear to God, Cole, if you fuck this up for me, you won’t just be hurting me. You’ll potentially be hurting other girls.”

I knew he was sitting up by how the bed had dipped, but I kept my bare back to him. “Let me prove to you that I’ve changed, Maze. I’m on your side. *Always.*”

I straightened my shoulders. “Good. Now close your eyes so I can get dressed, and then we need to talk about some ground rules to keep this plan from crashing.”

The sound of his chuckle hit my ears, and I climbed out of bed quickly, dashing for my clothes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

COLE

I PEEKED. I had one eye open as she pulled her jeans on, her bare back begging for my tongue to run down her spine. The slight curve of her breast bounced just enough to give me a hard-on as she pulled her shirt on. *Ground rules, my ass.*

“Cole!”

I shut my eyes quickly and failed at keeping my mouth even. “I couldn’t help it.”

Mazey sighed, and it was full of fake irritation. “Ground rules!”

“Right, right. No touching you. No flirting. We’re partners in crime, friends even, but nothing else.” I paused for dramatic effect. “*Yet.*”

I caught her small smile and beamed on the inside. I wasn’t sure how I went two years without her in my life, but I wasn’t sure I’d survive another two without her. This was going to take a lot of self-restraint on my end. I *lived* in a fucking house with the guy who hurt her. She’d had bruises on her legs that day. Make-up smeared. Blonde hair a wild mess.

The look of pure devastation on her face that morning had haunted me from the very second I locked onto her blue eyes. I wasn't sure how I wasn't going to kill him with a fucking butterknife in the morning, but for her, I'd do anything.

I'd been practicing self-control for two years. I'd been leveling out my anger, centralizing my temper and impulsiveness before losing my shit, and I was proud of it. But knowing what he did to her...

“Cole?”

I snapped my gaze up. “Huh? Oh, right.” The covers fell to my lap, and Mazey's eyes went right to my dick. I had to physically bite my tongue so I didn't say something that would make most teenage boys snicker. “Time to close your eyes, yeah?”

Heat splashed over Mazey's cheeks as she spun around, trying to play off her slip up. I chuckled under my breath while I got dressed, and a half-second later, we were walking out the door and heading to my car.

“Do you think everyone is still asleep?” There was a slight hitch to Mazey's voice, and it hit me square in the chest.

“You mean Ryan?” I nodded over to his room. “The door is closed. He's probably still asleep.”

Her breath filled the stairway as we climbed down the stairs. “Okay, good. I don't want him to know I'm here.”

I said nothing as we walked through the trashed house with the beer-pong table still placed in the middle of the living room and articles of clothing scattered all over the floor. If Coach saw the house right now, he'd have a fucking cow. He knew we partied, but he wasn't happy about it. Our first big game was coming up, and he preached that we needed to be

tucked away in our beds by 9pm every night so we could get a full night of sleep before practicing and conditioning. No one ever listened, though.

“My car’s parked in the back. Let’s go through the kitchen door.”

Mazey’s gaze traveled around the mess before nodding and following me. There was some clanking and sizzling coming from the kitchen, and I assumed it was an underclassman who had the task of making breakfast this morning with his attempt at scoring a bedroom in our house.

“What’s for brea—”

My words cut off as my back went ramrod straight. *Shit.* Ryan turned around as he stood at the stove, a spatula in hand. “Huh?”

Mazey stopped right beside me, and I felt the breath leave her lungs. I stood frozen in my spot with angry blood rushing through my veins like Niagara Falls. *Breathe, Cole. Fucking breathe.*

“Oh, who’s this?” Ryan’s flirty gaze landed on Mazey, and my fists ached. “Did Cole *actually* let a girl in his room?” He looked back at me, and the room began to darken. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

Wait, does he not recognize her?

My tone was leveled, although I was anything but. “Some girls are worth it,” I answered coolly, wanting to rip his fucking head off. Not only did he sexually assault her, but he didn’t even remember?

Ryan stood back against the stove, shirtless, looking pompous as hell. The spatula dripped with bacon grease as the pieces of meat sizzled in the pan, and Mazey stayed silent. I

was too afraid to see the expression on her face, because if it showed fear or hurt, I was going to lunge at him. My feet shook against the floor, and I was pretty sure God had come down from Heaven and was holding me back with his own will.

Ryan hummed, “Hmm. Do I know you?”

No, you fucking asshole, you don't know her.

“She’s new,” I answered. My hand landed in Mazey’s as I pulled her through the kitchen. Just as I passed by Ryan, keeping her as far away as possible, I shot him a glare. “And she’s mine.”

Ryan smirked and threw his head back with laughter. “I haven’t seen that look in years, Cole. Don’t worry. I’ve got a long list of girls. I don’t need yours.”

And what about two years ago?

When the cool morning air hit my lungs and the door slammed behind my back, I took my hand from Mazey’s and stormed away. The side of the house was the first thing I landed on, and my fist clenched tightly before I wound my arm back and punched the shit out of it. *There.* I inhaled gulps of cool air, and the sweat along my forehead dried, and that was all the time I’d give myself. I walked back over the dewy grass and found Mazey leaning against my car—the same car she’d sat in many, many times in the past. I walked over to her quickly and stared down into her pretty blue eyes. *Vulnerable.* She was tough as nails now, confident in the bedroom, and demanded attention with her silent beauty, but I could see through her walls. “Are you okay?”

Her dainty chin dropped once in a nod. “I’m fine. Are you okay?”

I nodded, but my jaw clenched tightly. Mazey's eyes bounced between mine before she whispered, "You have changed. The old Cole would have punched him in three seconds flat." Her shaky hands landed on my red knuckles, a drop of blood covering the tip of her finger. "Thank you," she whispered.

I sniffed, rolling my lips together. *Fuck, I was still half angry that he had dismissed her. Did he really not remember her?* "Let's go before I turn around and kill him with my bare hands."

