



# SCARS

STEFANIE JENKINS

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Stefanie Jenkins



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## Blurb

**R**eturning to my hometown of Meadows Ridge, I'm just as broken as the day I left.

I'm no longer the teenager who had everything at his fingertips. All it took was one moment to turn the world as we knew it into a painful memory.

I deserve the nightmares plaguing me.

Then there's her, Riley Parker—the woman I left behind, my bleeding heart still in her hands. The hurt and anger in her doe eyes is justified. But I'm determined to prove to her that deep down, I'm still the same Cooper Graham she once loved.

Will I be able to get off this path of destruction, or am I doomed to live with the scars branded on my soul forever?

**Trigger Warning:** Scars is an angsty and emotional second chance romance. There is discussion of self harm in the past in this book.

To all the readers who love to have their hearts ripped from their chest, stomped on, thrown in a blender & eventually put back together in the end, this one's for you.

“To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die.”

- Thomas Campbell

# Playlist



## Listen to the full spotify playlist here

Country Girl (Shake It For Me) – Luke Bryan

Scars – Madilyn

Break Up In A Small Town – Sam Hunt

Babe I'm Gonna Leave You – Led Zeppelin

We Are The Champions – Queen

Paralyzed – NF

How Do I Live – Trisha Yearwood

Cryin' For Me (Wayman's Song) – Toby Keith

I2I – Tevin Campbell

Love Story – Taylor Swift

Unsaid Emily – Julie and the Phantoms Cast

It's All Coming Back to Me Now – Celine Dion

Fool of Me – Meshell Ndegeocello

Just A Fool – Christina Aguilera, Blake Shelton

Come Home – One Republic, Sara Bareilles

Hold My Hand – Lady Gaga

What About Us – P!nk

You Are a Memory – Message To Bears

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# Prologue

Cooper

“**A**re y’all deaf *and* stupid?” Coach Benson’s deep, boisterous voice echoes through the bus, causing all of us to silence. “I said get your damn asses off the bus and out of my face.” The huge smile on his face vastly contradicts the menacing tone.

As soon as he descends the steps and out the door, the chatter continues as if someone just turned the volume up on the world. But it gets us all moving. Don’t have to tell us twice—or, well, maybe you do.

After traveling for two hours, we’re finally back in the parking lot of Meadows Ridge High School. I can’t wait to get off this fucking bus. My muscles are sore as hell and my ass numb. At least the boosters had the funds to get us the nice buses and not force us to ride in the typical yellow ones.

I grab my bag from the empty seat beside me and sling it over my shoulder. The line moves slowly as we all shuffle our way to exit the bus. Outside the windows, it looks like what feels like half, if not the whole, town is waiting to celebrate with us.

This morning, the fourteen of us woke up normal teenagers, and now we are champions—North Carolina State Baseball Champions, to be exact.

“I can’t believe all those people are here for us,” Kaden, our third baseman, says in shock as he stares out the window.

“Fuck yeah, they are. We’re fucking champs,” Max, our shortstop, exclaims as he slaps Kaden’s shoulder.

*Fucking champs.* I still can’t believe it. Last year, we came close, but the Topsail Pirates knocked us out in the playoffs. I don’t know if it was skill or pure determination to graduate as champions, but it finally fucking happened.

Coach Benson slaps my back as I step off the bus and onto the sidewalk. “I’m proud of you, Cooper. Gonna miss you around here.”

“Thank you, sir. I’m going to miss you, too.”

Verne Benson has been my baseball coach all four years here. He saw something in me as a scrawny freshman when I walked onto his field for the first time as one of two players selected for varsity.

“Are your parents here?”

I shake my head. “Nah, they went straight home from the stadium.”

My parents might not be here, but there is someone in the crowd that I’m searching for.

“Cooper,” a familiar female voice shouts, and we both turn to find my girlfriend, Riley Parker, standing high above the crowd with her hands cupped around her mouth so that I can hear her over the sheer volume. She is clearly standing on something to see over the crowd because there is no way she should be able to see at only five foot two. The crowd swallows Riley once she jumps down, confirming my suspicion.

Coach Benson clears his throat, stealing my attention back. “You be safe tonight.” He chuckles, and I’m unsure, based on his expression, the meaning behind his words, but either way, I plan to be.

“Yes, sir.” I flip my hat around backward and head toward her.

I push through the crowd, nodding at all the slaps on the back and the yelled congratulations and high-fiving the hands being held out as I pass. A few folks try to stop me to chat, but my sole focus is on the brunette beauty making her way over to me.

When our eyes lock, her smile widens, matching mine—full of pride. I drop my bag at my feet and scoop her into my arms before spinning her around.

“You did it, baby! I’m so proud of you,” she screams in excitement.

“We did it,” I correct.

As soon as I stop spinning, I place a searing kiss on her lips. I don't even bother setting her back on her feet. Her legs swing and wrap around me as my tongue plunges deeper into her mouth. She tastes sweet, like the watermelon candies she's always eating.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathless. Nothing could kill the high I'm feeling. It's like I'm on top of the world. Having Riley in my arms just feeds the adrenaline flowing through my veins.

"Oh, that's interesting. I didn't realize I was on the field, too," she sasses.

"But you were," I say, brushing the hairs off her face. "You always are—" I place my hand over my heart. "—right here."

Riley's eyes glaze over with unshed tears. "You always say the sweetest things."

"I mean it, Riles" I whisper just before closing the distance and claiming her lips once more. I couldn't care less that we're in public. All that matters right now is us.

"Could you two just get a room already?" Tanner, my best friend since we were kids, says behind me.

I flip him the bird without taking my lips from hers. Riley puts her hand on my chest, pushing me back. Lust swirls in her eyes as she reluctantly releases her legs from my waist. A deep groan slips from my lips as she slowly slides down my body till her feet are steady on the ground.



Riley sashays over to Tanner and pulls him into a hug. “I’m so proud of both my boys.”

“Oh, yeah?” Tanner smirks. “If my skills *on* the field were impressive, you should see what I can do *off* the field. Finally ready to be with a real man, baby cakes?” When he waggles his eyebrows at her, I can’t help but laugh at him. His flirtatious and teasing tones might work on other girls, but not mine.

Riley scrunches her nose and laughs. “Ew, don’t be gross, Hayes.”

Linking my fingers with hers, I tug Riley against my chest protectively.

“Hey, get your own girl to celebrate the victory with,” I growl.

Tanner throws his head back in laughter. “Nah, I’m good, actually,” he responds, glancing around the crowd before pulling a flask from his duffel bag. “Max’s older brother got us some of the good stuff, so I’ve got my victory right here.”

He cheers and takes a small swig. He offers it to me, but I decline, so he quickly places it back in his bag before someone notices.

All our lives, our sole focus has been baseball—it still is. Our dedication meant not much time for partying and alcohol, but this is a celebration. Our victory is the perfect sendoff for Tanner and me, who are both heading off to Chicago in a few short weeks for training after being drafted by the Knights.

Meadows Ridge, North Carolina, is barely a blip on the map, but now two of its residents are heading to the majors. With Tanner's ability to block wild pitches in the dirt and good pop time—throwing players out at second and third base, not to mention he can offensively hit as well as catch, and my strong, effortless arm and excellent ERA (earned run average) as pitcher, we are a lethal combo. We are going to take the baseball world by storm—just like we've dreamed of since our T-ball days.

“Tanner,” a bubbly voice calls out. Although she enunciates each syllable as if his name is actually two words—Tan-ner—it comes off more like a toddler whining. Jessie Hall runs toward him, her blonde ponytail perched on top of her head swaying side to side as she approaches.

I'm pretty sure she's slept with the entire varsity baseball team. Yours truly not included, of course. *Thank God.* This beauty beside me has held my heart since I first laid eyes on her in the boys' locker room at the start of sophomore year. I will never forget the blush that came over her body as she realized she was in the wrong place. We've been inseparable ever since.

“Or maybe he won't be alone at all,” Riley mumbles under her breath, hiding it with a giggle as Tanner seems to fall under Jesse's spell.

My breath fans over Riley's ear. “Quick, let's get out of here.” She nods, and I swiftly turn us away from Tanner and Jess and lead us toward the parking lot.

We're almost to where her black Honda Civic is parked when she slips from my grasp and turns to face me, now walking backward. Riley laughs as she holds out her hand in front of us, pretending to be a reporter with a microphone in hand.

“So, Cooper Graham, you just won the North Carolina State Baseball Championship, including being named MVP. What are you going to do now?”

If she expects me to answer like a football player after winning the big game and say I'm going to Disney World, she's going to be highly disappointed. When we finally reach her car, I back her up, caging her between me and the passenger door.

“Hmm, I can think of a few things. Like this—“ I lean in and press soft kisses against her collarbone, working my way up her neck. She shivers when I reach that sweet spot just under her ear. I know it's not from the warm air of a typical North Carolina spring evening but from my touch.

“That girl is batshit crazy,” Tanner shouts, repeating the *batshit crazy* part as he catches up to us. I guess he didn't think she was so batshit crazy when she sucked his dick last summer.

“Well, so much for being alone,” I mutter, dropping my forehead against Riley's shoulder.

“Just take me home, and then you two can do whatever it is you grossly cute couples do when I'm not around.”

“When are you not around, exactly?” Riley taunts him. Their friendship always makes me smile. Even though they’ve only known each other for three years, it feels like it’s been the three of us all along. They bicker like siblings, and I know without a doubt my best friend is just as protective of her as I am.

Tanner holds up his pointer finger and winks. “Touché. But I know what y’all are like when I’m around, so I don’t need to bleach my brain at the thought of what it’s like when I’m not.”

He grimaces and shivers dramatically, causing me to roll my eyes. We’ve both caught him in far worse positions than he did just now with us. All I would need to say is “*Mistletoe Meltdown*,” and he would eat his words, but I keep my mouth shut.

I feel the vibrations of Riley’s laughter against my body. It flows through me like an electric current and goes straight to my dick.

I take a step back from her and carefully adjust myself, hoping no one notices. The last thing I need right now is Tanner looking down and seeing how hard I am and making his jokes at my expense.

“Ry-Ry, you might not say it aloud, but you know you’re gonna miss me in the fall.” He steps up and taps her on the nose, knowing damn well she hates the gesture.

Tanner and I aren’t the only ones leaving Meadows Ridge to chase our dream. Riley was accepted to the Hamilton School

of the Arts in Boston on a full dance scholarship. I could not be prouder of her.

“Whatever,” she lies through her teeth before turning to me and holding up her keys. “You’re driving, Mr. MVP.”

I snag the keys from her as she presses up on her toes and kisses me quickly. Riley doesn’t give me a chance to deepen the kiss before she pulls back and climbs into the passenger seat of her car.

After shutting the door behind her, I press the button on the key fob to open the trunk. Tanner chuckles when he takes in the mess of her dance gear strewn out all over the trunk. We toss our bags on top and shut it.

Tanner moves the driver’s seat forward to climb into the back seat and situates himself in the center. It’s a little funny seeing him smushed in the back like a damn sardine. I push the seat back into place and get in.

“Fuck,” I curse under my breath when I jam my knee into the steering wheel.

Riley snorts from her seat. “You’d think you would learn by now that your girlfriend is so short.”

I mock her as I adjust the seat to accommodate my size. She is right, though. With almost a foot between our heights, I should remember by now that I need to always adjust the seat before getting behind the wheel of her car. Once I’m settled, I turn the car on and set out for the Hayeses’ house.

The music is playing softly, more as background noise, as we pull out of the parking lot and leave the crowd behind. When one song ends, the local radio station DJ's voice cuts in through the speakers. "And to our Meadows Ridge Wildcats, this one's for you."

"Ahh, fuck yes." Tanner leans forward over the center console and cranks the volume up as Queen's "We are the Champions" begins to play.

The smell of cinnamon fills the front seat. Tanner is just as obsessed with cinnamon gum as Riley is with her watermelon candy. Before he sits back in the back seat, he hits the button for the sunroof, opening it up to reveal the night sky. I love living out here without all the ambient lights, where we can actually see the night stars as clear as day.

"Tanner, what the fuck are you doing?" Looking up, I find him now standing with half of his body flying out of the sunroof.

I glance at Riley, and she's shaking her head in amusement, laughing.

"Don't encourage him," I tease.

"He's *your* best friend," she snaps back, but her smile reaches her eyes.

We both jump when an added loud thumping noise from Tanner dramatically smacking the roof as if it's his own personal drum set joins his loud, off-key singing.

I do my best to ignore my best friend and focus on the road. Highway 15, the long stretch of road that is basically our only major highway in our town and will lead you everywhere, is desolate. A not-so-fun perk of small-town living is the only source of light on this road is from the headlights.

The song switches to “Babe, I’m Gonna Leave You” by Led Zeppelin. *Wow, way to take us from one high to a low.* The change of pace of the song, however, doesn’t deter Tanner from his performance and encourage him to sit back down. He’s now yelling, “Woo,” repeatedly at the top of his lungs. I glance up and see him throwing his arms in the air, almost like those wacky, wavy-arm inflatable tube men that the car dealership in town has out front during every sale.

“I love you, Cooper Graham,” Riley says, bringing my attention to her. She is leaning against the seat, now turned so her body is facing me, and smiling with a dreamy look in her eyes.

Taking one hand off the wheel, I reach over and lace my fingers with hers, bringing our joined hands to my lips. “I love you to the stars and back, Riley Parker.”

The first time I told her that, she tried to correct me and say the phrase is to the moon and back, but the stars are endless, and that is how much my love for her is. Traveling to the closest star would take more than our lifetime to reach, and I plan to spend lifetimes—this and the next—loving her.

My gaze stays on her and not the road for just a split second longer.

But all life needs is that split second to change our lives forever.

“Coop,” Tanner yells at the same time Riley screams, “Cooper, look out!”

I turn and jerk the wheel, avoiding the three deer standing frozen in the road. Life becomes slow motion after that.

The crunching of metal against pavement.

Riley’s screams.

Glass shattering.

The last thing I hear is Riley saying my name before silence.



My vision is blurry, but there are bright lights everywhere—bright fucking white lights. *Fuck, am I dead? What the fuck happened?*

“Cooper? Can you hear me, Cooper?” a voice calls out. It’s muffled and sounds close yet also so far away.

My head is spinning, and I can feel some sort of liquid dripping down my forehead. I try to move to feel it but wince in pain. There is also a constant ringing in my ears.

“Cooper, if you can hear me, don’t move.” That same voice again. They clearly know my name, but I can’t seem to recognize their voice. It’s not surprising because the throbbing



in my head is intense, and I'm struggling to recall anything.  
"You've been in an accident, Cooper."

*Why does this person keep saying my name so much? I know who the fuck I am.* It then registers that he said I've been in an accident. *How long was I out for?*

I try to open my eyes, squinting at the lights now coming into vision.

There's commotion to the right of me—at least, I think it's to the right. Frantic voices fill the space and overpower the ringing in my ears.

"We've got a pulse. Come on, let's move."

*Riley.*

"Riles," I shout, but my voice is hoarse. "Please, that's my girlfriend there. I need to get to her."

A firm grip on my shoulder holds me in place as the paramedic wraps a brace around my neck. "Cooper, they're taking her to Wilson General Hospital. You'll go there, too. You can see her once she's stable. But I need you not to move while we get you out of here, okay?"

*Not move? Is he insane? I need to get to my girl. Wait. There was Riley, but where's Tanner?*

"Tanner! Where's Tanner? He was in the car, too. Where is he?" I try to spin to look in the back seat, but the brace around my neck prevents me from doing so.

I continue to shout his name in case he's back there. *Where else would he be?*

“Cooper, I need you to stay still,” the paramedic commands. *Fuck that.*

“Where is my best friend?” I demand, now getting extremely agitated. My temples pound with each beat of my heart.

There is movement in front of the car that draws my attention to where the windshield used to be. Pieces of shattered glass are everywhere. Did they remove it? Or did it happen in the accident?

The crowd of uniformed officers shifts in front of the car, and something draws my attention to the ground—a white sheet draped over a lump. That lump isn't an animal. It's a body.

“No, no, no, Tanner!” I scream at the top of my lungs, tears running down my face, thrashing around the best I can, trying to break free to get to him. *No, he's not dead. He can't be.*

The paramedic shouts for assistance, but I ignore him and continue to scream out for Tanner, hoping to wake him. *He's just sleeping, that's all.*

Today, we were on top of the world, and now, my girl is being taken away in an ambulance, and I am stuck here. The vision of the sheet draped over my best friend's body is the last thing I remember as everything fades to black again.

# Chapter 1

Cooper

Six years later...

*The Chicago Knights let go of star pitcher Cooper Graham.*

*Brawl on the field ends in death...of career.*

*Three strikes and Graham is out of a job.*

These stupid fucking trolls think they're so creative hiding behind their punny article titles. I'm only punishing myself for scrolling through the Google alert linked to my name. While most of the hype has died down, those vultures finding someone new to attack, more articles continue to pop up.

"Hey, buddy, did ya hear me?" The Southern drawl of the taxi driver's voice reminds me we're not in Chicago anymore.

"Huh?" I look up from my phone to find the driver staring back at me with his arm stretched out along the back of the passenger seat, his bushy eyebrows knitted together in concern. I'm sure he thinks I'm stoned or something for not only asking him to make the ninety-minute drive from the airport but having zoned out for most of the drive.

He nods his head out the window. "I said we're here."

I follow his gaze to see the white farmhouse on the hill. "Oh, thanks. Sorry about that." I'm not exactly sure why I'm apologizing.

Pulling my wallet out of my pocket, I grab enough cash to cover the fare, gas for his trip back, and a healthy tip for his

troubles. I'm going to have to get used to no Ubers around here. Being back in Meadows Ridge is like taking a step back in time.

After grabbing my bags from the trunk, I watch the taxi pull off and contemplate chasing after him and say I made a mistake and to drive me as far away from here as possible.

My feet haven't moved from the sidewalk, even long after the taxi is no longer in sight. Finally, I turn toward the house in front of me.

It's weird how everything still looks the same, yet it feels different. The red door that Tanner and I would leave wide open when running outside to play catch after dinner before the sun went down. The white picket fence my dad would make us paint every summer lines the yard. Once, we convinced Austin, Tanner's younger brother, to do it instead. We thought we had gotten away with it until Dad finally caught on, and he made me paint the entire thing all over in a slightly darker shade of white so he would know if I missed any spots. I can see the old shed on the side of the house where I first fingered Riley.

I adjust my backward hat and take a few calming breaths, refusing to give in to the emotions I've refused to allow myself to feel in years.

*This is home.*

I haven't been back in six years, not since I left it all behind, including her.

The sound of heavy footsteps on gravel has me pulled from memory lane. There's a man walking around from the back of the house, and his body goes rigid when our eyes meet. I swallow thickly.

*Guess I've missed the opportunity to flee.* Maybe it's one of those "if I don't move, he won't see me" moments like you see in the movies.

"Well, I'll be damned." *Too late.* "Never thought we'd see you round here again. You must be lost or something," he spits out with his arms crossed and expression stern. *I deserved that.*

Grabbing my bags off the ground, I close the distance between us. "Well, hello to you too, Dad."

I completely lose my next train of thought when he pulls me into his arms without saying another word and slaps my back with such force that it makes me drop my bags to the ground. He pulls back with his hands still gripping my shoulders tightly and looks me up and down. I have filled out more since I was last here in Meadows Ridge—my dark, curly hair is a little longer and more unruly than ever, and the facial hair lining my jaw hasn't been trimmed in over a week.

I left when I was just a boy, and now I'm a man—a man home to repent his sins.

"Your mother is never going to believe this. Wait." He pauses. "Maybe I should call Dr. Kingston and have him on standby for when your mother goes into cardiac arrest."

I wait for him to smile, showing that he's joking, but his features remain grim.

Dad drapes one arm over my shoulder and leads me up the driveway to the front porch steps. I stop and look up at the house and exhale an unsteady breath. It feels good to be home until I take my first step and something catches my attention on the bottom of the wooden post.

Carved into the wood are the initials *CG* and *TH*. We carved them when we were only seven years old. Getting grounded for two weeks was well worth it—one week for defacing Mama's house and one week for using a knife unsupervised. Eventually, when Riley came into our lives, I added her initials alongside mine.

I crouch down and run my fingers over the indented wood. The post has a fresh coat of paint except for the space surrounding the carving. It's chipped and faded from the sun, but the initials are clear as day.

"I didn't have the heart to paint over it. It was like erasing a legacy or something. It just didn't seem right."

My fingers linger on the *RP*, and my chest tightens.

*Does she still live here?*

*Does she still hate me for what I did? I know I do.*

*Is she married? Does she have kids? Is she happy?*

I could easily fall down a rabbit hole of questions I don't deserve the answers to. To keep myself from asking my father

any of them, I bite down on my tongue until I taste hints of copper.

This town is small, so I know word of my return will spread like wildfire. That's the thing I always hated about small-town living. You can't even take a shit in the morning without half the town knowing about it by lunchtime. And by the end of the day, the entire town knows about it, but they've twisted it so much that you somehow ingested a flesh-eating disease and it's eating you from the inside out and that's why you're shitting your brains out.

If she's still here—she'll know I'm back soon enough.

I push off the step and look toward the sky. The warmth of the sun's rays hitting my skin. Deep breaths in and out at the thought of Riley still being here and possibly having moved on with her life.

“You gonna stand there all day, boy, and work on your tan?”

I quickly climb the last few steps and stand behind him. The front door creaks as he opens it.

When I snicker, he glances over his shoulder and shrugs. “What? It gives the house character.”

This time, I cover my teeth with my lips to keep my laughter silent.

“Asshole,” my father mutters and walks down the hall. I drop my bags by the front door and look around as I make my way to the kitchen.



“Shan,” he calls out. “Hope you made plenty. We got a guest for dinner.”

Asking Shannon Graham if she made enough food for a meal is like asking if the Pope is Catholic or does a bear shit in the woods. My entire life, my mother has always made enough food to feed an army for every meal. You would think I wasn't an only child or something. No food ever went to waste, though. If Ma wasn't dropping food off at the neighbors, she was taking it to the local food bank.

“You know there's always enough. Who's here?” Ma has her back to me as I enter the kitchen and wipes her hands on her apron as she spins around.

“Wade Matthew Graham, I think I'm dying. I swear I see our son standing in our kitchen.” She slowly creeps closer, as if she's a predator stalking its prey, not wanting to scare it away.

My father's deep laughter fills the silence of the room. “Well, if you're dying, then I guess I get to annoy you not only in this life but in the afterlife, too, because I see him, too.”

She is now standing right in front of me, so close that I can see the tears shimmering in her eyes, which match mine.

“Hey, Ma.”

“Holy shit,” she shouts and pulls me into her arms and squeezes as if she'll never let me go. I relish the feeling of being back in my Ma's arms for a moment, but the peaceful moment quickly passes as her grip tightens, nearly cutting off

circulation. I may be taller and stronger than her, but hell hath no fury like a mama and her cub.

“Ma,” I squeak. My voice resembles that of when I went through puberty. Not the greatest time for me back then.

“Jesus, Shannon, let the boy go before he passes out. He just got home, and you’re already trying to send him to the hospital,” my dad jokes, moving to the other side of the kitchen and turning on the sink to wash his hands.

She finally lightens her hold on me, and I dramatically exhale. “Damn, Ma, you’ve got quite the grip,” I say, rubbing at my arm.

“Don’t curse, Cooper. It’s not attractive,” she scolds.

“What?” I shriek. “You just said ‘shit.’”

My father laughs in the background while I stare back at her and raise my eyebrow in question. *If that’s not the pot calling the kettle black.*

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” *Playing the innocent card, I see, Mama.* I hold back my eye roll to keep from being scolded again like a little boy.

“Now, stand still and let me look at you.” She grips my shoulders just like my father did and tosses me around as if I weigh nothing. She exhales. “Well, I guess even if they don’t give you phones to call home to your parents, a pen and paper to write, or a car to drive home once in a while—” I don’t miss her not-so-subtle digs and lower my head in shame. It wasn’t

their fault I stayed away. She releases me and walks back over to the stove. “—it seems they at least fed my boy.”

I take a seat on the barstool at the island beside my father. “Yes, ma’am. They fed me just fine, even though it was never as good as your cookin’, Ma.”

She turns around and bops my nose with the dish towel. “Don’t you know, Cooper, flattery will get you everywhere.”

“And I’m sorry for not keeping in touch. I just thought it was best—”

My father cuts me off with a strangled laugh. “Best for who? You?” he asks sternly.

My mother slams her hands on the counter, and her back stiffens. “Wade! Not tonight. Tonight, let’s just enjoy having our baby boy under our roof or even in the same zip code as us. Tomorrow, we will deal with everything else” She walks around the counter and places her delicate hands on my cheeks. “You will be here tomorrow, right?”

I know I hurt my parents while I was away, but hearing the desperation in her voice to keep me around cuts deeper. It’s time I make all this right—and tonight, I start with my parents.

“Yeah, so, um, about that. I was kind of hoping that I could stay here while I get back on my feet.”

My eyes bounce back and forth between my parents. My father remains silent, but Ma’s eyes once again fill with tears, and they spill over as she pulls me back into her arms, this

time not squeezing as tight. “Oh, the dear Lord has finally answered my prayers.”

I rub her back as she cries on my shoulder. When she pulls back, she wipes under her eyes with the bottom of her apron. “Of course, dear. Your room is still exactly the same as you left it.” She glares at my father over my shoulder. “Your father wanted to box it all up, but I never had the heart to. Why don’t you go take your bags up there, and I’ll finish dinner. Should be ready in about twenty minutes.”

“Sure.” I leave my parents whispering in the kitchen, I’m sure mainly about my surprise return and plans to stay.

I grab my bags from the door and make my way up the stairs. When I reach the seventh step, I pause. *I wonder if it still does it.* The floorboard creaks when I press on it, echoing throughout the confined space. I can hear my father’s voice in my head saying again, “*It gives the house character.*”

I learned early on that I needed to skip this step in order to sneak out. Of course, I wasn’t sneaking out to go underage drinking or anything. It was usually to go play video games at Tanner’s, play catch in the back field behind my house, or meet up with Riley. Both our schedules back then were intense with practices, rehearsals, games, and performances, but we always found time for each other, even if it was just in passing.

When I finally make it to my old bedroom, I stare at the closed wooden door. Mom said they kept my room exactly the same, so I am aware of what haunts me on the other side—a

life I used to live, a person I used to be, the people who made me a better man. Not the man I see when I look in the mirror.

Breath whooshes from my body as I open the door. Posters line the walls, trophies sit on the shelves, and a twin bed sits in the corner, covered with dark blue-and-gray bedding. Oh, if that bed could talk. Hell, if any of those walls could talk, I would definitely be in trouble.

I set my bags down on the bed and spot photos on my desk. I torture myself by looking at them close up. One is of Riley doing some dance-kick move on the beach. *God, she is breathtaking.* She always moved like an angel on the dance floor. All of that thrown away because I took my eyes off the road.

Setting the frame down, I pick up another. This one is from homecoming senior year when she and I were crowned homecoming king and queen. The frame behind that one, though, that's the one that hurts the most: a photo of Tanner and me at Coach's house the night we learned of Chicago's offer to us both. We were both smiling so big, knowing that we had not only accomplished our dream but we'd done it together.

*"Any idea why Coach asked us over tonight?" Tanner asked as he adjusted his tie from side to side as we walked a few feet behind our parents up Coach's driveway.*

*"Nope." I shook my head. "All my parents said was that we were going over Coach's house for dinner and that he had something to discuss." It wasn't strange or anything for us to*

*go over to the Bensons' house. Coach and his wife often hosted the team for pregame dinners, banquets, and barbecues. But tonight, it was just the Hayeses and my family.*

*"Are you even sure it's okay that you brought me along?" Riley asked from my side.*

*"Of course, babe. You're with me." I tightened my grip on our intertwined fingers. "And don't worry. Ma said they included you in the head count. It's like he knew we were inseparable or something."*

*She scrunched her nose mockingly at me, and I did the same before kissing the tip of her nose.*

*"Come on, guys, please don't do that 'you're a bird, I'm a bird' lovey-dovey shit."*

*"Tanner Michael Hayes," his mother scolded as we walked up the stairs. "I expect you to be on your best behavior."*

*"Does she even know you at all? What good behavior?" Riley and I joked under our breath so the parents didn't hear and scold us again.*

*Dad knocked on the front door, and moments later, we saw movement through the frosted glass windowpane beside the door. The door opened, and Coach's wife, Ellie, greeted us with a warm and welcoming smile.*

*"Hey, y'all, thanks for coming over. Verne is out on the back patio, manning the grill. Why don't ya come in and make yourself at home?"*

*I placed my hand on Riley's lower back and ushered her into the house. It smelled incredible in here—like cinnamon and sugar.*

*While the adults all stood chatting about whatever adults chatted about, Tanner, Riley, and I all headed toward the sliding glass door that led out to the backyard. We found Coach standing in front of the grill, holding a pair of tongs and shutting the grill lid.*

*"Hey, Coach," I said as we approached.*

*He turned, and all three of us burst into laughter as we took in the apron covering the front of him. Its black-and-white lettering said, "My meat is 100% going in your mouth today."*

*"That's, uh, quite an apron you got there," Tanner said, pressing his lips together, trying but failing to smother his laughter.*

*Coach pointed the tongs in our direction. "Well, if you don't like it, don't let the door hit ya where the good Lord split ya."*

*Riley snorted behind her hand. Red painted her cheeks in embarrassment.*

*"Hello, Miss Parker."*

*"Hi, Coach Benson." She gave him a small wave. "Thank you for having me."*

*"Of course, dear. It's our pleasure to have you here. There will be plenty of food. Ellie has been cooking all afternoon."*

*“Whatever smells like cinnamon and sugar in there has had my mouth watering since we walked in.”*

*“Ah, those were her famous snickerdoodle cookies she made for dessert.”*

*Eventually, our parents and Ellie joined us out back as Coach finished up grilling. After he set the meats on a plate with help from Foster, Tanner’s dad, Coach turned the grill off. “This meat needs to rest a bit, and then we can sit down and eat, but why don’t we head inside and chat for a few and fill you in on why I asked you two over tonight?”*

*“You mean it wasn’t to put us in a food coma?” Tanner joked as we followed Coach back inside.*

*He set the plate of food on the counter and covered it with tinfoil. “Just give me a moment. I need to grab something from my office.” He disappeared down the hall.*

*“You don’t think Coach is leaving us, do you? And this is his way of breaking the news?” Tanner whispered.*

*“He can’t leave. It’s our fucking senior year, and we need him.” Plus, if he were leaving, he would have invited everyone over to break the news, right? Fuck, now I was worried as hell. I looked over at Riley with a nervous smile, and she gave a genuine one back. It only calmed my nerves slightly.*

*The chatter between our parents came to a halt when Coach reentered the room, carrying two manila folders. He set them both down on the counter between us. His face was stoic, so he gave nothing away. “Do you know what these are?”*



*“Folders?” we both said in unison. He spun the folders and pushed them so they were in front of us.*

*“Go ahead. Open them.” He waved his hands, telling us to go on.*

*With one last look at each other, Tanner and I revealed a familiar black, white, and gray logo with a shield and sword.*

*“We’ve known that you’ve caught the eye of many over the years. All you need to do is sign these, and after your senior year, you’re both headed to Chicago. The Knights want you both.”*

*My head whipped up as I processed his words. I couldn’t even wrap my head around the details listed in this letter. Pressing my palms on the counter, I looked to the ground, trying to steady my breath.*

*“This for real, Coach?” Tanner’s voice was shaky.*

*“It is. You boys did it.”*

*I glanced up to find the blank expression that was on Coach’s face when he reentered the kitchen now replaced with tears of joy and pride.*

*Riley wrapped her arm around my shoulders from behind, and I spun to face her and pulled her into my arms, burying my face in her neck. Tanner was currently hugging his parents, and I couldn’t hear what they were saying in hushed tones. My eyes then met my parents’. My dad had his arm around Ma’s shoulder. She wiped the tears away with the bottom of her sleeve.*

*“Dude, we actually fucking did it,” I choked out, slinging my arm around Tanner as we stared down at the letters that had made all our dreams come true.*

*Moments later, Coach told us to look up and say cheese for a photo.*

I grip the frame so tight that I nearly crush it. I set it back down before I do something like throw it against the wall.

Fuck, I miss my best friend. Thinking about the accident makes me so angry.

*Why did he have to die?*

*Why did she have to not be able to dance again?*

*Why did I get to walk away?*

Plopping down on the bed, I look around the room. Was this actually a good idea to come back here? Before I can talk myself into grabbing my stuff and racing out the door as fast as the Flash, there’s a knock on my bedroom door.

My father stands in the doorway with his arms crossed. Once again, he appears just in the nick of time to save me from running.

He looks around the room, and when his eyes lock on mine, he gives me a small smile. I wonder if he spent any time in here after I left. Ma had mentioned he wanted to pack it all up—was it because it was too much of a reminder of what a disappointment I was?

“Your mother has dinner ready.”

“Okay, I’ll be right there.”

He silently nods and leaves. Wade Graham is a man of very few words, but he’s known for throwing plenty of witty one-liners from time to time, not to mention his specialty—dad jokes.

I cast one last look around the room and rise from the bed to head downstairs to join my parents for the first family meal in six years. I slap the baseball sign above the bedroom door as I exit, just like I did every time I walked out of this room growing up. Just because I don’t play ball anymore doesn’t mean I’m not still superstitious and a creature of habit.

*Welcome home, Cooper.*

## Chapter 2

### Cooper

**T**he banging of pots and pans startles me awake. I wake up facedown, halfway hanging off the bed. There is no way in hell I can continue to sleep on this. I stretch and let out a loud groan at the tightness of my muscles.

How the fuck did I sleep on this mattress when I was younger? Probably because I didn't know any better.

Maybe today, I'll go into town and upgrade this bed—I said maybe.

There's another loud noise coming from the kitchen, and I wonder if Ma is doing this on purpose.

I press my face into the pillow and blindly reach for my cell phone on the nightstand. I peek at the screen and see it says 10:30 a.m.

Finally, I crawl out of bed and head toward the commotion. Out of habit, as I jog down the stairs, I skip the squeaky one.

I adjust my sweatpants that are hanging low on my hips and run my hands over my face as I enter the kitchen, just as another loud clank rings out.

“Ma,” I shout. “What’s with the fucking ruckus?”

“Cooper James, I told you not to swear,” she scolds. A deep furrow appears between her brows.

I hold up my hands innocently. “Sorry, Ma.” Wow, way to make a twenty-four-year-old feel like he’s five years old again, getting caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“And put a shirt on. What if I had company?” I glance down at my bare chest. *Oops*.

The scent of fresh coffee and warm baked goods lingers in the air. I laugh as I grab a coffee mug from the shelf. “I’m sure it’s nothing your church ladies’ group haven’t seen before, and I’m sure they wouldn’t mind. Give them all something new to gossip about,” I joke, filling the mug.

Ma swats me with the dish towel, and little droplets of coffee splash over the side of the mug and onto my hand. I hiss as the liquid burns my skin.

“Thanks, Ma.” I scowl at her.

“Serves you right. You should’ve woken up at a decent hour and came downstairs fully dressed, so it’s all on you.”

I roll my eyes. Having done any of that wouldn’t have salvaged my hand from the hot coffee. I lean back against the counter and cross my ankles as I bring the mug carefully to my lips and watch my mother move effortlessly around the kitchen.

“What’s all this for?” I motion to all the paperwork and cookbooks spread out all over the kitchen table.

“I have a committee meeting later to discuss the fall festival and Hootenanny.”

Well, glad to see something else hasn't changed around here. Ma always loved her committees. If it wasn't a church group, it was a sports booster or the PTA. This is where she always shined—she loves planning and organizing.

“Y'all still do that round here?”

“Of course,” she says as if offended I even suggested that they stopped stop doing these events. “It's Meadows Ridge tradition. And I expect now that you're home, you will also take part.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger. “I don't know if that's such a good idea, Ma.”

She spins and crosses her arms, her shoe tapping against the tiled floor “And why not? I expect you won't be hiding in your room the entire time you're staying here because I can assure you, Cooper James Graham, there will be no hiding out in this house from this town.”

I think about speaking up but decide it's best to remain silent.

“I will not allow that to happen. Do you understand me?”

Avoiding her gaze, I pretend to find an interesting spot on the floor to focus on. When she clears her throat, I finally respond. “Yes, ma'am.”

Ma walks over and smacks me in the chest softly and smiles. “Good. Now, what's on your agenda today?”

I take another sip of coffee. Hmm, besides possibly bed shopping, I hadn't really given that much thought. "Not sure."

"Well, unless you want to be the center of attention with the church ladies that will be here in about thirty minutes, I suggest one, you get dressed, and two, you make yourself scarce today."

I nod. I may have joked about it a few minutes ago, but that is definitely the last thing I want or need right now.

I'm surprised she didn't warn me when we talked last night during dinner. Maybe this is all part of her plan to force me out of the house and face reality.

Throwing the rest of my coffee back, I turn and then set the empty mug in the sink.

Ma clears her throat. "I know I taught you better than that."

Damn, at the rate she's going, she's going to be busting my balls black and blue before the day is even over. I rinse the mug out and place it in the dishwasher.

"Happy?" I stick my tongue out at her.

"Yes, very. Now, come give your mama a hug." I step up and wrap my arms around her. "I am so happy to have you home, Coop."

"I know, Ma. I'm happy to be home, too." And honestly, I mean it. When we pull back, her eyes focus on the ink on my chest. When I left, I was still only eighteen and had pure skin. Now, I have seven tattoos on my body. This one that has her undivided attention, though, is the one on my chest over my

heart—a baseball surrounded by angel wings and the number twelve written in the ball’s stitching.

It was my first tattoo. I got it on the one-year anniversary of Tanner’s death. She places her warm hand over the ink. There’s no way she can’t feel how hard my heart is beating right now.

I see the emotion blanketing her expression. Her eyes glass over, and she quickly drops her hand and moves to the sink with her back toward me.

Clearing my throat and swallowing my own emotions down, I close the distance between us. She’s wiping away her tears when I place my hands on her shoulders.

“I’m so sorry, Cooper,” she sniffles.

Was my mother like everyone else in this town? When she saw me, did she see a killer? That was one of the many reasons I left. I was the driver, so I was responsible for the death that shook this town.

“He was just so young. I wish I understood the plan that God had for him.”

“Me too,” I whisper. I feel my own tears threatening to spill over.

I think I know exactly where I should go today.

“Hey, Ma, is it okay if I borrow your car?”

She uses her dish towel this time instead of the base of her hands to wipe under her eyes. “Sure, but I can do ya one



better.” I follow her to the back door, where the hook with the key rings hangs, and she grabs a set off there. My hand trembles slightly as she places it in my hand. It was the one Riley had given me when I had gotten my driver’s license. On one side of the metal plate, etched in Riley’s handwriting, reads, “Drive safe, handsome,” and on the other, “I love you.”

Oh, the irony of the words “drive safe.” Maybe I should have had this key chain the night of the accident.

“Is that what I think it is?”

She nods. “Your father couldn’t sell it, so he uses it occasionally for lumber loads. It’s parked out back by the field.”

“I-I don’t know what to say.” I stare at the keys as I process the fact that they kept my truck, not even knowing if I would ever return. It stirs more emotions in me that I have not had enough caffeine or alcohol to deal with just yet.

My mother places her palm over mine and encloses my fingers around the keys.

“You don’t have to say anything, but like I said before, time is ticking before the ladies get here.”

“Oh, shi—shoot. Got it, Ma.” I kiss her cheek and quickly spin on my feet.

Before I reach the stairs, I hear her shout, “And maybe think about getting a shave and a haircut, too.”

I swear I hear Tanner say, “Toot toot,” but I know it’s just in my head.

Thankfully, I showered last night after dinner. After throwing on a pair of dark jeans and a lightweight Knights hoodie from my suitcase, I grab the black hat and sunglasses off my desk. I stand in front of the mirror as I slip the shades on and twist the ball cap around so it's now backward.

It's not the best disguise, but it'll do for now.

I make it downstairs in record time and slip out the back door just as I hear the front storm door creak open and female voices chattering throughout the house.

*Phew, talk about a close call.*

I walk back to where Ma said Dad had parked my truck—a 1971 Ford F-250 custom pickup with a two-tone paint job of red on top and white on the bottom, although the fade over the years and rust has made it look more of a cream color.

“Hey, old girl. Miss me?”

Once seated in the driver's seat, I run my hand over the worn dashboard. So many memories—good, like purchasing this truck with my own money and the long summer nights that my dad helped me fix up the V8 engine, making out with Riley in the truck's bed, or cruising around with Tanner after practice. Also, some bad, like Riley and I having our first fight in the cab of this truck. Then again, it wasn't long after that fight that she was in my lap, making up. So I guess all memories aren't too bad.

I turn on the engine and sink back into the seat to listen to her purr—it's music to my ears. Leaning down, I reach under

the bench seat and feel around. I wonder if— “Yes,” I chant, pulling out the container of cassette tapes. The thing I always loved about this truck was that it was truly old-school. No Bluetooth connection, not even a CD player. I pop in one of the cassette tapes and chuckle as the cab fills with country music.

First things first, it’s time to go visit an old friend.

## Chapter 3

### Cooper

**T**he thing about growing up in this town is that I know the roads like the back of my hand, so making my way through to the cemetery is as easy as riding a bike.

In no time, I'm pulling through the ironclad gates of New Cathedral Cemetery. I scoff. *Why do they need these ridiculous gates—are we needing to keep the spirits inside?* I can't imagine that we need to keep people out. Who the fuck would *want* to be in a cemetery unless they had to be?

I don't bother stopping in the office for directions to the gravesite. It may have been years since I was last here, but I can recall how to get there as easily as remembering how to get to his parents' house. After following the narrow road over the first hill and over the stone bridge, I finally come to a stop. The Hayeses picked out a plot just under the giant oak tree, one that the younger versions of ourselves would have loved to climb. It was something I focused on the day of the funeral.

*I couldn't believe this was happening today. It was too hard for my brain to wrap itself around this. How was I attending my best friend's funeral? I waited with bated breath for the top*

*of the casket to open and for him to pop up like a jack-in-the-box, yelling, “Gotcha.”*

*As I looked around the crowd, I saw so many familiar faces who just days ago gathered to celebrate our victory, but now, we’d gone in a total one-eighty direction.*

*Riley was still in the hospital, so she couldn’t attend. She was constantly on my mind, and I knew she hated not being here. And honestly, so did I. I wished she were here to help me through this nightmare. She was the light in my darkness, and I needed her now more than ever.*

*Without her by my side, I just felt so lost—like I was spinning continuously down a rabbit hole, searching for anything to hold on to.*

*Sandwiched between my parents, I was thankful they were here, so close that their arms brushed mine, letting me know they were there just in case I needed them to hold me up.*

*“Today, we celebrate the life of Tanner Michael Hayes, a young man who had his entire life ahead of him. He had hopes, dreams, and aspirations. We don’t understand why this happened, but we must believe that he is in a better place now.”*

*I bit down on my tongue to not yell, “A better place? How can he be in a better place when he should be here, achieving those goals and reaching those dreams? He should be living the life we always envisioned.”*

*It was supposed to be us, forever, till the end.*

*We were supposed to be old and senile, and as Tanner would joke, we would then become new best friends all over again when our memory went. Not now, not at only eighteen.*

*Instead of listening to what the minister was saying, I focused on the giant oak tree in front of me. It reminded me of the trees we used to climb as kids. I wondered how long it would have taken us to get to the top. Would we be able to see far off in the distance from the top?*

*I didn't know how I made it through the service, but before I knew it, it was concluding. I'm not sure I could say anything about it. I couldn't tell you who spoke or what songs played. I was just existing—a body in attendance.*

*A line formed as people prepared to say their last goodbyes before leaving. The line went around the casket to where Foster, Lulu, and Austin Hayes stood.*

*I stared at the dark wooden casket as if somehow it could give me answers, like why this had to happen. Reaching out to touch the top, I hesitated, my hand hovering with an inch between us. I couldn't bring myself to touch the smooth wood—that would mean this was real and that he was really gone.*

*I can't do this. I can't say goodbye to my best friend.*

*My dad placed his hand comfortingly on my shoulder, and I pulled my hand back. When I looked forward again, I saw the line had moved. One step closer to the Hayes family.*

*First up was Austin, who stood there, wearing the same suit he just wore to prom, looking numb. Isn't that what we all*

feel? He'd barely said anything since the night of the accident. He looked up to us, and even if the Hayes brothers fought and Tanner called him annoying often, they were still brothers. They had a different bond that Tanner and I didn't have, nor did I have with anyone as an only child.

When my mother hugged Lulu, she sunk into her arms and held on tight. I swallowed slowly as I watched my mother comfort her best friend. Next up, it was my turn.

I stepped up to the woman who had been like a second mother to me all my life. However, the eyes that looked at me were cold as ice. Her expression was blank, as if she were a stranger and not the woman who would paint school colors on her face during our games to show support or kiss my boo-boos when I fell at her house and my ma wasn't there to do it herself.

My heart broke as her swollen eyes met mine. Her cheeks were stained red from her constant tears. Lulu stepped closer to me and raised her arms as if she were about to hug me. But instead of wrapping her arms around me, her clenched fists slammed against my chest, and her sobs rang louder.

"It's not true," she repeated over and over. "You did this. I hate you for taking my baby away from me. Why?"

It took both Austin and his father to pull her off me while I stood frozen, taking the verbal and physical lashings. I didn't have to turn around to know that everyone still lingering was watching. I could feel their penetrating gaze as she spoke those hurtful yet honest words.

*I did this.*

*Her son is going to be lowered six feet under because of me. I should have been paying attention. How was I ever supposed to live with myself knowing that? I wish it had been me.*

*My mother and father guided me away from the casket and away from curious eyes. The sounds of Lulu's wails overpowered anything either of my parents said. If I had to guess, it would be something like how she was wrong and just hurting right now. Didn't make what she said any less true.*

*When we reached my father's car, he attempted to pull me into a hug, however, I shook right out of his grasp, slipped into the back seat, and hung my head in my hands.*

*The drive back to the house was extremely unconformable and awkward as no one spoke. What was there even to say? The air became suffocating, and the tie around my neck strangled me until I finally loosened it.*

*My father hadn't even put the car in park before I jumped out. I skipped changing out of my suit, grabbed my keys from the hook, and headed straight for my truck. There was only one place I needed to be.*

*It wasn't until I was in Riley's hospital room and safe in her arms that I let the immense pain unleash. She held me in her arms as I cried all the tears that had refused to fall during the funeral. It was then that I fully came to terms that today, I had said goodbye to my best friend—and it really was all my fault.*



A shiver runs up my spine, shaking me from my thoughts. I could hide here in my truck, but that's taking the cowardly way out. I've spent six years doing that while avoiding this town.

With every step I take closer to my best friend's ultimate resting place, my chest gets tighter. I struggle to find my breath. My knees buckle, and I collapse to the ground in front of the stone where etched in the center reads *Here lies Tanner Michael Hayes*.

My fingers dance along the dash between his date of birth and date of death. How can something under two inches long be such a powerful thing? It represents how a person spent their time on this Earth. And for Tanner? It wasn't nearly enough.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," I chant, barely recognizing my voice over my sobs. His mother's words are still fresh in my mind, playing on a loop. "It should've been me." Tanner would've made the most of his life, not fuck it all up.

Living without Tanner, knowing that everything I do, he will never get the chance to, is a far worse pain than losing him to begin with.

## Chapter 4

### Riley

With one leg propped up on my bed, I finish lacing up my sneakers. I trace the long scar that runs down the side of my knee. The deep red hue has faded over time. The shade used to reflect my anger at everything this scar stood for, but as the years passed, I learned that every time I saw it, it was to remind me of where I'd been. I press a soft kiss to the skin before adjusting my capris to cover it.

A loud cracking sound fills the space as I press my hands into my knees and rise. Years of dancing earned me the daily soundtrack of snap, crackle, and pop every time I move.

I grab my phone and earbuds off the dresser before flipping the light switch off and leaving the room.

Stopping in front of the closed bathroom door down the hall, I can hear the shower running. I have no idea if he can even hear me as I tap my knuckles against the door. When a few seconds pass with no response, I twist the knob and partially open the door.

“Hey. I’m going out for a run.”

“Okay. Be safe,” the deep voice calls from behind the curtain.

“Always am,” I respond as I close the door and jog down the stairs and out the door. The warmth of the North Carolina sun, even in the early fall, kisses my skin as I bend forward, stretching out my calves. With my earbuds in place and phone secure in my arm band, I press Play. As the opening beats of Macklemore & Ryan Lewis’s “Can’t Hold Us” fill my ears, energy flows through my veins. I bounce on my toes to get the blood pumping before setting off down the driveway.

Every morning I run, a way to clear my head and focus. It doesn’t matter that it’s Saturday and that I’m getting a later start than usual; my body craves its release.

With each slow-paced jog, I amaze myself that I am even doing this.

