

G COLGROVE

True love is
worth the wait.
No matter how
long it takes.

LOVE
ME
Later

LOVE
ME *Later*

G COLGROVE

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CONTENT/TRIGGER WARNINGS

Dearest Readers,

This story deals with sensitive situations and first-person experiences that may be triggering to some readers. In light of the tragedy that occurred in Uvalde, Texas, in May 2022, I feel it necessary to forewarn readers that this book contains a scene which includes gun violence in a school setting. If you'd like a complete list of triggers/content warning for this work of fiction, please click the link provided.

[Complete List Here](#)

PLAYLIST FOR LOVE ME LATER

[You can listen as you read with this link!](#)

“Marry Me” - Thomas Rhett

“WYD Now?” - Sadie Jean

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“Dancing On My Own” - Calum Scott

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“Got What I Got” - Jason Aldean

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“Take My Name” - Parmalee

LOVE
ME *Later*

G COLGROVE

JACKSON

THE FIRST DAY THEY MET...

“Class, I know it’s the first day back from spring break, but I need y’all to focus. Please,” Ms. Rhodes, our chemistry teacher, pleads with us. “I’ve got something fun planned, but I need butts in seats and mouths zipped if we’re going to get through this.”

Sitting at my desk, I have my arms folded across my chest and watch as everyone around me continues to act like an idiot. This is the one class I actually get to be myself in. No one else on the football team would ever sign up to take AP Chem. This teacher actually expects work to be done, and most of the guys would rather breeze through their classes so they can focus more on training, even in the off season. But me, I love the mental challenge almost as much as the physical. So I enjoy the forty minutes a day where I’m not expected to behave a certain way—and where I’m not Jameson Nash’s little brother.

Glancing over to my left, I look out the window and wait patiently for the rest of the class to settle down. The door handle clicks open, and all the talking around me comes to a complete stop. Looking at the front of the room, I expect to see the principal. She always drops by unexpectedly on the first day back to greet everyone. Only it’s not her.

“Can I help you, honey?” Ms. Rhodes asks the girl currently hovering in the doorway.

The look on her face tells me she’s ready to turn and run at any moment. Her bright green eyes dart anxiously around the

room before settling back on the teacher.

“I’m Rory—I mean Aurora—Monroe, the new girl.” She sighs while taking two cautious steps away from the door.

“Oh, yes, of course.” Ms. Rhodes quickly makes her way over to the dark-haired girl and places an arm around her shoulders. “You’re Skip’s daughter.” She smiles down at her. Aurora manages a half smile and nods her head. Ms. Rhodes leads the girl farther into the room and then gently turns her to face us. “Class, this is Aurora Monroe. She and her father have just moved here from Chicago. Her grandfather is none other than Police Chief Monroe.”

At Ms. Rhodes’s words, I notice a slight flash of what appears to be pain shooting across Aurora’s face. She quickly composes herself and puts on a smile that looks fake, at least to me. So this is Chief Monroe’s granddaughter; who would have known? Everyone in Hawk Bend has been talking about her father moving back after living in Chicago for the past twenty years.

“Hey,” Aurora says while nervously tucking her long, curly hair behind one ear.

When none of the class responds to her greeting, Ms. Rhodes’s face hardens, and she protectively pulls Aurora closer.

“I expect all of you to make her feel at home.” Ms. Rhodes gives Aurora’s shoulders one last squeeze as she quickly glances around the room, her eyes finally landing on me. “Jackson, you’ll be Aurora’s lab partner for the rest of the year. I expect you to share your notes and bring her up to speed.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I reply without missing a beat.

Scooting my chair to the far left of the table, I make room for Aurora to join me. She tosses her book bag onto the floor and takes a seat. Her body is stiff, and she refuses to make eye contact with me. Unapologetically, I continue to stare at her. It’s rare for a town as small as Hawk Bend to have a new kid

in school. I'm curious to know more about her. Besides, she's the prettiest girl I've ever seen. It's hard not to look at her.

Nervously, she bounces her leg under the table as Ms. Rhodes explains the experiment she's about to perform. Her jeans make a rhythmic whooshing sound as her speed increases. I reach into my book bag and pull out my chem notebook. Placing it on the table, I slide it in her direction. She looks over at it and then up at me. Flipping to the tab marked third quarter notes, I tap my finger on the paper.

"Start here. This quarter is almost over, so there is a lot for you to copy." I smile at her and watch as her emerald-green eyes soften. "I'm Jackson," I say, almost hypnotized by her stare. Somehow, I manage to pull myself together and extend my hand out to greet her.

"Rory." She slips her small, tan hand in mine and grips me with a force I didn't expect. She's not exactly petite, but she's definitely stronger than she looks.

For the rest of the period, I pretend to pay attention to Ms. Rhodes, but my mind and eyes keep wandering to this mystery girl sitting next to me. I watch as she furiously copies down my notes, trying to cram six weeks' worth of work into forty minutes. When the bell rings, she slumps down in her seat and shakes out the cramp in her hand.

"I didn't finish." She shrugs. "Do you mind if I borrow them again tomorrow?"

"Take them home with you," I respond, but she quickly shakes her head.

"Ms. Rhodes just reminded the class about the test tomorrow—"

"I don't need them," I interrupt her. "Photographic memory."

She squints her eyes and gives me a once over. Only now do I notice the faint dusting of freckles along her nose and cheeks. She's not convinced, but eventually she stacks both of our notebooks on top of one another and places them inside her book bag.

“Thanks. That’s nice of you.”

“It’s nothing,” I say, fully meaning it. I really do have a photographic memory, so studying for a small pop quiz wouldn’t happen even if I had my notes. “So, where’s your next class?” I’m hoping that her schedule is identical to mine, or that it’s at least in the same direction so I can walk with her.

“AP Spanish. It’s in room...” She pulls a piece of paper out of her pocket and unfolds it. “118.”

“Damn, really? That’s cool. I barely passed Spanish I.” She’s smart. I like that.

“My mom was from Venezuela, so I’m fluent in Spanish...” Her voice trails off, and the pain there is obvious.

Was. So the little old ladies at church must have been right. Just last week they were talking about how Skip Monroe’s wife had died, and he was moving home under the pretense that he would replace his father as chief of police. The old man is way overdue for retirement. So, the excuse makes sense. The reality is, I can only assume, Skip Monroe needed to move home so he wouldn’t have to raise his teenage daughter alone.

“My class is next door to yours. Do you want me to show you the way?” I’m hoping the change of subject will pull her from her thoughts.

She gives me a forced smile and nods her head.

The two of us walk down the hall, and I feel Rory moving closer and closer to me. As the first new kid, pretty much ever, all eyes are on her. She’s trying her best to ignore the stares and whispers, but I can feel how overwhelming it is for her. I open my mouth, hoping to distract her, but my idiot brother beats me to it.

“Damn, how can someone as pretty as you be Chief Monroe’s granddaughter?” Jameson compliments her as he gives her the famous Nash smile all the girls drool over.

Of course he already knows who she is. To him, she’s fresh meat.

Before Rory can respond, the bell rings, letting us know we're late for class. Placing my hand on Jameson's chest, I give him a shove.

"Get out of the way dumbass, you're making us late," I warn him.

"Who are you?" Rory asks, raising one eyebrow at my brother before looking back and forth between the two of us.

It's easy to tell we're related. The differences between us are so slight, you'd have to be an idiot not to figure it out. And this girl is far from being an idiot.

"Jameson Nash, Jackson's older, better-looking brother. Also, varsity quarterback, small town hero, and your date for Friday night."

"Cute, but no." She laughs while grabbing me by the shirt and pulling me past Jameson.

I look back and watch as my brother deflates a little. Rory is probably the first girl who has ever said no to him in any capacity. But his disappointment doesn't last long as one of the varsity cheerleaders calls out his name and wiggles her finger at him.

"Your brother's a textbook douchebag... no offense," she remarks, while placing her hand on the doorknob of her next class.

"Tell me about it. I have to live with him." *And in his shadow.*

"Thanks for the notes and for making sure I didn't get lost." This time, when Rory smiles, it actually reaches her eyes. It's like a bolt of lightning straight to the chest. "Maybe I'll see you later."

"Definitely," I mutter while watching her walk into the classroom. "Bye."

The door slams shut in my face, and I exhale the breath I have been holding. Forty minutes, twenty-four hundred seconds. That's all it took for this new girl to steal a piece of my heart.

“I think I’m in love.”

JACKSON

TWELVE YEARS LATER, PRESENT DAY...

The house is still dark as I make my way toward the kitchen. The old floorboards squeak beneath my feet. Another reminder of how much work I need to put into this place. Once inside the kitchen, I pull the cord that hangs down from the light fixture and give it a firm tug. Dull amber light shines down, making this room seem more outdated than it already is. The smell of coffee hits me, and zombie-like, I walk over to fill up the travel mug that sits beside the freshly brewed pot. I pour until it's three quarters of the way full before placing it back down on the faded green Formica countertop. Bypassing the small kitchen table, I grab my duty rig that hangs on the hook. Once my belt is fastened, I kneel and unlock the safe that sits at my feet. Inside, my on-duty gun and badge waits for me. Finally suited up, I lace my boots and head back over to put the finishing touches on my morning coffee.

Through the kitchen window I can see the sun rise over the fields. The sky turns from midnight blue to warm pink and red. This is my favorite time of the day. Out here, away from everyone and everything, I'm at peace. This old place sits on over thirty acres, so there is an endless amount of quiet all around me. Grabbing my coffee, I open the refrigerator door and add the hazelnut creamer. It's Rory's favorite flavor—this month, anyway. So I've been doing my best to keep it stocked. Closing the fridge door, I look at the invitation that sits under one of the old clunky magnets I've collected over the years.

Charles Monroe Jr. requests the honor of your presence at the wedding of his daughter, Aurora Sofia

I close my eyes and Rory's face flashes in my mind. Quickly, my smile turns to a frown when I open my eyes and continue on...

to Bradley Joseph Durand.

Fucking Brad. The asshole attorney from Austin who Rory met one night while at a conference in San Antonio. He was meeting clients in the hotel lobby bar, and she was having drinks with a few of the fellow attendees. While carrying her glass of wine from the bar to the table, she tripped and spilled it down the front of him. Too bad she wasn't carrying hot coffee or tea instead. The idea of Brad screaming in pain as scalding hot liquid falls into his lap makes me laugh.

Their relationship didn't move fast. That isn't Rory's style. She keeps others at a distance, rarely letting anyone get too close. But Brad was persistent and didn't mind taking things slowly. They've been together for almost three years now and are finally getting married, although they still don't live together, which is crazy if you ask me. How are you supposed to ever really know someone if you haven't lived with them?

But, I digress. After the honeymoon, Rory will move into Brad's big, fancy house. She claims he needs to be close to the office and the airport for easy travel—both are just excuses she's making to justify uprooting her life for him. It's only a thirty-minute commute that she'll be making daily to finish out the school year. But it's too much for him.

Pulling the invitation out from under the magnet, I walk over to the stove. The knob clicks as I turn it to start the gas. When the flame comes to life, I place the invitation directly into the fire. Watching the plumes of smoke waft through the air, I allow my jealousy to bubble at the surface. This is the only place I'm allowed to have these feelings. My one and only safe space. Shaking my head, I wonder for the millionth time how I ended up in this situation. How could I let the one woman who is perfect for me in every way slip through my fingers? How am I supposed to stand beside her at the altar as

her fucking *man of honor* and watch as she marries another man?

Counting to ten, I take a deep breath and let it out before doing it all over again. By the time I'm finished, the invitation is nothing more than ash. Turning off the stove, I grab my coffee and head outside to my truck. I catch my reflection in the driver's side window and straighten my shoulders before putting my game face on. After all these years, I'm a goddamn professional at hiding my true feelings. I smile at myself and see the years of regret hiding behind my eyes.

"Looking good, Officer Nash," I mutter. "No one could ever tell you're a giant pussy who couldn't pull the trigger just by glancing at you."

RORY

Sitting at my desk on this chilly Monday morning, I quickly scan through my emails. After taking Friday off, I need to make sure there isn't anything important that requires my immediate attention. Thankfully, everything looks relatively good. No fires need putting out, which means it must have been a slow day.

"Is it just me or do the weekends seem to get shorter and shorter with the progression of the school year?" Lyndsey grumbles as she walks through my office door.

She takes a seat in one of the worn-down red vinyl office chairs that are staged in front of my desk. Lyndsey reaches over and hands me one of the Styrofoam coffee cups in her hand. With a grateful smile, I grab hold of the cup and take a long sip.

"Only two more months until spring break. Think you can last that long?" I tease her.

Lyndsey slumps down in the chair and pulls her hoodie over her blonde ponytail. She groans out loud, and I can't help but chuckle at her over-dramatization of the situation.

"It's going to take a lot of wine to get me through it. I'm warning you ahead of time. I'm claiming every single one of your Friday nights from now until then. So no more ditching me for fancy dinners with Mr. Perfect anymore." Lyndsey sits up and places her elbows on the edge of my desk. "He's going to have to deal with sharing you."

Before I can answer, the bell rings, and I glance outside to see the hallways filling up with students.

“I promise, from now until the wedding I will reserve my Friday nights exclusively for my friends.” I step around my desk and offer her my hand.

“And...” Lyndsey stares at me.

“And wine. Lots and lots of wine.”

“Good girl,” she praises me. Finally, taking my hand, I help her back to her feet. “I can’t believe the wedding is only two months away.”

The two of us walk the halls, making our way toward the gym. There is a pep rally this morning to kick off spirit week. Between that and the Valentine’s Day dance quickly approaching, the student council has lined the halls with decorations. They taped banners above the lockers and have an insane amount of streamers hanging from the ceiling. They’ve really gotten into the spirit this year.

“Me either. With the holidays over, time is going by so fast. There are only a couple of things left to decide on, but the date will be here before you know it.”

“Then you’ll be living in Austin, and you’ll forget all about us.”

“Highly unlikely.” I snort. “Remember, I’ll be commuting until the end of the school year.”

“Whatever, it won’t be the same and you know it.”

There is no response I can give that will reassure her because I know she’s right. The closer I get to my wedding day, the more I realize that my entire life is about to change. I’ll be moving to Austin, looking for a job at a new school, and leaving my dad, Jackson, and the rest of my friends behind in Hawk Bend. The thought alone makes my chest tighten, so I push it to the back of my mind to deal with it at another time.

When Lyndsey and I finally step inside the gym, the smell of years of sweat and stinky teenagers hits me. It’s a distinct odor that hasn’t changed since I was a student here and will

forever be burned into my memory. In the middle of the basketball court, the school band is playing our fight song. The beat of the drum causes my whole body to vibrate in time with the rhythm. Quickly, the two of us move out of the way to line-up along the padded wall with some of the other teachers. A few kids pass by and wish me good morning.

All is nice and calm on this Monday morning. So when the sudden giddy, high-pitched laughter from a group of teenage girls breaks through the dull hum, I can't help but look in their direction to see what's up.

There is a group of about six seniors all huddled together. They are laughing loudly and flipping their hair. It's so cliché it's painful to watch. All of their attention is on the handsome man in uniform as he tries to break free of their circle. His eyes meet mine, and I shake my head before taking a sip of coffee. Jackson rolls his eyes before saying only God knows what to the girls. On cue, the girls' laughter raises a few octaves. Eventually, he escapes their blockade, and I watch as he walks toward me.

"Your fan club is out in full force today," Lyndsey remarks bitterly. "Kind of sad how you get older and they get younger."

Since high school, I don't think there's been a girl in this small town of ours who hasn't had a crush on one—or both—of the infamous Nash brothers. For good reason, too. Jameson and Jackson have those rugged, down-home good looks that litter the covers of small-town romance novels. Unlike Jameson, though, Jackson has the heart and personality to make him more than just a pretty face.

"Jealous, Lynds?"

Jackson leans against the wall, his intimidatingly thick arms are folded casually across his chest as he bumps shoulders with me. I look up and he gives me a wink, his hazel eyes sparkling with mischief. That look always means he's about to cause some trouble.

"Hardly." Lyndsey narrows her eyes at him, accepting Jackson's challenge. "It's a bit sad when you've run through

all the women in town, and now the only ones left are the barely legal high school girls. Pathetic, really.”

“Lyndsey, that’s how rumors get started,” I scold, elbowing her in the ribs.

“Don’t worry, Rory. She’s still mad because I tossed her ass out of my bed one summer when she was home from college. My brother’s sloppy seconds never did interest me.”

Lyndsey spins on her heels, her face red with anger. Before she can unload any of it onto Jackson, the band stops, signaling the pep rally is starting. For the next forty-five minutes, I stand between my two best friends. After all these years, I’m used to the tension between them. Jackson’s right, Lyndsey still holds a grudge because he rejected her. You know the old saying, some things never change? Welcome to Hawk Bend. It should be the motto of the town and all who live in it.

After the pep rally, Lyndsey, still pissed, mumbles something about having to get to her classroom, leaving Jackson and me standing here with the other guidance counselor and the vice principal. Together, we make sure all the students get out of the gym and to their second period class. When we get back to my office, I grab the call slips from my inbox and begin shuffling through them. These are the students that I need to meet with today. These slips always indicate urgent matters, and therefore, require my full attention. Jackson makes himself at home by plopping down in the too-small-for his-size chair, his belt clunking loudly against the steel frame.

“How was your weekend?” I mutter mindlessly while taking my seat.

Jackson answers me, but I’m not paying attention to what he’s saying. The last call slip is for one of the sophomore girls who has spent more time in my office this year than any other student in the school. Because of her behavior, all of her teachers agree something is going on with her, but none of us can figure out what. It’s hard to tell what’s normal teenage angst and what’s cause for concern these days.

“Then we picked up a few hookers and some Molly. You know, just a typical weekend around these parts.” I look up from the slip of paper and blink at Jackson. “Welcome back to the conversation. I knew hookers and drugs would reel you in.”

“Sorry, I saw this student’s name and got preoccupied. When you go back to the station today, can you look into something for me?”

Jackson is our unofficial resource officer here at the school. He’s here most days and usually stays until third period. Then he checks in with my dad and the other officers at the station before going about his actual job.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Will you see if there’s any record of emergency calls or anything suspicious regarding the Baucom’s? You know, the family over on Tall Oaks?”

“What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know. The daughter, Anabelle, there’s something up with her. I’m just trying to figure out what.”

Jackson pulls out his notebook and writes down the information I’ve just given him.

“I’ll text you if I find anything.”

“Thank you.”

Jackson’s phone goes off, and I watch him intently as he checks it. My eyes fall to his left arm, which is almost completely covered in colorful ink. On his bicep, almost hidden amongst the swirls of black and the scarlet wings of a phoenix, is a fine line drawing of two hands connected in a pinky promise. The artist did an amazing job of blending it in with the background. So good, in fact, that if you didn’t know to look for it, you’d never see it. But I do, because I have an identical tattoo on my hip bone. Only mine is bigger and surrounded by orchids.

For the second time today, a wave of sadness rushes over me. Jackson has been a constant in my life for such a long

time. Since moving to Hawk Bend, the only time we've been apart is when I went to college. But even then, I was home most weekends to visit my dad and, of course, Jackson. I hate the fact that soon I won't be seeing him every day. The familiar heaviness settles on my chest for the second time today and almost makes me doubt the decisions I've made.

"Want to grab dinner tonight? I've been craving Chinese." Jackson places his phone into his front pocket and leans back in the chair.

"Can't. I'm making dinner for my dad tonight. You're more than welcome to join us. You know I always make enough to send him home with leftovers."

"Sounds good to me. We can go out for Chinese food another night this week."

"Ms. Monroe." Looking up, I see a student standing in the doorway. "Sorry, the door was open, and I thought it might be rude to knock while you were talking. We have a meeting to go over my college admissions."

"Of course, Elizabeth. I'm sorry, come in."

The young girl shyly looks between me and Jackson before blushing a dark crimson over her cheeks and neck. "Hi, Officer Nash," she squeaks with a small giggle.

Jackson stands up and gives the girl a smile. "College admissions, exciting stuff," he cheers, holding up his hand up to give her a high five. She blushes an even deeper shade of red before lightly tapping her palm to his. "See you later, Rory," he says, stepping out of my office.



FROM THE KITCHEN I can hear the front door of my townhome open and close. "Aurora, it's me," my dad announces. I look up at the clock, early as usual.

“Back here.”

His heavy footsteps make it sound as if he’s storming through to raid the place, and I can’t help but smile. To me, that sound is comforting because it means he’s home and safe. When I was younger, there were nights I couldn’t fall asleep until I heard those big, heavy footsteps trudging through the house.

“Smells good kid.” He leans over the pot and inhales deeply. “What are you making?”

“Sancocho. I thought you could take the leftovers home. With as cold as it’s been the last couple of weeks, we could all use some hot comfort food.”

My dad opens the drawer and grabs a spoon. Dipping it into the pot, he scoops a little out and blows to cool it before placing it in his mouth. I look up at him and wait to see his reaction. This is one of my mother’s recipes, and I’ve only made it once or twice before.

“Mmm, it’s perfect. Just like your mom’s always was.” He smiles down at me.

Despite how many years it’s been since her passing, the sadness is still there behind his pale blue eyes. He rubs the heel of his palm against his chest, which he does unknowingly every time he mentions her. Dad takes a few steps away from me, braces himself against the table, and slowly sits down on the kitchen chair. He looks tired, the lines on his face more prominent than I’ve previously noticed. He brushes his hand through his thinning gray hair and clears his throat.

“You ok, dad?”

He waves his hand, dismissing my worry. “I was cleaning the gutters this weekend, and I tweaked my back getting off the ladder. Nothing to worry about.”

“Why didn’t you wait for me to help you?” I ask while closing the fridge. Turning to face him, I hand my dad a beer. Reaching for his keys, he uses one of them to pop the top off the bottle. “What would have happened if you fell while I was

out of town? No one would have found you. You could've been laying there for days."

"Aurora Sofia, quit fussing over me. I'm more than capable of cleaning out my own gutters," he scolds me as if I'm still five years old. "Besides, you know Mrs. Gonzalez was probably watching me through the window. Nosey old bat. She'd have seen me fall and called someone."

"All I'm asking is that you not give me any more reason to worry. Pretty soon, I won't just be down the road."

"Don't remind me," he grumbles around the opening of the beer bottle. "Speaking of the wedding, what's left to do?"

"Not a lot," I tell him while chopping up the cilantro. "The original bakery in Austin I had picked to make the wedding cake called last week. Somehow, they triple booked our date. Since we were the last to schedule, we're screwed. So now I have to find a new bakery and do the tastings all over again." The idea of sitting and eating free cake isn't really that horrible. But I fell in love with the design the last decorator was going to do. "I have an appointment this Saturday at the new place. Wanna tag along, old man?"

"No, you and Brad don't need my opinion on whether to choose chocolate or vanilla."

"Brad will actually be out of town this weekend." My dad gives me a knowing look, but I stop him before he can say anything. "Don't start. All he cares about is if I'm happy. These little details don't matter to him."

"Take Jackson with you."

Before I can explain how I feel bad dragging Jackson along with me to do the wedding stuff my soon-to-be husband is supposed to be doing, I hear the front door open and close.

"Take me where?" Jackson asks while heading straight to the fridge. He opens it up and pulls a beer out, popping the top off with his truck key the exact same way my dad did just minutes earlier.

"Aurora is going cake tasting by herself on Saturday. She asked me to go, but I told her to take you instead."

Jackson looks at me, and I sigh. “You don’t have—”

“I’m in,” he cuts me off. “What kind of person says no to free cake?”

JACKSON

ONE MONTH AFTER THEY MET...

The bell rings, and all the students jump up from their desks and make a beeline for the door. It's Friday, and everyone is excited to get a start on their weekend. Not like there's much to do around here, anyway. When the weather is good, night swimming and drinking at the quarry is always on the schedule. But it's late spring and the switch for the summer heat has yet to be flipped. So, most likely, there will be another party out by the abandoned mill. Stepping outside, I squint as my eyes adjust to the brightness of the sun. The smell of fresh cut grass is in the air, and I know the groundskeeper is getting the field ready. The new football season is fast approaching, and this is my year to play first-string. I walk down the row of cars and stop when I come to the spot my brother parked in this morning. It's empty.

My head tilts up to the sky as I scrub my face with my hands. Why couldn't I have been an only child? I pull my phone out from my front pocket and call him.

"What?" Jameson barks.

"Where the hell are you, dumbass?"

"Becca and I took off after lunch."

"How the hell am I supposed to get home, dick?"

"I don't know, take the bus or walk. I don't give two shits."

Jameson disconnects the call, and I squeeze my phone in anger. Only a few more months until he moves into the dorms

at LSU. *You've put up with his shit this long, you can last a few more months.* I repeat the words over and over in my head as I watch the yellow school bus drive past me. It's fine, everything is fine. I'd rather walk, anyway.

"I missed the bus again, didn't I?"

Looking down at my side, I see Rory standing next to me. Her arms are full of library books, and I watch her struggle to balance them all.

"It just left." Reaching out, I grab the books out of her hands and smile at the confused look on her face. "I'm walking today too, so I can help you carry these."

"You can't carry all of them," she argues, reaching out to steal a couple back. But I turn my body far enough away from her that she can't reach. "Jackson, I'm being serious."

The look on her face tells me she is. "Fine." I give in, handing her the smallest book. "Now you're helping."

"Really?"

She has one hand on her hip and her head cocked to the side as she glares at me. Damn, she's cute when she's annoyed.

"Why do you have all these books, anyway?" I ask, trying to change the subject. I begin walking, which gives Rory no choice but to follow me.

"Just trying to get through the weekend."

"You're planning on reading all these by Monday?" Looking down, I notice how thick some of these books are.

Rory lets out a small laugh and shakes her head. The gesture causes the curls of her ponytail to sway back and forth.

"No, I probably won't like all of them enough to do that. But I plan on reading most of them."

"Is this what you do every weekend?"

"I do other stuff too, like help my grandparents around the house."

Rory has been the new girl for a month now. I've never seen her at any of the parties, but I know she eats lunch with a group of girls who are more on the quiet side; I just assumed she was hanging out with them. I definitely didn't picture her alone with her face in a book every weekend. When I don't respond, I watch as her body stiffens defensively. She nervously twists the hem of the Maroon 5 concert T-shirt she's wearing.

"You probably think I'm some nerd."

"No, I was actually wondering if you wanted to go to the party with me tonight." Her green eyes look me up and down suspiciously. "As friends," I quickly add, worrying that she might say no if she thinks I'm asking her out.

"I don't know." She chews on her bottom lip.

"It'll be fun, I swear." There is no denying the desperate urge in my voice. I sound like some newb who's never asked a girl out before. But Rory isn't like other girls, and maybe I don't know her well enough to say that, but something tells me I'm right.

"Nobody's going to want me there. They'll think I'm a nark because of my dad and grandpa."

We walk the next block in silence. She's right. I'm sure some people at the party won't want her there because of her family, but that's not a good enough reason not to go. When we reach her grandparents' house, Rory and I stand in front of the walkway, and I watch as she reaches for her books. Taking a step back, I shake my head at her. I'm not letting her off the hook that easily.

"My house is just down the road. Do you see the old oak tree with the tire swing?" She glances to where I'm pointing and nods. "If you don't want your grandparents to see me picking you up, we can meet there tonight at eight."

"Jackson—"

"No one is going to say shit about you being a nark. I won't let them." I smile down at her, hoping she'll blindly trust me because I mean every word I say.

I can see her struggling to decide. Rory doesn't know me well enough to trust me yet, but I want to prove to her that I'm one of the good ones. No one will talk shit or make her feel left out while I'm around. Finally, she nods, and I can't help the goofy grin that spreads across my face.

"Eight o'clock. I'll meet you in front of the oak tree," she says.

Rory reaches for the books again, but instead of giving them to her, I hold out my right hand with my pinky extended.

"Pinky swear?"

"What?"

"Pinky swear that you'll meet me tonight."

She wrinkles her nose, probably not knowing what to make of my childish request. Finally, the corners of her mouth curve up into a smile, and she links her pinky finger with mine.

"Pinky swear."

JACKSON

PRESENT DAY...

“*B*rody, watch your swing, bubba. You’re not chopping wood out here, ok?” This poor kid is the smallest on our team and I swear the bat is bigger than he is. But he’s got a lot of heart and a drive to learn. Picking him up, I reposition him so he’s facing the plate. “Are your feet good?”

The tiny four-year-old looks down at his feet, then straight up at me. The helmet, still a little big for him, bobs back and forth with the motion.

“Yes, Coach Nash.”

“All right, then let’s get this bat where we want it.”

It’s been a hectic Saturday morning. Usually there are three of us out here to keep the kids focused. It’s obvious we’re struggling slightly. You’d think one of the parents sitting on the bleachers would put their phone down to help, but they don’t.

Right now, Terrell has his son and half the team working on fielding in the outfield, and I’m teaching batting. That means all my attention is on one kid while I leave the others to entertain themselves.

Glancing behind me, I see how right I am. Every one of them is playing in the dirt. But I don’t stop them. After all, it’s to be expected. This is T-ball, not the major leagues. You have to let them enjoy it while it’s still fun, before it becomes too competitive and life-changing. Now that Brody is all set in his position, I reach behind me and grab the tee, placing the ball on top of it.

“Swing away, big man!” I holler once I’m standing a safe distance away.

With the intensity of a ferocious lion, this kid eyes the ball and finally swings. It’s a line drive and a pretty decent hit. As he runs the bases, I hear a familiar voice behind me that’s cheering along with my group of kids. Turning, I see Rory. She’s early, which is normal for her. And without me noticing, she’s somehow got the kids to stop making dirt castles and has them all paying attention.

When Brody rounds third, Rory holds her hand out for him, and the little kid high fives her with all his might. This kid has the biggest smile on his face, and I’m reminded why I volunteer to coach this along with pee-wee football. Even though I have no kids of my own.

“Coach Nash, did you see how far the ball went?” Brody stomps on home plate and looks up at me.

“I sure did,” I knock on his helmet. “You keep swinging like that and you’ll be hitting home runs in no time!”

Brody smiles at me before rushing off to the dugout. I walk over to Rory, who is now talking to Terrell while all the kids pack up their gear.

“We’d love to have you and Brad over for dinner before the wedding. Text Nia and let her know what date works for you,” Terrell says.

Fucking Brad. First, he steals my girl, now my friends.

“Sounds good.” Rory smiles at him.

Terrell looks at me and slaps me hard on the back. “We did good today. They didn’t overpower us too badly.”

“Aww, how cute,” Rory teases. “Two grown, powerful men of the law, scared to be alone with a group of preschoolers.”

“You just wait, Rory. Some day when you have a few monsters of your own, you’ll know what I’m talking about.”

Rory flashes a fake smile, but I’m the only one who can tell it’s not genuine. I watch as she swallows hard and clears

her throat.

“Something to look forward to, I guess.” She smiles at Terrell and refuses to make eye contact with me.

Terrell’s son runs over with his equipment bag dragging behind him. Terrell picks up the bag and gives it a quick dusting off. “All right, we’re out of here. Rory, I hope to see you soon, and Nash, I’ll see you at the station on Tuesday.”

“Later, man,” I call after him.

“Are you ready for cake?” Rory questions me before walking off the field.

“I swear that’s the dumbest thing you’ve ever asked me.”

Grabbing the rest of the equipment, I follow behind Rory. She’s dressed in a dark denim jean jacket, a white cotton tee, black leggings, and slip-on white Vans. Those black leggings leave almost nothing to the imagination, and I try my hardest not to stare at all those damn curves. *Quit being a perv, Jackson.*

Rory’s Jeep is parked next to me, so I toss everything I’m carrying into the bed of my truck.

“Which vehicle do you want to take?” I look over just in time to see her tossing keys at my face.

“Mine, but you’re driving.”

“Yes, ma’am.”



THIS PLACE IS like the Willy Wonka of bakeries. To my right, they filled glass cases to the brim with every single type of cupcake and pastry you can imagine; on top of them sit a row of pies that appear fresh from the oven. The berry filling inside oozes through the top slits of the crust. The bakery manager sat Rory and me in a booth by the window. Spread out on the

table in front of us are two dozen small plates. Each one is topped with a different piece of cake for us to try. With the smell of sugar, chocolate, and freshly baked treats in the air, my stomach is growling. I'm ready to take this taste-tester job seriously.

“Can we do one of these every Saturday?”

“If we do, I'm going to need to buy a bigger pair of leggings or take out the elastic in these.” Rory looks over the sheet of paper the owner gave her. From where I'm sitting, it looks like a road map of which flavor combo is on which plate.

“Rory, these are bite sized.” I grab a plastic fork and pick up my first piece. “Fewer calories,” I mumble with my mouth full.

“That logic doesn't apply when you're eating a dozen or more at a time.” Her eyes dart to my mouth as I lick the frosting off the back of the fork and her stare lingers a little longer than it should. My cock twitches in response, and I'm thankful the table tops not made of glass. When she realizes I've caught her, she quickly sticks her own fork in the mate of the one I just ate. “What do you think of that one?”

“Um.” Since all my blood has traveled to my dick, that is the best answer my brain can think of.

Rory grabs a napkin and spits the chewed-up piece of cake into it. “Oh my God, that's gross.” She looks around to make sure none of the workers are watching. “Tropical Coconut Guava is a definite no.”

“It's not that bad, drama queen.”

“Easy for you to say. You'll literally eat anything.”

To avoid making an inappropriate comment, I pop another piece in my mouth and watch Rory as she carefully inspects which one to try next. “So, where is *Brad* this weekend?”

“Why do you always feel the need to say his name like that?” She takes a bite of one of the chocolate pieces and moans a tiny sound of approval.

“Like what?” I know exactly what she means, but I’ll never admit to it.

“Like he’s some pompous country club ass whose name should be Biff instead of Brad.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” But there is no hiding the smile on my face.

“Uh-huh.” She puts her fork down and draws a star next to the chocolate raspberry truffle. “The tight end from the Cowboys, the one that just got caught hiring the escort? That’s his client. Brad is meeting with the owners to smooth things over. Especially since the guy’s contract is up for renewal.” She shrugs at me and I know there’s something else, something she’s not telling me.

I know Rory better than anyone, and I can tell by looking at her she has something on her mind.

“Are the two of you doing ok?”

She nods while finishing the bite of cake in her mouth. “Yeah, I mean, I guess I kind of threw a curve ball at him last week.” Placing my fork on the table, I wait in silence until she’s ready to tell me whatever it is. “This is girl stuff, so don’t get weird on me, ok?”

“All right. What’s up?” She thinks talking about this kind of stuff grosses me out, but it actually just gives me anxiety. But not for reasons one might think.

“My last pap came back showing abnormal cells.”

And there’s the anxiety. “Jesus, Rory. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t tell anyone, and I’m happy I didn’t because it ended up being nothing. Why worry you or anyone else?”

Rory’s mom, grandmother, and great-grandmother all died before the age of forty from ovarian cancer. Her biggest fear in life is being a carrier of the gene. It’s something she’s told me many, many times. So I understand better than anyone how real and scary an abnormal test result must have been for her. I hate the fact that she dealt with it alone.

“So, if everything is ok then what’s the problem?”

“Last week I went and had the gene test done. That’s the real reason I took the entire day off on Friday.” Rory smashes her fork into a crumb of cake as she shakes her head. “When my OB told me everything was normal, I immediately scheduled an appointment for the testing and opted to pay out of pocket. Insurance pre-authorization would have taken too long. When I told Brad what I did he got pissed. The two of us agreed I wouldn’t do it until after the wedding, if ever. But I couldn’t wait any longer. That scare just made me feel like it was time.”

This fucking guy, this is why I hate him. Well, it’s one of the *many* reasons. He’s selfish, and he has no clue how important this is to her. Or if he does, he doesn’t care, and that’s worse. When Rory first told me years ago about her plan to one day have the genetic testing done, I researched it in depth. Early detection would give her options. Options her mother, grandmothers, and God only knows who else in her family never had.

“So, when do you get the results back?”

“It takes anywhere from two to six weeks.”

“Ok. What do we do until then?”

Rory stabs a piece of cake and shoves it into my mouth.

“We live.”

RORY

Leaving the bakery, Jackson and I walk down the brick path toward the parking lot. All around us, people are laughing and talking, enjoying this beautiful Saturday. But the two of us are quiet. Telling Jackson about the genetic test was probably the wrong thing to do. There's no doubt in my mind that he'll stress about this until I receive the results. I didn't intend to put a damper on our day, especially since time spent together like this will soon be scarce.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Jackson. His brow's wrinkled, and I know I need to snap him out of this mood. Across the street, a giant, *now open*, banner flaps in the wind. The sign on the awning reads, *Let's Axe Up*. Perfect.

"Do you have anywhere you need to be?"

Jackson makes eye contact with me, and I watch as his facial features finally relax. "Not really."

"Good, because I've got an idea."

Taking his hand in mine, I step off the curb and wait for the cars to pass. Once it's clear, I lead him across the street.

"You know the crosswalk is right over there," he lectures.

"Don't be such a cop. No one gets arrested for jaywalking."

"That's because they get hit by a car and die."

"Pedestrians get hit in crosswalks, too. God, quit being such a downer and look." Jackson's eyes follow to where my

finger is pointing. “Feel like doing something manly after helping me with wedding crap?”

Like a little kid, Jackson’s eyes go wide with excitement. “Hell yeah.”

We walk inside, where the teen behind the counter greets us. He goes over pricing and books us a ninety-minute time slot before having us sign our waivers. Once we’ve paid, we’re led through a double door into a black lit room. There are vibrant colored words and drawings that have a neon glow hung up on all the walls.

The kid brings us to our own private lane, sectioned off from the others by a chain-link fence. Just before the kid leaves, our private lumberjack places six axes down on the wood plank bar top. He gives us some basic rules before showing us a couple of different techniques, and we do a few practice throws before he finally gives us the green light.

“All right, y’all look like you were born for this. If you need anything, I’ll be right over there,” Lumberjack Liam announces before leaving us.

Jackson picks up the heaviest axe and steps up to the neon green line that’s spray painted on the concrete floor. He grips the base tightly in both hands and then lifts it behind his head. His shirt stretches tightly across his muscular chest and arms, causing the two women next to us to take notice. He throws the axe at the wood target at the end of the lane and hits just to the right of the bullseye. He makes it look effortless. Grabbing the next axe, he does it all over again. The women next to us haven’t stopped staring since his first throw.

They continue to watch Jackson, and they’re clearly liking what they see—a lot. Of course, they do. Outwardly, he’s perfect, always has been, and he’s only gotten better with age. Jackson turns around and catches the women staring at him. He flashes that dangerous smile of his and tips his baseball cap to them. Such a flirt without even trying to be. With one look, he’s got these women all hot and bothered. Anxiously, they wait for him to head over to their lane, hoping he’ll give them

the time of day. But he doesn't. Instead, he walks past them and straight to me.

Even under the black light, I can see the flush creep over their faces in either embarrassment or annoyance at being ignored by him. Over the years, Jackson's had a few serious relationships and even more flings. But he isn't a man-whore, not like his brother, Jameson. No, Jackson is picky and shies away from those who make it too easy. He likes to make the first move. Much to my disappointment, this is how I knew early on that the two of us would never be more than what we are.

Shortly after moving to Hawk Bend, Jackson and I became friends. No, that title doesn't do him justice. Jackson became my *lifeline*. We were together all the time, and he was always so nice to me. For the most part, other kids were too, but there was just something different about him. If I was a normal teenager who hadn't just lost her mom, maybe things could have been different. But my head and my heart were all screwed up, and Jackson seemed to get that. I clung to him for so much emotional support, and he was always there for me. By the time I realized my feelings for him, it was too late. I was Rory, his bff. Rory, who was nothing more than a sister-type of friend who he could never picture being romantic with.

Were there times I thought maybe, just maybe, there was something more between us...or at least the possibility for more? Sure. But by that point, the risk was too great, and I couldn't handle the thought of ever losing him. So, I never went there. Being friends with Jackson is better than nothing at all. Even if it meant having to put up with all the girls he dated, who were never good enough for him. But he's put up with the fair share of assholes I've dated, so I guess we're even.

"You're up," Jackson exclaims as he sits down on the stool next to me.

"Be prepared, Nash. I'm going to kick your ass." I hop off the stool and grab my first axe. "Nothing but bullseye. Are you ready?"

“Keep dreaming, Monroe.”

“Let’s make it interesting. Loser buys a round of beer and tacos.”

“Done.”



“YOU SUCK.” Jackson pouts while handing me a bottle of Bud Light.

“You’d think after all these years you’d know better than to bet against me.” I take a sip and almost spit out my beer as a memory pops into my head. “Remember the spring break of my senior year of college?”

Jackson groans and covers his face with his hands. “Don’t remind me. I still can’t believe you found a strip club having an amateur night for men!”

“South Padre during spring break is where truly anything is possible.” I laugh. “That bachelorette party is the reason you won. They loved them some Jackson. All the money they stuffed into that tiny little G-string you had on...”

“Dollar bills weren’t the only thing they gifted me with. Somehow, grandma slipped out of her silky granny panties and stuffed them down there.” He smiles while pointing to his crotch. “Nice lady, though. She still sends me a Christmas card every year.”

Unable to contain my laughter, this time I choke on my sip of beer. “I bet if we search hard enough, we can still find that video on YouTube. The internet never forgets.”

“You have a dark and twisted sense of humor, you know that?”

“Yeah,” I say proudly. “It’s a gift.”

Jackson takes a sip of his beer and looks around. “This is a cool place. Do you guys come here a lot?”

“No. It’s not Brad’s scene.”

The truth is, this place is too *normal* for Brad. There’s no lure of exclusivity. It’s packed with regular people who are looking to unwind after a busy work week. Jackson and I are outside, and from where I am, I can see the band setting up. Live music, good food and drinks, who could ask for more? I found this place a while back on Yelp and have been waiting to take Jackson here. I knew he would like it.

“Oh, before I forget and she slaps me upside my head again, mom wants to know if you’ll go shopping with her. She needs a dress for your wedding and their anniversary party. I told her she has plenty of time, but you know how she is.”

“Yeah, of course I will. I’ll call her tomorrow and set something up.”

The band begins their set just as a server drops off an entire plate of tacos. Simultaneously, Jackson and I each pick one up and then *clink* them together.

“Cheers,” we say in unison.

This has been a good day. Despite the bomb I dropped at the bakery, everything else has been perfect. Once I’m living in Austin, I need to make a conscious effort to ensure things between Jackson and me don’t change. It’ll be hard enough going from seeing him almost every day to only a few times a month. But I have to remind myself that it’s better than nothing. I can’t begin to imagine a life without Jackson. When the band stops playing, I open my mouth to tell him just that, but instead, I watch him tense up.

“Brad’s here.” Jackson shifts in his seat and sits up a little straighter.

“What?”

Surprised, I look around and, sure enough, walking toward us is Brad. He sticks out like a sore thumb in his white button-down dress shirt and black suit pants. His dark hair is perfectly styled, as always, and he has the slightest hint of a five o’clock

shadow. He looks like he just stepped out of *Forbes* magazine, making the rest of us look like models in the Sunday Walmart advertisement. When he sees I've spotted him, he gives me a smile, then grabs an empty chair from a neighboring table.