And with that, we climbed in my car and headed toward her dorm room.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MAZEY

“ARE you sure you don’t want to go out with me? There’s a party at the football house again. You seem to get lucky there, since you have disappeared there twice now and have *yet* to tell me who with.” Sutton gave me a quick look before glancing back in the mirror to finalize her outfit for the night.

“I told you, I can’t remember his name, and I’m sure,” I answered, lying back on my bed. “I have a paper due.”

Lies. I mean, I did have a paper due, but I wasn’t doing it. Instead, I was researching the statute of limitations on sexual assault, and how it differed in each state, and what that meant for me if Ryan admitted to what he’d done. It was making me nauseated.

“Okay, *fine*. Well, I’m not sure I’ll be back later tonight, but if I do, I’ll be quiet so I don’t wake you.” I glanced up at her from my computer. “Okay, well, be careful. Call me if you need me to come get you or something.”

She blew me a kiss and went to leave before I rushed out, “And don’t take drinks from anyone.” There was a burn in my chest, and I hated myself for saying it. I hated Ryan even more

for putting me in the position of feeling this way or feeling the need to give extra warnings to girls who likely knew better.

Sutton smiled with a half-roll of her eyes. “Thanks, *Mom*.” I glanced away as she opened the door but quickly peered back up when she squealed, “Oh! Jesus. What are you doing outside our room?” She turned back to me with her eyes full of dark make-up, giving me a strange look. “You don’t remember his name...?” Her face had, *You have some explaining to do*, written all over it. I peered around Sutton and froze.

“I’m here for Mazey.” Cole’s voice was warm and decadent, sultry even, and it rubbed every part of my being raw.

I had hardly seen him since last week. He had stayed true to his word. He’d been on his best behavior and only texted me to check in with how my *research* was going. And I made sure to look at Ryan’s face very closely each time I crossed paths with him, because I was certain that Cole would lash out, but I was proven wrong each time.

“Oh, hey,” I said, regaining my ability to speak. I pushed my laptop off my legs and climbed over the edge. Sutton stood back with her brows crowded.

“Um...okay,” she finally said to Cole, looking back and forth between us. Eventually, the crease between her eyebrows softened, and the tiniest smile fell to her lips. “I’ll make sure to stay out tonight.” She half-laughed, giving me an amused look.

I was quick to insert my refusal. “That’s not necessary. Cole is just here to help me research.” *There. That’s not a lie at all.*

Sutton’s head fell back with a light laugh. “*Right.*”

She was halfway out the door, and Cole had managed to make it all the way to my bed as I rushed over and called down the hall. “I’m serious, Sutton. And be careful!”

Her laugh echoed, and I slammed the door quickly and turned around, my eyes landing on Cole.

Jeez. Did he purposefully look that good just to taunt me? I sniffed the air. Why does he smell so freaking good?

“So, how’s the research going?” he asked, taking a seat on my bed and pulling my laptop over to his lap. He opened it and began scanning the screen as if this was somehow planned.

I crossed my arms over my loose t-shirt, remembering that I was in my pjs. “What are you doing here?”

Cole slowly turned his determined gaze from my computer and caught eyes with me. “I told you I was going to help you with this thing. Remember?” He shrugged, leaning back on my pillow. *Great, now it was going to smell like him.* “It’s the weekend. I was waiting for you to show up at the house, but...”

“But Ryan is out of town, yeah. That’s why I didn’t go.” *I sounded like a stalker.* “I only know because of Kate. She’s home, too.”

Cole tipped his head back. “Ah, and how is Kate?” His eyebrows rose. “Does she still hate my guts?”

I laughed, dropping my head. “She told me she was going to come here and rip your throat out if you even dared talk to me. No one was pleased that I was coming here.”

Cole said nothing, and when I looked up at him, he was staring at me with a tight jaw. “That’s fair and not at all surprising.”

My heart clanked, and something burned my insides. I flicked my gaze down to his tight black tee, landing on the ink that covered the inside of his bicep. I jumped in my spot when he spoke again.

“*Paenitet.*” The word flew effortlessly from his lips, and I zeroed in on them. “Regret.”

My teeth sunk into my lower lip as I glanced away. There was pain between us, so much left unsaid, and the room seemed to grow smaller with each silent second. Cole cleared his throat as he bent down and kicked his shoes off. I watched as he lazily leaned back on my bed again with his long legs stretched out in front of him. “I have something for you.”

“For me?” I asked, taking a tiny step toward him. *Do I sit on the bed beside him? Do we pretend we didn’t have sex the other night?* That was what I wanted, right? We were to strictly focus on this issue with Ryan and leave the other stuff buried. But that wasn’t what I wanted, standing here, looking at him on my bed, appearing so...collected, and strong, and capable. He had changed in tremendous ways, and there was a tiny thought in the back of my head that whispered, *Everything happens for a reason.* Although, if I could go back and do it all over again, I would have never gone to that party, and I would have never allowed this wedge to separate us.

Cole leaned to the side and pulled a piece of paper out of the back pocket of his jeans. He held the thin piece in between two fingers that I happened to know were very talen—*never mind*—and waited for me to come over to grab it.

“What is this?” I asked, unfolding it while he peered up at me.

“A list.”

I began reading its contents. There were several names on the list, one after another, all females. “What is this?”

Cole sighed and leaned farther on my bed. His jaw was cut to steel, and his lips moved so effortlessly that I began to sweat. “I gathered each girl’s name that I saw Ryan with over the last few months—that I could remember. I don’t often pay attention to him, but dudes talk in the locker room. I’ve also put a little check by the girls that haven’t come back to the house after being with him.” He shrugged. “I’m sure I’m missing a good bit, but it’s the best I could do. I thought that maybe we could talk with them...” He trailed off, and my heart beat harder and harder. *Did he really spend time doing this for me?* “Well, you should probably be the one to do it. It would be weird if I cornered them.” His light chuckle sparked my blood. “Anyway, talk with them. Maybe see if Ryan did to them what he did to you? It could be a start.”

