



MORE

THAN

Myself

BECOMING AN EVANS
BOOK FIVE

JENNI BARA

MORE THAN MYSELF

BECOMING AN EVANS SERIES



JENNI BARA BOOKS



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Also by Jenni Bara

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More Than Myself

Becoming an Evans Book Five

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Becoming An Evan Series

More Than the Game

More Than Fine

More than a Hero

More than a Story

More than Myself

Metros Baseball Men

Wishing for More

Writing as Kacie West

Goldilocks and the Grumpy Bear

Tumbling Head over Heels

*To my parents for your endless support
in all I do, and for leading by example
so I always knew what
amazing parenting looked like.*

CHAPTER 1





aly

“WHAT DID YOU DO?” Aly Gomez snapped. How much could one person take? Because she was pretty sure she was at her breaking point.

“You always assume it’s me,” her brother, Andy, grumbled.

“Because 90 percent of the time it *is* you.” She flung her hand in the air as she paced the front porch of the house she was remodeling. Being halfway across the country wasn’t ideal when she was the sole legal guardian of a difficult eleven-year-old. “You put earthworms in Sarah’s bed the day she quit, and you filled Tanya’s closet with garbage. The poor woman couldn’t get the stank out of her clothes for two weeks!”

Andy snickered.

“It’s not funny, dude; you’ve been officially labeled a nightmare with these people.”

He sighed.

This entire thing was too much. Too hard for a twenty-four-year-old and an eleven-year-old to figure out, but there wasn’t another option.

“Where are you?” She glanced at her watch. It was three where she was, so that meant it was six in Jersey. He was done with his swim team practice.

“In the locker room.”

Aly took a deep breath and reminded herself that she could do this. “Why did I get a text from *another* nanny telling me she’d quit?”

“This was not my fault,” Andy cried, his tone defeated.

She softened. “Okay, *what* happened?” *Please, God, don’t let it be another problem with the house.* A month ago, she’d had someone temporarily repair the roof. And one of the bathrooms had a pipe burst in the shower, so it was out of commission. The furnace was unreliable, and she’d had to replace the fridge about six weeks ago. The place was a money pit.

“Last week, she said that if she had to get up at four a.m. for swim practice again, she was quitting. Coach scheduled four morning practices at five thirty and two evening practices this week.”

She clenched her jaw. Although her brother was a pain in the ass, this wasn't his fault.

She blew out a hard breath. “Okay, I'm sorry. This one isn't on you. I'll find a nanny who doesn't care about early mornings.”

How she'd make it happen was a mystery. Just like she had no idea how she could continue to manage the upkeep on the house. They needed something smaller. A place without a yard. Just last week, she'd paid almost four hundred dollars for a second leaf cleanup. And she'd have to do one more before winter. Even with how much the TV show paid, she was barely getting by.

Aly stared out at the street. She'd been through so many nannies in the last year that she'd developed a reputation. Actually, it was her brother with the rep, but it made the search for childcare nearly impossible. And there was no way she'd find someone tonight. She wasn't even done with her workday.

Before her mother got sick, Aly's job had been ideal. Her mother had never been great at holding down a job or a relationship. She flitted from one thing to another, getting bored quickly. The only things her mother ever stuck with were her kids. But when Aly had gotten this gig, life got easier. She had a steady income, and she was happy to help her mom out. Being the financial provider of the family was something she could do. But raising her much younger brother wasn't in Aly's skill set. And the day-to-day stuff with Andy hadn't been her job.

Until last year.

“Alley-cat.” The voice had her back straightening. If her costar wasn't the world's biggest twat pocket, the nickname probably wouldn't bug her as much. It was amazing how one person could be so good at making her feel incompetent. “*Ya done yet?*”

“Give me a minute, Logan.” She turned away from him. The man was exactly what the show wanted in a star. He had big biceps that he showed off in his sleeveless flannel shirts and a panty-melting smile. Aly couldn’t stand him. “Andy, I’ll have to wait until morning to look for a nanny. Is there a friend you can stay with?”

“The Demodas always let me stay.” Andy’s voice perked up. “Maybe I can just do that until you come home.”

Aly clenched a fist, her short nails biting into her palm. This was Andy’s grand plan. And she got it; Steve was his best friend, and the Demodas had one of those perfect-family, happy-home situations—the kind Aly had wished for when she was Andy’s age—but that didn’t mean she could dump Andy off on them for the next few weeks.

“You can stay there tonight, but I’ll find a new nanny tomorrow. Thursday at the latest. And you have the credit card if you need something, right? If you go somewhere, don’t feel like you can’t get what you need.”

If she couldn’t be there, she didn’t want Andy to feel like he had to depend on his friends’ parents for money.

“I know what I’m doing, Aly.” Andy’s eye roll was practically audible.

He wasn’t impressed with his sister. And she got that too. She was barely keeping it together. But she’d start doing better.

Hopefully.

Maybe.

CHAPTER 2





Will

WILL Evans grabbed the clipboard and test strips before heading out his office door. He glanced at his watch and shook his head. He'd told his sister he'd be there for dinner, but he'd have to haul ass to make it. He didn't allow himself to be late.

After swim team practice, a call from a mother whose eighteen-month-old son had developed a rash after his swim class had derailed his evening. He'd assured the neurotic woman that nothing was wrong with the water. But he'd closed down all swimming and had run tests to be sure.

He ran his hands through his still damp hair and sighed. The clipboard smacked against his leg as he swung it, and he sighed, taking in the two Olympic sized pools and the stands littered with swimmers waiting for the all-clear.

This gym complex had been his parents' dream, and all he'd ever wanted to do was take it over. And he had, just a lot sooner than he'd planned. Now, over fifteen years later, not only was the gym in the black, but he had expanded to add the pool and the swim team. He'd never give up coaching the team, but the rest was becoming a chore he hated.

"We're good to go, man," Will assured Ken, his evening manager, as he jogged across the concrete. "Everything checked out."

"Just like you said. Although I could have done this. You could have gone home." Ken smiled before blowing his whistle and making the announcement with the bullhorn.

Will headed back into the locker room to grab his keys, hoping to get out of there quickly. But once again, his night was derailed. This time by his eleven-year-old star swimmer sitting on the bench. The poor kid looked lost. He sat on the hard surface, shoulders slumped, staring at a pair of feet that were too big for his thin frame.

"Andy?" Will came to a halt.

Andy slowly raised his big brown eyes from the floor, but he didn't respond.

"What are you still doing here?"

The boy scanned the locker room, almost like he was caught in a trap and was looking for a way out. The poor kid had been through a lot this last year. His mother had passed away last winter. Breast cancer. That pulled at Will's heartstrings in a very personal way.

"What's going on?" Will asked, taking the seat next to him. Will had been Andy's swim coach since he was about four years old, and the two had bonded over the years. He tried not to play favorites with his swim team kids, but he couldn't help but feel closer to him than most.

Andy shrugged. Will had done that a lot too after he lost his parents. Shrugged everything off, shut down. Angry and off-putting—those had been his best traits at the time. "Who was supposed to take you home?"

Andy finally looked up at him, his expression blank.

Practice had been over for thirty minutes, and although Will had asked the question, he already had a good idea of what the answer would be.

He'd heard the stories. According to the team mothers, Andy's older sister had a legendary reputation for being a slouch. The moms did what they could to help, and they all had soft spots for him, but every single one of those mothers had complained to Will about that older sister from hell. Will hadn't met the woman. His only experience with Andy's sister had been when she sent payment and forms in, which she did without a hassle, so he was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt.

After all, she'd lost her mother too.

"Do you think maybe she just can't find you?" Will asked. The kid *was* sitting in the men's locker room, after all.

Andy's brows shot up, and he gave Will a look that said he thought the coach was ridiculous.

"*She* isn't coming. *I'm* supposed to get a ride. But we worked on my turns after practice, so when I got out of the pool, everyone was gone."

Shit. Will sighed. "Is she going to be home for dinner?"

Andy shook his head and glared at the floor.

“You want to come over to the Demodas and eat? That’s where I was heading.” Lucky for Will, Andy and Will’s nephew Steve were good friends.

Andy finally cracked a smile. “Really?”

“You know Mrs. Demoda. She loves a crowd.” He had seven brothers, a few sisters-in-law, and a bunch of nieces and nephews. And Beth Demoda was never happier than when they were all under her roof. But his brother-in-law Marc would expect a text. “I’ll let them know we’re both coming.”

“Awesome.”

Will paused and thought it over for a second. “How about you tell your sister what’s going on, and she and I can catch up when I drop you off at home later?”

“Kay,” Andy said, but the smile fell from his face.

Will used the Remind app to text the parents about practice and meet updates, but he should probably look up Andy’s sister’s number. They needed to talk directly. It was one thing for the busybody mothers to complain that Andy’s sister never signed up to bring snack, but it was another for the poor kid to be here without a ride.

“Does Mrs. Demoda not want me?” Andy asked, his shoulders slouched, when Will frowned at his phone.

His eyebrows shot into his hairline. “No, man. She doesn’t care.”

Andy huffed and peered over Will’s shoulder, reading the messages.

Will: Can I bring a plus-one for dinner?

Will winced at the way the question looked when he reread it.

Beth: Is Genni here?

Beth: You didn’t tell me.

Beth: She hasn't been here in forever. You don't have to come if you want to spend time with her.

Beth: I'd love to have her if you still want to come.

Andy paused. "Why is she talking about Ms. Sterns? Is she here?"

Without context, none of it made sense. But Beth's last text, the one about loving to have Genni over, was a lie. All his siblings hated his now ex-girlfriend. And he knew his sister wouldn't react well to the story behind the breakup.

"I haven't told my sister that Genni and I are done." That was putting it mildly.

Andy cocked his head and narrowed his eyes questioningly.

Will sighed. "Genni and I have broken up a lot in the five years we've been dating. Normally, it isn't news. But it's more of a permanent thing this time."

Andy still just stared at him from his spot on the bench.

"She'll make a big deal about it, and I don't want to talk," Will explained.

The kid nodded like he understood the concept. Probably more because he was eleven than because he actually related to the reasons Will didn't want to get into his breakup with his family. Why the hell was he even explaining this to Andy anyway?

Will shook his head and typed out a message to Beth.

"As soon as she knows it's you—"

Beth's response came in an instant, and Will turned his phone before Andy could say anything.

Beth: Cool. Steve will be thrilled, and we're nut free tonight, so it's safe.

Andy finally smiled again. Both Beth and Will had been around Andy enough over the years to remember his allergy.

“I guess she doesn’t mind.”

“Let me get my stuff, and we’ll go,” Will said.

Andy headed out of the locker room, shouldering a bag that looked twice as big as his twiggy frame. The poor boy was too thin. Although Andy had never been heavy, he’d lost a noticeable amount of weight in the last year. With the hours he spent in the pool training, he probably burned two thousand calories a day. He needed at least three good meals daily. That was another conversation he’d have to have with Andy’s sister.

“You play baseball?” Will asked as they headed to his sister’s house in his old truck.

Andy turned, his jaw clenched. He shook his head slightly before he rolled his eyes and stared out the windshield. This kid had attitude in spades. Normally, Will only dealt with him at swim practice, and Andy had never been an issue there. This kid loved the water. So the new, somewhat hostile territory was jarring.

“I know you swim. I was just asking whether you liked baseball. When we have dinner at the Demodas, we usually play a game after,” Will explained.

“I’m not good like Steve, but I can play,” Andy said.

“Do you like to? Because we don’t have to,” Will said, glancing over to gauge Andy’s response before focusing on the road again.

“Dunno,” Andy replied.

“How about we come up with a signal in case you decide you don’t want to? I’ll tell them you can’t play because you have a meet this week, and if you hurt your shoulder and can’t swim, I’ll kill you.” Will smiled at the kid. No one in his family would question Will for assuming the impossible would happen. He did it regularly.

Will expected Andy to laugh at his suggestion, but the boy only stared out the window.

“Maybe you could do this with your hair if you don’t want to play.” Will tossed his head back to get his hair out of his

face.

Andy let one snort of a laugh escape him. “My hair is nothing like yours, Coach. If I did that, I’d look like I was having a seizure.”

He was right. Will had straight hair that moved when he tossed his head back. Andy’s hair was cut short on the sides, and the top, although longer, was so curly it barely moved.

“So.” Will paused, thinking. “Scratch your head?”

Andy scratched his forehead at his hair line once and turned to Will.

“Yeah, like that.”

After that discussion, Will ran out of things to say. Thankfully, once they joined the chaos that was his sister’s house, talking became unnecessary. Even with just his sister’s kids around, the house was loud. Add a few extra people into the mix, and man, was it hard to keep up.

“How is my favorite little monster?” Will asked, scooping up his niece as he headed through the huge foyer. His brother-in-law was a former baseball star, and their house was twice the size of Will’s gym. Peyton, his niece, was adorable, with her big green eyes and dimpled smile, but even at nine months, she was a handful. “Still making sure Mommy and Daddy never sleep?”

“Don’t encourage her.” Marc came into the front hall carrying Colten, who was Peyton’s twin brother. “Hey, Andy, Steve’s in the kitchen. Mrs. Demoda made queso.”

Andy’s eyes lit up, and he ran into the kitchen without a word.

“Another babysitter bites the dust?” Marc asked.

“Maybe. I’m not sure what’s going on.”

Marc made no comment. Probably because he had nothing good to say.

Andy had been through multiple nannies over the last six months, but Will didn’t remember seeing one around in a

couple of days. That usually meant Andy's sister was home.

"Nick's here, and Corey's coming after the game." Marc changed the subject.

"Game?" Will furrowed his brows. It wasn't baseball season.

"Taran's doing a fundraiser with the Nets. Corey's probably feeling possessive." Marc grinned. "You know, about her being around all those guys."

Will chuckled and shook his head. It was more likely that his best friend wanted to be with his woman while he could. They were actually in the same city tonight, and that didn't happen enough.

After his best friend had settled down with Taran, part of Will had worried that Corey would rag on him to find the "right girl" like he had. But with his need for a controlled environment, the chaos of love had never fit him. Turns out, Will hadn't needed to worry, because Corey didn't focus enough on anything—except Taran and baseball—to give anyone a hard time.

"I'll probably leave before Cor gets here. Practice is at five thirty tomorrow," Will said as they walked into the open kitchen and living room space.

Will greeted his sister with a kiss on the cheek and his brother Nick with a slap on the back of the head as they stood around the granite island. None of Will's other brothers would be here, since no one else was in town. Andy was perched on a stool, eating queso like he was worried someone would rip it away.

"Slow down there, buddy. You don't want to choke." Will chuckled before turning to Nick's wife, Morgan, just as Peyton yanked at his hair. "You ready for one of these?"

The way Nick examined his wife while he waited for her response was a clear reminder that Will had never looked at anyone that way. Letting someone have the ability to hurt him was something Will had always steered clear of. As a kid, he'd watched his parents love each other, but after his mom died,

the grief that took over his father's life seemed unbearable. He wasn't sure how his brothers could open themselves up for that type of hurt.

"God help you if you get a mini-Nick," Marc teased.

"Stop. Y'all are making me nervous. I can handle crazy, but I don't know what I'll do if this little girl doesn't sleep." Morgan rubbed her round belly.

"Eh, who needs sleep?" Nick smirked.

"Me!" Morgan said. "Unlike you, I'm not a machine." Morgan pulled her phone out of her pocket as it buzzed in her hand.

"Speaking of machines, maybe you should stress less about your next book." Nick shook his head.

"Easier to get *Goldilocks and the Grumpy Bear* out now than after the little one is here. Plus, it needs to come out before Christmas. And I promise not to publish until she's at least a few months old." Morgan laughed as she headed out of the room to take the call.

"Hey, Dad, can we swim? Andy said I can't beat him, and I know I can," Steve asked Marc.

"We have forty-five minutes or so until dinner," Beth answered when Marc looked at her in silent question. "If you don't mind going out with them."

"Sure," Marc said, glancing out to the pool. A year ago, they had converted the pool area into an indoor/outdoor space. They'd even managed to design the collapsible walls in a way that didn't ruin the gorgeous ocean views.

"First one in wins." Steve flew out of the room to get his suit on while Andy stayed, never slowing his queso consumption.

Beth sent her husband a glare, and Marc cleared his throat.

"Hey, Nick, can you help me with the kids?"

Will's jaw locked. She was clearing the room. It might be subtle, but Will knew her tricks. So did Nick, because he sent

Will a *you're screwed* smirk as he grabbed Peyton and followed Marc outside.

“Do you not want to swim, Andy? Or do you just not want to race? You don’t have to,” Beth said as she set a glass of blue Gatorade in front of him.

He looked at her and shrugged as he downed the Gatorade in one long chug.

“Your suit is in the car, and we both know Steve doesn’t stand a chance,” Will reminded him as he reached over and nabbed a chip and queso before Andy ate it all.

Andy just stared at him until it clicked.

“I don’t care if you use your team stuff.” Will shrugged. “Car isn’t locked.”

Andy’s lips pulled up into what was almost a smile before he ran out of the room.

Will grabbed another chip.

“Want a beer?” Beth asked him.

“I got it.” Will moved to the fridge. His sister did enough. She didn’t need to wait on him hand and foot.

“So,” Beth started.

Will sighed. He hadn’t even told Corey or Luke about Genni, but somehow, his sister already knew something was up.

He placed a beer in front of her before dropping into the chair across the table and taking a sip of his own.

“Genni got married last weekend,” Will said. Might as well get straight to the point.

Beth sucked in her drink at his admission and choked. She set her bottle down with a *thunk* and held her hand to her chest while she coughed.

Will jumped up. “Jesus,” he said, hitting her back as she gagged. “Arms up,” he demanded.

“*What?*” Beth demanded when she got her breath back.

“I thought you knew. Isn’t that why you wanted to talk?” Will asked.

“Married?” she asked.

“Not to *me*.” Will sighed, running a hand through his hair.

“I assumed.” Beth stared at him, her eyes wide and her jaw slack.

Will took another sip of his beer, rubbed his forehead, and then pinched the bridge of his nose before continuing. “She’s been seeing some old guy for a while.” He spun the bottle in front of him with both hands. “She never mentioned that it was serious, but she called on Sunday night. I guess she got tired of waiting for me and decided to marry him.”

Beth’s eyes narrowed. “It’s Thursday.”

Will nodded.

“You didn’t say anything for four days?” She crossed her arms over her chest and pressed her lips into a tight line.

He sighed and took another swig of his beer. *This* was why he didn’t want to talk about it.

“Did you tell Corey?” she asked.

Corey Matthews had been Will’s best friend since they were ten, and he was closer to him than he was to any of his siblings, even his twin brother. People always assumed he’d go to Luke with shit, but his brother was never around.

Will shook his head.

“Luke?” she asked.

He shook his head again.

“Okay,” she said. “She just pushed Clarissa out of the top spot of people I hate the most in the world.”

Will smirked. Clarissa had left his brother Grant a few years earlier, but it turned out to be a good thing. Grant was now married to Trish, and she was awesome.

“Still,” his sister continued, “I’m kinda surprised you’re okay with it.”

He slumped back and huffed.

Andy ran into the kitchen at that moment and paused when he caught sight of Will. “Sorry?” The poor kid thought Will’s reaction was to him.

“You’re fine, dude. I was just telling my sister about Genni,” Will said.

Andy nodded. “She was never very nice.”

He was right. Genni had gone to a few swim meets, and she had always acted like the kids on the team were a communicable disease she might catch. Not to mention the way she’d acted the weekend of Andy’s mother’s funeral. She’d set an actual timer to make sure they didn’t stay at the wake for more than ten minutes. She’d only given Will enough time to give Andy a quick hug before he was forced to leave so they could do something she deemed more important. That was probably the beginning of the end of them when Will really thought about it.

Andy continued out the door to the pool.

“You told *him* about your breakup?” Beth’s voice rose an octave as she cocked her head to the side.

Maybe it was weird, but the poor kid had been upset that his sister hadn’t shown up again. And then he was worried that he wasn’t welcome at the Demodas’.

Will shrugged and closed his eyes for a long second.

“Are you okay?” Beth rested her hand on his forearm. “Your girlfriend of five years just broke up with you because she got married, and you’re acting like it’s no big deal.”

Will hadn’t been completely in the dark about the other guy. After a friend’s wedding a few months ago, they had decided to see other people. And he honestly didn’t mind that Genni had moved on. They’d never had a great love story, and no matter how much she wanted it, they never would.

Genni was beautiful, smart, talented, and full of ambition. And when she wasn’t being a witch, she was fun. He wasn’t interested in marriage or living with someone, but he liked

having a steady girl rather than random hookups, like some of his brothers preferred. And Genni had been perfect for that for a time.

But Will was self-aware enough to realize that two control freaks couldn't make it long term. Most of their fights started because neither wanted to give in nor do things the other's way.

"If I thought you guys wouldn't make a huge stink about it, I'd probably be relieved. Our relationship was a headache. And although it was predictable—which I like—I realized this past year that we needed to be done." Will liked the consistency of a steady relationship, but he made sure it wasn't ever with anyone he'd get too serious about. Because he wasn't willing to go down that road.

Beth stared hard at him and tapped her nails against the table. "Luke has always said you'd be different if it was the real deal. You were too chill about her. Maybe he was right."

His twin brother, Luke, loved to meddle in the relationships of his siblings. Mostly so he didn't have to deal with his own lack of one. He and his twin shared the fear of getting hurt. They'd watched their father grieve their mother until the day he died. Will was more open about his unwillingness for marriage. With Luke, it wasn't allowed to be discussed.

"God forbid anyone tell Luke he's wrong or to butt out," Will replied, ready to be done with this conversation. "What were you going to talk to me about if not Genni?"

"Andy." Beth gave him a pointed look. "Why is he with you tonight? Is there anything we can do to help?"

"Oh." In hindsight, her concern was obvious. "His sister didn't show, and he said he was supposed to find a ride home. I'll drop him off at home in a bit. I plan to talk to her then so I can figure out what's going on."

Beth swallowed uncomfortably. Her pursed lips and furrowed brow made her look far more hesitant about her next words than she had been about Genni. That right there

tightened Will's stomach into a knot. "Will, do you know...is she in the state?"

"What do you mean *in* the state?" Will's body tensed. She'd better not be leaving her eleven-year-old brother alone.

"I'm starting to get the idea that Andy is playing a game to avoid babysitters. I don't think she's here as much as Andy lets us believe." She sat back in the chair, her arms crossed over her chest as she pulled her lips into a tight line.

Will blinked. Andy might have an attitude about some things, but the kid love swimming and had so much natural talent that Will had always given him a bit more attention than the other kids. Could he have missed something that big?

Shit. Maybe so.

"If he needs a place to stay, Steve has an empty bunk in his room," Beth volunteered. "What's one more?"

As convincing as the question was, his sister had four kids, *plus* she watched three more during the day. Seven was more than enough. She didn't need another, especially one who had a completely different schedule from the others. Swimming was a beast.

"I'll let you know what's going on," Will assured her.

"You need help with the brisket, Beth?" Morgan asked as she came back into the kitchen.

"I'll string it," Will offered quickly, because if there was one Evans man who knew his way around the kitchen, it was him. And if there was a woman who could ruin a meal, it was his sister-in-law.

But as Will cut the meat, thoughts swirled around his head; Andy going at the queso, the lack of a babysitter multiple times, his weight loss. How often was Andy alone?

CHAPTER 3





“I UNDERSTAND he’s been difficult but—”

“Ms. Gomez, let me be frank. Even if he wasn’t, as you say, *difficult*, we don’t have anyone available to start with him until the new year.” The woman’s tone was sharp. “I can put you on a list, but I wouldn’t hold my breath.”

Aly sighed. “Okay, thanks anyway.”

After two days and phone calls to six services, she’d gone back to the current service and begged, but she was still no closer to finding someone to watch her brother. She tried Andy again, but the call went straight to voice mail, as it had been doing since his teacher had called to tell her he hadn’t turned in his project on the states. And now he was at swim practice anyway.

The *tap, tap, tap* on the door had her looking up.

“Sweet cheeks, sorry, but Logan’s losing his patience.” Garry Nolan, the director of the home improvement show, stood in the doorway to what would become a little girl’s bedroom, where Aly had come for privacy so she could try to find someone for Andy. “Get everything worked out with your brother?”

This was her fourth season on the of reality-esque show that aired on the Home Improvement Network on Tuesday nights. Although she was considered Logan Atwood’s assistant, she did most of the designs for the remodels, as well as some hands-on work. She liked that he did most of the social media and publicity and left the design to her. She had no interest in fame, but the show had shown her that she had a passion for design.

Garry tried to be as accommodating as he could for Aly and her situation with Andy, but when the show’s star threw one of his regular temper tantrums, everyone had to adjust. Nodding, she stood and put her phone in the pocket of her leggings.

“Hit makeup before you go into the master bath. Logan wants the mosaic done today.”

She nodded again. Of course he did. But custom mosaic tile work wasn't something that could be completed in an hour or two. Especially when she had to factor in hair and makeup, lighting, camera angles, and reshoots. To viewers, it would look like the mosaic took minutes, but reality was different.

Reality was *always* different.

"This one is turning out to be one of your best. The blend of the golds and pinks? It's gorgeous." Garry smiled.

"The tiny pieces are taking way longer than I planned though."

She'd discovered her knack for tile work on accident, but it had been a happy one. Art had always been her passion, and after she completed a project during her junior year of high school, she fell headfirst into tile and glass work. Putting a room together and planning it around one piece was fun. And she had recently started working with some of the show's carpentry staff on wood projects. As much as she hated the *show* portion of her job, the actual work fit her perfectly.

The place was crazy, as always. From what their audience witnessed, the set seemed like a calm, empty place to work, but the reality was that there were always at least fifty people around. At any given moment, there were multiple teams working on the house, the crew filming the current shot, and the staff setting up the next one.

"Excuse me," she said as she headed down the stairs, squeezing between two cameramen and a woman holding a light.

Aly walked into the quiet makeup room, which had been set up in what would be the dining room. The picture framing she'd designed looked amazing with the old textured ceiling and the off-white molding that stood in contrast against the maroon walls. It was hard not to smile when she took in how perfectly things were coming together. She could picture how the hutch and solid wood table would complement each aspect of the newly redecorated space.

As long as the crew took care of the house.

She narrowed her eyes at the unprotected hardwood. Putting the makeup chair on the newly finished floors would be a sure way to scratch them. She crouched and adjusted the tarp meant to cover the area where the makeup team worked.

“Someone can do that for you.”

Aly jumped at the unexpected voice. She couldn't remember the woman's name, but the show went through hair and makeup people quickly. Most of the time before she could even connect with them. Aly was the definition of socially awkward. Depending on her nerves, she vacillated between not knowing what to say or talking too much. Plus, with the amount of time and attention Logan needed, the crew and support personnel tended to ignore her.

“I don't want to bother anyone.” However, she did need to protect the floors.

“You're one of the stars. You're supposed to be a bother. Where is your *I'm better than everyone* bitchiness?” A pop cracked as she snapped her gum.

Aly finished adjusting the tarp and turned her full attention to the woman. “I'm sorry. Are you new?” she asked, shocked because she was sure this bleached blond with thick black eyeliner and a constant chattiness hadn't been here before today.

“There ya go. There's a hint of prima donna.” She smirked her red lips as she leaned against the doorframe and crossed one black knee-high boot over the other. “I started two days ago, but you've been preoccupied with your emails and phone calls. Figured you hadn't noticed that I wasn't Rachel.”

A heated blush crept up Aly's cheeks. She hadn't meant to be rude, and she usually prided herself on the kindness she showed the crew, but she'd had a lot on her plate lately. “I- I'm sorry?” Why did that sound like a question?

“Don't be.” The woman pushed off the doorframe and reached out a small hand with three rings and black polished nails. “I'm Lily,” she said, helping Aly to her feet with the

outstretched hand. “Your aura is gorgeous. I can tell we’re going to be friends.”

Was she messing with her? Most women on set hadn’t bothered to talk to her. They wanted Logan’s attention.

“One of these days, we can get together off set, and I’ll convince you,” Lily assured her with a wink of an eye flocked by lashes most women would kill for. “But for now, since you don’t have your head stuck in your phone, park it in the chair. I’ll fix your makeup, and we can gossip a little.”

She guided Aly to the chair and pushed lightly on her shoulders until she plopped down in the seat. The red and white roses tattooed on the insides of both of Lily’s wrists caught Aly’s eyes as her skilled hands went to work.

“So which one of the guys is off-limits?” Lily flashed a grin.

Aly took a deep breath; she wasn’t good at gossip or small talk. Her brain never knew how to respond.

She swallowed. Truthfully, the crew was full of nice people. The only one Aly thought should be avoided was Logan, but that was a waste of her breath. All the women chased him.

Lily leaned back against the makeup table and crossed her arms over her black tank top, causing the chains around her neck to rattle. “Which one of the guys is yours? Who should I keep my hands off? I’m on the market, and I don’t want to step on my BFF’s toes.”

“Oh.” Aly chuckled. “None.”

“Got a boy back home?” she asked. When Aly shook her head, she prattled on. “Prefer women? It’s okay if you do.” Aly again shook her head. Lily’s black polished nail came up and tapped her chin. “Tough nut to crack. That’s what I heard. Guess it’s true.”

“Huh?”

“I heard you don’t make friends with the crew,” Lily explained.

Aly felt a blush creep up her cheeks. Yes, she was bad with people, but being called out on it was mortifying. “I don’t have a lot of time, and my people skills suck. It’s not that I—” She huffed. She didn’t know how to finish the sentence.

“Lucky for you, I love peopling.” Lily smiled again. “I heard talk about a kid. You have one back home?” Lily held her palm out, gesturing Aly to fill in the blanks.

“It’s a long story.” Aly shrugged.

Lily raised her pierced eyebrow expectantly, so Aly stumbled through.

“My mom died last winter. Breast cancer. It shouldn’t have been sudden, but she told me the chemo was working and she was getting better. Until she wasn’t.” Aly swallowed. Her mom hadn’t wanted to face the truth, so for months, she’d sworn she was beating it. Finally, when the doctor had given her only weeks to live, she told Aly the truth. If they’d had those months to prepare, maybe then Aly could have had a better plan in place. She cleared her throat. “Neither of our dads has ever been in the picture, so I have sole custody of my little brother. And he’s a lot.” Aly sighed, her shoulders slumping. “I have no idea what I’m doing, and I-I suck at it.”

“I’m so sorry about your mama. But you don’t suck at taking care of him.” The smile dropped from Lily’s face for the first time. “I’ve only been here two days, but I see you on the phone all the time. And when you’re not, you’re sending emails. The staff talk about how you’re constantly checking up on the kid. Sounds like you really care about him.”

“Thanks, but he’s making me nuts.” Aly blew out a breath. “I spend every free minute trying to find nannies and taking phone calls from his teachers. None of which are flooded with compliments, by the way.” Aly shook her head. She couldn’t do it from far away anymore.

“That’s why we’re headed to Jersey next, right?” Lily asked.

“From your lips to God’s ear. I asked the producers if we could try. And I’ve applied for at least twenty jobs back home.

But if I stay there, it means taking a massive pay cut I can't afford. I feel like the world's worst guardian because I'm not in Jersey with him, but if I go home unemployed, we'll lose our house." Aly slammed her mouth shut. Ugh. The makeup girl did not need to listen to her woe-is-me story.

Lily frowned, her eyes soft, but just as she opened her mouth to respond, a knock echoed from the hall.

"Let's go! There's only so much you can do without a diet and surgery, Aly," Logan called from the hallway. He leaned against the doorframe in his typical sleeveless flannel over a T-shirt and jeans. He didn't actually do much work on the set, so the shirt was still a pristine white, and the jeans looked brand new. He was simply there to look good.

"What a dipshit," Lily mumbled under her breath. "Between the thick gorgeous hair and the killer curves, you've got it going on."

A laugh slipped out before Aly could stop it. She was at least thirty pounds too heavy for TV, and her curly hair gave most of the hair and makeup staff fits. They'd blow it out, only to add soft waves that constantly wanted to frizz in the heat. Her gray eyes were boring, and it took layers of contouring makeup to give her cheekbones.

"I'd bet money that guys all over the country jack off to your picture." Lily winked.

Aly's mouth dropped open at the brazen statement.

"Seriously, girl. Between your ass in those black leggings and the crop tank, you've got heads turning every time you walk by." Lily snapped her fingers.

"You're ridiculous." Aly chuckled and heaved herself out of the chair.

"Find me later. We're getting that drink," Lily called as Aly left the room.

Aly turned, ready to fight her way back up the stairs, but the gorgeous blond man in front of her parted the crowd of crewmembers like he was parting the Red Sea. Everyone moved for them.

“That chick’s freaky.” Logan smirked before rubbing his hands together. “She’s the perfect new goal.”

Aly rolled her eyes. “She’s too smart for you.”

He landed a swift, cracking smack to her left butt cheek, causing her to jump. God, she hated Logan.

“Don’t be jealous; it doesn’t suit you.”

She forced a closed-lip smile before stepping into the master, but a buzz stopped her in her tracks. She yanked her phone out of the pocket on her left leg as Logan crashed into her.

“Geez, give a guy some warning.”

“Sorry, but I’ve been waiting on this call. Give me five minutes.”

He glared. “Hurry up. This kid stuff has already put us behind. If you can’t keep up, you won’t be hard to replace.”

She fisted her free hand. *Shit*. If Logan complained too much, that was exactly what the producers would do. She needed a plan.

CHAPTER 4





“Is your sister meeting us at the house?” Will couldn’t hold the question back any longer.

“No,” Andy replied, looking out the window of the truck.

They’d left Marc and Beth’s house and were headed to Andy’s so Will could finally have a chat with his sister.

“How come?” Will asked.

“Dunno.” Andy shrugged, never pulling his focus from the scenery outside the passenger window.

“What time will she be home?” he asked, even though he was starting to believe that Beth was right.

“Dunno.”

“Did you call her?”

“No.”

“You sure are chatty tonight.” Will smiled sideways at him.

Finally, Andy turned and gave him a blank look.

Just rip off the Band-Aid, man. “Has your sister been staying with you for the past few days, or have you been alone?”

Andy turned away and looked back out the window. “She can’t always get away.”

What did that mean? “She just leaves you alone?”

Andy sighed and dropped his chin, focusing on his hands in his lap. “Aly thinks I’m staying with a friend until she can find me a new stupid babysitter.”

Aly? Will paused a beat. Right. Of course his sister had a name. “Let’s back up.” He shook his head. “*How* are you staying alone?”

Andy pressed his lips into a straight line. “What do you mean? I just stay home.”

“Always? Between all the other sitters?” Will squeezed the steering wheel so tight his knuckles were white.

“I’m used to it,” Andy said with a shrug, but he avoided Will’s gaze.

He had two nephews Andy’s age, and sure as shit, neither of them could have pulled that off.

“How do you get to practice in the morning?” Andy had never missed or even been late to swim practice, which often started at five a.m.

“Uber,” Andy replied.

“Uber?” *Uber?* “A random stranger picks you up?”

“Like the app on my iPhone.” Andy’s tone was full of correction, but he didn’t dispute the accusation. He really was climbing into the car with perfect strangers before the crack of dawn most days.

“How do you pay for that?” he asked.

Andy dug around in his bag and pulled out a credit card. Will snatched it from his hand and held it in front of him, his wrist resting on the steering wheel. The name stamped on the Visa was Andre Gomez. “Where did that come from?”

“Aly,” he answered.

“Aly,” Will repeated, like it was an expletive. “What about eating and all that?”

“I get lunch at school,” Andy said.

“Breakfast? Dinner?” Will asked, anger simmering in his gut. He thrived on order and control. He liked things to make sense, and none of this was making fucking sense.

“Sometimes a friend’s mom will take me from swim practice to school, and they’ll feed us on the way. Otherwise, I walk to school and eat a big lunch.” He shrugged.

Will took a calming breath. No wonder this kid was losing weight. “And Aly doesn’t mind that you aren’t eating?”

Finally, Andy turned and looked at him, his eyes harder than any he’d seen on a kid before. “Aly thinks I stay with friends. She probably thinks *they* feed me. The credit card is to pay to get to swim practice. I told her that the nannies didn’t

want to drive me at five in the morning. So now I use the card to Uber. But if I use it for food, she might figure out that I'm not staying with friends."

What the hell? *How did a kid slip through the cracks like this?* That thought stopped him in his tracks. He forced his grip on the wheel to loosen and took a breath.

This was exactly what had happened to his family. They'd fallen through the cracks. His mother had died of cancer when he was in high school, and after that, his family had fallen apart. It happened before anyone realized, and it happened so easily. If it hadn't been for Beth... He shook off that thought.

Will slammed the truck into park in front of Andy's dark house. Not a single light was on. *Because no one was home.*

"Come on." Will opened the door. "Go in and get everything you need for a few days. I'm going to call your sister."

Silently, they made their way up the front walk. When they stepped onto the porch, Andy pulled a set of keys from his backpack and unlocked the door. Once inside, he took off up the stairs. Seconds after he was out of Will's sight, the bedroom door slammed.

Will sighed and paced the foyer. From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a picture of Sue Gomez and her son sitting on an end table in the family room. He picked up the frame of the smiling mother and son. Andy looked a couple of years younger than he was now. It was probably taken before she got sick.

He went back in time too over a decade ago. To a strikingly similar story. One where a son had lost his mom. Except the kid wasn't with Will that time, the kid *was* Will.

Cancer sucked.

Will's mother hadn't suffered for over a year like Sue had. Will's mother had gone quickly. Less than a month had passed between his mother's diagnosis and the funeral.

He didn't often think about the way he'd lost her. He liked to remember her as the woman who ran Flip. As the famous

coach who took her athletes to the Olympics. Not the thin, gray woman he visited in the hospital. But that didn't mean he'd forgotten.

He walked into the kitchen and flicked on another light. Two bowls with the remnants of cereal sat in the sink, and a whiteboard with names and phone numbers hung on the wall. Time for a chat with Aly.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and said a little prayer for patience, then he dialed the number and brought his phone to his ear.

"Hello?" The voice on the other end of the line was small. The woman didn't sound much older than Andy.

"Is this Aly Gomez?" Will asked. He balanced the phone between his shoulder and his ear as he washed the few dishes in the sink. If he had it his way, no one would be here tonight. Dishes shouldn't rot in the sink.

"Yes," she replied. "Who is this?"

"Will Evans. Andy's coach," he said tightly.

"Oh. Oh—uh, hold on one second." She stumbled through the statement.

His annoyance grew at the commotion of voices and noise in the background. Where was she? She should have been helping her brother, but from the sounds of things, she was out with a group of people.

"Sorry," she said when she finally came back on the line.

He sighed, at a loss for words.

"I just—had to pause taping—sorry." She stammered again, as if talking to him was a difficult task.

"Taping?" he asked.

"My show?" She said it like a question.

Ah. He'd heard she was an actress or something. The mothers commented from time to time about how she should spend less time in the spotlight and more time taking care of her brother. Sounded like they were right.

“I’m calling about your brother.”

“I assumed.” She sighed. “I think we met at the funeral, but it’s all a blur. Did he do something wrong?”

Will paused, his brow furrowed. Why would she immediately think Andy was in trouble?

“Usually, it’s the school or the nanny who calls. But since the nanny quit and he’s staying with the Demodas—”

“The Demodas?” Will cut her off, wiping his hands dry on his pants before turning away from the sink and grabbing the phone before it slipped from his shoulder. “Andy told you he’s been staying with the Demodas?”

Acid churned in his gut.

“I know it’s odd to let my brother stay with friends as often as he does, but I looked into the Demodas. I’ve met them plenty of times, and the way these babysitters keep leaving with no notice—”

“Andy told you he’s been staying with my *sister*, and *she wouldn’t drive him to swim practice?*” He ground his molars to keep himself from going off.

“W-well, uh.” There was a pause, and she sniffed. “I thought—I mean—it was *nice* of them to have him. I get that five a.m. is early.”

“We’re going to start this conversation again,” Will said through gritted teeth. “I’m going to talk, and you’re going to fucking listen.”

“O-o-okay,” she stuttered.

Will took a deep breath and ran a hand through his hair. “Andy has been staying home alone. *Every single freaking time a nanny quit.* Your eleven-year-old brother has been home alone in his house, figuring everything out himself.” Will paced to the end of the room, then turned. “He has not once stayed with a friend. *Especially my sister, who would have driven him to the moon at any ungodly hour if that was what he needed.*” He practically growled the last part.

“What? Alone?” It was barely a whisper.

“Yes. Home alone,” Will confirmed.

“I-I had no idea.”

“How?”

“He—he told me...” She huffed. “I believed him. I don’t know.”

“Didn’t you think to check?” he snapped.

“I did the first couple of times, but Andy always assures me it’s okay, so I guess I haven’t in a while,” she snapped back.

“Do you know *anything* about kids?” He was doing his best not to shout, but only because he didn’t want Andy to hear him.

“*Obviously* not.”

“And what have you been doing while your brother, who you haven’t thought to check on, has been home alone, taking care of himself? Making a name for yourself as some kind of crappy, boozed-up actress?”

“*Me?*” The fire in her tone was lethal. “I am not an actress, nor am I boozed-up. What I do is pay the bills. All of them. Houses don’t just pay for themselves. Or were you under the impression that my mother was rich like your family?”

Will’s jaw hung open. He was momentarily at a loss for words. He truly hadn’t thought about that aspect. Before he could respond, the irate woman on the other end continued.

“Do you know how much it costs to treat breast cancer? We put a second mortgage on the house to pay medical bills. I’m in debt up to my eyeballs. Not to mention cost-of-living expenses for Andy and me. And let’s not forget what it costs for Andy to swim with your team. I’m doing the best I can. I’ve heard the rumors. Why don’t I just quit my job and come home? The swim team moms and the staff at the school? Every one of them judges me and how I’m handling things, but if I quit so I can be home, then how do I pay the bills? Got a suggestion? If so, I’m all ears. Because I’ve been the one paying the bills *for years*.”

The words shocked his system.

And she was right.

She was supporting her family, and that was exactly what Will had done when he took over the gym to pay the bills at home. By the time he was eighteen, both of his parents had passed away and the gym had belonged to him and his brothers.

Although he was the only one with an interest in running the gym, he'd had no idea what he was doing. He wasn't sure how old Aly was, but she sounded young, and if she had been paying the bills for years, that made them a lot more alike than Will wanted to admit.

"I'm sorry," he said after clearing his throat. "When something hits personally, it's hard to see the forest past the trees."

"It's okay." She sighed. "Like I said, I looked into the Demodas. And you. I know what you went through. And you probably have a general idea of how much cancer costs."

That comment led to a long, awkward pause.

"So," Will said finally, "it's clear that we need to speak directly and not communicate through him."

She scoffed. "I'll add it to the list of things I've learned a little too late." It was a mumble, but it still made the corner of Will's mouth turn up.

"What's the plan for the new babysitter?" Will scanned the clean kitchen before heading back to check the family room.

"Find one that thinks saran wrap on the toilet seat and switching the sugar dish to salt is funny? My brother can be a little shit sometimes."

He'd told Andy to get his stuff, but he hadn't spoken the words aloud yet. Looking around this dark, empty house firmed up his decision.

"I might know someone." It was weird thinking about having someone in his space full time. Luke stayed with him

here and there, but it had been years since he'd lived with anyone.

“Really? Are they okay with frogs too? Because he’s been known to put them in the bathtub.”

The laugh slipped out. “I think I can handle a frog.”

“*You?*” The disbelief in her tone was obvious.

“I grew up smack in the middle of seven brothers. Trust me. I know every stupid stunt in the book. And it sounds like Andy could use some consistency. He’ll be safe and taken care of, and his living expenses just went down to nothing. And don’t worry about the swim cost. Andy is officially on scholarship.”

