

Breaker Ridge BOOK ONE



Tom

KEELAN STORM

Torn

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Jaiten Press

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Breaker Ridge Torn is book 1 in an emotional, new adult high school - college years romance series filled with unforgettable characters, drama, angst, humor, and heat.

Trigger Warnings include physical and emotional abuse, grief over the loss of a parent, PTSD, cursing, alcohol use, and sexual content.

Characters and a few select situations are from the previously published series, Tied by Fate.

Blurb

TUCKER PIERCE was my salvation and my nightmare rolled into one.

The top dog of our school. Star forward destined for the NBA. And the biggest player on campus. He was also my best friend. When my life had gone up in flames, he'd become my rock. Loving him could break me. It nearly did. And if he knew my REAL secret, it would break him, too.

Lucky for me, the new bad boy in town had me in his sights, and he was just the distraction I needed because Tucker was not an option. There were rules: Best friends were off limits.

At least, until one moment changed it all, and I knew...

SOME RULES WERE MADE TO BE BROKEN...

Author's Note

Characters and a few select situations are from the previously published series, Tied by Fate

Some characters, locations, & events have been changed.

Bentonville—Breaker Ridge

Summer Grove—Summer Ridge

Benton Hall—Breaker Hall

Tucker Patterson—Tucker Pierce

Annie Dearly—Annie Donovan

Izzy Dearly—Izzy Donovan

Hector Gonzales—Mateo Sanchez

Tyler Dearly—Archer Donovan

Chris Thanos—Colton Thanos

Tabitha Thanos—Harper Thanos

Wesley Hernandez—Zane Hernandez

Dedication

To all the girls who had to find the wrong guy before they
could love the right one.

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Chapter 1

ISABEL

Tucker: I know your dirty little secret.

My feet slowed near the top of the stairs as I frowned at my best friend's text. *Dirty secret? I don't have a...* My heart jumped, and I froze. *Oh, God. He can't mean...*

I rushed the last few steps to my room, dumping my dance bag at the foot of my bed before running a shaky hand back through my dark hair, the strands still damp from my hours at rehearsal. My face scrunched slightly at the feel as I battled my mounting panic, forcing myself to think.

Tucker *couldn't* know. *Could he?* I shook my head. *No. There's no way. He wouldn't have even brought it up like that if he found out... Right?*

"Crap. Oh, crap. Oh, crap," I mouthed. Because there was seriously no telling with Tucker. My hands dropped to my hips as I paced the hardwood slats of my bedroom floor.

But it's not like I've even told anyone. Not except Annie, and there was no way my sister would've spilled. Not even to Jet if I asked her not to.

The breath I'd been holding released from my lungs with my relief. *Unless... What if no one told him? What if I've just been that obvious?*

Oh, God. Humiliation flooded my cheeks just thinking about it. Tucker would never let me live it down. Things would get

weird, and I could *not* handle that. I just couldn't. But ignoring his text would only make it worse. *Crap.*

Me: I don't know what you're talking about.

I cringed the moment I hit send, because that text was basically like catnip for Tucker. There was no telling what he'd come back with. Lost somewhere between annoyed and terrified, I tossed my phone onto the bed, not able to look at his response yet, and headed for the shower. I shoved open the bathroom door, and my hand immediately flew to my chest.

"Holy shit!" I shrieked, gaping at the six foot plus of practically naked, startled male. Steam flooded out around me as my eyes trailed along the corded muscles of his back to the firm, perfect ass I'd just seen him tuck beneath his boxers before I realized I was staring. I jerked my gaze back up, only to find Tucker's amused smirk as he watched me from the streak he'd swiped across the mirror.

Oh, my God. Horror struck my expression, and I spun away, pressing my back against my bedroom wall as my entire face flushed crimson. *That did not just happen. That did not just happen.*

"Liked what you saw?" his deep voice chuckled, and I closed my eyes, suddenly praying a hole would open up in my floor so I could jump right in.

"More like nearly had a heart attack!" I snapped instead of answering. "What the hell, Tucker?!"

“Sorry,” he replied, laughter still filtering through his voice. The jerk. “Didn’t think you’d be home yet, and Annie said I could come up here to change since she’s out with Jet. The locker rooms were packed when I got done at the gym today.”

“Yet you have your own bathroom right across the street,” I countered, listening as he rustled through his bag, doing my best not to picture which half of his body was still uncovered. Because Oh. My. God. The perfection I’d just seen.

“Yeah, but I kinda busted my shower this morning, and I’d rather have a chance to fix it before my mom can ask why I’m using the one downstairs.”

“You *busted* your shower,” I said slowly, tilting my head as my brow furrowed. “Do I even *wanna* ask?”

“Probably not.” Tucker sauntered out of the bathroom, jeans slung low on his hips, his black t-shirt stretched across his broad shoulders and chest. The sleeves hugged the bulge of his biceps, holding my gaze hostage as he ran the towel over his deep, sandy blonde strands. He dropped his gym bag against the wall before turning to face me, and I had to yank my gaze up to meet the swirling whiskey of his stare as he tossed the damp towel to the floor. He flopped across my bed, stuffing my pillow under his armpit before leaning his head against his hand, and gave me a playful grin. “So, still waiting to hear when you got so dirty.” He waggled his eyebrows.

I stiffened, my heart hammering in my chest at the reference to his text, before faltering. “What?”

“The mess, Izzy.” Tucker smirked. “In the bathroom. Y’all’s room is always perfect, but it’s like a tornado blew through there today.”

“Oh.” I blinked, still trying to process. That was it? That’s what I’d been freaking out over?

“Wait.” Tucker cocked his head forward, leaning closer. “Did you think I meant something else?”

“What? No, of course not. What else would you have meant?” I protested too quickly, earning myself a raised brow before Tucker’s eyes widened.

“Holy. So you *actually* have a secret?”

Shit. Damage control. I needed damage control. Rolling my eyes, I spun away and scooped up the towel he’d dropped. “Not what I said,” I tossed the words over my shoulder before darting to the bathroom where the hamper lived.

“Yeah, but I’m right, aren’t I?” Tucker sprung up from the mattress to follow.

“No.” I winced when he stopped in the doorway to reach up and grip the doorjamb just barely above his head. His large frame filled the space as his elbows spread out to rest against the sides, blocking my escape.

I swallowed, my attention drawn again to the way the material of his shirt pulled at his biceps before I caught myself. Ducking my head, I began snatching up the mix of dance items and beach gear from the floor, way too aware of

how Tucker's gaze was drilling a hole in the back of my neck as I tossed things into the hamper.

"You're a really bad liar. You know that, right?"

"I'm not lying," I snapped.

"Then why won't you look at me?"

"Maybe because that was embarrassing?"

"For who?" Tucker smirked. "I'm the one that had my pants down."

Oh, God. Heat flooded my cheeks all over again, and I reached for the beach towel under my sister's flip flops, giving it a sharp tug. Sand flung out over the bathroom floor, and I dropped my head with a groan as Tucker chuckled. *Hole. Floor. Seriously. Anytime now.*

"You suck," I grumbled.

"Nope. Definitely something I don't do."

I shot him a glare as he flashed me a glimpse of that cocky, playful grin that was just so... *him*.

"Can you just get out of my room, please? I'm still gross from practice, and I can't shower with you up here."

His attention immediately shifted to trail along my sweat coated spandex, like he'd just thought to take me in, and I gave him a pleading look when his eyes finally came up to meet mine, but instead of some snarky comment like I'd expected, he cleared his throat.

“Uh, yeah. Good idea. I’ll... wait downstairs.” He drummed his hands against my bathroom doorway before pushing off and took a few awkward steps backward, nearly bumping into my bed. I gave him a funny look, but he shook his head and shot me a grin, playing it off as he ducked out of my room. “And I’m raiding your fridge!”

“Shocker!” I called back, hearing his laugh as his feet hit the stairs.

“Need snacks for that dirty secret you’re gonna share!”

I groaned and dropped my head against the wall. *Shit.*

Why? Why did I have to freak out?

Mind whirling, I trudged over to turn on the shower, peeling off my clothes in a daze, but it wasn’t until the warm spray of the water hit my back that I managed to snap myself out of it. I dropped my head back with a sigh. *What am I doing? I’ve gone months without revealing my feelings. Why did I suddenly think he figured it out?*

Better yet? How am I going to play this so he doesn’t?

I took my time getting ready. My mind needed a chance to process before I braved going downstairs, and by the time I finished my hair and makeup, the best I could come up with was denial. Or distraction.

Selecting a black skirt and an off the shoulder purple top, I paired it with my favorite, strappy black sandals. If my life

was about to go up in flames, I was going to look good doing it. I paused by my dresser, letting my fingertips dance along the delicately carved etchings for a moment, and took a steadying breath before selecting a pair of earrings before heading downstairs.

I found Tucker leaning against the kitchen counter, some of his sun-streaked locks—a product from all of his days at the beach—swept across his tanned brow as he scrolled through his phone. He looked up, and my stomach rolled with nerves as he watched me slide onto the barstool across from him.

He doesn't know. It's fine. I had to steel myself with the reminder before managing a small, “Hey.” Praying it sounded normal enough to pass.

“Hey,” Tucker greeted back after a few seconds, his eyes flickering over me as I tried to swallow the lump of nerves now suddenly in my throat. “I’d say it took you long enough, but I think you were actually faster than normal.”

“Funny,” I deadpanned, rolling my eyes, my tension easing as he flashed me a wide grin.

“Here; made you one.” He slid a sandwich in front of me, and my stomach instantly rumbled at the sight of food.

“Thanks.” I smiled just as our phones went off.

Tucker answered while I glanced down at my text.

Annie: Bob’s Diner? Jet’s calling Tucker.

I glanced up, meeting Tucker’s gaze. “*Diner?*” he mouthed, and I nodded.

Me: Perfect timing. Be there soon.

Annie sent me a thumbs up back, and I slid down from the stool, smoothing my skirt as Tucker hung up with Jet. We headed to the door, and I'd just grabbed my purse from the hook when Tucker leaned in, the scent of his cologne enveloping me as his face hovered just an inch from my ear, his breath brushing across my cheek, sending my stomach in knots once again.

“Still going to get you to spill that secret,” he whispered, leaving me gaping as he darted out the door, half of my apparently stolen sandwich devoured and in hand.

My mouth opened to protest before I paused, forcing myself to take a deep breath. I knew better. I *knew* Tucker. If there were any chance of making it out of this without him figuring out the truth, I couldn't react. *Okay. I can do this.* Pulling my shoulders back, I followed him out the door.

Tucker was leaning with a shoulder against one of the tall white columns along the wraparound porch rail, one hand in his jeans pocket as he dragged the other through his hair, drawing my attention to the way the evening sun highlighted the flecks of gold in the strands. My heart stuttered for a moment before I shut it down.

Again, I knew better. That wasn't going to happen.

It couldn't.

“No blush? I'm impressed,” he quipped, looking for some kind of reaction.

I rolled my eyes, looking up to meet the playful glint in his gaze. “Maybe I just don’t have anything to blush *about*.”

One of his eyebrows raised, assessing, and my heart raced, wondering what could be going through his head, when he finally gave me a tiny, accepting nod. “You ready?”

“Yes,” I gushed and then flinched, knowing I’d probably just sounded way too eager. “Any chance we can ignore that?”

“Nope.” Tucker smirked, pushing off the column with his elbow. I groaned and followed him down the porch steps before heading across the street to his truck. He opened the passenger-side door of the massive, lifted Chevy, and I reached up, looking for a hold before climbing in. I was just about to shift when my foot slipped. Tucker’s arm shot out to block my fall, his hand landing just high enough on my thigh to feel like he was cupping my ass.

“Shit,” Tucker cursed, his hand retracting so fast I might’ve fallen if I wasn’t already scrambling into the seat. I pulled the door shut and grabbed the seatbelt as Tucker ran around to his side.

“Sorry about that.” He laughed as he started the engine.

“It’s fine. I know it was an accident,” I offered back, praying the tension would leave. Or was it just mine? Needing something to do with my hands, my fingers wrapped around my wrist, and I pressed my thumb to the inside, feeling the way my pulse was flying beneath my skin. My face had to be scarlet. Tucker wouldn’t even look at me. Or maybe he was just watching the road. *Ugh. Get it together, Isabel.*

We were halfway down the block before he spoke. “So, black, huh? And was that lace I detected?” I groaned as he laughed. “Don’t be embarrassed, Izzy. It’s fucking hot. And it gives me so many ideas for that dirty secret of yours now...” He tapped his chin playfully, but I was still reeling from the fucking hot comment that I nearly missed when he said, “Let’s see, you wear and then sell sexy underwear online?”

My head spun to gape at him.

“No? Hmmm... You’re running away to join the circus as an acrobatic tightrope walker.”

“What?”

“No, wait. You quit dance school and started pole dancing lessons instead.”

I shot him my best *‘are you crazy’* look. “One glimpse at my underwear and *this* is what you think of me?”

“You’re right.” He nodded, his face turning serious as he looked out the windshield. “You’d never quit dance. Oh, I know...”

I rolled my eyes up to the roof of the truck’s cab as Tucker continued his ridiculous guesses, and by the time we pulled up to the diner, I was outright laughing.

“You’re pregnant. Wait, no, you’re failing,” he said as he put the truck in park.

Oh, good Lord. Really? I couldn’t resist playing along.

“Yep, that’s it. I’m pregnant *and* failing at seventeen. I’ll probably have to drop out of school. Leo’s the father. I told him during our partner rehearsal today at dance, so that’s why I was home early.” I shook my head with a grin, but when I caught the horror on my friend’s face, I burst out laughing. “Oh, my God, Tucker, I’m *kidding*.”

I watched as color slowly returned to his cheeks, and he pointed a finger at me. “Don’t joke like that. Shit.” He sat back, his complexion still a few shades lighter than normal, and let out a ragged sigh before looking at me again. “I know I started this, but can we end it now?”

I gave him a triumphant look. “Not fun anymore?”

Tucker shook his head as he cut the ignition. “You nearly gave me a heart attack, Izzy. I wanted to pound Leo’s face in for a second there. I wasn’t even sure if he was into girls.”

“He goes both ways, I think.” I shrugged. “But it’s not like that with Leo and I anyway, so his face is off limits. Got it?” I grinned.

“Yes, ma’am.” He saluted, looking more like himself. “Ready to head in?”

“Please.” I reached for the door, careful as I slid down, not needing another panty mishap with the crowd.

Bob’s Diner sat near the edge of the public beachfront, with an array of tables along the back deck overlooking the ocean. It was a cross between coastal and early 90’s theme and had the best burgers around, making it one of the more popular

hangouts in town. I followed Tucker as we walked up, letting his larger frame part the crowd, but we'd barely made it to the door before girls flocked over. I rolled my eyes. *Here we go...*

It was no secret my best friend was insanely hot. And tanned. And tall—*ridiculously* tall. Not to mention had muscles that went for days with an amazing athlete's build. He'd been the star of the varsity basketball team since our freshman year. Tucker thrived on attention, especially once his scholarship offers started pouring in. Throw in lifeguard, personable charm, and confident swagger, and you had Breaker Ridge High's biggest player and most popular guy.

Girls throwing themselves at him was my problem, not his.

Tucker gave me a questioning look as he pulled open the door, but I waved him off and slipped past, dodging the cheerleaders that latched themselves to his arm. "*Annie and Jet,*" I mouthed, and he nodded, stopping to chat with some of the guys in his crew that were in one of the front booths.

My stomach rumbled at the smells flowing from the kitchen as I went in search of our friends. I found them in a back corner booth, noses nearly touching with their foreheads pressed together, Jet twirling his fingers through the long strands of my twin's ponytail as he held her close.

My heart squeezed for a moment watching them. The way they stared into each other's eyes, the way a smile lit up my sister's face with just the way Jet could look at her. The way they always sought some part of each other to touch. The way you knew, within just seconds of being near them, that they

were meant to be. Soul mates, they'd always claimed, and I knew it was true. Forget the fact we were only juniors. Those two were endgame.

I wanted that. I wanted it so much it ached.

If only I hadn't fallen for the biggest player on campus.

"Hey, you okay?" Tucker's voice made me jump. I looked up, my heart performing a traitorous stutter as I looked into those whiskey brown eyes. He grabbed my elbow, giving it a gentle tug, and then dropped into the empty side of the booth across from our friends. I slid in beside him as he smirked. "Hey, you two gonna stop sucking face long enough for us to order?"

"Says the guy who probably flirted with half the restaurant before making it to the table," Annie deadpanned, shooting Tucker a look.

She shifted to face us as Jet wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "I'm shocked y'all got here so fast," he said, smiling as he picked up his drink.

Their eyes all trailed to me, and I rolled mine. "I'm not *always* late."

Annie's lips tilted in our matching grin. "You're the definition of late, sis."

"Not today." Tucker grinned wickedly. "Ask her what she saw when she got home this afternoon."

"What?" Annie frowned.

“Nothing,” I snapped, shooting Tucker a death glare. That he was clearly deciding to ignore.

“What?” he teased. “Don’t want them to know you got a peek at the goods? Or are you worried all the girls here will be jealous?” He hooked a thumb to the crowd.

Heat flooded my cheeks as Jet nearly choked on his drink, and Annie shot forward in her seat. “Excuse me?” she demanded. “What the hell?”

I fought the urge to slouch down, praying no one nearby had overheard. “*Nothing*. But it would’ve been nice if *someone* had bothered to send me a text that she’d given our friend permission to use our *shower*,” I stressed with a pointed look, letting the accusation lie until Annie sat back with her own slight blush.

“Oh. Crap.”

“Yep.” I popped the p while the guys chuckled. “Thanks, by the way. All kinds of hair going on over here.” I waved my hand in Tucker’s direction. “I’ll be having nightmares tonight.”

Tucker gaped while Jet and Annie snorted. “Oh, we’re playing this game now? Maybe I should ask Annie about that dir– Ooph,” he grunted when my elbow met his ribs.

‘*Stop.*’ I pierced him with my best warning death glare, hating the tiny smirk still on his lips with his returning look.

‘*Make me.*’

My brow furrowed, not above pouting to get him to stop at this point. *'Please.'*

He stared at me for a moment before caving. *'Urgh, fine.'* Inwardly, I cheered until I saw the *'for now'* lingering at the edge of his look.

Crap.

“Uhh...do we wanna know?” Jet asked, snapping our attention back to our friends and the curious glances we were getting.

“No. Tucker’s just being a jerk.”

“Oh, so the usual then,” Annie quipped right as my stomach released a loud growl.

“Okay, so on that note, food?” Jet asked, holding up a menu as the rest of us laughed.

This. This was what I loved about our group. As fast as our irritation flared, we were even faster to laugh it off. We’d been friends forever, all growing up on the same block. It was hard to remember a time when we weren’t in each other’s lives.

We joked and chatted for a while as we ate, and I’d just finished the last of my grilled chicken salad when Jet polished off his soda and asked, “So, what’s our plan tonight?”

“Archer’s staying over with Colton, so we don’t have to worry about getting back,” Annie offered, referring to our and Jet’s younger brothers.

I nodded, already gathering from her comment that our mom would be late again tonight. It was happening more and more lately, but the hospital was short on staff, and with our current situation, she couldn't afford to turn down a shift.

"Dancing?" I suggested, trying to ignore the ache forming in the pit of my stomach with those thoughts. "Breaker Hall's supposed to be opening back up. They've always had good bands."

Annie grimaced. "Yeah, but that's *just* dancing. What about a party?"

"Corey's got one starting down at the beach in a bit." Jet shrugged.

"I'm game." Tucker nodded. "Izzy?"

"Umm... How big is it?"

"Not too big. It's not the whole Ridge this time. Just Breaker and maybe part of Summer," Jet said after shooting a few DM's on his phone.

"We don't have to go," Tucker said, seeing my hesitation, making me glad he couldn't actually feel the momentary flare of dread that passed through me, too. I forced myself to shake it off, hating to see their disappointment.

"No, it's fine. Let's go party." I forced a smile.

Chapter 2

ISABEL

Any hesitation I had about the party dissipated as soon as Tucker pulled me into the crowd of dancers. Music flooded my senses, the beat pumping through me like it was the very blood rushing through my veins. Giving me life. Making me soar while Tucker's large hand splayed over the side of my waist, grounding me as we moved together, perfectly in sync. In tune with each other. I was so lost in the music's pull that I barely registered the gentle pressure of his fingertips when he wanted my attention.

"Break?" he murmured, stepping back. I frowned, confused by the sudden shift until he pointed towards the kegs. Annie and Jet stood nearby, cups in hand, as they chatted with friends. Tucker raised his brow, asking me again, and I nodded.

Coming down from my dancing high, I looked around the beachfront crowd as I followed Tucker over to the tailgate that housed all the drinks. My brow furrowed, and I pressed a fingertip to my bottom lip. "I thought Jet said this wasn't going to be too big."

"I guess word got out." Tucker looked down with a small apologetic smile.

I nodded. It made sense. Corey's parties were held down at his family's private strip of beachfront and were notoriously big, so it shouldn't have been surprising to see there were

several people there I didn't know. I could barely see the Breaker Ridge people through the crowd, so I knew a good chunk of the Ridge had to be there, too. Maybe even some tourists now that summer was so close. Our small, picturesque beach town was like a magnet during vacation seasons. It definitely kept things from getting boring, but crowds like this were not my thing.

"Come on." Tucker must have seen my hesitation because he wrapped his arm around my shoulders to lead me the rest of the way to our friends.

"Having fun?" Jet asked, his smile relaxed and easy as we walked up. Annie was tucked under his arm, her head resting against his shoulder as she sipped at her beer. She gave me a hopeful smile, telling me she wasn't sure if I was having a good time.

"Tons," I answered.

"I'll say." Corey suddenly appeared, throwing an arm around my neck as Tucker dropped his. "Looking good tonight, ladies. Always a score when I can get both the Donovan twins at one of my parties. Really amps up the hot chick factor. Especially when *you* get on that dance floor, Izzy. I mean, *damn...*" His eyes trailed along my body before pressing his lips together in appreciation, making a flush flood across my features.

"Seriously, man, what the fuck?" Tucker punched him in the arm. "Get off her if you're gonna be a creep."

"Shit. Kidding." Corey held up his hands before rubbing at his arm. "Guess I won't ask you to save me a dance then?" He

turned to me with a wink.

“Sure.” I laughed it off, rubbing the bottom hem of my top between my fingers. *God, I hate feeling awkward.*

Tucker rolled his eyes and then met my gaze, clearly checking if I was okay. *Seriously?* I shook my head, tempted to give him my own eye roll. It had been embarrassing, but it was just Corey. They were buddies.

“Wow, is that new?” Annie suddenly interrupted, breaking whatever weird tension had just surfaced. She reached out to touch the shaved design at the base of Corey’s slight afro.

“Oh, yeah. Just got it yesterday.”

“I like it.”

“Thanks.” Corey beamed, his bright smile in direct contrast with the deep color of his skin. “Anyone needing a refill? I’m about to go tap the next keg.”

“Me!” Annie held up her cup.

Jet took it, placing a kiss on her cheek. “On it.”

“I actually never made it over there, so I’m game,” Tucker replied. “Want anything?” He looked at me.

“Bottled water?”

“Oh, the cooler over here’s already out, but the red one on the other tailgate still had a bunch when I checked.” Corey pointed a few spaces down to his brother’s pickup.

“Thanks.” I smiled, taking off.

The crowd was more sparse on my way to the second tailgate, but without Tucker or my friends there to draw the attention, it was like I could feel the stares from other people as I passed, and I quickly squeezed through the line for the keg to join the one for the coolers to get out of the spotlight.

A guy I'd brushed past looked up from his conversation with his girlfriend, his eyes following me like Corey's had only done playfully before, and the girl he'd been flirting with whacked him in the stomach with the back of her hand before shooting daggers my way. I quickly turned away, fighting the urge to duck my head, because that was definitely drama I didn't need or want. *At least, the line for the coolers is fairly short.*

My fingers tapped against my thumb, helping me focus on a rhythm in my head while I waited, but when a familiar voice filtered in near the tailgate, I stiffened, awareness suddenly prickling across my skin. My gaze shot to Lisa, but her back was to me, her long strawberry curls spilling over one of her shoulders as she vented to her friends.

"It's so frustrating. She hardly ever comes to parties. How am I supposed to get time to talk to Tucker tonight since *she's* here? Even when he's not glued to her side, he's always watching her. Like he has to protect her or something. I mean, we get it. Her dad died, and it sucked, but it's been months now."

I froze, that last line cutting more than the clear condescension as Larissa hissed, "Oh, my God, Lisa, you can't

say that.”

“Well, it’s true. I’m not trying to be mean, but you don’t see Annie acting all clingy or moping around anymore. It’s just pathetic. I can’t wait until he gets tired of her.”

That was the last I could handle. Tears pricked the backs of my eyelids, my stomach knotting as I hurried to put distance between us, the crowd that had bothered me before now at the back burner of my thoughts. That couldn’t be right, could it? I wasn’t clingy. I didn’t think I was, at least. I mean, yes, Tucker had been there for me. When I was lost in the spiral of grief, Tucker had been my rock as much as Jet had been Annie’s, but I wasn’t in that dark place anymore. Did others really think I was? Did Tucker?

Stop it. I scolded myself even as my heart pounded in my chest. *It’s Lisa. Did I really expect anything else?* If I was hiding my feelings for Tucker, *hers* were out on display with a huge neon sign. Of course, she’d be upset about not getting another shot at him. She’d already screwed up her first one.

I took a deep breath, realizing I was probably overreacting. If anything, Tucker and I had only grown closer this past year, so I’d know if he was just taking pity on me...right?

My feet slowed when I neared the spot where I’d left my friends. The guys were still over at the kegs, but I refused to chance a glance at Tucker, afraid he’d notice something was off. Him digging after my *dirty secret* was already enough.

I searched for Annie instead, spotting her out closer to the shoreline, the water a deep rippled canvas behind her painted

with strips of white from the moon as light from the nearby bonfire lit her features from the front. We were identical, but it would be hard to mistake us most times; at least, for the people who knew us. Tonight, she was in jean shorts, a tank top, and her favorite pair of flip flops with barely a trace of makeup.

If Tucker was my rock, my sister was my tether. Somehow similar and polar opposite at the same time, we thrived through the connection of our twin bond. Catching my eye, she smiled and waved me over as she separated from a group I didn't know.

“Hey, I thought you were getting a water.”

“Changed my mind.” I shrugged and then sighed when Annie gave me a suspicious look, but I was saved when our friends Megan and Emma walked up.

“Hey,” they greeted, sounding in unison, likely through their hours of cheerleading together, though in reality they couldn't have been more night and day.

Megan was the captain and heavily invested in clubs and her studies. She was controlled with a lean form, natural tanned skin, and long black locks. Emma had a bubblier personality and was full of spunk. She had a tiny build with just enough curves in all the right places and light blonde hair, dominating the top of the pyramid.

“I'm almost shocked to see you here, Izzy. I don't think I've seen you at a party since before spring break. That last one out at Tucker's grandparents' place before they sold it,” Megan clarified, missing the way my breath hitched.

“Oh, you mean the one I had to miss?” Emma sighed with a playful grin. “I heard it was epic.”

“Yeah, just needed a break after that spectacle.” I ran a weirdly shaky hand through my long chestnut tresses as I tried to recover, ignoring Annie’s assessing look over the night she *knew* shouldn’t be named. Not that our friends knew it. Not the full extent.

“I’ll bet,” Megan replied. “But I’m surprised you’re not out there dancing.”

“I was earlier, but Tucker wanted a break. Y’all wanna go back out there with me?” I asked, hooking a thumb back to the crowd of dancers, knowing the second they walked away Annie would pounce.

“Sure.” Emma beamed and linked her arm with ours, pulling us along before Annie could protest.

Within seconds, I was free again. My doubts and insecurities floating away as I danced with my friends. Annie moved awkwardly beside me, and I bumped her hip with mine, drawing a smile, knowing she was only tolerating this to see mine.

A couple of guys came up to dance with Megan and Emma just as an unfamiliar chest pressed against my back. I shifted, rolling my hips with the music, feeling him begin to press closer as I tried to sneak a glimpse over my shoulder, when Tucker’s broad form suddenly appeared.

“Move.” A touch of a growl laced his tone, and I jumped as he slid in behind me. “He was too close.” He leaned down to whisper in my ear, and I shivered, suddenly aware of how close Tucker was instead. The way his abs pressed against my back as he stretched back to his full height. How his large hand splayed across my waist like before, sending tingles down my abdomen to an aching pull between my legs, but I quickly shut it down.

Annie’s eyes met mine as Jet pulled her close, questions filling her gaze, but I forced a smile back to my face, letting the music envelop me once again.

It was several songs later before Corey cut in for the dance I’d promised, and another girl backed against Tucker, claiming his attention as soon as he stepped away. A stab of jealousy flickered through me, but I made myself ignore it, choosing to enjoy the night and my friends.

Even when I lost sight of Tucker on the dance floor, awareness prickled the back of my shoulders, reassuring me that he was still watching nearby. Lisa’s words filtered back in, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. Pleasure swarmed through me knowing he was there, and when I finally caught a glimpse of him at the edge of the crowd of dancers, his eyes immediately locked on mine, the small smile playing at his lips making my heart skip.

Lisa basically implied it was pity, but was it too much to hope for something else? *Probably*. If only I could get my heart to listen.

At some point, Annie and Jet slipped away, leaving me to dance with Megan and Emma as Corey took off with another girl. A few more guys came up, eventually stealing them away, too, and I begged off the next guy that came up to dance, claiming I needed a break. My eyes flitted along the edges of the crowd as I decided to head for the water I'd neglected to grab before, suddenly feeling stifled in the encroaching crowd. But before I made it off the dance floor, a hand wrapped tightly around my wrist, pulling me back.

Like I was hit with a bullet, my breath stopped, sights and sounds around me jumbled, out of focus, still moving around me. I was frozen, though I could feel the wall from that night pressed against my back, feel his breath against my cheek. The way his body pressed in over mine, caging me in so I could barely move.

“Hey.”

As soon as it started, it was over, and I was left clutching my stomach, gasping for breath.

“Hey, you okay?”

I blinked, still forcing air back to my lungs.

“You dropped an earring. I—”

I shook my head, confusion still swarming my senses as the random guy pressed something into my palm. I yanked my hand to my chest, dropping whatever it was, and bolted, not stopping until I made it to the edge of the crowd. I put my hands behind my head and worked on calming down. I needed

to breathe. I needed to process. I needed to understand what the hell that just was. Had Annie felt it, too? The panic that shot through me? Because I was definitely freaking out. Tucker would know in a second that something was off if he saw me. My stomach swooped, wondering where he was. Because if he'd still been watching, he'd already be at my side.

It's not like he's mine, though. I reminded myself even as I glanced around. It only took me a second to find his towering build near the bonfire, a girl hanging from each arm. I watched their suggestive touches as Tucker gave them that perfected flirty smile. My stomach rolled, and I spun away before he could see me, managing to bump right into Emma.

“Oh, crap, sorry, I— Holy...are you okay, Izzy?”

“Um, yeah.” My voice wobbled, betraying my urge to cry. “I just need a minute.”

Emma gave me a sympathetic look. “How about um, no. Not buying it. Do you want me to find Annie? I'm about to head home, but I can hunt her down first?”

I shook my head. “Actually, can I get a ride? I just need to escape.”

“Sure.” Emma frowned, and we were at her car before I realized what I'd said. She watched me, questions just dying to be asked waiting on her tongue, but I appreciated her holding them back. My mind was such a mess then. Especially when I saw my missed texts.

Tucker: Are you okay?

Tucker: Did something happen?

Tucker: Izzy, seriously.

I groaned, realizing he'd seen me. I quickly shot him one back that said I had a headache and not to worry and another to Annie saying where I was before pressing my head to the window for the drive home, tears hot behind my lids.

Chapter 3

ANNIE

After being subjected to the dance floor, Jet and I snuck off for a little private time, knowing Tucker would keep watch over Izzy. Not that she wouldn't be fine without us, but we were all a little on edge after the last party she'd been at to leave her alone.

We settled against a log we'd found behind the backside of the bonfire, cuddling with our toes in the sand as we sipped at our beers. I laid with my head against Jet's chest, my thumb hooked in the belt loop behind his back, while his fingertips trailed lazy circles against my hip beneath my shirt. Tingles spread over my side with each stroke, calming me and driving me crazy all at once. I squirmed a little as the pull between my legs began to tighten and felt Jet smile against the top of my head.

"Problem?" he murmured.

I raised an eyebrow and tilted my head up to give him a look. For a second, I got lost in his ocean blue eyes, loving the way they popped against the sun-darkened olive of his skin and the contrast they played with his jet black hair. He was mesmerizing. So many girls that came through our small tourist town swooned over his darker Greek features, but his eyes had always been only for me. Sometimes, I had to remind myself to breathe. Kind of like now.

Setting my beer in the sand, I reached up to run my fingers through his dark, wind blown strands as his fingers trailed a little lower over my skin. My breath hitched. “Don’t start something you can’t finish,” I warned.

“Don’t tempt me,” he tossed back, his voice lowering to growl at my ear. “One little walk to my car, and I could have you panting and writhing against my fingers in no time.”

Shivers erupted over my skin, because fuck, that was hot. *Jet one, my panties zero.* I was dripping with just that comment alone. Too bad his car was too close to the crowd.

“Later,” Jet whispered, realizing the same thing I had. He shifted, pulling up a little straighter to dial things down, and I settled against him again, trying to get the message to my lady bits that things were on hold as we watched the crowd.

I lifted my head from his chest as I took a huge gulp of my beer and nearly choked when Jet quipped, “So how ‘bout them Cowboys?”

“What?” I laughed. “Since when are we talking football?”

“Just had to lighten the mood.” He grinned, reaching down to adjust the front of his jeans, and I laughed again.

“Ah, got it. Want me to help with that later?” I sent him a playful, suggestive look over my cup, leaning my body further over his, and Jet groaned.

“Always, but definitely later, sweetheart.” He smacked me on the bottom. I let out a little yelp and then blushed. Jet just

grinned as he drank from his cup. “So, what was the deal with Tucker needing your shower?”

“Oh, get this.” I shifted, and Jet’s hand slid to my thigh as I sat up to face him, his brow raising as I prepared to dish. “Apparently, he broke his. Said the shower head snapped off.”

“What the fuck?” Jet laughed. “Oh, there’s gotta be a good story behind that.”

“Like he slipped on the soap?” I grinned.

“More like got too into his *alone* time.” Jet waggled his eyebrows.

“Ugh...babe, no.” I slapped his stomach. “I don’t wanna think about Tucker like that.”

“Well, I’d hope not.” He chuckled. “But no, how much you wanna bet it’s probably more like he snuck a girl in last night?”

“Probably,” I agreed, hating that was true. “I just feel bad about Izzy. I should’ve texted her. She’s just never home that early on dance days.” I sighed. “I thought it would be fine. And it’s not like you could’ve offered up *yours* today.”

“No kidding. I don’t know what was up with my parents today, but it was weird, right?”

I nodded. Things in the Thanos house were never that tense, but just fifteen minutes this afternoon of whatever vibe his parents had going and we were hauling our younger siblings out the door to escape, not coming back until his dad called. But things had still felt off.

“Do you think something happened?” I asked.

“Must’ve, but no clue what. I’m sure it’ll be fine, though. They almost never fight.” Jet shrugged. There was a tiny knit in his brow as he gazed out at the fire, but he shook it off before I could think of something to say that might help, laughter quickly replacing the flicker of worry in his eyes. “Okay, lighter note. Back to that shower thing. Just how much of a peek do you think Izzy got today?”

“Oh, God.” I laughed as I cringed, immediately picturing it. “Enough, I’m sure. Tucker’s not shy.”

“True,” Jet said as he stood, holding out his hand. “Refill?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” I passed him my cup, a little thrown by the next sudden change in topic. Leaning back against the log as he took off for the kegs, I pulled out my phone and spotted a missed text.

Izzy: Headache. Got a ride home from Emma.

I frowned, debating if I should text back. If it was really a headache, I didn’t want to bug her, but something niggled at my insides, making me wonder...

Could something have happened? If so, why didn’t she come find me? Why didn’t Tucker?

Giggles caught my ear from nearby, and I turned to look, just in time to spot Tucker with a tall, perky brunette tucked under his arm as they disappeared into the sea of cars. Right in the direction of his truck.

Gagging, I rolled my eyes. *Well, that explains that.* I should've known. *Oh, crap. I should've known...*

Me: Sure you're okay?

Three little dots appeared, lingering for nearly a minute before my sister replied.

Izzy: Will be.

I sighed. Did I believe her?

Izzy: Stop it. I'll be fine. Have fun.

I grinned, loving how well she knew me. I'd have to make sure we talked tonight when I got home. Or at least in the morning. I slid my phone back in my pocket and suddenly got a strange vibe that I was being watched. Looking up, it only took a second for me to spot a guy studying me from the edge of the crowd of dancers. Our eyes locked, and my brow furrowed, surprised by the intensity in his stare. Like he was checking me out, but...more than that? *What the hell?*

I was about to give him that exact look when something red appeared in my peripheral vision. "Thirsty?" Jet asked.

"Thank you," I gushed, my hands wrapping around my cup as he leaned down to brush his lips across mine. I glanced back at the dance floor as Jet settled in beside me again, curious if the guy was still staring, but he was at least looking away now. Though I couldn't help but notice the tension in his jaw, it was so tight.

"You okay?" Jet asked, drawing my attention back to him.

“Yeah.” I smiled, leaning in for another kiss, but my plans for a gentle one like before faded when Jet weaved his fingers through the back of my hair, pulling me in. I moaned as his tongue searched mine, and when he nipped my bottom lip, tingles shot straight down to my core, making me gasp. Jet’s brow raised when I quickly crawled over his lap, and I leaned down to whisper against his grin, “Drink up, babe. We’re about to go find your car.”

“Babe,” I panted, barely stifling a moan when Jet sucked at my bottom lip. “Babe.” I tried again, and Jet groaned, knowing what I was about to say. I’d stopped us so many times before. He brushed one more kiss across my swollen lips before pulling back, and I leaned in, pressing my forehead to his as we worked to catch our breath.

Desperate and aching after leaving the party, we’d parked by the curb down the street from our houses, our hands flying straight to each other’s zippers as I crawled over Jet’s lap, and just like he’d said, I’d been writhing against his hand in no time. The kisses that followed were intense, and I knew he wanted more, but even if I could get over the idea of our first time being in his car, it couldn’t be tonight.

“I’m sorry,” Jet murmured.

“Don’t be.” My forehead rolled against his, our steam still fogging the windows. “It’s just that it’s getting late, and I need to check on Izzy.”

I felt his brow furrow. “You think her headache’s that bad? Or do you think it was the party?” he said as he gently helped me back into my own seat.

“Maybe both?” I lifted a single shoulder into a slight shrug, avoiding his gaze as he put his beloved Mustang in drive. Hating that I had to keep my real suspicions from him. But Izzy’s feelings for Tucker weren’t mine to share.

The silence pulsed around me as we pulled into his family’s driveway. Jet just put the car in park and took my hand, brushing his thumb across my palm.

“This is a sister thing. Isn’t it?”

I gave him an apologetic look, and the understanding in Jet’s eyes was all I needed, even as he leaned in to press a reassuring kiss to my brow.

“Don’t feel bad about being a good sister. There are some things I know I don’t need to know.”

I nodded, my heart swelling with everything he could make me feel.

“Thank you.” I smiled.

“You’re welcome.” He grinned and reached for his door.

I waited for him to run around and open the passenger side, and he linked his fingers with mine to walk me home. One more knee-wobbling kiss against my front door, and twenty minutes later, we finally said goodnight. My eyes lingered on Jet’s ass as he left, then flickered for only a moment over the empty space in the driveway that told me Mom still wasn’t

home. I sighed and pushed open the door, plans for a shower and pajamas before some much needed girl talk in mind, before I heard the music. *Oh, no.*

With a sinking feeling in my gut, I rushed to the laundry room and opened the garage door to Izzy's makeshift studio. One look at my sister and I was barging over to shut off the music.

Izzy spun around, shock filtering through her expression as I ripped away her therapy. "Do you mind?"

"No, it's the middle of the night, and you're dancing, which means something's wrong. Now, get upstairs. We're talking," I ordered, my hands going to my hips when I saw her preparing to fight.

"And if I'm not ready to?"

"Too bad. I might've gone MIA on things when Daddy first died, but if what I'm thinking is right, then turning to Tucker about this isn't really an option this time." Izzy flinched, and inwardly, I winced, wondering which part of that hit a nerve. "I'm *here* for you, Izzy. *Talk* to me." I calmed my voice, dropping my arms, wanting her to see I meant it. I was here for her. Now, at least.

Izzy stared at me for several long moments, her hands in fists and dried tears on her cheeks, but she was wound so tightly that I honestly wasn't sure if I'd get through to her tonight without a full-blown fight. I was debating my next approach when I watched her shoulders finally droop in

defeat. Or acceptance. I'd take either. As long as she was talking.

“Fine. As long as you let me shower first.”

“Deal.” I nodded, passing Izzy her phone from our dad's old workbench.

She sighed, taking my peace offering, and I followed her up the stairs.



After Izzy's impossibly long shower, I took a quick rinse, realizing how much sand still covered my legs after the beach. Now, we were each on our beds, Izzy under her geometric black and purple covers, an arm tucked under her head, while I lay spread over solid bright orange, my chin propped on my hand. Comfortable on my stomach, my ankles crossed above my bottom, swinging slightly as I waited for Izzy to start.

The silence dragged on. Aside from the ticking of our clock.

“Talk to me, sis,” I urged.

“About which part?” she murmured, her voice so soft I barely heard it.

“A small thing, if it helps you start.” Because I was going nuts waiting.

My feet bounced as my nerves started to flare. What could be *this* bad that Izzy was afraid to talk? I was about to prod again when I finally heard her take a deep breath and say, “Am I clingy? Or pathetic?”

“Um, what?” My mind blanked, I was so thrown by the comment.

“Nevermind.” Izzy immediately backtracked. *Crap.*

“No, not nevermind. Why would you ask that?”

“Just...I heard it somewhere.”

“Someone said that? About *you*? Who?” I demanded, ready to spring off the bed and make some heads roll. I slapped the covers. “Seriously, Izzy, who?”

“Lisa.” She sighed. “But before you go off, she didn’t know I was behind her when she said it.”

“And that makes it better? What else did she say? And what the fuck was her excuse for calling you those things?” *Cuz it better be good.*

“Calm down, Annie. In my head, I know she was probably just being petty. She was mad that I was at the party, which meant she wouldn’t get a chance to talk to Tucker because he’d always be with me. Because I’m *clingy*. And *pathetic*. And he just feels sorry for me because of Daddy. And he’ll get tired of me.” Her voice caught at the end.

“You don’t really believe that, do you? Because, Izzy, that’s crazy. You’re none of those things, and Tucker getting tired of you? Please, we’ve all been best friends for pretty much ever. Lisa’s just jealous. *Tell* me you know this.”

“Yes.” Izzy sighed. “But, at the same time, she’s not totally wrong. Tucker *does* glue himself to me when we’re out a lot of the time. I just never thought much of it because we’ve gotten

so close. I know you couldn't help it, sis. You were going through a rough time when Daddy got sick, too, but when you pulled away to lean on Jet, Tucker really became my rock. I'm just worried now that Lisa might be right. What if he sticks so close because he feels sorry for me? I mean, what if it's all one-sided, like my freaking feelings are?" She pressed a hand over her face in frustration, her nails digging into her forehead. "I can't take it if he ditches me, Annie. I just can't," she mumbled against her palm.

I stared at her for a moment, shocked by how thoroughly Lisa had wormed her way into my sister's head. *I swear, when I see that bitch again...*

"Izzy. Look at me." Insecurity stared back at me when she lowered her hand, piercing a part of me in return. I had to fix this. "First off, Tucker does not feel sorry for you. All of what Lisa said is crap. Second, are you sure your reaction doesn't have something to do with your crush?"

Izzy scoffed and rolled her eyes up to the ceiling, making me frown. "My *crush*. Sure. You've told me before that I can't always understand things with you and Jet because I've never had a boyfriend, and I get that. I do, but you don't always understand either, sis. It's torture some days, watching Tucker flirt and go after girl after girl, and it's so much worse now that he actually *sleeps* with them. And there I am, the good little best friend standing right nearby. I *feel* pathetic." She sighed, running her fingers through her hair to twirl the ends around the tips.

Our room fell silent again, that clock ticking away as I processed her words. Hell, even just what to say, because she had a point. Maybe I didn't understand.

"Hey, Izzy."

"Yeah?"

"Maybe you should just tell him how you feel. I know I said before that you shouldn't, but—"

"No." She cut me off. "I can't. If he doesn't feel the same way..." She shook her head. "I just can't stand for things to get weird, Annie. I can't stand to lose him if he takes it wrong."

"Okay..." I drew out the word, thinking. "Then, maybe you need to try to get him out of your system. Date someone else. Remember that guy from the last party? The one in the leather jacket you told me about?"

"You mean the hunky awesome dancer that made my panties want to melt off when he smiled but then never came back like he promised?"

I laughed at the description. "Yeah, him, or someone else even. But to be fair to Leather Jacket Guy, the party did get broken up pretty unexpectedly."

"Yeah, I know. Kind of the reason why." Izzy pointed a sarcastic finger at herself.

"No." One of my fingers flew up. "Don't even go there. What happened was *not* your fault," I stressed, quick to shut

that toxic mentality down. *That night's on Tucker's jackass cousins.*

“Maybe.” Izzy sighed, her fingers going back to twirl through the ends of her hair. “Either way, dating’s not high on the priority list right now.”

“Why not? I was serious about considering someone else. Give Tucker a taste of his own medicine. *You* take off with a guy for once. Wait. No, that sounded wrong.” I grimaced, but Izzy just laughed.

“I doubt Tucker would consider it a dose of medicine anyway, considering what I saw tonight.”

“You mean him hooking up with that girl?”

Izzy flinched. “Just one then? Guess that’s better than the two I saw when I left.”

“Two at once?” I grinned, trying to lighten the mood. “Please, the boy gets around, but two at once is a bit much.” The corner of Izzy’s mouth started to inch into a grin when something she’d said clicked. “Wait. You said when you left. Wasn’t he *with you*?”

Izzy shook her head. “No, he took off while I was still dancing.”

“He *what*?” I snapped, making Izzy jump. I shook my head, a string of curses running through it as I seriously debated between calling Tucker to chew him out *tonight* or wait until I could really tear into him *tomorrow*, when I caught Izzy’s confused look. “Sorry, I just thought he was with you.”

“No. But can we drop this convo now? I’m getting tired.”

“Uh, sure...” I hedged, picking up on the strange edge to her tone. But it *was* late. I got up, turning off the main light as Izzy rolled over to flick on the little nightlight by her bed.

“Night, Annie.” She kept her back to me.

“Night, Izzy.” I frowned, wondering if there was something I’d missed.

Chapter 4

TUCKER

My shoulders rolled under the heat of the sun as I watched from my lifeguard chair the next day, careful to keep my eyes peeled on the water. It was definitely getting closer to summer, if the growing crowd and heat said anything, but the slight ocean breeze was just enough to keep the sweat at bay. Not that I minded the sweat.

I had plenty of fun making some last night. I smirked to myself. One of the chicks I'd been working on had been an easy score. I'd even *almost* wondered if I could've snagged both those girls. That would've been the dream.

But the second I saw Izzy taking off with Emma, her shoulders strung with tension only minutes after I'd left her dancing in relaxed, contented bliss, I'd known I had to check on her.

Just like I'd been checking myself every second I'd been on that dance floor with her last night. I'd *had* to take that break. The way she moved, how she'd smile up at me with that perfect, crooked grin and those don't-care-if-you-lose-your-fucking-soul-in-them eyes when she lost herself in the song... She had no clue how stunning she was. It was no wonder every guy at our school wanted her. Hell, every guy that came along the damn Ridge did.

Yet, she seemed clueless. Or at least unaffected. The number of tourist guys I'd seen her turn down or that I'd chased away

without her ever knowing... But fuck if I was going to let any of them screw her around. She'd been through enough.

I shook my head, schooling myself again as my mind shifted to the way the firelight had danced across her skin. To how there always seemed to be something hidden in her expression. Like a secret I wasn't supposed to find. *Like those fucking panties.* Christ. I'd barely kept myself from dragging a hand down my face; they were so hot. She'd been mortified. Too sweet for any of the things girls I typically went after would go for. And I had plenty of conquests in sight. The buffet never-ending, especially with summer vacation only weeks away. Tourists were already starting to fill the beach houses.

Speaking of...

A blonde in a tiny blue two-piece walked past my chair, an extra sway in her hips and interest clear in her eyes as she gave me a coy smile. I tilted my head back, eyeing her from under the bottom rim of my sunglasses as I flashed her a grin. She blushed just as a guy that I'd guess was her older brother shot me a look and pulled her away.

I shrugged, my grin spreading. *Wrong move, fucker.* He just made this way more fun, and my shift was nearly up. Just had to wait for my relief.

As if on cue, my head turned at the familiar growl of the twins' ancient Ford pickup coughing up a lung. Once powder blue, the faded heap of rust groaned as it rolled up and then sputtered to a halt somewhere behind me. Why they'd picked that thing, who knew. They definitely could have afforded

better while their dad was still around. Probably even now, but Izzy loved it. I shifted slightly to watch as Annie jumped out and dashed for the chair next to mine. Then, before I looked away, my gaze locked on the long, pale legs that swung out from the other side.

Izzy stepped down, the ocean breeze blowing the dark, chestnut strands of her hair back to reveal the smooth, untanned skin of her shoulders. The wrap she wore over her favorite purple bikini slid down her arm, and my heart raced. *More black fucking lace.*

Hell, maybe that's why she's been in my head.

I'd just scored last night, but God, I clearly already needed another lay.

Swallowing, I forced my eyes away as Annie climbed up beside me.

"You," she stressed, "are a jackass."

"Huh?" I replied like a genius.

Annie rolled her eyes. "A jackass, Tucker. Lives on a farm? Back end of a donkey, if that helps. Either way, you're on my shit list."

What the hell? "What did I do?"

"Oh, my God. I can't get into this here." She rolled her eyes up to the sky before sitting back in a huff. "We'll talk later. Sunscreen?" She stuck out her hand.

“Uh, sure.” I passed her my tube, distracted as I watched a couple of guys run up to help Izzy spread out her towel. She smiled, trying to decline, but clearly clueless, they both snagged spots in the sand at her sides, neither noticing the Kindle she clutched in her lap. *Dumbasses.*

“Has there been any action today?” a voice asked as my jaw tightened.

“What?”

“Action. You know, someone drifting out too far, a surfer wiping out on a wave, etcetera...” Annie elaborated, slapping on sunscreen and sunglasses.

I ran my fingers through my hair, pulling the wind-blown strands away from my face, needing something to do with my hands while having to wait to check on my friend.

“Uh...no, no action today.”

Annie set the sunscreen aside, curiosity clear in her deep green gaze as she finally looked at me. “What’s with you? You’re acting weird.”

“Nothing,” I nearly snapped, catching myself sneaking another glance at Izzy. *Fuck, I need to knock it off. She’s fine.*

“Okay...” Annie dragged out the word as she raised a skeptical brow, but I ignored it, and, letting it drop, she asked, “Who’s on duty when you get off?”

“Not sure.” I leaned back as Annie rolled her eyes, and, trying to kill the awkward vibes, I pulled my arms over my

head in a deep flexing stretch, emphasizing my abs and biceps while winking at a couple of bikini-clad girls down below.

Annie released a long huff of breath. “*Well*, despite witnessing stuff like *that...*” She gestured to the giggling tourists. “It sucks that we don’t have the same shift more often. *You* I’m used to, but the other lifeguards this year are usually too busy flirting to hold decent conversations with. Except for Emma. She’s fun. Anyway, like *you* today, apparently, it gets kind of annoying.”

“You only think it’s annoying because you’re with Jet. I mean, come on, Annie. You’ve had my poor friend’s balls on lockdown for years. Let him live a little.” I grinned.

“Ugh...don’t be gross, Tucker.”

“Fine.” I smirked, chuckling inside. It was so fun to set her off. “I’ll be sure to let Jet know you think his balls are gross.”

Annie gaped before whacking me in the arm with the back of her hand. “That’s not what I meant!”

“What’s not what you meant?” Emma said, coming around the back of our chairs.

“Nothing,” Annie quickly snapped, her face turning red as she shot me a death look.

I held up my hands in innocence. “On that note, I’ll be going. Perfect timing, Ems,” I said, jumping down so she could climb up. “Catch you later.”

“O-kay,” Emma muttered, giving me a wave with Annie as I backed away, and I shook my head with a smile.

With thoughts of food and freedom on my mind, I turned to leave and bumped straight into blue-bikini-girl.

“Sorry.” I held out my arm to steady her, a quick glance around telling me she’d managed to ditch the guy.

“No problem.” She smiled sweetly, though her eyes told me she was anything but innocent. *Fuck yes.* My smile widened, and a few minutes later, I’d snagged her number and plans, and she was off to meet friends.

“Heads up!” a voice boomed. A shriek followed, and my gaze shot to Izzy, but she was fine, her nose buried in her book with the errant volleyball just a few feet away.

“You okay?” I heard some guy ask another girl, but my focus stayed on Izzy as I approached.

Relieved to see those other guys gone, I found her lying on her stomach across her towel, her long legs stretched out behind her. Her hair was pulled forward over her shoulders, a few errant, chestnut strands blowing in the breeze across her back. A serene look covered her face, her eyes zipping across the pages of her Paperwhite as her fingers absently caressed the edges as she read.

I stood a few feet away at first, not wanting to disturb her when she seemed so relaxed. She’d said it was a headache last night, so maybe I’d been crazy to think something else could be wrong. She seemed fine now.

A slight shudder rippled across my shoulders, thinking back to the twins just a few months ago. Their dad’s death had been

rough. On all four of us. Annie had been just as bad at first, but once Jet finally got her talking, it had been better. Izzy, though? It had taken a lot of work to get her out of her shell.

Sometimes, I still wondered if we'd cracked all the way through.

When she shifted, tucking some of her dark strands behind an ear, I realized I'd have to disturb her. "Hey, Izzy, I think you forgot your sunscreen." I nudged her leg with my foot when she didn't budge. "Izzy."

My brow rose when she jumped. "Crap." She clutched at her chest. "Not funny, Tucker. Don't sneak up on me like that." She glared as she scolded, catching me trying to hold back a grin.

It only spread wider. "No, seriously, you're starting to burn."

"What?" she muttered, twisting around like she'd be able to see her back. "Crap." She sat up, unintentionally giving me a good glimpse of her cleavage as she reached for her sunscreen, and then motioned to the empty side of her towel. Right beside that lacy black cover up she'd left bundled neatly at the edge.

I took the offered seat, hoping she wouldn't notice my body's reaction to everything. *Get it together, man. It's just Izzy. You see her all the time.* I berated myself, performing a mental headshake. Seriously, noticing my best friend that way was the last thing I needed to do. Fucking hormones.

She started rubbing the lotion across her chest, and I swallowed...hard. "Got any water?" I asked roughly.

She glanced at me. “Yeah, there’s a couple in my bag.” Quickly grabbing one, I was halfway through sucking it down when Izzy turned, pulling her hair aside to reveal creamy, lightly freckled shoulders. “Could you get my back? I’m sure it’s already started to burn, but I don’t want it to get worse.”

It took all I had not to choke on my water. “Um, yeah.” I cleared my throat as I grabbed the lotion, my hands fumbling nervously over her for how to begin. Praying she wouldn’t notice. This was just *Izzy* for fuck’s sake. I’d done this tons of times before, no problem. But for some messed up reason, *every* bit of male inside me was way too aware of her skin under my touch right now. Soft, smooth, the way she goose pimped with each light stroke of my fingers and how my dick... *Fuck, what is wrong with me?* I shook my head, trying to regain focus as I realized she’d been talking.

“But hey, Jet was over earlier. He wants to go out again tonight. I voted Breaker Hall, but Annie said no.”

“Are you surprised?”

“No, but she can go for the bands if nothing else. I at least want to go *sometime* soon. It’s supposed to be really good now. And you need to be there in case there’s no good dance partners.”

I grinned. “Yes, ma’am, but you know you could train a few other guys to dance well, too.”

She shrugged. “I’ve tried. You’re the best.”

My chest swelled at that, along with my dick again as my mind flipped to an image of her dancing against me.

I shot up, tossing the sunscreen down, and Izzy looked up at me, startled. “You should be good,” I said, my eyes quickly scanning the beach for an escape. I spotted my truck first. “I’ll talk to Jet. Plans. Stuff. Catch you later, Izzy.” I took off with her looking at me like I was crazy.

Right now, who knows. Maybe I am.

Chapter 5

JET

Weekends were my favorite. Not just because there was no school or bullshit grades to worry about for a couple of days, but just the whole aesthetic of freedom it brought me. Up at dawn to surf, time with my girl, out with my friends, parties, and my hands on an engine. When I could get under a hood, dissecting what needed to be fixed or adjusted, like a giant, mechanical puzzle. That was my element. Either working on my own projects at home—usually my vintage Mustang I'd been restoring with my dad—or here, in my dad's auto shop.

I was in a back storage office, assembling some parts that had come in yesterday, when Rodrigo, one of the mechanics, rapped on the door. “Hey, Baby T, your dad wants you to come cover the counter for a while so some of the guys can take their lunch.”

“Sure thing.” I set the part I'd just finished on a shelf, not bothering to comment on the nickname the older guys at the shop had dubbed me with. Most had known me since I'd learned to walk. Rodrigo probably longer. Following him around the edge of the shop floor, the scent of tires and oil enveloped my senses with the sounds of drills and hollered conversation before I pulled open the door to head inside.

A couple of customers were getting their receipts and keys before heading out the door.

“Just have one more guy waiting on his oil change and two more that are pick-ups for after lunch,” one of the mechanics up front said before sliding over the paperwork. “Hopefully, it stays pretty slow until we get back. Sucks getting a rush on skeleton crew.”

“Tell me about it,” I agreed, starting to straighten up the counter as they went to clock out. I grabbed the disinfectant spray next to wipe down for something to do. Through one of the office windows, I could see my dad on the phone. Probably still dealing with a late shipment that had one of our cars behind. With nothing left to do but wait, I pulled my sketchbook from under the counter, ideas itching to exit my fingertips with all the quiet. I’d just lost myself in the designs when I felt a presence over my shoulder.

“These look really good, Son.”

“Thanks.”

“Reminds me of the stuff my brother could draw when I was growing up. Except his were more of buildings and scenery.”

“Guess it makes sense he became an architect, then. Not that I’d want to run a major firm in London, though. Small town fits me just fine.”

Dad laughed. “Yeah, me, too. But you never know; your cousin and uncle love it. Dimitris would love those sketches, too. You should show him sometime.”

“Yeah, guess I could. Maybe next time we do a family video chat.”

Dad nodded, his expression turning pensive. The bell above the door sounded, grabbing our attention as Tucker came in. Relief crossed his features when he spotted me, and he strutted over to drop himself against the counter by my sketchbook. “Tell me you’re almost done.”

“Uh, *no*.” I gave him a look as my dad chuckled.

“Hey, Tucker.”

“Hey, Stef. Then tell me you’ve got a break coming up or something.” Tucker switched his attention between the two of us. I paused, taking in the quick tapping of my best friend’s knuckles against the formica.

“You could head out, if you want,” Dad cut in. “We’re slow enough now.”

“Probably just a lull, though,” I pointed out, still eyeing Tucker. He stabbed his fingers back through his hair, and my brow rose. Okay, yep, *something* was up.

“Yeah, but I’ve got it. Enjoy some of the nice weather, and handle *this*,” Dad jerked his head at Tucker, “before you head to your second job later.”

Tucker’s tone went dry at the playful dig. “Thanks, Stef.”

“Anytime.” Dad grinned while I narrowed my eyes. Not because of Tucker, but my dad knew damn well I didn’t consider Riptide a second job. It had actually been the perfect score when I’d started working last summer. Time at the shop here was great, but anytime near the waves was worth it.

“I’d rather stay, actually. Got something in mind for Annie I’m saving up for, but I’ll take a break.”

“Sounds good,” Dad agreed just as Rodrigo came in, giving the all clear on the last customer’s oil change. I shoved my sketchbook back under the counter, but before Tucker and I could take off, several more customers came in, and he had to step to the side while I got the vehicles checked in.

“Thanos Auto Repair.” My dad answered the phone at the end of the rush. “Oh, hey, dear.” His shoulders stiffened as my mom’s voice carried out from the receiver. “Helen. Helen, wait. Let me call you back from my office. Cover the front, Jet,” he said over his shoulder as he hung up, barely glancing back at me before the office door shut.

“Uh, that was weird.” Tucker joined me at the counter again, both of us watching as Dad shut the blinds.

“You’d think, right? It’s been like this all week, though.”

“Oh, dang. Really? Did something happen?”

“No clue.” I shrugged. “What’s up with you?”

“Honestly, not worth bringing up anymore. It’ll be fine.” He said it like he was trying to convince himself, which I’ll admit made me curious, but if he could respect not digging into my shit, I could respect not digging into his. “Told Izzy I’d check with you on plans for tonight, though,” he added. “We’re gonna have to work in a night at Breaker Hall soon. She’s dying to go.”

“I know. I think Annie’s worried about the crowds with it, though.”

Tucker frowned, confused. “It’s dancing. Izzy’ll be fine. She was good at the party. Well, except for her headache.”

“If you mean the Lisa drama, then yeah. She was good ‘til then.”

“Wait, what?” Tucker shot to attention. “What the fuck happened with Lisa?” he demanded.

Shit. Annie didn’t talk to him yet?

Several customers looked up at his reaction, and I shot him a look to calm down. “Nothing major, but she got in her head pretty bad. Some stuff about you, I think. You picked a real piece of work for the first girl to screw over.”

“First girl to screw, not screw over.” Tucker rolled his eyes.

I shrugged. “Either way, it was bad, and she’s messing with Izzy now, so Annie’s pissed. Especially since you ditched Izzy for those girls at the end.”

“Shit,” Tucker grumbled, running both hands back through his hair this time. “*That’s* when it went down? No wonder Annie called me a jackass.”

“Yep,” I agreed, not feeling bad for him in the slightest. Not with this. Izzy had been top priority for us last night, and he dropped the ball.

“I’ll have to talk to Izzy.” Tucker pulled out his keys, already itching to leave.

“Check with Annie first,” I warned.

“Fuck, that bad, huh?”

Yeah, basically. I lifted a single shoulder in response as the bell on the door jingled.

We looked up as a guy about our age walked in, cell pressed to his ear in mid conversation.

“I know, man. I wish I could make it tonight, but I can’t. When’s the next race? Still that abandoned lot past Rex’s dive? Great. And sorry about tonight. I’ll swing by at the end if I can. Yeah. Sounds good.”

He looked up when he ended the call, finally spotting Tucker and I at the counter, and then froze, his eyes locked on us in a stare.

“Can I help you?” I asked, trying to play it cool, excitement coursing through my veins after that conversation.

“Uh, yeah.” He shook off whatever it was to approach. “I was wondering if I could get an application.”

“Sure.” I pulled one from the file cabinet and passed it over. “Are you certified?”