"I've been calling you for hours." Brad places the chair next to me before leaning down and giving me a quick peck on the lips.

"How did you know where I was?" I ask, unable to hide the irritation in my voice.

He sits and stares at me blankly. "Hello, my fiancé. How sweet of you to surprise me," Brad says sarcastically before he looks at Jackson and rolls his eyes. "Women are supposed to love impromptu romantic gestures, right?"

"Brad?" I pull his attention back to me.

"My meeting with the Cowboys ended early. I was calling to let you know I was on my way to your place, but you never answered. Then I remembered we have that app that allows me to find your phone." He reaches across the table, grabs my beer, and takes a sip. "So here I am."

Brad and I hold each other's stare as I struggle to find my words. I'm pissed. Not only did he stalk me, but he interrupted my time with Jackson. Although, I probably shouldn't bring that up. So I'll stick with the stalking argument.

"I'm going to go grab us some more beers," Jackson says while standing up from the table.

His eyes linger on me, and I nod.

"I'll take a bourbon sour, made with whatever they *consider* top shelf." Brad looks around before landing his stare back at me. "A place like this probably waters down all their liquor, anyway."

"Watered down bourbon sour. Coming right up," Jackson repeats while walking away.

"Rory, why do you have your mad face on?" Brad tries to joke with me.

“You stalked me using that stupid app we installed for emergencies.”

“I tried for hours to get a hold of you. Check your phone. You’ll see a ridiculous amount of missed calls and texts.” He reaches out and twirls one of my curls around his finger. “I think checking the app to make sure you were ok was justified.”

“Checking the app is one thing. Showing up where I am and acting like a caveman is another.”

“Caveman, huh? Is that what you want?” His eyes go dark as they land on my lips. “I can go savage, if that’s what you’re craving.” He leans in for a kiss, only to have me slap my hand over his mouth.

“Stop it, I’m still mad at you.”

“Seriously? What is there to be mad at?” Brad finishes my beer and shrugs his shoulders. “Unless...”

“Unless, what?”

“The real reason you’re mad is because I crashed your alone time with *Jackson*,” he says with a mock swoon, placing the back of his hand against his forehead.

“Grow up.” I groan.

But Brad’s right. I’m not mad that he utilized the locator app to ensure my safety; it was a thoughtful thing to do. If I was on my way to his place and hadn’t heard from him in hours, I would have done the same. Probably. The real reason I’m pissed is because he showed up while I was trying to have a fun night with my friend. I would act the exact same way if I were out with Lyndsey. It has nothing to do with Jackson.

“What are you doing at a bar with him, anyway? I thought you had wedding stuff scheduled?”

“Wedding stuff?” I snort. Way to be involved. “Yes, I actually went to a cake tasting today. I put a deposit down and booked the place, crisis averted. Thanks for asking. Jackson came with me, and that’s why we’re both here in Austin.”

“So Jackson helped pick out my wedding cake?”

“*Our* wedding cake, and don’t start this crap again.”

Before Brad can answer, Jackson places one beer and Brad’s bourbon sour onto the table.

“I think I’m going to head home,” he says.

“Yeah, it’s getting late,” I agree, reaching behind me to grab my purse.

“Rory,” Brad interjects.

“We’ve got my Jeep.”

“Jackson, do you mind driving Rory’s car home and I’ll swing by with her tomorrow to pick it up?”

“His car is still at the baseball field,” I answer for him.

“It’s fine. I’ll drop your car off at your place tonight and have one of the guys take me to get my truck.”

“See?” Brad says. “Everything’s worked out.”

Jackson’s eyes finally meet mine, and he gives me a wink.

“Thank you for hanging out with me today,” I tell him.

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t pass up the free cake.”

“Good man. I see why you picked him to be your *maid of honor*.” Brad holds out his fist for Jackson to bump. “Drive home safe.”

Jackson hides his annoyance well, but I see it. He taps his knuckles to Brad’s. “Goodnight.”

I watch Jackson walk away until he’s completely out of sight. There’s a huge part of me that wishes I was leaving with him instead of staying here with Brad. But I quickly correct myself. The only reason I feel like this is because I’m still not over our fight about the genetic testing. Therefore, every little thing Brad does is extra irritating. That has to be it, right?

“Oh, this is disgusting.” Brad cringes after taking a sip of his drink. “The band is back, too. Quick, let’s get out of here before all that noise starts up again.”

Or maybe Brad is just really, really irritating, and I’m only now realizing it.

JACKSON

SIX MONTHS AFTER MEETING...

“*A*ll right, y’all listen up,” our coach yells loud enough to get our attention. The entire team huddles around him in the middle of the football field, sweaty and tired. “Tomorrow is the homecoming game against South Ridge. We have gone undefeated against them for the past five years. I expect this year to be no different. We’re all going to give a hundred and fifty percent, ya hear? Losing is not an option.”

“Yes, sir!” the entire team shouts in unison.

“I expect you all to stay home and get some rest tonight. We’ll see you here bright and early tomorrow morning for drills.”

“Yes, sir.”

The team grunts one final bulldog cheer before heading toward the locker room.

“Jackson, fall back, son!” Coach Williams calls out to me.

“What’s up, coach?”

“I just want to give you a heads up. The scouts are coming to see you this weekend. I know you got little field time when Jameson was quarterback, but this is your moment to shine. You’ve got real talent, son. With a little work, you can be even better than your brother is.” He slaps me hard on my shoulder pad and gives me a nod. “I know you’ll make us proud.”

“Yes, coach.”

It wasn't unusual for college scouts to come and watch us play. Hell, they started scouting Jameson during his sophomore year, but not once has anyone come specifically for me. There are a couple of colleges I've had my eye on, and I'm hoping one of them will be here. A full scholarship like Jameson got is my end goal. It's what I've been working toward for years. I'm feeling the pressure a bit more than I was a minute ago, but all I can do is focus, play my best, and, like coach says, make everyone proud.

After hitting the showers and changing into my faded jeans and T-shirt, I hop in my old beater truck and head for home. When I pull up to my house, through the window, I can see Rory and my mom sitting at the kitchen table. Before going out tonight, Rory needs to grab a few things for the homecoming dance. When I walk into the house, I can hear her and my mom laughing.

"Hey, baby," mom says while wiping her eyes. "How was practice?" She stands and opens the fridge door behind her. Reaching in, she grabs a couple of Gatorades and hands them to me.

"Good. Great, actually. Coach says the scouts are coming to watch me tomorrow."

"Yes, lord. I've been praying every night, baby," my mom gushes. I know the stress of trying to figure out how to pay for college tuition is one of her biggest worries. "That's such great news."

"What's great news?" my father asks as he walks through the back porch door, just getting home from work. He places his lunch pail on the yellow tile countertop and hangs his jacket up on the hook.

"Coach Williams told Jackson that the college scouts will be there tomorrow."

"Which ones?"

My dad looks at me, and I shake my head. "I don't know. I didn't ask."

“I doubt any of the division one teams will scout this late in the season. Jameson already had his offer from LSU long before this time last year.”

“Divisions one or two, none of that matters.” My mom swats the air with her hand while glaring at my dad.

“It does matter, Leann. Only the division one schools have a real chance of going pro. What’s the point of even going to college and playing football if that’s not his goal?”

“I always thought people went to college to better themselves and their education,” Rory chimes in. My dad gives her an exasperated look, causing her to shrug. “I guess I was wrong.” She smiles at him, which somehow eases the tension in the room.

“Jackson, I’m very proud of you. We both are—aren’t we Mitch?”

“Yes, of course. I was just thinking out loud, is all.” My dad runs his grease-stained hands through his thinning hair. “I’m gonna go wash the day off me.” He turns, stalling to look back at me. “Way to go.”

I don’t respond with words, only a single nod. Throughout our childhood, my father has put Jameson and me against each other. No matter what we were doing or which sport we played, the two of us were in a constant competition. Somehow, Jameson always came out ahead.

“Thank you for the cookies, Mrs. Nash,” Rory says, breaking up the awkwardness as she gets up and places her dish in the sink.

“Any time, sweetheart.” My mom lovingly rubs Rory’s back, and even my dad gives her a small smile before finally leaving the room. “Where y’all headed off to?”

“The mall. My grandma insisted I have my shoes dyed to match my dress. So, I have to go pick them up.”

“You’re going to look so beautiful. Oh, I can’t wait for pictures,” my mom gushes.

My mom took to Rory immediately. Over the summer, the two of us were almost inseparable. When practice started up, most days I'd come home and Rory would be here waiting for me. Just like today. It gave her and my mom some one-on-one time to get to know each other—which is something Jameson's girlfriends never did. Hell, even my dad likes Rory. He's a hard man who doesn't easily show emotion. But now and then I catch him teasing her about her taste in music, or about being a city girl. Something pointless like that. That's his way of showing he cares.

“Mom, we gotta go,” I tell her before chugging the last of my second Gatorade.

“Ok, ok. Be safe and don't stay out too late.”

“I'll make sure he's home early!” Rory calls out.

We walk out of the house and straight to my truck. I follow behind Rory and open the passenger door for her.

“You don't have to do that every time, you know?”

“Yeah, I know that. My mom would have my neck if I made you open your own door, and you know she's watching,” I lie. Yes, my mom would be upset if I didn't show Rory respect, but I enjoy doing things like this for her.

Once behind the wheel, I start the truck and Rory scrolls through the radio stations. When she finally finds one she likes, she rolls the window down and takes her hair out of her ponytail. Once her curls are wild and free, she kicks off her flip-flops and puts her feet up on the dash. She sings along, loudly, and makes up words to the parts she doesn't know. Lately, Rory seems to have more good days than bad, and I'm hoping maybe that's because of me. Our friendship has been easy so far. We get each other. But tomorrow, all of that might change.

I invited her to homecoming way before any of the other guys got the chance to. She thinks we're going as friends, but tomorrow is the night I'm going to tell her how I feel. I want what we already have and so much more. Tomorrow night,

I'm going to ask Rory to be my girlfriend. Even the thought of it has my stomach in nervous knots, but in a good way.

“Jackson? Hello? Earth to Jackson.”

I'm so focused on thinking about tomorrow, I don't even realize she has stopped singing. “Sorry, I zoned out there for a minute.”

“Are you worried about the game?”

Rory thinks my nerves are about the scouts. Good, we'll go with that. “Kind of. To be honest, I love football, and playing throughout college and even after has always been my dream. But that scholarship is what I'm really after.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. I've written so many essays for these scholarship applications my laptop is almost out of memory. I've started recycling them, hoping that no one will notice.” Rory looks over at me. She runs her fingers through her hair to move it away from her face. “I'm going to miss not having you around next year.”

Rory is only applying to colleges within driving distance to Hawk Bend. She refuses to be further away from her dad than that. I'm the opposite. Most colleges I've applied to are out of state. I figure college is the best time to get out and explore life outside of our small town. But I won't stay away for long, especially if Rory is here. She will always bring me back.

“We'll make it work. Trust me, you're not going to get rid of me that easily.”

“Pinky swear?”

She holds out her pinky and nervously chews on her bottom lip.

Wrapping my pinky around hers, I smile. “Pinky swear.”

JACKSON

PRESENT DAY...

Sitting in the parking lot of the high school, waiting for the Valentine's Day dance to start, I'm mindlessly scrolling through video after video on YouTube. At first, this was something I had not planned on attending. Especially since I never have before. Hawk Bend is a sleepy town, and the kids are pretty good. Nothing more than normal teenage stuff ever happens here. But on Friday, the principal caught me just as I was heading out and asked if I could help chaperone. It appears one teacher had to bail out because of a family emergency. And since I'm a sucker, this is where I'm spending my Saturday night.

A couple of cars park, and I see Lyndsey and a few others make their way inside. After a few minutes, Rory pulls her Jeep into the spot next to mine. I watch as she messes with her hair before applying some lip gloss. She looks out her driver's side window and smiles at me. Waving at her, I exit the truck and walk over to open the door for her. Rory's wearing a long sleeve red shirt that has the word *love* written across her chest in white. She's got on my favorite pair of dark denim jeans, the ones that fit her so well you'd swear they were painted on, plus red and white Converse. Rory catches me looking at her shoes and points her foot at me, giving it a little wiggle.

"Adam would freak out if any of us showed up in heels. The kids are one thing, but he expects us to know better." She wags her finger and drops her voice a few octaves to mimic the PE teacher.

“I was only going to point out how festive you look,” I reply, truthfully. She looks cute, yet sexy as hell at the same time.

“Ah, I see. Maybe my festiveness is only noticeable because you are looking very formal dressed in uniform.”

The two of us walk side by side toward the school. “That’s because I’m technically on duty, even if I am off the clock.”

“I’m sorry you got talked into this. We literally couldn’t get anyone else to agree to chaperone. You were our last resort before we had to call parents. You know no one wants their mom or dad here.”

“It’s fine, really.” Honestly, there are worse places I could be.

We walk the hallways in a somewhat comfortable silence. After leaving the bar, Rory and I have seen each other a handful of times. But since that night, I’ve had a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach. I know exactly why Rory got pissed off at Brad. She’s always been a very independent person and can’t stand feeling suffocated. So him showing up out of the blue is possibly the worst thing he could’ve done. But it felt like there was more to it.

The look on Rory’s face told me her anger wasn’t just over his *surprise*. She looked genuinely unhappy. Despite my feelings, I’ve always tried to remain neutral regarding the men she dates. As long as they treat her right, I accept them. What else can I do? All I’ve ever wanted is for her to be happy, even if that means being with someone who isn’t me. But now I’m torn because I think she’s about to make a huge mistake this time.

“Minor crisis,” Lyndsey announces from across the gym. “Rory, I need you.”

“Now what?” She sighs. “See you around the punch bowl.” Rory squeezes my elbow before walking away.

After being asked to carry out the plastic folding tables for the refreshments and helping the DJ carry in his equipment, the dance is finally underway. All the chaperones are

strategically spaced out to make sure nothing inappropriate happens on the dance floor or otherwise. God, sometimes I really hate being the adult. It feels like only yesterday it was me out here with my friends, dancing with whichever girl I had asked to be my date.

“Do you ever get déjà vu?”

I’m so focused on keeping the kids in line that I hadn’t even noticed Rory standing next to me.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes, when I walk these halls with you or Lyndsey, the memories are just so real. It’s as if we’re still sixteen ourselves.” She looks out over the dancefloor and wrinkles her nose. “Then one of these actual teenagers calls me ma’am and ruins the entire fantasy.”

“Being at a dance with me can’t be giving you déjà vu.” Rory’s eyes meet mine and she knows exactly what I’m talking about. “You and I never got to do this.”

Homecoming senior year, the day was supposed to be a big one for me. The college scouts were there to watch me play, and Rory and I were going to the dance together that night; only, things didn’t go as planned. During the fourth quarter, I got hit. Hard. My body was thrown one way and my left knee went the other. Both my ACL and MCL were torn. They carried me off the field, and I was having the first of two surgeries within hours. That day, my entire future changed. No more football, no more college. In a split second, everything I had been working toward was just gone. I spiraled into a depression that sometimes even Rory couldn’t snap me out of. For years, I watched as everyone around me lived while I dwelled on what could’ve been.

“Yeah, you did little dancing the rest of senior year. But you bounced back.”

“Took me long enough.”

“All right, Hawk Bend,” the DJ’s voice carries over the sound system. “This is the last slow one of the night. Make it count.”

Holding my hand out, palm side up, I look down at Rory. “Can I have a do-over?”

“Hmmm.” She wrinkles her nose at me, unsure. Then she smiles. “Ok.”

Eagerly, she places her hand in mine, and I spin her before pulling her into my arms. The top of Rory’s head rests chin level on me, and I can’t help but breathe her in. She smells like marshmallows, just like she always has. All these years and she still uses the same vanilla scented products. I rest my chin on the top of Rory’s head and pull her closer to me. Out of all the *what-ifs* in my life, she is my biggest regret.

The two of us sway in silence as if we’re the only two in the room. I notice a few of the kids watching us and giggling, but I don’t care. Having my best girl in my arms is all that matters.

“This song is kind of sad,” Rory says.

I pull away from her slightly so I can see her face. “I’ve never heard it before.”

“It’s trending, or whatever the kids say. But I’ve never really listened to the lyrics before.”

Rory is silent as I focus on the lyrics. The song is about high school sweethearts still trying to figure their crap out now that they’re in their twenties. Perfect. Fuck the universe and all its signs.

“Unrequited love is always sad,” I say while looking into her beautiful green eyes. “Years of missed opportunities that leave one or both sides involved wondering what could’ve been.”

Rory looks at me, unblinking. She licks her lips, and I feel my body start to react. My pulse quickens and the nerves in my stomach begin to flutter. Now is the time, dumbass.

“Jackson,” she whispers.

“Jackson, we have a situation in the parking lot,” Lyndsey interrupts. She looks back and forth between Rory and me as

we quickly put distance between ourselves. “Sorry to interrupt.”

“No, it’s fine. You’re not interrupting anything,” Rory says, as the blush on her cheeks darkens.

“Ok... Jackson, the principal has a group of kids out there and has requested your help.”

Without a word, I nod and make my way toward the gym exit. Once I’m far enough away, I take in a deep breath to help center myself. I keep thinking I’m seeing all these signs pointing me toward Rory. But it’s obvious that the universe seems to push us apart before we can say or do anything we won’t be able to take back. Maybe all this time I’ve been delusional thinking we could have been more, when all along Rory and I have been exactly all we were ever meant to be.

RORY

*M*ondays are the worst day of the week. You'll never hear anyone talk about how excited they are that tomorrow is Monday. But apart from the normal back to work blues, this morning might be more difficult than others.

As I sit in my office, I pull the file for Anabelle Baucom. She's been my problem child all year, and instead of getting better, her behavior is only getting worse. Saturday night at the dance, they found her and a group of kids hanging out on the football field, drinking. They might have gone unnoticed, but when they started throwing rocks at the scoreboard, the sound of breaking glass drew attention to their activities. After bringing the kids up to the parking lot, Jackson and Principal Aguirre explained they had to call their parents to pick them up. Anabelle went ballistic. She started arguing and yelling. Even kicked the principal's car repeatedly, leaving a huge dent on the side. She was out of control and only calmed down when her father arrived.

Principal Aguirre and I decided together that pressing charges wouldn't help Anabelle. It's obvious there is something going on with her, and she needs help. So this morning I have a meeting with her and her father to figure out the best way to do that. Opening her file, I glance over everything once more. It seems the behavioral problems started at the end of the last school year. Before that, there really isn't anything that stands out.

"Ms. Monroe," the male voice calls out to me.

I glance at the door and see Anabelle and her father hovering in the doorway. With a smile, I stand to greet them.

“Good morning, Mr. Baucom, Anabelle. Please come in and have a seat.” I gesture to the chairs in front of my desk. “Thank you for meeting with me on such short notice.”

Mr. Baucom shuts the door behind him. “Yeah, well, you didn’t really give me a choice,” he says while sitting. “Do you know how long this will take? I can’t be missing work for stuff like this.”

“Well, I can assure you the reason we’re here is important.” My eyes dart to Anabelle, who has her head bowed with her hair practically covering her face. “Over the past year, there’s been a noticeable change with Anabelle, and it’s only getting worse. I’m worried about your daughter, and I feel that maybe if we come together to help her, we can figure out what’s going on.”

“There ain’t nothing wrong with her. She’s fine at home. Maybe school just ain’t her thing.” He dusts the dirt off his jeans, refusing to make eye contact with me.

“Mr. Baucom—”

“Call me Troy,” he interrupts. “Mr. Baucom was my father.”

“Troy.” I nod and fight the urge to roll my eyes. “I think we should ask your daughter what the problem is instead of assuming.” My eyes move back to Anabelle, and wearily, she looks up at me. “It’s ok to talk in here,” I tell her.

“There’s nothing going on. All the teachers here just pick on me.” Anabelle’s words are defiant and confident, but her facial expression doesn’t match. She looks like a scared little girl.

“So the reason you got in trouble for drinking and kicking in the door of Mr. Aguirre’s car is because the teachers pick on you?”

Anabelle shrugs. “Maybe.”

“When I go through your file, it makes little sense to me. All of this started a little less than a year ago. Even your transcripts from the previous county where you attended are all positive.” Anabelle looks out my window, ignoring me completely. “There’s usually a reason behind such a drastic change in behavior, especially in such a short amount of time. Your dad and I are here for you.”

Unsure of what more I can say, I look at her father for a little help. He removes his ball cap and smooths out his hair. “Maybe I should think about putting her back in counseling.”

“I didn’t know she used to go.” I quickly flip through her file, trying to see what else I might have missed.

“It won’t be in there. My last job had good insurance, so it was private.” Troy takes a deep breath and lets it out. “She went for about a year after my wife died.”

“When was this?” I look at Anabelle. She’s still staring out the window, and I watch as a single tear falls down her cheek. My own heart clenches in pain, remembering how hard it was for me when I lost my mother.

“About three years ago.” Troy clears his throat and sits up straighter. “If I tell you I promise to look into counseling, are we good here?”

Before I can answer him, there is a loud knock on the door. “Come in!” I yell. The door opens, and it’s Jackson. “Before you leave, Officer Nash needs a word with you.”

Jackson walks in and stands to the right of me. Anabelle nervously looks between the two of us, almost in a state of panic.

“I thought you said the cops wouldn’t be involved!” she cries out.

“Anabelle, Principal Aguirre will not be pressing charges. That’s what I told you Saturday night. Aside from the extensive damage you did to his car, they caught you drinking and destroying school property while attending a school function. You can’t just get off with a warning for something like that,” Jackson says. He then looks over at Anabelle’s

father and speaks to him directly. “One of our officers runs a program for at-risk youth. They meet on Saturday mornings and perform a couple of hours of community service. We have signed Anabelle up for six weeks.”

“And what if I say no? Why would I want my daughter hanging out with a bunch of punk kids and some do-gooder cop with a God complex?” Troy stands up and makes his way to the door.

“The school still has the right to discipline Anabelle for her actions. Instead of suspension, they’ve enrolled her in this program. If she doesn’t attend, we will notify Ms. Monroe and there will be further disciplinary action.”

“No.” Troy shakes his head.

“Troy, they can expel her,” I warn him.

Troy’s hand lingers on the doorknob. Angrily, he looks between us and Anabelle. “Whatever, I’ve got to get to work.” He opens the door and storms out of the room.

Jackson and I look at Anabelle, both of us silent for a moment.

“Now that it’s just us,” I begin. “Is there anything you’d like to talk about, or do you have questions? It can be about anything.”

Nervously, Anabelle looks to Jackson and then back at me. “No.”

“If you just want to talk to me, Officer Nash can—”

“No.” Her anger and irritation with us is clear. Like father, like daughter. It’s obvious she’s hurting and doesn’t know what to do about it.

“My mom died when I was a teenager. Almost immediately after it happened, we moved here to Hawk Bend. So if you ever need someone to talk to, someone who understands, my door is always open.”

Anabelle’s eyes go wide, and I think I might have reached her. But just like that, I’ve lost her. “Can I go now?”

I open my side drawer and pull out a counseling slip. After I sign it and time-stamp it, I hand the paper to Anabelle. “Make sure you get straight to class, ok?”

After she leaves, Jackson shuts the door and turns to face me. “The dad’s a real piece of work.”

“Yeah.” I huff. “You couldn’t find anything on him?”

“Not even a parking ticket.” Jackson takes a couple of steps forward but stops. “Are you ok?”

My eyes meet his, and I know why he’s asking. “Yeah, I’m good. If she is acting out now because she never dealt with the feelings associated with losing a parent, I hope she reaches out to me.”

Jackson and I continue to hold eye contact, and the same rush of emotions I felt while dancing with him come flooding back. The air around us practically buzzes with electricity and, for the life of me, I can’t figure out why I’m suddenly confused about my feelings for him.

“Jackson, at the dance—”

“I actually have to get going. Department meeting.” He quickly shuts me down.

“Yeah, sure. Maybe we can grab dinner later?”

“Not tonight, but I’ll text you.”

Jackson walks out of my office, and I’m left even more confused than I already was. Did our dance leave him feeling different as well? Or can he sense the change in me, and now things between us are just going to be weird? *Crap*. I throw my head back against my chair and look up at the ceiling. This is not how a bride-to-be should feel weeks before her wedding. My mind should be on Brad, thinking about our future together. Not sitting here trying to figure out what the hell may or may not have happened between Jackson and me.

At brunch yesterday, Lyndsey had tried to get me to confess. I knew she had caught the way I was looking at him. But I dismissed her accusations and told her she was crazy. Jackson is just my best friend, nothing more. I’m not sure if I

convinced her or not. How could I when I can't even convince myself? Thankfully, she eventually changed the subject. The really sucky thing, though, is I have no one to talk to about all this. I can't go to my dad or Jackson's mom. If my grandmother was still alive, I could've told her, but her and my grandfather passed years ago. So I guess I'm on my own with this one.

For the rest of the day, I do what I do best and deflect. I don't want to think about Jackson, so I throw myself into my work and even manage to finalize some last-minute wedding stuff while eating lunch. Driving home, I decide to pass by my dad's. If he's there, I'll take it as a sign that I should go in and talk with him. But when I get there, his truck isn't in the driveway. Before I pull away, my phone pings with an incoming text. It's Leann, Jackson's mom, confirming our shopping date for Saturday. I look down the street and see the old oak tree that sits in her front yard.

Over the years, Leann has been like a second mom to me. Leann and my own mother came from completely different worlds, yet they have so many similarities; their warmth and love for their families being the two main ones. I know for a fact that she would sit and listen as I unload all of my doubts and fears about Brad and Jackson, but I'm not really her daughter. I can't have a conversation with her about Jackson, not like that.

"It's just cold feet," I tell myself.

Flipping a U-turn, I head home. There is a bottle of wine in the fridge that's calling my name. When I pull into my driveway, I notice the back porch light is on. That's weird. I could've sworn all my lights were off when I left this morning. With my Jeep parked in the garage, I turn off the ignition and make my way inside. As soon as I open the door, I'm greeted by the scent of garlic and basil. From where I am, I can hear water boiling on the stove. *Jackson*. If he's here, that means everything is good and all the weirdness I'm feeling is strictly one-sided.

With a smile on my face, I make my way toward the kitchen. "I thought you couldn't do dinner tonight?" I turn the

corner and take a step back, surprised. “Brad?”

“Were you expecting someone else?”

Brad is standing at the stove wearing my apron over his white button-down shirt and jeans. He’s stirring a pot full of tomato sauce with a big wooden spoon.

“No. Well, kind of. I had asked my dad earlier if he wanted to have dinner. He said if he could, he’d meet me here after work.” It’s better to lie than tell him I thought it was Jackson here cooking for me.

“Ah.” Brad taps the wood spoon on the side of the pot twice before placing it on the counter. “I know you didn’t like my last surprise too much, but I’m hoping this one makes up for it.” He stands before me and cups my face in his hands. “I’ve missed you, and I hate when you’re mad at me.”

“We’ve already made up,” I tell him. “You didn’t have to do all of this.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t even come to Austin for Valentine’s Day.” The tips of his fingers trail down my neck before fiddling with the chain of my necklace. “That means you’re still upset.”

“I’m not angry with you. I had to work. You, of all people, should understand that.”

“Look, I know lately we’ve had more bad days than good. I’m hoping once the stress of the wedding is behind us, we can get back to normal. But before that happens, I need to make sure we are ok.”

Brad’s dark, chocolate-colored eyes search mine, and I know this is the point where I’m supposed to reassure him. “We’re good. I just have a lot on my mind between work and the wedding. Plus, waiting for these test results is like having a dark cloud hanging over me.”

Wrapping me up in his arms, Brad holds me close to him. “Everything will work out. The moment you become Mrs. Bradley Durand, your whole life’ll change, baby. Nothing bad happens in my family. You’ll see.”

Brad brings his lips to mine and kisses me. After three years, most of the magic is gone. His kisses are familiar and lack the excitement they once had. It's sad how quick the fire can burn out. When we part, I roll my lips and step out of his embrace.

“What's for dinner? I'm starved.”

Brad claps his hands together and immediately starts telling me all about the meal he's prepared. While we eat, the two of us finish my bottle of wine. Afterward, Brad watches Sports Center while I read. When he shuts the TV off, I worry he'll want sex. With everything going on, I'm just not in the mood tonight. But he doesn't initiate, and I feel guilty about being relieved by that, but I am.

Now in bed, I lay here and stare at the ceiling fan as it spins around and around. I feel trapped in my home. Suffocated, because the man I love is here in bed with me instead of being in his own place. Get it together, Rory. This is how normal adult relationships are supposed to be.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice my phone light up. Leaning over, I unlock it and see a text from Jackson.

Jackson: Are you awake?

Before I respond, I look behind me to make sure Brad is still asleep.

Me: Yeah. Is everything ok?

Jackson: I want to say I'm sorry for running out of your office like that. Can I call you?

With Brad asleep, I could easily sneak to the front of the house to speak to Jackson. But the fact that I have to use the word *sneak* proves I'm doing something I shouldn't be doing.

Me: Brad is here. Can we talk tomorrow?

The three dots flash across the screen over and over, but no response comes through. After five minutes, my phone lights up again, alerting me of the incoming text.

Jackson: Another surprise? Lucky you.

He ends the text with that crazy-looking emoji that has one eye closed and its tongue sticking out.

Jackson: I just wanted to tell you we're good. It was a busy day, is all. See you tomorrow.

I put my phone back on the nightstand before rolling onto my back once more. Is it possible that I'm so freaked out by the wedding and the move that I imagined that whole moment with Jackson when really nothing happened? Jesus, Rory. It's time to pull yourself together and quit making issues where they don't exist.

JACKSON

NINE MONTHS AFTER THEY MET...

Sitting on the recliner in the living room, I throw the tennis ball against the wall over again and over again. Since my accident, I've spent so much time in this damn chair I'm surprised it hasn't swallowed me whole. Although some days I wish it would.

The damage to my knee was so extreme the doctor refused to perform both surgeries at once. Originally, he was super optimistic. Because of my age and physical shape, he was confident I'd be healed enough to start physical therapy before Christmas. The doctor was wrong. It took eight full weeks for me to recover from my MCL surgery. Now, here we are in January and I'm three weeks post-op from having my ACL repaired. I haven't left the house since October except to go to the hospital or follow-up appointments. The boredom is real, and it's driving me crazy.

The rhythmic sound of the tennis ball as it hits against the wood paneling of the wall is enough to annoy the hell out of anyone. Yet, I find it soothing. Maybe I really have lost my mind. Hell, I've watched enough daytime television for it to be possible. On the coffee table sits the uneaten grilled cheese and tomato soup that my mom made me for lunch. The pain meds are supposed to be taken with food. But, I've been on them for so long now that the rule doesn't really apply to me anymore. They no longer do much.

"Jackson, baby?" My mom calls out from the kitchen table while folding laundry. I have the recliner turned, facing away

from her. “Wanna give that a rest and maybe watch a little TV?”

“No, I’m tired of watching that crap.”

“How about playing some video games?”

“I don’t feel like doing that either.”

Thump, thump, thump. The timing of my throws is spot on.

“Jackson Michael Nash, so help me God if you don’t stop throwing that thing against my wall, I’m going to smother you in your sleep with a pillow.” My mother’s hand slams down on the table, and instead of catching the ball, I let it drop, watching as it rolls under the couch. “Thank you, Jesus.”

From the safety of the living room, I mock her words. Underneath me, my phone vibrates, but I refuse to check it. When I got home from the hospital the first time, everyone from the team and school was calling and texting to check in on me. Now that my injury is old news, it’s only my closest friends and Rory. None of which I’m in the mood to talk to right now. Reaching for the pain pills, I grab the bottle off the coffee table and toss one in my mouth. It’s too early for my next dose, but I’m in pain and if I take it now, I’ll be able to sleep for a while. Pushing the back of the recliner almost flat, I close my eyes and pray that when I wake up, all of this will be some horrible nightmare.

Unfortunately, when I wake, I’m stuck in the same reality. Rubbing my eyes with the palms of my hands, I let out a frustrated groan.

“You snore.” Her voice cuts through my silence.

With an annoyed sigh, I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling. “No, I don’t.”

“Uh, yeah you do. Pretty loudly too, I might add.”

“Rory, what do you want?” Putting the chair up, I glare at her.

Sitting on the floor with her legs crossed, Rory has textbooks spread out in front of her. She has a notebook open and a pen in hand.

“I brought your homework.” She reaches into her book bag and pulls out a stack of papers three inches thick and tosses them at me. “You’re welcome.”

“I told you last time, you don’t have to do this.”

My teachers and parents are trying their best to make sure I keep up on my schoolwork despite all the days I’m missing. It’s their way of making sure I graduate on time. Like it matters anymore anyway. My grades are good, but not good enough to warrant any type of scholarships, and my days of playing football are over.

“I think the words you’re looking for are ‘thank you, Rory, for going out of your way and hanging out with me while I’m passed out on the recliner snoring like a damn pig.’ Jerk.”

“I never asked you to hang out with me.”

“You don’t have to ask me. You’re my friend. I want to be here.”

“Well, I don’t want you here. I’m tired of hearing you tell me about school and everything else that’s going on. I don’t friggin’ care. You annoy the hell out of me.”

Rory stares at me, unblinking. Her lips are pursed together and her cheeks are turning red. She’s pissed. Good.

“Since your accident, you’ve become a real ass. So, you can’t play football anymore. It’s not the end of the world,” she says while shoving her things back into her book bag before standing up.

“You wouldn’t understand. You lose the one thing that matters most to you in the world, then see how you act afterward.”

“Really?” Rory’s hand is on her hip as she glares at me. “I’ve never lost anything important to me?” Shit. That was the wrong thing to say. Unable to look at her, I stare out the window until she finally snaps. “Selfish asshole.”

Rory storms out of the room and I don’t breathe again until I hear my front door slam shut. What was I thinking running my mouth like that? To her, of all people? Reaching into the

side of the recliner, I pull out my phone. I should call her and apologize, but will she even answer? Maybe a text will be better. My fingers hover over the keyboard, but I can't bring myself to type.

Letting her stay mad at me is what's best. She needs to be spending time with her other friends and enjoying the rest of our senior year. Not hanging out alone in my living room watching me snore while I'm in a pain pill induced coma. The screen on my phone goes black, and I toss it off to the side. It's better this way.

A few days go by and I still haven't heard from Rory. I miss her, but I refuse to give in and call her. It's almost two in the morning and I'm lying on the bed watching a movie. There is a light tapping sound coming from my window. I mute the TV to see what the noise is, but it's quiet. When I pick up the remote to turn the sound back on, that's when I hear it again.

Reaching to my right, I grab my crutches and pull myself out of bed. Hobbling over to the window, I open my blinds to find Rory standing there. We stare at each other for a moment before I finally unlock the window and push it open.

“What are you doing here?”

“Just move.”

“Rory?”

“Jackson?” She holds her ground with me.

With a sigh, I hobble back over to my bed and watch her climb through the window with such ease it looks like she's done it a hundred times before. She stands before me in a pair of gray sweatpants, a black zip-up hoodie, and her neon green fluffy slippers that look like monster feet. Now that she's out of the dark, I notice her eyes are puffy and bloodshot.

“Have you been crying?”

“Why haven't you called me?”

Shit, is she crying over me? “I had nothing to say.” That's a damn lie. I've thought of a hundred ways to apologize to her since our fight.

“This was a mistake.” Rory angrily wipes at her eyes, trying to stop the tears. “I shouldn’t have come here.”

I watch as she puts one leg over the windowsill, ready to climb out. “Wait.” Rory looks at me, and I let out an exasperated sigh. “I’m sorry I said what I did. Just don’t run away crying. I feel bad enough as it is.”

“I’m not crying because of you.” She continues to sit on the windowsill, half in and half out of my room.

“Will you please come inside and tell me what’s wrong?”

After a few seconds, Rory finally climbs back into my bedroom. She shuts the window and sits down on my computer chair. Tucking her knees to her chest, she rests her chin on top of them. Her face is so sad. I’ve never seen her like this.

“My mom died a year ago today.” Her voice is so broken it trembles as she speaks. “I’ve had this voicemail from her saved on my phone, and I’ve never listened to it. I want to hear her voice so bad but...”

Rory’s cheeks are soaked with tears that won’t stop falling. She buries her face in her sweats, and all I can do is watch her. Every single part of me wants to hug her, hold her in my arms, and try to make the pain go away. But my damn body is too broken to do that properly. Sliding a little to the right, I clear my throat.

“You can put it on speaker and I’ll sit here and listen with you.” Rory’s sad eyes meet mine as she thinks about my offer. I pat the spot on the bed next to me and finally she nods.

The bed dips as Rory sits down. She’s careful of my knee and shifts her legs to the side to avoid making contact with it. I watch as she unlocks her phone and stares at the screen.

“Will you hold my hand?” Her sad green eyes meet mine and all I can do is nod.

Rory holds her hand out, and I slip my fingers through her own. She looks back down at her phone and I give her a slight squeeze, reminding her I’m here. Her thumb hovers over the voicemail button, and she finally taps the screen.

“Hola, Nena.” A raspy voice, barely above a whisper, comes through the speaker. Rory hiccups and squeezes my hand tightly. “You might think I’m crazy for calling you in the middle of the night, especially since you are here lying beside me. But there are things I must say before...” Rory’s mom trails off for a moment before taking in a deep breath. “My beautiful baby girl. When you were born, your father and I spent hours talking about your future. What college you might attend and what career path you’d choose. We’d dream about your wedding day and the person you’d marry. How your father would walk you down the aisle trying his best not to cry as he gave you away. I always pictured your father and I, gray-haired and surrounded by grandchildren. The two of us had your whole life planned out before you could even walk. But God has other plans for me.” With her free hand, Rory wipes at her tears. “I tried to fight this, Aurora. Please know how hard I tried. I never wanted to leave you or your father this soon. It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. Remember that although my body is gone, my soul will be with you forever. For you are my daughter, my flesh and blood. My strength lives within you. Always hold your head up high and live each day to the fullest. This life we’re given is far too short for regrets. *El amor de una madre nunca termina, ni siquiera en la muerte. Eres mi corazón y te amaré siempre y para siempre.*” *A mother’s love never ends, not even in death. You are my heart, and I will love you always and forever.*

I didn’t understand most of what Rory’s mom’s last words were. But I picked up on the important ones. Love and heart. With her hand still in mine, Rory’s stare is blank. Her tears still fall, but it feels like she’s emotionally checked out. There is nothing I can say that will make her feel better, so I decide that just being here for her is better than nothing. Letting go of her hand, I carefully maneuver my legs around her and rest my back against the headboard.

“Rory.” She turns her head and looks at me. Her pain is so raw it makes mine seem small. “Want to watch a movie?” It’s probably the wrong thing to say, but it’s all I can think of right now.

Rory stares at me for a moment, then finally nods. She crawls up the bed and sits beside me. Grabbing my blankets, I pull them up and over the two of us before finding the remote. I unmute the television, leaving it on whatever the hell I was watching before Rory got here. We sit in silence for who knows how long until finally, Rory places her head on my shoulder.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

The next morning I wake up to my dad lightly tapping on my door.

“Jackson?”

With my back still propped up against the headboard, I look down to find Rory asleep in my arms, her cheek against my chest. Shit.

“Jackson?” My father knocks louder this time.

“Rory.” I shake her.

“Hmm.”

“Rory, we fell asleep.”

She opens her eyes and looks around, confused. “Oh no. My father’s going to kill me.”

Rory climbs over me and heads toward the window.

“Jackson, open up now!” my father calls from the other side of the door.

“Crap!” Rory exclaims as she throws her hair up into a ponytail. “What do you want me to do?”

“Aurora, I can hear you in there.”

Rory’s eyes go wide, and she slaps her hand over her mouth.

“You can come in, dad.”

My father opens the door slowly before finally poking his head inside. When he sees the two of us are dressed, he takes a few steps in.

“Aurora, your father is looking for you. Best to head home now.”

“Ok.” Rory gives me a small wave before heading toward the door. When she’s in front of my father, she stops. “Sorry, Mr. Nash,” she mutters before quickly ducking under his arm and disappearing down the hall.

My father waits until she’s gone and then looks at me. “Skip and I have been friends for a long time, Jackson. If you get that girl into any kind of trouble—”

“Dad, I can’t even stand up on my own. Believe me, nothing happened.”

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

“Last night—”

“I don’t want details. Just be safe and smart. No more sneaking around in the middle of the night, you hear?”

“Yes, sir.”

There’s no point in arguing about this with my dad. He’s been under the impression, and for quite some time, that Rory and I are a couple. No matter how much I deny it right now or try to explain, he’ll just think I’m lying. And deep down, I wish he was right.

JACKSON

PRESENT DAY...

Sitting on the back porch, I read Rory's text over and over. Did she invite me out to dinner knowing Brad was going to be here? No. She usually makes it a point to tell me beforehand if he's joining us. I've always thought it's her way to give me an out; deep down, she knows I'm not crazy about the guy.

Now that I can't talk with her, I'm unsure of how to reply. I type and retype a few different responses before settling on the one I finally send. Rory doesn't respond, and I don't expect her to. The moonlight illuminates the land in front of me. There isn't a single cloud in the sky, and there are no less than a million stars shining down on me. It's time to face the facts. Rory will never know how I feel. I fucked that up a long time ago. Part of me has always thought she deserves better than what I can give her, and now it's too late.

Taking a sip of my beer, I spin my phone around and around on the glass side table. It's time to put Jackson first. I unlock my screen and re-download the three dating apps I used to use regularly. Except this time, when they ask me what I'm looking for, I check the box for *serious relationships only*. Before bed, I scroll through way too many profiles, swiping right on a handful. All right, I've made the effort. Let's see where it leads me.



THURSDAY EVENING, I'm sitting at my desk in the station finishing up a few last-minute reports. The paperwork for this job has always been my least favorite thing. Terrell sits across from me, on the phone with his wife. He's telling her he's going to be late again, and she's ripping him a new one. Her voice carries over to where I sit, and I bite my lip to stop the smile that's on my face. While Terrell breaks out into a full apology, my cell phone buzzes on top of my desk.

Vanessa: Hmmm, that's a tough one. I guess I'd have to say Jack and Jill.

Squinting at my phone, I shake my head in disbelief. Vanessa is a woman I matched with on one of the dating apps. She made it past the first round of interrogation questions, and last night we exchanged numbers. There are a few questions I ask every girl before I decide to go on a date with them. Some might think they're dumb, but it helps me get a read on what type of personality they have. Earlier, I asked what her favorite Adam Sandler movie is. Honestly, most answers are acceptable, except for this one. Even Sandler doesn't like *Jack and Jill*.

Vanessa: Have you seen it?

Unfortunately.

Me: Yeah, I think when it first came out.

This is the first test she's failed. Come on Jackson, you can look beyond her obvious horrible taste in movies.

Vanessa: So, tomorrow I was supposed to meet up with an old friend from college, but she had to reschedule. Would it be too bold of me to ask you to dinner?

Hmm, she's making the first move. Not really my style, but since I'm putting myself on a fresh path, why the hell not?

Me: Not too bold at all. If you pick the restaurant, I'll pick you up at eight.