I just stood there.

I just stood there with my mouth open and stared at him in awe.

“Mazey?” he asked, eyes bouncing back and forth between mine frantically. “Did you not want me to do that? I haven’t said anything to anyone.”

I finally let out a breath of air. “No, no.” My fingers clenched the paper. “I just...thank you. This is...so helpful.”

Cole’s head tilted, and his lip curved just barely. “You don’t have to thank me.”

I could kiss him right now.

Heat slithered up my chest and landed on my cheeks. There was a laptop in between us that held article after article of laws about sexual assault, the limitations, *so much shit*, and

I wanted to throw it across the room and crawl onto Cole's chest and become wrapped up in him. Because that was what happened last week. That was what happened inside Ryan's bathroom, too. Cole consumed me. Even more so now because he wasn't a teenage boy with anger issues who obeyed his parents even though they were callous, close-minded people. He was so much more. He was a man of good worth, and I was really, really proud of who he had become.

“Maze, why are you staring at me like that?”

A tiny hiccup left my chest. “Like what?”

His mouth parted, and I felt like we were on top of the sun. “Just...different.”

Tentatively, I took another tiny step toward him. The muscles along his temples flicked as he watched me. My hand landed on my laptop, and I shut it before shoving it off his lap. Both of our breathing had picked up in speed, and Cole's hands fell from his lap. I glanced down and had zero thoughts of what I'd said just one week prior—*ground rules*. There were no rules when it came to Cole Johnson. None at all.

“What are you doing?” His whisper was all the push I needed to climb on top of him and straddle his long legs. His hands instantly went to my waist, his thumbs dipping underneath my loose t-shirt and singeing my skin.

“I don't know,” I whispered back, leaning forward and hovering my lips above his. He smelled of cologne and mint. The loud gulp that came from his throat made me throb, which was ridiculous, but I couldn't seem to care.

One of Cole's hands left my waist, and he gently tugged on my hair tie holding my messy hair in place. The strands fell in luscious waves, cascading down, locking us in a small and

crowded space together. “I didn’t come here for this, Mazey. You know that, right?”

My finger traced all around his soft lips as heat flung to every inch of my skin. “I know—”

Cole suddenly pushed my lips onto his, his fingers tangling with my hair. His tongue dipped inside, and I let out a whimper so soft I wasn’t sure he heard it, but with the feverish way he was kissing me, I thought he did.

One hand clamped on my hip, the other woven into my hair. Faces pressed together and hearts complete. We kissed for what felt like an ever-lasting eternity of sensual peace. It was rough but slow. Possessive, almost. But in the most enticing way.

Cole’s lips stopped moving over mine for a second, and he swung his legs over the side of the bed, still holding me in place. He gently placed my feet back on the ground and stood up, peering down at me. For a second, I thought he may have been leaving, trying to stay true to his word and my request of no distractions and ground rules, but he fingered the edge of my t-shirt and pulled it slowly over my head.

He sucked in a breath as he realized I wasn’t wearing a bra, and I swallowed back the lust in my throat. Next, he dipped his fingers into my sleep shorts and bent slowly as he pulled them down my legs. I throbbed at my center, feeling everything curl and intensify as his breath hovered over me.

He gently lifted each of my feet, his hand caressing my calf as he allowed me to step out of my shorts and panties. When he stood back up, he undressed himself. His black t-shirt was over his head, his jeans unbuckled, and boxers gone. When his hands landed on the small of my back, our bodies collided, and our lips connected. He kissed me deeply, and that

was when I knew there was nothing more than *us* in this moment. I didn't know what it meant, but I didn't care.

My back was on my bed next, and Cole hovered over me with eyes full of so many things that were buried beneath his hard exterior. I shook my head and pressed my finger to lips before he slowly bent down and began placing kisses to my neck, my collarbone, my chest, and eventually, every inch of skin.

I was worked up, both emotionally and physically, so when he centered himself at my entrance and stayed locked with my stare, my eyes welled up. He knew. He could see right through me. He could see right through us. His forehead came down on mine as he entered me, and this was so much different than last week.

It wasn't hot and rushed.

It was slow and a desperate attempt at unbreaking what was left of us from two years prior.

"I have never felt this way," he breathed into my ear, working me slow and deep. My legs fell to the side, and one of his hands gripped onto mine and placed them above my head, burying our joined palms into my pillow. I gasped, grinding along with him. "Nothing has ever compared to what I feel for you. Even now. Two years later."

A moan escaped me as I clenched my eyes shut. His words, even if they weren't dirty, did things to me. Things that I had never experienced. The feeling of pleasure went way past the surface. Everything was intensified. We were in the middle of a burning room, lost, and with no need to find our direction.

“Eyes on me.” My eyes fluttered through the building in my core. I took one glance at his intense stare and moved to study his muscles that moved with fluidity and a precision that only he could master. “That’s it, Mazey. Look at *me*.”

Cole started to thrust slower, making me sweat and whimper. His fingers dug harder into mine, pressing my hand further into the bed.

“Cole,” I moaned.

“I love hearing my name on those sweet lips.” His hips pounded into me harder and faster, and my eyes started to flutter. “Eyes on *me*.”

The second I snagged his gaze, I felt myself tip over the edge. My mouth was suddenly captured with his, his tongue drinking me in as a shudder wracked all the way down to my toes.

“*Fuck*,” he said into my mouth, pulling out quickly and gripping himself hard as I lay there, with him spilling out all over my belly. My mouth parted as I watched the muscles along his forearm bounce with the movement and the way his strong, chiseled jaw towered over me with his head tipped backward.

Fuck was right.

When he finally looked back down at me, still holding himself, he shook his head. “I will take this visual to my fucking grave, Maze. You naked, flushed with heat, with my cum all over your body. *God damn*.”

I let out a breath and shook my head at his filthy mouth. “So much for ground rules.”