“No, cars are more of a hobby. Or obsession.” The guy grinned. “I’ll take just being around them and work counters for now, if I can.”

“Oh, hell.” Tucker grinned, crossing his arms over his chest as he looked at me. “Sounds like I’m talking to *you*.”

I shrugged, owning it, before looking back at the guy. “I get it. What’s your name? My dad likes to meet all the applicants, if you’ll hang on a minute.”

“Oh, yeah, sure. It’s Zane. Zane Hernandez.”

I rapped on the office door, the relief on my dad’s face palpable as he hung up with my mom and pulled Zane into his office.

I turned to Tucker, a wicked gleam in my eye as I hissed, “Did you *hear* that? I’d heard rumors about the racing but could never find out a location. You up for it?”

When we pulled up that night, the races were already underway. Tucker backed up so his tailgate faced the track, and I was hopping out before he’d even put it in park. I pulled open Annie’s door in the back to help her down, and as her red sneakers hit the dirt, my eyes couldn’t help but trail along her long legs in those skin-tight jeans she’d somehow shimmied into. A high pony exposed the skin along her neck, a bright yellow tank top fitting snugly across her breasts, drawing my attention wherever I looked.

“Damn, you look good tonight,” I growled, leaning in, ready to pin her against my best friend’s truck before we even started the night. My mouth literally watered when she looked up at me, a flush creeping up her chest.

She bit her lip, her eyes sparkling. “You like?”

“Like mine, too?” Izzy grinned, coming around the truck. She held out her arms, displaying her matching outfit, except she’d paired hers with bright red earrings and heels. “Annie never lets me do the twin thing.”

“Twin vibe’s always fucking hot,” Tucker growled. His eyes raked over Izzy, sending her into her own flush before his gaze came back to Annie and me. “Now, knock it off before you two start something you know you can’t fucking finish,” he joked as he let down the tailgate.

I groaned, shooting them both a glare as I stepped back, and Annie brushed a lingering kiss across my lips, brushing her hand along the front of my jeans before running to hop onto the truck bed. I stifled another groan and grinned, crawling up behind her to pull her into my lap. My mood was too good tonight to let my cock-blocking friends get under my skin.

Annie sunk against me, leaning her back against my chest, and then wiggled her hips against my erection. She sent me a smug look past her shoulder as I sucked in a breath, and I narrowed my eyes, wrapping my arm around her waist to pull her flush against me before burying my nose behind her ear. My dick twitched all over again with the scent of her and her apple shampoo, but I ignored it as Izzy pulled herself onto the tailgate beside me, Tucker taking the other end.

Izzy’s brow furrowed. “Is it just me, or do we feel a little out of place here?” Her teeth pressed into her bottom lip as she looked around, her fingers anxiously rubbing the bottom hem of her tank top with her hair pulled back out of reach.

I glanced down the row of cars, knowing the Outer Ridge crowd was rougher than what she was used to back home. We'd see them at the beach sometimes and then at some of the larger Breaker Ridge parties, but the latter usually weren't Izzy's scene.

"You'll be fine," Tucker reassured her, running a comforting hand along her back. "The way you and Annie are fixed up tonight, I don't think anyone's asking questions."

Izzy flushed again as Tucker bumped his arm against hers, trying to get her to relax.

Annie looked back at me, and I could see the hint of worry for if we'd pushed just a little too far by coming here after last night. *Shit. I need damage control, and quick if we're gonna stay.* I squeezed Annie's hand, reassuring her with a small smile. Hoping she wasn't right. I understood being cautious after what happened at spring break, but Izzy wasn't fragile.

"We'll be fine, ladies. This isn't Outer Ridge exclusive, anyway, from what I've heard. Besides, you know Tucker and I will throw y'all in the truck and haul you back home if there's even a chance something happens," I promised, looking at Tucker for backup.

"Absolutely, we've got y'all."

The twins shared a long look before Izzy's shoulders eased, and Annie relaxed back into my embrace. Relieved, I pressed a kiss to the back of her neck, lingering an extra second with a gentle sucking pressure. Loving the way her breath hitched.

Her fingertips found my leg, her thumb trailing a mesmerizing pattern on my inner thigh that sent my nerves on fire.

Hard as a rock with nothing I could do about it, *yet*, I turned my attention out to the track as another set of racers rolled up to the makeshift oval at the center of the abandoned lot. The turns were worn into the field and guided by cones, no other markers in sight, everything easily moveable or ready to be left for a quick escape.

Spectators filled the outskirts around the mixture of muscle cars: vintage, classics, and new. If it had the right engine and specs under the hood, it was welcome for the race. A woman in jeans tighter than the twins' with a black crop top walked up to the edge of the track at the start and held up a cloth. The engines revved. My breath held. She dropped the cloth, and tires spun in the dirt, leaving a cloud in the night air as the drivers took off.

It was fucking beautiful. The sounds of the engines, the dirt flying. The roar of the crowd.

My blood raced.

Annie's fingertips bit my thigh, and I pulled her tighter, harder against the strain in my lap, needing her to feel me. The thrill I was getting from both her reaction and...*this*. It was like the race called to me.

Just before the end, a Challenger fishtailed at the last turn, and the other car flew over the finish line several solid seconds ahead. Annie shrieked and swatted Izzy's arm as she screamed

over the crowd, “Holy crap, sis! Did you see that? That was awesome.”

Fuck, I knew I loved her.

I dragged her mouth to mine before Izzy could reply, and who knew how many endorphin-fueled minutes later, I felt a sting against my upper arm with Tucker’s harsh flick.

“Hey,” he barked. “You’re the one who dragged us out here. You gonna watch or not?”

“Sorry, not sorry.” I matched his grin as Annie reached behind her back to rub her hand across my throbbing dick in a long stroke. A sharp hiss broke my lips, and she pulled her hand away to settle back in my arms, a wicked little smile in place.

The fucking vixen. The girl was playing with fire right now, and she knew it. *If we were in my own damn car...* I trailed my fingers along her hipbone instead as I leaned back to watch the remainder of the next race, thoughts of what I was dying to do to her in mind. Part of me wondering just how far she’d let me go tonight with how revved we both seemed to be. I’d been the good, patient boyfriend for years, and I would never push her, *on purpose*, at least. But I was dying for more.

“So what do you think *that* guy does?” Annie pointed out a large man packed with tattooed muscles, a shaved head, and a clipboard.

Izzy’s eyes widened. “He looks like a bookie.”

Tucker and I snorted, and Annie whacked me on the leg. “Sorry.” I straightened my features, feeling bad when Izzy’s face fell. “I just...” I tried not to laugh. “How would you know what a bookie looks like?”

She shrugged, insecurity now touching her shoulders. Since Tucker and I were apparently assholes. “Just a guess. It’s not like I’ve never seen one on TV or in movies.” Well, she had me there.

“I think it’s more likely the guy scheduling the races,” I replied, catching him talking to a few of the drivers.

“Nah.” Tucker shook his head. “My bet’s on the bookie thing.” He bumped Izzy’s arm with his and gave her an apologetic grin. She gave him a small one back, accepting.

“Okay, well, if we’re going with the bookie thing, then who would you bet on?” Annie looked around our group as the next two cars took their spots to wait.

“Ooo, this just got exciting.” Izzy rubbed her hands together, her face lighting up. “What is that? A Camero?”

I nodded, impressed. “And a Charger.”

“I’m going with Camero,” she decided.

“Camero,” Annie agreed.

They looked at Tucker. “I gotta go Charger.”

“Team Charger,” I said, assessing some of the potential upgrades.

“Holy crap,” Izzy squealed, wiggling in her seat. “Now, I can’t wait.”

I exchanged a look with Tucker at her reaction as we all laughed, and the second the cloth dropped, we leaned in, the girls cheering and hurling insults as the Charger pulled ahead, but the Camero clearly had the better driver, gaining ground with each corner. It flew over the finish line a split second before the Charger, and Izzy screamed and threw her arms around Tucker with the victory.

Ho-ly crap. Tucker and I exchanged looks over her head as Annie laughed. What the hell had happened to our friend?

“Hey, isn’t that David?” Annie suddenly tapped my leg when things settled down.

Our eyes all shot to where she pointed several cars down the lot, and my jaw about fell open. “Well, shit.”

“Well, that’s a yes.” She laughed, still eyeing one of our friends from school. “You didn’t know he’d be here?”

“Sweetheart, if I knew David knew about the races, I’d’ve been coming to these a lot sooner. Fuck. That fucker,” I grumbled, making my friends laugh. But it did make sense now that I thought about it. David and I had been talking shop about cars off and on for ages. I’d even given him some pointers and feedback when he’d been thinking about buying his Firebird last New Year’s.

As if sensing he was being watched, David looked up, surprise catching his expression when he spotted us. He,

Tucker, and I all jerked our heads with a nod while Annie waved.

“Should we go say hi?” she asked.

“Sure.”

“Why not?”

“I’m game.”

We took turns agreeing. But Izzy paused when she hopped down from the truck bed. “Um...I might need a pee break first.”

She bit her lip like an apology, and Tucker shook his head in playful exasperation. “I spotted a couple of port-a-potties when we drove in, but you’re not going alone.” He jerked his head at Annie and I. “Y’all go. We’ll catch up.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Annie saluted, grabbing my hand to pull me along. “And don’t let her out of your sight!”

Chapter 6

TUCKER

You could tell it had rained recently. Muddy patches rested in the sparse grass on the outer parts of the abandoned field. A large puddle sat in front of one of the port-a-potties, making it a dangerous feat to get in, but luckily, it was mostly dry in front of the second one.

I scrolled through my phone, watching a few videos and responding to some social media tags, when I heard the revving of another set of engines preparing to race. I glanced back at the scene before checking the time. *Damn*. I'd been waiting over ten minutes for Izzy to finish her pee break. Not that I should be surprised. Hell, most times, I wasn't sure if she could be on time for something if her life depended on it. School and dance aside. *Then* she somehow managed, but this was ridiculous. I slid my phone into my back pocket.

"Izzy, come on. What could possibly be taking you so long? Do your thing and let's go. Before Annie sends out a search party."

"I'm sorry." Her sarcastic voice came back. "Have *you* tried hovering over a disease infested toilet seat while balancing your flashlight on your phone?"

Have I what? I couldn't have heard that right. "Are you kidding me? Tell me you're not really doing that." I held back a chuckle, realizing that's *exactly* what she was doing.

“Hell yes, I’m doing that! It’s gross in here! At least, guys get to pee standing up. Do you have any idea how awkward this is? Ack!” I heard a shriek and a scuffle and had to grin, pressing my lips together not to laugh.

When Izzy finally stepped out a couple of minutes later, she’d already fixed me with a death glare. “Not a word,” her tone threatened as she marched ahead, her shoulders held back in defiance. I’d just cocked a brow at her performance when her heel caught the edge of a mud puddle, sinking down. My hand shot out, grabbing her wrist to stop her fall, and I’d swear my heart even skipped a full beat as I pulled her flush to my chest.

“Careful there.” I laughed, squeezing her shoulders with my arm before I noticed something was off. “Izzy? You okay?” I asked, giving her a gentle shake, but she was frozen, still pressed against me. “Izzy?” I asked again. Another second or two passed, fueling my concern, before she finally gave me a shaky nod.

“Yeah.” Her voice sounded breathy. Off. I frowned as she pushed away, turning to pull her heel from the mud. “Sorry, just a shock.” She laughed over her shoulder as she slipped it back on, the sound breezy and light. It’d be almost believable if I didn’t know her so well. *Or the fact that she isn’t annoyed by the mud caked over her sexy-as-fuck shoe. Whoa.* I froze at the thought. I did *not* need a repeat of this morning, but before I could shake it, Izzy spun with a few backwards steps, a true smile lacing over her features, distracting me. “Now, come on, before we miss the next race.”

Smiling, I shook my head. “Don’t wanna miss who the *bookie* scheduled next, right?” I couldn’t help but tease as I took a couple of long strides to catch up.

She swatted me in the arm with the back of her hand as another little laugh breezed past her lips, and my smile couldn’t help but widen at the sound. One that was so foreign just a few months ago. I would’ve killed to hear it last fall. I worked my ass off to bring her back here, to this point where she could smile so easily again. A laugh would’ve been a miracle.

We chatted a little as we walked, Izzy inching closer and closer to me as we started passing through the crowd. I nudged her shoulder with my bicep when she turned for my truck, jerking my chin over to our friends. “We still meeting up?”

She glanced over, her shoulders hunching just slightly, unconsciously, when she saw the larger group now surrounding Annie and Jet. Her brows pulled together for a moment, and she blinked up at me, nervousness and hesitation playing behind the surface of the emerald, mossy green of her eyes. “Mind if we stop by your truck first so I can clean up my heels?”

A smile pulled at my lips in understanding, her own look telling me she knew I would. She was the true introvert of our group, and something told me this wasn’t the time to force her to be social.

“Come on.” I threw an arm around her shoulders, guiding her to my Chevy. The thank you was there in her exhale.

“Gotta get you cleaned up so I can bet you on who’s gonna win again.”

“Oh, yeah?” She raised a brow.

“Oh, definitely.” I smirked back at her. “Damn highlight of the night so far. Izzy Donovan, yelling insults at an illegal car race like she’s a little league mom behind the dugout. I mean, who knew?” I winked, and she laughed, a slight tinge of pink flooding her cheeks. “Oh, shit! Could *this* be your *real* dirty secret? You’ve been here before?” I threw in one more guess, still dying to know whatever had gotten her so worked up yesterday when I’d first teased.

She rolled her eyes and pulled out from under my arm when we got close to my truck, clearly choosing not to answer. “Still have those napkins in your glove box?”

“No, but there’re paper towels in my toolbox.”

“Perfect. Maybe we can even sit up here to watch a race or two before heading over?” she asked as she pressed her palms to my tailgate, pulling herself up to sit on the edge. “As long as you don’t make fun of my cheering.” She winked, and my brow rose. Well, fuck. She tossed one back.

I stepped up behind her as she turned, prepared to brace her if she needed help steadying herself in those heels, yet unprepared for when she shifted onto all fours, greeting me with a front and center view of her ass in those tight-as-sin jeans. *Fuck...* My mind stuttered for a moment. *Seriously. It should be illegal to have a best friend with an ass that fine.*

“...ker? ...Tucker.” I realized Izzy was speaking and had to shake my head to wipe whatever the hell *that* fresh torture was from my brain. I didn’t even have the fucking black lace to blame it on this time.

“Um? Yeah?” I asked, yanking my gaze away before Izzy could notice where it was glued.

She glanced back over her shoulder, already halfway across my truck bed. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah,” I said again, shaking it off. “Race? Up here? No problem.” I hoisted myself up after her, trying to not sneak another glance when she bent over to grab the handle of the built in toolbox below the back window. Lot of good that did me, though, because those perfectly rounded curves were the first place my eyes went. *Fuck.*

I spun away, my foot landing on an empty glass bottle. “Shit!” I cursed when it started to roll. Behind me, Izzy gasped, and a loud bang rang out as my legs flew out from under me, my stomach jumping to my throat as I prepared to hit the hard plastic-lined metal, praying I didn’t fuck up my playing arm on the way down. But a pair of hands suddenly pressed against my back, pushing against me in their futile attempt to break my fall, and I landed on something much softer than my truck bed, a deep thud echoing behind me. It took me a second to breathe before the shock left my lungs, and I heard a wounded groan.

Shit, Izzy.

I quickly rolled off my friend and found her clutching the side of her head where she'd landed against the toolbox. With my weight gone, her legs pulled in, curling up to her stomach, and I scrambled to my knees at her side. "Fuck. Izzy, are you okay? Did I hurt you? Where did you hit? Besides your head," I rambled off the questions, my hands already gently pulling hers away to inspect her scalp, but the night air around us was quickly darkening into a deep dusk, making it difficult to see. I gently ran my fingertips along her scalp instead, almost immediately finding the quickly growing welt above her ear. She hissed in response, and I cringed, stilling at the sound.

"Hang on." I pulled my phone from my pocket, amazed to see the screen wasn't busted after that fall, and turned on the flashlight, balancing it on the edge of the toolbox above her head so I could see. She tilted her head away when I reached for her, and I paused, using my fingertips to lift her chin just high enough to raise her gaze to mine. "Trust me?"

There wasn't even a moment's hesitation before she nodded, and I lowered her head to my lap before gently bringing my fingertips back to her scalp. She whimpered as I traced the edges of the bump, checking for any cuts or other spots I may have missed.

"Well, what's the verdict? Am I gonna live?" she asked as I made my inspection.

I grinned, relieved to hear the slight humor. "Pretty good chance. I'm a little worried about a concussion, though. Does anywhere else hurt?"

“Not really.” She shook her head as she started to sit and then paused with a large wince. I reached out to steady her, helping her settle with her back against the toolbox.

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty good at shifting myself for a fall thanks to dance. Leo wasn’t always that perfect with his lifts.” The corner of her mouth lifted into a crooked grin, and my heart eased at the sight even as it sunk.

I sat back, taking the spot at her side, the sound of the races a forgotten background noise in our own chaos. I pulled a leg up, resting an arm across my knee, then dropped my head against it as the reality of what just went down sunk in. “I can’t believe you tried to catch me.”

I looked at Izzy where she now had her forehead resting against her knees, her heels kicked off and her feet bare. The edge of her pained smile was still just visible against her legs when she said, “Can’t have you busting an arm or shoulder before you even sign with a school. Too much riding on your future with all your scholarships.”

I shook my head, in awe as much as I was annoyed. “And you busting something by catching me won’t ruin yours?”

“You mean all the ones I don’t have yet?”

“You will. You know your dancing kicks ass,” I said, knowing her dream was to go to a prestigious dance school. Not that she would really let herself hope that big if it meant leaving Annie. But the affirmation was drowned by the roaring

of an engine, and Izzy winced, clutching her head, making worry strike me again.

“Is it that bad?”

“Kind of? Mostly the sound. Is it bad that I want to lie down?”

“It’s actually probably a good idea, especially if it’s a concussion.” My brows pulled together, realizing something I should have before. “Maybe I should get you home so your mom can take a look at it.” Izzy laughed, but there wasn’t much funny to the sound.

“If she’s home,” she muttered, sadness stealing over her tone. My face softened.

“We can call her. Or text. I know your mom works more now, but you know she’ll still show in a heartbeat if you need her. I’ll even drag your ass to the hospital to see her there if I have to. Now, come on. Why don’t you lie down inside the cab while I get Annie and Jet. It’ll be quieter,” I said, watching as she cringed with another roar of an engine.

She nodded, pain clear on her features with the movement. I jumped up and reached for her hands, gently pulling her to her feet. She wobbled for a moment, and I guided her to sit on the tailgate before I hopped down. Izzy was already trying to slide down on her own when I turned around, but I shot her a look and reached out, scooping her into my arms bridal style. She yelped, throwing her arms around my neck.

“Tucker,” she snapped, though it came out as more of a grimace.

“Nope. You’re barefoot and not steady on your feet. I’m carrying you. Get over it.”

She rolled her eyes but didn’t protest anymore, even slowly resting her head against my chest, the movement stiff and unsure, yet heavy, like she was afraid it might hurt but it was hard to hold up.

I pulled open the back door to my truck and lowered her feet to steady on the running board so she could climb in, but the second I let go, she slipped. My hands flew out to catch her, one at her waist and the other hooking below her thigh, landing way up close and personal. My heart jumped, and I quickly hoisted her up straight onto the seat as she erupted into giggles.

“At least, you won’t catch a glimpse of my panties this time.” Her ass wiggled in my face as she crawled inside, and my jaw about dropped, my hands springing back though I’d already let go. Because what the fuck was that? But before I could even start to process *whatever the hell it was*, I watched as Izzy collapsed face first against the seat. *Shit*. I jumped in.

“Izzy.” I tapped at her cheeks, my heart racing in my chest. I scrambled to pull out my phone, realizing I’d left it back on the toolbox. Double shit. “Izzy.”

“I’m fine. Just tired,” she mumbled, letting my breath return. She shifted to her side, snuggling into my backseat like it was

a bed. Her hand reached out, grabbing my thigh like she could sense I'd planned to move. "Don't go."

I froze, something pulling for me in her tone, but I was uneasy with how quickly her behavior had changed. "Just let me get my phone, and I'll be right back." I brushed my thumb along her wrist, giving it a gentle, reassuring squeeze, and she nodded, snuggling deeper into the seat with a tiny sigh. I backed out, grabbed my phone, and was about to dial Annie when I remembered how close they were to the track. I shot her a message over our group text so Jet would see, too, and then hurried back to Izzy, stopping only a couple seconds longer to turn on my truck for the AC and flipping on one of the overhead lights. I hurried to join my friend in the back.

"You still doing okay?" I asked, sliding her legs over my lap for room, one hand resting at her ankles.

"Never better," she deadpanned, a bite of laughter hiding in the undertone. She narrowed her eyes at the back of the driver's seat, like it had caused some great offense. "I'm not helpless you know."

I frowned. "I know that, Izzy. I never said you were."

"Not you. Uck. How weird is that?" she said, the topic seeming to shift without missing a beat.

"How weird is what?"

"Izzy."

"What?"

"Exactly."

I frowned, so thoroughly confused by this point. “Maybe I should go get Annie and Jet.”

“No!” She twisted to grab the arm I’d left draped over the back of the seat and locked her gaze with mine, a slight haze at the edges of her normal bright green. “I’m fine. I swear,” she promised. “Just tired.”

“With a massive bump on your head.”

Flicking her wrist to wave me off, she rolled and peeked through the fingers of her other hand. “Wanna know a secret?” She grinned, biting her bottom lip like she was suppressing a giggle.

“Sure, Izzy.” I smiled, checking my phone for a message from Annie and Jet. Nothing. I was about to send another text when her tone suddenly turned husky.

“Those panties you saw...” She dragged it out, my throat going tight as I tried to swallow. Her voice grew lower, breathy. “Not even close to the dirtiest ones I own.”

Oh, fuck me... I was scraping a hand over my face when Annie yanked open the door, and Izzy promptly rolled back to her side to throw up on my floorboards.

Great.

Chapter 7

ISABEL

“You got it? Hang on, I’ll come help.”

My eyes closed, resisting an urge to roll as I took a deep breath. “Annie, I’m fine. I can get it,” I said when she ran around and opened my door. Her hands went immediately to my backpack at my feet, and I squeezed it between my legs to get her to pause and look up. I met her eyes, finding the stubborn steel I was determined to match her with this morning. The whole day, really, if I knew her. “I’m not broken,” I added, cueing her huff of frustration.

“Maybe not, but you know the doctor told you to *rest*, and Mom didn’t even want you going back to school until tomorrow.”

“Yeah, well, I’m going nuts resting, and Mom said if my headache was gone and I felt up to it, I could *try* today. So here we are. Now, may I get out of the truck, dear sister?”

Annie rolled her eyes and stepped back with a sigh, her hands going to her hips. “Fine. But one single wince or twinge of a headache today, and you’re calling Mom to go back home. I know it still hurt last night. Don’t forget, I sleep feet away from you,” she called me out.

I just ducked my head as I slid out from our truck, knowing there was no point in denying. But I’d been resting for days now. My concussion was Saturday. Seeing as it was now

Wednesday, I knew if I didn't get back to school, I'd be risking whatever rumors the high school population could cook up. Tucker and Jet would straighten them out in a heartbeat, sure, but those things tended to linger behind the scenes, and I just didn't need the drama. There'd been enough of it this year.

I adjusted my bag across my shoulders and shut the heavy, rusted door, pressing my lips together to avoid a wince with the bang. Tensing slightly, I waited for Annie to comment, but she wasn't even looking. My gaze followed hers to a black Mustang with silver racing stripes parked at the far end of the junior lot, the lines shiny, sleek, and obviously new. My brow rose, my interest definitely peaked as my mouth began to water. *Okay, Jet's definitely rubbing off on me too much.*

"Holy..." Annie muttered. "Jet's gonna freak when he sees that car. Think Breaker Ridge has a new guy? Or girl?" Annie linked her arm with mine as we headed up the walk to the school. "Sorry. My mind just goes to guys with cars thanks to Jet."

I laughed. "I get it. I'm heading up to the nurse's office first, so maybe I'll hear something." Annie's head snapped to face me. "To *check in*. Like I'm *supposed* to. Remember?" I stressed, meeting her eyes again. Her shoulders relaxed.

"Sorry. I know you hate that I'm worried. Call it the big sister prerogative."

"By two minutes, Annie. The claim hardly counts."

"I'd worry, regardless." She shrugged, forcing a tiny grin to my lips as we reached the edge of the courtyard.

A large oak stood tall just off center, surrounded by a square of wooden benches painted in bright red and black. Cement benches with engraved dedications circled the area at different angles, making conversation points throughout that side of the courtyard. Black, metal picnic tables filled the other half, with nothing but lush green grass filling any empty space between thanks to the rain this spring. A wide covered sidewalk cut straight through the center, connecting the red brick buildings and maze of sidewalks that made up Breaker Ridge High, the letters displayed with a two-toned shadow effect in shiny red and black against the brick with a large emblem of a fighting shark beneath it.

Right below that, at the center under that large oak, were Tucker and Jet, surrounded by their crew: Noah, Mateo, Kyle, and Corey. The four that had had my best friends' backs since grade school. The top dogs of Breaker Ridge High, and Tucker was basically their alpha. Even now, the female population flocked around them, though none crossed a line with Jet. Annie had marked her territory years ago. He spotted us first, a beaming smile lighting up his face when his gaze met Annie's.

"That's my cue. Unless you want me to go with you?" My sister paused, her body already naturally leaned towards her man as Jet nudged Tucker with his elbow. Whiskey brown eyes looked up from the senior walking her fingers along his arm, and I watched Tucker's flirtatious grin turn into a genuine smile when his gaze locked with mine. My heart skittered.

Down, girl. I quickly corrected myself. I'd already let enough of my feelings slip over the weekend in my concussed

state, and Tucker didn't need any more clues. *Though, if my hazy memory is right, he didn't back away...*

"Izzy?"

"Hmmm?" I glanced at Annie, realizing she was still waiting for my reply. My brow furrowed, trying to remember the question, and I tucked my hair behind my ears as I considered. I didn't feel *great*, but I was fine, and I didn't need to be giving off any *more* pathetic and clingy vibes, anyway.

My eyes drifted to where Lisa and her cronies gathered around the guys, wondering who all they might've spread those comments to. They weren't top tier, but they were high enough on the food chain that they could do some damage if they wanted. I just couldn't give them any more to feed from.

"You okay?" Annie pulled me from my thoughts, and I gave her a small smile.

"I'll be fine. Promise."

"You're sure? Because I can walk with you."

"No, I'm fine. Really. Go." I gave her a little push. She grinned and took off, but Tucker's brow furrowed when I didn't follow. "*Nurse*," I mouthed, holding up my note for the office when he started to push off the tree. He nodded and leaned back again, his eyes falling back to the girl as I walked away.

See? All in my head.

I'd just reached for the door handle when a large hand gripped the bar above mine.

“Hey.” Tucker smiled down at me, taking the weight of the large metal door as he held it open with his arm above my head. I couldn’t help but smile even as I gave him a look, my stomach performing a tiny, giddy flip that he’d followed. “What?” he laughed, reading my conflict.

“Nothing.” I shook my head, at myself more than anything else, and added, “Thought you were busy lining up your next hookup?” as Tucker guided me through the doorway.

“Vanessa? Nah, well, maybe. Who knows? She just hooked up with Noah last weekend.”

“Ah.” I nodded, my heart dropping into my stomach with the thought of him and *another* potential conquest, knowing there was nothing I could do about it without risking everything. Especially with what I now knew I was keeping from him. What I was keeping from all of them.

When it happened at the party, I’d hoped it had been a fluke, but then there it was again when Tucker grabbed my wrist at the races. The flashbacks that left me frozen and breathless...

“You okay?” Tucker pressed his thumb to my wrist for a moment, and my breath hitched, prickles spreading across my skin with his touch, far too aware of his presence right next to mine. The way his elbow brushed along my upper arm as we walked and every single tingle that burst across my skin. I was so screwed.

“Uh, yeah. Did Annie send you after me?” I asked, needing a distraction.

“No...” He gave me a funny look. “But I didn’t realize it’d be weird if I wanted to check on you. You *were* hurt saving *my* butt after all. A little detail most people don’t know, by the way.” He grinned down at me, and I rolled my eyes.

“Sure, deprive me of my noble moment. It’s fine. Your secret’s safe with me.” I grinned back.

His head tossed back with a laugh, the sound going straight to my core, and he bumped his arm gently against mine. “Missed your smartass this week.” He reached up to grip the back of his neck, suddenly clearing his throat. “So, you’re feeling better?”

“Better enough.” I eyed his nervous gesture. “Just gotta check in with the nurse in case anything flares up today. Annie’s already threatening to send me home.”

“Not surprised.” He gripped the office door, opening that one for me, too.

“Thanks.” He dropped into one of the red chairs up front while I signed in. “You can go,” I told him, but he shrugged.

“I can wait. Gotta give Annie a good report when I walk you to homeroom, right?”

“Oh, Lord, this is gonna be a whole thing today, isn’t it?”

“Yep.” He shot me a grin, and my eyes narrowed on my friend just before the nurse called me back.

After a quick exam and promising the nurse I’d check in again by lunch, I was free to go, finding Tucker waiting just

like he'd promised, even though the bell had rung minutes before.

"You're gonna be late," I pointed out, and Tucker rolled his eyes as he opened the door.

"Just walk, Donovan. Unless you'd rather I carry you again."

My eyes widened. "Nope. I'm good." I darted past him into the hall, but not before he saw the flush burst across my cheeks. His chuckle reverberated around me as he followed.

Lost in my own thoughts, we were halfway down the hall before I picked up on an excited buzz as people gossiped or stared at their phones. I looked up. "Know what that's about?"

Tucker popped a shoulder. "Find out soon enough."

"Annie and I saw a new Mustang in the parking lot this morning. We thought maybe there was someone new. Could be that."

"Could be. Not like it'll rock the boat much around *here*," he said, stopping to lean against my classroom doorway. He gave Annie a wave when she spotted us and then looked back at me. "See you in second period?"

"That's the plan." I watched him push off the doorway before going to find my seat beside my twin.

"All good?" Annie asked.

"Yep." I barely had the chance to answer before Megan rushed up to snag the empty desk in front of ours. Our eyes

widened as she spun around in her seat, her features lit with the promise of gossip as she confirmed our suspicions.

“Oh. My. God. Tell me y’all’ve seen the new guy.”

“Um, we saw his car,” we answered in unison just as the teacher cleared his throat.

Megan scrunched her face, questions still clearly at the edge of her lips as she warred with the urge to gossip. She finally caved and mouthed, “*Sinfully hot,*” pressing her hands to her chest before turning around.

Okay... Annie and I exchanged a look. Color me intrigued.



By the time my next class was over, the halls were buzzing. Or maybe that was just my head after the bells. I couldn’t tell. All I knew was my interest in seeing the new guy was dying quickly, and I was waning. Fast. *So much for insisting I could make it through the day.* But crapping out by the start of second period was pathetic. *I can do this.* I took a deep breath, watching Tucker flirt with the same girl from this morning in his usual seat against the wall. She was leaning back against the desk next to his. *My desk. Great.* But right now, I honestly didn’t care.

“Sorry.” My book bumped into Vanessa’s backside as I slipped into my seat.

“Do you mind?” she hissed, giving me a glare.

I didn’t. Not today.

“Hey.” Tucker shot her a look, his tone a clear warning before his gaze shifted to me, trailing over my features for signs of pain or fatigue. Not wanting him to see, I managed a small, reassuring smile.

“Seriously?” Vanessa huffed.

I rolled my eyes as she stomped off. “Tell me you’re gonna pass on that one.”

“Probably.”

“No, seriously, Tucker. Lisa vibes all over her,” I warned, hating to bring that up. The one real sore spot between us, not that I even knew if he realized it, but either way, him hooking up with Lisa had been way more drama than it was worth. She’d been clingy for weeks and was *still* dying to get her hooks in him.

Serves him right. I couldn’t help but think as I watched Tucker blanch.

“Maybe you’re right.”

I nodded and leaned forward to rest my head in my hands, needing a break from the fluorescent lights.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” I rubbed my fingers into my brow a few times before sitting back up. “Good to go.” I forced a smile, but it turned into a wince as the tardy bell rang.

With a decisive sigh, Tucker grabbed his backpack, tossed his book onto the desk in front of mine, and stepped over to

drop into the seat.

“Settled, Mr. Pierce?” The teacher glared from behind his desk.

“Just fine.” I pictured my friend’s wide grin making Mr. Johnston’s red face turn another shade closer to purple. Tucker threw his arms behind his head. “Ready when you are, sir.”

Oh, hell. I was now trying not to grin. I nudged him in the back to whisper, “Be good.” But I might as well have been talking to the wall. Tucker was untouchable in most classes at this school. Something Mr. Johnston knew, too.

With a triumphant smirk in place I didn’t even have to see, Tucker leaned back with the start of the lecture, his broad shoulders shielding me from the front of the room from his new seat. He murmured over his shoulder, “I’ve got the notes today. Put your head down.”

God bless him. My body immediately sagged to my desk, another little piece of my heart melting with unrequited fate. I tucked my face into my arms and closed my eyes.

The next thing I knew, someone was nudging me awake, and I shot up way too fast, dropping my head back to my hands with a groan.

“That bad, huh?” Tucker’s voice asked from my side. I nodded, knowing hiding it was pointless, it was throbbing so bad. He gently grabbed my elbow, pulling me to my feet. Students around us were all gathering their things, class clearly over. I blinked, the lights blinding, and reached for my

book, but Tucker grabbed it before I could and scooped up my backpack, throwing it over his shoulder with his own. “Come on.”

His fingers wrapped around my elbow again, guiding me around the desks, and I just about died from the sounds when we got to the hall, immediately tucking my face into his side. Anything for relief.

“Shit.” I heard his curse. “We’re heading to the nurse.”

I didn’t have it in me to argue.

Chapter 8

ANNIE

“Have you seen the new guy yet?”

“No, but I’m dying to.”

“I had him in my first period. To. Die. For. Serious bad boy vibes.”

“More like money.”

“Ooo, can it be both?”

The trio of girls in front of me giggled, and I had to force myself not to gag. It was barely third period, and I was so over it already. There was just no way this guy could be that impressive. *But the way people are acting, you’d think we’ve never had anyone new here before.* Even some of the guys were worked up. Not like the girls, but more a mixture of wary and stoked for potential new blood and competition.

Ugh. I needed Izzy to get here. We only had this and one other AP class together, and I was dying for someone sane to talk to. Not to mention the anxious feeling I had to check up on her. She could say she was fine all she wanted, but I knew she was pushing herself. The clock ticked closer to the start of class, and when there was less than a minute to the tardy bell, I glanced at the empty stool beside mine.

If there was anything my sister did on time, it was school and dance. Worry settled deeper in the pit of my stomach, and I pulled out my phone.

Me: You okay?

My thumb hovered over send when another text popped up.

Tucker: Just took Izzy to the nurse. She has her lying down. Doubt she'll be in class.

That pit in my stomach flipped.

Me: What happened? Is she okay?

Tucker: Her head's throbbing, and she slept all through second period. I tried to wait with her, but the nurse kicked me out.

Me: If this is supposed to make me LESS worried, you're failing drastically, Tucker.

I shot to my feet as the bell rang, but I barely made it a step when Ms. Garza caught me with a sharp eye, her voice cutting with warning. “*Where* are you going, Miss Donovan?”

Knuckles rapped on the open classroom door before I could answer.

“AP Chemistry with Ms. Garza?”

Excited whispers erupted around the room, and my head snapped over at the new voice, giving me my first glimpse of the new guy leaning in the doorway. Faded jeans, a dark, fitted tee stretched over well-muscled shoulders, and a tall build, but that was all that really registered, my thoughts still on my twin.

“You’ve got the right place. You must be Zane. I saw you on the roster.” Ms. Garza smiled, her cheeks slightly pink. The ice

in her tone had completely thawed as she motioned for Zane to come in. She glanced around before her eyes landed on Izzy's empty spot. "Looks like we have room at the table with you today, Annie."

My eyes shot wide. *Excuse me.* "Uh, that's—"

"A perfectly good chair. And unless Izzy is here today, there's no reason someone can't use that seat."

Well, if that's the case... "Actually—"

"Sit, Miss Donovan." Ms. Garza's harsh tone cut me off, and I bit the inside of my cheek to not talk back.

Though telling her off would at least get me down to the office.

Not quite willing to push my luck, I shot the new guy—Zane—a glare for the worst timing possible and found his eyes already locked on mine, except his were full of shocked surprise. Whatever that was about. With a growl, I dropped into my seat, narrowing my gaze at my desk as I talked myself down. There was too much riding on my academic career to risk getting a referral, so instead of calling the teacher out on her bullshit, I gripped my pen, pressing the tip to my notebook as Zane took my sister's seat. The paper tore, providing me with a strange mix of stress and relief as my shoe tapped restlessly against the tiled floor.

Discreetly sliding my phone from my pocket, I held it against my thigh under the desk to check on Izzy and discovered several missed texts.

Tucker: You're freaking out, aren't you?

Tucker: Calm down. The nurse said she's fine and just needs to rest. She's calling y'all's mom now. I texted her, too.

Tucker: Fuck, Annie. I'm betting you're already halfway to the office. Don't make me text Jet. Izzy. Is. Fine.

My shoulders sagged as a grin tilted my lips.

Me: Don't bother Jet. I'm in class. Thank you.

I sent another quick text to Mom, just in case, and then stuck my phone under my thigh against the stool, out of sight but where I could feel if it went off. Taking my first semi-relaxed breath in minutes, I finally looked up to see several rows of equations already on the board. Quickly flipping to a clear page, I hurried to catch up.

“So, Annie Donovan, huh?” Zane murmured.

I grit my teeth. “Yep. And you're Zane. Now that we're all caught up, I'm trying to focus.” I didn't even look his way. Which was apparently the wrong response because I could *feel* him tense, even with more than a foot between us.

“That's how it's gonna be?”

What? What is that supposed to mean? “I guess so. But hey, if you need someone to roll out the red carpet for you, there're plenty of other girls in this room who'd be happy to do it.”

“Just not you. Got it. Cuz you've got a boyfriend.” His voice flattened with irritation.

What the hell is with this guy? I looked away from the board finally to cut him an annoyed glare and found dark eyes already fixing me with a similar look, only Zane's was bordering closer to disgust.

Seriously, what's this guy's problem? I set down my pen, my expression calling him on whatever the fuck it was, but the longer I stared, the more I realized he looked familiar. My eyes widened the second it clicked. "You were at Corey's party last weekend. The creeper that was watching me."

Zane made a weird amused cough sound and then shook his head, clearly pissed as he looked away. "Yeah. That was me. The guy from the party."

I frowned at his clipped tone, feeling like I was missing something, but Ms. Garza started walking down the aisle, pinning me with her patented brand of ticked off teacher stare. "Problem, Annie?" her tone grated.

"Nope." I pasted on a fake smile. "Just answering a couple of questions for the new guy."

She narrowed her eyes before turning away, and Zane snorted, his gaze fixed on the board, our conversation officially done. For now.

It was after that class that I suddenly couldn't *stop* seeing Zane in the halls. Every class I went to, we'd pass each other, and each time he passed me, he'd look away, an annoyed tick in his jaw. It made no freaking sense.

Jet walked with me to my final period, keeping my fingers wrapped warmly with his. He squeezed my hand and pulled me into a little cove between two sets of lockers. His muscular frame blocking me in, he tilted my chin up to meet his gaze.

“You okay?”

I nodded, the tightness that wound through my body easing as I lost myself in the depths of his eyes, the ocean blue calming me even as it made my heart race. He brushed my mouth with a light kiss, stealing my breath as he whispered against my lips, “Just one more class and we’ll go check on Izzy.”

“What about practice?”

“We’ll skip. Wrestling and track are pretty wrapped up anyway since the school year’s almost out, and your sister is more important.”

My heart fucking melted. I reached up, wrapping my hand around his neck to pull his lips to mine, though they were only inches away. He responded instantly, his gentle pressure teasing for more. I ran my tongue along his bottom lip, feeling the moan he held in with the fingertips I kept pressed to his chest. The second he opened his mouth to mine, I dove in, deepening our kiss, wishing we were somewhere we could do more.

“Class, Annie,” Jet breathed, his forehead dropping to mine way too soon.

I nodded, my voice breathy. “We need time. Soon.” I looked up at him from under my lashes, and his brow shot up, catching my meaning.

‘You’re sure?’ his expression asked.

I nodded, biting my lip, but Jet pressed a kiss to my brow, reassuring me, and gave my fingers one last squeeze. He let them slide from his hand as he slowly turned away, and I watched the strong plane of his back as he headed down the hall, leaving me flushed and breathless in his wake.

One more class. I pep-talked myself before pushing off the wall. And nearly walked right into Zane. I stuttered to a halt. His shoulders tense and jaw set as he stared at me from the classroom doorway. His eyes were tight, something simmering under the surface that I had no idea what I’d done to cause. My own narrowed in precaution, and he scowled, disappearing into the room. *My classroom. Again.*

You’ve got to be kidding me. I pulled my shoulders back, took a deep breath, and marched inside to find him sitting in the seat behind mine. *Of course.* At least, I wasn’t right next to him this time. I dropped into my assigned spot by the windows, immediately feeling his gaze hit my back. The last of my buttons pushed, I spun around in my seat to hiss, “Do you have a problem?”

He popped a shoulder, not even trying to pretend he hadn’t been staring, and leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest as he hung a foot out into the aisle. “Depends.”

“On what?”

“I’d think you’d know.”

I officially looked at him like he was crazy. “Well, obviously not, so why don’t you enlighten me.”

“Nah, might just have a chat with your *boyfriend* instead.”

“What?”

Zane rolled his eyes. “Forget it.”

My jaw dropped as he turned, falling into conversation with David before I could react. “Asshole,” I muttered, turning around in my seat. I was officially over today and whatever the fuck his riddles meant. He was inconsequential anyway.



The second class was over, I bolted out the door, beating the mad rush of the school parking lot, and rushed home, pulling into my driveway about the same time Jet was pulling into his. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!” I yelled, slamming my door. Jet frowned, already halfway across the lawns. I threw out my arm as he ran up. “This is just bullshit, right?”

“Maybe she went to get some medicine or something,” Jet offered, matching my stride, knowing not to touch me when I was this worked up.

“She better have,” I growled, marching up the porch steps to throw open the door. Jet caught it before it could slam into the wall.

“Annie,” his voice gently warned as it tried to comfort, but I was too pissed to stop yet.

“In a minute. I need to check on Izzy first. Since Mom left her *alone*,” I said over my shoulder, already halfway up the stairs. Jet was just a few steps behind me. He didn’t say another word. Just followed. Letting me know he was there whenever I needed.

Relief instantly washed over me when I saw Izzy passed out in her bed, and easing closer, I could tell her features were more relaxed than I’d seen them in days. I picked up the damp washcloth that had slid onto the pillow and went to re-wet it at our bathroom sink, gently replacing it against her brow.

Jet watched me from the doorway, and when I was satisfied that Izzy was alright, I found his arm stretched out and waiting. I smiled and let him pull me into his embrace.

“Feel better?” he whispered. I nodded, and he tugged at my hand. “Come on.”

We settled into the large armchair in the living room, my bottom on the cushion by his thighs with my legs hooked over his lap. I dropped my head against my knees as his fingers found the knots in my neck.

“Oh, my God,” I groaned, making him chuckle.

“Not quite, sweetheart, but I’ll take it.” I grinned at that and then made an embarrassing moan as his thumb found a spot in my shoulder. “You’re so tense today. Is this all because of Izzy?”

“Not as much now that I got to check on her. But yeah, probably. That or dealing with the new guy being a jackass all

day. Or coming home to find out Mom ditched again. I mean, from what Tucker said, Izzy was miserable this morning. How could she just *leave* when Izzy felt that bad?"

"I don't know," Jet replied. "But I'm surprised about Zane. Tucker and I met him the other day at the shop. He seemed alright. Didn't really have any classes with him today besides athletics, but he was cool. We talked cars some."

"Ugh, no wonder he doesn't bug you."

"Probably." Jet shrugged, a hint of a smile in his tone. "He definitely knows his stuff. Dad might hire him."

"Great," I deadpanned. "Did I mention I also figured out he's the guy that was staring at me at the party last weekend?" Jet stiffened below me, his thumb pausing on my neck with that news, and I whimpered at the lost relief.

A few tense moments passed before he seemed to shake off his thoughts, and he tapped my back, swinging my legs from his lap. "Come on." He stood and pulled me to my feet.

"Where are we going?" I asked, letting him guide me along.

"Well, the way I figure it, your mom's not home, probably won't be for a while, Izzy's passed out, and *my* mom took your brother to soccer practice with mine." He opened the sliding back door, only then dropping my hand. "So, basically, we're alone, and you need to relax." He winked back at me as he turned on the hot tub at the end of the covered patio.

Hell-fucking-yes.

I'd already stripped to my bra and panties before Jet had even kicked off his shoes. His gaze locked on my body, trailing along my form between the bits of bright red panty set I'd chosen that morning. I grinned, loving the feeling of power it gave me when he stared like that, like he was privy to the best dessert in the world and couldn't wait to eat me up.

Eat me, please.

Slowly, I climbed up the steps to the hot tub, and as I dipped my toes into the water, I looked over my shoulder with a wink.

I'd never seen Jet move so fast.

He scrambled out of his clothes, fighting to get his jeans off his legs, and then nearly ripped his t-shirt away when it got stuck behind his shoulders. I giggled, but when he was stripped and stalking towards me in his boxers, abs and glorious tanned muscles on display, it was my turn to gape.

As soon as he climbed in, he pulled me to him and sat back in the water, positioning my knees on either side of his lap. One of his arms wrapped around my back, the other sliding up so his hand curled around the back of my neck, drawing me closer. I could feel the strain growing in his boxers between my legs. Less than an inch rested between our lips, those blue eyes telling me everything he felt and all the things he wanted to do to me, the things I'd promised. I didn't dare breathe. A moment that had felt playful before suddenly felt much more intimate.

I licked my lips, the signal for Jet to close the distance between us. It started off slow, deep, my hands roaming his

chest as he caressed my back. Like we were testing, assessing each other and looking for cues, and I soon realized we were both thinking of what I'd said that afternoon.

“Talk to me, sweetheart,” Jet begged, and I knew he was holding back, even as his hand slid beneath my bra. His thumb flicked over my sensitive peak, and I whimpered, my hips grinding against his erection in response. “Shit, Annie,” he hissed when I kept my core pressed against him, loving the friction. Loving him against me. Wondering what it would feel like to finally have him *in* me. “Annie.” He tried again.

Reaching behind my back to undo the clasp of my bra, I tossed it away, my chest held bare under his gaze. “I’m fine. I promise.” I guided his hand back over my breast, and as if it was the signal he needed, Jet crashed his lips to my neck, sucking and nibbling at the spot he knew just how to find, his fingertips pressing into the small of my back while the others circled and brushed over my nipple, cupping me with exactly the right pressure in his palm. I leaned closer, clutching myself to him in the water as my hips ground against his cock, chasing the friction I was craving.

“Babe.” I began to whimper, and he grabbed my hips to match my thrusts, giving me the added pressure I needed to send me over the edge. My fingers wrapped in his hair as my arms clutched his shoulders, and he swallowed my cries as I convulsed over his lap.

When I came back down, Jet eased me back from his lap. “Hang on, okay?” he said before hopping out of the water. My

brow furrowed when he reached into his jeans, but when he emerged with a condom, I sucked in a breath. Jet held it up between two fingers, his gaze asking for permission. I nodded. A promise was a promise, and I'd been putting this off long enough.

I watched as Jet pulled his boxers down, his erection springing proud and free. He ripped open the package, rolling it on, and I couldn't help but notice that his hands didn't shake like they had the last time we'd tried. He was sure. *I need to be, too.*

I was. I could be. For him.

I slid my panties off as he climbed back in, lowering his body beneath the water. My legs shook as I crawled back over his lap, and his hands reclaimed my hips. "I want to touch you first. Okay?"

I nodded, keeping my eyes locked with his. He slid a finger inside, pumping once before adding another, and I moaned, dropping my forehead to his. His lips found mine, his fingers repeating that steady rhythm we'd perfected over the years. He knew just how to touch me, how fast to go to make me moan, where to press, when to back off and when I needed more. I began to pant when his thumb found my clit, circling, teasing. I was burning, the heat from the water nothing compared to how Jet made me feel. He nipped at the spot on my neck, and I cried out, my hips moving, seeking on their own now as he pumped his fingers faster, curling them until I was on the verge of another release.

I gripped his arms as I came, and Jet pulled me in for another kiss as he lined his cock up with my core, but when I felt the tip press against my entrance, I stiffened. Jet immediately froze, his eyes flying back to mine, my indecision clear and on display. I snapped my eyes shut, but he'd already seen. A few moments passed, tension hanging in the air before I felt him brush his thumb along the line of my jaw.

“Talk to me, sweetheart.”

I pressed my lips together. I couldn't.

“Please.” He brushed his lips over mine. “It's been fine so far. Tell me what's wrong. I'll fix it if I can. We can slow down. Whatever you need.”

I could feel his desperation, hear it in his voice, his need to understand. To share with me what I wished to God I could share with him. What I wished I understood myself.

“I'm sorry.” My head shook of its own accord, and I wiped away the tears that sprang to my eyes. “I don't know. I just... can't.” My voice wobbled.

Silence.

Seconds passed. Three, maybe four, before Jet lifted me from his lap. “It's fine. Another time.”

He pressed a kiss to my brow and stood, but all I could feel was his disappointment washing over me. He grabbed a towel from the outside storage chest, holding one out for me as well. We dressed in silence, tears flowing quietly down my cheeks, hating that I'd let him down. He'd never say it, but I knew I

had. Every time we pushed that boundary, I chickened out. This was my problem, not his. A twisted set of emotions I wasn't sure how to untangle.

We headed inside, and I pulled out some leftovers while Jet turned on a movie, settling in at one end of the couch. I took a spot at the other end, the mood still off, but Jet wrapped his arm around my waist, and I yelped as he pulled me onto his lap.

“What happened outside does not mean you get to pull away from me in here,” he growled into my ear, and I shivered at the rumbled vibrations it sent through my body.

“Got it.” Still awkward, I reached for our bowls on the coffee table, and the mood finally started to ease as we got caught up in the movie. Jet kissed me goodbye once Archer came home, dirty and sweaty from soccer. I heated up another bowl and then sent my eight-year-old brother up to shower before helping him with homework, not even touching mine until he was tucked into bed.

Settling in at the kitchen counter, I popped in my earbuds to blast some Taylor Swift, hoping it would dial back the combo of resentment and anxiety that was bubbling under my skin. Pissed at my mom, annoyed at the day, frustrated with myself about tonight. I pressed my palms to my eyes as tears threatened again, somehow managing to complete the last of my pre-calc before midnight. I trudged upstairs for a shower, glancing at the uneaten sandwich I'd left on Izzy's nightstand earlier. She was still asleep but now a twisted mess in her

covers. I went to re-wet her cloth again before jumping in the shower, worried that she still hadn't woken.

It was just as I was ready to climb into bed that I heard the front door open. *About time*. I bolted down the stairs, catching a glimpse of Mom still in her scrubs as she headed into her room. I shoved open the door, and she jumped, her hand flying to her heart.

“Annie. You scared me. What are you doing up?”

“How about doing everything that should be on you! Helping Archer with his homework. Making sure we got fed. *Checking on Izzy*,” I stressed, my hands flying as I paced. “I normally don't mind stepping up, Mom, but this is crazy. You *left Izzy* today! How could you? She was miserable and in pain, and all you could do was give her a big fuck you and head back to work.”

“Watch it, Annie,” Mom warned, something shaking in her voice, but I was too pissed, too *hurt*, to stop.

“No. Just no. Get mad all you want, fine, but after what you pulled today... *Izzy needed* you! We all do, and any other day you've been gone and left it all on me I've shut my mouth and dealt with it, but today it's just bullshit,” I snapped, my chest heaving as I came to the end of my rant. I planted my feet, waiting for her excuse, but it never came.

Mom turned her back, her voice turning dry and cold as she pulled a fresh set of clothes from her dresser. “Go to bed, Annie.”

My jaw dropped. “Seriously?”

“Yes. Seriously.” Mom slammed the drawer shut. “Go to bed.”

“You don’t want to ask about Izzy? Do you even fucking care?”

Mom’s shoulders stiffened, and her green eyes blazed with wounded anger as she slowly turned around. “Don’t *ever* ask me if I care. I lost your father. I work my ass off, *trying* to stay sane and keep things afloat. To make sure you three don’t have to lose anything else. And as for your sister, she had another checkup this morning, then *I* went back to work so that my boss would let me take tomorrow off to stay home with her. So, yes, Annabel. As hard as it might be for you to see, I still fucking care.”

She was shaking by the time she was done, her features, so close to mine and Izzy’s, just barely holding her composure. I couldn’t help but whisper, “We *all* lost Daddy, and we’d rather lose something else than lose you, too.”

She looked away, every muscle coiled in her body but with nothing left to fight. “Go to bed, Annabel.” Her voice turned to steel as she slammed the bathroom door in my face.

Chapter 9

ISABEL

“You’re mine.” His breath teased the wisps of hair by her ear, causing a shiver to race along her skin. She sucked in a gasp as he thrust inside her core for the first time, and his lips found hers, claiming her, possessing and stealing every doubt she harbored as they became one.

It was heaven. Why she’d fought him so long, she couldn’t say, but no longer. As his pace grew faster, she tilted her hips to meet his thrusts—”

“Hey, Izzy, you up?” Tucker burst through my bedroom door, Jet following right behind him.

A gasp escaped my lips, and my fingers flew above the covers, leaving the throbbing ache between my legs. I quickly dropped my Kindle face down on the bed, my cheeks heating at the intrusion as Tucker tossed himself across my covers, propping his head against his hand.

“Do you mind?” I wiggled my legs out from under him, quickly shifting to sit with my back against the headboard, doing everything I could to avoid his eyes after what the guys had just interrupted. It wasn’t even something I really did. But, *of course*, one of the few times I tried...

“Damn, I love how comfortable your bed is. It’s no wonder you’re looking so much better. Got tons of beauty rest this week.” Tucker tugged playfully at my feet, pulling my gaze to

that whiskey brown color that had me sucking in another breath. He shot me a wide grin that did nothing for helping me rein in my blush. I had to look away. Anywhere. Everywhere. But the guys had completely invaded my space!

Jet leaned in a sitting position against my sister's desk, his legs out with his arms across his chest, his blue eyes watching, always assessing.

"You okay, Izzy?" he asked, a suspicious look on his face.

"Mmmhmmmm." I nodded, but not before concern crossed Tucker's chiseled features. My heart skipped. I was such a goner. Drowning in one-sided affection. I both soared and plummeted every time he looked at me.

"You sure you're okay?" Jet prodded. "Annie said you were doing better. Staying home today was just a precaution, right?"

"Yeah, no, it was." I nodded, doing my best to discreetly slip my Kindle under my pillow.

Mistake number one.

Tucker's eyes honed in, and his hand snatched out, grabbing it before I could react.

"Hey!" I protested as he rolled off my bed, his prize in tow. I hopped up, trying to grab it, but he raised his arm, keeping it far out of my reach. "Tucker," I begged.

"Nope, not with that reaction." He grinned mercilessly as his eyes skimmed the fresh burst of desperate crimson spreading across my skin before he looked to the screen.

God, no, please don't let him read it!

“She sucked in a gasp as he thrust into her core—” Tucker began. His eyes quickly snapped to mine, and my breath hitched when that warm whiskey swirled into shades of deeper brown. His brow raised in amusement as he studied me. “So *this* is your dirty secret...”

I just about died. Collapsing back to the bed, I pressed my face to the covers, but I could feel both guys' eyes glued to the side of my face, waiting for my response. I groaned. “Well, since you're not going to stop hounding until you know, then sure.” I bit my bottom lip at the lie, but it was the perfect cover. I couldn't pass it up.

Tucker went silent, but I could hear the slight chuckle in Jet's tone when he said, “I'm shocked. Didn't realize our little Izzy was so scandalous.”

Shit. Where the hell is Annie? This would *not* be happening if she was here. I sat up and threw my pillow, whacking Jet in the chest. “Why so shocked? Tucker's teased me about my book porn before. Didn't think it was real?” My gaze darted to my best friend as I snapped, knocking an expression from his face I couldn't quite read. My brow furrowed with a moment of curiosity, but before I could question it, Annie's footsteps came bounding up the stairs.

“Don't tell me you jackasses busted in there already!”

Their eyes widened, but Jet grabbed Annie as soon as she entered the room, pulling her to him for a kiss. She visibly

began to melt, several seconds passing before she whacked him in the arm.

“Jerk.” She grinned against his lips.

“For?” Jet smiled.

“Distracting me.”

“Ah, that. Yeah. No regrets.”

Their brows pressed together before Annie turned in his arms to smile my way. “You look so much better, sis.”

“Great. Cuz it’s Friday. I missed a whole week of school, and I *need* to get out of this house. Plus, Mom gave me the all clear this afternoon. So you can’t say crap.” I grinned at my twin and swung my legs down from my bed, plans for the evening already in mind.

Annie’s hands went to her hips with an only half-playful sigh. “You swear you’re good this time? I mean really good?”

“Yes.” I made a cross over my heart to prove it, and when Annie’s arms dropped, I knew I’d won.

“Fine. Where do you want to go?”

Already heading to my closet, I tossed her a devilish grin, and her shoulders dropped with a groan.



The parking lot was already packed, and bass was pumping through the doors by the time we pulled up to Breaker Hall that evening. My body literally buzzed in anticipation, and I

grabbed Annie's hand, pulling her with me up the wooden steps.

She groaned as we reached the door. "Any chance it's not too late to convince you to go somewhere else?"

The guys chuckled from behind us at the question, but I ignored all three of them, knowing they didn't truly understand the hold dancing had over me. The loss I'd felt when they'd shut down our town's dance hall last fall. Right when I could've used its distraction the most. Nearly derelict before, it had now been fully renovated and restored.

I was dying to get inside.

Country music poured over me as I opened the door, the beat already calling, but I forced myself to pause and take it all in.

New floorboards gleamed throughout the familiar, rustic interior, and the large wooden posts that divided the hall into thirds looked polished, shining under the new recessed lights. The dance floor was still at the center of the room, with custom, rustic tables and chairs hugging the walls on either side. A bar sat off to the right of the entrance, its countertops now a shiny, mahogany brown. But it was the back of the hall that had outdone itself.

Where there'd once been a tiny platform for the DJs and bands, now featured a long, wide stage a couple feet high. Lifehouse's You and Me began to pump from large speakers at its sides, shifting the vibe of the room with the new beat.

“*Sure* you don’t want to go to a party or something instead?” Annie hedged hopefully.

Jet chuckled, coming up to wrap an arm around her waist from behind. “Nice try, sweetheart. Tucker and I already sent out the word. This *is* the party tonight.” He gestured over to the edge of the crowd to where Corey and some of the guys were all either flirting or pulling girls onto the dance floor.

Annie’s shoulders fell in a sign of final defeat, and I laughed. “You’d think it was torture or something.”

“Nearly.” She grinned before Tucker caught my attention over her head.

“Y’all good?” he asked, a girl already trying to wrestle him away.

“Yeah, go.” I waved him off, not wanting to watch. “Just save me a dance!”

He held up a hand in acknowledgment before disappearing into the crowd, some blonde in tow, and my gaze skimmed the room for who else might be there, noting several familiar faces from school. As soon as I spotted Emma and Megan, I rushed out to jump into the fray, dying to lose myself in the music’s pull.

My fix was quick, my anxiousness from the week dissipating nearly as fast as the beat of the song. Parties were my friends’ element. But this. *This* place was mine, and I’d been without it for far too long.

I found myself laughing alongside friends and shrugging away a few unwanted advances of some overzealous, early tourist guys before they finally got the hint. Right now, I was here for me. Guys could come later.

As if on instinct, my gaze fell to Tucker, finding him pinned against one of the wooden beams by Vanessa now, of all people. My brow furrowed at the switch, the blonde from before nowhere in sight, and annoyance flared. *I swear, if he ignores me about her...* I clenched my jaw, because I would *not* be bailing him out of this situation, too. He'd been warned.

Forcing myself to look away, I caught Annie's knowing gaze, but I just smiled, ignoring it, and instead, grinned at my sister's *attempt* at dancing until Jet whisked her away.

It was several songs later when Emma nudged my arm. "Water?"

I shook my head. "Y'all go. I'm fine." I waved off my friends as they disappeared into the sides of the crowd. Another guy came up as soon as my girls had gone, and I finally gave in, actually getting lost in it for a couple of songs before his hands got carried away. I pushed him back, annoyed, and was just heading to the edge of the dancers for air when I caught another glimpse of Tucker. Now near the bar, I watched as Vanessa leaned closer, pressing herself to his chest as she said something dirty. At least, I assumed it was if her look and body language had anything to say about it.

Tucker swallowed, his jaw taut, like she'd hooked him with whatever she'd just promised, but his gaze focused on

something over her head, his back ramrod straight. Something eased in my chest, knowing far too well now the tells of when he'd chosen a hookup. So when Vanessa started trailing her fingers up his arm, he pulled back, shaking his head, a hard pass in his expression when he finally looked at her.

Her eyes flared, and I could almost hear her hiss as she stormed away.

I couldn't help but smile.

Until Lisa suddenly appeared, sliding up to his side. Her fingers curled around his arm, staking her claim before any other girls could approach. I could only roll my eyes even as my stomach churned, watching as she flipped her long, strawberry waves over her shoulder, saying something she clearly thought was flirty, but Tucker just gave her a tight smile, one of his hands coming up to grip the back of his neck. He shifted, searching for some space, that subtle look of panic I'd seen before crossing his features whenever Lisa was near. Cueing another eye roll, I decided to take pity on my friend.

TUCKER

“It’s been a while since we’ve danced. Wanna give it a go?” The tips of Lisa’s nails dug with a slight, sharp pressure as she scraped them along my arm, both the move and her tone seductive. Or at least it would be if it wasn’t *her*. I couldn’t stand clingy, and this girl didn’t know how to be anything but. It was always a bitch getting away from her. Hell, I’d take *Vanessa* back right now if I’d known Lisa was going to swoop in.

My hand gripped the back of my neck as she leaned closer. I didn’t even register what she said next, too busy plotting my escape, trying to avoid being the straight up asshole that told her to fuck off in this crowd if I could help it. I’d walk away, but unless I glued my mouth to the next girl that walked by, this chick would seriously just follow. *Actually...might not be a bad idea*. But before I could play my Hail Mary, a soft hand gently grasped my arm that wasn’t latched under Lisa’s talon-like nails.

“Ready to cash in that rain check?” Izzy’s voice filtered up as she slid in front of me, positioning herself so that Lisa had to step back. My stomach coiled strangely even with my relief. *Oh, thank God*.

“Do you mind?” Lisa snapped.

Izzy’s back stiffened, and I frowned, a glimpse of something close to insecurity flashing across my friend’s eyes before she

tucked it away. She raised her brow, urging my answer.

“Sorry, Lisa.” I shrugged a shoulder, my gaze not leaving Izzy’s. “Just been waiting for you to say the word.” I smiled at my friend through the lie, though nothing was further from the truth. Because in reality, I was avoiding her. Honestly dreading this moment since we’d walked in. Since we’d been in her fucking bedroom and I’d read that line in that book.