Vanessa lives in Austin, which has more restaurant options than Hawk Bend. Plus, a late dinner will give me enough time to go home, shower, and change after work.

Vanessa: I'll text you my address tomorrow.

She ends her text with the wink emoji. It's been a hot minute since my last actual date. This should be fun.

"What are you smiling about over there?" Terrell asks.

Looking up, I realize he's been watching me. "I reinstated my dating profiles."

"Really? Good for you. It's about time you put yourself back out there. Find a woman besides Rory who's willing to put up with your ass."

"Nia sounds pissed." I point to his phone, hoping to change the subject.

"Yeah, I've been late every night this week. Can't say that I blame her. With the baby teething she's up to nurse a lot more at night. She's just exhausted." Terrell rubs his bald head with the palm of his hand. The bags under his eyes are pretty dark. I bet Nia isn't the only one losing sleep. "So tell me about this girl." *And we're back to me.*

"I don't know that much about her yet. She graduated a couple of years ago from the University of Houston. Moved to Austin a few months back. She works in marketing."

"That's it?"

"Yeah, man. I've only been talking to her for a couple of days."

"You didn't run a check on her?"

"No." I snort. "I'm picking her up. So if there's any sign of crazy, I can bail and she won't know where I live."

"Does she know who your brother is?"

At the mention of Jameson, I frown and shake my head. “No. I won’t make that mistake again. I’ll let her get to know me before I drop that bomb.”

For the last five years, Jameson has been the top ranked quarterback in the NFL. Last year he won his first Super Bowl ring. More than a few women have used me in hopes of getting close to him. Now I don’t mention we’re related unless I absolutely have to.

“Good luck. Can’t wait to hear all the dirty details at practice Saturday morning.”

“Not this time. I’m turning over a new leaf. No more one-night stands.”

“Wow, is Jackson Nash thinking about settling down?”

“Shut up.” With a roll of my eyes, I put my attention back on these reports so I can get the hell out of here.

“No, it’s a good thing. Leave the single life behind and find someone who you can settle down with. Then you can be as happy as the rest of us.”

“Speaking of...” I point to the case files on his desk. “You better get busy before Nia throws your shit out on the front lawn.”



FRIDAY NIGHT, I pull up to a small bungalow in an older, yet trendy neighborhood of Austin. The walkway is lined with flowers and lawn lights that look like sparklers from the Fourth of July. I take the steps two at a time and knock on her bright red door.

“I’ll be right there,” her voice calls out from inside the house. Through the door I can hear frantic shuffling, followed by the jingling of keys. “Sorry,” Vanessa apologizes after

finally opening the door. “I’m forever misplacing my keys.” She gives me a bright smile and I give her a quick glance over.

We video chatted briefly last night so we both felt comfortable coming into today, knowing neither of us are catfishing each other. She’s taller than I expected. Maybe it’s the stilettos, but aside from that, her body looks just like the pictures. Vanessa described herself as a gym junkie, and she has the athletic build to show for it. Long toned legs peek out from under her form-fitting black pencil skirt. Her hips have a delicate curve to them, and the thin aqua-colored belt she’s wearing shows off her tiny waist. She’s definitely got that hourglass figure going on. Her blonde hair is on the darker side, but definitely not natural since her eyebrows are fairly dark. Behind thick black lashes are a pair of mahogany-colored eyes. She’s pretty. A lot more polished than the women I usually date, but maybe the new Jackson likes this look.

“That’s all right. Sorry I’m a little late. I didn’t expect to hit traffic this time of night.”

“Don’t worry about it. I wouldn’t have been ready if you were on time.”

The two of us linger awkwardly on her tiny front porch. “Shall we?” I gesture to my truck.

“Oh yeah, let’s go. I hope you like sushi.” *Nope*. “My coworkers keep talking about this new place that just opened. I’ve been dying to try it.”

“Sounds perfect,” I lie, opening the truck door for her.

The restaurant is downtown and all the street parking is taken, forcing me to park in one of the city lots. Once I find a spot big enough, we walk the half block to the restaurant. Through the windows, I can see the place is slammed. It’s wall to wall people at the bar and by the hostess stand. Even outside, there is a crowd waiting to be seated.

I open the door for Vanessa and she walks straight up to the hostess. The woman behind the podium smiles. “Welcome to Takara. Can I have the name on the reservation?”

“Uh, we don’t have one.”

The hostess frowns and looks between the two of us. “I’m sorry, but without a reservation, you’re looking at a two-hour wait.”

Vanessa looks at me, and I shrug. “If your heart is set on eating here, maybe we can try to get a seat at the bar while we wait.” God, I’m really hoping she opts to leave, but the smile on her face tells me that’s not going to happen.

“Table for two then,” Vanessa tells the woman.

Once our name is on the outrageously long list, the two of us hover by the bar. I’m trying to multitask, listening to Vanessa speak and keeping an eye out for anyone who might vacate their seat soon. After about ten minutes, I hear someone call out my name.

“Jackson?”

Turning my head, I see Rory. Behind her, Brad is talking to the hostess. Vanessa gives me a questioning look, so I give her a reassuring smile. Placing my hand on the curve of her back, I guide her over to where Rory is standing.

“What are you doing here?” Rory asks.

“It’s Friday night, and Vanessa and I are having our first date.”

This past week, I’ve been trying to avoid Rory as much as possible. Even when I’ve been at the high school I haven’t gone to visit her. I’ve actually avoided her office altogether. It’s the first time in a long time the two of us haven’t been current about what’s going on in each other’s lives. She’s probably more than a little shocked to find me here in a sushi restaurant, no less.

“Hey!” Brad joins us, interrupting the awkward silence. “Jackson, what are you doing here?”

“He’s on a date,” Rory answers for me. Her face is expressionless as she takes in Vanessa.

“Oh, well hi. Nice to meet you.” Brad extends his hand out to Vanessa. “I’m sure you’ve heard all about Rory, but I’m

Brad, Rory's fiancé."

"Are you Rory?" It's obvious from the look on her face that this whole interaction confuses Vanessa.

"Sorry," I quickly mutter. "Vanessa, Rory and I grew up together. She's one of my best friends." I look at Brad, avoiding Rory's gaze altogether. "Vanessa and I only met a couple of days ago."

"Oh, gotcha. I was wondering how the two of you didn't know the other was going to be here." Brad points back and forth between Rory and me. "Sometimes I think these two don't blink without letting each other know."

Rory gives him one of her signature *shut up* looks before turning back to Vanessa. "It's nice to meet you."

"Durand, party of two!" the hostess calls out.

"What time is your reservation?" Brad asks.

"I didn't know we needed one. Our table should be ready by... June," Vanessa jokes.

"Oh, well, hang on." Brad walks over to the hostess and the three of us watch in strained silence as they exchange a few words. I watch the woman grab two more menus as Brad waves us over to him. What the fuck did he do?

"Oh my God, how did he do that?" Vanessa stares at Brad with her mouth partially open in awe.

"One of the partners in his firm owns fifty-one percent of the restaurant," Rory explains. I pick up on the irritation in her voice even if Vanessa doesn't. "He name dropped."

Rory walks past Brad, and he casually follows her. Vanessa gives me a big, excited smile as I gesture for her to take the lead.

"How amazing is it to have that kind of power?" she asks.

"Well, that's our Brad," I mutter. "He's all sorts of amazing."

RORY

Jackson has been avoiding me all week. Even at school, the only reason I knew he was there at all was because others had mentioned him. When I text, he takes forever to respond, and we haven't hung out alone since the night of the Valentine's Day dance.

From the way he's acting now, I'm almost certain what happened between us that night wasn't all in my head. It was real. A brief moment of insanity that will never happen again. Jackson is sending me that message loud and clear with his actions. He's never been one to face his problems head on, so if avoidance is how he's choosing to deal with this, then fine. I'll embrace my crazy and realize that cold feet can sometimes make a person do things they'd normally never dream of.

Except now I'm sitting here on a Friday night having an impromptu double date with Jackson and some random woman. The four of us sit in awkward silence as we look over our menus. Eyeing Brad out of the corner of my eye, I could strangle him right now, and he has no clue he's done anything wrong.

"Hey y'all. I'm London and I'll be your server this evening." The young guy stands next to me as he fills our water glasses. "Can I get anyone a drink to start with?"

"Yes, please," Jackson and I say in unison.

We make eye contact and both of us let out a nervous chuckle.

“Get used to it Vanessa,” Brad interjects. “These two have many inside jokes and weird quirks. Sometimes it feels like they share a brain.” Brad’s fingers brush the hair away from my shoulder before lightly grazing the nape of my neck. “We’ll have a bottle of the Louis Jadot Chardonnay.”

“Great choice.”

“I’ll have a beer,” Jackson quickly adds before the server walks away. “Coors on tap if you have it.”

“Yes, sir,” the server responds. Once again, the four of us are alone.

“So.” Vanessa takes a sip of her water. “You two are engaged. When is the wedding?”

“Beginning of April,” I answer in a vain attempt to be polite to this stranger.

“Jackson here is Rory’s maid of honor,” Brad says, without looking up from his menu.

“Stop calling it that.” My tone is harsher than it should be, but it irritates the hell out of me when Brad makes the same tired joke over and over.

“No, it’s ok. Doesn’t bother me any.” Jackson smiles and gives Vanessa a wink.

Why does that annoy me? Jackson and I have been on many double dates. I’ve seen him in serious relationships and even picked him up the morning after a few one-night stands. I’ve never felt hostile or jealous toward any of those women. So why do I suddenly have the sudden urge to claw this particular woman’s eyes out?

“See, babe. It’s all in good fun. Jackson knows that.” Brad dismisses me and takes charge of the conversation. “The two appetizers I was told to try are the wagyu tartare and the softshell crab tempura.”

“Yum, that all sounds delicious,” Vanessa purrs. Ok maybe she didn’t exactly purr. Good lord, I need to quit.

“Jackson’s allergic to shellfish,” I mumble.

“Oh my God!” Vanessa turns to Jackson with her hand covering her perfectly colored red lips. “Why didn’t you tell me when I suggested we try a sushi restaurant?”

“Because there are other things on the menu that I can eat. It’s no big deal.” Jackson shoots me a look and I’m left wondering what I did wrong. “You seemed excited to try this place out, and I was happy to oblige.” Jackson leans into her, smiling.

The server is back with the wine. Thank God.

“Shall I—” He motions for Brad’s glass, and I know he’s offering to let him taste it before he pours the bottle.

“Nope, we know what it tastes like,” I quickly interrupt him while holding my wine glass up in the air.

With an irritated look, the deflated server pours my wine and then moves on, pouring for the rest of the table as he tells us about tonight’s specials. Gulping my wine, I listen to Brad order the appetizers, and then I allow him to order for me as well. I’m too busy trying to calm myself down to care what the hell I eat. When everyone has ordered, I listen as the three of them talk. Every once in a while I remind myself to join in so it doesn’t look weird that I’m sitting here drinking in silence. After the appetizers, main course and many, many glasses of wine, my blood pressure is back to normal.

“So, Jackson, tell me about the meaning behind your tattoos.” Vanessa traces the outline of Jackson’s phoenix with the tip of her finger.

“It’s pretty cliché. It’s a phoenix rising from the ashes, but it holds meaning to me. I suffered an injury playing football during my senior year of high school. It forced me to reevaluate my goals and life plan.”

“That’s terrible.” I watch as Vanessa’s finger moves from the wings to the swirls of black and grey smoke before finally stopping at something no one ever notices. “What is this? It almost looks like hands connected in some way?”

Next to me, I feel Brad stiffen. Shit, this is not going to be good. Just take another gulp of wine, Rory.

“Wow!” Jackson says, surprised. “Usually I have to point it out to people. You’ve got a good eye.”

Yeah, too good.

“I know I, for one, have never noticed it before,” Brad chimes in.

“Really?” Jackson looks at me, and all I can do is keep drinking. He has no clue I’ve never told Brad about our matching tattoos. “It’s two hands joined in a pinky promise. It’s something Rory and I used to do as kids. We got it on a whim.”

“You guys have matching tattoos?” Vanessa looks between the two of us and I quickly give her a fake smile. Hoping like hell it at least appears sincere.

“We were young and dumb,” I say, dismissing her obvious concerns. This is a big red flag, I know. “That’s why Jackson has his practically covered up.” Quickly, I place my hand on top of Brad’s and give it a squeeze. “Why don’t we get the check and let them enjoy the rest of their date by themselves?”

“Yeah, it’s been a long week.” Brad motions for the server and pulls out his money clip.

“Let’s split it evenly,” Jackson says, pulling out his own wallet.

“No, please, I insist. It’s the least we can do for hijacking your date.” Brad hands his credit card to the server. “Besides, Rory drank about five hundred dollars’ worth of wine. That makes most of the bill my responsibility.”

Jackson’s eyes meet mine, and I can see Brad’s comment irritated him.

“You can blame Lyndsey for that. She’s declared Friday’s to be the unofficial *drink wine with friend’s* day. It’s how the girls unwind after a long week at work. I’m surprised you could even get Rory away from her tonight,” Jackson says, trying to defend me.

“You’d know better than I would.” Brad won’t even look at Jackson. “Vanessa, it was a pleasure meeting you.

Hopefully, we can all do this again sometime.” Brad stands and buttons his suit jacket.

“Yeah, it was great meeting you. You’ll have to come to Hawk Bend and meet everyone soon.” I stand up faster than I should and now I really feel the effects of all that wine.

“I’d like that, thank you.”

“Night.” Brad grabs me by my elbow and I’m actually grateful because my balance is way off.

“Goodnight, Rory,” Jackson calls after me.

Brad and I make our way through the crowded restaurant until we’re finally outside. The cold air is like a slap in the face, yet it does nothing to help my sobriety. The longer Brad is silent, the more worried I become. This isn’t something I want him to make a big deal about, but I know he will. When we are finally at the car, Brad unlocks it from the key fob and lets go of my elbow.

“Say something,” I demand.

“Not now.”

“Brad, you’re making a bigger deal out of this than it is.”

“Three years, Rory!” he shouts before glancing around to see if anyone noticed his outburst. The two of us are standing behind his midnight-blue Range Rover, staring at each other. Brad takes a deep breath before lowering his voice. “When we first started dating, I asked you the meaning behind your tattoo. You told me it was in remembrance of your mother. How could you lie to me about that?”

“I didn’t. It is for her.” Brad throws his head back in disbelief. “Ok, the flowers are, but not the rest.”

“Unbelievable.”

“This is why I never told you. You’ve always been so insecure when it comes to Jackson. You hate how close we are.”

“Insecure?” Brad laughs darkly. Shit, wrong choice of words. “I’m not insecure, Rory. It’s just all this time I thought

it was Jackson who didn't have the balls to tell you how he really feels. But now?" Brad exhales but doesn't finish his sentence. "Never mind, just get in the car."

"No, tell me what you were going to say."

Brad closes the gap between us, and his dark eyes roam over my face. In them, I see both hurt and anger.

"Now it feels like maybe Jackson wasn't the one I should've been worried about. Maybe you have feelings for him as well."

Ouch. Hearing it out loud makes it sound all too real.

"After three years of being with me, you're having doubts now because of a stupid tattoo?"

"No, watching my fiancée get drunk to mask the jealousy she was feeling is what started the doubts. The tattoo just added fuel to the fire."

I open my mouth, but quickly shut it. The wine has made my brain foggy, and I don't know how to respond. Brad shakes his head in disappointment and walks to the driver's side door.

"You're wrong!" I yell after him.

"For the last time, get in the car, Rory."



THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up with one of the worst hangovers I've had in a while. The morning light is blinding as it penetrates the thin, white sheet I have thrown over my face. I don't quite remember how I ended up in my bed. Unfortunately, that's the only thing blurry about last night.

"How are you feeling?"

Brad's deep voice is barely above a whisper. I peel back the sheet from one eye and find him standing in the doorway.

“Like my head is about to explode at any moment.” I sit up and rest my back against the headboard. Looking down, I notice I’m in one of my old college shirts and panties.

“You didn’t cooperate enough for me to get pants on you.” Brad enters the room with a bottle of aspirin in one hand and a glass of water in the other. “Here, take this.”

The bed dips under Brad’s weight, and I let out a sigh. “I’m so sorry. I have no clue what came over me last night.”

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth about the tattoo when I first asked?”

“I’ve never told anyone. It’s not like I was keeping it from you on purpose.”

“Is the reason you’ve kept it a secret because it really means nothing, or is it because it means so much you can’t share it with anyone but him?”

“It doesn’t mean what you think it means.” I pop four Tylenol in my mouth and swallow them with a big sip of cold water. “It’s exactly as Jackson said. We got them on a whim one drunken night while I was in college.” That’s not entirely true, but right now Brad doesn’t need to hear the true story.

He scrubs his face with the palms of his hands. It looks like he got little sleep last night and that’s my fault. “Marriage is something I’ve never taken lightly. I want it to be a one and done. If you have any doubts, now would be the time to bring them up.”

Brad’s dark eyes hold mine, and for the first time, I see vulnerability. Slowly, I shake my head. “No doubts.”

He doesn’t look completely convinced, but he accepts my answer. “A few emails came in overnight that need my attention. I’m going to head back to Austin, and you have to meet Leann in less than an hour.”

“Oh crap, I forgot.”

My fingers gently massage my forehead, trying to ease the blinding pain. Brad’s fingers wrap around my wrist as he

guides my hand to his chest. His firm chest is a stark contrast to the soft shirt under my fingertips.

“I love you,” he proclaims, while staring me straight in the eyes. I hesitate for a moment, but Brad’s lips are on mine before he can notice. His kiss is soft, which is unusual for him. When he pulls away, his knuckles caress my cheek. “I’ll call you later.”



“DID I mention I hate to shop?”

Leann and I are back-to-back in the narrow clothing aisle and I can hear the wire hangers slide against the metal rack as she quickly looks at each dress.

“A few times now.” I smile.

Hawk Bend isn’t known for its shopping spots, so Leann and I had to make our way closer to Austin. This is the fifth store we have been to today. And if it wasn’t for that third cup of coffee I snagged at the local drive-thru before heading out of town, I’d be screwed. Thankfully, the caffeine also helped the lingering headache, and I no longer feel like my head is in a vice.

“I should’ve never agreed when Jameson offered to throw this thing. This isn’t even a milestone year.”

“We should consider every year a milestone. Thirty-two years of marriage is just as special as thirty or forty. You two deserve to be celebrated.”

Leann makes a strangling sound with her throat, and I have to stifle my laugh. She’s a born and bred small-town girl who enjoys the simpler things in life. She would be happy celebrating her anniversary with a small gathering of friends at the local hall. But instead, she agreed to a formal affair at one of the fanciest hotels in Austin because Jameson offered.

“I swear that boy just enjoys showing off his money.”

My eyes go wide with agreement as I pull another dress from the rack. Leann is only half right, though. Despite Jameson’s many flaws, what he does for his parents comes from the heart. A few years back Jameson bought the building his dad’s repair shop is in, so he would no longer have to pay rent. Then, after winning the Super Bowl, he bought them both new cars. He tries to make their lives easier even though they fight him on it. Of course, both gestures pissed off Jackson, but the sibling rivalry between those two will probably never end.

“Here.” I hold out the four dresses in my hands for Leann to take. “Try these on.”

She briefly looks through them and frowns. “They’re just so fancy.”

“They are, and you’re going to look so beautiful in whichever one you pick.”

Her hazel eyes meet mine, and I can’t help but see Jackson in them. With a heavy sigh, she takes the dresses from my grasp and turns toward the small dressing room. Once inside, she closes the door, and I take a seat on a nearby chaise.

“How’s your wedding coming along, sweetheart?”

“Um, great. Everything is done.”

Looking in the mirror opposite me, I notice I’m chewing on my bottom lip. A nervous habit I’ve started doing whenever someone brings up the wedding.

“That’s wonderful. I ask Jackson all the time, but you know, men. Never one for details.”

Leann opens the door, and she’s wearing the blush pink cocktail dress I chose. It has a shimmering lace overlay and falls at the knee with a scalloped hem. The color complements her olive complexion and dark hair, while the cut of the dress stresses her lean figure.

“That one’s my favorite.” I smile at her. She turns, takes in a deep breath, and puffs out her cheeks. She’s not convinced.

“Mitch is going to have a coronary when he sees you in that.”

“The only thing giving him a coronary will be the credit card bill when it comes.” She takes the tag between her fingers and raises an eyebrow at the price. “I’m gonna have to clean the house in this to make sure I get my money’s worth. You make sure I’m buried in it too, for what it cost.”

With a laugh, I nod my head. “Yes, ma’am.”

“This might be the one, but I feel obligated to try the others as well. I still need something for your wedding.” She does one last turn in the mirror before facing me. She takes two steps forward and places her hands on either side of my face. “My sweet girl. Thank you for putting up with me today.”

“Leann, I’m always here for you, whenever you need me.”

“The daughter I always wanted.” Her eyes hold mine, and I fight the hard lump that’s rapidly forming in my throat. “How many nights have I prayed Jackson would wake up and realize what’s right in front of him? But if my boys were half as smart as they are good-looking, they’d be dangerous.”

JACKSON

TWO YEARS AFTER THEY MET...

Sitting on the creeper, I stare at the tire in front of me. Another day, another break job. Rolling the creeper slightly to my right, I reach for my electric drill, then roll back to remove the lug nuts one by one. Once the tire's removed, I place it under the chassis for added safety. After the jack gave out last week, I'm taking every precaution I can think of. The last thing I need is four tons of metal crashing down on me. *Or is it?*

"Jackson, make sure you check those rotors real good. Mrs. Kramer said her car just started shaking the other day; it only happens while braking."

I've been working with my father every day since I graduated from high school. But no matter how many jobs I do for him, he feels the need to remind me of the simplest tasks.

"Jackson."

"I heard you. Check the rotors, just like I always do."

Looking down at the smudges of grease on my hands and black dirt under my fingernails, I can't help but think about what a drastic change my life took. I should be finishing my first year of college right now and focusing on football. Not sitting on a hard piece of wood with wheels under it while sweating my ass off in these stiff blue coveralls and being told the same thing repeatedly, like I'm some sort of idiot. There's no way in hell I can live the rest of my life like this.

"Jackson?"

“What?” I snap. I’m so tired of hearing my father call my name a million times a day.

“Watch your tone.” The look he gives me puts me back in my place. “Where did you put the keys for that Altima?”

Reaching in my pocket, I pull out the set he’s looking for. “Sorry. I forgot to hang them up when I was done with the test drive.”

My father shakes his head in disapproval as he takes three steps toward me to collect the keys. He’s obviously frustrated with me but jokes on him because I feel the same way.

Next to me, my phone buzzes on the oil-stained concrete. Tapping the screen with my finger, I see it’s another text from Rory. She’s in town for the weekend and keeps trying to make plans. I’m having too big of a pity party right now to be around her. Plus, she’s got her boyfriend with her. Seeing her with someone is just another slap in the face. Another thing I’m missing out on in life. My phone vibrates again, and I don’t even bother to look at it this time.

After work, I head home and straight for the shower. The best part of my day is washing all the sweat and grime away. By the time I’m finished, my mother has a plate of food waiting for me on the table. Except dinner isn’t the only thing waiting for me in the kitchen.

“Jackson, look who stopped by.” Rory and my mom are catching up while my father relaxes in the living room with the baseball game on. My mom gives Rory a hug before heading toward my father. “I’ll give you two some privacy,” she calls over her shoulder.

Alone in the kitchen, the two of us only stare at each other. She looks good, and I can smell that vanilla spray she loves so much wafting off of her.

“Did you have a busy day?” Rory’s green eyes are boring into me and her left eyebrow is cocked.

“Every day is busy. Having an actual job is a lot different from college. Maybe if I got to sleep in until noon and only had to take a couple of classes every other day I’d have time to

text you back.” I open the fridge door and grab one of my dad’s beers. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“I made an early dinner for my grandparents, and now they’re watching Jeopardy. My dad isn’t home yet, and Paul has a paper he needs to turn in by midnight. So I figured I’d walk down here and say hi.”

“Hi,” I manage, after chugging more than half of the beer.

“Ok then. I’m not the only one in town this weekend. Lyndsey and a few others are home as well. We were all thinking about getting together at the quarry tomorrow night. Feel like going?”

“No.” I snort.

“Jackson, what the hell is your problem?”

“Look, I’m tired, and my dad is making me work a half day tomorrow so we can catch up. Sitting around talking about how awesome college is and hearing about all the fun you guys are having is the last thing I want to do with my time off.” Rory says nothing. “It just doesn’t sound like a good time to me.”

“So this is how it’s going to be when I come home now? You’re just going to ignore me and refuse to answer my texts because what? We have nothing in common anymore, so there’s no point in hanging out or being friends?”

“Yeah, maybe it’s for the best.” I can’t make eye contact with her because I’m lying.

“How much longer are you planning on feeling sorry for yourself?” Rory stands and makes her way toward the door. “So what if you can’t play football anymore? Find a new dream. Or don’t and live miserably for the rest of your life.”

The old screen door creaks as Rory pushes it open and walks away from me.

“Fuck!” I yell while throwing my now empty beer can in the sink.



THE NEXT DAY AT WORK, I've got my head buried under the hood of a car when I hear truck tires pull onto the gravel road. My dad had to drive to Austin to pick a part up from one of the dealerships, so I'm forced to greet anyone who comes in. Stepping through the bay door, I see Chief Monroe making his way toward me.

"Hey there, son." He removes his aviators and places them in his shirt pocket. "Is your dad around?"

"No, sir. He should be back in about thirty minutes. Is there something I can help you with?"

"The damn town council is making me get a quote for the new tires we need on the patrol vehicles. Apparently, last time we went over budget. Can you ask your dad to put something down on paper? He knows our current fleet."

"Sure, I'll tell him when he gets back."

"Let him know there's no rush. I won't meet with the council again for another two weeks."

"Ok."

Chief Monroe rubs the graying scruff along his chin as he eyeballs me. Suddenly, I'm filled with the smallest bit of fear. Even though I've done nothing wrong, having a cop look at you this way is enough to make anyone nervous.

"Jackson, do you like working for your dad?"

"Yeah, I mean, it's a job. Right?"

Chief Monroe takes a few steps closer to me. His boots kicking up the gravel as he walks. "Look, I was thinking, I've got a few men who are due to retire in a couple of years. Maybe sooner."

“Um, good for them?” This entire conversation is confusing to me. Then it hits me. “Wait, are you offering me a job?”

“No.” He chuckles. “It’s not that simple. There are certain steps to follow. Physical agility and psychological requirements must be met before I can hire you as an officer. Even in a town as small as this one.”

“Sorry, I’m confused.”

“People are worried about you.” *People? Or Rory?* “You suffered a life-changing setback, but you’re young, and there are still plenty of opportunities out there. This is one of them.” Chief Monroe puts his aviator sunglasses back on and adjusts his cap. “Take a few criminal justice courses at the junior college, see if it interests you. If it does, you let me know and I’ll make sure Hawk Bend pays for your spot at the academy.”

Chief Monroe opens his truck door and gets halfway in before I ask, “Why would you do that for me?”

Sure, over the years, he’s gotten to know me because of Rory. But this offer seems to come from out of nowhere.

“You were there for my daughter when she needed a friend. Now you’re pushing her away when you need someone. Well, I’m a lot harder to move than she is. If you push me, I’ll push back. I’m not going to sit around and watch someone who means so much to Aurora throw their life away.” Chief Monroe slams his truck door and pokes his head out the window. “Understood?”

JACKSON

PRESENT DAY...

“So, how’d your date go?”

T-ball practice is over and Terrell and I are gathering up the rest of the equipment from the field. Nia tagged along with him today. She’s busy with the kids and passing out the updated game schedule to all the parents, giving us a minute to talk.

“Not how I expected it to.”

“Oh, yeah?” Terrell wags his eyebrows at me. “Was she into that freaky-deaky stuff?”

“Yeah, that definitely didn’t happen. We ended up running into Rory and Brad at the restaurant. So my first date turned into a double date.”

“Yeah, but that’s good, right? Rory’s always been a great wing-man for you.”

I’m sure that’s how my friendship with Rory looks to the outside world. None of our friends know my true feelings, nor have they noticed this weird shift that’s suddenly happened between us.

“True, but our relationship can intimidate new people. Women easily get jealous and territorial about it. Usually double dates don’t happen until we’ve made sure the new person knows exactly how we are.”

“I can see that. So, did this chick get scared off?”

My mind goes back to last night. When I walked Vanessa to her door, she wrapped her arms around my neck and asked me if I wanted to come in. The old Jackson would have taken her up on the offer then never called her again. But I'm looking for something serious, which takes time and doesn't involve ghosting some poor woman the day after a hookup. So instead, I gave her a soft kiss on the lips and scheduled our second date.

“Surprisingly, no. We're going out again Wednesday.”

“Terrell, we're going to be late!” Nia calls from across the field.

“Lunch with the in-laws.” Terrell hands me the bases he's collected. “Enjoy the single life while you can.”

“Weren't you the one who told me to hurry up and settle down?”

“Terrell, let's go. Bye Jackson.” Nia waves at me.

“My opinion changes daily,” Terrell jokes as he walks off the field.

Once home, I decide to tackle a few projects I've been putting off. Looking around the laundry room and half-bath combo, I decide today is the perfect day to demo this room. Walking back outside, I head toward my tool shed.

I knew what I was signing up for when I bought this place. Mr. Jenkins, who owned the house, was a widow. He and his wife had one son who left for college in California and never moved back. For twenty something years, he lived here, alone. One afternoon, the station received a call from his son asking if we could perform a wellness check. Mr. Jenkins hadn't answered his phone in two days, and the son was rightfully worried. When I pulled up to the rundown house, I found the old man lying on the front porch. He had tripped going up the steps and had been waiting for someone to find him. When the hospital finally released him, I made a point of checking in on him a few times a week. After he passed, his son asked if I knew anyone who might be interested in purchasing the home. He saw the place as a burden. It was too rundown to be a

profitable rental, and the last thing he wanted to do was be a landlord. He ended up selling it to me for way below market value as a thank you for all that I did for his dad.

Grabbing a small sledgehammer and a few other things, I make my way back inside. There isn't anything better to clear your mind than putting a few holes in walls. In the front room sits an old stereo system that belonged to Mr. Jenkins. It's one of the few things his son left behind. My eyes glance over the CD jackets before finally settling on one. Lynyrd Skynyrd blares through the speakers as I begin my work. The hammer easily tears through the old drywall, and I'm soon completely tuned out to the world around me.

I have no clue how long I've been at it. All I know is the sun has set, and my arms feel like Jell-O. Looking around, I've got two of the four walls torn down and the old linoleum pulled up. I put the washer and dryer back in place for now, but the toilet lies on the floor in pieces. Grabbing the T-shirt I tossed on one of the broken boards, I pick it up and wipe the sweat off my brow.

“Busy day, I see.”

Turning toward what used to be the door, I find Rory standing there.

“It's the first free weekend I've had in a while. Thought I'd take advantage of it.”

Rory's eyes make their way from my face to my chest. They slowly trail down my abs before settling at my belt buckle. For a moment I think I see her breathing quicken, but when her eyes snap back to meet mine, she's fully composed.

“I brought you dinner.” She moves into the kitchen and I happily follow her. The smell of food makes me suddenly aware of how hungry I am. “Your mom and I stopped at that BBQ place your dad likes on the way back from Austin.” Rory is standing at the kitchen table removing Styrofoam containers from brown paper bags.

“How'd dress shopping go?” Standing at the kitchen sink, I wash all the dust and debris off my hands. Glancing over my

shoulder, I catch Rory staring at my back.

“Good.” She licks her lips before grabbing the plates and silverware from the drawer. “Your mom’s all set for the party and the wedding... and apparently every other function she needs to attend from now until she dies.”

“Thank you for going with her. Jameson’s wife, she’s, um —”

“Jackson, I know. I mean, do supermodels even shop? In movies and books, the rich and famous people always make a phone call and then racks upon racks of clothes just magically appear.”

I let out a laugh and nod my head. My brother, being at the top of his game, met one of the world’s most famous supermodels at an event a couple of years back. Three months later, they eloped on a beach in Thailand. They invited none of us. I can count on my hand the number of times I’ve been in a room with her. She’s not big into family and wouldn’t be caught dead in a place like Hawk Bend.

“Who even knows. Those two are so out of touch with reality, nothing would surprise me.” I grab a couple of pieces of brisket with my fork and place them on Rory’s plate while she scoops a heaping spoonful of coleslaw onto mine. “Did mom bitch and complain the whole time?”

“You already know she did.” Rory can’t help the smile on her face. She loves my mom, always has.

Grabbing a slice of white bread, I dip it into the BBQ sauce then lay a piece of brisket on top of it. The two of us eat in comfortable silence, but I can tell Rory has something on her mind.

“Jackson, I want to apologize for last night. I should have stopped Brad from getting us all a table. If we cost you a second date—”

“You didn’t.”

Rory’s eyes go wide and I watch as her jaw tightens. “Oh, well, that’s good. So, um, things went well after we left.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Together, the two of us have shared dozens of first date stories. But this time it feels wrong, so I keep the details vague. “We’re going out again on Wednesday.”

“Wow, that’s soon. You must really like this one.”

There’s an edge to Rory’s voice I’ve never heard before. Or, I should say I’ve never heard the edge directed at *me*. It’s what I jokingly refer to as her school counselor’s voice. It’s the professional tone she uses when she’s annoyed or frustrated but is trying to hide how she really feels.

“Rory?” Her beautiful green eyes meet mine and the look in them is impossible to read. “Why didn’t you tell Brad about our tattoo?”

Rory stands up from the table and opens the fridge door. She grabs a couple of bottles of water and places one in front of me.

“I’ve never told anyone I’ve been with.”

“Why?” I hold my breath, waiting for her to answer.

“Because it’s something that belongs to us and only us. I don’t feel the need to share that piece of myself with anyone but you.”

My eyes scan her face, looking for the smallest sign that her words mean something deeper. That there is, in fact, suddenly something more between us. Something that, until now, has only been one-sided and never reciprocated. But Rory is emotionally too strong to let something like that slip. Especially if she’s trying to hide it. While I look at Rory, she focuses on the water bottle in front of her, peeling off the label. The light above us catches the diamond in her engagement ring, pulling my attention to it.

“That night at the Valentine’s Day dance—”

“I’m sorry if I weirded you out.” Rory interrupts me and I pause, allowing her to finish. “That was just me getting emotional. Before you know it, I’ll be married and everything will be different. I got caught up thinking about how much I’m going to miss everyone and everything.”

She gives me a warm smile, and I internally deflate. Of course that's what she was feeling, and here I took it to mean something else. Again, wishful thinking on my part.

“This town will always be your home. You're welcome at this dump anytime. As long as you bring food with you, that is.”

“Deal.” Rory smiles.

RORY

“Anabelle, how many times do you have to be told that there is no smoking allowed on school premises?”

It’s Friday afternoon, and this is the third time this week that Anabelle Baucom has been in my office.

“It’s a vape.” The baby-faced teen, dressed in ripped jeans and an oversized long-sleeve shirt, rolls her eyes at me. Her mousy brown hair hangs long, covering most of her face. “You guys act like I’m going to burn the school down with a lit cigarette.”

“Vaping is just as bad for you as smoking. That’s why you have to be twenty-one to vape legally in this state.”

“That’s stupid. It’s practically water,” she mumbles while chewing the skin around her fingernails.

“Did you get the vape from someone here at school?” Anabelle ignores my question. “Fine, you don’t have to tell me where you got it. Did you meet with Officer Le Blanc last weekend?”

“You already know I did.”

She’s right. If she would have ditched, I would have been notified since it’s the main reason she wasn’t suspended, or worse, expelled. I look at this poor lost soul sitting in front of me and watch as she mindlessly stares out my office window. I want so badly to help her, but I can’t seem to reach her no matter what I say or do. The bell rings loudly through the silence, and Anabelle finally makes eye contact with me.

“I’m going to be late for last period.”

“Fine. But you owe me two after school detentions next week, to start. I want you to meet me in my office after the second bell on Monday and Wednesday.”

“Here? This isn’t where detention is held.”

“I know that. But I’m trying something new with you. You’ll report to me and we will sit here in silence, or we can use the hour to talk about anything you’d like. It’s up to you.”

“Why?”

“Because when I tell you I want to help you, I mean it.”

“Whatever.”

Anabelle grabs her book bag and throws it over one shoulder before exiting my office.

“Have a good week—” Annabelle slams the door before I can finish. “—end.”

I slump down in my chair and thump my head against the leather back. My time is running out with that girl, and I know I can’t save them all, but I really want to help her. Sitting up, I place my hands on the keyboard and begin typing. Once I have the information I need, I pick up my desk phone and dial the phone number. It rings a few times before going to voicemail.

“Hi, Mr. Baucom. This is Aurora Monroe from Hawk Bend High. Anabelle’s guidance counselor. I wanted to reach out and see if you’ve thought further about getting Anabelle back into counseling. If you need help finding someone, I’d be more than willing to reach out to some of my contacts. Let me know.”

I hang up, unhopeful that I’ll receive a return call. Before I can obsess too much about it, there’s a knock on my door, signaling my next student is here.



IT'S a little past four when I'm finally able to pack up for the day. Opening my desk drawer, I grab my phone and see I have a missed call from Brad and a text from Jackson. I decide to check my text instead of returning Brad's call. It's a brief video clip of a girl sitting at a table with a giant punch bowl of sangria in front of her. Instead of drinking from the straw, she reaches for the giant ladle next to her and chugs.

Jackson: Actual footage of Rory on Friday nights.

I grin at my phone. A slight chuckle escapes me as I watch the video play over and over. Even though he's making fun of me, this feels like the old Jackson. It's exactly how the two of us used to be before whatever glitch in the matrix happened on Valentine's Day. This is normal.

"Oh, my God! Thank the friggin' lord it's Friday." Lyndsey walks into my office with her purse and the giant gallon of water she's been toting around all week. "I think I'm too tired to go out tonight. Can we have a girls' night in?"

"Yes, please." A low-key evening sitting on the couch having a glass of wine with my girl is the perfect ending to the weird couple of weeks I've had.

My phone vibrates in my hand, and I glance down at the screen. It's another meme. This one is the *SNL* skit where the woman places an IV in her arm that's attached to a wine bottle.

Jackson: This way you don't need to dirty a glass.

"Brad?"

I look up from my phone to find Lyndsey watching me. "No, Jackson."

Lyndsey's face screws up in confusion. "Since when do you smile like that when you get a text from him?"

“What are you talking about?” A wave of nervousness rushes over me.

“Rory?” Lyndsey pauses for a moment, as if waiting for a response. When I don’t give her one, she continues. “I know I’ve asked you this before, but are you sure there isn’t anything going on between you and Jackson?”

“Gross, Lynds. This is Jackson we’re talking about here.”

“Exactly.”

Lyndsey’s blue eyes hold mine and I suddenly feel very exposed.

“I love Brad, a lot.”

“But?”

“There’s no but.” I toss my phone into my purse and then place my chin in my hand, leaning on the desk with my elbow. “All right, truth?” Lyndsey leans forward and waits for me to spill juicy details I don’t have. “I’ve been having all these weird feelings lately.”

“Feelings? About Jackson?”

“Oh my God, yes, about Jackson.”

“I knew it.” She smiles evilly. “Spill. I want all the details.”

“There’s nothing to tell. Do you really think I’d cheat on Brad? It’s just... Jackson’s always been my friend. Yeah, ok, maybe in high school or right after, I had a tiny crush on him. Who didn’t? But he was never interested in me like that. Then when we danced on Valentine’s Day, it’s like something inside of me shifted, and I started looking at him differently.”

“Did he say anything?”

“No, he avoided the entire situation. Whatever I did totally freaked him out.” Nervously, I chew on my lip, thinking about that night. “Everything going on inside my head is because of nerves. Nerves about the wedding and moving. It’ll pass, I know it will. I don’t handle change well, that’s all.” Lyndsey

continues to stare at me, the look on her face now a mix of doubt and sympathy. “I love Brad.”

“You already said that.” Lyndsey stands up, signaling it’s time for us to leave. “I’m just not sure if you keep repeating it to convince me or yourself.”



AFTER SPENDING Friday night with Lyndsey, I drove to Brad’s on Saturday morning to spend the entire weekend with him. With the wedding being only two weeks away, I feel like I need this time to reconnect and remind myself of what the two of us share. Does Brad have his faults? Of course he does, we all do. But deep down, he has been a really good partner for me. And I love him, despite where my recent thoughts have been. He’s intelligent, hard-working, and handsome. Together, I know the two of us can live a happy life.

After spending the weekend together, I still feel the need to remind myself of that fact. Despite how well Brad and I seem to fit, I miss the spark we had. I can’t remember the last time we had sex, and that should concern me. Only, it doesn’t. I keep telling myself that once we say our vows and the wedding stress is behind us, everything will return to normal. I guess we’ll have to see.

As for Jackson, he and I have also gone back to pre-Valentine’s Day normal. We’ve seen each other almost every day at school this week. We’re texting randomly throughout the day and even had dinner with my dad last night. I know he’s been on a few dates with Vanessa, and I’m happy for him, genuinely. All I’ve ever wanted is for Jackson to find happiness, and who knows? Maybe Vanessa will end up being ‘the one.’

“This crap is so lame.” Annabelle plops herself down in the chair in front of my desk pulling me from my thoughts.

“It’s nice to see you, too. I’m glad you’re talking to me this time.” We spent the entire hour in total silence on Monday. “Did you have a good day?” Since assigning her detention with me this week, I haven’t received any behavioral slips from Annabelle’s teachers. Despite her annoyance, maybe I’m making progress with her.

With a roll of her eyes, she slumps further in her seat. “My day sucked, just like all the others.”

“Did something happen, or...”

“Like you actually care.” Annabelle turns her head and stares out the window.

“I do.” Her eyes snap back to meet mine and all I see is a scared girl who is trying her best to hide the tornado of emotions that lies within her.

“How old do you have to be to drop out and get your GED?”

I was not expecting this question. “Why would you want to drop out?”

She tucks her long hair behind her ear and nervously bounces her leg up and down. “I don’t know. I thought it might help me get emancipated.”

Sitting at my desk, I think long and hard before answering her. It’s obvious something is going on and since this is the first time she’s opened up to me, I don’t want to scare her by asking too many personal questions right out the gate.

“Emancipation is complicated. The judge is going to ask for a reason and then proof that you can take care of yourself.”

“I already do.” Her eyes hold mine in an almost dare.

“Financially. They’re going to ask for proof that you can manage as an adult. They’ll expect you to have a game plan. Have you thought that far ahead?”

“No.” Annabelle gnaws the skin on her knuckle and I notice her fingernails are chewed down to nubs.

“Why do you want to be emancipated from your father?” The two of us sit in silence for a while. Patiently, I wait while Annabelle continues to stare at the floor. “You know, when my mom died, my dad was sad all the time, too. Still is. It took him a long time to push forward and get back to how he used to be before. Even then, he was never really the same.”

“Did he um...” Annabelle stumbles as she tries to find the right word. “Did he ever get angry?”

“At times.” I’m choosing my own words very carefully because I want to hear everything she’s trying to tell me. I don’t want to lose her by pushing too hard or assuming.