*Take that, every doctor that said I wouldn’t be able to run, let alone dance again.* It was hard work, but I was too determined for that accident that had taken everything else from me to take that away.

I’m a creature of habit. Every morning, I run the same route—down our road, turn left at the stop sign, follow Highway 15 to the cemetery, sit with Tanner for a few minutes, and run back. Yet today, I take a right at the stop sign.

The song changes to a quicker pace, and I up my speed, careful not to push it too far with my knee.

When a familiar white farmhouse comes into view, I realize I somehow ended up on Elm Street—the one road I’ve spent six years trying to avoid. Not that it mattered. I never had to worry about running into him since he hasn’t returned in six years.

As I approach the Graham house, a parade of cars lines the driveway and street. Shannon must be hosting one of her many committee meetings. That woman loves to plan. I try to think about what event she’s working on. Of course, the fall festival and Hootenanny. It’s just around the corner.

I bite back the bitter taste in my mouth at the thought of attending yet another one of these events where people of this town still stare at me. It’s been six years since the accident that rocked this small town to the core and changed all our lives, but I still hear the whispers. Folks think they’re being quiet, but I hear “she was in the car,” “it was her car,” and of course, the dagger straight to the heart, “that Graham boy left her behind.”

Without another glance, I pick up the pace, leaving the house that holds so many memories in the distance. Just like the boy who had my heart did with this town. Too bad while he left me behind, he took my heart with him.

I hit the next song, and with it, my highest-heart-rate track forces me to push that feeling of resentment down. What’s done is done, and I’ve moved on.

By the time I turn back down our driveway, my slight shimmer of sweat has turned into a full-blown hurricane. Here

lies Riley Parker—death by drowning in her own perspiration.

As soon as I open the front door, a delicious aroma hits my nose. “Mm, something smells good in here.” I stretch out my arms behind me as I slowly pad my way to the kitchen to find Austin with his back to me.

*Damn, is there a better view than a man in the kitchen cooking?*

I throw my arms around him and rest my chin on his shoulder to see what he’s cooking that smells so divine.

“Phew! Babe, you stink.” He laughs and pushes me off him.

Lifting my tank top to my nose, I take a quick whiff and scrunch my nose. *Yep, I am definitely a little ripe.*

“Breakfast will be ready soon. Why don’t you go rinse off before I lose my appetite, or worse, you add more salt to this with your sweat dripping everywhere.”

“Yes, boss.” I salute and press a quick kiss to his cheek as he shakes his head at me, chuckling. I turn on my heels and race upstairs. I don’t bother grabbing my clothes from my room first and head straight for the shower. The warm water feels good against my sore muscles. I stand there for a moment, thankful for another morning run, soaking up the feeling before lathering up the loofah and running it over my body.

My body tenses as it runs over the scars on my body: a forever reminder of what was lost. Why, with the already daily reminder when I look in the mirror, did I torture myself by

running past his house? Why today? There hasn't been a single call, text, or visit in years—not since the night he left. It took me years to stop daydreaming that one day he would come back for me or that it was all a nightmare that he left and I would wake up surrounded by his arms. Because *he did leave*—when I needed him most.

I press my back against the cold tile and regain composure of my breathing. I turn the shower off and grab the plush yellow towel off the rack. Every time I wrap the towel around my body, I laugh. Austin hates the brightness of the yellow. When we picked them out for our bathroom, I wanted this over his dark gray option. All it took was a pouty face from me and a loud sigh from him, and we filled our cart up with loads of sunshine.

I scurry across the hall to my room and toss the damp towel on top of the pile of dirty clothes on the floor. I can hear Austin's voice in my head reminding me of the hamper right next to the pile, but I choose to ignore it. In record time, I'm walking down the stairs dressed in yoga pants and another tank while pulling my wet hair into a messy bun.

I reenter the kitchen just as Austin is putting his plate into the sink. I notice he's dressed in jeans and a henley and not his typical Saturday morning attire of gym shorts and a T-shirt.

“Where are you off to today?” I ask, taking a seat at the table in our kitchen nook. This is one of my favorite things about the house. Through the triple-pane bay window, we can watch the sunrise paint the sky the most gorgeous shades of

pinks and oranges while sipping on coffee. When Austin and I first looked at this house, I envisioned something like that, but nothing compared to reality.

I lean down and inhale the delicious aroma of the ham and green pepper omelet topped with homemade pico in front of me. *Mm, Austin is an amazing cook, and I don't deserve the way he spoils the crap out of me.*

I'm not even ashamed of the moan that escapes my lips seconds after shoving a forkful of food into my mouth.

Austin spins around, chuckling, and leans against the sink. "Mom needs some help around the house, so I'm going to spend some time over there."

"You need any help? I don't really have plans today other than some things around here, but I could push those to tomorrow."

He pushes off the counter and stalks toward me as I take another bite of the food he prepared. "Nah, enjoy the quiet. I'll bring you some leftovers, though."

Even though I'm still eating, my mouth waters at the thought of Mrs. Hayes's cooking. I swear there must have been something in the water, or maybe folks made a deal with the devil because all the women of that generation are amazing cooks. The hardest job in town is being a judge for any of the cooking and baking competitions.

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree with Austin's skills in the kitchen. "Oh my God, I would love you for life." I look

up at him and bat my eyelashes, giving him a loving smile.

Austin presses a kiss to my temple and laughs. “You mean you don’t already?” I roll my eyes at his sarcasm. *Of course I do.* “So, how many miles did you get in, by the way?”

“I don’t know, maybe three-ish?” I know it’s more, but that’s covered with the “ish.” I don’t add that I went on a different route because I know that would open up a whole other can of worms that I’m not ready to open now—if ever.

“Don’t push yourself, babe. Remember to stretch, hear me?”

He pinches my chin between his thumb and forefinger and stares down at me when I don’t answer. I know he worries that I’ll push myself too far. Austin was there through it all—the rehab and therapy sessions.

“Yes, sir.” I salute with my fork.

He mutters, “Jackass,” as he brushes past me.

“Tell your ’rents I say hey,” I shout over my shoulder.

“Always. Love you,” he yells back, followed by the jingling of his keys in hand.

“Love you, too,” I say as the front door closes. I stare out the window until I watch his car disappear out of the driveway.

I all but lick the plate clean. After cleaning up the kitchen, I head into the living room for some post-run stretching. I may not admit it to Austin, but he is often right. I may have overdone it a little today. I blame that on my unexpected detour.



First, I stretch my hamstrings, then my quads and calves.

Now, on to my least favorite chore—laundry. After washing the three loads of laundry I ignored all week, I bring the basket to the couch and turn on a cooking show, one of my guilty pleasures, to watch while folding.

The next thing I know, I feel knuckles brushing against my cheek. When I open my eyes, I find Austin crouching down beside me, smiling.

“Hey,” I manage, still half-asleep and rubbing at my eyes. “What time is it?”

“Umm, a little after five.”

“Oh, wow.” I push myself up till my back rests along the arm of the couch and slide my legs up. I wince at the tightness of my muscles. There is definitely a menthol bath with my name on it later.

Austin moves the laundry basket to the floor and takes a seat next to me.

“What did I tell you about pushing yourself too hard, huh?” he asks as he rests his arm on the back of the couch, and I scoot into the space beside him.

Closing his arm around my shoulder, he pulls me into his chest. I soak in the warmth of being in his arms. There’s comfort and safety as I listen to the beat of his heart. He smells like his Irish Spring bodywash, so he must have showered before he woke me.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You know, as my best friend, you’re supposed to be nice to me.”

His deep laugh vibrates throughout my body. Austin tips my chin upward with his finger. “No, as your best friend, I’m supposed to tell you the truth.”

We settle in and watch the chefs run through the aisles of Target, looking for food to cook.

Austin groans. “Why do you always get me to watch these shows? I ate my face off earlier, and now my stomach is already growling.”

“Because you love me.”

He rests his head on top of mine as he whispers, “That I do.”

A lump forms in my throat as sadness washes over me knowing at one point there was more behind those three words for him. I wish things were different for Austin and me. I would have loved to have given him my heart. Austin deserves someone who can love him unconditionally. He has a heart of gold, and the woman who sweeps him off his feet one day, well, she is a lucky woman.

Unfortunately, no matter how many times I tell myself otherwise, my heart still belongs to the only person who has ever owned it—the same person who broke it into a million pieces.

## Chapter 5

### Cooper

Sweat drips from my brow as I walk through the back door and head straight for the fridge. I guzzle down the bottle of water in one go. Jesus, I know I'm not out of shape, but this was worse than any team conditioning session. Maybe I should have accepted my father's help when he came out two hours ago and offered, but I let my pride get in the way and told him it was a piece of cake.

*Why did I agree to help Dad with the few projects outside?*

For the last five days, I've done nothing but manual labor around here. My dad's honey-do list has only grown over the years. Some tasks I'm sure have been on there since I was a kid. I've tried to keep my mind and my hands busy by helping him cross things off one task at a time. I've pushed myself past my limits so that by the time I make my way to bed in the evening, my eyes are closed before my head even hits the pillow.

The delicious aroma from the gumbo Mama has simmering on the stove has my stomach growling, screaming, *Feed me, feed me.*

I'm halfway to the living room to tell Dad I finished replacing the broken posts on the back fence when a familiar voice has me stopping in my tracks.

“Well, you have to wonder if the Knights’ loss and end of the season has anything to do with the recent release of pitcher Cooper Graham,” the distinct voice of sportscaster Emory “The Captain” Sherman says.

*What the hell?*

I quicken the pace of my steps, making it to the living room in just a few long strides. Dad is sitting in his favorite recliner with his feet propped up. In the television’s reflection, I can see his head hanging to the side, sound asleep. If that wasn’t enough, the soft sounds of his snoring linger in the air. Falling asleep to sports—some things never change.

I remain back in the shadows but close enough to still hear what they’re discussing on the show. Although, I’m pretty sure the neighbors who are miles away could hear with the volume of the television.

“Don’t get me started on him. He clearly was only thinking about himself when he threw that punch that cost him his career.”

“Yeah, but let’s face it, he’s always had his behavior in the spotlight. Tabloids and Cooper Graham went hand in hand.” The men on the screen laugh, and I grind the back of my teeth together. Those fuckers hide behind their stupid-looking, expensive suits and cameras.

“Ha, we all can’t forget the one—” He cuts himself off. I’m sure his ass would be handed to him by his bosses if he brought that up on national television. I thought this show was about sports, not fucking gossip.

“Look,” the Captain says with his hands splayed out on the counter in front of him. The seriousness in his features has me craning my neck from side to side, telling myself not to punch a hole in the TV. “All I’m saying is that he clearly didn’t think it through how his actions would affect his teammates, and I think, more than anything, he could be the reason they lost their game against the Diamonds. The major change in the team lineup, I assume, shifted the team morale and focus.”

*Fuck me.* I step out of the room and rest my back against the wall. *What the fuck do they know, anyway?*

The snoring gets louder and more obnoxious. I need to get out of here before my dad catches me. The last thing I need is for my old man to tell me that this loss wasn’t my fault. Been there, done that, bought the entire fucking T-shirt collection.

The men on the screen talk again, but fuck them. I push off the wall and quickly grab the remote off the end table beside my dad and turn the TV off. He stirs in his chair, and I make a quick exit back to the kitchen.

I press my palms to the counter and exhale a harsh breath. My anger bubbles within. I try to take a few calming breaths, but nothing is helping the steady, uneven pace of my beating heart. Every anxiety that I’ve pushed down and buried under

hours of manual labor comes crawling to the surface, leeching into my skin.

*My fault.* Two words that have enough weight to sink someone to the bottom of the ocean and stay there without an anchor.

When I open my eyes and look up, I spot the bottle of bourbon sitting on the shelf alongside the other bottles of alcohol. *Bingo!*

Picking up the bottle, I forgo a glass and head back out to the backyard and lean against the shed. Sliding down to sit on my ass, I twist open the bottle and take swig after swig till my thoughts become muddled and cloudy in my mind.

I drown myself in this bottle, and the last thing I recall as the sun sets in the distance is *everything is always my fault.*



“You’d think that with all that money you make, you’d be able to fix that ugly mug of yours.”

I jolt awake at the muffled, deep voice in my room that definitely doesn’t belong to my mother or father. *Am I dreaming?*

The side of my face that is pressing into the pillow feels damp. *What the hell?* I bring my left hand to my face and realize that I’m drowning in my drool, nursing a terrible hangover. I’m pretty sure if you looked up the world record for the worst cotton mouth, you would see my name beside it.

I try to put the pieces of the puzzle of last night in my brain together, but things are rather fuzzy at the moment.

I remember working on the fence, the news broadcast, swiping the bottle from the shelf, and then—*wait, how did I get up here?*

A throat clearing forces me to twist toward my childhood desk. The fast movement has my head spinning even more. I pinch my eyes shut, and when I open them; I think I might be fucking dreaming.

“Tanner?” I blink a few times, waiting for my eyes to focus. *Fuck, it’s bright in here.* Once my vision clears, I see that it’s not Tanner but his younger brother, Austin.

“You look like hell, man.” Austin is sitting in my desk chair, bent over with his elbows resting on his knees. I don’t miss the fidgeting of his hands as he avoids commenting that I just called him by his brother’s name. *Does that happen often?* Growing up, there was no denying them being brothers with their similar features, including their voices. There may have been less than a year difference between them, but their personalities couldn’t have been more different. Tanner was athletic, outspoken, and preferred to be being the center of attention, while Austin was extremely introverted, preferring to blend into the background and hide behind his books. Had Tanner still been alive, is this what he would have looked like at twenty-four?

I push myself up on the twin-size bed. My body aches almost as much as my head.

“What are you doing here?” I run my palms over my face and through my hair, wincing as I catch a whiff of myself. I smell like a fucking distillery. Maybe I should open a window.

Austin pushes off his elbows to sit straight up. “Your mom sent in reinforcements.” *Typical Shannon Graham.*

I look around the room, and he must sense exactly what I’m looking for.

“She’s not here—she and your dad are at church.”

Silence fills the small space. A million questions neither of us verbally acknowledge linger in the air.

Austin is the first to break the ice. “So, were you planning on coming around, or were you just planning on drinking yourself stupid out by the shed every night?”

I could correct him that it wasn’t *every* night, but point made. “About that.” I grip the back of my neck. “Yeah, I’m so —”

He holds his hand up, stopping me. “Nah, man, it’s whatever. Shit happens.” He shrugs. I may not have been *as close* to Austin as I was to his brother, but he’s still an extension of my best friend. I owed it to him and his parents to at least stop by. “So, what are you gonna do now that you’re in retirement?”

That’s the million-dollar question.

I scoff, shaking my head. *Retirement at twenty-four—what a joke.*



“I’m not sure. Right now, I’m just—” I search for the right words. “—sorting things out.”

It’s his time to scoff. “And sorting things out means hiding out at Casa del Graham for the rest of your life?”

My back stiffens. “I don’t hide out here.” I don’t need a lie detector test to tell that I’m lying. It’s obvious as the words leave my mouth.

He quirks a brow in question. “Oh, I’m sorry, you’re right. You go to the cemetery and the back field by the shed, where I hear your father had to carry your passed-out ass from.”

Well, that explains how I got from there to here. If I were him, I wouldn’t have wasted the strength and just left my ass out there for the wolves.

Austin clears his throat. “Look, I’m not here to tell you what to do, but I told your mama I would try to talk some sense into you, so that’s what I’m here for.”

Clearly, Mama has had enough of my shit without telling me she’s had enough of my shit. I guess I can’t blame her. After my first visit to the cemetery, I came home and put myself to work. All of those feelings of guilt hit me like a freight train, and I couldn’t even go into town to order a new bed, so I’ve been sleeping on this piece of shit for a week.

I can’t believe Mama turned on me, especially after all the help I’ve done around here.

“Alright, almighty one, and what is it exactly that you suggest I do?”

“Well, I teach at the high school.”

“Okay,” I drawl out, unsure where exactly he’s going with this.

“I’m not sure if you’re aware of this or not, but Coach Benson—”

My breath halts at the mention of my high school baseball coach. *Coach Benson what?* I wait with bated breath for him to finish that statement.

Austin pauses and looks down at his feet for a moment as if he’s gathering his thoughts. After a quick clearing of his throat, he looks back up. “Coach Benson was diagnosed with stage three pancreatic cancer.”

I’m thankful to have been sitting down, otherwise, I would have fallen over as the world feels like it’s being ripped out from under me.

“No, I, umm—wasn’t aware.” In all the conversations I’ve had with my parents over the last few days, how the fuck did monumental news like that slip from their minds?

“He’s decided not to hold the fall baseball conditioning clinic with his condition, and I know how important it is to the players who signed up.”

“And what? You want me to run it?” I joke, but from the serious expression on his face, I don’t think I was that far from the truth.

“Yeah, actually. That’s exactly what I’m thinking.”

I laugh. “What the fuck do I know about coaching?”

“Umm, a hell of a lot more than anyone I know. What better person to work with the boys than someone who wasn’t only trained by Coach Benson and attended this clinic for four years but a professional player?”

“I’m not a—”

Once again, he cuts me off. His pinched expression is a clear sign that his patience is running thin with my excuses. “It doesn’t fucking matter if you’re an active player or not.” When did Austin become so outspoken? He was so quiet as a kid, but damn, things certainly have changed. “These kids *need* you. They *need* someone to look up to. They need someone to guide them. Just think about it, Coop.”

He quirks a brow, waiting for an answer. Stubbornness is clearly a strong trait in the Hayes genes.

I grumble. “Fine, I’ll think about it.”

He nods in acceptance. “Well, I better go. Mom might have forgiven me for skipping out on church, but she’ll have my ass if I’m not at her house for that post-church meal.” He rises to his feet and tucks the chair back to where it originally was. I stand and stretch side to side and follow him out of the room.

“So then, I take it you’re not living at home anymore?”

He nods. “I moved out a few years back. Have a little cottage over on Westerly. Who wants to be living at home with their parents in their twenties, anyway?” He chuckles, and I roll my eyes at the obvious dig.

“Real nice, fucking asshole,” I mutter. Ending up back here in my childhood bedroom was never part of the plan. But maybe it happened for a reason. A reason I’m still figuring out. Maybe it’s a chance for a fresh start for me to figure my shit out.

“Dang, little Hayes, you move out and teaching? You’re fucking all grown-up. Maybe I can swing by your place one day soon, and we can actually catch up instead of you being Ma’s errand boy and I can learn what else is new with you.”

Austin opens his mouth to say something but then shuts it. His features harden. *Was it something I said?*

He shoves his hands into his pockets. “Yeah, sounds good.” The words might show an interest in that, however, there’s lingering doubt swirling in his eyes. “Good to have you home, man.” He slaps my shoulder. “I’ll see ya round.”

Before I can even say goodbye, he’s out the door.

I allow myself to get distracted by all the thoughts going crazy in my mind right now as I make my way back to my bedroom.

*Coach has cancer.*

*Could I even step up to run the training?*

*Am I really the best role model for those kids?* Just last night, I allowed mindless sportscasters to get in my head and drowned myself in the bottom of that bottle.

It’s a lot to process, especially while the thoughts wage war against the throbbing hangover.

I flop backward on the bed. *Bam!* My head bangs against the headboard. “Fuck,” I yelp, thankful to have the house to myself. Massaging the back of my scalp, which only adds to the tightness in my head, I take that as a sign to get my ass out of bed and stay out.

## Chapter 6

### Cooper

**G**ravel crunches under the tires as I turn off Brigham Lane and onto the long driveway that leads to the two-story log cabin–style house set back about a mile off the road.

We spent plenty of evenings here back in the day. Coach Benson was more than just a coach—he was a role model, a hero, and a father figure to many of his players. He had an open-door policy where his athletes could come talk to him, even if not about baseball but seeking advice about life. He judged no one and listened with an open mind and heart.

My hand trembles as the life-size version of a Lincoln Log cabin comes into view. My favorite feature of the house has always been the porch that wraps around three-quarters of the house and leads to the stone-paved patio out back.

I grip the steering wheel tighter, attempting to calm my nerves. I spent the entire morning after Austin left trying to process the news. One of the strongest men I know has cancer—a disease that takes no prisoners. I’m having more trouble wrapping my head around this than I am the fact that I recently lost my career.

After putting my truck in park, I adjust my hat and grab the bouquet I picked up for Coach's wife, Ellie. Mama taught me to never show up somewhere empty-handed.

"Oh my stars, if it isn't Cooper Graham." Ellie rises from the rocking chair on the front porch as I approach. She opens her arms, welcoming me before wrapping me in a big hug.

"Hi, Mrs. Benson."

"Oh, enough of that," she waves off as we part. "We're both adults here. Please, call me Ellie."

I nod in understanding, although as I test out the waters, it feels odd on my tongue to say. "These are for you, Ellie." I hold up the flowers between us.

She brings them to her face and inhales. "These are beautiful. Thank you, Cooper. Gerber daisies are my favorite. How did you know?"

I just shrug and smile while shoving my hands in my pockets. I don't admit that they were the only style at the store.

"Your mama may have taught you to never arrive empty-handed, but I bet your mama also taught you not to give another man's woman flowers. She's spoken for," a deep voice bellows from behind.

I turn around and find Coach Benson gripping the doorframe as he steps out onto the front porch.

"Oh, hush, Verne. When was the last time you brought me flowers? 1987?" she taunts. *Maybe I should've brought popcorn instead of flowers.*

“Don’t be telling the boy lies, El, or I’ll have the florist stop their weekly deliveries.” The smile on his face as he looks at his wife is what true love is.

I look down at my feet, feeling like I’m encroaching on a private moment. When I look up, Coach’s gaze has turned from Ellie to me. He tilts his head to the side, probably deciding if he’s dreaming or not.

With slow and steady steps, I close the distance between us while I take in his appearance. The years have put plenty of wear on him, just like it has on all of us, but it’s not until I wrap my arms around him that I feel the effects of the disease. Coach was always a larger man, but the large light gray sweatshirt hides the now smaller frame.

“It’s good to see you, Coop.” He slaps my back twice.

“You too.” Somehow, the words don’t get caught up in my throat.

Neither of us makes a move to separate right away. When we do, he gives me a once-over similar to the ones my parents did when I arrived home. He pinches my chin between his thumb and forefinger and jerks my head from side to side. He makes a loud clicking sound with his tongue. “What, they don’t pay you a big enough salary to afford a razor? That’s a shame. Here I thought the league paid players well.” He smirks.

*Asshole.*



I shake out of his grasp and run my hands over my beard. “Why is everyone always hating on this?” First, my mother, then Austin, and now Coach? “I think it makes me look distinguished.

“Is that what they call it these days? I think it makes you look like a jackass.”

“Oh, Verne, behave, will ya?” Ellie scolds. “I think it looks nice.”

I give him a *take that* look with raised brows and a smug smile on my face.

He shakes his head and rolls his eyes playfully, which only makes me laugh. “I’m just teasing the boy.”

“Why don’t you two have a seat and catch up?” She extends a hand to the empty chairs before retrieving the book she was reading when I pulled up from the table. “Can I get you boys some lemonade? I just made a fresh batch.”

“That would be lovely, thanks,” I say at the same time Coach scoffs.

“Ellie, we’re not little girls trying to make a quick buck. Maybe throw in some bourbon to celebrate this homecoming.” Just hearing the word “bourbon” instantly makes my stomach do somersaults.

A shiver runs up my spine at the glare she gives him over her shoulder as she heads inside.

Moments later, the screen door reopens as she comes back onto the porch carrying two glasses. The one she hands her

husband is a shade darker than mine. Coach takes a hefty swig and sighs. “I knew she loved me.” He sits back with a big smile on his face, resting the glass on his knee.

I bring the glass to my nose and inhale. Skeptically taking a sip, I let out a sigh of relief that there’s no booze in mine. I think I had enough last night to be good for a while.

“So, what brings you here today, son?” He takes another sip of his drink before this time setting it down on the table between us.

*Is he not aware of my wake-up call this morning?*

“You’re going to pretend you don’t know?”

“Oh, not at all. I just want to not make assumptions and hear it straight from the horse’s mouth.” He rocks back and forth in the chair with his hands folded over his stomach.

I stare at him and take in every detail. He looks like a shell of the man I knew when I was younger. Obviously, people change in six years, but this is almost like a different man entirely. Gone is the man who used to run alongside the freshman running the bases, encouraging us with taunts such as “my grandmother could run faster than you, and she’s been dead for years.” My heart breaks a little more, thinking of all the moments I missed and might never get a chance to.

Had Austin not stopped by this morning and told me the news and about the job offering, how long would it have taken me to get my head out of my ass and come over and see Coach? I don’t really need to think about it because I know

with all honesty, I wouldn't like the actual answer. He was another person I up and left behind—a man who played a huge role in where I am today. He's a much better man than I am to not have kicked me off his property today.

“Say what you need to say, son,” he says, pulling me from my thoughts. “Let's get the elephant in the room out in the open. I can literally see the wheels in your brain moving a mile a minute. If you don't get it out, you might give yourself a damn aneurysm.”

I lean forward, resting my knees on my elbows, and exhale an unsteady breath. “Why didn't you tell me?” How could my parents keep this from me, too?

“And when did you expect me to do that? When you were coming home for the holidays or when you called to check in? Ahh, yes, that's right. You did neither of those.”

Silence passes between us. *Way to kick a man when he's already down.*

“Look, Cooper, I'm sorry. I know this is a lot to handle, but it's all out of our hands. There's nothing I can do but use the time I have left with my family.”

“But if you had told me, I could've gotten you the best doctors and a second opinion. Contrary to what my appearance might tell you, I can, in fact, afford things like the best doctors' care.”

“And we did that, I promise you. The second, third, and fourth opinion were all the same.” He gives a glum, forced

smile. “So, how about instead of rehashing what’s already in the past and all this depressing shit, you tell me you’ve come here to accept the job offer that dipshit was supposed to focus on this morning? Ease my mind, Coop. Tell me you’ll take care of my boys. It’s killing me not to host that.” He pauses, realizing his words, and then holds up his hand. “Sorry, no pun intended.”

I take a long sip of my lemonade, wishing that Ellie had slipped a little alcohol in there after all for the added liquid courage.

“I don’t know, Coach. I’m not sure that’s best for the kids.”

“Best for the kids? Or best for you?” He narrows his eyes before leaning his elbow against the armrest of the chair. “You are what’s best for those kids. The fall ball clinic is something you’ve been through before. You know what it takes to make it in the game. You have the talent and the skills that deserve to be passed on—skills that snagged the eyes of the scouts as a sophomore in high school. Now, I’m not naive enough to think you’re the ballplayer you are today because of me. I’m pretty sure you were born with a glove in your hand. I just helped you realize your potential. The boys will listen to you; you can be a role model.”

I scoff and push to stand, pacing back and forth on the porch before settling back against the railing.

“Some role model. I’m sure their parents would love to add to the town gossip and worry that their sons will learn all my bad habits.”

Coach waves his hand, dismissing my comment. “Those parents want what’s best for their sons, and if they didn’t, they wouldn’t put them through the additional training. Now, this is the first year I haven’t been able to host in twenty-six years. Are you really going to deny a dying man’s wish for you to take over for him?”

While Coach has been the head baseball coach at Meadows Ridge High School for forty-five years, for the past twenty-six of them, he’s hosted this separate clinic in the fall. While it costs money, he only ever charges the cost that it takes to run the program. He also never turns anyone away. If a child can’t afford it, he makes it affordable. He’s done it for so long that the town even pitches in, raising money to hold in a pool for anyone who can’t afford to make the payment on their own.

He continues. “I’m not asking for forever, Cooper. If you decide this isn’t what you want, then it’s at least something to keep you out of trouble, keep you from going out of your mind, and get you out of your mama’s way.”

“Coming on a little strong, aren’t ya?”

“But you’re going to say yes now instead of denying it, right?”

I grip the back of my neck to keep from flipping him off. *Asshole.*

“You know, I watched that game.” He doesn’t need to elaborate; I know exactly what game he’s referring to—the one that changed everything. “That’s not the Cooper Graham I know.”

I scoff and shake my head, focusing on my crossed ankles. “I haven’t been that Cooper Graham in a long time. Honestly, I think he died the same night Tanner did.”

Coach rises slowly from the chair. He waves me off when I step forward to assist him. “No, he’s in there somewhere. Under all that pain and guilt, I know he’s still inside you.” He pokes me hard in the chest. “He’s right here.”

The memory of the events that followed that game still haunts me. It’s like I can never escape my mistakes.

*My knee bounced as I awaited the verdict. I was sweating bullets and felt like I was on trial for murder, awaiting to hear if I got the death penalty. Wasn’t this one and the same, though? I was on trial for my actions, and the victim was my career.*

*I could handle another few games’ suspension. Been there, done that. Pay a few hefty fines and make a public apology? Those were all simple things I could do, but the air in the room felt much different this time.*

*Sitting at the conference table for the Chicago Knights, with crossed arms and matching stern looks, were Luke Brennan, head coach, Simon Dunn, general manager, Alexander Everett, owner, and Violet McPhee, head of public relations for the team.*

*“Now, Cooper, we told you that you had one more chance, and then you were done.” I heard the words that came out of Alexander Everett’s mouth, but it took a moment for them to fully register. “We take our rules and regulations of the league*

*seriously. We, as a team, take pride in our reputation and expect all of our players to uphold them. You not only disgraced yourself but this team and this entire organization.”*

*“Sir, if you’ll please let me explain,” I pleaded.*

*“I’m not sure there’s anything to explain, really. Shall we rewatch it?” Violet might have given off a nonchalant attitude right then, but I would have bet last year’s bonus that she was jumping for joy on the inside. She’d made no attempt at hiding her disdain for me, after calling me a PR nightmare. She might hate me, but she was damn good at her job because as many times as I’d been in hot water, she’d helped get me out of it by working her magic. She didn’t earn the nickname “Violent Vi” for nothing—she was ruthless at her job.*

*With a few taps of her perfectly manicured finger, she spun the laptop so that we could all see the video footage from yesterday’s game.*

*I knew the moment I hit Leo Ryan, the first-base coach for the opposing team we played that day, I was changing the trajectory of my future, but I hadn’t thought it would totally derail it. Maybe pay a few fines, deal with a few games’ suspension, but here I was, twenty-four years old and being fired from my dream job—not even demoted to a minor league farm team, but actually being let go.*

*“It was a mistake. I’m incredibly sorry.”*

*“And I’m sure you are, son, but mistakes include leaving your homework at home or showing up to practice late. Punching the first-base coach of a major league baseball team*

*on live television? Not included on the list of mistakes that are allowed to happen and keep your job.”*

*I hung my head and exhaled. There was obviously nothing I could do or say to change their minds. This was on me—I knew their warning and had completely ignored it.*

*Everyone on that side of the table stood, so I did the same. This meeting was clearly over. This was it.*

*“I really hope it was worth it, Cooper. And I wish you nothing but the best,” Coach Brennan said as he shook my hand.*

*I turned my back on them and walked out of the room with my head held high—and my tail between my legs.*

*As soon as I stepped outside of the stadium, the swarm of reporters nearly swallowed me whole. Someone must have tipped the vultures off. I wondered if it was Violet who tipped them off as one last fuck-you to me.*

*“Cooper, Cooper, can you comment about the rumor that you were just let go from the league?”*

*I ignored them and kept my features steady as I made my way to my car.*

*“Coming home to my apartment felt lonely. It was days that the paparazzi camped outside. Eventually, they found other news, bigger things to worry about besides me. Articles still appear, but the focus isn’t solely on me on every front page and headline. I needed an escape. So when Ace had a come-to-Jesus moment with me and told me I needed to figure my shit*



out and get my head on straight, I knew I couldn't do it there. There was only one place I could do that. Next thing I knew, I was packing some bags and booking a flight home."

Coach remained quiet throughout the entire story, at one point needing to sit back down. His eyes drank in every word, judgment-free. Finally, he clears his throat and sits up a little straighter.

"You know what the biggest takeaway from that story is?"

I shake my head, unsure where he's going with this. I assume it's not the obvious—listen to the rules, don't get fired, don't choose violence on national television.

"That you came home. You could've gone anywhere in the world, had all the money and resources to disappear, yet you *chose* to come home to our Podunk small town. That's saying something, son."

By the time we finish up our visit, Coach is looking downright exhausted. He put up a good fight when Ellie came back out on the porch and said it was time for him to lie down, but I made an excuse that I had to leave for plans anyway to make him feel better about it. I promised not to be a stranger, and he promised he would call the principal at the high school to set up a meeting, knowing I couldn't refuse him.

As I drive off, his words swirl in my head. "*I know you might not think it right now, but I am so damn proud of you, kid.*" I hope one day I can actually believe it.

## Chapter 7

### Riley

“**M**m,” I groan and settle back in my chair, resting my hands over my stomach, which is now full of a food baby. Would it be totally inappropriate for me to unbutton my pants right now? Maybe, but the better question is, do I even care?

“Hey, nobody forced that third slice down your throat.” Austin chuckles as he shoves the last bite of pizza crust into his mouth.

“I have no regrets. Not my fault. It’s the best pizza in town.”

“Right, we’ll just forget that it’s the only pizza in town.”

I shrug. It’s true, Vincenzo’s is the only pizza spot in town. It’s one of the three places to eat in town, unless you count the local dive bar, The Pint, where you can overindulge on stale peanuts.

Vincenzo’s is one of my favorite places. Besides the delicious greasy food that I will surely need an antacid when we get home and add another mile to my run tomorrow to make up for it, it’s just so homey and quaint. The red-and-

white checkered tablecloths and the candles in the center just scream small-town, happy life. I am also addicted to the breadsticks. *Give me breadsticks, or give me death.* The only thing missing is the two dogs out back in the alley, sharing a plate of spaghetti and meatballs.

Mondays at Vincenzo's are a tradition for us. We spend dinner chatting about our day, laughing at the wild stories our students told us about their weekend, and setting goals for the week. Could we do this at home? Sure, but how can the week be bad when you start it out on such a high note with delicious food and not having to cook?

Our usual server, Jane, drops the check off. When I look up, I notice her staring strangely at me. Worried I have food on my face, I grab my napkin and wipe my mouth. She quickly rushes off in a scurry. *Okay, that was weird.*

In my haste to clean my face, Austin took advantage and grabbed the bill, and by the time I speak up, he's already pulling cash out of his wallet.

After bickering that it's my week to pay for a few moments, I finally cave with a sigh.

"Fine, but I'm paying for the next *two* weeks," I say sternly as we both scoot out of our corner booth. Instead of agreeing, he just makes a humming sound.

Always the gentleman, Austin grabs my jacket from the coatrack and helps me slide it onto my shoulders.

“Not that I’m complaining, but what’s up with you?” I ask as I pull my hair out of the back of my jacket and settle it over one shoulder. Austin has been unusually quiet this evening. I know he mentioned this afternoon when we left work that it had been a long day, but I know my best friend well enough to see something is clearly on his mind.

“What?” He mocks shock as he places his hand over his chest and grabs his own jacket. “I can’t just spoil my girl?”

“Oh, spoil away, baby,” I tease. Maybe it really was just a long day and nothing more. It’s probably all in my head—him acting weird and the funny looks from Jane.

“Thank you.” He presses a kiss to the top of my head as he wraps his arm around my shoulder and leads us to the front entrance of the restaurant. “What do you say we stop by Scoops on the way home for some milkshakes?”

“Okay,” I drag out. “Now I definitely know something is up with you. What aren’t you telling me?” I stare up at Austin, waiting for him to come clean, when his body tenses up, and he halts.

The muscles in his jaw are so tight that it looks like he might break a tooth.

*What the hell is going on?* I know I’m not paranoid now.

“Austin?” I follow his gaze past Mr. Taranto, the local barber, who is waiting for his pickup order, and my jaw drops at the ghost who just walked through the front door. I mean, it’s not literally a ghost, or is it? Did I eat myself into a full-

blown coma, and I'm dreaming right now? Did I maybe choke on a breadstick, and this is really the afterlife?

Yeah, that must be it because there's no way in hell I'm seeing Cooper Graham in front of me. He left this town without a second thought, leaving everything and everyone behind, including me.

Austin's arm tightens around my shoulders protectively. I'm thankful that he has a hero complex at the moment, however, when our eyes lock, an unspoken apology passes through them. He looks like a toddler who was just caught with this hand in the cookie jar after his mother specifically told him not to.

*Oh my God.* Everything clicks into place right now.

"You knew," I say just above a whisper as a shadow approaches.

"Riles." My stomach dips, and I fear that my delicious dinner is going to come back up at the deep timbre of his voice. It's like that feeling of being on a roller coaster when you think you've prepared yourself for that first drop, but nothing compares to the real thing. I thought and prayed a million times for him to return and what I would say if he did, and all those conversations go right out the door.

My eyes focus on the man in front of me. Dark curls peek out from under a backward baseball hat, and a thick layer of facial hair lines his jaw—a complete contrast to the smooth skin I used to feel against my own when his lips touched mine. There is still a slight ridge in his nose from where he took a

line drive and broke his nose junior year. Cooper Graham is hauntingly beautiful. His secrets run wild in his veins, and just one look into those dark eyes can obliterate your soul. I would know—I still haven't recovered.

“Coop.” Austin breaks the silence and our staring contest. I keep blinking, waiting for the moment that I open my eyes and he's gone, but no such luck. Austin takes his hand off my shoulder and extends it in front of us.

“It's, umm...good to see you,” Coop responds as he shakes Austin's hand.

*Good to see who? Me or him?*

When Austin pulls his hand back, instead of placing it back where it was on my shoulder, it now rests on my lower back. Another awkward silence surrounds us, and I wish the floor would just open up and swallow me whole.

“Are, umm,” he stutters again, “you two together?” His eyes bounce between us like one of the many ping-pong matches we had as teens in the Hayeses' garage. Cooper grips the back of his neck.

*Don't do it, Riley. Don't look at the flex in his bicep as his muscle tenses with each stroke back and forth.*

Sighing heavily, Cooper shakes his head, maybe deciding he doesn't actually want to know the answer. I could easily fuck with him and say yes so that he feels a smidge of what I'm feeling right now—as if the rug was ripped out from under me. Would Austin throw me under the bus if I did lie? It doesn't

matter, though, because I'm not quick enough in my response because Cooper speaks again.

"I'm just surprised you didn't say anything the other day." He pauses. "You know what? It's none of my business."

"You're right, it's not any of your business," I snap, finally finding words.

*Wait, he said the other day. Not only did Austin know he's back, but he's seen him?* I think it's time to revoke his best friend card. And to think he said his job as his best friend was to be honest with me. Where's the fucking honesty now?

"Mr. Hayes," someone calls out, and all three of us turn to find one of his students waving him over.

"Excuse me." Austin slips away before I can grab onto his shirt and tell him, *Don't you dare fucking leave me.*

"Coward," I mutter under my breath.

"So, do you still dance?" My head snaps back from where I was glaring lasers into the back of Austin's head.

I tilt my head to the side and narrow my eyes. "Really? You want to make small talk after all this time?"

Cooper purses his lips together and shoves his hands into his pockets. "I deserve that."

You know what I deserve? Answers. However, now is not the time or place for this. I'm sure our current situation is enough to keep all the gossip queens busy for days.

I straighten my back and cross my arms, creating a rigid stance. “For the record, no, I don’t,” I spit out, crossing my arms.

Cooper opens his mouth to speak at the same time the young hostess at the counter yells, “Order for Graham.”

“Right here.” Cooper turns and meets the girl, handing her cash for two pizza boxes and a plastic bag on top. “Keep the change, darlin’.”

The girl smiles at him as if he just promised her the world. I can’t stop the snicker from leaving my lips. He used to promise me the same thing.

I sigh. *Fuck this*. I don’t bother saying goodbye—he sure as fuck didn’t—or waiting for Austin and push open the door, walking out to the sidewalk. The ache in my chest only eases the further distance I put between me and the restaurant. Weaving through the crowd, I pretend everything is okay and normal as I head to Austin’s SUV.

I’m halfway to the vehicle when a voice calls my name behind me, but I ignore it.

“Riley! Riley, stop!” The voice gets closer. Only it’s not Cooper chasing me; it’s Austin.

He tugs on my hand and forces me to turn around to face him. It takes all the strength in my five-foot-two body to not slap him across his face.

“You knew. You fucking knew. When did you find out?” All the words that were caught in my throat when Cooper was in



front of me now flow out of me like vomit the morning after my twenty-first birthday.

I don't even give him a chance to respond until I talk again. "I can't believe you didn't fucking tell me, Austin. If your goal was to catch me off guard and make me look like a fool in front of the entire town, then great job. It worked."

Austin pulls me against his chest with such a force it almost knocks the wind out of me.

"I'm sorry," he chants over and over. "I didn't want you to find out like that. I've been trying to figure out how to tell you."

"It's pretty simple, actually, Austin," I say through gritted teeth. "You say, 'hey, Riley. I have something to tell you.'" I deepen my voice to mock his and then twist, pretending I'm a second person. "Yes, Austin, what is it?" I repeat the twist of my body. "Cooper is home," I twist one last time. "Oh, thank you so much for telling me."

"See? Pretty fucking simple." I throw my hands in the air. People stare as they pass us by. "Let's just get in the car and go home. I just can't right now. I don't wanna hear any more." I shake my head, pulling away from him, and wrap my arms around my waist so that he can't reach for me again. I wish we had driven separately.

We walk to the car in silence. As I wait for him to retrieve the keys, I glance over my shoulder just as Cooper's truck drives by. We lock eyes as he passes. I say a silent prayer that this is the last time I'll have to see him. Maybe he's just in

town on a visit and will be gone by morning—one can only hope.

Once settled in the passenger seat, I cross my arms and stare out the window, ignoring Austin as he turns the car on.

The short ride is tense and silent. It's so quiet I'm pretty sure Austin can hear my heavy beating heart.

When Austin pulls up in front of our house, neither of us makes a move to get out.

Still staring out the window, I break the silence first. “When did you see him? How did you see him?”

Austin sighs heavily. “Shannon called me and said that he had randomly shown up on their doorstep last week and needed something to keep him busy, so I thought since Coach isn't doing the fall training clinic—”

“Austin,” I interrupt, saying his name as a warning. “Please tell me you did not offer him a job at the high school.”

Silence.

When I glance over at him, I can see the whites of his knuckles from his tight grip on the steering wheel.

A maniacal laugh slips from my lips. This has to be some sort of dream, right? *No, it's a fucking nightmare. So much for Cooper not sticking around for long.*

“So, let me get this straight. You find out the man who broke my heart is back after six fucking years. You see him

and never tell me until I find out on my own in front of everyone. And then I learn you got him a job at *my* school.”

“Well, he hasn’t accepted the job yet. It was only an offer, and he said he needed to think about it.”

*Seriously? Is that supposed to make me feel better?* I let out a scream, but my hands cover my face, muffling the sound. I grab my purse and exit the car, slamming the car door before he can respond.

I can’t even look at my best friend right now.



After a long, hot shower—*enjoy your cold shower, Hayes, because I’m pretty sure I used up all the hot water*—I come back to my room, and something grabs my attention on my nightstand.

I close the distance to find a bright blue-and-white cup with the ice cream shop logo. Propped up against the milkshake is a white envelope with my name on it.

*When did he get this? Was I really in the shower that long for him to run back into town, get this, and come back?*

I sit on the edge of the bed, still wrapped up in my towel, and bring one foot underneath me as I take the first sip of the sweet treat. *Mm, Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup.* Damn, that’s good. Austin is not playing fair here.

Opening the envelope, I smirk when I pull out a red card with a bright yellow lightning bolt in the center. I’m always

teasing him, saying he looks just like the actor who plays the Flash, and when I gave him a bag full of Flash memorabilia, including this notecard set, for his birthday one year, he said he would “never ever use them to spite me.”

No need to say “I told you so” that one day he would.

I open up the card to reveal a note in his chicken scratch handwriting.

*Riley,*

*I am truly and honestly sorry for keeping this from you. It was never my intention to hurt you. I was hoping to find a way to tell you the news that might ease the blow and shock, but it all backfired in my face. You are my best friend, and I would never intentionally hurt you—I hope you know that.*

*Love, A.*

I hate that this apology note has gone straight to the feels. Deep down, I know he meant well, and in his mind, he was trying to protect me. I just wish that he would have been open and honest from the beginning when Shannon called. He and I are a team. Deciding it’s best to make him sweat it out, I finish the milkshake and toss the empty cup in the trash can.

Once changed into my pajamas, I set the card back on the nightstand and crawl under the covers. I don’t bother closing the curtains as I lie down and stare up at the stars.

I fall asleep to the sound of Cooper's voice, whispering those eight words that have engraved themselves into my mind, body, and soul—*I love you to the stars and back.*

## Chapter 8

### Riley

I've never been so excited to have a free period in the morning as I am today. I slept like shit. Instead of my usual run before school, I decided a change of venue would help clear my head to keep from possibly running down Elm Street again. So I came to the high school just before dawn and ran the track.

With each pound of my footsteps on the pavement, I replayed the moments from last night. Austin said he had arrived last week. Was he here the day I changed my running route and ran past his house?

A knock at the open door causes me to jump. When I turn my head, I don't see anyone. "What the hell?"

Suddenly, a small white flag waves midair.

I smirk.

Austin appears in the doorway. "Is it safe to enter?"

I roll my eyes as I mock him. "Very funny."

He walks into my classroom with one hand still waving the flag and the other behind his back. I arch my neck, trying to

find what he's hiding, but he twists his body away from me, so I just pout.

"I come in peace. I promise."

"I know," I sigh.

"You were gone this morning, so I was worried I might need to bring out the big guns since you stayed holed up in your room last night." His brows draw together in concern.

"Sorry, I couldn't sleep, so I decided to just run the track."

"Ry, I really am sorry. I should have told you." I hate the distraught look on my best friend's face.

"Austin, I get it. We can't go back in time." Trust me, if we could, I would. "So, let's just move forward. Just please don't keep things like that from me."

"I won't. It kept me up most of the night, too. All I could think about was everything he put you through, and I was an ass." His appearance is slightly more disheveled than usual. His blue dress shirt is slightly wrinkled, and there are dark circles under his eyes that match mine. At least makeup conceals mine. "Just promise me that if you at all feel—"

I rise and place my finger over his lips, silencing him. "I will."

Tossing the flag onto my desk, he grabs my wrist gently and pulls my hand down. His eyes focus on mine, and his face goes serious. "Promise me you'll tell me, Riley."

"I promise," I say in a hushed tone.

He nods in response and squeezes my hand before releasing it. “So, we’re all good?”

I giggle that he’s so worried still. “Yes, we’re good.”

Austin purses his lips together. “Then I guess you don’t want this coffee.” He finally reveals what was behind his back: a large coffee from the coffee shop—aka the nectar of the gods and not the gross sludge served in the faculty lounge.

“Ahh,” I shriek, reaching my hands out in front of me and wiggling my fingers. I’m pretty sure my face just lit up like a kid on Christmas morning. “Gimme, gimme.”

When he hands it over, I bring the cup to my nose and inhale the delicious aroma.

Austin chuckles when I let out a breathy moan after the first sip. I’d say I’m sorry, but I’m not. I’m glad it’s just the two of us in the classroom now.

I follow him over toward the window and follow his gaze.

“When I was in the office this morning, I heard rumors he has a meeting with Principal Horne tomorrow.”

I hum as I take another sip.

“You ready for this?”

“Not really sure what choice I have.”

“Maybe you can have your classroom changed,” he manages in between a snicker.

“Dick,” I mutter under my breath but loud enough for him to hear me. I look directly out at the Tanner Hayes Memorial



Field. The school renamed the field in memory of Tanner four years ago. It was an emotional day, with most of the town in attendance. Every part of me thought Cooper would at least be in attendance for the ceremony that day, but he wasn't. Tanner would be so disappointed to see the man that he became.

I rest my head on Austin's shoulder as we stare out the window in a welcoming silence.

"Well, I better get back to my classroom," Austin announces moments before the bell rings. His smile resembles a Cheshire cat's, and I know something is up. "Pop quiz today."

"Ooh, you're evil, Mr. Hayes. I do not know how the students voted you as their favorite teacher last year. You have an addiction to pop quizzes."

He shrugs. "What can I say?" He spins and walks backward toward the door, running his hands over his silk tie. "The kids love me. At least I waited till Tuesday to give it and not yesterday. I'm not *that cruel*."

I can't help but match the smile on his face because you can tell he loves his job, as do I.



The last bell rang fifteen minutes ago. The chatter from the halls has quieted down as students gathered their belongings from their lockers and made their way out of the building. I'm just gathering up my things to head down to the school's

auditorium for rehearsal with the dance company when my desk vibrates. *What the hell?*

I look in the drawer I typically keep my phone in and come up empty. The buzzing continues. I open the drawer beside that and shuffle the bag of watermelon candies around, causing a few to spill out of the bag.

“Aha, there you are.” I don’t even remember putting it in there.

My smile falls when I see a photo of my two sisters and me on the screen.

“Yes, Lyla,” I say, answering my oldest sister’s call.

“Is that seriously how you answer the phone, Riley?”