“I told you there was an us.” He bent down quickly and kissed me again, and suddenly, I was heating up again. “We

are what we are, babe. We've always been..."

"Different," I finished for him. *We were just...different.*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

COLE

IT WAS EVEN HARDER NOT to kill Ryan in his sleep after spending my time with Mazey. Not just because we'd been spending our evenings together in the back of my car, or her dorm room when her roommate was out, or after her class that caused me to be late to mine, but because I was slowly getting to know this new, even brighter version of her.

The last time I saw her, two years ago, she was broken. It was as if a rainy cloud had followed her every step until she and that brewing storm left my estate for good, and yet, I still never saw the sun again. Mazey lit me up inside. My insides sparked, my heart jolted, and the strangest bout of happiness settled deep within with her near.

She had always been my little ray of sunshine, and she was shining even brighter now, even when we were spending our "*free*" time talking about the fuck-boy that had the audacity to walk this earth.

We'd made next to zero progress with Ryan. Mazey had been reaching out to some of the girls on the list that I gathered for her, but most of them didn't want to talk the

second she brought up his name. “It’s understandable,” Mazey had said, but I could see the disappointment and defeat lingering.

It was obvious that Ryan was *still* up to his high school ways, though, which only made me watch him closer. There was a party tomorrow evening, the last one before the season started, and I was bound and determined to catch him in the act. I wasn’t sure what I’d do when I did, but I was certain I could get at least one hit in before Mazey told me to stop.

My phone dinged as I sat back on the couch at our house, watching Reese and a few other guys play Mario Kart on the big-screen TV. I leaned forward just a smidge, with my phone in hand, and saw Ryan in the kitchen, talking with a few guys. He caught me for a brief second, but I was quick to turn away. I was damn good at controlling my face despite the burning zip that punched me in the stomach.

MAZEY: Caroline agreed to talk with me! This is the first girl that hasn’t fled at the mention of Ryan’s name.

I GRINNED, picturing Mazey’s excitement, and texted back quickly.

ME: That’s great. What are you doing right now?

ONE OF THE underclassmen came in with a shit-ton of drinks and snacks in his hands. Reese paused the game and snapped his head over to the coffee table that was in a constant state of *sticky* due to spilled beer at parties.

“Fuck yeah, snack me up, bro.” The underclassman chuckled and threw a bag of chips at Reese who then ripped it open and ate the contents within one minute, followed by chugging an entire cup of soda. I leaned forward and grabbed one of the drinks and took a few hefty gulps before looking back at my phone for Mazey’s response.

MAZEY: You know I’m studying. Don’t even think about interrupting me.

ME: I want to take you on a date.

I SMILED AGAIN as I shut my phone. I’d been asking Mazey on a date every day since I’d stripped her bare in one of the abandoned classrooms after her class. I may or may not have coaxed her into agreeing by refusing to make her come until she said yes, which she did after three seconds. But after her body had calmed, she said she wanted to get things straightened out with the Ryan ordeal so she could hopefully move past it, and then we’d talk about *dating* and being seen around campus together.

I understood where she was coming from, but so far, Ryan hadn’t even acknowledged her. The fucker didn’t even recognize her the other day, which, to be honest, felt a little iffy to me. How could you not remember her?

My fingers clenched on my drink, and the cup started to crinkle. The underclassman peeked over at me with caution, and I loosened my grip, telling myself to calm the fuck down for Mazey’s sake.

I could knock him out right fucking now, and he'd have no idea. No, I'd want him to know why I was coming at him. I wanted to watch the anger turn to fear. I wanted him to admit his wrongdoing and then suffocate him with his desperate apologies. And then maybe break his fingers or something. Yeah, break what he used to touch her with.

Mazey texted back again after around fifteen minutes, and my breathing began to level. I felt calm almost instantly.

MAZEY: Cole...

I HUMMED OUT LOUD, smiling deviously to myself.

ME: You know I love it when you say my name. Say it again.

I ADJUSTED myself in my pants, knowing that my plan of toying with her backfired, and I ended up giving myself a boner. For some reason, I felt more relaxed than usual. Part of me forgot that Ryan was in the next room, until his voice hit my ears.

“You alright, Reese? You just crashed off the screen...” I turned my head at the sound of his voice and mumbled, “*Stop breathing my air.*”

Reese's controller fell as I peeled my attention away from Ryan and his triumphant face. *Why did he look so fucking smug?* I swallowed my thick spit, suddenly feeling off as Reese's head fell back like he'd fallen asleep.

“What the fuck...?” I said, but my voice wasn’t quite level. *Shit, what was wrong with me?* “Reese,” I said, standing up on wobbling feet. *Was I fucking drunk?*

“What’s the matter, Cole? Feeling a little off there, bud?”

Did he just call me *bud*? I turned my head, and something snapped on the inside. I tried lunging for Ryan, but I got tripped up and fell to my knees. *What the fuck?*

A pair of shoes fell into my line of vision, and if I weren’t so fucked up, I would have swept the person off their goddamn feet. “Hmm...” Ryan’s tone had my jaw clenching. “Now I guess you know what Mazey felt that one night, eh?”

Fuck.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MAZEY

MY PHONE DINGED AGAIN, and I didn't even attempt to hide my smile. Butterflies continued to flutter around my belly even with Cole all the way at his house instead of being trapped inside my dorm room.

Things between us had been totally unconventional, which fit us because our story was *anything* but. There were things holding me back from dropping that big *D* word—and no, I did not mean dick. I had no issues there when it came to him. I meant dating. Like, for starters, what about our families? What about his parents not approving of me at all? Or mine hating him? Or Kate? What was she going to say when I told her that Cole and I were making amends, and oh, I don't know, that his dick had been in me more times in the last few weeks than I'd ever had at Stanford?

I sighed, pushing my book off my lap. When I pulled open my phone, I was half disappointed that it wasn't Cole who had texted me back, but it was from a random number.

Can we talk now? About Ryan? I think I'm ready.