“With you?”

“I was a teenager, so I’m sure I did plenty to upset him. Does your dad get angry a lot?”

Annabelle nods her head silently, and I watch as a single tear falls down her cheek. “He says it should’ve been me. The car ran the red light and hit my mom’s side. He says it should’ve been mine.” My heart instantly shatters and it takes everything I have not to react. “He drinks a lot now. Some nights are worse than others.”

“Annabelle, when he drinks, does he touch y—”

“No,” she quickly interrupts while swiping at her tears. “Not like that.”

“Is he violent with you?”

Annabelle begins to sob uncontrollably. Immediately, I stand and go to her. Placing my hand on her shoulder, I’m shocked when she wraps her arms around my waist and buries her face in my shirt. I knew something was going on with this poor girl. She’s been in my office this year more times than I can count, and I can’t help but feel as though I’ve failed her.

“I’m scared if I don’t get away from him, he’ll...” She sobs, unable to finish her sentence.

“I’ll take care of it. You’ll be safe, ok?” She doesn’t respond, and I don’t expect her to. All she does is squeeze me tighter.

When Annabelle's tears have slowed, I call Jackson and let him know what's going on. My next call is to the Department of Family and Protective Services. They will be the ones in charge of finding a safe place for Annabelle to stay during the investigation. After what feels like an eternity, I watch as Annabelle walks down the hall with the social worker.

"They'll put her in the group center until they find her a temporary home."

Jackson is standing next to me as he whispers the details I already know. If the allegations against her father are proven to be true, a teenager being placed in the system for the first time has a very little chance of finding a forever home. She'll bounce around for two years and then be kicked out the second she turns eighteen.

"Rory?" I look up at Jackson, his hazel eyes sad and full of worry. "There's no way you could've known."

"Yeah."

"You didn't give up on her, and you gave her a place where she felt safe enough to tell her secret."

"I know."

And I do know. Everything Jackson is saying is right. There were never any bruises or signs of abuse. A lot of teenagers act out for a number of different reasons. I only wish Annabelle would have trusted me sooner.

"I have to get back to the station. Do you want to come with me?"

"No." I exhale. "I'm going to grab my stuff and head home."

With a weary nod, Jackson reluctantly takes a step away from me. "I'll check in on you later, ok?"

My cell phone rings, and I glance over as it dances across my desk. "Ok, I'll talk to you soon."

Heading for my phone, I pick it up and check the caller ID. It's an Austin area code.

“Hello,” I answer.

“Hello,” the thick Texan accent replies. “May I speak with Aurora Monroe?”

“This is her.”

“Aurora, this is Brittney at GenCo Laboratory. We have your results from the genetic testing you had done a few weeks back. How soon can you come in for an appointment?”

JACKSON

*I*t’s our last night in South Padre. The academy starts in a few weeks and this mini vacation is just what I needed. Rory and some of her friends from school decided at the last minute to come here for spring break, and I jumped at the opportunity when Rory asked if I wanted to join them. I had met her college friends a few times over the years, and we’ve always had fun together. This trip is no different.

Standing at the bar, I watch as the bartender pours our shots into two dozen test tubes. When she’s finished, she pushes the tray toward me and I hand her the cash.

“Keep the change.”

She gives me a wink as I pick up the shots and make my way back toward the pool tables where our group is. Rory is sitting on the barstool with her phone in hand. I know she’s texting that dumbass boyfriend of hers. He didn’t come on this trip because he said celebrating spring break was juvenile. He’s pissed that Rory came and has been trying to ruin her trip by starting petty arguments since she left.

Walking up behind her, I grab the phone out of her hands before replacing it with a shot and then slip her phone into my back pocket.

“Forget about him,” I tell her. “It was his choice to stay at school and be miserable. Drink.”

Rory looks at the test tube in her hand and scrunches her nose at the pale pink liquid.

“What is this?”

“Pineapple upside down cake.” I smile.

Rory tips her head back and takes the shot. “Oh, that’s dangerous. I’m going to need a liver transplant by the time this trip is over.”

“Don’t worry. It’s our last night. You’ll be fine.” Looking behind me, I see that the other pool table is unoccupied. “How about a game?”

“I don’t know. I’m not very good at playing pool.” Rory hops off the barstool and grabs a cue.

“We could make it interesting?” I try to entice her.

This entire trip, Rory and I have been making little bets with each other. I originally started it because I was trying to get her out of the bad mood that the dumbass had put her in. But now, it’s become a fun game to see who can one up the other.

“What’d you have in mind?”

She picks up the chalk and sticks the end of the cue into the hole. Watching her hand wrap around the hard piece of wood as she mindlessly twists has my mind racing with dirty thoughts. I clear my throat and smirk at her.

“Why don’t we just play? That way it’ll give us enough time to think of a really good dare to torture the other with.”

“Works for me. Rack ’em.” She blows on the end of the cue, causing a puff of blue dust to go flying.

Playing this game of pool with Rory was a bad idea. Watching her bent over the table, ass up in those short jean shorts she has on, is doing nothing to help my game. Her body is too much of a distraction, and I’ve spent the majority of the time trying to hide my rock-hard erection.

Again, Rory is bent over the table, facing me. From where I’m standing, I can see straight down her shirt. The lace of her bra and curve of her breasts. It’s all right there in front of me. Trying not to stare, I look up and see her sparkling green eyes watching me. Her lips curve into a smile as she bites her

bottom lip. It's almost as if she knows what she's doing to me—and she likes it.

“Eight ball, right corner pocket.”

The clicking sound of the cue ball hitting the eight ball seems to echo through the noisy bar. Sure enough, she sinks her shot. I drop my head in defeat as Rory does this dorky, yet somehow still sexy, little victory dance.

“Phone, please.” She holds her hand out to me, palm up.

“All right, what's my punishment?”

Rory unlocks her phone, bypasses the many notifications from the dumbass, and begins furiously typing. She pauses for a moment to take another shot and then continues. The suspense is making me sweat. Or maybe that's because she has her body pressed up against mine now. The alcohol has caused her to drop all her inhibitions. Her finger swipes up on the screen, and I watch as a naughty smile lights up her face.

“Perfect.” She looks around and sees that her friends have all paired off with people they've met at the bar. “Jackson and I will meet you guys back at the hotel!” she yells out to them before grabbing my hand and leading me out of the bar.

“Rory, where are you taking me?”

“It's a surprise. Come on.” We step out into the warm night air, and she's back on her phone. “All right, we need to walk two—no, three—blocks that way. I think.” She points to the right.

“Will you just let me see the phone?”

This woman is directionally challenged in our hometown. There's no way I trust her to lead the way here in South Padre.

“Ok, but I need to hide the name. Just look at the map part.” Tippy Rory shows me her phone and keeps one hand covered over the top half of it. “Got it?”

“Yeah, we're good,” I reply while leading her in the opposite direction she originally said.

After about a fifteen-minute walk, Rory and I are standing in front of a buzzing neon sign that sits atop a dark brick building with no windows.

“Night Cravings?” I look at Rory and she just nods her head. “My reward for losing is watching naked women dance around a pole?”

“Well, not exactly.”

Before I can ask anything else, a group of about ten women get out of a hot pink Hummer limo. They are all dressed up and one of them has on a necklace of giant penises and a wedding veil. Rory grabs onto my shirt and pulls me along with her. When we walk inside, there is a hairy bear of a man on the main stage shaking his G-string clad ass to “SexyBack.”

“Rory?”

“Hey, how can I help y’all?” the man behind the podium asks.

“My friend here needs to get signed up for amateur night.”

“Rory?”

“Yummy.” The man behind the podium eyes me hungrily. “Lucky for us, we have one spot left.”

“Perfect.” Rory claps before the man hands her a pen.

“Rory?” Finally, she looks at me. “I can’t do that.”

She looks up at the man on the stage and makes a face. “You can, and you’ll be way better than him.”

Rory finishes filling out the paperwork, and the guy tells us to head toward the back of the building and look for the door marked “dressing rooms.” When we find it, it leads us down a long hallway broken off into smaller rooms. We walk into an empty one and find a rack full of costumes. Rory browses through the selection while I nervously look around. When I hear laughter, I turn my attention back to her. She’s holding up a police uniform, or shirt, I should say. The bottoms are nothing more than tiny leopard print nut-huggers.

“No fucking way,” I tell her while heading out the door.

“You can’t back down from a dare.” I turn and find Rory taking the shirt off the hanger. “I can swap the hot pants out for this sequined banana hammock if you’d like?”

I take in a deep breath and pull my tank top up and over my head. Rory’s walking that fine line between tipsy and wasted, and she can’t help but watch as I remove my board shorts next, leaving me in nothing but my boxer briefs. Her laughter stops as she takes in every inch of skin I’m freely showing. Watching her, I can’t help but notice as she swallows the lump in her throat. Closing the gap between us, I force Rory to look up at me. Her green eyes are dark and bore into mine. I watch as her chest rises and falls as her breathing quickens with each passing moment.

“You’re sure this is what you want?” She squints her eyes, unsure of what I’m asking. “You want me out on that stage so all those other women can look and touch what’s standing in front of you now?”

Rory licks her lips and leans into me. My thumb gently brushes against the small dusting of freckles that line her cheek. Just as her eyes close, there’s a loud knock on the door, which causes her to jump and move a good two feet away from me. Shit.

“Sorry to interrupt, lovers. But you’re up, handsome.”

Rory lets out a long, shaky breath and holds out the cop outfit for me to take. When I grab it, I allow my fingertips to graze over the back of her hand.

“I’m going to grab a big glass of water, sober up, and find a seat.” Rory hesitates for a moment and takes another long, hard look at me. “Good luck.”

JACKSON

PRESENT DAY...

It's Friday night and Vanessa and I are having dinner at the steakhouse in Hawk Bend. She flat out refused my offer to come to Austin tonight, insisting that she wants to see where I live. She's brought up coming here the last few times. Finally, I gave in. At least, that was the plan until work ran late and I ended up changing at my parents instead of driving all the way home. Thankfully, Vanessa was flexible with the last-minute change and met me here instead.

This is one of the nicest restaurants in town and not just because it's the only one with actual tablecloths and servers. John and Maggie have owned the place for the past thirty years, and their oldest is about to take over ownership full-time. Attached to the restaurant is a bar owned by the family as well, but the menu there is more on the casual side.

"Thank you for dinner," Vanessa says while I sign the credit card receipt. "This place is charming." I close the black receipt book and find her looking at me. "Just like you." She smiles.

"Well, I'm glad you liked it. We can go next door and grab a drink if you want? Show you a little more of this charming old town."

"As long as the tour ends at your place." Vanessa reaches across the table and links her fingers with mine. *Subtle.*

"That can probably be arranged."

Vanessa and I have yet to take our relationship to the next level. I could tell when I dropped her off after our last date that

she was slightly irritated by that. It's not from lack of attraction, because I am attracted to her. I just need to be sure I actually like her enough to want to call her the next day. And I think I might finally be there.

“So, drinks?”

“Yeah,” I reply, while standing up from the table. “We're just going to go through that set of swinging doors there.”

Placing my hand on the small of her back, I lead Vanessa through the restaurant. I smile at a few people I know until we're finally inside the bar. The atmosphere here is completely different. Loud country music blasts through the speakers and actually drowns out the loud voices of those letting loose after a long work week.

“Do you spend a lot of time here?” Vanessa screams at me.

“When I was younger. Not so much anymore.” We make our way to an empty table and I brush the discarded peanut shells onto the floor. “Do you want another glass of wine?”

“Please.”

Vanessa takes in the surroundings with an unreadable expression. She sticks out like a sore thumb, and I can tell she's pretty uncomfortable.

“I'll be quick.”

Walking up to the bar, I'm greeted with a fist bump from Ricky. Like me, he's lived here his whole life. He and Jameson were in the same grade.

“Jackson, what's happening, man?”

“Not much. How's Carley?”

“She's good. Only six more weeks or so until the baby gets here. What can I get for you tonight?”

“Coors for me and a glass of your house red.”

“Coming right up.”

Ricky turns around and grabs a wine glass and a pint from the counter behind him. Glancing behind me, I make sure

Vanessa is ok. She's scrolling through her phone, trying to look busy. Surveying the room, I spot Rory and Lyndsey over in the game area, playing darts with a couple of random guys. Lyndsey is flirting with one while Rory looks to be faking interest in whatever the guy talking to her is saying. Both girls have a drink in hand, and I watch as Rory chugs hers. I'm actually surprised to see her here since she called out from work today. She claimed to have a migraine, but I'm not buying it. She isn't handling the situation with her student too well, and I'd bet my last dollar that's the reason behind her call out.

"That'll be ten even," Ricky says, placing the drinks in front of me.

"Does Lyndsey have a tab going?"

"You already know she does."

"Put these drinks on her tab, and this is for you." I hand Ricky a ten-dollar bill.

"Anything to irritate her, huh?"

With a smile, I grab the drinks. "You know it. Thanks, Ricky."

With a glass in each hand, I rejoin Vanessa at our table. The two of us spend the next hour sitting and trying our best to make conversation over the noise. Before we leave, I walk Vanessa to the restrooms and wait for her in the hallway.

"Jackson, thank God you're still here."

Lyndsey is slowly walking toward me with Rory. Only Rory isn't really walking, she's more like dead weight leaning against Lyndsey. Quickly, I make my way to them just in time to catch Rory as she stumbles.

"How much did you let her drink, Lynds?"

Rory's eyes are half-shut, and she's trying to push me away. I grab hold of her wrists to prevent one of her flailing arms from smacking me. Being restricted causes her to focus, and when she finally realizes it's me, she relaxes and buries her face in the crook of my neck.

“You’ll have to ask Ricky. I was too busy talking to that guy. She showed up kind of tipsy, so the few drinks she had here could’ve pushed her over. Neither one of us drove here, otherwise I’d take her home myself.”

Rory says something that sounds like *home*, and I wrap my arm around her waist to better hold her up.

“I got you Rory. We’re going home.”

“Jackson?”

Shit, I forgot about Vanessa. I take Rory and gently pass her off to Lyndsey. Turning around, I see Vanessa looking at the girls. Let’s see how this plays out.

“Rory’s had too much to drink, and she needs someone to take her home.”

“Oh, ok. Do you want me to help you get her in her friend’s car?”

“No, I’m going to take her home.”

Vanessa narrows her eyes at me and straightens her shoulders. “You? Can’t you call her fiancé? There must be someone else who can take her? She’s already ruined one of our dates.”

“No, I’m not just going to pawn her off on someone else. Especially in the current condition she’s in.”

“Fine.” Vanessa sighs while opening her purse and pulling out her keys. “I’ll follow you to her place and then we can go back to yours.”

“Actually, it’s probably best if you go home.” Vanessa cocks her eyebrow at me. “She’s had a rough week, and I’m going to stay with her and make sure she’s ok.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Get home safe.”

Vanessa turns and heads toward the exit sign. But before she opens the door, she storms back to me. “You’re pathetic, Jackson. She’s marrying someone else, and you’re still choosing her over me.”

“It was never a choice.”

This time I’m the one to turn away first. I walk back up to Lyndsey, appreciative of the fact that Vanessa and I were too far out of earshot for her to hear anything. Kneeling just a little, I wrap my arms around Rory’s thighs and lift her up and over my shoulder. Everyone in the bar is watching, and I’m sure she’ll never live this down, but right now it’s the fastest way to get her out of here.

“Lynds?” Rory mumbles.

“Jackson has you. Just don’t puke on him, ok?”

Thankfully, Rory doesn’t puke on me, but we have to pull over twice on the way home. Instead of bringing her back to the townhouse, I bring her to my place. It’s quiet, and when she wakes up tomorrow, she can rest with no outside interruptions.

By the time I pull up to the front porch, Rory is still shit faced but slightly more coherent. With my help, she’s able to hold most of her own weight as I lead her straight to the bathroom. Wrapping my hands around her waist, I lift her up and set her down on the counter. Rory rests her head against the wall and eyeballs me. Grabbing a washcloth from under the sink, I wet it with cool water and place it on her cheek.

“That feels good.” She hums.

“Rory, you can’t drink yourself stupid over the Annabelle situation.”

Rory snorts and takes the washcloth from my hand. “That was just the tip of the iceberg this week. My life went straight *Titanic* after that. Crash—boom.” Rory slams her fist into her palm for dramatic effect.

“What are you talking about?”

I pour a little mouthwash into a dixie cup and hand it to her. She swooshes the liquid around and I hold her hair for the third time tonight so she can spit it out into the sink.

“I’m positive for the BRCA genes.” Rory refuses to make eye contact with me. “Yay me. That’s where I was today. They

make you come into the office to give you bad news.”

Fuck, this isn't good. “Rory—”

“Don't, don't, don't,” she interrupts me. “I just need to not think about it tonight. That's the only reason I drank so much.” She closes her eyes and smiles. “It made me feel happy for a minute. Then I felt sick. But now I'm here with you, and I want to feel happy again. So shhhh.” Rory presses her nose against my cheek and my entire body freezes.

“Ok, so we're back to being happy. How about we shift to sleepy?”

“Sleep sounds fantastic.” Rory's fingers curl around the hem of her shirt, and she lifts it up and over her head. “Whoops, there goes my top!” she exclaims while tossing it across the bathroom. I've seen Rory in a bikini more times than I can count. This is exactly the same thing, I keep telling myself. “What comes off next?”

Rory reaches behind her and fiddles with the clasp of her bra.

“Nothing,” I quickly scold her. My fingers wrap around her wrists as I pull her arms back in front of her.

“You're blushing, Jackson.” Her drunk giggles are echoing off the tile. “How come you never liked me *like that*?”

“This is not a conversation that we need to have right now.”

“Is it my body? Because I've never really seen you date a thick girl.”

“Rory—”

“I mean, I know you like your woman super thin or whatever. But my body is fucking beautiful.” Rory's hands cup her breasts as if to emphasize what she's telling me. Little does she know she's preaching to the choir.

“Rory, everything about you is fucking perfect,” I confess, because I know she won't remember any of this in the morning. Now it's her turn to blush. Before she can respond, I

lift her off the counter and place her back on her feet. “Now it’s time for you to get some sleep.”

The two of us walk into the bedroom. Once inside, I hear the zipper of Rory’s jeans, and I’m too late to stop it. Even drunk and off balance, watching her peel off those skin-tight jeans has all the blood rushing to my cock. *Fuck, Jackson, look away.* But, I can’t.

Once she’s done, Rory crawls up my bed toward the pillows, and I’m forced to watch the way her ass jiggles in those black lace panties. The soft flesh of her thighs right there in front of me. I turn to grab a T-shirt out of the drawer and when I turn back, she’s sprawled out in nothing but her bra and underwear on top of my duvet. It’s like every fantasy of mine come to life. My cock grows painfully hard as it pushes against the zipper of my jeans.

“Jackson?”

“Yeah.” I clear my throat. “Let’s get you in a T-shirt.” I sit on the edge of the bed and lift Rory into a sitting position. I help get her head through the hole and then her arms. “You’re all set.” Before I can stand, Rory grabs hold of my forearm.

“Thank you for taking care of me.” Then it happens. Her lips are on mine, kissing me in a way she never has before. It only lasts a few seconds, but it’s enough to ignite every single nerve ending in my body. “Night.” She exhales while laying her head on the pillow.

Without a word, I get off the bed and head right back to the bathroom. I shut the door and pace back and forth like a crazy person. A drunk Rory has always been a flirty Rory, but she’s never been this direct. Stopping in front of the sink, my hands go white as I grip the tile. I turn on the faucet and splash cold water on my face. Crap, it isn’t enough. My dick is so hard it hurts.

Pulling back the shower curtain, I turn the water on and strip. Not caring that the water is still cold, I stand directly under the stream. Closing my eyes, the only thing I can see is Rory, half naked on my bed. The image forever burned into

my retinas. There is only one thing that is going to calm me down and get me back to rational thought.

My hand grips the base of my cock as I slowly stroke it up and down. A highlight reel of Rory plays behind my eyelids with the last image I have playing over and over. I can still feel her soft lips on mine. The way her body felt pressed up against me. Moving my hand faster, I grip my dick tighter and let out a low moan.

The fullness of her breasts as they practically spilled out of her bra. The roundness of her ass as she crawled up my bed. Picturing those soft, thick thighs wrapped around my head. *Shit*, how I'd love nothing more than to pull her hair from behind and watch my cock slide in and out of her wet pussy. To hear her call out my name as her orgasm tears her apart.

“Fuck.” I grunt, shooting my cum onto the tile in front of me. Every muscle in my body is tense until my orgasm finally lulls.

With my face directly under the stream of hot water, I feel both a sense of calm and guilt. Rory was vulnerable tonight, and here I am. Her trusted friend, jacking off to her in the shower, while she's passed out drunk. I can't go on like this. She needs to know the truth about how I really feel about her. This has gone on long enough.

RORY

Stretching my arms up and over my head, I slowly open my eyes. The small amount of daylight peeking through causes me to shut them once more. Awesome, yet another hangover. I've really got to get my shit together.

Forcing my eyes to open again, I blink away the blurriness. This is not my house. It takes me a minute to realize where I am. Jackson's. I don't even remember seeing him at the bar last night. I wonder if Lyndsey had to call him to come and get me.

Sitting up, I look down and notice that I'm not wearing the clothes I had on yesterday. In fact, all I'm wearing is one of Jackson's T-shirts. I lift the hem and let out a sigh. Thank God. I still have my panties on. It's stupid of me to even check. It's not like Jackson would take advantage of me. He's had plenty of chances over the years and never did. Standing, I move to his dresser and grab a fresh T-shirt and a pair of sweats. I need a shower to wash this funk off of me.

When I turn and make my way toward the bathroom, I glance down at the bed. Jackson is laying on his stomach with his arms propped under his pillow. He's in nothing but his tight boxer briefs. My eyes take in every inch of perfectly toned flesh. With his arms like that, the muscles in the upper part of his back are flexed. My eyes travel down his spine to where the lettering of his tattoo is. *Not until we are lost do we begin to find ourselves.* I've seen that tattoo hundreds of times, but this is the first time I've ever wanted to run my tongue

over it. Jackson stirs, and I rush into the bathroom, locking the door behind me.

Pull yourself together, Rory. It's been a really shitty week, and Jackson is your comfort. That's all this is. He's your safe place, and your hormones and your head are getting confused. This little pep talk I've been giving myself since February is getting old. Maybe a cold shower will help with more than just the hangover.

Turning on the water, I remove my clothes and step into the tub. Pulling the shower curtain shut, I stand there for a minute and allow the water to wash away all the emotional crap I've been holding onto. My mind goes back to yesterday, and I think of Brad and I sitting in the little conference room at GenCo, hearing the results. Then the argument that ensued at his place right after. Closing my eyes, I push that thought from my head.

Reaching for Jackson's body wash with one hand, I pick up his loofah with the other. I squirt a dollop onto the sponge and inhale the scent as I lather it between my hands. The familiar smell of Jackson engulfs me. I close my eyes and allow my mind to drift. Thoughts of Jackson help the memories of yesterday fade, replacing them with a heat that flushes my entire body.

The water is still cool, so I know exactly what my body is telling me. Thinking about Jackson is turning me on. Between dealing with the stress of Annabelle and now Brad, maybe a release will help me put those thoughts to the back of my mind. It needs to feel something other than disappointment and pain.

Lathering up my skin, I allow the roughness of the loofah to graze across my nipples. Slowly, I come alive, and the ache in my head dulls as the blood rushes south. Running the loofah over my slit, my body yearns for me to push deeper, but not yet. My mind goes back to Jackson. How incredibly sexy he looked lying in bed just now. How badly I wanted to run my tongue up his spine while my hands roamed over his body. I wonder how he would react. Would he reject me? Try to talk me out of it?

No, in my fantasy, he pins me down on the bed. His body is pressed firmly against mine as his mouth devours me. God, what would it be like to have his lips on mine? To feel him touch every inch of my body?

Dropping the loofah, I place my right foot on the ledge of the tub and press my back up against the tile wall. Unable to take it anymore, my fingers make circles around my clit. Over the years, I've imagined Jackson naked. I know his size is impressive, even though I've never seen it. But it's impossible not to notice things while being friends as long as we have. What would it feel like to be stretched and fucked by Jackson Nash? Would he be rough? Gentle? Shit, I bet he has a filthy mouth.

I bite my lip to stifle the moan that almost escapes. Just the thought of him has me feeling things I haven't felt in a while, maybe years. My fingers move faster, and I'm forced to bite my fist as my orgasm nearly rips me apart. My vision goes spotty, and my hearing becomes muffled. Removing my hand from my mouth, I look down and see a perfectly shaped bite mark. Holy crap. I can't remember the last time I came that hard. And now I'm supposed to walk out there and face him as if I didn't just touch myself in his shower.

Rinsing off the rest of the body wash, I turn off the water and reach for the towel. I can't even look at myself in the mirror as I dry off. The euphoric feeling is gone and quickly replacing it is guilt. Why does it feel like I just cheated on Brad? Women have fantasies all the time. This isn't anything different. Ok, maybe the fantasies are normally about famous actors or sports figures. Usually they're not someone you shared a bed with all night. Or someone still asleep in the other room. How did I allow these feelings for Jackson to get this far?

I finish dressing and throw my hair up into a bun. Gathering up all my clothes, I tip-toe out of the bathroom. Peeking through the bedroom door, I see Jackson is still asleep. Good. At least I don't have to face him right away. Making my way through the kitchen, I enter the laundry room and toss my clothes in along with the hamper full of Jackson's

things. After starting the washer, I make a pot of coffee. When Jackson finally wakes, I've been sitting on the rocking chair out on the front porch for almost an hour. It's just enough time to allow the guilt and weirdness I was feeling to fade.

"Why didn't you wake me?" Jackson has on a pair of black sweatpants and he's zipping up his Hawk Bend P.D. hoodie.

"I didn't know what time Lyndsey called you to come get me. So I figured I'd let you rest."

"Lyndsey didn't have to call me." Jackson sits down on the rocking chair next to mine. "I was out with Vanessa, and we happened to be at the bar."

"Shit." That woman must hate me.

"Yeah, she uh, she wasn't too happy."

"God, I'm so sorry. I'll apologize—"

"There's no need. We won't be seeing each other anymore."

"Ugh, now I feel even worse."

"Rory, if she would have been the one, she would have understood my loyalty. Good riddance."

"So, I guess she won't be coming to the wedding?" I try to joke, but then I remember my argument with Brad. "That is, if there even is still a wedding."

"Can we talk about what happened now?" I look at Jackson, confused. "You told me you got your test results back last night."

"Was I just a sobbing mess of a drunk girl last night?" I have absolutely no memory of anything that happened after my third beer. God only knows the things I said and did.

"There was no sobbing." The look on Jackson's face is unreadable, and I can only imagine what a fool I made of myself. "You actually wouldn't talk about it at all."

Looking out over the fields in front of me, I see a goose swimming with three little ducklings in the pond. The familiar

pain in my chest aches, and I'm forced to take a few deep breaths to avoid shedding tears.

"I'm positive for both genes."

"What happens now?"

"Now, I'm going to choose to have my ovaries removed. Maybe a complete hysterectomy. Depends on what my doctor thinks is best."

"When?"

"I don't know. Next summer, the one after. Maybe sooner. The closer I get to forty, the more nervous I get."

Jackson says nothing, only nods. The two of us have discussed more than a few times what would happen if I ever took these tests and they didn't come back in my favor. So, none of this is a surprise to him.

"How did Brad take it?"

"Not good." I snort. "He thinks I'm being rash and wants me to reconsider. You know, I've been nothing but honest with him from the moment we became serious. I told him this could be a possibility. He always said he understood."

"And now?"

"Now he tells me it's unfair to make this type of decision and take away his chance of ever having a biological child."

"There are other options. You can freeze your eggs, and then when you're ready, you can find a surrogate. He makes decent money, that can be an option."

I stare at Jackson in awe while he speaks. This is a topic I've never discussed with anyone. There was never a point because, until I was diagnosed, everything was just a bunch of *what-ifs*. So him being knowledgeable about what my options are means he did the research on his own.

"No." I shake my head. "This ends with me."

"Rory, you don't—"

“My great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mom. Now me. I won’t pass this on.”

Jackson and I sit in silence. He has no clue what to say to me, and honestly, I don’t expect him to. No one prepares you for a conversation of this magnitude. There isn’t a handbook anywhere. So I’m more than ok with his silence.

“Brad’s always known you’ve felt like this?”

“You know he has. The moment we got serious, I told him everything. I also told him I didn’t want children at all. He said that was fine because he didn’t think he wanted them either.” I wait for Jackson to tell me maybe one day I’ll change my mind, but he never does. “Now he tells me we should at least have one. That I should experience pregnancy and childbirth and then have the surgery. I guess now that I’m completely removing the option, he’s suddenly changed his mind about having a family.” I wipe the tears from my cheeks and look back out at the pond. “Even if I did want kids, carrying them would never be an option. He isn’t even understanding of the fact that pregnancy can speed up my expiration date. I don’t want to die and leave a child behind. It’s not fair.”

“Rory, you need to be selfish. You deserve to grow old and live a full life. You deserve the life your mom and grandmothers never got. If you decide you want children later in life, there are other ways. If Brad can’t get on board with that—”

“I won’t change my mind.”

“Then Brad needs to...”

Jackson doesn’t finish his sentence, but then again, he doesn’t have to. I know exactly what has to be done if Brad and I can’t see eye to eye on this. Situations like this can either bring a couple together and strengthen their relationship, or it can break them beyond the point of repair. With the wedding two weeks away, it’s something Brad and I need to figure out.

“You know, no matter what, I’m always going to be here for you.” Jackson reaches out and takes my hand in his. He

runs his thumb across my knuckles and the gesture sends a shiver through me. “We’ll get through it.”

Jackson’s eyes hold mine, and the way he’s looking at me is exactly how Brad should have. The words coming out of his mouth are the words I needed to hear Brad say. It’s funny how life sends you the people you need at the times you need them most. When life took my mother from me, it gave me Jackson. He is my soulmate. The bond we share with one another can never be matched. Lovers may come and go, but Jackson will always be my constant.



AFTER SPENDING MOST of the day helping Jackson with a couple of home projects, I ask him to drop me off before dinner. It would have been easy to stay there with him, hiding from real life. But I can’t run from my problems. I unlock the front door and hang my purse up on the hook. Flipping through the mail, I walk down the hallway toward the living room.

“I was starting to worry about you.” Looking up, I see Brad sitting on my couch. “I tried calling, texting. I even checked that locator app, but nothing.”

“My phone died sometime last night.”

“You didn’t think to charge it.”

“I didn’t want to.” I sigh, tossing the mail onto the coffee table.

“Where were you?”

His tone isn’t exactly accusatory, yet I’m still nervous to tell him. “Jackson’s. I got way too drunk last night with Lyndsey, and he took me home.”

“He didn’t take you home. He took you back to his place.”

I remain silent because it feels like Brad is trying to pick a fight with me. Right now, the only thing I'm thankful for is the fact that I changed back into my own clothes before coming home. Showing up wearing Jackson's sweats and no underwear would not have helped this already tense situation.

"Brad, why are you here?"

"You left yesterday, and you were so angry with me." Brad stands but remains on the other side of the coffee table. "Getting those results yesterday was a shock to me, too. As your soon-to-be husband, I felt like I deserved a right to express my feelings. You thought otherwise."

"It's my body and my decision."

"And it's a decision you've had years to think about and process. You're denying me my feelings."

"I'm not denying you anything." I can feel my frustration and anger rising to the surface, and I take a deep breath to calm myself. "Look, if you are dead set on having children, then I am not the woman for you. I'll never be able to give you that."

"There are doctors we can talk to." I shake my head. "Specialists we can see."

"No," I whisper, absolutely defeated.

"Do you love me?" Brad's dark eyes hold mine.

"Of course I love you."

"Then why won't you table this conversation until we can get a second opinion?"

"You told me once that when you get married, you want it to be a one and done. If I don't take action or if you somehow wear me down and I have a baby, there is a very high chance you will be a widow before we even celebrate our tenth anniversary." Brad deflates and I watch as my words slowly sink in. "Brad, you are right about one thing. I've had years to process this. If you need time, if having a biological child with your spouse is something you're not willing to budge on, then we need to call off the wedding."

“No.” Brad eats up the distance between us and grips my shoulders. “I love you, Rory.”

“But if having me and only me isn’t enough—”

“You are enough, baby.” Brad’s hands cup my face and he lowers his forehead to mine. “That’s not what I’m saying.”

He wraps his arms tightly around me as he pulls me close. The stress of the week is once again weighing heavy on my heart. When Brad doesn’t release me, I finally give in and wrap my arms around his waist.

“I will never have children, and you’ll never be able to change my mind on the matter. So, you need to be sure that this is something you’re ok with. That years down the road you will not regret the decisions made tonight.”

“I’ll never regret choosing you. If it only ends up being the two of us, so be it.” Brad pulls back and looks me square in the eyes. “That will be enough for me.” Brad presses his lips gently to mine, but the kiss only lasts seconds before he pulls me back into his arms. “I love you, Rory.”

I close my eyes and bury my face in Brad’s chest. “I love you, too.”

“Two more weeks, baby.”

Brad’s words cause my heart to do a somersault in my chest. Only it’s more like dread I’m feeling than excitement. My head keeps telling me I’m doing the right thing. But it’s my damn heart that won’t fall into line.

JACKSON

ONE YEAR AGO...

Sitting inside of our favorite Chinese restaurant, I look over the menu as I wait for Rory. She called earlier this afternoon and said she had some news to tell me. I told her it was kind of ironic because I have some news of my own that I need to share.

“Sorry I’m late.” She slides into the booth across from me and pours herself a cup of tea. “I stopped by my dad’s and lost track of time.”

“Don’t worry about it. I ordered those green onion pancakes you like.”

“Yes, thank you. I always forget they have those on the menu here now.” Rory twists her hair between her fingers before draping it over one shoulder. “I think I’m going to have the Mongolian beef. Are you getting orange chicken again?”

Her green eyes look up at me, and I smile. “Don’t act like you know me so well. I’m getting the general’s chicken this time.”

“Excuse me.” Rory chuckles. “Can I talk you into ordering it extra spicy?”

The two of us always end up sharing our entrées, so her request is not unusual. Thankfully, after years of sharing food with Rory, my tolerance for spice has gotten better. Now, I actually kind of like it.

“Yeah, I’m good with that.”

My eyes linger on her face as I try to figure out what her news is. Secretly, I'm hoping that she tells me she broke up with that douche, Brad. But if that were the case, I think she'd be the tiniest bit upset. Unfortunately. Despite my feelings for the guy, Rory actually seems to like him. Either way, I give their relationship another three to six more months, tops. The server drops off our pancakes and then takes our order. Once the small talk begins, I have to stop her.

“Rory, you're killing me. What's the news?”

I watch as she chews on her bottom lip, nervously.

“Promise me you won't freak out or anything?” She slips her hand inside her purse and digs around for something. When she finds what she's looking for, she pulls it out and places it on her left ring finger. Fuck me. “Brad proposed last night.”

Rory holds up her hand to show me the ring, and I feel the world around me go black. All I can do is stare at the diamond that takes up most of her finger. I swear I don't even breathe for a solid minute or two. It isn't until I feel her hand on top of mine that I snap out of it.

“Wow, I mean, wow.” I stumble through my words.

“I know, right? Honestly, I didn't think Brad was the marriage type. He really surprised me last night.”

“He's full of surprises, that guy.”

I fight the urge to remind her that Brad is full of bullshit, and that nothing he said in the past holds any truth in the present. Hell, this is the same guy who, when they first met, told her he didn't believe in marriage and didn't plan on having any children. Rory thinks she's hit the jackpot, finally finding a guy who feels the same way she does. It's just... Never in a million years did I think this would happen so soon and I'm worried. Next thing you know, he'll be telling her he changed his mind about having kids, too. He's just that type of guy. He says what she wants to hear and then uses the bait and switch to meet his wants and needs.

“Yeah, looks that way.” Rory is still looking at her ring, and it hits me that this is actually happening. I breathe in and push down all the pain I’m feeling. “Congratulations.”

“You’ll be my man of honor, right?”

“A man of what?”

Shit. I think I know exactly what it is she’s asking of me. The two of us have joked about this in the past, but now that the moment is here...

“You know. The person who stands at the altar next to me. They’re usually called maids of honor, but you’re a man, so you’ll be my man of honor.”

Since the moment I met Rory, all I’ve ever wanted to do is stand next to her at the altar in front of a reverend and all our family and friends. But I wanted to be standing there as the groom, not some bitch in a suit. I scrub my hands over my face and let out a deep sigh.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll be your man of honor.”

“Thank you.” Rory reaches across the table and gives me a tight hug. Discreetly, I breathe in her familiar scent of marshmallows and vanilla. When she finally pulls away, she takes a piece of green onion pancake and places it on my plate before grabbing her own. “Now, what’s your good news? Did you propose to Sharlyn?”

“Uh.” I hesitate. “No. We broke up.”

“Jackson, no. I really liked her. What happened?”

She was tired of feeling like she was always second best, and said that no matter what, she would never be my one true love. You know, the usual thing that happens with the women I seriously date.

“It’s no big deal. She wanted a bigger commitment than I was ready to give. You know me. Perpetual bachelor.”

JACKSON

PRESENT DAY...

The past two weeks are a total blur. I couldn't tell you where one day began, and the other ended. It's as if I was nothing more than an empty shell, pretending to be alive while cruising on autopilot. Last night at the rehearsal dinner, it finally hit me. This is it. Rory and I will never be more than what we are. I've been in love with her for more than a decade, and I never told her because I was too scared to lose her. But I *have* lost her. Three years ago when she dumped her glass of wine in Brad's lap, that's when it officially happened.

Last night, I stood beside Rory and listened as she and Brad went through their mock ceremony. The officiant even made a joke asking if he should skip the part where he asks if there's anyone who objects. Can I? No, of course I can't. If I didn't have the balls to tell Rory the truth after all these years, there's no way I could do it during her wedding ceremony. *Right?*

Standing at the entryway of the venue, I smile at the guests who are arriving. Next to me is one of Brad's cousins. The two of us have been placed here as ushers. We are to greet the guests and to make sure they know which side to sit on.

"Are you ok, man?" I look at Jonathan and give him a puzzled look. "You're sweating pretty bad. Do you feel ok?"

"Oh," I reply while reaching for the handkerchief in my back pocket. "Yeah. Bad hangover."

"I think Brad and the guys stashed a bottle of bourbon in their suite. Something about taking shots to calm Brad's

nerves. Maybe you should go take a couple of hits. It might make you feel better.”

“You know what? That’s actually not a bad idea.” I give him a slap on the shoulder. “I’ll be right back.”

There is no way in hell I’m going to Brad’s suite. I just need to take a walk and hopefully calm myself down. For the millionth time, I pull at the thin fabric of my bowtie. It feels like the damn thing is choking the life out of me. Unsure of which direction to head, I stand there for a moment.

If I make my way toward the parking lot, I can’t guarantee I won’t hop in my truck and hightail it back to Hawk Bend. Like the coward I am, I seriously contemplate that idea. It isn’t until I see my parents walking toward the building that I quickly change my mind and head in the opposite direction. There is no way in hell I can face my mother right now. She’ll be able to see right through me. Rounding the corner, I bump into Lyndsey, literally.

“Jackson, Jesus Christ.”

Reaching for her, I grab her by the elbows before she falls to the ground.

“Sorry, I wasn’t paying any attention. What are you doing out here?”

“There’s only ten minutes left until the ceremony. I have to find Skip and bring him to the bridal suite.” She eyes me up and down. “You look like shit.”

“Hungover.”

“Awesome. You better not puke on my dress when we’re up there.” Lynds brushes past me on her way to continue to find Skip. “Get it together, Jackson. You don’t want to embarrass Rory.”

I watch as Lyndsey disappears around the side of the building. Rory is alone in her bridal suite, and I don’t know how long it’ll take before Lyndsey is back. Do I go to her or continue to suffer in silence? I don’t want to do the latter anymore.

“Screw it.” I’m tired of being a coward.

Standing in front of Rory’s door, my hand hovers over the handle. My anxiety is at an all-time high, and it feels as if my heart is about to explode. Gripping the handle, I turn it and open the door. Rory is standing in front of a full-length mirror, adjusting her veil. The ivory-colored lace of her dress molds to her every curve flawlessly. My fingers itch to trace the line of buttons that run down the length of her spine and stop directly above her ass. When the door clicks shut, her eyes meet mine.

“You look gorgeous,” I mutter under my breath.

Rory turns to face me, giving me a brief smile. “So do you.”

Her smile fades quickly as she turns back to the mirror. She doesn’t seem as happy as one should on their wedding day. Maybe it’s just nerves, or maybe I’m looking for a reason to justify the hurt I’m about to put her through.

“I came to tell you that, uh”—I clear my throat—“I need to leave.”

“Leave?” She turns and takes two steps toward me.

“There’s been an emergency.”

“What happened? Is everything ok? Your parents?”

“No, nothing like that.” I take a step forward and see Rory relax a little. “My parents are fine. They’re here. It’s me. I’m the one who’s not all right.”

“Are you sick?”

“No.”

“Jackson, you’re worrying me.”

Rory’s gorgeous emerald-green eyes look at me with such concern, and I know I’ve got to rip this bandage off once and for all.

“I need to leave because I can’t stand beside you at the altar and watch you marry Brad. The thought of you spending the rest of your life with someone who isn’t me...it’s killing me.”

Rory's eyes go wide with shock, but she says nothing.

"There were so many times I tried to tell you how I felt, but I couldn't. The fear of losing you as a friend if you didn't feel the same was too great."

Taking another step closer, Rory continues to stare.

"I know my timing is horrible, and I'm so sorry. I really am. But I can't let you go out there without hearing the truth."

I lower my voice as if I'm afraid of someone else hearing my confession.

"That first day, when you walked into Ms. Rhodes class, I knew then that you were it for me. Over the years, you have been the only person I want to share my life with. Every single up and down, you've been there. I want no one else. You're the first person I think of when I wake up, and it's you I see when I close my eyes at night. I've memorized every freckle on your face and each fleck of gold in those gorgeous green eyes of yours. Your smile, your laugh, and every delicious curve of your body. I burned every single inch of you into my memory."

"Aurora?" There's a knock on the door and as I turn, I hear Rory take in a shaky, fast breath.

"I love you, Rory Monroe. I'm in love with you. And even if this is the only time I get to say those words to you, I'm glad you finally know the truth."

My hands grip her waist as I pull her close to me.

"Jackson, I—"

My forehead drops to hers, and she doesn't finish her thought.

"Jackson? What's going on here?" Skip enters the room and I know what this looks like.

Pressing my lips to Rory's cheek, I give her a kiss goodbye. "I love you."

Reluctantly, I release her from my grip and turn to face my chief and friend.

“Don’t worry, I’m leaving.”

RORY

*M*y mind is moving at a million miles a second as I try to process Jackson's confession. All this time. He's had all this time to tell me he's been in love with me. An entire decade, to be exact! Yet, he chooses my wedding day. Then he doesn't even give me a moment to process the information before turning and running away.

"Aurora."

My eyes look up, and I see the pale blue of my father's looking down at me.