I snicker. “Oh, I’m sorry. How about ‘hello, my darling sister, how are you today?’” I make my voice so sickeningly sweet and over-the-top that I may have just given myself a cavity from it.

“Yes, that’s much better. I expect you to answer the phone like that every time, now that you mention it.”

I roll my eyes. “Did you need something, or did you want to just call to bust my proverbial balls?”

“Such a lady with that mouth.” I can hear the humor in her voice, but if it’s really the latter for calling, I don’t have time for this.

“Okay,” I draw out. “I’m hanging up now. If you want to annoy someone, call our other sister.”

“No, wait,” she shouts, and I bring the phone back to my ear. “I wanted to check in to see how you’re doing.” Her voice changes to her concerning mom voice she uses with my nieces.

“How I’m doing? I’m doing just fine. Umm, thanks for asking.”

“Really? Because a little birdie told me that last night at Vincenzo’s, there was a bit of a showdown between you and he who shall not be named.” She says it as if Cooper is really Voldemort.

A showdown? Seriously? What is this, the Wild West? He came in with his spurs on his saddles, and I told him this town isn’t big enough for the two of us.

“Riley Mae, are you even listening to me?” she screeches, and I have to pull the phone away.

I’m pretty sure she would yell even more if I answered honestly with “no, I’m just dreaming of tumbleweeds and cowboys,” so I go with the safe answer of “What?”

She sighs. “I said, why am I having to hear it as gossip halfway across the country when I should have been hearing that straight from the horse’s mouth?”

I snort. I swear my parents should have made Lyla’s middle name “drama queen” instead of Rose. “Well, there’s no need to bring a horse into this.” I’ve been called many things over the years but can’t say that I’ve been called a horse before.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, can you be serious for one moment?”  
She’s so easy to get a rise out of.

“No, actually, I think I’d prefer not to be.” If I don’t joke about it, then I might let my emotions get the better of me.

“You’re such a child,” she scolds.

“Look, there’s nothing more to say. It didn’t go down like a showdown or smackdown or any other down. Austin and I were at dinner per usual on that night, and as we were leaving, we ran into him.”

“What’s he even doing back here?”

“I don’t know, Ly. I must have forgotten to ask him that on my *20/20* interview special for the front page of the gossip times. Wait, how did y’all even find out?” Like she had said before, she lives halfway across the country.

“Oh, you know how that gossip town works. Ethel Bankhead was eating at Vincenzo’s with her grandsons, and she called so and so, who called so and so, and when they were talking to Mom on the phone this morning, they mentioned it. Said you ran like hell out of there. Surprised you didn’t burn the place down with the fire on your heels.”

I know she’s trying to lighten the mood here, but all I can think about is being the center of attention and the topic of everyone’s conversation.

“I know you’re looking out for me and all, but I’m a big girl. I can handle him back in town, and who knows, maybe he won’t stay all that long and he’ll leave just as fast as he did the

first time.” Even as I say the words aloud, I can only hope they are true. “But I gotta get to rehearsal.”

“Fine, but call me and Sutton later on a video call. We’re *not done* talking about this.”

“Can’t wait,” I sarcastically singsong. “Give Mom, Dad, and the girls my love.”

“Always.”

After we hang up, I shove the phone in my bag and grab the rest of my belongings. I run my hands over my face and sigh heavily, feeling like the weight of the world is sitting on my shoulders.

The difference between talking about Cooper with Austin rather than my sisters is that it’s honestly sincere with Austin. He was here to help me pick up the pieces after he left. When my family moved to Meadows Ridge, Lyla was already in college, and Sutton was a senior. By the time the accident happened, they both were off doing their own thing. Eventually, my parents moved to be closer to my nieces, leaving me the lone Parker in this town.

Austin means well, whereas my sister now was just trying to get information. God forbid either of them be the last to know something. I love my sisters to death and would do anything for them, but they can be a lot to handle when they band together. But I know there’s no getting out of that video call later because if I don’t call, they’ll just keep blowing up my phone till I answer. Some days, I think they should name Mason Parker a saint for putting up with his three daughters all

these years and not going insane. Throw my mom into that equation, and he definitely at least deserves a gold medal.

I glance at the clock on the wall above my chalkboard. *Damnit, now I'm going to end up being late.* The girls at least know how to warm up even if I haven't arrived.

Joining the faculty at my alma mater when I did couldn't have been more perfect—Mrs. Wirth, who was in charge of the dance program when I attended, was retiring, so I took over.

I'm lost in my own thoughts about how this video call might go as I rush out of the classroom and run directly into someone.

“Oh, sorry, Ms. Parker,” Beau Marshall, one of my students, says in a total panic.

“It's okay, Beau. I wasn't watching where I was going. Where are you headed off to?”

“Just the weight room, ma'am. Need to keep up even if Coach Benson isn't running the clinic now.” Disappointment laces his voice. Beau is one of our star baseball players, following in Tanner's footsteps as catcher. He slumps his shoulders and looks at something that must be super interesting on the floor.

The fall clinic has always been a way for these kids to focus their energy and hone in on their craft. Coach's diagnosis came out of the blue and shocked our community.

My anger fades for a split second over Cooper's return when I think of him taking over the clinic that these boys were all looking forward to. There is no other better person than Coach to run this. Cooper is the best player I know. Feelings aside, he is amazing on the field. All he sees is the diamond. So much so that he threw everything else away, including me.

It's on the tip of my tongue to say that they offered Cooper the job and the clinic will most likely be starting back up soon, but it's not my place to say. So, instead, I give him a soft smile. "You're very dedicated."

"Yes, ma'am. Baseball is my life." He pauses. "Well, and Maddey." His smile lights up his face at the mention of his girlfriend, who also happens to be one of my dancers.

"Speaking of Maddey, I'm late for rehearsal, so I need to get going. Have a good afternoon."

Beau nods and begins to walk away.

"Oh, hey, Beau," I shout over my shoulder, and he looks up. "Good job on your *Romeo and Juliet* paper. I'm not supposed to share yet, so act surprised when you get it back, but you got a 96."

"Yes." He throws his hand up in the air, reminding me of the lead in *The Breakfast Club* at the end.

I watch as he adds a little pep to his step. At least I know I brought some form of joy into his life, even if just for a moment.

## Chapter 9

### Cooper

**M**y knee bounces at a rapid pace as I wait in the lobby outside the principal's office.

I have no idea why I'm so nervous. Trying to calm my anxiety, I glance around the room. The secretary, Alice, is focusing heavily on something on the screen. When I reach the nameplate on the wall beside the principal's door that reads *Ian Horne*, I have to smother my laughter with my fist.

The last time I was sitting here, I was awaiting my turn to be questioned about my involvement in the senior prank.

To this day, I maintain my innocence that I had nothing to do with changing every sign that had Principal Horne's name from Ian to Iam to be read as *I am Horne*, a play on words of sorts.

Since I was nowhere near the school that night, I would have no idea that there were one hundred and twelve places around the school with his name listed in some shape or form.

I'm still chuckling at the memory when his office door opens. Principal Horne looks exactly the same, with his wire



glasses perched on his nose.

“Cooper, it’s great to see you.”

Rising from the chair, I meet him halfway and shake his hand. “You too, sir.”

He chuckles. “Please, call me Ian.” I nod, even though that feels weird. “Come on into my office, and let’s chat.” Ian extends his hand to lead me into his office.

“Have a seat, Coop,” he says as he closes the door behind him. I take a seat in one of the open seats in front of his desk while he takes a seat behind it. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

I shake my head and wave him off. “Oh, no trouble at all. I know you’re a busy man. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me this morning.”

“Of course, but I think I should thank you, actually. I spoke with Verne, and he said that you’re interested in taking over his fall ball clinic.”

“I am. I’m not sure how good of a role model I’ll be, but I promise to do my best with the boys.”

“I think the kids can definitely benefit from your knowledge. One of the best damn baseball players to walk this hall.”

An awkward silence comes over us as he processes his own words. *Yeah, one of them—the other was gone too soon.* Ian clears his throat.

“I know Verne went over what we expect of you, the schedule, and all that. Here is a list”—he pulls a folder from a pile on his desk—“with the current roster and their class schedules and contact information.”

I accept the folder and start browsing, not that I recognize anyone’s name.

“I have some paperwork for you to complete as well. All pretty standard.”

My eyes widen, and he must sense my nerves because he laughs. “Relax, Cooper. You only have to cross some t’s and dot some i’s. I don’t need a blood oath or anything,” he jokes. “Cooper, it’s all going to be okay. You’re going to do a great job. Both Coach Benson and I both have all the faith in you.”

I laugh awkwardly. “No pressure or anything.”

“Come on, let me walk you down to Coach’s office, where you can set up.” Ian rises, and I follow. He searches for something on his desk, shuffling a few items before snapping open a drawer. He retrieves a set of keys and holds them up.

“I thought I was being a baseball coach, not a janitor.”

He chuckles as we exit his office. “Alice, I’m going to walk Cooper down to show him around a little. If Eric Taylor shows up, let him know I’ll be back shortly.”

She nods and gives me a small wave.

We make small talk as we walk down the halls.

“Man.” I blow out a breath and grip the back of my neck.

“Feels weird being back, huh?”

“Yeah, something like that.” Memories flash in my mind of walking down the halls with Riley on my arm and Tanner beside me; getting caught kissing Riley against her locker by Mr. Kramer, one of the math teachers; and overall, feeling like being on top of the world.

There is an innocence that carries through the hallways in high school. As teenagers, we feel we are invincible, that everything in the outside world—all the dangers and evils and, honestly, reality—couldn’t penetrate our bubble. We learned quickly that it didn’t matter your age. When life was ready to throw you curveballs, it threw hard and fast. There wasn’t time to wait for the perfect pitch. It was happening whether we were ready or not.

I freeze in my tracks when we pass a classroom with an open door and I recognize that female voice.

*Riley’s a teacher here? Once again, why didn’t anyone think to share that?*

Honestly, it catches me a little off guard. Careful not to disturb her or make myself known, I stand there in the shadows just outside her classroom and observe her in her element.

“I mean, why would they kill themselves? There are so many more women out there that Romeo could have had. No need to tie himself down to just one and die over her,” a male voice says, followed by slight chattering.

I cover my teeth with my lips to keep my snort from escaping. The kid has a valid point. At least the fifteen-year-old version of me agreed.

“Now, that’s an excellent question, Hudson. One that I’m sure many people would agree with, actually. But—” She rests back against her desk and crosses her ankles. “Have you ever loved someone so much you actually ached? It sucks.” She pauses and catches her breath, and I can’t help but wonder what’s going through her head. “Especially when it’s someone you’re supposed to hate. Your heart can’t help who it’s called to—” If I hadn’t been paying attention so closely, I would have missed the hitch in her voice. “—even if it’s your mortal enemy.”

*Is that how she feels about us? Are we our own version of Romeo and Juliet?*

“I heard my mom once say that her favorite books to read were enemies to lovers,” another voice adds.

“Well, that’s a little different. But I understand why she would enjoy those.”

“Cooper.” Ian pulls my attention back to him. His voice is low enough, so hopefully, Riley doesn’t catch us out here. The last thing I need is to make a scene here.

“Sorry about that.” I catch up to him a few feet away.

“The kids all love Miss Parker. She and a few other teachers are a breath of fresh air to the faculty. That won’t be an issue,

will it?" He nods toward Riley's classroom, and I know what he's referring to.

"No, not at all." I steady my features to not give away my nerves.

I take one last glance over my shoulder before I step in stride with Ian.

When I turned around the other night in the pizza place, all I saw was her back rushing out the door. I was almost at the door when Austin reached me and grabbed my arm.

*"Don't," he warned.*

*"Are you two together?" I asked again, this time needing an answer. If they were together, I could be happy for them. After all, she deserved someone to treat her right and love her the way she deserved.*

*"No, but she's important as hell to me, so just let her go. She just needs time to process it all. I didn't warn her." Austin slumped his shoulders and rubbed his temples. I guess he was dealing with a little bit of guilt here.*

*"See ya round." He walked out the door and chased her down the sidewalk.*

*I sighed heavily and glanced around the restaurant to see that everyone had witnessed our moment. It was only a matter of time before everyone knew. It wouldn't surprise me if by the time I got back to my parents' house, they asked me about the interaction. As I gave a weak smile to no one in particular, I headed out the door toward my truck.*

*I looked around but didn't see them anywhere. I pushed down the urge to go searching for them and hopped in my truck. The smell of the greasy Italian food made my stomach rumble as loud as the truck starting up.*

Ian and I walk in silence the rest of the way till we get to the closed door with Coach Benson's name on it.

After unlocking the door and pushing it open, he drops the keys in my hands. "This includes master keys to the locker rooms and the various storage closets with all the supplies and equipment, along with the field house. I'm calling parents today, and we should be able to start Monday if that works for you." I nod. "The kids will meet you out at the field around 3:00 p.m."

Ian slaps my back and wishes me good luck before turning to disappear around the corner.

With a few calming breaths, I flip the light switch on and take in the surrounding room. *You can do this, Coop.*

There are various framed photos on the walls and trophies on the shelves. I drop the folder of paperwork on the desk that I need to complete and return to the main office.

It doesn't take long to finish the paperwork and drop it back off to Alice and tell her I'll see her next week.

On my way out, I make a pit stop at the baseball field. I lean forward with my elbows propped up against the fence behind home plate.

I don't have to close my eyes to be overwhelmed by the memories this field holds. Not just any field but the Tanner Hayes Memorial Field.

If he were standing right here next to me, I'd imagine he'd say something like *"See that, fucker? I got a field named after me. Think they'd still do that if they knew I made it to third base with Quinn James in the dugout during junior homecoming?"*

The hairs on the back of my neck rise as if someone is watching me. I look around but come up empty. I shiver. *I'm clearly losing my mind.*

As soon as I arrive home, the smell of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies lures me to the kitchen, where I find Ma pulling a tray out of the oven.

"You know, Ma, I'm thinking you never actually leave this room," I tease.

She shrugs as she sets the tray down on the counter. "Some people pray or meditate to ground themselves and find inner peace. I find mine here." She looks around the farmhouse-style kitchen. "It's similar to the way you find yours on the field."

I nod in understanding as I snag a cookie from the tray. Ma scowls at me, but karma is hot on my heels because it's still incredibly warm, and the cookie burns the tips of my fingers.

"Serves you right," Ma mutters under her breath.

I blow on the cookie, attempting to cool it before breaking the cookie in half. I don't know how she makes them so

perfectly—still soft on the inside and the chocolate chips melted to perfection.

“Mm.” I embarrassingly let out a soft moan when I finally take a bite of the sweet treat. “Ma, you keep this up,” I say as I shove the other half of the cookie in my mouth, “I’m going to need to double my exercise efforts.”

Ma giggles. “Well, your father, I’m sure, is happy to have you home to help eat all of these sweets. When you first left, I went a little overboard with my baking, and your father ended up needing to go up two pant sizes. We all found our own way of dealing with you gone.”

Feeling the change in the somber air, Ma clears her throat. “So, where you off to this morning?”

“I had a meeting at the high school with Principal Horne.”

“Oh,” she gasps in surprise but avoids any eye contact with me.

“Uh-uh.” I wag my finger at her. She doesn’t get to play dumb here, knowing damn well that this is all because of her making that initial call to Austin. “Wasn’t that all part of your plan to get me out of the house and basically throw me to the wolves?”

“Wolves? No.” She shakes her head. “Wildcats? Maybe.” The corners of her lips turn upward in a smug smile at her joke. I’ll give her that. It was a good one.

“I was just looking out for you, Cooper.” I don’t mean to, but I scoff. “I’m serious.”



“Were you looking out for me when you didn’t think to mention a few important facts”—like Coach being sick —“when I returned?”

She places her hands firmly on the counter. “You’re right.”

Well, I honestly wasn’t expecting that. Shannon Graham is a prideful woman, and it’s rare that she admits that she’s wrong. Although, I guess she didn’t exactly admit she was wrong, just that I was right, so it’s implied.

“Maybe I should have told you, and I know it’s all a lot to take in, honey, but what exactly did you expect me to do? Sit you down and go through a timeline of the last six years and fill in every detail of what has happened or changed around here? Did you prefer the CliffsNotes version?”

I purse my lips together. I guess she has a point. Ma walks around the counter and places her hands on her shoulders, twisting me to face her.

“I understand you are a little upset, but you came home to get your head on straight, and all we were watching you do was sink further into yourself. With each day that passed, I knew I had to do something if you weren’t. I had already planned to bring in reinforcements, but *you*—” She pokes my chest firmly. “—gave me no other choice. It broke my heart watching your father carry you in, blackout drunk. So, I made the call to Austin that very night and put things into motion. You agreed on that second day back that you wouldn’t hide, and that’s exactly what you did. I had to do something. I’ll apologize for how I went about it, but I won’t *ever* apologize

for doing it. Cooper, you are my son, and I love you. You might not realize this, but you need this, and one day, you'll realize what I did was for your own good.”

With that, she spins around and exits the kitchen without another word.

I grab one last cookie before sinking back against the chair. I sigh while aggressively taking a bite of the cookie. *Well, that went well.*

## Chapter 10

### Cooper

I anxiously wait on the field for the players to arrive. Today is the first day of the clinic, and I think I might have more butterflies than when I did before playing my first professional game. I don't know why I'm so nervous—maybe because whatever I teach these kids will be what sticks with them for the rest of their lives. If I fuck it up, fuck them up, then that's another thing on me.

“Hey,” I say as the group of twelve boys walks toward me, carrying their bags. *Is this as awkward for them as it is for me?*

“I assume there's no need for introductions on my end, but I'm Cooper. You don't need to call me Coach, just Coop or Cooper. I'm not your coach, just helping Coach Benson with this clinic.” *He'll be back*, I infer, even though we all know there's a good possibility that's not true.

I pull out the roster and begin reading the names aloud that Ian said would be in attendance. Each player says, “Here.”

“Beau Marshall,” I call out. Silence greets me, so I repeat the name.

“Right here,” an exasperated voice yells out as a kid runs up to the group.

“Going for the dramatic entrance, Marshall,” a player taunts.

“He was probably getting his dick sucked by Maddey,” another teases, making a crude motion to his crotch. I blow out a terse breath. *Sweet Jesus, were we this bad back then?* Actually, I’m sure we were far worse.

“Enough,” I bark before this gets out of hand. Beau’s face is flushed, and I’m not sure if he’s embarrassed or ready to take a swing. “Beau, nice of you to join us. Just remember, we start at three o’clock sharp.”

“I’m sorry. This won’t happen again, I promise.”

I nod in response and get back to the roster. All thirteen kids are present. There are a few players who aren’t taking part because of other commitments.

“Alright.” I toss the folder to the ground and cross my arms. “Over the next few weeks, we’ll focus on different skills: throwing, pitching, hitting, infield and outfield defense, and base running. This first week will be pretty generic as we get to know each other and I see what exactly I’m working with. There will also be two days instead of being on the field that we will meet in the weight room.” I pause as I take this group in. No one seems like they’re ready to run for the hills, so I take that as a good sign.

“For our time together, I will put in my effort, but in order for this not to be a complete waste of our time, I need you all to give it that, too. That includes being on time.”

My eyes first find Beau’s, and he looks down, adjusting the brim of his hat, before I search the rest of the crowd. When no one says anything, I clear my throat. “This is where y’all will say yes, Cooper.”

“Yes, Cooper,” they all say in unison. I feel a bit like a drill sergeant.

After warming up, each player takes their position. I lean back against the fence and watch the players toss the ball back and forth. I focus on Beau as he squats above home plate, and I can’t help but feel the familiarity of him. Was he on one of the younger teams we had visited? I rack my brain through memories of where I might know him from.

I make it through the entire first day without losing my mind. This group is full of talent and could honestly give our winning team a run for our money. The team is packing up as I walk the diamond to collect the bases.

“Cooper,” Beau calls out as I lean down to pick up second base.

“What’s up, Beau?”

“I just wanted to apologize for being late today. I didn’t make the best first impression, and I don’t want you to think that I’m going to be taking advantage of your time here.” The poor kid looks like he’s ready to blow a gasket.

“Woah, Beau, relax. Today was only day one—we’ll call it first-day jitters.”

“I promise it won’t happen again, sir.”

“Woah, woah, woah.” I nearly drop the bases I’m holding. “No need to make me feel old as shit by calling me sir.” We both laugh. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Beau.”

He turns and jogs toward the open gate, trying to catch up to the rest of the team, but I call his name.

“Look, I know this is going to sound certifiable, but have we met before? I’ve spent this entire session feeling like we have.”

Beau adjusts the strap of his bag on his shoulder. “Umm, yeah, actually. You once signed my ball cap when I was a kid.” *Holy shit.* “I actually wore it every day until it almost fell apart. Now it sits in a box in the closet.”

I adjust the bases under my arm and use my free hand to grip the back of my neck as I blow out a harsh breath. “You called me your hero,” I recall.

Beau laughs. “Yeah, not one of my finer moments. My mother scolded me most of the afternoon that day for running over to you and asking you that.”

“You ever need a replacement, just let me know.”

“Marshall, you coming or what?” someone shouts.

He shouts back that he’ll be just a minute longer before turning back to me. I hold my hand up to stop whatever he was

going to say.

“Go on and get out of here.” I nod toward the group. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

With that, he leaves, and I’m left on the diamond with nothing but memories of everything that happened that first day I met Beau.

*I was leaning forward, resting my elbows as I mindlessly flipped through the outdated magazine in the physical therapist’s office. I tossed it on the side table beside me.*

*My knee anxiously bounced up and down. Could the other patients feel the motion? I refused to look up from where something interesting on the floor held my gaze. I could feel the stares from everyone in the office. It’d been the same since the night of the accident, or the next day, once word spread about what happened. I couldn’t walk anywhere in town without people stopping and whispering.*

*My palms began to sweat, and the room, I swore, was getting smaller the longer I sat there.*

*I pressed up on my knees to stand and walked over to the woman at the front desk. She looked up from her screen and raised her brows in question.*

*“Excuse me. My girlfriend, Riley Parker, is still back in her session.” She nodded, recalling as she checked us in only forty minutes ago. “In case she finishes up early, could you let her know I just stepped outside for some air?”*

*“Mmm-hmm.” She nodded.*

*“Thanks.”*

*As I exited the building, I put my head back down. I stepped outside from the balmy air, and even though it was hotter than Hades’ asshole, it was a reprieve from the brewing anxiety attack I felt creeping up and the stifling air of the office.*

*I never used to experience things like this—sure, I had nerves before a game, but who didn’t? But this wasn’t something like once in the heat of the moment, the feeling passed or could be fixed by imagining the crowd in their underwear during a speech. Crouching down, I leaned back against the brick wall, closed my eyes, and tried to calm my racing heart. Was this shit ever going to get easier?*

*“Excuse me, Cooper?” a small voice said, and I blinked my eyes open and came face-to-face with a young kid wearing a Red Sox baseball jersey. “Can I have your autograph?”*

*“Umm.” I stood up straight and gripped the back of my neck. It wasn’t the first time I’d been asked for autographs from kids. Coach took us all to the elementary school to help with the younger players once in a while.*

*“Beau.” An older woman, who I assumed was his mother, rushed over to us. “You can’t just run off from me like that.”*

*“But Mama, it’s Cooper. I asked him for an autograph.”*

*“Leave him alone, sweetie.”*

*I rose to my feet and adjusted my hat. “No, it’s totally fine, ma’am. It’s no trouble at all.” She opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something but instead shut it and nodded.*



*“I’m sorry, buddy, but I don’t seem to have a pen.” I felt my back pockets just in case one magically appeared.*

*“Mama, Mama.” Beau tugged on his mother’s arm. “Do you have a pen, please, please, please,” he pleaded with a pout.*

*She searched her bag, and moments later, she revealed one and held it out. Before I could reach for it, Beau grabbed it and all but shoved it in my face. I chuckled while his mother looked absolutely horrified by her son’s behavior. I accepted the pen, and he did the same with his hat, showing that was what he would like me to sign.*

*“You like playin’ ball, Beau?”*

*“Oh yes.” He nodded enthusiastically, and I couldn’t help but laugh again, feeling slightly lighter than before. Maybe laughter was food for the soul, as Mama said.*

*“What position do you play?” I asked as I scribbled my name on the inside brim of his hat.*

*“I’m a catcher.” He crouched down into his catcher’s stance and pretended to catch balls.*

*“You know, my best friend is—” My words caught in my throat. He was—he never would be anything again.*

*I set the hat down on his head and tapped the brim with my finger. “Be good, kid.”*

*“Thanks, Cooper.” He smiled as if today was the best day of his life. “You’re my hero,” he shouted over his shoulder as his mother led him away.*

*Once he was out of range, I scoffed. Hero? Some hero, I am.*

*I pulled out my phone and saw I still had about ten more minutes left until Riley was supposed to be done. I think I can manage that much back in the waiting room. I was almost to the front door when my phone buzzed. I glanced down at the screen to see “unknown caller.”*

*“Umm, hello?”*

*A throat cleared on the other end of the line. “Hi, is this Cooper Graham?”*

*“Yes, this is he.” Please don’t be another reporter looking for a statement.*

*“Cooper, this is Simon Dunn. I’m the general manager of the—”*

*“Chicago Knights,” I finished for him.” I wasn’t expecting that. “Umm, what can I do for you, sir?”*

*“Well, Cooper, I’m hoping you can do a lot for me, actually. I was sorry to hear about Tanner Hayes.” I swallowed the emotion that crept up my throat, and my eyes instantly glossed over with unshed tears. Fuck, there was no way that he was calling just to offer his condolences. “You know, son, we’ve had our eyes on both of you for most of your high school career, honestly.”*

*“Yes, sir. Coach Benson had made us aware.” I wasn’t really sure where this conversation was going.*

*“I wanted to talk to you, Coop.” His voice grew more serious. “Look, I know you backed out of the offer, but you have some serious talent, and I saw your potential at just fifteen. Over the years, you’ve only gotten better and better. I know that you have a lot going on with...” He trailed off. “But you have honest-to-God natural talent, and I want you on our team. What do I need to do to make that happen?”*

*“But like you said, I missed the date.”*

*“I’m well aware, but I want you and am willing to do whatever I need to do to have you wearing a Knights jersey.”*

*“Wow, I’m not really sure what to say. I need to go, but can I think about it?”*

*“Of course. Think about it and talk it over with your parents. I know you’re eighteen already, but this is a lot to take in. You can reach me on this number. I look forward to hearing from you.”*

*The call disconnected, and I stared at it, still in shock. After pocketing my phone, I pinched my arm tightly. When I winced at the pain, I realized, nope, I wasn’t dreaming.*

*Noise from behind me caused me to spin around, and I found the main entrance door opening and a nurse wheeling Riley out in her wheelchair.*

*I rushed over to meet them. “Hey, babe.” I leaned down and pressed a quick kiss to her lips before stepping back and moving in to relieve the nurse from pushing her chair. “Thank*

*you,” I said to the nurse before turning back to Riley. “Sorry, I stepped outside for some air.”*

*Riley glanced back over her shoulder. “It’s fine, Coop. Jeanie wheeled me out after my session, and the girl up front gave me the message.” She tilted her head to study my face, but thankfully, the moment I saw her, my look of shock faded. “Everything okay?”*

*Tell her about the call, Cooper. Tell her that the team still wants you. I pushed those thoughts aside and instead told her about Beau.*

*“Yeah, there was a kid that asked me for my autograph. He told me I was his hero.”*

*We reached my truck, and I pressed the brakes on her chair before unlocking and opening the door. I scooped her into my arms and carefully placed her in the passenger seat, careful not to bump her immobilized leg.*

*“All good?”*

*She nodded, giving me a weak smile. Her sessions were exhausting for her. She typically took a nap right after.*

*I quickly shut the door, broke down the chair, and set it in the truck’s bed. She hated that thing, but because of her wrist, she couldn’t maneuver around on crutches till it healed better.*

*Once settled in the driver’s seat, I put the key in the ignition. But before I could turn it, Riley leaned over and placed her hand in mine, lacing our fingers. “Cooper,” she exhaled. “I*

*know you might not think it, but you made that little boy's day. He's going to remember that, probably for the rest of his life."*

*"I'm nobody's hero." I shook my head and stared out the windshield.*

*"Hey." Riley raised her voice in the cab of the truck. "You're my hero, Cooper Graham."*

*When I turned to face her, her smile was wide, and for the first time in forever, I saw a glimpse of my girl. She might call me her hero, but what she didn't know was that she was mine.*

# Chapter 11

## Cooper

**Ace:** *What the fuck, man? You don't call. You don't write. You're breaking my fucking heart.*

I shake my head at the dramatics of his text message.

**Me:** *That would imply that you had a fucking heart for me to break.*

**Ace:** *You wound me.*

**Ace:** *I can't believe you're leaving me hanging and missing out on our post season beach trip.*

For the last few years, the guys and I took a trip to the Dominican Republic at the end of the season to decompress and relax. Beaches, babes in bikinis, and brewskis were all we needed, Ace always said.

**Ace:** *The guys don't give a shit that you've been dethroned from the knighthood.*

I bark out a loud laugh. One of the first nights after they fired me and the guys were free, they came over and drank ourselves silly. By the end of the night, we were recreating a scene from *King Arthur*, but instead of making me a knight at the round table, I was being dethroned. We got out toy swords and all.

*“Off with his head,” Ace shouted in a terrible British accent. Beer had splashed out of the top of the bottle and all over the floor.*

**Me:** *Nah, thanks for the invite, but I can't leave. I've got some commitments that I can't skip out on.*

What kind of dick move would that be? Agreeing to this, making it a few sessions, and then bailing. I might be an asshole, but I'm not that much of an asshole.

I wait for him to respond. Seconds pass, and not even the three bubbles showing he's typing appear. Ace Sullivan is the epitome of squirrel brain, so I give up and shove my phone in my back pocket and continue to head toward the door. As I pass the auditorium, music catches my attention. Curiosity gets the better of me, and I find my feet following the direction of the tunes.

I carefully open the door leading to the auditorium to not let too much light in.

“Coach Graham?” a shadow asks softly from beside me. Now that my eyes have adjusted to the darkness of the audience, I recognize Beau sitting in one seat in the last row, with his arms perched on the seat in front of him.

I take a seat next to him. “Hey, Beau, what are you still doing here? Clinic let out almost an hour ago.”

He nods toward the stage. “That’s my girlfriend, Maddey. I’m just waiting for her to get done rehearsal with Miss Parker.”

I watch as Riley directs Maddey across the stage with clapping and silly comments like shouting, “Hit,” and “Bop bop bop.” A dancer’s language is honestly strange. They talk in tongues with noises, and their counting begins with a five instead of a one. Whenever Tanner and I teased Riley, she would just come back with “At least I don’t always feel the need to be slapping other guys’ butts.” She had me there—there is quite a lot of unnecessary spanking on the field.

“Okay, Maddey one more time, and then I think we’re good,” I hear Riley say before disappearing into the wing of the curtain.

Maddey walks in a small circle, shaking her limbs out, and I can’t help but smirk because I can remember many rehearsals where I watched Riley when we were younger and she did the same thing. Must be a dancer thing to psych themselves up.

“You ready?”



“Yep,” Maddey responds to the voice before taking her position in the center of the stage, lying down on her side.

She begins to dance as the music starts. I have to say she’s an extremely talented dancer. Each move flows with precision and grace. I can’t help but watch Beau with my peripheral vision, and he can’t take his eyes off Maddey, pride written all over his face.

Riley runs out from backstage and hugs Maddey after she takes her final pose. Her back is currently to us, so she hasn’t noticed that I’ve been sitting here with Beau. They have some sort of hushed conversation before Riley heads backstage and Maddey walks down the front stage steps and grabs her belongings from the front row.

Beau stands and slings his bag over his shoulder. I stand to let him out of the row. The petite blonde approaches us moments later. Beau wraps his arm around her shoulder and kisses her temple.

“Ew, babe, I’m all sweaty.” She tries to push him away, but he doesn’t even flinch.

He chuckles. “I don’t care. You’re still beautiful.” *Smooth, kid, real smooth.*

“Bye, Coop. See you at the next session.”

With a small wave back, I respond, “See ya later, Beau.” They disappear out the door, and I’m torn as to my next move. I’m not sure if Riley is going to be coming out this way. Should I slip out the door before she reappears? When a few

moments pass by and she doesn't appear, I wonder if she slipped out of a different exit. I head toward the door to leave as music plays.

A familiar piano solo, in fact. One that I only know because the marketing team for the Knights had a few of us players do some social media videos dancing to the chorus. It was apparently some trend, and they thought it would be hilarious to involve giant fans and hoses.

I settle back in my seat, thankful I'm far back enough to still be cloaked in darkness in case she could see me.

*Does she have another student rehearsing?*

Almost a minute passes before she walks out onto the stage, pausing at the loud boom of the song.

I lean forward in a similar stance to how Beau watched his girlfriend with his arms on the seat in front of him, and I watch Riley move across the floor.

*Doesn't still dance, my ass.* While there is something different about her movements, a slight caution and hesitation, there's also a comforting familiarity.

If I wasn't so entranced by her flowing movement, I'd call her out on her lie. The emotion comes off her in waves. God, she is beautiful. Every time she dances, her body tells a story her mouth refuses to speak.

So many questions swirl in my mind as I watch her lose herself onstage. The lyrics hit me in a direct line to my heart.

*Did she choose this song on purpose?*

*Does she remember what it was like when we were together? How could she have forgotten? I know I haven't.*

*Did she know I was watching her, and that's why she picked this song?*

*Is this what my return has done to her?*

But along with the questions come the lingering what-ifs. What if she hadn't gotten hurt? Would she be dancing professionally? She wouldn't have been confined to this small town—she would have seen the world.

I know her well enough that as the music gets louder and she takes a few steps back, I know there is something coming.

She soars through the air, literally defying gravity when the music reaches its highest note. I have to bite back the screams of excitement when she lands it perfectly.

When the music fades, she collapses to the floor. I don't know if that is part of the choreography or if she's completely drained or, worse, hurt. Before I can even think better of it, I'm out of my seat and racing to the stage.

## Chapter 12

### Riley

**T**he music stops, but I make no move to get up. My breaths come in harsh, ragged pants. Dance has always been my way of expressing my thoughts and getting a handle on my emotions. I know I'm not as good as I once was and never will be at that level again.

After the accident, no one thought I would ever dance again, but I was determined to not lose one more thing when I had already lost so much. It was slow and steady, and yeah, maybe some days I push myself harder than I know I should, but I can't help it. Dance has always been my saving grace, the one thing that can save me from the world—from myself. I can both lose myself and find myself through the movement.

I'm not sure what made me decide to turn this song on after Maddey and I finished rehearsal. I allowed the lyrics to carry me across the stage with every move, just needing a moment to myself.

Cooper coming back into my life shook the comfortable life I've made for myself, shaking the very ground I stood on. Not

only is he home, but he's here in my school. It's like I can't avoid him.

Footsteps close in. Maddey must have stayed to watch the show, but it's not a feminine touch that touches my shoulder or a feminine voice that breathes my name.

"Riley? Riles, are you okay?"

I jump back, falling down on my hip with a wince. *What is he fucking doing here?* I look over to find Cooper crouching down with his elbows resting on his knees and his brows bunched in concern.

"What the fuck, Cooper?"

"I asked if you were alright."

"Yeah, I heard you. I'm fine," I spit harshly as I stand and brush off the front of my outfit. Cooper pushes himself up to his feet, towering over me.

"Why did you tell me you don't dance anymore? That was —"

I cut him off with my hand. I don't want his praises or applause. "You don't get to talk about me anymore. Don't think about me. I don't exist to you. You made that perfectly clear six years ago. There's no reason to change that now."

"Riles..."

I can't do this. "Don't." I choke on my own words. "You left Riles in the past without another word to her. She's dead. I'm not that naive girl you left behind. It hurt like hell to lose

you, but I pulled all my tattered pieces up off the ground and rearranged them until the thought of you no longer made me feel like I'd died along with Tanner. I'm stronger than that girl, and I'll never go back to being her. You need to leave."

"Riley, please let me explain," he pleads. For every step closer to me he takes, I take two away. *God, he just won't get the hint.*

I let out an exasperated breath. I can feel the warmth of my cheeks, and it's taking everything in me to keep the tears at bay. "Do you know why I hate you?"

Cooper shakes his head, and I scoff. *Of course he doesn't.*

"Every day of my life, I have to wonder why I wasn't enough. Why being with me wasn't enough for you. Why having my love wasn't enough for you." I grab my bag and walk away but halt once I'm off the stage.

"You're a coward, Cooper Graham—a goddamn coward." Venom laces my voice and seeps through my pores.

He doesn't make a move to dispute my claims. At least we can agree on that.

"I always supported your dreams. I always wanted to be there for you." My arms flail. "You're nothing but a liar and a coward. You couldn't even tell me the truth to my fucking face. You just up and disappeared on me."

I rush out of the auditorium without a second glance, the door hitting the wall with a loud clank. Once again, I'm running away from Cooper. I push open the main door that

leads to the faculty parking lot and am forced to squint as the sun assaults my vision.

My sunglasses are somewhere in my bag, and I can find them once safely in my car.

Jogging down the stairs, I glance over my shoulder to make sure I'm home free with a clean getaway. While I may be running from him, once again, he's not chasing me. Do I even want him to? I'm so lost in myself that when I turn back around, I slam directly into a hard body. Hands reach out and grab my arms, steadying me before I can fall back on my ass. That would have surely been the icing on the cake of this day, which went downhill in a matter of moments.

"Woah there, beautiful, where's the fire?" The familiar Southern twang is smooth and full of arrogance.

I look up to see the bright green eyes of Tripp Briggs, a classmate of Cooper's and mine, staring down at me. His hands linger on my arms a second longer than necessary.

"I'm sorry." I step out of his grasp. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

Tripp runs his hands down his button-up shirt. "It's okay. I'm fine—built like an ox."

"Are you sure?"

"Riley, I'm fine." He's sure to enunciate the last two words. "But—" I swallow thickly, knowing exactly what's coming. His cocky trademark smirk is already in place. Tripp dips his

head to close the distance between us. “—if you wanna make it up to me, you could have dinner with me.”

The door behind me opens with a loud creak, but Tripp’s gaze on me never wavers. The world could burn around us, and I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t move—which is a little ironic since he’s now a firefighter.

I don’t even need to look back to know who just walked outside. I can sense his eyes on me. It sets my skin on fire, and I don’t like it.

Every time Tripp has asked me out on a date, which honestly, I’ve lost count over the last few years, the answer is always the same—*no*. It’s not that I was still holding out hope for Cooper to return—okay, maybe a little part of me deep down always was—but I just wasn’t ready. I spent the last six years putting myself back together with physical therapy and doctors’ appointments and healing.

I’m sure he’s expecting me to decline yet again, but when I open my mouth, for the first time, I say, “Sure, I’d like that.”

*Wait, what?*

His eyes widen, and his brows nearly meet his hairline in shock. Tripp seems to be just as surprised at my response as I am, but he quickly recovers as his shock turns into a warm smile. “Well, great. I guess it’s my lucky day that you weren’t paying attention and that I happened to be here.”

*What am I even doing? Why did I just say yes? Was it only because Cooper was there? This must be a new low for me to*



pull Tripp into this stupid game we're playing.

"Are you free Friday?" he asks.

I glance over my shoulder but don't see Cooper anymore, only a glimpse of his bumper as he races out of the lot.

"Friday? I believe I'm free."

Tripp claps his hands together, and I jump back at the noise.  
"I'll pick you up around six."

I offer him a small smile and nod. I worry that if I open my mouth without an audience, I might admit that I was so flustered and I didn't know what I was actually saying.

## Chapter 13

### Riley

The rest of the week passes by in a blur with no more run-ins with Cooper. Maybe he finally got the hint.

“You think I don’t realize what you’re doing?”

I look up in the mirror and see Austin leaning against the doorframe with his arms and ankles crossed. “What are you talking about? I’m not doing anything, just getting ready for my date.”

Breaking my gaze with him, I turn back to applying the finishing touches to my makeup.

“Tripp Briggs has been asking you out for years, and you’ve always turned him down until *now*.”

“So?” I shrug. “And haven’t you been telling me for years to move on?”

“Yes, but don’t you find it odd that you *finally* agree now that he’s back?” I don’t miss the way he emphasizes the word “he”—there’s no need for clarification.

I set my hands down on the sink, firmly gripping the edge. “Austin, this has nothing to do with Cooper.”

“No?” He arches a brow, and his gaze looks right through me. It must be in the Hayeses’ DNA to call me out on my bullshit—Tanner used to do it all the time.

“It. Has. Nothing. To. Do. With. Cooper.” I enunciate each word to drive the point home.

Austin pushes off the doorframe and steps up behind me, placing his hand on my shoulder. “Okay.” His tone tells me he doesn’t believe me, but he won’t push further. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

I reach up and place my hand over his and give it a reassuring squeeze. “It’s a little late for that, don’t ya think?” I quickly slip out of his grasp and avoid the knowing look.

“You look beautiful, by the way,” Austin shouts before following me down the stairs.

I’m gathering up my things when I hear tires coming up the gravel driveway. Moments later, my phone dings with a text message.

**Tripp:** *Here.*

“Well, I gotta go.” I slip my phone into my purse, not bothering with a response text back.

“What?” Austin screeches. “He can’t walk his ass up to the front door? Didn’t his mama teach him manners? I think I need to go have a talk with Mrs. Briggs to let her know how much of a dick he is.”

I roll my eyes at his dramatics. “Good night, Austin.”

“Don’t be out too late.”

I glance over my shoulder as I open the door. “Yes, Daddy,” I tease, smiling playfully at him. I would say the way he is currently acting, all protective and such, is a great example of why I’m glad Tripp didn’t walk up to the front door to get me.

In a flash, Austin is behind me, moving the door out of my grasp, opening it just slightly more to allow room for him, but I shove him back inside before he can make a scene.

“Hey, watch it, young lady. Also, don’t call me Daddy.” He winks. “I might like it.”

I pretend to gag and groan. “Stay out of trouble.”

“Neva,” his loud voice echoes the front porch, and I bet if I were to turn around, I would see him in a Superman stance. His laughter only stops once I hear the click of the front door.

I make my way down the steps to Tripp’s truck. Pausing for a moment, I wonder if he’ll look over to see me almost to his truck and hop out to run around and open the door. *Nope*. He doesn’t notice me. Tripp is too busy focusing on himself in the rearview mirror, adjusting his hair.

My heart races with every step, beating harder the closer I get. Austin’s words play on repeat in my mind, but I shake them away. This has nothing to do with Cooper—it’s just a date.

I take some calming breaths as I open the passenger door. At least it was unlocked, and I’m not going to have to wait. As

I slip into the truck, Tripp lets out a loud, low whistle. His gaze takes me in as if he wishes he had X-ray vision. Who knows, maybe he does.

“Damn, girl.” He runs his hand over his clean-shaven jaw. “You’re fine as fuck. You’re going to look like a dime hanging on my arm. I’ll be the envy of the whole damn town.”

I swallow down the sour taste that enters my mouth at Tripp’s words. I’m not a damn prize you can show off at the county fair. When he says the town will be envious, does he mean one man in particular?

*What the fuck, brain?* That’s twice Cooper Graham has appeared at the forefront of my mind.

“Maybe we should just skip dinner and go straight for dessert.” The hunger in his eyes has nothing to do with food.

An awkward laugh slips from my lips as I tuck a stray piece of hair behind my ear. *Maybe I should just jump ship now.* I glance over at the closed front door and wonder how badly Austin would make fun of me if I walked back in there right now.

*No, fuck this. I can do this. Going out on a date is the first step in taking my heart back.*

“Ready to go?” Tripp asks as he starts his truck up.

I press my lips together to keep from saying “no” and just nod.



I might not be an expert on first dates—I mean, I’ve literally only ever been on one before when I was fifteen years old—but I’m pretty sure it’s not proper first-date—or really, any date—etiquette to not give your date a chance to talk once in a while, but also, maybe don’t check out the server’s ass every time she walks away.

Tripp Briggs is attractive. All you have to do is ask him, or don’t because he will tell you all about it. I spent all of dinner listening to how he beat his personal best record weightlifting at the firehouse and how all the women fawned over him at the Guns and Hoses Charity Event last month.

“Want to go in?” Tripp tips his head toward the sign for the Pint.

It appears Tripp has already decided because before I can even answer him, his hand on my lower back—which has slid lower and lower on our walk from the restaurant—is already leading me toward the entrance.

“Sure, why not?” I respond just for the hell of it.

As soon as we walk through the door, the stale stench of beer and peanuts, along with the oldies playing, is oddly comforting. However, the loud laughter coming from the opposite end of the bar has my spine straightening and my breath hitching. I close my eyes and see if I imagined it. But when I open them, I hear it again and follow the sound to find none other than Cooper and Austin, along with a few friends from high school, sitting at the corner booth.

“Hey, babe, why don’t you go grab us some beers? I gotta go take a piss.”

*Jesus, take the wheel.* I give him a forced smile and make my way over to the bar. After ordering two beers, I stand with my elbows propped against the bar top and focus on the television in front of me.

I can feel his gaze on me without looking over. The worst part is that I feel more than what I have all evening with Tripp. *What the fuck is wrong with me?*

It’s pretty busy in here with its Friday night crowd, so the bartender returns with the drinks just as Tripp returns from the restroom.

“Thanks, babe.” *There’s that nickname again.* He leans in for a kiss, and I panic, turning my head at the last second so his lips come in contact with my cheek. I fake cough to pretend that was why I turned my head. When I meet Tripp’s gaze, he doesn’t give anything away in his expression that he didn’t buy it.

The loud laughter rings out again, drawing his attention over the top of my head and straight at them. His eyes widen for a second, and I wonder if this is the first time he’s realized Cooper has returned home. He nods toward the crowd. “Want to go say hello to everyone?”

I pull the corner of my bottom lip between my teeth and glance over my shoulder to find Cooper staring right at me—at us—his grip tight on the glass bottle in his hand.

“Actually, I was thinking maybe we could head over there”—I point in the opposite direction—“and maybe play a game of darts.”

Something dances in Tripp’s eyes that makes me think he sees this as an opportunity to touch me more. It’s a chance I’m willing to take if it puts distance between us and Cooper. But the joke is on Tripp because I can actually hold my own.

“Lead the way, darlin’.” He extends his arm towards the high-top tables.

We find an empty table, and Tripp goes over to grab the darts while I set my beer and purse on the table just as my phone buzzes inside it. I retrieve it to see a text from Austin. I should rename him in my phone as *fucking traitor*.

**Austin:** *I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were going to be here.*

**Austin:** *I can make up an excuse and get us to leave to go somewhere else.*

**Me:** *No, it’s fine. This town is big enough for all of us to be in.*

The conversation I had with my sister the day after Cooper arrived home comes to mind, and I have to suppress the giggle picturing a Wild West showdown yet again. Part of me wants to ask him why he didn’t mention his company for tonight earlier, but Austin is a big boy and can hang out with whoever he wants without my permission.



**Austin:** *How's the date going? You ready to be called Future Mrs. PG13?*

*Oh, for fuck's sake.* Even though I'm too far away, I still look up and narrow my gaze toward his table. It's not only the mention of Tripp's nickname in high school but the thought of actually marrying him that threatens my dinner to make a grand reentrance.

Tripp Briggs's nickname growing up was "PG" because of the double *p* and double *g* in his name, and when he got to high school, they added the 13 because of the reputation he had with the ladies. I believe the guys told me once that he lost his virginity as a freshman to a senior who was one of his brother's friends.

**Me:** *\*middle finger emoji\* Keep that up and don't bother coming home. Maybe you can stay with your new bestie.*

**Austin:** *That good, huh?*

I look over and see Tripp having a conversation with someone. *Did he already forget about me?*

**Me:** *Something like that.*

**Austin:** *Need me to come running over and say we have to go because our house is on fire?*

I snort. Clearly, he hadn't thought this through, although I love his enthusiasm to rescue me.

**Me:** *Yeah, probably not a good idea to fake a fire call to a damn firefighter.*

**Austin:** *Valid point. Just say the word and we'll swoop in and save the day.*

My jaw clenches when I notice he said “we’ll,” not just “I’ll.” Oh, I’m sure Cooper would fucking love that. I’m just about to reply that I can handle myself when a throat clears behind me.

“Everything okay?”

I jump at the sound of Tripp’s voice and the closeness of him. As his hand settles on my hip, I feel his front to my back.

I quickly shove my phone back in my purse before he can see the conversation. “Yeah, just my sister’s checking in on me.” *Why did I just lie?* Who is this woman I’ve turned into lately? Constantly spewing lie after lie.

“I’m sure they know you’re in excellent hands—I’m even CPR certified.”

I hide my laughter by taking a long pull of my beer. *Is being CPR certified something women look for these days?* I can see all the Tinder profiles saying “seeking a tall, dark, and handsome man looking for love—oh, and he must be CPR certified.”

“How about I go first, and I’ll show you how it’s done?”