“I’m not looking for charity,” she snapped. “Just a babysitter, who I can *pay*.”

“Right, but I’m available *and* qualified. I have multiple certifications in first aid and childcare. Plus, I have seven brothers who think pranks are funny as hell.” He took a breath and added, “And I’m not taking your money.”

The loud huff echoed in his ear.

“You were right about my family. Financially, I’m fine. I can afford to take care of Andy and any and all bills that come with him. But I remember what it was like to struggle, and I’m only where I am because of the help of someone else.” He cleared his throat and absently picked up the photo of Andy and his mom. “You said you know my family’s story. I refer to Beth as my sister, but you probably know that she was one of my mother’s gymnasts who was there for us. And she’s never let me pay her back for all she did; financially, emotionally, physically, I can’t pay her back. But I can pay it forward. Let me help your family the way she helped mine.”

Aly said nothing. Will couldn’t even hear her breathing on the other end of the line, so he continued.

“And the truth is that Andy’s talented. If he had come into swim tryouts saying he couldn’t pay, I’d have put him on the team on Flip’s dime to begin with.”

She still said nothing, and he could almost picture her frowning at him from wherever she was. Which was strange, because he didn't really remember what she looked like. He'd attended her mother's funeral but hadn't stayed long because of Genni, so he had only a vague recollection of a young woman with dark hair. He searched the room, his attention finally landing on a photo of a young woman. Seeing her in the frame felt like a hard kick in the chest.

Damn, she was gorgeous.

Thick golden-brown curls floated down her back. Her eyes, flocked by long lashes, danced with joy as she smiled. Killer curves, the kind a man should be enjoying, were wrapped in a tight black dress with a deep neckline. This was the exact type of woman he'd spent his life avoiding—the kind he could get lost in.

"I have no other option at this point." Her answer shocked him out of his daze.

Her lack of gratitude should have annoyed him, but all he could do was smirk.

"You're on TV, right?" Will asked as he put the picture down and forced himself to put Aly back in the Andy's-sister box.

"Yes, it's a home reno show. Although I pretend not to hate my costar, I'm not an actress. I work in construction."

Shit, she was funny too.

"We're taping in California right now, but we should wrap this house before Thanksgiving, and we'll be on break until after Christmas." There was a long pause. "I hope."

Her uncertainty wasn't all that comforting. But it didn't matter.

"I'm not going anywhere. Andy can stay with me for however long you need. Do you want to talk to him? He ran to his room and slammed the door before I called, but I can get him for you."

She sighed a long sigh. “I can try to get him again, but he’s been ignoring my calls all day because he didn’t turn in his project on Georgia.”

“Sounds like we’re going to have a busy weekend.” Will chuckled. “But I’ll have him call you after he and I have a heart-to-heart.”

“Okay.”

“We’ll talk later.”

“Will—” she said quickly before he could hang up.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

He smiled as he hung up the phone. How hard could this be?

CHAPTER 5





“I’VE LOST MY MIND.” Aly paced the front porch.

“I find that hard to believe.”

Her head snapped up, and she came face to face with a bleached blonde standing in the doorway.

“I just agreed to let a random guy be my brother’s babysitter, and he won’t even let me pay him.”

“Hmm.” Lily tilted her head, one black nail tapping her chin.

“But I’ve exhausted all my other options. And Logan is going to get me fired if I don’t stop obsessing about Andy and get back to work. So when his swim coach volunteered, what else could I say?” Aly didn’t stop. “Will’s nephew, Steve, is Andy’s best friend, and the entire family is amazing. It’s highly unlikely the guy’s crazy, right? But then again, I never knew I was either.”

“Whoa, do you breathe, babe? Slow your roll.” Lily laughed.

But Aly kept pacing the wooden planks of the porch. When she reached the railing at the end, she turned and made another lap.

“His coach, who is his best friend’s uncle, volunteered to babysit for you?”

“It’s the setup for a *Dateline* story, right?” Aly asked, shaking her head.

“I don’t think so, but if you want me to have the guy checked out, my family has connections.” Lily shrugged.

Aly gasped and put a hand to her chest. “Oh my gosh. Your family is in the mob?”

Lily crossed her arms and leaned against the pole beside the porch steps. “You’re paranoid.” She chuckled. “I meant the police.”

“Oh.” Maybe Aly was a little maniacal. She tended to spiral. If she had been in New Jersey, she would already be at Will’s house, demanding her brother come with her. But she

knew the Evans family. They were good people. She just didn't trust her ability to parent, and finding out Andy had been lying to her and staying alone? She shuddered.

What if something had happened to him? How would she have lived with herself?

“What’s the verdict about checking out the swim coach?”

Aly shook her head. “He’s fine. I *know* he’s fine.”

Lily pressed her lips together, but she couldn't hide her smile.

“I sound high or something, but I promise I’m not,” Aly assured her.

“I think you sound stressed out, overworked, and under-sexed.”

That was an understatement. She hadn't been on a date since before her mother died. And sex? It had been, what? Two years? She couldn't even remember.

“You seem to forget that my job intimidates most men and that I’m socially awkward. And my looks aren't enough to convince guys to overlook the first two issues.”

“You and me? We’re going to open your eyes to reality. You’ve been hanging with dipshit Logan too much.”

Aly’s phone buzzed in her hand, and she held the device up so she could read the messages that came through.

Andy: I'm fine. Staying with Will.

Andy: Don't want to talk

Yeah, that was typical. He never wanted to talk to her.



WILL BRUSHED his hand through his hair as he stared at the TV in his family room. Aly's TV show—that he'd search for on-demand—was on the screen, but he wasn't actually seeing the scene playing out in front of him.

Andy was tucked into bed in Will's guest room. He'd wanted to talk to him that night, but his three grunts and two *fines* made it clear that Andy wasn't ready to open up. Getting him into Will's house and settled took precedence for now. Andy had passed out almost as soon as his head hit the pillow. The poor kid. Who knew how long it had been since he'd had a good night's sleep.

The knock on the door was only a warning before it swung open, and Will's best friend sauntered in. Corey's manners hovered somewhere between *really?* and *what the fuck?* Will had long ago stopped trying to teach Corey Matthews simple things like waiting to be let in.

"Porn?" Corey asked him, pausing to look at the TV momentarily before heading into the kitchen.

Why the hell would Corey think Will would stand around *in the living room* watching porn with an eleven-year-old in the house? These were the things that never ceased to amaze Will about Corey.

"No, douche, that's Andy's sister," Will said, shaking his head and making his way to the kitchen. Although Corey looked confused, Will didn't give him a chance to comment. "I thought you were going to Beth's."

"Yeah, me too. But your sister called and told me what a shitty friend I was being. She freaked out on me for not knowing what was going on in my bro's life and told me I better go figure it out. And then Taran heard, and she started screeching. How come chicks have the ability to take on an octave that makes men's ears bleed?" Corey frowned.

"You love her," Will reminded his friend.

“Of course.” Corey’s lips turned down and he cocked his head to the side. “Why would you say that?”

This interaction wasn’t anything new. Conversing with Corey had always been frustrating as hell. Will shook his head before bringing the topic back to Andy.

“Cor, you were at a basketball game. I wasn’t going to take you away from the game to tell you about Andy.” Will shrugged. “I was going to call you.”

“Who the fuck is Andy?” Corey crossed his arms over his chest, brow furrowed, and he stared Will down.

“You know. Andy, Steve’s friend—from my swim team. The one who has a shot at states this year?”

“Oh yeah. Your favorite one. What about him?” His friend pulled two beers from the fridge but the *what the hell are you talking about* look didn’t leave Corey’s face.

Will took a breath, then dove in. “Andy’s going to live with me for a while. His sister is sending over forms for medical and school authorization tomorrow.” Will shrugged.

“*What?*” Corey dropped both beers. Luckily, they only fell a few inches onto the counter with a clatter. Will grabbed them, put them back into the fridge, and took out two that wouldn’t explode, then handed one to Corey.

“It happened out of the blue.” Will started in on the whole story, explaining how Andy had been hiding things from his sister, and how Aly was caught between a rock and a hard place.

Corey ran his hands through his hair, “Do you think now is the best time for this? It’s an odd reaction to a breakup—even for you.” He took a long pull from his beer. “I know you might feel a bit”—Corey turned his nose up like the words tasted like spoiled milk—“lonely and lost or some shit.” The guy was terrible at heart-to-hearts, and half the time, Will didn’t follow his train of thought, but he kept his mouth shut and let him continue. “But taking in a kid isn’t like getting a dog. Maybe that’s what you should do. Get a dog. Seems like a better idea.”

Will scratched his head. “What are *you* talking about?”

“Beth, and Taran, too, I guess...they took turns yelling at me about Genni. About how she apparently broke up with you because she *got married...*” Corey trailed off, raising his brows.

“Oh yeah.” Will nodded. “She did.” It felt like that drama had happened a lifetime ago. Or like he’d watched it happen to someone else.

Corey narrowed his eyes.

“What?” Will asked, both palms up.

“That’s it?” Corey asked, his expression still full of disbelief and annoyance.

“What’s it?”

Corey shook his head, took a deep breath, and focused on an invisible spot on the other side of the kitchen. “When I thought Taran and I were over, it messed me up real good.”

“Aw, fuck. Are you two having issues again? Because I don’t have time for that shit now.” Will frowned. “If she’s not solidly in your life, you’re a total basket case.”

“Taran and I are great.” He snorted. “I’m worried about you.”

God, he wished people wouldn’t worry about him. It was exactly why he hadn’t wanted to tell them. He knew this would happen. Luke, Joey, Danny, and Clayton would be calling at any moment. At least he could count on Grant to shut up and leave him alone.

He was fine, but convincing Corey of that would be a challenge. Especially because he didn’t want to explain how he’d spent almost a year getting used to the idea. He went a different way. One Corey would get.

“Cor.” He spun his beer on the counter as he spoke. “Do you worry every time Luke picks up a new girl in a new city?”

“Nah.” Corey shook his head and took a swig of beer. “He’s just killing time. He doesn’t care.”

Will stared at him without responding, waiting for his idiot friend to get it.

“Really?” Corey finally said, his eyes going wide. “Five years, and you didn’t care?”

Will shrugged.

“Okay, then. She’s no longer your girl.” Corey picked up his beer and held it out. “To bigger and better things.”

Will clinked his bottle against Corey’s. “Bigger and better.”

“Hopefully this kid thing is easier than people make it seem, because I think you might be totally fucked.” Corey chuckled.

CHAPTER 6





AT FOUR THIRTY, Will woke Andy and gave him a ten-minute warning for breakfast. He'd spent half the night stressed and had barely slept because of it. Although that was Luke's fault.

After Corey left, the phone calls had started. Most everyone took him at his word. That he was fine. Except Luke. His twin had to throw in his two cents.

He wasn't sure whether it was the breakup with Genni, he said, or the new girl—as Luke referred to Aly—but he wanted Will to take a good hard look at why he was taking the kid. Of the two of them, Luke was the superman, the saver. If Luke had shown up with a kid? No one would have batted an eyelash. But now Luke had Will almost convinced that he didn't know what he was doing.

After hours of staring at the ceiling and replaying his conversation with Luke, the obvious knocked him in the teeth. Will had taken care of his younger brothers after his parents died. Will had been the one helping Beth and Marc with the kids. He knew exactly what he was doing. Starting with communication and consistency. This morning's breakfast conversation would revolve around those two things.

He had a plan organized as the blender whirred, liquefying the frozen fruit.

“What's that?” Andy asked as he flopped into one of two bar stools in Will's kitchen. He took in the room that looked like it belonged in 1995, his lip curling and his nose scrunching. Wallpaper, fruit-tiled backsplash, shiny cabinet pulls, Formica countertops, white appliances. Yep, it was a late-nineties time warp.

The house had belonged to his parents. He was the only brother who stayed in Ambra, so he had taken it over. He'd done some work, but the idea of remodeling the kitchen was overwhelming, so he hadn't touched it yet.

“You want to talk about the ugly kitchen or what's in the blender?”

Andy's mouth wobbled, almost lifting to a smile, before he locked his jaw. “The kitchen's pretty bad, Coach.”

“Will,” he corrected.

Andy cocked his head to the side.

“At practice, I’m Coach. At home, I’m Will.”

The kid gave him a clipped nod before he examined the green liquid in the blender. “What is that, *Will?*” he said, his voice pitched high in trepidation, and disgust was painted on his every feature.

“Breakfast. It’s a banana, pineapple, honey, and kale smoothie.”

Andy swallowed thickly but didn’t respond, his focus never leaving the contents of the blender.

“Good source of vitamins. It’ll give you a quick energy boost while staying light before swimming laps. We’ll grab something heavier after practice,” Will said. Then he added, “Did you know most of the country’s kale comes from California or *Georgia?*”

Andy’s spine snapped straight, and he lifted his chin defiantly. “*Aly* told you.”

Will turned to the blender and answered with feign nonchalance. “That you didn’t turn in your report for school? Yup.” He split the smoothie between two glasses before turning to hand one to Andy. “Guess we’ll be busy with more than swim practice this weekend, huh?”

Andy opened his mouth, then snapped it shut again, scanning the room for several seconds. “*We?*” he finally whispered, turning his attention back to Will.

Will released his breath at the hope he heard in the one word. “Yeah, if I’m in charge, it’s my job to help you make sure all this stuff gets done. We’ll sit down at the computer and learn all about Georgia, because the only thing I know is that it smells like burning sewage when you drive down I-95.”

Andy tried and failed to hide a smile. “Really?”

“My parents drove us to Florida every summer for vacation when I was little, and the first two times I thought it was a fluke, but it turns out it’s because of the paper mills.”

“Making paper smells like burning poop?” Andy let out a laugh. “Poop? That is definitely going in my report. The poop-smelling state.”

Will lifted his smoothie and took a sip, hiding his own smile. Oh, to be eleven again. “Drink up.” He nodded to the smoothie when Andy had settled. “I’m going over a few ground rules.”

Andy froze with his smoothie halfway to his lips. “Rules?” His tone went flat.

“Yeah, I have rules at swim team, so why wouldn’t I have them at home?”

“Of course you do,” Andy muttered, but he lifted the drink and took a sip. Silently, he placed the glass back down before swallowing. “I expected this to be gross. But it’s not that bad.”

Will fought a smile when the kid took a bigger gulp of the green smoothie. There might be a hint of the leafy green in the drink, but the banana and pineapple flavors dominated, combining perfectly with the smoothness of the honey and tart of the Greek yogurt.

“Tell me the team’s rules.”

Andy lifted a finger. “Be prepared and on time—always for everything.” A second finger joined the first. “Be respectful. Not only to your coach and teammates, but to the judges and competition.” Finger number three. “Listen first; talk second.” He added a fourth finger. “Ask: If you have a question. If you don’t understand. If you need help.” All five fingers stood tall. “You will work as hard as we do, so if we give 100 percent, you will too, and 200 percent always wins.”

With a lift of his chin, Will said, “Those are the rules here too. We both follow them.”

Andy frowned. “Be prepared means *homework*, huh?”

Will nodded, leaning onto the beige counters. “And if you need help. All you do is ask.”

Dark brown eyes flicked away from Will to glare at the wallpaper.

“I know you’re mad at everything right now. Probably frustrated and hurt too.” Will took a breath, hoping to get the words out correctly. “When I get that way, I pour it into my swimming. I go out and swim laps. Let the problems go with every turn I make.”

Andy’s gaze shifted slowly back to Will then, but he remained silent.

“Thought we could put some laps in before practice.” Will lifted a hand before Andy could protest. “Together. Swimming side by side. I’d like to make that a thing. When you need an outlet, you tell me, and we go swim.”

The corner of Andy’s mouth began to lift before he caught himself. “You’ll take me anytime?”

Will nodded.

“Even at midnight?” His brows lifted in challenge.

“Even at three a.m. or at five in the evening, when the pool is packed. It’s my gym. I can close two lanes at any time.”

With that, Andy finally let the smile flood his face.

“But I’m adding a sixth rule.” He’d never seen a smile disappear so fast. “Don’t lie. Not to me. Not your sister. Not to your teachers. Break the rules? There will be no swimming.”

Andy’s mouth fell open. “But Coach—”

“*Will.*”

“The team needs me.”

Will gave a clipped nod. “I agree.”

Andy started to smirk, but Will wasn’t finished.

“So follow the rules, or they’ll have to do without you.”

Andy’s jaw locked and his nostrils flared.

“I want you to be the best swimmer you can be. You know that. But more than that, I want you to be the best *man* you can be. And it would be a disservice to you if we acted like some things in life—doing your schoolwork, being a good person, telling the truth—are less important than a swim meet.”

Andy glanced at the green liquid in his cup, and he glowered before he finally focused on Will again. A deep challenge shone in his brown irises. “And the rules apply to you too?”

“Of course.”

“Why are you letting me stay here?” The question was a demand for honesty. He wanted the truth.

“You know my mom was sick too, right? I was older than you by a couple of years.”

Andy didn't respond. Just gave him that cold look he'd gotten so good at over the last year. Will had thought maybe they could bond over their experiences, but maybe not.

“Over and over, people told me it would be okay.” Will picked up his smoothie and took a long sip as Andy watched, waiting for him to swallow. “It wasn't okay for a long time for me though. My family struggled, and a year later, my dad died too. Nothing was okay.”

“Nothing's been okay for me either.” Andy mimicked Will, grabbing his smoothie after the admission and wincing slightly as he swallowed.

“My sister, Mrs. Demoda, she helped me a lot and made things okay again after a while,” Will said.

Andy only blinked at him in response.

“What I mean,” Will explained, “is that sometimes we need the help of another person. Extra support until things start to get a little better.”

Andy nodded again but looked at the half-full glass of green liquid.

Will put his hand on Andy's small hand on the counter. “I'm going to make things a little better. I promise.”

“Thanks,” he said quietly.

And Will intended to keep that promise. “Let's hit the pool.”

CHAPTER 7





“So.” Lily poured the concoction into two glasses. Her new friend swore it was wine, but Aly had never seen purple wine that swirled like an almost magical potion. Then again, Aly wasn’t a drinker. “How are you the lucky bitch who gets her own room?”

Aly scanned her hotel room and shrugged.

Lily chuckled. “It’s your chattiness—people get sick of it, right?”

Aly shook her head at the heavy sarcasm in Lily’s voice. But sometimes it was true—she *did* talk too much.

Over the last three weeks, Lily had become Aly’s sounding board through the changes with Andy. Lately, the silence from her little brother was the most common topic. Besides daily calls from Will, her phone made no noise. No angry nannies, no mad principals, no exasperated teachers. It was almost too good to be true. Like it was the calm before the storm. Part of her waited for the inevitable blow-up, even though Andy and Will regularly assured her that all was well.

Aly had a hard time believing that she’d finally caught a break. The house repair bills, along with the worry that Andy would eventually self-destruct, kept her on that razor’s edge of unease. Which had led Lily to insisting they get together for drinks. Going out to a bar was beyond Aly. She didn’t have the headspace for the crowd. But when Lily found out about her empty hotel room, they reached a compromise.

“The rumor is you threw a fit and demanded to stay alone,” Lily said, pushing the glass of purple wine toward Aly.

“What? *No!*” Aly would never behave like that. “No one ever wants to stay with me, and we have an odd number of women. I’m always alone.” A blush crept up Aly’s cheeks at the admission. Yes, she was disliked by most of the crew, and now Lily knew it too.

“That can’t be true,” Lily said, her lips, painted a burgundy so dark they almost looked black, turning down at the corners. “Everyone loves you. You have no idea what we’ve been—”

Lily slammed her mouth shut. “Never mind.” She lifted her wineglass to Aly. “To being almost done.”

Only the final reveals and the wrap-up interviews were left to shoot. It was ten days before Thanksgiving, and she couldn’t wait to be back in New Jersey with Andy to celebrate. Missing another holiday with him wasn’t an option.

“To finishing in two days.” Aly lifted her glass and took a small sip. The tart liquid hit her tongue and she swallowed.

“See, I knew you’d like it.” Lily smiled. “So,” she wagged her brows, “tell me about the hottie.”

Aly crossed her arms. “Babysitter.” The phone calls with Will were an important part of her day, and most of the time, she didn’t think of him as the sexy thirty-two-year-old man he was. Will was gorgeous, and she’d never complain at the sight of him on her phone’s screen during their video chats, but Aly worked hard to keep him firmly in the category where he belonged: coach-slash-babysitter-slash-whatever.

“Sure, sure.” Lily flicked her hand in the air and leaned forward in the chair. “I swear he was flirting with you yesterday.”

Aly chuckled and picked up her wineglass. She spun the long stem between two fingers, scrutinizing the way the swirls of silver danced through the lilac wine as the glass moved in a slow circle. “Will’s just friendly. But more importantly, Andy seems happy. He actually talks to me when I call instead of just grunting like he used to.”

A dramatic sigh left Lily’s lips. “We have such different definitions of important.”

By this point, Aly knew better. “You can drop the shallow act with me. If Andy was your brother, you’d be all about his happiness.”

“I will begrudgingly admit that you’re right.” Lily rolled her large purple eyes—colored contacts, surely, because yesterday they had been green. “But I’m a lucky bitch and have parents who always took care of my sister and me. They might not understand my”—she tipped her head and the

bleach-blond hair she styled in what almost looked like dreadlocks danced across her chest—“free spirit. But they love the shit out of both Summer and me. We never had to worry about things like what you’ve gone through.”

She didn’t want to be jealous of her new friend, but the contrast in their life experiences stung. “My mom loved Andy and me. She meant well, but keeping jobs and paying bills weren’t her strong points. She wasn’t the best caretaker. That’s one thing I inherited from her.”

Lily huffed as her long silver nails tapped on the tabletop next to her wineglass. “Stop that. You have a job. You’re providing for your brother. And now you’ve found him a babysitter he likes. You’re crushing it.”

Aly spun her glass again. “It’s not that I’m not providing. That’s the only thing I’m good at. But crushing it would be finding a job in Jersey and being there for him myself. I don’t want him to feel like he’s on his own. I just—” She ran her hands over her face. Her stomach churned once again at the idea of Andy staying alone. Will was there now. The past was the past, and there was nothing she could do about it. But moving forward, she would make sure Andy was good. No matter what. “I just want him to have it easier than I did.”

Lily reached across the table and grabbed her arm, giving it a squeeze. “That’s why he will.”

Aly swallowed the lump in her throat. “Hopefully.”

They both jumped at the knock on the door.

Aly tilted her head and stared at the door in confusion. Rarely did anyone come to Aly’s room this late.

“I think it’s Garry, but he’s like twenty minutes early.” Lily stood and popped up on her tiptoes to look through the peephole. “Yup.” She flung the door open. “Come in. You want a glass of wine?”

Garry scanned the room, his attention landing on where Aly sat at the table. “Never seen purple wine like that before.”

“Witch’s brew.” Lily batted her lashes, making Garry chuckle uncomfortably. Lily was gorgeous *and* larger than life

and scary. Like most people, Garry was on edge around her.

“I’ll pass on drinks that’ll make my shit sparkle.” He turned back to Aly and smiled. “But I do want to chat for a minute.”

Lily looked like the cat that ate the canary, and Garry rarely smiled, so although the expression should have been a reassuring one, it put Aly on high alert.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her back going ramrod straight.

“Ugh.” Lily slumped into her chair. “Why do you always assume something is wrong?”

Aly ignored her friend and braced herself for Garry’s words.

“Nothing is wrong. But the network wants to do a Christmas special.”

Aly’s heart plummeted to her feet. *Shit*. A special meant another location and three weeks of intense work to get the house done as the episodes aired. And it meant another holiday without her brother. She’d already missed Halloween and most of the summer. She’d flown home for the first day of school and Andy’s birthday, but she’d missed the first two swim meets. And now this meant she wouldn’t be in Jersey for Thanksgiving. Maybe not even Christmas.

Mentally, she ran through the financial implication of quitting on the spot—just turning to Garry and saying she was done. Best-case scenario? If she sold the house as-is, she’d have to take out a twenty-thousand-dollar personal loan to cover what she’d still owe on the second mortgage. And that didn’t include the cost of selling the house. And then what?

Where would they live? How would she pay for food and to keep a roof over Andy’s head? The scholarship Will had put in place helped, but her savings was nonexistent, and bills piled up every month.

“Aly?” Garry called.

She blinked, bringing herself back to the moment. “Okay.” She nodded but couldn’t look at him. She studied her fingers as she traced the base of her wineglass, accepting her fate and knowing that Andy would never forgive her. But there wasn’t another option. “Where are we headed?”

He chuckled. “You didn’t hear me, did you?”

Shoot. What had he said?

“You’ve had a hard year, and through it all, you’ve never once complained or asked for anything extra. You’ve been a huge asset to the show. Everyone here and at the network wants to do something for you.”

Aly froze. Was he saying she could skip the special? Would they still pay her? That would be the best gift ever. Extra money over the holidays would be amazing. She blinked, waiting, afraid to get her hopes up.

“Lily,” Garry tipped his head in her friend’s direction, “mentioned your childhood home—the stress of the bills and the work it needs.”

Aly swallowed. She’d told Lily that in confidence. What kind of contractor lived in a house that was falling apart?

“We sent a team to check it out last week, drew up some plans, rushed the permits, and we, *Mi Casa es Su Casa*, would like to fix the bones and give the house a facelift for you.”

The words took a minute to sink in, but when they did, Aly’s jaw dropped, and she turned to Lily for confirmation that she wasn’t hearing things. Her friend nodded like a bobble head and smiled.

“I’m—” Aly sucked in a deep breath before blowing it out again. “What—” She stopped again. She didn’t want to sound ungrateful.

“She’s trying to ask what the catch is.” Lily shook her head. “I’m starting to really love her, but her glass is always half empty.”

Garry looked away, a red flush creeping up his neck. “Your story pulls at heartstrings, Aly. I’m not going to pretend it

doesn't." He still wouldn't meet her eye. "We would want family interviews, like always. You and your brother on camera. But we'd fix up the house. You know we don't cut corners. And the house will sell well over market value when we're finished." He cleared his throat. "Plus, we can spin it. Make it look like Logan is doing something sweet for you. You know viewers will eat that up. They love the idea of you two as a thing. What do they call it now? They *ship* you."

Aly groaned. Viewers loved the idea of her and Logan, but it wasn't even in the ballpark of possible. "What did Logan say?"

"The dipshit is on board. He knows how much you do." Lily scoffed.

Garry tried to hide his laugh as a cough but failed miserably. "He likes the bones of the house, and being in the New York area for the holidays opens doors to new promo."

What he meant was that Logan loved attention. And the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade and Times Square on New Year's Eve. Being in New York City, the city the big networks called home, gave him the opportunity to swim in the ocean of publicity they provided.

"He's on board. And I'm not kidding about houses selling for at least 25 percent above market value after the show." Garry gave her a pointed look, his hands stuffed into his pockets.

After the remodel, Aly could probably profit a hundred thousand dollars. But if she could get an additional 25 percent, she could buy a two-bedroom condo outright. And she could afford the pay cut a job in Jersey would require. She could be with Andy every day.

She met her boss's eye, and in them, she saw the understanding. Garry knew this might give Aly the out she needed. She didn't know whether it spoke to how little he valued her or to the care he had for her as a person. But either way, she couldn't pass up on the chance.

“Thank you.” She’d figure out what it meant and deal with how Andy would feel, but no matter what, she couldn’t say no.

CHAPTER 8





A THRUMMING CADENCE floated in the air as he moved through the hallway, waiting for Aly to pick up his FaceTime request. Elementary schools weirded him out. Everything was so low to the ground. The drinking fountain came up to Will's thigh. Even Andy wasn't that short. But being in the oldest in the school probably made the kid taller than most.

Although the screen stayed dark, Aly's quiet voice came through after the third set of beats.

"Will, something wrong?"

It had been over a month, but Aly still answered every call like she was bracing for bad news. Although juggling the gym and an eleven-year-old wasn't for the faint of heart, Will hadn't called her to give her bad news a single time. He'd simply handled the issues as they'd come up. And Andy hadn't been *that* much trouble.

He'd done stupid things, sure. On day two, he had switched out the orange juice for a mixture of water and the cheese dust from the Kraft Mac and Cheese box. The prank made for disgusting smoothies before swim practice, but Will forced Andy to finish while he chugged his down as well. After that, Andy didn't mess with food *he* might have to eat. On day five, Will came home from a long day at the gym to find every surface in the kitchen covered in foil. That was the moment he decided Andy needed chores to keep him busy. But after an argument about the list Andy had to work through after school each day, the kid had added salt to Will's coffee grounds. Morning six had not started off well.

That was when Will decided to give the kid a taste of his own medicine. He went into Andy's phone and turned on autocorrect for words like *ok* and *nope* so they'd say things like *Will is my hero in all things in life*. Or *I love my sister to the moon*. Or *Can't. I have to poop*. After twenty-four hours, he got tired of sending ridiculous messages to his friends, and Andy called a truce.

Things had been easier in the last few weeks. Will hadn't had company in the morning before swim since before his mother died. When he was Andy's age, his mother would get

up at four thirty and make smoothies for the two of them. Now Will was the one getting up and getting the blender going each morning. Over smoothies—and a cup of coffee for Will—they'd talk about the NFL football season or they'd go over spelling words, math facts, or state capitals before they headed to the pool for morning swim.

They made dinner together at night. Andy was exceptionally great in the kitchen for an eleven-year-old. He'd learned to cook when his mom was unwell, and that had carried over to when he'd been home alone. They ate, they swam, they watched a little TV. They took turns controlling the remote. Andy was Will's second set of hands when he winterized the boat for the year.

All in all, it was going well.

"Nothing's wrong. I'm calling for the conference." Will shook his head. He had this under control, but she still had a hard time trusting that Andy was okay.

"I thought that was at six thirty. What time is it?" There were mumbles and muffled movements.

"It's six twenty. Need me to do it without you?" Will asked. Why hadn't she turned her camera on? Normally, she was filming at this time of day, but they were down to the final interviews, so he figured most of that would be over.

"Shoot, no, no. I was just an hour off. Stupid time zones. Why can't we stick with one time? Fall back on the East Coast—blah," Aly rambled.

Will smirked. He liked the hint of crankiness she usually carried. Probably because it was from a distance. Or maybe because the delivery was always funny. Not many people made him laugh the way she did. "Give me a second."

Will stopped in front of Andy's classroom. The door was closed, and from the window, he could just make out a set of parents inside.

"Okay, I'm ready."

He turned his attention back to the phone, and his heart stopped.

“*Damn*, girl,” he stuttered. Aly was a beautiful woman. He’d observed that during every one of their FaceTime calls. But right now? A deep V highlighted her cleavage, and her dress wrapped around her like a second skin and tied with what looked like a simple bow around her waist. Her hair was thick and gorgeous, and her makeup was done for a night out. The woman was beautiful, funny, and smart. And from what Will could tell from watching season one of her show, she was talented too. There was no reason she shouldn’t be out on a date, but the thought of her dressing up for another man curdled like bad milk in his stomach.

“Sorry. Its exit interview day, and Lily went all out. I told her it was too much.” As if the rest wasn’t enough, at that moment, her cheeks highlighted a blush that ripped through his body like a current. When he realized he was staring like an idiot, he shook his head.

“You look amazing.” Especially now that he knew it was for work and not some random fucker.

“Thanks.” Her smile hit him hard in his chest.

He needed to stop this. She was Andy’s sister. Nothing more. Especially because it was becoming more and more clear to him that she was the type of woman that could get under his skin.

“You’re dressed up.” Unlike him, she didn’t seem impressed.

He glanced down at his slacks and white button down. “I figured a wet bathing suit or ripped jeans wouldn’t scream, ‘Hey, I’m a responsible adult.’”

“I haven’t gotten a *your brother isn’t doing his work* call in weeks. You’re doing something right, Will.” Aly sank her teeth into her full bottom lip, and all the blood in Will’s body moved south.

He looked away and discreetly adjusted himself. Thankfully, he was alone in the hall. A semi in slacks wasn’t ideal in any setting, but especially in a school. He ran through a few of the state capitals he and Andy had been working on to

fix his problem. And mere moments after he had things under control, the door to the classroom swung open.

“Hold on, we’re about to go in.”

The man and woman who exited were a few years older than him. They nodded a hello as they moved past.

“Well, well. My second Evans of the night.” Ms. Silverman shook her head.

“Was my nephew’s conference today too?” He doubted this conference would be much like Steve’s. Unlike Andy, his nephew was a rule follower. A perfectionist and a pleaser. The chaos in Beth and Marc’s home came 100 percent from their female offspring. Mandy and Peyton were the ones who gave his brother-in-law gray hair.

“Yes, about an hour ago. I see Beth often, but it’s been over a decade since you’ve been here, Mr. Evans.” Ms. Silverman smiled. Two of his younger brothers, Clayton and Joey, had been in her class years ago. Her white-blond hair and wrinkles told her age, but so did the knowledge that she’d been a seasoned teacher back when his brothers had been her students.

Will had been barely twenty-one when he attended Clayton’s fifth-grade conference. He had spent a lot of time trying to forget that part of his life, and yet, lately, more and more memories surfaced.

“About that,” he lifted his phone, “I have Andy’s sister Aly Gomez on FaceTime.”

“Ms. Gomez.” She nodded at the screen. “Neither of you should look so worried. I’ve seen vast improvement in Andre’s behavior over the last few weeks.”

The statement gave Will a weird lift. He didn’t know what to make of the feeling surging through him. Was it pride?

“His desk is right here.” Ms. Silverman nodded to the small desk directly in front of hers. “I like to keep an eye on him.”

“Yeah.” Will chuckled. “I find that works best too.”

“Salt water isn’t my favorite.” Her nose scrunched up.

“Salted coffee isn’t so great either.” Will chuckled and peeked at Aly, who looked horrified.

“Don’t worry,” Andy’s teacher assured, “he’s gotten much better lately. I even caught him smiling twice this week instead of glaring at me.”

“Apart from swimming, I don’t get smiles too often either,” Will agreed.

On-screen, Aly’s gray eyes swirled dark. In the last few weeks, those smoky eyes had become a fixture in his life. Normally, they were the color of a foggy morning, but when Aly got upset, they turned the color of wood smoke.

“I don’t see him enough to know.” She bit the inside of her lip so hard it was easy to spot, even on his phone’s small screen. The guilt that echoed in her voice made Will wish he could reach through the device and squeeze her hand. She was trying. It was obvious how much she cared, but she was hard on herself.

“You’ll be here soon,” Will murmured. He crouched down and peered into Andy’s desk. There were a few folders and a couple of notebooks stacked inside. It was neat, just like Andy’s room at home. Although he had the potential to cause chaos, he was a pretty clean kid. Looking through Andy’s desk, Will found a folded piece of paper with his name on it.

“Let’s get the good news out of the way,” Ms. Silverman went on before Will could open the note. “Andy’s smart. And now that he’s turning in his work regularly, his grades are good. He’s reading above grade level. And academically, I don’t have many concerns.”

The compliments were nice to hear, but Will knew all that already. As long as he sat at the table with Andy, homework fights were nonexistent. They had set up a system where Will did payroll or bill-pay for the gym while Andy worked, and it had become a nonissue. He craved attention, and now that he was getting some, Andy’s attitude was less off-putting.

“And like I said, his behavior recently compared to just a month ago has been like night and day. I think having consistency and clear expectations at home has helped him settle in. Between his teacher’s comments from last year and what I’ve seen since school started this fall, it appears he hasn’t done this well in a while.”

She continued on, discussing his grades and work. It was all good news, but something in Andy’s teacher’s tone gave Will pause. He glanced at the phone, only to find the screen frozen, like the connection had cut out.

“Aly?” he asked. But the call dropped.

“We lose her?” Ms. Silverman asked.

He nodded and clicked on her contact icon, but the call failed.

“I really wanted to talk to both of you about this, but I guess you’ll have to be the messenger.” She watched Will warily from behind her glasses. “We were talking about Thanksgiving plans, and he mentioned that he didn’t know where he would be. He wasn’t sure whether he’d stay with you once his sister came back for the holidays.” She paused and sighed. “*Or* what would happen after.”

Ms. Silverman’s sentence hung in the air.

Shit. Will had made assumptions, but he hadn’t actually talked to Andy about what would happen next, and the kid hadn’t asked. Will was the silent type, unlike his siblings, and he was still adjusting to being the point person for communication with the boy. He was used to people who put a lot of verbal demands on him. Andy was the opposite of that, which only made clear communication more important.

“I had no idea he was worried.” Will shook his head.

Ms. Silverman gave him a small, sympathetic smile. “I think he might be scared of the answer. But I had him write a letter to you explaining his concerns.” She tapped the folded paper Will had placed on the desk after he found it in Andy’s desk. “It might not be my place to tell you how to handle this, but consistency is the most important thing for children.”

Of course it was. Communication and consistency. And Will had failed at communicating with Andy. He flicked open the letter and scanned it quickly.

I'm sure my teacher told you what this is about already because she asks a lot of questions and probably tells you and Aly everything I say. But I know Aly is coming back soon, and that means you won't be stuck with me anymore. But I wondered if you'd let me come back again when Aly leaves. I know I've been a pain in your butt, but I promise, if you let me come back, I won't be anymore. I've been trying to be better because I like being with you. If you let me stay, I'll even pretend to like the kale smoothies.

Andy

A lump lodged in Will's throat the second he read the word *stuck*. He cleared his throat, a flurry of emotions warring inside him. This situation might have started because Will wanted to pay something forward, but the truth was that it was giving Will things he never expected. He looked forward to Sunday football more, because he and Andy got to discuss the teams. He liked waking up early and having someone there in the morning. It wasn't that Will had been lonely—he'd never say he was—but Andy added something to life. They needed to talk. He might not be the easiest kid, but Will enjoyed their time together. And he never wanted Andy to feel unwanted. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"You read it?" he asked Andy's teacher. When she nodded, Will pushed to his feet, grabbing his phone in one hand and

the letter in the other. “We’ll take care of it. Thank you for letting me know.”

“He’s happier than I’ve seen him since September. You’re doing a great job.”

He gave her a clipped nod and left the room, not feeling great about anything. Although he and Aly hadn’t talked about it, Will made the decision right there—Andy wasn’t going anywhere.

He had just gotten in his truck when his phone buzzed with the new FaceTime request.

“Hey, sorry. I lost service. Probably too much on the network here. But what did she say?” Aly asked.

Will clicked the phone into the mount on the dash and started the truck before looking into the camera. “Andy is staying with me, in my house, through the holidays. And at least for the next couple of years. We need to get that straight and make sure he knows.”

It was a statement, not a question. More of a confirmation of what he thought was a known fact. One they just hadn’t voiced yet. In his mind—after everything he’d heard about how well Andy was doing and how he needed consistency—there was no other option.

“*Excuse me?*” Aly’s screech ripped through the air in the confined space, raising an octave higher than her normal tone. She narrowed her eyes, her irises swirling dark like dusk.

Will froze. *Why would she fight him about this?*

“You heard me. He’s doing well where he is. Let’s not mess that up.” Will clenched his jaw and tightened his grip on the wheel. She had been perfectly content with this arrangement until about thirty seconds ago. What the fuck was going on?

“He’s my brother. You’re not going to *tell me* what he will and won’t do,” she snapped, her face red and her mouth fixed in a scowl. “I get that you like to issue statements, and I appreciate your help, but I’m his guardian. I decide what’s best for him. And no one said this was an indefinite arrangement.”

“And you think moving him for a couple of weeks is best for him? Bringing him home while it works for you and then dumping him off with a new nanny when you go off to the next location is in his best interest?” If she thought that was consistency, she’d lost her fucking mind. “I might just be the swim coach and babysitter, but I know a million times more about kids than you ever will.”

“I. Didn’t. Say. That.” The word hissed through her tight lips as she stared through the phone at him.

With as hard as he was gritting his teeth, Will’s jaw just might crack, but he refused to look away. “What’s your plan?” It was a challenge. He knew this woman well enough now to know she probably hadn’t formulated one yet.

Aly blinked, her gray eyes as violent as a summer thunderstorm. “To come home and talk to him.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I think it’s great you’re coming back,” Will said. “It will be good for him to see you for the holidays, but then what?”

Aly sighed. “That’s over six weeks from now. I have time to figure that out.”

Okay, this could all work out. He took a deep breath and pulled back just a hair. Not all the way, because in the end, he was right, but enough to bring her back from the edge.

“Moving Andy back and forth isn’t what’s best for him. He’s happy, and I’m not going anywhere. It makes sense for him to stay with me,” Will pointed out.

Aly’s shoulders drooped. She looked away and blinked a few times. “Will, he’s my only family, and it’s Christmas.” She swallowed hard.

Yeah, okay—he was an asshole.

He hadn’t really thought about Aly and what she’d do. But there was no reason she couldn’t stay too.

“I’m sorry.” He shook his head. “I know we didn’t talk about this, but you could stay with us too. I should have led with that.”

“What?” Wide eyes shot back to him. Fuck, she was gorgeous. He shook that thought off; it wasn’t the point.

He cleared his throat. “I have plenty of room. You’d have a bedroom and a bathroom all to yourself. And like Ms. Silverman said, he’s doing well. Let’s not mess that up. I know this is different, but we can make it work.”

Her sigh was about the size of lake Michigan, but she nodded. “A hotel would be too expensive anyway.” *Hotel? What did that mean?* But Aly went on without clarifying. “You’re right. But maybe next time, make it a conversation rather than a demand.”

Will smirked. “Fair enough. Do you mind if I talk to Andy about it?”

“That’s fine. Tell him I’m staying with you through New Year’s and that we’ll figure it out from there. But I want to make one thing clear: this isn’t indefinite,” Aly countered.

Will did his best to hold back a glare. Now wasn’t the time to hound her about it. After staying with him for a few weeks, she’d see that Andy was exactly where he was supposed to be. “I have to get back to work and finish up so I can fly home tomorrow.”

“Do you need a ride from the airport?” he asked.

“Nah, I’m good. I’ll call you when I land,” Aly assured before hanging up.

Ten minutes later, he had to chuckle as he walked in his door.

“Boom diggity. How you like them apples?” Corey’s voice echoed through the house.

He’d asked his best friend to hang out with Andy while he was gone, but who the hell knew what Corey was up to. Will headed through the living room and back to the kitchen at the rear of the house.

“Cor!” Taran, Corey’s fiancée, snapped from across the kitchen table.

“What? I can’t let him win.”

“It’s okay, Aunt Taran. We both know what he does.” Andy cackled, the sound bringing an immediate smile to Will’s face.

“You cheating again, bro?” Will asked as he took in the NFL Spot-It game on his kitchen table. His best friend was the sorest of sore losers—although he wasn’t much worse than the average professional baseball player. Winning was everything. Normally, he wouldn’t stereotype, but every professional athlete Will knew had issues with losing.

“Of course he’s cheating.” Taran shook her head.

“I’m insulted by the implication you’re making, chipmunk.” Corey crossed his arms and tipped back in the chair. He was going to fall over and bust his ass, but Will kept his mouth shut. He’d told him not to do that many times, but his best friend never listened.

“Implication?” Taran’s voice rose on the word. “Cor, we’re outright calling you out. I should write a blog post about it. *Corey Matthews might be fair on the mound, but God forbid you play cards with the man.*”

“You’re cute when you’re all fired up.” Corey sent an air kiss to his fiancée.

“Gross,” Andy complained.

The oversized child’s chair skidded an inch, and Corey slammed the front legs down, his wide eyes darting to Will.

“Don’t.” Will shook his head. The chairs were probably forty years old and had made it through his band of brothers. Yet Will had no doubt they wouldn’t live through much more time with Corey Matthews. “One day you’ll break my chair.”