"Did you hear what he fucking said to me?" My father sighs and wipes a tear from my cheek that I didn't even know had fallen.

"No, but I'm pretty sure I know what it was about."

"You knew Jackson was in love with me?"

"I've had my suspicions over the years."

My father is way too calm, which somehow makes me internally freak out even more.

"And you didn't think to tell me?"

"Aurora, the two of you were always on different timelines. He'd be single, and you'd be with someone, or vice versa. I figured whatever was meant to be would be. The friendship the two of you share seemed enough to keep you both happy."

“But now what?” What am I supposed to do now that I know the truth?

“Rory? Skip? Are you guys ready? The coordinator said it’s time. Man, she scares the crap out of me.” Lyndsey stands in the suite’s doorway, and I watch as her eyes soften. “Is everything ok?”

“Lyndsey, we might need another minute.” My dad gives my shoulder a squeeze, and I shake my head.

“No, I’m good to go. Let’s go.”

I grab my train with my left hand, my bouquet with my right, and walk toward the door. It’s time to power through this and face my future.

“Where’s Jackson? The drill sergeant has been looking for him. I haven’t seen him since I left to find your dad.” Lyndsey eyes me suspiciously, but I don’t have time to go into detail with her right now.

“He left.”

“What?”

“Aurora.” My father’s voice calls from behind me.

“He didn’t feel good.”

“Aurora.”

Lyndsey looks back at my father before her eyes settle on me. “I’ll give you two a minute.”

Once the door is closed, I let out a long sigh. “Dad, my wedding was supposed to start five minutes ago. Jackson had a decade to tell me how he felt. He lost his chance. Now, are you going to walk me down the aisle or am I going solo?”

My father shakes his head in defeat. “If your mother were here, she’d know exactly what to say. Hell, she probably wouldn’t have let the two of you carry on the way you did all these years, either. You’re sure this is what you want?”

“It is. Brad is... I *love* Brad.”

My father takes my arm in his and gives me a solemn nod. “Then let’s get you married.”

Walking outside, through the gardens, to the front of the old Victorian home, I can hear my father speaking, but I can’t make out a single word of what he’s saying. My mind keeps repeating the words that Jackson said to me over and over. Each step I take toward the entrance becomes heavier, and the pain in my chest grows stronger. Stepping into the foyer, I peek through the double doors. They decorated the inside to perfection. Sheer mint-colored draperies hang from the ceiling, creating a soft contrast to the dark wood rafters. The same mint color is adorned throughout the floor runner and in the floral arrangements that are spread throughout the room.

I see Brad standing at the end of the aisle. His eyes are locked on me. I’ve dreamed of this moment my entire life. How I would feel being the bride and watching as my future husband saw me for the first time. I envisioned myself grinning from ear to ear like a fool. Fighting back tears of happiness as I tried not to ruin my make-up. Excited about the future and what’s to come. But instead I feel nothing but dread. Pure panic at the thought that I’m making the biggest mistake of my life.

Watching as Lyndsey walks down the aisle, I see the look of confusion on Brad’s face when he notices that it’s my turn next. Jackson is obviously missing from the procession, and I have no clue how I’m going to explain all of this. When the wedding march plays, I inhale sharply and squeeze my father’s forearm.

“Just say the word and I’ll get you out of this.”

My eyes lock on his before moving back to Brad.

“Father of the bride and Rory, that song is your cue.” The wedding coordinator scolds, giving the two of us a little shove.

Like a robot, I do what I’m told. It’s as if everything is happening in slow motion. My eyes scan the room, and I see all the guests looking at me. The smiles on their faces are wide and happy. And then I see Jackson’s mom. She’s smiling, but

there is a sadness to it. She knows her son isn't here, and if she's anything like my father, she probably knows why.

"Dad," I whisper.

Only he doesn't hear me and keeps walking. Finally, the two of us are standing in front of the officiant and Brad. Brad reaches for my hand, but I pull back.

"Rory?" He speaks softly so that only those of us here in the front can hear him.

"Aurora," my father leans in. "This is it, baby."

"I can't do this."

"Rory, what are you talking about?" Brad takes a step closer, his voice sterner than before.

"I'm sorry, but I can't marry you."

Turning, I make my way back down the aisle and away from Brad. I'm running away from this marriage and our future, plus the life we've already started to build together.

"Rory!" Brad shouts my name, and I can hear the whispers from the guests as I pick up speed and run straight out the door.

Glancing around, I try to figure out what my next step is. I can't stay here and face everyone as they leave. My best bet is to hide back in the bridal suite and wait for the crowds and gossip to die down. Running through the gardens, I don't make it that far. Brad wraps his hand around my wrist and spins me to face him.

"Rory, what the hell are you doing?" His dark eyes are raging. He's angry and hurt and has every right to be upset.

"I'm sorry, I can't do this." The tears I've been holding in are flowing freely now. "I never meant to hurt you."

"Look, you're scared, I get it. We've had issues these past couple of months and you're having cold feet." Brad pleads with me. "Maybe we just need to take some time and postpone ___"

“No.” I shake my head, trying to make him understand. “I was wrong to let this go on as long as it did.”

“Where’s Jackson?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Brad lets out a dark laugh and runs his fingers through his short hair in frustration.

“That stupid prick. What did he say to you?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I knew he was going to pull something like this. For three years, I’ve watched how he looks at you. How he looked at me with such jealousy because I had what he wanted. Then, like a fool, I believed you when you told me you didn’t feel the same. I ignored every red flag. God, I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not. I was lying to myself, to everyone. The only thing I’ve known for certain these past couple of months is that this wedding isn’t what I wanted. I should have been honest with you about that.” Brad stares at me, his expression unreadable. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” he sneers. “Fuck your apology, and fuck you, too. You are by far the most selfish person I have ever met. You’re doing me a fucking favor.”

Brad storms off and leaves me standing there in stunned silence. He’s right. I’ve been incredibly selfish, but there’s one person who has been worse than me.

Jackson

After walking away from Rory, I drove straight home. About halfway to Hawk Bend, my phone started blowing up with calls from my mother and texts from Lyndsey and Skip. I didn’t even bother to read them or listen to the voicemails. Instead, I turned my phone off and threw it on the floor of my truck. One day soon, I’ll have to face the consequences of my actions, but not today. No, today I’ve had all I can take.

Now, sitting here at my kitchen table, in complete darkness, I continue to nurse my warm beer and my ego. It’s been hours, and by now Rory and Brad are probably sharing

their first dance as husband and wife. I confessed my love for her, and she still chose him. Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut and not told her how I feel. At least maybe then, I wouldn't have lost her entirely. Another *what-if* to add to my life.

It's time to put this pity party to bed. Taking another sip, I stand and dump the rest out in the sink. That's when I hear the tires on the gravel road. Looking out the window, I see a familiar pair of super bright LED headlights with a light bar in between them. *Shit*. Flipping on the light switches for the kitchen and the front porch, I make it outside just in time to see Rory stepping out of her Jeep.

"You asshole." She slams the driver's door shut and rushes toward me. Her hair and makeup are still done, but she's wearing a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt. No wedding dress.

Once on the porch, the two of us stand toe-to-toe. But instead of Rory saying anything else, she slaps me hard across the face. My head snaps to the side, and I rub the sting away.

"What the hell did you hit me for?"

"You had years, Jackson. Years. Why would you wait until my wedding day?"

"I don't know." Rory's eyes are puffy and bloodshot. But behind the obvious pain is anger, and lots of it. "Maybe it wasn't the best idea."

"Are you serious right now? You pulled the pin out of a grenade and exploded my entire life. Then you just walked away." The manic laughter that accompanies her words tells me just how badly I fucked up. "How could you do that to me?"

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? Oh well, that makes everything better."

Rory takes the two steps off the porch and walks back toward her Jeep.

"Did you get married?"

“Does it look like I fucking got married?” She throws up her arms and looks down at her clothes. “I should be dancing right now, drinking too much champagne, and throwing cake in Brad’s face. Instead, I’m here in jeans and a T-shirt, yelling at you.”

She opens the door to the Jeep, but I rush toward her, placing my hand on the car door and slamming it shut. Then I back away, giving her some space to breathe. She remains facing the vehicle, unwilling to look at me.

“Why aren’t you there, Rory? I walked away. I told you how I felt, and then I left.” Rory doesn’t look at me, so I continue. “If what I said meant nothing to you, you could’ve married Brad and continued your life as if nothing happened. Why didn’t you get married?” Taking two steps closer, the gravel crunches underneath my boots, filling the silence. “Is it because you feel the same way I do?”

“Jackson, don’t,” Rory warns me.

“Tell me.” I’m standing behind her now, and I watch as her breathing quickens. The warmth from her body radiates into mine. “Tell me why you didn’t marry Brad.”

She turns and pierces me with her gaze. Aggressively, her hands are on my chest, and she shoves me hard.

“You selfish bastard.” She pushes me again, and this time I stumble back a little. “You should have told me last night. Or literally any other time *except* today. You embarrassed me.” Rory continues to walk toward me. Each step she takes, I take one away from her. “I hate you!” she screams. She shoves me once more. “I hate you.”

She goes to push me one more time, but when she does, I grab hold of her wrists and slam her up against the door of her Jeep. I pin her arms above her head and firmly press my body against hers.

“You don’t mean that.”

Rory’s eyes are on fire as she holds my stare. I know this woman. She won’t back down once she’s this hot.

“Yes, I do.”

I catch the tiny hitch in her voice as she speaks those words. She's lying to herself and to me. My eyes travel down her face to her lips and then her chest. Her full breasts rise and fall with each angry breath she takes.

"No, you don't." My voice is low as I nuzzle her neck, breathing in her scent that I love so much.

She squirms, trying to break free of my grasp, and the movement only makes my dick harder. With a roll of my hips, Rory stills, and her eyes snap up to meet mine. She feels like a dream, like one of the many fantasies I've had over the years.

"Jackson—"

The way she breathes my name causes me to react. Like a magnet, my lips are on hers, and I capture the moan Rory lets out. This is actually happening. We're both coherent and sober and here. Rory bites my bottom lip, and I part mine for her. The sensation of her tongue against mine forces me to push deeper against her. The sudden need to feel her is too great to ignore.

I release her wrists from my grasps. Rory's fingers tangle through my hair before trailing down my neck toward my back. My hand moves under the hem of her shirt and palms her breasts. Over the lacy fabric, my thumb grazes across the nipple that's poking through. Her body shivers under my touch, and I can't help but smirk. Knowing that it's finally me causing this reaction in her makes me feel more alive than I ever have.

My lungs burn in need of oxygen, but I'm afraid that breaking the kiss will snap us back into reality. And I never want this to end. I've waited what feels like a lifetime to kiss and feel this woman underneath me. I don't want it to end here. My entire body is lit up like a firecracker on the Fourth of July. My heart is practically bursting out of my chest because having her finally makes it whole. Rory is the missing piece, and finally having her in my arms means she's home. But I have to remember that just hours ago, she belonged to someone else.

Breaking our kiss, my lips trail down her jawline. “Tell me what you want, Rory.” My lips move down her neck, peppering open mouth kisses along her soft skin. My hands continue to roam down her soft stomach and over the curves of her hips.

“I...” Rory grinds herself against my erection. “Oh, God,” she moans out.

“If we’re moving too fast, I’ll stop.”

The palms of my hands are squeezing her round, luscious ass that she’s shaken in front of me and teased me with unknowingly since the first day we met. The feeling of her nails running down my spine makes me not want to give her an option.

Finally, she speaks. “Take me inside.”

JACKSON

Just like I did at the bar two weeks ago, I lift Rory up and toss her over my shoulder. She squeals and swats at my ass.

“Oh my God, I didn’t mean that literally!” She wiggles on my shoulder, and I smack her ass before giving her cheek a hard squeeze. “Ouch, damn it Jackson. I’m not anorexic like the other girls you’ve been with. Put me down.”

“Thank God for that.” And I mean it, the last thing I need is for her to be self-conscious. She’s delectable and curvy and everything I’ve always wanted but could never have.

Taking the steps up onto the porch, I walk into the house. On the kitchen table sits the beer I was drinking earlier. I toss the bottle into the sink and then place Rory on the table instead. She stares at me, and I can tell she’s nervous. This is all unfamiliar territory for us. We’re about to cross a line that neither of us can come back from.

“Rory, you and I have too much history. We can’t compare ourselves to who the other has been with in the past.” My fingers play with the hem of her shirt before I slide my hand over her soft abdomen. “I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it a million times more. You are fucking perfect. You do this to me.” My free hand takes one of her own and I press it firmly against my erection.

Rory’s eyes snap down to where our hands are one, and I feel her grip me through my jeans. Instinctively, my hips rock

toward her, desperate for more. She licks her lips and mutters something incoherent under her breath.

“You’ve gotten me hard more times than I can count.” Her eyes rise back to mine, and I can’t help but notice how her pupils are blown out with lust. Her usually bright emerald-greens are now deep, dark pools of want and desire.

“I’ve thought about you, too.”

“Oh yeah? And what exactly did you think about?” My mind races at the thought that Rory Monroe has gotten wet thinking about me over the years.

Rory’s eyes stay locked on mine as she removes her hand from my groin. Losing her touch is almost too much to bear. She pulls her shirt up and over her head before tossing it onto the floor. My eyes roam down her body, pausing at her tan nipples that poke out through the thin lace of her bra. My mouth drops to one and I suck on it through the fabric. Rory lets out a sigh and drops her head back.

“I’ve thought about that.” She moans. “How your mouth would feel on me.”

I suck harder before taking the erect bud between my teeth and giving it a playful nip.

“What else?” I ask before moving to her other breast and showering it with the same attention.

Rory’s back arches as she pushes her chest out more for me. “I wanted to know what it would feel like to be underneath you. To feel your weight pressed against me.” My mouth moves to the exposed flesh just under her bra and I allow my tongue to trail down her abdomen. Tasting the salt on her skin. “I wanted to know how you would feel inside of me, stretching me, making me come.” My fingers undo the button of her jeans, and I quickly unzip them. “Oh God, this is really happening, isn’t it?”

Without looking at her, I smirk against her flesh. My fingers grip the waistband of her jeans as I peel them off of her, along with her shoes. My eyes travel from the tip of her toes to the top of her head. Rory is spread out on my table like

a feast. A curvy, delicious snack in lacy black underwear. My nose nuzzles hers and I close my eyes for a moment.

“So fucking beautiful,” I mutter. “This is the last chance you have to walk away. My restraint is slowly fading and I know once I taste you, you’re the only thing I’m ever going to want. Once I make love to you, you’re officially mine. I’ll never be able to let you go.”

Rory doesn’t respond with words. Instead, she kisses me. Her soft lips burn hot as the fire between us ignites. Slowly, I lay her down until her back is flat against the table. When I finally break our kiss, I crouch down on the linoleum, ready to worship this goddess in front of me. With my face buried in the lace of Rory’s panties, I breathe in her scent. The fabric is damp, and I feel my cock pulsate, knowing her arousal is all for me.

Through the fabric, I tease her. Rory arches her back and wiggles under my touch. I use this opportunity to remove her panties. My imagination is seriously lacking because she is better than anything I ever pictured. My tongue licks along her slit from entrance to clit, and I chuckle a little as Rory’s breath catches in her throat.

Her hands are balled into fists at her sides as she struggles to maintain composure. With the palms of my hands placed firmly on the back of Rory’s thick thighs, I push back, opening her up for me. This time, when I run my tongue up her slit, I go a little deeper. A groan escapes me as I get my first real taste of her. She’s unlike anything I’ve ever had before. I was right when I predicted she’d be the only thing I ever wanted. Just one drop of her on my tongue and I’m an addict.

Licking up her slit once more, this time I don’t purposely ignore her clit. My tongue draws small circles around the swollen bud. Rory runs her fingers through my hair and pulls as I suck harder. The sounds she’s making cause me to grow even harder, and I’m forced to undo my own jeans to give myself a bit of a relief.

“Jackson.” Rory moans as she grinds her pussy against me.

“Do you need more, baby?” I suck hard on the flesh of her inner thigh, leaving a small mark.

“Oh... Jesus... yes.”

Rory squirms and pulls my hair, trying to reposition my face to where she wants it.

“Do you want this?” My finger teases at her entrance before sliding deep within her. Damn, she’s so wet and tight.

“More,” she cries out.

I slip another finger in and stroke the sensitive spot deep inside of her. Rory bucks each and every time I hit it. She pulls my hair once with obvious frustration that my mouth still isn’t where she wants it.

“Use your words, Rory. Tell me how badly you want to ride my face until you come. How you want to taste yourself on my tongue when you’re finished.”

“Yes, please. It’s been so long, Jackson.”

Long? Were she and Brad not—never mind. I can’t think about that now.

My fingers pump in and out of her, and with each thrust, I feel her body tighten more and more. I suck her outer lips and watch as she squirms to move closer. With my hand on her abdomen, I hold her in place for me.

“Tell me what you need, baby.” This is just as torturous for me as it is for her.

“I need to come.” I look up and see Rory’s eyes on me. “Make me come, Jackson.”

While she watches, I take her clit between my teeth and suck. Rory’s eyes linger for a moment longer before collapsing back onto the table. Her walls clench tighter around my fingers and her thighs are trembling. At that moment, I know I have her.

When Rory’s release hits, her thighs squeeze tightly together, holding me in place as if her life depends on it. Every single wave that pulses through her leaves me wanting more. I

lap up her juices as her moans become softer and until the tightness in her body fades. Glancing up, I see the sheen of sweat that has settled over her skin. Her eyes are closed, and her thick curly hair is all messed up. She looks beautiful.

I take a step back, and Rory's eyes reluctantly open. She watches as I step out of my jeans. My erection peaks out of the waistband of my boxer briefs, and I can't help but palm it over the fabric. Rory sits up on her elbows and licks her lips. Her eyes are glued to my crotch, and I watch as they go wide when I finally remove the boxer briefs as well.

"Holy shit," she mutters. "You're going to kill me."

"What a way to go, though, right?"

Her eyes drift up to meet mine, and she smiles. Suddenly, I'm too far away from her. Closing the gap between us, Rory sits up on the table and places her hands on my chest. The tips of her fingers trace the lines of definition in my pecs before moving down my abs. She continues until her finger touches the tip of my dick. It's dripping with precum, and I watch as she swirls her finger around, coating the tip before bringing it to her mouth and sucking it off.

"Mmm, you taste delicious."

Fuck me. When she looks back up at me, I grip the back of her neck and pull her in for a kiss. Rory moans into my mouth as my cock presses against her entrance.

"Do you trust me?" I breathe. "If you don't trust me, I'll get a condom but—"

It's been a while since I've been with anyone, and I know I'm clean. I also know she's on birth control, so we're covered. I'd love to feel her raw. But I'll do whatever Rory is comfortable with.

"I trust you, Jackson." Rory's eyes hold mine and then she says it. "Because I love you, too."

Her words hit me like a bolt of lightning, and I literally feel my heart explode. My mouth is once again on hers and when Rory's tongue enters my mouth, I enter her. With a gasp, her nails dig into my shoulder blades. I take my time, moving

inch by painfully slow inch. I want to savor this moment. Savor how she feels wrapped around my cock.

“Holy hell, you feel like heaven.” I admit through clenched teeth.

Fuck, I’ve never felt anything like her before. You hear people talk all the time about how different sex feels when you’re with the one. I always thought that was a bunch of bullshit because sex, in general, feels fucking fantastic. But they were right. Being with Rory, right now, like this, nothing in the past has ever come close to feeling this good, this right. She is my home.

Fully inside of her now, I slowly pump in and out, allowing her body to adjust to me. Rory’s foot moves up my thigh before she locks her ankles around my waist. Her bra straps fall to her elbows and I pull the lace cups down over her breasts. They are full and round, and I want to watch them bounce as I pick up speed.

“Jackson.” Rory’s lips brush against my ear. “Is this really happening?” Her tongue licks up my earlobe and I grip her hips, increasing my speed.

“Yes, baby. Finally.”

The tips of my fingers dig into her tanned, soft flesh as I bounce her up and down on my cock. My mind is moving a mile a minute as I try hard to focus on not coming too quickly. The fear that this is all a dream is still too real. Rory’s tits bounce against my chest with each thrust, and suddenly my concentration is broken.

“Can you come again? I want you to. I want to hear you scream my name while you do it.” My thumb moves to her clit and I apply pressure.

Rory’s internal walls clench down as she moans a yes. Rubbing her clit faster, I take one of her nipples into my mouth and suck. With my tongue flicking back and forth against the bud, Rory reaches another release. And like the good girl she is, it’s my name she’s screaming as she does.

With both hands back on her hips, I grip hard and chase my own orgasm. It doesn't take long before I'm there. My balls tighten, and I feel my cock swell; before I know it I'm shooting my cum deep inside of her.

"Oh, fuck, yes," I grunt out. My grip on her is so tight I know she'll have bruises tomorrow.

The two of us remain motionless. Both our bodies are slick with sweat that leaves us glistening under the pale amber light that shines down from above. The only sound for miles is our breathing as we cling to the high we just had. I'm scared to move, and I wonder if she feels the same. The line has been crossed; the bridge torched and burned to nothing but ash. This is our reality. I've laid my cards out, and she's done the same. I have no intention of ever going back to how things were, even though I fear Rory didn't give herself enough time to process everything before taking the plunge.

"Holy shit." She exhales. "I just had sex with Jackson Nash."

The two of us laugh and, paired with the movement, it causes me to slip out of her.

Moving my head back a few inches, I stare at her face. She's more beautiful than ever with this just fucked glow that lights her up from within. With my fingers, I brush back a couple of curls that are stuck to her face and tuck them behind her ear.

"I'm sorry I ruined your wedding and caused your life to implode. You were right to call me selfish—I was. Or am. I don't know. Either or, I should have told you before today." I take a breath and run the pad of my thumb gently across Rory's cheek. "But the thing I'm most sorry for is that I'm not sorry at all. I love you, Rory, and my only regret is that I didn't come clean years ago... especially now that I know exactly what I've been missing out on."

Rory rolls her lips and nods. "I'm not sorry either. You helped me realize I was about to make the biggest mistake of my life. Something I was too stubborn to admit to myself."

Rory bites her lip and looks down. “You’ve always been good at that.”

Taking her chin between my fingers, I lift her head back up to look at me. I can see a little bit of stress settling behind her eyes, and I know she’s worried about the repercussions of her actions.

“We’ll get through this, ok? Together.”

RORY

When I wake up the next day, the sky is still dark. Checking the clock on Jackson's bedside table, it says half-past five. I've only been asleep for a couple of hours. The body heat that radiates off Jackson is immense. Over the years, I've joked how he was a personal heater, always warm despite the season. But laying here with him naked, our limbs tangled together, my observation was an understatement. Jackson is a damn inferno.

Carefully, I untangle myself and place my feet on the cool hardwood. Memories of last night sit at the forefront of my mind as I replay the highlight reel. What a drastic turn my life has taken. Less than twenty-four hours ago, I was all set to be married to Brad. Today we were supposed to leave for our honeymoon. Looking behind me, I watch Jackson sleep and smile. I feel like I've traveled a million miles since yesterday, and I'm emotionally and mentally exhausted.

And this is just the beginning. There are going to be so many questions from so many people. Together, Jackson and I need to face my father, his parents, and our friends. But even worse, eventually I have to face Brad again as we exchange the pieces of our life the other still possesses. That confrontation is something I am not looking forward to.

Despite the mental exhaustion, my brain is too aware of everything to even attempt to fall back asleep. I grab a quick shower and put on a pair of Jackson's sweats and a T-shirt before making my way to the kitchen. When I see the kitchen table, I can feel the heat flood through me before settling in

my abdomen. Jackson Nash had his way with me right there. And there, I think as I look over at the living room couch. And again in the bedroom. *Twice.*

Along with arousal, I feel a wave of guilt rush through me. I'm a horrible person. To mimic Brad's words, I'm "selfish." I've never been the type to jump immediately from one man to another. Then here I go on my wedding day, leaving one man at the altar only to end up naked in another man's arms hours later. Telling him I love him, no less.

"I'm a horrible person," I say out loud.

Unfortunately, I have no way to absolve my sins at the moment, so I do the only thing I can think of; I clean. The pan Jackson used to make our omelets last night still sits on the old wood-burning stove. Just as our dirty dishes remain on the counter. Quietly, I get to work, hoping that by busying myself I'll be less likely to think about what a horrible human I've become.

After the dishes are done, I start a load of laundry, tossing in Jackson's dirty clothes basket along with the panties I had on yesterday. Then I make a pot of coffee before heading out to the porch and watching the sunrise from the rocking chair. Off in the distance, I see a family of deer grazing, along with a few ducks swimming in the pond. I close my eyes and take in a deep, cleansing breath, loving how clean and crisp the air feels out here. It feels like freedom, and I have to remind myself that no matter what I did or how much pain I caused, Brad and I are now free. Free of each other and all the obligations and commitments we made that I would not be happy with and, in the end, would have made him miserable as well.

"The kitchen's clean, the laundry's going, and there's a fresh pot of coffee made." Jackson's sleepy voice breaks through the silence. "What's going on in that head of yours? Regret?"

A small smile turns the corners of my mouth up, and I shake my head. He knows me too well. "No regrets. A lot of guilt, but that's to be expected, right?"

My eyes finally glance over to where Jackson stands, and he takes my breath away in the warmth of the morning light. The mess of his hair, the way his tan skin glows, and how his gray sweatpants hang sexily on his hips. His hazel eyes glow golden as they settle on me.

“Yeah, I think so.” He looks down at his hand and I notice he’s holding my cell phone. “Your phone was lighting up like a Christmas tree.”

Jackson steps out onto the porch and hands it over to me. It was dead, and I placed it on the charger before coming out here to enjoy my cup of coffee. Scrolling through, I see endless texts from my dad, Lyndsey, and Jackson’s mom. There is one from Brad, and I unlock my screen to see it in its entirety.

B: I want all memories of you out of my life. But I need some time to cool off first. I’ll reach out when I’m ready.

That’s fair. At least there wasn’t any name calling, or worse. If the roles were reversed, I wouldn’t be able to show that type of constraint. I choose not to respond. I’ll give him the time he’s asking for and when he’s ready, he’ll reach out.

“Everything ok?” Jackson watches me nervously.

“Yeah.”

Before I put my phone down, another text comes through from my dad. I send him a quick response that I’m ok so he can stop worrying, and then I turn my phone back off. Everything else can be dealt with later.

“I should probably get my cell out of the truck, too.”

“Probably. Your mom sent me a few messages, so I’m sure she’s been blowing up your phone.”

“How do you want to handle all of this?”

The empathy in Jackson’s voice tugs at my heart. Eventually, everyone will be happy for us. I mean, they love us, so they have to be. Right? But I know it won’t come right away. Jackson’s dad is very straight edge, by the book. He isn’t as forgiving with Jackson as he is with Jameson. It’s

almost as if he holds him to a different set of standards. And the way Jackson went about everything yesterday will not sit well with him. By now, the rumor mill has to be running wild as to why Jackson left the wedding, followed by me running away shortly thereafter. Mitch Nash must be sitting on his recliner stewing in the embarrassment.

“It’s spring break at school and since I’m no longer spending it in Mexico, I’m going to use the time off to hide away from the world.” I bite my lip and smirk at him. “Care to join me?”

Jackson lets out a sigh and holds out his hand for mine. I slip my hand in his and he gently pulls me to my feet before taking over my seat. He then pulls me into his lap, where I gladly curl up, resting my head against his chest.

“I’ve got the personal time to take. But I don’t know how your dad is going to handle it if I call out all week to violate his daughter. He might take that as an indirect form of insubordination.” Jackson’s hand dips under my shirt, and I feel his nails run ever so lightly down my back. “But you can hide out here as long as you want. Like you said yesterday, I’m the one who pulled the pin out of this grenade, so I’ll deal with the carnage first.”

Jackson thinks it’s his job to take the heat alone. But I won’t let him. I’ll talk to my dad before Jackson shows up at the station on Tuesday and let him know that the two of us have decided to move straight into a relationship. I’ll tell him that hearing Jackson tell me how he really felt allowed me to see how I had been suppressing my true feelings for him as well. And above all, to let him know that I’m happy. That for the first time in months, I can actually breathe without the weight of the world pressing down on my shoulders. I can’t guarantee Skip Monroe won’t pull some over-protective dad crap on Jackson, despite seeing him as the son he never had. But I’m sure hearing that I’m happy will ease any worry my dad might have.

After spending a few more quiet minutes rocking on the front porch, Jackson takes a shower while I make us breakfast. By the time he’s done, I’ve got a plate of chocolate chip

pancakes and some bacon waiting for him on the table. The table that I've disinfected three times since waking up.

"Smells good," Jackson remarks as he strolls back into the kitchen. "Mmm, chocolate chip, my favorite."

"I know." I laugh.

"It's kind of weird, huh?"

"What? Waking up the next morning and realizing the person you just had sex with for the first time knows absolutely everything about you? Yep, just a little."

I shake the can of whipped cream before squirting a dollop onto Jackson's plate. He hates it when the whipped cream physically touches his pancakes, so I make sure it's isolated to its own corner of the plate.

When I'm done, there is a bit of cream on the tip of my finger, which I mindlessly put in my mouth to suck off. The low growl that reverberates through Jackson's chest forces me to look at him. His hazel eyes are glued to my mouth as I slowly slide my finger out. When I look down, I see his sweatpants are now tented. Cocking my eyebrow at him, I watch as the look in his eyes turns from aroused to hunger.

"Something that little, huh?" The words come out slightly above a whisper as my mind starts to think all these dirty, naughty thoughts.

"Fuck, Rory. You have no idea." Jackson closes the gap between us, and I moan when I feel his erection press into me. "Do you know how much self-control I've had to have over these years to hide this from you?" Jackson rolls his hips and the material of the sweatpants rubs against my bare pussy.

Jackson's mouth hovers over mine as his hands grip the hem of my shirt before removing it completely. His eyes fall to my chest, and he lets out a satisfied groan. He palms my breasts in his hand and kneads them, slowly.

"They fit perfectly. It's like they were made just for me."

My own hands roam over his hips and then up his muscular back. He's wide and strong and so very fucking hard.

Every single inch of him. With my hands tangled in the short locks of his hair, I pull his mouth to my own. Unable to hold back anymore, I claim what is mine. And I'm lost. With just one kiss, Jackson has me hypnotized. Just like all those women I used to make fun of for fawning over him. I get it now. He's an absolute swoon worthy, panty dropper of a man.

With his hands behind my thighs, he lifts up, and I'm forced to wrap my legs around him. Without breaking our kiss, Jackson walks us down the hallway to the bedroom. He playfully tosses me on the bed before caging me in with his arms. His nose nuzzles the curve of my neck while his tongue darts out and licks down my flesh, finally ending between my breasts. Suddenly, he stops, and his head snaps up to look at me.

"Don't move," he warns.

Jackson steps out of the bedroom, and I hear his soft footsteps against the hardwood. When I hear him making his way back, my curiosity is piqued. Jackson enters through the door and holds out his hand. He's waving the can of whipped cream back and forth.

"You got a taste. It's only fair that I do as well."

Jackson shakes the can before spraying a thin white line between the valley of my breasts. I watch as his tongue licks up the cream, and he lets out a satisfied groan. He moves the can to my nipple and sprays a good-sized dollop and then does the same to the other one. The cold causes a shiver to run through me. I can't take my eyes off him. The sight of Jackson taking my breast in his hand as he puts my entire nipple into his mouth leaves me panting, wanting more. His tongue laps at my nipple, and I can't help but squirm and sigh as he flicks it back and forth. Once he's satisfied that he's licked that one clean, he moves to the other.

"Jackson," I breathe out, as my fingers pull at his short hair.

With a pop, he releases my breast and wipes the corner of his mouth.

“This is what you should’ve served me for breakfast.” He squirts another line of whipped cream from my rib cage to my navel. “You taste better than any chocolate chip pancakes I’ve ever had.”

His tongue circles around my belly button before devouring the remaining whipped cream off my skin. Following the last drop, he hovers at the waistband of the sweatpants I’m wearing.

“There are so many things I want to do with you, to you. So many things I’ve thought about over the years. But right now, I just need to satisfy this overwhelming craving.” Jackson pulls down my sweats and chuckles softly. “Have you seriously had no panties on all this time?”

I nod my head. “I didn’t wear any the last time I borrowed your clothes, either.”

Jackson nibbles his way up my inner thigh and sighs. “I’m jealous that my damn pants got to touch this before I did.”

The tip of his finger traces down my slit, causing me to rock against him, yearning for something deeper. Jackson throws my legs over his shoulders, and I watch as his fingers open me up wide for him. My body aches, and all he does is stare.

“Jackson?”

His eyes snap up to meet mine, and there’s no denying the spark in them. He’s getting off on torturing me.

“I’m just memorizing the parts of you I’ve only been able to imagine.”

Before I can respond, he buries his face in my sex. My back arches off the bed, and my toes curl as I feel his tongue delve deep inside me. I’m tender and sore from all the activities last night, but I easily forget as he devours me.

Holy shit, he’s good, too good. My mind has a brief flash of all the women I’ve seen Jackson with over the years, and I quickly force their faces to the back of my mind. Why he’s so good shouldn’t matter. He’s mine now. From here on out, only

I will enjoy all the hard work and effort he's put into mastering these skills.

With his mouth on my clit, the vibrations from his groans have me clenching the duvet cover tightly within my fists. Jackson's arm wraps around my thighs as he tries to hold me still. But it's no use. I grind against him, feeling that familiar warmth spreading throughout me.

My sensations are heightened, and I feel everything. The burn of his beard against the most sensitive parts of my skin. The way he's stretching me with not two but three fingers this time. And the way they drag painfully slowly against that spot deep inside me.

The fuse inside me is lit, and when the bomb goes off, I'm half off the bed, screaming out Jackson's name as I come. My body quivers with tiny aftershocks that I've never experienced before. These orgasms will be the death of me. They feel as though they're never ending, which is amazing and different at the same time. Jackson is different, and he doesn't deserve to be grouped with the other men I've been with.

With my eyes still closed, and my breathing not yet under control, I feel Jackson's powerful hands grip my calves and before I know it, I'm being flipped onto my stomach. He manhandles me like a rag doll. Or like a caveman claiming his woman. I never thought I'd be into that, but it makes me feel delicate and feminine. His impatience makes me feel desired, needed. And I want more, so much more.

He grips my hips and pulls me down closer to him. I can feel the bed sink under his weight as he places a knee on either side of me. Finally able to process my thoughts, I lift my ass in the air. Without warning, Jackson bites down hard on my right cheek, causing me to yelp.

"Sorry, I couldn't help myself. It's too damn tempting." The palm of his hand rubs away the slight sting. "Oops, that's another mark that's probably going to last awhile."

Looking over my shoulder, I catch the cocky smirk that plays on his lips. I hate hickeys and anything of the like. Usually I'd be pissed finding one on my body. Jackson knows

this about me, yet he's giving them anyway. I act put out, but the couple that he put on my inner thighs actually aren't too bad. Maybe I don't hate them so much after all, as long as it's Jackson who's marking me and no one else.

His palms grip my ass cheeks as he positions my entrance at the tip of his cock. I can feel him, the tip hard and engorged. Jackson's insatiable. He's like the damn energizer bunny, and his recovery time yesterday was almost nonexistent. It made me feel worshiped and sexy as hell. The look in his eyes, so hot and full of want. It's almost as if I can feel his thoughts before he even lays a finger on me.

"You're so wet, Rory." Jackson pushes just the tip of his erection inside me. "So beautiful." He pushes deeper. "So sexy." Deeper. "And all mine." Jackson growls as he bottoms out.

He holds still for a moment, and then I feel him move. The ridges of his cock, so thick and hard, drag against my inner walls. My body clenches tightly around him, refusing to let him go. He pulls all the way out, and I whimper at the loss of him. With a small laugh, Jackson slams into me once more.

"Don't worry, baby. I won't ever leave you wanting more."

Jackson wraps my ponytail around his hand and pulls until my back is flush against him. His hand releases the grip on my hair, only to replace it with my neck. He holds me firmly there but doesn't squeeze. His other hand roams freely over my body; he teases and twists my nipples as he bites down on my earlobe. Our bodies rock back and forth in a rhythm all our own.

"God, you're so deep." I moan while Jackson's hand drops to my clit.

"Yes, love. So. Fucking. Good." Jackson grunts.

The sound of skin slapping against skin rings loudly throughout the room. When I feel the muscles in his thighs flex, I know he's close. His fingers rub my clit faster now, and I'm forced to use the hand he has wrapped around my neck as

an anchor. Jackson turns my head to the side, and his mouth is on mine. Our tongues massage each other's, and it's too much.

Another explosion shoots through me, and I feel Jackson fight against my body as it tries to kick him out.

"So. Damn. Tight," he says, emphasizing each word.

I feel the moment he unloads inside of me. He lets out a primal roar as his cock spurts and spasms. The two of us collapse onto the bed, and I relish under the weight of this man. *My man.* Jackson pushes my hair off to the side and settles his face in the nape of my neck.

"My inner sixteen-year-old just gave me a high-five," he whispers, still trying to catch his breath.

"What?"

"Oh yeah, you're making all his wet dreams come true."

"Your inner sixteen-year-old?" I rest my cheek against his forehead as I listen to him breathe.

"Yeah." He chuckles. "Sixteen-year-old Jackson thought about having sex with you about two million times a day. At least."

"Be serious."

"I am. Only he wouldn't have known what to do with you. Back then, I was more of a taker than a giver. I would have left you disappointed instead of completely and utterly satisfied like you are now."

"Maybe it's a good thing we waited, then."

"Maybe." Jackson rolls off me and sits up on his elbows. I turn my head to face him and see that hungry look in his eyes once more. My eyes glance down to find him hard again. "It won't stop me from making up for lost time, though."

JACKSON

*A*fter our morning spent in bed, Rory and I enjoyed a breakfast of ice-cold pancakes and bacon. Rory showered while I did the dishes, and then we hopped in the truck heading for her townhouse. Since she plans on staying a few nights at my place, she insisted on grabbing some of her things. I fought her on it, telling her how sexy she looks in my clothes—or even better, with absolutely nothing on at all. But I lost that argument. Once in the house, she heads straight for her bedroom. I’m left alone in the living room, staring at all the unopened wedding gifts.

“My dad or Lyndsey must have dropped them off yesterday. After...” Rory takes a step forward, standing at my side. “Since I’m off this week, I’ll go through them and make sure they get returned. There’s no point in putting it off.”

“I’ll help you.”

But Rory only shakes her head. “No, it’s my responsibility.” She glances at the packages once more before turning back to me. “I’m ready if you are.”

I know her. She won’t allow me to help with any part of the life she shared with Brad. Even if I’m the cause of all the extra work, she’ll want to do it solo. I’ll push a little harder on the matter, but not right now. Right now, I’ll let her continue to be stubborn.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

The two of us walk back out to the truck, and I open the door for her. Before she gets in, she reaches her hand under the

passenger seat and pulls out my phone. It must have slid under there after I threw it yesterday. She hands it to me, but it's dead. Usually, I'm required to have it on me at all times in case something happens with work and I'm needed. But since I had planned on nursing a broken heart and the worst hangover ever today, I'm on PTO, which means no calls.

On the way home, the two of us grab a couple of burgers and shakes from the Whataburger before heading back to the house. Coming up the gravel road, I see two familiar trucks parked off to the side of the house by Rory's Jeep.

"They couldn't even give us a day?"

"Huh?" Rory is busy digging a fry out of the bag and hasn't seen what I have yet.

"Our dads are here."

Rory's attention turns toward the house, and I hear the annoyed groan she lets out. "They must have planned this. It's too much of a coincidence."

"And I guarantee my father was the ringleader."

My dad seems relaxed, casually leaning against the side of his truck, both arms folded across his chest. He's a tall man, built like a brick outhouse, although he's more flab than muscle these days. Back in his prime, he was the star quarterback, just like Jameson and me, for a hot minute anyway. Instead of going pro or getting hurt the way my brother and I did, he had to turn down the college offers to stay behind and help his parents. As an only child, it's what they expected of him. Which is why he rode Jameson and I so hard about always playing our best and keeping our grades up in school. He kept our nightstands stocked with condoms to ensure we never got the girl we were with pregnant, trapping us here in Hawk Bend. Dad did everything he could to keep us out of trouble and on the right path, hoping one day we could live the life he never got to. It killed him when I got hurt. All those dreams he had would come true for Jameson, but not me.

Those shattered dreams didn't earn me any sympathy. Only the opposite. We fought constantly when I worked for

him at the garage. Then, when I went to the community college to get my AA in criminal justice, he claimed I was abandoning my responsibilities to the family. Hell, he didn't even talk to Skip for a month when he found out it was he who put the idea in my head. But over the years we've found a mutual ground, mainly thanks to my mom. But now, here I am. The fuck up once again. I can see it written all over his face as I pull the truck forward and eye him and Skip through the windshield.

"United front?" Rory places her hand on my knee, giving it a squeeze. All I do is shake my head. "Jackson, I can handle Mitch."

"Take the food and go inside with your dad. I'll join you in a few minutes." I don't say *we* because I have no clue if my dad will be staying after he's said his peace.

Reluctantly, Rory gets out of the truck. She briefly stops to say a few words to my dad, and then she and Skip walk into the house. Whatever she told my dad brought a smile to his face. He always did have a soft spot for her. Maybe I shouldn't have told her to go inside. She could have been our mediator.

Lifting the handle, I push the truck door open with my shoulder. My boots hit the gravel, and my dad takes a few steps closer to the porch. The two of us stand here, face-to-face, in silence.

"You just had to go and make a scene, didn't you?" His voice is low, but there is no denying the irritation.

Running my hand through my hair, I scoff at his words. "I didn't make a scene, Dad. I wasn't even there."

"You *were* there, and the scene that followed after you left *was* your fault." My dad takes another step closer and lowers his voice. "What compelled you to do what you did to that poor girl? And on her wedding day? She embarrassed herself in front of all those people." My father throws his hands in the air, exasperated with me. "And that fiancé of hers. You didn't even stick around like a man to face him. You ran away like a coward."

“No, see, that’s where you’re wrong. When it comes to Rory and how I feel about her, I was a coward. I’ve been in love with her for as long as I can remember. It took a lot of courage on my part to do what I did yesterday. If I was a coward, I would’ve kept my mouth shut and watched her marry that douche who didn’t deserve her.” My eyes drift up to the house, and I know for a fact Rory and Skip can hear our conversation. “I’m tired of having the things I want most in life taken from me. There was no way in hell I was going to let that happen with Rory. I couldn’t lose her, too.”

“The way you went about it was wrong. And your mother and I didn’t raise you to be like that.”

“Yes, you did. You, specifically, raised me to go after the things I want. And there is nothing I’ve ever wanted more in my life than her.”

My dad stares at me for a long, hard minute before he deflates. His proud shoulders slump and he nods his head in surrender or disappointment; one of the two. He runs his fingers through his short gray beard before sticking his hands in the front pockets of his jeans.

“You better mean what you say. That girl is not disposable. She’s not like some of the others you and your brother have brought around over the years. She’s too good for you.”

“Yeah.” I snort. “And I know it.”