I hadn’t been able to look at her right since.

Then to have her dancing against me? With the thoughts roaming through my head, it was the worst idea. But right now, I was desperate.

I held out my arm, letting Izzy hook her hand at my elbow, and led her out to the dance floor, Lisa’s daggers still piercing at our backs. “Thank you,” I stressed once we were out of earshot.

“Yeah, well, we both know she wasn’t going to take the hint.”

“Fuck. Tell me about it. I seriously hoped she’d drop it by now. It’s been months.”

“At least, you took my advice about Vanessa.” Izzy jerked her chin, and I caught a glimpse of *that* potential disaster now hanging all over Mateo, the crazy brunette glancing back at me like it was some form of payback I was supposed to give two shits about. I inwardly shuddered, glad I’d dodged that bullet. Mostly.

“Tourist girls are so much easier,” I muttered, feeling Izzy momentarily stiffen.

“Thank God it’s almost summer then,” she replied dryly.

I frowned, unsure about her tone, but as we reached the crowd of dancers, my thoughts shifted back to the dress she was wearing, imagining the way the material would bunch up closer to her ass if I pulled her close to grind against me. Or how it would raise up her thighs if she lifted her arms to my neck. If there’d be more of that sexy black lace underneath. To how easy it would be to slide my hand places to find out. To explore. To all the things she apparently *thought* about doing that I’d never allowed myself to picture for her before. Not that I didn’t know she was hot. She was fucking gorgeous, but there was something about her reading that book that was seriously messing with my head.

Except my reaction didn’t even make sense. It was Izzy. *Innocent* Izzy. And she was reading about sex, not actually doing it. *Ah, fuck, what if she touches herself?*

Argh! Stop thinking about it! My head gave a sharp shake, unprepared for that image. Even more unprepared for how my body reacted as blood pooled to my already straining cock.

An upbeat country song started to play, saving me from my newfound torture, and Izzy turned to face me, her hair flipping past her shoulders. Her hands flew into position. “Let’s dance.”

I nearly hesitated. *Get it the fuck together, man.* Taking her hand, I placed my other at her waist, leading us easily into the

song. A tingle zipped up my spine when she brushed against me, and I tensed.

“You okay?” she asked, catching my discomfort.

“Yeah,” I lied again. “Never better.”

One of her eyebrows raised, something still off in my tone, but I shook my head, forcing whatever the fuck was wrong with me back, and pulled her close to twirl her around the dance floor faster than before. She tilted her head back and laughed at the thrill, sending those confusing tingles up my spine once again.

We were three songs deep when the music finally shifted back to pop, and Izzy turned to lean against me, the move always so natural for us before, but being the nutcase I was tonight, I jumped back. Izzy frowned, giving me a confused look over her shoulder.

“Sorry.” I shrugged, glancing around, desperate for an excuse. I spotted Kyle, and we both jerked our heads in a nod at each other as he loped up.

“Hey. Any chance y’all would mind if I cut in? My ex is here. Would kill to make her jealous right now.” He looked hopefully at Izzy.

Her brow furrowed. “The one that cheated on you?”

He nodded. “Please? Not like I need a show or anything. Though I won’t knock it if you want to play it up some,” he added with a playful grin. “Or not.” His eyes widened at the

death glare I suddenly shot. *Fuck. Why'd I do that? I knew he was playing.*

I took a step back, my hand gripping my neck, and spotted another blonde eyeing me near the stage. "I'll, uh, leave y'all to it," I muttered, getting out of there before Izzy could tell I'd gone insane.

ISABEL

My eyes followed my friend's back as he moved through the crowd before I looked back at Kyle. "Sorry about that. Tucker's in a weird mood tonight. I don't mind if we dance." I started moving to the music, not wanting him to feel paranoid, but his fingers only rested lightly at my waist, barely touching.

"Kyle, if we're going to make your ex jealous, we'll need her to buy it." I smiled, leaning a touch closer to let him know it was fine. I trusted him. Any of the guys in Tucker and Jet's crew I knew I could trust. I hoped. *I'd trusted his cousins, too, before...*

An errant shiver slipped down my spine as a glimpse of that night flashed through my thoughts, but I quickly shoved it back before Kyle could see, his wide smirk proving he'd missed my sudden unease.

"Good point." His head dipped above my ear as he slid an arm around my back, pulling me against his tall, wiry frame. I released a breath, sliding my hands up to wrap around the back of his neck, and before I knew it, I was lost in the dance again.

It was a couple of songs before a guy I didn't know cut in, and Kyle bowed out before I could protest. "Sorry. Water break." I held up a hand.

Finding Annie with Jet at the bar, I quickly swiped her drink, downing half of the cool liquid before coming up for air.

“Sorry.” I flushed under their laughing grins.

Annie shook her head when I offered her bottle back. “Already my second. It’s fine.”

I nodded and took another long swallow. “Haven’t seen y’all around much tonight,” I said as I switched to light sips.

“Might be a reason for that.” Jet grinned as he tossed back his drink, and suddenly, it was Annie’s turn to flush, her eyes going wide. She shot Jet a look, but he just shrugged. “The evidence is pretty damning anyway, sweetheart.” His gaze swept down to her neck where a couple of bite marks surrounded a fresh bruise below her ear.

“Shit.” Annie’s hand flew up to cover it. “Is it that bad?”

“I’d call it perfect.” Jet shrugged, while I was more honest. Though, I guess he was, too.

“Nothing I can’t fix with makeup before school Monday.”

Annie’s shoulders sagged in slight relief as she shot her boyfriend a look. “So much for *I’ll be careful.*”

“Sorry, not sorry.” Jet grinned proudly. “Just letting all these fuckers around here know you’re taken.”

Annie and I rolled our eyes, the three of us falling into idle chatter until a group of friends from school came up. Kyle threw an arm around my shoulders, his sweat now dripping down his freckles from the ends of his red hair.

“You are a lifesaver, Izzy.”

I grinned, cringing with a slight sidestep from his damp embrace. “You’re welcome. But it was just a dance.”

“Yeah, yeah, but did you catch the look on Farah’s face? Totally worth the possible swing from Pierce.”

“Wait, what?” Jet laughed, the comment catching his attention.

“Nothing,” I quickly explained. “Tucker just gave him a weird look when he asked me to dance.”

“No, when I asked you to play it up a little.”

“Which was a joke.” *I think*. “Tucker was in a weird mood before you came up. I doubt it was that.”

“Maybe.” Kyle shrugged. “Still. Thanks. I owe you.”

“Sure. Fine. Now, go.” I ducked out from his arm, pushing him away, and he planted a kiss on my cheek before jumping into a conversation with Corey, Mateo, and Megan. Shaking my head, I caught something strange in Jet’s expression. “What?”

He shook his head, turning back to his convo with Annie, Noah, and Emma, and I looked around the room with a sigh, confused by the odd vibes the guys were sending out tonight. I’d wonder if it was them still being overprotective, but that didn’t really fit. At least not Jet. *Maybe* Tucker?

My eyes skimmed the dance floor, searching for my friend, when I caught a glimpse of the last face I expected to see. The one face I’d doubted I’d ever get to see again. My hand shot out to grip Annie’s arm.

“Ow,” she muttered as I pulled her away from the group by her dark gray sleeve. Trimmed in silver accents, the shirt was a matching pattern to my dress. The closest she’d usually ever let me dress her to our twin vibe outside of special occasions. I’d played it up tonight, coaxing her into wearing her hair down, too. “Izzy, what?” she snapped.

“You will never believe who I just saw.”

“Who?”

“Leather Jacket Guy.”

Her eyes widened. “*The* Leather Jacket Guy? Your mystery guy from the party before spring break?”

I nodded, my eyes now desperately searching the dance floor, trying to convince myself I wasn’t crazy. “At least, I *think* so...”

“Well, go find out.” She was already pushing me towards the crowd, and I panicked, grabbing her hand.

“No!” I half-whispered. “What if it wasn’t him?”

“And what if it was? This is perfect. We were just talking about him, remember? I call that a sign.”

I shook my head, unsure. “Doesn’t change what else I said that night either. I’m too hung up on...*someone else*. It wouldn’t be fair to him.”

Annie rolled her eyes. “And that someone else can’t wait to keep screwing *anyone* else.” She grabbed my shoulders, turning me to watch as Tucker and some blonde ducked

outside. My heart dropped. “Tucker’s got his head too far up his ass for *anything* real anytime soon,” Annie whispered at my ear. “And you deserve better. If Leather Jacket Guy’s here, find out. It can’t hurt. You *liked* him *before* all this Tucker mess came up. Remember? And it’s just a dance.”

I nodded, realizing she was right. “I feel awkward, though. Just walking up to him. I can’t even *see* him anymore.” I went on tiptoes, but the crowd was too packed at this point.

Annie nodded, the wheels already turning in her expression. She whipped around, darting back to whisper something in Jet’s ear. He nodded and pushed off the bar, sending me a grin as he approached. “I hear you’re needing a chariot.”

I laughed, taking his hand to let him pull me into a quick-paced two-step. “That was about your corniest line yet,” I teased.

Jet just shrugged, his easy smile still in place, making me wonder what had been in his cup. We flowed with the music, weaving our way through the crowd of dancers to the latest country songs that were now bursting through the speakers, but after several trips around the floor, I was convinced I’d imagined the whole thing.

“So, what does this guy look like?” Jet asked, sensing my disappointment.

“Tall, like normal tall, not Tucker tall, with dark hair. Broad shoulders. Dark T-shirt, I think. And tanned. Maybe Hispanic? With kind of a bad boy vibe and a grin that could make a girl’s *panti*—”

Jet's eyebrows flew up. "Okay. Yeah. Got it." He shook his head.

"Sorry." I fought a blush. "Way too much."

"A little, but more unexpected. Any chance *that's* the guy?" Jet led me out into a spin, and I gaped, finding myself face-to-face with the drop dead gorgeous hottie that had been in the back of my head for months. My fingers slipped from Jet's, as if he sensed to let go, and I stumbled forward, shocked and staring as I tried to find words. Tried to figure out how to react or even speak. I'd forgotten how hot he was.

It took him less time to recover, that chiseled face hardening slightly with a scowl as I basically drooled. His dark gaze flickered past my shoulder before coming back to mine, and I cringed at the hostility between them and his tone. "Wondered if it was a one-off. Guess now I know." He turned and stalked away, leaving me frozen and stunned. It was several seconds before I could get myself to move.

Annie rushed up as soon as I was in sight. "Well?"

I shook my head. "It was him."

"Crap. That doesn't sound good." She clasped my hand to drag me away from the main crowd. "What happened?"

"I don't know. Other than he couldn't stand the sight of me. Maybe he thought *I'd* ditched *him* that last time?" I suggested, trying to make sense of it. Had he come back to find me that night before all of that drama had gone down?

"Maybe." Annie's brow furrowed. "I'm sorry. That sucks."

“Yeah. Whatever, though. You mind if we leave?”

“Leave the dance hall? Yeah, if that’s what you want.” She waved Jet down, already pulling me towards the door as she texted Tucker.

“What?” Jet laughed as he came up. “Did Izzy tell you she’s into Zane?”

Annie gasped, her eyes flying up from her phone to meet his. “No.”

He nodded. “Oh, yeah. How’d it go?” He looked at me.

“Could’ve been better,” I admitted. “And *I’m sorry*, y’all *know* him?”

Annie nodded, dejection filling her tone. “He’s the new guy.”

“Shit. What the hell?” Jet was cursing and flying out the door before I could finish processing *that* information.

Annie and I looked at each other, equally confused, before she darted outside, but something held me back. I glanced over my shoulder, finding *Zane* staring at me from across the room, pure shock on his features before I followed my twin out the door.



TUCKER

“Mmmm...” the blonde I’d pulled outside moaned as I slid my hand beneath her bra. Something I’d normally be all into, but tonight, I was too in my head. Or rather, a certain brunette was. Hence my choice for the blonde. Because what the fuck was wrong with me that I couldn’t get the other image out of my head even with another girl’s thighs straddling my lap? I cupped her ass, grinding her to me, desperate to distract myself, when the door to my truck suddenly flew open.

“What the actual fuck?” some guy grated.

“Oh, my God.” The girl scrambled from my lap just as the guy grabbed a fistful of my shirt, tugging me over to deliver a sucker punch right in the eye. I blanked for a second, shock and fury pulsing through me, then shook my head, because the guy was right. *What the actual fuck?*

He pulled back for another swing, but I hauled out, shoving him back against another car.

“That’s my girl, you fucker!”

“Who never said a thing about you!”

I dodged his next swing, stepping aside so his fist struck my truck, then pulled back for my own.

“No! Wait!” The girl whose tongue I’d just been sucking gripped my arm, but I shook it off, too pissed to reason.

“Tucker, stop!” I heard another voice in the background, but it barely registered, my fist already colliding with the guy’s jaw. He flew back past the truck bed, sliding in gravel. “Oh, my God!” the blonde screamed, but this time I could hear Izzy’s with it.

I hesitated just long enough to watch the guy scramble on the ground, trying to regain his footing, but as soon as I stalked forward, Jet threw himself in front of me, his hands shoving back against my chest. “He’s on the ground. Enough.” He clapped my shoulder, making sure my focus went to him, and I locked in, the reason in his steady blue gaze driving the fury from my own. I took a breath. Then another. Until I felt soft fingers come and wrap themselves around mine.

“Come on, Tucker. Let’s go,” Izzy’s voice filtered up at me, and I looked down, seeing the alarm still prevalent in her soft features, Annie’s like a mirror at her side.

I nodded, the air starting to slow in my chest. We piled in my truck, and Jet pushed me over to the passenger side. I didn’t even argue, watching instead from my rearview as the blonde ran up to the guy, and he pushed her off, disgust covering his face. Not that I could blame him. I never would’ve touched her if I’d known.

“You okay?” Annie asked from the backseat.

I nodded, another flash of annoyance hitting when I caught another figure watching us from the corner of the lot. My eyes narrowed with the cold, hard look in his expression as we pulled out. Zane.

Chapter 10

ISABEL

The look on Zane's face was still rolling through my thoughts when I got to school Monday morning, and even if I'd wanted to forget, it would be impossible with all the talk of him in the halls. Annie had not exaggerated how much hype he was still getting. The mysterious bad boy that all the girls were dying for a chance to know. He ignored them all. *Apparently, giving all his focus to my sister. Who he'd thought was me.*

The guy I'd kept in the back of my mind for months, the guy that had scooped me up with no more than a grin, keeping me transfixed and perfectly in sync on that dance floor—before that night had all gone to shit—that guy somehow hated me enough to treat me like dirt the next time I finally saw him. Granted, it had been Annie he'd seen first, so there may have been outliers that had escalated things, but still. I needed answers.

I just wasn't sure if I had the nerve to get them.

“Miss Donovan, welcome back,” Ms. Garza greeted when I entered AP Chemistry later that morning. “Are you feeling better? Your sister mentioned you had a concussion.”

“I did. Last week was rough, but I'm doing better now.” I gave her a tight, yet polite smile, watching the way her eyes floated discreetly along my head for the injury.

“I see,” she said tightly in return when she didn't find it. “Well, hopefully, your sister gave you the assignments to keep

up with. You know I can't really slow down the pace in here just for one student." Her eyes glanced at my temple again, and I had to work not to roll my own.

"I understand. I caught up on most of it this weekend. Am I still in my old spot?" I gestured with a head tilt to the lab tables, no longer interested in being subjected to her attitude.

She lifted her nose slightly, like she was annoyed I was being compliant. "I see Annie mentioned the new student. But yes, just pull up another stool. Better to have a group of three than you off by yourself."

She turned away to write on the board, and my lips pressed together as I turned to face the room. Several people quickly looked down to stare at their desks while others gave me looks of pity or relief that it hadn't been them under Ms. Garza's bitter scrutiny. I smiled at a few I knew pretty well and went to settle at my table, pulling out my supplies and my latest book to pass the time after grabbing an extra stool from the back corner as asked. I'd just grown immersed in the smut-filled pages of my book, wondering if I'd make it through the scene before the bell, when a voice whispered in my ear.

"I am seriously an asshole."

I jumped, and Zane's face scrunched at my reaction as he pulled out his stool, dropping his bag at his feet.

"Again. Apparently. Sorry."

"For what? Being a dick?" Annie snapped under her breath as she took the seat at my other side.

Zane rolled his eyes. “Yes, exactly that.” He leaned forward, closer to me. “Seriously. If I’d known.” He glanced between Annie and I. “Well, it was a big misunderstanding, okay? I’m sorry.”

Wow. Okay...

I nodded, processing the implications as Annie scoffed. “Confuse us all you want. No excuse for acting like an ass.”

Zane growled slightly beneath his breath and shot Annie a glare. “Trying to talk to your sister here.”

“And snapping at mine isn’t helping your case,” I said calmly, sliding my book back into my bag with a glance at the clock. Annie smirked as Zane’s mouth fell open, and I shot her a look to back down. Zane started to protest, but something in my expression must have told him to drop it for now because he snapped his mouth shut, the lines across his expression growing tight with his shoulders. He gripped his pen in his fist as the bell rang, and Ms. Garza began the notes, the tension surrounding us stronger than before.

How it had gotten that way, I wasn’t even sure. I’d wanted answers, but the second I’d had the chance, I’d shut him down. It took me most of class to realize the real problem. Confusing us or not, Zane and Annie did not get along. I just wondered if any of it was salvageable.

When the bell rang for the end of third period, Zane stood, and ignoring Annie’s death glare, he leaned in again, his smooth voice at my ear. “I still want to explain. Without your sister around.” His dark eyes locked with mine as he pulled

away, holding my gaze until I gave him a tiny, barely perceptible nod. He grabbed his bag and tore off, Annie already scowling in his wake.

Gathering my things, I looked at my sister. “This last week or so of school is going to be fun if y’all keep that up. I know y’all got off on the wrong foot, but he *was* apologizing.”

Annie sighed as we headed to the hall. “Sorry. You’re right. I came in with bitch-mode today, but I know you wanted to talk to him. I’ll try to dial it back. For your sake.”

“I’ll take it.” I smiled as we reached the split in the hall that took us to our separate classes. “Thank you.”

“Sure. But whatever he says, I want you to remember, *he* was the asshole first,” Annie called over her shoulder before mixing into the crowd.

“Got it,” I muttered, knowing she couldn’t hear me. I headed in the opposite direction, almost immediately finding myself being cut with an icy blue glare. Lisa slammed her locker door shut, the red metal reverberating over the cacophony of the crowd, and then flipped her long curls over her shoulder as she stormed off, her posse on her heels. I took a deep breath, refusing to be pulled into her drama, and pushed open the doors to slip outside. The fresh air filled my lungs, steadying me, and I started down the long covered sidewalks to my next class, getting another glare from one of Lisa’s friends I passed along the way.

I sighed but then frowned when I caught a glimpse of a dark sleeve just past the corner of the gym. Detouring to the edge of

the sidewalk, I found Zane leaning with his back against the side of the building, his cell to his ear. Lines of stressed anger creased his brow as he snapped into his phone. My brow shot up just as his gaze caught mine, and his expression did an immediate shift, clearly alarmed that I'd seen. "*Sorry,*" I mouthed, backing away, my pulse beating from my chest. I spun as a couple of sophomores ran up, linking their arms with mine.

"Oh, captain, our captain," Dinah chirped. "It's so good to see you back."

"Last week was weird with you gone," Casey gushed from my other side. "Please tell us you're able to dance again today. Ms. Teiger's been hardcore about some moves she wants us to nail for our final, and we desperately need your help."

I laughed, my tension from before immediately easing. Loaded with potential, these girls were my right hands for the dance team, even texting me all throughout the week with updates. It barely felt like I'd been out at all, minus the confined to bed part.

"I'm allowed to dance." I laughed as we headed inside the gym. "All in working order now. Just let me change and you can show me those moves. If y'all need help, I'm sure the rest of the team does, too."

Turning down the little hall that led to the locker rooms, I smiled as we unzipped our bags, the familiar smells and cheerful buzz of dancers around us feeling like home. It was good to be back.

A sentiment I wished could have lasted. While I'd insisted I felt fine, Ms. Teiger wasn't taking any chances with my health, relegating me to simply watching and correcting forms instead of doing any actual dancing myself. Which was fine, but I missed being in the thick of it. Some of these girls would be leaving after this year, and I'd been looking forward to my last few practices feeling connected to my team.

Not wanting to disappoint or take my duties lightly at that, I immersed myself in the task, actually surprised when the bell rang for lunch, and I quickly changed to go meet my friends, wondering in the back of my mind about Zane and whatever it was that I'd witnessed. Was he mad that I'd seen him? Would he still want to talk?

My stomach knotted just thinking about it. I ended up just picking at my chicken wrap for the first part of lunch before Annie snapped. "Oh, my God, sis. You're driving me crazy. *Eat*. The last thing I need is to worry about you not eating enough next."

I raised a brow, giving her a wry look. "Would you stop? I'm going to eat."

"Then what? Is it your head?"

Oh, my God... I looked up at the sky and then dropped my eyes to meet Jet's, finding him laughing with his next bite. "Please, tell her to calm down. I'm fine."

He held up a hand, wrapping an arm around Annie's waist as she huffed. "Neutral party here. But, honestly, you are acting kinda off."

“Who is? Izzy?” Tucker asked as he joined our table, a few of our classmates hurrying to clear him a spot on our crew’s usual bench near the large oak. His eyes raked over me, one still a clear whiskey, the other shaded under a deep bruise that made me want to wince. *Serves him right, though.* I couldn’t help but think as he searched my expression for signs of distress.

“I’m *fine.*” I rolled my eyes. “Just *in* my head. Not in pain from it. Now, will y’all stop?”

“Eat and I will,” Annie countered.

With a frustrated grunt, I lifted my wrap to my lips and took a bite. “Happy?” I muttered as the flavors burst through my mouth. Hungrier than I’d thought, I took another bite, and Annie smiled smugly in return before looking over to Tucker.

“Jeez, you look like shit.”

“Well, thanks. Nice to see you, too.”

“Of course, it is,” she quipped. “But seriously, that thing looks angrier than it did this weekend.” She pointed to his eye with her fork.

“Not as angry as that girl’s date,” Jet joked, smirking at the glare Tucker shot him.

“It’s not like she filled *me* in that she was there with someone else. Fucking dirty sucker punch,” he grumbled, shoving a bite of his chicken sandwich in his mouth.

“Oh, yeah, cuz that makes it all okay.” I rolled my eyes, my appetite suddenly gone again. I stood and grabbed my trash,

ignoring Tucker's frown at my remark, and then turned to grab my bag, coming face to face with a hard, charcoal gray covered chest.

I shrieked before slapping a hand over my mouth and then inched my eyes up while my friends laughed, finding a light smirk on chiseled russet features staring down at me. A touch of laughter surfaced over the tighter edge of his eyes, reminding me of that look he'd held by the gym.

"Bad timing? Again?" Zane said, the quip somehow telling me things were fine, even though I barely knew him. But like a genius, I just stared. "Hey, man." He made a fist bump motion with Jet and then nodded at Tucker before looking back at me. "Mind if we talk a minute?"

I nodded, pulling my bag over my shoulders. He took the trash from my hands, tossing it in a nearby bin as I followed him away from my friends, nerves rattling my stomach. We found a spot away from the lunch crowd, and Zane leaned with a shoulder against the red bricks of the main building, one hand gripping the black strap of his shoulder bag as his gaze trailed over my body. Not in a creepy way, but like he was taking me in, picking up on the subtle things he'd missed before that had caused all the confusion. I took the moment to study him as well.

How his hair was styled into perfect, casual placement, the strands nearly as black as Jet's, the color a compliment to his russet skin. He had straight, symmetrical features that made him classically handsome, with decent height and broad, well-

muscled shoulders under a plain tee and relaxed fit jeans. His clothes read casual, but there was a crispness to the lines I knew from Tucker's family and my knowledge of fashion that told me how expensive they likely were. Even his bag was designer, but low key, the complete opposite of his eyes.

The color was so deep, so brown, the depths seemed endless, a pit waiting to be filled. But there was that tightness there and in his stance that screamed in warning. Captivating. It was no wonder the girls were dying for a shot with him.

Yet somehow, he was here, talking to me.

Well, nearly. Silence still stretched between us as we took each other in, but it wasn't until I realized how long we'd been standing there that my nerves started to flutter, not sure what he'd say.

"Um, sooo..." I eventually mumbled, breaking the quiet. I tucked my hair behind my ear, fighting the urge to look down.

"Sooo..." Zane repeated, the corner of his mouth tilting in a slight smile. "I'm sorry for pulling you away from your friends. But with how things went in class earlier..."

I nodded. "I get it. I don't get *why* you two seem to hate each other so much already, but I get wanting to talk alone."

"Urgh," Zane groaned and scraped a hand over his face. "My fault. I got pissed off when I thought you were acting like you didn't know me, which *should* have been cool since we'd only met that once, but then when I thought I saw *you* with a boyfriend..." He shook his head. "People couldn't wait to tell

me about the epic story of Annie and Jet, and I felt like such an ass, thinking about you all this time. I swear, if I'd known you were a twin... Is there any way we can start over? Because I'd really like to ask you out."

His eyes searched mine, waiting for an answer, but I was still reeling from his confession. Thrown that he'd thought about me all this time, too. "Um..." I hesitated, surprising even myself. "Yes and *no*," I said slowly, watching as something flickered in the dark pools of his eyes. "I mean, of course, we can start over, but with the other, I just...with Annie and all." I shrugged, though my eyes slid back to Tucker without permission, finding his whiskey stare there waiting, boring back into mine like he was ready to leap up at the slightest sign of my distress.

"Of course. Your sister. I get it. Basically, I've got some backtracking to do," Zane said, bringing my attention back.

"Is that okay?"

The corner of Zane's mouth lifted in a devilishly handsome smirk, sending my heart pounding when he said, "You're worth the challenge, and I'm not one that gives up as long as I've got a shot."

My cheeks heated, still far too aware of Tucker's gaze as I stumbled for a reply. "We'll see."

Chapter 11

JET

There was an underlying tension lingering at our table once Izzy left. It was hard to pinpoint at first; the signs were so subtle, but I could feel the shift. I just couldn't quite track the source. Until Tucker's brow furrowed.

"When did Izzy meet Zane?" he asked, his eyes following our friend as he took the last bite of his sandwich.

"A couple months ago. At that last party we had at your grandpa's beach house." Annie shrugged, picking a fry off my tray.

"What?" Tucker's head spun back to face us.

"Yeah. Remember that guy she talked about dancing with? *That's* him."

"You're kidding." Tucker stiffened, a strange bite to his words that made Annie's eyes widen under his stare.

"Uh, no. *Zane* is apparently Leather Jacket Guy," she confirmed.

"And no one thought I should know about this? When did y'all find out?" he barked, something flaring through his expression.

"At Breaker Hall, right before I had to go outside to haul you back from that fight," I replied, my own warning in my voice when I felt Annie tense beside me. I squeezed her thigh below the table, not needing her to go off next, and followed

Tucker's gaze as it snapped back to the edge of the courtyard where Izzy was leaning against the building with Zane. I quickly glanced between them, looking for something that could be setting Tucker off, but Izzy seemed fine. Most of her was hidden from our angle, but none of her major stress tells were showing.

"Uh...why does it feel like we're missing something?" Annie muttered. I raised a shoulder, watching as Izzy searched for us past Zane's arm and how her eyes locked immediately with Tucker's, a moment holding between them before she looked away.

Wait...was that? I shook off the thought, knowing it had to be crazy, but it wasn't until the bell rang with the end of lunch and Izzy waved a goodbye to Zane that Tucker's stance finally relaxed.

"What was that about?" he asked as soon as she walked up.

Izzy swallowed, running her fingers back through her hair before tucking a few strands behind her ears. "He was apologizing for mixing Annie and I up and wanted to know if we could start over."

"And you said..." Annie prompted, picking up her bag as she gathered her trash.

I took it from her, dumping it with mine as Izzy shrugged. "Yes, to that part." Her eyes darted between Tucker and I for a second before I got the hint. *Girl talk*. We were not wanted.

“Come on, man.” I jerked my head at Tucker, watching him fight to look away as we headed to athletics. “Wanna tell me what that was about?” I asked once we were far enough away from the girls.

“What what was about?” Tucker stared straight ahead. *Okay...so we're playing dumb, then.*

“You acting like Izzy was some damsel in distress the second you found out who Zane was,” I threw back.

“Did I?” He laughed. “No telling, man. Don't worry about it.” He clapped me on the shoulder and pulled open the gym door. My eyes narrowed in suspicion before following him inside, and we cut around the corner past the bleachers to the locker room, tension thick in my friend's shoulders with whatever he wasn't sharing, but I wasn't an idiot. I knew something was off. I just couldn't pinpoint what.

“Seriously, man. If something happened at that party that Annie and I should know about—”

“No. It's fine. I just... I don't know.” Tucker yanked open his locker, seeming locked in his own frustration as we changed. He stuffed his bag inside, slamming his locker before gripping the back of his neck. I looked up, my brow raised in open expectation, the room slowly clearing around us as I waited for him to spill. “Shit.” Tucker huffed. “I just... didn't like that he had to pull her away to ask for a fresh start. If that's *all* he wanted, he could've said it right there, in front of us.”

I nodded, processing for a moment. “And if that *was* all he wanted?”

Tucker rolled his eyes. “You and I both know that wasn’t it. We’ve both had to play defense on guys with Izzy, and this guy clearly wants more.”

“And what? That bugs you?”

“Yeah. She doesn’t need any of that drama after what happened in March.”

“You mean drama from that party? You’re worried he’s gonna trigger stuff for her with that?”

“What?” Tucker glanced at me, confused, before shaking off some other thought. “I mean, yeah, I guess.”

I shook my head. “Izzy hasn’t brought anything up that we should worry about. I’d say it’s fine. She’ll speak up if she needs us, and it’s not like she doesn’t know how to turn down a guy herself, right?” I shut my locker door, signaling that we needed to head to class before the coaches reamed us out at one of the last practices, and Tucker nodded, leading the way to the field.

“You’re probably right.”



I’d definitely been right. And so had Tucker. Zane had asked Izzy out so much over the next several days, I wasn’t even sure I knew the count anymore. But I did know she had shot him down every single time.

Most of the guys on campus found it hilarious, but a lot of the girls were bitter. Petty jealousy weighing in that Zane hadn't given them the time of day. Something Tucker and I were shutting down ASAP before it got out of hand.

We were just coming out of the locker rooms later that week when Zane sidled up beside Izzy on one of the sidewalks. Her mouth quirked slightly at whatever he said before she shook her head, her gaze set firmly on the door in front of her. Zane just smiled and turned, determination mixed with frustration filling his expression as he headed back the opposite way.

"Fuck, I'm getting tired of watching that," Tucker grunted.

"What? Izzy getting hit on? Or Izzy getting hit on by *him*?" I smirked, intrigued at the scowl that one earned me.

"Jet, Tucker, hey, y'all got a minute?" Zane jerked his chin when he saw us.

I jerked mine back. "Sure. What's up?"

"Izzy." He got straight to the point as Tucker stiffened at my side. "I need y'all's advice. It's like she's locked down. How do I get in?"

"In how?" Tucker nearly growled.

"Like with a date."

"Make up with Annie for one," I advised, noting the way Zane didn't even flinch. "She's not gonna say yes if you're still at odds with her sister."

Zane released a frustrated sigh. “Was afraid you’d say that. She kind of implied the same thing.”

“So why’d you ask?” Tucker snapped, and Zane raised an eyebrow, irritation flickering behind the surface of his expression.

“Because I’ve been *trying*,” he stressed slowly before looking back at me. “But your girlfriend’s a tough nut to crack. Does she always hold grudges, or is it just with me?”

I shook my head. “You just made a shit first impression. Even if you *thought* she was Izzy, those two are fiercely protective of each other, so it’s not gonna be easy to come back from. You’ve gotta be sincere with it, because Annie can read BS from a mile away. But if it makes you feel better, it’s not just you. Izzy doesn’t usually date to begin with. You really want in? Figure out what will impress her. What can you do that other guys haven’t thought of yet?”

Zane nodded, taking it all in. “Might need ideas on that. Anything from you, Pierce?”

Abruptly, Tucker stopped walking, steel in his expression that threw even me. “Don’t put in that effort unless you mean it. You screw her around, and you deal with me,” he grated, his jaw clenched with his warning. Zane stared back for several long seconds, his eyes tight with their own edge before he gave a nearly imperceptible nod.

Tucker reached for the door to the building to disappear inside, and Zane stalked off in the opposite direction, tension

still pulsing through the air around me even with them both gone.

Well, that was fun.

Shaking it off, I headed inside, finding Annie pulling a book from her locker as she chatted with Emma.

“Hey.” I leaned in to press a kiss behind her ear as I slid an arm around her waist. Her breath hitched, her body naturally leaning into mine.

“Hey.” She smiled, sending my heart pounding in my chest. “Was starting to think you wouldn’t make it.”

“Never. Can’t make the future valedictorian late.” I winked, earning me a jab in my side. I pretended to rub at it while Emma rolled her eyes.

“On that note, I’m heading to class. Let me know if y’all need any help,” she said over her shoulder.

“Sure,” Annie called back, closing her locker door.

I gave her a curious look. “What do you need help with?”

“Plans for your birthday.” She beamed up at me, linking her fingers through mine. “But I’ve pretty well got it covered. It’s just keeping it low key at this point that will be hard.”

My head fell back in a grimace. “I told you I didn’t want anything.”

“I know, but you always say that.”

“And you always do something, anyway.” I smiled, shaking my head with a sigh, knowing there was no point in arguing.

Annie turned, her eyes on mine as she began walking backwards down the hall. “Exactly. And I swear, it’s going to be awesome this year. One you’ll never forget.” She squeezed my hand, giving me a look that was full of promises. My pulse immediately jumped, and I had to fight the urge to pull her against one of the nearby lockers. *If she means...*

I quickly shook the thought away, hiding a frown. She’d backed away from sex so many times now, there was no way that was it. *Right?*

“Come on.” She laughed, like she knew what I was thinking, and tugged me along. When we reached her classroom at the end of the hall, she pulled me close, her fingers twirling through the hairs at the nape of my neck. I let her pull me down for a kiss, stunned as she whispered the next words against my lips. “I won’t stop us the next time. I promise.” Her fingers brushed against the erection now straining against my jeans as she disappeared into class.

My hand snatched out, pulling her back, and I tucked her body between mine and the corner of the wall behind the door. She smirked up at me until she saw my expression, and her eyes widened, alarmed confusion striking the brilliant green that had my heart. I ducked my head to her ear. “Don’t keep making promises you can’t keep.” I strained to keep my voice in check, hearing the way hers wobbled when she replied.

“I know. I’m not trying to.”

“I know you’re not, sweetheart. I know.” I dropped my forehead to hers. “But it kills me each time you pull away. Just

don't promise if you're not sure.”

She nodded, her breath slightly ragged, so much between us that screamed to be expressed. That we couldn't. Not here. But something I knew was coming if this kept on. My heart squeezed when she finally whispered, “I won't.”

I held her there several more seconds and then kissed her brow, letting her go to dart into class just seconds before the bell.

Chapter 12

ANNIE

I won't? Seriously? I won't? What the hell is wrong with me? That was the last thing I should've promised. I shouldn't have even brought it up. Argh!

“What’s wrong?” Izzy whispered as soon as I dropped into the seat beside hers.

I shook my head, pressing my face into my hands, my fingernails digging into the edges of my brow.

“Annie,” Izzy hissed.

I shook my head, pulling a pen from my bag, and then opened up my Chromebook to start on the assignment. “Later,” I hissed, sensing Izzy still waiting for me to answer, but I couldn’t. Not here. I didn’t even know how to answer. I didn’t even know how to explain what was wrong.

Except that I’m a shitty girlfriend that can’t stop screwing up my nonexistent sex life.

Izzy finally looked away to start on her own work, but I knew she was on high alert, sensing my tension. *Ugh...I’d kill to not be in class right now.* I needed to run. I needed the fresh air in my face and the feel of the ground pounding beneath my feet to help me clear my head and just think. My head was such a mess, I only got a few lines written by the end of class, and Izzy was quick to pounce the second the bell rang.

“You. Me. Beach day. The second school’s out.”

“You have dance.”

“And you need to talk.”

“I need to run.” I sighed, closing my Chromebook.

Izzy did a slight double take before sliding her books into her bag. “Crap, now I know you *really* need to talk.”

“Okay, yeah, maybe, but let me *think* first.”

Izzy went quiet, clearly thinking about how to respond as we finished gathering our things. “Can you at least tell me what it’s about?” she asked as we headed into the bustling hall.

My shoulders dropped, knowing it would be torture if it was her holding back from me. “Jet,” I admitted, my stomach performing a sick twist as her brow raised.

“He’s starting to pressure?”

“No. I just...look, I really don’t want to talk about it here,” I hissed, noticing several of our classmates glancing over with her comment.

“Okay, I’m sorry. Just let me know when you’re ready.”

“Will do,” I quickly agreed, relief flooding through me that she was letting it go.

We said goodbye at the split in the hall, leaving me plenty of time to make it to class, but I couldn’t bring myself to hurry, too into my head still for dealing with my newest headache of every afternoon.

Zane was already in his seat by the back window when I went in, and while he’d lately taken to ignoring me and my

annoyed glares, today his gaze shot right to me.

I stifled a groan. I could understand him mixing Izzy and I up. Hell, normally, I'd find it funny, but he'd just been such an ass about it. Everything he did now seemed to rub me the wrong way.

"Can we talk?" he asked the second I reached my seat.

Oh, what fresh hell.

"Ignoring each other has been suiting me just fine. How about we stick with that?" I snapped, keeping my back to him. I heard David and some of the guys behind me snicker and shot them a look. Zane did the same, shutting them all up. I glared when our eyes met, and he released an exasperated sigh in response.

"I get it. You don't like me. I was an ass."

"Correction. *Are* one."

The edge of his lips curled into an amused smirk. "Fine. *Am* one. But only to people who piss me off."

"Oh, I'm sorry." I spun in my seat to fully face him. "*Who* started this exactly? Cuz if I remember correctly, *you* were the one treating me like dirt for days just because you thought my sister was ignoring you."

"Okay, okay, I get it." Zane rolled his eyes, holding up his hands in mock surrender. "I've already said I screwed up. Forgive me for wanting to start over. Maybe start fresh."

It was my turn to smirk. “Why? Finally figured out that my sister won’t give you the time of day if we can’t get along?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “I like her.”

“You barely know her.”

“Then I’m drawn to her,” he countered. “She’s been in my head for months, since I first saw her, and I want the *chance* to get to know her. Something I can’t do without you and I at least tolerating each other,” he finished, actually shutting me up for a moment with his honesty.

My eyes narrowed, taking him in, reading between the lines of his words for anything my own mixed judgment might have tainted. Anything he might be trying to hide. There was more behind his smooth exterior than he wanted me to see. I could tell that much. A roughness to his edges that put me on guard, but there was enough sincerity within it all. I took a deep breath through my nose before replying, making sure the warning was clear in my tone. “Izzy deserves a guy that really wants her. Someone that knows what she’s worth and is willing to work for her.”

“I know she’s worth getting to know. I know I want that chance,” Zane replied.

Well, damn. How was I supposed to shoot him down after that? Izzy liked him. She’d thought about him for months, too. Maybe not as much as Tucker, but enough that I knew her interest was there. I’d even encouraged it a couple weeks ago. *Before* I’d met him. But did I really want to be the one to stand in the way of her being with a guy that actually wanted her

back? And it's not like Tucker's getting his head out of his ass anytime soon, anyway.

Ignoring that flickering warning of irritation in my gut, I gave him a slow nod. "Fine. She likes flowers. Try that." I threw him a bone, praying it wasn't a mistake, and turned back to face the front of the room so I wouldn't have to look at his smug grin.



I bolted for the parking lot as soon as the last bell rang, ready to dump my stuff in Jet's car and take off for the run I'd now been itching for for hours, but found Izzy waiting by his Mustang instead. I frowned. "Don't you have dance?"

She shrugged. "Rescheduled my tutoring girls for Saturday, and Leo can wait if I'm late for our one-on-one. You need to talk. And run. Now, come on." She linked her arm with mine, not even giving me a chance to protest, and tugged me the first few steps towards the track.

My heart swelled slightly as I fell in step, and I gave her arm a squeeze. "You're awesome."

"I know." She beamed and took my bag when we reached the edge of the track. "Now, go. And I expect a report when you're done."

I grinned, popping my AirPods in and selecting my favorite workout mix. "Don't get bored."

"Won't." She held up a book over her shoulder, already headed for the stands, and I was off.

The second my feet hit the track, half my stress lifted. My worries about Zane, my sister, Mom, Jet...it all untangled into neat separate paths I could follow and focus on. Could start to untangle every confusing thought and feeling I had about that promise I'd just made this afternoon. It felt so good, so freeing: the fresh air, the ground beneath my feet, my breaths, all falling into sync. I wasn't even sure how long I'd run before I stopped, but when I finally pulled my AirPods from my ears, the sound of crickets greeted me in the early summer evening.

My brow rose, and I quickly glanced up at Izzy, finding her sitting between a set of seats in the stadium stands, a textbook open in front of her as she scribbled out notes on some homework assignment. She was still writing when I plopped down beside her, and I waited for her to finish up her thought, wrapping up an essay I was still due to write before she slid her book back in her bag and looked over at me.

I just sat. So did she. The sound of crickets around us.

"I'm scared," I eventually blurted, surprising even myself.

"Of what?" Izzy whispered.

"I don't know." I sighed, dropping my head into my hand to push the wisps of stray damp strands back. "At least, nothing that I can name concretely. Jet wants more. He wants *me*. And I want *him*." My voice rose. "But every time we get close, I back off. I know I'm scared, I just can't quite name of what."

Izzy nodded, leaning back so that her shoulder pressed against mine. "I get that. You're not ready."

“But I *am*. I mean, I think I am. I *want* to be with Jet, sis. I really do. But it’s like my body or my head betrays me every time.”

“Ah.” Izzy nodded again.

“What?”

“Your head. You’re too in your head. It’s how you are, sis. You know this. You overthink. Self sabotage.”

“You think?”

“Annie...” She gave me a look that said I’d be dumb to argue. “You’ve worked yourself up and gotten in your head. That’s all it is. I’d swear it at this point. I mean, y’all have been together how long? Four years? Jet’s been so patient, you say you want this with him, and I know back at New Year’s you would’ve done it then if you’d had protection. It was *after* that that you started freaking out. You’re in your head.” She tapped her temple, stressing her point.

I scoffed, half as a laugh, half as frustration. Because she was right. I was just in my head. I wanted Jet. He wanted me. There was nothing to be afraid of.

“You’re awesome. You know that, right?” I bumped her shoulder with mine.

She laughed. “Again, I know.”

“I talked to Zane, by the way.”

Izzy’s head whipped to face me, her hair flipping past her face. “You did?”

I could hear surprise mixed with hope and reservation in her voice, making regret strike me that it had been me holding her back. Something I had to work on.

“I did. He wants a chance with you. Made a compelling case.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “If you think he’ll make you happy, Izzy, I’ll deal.” She sighed and turned to face the field, the astroturf a deep shade of shadowed green with the now setting sun. I frowned and bumped her leg with mine. “Hey, your turn to talk now.”

“Hmmm,” she hummed a light laugh. “I guess so. It’s nothing huge, though, like yours. I like Zane, and I’m glad y’all talked, but I don’t know if dating him is right, not with how I feel about Tucker still.”

“Is that really a reason to turn someone else down, though, sis? I mean, I love Tucker to death, but you know how he is.”

“I do. Doesn’t mean it changes anything.” Izzy sighed and then suddenly stood. “Maybe if I dance on it.”

“Isn’t it getting late?” I looked around as Izzy offered her hand, helping me up.

“Not for Leo, and it’s not like Mom’s home to know.” She grabbed her bag, turning to leave. I quickly snatched mine and followed.

Touché, sis, touché.

Chapter 13

ISABEL

Zane was persistent. I'd give him that. The more I turned him down, the harder he tried. Something that would be irritating with most guys, but something about the way *he* did it was making it hard to resist, especially after he'd talked to Annie. He'd really stepped up his game.

I opened my locker, the last time I'd have to stop here for the school year, and found a pale pink peony waiting inside. It was the only thing in there. I'd cleared it out for the year yesterday. Now, I was just stopping by throughout the day to see how many I would find.

"Okay, I officially wanna know how he keeps beating you here between classes," Casey muttered, sounding truly perplexed. "How many is that now?"

"Eight, today. There were three at lunch." I couldn't help but smile as I picked up the flower, bringing it to my nose to inhale the sweet scent.

"Seriously, *how* are you still turning him down?" Dinah gushed as I added the flower to the bundle lying across my left arm.

Roses, daisies, carnations, even stock in my favorite purple had been left for me to find over the past few days. Part of me felt like I was floating, a foreign giddiness hitting my middle

at this new kind of attention. Guys had tried with me before, but this felt different.

I was afraid to trust it.

I was more afraid to give up on someone else.

I glanced down the hall to where Tucker was leaning against his locker, his buddies around him, laughing and screwing around before our last class of the school year. Girls hovered nearby, those not under one of the guys' arms clearly hoping for a speck of attention. A blonde giggled at something Tucker said, and he looked down with that playful grin of his, giving her a wink. She practically preened at the attention, and I rolled my eyes, my stomach giving a harsh twist as I slammed my locker shut.

“Whoa.” Casey held up her hands. “Sorry, we’re not trying to make you mad.”

“Ugh, no.” My head dropped at the looks on their faces, instantly feeling terrible. “Sorry. It’s not y’all. It’s me. I’m so torn about what to do now.”

“Uh, date the hot, edgy bad boy that does all this swoony stuff just to get a date with you,” Dinah chimed in a sort of sing-song voice, like she was stating the obvious and I was plain crazy.

Maybe I was. Zane was hot, and charming, and had this edge to him that was different from the jocks or surfer vibe types we typically had around here. A mysterious air that had girls dying to know more. Like *I’d* been dying for more of that

night we'd danced. Before I'd gotten all twisted up about Tucker.

“Girl, seriously, if you don't want him, I'll take him.” Casey grinned.

I grinned back, the comment lightening my mood. “If I decide to turn him down, I'll be sure to send him your way.”

“Deal. Holding you to it, boss.” She saluted, and I rolled my eyes with a smile as we split up to head to class. Lord, they could be cheesy, but they were my pack outside of my crew.

Still grinning as I headed into class, I carefully laid my bouquet of mixed flowers across my desk. Were they right? Was I crazy for still turning Zane down? I couldn't deny my attraction to him, and *Lord*, the chemistry I remembered us having on the dance floor. I couldn't help but wonder if it would be the same if I said yes to him now. It was so tempting lately. It just felt wrong somehow to agree to date someone when I was so twisted up about someone else.

As if on cue with my thoughts, Tucker strutted in, nearly every pair of female eyes drawing immediately to his form. Even mine couldn't look away, fixed on the tight fit of his tee across his broad chest and shoulders, the way his dirty blonde strands flopped across his brow, and that sexy, cocky smirk that could drop a girl's panties from a mile away.

Okay, that was a bit of an exaggeration, but hell if it wasn't on target. The number of times that smile had made girls melt. Including me. The difference was I knew the *real* him. The

deeper side that most people didn't get to see. Funny how that was the part that felt like it was slowly killing me now.

Zane doesn't make me feel that way. There's hope with him. Potential...

If only my stupid heart could let go and listen.

Like I was a magnet pulling him in, Tucker's gaze locked on mine, and I watched the flirty tilt to his lips shift into the genuine smile he often reserved for me. My chest swooped, my own unavoidable grin splitting across my face.

"Hey."

"Hey."

Tucker jerked his head at the person sitting in the desk beside mine, and the guy scrambled out to go find a new seat. One of my eyebrows raised, my lips pursing slightly, shaking my head while Tucker claimed the spot beside me. He sat back and ran his fingers through the tousled strands of his hair, his eyes falling for a moment to my desk.

"More flowers?" he asked, fixing me with that heart pounding grin again.

"Uh, yeah." I fought the urge to blush, something suddenly feeling awkward about having them out on display. Did he care? Would it bother him?

Internally, I rolled my eyes at myself with that one. His constant flirting with any girl that crossed his path the past few days clearly said it didn't.

He nodded, studying my expression. “Good. You deserve to be spoiled.” There was a slight shift to his tone that caught my breath, his eyes holding mine just a second longer. Something flickering beneath the surface like there was more he wanted to say, but no sooner had I seen it, the bell rang, and it was gone. He looked away, diving into a conversation with the people on his other side while our teacher started up whatever movie they’d brought for the last day.

Some students settled to watch while others chatted, but all I could do was stare at the flowers on my desk, wondering if I’d imagined the whole thing.



As soon as the bell rang, classrooms and hallways erupted, students whooping and fleeing for the parking lot for the first taste of freedom and summer. Tucker and I headed to the large oak in the courtyard where we’d agreed to meet up with Annie and Jet, finding Annie perched happily on his lap, her fingers twirling through the dark waves at the nape of his neck. Jet’s fingers locked behind her lower back as they leaned in close, noses touching as they nibbled at each other’s lips.

That stupid pang of jealousy I sometimes got hit my middle, and I grabbed Tucker’s arm, sparks flying up my own from the contact. He looked down, giving me a curious look as I pulled him to a stop. Then he smirked, realizing what I was thinking. “We’ll be here forever if we wait for them to finish.”

“Just give them a minute,” I murmured, Annie’s concerns from the other day still weighing on my mind. I didn’t want to

interrupt. But as soon as I said it, they pulled apart, as if sensing we were there.

With one last lingering peck, Annie slid from Jet's lap, pulling him to his feet behind her. They turned to face us, and Jet's brow rose when he saw the bouquet across my arm.

"Wow, that's grown since the start of lunch. Zane any closer to earning that date with you yet?"

I shrugged. "Not sure." My lips pressed together as I chanced a sideways glance at Tucker, still wondering about that moment in the classroom, but any hope I had quickly fell when I saw he was watching a girl's ass as she walked past. Disappointment dropped in my chest. I was so pathetic.

Quickly tucking the emotion away before anyone could see, I added, "It's not like he's even asking anymore since he started sending the flowers."

Jet's smile widened. "So he's playing the long game, then."

"Maybe." I couldn't help but smile back, surprised how much I liked the sound of it.

"Better not be a game," Tucker said gruffly, suddenly glaring at Jet. His tone nearly doused the buzz floating through our group, and I frowned, my fingers rubbing the hem of my shirt as I considered the comment.

Annie rolled her eyes. "Way to kill the mood, Tucker." She shoved against his stomach to push past. "On that note, let's roll. We've got lots to do before tonight."

“We do?” Jet frowned, starting to follow, and Annie spun to walk backwards, sending him a grin.

“Oh, yeah. Tonight. Will. Be. Epic. But I meant me and Izzy. You’re with Tucker for now. *Tonight*, you’re mine.” She wagged her eyebrows, her teeth pressing into her bottom lip with a suggestive look. Annie turned back around, linking her arm through the crook of my elbow to lead us away from the guys. “Oh, my God, I’m so psyched for tonight,” she gushed once we were out of their earshot.

“For what part?” I laughed, letting her pull me along. “The party or your present?”

“Uh, *both*.”

“So you’re ready, then? Like, you’re *sure*?”

Annie shrugged. “Didn’t spend time at the track all week and then waxing yesterday for nothing. Which hurt like a bi-atch, by the way. But dang, does it feel better than shaving when it’s done.”

“Tell me about it,” I agreed, laughing a bit at the memory of us cursing up a storm as we took turns with our self torture last night. Not that I’d never had it done before, but trips to the salon were far and few between since Daddy had passed and our funds were tighter. My modesty was happier this way, but professionals were definitely faster about it.

“So, has Zane really not asked you out since the flowers?” Annie asked, flipping the conversation as we rounded the last building before the parking lot.

“Nope. I thought maybe he would today since we won’t see each other as much, if at all, with summer starting, but...” I shrugged, trailing off, and Annie’s brow furrowed.

“I thought he would have.”

“Me, too, but I’m kind of glad he hasn’t.”

“Huh? Why?” Annie looked over, confused. “Wait, no. I already know.” She closed her eyes, shaking her head. “Izzy...”

“What?” My shoulders stiffened, immediately going on the defensive. “I’ve *told* you how I feel about it. It’s not fair to him when I’m so hung up on someone else.”

“Yet that someone else doesn’t even have you on his radar,” she tossed back, missing my flinch. “He’s too busy screwing around with every other girl in town, and you *know* it’s about to get worse now that it’s summer and all the tourists are going to start flocking in.”

“I know. I know. But sometimes...” I hesitated, my steps slowing as I bit my lip, letting the last of our classmates pull ahead. It was just us lingering behind.

“Sometimes what?” Annie prompted, stopping beside me.

I sighed, knowing I was crazy but dying for someone to tell me that maybe I wasn’t. “Sometimes, I could almost swear Tucker says or does something that makes me wonder. You know?”

Annie’s expression shifted into a mixture of pity and understanding, and I had to swallow back a sudden urge to cry.

Because it *was* just me who saw it.

“Forget it. You’re right.” I started walking, cutting her off before she could reply, suddenly never more eager to leave.

“I don’t *want* to be,” Annie offered, hurrying to catch up. “I just don’t want you to get hurt. You deserve a guy who’s going to put in all of his effort on *you*. Which is killing me to admit this but seems to be Zane.” She gestured to my bouquet.

“You’re right.” I knew she was. Not that my reservations were wrong, but she had a point. Things with Tucker weren’t going to happen, and I *liked* Zane. At least, what I knew of him. “Too bad he’s not asking anymore.”

“Oh, yeah?” Annie grabbed my arms, pulling me in front of her to face the parking lot. I frowned, about to argue, when my eyes widened, realizing what she’d seen.

Zane, leaning with his arm against the hood of my truck, dressed in the same leather jacket he’d worn when I’d first met him. Which made no sense with the late May heat, but hell if I wouldn’t admit the look was sexy, sending a charge through me as I remembered my attraction that first night. The energy that had been between us.

He looked up with the excited murmurs of the lingering crowd, his eyes finding mine like he’d known exactly where I’d stand, and without asking my permission, my heart began to thud with his smile. He gestured back to my windshield, drawing my gaze to painted white letters against the glass I’d somehow missed before.

Is it a yes yet?

My pulse raced, my feet frozen. He held his arm out like he was waiting for the answer, but I couldn't move. Taking it all in. Everything this gesture could mean right now. If I let it.

Annie gave a gentle push at my back, and I stumbled forward, my fingers twisting through the ends of my hair. Zane stood straight as I approached, his smile shifting to somewhere between hopeful and amused.

“So, this yes...” I hedged. “What does it mean?”

“Exactly what I've been asking for.” Zane's eyes bore into mine as he placed the flowers in my arms. “And everything you're willing to let me take after that.”

I swallowed, nerves swooping through my middle as I took that in. Zane wanted me. *I liked him. Doesn't my heart deserve a shot?* Steeling away the remnants of my hesitation, I nodded. “Then yes.”

“Yes?” Zane's grin spread wide, his eyes lighting up.

“Yes.” I couldn't help but smile back, surprised when he suddenly leaned in to place one hand along the side of my neck, like he was holding me in place as he pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth. I sucked in a breath for the short second it lasted, my heart skittering in my chest, and Zane brushed his thumb along my jaw before lowering his arm, his eyes immediately finding mine.

“Just tell me when, and I'm yours.”

Chapter 14

TUCKER

One-eighty, one-eighty-one, one-eighty-two... I counted off another set of curls as *Numb* by Marshmello, Khalid blared through my AirPods, the combo perfect for busting through the irritation that had been grating at my nerves all week. The reason for it was pissing me off more than anything, and I was determined to get it under control before we went out tonight.

“You can’t seriously be doing another set.” Jet raised his voice as he came out of my bathroom, fresh from a shower after his own workout.

I glanced over, raising my brow, and lifted my arm into another curl. *One-eighty-eight...*

Jet shook his head and grabbed his headphones from my desk before dropping onto one of the massive bean bags in the corner of my room. “Fine. Just know I’m not waiting around once Annie texts.”

Fuck. I’d already roped him into a workout on his birthday. It wouldn’t be fair to make him late for his party, too. Counting off the last of my set, I set my dumbbell with the others behind my weight bench and pulled my arms in a cool down stretch behind my head. Jet looked up when I stood.

“Ten minutes,” I told him after grabbing some clothes from my closet and heading to the shower. When I came out, hair

freshly textured into a casual surfer vibe, my stomach rumbled loud enough for Jet to hear. “Feel like grabbing food?”

“Now, you’re talking my language. Especially if it puts you in a better mood.” He hopped up with a grin.

I scowled. “My mood’s fine.”

“Your mood’s been shit since lunch,” Jet called me out as we left my room.

“Whatever,” I grumbled, leading the way past the couple of guest rooms between mine and my sisters’ rooms at the end of the hall. A few Barbies sat abandoned at the top of the stairs, and I rolled my eyes, shoving one over with my foot so no one would trip. “Heading out!” I yelled, hurrying outside before anyone could reply, knowing my mom wouldn’t be able to pass up the chance to second guess this trip. I backed out of the wide, wraparound drive before she could try and pulled into the drive thru at Bob’s Diner just a few minutes later. Jet and I had just gotten our food when my truck beeped with a text across the screen.

Annie: All clear.

I stopped at the edge of the parking lot to send her a thumbs up, just then noticing all of the notifications I’d missed during my workout. Clicking on a video Lisa had posted, I froze as Izzy appeared on the screen with Zane, stuck watching their exchange. Her blush. The flowers. The way she smiled. But when Zane leaned in for a kiss and Izzy’s eyes fluttered closed, a strange twinge ripped across my middle.

“What the fuck?” I grit out, my hand clenching as if to crush the phone.

“Wha-?” Jet said through a mouth full of fries.

“That.” I shook my head in disgust, tossing my phone to the seat between us. I peeled out, whipping around a corner and through a yellow light at the last second. The burger I’d unwrapped a few minutes before sat abandoned on the seat, my hunger vanished, I was so pissed.

“Well, damn,” Jet mused next to me, like nothing was wrong.

“Well, damn? That’s it?” I snapped, shooting my best friend a look. He shrugged, giving me one back like I was crazy.

“I mean, it’s a good thing, right? Zane’s been pulling out the stops, and she likes him...”

“So that means he can just fucking kiss her like that? Last I checked, he hasn’t even taken her on a fucking date yet.”

Jet’s eyes widened for a second before his brow furrowed, watching me carefully when he said, “Do you really think Izzy would have let Zane kiss her if she didn’t want it?”

“Man, fuck off. He didn’t even give her a choice.” I scowled, not wanting my best friend’s reasoning skills right now. He held his hands up, and the truck fell silent, leaving me to fume in my thoughts as I swung around the long route to the stretch of familiar beachfront past Corey’s.

Like any true party, kegs and coolers were already tapped and flowing from the bed of a pickup as we pulled up. There

was a bonfire prepped and ready to flare to life, surrounded by a couple of logs and chairs, just waiting for dusk at the center of the scene. Volleyball was set up on the other side where some of our friends were already gathered, but it was the tents that dotted the surrounding edges that nailed the real surprise of this party.

“No way...” Jet shook his head, a grin spreading across his features when he saw the setup. “We’re actually camping out here?”

I nodded, a corner of my mouth lifting slightly with his reaction. “All Annie’s doing. She even got it cleared with the parents.”

As if on cue, Annie looked up, and Jet’s eyes locked with hers through the windshield, a smile breaking his face as she ran up. My gaze immediately found Izzy, her own smile staring down at the screen of her phone. Frustration swirled through me again, wondering who had her attention...if it was Zane. I couldn’t say why, but something about him with her hit me wrong. Everything in me rebelling the idea.

My jaw clenched as I watched her. Noting the way her hair was pulled back into a loose braid, drawing my attention to her pale skin and the bright strip of purple from her favorite bikini where it peeked through her off-the-shoulder pale pink top. A sliver of skin showed above the waist of her white jean shorts, her long, toned legs left on display. I swallowed, pulling my gaze back up as some baby fine strands of hair played havoc near her brow with the wind. She brushed them back from her

face before looking up, and my stomach clenched all over again when our eyes met. Something Jet must have noticed.

“Don’t be a dick,” was the last thing he said, jarring me from my thoughts before throwing open his door.

Right. I took a half-beat before following him out.

“You’re here!” Annie yelled just before leaping into Jet’s arms, her smile beaming to match his as her legs pulled up around his waist. He spun her around, locking his mouth with hers as he pinned her against my truck, his hand dipping to cup her ass.

I looked up, shaking my head, they were so intense. Izzy walked up, pausing at my side, and I closed my eyes before looking down, still trying to make sense of my tension around her.

“So, this is how our night’s going to look, huh?” Izzy smirked, breaking the ice I doubt she realized was there. I immediately eased, crossing my arms over my chest, and nudged her arm, taking in the cute flush that stained her cheeks as she avoided looking at our friends.

“If we’re lucky, no. Or yes, actually, because I have no clue how those two haven’t screwed yet.”

“Tucker!” she hissed, whacking my arm.

“What?” I smirked, eating up her reaction. “You don’t think they’re going to?”

“No, I mean, of course.” She flustered over her retort, when Annie suddenly interrupted with a loud, whimpering moan.

Izzy's eyes flew wide, and I had to fight not to laugh at the scandalized look on her face.

Taking pity on her, I banged my fist against the hood of my truck. "Alright, cool it or go find a tent." Jet flipped me off before tucking his arm around Annie again, not missing a beat with inhaling his girlfriend's lips. "Seriously," I shook my head, looking back at Izzy, "if we don't leave with two less virgins in the morning."

"We can hear you," Jet growled.

"Good. Stop eating your girlfriend's face long enough so we can go party."

"Oh, my God." Izzy pressed a hand over her face.

Jet finally eased off of Annie after a few final pecks and whispered words and then lowered her to the ground, his arm snaking around her waist at his side as they turned to face us. He grinned while Annie tucked her face to his shoulder to hide from my smirk.

"Shut up, Tucker."

"Didn't say anything."

"But you want to. I can feel it."

"Except I didn't." Yet. Saving it for later would be so much better.

Izzy rolled her eyes. "Ugh, enough already. Happy birthday, Jet." She wrapped her arms around him in a hug.

"Thanks." He squeezed her back. "Y'all ready to go party?"

“Yes!” Annie exclaimed, grabbing Izzy’s hand to pull her ahead, the two of them already chatting away. Jet and I just shook our heads and followed.



ISABEL

The sky was painted in shades of oranges and yellows as the afternoon passed into evening, the robust heat of the early summer sun easing into a pleasant warmth accompanied with a light breeze from the ocean. I was laid on a blanket across the sand with Annie, Casey, and Dinah, the four of us giggling and shamelessly watching our hot guy friends playing shirtless volleyball while we gossiped, drank, and tried not to drool.

Well, *the rest* of them were drinking. I wasn't. I was currently trying to hide my internal freak out. Between the videos of Zane and I spreading like wildfire and Tucker now looking at me every other minute, my nerves were a wreck.