“I’ll buy new ones.”

“I don’t want new chairs.” They might be old, but they had belonged to his parents. And on quiet nights when no one was around, it was nice to sit with the memories of family meals at this table. He studied Andy, who was spinning the lid of the Spot-It game on the table in front of him. And now these chairs were where the two of them sat together in the

evenings. “Are you staying for dinner? I made vegetarian chili.”

“You mean flavored beans. Got any good stuff we could use to doctor it up?”

Taran whacked Corey hard on the back of the head. “I’m not eating anything that breathes.”

Andy peered up at Will, eyes dancing with mirth, and pressed his lips together, fighting hard not to smile. Yeah, his best friend and his girl were idiots, but they were Will’s idiots, and he loved them.

Will moved over to the cabinet and pulled out four bowls.

“You know.” Corey came up next to him. He opened the drawer and pulled out flatware. “I had my doubts about you doing this dad thing with him.” He tilted his chin toward the table and lowered his voice. “But you’re a fucking natural at this. I knew you’d love the excuse to not have to come out with me, Mr. Homebody, but I thought for sure you’d be crawling out of skin by day four with just the chaos he’d cause.”

Will chuckled. “Yeah, well, I’ve had my moments. Kraft Mac and Cheese smoothie day was a big one.”

“I told Taran that I feel crappy for not being more supportive. She said I should tell you.” Corey shrugged and leaned back against the counter. “But it’s cool, and I’m glad you’re happy. You probably would have hated a dog. They’re a fucking mess.”

“Thanks.” Will shook his head.

It took an hour to get Corey and Taran fed and out of his house. Once they were gone, he and Andy stood at the sink, doing the dishes.

“I wanted to talk about something Ms. Silverman mentioned,” Will hedged, handing Andy the pot to dry.

The boy’s narrow shoulders pulled back tight, and he froze, his gaze fixed on the stainless-steel pot in his hands.

Will nudged him with an elbow. “Nothing bad.”

Andy pressed his lips in a firm line, then asked, “Is this about being allowed to stay here again?”

Will shut off the water and turned to lean against the counter. He shook his hands dry before crossing them over his chest.

The boy scanned the kitchen, looking everywhere except at Will.

“You’re probably excited to spend Christmas with your sister. Maybe even at your house.” Will crossed his ankles and studied his black dress shoes. Until now, he’d been sure that Andy would jump at the idea of staying with Will, but the realization that Andy needed to feel wanted hit Will smack in the chest. He cleared his throat. “I was thinking about what a good system you and I have going on. Even and odd days. Swimming laps. Smoothies. Homework. And I’d be pretty lonely if I had to spend Christmas without you.”

“You...would?”

Will tipped his head up and nodded. “Yeah, I’ve gotten used to having you around. I was hoping you and Aly might stay with me while she’s home.”

Andy squinted and raised his chin. “Aly wants me to stay here?”

That was a loaded question, and Will had to word his answer carefully.

“Aly wants you to be happy. I’m hoping you’re happy here. Because there’s nothing I’d like more than to have you both stay with me. But she wants to be wherever you are.”

Andy swallowed hard.

“I understand if you want to spend Christmas at your house, but, Andy,” Will waited until the boy’s brown eyes met his own, “having you here has been like a present for me. Nothing about it is a burden.”

Andy blinked multiple times. “R-really?”

“Yeah, and for the record, you’re stuck with me, man. Even if you don’t live in my house, I’ll always be around

when you need me.” Will grabbed Andy by the arm and pulled him into a hug before he gave his head a good rub with his knuckles.

“Hey.” Andy yanked away. “I know why Steve hates that now.”

Will chuckled. “What do you want to do while Aly’s in town?”

“We’ll stay here.” The kid’s mouth lifted slightly in a rare smile.

Will’s heart pinched hard at the sight. It would all work out. If Andy was happy, he was happy. What could go wrong?

CHAPTER 9





SHE STOOD in front of the gray craftsman, taking in the angled stone and the white columns on the large porch. It was hard to see the roof line in the dark, but even so, it wasn't a typical beach house. Set on the bay instead of the gorgeous sandy Atlantic coast, the home, with its light gray shingles, looked more New England than Jersey coast, but it was gorgeous.

"You good, ma'am?" The driver's question startled Aly back to the moment.

"Yes, sorry." She grabbed both bags out of the trunk and added them to the pile on the curb. After a long day of travel, her nerves were shot, and worries about what the next few weeks would look like while she lived with her brother and Will whirled around her head. Not to mention the anxiety of talking to Andy about their mother's house that weighed on her chest. "You're good. Thanks again." She slammed the black trunk lid and moved away as the driver pulled away.

She turned back to the house just as the front door opened and her brother walked out in front of Will. There was no way Andy had shrunk in the two months since she'd seen him, but he looked tiny standing in front of such a large man. Her stomach flipped slightly as Will jogged down the four steps. His black T-shirt pulled tight against the thick muscles of his shoulders. He was tall and broad, with a chiseled jaw covered in a light scruff—he was even better looking in person. Lily would lose it.

"You should have texted when you pulled up." The deep baritone fit the ruggedly handsome man in front of her perfectly.

"Didn't want you to have to come out in the cold."

Will folded his corded arms across his chest and lifted his brow. But she turned away from the Roman warrior of a man.

"Hey, mush," she said, focusing her attention on her little brother.

"I hate it when you call me that." Andy swatted her hand away from his hair the second she made contact with him. "Don't do that."

She fought the sigh. “I’m excited to be here. I brought you a few things.”

“I told you not to.” The words were barely a breath. Oh, how she’d missed this hostility.

“Andy, don’t be a dickwad. Give your sister a hug and bring her bags in.” The deep command instantly got a response. Thin arms halfheartedly wrapped around her for less than a second, and then Andy was pulling away and grabbing one of her bags.

“You don’t need—”

“He does.” Will cut in, scooping up the other bag and her carry-on. “It’s his job to support and care for the women in his life—especially his family.”

Unsure of how to respond, she silently followed the two up the path. The landscaping was minimal. It was mostly stone, as were half the houses around the bay. Four steps, and they were on the porch. The real wood of the planks was impressive. Natural boards like this were rarely seen anymore, and the stain brought out the grain in each one beautifully. The mahogany door was heavy solid wood. One of her favorite styles, especially with the black wrought-iron hardware.

And the—

She stopped her thoughts. Nervous energy caused her to home in on details, especially design, but she hoped to avoid rambling like a moron about his house. Will’s perception of her wasn’t great, and she didn’t need to wear on his nerves the second she stepped foot in his home. She simply shut the door and moved into a large living room, trying like heck not to notice the wide plank knotted wood floors or high ceilings. Her brother was halfway up the stairs to the right when Will called over his shoulder.

“We’ll put your stuff in your room, and then we’ll get ready to eat.” The heavy thunk of Will’s Timberland boots echoed around them as they climbed the steps.

Her fingers trailed lightly along the dark wood railing. Craftsman style shone in every detail of the house.

“This is my room.” Will tipped his head to a closed door on the left the second they were up the stairs. “And Andy’s here.” This time, he stopped for her to look through the open doorway. She’d seen the bunk beds and a desk on FaceTime, but now that she’d seen the room in person, she was shocked by how much of her brother’s stuff was already here. The posters and pictures that had hung on his wall at home were on display, not to mention most of his knickknack crap on shelves and the desk. Trophies and medals lined the bookcases. “There’s a small bathroom connected to his room, so the one in the hall is all yours.” They moved farther down the narrow hallway, passing four other doors to the very end room. “I figured you’d like this one. It’s got the double bed.”

He moved into the room where Andy stood, and both men set her bags on the comforter. Will glanced around like he was doing one last check to make sure everything was in order. But the only chaos was her bags.

“Bathroom’s two doors down. We’ll give you some time to settle in. Dinner will be ready in a half hour.” Will led Andy out of the room and shut the door behind them.

When she was alone, Aly released her first good breath since the Uber had driven away. No way would this work if every cell in her body was clenched all day long. She lowered herself to the edge of the bed and took another breath to loosen the tightness in her chest. The room was cute. Pale green with light wood furniture and a paisley patterned comforter and drapes. Even a vase filled with daisies sat on the dresser.

After putting her clothes in the closet and dresser, then organizing her stuff in the mostly empty bathroom, she had no choice but to head downstairs and do her best to chill with the guys. The living room was empty, but she followed the sound of voices to the back of the house through a swing door into the kitchen.

Her mouth fell open before she could stop her reaction. For as tasteful and gorgeous as the rest of the house was, this kitchen was the polar opposite.

“He knows it’s butt ugly,” Andy said, watching her with a dull look on his face.

“Andy!” she sputtered.

Will chuckled. “It’s okay. He’s right. This room needs a complete overhaul. I just haven’t gotten around to it yet.”

The layout wasn’t bad. Even though he was cooking, the counters were bare except for a coffee pot. She liked the U-shaped counter with the center island, and there was plenty of room for the large table. The space just needed a facelift to bring it into the twenty-first century. She kept her criticism to herself.

“It smells really good in here.”

“That’s Will’s lasagna. Which he says is too much work to have for a daily meal.” Andy rolled his eyes.

Will whacked him playfully with a towel. “I said too much work for a weekly meal. I’ll make this every day when pigs fly, dude.”

Andy’s mouth lifted into a small grin, and Aly’s heart stopped. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen a smile on his face.

“So what was Michigan?” Will asked, casually tossing the dish towel over his shoulder.

“Lansing. Although it should be Detroit because who’s ever heard of Lansing?” Andy answered, even though Will had moved to the far side of the kitchen and was pulling white dinner plates out of a cabinet. “Oregon is Salem, and that’s the last one.” Andy slammed his notebook shut. “Food time.”

“Food time,” Will agreed with a nod as he dropped the plates and silverware onto the table. “Make it look good.”

“It’s a waste of time. We’re going to use the silverware in, like, two minutes, so who cares if the fork is to the right or left or tossed in a pile?”

“Someday you’ll meet a hot girl and want to impress her, and you’ll call me and thank me for teaching you manners so she doesn’t think you’re an ape.”

Andy scoffed but proceeded to set the table, even giving everyone a napkin. Aly stood stone still, watching the easy banter and pressing down on the jealousy that rose within her. She and Andy had never had what Will had created in just weeks.

She wasn't stellar in the kitchen, either, but Will moved effortlessly, like he did this all the time. Even in today's society, a lot of men would be uncomfortable in the role of cook, not to mention homework helper, but Will did it without pause.

"There, done. But it's not because I want to impress a girl. I just want food."

"Go wash your hands, monkey man." Will chuckled before turning to her. "Have a seat. What can I get you to drink?"

"Uh, just water?"

Will nodded and filled a glass as Andy came running back to the table.

"Okay, say grace," Will reminded Andy once the tray of lasagna sat in the center, smelling like heaven on earth.

"Grace." Andy smirked.

"Smart-ass." Will shook his head.

"Okay, okay," Andy said and folded his hands. "Thank you for the lasagna. And please help me convince Will to make it again next week since it is my favorite, even though it's too much work for a weekly meal. And thank you for giving Will and me each other because it's been the best. Amen."

Will extended an arm and gave the kid a squeeze on the shoulder. Andy beamed up at him at the gesture. Aly swallowed down another hit of jealousy, feeling like the odd man out. But they ate dinner while Will made small talk about Aly's flight and Andy acted like Aly wasn't there.

"Odd or even?" Will asked when both he and Andy had finished.

"Odd, ha-ha!" Andy smiled at him.

“Damn, okay. I got dishes. You get Minecraft,” Will said.

Andy jumped up from the table, dropped his dishes next to the sink, and hustled through the swinging door.

“What’s odd or even mean?” Aly asked as she helped clear the table.

“We have a system for chores like dishes and garbage and folding clothes. If it’s an odd day, I do it. If it’s an even day, Andy has to help,” Will explained.

“You two seem...I mean, everything seems...good.” Aly finally stumbled through the observation. She was happy, of course—really happy—that Andy was well taken care of. Not only had Andy found a place to stay, but he’d found a place where he really belonged. She wished she could have the type of relationship with her brother that Will had developed, but she was hopelessly awful with people.

“Yeah, everything is great,” Will agreed and took the plates out of her hands. “I got this,” he said, organizing the dishes in the sink. “Why don’t you go chat with Andy? He enjoys showing people his Minecraft world. You might even get a smile.”

That was highly unlikely, but she would try.

She pushed through the door to find her brother exactly where Will had predicted: on the sectional sofa, PS5 controller in hand, and staring at the TV. The room wasn’t huge, but the high ceilings with wooden beams gave it a roomy feel.

“Whatcha playing?” she asked, moving to sit not too far away.

“Minecraft.” He didn’t even glance away from the TV.

“Will said you have a very cool house.”

He grunted.

So much for small talk. She might as well jump right into the bigger stuff.

“I wanted to talk to you about why we’re staying here instead of at our house.”

He narrowed his eyes and turned her way warily, glaring at her like she'd already done something wrong.

"I'm here because Will *likes* having me around. Unlike you." He slammed the controller onto the cushion and crossed his arms.

Aly's heart skipped painfully. No matter how hard she tried, she could never convince him that she loved him.

"We've talked about this. I want to be here more, but I have to work," she explained for the hundredth time.

"Yup. Can't do construction in New Jersey."

"Not for the same money." She sighed. "But the reason I wanted to talk is because the show wants to redo the house for us as a Christmas present."

Andy cocked his head to the side. "Why?"

Lying would get her nowhere. "Multiple reasons. Some are because they think the story will give the show publicity."

There went the glare again.

"Also, they want to help me. If they fix it up, we can sell it ___"

"You're going to sell Mom's house?" Andy shot to his feet, knocking the controller to the floor.

"If we sell it, we can buy something smaller that needs less upkeep. With fewer bills, I can work locally and be here with you."

"I can't believe you're just going to sell our house." Andy's voice rose, and he blinked hard. His eyes glistened, but the hard set of his jaw said he wouldn't let himself cry.

"Mush—"

"Don't." The anger in his tone ripped at her heart. "Don't call me that," he spat, backing away and twisting the knife in her chest.

She rose slowly. "Andy, I don't know what to do. You're mad at me because I'm never here, but now that I'm working

on a solution that will allow me to be here more, you're even more mad. I don't know what you want."

"I want my mom back," he yelled, breaking her heart. It was the only thing she couldn't possibly give him. But she would sell her soul if she could. "But I can't have that, so I want Will. At least he *tries* to be a parent. I want you to leave."

Her eyes welled, and she swallowed hard against the lump in her throat. Her job was to keep it together. She was the adult here, and she'd take the anger Andy threw at her. But she needed a minute before she could talk, otherwise she would lose the small hold she had on her emotions.

He turned to the kitchen and smacked right into Will, who stood in the doorway. He put his hands on Andy's upper arms to keep him from stumbling. His brown eyes tracked over Aly before turning down to Andy.

"I want to swim *right now*."

Will simply nodded, and Andy took off up the stairs, leaving them alone in the room.

Aly shut her eyes, and her shoulders sagged. That couldn't have gone worse. The only thing she wanted was for Andy to feel safe, loved, and taken care of, and she was failing at all of it. An impossible loneliness crept over her. God, she was so bad at this, and her brother may possibly hate her forever at this rate.

Footsteps echoed across the hardwood. Then Will's arms were around her, and he was pulling her into him. She froze, taking in the hard plane of his chest against her and the woody cedar of his cologne. She couldn't remember the last time someone had given her a good hug, but the feeling of warmth rushed through her, and she leaned into it.

Into him.

She snaked both arms around his tight waist, one that was probably smaller than her own. Pulling away was the right response, but the feeling of utter safety that flooded her when she was in his embrace kept her right where she was.

“We probably could have eased into that entire thing since you hadn’t mentioned any of that to Andy or me. I wondered what you meant about the hotel. But he’s angry at everything, Aly. And you’re an easy target.” He ran a huge palm up and down her back, sending sparks of heat through her thin shirt. “I’m not excusing his piss-poor behavior, but he’s having a hard time.” He pressed his nose into her hair, his breath tickling her ear and causing a shiver to rush through her. Every muscle in Will’s body tightened and locked then. For one split second, the air around them charged with an electricity more intense than she’d ever felt, but he cleared his throat and released her, breaking the connection.

He ran his hand through his hair and stared across the room. “I told him that when he’s upset, we could hit the pool to work out his feelings. So he and I are going to the gym.” Will swallowed before he finally turned back to her. “Did you want to come swim laps with us?”

She chuckled. “There’s no way I could keep up with you two.”

Will’s eyes danced with mirth. “Too bad, because I’m damn sure you’d look hot in a bathing suit.”

And with a grin, he left her alone to fumble with the overabundance of emotions swirling inside her. Some were normal: regret, guilt, loneliness. And now lust had joined the list. But her focus needed to be Andy, not her hot as heck new roommate—who needed to stay firmly in the role of Andy’s caretaker, because the last thing Aly needed was another reason for her brother to hate her.

CHAPTER 10





WILL GLANCED into the rearview mirror. Andy sat in the back seat, brooding silently as he watched out the window. Aly had been back for a week, and still there was a lingering tension between the Gomez siblings. Aly had promised not to make any decisions about selling their mother's house until after the remodel was done. And that Andy could participate in the show as much or as little as he wanted. But so far, he'd refused to even drive by the house as the crew loaded all their possessions into a pod in the driveway. Andy's room was being boxed up tomorrow. Will hoped to convince Andy to go over for that part. Aly wanted him there, even if she refused to ask him to come. Her stock response to everything was "whatever Andy wants."

"You two sure this is okay?" Will asked. He couldn't stand the silence anymore.

"I want to see Steve," Andy answered, not looking from the window as they drove over to Beth and Marc's place.

"Whatever Andy wants." Aly fisted her hands in her lap, eyes darting around like she was trying to find something to focus on.

She was wearing a sweater dress to Thanksgiving dinner, but with her curves, the dress was sinful. It didn't scoop low across her chest, nor was it short, but it clung to her ample breasts, showing them off before it pinched in at her waist, then pulled across the curve of her hips. He pushed his hand through his hair and put it back on the steering wheel, upping his effort to keep his attention on the road. Not the bare legs his hands itched to touch, just to see if her skin was as soft as it looked.

A week had given him plenty of time to pick apart every detail of their hug the night she'd arrived. He should've asked whether it was okay to touch her. But seeing her standing there alone, devastated...he'd just reacted. The reaction was so unlike him. Instead of planning what to do, he let himself relax into her, focusing on how the simple hitch in her breathing had caused him to swell in his jeans. On how much he had wanted to press his lips against the pulse that pounded in her neck, just to see what her moan might sound like.

He cleared his throat. “They’re excited to have you both there.” Two faces turned his way, wearing identical skeptical expressions. The siblings stared at him for a beat before they glanced away, dismissing his statement like he’d only said it to make them feel better. But they didn’t get his ridiculous family. Although they knew Andy, Aly was like a shiny new toy that fascinated his siblings. And she was about to get a firsthand look at how annoying they were.

He pulled his old truck up to the gate and rolled down his window.

“Oh, shoot. I didn’t bring my ID,” Aly said. Usually, when nonfamily came to the Demoda household, the secret service—courtesy of Beth’s biological father, who was the vice president—insisted on photo IDs.

Will waved at the agent, who opened the gate without stopping them. “Even with as uptight as Marc is about security and keeping the press away, he doesn’t hassle family or even close friends. The guys have a list and get to know the regulars.”

“We come over all the time. Aunt Beth and Uncle Marc *like* having me here.”

In the last few weeks, his siblings had all insisted that Andy call them aunt and uncle, not Mr. and Mrs., which Andy loved. But Aly’s eyes narrowed every time he referred to one of the Evanses or Demodas that way.

“We all love having you around. Especially your sister.”

Andy snorted. Aly shut her eyes and swallowed hard but didn’t react in any other way. Without a thought, Will reached over and covered her fisted hand with his. Andy was being a little shit. Sure, Aly had made mistakes since their mother died, but she was sailing through uncharted waters. Will remembered dealing with his little brothers, especially Clayton and Joey, after his parents had passed away. And he hadn’t had to do it alone; he’d had his older brothers. Aly had no one. It would have been easy for her to fall into the *poor me* routine—Will certainly had back when his parents died—but she

never complained. She just kept going. She had this internal strength that fascinated Will.

He put the car in park and glanced into the review mirror at Andy. The kid's attention was no longer on their surroundings. Instead, his eyes were locked on Will's hand. He quickly pulled it away from Aly and turned around.

“Rule number two.”

Andy's jaw locked, but he wouldn't meet Will's gaze.

“I'm serious, Andy. You will be respectful to everyone here. Including your sister, who is jumping through hoops to make you happy at her own expense. If you can't do that, we'll leave.” Will didn't look away from the boy, who was now glaring right back at him.

Finally, Andy gave a clipped nod. “I promise I'll be good. Can we go inside?”

“Yeah.”

The word had barely made it past Will's lips before he had his door open and was running to the house.

“You don't have to do that.” Aly's voice was quiet.

“Yeah, I do,” Will corrected, turning to look into her gray eyes. “Someday he's going to meet someone, and by the way he stares at the girls at swim team, it's going to be a woman. He needs to know that if he wants that woman in his life, he needs to treat her with love and respect. Adore her, protect her like she's his most precious treasure, and support her in all her dreams and achievements like they're his own. And that all starts with how I let him treat you. So yeah, Aly, I really do need to do that.”

She swallowed and ducked her chin, not saying a word.

He got out, then rounded the truck to open her door. When she'd climbed out of the car, he gestured her ahead of him and followed her to the door. Inside, the house, as usual, felt more like a zoo. Noise in every direction, and chaos as far as the eye could see.

“Hey, Aly! Glad you could come,” his sister greeted once they made their way through the foyer. “Andy went...” Beth paused for a second, her blond curls bouncing as she looked one way and then the other. “Actually, I’m not sure where he and Steve took off to, but they were laughing.” She shrugged and smiled.

“Thanks for having me,” Aly said, but she scanned the room with a wary expression, taking in the crowd.

Will placed his hand on the small of her back and whispered an explanation of who was who, since this small Thanksgiving gathering consisted of more than twenty people.

But Aly put her hand up. “I’ll never remember all these names. Are they going to be mad if I try not to use them?”

Will chuckled. “Nah, half the time we answer to anything. With a family this big, our parents just yelled out names until they got the attention of the person in question.”

“Hell yeah,” Luke agreed, coming up beside him. “You know how many times I got called Will or Grant growing up?” He shook his head. “But I’m Luke, the better half of the Evans twins.” His blue eyes flicked down to where Will’s hand rested on Aly’s back. “At least for now I’m his better half.”

Will raised his brow at his twin, who smirked in return.

“Did you see I was right about who’s *not* coming?”

Yes, Will was aware that his brother Danny had chosen to spend the holiday in Pennsylvania with Grant.

“That doesn’t mean it’s because of Glory.” Will didn’t want to get into the family gossip with *Mr. I need to butt into everything*.

“I’m telling you—something serious went down there.” Luke tipped his beer toward the tall, dark-haired beauty across the room.

“Butt out,” Will pointlessly suggested.

“Come on.” Luke turned his attention back to Aly. “I’ll introduce you around and tell you everything you need to

know about us. I'm sure my uptight brother will join the cooking crew while we eaters relax."

Aly took a few steps toward him, and Luke wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close and causing her golden-brown waves to brush against Luke's blond hair.

Will clenched his jaw at the sight.

"Let me know if you need a dentist for that cracked tooth," Luke called over his shoulder.

Will shook his head and turned in the opposite direction, heading to the kitchen. The asshole wanted to get a rise out of him to prove a point. But Will wasn't oblivious to his own feelings. The devil on his shoulder and the uncomfortableness below his belt were constant reminders of exactly how he felt about Aly.

"Everything going okay?" Beth asked.

Will followed her gaze to Aly, who was smiling shyly up at his twin. Weird feelings of jealousy settled in his gut. His ex-girlfriend hadn't been liked by the family, and none of them had gone out of the way to make her feel included after their initial meeting. Mostly, they'd given her a wide berth. But watching his brothers chat and—Will's eyes narrowed—flirt with Aly was surreal.

Which made no damn sense. He and Aly weren't together. She was Andy's sister, and that was it. But that didn't stop the possessive urge brewing inside him. The one that had him fighting not to stalk across the room, toss her over his shoulder, and get her alone so he could find out whether she tasted as good as she smelled.

Will shifted uncomfortably under Beth's scrutiny. "Everything's fine." He looked away from Aly.

"Okay... Want to mash the potatoes?" Beth asked, pointing to a large pot. "The turkey is in the smoker, and the guys just gave me the twenty-minute warning."

"Sure." Will grabbed the warm milk out of her hands and turned toward the pot of potatoes.

“I made the stuffing using vegetable broth instead of turkey broth,” Beth said.

“And I made the green bean casserole with cream of mushroom. I think the only thing I can’t eat is the turkey. Win for me this year!” Taran smiled, hopping up onto the counter next to the covered desserts. “Although I’m most excited about the pies. I can’t decide whether I want apple or pumpkin or pecan more.”

Will stopped and turned. “*Pecan?*”

“Yeah, it’s a staple in Texas. Don’t knock it!”

“Southern deliciousness or not, it has to go.” Will frowned and then turned to his sister. “You know Andy’s severely allergic.”

“Oh shoot.” Beth’s eyes widened and she shook her head. “She didn’t make it here, and it hasn’t been uncovered. I swear there are no other nuts. He’s been here a lot, so I’ve stopped buying them. I promise I was careful.”

“Turkey is here!” Corey announced, carrying the large bird to the kitchen counter.

“I’m sorry, Will. I wasn’t thinking. I’ll throw it out.” Taran grabbed it and started for the trash can.

“What? Chipmunk, I want some of that pie!” Corey declared, slamming his hands to his hips.

“Then take it home,” Will barked. “I’m not going to let you kill my kid today.”

For a moment, the entire kitchen, including Luke, who’d arrived just in time to butt in, stopped. Every set of eyes was locked on him.

Before he could ask what the fuck the problem was, Taran piped up. “I’ll put it in the car and then wash my hands. Remember, Cor, Andy has that nut allergy.”

“Right.” Corey nodded, but his mouth pulled down into a confused frown.

“Will, can you help me grab the beer from the garage?” Luke asked.

“I’m mashing the potatoes.”

“I got it,” Corey said, taking the hand mixer from him.

Will shrugged and followed Luke to the garage.

The door hadn’t even shut behind them before the words were out of Luke’s mouth. “You need to take a breather.”

“Are you giving me a hard time for getting rid of the pie?” Will asked. “Because f—” He stopped himself. His sister had a no cursing rule in her house, and he respected her enough to follow it even if she wasn’t in earshot. “Get over yourself. I have an EpiPen in the car and one in Andy’s bag. There are two in my house and one at the gym. He won’t be able to breathe if even a trace amount of nuts ends up in his food.”

Luke sighed. His blue eyes locked on Will like he was attempting to do the twin thing. The thing where Luke just knew. Although Luke loved their connection, Will didn’t most of the time. “You called him *your* kid.”

Will cocked his head and frowned. “What?”

“Inside, you said, ‘I won’t let you kill my kid.’”

Had he really said that? It wasn’t that far out of left field. With every day that went by, Will wanted to take more responsibility for him. He wanted to be the man Andy looked up to. The one who taught him the important things in life.

Luke moved closer and put his hand on Will’s shoulder. “Look, man, I think what you’re doing with Andy is great. But now you’re calling Andy your kid and you’re looking at Aly like you want to stake a claim there too, and—”

There his twin went again. Butting in where he didn’t belong and reading too deeply into the situation.

“And what? You need to jump in and tell me what’s best because you know better than me?” Will shook his head. “Andy’s my kid because he’s my responsibility. Like how I call the kids on swim team my kids. And sure, Aly’s hot. I won’t pretend I’m blind to it. But unlike you, I don’t lead with

my dick. I use the head above my shoulder to make decisions. Get off your high horse, stop butting into the lives of everyone around you, and eat some turkey.” Will pushed away and stomped back into the house.

“This has disaster written all over it,” his brother muttered from behind him.

CHAPTER 11





TOO MANY NAMES and too many faces. Just too many people in general. They all talked at once, gave each other a hard time, and yet seamlessly worked together to get all the food to the enormous table.

The bright spot in the chaos was Andy. He'd helped Corey plate the turkey, and then he'd brought dishes to the table. The way he interacted with the family made it clear how well he fit into this group. A tall, bearded man took the platter out of Andy's hands.

"Thanks, Uncle Joey. That was heavy." Andy vibrated with excitement.

She hadn't loved the aunt and uncle thing at first, but the adults treated Andy exactly like they did Steve. Like he was family. Knowing her brother was surrounded with so much love eased the sting she felt every time he used the terms.

"You and Steve better eat a lot of that turkey so you get big and strong." This dark-haired man was the size of a tank and former military. Maybe. Aly couldn't remember. "You don't want to be scrawny pretty boys like these two." The man smirked as he tipped his chin to Will and Marc.

A very pregnant redhead smacked him in the stomach. "Stop harassing your brothers, Nick."

In a lot of ways, it was like being on a set or one of the publicity shows she'd done over the years. Every person in the room was gorgeous. All the Evans men were tall, built like they spent hours in a gym, and handsome. The Evans gene pool was *stellar*. Too bad Lily had plans with her family today because she would have loved the eye candy. And the women? Beth and Corey's girlfriend were tiny, adorable girl-next-door types. The redhead and the younger dark-haired woman pretty much defined gorgeous leggy beauties. If Aly hadn't spent years surrounded by the beautiful people of television, she'd be overwhelmed.

"Where's Danny?" someone asked.

Who the heck was Danny? That would be the better question.

“Danny?” Aly whispered to Will, who was in the seat next to her. Since he’d reappeared a few minutes ago, he’d been wearing a perma-frown.

“Danny’s one of my younger brothers.”

“He’s at Grant’s,” the redhead answered, lowering herself into a chair slowly. The size of her stomach made Aly wonder how close she was to her due date.

“Grant’s my older brother. He and his wife and kids live on his farm in Pennsylvania. They sell Christmas trees. This weekend is too busy for them to get away,” Will explained. “And Clayton, my youngest brother, is in Detroit. He’s playing against the Lions later today.”

“That’s going to be a blowout.” Marc pulled out the seat at the head of the table.

“Maybe not. Clay might choke.” Corey chuckled as he sat next to Will.

“That’s your job, bro,” Nick teased.

Corey subtly flipped him off before turning to whisper into his fiancée’s ear.

Following the family’s conversation was tricky, to say the least. Clayton was the professional quarterback who played for Seattle, but she wasn’t sure what that had to do with Corey, because he played baseball. Didn’t he? She was pretty certain he was a pitcher.

As soon as she caught up, they moved on to another topic she had to navigate her way through. By the time dinner was done, she was mentally exhausted and had hardly spoken ten words. They probably thought she was mute. Not that they gave up.

“How’s it really going with my brother?” Beth asked, standing next to her in front of the large stone fireplace after dinner. The room was an open concept, but with the sheer size of the place, the kitchen, where clean-up was going on, seemed far away.

“Oh, uh, okay—” Shoot, this was Will’s sister, and she didn’t want to seem ungrateful. She sputtered new words out fast. “I mean perfect. It’s nice of him to help.”

“Now I *know* you’re lying.” Beth chuckled. “I love Will, but he can be a bossy, judgy know-it-all.”

Sometimes, but—her attention drifted to where Will stood at the counter with one of his nieces, helping her scoop potatoes into a Ziplock bag—other times, he had the patience of a saint. Even in the chaos of the room, he gave the little girl his full focus. Like she was the only important thing there. It didn’t matter in the least that the six-year-old was making a mess. He just showed her how to scoop more effectively and laughed with her. It was almost like a magical power the man possessed.

“You haven’t noticed how annoying he is?” Beth prompted.

Aly turned to the smirking blonde. “He balances it well enough. I don’t mind.”

Once the words were out, Aly felt like an idiot for saying them, but Beth just threw an arm around her waist and hugged her.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” Beth pulled her across the room. “Come chat with Taran. I’m sure you’ll be seeing a lot of each other.”

Why would she? She kept the question to herself, though, and then she was back to trying to keep up once she’d been dragged into a conversation with Taran and the redhead.

And unlike Andy, she didn’t complain at all when Will said he wanted to go before Clayton’s game started.

Andy was as excited as Will was to watch the football game. Aly planned to watch too if it meant spending time with her brother.

“Do you know much about football?” Will asked, plopping next to her on the sectional once they had settled back into his house.

“Only the very basics.” One team was blue and silver, and the other was white and blue with a hint of green.

“It’s always fun to teach a newbie.” He grinned and kicked his bare feet up onto the square coffee table in front of him.

He’d changed from his dress clothes into a white T-shirt and sweats. Her core clenched as she took in the way the tight fabric showed off the definition in his shoulders and pecs. It wasn’t fair that when he put on grungy clothes, he looked panty-meltingly gorgeous, but when she put on leggings and a T-shirt, she looked haggard and ready for bed. Their shoulders almost touched as he leaned back.

“Clayton’s team has hawks on their helmets. See right there? Number eight?” Will pointed at the huge television that took up a large portion of the wall. “That’s him.”

She found the large navy number and scanned the man on the screen. No wonder Lily didn’t mind watching the football games. The view was impeccable.

“Why are you laughing?”

Aly bit back her smile. “I have a friend, Lily, who really likes football uniforms.”

Will’s brown eyes widened, and he leaned forward and turned to face her. “Are you checking out my brother’s ass?” He followed the question with a sound that fell somewhere between a scoff and a laugh.

Aly’s cheeks heated at his response.

He reached out, his voice dropping to a deep hum. “This”—he ran his knuckles along her jaw, causing Aly’s heart to pound in her ears and a deep throb to hum throughout her body—“this gorgeous blush is haunting my every thought.”

Their eyes locked—until the door swung open. Will shifted to rest his elbows on his knees as Andy made his way to the sofa.

“Here,” Andy said, handing Will a bowl full of popcorn that matched the one in his other hand.

“You’re eating again?” Aly asked as he settled the bowl on his lap.

“Just popcorn.” Andy shrugged but didn’t look at her.

“It’s been, like, two hours since dinner, Al.” Will smirked, tossing a kernel into the air, then catching it in his mouth before shooting her a grin.

“I don’t think I’ll need to eat again for at least a year.” Aly shook her head.

Will sat back against the cushions so their shoulders brushed against each other. Her skin broke out in goose bumps at the contact.

His low voice rumbled straight to her center as he stared at her leggings. “That would be a shame. I like watching your ass. Especially in those.”

“What?” Andy asked, turning to look at them.

Aly blinked, having no idea how to respond.

“Should be a good game. I like watching the passing plays, especially in the snow.” A dimple she hadn’t noticed popped on his left cheek as he smiled at Andy. “And we get to teach your sister about football. That’s going to make it even better.”

True to his word, he spent the duration teasing Aly, explaining plays, and teaching her the ins and outs of the game, not seeming the least bit annoyed when she asked questions. Even her brother jumped into the conversation on occasion. And although things had started out rough, by the time she headed up to bed, she counted it as a good day overall.

She wanted to hope the same for the next day, especially when Andy agreed to go over to their mother’s house and be on set for a few hours. Aly had warned Garry and the crew that he was hesitant to be on camera and had explained that they should probably stick with mostly candid shots of him. Luckily, they were willing to work with that. And Will had agreed to come as moral support for him.

Aly had ridden over with Lily earlier in the morning, and they'd already shot a few demo scenes. By the time Will texted that they were just through security, they'd already knocked out the kitchen. A barrier had been set up around Aly's mom's property. No one who wasn't part of the crew was allowed in, but there were a handful of fans watching from the outskirts, even though nothing major had happened yet.

The plan was to record footage of packing, complete her interview, and get a jumpstart on demo. Episode one of four would air the following Tuesday, and another would follow every Tuesday until Christmas. That meant long days for Aly over the next three weeks.

"Well, shit, he's going to steal attention from dipshit Logan today." Lily waggled her brows. "Look at that man. I'm not usually a fan of the ripped jeans and boots look, but wow." Aly's friend stood beside her, her eyes—blue today—locked on Will as he moved through the chaos of the front yard. The fitted beige sweater he wore showed off the lean muscles of his upper body. "I cannot believe you live with that model of a man."

"I know, right?" She pulled on her cropped white tank. Normally, the inch of skin between her black Spanx leggings and her top didn't leave her self-conscious, but something about having Will near made her fidget.

"You look hot today. I did such a good job with your eyes. They pop. Your roommate will *love it*."

Aly rolled her eyes. "Way to toot your own horn, Lil. But besides being a huge flirt, he makes living with him easy," Aly admitted.

"Ooh." Lily did a shimmy. "Flirt, you say. I'll test that theory. Everything I've seen during your FaceTime calls makes it seem like he has a thing for *you*."

"I'm telling you, he's just a flirt." Aly opened the front door just as Will and Andy stepped onto the concrete porch. "Hey, guys, come on in."

“This seems like a lot more people than normal,” Andy complained. But he was right. He’d been on set a handful of times, but always for full-season shows. They had more time for those, so less had to be done all at once. Right now, the basement was already gutted and being reframed, and parts of the first floor were in demo mode, even while they emptied the upstairs bedrooms. The quick specials required a big crew. “No one is in my room, are they?”

“No, we told them you wanted to go in first.” Apart from the camera they’d installed on the wall, no one had set foot in Andy’s room.

“Good.” He stomped past them and up the stairs, squeezing past two men holding lights.

“He’s a ray of sunshine and rainbows. I didn’t even get a hello.” Lily frowned and crossed her arms over the leather corset she wore that looked more like bondage. She turned slowly. “You’re the FaceTime hottie who makes my day when you’re shirtless.” Lily’s bleach-blond hair was so light it was almost white, and it was straight today, coming down to her waist. She tucked it over her shoulder as she smiled at Will.

But the weirdest thing happened. Will, who didn’t normally have personal space issues, took a step back. Undeterred, Lily stuck her silver-bracelet-clad arm out to shake his hand. Will didn’t respond until she added, “I’m Lily. Aly’s bestie.”

“Oh.” He finally put his hand in hers, and he broke into a small grin. His eyes tracked from the spiked black boots that came up to about mid-thigh over her outfit to her perfectly made-up face. It almost irked Aly, but Will’s expression didn’t say *wow, she’s gorgeous*. Instead, he wore the same incredulous look everyone who saw Lily on a construction site wore. But Aly couldn’t have predicted his next words. “I heard you have a thing for my brother’s ass in football pants.”

Lily lifted her fingers to her lips as she laughed. “Ooh, yes. That man in skintight white pants would get my attention any day of the week. His ass was definitely the highlight of my Thanksgiving.”

Aly shook her head. “Don’t get too excited. Will gets annoyed when people look at his brother’s ass.”

Will’s eyes cut over to Aly. Slowly, his gaze raked across her face and settled on her mouth. He pressed his teeth into his lower lip before he said, “That’s just a you thing, Al.”

His comment made her breathless. “Huh?” she asked, but Will just smiled.

“I have to go do dipshit’s makeup because you two are supposed to have one-on-one chats in twenty.” Lily reached over and flicked a few of Aly’s curls. “If Garry wants you touched up, let me know, but I think you look perfect.”

“That’s ’cause she does.”

Aly almost shivered when she realized his gaze still lingered on her.

“*You*, Will Evans, just get better and better. But for the record, Aly, I’m doubling down. I’m so right.” Lily flashed her white teeth at them before turning to saunter off, her five-inch heels clicking along the floor.

“What’s she right about?” Will asked.

“According to her, everything. But most of the time, I’m not sure what she’s talking about,” Aly said vaguely. Although in the last six weeks, they’d become very close, she still found herself lost in their conversations most of the time.

“How did you two end up best friends?”

Aly cocked her head to the side. That was a good question. “I have absolutely no idea.”

Will laughed and wrapped his arm around her shoulder, giving her a quick kiss on the side of the head. “You’re adorable. And much taller today.”

“It’s the work boots,” Aly said, examining the tan lace-ups on her feet while she tried to get her heart under control.

“I’ve seen the outfit on TV, but up close and personal, it’s even hotter.” Will’s breath danced off her ear, each word sending a shiver down her spine.

There was no controlling her heart now. Not when every touch lit her up. She shifted, and Will dropped his hold, but instead of pulling away, he lowered his hand to her waist. His fingers brushed against the inch of bare skin, sending sparks along her back.

A surge of longing rushed through her. In her boots, she was taller, her eyes even with his lips, the scruff on his chin.

How would it feel to press her lips to his? To let him dominate her mouth? She swallowed slowly and raised her eyes to his. His burned with hot desire as he scrutinized her. Holy cow, Lily was right. This was more than flirting.

“Is this Will?” Garry called.

Startled, Aly jumped out of Will’s arms. She had forgotten they weren’t alone. That there were other people in the room. A lot of people. She fisted her hands at her sides, unsure of what to do, and looked to her stocky director, then back to Will, who chuckled and shook his head.

“Will Evans.” He held his hand out to Garry.

Right. Introduce them. Why didn’t the correct responses ever come naturally? “Sorry.” She shifted in her boots. “Will, this is the show’s director and one of the producers, Garry Nolan.”

Garry shook Will’s hand warmly. “I’ve heard good things. You’ve been a godsend for our girl.” He turned to Aly. “I passed Andy in the hall. Told him they’re using the nail gun downstairs if he wants to try it this time. I plan to do the sit-down with Logan at one, but if you need more time, we can push it.”

“Thanks.”

“It was nice meeting you,” Will said. “I’m going to head up and check on Andy.”

“I’m coming too.” Aly turned and headed to the stairs, dodging crew members with every step, Will on her heels. Her brother was sitting on his bed with a pile of random stuff next to him when they found him.

He looked up and held eye contact with her for longer than he had in months. “Not all the memories here are bad.”

Will moved to lean against Andy’s empty desk, leaving Aly to sit next to her brother on the small bed. “No, mush.” She froze, remembering too late that she wasn’t allowed to call him that anymore. But this time, he didn’t lash out.

“Mom used to tell me bedtime stories.” Her brother lowered his head and picked at a thread on the comforter. “She didn’t read them because that wasn’t as fun.”

Aly smiled. “She was too creative for something as boring as reading.”

“She always said that’s where you got your creativity—that you were just like her.”

Oh yeah. Her mother had drilled into her how alike they were. “Yep, 90 percent creativity, and 10 percent flakiness.”

“Exactly.”

Will sucked in a breath so loud that Aly turned his way. He stood, arms crossed, head cocked, expression unreadable. She had spent years trying to prove she wasn’t as flaky as her mother claimed, but she had failed repeatedly.

“You’re right.” Andy’s voice was so soft that she had to lean in to catch everything. He cleared his throat. “Without Mom, it’s not the same. Can we take our stuff, but not live here?”

A weight came off Aly’s shoulders at the words, and her spirit soared. He was finally coming around to the idea of living with her elsewhere. To giving her another chance at this parenting thing. “I’d love that.”

“Good.” Andy nodded. “We’ll stay with Will forever.”

Those five words deflated the hope that had ballooned inside her. Andy hopped up and darted straight to Will. The man opened his arms without hesitation, but he watched Aly closely as he embraced the boy. It looked like she’d never get her brother back from him. And she couldn’t blame Andy one bit. In the time she’d been staying with them, she’d realized

that the routine and home life Will provided was the type that she had always wanted to give her brother. Had always wished she'd had as a kid.

Maybe it was a sign that her place was on *Mi Casa es Su Casa* and Andy's place was with Will. She stood and blinked back the tears that threatened to spill at the pain she felt from the knife that lodged in her chest. Andy released Will and, quick as lightning, he shot over to her and wrapped his thin arms around her. Her heart stopped before it soared as she hugged him back. Maybe he just needed more time. Maybe by Christmas she could convince him that he belonged with her.