My dad backs away, turning toward his truck. “Oh, and call your mother. She’s over the moon about this whole thing.” He juts his chin toward the house. “She wants to have y’all over to the house next weekend for supper.”

“Yes, sir.”

The old door on my father’s truck creaks open, but he hesitates before stepping inside. Even after Jameson bought him a brand new one, he still drives this old hunk of junk.

“I am happy for you, son,” he admits, still facing away from me. “Even if you did go about it in the wrong way.”

I watch as my dad gets in the truck and starts the engine. He backs away from the house and hollers out the window,

reminding me one last time not to forget to call my mother. When his truck is out of sight, I take the two steps up to the porch and walk through the open front door. Rory and her dad are sitting at the kitchen table waiting for me. I take a step toward Skip, fully prepared to apologize, but he stops me.

“I mostly came to make sure the two of you behaved.” He places his hands on his knees and stands up. “I have no objection to this relationship. Like your dad, I wish you would’ve come clean before the wedding and saved me some money.” Skip slaps my shoulder as he walks toward the still open front door. “By the way, you owe me five grand.”

His words confuse me a little, and my eyes dart to Rory for clarification. “I thought Rory and Brad paid for everything?”

With a deep laugh, Skip slaps me on the back once more. “Can’t blame me for trying. See you Tuesday.” He walks out the front door but hesitates. “Oh, and Jackson, you’re on traffic duty.”

Shit.

“Bye, dad. Love you!” Rory calls out after him.

“Love you too, baby.”

Once Skip is off the porch, I shut the front door and lock it. With a long sigh, I join Rory at the table. Her face is a mixture of sympathy and curiosity.

“You ok?”

“Yeah. It’s just another thing I’ve done to disappoint him. But honestly, this time I don’t care.” Rory laces her fingers through mine and the warmth of her touch grounds me. “He still likes you, though, so we’re good.”

“Well, I’m a very likable person.” She smiles. “Chocolate milkshake to make it all better?”

Rory waves the Whataburger cup in front of my face, teasing me. I grab her wrist and pull her closer. With my other hand, I remove the plastic lid and dip my finger into the cold, melting milkshake. Over the cup, I hold my finger out for Rory. She smiles as she moves her lips level with my finger. I

watch as she takes the entire length into her mouth. Those full, plump lips of hers snugly wrap around the digit as she swirls her tongue and sucks me clean. My eyes go dark, and I feel my cock grow hard. All I want to do now is bury myself deep inside of her and make her scream my name.

“I’ve got a better idea of how you can make me feel better.”



SITTING AT MY DESK, I’m trying to finish up the last of my reports. Skip has stuck me with traffic duty all week. He claims to be happy about my relationship with his daughter, but sticking me on traffic duty has me thinking otherwise. He’s punishing me, showing me how he can make my life hell if he wants. My thoughts are validated when Terrell walks in laughing.

“Shut up,” I grumble. I hate doing these stupid reports. Everyone does.

“It could be worse,” Terrell says, still laughing. “He could’ve shot you.”

“I’m sure the thought crossed his mind.”

“I know if it was my daughter you were violating, you’d be face down in a cornfield by now.”

“Comforting, thank you.”

“So you two are really a thing now, huh?”

This is the first time I’ve seen Terrell since the wedding. He wasn’t in attendance because some officers had to stay behind to work. Even a town as quiet as Hawk Bend still has its fair share of crime and issues that must be dealt with on the daily. But Nia, his wife, was there. And I’m sure she called him the moment everything went down.

“Yeah, we’re really a thing.” I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face.

“Damn, brother.” I look up to find Terrell shaking his head at me. “You got it bad.”

“I always have. Now I can just be upfront about it.”

“Bro, don’t lie.” Terrell picks up a file and starts typing on the computer.

“Don’t lie about what?”

“Always?” He chuckles.

“What?” Pushing aside my paperwork, I scoot my desk chair closer.

“Do you forget that I *know* you? All the badge bunnies you and I used to hunt at that bar in Austin during the academy and all the cop groupies you continued to conquer after. If you had been in love with Rory *always*, then what the hell took you so long to own up to it?”

“It was never the right time.”

“Riiight.” More laughter. It’s becoming irritating. “Funny how the *right time* ended up being the day she was supposed to marry someone else.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Nothing. All I’m saying is maybe you freaked out a bit, you know? Suddenly realizing you were about to lose your best friend. And maybe that selfishly manifested into feelings of love.”

“What the hell kind of psycho-babble is that crap?”

But I know exactly what Terrell is saying. I knew some people would think I selfishly confessed my love for Rory in an attempt to keep her from leaving me here alone. And I did, don’t get me wrong. I’ve already fully admitted to my selfishness. But what none of them will ever see is the decade long love I’ve felt for her. Our friends and this damn town can think whatever the hell they want. As long as Rory knows the truth, that’s all that matters.

“Look, as your friend, all I’m saying is you better treat Rory a million times better than you did the others. Because if you don’t, you’ll be wishing for traffic duty when Skip’s done wiping the floor with you.”

JACKSON

*A*fter Terrell's friendly warning, I finished the rest of my reports, hopped in the truck, and headed for home. Pulling up the drive, I spot Rory's Jeep parked in front of the detached garage. I pull the truck in beside it and step out. Having her here to come home to this week has been nothing short of amazing. This old house is alive with her here. It's so much better than the cold and dark that I'd grown used to. Going through the side door, I place my hand on the doorknob and twist, only to find it unlocked.

"Rory, I told you, please keep this door locked when I'm not home."

I step into the kitchen, and I'm immediately greeted by the smell of delicious food and music playing over the stereo. But no Rory.

"Rory?"

"In the living room," she calls out. "How was your day?"

"Long," I mutter under my breath. "You forgot to lock the door again," I yell louder this time so she can hear me.

"The front one's locked."

"Do you think serial killers and home invaders are opposed to coming through the side doors?"

"Southern ones, yes. It's bad manners for uninvited guests to use anything but the front door." Her words are heavy with the thick Texas twang she puts on whenever she talks about the old southern ways.

Smartass.

Removing my gun from the holster, I place it into the safe on the floor and then lock it. I hang my duty rig on the hook and then unlace my boots, leaving them by the mud bench. Once my nightly ritual is complete, I walk through the kitchen and stop dead in my tracks when I see her.

Rory is kneeling on the floor in front of the old fireplace. She's wearing nothing but tiny black shorts that could very well only be underwear, and she's paired it with a ribbed white tank top with no bra. Her hair's messily thrown up on top of her head, and I watch as she dips the paintbrush she's holding into the can of paint beside her. The sight of her on her knees, dressed in practically nothing, causes my cock to come to life.

“What are you doing?”

“Hey.” She looks over at me and gives me a smile that tugs at my heart and my dick. “You have been talking about painting this fireplace since you moved in. I'm getting restless hanging around here all day by myself. I might not be able to take the lead on any of the other projects you want done, but I *can* do this.” Rory glances back proudly at the fireplace and then back at me. “Do you like the color? I went lighter, so if you don't, it'll be easy to change.”

Rory leans back onto her calves and tosses the paintbrush into the metal tin. With the back of her hand, she wipes at her brow, pushing a stray piece of hair out of her eyes. I take two steps closer to her, and I watch as she arches her neck to look up at me. The pad of my thumb grazes across her plump bottom lip.

“Does this mean you like the fireplace?” Her gorgeous green eyes hold my stare.

“I love it.” My fingers work the buckle of my belt and slowly I pull it through the loops, tossing it to the side.

“Dinner's ready. It's keeping warm in the oven. Nothing special, just baked chicken.” Rory licks her lips as I pop open my button and unzip my pants. I see her nipples poke out

through the thin tank top and notice her breathing getting heavier. “Are you not hungry?”

“Are you?”

Rory’s eyes travel down my body until finally settling on my crotch. My cock twitches under her gaze, and I watch as a slow smile spreads across her face. I widen my stance, allowing my pants to drop to the floor. Rory’s fingers grip the waistband of my boxer briefs, grazing the tip of my cock as she pulls them down just enough so my entire length is free of confinement. Greedily, her eyes soak me in. She wraps one of her paint splattered hands around the base of my dick and then looks up at me.

“I’m hungry for you.” Direct and practically breathless. I like it.

Her words send a tingle straight down my spine. I fight the urge to grab her by the hair and slide my cock down her throat. With my fists clenched tightly at my sides, I grit my teeth as Rory flattens her tongue and licks up the shaft. She then twirls her tongue around the tip, stopping at the slit to lick up a drop of precum that’s seeped out.

“How do you want it?” She strokes my length and looks up at me.

“In your mouth would be a good place to start.” I’ve been waiting for this moment and, now that it’s here, I’m eager to get the show on the road.

“Hmm, obviously. But I meant more like slow? Fast? Do you like your balls played with?”

“Holy fuck, yes, yes, and yes. Just give me something, baby. You’re killing me.”

Rory has that smug look she gets when she feels like she’s one upped me. She thinks she has me at her mercy with this game. But little does she know that over the years I’ve let her win more times than I can count. But not tonight, not right now. I’ll be winning this round.

Sweetly, I run my fingers through her hair until I have a good enough grasp for a firm grip. Rory is once again teasing

me, and I wait until she wraps her lips around the tip before pushing myself further into her mouth. Her eyes go wide with shock, and I can't help but laugh a little as she gasps and chokes on my dick.

“Don't bite me.”

Her liquid-green eyes snap up to meet mine. I can tell she wants so badly to say something. She's a fighter and has never been one to put up with my shit. But she's also too turned on to stop me. It's a battle she will not win. The scoreboard tonight reads Jackson, one. Rory, zero.

I know the moment she decides to not tease or fight with me about this. Her throat relaxes, and I feel my cock slide further in.

“Holy shit. God, you're so damn sexy right now.” At my praise, Rory sucks a little harder. “Good girl, just like that.” Maybe if I give her enough compliments, I can talk her into greeting me with a blowjob every time I come home.

Rory's hand continues to work in rhythm with her mouth and her free one reaches up to play with my balls. At first she's gentle, like most are. But then I feel the strength of her grip increase. Releasing her hair from my hand, I bring it down to the one she has cupping my balls and I squeeze. I let her know just how much pressure I like and just how much I can take. Most women are afraid to use this amount of strength on such a sensitive area. But this is how I like it. Give me a little pain with my pleasure. But Rory isn't shy. She's a quick learner, and soon I'm able to just place my hand back behind her head and let her do her thing. I watch as Rory's eyes tear again, and her cheeks hollow out even more. Her increasing speed and suction have me feeling the telltale signal in the base of my spine.

Pulling Rory's hair, I remove her mouth from my cock. Kneeling, I kiss her swollen lips long and hard while gripping the round globes of her ass firmly in my hands.

“I don't want to finish in your mouth.” My lips kiss the corner of her mouth before moving down her jaw. “I want to come inside you. I want you to feel my cum dripping out of

you while we eat dinner. Then when we're done, I'm going to fill you up again."

"Yes, Jackson."

Rory shimmies out of her little shorts and then lies on the floor. I unbutton my uniform shirt, allowing it to fall off my shoulders before it hits the floor. Next to go is the Kevlar vest. I undo the Velcro and pull it up and over my head. Finally, I cage her in with an arm on either side of her head. Rory's hands dip beneath my undershirt, and I close my eyes, enjoying the way her touch feels against my bare skin. With my cock at her entrance, I slide home, bottoming out on the first stroke.

Rory's back arches, and she moans in response. She's so wet, and I haven't even laid a finger on her yet. I pull out and push in once, twice, three times until I find a speed that won't get me there so fast.

"Reach down and play with yourself," I tell her. "I want to be inside you when you come."

I feel her hand slip between our bodies and I glance down to watch as Rory pleasures herself. Her slender fingers massage the swollen bud and when her speed increases, so does mine.

"Jackson," she cries out. "You feel so good."

"So do you, baby. So good. And this view, holy crap."

Her thighs are quivering and with each stroke of her clit, her breathing becomes heavier and heavier. God, she's beautiful when she comes undone.

"Jackson, I'm—oh God."

"Fuck yes," I groan out. "Me too. Come with me Rory."

With my permission, Rory erupts from the inside out. Her walls clench down tightly around me, forcing my own orgasm at the same time. The two of us cry out in pleasure as we ride the waves of pure ecstasy before collapsing onto the hardwood.

My lips are once again on hers as the overwhelming need to hold on to this feeling for as long as possible hits me. The tips of my fingers trail down her neck and arm. Despite the warmth in the room, my touch causes her flesh to break out in goosebumps. I smirk, breaking our kiss, and stare down at her. Rory's eyes are closed and my mind races with thoughts that would normally scare the crap out of me.

"Move in with me." The words come out faster than my brain has time to process the thought.

Rory opens one eye and shakes her head. "You're crazy."

"I'm serious."

"Jackson, I can't move in with you."

"Why not?"

"It's too fast."

"Fast?" How could she possibly say that we are moving too fast?

"You know what I mean." Her eyes meet mine, and they soften when she realizes I don't. "Jackson, right now I'm technically still supposed to be on my honeymoon. With another man. You and I have known each other forever, but this part is still very new."

"So how much time do you think you'll need?" I'm not going to lie, I pictured this going very differently in my head. "A couple of weeks, a few months? What?"

"I was with Brad for three years and we never lived together."

"But I'm not him."

"I know that." Rory sits up and starts looking for her panties.

"Are you telling me it's going to take years before you'll know if you want to live with me?"

"No, yes." She sighs. "I don't know." The two of us sit there quietly for a moment. A million different things run through my head. "Look, I love you. More than I've ever

loved anyone else. This week has been a whirlwind, and even though I don't regret what's happened or how it happened, I still can't go from being your friend to your girlfriend—much less a live-in girlfriend—in less than a week.” Her hand cups the side of my face and I can't help but lean into her touch. “I just need time.”

The reality of her words hits me, and I nod. She's right. The two of us will burn out before we even have a chance if we don't slow down. I've always been the more impulsive out of the two of us. To me, it seemed like moving in together would be the natural next step. With our years of friendship, I know we are compatible. But Rory's more logical and she's right. Our relationship has completely changed. We have a solid foundation built on friendship and trust, and we need to make sure we give this new stage the time it needs to be just as strong as the others.

“You're right,” I finally agree. “But be prepared, I will ask again. Especially if you keep wearing little outfits like this and making food that smells as delicious as that.” I point over to the kitchen.

“I'm sure I can manage that a few times a week,” she says. “Without changing my address.”

RORY

The mid-morning sun shines warmly through the window of the local breakfast joint in town. It's been almost a week since I've seen Lyndsey. I've felt bad dodging her numerous phone calls and texts, so I invited her to hang out with me today while Jackson is at work. Plus, I figure she will undoubtedly have questions—specific questions—that are not safe for work. Taking a sip of my coffee, I hear the bells over the door chime and look up to see her walking in. I give her a small wave and worry a little because of the expressionless look on her face. She takes a seat and picks up the menu that's laying in front of her. Without a word, she studies it as if it's her first time here.

Plucking the menu out of her hands, I motion for the waitress, who comes over to our table. “I will have your breakfast biscuit with bacon, and she'll have the banana nut waffle with no powdered sugar. And more coffee when you have a minute, please.”

The waitress smiles as she heads to the back to give the cook our order. Lyndsey crosses her arms over her chest and leans back in the chair.

“You know, I thought I only hated it when guys ordered for me. But, no. I didn't like it when you did it right now, either.”

“You were trying to make me suffer with your silence.” Lyndsey shrugs. “Every time you come here you get the same thing, and have, since high school.”

“You ignored me for almost an entire week.”

“I know.”

“You were a runaway bride.”

“I know.” I exhale.

“And then you didn’t even call me afterward to let me know if you were ok. I’m your best friend.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. It’s just—” How do I even begin to explain these past six days? “Everything happened really fast, and I needed time to process.”

“So.” The waitress comes to the table and places a coffee mug in front of Lyndsey and pours each of us a cup. “Have you had enough time to process that dick of his?”

The waitress jumps—shocked at Lyndsey’s choice of words—and spills a bit of coffee onto the table. I quickly grab some napkins and clean up the mess while apologizing to her. The older woman walks away with a huff and I roll my eyes.

“Can you not?” I glare at Lyndsey. “It’s bad enough when I walked in here, everyone stopped and stared at me. You could hear a pin drop in the kitchen while all eyes were on me for a good thirty seconds.”

“Good. Let the old-timers gossip. It’s about time there was some drama in this little town.” Lyndsey stirs the creamer into her coffee and places the spoon back on the table. “So, you’re really with Jackson now, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Why does it still feel so awkward to say that out loud?

“God, Rory, that’s so weird. I mean, it has to be right?” Lyndsey puts her elbow on the table, then places her chin in her hand. “Have you guys had sex yet?”

A smile I can’t stop spreads across my face. “Yeah.”

“And there was no awkwardness?” I shake my head. “Not even a little?”

“Lynds, it’s so hard to explain.” I sigh and chew on my bottom lip for a moment. “Have you ever been with someone

where everything just clicks? Emotionally, mentally, and physically? Like everything is just perfect?”

“Nope.”

“You’re not making this very easy for me.” I tap my finger on the table, trying to think of a better way to explain. “It’d be like if you and I had sex—”

“Whoa, now. Don’t be getting greedy. You can’t have all of us,” she teases.

“Shut up, you know what I mean. Jackson and I are friends—best friends—and we have fun together, enjoy most of the same things. And we have all of these amazing memories. It’s like skipping the most awkward parts of a relationship. Like... dodging all the bullshit of dating and getting to know someone only to find out in a few months or years later that they weren’t who you really thought they were.” I smile and take another sip of coffee. “Jackson and I get to skip all that. We get to pass go, collect two-hundred, and be happy.”

“Damn, he’s got you dickmatized. Those Nash brothers have a way about them, don’t they? So, I got to know.” Lyndsey takes a quick glance around us, making sure the sweet little old waitress isn’t in earshot. “Is he?” Lyndsey holds out both of her index fingers, about an inch apart from each other. “Or?” Dramatically she moves them a good foot apart.

With a smirk, I take a sip of my coffee. “Definitely closer to the latter.”

“Damn, those two hit the genetic lottery. I bet their dad—”

“Stop, I can’t go there.”

“Sorry, I’ve been on a romance reading binge where the main character breaks up with her boyfriend, only to rebound with his dad.” I give her a blank stare. “What? It’s hot. Don’t be judgy.”

“Might be time to switch to non-fiction for a bit,” I tease. “He asked me to move in with him.”

Lyndsey chokes on her sip of coffee, and I hand her the last napkin on the table. “Already? Is he crazy?”

“Yeah.” I laugh. “Probably. I told him no. I love him, but I need time.”

“Are you worried about burning hot and then flaming out?”

“Not really. It’s just...he’s ready to jump in feet first and worry about the consequences later. I’ve never been able to do that.” If I’m going to change my ways for anyone, it’ll be Jackson. Yet, the idea still scares the crap out of me. “I just need time to wrap my head around everything. Time to realize this is all real. I’ll get there, eventually.”

The waitress returns with our food and a sour expression on her face. She’ll no doubt be praying for the two of us in church on Sunday.

“Well, he’s been patient this long. Don’t let him be a dick and force you to move faster than you’re comfortable with.”

“Yeah.”

I don’t admit it to Lyndsey, but Jackson moving too fast *is* something that worries me. When he asked me to move in with him yesterday, I had to force myself to remain open-minded and have an actual conversation with him about his feelings. If it was any other man asking me to move in with him this quickly, I would have walked out and blocked the guy’s number. Maintaining my independence has always been super important to me and, so far, no one has really been worth giving it up for. But Jackson is. So, I can’t behave that way with him.

“So, what do you want to do after this?” Lyndsey asks in between bites.

“Do you feel like helping me with some maid of honor duties?”

Ok, so there was a slight ulterior motive for asking Lyndsey out for breakfast, besides catching her up on everything.

“Jackson was your man of honor, remember?”

“Yes.” I sigh. “But I don’t want his help with this.” Lynds cocks her eyebrow at me suspiciously. “I have to go through all the wedding gifts and figure out how to return them.” She groans around the bite of the waffle she just took. “I’ve got a couple of bottles of that two-buck chuck you like from HEB.”

“Fine. But you’re buying my breakfast and I’m going to want pizza for dinner tonight, too.”

“Deal.”



RETURNING to work after a holiday break is always filled with forced interactions and conversations. After all, it’s polite to ask your co-workers what they did during their time off—which is proving to be quite awkward for me on this Monday morning.

When I enter the teacher’s lounge, the few faculty members who are already in here are speaking in hushed tones. Hushed tones that stop the minute they see it’s me. There are lots of sympathetic smiles and apologies for my wedding that didn’t happen. It’s funny, it’s the same type of sympathy I received when my mom died. But with the condolences also come a few congratulations. The coworkers who I’m close to gush over my newfound happiness with Jackson, telling me how lucky I am to have dodged the bullet.

By the end of first period, it feels as though I’ve spoken to every single adult and half of the senior girls. Mentally, I’m already exhausted. Prepping my call sheets for the rest of the day, I hear my office door click shut. Looking up, I find Jackson leaning up against it.

“Where have you been? Usually I see you before the first bell.”

“I feel bad for every person I’ve ever interrogated.” He rubs his temples and closes his eyes. “Literally every person I came in contact with had a minimum of fifty questions for me.”

“Yeah, it’s been an interesting morning.” I open my side drawer and reach inside. “Aspirin?” I shake the bottle.

“Only if you have a six-pack of beer for me to chase it down with.”

“I’m fresh out. But we are in a high school, so I’m sure you’ll be able to find alcohol somewhere.”

Jackson walks over to me, places both hands on the armrest of my chair, and bends down. His nose nuzzles my own and I close my eyes, allowing his touch to melt away the stress of the day.

“You take the edge off better than any aspirin or beer can.” His lips brush against mine and all too quickly, they’re gone. “I slept like shit without you last night.” Jackson stands tall before taking a seat in front of my desk.

“Poor baby.”

After being together every night since my wedding day, Jackson wasn’t shy about telling me how unhappy he was that I insisted on sleeping at my place last night. With my vacation being over, I needed to get back into my routine; I decided to sleep at home last night because my routine involves having access to my closet and anything else I might need. But I slept like shit without him, too. Even though I won’t admit that to him right now.

“I’m glad to see the change in our relationship didn’t soften you any. I wouldn’t know how to react if you were suddenly sympathetic toward my feelings.” The smirk on his face tells me he’s kidding. But then his face turns serious. “I got a call from the social worker regarding Annabelle Baucom’s case. The investigation’s complete and Annabelle’s claims were found to be true.”

“All right.” I sigh. It kills me to know the things that poor girl had been dealing with while living with her father. Also,

the reliving of it each and every time she'll have to tell her story. "When do you think the trial will be?"

Jackson looks away from me and glances out the window. "Rory..."

"Please tell me the department is recommending his case be brought to trial?"

"Of course we are. But Baucom has no priors. The district attorney will more than likely offer him a plea deal."

My eyes sting with tears I won't allow myself to shed as I shake my head in disgust. "The system is bullshit. Piece of crap parents and people like that should have to pay for what they've done. These poor kids don't get a choice. They have to live with it forever."

"You're right. It's fucked up. But she's safe now."

"Maybe."

Jackson gives me a sympathetic look. He's fully aware of the nightmare tales that leak out regarding kids in the system.

"We won't know anything for a while. Maybe we'll get lucky and he'll screw up somewhere and then a trial can happen."

"Fingers crossed," I grumble.

"Hey." Jackson stands and picks up his chair, placing it beside me. He sits and spins me to face him. "I know it's hard to compartmentalize this crap. What we see with kids." Jackson closes his eyes as if he's trying to block out the images that are flashing in his mind. "It's something you never get used to."

My thumb grazes over the stubble of his short beard as I cup his face. He opens his eyes and the emotion behind them is foreign. Jackson, like my father, doesn't openly share the day-to-day happenings of being a cop. It's like if any part of their job touches their personal life, it'll somehow become jaded. It's almost like living a double life.

"I'm here, you know. If you ever want to talk."

This isn't the first time I've offered him my ear. Maybe now he'll finally accept it.

"Right back at ya." But, just like that, he's done with this topic, and I see the switch flip inside him. Jackson spreads his legs and pulls my chair closer to him. My knees rest on the insides of his muscular thighs. "Do you know how many times I've thought about having sex with you in this room?"

"Here?" I ask as he nods. "In this dingy little office of mine?"

"Well, to be honest, there are quite a few locations in this school I've envisioned the two of us naked in. Football field, behind the bleachers, locker room, locker room shower—"

"I get the hint." I smile.

"Right." Jackson licks his lips as his eyes roll back. "But seeing you sprawled out on this desk, ass up, pants around your ankles, panties pushed off to the side. Watching as my cock moves in and out of your wet—"

My hand is over his mouth before he can finish. "You can't talk like that here," I warn him. My cheeks are hot, and I'm squeezing my thighs together tightly. The ache in my core throbs. I can still feel him there after all the times he's taken me this past week.

Jackson grabs my wrist and moves it away from his mouth. He brings my fingers to his lips and kisses the pad of each one.

"The last thing I want to do right now is talk."

He leans forward, that hungry, starved look in his eyes. Jackson wants to fuck me on top of my desk, and I'm going to let him. His lips hover over mine, but before they meet, there's a loud knock on the door, snapping us back into reality.

"That's a student," I stumble through my words. My brain, still unable to process any thoughts outside of Jackson and his cock.

"Don't make me sleep alone again tonight."

Another knock on the door.

“Just a second!” I yell to my waiting student.

“Rory?”

Little does Jackson know, I already packed everything I need from home. My little duffle bag is in the trunk of my Jeep as we speak.

“I’ll be there when you get home.”

RORY

Three weeks have passed since Jackson, and I crossed that line in our friendship. A line that had been blurry for far too long; one I'd refused to acknowledge.

Making the leap of faith from friends to lovers was one of the easiest things I've ever done in my life. The first day I met Jackson, I knew there was something different about him. Not long after, I knew he would be in my life forever. It sounds stupid to say, but I've always felt like maybe my mom put him in my path for a reason. My mom always knew what I needed better than anyone. I think maybe she knew how badly I would need someone, especially after she was gone and we moved. I think she knew I'd need someone to help replace the friends I was leaving behind in Chicago. Someone to help me adjust to my life here as the new kid. Jackson did all that. He made the pain of losing my mom and my old life somehow less painful.

These last few weeks the two of us have fallen into our new way of couplehood quite nicely. Any awkwardness felt on my end is now long gone. There is still a small amount of lingering guilt I have over how our relationship came to be and, of course, about Brad. It's hard not to. Even though I wasn't in love with Brad, I *had* love for him. And the breakup is still so fresh. He finally texted me a day ago, saying he was ready to meet up and exchange the things we had left in each other's homes. Closing the door on that chapter of my life will help. I have no clue what to expect when I see him; nor do I know what he'll say to me. Whatever it is, I deserve it, and I won't argue the point.

But Brad will have to wait because this weekend we are celebrating Mitch and Leann's wedding anniversary. At five sharp, Jackson's truck pulls into my driveway. The deep rumble of his exhaust always alerts me of his arrival. My high heels clack against the laminate floor as I make my way toward the garage door. Once inside, I hit the button and wait as the door slowly rolls open. Jackson steps out of his truck and leans against the side. He's dressed in a black suit, dark gray dress shirt, and a black tie decorated with a gray filigree pattern. His hair and beard are both freshly trimmed. It's a rare sight seeing him all fancied up, but damn, he looks good when he does.

Jackson, with his head bowed, walks in my direction. When he finally looks up, he stops dead in his tracks and removes his sunglasses. His light hazel eyes take in every inch of my body from head-to-toe. The look in them is one I've gotten used to over these past few weeks. In them holds an incurable hunger and want that's focused solely on me. Usually when he looks at me like that, my clothes almost immediately come off. That thought alone causes a sudden warmth to spread through my abdomen and I'm forced to press my thighs together. *Jesus, Rory quit being such a sex crazed maniac.* Jackson takes a step away from the truck and smiles.

"You look amazing," he finally manages.

"Thank you." Glancing down, I run the palm of my hand over the silky black fabric of my dress. The formfitting pencil dress falls an inch below the knee and has a sexy slit up the back. Black polka dots adorn the see-through material of the three-quarter length sleeves. This dress has a retro feel to it, almost rockabilly, which is why I love it. With my curves, it makes me feel like one of those classic pinup models. "You look pretty good yourself there, handsome." I smirk.

Jackson runs the palm of his hand over his hair and gives me his signature cocky grin. "I clean up pretty nice, don't I?"

"Always have."

The two of us are now standing mere inches from one another. The air around us carries a charge of electricity. It's crazy to think it's only been a few hours since I last saw him. I literally left after his T-ball game was over. Yet, I'm desperate for him, for his touch. If there was enough time, I'd drag him into the house and have my way with him. Or better yet, I'd let him throw me against the side of the truck, hitch up my dress, and take me right here for all the neighbors to see.

“Rory?”

Jackson's voice cuts like a knife through my dirty thoughts. “Hmm?”

“I asked if you were ready?”

“Oh, yeah, I am.” I turn away from Jackson and walk to the passenger side of the truck.

From behind me, Jackson lets out a pained groan. “Damn it, Rory.” His hands are on my ass as he runs them over my curves. “The sight of you makes me want to do illegal things.” I turn slightly as he opens the truck door. Leaning into him, I place my hand on his chest.

“We can break a few laws later. Or maybe I can, so you're forced to cuff me.” Jackson raises his eyebrows, liking the sound of that. “But right now we need to leave or we'll be late.”

“Fine. But don't think I'm going to forget what you said about handcuffs.” He shuts the truck door, and I can't help but smile at his promise.



WALKING INTO THE BALLROOM, I feel more like myself. My raging hormones have thankfully calmed, and I no longer feel the urge to rip Jackson's clothes off. Although this is our first official get together as a couple, I feel good. There aren't any

nerves like I expected. But why would there be? I know all of Jackson's family and have for years. Another perk of falling in love with your best friend.

Glancing around, I spot a sea of familiar faces. Jackson's parents have lived in Hawk Bend all of their lives, as did their parents before them. It doesn't surprise me that most of the town is here. Even my dad, who hates dressing up for these types of functions, is standing off to the side of the bar talking to a group of men.

"Well, look who finally made it." Jameson's greeting cuts through the inaudible murmur of voices. "I thought maybe that piece of junk truck of yours broke down."

Next to me, I feel Jackson tense up. I reach out and place my hand on the small of his back for support.

"Jameson, wish I could say it's good to see you, but I'd be lying."

The two men stand face to face. Their physical similarities are so prominent, yet they couldn't be more different from each other. Jameson stands there in his pinstriped suit with a confident grin on his face. He knows how his presence alone irritates Jackson, and he loves every second.

"Don't worry Jackson, it wasn't you I came to say hello to anyway." Jameson snakes his arm around my waist and gives me a kiss on the cheek. "Rory, you're looking good, girl."

"Thanks. Good to see you, too."

Before he can respond, a tall, dark-haired woman with an amazing body rushes to his side. She's wearing a satin, slip dress the color of liquid gun metal. The slit on either side shows off her model-esque legs.

"Jameson, they are serving the wrong champagne. I specifically ordered Cristal for the occasion." Her heavy accent only adds to her exotic look. Even if I didn't recognize her from the pictures I've seen, I'd know who she is. She's far too glamorous to fit in with this crowd.

"Martina, calm down, baby. I'll handle it. I was just saying hi to my little brother."

Martina turns to Jackson and unashamedly checks him out. Practically eye-fucking him right there in front of Jameson and myself. When she's finished, an approving smirk dances on her lips. Instinctively, I move closer, feeling the need to claim and protect what's mine.

“Jackson, bienvenidos, amor. It's been too long since we've seen you,” she purrs. Martina places her hands on Jackson's shoulders and kisses either cheek. Her rich brown eyes finally meet mine and she cocks her eyebrow. “I see the Nash men have a type.” *Type?* The only thing this woman and I have in common is we are both Latina. Besides that, there's nothing. “¿Tú debes ser la novia? Es un placer conocerte finalmente.” Martina kisses me the same as she did Jackson.

Good, at least she recognizes that I am, in fact, Jackson's girlfriend.

“Igualmente. I've heard nothing but good things,” I lie, kind of. No one has outright said anything exceptionally bad about this woman, but from my first impression, I don't like her.

“So the rumors are true? You two are really a couple now?” Jameson's eyes bounce between Jackson's and my own. “Kind of fast, considering just a few weeks ago you were engaged to Brad.” Jameson turns to Martina. “Babe, you know Brad, the attorney I met with yesterday? The one who's helping me break my contract with the Chiefs?”

“This is who you were talking about?” Martina looks back at me and I can feel the heat rising to my cheeks. Finally, she glances at Jackson. “Your brother is better looking than that man. ¿Mejor en la cama también? ¿No? Smart choice if you ask me.”

“Um, thanks.” Jackson looks at me and all I do is shake my head.

Martina turns back to Jameson. “The champagne, mi amor?” She spins Jameson away from us and ushers him toward a woman standing near the entrance. The woman deflates a little when she spies them approaching.

As Jackson and I watch the two of them walk away, a server carrying a tray of champagne flutes offers one to us. Jackson and I both accept and take a sip.

“Tastes good to me,” I comment while sipping the crisp, bubbly drink.

“The woman’s a hurricane. Hard to believe Jameson found someone just as entitled as he is. Birds of a feather, though, right?”

After walking around the room and saying hello to everyone, they announce dinner will be served soon. Leave it to Jameson to host a sit-down affair instead of a casual buffet. Seated at our round table is Martina, Jameson, Jackson, their parents, myself, and my father. Both the wine and conversation seem to flow easily. Everyone is enjoying the good food along with each other’s company. Even Martina has relaxed enough to share a laugh or two with us common folk. It appears these two brothers can put their rivalry aside for the sake of their parents and there have been zero issues between the two.

Just after dinner, Jameson gets up from his seat and walks over to where the band’s been playing. The singer sees him approach and hands him the microphone. Once the music stops, Jameson turns on the mic and gives it a few taps, causing all eyes in the room to focus on him.

“Hey, y’all. First, I want to thank everyone for coming out tonight. I’m honored that you could be here to celebrate with us. As you all know, my parents have worked hard their entire lives to make sure that Jackson and I never went without. I’m happy to say at least one of us can now return the favor.”

Oh, crap. I spoke too soon. The low blow causes Jackson to tense beside me as he places his hand on my thigh. Leann looks back at him apologetically while Mitch keeps his gaze locked on the golden child.

“Yesterday, I had a meeting in town with one of the best attorneys in the area. This morning he notified me that my contract with the Chiefs is over, and the Houston Texans have made me an official offer.” Jameson reaches into the suit

jacket and pulls out an envelope. “Your son is finally coming home. Maybe this present will help us see each other more.”

Jameson holds out his arm and waves the envelope back and forth. Mitch and Leann glance at each other before Martina stands and motions for them to follow her. Together, the three of them make their way toward Jameson.

“Did you know anything about this?” Jackson is staring at me, the look on his face unreadable.

“No, it must have happened after.” I place my hand on top of the one Jackson has on my thigh. “Houston’s over a hundred miles away. You won’t have to see him.”

“I know.”

But before Jackson can say anything else, there is a small squeal coming from the center of the dancefloor. Leann has opened the envelope and is looking at the piece of paper that’s inside.

“A house, Jameson? You bought us a house?” Mitch appears to be in shock as he looks between Jameson and the flier Leann is holding.

“I did. I want my parents to be more involved in our lives.” Jameson snakes his hand around Martina’s waist and pulls her closer to him.

“You want us to live here?” Leann asks.

“Well, not full time if you don’t want to.” Jameson smiles at Martina. “But we’re hoping the two of you will be around more than not. Especially after this little one is born.” He places his hand lovingly over Martina’s flat stomach, and my mouth drops open.

Leann squeals again. This time, she pushes Mitch aside and wraps her arms around Jameson and Martina both.

“A baby, oh my God, a baby. I’m finally gonna be a MeeMaw, Mitch.”

“That’s why I bought you a four-bedroom house, Mom. You’ll need the space for all the grandbabies Martina and I are gonna give you.”

The guests all around us break out into cheers of congratulations at the joyful news. I glance at Jackson through my peripheral and try to get a read on how he's taking the news. My dad pushes his chair away from the table and stands.

"Well, I need another ginger ale. Congratulations, Uncle Jackson," my dad says before heading toward the bar.

"Are you ok?" My hand squeezes his and slowly his eyes meet mine.

He gives me a small smile and then kisses my cheek. "I'm good, but this champagne is going through me. Meet you on the dance floor?"

JACKSON

*A*fter making some dumb excuse to Rory about needing to pee, I leave the table and make a beeline out of the ballroom. Toward the front lobby, I see an alcove. The placard on the wall shows that's where the restrooms are located. When I reach the men's room, I push the door open with the palm of my hand. It slams into the wall behind it with a loud bang. Pacing back and forth in front of the sinks, I try to calm myself down.

I hate living in Jameson Nash's shadow. My entire life, he's always been the tiniest bit better than me. But since my football injury, that tiny bit turned into an entire ocean. Somehow my dumb ass brother has managed to make something of himself and can spoil our parents with the gifts of new cars, buildings, and now a damn house. The jealousy I never wanted to admit to is bubbling over. Which is why I needed to get out of that room. Away from everyone, including Rory, so I can calm myself down.

My knuckles are white from gripping the counter as I focus on breathing in and out. Suddenly, the door to the restroom swings open and there stands Jameson. He has that ever present smug look on his face, and all I want to do is punch him.

"Leave me alone." It's a warning. If he comes near me right now, I have no clue what I'll do.

Jameson takes two steps toward me, which allows the restroom door to swing shut. He stands in front of it, blocking

my exit.

“Why are you hiding out in the bathroom like a little bitch?”

“Jameson.”

He lets out a laugh and I feel him move closer to me.

“Don’t worry Jackson. Mommy and Daddy won’t be leaving you for a while. The house needs a few cosmetic updates so it won’t be ready until after summer. Quit your crying.” Jameson gives me a condescending slap on the back. “Besides, it’s not like you’re going to be left all alone in that podunk town, anyhow.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Rory. She almost made it out, but you somehow dragged her down to your level of loser. I mean, to choose you over Brad and a life outside of Hawk Bend. Then again, she never made the best decisions.”

“What the hell do you know?”

He doesn’t know a damn thing about Rory. Jameson is too shallow to know anyone, and Rory could never tolerate being around him longer than a few hours. He stands at the counter now, next to me, and our eyes meet in the mirror. So similar, yet so different.

“That girl could never make up her mind about what she wanted. I mean, there was even a time right after high school where I thought I was going to get the chance to nail her before you did.”

“You watch your mouth.” I turn to face him, but Jameson just laughs.

“She never told you, did she?” Jameson stares at me, my jaw tense and my fists clenched at my sides. He laughs. “No, of course she didn’t. She knows better than anyone how you and I are. She’s a hell of a kisser. Since that’s as far as I got before she changed her mind, you’ll have to tell me how she is in all the other areas I missed out on.”

Red, all I see is red. Without a thought, my fist connects with Jameson's face. His head snaps to the side, and a small amount of blood splashes onto the counter. Unfortunately, I didn't hit him hard enough to knock him out, and he's already facing me again, blood running out of his nostrils.

"You fucking hit me." He spits blood into the sink. I guess I got him better than I thought.

For a second, there's a part of me that thinks he won't fight back. But then I spot the moment his right hand twitches. When his fist comes at me, I quickly dodge it, which causes him to lose his balance. The small chuckle I let out tells him I have the upper hand, which infuriates him. The next thing I know, Jameson slams his body into mine and the two of us land with a loud bang against the bathroom stall.

"You can't beat me!" Jameson yells. "My training regimen is far superior to yours."

The two of us try to get the upper hand on one another, but it's not happening. We're too evenly matched, with equal strength, equal build. The thought pisses me off even more. I just want to be better than him at one thing.

"Yeah, but I have hand-to-hand combat training."

"Years ago at the academy." Jameson pants. "Now all you do is ride around town and eat donuts all day."

"Yeah, well, you're just the pussy quarterback who can't take a hit because he hides behind his team."

With Jameson's head locked tightly in the crook of my arm, he deals a few blows to my ribs. Thankfully, the awkward angle he's at means his punches aren't coming at full force. So instead of possibly breaking my ribs, I might only be a little sore for a few days.

"What the hell is going on in here?"

Our father's voice booms through the bathroom thanks to the acoustics. But neither his presence nor his words stop the two of us from fighting.

“Break it up, you two. Before the hotel tosses you out on your asses or calls the cops,” Skip scolds, suddenly appearing in the bathroom with us. “Jackson, I don’t want to deal with Austin P.D. on my night off.”

Skip’s hands come down on my shoulders while my dad grabs Jameson. In unison, the two older men pull us apart easier than they should be able to at their age. They hold us there for a moment to make sure the two of us don’t go after each other again.

“Grown ass men behaving like children. How long are y’all going to continue to behave like this?” Our father stands tall and proud, lecturing us like he used to when we were kids. His eyes land on me, and I hold his stare. “Jackson, get your shit together.”

“Me?” I ask, throwing my hands up in the air. “I didn’t start this.”

“I don’t care who started it. I’m ending it.” Our dad wipes his brow and shakes his head. The look of disapproval written all over his face. “Both of you, out. Now.”

Like two little kids, Jameson and I make our way out of the bathroom. Our mom and Rory stand in the hallway together with Martina, waiting for us. Neither one of us wants whatever lecture my mom is planning to dish out. So, without stopping to talk to anyone, Jameson makes his way back toward the ballroom while I head toward the closest exit.

Once outside, I breathe in the crisp night air, trying to clear my thoughts. Rory kissed Jameson. There is a part of me that needs to know every single intimate detail. But the other part of me doesn’t believe it. He was just trying to get a reaction out of me and he succeeded. But he could’ve gotten a reaction out of me another way. Why would he lie about something like that? And if it is the truth, why hasn’t she ever told me?

“Are you ok?”

Rory stands behind me as I continue to look out onto the river. The glow of the Austin skyline reflects off the water.

Once again, my knuckles are white as I grip the rail in front of me and ask the dreaded question.

“You and Jameson never... I mean, you never kissed him. Did you?”

Rory is silent and I can hear my heart beating out of my chest as I wait for her to deny the allegations. Hearing her soft sigh warns me of the answer I will not like.

“I can’t believe he told you about that.”

I turn to face her and lean against the railing. Her emerald-green eyes look sad, but not worried. The breeze picks up, and I watch as she tucks a loose curl behind her ear.

“So it’s true?”

“Sort of. It was nothing, and I’m sure Jameson made it out to be a lot more than it was.” Rory takes a step closer to me, and I force myself to remain calm. My jealousy is eating a hole right in the center of my heart. “It was my sophomore year of college, spring break. The one you had that really nasty stomach bug. A few of us got together at the old mill, and Jameson showed up later on. Once everyone was more than a little tipsy, one guy suggested playing spin the bottle. It was nothing more than a five second peck on the lips, and I pulled away before he could go further.”