I watched Jet set the ball, and Tucker spiked it over the net, scoring another point for their side. Raising his arms, Tucker whipped around with a triumphant holler, and again, his eyes found mine. I smiled before forcing myself to look away, my heart skipping a beat as traitorous butterflies hit my middle. Was it even okay to have those anymore?

It wasn't like I could just *turn off* having feelings for Tucker just because I'd said yes to a date with Zane. *And then invited him to the camp out tonight...*

My face scrunched, internally groaning at the memory. It suddenly felt way more forward than I had meant it. What had I been thinking? How was I supposed to navigate two crushes in the same proximity, especially when one was a *date*? My

pulse sped and my breathing quickened, because I was clearly in over my head.

A car skidded to a halt in the sand, yanking me from my thoughts.

“We’re here! Let the partying begin!” Megan called out her driver’s side window. The back doors flung open, and Emma piled out laughing with Trisha, another cheerleader from the varsity squad. She was tall and lean, built like a model, and had her waist long Barbie blonde hair pulled into a high ponytail. Her sheer yellow wrap was left open, revealing a tiny string bikini top and the world’s shortest jean skirt. If there was a female version of Tucker at our school, she was it.

My brow furrowed at seeing her, and I glanced at Annie, wondering if I’d missed the guest list update, but she looked just as surprised, her mouth pressing into a tight line.

“Slushies, bitches!” Trisha called out as Emma held up a couple of drink caddies. “And not the virgin kind either!” She waved a large bottle wrapped in a paper bag over her head.

“I’m in!” Casey hopped up from our blanket, already rushing over with Dinah.

Annie and I followed, her eyebrow slightly cocked and her jaw set. I nudged her elbow before she could say anything, letting her know it was fine. Megan held up her hands, stepping aside to meet us.

“I’m sorry. She came over when Emma and I were getting ready today and overheard. We tried to cover, but she didn’t

buy it.”

Annie took a deep breath. “Fine. I just don’t want this getting out of control. It’s a camp out, not a rager.”

“Annie! Izzy! Come on!” Emma waved us over.

“Come on, sis. It’ll be fine.” I tugged Annie’s arm, eager to leave the tension.

“Pick your poison. There’s still blue coconut and watermelon.” Emma gestured to the remaining drinks in the caddy as she poured coconut rum into her slush.

Annie and I reached for the last two pink drinks, and I popped in a straw, immediately taking a sip of the cool sweetness while Annie took her turn pouring in a lavish amount from the bottle.

Trisha rolled her eyes. “Live a little, Izzy.”

“I’m good.”

“Leave her alone,” Emma quickly defended. “We all know the dance floor’s where she gets her high.”

“Mmmm...music! We need music!” Dinah cupped a hand around her mouth and hollered, “Corey, get your speakers going already!”

We watched as he dove for the ball, his wrist bump sending it wild and out of bounds. He landed chest first, all the guys wincing as he slid across the sand. “Argh, fuck! Yeah, on it,” he bit out. Mateo reached out to give him a hand while us girls all bent over into fits of giggles.

“Oh, my God. That was perfect.” Annie was wiping away tears when the guys ran up, abandoning their game.

Corey narrowed his eyes playfully, still swiping at chunks of sand that stuck to his sweaty chest. He pointed a finger at each of us. “Laugh now, ladies. It’s called karma.”

“It’s called don’t eat the fucking ground,” Noah said as he filled his beer, sending Trisha and Megan dissolving into another round.

Smiling, I shook my head and exchanged a look with Tucker as he followed Noah to the keg. Jet slid into the space next to Annie against the tailgate. “Hey, sweetheart.” He kissed her cheek and swiped her cup, taking a long pull.

“Hey!” She swatted his arm and snatched it back.

“Whoa.” Jet’s brows rose when he swallowed. “A lotta coconut. Going hard with it tonight, huh?”

Tucker smirked. “Not the only nuts she’ll be going hard with tonight.”

Oh, my God, he did not. I smacked him in the stomach as Annie gaped.

“What?” He just grinned back, looking way too smug.

Annie scowled playfully and lifted her drink. “You should know how tempted I am to throw this in your face right now.”

Jet grinned. “Don’t waste it, sweetheart. I’ve got plans for the cold on your tongue later.”

My jaw dropped, and Tucker's head fell back in a burst of laughter. Annie whacked Jet in the chest.

“Will y'all stop? Not everyone needs to know what we do,” she hissed, her eyes darting around the crowd where our friends had dispersed to light the bonfire. Taylor Swift's *Cruel Summer* started pouring through the speakers on top of the truck as if on cue.

“Don't mind me.” Corey grinned behind us. “I'm just in charge of the music and booze.”

Annie dropped her head with a groan then looked up through her lashes to glare at Jet, a smirk at the edge of her lips. “You are so lucky it's your birthday.”

He winked. “How lucky?”

“Oh, my God. I can't. I can't with you.” She threw her hands in the air and pushed off the tailgate with her hips, but barely a step later, Jet wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her back against his chest.

“Nope. I think you mean can't *without* me.”

“I—” She cut off with a small shriek as Jet scooped her up. He marched off towards the crowd as Mateo prodded and threw another stick on the bonfire. Sparks flew and flickering flames erupted into a blaze.

“Yes! Me! Wood! Fire!” Mateo bellowed, throwing his arms above his head like he'd just created life. “Now, who brought the food?!”

It was like the cue that started off the next phase of the party. Our small crowd gathered around the bonfire to grill hotdogs and roast marshmallows, talking and laughing, some of us eventually breaking off to dance as the last of daylight trickled into evening. I sat off to the side of the crowd left around the fire in one of the lawn chairs across from Tucker. Annie was perched on Jet's lap in the chair between ours at the end, his arm wrapped around her waist while her fingers brushed patterns on the back of his hand. I looked away, trying to give them privacy when he tucked his face into the crook of her neck, but I still heard Annie's breath hitch and the way she shifted in his lap.

If Annie hadn't already told me what her plans were for later, it wouldn't be hard to guess. There was a different vibe between the two of them tonight, the air charged with an intangible tension. As close as we were, it left me feeling... odd. Out of place. Mostly because the person I wanted to feel that with was too busy comparing latest conquests with Noah just feet away. And the other guy I'd decided to give a shot... nowhere to be found.

I glanced down at my phone I'd been holding between my legs, the blank screen giving me my answer, but still, I debated opening my messages to our last convo when I'd stupidly thought to invite him, wondering if the pin I'd dropped hadn't gone through. *Argh!*

I gripped the arm of the chair, hating second guessing myself like this. If it was Tucker or Jet, I'd just send another text to chew them out, or seriously start to worry, but I didn't have

that history with Zane. That luxury of knowing what would set him off or if this was something normal. With how hard he'd tried to get me to agree to a date, I hoped not. Either way, I wasn't a fan. I took a deep breath, releasing a long sigh without thinking.

"You okay, sis?" Annie turned, breaking off a kiss with Jet. "Babe, stop." She pushed on his chest when his lips moved behind her ear.

"Yeah," I quickly replied, though I knew she'd read right through it.

"Did he say when he'd come?" she asked, proving me right.

"No, just that he would."

"Then don't worry about it. I'm sure he'll be here. Right, babe?"

"Wait, you're sure who will be here?" Tucker cut in before Jet could answer.

Annie popped a shoulder. "Zane."

"What?" Tucker's eyes flew wide, a touch of a bark behind his voice. "Since when was *he* coming?"

My brow knit, surprised at his reaction. "Since I invited him."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Nooo... He asked me out after school, and then I asked if he wanted to come. Why is this such a big deal?" I asked when Tucker scowled.

“Because we all agreed on the list for this camp out, which we kept small for *you*, and then you suddenly decide to start inviting people.”

“One person.” My nostrils flared, the accusation I’d suspected feeling like a slap to the face. I took a deep breath, my fingers gripping the arms of the chair so that my knuckles turned white as I leaned in. My voice came out as a grate barely above a whisper. “It was one person Tucker, which you didn’t seem to care about when it was Megan and Emma bringing Trisha.”

“That’s different.”

“How? Because half the school won’t figure out we’re here with her at the party?” I pointed to where Trisha was posing and taking pictures with the guys by the drinks before no doubt posting all over her social media.

“Oh, fuck, speaking of...” Annie groaned as a couple of cars rounded the corner. She jumped up, but Jet caught her hand before she could storm over to where they were pulling up.

“It’s just some of the football guys.” Noah gave her a funny look.

“Doesn’t make it okay,” Annie snapped back.

“Says the girl dating the quarterback. Way to show support.”

“You’re missing the point, Noah.” I sighed.

“Sweetheart, it’s fine.” Jet squeezed Annie’s wrist. “This birthday is awesome, so who cares if a few extra people show?”

Just makes it easier to sneak off with you later.” He pulled her back down to say the last near her ear.

Annie flushed as a grin curled at the edge of her lips, and she swatted his knee. “Fine. Your call. Come on, sis.” She grabbed my hand.

“To where?” I asked as she pulled me along.

“To make sure this doesn’t get out of control.”

Great. More conflict. I was already tense from the last bout, Tucker’s stare like an anchor at my back. I followed Annie over to Trisha and the guys when suddenly a loud engine revved before swerving around the corner. My face lit up, and Annie nudged my ribs with her elbow. “See? I told you. Go.” She gave me a little push.

I inched forward, relief flooding through me as Zane pulled up, revving his engine a few more times before cutting it and throwing open his door. I felt everyone’s eyes on us, sending my chest tight right beneath my throat, but I ignored it, my gaze locking with Zane’s as he stood and ran a hand back through his perfectly styled strands. Dressed in a black tee with black swim shorts and flip flops, tanned arms and muscles on display in the flickering firelight of dusk, I swallowed, my teeth biting into my bottom lip as I reminded myself not to drool.

How had a guy as hot as this chosen me?

“Hey.” He smiled, shutting his door.

“Hey.” At least, I’d meant to say hey. It came out as barely more than a breath. I stood there, feeling completely awkward and frozen for several moments before he took pity on me and walked up.

“You look nice.”

“Thanks.” I blushed, my fingers going to wind through the end of my over-the-shoulder braid. “Do you, um, want something to drink?” I pointed my thumb over my shoulder like an idiot, but Zane’s smile just went wider.

“Sure. As long as I finally get you back on that dance floor next.” He brushed his lips near my hairline before taking my hand. I sucked in a breath, but he just looked back as he guided me over to my friends, his expression a playful challenge saying, *‘What? Wanna argue?’* He wasn’t wasting a moment of our time.

Neither was I.

Tucking my fingers into the hold of his hand, we came up to the group near the kegs just as Trisha snapped, “Fine, I’m not taking anything down, but I won’t post anymore until tomorrow.”

“Not the same, but fine,” Annie grated.

“Beer? Or there’s wine coolers or rum,” I gestured to the back of the truck, interrupting what I hoped was the end of the exchange.

“Beer.” Zane raised a brow, a hint of humor resting on his features as he looked between Annie and me.

“Great, there’s a keg here, and Corey’s got a few bottles of some other brand in the back cooler that he prefers.” Kyle motioned behind him. “The slushes are the ladies’.”

“Are there any left?” Annie asked as Zane headed to the keg.

“A couple of blue ones.” He shrugged.

“You already finished yours?” I asked, surprise and worry mixing within my tone as Annie moved around to the drinks.

“Nearly, but more fun for later than anything.” She winked at me, adding rum to one of the cups. She’d just put the lid back when Jet ran past me and scooped her up. “Oh, my God,” she shrieked.

“Nope, save that one for later, too.” Jet smacked her butt, and I didn’t even have to see her face to know that Annie just rolled her eyes.

“Seriously, babe?”

“Yup.” He laughed. “Hey, man, glad you made it.” He exchanged a fist bump with Zane. “What do you say we get these ladies out with the dance crowd?”

“Couldn’t have said it better.” Zane smiled.

Annie groaned and flipped the hair of her ponytail back, her face starting to flush from her position. “Uh, I could.”

“Sorry, sweetheart, not getting out of it tonight.” Jet grinned, running over to the dance floor before flipping her back around.

Zane looked at me after chugging the rest of his beer.
“Ready?”

I bit my lip and nodded. *More than anything.*

Chapter 15

ISABEL

We'd been dancing for what felt like minutes but had to be hours, taking a break only once after Annie and Jet had slipped away. I'd grabbed the last slush drink while Zane had another beer. Now, I was transfixed in his hold on the dance floor, loving the way it felt when his hand slid around my waist like it had that night. The way he stepped up behind me, so sure, so confident, how he pressed against me, just enough that I felt the hard planes of his lines and his heat, smelled the scent of his cologne, letting it invade my senses as we moved together. So few could ever find that perfect sync that he seemed to have mastered, though another did come to mind.

I glanced on reaction, catching Tucker watching before he looked away, Trisha tucked happily on his lap near the fire. She leaned in, whispering or nibbling below his ear in a way that made his lids grow heavy. A pit stirred in my stomach, especially after our exchange before, but I shoved it back, not wanting the damper on my mood. Everything with Zane was going so well. The song changed, and he stepped back with a buzz to his pocket. I frowned as he pulled out his phone, and he gestured that he had to step away, *dejavu* from our last dance striking my gut. I nodded, pointing to the drinks, and he nodded back before stepping away from the crowd.

Yet as soon as he left, my senses had to fight not to go into overload. I frowned, not realizing when the party had gotten so

large, and had to squeeze my way past several dancing couples to make it back over to Corey's truck, thankfully finding my slush still tucked carefully behind the tail light. I grabbed a beer for Zane just in case, wondering how long he'd be. If he'd disappear like he had at spring break. But before I could get too in my head, Megan walked up with Emma, sending a smile of relief to my face.

"When did this crowd get here? Annie's going to freak when she realizes," I greeted.

"*If* she realizes." Megan grinned. "She and Jet have been AWOL for a while now."

"Like you clearly were with Zane on the dance floor," Emma teased, reaching around me for her own drink. She took a pull from her blue slush while I flushed.

"Yeah, guess so." I grinned. "I can't believe Lisa put that video up earlier, but oh, my God, I'm so glad he's here."

"We're just glad you stopped turning him down." Megan bumped my hip. "Where is he?"

"Phone call," I answered after another sip, the half-melted sweetness helping to cool my flushed skin. A funny feeling struck my chest, but I shook it off again. What were the chances of losing touch with him *two* parties in a row? *And this time I have his number.* I reassured myself, the strange pull in my chest not quite leaving as I lost myself in chit chat with my friends until I finally saw Zane shifting his way through the crowd. The knot I hadn't realized held my stomach unraveled.

“Hey, sorry,” he said, walking up.

“No problem.” I smiled, handing him his beer. He smiled back before taking a drink while Megan and Emma exchanged glances, backing away.

“Y’all stop.” I rolled my eyes, making them grin. But before I could start up conversation, a couple of guys I didn’t know walked up, stealing my friends away to dance.

“What?” Zane asked at the look on my face.

“Nothing.” Though I felt my brow knit. “I just didn’t realize Summer Ridge was starting to show. Unless they’re tourists.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Kinda? Jet said he didn’t mind if a few more people came, but it wasn’t supposed to get huge.”

Zane looked around, assessing. “Doesn’t seem too crazy. Wouldn’t Tucker and the guys shut it down if it was getting too big?”

“Maybe? Tucker’s kind of mad at me right now, though, so...” I shrugged a shoulder, still looking around at all the people I didn’t know. But Zane was right, it wasn’t out of control or anything. “You know what? It’s fine. Let’s just go dance.” I tugged gently on his arm while I shook my head, knowing I needed out of it.

“Why’s Tucker mad at you?” Zane asked, following beside me, his expression intent on mine.

I looked away, spotting Casey and Dinah at the end of the dance crowd. "Because I invited you." I rushed out, pulling him over to my friends to dance before he could ask more.



ANNIE

“Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?” Jet squeezed my fingers where they were laced together with his.

“Yes,” I laughed, my heart stuttering with happiness. I felt his eyes on my face as I looked out at the water, the moonlight like a dancing ribbon over the rippling waves. Tonight felt so special. Jet was doing everything to make it that way, too. From every flirty moment, to our moonlit walk on the beach, to every sweet whispered word. I knew this man loved me. I knew that he needed me. And I wanted him. So freaking much, I wanted him. But those thoughts from before kept trying to squeeze their way in, and I just kept shoving them back. But at least I now knew it was all in my head.

I took another drink of my slush, inwardly begging the effects of the coconut poison to wash the remnants of doubt away.

“Annie.” Jet tugged my hand, pulling me to a stop, his eyes searching my expression, but I stepped forward instead, leaning my brow against his chin. My arms came up loosely to wrap around his neck, breathing in his patented scent of spice and ocean when he hadn’t been under the hood of a car.

“I love you,” I whispered, drinking him in, my head almost fuzzy from the effects. He dipped his head, pressing a kiss to my brow, and my chest swelled, his touch like the very breath

in my lungs. I sighed as he kissed down along my cheek to my lips, sinking into him with a deeper kiss.

Like so many times before, it started slow at first, relaxed and intimate, the anticipation of what we were planning to do swelling throughout the air around us. It soon turned faster, more desperate, like heat was riding through my veins.

“Babe,” I whimpered, my back nearly going limp when he sucked at my bottom lip, but his arm held me up, safe and secure against him.

“Mmmm...” his throaty chuckle rumbled through his chest. “You ready to head back to our tent?”

I nodded, though a knot of apprehension shot straight from my gut to my throat. I took another long swallow of my drink, the ice half-melted but still plenty cold for what we’d teased about before. I looked at Jet over my shoulder. “Gotta get ready, right?” I winked, sticking out my pink and blue mixed tongue before taking another suck at the straw.

“Oh, hell, yes.” Jet scooped me up for who knew how many times tonight, and I shrieked, wrapping an arm around his neck as he raced for the tents. I gave him a surprised look when he stopped in front of ours.

“How’d you—?”

“Only two tents here look familiar, and this is the furthest one out.” He set me down, unzipping the tent. He leaned in and emerged with a towel. “Milady?”

I nearly snorted with that one but handed him my foot, letting him clean off the damp, cakey sand from the ocean before crawling into the spacious tent I'd set up for us earlier. Several blankets were laid out across the bottom with our pillows at the end. Our bags and a small camp light were tucked off to the side. Nothing overly fancy, just comfortable, but I'd left the top open for a view of the stars.

Sounds of the music and party filtered in from the distance, but they were honestly the last things on my mind when Jet climbed in behind me, pulling up the zipper to close us in our own personal cocoon.

He moved forward on his knees, slowly, like he knew I might run. My breaths in return came quicker, now more than ever aware of what I'd promised. Of what was about to happen. Of what for some reason I'd been too scared to do. *Until now.* I reassured myself. *I can do this. I will do this. For us.* I just needed to take charge. Not give my head a chance to protest.

"I want *you* first tonight." I tugged Jet over by the waist of his shorts. His eyes widened as he tumbled down over me, but he caught himself, his elbows by my shoulders as his knees straddled my hips. He leaned in for a kiss, but I pushed him back, rolling us over so I was on top.

"Like I said, I want you first. Or did you *not* want to feel the cold on my tongue?" I took another long pull from my straw, and his brows shot up before he quickly tugged away his shorts. I propped my drink in the corner between our bags,

turning back around just as Jet all but ripped his shirt away, and I laughed. “Impatient?”

“Dying.” His voice growled low, and I shivered.

I took another deep breath and leaned down, my hand reaching out to grab the soft steel flesh between us. Tightening my grip into a firm hold, I slowly lifted his cock so the tip touched my lips, brushing across it with a kiss. Jet moaned in response, and my tongue flicked out to run the cold across the head. His hips jerked, and I took more in, loving the little curses that flew from his mouth with the sensation of my tongue on his cock.

“Shit. Annie. Fuck.” He growled when I took in as much as I could, feeling it hit the back of my throat. My free hand wrapped around the base, caressing and moving in rhythm below where my mouth couldn’t reach. I moaned with the first of his pre-cum, and Jet’s fingers moved to wind through the strands of my ponytail, wrapping it around his hand. He began to guide me, moving my head at the pace he needed while I kept swirling my tongue. When his feet began to fidget at my sides, I moved a hand to his balls, massaging several seconds before giving them a gentle tug that had Jet groaning and cursing my name, his hot cum spurting into the back of my throat.

Greedily, I swallowed, a grin at my lips like every time I made him finish. I sat back and swiped at the corner of my mouth with my thumb before licking the stray drop away. Jet watched from where he lay, a satisfied smirk on his lips and

his arm splayed across his brow. He looked so relaxed, I wasn't prepared for when he rushed forward, scooping me up so that I suddenly laid under him instead.

“That was amazing. I love you. You know that, right?” he said, brushing gentle kisses along my jaw. All I could do was moan and nod as his hand slipped inside my shorts, no part of me thinking to argue. He slowly shifted me out of my clothes, kissing his way down my body before resting his head between my knees to just stare for a moment, nothing but love in his ocean blue eyes. I lifted my hips. Eager. Dying to feel him touch me, feel his tongue on my body. But he just slowly brushed his way up my thighs, kissing and pecking and licking with torturous perfection until he was finally at my core. My back arched as he drug his tongue up to my clit, swirling around it before latching on. Panting, my fingers gripped his hair when he began to suck, and I mewled.

“Fuck, yes. Love those sounds, sweetheart,” he purred against my pussy, and I whimpered, my hips now moving on their own as Jet slid in two fingers. That perfect pressure building as he continued sucking. My legs began to tremble, and I tugged his hair, needing more. Of this and of him. Jet growled, increasing the pressure from his tongue until I curled up, my body going rigid with the sweet spasm of release.

I fell back against the blankets, just trying to catch my breath, while Jet reached over to our bags.

“Mine. The front pocket,” I said, knowing what he was looking for, but the second I saw Jet pull the box of condoms

free, a knot settled back in my stomach. *No. I want this.* I splayed a hand on my middle, trying to settle my nerves. It was normal to be nervous. And this was Jet. He was everything.

I moved an arm above my head, taking deep breaths to steady myself, my stomach only churning faster. I grabbed Jet as soon as he was ready, pulling him over me, but one look at my expression and he knew something was wrong.

“Annie?”

I shook my head, wanting anything but to screw this up *again*. “I’m fine. I promise.” My voice wobbled in betrayal.

Jet took my face between his hands, forcing my eyes to meet with his, the steady blue I’d seen so many times before now clouded with the touch of frustration I couldn’t even begin to blame him for.

“*Talk to me, Annie.*”

My head shook, my stomach churning. I pushed him back, sitting up to rest my head between my knees.

“Are you sick?” He touched my back, and I jerked away. Just needing air. Space. Something. I was ruining everything.

I managed to shake my head.

“Do you need to slow down? What’s wrong? Please.” I heard the torture in his voice. Of what I was doing to us. It just sent my stomach spinning harder.

“Just give me a minute. Please. I can make myself.” But the second I’d uttered those words, I knew I’d messed up.



JET

The world froze for a minute.

“You can *make* yourself?” My words came out too quiet, and I knew *I* was going to mess this up this time if I wasn’t careful. But those words were like a shot to my gut. She was having to *make* herself be with me? I didn’t think *anything* she’d ever said had hit me that way before.

I suddenly felt sick. Something that must have shown in my expression.

“No.” Annie shook her head, the torture in her features rivaling everything I felt inside, giving me hope, for at least a moment. Until she dropped her head between her knees. “Yes...I don’t know.”

“You don’t know what, Annie?” I felt my voice start to harden, so tired of her shutting me out.

“I just...I just don’t, Jet. I don’t know!”

Tension wrapped around us. The air so thick I could barely breathe.

“Well, don’t worry. I won’t *make* you.” I grabbed my shorts, stuffing my feet in the legs. Just needing a moment of air, of space to calm and to cool. Needing to do something before one of us said anything else we might regret.

“Babe, wait, no.” Annie clutched at my arm when I reached for the tent’s zipper. “Please. I didn’t mean the *make* myself

thing like that.”

I froze, her hand still wrapped around me, and took a breath, praying that was true.

“Then how did you mean it? Because the way I see it, telling me you have to *make* yourself is anything but good.”

She groaned. “I know. I’m sorry. It’s just that, I want this, but I just...”

“Can’t,” I finished for her when she trailed off. “That’s always what you say, but you never talk. You never *explain*. I can’t fix anything if I don’t know what’s broken, Annie.” My voice began to raise. “What was the one thing I made you promise this time? The one thing you swore you wouldn’t do if you weren’t *sure*?”

“Promise sex,” she whispered, sounding sick. Sick of her stomach or herself, I wasn’t sure. She dropped her head into her hands before looking up at me again, those emerald eyes glazed and shining instead of piercing me with their green, the first thing I should have noticed tonight. “Babe, please. I’m sorry.” She reached out, but I moved back.

“How much rum did you add to your drinks tonight?”

She frowned at the turnabout, her eyes darting back to her cup. “Ummm...”

“A lot, then.” I nodded, the edge of my mouth turning into a scowl. “God, Annie, did you have to get yourself that drunk just to *make* yourself *try* to sleep with me?”

“What?”

By the look on her face, I knew she was lost, but I was done. Tossing a blanket up behind me to shield her bare body, I unzipped the tent, stepping out into the hot, Texas night air.

“Babe!” I heard her call out as I strode away. Not that I went far, just to the edge of the water, pacing our steps from before, trying to make sense of everything that had just gone down.

Annie has to make herself try to have sex with me. She can't have sex with me. And she won't tell me why. It was brutal. Like being punched in the chest. If she would just talk to me, it might be okay, but she wouldn't even do that.

Memories of last New Year's played havoc at the edge of my thoughts, a night that I almost lost her because, again, she wouldn't talk. Not until I made her.

Not until I made her...

When it was almost too late.

My heart sank to my stomach, realizing how close that might be. I refused to be too late this time.

Running back to our tent, I could hear her tears through the canvas and hurried to crawl back inside. I pulled her to me, and she clung to my chest. “I'm sorry,” I whispered at her temple. “I shouldn't have left.”

“I shouldn't have stopped,” she sobbed.

“Of course you should have.” I shook my head, squeezing her tighter. “Especially when you needed to. I'll never force you. I'm just so tired of *waiting*, Annie, but I'll never force you.”

“I know.” She nodded, burying her head further into my chest. We sat there for several quiet minutes before I finally spoke again, knowing I needed to do something to turn this night back around. Sex or not, we needed to move forward, and there was only one way I could see to do that.

“We need to talk,” I started, and she stiffened. “Sorry. Poor choice of words,” I corrected, feeling her relax again. “What I was leading up to was, would you like to see what *I* had planned for us for my birthday?”

“You had something planned?”

“I did.” I smiled. “But I’ll need your keys.”

Chapter 16

ISABEL

“Drink?” Casey motioned.

I passed mine over for her and Dinah to share. My girls were still at my sides, helping me fend off unwanted guys while Zane had gone for another beer. I was keeping my slush in hand, relishing in the coolness of the crushed ice after so long on the dance floor, but the longer I danced, the looser I seemed to feel. Strange but relaxed.

“I need a break.” Dinah leaned in to whisper-yell. “Girl’s room.”

“Me, too.” Casey passed me my drink back, but I waved them on.

“I’m good. Y’all go.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah.” I was lost in the music anyway, the beat pumping in my veins. Freedom seeming to pulse from my chest. The crowd wasn’t even bothering me much tonight. Which was nice, but now that my friends had gone, I couldn’t help but notice what I’d managed to ignore all night. Tucker. Or rather, the lack of him.

His presence was always right there, or *watching* me even when he wasn’t. That layer of protection was gone, and without it or anyone else close to me around, I felt...exposed. Bereft. Like something was missing even when it had no

business to be there in the first place. Tucker wasn't my keeper. A sick realization stole over me in that moment. Because Lisa had been right. I was too dependent on Tucker.

Betraying me again tonight, my eyes skirted through the areas of the party until I found his broad form leaning against the hood of his truck with *Trisha* still on his arm, her hands snaking their way up his shirt. He cupped her ass even as his gaze came up to lock with mine, seconds passing before he glanced back down at tonight's apparent conquest.

Frustration suddenly boiled from the inside, that he'd barely chosen to talk to me tonight after such a stupid fight, but I shook it off, taking the lid off my slush to down what was left. Hoping the coolness would wash away this heat that suddenly seemed to cover me from within.

I pulled at the neck of my flowy pink crop top, trying to mimic a breeze, and managed to step away from the main crowd before I realized something might be wrong. I'd never felt this kind of heat before. Like even if I went and jumped in the ocean, it would still take over.

I glanced around, hoping to find Zane near the drinks, thinking we could go for a walk by the water, but my vision stuttered, like it was following a second too late anywhere I looked. I sucked in a breath, suddenly hyper aware of how strange I felt. Like I was me, but floaty. And hot. So hot.

I made it over to Corey's truck as wind picked up from the ocean, licking across my skin, giving me a chance to breathe and calm as I looked for my date. Who was nowhere to be

seen. I turned around, wondering if I'd passed him somewhere on the way, when someone stumbled back, knocking my back flat against the truck.

Just like before, the images struck. The feel of Ryder's body pressed against mine, pinning me against the wall. His lips whispering at my mouth, his nose trailing along my cheek. Keeping me trapped. Hidden. Like I couldn't breathe and there was nowhere to go. Thousands of seconds passing in only moments before just as suddenly as it started, it was done, the guy in front of me ripped away.

I sucked in air I didn't have, my mind scrambling, knowing I couldn't let the fear show. Not if I didn't want anyone to know. I'd handle it alone before facing the consequences of someone finding out. Of *him* finding out...

A few moments passed before I collected and finally glanced up to find my savior. My lip trembled, a relief setting in me I didn't know I could find as I crumpled into his arms.

TUCKER

“What’s wrong?” Trisha asked, my attention distracted ever since I’d caught Izzy’s eyes on the dance floor.

“Not sure.” I shook my head as her hands snaked further up my shirt, her lips teasing me with all the things she’d promised to do. Not that I could focus on it. All I knew was something felt off. I just couldn’t say what.

Well, that was bull. Because I knew why I was tempted to watch for my friend now. It was my own damn pettiness that let the party get this large. I just couldn’t get over her inviting someone after we’d all agreed, and then with Jet sounding cool with it, it hadn’t seemed like it would hurt at first. I didn’t need to hover with Izzy bringing a *date* after all.

Shit. Her date. That’s what was off. Zane wasn’t with her.

A loud engine revved a few cars down, and I watched a black and silver Mustang tear out onto the road, its engine roaring as it sped off. My head whipped back over to the dance floor, a pit dropping in my stomach when I didn’t spot Izzy right away.

Not that she wasn’t allowed to leave, but what if something else was wrong?

I found her pushing through the dancers, confusion flooding her features. She pulled at her shirt like it was a fan and she couldn’t get air.

Shit.

Shoving Trisha's hands away, I took off.

"Hey!" she called out from behind me, but I ignored her, keeping my eyes on Izzy from above the heads of the crowd. I pushed my way through, others parting as I approached, and followed her over to the drink station. I was just about to call out when a couple of guys ran by. One tripped over my shoe and tumbled into Izzy, tossing her back against the truck. Shock splayed across her features, her eyes almost seeming to zone out as she struggled to suck in air. I knocked the second guy out of the way and yanked the first one off my friend.

"Fuck off," I grated, tossing him to the side. "Are you okay?" I turned back to Izzy.

She blinked, confusion crossing her expression for a second before she glanced up. Her bottom lip trembled, and she threw herself into my arms.

"Whoa." I held her close, doing my best to move us away from the crowd so I could check on her. Throwing open Corey's driver side door, I guided her under the light, shielding her body with mine from others around us as she trembled.

"Izzy, what's wrong? Are you hurt?" She shook her head, her breaths still too quick, and then she moaned and reached for her head. "Izzy, it's okay. Slow down. Talk to me."

She closed her eyes, forcing deep, slower breaths before she managed, "Something's wrong. I don't feel right."

"Don't feel right, how?" I pressed.

“Like...like I’m too hot, and my arms are heavy, but I feel floaty. And every time I try to look at something, it’s like my vision follows. I know it sounds crazy, but it’s weird. I don’t know what’s wrong.” Her words tumbled out, and my brow furrowed.

“Izzy, look at me.”

Her lids flickered open, looking up into my own, but the clear emerald I’d hoped to see looked glassy and glazed. I glanced down at the cup in her hands, fear spiking my chest. “Izzy, where did you get this drink? Did someone give it to you?”

If it was Zane, he was dead.

“No. I grabbed it from the caddy earlier.”

“And you didn’t put anything in it?”

“What? No...” She trailed off, my words starting to sink in. “I just kept it behind the tail light like Emma and Megan earlier?”

Fuck. She’d left it sitting out, at this party *I’d* let get too large. Full of too many fuckers I had no clue if I could trust. I started to feel sick, knowing if someone had slipped her something it was basically on me. Though they’d be dead when I found them.

I pulled the cup from her hands, holding it closer to the dash light, praying for what I hoped to be true, and almost had to laugh with relief when I found the large E carved into the styrofoam. I took a moment to breathe.

“Looks like you and Emma got things mixed up.” I pointed out the letter on the cup.

Izzy groaned and dropped her head to my shoulder. “Great. I get to be an accidental first time drunk.”

But a hot one. The thought struck me before I could stop it.

“Can we go out by the water? I’m too hot.”

“Yeah.” I stepped back, tossing the cup in the cab and shutting the door as Izzy stepped aside. She wobbled, stumbling away from the truck, and I reached out to grab her arm.

Fuck, how much did Emma put in that thing?

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” She straightened, readjusting so she was gripping my arm as we walked. I guided her out by the water, the edge of the ocean cool at our feet, and heard her sigh in relief.

“Oh, my God. Zane.” Izzy suddenly spun, and I had to catch her before she fell. “He went to get a drink, but I couldn’t find him. He’ll be looking for me.”

My brow furrowed. “Izzy...Zane left.”

“He what?” She stared up at me. Confusion marring her soft features, like the words didn’t quite make sense.

“He left.” I tried again. “I saw him pull away a few minutes ago.”

A few moments passed before she whispered, “Oh... Maybe he texted?” She pulled her phone from her pocket, and I could

hear the touch of hope in her voice before her shoulders dropped. “Nothing.” She stared at the screen for a minute. “Maybe I should call.”

“Whoa, nope.” I grabbed her phone from her hands, shoving it into the pocket of my shorts out of reach.

“Hey.”

“Sorry. No good comes from drunk dialing. Or texting,” I added when I saw her prepared to argue. “You can have it back later. Then, tomorrow you can decide how pissed you are for him ditching you on a first date.”

She winced, and I immediately felt like an ass.

“Sorry. But it was shit for him to leave and not tell you.”

“I know.” She sighed, nearly stumbling again as she turned away. “Argh,” she growled, her hands clenching at her sides. “I hate this. I don’t like being drunk. I don’t *want* to be drunk, Tucker. It doesn’t feel right.” She looked up at me, her voice pleading for me to fix it somehow. The sounds of the waves lapping the shore at our feet, music and our friends in the background. And all I could think was how gorgeous she was in that moment. Sadness, frustration, and all. There was such pureness in her soul.

Zane is an idiot.

Any guy she decides to give a shot is an idiot if they pass her up.

Exactly why I didn’t let most of them have a shot. This right here. She didn’t deserve to be hurt. But if I couldn’t help that

this time, I could at least help with the other.

“Come on.” I snaked her arm through mine to steady her, guiding her down the shore. “I’ve got some water in my bag. It’ll help you sober up.”

“Really?”

I nodded, a smile touching her features for the first time since she’d been near me that night.

When we reached the tent, I held her steady as she brushed away the sand from her feet, then watched as she crawled inside, looking anywhere but at her ass in those tiny white shorts. When I followed, I found her sprawled out with her hands above her head, the room divider open so that she was half on her side of the room and half on mine. A small camp light was on in the corner, trademark Izzy even if the moon had been enough for us to see. I leaned over to my bag and pulled out a water, putting the bottle in her hand, then took a seat by her side and helped pull her up to sit beside me. “Now, drink.” I nudged her shoulder with my arm.

Watching her fumble with the cap for a minute, I eventually reached over and twisted it free. She gave me a tiny smile, and I waited while she took long swallows, eventually getting most of the bottle down.

“Are you sure this is going to help me sober up? Because right now, all I want to do is lie down.”

“Then lie down. *After* you finish with that water. Even if it doesn’t sober you up, it’ll help the hangover not be as bad

tomorrow.” Izzy groaned at that, her face scrunching at the thought, and I couldn’t help but grin. “I know. Who would’ve thought *you’d* be getting a hangover for Jet’s birthday.” I nudged her arm again, making her laugh a little this time.

She took another long swallow, polishing off the bottle, and handed it back to me with a sigh. “While that’s true, I think you also mean, who would’ve thought I’d be the one getting *ditched. Again.* At another party. Same guy.” She tossed her hands out, laughing sardonically before lying back on the blankets, and sighed, the sound almost hollow with her next words. “I feel so pathetic, Tucker.”

I inwardly winced, hating that she was feeling that way. Hating anyone that could make her feel that way. *Zane better have a damn good excuse for ditching her tonight.* Which was crazy because even the thought of him near her still pissed me off.

“You shouldn’t.”

“Why? Annie’s BS radar was going off. I should’ve listened. Even you don’t like him much.”

True. “I just didn’t want him to hurt you,” I corrected, lying through my teeth. “And Annie was pissed about how she met him more than anything.”

“Yeah, still right, though, it seems.”

“Maybe.” I popped a shoulder. “Guys are dumbasses. He still might text.” *I’ll feel like punching him either way.* My brow furrowed at the thought, and I pulled her phone from my

pocket, tossing it onto her bag. “Just in case. But you should still wait until you’re sober to answer.”

Izzy exhaled a little snort sound and then sighed again. “Lay by me? I really do feel weird.”

My mouth quirked in an understanding smile, and I leaned back, propping my head on my arm, my other lying between us, just a breadth away from touching hers, letting her know I was here and she was safe. I looked up through the top of the tent, the stars like a vast blanket above us in the sky. It was peaceful in that moment. Comfort filling the air around me but charged with something else that I didn’t know how to name. Reminding me of the last time I’d woken with her next to me. Those several seconds of contentment and peace before we’d realized where *and how* we were and sprung apart.

Izzy suddenly laughed. “Oh, my God, do you remember the last time we slept together?”

I barked out a laugh. “I was just thinking about that. Your sister was so pissed. I’m lucky I made it out of there with my dick still attached.”

“Not that we did anything.” Izzy giggled. “But this kind of reminds me of that now. You were there for me that night, too.”

“Always.” I looked down as she looked up. Our eyes locked, and for some reason, I couldn’t seem to look away, lost in the depths of those mossy currents of emerald green. There was a connection there between us, something passing that only the

two of us could share. I would always protect her. Always be there for her. I needed her to know that, too.

She shifted, the tiny movement bringing the tip of her nose to mine, and something in my chest jumped. I hovered as she leaned closer, her breath brushing at my lips. My brain had faltered. Nothing in me reacting except I felt everything, and it would ruin everything, ruin *us*, if this went too far.

I sat up, suddenly feeling numb. “I’ve, uh, gotta go. Bathroom. There’s more waters in the bag if you need them.” I scrambled from the tent, leaving my best friend breathless and confused.

I was such a piece of shit.

Chapter 17

ANNIE

I had no idea where we were going. Other than the familiar sounds of waves ahead of us, Jet kept his hand over my eyes, his other hand guiding me at my waist as he walked behind me.

“Watch the steps.” His fingers pressed gently into my side as he moved around me. “Keep your eyes closed,” he warned before lowering his hand to take both of mine. I squeezed my eyes shut tighter, anticipation and excitement beating my curiosity. Bits of tall grass brushed at my calves as we descended the wooden steps, and I soon felt sand shift under my feet, confirming my suspicions about the ocean.

“Jet, seriously, where are we going?”

“Soon.” I could hear the smile in his voice, the sound infectious, even after what happened between us. He was clearly excited, and as much as I was dying to know, I didn’t want to ruin this for him.

Letting him guide me along the beach, it wasn’t long before I felt wooden planks below my feet. *A pier*. Or at least, what I thought it would be. We took a few more steps before Jet stopped, and I felt him move behind me again, one of his arms sliding around my waist. He pulled me back against him and murmured, “Okay.”

I opened my eyes, and my breath caught in my chest. The ocean splayed out before us, dark and rippling under the night sky, but I recognized the pier he'd brought me to in an instant. Without thinking, I moved, my hands reaching out for the railing. My fingers curled over the top beam, moisture still clinging there from the ocean's last spray. Jet moved beside me, but he didn't speak, just letting me stare into the silence. For once, I was speechless. I didn't know how he knew, but he did. Jet had taken me to the one of the few places that could help everything twisting inside of me make sense, but it was the house in the distance that spoke most of all.

I closed my eyes, images floating through my thoughts. All the days spent there with my friends, our families, my mom. My *dad*. Parties, our nights on the beach around a bonfire and our days surfing and water skiing in the water just below my feet. The mornings on Tucker's grandpa's boat. All of it. All of what I'd lost, what our group had lost, surrounding me. I wasn't normally so sentimental, but this was more. This touched a part of me I'd somehow buried. Or at least thought I had, because it wasn't until this moment that things finally made sense.

I opened my eyes, finding Jet watching me, nothing but love and compassion in those ocean blue eyes. "How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"That this was the exact place I needed to be."

“Because this was the last place I really saw you smile and the place I first felt you start to pull away.”

A pang filled my chest because I knew exactly what he meant. This place was my dad’s last good day. The last chance I had to hear his booming laugh. It was also where I’d come after we’d finally placed him in the ground. I’d stared out at the water for hours that day, and Jet had never left my side. But a part of me had pulled away from him. Something I thought I’d already fixed.

“Annie?” Jet asked when a tear slipped down my cheek. He reached up to brush it away, and I shook my head, letting him know I was fine.

“You were right before. About needing to talk. I just don’t think I was ready then.”

“And you are now?”

I nodded and pulled him down to sit with me on a nearby bench, the light from the post overhead shining down just feet away. Enough where we were still partly in shadow but I could see every expression of hope and longing on his face. Of all the damage I had done. I took his hand, relief and calm flooding through me as his thumb started an instant caress.

“I didn’t mean to break my promise tonight,” I began. “I really thought I was ready. I’d even gone for a run before talking it through with Izzy. I’d thought I’d just built everything up in my head so much that I was getting in my own way.”

“But that’s not it?”

I shook my head. “Well, partly. But it’s this.” I swept an arm out around us. “Do you remember our talk last New Year’s? Why I was trying to pull away?”

“You mean when you thought leaving me before losing me would hurt less?”

I winced, hating the way it sounded. “Yes.”

“I thought we talked through that.”

“We did. Or I thought we did.”

“So this is still about that? You still want to leave me?” Jet asked, dejection and fear filling his tone.

“No. I don’t think I could ever do that. But I think some piece of me never stopped pulling away. Like there’s still this fear of if you left me first. Which is stupid. Because I know that even though my dad’s not here anymore, *you* are. I *know* this.”

“But the fear’s still there,” Jet surmised.

I let out a long sigh. “Yeah.”

“Okay.” He nodded, something setting in his thoughts from his tone.

“Okay?”

“Yeah. Okay. I’ll wait. Until I can prove to you that I’m here for the long haul, that I’m not going anywhere, I’ll wait. As long as you need me to, sweetheart. I’ve told you before, we’re endgame, remember?”

Tears sprang to my eyes. *How could this man be this wonderful?*

“How can you say that?” I said instead. “How can you be fine with it? With waiting? I’ve made you wait so long.”

“Because you’re it for me, Annie. Every piece of me is yours. There is no me without you.” He moved my hand to his chest over his heart, and my brow furrowed when he moved to one knee in front of me.

I gasped.



JET

My eyes locked with this beautiful girl in front of me, nerves battering away in my stomach when I heard her sharp intake of breath, wondering if she already realized what I was doing. I reached in my pocket, my fingers tracing the small piece of metal as I held her gaze, trying to find my courage. I'd wanted to do this before, so many times, but I'd wanted it to be perfect.

Coming here felt like it cemented that. Like it was coming full circle. That last good day we'd had out here before Patrick Donovan had passed would be forever ingrained in my memory. Annie's laughter, her smile. I'd taken that last chance for permission, and while we might not be ready yet, I had her dad's answer in my back pocket. Steeling my nerves for what I was about to do.

"I love you," I stressed to her, my free hand rubbing circles into her palm.

"I love you, too." The corner of her lips lifted into that perfect crooked smile, but I could see her apprehension, the way she watched me and the hand in my pocket.

I just prayed I didn't mess this up.

Swallowing, I pulled out the ring, holding it up between us. "I wanted to get you something special."

"Jet?" Annie breathed.

“Just trust me.” I reassured, holding her gaze, watching her war between her faith and her fear, already knowing which would win out.

She gave me the tiniest nod, her hand trembling slightly as she held it out. I reached for it, holding it steady as I slid the ring onto her finger, watching as she tilted her hand to admire the interlocked diamond hearts, the stones glinting in the pier’s overhead lights.

“It’s beautiful...but what does it mean?” she asked, searching my expression.

I smiled, still catching the hint of her apprehension. “For now, it’s a promise. One day, when we’re ready, I’ll propose, but until then, this is my way of saying you’re my forever. That I’m never leaving you, and you’ll never lose me. Not as long as I’m around to fight for us.”

“Oh, babe.” She grabbed my face, pulling me in as she leaned down to meet my lips, her fingers threading in my hair. I groaned, shifting myself closer as she came down to meet me on her knees. One arm snaked around her waist as the other came up her back, holding her to me, needing her close. I nibbled at her lips, and her back arched her front against my chest, making me only crave her more. Her head tilted back, and my lips found her neck, nibbling, breathing, caressing as I trailed along her smooth skin, every sound she made like a fire to my soul, but I knew I had to keep it in check.

She tugged at my collar to deepen the kiss when I brought my mouth back to hers, and I couldn’t help but groan as she

pulled me closer, willing to give her everything she needed. Knowing even with that I had to keep my promise.

Her lips suddenly parted from mine, just long enough for her to pull her shirt over her head, and I groaned, knowing I was a goner. But whatever she was willing to give, I would take. Those green eyes set so intently on me, I watched as she reached back to slowly untie the strings of her bikini top. As soon as the top half fell and revealed her bare flesh, my hands were on her, cupping the mounds that fit so perfectly in my palms as my calloused thumbs brushed over the sensitive peaks.

She whimpered, her fingers winding in my shirt to tug, and I helped her pull it over my head, my brow rising when she suddenly pushed me back to straddle my hips. She leaned over me, and my hand wrapped around the back of her neck, pulling her forward so I could replace my touch with my lips, sucking in her bared, sensitive flesh. Rolling it under my tongue as my free hand still caressed the other.

She hissed in a breath and then moaned, her hips beginning to grind against mine. My hands slid down to knead her ass, doing everything I could to resist the temptation of rolling her over and grinding so fast that I'd make her scream. This had to be her pace. What she wanted.

It didn't take long before she cried out and tensed in my arms. Her toes curling and her legs trembling. I brought her lips back to mine, nibbling as she caught her breath, but I wasn't prepared when she grabbed my swim trunks, yanking

them free. She reached into the pocket and pulled out a condom, and my brow shot up.

“Thank God,” she murmured.

I swallowed, my eyes immediately going to hers, needing to know if she was sure, but every ounce of doubt I’d ever caught in her gaze was gone. Only fire and determination left in its place. She wanted this as much as I wanted her. I nearly lost it with just that look and flipped her to lie beneath me, holding her up for just a couple of seconds to spread my shirt beneath her bare back.

She was crazy if she thought I’d let her do all the work alone.

My fingers curled under the waist of her shorts, peeling them down her long, tanned legs. I tossed them aside as Annie ripped the condom package open, and my dick jerked, every nerve in my body firing as she rolled the latex on for me. I forced myself to keep control. I’d waited ages for this. I could wait ten more seconds for her to take charge. To get whatever confidence and reassurance she needed for this to happen.

The second she was done, I reached between her thighs, needing to make sure she was ready. I’d never be able to hold out long enough if she wasn’t, but as soon as I touched her, I groaned.

“Fuck, sweetheart, you’re already dripping.”

She nodded, her teeth biting into her bottom lip. Her hand reached to pull me closer. “Babe, please.” Her hips wiggled,

something begging in her voice, and *fuck*, I was almost done right there. This was nothing like any of our times before. Intense and expectant with what we were about to share. I covered her body with mine, my gaze seeking permission one last time before we crossed that line.

“Don’t stop,” she pleaded, her body thrumming anxiously beneath me. She dragged my mouth down to hers, and I kissed her fierce and deep before shifting my hips forward into a perfect moment of bliss.

Annie tensed as I slid in, and I groaned as I filled her for the first time.

“Sorry,” I murmured, making myself pause at the tears that sprang to her eyes. One trailed down her cheek, and I swiped it away with my thumb.

“No.” She shook her head, emerald eyes blazing with so much love. “It’s like you’re *home*.”

My heart swelled in my chest, because it was exactly how I felt. She was home. She was everything.

My eyes closed as I lowered my forehead to hers. “Just let me know when, okay?”

“It’s fine,” she breathed. “Just go slowly.”

I nodded, slowly pulling back, doing my best to take her cues as I found a rhythm, desperate to make this perfect for us both.

I brushed a kiss along her temple, feeling her breath against my neck, how it slowly quickened, matching the rhythm of our

hips. How hers began to rock, matching me thrust for thrust as her body finally began to ease. Every stroke I made inside of her bringing me that much closer to the finish I didn't want to come.

Nothing could have prepared me for this with her. For everything I would feel. It wasn't just the physical. It was every moment, every touch stoking the fire to our connection, filling me from within. Her arms came up around my back, clutching me to her, and I desperately held my pace, praying I'd done enough for her as I fought to keep going, her moans my kryptonite.

"Annie," I tried to warn, my breath against her lips.

She nodded in understanding. "Touch me?" she panted, having no idea what she asked of me. Determined, though, I reached between us, giving her the extra friction she needed, but only a few strokes later, I couldn't hold out. Pressing my forehead back to hers, I groaned my release, desperately still touching her as I came. Miraculously, she followed, her body tensing below mine as I felt her spasm around me.

I kissed her brow, her nose, then her lips, languishing there as she came down from her high. Everything perfect in this world right here in my arms. "I love you," I whispered.

Her lips curved into a smile. "I love you, too."



ANNIE

“You okay?” Jet asked.

“Mmmm...” I purred, snuggling further into his shoulder. “Perfect.” My fingers played at the hairs of his chest, circling so the dark strands swirled around my finger, the diamonds on my ring glinting in the faint hues of morning light. My chest swelled. I didn’t think I’d ever been so at peace. I doubted Jet even knew how much he’d really done for me tonight. A part of me that hadn’t surfaced for ages felt free, and I didn’t think I’d ever felt more in tune with this man beside me as I did right now.

We’d come back to our tent after the pier and laid here for hours in each other’s arms, the two of us staring up at the stars as we talked. It had been the most perfect night. I didn’t want to let it end.

A buzz came from over by our bags, and Jet stretched an arm out, grabbing his phone. He yawned, rubbing his thumb and index finger across his eyes before glancing at the screen. I looked up, curious.

Harper: Last night sucked. Tell me you’re coming home soon so I don’t have to be here anymore.

I frowned as Jet stifled a groan, and he shifted so he could send a text back to his sister.

Me: What happened?

Harper: It's tense as hell again. They won't admit it, but I heard them fighting. I can't figure out what's going on, and Colton's scared.

Me: He doesn't need to be scared. They're probably just going through some shit. I'll be home soon.

Harper: Sorry. And Happy Birthday, douchebag.

Me: Yeah, thanks.

Jet dropped his phone at his side on the blankets and then exhaled a moan of frustration, the wisps of his breath rustling my hair. I looked up, finding him already peering down at me.

“This has to end, huh?”

“Fraid so.” He offered a half smile.

I rolled away while he sat up, and we went to dig in our bags for clothes. I was just pulling on my tank top when I saw several missed notifications from Izzy on my phone. My eyes flew through them, my pulse beginning to race.

“Babe, I have to go find Izzy.”

“Everything okay?”

I looked back to where he was tugging his shirt over his head, his black waves in casual disarray that had my fingers itching to run through them again. But one look at my face and he knew the answer. “No.”

ISABEL

I felt like such an idiot.

Why? Why had I done that last night?

Well, of course, I knew *why*. Alcohol. My greatest nemesis right now. As if things weren't already awkward enough, I'd gone and tried to *kiss my best friend*. Which *clearly* had not gone well. I'd terrified him. Crossed a boundary that I freaking *knew* to leave alone, but had I listened to myself? Nope. *Thank you, alcohol.*

But he leaned in, too. He didn't pull away. Not right away, at least.

My thoughts spiraled in their constant torrent they'd been in for hours. Because as much as I wanted to argue what a dumb, stupid, *drunk*-motivated idea it had been, I wasn't wrong. Tucker and I had shared a moment last night. It was impossible not to feel the pull between us when I'd leaned in.

Unless it was just one-sided.

"Argh!" I pulled my pillow over my face to scream. Whatever the case, I'd been alone in this tent with my thoughts the entire night.

Tucker had not returned.

I had screwed up everything.

Deciding I was done wallowing, I sighed and forced myself to sit up, brushing loose strands of hair away from my face. My eyes fell to Tucker's bag, and I debated a moment before crawling over to dig out another water, my mouth cakey and parched, feeling just as gross as the rest of me. I downed half the bottle and put the lid back on before going to find my toothbrush. My mouth at least needed to feel normal, and I honestly just needed out of this tent.

I need to find Tucker. My stomach jumped just at the thought, not that it felt great this morning anyway, but if things were ever going to go back to normal between us, I had to bite that bullet. I'd lie if I had to to make it okay. Blame it all on the alcohol, or I was shifting for an itch. Something. *And if he happens to feel the same way about me?*

I closed my eyes, refusing to let myself hope. But I already knew I had. Hope had flickered throughout my middle all night. Exactly why those thoughts wouldn't leave me alone. But I wouldn't have my answer if I didn't talk to him.

Resolved, I loosened my braid and took a couple of minutes to run a brush through my hair, the locks now falling in waves down my back. I cleaned up my makeup and pulled on a purple sundress. Just enough to make myself feel put together before unzipping the tent.

Brushing my teeth around the backside, I put my things away and grabbed my phone, the lack of notifications from Zane, or anyone, still staring up at me in mock display. But I'd

been good and hadn't texted. *Him at least.* My eyes widened in horror, remembering what all I'd texted Annie last night.

I quickly messaged that I was fine. She didn't need to worry. The last thing I wanted to do was ruin her time with Jet.

Praying she didn't freak out before reading my last text, I headed off down the beach, knowing I needed to get out of my head. It was dead, everyone passed out in tents or on the sand, so many people had shown up by the end. Remnants of the party laid across the beach, but more so over by the cars. It was going to be hell picking all of it up.

Movement a couple of tents down caught my attention, and I looked over as wind caught a half-opened flap.

I stopped. Frozen at the sight of Tucker with Trisha. Her bare chest pressed to his stomach. A blanket barely covering the bottom half of her ass and both their bare legs on display. It was all too clear what they had done.

My heart dropped to my stomach, and it churned. My hand covered my mouth, feeling sick, any hopes I had from last night dashed into grains smaller than the sand below my feet. I forced myself to swallow and turned away, needing away from that sight. Needing away from my thoughts. Needing away from myself. From here. Needing my sister.

No. It's fine. You expected this. You knew it wasn't likely his feelings would be returned.

But expecting it and seeing it full front and on display were two different things.

It's fine. I told myself again. Though my heart was stupidly breaking in my chest.

I hurried away, heading over to my truck to pull out a trash bag, start the cleanup if nothing else, when a glimpse of black caught my attention by the dwindling fire.

Zane.

He glanced up right as I saw him, dark rims beneath his eyes. No, a *black* eye I recognized as I moved closer. I sat in the chair next to his, my phone in my lap. My hands covered it like it was proof, my defense for whatever this conversation was about to be. Though it looked like he might have a pretty good defense of his own.

“So, is there a story there?” I gestured to his eye.

“Yeah.” Zane smirked, looking relieved, and straightened in the chair, his movements clear that there were more bruises beyond what I could see. “But I think I owe you an I’m sorry first. I didn’t mean to rush out on you last night.”

“Why did you?”

“Let’s just say that I’ve got a best friend with *really* horrible timing.”

“Isn’t that why you ditched me back at our spring break party?”

“So you see my point.” He raised a single brow, a hint of that sexy grin peeking through, and I almost couldn’t hide my smirk. He wasn’t out of the woods yet, though.

“Okay, you got the pass last time for not having my number. What about now?”

“Ah...” He grimaced, his head falling back against the chair. “I was *really* hoping my text had gone through.”

“We have service out here, Zane.”

“Not here. I sped off too quick. It was when I got there. But shit kinda went down fast.” He pulled his phone from his pocket, showing me a completely busted screen. “It doesn’t even turn on anymore or I would’ve called. I headed back here as soon as I could, but I wasn’t sure which tent was yours, so I just...waited.” He shrugged a shoulder.

“Huh.” I released a puff of air and just sat there for a moment, processing, but my silence must have worried him because he continued.

“Look, I know I messed up, but I would’ve done it differently if I could’ve. I swear. Give me another chance? A redo.”

“Izzy!” Annie’s voice rang out before I could respond.

I glanced over, finding her running up with Jet. “Hey.”

“Hey.” She dropped down on the log across from me, her eyes darting between me and Zane in question. ‘*You okay?*’ I could read the question in her glance.

I nodded, reassuring her as Jet took the spot at her side. She leaned into him, settling against his shoulder like it was the most natural thing in the world. I smiled even as my heart ached. *What I would give to have what they have.*

“How did y’all’s night go?” I asked when they had settled, and by the grin on Jet’s face alone I knew that things had gone well.

‘*You’re so spilling later.*’ I raised a brow at my sister. She smirked.

“Ours was good. You’ll have to tell me more about *yours* later.” She glanced back between Zane and I, and I rolled my eyes.

“Zane was actually just asking for a redo.”

“Oh, yeah?” Annie gave him an assessing stare. He held it, not backing down.

“Okay...” Jet interrupted when tension started to rise. “How about we start getting things cleaned up? Harper texted, and I need to get home.”

“Oh, yeah, sure.” I jumped up, eager to avoid the tension, and ran straight into someone’s chest as I rounded the chair. “Ugh.” I grunted, my hand going to my nose as I looked up. I froze when I saw it was Tucker. Our eyes locked, guilt and avoidance dancing in the whiskey brown looking back at me before he looked away.

“What’d I miss?” He ran a hand back through his hair, sunlight glinting off the strands while I was left trying not to stare, a thousand emotions rolling through me. He didn’t even want to look at me. It was like a shot to the chest.

“We’re cleaning up,” I snapped, stepping around him.

“And Zane’s asking for a redo,” Annie called out as I headed over to the truck.

I felt Tucker stiffen even from steps behind me, but I refused to look back, pulling out a trash bag. I handed a second one to Zane when he walked up.

“So, the tension’s fun,” he quipped. “Can’t help but feel like I missed something *here*.”

“Nothing worth mentioning.” I popped a shoulder, fighting the urge to look back at Tucker, *feeling* his eyes on me and Zane.

“That’s fine. I get it. Maybe I’ll get it out of you tonight. On that redo...” Zane trailed off with his prompt, a devilish glint in his eye and a single brow cocked in playboy style as he waited for my reply. This time I couldn’t help but grin.

“Alright. Fine.”

“Perfect.” His eyes flicked past my shoulder with a cocky smirk. My brow furrowed with a moment of curiosity as he leaned in with a gentle, claiming peck, stealing it from my mind. The same flutter as the day before struck my chest before he pulled away, giving me reassurance this was the right decision. He’d left, yes, but with good reason.

I could feel the others watching us, Tucker’s gaze burning into my back. But I’d had enough of caring what he thought right now, the sting of what he’d done still too fresh. Even knowing the feelings were one-sided, it stung. When things

got weird, instead of talking, he'd run. Zane had come back. And he deserved a real chance.

He stared down at me, watching, something deeper in his eyes that I wasn't sure how to read. His thumb brushed my bottom lip, and for a moment, I thought he'd take another kiss. Instead, he gave me a sexy, devilish smirk and said, "How's tonight?"

Chapter 18

ISABEL

Tonight. Tonight was good. Tonight was perfect. It didn't give me time to overthink. Because I knew I could. Easily. There was something about Zane, though. An edge. A pull. Something that made me want to know more.

After we'd cleaned up the beach, I'd headed home for a nap while Annie went to Jet's, support for when he confronted his parents. When I woke up, she'd already left for work, and I headed to the dance studio, immersing myself for the next several hours of private lessons and another session with Leo, so our sister dish session about last night had had to wait. But heck, I could see us pulling an all-nighter tonight if this date went well. My stomach fluttered at the thought even as a pit in my stomach tightened. I'd have to tell her about Tucker.

I stifled a groan as that pit deepened and ran my hand back through my sweat drenched strands as I left the studio late that afternoon, now eager to get home for tonight. I climbed in my truck, taking a moment to coax the old engine to life. After three tries, it revved beneath me, the loud rumble a balm to my conflicted thoughts. I took a deep breath, breathing in the sensation before buckling, and drank some more water before checking my phone.

Zane: I'll be there at 7.

My stomach flipped until I saw the next message notification.

Tucker: Are you seriously giving him another chance after he ditched you last night?

My eyes flashed, nostrils flaring at the audacity. How dare he?!

Tossing my phone into the cup holder, I pulled out of the parking lot, finding the highway that would lead me from Summer Ridge to home. It was a good twenty minute or so drive, thank God, because I freaking needed it now. Shoving away thoughts of everything I wanted to text back to my stupid best friend. Things I knew would be better not to say. But I was too pissed right now to attempt something decent.

He's worried about me giving *Zane* another chance? About *Zane* leaving?

Zane at least came back. He didn't take off to shove his dick up the school whore just to get away from me.

My eyes widened, and I immediately felt guilty for thinking of Trisha like that. She didn't know what had almost happened with Tucker and I. Granted, she was...experienced, but I shouldn't have called her a whore.

I took a deep breath, my hands gripping the wheel too harsh for the mellow driving usually brought me. It was my catharsis. My safe space outside of dancing that usually helped me to sort my thoughts. Not today. Or at least not the way I wanted.

I was apparently angrier than I'd thought. About Tucker *and* Zane if I was being honest. There was more to that story there

than he'd shared. The way he'd moved...he'd been sore, and I wouldn't be surprised if he was covered in bruises. Then with his phone. Something pretty big had to have happened. But was it so big he couldn't have found me first before leaving?

He came back. I reminded myself, but in reality, it still sat off with me. Enough that I wished I knew more. But did I have the courage to ask?

I frowned, gunning my poor engine up to a pathetic sixty, relieved when I finally felt the catharsis start to take hold.



A few detours on back roads and I was finally relaxed enough to head home. I pulled up the drive, sliding from my old Ford just as I heard the front door slam across the street. I glanced up, spotting Tucker. He was in his red swim trunks and a white Tee that pulled across all the delicious muscles of his chest, a whistle around his neck. Clearly dressed for a shift at the beach. Anger, humiliation, fear...all of it clenched through my core. He looked up, his eyes locking with mine. How I'd seen him this morning flashed through my thoughts, leaving a bitter taste in the back of my throat, and I slammed the truck door, spinning away.

I was at my door in seconds, shutting myself inside before I caught another glimpse of him. My breaths were strained, and I finally pulled up our text thread on my phone.

Me: Maybe you shouldn't be so against me giving second chances...