“After you.” A wicked smile tips on my lips, and I extend my hand, giving him the floor. Well, if nothing more for this evening, it will at least be a little fun kicking his ass and wiping the floor with him.

## Chapter 14

### Cooper

**T**ripp fucking Briggs.

What the hell is she doing with him?

When I saw them in the school parking lot earlier this week, I had assumed it was just friendly chatter. But now she's out on a Friday night with him, clearly on a fucking date?

I look over to see Austin pocketing his phone with one last glance over toward the dartboards, where Riley disappeared to with Tripp not too long ago.

“Everything alright over there?” I scowl.

Austin gives a glare that screams *don't get involved*. Like fuck I will listen. My eyes had landed on her the moment she walked in with that douchebag by her side. It took everything I had to not storm over there when he leaned down to kiss her cheek.

Austin and I haven't spoken much since our first two interactions, so when he texted asking if I wanted to get together for a drink, I took it as a peace offering. It's not like I had anything else better to do. My parents had gone out, and I

was home alone, surfing Netflix for another show to go on a bender on.

I try to focus on the current conversation, but my gaze keeps slipping to where they are playing a game of darts.

Tripp steps up behind Riley till there is no space between them. His hands are all over her as he shows her the proper stance for throwing a dart.

*What the fuck, dickhead?* I can fucking see she's uncomfortable all the way from here. How the hell can't he?

My blood is boiling, and pain radiates in my jaw from the clenching of my teeth.

“So, Cooper, is Ace Sullivan as hot in person as he is on TV?” Jessie asks with her chin propped up on her fist, and I swear there are heart emojis in her eyes.

Max chokes on his beer at his girlfriend's comment. I still can't believe that while I was gone, Max Cole and Jessie Hall got together. No offense, but those two are the last two people I ever expected to get together.

“Jesus, babe.” He shakes his head. “Keep it in your pants, will ya?”

“What?” she shrieks. “I'm just asking. You know I still love you and only want your dick. But don't act like you wouldn't pass up a night with him, too.”

My brows raise to my hairline. I'm not sure how this conversation veered way off course. I have no clue if she's just

teasing him or not. Either way, I can't wait to tell Ace that he has a fan club here.

“You are some kinky motherfuckers,” Kaden laughs and tries to bring conversation away from Max's dick.

Once again, my eyes drift over to the corner. Tripp and Riley are now sitting at the high-top table chatting.

“I'll be right back.” I slip out of the booth and head to the restroom.

Pressing my hands on the counter, I let out a harsh breath.

*Get your shit together, Cooper.*

Is this how it's going to be from now on? I'm just supposed to stand back and watch her parade around town with men who aren't me? I know I did this. I let her go, but of all the people she has to go out with, it had to be Tripp fucking Briggs.

I push off the counter and swing my arms, throwing a punch in the air, wishing that it was really Tripp's face and narrowly missing the mirror.

A knock on the door halts my tantrum.

“Yeah, be out in a second,” I bark.

When a second knock rings out—*impatient motherfucker*—my patience snaps.

I grip the knob and fling the door open, ready for a fight. Before I lift my gaze, the scent of lavender fills the air. While it should bring calming effects, it makes my heart speed up.

I lift my gaze to find familiar brown eyes staring back at me.

“Are you gonna move? Some of us need to actually use the restroom.” Her sharp tone and rigid posture easily give away her annoyance at our current predicament. *Guess I can say she didn't follow me in here.*

I'm at a crossroads here. I could move out of the way, go back to my friends, and ignore her for the rest of the night, or I could say fuck it, pull her into the bathroom with me, lock the door, and claim her as mine.

Would she let me kiss her? Touch her? Would she scream my name loud enough for Tripp to know she will never be his?

“Cooper.” Her stern voice pulls me out of my thoughts.

“What?” I snap.

“Seriously, I need to use the bathroom, so please,” she says through gritted teeth, “move.”

Door number one it is.

“Sorry,” I mumble as I step out into the hallway.

Riley brushes past me, causing her perfume to touch my skin. Not only will I have to see her all evening, but I'll be able to smell her. *Fuck.*

When she slams the door behind me, I feel my restraint crack.

The sound of the door lock clicking—another crack.

*I can't do this.*

I shove my hands in my pockets to keep from banging on the door till she opens it and head back to the table. But causing a scene in public—yet again—isn't high on my to-do list. Especially when she's here with another fucking guy.

On the way back to the table, images of him with his hands on her like they were moments before I left for the bathroom flash in my mind, and that's the last crack needed to undo me.

I can't sit here and watch her with him and not do a damn thing. I need to get out of here.

“Well, this has been fun, y'all, but it's been a long week, and I need to get going.”

“Oh no,” Jessie whines.

“One more round,” Kaden counters.

“You guys stay, and the next round is on me.” I pull my wallet out of my back pocket and throw enough bills to cover not only my tab but the next round.

Everyone at the table cheers, but my eyes turn to Austin, who is trying to read me. I give him a dose of his own medicine that says “don't get involved.” He just shakes his head and returns to his beer.

With promises of doing this again soon and wishing everyone a good night, I all but run out the door without even a second glance back.

I wish the weather was cooler here so that as I stepped out onto the sidewalk, the cold would smack me back to reality.



Linking my fingers, I place them on the top of my head and crane my neck from side to side.

I could head to my truck and go home, but I'm too amped up.

Instead, I start walking, my mind replaying the way she looked tonight. How it could have been different if she had been on my arm. Does she even like that fucker, or is she settling?

I don't realize where my feet have taken me until I look up at the cemetery gates. They're closed now, but I don't hesitate to jump it. *I've literally become one of those crazies.*

When I'm finally at his grave, I sink down into the dirt.

"Everything is so fucked-up, Tanner. I don't know what I'm even doing anymore," I whisper to him. *Did I ever, though?*

He can't answer me, but I still let out all my feelings.

"I had her. She was mine. Then I lost you. I killed you. Everything in my life is shit. Everything I touch gets ruined. Why did you have to die? Why couldn't it be me?"

The wind picks up, and for a brief moment, I feel him. As if he's here with me.

What would he be saying? That I'm an idiot. He'd tell me to get off my ass and get my girl back. He'd be asking me what I'm planning to do.

Letting out a breath, I look down at his grave.

"I hear you, buddy. Loud and clear."

I need to get Riley back. She's the only thing in life that makes sense anymore.

The question is, though, is it too late?

## Chapter 15

### Riley

Well, if the first part of this date was a disaster, then I would definitely say the second part was catastrophic. After Cooper's and my run-in outside the bathroom, the sense of relief I felt to find he had left before I returned made me think that there was possibly a chance to turn the night around. But Tripp is the epitome of a sore loser because after the fifth game of darts that he lost, he asked if I was ready to go.

The ride home was silent and awkward, and I let out a sigh of relief as we finally pull into my driveway. However, as Tripp puts his truck in park, the anxiety creeps into my mind. How do we end the night? Is he going to kiss me?

As if my thoughts had conjured up the notion, Tripp says my name, and I turn to find his face just inches from mine. Before I can push him off, his lips press against mine. His hand cups my cheek as he tries to slip his tongue between my lips. This kiss is more awkward than you see in the movies. I'm not sure what I honestly expected about kissing another man. Did I picture that one day when I was going to finally kiss someone at the end of a date, it would be a replica of

Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams's recreation of their kiss in *The Notebook* at the MTV Movie Awards?

Finally, my body catches up to my brain, and I press my hand against his chest, pushing him back. I give him a smile as he sits back in his seat and runs a hand through his hair.

“Sorry, I guess I got a little carried away. It was just I’ve been thinking about doing that all night long.”

“Oh.” *Oh?* Good going, Riley. I’m sure that’s exactly what every man wants to hear when he makes a confession like that. I guess it’s better than lying and agreeing that I did, too. “Well, I better go. Thank you for tonight.”

He smiles. “I hope we can do it again.”

I pause a second, waiting to see if Tripp gets out of the vehicle to walk me to the door, but I just nod awkwardly when I realize that’s not happening. *Well, alrighty then.* He doesn’t even wait for me to get inside before he pulls off and turns around in the driveway. The further the glow of his taillights gets, the easier I can breathe.

“Did you have a nice time tonight?” a voice calls from the shadows.

“Fuck,” I yell, clutching my chest.

I turn around to find Cooper leaning against the side of the house, like a psycho lurking in the shadows.

“Cooper, what the hell are you doing here? Are you fucking stalking me?”

He stays quiet. *That would be a yes.* Has he been here the whole time since he left the bar? *Was he watching me and Tripp kiss just then?*

I glance around and find his truck parked on the side of the house, away from view. No wonder I didn't see it when we pulled up. Clearly, that was on purpose.

A part of me feels utterly relieved that he waited until after Tripp had left to make his presence known. I don't even want to think what would have happened had he not.

“Good night, Cooper,” I say with disdain, not wanting to listen to whatever he came here to say. It's been a long fucking night, and I just want to curl up in bed and indulge in reality TV.

However, I don't get far because Cooper wraps his fingers around my bicep, forcing me to spin slightly and meet his gaze.

If his bunched brows and tight jaw weren't enough for me to know how mad he is, I can feel the anger radiating off him. “What the hell are you doing going out with that guy? He's an asshole—always has been. He's been jealous of me since we were kids.”

I scoff, yanking my arm from his grasp. “Sure sounds like *you're* the jealous one.”

Cooper steps up to me, but I don't back down. We are currently toe to toe, and even with our height difference, our

bodies press against each other with the rise and fall of our chests.

“He’s always wanted what’s mine.” This time, his tone is a little softer as his eyes dip down to my mouth.

Those five words feel like a backhanded slap to the face. The force of that one sentence causes me to back up as if he had pushed me with his hands.

“What’s yours?” I question venomously. My head is spinning. “I’m yours all of a sudden?”

“Riley, you’ve always been mine.” He attempts to close the distance once again, but I hold my hand up to stop him. Of course, he doesn’t listen and keeps walking until my palm presses against his chest. I can feel how erratic his heart is beating—it matches mine.

“Don’t you dare pull that bullshit.”

He places his hand over mine, holding it to his chest.

“What shit? It’s true, and you know it.”

Yanking my hand back, I spin and run into the house, rushing up the stairs and straight to my closet. I grab the box I keep up on the high shelf with such force a few items fall down to the floor. I ignore them and rush out the door. By the time I make it back outside, Cooper is almost back to his truck. I guess he thought I was done with this conversation.

Since Cooper has his back to me, I could easily turn around and go back inside, but I’m tired of this same song and fucking dance. It’s time we have this out here and now.

“I was always yours, huh?” I scream at him. He turns around, tilting his head to the side in confusion.

My heart beats loudly in my ears. I toss the lid of the box to the ground. “Was I yours every time you had whores on your arm?” I reach into the box of clippings from my closet and throw them in his direction. From the tabloids, magazines, newspaper articles—they’re all there. Every time I saw a new one, I tortured myself by keeping it. “Did you think of me every time you slid into one of them? Did you think of me every time one of them had their lips wrapped around your cock?”

The contents of my stomach threaten to come back up, but I try to swallow it back down. I don’t need to look at the images now spread out all over the front lawn. They’re all tattooed in my mind. Every beautiful memory we had, tainted by these images. I know somewhere in that pile is a tabloid article about him getting caught in the locker room with the assistant coach’s daughter.

“Do you think because I live in a small-fucking-town USA that I wouldn’t keep up with you? You didn’t just break my heart—you shattered me. But just because I was something for you to just throw away didn’t mean that I didn’t follow you. I may have been nothing to you, but to me, you were everything.”

Fueled by rage and years of pent-up feelings, I chuck the entire box in his direction. With his quick reflexes, he just

narrowly misses being hit with it. The rest of the articles spill at his feet.

“So, here, have it back.”

“Riles, stop! I—” he finally speaks, but I stop him. The time for talking was years ago.

Did he think I would have stopped him from going? It was always our plan to follow our dreams but still be together. Did he not love me enough to stay?

“I don’t want to fucking hear it. Save it for someone who cares or matters to you because I clearly don’t. I finally think I figured it out—it’s not me you want; it’s just that you don’t want anyone else to have me either. Well, fuck you, Cooper Graham, fuck you!”

My body is shaking as I storm back inside the house, leaving him there with his mouth agape and tears in his eyes. I slam the door so hard the walls inside vibrate and a frame comes crashing to the ground. *Of fucking course.* The satire of reliving my heart being obliterated into a million pieces yet again.

I lock the door to keep him from following me inside, not that I honestly think he would. He’s never chased after me before—why start now?

A bloodcurdling and ear-piercing scream leaves my lips as I drop to my knees in the entryway. I lose myself in the oblivion of pain caused by Cooper Graham all over again, knowing damn well I barely survived the first time.



## Chapter 16

### Cooper

*B*<sup>eep.</sup>  
*Beep.*

*Beep.*

*The sounds of the heart monitor were the only sounds filling the hospital room. At least there was a heartbeat.*

*Two days ago, I woke up in the hospital room with my parents by my side. It took hours before I could see Riley. Because of the accident, she needed to have reconstruction surgery on her right knee, and her left wrist was broken. They heavily sedated her for the pain, but now, everything was just on her to wake up. The wait had been excruciating.*

*The doctors fought me tooth and nail that I needed to rest, but I wasn't leaving her side once I was allowed in her room. Being the hometown hero I guess had its perks because they eventually caved and told me they would be in to monitor my concussion.*

*A fucking concussion. My best friend was dead, my girlfriend was lying here—her dream of dancing gone—and*

*all I had to show for it were some bruises and a damn concussion. Where was the fairness in that?*

*Beep.*

*Beep.*

*Beep.*

*I laced my fingers with hers on her uninjured wrist. I leaned over and brushed my lips against her knuckles, where the skin was torn and discolored with bruises.*

*“Come on, baby, I need you to wake up. I can’t do this without you. I already lost Tanner. I can’t lose you, too.” I rested my head on top of our hands, careful not to disturb the wires attached to the top of her hand. “I love you to the stars and back, Riles.”*

*I couldn’t let that be the last thing I said to her just moments before the accident.*

*“Coop?” I heard the softest angelic voice say. It was so soft that if the room hadn’t been so quiet, I might not have heard it.*

*My head perked up, and the most beautiful brown eyes I had ever seen met mine.*

*“Riley.” I blinked a few times to confirm that she’d actually said my name and it wasn’t just my mind playing tricks on me. Please don’t let this all be a dream.*

*“Cooper,” she said again.*

*I was out of my chair with such force it knocked backward. Mindful of all the wires and tubes, I sat partially on the bed. I*

*pressed my lips to hers before gently placing my forehead against hers.*

*“What—what happened? Where am I?” Her voice was raspy, and I imagined her throat sore from the tube that was recently pulled out.*

*“Let me run and get the doctor and your parents.” I pushed to stand, but she stopped me.*

*Her soft grip on my hand stopped me from moving. Unshed tears filled her eyes as she took in her surroundings and noticed the cast on her wrist and brace on her leg.*

*As the tears spilled over, I swallowed her in my arms, slowly stroking her hair. She wrapped her arms around as tightly as she could without pulling the wires and IV free.*

*Everyone else could wait. Right now, I just needed to hold my girl and have her hold me back.*

*“I’m so sorry, baby,” I whispered in her hair over and over and pressed soft kisses to her temple. Her world was crumbling at the realization of her crushed dreams, and I was about to obliterate the rest of the pieces after I told her Tanner was gone.*

*Her shoulders trembled less, and I realized I was running out of time before the doctors came in and she found out from someone other than me.*

*“Riles.” I slightly turned her chin so she was now facing me. “I have something I need—” The tears fell down my own cheeks, and her eyes darkened. She knew something was up. I*

*had to bite the emotion that threatened to pull me under. “The night of the championship, we were on Highway 15. Do you remember that?”*

*Her brows slightly furrowed before she hesitantly nodded.*

*“There was a—” Fuck, how did I do this? How did I face the reality that my best friend was gone?*

*Riley looked around the room. “Where’s Tanner? Was he in another room? Can I go see him? Hopefully, he doesn’t draw a penis on my cast like you guys did with Austin.”*

*My shoulders sank. Not even the mention of the memory of drawing dicks all over Tanner’s brother’s cast when we were younger could relieve the ache in my chest. I rested my head against the bed and closed my eyes, letting the tears take over.*

*I just needed to rip the Band-Aid off.*

*In one breath, I gave her the news. The gut-wrenching scream that came out of my girl broke me into a million pieces. She clung to me as she lost it.*

*We lay in the hospital bed, holding each other, mourning our losses.*

*“I love you so much,” she whimpered. Her voice was broken as she drifted off to sleep, exhausted from this pain—both physically and emotionally. Our worlds would never be the same. We would never be the same.*

*“I love you to the stars and back, Riley—always have, always will.”*

*I shifted to go back to my chair when she startled, clutching my shirt in her sleep.*

*“Stay.”*

*I settled back beside her. “Don’t worry, baby. I’m never going to leave you, I promise.”*

I jolt upright in bed, calling out Riley’s name. Sweat paints my skin, and my breath comes out in short, harsh pants. I’m no longer in the hospital but in my room at my parents’ house.

*I’m never going to leave you.* The words I promised her all those years ago are on repeat in my mind as I try to calm my racing heart. That promise I broke only weeks later.

Of all the moments I had to dream about tonight, why that one?

Nightmares have plagued me since that night. Sometimes, they were like a replay of the accident; sometimes, Riley was the one that I lost instead of Tanner. The worst one of all was when I witnessed the accident as if I was a bystander passing by the scene. I screamed out for Riley and Tanner as I watched the car roll and Tanner get thrown from the vehicle. No matter how hard I ran toward them, I could never get close enough.

The nightmares have gotten so bad that after my first season with the team, I started getting my own hotel room because I was waking Ace up with my screams.

I fall back against the pillows, scrubbing a hand over my face.

I don't know which is worse—the emptiness in my chest, the sound of Riley's scream after she slammed the front door last night ringing in my ears to fill the silence of my bedroom, or the vision of Riley completely heartbroken, standing in front of me.

Hours pass by, and morning comes too soon without another wink of sleep or peace of mind.



**Austin:** *Meet at my house at 9:30.*

That text came through around 7:30 when I was on my umpteenth cup of coffee. It's also the reason I'm standing on their front porch minutes before 9:30. I don't see Riley's car anywhere, and I'm not sure how that's supposed to make me feel.

I raise my fist to knock when the door swings open, revealing a flustered and disheveled Austin. The ends of his hair stick out. Last night, I had left Austin at the bar before I came here and waited for her to arrive home. I'd say that he could just be severely hungover if it wasn't for his expression. If looks could kill, I might be dead, buried, and resurrected to do it all over in just these few split seconds.

“Cooper, are you here for good?”

“Well, good morning to you, too.” I lift my backward hat from my head and run my free hand through my hair before

placing it back on my head and shoving my hands in my pockets. That is quite a greeting first thing in the morning, especially with how the last twenty-four hours have gone. The hardened expression tells me he's not making room for small talk today.

When I don't respond, he huffs out a breath. "I mean it, man. No chance you're leaving again? Because you need to stop fucking with her. If there's even just the slightest chance you're going to leave her again, don't even bother with her. Just leave her the fuck alone. She's not as strong as you might think."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It's—" he begins but pauses and shakes his head, dropping his gaze to the ground as if something on the floor holds all the answers. I follow his line of sight and come up empty. "Never mind." He finally steps back, allowing me to enter the house. I look around as he shuts the door behind us.

"Don't worry, she's not here. I don't have a fucking death wish. She's at rehearsal for the fall festival, not that it's any of your business where she is."

The hostility and tension in the small space could blow the roof off this cottage, and I need to defuse the situation before it does. This isn't the same Austin that extended the olive branch or who I shared laughs with last night.

"Look, Austin, I'm not sure why you called me here this morning. It doesn't matter what my intentions of being here

are. She made it pretty loud and clear last night that she wants nothing to do with me.”

“And I came home last night to find her crumpled up on the floor, right there.” He points down to the corner next to the door. “Once again, crying over you. She was a fucking mess, man. It took hours of trying to console her before she finally passed out in my arms. I begged her to stay to get more rest this morning, but she refused to bail on her girls, who were relying on her.” He doesn’t say “*unlike what you did,*” but it’s an unspoken conversation hanging between us.

I’m not sure which has me in knots more—hearing how she was distraught on the floor, upset at my hand, or the image of Austin holding her all night.

Something changes in his demeanor. His shoulders deflate as he exhales harshly. “Come on, follow me.” Austin leads me into the living room and extends a hand for me to take a seat on the couch, so I do. He walks over to the built-in bookshelf beside the fireplace and reaches behind something, pulling out a black photo album.

Austin holds it out in front of me. “Here.”

I glance at it. “What’s this?”

“Will you just open it, asshole?”

I wipe my sweaty palms on my knees before accepting the album. The worn leather is smooth under my touch as I run my fingers over the cover.



“I’ll give you a moment.” I look up to see Austin heading into the kitchen and turn my focus back to the album.

As I flip through the pages, I see pages and pages full of newspaper clippings. Not from my affairs, indiscretions, and moments of weakness trying to cover the pain I felt inside, but the good moments—the great, even. All the way from high school to the last game I played for the Knights. She saved each one. I read articles, and the breath rips from my lungs when I see ticket stubs from games over the years.

*She was there?*

I run my palm over my face and blow out a breath. The room feels as though it’s closing in. I need to get myself under control and not let the emotion that threatens to pull me under win.

Eventually, footsteps enter the room, alerting me of Austin’s return, but I ignore him and remain focused on the book.

*I can’t believe she did all this. I can’t believe she was there.*

“I’m sure she would have my balls in a vise for telling you this—” The mention of Riley anywhere near his balls has my blood boiling and my head whipping up so fast I’m surprised I didn’t give myself whiplash. “—but I don’t think she ever missed a game, or if she did, she recorded it and watched it later. You broke her, Coop. She had just lost her dream, lost Tanner—” His voice breaks finally at the mention of his brother’s name. “—and she needed you. And you just up and left. Like, what the fuck, man. She might be strong, but you

chip away at a brick wall long and hard enough, it's going to crumble.”

“What do you mean by that?”

He shakes his head and steadies his features. “Not my story to tell. You'll have to let her tell you.” Well, with how we left things between us last night, I don't think that will be happening.

I close the book and balance it on my knees. “Can I keep this?”

Austin nods. “Yeah, I found it in the trash this morning, so I don't think she's going to be looking for it anytime soon.”

I'd be lying if I said that didn't sting. *Shit, I really fucked up.*

“For the record, I didn't mean to cause any trouble by coming home,” I say as he escorts me to the front door.

“I know,” Austin sighs as he shuts the door behind me, leaving me more confused than ever.

## Chapter 17

### Cooper

**A**fter leaving Austin's house, there was only one place I could think of going. I'm seriously thinking maybe I should have my head examined for the time I spend in a cemetery of my own free will. Then again, when Tanner was alive, he was the person I came to when I needed him, and we spent so much time together. Why should that be any different in death?

I grab the scrapbook from the passenger seat of my truck and walk the few feet away to my best friend's final resting place. Dropping the album to the ground, I take a seat and rest back against the tree.

There are fresh flowers in the metal vase beside the stone. They weren't here last night. *Were his parents just here?* I look around for a car but come up empty.

Sinking back against the tree, I welcome the rough scrape against my skin through the material of the shirt and pick at the grass beside me.

"I fucked up, man. God, I wish you were here. You could tell me what to do." I scoff. "Actually, no, that's not true. You

would've stopped me from leaving, and now you would've told me 'I told you so.'"

As if I flipped a switch, the tears unleash. Tears for love, for loss, for the moments missed, the what-ifs and pain I put her through. These tears just aren't for Tanner; they're for Riley, for me, for us. Not only was last night enough to show me how much I hurt her, but this book beside me is just as much.

Everything always comes back to this accident. Every moment over the last six years stemmed from that night. A domino effect, so to speak, and that accident was the tipping point that set everything off. Whenever I think I have a handle on my grief, the darkness latches on and drags me back under. I'm drowning in myself.

I don't know how long I stare at the stone in silence. Could be hours; could only be minutes. Using the bottom of my sleeve, I wipe under my eyes. *Thank fuck no one else is around.*

"I'd give anything for just one conversation. Just one," I beg to no one. I know life doesn't work like that, but fuck, I wish I did. I rest my forehead on my arms, close my eyes, and let the silence take over, showing me how truly alone I am. Maybe that's the way I'm meant to be.

*Leaves crunch under the weight of someone's footsteps, and without lifting my head, I know that they've taken a seat beside me.*

*The smell of cinnamon fills the air, and I whip my head up.*

*“Hey, Coop.”*

*I blink rapidly at my best friend’s face. Okay, yeah, I definitely need to have my head examined.*

*“You’re not here. You can’t be,” I stutter.*

*“Can’t I?” He brings his knees up and rests his elbows on them, matching my position.*

*“No,” I choke out. “You died. I saw you lying there. You—”*

*He holds his hands out to the side. “I’m here now.”*

*I blow out a harsh breath. This is absolutely insane. How am I sitting here with my best friend—my dead best friend?*

*“Fuck, I miss you, man. Why did you have to die?”*

*Tanner swallows thickly and stares off into the distance. I guess he doesn’t even have the answer for that.*

*“I didn’t get to say goodbye. There’s this void right here.” I place my hand over my heart, which is beating erratically in my chest. “You should be here.”*

*“Remember what you used to say to Riley after the game?”*

*“She’s always with me in my heart.”*

*“As am I.” He goes silent for a moment, and I try to think of all the things I wish we could talk about, so instead, we just sit soaking up the silence. “I miss you, too, buddy.” Tanner’s voice is faint, as if blowing in the wind.*

*“Don’t go,” I plead. It wasn’t enough time. “Please come back.”*

A foot nudges my own, and I jolt upward. When I open my eyes, a shadow blocks out the sunlight as they stand in front of me.

“Cooper,” a low-pitched voice calls. This time, the voice doesn’t belong to my dead best friend, but I still know that voice.

I blink rapidly until my vision finally becomes clearer, and the dark shadow turns into none other than Coach Benson. He’s looking frailer than before. The strong man I know is slowly slipping away, right in front of my eyes.

Glancing from side to side, I grip the back of my neck, wondering if that was all just a dream. I mean, it had to be, right?

“You okay? Ya look like you’ve seen a ghost, son. I mean, then again, we are in a cemetery.”

*Haven’t I? How do I say I just had a conversation with my dead best friend without the men in white coats coming to pick me up?*

Shaking the thoughts from my head because I’m clearly losing it, I rise to my feet. “What are you doing here?”

“Making a reservation,” he says so blankly.

“Jesus.” I exhale a harsh breath.

“Nope, not Jesus. Just Verne.”

“Seriously, Coach?” I quirk a brow.

“Now, Cooper. I just found you sleeping here.” He circles his pointer finger in the air. “I’m not sure you have any room to judge.”

“No, I’m not judging. It’s just—” I fumble for words. Maybe it’s all the haze in my head right now that is still processing what just happened. I clear my throat. “It’s just how can you joke?”

Coach shrugs. “Son, if I can’t joke about it, what can I do? This isn’t something I can stop. I prefer to deal with death through humor and watch the others around me smile while you deal with it by, what.” He tilts his head to the side and circles his hands as if using them to conjure up the right word. “Sleeping with the dead? Come on, walk with me.”

I grab the scrapbook and place it under my arm before walking to Coach’s side, and we make our way over to the bench a few feet away.

“So what are you *really* doing here, Cooper?”

“I, um—” I stutter as I take my hat off my head and lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees. As I exhale a steady breath, I focus on the Knights’ logo on the hat. “I just needed a moment.”

“Needed lots of moments lately since you returned, huh?”

My head whips to the side, and my eyes narrow in question. “How do you know that?”

“I might be old, but I’m not dead yet. And—” He smirks at his poor joke. “—Ellie and I ran into your parents at the

grocery store the other day. They may have mentioned it when your mama thanked me for giving you the opportunity. How's that going, by the way?"

Smooth transition from one subject to the other.

"It's honestly going well. You weren't kidding when you said this group has so much talent."

Before I can say more, Coach gets lost in a coughing fit.

"You should probably get home and rest, Coach."

Once he composes himself, he puts a white handkerchief that he used to wipe his mouth back in his pocket.

"And I think you should take a glass of shut the hell up."

I fight back my laughter. Someone clearly woke up and chose violence today.

"I had an idea, actually, that I wanted to run by you. Beau Marshall has probably more talent in his pinky finger than anyone I know."

"He does. That boy eats, sleeps, and breathes the game—like someone else I know. So, what's your big idea?"

"I want to bring someone else in just to assist a little. Well, mainly to focus on Beau and strengthen his skill set."

"Cooper, it's your clinic. It's your baby, so to speak, and you can do with it as you see fit." I nod. "It's none of my business, but who are you thinking of bringing on?"

"Ace Sullivan."



Coach lets out a loud whistle. “As in Ace Sullivan, the catcher for the Chicago Knights?”

“Yep, one and the same.” Ace was already in his second year playing for the Knights when I joined the team, and he took me under his wing.

It’s no secret that when I first arrived in Chicago, I was on a bit of a self-destructive path. A combination of guilt, shame, and being on my own for the first time. Honestly, if it wasn’t for Ace pulling my head out of my ass, I’m not sure I would have even survived as long as I did.

Our friendship off the field only strengthened the bond we had on the field and made us a better team. No one could ever replace Tanner, but somehow, Ace wormed his way into my life and became invaluable. Although some days, I feel like he’s more like gum on the bottom of your shoe or an STD that you bring home from a weekend in Vegas, but he’s a damn good ballplayer. I think the kids could really benefit from him—Beau, especially.

“Whatcha got there?” He nods toward the book by my side on the bench, and I hold it up. “That have something to do with needing a moment today?”

“Yeah, something like that.” I stare at the closed book as if it holds the answers to life’s greatest questions.

“May I?” He accepts the scrapbook when I place it in his hands. He traces his fingers over the leather binding.

I watch as he smiles with pride, flipping through the pages.

“I’d say whoever made this loves you very much and is just as proud of you as I am. Your mama?”

I shake my head. “Riley, actually. She made it and held on to it till Austin dug it out of the trash this morning.”

“Ouch.” Coach winces. “You and Miss Parker having a lover’s quarrel?”

I have no control over the bellowed laughter that slips from my lips. “Sorry, Coach, but I think that’s the understatement of the century, possibly the millennium.”

Silence passes through us as he closes the book and hands it back to me.

“Well, I know you might not want to hear this, Cooper, but put yourself in her shoes for a moment. And I don’t mean literally since she’s such a tiny firecracker. Did you honestly think you would come home to find nothing had changed? You said it yourself that day at my house—you’re not the same Cooper Graham as you once were, and she’s not the same girl either.” She said so herself that day in the auditorium.

I push to my feet and pace slowly back and forth.

“I get that, but I can’t change my past. I can’t go back.”

“So move forward. Show Miss Parker what I know and that you refuse to accept—that you *are* the same Cooper deep down.”

## Chapter 18

### Cooper

I'm holding the phone out in front of me as it rings. When I'm ready to hang up, the call picks up. The screen remains black, but I can hear loud music. It takes a moment for the video to load and my best friend's face to appear.

"Cooper," Ace shouts at the top of his lungs, and I yank the phone back slightly. As if there was a giant echo, a swarm of people yell "Cooper" in the background.

Ace is clearly drunk. His black sunglasses are slightly lopsided, perched on his face, and his skin is more flushed than usual. Most likely an outcome from hours of day drinking in the sun.

The video cracks, and the sound breaks up. "Can you hear me?"

Only about every three words come through, but I'm able to make out "I'll call you back" before the call disconnects.

Well, alrighty then. Hours have passed when my phone finally rings again.

I answer the video call and instantly bring my hand up to cover my eyes. “Dude, what the fuck?” On the screen is Ace, his chest bare and a fluffy white towel wrapped around his waist and slung way too low on his hips for comfort. “Put some fucking clothes on, will ya?”

Ace’s loud laughter echoes in his hotel room as he sets the phone down. Thank fuck the view is now of the ceiling. “Don’t act like you don’t miss my dick,” he teases. “You know it misses you.”

I huff and run one hand down my face. *Jesus fucking Christ.* I change my mind—if I thought I was going to be a bad influence on the kids, Ace Sullivan is a new level of trouble.

“Still talking about your dick like it has feelings, I see.”

Ace finally picks up the phone, and I can’t help but laugh. Well, at least he’s no longer in a towel but in a white robe, this time with the hotel emblem on his chest. With the white material of the robe, his sunburned skin sticks out like a sore thumb.

“You look ridiculous.”

Ace fluffs the collar of his robe. “Look, Graham, you either see me naked or get this version. But hold up, wait till you see this view.” The camera flips around as Ace walks toward the open balcony doors.

“Much better view than yours, I bet.”

I look up at my parents’ backyard. *Yeah, definitely not paradise.*

“You’re missing out, man. This resort is the shit.” He plops back onto the bed, and the phone bounces. “So, what’s up, fucker? I assume you didn’t just wanna FaceTime to talk about my dick.” He smirks. “I mean, I know it has its own fan club, but you missed the monthly meeting.”

Why the fuck had I called him again? Oh, right.

“Look, I got a gig for ya if you’re interested.”

“Ooh, a gig, huh?” He sits up straighter against the headboard. “You gonna make me an offer I can’t refuse?” he says in his best godfather voice.

“How would you like to come help with the team?”

“If it means I get to see my BFFFL, then sign me the fuck up.”

*What the fuck is a BFFFL?* I quirk a brow in question.

“You know, best fucking friend for life. We met this group here for a bachelorette trip, and this girl, Becky, kept saying that her BFFFL was getting married. The group of hotties was standing at one of the oceanfront bars, playing a game called hide the pickle. Wanna guess what Becky and I played later in my hotel room?”

*Fuck me.* I run my hands over my face. *Please don’t say—*

Ace interrupts my thoughts, singsonging, “Hide my pickle!”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I laugh, shaking my head.

“Nothing, what’s wrong with you? Besides clearly needing to get laid.”

I open my mouth to tell him to leave my sex life out of his mouth, but the back door to the house opens and Ma appears. “Cooper, sweetheart, dinner is ready.”

I wince, feeling like a child.

Ace bites his bottom lip to stifle a laugh.

“Well, don’t want to disappoint your mama bear and get you grounded or your dessert taken away.”

“Shut the fuck up, BFFFL.”

“See?” He winks. “It’s fucking catchy.”

I chuckle as I stand.

“But hey, in all seriousness, though, I’m happy to come help ya out, man. I’ll call you when I’m back stateside, and we can figure out timing and shit.”

“Sounds good. Have fun, and remember to wrap it up.”

He barks out a laugh as I disconnect the call and head back inside.

It’s going to be weird having Ace here. I’m not sure Meadows Ridge is ready for him.

But maybe it will also bring healing. A way for my two lives—the old and the new—to merge.

## Chapter 19

### Riley

*P*<sup>op!</sup>

“Winna, winna, chicken dinna,” the man behind the counter shouts in a strong Southern accent.

I throw my hands in the air, celebrating my victory.

“Unbelievable,” Austin mutters, pulling my attention to him. He stands there shaking his head, his arms crossed with one of his hands holding his jaw. I give him my cheesiest smile and bat my eyelashes.

“Aww, don’t be sad.” I press up on my toes and kiss his cheek as the worker claps his hands.

“Ten out of ten gets you a prize from the top shelf. Ya sure you’re an English teacher and not a secret ninja?”

A giggle slips from my lips as I jump up and down in excitement and clap my hands.

“Umm, that one, please.” I point to the giant panda bear propped up in the corner with the red bow tied around his neck.

I hug the bear tightly once the man hands him over the counter. This thing is seriously huge. The panda is adorable and reminds me of my favorite video online of the sneezing panda.

“You know, I might as well hand you my man card now since I played three games in a row and all I won was this little rinky-dink thing.” Austin holds up the small stuffed dragon.

“Aww, but it’s such a cute baby dragon,” I tease but then hold my hand out in front of me.

Austin’s gaze dips to my open palm, and he gives me a slight shove. “Fuck off.”

I prop the panda bear on my hip like a toddler—a ridiculously huge toddler, that is—and wrap my left arm around Austin’s right as we walk away from the dart game.

Today is the annual Meadows Ridge Fall Festival. Basically, the entire town shuts down and is in attendance. An assortment of colorful tents lines the county fairgrounds, hosting local vendors and carnival games.

This evening, all festivities move to the giant barn on the far edge of the property for what we call “Hootenanny.” There is music, line dancing, and good fun.

“What do you want to do next?” Austin asks as we dodge through a crowd of rambunctious kids.

I looked down at my watch. “I have about thirty minutes before I have to meet the girls at the main stage for their performance.” The high school’s dance company is



performing two dances today. “How about food?” I say as soon as the delicious aromas of grease and fried food assault my senses. My mouth instantly waters at the thought of fried dough covered in powdered sugar. This is not the event you want to attend if you’re watching what you eat. Today, I’m watching what I eat—watching it go right in my mouth. I’ll make up for it tonight on the dance floor and tomorrow’s run.

Austin groans, and I giggle. Poor guy. The button of his pants might actually bust. All morning, he had been judging the chili cookoff entries. Each judge may only get a small sample of each entry, but when there are nineteen different chilis entered, well, I think Austin might chug Pepto later when we head home to change for Hootenanny.

We continue walking around, waving to students, and stop by a few vendor tents. The bright yellow sign draws my attention to the booth to the right.

“Okay, so I know I can’t convince you to get food, but what would I have to do to convince you to get me a frozen lemonade?”

Austin purses his lips, and I can see in his eyes he loves this idea. “I can think of a few things.” He waggles his brows, and my heart instantly aches because it wasn’t Austin that I saw in that moment but the spitting image of Tanner.

“Ew, you perv.”

“Who you calling a perv?” he shrieks. “I meant like the laundry, the dishes, the grocery shopping. I think you’re the perv.” He huffs out a long, playful sigh.

We both laugh.

“One frozen lemonade coming up.” He taps the tip of my nose with his finger. *There it is again—Tanner.* He always knew I hated that gesture yet constantly did it because he loved getting a rise out of me. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

Before I can respond, he’s already halfway to the line. Instead of standing in the middle of the crowd, I head over to one of the picnic tables and set the panda bear down before taking a seat beside it. “Guess it’s just you and me, Mr. Panda.”

I’m adjusting the big red bow around his neck when giggles and bouncy blonde curls catch my attention above the bear’s head.

I look up to find Tripp with his niece perched on top of his shoulders. His hands hold her legs steady while she bangs her little hands on the top of his head like a bongo drum. He’s having a conversation with his brother, Leighton, and his sister-in-law, but I guess he’s rather bored with whatever they’re saying because he scans the crowd. His eyes land on me, and I give a small wave and smile. He smiles back at me, although it seems a little forced.

Earlier this week, he called asking for a second date. I told him I think we’re better off as just friends. He seemed to be okay with it, but I’m not so sure now, seeing as how his smile isn’t the same smile that he’s given me before.

Tripp finally breaks his gaze when his niece covers his eyes with both her hands. It’s *then* I see a genuine, wide smile

appear on his lips.

Austin approaches, holding out a cup full of the pink frozen treat. “One frozen lemonade, m’lady. They had different flavors, so I grabbed you a watermelon lemonade.”

“Ahh, you’re the best.” I grab the cup and take a long sip from the straw. My lips pucker at the tartness, and I know if I don’t slow down, I’ll be getting brain freeze. “You wanna sit and people-watch or continue walking around?”

“You good with walking around? That way, I can feel a little better about all the food I ate this morning.”

I push up from the table to stand, pulling my legs out of the bench one at a time, and tip my straw in his direction. “Hey, you only have yourself to blame.”

Austin rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Whatever. Want me to carry your bear?”

“Nah, I got it. You got your little baby dragon.”

He mocks me, and I can’t help but laugh as I adjust the bear on my hip.

Tripp and his family are gone by the time we pass by where they were standing. Probably for the best to avoid a potentially awkward encounter. Hopefully, one day we can just all get past it.

“Wonder what’s going on over there?” Austin tips his head toward one area just ahead of us that has a crowd swarming around.

I shrug as I try to remember the map of the layout of the festival but am coming up blank. We push our way through the front of the crowd, and my jaw drops.

Cooper is sitting on a collapsible metal bench above a mini pool-like tank, taunting Beau, who is standing a few feet away from him, throwing another ball toward the circular target to the right of Cooper. I wonder how his mama got him to agree to work the dunk tank?

“Marshall, if you don’t hit this target, you’re gonna get double the number of drills to do on Monday,” Cooper yells with his hands cupping his mouth.

“You mean you *wanna* be dunked? Isn’t that like against the rules or something?” Beau shakes his head, and I have to say I agree with him. It’s a little strange, but maybe it’s a strategy?

“No, I don’t *want* to get dunked, but watching you miss all these makes me think I’m not doing my job right,” Cooper taunts back.

Beau lets out a loud laugh and tries once again. The pitch is fast and hard, but there’s a slight curve to it, and it narrowly misses the red circle.

*Come on, Beau. Fucking dunk him.*

Part of me wants to stay to watch Beau hit his target and dunk the motherfucker. Maybe he can put his money where his mouth is. But when Cooper scans the crowd and his blue eyes lock on mine, the air rips from my lungs, and I wish we had never stopped by the dunk tank to begin with.

Thankfully, since our explosive encounter last weekend, we've both been able to avoid each other. It's impressive, being that we live in such a small town.

Coop never takes his eyes off mine, even as he resumes his teasing to Beau.

"Come on." Austin tilts his head away from the booth. I nod, thankful that he has the strength to pull me away.

"Hi, Ms. Parker. Hi, Mr. Hayes." Beau's girlfriend, Maddey, waves as we walk right behind them.

"Hey, Maddey. You got about fifteen minutes till you need to meet at the stage." She nods in understanding.

"Beau," Austin shouts over his shoulder, "you dunk him, you'll automatically get an A on your next two tests."

"Hey, that's cheating," Cooper barks.

Austin shrugs. Beau Marshall is an extremely smart kid and has gotten nothing less than an A in my class, so I imagine he doesn't need that bribe.

Austin and I are a few feet away from the crowd when we hear a massive wave of cheers. *I guess Beau finally hit his target.* I let out a small giggle and quickly try to recover by bringing my lemonade to my lips.

I wince when I feel Austin's elbow ram into my side. Turning to him with a small scowl, I find him shaking his head, smirking.

"What?" I gasp. "I'm just happy for Beau."

“Uh-huh,” he hums. “Oh, there’s my parents. Want to swing in?”

I follow my gaze to where he points, finding his parents standing outside a tent that is selling homemade soaps and candles.

“Actually, I’m going to go drop this bear off in the car and head towards the main stage.”

“Alright, I’ll see ya afterwards. Good luck.” He leans in and presses a kiss to my temple.

As I head out to the parking lot, I toss my empty lemonade cup in the trash can. I grab my keys from the purse slung over my chest and unlock the car as I approach. I’m halfway in the back seat, settling the bear in his seat, when I feel the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

I don’t need to turn around to know who is near. Maybe if I don’t move, he won’t know I’m here. Maybe he’s just walking to his car.

“Riley.” The husky timbre of his voice travels through my veins, and I hate he has such an effect on me, even after everything we’ve been through. *Well, so much for not knowing I’m here.*

“Not now, Coop,” I bite back as I slam the door to the back seat rather harshly but don’t turn around to face him. I’m holding on by a thread, just waiting for it to snap.

I squeeze the keys tightly in my fist, no doubt the ridges of the key leaving its tooth marks in my skin.

He steps up close enough that I can see his reflection in the window. Water drips from his curls, slowly trickling down his skin, and a beach towel is draped around his neck, confirming that Beau did in fact dunk him.

“I don’t have anything else to say to you, and I need to go.”

He exhales. “That’s fine. What I need to say won’t take too long. Just let me get this out, and then I’ll leave you alone.” His tone is, I don’t know, almost dejected.

My back straightens, and I cross my arms over my chest as if they might protect my heart from anything else he has to say. Curiosity gets the best of me, which is why I’m not running away.

“I, umm—I just wanted to say I’m sorry. I had no right to say what I said the other night when I put you through the same thing. I was young and immature and will forever live with the pain I caused you.” He clears his throat and steps up right behind me. All I would have to do is take an exhaling breath and my back would be flush against his front.

His hands skate over my arms, never touching my skin, but I can feel the heat coming off him. “I’m sorry, Riles.” A lone tear trickles down my cheek as I squeeze my eyes shut. “I know my words will never be enough, but I just had to *finally* say those words aloud to you. They were long overdue.”

With that, he steps back. By the time I open my eyes, Cooper is feet away. I don’t even know how to respond to that. Why now? Why apologize? *Fuck*. I grind my teeth together and press my palms into the car door.

*Inhale for three, exhale for three*, I repeat over and over, trying to calm my heart rate.

It takes only a few minutes to compose myself. I refuse to let him have more power over me, but as I lock my vehicle and walk through the parking lot, Coop's words play on repeat like my favorite song—words that I've been dying to hear for six fucking years. *I'm sorry*.

“Ms. Parker, over here,” Maddey shouts, waving her hand in the air. I was in such a daze, thinking about his words, that I hadn't even realized that I had made it to my destination.

I shake his words out of my head as I approach the dance company. The girls are off to the side by the stage, stretching. “Alright, ladies, y'all ready?” I know they are, but I can't help the smile that spreads on my face when they all cheer in unison.

Instead of wearing costumes for their two routines, the girls are wearing black halter leotards with black booty shorts and skin tone tights underneath, rolled halfway up their calves—our typical uniform for rehearsals. Each dancer has a different-colored Meadows Ridge High School Dance Company T-shirt cut off and hanging off one shoulder. The festival lacked the proper space for a costume change, so this was the easiest solution.

“We're all ready, Riley,” Tom, the stagehand, calls out.

I clap my hands together. “Line up, ladies. A quick prayer circle, and then you're on.”



The girls all line up in a circle, and we cross one hand over the other before accepting the hand of the person next to us.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the stage Meadows Ridge High School Dance Company.” The crowd applauds, and a few loud whistles lead my gaze over to where Beau and a few of the other girls’ boyfriends are standing.

And who else is standing beside Beau? None other than Cooper Graham. I groan as the girls take the stage.

*Just ignore him. He’s not there.*

It’s actually much easier to do when the music starts and I focus my attention on the dancers. Every time I watch any of them perform or practice, I’m in awe that this is my life, that I’m surrounded by such wonderful talent. While I might not be performing like I had once dreamed, being these kids’ teacher and knowing that I get to help strengthen their talent and aid in achieving their dreams and creative outlet is so much more than I had dreamed.

When the second song ends, the girls run offstage and swarm me in a giant hug.

“You guys were absolutely amazing. I’m incredibly proud of you,” I tell each of them as they pack up their things.

Most of the girls have their things packed in record time, heading off to meet their families or friends. Maddey is the last one left besides me.

“Will I see you later tonight?” Maddey asks as she adjusts her dance bag strap on her shoulder as we walk side by side

toward where I saw Beau standing during the performance.

“Of course. You know I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Awesome. I’ll see you then.” Maddey sashays over to where Beau stands with Cooper. They’re both deep in conversation, yet Beau must be able to sense Maddey approaching because without even breaking eye contact with Cooper, he extends his arm, allowing Maddey to slip in and wrap her arms around his waist.

Beau and Maddey remind me so much of a younger version of Cooper and me. Not just a dancer and baseball player, both with big dreams. When I see them, I see an adolescent love where, in their eyes, nothing can stop them. I wish them nothing but the best and hope that the biggest difference between us and them is that in the end, they can make it last.

My thoughts are so jumbled that when hands come down on my shoulders, I jump with a shriek.

“Woah there, killer. It’s just me,” Austin coos as he runs his hands up and down my arms. “I thought you heard me calling your name.”

I shake my head. “Sorry, totally had my head in the clouds.”

Austin slings an arm over my shoulder. “Girls were fantastic.” I beam with pride. “Wanna head on out? I could totally sleep off this food coma before we head out later.”

“Why, Hayes, I never heard more perfect words come out of your mouth.”

Glancing over at Cooper one last time, I let Austin lead me out of there. When will I be able to look at him without the pain?

## Chapter 20

### Cooper

**E**ntering the barn, I glance around the building like I just walked into a time warp. Twinkling lights hang from almost every surface, and the giant bronze chandelier hangs from the center of the roof. There's a large stage against the back wall, with a band currently playing covers of country favorites. The dance floor is already full of an assortment of dancers—some who enjoy dancing, while some, I'm sure, are there under the influence of alcohol.

I've attended this event all my life except for the six years I was away. Memories flash in my mind—the many times Tanner and I ran through the crowds as young kids and the first time I walked in here with Riley on my arm. It was our version of Cinderella at the ball. You know, if Cinderella had traded her ball gown and glass slippers for a mini jean skirt and cowgirl boots.

As if summoned by my brain, her familiar laughter rings in my ear. I find her on the dance floor, smiling as she dances with some girls I recognize from the festival earlier today.

I shove my hands in my pockets and walk in the opposite direction, over to the main bar area on the far side of the barn. After a bartender delivers my beer, I take a long sip from the bottle. I just need to make an appearance, shake some hands and kiss some babies, and then I can head home.