The vice around my heart eases a little when I hear how the kiss happened. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I take a step in her direction. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because it was nothing,” she reiterates. “It was just a bunch of teenagers being young and dumb, playing a stupid game.” Rory’s hand reaches for my own, and I watch as her fingers lace with mine. “Your brother is not someone I’ve ever wanted to be friends with, let alone something more. But I’m sorry he could use me to get to you.”

I tug on her hand, and Rory closes the gap between us. My hands slide around her waist as I drop my forehead down to hers. “I don’t know why he always has to rub it in my face that he’s better than me.”

“Because you let him.” Her words sting, but I know she’s right. “Jameson has never been better than you. He’s just had the better luck. You’re a good person, Jackson, and your parents don’t care if you can buy them new cars or some mcmansion right on the lake.”

“The damn house is on the lake?” I groan.

“Yeah.” She smiles. “I mean, first you have to walk past the outdoor kitchen and the pool, but after that, the lake is right there. Your mom has already invited me to spend the weekends there when the weather is good.”

“Great.” I snort.

“What Jameson gives are just things, Jackson. Right here...” Rory trails off, placing her hand over my heart. “This is what really matters. And you have so much here to give.”

The two of us stand there in silence. Rory’s hand over my heart and my forehead pressed to hers. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Jameson has been the bane of my existence for almost my entire life. I’ve moved on and gotten over the fact that he was the one who got the free ride to college and the pro career I always dreamed of. I actually got over that years ago. Sure, it stings knowing he’s able to give my parents more than I can, but like Rory said, it’s only things. But hearing him talk about Rory, like she was some sort of conquest he got to first, *that* sent me spiraling back into a tailspin of uncontrollable jealousy.

“So how did it feel?” Rory asks. I open my eyes to find her looking at me. Bottom lip between her teeth and a genuine curiosity sparkling in her eye. “When you punched him? Did it feel good?”

“I’m not gonna lie.” I laugh. “It felt pretty damn good.”

“Do you think you broke his nose? Wonder how he’s going to spin it during the press conferences he undoubtedly has scheduled announcing him to the Texans? Nothing like being on television looking like you just got into a bar fight.”

Rory is right. Jameson has always been obsessed with his looks. Well, he won’t be so pretty looking this time when

ESPN sits down with him.

“I didn’t even think about that. That definitely makes me feel better.” Rory smiles and smooths her hand over my tie. “How is it you always know the right thing to say to pull me out of my funk?”

“It’s a gift. Back home I’m known as the Jackson whisperer,” she teases.

“Is that so?”

“Uh-huh. It’s a highly developed skill. Took me years to perfect it.”

My fingers tiptoe down the silky fabric of her dress until the globes of her ass rests in my palms. Giving them a firm squeeze, I smile down at her.

“Oh yeah, what’s your secret? How were you able to perfect that skill when no one else could?”

“Well, that’s easy.” Her eyes sparkle with the reflection of the moon as I watch them scan over my face. “I love you.”

No matter how many times I’ve heard her say those three little words over the last few weeks, I still can’t believe it. This woman has meant everything to me for so long. To be with her now and to have her actually reciprocate these feelings... I don’t have the words. Instead of trying to find the right ones, I bring my lips to hers and feel their soft plumpness. Rory’s mouth parts, and our tongues find their way to one another. When we break apart, I brush the hair out of her eyes with my hand.

“Jackson, I’ll always be here when you need me. Ride or die till the end, baby.”

“Pinky swear?”

Placing my hand in between us, I hold out my pinky finger. This may not be the most hardcore ride or die gesture, but it’s us. It’s who we are. Rory wraps her pinky around mine and smiles.

“Pinky swear.”

“Sorry to interrupt.” Looking over Rory’s head, I see Jameson and Martina standing about a foot away. There is already some bruising on the bridge of his nose and under his eyes. Good. “Martina told me I need to apologize for my behavior.”

Rory’s head whips around to look at Jameson. She’s clearly as shocked as I am that there’s someone in this world who could make Jameson apologize for his actions. Maybe I underestimated Martina. Rory turns away from me, but I pull her back before she can put any distance between us.

“I’m listening,” I tell him.

“I should’ve given you a heads up about the house.” My brother looks at his wife and she cocks her eyebrow at him, encouraging him to go on. “And about my plan to move back to Texas. I know you’ve been the one making sure mom and dad are always doing good, and I appreciate that. Buying them that house was my way of taking some of the burden off of you. That’s all.”

Well, now I kind of feel like the dumb ass for overreacting. I’m so used to assuming the worst out of Jameson that I didn’t even think his intentions might have been for good and not purely to rub my nose in his success or money.

“Jackson?” Rory whispers.

I glance down at her and she gives me a knowing look. Yeah, yeah. I guess it’s my turn now.

“I’m sorry I threw a tantrum like a toddler.” I exhale. Even though it’s the right thing to do, the words feel bitter in my mouth. “You do good by our parents, and I should be man enough to put our own rivalry aside to acknowledge that.”

Jameson nods and reaches for Martina. “Oh, and about the other thing.” This time his eyes bounce between Rory and me. “I tried to make it seem like a bigger deal than it was. But I’m sure she told you that already.”

“She did.” I give Rory a squeeze and kiss the top of her head.

“I’m happy for you two.”

“Thanks. I’m happy for you too, about the baby and all.”

Jameson smiles and places his hand over Martina’s stomach. My brother is genuinely happy and, for the first time, I’m not jealous of what he has. Maybe it’s because I’ve finally got everything I’ve always wanted as well.

“¿Son siempre así?” Martina looks at Rory.

“Desde el primer día los conocí.” She sighs.

“¿Hay alguna esperanza?”

“Tal vez algun día. Es decir, mientras sigamos diciéndoles qué hacer.”

“Hey, now. It’s not nice to talk about us in front of our faces. Wait to do it behind our backs like normal wives and girlfriends,” Jameson jokes.

“Martina asked if you two had always been like this and if there was any hope that you two could change.” Rory looks up at me and smiles.

“Sí, mi amor. Perhaps now that you two have us things will be better. No?” Martina looks at Jameson with a knowing look.

Glancing at Jameson the two of us stare at each other for a moment before laughing.

“Not a chance,” we reply in unison.

JACKSON

*A*fter all the drama between Jameson and I was over, my parents' anniversary party continued on without a hitch. A little before midnight, Rory and I hopped into my truck and headed for home. Looking up at the clear night sky, I knew my plan for how I wanted this evening to end would actually work.

"Are you tired?"

Rory looks over at me and shakes her head.

"Not really. Why?"

"I've got an idea. Do you feel like taking an adventure with me?"

"Sure."

Getting off on the next exit, I make my way east of Hawk Bend. The old dirt road we're on is private, and few people know it exists. It leads to a spot that overlooks the quarry. When I reach the clearing, I bring the truck around and then reverse it so the rear is facing the cliff's edge. I cut off the engine and unlock the doors.

"If I didn't trust you as much as I do, I'd be a little freaked out right about now." Rory is looking out the windshield at nothing but total darkness.

"Give me a second, and I'll come get you."

"Um, ok."

Stepping out of the truck, I shut the door and head for the tailgate. Once it's down, I roll the tonneau cover back, exposing the bed of the truck. After adjusting a few things, I make my way to the passenger side to collect Rory. Her door is open as she patiently waits for me. She ditched her heels a long time ago, and I watch as her bare foot swings idly back and forth.

“You ready?”

She tilts her head to look at me. “What were you messing with back there?”

I grab her hands and spin her to face me. Rory stands on the running board and places her hands on my shoulders. With my arms wrapped around her thighs, I lift her, carrying her to the bed of the truck.

“Just a few things I packed before coming to pick you up.”

I place her down gently on the tailgate, and Rory looks behind her. Before I got ready for tonight, I blew up the air mattress I use for camping trips and grabbed all the extra blankets and pillows I could find.

“You planned all this?” With a small shrug, I smile at her. “It's pretty romantic, actually.”

“Yes, ma'am, it is. Now scoot your ass back and get comfy.”

Rory rolls onto her hands and knees, crawling to the back of the cab. My dick grows hard at the sight of her. She's so fucking sexy without even trying, and it drives me crazy. I watch as she gets comfortable and then follow her. Once I lay down, I extend my arm out for Rory and she rests her head on my bicep. Together, the two of us stare up at the night sky.

“This is really beautiful,” she murmurs.

My fingers lazily drift up and down her arm as I hum in agreement. The sky is crystal clear and lit up by the almost full moon. There are more stars shining down on us than anyone could ever think to count. The only sounds to be heard for miles are the bellowing of the bullfrogs along with the chirping of the crickets. A true backcountry serenade.

“How is it I never knew this spot existed? You’d think the teenagers would be all over this. It’s the perfect make-out spot.”

“It’s an access road for the water department. Technically, no one’s allowed up here. The only reason I know about it is because we have to patrol it.”

The two of us fall into a comfortable silence once more. One bonus of falling in love with your best friend is having the ability to just simply exist with each other. It’s times like these when I can truly appreciate the bond Rory and I share.

“Do you ever worry that one day you’re going to wake up and all of this will have been a dream?” Rory turns her head to the side to look at me. “You know how I was with my past relationships. No matter how serious they got, I always kept them at an arm’s length. Even Brad. But you.” Rory pauses. “My feelings for you scare me sometimes.”

“Why?” I bring my hand up to cup the side of her face and lazily run the pad of my thumb across the freckles on her cheek.

“Because they’re so strong. I never knew love could feel like this. Or maybe I did because I saw it with my own parents and seeing how broken my dad was when my mom died...” Rory’s voice trails off, and I watch as that all too familiar sadness creeps in.

“You, pretty lady, are going to be stuck with me until we’re old and wrinkly.” She nods, and I know she’s only doing it to pacify me. I know it’s not me she’s worried about losing. She’s worried about leaving this earth prematurely, just as her mom did. To lighten the mood, I do what I do best; make her smile. “I’m talking about droopy balls down to my knees. Saggy titties that you’ll have to tuck into your pants. All that good stuff.”

“That’s a disgusting visual.” She screws up her face, the ridiculous mental image obvious in her head.

“I, for one, can’t wait. You’re going to be the hottest seventy-year-old in the bingo hall.”

That gets a laugh out of her. “And you’ll be the dirty old man still flirting with all the women. Flashing them that cocky grin and hoping your dentures don’t fall out mid-smile.”

“Saggy balls and dentures? Talk about a catch.” My fingers tickle her ribs, and Rory laughs and wiggles under my touch. “With all that to look forward to, you better enjoy me while I’m still in my prime.”

Rory takes her bottom lip between her teeth and undoes the buttons on my shirt, one at a time.

“So.” Her eyes travel up to meet mine. “You’re sure no one comes up here?” Her hand slides under the left side of my shirt as she pushes it slightly off my shoulder. “I mean, I don’t want to start anything if it means one of our friends will catch us while out on patrol.”

Rory grabs onto the material of my undershirt and yanks it until my abs are exposed. Her hand slips underneath and caresses my chest. Despite her supposed concerns, I doubt she has any plans to stop what she’s already started.

“We should be. For the time being.” Patrols are random, so I have no clue when someone will be by. But I will not let that stop us.

She tugs at my belt, loosening it while I slowly inch the zipper of her dress down. The feeling of her soft hand as she slides it down the front of my pants leaves me with ragged breaths. Her grip around my cock is gentle at first, but with each thrust I make into her hand, she tightens it. My arm snakes around to her front. The lace of her bra is rough under my touch as I seek out her nipple. Rory lets out a soft moan when I find it. Rolling the erect bud between my fingers, I can’t help but notice the way she keeps pressing her thighs together as she chases any type of friction she can find. She needs a release, and I’m more than willing to oblige.

“I want to make you come right here under the stars,” I tell her. My voice is gravelly and filled with lust for her. “You’re going to scream so loud the whole town below will hear.” Grabbing her wrist, I remove her hand from my cock and roll her until she’s flat on her back. “My mouth is watering just

thinking about how good you taste when you explode all over my tongue.”

“Mmm,” Rory moans into my neck. “Yes, please.”

Pushing the hem of her dress up, I hook my fingers around the thin strap of her thong. Removing it, I toss it through the open back window of the truck.

“Those are going to be lost in the bottomless pit that is the floor of your backseat,” she teases.

“Uh-uh.” I shake my head. “Those are going in my glove compartment, and every time I miss you, I’m going to pull them out and take a big whiff.” I lay back and pull Rory on top of me. She straddles my cock, which is still painfully confined to my pants. “Your scent alone gets me hard as a fucking rock.” My thumb runs up her slit, and as I slip in between her lips, I’m instantly greeted by the wetness of her arousal. Bringing the pad of my thumb to my mouth, I suck her juices off, tasting her. “I need more,” I growl out.

The tips of my fingers dig into Rory’s curvy hips as I lift her away from my dick and toward my mouth. When her pussy is close enough, I lick up her slit in search of her clit.

“Oh, shit,” Rory exclaims. “Jackson, what are you doing?”

“Waiting for you to sit on my face.”

My words are so matter of fact that Rory stumbles over her own.

“Oh, God. I can’t—” But I don’t wait for her to finish. I pull her even closer and tighten my grip so she can’t squirm away. “Jackson, wait.”

But I don’t. If she won’t come to me, I’ll bring myself to her. I scoot down on the mattress and position my face right underneath her cunt. Her soft, bare flesh a mere few inches away. My tongue once again darts out as I lick her from entrance to clit. She’s almost in the perfect position. Now I’m able to deep tongue her core while I play with her clit. Rory’s hands find the light bar on the roof of the truck and she uses it to help balance herself. Which is fine. Only with each roll of her hips, I feel her move farther and farther away from me.

Her moans are soft, and her breathing is heavy, so I know she's into it. Which is why I'm confused as hell that she keeps pulling away.

"Rory, do you not want my face buried in your pussy?"

"What?" she hisses, surprised by my question.

"Do you want me to stop?" I lift my head and suck hard on her clit.

"Oh, shit, Jackson. No. Don't stop, please," she pleads.

"Then I need you to be here." With more force than needed, I pull her down, so she's literally sitting on my face. "Finally," I groan out loud, although I doubt she can understand my muffled words.

Like a starved man, I eat her like she's my last meal. With her pussy planted firmly on my beard and the softness of her thighs cradling the sides of my face, I'm finally in my happy place.

"Oh, God. Jackson," Rory's strangled moan squeaks out. It's so obvious that she's conflicted. My mouth continues to devour her, causing her thighs to shake around me. "Shit," she concedes, finally. I feel her legs relax as she lowers herself, using my face exactly as I want her to. "You better not suffocate and die on me."

I have no plans on dying tonight, but what a hell of a way to go if I did. Rory grinds against me, using me as her own personal sex toy. Looking up at her, I see her dress bunched around her waist. Her breasts spilling out over the black lace of her bra. The curve of her neck's exposed as she arches her head back. Dark brown curls, wild under the moonlight. She looks like a fucking goddess.

"Shit, Jackson, oh, God. I'm... I'm..."

Rory lets out a cry as her orgasm tears through her. I can feel every single wave of pleasure as her excitement coats my tongue. I take it all in, loving the fact that every drop belongs to me. She is mine, forever and always. Every moan, every orgasm, all mine. My cock jumps at the thought. The ache in my pants is something I can no longer ignore.

As Rory's cries subside, I undo my pants. The tip of my cock is dripping with precum, and I can't help my own moan of pleasure as I stroke my hand up and down it a few times. But there's only so much solo manual stimulation a man can take when the real thing is inches away.

Without warning, I grab Rory by the waist and slide her down toward my cock. Once I feel her heat at the tip, I grip the base, making sure I'm in the perfect position.

"Ride me, Rory." My free hand pulls the lace of her bra down, exposing her breasts. Slowly, Rory slides down onto my cock. "Shit, yeah." I groan, through clenched teeth. My hands travel up her exposed flesh until I reach her breasts. "You're so damn beautiful, you know that? You look like a sexy forest nymph right now."

"What?" She breathes out. "A forest nymph?"

Her rhythm slows, and I know my words have snapped her out of the moment.

"Never mind," I tell her while thrusting my hips, hoping to return to the speed we were just at. "You look like a fucking porn star when you ride my dick. Is that better?"

"God, yes." She moans. The tips of her fingers dig deeper into my chest. "Now is not the time for you to get poetic."

"Point taken."

Licking the pad of my thumb, I touch it to her clit. My eyes move from Rory's bouncing tits to her face and back again. Earlier, she asked if I feared waking up to find out this all a dream. The truth is, yes, I'm terrified. Every damn day. I'm not used to wanting something and actually getting it. The events of my past tell me to not get used to this. But the person I've tried hard to become feels differently. The unfamiliar voice inside my head tells me that I deserve this happiness after all the mishaps I've faced. Rory is my reward, and I had to go through all that crap to truly appreciate the gift she is.

Her walls start to spasm around me, and I feel the telltale tingle at the base of my spine. We're close.

“Come with me, Jackson. Please,” Rory pleads with me as if her life depends on it.

“Keep going, baby. I’m with ya.”

The moment I feel her orgasm hit, I grab onto her hips and bounce her up and down at the speed I need to get me there. Rory screams out, just as I knew she would, and soon my own cries of release join her. Like Jell-O, she collapses onto my chest as the two of us try to catch our breath. If by some cruel joke this ends up being all a dream, I hope I never wake up. Because this is how I want to spend the rest of my life. Just me and this gorgeous woman, living, loving, and creating memories that will last us a lifetime.

RORY

Pulling into the driveway of the two-story colonial feels so bizarre. It's been almost two months since I ran out of our wedding and left Brad standing at the altar. Two months since he told me to go fuck myself when I confessed I no longer loved him. Two months since I had to look him in the eye and face the reality of what I did. The box of his things currently in my backseat has sat in my garage, waiting. With all the end of the year activities at the school and Brad's ever busy schedule, this is the earliest we've been able to meet up. I suggested it might be easier for us to just mail the boxes to each other, but Brad insisted this was the more civilized thing to do.

"Just remain calm. Don't react to anything negative he may have to say. Remember, you were the one who hurt him, not the other way around."

I've said these words out loud a handful of times on the drive over. I want to give Brad whatever closure he may be seeking and to do so I need to not be on the defensive. Hopefully reminding myself that I'm the cause of any hurt feelings will help me do that.

Taking another minute to gather up my nerve, I see the front door open. Oh well, so much for my minute. Brad makes his way down the path as I open the Jeep door and step out. Closing it, I lean against the door panel as Brad comes to a stop in front of me.

"Hi," I say, almost in a whisper.

“Hey.”

This is so awkward. We stand here facing each other, and I take a long look at him. He looks good. His usual five o’clock shadow is now a well-trimmed beard, and his short, perfectly styled hair has grown out into soft waves. He’s dressed in a T-shirt and jeans, which is very unusual for him. He’s never this casual. It looks like not being in a relationship with me agrees with him, and that thought makes me happy.

“Let me grab your box.”

“No, allow me.” Brad moves before I can. “Is it in the trunk?”

“Back seat.”

Brad opens the rear driver’s side door and slides the box over to him. “Yours is in the kitchen. There’s a pitcher of tea on the island if you’re thirsty.”

“Um, yeah, that sounds good.”

Brad shuts the jeep door, balancing the box in one hand. “After you.”

I lead our way into the house, bypassing the staircase and heading straight into the kitchen. The afternoon sun shines brightly through the large bay window. On top of the white marble island sits a vase of fresh flowers, the pitcher of sweet tea, and a small brown moving box. Ironic, despite being together for over three years and the fact that I was supposed to live here, I never brought much over. Peeking inside, I see the box isn’t even halfway filled.

“The house looks wonderful.”

“It looks exactly the same as the last time you saw it.” Brad chuckles slightly as he reaches for a glass out of the cabinet.

“Right.” I roll my eyes at my stupidity. Brad pours the tea into the glass and hands it to me. “This is really uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, I knew it would be. I’m kind of having fun watching you squirm.”

“Thanks,” I mutter before taking a sip.

“I have to admit, I’m surprised you came alone. I thought for sure Jackson would tag along, waiting for you in the car like the love-sick puppy dog he is.”

“Nope, it’s just me.”

“If I were him, I wouldn’t have let you come alone.”

“He trusts me.”

“Must be nice. I never had that much confidence in our relationship. Guess I should’ve gone with my gut, huh?”

Trying to maintain my composure, I take another sip of tea and calmly place it on top of the marble. “I think I’ll just grab my stuff and head home.”

“Wait, please,” Brad says, trying to stop me. “I told myself I wouldn’t be an ass. Yet... uh... it’s exactly how I’m acting.”

“It’s warranted.”

“Even so.”

“Out of curiosity, why did you insist we do this face-to-face? I thought for sure you’d jump at the opportunity to never see me again.”

“You give yourself too much credit.” He smirks. “Despite the whole wedding fiasco and the last few months of our relationship, we had a good run.” Brad pauses, waiting for me to argue or agree. When I don’t, he continues. “I loved you, and I think, in your own way, you loved me too.”

“I did, of course I did. What I did to you was wrong, and I’m truly sorry. I embarrassed you in front of all your family, friends—”

“Important work acquaintances,” he adds.

“Everyone. If given the chance to do it differently, I would.”

“Would you still choose him?”

Nodding my head, I sigh. “Every time.”

“I’m partly to blame.”

“No, you’re not—”

“Yes, I am.” Brad runs his fingers through the scruff of his beard, thinking about what to say next. “As an outsider, it was easy to see how Jackson felt about you. I thought if I could just get you away from him, from Hawk Bend, maybe it would be enough.”

“Brad—”

“No, Rory, let me finish. What I’m trying to say is, toward the end, it became about winning. I was going to have you and Jackson wasn’t. It’s all that mattered to me, and it made me not see past the end of my nose. I couldn’t see the actual issues we had. You and I want very different things out of life. I want a family. I want to have children of my own and watch them grow up in this house.” He takes a long look around, as if envisioning his future. “Your situation is unique, and your reasons for not wanting kids, not wanting to be a mother... those feelings are valid. I see that now. But my own needs and wants mattered more to me than your health and well-being. That’s not how people who love each other or who’re committed to each other should behave.”

“Sounds like we were doomed, even without Jackson.”

“It seems that way. But, if it’s all right, I’m still going to put most of the blame on him.”

“Sure.” I chuckle. This completely transparent side of Brad is not something I’m used to. He’s a much more likable guy when he’s vulnerable. “You deserve to have everything you want in life.”

“So do you,” he replies as I reach for the box, but Brad stops me. “I’ll carry it out to the car for you.”

“Don’t worry about it. It doesn’t look very heavy.”

Brad nods and follows me to the front door. When he opens it, I watch as a two-door Lexus pulls up in front of the house. The woman driving looks oddly familiar.

“She’s early. I didn’t plan this, I swear.”

The woman gets out of the car but hesitates when she sees me. I turn to face Brad and cock my eyebrow at him.

“Is that...” Crap. What’s her name? “Vanessa?” I remember the woman now as the one Jackson briefly dated. The poor woman whose date Brad and I sabotaged at the sushi place.

“It is.” Brad wrinkles his nose at me and shrugs. “A few colleagues and I had drinks after work one night, and I ran into her. We quickly bonded and formed the official *I hate Rory and Jackson* fan club. Soon after that, we realized we actually have a lot in common.”

“Umm.” I struggle to find the right words. I’m happy for Brad and Vanessa, I guess. It’s just a very random pairing.

“I know it’s weird. I hate to admit this, but Jackson does have excellent taste in women.” Brad points his index finger at me as a warning. “Don’t ever tell him I said that.”

“I won’t, and I’m happy for you.”

“Coming out of a long-term relationship, I don’t know if it’ll go anywhere. But I look forward to finding out.” Brad leans down and gives me a quick kiss on the cheek. “Goodbye, Aurora. Have a good life.”

“You too.”



HAWK BEND HAS BEEN full of hot days and even hotter nights this summer, thanks to Jackson. After calling off my wedding, I recommitted to my job at the high school. Between summer school classes and meetings with upcoming seniors about college, my days were busy. Jackson and I spent as much time together as possible, which was always the norm for us. Our days off were spent working on his house or enjoying a good cookout with friends and family. Now, it’s August, and I can’t

even remember the last time I slept in my own bed. Somehow, I've unofficially moved in with him without even realizing it. And I'm happy.

The new school year starts in a few days, and I'm busy trying to pack the rest of my things to take over to Jackson's house. Since I'm not ready to sell my place just yet, I've decided to try and rent it out. I figure it's better than letting it sit empty. Lyndsey left about an hour ago, and right after that, Jackson texted to let me know he'll be late.

I'm in my closet, taking out the last of my clothes, when I hear the deep rumble of his truck's exhaust. A few minutes later, he's standing in the bedroom doorway, still in uniform.

"Hey there, handsome." I toss the clothes onto the wardrobe box and reach for the glass of wine sitting on my nightstand. "Long day?"

"Hmm, isn't it always?" Jackson glances around the room. "This place looks so empty."

"That's the idea." I smirk. "Are you having second thoughts about me moving in?"

"No." He snorts. "I was simply making an observation." He stalks over to me, his heavy boots making the floor creak under their weight. "Besides, you pinky swore you wouldn't change your mind. No take backs."

"No take backs," I reply, holding my hand up in surrender.

Jackson lowers his head and kisses me on the lips. Feeling the sudden urge to deepen our connection, I place my free hand at the back of his head and tangle my fingers through his hair. Groaning into my mouth, he presses me firmly up against him.

"Someone missed me today." His teeth nip at my jaw.

"Maybe a little."

"Are you ready to get out of here, or do you want to pack some more?"

Jackson kisses my lips once more before relocating to my neck. I tilt my head to the side, giving him better access.

“Uh...” I fumble, finding it very difficult to concentrate. “I only have the odds and ends left.”

“Yeah, like what?”

Jackson’s hand slides under the hem of my cami. With his palm pressed against my abdomen, I feel it slowly creep its way up.

“Like bathroom stuff, and the things in my nightstand.”

His head snaps up, and his eyes meet mine. The look of trouble sparkles deep within them. “Nightstand, huh?” Jackson removes his hand from under my shirt to grip the tiny knob of the single drawer. “What does Rory keep in here?”

The small wooden drawer glides ajar with ease. Inside are a few hair ties, hand lotion, the remote for the TV and a little, indiscreet black bag. With his finger, Jackson moves the contents of the drawer around.

“Looking for anything in particular?” I place my wine glass back on the nightstand.

“Yes.” He picks up the black bag to inspect it further. “See, to the untrained eye, this looks like your typical, run-of-the-mill makeup bag. But I’m a professional, in case you can’t tell by the uniform, and I know this houses something other than make-up.”

“Well, officer, it’s nothing illegal if that’s what you’re hinting at.” My voice sounds almost cartoonish, and I lay it on thick. The material of his shirt feels stiff to the touch as I rub my hands down his chest.

“Ma’am, please take a step back. Putting your hands on an officer can be considered assault. If you don’t comply with my request I’ll be forced to restrain you.” His tone is stern and professional, but that look in his eyes tells me he’s here to play. My fingers curl around Jackson’s belt buckle, and with a firm tug, I pull him toward me. My other hand cups the large bulge in his pants. “This is your last warning, ma’am.”

“What are you going to do about it? Arrest me?”

“No, not yet, anyway.”

Jackson tosses the bag onto the bed, and before I can even blink, he spins me away from him. I can hear the metal of his handcuffs clinking together as he removes them from his duty rig. He grabs my right elbow and brings that arm behind me. The cold metal now secure around my wrist, we take two steps back. He extends my shackled arm, and I hear the other cuff click into place. I'm seriously handcuffed to the bed.

"I warned you." His voice is still stern as he guides me to sit down on the edge of the mattress. "Now I can search the contents of this bag without distraction."

Jackson unzips my toy bag and begins to ruffle through the contents. He pulls out my shiny, silver bullet, cocks his eyebrow, and gives a *what the fuck* look.

"Don't let its size fool you. It gets the job done."

He tosses it onto the bed and pulls out my hot pink wand next. "This one looks like the old school plug-in vibrators my grandparents used to have. But obviously on a much smaller scale."

"It's the same thing."

Jackson's hazel eyes meet mine. "Noooo. MeeMaw used it on Papaw's back. He was sore from fixing cars all day."

"I assure you they used it for other things as well."

"Eww, Rory, you're killing the vibe here."

"Sorry." I roll my lips to hide my amusement.

He dips his hand back into the bag and pulls out my red rose vibrator.

"Ma'am, I have reason to believe that these items might be paraphernalia of some kind disguised as sex toys."

"Really, paraphernalia?" Jackson stays in character despite my questioning. "Do you think that tiny little rose is a bong?"

Jackson inspects the vibrator. "This hole here could easily be where you put your mouth to inhale. All pipes, bongs, and vapes have one. Ma'am, I'm not sure if you are aware, but marijuana consumption is illegal here in the great state of

Texas. I'm going to have to bring you down to the station." He takes a step toward me but stops. "Unless..."

"Unless?"

"If you had some way to prove to me that these are in fact personal stimulation devices, I'd have to let you go. With a warning, of course."

Personal stimulation devices? What a dork he can be sometimes.

"I want to comply, officer." I nod in agreement. Giving him my best damsel in distress voice. "But you see, I'm indisposed right now." I jiggle my arm, causing the cuffs to clink against the headboard. "With only one free hand, I'm unable to give you a proper demonstration. Unless..."

"Unless?" Jackson's eyes hold mine. Behind them is so much heat I feel as though he'll set me on fire at any moment.

"I was thinking, maybe you could assist me. I don't want to go to jail over a misunderstanding."

"I'd have to touch you. Do I have your permission?" I swallow the lump of excitement in my throat and nod. God, he makes consent sexy. "I need you to use your words. Verbal consent is important in these types of situations."

"You have my permission to touch me."

I lay back on the bed. Knees bent and my right arm pulled up toward the headboard. The sound of Jackson's boots against the floorboards alerts me that he's coming closer. The palms of his hands rest on my kneecaps before they slide down my thighs. Maintaining eye contact, his fingers wrap around the waistband of my leggings. Slowly, Jackson peels them off of me. His knuckle grazes over the silky fabric of my panties. A low groan reverberates from deep within his chest.

"Ma'am, upon closer inspection, it appears you're eager to prove your innocence to me."

"Oh, I am, officer. I've never been in trouble, ever. And I really don't want to go to jail."

Jackson's finger moves the small piece of fabric away, then slides one finger deep inside my core. "A good girl, huh?" My back arches off the mattress as he curls his finger, hooking just the right spot. "I'll be the judge of that."

He slides his finger out and brings it to his mouth. I watch his full lips form a perfect seal as he sucks himself clean.

"Now that I've performed a brief cavity search, I'm going to remove these so I can start the test of the aforementioned items." Pulling my underwear down, he tosses them to the side. His attention is now solely on the vibrators. "Which one do I want to test first?" My eyes watch him intently. "You ruined this one for me thanks to the MeeMaw reference." He grabs the pink wand and pushes it away. "This silver one looks like a bullet. A little cliché for a hot cop, bad gi—excuse me, good girl role play. So that leaves this pretty little flower." He picks up the red rose bud and eyes it suspiciously. "How do I start this thing?"

"Jackson," I warn.

"Wait, I think I figured it out."

The rose comes to life in his hands, and I watch him hit the button repeatedly until he's cycled through all the speeds. He presses it a few more times until the damn thing is almost at full strength.

"Don't start with that one, please."

"Ma'am, you told me you would cooperate. Are you going back on your word?"

He presses the vibrator firmly against my outer lips. Holy crap, I don't think I've ever used this speed.

"No, I fully...Oh, God." I feel his other hand spread me wide and soon the suction finds my clit. *This is going to be so embarrassing.*

Jackson has no clue what type of power that little red rose bud holds. This is my go-to toy when I'm not in the mood to put in any work for an orgasm. This little sucker can get me off a handful of times in under five minutes. *Think unsexy things, Rory.* Holding my breath, I try my best not to lose

control. But the second Jackson pushes down on my clit, I'm lost.

My back arches and my toes curl as my orgasm rips me to shreds. Stars, I'm seeing actual stars. Somehow, over my screams, I can hear Jackson mutter something that sounds like *holy shit*. But he doesn't remove the toy from my clit. Instead, he keeps it there and watches me like a damn science experiment. Not even fifteen seconds later, the tingling in my abdomen starts, and I'm once again bucking off the bed. A string of incoherent words and syllables fall from my lips.

"This thing is friggin' incredible. I know toys aren't the competition or anything, but I'm a little jealous of this one." He removes it from my clit, and I open my eyes a bit to find him staring at me in awe. "New game."

JACKSON

*I*t's one of my favorite times of year—pee-wee football season. Every season starts off with a huge cookout over at the high school to welcome new and returning players alike. The scent of grilled hot dogs and hamburgers hangs heavy in the air. There are jumpies for the kids, and a water slide. This year, there's even a bluegrass band playing to add a little music to the festivities. And thanks to our activities last night, Rory and I showed up over a half hour late.

No one specific is to blame. Maybe twelve orgasms is one too many. But damn, it was fun to watch. By number ten, Rory was a spineless puddle on the bed. There's no way I was getting her over to my place after that. Plus, I'm not a total idiot. I know after an intense marathon session, after-care and TLC is what she needed. Who cares if it meant waking up a little early to go back to my place before heading out to the field?

After having my fill of food, I make the rounds. I like to start off by introducing myself to the parents who don't know me personally, and then I move onto the ones who know me *too* well. Like Ricky and Carley. They are sitting at one of the picnic tables with Nia and Rory. The last time I saw Ricky was at the bar the night I had to take Rory back to my place. His oldest boy is on my team this year.

"I don't know how you can stand having that draped over you in this heat," Nia tells Carley while fanning herself off. Carley is nursing her newest under a blanket. "I'm getting sweaty just looking at you."

“Normally, I don’t care. But the last thing I want to do is explain to some four-year-old boy why my boob is hanging out.”

“That’s a thing?” Rory asks.

“If they don’t have siblings, yeah. Kids have way too much curiosity.”

“Looks like I’m joining the conversation at the right time. I love talking about boobs. They’re fun,” I chime in.

Ricky stands up and joins me where I stand. “It all changes after kids, man.”

“What? The boobs?”

“Yes, the boobs. At the moment, mine are not just for decoration, so it complicates their fun aspect,” Carley lectures me.

“You’ll see someday,” Ricky adds.

With a laugh, I shake my head. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Rory has checked out of the conversation and is pretending to scroll through her phone. It’s one of her coping mechanisms when people talk about having babies.

Changing the subject, I go into my speech about how the season will play out this year. I tell them everything they need to know about gear and practices. By the time I’m done, Rory is still sitting at the table, talking to someone she knows from work, and Nia is no longer with the group. Terrell is also a coach, so there is no need for her to hear everything she already knows.

“Sounds like football is going to be a lot of fun, huh, bud?” Ricky picks up his son and brings him eye level with me. “Coach Nash and I used to play football together a long time ago.”

“Ok, that’s my cue to use the bathroom. I was there and I don’t need to hear the stories for the five millionth time.” Carley stands, her little one sound asleep in her arms. She looks at Ricky with his hands full before smiling at me. “Jackson, can you hold him for me, please?”

“Oh, um, yeah sure.” I place my Dixie cup down on the wooden table and hold my arms out.

“Just make sure his head doesn’t go flopping around all over,” Carley tells me as she lays the baby in the crook of my arm.

“Make sure the head doesn’t pop off. Check.”

“I know I haven’t seen you in a while, but you look really happy, man,” Ricky says as Carley walks off.

Glancing at Rory, I smile. “Yeah, I’ve got her to thank for that.”

“It’s crazy how things work out sometimes. I mean, the two of you were always close, so it didn’t surprise me when I heard the news.”

“I almost lost her, but—” I don’t finish that sentence because I hate thinking about how dumb I was to let my feelings go on for so long. “It’s really something, though. Being in love with your best friend. I guess we both lucked out there.”

Looking over at Rory, I find her staring at me. The look on her face is unreadable. When her eyes finally meet mine, she takes in a deep breath and gives me a quick half-smile.

“That we did. Then, before you know it, the two of you will have a few of these of your own. I bet you can’t wait to coach your own kid.”

With a laugh, I shake my head. “Nope, not me. I’m not a breeder, man.”

Ricky cocks his head at me. “Wait, you don’t want kids?”

“No, I mean, I think they’re great and all, obviously. If I didn’t like kids, I wouldn’t be coaching the pee-wees. But I get to have all the fun with none of the responsibility.”

I knew it was only a matter of time before people started talking to us about our future and kids are usually a normal part of that conversation. With all the nosey bitty’s in this town dying to know everyone’s business, I’m surprised we made it this long. I’m just thankful the questions today are being

thrown at me and not Rory. It's a subject she doesn't like to talk about, and only those closest to her know why she doesn't want kids. When the topic's brought up by others, she simply smiles and brushes it off.

"Man, I can't imagine what I'd do with all that free time," Ricky says in awe.

Without a word, Rory gets up from the table and walks away. I watch her as she crosses the field and disappears from sight.

By the time the cookout is over, she is still nowhere to be found. I keep myself busy by helping the others pack up the leftovers to bring to the church. There isn't a reason for me to worry. She knows almost everyone here, so I'm sure she's been preoccupied. It's not until I'm almost to my truck do I finally spot her waving goodbye to those who pass her.

"Where've you been?" I ask, tossing a cooler into the bed of the truck.

"Here."

Her tone is sharp, and I hate that her sunglasses are hiding her eyes. They always give away her true feelings.

"Everything good?"

"I'm tired. It's been a long day."

"Ok. I just need to drop this cooler off at the church so they can donate the food, and then it's straight home."

"Great," Rory mutters under her breath as she opens the truck door.

"Great." I sigh.

We spend our drive home in total silence. Rory is sitting in the passenger seat with her arms folded, staring out the window. By the time I pull into my driveway, I can't take it anymore.

"Are you sure you're ok?"

"I'm fine."

“Is that like girl code fine?”

“What?” Her head snaps to the left to look at me.

“You know, like when a girl says she’s fine, but she’s anything but.”

“Let it go, Jackson.”

“So, there is something wrong.”

I pull the truck next to her Jeep, and Rory immediately hops out. With the keys in her hand, she takes the steps two at a time and walks into the house. Awesome. Following her, I’m greeted by loud banging sounds coming from the laundry room.

“If there’s nothing wrong, why are you beating up the dryer?”

She storms to the doorway, hand on her hip. “Why did you tell Ricky you don’t want kids?”

“Because I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.”

“No, I—”

“Jackson, yes you do,” she yells. “Since the day I met you, you’ve said things like, ‘when my son does this,’ or ‘if I ever have a daughter, I’ll do this.’”

“That’s just something people say.”

“Not me.”

I puff out my cheeks and place the palms of my hand on my forehead. I’m so confused about what’s going on here.

“Rory, I’m with you, like forever, with you. We’re not having kids, and I’m more than ok with that.” She stares at me, and I can see the tears start to form in her eyes. “I don’t understand why you’re going all crazy on me.”

We stare at each other for a few moments and finally Rory caves.

“I can’t have kids,” she says with a shaky breath. “I’ve pretty much known that forever. And you know, I’ve never

wanted them either. But.” She pauses, closing her eyes as if trying to block out an image. “Seeing you today, holding Carley’s baby, I was heartbroken because you’ll never have that.”

“Oh, baby.” I take two steps and Rory holds her hands out in front of her to stop me.

“People always say never say never because you can always change your mind. I thought it was a load of bullshit until I saw you today.”

“Rory, nothing’s set in stone. We’ve got time if you want to discuss this later on. There’s adoption or foster care.”

But she only shakes her head. “You’re not understanding. Deep down, I know I still don’t want kids. But I know you do, and this is the first time I’ve ever felt like I was denying my partner that joy.” She takes a step closer. “To hear you lie for me, knowing the truth...it broke me. Everything you’ve ever wanted in life has always been this close.” She holds her fingers out until they just barely touch. “I don’t want to be the reason you miss out on anything else.”

“What the hell are you saying?” She shakes her head. The vice in my chest tightens because it feels like she’s about to break up with me. “So you were fine marrying Brad knowing he wanted children. But me?”

“It’s different.”

“It’s not.”

“I didn’t love Brad the way I love you. I couldn’t care less what he wanted or needed out of life to be happy. But you? I’d lay down my life to make you happy.”

“And you don’t think I’d do the same for you?”

“I know you would.” She stares at me, unblinking for a moment, and then sighs. “I think I just need some time.”

“No, screw that. I’m not losing you over this.”

“Jackson—”

“No, Rory. I knew what I was getting into. Hell, I’ve known since we were seventeen and I’m here.”

“I know that. It’s not you—”

“It’s not you, it’s me,” I interrupt. “Seriously?”

“That’s not what I was saying. These feelings came from completely out of nowhere. This is shit I processed and decided on over a decade ago. I just need a few days.”

“Fine. We’ll take a few days and figure this all out. We’ll get through it.”

“Jackson, I need a few days alone.”

“No, you can’t pull this shit. Not with me.”

“I’m not walking away from what we have. Believe me, I’m too selfish to let you go.” A single tear falls down her cheek, which Rory quickly brushes away. “Just give me a couple of days, please. There is so much going on in my head and I need to get it all straightened out.”

“No, I don’t accept your need for space. It’s me, Rory. We get through shit together, not alone.”

Rory walks back into the laundry room, only to exit a minute later with a small plastic bag of clothes.

“One or two days. That’s all I’m asking for. Let me clear my head.” She reaches for her keys on the hook.

“No, I deserve better than this runaway no communication bullshit. If you walk out that door...”

“Don’t say it.”

“Don’t walk out the door, Rory.”

The threat tastes sour as it sits on the tip of my tongue. Yet, I can’t bring myself to say the words out loud. The two of us hold eye contact for what feels like an eternity. There’s a brief moment where I think she’s going to hang up her keys and give in. But she doesn’t.

“I’ll call you in a few days.”

RORY

Sitting in my office, I watch the rain as it beats down on my window. It feels like it's been raining since I left Jackson's Saturday night. Fitting. I hate being apart from him, but unfortunately, this is how I handle things. The short time apart has helped to clear my head. But I need to find another way of handling my shit. Behaving this way toward him isn't fair.

My feelings for Jackson are stronger than I've ever experienced. God, and the way I felt seeing him hold the baby was unlike anything I've ever experienced before. It stirred up feelings about children I thought were long gone. This sliver of doubt isn't even about me. Thinking about it now, with a clear head, I believe what finally hit me is the severity of the sacrifice Jackson is making just by being in a relationship with me.

Somehow, he always ends up drawing the short end of the stick. This time, that stick is me. I wonder if being just the two of us forever will be enough. Will he feel like he missed out on something he truly wanted? Or worse, will he resent choosing me over having a family?

Deep down I know the answer to all of my questions is no. Jackson means what he says and does what he means. Whereas I still run away from my problems, Jackson now faces them head on. Mostly, anyway.

Tonight, on the way to his place, I'll stop by the grocery store and get everything I need to make a nice dinner. I'll

apologize and tell him that from this point on I will try to be better at communicating. No more running scared. I'm still too chicken to call. So, I'll text, letting him know I'll be home tonight.

A small wave of panic rolls through my stomach as I remember his unspoken threat. Oh God. What if he tells me not to come over?

My hand hovers over my phone as I think of every mean thing Jackson could say to me. A knock on my door causes me to jump out of my seat.