I waited, my back still pressed against the door as three little dots almost immediately popped up on the screen. God, why had I run?

Tucker: Izzy...

Seriously? That was it? I exhaled in frustration, squeezing my eyes shut for a moment.

Me: Forget it, Tucker. Let me know when you're ready to talk.

Me: And not about Zane.

Hands shaking, I tossed my phone on the couch and headed upstairs for a shower. The warm water felt amazing, cascading down on my tired muscles. I tilted my head back, letting the stream flow through my long strands, the water washing away some of my stress. I must have stayed there longer than I'd meant because I suddenly heard a tap at the bathroom door.

"Hey, Izzy?" Harper's voice called in.

"Yeah?..." I frowned, surprised to hear Jet's sister.

"Sorry, I just came over to watch Colton and Archer. They wanted to play Archer's new video game. Annie mentioned earlier you had a date tonight, so I thought you'd be gone. Um, anyway, your phone's been going off. Zane said he's on his way."

My eyes widened in horror. *Oh, my God, what time is it?*

"Uh, thanks, Harper."

“No problem.” I heard the door click shut, and I scrambled to do a quick shave and hop out. I glanced at the little clock on a set of decorative shelves we had around the mirror, my stomach flipping when 6:52 stared back at me. How the hell was it almost seven?!

“Hey, Harper?!” I called through the door as I desperately towel dried the excess water from my hair.

“Yeah?!” I could hear her from across the room near the closets.

“Can you text him that I’m running late for me?!”

“Already did!” I could hear the grin in her voice. “Pulling out some outfits for you now!”

Oh, bless her. The girl had style. A little mini-me when it came to fashion. Annie’s replica when it came to spunk.

I pulled out my hairdryer, brushing so that my locks fell straight but full down my back, and then rushed to finish my makeup, deciding on a faint shadowed look around my eyes for the evening. When I rushed out from the bathroom, Harper was already laying jewelry across three different outfits on my bed.

“I wasn’t sure how dressy you wanted to go since it’s a first date,” she declared, turning around to face me. “Ooo, you look hot.”

“Thanks.” I grinned, trying not to blush as I wondered if Zane would think the same. I scanned the outfits on the bed. A flowy sequined top was laid out with the option of jeans or a

skirt, but it was the other that was instantly my favorite. A black dress that ruched at my waist and flowed past my hips. It stopped a few inches above my knees and had stylish capped sleeves and a sweetheart neckline that showed just a hint of cleavage.

I had no idea where Zane was taking me, but this...*this* was a knockout dress.

A car horn sounded, and I jumped. Harper's eyes widened. "I'll go check. You pick. I'll stall." She was out the door before I could blink. My heart raced, knowing Zane was now just outside. Knowing I was really going to try to give this a go.

I was going to try to get over Tucker...

My stomach flipped, and I held a hand to my middle, suddenly feeling sick.

No. No. This is good. I scolded myself. If his reaction last night told me anything, I had to move on.

Refusing to let myself stall anymore, I hurried into the amazing black dress, running my hand along my curves. I looked in the mirror, holding up the pink beaded necklace and pumps Harper had laid out with it...but something told me to be a little more daring. Pumps were my go-to, but with Zane and this outfit, I wanted to match his vibe.

I quickly dug in the back of my closet and produced a pair of heeled, black, knee-high boots. Zipping them up, I selected a

pair of silver earrings before taking a last glance in the mirror. Perfect.

“Izzy!” Harper called just as I grabbed a clutch and rushed from the room.

“Coming!”

“Took you long enough,” my brother said when I made it downstairs. He sat crossed legged on the couch, his eyes glued to the screen as he and his best friend battled it out between two characters in their game.

“Funny.” I ran my hand through his light blonde hair, ruffling the strands as I passed by.

“Hey!” He flinched away, finally glancing up. “Whoa.” His mouth gaped.

“Thanks?” I grinned, grabbing my phone from Harper who was waiting by the door.

“Girl, you did not tell me how hot he was going to be. I need details,” she said as I put my phone in my clutch. “Like, call me over when you dish with Annie because I need to hear everything that goes down with that hot slice of bad boy outside.”

I raised an eyebrow at her. Seriously? The girl was just thirteen. Lord help Jet when she started to date. He was not going to take it well. “Sure you want in on that session? Because Annie’s probably going to be filling me in on everything she let your brother do to her last night...” I let the insinuation fall and watched Harper’s face scrunch in disgust.

“Ew. Pass. But I still want to hear how *your* night goes,” she said, stepping away from the door.

I laughed. “Deal. Be good,” I called over my shoulder to Archer.

“Yeah, yeah.” He waved me off.

Stomach still flipping, I stepped outside, my eyes drawn to Zane like he was a magnet in front of me. Dressed in black jeans and a white T-shirt, he was leaning back against his car, an intense look on his face as he scrolled through his phone. His arms were crossed over his chest, his muscles bulging, and a hint of black peeked out from the edge of his sleeve on his bicep from his position. Inwardly, my brow raised, curious, but before I could study it, he looked up, seeming to double-take for a moment before a single eyebrow lifted. The movement so faint I could barely detect it.

My breath held as I walked towards him, eager for his reaction yet nervous that I’d overdone the outfit. Was the dress overkill? The boots? What if he hated it?

“Wow,” he said as I stopped in front of him. “You look amazing. Hot.” His dark eyes raked down my form to linger on my legs in the boots. I blushed, brushing some strands of hair behind my ear.

“Thanks.”

He opened the car door, letting me slide inside before shutting it for me. My fingers slid over the buttery leather of his seats, taking in the smell. Like money and a hint of danger.

Zane got in from the driver's side, and with the sun shining behind him, encasing his darkness with a ring of light, I couldn't help but think how he looked like a fine helping of sin. Just waiting to pull me over to his side. A little thrill ran through me, surprising me with the reaction because that was *not* who I knew myself to be. But damn if I didn't want to explore whatever this pull was I had with him.

“Ready?” Zane shot me a dazzling smile, and I smiled.

“Let's go.”

The engine roared, the seat vibrating beneath me as he brought the Mustang to life until it settled into a soft purr to match my insides. Holy mess, I could get used to this car.

We pulled up to Bob's Diner a few minutes later, and my stomach dropped. Zane looked over, about to cut the engine, but then stopped when he saw my expression.

“I'd thought we'd sit out at the beachfront tables. Give ourselves a view. But by the way you just deflated, I take it that's not the best idea...”

“No, it's...I'm sorry. It's nothing. I just...” I stumbled over my response, trying to find a way to explain.

“Not nice enough?” He smirked, like it was a normal thing to expect.

I shook my head, not wanting him to think I was stuck up. I didn't need him to throw out gobs of money for me to have a good time. “More like not private enough. Everyone's going to recognize us here, and I don't want to feel like we're being

stared at the whole time.” Plenty of girls at school had already made it known they were jealous of Zane’s attention without me putting it on display.

He nodded. “That makes sense, I guess. So is there anywhere else you’d like to go?”

I bit my lip, hoping it wasn’t too much to ask... “Like Mexican food?”

He raised a single brow before looking down at himself and back up. “You’ve seen me, right? Three quarters Mexican right here. Of course I can go for Mexican food. Just name the place.”



A half hour later we sat at a booth in the back of my favorite Mexican restaurant out in Summer Ridge. Zane poured over the menu. Mine laid across the table, so used to the food here I didn’t even have to look.

“You know what you want?” Zane asked. I nodded, taking a sip of my water the waitress had brought over a few minutes before.

“I come here with Annie and the guys pretty often. There’s this nachos platter with tons of toppings and different cheeses that we usually all split. It’s enormous, but man, is it good.”

“Oh, yeah? You wanna split one?”

My brow raised, for some reason the idea striking me odd. It had always been our group’s thing. Somehow, sharing it with

Zane felt weird.

“Or not.” He gave me a strange look at my expression.

“Sorry. It’s just that it’s more of our group’s thing, I guess. And it’s *huge*. The guys seriously eat most of it.”

He nodded. “I get it. I’m not *in* yet.”

I grew quiet. No one had ever been *in* with us. At least not completely. But did it sound like he *wanted* to be? “I was thinking of a taco plate,” I said to break the quiet. “The way they season the meat here is seriously amazing.”

“Sounds good. I’ll try it, too.” He smiled, setting his menu down just as our waitress walked up. A petite blonde with deep brown eyes and stick straight hair down her back stopped at Zane’s side of the table, pencil and pad in hand.

“Decided what we want yet?” she asked, a flirty lilt to her voice. Her attention focused solely on Zane. I watched as she jutted her chest when he looked up.

“We’ll both take a taco plate.” He handed the menus over to her, barely bothering to meet her eyes before focusing his attention back on me. “Anything else?”

“Um, no. Unless we can get some more guac and chips.”

“Sounds perfect. That, too. And another water for my girl here.”

I flushed at what he called me, not failing to miss the dirty look the blonde then sent me. She clucked her tongue in frustration before taking off.

“I’m so going to have to watch for spit in my food,” I muttered, and Zane laughed.

“She was that pissed, huh?”

“So you knew she was trying to get your attention?”

“Of course, but the only one’s attention I want is yours.” He stared at me with those dark-as-sin eyes, and I couldn’t help but look down, feeling the next flush rush to my cheeks. His hand stretched across the table, reaching for mine, forcing me to look back up at him. “I’m not messing tonight up by looking at someone else. I’m here with you.”

“Unless you get another phone call...” I let the little dig lie, taking my hand away and reaching for my water. What the hell? Why? Why had I said that right then?

Because I still deserve answers from last night. I held Zane’s gaze, waiting for him to respond, making sure my expression conveyed how serious I was. Last night was not okay.

He sighed, his voice tight, something stirring deep within his eyes. “I already told you sorry.”

“You did,” I agreed. “But you still left. Without telling me first. I have a thing about people leaving me,” I said when I saw what looked like a touch of his frustration start to flare.

His expression quickly shifted, and he frowned. “Why does that sound deeper than it should?”

I shrugged, setting my glass back down. “Because it is deeper, I guess. My dad passed away last year. Cancer.” Something flashed in the depths of his eyes once again, but I

continued. “I know it’s not the same as getting dumped or stood up by a bad date, but it still hits wrong since then. The parallel isn’t perfect, but if the most important man in my life could leave so easily, even if he didn’t want to, it’s hard to tolerate the other bull that some guys pull. I don’t want you to be one of those guys.”

My gaze shifted to rest on my glass, watching the ice bob in the water as I waited to see how he would respond. My stomach in knots at the confession I’d just given. Several seconds passed in silence before Zane took a deep breath.

“Well, shit. Things just got real deep.”

Tell me about it.

“But Izzy...” He paused, waiting for me to look up. “I don’t want to be one of those guys, either. Last night, with Rick... we’ve been with each other through tons of shit, thick and thin. He’s got it pretty rough at times and doesn’t always make the best choices. Something we do together, if I’m honest, and when he called last night...” Zane shook his head. “I didn’t see it at the time, but I could’ve found you first, but right then all I knew was I had to have his back. He’s like my brother. If shit had gone down, wouldn’t you have done everything to get to Annie?”

I sat back, hearing the sincerity in his words, his intensity for me to understand. “You’re right, if it had been big enough, I would have taken off for my sister in a heartbeat.” I turned my water glass in my hands, trying to process everything I needed to say so we could move forward. I got it, I really did, but I

had to lay things down now. “Just promise me this won’t be a habit. It’s twice now you’ve disappeared on me, and while I get you needing to go last night, the only thing that got you *this* date was you coming back this morning. But I’ll be honest, Zane, I rarely date, and I don’t do games. Do not play me.”

I held his gaze, trying not to shake at how forward I was being, making sure my expression conveyed my sincerity. He stared back at me, respect in the dark irises of his eyes.

“I won’t,” he said right as our food arrived.

Things lightened up after that. We spent the rest of our meal chatting, talking about music, movies, and everything in between. Our waitress tried a few more times to catch Zane’s attention, but with each attempt, he made sure his focus was solely on me. By the time we left, I was half-certain she’d shoot daggers through my head with just her glare if it were possible.

“So where to next?” Zane asked as we climbed back into his sexy-as-hell car.

“You don’t have anything planned?” I asked, giving him a playful grin.

“Well, I figure I called it so badly with the first place, I’d just ask where you’d like to go next.”

“Ah, so copping out then,” I teased.

“Hardly. We could go to a movie if you want. Keep it traditional. And private.”

I sucked in a slight breath, something in his tone alluding to everything that might mean.

“How about dancing,” I suggested instead.

“So you *do* care,” he teased back.

I shrugged. “Maybe. Kind of surprised you didn’t pick up on the idea yourself, though, considering our first two sort of dates...” I bit my lip, giving him a sideways playful glance before looking out the window.

“My girl has some hidden spunk, huh?” Zane laughed. “Fine. Dancing it is. But you’ve gotta trust me.” He gave me a wicked look before roaring the Mustang to life.



“Um...so, about trusting you...” I said a few minutes later, taking in the rough exterior of the building we’d just pulled up to. It was an old, cracked cement structure, with bars over the windows and a single dim light next to a wooden door. Tucked in a back neighborhood of an area I’d never driven through in Summer Ridge, the parking lot was long and wide, but half of the street lamps that hung over the area were out or flickering, giving it a spookier, edgy type of vibe.

“What? Too far away from the traditional movie date thing?” Zane smirked.

Kind of...I mean, it’s no Breaker Hall. But after such a nice dinner, the last thing I wanted was for him to think I wouldn’t give his place a try. “I’m not saying that,” I said instead.

“No, but you’re thinking it,” Zane countered. “Don’t judge a book by its cover, Izzy.”

“I don’t want to, but sometimes... I mean...” I gestured out the window.

“Izzy?”

“Yeah?” I glanced over.

“Do you trust me?”

Zane held my eyes with his dark gaze, and my stomach flipped. Did I? I barely knew him. But I wanted to, and he’d been nothing but perfect tonight so far... My decision made, I nodded, making Zane beam as he got out to open my door.

“Come on.” He held out his hand. “If this doesn’t work out, or you’re uncomfortable, I promise to take you somewhere else.”

“Deal.” I smiled, casting aside my apprehension to take his hand. He pulled me from the car, keeping my hand held in his as we followed the cracked sidewalk to the door.

A tall, burly looking bouncer stood near the entrance, and I had to resist the urge to hide behind Zane, tucking myself slightly behind his arm instead. My shoulders almost dropped in relief when the man asked for ID, but then I watched Zane pull a card from his wallet.

“My girlfriend forgot hers at home. Hope that’s not a problem,” he said, his tone smooth with no trace of the deception. The guy eyed us suspiciously for a moment until

Zane added, "Look, if you need to, go check with Beth. She'll vouch for us."

I did my best to look confident, my middle squirming at the word girlfriend, though I knew it was part of the front. I hoped the guy wouldn't read my nerves, but he just shook his head and shrugged, letting us by.

"How did you do that?" I whispered as we passed the bouncer into the entrance, but my jaw gaped in shock as Zane led me a little further inside, and I caught him smirking from the corner of my eye.

"You thought I was dragging you into someplace seedy and gross, didn't you?"

I nodded, still staring. "Kind of." But it wasn't. There were just regular people there with regular stuff, a little harsher than the Breaker Hall crowd maybe, but nothing crazy. A few worn in pool tables took up a back corner of the room, and a small band with a singer was performing on a corner stage. A mix of a college crowd and adults filled some of the booths and tables that lined the edges of the room, while others were seated around a circular bar that wrapped around a large wall of liquor in the second half of the building's space, but despite taking it all in, my eyes were drawn to the makeshift dance floor at the center.

"Want to?" Zane gave a head jerk towards it, my toes already itching to move that direction.

I nodded and tugged at his hand, loving when he immediately pulled me to him for the dance. Time flew, and

Zane eventually had to ask for a break. I nodded, knowing I could get lost in it and go for hours. I went to wait by an empty pool table while my date went for drinks.

Tucker: I'm sorry.

The screen of my watch buzzed, and I rolled my eyes when I saw the message from my friend. Damn straight he better be sorry. But I ignored it, not ready to deal with him yet. This time belonged to my date.

“Water?” Zane held out a bottle when he returned.

“Thanks.” I glanced at the wall of pool sticks.

“You wanna play?”

“Hmmm...but I thought we said no games...” I grinned with a wink, already making my selection from the wall. Zane smirked at my teasing and picked one of his own.

“Do you need a run-through?” he asked, his gaze turning curious as he watched me set up the game. Removing the triangle, I placed the cue ball and leaned over the table to aim... Zane’s jaw dropped with the crack of the balls, and I beamed and hopped in excitement when three solids flew into the pockets.

“You...” Zane almost stammered. “So, you play?” he recovered.

“Remember the beach house where we first met? Tucker’s grandparents used to own it, and they had a game room upstairs. I’ve kicked many a butt at this game before,” I replied, not able to help the small smirk that played at my lips.

“Oh.”

“They sold it right after spring break, though, so I might be a little rusty.”

“Yeah...I’m not sure rusty is the word if you keep sinking balls like that.”

I blushed and looked down, something about his tone making me self-conscious. Did he *want* me to play badly?

Zane nudged the toe of my heel with his pool stick. “Hey, don’t get too shy on me now. We’ve been having a good time.”

“Sorry, you’re right.” I nodded, shaking off my hesitation. I gave him a wicked smile. I was so going to dominate this game.

Chapter 19

ISABEL

“Oh, my God, that was so much fun,” I gushed when we finally stepped outside. I clutched Zane’s hand, giddy from the thrill of the night. I’d just handed his ass to him three times at the pool table before he finally won one. Not that I’d ever let him know I missed the last shot on purpose. If it wasn’t so late, I’d have dragged his sexy ass back onto the dance floor again, too.

“I’m glad you liked it.” He smiled.

“How did you know about this place anyway? You only moved here a few weeks ago.”

“Rick’s sister does the mic here some nights. She’s been here in Summer Ridge a few years now for her university.”

“The Beth girl you mentioned to get us in?”

“Yeah. Rick and I would come visit her sometimes, and my grandpa lives close to the area. Got us away from some of the bullshit back home.” He paused, a darkness tingeing his voice with the last statement. “Anyway, she’d get us in sometimes. Even let Rick do his guitar thing on stage with her a few times.”

“Wow. That’s cool. Was that her up there tonight?”

“Probably wouldn’t have gotten in if it wasn’t. That bouncer was new.” Zane grinned, pulling out his keys as we reached his car. He opened my door again, and I slid into the soft,

buttery leather of the expensive seats, settling in for the drive home.

“You know, I’ve been in Jet’s car tons of times, but I swear it has nothing on yours,” I commented as we pulled out onto the road.

“Oh, yeah?” Zane glanced over with a cocky smirk. “Why’s that? You like the price tag or is it the upgrades?”

My eyes widened. “Um...I hadn’t thought of it like that. Just the overall vibe, I guess. Jet’s car is great, too, and he and his dad have been fixing it up, but it’s nothing like this.”

“Gotcha. Can’t deny his good taste, though. If I’d had the chance for a fixer upper, I might’ve taken it. My parents got me this one when I turned sixteen. Brand new off the lot. No choice. Just the best.” He sounded almost bitter.

“How is it that you’re making it *not* sound like a good thing?”

His hand gripped the wheel, tightening, his entire upper body seeming to tense. “It’s their leverage.”

“Oh.” The word left my lips so softly I wasn’t sure he’d even heard, but he glanced over, seeming to catch the tension that suddenly filled the car.

“Sorry. Don’t get me wrong. I love my car, but they hold it over my head. Or my dad does, anyway.”

“How does he—”

“Don’t worry about it.” Zane cut me off. “It’s no big deal. Not really. What else do you want to talk about?”

“Um...” My brain stuttered at the abrupt turn, trying to think of something we hadn’t talked about yet. “How’s your application coming with the shop? Jet told me you applied.”

“Oh, I actually start this week. For the summer, anyway.”

“Just the summer?” I asked, knowing how into cars he was. Or at least suspecting.

“For now...” There was that darkness to his voice again. “My parents are lawyers, and my dad thinks it’s important that I follow in their footsteps. Take every opportunity, you know? So, I’ve always interned at their office, but with the move and them still getting things rolling, I talked them into the garage gig for a while.”

“Do you not like interning for them?”

“No, it’s not that. I plan to become a lawyer.”

I gave him a confused look. “So, why do you sound like you hate it?”

“I don’t, but...” He sighed, running a hand along his strong jaw as he seemed to consider a response. “Let’s table that one for another time. What do you do for a job?”

“Dance.”

Zane took his eyes off the road for a few seconds with a questioning look. “Isn’t that a hobby?”

“Yes. And no. It’s my passion and my future career if I’m lucky. I’m part of a studio in Summer Ridge where I go for several sessions every week. I’ve got a dance partner I work with on most projects, but the job aspect is that I’m hired out for private tutoring lessons for the younger dancers there. I have four girls that I work with right now a few times a week. But Leo and I also do competitions and things as well.”

“Who’s Leo?”

“My partner. We’ve been working together for a few years now. I actually used to babysit mine, Jet’s, and Tucker’s younger siblings for my job, but since I started dance tutoring, Jet’s sister Harper has taken over the babysitting thing for me.”

“She’s the one that came out when I pulled up today?”

“Yep, and she’s dying to get feedback from my date with the hot bad boy when I get back tonight.” She was so going to kill me for telling him that.

Zane smirked. “The hot bad boy, huh? Is that how you see me?”

“Shut up.” I flushed, turning to look out the window, but I’d walked right into that one. I could *feel* the smirk on Zane’s face as he stared out the windshield, but he was nice enough to let it go, and I was relieved when the next part of the drive fell into a companionable silence. Conversation had been flowing so well, better than I would have expected, but it was nice to have a moment to reflect and process, too. Especially before Annie could pounce on me when I got home.

The rest of the drive flew by, the Mustang purring beneath us along the highway, nulling my thoughts into contentment, everything from the night in a pleasant buzz in my chest. When we pulled up to my house, Zane put the car in park and looked over. "I had a really good time tonight."

I smiled. "Me, too."

He started to lean in, and I pressed a hand to his chest, a zip streaking through my stomach at the firm bulge of muscle beneath my palm. His brow lowered, his gaze questioning. I honestly wasn't sure why I stopped him. Sure, kisses on first dates had always been a no for me before, but that didn't really apply to us anymore. And even if it did, I knew with him I didn't want to pull away. He waited, watching the hesitation battle with desire in my eyes before I lowered my hand.

As if it was all he'd been waiting for, Zane's lips tilted up in a sexy grin before he closed the space between us. His arm wrapped around my back, pulling me in as his lips pressed to mine. Feelings burst from my chest as a thrill ran up my spine. My arm slunk around his neck, pulling him to me, and I opened my mouth when his tongue pressed for entrance at my lips. I was hesitant at first, but there was no room for that once I'd let Zane in.

His tongue found mine, the pressure gentle yet certain, caressing in several tantalizing strokes before he pulled back, and I sighed at both the satisfaction and the loss of that first *real* kiss. Not too sweet yet not too deep. As if he sensed this was new for me and not to cross my boundaries.

He helped me out of the car, pressing one more sweet kiss to my lips before driving away, and I stood there, my fingers pressed to my lips for several minutes, everything within me feeling as though it was glowing before I headed inside.

I quietly pushed open the front door, not wanting to disturb anyone that might already be asleep, and then shrieked when I flipped the light on.

“Oh, my God. Sorry! Sorry,” Annie cried as she and Jet sprung apart. I clapped a hand over my eyes and spun to face the wall while they scrambled to grab their clothes. “I’m so sorry, sis. I thought we’d hear when you got back.”

“Obviously not!” I kept my eyes clamped shut, staring at the wall, just praying for a hole in the floor to open up. Any time now would be great. No, better yet, a rewind button. Something that could take me back to *before* I just saw Jet’s bare ass over my practically naked sister!

“It’s safe now, Izzy,” Jet offered, his voice still near the couch. But there was no way I could look at him yet.

“It should have been safe when I came in.”

“You’re right. We just got a little carried away. Sorry. Really.”

“Sorry, my butt,” I protested. *And his. Ugh, no, think clean thoughts!* “We have a room, Annie. Take it up there and stick a sock on the door or something next time, please.”

“Noted. Now, stop freaking out and turn around, please. You’re making this into too big of a deal.”

“Says who?” My eyes flashed as I finally spun to face them. “I’m pretty sure I’m a little traumatized now. I mean, I know y’all do stuff and all, but that doesn’t mean I want to witness any of the lead up. Ever.” My eyes skipped between them, resting at their chins, unable to look either of them in the face.

“My ass is that terrifying, huh?” Jet teased with a gentle smirk, and Annie whacked him in the chest with the back of her hand.

“Babe!”

I snorted with a small smirk of my own. Okay, leave it to Jet to lighten the mood. I finally met his gaze, every ounce of his apology he’d given there waiting for me, though I couldn’t miss the laughter he was holding back either.

“We okay, now?” he asked.

I lifted a shoulder, offering a small smile. “I guess. Just seriously, someplace private next time.”

“Deal. Or you could always just pay us back. How’d things with Zane go tonight?” He winked.

“Babe!” Annie cried again as I flushed.

Jet just laughed and then leaned over to give Annie a kiss, and bless the man because I could tell he was holding back for my sake. Annie frowned a little when he pulled away. “I’m gonna head home, let y’all talk. Hope your date went well, Izzy.” He slipped past me and out the door, and I rounded on Annie again.

“Seriously, sis, what if Mom came home instead? Or if Archer had come in?”

“Archer’s staying over with Colton again.” She waved me off. “And I didn’t really think about Mom, okay? She’s hardly ever here.” My insides winced at the comment, sensing Annie’s pain through our bond that matched mine. “Can we just drop it now? Please? It was embarrassing on my side of things, too, and I’ve kinda been waiting all day for a chance to talk.”

Her last plea struck just the right chord, my tension ebbing away, excitement taking its place. “Yeah, come on.”

We headed upstairs, Annie changing into tiny cotton shorts and a tank top while I pulled on a silk pajama set. I rushed through my clean up routine in the bathroom, washing away my makeup while Annie declared we needed snacks. She returned with a giant bowl of popcorn and a couple of sodas as I emerged from the bathroom. My mouth watered at the smell of the buttery goodness, and we settled onto her bed together, our Spotify account playing in the background.

“So, who wants to go first?” I asked, popping a few pieces of popcorn in my mouth.

“Uh, *you*, of course.” Annie nudged me with her knee. “Tell me about date night. How was it?”

A smile broke across my face, and I pulled a pillow up to my chest. “Great. Perfect.” I sighed. “He was just...I don’t know. There’s something about him, sis. Like a touch of danger and sin waiting to happen, but the way he looks at me...the way he

treats me. He's just... It was just amazing. He called me *his girl*." I brought the pillow up over my face. The way those words had rolled through me earlier hitting all over again before I glanced back at my sister.

Annie smiled, watching me. "That's great. Gotta say, though, I never pictured you for having a taste for bad boys."

"Is he really one, though? He's so sweet with me."

"Well, he's not a white knight; I'll tell you that. There's more to him than he wants to say. I mean, my BS shields don't go up for nothing. I'm really glad that he's good to you, but do you sense that at all?" Annie asked, now sounding concerned.

"A little," I admitted. "But until he gives me a reason to not trust him, I'm not going to judge a book by its cover. And before you say anything, I did call him out for ditching last night. He had his reasons for it, but he knows not to do it again."

"Good." Annie grinned, finally taking her own handful of our snack. "So, where'd y'all go?"

"Dinner and then pool and dancing. It was...perfect. I let him kiss me," I said the last on a whisper, and Annie's eyes widened, knowing what a big deal it would be.

"Whoa, like a small kiss like before or a *kiss* kiss?"

"A *kiss* kiss. And Lord, can he use his tongue. But he also knew just how far to take it. It was amazing." I was smiling like an idiot just thinking of it.

“Well, speaking of things being amazing...” Annie trailed off, her teeth pressing into her bottom lip as she sported an enormous grin.

“Oh, my God. Did y’all? Finally? I mean, when I saw y’all this morning, I could tell *something* happened. You practically look like you’re glowing, but what? I mean, tell me,” I gushed so fast I could barely understand myself.

Annie’s smile split wider, and she nodded. “We did.”

I screeched and threw my arms around her, the popcorn tumbling over onto her bright orange covers. “Oh, crap. Sorry.” We scrambled to pick it up. “So how was it?” I glanced over, loving seeing how happy she was.

“You mean before or after he gave me this?” She held out her hand, and I gaped.

“How? What?” I grabbed her hand, pulling it up close to my face so I could study the mix of chocolate and white diamonds that formed interlocking hearts on her finger. How had I not *seen* this?! My heart pounded in my chest like I was sure hers had done. “What is it?”

“A promise ring.” Annie gently tugged her hand back, and I raked my hands back through my hair, officially in shock.

“You *have* to tell me about it. Did you freak out? Was it before or after y’all had sex? Or is this what made you finally jump his bones?” I winked, moving to my knees with a giddy bounce.

Annie laughed. “Oh, my God, hold up. I’ll get to it, I promise.”

“Okay.” I sat back on my feet, the popcorn now the last thing on my mind.

“It was...*amazing*, Izzy.” Annie closed her eyes. “But yeah, you’re right. I started to freak out, and the whole thing almost didn’t happen. You know how we thought I was just overthinking?” I nodded. “Well, I was, but it was more than that. I had to stop again when Jet and I first tried, and he took off.”

“He what?” My voice nearly growled.

“Not for long. I just really hurt him. But when he came back, he wanted to talk. Turns out he had a whole other birthday surprise for me. We ended up out at the docks back at our *place*, and just being there...everything that had been wrong hit me, and it was like Jet knew. He *knew* I needed to be there. And then he pulled out the ring. I swear, I thought my heart was going to jump out of my chest. I was ready to run, but then what he said...he understood it all. He understands me. I’ve really struggled with Daddy being gone, but as soon as Jet gave me this ring...” She turned it with a loving stroke on her finger. “That was it. I didn’t want to hold back anymore. And he was just *perfect*.” She sighed. “I mean, it hurt at first, but after a bit it was just...*delicious*.” A slight blush touched her cheeks, and I smiled and squeezed her wrist.

“I’m so happy for you. You’re happy, aren’t you?”

“So much.” She looked back at me, tears glistening at the corners of her eyes. “We stayed up the whole night talking and staring up at the stars. It was definitely worth waiting for. I would have stayed there longer if Harper hadn’t reached out. And then I saw *your* texts.” Her gaze suddenly turned assessive. “What in the hell went down last night? *Besides* Zane leaving?”

I groaned and dropped my head into my hands before peeking through my fingers. “You mean how I accidentally switched cups with Emma and ended up drunk? And then Tucker took me back to our tent, and I kinda almost kissed him?”

“You what?!” Annie’s eyes bulged, the popcorn she’d been about to put in her mouth dropping to the bed. I nodded, curling my fingers into fists to rest in front of my throat.

“I did. We were lying there together talking and turned at the same time. Our faces were this close.” I held up my thumb and index finger to show her. “If I hadn’t been drunk, I doubt I’d have done it, but there was this moment, sis. This pull between us. It was like my brain did its own thing, and I shifted closer. I don’t think we could have been closer without our lips touching.”

“And what did he do?”

I popped a shoulder, my chest deflating at just the memory. “What do you think? He freaked out. Spouted off something about waters and took off. I’d wanted to talk to him this morning, but then I saw him in a tent with Trisha. And trust

me, they'd done way more than kiss." My stomach turned as I said it.

Annie's eyes flashed. "No wonder he was acting so shady this morning. Tell me you're pissed, cuz I would be pissed."

"A little?" I sighed. "More hurt than anything. But if it helps, I think it's what I needed to really give Zane a full shot on our date."

Annie nodded, processing. "So, what are you going to do?"

"You mean besides wait for Tucker to man up and want to talk to me? I'm going to date Zane. *He* took off, yeah, but he came back, and he's not afraid to be with me. Tucker's too afraid of any kind of commitment for me to waste my heart on anymore."

But even as I said it, my heart clenched in my chest. I pushed the feeling away, not wanting it to spoil my night.

"Has Tucker said anything?" Annie asked, not willing to let it go yet.

I nodded my head at my phone on the nightstand. "Just a couple of texts."

Annie grabbed it, and I saw the latest notification I'd somehow missed before she swiped through my passcode.

Tucker: Like really sorry.

I rolled my eyes and snatched my phone.

Me: Do you even know what you're sorry for?

My fingers twirled through the ends of my hair while I waited to see what he'd say. If he'd respond. Annie sat quietly beside me, and I knew she had to be aware of the palpable tension rolling over me. It was barely a minute before I saw the three little dots and his text.

Tucker: Does it matter?

My eyes flashed. Seriously?!

Me: Of course it matters.

Tucker: Shit, Izzy. Do we have to do this? I'm sorry. Can't that just be enough and move on?

My throat tightened, and tears sprung to prickle at my eyes. He wasn't even willing to talk.

Me: Fine.

I dropped my phone and took off for the bathroom.

TUCKER

Fuck. My hands clenched around my basketball when Izzy's last text came through. I slammed it against the brick of my house, watching it ricochet off and fly somewhere on the far side of the yard. I was so fucked. *Fine* was basically the fuck all of anything she could've texted back. The Izzy version of *Fuck off, Tucker.*

My hands gripped the back of my neck, sweat drenched in the lower strands at the nape from the past hour of drills in my driveway. Basketball season might be over, but I still had scholarships I was up for and more I wanted to earn. Another whole season to prove to those schools and any others that I was the best damn choice they had.

Not that I felt like it right now. Because seriously. Fuck. Even trying to save things with Izzy, with *us*, I was fucking everything up.

I glanced over at her house just as her bathroom light came on. I could picture her up there. Standing in front of her bathroom mirror, refusing to let angry tears fall, her cheeks flushed crimson with frustration. How she'd run her fingers through her hair that tumbled down her shoulders as she rocked side to side on her toes, a silent count of a dance running through her head as she tried to calm herself down. I didn't even have to see her to know.

She had every right to be mad. I'd fucked up. Not just now but last night. I knew she wanted to talk, and normally, I'd be the first one dialing the phone to make sure she was okay, but with *this*? I was still too disgusted with myself to face her.

I'd pushed boundaries with girls before, but *never* past where they were willing to go. But the *second* Izzy got drunk, some stupid, fucked up part of me had come *that* close to taking advantage. Of my best friend. She'd trusted me, and I'd nearly broken it. I'd barely been able to pull away, those shatter-your-soul eyes of hers sucking me in. It didn't even make sense. It was Izzy for Christ's sake.

She deserved so much fucking better than me. Than what I'd almost done. But she deserved better than *Zane*, too.

My insides boiled just thinking about how she'd given him another chance. There was something off with that fucker. I just wasn't sure what. And the one chance I'd had to maybe make her see that, I'd fucked up.

Instead, I'd had to watch tonight as he'd brought her back home. I'd watched as he leaned in and the way she hadn't pulled away. Watched as Izzy stood there, dressed to kill and glowing in the aftermath, her hair slightly messed as he'd sped off without walking her to her door.

My stomach felt sick just thinking about it. All of the trash I'd managed to keep away from her before and she'd chosen *Zane*. I grabbed my phone from my pocket so I couldn't punch something, knowing I needed a distraction, and grinned when

messages for another party popped up. I'd only be able to catch the tail end, but I didn't care.

Anything to get out of my head...

Chapter 20

ANNIE

“Why did I think this was a good idea again?” I winced with the next screech from the backseat. Izzy smirked from the passenger seat next to me.

“Because we promised Archer, and Mom needed some decent sleep. You saw how exhausted she was when she came in this morning.”

I nodded, my forehead creasing slightly with my frown. We’d barely seen Mom at all over the past week, finding out she’d been put on nights lately and had been working overtime to boot. She looked...wrecked. And as much as we missed her, I was worried.

“You’re right. Keeping these guys out and busy for a while today will help.” I glanced in the rearview mirror where all of our younger siblings were jam packed in the Thanos’ minivan and pulled into an empty spot at the beach.

“Finally!” Archer and Colton cried, and I rolled my eyes. Like we didn’t live just five minutes away. They bolted out, barely remembering to slide the seat up for Tucker’s sisters to follow. Chelsea and Vicky crawled out, and Harper huffed as she gathered the bags they left in the back.

“Y’all still have to help, guys!”

“Around the back!” Izzy called, opening her door and steering all of the kids before they could take off down the

beach.

I hopped out, hitting the button that lifted the hatch, and groaned collectively with the kids at all the crap we'd brought.

“Okay, Izzy and I have the cooler. Boys, y'all grab the chairs, and, girls, y'all have the bags with the towels and sunscreen. Let's go.” I passed the bags to Chelsea and Vicky, the eight and nine-year-old redheads mini versions of Tucker but with their dad's hair color and mom's green eyes.

Gathering the rest of the stuff from the back, we went to set up on the beach, making sure to stay away from flying volleyballs and the overly crowded areas, finding a spot not too far from the lifeguard station. Which was perfect for the rest of my plans, though Emma was the only one up there right now. She waved when she spotted us.

I waved back and went to help Harper set things up while Izzy coated the kids down with sunscreen. While I was dying for some relaxation and sister time, I knew we had to devote time to Archer, too. Izzy and I had been so busy, we didn't want him feeling abandoned by Mom *and* us. So for the first hour, I tossed the football around with him and Colton while Izzy took selfies and played with Snapchat filters with the girls before making sandcastles.

We eventually all paused for water and snacks, the kids taking turns burying each other in the sand before we let them go play in the water. Izzy and I laid back on our beach chairs, her Kindle in hand and me with my AirPods, knowing my sister needed some down time before she'd be ready to talk.

“What’re you reading?” I asked when I couldn’t wait any longer.

Izzy glanced up, her brow slightly knit like she had to process what I’d said. “Oh, *Just a Family Friend*. Harper just recommended it. It’s by this new author, Lisa J Page.”

“Any good?”

“Yeah, it is. But I do miss my smut.” She grinned, and I couldn’t help but smile back.

“Yeah, nothing like a good smut book.”

“Speaking of smut.” Izzy set her Kindle down. “How are things with you and Jet?”

“Good.” I couldn’t help but laugh when she wiggled her eyebrows. “Really good. I mean, we’re not pros at it yet or anything, but let’s just say practice is definitely making things better. And longer.”

“Oh, my God.” Izzy dropped her head before looking back up. “That’s... Yeah, okay, it makes sense. How often?”

“Pretty much every day since we started. I mean, there are perks to Mom and you always being at work lately.” I winked. Izzy shook her head, a slight roll to her eyes. “I really regret making us wait so long.”

“But I bet you wouldn’t trade that night for anything.”

“No.” I smiled wistfully. “How are things with you? I know Tucker’s still being a giant douche, but what about Zane?”

“We’re good. I’m not really sure what we *are* yet, but we’ve gone out a few times this week, and we had lunch yesterday, but it’s always short. I thought about asking him out to Breaker Hall, but I’ve just been so busy with dance. Leo and I are working really hard right now to prep for dance camp next month, but I feel like it’s bothering Zane that I’ve been so busy and they haven’t been like *real* dates.” She tilted her head in consideration. “Maybe we should do Breaker Hall tonight.”

“Maybe.” My brow creased, realizing how little I’d seen my sister as well. “How many hours *are* you spending at the studio?”

Izzy shrugged, the brace of her shoulders suddenly evasive. “Nothing crazy. About two hours with my tutoring girls each day. Their moms upped their sessions now that it’s summer. Then about four to six hours between my solo exercises and my routines with Leo.”

“Then the hours you’re holed up in our garage studio at home. Izzy.” My tone held a hint of scolding, big sister mode taking effect, but Izzy sent me a glare, warning me off. “Don’t get defensive. You know that’s a lot.”

“For something that I’d like to make a career out of? I don’t think so. It’s not like you give Tucker grief when he spends hours practicing or working out. And don’t you dare say that’s different, because it’s not.”

“But Tucker’s not playing basketball over eight to ten hours a day.”

“No, he’s too busy jumping from girl to girl to do that.” She rolled her eyes, her gaze then drifting to where our friend was now perched at the lifeguard station. Proving her point, a girl in a bikini was standing below his chair, a hand on her cocked hip as Tucker said something while flashing her that stupid, flirty grin of his. She giggled, twirling her hair. I was about ready to gag—because he really had been going overboard with girls lately—but Izzy’s expression turned hard.

As if sensing us staring, Tucker looked up, his eyes going straight to my sister’s. They widened for a second before he looked away, his attention right back on the girl.

The hell?

I looked at Izzy, watching her blink in rapid succession, hurt now showing through the hard exterior. My jaw clenched. Speaking of my other reason for wanting to come here...

“Tucker still hasn’t tried to talk to you, has he?”

“No.” Izzy gave me a ‘*you know that*’ look.

“Kay, just checking.” I jumped up, and Izzy’s eyes widened when she realized what I was going to do.

“Annie, no.” She grasped at my hand, trying to pull me back, but I was already done. Enough was enough.



TUCKER

“So, do you have any plans tonight?” the girl I’d been flirting with asked, giving me that look that I recognized all too well from vacationers each summer. She leaned in, pressing her arms together slightly to emphasize her cleavage. My eyebrow lifted with my cocky smirk, taking a moment to enjoy the view from the easy catch before movement behind her caught my attention.

Oh, shit.

“Move.” Annie checked her shoulder as she came to stand in front of me. The girl stumbled and gave her a scathing look, but Annie just rolled her eyes and flicked her fingers. “Shoo. Best friend territory here, and you’re not wanted. She rested a fist at her hip and cocked an eyebrow. “Did I stutter?”

Reading the dare in Annie’s expression, the blonde finally faltered and huffed as she stepped away.

“Thank God. It was like mating season over here,” Emma muttered next to me as Annie whipped her gaze up to mine. If I could’ve disappeared into the back of my seat, I would’ve with the look she was shooting me.

“You’re an ass, you know that, right?”

“Got the official sticker in this morning. What’s your point, Annie?”

“That you’re ignoring Izzy. And the rest of us I’ll bet since Jet and I have barely seen you this week. What’s the deal, Tucker? Sorry, Ems.” She glanced over at our small friend.

“I’m good.” Emma held up her hands.

Traitor. I shot her an annoyed look, but she just looked back, unaffected.

“I repeat. What’s the deal, Tucker?” Annie snapped.

“You know the deal.” I rolled my eyes. I was sure Izzy had filled her in completely by now. It was a miracle Annie hadn’t gone off on me before this, honestly.

“*Do* I? Because the last time you ignored my sister this long, your dumbass cousins had gotten all up in your head. So what’s it this time? Balls too small to man up and *talk* to her?”

I shot her a glare with that one. “Nothing’s wrong with my balls. Ask any of the girls I’ve been with.”

“Ew. Don’t be gross, Tucker. Seriously don’t need the over share.” Annie looked away, both her and Emma’s faces scrunching in disgust.

I shrugged. “You brought it up.”

Annie took a deep breath, her shoulders rising and then slowly dropping with her long exhale. “Look.” Her voice lost some of its edge when she looked back, sincerity replacing some of the anger in her expression. “I don’t know what’s holding you back, but whatever it is, *please* get over it and talk to Izzy, okay? It can’t be worse than this rift this is putting between y’all.”

My brow furrowed hearing it that way. Was it really a rift?

“She’s hurt, Tucker. And probably not for why you think,” Annie pushed one more time. “*You* stepped up when I couldn’t, and I’ll always be grateful for that, but you don’t get to just check out now.”

That last bit struck me in the chest, and I sat there for a minute, debating on all the damage talking versus not talking would do. The last thing I wanted was to check out. I just didn’t know how to *fix* what I’d done.

“*Talk to her,*” Annie mouthed like she’d heard my thoughts, and I sighed.

“Fine. Mind if I take my break, Ems?”

“Go for it.” Emma waved me on, and Annie climbed up in my seat when I jumped down.

“And don’t be a dumbass!”

I flipped her off behind my back and went to find Izzy. She had her head ducked over her Paperwhite, pretending to be engrossed, but it was pretty obvious she was just staring at the screen. I knelt down, and her legs automatically shifted, making room for me at the end of the towel at her feet.

“Book any good?” I asked, choosing not to call her out.

She shrugged. “Surprised you’re here. Annie must’ve threatened something pretty good to get you to acknowledge that I exist again.”

I raised a brow, lowering my gaze to meet hers above the Kindle. My distance had not been that severe. But the pain in the eyes staring back at me when she finally looked up told me maybe it had been. *Fuck*. I seriously was an asshole.

I just hoped I wouldn't end up being one again.

"I don't know how to talk about this now, Tucker. It feels so much bigger now than it should," Izzy said softly, lowering her Kindle onto her lap.

My hand went to grip behind my neck, unsure how to start myself. "Do we *have* to talk about it?" She winced, and I quickly continued. "I mean, we both obviously didn't mean for it to happen. Can't we let the awkward moment go? It was an accident."

Izzy peered up at me from under her lashes. "Was it an accident that you left me drunk, confused, and alone the rest of the night while you took off to sleep with Trisha?"

My stomach sank, and I could feel the blood draining from my face. "You knew?" I wasn't sure why it mattered that she knew, but it did.

"If you don't want someone to know, you should close the freaking tent." Izzy scowled and turned away from me. The hell?

"And you didn't run back to Zane the first chance you got?" Her eyes widened. "I got you back to the tent where you'd be *safe* and left out of *respect*. What I did with anyone else after that shouldn't even matter."

“Really. So it shouldn’t matter if I decided to give Zane another chance then. *He* came back.”

That’s what this was about? Because I didn’t come back? I shook my head, so thoroughly confused. Why would she have *wanted* me to come back after that?

“I stayed away for my own reasons.”

“Which were?”

She looked up at me, cheeks flushed and green eyes blazing, but I shook my head, still too disgusted with myself to say. “Forget it, Izzy. We’re not getting anywhere with this right now.”

She reeled. “Because *you* don’t want us to.”

“No, because you won’t let the whole thing drop. I said I was sorry, but it wasn’t good enough. *Zane* says it, though, and you can’t wait to throw your *tongue* down his throat.”

Her eyes widened like she’d just been struck, and I immediately felt like a dick. But I just couldn’t get over that she forgave him so easily.

Izzy stood, her arms crossing over her chest in defense even as her eyes flared. “Fuck you, Tucker. I don’t know where this asshole side came from, but I’m over it.”

She took off, my eyes glued to her ass as she stormed away. *Fuck! What is wrong with me?* I ripped my gaze away and pressed my hands against my brow, my palms squeezing at my temples. *So much for not being a dumbass.*

Chapter 21

JET

“Bad day?” I asked, watching my friend run drill after drill from where I stood at the end of his driveway. He whipped around after making his next jump shot and passed the ball right into my gut. I sucked in a breath, barely managing to catch it. *Yep. Bad day.* But Annie’s phone call earlier already told me that. I’d just had to wait until I got off work before I could come over.

“Been better,” he finally acknowledged. But that was it. That was all I got. We settled into a game, Tucker making shot after shot while I struggled to hold my own. He was a powerhouse on the court when he *wasn’t* in a shit mood. Now, he dominated.

We played for what had to be at least an hour before Tucker finally tucked the ball under his arm. He tossed me one of the water bottles he had at the edge of the drive, and we both sucked them down, trying to catch our breath.

He ran a hand back through his hair, sweat keeping the strands back from his face, and leaned his back against the bricks of his house. I waited, knowing the signs of when he was getting ready to talk. He eventually sighed.

“I fucked up.”

“I heard.” His eyes shot to mine, but I didn’t react. I had no judgment. “I know their side. I need yours.”

He scraped a hand over his face. “I was such a dick to Izzy, today, man. I messed up last weekend, and I just keep making it worse.”

“What happened last weekend?”

“Annie didn’t tell you?” He looked up, surprised.

“When it comes to Izzy, I don’t hear everything, but I knew something went down at the party.”

Tucker growled. “That fucking party. Izzy accidentally got drunk, and I found her after Zane fucking ditched her. She was really upset, freaking out and everything, so I took her back to the tent, ya know? Got her out of the crowd since she was so stressed out.”

“Okay, yeah. I’m not hearing anything bad yet,” I said when he paused. *Other than Izzy being drunk. That one’s a surprise.*

“I know. I just—” He gripped his hair, yanking with a slight pull, whatever it was killing him to admit it. “I fucking almost took advantage of her, man.”

“You what?” My voice snapped with the first hint of alarm.

“Not like that.” He scowled. “But she was drunk and we were talking and somehow ended up too close. I almost kissed her.”

Whoa. I froze, my thoughts fleeting for how to process. So much starting to make sense.

“You didn’t, though?”

“No, I stopped myself in time, but that doesn’t change the fact that I almost took advantage of her. She was drunk and trusted me, and some stupid part of my brain almost...” He trailed off, looking sick. “Anyway, apparently she’s pissed that I took off, but it was fucking okay for Zane to do it.”

“And that’s what you yelled at her about today.”

“I didn’t yell, but, yeah. It’s just bullshit. I left after that out of *respect* for our friendship, but my apology apparently doesn’t matter while *his* does. Of all the people for her to fucking finally date.”

“You know you sound jealous right now, right?” I did my best to hide my smirk, prepared for the daggers Tucker then shot me. But hell if I wasn’t right.

“Don’t even fucking go there. I’m *worried*. That’s all. Zane isn’t who she thinks he is.”

“Then who is he?”

“Not the point right now, man,” Tucker growled.

“I know. You’re pissed because Izzy forgave Zane and not you. But have you told Izzy what you’re actually sorry *for*?” He glanced away, giving me my answer. “Look, if you want to fix things with you and Izzy, you’ve got to *tell* her what you’re thinking. Y’all are close, man. Don’t let one moment ruin it. Man up and deal with it.”

I waited, watching as his jaw clenched as he fought the logic of what I had said.

“I hate when you’re fucking right.”

“You know I’m usually right. That’s why you come to me.” I grinned, earning me another glare, but there wasn’t the same heat in it as before.

He tossed the ball for me to catch and jerked his head at the makeshift court. “Come on.”

TUCKER

I took Jet's words to heart. All except that bit about sounding jealous. If I was jealous of anything, it was that Zane so easily got her forgiveness. But I hadn't exactly been doing the best at apologizing either. I waited until well after dinner when I knew Bridgette would be gone for work again, not wanting the extra audience, and crossed the lawns to the twins' house. The street lamps were all that were on to light my path, but I knew the Donovans' place like I knew the back of my hand.

I raised my fist to knock when the porch light suddenly flicked on and the door opened.

"Whoa." Annie stepped back, surprised, and gave me a skeptical look. "What are you doing here?"

"Uh," I lowered my fist, startled by the timing myself. "I was hoping to talk to Izzy."

Annie cocked a brow, her head tilting to the side. "You really think you deserve to?"

I hesitated, knowing I had to tread lightly with her on guard. "Probably not, but I know I need to. You were right earlier. I hurt her, twice now, but the last thing I want to do is check out."

Annie stared up at me for a minute, eyes slightly narrowed, assessing. I waited, sensing I had to pass whatever test this

was before I'd make it through the door. I gave her my most sincere look.

"Fine. Come on in." She pulled the door open wider and reached past me to pull a few envelopes from the mailbox on the porch rail. I followed her back inside, the main level of the house silent.

"Is she upstairs?" I asked, pointing towards the direction of their bedroom above as Annie flicked through the mail and tossed the stack in a basket behind the couch.

"No," she finally answered, dropping into the oversized armchair. "It's just Archer and me here. Izzy's still out at Breaker Hall on her date."

Her date. It felt like a sudden punch to the gut. She was out with Zane. Again. My hand clenched and unclenched at my side, trying to get control of whatever that reaction was.

"So, why'd you let me in, then?"

She shrugged. "Bored. Figured we could hang out while you waited for her. Besides, I know you don't like her out with Zane either."

The latest fist I'd made froze. "That obvious, huh?"

"After what y'all argued about today? Yeah."

"So why'd you give her the go ahead on him, then?" I asked, an edge of accusal in my tone as I took my usual spot at the end of the long sofa.

Annie just stared at me, like she was debating on what or how much to say. “Because *he* made her feel wanted.”

I frowned, wondering what that was supposed to mean. “Plenty of guys have wanted her before.”

“But no one that made her feel special like Zane did. I’m on edge about the guy, too, Tucker, but I can’t deny that he treats her well.”

I scoffed. “Ditching her is treating her well?”

“Are you really one to talk on that?” Annie snapped, and I sighed.

“Maybe I should just wait outside.”

“No, no, I’m sorry. I just...I don’t want Izzy hurt, and I’m really torn on how to support her right now.”

I nodded. That, I could definitely understand. We settled in after that, pulling up one of our crew’s favorite movies, chatting and laughing some while my nerves ratcheted up higher with each tick of the clock. How late was she going to be out with him?

The movie was almost over when Archer called out with a bad dream, and Annie took off upstairs. I turned off the movie, suddenly feeling awkward. The feel of the Donovans’ house was so different than it used to be. Oddly quiet and empty. Patrick leaving had left a permanent scar.

I glanced at the clock and decided to wait outside. With how late it had gotten, Izzy had to be getting back soon, and it would be better if we talked alone.

Quietly shutting the door behind me, I took a seat on the far corner porch swing, the summer night air stifling if it weren't for the slight breeze. I pulled out my phone, scrolling through social media when a text from a girl from earlier this week came through. I rolled my eyes. I'd told her I don't do seconds. A couple of texts from my cousins sat below it, and I hit delete on all three before bothering to read them, ignoring the itch that maybe I should. But they weren't worth my time. Not after what they'd done.

The roar of an engine turned down our street before I could get lost in the torrent of those thoughts, and I sat up straight, my nerves suddenly battering away at my middle.

I watched as Zane and Izzy pulled up, but they didn't get out of the car, and my gut flared when I quickly figured out *why* that probably was. It was a solid five minutes later before Zane threw open his driver's side door and ran around to get Izzy's. I heard her giggle as he helped her out, and the door slammed. I moved to stand, meet her when she came up the walk, but froze when Zane wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close. He leaned back against his car, pulling her against his chest, and buried his fingers in her hair at the back of her head. Izzy's arms came up around his neck, her dress raising up her thighs, and I stood frozen, tension flooding through every inch of my chest, watching as they kissed in the shade of darkness.

Forcing my gaze away, I worked to get myself under control, knowing I needed to if I wasn't going to go off on her again. It

was the longest minutes of my life that I waited before hearing Zane's Mustang pull away.

I looked over as Izzy came up the steps wearing a sleeveless, emerald green shift dress that fell a few inches above her knees and her favorite black dancing heels. She looked gorgeous. Her hair was mussed with that sex-tossed look, and her lips were swollen, cheeks flushed, and eyes bright. The urge to yank her up to my side spilled over me, and I stepped back, startled.

Izzy jumped when I moved, her hand flying to her chest. "Oh, my God, Tucker. You scared the crap out of me."

"Sorry," I grumbled, still shaken from whatever that urge was.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Waiting for you. But that backfired." I growled, looking out towards the street.

Izzy frowned before her eyes widened in horror. "Oh, my God. You saw..." She trailed off, her cheeks now flushing for a whole new reason.

"Yeah, I saw," I grated.

"Well, you didn't have to watch." Her eyes flashed at my attitude.

"Not like I wanted to."

Scowling, her euphoria gone, Izzy ran a hand back through her hair and crossed her arms over her chest. That hint of her

insecurity showing through. “Why are you here, Tucker?”

“To tell you I’m sorry. For real this time. That I didn’t mean to almost take advantage of you that night. Not that you have a problem with that, apparently.” I looked past her, unable to meet her eyes, all of my frustration flaring at everything I’d just been forced to see.

“Wow, what a fantastic apology. I’m so glad you stopped by.” I could hear the glare in her voice. She took a step closer to the door, and I stepped forward, cutting her off. My hand went up to grip her neck, forcing her eyes up to mine, my stomach jumping at the touch and swirl of fiery green now locked in my stare.

“I mean it, Izzy. Taking advantage of you was the last thing I’d meant to do, so me *leaving*, which has you *so* pissed off, was me trying to show you some *respect* after almost crossing a line. But I guess respect is the last thing you care about after letting him grope you for all the world to see.”

She yanked back from my hold, her jaw setting with her own flash of anger. “It was *not* for the whole world to see, and it’s not any of your business. Thank you for the apology, but goodnight.” She stepped around me and slammed the door at my back, leaving me fuming on her porch and dying to drag her back. I shook my head at my latest crazy thought and took off for my truck, ready for any kind of distraction.

Chapter 22

ISABEL

One, two, three, four... I counted off the beat, trying to drown out my spiraling thoughts as I fell into the dance. I'd been rehearsing for hours now, but no matter how many times I ran through my routine, my thoughts continued to race.

'I didn't mean to take advantage of you.'

'Not that you have a problem with that.'

'It was an accident.'

'Can't we let the awkward moment go?'

'Letting him grope you for all the world to see.'

Argh! Stop it! I spun, smacking the table as I jabbed the remote to kill the music. Nothing was working. It had been over a week since my argument with Tucker, and we had yet to fix anything. A part of me ached, hating the tension between us. *If only I hadn't gotten drunk and tried to kiss him.*

Nothing would make me not regret that. There was a reason I'd never brought up my feelings with him before, and this just proved what a disaster it would be. One lapse of judgment and I was at stake of losing him. It was killing me not talking to him. As much as he'd pissed me off that day, the silence between us now felt like a piece of my world had been ripped away. One I wasn't willing to lose.

But with how things were going now, I wasn't sure how to fix it.

Maybe I just needed to forgive him. But that felt wrong, too. Some of what he'd said to me the other night? That had hurt.

But the way that he'd grabbed me and how his eyes bore into mine? I could still feel the thrill that rushed through me. Even if he was being an asshole. I'd felt the spark down to my toes. Which only made me feel guilty about Zane. Ugh.

I took a long drink of water, dabbing at the beads of sweat across my brow and chest with a towel, and then reached down into a low stretch, pressing my face against the bright pink cotton spandex along my thigh. Trying to ease the burning behind my eyes. I refused to cry again.

Forcing myself to take deep, calming breaths, I switched to the other leg, feeling the slight pull at the back of my knee. Using that to take the focus off the tears. I had to pull it together before Leo got here.

"Hey, warming up without me?" I suddenly heard his voice behind me and jumped. "Oh, whoa, sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

"No, it's fine. I was just lost in my thoughts," I said as I popped up, tightening my ponytail. Leo set his stuff down next to mine off by the mats and then met me by the mirrors. Dressed in dark green joggers and a white T-shirt that hugged against his lean, muscular form, he stood about five inches taller than me with dark locks and a light olive tone to his skin. His Italian side, he liked to brag. He was good looking, with a playful charm, but he felt more like a brother than anything.

He studied my expression for a minute, and I thanked God that I'd been able to stave off the tears. "Everything okay? You've seemed kind of off all week."

"Yeah, no, just some drama. Don't worry about it." I waved him off.

An eyebrow cocked, assessing, and I knew by that look he wasn't going to let it go. "Is this about some guy or something?"

Only the guy. Another flash of guilt struck me with that thought.

I turned away and reached for the remote to put on some warm up music. "Let's not get into it, Leo."

He tilted his head back with a smug grin and pulled an arm across his chest in a shoulder stretch. "Oh, so it is. New boyfriend I haven't heard about yet?"

I couldn't help the slight blush and smile that crept in. "Yes. And no."

"Okay, not sure what that means."

"Yes, there's a new guy, but no, that's not why I've been distracted," I clarified, mimicking his stretch.

"Ah, so girl drama, then. Any cat fights? Can I watch?" He winked, earning an eye roll from me. "Want to talk about it?" His tone turned genuine.

"Not really." I looked away and took another long pull from my bottle of water while I waited for him to finish warming

up. Leo and I might be fairly close, but my feelings about Tucker weren't something I could just share with anyone. *Though he might be the best case for a guy's point of view. It's not like he and Tucker ever talk where something would get back to him.*

I must've zoned out, going over the pros and cons, when Leo gave me a playful karate chop to the head. "Come on. If you don't want to talk, let's dance." He grabbed the remote, switching the song to our current number, and then spun me out onto the middle of the studio floor. The renewed focus of the dance helping me stave off spiraling once again.

ANNIE

“Hey there, sexy, got any plans for the day?”

I leaned against the doorway to Jet’s room, one arm splayed up above me, curling to rest over my head, my other hand resting on my cocked hip. I winked when he looked up.

A smile broke out across his face, and he jumped up from his chair, tossing his video game controller aside to wrap his arms around me and sweep me up in a kiss. His hand gripped the back of my neck, firm yet gentle as he pulled me in, and he sucked at my bottom lip. My spine about turned to butter, butterflies erupting across my middle.

I smiled, breathless against him as he pulled away. “I should surprise you more often if that’s the way you’re going to greet me.”

A slight groan rumbled from his chest, and he nibbled at my lips. “Tempting. I thought you were on duty this afternoon.”

“Oh, I can leave if you want.” I turned in his arms, pretending to head out the door. Jet’s arm snaked around my waist, pulling me back to him. He closed the door behind me and gave me a wicked grin before lifting me over his shoulder.

“I don’t think so.”

I released a soft squeal and laughed as he carried me across his bedroom, dropping me gently onto his bed. I scooted up so that my head was on the pillow, excitement coursing through

me. Jet crawled over me with a playful yet predatory look in his eyes that had my nerves buzzing, waiting for what he would do.

He kneeled with his legs on either side of my hips and grabbed my wrists, lightly pinning my arms above my head with his hands. “You’re not going anywhere,” he growled softly by my ear.

Holy shit. My core clenched at his voice. This man could do whatever he wanted to me right now, and I’d be game for it.

Pretending to be alarmed, my eyes widened. “Are you holding me hostage?”

Please, say yes!

“Absolutely,” he growled before slowly kissing behind my ear and down my jawline. I shivered, his attention possessive but soft, and then moaned when he found the perfect spot to suck at my neck.

“Mmmm, love those sounds, sweetheart,” he murmured, a smug smile in place as he slid down next to me on the bed.

I pouted and laid my head against his chest, my free arm wrapping around his waist. “No fair. You stopped.”

He chuckled and pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “So, why aren’t you at work?”

“I asked Tucker to cover for me today.” My fingertips traced along his chest, following the sculpt of his muscles beneath his shirt. “It feels like we’re always at work or hanging out with

people lately. I needed some time for us. We went from every day to barely at all this week.”

“Aw, my little nympho.” I shot him a look but saw his playful expression. He pressed a kiss to my lips. “You can surprise me like this any time you want.”

Oh, yeah? My kind of invitation. “How about like this?” I asked with a devilish grin as I moved to straddle him, leaning over to suck at his neck.

“Mmmm, definitely,” he groaned, his hands coming down to cup and grip my ass in my tiny athletic shorts. He rolled my hips against him, his hardening length pressing up against my core. I moaned as one of his hands released me, guiding my lips up from his neck to meet his. He trapped me in a fervent kiss, my hips still grinding against him, meeting his gentle thrusts in a slow, tantalizing rhythm.

My breaths grew more shallow as my heart fluttered in my chest, and I wondered if this man had any idea what his touch, his very presence did to me.

I began to moan, my hips growing more urgent, searching for that sweet release that was building in my core when I suddenly gasped, Jet flipping us to pin me beneath him. His lips recaptured mine, not missing a beat, and he reached between us, his fingers sliding up under the hem of my shirt. I shifted so he could pull it over my head and raised my hips, giving him quick access as his fingers curled under the band of my shorts to rip them down my legs.