A second passed, and another text came through.

Oh, sorry. This is Caroline. I got a new number.

My fingers moved quickly over my screen as my heart beat harder.

Me: Absolutely. Tell me where and I can be right there. And everything can stay between us, if that's what you want. No pressure.

Caroline: 46296 West 1st St. I'm on my way.

I pulled up the address on my maps app and didn't recognize it. I nibbled on my lip for a second before getting up and grabbing my purse. I knew what it felt like to talk about something invasively personal to someone you didn't know. If this random address was where Caroline felt the most comfortable talking, then so be it. This wasn't about me any longer. This was about her and taking down the monster the school had put on a pedestal for his football achievements. *Typical.*

After following the directions on my phone for almost an hour, I pulled up to a place that made my stomach tighten. *Why here?* I looked out my windshield and both side windows. There wasn't a single car in the parking lot, and the sign that read *General Mercy Hospital* was half shattered and yellowed from the sun. The building—or should I say, *old hospital?*—looked to be abandoned. There were broken windows, and the two sliding doors that led into the main part of the building were open with caution tape half hanging as it flapped in the wind.

Call me overly cautious, but my nerves spiked as I stepped out of my car and shut the door. I swallowed, feeling completely uneasy but also desperate in the same breath. What if Caroline came here because it was the only place she could think to be truly alone? I mean, I would have at least picked a

quiet coffee shop or something instead of a random, empty hospital, but trauma and fear could make people do strange things. I gave her my word, and I was going to stick to it.

Except, I'd have 911 dialed on my phone... just in case.

I was likely being too vigilant, but after being caught in a shitty situation with a guy like Ryan, it made being careful worth it.

I sent Cole a quick text, telling him where I was and that I was meeting with Caroline, and then had 911 dialed on my phone before I started walking to the front doors.

Broken glass cracked beneath my shoes, and the dirt over the once shiny floor was slippery as I called out, "Caroline? I'm here."

My fingers fumbled as I sent her a quick text before bringing up 911 again and keeping my finger hovering over the *Call* button.

"Caroline?" I yelled once more, walking farther into the hospital. It didn't take me long to get to what appeared to be the lobby, and once I did, I froze.

"Mazey, Mazey, Mazey. Long time no see."

Shit.

My phone shook in my hand as I locked onto Ryan's pretentious posture and smug face smiling at me like a clown in a haunted house. Something twisted on the inside, and I fought the urge to run.

Ryan was blocking something with his wide stance. I could see a chair in between his legs, like he was guarding someone. *Oh my God, did he have Caroline?* What was this? Some horror film?

“So, you *do* remember me?” I asked, taking a step farther into the dirty lobby with scattered waiting chairs that I was pretty certain were now homes for rabid animals. My chin raised, and my shoulders straightened with my finger still hovering over the *Call* button.

Ryan threw his head back and laughed. *Why was he so sweaty?* There was a line of sweat that covered his gray t-shirt all the way from his neck to the bottom hem. His dark hair was wet around his face, and his eyes looked crazed. I’d seen him in his normal habitat, and right now, he looked so far from normal it was scary.

Then again, could you really be *normal* if you got off on date-raping girls?

He stepped forward, and I stepped back. “Of course I remember you. Did you and Cole seriously think that I didn’t know who you were? Jesus, you were the talk of senior year after you left.”

“You mean after you drugged and then sexually assaulted me?” Anger simmered, and my chest flared with heat.

He shrugged, looking half-pleased. “Semantics.”

“*Maze.*”

I gasped, my stomach crashing to the floor. I peered around Ryan’s body, and my fingers flew to my mouth. “Cole!” I began to run toward him but stopped dead in my tracks as Ryan covered him again. My finger pressed the *Call* button, and I placed my phone in my back pocket. *This wasn’t good. This wasn’t good at all.*

The slight visual that I saw of Cole was bad. He was soaked with blood, and his eyes were barely open. His voice didn’t sound right, either.

“What the hell did you do to him, Ryan?” I prayed like hell he couldn’t hear the operator talking on the other line, but hoped like hell they could hear us. Would they find us? Did we need an ambulance? The police?

Ryan laughed again, lazily putting his hands in his pockets. “I roofied him like I roofied you. Thought it was appropriate.”

My eyes burned. “Appropriate? What the hell is wrong with you?” I tried to see past him again. “Cole, are you okay?”

He didn’t answer me, and Ryan rolled his eyes. He turned around, putting his back to me, and slapped Cole so loud the noise echoed throughout the empty hospital. “Wake up.”

“Ryan.” I treaded slowly. “What are you doing? Why are we here?”

Cole began to stir, and as soon as Ryan stepped aside, our gazes caught. His eyes were glossy, and there was blood smeared on his face. I nearly doubled over when his face splintered through his next words. “I’m...so...rry, Maze. I ca...can’t fucking get up.”

Shit, he was tied up to a freaking wheelchair.

“Ryan, let Cole go. This is absolutely insane. Haven’t you done enough?”

Ryan sat down in one of the torn-up chairs and crossed his leg over the other, seemingly relaxed with the fact that he just drugged Cole and had brought us to a dilapidated building. There was a faint voice coming from my back pocket, so I took a step back from Ryan, hoping he didn’t hear it. *They probably thought I was pranking them.*

“Haven’t *I* done enough?” Ryan asked. “You two are the ones poking around in shit you have no business with.”

I swallowed past the dryness in my mouth. “You mean contacting all the girls you raped?”

“I didn’t rape all of them. Most were willing.”

Tears hit the backs of my eyes. I used to *hate* that I couldn’t remember what had happened, but standing here, hearing him talk like he was, made me thankful that I hardly had a recollection of the actual assault. I wasn’t sure I would be able to stand in front of him. “I wasn’t,” I said calmly. “I wasn’t willing, and you assaulted me. You left bruises on my body. You fucking date-raped me and then let Cole take the blame for it.”