Someone steps up beside me.

“Graham.” My spine tenses at his voice. *For fuck’s sake.*

“Briggs.”

“Back home to lick your wounds?”

Just as I open my mouth to tell him to fuck off, Austin appears, slapping his hand on Tripp’s shoulder. “Hey, man, I just came in from the parking lot, and looks like someone backed into your truck.”

“Son of a—” Tripp slams his beer on the bar top, causing liquid to shoot out of the top, and runs off.

Austin smirks as he takes the now vacant spot beside me. He waves his finger in the air, signaling a refill of his drink.

“You didn’t need to do that.”

“Do what?” Austin twists so he’s now facing me with his elbow propped up against the bar top. I’m not falling for his false innocent act.

“Did someone actually back into his truck?” I arch a brow, letting him know I’m onto him.

He shrugs and takes a sip of his fresh beverage. “Yeah, okay. Whatever. Maybe they did, maybe they didn’t. But I

needed to defuse the situation, and that was the quickest thing I could think of. If there's one thing Tripp Briggs loves more than his reflection is that stupid truck."

"Again, you didn't need to do that," I repeat.

"So, you weren't five seconds from punching him?"

I remain silent, and that's enough for him to know the truth. He nods, chuckling. "Right, so you're welcome." He tips his drink in my direction. "You need to be careful, man. One of these days, shit is going to escalate between the two of you, and no one will be there to break it up."

I know he's right, but it doesn't mean I'm going to admit that. I don't know what it is about Tripp Briggs that constantly gets under my skin.

"Well then, maybe he shouldn't ever open his mouth again and think about looking into a mute lifestyle." But then again, he will probably just look at me the wrong way, which will make me want to sucker punch him in the face.

"Just be the bigger person. I know he probably deserves a swift kick in the ass. Lord knows he's given plenty of folks a reason to, but I figured this was the last place you wanted to cause a scene."

I flip around so both my elbows rest up on the bar, and Austin matches my stance. We watch Tripp finally storms back into the barn, his eyes searching for us and a scowl on his face. Once he finds us, Austin catches me by surprise and tips his beer in Tripp's direction. He responds with his middle

finger in the air before storming off to the other side of the barn.

I sigh and sink back into the bar, propping the bottom of my shoe on the base of the bar.

“Who knows, maybe if I just fucking decked him, it would give people something else to talk about.”

“You mean then they wouldn’t be talking about how we all might suffocate from the tension between you two?”

My eyes instantly seek Riley, who is walking directly toward us. The closer she gets, the faster my heart beats. Can she hear it over the shift in the music?

“Dance with me,” she says when she approaches us.

Maybe our interaction between us earlier at the fall festival changed things. I hope she truly understood how sorry I am. Every foul word or name she thought or said about me, I deserved. Those words are long overdue, but I have to have hope and faith that they just weren’t too late.

My breath hitches at the thought of spinning her around like I used to. I stand up straighter and open my mouth to accept the invitation, but then she tugs on Austin’s arm.

“Pretty please?” she whines, sticking out her bottom lip in a pout. Of course, she’s talking to Austin.

No longer waiting for him to answer, she pulls him forward with such force as he’s bringing his beer to his lips that some spills from his mouth and down the front of his red plaid shirt.

While he may look similar to his brother, the groan that slips from his mouth as he allows her to whisk him away to the dance floor tells me that this is where they differ. I'm pretty sure if Tanner had been here, he would have been the one pulling Riley out on the dance floor.

The black cloud over my heart rolls back in, forming a pressured pain that squeezes at my heart. Fuck, will it get easier? Maybe it was a mistake coming back here.

I watch Riley and Austin smiling in front of me and wonder if it would be easier for everyone if I had never come back or if I slipped away in the night as easily as I had once before. They all could go back to the lives they were living before I arrived back here and disrupted them.

When watching gets to be too much, I turn to give my back to the dance floor. A shadow looms over me. *Guess Tripp came back for round two.* However, I know I'm wrong when a hand moves in circular motions between my shoulder blades. That touch could only be the soothing and loving touch of a mother.

"Spin your mother around the dance floor, will ya?"

"I don't know, Ma. I'm not really in the mood to dance right now," I grumble.

"Oh, I'm sorry. You thought I was asking? It wasn't a question. Be a dear and dance with me." She uses her mom tone. You know, the one that in the fine print screams *do what I say or feel my wrath.* I'm pretty sure Shannon Graham



doesn't care that I'm twenty-four—she'd pull me over her knee and spank my behind if I disobeyed.

I laugh and set my beer back on the bar top. Holding my hand out to her, she beams as she accepts it. We find an empty spot on the outskirts of the crowd. While Ma and I move around the floor, my eyes can't help but stray back to Riley. She commands the room without even realizing it. Maybe not the room after all. Looking around, I notice that I'm the only one fixated on her.

“That girl still loves you, Cooper.” Ma must know exactly where my head's at. *Was I that obvious?* “Make her see that you do, too.”

I shake my head. I'm not sure she'd even believe me at this point. When I look up, I realize Ma has somehow steered us right next to Austin and Riley.

“Hi, Mrs. Graham,” Riley says with a genuine smile. Her attention then turns to me, and it fades.

I swallow down that gutting feeling.

“Hello, dear,” my mother says sweetly before leaning close to my ear so only I can hear what she's saying. “Sometimes we just need a little push.”

*Huh? What is she talking about?* I don't have time to ask before she's giving me more than a slight nudge directly toward Austin and Riley, barreling right between the two of them.

“Ma,” I shout in shock.

“I am so sorry, silly me,” Ma gasps. She has both hands pressed to her chest. “Come on, Austin, spin me around the floor. I’m clearly not a good dancing match for my son, and you were always my favorite partner.”

Austin’s gaze bounces back and forth, and he must sense something in my mother’s expression. “Of course,” he chuckles.

Riley and I stand there, staring as the crowd continues to move around us. She turns to walk away, but my mother’s words replay in my head—*sometimes we just need a little push*. She had said the same thing during our conversation that landed me working at the high school.

“What? Don’t you think you can spin circles around me anymore, Riles?”

She halts at the nickname that still rolls perfectly off my tongue.

“You probably don’t even remember how to dance, city boy.”

I place my hand on my chest, pretending to be offended by her words as I close the small gap between us. “City boy, huh?”

A mischievous smile takes over her face, and I don’t know if I should be excited or nervous by the glint in her eye.

“Maybe that’s why even your mama doesn’t wanna dance with you and picked a better partner.” She places her hand in

mine. “I don’t wanna get run over. Don’t hurt me, Cooper Graham.”

She freezes at her words, and so do I. *Don’t worry, baby. I’m done hurting you.*

I don’t allow her to get lost in her head because I swing her out and back into my arms. We follow the movement of the crowd, and I spin her every so often. Her dark waves sway in the breeze each time she spins, and I relish in her scent of lavender that surrounds me. It’s always brought peace to my frazzled nerves. I even went as far as buying a bottle of her lotion and kept it in my gym bag and would inhale it before every game. What can I say? I’m a glutton for punishment.

“Not so bad, Graham. Maybe it was your mama who has two left feet. But I swear to God I will kill you in your sleep if you ever repeat that. You will be done and buried before anyone realizes you’re gone.”

My eyes widen at her threat. “I wouldn’t dare.” I pause, worried that the next words out of my mouth will push her out of my reach. “Or maybe it was just that I didn’t have the right partner.”

Her brown eyes dip down to my lips for a moment—it’s so fast that if I hadn’t been so focused on her, I may have missed it—before lifting to my own. I watch her throat work as she swallows slowly before she speaks. “Maybe.”

That one word makes my heart flutter with hope. Neither of us speaks after that as we lose ourselves on the dance floor for the rest of the song.

With a few final spins, the crowd erupts in cheers around us. I dip her back as the last note of the country song plays. Our chests are flush against each other, and our breaths blend as we both pant. I don't know how long we stare at each other until a bucket of ice water douses us, attempting to extinguish the flame between us. I don't mean literally a bucket of ice water. This isn't like *Carrie* or anything.

The song changes from the upbeat Luke Bryan song to a slow one, but not just any song—one that both Riley and I are extremely familiar with.

She quickly stands, brushing off her outfit. She curtsies as if she had just performed onstage. “Thanks for the dance,” she mutters, looking anywhere but at me. She goes to turn, but I don't let her get too far. I reach out and grab her hand and pull her tight against me.

“One more, Riles.”

She doesn't respond with words, but I let out a breath of relief as she stands straighter and places her free hand on the back of my neck while still holding my other hand.

At first, it feels almost as if we are middle schoolers dancing awkwardly for the first time. That's not going to work for me. I tug her a smidgen closer, and thankfully, Riley doesn't put up a fight and instead settles against my chest. Can she feel my heart beating erratically in my chest?

We sway slowly to the tunes of Trisha Yearwood.

Riley's hand on the back of my neck tightens, and I feel her body jerk slightly. I release her hand and tip her chin upward, forcing her to look at me. I knew if I had asked, she would refuse and stare elsewhere.

"Riley," I breathe as I watch tears slowly trickle down her cheek. My thumb swipes the tears away, but more continue to fall.

"Don't look at me like that," she snuffles.

"Like what?" I don't let my gaze waver, though. The entire barn disappears around us.

"Like Nicholas Cage and Monica Potter looked at each other at the end of *Con Air*."

So, she was thinking the same thing I was. The first time I ever said I love you to her was at the drive-in theater while playing that movie. This song had become our song.

"Like you can't believe I'm here, and if you blink, I might just disappear."

"Won't you?" I didn't mean for the words to slip, but now that they're out in the open, I don't regret them.

The emotion in her gaze washes away with my words. "I guess I learned from the best."

She slowly steps back, never taking her gaze off me. I reach out, but she pulls her hand back like I just burned her. With one last look at the ceiling, she shakes her head before turning and bolting out the door. Was she shaking her head at me not

to follow her or that she couldn't believe what was brewing between us just a second ago?

I follow her out the main double doors, and the cool, crisp air is a reprieve from the air in the barn.

*Where did you go, Riles?* I look around, perching my hands on my hips. There's a crowd gathered a few feet away, but Riley isn't there. Something catches my attention in the darkness toward my left.

A soft snuffle in the darkness confirms which way she ran off to. With slow and careful steps so as to not startle her, I make my way toward her. However, fate or, well, Mother Nature had other plans. I'm so focused on the woman in front of me with her back currently toward me and her shoulders trembling that I miss the stick in front of me until my foot is pressing down on it.

*Snap.* The branch breaks in half, causing Riley to whip around to face me.

I wait for her to berate me for following her, but the words never come. Before I can exhale my next breath, Riley is barreling toward me, launching herself into my arms, and pressing her lips to mine.

## Chapter 21

### Cooper

Completely surprised by her assault, I'm frozen in place. It takes just a second for my brain to register that Riley is kissing me, and I finally kiss her back. I devour her mouth with slow and steady strokes of my tongue against hers.

Switching our positions so that her back is now up against the barn, our kiss quickly goes from soft to feverish, with lips clashing and teeth clanging. There is nothing sweet about this kiss, as if we're trying to make up for all the years our lips were apart. I can't get close enough to this girl.

I hoist her up by the back of her thighs, and she instinctively wraps her legs around my waist. Fuck, I've missed this—missed us. It was one thing having her in my arms on the dance floor, but to have her this close in an intimate position, with my dick pulsing against her core, feeling the heat coming off her body—if we keep this up, I may just come on the spot.

She runs her fingers through the ends of my hair, which I've let grow out just a little longer than usual since being home. When she tugs on the strands, I exert a loud groan into her mouth. In return, I bring my erection to her, and she breaks the

kiss, her head falling back against the side of the barn, giving me open access to her neck. Starting at her collarbone, I bite and suck my way back up to her ear. With each nibble, I lick away the sting.

I need to feel her, to be inside her. I don't even care that we're in the shadows and that anyone could catch us.

With my body still pressed against her, I trail my hand slowly up her thigh from under her ass. I'm halfway up her thigh when I feel a raised, tight bump on her skin. *What is that? Is that a scar?* It's too high to have been from the accident. My fingers continue exploring the skin, discovering matching narrow lines. I know every freckle, every mark, every inch of her skin from when we were younger, and those definitely weren't there then. *What the hell happened to you while I was gone, baby? What am I missing?*

Riley freezes in my arms. Her hands drop to my chest and push me away. "Stop! We can't do this. I can't do this."

I let her back on her feet. What just happened? I reach for her hand, but she slowly puts distance between us. "Riley, talk to me." My fingers graze hers, and I hold tight. Her gaze meets mine, and the sadness in her eyes rips the very breath from my lungs.

"I'm sorry, Coop. This was a mistake," she says just above a whisper before turning away from me and running off back into the barn.

*Sorry? What is she sorry for? What the hell just happened?*



Is this what Austin meant when he said she's too fragile? That she's not strong enough? Did I damage her beyond repair?

No, that can't be it. Riley is the strongest person I know. I mean, look at her. She lost everything yet still managed to pull the pieces of her life together and make something of herself. She still has the ability to give others a smile. A genuine smile. She has compassion and love that she gives freely. To everyone except me.

What have I done with my life? I let the pain and guilt eat at me until I was nothing but a shell of the boy I used to be. I may have survived, but only barely. My life paused, leaving me on Highway 15 with my best friend's dead body while Riley moved on. She healed.

I place my hands on my head and let out a frustrated breath. "Fuck, what am I doing?"

I make my way back into the barn and look around for Riley. We need to talk about this, but she's nowhere in sight. I need to convince her that this wasn't a mistake—that *we* are not a mistake.

Austin is standing over at one of the high-top tables, so I head in that direction. Maybe he saw which way she went. "Have you seen—"

"What the fuck did you say to her?" His jaw is tight, his fists balled up on the table. His voice is stern but low. "I told you to be careful with her." I see we're back to the version of Austin from the other morning.

“I was.”

“Then why the fuck did she come running in here in tears, grab her bag, and bolt?”

“Where is she?” She just up and left? I look around and see there’s another door open on the opposite side of the barn. She must have slipped out there so I wouldn’t see her.

“Home, I assume. That’s where she said she was going, at least.” He grips the back of his neck and exhales loudly. “I swear to God, Cooper, I will never forgive you if something happens to her.”

“Does this have something to do with the...” I trail off. No, that’s none of his business. I know that the two of them are close and as thick as thieves, but would he know about the marks on her thighs? Did she confide in him who hurt her?

Austin and I have a staring contest in the middle of the biggest event in town. *Fuck this. I’m wasting valuable time.*

“I need to go find her.”

Austin grabs my arm, stopping me before I can walk away. His expression is now slightly softer.

“Here.” He pulls his keys from his pocket and twists until he frees a single bronze key.

“What’s this?”

“My house key. Trust me, you knock on that door, she will ignore you. This way, you can let yourself in.” I accept the key

and tuck it into my pocket. “And Cooper, I mean it. You hurt her and we’re done—that’s it. No more chances.”

I nod, heeding his warning. But I have no intention of hurting her—ever again.

I race out of the barn and head straight for my truck. It’s time to get my girl.

## Chapter 22

### Riley

**M**y hands press firmly into the tile as the warm water cascades down my body.

If only this water could wash away the sins from dancing with the devil. The devil in the form of a six-foot-two man who made my body come alive with just a few simple touches.

Every spot his fingers touched is still buzzing with need, even after scrubbing the skin raw with my loofah.

*What the fuck was I thinking?*

It was just the power of Hootenanny, of being swept up in the moment. *Yes, that's it*, I lie to myself. Maybe if I repeat it enough times, I'll actually believe it.

Taylor Swift was speaking a direct line to me when she said that you should have said no. For once, why didn't I listen to the Queen? I've officially failed as a Swiftie.

I should've just walked away when I caught on to what Mrs. Graham was up to when she stole Austin right out from under me. Instead, I gave in to his taunts and let him spin me around, showing off that he remembered every move. I don't know if

Cooper was in on his mother's plan or just saw it as the perfect opportunity.

I should've just said thank you for the dance and left the dance floor. Instead, I willingly stepped into his arms once more. Our bodies became one as we swayed to the slow song—no, not just any song. *Our* song. In that moment, the years we spent apart were gone, and I was his and he was mine. I allowed my mind to envision what our life would be like: married with two kids and dancing to this song in the middle of our living room just because. But when I looked up and saw the way Cooper was staring at me, reality came crashing down.

Once again, I gave the town enough gossip for days, watching us get lost in each other's gaze. Things got too intense for me, and I felt like the barn was closing in. I had to get out of there before I did something crazy like kiss him.

Why, of all the times we've blown up at each other since his return, did he choose *this* time to actually chase after me?

The more I think about it, though, kissing him in front of everyone would have been the safer choice instead of basically assaulting him in the darkness outside of the barn. I made myself vulnerable and put myself in a position I never thought I would ever be in again with him, and I'm the reason a can of worms opened that I've never been prepared to face with him.

Again, what was I thinking? Great, I've gone from Taylor Swift to Dierks Bentley.

I hear footsteps outside the bathroom door. I guess Austin is home. A soft groan slips from my lips. So much for him believing my lie when I said I was okay before I slipped out of the barn. All I want to do is curl up in bed and forget about tonight, not get the third degree that I know Austin will want to give. I know he worries about me, and I can't blame him for his protectiveness, but I asked for one night, and he couldn't even give me that.

Once I turn the shower off and wrap myself up in a fluffy ball of sunshine, I mentally prepare myself for Austin's interrogation.

My bedroom door is open further than I left it when I went into the bathroom, and my shoulders slump. *Looks like we're not wasting any time.*

I keep my eyes down as I enter the room and head toward my dresser. It's a little creepy that he's just hanging out in the dark. "You're making it a habit of sneaking into my room when I'm in the shower," I tease before steadying my voice. "I told you I was fine, Austin, and I just want to go to bed."

"I was beginning to think you weren't going to come out until there was no more water in Brayden County."

It's not Austin's voice that I hear, though.

"Cooper," I shriek as I spin around, clutching the towel tighter, feeling just as exposed to him as if I'd dropped the towel and was standing completely in the nude. One hand fumbles to keep the towel tied at my breasts while the other pulls down at the bottom, trying not to expose too much skin.

I flip on the lamp to add a soft glow of light to the room. Perched on the end of the bed is Cooper, still dressed in the same outfit he wore earlier, but his hat is beside his thigh on my bed. He's bent over, resting on his elbows, sliding his palms back and forth against each other.

“Look, Cooper, I don't know why you're here or *how* you even got in here.” I have a feeling I'll be putting an ad out for a new roommate and best friend soon. Why can't Austin just butt the fuck out? “But you can see yourself back out that way. Don't let the door hit you on the ass on the way out—or do. I don't actually give a fuck.”

But he doesn't move. He just goes back to staring at his hands as if they hold all the truths or answers.

I huff out in frustration as I stalk over to my dresser. “What do you want, Cooper?” I ask as I open the top drawer and retrieve a pair of panties.

“You. I want you.” Those four words slip off his lips so easily.

I snort and roll my eyes as I slam the drawer shut. “A little late for that, don't ya think?” I know my voice comes off harsher than I intended. Actually, no, I'm not sorry. He's the one in *my house*, in *my room*, without *my permission*.

“No, actually. I don't—not if that kiss is any indication that you want me as much as I want you.”

I shake my head. Ugh, I knew this was going to come back to bite me in the ass. “I was just swept up in the moment.”

“Bullshit,” he shouts, and I startle.

“I think you should just go.” This is clearly getting us nowhere.

“No, I’m not going anywhere, Riles. I made that mistake once, and I’ll be damned if I do it again.”

My breath hitches, and all I can hear in the room is the drumming of my heartbeat in my ears.

Cooper worries his hands together as if he is waging a war on the inside and trying to keep himself composed. “Who hurt you?” He says those three words like the answer is as simple as answering what the weather is outside or what’s for dinner.

I stay silent.

“Riley.” His voice is stern and holds more conviction yet also a slight frailty to it. “Who hurt you?” he repeats, accentuating each word. “I need answers.”

“Really? Do you honestly think *you* of all people deserve answers? What about me? What about the answers I’ve been owed all these years, huh?”

“I need to know whose ass I need to kick.” His breath is harsh, his shoulders heaving. The tightness in his coiled muscles is enough to pop like a bottle of champagne. It’s killing me to see him like this, but I won’t back down. He’s allowed his secrets, like why he left, and I’m entitled to mine. “Riley, so help me, God, if you don’t start talking...”

I know that if I tell him, this is going to change everything, but if I don’t, I fear he might channel Michael Myers and go



on a killing spree.

He scoffs and grabs his hat. “Fine, fucking be that way,” he spits with gritted teeth and pushes on his knees to stand.

*Do something, Riley.* My eyes bounce back and forth between him and the door.

I squeeze my eyes shut, not able to look at him as I open my mouth to speak my truth. “It’s me, okay?” I shout back, years of buried emotion finally erupting out of me. “No one else hurt me but me. I made those scars.”

Cooper stumbles under the weight of my words as if I just sucker punched him right in the gut, knocking the wind out of him. I guess in a way I did. Words are a powerful force—not only can they create, but they can destroy. It’s why my mother always told me growing up to choose my words wisely.

He stumbles backward and braces a hand out to catch himself as he falls back to the corner of the bed. Scrubbing his hands over his face, he refuses to even look back in my direction. It’s not like I can blame him. There are some days that I can’t even stand to look at myself.

Now that he’s got an answer, does he regret asking that question? That answer leads down a rabbit hole that I’m not sure either of us is prepared for.

The silence causes my skin to itch with anxiety. I need to say something—anything.

“Coop,” I croak, the tears fighting so hard to fall. When he looks up and our eyes collide, I’m done for. His tear-filled

eyes match those that I awoke to in the hospital. The ones that say there are so many things that he wants to say but just can't find the strength to say them. "Say something."

"I—I," he stammers, and I'm not used to seeing Cooper Graham speechless. He looks up at the ceiling and exhales a deep breath. "I don't know what to say." Silence passes over us again. "Why?" The frailness in his voice shatters my heart even more.

Tears are now streaming down my cheeks. I can't stop them anymore.

"Umm, give me a moment to change out of this towel, okay?"

Cooper nods but remains silent, almost in a daze. Seeing him like this breaks my heart. The truth lingers in the air, attempting to suffocate us. I head toward my closet and slip into the panties that I had grabbed and reach for my robe hanging on the hook on the door. I think Cooper might crawl out of his skin if I make him wait any longer. Honestly, so might I. Part of me wants to wait to have this talk and put it off as long as possible, but I also want to get this over with, too.

After tying the sash around my waist, I sit down next to Cooper and place my hands in my lap.

Cooper's leg bounces with anticipation as I try to find the words to start. There's only one person who knows about this, not even my sisters, and that was only because he found me on the bathroom floor, blood streaking down my thighs. The look of terror and confusion on Austin's face haunts me to this day

—the look of fear in his eyes that he was going to lose someone else close to him.

I place my palm over Cooper's knee, which is bouncing so much I can hear the picture frames rattling on top of the dresser.

I focus on my fingers spread over his jeans, clinging to the fabric that is snug against his thighs. Cooper's gaze drops to my hand as he places his own over mine, linking our fingers. I channel the strength he's trying to give me and focus on our joined hands as I open my mouth to speak.

“For the record, I didn't want to die. I just wanted to feel something.”

He gently squeezes my fingers, so I continue. “Dance had always been my emotional escape. No matter the mood—good or bad—I could express myself through dance. It was the one thing where I could both lose and find myself. Dancing was one of the two most important things in my life. You were the other one. After the accident, it was clear my future had shifted and I wasn't going to dance again. It hurt like hell, but at least I still had you.” I pause again. At this rate, I'm never going to get through this. “Until I didn't,” I say just above a whisper.

I release a shuddering breath. “In a matter of months, I lost my two best friends, the love of my life, and the dream I've had since I was a little girl. When I thought of my future as a child, I only ever saw dance, and then when I met you, I saw

you *and* dance. Then you were both just gone. It just all became too much—I was drowning.

“People said time would heal, journaling would help, focusing on my physical therapy would alleviate the ache, but none of them worked. A weight was pressing on my chest that made each breath hard work. If something as simple as breathing in and out was difficult, how was I to tackle the harder tasks?”

At some point, our hands flipped over. I’m not sure who made the move, him or me, but neither of us pulls away. We find strength in each other where our palms now kiss.

“With each pinch of the metal against my skin, pressure released from the weight in my chest. Similar to the way a balloon slowly releases air after puncturing a hole in the latex. The soft hiss of air as it deflates matched what my breath became. Each time, a surge of energy rushed through my veins—relief.”

I knew it was wrong, but it was all I could find to feel better, so I did it anyway.

The night Austin found me on the bathroom floor, I had only done it a handful of times. As I close my eyes, trying to steady my labored breathing, Austin’s distraught face is as clear in my mind as if he were standing right in front of me.

*“Austin, it hurts. It hurts so much.”*

*Austin rushed over to my side and took in the dribbling blood between my thighs.*

*“Let me get these cuts cleaned up,” he breathed out, running his hands through his hair.*

*I shook my head. “Not that. It hurts in here.” I placed my hand over my heart. “I hate him. I hate him so much.”*

*Austin crouched down in front of me, cupping my cheek with his palm. His thumb swiped away the fallen tears. “You don’t hate him, but that’s okay.” He brushed his lips gently across my forehead before he scooped me in his arms and carried me to the shower.*

“Show me,” Cooper finally speaks, pulling me from my memories.

“What?” I twist my body to face him and pull one leg under me.

“Show me,” he repeats.

It takes a second for the fog in my brain to clear to understand what he’s asking. I pull my hand away and instantly miss the loss of his touch. Rising to my feet, I pace in front of him, needing to put distance between us. To keep my hands from fidgeting, I grip the knot on my robe tightly. “Cooper, I don’t know—”

“Please.” His tortured eyes meet mine, and for once, this isn’t the man who took my heart and smashed it but the innocent boy who promised me the world. The one who I gave and trusted my heart with and who gave me his in return.

I nod. My fingers tremble as I slowly untie the ribbon sash. The robe loosens and drapes partially open. I’m thankful that I

had grabbed a pair of panties to put on but wishing I had put a bra or a top on. The silk material at least stops before revealing my nipples.

Cooper slides off the bed to his knees and shuffles closer to me.

“Coop, what are you doing?” I whisper. My body is so tense that one wrong move and my spine could snap in two.

His hands slowly trail up my thighs, leaving goose bumps in their wake. The sensation of his fingertips dancing along my skin has my nipples hard against the silk material. He parts the robe fully to reveal my legs. His eyes darken as he takes in the dark ripples taut against my skin. One day, the angry skin will fade just like the scar on my leg has done.

I ask him again as he lowers his head and presses his lips against the bottom scar.

“Kissing your scars.”

“Why,” I choke out, trying to pull back, but he grips my thighs, holding me in place.

“I’m kissing every moment you needed me and I wasn’t there. Let me kiss them, please.”

He looks up at me through thick, dark lashes. A myriad of emotions swirls in his eyes.

Silently, I nod, unsure there are any words that I could even say at this moment. That familiar weight forms on my chest again, and I feel like I’m spiraling out of control. But it’s when Cooper’s lips are back on my skin, peppering kisses against

the raised marks, that I feel the balloon slowly leaking air. I don't need the razor pressed against my skin to breathe. Coop is doing that all on his own.

A sob rips from my lips, and I have to catch myself. I grab onto his shoulder, gripping the fabric of his shirt for dear life as I stand on wobbly legs. *Did I fall in the shower and hit my head? Am I dreaming?*

"I will spend this lifetime and the next making up to you the pain I caused," he says against my skin. Slowly, with each kiss, Cooper is putting the missing pieces of my heart back together.

I thread my fingers through his unruly locks of hair. "Coop, we will spend a lifetime healing each other. I need—" I lose all train of thought when he brushes his lips against the fabric covering the apex of my thighs. "I need," I attempt again.

My breath comes in quick pants.

"I'm here. Tell me what you need." His hands grip my hips as he rises to his feet and pulls me closer to him. His erection presses against me, and I swallow thickly.

"You. I just need you." With my hands now on the back of his neck, I pull his lips to mine, picking up where we left off earlier.

## Chapter 23

### Riley

**Y**ears of anger and bitterness melt away with each swipe of Cooper's tongue against mine. The silk fabric of my robe slides off my shoulders as Cooper lowers his head, trailing his lips down my collarbone, down the center of my breasts, and over to my left nipple. His tongue swirls around the hard bud, and I let out a soft whimper.

His name becomes a plea on my lips as he moves his mouth to the other.

I reach down and grab the bottom of his shirt, pulling it up over his head. My fingers travel over his skin, over the colored ink on his chest and bicep. I've explored his body endless times, but this feels completely new. There are new muscles formed, stronger ridges of his body, like the V that disappears down the center of his jeans.

"You wanted to feel something, Riles," Cooper says before sealing his lips against mine again. This kiss is hungry and desperate.

He grabs my hand and places it over his hard cock, pressing against his jeans. "Do you feel this?" He undoes the button



and pulls the zipper down. My hand slips under the material of his boxer briefs and wraps my fingers around his shaft. “Do you feel what you do to me? Want to feel me inside of you?”

I moan out a jumbled “uh-huh” as he distracts me with his mouth once again on my nipples.

“Bed. Now,” he demands as my thumb swirls around the precum leaking from the tip of his cock. He pulls my hand from his pants and spins me around so my back is to the bed. I sit and slowly back up toward the headboard as I watch him strip from his jeans and underwear. The coolness of the covers is a stark contrast to my heated skin.

“I feel rather overdressed.” I’m still in my panties while he’s completely naked, closing the distance between us, stalking me like I’m his prey.

I reach down to shimmy them off, but Cooper grabs both my hands, bringing them to his mouth, and kisses my wrists. “Please, let me.” He places my hands above my head before sliding back down my body and slipping his fingers between the sides of the fabric. He slowly slides my panties down my legs, his gaze never wavering from mine. There is something so intimate about this moment—the house could be on fire, and the only thing that matters in this very moment is him watching me watch him. He discards the fabric to the floor.

My heart beats wildly in my chest, matching the bass of one of my highest-heart-rate running jams.

Cooper pushes my thighs apart, my pussy on full display for him. I watch as his eyes darken and the tip of his tongue drags

over his bottom lip. My walls clench as I imagine him running that tongue over my clit.

“There are so many things I want to do to you...that I need to do to you.”

“Tell me,” I breathe.

“I want to slide my tongue along your pussy, fuck you with my mouth, and tease you till you come all over my face. I want to drown in you. I want to watch you ride my fingers as they plunge deep inside you.”

“Coop,” I plead, needing him, needing anything before I come from his words and deep, raspy voice alone. Cooper was always more vocal with these things when we were younger, but this version of Cooper—*holy fucking shit*. I thought men like this only existed in romance novels and porn.

“I need to be inside you, but first, I just need one taste.” He bends down and lazily drags his tongue through my wetness. I arch my back, craving more. Another lick and my body is ready to explode. Cooper circles my clit with his tongue.

“You taste better than I fucking remember,” he says against my skin before diving back for another taste. The vibrations of his humming against my clit are my undoing.

“Cooper, I’m going to—” I press my palm against the back of his head, threading my fingers through his hair. “Don’t stop, please,” I beg.

“That’s it, baby. Come for me.” As soon as he slips two fingers inside me, I explode, panting his name breathlessly. It’s

been too long since I've orgasmed at the hand of someone else or something that isn't a toy.

Coop lifts his head, lips glistening with my release, and settles his body between my legs. When he kisses me, I taste myself on his lips.

My body needs more, but Cooper savors our kisses. When he kisses the skin on my neck, I know there is no way he can't feel my pulse beating against his tongue.

"I need to be inside you, Riles. Do you have a condom?"

*Fuck.* It's like jumping in a pool of ice water. A condom.

I shake my head. To be honest, I've only ever been with Cooper.

"Shit," he mutters, dropping his head to the groove of my neck. "I hadn't planned on this, so I don't have one."

Just as I'm about to say screw it, fuck me bare, that's not what my brain comes up with. "Austin," I shout.

Cooper's head lifts quickly, and he narrows his eyes at me. "Umm, babe, we're going to have a talk later about you mentioning other men's names when we're naked."

It's my turn to scowl. "No, go into his room. Top drawer in the nightstand on the right side of the bed."

"Stay there," he growls before kissing me breathlessly.

He hops off the bed, cock still hard as fuck, and opens the door.

My body is needy, and just before we realized we didn't have anything, I was on the cusp of coming apart again. My fingers trail between my breasts and lower until my fingertips graze my clit. I dip two fingers inside, gathering the wetness left behind from my last orgasm, and begin making circular motions on my clit, building my release back up.

Cooper's labored breathing fills the room. I was so focused on how good it felt I hadn't even realized he had returned and is leaning on the bed with one knee perched up. I keep moving against my clit as I watch one of his powerful hands grip his shaft and take slow and steady strokes. His eyes focus on where my fingers dip back inside me.

His free hand grabs my wrist, halting my movement. He brings my fingers to his lips and sucks my juices from my skin. The vibrations of his hum of approval send shivers down my spine.

"I'm torn between wanting to watch you continue and being inside you. But I think right now, the latter wins. But don't worry—I'm going to watch you get yourself off again over and over."

He holds up a strip of condoms, tearing one square from the bunch and tossing the others on my nightstand. Cooper tears the package with his teeth and sheaths his cock before settling back between my spread thighs.

My body suddenly tenses as his cock weighs heavily against my clit.

“What’s wrong?” Cooper pushes a stray hair off my forehead.

I shake my head, wanting to erase the thoughts that picked the worst time to pop up in my brain. “It’s nothing.”

Reaching down, I wrap my fingers around Cooper’s erection and line him up to my entrance, but he grips my wrist and pins it above my head.

“It’s not nothing. Talk to me.” His voice is so firm that I know this could go two ways, and neither will end with his dick inside me unless I’m honest with him.

“It’s just—” I bring my bottom lip between my teeth, feeling self-conscious as hell and stupid suddenly. “You’re the only one person I’ve ever been with, Coop. What if—what if I’m nothing compared to those other women? I saw the ones photographed with you. They’re gorgeous, and I’m just me.”

His palm covers my mouth to keep me from continuing.

“Don’t ever compare yourself to them. When I was with them girls? All I could think about was you. They paled in comparison to what I have with you. You’re worried about measuring up to them? They never measured up to you. I couldn’t even look at them or kiss them when we fucked. The only way I could get off was by closing my eyes and picturing you.”

Tears prick my eyes, envisioning him with them.

“You are everything I want.” He leans down and presses his lips to my forehead. “Everything I need.” Another kiss to my

left cheek. “Everything I crave.” A kiss to the other cheek. “You, Riley Parker, are my everything. Understand?”

I nod, but he makes no move of his hand. Thankfully, his palm doesn't cover my nose, and I can breathe.

I want this. I want him. Why did I let those dark thoughts slip through the cracks?

“Good. I don't care if I have to fuck you seven ways till Sunday and never leave this bed till I fuck the understanding into you.” His palm suppresses the moan that slips from my lips as his fingers continue to play with my clit. “I know you're close, baby.” I nod. “But you're not going to come again without my cock inside you.”

Cooper removes his hand from my mouth and wraps my thighs around his waist, spreading me open as his tip teases my entrance. With one powerful thrust, Cooper is inside me.

My lips part on a sigh.

“Fuck, Riles. You feel so good,” he says once fully seated inside me.

He grips the outside of my thigh and pushes it toward me so he can get even deeper.

“Feel this, Riley. Feel *us* right now. Feel my cock deep inside you.” His words wrap around my heart and travel lower, settling in my throbbing clit.

“I'm not gonna last much longer, Riles. Your pussy is so tight,” he pants through gritted teeth. The speed of his thrusts increases.

My second orgasm of the night hits harder than the first. My body shakes, and my nails dig into his shoulder as we find our release together.

“You still with me?” Cooper laughs, a slight sheen of sweat painting his forehead. His breath is wild and ragged, matching mine.

I brush my hand over his curls, pushing them out of his eyes. “Yeah, I just need a minute.”

“Okay.” He presses his lips against mine. I take comfort in his touch, of him still inside me, before he slowly backs up and off the bed. “I’ll be right back.”

As he walks to the bedroom door, I watch his toned ass as he looks out into the hallway, I assume looking to see if Austin is home—Lord, I hope not. It’s not like we were quiet. I roll onto my side while I wait for Cooper to walk back in.

Where does this leave us? Where do I want this to leave us?

## Chapter 24

### Cooper

If this is all a dream, for the love of God, I never want to wake up.

I'm partially propped up on pillows against Riley's headboard while she lies across my chest, her fingers dancing along the outlines of the memorial tattoo over my heart.

I had no idea that following her home would lead to everything that's happened. From her confession to making love, I wasn't prepared for any of it. To be honest, I had no expectations when coming here—except for my plan to get her back. I was willing to do whatever it took, though. For all I knew, she was just going to throw me out. The heartbreak in her voice as she spoke, knowing that I'd caused most of that pain, tore me apart. It confirmed what I always knew. She really is the strongest person I know for having been through everything she has and survived. That's what she is—a survivor.

Everything that Austin said about her, though, all makes sense. Speaking of Austin... “So, care to explain how you



knew Austin had condoms in his room? Have you and he ever...”

“Oh my God, no,” she shrieks. “I knew they were there because I went into his room looking for a phone charger once and came across them. I mean, for all I know, he could have used them already, but I had high hopes of there being something with him being a single guy.”

“So you and he never...” Again, I trail off instead of saying it aloud. It’s not that it matters. I just know that those two are extremely close. I mean, close enough that I questioned it when I first ran into them.

“Like I said, there’s been no one but you.” She looks away and sucks her bottom lip between her teeth. I free her lip with the tip of my thumb. *What isn’t she saying?* “There was one drunken kiss one night, though. I always knew that there might have been more feelings on his side, and drunk off emotions and alcohol, well, one thing led to another. But it was just a kiss and never happened since. We talked about it, and he knows where my heart has always been. But Austin has been my rock all these years. We were both two broken souls healing together.”

I know Austin is a good guy, and can I honestly blame him for his feelings? It wasn’t that long ago that I told myself if she was with Austin and was happy, I would be okay with that.

Riley settles back against my chest, and her fingers continue to dance across my chest.

“You know, he showed me the book.”

The way her body freezes, I know I don't need to elaborate on what book I'm talking about. She knows. *Did she know Austin dug it out of the trash, and it's now on my shelf at my parents' house?*

“Why didn't you ever tell me you came to my games?”

I feel her shoulders lift against me as she shrugs.

“Hey.” I sit up, forcing her to do the same. “Talk to me.” The sheet that once draped over her body drops to her waist, exposing her breasts. My eyes dip down once before lifting back to her gorgeous eyes. I mean, how could I not?

“It didn't matter that I was there—you chose to leave. I didn't think there was anything I could've said or done to convince you to come home. So instead, I stood on the sidelines—wait, no, wrong sport. On deck? Maybe in the bullpen?”

I smirk at her ramblings. She realizes what she's doing when she looks up at me and narrows her gaze.

“Whatever it is, you know what I mean. I watched you achieve your goals and your dreams from afar. I knew for whatever reason, this was something you felt you had to do, but it didn't make the pain any better or easier. Hell, I'm not sure it ever will.”

I silence her with my lips. “I love you to the stars and back, Riley Parker. I love you so much.”

Riley climbs into my lap, her thighs straddling mine. “I never thought I would hear those words on your lips again. I

love you, too.”

Those four words are like a symphony to my ears. I crash my lips against hers, coaxing my tongue between her lips. Her pelvis grinds against my cock, which is already standing at half-mast.

“You know, you were right about one thing the other night,” she says, reaching over and grabbing a foil packet from where I threw them earlier.

“Oh yeah? About what?” I’m so turned on and focused on her movements, tearing the condom wrapper and placing it above my tip before sliding it down my shaft, that I can’t tease her for me being right about something for once in my life.

“I’ve always been yours.” She smiles as she sinks down on my cock.

*Fuck.* I throw my head back as her warm, wet pussy envelops me.

“Say it again,” I pant as she rocks back and forth on my dick, taking her own pleasure.

“I’ve always been yours.” She draws out each word as her movements quicken.

“Mine.” I grip the back of her hair, exposing her neck, and pepper kisses along the column of her neck.

“Yours,” she repeats over and over until we both find our releases.

No matter what, from this day forward, she is mine, and I am hers—always.

## Chapter 25

### Riley

I carefully tiptoe back into my room after using the restroom, trying not to disturb a sleeping Cooper, who is facedown on my bed with the sheet draped around his waist. The corded muscles of his back are on full display.

My eyes trace the colorful ink along his left shoulder. A fiery phoenix rising from the ashes surrounds his scapula. Intricate lines of red, orange, blue, and purple paint the feathers of the bird. It's stunning, and I wonder how long it took to be done. I wonder about the story behind getting it. The phoenix is a symbol of rebirth. Did he get this for overcoming the accident and Tanner's loss by becoming stronger through the adversities life threw at him?

The man seriously sleeps like the dead because he doesn't even stir as I trip over my own two feet while pulling my workout capris up my legs.

I'm unplugging my phone from the charging cord on my nightstand when fingers wrap around my wrist and pull me down to the bed.

"Ahh," I shriek as my body meets Cooper's hard body.

“What are you doing up, and *more importantly*, why are you dressed right now?” His eyes wander up and down my body appraisingly, and my skin flushes. I can feel the heat creeping up my chest as his eyes darken.

“I have to go for a run.”

“No, you don’t,” he whines like a child being told on a Monday morning to get up early for school. “I’ve dreamed about this moment, of you waking up in my arms again for so long and all the things I could get to do to you. And now you just want to leave me here? Don’t go,” he whines again.

I know what he means, and I’ve dreamed of this, too, but I can’t help the giggle that escapes my lips when I find him pouting at me. Bringing my palm up, I cup his cheek. “Yes, I do. I do it every morning.”

“You’re sure there’s nothing I can do to convince you to stay?” A hint of seduction laces his voice.

I shake my head as Cooper dips his head to the sensitive spot where my neck meets my shoulder and peppers kisses along my skin. When his beard rubs against the already sensitive spot, I squirm in his arms, but he holds on to me tighter and continues upward. “I mean, if cardio is what you’re looking for, I can think of a few ways to get our heart rate up and going.”

*Oooh, you’re good, Graham, real good.* He is clearly playing dirty to get what he wants.

“Or if yoga is your thing, you can get into a downward dog position while I fuck you from behind.”

My heart rate was already thrumming to a steady beat, but now, an involuntary moan slips from my lips when I feel his hand slip down between my legs over my clothes. I sink into his touch as he puts more pressure on my clit.

“Ugh.” I sit up quickly and push Cooper off. “No, no, no.” I jump to my feet and adjust my clothing.

Cooper props himself up on his elbow and smiles wickedly up at me, and I seriously have to question why I’m putting more distance between us. *Get it together, Parker.*

“Fine,” he huffs when he realizes I’m not giving in. “I don’t have anything here besides the clothes I wore last night, but I can run home and change and then go with you.”

“No, it’s fine, Coop. You stay in bed and rest up. I won’t be too long, and then maybe I’ll grab you before I jump in the shower. You know, it’s probably best to conserve water.”

Pushing up to his knees, he crooks his finger in a “come here” manner. I oblige and place my arms on his shoulders.

“Be careful, okay?”

I nod. “Always am.”

Cooper presses his lips to mine, and before I get dickmitized again by him, I pull back and press a quick kiss to his lips one last time. As I walk around the room, gathering my earbuds and my phone from where it dropped on the floor when Cooper grabbed me, Cooper settles back against the pillows.

“Alright, well, I guess I’ll just stay here. I’m not exactly sure what I’m supposed to do about this, though.” He points down at the prominent erection currently tenting the sheets.

I smirk and shrug. “I’m sure you can think of something.”

I’m sitting on the bottom step, lacing up my sneakers, when the front door creaks open. Looking up, I find Austin walking in and carefully closing the door. I’m not sure he’s even noticed me sitting here. *Interesting*. I wonder what happened at Hootenanny after we left. Oh, I’m sure the rumors are soaring this morning, and it’s only a matter of time before my phone is ringing off the hook.

“Walk of shame, Mr. Hayes?” I tease when I see him wearing the same clothes as last night.

He jumps at the sound of my voice. Turning around, he scowls at me while I rest my elbows on my knees and prop my chin on my fists, a Cheshire cat smile tipping the corners of my lips.

“If you call sleeping at my parents’ house in my childhood bedroom as a twenty-three-year-old, then yes, I am doing the walk of shame.”

My eyes widen. Well, that wasn’t exactly the juicy story I was expecting.

“Why did you sleep at your parents’ house?”

I follow him into the kitchen, and he drops his stuff off on the table.



“I gave Coop my house key and thought I’d come home to find either you two made up, or I’d be helping you bury a body.” He looks around dramatically as if searching for which option it turned out to be.

“Upstairs in bed.”

He arches a brow, waiting for me to continue. “Okay,” he draws out, “but that doesn’t answer the question of dead or alive.”

“Hmm, guess you’ll have to find out.”

“Uh-uh.” He shakes his head, laughing. “I’m not going in there. For all I know, he could be butt-ass naked. No, thank you.”

I smirk because when I left him moments ago, he *was* naked, and Austin would definitely get an eyeful. I don’t pay attention to him as I walk around the kitchen, continuing my routine, grabbing my water bottle and filling it to the brim. When I turn around, I find Austin leaning against the counter with his arms and ankles crossed.

“What?”

“It’s nothing.”

“What?” I repeat. He’s creeping me out a little as the corners of his mouth tip upward. “Tell me,” I whine.

“You’re doing that thing with your face when you’re happy and you have this dreamy look in your eyes.” He pauses and rakes his eyes up and down. “It’s making me rather nauseous,” he says, followed by a fake gagging noise.

I roll my eyes, muttering, “Dick,” loud enough for him to hear me.

“Why yes, I have one in case you forgot. It works just fine, too.”

“Dude, seriously?”

He shrugs. “You’re the one who brought it up.” Closing the distance between us, he kisses the top of my head before heading to the fridge and grabbing the bottle of orange juice. “But seriously, Ry, it’s nice to see you smile again—it’s been forever.”

“What are you talking about? I smile all the time.”

“Nah, not like this. I think this smile has something to do with a certain six-foot-two blue-eyed brunet who is still upstairs—to be determined dead or alive.” He purses his lips together. “Wait, maybe that smile is that Cooper won’t be a problem anymore because you really did off him.” He narrows his eyes at me, searching for answers, and I can’t help but laugh.

“Maybe lay off the late-night true-crime documentaries there, babe,” I tease, slapping his chest twice before walking toward the front door. I need to get this run over with before Cooper walks downstairs and gives me shit for not staying in bed.

“I’ll be back in a bit,” I shout before closing the front door behind me. Just before the door latches, a thought hits me. I whip the door back open and pop my head in just enough to

see Austin heading toward the stairs. “Wait, if you gave Cooper your house key, what did you use to get in here this morning?”

“I had to borrow the spare key we keep at my parents’.” I’m sure that was a fun conversation to have with his parents this morning, but then again, I’m sure the better conversation he had with his parents took place last night when he told them he needed to crash at their place.

I close the door again and jog down the few steps. I pull up my running playlist and secure my earbuds. Clasp my fingers together, I reach up and sway side to side, stretching out my already sore muscles—*thank you, Cooper Graham, and the way you played my body last night.*

As Taylor Swift’s song about shaking things off starts in my ears, it’s Austin’s words that overpower them. *It’s nice to see you smile again. It’s been forever.* His words hit me like a ton of bricks. I’m not sure how to explain it, but I do feel different this morning. I don’t just mean the ache between my legs as I stretch out my quads. Something shifted between Cooper and me—a veil, so to speak, lifted as we put everything out on the table. Confessing my darkest secrets to him lifted the weight that had been on my shoulders for years. My chest feels lighter and my heart fuller.

With one last deep breath, I set off on my run. Most days, I run to escape and clear my head, but this time, for once, I can’t wait to get back and find the man waiting for me.

## Chapter 26

### Cooper

**A**fter Riley closed her bedroom door, I tried to fall back asleep, but to no avail. As I tossed and turned in her sheets, her scent enveloped me, and all it did was make my dick harder.

I'm not sure how much time passes before I say fuck this. Getting more sleep is just not happening. Now that my body has had her back in my arms, it can't relax without her by my side, even after only one night together. I'm not sure how long she's going to be gone for her run, but maybe coffee will help pass the time.

I wonder if maybe after she gets back and showers, I can convince her to take a nap with me. I must have lost my touch because I was sure I was going to convince her earlier to stay, but she was adamant about going. I didn't want to disrupt her routine with me being here.

Scooting off the bed, I search for my clothes. I'm not sure if Austin ever made it home or is awake, so it's probably best not to walk around the house naked. I don't want to scare him. *Thank fuck he wasn't home last night when I ran to his room*

*with my dick in hand.* I find my jeans on the floor and slip them on. My shirt is a few feet away, sitting on top of the giant-ass panda bear I saw her carrying around yesterday at the festival. I chuckle as I retrieve it from his head, as if it had acted as a blindfold, covering his eyes.