As soon as they were gone and I was naked before him, I reached for his shorts, sliding my hand inside to cup his balls, massaging with a gentle motion. Jet groaned, his deep blue eyes staring down at me with a fire full of delicious promises. I licked my lips in anticipation, and his eyes darkened. He yanked his shirt off and then quickly kicked away his shorts. His hand shot out for the drawer in his bedside table, and he reached between my thighs, plunging his fingers in my throbbing pussy.

Oh, fuck, yes. His fingers were magic, knowing just how to touch me after all of our time together. All the years we'd spent learning each other's bodies before finally claiming each other as one.

I moaned, my legs spreading wider while his thumb found my clit, and he rubbed in gentle circles, still kneeling over me on the bed.

"Fuck, sweetheart, you're so wet. I can't wait to thrust inside of you."

All I could do was pant, my hips grinding against his hand, searching for my release. I was so close, everything in me on fire. I was such a goner for his touch. For him.

"Come for me, sweetheart," he demanded when I started to tense. It was all that it took; my back arched, stars bursting in my eyes. I ground wantonly against his hand, and Jet ripped the condom wrapper open with his teeth, rolling it on before I could come down from my release. He lined up with my core, sliding inside before I could even catch my breath, and I

moaned at the feel of him. How perfectly he filled me. I could never get enough.

It was just that one moment of pause, us relishing in the feel of connection, and then Jet began to move, his hips thrusting quickly, plowing into me with a confidence that was nothing like our first time. He wasn't afraid of hurting me anymore, and I relished in his hard thrusts.

"My God, Annie, you feel so good," he murmured. All I could do was whimper, too many emotions running through me. He pulled back, going to his knees before me and yanked my hips into his lap.

"Oh, God, yes!" I cried when his cock hit the back of me. The new position reaching places so much deeper than before. His fingertips dug with gentle pressure at my hips as he ground me against him, matching each of his thrusts. Just a few more strokes and I felt the coil in my lower belly start to tighten.

"Fuck, Annie, I'm going to—"

"Not yet. Almost," I begged, so close to what I knew was going to be a spectacular finish. Jet's face screwed, trying to hold back from his own orgasm, and he reached between my thighs to rub desperately at my clit.

"Oh, God!" I cried out again, my body erupting into trembles as my orgasm tore through me. Seconds later, Jet was groaning through a release of his own. He collapsed over me, pressing his lips to mine.

“Love you,” he whispered, sending my heart soaring in my chest.

“Love you, too.”

~~_____~~

JET

We laid there for several minutes, catching our breath, everything that mattered in life in my arms.

“Wow, I needed that.” Annie murmured as she snuggled against me, tucking her head under my chin to rest against my chest.

“My pleasure.” I smirked. And damn, had it been. Being with her was worth the wait, but now that we were finally there, I couldn’t get enough of this girl. I lifted her chin with my finger, bringing her lips up to mine, and we got lost in several minutes of a languid kiss.

Annie eventually pulled away and placed a hand on my chest. “Your parents will be home soon,” she explained. I groaned, realizing she was right. Reluctantly, we got up, cleaning up and getting redressed. We settled back on my bed, leaning back against my headboard with Annie tucked into my side, and I turned on the TV, pulling up the latest show we’d been streaming.

“Do you think Tucker’s been acting weird lately,” Annie asked between episodes.

My brow furrowed, surprised at the sudden topic. “How so?”

She shrugged. “Just weird. Aside from the fact that he’s been kind of a dick lately, *more* than usual, he’s flirting constantly. Which is a Tucker thing anyway, I know, but he at least used

to know when and when not to. Did I tell you that I saw like four empty condom wrappers in the backseat of his truck the other day? He just smirked at me when I called him out on it, but I *know* those weren't there the week before. It's like he's gone full on man whore lately. A few random hookups I've gotten used to, but this just seems excessive now." She looked at me for confirmation.

"No, you're right; something's off," I agreed, knowing Tucker had always been careful with what he'd boast about around the twins, but Annie was right, the amount of hookups did seem high lately, even for Tucker.

"It's the way he's been treating Izzy, too," Annie continued. "Twice he said he was going to apologize only to go off on her? I mean, I know he hates that she's dating Zane, but he doesn't need to make her feel like crap about it. And now he's practically ignoring her while he's off on some constant booty call hunt. It just doesn't make sense. It doesn't even feel like we can all hang out right now with what's going on with those two, especially not when Zane's around."

I nodded, so much of what she was saying solidifying what had been playing at my thoughts. "I think he likes her."

"Well, yeah, they've been on several dates."

"No, I mean Tucker. I think Tucker likes Izzy."

Annie froze, her eyes widening. Her mouth moved, opening and closing but nothing coming out. "Do you think? I mean really?" she eventually managed.

“I’m not positive, but yeah, I’m pretty sure. I even called him out on sounding jealous the other day. Not that he’ll admit it.”

“Okay, wow. Um, so, do you think he knows?”

I shook my head. “He’s gotta be in denial. He would’ve said something if he did. That’s big. Falling for one of your best friends. He’s not going to know what to think about it. What sucks is his timing.”

“Oh, my God, you have no idea.” Annie’s shoulders dropped as she came close to looking distraught.

“What do you mean?”

She shook her head and dropped her face into her hands before lowering them to cup her mouth. “If I tell you, you can’t say anything. Not until we figure out how to handle this.”

“Okay...” I agreed, starting to worry at her reaction. I ran my hand along her knee, encouraging. “Tell me.”

“Izzy’s had feelings for Tucker since spring break. Well, probably before then, but that’s when she realized. She’s been holding out all this time until I finally pushed her into dating Zane. Ugh.” She covered her face up again and brought her knees up, resting against them. “This is so bad. She’s going to kill me. And you can’t tell her I told you.” She pointed a finger.

I just stared, trying to process. I’d suspected at one point, but it had seemed so out there...

“What am I supposed to do?” Annie looked up, her expression torn with her guilt.

“Nothing. Not yet. I only have suspicions about Tucker right now, and even if I’m right, I don’t know if he’s ready to deal with it.”

Annie nodded. “Plus Izzy’s feelings for Zane are getting pretty serious. I don’t want to mess that up. I mean, I don’t like him that much, but she swears he’s good to her.” She took a deep breath, like she was convincing herself. “But at the same time, if she knew how Tucker feels. Or might feel...” She grasped her ponytail, bringing it over her shoulder to slide her hands over the strands. “Ugh, I don’t like this. It feels so complicated now.”

“Sorry.” I gave her a sympathetic look. “But if it helps, I don’t think there’s any point in bringing it up until Tucker figures things out.”

“Yeah?”

I shrugged, hoping it was the best answer, and pulled Annie back into my arms, pressing a kiss on top of her head. She adjusted, snuggling into my embrace and that crook in my neck her head fit so perfectly into when I suddenly heard the front door open and slam shut. I assumed it was Harper coming back from the park with the kids, but my parents’ angered voices carried down the hall.

“Just drop it, Helen. You know we can’t.”

“Ugh, I’m so tired of hearing that. We *can’t*. Why can’t we?! What’s it really going to hurt?!”

“You know exactly why.” My father’s voice rumbled with a warning I’d rarely ever heard.

Annie tensed in my arms, but I was sure she was feeling mine more than hers. It thrummed through me in that moment, and my jaw clenched. All the times that they swore there was nothing wrong, even when the tension sat festering throughout the house. I’d had enough.

“Babe?” Annie whispered in alarm when I jumped off the bed. She scrambled to follow as I threw open my door and came face to face with my parents in the hall.

Their faces paled, obviously not having realized I was home. *Gotcha. Can’t deny there’s shit going on now.* I crossed my arms over my chest, Annie pressed against my back.

“Jet. Annie.” Mom plastered on a fake smile.

“Don’t even.” I cut her off before she could try some lame bullshit excuse. “All the times you two swore there was nothing wrong, that you weren’t fighting. Don’t even try to deny it right now. Everyone in this house has been miserable for weeks, for over a month with you two at each other’s throats.”

“We have not been—” Dad started.

“Oh, not in front of us. It’s always when we’re not around. You’ve made sure of that, but whatever toxic bullshit is going on between y’all is really fucking evident to anyone around.”

“Language, Son,” Dad’s voice warned, but I didn’t care. Mom looked distraught, glancing between us. There was something there she didn’t want me to know.

A fresh flash of anger washed over me, and I felt Annie’s fingers wrap around my bicep with a gentle squeeze, letting me know she was there. That she had my back. But also her own warning to not get out of control. I took a deep breath and looked between my parents.

“Let me put it this way. As secretive as you think you are, *everyone* around here can feel it, and we’re sick of it. Harper had to call me home from my birthday because Colton was literally scared at how this house felt. So, how about y’all actually be adults and figure out how to handle whatever’s going on.”

“It’s not that easy.” Mom’s voice trembled, her hands at her sides curling into slight fists, fighting to control her emotions. There was desperation in her gray eyes as she looked from me to my dad. He sighed, tilting his head back in frustration.

“It *should* be.”

“Well, it’s not.”

“Well, whatever it is, figure it out,” I snapped. “Because I’m done.” I grabbed Annie’s hand, needing to get away. We hopped in my car, and I sped off, gunning the engine as we reached the outskirts of town. Annie kept her hand on my thigh, silently letting me know she was there. The roar of the engine vibrated through me, slowly clearing my head with the thrill as I tore down a back road, my girl at my side.

Chapter 23

JET

I stared at the screen full of numbers in front of me while I cross-referenced the latest shipment of parts that had been delivered today. I'd already pulled a shift at Riptide this morning, going over shipments and inventory there, so this was like a double dose of torture. Anything with numbers my nemesis.

My eyes began to cross, and I rubbed my thumb and index finger across my brow to stem the faint headache that was forming.

I didn't want to be here. And not because of the inventory.

Ever since that blow up at home, the shop just didn't have the same appeal. There was too much tension lingering in the air with both my dad and I here. We'd gone from an easy relationship to trying to avoid each other as much as possible. Even the guys here knew something was up.

I still hadn't figured out what was going on with my parents, but I'd at least give them props that they'd dialed things back. It was just that I *knew* there was more to it. My mom would barely even talk to me anymore and forget looking me in the eye. Like if she did, I'd figure out whatever secret she was keeping. It was driving me crazy.

If I'd known how weird it was going to get, I might've held back from confronting them.

I gave a little snort through my nose at *that* thought. Because that was bullshit. As much as calling my parents out seemed to have backfired, it'd needed to be done. Let me take the brunt of the fallback if it meant Colton and Harper had less tension to deal with. I could deal.

I turned to the last page of the shipment and glanced up at the clock. Half an hour. I could do this. I sighed, the sound halfway like a groan.

"If you show me what to do, I can finish that up for you," Zane offered. He stood at the other end of the front counter, wiping it down with the current end of the day lull.

I looked up. "You know, I should've thought of that an hour ago. You need to learn how to do this." I jerked my head for him to come over, and between the two of us and someone *not* ready to tear their eyes out from staring at all of the numbers, we had it wrapped up in almost no time flat.

"Thanks, man. I'm definitely passing this job off to you once you're done training."

Zane smirked, but before he could reply, the door to the back opened and my dad stepped in. I stiffened slightly as he came up and gestured to the papers I'd just been going over.

"This the shipment?" he asked, his expression as stoic as his voice.

"Yep."

He picked it up and headed back through the door, leaving me with Zane and his raised brow. He blew out a long exhale.

“I’m not normally one to give a shit to pry, but damn. I’d thought *I* had shit going on.”

I scoffed. “Tell me about it.”

“We should hang out. Take the girls on a date. Get your mind off it.”

“Oh, yeah?” I picked up a stack of papers to file, trying to stay busy. There was only one customer left, and we’d be in the clear. The bell above the door chimed, and I stifled a groan, hoping they weren’t expecting service right now, but when I turned around, a smile immediately split across my face.

“Hey, guys.” Annie and Izzy waltzed in, both dressed in bikinis and coverups for the beach where they must have spent their afternoon. Sand dusted their long legs and with windblown hair and wide smiles, Annie had that perfect sun-kissed tint to her skin while Izzy had a hint of pink to her cheeks and nose.

My girl came up and lifted herself by her elbows on the counter to lean in for a kiss. I met her, brushing one across her lips while Zane went around the side of the counter to meet Izzy. She tiptoed to place a kiss at his jaw, and his eyes raked down her form as she rocked back on her heels.

“Damn, gotta say I love this look.”

Izzy blushed through her sunburn. “We thought we’d see if y’all wanted to go out.” She glanced between Zane and me.

I grinned. “Zane was actually just saying we should double.”

“Really?” Annie looked at him, surprised.

He popped a shoulder. “Thought it might be a good idea. And your boy here needs to let off some steam. I’ve got just the place, *if y’all* are game...”

I glanced between the twins to judge, but Annie’s lips had already curled into a mischievous grin at the challenge. “We’re in.”



“This was the best fucking idea for date night.”

Zane smirked. “Thought it might go over well.”

We sat against the hoods of our cars, our Mustangs parked side by side at the exclusive races I’d been dying to get back to. We’d had to leave so abruptly that night that Izzy got hurt. She’d seemed a little apprehensive of the idea today at first, but once we’d gotten here, she and Annie had taken to it even better than the last time, hollering and cheering at the first few rounds of races.

They’d even done another version of their twin bit. Sort of. Annie had on tiny white cut-off shorts and a black and purple tank top while Izzy was wearing a white jean skirt, a black crop top, and a sleeveless purple leather jacket. That and her makeup gave her an edgier look, matching her vibe to Zane’s. Less the sweet and innocent version of my friend I knew. At least, from the outside.

She beamed, laughing and chatting with Annie while Zane’s arm snaked around her exposed midriff. He looked like he

didn't give a damn about anything, but his stance was claiming, almost possessive as he held onto my friend. Izzy leaned over towards Annie, and he pulled her back. My brow almost furrowed at the slightly rough movement, but Izzy seemed unfazed, settling back into his firm hold.

Not that I could talk. I had my arms wrapped around Annie where she perched between my legs, the smell of her apple shampoo invading my senses as she leaned back against my chest. My dick was hard against her back as she twirled tantalizing circles into my thigh between energetic cheers.

I hissed when she wriggled her ass in my lap and caught the little smirk on her lips. *This girl...* The things I planned to do to her later...

"I can't believe y'all have been to one of these before," Zane commented as the next race was being set up. "It's pretty exclusive. Not that you're not the right crowd, man, with your car, but..." He shrugged. "Hell, I don't know."

I laughed. "Well, my car still needs some work. There's tons more I'd like to do under the hood, but yeah, I'd heard rumors about these things for years but didn't have an in. Except *David*, apparently, who never fucking told me." I scowled, and Zane smirked.

"He was *my* in, actually. One of the first guys I ran into when I moved."

"That fucker." I growled, grinning. "I know y'all hang out a lot, though."

“We do. So, who was your in?”

“You.” He looked surprised. “I overheard you talking about it on the phone that day you came in for an application.”

“Well, fuck.” Zane grinned. “Got ya in twice now, I guess. I’ll get ya hooked up with Monty, get you down on the list for text updates on where the next one’s at. They like to rotate it and keep the dates under wraps so the cops don’t have a chance to hear about it.” He started to yell at the end as the next pair of racers revved their engines.

I saw Izzy stiffen at his last comment, and I gave her a reassuring look before turning my attention to the race. The flag dropped, and the cars took off, tires spinning through the dirt. Annie and Izzy screamed, their hands cupped around their mouths to cheer for the red Corvette. It cut off the Jaguar, sending it fishtailing as they rounded the first curve. The driver tried to adjust but over-corrected, and it spun three times before coming to an abrupt halt. The twins gaped, but I was only more revved up as the ‘Vette sped across the finish line. The atmosphere perfect for getting my mind off things at home.

“Oh, my God.” Izzy put a hand to her chest. “Did you see that? I hope he’s okay.”

“He’s fine.” Zane shrugged, blowing off her worry. “Comes with the territory when you don’t know what you’re doing out there.”

“And you do?” Annie’s voice was barely restrained from a snap, but before Zane could reply, the burly looking guy Izzy

had called a bookie our last time here walked up. He was a solid guy, built like a brick, with a shaved head and tattoo sleeves running down both arms.

“Hernandez, just got word that Reyes isn’t gonna make it tonight, so I’m a driver short. You in?”

“Definitely. Put me down,” Zane replied, flashing a hint of a cocky smirk at Annie. He stuck out a hand, gesturing my direction. “Monty, this is Jet. Told him I’d get him on the list.”

I leaned forward and held out my hand. “Hey.”

Monty eyed me for a moment, assessing before giving my hand a quick, solid shake. “You race?” He jerked his chin at my car.

“No, it still needs some work done.” I barely managed to get it out, surprised, but the thrill of possibilities tore through me, my insides seeming to buzz at the idea. Annie watched me, and I knew she was taking in my reaction, but all I could think right then was how it would feel to have her watching me out on that track. My dick twitched, harder than ever, and I was now itching to get back to my garage to start on those mods.

Monty nodded, jotting something down on his clipboard before holding it out. “Write your number at the bottom, and I’ll get you down. And once that car’s ready...” He let the insinuation lie.

I scribbled my number down and handed it back. “Definitely.”

The twins’ eyes widened.

“Are you serious?” Annie turned slightly in my arms to hiss when Monty walked off.

I shrugged. “Maybe. It’s something to consider, anyway.”

“Babe.” She gave me a look, and I raised my brow.

“What, like you wouldn’t like seeing me out there?”

“I– Well– Okay, yeah, that might be hot.” Her eyes turned deviant, looking up into mine, and she bit her lip. *Fuck...* It always hit when she did that, and I brushed my thumb over her bottom lip, releasing it before capturing it with a kiss.

ISABEL

I was still staring in shock when Jet leaned in to kiss Annie. How in the world had my night suddenly turned into this? I'd come to watch the races, and now, suddenly both guys I'd come with wanted to be *part* of them?

Zane gave my waist a squeeze, my body now feeling stiff against him. "You don't want me out there, huh?"

I blinked at the accusation in his tone. "I, uh, just wasn't expecting it. Have you raced before?" I looked up at him and realized there was still so much I didn't know. So much that I wanted to even though nerves and apprehension flooded my stomach, my fingers now running through the long strands of hair I'd left down around my shoulders, trying to force myself to relax with his arm curled around me. Things had felt so perfect before, but the vibe of the night seemed to change in an instant.

"I've raced a couple of times." Zane answered like it was no big deal, like it was something I should have expected. I nodded, still trying to process.

Zane was racing. Jet was thinking about it. Annie *liked* it.

What in the heck was happening?

My enthusiasm for the next couple of races waned slightly, my thoughts in a whirlwind as I stressed. Could Zane really race?

Before I knew it, he was being waved over, and he gave me a bruising kiss before taking off. “Watch. You won’t have any doubts when I’m through.”

I nodded, a little stunned, and switched over to lean on Jet’s car, Annie getting out of his lap to sit by my side. She clenched my hand, easing some of my nerves as I watched Zane waiting at the start. He had a single hand clutched on the wheel, and he stared out the windshield, an intensity in his expression that had tingles race up through my core.

A dark knight.

I could tell he was in his element, and I was surprised at how delicious the anticipation was to watch him.

“What’s he racing against?!” Annie asked as their engines revved.

“Dodge Viper!” Jet called back.

“I call Mustang.” Annie gave me a sideways glance, bumping my shoulder, and I matched her grin.

The girl at the start line held up the white cloth, my stomach in my throat as she gave it a harsh flick, and they were off. The Viper took the lead and made the first corner, leaving Zane’s Mustang in a cloud of dust, but Zane held steady, making the first turn in a smooth glide. He began to gain ground, edging up on the side of the Viper. They reached the next turn, and the Mustang veered out, sending the Viper wide and off the track. It caught up in no time, and they raced, neck and neck. My heart in my throat, I watched as the nose of the Mustang

crossed the finish line first, and I leapt up with a scream, bouncing up and down on my toes.

“Did you see that?!” I turned back to Annie and Jet who were cheering right there with me.

“That was awesome!” Annie yelled back.

I waited until Zane had parked, and the second he threw open his door and stepped out, I ran towards him, jumping into his arms.

He twirled me around before setting me down, a triumphant, cocky smile in place. “That was for you.”

I threw my hands around his neck and kissed him, long and deep, not caring who was there.

Chapter 24

ISABEL

Isabel

The rest of the night at the track flew by. Annie and Jet took off after several more races to go to a party out in Summer Ridge, but Zane and I stayed a while longer, not slipping away until just before the end.

I hadn't been ready to go home. Home rarely felt right anymore, and tonight, it felt like I wasn't even myself. The way I'd thrown myself at Zane in front of that crowd? The location had been right smack in the center of Outer Ridge this time, and there I was, acting like it was nothing to be in their mix. It was intimidating, especially when I began to realize how easily Zane fit in. Did I really belong by his side?

I gave a mental shake of my head. That didn't matter. What mattered was how I felt protected with him there. Like he was my buffer for the dark as I got a glimpse into that world.

I was terrified and exhilarated all at once.

"Everything okay in there?" Zane tapped the side of my head. We'd gone for some takeout and ended up just driving around, the gentle purr of the car's vibrations lulling me into my thoughts.

I smiled, my eyes still staring out the windshield, and brought my bare feet up onto the seat to hug my knees.

"Yeah, just thinking."

“Uh-oh. Good thinking or bad thinking?” I felt him glance over at me.

“Good? I think? Tonight was just new for me, I guess. *You’re* new for me. Darker than I’m used to. It has me wondering how well we fit.”

“We fit perfect.” Zane’s voice darkened. Pulling over to stop at the side of the back road we’d been on, he put the car in park and looked at me. I looked back, curious at his reaction. “If I’m your dark, then you’re my light. Don’t ever let anyone make you think we don’t work because I’ll rip them apart for ever putting doubt in your mind.”

He stared at me with such intensity, that darkness swirling in the depths of his eyes as he spoke, that my heart raced. My eyes widened, a spark of fear flickering faintly behind the thrill of his words. How possessive he sounded. Something must have been wrong with me. Because I liked it.

“I won’t,” I whispered back, realizing he was waiting for a response. “It was more my own doubts. I’m so innocent and boring compared to you.” He was mystery and intrigue rolled into one. I was the girl whose sheltered life got thrown for a loop, who was acting okay on the outside but didn’t know how to fully recover.

“Innocent, maybe, but you’ve got a wild side just waiting to come out.”

I frowned.

“Don’t believe me?”

“No.” I shook my head with a nervous laugh.

Zane just gave me a challenging look. “Come on.” He unbuckled my seatbelt. “Get up there.” He pointed to the sunroof, pressing a button for it to open. I looked at him like he was crazy.

“What?”

“I’m proving a point. Get up there.” I hesitated, not sure what he had planned, but he grabbed my chin, steering my eyes to his. “Trust me.”

Slowly, I nodded, and he let go so I could climb up through the sunroof. My hands rested on the dark metal, the edge of the window resting at my back. I looked down, just able to see his arm that rested on the gearshift below me.

“Now what?”

“Now, hold on.”

My eyes flew open as he shifted the car into drive. “Zane!” I called out, grasping the hood.

He pulled back onto the lone road and began to speed up. My heart raced. *Trust me*. His words from before played in my thoughts, and I tried to force myself to relax.

Wind slowly began to whip through my hair, like a gentle caress before carrying it back from my shoulders. It was dark aside from the headlights, brush and trees flying past as Zane sped faster. My heart felt like it was in my throat, but the longer and faster we went, the freer I began to feel.

The wind that tore at my hair pressed at my eyes, tearing them up and drying them at the same time, but I couldn't help the smile that crept onto my face. Exhilaration whipped through me, and I started to laugh as my stress began to melt away. Everything with Mom, with Tucker, how I longed for my dad and the life I used to have. I held my hands up above my head and tilted my head back, relishing in the feel of freedom from it all. Like a weight was lifting. It was like I was soaring, and I didn't want to come back down.

Zane eventually began to slow, and the second he stopped the car, I slipped back inside, my smile breaking my face.

He looked triumphant, his eyes raking over me. They landed on my lips, and before I even realized what happened, I was in his lap, straddled across his legs in the driver's seat.

Our mouths met in a kiss that was desperate and fierce. His arms wrapped around my back, sliding beneath my jacket as I gripped the hair at the back of his head. Both of us pulling at each other, frantic to be closer. My skirt dug at the outside of my thighs, but I didn't care, too engrossed in whatever intensity this was.

Zane gripped my hair and gave it a gentle yank, tilting my head back, and his lips moved to my jaw before traveling down my throat. His hand trailed along my waist, sliding up to cup at my breast—the first time I'd ever been touched there—and I moaned at the gentle massage, heat pooling between my legs. I forced his mouth back to mine, needing to taste him, my kiss becoming faster, deeper, the exhilaration from before still

thrumming throughout my body. I felt consumed, something coming over me. I leaned back and gripped his shirt at his abs, tugging. The second Zane registered what I was trying to do, he let go of my body to yank it over his head in one swift pull.

I was left breathless, staring at the lines of sculpted muscle in their glorious natural tan, but my gaze was immediately drawn to the tribal tattoo that covered his shoulder and a side of his chest. I'd suspected he'd had one after the glimpse of black I'd caught at the edge of his sleeve before, but seeing it and knowing it was real was something else.

I reached out, my fingers gently touching the edge of the design as I traced along the pattern that traveled down over the top of his bicep. Zane sat there, waiting as I explored, the moment intense between us. My eyes eventually came to meet his, and I sucked in a small breath at the want I found in his gaze.

“Does it mean anything?” I asked, suddenly nervous.

He nodded, and I could see he sensed the shift in my mood. “I got it in honor of my grandpa. He’s Cherokee.”

My brow lifted slightly as I took in more of his heritage, and I could tell this piece of him meant a lot.

“You and your grandpa are close?” I asked, my hands now resting against his chest, covering part of the dark pattern for balance. He felt warm under my touch, and I could feel his heart beating beneath my hand. It raced, like the conversation approached some sort of boundary. So many boundaries with him.

Zane nodded. "He's a great man." His eyes lowered and compassion stole my heart, sensing there was more there he just couldn't share.

I cupped his jaw and leaned down, brushing my lips against his. Zane almost hesitated, yet his tongue swept up with mine the second I asked for entry.

My phone rang, and I winced. Like a sixth sense, I knew it was Annie. Placing my hand on Zane's chest, I pulled away and reached over to grab my purse. Zane frowned, his jaw setting into a slight scowl when I crawled off his lap, but I knew I had to answer.

"Hey," I greeted, placing it on speaker. "You okay?"

"Hey, yeah. I'm fine. I was just hoping you wouldn't mind doing the designated driver gig. Jet and I kind of went overboard with the drinks tonight."

"Oh, uh—" I looked at Zane, seeing the irritation that rolled through him at being interrupted. I pulled a face, asking for him to understand. I couldn't just leave my friends high and dry. "*Please,*" I mouthed when he didn't reply.

He let out a huff of breath and then jerked his head. "Fine."

"Oh, crap, you're still out. I'm so sorry." Annie's slurred voice came through the phone.

"No, it's fine, sis. Just text me where you're at, and we'll come."

"This session? Not over," Zane grated when I hung up. He put the car in drive, and I ducked my head, trying to hide my

flush.

What had come over me?

~~_____~~

The party was insane. And I'd been to parties before, but this one seriously took the cake. Zane stopped in what was basically the middle of the street because there was no place to park.

“Fuck, no one better hit my car,” he said, glaring at the drunk idiots passing by as he put it in park. “Can you text your sister and tell her to try to meet us out front?”

“Sure.” I scrambled to type it in my phone, knowing we had to hurry.

We got out of the car, and Zane came around to take my hand. I followed behind his back as we waded through the crowd, using him as both my comfort and my shield.

Annie: Jet and I got separated when I went to the bathroom. Hang on.

Me: I'll text him, too. Just head over.

Annie: Can't. His phone died.

Crap. I tapped Zane's arm and showed him the texts. He nodded, and we made our way up the steps and into the house.

“Stay with me,” he said over his shoulder.

He didn't have to tell me twice.

I spotted Annie squeezing her way past a couple flirting and drinking in a doorway, and I raised my hand. “Annie!”

Relief struck her eyes when she saw me, and she pushed past a few more people to reach us. “I seriously have no idea where Jet is.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll find him,” I reassured her.

Zane kept us behind his back, pushing us into a corner alcove away from the crowd. There was a hall off to the side, a few couples stashed away in the dark corners near the already full rooms.

“Y’all stay here,” he directed.

“Like hell.” Annie’s eyes flashed, and Zane rolled his.

“It’ll go a lot faster if it’s just one of us moving through this crowd. Now, wait here,” he growled.

“Annie!” Our heads all whipped to the other side of the room just as her mouth had opened to protest.

“Babe!” Her face lit up, relief replacing the tension in her shoulders as Jet came around a corner.

“Thank God,” he said when he reached us.

“Where were you?” Annie swatted his shoulder as she wrapped herself around his side. His arm curled around her back.

“Stopped a guy from assaulting this girl, and I was trying to help her find her friends. I thought I’d be back before you got

out, but she had no idea where she was going.” He shook his head.

“Y’all found them, though?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Great, then let’s get out of here.” Zane pressed a hand at my back, but before we could move, a door flew open down the hallway, banging back against the wall.

I jumped, my eyes shooting that direction in reaction, and I froze when I saw Tucker stumble out of the room, still zipping up his jeans with his shirt tossed over his shoulder.

My stomach knotted, knowing instantly what he’d just done, but then Lisa stepped out behind him, her hands still adjusting her skirt.

My eyes flew wide, everything in me sinking. Tucker never did seconds, so what was he doing with *her*?

As if sensing me staring, he looked up, and his eyes met mine. He stilled, the moment seeming to freeze in time between us, and his face paled as he slowly met the eyes of each of us there, like he’d just realized the gravity of what he’d done.

That, or he didn’t think he’d get caught.

My jaw clenched. All the crap we’d put up with the first time he’d touched this girl, and *she* was the one he’d broken his rule for?

Lisa looked around when she noticed Tucker tense, and her eyes found mine. I watched as a smirk crept up her lips, and she placed her hand on Tucker's arm. How he didn't pull away. How his eyes then slid to mine.

My vision flared red as hurt flashed across my expression, and I quickly turned away before anyone could see. Everything in me mixed and confused.

"Come on." I yanked Zane's and Annie's hands.

I needed to be outside. I needed air. I needed freedom from whatever feelings I still had for him. But more than anything, I was just done.

Chapter 25

TUCKER

I was dead the next morning, I'd had so much to drink the night before, but the buzzing under my face did a decent job of stirring me from sleep. I groaned, pulling my phone out from under my cheek and squinted at the screen, my vision blurry enough I barely made out Jet's name.

"What?" I grunted.

"Grab your board and meet me downstairs."

I groaned. "It's too fucking early for this shit, man."

"To hit the waves? Best time, actually. Now, get up. I'll be over in five."

I dropped the phone when he hung up and pressed my face back into my pillow. Fuck. The waves my ass. This was Jet therapy day. Where he gets under my skin and makes me spill my shit.

I was not ready for it.

The anger and disappointment in Izzy's face last night flashed through my thoughts, and I winced. How many times was I going to fuck things up? I had to have been half past stupid to give into Lisa again last night. I *never* broke my rule, but stick some extra alcohol in my system and a few purred words in my ear while she rubbed herself over my lap, and there it fucking went. Out the window.

Hell, maybe I do need this session with Jet.

The waves would be good, anyway.

With a final, defeated groan, I pushed myself out of bed, my stomach rolling at the vertical movement, and went to wash up in the bathroom. Taking a two-minute rinse and running a toothbrush over my teeth, I left my stubble and threw on some board shorts before going to meet Jet downstairs. He eyed me as I came out of my garage, and we loaded our boards in the back of my truck before heading down to our favorite surfing stretch along the beach.

The patch of sand we parked at was bare of other cars, but the waves were awesome, some of the best ones we'd had this season so far. We paddled out, spending the next few hours surfing, not a word between us. I was starting to think this was the only reason Jet had wanted to come out here, but my relief from that speculation died once we headed back in. Jet was too quiet, biding his time in that way he had until he'd get me to spill.

Except I didn't want to this time. Not about this.

We pulled out and headed down the beach so Jet could check his schedule over at Riptide and talk to his boss. I grabbed a drink, waiting for him outside the front when I saw the twins pull up in their truck. They hopped out, and I watched like a stalker as they went and set up their things near the shore, knowing that today I was the last one welcome at their sides. I felt like such an ass.

Annie plopped down on a beach towel in her favorite yellow two piece, popping her earbuds in her ears before lying back,

but Izzy took time to set up her chair. She bent to secure her towel under the metal bar, that tiny purple bikini of hers emphasizing her chest with the perfect, ample view. It took everything I had in me to drag my gaze away, my brain stuttering for a moment. I was so screwed.

How fucked up was I? That I couldn't stop looking at her, or yelling at her, screwing everything about our friendship up.

I smashed my empty water bottle against my thigh, the resulting crunch only a fragment of my frustration. Jet's brow rose, catching me as he stepped outside, and his gaze followed mine over to the girls.

"Come on." He waved me to follow, and we climbed in my truck, my friend watching me in that fucking assessing way he had.

Fuck. So much for getting out of talking.

I kept my eyes on the road, my hands alternating between gripping my neck and the wheel, not ready to give in yet. I needed food first if Jet was going to start digging.

We pulled into the lot at Bob's Diner a few minutes later, and my stomach rumbled at the smells flowing from the kitchen as we headed inside.

I nodded 'hey' to a few people in the first booths but passed on their invites to join, spotting the guys in the large corner booth in the back instead.

Jet gave me a look that said he knew I was stalling, and I looked away, not wanting to confirm or deny. He shook his

head and took the last booth seat, so I pulled up and straddled a chair at the end, running my hand through the sun-bleached strands that fell over my forehead.

The waitress was already there, and we exchanged fist bumps and ‘hey’s’ with the guys as we took turns placing our orders.

“Sup, guys?” Corey said when she left. “We were just talking about that party out in Summer Ridge last night. I think it actually rivaled that massive one I had last New Year’s.”

“Nah, *that* was an epic party,” Kyle stressed. “Last night’s was more drama than anything.”

“Drama or not, it was a good party,” Noah argued, running his comb through his already perfectly styled brown strands. “Snagged a good one last night.” He winked.

“Fuck, when do you and Pierce not?” Mateo grumbled. “Bet *you* got laid, too.” He looked at me, and like a deer caught in headlights, I glanced at Jet.

He just looked back, no sympathy. Shit. Not only was he wanting to talk, he was pissed.

Corey caught our exchange. “Whoa, okay, something went down.”

“Just drop it,” I grunted, not wanting to get into it.

Catching the tension and my warning, Kyle started in about seeing his ex there last night with some guy, sending us down the rabbit hole, but it was better hearing him complain about his ex again than spilling my guts here, surrounded by eyes

and ears just waiting to spread the latest round of gossip. *I'm sure Lisa's doing a good enough job of that on her own.*

Fuck. Why had I slept with her? How fucking stupid did I have to be?

Conversation stalled as our food came, and the six of us gobbled down our burgers. We were heading out and clearing the table when a flash of strawberry blonde by the back windows caught my attention.

“Fuck.”

“What?” The guys looked over, and Mateo knocked my arm when he spotted Lisa.

“Bet you're glad most of *that* drama's over.”

“Yeah, fucking thrilled,” I grunted, already backing my way towards the main door.

“What's that mean?”

“It means he slept with her again last night. At the party.”

All four of our friends' heads whipped around in shock as I shot my best friend a look.

“They were going to find out, anyway. Think about who it is. Better they hear it from us than the rumor mill.” Jet threw a tip on the table. “Let's go. Later, guys.”

“Later,” their scattered replies called back, still sounding stunned.

“Care to explain why you'd sleep with the clingiest piece of drama that gave you hell for weeks again?” Jet immediately

started in when we stepped outside, his patience apparently gone.

“Fuck, I don’t know, dude. I’d just needed out of my head, and I was drunk, and then all the stuff she kept promising in my ear.” I gripped my hands behind my head. “It was stupid. I get it. But I shut it down after y’all left. I swear.”

“You better hope. That girl’s crazy kind of clingy.”

“Yeah, I know,” I grumbled, remembering too well from last time.

Relieved I wasn’t parked in view of the oceanfront tables where I’d spotted my latest mistake, we rounded the side of the building, and I stopped in my tracks, watching Zane helping some girl into his car across the parking lot. A girl that *wasn’t* Izzy. I watched as she giggled and ran her fingers through her hair and the cocky grin Zane pulled before sliding inside.

“What the fuck?” I glared, my hands twitching at my sides as my stomach turned. All I could think about was Izzy. How devastated she would be. I barely moved a step when Jet caught my arm.

“No. Not here.” My friend’s expression spoke volumes compared to the calm in his voice.

I nodded, still seething as we climbed in my truck.

“Drive,” Jet instructed from the passenger side.

I fumed, not understanding why he wasn’t as pissed as I was, but I jammed my foot on the pedal, anyway, tearing out of the

parking lot, and turned at the first light so I could race down a back road out of town.

“That’s bullshit!” I finally exploded. “Half the guys in this town bust their balls for years wanting to date Izzy, and he fucking goes and pulls that?”

“Yeah, it’s fucked up,” Jet agreed. “*If* it’s what you think it is.”

“You thought it, too,” I snapped back.

“Suspect it. We don’t have any proof.”

“Proof?! How about what we just saw?!”

“Not proof. But, yeah, it looked bad. Except I’m not going to jump to conclusions without getting answers.”

My knuckles turned white against the wheel, and my truck pulled at a sharp curve, it was such bullshit. Jet shot me a look.

“I’m not saying we ignore it, but if you weren’t so busy trying to avoid what’s actually going on, you might’ve noticed that Izzy’s *happy* with Zane, and I’m not going to blow it up without facts.”

I frowned, hating his fucking logic that always made him right. “Fine. Whatever. Except I’m not avoiding anything.”

Jet rolled his eyes. “Dude. I know this is new for you, but you seriously can’t be this slow. It’s so obvious.”

I paled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Bull. I can see it on your face. You know exactly what I’m talking about. You’re just too chickenshit to admit it out loud.”

“And you fucking want me to?!” I snapped, but at the look on Jet’s face, I sighed, slowing to a normal speed. He fucking knew anyway, so why not? “Does Izzy know?”

“I don’t think so, but your timing is seriously off, man. She’s happy with Zane now, unless you want to try to convince her to break things off with him so *you* can make a move.”

“No!” I snapped, dragging a hand across my face in frustration. “I don’t need this. I don’t want this. I don’t want her with that douche either, but I don’t *want* to want to have sex with her. Biggest dumbass plan for ruining our friendship.” I growled under my breath as all of my frustration poured out, then white-knuckled the wheel again as I turned at the loop to head back to town. “I can’t. But I can’t stop thinking about her either. Those legs, man, her chest, those fucking soul sucking eyes of hers... All I have to do is look at her now. I’m fucked man, and fucking isn’t helping.” I sagged in my seat, winded at the admission.

Jet stared at me in shock. “*That’s* what you’ve been doing about this? *That’s* what you think is going on?”

“Yes,” I muttered, disgusted with myself. “It’s the only thing that makes sense. It’s like I, suddenly, out of nowhere, noticed how incredibly *hot* she is. Not that I didn’t know before, but all she has to do now is breathe, and my body reacts. My hands fucking itch to touch her, and all I want to do is rip her away from Zane every time I see him anywhere near her. How could I let this happen, man?”

“Wow...” Jet mumbled, and the truck fell silent for a minute before he began to speak. “Remember last Christmas when my car was leaking oil? We kept messing with the oil pan, we changed out the gasket, we changed the lower cover, but it ended up being an internal routing tube causing all the problems? I think this might be one of those internal things.”

I gave him a doubtful look.

“I’m not saying you don’t want her like that. She’s hot. I’m dating her twin. I would know, but isn’t it possible that there’s more to it? I mean, couldn’t you possibly have actual feelings for her?”

My brow furrowed as I considered the idea. But no, it had to be about sex. *It’s always about sex with me. Isn’t it?*

“Dude, fill me in. What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know, man.” I scraped my hand down my jaw, so confused.

“Well, answer me this. If you had to pick, do you want her with Zane over you?”

A flash of anger tore through my middle, and I scowled. “Hell no. Something’s been bugging me for weeks, since he first went after Izzy, and today fucking proved me right. He should be thrilled that he has Izzy, not sneaking off with other girls. She doesn’t deserve that bullshit. She deserves someone who...”

“Someone who...” Jet encouraged when I paused, searching for the right words.

“Someone...better.” I exhaled finally, giving in. “Someone who knows she loves kids almost as much as dancing. That her favorite food is bean and cheese nachos but smothered in queso sauce. How I let her steal mine. How she sleeps with a nightlight because she’s afraid of the dark. That she loves purple but only the right shades. Her regrets. Her fears. That lightning scares her, but she thinks it’s the most beautiful thing in nature. That she’s still a little broken after losing her dad, and that I was the one that got to pull her out of it.” I gripped my neck, exhausted from warring with myself. “Who else would get that, man?”

“No one.”

We rode in silence for a few minutes as we came back into town, me still processing while Jet knew to wait. He always fucking knew. We pulled up in front of my house, the sounds of our siblings playing coming from across the street.

I paused before opening my door, realization finally washing over me, and I sunk back against the seat. “I have feelings for Izzy.”

Jet nodded. “No shit. And you’ve just about blown your chance, because before Zane came around, she wanted you.”

My head whipped around. “She what?”

He tilted his chin up in a silent ‘yep’ with his look. “And don’t you dare tell Annie I told you.”

Fuck. He has to be kidding me, right? Except Jet wouldn’t kid. Not about this. How did I miss it? Had she been that good

at hiding it? Or was I that in denial?

Better yet, was there even a shot for us anymore, now that she was with Zane?

Unlikely. I closed my eyes, wincing at everything I'd done.

“You’re finally realizing how bad you’ve screwed up, huh?” Jet asked, and I nodded. “Good. Question is, now that you know, what are you going to do about it?”

I thought about it long and hard, pounding out drills in the driveway and throwing myself into a workout, waiting on an answer to come. I couldn't screw up anymore. Izzy might have had feelings for me before, but like Jet pointed out, she was with Zane now. She'd given up on anything with me. Question was, now that I knew, could I give up on everything with her?

By late afternoon, I was pretty sure I knew what I had to do. Picking up my phone, I called Annie.

“Hey, dumbass. How's your day going?”

“Yeah, love you, too.” I rolled my eyes and threw my leg over my weight bench to sit, my fingers gripping along the edge of the padded surface.

“What do you want, Tucker?” Annie cut straight through my bullshit.

I took a deep breath, bracing myself for what I was about to hear. I needed to hear it from the closest source, just to be sure.

“Is she happy?”

“Who?”

“Izzy. Is she happy? With him.”

Annie took several long seconds before she answered, her voice softer this time. “Yeah, Tucker, she is.”

I nodded, my chest feeling tight. I could tell by her voice that she knew. Just how long had I been in denial? “Okay. Great. Thanks. That’s all I needed to hear.”

“Wait. Are you going to say anything?”

“It depends. Did Jet tell you what we saw after lunch?”

Chapter 26

ISABEL

“Damn, girl, you’ve been on fire today,” Leo commented as we finished another practice run on a new choreography I’d been putting together.

“I’m just...fired up.” I shrugged, inwardly cringing at how it sounded, but it was accurate. After seeing Tucker with Lisa last night, I was...angry. Like my nerves were burning, itching to move and not be ignored. The angst in the moves and music with this new routine were the perfect outlet for everything I was feeling today.

“Well, I’m here for it. This is one of your best routines yet. We’re going to dominate at competition with this piece. Here.” He held out my water bottle. “Drink up. Don’t need you passing out on me when I drive you home later.”

I rolled my eyes playfully as I took it. “Like I’ve ever done that.”

“You never know. Look at you.” He gestured to the mirror wall. “You’ve barely brokek today, we’ve been going so hard.”

I glanced over, taking myself in. My hair was still pulled back into a messy bun, and baby fine strands had started to ease their way loose at the edges. My cheeks were flushed, sweat dripping in beads down my neck onto my chest to disappear into my sports bra and reappearing again on my bare

midriff, slipping quietly along the faint defined lines of my abs. Parts of my purple and black spandex were soaked, but it was nothing more than I'd had before. I could see where Leo was coming from, though. I'd been so driven to drive away my anger that I'd barely paused for hours.

"Fine, you win." I took a long pull of water, noting his relief behind his playful grin. "Thank you for the ride, by the way. My truck was being a pain this morning, and I didn't want to get it stranded here if it crapped out."

"No problem. It actually works out better because I can make sure you don't stay too late."

"Funny." I gave him a wry look that just made him snort and shake his head.

"You know I'm right. You're wearing yourself down lately. You still won't tell me what's going on, but I'm here if you want to talk," he offered again.

I nodded, his comment immediately sending my thoughts back to Tucker.

"Come on." I set the water down and hit play on the remote, the music filling the room again. Leo sighed. His hands went to my waist, and I shoved everything out of my thoughts, letting the pull of the music and dance take over. We made it through three more run throughs when I realized someone was watching from the doorway.

I tried to look, but I was spinning too fast. Leo pulled me to him in the last counts of the song, and I clutched to his chest,

my heart thrumming against my ribs with my breath.

The second we finished, I looked over, and a smile split my face. Zane was leaning against the doorway to our room in the studio, arms crossed over his chest, eyes intense as they watched us. A hint of that tribal tattoo peeked out of the edge of his sleeve, and my core began to clench at the memory of my fingers running over its dark pattern just last night.

I pushed away from Leo's arms to jog over, wishing I wasn't covered in sweat so I could throw my arms around him. "Hey. What are you doing here?"

He looked down at me, arms still crossed. "Came to surprise you and see if you needed a ride."

"Oh, that would be great. Leo was going to take me, but it's so out of the way. Hey, are you okay?" I asked, realizing how tense he looked, the charming smile he'd usually toss my way nowhere in sight.

"Fine."

"Hey, man. I'm Leo." My partner walked over and held out his hand. Zane just stared at it. "*Okay...*" Leo slowly withdrew it. "So you're the new boyfriend, right? Zane?"

"Yeah. Glad to see you know I exist."

My brow furrowed while Leo's rose at the harsh tone. He looked down at me. "Why don't we call it for today, Izzy?"

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. We'll keep working on the new routine next week."

“Uh, okay,” I replied, not quite sure what was happening. But it was close to time for us to finish up, anyway. I went and did a quick towel off before gathering my things, not wanting to grossify my boyfriend’s car.

“Let’s go.” Zane’s voice cut from the doorway.

“Coming.” I hurried over, wondering if something had happened at home or with Rick to make him upset. Not quite knowing since he’d shared so little. “Is everything okay?” I tried when we got to his car.

He scoffed, yanking his door open and leaving me to get my own. I fumbled with the handle, my arms full with my quick departure.

“Seriously?” he snapped. “You don’t fucking know?”

“No, I don’t,” I replied, frowning as we got in. “Can you tell me?” I set my things down at my feet, sticking the loose items in my bag, and reached for my buckle, my nerves now on high alert for a whole new reason today. I had no clue what was going on.

Zane’s jaw clenched. He clutched the wheel tight, his eyes refusing to meet mine as he glared out the windshield. He pulled onto the highway and slammed his foot onto the accelerator, our speed ratcheting up way faster than what it should be in town.

“Slow down, please.”

He ignored me.

“I feel like such a fucking fool. How often does he touch you like that?”

“What? Who? And seriously slow down.” My own voice began to snap. I had no desire to die from reckless driving, no matter how decent at it he might be. “Zane!”

He finally took his foot off the pedal and sent me a sideways glance. “That dance partner of yours. How often do you let him touch you like that?”

Real anger powered his words, and my jaw dropped. *That’s* what he was mad about? “It depends on the routine, but that’s all it is, Zane. It’s a dance.”

“It’s fucking disrespectful.”

“It’s my job.”

“No, those girls you tutor are your job. What you do with that guy is a choice.”

“It’s purely professional. I swear. Leo and I have been dancing together for years. He’s like a brother.” Zane shook his head, anger still thrumming through him. Nothing seemed to be getting through. “I swear, there’s nothing between me and Leo. Besides, he’s into guys.” I closed my eyes, hating the half truth, because I knew Leo went for girls, too, but I needed to say something to bring Zane back down.

It was the first chink in his armor, and I felt the simmering tension in the car begin to ease.

“Really?” Zane finally met my gaze.

“Really.” I nodded and then carefully reached out to touch his arm, feeling the power corded within his muscles. “I would never do anything to disrespect you. At least, not on purpose.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” I sighed. “Poor choice of words. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

His shoulders finally relaxed, and my stomach unknotted in relief, knowing the fight was over.

“I’m sorry.” He reached over to place his hand on my thigh, giving it a possessive squeeze. “You’re *my* girl, and seeing the way he placed his hands on you, it just hit wrong.”

I nodded slightly, taking it in. “Please, just talk to me next time, instead of getting so mad.”

“Don’t give me a reason to get mad.”

Excuse me?! My eyes flashed. “You’re kidding me, right?”

He glanced over at me, something flaring behind his own eyes before he tampered it back. “Sure.”

He reached out, adjusting the radio to my favorite station, and then shot me that charming smile that I missed over his shoulder. I blinked, trying to process the emotional whiplash before realizing this was his apology. I gave him a small smile back, and we relaxed into the rest of the drive home, Breaker Ridge still ten minutes away. Taking out my phone, I settled into my seat, resting my head on the window and pulling my legs up. I swiped through my password and then frowned at the text waiting for me.

Annie: Not to cause drama, but I thought you should know. Jet and Tucker saw Zane helping a girl into his car this afternoon. It looked like they might've been flirting.

I stared at the message for several minutes, trying to process. I didn't want to overreact, but after how angry he'd just gotten at *me* for disrespect? Another girl in his car didn't sound good, and if it *was* something bad, I needed to know.

"Hey, Zane?" I decided to hedge carefully.

"Yeah?" He turned the radio down.

"So, uh, did you have a different girl in your car this afternoon?" His eyes snapped to mine, and I could see in that instant it was true. "Who was she?"

"Fuck, don't look at me like that. It was nothing."

"Then who was she?"

"Rick's sister."

"Beth?"

"Yes, she called me up, wanting to talk. She's worried about Rick and some stuff going on back home. We went to lunch. I gave her a ride. That's it. So don't give me that look. Like I fucking cheated or something."

"I wasn't." I huffed. "I just asked who she was. Besides, it's not like you didn't freak out about Leo. For no reason."

"Hey." He grabbed my chin, his fingers digging as we came up to a light, forcing me to look at him. His dark eyes poured into mine. "I had every reason. You're mine."

My eyes flashed. “So you’ve said, but that means the same goes for you, and I didn’t know it was Beth. You would’ve asked, too, if it had been me.” I yanked my chin away and pointed to the green light.

He turned forward again, his jaw clenched, and took a deep breath. Awkward silence fell between us.

“Is everything okay? I’ve never seen you get mad like this,” I asked after several long minutes.

He sighed again, this time the sound reaching deeper. “Nothing I can’t handle. I didn’t mean to go off on you.” He took my hand, bringing it up to his lips as we turned down my street. “I’ll call you, okay?” He looked up at me as I climbed out of his car, and I blinked in surprise.

“You don’t wanna come in?”

“Not today. I’ve got stuff to handle.”

“Whatever’s going on with Rick? You can talk to me if you need to. You know that, right?” I gently pressed, wanting him to know I was here.

He offered me a tight smile. “Another time.”

My insides dropped a little, wishing he’d open up. But I knew he kept a lot of things close to his chest, and it wasn’t going to happen right away. “Okay. Thanks for coming for me today.”

“Sure.”

The engine revved, taking off as soon as I shut the door, and I stood there for a moment just trying to get my emotions in check. It had been such a whirlwind of a ride home.

“Izzy?”

I spun at the voice behind me, and my spine immediately stiffened.

Tucker stood at the edge of the walk, one foot resting on the curb and one on the street. He had his hands in the pockets of his basketball shorts, his head ducked slightly as he looked at me, and as much as my fueled emotions didn't want to admit it, I could see the regret in his expression.

Still, my jaw clenched. “What do you want, Tucker? Here to yell at me again? Make me feel like shit over something I don't deserve?” I swung an arm out, my dance bag swaying in my grip. “How about what you pulled last night? I mean, *Lisa*? Of all the stupid things you could've done. Don't expect me to have your back this time if she pulls the same stuff again. It's your own fault this time.” I fumed. I was so fed up with him.

TUCKER

I watched as she went off on me. Nostrils flaring and eyes ablaze, she was a gorgeous force to be reckoned with. I was an idiot for taking so long to realize it.

“Izzy,” I said her name softly, but she either didn’t hear me or didn’t care.

“I mean, how *stupid* do you have to be?” she growled. “Not enough tourist girls around for you to fuck lately or something? Or did you already go through them all?” I winced slightly with that one but let her put me in my place. I’d been nothing but an ass to her for weeks now.

“Izzy,” I tried again.

“What?” she snapped.

“You’re right. About all of it. And I came to say I’m sorry. You haven’t deserved any of it. Me ignoring you lately or leaving that night or yelling at you about Zane. It’s my issue with *him*, not you, and I’m sorry. Really.”

She stilled, her chest heaving as she looked up at me, and I started to wonder if she was going to yell some more or cry. The moment her lips pressed together, I stepped forward, pulling her into my chest. Her dance bag dropped at my feet, and she wrapped her arms around me, clinging as she cried into my shirt.

I held her, running my hand along her back, feeling like shit all over again that she'd been hurting enough to need to cry. Loving—and hating—how right she felt in my arms.

She deserved better than me.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to fall apart on you,” she murmured into my chest.

“Don’t worry about it. What are best friends for?” Because that’s what I was. Whether I’d ever be privileged enough to call her mine or not, I was her best friend.

“I missed you,” she sighed.

“I missed you, too.”

We stayed there in our hug for another minute before finally letting go, and I picked up her bag from the ground, carrying it for her as we headed up the walk. So much unspoken that I wanted to say. Like had I ruined everything? Had I completely lost my chance? But now wasn’t the time. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just been a long day.” She took her bag back, but I placed my hand on the doorknob before she could head inside. She looked up.

I frowned, not sure how to bring it up, not wanting to start another rift with us again, but I had to let her know. I couldn’t stand back, put myself on the sidelines and let her date Zane until I knew for sure.

“Uh, about Zane. This afternoon—”

“Annie told me. It was his best friend’s sister. She was worried and came to talk. That was it.” I couldn’t help noticing the monotone to her voice, like a mirror to my emotions with what that explanation meant.

I had to step back.

Izzy placed a hand on my arm, pulling me back into those eyes, her expression gentle for the first time she’d looked at me in weeks. “Thanks for worrying about me.” Her soft words touched my ears before she disappeared inside.

Chapter 27

TUCKER

The rest of June passed by in a tortured blur. Now that I knew what my feelings were, it was a vicious kind of ache to watch Izzy with Zane. To see her so happy, knowing that it *could* have been me.

Holding it all back now was the hard part. I could tell she was growing closer to him, and while I was doing my best to play the role of supportive best friend again, there really was something about the guy that set me on edge. Like an itch at the edge of my thoughts that I couldn't quite place.

But hell, for all I knew at this point, I was just jealous. Not like I'd ever been in this situation before...

I watched Izzy from across my backyard where she was perched on Zane's lap in the back of the little patio my mom had set up in her corner garden. Annie was laid across the bench swing, her head in Jet's lap, the four of them talking and laughing.

Funny how I felt like an outsider in my own backyard.

We'd all gathered for the fourth of July, mine, Jet's, and the twins' families coming together for a barbecue. The kids were all running around playing frisbee and tag. Dad and Stefano were manning the grill while I was setting up the tables for the food my mom and Helen were producing in the kitchen. Anything to stay busy and away from Izzy. It was getting

harder and harder to act myself around her, but I was a ticking time bomb when Zane was around.

I didn't care how decent Izzy swore he treated her. He wasn't good enough.

No one was good enough for her.

I glanced up, unable to stop myself half the time anymore, and watched as she slid her arm around his neck, the way he gripped her tighter around her waist as they leaned in for a kiss.

My stomach knotted, and I snapped the last table leg in place before whipping around to head inside.

"You okay, Son?" Dad asked, pausing his conversation with Stefano as I yanked the patio door open.

"Yeah, just thought I'd see if there was any food to bring out yet." I ducked inside before he could say more.

Voices from the kitchen carried down the entry hall, and my brow furrowed at the conversation. I stopped a few feet away, something in their tones telling me not to interrupt.

"Will y'all leave it alone, please? I swear, I'm fine."

"You're anything but fine, Bridge." Mom's voice was gentle, yet scolding. "We hardly see you anymore, and when we do, you look..." She trailed off, and I could just picture her gesturing with a wooden spoon or something in hand, gentle concern on her face.

"I look what, Jenna?"

“Tired.” Helen answered instead. “Beaten down. Miserable. Like you don’t even enjoy life anymore.”

“Would you?” Bridgette hissed. “Neither of you get it. You still have your husbands.”

“And you still have your kids. Who. Need. You,” Helen shot back. “Take it from me, the last thing you want is any regrets with your kids. Archer spends more time at our houses than yours these days, where he will *always* be welcome,” she paused to add, “but he misses you, and the twins won’t be around forever. College is around the corner.”

“Don’t you think I know that?”

“Then *why* are you pushing them away?”

“Why are you pushing away Jet?”

My ears picked up, surprised at the turn.

Helen sighed. “For reasons you wouldn’t understand. I’m trying to respect Stef and stay true to myself, and right now, it’s hard. But you’re right. Jet had every right to be frustrated with us, and I need to stop pushing him away.”

“We just want you to be happy again, Bridge,” Mom added. “Maybe get some help?”

Before I could hear Bridgette’s reaction, the back door opened and sounds from the backyard flooded in. Archer came running down the hall and bolted into the bathroom under the stairs. The voices in the kitchen stopped.

“Hey.” I rounded the corner after a few more seconds, praying they couldn’t tell I’d been snooping.

“Hey!” Mom spun around, a far too wide smile on her face. “Oh, we should start sending some of this food outside. Chuck!” she called for my dad, scrambling over a few pots on the stove. A few strands of her light blonde hair had come loose from where she’d swept it back with a clip, and she tucked them behind her ear. “Thanks for bringing some of your baked beans over, Bridge. They’re always a hit.”

“Sure.” Bridgette looked tense, tucked over cutting boards with Helen at the kitchen island.

I watched, my brow raised. They were anything but subtle. “Want me to get anything, Mom?”

“Um...” Her eyes flitted around her professional bakers kitchen.

“Those your baked beans I smell, Bridge?” Dad came in, rubbing his slight beer belly, the rest of him still broad and well muscled. He reached for the Mexican bean pot on the stove. “Best dang thing at our barbecues, aside from your desserts, dear.” He kissed Mom on the cheek, making her blush.

“Kiss up.” She smiled, pushing another side dish into his hands. “Those are ready to go. How’s the grill coming?”

“Stef’s out there checking it now. Shouldn’t be too long.”

“Oh, do you think your brother will make it here in time?”

I shot to attention. “Wait, Uncle Drew’s coming?”

“Yes.” Mom gave me a funny look. “He was waiting on Micah and Ryder to get back into town from University, and then they’re heading over.”

Fuck. “Micah and Ryder are coming, too?” My thoughts shot to Izzy, how this would affect her.

“Yes.” Dad gave me a warning look, that rare Chuck Pierce glare that I knew meant business. “I don’t know what fallout you had with your cousins, but this is a *family* holiday, and you *will* figure it out.”

My jaw set, and I bit my tongue. Even if I wanted to argue, I couldn’t spill. Izzy had been adamant to leave it in the past at spring break.

Just like I’d been adamant when I promised to cut my cousins out of my life for daring to touch her.

This would be fun.

“There’re some platters over there you can take outside.” Mom waved to one of the counters. “Now go. Be social. We’ll be out with the rest in a bit.”

I followed Dad outside and set things down on the table, my footsteps wooden as I made my way over to my friends. Jet looked over as I sat back into one of the empty patio chairs.

“You okay, man?”

I ran my hand back through my hair, my eyes trailing over to Izzy’s. She watched, curious, Zane nibbling at her neck.

My stomach rolled, feeling sick from watching *and* having to tell her. “Um, so, my cousins are coming.”

She stiffened, her hand grasping around Zane’s wrist. He stopped to give her a curious look while Annie shot up from Jet’s lap to her own side of the swing. “You’re kidding.”

“I wish.” I threw my head back in frustration before looking up again. “I just found out. They’ll be here soon.”

“Shit.” Annie hopped up. “This is...crap, I want to say bullshit, but it’s your family. We should’ve known. Or at least suspected. Are you okay, sis?”

Izzy sat silent, her eyes staring into space, like she was lost in her thoughts. Zane looked around at the alarm on our faces. “What the hell am I missing?”

The three of us exchanged looks, hesitating, not sure what was safe to say until Izzy blinked, like she was coming back to the present.

Weird.

“It’s fine,” she said, looking at each of us. She placed her hands on Zane’s, staring at her lap. “It happened at spring break, just a few minutes after you took off to find Rick. Tucker’s cousins were at the party, and...” She swallowed, her voice going soft. “I never expected it. We’d basically grown up around them. But...let’s just say if Jet and Tucker hadn’t shown up, that night would have been a totally different story for me.”

Zane’s face darkened. “They didn’t, did they?”

“No. But they wanted to. Or at least Ryder did. Micah was just there to make sure it could happen.”

Thunder rolled through Zane’s expression as he looked up at me. “And you’re fucking letting them in your house?”

“I promised her I wouldn’t tell.” I glanced at Izzy, everything in me cringing as I watched her try not to retreat inside her shell.

“Well, I didn’t fucking promise.” Zane lifted her from his lap, and Izzy’s eyes widened in panic. She leapt forward, tugging at his arm.

“Zane, stop. Please. It didn’t happen. It’s over.”

He spun around, yanking her up to his chest. I was ready to tear her away from him with the way he handled her when he growled. “They almost touched what’s mine. And you’re telling me to let it go?”

“Please?” she whispered, looking up at him. A moment passed between them, eating at my chest, when there was a shift to Zane’s stance, telling me she’d won.

“You’re with me while they’re here. Or one of us. They don’t deserve to even have you in their sight.”

Her bottom lip began to tremble as she nodded, and he leaned in, swooping her up into a kiss.

I looked away, Jet and Annie giving me sympathetic looks.

Is this what Izzy felt all those months? Because this was hell.

ISABEL

I was basically numb from that point on. Half there, half not. We'd just gotten up for our plates when Tucker's uncle Drew showed up. Micah and Ryder strode in behind him, wearing cocky smirks and swaggers like they owned the place. I'd almost forgotten how their personalities could take over the room. How girls would fawn over their presence, falling over themselves just to get a piece of them, their self respect out the window. The ultimate playboys. They were more intense versions of Tucker but with dark brown locks and freaking gorgeous hazel eyes. They had nothing on the whiskey I often drowned in with Tucker's.

And Tucker at least knows what a boundary is.

My stomach knotted as I spooned a couple of Jenna's amazing bacon wrapped green beans onto my plate. Usually one of my favorite barbecue foods. Tonight, I had no clue how I was going to eat it. I kept my eyes pinned on the table, barely seeing what was in front of me while Micah and Ryder made their rounds.