“Mazey.” Cole’s mumble caught my ears, and I shifted my gaze to him.

Ryan snickered. “Go ahead, you won’t be able to get him untied.”

I rushed over, knowing damn well I would try. “Cole!” I yelled, bending down to get in his face.

His eyes were hardly focused as he tried to shake his head. He gulped loudly and let out a raspy noise. “I feel drunk.”

“I know,” I whispered, going behind the wheelchair to see how Ryan had tied him up. It was a big, thick rope with bands and bands of woven hemp wrapped around his sturdy wrists so tightly they were likely bleeding underneath. My shaky fingers fumbled with it as I pulled and tugged. I fell onto my butt at one point and fought the urge to pull my phone out and make sure 911 was still on the line, but I was too afraid that Ryan would see.

If he was capable of this, what else was he capable of? Would he lunge at me if he knew I was on the phone with 911? *Outsmart your attacker, and be patient.* I regained my ability

to focus and canceled out my panic as my former self-defense instructor's voice came through. My legs were still shaky when I stood up again, and Ryan's smile did nothing to fuel my strength.

"Cole has been beating himself up since that night. Did you know that?" Ryan leaned back farther into the torn seat, and I wished a rabid squirrel would climb out and bite his fucking head off. Ryan clicked his tongue, staring at Cole and me. "It was almost pitiful to see how fucked up he got over it. I think he actually thought *he* was the one that did it."

"Cole would never," I gritted. "He's much more of a man."

Ryan ignored me and continued on with his story. "Cole was a little bitch and left you in the shadows. You should be thanking me. Look at you two love birds now. Fucking in classrooms and shit."

My stomach churned. "Have you been spying on us?"

He laughed with a haughty tone. "It's only fair. You've been spying on me, too. Did you really think I didn't see your eyes following me around? God, you're so fucking dense."

Cole growled, and I bent down again, trying to untie him. *How the fuck was I going to get this undone?*

Ryan ignored the fact that I was tugging on the rope and gritting my teeth and started up again. "Do you want to know the story about that night? I mean, Cole has been feeling guilty for it, but for all the wrong reasons."

He was baiting me, and I took it. "What are you talking about?"

Ryan stood up, and the shuffling of his feet across the littered floor made my hands shake. "He's the whole reason we did it."

I paused my fingers, and I was pretty sure that Cole had stopped breathing. He was awake—fighting sleep, but he was awake. “*We?*” I asked, standing on wobbling legs.

“We wanted to fuck with him. He was always so secretive about you, and we all knew you two were fucking. You were the golden girl of that school, Mazey, and if Cole wasn’t man enough to claim you...we would.” He paused. “Well, *I* would.”

“Who?” Cole asked, trying to stay coherent. His eyes fluttered back and forth, and he slowly shook his head, tightening his jaw.

“It doesn’t matter. They left the room shortly after you walked in.”

When Cole walked in? Did he see it?

Ryan chuckled, and it rubbed me raw. “You were so fucked up. You didn’t even see Mazey lying on the bed. We were just trying to fuck with you, get you to admit that you and Mazey were together...get a rise out of you. But you stumbled right past us and ran face-first into the fucking wall.” He laughed harder. “It was actually hilarious. Then, you passed out, and Mazey was hardly awake, so we left the room disappointed we didn’t see you lose it.”

They left the room? “Then how did I get the bruises? Why did the doctor say I was sexually assaulted, Ryan?”

Ryan’s eyes flicked to mine, and he ran his gaze down my body slowly. Cole noticed, because he pulled on the rope for half a second before his arms went limp. “You already know the answer to that, Mazey.”

I half-laughed sarcastically, now baiting him. “So, what? You came back to that room and raped me while Cole was

passed out in the corner? Was I even awake?"

Silence filled the area, and all I could hear was the rush of blood in my ears. *He was sick.* My heart thumped, and my vision grew dark. I shut my eyes and placed my hands on Cole's shoulders and pretended that his palms were covering mine. *Breathe, Mazey. Breathe.*

"You were awake. You hardly fought me, which was kind of a letdown."

I wanted to lash out. I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs and kill him. But instead, I bent down so I could hide my expression and began trying to loosen the knot at Cole's hands. I wanted to leave. I didn't want to be near Ryan. Nothing mattered except getting far away from him.

"So...what?" Cole croaked, fingers twitching as I tried to untie him. "You...get off on raping girls? You like the power trip?" Cole grunted and shook his head roughly, likely trying to steady his voice. "That means you're a fucking psycho... and after I get out of here..." He cleared his throat and took a hefty breath. "I will come for you."

Ryan threw his head back and cackled like a suicide bomber. It was deranged, and he looked like a lunatic. "After you get out of here?" He held a finger up and disappeared into one of the rooms off to the side.

My heart leapt, and I hurriedly moved to the front of Cole and wrapped my hands around his bloody face. "Hey, hey," I said, shaking his eyes open. The green within them was too dark to be his. "I'm going to go find something to cut the rope. I'll be right back."

I heard Ryan shuffling around, so I ran down the hallway in the opposite direction. The hall grew darker and darker until

I got to the very end where there was a single, half-cracked window. I tucked away in the corner and pulled out my phone, seeing that the call had been disconnected. “Fuck!” Air filled my lungs, and I glanced around, trying to find something to cut Cole’s rope with. I dialed 911 again with my blood-caked fingers from Cole’s face and waited for them to pick up again.

“Glass,” I said, seeing the shards of glass on the ground. I bent down, scooped up a shard and began running back toward Ryan and Cole. There was a splashing noise the closer I got, and when my phone finally connected despite the one bar of service I had, I skidded to a complete stop as I watched Ryan throw a red gas can near Cole.

“This is 911, is this Mazey?”

How did they know my name?

The phone fell from my hand as I watched Ryan pull out a lighter from his back pocket. The smell of gasoline was suffocating, and Cole’s eyes found mine from across the lobby, and I panicked. “No!” I yelled, seconds from running over to him. *Oh my God!*

“Hello? Mazey? Are you still there? We have someone coming to you right now. We got disconnected earlier, but we’re back. What is going on?”