“Shit, sorry,” Lyndsey apologizes. “I didn't mean to scare you.”

“You're fine.” I breathe out, my heart beating out of my chest. “What's up?”

“Copier is down again. Ms. Melanie saw me walking by and asked me to grab you.”

“How is it I'm the only person in the entire school who can fix that damn thing?” I make my way toward Lyndsey and the two of us step out of my office.

“The real question is, why can't they buy one made in this century?”

“Because then we'd all have to take another pay cut.”

“Shh, don't give them any ideas,” she teases. “See ya after school.”

Lyndsey makes her way back toward her classroom as I head to the front office. Upon entry, I see Melody hunched over the photocopier. Already frustrated, she bangs her fist against the side.

“Ms. Melody, we have to be nice to the machine,” I say softly, while stroking the cold plastic frame. “It's very sensitive.”

Melody has been the school secretary for almost thirty years. She's a sweet woman who wouldn't hurt a fly. In fact, the only thing that butters her biscuits—her words—is modern

technology. The fact that she considers this late eighties model Xerox to be modern is adorable in and of itself.

“I swear, if it wouldn’t throw out my back, I’d toss this thing out into the rain right now.” She pushes her red-rimmed glasses higher up her nose and fixes a stray piece of salt and pepper hair that’s fallen out of place.

“Have a seat and I’ll see if I can fix it.” I pop open the front of the copier and look for paper jams. “It’s quiet in here today. Where is everybody?”

“Today is the first school board meeting. Those things usually take up most of the morning.”

“It must be nice to have a few hours to yourself.” Kneeling down to take a closer look, I see the cause of the issue. There are a few pieces of paper jammed in the gear.

“Ha. This office is a revolving door. Someone’s always coming in and out. Like right now.” Melody stands up and makes her way over to the desk. “How can I help you, sir?”

“I’m, uh, well, I was looking for Ms. Monroe.” My ears perk up at the mention of my name. “I was needing to talk to her about my daughter, but she wasn’t in her office.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No. She’s not expecting me.”

I rack my brain trying to figure out whose father this could be. It’s only the second day of school so I haven’t had to reach out to any parents yet. I pull the paper out of the gear and close the copier. Standing, I turn and my eyes immediately land on Troy Baucom. Annabelle’s father. The last I heard, his trial was still pending, and they had placed Annabelle with a temporary foster family.

Upon seeing me, he nervously shuffles from side to side before glancing back at the door. A wave of nerves settles in the pit of my stomach when I see how shifty he’s being.

“Mr. Baucom, you shouldn’t be here,” I tell him.

“I want my daughter back.”

“Sir, I can’t help you with that. The state—”

He slams his fist down on the counter, and Melody lets out a small yelp.

“You were the one who opened your mouth and got her removed from my home. *Her* home.” His words are direct and steady, despite the alcohol I can smell on his breath. “You pick up the phone and tell whoever that you were wrong.”

“That’s not how it works.”

Troy reaches behind his back, pulls out a handgun, and points it at me. Melody screams while I calmly stare down the barrel.

“You get me my daughter back, or else.”

Jackson

I pull into the station a little before ten. For the hundredth time today, I check my phone. This no contact, I need space crap is bullshit. Over the years, I’ve watched Rory pull this shit on other guys, and now it’s happening to me. I pull up our text message thread and send her one.

Me: This has gone on long enough.

Staring at the screen, I wait for a reply. But there is none.

Me: I only have about five minutes until my shift starts. Can you please call me?

Nothing. No response, no three little dots to get me excited. Radio silence.

Shit.

I tell myself to give her the benefit of the doubt. After all, she’s at work. Maybe she’s busy. If I don’t get a response by the time my shift ends, I’ll swing by her place and end this once and for all. I’ll carry her out of the townhouse caveman style if I have to.

The station is buzzing with a tense energy. Skip and the other officers are huddled around the dispatch booth. All of them have the same tense expression on their face. Maybe there’s been an accident.

“Did the caller specifically state she saw a gun?” Skip asks the dispatcher.

“I think she said she saw him put something behind his back that looked like a gun. Her cell cut out before I could ask any follow-up questions. Her service was so bad I was only getting every other word.”

“But she was panicking?”

“Maybe, or jogging. She was breathing heavily.”

“Do we have her location yet?”

“Sir, we have another call coming in. This time from inside the high school. Caller states there’s a man with a gun. He fired two shots and then barricaded himself inside the school office. And now the switchboard is lighting up with incoming calls.”

High school? There’s an active shooter at the high school?

“Everyone move out. I’ll call Jackson to see what the hell is going on. He should still be there.” Skip turns and his pale blue eyes go wide with shock. Or fear. The same fear I’m feeling right now.

Without a word, I run out of the station and straight for my truck. Every other officer on duty follows, but I pay them no attention. There are no lights and sirens for these types of calls. We show up unannounced and without warning. Speeding down the street, I check my phone once more. Still nothing.

Fuck.

Please let her be safe.

Calling, I impatiently wait for her to answer.

“Pick up, pick up, pick. Please baby, pick up.”

It goes to voicemail.

Fuck.

For the first time in a long time, I pray. My mother’s blind faith is something I did not inherit. Yet, I find myself pleading

to a higher power. For him or her to watch over everyone in the school. My pleading becomes more specific because I pray that Rory's safely locked away in her office and nowhere near the perp with a gun. I also pray that this is a big misunderstanding, and when we show up at the school we can breathe a sigh of relief at the false alarm.

With the school in eyesight, I realize my last prayer has gone unheard. There are a handful of students and staff on the sidewalk. Some are crying and all look panicked. I swerve and aim the hood of my truck at the school, then hop out.

Everything in me wants to run in there, guns blazing. But I can't, not yet. Doing that runs the risk of the shooter firing and possibly hurting someone, or me.

"The neighboring towns are sending backup," Skip tells us.

Glancing around, I see the entire force is here. I hadn't even noticed. My tunnel vision is directed at the school.

"Did we get any more info?" I ask.

Skip's eyes meet mine and I already know the answer. "There was a school board meeting today. Principal Aguirre and Vice Principal Miller are on their way now. Melody Harris was the only employee in the office this morning."

"And that's where he's barricaded?" one guy asks.

"Yes. Active shooter drill means that all classrooms are on lockdown." More squad cars arrive every minute that Skip talks. "We get suited up and start with the classrooms on the outer wall. When everyone's evacuated, we move on to the next. Once all the other departments are here, we'll assemble two teams for the interior. Remember, everyone is a suspect until proven otherwise. We don't know if the shooter is a student or someone from outside the school. Stay alert."

A resounding "Yes, sir" sweeps through us.

As the others break to divvy up the tasks at hand, Skip places his hand on my shoulder. "She's not answering her phone."

“I know.” I should tell him she’s all right and make up excuses as to why we can’t reach her. But I can’t lie to Skip or myself.

“So help me God, Jackson, if something happens to her.” Skip’s voice catches, and I watch as his eyes burn with tears as he looks helplessly at the school. Someone calls his name, and he tries his best to shake off the worry. “We go in soon. Get ready.”

Reaching for my phone, I try Rory once more. Still nothing.

Something is wrong.

If she was on campus and heard the gunshots, she would have called to report it immediately. Or at least texted one of us to let us know she’s ok. Dispatch said countless calls came in after the first one. If one would have been from Rory, they would have told Skip, who then would have told me. Just as I’m about to dial her again, I hear my name being called. I look up to find a distraught Lyndsey running toward me.

“She’s in there.” My heart stops beating and my knees go weak. “She’s in there, Jackson. You have to go get her.”

Lyndsey is frantic. But I snap myself out of it, needing to remain calm. Jumping to conclusions and panicking won’t help.

“Where is Rory, Lynds?”

Skip is off to the side of me, arguing with one of the higher-ups from a different town. There’s no way for me to get his attention.

“The photocopier went down and Rory was in the office fixing it. She’s in there. I heard two gunshots. Oh, God. What if they shot Rory and Ms. Melody?”

Lyndsey just confirmed my fear. The reason Rory isn’t picking up her phone or calling me or her dad is because she’s being held hostage at gunpoint, or worse. *No!* I refuse to think anything worse has happened.

My eyes dart to Skip. He's being lectured by more than a few people now, and I watch as he finally surrenders. The man, who I can only assume is now in charge, looks around. Glancing back at Skip, he makes eye contact before mouthing the words "*Go now!*" at me. They're benching him because of his relation to a possible victim. I need to get in there before they do the same to me.

I rush toward the side of the school. In front of me, I see one group of officers moving from window to window, evacuating the students and faculty inside those rooms. In front of the school, another group is suiting up and will start clearing the interior. That's the team I should go in with, but if I do, I'll be caught and forced to sit out here and wait. And I can't wait. Not as long as she's in there.

Moving toward the back of the school, I pause at the gym door and remove my gun from its holster. I can count on one hand the number of times I've had to draw my weapon while on duty. Not once did I think I'd have to do it here. I pull open the door and raise my Glock, scanning the interior as I make my way through the empty room.

Hallway after hallway, I sweep in total silence. It's eerily quiet, with everyone locked inside their classrooms, hiding under a desk, or huddled together in the corner. All of them fearful to make even the faintest of peeps because it might draw the attention of a crazed shooter. As I move closer to the office, I stop dead in my tracks. The clicking of high heels on the vinyl flooring echoes throughout the school, and I rush toward the sound.

Rounding the corner, Ms. Melody almost lands face first in my gun.

"Jackson, oh my God!" she cries out.

"Shhh, I need you to lower your voice," I tell her, pulling her back around the corner.

"He's crazy, Jackson. That man, I thought I was a goner, but he let me go."

"Is he still in there? Is he alone?"

I hold out hope Lyndsey was wrong, and that Rory was already out of the office before this asshole started shooting it up.

“Oh, God. I left her. I can’t believe I did that.”

“Who, Ms. Melody? Who did you leave?”

“I’m so sorry, Jackson.” She cries. “He came here looking for her. Rory’s still in there with him. She’s trying to talk him down, but I don’t know if she’ll be able to get through to him.”

All at once, I feel all the blood drain from my face. Rory’s trapped in a room, alone with the shooter. One who came specifically for her.

“Go,” I tell Melody. “There’s a team coming through the front. Someone will get you out safely.”

“I hope—”

“Go!”

This time Melody listens, and I hear her heels once again clicking on the floor as she moves away from me. The time at the academy, and all my years of training never prepared me for this. Not once did I expect to be put in a scenario where I had to rescue the woman I love from a life-or-death situation. But here I am. The world in front of me goes by as if in slow motion. The blood rushes to my ears, and now, instead of silence, I hear my heart pounding in my chest. But my mind and eyes are laser focused as I make my way slowly down the hallways of Hawk Bend High.

RORY

*M*y eyes travel from the gun to Troy. An odd sense of calm rushes over me as I put my hands up defensively.

“Oh my God!” Melody screams.

“Shut up!” Troy yells back, pointing the gun at her now.

The action only causes Melody to scream louder. Without thinking, I jump in front of her. Placing myself in the direct path of a bullet if he were to fire. My mind races with thoughts of how this might end. What will happen to my dad if I die? Who will take care of him? And Jackson. What if I die before getting the chance to tell him I’m sorry and that I’m an idiot who should have stayed and talked through my issues instead of running away like a child? God, I really want the chance to tell him I was wrong, he was right, and that I’ll never run out on him again.

“Your issue is with me, not her. If you want to point a gun at someone, point it at me.”

Melody continues to cry while I watch Troy struggling with what to do next. Looking out the door, I see the hallways are empty. I glance at the clock to find there are still twenty minutes left before the next bell. The screaming and crying is taking its toll on him. He reaches his breaking point and explodes.

“Enough,” he barks, raising his gun in the air.

Firing two shots into the ceiling, Melody and I both drop to our knees. My hands are shaky as I press them against the worn blue carpet. The office door slams shut, and I know we're now trapped in here with him.

To my side, Melody is shivering, almost silent whimpers of fear escape her while I try my best to remain calm. My eyes still glued to the floor, a pair of dirty boots come into view. I lift my head to find Troy staring down at me.

"Get up," he says calmly.

"You realize the police will be here soon, right?"

"I said, get up."

"You just fired two shots inside of a high school. It won't just be Hawk Bend P.D." Troy grips my bicep and pulls me to my feet. "This is not how you get Annabelle back."

He drops me onto one of the desk chairs before collecting Melody off the floor and sitting her on the opposite side of the room.

"You weren't going to help me get her back. Not until I pulled this out." He waves the gun in front of my face. "This got your attention."

"You're right. I wasn't going to help you."

"Why?" He cries. His eyes, bloodshot and wet with unshed tears.

"Because you hurt her."

"I didn't mean to. My wife... she's gone... and I don't know how to do any of this without her." He paces back and forth, the gun still tight within his grasp. "I never drank until she died. At first, it was just to numb the pain. But then I needed more and more. The alcohol turns me into something I'm not."

"It wasn't safe for Annabelle—"

"How do you know she's safe where she is?" He places his hands on the desk in front of me and leans in, yelling; spit flies from his mouth as he talks. "Everyone knows the horror

stories of kids in foster care. Worse is probably being done to her than she ever experienced at home.”

“Troy—”

“No, shut up.” He starts to pace again.

I glance over at Melody, who is now silently crying. This whole situation makes me feel so helpless. This detached calmness I’m experiencing may not last, so I need to use it to my advantage while I still can.

“Troy, you need to think about what you’re going to do when the police arrive.”

“No, no way. They can’t come in here. I won’t let them.”

“They may not give you a choice.” He looks at me and cocks his head to the side. “It’s not like on TV. They’re not going to call you asking for a list of demands.”

He runs his free hand through his hair before pounding on his skull.

“I didn’t fucking think this through.” He drops to the floor, knees up and begins to rock. “I’m gonna fucking die in here. Maybe that’s for the best.”

“You don’t have to die,” I tell him. “You can put the gun down on the counter and then walk out with your hands up. Surrender.”

“They’ll fucking shoot me.” His expression is blank as he continues to rock. “I’m a dead man.”

“Hey!” I snap. His eyes meet mine and all I see is a lost soul who has nowhere to turn. Which can be dangerous if I’m not careful. “If you die, you’ll never be able to ask your daughter for forgiveness.”

“She’ll never forgive me. She shouldn’t.” His bottom lip trembles, and he presses the handle of the gun against his forehead. “I was supposed to protect her, instead I hurt her.”

“She could forgive you. It might take many, many years. But if you do something stupid and end up leaving here in a body bag, you’ll never know.”

Melody lets out a small whimper and Troy looks at her. He stands and pushes open the office door.

“Get out,” he tells her.

Melody looks at me, eyes wide in fear. “Just me?”

“Out!” he screams. “Before I change my mind.”

I nod at Melody and watch as she runs out of the office. Troy shuts the door behind her and makes his way back over to the desk I’m sitting at.

“What are you going to do now?”

“I know who your father and your boyfriend are.” He once again grabs me by the arm and leads us to the doorway. “If I go out there using you as a shield, they won’t shoot at me.” With his hand still around my arm, he tightens his grip and places the gun to my head. Pulling me flush against him, he whispers in my ear. “We walk nice and slow.”

Nodding, I lead us away from the office. The hallways are quiet, too quiet. The only sounds I hear are Troy’s heavy breath in my ear and the pounding of my heart. My calmness is wearing off, and I feel the strangling grip of fear around my neck.

Rounding the last row of lockers, I can see the front entrance. Off in the distance are more squad cars than I can count. I fight the urge to punch this asshole in the groin and take off running. Who knows what he’s capable of if he becomes too desperate.

“Almost there,” Troy whispers.

“Hands in the air,” Jackson’s voice shouts from behind us.

Troy stills, and I feel my breath hitch in my throat.

Please don’t be stupid. Please don’t be stupid.

“I said, get your fucking hands in the air.”

Troy flips us around and uses me as a shield to protect himself from Jackson. Our eyes meet, and all I want to do is run to him. But Troy has me by a death grip and the gun is still pointed at my head.

“I’m sorry,” I cry out. And I’m not sure if I’m apologizing for being taken hostage or for the past two days, since I may not get the chance.

“Shut up!” Troy screams.

“You don’t want to do this,” Jackson warns him. “Right now, it’s just me. But twenty men are about to break down those doors. Do you really think you’re going to make it out of here if you don’t drop your weapon and stand down?”

“If I let her go, you’ll shoot me.”

“You have no idea how badly I want to kill you right now.”

Jackson’s eyes never leave mine. I’m trembling as the adrenaline quickly wears off. A steady stream of silent tears falls freely down my cheeks.

“Put the fucking gun down, Baucom.”

I feel the gun shift and watch as Jackson’s eyes follow the movement. Oh, no, this isn’t happening. This can’t be happening. Troy rotates the gun and points it at Jackson. Time slows down as the two stare each other down. The moment a loud bang rings out, I close my eyes as both my heart and time come to a dead stop.

“Drop your weapon!” a string of voices behind me yells out.

I open my eyes to find Troy lowering the gun before tossing it to the floor. His death grip on me releases as he takes a few steps away from me. Looking back at Jackson, I find him still standing in the same spot, staring at me. It wasn’t a gunshot. He’s ok, I’m ok.

“Turn and face us, now,” the officer behind me commands.

I can hear Troy’s boots against the floor as he shuffles to face the officers. I’m still standing here, frozen. There isn’t a single part of my body that doesn’t feel like it’s made of stone. When Troy is far enough away, I let out the breath I didn’t realize I had been holding. Jackson motions for me to come to him, but I can’t.

“Now, walk toward us. Keep your hands high, where we can see them.”

From behind, I can hear the shuffling of bodies, and I know it’s over. The emotional dam bursts open, and I collapse to my knees, gasping for air. I don’t even realize the muscular arms holding me as I collapse deeper into his chest. His hand soothes my head as he pulls me into his lap.

I’m alive.

He’s alive.

We’re ok.

Those are the words Jackson repeats as I sit here, broken in his arms. “We’re ok,” he says. Over and over again. His soothing voice is the only thing grounding me to the reality that this ordeal is over. He came for me, as I knew he would.

Jackson

It took everything in me not to fire and end that asshole. Coming up behind them, seeing him use Rory as a human shield; it’s what my heart wanted to do. The internal struggle between the primal urge to protect the woman I love versus the logical part of my brain going through the motions of my training. If Rory wasn’t in the line of fire, logic wouldn’t have won.

Thankfully, once the other officers arrive, the coward surrenders without a fight. As Baucom moves away from Rory, I try to get her to come to me. From where I’m standing, I can see her legs start to shake. But before I can reach her, she collapses to the ground. Kneeling beside her, I wrap her in my arms and stroke her hair. Her cheeks are damp with tears that won’t stop falling and her breathing is labored. Nothing but hiccups as she gasps for air. The adrenaline crash is always difficult to watch, more so when it’s someone you love.

Her hands grip tightly around my Kevlar vest and I feel her sink into me. Without having to say a word, this gesture tells me she knows it’s me. She knows I’ve got her, and I’ll never let go. Scooping her into my lap, I lean my back up against the locker and continue to hold her tight. With Rory’s face buried

in my chest, I watch as the officers walk a handcuffed Troy Baucom past us. His eyes meet mine, and for a second I think he's going to look away, but he doesn't.

"I wasn't going to hurt her."

The officer directly behind Baucom gives him a shove. "Keep moving."

Skip is now to the right of me, his jaw locked tight as he stares at Baucom. Once he passes us, Skip turns his attention to me.

"Medic is on the way in. Is she hurt?"

"Not physically."

"Aurora?"

Rory takes in a shaky breath and turns her head toward her father's voice.

"I'll be ok," she manages in between gasps.

Skip kneels and runs his hand over her back. "I thought I was going to lose you." His confession causes Rory to only sob harder. "Thank you, Jackson." I give him a nod and watch as he wipes at his eyes. "I'm going to have a medic look you over just to be safe. The deputies are going to take Melody's statement, and then they'll need yours. I'm sorry they won't wait. But, after that, Jackson can take you home."

Rory doesn't move, only nods her head. Skip's warm, pale-blue eyes meet mine, and I try my best to reassure him.

"I'm not leaving her. You do what you have to do. I've got her."

Skip nods and walks back to the front of the school. A minute later, two medics are kneeling down in front of us, checking Rory's vitals and asking her a series of questions. Most of her answers are short, one-word sentences. She only elaborates if she has to. She keeps a death grip on my hand the entire time.

By the time medics wrap it up, one of our officers comes in and takes Rory's statement. I watch as she robotically

recounts the events as they happened. The officer asks her a few follow-up questions, and then we're free to leave.

Inside Rory's office, she grabs her purse and cell phone from her desk drawer.

"I have so many missed calls and texts."

"You don't have to worry about any of that right now. It's mostly me and your dad, I'm sure."

Rory takes a breath and looks around her office. Her eyes void of all emotion. "Take me home, please."

"Do you want to go to the townhouse or—"

"Your place, Jackson," she interrupts me. "That's my home."

With a sigh of relief, I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her close. Together, we walk out of the school and directly to my truck. The media is still here, trying to capture every bit of information they can. Thankfully, the police barricade has them pushed back far enough away that Rory has some privacy.

Once home, I make her a cup of tea and watch as she sits on the couch. She didn't say two words on the drive home. Even now, her face is expressionless as she stares blankly, straight ahead.

Walking into the living room, I hand her the cup of tea and take the seat next to her on the couch.

"I'm sorry," she says. Her voice raspy from all the crying.

"You have absolutely nothing to apologize for." I take her hand in mine and place it on my knee.

"That's not true." She takes a sip of tea and then a deep breath before she continues. "The argument on Saturday... it was all my fault. And I'm not just saying this because of what happened today. I'm saying this because it's the truth." Her green eyes meet mine. They're red and bloodshot from the tears, yet they're still so beautiful as they stare into my soul. "Seeing you with the baby—"

“Stop. Rory, I’m not some new man in your life who you need to explain your situation to or justify your reasons. I’ve been here from the beginning, I know it all. I’m not that dumbass who thinks he’s going to change your mind in ten years. You are all I need.”

“I know that. I think I’ve always known that. But I got scared. You’ve been by my side since the moment I met you. And I’ll never walk away from you again.”

Cupping her face in my hand, I brush the pad of my thumb across her cheek. “You know what this means, right?”

“Saggy tits and droopy balls?” Rory chuckles and for the first time all day, a small, half-smile plays on her lips.

“Yep, and I can’t wait.”

RORY

ONE YEAR LATER...

“Wow,” Lyndsey announces, the door slamming shut behind her. “Your view is so much better than mine.”

“Jameson,” I respond as best I can without moving my mouth. The make-up artist is lining my lips, and I don’t want to mess her up. She finishes and I take my opportunity to speak. “It’s his gift to us. We get to stay in this room the whole week.”

“And Jackson just accepted, huh?” Lyndsey plops down in the empty chair and grabs a flute of champagne.

“That boy didn’t have a choice,” Leann chimes in. “You don’t turn your nose up at a gift. Besides, those two have done enough bickering to last them two lifetimes.” She reaches out and squeezes my hand. “Times are changing.” She winks at me.

“They are,” I reiterate.

It was Christmas time when Jackson surprised me with an engagement ring. We were camped out in the back of his truck, star gazing at the cliff that overlooks the quarry. “Our spot,” as we now refer to it. We were all bundled up and cuddled under multiple blankets when suddenly a shiny diamond solitaire appeared before my eyes.

There was no fancy speech, or him getting down on one knee. I held out my hand. He slid the ring on my finger and then offered me his pinky.

“Forever?”

With my pinky tightly wrapped around his, I whispered, “Forever.”

We consummated our engagement that night and told our parents the exciting news the next day.

Jackson has always been my partner in life, and today we’re making it official. We will say our vows on the white sandy beaches of Aruba, with only our parents, Jameson, Martina, our new nephew and Lyndsey. It’ll be short, sweet, and absolutely perfect. Then we’ll have the rest of our lives.

Looking in the mirror, I can’t help but think of the last time I stood in a wedding dress waiting for my father. There is no formal gown or long flowy train this time. No, this time I’m in a simple satin, ivory colored, charmeuse midi-dress that I had hemmed to fall just below the knee. Instead of expensive high heels, I have on my dollar flip flops, which I plan on kicking off as soon as my feet touch the sand.

“Aurora?” I turn to find my dad slipping the key card for the suite back into his shorts pocket. “Are you ready?”

Closing the gap between us, I pull my father in for a hug. He wraps his arms tightly around me and rests his chin on the top of my head.

“Are we going to need a getaway car for this one, too?” he jokes.

“No.” I smile. “Besides, I think we’d need a boat this time.”

Gripping my shoulders, my dad pulls away. His eyes scan my face before they finally meet my own.

“You look so much like your mother.” He smiles sadly. “There are so many milestones that she’s missed. But I know she’s with us, and she would be so damned proud of the woman you’ve grown up to be.”

My eyes sting with tears and I’m forced to roll my lips to stop them from trembling.

“I wish she was here. She would have danced all night.” I laugh a little as a vision of my mom pops into my head.

“Yeah, that she would have. Dragging me out there with her. Ven, ven, corazón. Bailar conmigo.” He laughs. “Man, when she got excited, she’d talk at me all fast in nothing but Spanish. And, of course, I had no clue what the hell she was saying. But I followed her anyway.” He takes my chin between his thumb and index finger, taking another long, hard look at me. “You and Jackson have a similar love. That man would walk through fire for you, and I know you’d do the same.”

“I know, and I would.”

“Always be there for each other. Never take a single moment for granted. You never know.”

I wrap my arms around my dad, giving him another hug. “I love you.”

“I love you too, kid.” He kisses the top of my head and gives me a firm squeeze. “Now, let’s get you married.”

Jackson

Standing under the arch, I stare out at the ocean. The sun is setting, and when I close my eyes, all I hear are the waves crashing against the shore and the fabric draped around the arch, rustling with each breeze. Peace and warmth, that’s what this is. The environment mirrors everything I’m feeling.

This is the moment I’ve been waiting for since I was sixteen years old. I said I was going to marry Rory on the first day I met her, and here we are. Did I go about things the hard way? Of course. But that’s just how my life goes. I’ve had my fair share of obstacles and pity parties, but look where I am now. Standing on this beautiful, white sandy beach. Crystal clear water as far as the eye can see and the most important people in our lives are here to watch as we say *I do*.

I would do everything over the exact same if it meant this was the outcome.

“Jackson?”

I turn to find my parents. My mom's face is all lit up with a smile. In fact, I don't think that smile has left her face since Rory and I told her we were getting married. Glancing behind them, I see Jameson and Martina. Jameson is wearing one of those baby slings, and I can't help but chuckle at the visual.

"Did you ever think we'd see the day when Jameson Nash, superstar, macho quarterback, would wear a baby strapped to his chest?"

"He's doing it to help Martina. Poor girl, I worry this little breeze might blow her away. I'm pretty sure the baby outweighs her already."

"Leann," my dad warns.

"Oh, hush. I love the girl, Mitch. I'm just saying, would it kill her to eat a steak?"

My father rolls his eyes at me, and I contain my laughter as to not encourage my mother. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the officiant and the wedding planner Rory and I met with making their way toward us. The show is about to start.

My father clears his throat, then nods his head at my mother. She gives me a kiss on the cheek before going to stand with the others.

"Jackson, I um..." My father stumbles over his words. "I, uh, wanted to take a moment and tell you how proud your mother and I are of you. Or more specifically, how proud *I* am of you."

"Dad—"

"No, let me finish," he interrupts. "I know the two of us haven't always seen eye to eye. They always say to be a parent to your child, not their friend. But I think there were a few times when I should have ignored that. You think he's my favorite, but he's not. I love you both the same." My dad looks back at Jameson and shakes his head. "It's a good thing luck blessed that boy. If he was given the cards you were dealt, his life would have turned out very different from the one you've created for yourself."

I stare at my father, unsure of what to say. The two of us have never had a heart to heart like this. My whole life he's told me all the things I've done wrong, so all of this is very unexpected.

“Do you mean it? Or are you just buttering me up because it's my wedding day?”

“A little of both,” he teases. “This conversation was long overdue. I love you, son. And I love that girl. I hope the two of you will be as happy as your mother and I have been.”

Reaching out, I pull my dad in for a bear hug. The gesture surprises him, and I feel him tense before he relaxes.

“All right, now. That's enough of that,” he says, smoothing his navy-blue linen button-down that almost matches my own. We dressed our dads in navy blue while my shirt is a shade or two lighter—Rory's idea. “I don't get dressed up too often and I don't need you messing it all up before someone can take a picture.”

I smile at my dad, giving him a quick slap on the back. “I can't wait to tell Jameson that I'm your favorite.”

“Jackson, don't be an ass.” He groans, turning away from me to rejoin my mom.

I let out a chuckle and nod at the officiant who has taken his spot dead center under the arch. From out of nowhere, soft instrumental music plays, and that's when I see her.

She's stunning.

Her thick, dark curly hair is braided with small white flowers mixed in. And her dress...God, her dress. It's so simple, yet she looks drop dead gorgeous in it. The small rose bouquet she's holding in front of her doesn't hide the curves of her body that are only accentuated by the dress. She's barefoot, and I can't help but smile. She looks perfect.

I need to remind myself to breathe. So many emotions are rushing through me, and breathing is the only thing preventing me from running down this aisle and stealing her away. Screw the wedding and the small dinner we have planned afterward.

Instead, I breathe and anchor myself to the sand as I patiently wait for her.

As she and Skip come to a stop, all I can do is stare. Her emerald-green eyes are blazing under the setting sun. Forcing myself to look away, I nod at Skip.

“Take care of my little girl.”

“I will.”

He smiles at Rory before looking back at me. “I know you will, son.”

Taking Rory’s hands in mine, we stare into each other’s eyes as the officiant begins. We asked for the most basic, quickest ceremony the hotel offered. We didn’t need to write our own vows or agree to have and to hold ’til death do us part. All we wanted was to place our ring on the other’s finger and have someone with the power to announce us as husband and wife.

Minutes later, we’re doing just that. Rory slides the black titanium band around my finger, and my heart swells when she says “I do.” Then it’s my turn. I place the wedding band on her ring finger, say those two little words, and then hold out my pinky for her. She smiles and wraps her own around mine.

“Ladies and gentleman, it is my privilege to announce for the very first time, Mr. and Mrs. Jackson Nash.”

Our small circle erupts in cheers and I hear my brother shout out “About time!”

“You may kiss the bride,” the officiant announces.

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” I mutter as I move closer to Rory.

She meets me halfway, just as eager as I am to seal our union. The world around us fades to black, and there’s only the two of us. We did it. Our love story is end goals, as the high school kids tell us. Whatever we are, we’re married, and I get to spend the rest of my life with this incredible woman.



WALKING DOWN THE HALLWAY, hand in hand, Rory's sandals make that flip-flop sound which seems to echo in the silence. We get to the suite door and I pull out the key card, waving it over the access pad.

"Mrs. Nash?" I lift Rory into my arms bridal style as she wraps her hands loosely around my neck.

"Have I ever told you that your old-fashioned charm is one of my favorite things about you? I used to think you were a perfect gentleman, and then I got to know you."

"I don't think any sixteen-year-old has ever described someone as the perfect gentleman."

"You know what I mean."

I sit her down on the edge of the bed and stare down at her.

"You said you used to think I was the perfect gentleman. Do you not believe that anymore?"

Rory's eyes snap to my crotch. Yes, I'm hard, yes it's noticeable. When she looks back at me, she smirks.

"Nope. Now I know you're just a horn dog."

"Lucky for you, I can be both."

My mouth crashes onto hers, and I devour her. The taste of wine still lingers on her tongue. Rory's hands grip my shirt as she lays flat on the bed. Caged between my arms, I nip her lip, then her jaw, before working my way down.

"Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?"

"About a million times." She sucks in a breath as I bite her nipple through her dress.

"Make it a million and one." The palms of my hands graze up her thigh in search of the panties I need to remove. But

there are none. “Rory?”

“Hmm?” She looks at me, her pupils blown out.

“Have you not been wearing panties this whole time?”

“My dress is too tight. I didn’t want to have panty lines.”

I slip a finger deep inside her core while the other unzips my shorts. She arches her back off the bed and lets out the sexiest moan.

“All I want to do is bury myself in you.” My finger hooks and her walls grip down on me.

“Make love to me, Jackson.”

With her permission, I slide home. Her warmth surrounds me, and I close my eyes, savoring how good she feels. I will never grow tired of this woman. With her legs wrapped around my waist, she pulls me closer to her. The pad of my thumb rubs her clit, and I watch as she grows closer and closer to her release.

“Jackson!” she cries out.

“Come for me, Mrs. Nash. I want to watch my beautiful wife come again and again.”

Increasing my speed, I pump in and out, just the way she likes it. This rhythm gets her there almost every time. Her legs start to shake, and I watch as her eyes roll back in her head. At the first sign of her orgasm, I grip her hips and increase my speed, chasing my own release. Grunting and moaning, the two of us explode together.

Collapsing on the bed, I lay next to Rory. My knuckle drags across her pouty lower lip. This woman has been my center of gravity for the past decade and a half, and now I get to spend every day with her by my side.

“I love you, Aurora Nash. Forever.”

She turns her head to the side and smiles.

“I love you too, Jackson Nash. Forever.”

EPILOGUE

RORY: TEN YEARS LATER...

The bartender places a glass of chardonnay in front of me. Smiling at him politely, I bring the drink to my lips and take my first sip. The crisp, fruity flavor ignites my taste buds. The dimly lit hotel bar is busy. Almost all the tables are full of couples and groups having a pre-dinner drink. Their inaudible murmur of conversation carries over the music coming from the live piano player.

At the bar are myself and a few other solo patrons. Taking another sip of wine, I glance at my phone to check the time. When I look back up, I catch him behind me in the mirror. Our eyes meet, and I feel the small hairs on the back of my neck stand up as a shiver runs down my spine. Nervously, I twist my wedding ring around my finger.

“Is this seat taken?”

His voice is low and confident, sending a rush of warmth through my abdomen. He places his hand on the barstool beside me.

“I’m expecting someone,” I reply, hoping I don’t let on how affected I am by his presence.

Despite my words, he pulls out the barstool and takes a seat. His jean clad knee brushes against my exposed thigh, and I discreetly pull my dress down. But he notices. His piercing hazel eyes linger on my leg, leaving me feeling exposed and vulnerable.

“Any man who keeps a woman like you waiting isn’t worth your time.”

“How do you know it’s a man I’m meeting?”

“Man, woman, whomever...they’re still not worth your time.”

I roll my lips to hide my amusement. “What I meant was that I could be waiting for friends. You’re very presumptuous.”

He motions to the bartender and orders a Coors on tap. As he does, I unapologetically take him in. The plain black T-shirt he wears cuts a little tight across his broad chest and shoulders. The sleeves fit snug around his tattooed biceps. Dark brown hair kept short and his beard has the tiniest bit of gray on the chin, which I find extremely sexy. He catches me eyeing him and flashes me a smile that pulls at my heartstrings.

“Jackson,” he says, while holding out his hand.

“Aurora. Nice to meet you.” I place my hand in his, and I feel a flutter of excitement in my abdomen. Even after all these years, the simplest touch from him can do me in.

“Like the princess? That’s pretty hot.” Taking a sip of his beer, he watches as I pick up my wine glass. “You’re married?”

“I am.”

“Same.” He flashes me his ring finger. “Absolute knock-out, too. I have no clue why she picked me.” He smiles. “She has these amazing green eyes and an ass that won’t quit. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“So, tell me about your partner?”

“He’s a cocky, middle-aged jackass with a potbelly and a receding hairline,” I reply, without skipping a beat.

Jackson chokes on his beer and grabs a napkin from behind the bar to wipe his mouth.

“He sounds like a real catch.”

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and I love him.”

“And where is he while you’re sitting here drinking alone?”

“He’s in Europe right now. Some breakthrough hair restoration treatment. He’s trying to get ahead of his male pattern baldness.”

Jackson narrows his eyes at me. He wants so badly to break character and end our little game. I cock my eyebrow at him, almost in a dare, but he doesn’t take the bait.

“Good for him. My wife is also out of town, in case you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t.”

The guy next to me at the bar chuckles, and as I turn, I find him shaking his head. He’s been eavesdropping on our conversation. He grabs his drink and looks at Jackson before leaving the bar.

“Take the hint, bro. I don’t think she’s interested,” he tells him.

Jackson’s stare moves from my eyes to my lips and then back. “Is that true?”

“What do you think?” I challenge him.

“I think you’re very interested in me. You look like a woman who has no problem speaking her mind, and if you wanted me to leave, you would’ve said so already.”

“Is that right?”

“I think so.” Jackson finishes his beer and tosses a twenty-dollar bill onto the counter. “What would you say if I asked you to join me for dinner?”

“I’d tell you I’m not hungry.” I bite my bottom lip and lean in closer to him. “Yet.”

“And if I asked you to come up to my room so you could work up an appetite?”

“I’d tell you to lead the way.”

Jackson stands. With my hand in his, he helps me off of the barstool. I follow him through the bar, past the lobby, and into the elevator. He pushes the button for the tenth floor and then turns to face me.

Closing the gap between us, he cages me in. His palms flat against the mirrored wall on either side of my head. I need him to touch me. I don't think I can stand another second of him being this close yet so far.

My fingers grip his belt buckle, and I pull him closer. With his body flush against mine, Jackson lets out a groan.

“It's so hot when you do that.”

“Just claiming what's mine.”

My tongue licks his lips, which causes Jackson to crash his mouth onto mine. There is so much urgency in our kiss and I never want it to end. Gnashing teeth and tangled tongues, I can't get enough. My lungs burn from lack of oxygen, yet I refuse to break free. His hand grips my hip as he pulls me even closer. I can feel his erection against my abdomen, and I want more.

My hand slips down the front of his pants, and I grip his cock. Jackson thrusts into my grip, breaking our kiss. His head falls back with a shaky breath. I nip at his Adam's apple before trailing kisses over his neck. Before anything can go further, the elevator dings and the doors open, allowing us to get off on our floor.

Our hands are all over each other as we make our way to the room. Jackson reaches in his back pocket for the key card and blindly waves it in front of the lock. He fumbles with the handle until it finally opens and the two of us stumble into the room. When we've reached the bed, Jackson turns us so that the mattress rests at the back of my knees.

He takes a step back, and I watch as he undoes his belt buckle, pops open the button on his jeans, and slowly drags down his zipper. The tip of his cock peeks out just over the waistband of his boxer briefs. His hand palms his erection and I watch as he strokes it over the fabric.

“Do you like what you see?” The corners of his mouth turn up in the faintest of smiles.

“Very much so,” I reply, my mouth suddenly so dry.

“Don’t tell me your balding, pot-bellied husband lacks in this area, too.”

“He does.” I hold up my pinky and wiggle it a little. “I’m talking microscopic.”

“You better prepare yourself then, baby. Because I’m not going to hold back.”

Without warning, Jackson spins me around. His hands roam over my abdomen before they grip my breasts. He bites my ear lobe and nudges me toward the bed. Taking the hint, I get on all fours, anticipating his next move.

His firm hands slide up my bare thighs. I can feel my skirt rising higher and higher as Jackson moves the fabric over my ass. I don’t miss the appreciative groan he lets out when he finds I’m wearing the black lace thong that he loves so much.

“Do you like what *you* see?” I look behind me and immediately spot the fire burning in his eyes.

“Best damn view I ever saw.”

Jackson’s knuckle brushes over the lace fabric along my slit, and I arch my back under his touch. He moves the fabric to the side and the cold air that touches my bare pussy causes me to shudder. His finger teases at my entrance before it slides deep inside my core. Too soon, he slides out, and I desperately beg for more.

“Jackson, please.” I move my ass closer to him, and I can hear the chuckle under his breath. “Please,” I demand more urgently.

“Since you begged so sweetly.”

Jackson grips my hips and impales me with his cock. I gasp as he slides home, hard and unforgiving. He pulls out before bottoming out inside me again. His rhythm is fast, and he doesn’t miss a beat. I grip the comforter, holding on for dear life as Jackson both gives and takes. The way his cock

drags against my most sensitive spot has me crying out, begging for him not to stop.

“This position is too fucking much. You feel so damn good.” Jackson growls through clenched teeth.

Unable to take this delicious punishment without a release any longer, I slide my hand underneath me. My fingers find my clit, and I massage away the ache. The moans and words falling from Jackson’s lips, the sounds of our flesh slapping against one another as he thrusts into me again and again. I can’t take much more.

The familiar warmth starts deep within my abdomen. I’m so close and I pick up speed, working my clit, seeking the release I so desperately need.

“Jackson, I’m gonna come!” I cry out.

“Oh, shit, yes!” he breathes out. “Come for me, baby. Let me hear you.”

When my orgasm rips through me, I don’t hold back. At this moment, I couldn’t care less about neighbors or noise complaints. Jackson’s own release follows almost instantly, and he’s just as loud, if not louder, as he roars, filling me up with what feels like endless amounts of cum.

When we’re both spent, Jackson adjusts my panties back to their rightful place and then collapses onto the bed. I roll onto my side, facing him, and he lazily pulls me flush against his body.

“You’re by far the hottest guy I’ve ever picked up in a bar. What’s your name again?”

Jackson tickles my ribs, and I burst into a fit of laughter.

“Hair plugs? Pot belly? Tiny dick? You paint a beautiful picture of me, Mrs. Nash, you know that?”

“Role playing is all about im prov. I can’t help it if you lack imagination.”

“Or that I’m just so crazy in love with you, you’re literally the only woman I can describe.”

“Well, now I feel like an ass.”

Jackson laughs and kisses me on the forehead. “Happy birthday, baby.”

“Thank you.” I smile as I soak in his words.

The past ten years have been a whirlwind. There’s been surgeries and more than a few health scares. But through it all, Jackson has stood by my side. He never once faltered. It hasn’t always been easy, but we made it, both of us. I never thought I’d live to see forty, let alone forty-one. But here I am, another year older. I never take a single moment for granted. No matter how big or small, each one is important. And I’m so thankful that I get to spend the rest of my days, no matter how many, with the love of my life and my best friend.

“We should get ready if we’re going to make our reservation.” His words pull me from my thoughts.

“I’ve got a better idea.” I push Jackson onto his back and then straddle his lap. He holds his hands out and I lace my fingers with his. “Let’s order room service and then spend the rest of the night making love.”

Jackson laughs and shakes his head. “If that’s what the birthday girl wants. But, do I have to remind you I’m not as young as I used to be? I don’t want to leave you disappointed on your special day.”

Caging him in with my hands, I lean down and kiss him. “You could never disappoint me. Even in forty years when nothing on our bodies works right and we can’t hear or see, you’re still going to be my favorite person. The one I want to spend every second with until my last breath.”

“I know, I know. Saggy titties and droopy balls. Good thing we’ll apparently be blind and deaf by the time that happens.” Jackson chuckles and his hazel eyes light up from within.

“I can’t wait.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

G is a San Francisco transplant who now resides in BFE, North Carolina. She shares her little slice of heaven with her husband, two daughters, a grumpy Multi-Poo and two feisty feline badasses. Fueled by caffeine and chaos, most days you can find G glued to her laptop doing absolutely anything she can to avoid housework. She spends her free time binge-watching reality television, hanging out with friends around a bonfire, or having movie nights with the family.

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