

# *This Doesn't Mean Anything*

A NOVEL



SARAH WHALEN

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Mean Anything*

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and individuals either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

*For everyone who's ever feared the love they wanted wasn't attainable for them. You are valid and worthy of everything you want in this life.*

*And for past me, who worried she would have to compromise her own boundaries to find love (spoiler alert: you didn't. And you never will.)*

## *A Note From The Author*

While this story ends with a happily-ever-after (HEA), it deals with many sensitive topics, including, but not limited to: acrophobia, attempted sexual assault/sexual coercion/sexual harassment, domestic abuse/abusive parent (mentioned), death of a parent (mentioned), emotional abuse/gaslighting from a parent, some blood, alcoholism, and emetophobia (descriptions of vomit).

If any of these are triggering for you, I encourage you to practice self-care and be kind to yourself while reading.

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*Fall Semester*





# Chapter 1

Will you please just consider it?”

“Will you please just consider shutting up about it? And don’t you dare say I’m no fun,” Spencer snapped, returning her attention to excessively annotating her reading. Her roommate Reese stared with puppy eyes over her breakfast.

“It’s not that you’re no fun...”

Spencer gave her a withering look.

“...but we’ve been here for a month and all you do is lock yourself in our dorm and study,” Reese finished, ignoring her.

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Spencer said defensively, closing her book. How many parties could she have *possibly* missed in less than two months? She shouldered her bag and grabbed her half-eaten breakfast. “I gotta head to class.”

Reese pulled her back to the table. “Please? You don’t even have to talk to anyone. Just come with me. It’s so boring when you’re not around. Hunter’s always off doing dumb shit with all the guys. It’s like they all share the same brain cell.”

Spencer bit back the retort that would’ve asked her why she even bothered going if that was the case. What was wrong with staying in the comfort of your own dorm all night? But if

there were any party she was going to be dragged to, she'd rather get it over with before midterms.

Relenting, she sighed. "I will go with you to this *one* party, and just so I can make sure you get back okay. Now let go of my arm."

Reese's squeal was so high-pitched, dogs could probably hear her. "Yay!" Spencer fought the urge to cover her ears.

"You are way too damn giddy about this," she muttered aloud.

Reese tilted her head. "I can't be excited about hanging out with you?"

That threw Spencer for a loop. No one had ever said anything like that to her before. The closest she ever got to hanging out with anyone was doing homework in the same vicinity. She sighed again. "Reese, we live together."

"So?"

"We 'hang out' all the time. We eat all our meals together," Spencer reminded her. "We were even in the same orientation group. So was Hunter."

Hunter was really more of Reese's friend than Spencer's — they'd gone to the same high school, but she enjoyed the addition of his company, nonetheless. She couldn't imagine keeping up with anyone from her school.

Then again, Ravens College was maybe an hour's drive from her hometown, so she didn't see the point in missing people.

Not that her mother ever really encouraged her anyway. Or even texted since orientation. No phone calls. No going home on the weekends to do laundry because the communal machines were a nightmare. No grocery shopping trips or too-big dinners full of leftovers to bring back.

"Shit," Reese cursed, pulling Spencer out of her reverie. She was staring at her phone with a furrowed brow. "I forgot I have to meet with my professor to rent some supplies." She stood up quickly, shouldering her tote. "See you at lunch?"

*If I haven't faked my own death by then, Spencer thought. Or come up with a believable enough emergency.*



Unfortunately, Spencer hadn't found the time for either of those things between classes. She met up with Hunter and Reese on the outdoor patio of the dining hall. Even though it was almost October, it was still shorts weather, and her thighs were cooking from the heat of the metal chairs. But it was worth not having to constantly shout over the din of everyone inside.

“So, princess, I hear you're coming to the party with us tonight,” Hunter teased as he reached for the apple on her tray. His own tray was picked clean like crows had gotten to it. Spencer couldn't remember when or why he started calling her that, but he was stubborn, and she gave up on correcting him a long time ago.

She smacked his hand away. “Only so Reese can shut up about it.”

Reese frowned. “It's just so sad seeing you in the same position at your desk whenever I get back. It's like you never move all night.”

“I do,” Spencer said hotly. “I'm just trying to keep my scholarship. If I lose it, I won't be able to afford going here. I'll have to go to State and be surrounded by half of my high school.”