“Sorry, buddy, but it was probably for the best,” I say to the stuffed animal.

This is really the first time I take in Riley’s room. Last night, I didn’t really get to explore. Various photographs hang on the light gray walls—some of her and her sisters, Sutton and Lyla, and others are of her and Austin. There are so many moments that I missed out on. Judging by the amount of deep purple and black providing accent colors in the room, I assume they are both still her favorite colors.

This room is very her yet also a version I’m not exactly familiar with, but I look forward to getting to know the newer parts of her.

Trekking down the stairs, I look around for any sign of life. I feel like it should be awkward that I’m in her house, possibly alone, but it doesn’t. There’s something about this that just feels right.

“Ah, ha, he is alive.” Austin has a big smile on his face as he brings a mug of coffee to his lips. His chuckling echoes into the cup. I enter the living room, where not all that long ago, he was ripping into me, wondering what my intentions were with her.

“Uh, yeah? I wasn’t aware there was a possibility that I wouldn’t be.”

He shakes his head. “It’s nothing. But I take it everything worked out.” His tone insinuates that he already knows the answer to that, so I just nod and smile.

“If you want some coffee, there’s some in the kitchen. Mugs are in the cabinet to the left of the machine.” After filling up a mug for myself, I return to the living room and take a seat on the couch opposite Austin.

After taking a long pull of the rich caffeine, I set the cup down on the coffee table in front of me.

“Hey, Austin?”

“Yeah?” He doesn’t take his eyes off the program he’s watching on the TV.

Taking a deep breath, I really let everything that’s happened in the last twenty-four hours—shit, it hasn’t even been an entire day yet—sink in. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. I’m just glad that you two could work things out without murdering each other because I’m pretty sure since I gave you my key, if she killed you, I could somehow be an accomplice.”

*What the fuck?* I hold my hand up, shaking my head, unsure I even want to go down whatever *that* rabbit hole is.

“I don’t mean the key. I mean—” I try to form the right words to say. I don’t even know that thank you is even enough.

Austin cocks his head to the side and stares intently. He must be able to see it in my eyes or written on my face. “She told you?”

I nod solemnly. “Yeah, all of it. I don’t think there is anything I can do or say to repay you for being there when I couldn’t.” Words catch in my throat, and I hang my head in shame because I can’t help but think that had I not left her, she wouldn’t even have been in that position. I might as well have been the one to hold a blade to her skin.

“Cooper.” Austin scoots closer to me on the couch. “There’s no need to thank me. She means the world to me, and I would do anything for that girl. She’s come a long way from the broken girl I found on the floor of the bathroom.” His face pales, and he swallows hard. “She is seriously the strongest fucking woman—no, person—I know.” No contest from me there—I wholeheartedly agree. “It’s why she runs, you know?”

“What do you mean?” I ask, grabbing my mug and taking a sip.

“It’s her outlet. Some days, I think it’s to escape, and others, it’s to prove something to herself.”

This morning makes a lot more sense to me. Now I feel like a dick for trying to get her to stay.

Austin adjusts his shorts as he moves back to his side of the couch. “But Coop?”

“Yeah.”

“What I said still holds true. You hurt her and I’ll bury you myself.”

“I’d expect nothing less of you. If I hurt her again, you have my permission to take me out.” I click my tongue against the roof of my mouth. “Although, speaking of violence, I have to say it’s taking all my energy to not punch you in the face right now.” I sink back into the couch and extend my left leg in front of me.

His eyes widen like saucers. “Wait, so when you said she told you all of it, you mean...” He trails off.

“Yup, all of it.” I enunciate each word properly. Even the part about him possibly being in love with her. I mean, honestly, I can’t blame the guy. If I had to pick someone else besides me to love and take care of her, I think Austin would fit the bill. As long as it’s not Tripp Briggs. I rub my temples at the memory of them together. What the fuck was she thinking, seriously?

Austin goes silent, and when I glance over at him, he has his elbow perched on the arm of the couch, moving his hand back and forth over his jaw. “Ry was different this morning. She was getting ready to walk out the door when I got home. She was smiling, and it was like a weight lifted from her. I thought maybe it was from a good dickin’, but now it kinda makes more sense that she told you.”

I choke on my coffee, thankful that my mug was still covering my face, otherwise, I would have sprayed it all over the living room.



Austin chuckles. “Too soon?”

I use the bottom of my shirt to wipe my mouth after setting the mug back down. “Umm, yeah. How ’bout we just never bring up my dick regarding Riley ever again.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Austin smirks and salutes with his right hand. However, it’s not a normal salute. His pointer and middle finger make more of a “K” shape in sign language as it moves away from his forehead, just like his brother used to. My breath hitches as my heart plummets to my stomach. *Does he even realize he’s doing it?*

I quickly stand, needing to put space between us while I gather myself. I can’t even look in his direction as I walk over to a bookshelf on the other side of the room. More photo frames and various books line the shelves. Picking up the framed photo of Tanner and Austin, I chuckle. They’re wearing matching plaid pajamas in front of the Christmas tree. This was a Christmas tradition in the Hayes family—matching pajamas and a photo in front of the tree before opening presents. For a kid, that is the worst form of torture, but I imagine as a mom, there’s sentimental value to the photos, especially when photos are all we have left now.

Austin clears his throat. “You saw him just now, didn’t you?”

I set the frame back down. “How did you—”

“You got this look in your eye. I get that a lot.” He shrugs before looking down at his shirt and picking a spot to scratch, pretending there’s something on the material.

I can't imagine how that must feel. It's one thing to always have him on your mind, but to know people sometimes see him when they look at you, especially with certain mannerisms—that's almost too much.

Austin sighs. "My parents get that look, and sometimes even Riley. It's just something I've gotten used to over the years. You know, I used to call his phone just to hear his voice." He pauses before smirking. "That stupid fucking message."

I laugh along with him as we both mock the message in unison.

*"Hey, you reached Tanner. You wanna hear a joke? Knock knock! Who's there? Not me, obviously, so leave a message at the beep."*

Our laughter dies down, yet his voice in my head gets louder, playing the message on repeat. *God, what I wouldn't give to hear that one more time.*

"I got so angry when my parents finally canceled his phone. The first time I got that automatic message, I threw my phone, shattering it into pieces. It almost felt like losing him all over. I know that sounds dumb, but for that moment, listening to his voice message, I could pretend that he was still alive and would call me back."

"It's not dumb. I get it. I go to his grave a lot and just sit and talk to him. I pretend he talks back and give me plenty of shit for all my fuckups." I spin, resting my back against the shelf, and cross my arms and ankles. "Even once, I—" I look down,

shaking my head. “Never mind.” *Was I really about to tell him that time I dreamed about him sitting there with me?* But I think out of all the people I could confide in about it, he would understand since he just admitted what he used to do.

I close my eyes and inhale an unsteady breath. *God, I miss him.*

“Every. Single. Day,” Austin says with a pause between each word. I hadn’t even realized I had said that aloud.

Austin stands. “You know, if you ever want to talk about him, I’m here. I mean, I know we weren’t ever as close as you and he, but you know, I’m pretty cool. At least Riley thinks so.”

I belt out a loud laugh, and it feels good to laugh to ease the tension. “I’d like that.”

“Plus, I have all these home movies I stole from my parents’ house if you ever wanna watch them.” He extends his arm over to the entertainment center under the TV. Crouching down, he opens the two bottom doors, revealing a plethora of home movies. “Some of these babies are serious gold.”

My eyes rake over the spines of the videos with different years listed. I’m not sure I’m ready to fully take a drive down that memory lane just yet, but one day, I hope to. I wonder if Riley has seen them yet.

“Holy shit, is that—?”

“Tanner’s PlayStation? Yup.” Austin runs his fingers over all the stickers Tanner had stuck to it. Most of them have

frayed edges from wear and tear.

We played endless hours on this growing up. I can't believe he still has it.

“I couldn't let my parents throw it out when they cleaned out his stuff. I play it from time to time when I'm really missing him. Sometimes I feel like I can hear his voice in the back of my mind calling me out or shouting that he's going to tattle to Mom for me playing on it.”

Austin pushes off his knees to stand. “You up for a game?”

“Fuck yeah. Set that shit up and prepare to get your ass kicked.” I laugh as he hands me two controllers before setting up the rest of the gaming system.

## Chapter 27

### Riley

Sweat drips down my forehead, and my chest heaves as I slow my pace, approaching our front porch. I bring my hands to rest on the top of my head as I try to catch my breath.

I wonder if Cooper is still in bed. If he is, I hope he's prepared to be woken up WWE-style by me launching myself at him.

As soon as I pop my earbuds out, I get my answer about whether or not he is up.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?" I can hear Cooper shout even with the front door shut.

"I'm going to kill you," Austin responds.

I rush up the stairs and storm through the front door, unsure about what I'm walking into. I thought things were fine between them. What the fuck happened while I was gone?

Steadying my shoulders, I prepare myself to be the middleman between the two of them. Although how the hell am I supposed to stop two men, both of whom are a foot taller than me, if they start swinging fists?

“What the fuck, dude?”

I barrel through the living room and can't believe what I'm seeing. In fact, I have to blink multiple times to make sure I'm seeing this correctly.

Austin and Cooper are on opposite ends of the couch, game controllers in hand. They're both focused on the TV, and my eyes follow their line of sight. On the screen, I see the familiar street-fighting game on the big screen that I spent countless hours watching Tanner and Cooper play when we were younger.

“What the fuck is this?” I say, confused, perching my hands on my hips.

“Oh, hey, babe. Have a good run?” Cooper responds without even taking his eyes off the screen.

“Umm, what's it look like? I'm kicking your boyfriend's ass,” Austin taunts proudly.

“Fuck off, Hayes. A blind squirrel finds a nut, eventually. I wiped the floor with you the first two rounds.”

Austin throws up his middle finger quickly before focusing back on the controller.

“Eat shit, motherfucker.” Austin jumps up and does a celebratory dance. My eyes widen in shock. I've literally never seen him like this.

I'm thrown back in time as he spins and shoots Cooper with his finger pistols before blowing the tip of his finger as if it were the barrel of a gun. Such a Tanner thing to do.

“You okay, Ry?” He looks up and tilts his head in concern.

“Yeah.” I rub between my brows, just trying to comprehend everything. “I thought someone was getting murdered in here when I heard shouting.”

“I mean, someone did.”

Cooper mocks him as he stands and adjusts his jeans before settling back down on the couch. “Whatever. You up for another round?”

“Yeah, I need a refill first, though. Need one?” Austin stands and grabs the coffee cup off the table.

“Sure.” Cooper holds up the mug to Austin.

Austin bumps my hip as he walks out of the room toward the kitchen.

“So I guess I don’t have to ask how *your* morning was,” I laugh as I close the distance between me and Coop.

Cooper pats his knee for me to sit down. As I take a seat on his lap, I smack his arm.

“Hey, what was that for?”

“That was for scaring the shit out of me. I could hear y’all yelling outside as I approached and wasn’t sure what I was coming home to.”

“I like you wanting to protect me, but I think I can handle myself.” He chuckles, and I mock him. He sets his chin in the crook of my neck, his lips dancing over my skin, but he quickly pulls back. “Phew babe, you are, umm, quite ripe.”

A deep, rumbled laughter comes from Austin as he comes into the room carrying two cups, and I think about sticking my foot out to trip him. “Right? That’s what I’m always saying.”

I flip him the middle finger as Austin sets one mug in front of us on the table. “Yeah, I’m not feeling this.” I move my finger back and forth between my two favorite men. Not even twenty-four hours back together and these two are already ganging up on me.

I stand up and reach forward, touching my toes. My ass is directly in Cooper’s line of sight. I smirk when I hear a low growl slip from his lips.

I stand back up and carefully swipe the mug from the table. “And I’m taking this, too.” Ignoring Cooper’s loud grumbles, I head up the stairs to get cleaned up.

By the time I’m walking back down the stairs, the chaos has seemed to calm down between the boys. I threw on black leggings and a light hoodie and pulled my hair into a low ponytail.

I settle in on the couch between the two of them. Cooper must not like the distance there is between us because he tugs me closer until I’m flush against his chest. I relax into him and allow his heartbeat to lull me to sleep. Before I know it, I’m startling myself awake.

“Hey, sleepyhead.” Cooper looks down at me with a gentle smile. The video game is no longer on the TV, but there’s some show with the volume turned way down, I assume not to disturb me.



Damn, I'm making it a habit of falling asleep on the couch post-run.

"Hey," I respond sleepily. "Was I out long?" I look over to the side of the couch where Austin was and find it now empty except for Cooper's and my stretched-out, tangled limbs. Wow, I must have been out cold to not have woken up from him shifting us.

"He went upstairs," he answers without me asking. "And no, not too long." I guess "not too long" is up for debate because it was clearly long enough for them to finish playing, Austin to leave, and Cooper to focus on something else on the screen.

"You hungry?" he asks, just as my stomach lets out a loud rumble. "Well, I guess that answers that," he chuckles.

I press up on his chest to sit up and stretch from side to side. "I could definitely eat something."

"Me too," he mutters, and I glance over to see his eyes a darker shade of blue.

"Actual food, Cooper. I need actual food," I joke.

He shakes his head. "Right, sorry. Real food now, different later." He winks, lust lacing his voice. This man is insatiable.

I stand up, and he follows. "You mind if we swing by my parents' house, and I can jump in the shower and change?" he asks.

"Of course." I grab my purse, slip on my shoes, and meet Cooper by the door. "Hey, Austin, we're heading out for food."

You want anything?” I shout up the stairs.

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks, though. I might swing by my parents’ later and snag some leftovers and deliver their key back,” he yells back.

I turn to find Cooper’s shoulders tense at the mention of Lulu and Foster. I wonder if he’s talked to them yet? They hadn’t stayed long last night at Hootenanny, but maybe he’s stopped by to see them.

Cooper drives us the short distance to his house. His parents are out at the moment, and after his failed attempt at trying to get me to shower with him, I shoved him up the stairs and told him I’d wait down here in the kitchen.

Which is exactly where I am, sitting on a barstool at the island, when the back door opens and in walks Shannon and Wade Graham. They both silence when they see me. Wade looks like he’s ready to have a heart attack, not expecting me, while a smile lights Shannon’s face up all the way to her eyes.

She drops her bags down on the counter and rushes to me, wrapping her arms around me in a big bear hug. I huff out a breath at the force of her embrace before wrapping my arms around her, too.

Footsteps come running down the stairs, sounding more like a herd of elephants than one man. “Babe, I wish you would have—”

I squeeze my eyes shut, praying that Cooper realizes we aren’t alone before he can finish that statement.

“—taken me up on my offer. I think you would really like— Mom, Dad.” His voice raises an octave higher in shock. “I didn’t realize you guys were home.”

Shannon releases me from her grasp, and Cooper steps up beside me, wrapping me in his arms. Being in his arms, I feel safe, loved, protected, and happy. A happiness that I’ve only felt with this man.

“And what was it exactly that you think Riley would like, son?” Wade asks, leaning against the counter with a brow raised and a knowing look. *Oh my God, could this be any more embarrassing?*

“Nothing, Pops,” he says sheepishly. Thank fuck he wasn’t honest. If he was, I might just die right here in their kitchen.

Cooper wraps his arm around my shoulder, pulling me tightly against him, and I wrap my arms around his waist.

Shannon places one hand over her heart and one hand over her mouth, and I hear an “aww” under her breath. I’m pretty sure she made the same expression and sounds when she took our pre-prom photos out front with Tanner and his date.

“Now, there’s no need to thank me. I was just doing my motherly duty.”

Cooper scoffs. “You think you’re responsible for us getting back together, Ma?”

“I most certainly am. Did you forget about my dancing plan last night? You are very welcome. Now.” She claps her hands together, and Cooper and I both try to hide our laughter. I’ll let

her believe anything she wants. I'm not dumb enough to go against Shannon Graham. "Please let me make y'all dinner. I'm thinking of throwing a roast in the oven, or I can make chicken and dumplings. You tell me."

"Actually, Ma, I'm planning to take my girl out." *My girl*. I love those two words and how perfectly they sound on Cooper's lips.

Shannon huffs, but I slip out of Cooper's arms and step up beside her. "I promise I will come by this week for dinner because just the thought of your chicken and dumplings has my mouth watering."

"Wonderful, dear. We look forward to it."

Once back in the truck, Cooper spends most of the drive to Main Street apologizing for his mother's antics.

"Will you just relax?" I say as he puts his truck in park. "It's fine. She has an enormous heart and means well. She's just happy for us. Are you?"

"Happy for us?" He twists his body, scooting closer over the bench seat after taking his seat belt off. Cooper threads his fingers in my hair and pulls my face closer to him. "Abso-fucking-lutely."

When his tongue licks the seam of my lips, begging—no, *demanding*—entrance, I let him. After a few moments of losing ourselves in each other, I press my hand against his chest before I do something crazy like climb into his lap in the

middle of the day in the middle of Main Street. *Who even am I?*

Cooper and I cross the street hand in hand. Such a Southern gentleman, he opens the door for me. I smile up at him as I walk through. “And they say chivalry is dead.”

He chuckles, walking into Vincenzo’s behind me, and rests both of his hands on my shoulders. His front presses against my back.

“I think you’ll find that I’m quite chivalrous, sweetheart.” He then lowers his mouth to my ear. “In *and* out of the bedroom.” His voice takes a husky tone before he buries his face in my neck.

I squirm out of his touch when his beard tickles my neck. “Oh my God, will you behave?” I scold as we step up to the hostess.

“Oh, Miss Parker, hi,” Jane says in surprise as she stands at the hostess stand. “I wasn’t expecting you till tomorrow.”

It feels weird to be here on a Sunday when we come here every Monday. But a bowl of pasta with homemade arrabbiata sauce sounds absolutely amazing.

“Just thought I’d change it up.” I shrug with a playful smirk.

Jane’s eyes bounce over my shoulder and notice I’m with Cooper instead of Austin. “I see that.” She smiles widely. “If you give me a minute, I can have your usual table cleared off and get you guys seated.”

I nod as she heads off to the back corner.

I follow her with my gaze, and that's when I see everyone dining is looking at us.

Cooper leans down. "You wanna go somewhere else...a little more private?" He's clearly catching on that we have a vast audience.

I spin in his arms and shake my head. "No. They're going to talk and gossip either way. In fact, by sundown, I expect a call from my family having gotten wind of it. Maybe there will be another tumbleweed showdown." His brows furrow, and I wave him off. "Sorry, I'll tell you later."

I place my hand on his chest and look up at him with adoration. "I don't want to hide us ever. It's you and me, right?"

"You and me, baby." He smiles down at me, and I feel my knees go weak. "You know..." He purses his lips together and looks up at our audience. "If they're gonna stare, we might as well give them a show."

Before I can ask what he's talking about, Cooper is dipping me back and fusing his mouth to mine, like one of those famous return-from-overseas military kisses. In my shock at his quick movements, I gasp, allowing him instant access to slip his tongue inside my mouth. I run my fingers through the strands of hair at the nape of his neck under his ball cap. I let out a *definitely louder than should be allowed in public* moan against his lips as he deepens the kiss.

A throat clears, and Cooper brings me upright. "Sorry to interrupt, but your table is ready."

My head is spinning, and I'm not sure if it's from the kiss alone or from the whiplash. I'm at a complete loss for words right now and can feel how flushed my skin is. *Damn you, Cooper.*

“Sorry—” Cooper leans forward. “—Jane,” he says, reading her name tag. “Riley here seems to have lost her manners. Lead the way.”

## Chapter 28

### Cooper

**P**ulling up to the Hayeses' house, a place where I spent many years as a second home, slept over on school nights and spent long weekends, ate meals, and grew up in, has my stomach swirling with nerves, and my hands are even sweating on the steering wheel. This is the first time I will have been here since Tanner's funeral. After his mother screamed at me at the funeral, I decided it was best to stay away. Whenever my mother took food over or my father went to help Foster do work, I stayed home like a coward.

It's Thanksgiving—a day to be thankful for all we have. And I am extremely thankful for the beautiful woman beside me. It's been a few weeks since we opened up to each other and got back together. We are falling back into a new rhythm together, reminiscing about the past but, more importantly, focusing on the future and getting to know the new things about each other.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” I ask Riley, who is sitting beside me, unbuckling her seat belt.



“It’ll be fine, babe.” She gives me a reassuring smile. “Now, come on. We’re already late.” She winks.

As I hop out of my truck, I see my parents’ vehicle parked beside Austin’s, showing that we are the last to arrive. I walk around to the passenger door and open the door for Riley. Her lap is full of dishes. I take the tray of food from her and help her down.

“Hmm.” She laughs for a second as we walk up the path.

“What was that for?”

She covers her lips, trying to hide her laugh. “I just think this is a little funny that you aren’t sure this is going to be a good idea, but could you imagine how awkward this dinner would be if you and I had not gotten back together?”

I blow out a breath and shake my head. When she puts it that way, yep, that would have been worse, I think. But even thinking of the worst-case scenario that could’ve been, I’m still nervous as we stand at the door and Riley knocks.

It feels weird as fuck, standing here waiting for someone to open it. I had a key to the front door growing up and always just walked in, usually shouting, “Honey, I’m home,” in a terrible Ricky Ricardo impression.

The door swings open and Austin stands there, shaking his head with a smirk on his face. “Jeez, nice of you two to show up. Y’all better not have dove into the desserts early.”

*Oh, I did, only it was a different dessert.*

I run my thumb over my bottom lip, and I notice from the corner of my eye that Riley dips her head, her brown hair falling in her face. I would bet she's trying to hide a blush on her cheeks.

Austin's eyes bounce back and forth between the two of us, and I know the moment he connects the dots. He lets out a groan, running his hand over his face. "Thanks a lot, guys. I was kidding about that being why you were late. I didn't need the visual. Pretty sure there went my appetite."

He accepts the tray of food and narrows his eyes. "There better not be any health risks with these and bodily fluids added for flavor."

"Oh, that sounds like a good idea for business. Pussy-flav —"

My words are cut off by Riley's palm slapping across my mouth. "Don't you dare finish that statement, Cooper."

I smile behind her hand and quickly drag my tongue over her palm, and she quickly pulls her hand back. That's funny that she pulls her hand back when I lick it but has no problem when my tongue is licking other places.

"You two are so fucking weird." Austin sighs and heads toward the kitchen. As we pass the stairs, I run my fingers over the door of the under-the-stairs alcove, or "Harry Potter's room," as we called it. It was the perfect place for hide-and-seek.

As we pass the dining room, we get a glimpse of the beautifully decorated table. A burnt-orange tablecloth lines the long farmhouse-style table. Folded next to what I assume is the Hayes family fine china is a variety of fall-colored cloth napkins. Lulu seriously outdid herself because, to be honest, I would be totally happy with eating on paper plates with plastic utensils. There is a beautiful centerpiece in the middle of the table with a cornucopia and fall-colored fake leaves.

Austin places the tray on the counter between copious amounts of food. Is the whole town attending? Good thing Thanksgiving leftovers make me almost as excited as this meal itself. *Turkey sandwiches, turkey gumbo, turkey tetrazzini, turkey salad*, I think in my best Bubba Gump voice.

“Look who *finally* made it,” Austin’s voice booms, and our parents finally notice us.

Riley greets my parents and Austin’s with big smiles and hugs. After I shake my father’s hand and kiss my Ma’s cheek, it’s time to greet the Hayeses. I may have been home for a while, but this is honestly my first real interaction with them. Why am I more nervous now than the first time I met Riley’s dad, Mason?

I’m an asshole for having avoided them, but to be honest, I wasn’t sure how they would feel about seeing me again.

I push my shoulders back. “Lulu, thank you for hosting.” I steady my voice, and it feels awkward. She wipes her hands on her apron and steps in front of me. With one hand, she cups my cheek for a second. She doesn’t say anything, just stares at

me. Her eyes fill with tears, and the thought of making her cry has me torn up inside.

When she looks at me, does she still see a killer?

Still without a word, she pulls me into a hug. For a little woman, she has a lot of force. The grip she has on me reminds me of when I returned home and Ma hugged me for the first time. It's as if she thinks if she lets me go, I'll fly away or something. Back then, it was high on my list to do; now, I've remembered why this is home, and I can't imagine leaving this place without Riley by my side.

"Will ya let the boy breathe, Lu," Foster, Austin and Tanner's dad, says beside us and slaps my back.

Ignoring him, I hang on to Lulu for a few more minutes. I think maybe she needs this hug just as much as I do. A feeling of relief expands in my chest as tears form behind my eyes. *This* is the woman I remember growing up, not the one who looked at me with such disdain. Words catch in my throat. Why did I wait so long to see them?

"Ugh, I'm sorry." She backs up, wiping the tears that I hadn't even realized had fallen. "Oh, look at me, I'm a mess. And I messed up your shirt." I glance down at where she is wiping away the few wet spots on the breast of my shirt from her crying.

"It's no big deal." I clear my throat.

I shake hands and do a quick back-slapping hug with Foster. God, I've missed these people. "You know, Coop, I think you

could give Mike Tyson a run for his money when you swing punches like that,” he jokes, easing the tension. When the reporters and “fans” spat shit like that, I found my blood boiling, ready to show them and watch them eat their own words, but this time, I laugh along.

“Well, I’ll keep that in mind, sir.” Not that I plan on punching any more major league coaches again. Do I regret hitting Leo Ryan? Absolutely, but as I look around the room at everything and everyone I have in my life, maybe it was meant to be for me to come home and make Riley mine again.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Riley asks, glancing back and forth between Lulu and Ma.

“No, dear,” Ma chimes in. “Go get yourself set up with a glass of wine.”

“Come on, Ry. I could use a refill,” Austin adds, and they disappear into the dining room. I can still see them from where I stand. Austin says something that I can’t hear, and she giggles, playfully shoving his arm. I wonder how many meals and holidays they spent together in this house. Riley glances over her shoulder and smiles, as if she knew I was watching. I return the gesture.

“Cooper, can I get you a beer?” Foster asks, pulling my gaze toward where he and my father stand by the fridge.

“Umm, sure.” *Okay, that’s just weird as fuck accepting an offer for alcohol from my best friend’s father.*

“I’ve got Foster’s or Bud.”

“Bud, thanks.” Figure it’s better to pace myself since Foster’s beer cans are fucking giant, and it’s going to be a long day. I smirk as I accept the bottle he holds out for me. “It’s good to see some things haven’t changed and you’re still drinking Foster’s.”

He shrugs. “If the Lord didn’t intend for me to drink it, then he shouldn’t have put my name on it.” *I guess that’s one way to put it.*

I cheers them and take a sip of the amber liquid.

“Man, I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to watching you drink legally,” my dad admits.

“Funny, I was thinking the same thing.”

Eventually, after we get kicked out of the kitchen for picking at food, we find ourselves set up on the couches, with football playing in the background.

“So, Cooper, I hear you’re running the fall ball clinic. How’s things going?” Foster asks once settled.

I’m filling them in on everything and my plans to bring Ace in to work directly with the kids when Lulu appears in the doorway.

“Dinner ready, sweetheart?” Foster goes to stand, but she waves him off, and he sits back down.

“In just a few moments. Actually—” She turns her gaze toward me. “—Cooper, I was hoping I could speak with you before we sit down.”

“Sure.” I press up on my thighs to stand and follow Lulu out to the back door. She grabs her shawl from the rack and wraps it around her shoulders. There is a brisk breeze that causes us both to shiver slightly as we make our way out to the backyard.

“Walk with me,” she says, looping her arm through mine. “Please, just let me get this out.”

I nod, feeling quite uneasy as to what she wants to talk about. I thought we were doing okay, but maybe she’s spent the last hour realizing that it was a mistake and is going to ask me to leave. I hold my breath, waiting for her to continue.

“I need to apologize. I’ve spent years regretting that I even need to do it at all, but it’s long overdue. What I said at Tanner’s funeral—” She closes her eyes and takes a steady breath. I place my hand over hers, letting her know she can take all the time she needs. I’m not going anywhere.

“What I said at Tanner’s funeral...I was under duress and wallowing in such grief. I know that it’s not your fault, that it was an accident, but I was looking for someone to blame for why my baby boy was no longer here, and you happened to just be the lucky winner.” She lets out an awkward laugh. “No one deserved that, especially you. And then word spread that *you* were gone, and all I could do was spend years worried that what I had said that day led to your departure.”

I halt my steps and pull her into my arms. She clings to me, unleashing her years of pent-up grief and emotion. “No, no, no.” *Fuck, I wasn’t prepared for this.* “I was so deep in my

own issues at that time.” I pause and decide I don’t want to lie to the woman I used to consider my second mom. “I’m still working on my issues, to be honest. I didn’t need your words because they were already playing on a loop in my brain. That is one hundred percent on me, not you.”

The tears fall from my eyes as I allow the overwhelming emotions to take over—the loss we endured and the pain we’ve been through. I’m not sure who is holding who up.

I hate she has spent all this time not only dealing with the loss of her son but that she had this weighing on her.

“We followed your career, you know. It was hard not to. But where did this Cooper the media sees come from? Tanner would be so disappointed to see you throw away your chance like that. He would punch you for letting his death affect you this way. For leaving the way you did and staying gone. Promise me you won’t do it again.”

When I don’t respond, she pulls back and brings her hands to my cheeks. “Promise me you’re planning to stay.” She uses her motherly tone, and I can’t help but smirk.

“Yes, ma’am.” I nod. “I promise, I’m here.”

Instead of responding, she pulls me back into a hug, and I collapse against her.

“Now, what do you say we head back in there? I’m sure by now, they all have kinks in their neck from trying to see out here.”



We turn to head back into the house. “And Cooper.” She places her hand over my forearm. “Don’t be a stranger. You were gone far too long.”

When we finally return inside, everyone is standing in the kitchen, watching with bated breath. Looks like Lulu was right. I help her hang her shawl back on the hook.

“Are y’all going to just stand there and let this food go to waste, or we going to sit down?” Lulu waves her hands in the air for everyone to get moving, and suddenly, the room fills with chatter.

“You good?” Riley steps up beside me and rubs small circles on my back in a soothing motion.

“Yeah, everything’s all good.” I kiss the top of her head.

We all help carry various dishes to the table and settle in our seats, with both Lulu and Foster sitting at opposite ends of the table. Mom and Dad are on one side and us kids on the other.

Foster stands and clears his throat, now holding up a wineglass. “I’ll keep this brief since everyone is starving. I just wanted to thank everyone for coming today. We have so much to be thankful for this year.” Riley places her hand on my thigh. “Let us bow our heads and pray.”

Riley flips her hand over, and I link our fingers together while the other stretches out to take Lulu’s hand.

“Dear Lord, thank you for allowing us to all be together today. Thank you for our good health and for the ability for

forgiveness and love.” Riley squeezes my hand, and I give her a playful side-eye.

“In your name, Amen.”

“Amen,” we all respond in unison.

“I thought you said that you were going to keep it brief, Pops,” Austin jokes, bringing his wineglass to his mouth.

“Just because you don’t live here, son, doesn’t mean I can’t still ground you,” he teases back. “Alright, now, let’s eat.”

## Chapter 29

### Cooper

If someone asked me my top favorite things to do, it would include making Riley come, the noises she makes when she does said action, kissing Riley, and holding her in my arms.

Two of those things I'm currently doing—not the making her come part since we're standing outside her classroom at the moment. She had to drop her car off for an oil change this morning, so I drove her in.

We walked hand in hand in the silent hallways. Students won't arrive for another forty-five minutes, so teachers are slowly making their way to their classrooms to get ready for the day. What was supposed to be a quick kiss goodbye has turned into lingering and heated kisses. Neither of us can get enough of each other. It doesn't matter that we spend almost all of our spare time together; we're still making up for lost time. Honestly, I'm not sure I'll ever get enough of her.

Her fingers thread through the hairs at the nape of my neck as my hands slide down to her hips and tug her against me. My erection, now straining against my jeans, presses against her.

“Mm.” Riley lets out a soft whimper as my tongue plunges into her mouth.

“Baby, you need to stop making noises like that before I say fuck it, drag you into your classroom, lock the door, and bend you over your desk like I’ve envisioned every time I’m in there.”

We lose ourselves in the kiss until there is a throat clearing beside us, forcing us to step back from each other.

“Oh, sorry to interrupt.” Principal Horne looks absolutely dumbfounded. “I was worried that there were two students about to, umm—” He removes one hand from his pocket and waves it between the two of us. “Well, never mind.”

Riley buries her head in my chest in embarrassment. She can’t even look her boss in the eye, and I can’t hide my laughter.

An awkward silence fills the air, which I can say at least has absolutely killed my boner.

“Well, I’m going to go. You two have a nice day.”

“You do the same, sir.”

Riley stays silent.

“It’s a little funny. I feel like some sort of déjà vu right now, catching the two of you kissing in the hallways. Good to see you two worked things out.” He turns to walk again but halts again. “But maybe try to keep things PG in the workplace.”

“Oh my God,” Riley groans again. When she finally lifts her head, it’s like the fog has finally cleared, and words find her lips. “It won’t happen again, Ian.”

Instead of turning around, he just holds up his hand in the air, acknowledging he heard her.

“What do you mean won’t happen again?” I protest once Ian disappears from view.

Riley playfully slaps my chest, trying to push me away, but that just makes me push against her again. Her back is now flush against the locker, and my arms cage her in.

“I’m serious. My boss just caught me dry humping my boyfriend in the hallway of my workplace. Shit—he signs your paychecks, too, so he’s your boss, too. What if it had been a student? Or—oh my God—what about a parent?”

I bring a hand to my chest and mock the horror before leaning in to steal another kiss, but she pushes me away.

“Cooper, behave. I need to go get ready.”

“Fine,” I groan, resting my forehead on her shoulder and breathing her in once more.

“I love you. I’ll see ya later.” She slips under my arms and presses a quick kiss to my cheek.”

“Love you, too. Have a good day, babe.”

She gives a small wave before entering her classroom.



I pull my truck into my parents' driveway and park behind the familiar sports car already here with the license plate "ASSMAN."

"Fuck," I exhale. Of course he got here early and didn't tell me. If I had known he was already on his way, I wouldn't have run errands this morning. First, I swung by the auto shop to pay for Riley's car in advance after leaving the school. I knew she would've fought me had I offered while she was with me. Then, I stopped by the cemetery to have my usual chat with Tanner. Sometimes I talk; sometimes I just sit back against the tree and reminisce.

I jog up the front steps, skipping the second step, and yank open the door. The laughter is audible in the living room.

"Oh man, can I have a copy of this, Mrs. Graham?" I can't tell what photo Ace is currently holding in his hand, but based on him wiping tears away with the bottom of his palm, I assume it's not a very good one. "I would love to upload it to the Cooper Graham Fan Club website."

"Of course, dear. Actually, I'm sure I can put together a whole collage of photos."

"Ma," I yell. "What are you doing? I thought you were on my side."

She shrugs and smiles. "Cooper, it's not every day you have a professional baseball player with the nicest tush in the league asking for something in your living room."

My eyes wander to my best friend sitting beside her, watching his smile widen as he mouths “tush.” I fight back the urge to flip him off because I know that will only get me in more trouble with my mama.

“Seriously, Ma? You brought these all out?” Spread out across the coffee table are dozens of baby photos of me. *For fuck’s sake.* I run my hands down my face and let out a heavy sigh. I wonder how pissed Ma would be if I walked up and knocked over the pitcher of sweet tea in front of them, destroying all evidence of a naked four-year-old version of me riding a rocking horse toy.

Ma stands up with her hands on her hips. *Oh boy, I definitely went and did it now.* “If you had been on time, I wouldn’t have had to pull out the baby photos to entertain.”

“Yeah, Cooper.” Ace stands, mimicking Ma’s stance. “If only you were on time. I know your mother definitely taught you to be punctual.”

“That I did.” She turns to Ace and pats gently at his cheek.

I step up to Ace and pull him into a hug instead of decking him in the face. We slap each other’s back loudly, me a little harder than normal, and Ace lets out a low chuckle.

“Good to see you.”

“You too.” Ace taps my chin with his fist. “Although, seems you just got uglier since I last saw you.”

“Yeah, well, your mom doesn’t seem to mind,” I tease.

“Cooper James Graham!” my mother shrieks, looking appalled at my joke. She huffs and walks away. “On that note, I will leave you both to it. If you need anything, I’ll be in the kitchen.”

“I think she loves me,” Ace leans in and whispers as Ma walks away.

I roll my eyes as I gather the images up on the table. Ace sits back down on the couch and extends his arms over the back. “So, what was so important that you couldn’t be here to meet your very best friend?”

“Well, if you had arrived around the time we had talked about, then I would have been on time.”

Ace just shrugs. “I figured I’d surprise you. Surprise,” he laughs, waving his hands like jazz hands.

I explain the events of this morning, starting with our run-in with Principal Horne. By the time I’m done, Ace has tears running down his face. *It’s not that funny, asshole.*

“Do you have some sort of kink of getting caught doing things you shouldn’t be in places that you shouldn’t be?”

My shoulders tense at the mention of the exact indiscretion he’s referring to. All that blankets my mind is the hurt in Riley’s eyes as she threw that article at my feet.

“Nah, man, that was different.” My mood sours as I plop down on the couch. “This is Riley we’re talking about—not just some girl.”



“I can’t wait to meet the broad who made you change your ways.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know, Ace. Maybe I was always just like this. It’s always been here. That was all just a farce—a way of me not dealing with shit.”

All the guys on the team are aware of the events of my past, but they don’t know how deep the darkness ran in my veins. Out of all the players on the team, Ace and I are the closest.

“Can I ask you a question?”

I nod. It’s not like he wasn’t going to ask either way.

“Do you go to the cemetery a lot?”

“I try to go every other day, if not every day. It’s sort of like therapy without the hassle of dealing with insurance. I don’t really know if I can explain it, but it grounds me and gives me peace. After avoiding my grief for six years, I have to learn to embrace it being back home. I mean, I’d much rather have him here with me, but this is what I’m left with.”

Ace nods, although I’m not sure he fully understands it. He brings his hand up to grip the back of his neck. I can see that he wants to say something but is struggling.

“Maybe I could go with you one time while I’m here,” he asks shyly. *What?* Well, I definitely wasn’t expecting that. Sensing my slight hesitation, he continues. “I mean, unless that’s weird and you’d rather go alone.”

Not any weirder than going all Haley Joel Osment in *The Sixth Sense* and having conversations with dead people,

although it hasn't happened again since that day.

I shake my head. "No, it's not that at all. You just took me by surprise. Honestly, I thought you'd make fun of me."

"Nah, man. We all got our own battles we're dealing with." Ace clears his throat. "Enough with this emotional shit this early in the morning. What time are we needed at the field today?"

"Clinic starts at three. We'll probably leave about two thirty-ish."

"Sweet. Why don't you be a good host for once and show me to the guest suite."

I bark out a laugh as I stand. "Guest suite—this ain't no fancy hotel that you're used to staying at during away games."

"Tomato, tomahto. Lead the way. Your mom mentioned something about making blueberry and chocolate chip pancakes, so I think a nap will just have to wait. I assume there's no Starbucks or anything around here, right?"

I arch a brow and push my lips together, and he nods. "Right, didn't think so. Gas station sludge it is."

"Hey, we're a small town, not a deserted town. We can stop at the coffee shop on Main Street before going to the high school. So we'll leave a little earlier, even."

Ace and I walk toward the stairs, and it's then I notice the number of bags he brought. "Seriously, dude? How long you planning on staying?"

Grabbing his bags with both hands, Ace smirks. “I didn’t know what I needed, and judging that it’s late November and I’m fucking sweating and not freezing my balls off, it’s a good thing I packed a variety of clothes.” He pauses as we listen to Mama singing softly in the kitchen. “And for the record, your mom”—he nods toward where she is—“told me I was welcome to stay as long as I like.”

His smug expression makes me laugh. She says that now until she gets to know him.

I lead Ace up the stairs and pause just before the squeaky step. “Skip that step. It’s loud as fuck.”

He chuckles, but instead of skipping the step like I did, he steps on it. A loud creak echoes in the stairwell. “Oops.”

“This place is so homey,” Ace adds when we make it to the top of the stairs and head down the hallway.

“Says the boy from New York.” I’m pretty sure his backyard was literally a balcony.

“What? It’s quaint. It’s picturesque. Ooh.” I look over my shoulder at him, and his face is lit up like a Christmas tree. “It’s like a goddamn Hallmark movie.”

“You have no idea. Just you wait.” I stop in front of the closed guest room door. “Alright, this is you. I’m just right there.” I point to the door across from us. “Bathroom’s right there. You and I share it, so don’t make it all nasty and shit. Towels are in the linen closet.”

“Cool, thanks, man. Catch ya in a bit.” He disappears into the guest room, and I smother a laugh with my fist as I hear his gasps at the decor—Southern country at its finest.

I’m just entering my room when my phone buzzes in my pocket. When I retrieve it, I find a text from Riley—a dirty fucking text.

**Riley:** *I seriously hate you. Ever since you put that image in my head of you bending me over my desk fucking me, I’ve been wet. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to focus when all you can feel is arousal gathering between your legs?! \*middle finger emoji\**

Well, fuck me! Any idea how difficult it is for her? What about me knowing that she’s wet and aching for my touch? Just that thought alone has my cock hardening. I grip my erection over my jeans and contemplate taking care of business myself to take the edge off.

“What the fuck, man?” I startle at Ace’s voice. I look up to find Ace leaning against the doorframe. “I walk away for two seconds, and you’re already whipping your dick out? I didn’t realize I had that effect on you.”

“Get the fuck out of my room.” I reach behind me, grabbing a pillow, and chuck it toward him. Ace’s superfast reflexes work out in his favor because he’s already shut the door by the time the pillow comes in contact.

His laughter booms through the wood as he heads back to the guest room, and I groan, flopping back on the bed.

## Chapter 30

### Cooper

“So, this is where you grew up, huh?” Ace asks as he twists at the waist, stretching down to touch his toes as we wait for the team to come out of the locker room and meet us on the field. They have no clue what, or more so *who*, is waiting for them today. I’d be lying if I didn’t say that I’m like a parent on Christmas morning, excited to watch my kids open their presents.

“Yep, this is it.”

“Hmm.” He looks around the field. “You’d think it’d be bigger.”

“That’s what she said,” we say in unison, laughing.

“Holy shit, it’s Ace Sullivan,” a voice says from behind us.

We turn around to find the group standing there with mouths all agape. *Yep, it was totally worth keeping this secret from the team.*

“Alright, alright, everyone, close your mouths and quit fangirling. Y’all act like you’ve never seen a professional baseball player before.”

Ace opens his mouth, but I hold my hand up, cutting him off before he can throw a dig at my expense.

“Yes, this is Ace. He’s going to be helping me out for a few days. Y’all have been working hard lately, so I thought you might like to look at someone with an uglier mug than me.” Okay, I couldn’t help myself.

“Speak for yourself, dickhead,” Ace snorts. He opens his mouth to say something else but stops when something catches his attention elsewhere. He lets out a low whistle. “Now, how do I get to stare at that”—he nods toward the side by the fence that separates the fields—“instead of you?”

Everyone turns to see who has Ace pulling down his sunglasses from his face.

“That’s Coach’s girlfriend, Ms. Parker,” Beau says.

“Damn,” he elongates, “she is *definitely* way too good for you.”

“Don’t I know it,” I mutter under my breath. “Do me a favor. Introduce yourselves to Ace and what position you play, and then warm up. I’ll be right back.”

I don’t wait for a response before I jog over to where Riley leans against the metal fence.

“Hey, beautiful.” I smile when I approach her, leaning in and pressing a quick kiss to her lips.

“Hi,” she responds, pushing the hair out of her eyes.

“This is a surprise.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” She winces. “I hope it’s okay I interrupted.”

I wave her off. “The guys just came out, so we haven’t even started. They’re just warming up.”

She quirks a brow, and I close my eyes and let out a low groan, knowing I probably don’t want to turn around because if I do, I’m sure I won’t be seeing the team warming up but doing something crude. Riley lets out a little giggle.

“What’s going on?”

“So, Sutton is here.”

“Oh.” I try to recall a conversation lately where she may have told me her sister was coming to visit.

“Yeah, she just surprised me, completely unannounced and so like her. She came right here from the airport.” Riley runs her hands through her hair, clearly flustered. “Austin drove her home so that she didn’t have to wait around till rehearsal was over.” *Poor Austin.* “So, I know we’re supposed to have dinner at your parents’ place and then go out—”

“I don’t see why we can’t still do that. I can text my mama and tell her there’s one more coming. You already know that there’ll be plenty of food. There’s no need to worry.”

I swipe my thumb at the crease formed between her brows before dragging my hand to her cheek.

“Thanks,” she exhales, leaning into my touch.



Bringing my other hand to her cheek to cup her face, I pull her mouth to mine. As soon as our lips touch, that familiar weightless feeling settles into my stomach. I swear, each time I kiss this woman, it only gets better. Nipping her bottom lip, I smirk when she gasps. I know I should slow this down. This is not quite PG, but I can't. She's an addiction I can't seem to quit. When she moans, I know I need to stop before I let this go too far. When I finally pull back, peppering her lips with chaste kisses, I smile down at my girl. Riley's cheeks are flushed with my favorite shade of pink, and her eyes are closed as if she is savoring the moment.

“Feel better?”

She nods.

“oOoOO,” comes from behind us.

I turn to find the entire team, including Ace, with their backs to us, pretending to make out with themselves.

“Oh my God.” Riley laughs before burying her face in my chest.

“For fuck's sake. There might be one less in attendance tonight because I might end up burying that jackass behind the field house.”

“Let me know if you need any help. I'll grab my shovel.”

I let out a loud laugh. “God, I love you.”

“Love you, too, but you should probably get back.”

With one last quick kiss, I walk backward, putting space between us before I decide to take her out behind the field house and bury myself in her.

As I approach the team, they're all laughing at their shenanigans.

"Grow up," I tease. "I'm surrounded by a bunch of immature assholes, led by the leader of immature assholes." I poke Ace in the chest as I pass him. "Since y'all are clearly warming up your mouths instead of your muscles, how about laps around the diamond?"

They all groan, but no one puts up a fight as they take off.

"What the fuck, man." I smack Ace upside the head, knocking his hat to the ground once the boys are out of range for this conversation. "You're supposed to be a good influence on the kids, not—" I pause. "—well, your regular self."

"Hey." He holds his hands up innocently. "You knew you were getting when you asked for my help, man. Hate to break it to ya, but you only have yourself to blame."

I groan, running my hands over my face. "You're right."

"I'm sorry. What was that?" He cups his ear as if hard of hearing.

Instead of repeating myself, I flip him off.

"Now who's being a bad influence?"

"Fuck off, Sullivan. Why don't you join the boys in a lap or two to run your legs instead of your mouth?"

“Ouch.” He clutches his heart. Ace throws his arm over my shoulder. “You know, Cooper Augustus, I have to say I am quite disappointed in your manners. I can’t wait to tell your mama that you didn’t even introduce me back there.”

“You know that’s not my middle name, right?” I don’t know why Ace does this. It’s almost like he has a plethora of names in his brain and purposely wants to annoy you, or maybe it’s to put a smile on folks’ faces because some of the middle names I’ve heard him give people over the year are a little out-there like Octavius, Templeton, and the one he just used—Augustus.

He shrugs as I push him off me. “Meh, tomato, tomahto.”

“You’ll be able to meet Riley and her sister tonight at dinner.”

It’s like there’s a damn record scratch. Slowly, he turns with a quirked brow. “A sister, you say? Is she single?”

I nod. “Yeah, she showed up unannounced to visit.” I head towards home plate to wait for the boys to finish their laps. Suddenly, I’m thrust forward. *What the fuck?* Ace clings to my back like a goddamn spider monkey.

“I promise to do whatever you say, man, especially if her sister looks anything like her.”

I groan and pull him off me, grabbing my fallen hat from the ground. “Maybe just don’t open your mouth tonight.”

## Chapter 31

### Riley

“So why do they call you Ass?” I ask, perched in Cooper’s lap. The man has some serious separation issues because he wasn’t happy with me sitting in the open seat next to him when we got to the Pint earlier this evening. I don’t honestly mind; I just really love giving him shit for it.

Cooper chuckles, and his body vibrates against my back. “Oh boy, here we go,” he mutters against the beer bottle before taking a long pull of his drink.

I focus on the way his throat moves as he swallows his beer. Is it weird as hell I find that movement so damn sexy?

Cooper catches me and winks, and I quickly turn and focus back on Ace, who has a devilish smirk painted on his face.

“Oh, sweetheart,” he taunts in the worst fake Southern accent I have ever heard. He dramatically pushes back the chair from the table and takes a few steps forward. With his back still facing us, he flips up the bottom of his button-down shirt and reveals his denim-clad ass.

Cooper rubs his hand over his jaw. Clearly, this isn't the first time he's done this. "Unbelievable," Coop mutters under his breath.

Ace glances over his shoulder, ignoring his friend, and quirks a brow. "I think that says it enough, don't you?"