"I want the stuff on the bed." Andy pointed as he released her. "Everything else can go into boxes."

"You got it."

"Will." He spun back around. "Can we do some laps before practice this afternoon?"

"Absolutely," Will said. "Can you give us a minute though?"

"Okay. I'm going downstairs to see if I can find Garry. He said I could use the nail gun!"

Aly's heart once again squeezed. Andy hadn't wanted anything to do with her job since their mother died. The two times he'd been on set in the last year, he'd sat in a corner and pouted. She couldn't stop the smile that spread across her face as he ran out the door.

"Aly—" Will started.

"Alley-cat." Her hackles rose at the name before Logan even walked into the room. "Why am I always forced to wait on you?"

"Aren't we scheduled at one?" Aly asked, peeking at her watch.

"You know I don't like downtime, so get that fat ass in gear." His hand cracked against her left butt cheek, and her body stiffened.

Across the room, Will growled.

She spun toward him, her eyes widening. The sound he'd made was that of a wolf about to attack. His eyes burned into her as he closed the five steps between them, ignoring Logan like he wasn't in the room.

He snaked a hand over her shoulder and to the back of her neck, then yanked her toward him. She stumbled but caught herself against his chest. She peered up at him, confused, but the second her eyes met his, he crashed his mouth against hers. For a beat, she was frozen, but shock instantly morphed into something a lot more welcome. Hot and in charge, his lips rubbed across hers while the scruff of his beard tickled her face. A gasp escaped as he sucked her lower lip between his.

Liquid heat shot straight to her core, and she clung to his broad shoulders, ready to give him anything he wanted. Nipping at her lips, he pulled her tight against his solid chest. A throbbing settled between her thighs, calling out to her, demanding more. She opened her mouth slightly, and Will didn't hesitate, his tongue plunging in to meet hers.

To tease.

To twist.

To claim.

A small moan left her throat, and he swallowed it down. Devouring her. Feasting on her mouth like it was his last meal and he was desperate for every drop. She never wanted this to end.

“Geez, get a fucking room.” Logan's voice cut through her lust-filled haze.

Will pulled back and rested his forehead against hers. “I have a house full of them. Don't worry.” Then he whispered, “We'll talk later. And for the record, I don't fucking share.” With his teeth on her earlobe, he gave a hard tug that shot straight through her before he pulled back and strode from the room.

CHAPTER 12





WILL SLAMMED his phone onto the desk, glaring at the frozen image of Loser Logan on the screen.

“I don’t lead with my dick,” he muttered.

What a crock of shit, because all day, he’d been doing just that. Normally, he was in control of himself, so what was it about Aly that had him acting like an idiot? It was why he preferred less intense relationships. In the five years he’d been with Genni, he’d never gotten this fired up. Yet the second Logan had touched Aly’s ass, any reasonable thought had left his brain.

Swimming laps with Andy, which normally settled him, left him keyed up instead. After he’d barked orders at people twice, one of his assistant coaches nicely suggested that she run practice today. So Will had spent the last hour and a half in his office watching the newest episode of *Mi Casa es Su Casa*. Although he’d seen season one with Andy, there was a vibe in season four that hadn’t existed before, and Will didn’t like it. Logan was entirely too comfortable putting his hand on Aly’s ass. Especially when she was clearly not okay with it.

Damn, he wanted to do bodily harm to that man for touching her, which was completely out of character for Will.

He needed to focus on the gym, the swim team, and creating his managers’ schedule for the rest of December. Yet his focus was on that kiss. The one that was like nothing he’d ever experienced before. He wasn’t fifteen, so why was he so blown over by a simple kiss? He couldn’t stop thinking about the way Aly’s tits had pressed against his chest. How badly he’d wanted to lift her leg over his hip and slam into her until she screamed his name.

He gritted his teeth and adjusted himself in his swimsuit. What the fuck was his problem? He had to get out of this office. He’d check on how the kids were doing with dives off the block. His assistant coaches were focusing on that today, streamlining the cut through the water.

After a lap around the desk, he headed down the hall to the viewing room to check on his swimmers.

“I don’t know why she still isn’t here.” Nicole, a single, aggressively pushy mother who had a boy on the team, said.

He cringed, wanting to leave the room now that he knew Nicole was there. It wasn’t that he disliked her. He just had no interest in dating a mother of one of his swimmers. And she didn’t give up, even after he politely refused.

“The poor man has her brother all the time. And even when she’s in town, he’s still stuck dealing with him. What is she doing? *Out making a name for herself?*”

It took Will a second to realize that they were talking about Aly.

“Flirting with her costar?” Another woman laughed.

This wasn’t the first time he’d heard comments about Aly, but when they knew he was listening, they affected worried tones and dropped the mocking altogether.

“Not that Logan would ever be interested in someone like her.”

His mouth opened, and the words flew out.

“Why?”

All four women spun, wide eyed. It took them a few seconds to regroup before Nicole finally spoke.

“Coach Will, we were just talking about how Andy’s sister really needs to get her priorities in order.”

He gritted his teeth. “They seem okay to me. What exactly is your issue?”

“Well,” another woman rolled her eyes, “she hasn’t picked him up all week, has she?”

Will’s eyes narrowed. “Because I’m here. If I wasn’t, believe me, she’d be here. Because Aly loves her brother and is doing everything she can to take care of him.”

They all stared, slack jawed.

“If you’re looking for ways to help either of them, I’m sure I could come up with a list. Since it’s been less than a year

since their mother died. But if you're only looking to bad-mouth Aly, take it somewhere else." He glared down at the women. "I teach the kids that they must respect each other, and I expect parents to model that behavior as well."

The women all nodded, and Will left without looking back. His office might have felt like a box today, but he needed another time-out. An inability to stop himself from snapping at busybody mothers was exactly why he shouldn't get personally involved with any of the swim team parents.

"Will?"

He jumped, his attention darting to the doorway, where Andy stood, wrapped in a towel and dripping on the concrete floor.

"I don't feel good." Andy shivered.

Will's worry spiked at that declaration. Never in the years that Will had known the kid had Andy left the pool during practice. Andy might have tried the *I don't feel good* routine to get out of school twice since he'd been staying with Will, but never swimming.

"What's the matter?" Will pushed the chair back from the desk and stood.

"My stomach. I just want to go home." Andy grimaced.

Will moved toward him quickly and lifted the back of his hand to Andy's forehead. It wasn't overly warm, but it was hard to tell because Andy had just been in the pool.

Ten minutes later, Andy was dry and in his street clothes, and they were buckled into their seats in Will's truck. They made a stop on the way home to grab flu essentials before they pulled into the garage. Andy dropped his swim bag on the built-in bench in the mudroom and turned to Will.

"Can I put my suit and stuff in the wash tomorrow? I want to go to bed." Andy looked paler than he had a half hour ago. Normally, Will was a hard-ass about emptying their swim bags, but every rule had an exception. And today was a good day to enact one.

“I’ll get it. Go to bed. Call for me if you need me,” Will said, crouching to empty the bag. He tossed the towel and the swimsuit onto the floor, threw away ten half-drunk water bottles that Andy apparently liked to hoard, and then grabbed the disinfectant spray and gave the entire bag a good once-over. The suit and towel went into the washer before Will headed into the kitchen.

A smile broke out across his face when he found Aly at the old kitchen table with a sketch pad in front of her. He should have probably braced himself, because the last time he’d seen this woman, he’d kissed her and then left the room without talking about it. But there were no nerves in his system as he watched her tuck her long curls over her shoulder and study the pad on the table before her.

“Whatcha up to?” he asked.

She startled and turned. “Oh, hi, uh.” She swallowed. Her fists tightened around the pencil in her hand. *She* was nervous. “I’m, uh, just doodling. What’s up with Andy? He said he didn’t feel well.” She examined the closed door that led to the front room before she looked back at him questioningly.

He nodded as he placed the plastic bag from the store on the counter. “Stomach.”

Aly eyed the soda he pulled from the bag. “Throwing up?”

He didn’t want her to panic.

“Don’t know yet.” He stuck the box of electrolyte popsicles in the freezer. He put the white Gatorade, applesauce, and the ginger ale in the fridge and then stuck the saltines in the cabinet.

“You’re stocking up like he is.” Aly narrowed her eyes.

He shrugged. “I like to be prepared. I also got Motrin, cold medicine, and cough drops just in case. Give me a second. I’m going to change, and I’ll be right back.”

She finally met his gaze full on, and it sizzled for one beat before she glanced away, fisting her hands. The way her shoulders pulled tight told Will she was on edge, and he needed to explain his behavior.

When she was focused on her sketch pad again, he headed up the stairs and rapped his knuckles on Andy's bedroom door.

"Yeah?" The boy's voice was muffled.

Will opened the door to the dark room, finding Andy burrowed under blankets on the lower bunk. "You going to want anything before you go to sleep?"

"No."

It was only seven thirty, but Will wouldn't push him to eat. "I'm going to crack the door, and if you need anything or if you get sick, call me. I don't give a crap about puke—got it?"

"Got it."

He left the door ajar and then went to his room to get out of his quarter zip and bathing suit. He tossed on gray sweats and a T-shirt, pausing to glance at the king-size bed in his room. With Andy already in bed, Will had Aly to himself tonight. Just as his mouth pulled up in a smirk, the realization hit him.

What the actual fuck was wrong with him? Andy was sick in bed, and Will was mentally making plans for how to get his sister naked. Damn, he was an asshole. Words he didn't want to hear echoed through his head, and he hated when Luke was right. Will needed to slow down and breathe. Order and control were important to him, and everything about Aly made him feel out of control. He needed to step back. But how the fuck did he do that, especially when he'd been the one to kiss her earlier?

When Will made it back to the first floor, he found Aly still at the table.

"Andy has to be my number one priority." The words were out of Aly's mouth before the swing door had closed behind Will. As he moved toward the table to sit, the soft scent that was so Aly flooded his nose. She was such an odd juxtaposition. All day, he'd cued up episode after episode of her show on his phone. He watched her successfully complete tasks most would label masculine, but yet she was the softest, most naturally feminine creature he had ever met. Something

about her had Will acting crazy, but every time he laid eyes on her, a warm wave of calm rolled into the pit of his stomach. And just the sweet cadence of her voice had his dick surging in his sweats. She revved him up, calmed him down, and turned him inside out. He'd never met a person who could do all three so effortlessly.

She continued, unaware of the turmoil swirling inside him. "I don't want to mess things up even more with Andy. I know that's ridiculous because I keep doing it. And I'm well aware that you have some kind of natural magic with him that I don't possess, but—"

"It's not magic," he interrupted, wanting her to know it wasn't completely her.

She opened her mouth to start again, but he continued.

"I've been the constant in his life for the last few years. Through your mother's sickness and nurses coming in and out; through his teachers at school changing year to year; through all the nannies—I'm the one person he saw almost every day because of swim practice."

She frowned.

"I'm not saying this in judgment. I understand that you can't quit your job. But he clings to me because I've been the only one constantly here. And he and I already had a bond because of swimming. I was just like him—talented and driven—and he knows that. On top of that, we both lost our mothers to cancer, and I know how that feels too."

Aly sighed and fisted her hand on the wooden tabletop next to her sketchbook. "And you're just good at this stuff."

He placed his hand over her small fist and rubbed his thumb along her soft skin. For someone who worked with a ridiculous number of large tools, she sure managed to keep her hands silky smooth and callus-free. How would they feel running along his chest, dipping into the waistband of his sweats—

Focus. He blinked out of his lust-filled haze.

“I’ve been through what you and Andy are experiencing. Clayton wasn’t even eight when my parents died, and Joey was barely eleven. I went from the fun older brother to a parent figure. And I didn’t do it all right.”

“I doubt you did it as badly as I have.” Aly pressed her teeth into her bottom lip.

He locked on to the movement. Oh, that plump lip had been heavenly between his. He slowly brought his gaze up to her sad gray eyes. He longed to wrap her in his arms and take away the heartache.

“You’re trying, and you love him. That’s what’s important. He’s doing better. Plus, you have me now.”

She rolled her eyes and yanked her hand away to cross her arms.

“Yes, I’m aware that Andy is happy here with you.”

He shook his head. “That’s not what I meant. You’re not doing this *alone* anymore, Al.”

Her gray eyes shone, and she blinked hard. The anxiety, the worry, the stress she carried—he wished she’d let him take some of it from her.

“I promise that whether Andy stays with me or you find a place for the two of you, I’m here for you. For *both* of you. It’s not me versus you. It’s me *and* you. We’re a team.”

“I’ve never had that before.” She uncrossed her arms.

Quickly, he linked his fingers with hers. “You have me.” He made the pledge, wondering if he meant more than just with Andy. “For as long as you need me.”

She lifted her free hand and tucked one of her curls behind her ear. “Andy has to come first.”

“Of course.”

She dropped her chin and studied the intercut drawing on the pad in front of her, slowly pulling her hand from his grasp. “What happened at my house...”

Oh. He finally understood what this whole conversation had been about. The easy thing would be to call it a mistake and let it go. That was what he should do, but those weren't the words he uttered.

“It's back-burnered.”

Her shoulder tightened slightly.

“But that doesn't mean it was a mistake. I'd kiss you over and over, as many times as you'd let me.”

Shocked gray eyes shot to his. She looked floored.

He gave her a small smile. “I'm saying I understand why it needs to be back-burnered. And I respect that.”

And truthfully, he had his own reasons to pause whatever was brewing between them. Aly made him feel entirely too out of control. She was the type of woman he'd spent his lifetime staying away from. Maybe the exact one who could get under his skin and truly break him. She had the potential to be someone who could hurt him. So he needed this to stop. Not only for Andy, but to keep his own heart safe.

She searched his face, probably looking for a sign that he was lying, but she finally nodded. Then she went back to examining the paper in front of her. Swirls of blue in a variety of shades rippled across the page. The design was almost Tetris-like, with higher levels and lower ones, but with the right angles.

“What are you working on?”

She straightened before turning the paper to him. “It's a backsplash design.”

With the new angle, the shapes made sense—the cabinets, the exhaust fan, the stove.

“It's water.” Will could see it. The dark and the light. The ripples. Beautiful. Creative. But there was no denying that it was water.

She bit her lower lip again, fighting a smile. That might be one of his favorite expressions. Pride mixed with vulnerability. A shine in her eyes, a slight blush on her cheeks.

“What’s it for?” he asked. “Your mom’s house?”

Her shoulders tightened as she shook her head and chuckled. “Nothing I’m supposed to be working on.” She reached for a dark blue pencil and added more color to the design. “It’s been stuck in my head. I needed to get it out.”

He studied the Tetris shape again. It was familiar. With his chin lifted, he racked his brain for why the drawing felt so personal, and that’s when he caught sight of his own kitchen cabinets. Holy shit.

“Are you designing a mosaic for my kitchen?” His tone was harsher than he meant it to be.

She cringed. “I was just killing time because the idea won’t go away. I’m sorry.” She snatched the sketchpad back from him.

His eyes moved from the table to the rest of the room. This kitchen had always been the heart of his parents’ home. “The idea of remodeling this room overwhelms me. That’s what I always say.”

Aly covered her sketch like she was trying to undo it.

“But I think what people hear is that I can’t make the decisions necessary to do it.” Will rolled his eyes.

“You don’t seem to have an issue with making decisions and bossing people around,” she muttered.

He tossed his head back and laughed.

“Sorry, but it’s true.”

He let out another bark of a laugh before clearing his throat. “Exactly. It’s never been the issue.”

Aly leaned forward and crossed her arms, covering her designed completely. But he reached out and pulled the pad from below her elbows. He studied it again, this time understanding exactly what it was, seeing how the colors blended and pulled in the edges while not overwhelming the room. This woman was more talented than he realized.

“When my mom was around, the kitchen was where we all congregated. We’d talk around the island, play games at the table. This was where we came together.” Will frowned thoughtfully. It wasn’t until that moment that he realized Beth had used her kitchen in the same way. His might have been the shrine to the idea, but Beth’s continued the practice without being locked in the past.

He shook his head. Moving on meant change.

“I’d love to see how you’d redesign it. But I want it to be the heart of the home.” He unfisted his hand and ran his fingers along the knotted wood of the table. The one place that had been a constant in his life. “And the table stays.”

“It’s pretty.”

“My grandfather made it. Ninety percent of the furniture he made is in Grant’s house, but he made my parents this table as a wedding present.”

“He made it?” Aly asked, studying the table more closely. “Like from scratch or from a kit?”

Will chuckled. “Scratch. And he would have loved you. People who worked with their hands were his favorite type.”

Her gray eyes flicked from the table to him before she glanced away again.

“Do the whole room.” It left his mouth as an order, and he winced. “Would you mind? Doing the whole room? Like show me what you’d do. Work around this.” He tapped his finger on the table. “And this.” He tapped her sketch.

Aly shrugged. “I’ve been seeing it in my mind for days. I’d be happy to draw it out for you.”

Will relaxed against the back of his chair. “How’d you get started with this?”

“So complicated.” She pressed her lips together in a wry smile. “I’ve always drawn stuff. Art was my favorite class.” She pulled back and examined her nails but didn’t go on.

Will reached out, stopping her. He used his other hand to tilt her chin so she was forced to look at him. He could accept

that he wasn't allowed to toss her onto the table and fuck her. He got that they shouldn't complicate things further, but he wouldn't let her put up walls between them. "How'd you end up on the show?"

She blew a breath out through her plump lips. "My mom. She applied for me. I had done some tile work for art club at school and for a couple of community things. I went to trade school after graduation, and I was doing well. But she thought I was destined for more." Aly looked away for a long moment before turning back to him. "My mom always thought I was headed for greatness. Not in the stage mom way. Just in the 'Aly, you were born to be awesome' way."

"But you didn't want it?"

She tilted her head from side to side. "I wanted consistency. My mom was the queen of *for now*. It was fun sometimes." A hint of a smile pulled at her lips. "Like when I got to miss school to travel with the renaissance fair so mom could sell jewelry. But like with everything else, she got sick of it after a few weeks." Aly shrugged. "Then I was back at school and way behind in math. She was always that way. Flitting from one thing to the next. When you said Andy clung to consistency? I get it, Will. I craved it too. And as hard as it is to be on the show—the schedule, the call times, the demands—I've flourished in that environment because my home life has always been chaos."

Before his eyes, Aly shrank, like she was once again that confused little girl. She struggled with her brother more than he did because she never had an example of what a good parent looked like. What consistency looked like.

"I hate chaos," he admitted, pulling her attention back to him. "My parents were the definition of chaos. In a lot of ways, I had the perfect childhood, but I hated the craziness of having so many siblings. Not to mention the athletes who often stayed with us. I used to daydream about living alone for the rest of my life just so I could make sure nothing was cluttered or loud."

Aly chuckled and scanned the room with a warm smile on her face. “You’ve achieved the anti-clutter goal.”

“My house is streamlined,” he agreed.

“I wondered if you didn’t have much stuff at first, but I realize now that everything has a place.”

He grinned. “Exactly.”

Aly’s stomach growled, catching his attention, and Will pushed back from his chair. “We should eat.”

“I can help.”

“Nah. I got it.” Will shook his head. “I want you to work on my design.”

“I can’t do it in an hour. I need to measure and plan and—”

“Take as long as you need. I want to see what you come up with.” He pulled two steaks and broccoli out of the fridge. “But I want to hear more about how you became part of *Mi Casa es Su Casa*.”

And as Will cooked, he listened to her talk. About the interview process and the first season on the show. How much she’d learned. What she’d like to do from here. And before he knew it, they were putting away the dishes they’d washed. It was the best night he’d had in what felt like forever. The conversation was easy. He could do it over and over and never get bored. And that thought made his gut churn.

“Will.” The pained cry rent the air, drawing the attention of both Will and Aly, their heads swiveling toward the kitchen door.

The next noise was worse. There was no mistaking the gasp that echoed down the hall as they hustled up the stairs.

Aly froze. “He’s got the stomach bug,” she whispered.

Will nodded, and once he was in Andy’s bathroom, the smell reinforced their suspicions.

Aly gagged from behind him.

“I got this.”

“I should—”

“Team,” he reminded her as he rubbed Andy’s back. But the nagging voice in Will’s head said he was already getting invested in both Andy and Aly in a way he’d always avoided. Eventually, these two would move on, and where would that leave Will? He wasn’t certain he should open himself up to them. But he wasn’t sure he could stop himself either.

CHAPTER 13





ALY BACKED out of the room and shut the door behind her. One more shining example of Will's perfect parenting abilities. Even vomit didn't bother him. The rank smell had Aly gagging, but Will wasn't fazed. She headed down the stairs to grab a large pot and one of the ginger ales Will had put in the fridge earlier, because of course he was prepared.

The man was practically perfect, albeit a bit bossy. Even the way he'd pointed his fork at her and ordered she eat was all demand.

She reached the top step as Andy's bedroom door opened.

"Perfect." Will's brown eyes danced as he glanced at the pot and soda. "See what a good team we are?"

"Meaning you do the work and I bring random stuff?" Aly handed him the reinforcements.

He set the can in the pot so he could hold it in one hand. "I was thinking more along the lines of being so in tune that you brought exactly what I was hoping you would." Will brushed her bangs out of her eyes. "Get to bed."

The bossiness should ruffle her, but she was used to it at this point. Will Evans liked to give orders. And the flashing thought of what that might be like in the bedroom had her shivering.

"I meant your own bed."

Her eyes widened. Had he read her mind? He lifted his hand once more, his fingers dancing along her cheekbone.

"You have to work tomorrow, so I've got Andy tonight."

She swallowed, fixated on the way he watched her. Like his gaze was its own caress of her skin. He studied her like she was a work of art, and it flipped her stomach, clenched her core, and made her yearn for more.

"Don't"—she cleared her throat—"don't you have to be at the gym?"

He shook his head. "I already texted my assistant coach about running the teams, and I told the opening manager that I won't be in. They have it covered."

“While I got the pot? Holy moly, Will. How are you so on top of everything?”

He chuckled. “No, I did it earlier tonight. Knowing this,” he nodded his head toward Andy’s door, “was a possibility, I wanted to cover my bases.”

She groaned. That almost made it worse. “I didn’t even think about tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” He nodded and pressed his lips together in what she assumed was an attempt to fight a laugh. “You, Aly Gomez, are not the planner of our team.” By the end of the sentence, he couldn’t fight the laugh anymore, and it flowed from his lips.

“Oh, shut up.” She smacked him lightly on the stomach, her hand lingering on his abs.

His laughter died, and he grabbed her wrist and lifted it. His eyes burned into hers, hot with desire as he pressed his lips, warm and wet, against the pulse pounding in her wrist.

Her breath caught as a bolt of desire shot down her spine.

“For the record,” he whispered against the skin of her wrist, “if you hadn’t put whatever this is on the back burner, I’m not sure I could have resisted finishing our night with my mouth on a lot more of your body.”

The words sent an electric shock ricocheting through her. Humming. Throbbing. Her body ignited with his words. He yanked her wrist, and she moved in, tucking herself against his chest.

Dipping his chin, he whispered, “This was the best date I’ve ever been on. And just because I’m not acting on it doesn’t mean a part of me doesn’t want a lot more here.”

Holy cow. Could a person combust on the spot? Because she just might have.

He stepped back and smirked. “Go to sleep, Aly.” And with that, he went into her brother’s room.

Right, like she could sleep now. She groaned but headed into her room, and a fitful night of sleep left her cranky the

next day.

“It’s a good thing I’m so amazing at my job because you, miss, are pale as shit today.” Lily blotted the sponge under Aly’s right eye. “And it’s not even for a good reason. If you’d come in saying ‘sorry I look like dog food because I spent the night letting my hot roommate bone me into oblivion—’”

“I *told* you that isn’t happening.” Aly slumped back in her chair.

“I know. I know. Andy comes first.”

“Stop mocking that. I’m trying to do the right thing.” She huffed.

Lily stopped and pulled back, leaning against the counter behind her. “I know you are. Since I met you two months ago, all you’ve done is the right thing. You work impossibly hard on set and spend all your free time dealing with your mother’s house or your brother’s issues. You do nothing for you. You don’t go out, you don’t meet people, and you don’t have fun.”

“I have fun,” Aly insisted.

Lily sighed.

But it was true. Dinner with Will the previous night had been a lot of fun. She’d been having fun watching Andy play Minecraft in the evenings, and she’d had the best time watching Clayton’s football game.

“Of course you want the best for your brother, but you deserve to be happy too. You’re afraid that having a fling will mess stuff up with Andy, but Will doesn’t seem like the fling type.”

Aly scoffed.

“Not because he’s not gorgeous and women don’t throw themselves at him. I’m sure they do.” Lily rolled her red glittery eyes—seriously. Red sparkles. Her contacts were crazy. “I don’t know. He just seems like the type of guy who is above all that.”

“Lil, I haven’t told him that I want to move back permanently. I still have to sell the house and then look at my

finances. And I'm contractually obligated to finish this next project and close out the season. But all that aside, complicating things with Will seems like an awful idea."

"I can see how having someone around to help and take care of you is scary when you've never had that before," Lily said. "But that doesn't mean that I agree with you." She held both hands out when Aly tipped her chin defiantly. "Okay, I've said my piece. Let me finish your makeup. Because you really are pale today."

"I'm just tired," she mumbled.

And she didn't feel any better at almost ten p.m. when she finally walked into Will's house. Taping had run extra-long because Logan had decided he didn't like how his hair looked after they'd recorded half a day. In typical three-year-old temper-tantrum fashion, he'd screamed until they'd redone the shots.

"Hey," Will whispered from the sofa, where he sat with Andy asleep next to him. The room was dark apart from the glow of the TV.

"He still doing okay?" Aly had checked in all day via text.

Will nodded and then yawned.

Guilt racked through her. "Why don't you head up to bed? I'll stay down here with him." Will started to protest, but Aly crossed her arms. "You've been doing this for twenty-four hours straight. Let me do something so I don't feel like a complete waste of space here. Team implies more than one person, Will."

He squinted into the dark room before he finally stood. He came over and tugged on one of the loose curls she always wore for taping. He twisted it slowly around his finger.

"You're not useless. We missed you today. I'll leave my door open in case you need me." And with that, he went upstairs.

Aly tossed off her coat and kicked off her UGGs before climbing onto the sofa next to Andy. He shifted as she settled and then rolled over and rested his head on her thigh. She

smiled down at his sleeping form. He hadn't done this since he was about five. They used to watch movies together when he was little. This particular one was his favorite, and she'd seen it about thirty times through her late high school years and the first year of trade school. Then she'd joined *Mi Casa es Su Casa*, and she hadn't seen it since. She raked her fingers through his curls, rubbing his scalp as she moved.

"Aly?" Andy croaked.

She froze. "Yeah." She expected him to ask for Will or tell her to go away.

"Can you keep doing that? It feels good."

She smiled and started up again. "This one still your favorite?"

He nodded against her leg. "I love Groot."

"I think the raccoon guy is my favorite. He cracks me up."

"Rocket, not raccoon guy."

Andy's tone made her smirk. She knew Rocket's name, but pretending she didn't was their thing.

"How ya feeling?"

His thin shoulder shrugged against her thigh. "Kinda better."

"That's good."

"Can we finish the movie before we go to bed?" he asked.

Her heart squeezed. "I'd love to." Maybe it was a small thing, but his desire to watch this with her again felt like a big win. A hug and tucking him in without a complaint from him had her going to bed with a smile on her face.

Too bad she didn't feel like smiling not even six hours later.

"Ugh." She groaned and flushed the toilet again. Her stomach felt like it was full of hot coals. She didn't even have the energy to stand up.

A light tapping sounded on the hall door.

“Yeah?”

“Can I come in?” Will called.

Was he insane? No, she didn’t want him to come in.

“Aly?”

Her stomach clenched, and she gagged. She’d been puking on and off for almost a half hour. There couldn’t possibly be anything left in her stomach. She hadn’t really eaten the day before. She swallowed hard, but before she could say anything, the door opened.

“Here.” Will held out a white cloth, but she didn’t have the strength to reach for it. He only waited a beat before he crouched beside her and used the damp cloth to gently wipe her face. It was adorably sweet. And yet...

“Will.” She sighed. “I look like garbage, and I feel worse. I’m pretty sure I reek of puke. This is embarrassing.”

He stood, tossing the towel into the sink before he crossed his arms and glared down at her. “Letting me take care of you when you need it is the opposite of embarrassing. This is what men do; they take care of the people they care about. Now shut up and let me help you back to bed.”

She wasn’t sure whether his lecture was sweet or rude. But sometimes it was hard to tell with Will. He bent down again, and before she grasped what he was doing, he pulled her into his arms and stood.

Holy cow. She was too heavy for this.

“I’m entirely too—”

“Sick to walk? I agree. You need to get into bed and rest,” he said, moving easily into the hall before turning into her room. He was acting like she weighed a hundred pounds. “Taking care of you and your brother would be a hell of a lot easier if you two didn’t fight me so much.”

He placed her carefully on the bed before he started pointing.

“Motrin. Gatorade. Ginger ale. Water. Crackers.” All on the bedside table. “Pot.” The one she’d dug out for Andy was sitting on the swirls of green of the bedspread next to her. “Garbage can.” It had been dragged to the beige area rug next to the bed. “Your phone is also on that nightstand.” Will pointed to the other side of the bed. “Call me if you need anything.”

She glanced around her room. Of course he’d covered everything.

“You good?”

She was sick and embarrassed. And nowhere near as competent as the man in front of her. But otherwise, she was fine. He waited for her to nod before he turned and strode out, leaving the door cracked behind him.

She sighed, not knowing whether to be happy that he’d been so caring or crushed because there was no way that hearing her puke hadn’t ended the attraction he’d had for her. At least it was one less thing to worry about. Now she just had to get over her obsession with him.

CHAPTER 14





WILL PAUSED the television and turned to Andy. He'd recovered from the stomach flu quickly. Even Aly hadn't been down for the count for more than a day or so. And luckily, four days later, Will remained unscathed. The first episode of Aly's special had just aired, and it hadn't been what Will expected. Starting with how, although he and Andy had only been on the set once, they'd gotten a lot of screen time.

"Told ya." Andy smirked, and Will's phone buzzed again. "She's the doting big sister, I'm the precious little kid, and you're the babysitter who appeared out of thin air like a Christmas miracle." Andy spread his arms out and dropped them to his sides. "It's all crap."

"Andy," Will warned, even though the kid wasn't wrong.

"I told you we shouldn't watch it. It's dumb."

Will shook his head. He had convinced Andy that they should watch it. And with as big a part as he'd played in what had aired, it was certainly good he had.

"Even how they make that weirdo Logan look like he's this cool guy. But Aly hates him."

Andy sure was chatty tonight, even though Will was rendered speechless. Although Logan and Aly were less flirty than they had been the previous season, they were portrayed as friends. But that wasn't even the most shocking part.

"Did I look like I was glowing when I walked up the front steps?"

Andy laughed. "It's a filter. The show is painting you as the savior, so, of course, you glow. Reality TV is not reality. Aly used to tell me that because she didn't want me to think that the things I saw on the show were real."

"Yeah." This wasn't news to him, but when he was watching *himself* on the show, it was definitely weird.

"Is that your brothers?" Andy asked as his phone buzzed again.

Will shrugged. "I'm part of two chats, and both are blowing up. One is just the guys, and the other includes Aunt

Beth, Aunt Morgan, Aunt Trish, and Aunt Taran.” Will didn’t move to grab his phone. Truthfully, he was scared of what his family was saying. He could picture the ridiculous GIFs of him as an angel they were probably sending.

“Why do you have two chats? Do you talk bad about the aunts?”

Will chuckled. “You know as well as I do that if I uttered one bad word about them, their husbands would skin me alive.”

“So why do you have a chat without them?”

Ha! What a loaded question. Will took a second to plan his answer because *we’re inappropriate assholes who would piss off our sisters-in-law* seemed like the wrong way to go. “You know how you admitted that you like it when I assign you to be lap partner with Sophie at swimming?”

Andy turned crimson. “I—uh—”

Will didn’t let him go any further. “You and I can talk about that, and it’s cool. But you wouldn’t want to have to talk about it with Aunt Beth or Aunt Taran, right?”

Andy’s eyes widened, and he shook his head violently.

“No matter how old you get, there will always be things—like girls and who can fart the loudest—”

“Me!” Andy shouted and proved it.

Will shook his head and chuckled at the gas machine on his sofa. “Right. But those are topics best left for the guys.”

“Okay.” Andy’s answer was slow, and he pursed his lips. “So,” he swallowed, “do you talk about Aly in the chat with your brothers?”

Abso-fucking-lutely not. Will was mute where Aly was concerned, which was why he was steadfastly ignoring his phone.

“I would never say anything bad or disrespectful about your sister.” He might think it, and he’d had loads of disrespectful thoughts. All the things her plump lips could do

to him. All the ways he could dominate her curvy body. Thoughts of her on his kitchen table, in his shower, on her knees, ready to do his bidding—hell, he'd had a dream about fucking her on the desk in his office at the gym.

He shifted on the sofa, suddenly uncomfortable.

“The one thing the show didn't get wrong...” Andy let that hang.

Will gave him a minute, but the kid didn't elaborate. “Was what?”

The air vibrated out of Andy's lips as he sighed. “The way you and Aly look at each other when you think no one is watching.”

Well, shit. Will had to choose between honesty or a white lie. But lying was never the answer.

“Would it bother you if I liked your sister?” Hedging around the issue was a decent tactic though.

“Aly's not going to stay here.” Andy slumped his shoulders. “No matter how much I want her to. She's going to leave after Christmas and go back to her TV world.”

There was a lot to unpack in that statement, and some of it wasn't even about Will. And he had to address that first.

“You know Uncle Marc was a baseball player?”

Andy huffed. “I'm not stupid. He's literally the most famous person I know.”

Good thing his brother-in-law wasn't within earshot, because Marc didn't need a bigger head. “Right, but this upcoming season, he'll be coaching full time again. He's going to have to go away a lot. He almost didn't take the job because he was sad about leaving Aunt Beth, Steve, Mandy, Colten, and Peyton. But Aunt Beth talked him into it because he loves to coach and because he's so good at it.”

Andy frowned.

“Taking that job doesn't mean he loves them any less. You can love people and not see them every day. And your sister,

she loves you so big. Even when she's not here.”

Andy huffed out a big breath and rolled his eyes. “Whatever. Can I play Minecraft now?”

Will nodded and swiped his phone off the table before heading into the kitchen. Although he had no interest in hearing what Luke had to say about the show, his twin was the type to call until Will finally answered, so it was better to get it over with.

“What?”

“Why so cranky, little bro?” Luke snickered on the other end of the line.

“You're thirteen seconds older than me, asshole.” He shook his head and pulled a beer out of his fridge.

“Is it Clayton's comment or just a piss-poor mood in general?”

Fuck his brother. Luke knew exactly what would make Will scroll through the messages. The first set from the full group included a bunch of messages making fun of his “glow” and guesses about whether his teeth would sparkle like in a toothpaste commercial during the next episode. Typical stupid crap. He clicked to the next set, jaw locked.

Clayton: Better rack than Trish. Just saying. I thought Grant was a lock for wife-with-the-best-rack award. But damn, Aly...

Marc: GIF of hiding his head in his shirt

Joey: GIF hiding in bushes

Nick: Have you seen Moey lately? I might be biased, but hers are perfection. Thank you, pregnancy.

Luke: This conversation is a minefield

Danny: GIF of jumping on hot coals

Grant: Assholes this is why I keep leaving this chat Danny did you add me again

Danny: Hahahaha

Clayton: I feel like Will and Grant should be standing up for their girls' tits.

Grant: As far as you're concerned my wife doesn't have tits fuck off

Clayton: Will?

Danny: Willie?

Clayton: William?

Danny: Wilson?

Clayton: Wilber?

Danny: Willum?

Clayton: Willard?

Danny: Willston?

Joey: That is not a name...

Why was he related to such idiots?

“Will?” Shit. Luke was still on the phone.

“Do you need something, or do you just enjoy making me miserable?”

“Still wishing you were a lonely child?” Luke teased. The joke had gotten old about twenty years ago, but his siblings all teased him endlessly over a childhood slip.

“I'd kill to be a lonely child,” Will snapped. Before he could lose it on his brother, he caught sight of Aly, eyes wide and nervous, in the doorway. The door swung back toward her, and she stopped it quickly with a jerk so it didn't smack her straight on.

Without hearing anything else Luke said, he pulled the phone away from his ear and hit End, then shoved the device into his pocket.

Slowly, she stepped farther into the room. She still wore her black leggings and work boots, but she'd pulled a hoodie on over her top. Her face was tinted crimson, although whether it was because she'd been caught eavesdropping or because she was embarrassed that she'd almost been smacked in the face with the door, he wasn't sure.

"Andy mentioned you were unhappy with the show tonight..." She fiddled with the end of one of her big, bouncing curls.

"Unhappy with my family would be more accurate." Will held an open palm out to one of the seats at his table before he started the microwave to heat up the plate of food he'd saved for her. He ran his hand through his hair and studied the tile under his feet. "It's a running joke in my family to say I want to be a lonely child." He shook his head and peered up at her. "When I was five or six, I told my mother I wanted to be a *lonely* child. I didn't realize the expression was *only* child..."

She coughed out a laugh but quickly bit her lower lip to stifle it.

And despite his bad mood, he smiled. As much as he was trying to keep himself away from Aly, she was crawling under his skin. "It was cute at first, but now they love to throw it out anytime I'm frustrated with them. Which is almost always." Will opened the microwave door and pulled out the plate. Once he'd set it in front of her, his hand brushed against her bare arm, eliciting a shiver from her. He swallowed hard. He wasn't sure how much longer he could live with her and not kiss her again. All week, this tension between them had grown.

He grabbed his beer and sat beside her, as had become the routine when she worked late.

"Eat."

For a reason that was beyond Will, she chuckled as she picked up her fork. The door flew open again, and Andy jogged to the fridge.

“Grab your sister a water,” Will called before he had time to slam the door of the side-by-side.

“She can walk.” Andy sighed, but he grabbed the water, along with a Gatorade. He sniffed the air on his way to the table. “Is there more?”

“You’re a bottomless pit.” Will laughed. “You already had three pieces.”

“But your chicken marsala is almost as good as your lasagna,” Andy whined and reached out to grab Aly’s plate.

But she was quicker. She smacked at him with her free hand. “I haven’t eaten all day. Hands off my chicken,” she warned, holding her fork out at him, defending her plate.

“Sit down, monkey man. I’ll get you more of your own.” Will took a sip of beer before heading to the fridge.

Over the hum of the microwave, he could just make out the conversation about school and hating studying for his upcoming map test. Will shook his head. Andy was ready for it. They’d been working on states and capitals and the locations of each for over a month. He knew it cold.

“So,” Aly hedged, her lips pursed. She was about to hit them with something they wouldn’t like. Both she and Andy pulled that same face. “Garry was wondering if you might want to come by after school tomorrow. I’m tiling the kitchen —”

“And he needs me to be the adorable kid.” Andy tucked his hands under his chin and flashed a fake as hell smile.

“More sweet; less demon,” Will teased.

“You’ll have to help me with that. We can’t all have your savior glow.” Andy smirked.

Aly’s gray eyes flicked back and forth. “I haven’t seen it yet, but I’m getting a strong vibe about how they’re portraying

you both. *Wrong.*” She hit the last word hard and ruffled Andy’s hair.

“Hey!” Andy’s faced scrunched up, the look indignant.

Will couldn’t help but laugh. Being with his family might feel like chaos, but these two? Being with them felt like home.

Andy huffed. “See if I come tomorrow.”

But Andy did, and even though he tried to hide it on the drive from school, his excitement about being on the show again was palpable. Through the trek across the parking lot and for the duration of the trip, even while navigating security at the house, Andy was all smiles.

“Whoa.” The words were out of his little mouth the second they crossed the threshold. And Will didn’t blame him. It didn’t look like the same house. Entire walls were gone, opening up the first floor. Big windows lined the back of the house, and the clean gray color pallet brightened everything up.

“Shh.” A man holding a boom mike frowned over at them.

Will shook himself out of his awe and scanned the space. Behind a large island, Aly stood with a tile cutter, the nearest cameras rolling. The room was crazy. Lights hung from all angles, and a handful of people held reflectors pointed directly at her. Two guys with cue cards stood by rolling cameras, and at least four boom mics floated in the air. But Aly was the picture of calm as she chatted about how to correctly split the tile around an electrical box. Her smile was radiant and alluring as she set the angle on the diamond saw before making a cut. Every time Will watched the show, he was drawn in by how she naturally explained each process. Like she was talking to a friend, not thousands of viewers. How personal it all felt. He would have never known she was surrounded by such chaos.

What was it about her that emitted that sense of calm? Because off-screen, she wasn’t organized. Half the time, she didn’t have a plan for the following week, so it wasn’t because she had her shit together.

“That’s it,” Garry called.

Suddenly, chatter erupted all around. Aly spun, and her lips lifted when she spotted Will and Andy. He couldn’t pull his eyes off her as she brushed her hair over her shoulder and waved her brother over. It was too loud to make out her words, but she laughed and messed with Andy’s hair as he jerked his chin toward the wet saw.

“Looks like she’s winning him over.” The female voice came from behind Will, and he turned to find Aly’s friend observing the siblings. Today, the ends of her hair matched the lavender of her eyes, and he couldn’t be sure whether the eyebrow ring was new. But the skintight leather pants and crop top fit in as terribly on the construction site as what she’d worn last time.

“Lily.” She pointed at herself, like he might have forgotten.

“I remember,” he assured before his attention drifted back across the room to Aly.

She fist-bumped her brother, but Will had missed the reason for the praise. They were finally bonding, and Andy was opening up to her more and more. A slew of people stepped back and moved away en masse as the show’s host came up to the counter.

Will’s hands fisted at his sides. Who the fuck wore jeans that tight or cut off the sleeves of their shirts anymore?

He shook his head in disgust when Logan sent a sleazy smile Aly’s way. Will wanted nothing more than to stalk over and step straight between Aly and the fucking tool but—

“Did Aly mention the Christmas party on Saturday?”

Will startled at Lily’s voice before turning back to her. He cleared his throat. “No.”

“She really needs something for it.” Lily flashed a smile and leaned toward him.

He crossed his arms and leaned back subtly. He thought Lily had gotten his *not interested* hint when he’d met her, but he wanted to make sure that was still loud and clear.

“What’s that?” His eyes drifted again to Aly, who was helping Andy mortar the tile to the wall. In the last week, he’d put a lid on his feelings for her, but that didn’t mean they weren’t still simmering inside him. If anything, the brewing emotions were only getting stronger when kept in the dark.

“A date,” she murmured.

Will whipped his head around to Lily, a spark igniting inside him at the thought.

“We’re all allowed a plus-one. Wouldn’t want our girl all alone, would we?” She raised her pierced brow in challenge.

Will rocked back on his heels. “We would not.” He pulled his phone from his pocket and fired off a couple of texts. It only took about twenty seconds to get a reply from his sister, who agreed to keep Andy overnight. “Thanks for the info.” He gave Lily one more nod before heading straight to the island.

“Can I have a turn with the nail gun now?” Andy asked Garry.

“Sure. This way.” Garry led the kid toward the stairs.

Will scanned Aly’s crop tank top and black leggings. Nothing about the outfit should have been overly exciting, but it was. Aly in sweats and a T-shirt turned him on these days, so it probably wasn’t the clothes. Just the woman wearing them.

She tilted her head and tucked her long golden-brown curls over her shoulder.

“Do you need something?” Logan asked from across the island.