Hunter made another attempt at her apple, succeeding with a smirk. “We're barely a month in, how do you have *that* much homework?”

“I'm an English major. I'm up to my ears in readings,” she snapped, resisting the urge to pull one of them out and ignore them for the rest of lunch. She didn't really want to get into

the details of why they took her so long. Besides, the last thing she needed to do was prove their point.

“You’re 5’4”, that’s not saying much,” Hunter quipped unhelpfully.

Spencer scowled and opted to pick at her salad until enough time had passed that the silence turned from comfortable to awkward.

“Did you do the discussion post yet?” Reese asked, steering things back into neutral territory. In addition to being roommates, she and Spencer had the same freshmen seminar, but at different times. It wasn’t much more than a glorified study hall. Every so often, the TA would remember that they were actually supposed to have something to show by the end of the semester and assign busy work about their first year of college.

Spencer rolled her eyes, but nodded. “I got it out of the way. That class is a waste of time.”

Reese groaned. “I forgot to do last week’s.” She slumped on the table and pushed her tray toward Hunter. He globbed an obscene amount of ketchup over her fries, smirking again as Spencer gagged.

“You could always turn it in late for half credit,” she said, turning away from the monstrosity on his tray. “I think he takes late work until the midterm.”

Hunter offered his two cents between bites. “Or you could make up some excuse and see if they’ll give you a pass.”

“I just don’t understand how we’re expected to write 500 words about our learning styles. Much less reply to two other people,” Reese grumbled, pulling out her laptop anyway. “How much do you want to bet he doesn’t even read all this shit? Who has the time?”

She was typing when Hunter used one finger to close it and offer her a fry.

“Ass.” She rolled her eyes and pushed his hand away.

He offered it to Spencer instead, who only accepted because her salad was barely edible.

Reese sighed, but slid her laptop back into her tote before standing. “I’m meeting up with my group to work on a project later, but I should make it back in time to help you get ready for tonight.”

Spencer nodded, still plotting her escape route. She stood up too, sliding the rest of her lunch over to Hunter. “I’m gonna head to the library. I’ll see y’all.”



The library being her safe space definitely made Spencer feel like a cliché, especially as an English major. Not that she thought she was going to pen the Next Great American Novel or anything, but her mother was a high school English teacher. Following in her footsteps seemed logical.

Instead of claiming one of the open study rooms on the ground floor, Spencer made her way down to the basement, where there was a room lined with dusty tomes and a literal light bulb dangling from the ceiling in addition to regular overhead fluorescent lights. In the center of the room were two circular tables, ideal for collaboration — or, in Spencer’s case — manspreading the contents of her backpack onto.

She randomly stumbled into the abandoned study room while unbelievably lost during the first week of school. She’d followed someone through the accessible entrance and didn’t realize it led straight to the basement instead of the first floor. The creaky elevator looked straight out of a horror movie, so she’d spent a good five minutes wandering around trying to find the stairs.

Thankfully, the tall boy with blue hair offered up the other table so she could avoid the commotion upstairs. For a library, there was a lot of people meeting up to “study,” which really translated to procrastinating with their laptops and books out.

There wasn't anything wrong with that, but the noise made it impossible for her to retain anything she read.

Nick, the only other person in the room, was sitting backwards on an office chair, straddling it while he worked on his computer. He cocked his head. "Weren't you just in here?"

"Shut up," Spencer snapped, slamming her bag onto the other table. At this point in the semester, he should have realized coming here was part of her daily routine. He'd apparently claimed the room for himself as a freshman, correctly assuming no one else even remembered its existence despite everything in there being fully functional and even more ideal for group studying than some of the rooms upstairs.

He was also three years older than her and always ready to impart some wisdom about college life. Not that his advice ever really applied to her. She didn't drink, and most of his advice revolved around alcohol and the consumption of it. To his credit though, she probably learned more from him than any of the freshman seminars about underage drinking during orientation.

"I feel like I never see you anywhere else. Hard to do that with a school this size," he continued, further distracting her.

Spencer sighed. "If I give you *five* minutes of my time, will you please let me do my reading in peace?" She regretted not grabbing her headphones before she left her dorm earlier. It was hard enough to focus on the words when he *wasn't* being distracting. Following along to an audiobook helped, but that strategy hinged on her remembering to bring her headphones everywhere.

"Well, it's not like we make plans to meet outside of here. I don't even know what you're majoring in," she said.