I dramatically tilt my head to the side and purse my lips together as if fully concentrating on his ass and deciding whether I agree with him. I have to admit that I'm impressed this man's ego even fit in this bar, let alone this small town. I just shrug to fuck with him. "Meh, I've seen better."

Cooper chokes on his sip of beer beside me, liquid dribbling down his chin.

Ace steps back up to the table and sulks down in his chair. "Your words wound me," he says, placing his hand on his chest. "I take back all the nice things I said about you earlier."

"It's enough for me." My sister smiles, tipping her drink in his direction. Ace places his hand on her chair and tugs it closer to her. He then slides his arm over the back of the chair.

"At least one Parker woman likes me." *Oh boy.* Sutton is totally eating this shit up.

I can feel the stubble on Cooper's cheek against my own as he leans in. His warm breath caresses my ear. "It's more like he *is* a total ass."

"You know I can hear you, dickhead."

"Well aware." Cooper leans back in and whispers, "It's really because his initials spell out *ASS*, so he literally is an

ass.”

Oh my God, why would his parents do that? Did they not think that through beforehand? I guess that’s not exactly a high priority parents think of when naming their child. I recall last year when the librarian at the high school, Stacey Miller, had her son, Tucker, that it was about a week after he was born that her husband realized her son wouldn’t be able to sing the name game song in kindergarten without having some questions raised. *Tucker-tucker-bo-bucker-banana-fanna-fo*—well, you get the gist.

“So, Sutton, what brings you to town?” Ace asks as his fingertips dance over her shoulder, and she lets out a small shiver.

“Well, you see, my lovely baby sister here has been ignoring our calls—our older sister, Lyla, and mine,” she adds, clarifying who the “our” is.

“Oh, so there are three gorgeous Parker sisters.” The playfulness of his tone sounds like he just hit the jackpot. *Not likely, buddy. Keep it in your pants.*

“Yeah, but she’s old and married.”

I scoff. Lyla isn’t that much older than Sutton, but yes, she and my brother-in-law got married right out of college.

Sutton ignores me, and I continue. “And I assume it has something to do with a certain party.”

“Hi, I’m a certain party.” Cooper waves.

“Right, so I figured if she wouldn’t take my calls, why not just show up?” That makes sense in Sutton’s logic. If it were me, I would’ve just called Mom and tattled. “It’s not like she could slam the door in my face—”

“Of course I couldn’t. Not when you show up at my work! And for the record, I’m just a busy person. I have a full-time job; I have the dance company—”

Cooper cuts me off from continuing. “And me.” Cooper smiles, resting his head on my shoulder. His facial hair tickles my skin. He is so not helping the situation.

“Are you from here, too?” Ace twists his body closer to Sutton, and she does the same.

I watch with scrutinizing eyes as they chat and get to know each other.

“Hey, relax. He’s a decent guy under all that ego.”

A loud, embarrassing noise slips from my lips, a combination of a giggle and a snort. I don’t think I’ve ever made a noise like that.

“Sorry, wrong hole,” I say, trying to cover up.

“That’s what she said,” the table says in unison while I want to die of embarrassment. Thankfully, everyone is so focused on their massive *that’s what she said* moment to realize I just tried to blame that noise on a drink that is clearly still on the table and not anywhere near my hands.

“So, what’s good in this town—cow tipping?”

I roll my eyes at his small-town stereotyping, thanks to Hollywood. “Well, there’s this.” I extend my hands as if presenting him with a present that is drinking at the local watering hole. “You missed the fall festival and Hootenanny.”

“Hoose-whatty?”

“Hootenanny. It’s just a big party, really, with dancing.”

My cheeks warm at the memory of where dancing there led Cooper and me.

“Huh.” Ace purses his lips together. “Can’t imagine why you like it here, man,” he teases Coop.

“It’s home.” Cooper squeezes my hip before kissing my temple.

“Oh, and we have the PTA fundraiser after the New Year.” I can’t help but beam when I talk about it.

“What’s that?”

“Every year, the PTA hosts a fundraiser, probably the biggest of the year. It’s a faculty lip-sync contest. It’s a lot of fun, and you are in the presence of champions.”

“Oh, really?” Ace and Cooper say in unison as if they rehearsed it.

“Yup,” I say, popping the *P*, and take a sip of my beer just as my sister huffs jokingly, “Don’t get them started on this tangent again.”

“Whatever, you’re just jealous,” I taunt.

“Yeah, sure, I’m totally jealous,” she mocks.



“Anyway, ignoring the negative Nancy over there, I don’t want to brag or anything, but Austin and I are reigning champions.”

“Wow.” Cooper whistles. “I had no idea my girlfriend was more famous than me.” I roll my eyes at his sarcasm.

“Yeah, dude, sounds like your girl has more talent in her pinky finger than in your entire body,” Ace snickers.

Cooper mocks him while flipping him the middle finger. “Well, maybe I need to sign up for this and show them there’s a new kid in town and take their crown. After all, I *am* considered faculty at the moment.”

I spin in Cooper’s arms and wrap my arms around his shoulder. “You’re joking, right?”

Cooper quirks a brow. “Am I? What do you say, Riles? You and Austin up for a little competition?”

I throw my head back in laughter. “Umm, if you’re okay with publicly having your ass handed to you on a platter. Baby, I love you, but I don’t think you realize how serious we take this.” Austin and I have already begun rehearsing our routine earlier this year. Each year after the event, we give ourselves a week of relaxing before we brainstorm for the next one and start practicing right away.

The smug asshole smirks and shrugs. “I’m not scared.”

When Cooper Graham puts his mind to something, he’s not giving up.

“You know what? Let’s do it.” I’m honestly not scared. “Why not make a bet out of it?”

Cooper steeples his fingers as if giving this thought. “Hmm, I like where this is going. Continue.” He extends a hand.

I let out a small giggle. “If I win—” I pause and purse my lips together, trying to come up with something. It takes a few minutes for an idea to come to mind. “If I win, you have to wear the Wally the Wildcat costume”—he’s our high school mascot—“at the dance company’s bake sale in March.”

Cooper grimaces, knowing how hot and sweaty it is in that thing. But by him doing this, it means neither Austin nor I have to do it. Slowly, he nods, though.

“And if *I* win, we’re having a scary movie marathon.” I shrug. That’s not so bad. “Including the original and new *It* movies.” *And I spoke too soon.*

I nearly shoot off his lap, but his hand keeps me in place. “No, absolutely not.” I shake my head over and over. “You know clowns give me fucking nightmares.”

“It’s true,” Sutton chimes in. “Our parents hired a clown for Riley’s sixth birthday, and as soon as she locked eyes with that giant red nose, she bolted, locked herself in her room, and refused to come out till the end of the party.”

“But it shouldn’t be a problem if you feel so confident in your routine, right? Or are you not feeling so great about it?” he teases, and I want to slap that smug smile right off his face. He’s been trying to get me to watch those movies, or, well, the

original movies, for as long as I remember. The new ones had just recently come out.

I extend my hand between us, and Cooper looks down at my hand for a second before placing his in mine. His fingers wrap around my hand, and he tugs me forward so our lips are just a breath apart.

“Beep, beep, baby,” Cooper says, making a play on that stupid clown’s phrase before sealing his lips to mine. My hand leaves his and travels up his chest to the back of his neck. Our surroundings fade, and all that’s left are me and Cooper.

“Sweet Jesus, you two need a room before I have to go relieve the ache forming in my balls in the bathroom.”

Cooper groans in my mouth at Ace’s crassness, and I can’t stop laughing.

“What’d I miss?” Austin asks as he returns from the restroom and slips back into his chair.

“Oh, you know, Cooper and Riley dry humping and Ace’s aching balls,” my sister says as if it’s an everyday topic like the weather.

“Alrighty then,” Austin responds, swiping his drink from the table. “I think, on that note, I’m just going to head on over —” He looks behind him. “Well, honestly, anywhere else besides here. Anyone up for a game of darts?”

“Oh, me,” I pipe up, taking a large gulp, finishing my drink, and placing it back down.

“Sutton, wanna join and watch me kick your sister’s ass?”  
Austin holds his hand out to her.

She throws her head back in laughter as she accepts it and allows him to pull her up to her feet. “More like watch my sister kick *your* ass.”

True story—and the best part is my sister is just as good as I am, so when Austin gets done with me kicking his ass, Sutton will wipe the floor with him.

## Chapter 32

### Cooper

“I like her, man,” Ace chuckles beside me with a beer propped in his hand as we watch Riley and Sutton dance around Austin after Riley hit her second bullseye on the dartboard. We figured while the Parker sisters schooled Austin at a game of darts, the least we could do was to make sure he had a fresh, ice-cold beverage waiting for him at the table.

Honestly, I can't tell if he's referring to Riley or her sister, though. He's pretty fucking dumb if he thinks I or anything with a pulse can't pick up on whatever chemistry is happening between them.

“Looks like the major league decided to dump their trash here. Someone should really tell them to be more environmentally friendly.” That voice makes my blood boil.

“Fuck off, Briggs.” I turn and give him my back. Tonight is about having fun with my girl and friends. The last thing I need is this fucking tool fucking that up.

“Well, hello there,” Ace says, standing up straight. “I don't believe we've met.” He holds out his hand to shake Tripp's,

but Tripp just looks down at it as if it's disease-ridden. While I can't say the same about his dick, his hand should be fine.

"I know who the fuck you are." Jesus, is there ever a time when Tripp Briggs doesn't have a stick up his ass?

"Great, glad that's established. This here is my buddy, Coop. And I believe he just told you to fuck off."

Thankfully, Mercedes has perfect timing and delivers a tray of refreshed drinks so we can head back to the table. Ignoring the stares from Tripp and his brother, Leighton, I turn to Ace. "Just drop it, come on."

"That's right, just up and run away. That's what you're best at, right? Eventually, you'll leave again, and that pussy will be mine."

Rage blankets my eyes, and before I can even think not to, I swing around and slam my fist directly into Tripp's face. The sound of bone meeting flesh fills my ears, followed by screams.

Tripp falls to the floor, and I step up, hovering over him. I grip the collar of his shirt. "Don't you ever fucking talk about Riley like that ever again."

I crank my fist back to take another swing, but I'm shoved forward and lose my balance. I glance over my shoulder to see Leighton standing there.

"Hey, dipshit, I said to leave my friend alone," Ace shouts, punching Leighton.

I ignore the calling of my name and continue to beat the shit out of Tripp. Years of unleashed aggression are finally free. It's one thing to taunt me, but the moment Riley's name passed his lips, he sealed his fate.

“Alright, break it up,” a deep voice bellows. The next thing I know, I'm being hauled off Tripp, blood dripping from his nose, and metal grips my wrist as I'm placed in handcuffs.

*Fuck, so much for a fun and relaxing evening.*

“Cooper, we'll be right behind you,” Austin shouts.

I glance back over my shoulder the best I can as I'm being escorted out of the bar, deputies doing the same with the Briggs brothers and Ace. I find Austin standing beside Riley, who is being comforted by Sutton. She looks up and meets my gaze. The look of fear in her tear-filled eyes devastates me. I don't break eye contact with her until I have to when the front door of the Pint closes.

*I'm sorry, baby* is all I can think as I'm put in the back of the patrol car. God, I pray that once again, my anger hasn't ruined another good thing in my life.



I let out a sigh as I hang my head in my hands.

This wasn't exactly what I had planned for the evening—enjoy a few drinks, have a few laughs, watch my worlds come together. *Maybe even sneak Riley into the bathroom and fuck her on the sink counter.* But definitely not spending hours

cooped up in a tiny cell with three other men—two of whom I hate with a passion.

“Alright, hotshots, time to go,” Sheriff Giblin calls out from the other side of the bars, followed by a jingling of keys.

I lift my head at the loud clanking noise of the heavy door sliding open.

The four of us look at each other, unsure who exactly he’s setting free. As if he can sense our hesitation, Sheriff Giblin clarifies, “The Pint isn’t pressing charges, so y’all are free to go. Come on, get your ugly asses out of my jailhouse.”

*Don’t have to tell me twice.* I push off my knees to rise and smack Ace with the back of my hat when he doesn’t move. “Let’s go.”

I readjust my hat on my head and slip out of the jail cell and down the hallway. After signing a few documents and retrieving the rest of our belongings, the front door to the station swings open, and we’re free to go.

When I step outside, I look up at the sky and close my eyes, letting out a sigh of relief. *Freedom.*

I stumble forward as Tripp and his brother shove past me.

“Seriously? That’s what got us landed in here in the first place, dumbass.”

Tripp grumbles something under his breath, but I roll my eyes. I don’t need to revisit that cell anytime soon, if ever. I glance down the steps to where the Briggs brothers are heading, and that’s when I spot Riley leaning against the



passenger door of Austin's SUV with her arms and ankles crossed. She's lost in thought, focusing on something off in the distance.

I jog down the stairs two at a time, heading toward her, and the sound of my rushed footsteps on the concrete causes her to jerk her head to face me. Our eyes lock, and the breath literally rips from my chest, and I freeze in place. Ace runs directly into my back, giving me a slight nudge forward.

“Fuck, dude.”

Ignoring him, I close the distance between Riles and me. I swoop her into her arms and cradle her against my chest.

“Baby, it's okay.” Her body trembles against mine. I press a kiss to the top of her head when her grip tightens around me. “Riley, everything's fine. The officer said the bar isn't pressing charges, and they let us go. I'm fine, I promise.”

When she doesn't respond, my back stiffens. “Look at me.”

Her grip on my waist loosens slightly as I tip her chin up with my thumb and forefinger. Tears are streaming down her face. Something is wrong. I can feel it in my bones. This is more than just me and Ace getting arrested.

“Riley, you're scaring me.”

She sniffs and runs the bottom of her sleeve under her nose. “Coop, it's Coach.” She takes a staggered breath, and in those five seconds, everything changes. The ground beneath me folds, and the world spins off its axis. I'm falling into the darkness all over again as she continues. “He's gone, Coop.”

“What?” I ask in disbelief as my brain tries to process those two words—*he’s gone*.

Riley pushes up on her toes and cups both my cheeks with her palms. “Cooper, I’m so sorry.” Her bottom lip quivers.

Placing my hands over hers, I bring them down and shake my head. “No, no,” I whisper over and over. “He was fine when I saw him the other day. No, it’s not true.”

Pressure builds in my chest as I try to catch my breath. *This can’t be happening*.

I can’t do this. I’m not ready for this. *Will I ever?*

My legs buckle, and I’m thankful for Riley being so close. She quickly jumps to my aid as I wrap my arms around her, keeping me from falling to the ground. When I bury my head in the crook of her neck, the emotions unleash. She holds me tighter as my vision blurs, and a strangled sob leaves my lips.

I thought we had more time. We needed more time. Why didn’t we get more time?

## Chapter 33

### Riley

“So, how many casseroles do you think are enough?”  
my sister asks as she slides another aluminum foil tray into the fridge and pretends to wipe a drop of sweat from her brow.

I scoff as I stand in the Graham family kitchen, helping Shannon and Lulu make food to not only take to the Benson house but also for the post-funeral reception being held at the high school.

“Hey, I said I would help, not that I was any good at it,” my sister teases.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m thankful that she extended her trip to help around here. However, I’m not sure our definition of helping is exactly the same. I think Lyla would have been a much better help in this situation. Her motherly instincts and need to take care of people would kick in. I guess I can’t blame Sutton, though. It’s not like there’s a manual for these sorts of things. If there were, I bet it would be a bestseller.

Since we arrived at the Grahams’ house a few hours ago, my sister has played waitress for the men, delivering drinks

and snacks in the living room, and has gotten various items for us from the fridge but hasn't actually touched any of these casseroles. Honestly, it's probably for the better. We don't need anyone getting sick from them.

"Food and death have a weird relationship," Lulu adds. "I don't know why because, honestly, food was the last thing on my mind during those first few days. Foster had to force me to eat, and even then, it was just a few nibbles here and there. Yet people were constantly bringing food by the house. I think at one point we had nine different lasagnas in the freezer."

"I think it's a little weird," Sutton says as she takes a sip of her wine and pulls out a stool at the island.

Ugh, why couldn't Sutton Parker have been born with a filter instead of her foot in her mouth?

"Riley, dear," Shannon calls from where she's wrist-deep in dough on the other side of the island. "Can you go over to the pantry and grab me another sheet pan?"

"Of course." Could Shannon tell that I was two seconds away from smacking the hell out of my sister?

I wipe my hands off on the apron tied around my waist and head over to the pantry. Shannon Graham's pantry is more like a small walk-in closet. It's so neatly organized that I find the extra sheet pans right away. Everything has its own designated place, and I would bet my life that she would notice if someone put something back incorrectly.

As I turn to head back to the island, something catches my eye out of the back door.

I didn't even realize that Cooper was outside. I thought he was in the living room with Wade, Austin, Ace, and Foster. *When did he slip outside? How long has he been out there?*

There's been a slight chill in the air the past few days as a cold front blew through. I can see his breath with every exhale as he stands stoically, staring out at nothing in particular. His hands are in the front pocket of his black Chicago Knights hoodie, and his signature backward hat is upon his head. I can't see his full face, only his profile, but I can tell by his tight jaw that he's fighting through his emotions.

I hate this for him, for us, for this town. I'm watching him close in on himself before my very eyes, and I'm terrified that I won't be able to help him. Will his grief swallow him whole again? I know losing Coach differs from losing Tanner, but what if those same feelings inside him resurface?

Cold hands touch my skin where the fabric of my shirt hangs off my shoulder. *Shit, how long was I staring out the back door?*

Shannon gives me a soft smile when I look over my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Shannon. I guess I was just preoccupied." I hold out the sheet pans in front of us, and instead of taking them and walking away, she calls out to my sister to come and take them. After Sutton retrieves them, Shannon follows my line of sight outside and lets out a heavy sigh.

“How’s he handling all this?”

I lean against the wall, wrapping my arms around my waist.  
“Not very well.”

When we heard the commotion over at the bar the other night, I couldn’t believe my eyes seeing Cooper and Ace fighting with the Briggs brothers. Rage consumed Coop as his fist rammed into Tripp’s face. I’ve only ever seen that look once before—in the coverage of the game where he threw the punch that ended his career.

Thank God the owners of the Pint didn’t press charges. While watching Ace, Cooper, Tripp, and Leighton getting hauled off in handcuffs wasn’t exactly how we saw our evening ending, nothing prepared me for having to deliver the devastating blow of Coach’s loss.

I had dropped Austin and Sutton back off at the house and taken Austin’s SUV to the county jail to wait for news. There was no point in having us all wait. Austin called while I was outside, waiting for their release.

*“Hey, I’m waiting outside the precinct. The officer working the desk said they’ll be out soon.”*

*“Riley.” Austin’s tone sounded different from usual.*

*“What’s wrong?” The first thing that came to mind was my sister since she was with him.*

*“I just got a call from my mom.” Okay, so that wouldn’t be anything to do with Sutton. I pulled back the phone to verify the time. A little late for a friendly chat.*

*“She okay? Your dad?”*

*He sighed. “They’re okay. It’s Coach Benson.” I closed my eyes and held my breath as he spoke again. “He passed away tonight.” It’s actually kind of amazing how four words have the power to crush your heart into a million pieces.*

*As Cooper, Ace, and the Briggs brothers finally emerged from the main door, I tried to hold it together long enough for me to be in Coop’s arms. But once they were around me, the dam broke. How was I supposed to tell him?*

Was this what it felt like for Cooper as he waited for me to wake up to deliver the news of Tanner? How would Cooper ever be able to look at me and not think about the moment those words left my lips, that someone so important to him was gone?

“He’s been extremely quiet since I drove the three of us back to my house. And I’m not sure he slept more than an hour or two.” The one time I convinced him to rest, not much later, he jolted awake, panting and covered in sweat as if he had just come out of the shower without toweling off. He tried to get me to fall back asleep, but we’re a team. If he’s awake, I’m going to be awake. We’ll get through this together, even if it kills me.

Shannon’s shoulders slump as she stares out at her grown son, lost in his own head.

“He used to have terrible nightmares after the accident. Did he ever tell you that?”

I stand up straighter and shake my head.

“After the accident, they were so bad he would wake up screaming and calling out either Tanner’s or your name.” She glances back at Lulu, who is laughing as she assists my sister with a mixing bowl. “Sometimes both. As a parent, it’s truly devastating to watch their child go through something like that and not be able to help them and watch the demons in them try to overpower them.

“When he returned, I assumed he no longer had them.” She pauses, and concern fills those eyes that match the ones of the man I love. “But then, just before Hootenanny, I woke up to him shouting your name. He admitted that they still happen when I confessed I knew what had happened. The walls in this house are mighty thin. It scares me, the amount of weight that boy carries on his shoulders.”

“I don’t know what to do,” I say honestly.

“Just be there for him. That’s all you can do, sweetheart. I know it might not feel like much, but just being there beside him means everything.” She cups my cheek in a motherly fashion, and it makes me miss my mom even more. “Go on, take a minute.” She nods toward Cooper out back.

When she senses my hesitation, she gives me a little nudge toward the door. “We’ve got this in here.” Just as she says that, there’s a loud clang from the kitchen, followed by my sister shouting, “It’s fine, everything’s fine.”

“Go,” Shannon demands.



I grab my coat from the hook and carefully open the back door, not wanting it to slam. The weather in North Carolina is out of control. One day, it's beautiful and almost eighty, and the next, it's like it's actually winter and in the high forties. I guess it could be worse—there could be snow or ice.

I shove my hands in the pockets of my coat and step up beside Coop. Neither of us says anything at first, just soaking in the beauty of our surroundings.

To be honest, seeing Cooper like this in almost a catatonic state sends me into a bit of an emotional and anxious spiral that I keep to myself. I'd be lying if I didn't say a part of me wonders if this is going to be too much for him and it's going to send him away like it did years ago. I won't let him go, though. I'll be the rock he needs, even if I'm barely holding on myself.

## Chapter 34

### Cooper

**T**he vehicle comes to a stop, and I'm still staring out the window at nothing in particular. The entire drive to the cemetery, the surroundings basically became one giant blur.

I've honestly been in a bit of a daze since leaving the station the other night and Riley delivering the news of Coach's passing.

That's the thing about death. It doesn't matter if you're in the prime of your life and taken unexpectedly or if you live a long and happy life to pass at old age or even after having time to prepare. We all die—it's the only inevitability in life, and no matter what we do or how we prepare, we can't stop it. Death lingers around the corner for us all.

The other thing about death is that you can never fully prepare for the emotion it will stir. In the last few days, I've not only mourned Coach, but old memories and grief from losing Tanner have resurfaced, and honestly, my own mortality has been in question. *No*, I'm not feeling suicidal or anything, but all I can think about is when it's my time to go, whether it's tomorrow or sixty years from now, will I have any regrets?

Will I have made amends for the destructive path I've laid? The pain that I put my family and Riley through weighs heavily on my mind. Can one ever fully be forgiven for that?

“Coop?”

I startle at Riley's soft voice. “Huh?” With my elbow still propped up against the window, I turn to face her and find a wrinkled crease between her brows. I feel like a dick for a moment because I don't know how long she was talking to me while I let my thoughts consume me.

She gives me a soft, understanding smile. “I said, are you ready to go?”

*No, I'm not ready. I'll never be ready.* But I don't say either comment. Instead, I just nod.

We both get out, and I stand by my door while I wait for her to walk around. I stare at the hill in front of us, where what seems like half the town is currently walking up, and swallow thickly. *I don't think I can do this.*

Riley's fingers slip through mine, and she squeezes gently, knowing that I need her to give me the strength to do this. As we walk up the hill, my mind travels back in time to Tanner's funeral. As I watched my best friend's body being lowered into the ground, a storm cloud and heavy weight settled on my chest and never lifted.

The climb feels heavy, like I'm on a hike up Mount Everest with all my gear in tow, only it's not my gear weighing me down but my guilt. Guilt that, once again, I'm the one alive.

At the top of the hill, we head toward Austin, Ace, and Sutton, who are having a conversation with Austin's parents and mine. Ace and Sutton stuck around the last few days and have helped the best they could. I know I've been a shit host, but just the mere presence of my best friend being here has meant a lot. They had ridden over to the cemetery with Austin since I was running a little behind this morning.

After we say hello, I notice the Briggs family standing beside them. The bruises on Tripp's face peek out from under his sunglasses. I give him a nod, and he does the same in return before returning to conversation with his old man. Tripp and I haven't spoken since leaving the precinct, but this loss is as much his as it is mine, so we're at a sort of ceasefire. Honestly, our lifelong rivalry just seems childish now.

Across from us is a row of chairs draped in black velvet reserved for the family to sit during the service. Standing beside the chairs is Ellie, who speaks to the woman sitting in the second chair. *Holy shit, is that Melody Benson, the coach's daughter?*

I haven't seen her in forever. I see an adorable kid sitting in her lap, hiding his face in his mama's neck. The poor guy is probably overwhelmed and doesn't know what's going on—I'm an adult, and that's basically how I feel.

"I'll be right back," I lean down and whisper to Riley. She looks back at me and nods.

I walk through the growing crowd, stepping up in front of the Benson family, and reach out, placing my hand on Ellie's

lower back to get her attention. Clearing my throat, I say softly, "I'm so sorry, Ellie."

She spins around. "Oh, Cooper," she sobs, throwing her arms around me. *Fuck*. I bite the inside of my cheek until I taste blood to push down the emotion. "I know he's at peace, but my God, I'm going to miss him."

"Me too," I manage, hugging her closely, attempting to provide any form of comfort.

"Cooper Graham, look at you all grown up."

I pull back from Ellie to find Melody standing beside her mother, the little boy still clinging to her in her arms.

"Hey, Mel, it's been a long time. You look great."

Melody passes off her son to Ellie before closing the distance between us. She laughs lightly. "Well, given the circumstances and the number of times my husband has told me I need to rest before I fall apart, I'll take that as a compliment." When she steps back, she reaches for her son, but Ellie waves her off, clearly embracing the strength her grandson is giving her.

"I'd say the same to you, Coop, but my parents always taught me not to lie." Melody grabs my chin, tilting my head upward and examining the bruise coloring my cheek. She frowns and gives me a tilted stare.

"Hey, you should see the other guy," I say shyly, putting my hands in my pants pocket.

Melody's eyes lift over my shoulder toward where the Briggs family is standing. "Mm-hmm, I'm pretty sure I already did."

A moment of silence passes between us, and I'm about to excuse myself to return to Riley's side when Melody speaks. "I wanted to say thank you for bringing light to my father's eyes recently. I know he was so worried about everything after his diagnosis, but then you came home, and he saw it as a sign or something that at least the team would all be okay."

I scoff. "I don't know that I would say that some form of a miracle took place or anything, but your dad meant a lot to me. Honestly, more than I think he could ever know."

Melody shakes her head. "That's where you're wrong, Coop. He knew, and he loved you—all of you," she says, inferring all of his players, "as if they were his own. According to him, I definitely wasn't an only child. I had hundreds of brothers."

We both laugh. That sounds exactly like something Coach would have said.

"Oh, I forgot. I was actually hoping I'd get a chance to talk to you here. If not, I had planned to stop by your mama's house. I found this." She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a folded white envelope. She unfolds it and holds it out between us. I see my name written in Coach's shitty chicken scratch.

I stare at the envelope as if it holds all the answers to life's grandest questions.

“Umm, thank you,” I say as more of a question, unsure how to respond as I accept it and place it in the inside pocket of my suit coat. “Well, I should get back.” I stuff my hands back in my pockets to keep from fidgeting.

“Promise me you won’t be a stranger, Cooper, okay?” Ellie says beside us.

“I promise,” I respond, not wanting to believe that just weeks ago, I’d made that same promise to Coach on his front porch but didn’t get the chance to keep it. “Ellie, please call me if you need anything. I don’t care what it is or what time of day.”

She cups my cheek with her palm. “Thank you. You’re such a sweet boy.”

With a quick hug goodbye to both of them, I make my way back over to my family. As if Riley could sense me as I approach, she extends her left hand out to me without breaking away from the conversation she’s having. I take her hand in mine, and she rests her other hand on my arm.

“You doing alright there, slugger?” she asks in a hushed tone. I smirk at the nickname.

“Yeah, baby.” I press a kiss to her temple.

The minister clears his throat from the front, alerting us that the service is about to begin.

“On behalf of the Benson family, I would like to thank you all for joining us today to celebrate the life of Verne Benson.

He was a husband, father, grandfather, coach, and friend. I would like to begin with a prayer. Please bow your heads.”

After the prayer, the minister continues to speak, but I tune him out. I take that time to look around the crowd. There’s not a dry eye in sight, and the service has only just begun. I recognize players from my days as a student at Meadows Ridge High School and before. Coach Benson coached for forty-five years. This place was his first full-time coaching position, and he never left. I know that there were plenty of offers for better gigs, including coaching at a collegiate level, but he always said this was home and we were family.

There have been hundreds, if not thousands, of baseball players he gave his advice and guidance to. My chest constricts at the thought of all the millions of players that won’t ever get the chance.

Something catches my attention out of the corner of my eye just at the crest of the hill. Baseball players—current ones under his coaching and, right now, mine. Each one of them, including Beau, is wearing their letterman jacket instead of their suit coat and a Meadows Ridge Wildcats ball cap.

The minister pauses when he looks up from his bible at the new attendees. The crowd watches in silence as each player hands Ellie and Melody a single rose before taking a stance beside the casket in the open space separating us.

I may have only been their coach recently, but I have never been more proud of each one of them.



I meet Beau's gaze and nod, an unspoken conversation telling him how much their being here means to everyone.

Before I know it, the funeral director is standing before us and informing everyone that this now concludes this part of the service. He gives details of the gathering being hosted at the high school after this.

The crowd slims down as folks say their last goodbyes, but I can't get my feet to move, so I stand and wait till it's only me left. I'm not ready to say goodbye.

## Chapter 35

### Riley

“**Y**ou want me to go up and check on him?” Austin asks from beside me as we both stare up at the hill where Cooper has yet to come back down.

My car and Austin’s are the only ones left. Everyone else had already set off for the reception.

“No, I’ll go.” I glance over Austin’s shoulder and find my sister and Ace, who are standing close together, having a hushed conversation. They stop talking when she looks over and finds me watching. “In fact, why don’t you guys head on over to the school? We’ll just meet y’all there.”

“Are you sure?” Sutton asks, walking forward toward me.

“Yeah, we don’t mind waiting,” Ace adds.

I shake my head. “No, we won’t be that far behind.”

Austin tugs me into a tight hug. I know that today hasn’t been taxing on only Cooper. I’m pretty sure that today has dredged up memories for Austin as well. There have been many times in the past few days that I’ve caught him staring out at nothing, similar to Cooper, consumed, deep in thought. I

wrap my arms around his waist and bury my head into his chest. With a kiss to the top of my head, he steps back, and my sister swarms me.

“Thank you for coming,” I say.

“Of course. I’m glad to be here for you guys.”

I turn to Ace. “You too. I know Cooper might not say it aloud, but it means everything to him—” I pause. “—and to me that you’re here.” I can see why Cooper formed such a close friendship with Ace. It may have just been a few days since we met, but it feels like it’s been much longer. He just meshes well with us all.

“That guy might be a dick, but hey, he’s my dick.” Leave it to him to deliver the joke that seems to ease some of the tension of the day.

“Well, he’s my dick now,” I say behind my giggle. And this is another reason I’m thankful that he’s here. Ace has brought much-needed comic relief to our house.

“Alright, enough dick talk. This is a cemetery, for God’s sake.” Austin laughs awkwardly, gripping the back of his neck. “We’ll see you soon, Ry.”

He turns and heads toward the driver’s side while I watch Ace place his hand on my sister’s lower back, and she glances over at him with a smile. After he helps her into the passenger seat, he gets into the back seat, and they’re off.

I drop my purse off at my car and turn to look up the hill, hoping Cooper has had his moment and has already made the

trek down, but no such luck. Honestly, I'm rather worried about him, but no matter what, I'm going to be there to help him through this.

I cross my arms over my body and take the same path we took up to the gravesite. When I reach the top, I hesitate. Cooper has finally moved from where we stood for the service to now sitting on his knees with his head bowed, reading a piece of paper. He doesn't look up as I make my way over to him and take a seat beside him.

"Hey, sweetheart," I say softly, but he doesn't respond. "Everyone left to head over to the reception. You wanna go over?"

He shakes his head and finally speaks. "Can we wait just a little longer?"

"Sure." I place my hand on his thigh. He continues to stare at the piece of paper. "Whatcha got there?"

He straightens up in his seat. "Melody, Coach's daughter, gave it to me. He, umm—" He chokes on his words. After clearing his throat, he continues. "He, umm, left it for me."

My breath catches in my throat. Neither of us speaks.

"Here." Cooper extends the letter in front of me, and I try to push it back to him.

"That's for you, Coop. I don't need to read it."

"Please," he pleads, and I can't tell him no, so I nod and unfold the letter.

Cooper,

*If you're reading this, well, that means I'm no longer here, and honestly, I'm not sure how to feel about that. Even though I made peace with my fate months ago, I know my loss is hard on my dear Sweet Ellie, Melody, and my grandson.*

*I don't need to be there to know that my loss is hard on you, too. I'm sure you're deep in your head, wondering all the what-ifs. If I could come back down to Earth and smack some sense into that head of yours, I would.*

I chuckle. I look over at Cooper for a second, and I feel like there have never been truer words spoken about him at this moment as I watch him pace back and forth with his hands in the pockets of his suit pants. I continue reading aloud.

*You are one of the best players I've ever had the honor of coaching—not just because of your experience or talent but your heart. The love of the game runs through your veins. It's the air in your lungs and the love in your heart.*

*Let the game heal you.*

*Let go of the past and use the pain to power your future. And most importantly, forgive yourself. You're the only one holding yourself back from the greatness I know you're destined for.*

*There's a reason you didn't die that night.*

The tears are fully streaming down my cheeks, blurring my vision.

*Stop asking yourself why and start living, making the most of your time on this Earth. Trust me, it will be over one day before you know it. Don't let any more time slip through your fingers.*

*And if you let that girl of yours go again, I will personally come back and haunt your ass. She is your North Star. You've been lost for a while, but she'll lead you home.*

*I will always be with you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Coach B.*

I was so entranced by the words on the paper that I hadn't realized Cooper had taken a seat beside me. I fold the letter back up and clutch it in my hands. I stare in front of me at Coach's casket as I let his words process.

I know that Cooper still battles his demons from that night, but I guess I hadn't realized how much.

Cooper lets out an exasperated breath and rests his elbows back on his knees, focusing on the ground.

"Sometimes it's so hard to breathe when I think about everything," he admits. "It may have been an accident, but I caused the ripple effect that followed." His voice is so low I wonder if he meant to say that aloud. "You deserved so much better than me. A life with me meant being labeled a killer, a

fuckup. It's been branded on my chest. It's why I left. I thought I was doing what was best for you and for everyone."

"That wasn't your decision to make. You took that right away from me. We all have scars, Coop. Some are physically etched in our skin—" I focus down on my thighs, and Cooper reaches over, grabbing my hand. "—while others are branded on our soul. You need to wear your tragedies as armor, not shackles."

Slipping onto Cooper's lap, I grip his cheeks firmly and force his attention back to me. "You listen here, and you listen good, Cooper Graham. What happened that night was an accident. You may have been driving, but it was not your fault. You remember the good times. We fight, we love, we honor the ones we love and lost. We forgive." He swallows hard. "The Hayeses have forgiven you." I remove my right hand and place it over my chest. "I have forgiven you. The question is, Coop, when are you going to forgive yourself?"

He presses his forehead against mine, his shuddered breath fanning against my skin. "I don't know if I can."

"You can, sweetheart. It might not be today, and it might not be even tomorrow, but one day, you will be able to forgive yourself. I refuse to lose you again."

"You won't."

"Won't I? I feel like I'm watching you slip away the last few days and slip further and further into your grief. I'm terrified that you're going to let it take over, and one day, I'll

wake up and you'll be gone." The dam holding the tears back finally unleashes, and I don't hold back.

Cooper swiftly brings me against his chest, holding me tightly.

I let him hold me as long as he needs because I meant what I said. I can't lose him again. It would kill me.



## Chapter 36

### Cooper

I would have held on to Riley forever, but eventually, the cemetery workers needed to do their job.

Riley's words have latched their claws into my mind and my heart. She was right that Tanner would be disappointed in me, but it was her fear of losing me that caused me to break.

*I can't keep doing this to myself. I can't keep doing this to us. I need to live for both Coach and Tanner.*

We walk over to the casket; it's time to say my last goodbye. I don't feel as scared with Riley by my side, holding on to my arm. My palm presses against the smooth wooden material. I was so scared to touch the casket during Tanner's funeral because that meant it was real, but I can't live in that fantasyland now because this *is* real and he *is* gone.

"Thank you, Coach," I whisper, and Riley leans her head against my shoulder. "I'll take good care of them, don't you worry." I'm not sure which definition of "them" I mean—the team, his family, my family. They're all covered.

We stand there in silence, Riley's fingers grazing up and down my arm in a soothing manner.

We finally make our way down the hill toward her car. Riley doesn't put up a fight when I offer to drive.

"Hey." I stop her before she climbs into the car. I pull her against me, and she wraps her arms around my waist. The sadness I've dealt with all day is eased by her closeness. Just her being here with me slowly heals the cracks in my heart. "Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me, Coop. I love you."

"And I love you, too." I place a kiss on the top of her head. "To the stars and back."

"I'm going to text Austin and let him know we're leaving," she says as I get into the driver's seat after having adjusted it to my height. She focuses on her phone as I pull out of the cemetery. "They had stayed, but I told them we wouldn't be long behind them."

She sets her phone in the cup holder, and from my peripheral vision, I see her looking around, confused.

"Umm, Cooper, the school is the other way."

"Oh, I know. We're not going to the school. Do you trust me?" Leaving my left hand on the wheel, I rest my right hand on her thigh.

"Of course I do." She places her hand over mine, but I flip over my hand so our fingers link. I keep them there the entire

drive till I'm turning onto Westerly Ave and turning into her driveway.

*What would Tanner do?* Right now, he would tell me to take this woman home and worship her for sticking by my side, for better or for worse.

Before the keys are even out of the ignition, I'm opening the car door and running around to the passenger side of the vehicle. I open the door and haul Riley over my shoulder, firefighter-hold-style.

"Put me down, you brute. I'm wearing a dress," she exclaims.

She kicks her feet, and I quickly tilt my head to the side to avoid getting hit in the face. I slap her ass, and she lets out an audible gasp.

"It's fine, baby. No one is around to see anything."

Their cottage is off the main road, and since Austin took Sutton and Ace to the reception at the school, I know we're alone. But just to calm her nerves, I make a show of glancing around to confirm it.

"See? All good." I chuckle and keep my hand on her ass, keeping the material of her dress down, just to give her added reassurance because I'm sure as hell not going to set her down.

My grip on her tightens as we walk up her front porch steps.

"Cooper James Graham, put me down, or I'm callin' your mama!"

“Damn, baby, why do you have to be so cruel and bring up my mama when my dick is hard?”

I use the house key attached to her key ring to open the front door. I carefully race up the stairs, heading straight for Riley’s room. Her shrieks and giggles echo throughout the entire house.

Entering her bedroom, I kick the door shut with the bottom of my foot. As soon as the door clicks, I set her down, but before she plants both feet firmly on the ground, my hands are in her hair, and my lips are claiming hers.

I walk Riley backward until her lower back bumps into the dresser, and she breaks the kiss with a loud “oof.”

“Sorry,” I murmur against her lips.

I lift her up from the back of her thighs and settle her on top of the dresser—a few items crash to the floor. I could’ve walked the few feet to the right and spread her out on the bed, but I’ve imagined doing this for a while.

Bunching the material of her dress up around her waist, I quickly discard her panties. My tongue automatically drags over my bottom lip as my eyes meet her perfect pussy, on display and ready to be devoured. It’s glistening, begging me to have a taste. My gaze lifts, taking in her beauty. The way her chest rises and falls with each breath she takes. The cute little flush spreading from her cheeks down her neck. When I see her biting her bottom lip, I know she wants this as much as I do.

I drop to my knees, still completely dressed except for my tie, which I lost on the drive home.

Riley's eyes slowly close in anticipation.

“Uh-uh, eyes on me, baby. Watch me devour this pussy, how I crave your orgasm. Watch how much I enjoy licking every inch of you.” I give her a slow and teasing lick up her spread lips, gathering her arousal on the tip of my tongue, and swirl it around her clit.

“Look how wet you are, Riles, without me even fully touching you. Imagine how good it'll feel when I push my fingers—or my cock—deep inside you.”

She lets out a soft whimper. “Cooper,” she pleads and thrusts her pelvis toward my face, but I back up.

“I know what you need, baby.” She bites her bottom lip so hard that I can see white around her skin from the pressure. “Don't stop me until I'm drowning in your cunt.”

Her hands grab the back of my head, her nails digging into my scalp through my curls, and I finally allow her to push me where she wants me most, chasing her release. Riley grinds against my tongue, and I chuckle against her damp skin—my impatient, needy girl. Who am I to deny her so I make good on my word?

Each thrust and whimper brings her closer to the edge—figuratively and literally. I take hold of her hip still before she falls right off the dresser while my other hand holds her thigh open.

“Let me hear you, baby. Let me hear how good it feels.” My breath comes in harsh, ragged pants.

Her shouts ring out in the room. Hearing my name roll off her lips fills me with such a heady feeling that I know I will spend each and every minute of the rest of my life attempting to make her scream it over and over.

After one orgasm, she tries to push my head away, but I’m much stronger than her, so I don’t move.

“I want one more.” She’s so wet that two fingers slip easily inside her swollen pussy. I press my thumb to her clit, applying more pressure with each circular motion.

It doesn’t take long for her pussy to clamp down around my fingers, and I can’t wait for it to be squeezing every drop of cum from my cock, which is so hard it wouldn’t surprise me if there’s a zipper indent on my shaft when I spring it free.

“Coop,” she pants. “I need you now.” My greedy girl needs more, not even having recovered from her second orgasm. This one hit her quicker and harder than the first.

I rise to my feet, sucking her sweet release from my fingers. Sealing my lips to hers, I know she can taste herself on my tongue.

“I need to get a condom.”

Her grip on me tightens, and a moment of silence passes. Her eyes have an unspoken conversation with mine. *Is she asking what I think she’s asking?*

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She nods. “I want all of you, please.”

I’ve never had sex without a condom, not even with Riley when we were younger. I never even thought about it with anyone besides her. I just have to hope that finally feeling her without a barrier doesn’t end this for us sooner than I want.

I struggle to get my clothes off, thanks to Riley’s roaming hands. I let out a deep groan when her hand slips into my half-done pants and wraps around my erection. If she keeps this up, this will *definitely* be over too soon.

My eyes close as her hands continue moving up and down along my length. Her touch is pure heaven. When her grip disappears, my eyes whip open, but her hands don’t stay off me for long. Riley grabs the material of my dress shirt. With a tight grip, she pulls, sending buttons flying.

Her giggles add to the sound of our heavy breathing and now the clinking of the buttons on the hardwood floor.

“Sorry. I always wanted to do that, and you were taking too long.”

I smirk. “You can do that anytime you want.” The ravenous look in her eyes is sexy as fuck.

I quickly discard my shirt and the rest of our clothes before lifting her from the dresser with a slight yelp. I carry her over to the edge of the bed and sit down. Riley now straddles my thighs. Our kisses become even more heated—tongues tangling as if we are one. Without breaking the kiss, I grip the base of my cock and line up the head to her entrance.

“Once we do this, Riles, I can’t go back.” I’ll never fuck her with another condom again.

Instead of answering, she slowly sinks down on me until her pelvis rests against mine.

The feeling of her hot pussy directly against me and her wetness coating my cock—I lose myself in her as she bounces up and down on me, increasing her speed as she chases her release.

Riley’s hands grip my shoulders, her nails digging into my flesh enough to leave her mark on me as I thrust upward, meeting her frantic pace. I swallow her moans with my lips pressed against hers. She grips my lower lip between her teeth before licking away the sting.

I’m not sure I can hold off my own release for much longer. I focus on my thrusts and the way her face relaxes in pleasure. I know she is close, too. I bring one hand to her clit and move my fingers in a circular motion, applying more and more pressure. The more pressure I apply, the quicker her breaths get. Her hips jerk against my touch.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Riley shouts as she throws her head back, and I follow her over the edge, releasing inside her.

We stay there, my cock still buried inside her and our chests rising and falling in unison.

“If that’s not enough to celebrate life, then I’m not sure what is,” she laughs.



I quickly flip her onto her back. Light shines in through her window, leaving a sudden glow around her brown hair, which fans out over the bedspread, making her look like an angel—she's my angel.

“I'm more than up for spending the rest of the evening just like that. Feeling alive, feeling this, feeling you.”

“I think I can definitely get on board with that.”

## Chapter 37

### Cooper

“Cooper, stop,” Riley giggles, squirming in my lap as I continue to tickle her. Her giggle is literal music to my ears, a reminder we’re alive.

“Well, that’s what you get when you steal food off my plate.” The girl has her own plate of food in front of her, and she has the nerve to steal mine.

When we woke up this morning, the entire house was still silent. I’m not sure what time everyone got home from the wake, but clearly, rest was needed by all. Yesterday was extremely emotional, and I have to say I’m impressed that somehow Riley and I pulled ourselves out of bed. Riley didn’t go on her run first thing this morning, but I’m not going to let her get out of it completely. We can go together later.

I could get used to this—enjoying coffee and making breakfast together every morning. We are currently sitting at the table in her breakfast nook. I totally understand why Riley says it’s one of her favorite things about the house.

We both freeze and quietly observe Austin as he shuffles into the kitchen, running his hands over his face and through

his hair. Poor guy looks like he went to an all-night rager. He walks almost on autopilot straight to the coffee maker. To be honest, I'm not even sure he notices us as he breathes a sigh of relief.

“Oh, thank fuck, y'all left me some.” After making himself a mug, he spins to face us. “I think I need to move out or vice versa because you two fuck like rabbits, and I need my beauty sleep.”

“Oh shit,” I mutter.

“Don't get me wrong, I'm all for the two of you working past your shit and all, but seriously. Like, can y'all go five minutes without, ya know...” He trails off into his cup of coffee as he takes a sip.

“I'm sorry.” Riley looks up, sticking her bottom lip out in a pout.

I lose my focus on her mouth when her elbow rams into my rib cage, and I hiss at the contact. She gives me a stern look, and her eyes dance between me and Austin.

“Yeah, man. Umm, sorry about that.” With one arm still perched on her thigh, I reach forward, grabbing the plate from the other end of the table and holding it in front of us as a peace offering.

Austin's eyes light up when he takes in the plate of crisp bacon.

He closes the distance and walks over to the table, stealing a few pieces and shoving them in his mouth as he takes a seat

beside us.

“Between you two and those other horndogs, I seriously thought about going to sleep at my parents’ last night.”

Riley sputters in her coffee, and my eyes widen at the mention of Ace and Sutton.

“You know,” I speak up. “Maybe he has a point, though.”

Riley whips her head around, and I’m surprised she didn’t get whiplash because I’m pretty sure I did.

“A point about what?” She frowns, creating a crease between her brows. “And the next words out of your mouth better not be about my sister and your friend getting down and dirty.” Riles lets out a visible shudder.

I have to smother a laugh before she smacks me, so instead, I clarify. “Getting our own place.”

“What?” she screeches, clearly not expecting that. “You can’t be serious.”

“As a heart attack.”

“And,” Austin draws out, “I think that’s my cue to leave the room.” He gets up from his chair and grabs his mug in one hand, takes two steps away from us, and freezes. “I’m just going to take that, too.”

Neither Riley nor I break our staring contest, but in my peripheral vision, I see him reach forward and grab the plate of bacon before rushing out of the room.

Once we're alone, I tuck a stray piece of hair that had fallen out of Riley's messy bun behind her ear.

“What do you think, Riles? Move in with me?”

“I...I...” She struggles to find words. “You don't think it's too soon?”

I shrug. “According to who?”

“I don't know, everyone?” she asks more than says.

“Who gives a shit what everyone else thinks? I love you, and I still have a shit ton of making up to do. But more than that, I want to wake up every morning with you in my arms and go to bed every night with kissing you being the last thing I've done. I want you to yell at me for leaving my wet towels on the floor and dirty laundry next to the hamper rather than in it. I want to argue with you about the clutter on top of the dresser and then push it all to the floor and fuck you on it.

“If everything we've been through has taught me anything, it's to not waste the time we've been given in this life, and I, for one, think we've wasted plenty of time apart. I want to spend this one life with you by my side, always. Tell me you want that, too.”

Her voice is just above a whisper, and her bottom lip quivers. “I want that, too.”

We seal our deal with a kiss. I mean to keep it short and sweet, but just like every time I touch her, I can never get enough. Before I know it, my tongue is slipping inside her

mouth, tasting her sweetness mixed with the coffee she's been sipping on.

God, I love this woman.