Will kept his attention solidly where it should be—on Aly—when he responded. “Just letting Aly know I’m going to be her date Saturday night.”

Her eyes widened for a second before she rolled them.

“Going all-in on that shit,” Logan scoffed.

Will didn’t even care what he meant. “What’s that reaction about?” he asked Aly, closing the distance between them so he was right in front of her.

She sighed before looking up at him. “It almost seems normal nowadays. Of course you’d *tell* me you’re going to be my date for *my* work party. Amazingly enough, I’ve gotten used to your bossiness.” She chuckled.

“Good.” Will smirked, planning all the ways he intended to show her exactly how bossy he could be.

“Because I’m stuck with you since we’re friends now?”

“Friends *too*,” Will corrected.

Aly raised a single brow and cocked her head to the side.

“You’ll figure it out.” He winked.

CHAPTER 15





“BE QUICK,” Beth yelled after the boys as they took off up the stairs.

“EpiPen.” Will handed the tube over to his sister. They were supposed to have left over an hour ago, but Aly texted to say she was running behind, so Beth had waited to come over to grab Andy.

“I swear, Will, since Thanksgiving, I’ve been even more careful about it.” Beth held her hand up in an oath.

Will shook his head, chuckling. “I trust you.”

“That’s a lot of pressure, you know. You’ll be a crazy man if I mess up.” She crossed her arms over her chest and stomped her foot.

He took a sip of his beer and leaned back against his kitchen island. “Don’t be dramatic.”

“This is such a weird turn of events for me.”

He paused with the beer hovering over the counter and watched his sister. “Having extra kids is weird for you?” She had extra kids 90 percent of the time. She was the queen of *don’t worry. I’ll watch ’em*. That was the reason he’d called on her for this.

“No.” She laughed. “Normally, you’re the one watching the kids for us so Marc and I can—”

“Don’t.” He held up his hand. “Please don’t finish that thought.”

She cackled. “I was going to say so we can have a date night, but good to know where your mind is at.”

He shook his head, fighting a smirk. He’d fallen into that trap all by himself.

“Will—”

His entire body tensed at the change in her tone. It implied that what she was gearing up to say was something he didn’t want to hear.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry.” The door flew open, and Aly appeared, hair and makeup perfect, in sweats as the door

rebounded and almost hit her. She flinched and stepped out of the way. “We’re running late. Although why I should be sorry that my entire Christmas party is running late is—” Aly stopped when she caught sight of Beth in the kitchen. “Oh, uh, hi.”

Will chuckled. “I got your text. It’s fine. Beth was about to take Andy to her house.”

Aly looked at Beth again before returning her attention to him. “O-okay. Thanks.”

“Think she’ll ever get used to us?” Beth asked, watching Aly rush out of the room.

“Everyone does,” Will assured his sister. Marc had struggled with the big family when he’d first come into the mix. And now it was impossible to tell that he hadn’t always been an Evans. Even his brother’s shy wife Trish had fallen in step with the Evanses.

“*Mom.*” Steve’s voice echoed through the house. “We’re going to the car.”

“I better go,” Beth said. “Have fun. But,” she paused, “when kids are involved, it gets complicated fast. Make sure you work through the details before Andy finds out about you two.”

Will sighed. “He’s staying with you tonight.”

Beth shook her head. “Okay, don’t take me seriously, then.”

He wasn’t blowing her off. Not really. But he’d spent the last week fighting his growing feelings for Aly. And he was tired of fighting it. There was a chance he might fall hard for her; he knew this. But if he did, he couldn’t see how that was bad for Andy. “I’ll see you tomorrow at swim.”

Beth tipped her head up and stopped. “Marc will probably take him. He’s better at the super early mornings, and he might pretend he isn’t nosy, but he’s going to want to check in with you.”

Will groaned. He lifted his beer and took another long swig as the door swung shut behind her.

As good as another beer sounded, he didn't want to be drunk at Aly's party, so the empty bottle got tossed into the trash before he headed into the living room to wait. Light taps of heels on the wooden stairs had him turning in that direction.

The breath whooshed out of him as he tracked every inch of the satin dress. A deep V at the neck left her beautiful breasts straining against the red fabric before it pinched in at the waist. Images of it pooled at her feet crashed through his brain as she stood at the bottom of the steps.

"Is it okay?" She glanced down and smoothed imaginary wrinkles from the fabric hugging her lush hips.

He stalked across the room like a predator, stopping inches from her to force her chin up.

"Okay doesn't leave a man speechless with his jaw on the floor," he growled. "You are so far beyond okay that I can't even see it."

Her lips parted in an *O*, and he yearned to mess up that red mouth with his. To leave his mark on her. He moved his thumb to her lower lip, smoothing it slowly over the cherry lipstick. Her gray eyes darkened, and she swallowed thickly, the reaction sending Will's blood pumping south. But he had a plan for tonight.



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FOR ONE QUICK SECOND, Will's eyes burned with a fire that lit a flame deep inside her.

But then he glanced away and stepped back. "Let's go."

"What if I'm not ready?" she huffed at his unsurprising demand.

He shook his head and languidly perused her body. He paused briefly at the tops of her breasts, which felt heavy under his fierce gaze. She locked her shoulders to fight the shiver that threatened as he tracked down her legs before finally lifting back to her face.

"You're ready. Because if you look any better, we aren't leaving the house." With that, he moved to hold the door open for her.

She took a deep breath. The teasing flirting he'd been doing for the last week had been replaced with something a lot more intense tonight. And although they had agreed to keep this friendly, the way her body throbbed at every growly word from his mouth made her question whether she'd have the strength to resist him.

But the party was a required event, so she headed out into the cold. The car the studio had sent waited out front. Though the studio went all out, the point of tonight wasn't about having fun. There would be cameras everywhere. Being part of reality TV meant that anything the show deemed worthy became on-camera activity.

The leather cracked as she settled into the seat with Will beside her. He widened his stance, and his smooth navy dress pants pressed into her bare leg. She balled her hands in her lap to keep from touching him, but it was useless. Instead, he rested his warm palm on her thigh. Her breath caught at the simple touch, and a fire rushed through her. She longed for him to move his hand higher.

"Relax."

The word barely registered, but the small circles his thumb rubbed above her knee left her more keyed-up than calm. The ten-minute ride both went on forever and didn't last nearly long enough. And she felt the loss of his hand in more places than just her thigh when he pulled away as the car stopped in front of the restaurant.

The place was on the bay, and in the summer, it must have been gorgeous. Even in December, the moon danced off the water behind the glass and stone building.

Aly was barely on to the sidewalk before Lily was calling out to her.

“Hurry up. You need a quick touch-up.” Lily bounced in her heels, rubbing her arms, her sleeveless dress doing little to keep her warm. Her trusty makeup case was open and in the hands of the dark-haired man beside her.

“She doesn't need anything,” Will growled, resting a palm on her lower back, the warmth radiating through her thin dress.

Lily huffed. “Not *her*. I made sure she was perfect. You.”

His eyes widened comically as he moved away in three quick steps, leaving Aly blocking him from Lily and the makeup brush she was pointing his way.

“Don't be difficult. Otherwise, they'll put a filter on you. Do you really want to glow again?” Lily smirked.

Although there was plenty Will could have complained about in regard to the show over the last few days—especially since the producers were playing hard into the idea that there was something going on between Aly and him—the only thing he grumbled about was the “glow.”

The pressure on her arm as he tugged on it had her spinning toward him.

“Are they filming this?” His jaw was locked.

Aly instantly regretted not making that clear. Then again, she hadn't asked him to come with her. He'd demanded he be her date. Regardless, she still wished she'd explained.

“Per my contract, they can film anything they want. Andy is the only exception. When he’s with me, there are no cameras. Unless we’re on set.”

Will’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m sorry. It makes my life a hassle sometimes.”

He brought his hand up her arm and over her shoulder so it rested at the back of her neck. Inching closer, he brought his mouth to hover over her ear.

“Anyone who cares about a little hassle isn’t worth your time, Aly.” He kissed the side of her head and pulled away, turning to Lily. “If I look like I’m wearing makeup in any shot, I swear you’ll live to regret it.”

“Does that growl work for anything besides making the panties of every woman in a ten-foot radius wet?” Lily tilted her head and grinned.

Will scoffed but stepped up and let her add a bronzy flush to his skin. Twenty seconds later, she moved over to Aly.

“Just a small smudge.” She fixed Aly’s red lips before leaning close. “Have fun. And then go home and let him fuck you ten ways to Sunday.”

Aly snorted.

“I’m serious, girl. That Roman warrior of a man just put on makeup for you. If that doesn’t deserve the sexy-time payback, I don’t know what does.” She gave Aly a quick shove toward Will before turning back to the guy holding her case. “I’m officially yours for the evening. Better make it worth my time, Stew.”

Will chuckled as they watched Lily and her date head up the paved walk and inside before they followed behind. “You two might be the most unlikely pair of friends I could imagine.”

Aly shrugged. “I’m still not sure why she picked me.”

He paused midstep and grabbed her arm so she was forced to stop too. “I can’t imagine anyone not picking you.”

The intensity of his words rocked through her and flipped her stomach. His hand stayed firmly on her lower back as they walked through the doors to the restaurant. Two cocktail servers greeted them with trays of red drinks in long-stemmed glasses.

“Those look fancy,” Aly said as Will snagged one of the glasses rimmed in crushed candy canes and passed it to her. “You don’t want one?”

“I’m more of a beer guy.” Will shrugged before he added, “I wouldn’t mind tasting the peppermint on your lips though.”

“We’ll see, I guess.” She took a small sip as he guided into the over-Christmasfied ballroom.

Garland, half a dozen trees, fake snow, staged presents. Christmas had definitely thrown up in this room.

“They really go all out, huh?” Will asked.

“It’s like a set. They need to make it look like a place our viewers want to be.” Aly rolled her eyes. “Christmas magic and all. Anything tempting you?” Aly waved a hand around the many stations of food.

Will leaned in, his breath warm against her cheek. “Yes. For weeks she’s been temping me. I’m really hoping to wear her down tonight.”

She shivered. But Will simply pulled back and smirked. Through cocktail hour and small talk, he continued to torture her. His hand never left her—her shoulder, her hip. He was never more than a breath away, and he wasn’t bothered by the cameras, though multiple dotted the room.

“Dance with me,” he demanded. And as he wrapped an arm around her, tucking her close, the woodsy cedar of his scent filled her nose.

She leaned close and took another breath. That alone was a drug to her system.

“This entire night has been slow torture.” With two fingers under her chin, he tilted her face toward his. The deep need in his eyes penetrated as he fixated on her lips. Over his shoulder,

she could see that all four cameras had turned to focus on them. And although they didn't typically bother her, she didn't want this spun for ratings. If he kissed her here, it would be fodder for the show.

"No," she whispered and pulled away.

"Aly?" He frowned, his brows pulled together, likely having forgotten about the cameras.

She calmly stepped out of his arms and turned. With Will hot on her heels, she made her way toward the hall. There weren't too many options: bathrooms to the right or a dark coat room to their left. A woman had been taking coats as they came in, but now the space was unoccupied, giving them a quiet refuge among the rows lined with jackets and coats.

"Aly." Will's tone was sharp as he followed into the dark and kicked the door shut behind him.

The soft light from the window three rows away illuminated the top of his face, highlighting the confusion in his eyes.

"Should I apologize?" he asked, his brows still furrowed. "I thought"—he shook his head—"it doesn't matter what I thought. I'm sorry if I crossed a line."

The set of his jaw indicated frustration, maybe even anger, and yet his brown eyes were pleading for forgiveness. His vulnerability shone, despite his tense shoulders and clenched hands. As always, he was putting himself out there.

Aly dipped her chin and murmured, "I wanted you to kiss me."

He sucked in a breath. "But?" Those dark brown eyes roved over her face, searching for answers.

"We're surrounded by the cast and crew and cameras. And even if we weren't, I'm not sure it's a good idea."

"Why?"

The answer to that was easy. "Andy."

“Yeah.” He pushed his large hands through his dark hair. “People keep telling me that. I need to keep my hands off you because of Andy.”

It surprised her. Not that people agreed with the statement, but that he was talking about wanting her.

“They all know it. You’re all I see anymore, and my family can’t stop themselves from butting in. That’s what they do.” It was a statement he made easily, and yet it caused her heart to skip a beat. Especially when he moved closer and pulled her against his chest. His long arms draped over her shoulder, and he rested his chin against her hair.

She was suddenly wrapped back up in the heat that was Will Evans. His rapidly pounding heart beat a rhythm against her as the baritone of his voice vibrated deep.

“The thing is, I’m not a hookup guy. I never have been. We’re friends, but I know there’s more than that. I see it as a beginning, and I can’t figure out how that’s bad for Andy.”

“I’m not sure I’m a relationship girl,” she said honestly. Her mother had never been able to stick to one, and they were alike in so many ways. She wasn’t a caretaker. She wasn’t good at parenting Andy. And nothing about running a home the efficient way Will did came naturally to her. Aly was a mess.

His hands froze in their motion up and down her back as he tensed. “Yet I don’t believe you’re a hit-it-and-quit-it type. So are you telling me you’re—” He paused. He wasn’t uncomfortable—Will was rarely uncomfortable—but it was like he was trying to find the right words. “That you’ve never been with a guy?”

That was an absurd question, but she held in her scoff. She wouldn’t hurt his feelings when he was trying so hard to tread carefully around hers. “No, it’s just been a long time.”

He relaxed against her. “Why?” Again, he demanded openness from her.

“I’m busy?” The response wasn’t believable, even to her, but it might be true.

He pulled back and tipped her face up to his again, those deep brown eyes searching. “You can lie to me, but only as long as we both know it’s a lie. Don’t lie to me when I think it’s the truth, okay?”

She nodded.

“Still, I’d prefer if you just told me to butt out.” He smirked at her.

She shook her head and fought back a smile.

“I’ll give you a dose of honesty and you can decide what to do with it,” Will said. “I’m in bad shape here, Al.” His eyes twinkled, and he looked exactly like he was in anything *but* bad shape. “Everyone in my life knows it. I think you know it too. I want you, and more than just in my bed, although I have no objections to having sex with you all day, every day.” That hot, husky voice sent a bolt of heat straight through her, almost like he’d shot fire straight into her veins. “But I want to give us a try. I’m not asking you to *just* have sex with me. I’m asking you to try something more with me.”

He laid his feelings out for her so easily. Why couldn’t she do the same?

She’d spent the last few years focused on her mother, and then Andy. She hadn’t given herself time to think about wanting anything more. But as she looked up into Will’s face, she couldn’t deny how she felt.

She nodded.

The second she did, he dropped his head, immediately taking control of the kiss, his lips hot as they moved against hers. She leaned into him, letting his mouth dominate.

“Aly.” He groaned as he tugged hard at her bottom lip with his teeth. The second she wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders, he softened, tucking her into his arms and teasing her with a trail of kisses over her jaw and down her neck to her pounding pulse.

And she was lost.

She buried her fingers in his dark hair, twisting and pulling him back to her mouth. He devoured her, his tongue plunging in to stake his claim. His mouth was decadently lush, his kisses turning from hungry to teasing as he nipped at her again. His hand drifted lower and his fingers dug into the flesh of her ass before he pulled her tight to his thigh.

“Will,” she moaned as she pressed into him, hot desire ripping through her, heating her skin. A throbbing pulse beat in time with the steady thrust of his thigh against her.

He twisted her so fast she almost stumbled, but he steadied her, cradling his thick erection with her ass cheeks.

“You keep watch out that window,” he ordered.

She doubted anyone could see them through all the coats. The possibility of being caught sent a shiver racing along her spine.

“You like that, huh? You like living on the edge?” He snaked a hand up under the satin of her dress, his fingers dancing along her thigh and heading straight for her throbbing center. “Good, because I need to make you come right now.”

“Please,” she begged.

His chuckle bounced off the skin of her bare shoulder as he bit into her neck. Her breath caught, and her eyes flitted shut the second his finger ran along her damp panties.

“Hmm, already soaked for me.” The words vibrated along her skin, his lips a mere whisper from her.

Her heart stuttered when he hooked his thumb into the lace and tugged on it. She squirmed, seeking the friction she needed, until finally, he pressed his hand between her legs.

His thumb teased, circling her clit as he sank one thick finger into her. She couldn't hold back the moan.

“Eyes open, Al. You need to watch that window, and I want to watch your face as you fall apart.”

Was he kidding? She couldn't even see straight as he toyed and teased her. But she kept her sights locked on the empty window.

“I can’t wait to taste you,” he whispered. “I want to lick and suck. Devour this pussy and mark every inch of you as mine.”

The words and the fast, circular motion between her thighs almost made her knees give out. But he held her up, never stopping. Just driving her higher and higher until she felt the press of his teeth on her neck.

She exploded.

“Yes. Come on my hand. Come all over my hand, Aly. Fuck. You’re gorgeous.” His words sent her soaring so high she wasn’t sure she’d ever come down. Until she finally collapsed against him.

“Come home with me,” he ordered.

She glanced over her shoulder. “I live with you.”

He chuckled. “Come home to my bed, where I can spend the night with you. I want you naked and laid out for me to play with.” His face shone with desperate need. For her. The honest desire there caused her own need to rage, like she hadn’t just had the best orgasm of her life.

“Okay,” she answered, and he once again claimed her mouth.

CHAPTER 16





“UPSTAIRS.” His growl sent a shiver through her, and she complied, hurrying up the steps. “My bed.”

The reminder was completely unnecessary because his words had echoed in her mind through goodbyes and the ride home. His bedroom was much like the rest of the house—beautifully crafted with dark woods and warm tones, but also streamlined. Nothing was out of place. Dressers, nightstands, and a large armchair. The center of the room was filled with the cleanly made king-size bed covered with the gray plaid comforter.

“Don’t move.” He stood by the armchair in the corner, removing his jacket. When the navy blazer was folded neatly over the arm, he loosened and removed his red tie.

She took a step toward him.

“Don’t move.” The command held more bite this time. His attention stayed locked on her as he slowly unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it on the chair as well. Both shoes were toed off before he stalked toward her in just his T-shirt and suit pants, his corded arms on full display.

He circled her once, taking her in from each angle. One rough finger ran up her arm, causing her body to break out in goose bumps.

“I’ll make you feel good, Aly.” He brushed her hair over her far shoulder with the back of his hand and dropped his lips to the exposed skin, then traced along the curve of her shoulder with his tongue.

Her breath caught and her heart pounded at the sensations sparking through her.

“Trust me. But I’m not gentle,” he murmured against her skin before he sank his teeth into the flesh between her neck and shoulder.

She whimpered. “Yes.”

“I want this dress on the floor, and I want to see you.”

She swallowed, her body going tense. She scanned the bright room, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. It wasn’t

that she was insecure, but her stomach wasn't flat. Her hips were round, and her thighs were fleshy.

“No hiding yourself.” He growled. “This body has invaded my thoughts and dreams for weeks.” From behind her, he ran a hand up her ribs and claimed her breast. “These tits? I’m obsessed with the way they pull against every shirt you own. I’ve never seen such perfectly round breasts.” He rubbed his thumb over her nipple until it hardened, and then he pinched it.

A spark of desire rushed from her breast to her core, and she squeezed her legs at the pressure.

“I want to bury my face in them. Then I want to drag my tongue down your stomach, to the hips I’ve longed to feel against me.” He trailed a hand down the path he’d just described, resting it firmly on her hip. “The way they flare out in the perfect curve right next to the ass I stare at every chance I get.”

Her breath came faster, his words heating her as much as his touch.

He moved on, this time squeezing her thigh. “These beautiful legs. Soft and full and so ready for me to bury my face between.” His palm settled against her core, and he dropped his mouth to press against her ear. “Because I need this pussy. I need to make it mine.”

She hadn't even noticed that he'd undone the zipper of her dress with his other hand until he stepped back and the dress fell in a heap around her feet. He moved in front of her, his eyes eating up every inch of her, then stepped close and snaked his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her to him.

“You’re beautiful.”

The words had hardly left his lips before his mouth was on her again. He skimmed back up her legs, the rough pads of his fingertips lighting up every place they touched, and rested his hands on her ass, pulling her tight against his sizable erection.

Her body was vibrating with desire for this man. She slid both hands up under his cotton shirt, finding the contours of

his abs and pecs. Every inch of him was hot and hard. She wanted to feel his rough skin against her own, and Will helped her with that by grabbing his collar at the back of his neck and yanking his shirt off in one rapid movement.

Featherlight, he ran a hand along her back and undid the clasp of her bra, freeing her breasts. He stepped back and cupped them before her bra had even hit the floor and then buried his face between them. The scruff of his jaw punished her skin as he moved his head back and forth before claiming a nipple. The first lap of his tongue made her hips buck, and the heat of his breath when he chuckled almost made her do it again. The press of his teeth was somewhere between pleasure and pain as he bit into her pebbled nipple. She hissed, and he did it again, sending pulses of pleasure to settle between her legs. He traced a path back down her ribs and grabbed her hip, then spun her so he could back her toward the bed.

Her knees hit the mattress, and he lowered her onto her back.

“Best fucking thing I’ve seen in months.” Will gazed down, his eyes burning into her.

“My view isn’t bad either,” Aly said. The man was perfect. Broad shoulders, a dusting of hair on his defined chest and tight abs. She yearned to feel all that muscle against her. And her core clenched as he released his zipper and dropped his pants to the floor.

His erection pushed against the gray fabric of his boxer briefs, long and thick and demanding to be free. He leaned forward and climbed onto the bed, settling himself over her.

He groaned deep and pressed hard against her. “The way you feel against me is like nothing I’ve ever experienced.”

She arched into him in return. And as if he understood what she wanted, he peeled her panties down her legs, then slipped his fingers into her silky folds, eliciting moans from them both.

“Soaked.” His rough voice vibrated against her neck, pulling her deeper under.

Slowly, he lowered himself, tasting her, exploring her breasts with his tongue. Then he traveled lower, laving at her navel before continuing on his journey. His brown eyes darkened as he breathed deep. An intense longing marred his face. “If you taste as heavenly as you smell, I could die a happy man right here.”

The second his mouth rested on her, Aly bucked her hips hard against his tongue. He dabbled and played, teased and tortured.

“Oh God,” she cried.

“God can’t help, but if you ask me real nice, I’ll give you want you need.”

“Will, please.” She bucked against him again, her body throbbing.

He toyed with her, flicking at her clit with his tongue. She needed to come. Her moans echoed in the air as she climbed high and higher. He sank a finger deep inside her and curled it, sending a bolt of blinding bliss rocking through her. Her moan echoed around her as she exploded on his tongue. And Will didn’t stop until every drop of pleasure was pulled from her body.

“Everything about you is so fucking gorgeous.” Will reached over to his nightstand, pulled out a condom, and had it on in seconds.

Corded arms tight, he hovered over her as he kissed her hard and deep. With more tenderness than she’d ever felt, he ran a hand along the inside of her thigh. Then he lined himself up and thrust into her hard.

“Mine.” The words left his mouth the second he was fully seated inside her. He was thick and large, and as he moved, her body vibrated with an intense longing for more. She met his thrusts, sending him deeper. Each movement created perfect, endless friction, and she dug her nails into his back, pulling him close.

“Yes, baby. You like that, don’t you?” He groaned as he pistoned into her, driving her need higher.

Every thrust took her further as she moved firmly against him. He groaned when she swirled her hips and wrapped her legs around him. That simple act snapped his control. His eyes glazed over, and he drove into her with a primal passion that tore her apart. He fisted her hair and yanked hard, exposing her neck. Just as he latched on to her skin with his mouth, her orgasm ripped through her and she moaned, his name on her lips. His fingers bit into her hips as he shouted her name in response and came in one final thrust.

CHAPTER 17





ALY'S gray eyes sparkled below him. The dark heat that had flooded them moments ago faded, settling into a blissful contentment. Knowing he put a gorgeous, sated smile on her face was a stroke to his pride.

"Give me one minute to get rid of this." The second he pulled out of her, he longed to drive straight back in. In the bathroom mirror, he caught sight of the shower behind him. He had splurged on a rain showerhead with the jets on the walls. It might be the perfect next step. Clean Aly up before he got her nice and dirty again. His dick perked up at the idea.

He'd just come so hard his ears were ringing, but the idea of doing it again was enough to get him up. He headed back into his room to see if he could sweet talk her into the shower, but he found her sound asleep, snuggled under his covers.

He chuckled. Of course she would be the type that passed out cold after good sex. In so many ways, she was easy and agreeable. And how she bent to his commands was a high he couldn't explain. After grabbing the clothes off the floor, he headed for his closet. He tossed the suit pants and shirt into the bin for dry cleaning and the random clothes in the laundry bin, then he hung up his jacket and her dress on the high bar.

In the past, he'd kept his girlfriends' shit out of his closet because it hinted at an idea that he wasn't invested in. But Aly's dress, hanging next to his suits, was exactly where it should be. Having her in his house had him questioning why he'd never wanted to live with any of his past girlfriends.

He'd been with Genni for five years and hadn't wanted more than a weekend or two together a month.

But watching Aly from the spot he'd taken up against the frame of his closet door, seeing her curled up with her hand tucked under her cheek, made it impossible to imagine having her anywhere else. He pulled his phone out of the suit jacket pocket and shut off the lights. He had an early morning, but he hoped Aly could sleep through his low-volume alarm.

After setting his phone on the nightstand, he pulled back the covers and climbed in next to her. With an arm wrapped around her stomach, he tucked her against him. She snuggled

closer, pressing her ass into his dick. Her soft scent floated in the air, and her silky hair tickled his chest. It wasn't hot shower sex, but the contentment he felt in the moment surpassed any he'd ever had.



□

HE RAN his hands through his damp hair before pulling on a quarter zip and moving back into his bedroom. Aly was still asleep in his bed. He wished he was still wrapped around her, but practice started at five thirty. Waking her wasn't ideal, but he didn't like imagining her waking up to find him gone.

He sank down onto the bed next to her, moving her hair off her face and whispering, "Al."

A soft moan slipped past her lips. Fuck, he loved the sound. Unable to help himself, he let his lips touch hers.

"Will." Her whisper skated across his skin.

"Morning, baby."

Her gray eyes shot open instantly. "Did I fall asleep?"

He chuckled. "Out cold."

She shifted under the blankets, and he pressed her shoulder back to the mattress.

"You don't have to get up, but I have practice, and I didn't want you to wake up to find me gone."

The corner of her mouth lifted slightly. "I wish you could stay." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, a crimson blush rushed to her cheeks. "Or, uh—"

"I wish I could stay too. Trust me. I'd kill for a repeat of last night. Maybe five thousand repeats." He trailed a finger along the bare skin of her collarbone before he dipped it to her full breast.

She arched up automatically, and he groaned, dropping his mouth to hers again. He shifted, pressing his weight into her soft body. Maybe he could get her off before he had to leave. He deepened the kiss, exploring her mouth with his tongue.

In the back of his mind, he registered the sound of a door opening, but Aly's kiss was a drug he couldn't turn away from.

"Will!" Thumps moved up the stairs.

He pulled back, recognizing Andy's voice. But his bedroom door was open, and there was no stopping the kid now. Aly's gaze bounced around frantically, her panic growing by the second.

This was not ideal. But they were going to have to roll with it.

"I forgot my swim bag, so Uncle Marc just dropped me here—Will?"

He peered over his shoulder, finding Andy in the doorway. He'd shifted so he wasn't on top of Aly, but still—fuck. Aly sat up, pulling the blanket with her to keep herself covered.

Andy took two more steps in, his eyes narrowed to slits. "Aly? What?" A horrified expression crossed his face. "I told you not to mess this up, Aly. *I told you.*" The words poured from his lips before he spun and ran from the room.

Aly flopped back against the mattress and groaned. "Why?" she said to the ceiling.

"I'll talk to him." Will stood up.

"No, I should." She scanned the room. "Where are my clothes? Did you *clean up*?" She shook her head. "What am I saying? Of course you cleaned up." She waved her hand his way. "Utterly perfect." Then flicked her hand at herself. "Total freaking mess."

The way she saw herself was so wrong. She wasn't as neat as Will was, but most people weren't.

She shook her head against the pillow. "Remember how, a week ago, I said I wouldn't do anything stupid to upset Andy? What happened to that—"

Will cut her off with a hard peck to the lips. "We are *not* stupid." He growled when he pulled back. Then he stood and moved to the dresser and pulled out a T-shirt and sweats. "Put these on and then come talk with us," he said and strode to the door. He closed it behind him and pulled his shoulders back.

Now to deal with Andy. *Communication and consistency*, Will reminded himself. But he wasn't sure where to go with

this. Will consistently wanted Aly in his bed but probably couldn't phrase it like that to an eleven-year-old. Putting off the conversation wouldn't help anyone, though, so he took a quick breath and knocked.

"Andy?"

"What?"

"Can I come in, or did you manage to booby trap the door that fast?" Will wouldn't put it past him. Mad Andy was *trouble*.

"I didn't do anything. After you messed with my phone, I told you I'd stop."

Will cracked the door slowly, not totally trusting the statement. But nothing jumped out or fell on him, so he walked in to find Andy lying on his bottom bunk, staring at the ceiling.

"She. Is. Leaving." Andy gritted the words out.

That was ridiculous. There was no world in which Will would kick her out. And honestly, he couldn't imagine that Andy meant that.

"Dude. You like having your sister here."

"Not as much as you," he snapped and threw his pillow.

"Watch it," Will warned. "Pick that up."

Andy glared, and Will calmly stared back until he finally grabbed his pillow off the floor and stuffed it behind him with a huff.

Will moved to sit on the bed next to the angry kid. "You've hinted around at the idea that I like your sister, and you never seemed pissed about it. I get that this wasn't the best way to find out that I want to date her, but the reaction is a little extreme, don't you think?"

Andy sighed but kept his focus on the top bunk, unwilling to look at him. "She's leaving."

Will opened his mouth to correct Andy, but the kid went on.

“No matter what happens in the next few weeks, no matter how much you think she cares, in the end, she’s going to want to go.”

Will heard the quick intake of breath behind him, but he wanted to say this before Aly jumped in. “Wanting and having to go aren’t the same thing. And I’m well aware that she’s leaving.”

Andy’s eyes shot to him.

“She has a job, dude. One she’s really good at. She can’t just quit. So yeah, I get that she’s going to have to travel for work. But I won’t punish her for doing her job, and it’s not fair for you to either.”

Andy craned his neck around Will’s shoulder and peered toward the doorway. “You might as well come in.”

Will stood as Aly shuffled into the room. He reached out and wrapped his arm around her waist, noticing how Andy focused on the connection.

Aly cleared her throat. “I know how much you love being here with Will. And I’m not going to take that away from you.”

Andy scoffed, but before Will could reprimand him, Aly went on.

“*Don’t.*” It was the sharpest tone Will had ever heard her use. “I get that Mom wasn’t great at relationships and we had one ‘uncle so-and-so’ after another over the years who disappeared without a word.”

Will winced, finally understanding why Aly didn’t love having Andy refer to his brothers as uncles.

“But Will isn’t that guy, and you know it,” Aly said fiercely. “You think he’s pretty great. And I—” Her gray eyes cut up to him quickly before she looked away. She pulled her shoulders back as her spine stiffened. “I do too.” The blush hit her hard, and Will gave her waist a small squeeze of encouragement. “So maybe instead of deciding this is the end of the world, you could give us a chance to prove that it isn’t.”

Andy's eyes narrowed for one beat before he tossed his head back with a sigh. "Fine."

"Good." Aly nodded.

The siblings both seemed to think the discussion was over, but Will had other plans.

"Hug it out," he ordered.

Andy's jaw locked, and his glare was back.

"You heard me, don't be a dickwad. Hug your sister."

He sighed again, but he hauled himself up and flung his arms out as he moved toward her. But before they made contact, he stopped abruptly. "She's wearing your clothes," he accused with a frown.

"Yip," Will confirmed, trying to fight a smirk, because damn, he loved seeing Aly in his T-shirt.

Aly tugged at the shirt in question and simultaneously pulled the collar higher on her neck.

The movement caught Will's attention, and he zeroed in on the reason for it. The dark red circle just above her collarbone marred her otherwise perfect skin. He should have felt bad about it, but hell if he didn't. He wanted his marks all over her.

"Gross." Andy moaned.

Good thing the kid couldn't read minds. Will chuckled, and Andy sent him a glare before he gave his sister a quick hug.

"After practice, we'll put up the Christmas tree together. Sound good?"

Andy shrugged. "Sure."

Will brought his lips to Aly's ear. "Well done, Al." Then he gave her a quick kiss.

"Oh gross," Andy repeated, but he'd to have to get used to the displays of affection.

"Go get in the car."



□

BY THE TIME the tree was up, Andy was in a better mood. Especially since Marc and Steve were coming over to watch Clayton play at four.

Will eyed the colored lights that partially blocked his TV. Aly wanted the tree in the corner of the room, and he'd rather make her happy than see that sliver of his big-screen anyway. He probably needed to get more ornaments. The single boxful made the prelit tree look so sparse that Aly and Andy had insisted on using some of their own. A quick trip to the storage pod in the driveway of their house provided enough ornaments to spruce the tree up to Aly's standards.

"I think it's pretty." Aly smiled.

Will wrapped his arm around her. "Good." Because in the end, that's all he gave a shit about anyway.

"Do you normally have a crappy-looking tree?"

"Andy!" Aly scolded.

"What?" Andy shrugged. "You were the one who said it couldn't stay like that."

Will chuckled. "I'm not sure I even put ornaments on it last year."

The Gomez siblings wore matching slack-jawed expressions at his admission. But it was true. He always put up the fake tree for a few weeks, but he hadn't really cared about decorating it until now. "It's a good thing I have the two of you to straighten me out now."

Because sitting in his family room—lit only by the colored lights of the tree—with these two felt...nice.

"I was thinking we'd just do pizza for dinner tonight, if that's okay with you," Will said when Andy hopped up and headed down the hall. He rested an arm behind Aly's back and toyed with the ends of her ponytail. She didn't have her hair up often, but it was cute, and he loved the way her neck

looked. Her face, though, currently looked unhappy. “Is that not okay?”

“You’re staring at me. Is there something wrong with my hair?”

Will shook his head. “Nothing’s wrong. I just like looking at you, so get used to it.”

Aly blushed again, and Will tucked her closer.

“Did you know the toilet doesn’t flush weird anymore?” Andy came back in and settled on the sofa, frowning at Aly and Will. “I didn’t even need to jiggle the handle.”

“Oh.” Aly tensed against him. “I forgot to tell you I fixed it.”

“Fixed it?” Will asked. That toilet had been slow to flush for as long as he could remember, and if he wasn’t careful to remind his guests, it would run indefinitely.

“Um.” She fisted her hands in her lap. “I replaced the guts. It wasn’t a big deal. And then I replaced a washer on the faucet in there so it would stop dripping.”

“That toilet hasn’t worked right in years.” He’d messed with it a bit, but plumbing wasn’t his thing.

“It was an easy fix, but I’m sorry if I overstepped.” Aly’s cheeks went pink. “I should have checked with you. I did it this morning because I brought the stuff home the other day. I meant to talk to you about it, but I figured I’d get it done while you guys were at practice.”

“Aly, I’m amazed,” he assured her with a smile. “It needed to be fixed. I just hadn’t gotten around to calling a plumber.”

“You don’t need a plumber. It was simple enough. You could have figured it out yourself. It’s just basic handyman stuff.” Aly shrugged, but the tension left her. She always downplayed her talents like they didn’t matter.

He made a mental note to spend more time making sure she realized that her skill set was as valuable as anyone else’s.

“I’m lucky enough to have my own beautiful handywoman who can teach me her many skills.”

“Just have Aly do it. Last time you tried to fix something, you broke the dryer so bad you had to call Uncle Marc.” Andy snickered as he turned on the TV.

“Hey!” Will scoffed.

“I’m hungry,” Andy announced as soon as he found the station Clayton’s game was airing on.

“I was just saying I’d order pizza since Steve and Uncle Marc are coming over.”

“Aww, do we have to order the weird kind?” Andy complained.

Marc and Beth were the *my body is a temple* kind of family, and even the kids liked things like broccoli and spinach pizza with cauliflower crust.

“No, you and I can have pepperoni with extra cheese.” He turned to Aly for her request.

“I think I’ll skip the pizza and the game and work on the design for the cabinets.” Aly stood and headed for the kitchen.

Andy raised a brow at Will as his lips pulled tight. A kernel of worry landed in his stomach at Aly’s quick exit. He hoped she would get used to having his family around soon.

CHAPTER 18





“ONE MORE TAKE. I don’t like the way I said those last few lines.” Logan frowned at the playback of the sixth take of the same conversation.

“No!” Aly’s shoulders slumped. Andy’s swim meet had started at five, and it was already five forty-five. Missing more of it wouldn’t do her any favors, because Andy was still annoyed with her for dating Will.

Or hooking up with him. She’d spent the last few nights slipping into his room after Andy had fallen asleep. Will was becoming an addiction that would be very hard to break. Not that he’d given her any indication that he wanted it to end. Her body buzzed at just the idea of his hand running along her skin. Everything was going well, but she wasn’t sure where they were headed. But Will called it dating, especially when he was talking to Andy.

Garry called it viewer crack. The second episode of the special had aired, leaving viewers hanging on the *will-they-or-won’t-they* question as she fled the dance floor with Will chasing her.

She just wished she could get rid of the nagging unease that fluttered in her stomach.

“What’s the problem?” Garry asked, looking away from the screen.

“Today is Andy’s meet, remember?” Although they had all been off on Sunday, she’d worked extra Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, finishing the tile for both the downstairs powder room and the second bath upstairs. Last night, she’d worked with the crew until almost ten so they could be done at four thirty today.

Garry winced as he checked his watch. “Okay guys, we have to wrap this up.”

“What?” Logan demanded. “She can waste hours having to cover up the fucking hickey, but when I need a retake, it’s ‘Aly needs to go’?”

Heat shot up to her cheeks, and her hand instantly lifted to cover her collarbone. Lily had been cursing the hickey all

week, and she wasn't shy about it. She had even called Will and chewed him out for not keeping to somewhere the camera couldn't see.

"You know you two are never going to last, right, Alley-cat? He just wants the media attention."

Aly wanted to jump in and stand up for her relationship with Will. She had been floored a few days earlier when Will had defended her need to travel to Andy. Like he wasn't fazed that she'd be gone in a few weeks. At the time, that had been the sweetest thing she'd ever heard. But it hit her then that maybe it would be an easy way for him to end what was going on between them.

"Don't be a fucking kid about this. Pouting won't get you anywhere. This special is focused on Aly, so naturally, she'll get more attention." Garry sighed.

"Pout? I think you forget who's made this show what it is." Logan yanked off his tool belt and dropped it on the counter of the master bath before storming out.

"I know who's made it difficult," Garry muttered before turning back to Aly. "Sorry we ran late."

"It's okay, but are we done?" She didn't want to get her hopes up, only for Garry to ask for one more shot.

"You're good. Get out of here. I'll deal with Logan's pity party." Garry stepped over the threshold, waving for his assistants to join him.

Aly quickly headed to her old bedroom; for the time being, it was being used as her dressing room. Lily looked up from her phone as soon as Aly shut the door.

"You ready?"

"One sec." Aly grabbed her sweater and tossed it on over the tank top. "Thanks for coming with me."

"Sure. Maybe I'll win Andy over and he'll talk to me." Lily shrugged a shoulder clad in fishnet fabric. It was hard to tell if it was a fishnet unitard or just tights and a shirt, but her arms and her legs were covered in the black netting. She'd cut

the neck off the T-shirt and had paired it with a short black leather skirt, looking more like she was headed to a rock concert than a swim meet. But who was Aly to judge? She'd tossed a sweater and UGG boots on over leggings that still had tile dust on them.

"You'll probably get a warmer reception than I will." Seeing as it was close to six already and they were a half hour from Andy's meet, he'd likely be pissed when they finally arrived.

"Will said a few of his brothers were coming," Lily shimmied her shoulders, "so if they look anything like him, that has the potential to be serious eye candy."

"He did? When did he tell you that?" Had he stopped by? Aly hadn't seen him.

"I texted him to tell him we were running late because dipshit was being a baby and reshooting everything. He said to look for his brothers when we got there."

"Are we supposed to sit with them?" Aly's heart rate sped up. What was she supposed to say? They'd probably ask why she was late. She didn't want to bore them with details about the show, but she couldn't be mute either.

"If they're half as gorgeous as your man, we're damn sure sitting with them. Toss me a bone here." Lily threaded her arm through Aly's as they headed out. "Leave your car here. I'll drive."

"Sure." It would give her time to stress about being socially awkward in front of Will's family *again*.



□

“NEXT TIME, I’M DRIVING.” Aly still clung to the door, knuckles white, as Lily pulled into the parking spot twenty-five minutes later.

“What? Why?” Lily’s brow was creased in legitimate confusion.

“Because you drive like a psycho.”

Lily waved her off. “Don’t be ridiculous. You wanted to get here fast, and we did. You’re welcome.” She rolled her eyes and climbed out of the car to head into the building that housed the indoor pool. “Why isn’t this at Will’s gym?”

“They have meets all over the state. Tonight, the kids are qualifying for the state meet. I guess they needed a big complex,” Aly explained as they made their way inside. The crisp burn of chlorine hit her nose the exact moment the warm, humid air swamped her. The stadium seats were mostly full, and Aly didn’t see anyone she knew.

The second her gaze hit the concrete around the pool, she found Will. Sporting the team polo and black slacks, he was crouched and talking to a kid on the bench. Andy was wrapped in a towel a few feet down from Will. Aly sighed. The towel meant she’d missed at least one of his races.

“Let’s head down that way for now.” Lily pointed to two empty seats behind a group of women not far from where Andy sat on the bench in front of them.

Before her butt even hit the plastic seat, she regretted the decision.

“Did you watch it last night?” the blonde asked the woman to her right.

“Yes, but it’s got to be a stunt for the show. He was clear with you—he doesn’t date parents from the team. Plus, you know she’ll be gone in a few weeks. Staying and taking care of her brother has never been that woman’s priority.”

Lily huffed. “On second thought, let’s sit somewhere else.”

“It’s fine.” She could ignore petty jealousy. Logan had given her tons of practice with that.

In front of them, Will’s attention shifted to Andy. Aly couldn’t hear anything the two said, but Will scanned the stands until he spotted her. He tapped Andy and pointed, but her brother frowned hard when he looked her way; her tardiness was clearly not excused.

“Why is he pointing at us?” the woman in front asked the blonde.

“No idea...” Her blond hair swayed as she spun to look at Aly. She arched a brow and sneered before she turned back. Her voice lower than it had been but not low enough, she said, “The sister’s behind us, and she brought some Hollywood freak.”

Lily’s green eyes flashed with rage.

“Please,” Aly whispered, “just ignore them. Don’t embarrass Andy.” Aly channeled all her desperation into the plea. Lily could be unpredictable. “Lil, I can be the bigger person.” She tried to keep her voice low, but it wasn’t until Lily sighed, slumped in her seat, and yanked her phone out of her purse that Aly let out the breath she’d been holding.

“She’s definitely the *bigger* person.” The blonde’s stage whisper made Aly’s jaw clench.

“Oh my God,” the other woman barked. “Seriously, don’t worry. I’m sure it’s all a stunt. Look at him. They aren’t even in the same league.”

Aly studied Will. His chiseled forearms flexed as he typed rapidly on his phone. At a glance, Will did look good. Though *good* wasn’t a strong enough word. He looked like her every fantasy come to life. But that wasn’t what made him special. It was the little things, like how he always sat with her while she ate dinner, no matter how late it was. Or how she’d been there for three weeks, but somehow, the daisies in the vase in her room always looked fresh. And the way he cared about her little brother. Those were the things that put him in a league of his own.