"You never asked. But I know you're an English major." He gestured at her stack of 'great' books on the table as he stood up and turned around to sit properly in his chair.

She rolled her eyes to urge him to get to his point. "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out."

"Biochemistry. Minor in math," he answered.

Spencer schooled her expression before the shock registered on her face. She wasn't sure what she expected it to be, but he definitely didn't seem like the kind of person to willingly torture himself with that kind of course load.

Nick laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back in his chair. Spencer hoped he'd fall out of it when he said, "There. Are we making plans?"

"Sorry, already got some," she replied casually, as if it were normal for her to do other things aside from hole up in her dorm all weekend. She'd never been permitted to go to any parties in high school, and there was little she hated more than trying to navigate unknown situations.

Nick raised an eyebrow. "And what would those be?" Spencer felt his line of questioning stemmed from the fact that it was boring as hell down here and she was the closest source of entertainment.

"Reese is dragging me to this party and I'm going just so I can say I had the experience," Spencer admitted, not even trying to act like she was doing her reading anymore.

Nick twirled a pencil, glancing her way. "I don't think I even remember my first party."

"Of course, you don't." Spencer slid over to pack up her bag, confident she wouldn't get any reading done now. She'd just have to catch up after the party, which she planned to leave early because of a still undetermined fake emergency.



Reese had a 4:30 art class in the studio, so Spencer was the first one back to their dorm. They'd somehow managed to get assigned to the half suite at the end of their hall, so it was just the two of them instead of four like everyone else on their floor. Since their respective rooms were smaller, they got the

consolation of each having a bathroom on either end of their dorm.

Their hall was *Avatar: The Last Airbender*-themed, courtesy of their pop culture-obsessed media major for an RA. Spencer and Reese's door was marked with their names on cloud sticky notes and decorated with air swirls.

Spencer's room was simple — she didn't see the point in decorating to the nines knowing she would have to take it all down again at the end of the year. Especially considering it was probably half the size of the other dorms. There wasn't enough real estate to crowd the room with much.

There was a matching pink bed-in-a-bag set covering her bed and a whiteboard (which hadn't been updated since the second week of school) hanging on the wall. The top of it still said AUGUST. And her bed was only lofted high enough to accommodate her school-issued dresser and her mostly unused mini-fridge underneath it.

Her desk sat against the wall opposite her bed, housing her small library of required readings and a modest lamp from IKEA. The only notable part of Spencer's living space was the ceiling, where she and Reese had convinced Hunter to stick a bunch of glow-in-the-dark stars above her bed. They weren't placed in any particular pattern or constellation, but Spencer liked being able to count them as she nodded off to sleep every night. For craft store stickers, they emitted an unusually strong green glow, much to her delight.

Reese's room, on the other hand, was like walking into an art gallery. Or a zoo. She had her original works lining her entire wall — sketches, paintings, collages — all of different animals and plant life. A handmade macrame plant hanger swung from the ceiling. She even made the quilt that covered her perpetually unmade bed, and Spencer didn't think she'd seen what the surface of Reese's desk looked like since they moved in. Stacks of canvases and magazines took up a bulk of the space, with different colored pencils and brushes scattered around.



Spencer almost couldn't stand the sight of it, but at least Reese kept her mess contained to her room. She plopped her bag on the bed and slid on her slippers. It would be another hour until Reese got out of class, and that meant another hour to work out some excuse to avoid going out later.



When Reese finally got back to their dorm, Spencer was following along to an audiobook of *Frankenstein* for one of her classes. She abandoned this endeavor to surreptitiously watch Reese amble in with some of her clothes.

“Absolutely not,” she said, crossing her arms and scowling at the outfit laid out on her bed.

“What’s wrong with it?” Reese asked innocently. She held up a pair of fishnets and a crop top.

“What’s wrong with what I usually wear?” Spencer countered.

“I just thought you’d want to wear something different for your first party,” Reese sighed before stuffing the fishnets away. “It’s hot and humid as hell, anyway.”

Spencer shrugged. “Why’s it such a big deal? What’s so special about a party?”

She picked up the crop top. It was black and loose enough that it wouldn’t draw too much attention to her body. “Make you a deal. I’ll wear this with these jeans. They’re high-waisted enough. You can even let me borrow some of your makeup.”

Reese squealed loud as hell again. Spencer scowled and made a show of covering her ears.