They approached Tucker, exchanging fist bumps and forced hellos. Which I could tell was painful for Tucker, but it still hit wrong. He kept up conversation with them, holding their attention while the rest of us finished fixing our plates, but as I slipped by with Zane to duck back into our little garden corner

to eat, Ryder caught my eye past Tucker's shoulder, and he gave me a wink.

I felt myself turn green as my stomach turned to lead.

Annie linked her arm with mine. "Come on. We don't need to stomach this bullshit while we eat."

We headed through the side gate, the guys behind us, and went around to the front porch to head back inside. I gave Annie a curious look.

"I don't want them to know where to look for us," she explained.

We ended up in the Pierces' den that connected off of the garage where Chuck often disappeared to watch sports. With dark beige walls and light tiles, brown leather sofas lined the center of the room, surrounding a large entertainment center and a seventy inch flat screen. Trophies from Chuck's high school and college days filled the shelves along one of the walls with Tucker's showcased along the wall next to it.

It had to be the one room in the large house that Jenna hadn't had much say in. Chuck's man cave. Bookshelves filled with pictures and framed articles lined another wall, and my eyes were drawn to two right on top. Micah and Ryder, articles showcasing them in their university's latest football season.

I froze.

Annie's eyes followed mine, and she growled in frustration, rushing around the couch to slap the frames down. "Of course, they would be in here, too."

“Let’s just go back outside,” I mumbled. “I’m not even hungry anymore.”

Zane slid his arm around my back, and I leaned into his side. “They’re not going to hurt you. Not today.”

I took a deep breath and sighed. “You’re right, but I still want to go back. Mom’s actually here today, and I don’t want to spend the day hiding.” I looked around, seeing the small smile on Jet’s face.

“I think that’s a good call.”

We trudged back out, and instead of taking off into the back corner of the yard again, I grabbed a seat on the main patio between Mom and Annie, picking at my plate. I managed to finish about a third of it, eating up Mom’s attention as she caught up with Archer, Annie, and I, and loving when Zane got into a heated, playful debate with Stef and Jet about cars. Tucker still sat off to the side talking with his cousins, but somehow, I knew he was doing it for me. Keeping their attention focused on him.

It didn’t get tricky until night fell and the kids all convinced our parents to take them to the park to watch the fireworks. Without the buffer, I felt exposed, but Zane stayed true to his word. He was right there, his presence a constant protection. We ended up inside after a while, and Zane and I tucked ourselves into one of the large armchairs in the front living room. I trailed my fingers along his arm over his sleeve, remembering the tattoo that lay beneath, and he tilted my head up with a finger, leaning in for a kiss.

It was deep, demanding, like almost all his kisses, and I got caught up in the whirlwind that was Zane. I eventually had to come up for air, pressing against his chest. I felt the slight growl beneath my hands as he pulled away. I knew he wanted more, like that night in his car. We'd pushed that line a few more times since then, but all of it was still so new for me. There were boundaries I still wasn't ready to cross yet with him. Especially not here, in Tucker's house.

"Sorry," I offered.

"It's fine." But I could tell it wasn't.

"Maybe we can go out tomorrow, before I leave for dance camp this weekend."

"Fuck. I hate that you're going for that."

I smiled. "It'll be fine. I'll miss you, too, but it always goes so fast. I'll be back before you know it."

"Right. We're talking *weeks* where I won't get to see you. Where other guys will get to put their hands all over you. I know you've always gone in the past, but you're dating someone now."

I retracted at the bite in his words. "And? I'll still be dating you. We talked about this. This is like my job. This is my future. I'm not not going just because you can't handle the fact that you're jealous."

"It's called protecting what's mine. Just like I'm doing here." He threw an arm out to the kitchen where we'd last seen Micah and Ryder with Tucker, Jet, and Annie.

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t need protecting from *dance*, Zane. What I need is for you to be supportive. Of me *and* my dreams.”

“And I need a girlfriend who listens!” His voice raised. “Unless you can guarantee for me that Leo is the only guy you’ll be dancing with there, or that every other guy there is also gay, then I have every right to be pissed about you going!”

My eyes widened, shocked by his sudden temper. My hands came back to rest in my lap. What was I supposed to say? How was this even happening right now? Was this even a thing?

“I don’t know what to say. Leo is usually who I dance with, but at camp, I can’t guarantee there won’t be anyone else. And I’m sorry if you don’t like it, but I’m going.” I forced myself to look into his eyes, meet his anger.

“Even if that means we’re done?”

I blinked. “What?”

“If you go, how am I supposed to wait around here, knowing what *could* be going on there?”

I got up from the chair, suddenly furious. “It’s called *trust*, Zane!”

“It’s called *respect*, Izzy!”

“Which you’re not giving me now, either! I’ve done nothing to *disrespect* you! And I won’t! I just need you to trust me!”

I wrapped my arms around myself, never feeling more insecure about my decisions. Was I wrong?

“I trust those that prove I can trust them.” Zane glared and stood. “I’ll call you tomorrow. See if you’ve changed your mind.”

He walked off, slamming the door behind him, leaving me trembling in the middle of the room. Movement came from the wide archway, and I looked up. Tucker stood there, fury painted across his features, and I realized then that the others must have heard everything.

Embarrassed, I ducked my head and brushed past him.

“Izzy.”

“It’s fine, Tucker.”

I hurried into the kitchen. Micah and Ryder were in the back corner, knocking back drinks from Chuck’s liquor cabinet while Annie and Jet sat at the table, a half-eaten piece of cheesecake between them. They both watched as I came in, but I couldn’t look at them either.

Grabbing one of Jenna’s aprons from the pantry door, I found my hands shaking as I went to tie it around my waist. Tears began leaking down my cheeks, and I brushed them away with the back of my hand, going to stand by the sink where others couldn’t see.

I heard chairs scrape and footsteps leaving the kitchen, and I closed my eyes in relief. Heavy footsteps came up behind me,

and the apron pulled snug around my waist as large hands took over the strings, tying it at my back. *Tucker.*

I'd know his presence anywhere.

I expected him to step away when he finished, but he surprised me by leaning in, his arms wrapping around me so that his hands now rested on the edge of the sink beside mine. His scent surrounded me, something I'd never quite been able to name other than it was just...*him*. If I could bottle it, I would, because it was calming and exhilarating all at once. My heart thrummed, feeling him duck his head close to mine, and I felt his lips come to rest at my jaw just below my ear. I sucked in a breath.

“No one has the right to speak to you that way. You are *everything*, Izzy. And if he can't see that, then he doesn't deserve you.”

Another tear leaked down my cheek. “Really?” My voice was soft, breathy with him so near.

“Really. He tries it again, and I will rip him to shreds for hurting the person who means the world to me. The person I breathe for.” The tip of his nose trailed along the back of my ear, and I trembled. My eyes snapped up, meeting his in the window and the intensity that waited for me there. Did he mean?...

There was a shift in his expression as he realized the depth of what he'd just said, and he slowly stood, pushing off the sink. I didn't move as he left me alone in the kitchen, my thoughts now reeling at what had just passed between us.

Did Tucker seriously just admit to having feelings for me? My heart pounded, my mind spinning. Confused and torn. Hopeful and terrified. I was with someone else. *Someone who just threatened to leave me.* I shook my head. Either way, I couldn't get my hopes up just to have them crushed again. *Could I?* No, that wasn't right. I was still with Zane. Or was I? The way he left played again through my mind.

I picked up the sponge and began washing the dishes, needing something to do with my hands. Lost in my thoughts, I suddenly heard voices arguing in the front hall.

Zane?

Before I could react, a large body pressed against me from behind, and hands gripped my wrists under the water, holding me in place.

“I've been waiting for a moment with you.”

Everything in me froze. My heart stopped. Even my breath paused in my chest. *Ryder.*

He shifted his hips forward, rubbing his erection against my backside.

“We got interrupted last time. Might just throw you over my shoulder now while I've got the chance.”

Something inside me finally woke up, and I stomped on the arch of his foot with my high heel.

“Fuck.” He released one hand to grab his foot, and I spun away from his grasp, only to find Micah blocking the nearest doorway.

“Tuck—!”

I barely let out my scream before I was ripped back around. Ryder pressed my back against the counter, his hands gripping my wrists to yank them down to my sides. He pressed one of his legs between my thighs, closing himself in on me so I couldn't move. Just like before. Just like that night.

Like the dissolving flicker of a flame, my mind retreated.

Chapter 28

ANNIE

Tucker waved us off when Izzy started to cry, and Jet and I slipped out of the kitchen and down the back hallway after Micah and Ryder. They leaned back against the wall, and Micah hooked a thumb towards Chuck's den as he held up a bottle of Jack.

“Wanna join?”

I scowled and walked away and went to take a seat on the wide curve at the base of the polished staircase in the entry hall. Jet sat beside me, bracing himself against an elbow on the stairs behind him. His other hand rested on my back, his fingers twirling through the ends of my ponytail.

“This is good, isn't it?” I asked after a few beats of silence. “I mean, not all the crap Zane just pulled, but now, with Tucker?” I looked back at Jet, nodding my head towards the kitchen.

“I hope so.”

“I hope so, too.” But God, was it complicated. Tucker finally wanted Izzy back, but now, I'd pushed her into falling for someone else. Someone I was ready to smack for just talking to my sister like that. My insides were still boiling. It had taken everything in me *and* Jet's firm grip on my thigh to keep me seated at that table earlier. Zane was always good to her,

my ass. Couples fight, yeah, but no way in hell would Jet get away with talking to me like that.

I'd be having a very serious talk with my sister later.

Tucker came out of the kitchen, looking almost spooked. Jet and I straightened.

“Um, I...” He ran a hand back through his hair.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head.

I exchanged a quick glance with Jet. What had happened?

Before we could dig, there was a solid rap at the door. Looking like he'd just dodged a bullet, Tucker rushed over and yanked it open.

My eyes flashed to see Zane.

“What do you want?” I hopped up.

Tucker sidestepped, blocking the entry. “What she said,” he growled.

Zane clenched a fist at his side. “I need to see her.”

“You need to leave,” Tucker's deep voice rumbled. Not yelling but it was loud and laced with warning.

“Over what happened? I got mad, yeah, but I want to apologize.”

“You got mad?” I rolled my eyes, anxiety starting to roll in my gut, but I ignored it. “You made her *cry*, Zane. I warned you not to hurt her.”

“I know. I just...” He took a deep breath, cooling himself down, barely holding his patience. “You won’t get it. Just let me talk to her.”

“No.” Tucker started to shut the door, but Zane shoved his arm against it, holding firm.

“How about you ask *her* what she wants first?”

“How about you fuck off?” Tucker growled.

Jet shifted, his body easing into high alert at my side and drawing my attention. My brow furrowed, realizing he was frowning at something past my shoulder.

“Tuck—” I heard the start of my sister’s scream from the kitchen.

“Izzy.” My eyes widened, and I bolted, all three guys on my heels as Tucker released the door.

Fuck. My mind panicked when I saw Micah in the doorway. How stupid were we not to watch them?! The *moment* we fucking stepped away! I should’ve known. My gut tried to tell me. I ducked under his arm, and he stepped aside as Jet shoved him back, clearing the path to the kitchen. “Izzy!” I called out, fear and rolling anger coursing through every inch of my body when I saw how Ryder held her pressed against the counter.

Death wish much, asshole?!

I was ready to spring on his back when his hands flew up by his shoulders. “Just messing with her.” There wasn’t even time for him to step away before Tucker and Zane both grabbed him and threw him across the kitchen. I heard hollers and fists

hitting. None of it registered. I ran up to my twin, throwing my arms around her in a protective hug. “Izzy, Izzy, are you okay?”

Nothing. There was no reaction.

“Izzy.” I stepped back and clasped her hands in mine. “Hey, it’s okay. Everything’s gonna be fine. Come on.”

I tried to lead her from the kitchen, but she just stood there, frozen. It was then that I really took in her expression. Her eyes in a far distant fog. A new terror rushed through me. The front door slammed, shaking the walls, and she still didn’t react.

“Izzy.” I whispered her name, giving her a little shake.

“What’s wrong?” Jet asked from behind me.

“I don’t know.” I glanced back, some part of me registering that Micah and Ryder were gone.

“Izzy. Look at me.” I tapped her cheeks in desperation, and she finally gasped, her eyes coming back to the present.

Startled, her gaze flitted around to each of us in the room before it landed on mine. Her bottom lip trembled, and she threw her arms around me. I embraced her back, holding her tight as she shook in my arms.

Shock and confusion still flooding me, I looked around at the guys. *What in the hell just happened?* None of them seemed to have answers either.

“Come on, let’s go sit down.” I tried to guide Izzy over to the table, but her legs shook.

Jet swooped in and scooped her up bridal style, and Izzy gave a little yelp. “It’s okay, I’ve got you, Iz.”

She laid her head on his chest. Zane stepped forward, anger flaring over his features, and I sent him a look telling him to back the fuck down. Now wasn’t the time. Tucker stepped back from the doorway to let Jet pass, his shirt ripped at the neck where someone had yanked at it. So much torment rested in his expression. I gave his arm a reassuring squeeze as I passed.

“Would you mind taking me home?” Izzy asked, her voice meek and off key when Jet stopped to lower her on the couch in the front living room.

“Sure.”

“May I?” Zane asked, holding out his arms.

Izzy winced. “I *can* walk, guys.”

“Not from what I saw a minute ago. Please?” Zane’s expression was so sincere, even *I* would’ve had a hard time telling him no. She ducked her head in a slight nod, her cheeks flushing as Jet passed her into her boyfriend’s arms.

We headed across the street, but I paused on the porch steps when Tucker lingered back. “You coming?”

“In a minute.”

I frowned. What was his deal? “You know this isn’t your fault,” I said, taking a shot. *Bullseye.*

He looked off to the side of the yard, the bushes deep in the shadows of nightfall, and I saw his harsh swallow from the edge of the porch’s light. “Just give me a minute, Annie.”

I stood there, debating. Not quite sure for once what to say. But I knew one thing. “She won’t blame you.” I turned away and walked inside, needing answers from my sister.



TUCKER

The front door shut behind Annie, but I still didn't move. I was afraid to. Torn between going after my cousins and ripping them apart and staying and making sure the girl I'd been breathing for was okay. A torture all in its own.

My family, my own flesh and blood had now hurt her. Not just once but twice. I'd already sworn to keep them out of my life, away from her, and when I failed to do that tonight...

I forced myself to take several deep, calming breaths. It was like Annie had said. Izzy wouldn't blame me. No, she was too good for that. Even if I deserved it. Because no matter how I looked at it, I'd failed to protect her.

You're failing her now if you don't go inside. Some inner voice inside me tried to reason.

I closed my eyes, hating that it was right. Or that I was. Whatever.

Izzy needed me. She needed to see that I was here.

With forced steps, I made my way up the walk and opened the door. A piece of me relaxed when I saw Izzy. She looked drastically better than she had back at my place. No longer shaky and pale, she was sitting on the end of the couch. Her knees were pulled up to her chest, her dress tucked behind her thighs. She pulled a throw blanket off the back of the couch,

wrapping it around herself, and gave her sister an annoyed look when she tried to help.

“I’m not broken.” She sighed, looking at everyone that had gathered around her. Annie sat beside her while Jet hovered behind the sofa, and Zane had taken a spot on the large armchair. Leaning forward so he was close, he rested an elbow on his knees. His other hand reached out for Izzy’s. She looked down at it but didn’t move, both of her hands still tucked at her knees within the blanket.

I couldn’t help the smile that flickered.

She looked up as I closed the door, and relief touched her expression with a small hopeful tilt of her lips. A glimpse of that gorgeous crooked grin. Her gaze rested on mine, and I could see everything playing through her eyes: worry, confusion, reassurance, *hope*. It was too much. I dropped my eyes and leaned back against the wall by the door, crossing my arms over my chest. Becoming the asshole once again.

“Are you sure you’re okay, sis?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll *be* fine sounds like you’re not now,” Jet reasoned, his voice full of compassion yet authority, letting her know she wasn’t getting out of this. “We all saw how you shut down over at Tucker’s. We need you to talk to us, Izzy.”

She stiffened.

“You can’t force her,” Zane snapped at her reaction.

“We’re not, but we’re worried.” Annie gave him a look, and I knew she was holding back. She reached out and took Izzy’s hands. “Please.” There was so much in that one word, I knew this was killing Annie as much as it was me.

I watched as a lone tear trickled down Izzy’s cheek before she brushed it away with her fingertips. Her eyes briefly met mine, and I was surprised to catch a touch of fear in the depths of green before she looked away.

What was that about?

Like you don’t know. The other side of my brain argued. *Like you aren’t the reason she’s sitting there traumatized right now.*

Argh! I shoved the thoughts back. Hating how they were right. How much I wished it wasn’t true.

Stop self-deprecating, dumbass. Listen to her!

Shaking myself from my thoughts, I tuned in just as Izzy rested her chin on her knees, staring off somewhere past her sister. She took a deep breath, her whispered words haunting as they sucked any humor from the room.

“It started back in April. At that first party I went to with y’all after what happened before spring break. I’d told y’all I’d left because of a headache, but I lied.

“I was making my way off the dance floor when some guy grabbed my wrist. He didn’t mean anything by it, I don’t think, but the second it happened, it was like I was shot back in time. Right back to that night when Ryder had me pinned against the wall.

“I could feel it, hear it, smell it, everything. His voice in my ear. The wall pressed up behind my back. The beer on his breath mixed with his cologne. His touch. Everything. And then almost as soon as it had started, it was gone. But it left me gasping for breath, and I had to leave.”

“The night I found you dancing like a madwoman in the garage,” Annie murmured, and Izzy nodded.

“I was still trying to process it then. I didn’t know what it meant yet. The next time was our first night at the races. When my shoe sunk in the mud and you grabbed my wrist to keep me from falling.” She laid her head sideways against her knees to look up at me, and my gut rolled, fighting the urge to be sick. I could remember her reaction that night. How there were a few awkward seconds when she’d frozen and I knew she wasn’t herself. How I’d let it go when she’d graced me with that smile.

“Don’t blame yourself. You didn’t know.” Izzy tried to reassure me. “I didn’t want you to. But that was the night I realized I had a problem.”

“And you didn’t tell any of us. Even me,” Annie accused.

“Because I was embarrassed,” Izzy stressed. “I hated that it was happening. That I couldn’t control it. And I was afraid of what might happen if y’all found out.” She glanced at me again, but it was just for a second.

“Has it happened any other times?” Zane asked.

“At Jet’s birthday. After you left.” She gave him an apologetic look, like it was *her* that had done something wrong. “I went to go look for you by the drinks, and some guy fell against me, pushing me back into the truck.” Zane’s head dropped, and I knew it was his own regret tearing through him.

“Tucker pulled the guy off of me pretty quickly that time, so it wasn’t too bad. But tonight...” Izzy ducked her head back to her knees, her voice growing tight. “Tonight was bad. It’s never been that bad.”

“You had completely checked out.” Annie squeezed her sister’s hands.

“Probably because it was actually Ryder that did it this time,” Jet surmised.

“You think?” Izzy looked up, hopeful.

Jet nodded. “I’d imagine with PTSD it’s worse with the original instigator.”

Izzy stiffened, alarm gracing her features as I froze, and I watched as the various stages of realization played over her expression. “Do you really think it’s that?” she murmured, still looking at Jet.

“Maybe. It *sounds* like it may be PTSD, but I’m not a doctor. So...” He shrugged a shoulder.

But for me it had hit home, hearing it that way knocking everything into place. PTSD. Izzy had freaking PTSD thanks to what my family had done. I felt sick. My stomach literally rolling. It felt hard to breathe.

It changed everything.

I reached for the door, Izzy's eyes catching mine before I could look away. I saw it all, those green eyes pleading for me to stay. Hope, fear, desperation. She didn't want me to leave.

I couldn't stay.

I stepped out the door, pretending I didn't see the way it crushed her to see me go.

Whatever I had to do to keep her safe.



ISABEL

I watched as it happened. My worst fear. One of the main reasons why I'd kept this all to myself. Tucker was pulling away.

My heart fell in my chest when he turned his back, shutting the door. I blinked back tears, knowing in that moment that the glimpse of hope he'd given me tonight was now gone. I wasn't even sure if it had really been there, but I doubted there was any hope for it now.

I looked up at Jet, asking without saying for him to please follow. Tucker was hurting, too, and tonight, he wouldn't want me. Without missing a beat, Jet nodded, giving my shoulder and Annie's a gentle squeeze before taking off.

The door shut, and the house fell silent, though the tension that still lingered sat heavy and full in the room.

I could feel Zane staring at me. Could feel his regret. He'd messed up big tonight, but just like before, he'd come back. He *wanted* me. And as much as I was angry and hurt by what he'd said earlier, I couldn't deny that my feelings for him had begun to run deep.

It made everything I'd considered with Tucker tonight and my disappointment just now all the more confusing. Part of dating Zane was to help get *over* Tucker, to give *Zane* a real

shot, but now, with one little glimpse of hope, I felt myself torn between them.

How the hell was that fair to Zane? This was exactly what I'd worried about before agreeing to date him.

Not that it matters now...after tonight.

Maybe I'd have to thank Tucker for pulling away. It made the choice easy.

"Zane, maybe you should go." Annie's voice interrupted me from my thoughts.

His head jerked up, his tone intense. "Not yet. Not a chance."

Annie's nostrils flared, but I placed my hand on her arm. "It's fine. Zane and I need to talk."

Her eyes leveled with mine, assessing as we held one of our silent, instinctual dialogues. "Fine." Annie eventually leaned in for a hug. "But don't you dare just let him off the hook," she whispered at my ear.

I smiled. "I won't."

Annie turned and pointed two fingers at her eyes and then back at Zane. "I'll be upstairs if you need me," she called over her shoulder. "And we're talking later!"

I knew we would. I was waiting to hear the door shut to our room, never hearing the click, when Zane moved to the couch in her place.

“Please, talk to me. Don’t pull away.” He wrapped a hand around one of my ankles, giving it a gentle squeeze. “I’m kicking myself for leaving earlier. I promised you they wouldn’t touch you, and then...” He shook his head, clearly warring with himself.

“And then you got jealous and mad,” I finished for him.

He closed his eyes and nodded. “Yeah.”

I sighed, finally releasing the blanket to let it slip past my shoulders, and reached out to place my hands on his, but he flipped them, engulfing them in his large palms, claiming them as his. I paused for a moment to bask in the feel. I did care for him. So much. But some things weren’t going to fly.

“Zane, first off, I don’t want you to blame yourself for what happened with Ryder tonight. He’d been looking for a chance to do it, anyway. It was only a matter of time. What I *need* you to understand is how much you hurt me when you left.

“I know we’re not always going to agree. We’re going to fight, but you fight too aggressively. You go for the jugular the second you don’t get your way. You threatened to *dump* me tonight if I go to dance camp. I don’t think you get what dancing actually means to me.”

He opened his mouth to speak, but I shot him a look. I wasn’t done.

“Aside from my friends and family, dancing is my world. It literally *saved* me when my dad got sick. It’s my escape. It’s

my passion. It's who I am outside of my shell. It's what sets me free. And you want to take that away."

"I don't want to take it away."

"You want to restrict it, then."

"I just don't feel comfortable with you putting yourself in that position with other guys."

"But I'm *not*. It's all in your head. I swear. Yes, I dance with other guys, but the guy I'm heading back to every time is *you*." I squeezed his hands, needing him to see.

He nodded, slowly. "That's hard for me, Izzy."

"And it's hard for me when you talk to me like you did. You really hurt me, Zane. I don't deserve that. And as much as I hate it after just getting onto you, I need to know you're not going to do it again. You can be jealous and possessive all you want, fine, but I can't be with someone who's going to treat me like crap."

He surprised me by pulling me into his lap, and I gasped. My legs straddled his, my lips hovering just a few inches above his mouth as I stared into his dark eyes, the ever more familiar torrent swirling within their depths. It was strong tonight, harsher than usual.

"I'm claiming that possessive offer you just made before you change your mind." His voice held a slight growl, and I nodded. All I could think to do to react.

He picked up my hand and brought it to his lips to kiss my wrist, and my breath hitched. "You don't even know what you

do to me, do you? You were mine the second I saw you. So, don't even think about giving me up."

"Zane." I tried to warn, but I wasn't even sure for what.

"You're right." He placed another kiss to my wrist. "You don't deserve the way I treated you earlier, and I'm sorry. I'm just wound up today with everything going on."

My heart softened, hearing him apologize, and I ran my fingers back through his hair. He practically purred, but all I could do was stare into his eyes. There was so much there. So much he always hid so I wouldn't see.

"Tell me. Please. Tell me something to help me understand."

His eyes closed, his body growing tense.

"I don't share with just anyone, Izzy."

"Am I just anyone?"

He paused for only a moment. "No. You're not. There's a reason I connect with you, I think. We're both a little broken. You with your dad and now your relationship with your mom. For me...God." He dragged a hand down his face. "You're so pure compared to me, but I'm pulled to you. You're my light leading me away from the dark. Keeping me balanced as my world turns to shit."

I didn't dare speak or move. I barely let myself breathe, so in awe of the anticipation that he was finally confiding in me. His thumb brushed along my palm as he searched for words.

“There’s so much there that I could say, but tonight, the past couple of weeks really...we just found out my grandpa is sick.”

He closed his eyes as I sucked in a silent gasp, a chord struck.

“My grandpa has always been my rock. The one I always knew I could turn to for advice when my world got too dark. I’d call or show up at his door, and we’d settle in over the engine and talk.”

“He’s where your love of cars comes from.” Zane nodded. “Have they said what he has?”

“We’re still waiting on results.”

I closed my eyes, a tear slipping down my cheek, knowing on some level the pain he was going through.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

He didn’t reply. His only response was to press his lips to mine.

Chapter 29

ISABEL

That night ended up playing through my thoughts many times throughout the next few weeks, but instead of dwelling on the negative, I used it. The revelation of my potential PTSD, Tucker's withdrawal, and everything that passed between Zane and I, every bit of it became fuel as I put my heart and soul into my time at camp. It had been an incredible few weeks, but today was the final day, going beyond my expectations as they called out the awards for the top performances.

I stood in line with several of the other dancers on stage, Leo right beside me. He grabbed my hand, squeezing tight as we waited to hear our fate.

“And our last award today, for the best choreography in the senior division...”

My breath held, my toes curling in my shoes.

“We've got this,” Leo whispered. I nodded, praying more than believing.

The person at the mic checked the slip of paper. “Izzy Donovan and Leo Dileo!”

Leo hollered, throwing a fist into the air while my hands clasped over my mouth. “Come on.” He tugged my hand, and we rushed forward, claiming another prize for the day.

I looked out at the crowd, finding Annie, Archer, and Mom cheering from the third row. A smile split my face at seeing

them, and I gripped the other side of our trophy as Leo and I held it in the air.

“Congrats, you two,” our instructor said as we descended the stage, the crowd now dispersing for the late catered lunch with our families.

“Mind if I go show this off to my parents first?” Leo gestured to the other side of the hall.

“Go ahead.” I waved him on, two smaller trophies still in my hands.

We’d dominated this year, really stepping up our game, and as fun and amazing as it had been, I couldn’t deny I was excited to be getting back home.

“Izzy!” Annie ran up, and we threw our arms around each other, the ache that always came with the separation these weeks all too real. We smashed each other with our hug, bringing Archer and Mom into the fold when they reached us.

“You did so good, baby.” Mom ran her hand over my hair, and my heart beamed.

“She was alright.” Archer shrugged, a playful little grin on his lips. I rolled my eyes and ruffled his hair.

“Love you, too, Arch.”

“Let me see.” Annie reached out, her hands in a gimme motion, and I passed her the trophies. “I can’t believe y’all got three awards this year. And that jump and spin where Leo lifted you? I would’ve peed myself. It was awesome.”

I laughed. “It was a lot of practice. Y’all ready to go eat?” I motioned over to the mess hall where the crowd was starting to disappear.

“Heck, yes! I’m starving!” Archer blurted.

We headed over, managing to meet up with Leo and his family as we waded through the crowd. Snagging a table together, we spent the next hour chatting and laughing. Just truly enjoying the end of what was one of my final summers at this camp. Next year would be our last, unless Leo and I moved into counselors roles. It was bittersweet thinking about it.

“You know Baste Academy was here scouting,” Leo commented as we went to throw away our plates. “How much you want to bet we’re on their radar now if we weren’t before.”

“Probably,” I admitted, a little thrill running through me. “But it’ll be weeks before we’ll hear anything regardless.”

“Still.” He nudged my shoulder with his. “It’s exciting. We’re meant to go there, Izzy. I can feel it. You and me together, taking the dance world by storm.”

I laughed. It was nice to think about. Baste Academy was a dream, the most prestigious dance school here in Texas and the surrounding southern states, but my eyes couldn’t help darting back to Annie. Dance was my world but so was my sister.

We crawled into Mom’s car later that afternoon, and Archer called shotgun, pulling his Nintendo Switch from the center

console. Annie and I just exchanged looks, not that either of us minded. This way we were together.

“What do y’all want to do when we get home?” I asked, buckling in as Mom pulled out into the long line of cars exiting the parking lot.

She looked in the rearview, her expression apologetic. “I’m, uh, actually going out tonight. I know we usually do a family thing when you get back, but you’ve both got boyfriends now, so I didn’t think you’d mind.”

Annie and I exchanged surprised glances. “You’re going out?” I asked, deflating slightly. Not that I wasn’t happy at all for her. Mom hadn’t been out in ages. Just why tonight?

“Where are you going?” Annie asked.

“Girls night.” Mom glanced back in the mirror again. “Jenna and Helen insisted on it, and it was the only night all three of us could get away. Is that okay?”

“Of course, Mom.” I smiled, forcing my disappointment away. This was a good thing. I couldn’t even remember the last time she’d wanted to go on a girls night. I actually felt a little giddy thinking about it, hoping this was a sign we were getting our old mom back.

“Fine with me, if anybody’s asking.” Archer shrugged from the front seat, his eyes glued to his game. “Colton and I have an epic video game battle planned out with Chelsea and Vicky this weekend.”

“Okay, so that leaves us.” Annie grinned. “What are you thinking, sis? I’m all for pedicures and some sunbathing. Catch up on gossip, but it’s your call.”

“There’s gossip?”

“You’ve been gone for weeks. Of course, there’s gossip.”

“Hmmm, sounds tempting, but how about we save that for tomorrow? I’m thinking Breaker Hall tonight.”

Annie groaned. “You just got *back* from dancing.”

“Yeah, but it’s *my* call, right?” I winked. “Besides, I’m missing the guys, too, and *they’re* not going to go for pedicures and sunbathing.”

“Point.” She nodded. “I’ll text them.”

“Hey, did you bring mine?” I asked when she pulled out her phone.

“Oh, yeah. Archer.”

He reached in Mom’s purse and held my phone over his shoulder. I quickly snatched it, the lash of withdrawal in full play now that it was within reach again. I’d been cut off from the tech world for weeks. *Torture* for any teen, and I was dying for updates.

Annie started texting as I turned on my phone, and notifications immediately flooded my screen. I skimmed through, finding those on my friends first, and I couldn’t help but beam as I looked at all the stuff everyone had been up to.

Zane never posted much, so I wasn't surprised to see nothing new, but I hesitated before looking over Tucker's.

We'd left things so awkward, and he'd never admit it, but I knew from Jet that he'd taken things hard, even leaving for basketball camp a week early after what happened with his cousins. He'd needed the distraction. A place where he didn't need to think, only focus. Basketball drove him as dancing did me. A part of him I'd always been able to understand.

He would've gotten back home last week. I hoped he was doing okay.

"Hey, how's Tucker doing?" I found the need to ask, for some reason afraid to just look.

Annie's fingers froze mid-text. "Uh..."

"Crap. That's not good."

"No, I mean, he's fine. He's just...back to being Tucker. Hang on. Jet wants me to call."

I frowned at her explanation and finally opened his social page. To the amazing pictures others had taken of him at camp. Of endless jump shots and stunning moves on the court. To him beaming with his friends after a game. I could see scouts in the background of a few shots, and I just knew he'd be sifting through more offers this year. You could *see* the love he felt for the game when he played, even through a photo.

It was the posts after that that made my stomach sink. The last weeks of June when he'd dialed things back to nothing

obviously a fluke. Every post this past week had Tucker with a girl. On his arm. On his lap. *In his bed.*

My stomach rolled as my imagination flared, and I quickly shook my head. I had no right to think that way. Not after the amazing last moments I'd spent with Zane. He'd finally started to open up, and I was not going to take what I had with him for granted.

JET

“Breaker Hall?” I glanced at Tucker, my phone up to my ear with Annie’s call. He nodded, looking more distracted than anything. “Uh, yeah, sounds good. Tucker’s game, too. Have Izzy call Zane, and we’ll make it a thing.”

I looked at Tucker when I hung up. “You okay, man?”

“Yeah, let’s get back to work.” He tapped the edge of my car, his fingers curling around the edges where the hood was raised.

I did my best to withhold my frown, knowing he was avoiding talking, and nodded, diving back under the hood to finish the adjustments on the new suspension upgrades I’d been working on. It was Saturday, and with the family shop closed for the weekend and football not starting up again until Monday, I was taking advantage of the space.

I’d used a chunk of my savings lately. Annie’s ring had of course been a hit well worth it, but it was getting started on those upgrades for my car that drained the rest. Last weekend, I had installed a new turbocharger, and I had a new set of tires on order coming in next week, ones that were better built for the rough track and turns.

My dad and I weren’t done with some of the main restoration yet, but hell, if my baby wasn’t going to run sweet when I was through. I itched to get her out on the track. Even

if I got my ass handed to me the first time, I had to try, the outlet calling to me.

Tucker followed my instructions as we worked on the suspension, and when I was finally satisfied, I unhooked the hood strut and lowered the hood back down, holding it an inch or two away before letting it slam closed.

“We’re done?” Tucker asked.

“Yep.” I nodded as I ran a cloth over the edge of the red, glossy hood, cleaning up any fingerprints. “She’s gonna handle real nice after that. Thanks, man.”

“Yeah, no problem.”

We headed to the back to wash up, and I was just about to lock up when I heard someone talking in the front. I frowned, exchanging a look with Tucker. He just shrugged and pushed the door open to head inside. Well, if that was the plan...

I followed, pausing inside the door when I heard my dad’s voice carrying out from his office.

“I know, Dimitris, but she’s got it in her head. I’ve always been able to talk her down before. We did this because it’s what was best for everyone, but she’s so set on it now.”

My eyes widened, realizing what they were talking about, and I inched forward while Tucker went to lean on the edge of the counter, still out of sight. He looked withdrawn, but I knew he was picking up on every word. Just like I was.

“I know it’s not what we agreed to, and *I’m* fine with how things are, but she’s my *wife*. I feel like I’m breaking her heart

by refusing, but if I don't, then I'm going back on everything we promised. It's rough on the kids, too. They know something's up. Tell me what to do here, Brother." Dad sighed, sounding desperate and defeated. I could see him dropping his head into his hand through the office window, and I suddenly felt guilty for trying to listen. I was just so tired of secrets. I was tired of the way this had taken over our house.

"Yeah, yeah, try that. That might help... Thanks. How's Nic doing with it, by the way?"

Wait. Nic knows? Maybe I needed to give my cousin a call. We weren't that close, having grown up on different continents, but I was pretty sure he'd fill me in if he knew.

"Yeah? That's good. We'll have to video chat soon. Get caught up. I'll talk to you later, okay?"

I started backing up, not expecting the end of the call so soon, and waved for Tucker to move.

"Not so fast, Son."

I froze. *Shit. How long has he known I was here?*

"Might as well come in. You, too, Tucker."

I looked back at Tucker, but his expression was unreadable. Like it had been all week. He shrugged and headed into my dad's office.

Again, I followed, wondering what the heck this new dynamic with us was. Because Tucker was not himself. But one problem at a time.

Dad watched us as we came in, and I lowered myself into the second chair next to Tucker across from the desk. Neither of us spoke at first, and I couldn't help but notice how tired my dad looked then. He ran a nervous hand through the salt and pepper above his ear and sighed. "So, how much of that did you hear?"

"Not enough to have any real answers. Just that you, Mom, and Uncle Dimitris did something at one point, and it sounds like Mom's not happy with it anymore. But if you fix it for her, it's breaking a promise y'all made."

I held Dad's stare as I answered. Wanting him to know everything was upfront. Maybe then he'd be that way for me, too.

"Well." Dad let out a long exhale. "Sounds like you heard most of it."

"Maybe. But that doesn't mean it makes any sense. What is Mom wanting? What promise are you breaking if you agree to it?"

"You've always been a straight shooter, haven't you?" Dad chuckled.

"If I know, maybe I can help."

Dad shook his head. "There is no way for me to give your mom what she wants without causing a thousand new problems, Son. And I know you want answers. Hell, you probably deserve them with all the tension we've put you through lately, but it's just not all my place to share."

“What *can* you tell me, then? Because it sounds like Nic knows.”

Dad’s eyes shot wide for a moment before they settled into a gentle laugh. “No. I assure you, your cousin doesn’t know any more than you do. Or at least not much more. I was asking about Nic because his grandfather is sick. Your Aunt Sophia’s dad. He doesn’t have much time left.”

Tucker winced. “That sucks.”

“Yes, but it’s also part of the problem.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Your mother thinks we should be there for Nic when it’s time for the funeral, but not only would it be a huge undertaking, there’s a lot of bad blood between your mother and I and Greece. It’s trouble that doesn’t need to be stirred. And, no. I’m not going to go into it. But you know that we don’t have contact with that part of the family.”

“I do.”

“And for good reason,” Dad stressed. “It’s half of what’s been going on with us at home. The part I *can* tell you is, your mother wants us to go back for the funeral. And I know we shouldn’t.”

“Could just *she* go back? When it’s time? Just for the funeral, I mean.”

“Maybe? I don’t know, Son. I don’t even know if your uncle and cousin will be coming in from London for it, to be honest.

Your Aunt Sophia would want them to, though. God rest her soul.”

“Shit. How bad is this blood?” Tucker muttered.

Dad tossed him a look, leveling. “Bad enough that there’s been no contact for over twenty years.” He took a deep breath and sat back in his chair before turning his gaze on me. “Do you understand where I’m coming from now? Does this help?”

“It does...” I answered slowly, hating that I couldn’t know the rest. But I could respect my parents’ and uncle’s right to privacy if it really was that severe. “Thank you for finally being open with me.”

“Thank you for understanding. I’m sorry it took so long for me to tell you. The past is just...hard.”

I nodded, and we stood, both of us coming around the side of the desk to clasp each other in a hug.

“I love you, Jet.” Dad clapped me on the back of my shoulder, and I clapped his back.

“Love you, too. And I’ll help you work on Mom.”

“Alright then.” He chuckled, the tension in the room finally gone. We stepped back from the hug. “Now, what are you boys up to tonight?”

Chapter 30

TUCKER

Breaker Hall was packed tonight. The end of summer was approaching fast, and the tourists always came out in droves around this time, desperate not to let their fun end. Same with us locals.

I should be living it up right now, but I didn't know how to act like myself anymore. Even being my old self felt wrong. But it was what I had to do to keep my distance. I'd slipped up that night at my house, reaching too far for the stars that weren't my place, and now that I knew all the damage that had been done, I had to do everything in my power to backtrack. I could be Izzy's friend. That was it. And the only way I knew how to do that and keep my feelings at bay was to play the game I'd perfected before.

Too bad my heart wasn't in it anymore.

But I had to make her and everyone else believe that it was.

I was out on the floor with some girl. A brunette, I could tell you that much. But that was about all. There'd been a redhead before her and a blonde before that. Not that any of them caught my interest. Not the way Izzy did.

But she was with Zane. And even if she wasn't, she was off limits.

When the song ended, the brunette turned in my arms. "Want to get some air?"

I hid the urge to flinch. “How about a drink instead?”

She hung herself around my arm as we made our way to the bar, and I ordered a bottle of water for myself and a soda for her when she asked.

I propped an elbow with my back against the bar, the girl twirling designs with her fingertips on my arm as she chatted in my ear. I nodded along, throwing in a charming smile every now and then to keep up the charade, but my focus was out on the crowd.

Annie was off to the side chatting with friends, and Jet was heading to the restrooms, but they weren't really the ones I was looking for. I found Izzy wrapped in Zane's arms in a fast-paced two-step across the dance floor, a huge smile on her face. Exactly what I'd hoped to see, even though it was eating at me from the inside. I watched for another song, until she must have sensed me, and her eyes met mine. I gave her a smile and then leaned into the brunette on my arm, tucking my nose beneath her hair by her ear. Her breath hitched.

“Need a refill?” I asked.

Her nose scrunched with a frown. “Really?”

I shrugged. “Just trying to be polite. Or would you rather I be an asshole? Because tonight, I could probably play it both ways.”

Ugh. Why did I say that? I had no intention of leaving here with her. Interest lit her eyes, though, and I inwardly cursed.

“What the hell, Tucker?” A tiny body flounced up to my other side, and everything in me flinched. *Here we go.*

“What do you want, Lisa?” I turned to look at her with a bored expression.

Her hands were pressed into fists at her hips, her nostrils flaring as she glared. “I *want* to know what the hell *this* is.” She jerked her chin at the girl on my arm.

“Pretty sure she’s a girl,” I smarted back, and Lisa’s eyes flared.

“You don’t have to be a smartass. I *know* she’s a girl. I mean what are you doing with her? After you and I...”

“After we what?” I raised an eyebrow. I was being a dick, but tonight, I couldn’t bring myself to care.

“After we *slept* together. *Again*,” Lisa hissed. “Don’t even try to tell me that meant nothing to you. I know your rule.”

“Then you know it was a mistake. Like I already told you that night.” I took a drink of water, my expression bored. The girl on my arm looked smug, but I just ignored her.

“No.” Lisa shook her head, strawberry curls fanning her shoulders. “I don’t accept that. You stopped sleeping around for weeks after we made love again.”

I nearly spit out my water with that one. “After we *what*?” I tried not to choke.

She opened her mouth to continue whatever word vomit she’d spill next when Jet suddenly walked up. “Give it up,

Lisa. It's not happening."

Her mouth clamped shut, her eyes darting between us. "Maybe not tonight, but I know what we shared." She stepped up, tossing her long waves over her shoulder before placing her hand on my arm. "What you're feeling is new for you. I get it. And I can wait until you're ready."

My mouth was hanging open as she turned and sauntered away. I looked at Jet, his expression just as alarmed. *What the hell?*

"Finally, she's gone." The brunette at my side pressed a kiss to my neck.

My jaw clenched. "Yeah, after that, I'm gonna be honest. This isn't happening either."

She flinched back, looking affronted that I'd just shot her down. "Are you serious?"

"Dead."

With a huff, she stomped away. Jet chuckled, coming up to the bar.

"Shut up."

"Sorry. But I warned you about Lisa."

"You didn't say she'd be bat shit crazy this time. We *made love*? She'll *wait*? What the hell am I supposed to do with that?"

Jet shrugged, ordering a couple of waters while I pulled out my phone with the buzz of a couple of texts and scowled.

Micah: You over what happened on the 4th yet, or are you still ignoring us?

Ryder: Yeah, you'd finally started talking to us again. I was just fucking messing with her, man. A little payback from when she kneed me in the nads.

My jaw clenched.

Me: You mean when you got what you fucking deserved. I just wish she'd done it again this last time.

Ryder: Ouch. Cold, Cous.

Micah: Nah, he's just bitter from missing out on that sweet pussy of hers he never tries to get.

My vision flared red, and I would've crushed my phone with my hand if I could.

Me: You think this is a fucking apology or something? Or that it's going to fix things? You both better watch your backs, or all the shit y'all pull is going to come back on you someday. Izzy's a minor, so what're y'all gonna do if she presses charges...

I hit block on their numbers after that, too furious to even see what they might say. *Should've done it the last fucking time.*

And like she was the air I breathed, my eyes found her on the dance floor.

Jet turned with his drinks, leaning with his back against the bar like mine. Seeing my expression, he followed my gaze, finding it locked on Izzy again.

“So, tell me. Are you happy making her think you’ve really been hooking up with other girls? Because I know you haven’t.”

I scowled. “It’s the way it has to be.”

“It’s the way you *think* it has to be, but you want Izzy happy, right?”

“Of course. And she is. Look at her.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still remembering everything that guy said to her that night. She might have forgiven him, but you can’t for one minute tell me that a guy that speaks to her like that, no matter the reason, deserves to be with her over you. You’re not your cousins, man.”

I ground my teeth, wanting to lash out at him but not wanting to lose my cool. It was just Jet being Jet. The fucking voice of reason.

He pushed himself off the bar. “I’m gonna go get this water to Annie. Think about it.”

I shook my head as he walked away. I already had. Too many times to count.



Needing to get away from everything Jet had put in my head, I found a few friends to catch up with, but when Izzy came up with Zane, I pulled Megan and then Emma out onto the dance floor with the string of pop music that started to play. It was

when I'd gone back to the bar later that Izzy finally tracked me down.

I felt her quiet presence, not even needing to look down when she stepped up to my side. "You're ignoring me, aren't you?" She sounded sad, and my heart clenched.

"Just giving you your space. You've got a boyfriend now. Can't save up all your dances for me anymore." I gave her a playful wink. She stared up at me, like she wasn't sure what to say. Tension funneled around us, still thick in the air as Zane walked up. He wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her back against his front.

"How's it going?"

"Alright," I lied.

"Order me a drink?" Izzy looked up at Zane. "I'm going to go talk to Annie before we get ready to leave in a bit."

"Sure."

My brow furrowed, knowing it wasn't like her to leave early when it came to dancing, but Zane sent me a smug look over her head as she uncurled from his arms. My stomach twisted at the indication, and we both watched, awkward silence sitting between us as she walked away.

"You know, I finally think I've figured out your deal. It's not that you don't like *me*. It's that you *like her*."

My head whipped to face him, eyes wide before I managed to school my features. "I don't know what you're talking about."

“Oh, yeah, you do.” Zane smirked, studying my face. He motioned to one of the workers for a bottle of water and set the money on the counter. “I’m not blind. You want her, and you can’t stand that she chose *me*.”

Wrong. I needed her to choose you.

“You don’t see me doing anything about it, do you? She’s yours. You’ve won. Not that it was much of a fight when I barely tried.”

Anger flickered in Zane’s eyes with that one, and I bit back a curse. *Just poke the damn bear, then.*

“You just keep it straight that she’s *mine*, and we won’t have a problem. You can still be friends, I’ll even let her call you when she gets out of bed tonight, thighs still dripping with my cum as she makes me a sandwich, as long as you know your place,” he hissed before grabbing Izzy’s drink and stalking away.

My vision flashed red, and I lunged, but before I could land a blow, a strong arm wrapped around my middle and a shoulder dug into my chest, shoving me back. I fought to pull away, needing to break the asshole’s face, but Jet pushed me back, forcing me into a chair at a nearby table.

“Calm down. Not here.”

“Did you hear what he just said?!”

“Yeah, and he was trying to piss you off. You go after him and he wins.”

“He’s about to fucking win, anyway. I can’t let him do that to Izzy.”

Jet shook his head. “We both know Izzy isn’t like that. He’s just trying to get to you.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t fucking trust him with her.”

“Like you ever did? *Before* you decided *you* weren’t good enough.”

I scowled. “Don’t start with that shit right now. I’ve got to tell Izzy. Fuck, what if she doesn’t believe me? Zane’s so far up her ass with bullshit right now, and things are so tense between us...” I dragged a hand back through my hair before clasping my neck. Shit, things had flipped fast.

“Izzy’s smart, man. She’ll figure it out. He’ll slip up, eventually. Right now, he thinks it’s he said, she said. He doesn’t know I heard him, too.”

I scoffed. “Yeah, and what if eventually is too late? Fuck, she’s supposed to be leaving with him soon.” I shot up and Jet pressed a hand to my shoulder, pushing me back down.

“Calm down. I’ll go find them, see if Annie and I can distract Zane and send Izzy over here. I don’t want her going home with him anymore than you do after that.”

I nodded and ducked my head over the table as Jet disappeared into the crowd. This was bad. I *knew* something about him had sat wrong with me for months, but I’d stupidly let my guard down. *Fuck*. I slammed my fist on the table.

Several people around me jumped, and I sent them an apologetic look when I suddenly noticed Zane tucked away with a girl past the bar. A girl that was clearly not Izzy.

Anger flared through my middle. *This fucker just hinted he's about to go sleep with my friend, and now he's got some other girl off in the corner?!*

Oh, hell no. Shooting up from the table, I stormed forward, but like Jet was in my head, I could hear him telling me to slow down. If I tore in, I had no proof.

Working to control my heated breaths, I eased forward, casually placing myself at the end of the bar where I might be able to hear. I kept my back to them, not wanting Zane to notice, and smirked when I realized every word they spoke was now within earshot. I pulled out my phone, quickly sliding it into video mode.

“So, last week meant nothing?” the girl hissed.

“Exactly. Not that you should fucking care. You're leaving tomorrow, anyway. You were supposed to already be gone.”

“What? Afraid your girlfriend will find out how many times your dick found my cunt while she was away?”

“Shut the fuck up.” I heard a scuffle, and the girl whimpered. It took everything I had not to turn around, but I was now at the edge of my seat, ready to step in. “You say *one* fucking word to her or *anyone* about what we did, and you'll regret it. You were a *mistake*,” Zane growled, his words reverberating low in the back corner of the hall. He stormed away, and I

turned just in time to watch the girl run outside, a hand at her neck and tears in her eyes, mascara running down her cheeks.

I looked down at my phone, wanting to check the video, hoping it hadn't been too low to hear, and realized I'd never pressed record.

Well, fuck.

Chapter 31

ISABEL

I went to collect my heels from the floor near the door where they rested with several other pairs and sat on the bench to rest my feet before putting them back on. I had a few minutes before Zane would come find me. Jet had pulled him aside a few minutes ago with David to talk about cars and something about upgrades.

I was actually supposed to be finding Tucker, and I didn't want to tell Jet at the time, but I was reluctant. Things were weird between us right now, and I really didn't want anything to spoil tonight. Zane had asked for some time for just us, and after a few weeks away, I honestly couldn't wait to get my arms around him again. *Or my legs...*

I blushed at the thought. Not that we'd gone as far as he wanted, but I had a feeling we were getting close.

Holding out and flexing my foot, I saw a familiar pair of jean-clad legs approach to take the seat next to me. I closed my eyes for a moment, the tension all I could feel between us. *How are we back here? To this?*

“What do you want, Tucker?”

“To talk.”

“Seriously? *Now*, you feel like talking? Or are you just going to brush everything off again, make it a joke?”

“Izzy, please. I need to tell you something.” At the tone in his voice, I looked up. He hesitated, his feet bouncing on the floor. He looked up to the ceiling, a fist clenched above his knee before meeting my gaze. “I don’t think you should keep dating Zane.”

My mind stuttered. “What?”

“He’s not a good guy, Izzy. He just...”

“He what, Tucker?” I raised my brow, dropping my foot, my irritation starting to spark. “I thought we were past this. You not liking Zane.”

“I’ve *never* liked Zane,” Tucker half-growled.

“Perfect. Good to know,” I snapped, the revelation feeling like a slap. “Now, is there actually a problem, or are you just being a jerk?”

“The problem is what he said to me after you left to talk to Annie. How he plans on treating you *after* he has you in his bed. That and the fact that I just overheard him talking to some girl. He *cheated* on you, Izzy. More than once while you were gone.”

I reeled, everything in me coiling. That couldn’t be true, could it? After everything Zane and I had shared? My mind spun over all the times he’d called me his. The way he’d hold me to him, claim me with his mouth. The way he’d finally opened up to me. All the intense moments between us. I shook my head. There was no way.

I pulled my hair behind my ears, trying to collect. “You must’ve misunderstood.”

“No, Izzy, I promise you I didn’t.”

I couldn’t stand the way he looked sorry for me right now. Like it was a done deal. Like he was *sure* when none of it made sense. I forced back tears, hating what he was doing. *If he doesn’t want me, then can’t he just let me be happy?* He didn’t have to ruin it. Especially with something so ridiculous. “Do you have proof?” My voice turned cold, refusing to believe.

A second of pause. “No. Not for him cheating.”

“Then I don’t believe you.”

Tucker’s eyes narrowed, his voice tightening. “You really think I’m lying?”

I slipped my heels on and stood, hardly able to look at him. “I don’t know. Maybe you *did* misunderstand. You thought he cheated before with some girl when it was just Beth. But if you hate Zane so much that you have to make things up, then maybe you and I need some space.”

“Izzy, wait.” Tucker grabbed my hand, but I yanked it back.

“No.” I stormed off to find Zane, my features flushed red with anger. I was so disgusted with him. So frustrated. Hurt.

The minutes it took to get home felt like hours, I was so furious with Tucker. I threw open the car door, not even

waiting for Zane, and jammed the key in the front door lock, flinging it open as soon as we reached my house.

Smacking the light switch on, I marched inside, throwing my purse into the large armchair as I stepped out of my dreadful heels. I'd picked torture chambers tonight, and I glared at them as I kicked them over by the wall, letting out some of my frustration.

Zane followed me in, his brow raised slightly as he watched my performance. "Your mom at work again?" He looked around the empty first floor. "I didn't see her car."

I swung the door closed with a light slam and tossed a hand. "No, she's actually out for a girls night, so she'll be home late. And Archer's staying with Colton again like he does most weekends." I placed my hands on my hips as I paced, too much nervous energy to still.

"You okay?" Zane asked, going to sit on the couch. "I can tell you're mad or upset, but you haven't said why. Did I do something?"

"What?" I glanced up, seeing his confusion. "No." *At least, I hope not.* "I'm just mad at Tucker." I sighed and dropped my hands from my hips to join him on the couch. Crawling into his lap, I settled with my back against the arm of the sofa, my knees tucked up against his side as I leaned into his chest.

His arm wrapped around me, his fingers trailing along one of my calves. I closed my eyes, relishing in it. These weren't the actions of someone who cheated.

“Want to tell me about it?” Zane asked.

I shook my head. “I’m just so frustrated. We’ve been fighting so much this summer. And you would not believe the bull he tried to feed me tonight.”

“What did he say?”

I held my breath for a moment before taking a long one in and then forced myself to meet Zane’s gaze, wanting to gauge his reaction. Hating myself for feeling the need to do it.

“Something about how you said you’d treat me after you’d gotten me in bed?” It came out like a question, and I watched Zane’s head fall back against the cushion.

“Okay, yeah, I’ll admit, that was my bad. Locker room talk. I shouldn’t have done it. Especially not to your friend.”

“Not to anyone.” My face scrunched in horror.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” Zane cupped his hand around my neck, pulling me in for a quick, gentle kiss. “Was that all? You seemed pretty angry for just that.”

My teeth pressed into my bottom lip, almost afraid to ask, and I felt pissed off all over again that Tucker had put doubts in my mind. “Don’t be mad, okay? Because I didn’t believe him, but you asked what he said.”

“Okay, now you’re making me nervous.” Zane chuckled. “What is it?”

“He said he overheard you talking to a girl and that you cheated on me.”

Zane stiffened for just a split second beneath me, and his head reeled back. “He said what? Fuck that. How many times have I told you that *you’re* my girl? Why the hell would I go and cheat?”

I eyed him suspiciously, my heart trying not to sink. “Why does that sound way more defensive than it should?”

He shook his head, that same hand pulling my face up to his. His eyes bore deep into mine, and I could feel his body vibrating beneath me, he was so intense. “If I sound defensive, it’s because it’s crazy. You’re it for me, Izzy. You’re the only one I want. I’ve waited weeks to have you back, and I need you. Tonight, I need you.”

His words tremored, and I hesitated over him just for a second before pressing my lips to his. Tucker had to have gotten it wrong.

My fingers dived into Zane’s hair, curling through the strands, locking him to me as I moved to straddle his lap. He clutched me against him, one hand trailing up my thigh. He suddenly gripped my hips, dragging me forward, and I sucked in a breath when I felt the way his erection pressed between my thighs. My eyes flew open to meet his, shock mixed with arousal in my expression. Zane rolled my hips again, and this time my breath hitched.

“Move with me,” he whispered, and I swallowed, letting his hands guide me as I found a rhythm. Excited and scared. I was unsure, but I decided to trust him. And at some point I didn’t need him anymore, my hips understanding how to move on

their own. He let go, reaching to other places on my body, his lips trailing along my ear, my neck, my jaw... It was a whirlwind of sensations, something building between us as I rode his lap. My breaths grew heavy, my hips desperately searching, so close to finding what it was when Zane suddenly flipped me to lie beneath him on the couch.

I stared up at him, my dark knight.

His hand slid up beneath the hem of my dress, trailing along my leg until his fingers hooked under the edge of my panties. Immediately, I stiffened.

“Zane,” I warned.

“Shhh...it’s fine.” His other hand reached for his belt as he tugged at my panties.

“Whoa. Wait.” I pushed at his arms, scrambling back, but he dragged me back to him, his lips finding my neck, his hands already back under my dress.

“Calm down, Izzy. You know you want this, too.” He yanked my panties down my hip.

“Zane, stop, seriously.” I pushed against his chest, my pulse speeding. Why wouldn’t he move? Beginning to panic, I yanked his hand away and squirmed from under him until he sat back, giving me a look that I wasn’t sure how to read.

He clenched his hands into fists on the cushions, frustration thrumming through his shoulders. “Are you seriously going to be a tease about this?”

A what? I blinked, stunned, and leaned away, still trying to process. *Did he seriously just say that?*

“I’m not being a tease.” I managed to find my words. “I was *fine*. It was great actually until you pushed it too far.”

“Fuck.” Zane jabbed his fingers back through his hair in disgust and stood. “Too far. It’s always too far with you. Complete waste of my time tonight. I should’ve known.”

“Excuse me?!” I screeched as I flew up from the couch, my hands on my hips. I felt the heat hit my face with the slap of his words.

Zane scowled, his features flashing a dark quality he’d rarely shown before. At least not with me. Not like this. “We always have to stop with you. Did you not hear me before? I fucking *need* you tonight, and you can’t give it up just once?!”

My eyes widened, my stomach turning as my nostrils flared. He could not be serious right now. “No, I can’t just give it up just because you demand it, Zane! What the hell is wrong with you?!”

“Forget it! Should’ve fucking known.” He looked away, his jaw taut. And I wasn’t sure why, but somehow in that instant I knew...

“Tucker was telling me the truth, wasn’t he?” Zane’s eyes snapped back to mine, and this time I saw it, the guilt in those dark depths. “Who was she?” My arms crossed over my chest. Not that it mattered. He’d screwed up past any form of forgiveness.

“Does it matter?” he snapped back. “You fucking left, Izzy. When I told you not to. When I *told* you that I wasn’t okay with it.”

“So that gives you license to sleep with other girls?!”

“Well, I wasn’t getting any from you!” I stepped back as he stepped forward, his anger propelling him. “You were the *prize*, Izzy. The girl no one around here could get.”

I reeled, everything I thought I’d known about us suddenly wrong. “Is that why you wanted to go out with me?!” I pressed a hand to my chest. “To show everyone that you got me?!”

“*Of course*, I wanted everyone to know that I got you! But I also knew the first time I saw you that you were *mine*.”

“Exactly. *Was* yours. Not anymore. Now, get out,” I growled and shoved him hard in the chest, but it was like pushing a brick wall.

“You don’t get to push me around! I’ll leave when I damn well feel like it!”

I fumed, livid, realizing what was about to happen a moment too late. I cringed when his arm came at me with no time to move. All I could do was use my last split second to scream and brace myself for the blow.

It stung hard when his hand hit my cheek, and the force of it knocked me sideways. I looked up, for the first time terrified to be in his presence, and watched as Zane approached with venom in his gaze. The air left my lungs as I scrambled

backwards, and my heart leapt to my throat as he closed in, yanking me up and slamming me back against the wall.

My shoulder hit first, and stars clouded my vision for a moment with the force, but then Zane grabbed my wrists, yanking them up by my head as he pressed himself against me. My reaction was instant, and like I'd been shot with a bullet, I was back to that night. Except some part of me knew this was worse, that I couldn't retreat.

I forced myself back just as Zane's hand raised, ready to make the next strike. On instinct, I flinched, knowing the power it held, but before he could hit again, the door flew open and hope blossomed through me as a figure tore across the room to lunge at my attacker. Zane shoved off me as he dodged, and I slumped to the floor, my shoulder throbbing and my head ringing where they'd hit.

I could hear them fighting, the blows of their fists against each other's bodies, but I couldn't bring myself to watch, curling into a ball instead. Tears started falling fast, stinging my eyes, hurt and furious with myself for trusting the wrong guy.

There was one final thud from across the room before the door slammed shut, and footsteps headed quickly in my direction. I cringed, flinching at the touch to my arm. Afraid to see who was there. Who had won the fight. I just prayed it was Zane who had left.

Chapter 32

ISABEL

“Izzy?” Relief settled in at the sound of Tucker’s voice, the tight knot of fear uncoiling from my stomach. He knelt in front of me, his hands fumbling over my body, like he was afraid of how I’d react if he touched me. “Izzy. Talk to me. Are you okay?”

My tears only fell harder. I wanted to answer him, to tell him not to worry, but it was all I could do to breathe amongst the sobs.

“Izzy, where are you hurt?” I could hear the underlying panic in his voice.

I just shook my head, trying to tell him I was fine. Thanks to him, I was fine. I wasn’t crying because of physical pain. Relief, disbelief, anger, betrayal...all of it whirled through my system. I reached out, wrapping my arms around his neck to sob into his chest. Needing him. Needing someone I could trust.

Slowly, still unsure, his arms came around me, and he rubbed gently at my back.

“You’re fine. You’re safe. I promise,” he kept murmuring into my ear as I curled into his lap, letting him hold me as his whispered words reached my tattered heart. It took a few minutes for me to calm down, but I stayed in the safety of his arms a little longer, not yet wanting to move. Still too raw after

what Zane had just done. Eventually, Tucker rested his mouth against the top of my head, his nose brushing over my hair.

“You okay?” he whispered into the quiet.

I nodded, lifting my head, and he relaxed his hold so I could sit back on my heels in front of him.

“Tucker, I’m so sorry,” I said as I brushed the remaining tears from my cheeks with my fingertips.

“For what? Crying on me?”

I hiccupped a laugh. “No, well, yeah, for that, too, but I meant I’m sorry I didn’t believe you tonight. You were right. I should have never left with Zane.”

Tucker reached out and tucked a few stray strands of my hair behind my ear, and despite my frazzled nerves, my stomach fluttered. “Don’t worry about it. I’m just sorry you had to find out this way. Are you hurt?”

“Nothing worse than a bad fall at dance.” I tried to grin, though it felt more like a grimace. With a sigh, I met Tucker’s concerned gaze. I gasped, guilt striking me when I saw his face. “Oh, Tucker, your jaw...” I had to stifle the urge to touch his cheek where it swelled as I studied him, wondering where else Zane might have hit. There was a small cut above his left eye, a trickle of blood dripping past his eyebrow, and I knew from the look of it that it would bruise, too. “I’m so sorry.”

“Nah, I’ll be fine. You should see the other guy.” He grinned and winced. “I’m more worried about you right now. I saw the

way he was holding you. After your triggers you'd just told us about. What happened?"

"You mean how he hit me and slammed me against the wall right before you came in?"

Tucker's eyes flared, and his fist clenched, his entire body tensing, and I could tell he was warring with himself to not go after Zane again. It took several long seconds before he regained control. "I wish I'd gotten here sooner. How are you, after?..."