“Hey, doll,” a deep voice called, and both women in front of them turned. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m talking to Aly.”

What? She whipped her head around, but she didn’t recognize the enormous blond man.

He smirked. “The rumors don’t disappoint.”

What did that mean? Aly blinked, unsure of what to say. But before she could utter a word, he continued.

“And you must be Lily.” The man smiled at her friend.

Lily stood and cocked one shoulder, tossing her head back. “My reputation precedes me. You must be the hot available brother Danny.”

Aly froze, feeling like an idiot for not recognizing him as an Evans sibling. Nervously, she glanced over her shoulder, but Will’s focus was on the pool as one of his swimmers lined up to race.

“We saved you two seats, but we didn’t realize you were here until my brother texted. We like to be up high because we want to see the wall reach,” Danny explained, waving at them to follow him. “Andy won all three individual races, but his relay is coming up. Better get your yell on.”

Shoot. Of course she’d missed all his individual races. As late as she’d been, it had been stupid of her to hope to be there to cheer for him. For once, she wanted to feel like she wasn’t the world’s worst parental figure. Lily scooted out of her aisle seat and stood with Danny. Unable to stay in her seat alone, Aly stood and stepped toward the Evans brother, speechless.

He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and guided her up the steps toward two more giant Evans men. *Joey and Nick*, she reminded herself a couple of times so she wouldn’t mess up.

“I was away for Thanksgiving, doll, but I’ve heard nothing but good things, which is a shock.”

His tone was complimentary, but she wasn’t sure how to respond. Aly peered over her shoulder. The two women were back to whispering—probably about her. She wasn’t a glutton

for punishment. She didn't *enjoy* the badmouthing, but she could handle sitting with people whose opinions she didn't care about. But the Evanses were a different story. She wanted Will's family to like her. She wanted so badly to fit in, but after twenty minutes, while Lily laughed and chatted easily with all three men and Aly sat almost mute, it became very apparent that she didn't.

CHAPTER 19





WILL'S sneakers squeaked across the wet floor as he headed toward his manager.

"Hey, man."

"What's up?" Ken asked, looking away from the lanes of swimmers.

"Just got off the phone with a mom who swears both her kids got pink eye from the pool." He tucked his hands into his jacket pockets. "Hate to dump it on you, but can you clear the pool and check the water?"

Ken's face lit with a huge smile.

"Why does menial work like that make you so happy?" Will asked.

Ken shook his head. "It doesn't. I'm just glad to see you delegating the jobs to those of us who are supposed to do them. And giving yourself time away from this place."

Will opened his mouth to respond but stopped. It wasn't that Will *couldn't* do it. And Ken was right. In the past, this was the type of thing Will would have chosen to do himself. Today, though, passing it on to Ken didn't seem like a big deal. He'd felt that way about more and more tasks at the gym lately.

"Thanks." Will gave him a nod and headed out to his truck. It was freezing. For the first time this winter, the temperature had dipped into the single digits. He hustled across the parking lot, ready to get the heat blasting inside his truck's cab, but when he turned the key in the ignition, all it did was click. "Damn it."

He glared at the wheel and tried again, but nothing happened. Shifting on the seat, he pulled out his phone. Aly had picked Andy up from school so she could take him to the set for a bit. But she had texted earlier that she was making dinner. It was the first time she had done the cooking, and Will hated to be the asshole boyfriend who didn't show up.

Especially since she'd had a rough time at the meet. Andy had been a bit of a jerk about Aly's tardiness. Knowing Aly worked on the set of a TV show gave people the impression

that she spent her days having fun, when the truth was that every moment was filled with responsibilities she couldn't ignore. He, Aly, and Andy had sat down for another conversation about jobs, and Andy had warmed up by the time they finished dinner.

Some of the moms at the meet had been rude as well. Will hadn't wanted to force Aly to sit with his siblings because he knew his family was overwhelming. But when he saw Lily's text about Nicole's nasty comment, he wanted nothing more than to shield Aly from the world. He couldn't leave the team, though, so the next best option was sending his brother.

He stared at his phone. Typically, Will called Danny for car trouble. Danny loved tinkering with motorcycles and cars in his free time and could handle the small issues that popped up with the old truck. It had been his father's, so the idea of trading it in had never sat well with him, but Will should probably start looking into it now that he had others who depended on him to be where he was supposed to be.

First, though, he'd give Aly the heads-up and hope he didn't ruin her plans.

"Hey, Al." He tried to keep his annoyance out of his voice.

Before she could respond, Andy was calling his name in the background.

"Calm down," she said to her brother. "Sorry, he's excited to show you the kitchen design. We finished it tonight."

"I can't wait to see it." Aly hadn't let him peek at them, although she and Andy had been working on them for the last week. "But I'm still at the gym. My car isn't starting."

"Okay." She didn't seem disappointed at all. "Is it the battery?"

"Probably. Wouldn't be the first time." This wasn't Will's forte. "I'll call Danny to help me."

"We could help. I have cables in my car," Aly assured him.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Aly had the hood of his truck up and was connecting the cables while she explained

each step to Andy. Once again, Will was blown away by the calm she possessed as she went over the correct way to connect the two batteries. No part of her was annoyed that she'd had to leave the house on this cold December night or frustrated by Andy's millions of questions.

"You want to turn my car on, mush?" Aly asked.

Andy ran over and climbed in. Once her car was going, she turned to Will. "Okay, give it a try."

He turned the key, and the truck's engine sputtered to life. He left the car on and climbed out, heading straight for his girl. "My hero."

Aly rolled her eyes. "All I did was give it a jump. I didn't fix it. You're still going to have to take it in."

He made up his mind then and there. He'd take it to the dealer and trade it in on something reliable. He'd hate to get stuck somewhere when he had Aly or Andy with him.

"Don't sell yourself short." Will cupped her cold cheek in his hand before angling closer. Her full lips were ice cold, but when they parted slightly, the warmth of her mouth was a sinful temptation he couldn't resist. He deepened the kiss, hating the layers of coats between them because what he really needed was—

"Gross." Andy's voice broke through Will's lustful haze.

Aly jerked back, eyes wide. The shocked expression on her face said she had forgotten where they were. Maybe she was embarrassed, but Will loved how she got as lost in their kisses as he did.

"Way to kill the moment, dude," Will teased.

"Have a moment at home. I'm hungry, guys. Can you stop staring at each other so we can go?"

"Yeah, let's go home," Will agreed. Dinner together sounded perfect. He guided Aly and Andy to her car and then climbed in his truck and pulled out behind them.

"*What is that smell?*" Andy shouted when they walked in the front door.

With his face tipped up, Will sniffed. It almost smelled like something was burning.

“Shit!” Aly cried, pushing past. The haze drifted as she hurried through the swing door. The smoke thickened in the kitchen as it billowed out of the oven.

“Oh no,” Aly cried as she flung the oven door open and pulled out a dish full of unrecognizable charred food.

“You ruined it?” Andy asked from behind him.

Aly’s shoulders slumped as she stared at what was supposed to be their dinner. Will gave one a squeeze, but she didn’t turn his way. He turned the exhaust fan on, and it whizzed to life, sucking out some of the smoke that thickened the air.

On closer inspection, the dish looked like maybe enchiladas, but the cheese had turned dark brown, and the tips of every tortilla were black as coal.

“Gross.” Andy continued with his complaints.

Burned cheese wasn’t all that appealing, but Will was more concerned with the slight hitch in Aly’s breathing. This was exactly what he’d worried about when he’d called her from the gym parking lot. Knowing he’d ruined her dinner was a rock in his gut.

“Are you going to make me eat that?” If only eleven-year-olds knew how to read the room.

“Go watch TV,” Will ordered.

“What about dinner? I’m hungry, and Aly messed it all up.”

“Dude.” Will spun toward him and glared.

“Fine.” Andy stormed out, the door swinging wildly behind him.

Will turned back to Aly and grabbed her arm, forcing her to face him. The tears pooling in her eyes clawed at him like barbed wire. She blinked rapidly and ducked her head.

“Baby, I’m so sorry.” Will pulled her into his arms. “Please don’t cry.”

Aly rested her forehead against his chest and shook her head. “Why are you sorry? I’m the idiot who forgot to shut the oven off.”

“Nah, it was my fault. I should have replaced my truck a long time ago. I’ll take it to the dealer tomorrow.”

Aly’s head shot up, almost knocking into Will’s chin. “You’re going to buy a new car just because the battery died?”

“No, I’m doing it because this isn’t the first or second or even the tenth time I’ve had a problem.” He tucked her hair behind her ear and cupped her cheek. “I’d hate to have an issue and be stuck on the side of the road with you or Andy with me.”

Aly dropped her head again. She sighed loudly, and her body sagged a bit. She tilted her head slightly so she was looking at the ruined dinner.

“Chinese sound good?” Will asked. When Aly didn’t respond, he tried again. “Mexican, Thai, Greek? What does my girl want?”

She looked back to him, her gray eyes stormy, and said, “I ruined dinner and almost set your house on fire, and now you’re offering to buy me food? How are you so perfect?”

He chuckled. “Baby, I’m the guy who doesn’t know how to jump a car, remember?”

“You could figure it out.” She toyed with a button on his black and white plaid shirt.

He grabbed her soft thighs, scooping her up and making her yelp. His girl wasn’t a waif of a woman, but she had to get over the idea that she didn’t belong in his arms. Because she definitely did. After a few seconds of hesitation, she wrapped her legs around him, making his dick jump in his jeans. God, he’d love to strip her down and remind her of exactly how good they were together. Since that wasn’t an option at this moment, he’d have to use words. He spun and set her on the

island so their foreheads were touching. Every one of her exhales kissed his lips.

“You know what I think, Al?”

She shook her head before wetting her lips, and more of his blood beelined south. This woman was going to be the death of him.

“I’m not perfect. Ask my brothers. They’d be happy to give you a long list of my faults.” He pulled her closer, locking her tight to him. “But we fit perfectly together.”

She shifted, and her core pressed against his cock. The appendage was standing up and taking notice of how close it rested to its favorite place in the world.

“I know we’re good at sex, but Andy’s in the other room.” Aly sighed.

He chuckled. “I meant we work together, complement each other. And what I really want to do is eat takeout and have my very talented girlfriend show me the design for the kitchen. Then I want to take her upstairs and spend the night making her body vibrate with pleasure as she moans my name.”

Her eyes darkened with passion, and she swallowed. “My computer is upstairs and so are the mocks I brought home.”

“Then be a good girl and get them.” He pulled her close and gave her one more lingering kiss before he set her back on the ground.

Her eyes landed on the dish of enchiladas, and her mouth turned down again.

“I’ll take care of that. Get moving.” As she turned to leave the room, he gave her ass a quick swat. In response, she froze, making Will wonder if she took offense to the playful slap.

But instead of anger, when she turned to look over her shoulder at him, her face was alight with a sensual smile. “Maybe try that again later.”

He groaned. “You’re killing me, woman.”

Once her gorgeous ass disappeared through the doorway, Will grabbed a potholder and dumped the burned dinner down the garbage disposal. He cracked the window over the sink before heading to the fridge and pulling out the bowl of pineapple.

In the family room, Andy sat on the sofa, half watching TV and half pouting.

“This will hold you over until we get dinner.” Will held the bowl out, but the kid just glared.

“She burned the food, but I’m the one who got yelled at.” He crossed his arms over his chest and slumped into the sectional.

“She was about to cry, and you were being a dick.” Will placed the bowl on the coffee table. “When you lose a relay race at a meet, it’s usually obvious which of your teammates was the slowest, right?”

“Yeah,” he huffed.

“Do you tell him he sucked as soon as he gets out of the water?”

“No.” Andy’s head snapped up to look at him. “Why would I do that?”

“Exactly. Life with a family is like a relay. Everyone in the house takes turns carrying the team. When they have a bad lap, you don’t tell them they suck and make them feel worse.”

The boy cocked his head to the side as he considered the words, but before he could answer, Aly came down the stairs with her arms full.

Andy watched his sister for several seconds, his shoulders tight. “Sorry I made you feel like the weak link of our life relay. You don’t actually suck at *everything*.”

Will slammed his eyes shut and dropped his head. He’d work with the kid on tact next.

“Like these drawings. They’re awesome. You win that lap every time.”

“Uh, thanks.”

Will didn't have to look at her to know the apology hadn't hit its mark. But when he opened his eyes, her focus was on him.

“Want to see?” She nibbled her lower lip, her eyes dancing. It was that slightly nervous excitement he loved.

“I picked the handles and the faucet,” Andy announced as he reached for the long rolls of design paper. “And when she does the 3D walk-through, it's so cool. It's just like on the show!”

Aly rubbed her brother's head, the tension between them gone. “Go ahead. Roll one out.” Aly held one end steady so Andy could pull the other across the table. “This is just a printout.”

When the mock-up was unveiled, the Gomez siblings jumped into explanations and descriptions almost simultaneously. Although details weren't as precise in the black and white design, the fact that it matched his house stood out.

He never could have described his dream kitchen, but as he ran his finger over the large wooden hood above the island, it felt like Aly had gotten in his head and dug around for the exact style he'd want.

“Here's the 3D tour.” Aly spun her laptop and hit play.

Amazed by the rendering, Will sucked in a breath. His parents' kitchen table fit in perfectly with the design, and the blue of the backsplash was deep and warm, with hints of navy and cerulean and midnight.

“It's perfect, Al.” He squeezed her thigh.

“Yeah?” She smiled the first real smile since they'd gotten home.

He nodded. Before now, he'd been hesitant to redo the kitchen. But there was no doubt in his mind that this was exactly what the space should look like. This was the heart of the home, where he'd be with his family. He stared at Andy

and Aly, realizing he had no idea what her long-term plans were. And that needed to be discussed when it was just the two of them.

CHAPTER 20





SHE PRESSED her finger against the smooth chip, forcing the metallic sliver into the mortar at just the right angle. She'd have this design done in a few hours, and then they could add the grout tomorrow.

Although the master bath was lit up and the cameras were rolling, the house was quiet. This was her favorite way to work. The hours when she could create in peace. Mosaics were time-consuming, and the work was for a single person, so it made little sense to have an entire crew on set. Tonight, she worked alone. The footage of her would eventually be edited.

The quiet gave her time to think. For the last year, worries about her brother had plagued her, running on a constant loop in her mind. But today, her thoughts drifted to her time in this house. The place that no longer looked like her childhood home. A few years ago, she would have been devastated at the idea of selling it. But time and financial burden had changed her perspective. Now, being released from this house felt like freedom.

It didn't feel like home. Not anymore. Thoughts of home brought up visions of knotted wood floors and detailed moldings. And a man who smelled like cedarwood. Whose smile flipped her stomach.

She pressed in another small chip of glass-like tile. The design on the floor was turning out beautifully.

“Hey, you.” The deep voice shot through her like a current.

He stood at the door, his dark hair brushing across his forehead. A hint of a smile danced on his lips just above the scruff on his face.

“Will.” Her voice sounded embarrassingly breathless, but holy moly, he looked good in that blue sweater and ripped jeans.

“Garry asked me to swing by.” He leaned against the door, crossing one black boot over the other. “It's a ratings ploy, but I told him I won't step on camera until you okay it.”

She crossed her arms, unintentionally drawing Will's gaze to the scoop of her tank top. "This entire house is wired. You were on camera before you even stepped onto the porch."

Slowly, he brought his attention back to her face. "Give me an okay to be here, Al, or tell me to go."

"I'm always happy to see you."

"Damn right." He stalked toward her and pulled her into his arms, brushing his fingers along the bare skin between her leggings and tank top as he pressed his warm lips against her forehead. "You look fucking edible right now," he whispered in her ear.

"I was thinking the same thing," Aly admitted, fighting the blush that cursed her when she admitted her feelings.

"Don't temp me." He released her and studied the floor. "I like the pattern; it's turning out great. Do you know how talented you are?"

On set was the one place she felt talented. This, she was good at. Other stuff, not as much.

"Answer me." The growl made her core clench the second it left his lips.

That sound was like an electric shock jump-starting her. She wet her lips, trying to compose herself, but the way he focused on her mouth, his gaze burning into her, made it difficult.

Cameras. They might not be miked for sound, but the film was rolling.

She shook her head. "I know I'm talented at this."

"Good."

"You forgot this downstairs," Lily called from the door, holding out a brown paper bag.

"Oh, thanks." Will took it from her. "I brought a late lunch if you have a little time for me." He held the bag up, a hopeful grin on his face.

She nodded and sat on the floor, resting her back against the large vanity.

“I’ll leave you to it.” Lily waved before she disappeared again.

“They sent you to makeup again?” She tried to cover her laugh with a slight cough.

Will rolled his eyes and joined her on the floor. “Do not laugh at me. I hate it, but it’s better than that glow.” He handed her a sandwich and knocked his shoulder against hers. “The things I do for you.”

He’d done so much. And those were only a handful of the reasons she loved him. Aly froze at her revelation. It was way too soon to have fallen in love. Turning to her sandwich, ignoring the fluster of emotions inside her, she unwrapped it to find her favorite—ham and turkey with just one slice of tomato and mustard. He’d gotten it right, of course, because with Will, the small things mattered. He paid attention.

“I’m going to ask you a question that might seem scripted, but Lily said they don’t record sound when you do these things. Is that true?”

Aly nodded, swallowing thickly at the way he watched her with such intense scrutiny and the seriousness of his tone.

His eyes didn’t leave her face. “What are your plans for this place?”

“Oh.” They hadn’t talked about a final decision. Not since Andy had given the okay to sell. “Well.” She paused and took a breath. “Sell it. Pay off the loans. Hopefully have money left over.”

“And then what?”

Damn. Of course he wanted a plan. This was Will.

She sighed. “I don’t know.”

He chuckled. “Of course. Forget all the detail and what-ifs. Just tell me what you want.” He took her free hand. “You’re so good at what you do. The design, the knowledge, the patience you have when you explain the work, the talent in the

execution of it. Shit, it blows me away how good you are at it all.” He waved his hand around the room.

“Thanks?” She wasn’t sure why, but the words didn’t feel like a compliment.

“But is it what you want?” he asked, regarding her closely.

Aly snorted. What she wanted? It came down to so much more than this. She wanted Andy to know he was loved. She wanted him to be cared for and to not be stressed about money or who had his back. She wanted to not have to worry about those things for herself either. And now, as she took in the man sitting next to her, she wanted him too.

“I guess I need to be more specific,” he said. “If money wasn’t an issue, and if Andy was safe and loved and secure—”

Aly opened her mouth to interrupt, but he put his free hand up.

“Say all that was magically taken care of exactly how you’d want. What would you, Aly, want to do? Stay with the show? Or do something else?”

She gave herself a minute to really consider.

“Any answer is okay. All I want is your truth,” he promised, giving her hand a squeeze.

“I would love to keep doing the show. But there *are* other things that matter. Like you.” She couldn’t meet his eyes as the admission left her lips. “I travel a lot. Is that what you want? To have a girlfriend who’s gone more often than she’s home?”

He pulled on her hand until she was forced to scoot close enough that he could snake his arm around her shoulders. The warmth of his body pressed into her, bringing a sense of safety and a deep impression of being cherished.

“Of course I want you with me all the time. But your dreams, your goals, are important. I’d never hold you back from achieving them.” He pressed his lips to the side of her head. “I’ve never been serious enough with anyone to talk about marriage or moving in together, but my last relationship lasted years, and we spent more than half that time living in

different states. If you want this show, then my job as your partner is to support you in that dream.”

A lump formed in her throat. This man was so perfect, and she was nowhere near good enough to deserve him. But that didn't stop her from wanting him anyway.



ALY'S EYES shone as she shook her head. "Every time you say something like, that you blow me away."

He wished she could see herself the way he saw her. Because thinking that anyone worth her time wouldn't feel like he did was outrageous.

She cleared her throat. "I love my work with the show. What I've learned about woodwork, masonry, design, and materials is amazing. And the access I have to programs and software, it's..." She flushed and shook her head. "Sorry, I tend to word vomit about this stuff."

With two fingers on her chin, he turned her head so he could stare into her gray eyes. "You light up when you're passionate about something. I could listen all day. Don't apologize for that. Ever."

"I can get boring, trust me."

She had the definition of boring confused with fascinating, but he wouldn't harp on it. She'd learn in time.

"But what about you?" She sank her teeth into her lip as she waited.

"What about me?"

She dropped her chin again and focused on removing a speck of dust from her black leggings. "What do you want?"

You.

It was the first thing that had come to mind. It was simple lust, and it was so much more, all tied into a tight knot. He wanted to pin her down and bury himself inside her forever, but he also wanted her hopes, her dreams, her days, her nights. He wanted to be the reason she smiled, and he wanted his arms to be the ones she clung to when she needed support. He wanted a life with her.

"Family." The word he uttered surprised him. Because he had so much fucking family, and they all drove him nuts. But

more than anything, he wanted what he, Andy, and Aly had created over the last few weeks.

She swallowed, maybe as shocked as he was. “Like kids?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. He’d like more. Not ten, but one or two. As much as Andy could be a pain in the ass, he enjoyed almost every minute of time with him. “But it doesn’t have to be now. We have time.”

Aly picked up her sandwich. “Yeah, time.”

She was slipping into her own head, and he didn’t want her there. “Lily and I were talking, and she thought we should have a night out.”

Aly’s eyes shot to him, and her shoulders tightened.

“I thought you might like a night in better.”

She relaxed. “You know me.”

“I do. We thought maybe she could come over with Taran and Corey,” Will suggested.

Aly nodded, her attention fixed on the sandwich in her hand. “Sounds good,” she murmured.

But he wasn’t sure she meant it.

CHAPTER 21





ALY DROPPED her laptop on the counter and let out a weary sigh. She had finished the floor in the master bath, so she was coated in dust and in desperate need of a shower. Even her hair felt like it had a layer of tile dust in it. Will had practice until eight, and Andy was staying at Beth and Marc's for a sleepover, so she had plenty of time to get cleaned up.

She was halfway up the stairs when the chime of the doorbell sounded, startling her. Lily wasn't supposed to be there until about the time Will got home, and she was never on time, let alone early. But maybe she'd decided to show up early since she hard-core wanted to quiz Aly about Will.

It was time to pay the piper. Aly smiled. Lily might not have been what she would have pictured in a best friend, but she was turning out to be exactly what Aly needed. The same could be said for Will. She wouldn't have pictured herself with a gorgeous, fit control freak.

The second Aly pulled the door open, her smile fell. The stunning woman on the other side wasn't her best friend.

"Hello?" The greeting sounded more like a question.

The stranger at the door was everything Aly wasn't. She smiled confidently, and her long, thick, silky jet-black hair flowed past her shoulders. Her jewelry looked expensive, her makeup looked professional, and her gray blue dress straddled the line of classy and sexy that women strove for but rarely achieved.

She batted her long lashes. "I'm looking for Will. Is he here?"

"He's not home yet," Aly explained, brow furrowed. Will hadn't mentioned having anyone other than Corey and Taran and Lily over.

The woman tilted her head, a charming smile flooding her full lips. "May I come in and wait?"

Aly flushed scarlet at how inept she was at social interactions yet again. She should have invited her in already, and now she was tongue-tied, so she just nodded. The woman

walked past her and into the house without a word. Aly simply followed, wondering who she was and why she was here.

Will knew Aly was uncomfortable around new people, so she was shocked that he hadn't told her to expect one. Especially one who was currently making herself at home with a corkscrew and a bottle of wine she'd pulled from a rack in a lower cabinet that Aly had never seen Will use.

"Did you want some?" the woman offered in what was a reversal of roles.

Aly kicked herself, still speechless. She should have thought to offer this woman a drink. But before she could speak, the woman poured two glasses.

"Will keeps the Volnay Premier Cru for me. It's ninety dollars a bottle, but it's worth it."

Aly blinked. She had never seen Will drink wine, exorbitant in price or not. But the woman pushed the glass across the island like it was nothing.

"I'm Gennifer Sterns." She held her small, smooth hand out expectantly.

Aly flushed, trying not to compare her short, chipped nails to the beautifully manicured french tips Gennifer sported.

"And you are?" Gennifer cocked her head to the side in question.

Right, a response to the question would be proper etiquette here.

"Aly," she said softly.

"It's nice to meet you." She flashed her bright white teeth. "Are you Will's new cleaning lady?"

Her face went hot again as she scanned her leggings and the plain gray T-shirt she'd thrown over her tank before she left the set. It wasn't far-fetched to assume she was the cleaning lady. "No."

Gennifer perused the kitchen, her attention landing on the plans spread out on the table. Wineglass in hand, she moved

toward them and ran her nail across the design. “Wow, this is exactly what this place needs. Who did these?”

“I did,” Aly mumbled.

Gennifer’s eyes lit up. “I need your card; this work is amazing.”

Finally, Aly relaxed. She could talk about her work. So she went over several elements of the design, then asked, “Want to see it in color?”

Gennifer nodded, so she touched her screen and brought the computer to life before playing the walk-through.

“It’s flawless. So impressive,” Gennifer gushed.

Aly ducked her head and flushed under the praise.

When she looked back up, Gennifer was watching her, brows raised expectantly. She realized then that she was supposed to respond. But before she could, Gennifer continued to fill in the gaps Aly left in the conversation.

“Swim team must have finished late tonight, but I can’t imagine Will being more than fifteen or twenty more minutes, so why don’t you and I take our wine into the living room and get comfortable so he can view your work when he gets home?” Her blue eyes sparkled.

Will had already seen the design. Why would she think he hadn’t? Should she correct her? She had no idea. Nor did she know how to handle a stranger invading her boyfriend’s house. Normal social interactions were hard enough; this was the most confounding interaction she’d had in years.

Before she could find the nerve to speak up, Gennifer had grabbed her glass and moved into the other room. Although Aly left her glass on the counter, she followed helplessly. Once settled on the sofa, she turned to the woman.

“How do you know Will?” Aly finally asked, curiosity clawing at her. The woman was obviously comfortable in the house, but she’d never heard Will mention her, and she wasn’t featured in any of his family photos.

Gennifer nibbled at the corner of her bottom lip before smiling. “He and I dated for five years. We broke up because he was ready for marriage, but I got cold feet.”

Aly froze at the admission. Will had mentioned a long-term ex-girlfriend, but he’d made it sound much more casual.

“Oh.” Her heart rate sped up and her body heated uncomfortably. She racked her brain for some kind of response but came up woefully short. And what did it say about her that her boyfriend’s ex was more comfortable in his house than she was?

The garage door banged open, and movement sounded in the kitchen.

“Hey, Al,” Will called, “did you and Lily decide on wine? I got everything for the candy cane cosmos she wanted to make.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but her throat was closed off. What would he say when he saw his ex-girlfriend parked next to her on the couch? She shouldn’t have let this happen. Why hadn’t she turned the woman away at the door or ushered her out when she realized who she was?

“Aly?” He stopped short as he stepped through the swing door. “Genni?” He frowned at the woman sitting just a cushion away from Aly.

Gennifer lifted off the sofa and moved toward him, but Will jerked back.

“What are you doing here?”

She wasn’t discouraged. She reached out and grabbed Will’s arm. The contact made Aly’s stomach wobble like she’d just crested the steep drop on a roller-coaster. Will pulled his arm back and glanced at Aly, his brow still furrowed, before turning his attention back to his ex, but he crossed both arms over his chest.

“Why don’t you get rid of the contractor and then we can talk?” she asked.

Will raised his brows so high they were practically in his hairline. “Contractor?” he parroted, looking from Genni to Aly.

“The plans look amazing. Although I really wish I could have some input,” Gennifer said with a hint of pout.

“What?” he scoffed before turning back to Aly. “You told her you were the contractor?” he bit out.

Annoyance painted his face. She hadn’t. The conversation had gotten away from her. She opened her mouth, but the words were caught in her throat. Blinking back the sting of tears, she swallowed, but it was no use. Instead, she dropped her chin and focused on a spot on the floor in front of her while she wrung her hands, praying she’d magically disappear.

Will moved in an instant and pressed a warm palm to her cheek. “Al?”

“She assumed,” Aly murmured.

Will cocked his head and frowned at her. She shrugged helplessly. This woman was so far out of Aly’s league—her looks, her social skill, her confidence. Aly didn’t know how to respond to any of it. *This* was who Will had dated for *years*. That alone was eye-opening.

Will leaned in and pressed a light kiss to her lips.

“Let’s fix the assumption then,” he said, standing and pulling her to her feet. With a hand on her hip, he guided her closer to him. “Genni, this is my girlfriend, Aly Gomez.”

Genni’s eyes widened. “I hadn’t heard—”

She was cut off by the slam of the front door.

“Uncle Marc says I have two minutes to grab my phone or he’s leaving me,” Andy said, coming to stop when he stepped into the room. “Miss Sterns?”

Gennifer paused briefly, as if her brain was piecing together who he was. “You’re one of Will’s swim team boys, right?”

Andy nodded. “Didn’t you marry some old guy and move to DC?”

“We’re separating,” Gennifer explained.

Will tensed next to her, his normally open face shut down and unreadable.

He cleared his throat. “Andy, your phone’s in my car. Be good for Aunt Beth and Uncle Marc. I’ll pick you up at five for practice, so don’t stay up late.”

With that instruction, Andy hustled out of the room.

“He...lives here?” Gennifer asked.

Will gave a clipped nod. “He and Aly live with me.”

Before Gennifer could respond, another voice echoed from the front door. “Hey, hottie, I know you’re not big on climate change, but can we at least agree it’s a waste of money to leave the door open and heat the whole planet?”



| | |

THANK GOD LILY WAS HERE.

His girlfriend was as tense as nails, and Will wanted Genni out of here so he could put Aly at ease. Knowing Genni, she'd probably barged in and taken over, purposely making Aly feel like she was the one who didn't belong. His ex was good at that.

Will shifted slightly, not letting Aly out of his grasp.

"Sorry, Lily. That was Andy. The damn kid never shuts the door." Will tried his best to chuckle.

"Time to teach him all about the monster called global warming." Lily smirked.

"Do not try to scare my kid." Will laughed, thankful for the lightheartedness the woman brought wherever she went.

"Your kid?" His ex's tone was sharp.

He still hadn't figured out why Genni was here, but he wanted her out. He hadn't heard a peep since that call she'd made to tell him she was married. But she'd shown up here claiming they were separated, so he could only assume she wouldn't go easy.

"And who is this goddess?" Lily asked.

Will winced when Aly's whole being slumped next to him.

Genni was beautiful, but she had nothing on the woman he had pinned to his side. Never in all the years they dated had she taken Will's breath away. Never had he sat at his desk at the gym, daydreaming about stripping her down and losing himself in her. Never did he rush home to spend a few extra minutes with her. Genni was ordinary, but Aly was extraordinary.

It wasn't just that she was beautiful. It was her inner strength. Her ability to be calm in the face of everything for everyone around her. The way she kept going through life, with this perfect mix of *I will do this* and the humble nature

about everything she achieved. This woman amazed him regularly.

“Gennifer Sterns,” she said, stepping forward and lifting her chin. “Will and I dated for five years.”

Lily whipped her head in Will’s direction and glared in accusation, but all he could do was shrug. He wasn’t the one who’d called Genni a goddess. The only goddess in the room, as far as he was concerned, was standing next to him in a stained T-shirt. He cleared his throat. He’d deal with Lily after he talked to Aly, but first he had to get rid of Genni.

“Lil, I put the crap you ask for in the kitchen. Cor and T will be here in a few, and I invited Danny for you, so we’ll need six candy cane martinis.” Will hoped to win some points with his girlfriend’s ferocious friend.

Lily rubbed her hands together. “Ooh, hottie, you’re the best wingman a girl could ask for.” Then she pulled on Aly’s hand, forcing her from Will’s grasp. “Come on. Looks like whatever’s going on here will be best explained over liquor.”

Will watched Aly cross the room, and when she glanced over her shoulder at him, he sent her an encouraging smile.

“I’m sorry. I meant it when I said I hadn’t heard you were dating, let alone *living* with someone,” Genni said once they were gone.

“Now you know.” Will gestured toward the door.

“You love her.” It was a statement rather than a question.

Will almost hedged a response, but he’d never get that lie past his lips. “More than I realized was possible.”

“She’s lucky,” Genni said, her expression genuine.

“I’m the lucky one,” Will corrected. “Can I walk you out?”

The second he had the door shut behind Genni, he darted for the kitchen.

“She said they were about to get married,” Aly murmured at the countertop in front of her while Lily dumped a healthy

amount of the pink drink into a martini glass rimmed with crushed candy cane.

“No!” Will shouted, not caring if they accused him of eavesdropping.

Lily glared at him while Aly’s sad eyes and wounded expression stabbed at his heart.

“Genni and I dated. I told you about her, and everything I said was true. I was never serious about her. We broke up because I wouldn’t marry her. I had no interest.”

But doubt swam in those deep gray eyes. Doubt he’d never seen before and hated more than anything.

“Al.”

She shook her head. “I need to shower.” With an apologetic glance at Lily, Aly fled the room.

Will’s stomach sank. From the moment he’d stalked across Andy’s old bedroom and kissed Aly, he’d assumed if he wanted her, he’d get her. It was cocky, sure, but never in any of those moments did he have doubt.

But now? The unease he felt made him want to crawl out of his skin.

“Don’t stand here looking like a dumbass. Go tell her the skinny bitch isn’t what you want.” Lily huffed. “I’ll handle everything else while you fix this.”

She was exactly right. He’d show Aly exactly how he felt.

Will exited the kitchen just as his front door opened.

“Hey,” Corey said.

“Lily’s making Christmas drinks in the kitchen. There’s beer in the fridge if you don’t want that shit. Taran, there’s wine on the counter. Drink it. All of it. And then take the rest of the rack home with you. I don’t want that shit anymore.” Will stomped up the stairs.

“What’s wrong?” Taran called after him.

“Why would you think something’s wrong?” Corey answered.

But Will didn’t turn back to them. The shower in the hall bathroom was running. Although that was technically her bathroom, he hated that she wasn’t using his.

He flung the door open, and Aly jumped, eyes wide and arms thrown over herself to cover her bra and panties. Her full breasts strained against their lacy containment, and his cock surged against his zipper. The curves of her body called to him, crying for his undivided attention. He’d come up here for a reason, he knew it, but his mind was overtaken by the need to own her. Claim her.

“Oh, Will.” Her surprise faded, and her hands drifted to her sides.

He moved without hesitating, grasping her wrists and pushing them back, making her chest thrust toward him.

“What—”

Dipping his head, he latched on to the nipple fighting to free itself from its confines. With his lips wrapped around the taut bud, he sucked hard. She whimpered at the contact, encouraging him to toy with her. Adjusting her wrists so he held them with one hand, he used the other to yank the lace from her breasts before starting his assault all over again.

She squirmed and moaned, thrusting her hips against him. But he didn’t stop until she was begging.

“Please...”

He tugged her panties off and hauled her onto the counter before lifting one of her legs so it rested on his shoulder. Her heady scent assaulted him as the rough brush of his beard marked her silky skin.

“Will,” she whispered.

When he looked up, her eyes were dark and stormy and hot with a desire he craved to see every day. Without breaking eye contact, he pressed his lips to her core. The taste of her on

his tongue, the sight of her head falling back in ecstasy, had him burning with his own need.

Between the sweet, breathy moans and the taste, his control was hanging by a thread. But he was taking a back seat, her pleasure his driving force. He lapped against her languidly, and she bucked in response.

“Yes,” she cried and grabbed his hair.

He zeroed in on her clit when she rocked against him. *Damn*, she was amazing.

She sobbed his name, dragging out the word, while he sucked every last drop of pleasure out of her. She convulsed on his face, and when her movements slowed, he flipped her around and forced her to splay her hands flat on the counter. Lust radiating from her, she met his gaze in the mirror. The whimper that left her lips when she watched him had his cock jumping. He trailed a hand over the curve of her stomach and down into the valley between her thighs. Her damp heat greeted his fingers as he sank into her.

“So ready for me,” he said as she arched back against him.

With his free hand, he lowered his zipper and released himself from his boxer briefs, the tip of his cock already weeping for her. He pulled his fingers from her pussy, eliciting a cry from her.

“No, Will, please.”

“That’s it, baby. Beg for it.” He met her eyes once again in the mirror.

Desired burned hard in their depths as she whispered, “Please.”

He lined himself up and thrust into her, settling himself so deep her lush ass cradled his hips.

Fuck, this was heaven. Surrounded by the hot pussy of the woman who owned his heart.

“Watch. Watch your face as I make you come so hard your legs give out. See how you look when I own you.”

Snaking his hand around to play with her clit, he pulled back out and thrust his hips against her again. Her big tits bounced with every smack of his hips, and her eyes flitted shut.

He fisted her hair and yanked. "I said watch."

Her eyes snapped back open, and she found his gaze in the mirror. The connection was unlike anything he'd felt before. The desire, the emotion reflecting back at him as he owned her body, were reflections of everything he felt. An animalistic need snapped inside him, and a desperate clawing pulled at his throat as he moved frantically.

Her legs quivered as her pussy gripped him like a vise. He yanked hard against her hair, baring the ivory skin of her neck, and sank his teeth into it as her orgasm pulsed. Gripping, locking, owning him. His heart stuttered as his own orgasm ripped from deep inside him. He came and came in explosive waves. Emptied, he collapsed against her back as the last pulses of pleasure rocked him.

"Fuck," he mumbled, rubbing his lips lightly across her skin. He tucked her naked body against him.

The sigh of contentment that left her lips wound around his heart. This woman owned every piece of his soul. And he wanted her to have it. Much in the same way he wanted the right to take care of her.

He pulled back and unhooked her bra, trying not to get distracted by the way her beautiful breasts bounced free. With one hand still gripping her arm, he spun to check the temperature of the still running water in the shower. Luckily, the home had housed a large family for years, thus it had an enormous water heater.

"Come on, baby," he said, adjusting the temperature slightly, "climb in and let me take care of you."

Once he got her over the lip of the tub, he peeled his clothes off and joined her under the hot spray. He ran his hands over her slippery skin and had to fight the urge to get

lost in her again. He'd followed her up here for a reason. They needed to clear the air.

He wrapped his arms around her waist and forced her against the wall until she was looking at him. "Al."

"It's okay. I'm on the pill." Her lips turned up in a reinsuring smile.

"What?" He frowned. He didn't get it.

"Birth control." She raised her brows.

The hot water ran down his face as he absorbed her words. Right. He blinked at the realization. They'd had unprotected sex. And he was the asshole who hadn't stopped to think about it.

He cringed, grabbing her hand and bringing it to his chest. "I'm so sorry."

She rubbed his cheek. "I know you have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility, but it's not just on you. I knew what we were doing."

He shook his head. At least one of them had realized. He was always careful, but he lost all sense sometimes when it came to Aly. Everything about her broke through his rigid control and just let him live in the moment. It was equally amazing and unsettling.

She brought a hand to rest on his chest. "I've had negative tests since the last time I was with someone. I'm assuming you're good too." Her tone lifted in a question.

Fuck. Now he was the asshole who'd made her nervous.

"I swear I'm good, Al. If I wasn't, it would have been in the forefront of my mind." He shook his head. "No matter how much I lose total control with you, I would never hurt you."

Quick as lightning, insecurity flashed in her eyes, but she blinked it away. They had to talk about Genni.

"Aly." He drew her name out slowly, watching her sink her teeth into her lower lip. His dick twitched at the action, but

that guy would have to take a back seat. He'd had his turn. "I'm sorry she showed up here."

She pressed her hand hard against his chest. "Don't." She shook her head. "You did nothing wrong. I'm not upset. I felt dumb for the way I let her come in and take over." Her gaze drifted over his shoulder. "And then I was shocked because she wasn't what I expected."

His gut twisted in response to her confession. Genni was attractive, sure, and while they were together, the sex had been good. Those points had never made Will feel shallow until this moment. Because, for Aly, he wanted to be a better man. For so long, he was the type of guy who'd used Genni for what she could give him, and that revelation made him feel small and unworthy of the amazing woman in his arms.

He didn't want any walls between them, so he moved until he was in her line of vision, forcing her to look into his eyes.

"I'd love to claim that I've always been the kind of man who deserves you. But that would be a lie." Looking into those deep gray eyes flocked by wet lashes, the promise left his mouth like a vow. "I will spend every day for the rest of forever proving that I'm a man you can be proud to call yours."

Her eyes softened with an emotion he'd desperately wanted to claim was love.

"*Any* woman would be lucky to call you theirs," Aly assured him.

But later, after a fun night with friends, when he lay in his bed with her in his arms. He realized she'd never said that *she* felt lucky. And that left him uncertain.

CHAPTER 22





FOOTBALL GAMES WERE MORE fun at home. That was the lesson of the day. The box the Evans family had purchased for Clayton's game against the Giants was huge. There was a kitchenette area with food and two servers to the right. To the left was a sofa and a bin of toys for little ones. There were indoor and open-air seats for watching the game. But all the Evans siblings and their significant others plus kids? Whoa. Mid-way through the first quarter, Aly was overwhelmed.

Though she'd been overwhelmed for days. Yesterday, they'd finished the staging and cleaning of the house so the space would be ready for final interviews on Monday. The rush of trying to stick to that timeline for a Wednesday finale date had all the cast and crew on edge. And Friday night had been a roller coaster of highs and lows. Aly meant what she'd told Will.

It was fine.

She was fine.

He'd handled the situation better than anyone could expect. Lily even teasingly gave him an A+ rating on crisis management when Will and Aly had finally made their way downstairs on Friday night.

Will was worried that she judged him for dating Genni, but she, of all people, wasn't one to judge about dating history. She'd dated more than a few idiots in her lifetime. Will's confession about being unprepared to settle down in the past didn't scare her. In truth, it was more frightening that he was making it clear he was ready now.

Because she felt like she was on the edge of failure at any given moment. Like she was far from the kind of person a guy like Will should settle down with. And as she glanced around at this family—this perfect, ideal family she would have killed to be part of growing up—failure seemed all the more scary. Was she an awful person to wish the Evanses were just a bit less perfect?

So far, she'd had her ear talked off by at least three of his relatives while she nodded stupidly, adding almost nothing of

value to each conversation. Mostly, she spent her time trying to remember all the names.

“Come with me,” a large blond man holding a newborn said. It wasn’t Luke or Danny; she’d never met this man. “I’ve got a quiet place. Trust me.”

His eyes were kind and knowing, so she followed him. He led her to a row of seats that were half-blocked by a wall to the bathroom. The field was visible, but they were isolated in this spot, and the noise of the open area of the box was muffled by the wall.

“You’re pretty well hidden here.” He smiled.

“Thanks...” She trailed off.

He dipped his chin. “Grant.”

She smiled, and the two of them sat in comfortable silence, surveying the field in front of them.

After a few minutes, a little girl about a year old toddled over. “Dada.” Her toothless grin was adorable.

“Do you mind?” Grant asked, holding the newborn out.

Aly reached out nervously. Unable to say no, though, she took the little bundle of pink so he could lift his other daughter into his lap.

The little one on her squirmed, and Aly shifted, snuggling the baby against her chest and kicking her feet up on the chair in front of her.

Grant smiled when his daughter settled.

Grant’s wife and Will came over to check on them a few times, but no one else bothered them for the rest of the first half. And for the first time that night, Aly settled. Maybe, given some time, she could do this.



□

WILL SURVEYED the scene in the box at MetLife Stadium. Clayton was having a great game, but Will had seen almost none of it. He'd hardly taken his eyes off Aly. He'd watched her struggle to interact with his huge family, he'd seen her get nervous, and he'd observed her push through the discomfort. He'd helped her out here and there, but he'd let her find her own way too. Everyone had to in his family. And to his amazement, she was doing it. Both he and Trish had checked in when she and Grant set themselves up together in the corner. Boy, talk about uncomfortable silence. But the moment he saw her with Grant's youngest asleep on her chest, his future clicked firmly into place.