“Wait here.” Reese bounced up and headed into her bathroom. Spencer sighed, already regretting every decision in her life that led to this moment.

Her friend was way too damn excited about this for some reason. It wasn't the makeup that was the problem — nor the clothes. It was the fact that Spencer would literally rather cut off her own foot than leave the sanctity of her dorm to mingle with a bunch of loud strangers in a place she didn't know. The last “party” she went to was an end-of-year celebration for several members of her grade. And her mother had only permitted her to go because it was a school-sanctioned event that she could chaperone.

But Spencer had to admit that having Reese do her makeup while she got to relax in a chair was almost therapeutic. She hadn't had someone do this for her since maybe her graduation day. No one ever bothered to teach her, and it wasn't like she was going out much in the first place. Which was why being in this proverbial hot seat was bothering her more than she was letting on. She picked at her cuticles, careful to avoid chipping her meticulously painted black nails. It was the one “girly” thing she'd been allowed to indulge in without a lecture from her mother.

She wished she could just explain that she wanted to be the kind of person Reese was. Pretty. Outgoing. Someone people liked being around, no matter what kind of person they were. The kind of person that never made anyone feel invisible or alone.

Reese furrowed her brow, using featherlike strokes and concentrating like Spencer's face was one of her canvases.

Spencer listened as Reese muttered to herself, trying to remember what part of *Frankenstein* she'd left off on instead of how uncomfortable she already was. She closed her eyes as Reese angled her face upward.

“I know you don't really care for attention,” Reese said, “so I won't push you too hard. I just want to add a little something to...” She stopped short, focusing on gently brushing something on her eyelids. A second later, Spencer felt the cold slickness of an eyeliner pen, and it took everything in her not to twitch and mess up her work. Not that she wasn't tempted. Maybe it'd be too late to fix things and Reese would have to leave without her.

When she felt Reese's hands pull away, she risked speaking. "As long as I don't look like a raccoon that fell into the costume bin at a theater, I think I'll be okay. I just gotta remember I have this shit on before I accidentally wipe it off."

Reese rolled her eyes. "And ruin all my hard work?"

Spencer snorted. "You knew the risks, babe. You'd be better off doing Hunter's makeup."

"He said he'd let me do it for my birthday once and still hasn't followed through. I'm just biding my time at this point," Reese said. She checked her phone. "Looks like he's already on his way over there."

Spencer frowned as she followed Reese to the door. "I thought he was walking with us."

Reese shrugged. "We can give him hell about it when we get there."

"Is that a promise?"



## Chapter 2

Although they had no intention of drinking, Spencer and Reese elected to walk instead of drive. The townhouse was about a quarter mile away, so it was technically off-campus housing, even though the neighborhood was mostly older students and some regular townies.

“IDs? We’re not trying to get in trouble for giving anything to minors,” the guy at the door said, looking them over. Spencer squirmed in her outfit — which wasn’t even that revealing — as she flashed him her school ID. She hoped he was too busy being upset about being stuck on door duty to pay attention to what she was wearing. Reese was dressed similarly, her platinum blonde hair almost white in the washed-out lighting. Some mashup of the last year’s top music hits was playing.

The “bouncer” marked their hands with a red Sharpie X before letting them in, his gaze lingering on Reese. He wasn’t even trying to be subtle about it, and Spencer felt a protective urge come over her. They were freshmen for God’s sake, and judging by the number of red Solo cups, a good bit of the people in here were over 21.

Reese glanced over as they made their way inside the house, which was small and clearly furnished by guys. There was a ping-pong table in the middle of the living room, the limited kitchen counter space was entirely taken up by soda and alcohol, and a single leather recliner that looked like

someone rescued it from the side of the road nested in the corner.

There was a decently clean-looking couch pushed up against the wall, but there was still no way Spencer trusted that thing enough to sit on it.

A crowd of guys was taking turns drinking out of an unmarked gallon jug, but at least none of them had red Sharpie on their hands. There were different clumps of girls taking pictures around the room, dressed anywhere from ratty sweats to outfits more suited for a rave.

Reese grabbed two cups as they made their way to the drinks. “See? No one’s going to peer pressure us into drinking here.”

Spencer snorted, but took a cup anyway. She eyed the soda bottles warily, wondering if it was possible to spike packaged drinks. Their orientation safety seminar’s attempt at fearmongering them about underage drinking wasn’t exactly the most reliable of information sources.