“Ryan! No!”

The flame was bright, and everything seemed to move in slow motion. The sick smile on Ryan’s face as he threw the lighter near Cole. The look of horror on Cole’s face as Ryan landed on me. Ryan’s fist as he stormed me and punched me right in the jaw. The only realization I had that it wasn’t all a bad dream was when my head hit the floor and pain cut me in half.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

COLE

VOMIT HIT the back of my throat as soon as I heard the thud of Mazey's head smack the hard floor. My wrists ached as I fought against the rope and whatever it was tied to and yelled until my voice grew hoarse. "Mazey!" I squeezed my eyes shut and breathed through my nose. Gasoline and the smell of rubber burning filled my nostrils, but I fought like hell to move past the haze in my brain to control the situation I was put in. *Fucking think!* "Mazey!" I yelled again.

"Sorry, but I can't risk you two ruining me." Ryan shrugged, truly looking remorseful, which just proved how fucking crazy he was. "I know it's wrong, Cole. I just can't help it."

"So what? On top of raping girls, you're going to burn us alive? Become a murderer?" I was pleased at how even my words came out, not as slurred as they were before. I could still feel the sludge of the drug in my veins, but maybe it was the fact that the room was literally growing in flames or that the girl I loved was lying unconscious *too* fucking close to the raging blaze that caused me to break out of it.

“I’m sorry, Johnson,” Ryan said once more before turning around and jogging the rest of the way out of the building. *What the fuck.*

“Mazey!” Panic started to fill my lungs, or maybe it was the smoke. *Shit, think.*

“Cole?” Her tiny voice croaked, and then her head full of blonde locks popped up past the line of fire. “Oh my God. Cole. I have to...” She stood up on legs that were unsteady.

“Mazey, get back!” I yelled, my wrists straining again. Nausea mixed with adrenaline filled me as I glared at her. “You’re going to fall right into the fire!”

Mazey spun in a circle. “Where is my phone?!” *Her phone?* “I called 911!”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her that there wasn’t time for that. “Mazey, look at me.” I swallowed the burn in my throat and righted my vision on her. She started coughing, covering her mouth with her dirty hands. There was a line of blood dribbling down the delicate side of her cheek, and it was like something out of a movie. She looked like a goddess, surrounded by fire with the look of pure determination covering her beautiful features. “Mazey, you have to go.”

The determination turned to confusion. “What? I have to get you out.” She began going in circles again. “How do I get to you?”

My head fell as something I could only describe as torture filled me. I was in the middle of a fire circle. Literally. Ryan had taken the gas and poured a circle around me. He didn’t want any chance of me escaping so I couldn’t spill his dirty little secrets. “You can’t, Maze. I need you to go.”

She coughed again, this time wheezing. I smelled the smoke, too. The black soot was filling my lungs, and I only hoped that it would take me down instead of the flames. *Fucking shit.* “I’m not leaving you, Cole!” Her words hit my ears, and there was a sob backing them.

“Mazey.” *Fuck, my head was swimming.* “Go.”

“No!” she yelled, frantically searching for something. “What do I do?!”

“You fucking leave!” I yelled, wanting to bang my fists into the ground. “You go right now. Do not let me die with even more regret! Please, go!”

My arms tugged on the rope, and something began snapping in the chair. Hope landed on my shoulders. Even though I was in a ring of fire, if I could just get out of the fucking chair, I could figure out how to get through it.

“Cole! I am not leaving you!”

Goddamnit, Mazey! My arms tugged again and again. I was weaker than usual, but Mazey’s coughs were the push I needed. Never mind Ryan and the fact that he was trying to kill us. He was about to succeed all to save himself.

Mazey began wheezing, and my head popped up as she collapsed to the ground. *Fucking fight through it, Cole!* I gritted my teeth, feeling even more adrenaline replace the blurred vision and chattering teeth, even though there were roaring flames surrounding me. I knew it was the drug he’d given me, but I was going to climb my way out of this for *her*.

“I’m coming, Mazey. Just keep breathing!”

I moved my arms again and again, coughing just as Mazey was. I pulled up and down until my muscles burned with fatigue, and a cold sweat started to form on my back. Hope

was slowly slipping away, and I could no longer see Mazey through the flames, and I would rather have died a thousand deaths than let her down again.

“Fuck!” I roared. My wrist bones were splintering with the force, but the second I heard a popping noise, I paused. I did it again and again and rocked in the wheelchair until the rope began sliding on whatever it was tied to. “Maze!” I yelled, smoke straining my vocals.

Just then, I felt the shift, and I knew the rope was free. My shoulders popped and cracked as I leaned forward and brought my arms up and over the back of the wheelchair, falling to my knees on the hot floor beneath me.

I hopped up on my feet, pulling back from the flames and growing smoke.

“Fuck! Think,” I wheezed, straining myself further. My wrists were still tied behind my back, but at least I was out of the wheelchair. The tingling in my legs didn’t go unnoticed as I spun around, trying to find a way out of the circle of flames that were growing higher with each second. Things were snapping and popping, and when I leaned up, I saw Mazey’s lifeless form on the ground in between the ring of fire and a layer of smoke.

There was a slight ringing in my ears, and my vision crowded with black as I rushed over to the wheelchair and stood behind it. I wasn’t sure if it would work, but it was the best chance I had. I coughed a few times, holding it together, and shoved the wheelchair as hard as I could and ran after it, using it as a shield to get through the wall of flames.

It was hot as fuck, and I knew, even if I couldn’t feel it yet, that I had burns on my arms, but the only thing that mattered

was that I was on the ground, merely two feet away from the girl that I literally just dove through flames for.