In reality, the second he pushed for more than friendship, they had settled into something big, something lasting. Now he saw it—himself on one knee, watching her walk down the aisle to him, her stomach growing with their next child. Gray hair, wrinkles, grandchildren, he saw it all.

“Looks like Clayton's making the playoffs. That means he won't be back until February, and I'm leaving for Alaska in January. I'll be gone for six months,” Luke said, coming up next to him. “You won't be able to wait until the summer, so we might as well go now.” It was that twin thing. Normally, it pissed him off, but at the moment, it was nice to have Luke's assurance. To know he wasn't losing his mind. Because this had happened fast.

“Go where?” Corey asked.

“Man's going to need a ring,” Luke said with a smirk.

“Already?” Corey asked.

It was probably too soon, especially for her. But she was it for him. His heart had known for a while, even if he hadn't admitted it to himself yet. He'd never been more sure of anything in his life.

“We should go while Clayton's here,” Will agreed.

“Go where?” Danny asked. “I have multiple suggestions. We could do Poison or Blush or maybe—”

Luke cut him off. “The jewelry store.”

Danny’s whole face fell, and then he darted a look at Aly before settling on Will, his brows furrowed. “Are you freaking kidding me? We’re doing this again?”

The following day, Danny was still pissed, but the crowd of brothers was standing in the store where they’d help pick out rings for Marc, Nick, and Corey. Grant had gotten his ring in Pennsylvania. Although they’d all been there, they’d decided it was a bad idea to patronize that store again.

Will looked at the rings and cleared his throat, his palms sweaty. He hadn’t expected to be nervous. That was kind of a shock. The rings in front of him were in an assortment of colors, shapes, and sizes. He’d always had a general idea of what he liked best, but suddenly, he was second-guessing himself.

“It’s not really about me anymore, huh?” he asked Luke.

“What do you mean?” His twin cocked his head to the side in confusion. “Have you been dreaming about wedding rings for yourself?”

But it wasn’t about the ring. It was a general statement about his life.

“Fuck’s sake. Are you going to pull a Grant and say you can’t pick?” Danny moaned.

Grant kicked him in the shin. “It’s harder than it looks, shithead.”

“It’s not about you anymore,” Corey agreed, hands in his pockets.

“But it hasn’t been for a while, I’d guess,” Marc said, placing a hand on Will’s shoulder. “At least that’s what happened with me.”

“Me too. It was about Trish and Katie and Nate the second they came into my life. Long before I realized I was going to marry her,” Grant agreed.

Since October, Will's life hadn't been his own. And yet it was better than ever before. He'd held on to his single status for so long, gripping it tightly, but then again, he hadn't met Aly yet.

"I'll take that one," Will said, pointing at a simple platinum band with an average-sized stone. It wasn't so small it was pathetic, but it was small enough that Aly wouldn't feel uncomfortable wearing it, no matter what project she was working on.

"I like a man who knows what he wants," Danny said with a slap to Will's back, his tone one of victory.

"Do you need to borrow money?" Clayton asked at Will's shoulder as he craned over him to inspect his choice.

"No, I've got it," he answered simply. His baby brother was a star quarterback for a professional football team, but Will didn't need his help.

"I meant so you could afford one that doesn't suck," Clayton explained.

Will swore a couple of the guys chuckled quietly, but as he glared around, his brothers all wore straight faces. "I could afford any of them, but I know which one she'll wear."

Clayton frowned again. "Are you telling me that if she had a choice, that's the one she'd pick?"

"She might prefer a smaller one," Corey sheepishly admitted. "Aly's the polar opposite of flashy."

"Clay, you barely know her," Marc explained. "But she's like—"

"Me," Grant said. "She's like me. She likes things she can build or grow. They're easier than people. She likes simple shit, and she's comfortable with silence. The two of us had a great time yesterday. Not many people can sit and shut up. She's a gem. I love her. Thank God, because for a long time, I doubted you'd pick a good one."

Affirmations sounded around the room, along with nods from just about everyone. Will rolled his eyes. He already

knew they loved Aly, and he'd ignore the part about his former relationships.

"If she wants a crap ring, then what can you do?" Clayton asked and smacked his back.

"When are you going to ask her?" Joey asked.

"Not for a while," Will assured everyone. "She's not ready. She'll run for the hills if she knows I bought a ring, so you better keep your big traps shut at Christmas."

"Lucky for you, Nick and I won't be there to spill the beans," Clayton joked.

They weren't his concern. He eyed his twin, knowing quite well he would be the problem.

CHAPTER 23





“LET’S JUST GO WITH THIS,” Andy said, pointing to a blender. “He’ll use it, and it’s much better than the old one he has.”

Once she crossed this last stressor off her list, she could start worrying about going away with the Evanses for Christmas. Although not everyone was heading to Grant’s farm, the crowd would still be overwhelming.

The show had wrapped yesterday, and the cast had officially started the holiday break. Aly’s house was staged, and it would go on the market after the new year. The realtor Garry had connected her with said the house would move fast. The mortgage and the maintenance costs would be off her plate soon, and she would just have to finish the last half of the season with *Mi Casa es Su Casa*. From there, she could figure out what she wanted to do next.

“Yes on the blender?” Andy asked again.

“You can get that.” But Aly wanted to find something more personal. Will was thoughtful and caring, and in turn, she wanted to choose a gift that showed him how much she appreciated him. Not just a kitchen appliance.

“Then we still have to find something from you?” Andy frowned. “We’ve been here for hours, and I’m hungry.”

She shouldn’t have brought him along. Aly had assumed Andy would want to pick something out for Will, so she’d suggested they go today after school while Will was at his CPR recertification. But if she’d known he would complain the entire time, she would have come alone.

Add that to the list of what she didn’t know about preteen boys before now.

“You said we’d go out to eat. It’s almost six thirty.” The whining continued.

“We’ll eat as soon as we get this stuff done.” Aly grabbed the blender and headed for the checkout counter.

“Just two more stores.” The Paperstore caught Aly’s eye after they’d exited Macy’s and were wandering the mall again. “Let’s go there.”

Andy groaned. “Can I get something from there really quick?” He pointed to a small coffee kiosk with a display showcasing muffins and sandwiches.

“Fine.” She pulled out a twenty. “Come straight to me after you grab something, okay?”

Once Andy had scurried over to the kiosk, Aly headed into the Paperstore. Every year, her mom had given them each a Hallmark ornament that made noise and lit up, and she wanted to continue the tradition. She immediately found one for Andy. It was a question mark, and when the button was pressed, it would tell him whether he’d been naughty or nice. If naughty was the answer, the ornament announced *well, you get points for trying*. She laughed. Now to find one for Will.

“Did you find something?” she asked when Andy came up behind her.

His reply was almost unintelligible.

“Chew and swallow before you talk.” She continued her search while Andy hovered behind her.

A snowman in a flowered hammock sang “Mele Kalikimaka.” A popcorn maker that looked like it spouted snow played “Walking in a Winter Wonderland.” Another one was Thor from *Avengers*. None of them screamed *Will*.

“Aly.” Her brother’s voice still sounded weird.

“I said swallow first. You’re going to choke.” She continued to move down the row. An ornament of a man in a suit with his arms crossed caught her eye.

“Aaay.”

Finally, she turned to her brother.

“Shit!” Her heart pounded at the sight of Andy’s puffy purple lips. “Did you check for peanuts?” she demanded, ripping the sandwich out of his hand.

Wide-eyed, he shook his head. He rubbed the top of his mouth with his tongue frantically, pulling in gasps of air.

“Sit down.” She pulled him to the floor and turned to her purse. She dug through it, pulling out her wallet, a pack of gum, and car keys but not finding his EpiPen. “Slow breaths, Andy. I’m getting your pen.”

But his rapid breathing was turning into tight wheezes as his throat closed, rapidly cutting off more of his ability to pull in air.

“Miss?” someone called down the row.

“Call nine-one-one—he can’t breathe.” She tried to stay calm, but her heart was slamming into her ribs and her hands were shaking. “Where is the damn thing?” she muttered, finally dumping the contents of her purse onto the floor in front of her. But the EpiPen was missing. “Shit!” Where did it go?

On the way to the mall, Andy had gone through her purse for Tic-Tacs. He’d probably pulled it out.

Shit.

People were gathering around them, but Aly focused on her brother. Tears pooled in his frightened eyes, the fear there gutting her. But she couldn’t get upset.

“Okay, mush. I need you to breathe with me.” Aly took a deep breath, counting to three as she did.

The rough wheeze said he could still get some air into his lungs. Andy scanned the crowd of onlookers in a panic.

“No,” Aly ordered, forcing his face back to hers. “Look at me. We’ll breathe together.”

They took three more tight, groaning breaths as his terrorized brown eyes watched her helplessly.

“Miss?” a deep voice said from beside her. “Mall security. An ambulance is on the way, but can you tell me what’s going on?”

She took another breath, but Andy’s wheeze was louder, and the hollow of his throat pulled so deep she knew he wasn’t getting much oxygen to his lungs.

“He’s allergic to peanuts, and we don’t have his EpiPen.” Aly didn’t look away from her brother. “Another breath.”

“New Jersey law allows first responders to keep an EpiPen on hand. If you give your authorization, I can administer it while we wait for the ambulance. However, he’ll be required to go with the EMTs to the hospital.”

“Do it. Now.” She scooted back to make room.

Andy reached out, clawing at her arm, and she wrapped her hand around his and brought it to her cheek.

“I’m right here. He’s going to help, okay?”

The older man wearing a black security uniform moved forward and pressed the device against her brother’s jean-clad thigh. Andy jerked the second the needle shot into him, but within seconds, he pulled a desperate breath into his lungs. And then he tried for a second.

“No.” Aly slid closer and grabbed his face so he was forced to look at her. “Do not overbreathe. You’ll pass out. Breathe with me.” And for the next ten minutes, she focused on Andy’s increasingly easy breaths, trying to ignore the shaking of her hands.

The EMTs appeared, and she moved back so they could work. It was okay. He would be fine. But her heart hammered in her chest like the crisis wasn’t over, even after the police officer and both EMTs assured her that her brother would be fine.

It wasn’t until Andy was settled in the ER and the police officer had set her purse and shopping bags on the chair next to her that she saw the missed calls and texts. Before she could call Will, her phone vibrated in her hand.



□

HE GLANCED at where his phone was mounted on the dash as he drove down the highway. He was ten minutes from home, and Aly still hadn't responded. Will had been hoping to meet them for dinner. He'd finished his recert an hour earlier than he'd expected, though it had still been a long day. The class had started at noon, and between that and the test, it had been hours.

He was trying not to worry; she'd probably left her phone in the car. She wasn't the best at keeping her stuff together. He hit Call one more time, and this time, Aly answered on the first ring.

"Will." Her voice cracked.

Will's heart skipped. *Something was wrong.*

"Al?"

The shaky breath sounded in his ear, but she didn't speak.

"What happened?" His hands tightened on the wheel.

"Andy had an allergic reaction." She swallowed. "He's okay, but we're at the ER."

He accelerated without a thought. "Which one?" When he had the name of the hospital, he planned the fastest route in his mind, ticket be damned. "I'll be there in less than ten minutes."

Scenarios of what could have happened ran through his mind the entire way. By the time he pulled into the parking space outside the entrance, he'd run through so many what-ifs and contingency plans that he was shaking.

"Andre Gomez?" he snapped at the woman behind the desk. He winced and tried again. "I'm sorry. I'm looking for his room."

The older woman smiled sympathetically. "Will Evans?"

He nodded.

“His sister said you’d be coming. Go through that door and make a left.” She pointed. “He’s in room three of peds.”

With the press of a button on her side of the desk, the door opened, and Will hurried through it. The smell of antiseptic hit him hard as he raced down the white hall, desperately looking for numbers.

“Room three?” he asked a woman in green scrubs.

She pointed to a door across the hall.

Without knocking, he flung the door open. Andy was curled up on the bed, asleep under a thin white sheet. He was pale, and his lips were cracked, but his chest rose and fell with each breath. The tight fist that had squeezed his heart since Aly told him they were in the ER released, and he swallowed hard.

Andy was fine.

“Will.”

His attention snapped to the corner, where Aly was slumped in a chair. She looked as pale, if not more so, than Andy. His heart clenched again.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“What happened?” he demanded, moving to squat in front of her.

Her hand shook as she pushed her hair off her face. “I was distracted, and he was hungry. He wanted to eat something, so he grabbed a sandwich.” She shook her head.

“Did you check that it was okay?”

Aly shook her head and ducked her chin, avoiding his gaze.

His jaw clenched. They needed a more solid plan for eating out. This couldn’t happen again.

“At least you had his EpiPen.”

Shaking her head, Aly blew out a breath and ran her hands through her hair. “I didn’t though.”

“Didn’t what?” he asked.

“Have an EpiPen, and I thought—”

“How the hell not?” he demanded, pulling himself to his feet and pacing. “We have eight of them. How the hell did you not have one with you? Did you forget your purse?”

She pulled her shoulders back and tightened her hands into fists.

“It was me,” Andy croaked from behind him.

Will spun toward Andy, hands on his hips.

“I dumped her purse out in the car. It rolled under the seat. I couldn’t reach it, and I didn’t tell her because I was excited about picking out a present for you and didn’t want to wait.” Andy swallowed hard. “I’ll never do it again. I promise.” His voice broke.

Will strode to the bed to wrap Andy tight in his arms. “It’s okay. It’s not your fault.” And it wasn’t. It was Will’s job to take care of his family. And he’d failed. While he sat in a class that’s entire focus was on emergency response, he hadn’t been there for Andy or Aly when they’d *had* an emergency. They needed better plans. He thought back to Thanksgiving. He hadn’t even confirmed ahead of time that no one was bringing nuts to dinner. And he hadn’t focused on teaching Andy to ask before he ate either. That needed to become priority number one. “It’s not on you, dude. We’re responsible for taking care of you, and we’re going to do better.”

“It was so scary,” Andy admitted, and his eyes welled up. “I couldn’t breathe.”

“I know, dude. And I promise we’ll do better.” He released Andy and then followed the boy’s gaze to his sister, who was staring at the floor.

Will moved back to her and crouched at her feet again. Although she steadfastly avoided his gaze, he could see the glistening in her eyes that said she was barely holding it together.

As scared as Andy had been, he couldn't imagine what Aly had gone through. She'd watched helplessly as her brother struggled to breathe. He reached out, and limply, she took his hand. He stood, pulling her to her feet and taking her in his arms.

"I'm sorry." She cleared her throat and quickly stepped away. "I need some water."

She left the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

"Don't be mad at her. She was really good. She helped me breathe." Andy croaked out the words and coughed.

"I'm not mad." He turned toward where Andy lay in the big hospital bed, looking much younger than his eleven years. "Why would you think that?"

Andy just shrugged his little shoulder and coughed a few more times but didn't respond.

Did Aly think he was mad?

He should talk to her. He desperately wanted to follow her, but he couldn't leave Andy alone. He'd have to trust that she just needed a minute and that she would come to him if she needed him.

CHAPTER 24





SHE LEANED ON THE DOORFRAME, watching Andy's chest rise and fall where he slept in the bottom bunk. He'd been released from the hospital that afternoon after an overnight stay, and the doctors all said he was doing great. They'd been instructed to administer Benadryl for about a week, just to make sure he didn't have a flare-up, but otherwise, he was fine.

Strong arms wrapped around her middle, and the scruff of Will's beard brushed against her shoulder as he nuzzled her neck.

"You okay?"

The hot skin of his shirtless chest burned through her tank top.

"I wanted to check on him."

"Al, it's two a.m. He's good. Come back to bed." He pressed his lips against her neck.

She almost shivered in response, but she fought the feeling, refusing to let herself feel good. Not when her brother hadn't even been out of the hospital for twelve hours.

"I'm worried about you. You didn't sleep last night, and you're up again now. You need the rest."

"I'm fine." The response was automatic.

"It's not fair to blame yourself."

But Will himself had said it was the adult's responsibility. He made sure she knew he meant that not educating Andy well enough and lack of planning were to blame for the incident. "We both need to make sure he's more careful and aware. That's why I wanted us to set up rules and plans today."

Will had spent the day setting that up. Aly couldn't even think about it happening again or how they'd handle it. He was so much better at this stuff. He'd put plans in place for next time, but what if next time it was something else? Something Will hadn't had a chance to plan for?

"Tell me you know it's not your fault, baby," he whispered in her ear.

“I know it’s not all my fault,” she answered, knowing he was the one completely free of blame.

“He’s fine, so let’s go back to bed. You know, you’re my calm in chaos.” The whisper danced off her ear. “Let me be yours. Let me take away those running thoughts. Let me love you.” He pulled lightly on her, and she gave in to him, following him back to their room.

As his hands moved over her body, swamping her with desire, she relaxed, leaning into his touch as his lips skated across her skin...

Torturing...

Cherishing...

Dominating...

Driving her up to the brink before slowing down to start all over again. By the time he locked her hands over her head and thrust deep into her, he owned her, mind and body. And she came in crashing shocks of pleasure.

Lying in his arms, sated, she felt safe. She felt loved. But a nagging voice in her head said she *wasn't* worthy of it.

The next day, she set out to prove she could be more.

“Are you cleaning the entire house?” Will asked, leaning on the island.

“Just want to get things cleaned out since we’ll be gone for a few days.” She’d done the fridge, the kitchen, both bathrooms, and everyone’s laundry. Will kept a running to-do list, so when she’d seen it on the counter early this morning. While he was at swim practice, she knocked out items one by one. She would be useful for something. “You’re going to pick up more Benadryl, and then we’ll pack the car, right?”

“Can I go too?” Andy asked. He had been climbing the walls.

“Uh.” Will looked to Aly. They’d kept him home from swim practice and school. Today was a half day—the last one before Christmas break—and Aly had said he should stay

home, but in hindsight, she was probably wrong. Just like always.

“Whatever you think.” She couldn’t trust herself with the simplest of decisions at the moment.

Will nodded. “Go get your shoes.”

“Yes!” Andy took off.

“Al—”

“I’m fine. I just want to put the clothes away and make sure all the garbage is out and the water is off and—”

“Stop.” He strode toward her and cupped her cheek, making her turn to him. He watched her, worry obvious in his warm brown eyes. “You don’t have to do it all. Team, remember?”

She knew that. But they weren’t much of a team if he was always carrying the weight.

“You pick one, and I’ll do the other two when I get home.” He angled close and kissed her lightly.

“Gross.” Andy moaned.

“Don’t think a hospital stay means you get away with the shit I don’t allow.” Will shook his head but stepped back and ushered Andy out the door.

Aly surveyed the room. She should have taken things slower, because now that the list was mostly complete, the panic was returning. A family Christmas on the farm in Pennsylvania was a great idea in theory, but it meant she’d be surrounded by Will’s family for the entire long weekend. She didn’t fit in with them. They were so damn perfect, and Aly couldn’t keep up.

Every one of them was beyond nice, but they all talked and laughed together while she stared at them stupidly. After their last few interactions, they had to think she was completely inept. And now that she’d met Will’s ex-girlfriend, who was the opposite of inept, she couldn’t imagine the whole family not missing that girl and wishing she were the one at Will’s side instead of Aly.

She scanned the room again; the kitchen was clean. She'd put the clothes away, and then she'd let Will do the garbage. Andy's clothes were the first to be put away. The green shirt he'd worn two days ago was on top, the sight of it sending her back to that day at the mall. To how his throat looked above the collar as he fought to suck in air.

No. He was fine. She wouldn't let herself spiral.

After Andy's, she moved on to her pile and then paused at Will's. She might as well get them put away too. Heading up to his room with clothes, she tried not to think about anything but the task at hand. The jeans and shirts went onto hangers in the closet. Then she grabbed several pairs of folded socks and opened the top drawer of his dresser. She dropped the clothing into the drawer, but her attention caught on the little white box sitting in the front corner. It was a jewelry box—a ring box. Her breath caught. No, it couldn't be what she thought.

Abort, her brain screamed, even as she reached for it. The box was entirely too heavy in her hand as she stared at it. Her fingers moved, and she heard the crack of the hinges before she'd consciously decided to open it.

There, surrounded by white velvet, was the prettiest ring she'd ever seen.

Genni's comment about how they'd been ready to get married came to mind. She trusted Will when he said he never had any intention of marrying her, but that meant this ring was for Aly. She gasped for air, the knot in her throat making it almost impossible to breathe.

It wasn't that she didn't love him. But his words echoed loudly in her mind. He wanted family—kids. She had almost killed her eleven-year-old brother. How could she be trusted with a baby? They were so helpless. They needed a responsible adult, and that wasn't Aly. She could tile a bathroom, and she could fix the kitchen sink or install crown molding. But taking care of another life? She'd spent the last year proving how terrible she was at it.

Her heart cracked. Loving someone meant supporting their dreams and making sure they came true. How could she live

with herself if she let Will tie himself to someone as bad at family as she was?

“Aly?”

She clenched her jaw at the sound of Will’s voice, and no matter how much it hurt, she knew what she had to do.



| | |

THIS WAS BAD. Aly had been on edge for a week, and it had only gotten worse since Andy's allergic reaction. He should have been more careful with his words when he'd first laid eyes on them at the ER. He never should have implied that he blamed her, even though he hadn't meant it. But he hadn't been careful, and now, no matter how many times he tried to convince her it wasn't her fault, she didn't believe him.

It was definitely not the time to pop the question, and he hadn't planned to. That ring was supposed to stay in his drawer for at least a couple of months. Until she was ready.

But now...

She slammed his sock drawer and spun toward him. The second he saw her face, he knew she'd seen the ring.

A stupid part of his heart hoped she was shocked but happy.

"I can't go with you this weekend." Her words were flat. Robotic. And that stupid part of his heart shredded. But he couldn't let go.

"Let's stay home." He started toward her, but she held out her hand and stepped away.

"No. That's not what I mean." She swallowed. "You and Andy should go." With her shoulders pulled back, she fisted her hands at her sides. Frantic fear swam in her eyes. Shit. She was running.

If you love someone, let them go.

He thought back to every time he and Genni had fought. How hard she'd tried to tie him down, make him change his mind, make him want to be with her. Want to marry her. And no matter what she did, nothing changed. She *couldn't* have changed his mind.

And he couldn't change Aly's.

That ripped through him like a bullet, sending pain unlike nothing he'd ever felt before ricocheting through him.

If you love someone, let them go. If they come back, they're yours; if they don't you, never had them to begin with.

He couldn't imagine walking away. Couldn't imagine never pressing his lips against her plush mouth again. He couldn't believe he'd never make love to her again.

“But I can't go. We can't keep doing this.”

The words echoed around his head in a hellish loop. “I'm not going to pressure you into something you don't want, Al.” But he pulled out his phone and shot off a text. “That's the address if you change your mind.” Will swallowed and blinked a few times. “Take as long as you need.”

He grabbed his bag and left the room. But he left his shredded heart on the floor at her feet.

CHAPTER 25





THE WHOLE CAR ride had been silent. Neither of the boys felt like listening to the radio, and Will needed to say something, but he was having trouble mending his own heart, let alone that of the eleven-year-old next to him. The road blurred as he thought about it.

“How long does it take?” Andy asked, the sound of his voice strange to Will’s ears after hours of silence.

“Another ten minutes. Maybe fifteen.”

“No,” Andy corrected. “She said she’d do paperwork if I wanted to stay with you—to be done with her.”

Will sighed. Of course that was where Andy’s head was. But Will wasn’t ready to go there. He didn’t want to give up on her. He could forgive her panic, but he couldn’t come to terms with the idea that she was really done.

Once he’d loaded the car, he sat in the driver’s seat, waiting for Andy for a solid ten minutes. The kid had stormed out in a huff but wouldn’t talk to him. But Aly had sent a text.

Aly: I won’t take him away from you.

Giving him up was something he didn’t think he could live through. But he didn’t feel good about Aly turning him over to Will either. Andy and Aly were family, and even when things were tense, family needed each other.

“I have to have papers drawn up and petition the court,” Will explained.

“You have to decide whether you want to?” he asked.

“Yes,” Will agreed.

“Are you going to?” Andy asked, his voice small.

He pulled the car over. Andy’s last year had been hell. He needed some stability, and Will had been the only stable thing through all of that.

“Andy,” Will said, studying him. His heart was cracked in half, and his gut churned with acid. And yet, what he was about to say was true. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re mine.

You've been a part of my family from the moment I brought you into my house. You're one of the two best things that have ever happened to me. And no matter what happens from here, that won't change."

"Do you really want me?" Andy asked. He looked so much younger than eleven. In that moment, he was a small, lost child who was desperate for love and a place to belong.

Will did what he'd always done and gave him the truth. "Right now, you're the one thing I've got that I want most. As far as I'm concerned, we're peanut butter and jelly."

Andy made a face. "No nuts. Ham and cheese."

Will chuckled. "Yes, exactly. No nuts. We're ham and cheese."

"Even if she never wants to come back?" Andy swallowed and looked out the windshield.

That thought caused the crack down the center of Will's heart to widen. He didn't want to consider that, not yet. But for Andy, he had to. "Even if she doesn't. But," he said, eyeing the boy who'd turned back and was watching him carefully, "it might take me longer to accept that she won't come back than it will take you."

Andy nodded. "Because you love her. I just wish she'd never come in the first place. I hate her."

Although he didn't believe Andy meant that, Will understood. "Let's focus on having a good Christmas, okay?"

"Together?" Andy asked.

"Always," Will agreed.

Neither of them said anything else for the last fifteen minutes of the ride. Grant's gravel driveway was already full of cars when they crested the hill that led to the white farmhouse. They were the last ones here.

"They're going to ask," Will murmured.

Andy nodded. "They're going to worry about you again. Like when Genni broke up with you."

Will smiled softly. “They’ll worry about us both. You’re part of this family now too, dude.”

He smiled. “That’s kinda cool.”

“It is.” Will had to agree.

He and Andy climbed out and headed up the steps to the large wraparound porch. They’d barely set foot in the open great room when Luke watched Will with an intensity he didn’t expect. Especially since he hadn’t told them yet, but... twin thing. Luke’s eyes went hard, and he frowned.

“Hey, Andy, Aunt Taran and I are taking the kids out to the barn. Do you want to come?” Trish asked.

Maybe Luke had known before they’d arrived, because Grant’s wife never took the kids out to the barn. It was something Grant liked to do with them.

Andy scratched his forehead, using a signal they’d come up with long ago that meant *don’t make me*. Will crouched low and took a deep breath. “Dude, you can stay here with me. I won’t mind. But I guarantee you’ll have more fun with Steve and Nate.”

Taran wandered over. “I did a story on your favorite swimmer. Thought I’d tell you about it if you want to walk with me.”

Andy looked from Taran back to Will. “Once they know we’re fine, they’ll leave us alone about it, right?”

He couldn’t vocalize the lie, so he nodded instead.

“Fine, I’ll let you guys talk about it.”

Will gave his shoulder a squeeze, and once the women had herded the kids outside, he turned back to the farmhouse table that sat sixteen. Even without Nick and Clayton, there were too many eyes focused on him.

“How’d you know something was up?” he asked Luke as he sat next to him.

“I’ve had chest pain for hours,” Luke said with a sad smile.

“Don’t doubt the twin thing,” Corey said. “She’s not here, so something went down. How come you didn’t call?”

“I didn’t know what to say,” Will said. “We got in the car and drove instead.”

“What the hell happened?” Danny asked.

His first instinct was to tell them. Bare his soul in hopes that saying the words would ease the pain in his chest. But in the end, he just wanted her to stop running from him. If she came back, he wanted his family on *her* side. So he couldn’t be the victim.

He shrugged. “I moved too fast. Thought I felt more than I did.” The lie was acid on his tongue, and he swallowed it bitterly. His heart panged, and he moved a hand toward his chest before he caught himself. Luke focused on the movement though. Will swallowed. “You know me. Not built for forever.”

Beth scoffed and shot a glare at him. “You bought a ring. You don’t do things like that on a whim.”

“Every rule has an exception.” He had to get out of this room. He couldn’t keep lying. “We’re going back to the way things were. She has the show, and I have Andy. I’m the manny. Nothing more. Everything’s good.” He wanted to disappear under the scrutiny of so many people he loved.

Chaos erupted around the table, each one of them speaking over the others, until finally Will slammed his hand on the long table.

“The important thing is Andy’s well-being. Between this and the hospital stay, he’s had a hell of a week.”

“Hospital stay?” Beth asked. She scanned the room, and when Will mimicked her action, every face he landed on wore a look of confusion. Will hadn’t told his family. Aly had been freaking out, and he didn’t want to make a bigger deal about it. The attention would have made her feel that much worse, so he’d kept it under wraps.

Will cleared his throat and traced the grain of the wood on the table in front of him. “He had an allergic reaction.”

“With you?” Beth asked.

Will gave a clipped nod, still unwilling to let them think poorly about Aly.

“Why didn’t you *tell* us?”

Will shrugged.

“Benadryl every three hours?” Danny asked, and when Will nodded, he went on. “Can I listen to his chest?” Danny was a first responder. He was employed by the FBI as an arson specialist, but he still volunteered as a firefighter and paramedic.

“Probably wouldn’t hurt,” Will admitted with a shrug, “but everything’s good.”

He pushed back in his chair and headed for the door. To his utter shock, no one stopped him. The bitter PA cold bit at his cheeks as his black Timberlands crunched on the frozen ground.

“I’m calling bullshit,” Luke shouted from behind him.

The barn was five hundred yards away, and the house was about fifty. Between the two was nothing but open space. Without an option for escape, he steeled his spine and spun. Planting his feet, he crossed his arms over his chest, ignoring the cold, since he hadn’t grabbed his coat.

“Why?” Will asked.

“You can pull the ‘I don’t give a shit’ attitude with them, but it won’t work with me. This is different. *I* feel the difference.” Luke mimicked his stance.

Once again, Will cursed the twin connection. He just wanted everyone to butt out. But Luke never did.

“I’m literally reeling right now. My chest feels like a raptor took a few good swipes. If I’m feeling this bad, then *I know* you’re hurting. What are you doing, man? Why push her away?”

Will sighed. If Luke wanted the cards on the table, then he’d lay them out. “I’ll own it. Yes, I’ve avoided a lot over the

years. Hung onto a past happiness instead of trying to create a new one. Because watching Dad hurt after Mom died was rough.”

Luke swallowed.

“Why should I feel like that? How could anything be worth that?” Will shrugged. “Same fucking reason you cycle through casual relationships every couple of months.”

Luke tipped his chin and regarded him defiantly.

“Right. Not allowed to talk about you. Whatever. I avoided it, sure. Until Andy and Aly smacked me in the face.” Will uncrossed his arms and ran his hand through his hair. “I didn’t ask for them. And I sure as shit didn’t want more family. But none of that mattered.”

The twins stared each other down.

“The last month has been the best of my life. And even if I hurt more than I ever thought possible, I’d do it over and over again. Because it *is* fucking worth it. I love her more than anything. *More than myself*,” he snapped. “But it doesn’t matter, because she doesn’t want it.”

Luke’s eyes widened. “*She left you?*”

The statement ripped through his chest. Will winced, and all he could do was nod in affirmation.

“Go after her.” Luke frowned. “Don’t be an idiot.”

“No. I can’t chase her.” He shook his head. If going after her would change anything, if telling her he loved her and wanted her more than anything would fix this, he’d do it in a heartbeat. But that wasn’t the issue. “There wasn’t a fight. No misunderstanding. She knows how I feel. But she’s not ready.”

Luke opened his mouth.

“*No*,” Will growled. “I can’t make her love me. I can’t make her want forever. If a woman tried to tie you down, what would you do?”

Luke slumped in response.

“Right. Chasing her won’t help.” Will shrugged. “If she changes her mind in two weeks, two months, two years. *Hell*, if she changes her mind ten years from now”—he tossed his hand in the air—“I’ll be waiting with open arms. But it has to be her choice. Don’t butt in.”

Luke smirked.

“I’m fucking serious.”

His brother rolled his eyes.

“For once, maybe you should stop trying to fix other people and take a look in the mirror. You’re over thirty. You don’t have a house or even an apartment. You live out of a fucking suitcase. You’re a mess. Fix you and leave Aly the fuck alone.” Will spun and left Luke in the grass.

CHAPTER 26





“OH MY GOSH, you two are so cute,” Lily declared, giving her the side-eye and taking a sip of the *breakup blues* drink she’d thrown together when she showed up an hour ago. The house was staged with a few pieces of uncomfortable furniture, but for lack of a better plan and with nowhere else to go, Aly had come here.

Lily had texted, asking about how her Christmas with cows was going, and Aly had broken down and told her what happened. An hour later, her friend was at her door with a box full of stuff, including ingredients for the breakup drink. Its contents were a mystery, but the drink was fruity and went down easily.

“I swear I swoon—see how he looks at you?”

“Why are we watching this?” Aly kept her attention fixed on the blue bubbles rising from the bottom of the glass rather than on the montage of videos of her and Will on the screen.

“I’m trying to convince you that you’re stupid.” Lily rolled her light blue eyes—the color natural for once. She’d also skipped the makeup, and her hair was twisted into a messy bun on top of her head.

Aly had never seen her look so casual.

“No one is debating that. That’s exactly why he’s better off without me.” Aly slammed her drink onto the coffee table and slumped against the uncomfortable couch pillow with a huff. She missed snuggling with Will on the sectional while they watched whatever Andy had cued up.

“Aww.” Lily scooted over and wrapped her arm around Aly.

Seeking comfort, she dropped her head to Lily’s narrow shoulder. It was bony, and although she was grateful to her friend, it wasn’t the same as when Will held her.

“It’s scary to let someone love you. It can be hard to feel like you’re enough. Like you’re worthy of the care and attention of someone so wonderful. Especially because you’ve spent most of your life taking care of things for everyone else.”

Aly sighed. "That's not fair. Mom loved me."

"Yeah, but half the things she should have done fell to you. You shouldn't have had to remind her of due dates for bills or be the primary homework helper with Andy before you left home. Those are jobs for parents, not children."

That was true.

"And your mother somehow convinced you that you were her carbon copy. Yes, you inherited her incredible artistic abilities, but Aly, you've spun that in your head to mean that if you aren't doing everything, then you're not enough."

Aly jerked away from Lily and pulled her shoulders back as she dug her nails into her palms. "That's not true."

The corner of Lily's mouth lifted sadly. "It is. That's why you and Logan work so well together. He knows you'll do all the work while he just smiles and gets paid for it."

Aly paused. She'd taken over the design, and lately, she'd done more of the woodwork, but she wasn't doing everything, was she?

"I know you think Will did everything, but it seemed like you two were a pretty good team."

The sharp knock on the door had Aly jumping in her seat.

"Who's that?" Lily asked.

"No idea."

"Maybe your hottie came to collect you like he should." Lily waggled her brow.

But that wasn't the case. His text had been clear.

When you're ready, here's the address. If it's after Christmas, you know where I live.

Will loved her. She didn't doubt it. But he wouldn't force her to come. As bossy as he was, when it came to them, he always let Aly take the lead.

"I'll get it," Lily said when she didn't make a move for it.

Right. Answer the door. Why was she so bad at such simple things?

“Whoa, you’re hot like that too.”

Aly winced at Logan’s voice, but the door blocked her view.

“Why are you here, dipshit?” Lily slammed a hand to a sweatpants-clad hip.

“We need Aly. We tried Will’s house, but no one was there.”

She couldn’t see Garry, but that was definitely his voice.

“Fine.” Lily pulled the mahogany door open all the way.

Aly stood and moved toward the group. “What’s up?”

“We don’t have a contract past this season, and I want a signing bonus before Christmas. Unlike you, the network didn’t give me a house.”

Garry elbowed Logan in the ribs.

“What?” Logan asked, scowling at Garry. “It’s true.” He thrust a stack of papers at her.

“Uh.” She wasn’t in the right frame of mind to be making decisions this big. She wanted to sell the house and see about the affordability of a local place. And figuring out how to make sure Andy spent time with Will was at the top of her list of priorities.

“We know your situation has changed.”

“Because you had a kid.”

“Brother,” Lily corrected.

“What?” Logan scratched his head. “He’s not your kid?”

Oh my God. This man was an idiot. Aly shook her head.

“As I was saying,” Garry shot Logan a tight-lipped glare before turning back to her, “things have changed. We understand that. But the show won’t work without you. The viewers love you. We worried about how they would adjust to a different love interest.” Garry’s eyes cut to Logan again.

“But they love it. They want more of you. And we’d hate to lose you. Not only because of viewer appeal. Your talent is irreplaceable.”

“Oh.” Pride surged through her. The affirmation felt good, especially when she was so low. But it didn’t change her circumstances.

“We want to move the show to the East Coast. Keep all the projects within a three-hour radius. The Jersey market is booming, so we can definitely make that work. And you’ll have a guaranteed three days a week to be home with your family,” Garry finished.

“Oh.” Aly blinked. She could be around for Andy. But her thoughts went back to Will, and pain echoed through her. She swallowed, but before she could respond, the show’s director went on.

“We’re not asking that you lock in all the details today. Just a letter of intent to iron out the specifics with your agent over the next few weeks.” Garry handed her the letter. “We sent it over to Doug already. He’ll be reaching out, but we hoped an in-person plea might sway you.”

Lily cleared her throat.

Garry sighed. “Yes, Lily. You’ll get your contract extension too. I can’t imagine anyone would have the balls to split you two up.”

“That’s right.” Lily smiled.

Logan flinched when Garry landed another elbow to his ribs, then he cleared his throat and said, “You can tell that guy, Bill or whatever—”

“Will.” Aly glared.

“Right. Tell him that I’m in agreement. Your ass belongs to him, and I won’t touch it.” He rolled his eyes and huffed.

Lily snickered, but Aly only pressed her lips together to keep the pain from flaring. Because that sentiment wasn’t true anymore.

“But it’s more than that.” The words surprised Aly as they left her mouth, and everyone turned, wide eyed, to her. None of them expected her to stand up to Logan. The last month with Will ran through her mind. “I don’t want your role on the show, Logan. You’re the face, and your personality and mine are like night and day, but that doesn’t mean our talents aren’t equally important. That you and I aren’t equals. Because honestly, I think the show needs us both. And if I sign this contract, you need to start respecting that. Different but equal.”

Lily couldn’t contain her smile, but Garry just nodded. “That’s what we’ve been trying to say. Maybe not in those words, but Aly, we, the network and the producers do see that.”

Logan narrowed his eyes.

“You’re the star, Logan, but I’m the designer and the talent.” Aly met his gaze until Logan finally nodded.

“Fine. We need each other to make it work.”

“So life won’t revolve around your schedule?” She might have worded it like a question, but there was only one answer he could give that would get her to sign the contract.

“We can all agree that it has to work for you too.” It was begrudging, and he frowned while rolling his eyes. But it was a start, and that was enough.

She nodded and let them out, promising to reach out to Doug. And when they were gone, she flopped back on the sofa and took a gulp of her drink.

“That sucks.”

Aly raised her brow, shocked by the statement.

“Not for me. My family lives here. And now that I know this is home base, I can get an apartment. But for you.” She shook her head and studied the ceiling. “I wouldn’t want to be stuck here having to see Will all the time. What if he starts dating someone?”

Aly’s heart squeezed at the thought, and she groaned. “Stop it.”

“I’m just saying.” Lily picked up her drink and smirked around the straw.

“Lil—”

But she was cut off when *another* knock sounded on her door.

“What now?” Aly asked as she pulled the door open, expecting Garry and Logan to be back with more promises. Only the man standing on the porch was a huge blond. “Oh-oh, uh.” She cleared her throat. “Come in.”

Luke Evans towered over her, studying her silently. He was taller than Will, with much lighter hair. Really, they didn’t look like twins. He wiped his work boots on the rug before stepping onto the hardwood floor and ambling past her without comment.

He took in the room, then finally turned to her friend and asked, “Lily?”

Lily cocked her head to the side and gave Aly a wide-eyed look.

“Will’s brother, Luke.” Aly explained.

A slow grin spread over her friend’s face. “You Evans men are all something else. But I’m going to use the bathroom.” She pointed to the stairs. “The master. Far away. I’m going to turn the fan on because I’m weird about peeing around people.” She hopped up and practically skipped up the stairs.

“She’s going to eavesdrop, isn’t she?” Luke watched her until she disappeared at the top of the stairway.

“Yup, for sure,” she agreed, but then, in true Aly form, she froze. Why was he here? And what was she supposed to say to him? The awkward uncomfortableness that she’d struggled with her whole life settled over her. It was the way she always felt around the Evanses.

“Will told me to butt out, but I have a problem.”

“What?”

He shrugged. “I don’t fucking listen.”

Aly couldn't fight the smile that flooded her face.

"I had to come see you because I have this pain." He rubbed at the center of his chest. "I didn't sleep last night because it wouldn't stop aching."

Uh. What? No. She'd already dealt with one emergency this week. She couldn't do another.

"I don't know anything about medicine." She shook her head. "But chest pain is one of those call nine-one-one things."

Luke chuckled again. "You're adorable. It's the perfect light to his broody."

"So, ambulance?"

Luke flopped onto the sofa. "No. It's echo pain. Will and I have had it our whole lives. He hurts; I hurt."

Oh. That made sense. She hadn't been feeling great today either. Aly studied the new flooring at her feet, unable to look at him. She didn't know what to say to that, but she had to come up with something.

"Will deserves better than me."

When Luke didn't respond, she looked up.

He was staring across the room, but he nodded. "Will didn't deserve to be hurt by you."

She knew that too. She knew they all agreed—he deserved better than her.

"*But* he deserves to be happy, and the only time he's really been truly happy since our parents died was when he was with you. If I thought it would help, I'd throw you in the back of my Jeep and drag you back to PA with me. You two were good together."

That threw her. She couldn't hide the frown she wore when she regarded him, taking in his admission.

"Why does that surprise you?" he asked. "The first time my brother talked about Andy, I knew he'd end up with you."

“*What?*” Will and Andy had spent over a month together before she even came back to town.

Luke leveled a glare she had never seen him use before. “If you tell anyone this, and that includes Will, I will call you ten times a liar. But I’ve watched your show for years.” He gave her a sheepish smile and swung one leg that dangled off the sofa. “You’re damn good at what you do, and you teach well. I’ve learned a lot from watching you.” The glare came back. “But if anyone asks, I’ll deny watching that girlie show.” He pointed a finger at her to drive home his point.

She put both hands in the air. “I won’t tell a soul.” But her heart warmed at his admission. He thought she was talented, and that boosted her confidence a smidgen.

“I know you’re quiet or…” He trailed off.

“Awkward and never know what to say?” she corrected.

Luke nodded. “Apart from when I watch the show, this is the most I’ve ever heard you say.” He stuck his hands in his pocket and affected a serious expression. “But in case you didn’t notice, there is never a shortage of conversation in our family. A good listener’s a positive addition to our group.”

True, the conversation always flowed, and in some ways, the Evans family made things easy on her. They didn’t ask for much from her, but she always worried that they expected her to say more. And that made her uncomfortable.

“I can speak for everyone when I say we were happy to see you with Will. We would never want you to feel like we didn’t want you around,” Luke added.

She couldn’t leave that hanging out there, because the assumption that they’d upset her was so untrue. Her own insecurities had made her feel unwanted. “You didn’t. This is just what I was saying. He deserves better than me.”

He nodded. “But I knew exactly who you were when Will first mentioned you. You’re his perfect match, and I knew that as soon as he realized it, we’d be ring shopping.” He grinned. “Stop looking shocked.”