I gave him a small smile. "I'll be alright. I'm just a little sore. Seriously," I insisted at his doubtful look. "It hurt worse when Leo dropped me during that lift at dance camp last year."

Tucker grimaced. "Yeah, that bruise was ugly."

"But it healed, just like this will, too. Now, let's get you some ice." I stood and grabbed his hand, and he pulled it back with a hiss.

"I think I bruised it," he explained, giving me his other hand instead so I could pull him to his feet. "What set Zane off, anyway?" he asked as we walked to the kitchen.

"He wanted sex, and I told him no."

Tucker sucked in a breath, holding it a moment before releasing, a look of relief covering his face. "Good. He doesn't deserve you. Especially after cheating on you."

"Yeah, that's the other part that set him off. When I finally realized and called him out on it." I glanced over my shoulder as I filled some baggies with ice at the freezer. Tucker waited

on one of the barstools, watching me with his intent gaze, like he thought I still might break. I didn't want to consider how close that might be to being true. Because I couldn't break. I *wouldn't*.

Shoving the shakiness of the memories back, my brow furrowed after a minute as a thought struck. "Hey, how did you know to come here, anyway? I thought you'd still be with Annie and Jet, finding some party to head to next or something."

He shrugged a shoulder. "It just really didn't appeal to me. Plus, I couldn't stand the thought of you being alone with Zane, not after what he said tonight and what I overheard with that girl."

My brow creased as I approached, giving him the ice for his hand. He pressed his sore knuckles against it, and I held the second bag gently to his jaw, my heart rate picking up at the touch.

"Was it that bad?" I asked, so close to those whiskey eyes of his that always pulled me in.

His gaze held steady with mine as he gave a slight nod. "I couldn't let you down again."

My heart swelled a little at those words, knowing that even with all of our fighting and all of our distance, he would always be there for me. But then he added, "I couldn't let him win."

A rush of cold water fell over me, and I felt heat creep up my neck into my cheeks. “I’m not just some prize, you know.”

“I know that.” Tucker’s brow furrowed. I rolled my eyes, turning away, but he grabbed my hand, bringing my eyes back to his. “Listen to me, Izzy. Whatever he said...you *are* a prize, but not in the way you meant just now.”

My throat tightened, emotions rolling through me once again, and as he held my gaze, I had to flush with the sincerity I saw there. It was hard to look away, our gazes drawn together in an invisible, undeniable pull. There was no mistaking it this time, no way I could mistake this as one-sided. Tucker *had* to feel this, too.

My hand came up, brushing back the sandy blonde lock that had slipped down over the cut above his eye, and my fingers lightly brushed across his skin. Sparks erupted beneath my fingertips, his eyes still locked with mine, but just as I began to lean in, he turned away and took the ice from my hand. “Thanks for this. It really helped.”

I blinked, jarred by the rejection I should have expected.

Seriously? My eyes narrowed, staring at the side of his face, but he refused to look at me.

“Are you really going to pretend nothing just happened?”

“Nothing *did* happen.”

He kept his gaze on the ice in his hand, and my jaw clenched.

“Of course. My mistake.” My voice turned cold, my insides simultaneously flaring in irritation even as they shrunk in embarrassment. How stupid of me to think his feelings could have been returned. Tucking my hair behind my ears, I turned away, suddenly needing to be anywhere but near him.

“I think I’m going to go take a shower. My shoulder’s starting to ache a little,” I snapped as I left the kitchen, and I could *feel* his eyes on my back as I escaped up the stairs.

TUCKER

Fuuuuck. I scraped my hand across my face, sliding it around to grip the hair at the back of my neck with a harsh pull. Could I ever not screw things up?

How in the hell did I let that almost happen? After everything she's been through tonight? Scum of the earth right here.

She was *off limits*. Untouchable. Especially for me.

Especially tonight.

And I'd almost taken advantage of her. Again. Even now knowing that I could never make her mine. How fucked up was I? Anything beyond friendship with her was out of the question. She deserved so much better than someone whose family had caused her so much damage.

I jerked my head back as I let go of my hair and shoved myself up off the stool. Tossing the melting ice into the sink, I threw the baggies in the trash and spun out of the kitchen to leave, but only a few steps later, I stopped.

What the hell am I doing?

Izzy was pissed, yeah, and hurt, but I couldn't leave. Not with her here by herself. As easily as she'd seemed to brush the assault off, I wasn't taking any chances. For all I knew, Zane could come back. Or she could be in shock. But more

than anything, I knew after all of that, she would hate being alone.

Chapter 33

ISABEL

I stood beneath the steady stream of hot water, letting the heat work its way into my sore and bruised muscles. It felt like I was supposed to cry, but I couldn't, like a wall had gone up. Being struck and feeling defenseless tonight had given me a bitter aftertaste of myself. I'd trusted Zane. Stupidly. And I couldn't help wondering if there had been any warning signs. He'd had a temper, sure, but to *hit* me? Then the things he'd said...I felt like such a fool.

Especially after what had happened next with Tucker. How stupid I'd been to make a move. My skin still stained pink with embarrassment, confused by the dynamics that had come between us this summer. If I could erase all my feelings for him in a heartbeat, I would. I was so tired of not knowing what to feel. The hope that flourished for if he'd ever want me back, then the crushing disappointment knowing that he never would.

Being with Zane had held those feelings at bay, but it was a constant razor's edge I skated against. All I knew was that I was tired. Of the tension. The mixed signals. The rejection. All of it.

After the soreness in my muscles eased, I ran soap over my body and did a quick rinse before stepping out of the shower. I towel-dried my hair, wrapping the terry cloth around my body before bracing myself for the mirror. The damage, however,

appeared more internal than anything else. Perhaps a slight bruise on my cheek and the back of my shoulder where I'd hit, but it was nothing that some good makeup wouldn't cover.

Brushing my hair next and then my teeth seemed to center me a bit. I at least felt more put together as I stepped out into my room. Part of me wondered what Tucker thought. If he thought I was pathetic for trying what I did tonight. Or did he find me desperate or screwed up for trying something after what just happened with Zane?

But everything with Zane right now felt...numb. My emotions for him had shut down. There was no coming back from what he had done.

Tucker, however, had been exactly what I'd needed, and I'd have sworn he'd felt that moment in the kitchen the same as I did. But perhaps not. Maybe that's why he'd pushed me away. Or maybe he just found me repulsive.

Okay, wow... I rolled my eyes at myself. *Getting carried away there.*

I just didn't understand, and I was furious with him for making it so confusing. Tonight's rejection leaving a growing anger burning into my core that I didn't know how to diffuse.

Forcing it back, I pulled a silk pajama set from my dresser, my fingertips taking a moment outside of my frustration to brush over the ornate edges my father had lovingly carved years ago.

What would you think, Daddy, if you were here? What would you tell me to do?

I closed my eyes. The answer silent. I truly didn't know.

With a sigh, I headed downstairs, needing to grab my phone and check the lock on the door before I could tuck myself into bed with a good book, desperate to clear my head, distract myself from everything warring within. I was just a few steps into the living room when I stopped dead in my tracks, my heart going to my throat as I spotted someone by the window.

Tucker, I realized when he looked back at me, and my eyes narrowed as all of my frustration and humiliation suddenly came rushing back, like a raging river flooding through my veins.

"You startled me," I accused, crossing my arms over my chest. "I figured you'd be gone."

"I'm sorry. I just...couldn't leave knowing you were still scared. You didn't deserve tonight."

"You're right. I didn't." My voice went cold, something lacing through my tone that I hadn't ever quite used with him before. I knew he was probably talking about Zane, but his rejection still sat fresh, aching and raw within my confused heart.

Defiance flickered in the whiskey brown staring back at me, telling me he knew what I meant, but after everything that had happened tonight, whether it was just due to what happened with Zane, or Tucker, or both, I was just done. Done with the

mixed signals. Done with beating around the bush. Done with all of it.

“Just tell me why, Tucker. At least, tell me that. Why can it be *every* other girl, including *Lisa*, but not me? After everything you *claimed* and even hinted at before, what’s so wrong with me?! Why am *I* not good enough?!” I yelled, something begging in my voice. I pressed a hand to my chest, the gesture all that was needed to set Tucker off.

“Not good enough?!” He stalked closer. “Izzy, you’re perfect.” His tone lowered, making my toes curl as my heart stuttered, but the second I moved closer, Tucker stopped, and I froze. My fingers curled into fists at my sides, fighting the fresh surge of frustration and anger rolling through me.

Ice bit through my tone as I hissed through gritted teeth. “If I’m so fucking perfect, then why do you keep pushing me away?”

Tucker’s eyes closed, pain riddling through his expression as he shook his head. My chest heaved as I waited, but I wasn’t prepared for the anguish pooling through his gaze when he opened them again. “You think I want to? I *have* to!”

“Why?!” I held my hands out, holding the tumbling whiskey in front of me locked with my own desperate green. Determined for answers. Desperate to make sense of it. I threw out the only other thing I could think of, the one thing that had shut him down the second I’d thought we might have a chance.

“If this is about your cousins, Tucker, I don’t blame you. *They* did that to me, not *you*. You *saved* me back then, *both* times, just like tonight. You’ve saved me countless ways this past year, but this back and forth is killing me! I need a reason. I need something to make me understand how even with *every* ounce of chemistry I know you *have* to feel between us, how you can keep pushing me away!”

“Because you’re too good for me!” He finally cracked, his final steps bringing my back flush against the wall. I wasn’t even sure when he’d moved closer, but it didn’t scare me with him. *Nothing* scared me with him. The thought sent a thrill through me even as he yelled. “You deserve better, Izzy! You deserve to be treated like a fucking *princess*, and that’s not me!”

I stood there, stunned and pinned beneath his gaze for several moments before I finally remembered to breathe, and I whispered, “It’s *only* you.”

Something flickered in the torrential storm in his eyes, the whiskey breaking through the dam that held him back. He must have read something in my expression, because Tucker growled before crushing his lips to mine.

His hands buried themselves in my hair, and I moaned into his mouth as mine found his shoulders, pulling him to me, needing him closer. His tongue swept across my lips, asking for entrance as it sent a shiver racing up my spine, and I opened, letting his tongue brush against mine, caressing, delving, begging for more, a fierce need possessing me as we

finally explored each other for the first time. He could do whatever the hell he wanted with me at this point, I was such a goner. Nothing had ever felt like it did with him in this moment, like an actual *need* coursing through my body, and all I knew was I wanted more.

TUCKER

Ho-ly fuck. It was the only thought that I could process as I practically groped my best friend. Lightning had struck my chest. I was floating and tumbling all at once. As much as I knew I should back away, I couldn't get enough. A line had been crossed, and fuck if I ever wanted to go back to the other side.

I nipped at her bottom lip, sucking it gently between my teeth, and felt Izzy's spine about turn to butter, the little moan she made causing my cock to strain against my zipper. I reached down to brace her as she melted, grabbing below her ass, and her legs came up to wrap around my waist. I held her against the wall, nipping and sucking until she turned her head away with a gasp, but I didn't stop, trailing along her jawline instead, searching for any piece of her I could devour to have her make those sounds. Her throaty murmur nearly undid me when she grasped my hair, bringing my eyes back to hers with a sharp pull that sent another pulse to my cock.

"Couch, Tucker."

On instinct, I shook my head, the mossy green of her gaze shrouding the emerald with her desire as I stared into her eyes, searching for if she meant it.

"Couch, Tucker," she said again, her voice now pure, demanding vixen. "Now."

I swallowed; every ounce of willpower I had for doing what was right now gone with that sound, and shook my head. Frustration flashed across her features until I growled at her ear, “If I’m doing this, you at least deserve a bed.”

She shuddered in my arms, clutching herself to me as I raced up the stairs. I paused beside her bed, and she slid from my waist to rest on her knees, nothing but want and desire in her eyes as she pulled away from my embrace. Without missing a beat, she peeled away her silk pajama top, exposing her already bare, full breasts, the nipples tight and straining towards me. My hands twitched at the glorious sight, just itching to touch. How I held back, I wasn’t sure, but I needed to wait, something about *her* undressing for *me* letting me know how far she was willing to go. What my boundaries were. Because that was one thing I could promise her. She’d always be safe with me.

When her fingertips curled under the waist of her bottoms, I sucked in a breath. But she just tossed them away, not a trace of a blush touching her pale skin as she left herself naked before me.

Fuck. My eyes dropped to her bare pussy, barely holding myself back. I didn’t know who this vixen was, but she was torturous perfection, and I scraped my hand over my mouth with a groan as her fingers found the edge of my tee, her hands creeping up beneath the material.

I could feel her knuckles brushing gently along my abs, my muscles twitching in anticipation as she pressed her soft palms

flat against my core. Her body stretched, and I leaned to meet her so she could press a kiss below my jaw. “Your turn.” Her breath caressed my neck, her eyes daring me to argue.

I sprang into action, pulling my shirt up my back. Izzy helped me yank it over my head, her hands falling straight to the buckle of my jeans. Mere seconds later, I was naked and pulling her to me, covering her body with my own as I lowered us onto the bed.

Her arms wrapped around me, one hand grasping my hair while the other gripped at the plane of my back, her touch like an electric current through my body. I wrapped a hand around the back of her neck, tilting her face up to mine, my lips never leaving hers as my tongue finally explored the seductive depths of her sweet mouth. It was like she purred beneath me, her body humming as I trailed a hand along her lithe form, a charge coursing between us. I grabbed and squeezed her pert ass, loving how it fit in my hand, and then dragged my hand up her waist to cup her breast, my thumb brushing softly over her nipple.

She gasped and gave a little moan through our kiss, her chest rising to meet my touch, and I nearly growled knowing how I was affecting her, wondering if I was the first one lucky enough to have the honor of touching her this way, of worshiping her body. Because that was exactly what I was going to do tonight. If I was setting my reservations aside, she was going to get my all. My heart and body now unabashedly hers.

Still caressing her breast, the other pressed against me as we clutched each other close, her breaths quickened, small moans leaving her lips. Dying to explore her more, I shifted, easing my way down her form to begin trailing my lips along her jaw, blazing them down her neck and chest until I could wrap them around the straining pink bud.

She made a little mewl of approval, her hips rising up from the bed to press her core against my abs. And fuck...my brain stuttered as my cock twitched. I reached back down to cup her ass, gripping, squeezing, *claiming* as I held her to me. Fucking wanting to make her mine.

“Fuck, Izzy, I want to touch you,” I growled against her breast.

“Do it. Please.” She rocked her hips against me.

I held back a groan at her eagerness to comply. My hand slid around from her ass to rest at her upper inner thigh, and I looked up at her, needing to see that she was sure.

Those green eyes waited for me, full of trust and desire.

“Has anyone ever?...” I asked, wanting to know how careful I needed to be.

She bit her lip and gave a slight shake of her head. A drop of insecurity touched her features there, but my insides only growled in approval, and my hand slid up to dip my fingers in her folds.

Holy fuck, she was dripping. I closed my eyes for a moment, relishing, and then opened them to meet hers as I slowly

dragged my thumb over her clit, circling a few times before finally slipping my index finger inside. She sucked in a breath, and I felt her walls clench around my finger.

Fuck, she was tight. My cock twitched at the thought.

Slowly, I stroked her, letting her adjust to the feel. Her head tilted back, her eyes closing. I watched her breaths rise and fall as her hips pressed back into the bed, finding their own gentle rhythm. My thumb brushed over her clit again, circling, exploring before I added a second finger, feeling the way her walls stretched to meet my demands. Her hips curled back to press into the bed again, my pace quickening as I watched her heat and melt under my touch. One of her hands fisted in the covers while the other gripped my arm, her body beginning to tighten.

“Tucker,” she panted, her voice asking, begging.

That's it, Princess. Come for me. Let me see what you look like spread before me as you shatter under my touch.

I swirled over her clit again and curled my fingers. Just a few more strokes and she stiffened, her body beginning to tremble. I watched her eyes fly open with the shock of her first orgasm, and pride tore through me, my fingers assaulting her pussy until I could wring every last second of it from her.

Her breaths were ragged, and she still clutched my arm as she eventually came down from her high. When she looked up at me, I was stunned at the intensity in her gaze. She reached up, wrapping her hand around my neck to pull me back down

and crash her lips into mine, and I groaned, never wanting to let this moment go.

There was something about this girl, a fucking spark that would obliterate everything else if I let it, and I already knew I was a goner.

~~_____~~

ISABEL

This moment had to be heaven. Tucker's touch, the way he looked at me, everything. I was soaring, desperate for his touch. Everything with him felt as natural as breathing, and I wanted more, something new filling me and driving me now. Like I'd been awakened to what life was really supposed to hold, and all I could do was follow it. Chase it. *Claim* it at all costs.

There was no denying the connection that ran between Tucker and I now, and I'd be damned if I didn't grasp every moment of this night with him.

His tongue delved in my mouth, claiming, making every inch of me spark with electricity under his touch. His fingers began to pump inside me again, but I shifted, putting just enough space between us to grip his hard length.

Tucker cursed, his forehead dropping to mine as my hand began to pump along his cock. It was thick, *huge*, and a part of me flickered with apprehension even as the rest of me thrilled at his reaction to my touch.

"Fuck. Izzy. Shit," he muttered when I ran the pad of my thumb over the slit of his cock, spreading the drips of pre-cum over the head before sliding my hand back down. He shuddered and groaned. My eyes locked with his, everything in my expression telling him what I wanted, what I needed. That it was him, *only* him that I wanted, and I needed him

now. Needed him to show me that I wasn't crazy. That he wanted me, too.

Whiskey swirled over me, confliction in their depths mixed with desperation. My heart clenched, afraid of his rejection again.

“Please,” I whispered, running my fingers through his hair as I stroked his cock.

His eyes closed, something warring in his expression before he released a final growl and swept my lips up in a bruising, *demanding* kiss as he covered my body with his.

There were no words after that, only our hands clutching and our lips claiming, desperate to reach every speck of each other, like we couldn't get close enough.

His hand gripped my thigh, pulling my leg over to wrap around his waist. I felt him line up with my core, my breath held in my chest. With one slow thrust, he inched his way in, bringing us together as one, and he swallowed my sharp cry with his kiss. “Are you okay?” he paused to whisper.

“Perfect.” My lips brushed his with my answer, and he swept them up again, his kiss deepening, promising me it would be okay. That he had me. All I had to do was trust. My chest swelled, everything in the moment perfect. I could take the fleeting pain if it meant sharing this with him.

His hand slid between us to circle my clit, and within minutes, any discomfort I'd expected to feel had vanished with his touch. My hips began to shift, my body eager for more, and

Tucker finally started to move, everything I was feeling mirrored back in his gaze as he brought his eyes to mine.

His first few strokes were slow, but as soon as he saw I was fine, he sped up. My head threw back, a whole new array of emotions spilling over me. All I could feel was pleasure rushing through me, his body working in sync with mine. His mouth, his hands...neither let me go untouched until longing filled my every pore.

My fingers wound in his hair, clutching myself to him as I felt my orgasm start to approach, easier to recognize this time as the coil tightened in my lower belly. Tucker gripped my hip to hold me against the bed, his thrusts growing harder, faster. It was all it took to send me over the edge. My body tensed, waves crashing over me as I trembled in his arms.

I didn't even have time to come back down before Tucker sat back and yanked my hips into his lap, and I cried out at the sensations that hit with the new position. His large hands gripped my hips, his fingertips digging with a gentle pressure as he looked down at me from above, so much swirling through the whiskey in his gaze. Holding nothing back, all my doubts about what he felt for me were gone.

He splayed a hand over my stomach before sliding it up to grasp my breast, my back lifting further from the bed with each thrust, his cock hitting places I didn't know it could. It was only a few more strokes before I was coming undone again.

“That’s it, Princess. Don’t hold back. Come for me,” Tucker growled, a wicked demand in his tone, and I shattered at his words, my core spasming around his cock as I fell into another delicious tremble of release.

TUCKER

“Oh, fuck. God.” Izzy clutched at my arms as she spiraled through her next orgasm, and I couldn’t help the cocky smirk that played at my lips at how responsive she was. How easily I could make her come. The connection between us was undeniable. *Nothing* matched being with her. Electricity surged through my body with just her touch, and all I knew as I held her in my arms was that what I felt for her was so much deeper than anything I could have imagined. She was now my addiction that I would forever crave, and if she’d have me, I was hers. Hook, line, and sinker. This woman now owned me.

I locked my eyes with hers as she finally came down from her high and brought my hands back to her hips, ready to angle myself deeper for how well she responded to this position, but she shocked me, gripping my arms and pulling herself up over my lap.

Holy fuck, that was hot. Having her take charge. She looked down at me, her nose brushing against mine. Nerves were clear yet subtle in her gaze, but I took her cue, using my grip to guide her hips, helping her find a rhythm over my lap.

It didn’t take long, and soon, she had her arms wrapped around my neck, her fingers winding through my hair as she ground herself over me. “Oh, fuck, Izzy, you feel so good.” I groaned, clutching her close as she brought her mouth back to mine, our lips meeting in a dance. My heart raced, every inch

of me on fire with this gorgeous creature in my arms. I had to hold myself back from coming, waiting until I felt her start to stiffen. “Oh, God, yes, Tucker. Just like that,” she cried out as I ground my hips up to hers, meeting her thrusts. Her expression contorted in that sweet, blissful agony of release.

Managing to hold back my own, I just stared in awe, caught up in this intensity I’d never felt before, never wanting it to end. This was so much more than I’d known. *She* was so much more, and I reveled in the sensation of her coming undone in my arms time and time again as I shifted us back against the bed. I drew it out as long as I could, finally collapsing against her, breathless, at its eventual end.

Chapter 34

TUCKER

“Wow, that was...” I trailed off, my mind still spinning as my senses came back to me.

“Good?” Izzy offered, her own voice still out of breath.

“Incredible,” I corrected. “Especially for your first time.”

“I like to read,” she said sheepishly. “You learn a lot.”

I smirked. *Apparently so.*

Flushing, Izzy pulled her blankets over herself, her hands going to cover her face.

“No.” I stopped her. “Don’t be shy. I wasn’t kidding when I said it was incredible.”

She smiled, offering for me to crawl under the covers beside her, and I quickly complied, taking any chance I had to stay next to her bare form. “Is it always like that?” she asked as she settled into the crook of my arm, her head against my chest. My own swelled, loving how perfectly she fit there.

“No, Izzy, it’s *never* like that.”

She flushed again, but I could tell she liked my response.

“So...” she began, studying an errant lock of hair that she was now winding around her fingers. “What does this mean for us?”

I shifted to look down at her, noting her apprehension.

Does she really not know what that just meant? Did it mean something else for her? It was life changing for me. A pivotal moment that I'd never forget. "Are you really doubting what I feel for you after that?" I asked, now nervous myself. Her brow furrowed, and I suddenly realized I'd never actually admitted the words. I'd held back everything I felt for her for weeks without ever confessing to her how I felt.

Hooking a finger below her chin, I tilted her face up to mine. "I figured out what you meant to me weeks ago, and you were right before. I held back because of my cousins and what they did to you but also because I thought you were happy. But trust me, after what we just did, *mind-blowing* by the way, I'm not going anywhere. Not as long as you'll have me."

I watched a smile start to spread across her face before it shifted into a frown, and her gaze went back to the hair she was still wrapping and unwrapping around her fingers as she retreated into the edges of her shell. "And if we hadn't had sex tonight? What then? You've been sleeping with so many girls this summer. How do I know I'm not going to end up... *forgotten* the next time some other girl comes along? Or the next time you want to pull away?"

I closed my eyes for a second, hating how what I'd done so blatantly had made her doubt me so much. Stilling her hand, I urged her eyes to mine. "To your first question, my feelings for you aren't conditional on us having sex. The second you broke down my walls tonight, I was yours, even if we'd never come up those stairs. For your second point." I wrapped my fingers through hers, holding her hand in mine. She looked up

at me. “None of those other girls meant anything to me. I was confused and grasping at stupid, desperate straws trying to fix it. And as for me pulling away this past week, I wasn’t really with any of those girls. I just needed you to think I was.”

Her brow furrowed slightly as she took that in. “Because you found out about my...well, my reaction to your cousins.” It was a statement, but the question was still there behind it, looking for confirmation.

I nodded. “How could you want to be with someone whose family literally hurt you?”

Izzy’s head shook, her brow furrowing as she reached up to stroke her hand along my cheek. My eyes resisted the urge to close, relishing in the sensation. In her words of assurance. “Because you’re not *them*, Tucker. I would never hold what they did over you.”

A knot in my chest relaxed with her words, and I laced my fingers with hers, sliding her hand so I could place a kiss at the center of her palm. Her chest rose, so much in her expression as she looked up at me. How had I held back from her for so long? How had I not even noticed what I felt?

“So, now that that’s cleared up.” I chuckled, suddenly feeling awkward, not used to the emotion running through me.

“Wow, thought you were smooth, playboy.”

“Thought you didn’t play games.” I tickled her side, and she squirmed and swatted my arm, the two of us grinning as she snuggled back against my chest.

“You’re right, I don’t. So, I’ve gotta ask...What does this mean for us?”

“I told you I wasn’t going anywhere.”

She rolled her eyes. “*Okay*, that answers the question.”

I smirked at her frustration and lowered my head by her ear. “My heart is yours.”

Her breath hitched, and she laid quietly for a few minutes, processing I was sure. All I could do was stare, still in awe of her in my arms. There was no going back for me.

“That’s a bold statement,” she eventually whispered.

“I mean every word of it.”

The corner of her mouth twitched before she treated me with her trademark crooked grin. “So, does this mean I officially have a boyfriend now?”

I beamed and kissed her in response, pulling her up as I slid down flush with her bare form. Easily getting lost in it, we were soon grasping at each other once again, desperate to be closer. She reached for me, trying to position us, but I knew she’d be sore. I shifted my hips away and reached between her legs instead. There were other ways for us to find pleasure. But the second my fingers dipped between her folds, I froze.



ISABEL

I felt the moment Tucker stiffened, but before I could question it, he shot away from me onto his knees, his features quickly fading to white.

“Fuck.”

“What?” My heart raced, confused by his sudden panic.

“Protection. Izzy, we didn’t use protection.” His hand came up to grip his hair in a tight pull. “I’m so sorry. I’ve *never* forgotten before. I was just so caught up... We’ll go first thing in the morning. Get the Plan B or whatever it is. Fuck.” He cringed, angry with himself.

I quickly scrambled up to my knees in front of him and placed my hands on his chest.

“Tucker, calm down. It’s okay. I’m on the pill.”

It took a moment, but I could see when my words sank in, watching the panic slowly ebb from his gaze.

“You are?”

I nodded. “Annie asked if she could go on it after last New Year’s, after that night with her and Jet, and Mom got it for us both. Just to be safe. So, I’m covered. We’re fine.”

“Thank God.” His head dropped, and his hands came to my hips, pulling me against him. “You have no idea how much that just scared me.”

“I do, because it would scare me, too.”

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head before laying his cheek against it. “I won’t ever do that to us again. The pill or not, we’ll be as protected as we can be from now on.”

I nodded against his chest, sliding my arms around his back, and we held each other, taking comfort in our embrace before I finally sighed.

“We should probably go downstairs. Mom and Annie could be home any time now, and I don’t think it would be good if they found us in bed together.”

I felt Tucker sigh against me, feeling the same reluctance. Tonight had been so perfect.

“You’re probably right.”

I sat back so he could untangle his legs from the covers and watched as he got up, ogling his chiseled form as he moved about my room to find his clothes. Then he turned, catching me, and I ducked my head to peek out from behind my knees.

“You’re welcome to look.” He smirked in his cocky, playful way. “It’s nothing you didn’t just touch, anyway.”

“Oh, my God, Tucker!” I tossed my pillow at him, my cheeks now hot with embarrassment. He took pity on me and shut himself in my closet to dress, and as soon as the door shut, I grabbed my clothes and darted into my bathroom to clean up before he came back out.

Immediately, I dropped my forehead against the door, rolling it from side to side. *Why* had I just done that? He’d literally

just seen all of me. *Touched* all of me, and I'd run away?

Good job, Isabel.

Knowing it would be stupid to dwell, I took out a washcloth and cleaned up before pulling my pajamas back on. I looked in the mirror and stopped, barely recognizing the person staring back at me. My hair had dried, looking sex-tossed and framing my face, it highlighted my flushed cheeks. My eyes were bright, alive and wicked, my lips swollen. I pressed a finger to them, staring in awe at my reflection. I felt empowered, bold, giddy. I wasn't sure where this version of myself had come from. But I liked it.

"Hey, Izzy?" Tucker tapped on the door.

"Yeah?"

"I'm pretty sure I just heard your mom come in downstairs."

My face paled. *Crap.*

I opened the door. "What do we do?"

"Well, I either hide up here until you tell me the coast is clear, or we go down together. It's not like I've never been in your room before."

"True..."

"But maybe change out of your pajamas first?"

"Good idea."

After a quick change into a cotton tiered slip dress, I headed downstairs, my nerves in my throat as Tucker followed. I prayed it wasn't obvious what we'd just done, but when I saw

that the only light from the main floor was coming from the kitchen, relief struck me, thinking maybe I'd be able to sneak Tucker out before Mom even noticed.

I gestured to the door, and Tucker nodded. We quickly crossed the living room, doing our best not to make a sound. He leaned down, pressing a gentle kiss to my lips and whispered, "I'll see you tomorrow, Princess."

My heart fluttered at the nickname, remembering the way he'd used it in bed. It was definitely something I could get used to. Better than my regular nickname for sure.

He smirked down at me, his hand just touching the knob on the door, when the sound of glass shattering came from the kitchen followed by an anguished cry.

Alarm struck my features, and I spun, Tucker on my heels as we followed the sounds. Stopping in the wide doorway, I found Mom standing at the center of the kitchen with her back to me. Her chest was heaving, and her hands were clenched at her sides. Still in her dress from girls night, her hair tumbled half out of its clip, wild and disheveled around her shoulders.

"Mom?" I said, my voice quiet, taking in the shattered chunks of glass that lay scattered around the sink's edges, shards of dark blue from one of our glasses sprinkling over the surrounding counters and the floor.

She didn't respond. Tucker's hand came to rest at my waist, giving me a gentle squeeze. He was here. He wasn't going anywhere.

“Mom?” I tried again, trying not to sound alarmed, but everything in me screamed caution.

She looked up, glancing over her shoulder. “Hey, baby.” She plastered a fake smile on her face.

“Are you okay?” I asked, glancing over the scene, unsure about the look she’d just given me.

“Oh, this?” She gestured to the glass. “Yes, it just slipped.” She walked over to one of the cabinets and pulled out a cutting board before grabbing a knife from the set by the stove, her heels crunching over the broken glass. “I feel like a snack. Are you hungry? I’m thinking omelets. Remember your dad’s omelets?” She ducked into the fridge, emerging with veggies, cheese, and eggs.

Tucker and I exchanged a look, and I could see from his expression he knew something was wrong, too.

The front door opened, and Annie tumbled inside with Jet, laughter flooding over the tension mounting in the room. She stumbled, and he caught her arm, holding her upright. My eyes closed, realizing she was drunk. *Worst timing, sis.*

Tucker stepped back, catching their attention, and it only took a few seconds for the smiles on their faces to fall. Like a switch was flipped, Annie seemed to sober. I held out my hand, and Jet guided her over to the kitchen at my side.

We all watched as Mom cut mushrooms at the counter, broken glass just a foot away.

“Annie, sweetheart, you’re home. Good. I was just making omelets for me and your sister. Your dad’s favorite, remember?”

“Uh, yeah, Mom, I remember.” Her voice was quiet, cautious, the four of us watching the way Mom’s hands shook.

“Bridgette, are you okay?” Jet hedged.

“I’m fine.” Her tone was sharp, daring him to argue.

“You don’t seem fine, Mom,” Annie murmured softly.

“Well, I am. At least, I’m supposed to be, right?” Mom snapped, her eyes darting between the four of us. “It’s been a year since my husband got sick, so I *must* be fine by now, right?” Her hands clenched, her knuckles turning white around the handle of the knife.

“No one said that, Mom,” I offered, but it was like she didn’t hear me.

“Girls night was supposed to be good for me, right? Because it’s been long enough that I’m supposed to be okay. How am I supposed to be okay? My husband is gone. The love of my life is dead.” The edge of the knife’s blade pressed against her wrist. Jet stiffened while Annie and I gasped, and Tucker stepped away, his phone already at his ear, his voice hushed and rushing through the line. I didn’t even register his conversation, too focused on what was happening before me.

Tears began to fall down Mom’s cheeks, desperation wringing through her eyes. The knife pressed a little harder, not quite yet breaking skin. “All I wanted was a night out. One

night to not have to think about things. To not miss him so much. But I can't even have that. Because even though just *one* guy asked me to dance tonight, the second his hands touched me, it felt like a betrayal to your father." She shuddered, like just the memory of it was too much.

"Mom, Daddy wouldn't—"

She shook her head vigorously, the knife digging, cutting me off.

"You don't know. You can't know that. I'm *failing* him. I'm failing *y'all*." Her shoulders began to shake with her sobs, tears now flowing down my own cheeks as well. I felt Tucker's arms wrap around me again, pulling me back as two other figures rushed into the room, and I turned, burying my face in his chest, watching as Chuck pulled the knife from Mom's hands. As soon as it was free, Jenna wrapped her in her arms.

Annie's hands clasped over her mouth, tears flowing down her cheeks as Jet held her steady. My own flowing to match, we watched, stunned as Jenna pulled Mom away from the glass, and they sank to the floor at the side of the room, her sobs echoing around us.

Chapter 35

ANNIE

I wasn't sure what woke me up, but I knew the second I had that I wouldn't be going back to sleep. I glanced at the window, seeing it was still a dusky shade of dark outside, and scoffed. *Figures*. It had been that kind of night. Long and rough after everything that went down, and I was honestly surprised I'd managed to go to sleep in the first place.

Mom's meltdown had jarred me, and guilt festered inside that I hadn't realized how badly she'd been hurting. All the times I'd been angry with her for not being home or for leaving so much for Izzy and I to handle. She'd simply been trying to cope and stay afloat, trying not to drown.

I felt like a horrible daughter.

I rolled to my back, sticking my legs out and my arms above my head in a deep stretch before glancing to my side where Mom was fast asleep, passed out from a leftover sedative Jenna had found in her bathroom cabinet.

It was one of the few blessings last night after I'd gotten home. That and Jenna. She'd helped Mom shower and change and got her settled into bed while the guys cleaned up the kitchen. Izzy and I had lingered, helping where we could, but still in shock. Jenna had tried to send us off to bed at one point, but we couldn't, insisting we needed to stay with Mom instead. She needed us, and even if we hadn't been the best daughters before, we weren't going to abandon her now.

Jenna eventually agreed, but she refused to leave, deciding to sleep over on the couch in case something happened, and I had to admit, it did make me feel better knowing she was there.

We'd curled up in our parents' bed after that, Mom between us, and held hands above her head on the pillows, needing the connection.

Izzy's arm was still wrapped around Mom's waist now, their breathing both steady. I eased out of the covers and tiptoed over to the bathroom. My mouth was cakey and gross, because I'd *had* to pick last night to get drunk. I shook my head and swiped a little toothpaste on my finger, brushing it over my teeth and tongue before quickly using the restroom and hurrying back out into the room.

Izzy's eyes fluttered open as I crawled back into bed.

"You couldn't sleep much either?" she asked, her voice hushed.

I shook my head. "Do you want to go get some breakfast?" I offered, sensing our need to talk.

"Sure. As long as it's not omelets," she quipped, and we both shuddered. "Sorry. Bad joke."

We ducked out into the kitchen, and I was about to grab a couple of apples from the bowl but second guessed it, thoughts of last night's glass on the surrounding counter filling my head. They'd need to be thrown away. I turned for the fridge just as Izzy pulled it open, and we dug out yogurt and grapes for us to share instead.

Izzy and I glanced at the bar, both of us hesitating. Our gazes met, and as easily as if we'd spoken aloud, we headed for the back door. I could hear Jenna turning over on the couch as we slid it open and did my best to give it a quiet close.

Settling on the wicker patio furniture, Izzy and I munched on our food, the sky slowly turning shades of pinks and orange above us.

"I could really use coffee," I grumbled, and Izzy laughed.

"Me, too."

I popped another grape in my mouth, swallowing before I asked, "Did you realize how bad things were? I mean, was I the only one who missed it?"

"I think we *all* missed it." Izzy sighed. "What are we going to do? Mom needs help."

"Then we help her. We step things up around here. We've been doing a lot already, but I've been doing it with such a chip on my shoulder."

"No, you haven't, Annie. You've gotten mad a few times, sure, but you haven't been like that. And Mom needs more than just us. She needs *real* help." A tear slipped down Izzy's cheek, and she quickly brushed it away.

My own throat tightened, knowing she was right.

"I'm glad the guys were here last night."

"Me, too."

My brow furrowed, something in my last comment triggering a thought. “What *was* Tucker doing here last night? Last I knew, y’all had been fighting, and you’d left the dance hall with Zane.”

Izzy flinched, and my eyes widened, instantly knowing there was a story there.

“Okay, talk.”

Izzy sighed and shook her head. “You’re going to be so mad. Promise me you’re not going to take off on some crusade for vengeance when I tell you.”

“Um, no guarantees with *that* start. Now, spill.”

Her face scrunched, her hands gripping her knees before she clasped them in her lap. I could *feel* her nerves, but nothing could have prepared me for what she was about to say. I was left gaping, busy scooping my jaw off the floor when she finished filling me in, my brain still trying to catch up.

My eyes found the bruise on her cheek, the morning light just now bright enough to really notice it, and my insides officially began to boil as it sank in.

Zane had *hit* her. Tucker had *slept* with her. And I didn’t know who I was ready to kill first.

Correction. Zane. He’d touched my sister. I’d *told* the jackass not to hurt her. I’d *warned* him. And as soon as he’d started to gain an ounce of my trust, he’d blown it. I scoffed, because that wasn’t right either. He’d blown it after I’d first

heard him yell at Izzy, but *this*? What he'd just done? He had a fucking death wish.

“Annie?” Izzy hedged, but I couldn't speak.

My hands clenched, my nails digging into my thighs, trying to hold back. I'd thought I'd felt her panic last night, but it had been so fleeting. *How did I not realize?* At least that *something* had gone down. Thank God that Tucker had shown up.

“Annie?” Izzy tried again. “I know you're mad, but Tucker already dealt with Zane. Last night was awful enough. Can we please just let it go?”

Just let it go? Hell, I was ready to scalp a ball sack and have a new fucking coin purse. But the pleading look on my sister's face was like a bucket of water to the fire that stoked my anger. She was right. Last night had been awful, and with everything that had gone down lately, I honestly didn't know what to do. All I knew was that if it weren't for what was now happening with Mom *and* Izzy's possible PTSD, not knowing the boundaries of what I could push, I'd be on this in a fucking heartbeat. *Argh! Damn it!* I forced a deep breath and huffed.

“You're lucky I love you,” I grated, using everything in me to tamper the rest of my anger back.

Izzy sagged in relief and gave me an appreciative smile. “I really am.”

“You're also lucky that I love Tucker, or you'd have a dead boyfriend right about now.”

Izzy flinched, her shoulders curling in, and I immediately felt like a bitch. She'd been in love with Tucker for months, and she finally knew he wanted her back, had this amazing night with him, and then there I went, bashing her after her first time. My lingering frustration instantly vanished.

“How was it?” I nudged her knee with mine, bringing a softness to my tone.

She looked up, hopeful and doubtful all at once. I gave her a small smile, and her mouth pulled tight, tears lining the edges of her eyes. God, I felt like a bitch. Even if those were happy tears, I should have instantly asked her.

“It was wonderful,” Izzy said once she'd swallowed back her urge to cry. “He was so good to me, Annie. I know we moved fast, but the *connection* between us. All the tension that poured out once we burst that dam. I don't think we could've stopped if we'd wanted to.” Her ankles rolled where her legs were crossed as she curled her toes. “It was just...*delicious*.” She sighed. “And oh, my God, the number of times he made me come.”

My brow shot up. “How many?”

“*Six*,” she mouthed, holding up her fingers before biting her lip.

My jaw officially dropped for the second time that morning. *Six*? Ho-ly crap. “That's—” I stumbled for words. “Just wow. And y'all *are* together now, right?”

She nodded. “We made it official right afterwards.”

“That’s– Wow, I’m just...so happy for you.”

“Thanks.” She smiled, her whole body beaming. We wrapped our arms around each other in a hug, and Izzy added over my shoulder, “And just think of how much better our double dates are going to be now that you don’t hate my boyfriend.”

I laughed, pulling back. “True.”

We looked up when the door suddenly opened, and Jenna stared back at us with a small smile. “Y’all have a minute? Your mom wants to talk.”

She stepped outside and Mom followed, and thankfully, she looked nothing like last night, the deranged look free from her eyes, but she did look drained, exhausted.

How had we not seen?

They took a seat in the chairs opposite our loveseat, and Mom nervously tucked her hair behind her ears. “Um, first off, I’m so sorry about last night. You two did *not* need to see me that way.”

We shook our heads. “It’s fine, Mom–” Izzy started.

“No, it’s not. I’ve been having trouble for a long time now, but I’d convinced myself I could handle it on my own. After last night, it’s clear I can’t. I wanted to let y’all know that I plan on getting help. I’m going to get an appointment with the doctor first thing on Monday and see about starting up with counseling again as well. You two and your brother are my top priority, and I’m so sorry I dropped the ball.” Her eyes filled

with tears, and she blinked them away, but Izzy and I were already up and wrapping her in our arms.

“It’s fine, Mom,” I whispered as she cried silent tears into my shoulder. “You’ll be fine. We all will be.” I’d make sure of it.

Chapter 36

ANNIE

The end of summer crept along slowly after that. Mom managed to get a week off for mental health, and she'd set up her appointments as promised while Izzy and I made an extra effort to make sure we were around, outside of jobs and responsibilities. We wanted Mom to know she had our support. She was not alone. Even Jenna and Helen had been taking turns staying over at night all week. Which was amazing, giving me a chance to relax the load on my shoulders for at least a little while each day.

But with us home so often and focusing so much of our time on Mom, we hadn't had much time with the guys. Izzy and Tucker had even kept it under wraps so far that they were dating, at least around the parents, worried about how it might affect Mom after that awful night. We'd barely seen the guys actually, both of us a little afraid to leave her alone, but it was when Mom overheard me telling Jet no to some surprise he had planned that she practically shoved us out the door.

And exactly how we found ourselves on our first best friend couples double date.

Jet had even insisted on taking separate cars, which I was so here for. Way more of a chance for me to jump his bones later if we were alone. He was keyed up, too, his energy contagious. If we weren't meeting up with Tucker and Izzy, I'd have told him to pull over ages ago. But when he turned down a

secluded road, and I saw the gathering of sports and muscle cars up ahead, my excitement started to fade.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“What?” He grinned at me, not getting my shift in mood.

“What if Zane’s here?”

Jet shook his head. “He won’t be. Heard him telling my dad the other day at work he’d be heading back home to visit a friend before school starts back up. That’s why I wanted to come tonight. I wanted y’all here.”

I gave him a funny look, my fingers flying across the screen of our group chat, filling Tucker and Izzy in before they could freak out, too. “Here for what?”

“For me.” He gave me a sideways glance, a sly smile on his face.

It took a second for it to click. “No. Really?!” I clutched the seatbelt and bounced in my seat. “You’re gonna race?”

His grin just spread wider, and I’d swear my panties went damp. It was so fucking hot.

I crawled into his lap the second he parked and smothered his mouth in a kiss. There was a moment of surprise before he reacted, and his hands slid up my back, clutching me close. I reached between us and gripped his instantly hard cock, giving it a few strong strokes through his jeans. “Win and you’ll finally get to fuck me in your car,” I growled against his lips before throwing open his door. I hopped out, leaving him stunned and hard as hell as I darted away.

Izzy was just sliding from the massive Chevy, Tucker there opening her door, and I ran up and grabbed her hands. “Jet’s racing.”

Her eyes widened. “Really?” She glanced up at Tucker, and he shrugged, heading over to drop the tailgate.

“I figured he might be. We’ve been working on his car.”

“Jet, are you sure?” Izzy asked as he came around the front of his Mustang, discreetly trying to adjust the front of his jeans. I smirked, and he shot me a look that said I was so going to pay for it later. My thighs pressed together, my core clenching just thinking about it.

“Definitely.” He smiled at Izzy. “It’s like an itch I’ve gotta scratch. I’ve gotta try.”

With a small nod, she swallowed, and I pulled her hand over to where we all gathered on the tailgate. We settled into what was strangely becoming our routine with these things. Except this time Izzy was wrapped under *Tucker’s* arm while I perched in Jet’s lap. We made our friendly bets with the first few races, Izzy cheering and screaming alongside me. But it wasn’t until I’d checked out the crowd that I could fully relax. I caught Tucker doing the same, his eyes discreetly studying the cars and faces while Izzy wasn’t looking. None of us wanted Zane anywhere near her. Jet may have heard he’d be gone, but we couldn’t be too certain.

Monty came over after a few more rounds and tapped at his clipboard. “Got you down after the next round. You ready?” He looked at Jet.

“Yep. Who am I up against?”

“Starting you off with another newer driver. I think y’all will be a good match. Drives that Dodge Challenger over there.” He gestured to what I’d guess was an 80’s style muscle car.

Jet nodded. “Sounds good.”

“Alright.” Monty smacked his clipboard against his palm. “You’ll pull up in the lane behind the start when we count off the next race.”

My breaths suddenly felt tight in my chest, alert now that things were so close. Jet wrapped his arms around me, reassuring even as I felt the charge of his excitement. “Get ready to make good on that promise, sweetheart,” he whispered at my ear, and I shivered. He grinned, crawling out from behind me to hop down onto the rocky dirt lot, and leaned in, bracing his arms on the tailgate at my sides. “Kiss for good luck?”

I grinned, hooked in those blue eyes, and wrapped my fingers in his shirt, tugging him close as I gave him a long, deep kiss. “My panties are already soaked just thinking about watching you out there,” I murmured at his lips before releasing his shirt, and he groaned, adjusting his pants again as he headed to his car.

I smirked, way too excited considering my nerves, and Izzy grabbed my hand as we watched Jet pull up to his place in line. The three of us sat silent, barely noticing the current race. I couldn’t even tell you who won. My eyes were just fixed on the familiar red Mustang that held my heart inside.

I sucked in a breath as he and the Challenger rolled up, taking their place at the start.

Izzy squeezed my hand. “I call Mustang.”

I glanced over, and we shared a smile.

The second the flag dropped, I was on my feet, screaming at the top of my lungs, my heart in my throat. Izzy and Tucker hopped up, too, the three of us on edge, excitement rolling through the air around us. It was close, neck and neck around every turn until the Challenger swerved around the last corner, nearly clipping the red of the Mustang. I sucked in a breath, no longer breathing as Jet barely dodged. It cost him a few seconds as he pulled his front end straight, but I knew Jet would be pissed, and he floored it, shooting over the finish line just a second ahead.

“Holy, fuck! Photo-fucking-finish!” Tucker whooped, scooping Izzy up to twirl her around.

I beamed, my feet taking off the second the Mustang stopped, and I leapt into Jet’s arms, my legs wrapping around his waist as he stepped out of the car. He stumbled back against the door as his hands wrapped around my thighs by my ass. I beamed as I looked down at him. So fucking turned on and proud.

“Your turn to ride a stick shift next, sweetheart.” He grinned.

Hell, yes. I grabbed his hair, the dark locks twisting in my fingers, and devoured him in a kiss.



ISABEL

Tucker still held me in his arms as I watched Annie tear off after Jet, and I smiled, loving that they were so happy. And so so proud of my friend. My eyes widened, startled when Tucker suddenly tossed me higher, and I hooked my legs around his waist, clutching my hands around his neck for balance as he braced me with his hands under my ass.

“I want that smile facing me.” He gave me that sexy, playful grin of his, and on cue, I began to melt, lost again in the depths of his whiskey eyes.

“You’ve got it, Whiskey.”

“Whiskey?” He gave me a funny look, and I shrugged.

“Your eyes. Besides, you gave me a new nickname.”

“So, I did.” He leaned in, gently taking me in a kiss, my heart undeniably happy.

Slowly, it became heated, and Tucker leaned back, sliding me down so that my knees rested against the lowered tailgate as I straddled his lap. My fingers ran through his hair, and my other hand pressed against the broad, hard plane of his chest while his hand wrapped in the long strands I left cascading down my back.

He nibbled at my lips while I ran my tongue over his, the two of us taking turns nipping and exploring each other’s mouths. It had felt like forever since that night in my room.

Eventually needing air, Tucker nipped at my lips twice more before letting me pull away. I leaned my forehead against his, listening to the sound of our breaths trying to steady.

He ran a hand over my hair, pulling it away from my shoulders, and I sighed in relief at the exposure to air in the early August heat.

“You’re sweating,” he observed.

“You’re hot,” I countered, giving him a grin.

A devilish smirk played in his eyes, and he nipped like he was going for my jaw. I gave a little shriek as I ducked my head and giggled.

“I love that sound,” he said, bringing my eyes back to his. My heart stuttered, so much there between us. This past week had been hard, keeping our distance when we’d just gotten together. I swallowed, my mind now lost in thought, and Tucker grabbed my thighs, turning us so that I was now the one seated on the tailgate. He leaned over me, his arms caging me in. “I know you’re worried about your mom, but I think she can handle this. Us.” He motioned between us.

My brow furrowed in worry. “What if she can’t? She’s still so torn up about losing Daddy. Is it fair that I rub my happiness in her face now that I have someone?”

“Is it fair that you’re hiding us from her? You didn’t hide that you were with Zane.”

I flinched. “That was different. I didn’t know how bad she was feeling then, and besides, I’m not *hiding* us.” I reached up,

tucking a lock of golden hair back from his brow. He stilled my hand, encasing it in his.

“You are. But now that we’re together, I don’t want to have to hold back. Not when I feel this way about you. This week has been torture barely seeing you.”

I nodded as I sighed. It really had, and the more I thought about it, Tucker was right. Mom would want to know. She wouldn’t want me holding back my happiness to spare her pain.

“I’ll talk to her tonight, okay? Or at least by tomorrow if she’s already in bed.”

“That’s all I ask.”

“Hey! Did y’all see?!”

Jet’s voice cut into the moment. I glanced over, surprised to see his Mustang next to us again, and Tucker stepped back, giving him one of those fist bump things guys do before bumping their shoulders and clapping each other’s backs. “It was awesome, man.”

“It really was.” I smiled, leaning forward to wrap Jet in a hug. Annie immediately buried herself in his arms when I pulled away, and they hopped up to sit together on the other side of the tailgate. Chatter fell easily amongst us, everything perfect about the night in Tucker’s arms with my best friends at my side, when I suddenly realized I had to pee.

I grimaced, remembering the port-a-potties. *At least there’s not any mud for my shoes to sink into this time.* My heels hit

the hard dirt as I slid down from Tucker's arms, tugging my jean shorts back into place. He gave me a questioning look.

"Bathroom."

"Want me to come?"

I raised a brow. "I'm actually pretty used to these crowds by now. I think I've got it."

He nodded, turning his attention back to the track, but I could still feel his eyes on me as I walked away, putting just that little extra bit of confidence I needed in my step as I passed through the crowd.

A few guys leered as I passed, the ones with girlfriends giving me dirty looks, but I ignored them, keeping my focus straight ahead. A large diesel truck had parked at the back, blocking my path, and I quickly stepped around it, hurrying across the rest of the dried field to what was a lone stand this time.

Praying no one was in it, my bladder rejoiced as I slipped inside, and I quickly did my business before hurrying back out. *Ugh. I need to start bringing Purell when we come to these things.* I shuddered, quickly leaving the stand behind, and nearly screeched when a dark figure stepped out in front of me.

"Oh, my God." I clutched a hand to my chest. "I'm so sorry. You surprised me."

"Obviously."

I felt the blood drain from my features when I recognized that voice, and my eyes snapped up to his face.

“Zane,” I whispered, the breath leaving my lungs.

“Izzy.” He stood with his feet spread and his hands clenched slightly at his sides. Frustration poured over his form, reminding me of the other night, but his expression read deeper than anything else. Harsh, with his jaw set, the dark depths of his eyes radiated anger, and I had to force myself not to flinch as I looked into them.

“What do you want?” I managed to say, my words coming out breathy and small after our last encounter.

“You. For you to call me or text me back. You’ve been ignoring me all week. But I guess I saw why!” He swung an arm out behind him to where I’d been sitting with Tucker, and I swallowed. “How long did it take before you ditched me for him?” his voice grated.

I reeled. “Ditched you? *You* cheated on *me*, Zane, and then you *hit* me. I told you that night that we were through.”

He scoffed. “I may have fucked up, but *you* left. When I *told* you not to. All I’m asking for is a chance.”

My head shook, thrown by what he was trying to say. “There is no chance. I’m with Tucker now.”

He growled, and I stepped back, my eyes widening as he closed the space between us. He lowered his face to mine. “Bullshit. You’re *mine*, Izzy. Don’t fucking forget that. Even with another guy’s hands all over you, you belong to me.”

What?! “Have you forgotten that you *hit* me?!” I cried, a part of me wondering if I was crazy, no clue why I was pushing him or where this bravado was coming from. I tilted my chin up, determined to stand my ground. “We’re done. Let it go.”

I watched as a darkness passed over his expression, something in his dark eyes flashing, and he stepped forward again. His hand reached out, and I flinched on instinct, my charade broken. “We’re done when I say we’re done.” He surprised me by running his fingers through my hair before tucking a few strands behind my ear.

“Don’t.” I knocked his arm away with my hand, my eyes flashing. My stomach quickly ran cold when I saw the way he smirked.

“Be mad. I get it. But I meant it when I said we’re not done. I *will* win you back. Whatever it takes.” He stepped around me, disappearing into the darkness of night.

I stood frozen for a minute, still too in shock at what had just happened. That Zane really wanted to get back together. That he thought he had any chance of forgiveness. That he’d hidden in the shadows, like he’d been waiting for the chance to strike.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, finally bringing me back to life. I glanced down at the screen, my breaths still shallow. My hands shook as I swiped at the screen.

Annie: You okay?

My index finger hovered, shaking over the box that would let me reply, when a hand wrapped around my eyes, yanking

me back. I stumbled, gasping for air as someone forced a cloth between my teeth, silencing my screams. On instinct, I jerked an elbow back, connecting with the person behind me. A deep voice cried out, and his tight hold disappeared, allowing me a moment of hope, right before darkness consumed me.

Keep Reading With Book 2: [Broken](#)

BLURB

IZZY DONOVAN was the breath in my lungs and my most torturous temptation.

The girl no guy could get. Except for me.

And one other.

I'd held my distance from her as long as I could, desperate not to ruin her life, but now, it may be too late.

Every reason that kept me from her before was rolling in, trampling over her life and her dreams, and I had no one to blame but myself. I'd promised to keep her safe, and I was failing. But I couldn't pull away, not if I didn't want to lose us.

Losing us meant losing everything, and even when tragedy struck, I knew...

I WOULD PROTECT HER, PROTECT US, AT ALL COSTS.

Head to [Broken](#)

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Being an author and creating books is pointless without amazing readers like you, and I'd love to hear your honest review of how you felt about my Breaker Ridge Beginnings.

Even a line or two goes a long way. More reviews = more social proof = more trust in the quality of an author's work = more readers = more stories for you to love!

Reviews can be left on:

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[Bonus Chapter \(Zane's POV\)](#)

Thank You!

Thank you for reading Torn. I truly hope you enjoyed reading this book and my characters as much as I love writing them, and I hope you continue to follow the Breaker Ridge crew on their journey. To keep up with all of the drama, angst, and romance, sign up for my newsletter and get a [FREE](#)

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Playlist

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Lifeline - You And Me

Avril Lavigne - Complicated

Boys Like Girls - Two Is Better Than One

Alli Simpson - Notice Me

One Direction - Kiss You

Selena Gomez - Lose You To Love Me

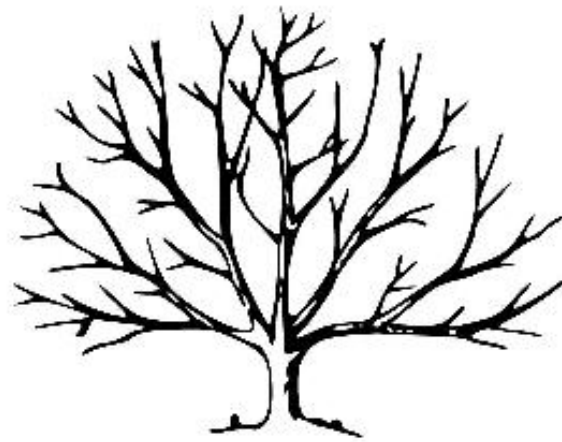
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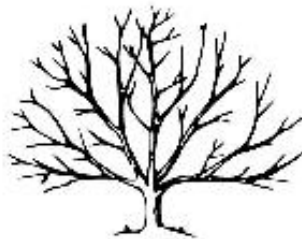
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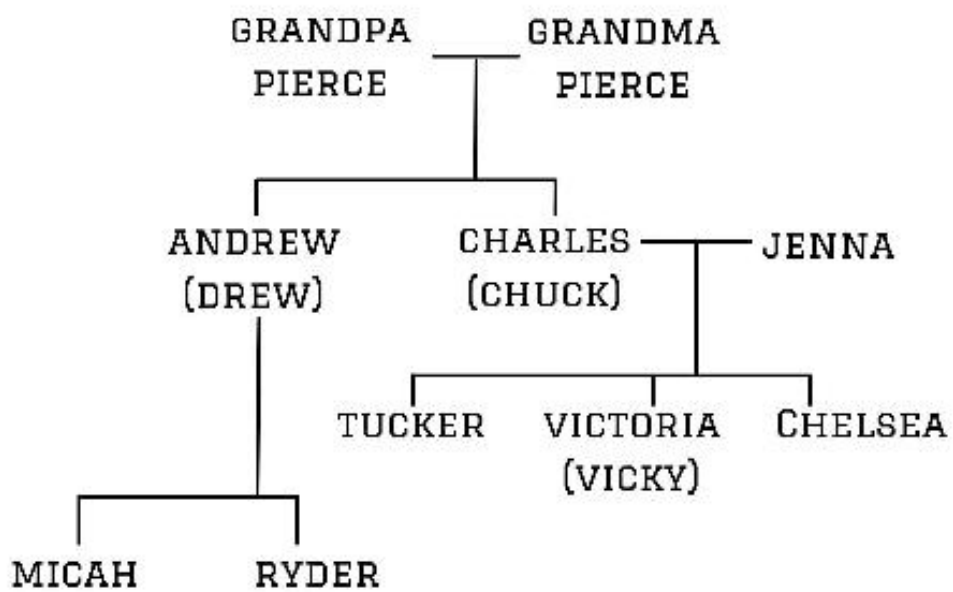


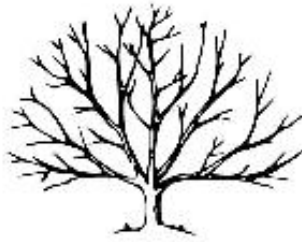
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FAMILY TREES



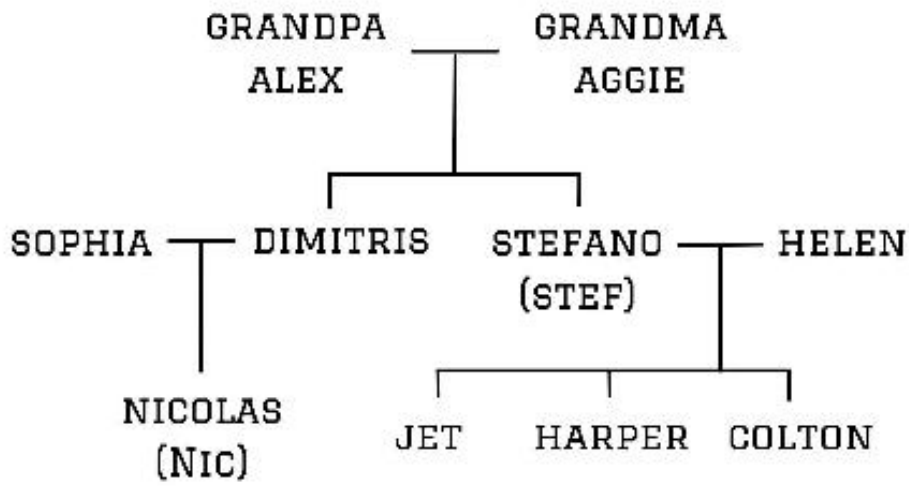


THE PIERCE FAMILY



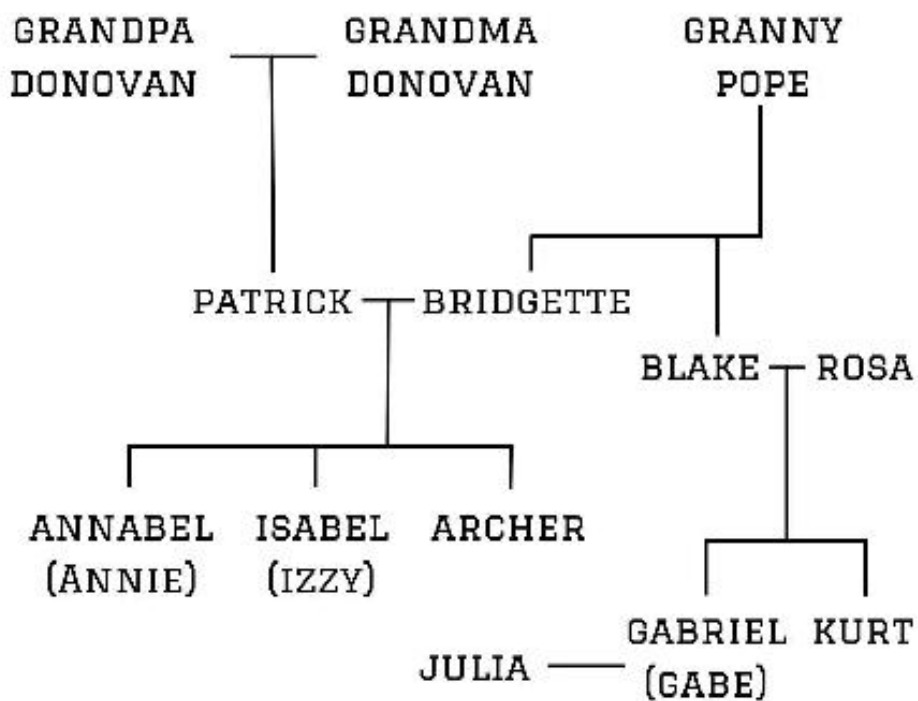


THE THANOS FAMILY





THE DONOVAN FAMILY



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About the Author

Author and lover of NA romance, Keelan Storm brings readers pages packed with drama, angst, heat, and emotion with swoon-worthy moments you won't want to put down. With her Breaker Ridge series, you'll find steamy, new adult, high school - college sports romance with ride or die friendships, unforgettable characters, and unpredictable twists and turns.

Keelan lives in Texas with her husband and two children, and when she isn't writing, she enjoys reading and finding hot new book boyfriends, taking midnight drives, pretty much anything teal, and inhaling unhealthy amounts of iced coffee.