Finally out of breath, Riley pulls back. "So, we are really doing this?"

"I guess so."

Sitting there in the silence, I pull her closer to me, savoring the feel of her in my arms.

"I love you to the stars and back, Riley Parker," I breathe against her lips before kissing her again.

A throat clearing tears us apart, and we both turn slightly to find Austin back in the kitchen, but this time, his fingers shield his eyes. His other hand is gripping the handle of his coffee mug, which is stretched out in front of him, searching for things in his path.

"Ignore me. I'm just here for more coffee." After letting out a low grumble when he runs into the corner of the counter, he quickly grabs the coffeepot and refills his cup. This time, he exits the room with his left hand, cupping his eyes from the side to avoid whatever position we might be in. "Carry on," he yells back.

We both laugh. "Really? You sure you don't wanna live with that one anymore?"

Riley shakes her head. "As much as I love him, I look forward to starting our lives together."

## Chapter 38

### Cooper

“**T**hanks for helping me with this, Dad,” I say as I finish hanging the last of the lanterns. Ace and Sutton have already gone back to their lives, and we are all adjusting to the new normal of life in Meadows Ridge.

I’m taking each day one day at a time as I process my grief. Some days hit harder than others, but no matter what, Riley has been by my side. There are no words that I can say to show my gratitude to her, but as my mother always says, actions speak louder than words, so I told her I had a baseball thing to handle today but have been setting everything up. The old drive-in we used to go to back in the day closed down a few years back, so I had to get a little creative in recreating that night.

“No problem. Thanks for asking. Was forgetting what you actually looked like since you’re never home.” There’s no bitterness to his voice as he says it. In fact, he chuckles.

I look up to see him winding the extension cord up around his arm with a smile across his face.

“I’m happy for you and Riley. Truly, I am.” After setting the bunched-up cord down, he places his arms on the top of the bed of the truck. “So, how are you holding up?”

“A day at a time, but I’m doing okay.”

Dad nods as he looks off into the distance for a moment. “I’m glad to see you happy and more like the kid you were instead of the man you had become.” That’s his polite way of saying he wasn’t mad, just disappointed. “You were on a dangerous path, and it just about killed me to see you so lost. I know that wasn’t you who threw that punch to end your career.”

I scoff. “Pretty sure that *was* me, Pops.”

He frowns, and I can’t help but chuckle. “You know what I mean. I know the man that hit that Coach was *not* the son I raised but the son consumed by his grief and in pain. You just took that pain out on someone.”

I open my mouth to speak, but he cuts me off, holding his hand up. “Yes, I know he had no business running his mouth about those things.”

At the press conference prior to our three-game series against the Sharks, a reporter asked first-base coach, Leo Ryan, what his thoughts were about his team going against me and my current winning streak. To sum up politely, because just thinking about it makes my blood boil, he said he wasn’t worried, and to be honest, he was shocked that the Knights had even kept me on, given my questionable behavior, including prior to my joining the team. He may not have come out and



said it directly, but the only major event in my life prior to becoming a Knight was the accident.

The press conference came to an abrupt end after that, and to my knowledge, he wasn't even reprimanded for his answer.

I took out my anger at him on the field. However, it wasn't until the sixth inning that I let the rage take over and get the best of me. Grant Haskin was at bat for the Sharks, and he hit the ball up the first-base line, which our first baseman, Cody Matney, ran after, so I headed to first base to cover for him.

I couldn't tell you what exactly he said behind me besides Tanner's name leaving his lips. Before I could even think, I had brought my arm back and fucking swung. Chaos ensued on the field before security escorted me out of the game. And that was it.

“You know you can always come talk to me about anything, right? I don't want to see you fall down that same rabbit hole again.”

“I know, Dad. I don't plan to.”

He claps his hands together. “Now, we better get you home so you can shower and don't make her wait too long.”



I rush up Riley's front steps and knock on her front door. My hair is still slightly damp from my shower.

Riley opens the door moments later, revealing her wearing a black-and-white sweater that hangs slightly off her shoulder

and formfitting jeans. But the best part is the megawatt smile she greets me with.

“Wow, you look gorgeous.” I step just inside the house and grab the back of her neck, pulling her lips to mine.

“These are for you.” I hold out a bouquet of various purple flowers.

“Thank you, they’re beautiful.” She brings the bouquet to her face and inhales its sweet scent.

“You ready to go?” I ask when she comes back from putting them in the kitchen.

She nods, and I lead her out the door.

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“Nope,” I say, exaggerating the popping sound on the *p*. I open the passenger door to my truck, and she hops in. I confirm that she’s all set and shut the door before running around to the other side.

We make small talk the entire drive down Highway 15. However, as we approach the crash site, a heavy silence surrounds us. Without even realizing it, my speed has slowed. I peer out the window at the small white wooden cross on the side of the highway, and my grip tightens on the steering wheel.

Soft fingers close around my right hand. I look over at Riley, and her warm gaze washes over me.

“So, I’m not sure we’re the only love blossoming in Meadows Ridge lately,” she says, pulling my attention away from the site back toward her and the road.

I quirk a brow, not sure where she’s going with this.

“Yep,” she says with a big smile, adjusting in the seat and pulling her left leg under her right thigh. “It seems since they left, Sutton and Ace haven’t stopped talking. They even made plans to meet up for New Year.”

Holy shit, I did *not* see that coming. But good for him. I need to remember, though, to give him shit for not sharing any of that information with me.

“Thank you,” I admit when I realize she did that to distract my mind.

“Why, I have no idea what you’re talking about.” She smirks, tucking a few pieces of hair behind her ear.

I click my tongue on the roof of my mouth and chuckle as I put my blinker on and turn down the gravel road that leads to the fairgrounds.

Riley sits up straighter, placing her palms on the dashboard. “Cooper, where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

As I come around the curve passing the barn, she lets out an audible gasp, taking in the view in front of us.

Instead of pulling directly into the space, I pull forward and back up till I’m just a few feet from the large projector screen.

When Riley doesn't move to get out after I put the truck in park and turn it off, I nudge her knee with the back of my hand.

“Well, come on, babe. For someone so excited earlier to want to know where we're going, you haven't moved at all.”

With that, she jumps out of the vehicle. Riley stands there in awe as I step up behind her and wrap my arms around her waist. “You like?”

She twists in my arms and wraps her arms around my neck. “I love it.”

“Good. I wanted to do something special for you. Life has been so crazy lately. I wanted to show you how appreciative I am of you.”

“I love you,” she says before pressing up on her toes and kissing me. When her tongue slips into my mouth, I pull her tighter against me. Before we lose ourselves in that kiss, I reluctantly pull back. I could spend the entire evening kissing her, but I also want to show her everything that my dad and I set up.

I lead her over to the bench that has pillows and folded-up blankets that I had left here earlier.

We set up the bed of my truck in no time, making our own romantic oasis surrounded by twinkling lights and the sunset. I set up the projector on the edge of the truck bed while Riley grabs us two beers from the cooler.

Riley sinks back against my chest, her head resting on my shoulder. “God, it’s beautiful out here,” she sighs.

While she focuses her gaze on the sky, I solely focus on her. “Yeah, it is,” I breathe.

Riley snorts. “God, you’re so cheesy.”

“Nah, just honest.”

Riley tips her head back, and I lean down, pressing my lips against hers. Before the kiss can get too heated, I pull back and press a chaste kiss to her forehead.

We settle in and focus on the movie. At some point, I zone out, focusing on the darkness out in the distance.

“Hey, you okay?” Riley asks, cupping my cheek, breaking me out of the trance.

“Never better. Just soaking in this moment—here with you.” I swallow slowly and watch Riley’s eyes focus on my bobbing Adam’s apple. “I don’t deserve you.”

She opens her mouth to speak, but I press my finger against her lips, silencing her. “Just let me finish. I don’t deserve you,” I repeat, “but I am the luckiest bastard in the world. Riley Parker, you own me, mind, body, and soul. I’m not sure I will ever believe I’m worthy of you.”

Riley climbs into my lap and cups my cheeks with her palms. “I love you, yesterday, today, and always.” She pulls my face to hers. The kiss turns from sweet to passionate in a matter of seconds.

“God, I want you,” she pants.

I’m helping her out of her jacket when a droplet of water hits my cheek. *What the hell?*

Riley must feel it, too, because she freezes and looks up.

“Oh my God,” she shrieks as one, then two, then multiple raindrops fall.

She hops off my lap and out of the bed of the truck. I follow her, grabbing the projector and throwing it in the truck before it’s ruined. I don’t care about the pillows and blankets.

*Well, so much for a romantic evening.*

“Hey, come here,” I say, beckoning her with my finger. “I wasn’t done with you.”

I grab her hand and help her carefully climb over into my lap.

My gaze drops to follow her tongue, darting out and dragging against her plump bottom lip.

Her hips roll against my hardening erection as she adjusts herself. I let out a small growl at the friction.

“You are so beautiful,” I whisper as I stare into her eyes. There’s that one song that says you can tell if someone loves you by their kiss, but I think it’s in their eyes. The way she looks at me, the way her eyes communicate and I can hear, even if her lips aren’t moving. Sometimes I even forget how to breathe when we lock eyes. I don’t know what I did to deserve

the love of this woman, but I promise to never take her for granted and give her the world she deserves.

“Are you okay?” She tilts her head and stares intently at me, trying to look into my soul. If she did, she would see herself and the future I want for us.

“Perfect,” I breathe before we come together like two magnets drawn to each other—made for each other.

With my hands steady on her hips, I forcefully rock her back and forth over my lap as her fingers link behind the back of my neck.

“That’s it, baby. Take what you need. Grind on me till that pretty little pussy comes.”

Her movements increase, and I know she’s close. I try to adjust us so that I can pop the button on her jeans and slip my fingers inside to rub her clit, but we’re now at an awkward angle. This used to be so much easier when we were younger.

Riley lets out a small groan in frustration and slows her movements.

“Take me home, Cooper,” she pants before pulling back and settling back in the passenger seat.

By the time we pull back into her driveway, the rain has shifted from a light drizzle to a torrential downpour.

“Ready?” I ask with my hand on the handle of the door as huge water droplets pelt against the windshield.

Riley giggles and leans over, pressing a quick kiss to my lips before opening her own door and sprinting to the front door.

Her laughter mixes with mine as I accidentally run through a huge puddle, splashing water and mud all over my jeans.

Once we're both safely on the front porch, I take my hat off and shake my head like a dog. Even though I was wearing a hat, water drips off the ends of my drenched hair and flies all over Riley.

“Oh my God, what is wrong with you?” she laughs, brushing her own wet hair off her face.

I grab her hips and pull her flush against my front before she can unlock the door.

“You know I just love getting you wet,” I whisper against her lips in a husky tone. I feel like a damn teenage boy with my hormones when I'm around her.

“Let's go inside,” she pants.

I nod and twist her around, her back now against my front.

“Maybe next time, be sure to check the forecast before planning an outside date night,” she giggles as she turns her key in the door.

I mock her and walk inside behind her, keeping a minimal distance between us.

Before I can reply, we both still as loud applause and familiar piano chords play through the house's Bluetooth



speakers. Is Austin having some sort of concert?

Second later, Austin slides across the floor from the kitchen. His back is toward us, so he clearly hasn't noticed that we came home. Austin is channeling his inner Tom Cruise, dressed in a light gray long-sleeve dress shirt, plaid boxers, and white socks that are pulled up mid-calf. If that wasn't bad enough, it seems he has a spatula in hand as a makeshift microphone.

He spins around when Bob Seger belts out the lyrics to "Old Time Rock and Roll." Perched on Austin's face are dark-rimmed sunglasses. *Damn, homeboy is going all out for his performance.* His off-key and over-the-top dancing have both Riley and me frozen with our jaws hanging and eyebrows raised.

Riley covers her mouth with both her hands, trying to stifle her laughter.

It's not until he shimmies in an almost sumo-wrestler-style stance that he notices us.

"Fuck," he shouts at the top of his lungs. When he launches backward, the sunglasses fall to the ground with a loud clang. "What the fuck, guys?" he asks breathlessly, one hand clutching the spatula against his chest while the other leans down to grab his glasses. "I thought y'all were out for the evening."

"Well, we were, but you know, kind of need decent weather for an outside date," Riley teases and looks back at the window at the top of the front door that is now covered in

water droplets. I let out a deep sigh. I know she's never going to let me live this down.

"I guess we don't have to ask how your evening is going." After helping Riley out of her wet jacket, I pull off my hoodie.

"Hey, I've had a house full of people the last week. Excuse me"—he points the spatula in my face before realizing what he's doing and tossing it to the side—" for wanting to enjoy the peace and quiet in my own damn house. You don't like it, Graham, get the hell out."

It's too easy to get him riled up. "Relax, dude. Don't get your tighty-whities in a bunch."

"Alright, you two, don't make me play referee." Riley stands between us, holding her hands up. She turns toward Austin. "We'll get out of your way and head upstairs and get out of these wet clothes. We'll probably stay in my room and watch a movie." She grabs my hands and laces our fingers together before heading toward the stairs. "You won't even know we're here, so you can get back to your—what, three shows a night?"

Our laugh echoes as we race up the stairs, ignoring Austin flipping us the middle finger.

"Shower?" Riley asks as we approach the bathroom door.

"Don't have to ask me twice. If it involves you naked, the answer is always yes."

I can't see, but I know she's rolling her eyes at me.

“By the way, babe, if your guy’s performance is anything like that,” I say, referring to Austin’s performance we walked in on, “I’m pretty sure I’ve got this in the bag.”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t underestimate me.” There’s mischief and challenge dancing in her eyes.

Riley lets out a shriek when I reach down and grab her thighs from behind and lift her onto the counter before settling between her spread thighs. Her hands rake over my beard.

“You know I love this on you.”

I belt out a chuckle. “Pretty sure you’re the only one who doesn’t give me shit about it.”

“Well, no one else gets to experience how incredible it feels against their skin.” Riley wraps her legs around my back and tugs me closer.

“Oh, yeah?” I ask, leaning down and pressing my face into the crook of her neck. “Right here?”

“Lower.” Her voice is husky and full of need.

If I wasn’t turned on right now and worried she might kick me, I’d pull an Austin Powers joke and lower my voice instead of my mouth. I know I make the right decision, peppering kisses down the valley of her breasts with her little whimpers of need. I unhook her bra and discard it to the floor.

“You’re getting warmer.” A light flush covers her cheeks, my favorite shade of pink.

Riley's stomach muscles tense as she lifts so that I can remove her pants, which is not an easy task pulling wet denim that has clung to her like a second skin.

Sliding my finger through her pussy, I find her arousal coating her lower lips. "Mmm, and you're getting wetter."

I slip a finger inside her with ease, twisting it around like a corkscrew, like I know she loves and which gets her off quickly.

"Baby, you need to be quiet, or Austin is going to hear you."

Another moan slips from her lips as her walls clench around my fingers. To silence her, I kiss the hell out of her. Her moans travel straight to my cock, and I need to have her.

"Come on, let's get in the shower so I can fuck you against the wall."

"Yes, sir."

## Chapter 39

### Riley

**T**ime flies when you're happy and in love. At least, that's what I keep telling myself because somehow, we blinked and it's already January and the night of the PTA lip-sync fundraiser.

Winter break was kind of a blur. My entire family came to visit over Christmas. I really didn't think I could fall even deeper in love with Cooper Graham until I saw him with my nieces. They clung to him like glue. By the end of the trip, they were both calling him Uncle Coopy, although my youngest niece, who is only two, pronounced it more like Uncle Poopy.

Lyla's husband, Gavin, knew I had a history with the famous Cooper Graham, but seeing him fangirl over him was priceless. He was in even more shock when Sutton left early to go spend New Year's Eve with Ace in Chicago.

When not rehearsing with Austin or hanging out with family, Cooper and I searched for a house. After what felt like years, we finally found one that we both loved. We just

submitted an offer yesterday and are waiting to hear back. It's close to his parents' house.

As I watch the art department perform the Backstreet Boys' "I Want It That Way," my mind swirls with anxiety.

*Will I remember all the choreography?*

*Will I trip?*

*Will I remember my facial expressions and to not look down?*

But the most important thing I remind myself of is to smile and have fun.

I've lost count of how many times I've stepped out onto a stage since I was three years old. But it doesn't matter because the same sense of nerves always washes over me while I wait in anticipation for the music to start. Even though I know the choreography better than the back of my hand, it doesn't mean I'm not internally freaking out right now. When the music starts, adrenaline will replace the nerves, and I'll lose myself in the steps.

My mind focuses, going over the choreography, when arms wrap around me from behind, causing me to startle.

"It's just me," Cooper whispers in my ear.

"Jesus, Coop, are you trying to give me a heart attack? I'm pretty sure if I can't perform, that automatically null and voids the terms of our bet."

“I wouldn’t dare dream about it.” Cooper twists me around to face him before taking a step back to take in my outfit.

Neither of us was willing to share which song we were performing, but I’m pretty sure it’s now pretty explanatory that Austin and I are performing “I2I” by Powerline from *The Goofy Movie*. Austin and I are both wearing bright yellow onesies that we bought online.

When I had originally told Austin my plan last year, he was dead set against it.

*“No, absolutely not. I’m going to look like a giant banana,” he complained when I suggested we wear matching yellow jumpsuits to channel our inner Powerline from The Goofy Movie.*

While I’ve loved our previous routines—Danny and Sandy from *Grease* and Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers—I’m not sure any performance will ever top this one. The icing on the cake won’t only be winning the competition and adding a third trophy to the shelf in our house but kicking Cooper’s ass.

Cooper rubs his jaw as he appraisingly checks out my outfit.

“You know, I typically prefer you naked, but I’m digging this look.” His finger traces my body from top to bottom, following the line of his eyesight.

We’re saved by the bell—or, well, the end of the song—before he can say anything further.

I smile at the art department as they make their way offstage. “Great job, guys.”

“Please welcome to the stage our defending champions, Riley Parker and Austin Hayes,” Principal Horne announces.

“See how it’s done, babe,” I shout over my shoulder to Cooper.

He steps forward and spans my ass, and I let out a shriek. “Go get ’em, tiger,” he laughs.

As soon as I step out onstage, my heart races.

*Thump. Thump.*

*Thump. Thump.*

*Thump. Thump.*

I’m surprised the audience can’t hear the steady beat of my heart as I walk in complete darkness and take my position beside Austin. The seconds feel like they turn into days as we wait for the music to start.

Just before I cross my arms, fingers wrap around mine and give them a reassuring squeeze. I follow the arm up to find Austin staring at me. Even in the darkness, I can see his styled hair sticking straight up. We used about half a bottle of gel to get it to stick up like Powerline.

“We got this,” he says in a hushed tone, knowing that if he speaks too loudly, it will echo on the stage out to the audience.

“I know,” I whisper back before crossing my arms over my chest.

Blue, red, and purple lights flash on the stage, matching the opening beats of our song.



I plaster a huge smile on my face, getting into character just as the lights light up the stage.

The opening dance moves are simple yet match the upbeat tone. My smile doubles when I see out of the corner of my eye Austin's mouth moving, not to the lyrics like we're supposed to be but counting. He's so focused on not missing a single step.

We fall into rhythm and motion, and as the song progresses, the moves get a little more intricate. Ignoring Cooper in the wings and his loud cheers, I allow myself to get lost in the music and the audience. I'm not an English teacher performing in her high school but literally living out my Lizzie McGuire fantasy and pretending I'm a pop star onstage. I know, I know, wrong Disney movie, but same generation.

We have a whole stunt section planned for the instrumental guitar solo. However, as soon as I cross my right ankle over my left and twist around, it's not the stock video footage we have from a concert venue on the screen. The screen goes blank for a second before a new video appears. I bring both hands to cover my mouth as I gasp.

Tears well in my eyes as I watch home video footage of Tanner playing his guitar to what looks like the exact beat of the song. It's when he looks up at the camera, points, and winks, as if he is doing it directly at me, that the tears finally spill. *Thank God my mascara is waterproof.*

I look over to the side of the stage, where Cooper stands with his arms crossed over his chest. Even though he quickly

wipes away a tear, it's his smile that gives him away. It's not one of shock, but it's as if he's proud of himself for pulling this off.

*How did he do this?*

*Why is Austin not as fazed and surprised as I am? Did he know?*

During the entire instrumental part, I stand here like a deer in headlights. So much for our planned choreography.

When the lyrics start back up, I'm still in shock at the screen behind me until Austin slides up next to me and gives my hip a small check with his own that causes me to stumble to the side.

He gives me a stern look that's both apologetic and telling me to get it together.

I turn to face the audience and, for a moment, completely forget where I am and what I'm supposed to be doing. Closing my eyes to catch my breath, I find my focus and pretend that somewhere out in the audience is Tanner dancing along with us.

I open my eyes and get back into character just in time to link my arms with Austin and flip over his back as the song gets its loudest, indicating it's time for our big finale.

Austin and I spent hours watching YouTube videos on learning the choreography done in *The Goofy Movie* during this scene—a rendition of Goofy's perfect cast.

Austin thought I was possibly certifiably insane for wanting to recreate it, and who knows, it's quite possible that I am, in fact, certifiable, but Austin and I nailed it during every rehearsal.

The crowd goes wild. I'm sure the parents of the students recognize the moves more so than the students.

We each dance toward the front of the stage to hype up the crowd and get them cheering, clapping our hands and inserting a few improvised moves.

As soon as the lights finally fade, I rush off the stage and jump directly into Cooper's open arms.

"Oh my God," I shriek. "I can't believe you and Austin did that and didn't tell me."

I slide down his body reluctantly and give his chest a slight shove, but he doesn't even move, not even in the slightest. His hands remain firmly planted on my hips.

"I'd say I'm sorry, but I'm not." He chuckles, brushing a stray hair off my sweaty forehead. "It was important for Tanner to be a part of today."

"What do you mean, a part of today?" He's not exactly making sense at the moment.

Cooper leans down and kisses the tip of my nose. "All in due time, baby." He winks.

*What the fuck does that mean?*

“Now, go take your seat.” He nods toward the stage exit that leads to the audience.

“Why can’t I stay here to watch you?”

“Because I’m asking you nicely,” he lies through his teeth, followed by a panty-melting smile.

“What are you up to, Cooper James?” I narrow my eyes at him. I smell bullshit here. He’s clearly playing dirty and has something up his sleeve.

“Nothing.” He spins me around and gives me a tiny push toward the door.

“I got my eye on you, mister,” I taunt over my shoulder.

“I hope so. That way, *you* can see how a real winner performs.”

I roll my eyes but willingly leave backstage and make my way to the seat reserved in the front row.

“Jeez, took you long enough.” Austin laughs when I finally take the empty seat beside him. At the end of our performance, Austin had gone off the same side of the stage he had entered from. He must have run straight to his seat.

I smack his arm.

“Woah, what was that for?” He massages the spot where I just hit him as if I had actually hit him hard. He’s lucky I didn’t kick him in the balls for the stunt he pulled. That moment of distraction and surprise on my part could fuck up our chances of winning.

“I thought we were a team, asshole,” I hiss, just loud enough for him to hear me. “Why didn’t you tell me you added that video?”

He shrugs. “Cooper asked me not to.”

I bite back responding, “*And if Cooper asked you to jump off a fucking bridge, would you?*” Instead, I bring my hand to my chest. “And here I thought we were a team. Rude, Hayes. That’s just rude. I swear, if you cost us first place, it’s your fault. You realize that, right?”

“I’d expect nothing less,” he whispers as Principal Horne finally announces the next performer.

“Next up on the stage, please welcome Cooper Graham.”

I sulk back in my seat and cross my arms as his cheers are about three times the amount we got. Of course, people are losing their minds that there is an ex-professional baseball player in their presence.

*Big freaking deal.*

## Chapter 40

### Cooper

**F**rom where I stand backstage, I can see Riley smack Austin as soon as she sits down. As I watch her give him a hard time, I laugh.

I feel a little bad for any abuse he might take from her for me roping him in on my plan, but I meant what I said. I wanted Tanner to be a part of the day. It may not have been the way I had always envisioned it, but it was something. As I watched him on the screen on his guitar, I felt transported back in time.

Austin and I had stayed up late one night, long after Riley had gone to bed, watching some of the home videos he had from when we were younger. When we came across this video in particular, an idea hit, and after swearing Austin to secrecy, I put my plan in motion.

Principal Horne finally announces my name, and I take a deep breath. *Here goes nothing.*

I take the eight steps out to center stage to the microphone, which isn't actually plugged into anything. When the spotlight flips on, I wince. *Fuck me, that's bright.* How did Riley always

dance on this stage with those lights? While I wait for the music to start, I feel like I'm in the middle of an interrogation for a crime and sweating fucking bullets.

This is more than just winning a simple bet with her.

I glance down and see Riley now sitting and pouting in her seat like a toddler not getting her way, and I smirk at her. She sticks her tongue out at me, and I wink just as the music starts. She has no idea that I had reserved that particular seat for her and Austin to sit in so that she was front and center.

The opening chords of the Taylor Swift song that I've been playing on repeat for weeks play through the auditorium speakers. If I thought finally hearing the song would calm my nerves—similar to how I felt as soon as I stepped out onto the mound and the crowd silenced in my head—I was sorely mistaken. In fact, it does the complete opposite. The butterflies in my stomach start swarming as if trying to start a whirlpool in there. It's not until I look down at Riley again and see the look of shock on her face that I start to relax.

She's straightened up, and her eyes widen. Riley is a huge Swiftie, so I knew as soon as the first few notes played, she would recognize the song.

The heartbeat in my chest thrums to the beat of the pop song talking about Romeo and Juliet.

Riley's eyes never leave mine as I lip-sync the lyrics. Every time I catch my breath and close my eyes, memories flash behind my eyes like a montage of our life together—the first time we met in the locker room, picking her up for our first

date, telling her I loved her for the first time. Every moment of us that has brought us directly to this one.

I might not have fancy techniques or impressive choreography—my routine is more of a simple one—but what I do have is one rather large trick up my sleeve for a finale that I don't even think Riles will see coming.

During the instrumental section, which includes what could be a banjo or fiddle of some sort, I walk to the side of the stage with stairs leading to the audience.

“Cooper, what are you doing?” Riley hisses, her eyebrows reaching her hairline when I stop in front of her.

Ignoring the lip-sync contest, I focus on the woman in front of me, who is more confused than I've ever seen. Austin has his phone out, recording what's about to go down, and I nod in thanks. I hadn't even thought to ask him to do this, but I'm glad he was on top of things.

“I was a fool to walk away from you once before. But they say if you love something, let it go. If it comes back, it's yours forever. And that's what I want with you—forever. I've known from the moment we locked eyes in the boys' locker room all those years ago that you were it for me. We may have found ourselves lost for a while, but the stars aligned and led us back together. I've won a World Series before, but nothing makes me feel more alive than when I'm with you.”

I reach into my back pocket to grab the black velvet box that has been weighing heavily the entire evening and do as Taylor Swift instructs with her lyrics and drop to one knee. I



open the box to reveal a diamond solitaire engagement ring with a white-gold band. While her family was here for the holidays, I had her sisters meet me at the jewelry store in town while Riley believed I was at the cemetery to help me decide which ring to buy. I had it narrowed down to three, and both Sutton and Lyla picked this one, which also was my number one pick, too.

“Riley Parker, will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she whispers, her voice cracking with emotion. She stands up and repeats yes over and over as she holds out her left hand. I slip the diamond ring along her slender finger and let out a sigh of relief that it’s a perfect fit. Before my next breath, I’m standing and pulling her into my arms, claiming her mouth, not giving a damn that we’re in the middle of the auditorium, surrounded by a crowd of people. We ignore the applause surrounding us. I bring my hands to cup her cheeks and keep her mouth on mine as the kiss deepens. She doesn’t resist when I push my tongue into her mouth.

Austin clears his throat, and Riley pulls back breathlessly. “Not that I’m not happy for you two, but I don’t think you need to get all down and dirty in front of everyone.”

Riley and I both laugh as we break apart. The man has a valid point.

“I can’t believe you went through all of this.” Riley stares at the ring as happy tears flow down her cheeks. I brush a few stray tears with the tip of my thumb.

“You’re worth it, baby. And even if I don’t win today, I’m a winner either way because you said yes.”

She wraps her hands around the back of my neck, and I do the same with her waist. “You have such a way with words.”

“Better get used to it because you’re now stuck with me, forevverrrrrrrrr,” I say, quoting my favorite line from *The Sandlot*.

## Epilogue

### Cooper

It was a beautiful sunny day, not a cloud in the sky. Two boys with a dream and the man who had stood by their side. The photo that stares back at me feels like an entire lifetime ago—the start of our senior year. When cleaning out Coach’s belongings, I found the photo perched on one shelf. Ellie told me to have it.

Someone knocks on the wooden door. “Hey, Coach,” a familiar female voice calls from the open doorway.

I look up to find Riley standing there, leaning against the doorframe in jeans and a Meadows Ridge Wildcats baseball T-shirt. *God, this woman is gorgeous, and she’s all mine.* Her brown hair is pulled back in a high ponytail, her sunglasses perched on her head. My favorite part of her outfit, though, is the shoelaces on her sneakers that arrived yesterday that have little baseballs on them. I can’t see them right now, but I know they’re there.

“Hello there, Future Mrs. Coach.” I make a face at how corny that sounds. I shake my head. “Yeah, sorry, that didn’t sound as good as it did in my head.”

I set the picture frame back on my desk beside the photo of Riley and me the night we got engaged. In the photo, I'm holding Riley in my arms while she holds her left hand out, showing off the ring. In her right hand is Austin's and her trophy.

I may not have won the contest or the bet, but like I told Riley that night, I was a winner either way because she agreed to be mine forever. Although getting her to finally watch the *It* movies would have been a much better time than sweating my balls off in the Wally the Wildcat costume at the girls' bake sale earlier this month. Of course, North Carolina had a record high temp that day. I'm pretty sure that was Tanner looking down and laughing at me. I swear, sometimes I still smell that stench on my skin, but I'm sure it's all in my head.

She giggles as she enters the office and walks around to my desk. "I still love it." When she reaches me, I grab her left hand and kiss her ring finger, where her diamond engagement ring sits. Some days, I have to pinch myself to prove that this is really my life and I'm not just dreaming.

"I love you."

She leans down and presses her lips to mine. "I love you, too."

I pull her into my lap, and she lets out a little yelp before settling against my chest with her hands around my shoulder.

"You ready for this?" she asks as her fingers play with the curls at the nape of my neck.

Tonight is the opening game of the baseball season and my debut as the Meadows Ridge High School head baseball coach. Today also represents the first season that Coach Benson is not walking out onto that field. It's weird, and I've spent more time deep in my head in anticipation of this game than I did before my first game as a professional player.

"Yeah, I was just thinking." I pause.

"Sheesh, don't think too hard. You might hurt yourself," she teases, and I tickle her side. When she jerks to the side, her jean-clad ass rubs against my dick. I grip her hips to stop her from moving.

"Baby, stop wiggling like that because if you keep doing that, my dick is going to get hard, and the only way to fix that is to be inside you, and we definitely *don't* have time for that."

I double-check the time to verify we don't, and my shoulders deflate because there isn't even time for a quickie. The last thing I need is to be late to the first game and smelling like my fiancée's pussy.

"I'm sorry, what was it you were thinking?" she asks as she hops out of my arms and sits on my desk, facing me. I frown at the distance, but it's probably for the better.

"I was thinking about Coach Benson and Tanner. I wish they were here to see this."

She rests her forehead against mine. "Do you remember what you used to tell me when you played?" She places her

palm over my heart. “You told me I was on the field with you, right here. That’s exactly where they are, too.”

Déjà vu washes over me as I recall that not that long ago, the dream version of Tanner had said those same words.

“Alright, well, time to get to work.” I stand and step between her thighs. She wraps her arms around my neck.

“I’ll see you out there. I love you, Coop.”

“Love you, too, baby, to the stars and back.” After a quick kiss and another for good luck, we both exit my office. I head to the right toward the locker room, where my team awaits me, and she heads left out the main doors that lead to the field.

As soon as I open the door to the locker room and turn the corner, the chatter comes to a halt. All seventeen players sit on the benches, fully dressed and ready to go.

“I’ve been sitting in my office, staring at a photo from the good ole days of playing for Coach Benson. It hit me that this is the first opening game that he has not attended in his entire career. But as I stand here looking out at all of you, I remember he is here. He’s here in each one of you. His knowledge and love of the game is in your heart, and you’ll carry him with you long after you leave these halls.

“I want you to go out there and play your best, give it your all, and kick some damn Topsail Pirates’ ass. Now, let’s get out there, Wildcats, and win this for Coach B.”

The entire team shouts “yeah” in unison as they stand and put their hands in a circle.

“Wildcats on three. One, two, three,” I count, and the team returns, “Wildcats.”

Everyone grabs their belongings, and we walk out of the locker room, each player slapping the Meadows Ridge High School Wildcats sticker to the right of the doorframe.

I’m not sure who actually started that tradition. It was long before I was a freshman, and I’m sure it will continue long after I finish coaching here.

When it’s my turn, I place my palm over the sticker, then pause and close my eyes. I channel the strength of Coach Benson and the hundreds, if not thousands, of times he slapped this same sticker.

“Coming, Coach?” Beau asks just outside the doorway.

I adjust the brim of my hat and clear my throat. “Yep.”

Beau and I walk side by side, just a few feet behind the rest of the team, out to the Tanner Hayes Memorial Field, where the stands are standing room only. Just behind the fence in the first row is Riley, with Austin on one side and Mrs. Benson on the other. Since his passing, Riley and I try to stop by weekly to visit with Ellie. Melody and her family also traveled from the next town over to attend the game. It means the world to me to have them here.

The team is all settled in the dugout while I stand just outside, looking out on the diamond. It’s a magical place. Babe Ruth once said, “Baseball is, was, and always will be the best

game in the world to me.” This place is where I found myself, found love, and healed.

The overwhelming feeling of how far I’ve come since I first stood on this field hits me all at once. But I manage to keep the tears at bay. After all, there’s no crying in baseball.

With the smell of cinnamon lingering in the air, I know that I’m not alone here. I have two angels who are always with me. I clap my hands together. “Alright, boys, play ball.”

THE END



**Want more angst?**

Be sure to check out *I Never Planned on You*, an emotional brother's best friend romance about grief, healing and learning to love again. Keep scrolling for a preview.

I Never Planned on You Excerpt

## Prologue

*I*t had been a blast skating around the rink with my friends, though my feet were killing me, so I decided to sit on the sidelines for a quick breather. A slow song came over the speaker, "I'll Never Break Your Heart" by the Backstreet Boys. I watched the skaters pair up to skate to the song. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I felt a chill come up my spine as Emmett, my older brother's best friend, took the place next to me.

*"You didn't want to skate with anyone on your birthday?"*

*"I needed a break." I shrugged, never taking my eyes off the skaters. "That, and umm...no one asked me."*

*Emmett tilted my chin to his face with his forefinger and thumb and looked at me in a way he never had before, or maybe I just hadn't noticed. It was strangely comforting. "Danielle Kathryn Jacobs, will you skate with me?"*

*I felt the breath rush out of my lungs as I tried to find the words to answer him. A simple yes, and I couldn't even find that. My brain wasn't working, so all I could do was nod. Did Emmett really just ask me to skate? Maybe he just felt sorry for me. He reached his hand out in front of me and threaded his fingers with mine as he escorted me from the wall to the ice.*

*As the song continued to play, we skated around the rink. His hand remained in mine, and the smile never left his face.*

*When the song came to an end and his hand hadn't moved from mine, I looked at him nervously and began to pull away from him. "Well, thanks for the skate. I'm sure there were plenty of other girls to skate with than me, so I appreciate you humoring the birthday girl so ugh...I didn't look super pathetic."*

*As I went to turn to skate in the other direction, he tightened his grip on my hand. "Woah, Dani, I didn't ask you to skate because I felt sorry for you. I asked you to skate with me because I wanted to. If I wanted to skate with someone else I would have, but I only wanted to skate with you. I just wanted you. Don't you see that?"*

*I could feel my cheeks instantly flush. "I...I..." Again I couldn't find the words to say anything, so I just kept looking into those baby blues. I'd had a crush on Emmett since before I even knew what crushes were, but could he, in fact, have a crush back? People continued to skate around us, but all I saw was him. "I don't understand. Really?" I asked him when I finally found the words.*

*He inched even closer to me and brushed a stray piece of hair that had fallen out of my beanie, behind my ears. "Yes, you really didn't know?" he asked with a confused look.*

*I shook my head.*

*"I thought it was pretty obvious, but if you don't like me like that, then I get it. I'm just your brother's best friend—or your best friend's brother." Emmett took his bottom lip between his*

*teeth; he wasn't the usual confident Emmett I had always known. It was my turn to surprise him.*

*My own confused look turned to a smile as I took my other hand to his cheek. "Em, you have never been just my brother's best friend or best friend's brother."*

*He covered my hand with his own as his dimple appeared with his wide grin. God, I loved that dimple. I had tried for years to do things to always make him smile so it would appear. "Good, because I wanted to know if..."*

*He looked down at his feet nervously.*

*"If what, Em?"*

*His baby blues met mine again. "If you would be my girlfriend."*

*My eyes grew big. Oh my God! Pinch me. I quickly felt a pinch and realized that I had actually said that aloud. I began to flush again but then giggled. "I didn't mean to say that aloud."*

*Forgetting we were in the middle of the ice rink, we were quickly brought back to reality when we heard my brother, Zach, skate up to us. "Will you just give him an answer already? Mom said we had to wait for you to get off the ice to eat cake!"*

*I quickly turned to my brother and gave him the death stare. "If you would leave, dummy, then yes, I would." I turned back to Emmett as Zach skated off, rolling his eyes at us and flipping me the finger.*

*With both of my hands now in Emmett's, I smiled at him and nodded. "Yes, Emmett Adam Hanks, I would love to be your girlfriend, although, I don't really know what that means. I think this may have just become the best birthday ever."*

*There it was—that dimple again. There was something in the way he was looking at me, as if I had just made him the happiest boy on the planet, maybe even the galaxy. That look ignited something in me that I didn't know what it was just yet, but I couldn't wait to find out.*

*"Well, for starters, I get to do this." He put his hand behind my neck, pulled me closer to him, and kissed me gently on the lips.*

*"Wow! Yep, this is definitely the best birthday ever," I managed to say as we broke apart. His grin went all the way to his eyes.*

*"Yeah, no kidding. I never thought my first kiss would be that...perfect."*

*Wait, did he just say that I was his first kiss? I had dreamed of my first kiss for like, forever, and I had hoped one day it would be with Emmett Hanks, but I figured that was about as likely as getting kissed by Justin Timberlake. Hey, can't a girl dream? But, he just admitted that I was his first kiss too.*

*Emmett looked up and began laughing. As I turned to see what was so funny, I saw my brother making kissy faces at us just before he lost his footing on his skates and fell on the ice. That made me laugh hard.*

*Emmett turned to me as he began to take the lead, skating me toward the exit. “Well, I guess we better get over there so you can make a birthday wish and he can feel better by shoving cake in his mouth.”*

*As everyone sang Happy Birthday to me, I tried to imagine a wish that was better than the reality that happened today. Emmett Hanks had asked me to be his girlfriend. Was I sure I wasn't dreaming? Emmett leaned in to my ear and whispered, “Make a wish, beautiful.”*

*I looked over at him, smiled, and knew my wish was that we could have our happily ever after just like Cinderella and her Prince Charming. Closing my eyes, I made my wish and blew out my candle.*



# Chapter 1

Danielle

Emmett and I sit on the swing on my parents' front porch with my feet in his lap, rocking back and forth. End of summer in Maryland is my favorite time of year. Yes, the weather can sometimes be temperamental, perfect one day, like today, the next super hot. But the leaves are getting ready to change, and there is a smell in the air that lets me know fall is just around the corner.

There is a light breeze passing by as Em runs his fingers over the dolphin anklet he gave me for my thirteenth birthday. It has a turquoise gemstone, my birthstone, in the center of the dolphin. It was that birthday that Emmett had given me my first kiss and changed my world.

I find myself lost in the memory of that day—the way my hand fit in his, the way his lips brushed against mine, and the look on his face as I opened his present. I'd started to cry because it was so beautiful, and knowing he had bought that prior to even asking me to be his girlfriend and admitting his feelings made my heart swell with emotion.

“Hey, beautiful, where were you just now?” Emmett runs his thumb over my anklet again and smiles at me. I'm not sure if the goosebumps covering my body are from his touch or from the breeze.

“I was just remembering when you gave me that anklet. That was the best day of my life.”

Em leans over to me just inches from my mouth and whispers, “Oh really? I thought the first time we...” He waggles his eyebrows at me. “...was the best night of your life.”

My cheeks heat at the thought of our first time together. Of course, my mind then goes to thinking of the last time we were together too. I love that after all this time, he can still make me blush.

I roll my eyes at him. “Yeah, that was all right,” I whisper back at him while closing the distance and placing a sweet kiss on his lips. Well, what started out as sweet soon turns passionate. I will never tire of Emmett Hanks’ kisses. I want to spend the rest of my life getting those kisses.

Pulling back breathless, Emmett laces his fingers with mine. “I’m gonna miss those.”

Emmett and Zach are headed off to college at the University of Pennsylvania. Our parents had gotten them a two-bedroom apartment outside of campus. I still have to finish my senior year of high school, and then I’ll join them. Zach and I are what are called Irish twins, born within the same year. People often confuse us for regular twins since we turn the same age each year, but people never understood why we were in different grades. I don’t think my parents planned to get pregnant with me so soon, but, hey, if you’re going to have sex, you might as well be prepared for anything, right?

It's only a two-hour drive from Annapolis to Philadelphia, so Emmett and I can easily make the drive to each other, but I hate the thought that I'll have to go days without being with him.

Fighting back my tears, I cup his cheeks. "There will be no shortage of those, Em, not now, not ever. I will just have to save them up in a jar, and every time we see each other, we can open the jar and make up for lost time." I kiss his cheek on each side, then his forehead before placing my lips against his. I'm not sure how much longer I can hold back my tears, because I'll miss those kisses too. I just want to be strong and not show how much his leaving is breaking my heart.

"I love you, Cupcake. Forever and always," he breathes as his lips touch mine.

He started calling me Cupcake when we discovered how good of a baker I am. If it wasn't for lacrosse and the gym, I think Emmett and Zach would weigh five hundred pounds because they're always eating the sweet treats I bake.

Our kiss is quickly interrupted by a throat clearing. We both turn toward the noise to see Zach walking out onto the porch, carrying the last two duffle bags.

"You about ready, man? I think you've had enough time sucking face with my sister," he says while making a gagging face.

I stick my tongue out at him.

“I’ll never have enough time for that. You’re just jealous after Melissa broke up with your sorry ass,” Emmett responds. Rising from the porch swing, Em grabs my hand and pulls me up, then walks down the steps toward his Jeep.

“Nope, not even in the slightest, dude. I’m single and ready to mingle with all those college girls away from their families and ready to throw themselves at anything with a dick. And I just so happen to have a dick ready and waiting for them.”

I roll my eyes at my brother. “Real classy, Jacobs,” I mutter under my breath. Emmett laughs while Zach pulls me into a hug.

“You might not want to admit it, but you’re going to miss me, sis.”

He’s right—I will miss him terribly. I wrap my arms around him and squeeze tightly, tucking my face into his chest. This is becoming too real. They’re leaving me. We’d agreed we would say our goodbyes here instead of at the apartment in Philly. We were there just last weekend setting most of it up. All they have left is the rest of their clothes.

“I’ll take good care of him, Dani, I promise,” Zach whispers in my ear before kissing my forehead.

“All right, let my girl go so I can get in there or we’re never gonna hit the road,” Emmett interrupts, tugging on my hand to pull me away from my brother and back into his arms.

Waving him off, Zach finishes loading the bags in the back of Emmett’s Jeep. Zach’s Jeep was left at the apartment when

we drove back the other day. I can feel the tears starting to fall as Emmett pulls me to his chest. This is harder than I thought it would be.

He cups my cheeks with his hands, and his thumb brushes away my runaway tears. “No tears, Cupcake. I’ll see you next weekend when you come visit. Okay? We got this. You are going to kick ass during your senior year, and then this time next year, you will be coming with me. Zach will have to find a new place to live, because I don’t think he wants to be living with us when we have free rein to have sex anywhere, at any time.”

A giggle bursts through my tears as I remember the one time we thought we were home alone and Zach walked in on us on the couch. He was absolutely mortified and couldn’t look me or Emmett in the eye for a week.

Wanting to avoid him seeing my tears, I turn my head and look at the ground.

“Look at me, baby girl.” So I do. “We can get through this. Having you as my girl for the past four years has been the greatest gift ever. We’re not going to let these silly two hours tear us down. It’s only preparing us for forever.”

The tears falling down my cheeks go from sad to happy, but the smile on Emmett’s face turns to a frown when I start to shake my head. Smiling back at him, I put my forehead against his and whisper, “See, that’s where you’re wrong. I haven’t been your girl for four years...I’ve been yours my whole life.”

Emmett lets out a breath and kisses me as if I'm his air. Holding on to him tighter, I can hear footsteps approach, belonging to our parents and Haylee, Emmett's younger sister and my best friend. Reluctantly pulling away from him, I know it's time for them to leave. There are hugs, kisses, and tears by all, and I walk with Emmett to the driver's side with his hand still in mine.

"I love you, Emmett Adam Hanks," I profess, wiping the last of my tears away.

"Good, I was hoping you did," Em jokes. "Forever and always, Danielle Kathryn Jacobs."

After one last kiss and hug, Emmett hops into the Jeep and gives me his famous wink once he closes the door, mouthing "I love you" as he starts it up.

Haylee wraps her arms around me in a big bear hug as they drive off. "We've got this! They won't be too far away, and plus, you and my brother are grossly cute and have the rest of your lives to make us want to gag with your cuteness. Now, what do you say we head inside and binge scary movies and eat our weight in junk food."

I laugh at her and turn around once the Jeep is out of sight. "Why, Hails, I thought you'd never ask."

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## About Author

Stefanie Jenkins is a contemporary romance author and stay at home mom. Born and raised in Maryland, she has called Surf City, NC home since 2018 with her husband, two sons and black lab. When not bringing the characters to life in her head, Stefanie enjoys reading, watching cooking shows, listening to true crime podcasts and collecting coffee mugs with funny sayings. You can always put a smile on her face with a Dunkin Donuts iced coffee, photos of Grant Gustin and inappropriate memes.

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## Acknowledgments

Cooper & Riley's story has been in the works since January 2020. Yep, you read that date correct. I worked on them whenever I was dealing with writer's block but they never talked long enough to get out the full story. After I completed both the Promise & I Never Series, they were ready to talk... and boy did they. Their journey is anything but easy but then again, life never is. I loved writing this small town and am planning to take us back there soon. Don't worry, Austin deserves a HEA, too! Be sure to add *Bruises* and *Burns* to your goodreads TBR.

There are so many people to thank so I apologize if I have forgotten anyone.

**You, the reader** – As always, I have to thank you for picking up this book and taking a chance on me. Thank you for trusting me with your heart especially after reading the dedication. If you enjoyed this book, I would love for you to leave a review on Amazon, Goodreads, or Bookbub. Reviews

no matter how big or small are so important to us little fish authors.

**Jen** – Thank you for being the Ethel to my Lucy! I’m not sure there are honestly enough, if any, words that I can say to thank you for everything you did to help this book be what it is today. From telling me not to give up and set it aside on days I wanted to trash the entire thing to beta reading and calling me names for all I put these characters (AND YOU) through. I’m forever grateful to have met you and have you in my corner.

**Sandra with One Love Editing** – Have you forgiven me yet for all your tears? Thank you for polishing this story to perfection.

**Kate with Y’all That Graphic** – Thank you once again for another gorgeous cover. I had an idea in mind of what I wanted but it wasn’t 100% clear but as soon as I saw you post this cover, I knew deep in my heart that this was it!

**@msquires\_reads1004,** **@rinasreads,**  
**@mybookish\_rendevous,** **@scbookaddict,**  
**@mercedesgrace1627** – Thank you for commenting on my instagram post back in July 2022 where I was looking for a name for the character that eventually became Tripp Briggs. There were so many great names suggested that quite a few characters were named. I hope you enjoyed seeing either a cameo by you (well your name) or a “distant relative” in Meadows Ridge.

**Surf City Dunkin Donuts** - Once of my best friends told me I should tally up how many coffees I drink while writing...

well I lost count. OOPS! However, it was definitely enough to need to thank them for keeping me caffeinated.

**My Dad** – While I hope you never read this book, I have to publicly thank you for not laughing at me when I call you and ask “death” questions such as about how long are the hyphens between the dates on a gravestone. For those who don’t know, my father is a funeral director...he doesn’t just hang out in the cemetery like Coop. He’s always my go to for accuracy in that department.

**Melissa** – SURPRISE! Since I’m writing these acknowledgements after ARCs went out, I had to add you here to thank you so much for your love of this book! I don’t think I’ve ever had someone love any of my books the way you love Cooper and Riley.