He cocked his head and raised a brow in an expression that meant he expected a response, so she took a breath. “I thought you’d all prefer someone more like his ex-girlfriend.”

Luke furrowed his brow and scoffed. “Genni? That makes no fucking sense. We all despise her.”

“But she’s as perfect as the rest of you.” Aly sighed.

“Perfect?” He guffawed. “You think my family is perfect?”

“Intimidatingly so.” Aly huffed.

Luke rested his elbows on his knees as he pounded his fist into his palm. “Let me give you some perspective. My sister, Beth, had a sex tape go public as a teenager.”

Aly gasped so hard she coughed.

But Luke stared at his boots and smacked his hand again. “Until a few years ago, Marc had a reputation as a drunk manwhore.”

Her eyes widened, and she pressed her lips together.

Smack. “Taran and Corey met because Taran blackmailed him for a story about Clayton.”

“*What?*” Aly whispered.

Smack. “Grant and Trish started sleeping together while she was still married to her last husband.”

Aly swallowed.

“Nick almost got Morgan killed by a stalker.” Smack. Smack. “I’m pretty sure Danny has been banging Marc’s sister behind his back for a while.” Smack. “I’ll bet money Clayton is currently fucking his trainer, and she’ll get fired when word gets out.” Smack. “Joey’s in breach of contract with his current employer because he created a better drug that he doesn’t want them to patent.” Smack. “And it’s been pointed out to me that I’m an immature man child.” Luke finally looked at her. “We are *not* perfect.”

Aly blinked. That was too much information to swallow at one time.

“Don’t forget Will,” a phantom voice yelled down the stairs.

Luke turned toward the stairs and yelled, “Thought you said something about peeing with a fan on.”

“Right.”

He shook his head. “Will—”

“He’s—” Aly started.

“You’re probably going to argue that Will is perfect because you’re blinded by love, but he’s a bossy asshole.”

She forced herself to admit the truth. “I like that about him.” His ability to take over gave her a sense of peace.

Luke’s mouth lifted just a small amount, and he went on. “He’s loyal and caring. And he would do anything for you.” He regarded her for a moment but went on when she didn’t respond. “If only you could see how impressive you are outside of your show. When Danny heard about Andy’s emergency—”

Aly sucked in a breath, and her spine went ramrod straight.

“He called his EMT friends to see who’d taken the call. He found the guy, and you know what he said?” Luke asked.

She slumped back on the couch. “That they couldn’t believe I was irresponsible enough to not have an EpiPen?”

“No.” Luke scoffed. “That both the cop and the security guard were blown away by how calm you were. By how well you handled Andy, and if it hadn’t been for you, he probably would have passed out.”

“What?” Aly asked in disbelief.

“Quick thinking. Calm head. I don’t think I could have been that calm, and I know for sure my brother would have panicked.” Luke sighed. “Insecurity is a weird thing. It sneaks up on you and it distorts the way you see yourself.” He reached over and patted her thigh. “You’re amazing, and Will would be a lucky fuck to have you in his life.” He shifted to pull out his wallet, then flicked through a few things and lifted

a torn, dingy piece of white paper using his pointer and middle fingers.

“What’s that?” The writing on the scrap of paper looked like a set of numbers in blue pen.

“My biggest regret.” Luke’s eyes dimmed as he slid it back into his wallet. “Met her on a plane. We had a long delay. Hung out the whole time.” He rested his fist in his other hand, but he didn’t slam it like before. Instead, he sat back and stared past her. “She gave me her number. But I never called. I wasn’t good enough for her. But I still think about her.”

He blew out a hard breath and stood.

“Don’t let Will become your regret. Because if you do, it will haunt you.”

Once he’d left, Aly was frozen in shock. Was she making a mistake? Could insecurity be holding her back? Regardless, Luke was right. If she gave up, she’d regret it.

CHAPTER 27





“HE’S COMING BACK FOR DINNER?” Will turned from the tomato he was chopping to look across the kitchen at his sister-in-law.

Trish shrugged. “That’s what he said.”

“Because he had to help on the dairy farm.”

“I think he was blowing off steam. He seemed upset.” Trish turned back. “Will you finish the salad?”

He nodded and went back to the food, trying to shake off the guilt. He’d been harsher than was fair with Luke. His twin might butt into everything, but he did it out of love. Part of him worried that Luke was being his usual asshole self and had gone after Aly. Especially since he’d been gone all day. When he finished the salad, he pulled out his phone.

Will: Where are you?

At the sound of a throat clearing behind him, he spun around.

Luke stood by the door to the mudroom. “Right here.”

Will craned his neck to peer around him. Aly wasn’t there, of course.

Luke smirked. “Hoping I have your girl?”

“No.” he clipped. But he had secretly hoped, hadn’t he?

“Good, because I don’t.”

Damn, that admission hurt. But Luke was the one who lifted his hand to rub his chest.

“Tomorrow’s Christmas Eve. You going to call her?” his brother asked.

He shook his head and swallowed past the lump in his throat. “I’ll have Andy call on Christmas if she doesn’t call him.”

Walking past, his twin rested his large palm on Will’s shoulder. He gave it a squeeze before he left the kitchen.



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THE KIDS HAD DECORATED COOKIES, and everyone had gone to the four thirty Christmas service, but Will felt half there.

Like part of him was missing. Without Aly, he wasn't complete.

He shook the thoughts loose and headed upstairs, yanking at the tie that choked at his neck. After throwing on a T-shirt and a pair of sweats, he made his way to the steps, but froze at the sound of Andy's voice.

“What are you doing here?”

By his tone, the visitor could only be one person. Will moved down the stairs as fast as his legs could carry him, but he came to an abrupt stop on the landing. There she stood in the center of the room, sweet as ever in leggings and a hoodie. Never the fashionista—just Aly. His heart felt like it was trying to crawl up his throat.

There was a moment of awkward silence, which was virtually impossible when his family was involved, but finally, Aly answered.

“I-I came to talk to you,” she said, but her attention moved from Andy, and she scanned the room. She was probably looking for Will, but he was behind her.

Selfishly, he wanted her to be here to talk to him, not Andy. But they were family, and Aly should be here to see her brother. As much as it hurt, Will knew what he had to do.

“Come on—”

Aly jerked at his words and spun to face him.

“Let's go out to the sunporch.” He tilted his chin.

“I don't—” Andy started.

But Will cut him off. “Now, dude.”

He led the way, and both Gomez siblings trailed behind. Once they were settled in the small room, he turned. “I'll give you two a minute.”

“No—” Andy shouted, looking up at him and pleading with his eyes. When Will moved for the door, Andy grabbed his arm, refusing to let go. “We’re a package deal, remember?”

Will smiled, giving him the reassurance he needed, then pointed at him. “In absolutely everything in life,” then he paused and turned to look at the woman he so desperately wished he could keep, “except Aly.”

Aly could be in Andy’s life in any way she wanted. But not through him.

“But—”

“No. She will always have a place in *your* life. She can visit *you*; she can call *you*; she can be there for *you*. She’s your family,” Will assured him, then he regarded Aly for a long moment. She hadn’t said a single word. She’d only stood there awkwardly, her arms wrapped around her midsection. “No matter what happened with us.”

“Ham and cheese?” Andy asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Ham and cheese,” Will agreed with a smile.

And Andy hugged him.

“I’ll give you two a few minutes,” he said, and then he left the room without looking back.



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ALY WATCHED Will cross the threshold, leaving her to deal with Andy alone. She didn't know where to start with her brother. She'd hoped for the package. For both of them. But Will hadn't even looked at her as he strode out of the room, and the coolness in which he'd spoken to her had leached into her, making her shiver.

It was too late for them. But Will wasn't giving up on Andy. She could be thankful for that, because as much as she loved her brother, she wanted her two favorite guys together. The package deal. Too bad she wasn't sure she could have any part of it.

"I hate you," Andy said, glaring at her.

"I hate me too," she agreed and then sighed. "But I love you."

Andy snorted.

She sat on the sofa near him and studied her hands, unable to look at him while she cracked her heart open in hopes of explaining herself to her brother. "I know it doesn't seem like it. I'm pretty much the world's worst"—she couldn't even say parent, because she had never acted like it—"person."

Andy frowned. "I wouldn't say worst. I mean, you've never killed anyone."

She laughed, although she didn't feel the joy that typically accompanied such an action. He'd compared her to a murderer. And she'd come out only slightly ahead.

Andy frowned. "Why are you here?"

"I miss you guys," she admitted, scanning the room for something to focus on. She stopped her search at the fireplace, where the heated wood popped and sizzled in a comforting rhythm.

"You missed *us*?" Andy asked. "Like, both of us?"

"Yeah." She shrugged but turned back to him.

“Like me too?” Andy looked up at her with so much vulnerability in his brown eyes that her own welled with tears.

“I always miss you when we’re not together.” She reached out, surprised when Andy let her take his hand. “I know I’m not good at any of the parenting stuff, but I love you, and I miss you. I love seeing you and spending time with you. Always.”

“More than your stupid show?”

Aly nodded.

“Would you quit it if I asked you to?”

Aly sighed.

“So, no.” Andy yanked his hand away.

“Stop.” She reached for him again. “I have to finish the last bit of my contract, but after that, yes. I will quit if you want me to. But they offered to do the show in Jersey only. I can be close to home. And they’d love to have you on set when you can be.”

Andy froze, blinking several times before he finally spoke. “You’d stay with me *and* do the show?”

“I can.” Aly shrugged. “I didn’t know how to be your parent. I still don’t. But I’m trying to learn. And I promise to do better and be around more.”

Andy’s gaze dropped to the floor. “Will says I haven’t been fair about your job.”

Aly nodded.

His shoulders pulled back. “But it seemed like your job and the house and the babysitters and everything were more important than me. You never had time for me.”

“Oh Andy.” She never wanted him to feel that way.

“But since you’ve been home, you’ve had more time for me. And I think it’s because you finally had help. Your job took care of the house stuff.” He shrugged, and although it wasn’t that simple, the house situation was being handled.

That alone lightened Aly's load monumentally. "And you had Will, so maybe before, you just had too much."

"I did," she agreed with a sad smile. "But I don't want you to ever think that you aren't important to me. You are one of the most important things in my life."

Without a word, Andy threw his arms around her neck.

"Can we start over?" she asked him, squeezing him tight.

Andy pulled back and shook his head. "No."

Aly's eyes welled with tears again.

"Like Will said, you'll always be my family. But Will wants to be my family too. He *is* my family, and I like it." Andy scowled and shook his head. "No, I love him, and he loves me. He didn't have to become part of my life, but he chose to anyway. I'm staying with him; we're ham and cheese."

The reality was far more complicated than Andy knew, but she and Will would have to work on it. "I'll talk to Will."

Andy sighed and shook his head. "Of course you'll talk to Will." He scoffed. "Ham and cheese are the glue that holds the bread together. You need glue to hold you together, and we need bread."

"Andy, you heard him. He—"

"He said we aren't a package deal for you," Andy corrected, giving her a pointed look she didn't understand. "He meant that you have to choose us separately. He wants to know you love him and want *him*, not just me."

"I think it's too late for that."

He frowned and shook his head. "Stay here."

"Andy," she called, but he disappeared without looking back.

CHAPTER 28





WILL STOOD at the counter and took a long pull of his beer before setting the bottle back down. If Andy decided to leave with Aly, then Will had to let him go. But he didn't know if he could live through losing both of them.

"You're going to be pissed." Luke came to stand next to him.

"You talked to her." Will took another swig.

"I'm not sorry—"

He held out his hand. "It's fine. Whatever you said got her here. And Andy needs her. So thank you."

Luke's blue eyes narrowed. "You think she's only here for Andy?"

He took another pull of his beer. "I can't let myself hope it's anything else. I won't live through another crushing disappointment. Yesterday you walked in and smirked like maybe you had her with you. And—" Will shook his head.

"Hey." Andy came flying into the kitchen. "Come on. We need to talk."

The kid pulled on his hand, dragging him back to the sunroom. Andy's smile lit the room more than the fire raging in the hearth or the lamp on the table next to the sofa. But Aly stood in the middle of the space, shoulders back and hands fisted at her sides. The glimmer of tears shone in those smoky eyes.

Those eyes that knocked him on his ass every time he looked into them. Why couldn't a look from her make him horny and nothing else? No, when she had her sights locked on him, his chest squeezed so tight he thought it would explode. It made his hands shake and made him want to promise her the moon and stars and anything else she wanted if only she'd stay with him.

But he'd tried that, and it had failed miserably.

"You two good?" Will asked him, forcing air into his lungs as he waited for a response.

"No," Andy clipped.

Will watched Aly, confused. She lifted a shoulder weakly, and when she dropped it again, her bottom lip quivered.

Will turned back to Andy and swallowed thickly, bolstering the courage to deal with whatever was going on. “What’s the matter, dude?”

“It’s not enough if only two out of three people are good.” Andy frowned and walked toward him.

Will crouched when the kid got close so they could be eye to eye, and Andy put a hand to his shoulder.

“She’s an idiot, but we knew that about her already.”

Will’s eyes shot to Aly. A silent tear fell down her cheek in response to her brother’s words, and she shut those smoky eyes, closing him off.

“But I forgive her.”

“I’m glad.” Will’s voice cracked.

“Now it’s up to you two to figure it out from here,” Andy said. He patted Will’s arm and shuffled out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Will stared at the doorway long after he left, unable to look at Aly.

Finally, she spoke. “I’m sorry. I made such a mistake.” Her voice broke.

He couldn’t bring himself to look at her. He used to think that the deaths of his parents were the worst moments of his life. Then Aly left him, and he knew nothing could hurt more. Until now. This moment was worse. He braced himself for the next words, the ones that said she wanted Andy back. And he couldn’t say no.

Three days ago, he’d lost the only woman he’d ever loved. The only woman he would ever love, and now he was losing Andy too. For the first time in his life, he was lost. He loved his brothers and his sister and their whole slew of kids. He loved coaching and the gym. But Aly and Andy were his reason for living, and now he’d lose them both.

Will slumped into a bucket chair in the corner and ran his hands over his face. “All right,” he agreed. “You can have him back.” Acid churned in his stomach and tears pricked at his eyes. He was a grown man, but he was absolutely going to cry over the loss of the boy who had become his son.

“What?” Aly asked, her tone one of confusion.

Will dropped his hands onto his knees and hung his head. “I won’t fight you.” His voice sounded dead to his own ears. “You’re his family.”

Her warm hand landed on his shoulder, and he wanted so badly to let himself lean into it, to seek out her comfort.

“But you’ve become his parent, and even if I wanted that, he’d never allow it. He’d just run back to you,” Aly said.

He lifted his head. If she wasn’t saying it was a mistake to leave Andy... His heart skipped a beat.

“What are you talking about?” he asked, his voice a whisper. He raised his head and studied her, afraid to hope even as the feeling grew inside him.

She took a deep breath and let it out, wringing her hands. Just when he thought she’d shut down, she said, “I found the ring, and I panicked. I should have talked to you, told you I was scared. But instead, I ran.”

He stared deep into her eyes, searching for the meaning behind her words. “What do you mean?”

“I was still adjusting to being a parent for Andy and felt like I was failing miserably. I didn’t know whether I could be a good wife. And if anyone should have more kids, it’s you. But how could I be a mom? Me, this utter failure? I should have told you I needed things to go slower—”

His heart surged in his chest, and he jumped to his feet and cut her off with his lips. He should have let her finish, but he couldn’t. He had to kiss her. And she jumped right on board and kissed him back.

She wanted him. And he could give her as long as she needed.

“I wasn’t going to ask you—” Will tried to explain, pulling back.

But before he could finish, hurt flashed across her face. “Who, then?”

“You. Never anyone but you. But not *yet*,” he clarified.

Confusion still swam in her teary eyes. “Al, I knew you weren’t ready. But I knew what I wanted. And my family does this thing where the guys all go together to pick out the ring. We were all here for Clayton’s game. I was ready, and I’d hoped you would be eventually. The moment you were ready, I wanted to pop the question. I didn’t want to have to wait for everyone to get here before I could.”

“I’m sorry.”

He looked into those gray eyes of hers, and his world fell into place. “I forgive you; it doesn’t matter, and I love you.”

She rested her head on his shoulder and let out a contented sigh. “I love you too. I just need time, because the idea that you might ask me tomorrow—”

“This is what we’re going to do,” he said as he held her tight to him.

“You have a plan that fast? I didn’t even finish my sentence.” Aly shook her head against his chest.

He just grinned. “You know I want you to be my wife, and I know you will be *someday*. But I understand that the pressure to get there could be stressful. So when you’re ready, I want you to take that ring out of the box and put it on your finger. Until that day, you and Andy will live with me, and we’ll grow together.”

Aly tipped her face up and regarded him. “Is that what you want?”

“All I want is you. You and Andy forever.” He leaned down and kissed her thoroughly. He couldn’t wait for that night. Couldn’t wait to do a lot more than kiss her. That night and every night from then on.

“Oh, gross. Are we back to this again?”

When Will pulled back, Andy was smiling at them from the doorway.

Aly, of course, was blushing even as she peered over her shoulder at Andy.

“Forever,” Will assured him with a smile.

CHAPTER 29





“THIS IS CHAOS,” Aly whispered. She scanned the room, stunned by the sheer amount of shredded wrapping paper and half opened boxes. Christmas morning with the Evans crew was chaos. In the best ways, but still. “How are you handling this mess?”

Next to her, Will chuckled. “I’m trying to ignore it. Like right now, I’m thinking about last night when you—”

Aly slammed a hand over his mouth as her face heated.

“What did you do?” Danny asked.

“Best Christmas present ever.” Will wrapped his arm around her and tucked her into his side. Once it was clear she was staying, Grant and Trish had shifted their kids around so Will and Aly could have a room. It had given them a chance to talk more and to do other things...

He was as happy as she was about the contract change for the show. And he liked the idea of making appearances on camera from time to time, along with Andy. Mostly, he was just happy she was there.

It was still surreal that she got to call this man hers. But that meant she’d never take him for granted either.

“I love you,” he whispered.

A Playskool farm mooed for at least the seventh time, and a firetruck blared its siren.

“Don’t let Heidi steal my stuff.” One of Grant’s girls stomped her foot.

“Look at this, Katie!” the girl she thought was Beth and Marc’s daughter called.

“Unnn Anny!” A toddler came flying over with a box, and Will’s brother scooped her up.

Andy had already opened his gifts from both her and Will, as well as the zillions of others from Will’s family. Now he, Steve, and Nate were playing a game on the floor away from the little ones.

“I have something for you.” Will pulled a rectangular box out of his pocket and handed it to her.

She tugged on the paper and pulled it open slowly. In true Will fashion, he took the paper from her hand and put it in the trash bag at his feet. He was currently the only one in the room worried about cleanup.

Aly smiled teasingly.

“I know. I know. Enjoy the experience; don’t worry about the mess. I’m trying really hard.” Will rolled his eyes.

She turned back to the box and snapped it open. Nestled inside was a beautiful rose gold heart on a simple chain.

“It’s mine,” Will said softly. “Tuck it close to yours to keep it safe.”

It took her a second to understand that he meant his heart. The necklace was gorgeous, but he was really giving her his heart. She traced the outline with her pointer finger.

“It’s beautiful.”

Will pulled the box away and had the necklace on her before she even said okay. Which wasn’t shocking. The heart fell just between her breasts, and he leaned down and placed a kiss on top before bringing his lips to her ear.

“I really want to put a different type of mark on your tit, but this one will do for now.” His voice was a growl.

She shivered and swatted him in the stomach. “Stop it,” she begged, shaking her head and hauling herself up to grab the gifts she’d brought with her.

“Wait.” Andy came over with a box in his arms. “Me first.”

Will opened the gift, making sure his paper was thrown away. “A blender.”

“It has three cups plus the big blender so you can keep making me those crappy kale things.”

“Language,” someone yelled from across the room.

“Thanks, dude. We’ll try it out when we get home.”

A box hurtled through the air then, and Andy had to duck so it didn’t hit him. “Steve!” Andy disappeared after his cousin, picking up the empty box as he jogged past it.

“Here.” She handed him the boxes wrapped in green striped paper, the small one on top of the larger flat box.

Will pulled the paper off the smaller of the two, revealing a picture frame ornament. Inside was a photo from her Christmas party. Aly and Will had their heads tipped together, a blurry Christmas tree in the background.

“Hell yeah, it is,” Will mumbled.

The frame said *First Christmas of Forever*.

Will opened the next box and looked at the scrapbook with a furrowed brow. She cringed internally, hoping this hit right.

On the first page, she’d put a small note with a photo of him and Andy from two weeks ago at the swim meet.

Thanks for being his consistency-turned-parent. We both love you.

The corner of Will’s mouth turned up, and he flipped the page.

“Holy shit.” Will’s eyes widened. “Where did you get this?”

“Photography was one of mom’s things. We have a lot of pictures. When I thought about it, I realized you were probably in several from swim lessons and practice and meets.”

“He was what, four?” Will ran a finger over the photo of Andy jumping into the water to Will.

“Guppies.” Aly nodded.

Will turned the pages and found the minnows and the flounders and the bass and the tuna. Then Andy moved to flips swim team and became a shark. He turned one more page, but it was blank.

“I figured we could continue it as you keep coaching.”

“Thank you.” Will wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tight. “It’s perfect.”

“It isn’t much, but I wanted to give you something special.”

Will shook his head. “You and Andy have given me so much. Just by being here with me. I used to think I was happy alone. An organized life with just me. But you two blew into my world and gave me something that was so much bigger and better. So much more than just myself. And that’s the best gift ever.”

EPILOGUE





Andy

“DAD,” Andy called from across the kitchen when the blender stopped. That word flowed so easily off his tongue now. For the first couple of months, Andy had to remind himself to call Will *Dad*. He’d started doing it because it was what they both wanted, but now he didn’t even need to think about it.

He had officially been adopted in April. It was one of Andy’s favorite days.

His dad poured a pink smoothie into one of the three cups on the marble countertop. For months, Aly had worked to redo the kitchen between tapings, and a few weeks ago, she’d finally finished. It was worth the wait; the room looked so good.

Andy swelled with pride as he looked at the backsplash that his sister had let him help create.

“What’s up, dude?” his dad answered as he added more ingredients to the blender before he started it again.

“Is she really skipping work to come today?” Andy shouted over the loud noise.

“She promised she’d be there, so she’s coming,” his dad assured him, shutting off the blender and filling the other two cups with a brown-green liquid.

“Is she going to wear all the junk again?” Andy asked, hoping he hadn’t made it sound like a good thing—even though he secretly kind of liked that she did it. It gave him one of those warm feelings inside. Even if she looked silly.

“You mean a team shirt and your button?” his dad asked, one brow raised at him. “She’s being supportive.”

Andy tried to not smile.

“And before you ask, I can guarantee they’ll *all* be wearing that stuff. Uncle Nick and Aunt Beth even ordered baby tees for the little guys,” his dad informed him.

Andy couldn’t hide his smile. Not many kids had a whole section of the bleachers cheering for just them. The first few times were weird. He wasn’t used to having anyone there, let alone rows of people. But now he liked it. Just like he liked

watching Nate's roping contests and Steve's games. He was lucky to have two cousins his age. He hated sitting through Mandy's dance stuff, but he went because that's what family did. He really hoped the rest of the little girls didn't dance though. His dad agreed with him but told him he would be in trouble if he told anyone else that.

"It's so embarrassing," Andy said.

His dad sent him a look that said *you're lying through your teeth*. "It'll be extra embarrassing, then, because Uncle Clayton and Uncle Luke flew in last night, and Uncle Grant and Aunt Trish are meeting everyone at the pool."

Andy's eyes widened. "*Everyone's coming?*"

"Dude, this is national qualifiers. Of course everyone's coming."

"Oh geez," he said. "I probably won't qualify."

"They won't care how you do. Don't be nervous about that. They just want to cheer you on," his dad assured him with a pat on the head as he set a smoothie in front of him.

He took a sip. "I don't like the taste of kale."

His dad laughed. "No one likes kale. We drink it because it's good for us. You want to keep growing, right?"

He did. Hopefully he would. All the guys in the family were huge, and he didn't want to be the runt of the family like Aunt Taran.

"Did you put kale in mine?" Aly came in, frowning. She was wearing the team T-shirt and one of his dad's coaching jackets, along with two buttons with Andy's picture on them.

"No, Al. I know you'll only drink it if it's berries and yogurt." His dad slid the smoothie that was not green across the counter.

When she reached for the glass, Andy's heart stopped. He stared, wide eyed, at the ring on her finger. He shot an accusing glare at his dad; he hadn't even told him.

“She doesn’t need to grow, dude. You do,” his dad told him when he caught sight of him.

“No, it’s not that. You asked her to marry you and you didn’t tell me? And she said yes? You didn’t tell me that either. You promised you would tell me.”

Andy frowned as confusion spread over his dad’s face. But when his dad fixated on Aly’s hand, he looked happier than Andy had ever seen him. Happier than when Andy had won states and qualified for the national meet or when Aly had finally come back home to them.

No, his dad’s eyes were brighter than he’d ever seen them as he rounded the counter. He picked up her left hand and gaped, mouth wide, at her finger. It was almost like his dad had finally won a prize he’d always wanted. And...were those tears in his eyes?

“Really?” his dad asked.

His sister was *definitely* crying as she nodded. Then his dad kissed her. One of those long, gross kisses that made Andy want to leave the room.

If he had given her the ring already, then why was he so surprised that she had it on? And why were they both crying?

Andy crossed his arms and waited for one of them to remember he was in the room.

His dad turned to him first, and sure enough, he had that choked-up look. “Want to be my best man?”

“Hey, I was going to ask him to give me away,” Aly said.

But they both opened an arm to him.

Andy jumped up from his seat and crashed into them. “I can do both,” he assured them. How cool was it that they were getting married? He was the luckiest kid. A year ago, that was something he never thought he’d be. Life was finally perfect.

Curious about Will's best friend Corey?
Check out [More Than a Story](#)



MORE THAN A STORY



CHAPTER ONE

“GET SOME GLASSES, jackass—I’ll donate to the cause.” The man’s shouts caused Taran to wince, and not only because of the volume.

New York fans were obnoxious, but they also tended to be *wrong*. That was a good call. The ball was so low it almost hit the dirt. Not even close to the strike zone.

“Guy’s got it out for us. He might as wella’be wearing purple the way he’s calling for the Rockies,” another fan added as Taran worked not to roll her eyes.

The ridiculous part of it was, the game was all but over: two outs, top of the ninth, Metros by three. Nobody was on base for the Rockies. The fans might be screaming, but all they needed was one more strike, and the game was done.

“Strike,” the man behind the plate called as the ball smacked into the leather mitt. Cheers sounded across the stadium, and the music played. Check the box for another NY Metros win, putting them at the top of the AL East.

Even with the screaming crowd, the entire game had been a disappointment. Taran needed a story for her sports gossip blog, and typically, a Saturday night at the ballpark brought something out.

But not tonight.

It was like everyone fun stayed home. Not one gossip-worthy person had showed up. No politician eating a hot dog, no Grammy winner singing the National Anthem, no star-

studded boxes for a photo op of Hollywood's elite. Not even former players watching their team; just an average game.

She pushed off the armrests and stood before heading up the concrete steps that led away from the *Sports Illustrated* box seats behind the home team dugout. Although the set of tickets was up for grabs for any of the reporters on staff, she used them more than anyone else. Sneaking between the people, she weaved toward the tunnels beneath the seats that housed forty thousand fans for every game day.

"Hey, kid," security called out as she rounded the corner out of the crowd and into the back tunnels. "Hey—*kid*."

Taran turned. Being four-eleven, she dealt with this a lot. Especially when she dressed to blend in. Not being noticed was the key to getting a story.

"Not a kid, not lost, don't need to find mom or dad." She pulled her lanyard out from under her shirt and flashed her press pass.

"She's good," Grey announced from farther down the tunnel. He was normally the security doorman, and Taran knew him well. The middle-aged man smirked as she got closer. "Might have even confused me today, Taran. Really working the young kid look."

She shrugged. It was easier if everyone ignored her. And everyone usually ignored a kid. Her image required her to blend in.

"Got something juicy?" he asked, waiting for a funny story she'd usually spill without effort, but she shook her head.

"Not today. It's like fun had an allergy to the game tonight."

"It *was* quiet. We didn't even kick anyone out. But the Rockies suck this year, so it's not shocking. I expected a blowout."

Taran nodded, but her phone buzzed in her pocket before she could add more. The second buzz told her it was a call, not a text, meaning it was her family or her boss. She wasn't sure which was worse. Either way, she was in for a lecture.

“Have a good night,” Taran said to Grey before heading farther down the tunnel. She pulled her phone out, frowning at the name before accepting the call. “Hey.”

“How was it? Get anything?” her boss said without even a hello.

Taran sighed. “Wayne, my blog is not your problem.”

“Your blog helps drive our hard copy sales. It’s linked on our website, and if you keep up the stories, people keep reading your full-length articles. And for the last few weeks, its sucked.”

Taran scratched at the coffee stain on her T-shirt above the words: *It’s okay if you don’t like baseball. It’s kind of a smart person sport.* It was impossible to say he was being unfair because her blog had been dragging for a while. It was April, and her clicks had been down since mid-March. She knew why. Like she expected, March had been a rough month, and finding gossip wasn’t high on her list of priorities. If she wanted to take the easy way out, she could have explained why she was dragging. But she was tired of the sympathy.

“I’ll find something,” she assured him.

“Or create it.” His statement was flippant.

Taran sucked in hard. “We work for *Sports Illustrated*, not the *National Inquirer*.”

“It’s a blog, for God’s sake. Get the clicks, then retract it tomorrow. No one cares.”

Her fingers tightened on the phone, pressing the metal into her palm. There were hard lines she didn’t cross.

“That’s not who I am.” Even if she was currently a gossip reporter, she wasn’t willing to outright lie in any story. Man, she was amazed that they even needed to have this conversation. Five years ago, she never would have believed she’d work for this type of man. But over these last few years, everything about her life had taken a hard left turn.

“Yeah, you and your *principles*. Anyway, how about next month’s article?”

“I have until Monday to find someone.”

She wrote full-length feature articles for the monthly magazine. Her stories were more color than fact and focused hard on the players’ lives outside of sports.

“Have you contacted any of my big five?”

Wayne had a list of athletes he wanted her to feature before the end of the calendar year. Although he deemed it a reasonable list, she knew better. The first was the hottest rookie baseball player of the year, and everyone was after him. The second one was a soccer star living in Guatemala. She’d reached out to his agent twice already but hadn’t even gotten a call back. The next two were on a media hiatus, and the last one—the elusive white whale—had never in his entire career done a color interview. He was good at answering questions about his game, even when he was playing poorly, but if anyone dared to ask about his personal life, the interview ended.

“You’re in the same building as Corey Matthews. Make an attempt.”

The white whale himself. It wasn’t shocking that Wayne demanded she go after him first. But unless the stars aligned and luck suddenly had her back, she wasn’t going to get Corey Matthews to agree to anything. He *hated* gossip reporters.

“Do you hear me?”

“Yeah.” She glanced down at her clothes. She’d stand out like a sore thumb if she went into the locker room looking like a kid. There was a change of clothes in her car, so she’d have to head out to the parking garage and hope Matthews didn’t leave before she got back. But everyone knew the pitcher bounced out as quickly as possible after a game.

“Yeah, what?” he asked. “Do I need to take care of locking down articles for you? Try to keep up with the big boys, princess.”

Wayne had never wanted to hire her. He was old, crotchety, and a full-blown sexist. He thought the only place women belonged in sports reporting was in front of the camera

where they could look cute. She fantasized about stabbing him with a fork, but that was about as likely as her getting an interview with the elusive Matthews. Still, she needed this job. Any chance of her dream job had ended in disaster two years ago.

“I’ll get one of the five by Monday.” She made the impossible promise to get him off the phone and hung up, having no earthly idea how the hell she was going to do it.

MORE THAN A STORY



CHAPTER TWO

TONIGHT, Corey didn't quite hate the Captain America nickname like he normally did.

"We're heading to Poison. Want to come?" Ryan Daily, the second pitcher in the Metros' rotation, walked out of the locker room behind him. The guys on the team went to that bar after home games, and everyone in New York knew this. It was a great place to get media attention or a quick hookup, but it wasn't the spot to relax after a game. At least not for Corey.

"Thanks, but I'll pass," Corey said.

His baseball team was starting out the season at the top of the division, and Corey had pitched another great game. Including preseason, it was his twelfth in a row. A record for the man whose head game caused his pitching to be about as consistent as the spring weather. Even if that was the only thing going well in life, that should be enough, but it wasn't.

"Blowing us off for a hot date?" Daily asked.

Corey just smirked.

Daily smiled as they fist-bumped. "Have fun, Cap. Bet she'll love that your ugly mug is about to be all over," Daily said as he walked away.

Sideline was finally thinking about replacing the face of their multinational sportswear brand. And since their current brand ambassador, Marc Demoda, and Corey were tight, they'd talked Sideline into a campaign using both men to transition from Marc to Corey.

He'd *good old boyed* the media after the game, and not one of the eight men in the locker room had mentioned his third inning. Even the harsh New York media had nothing bad to say about Corey these days.

"Good game, Captain," another teammate called before he made it out of the locker room but he smiled. No one was being sarcastic when they called him Captain America today.

His phone beeped in his pocket and he wondered which of the many Evans siblings was texting him.

He was surprised to see Clayton's name on the screen.

Call me.

He was grateful that was all it said.

Corey flicked up and hit the call button.

"Dude," was the twenty-two-year-old's replacement for hello.

"Where's the fire?" Corey answered.

"It's official. They don't want me."

He sighed. Clayton was the youngest Evans sibling—more than ten years younger than Corey—and was currently at USC on a hot deadline with the NFL draft. All he wanted was to come home to New York with a contract to be the next QB for any tri-state area team. It hadn't looked promising since none of the teams needed a quarterback for a few more years, barring some devastating injury, and Clayton was too high priced for a team without the need.

"You're pouting about being one of the top three draft picks this year. You know that, right kid?" Corey asked.

"Fuck you. I called *you* because I thought you would get it," Clayton shot back.

Corey wouldn't correct him about who actually made the call, because the truth of it was that he knew exactly how Clayton felt. He, too, had wanted more than anything to come back to New York and pitch after college.

Corey cracked his neck left and right. He couldn't lie to Clayton and say he was good enough to play wherever he wanted.

Ten years ago, Corey, sporting an Olympic gold medal, had been one of the best pitchers to come into the MLB, and even that wasn't enough to get him back into the New York area. The Houston Astros had drafted him.

He stopped mid-step and shut his eyes, reliving that time of his life.

Looking back, Houston hadn't been *that* bad. The city itself was great, and the space he gained from all the drama in his life had been his saving grace. Plus, he'd had fun in Houston, and he'd grown up a lot.

"Hello?" Clayton demanded in his ear, and Corey wondered how long he'd been silent. He glanced around, realizing he couldn't stand here staring into space, and continued to the exit.

"Yes, I know how you feel, Clay, but tell me this. Do you really want to play football?" he asked, juggling the phone on his shoulder and searching for his keys in his gym bag. That's what it came down to—if he wanted to play, he'd go where they'd play him.

"Yes." All of Clayton's frustration came through in that one word.

"Who wants ya?" Corey asked. He was going to sell the hell out of that team. Especially one that might, in the future, let Clayton go to a team that could pay more.

"Mostly Denver and Seattle."

"Ha, the hauntingly bad luck of going top three."

Clayton snorted.

"Joking aside, Seattle's got the first pick and Denver the third, right?"

"If you say I'm living every kid's dream, I'm hanging up."

He remembered people saying similar things to him when he was drafted out of Penn State. It had crushed him not to be in New York.

“It’s either going to be the mile-high can’t breathe capital of the world or the rainy dark cloud of the US,” Clayton moaned.

“You really think both cities suck? Or you’ve decided not to give anyone but New York a chance?” he asked, as he started down the tunnel to the parking garage.

“Both cities suck. Suckety suck, suck, suck.” Clayton sounded like a teenager.

“Don’t be a pussy. Seattle—that city has potential. I know it means going number one, but the piano bars, the fish market, the docks, the underground, the club scene—all awesome. And it’s more of a neighborhood than any other city. I’d go there.” Corey nodded at another of his teammates as he opened the tunnel door into the parking garage. “I doubt you’ll be lonely since we’ll all visit you constantly.”

“Just what I need, a bunch of people checking up on me. I hate the west coast,” Clayton mumbled.

“Really?” Corey shook his head and hit the unlock button on his key fob. “You seem happy as a pig in shit every time I see you in Cali.”

“I mean—” He couldn’t finish the sentence because it was true.

“Look, Clay, you want to be home, but it’s not time yet. I know exactly how you feel, but being away from everyone means you can put the time in to earn your stripes in Seattle.” Corey leaned against the side of the red truck.

“I guess that’s true. You guys would try to make me hang out all the time, especially Beth. I mean, I’m her favorite,” Clayton joked about his sister and one of Corey’s best friends.

“Horseshit. I’m her favorite. And besides, Seattle won’t be able to afford you in three years, and you can force a trade back home then.”

“Ya think?” Clayton sounded hopeful.

Corey switched his phone to the other hand and rolled his sore shoulder, causing the ice still taped to him to crack. “I’m sure. Denver could afford to keep you. Seattle can’t. Ask your agent. He’ll tell you the same thing. Go with Seattle.”

“Thanks bro,” Clayton said.

“Anytime, Clay, and don’t melt in all that rain,” Corey teased as he adjusted his shoulder again, and turned his head a bit, catching the movement of someone in the shadows. He narrowed his eyes. It looked like a ten or twelve-year-old boy hiding behind the pole several feet away. He didn’t understand how he could have gotten into the parking garage, but the kid was definitely close enough to hear the conversation.

“Oh, by the way, that third inning—fuck—you sucked. Did you forget that the guys shouldn’t be hitting the ball?” Clayton was laughing as Corey cursed him.

“You want a pep talk going into the draft? Don’t mention that inning. I got out of it, so don’t even start with the worst one of the season shit.” Corey moved straight to the pole, heading after the kid. “I got to go, Clay.”

The white stripes of the Yankee cap were easy to see moving in the dark between two SUVs. Corey guessed the route and quickly eased the other way around the big black escalade, beating him to the back of the car. The kid was still looking over his shoulder, checking to see where he’d gone, when he smacked into Corey’s chest and fell backward.

Corey caught his small arm before the poor kid hit the concrete. “Whatcha doing here, kid?”

The Yankees cap snapped up, and a pair of sea-mist-green eyes looked up at him. “My job,” said a voice that was definitely *not* male.

He quickly released his hold on the thin arm, not wanting to be accused of assault, and the woman stumbled back again but righted herself.

Corey crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at the little woman. She couldn’t have been more than five foot,

and she was maybe a hundred pounds soaking wet. There was not a curve on her, at least not one he could see under her big white T-shirt and what looked like a ten-year-old boy's jeans. He rocked back on his heels.

“What exactly is your job?”

A small crease appeared between her green eyes. “You don't know who I am?”

Normally, that question came across snotty, but the way she said it was more incredulous. Like honest to God, he should know her. Corey wasn't one of those guys who forgot a woman, and he scanned her again—from the stupid Yankee hat riding low on her forehead, covering ink-black hair, to the coffee stain on the white shirt with a snarky saying, to the tips of the Nike sneakers with a hole in one toe.

“Nope,” he said unapologetically.

“Well then, let's meet again for maybe the twelfth time.” Her sarcastic tone set his teeth on edge.

“If I've met you twelve times, you clearly aren't memorable,” Corey snapped back.

“Whatever you say.” She rolled those sea-green eyes making a *you're an idiot* face.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

“Taran. Murphy.” Each syllable popped slowly out of her mouth as she raised a single thin eyebrow. It would have pissed him off if the name didn't send ice into his veins.

A breath hissed through his teeth. “*Sports Illustrated* gossip reporter.”

Normally, he played the game of media darling with reporters. But not this one. This one traded in athlete gossip. She would exploit an athlete's personal life for a career boost. The kind he never gave a second glance. He didn't remember her because he'd probably never looked at her. Want to talk about his game, his team, his arm, his contracts, his agent? He'd give a reporter all the time in the world. Want to talk about his personal life? As far as he was concerned, the

reporter didn't exist. But at the moment, her existence was glaring. He reran the conversation with Clayton through his mind. Seattle and Denver might both be off the table if any of what either man said was reported. Nobody wanted a whiney quarterback who didn't want to be part of the team. And Corey couldn't remember exactly what he had said aloud about Clayton's feelings.

"In Case You Didn't Know." She quoted the name of her monthly article.

"What did you hear?" Corey demanded.

"Enough." The cat that ate the canary smile she flashed had his hands fisting. "I think I've got this week's blog."

"Blog?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

"It's when people write articles on a website," she said slowly, enunciating every word with a sugary sweet voice, implying he was a dumb fuck.

He knew what a damn blog was. He just hadn't realized she wrote one.

"What will it take for you to forget it?" he asked, but he sneered at being forced into a game he didn't want to play.

She paused and stared at him for a beat, and then a devilish smile slowly spread across her face. "The full interview for next month's article."

He snorted. "Clayton's not doing interviews. He's on a media hiatus."

It almost looked like he'd confused her, but before he could zero in on the look, it was gone, replaced by an arrogant, not-my-problem-stare. "I'm sure Clayton would do an interview with someone you said was okay."

"Yeah, right." Anyone who knew Corey knew he'd never trust the person who wrote "In Case You Didn't Know."

"I'm sure you could convince him if you needed to." Her shrug was nearly imperceptible in that ridiculously big stained shirt.

“What do you expect me to do—call you my girlfriend and ask him for a favor?” He snorted again at the idiocy of the idea.

But Taran just smiled. “That would work.”

Now he laughed outright. “Sorry, I don’t fuck trash reporters—even desperate ones.”

Those sea-mist eyes turned hard as diamonds. “No interest on this end either.”

He glanced at her again. She probably had no life of her own. That’s why other people’s personal lives interested her so much.

“However, I want an invite to the Demodas’ place. I know you’re going, and so am I if you don’t want to read about your lovely phone call with Clayton on my blog tomorrow.” She shot him an icy glare, daring him to balk. “Your choice.”

“By the way, he’s right about the third.”

Corey froze. How the hell could she know what Clayton had said about that inning?

Dear Reader,

First, let me just say a massive THANK YOU! Thank you for reading *More Than Myself*. Thank you for supporting me. It's only because readers exist that writers get to live out their dreams.

So, Will and Aly—boy were they a challenge. As much as everyone loves to throw stereotypes out the window and have a new spin on a trope, when done on the page it is HARD. Balance their talents and their strength with their personalities was a tight rope walk which I crash to the safety net multiple times. My author friends were such a help in straightening this story out. I hope in the end these two worked as perfectly as I wanted them to. Not only were these two difficult characters to perfect, they came at a hard time in life. So, thank you for waiting somewhat patiently for Will to get his happily ever after.

Want to see a peak at their future? Check out my website www.jennibara.com for their bonus epilogue.

If you love the Evanses, check out the first four book in the series all found on amazon or in Kindle Unlimited. I hope to have book six out sometime in 2023. Which brother will be next? That's always the question, isn't it? Don't worry I promise to get to them all in due time!

Finally, remember: Live in your world, fall in love in mine.

Jenni

www.jennibara.com

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR





Jenni Bara lives in New Jersey, working as a paralegal in family law, writing real-life unhappily ever-afters every day. In turn, she spends her free time with anything that keeps her laughing, including life with four kids. She is just starting her career as a romance author writing books with an outstanding balance of life, love, and laughter.