“Mazey,” I whispered with what seemed to be my last breath. I rolled toward her, shaking myself out of the haze that told me I was seconds from losing all oxygen, and gripped her ankles with my hands still tied behind my back. I climbed on my shaky feet, unsure if I could make it to the door. The hallway appeared to be miles long, and it truly looked impossible. The room grew black every few seconds before coming back to life again with the cracking of wood or the popping of an ember.

Coughs left my chest, and it hurt to breathe. A cloud of smoke followed me as my hands gripped the fabric of Mazey’s jeans with my numb fingers and pulled her behind me. “Fuck,” I groaned, trying to right the room. I could see the door. The sunlight called to me as the flames fell back. *Almost there.* I coughed again and again until my throat was torn out of my neck, and my lungs screamed for clean air. The second I was in between the two sliding doors, I fell to my knees, and my face hit the concrete.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MAZEY

SEVERAL WEEKS Later

“PUT THE GODDAMN CIGARETTE OUT!” Cole’s stern voice caused me to jump in my seat. “My girlfriend was in a fucking fire and is on constant watch from the smoke inhalation!”

“Sorry, man.” The poor guy looked at Cole and then to me with a look of fear and remorse in his eye before dropping the cigarette and squishing it with his shoe.

“You know, you were in the fire, too,” I said through a smile.

Cole’s hot grin met me. “But I only care about you.”

I glanced down to the bandages wrapped around his forearms, feeling sick to my stomach over what had happened just a couple weeks prior. Cole had been labeled the *Knight in Shining Armor* of campus. Word got around about what had happened with Ryan, considering there was a *huge* manhunt for him after the authorities had arrived at the scene. Thanks to my 911 call, the police and firefighters showed up nearly

seconds after Cole had dragged me out of the burning building—talk about chivalry. Although, it was *my* fault we were there in the first place.

My parents were still disappointed with the reason I had transferred to Noany Bay. No one but Cole knew that I had been there to catch Ryan and to potentially take him down. Once they learned that I had figured out who had sexually assaulted me, and that I was wanting to put a stop to it, which ended up with Cole and me almost *dying*...well, to say they were concerned was an understatement.

The only good thing that came out of it was that my parents no longer held a grudge against Cole, and his parents didn't seem to *despise* my family any longer, although Cole didn't really care about his parents' opinion—his words, not mine. And Ryan was locked away on *numerous* counts. The rape kit matched his DNA, for starters, and other girls were coming forward, and there was a recorded statement of him admitting his wrongdoings from the 911 call, *along* with the fact that he tried to kill us.

Yeah. Cole and I were definitely popular on campus as of late.

Which was why we were back in our hometown for the weekend, going on our first official date. We were attempting to avoid the spotlight.

“It seems so silly that we're on our first real date right now.” I smiled as we entered the small hole-in-the-wall movie theater that sat just outside of Pike Valley. We were surrounded by a ton of teenagers, and I felt so out of place.

“Why is that?” Cole asked.

I half-laughed. “Because think of all we’ve been through.” Cole held my hand as we handed our tickets to the ticket clerk, who I was pretty certain was higher than a kite, and opened the door for me. I blushed, and he noticed.

“We have been through a lot, I agree.”

“So, a first date seems so weird, right?”

Cole pulled me back slightly before we could make it down the darkened aisle. He peered down at me at the same time I peered up. “You’re right.”

My brows crowded at the devious smile that covered his features. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Since we’ve already been through what most people have in a lifetime, maybe we could skip to the good part?”

My lips curved slightly as his hands found my waist. He pulled me into his chest, and I inhaled his cologne. “The good part? The movie hasn’t even started yet.”

Butterflies filled me up to capacity because I knew what that look meant. Cole’s eyes twinkled, even in the darkened cinema, and his sexy grin had my entire body sparking to life.

“What do you say we take a walk down memory lane?”

My brows crowded for a split second before I thought about the last time we came to this shitty movie theater. We were with our separate groups of friends. Me with the scholarship bunch, and him with the elite. It had been a total coincidence that we were at the same movie at the same time—or at least I *thought*. Now, looking back with years of maturity clearing things up for me, I was wondering if Cole had planned to be there the same night I was.

“Do you remember, Maze?”

Cole's hand fell into mine again as he rounded the corner and opened the side door. He pulled me up the steps, and my heart beat faster and faster with anticipation until we got to the final stair. There was a thin red curtain separating the stairs and where the projectionist sits, which of course, was empty. The teenage worker never stayed up here after the movie started playing—at least, not when we came up here several years ago.

“So,” Cole mused, pushing the curtain back so we were alone. He peered over his shoulder at me. “Do you remember?”

My stomach dipped, and I began sweating. Snippets of kissing and touching from the past started to filter in, and my chest began to heave. “What if I tell you I don't?” I said, biting my lip.

Cole's green eyes darkened, and with the shadows from the screen playing down below, it felt as if we were tucked away in a secluded club back at Noany Bay. His steps carried him over to me quickly, and as soon as he reached me, I placed my hands on his biceps, careful to watch for the bandages, and shoved him down onto the empty chair.

A rough gasp left him, and his eyes narrowed. “I know damn well you remember the last time we were up here, baby.”

I hummed, hooking my legs over the sides of him. Our middles met, and Cole hissed before bringing our mouths a breath apart. “Think you can refresh my memory, *Cole*?”

He growled before taking my mouth. “I love hearing my name on those *sweet* lips.”

The End

AFTERWORD

Dear Reader,

Thank you so much for reading Ground Rules! I hope you loved this novella! If you love college romance, try [Weak Side](#) next! Or if you're interested in the series where Cole originated from, try [All the Little Lies](#)!

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Shadow Valley Series

[Sticks and Stones](#)

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[Yours Truly, Cammie](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.J. Sylvis is an Amazon top 50 and USA Today bestselling author who is best known for her angsty new adult romances. She currently resides in Arizona with her husband, two small kiddos, and dog. She is obsessed with coffee, becomes easily attached to fictional characters, and spends most of her evenings buried in a book!

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