“Do you want me to stay with you the whole time?” When they first met, Reese had mentioned several times that she opposed drinking, even after it would be legal for her to do so. It sounded like there was more to it than what she let on, but Spencer could never get anything else out of her. Their shared aversion to alcohol was what made their friendship work so well. They didn’t need to be inebriated to enjoy being in each other’s company, which was more than could probably be said for half the people there.

Surprisingly, Reese answered, “Whatever you want. You don’t have to worry about me, you know.”

“Just letting you know I’m here for you,” Spencer responded quickly.

Reese gave her a one-armed hug as she poured herself a Coke. “I’ll holler if I need you. But you should enjoy yourself, too. It’s not like you don’t know *anybody* here.”

She wasn’t wrong. Spencer recognized at least two out of the five soccer guys doing shots when they walked in, and she

was fairly sure some of the girls lived on their hall. But there was a difference between *recognizing* someone and being comfortable enough to socialize with them. Hunter was yet to be found, but he was probably already face down in some bushes or setting fire to something in the backyard. As entertaining as either of those would be to watch, Spencer wanted to have deniability when questioned about it.

She elected to sit alone at the foot of the stairs, watching Reese effortlessly weave among different pockets of the crowd. It seemed like she knew a lot of the people here, and Spencer felt a little guilty that her friend almost missed out on seeing everyone because *she* was feeling antisocial. Reese was definitely getting some looks, too, but at least people were leaving room for Jesus. No need to slide in like some surly human cockblock.

A slippered foot gently nudged hers, and she yelped. To her surprise, Nick peered down at her.

“Can I help you?” he asked. The corners of his mouth turned up as she hastily covered the top of her cup with her hand like she was afraid it would spill, hoping he wouldn’t notice it was empty. She didn’t really feel like explaining her paranoia regarding the drinks, because he would almost certainly make fun of her for it.

“Sorry, am I in your way?”

“Kind of,” he admitted. He gestured with his cup. “My room’s upstairs.”

Spencer remembered their conversation earlier. At a school the size of Ravens, there was only a matter of time before they saw each other outside of the library, even without making plans. She just hadn’t expected it to be while she was sitting like a gargoyle inside his house.

She could feel her face warming as she scooted to one side to let him pass, but he sat down on the step above her.

He looked different away from the harsh, clinical lighting in the library. His blue hair appeared more teal, and she could see dark brown roots peeking out from his scalp. She shook

her head quickly, wondering why she suddenly felt self-conscious about his eyes on her and the close proximity of their bodies.

“So, this is the party you were talking about earlier,” he mused teasingly. Good. He hadn’t noticed her staring. He pointed at Reese with his cup. “That your roommate?”

She nodded. “I’m just here because I promised I’d go to at least one party. Trust me. This is the last place I would ever be.” Especially considering she still had a reading to finish before the end of the weekend.

“I’ll try not to take that too personally,” Nick said dryly. “Sam’s the one who’s always throwing these things. I just run the door because I’ve been blackout drunk enough for a lifetime.”

Spencer regained some of her composure. “Aren’t you always the one telling me what *not* to drink?”

“Do as I say, not as I do. There’s Sam,” he said, pointing again with his cup. The man in question currently had a lampshade on his head. The actual lamp was nowhere to be seen. “Watching him get shit-faced every weekend should do more to scare you straight than those dumb alcohol safety videos you have to watch for orientation.”

“It’s a good thing I wasn’t planning on drinking, anyway. Beer smells like wood piss,” she said. A couple making out in the corner caught her attention. It wasn’t like she was purposefully creeping on them – they weren’t exactly being subtle. The girl let out a loud moan, and Nick smacked himself in the forehead. “Jesus fucking Christ,” he muttered.

At Spencer’s amused expression, his face settled into a scowl. “I’d yell at them to get a room, but this is my house and I’d rather they take that shit somewhere else.”

“Do you know them?”

Nick shook his head, still muttering under his breath. “I don’t even think they know each other.”

“What? Like you’ve never hooked up with anyone before?” Spencer teased, genuinely curious. Maybe it was her

own naivety, but she couldn't fathom the idea of so casually letting yourself be that vulnerable with a stranger.

He scoffed. "If you must know, at least my hookups never happened in a room full of people. Why do you ask?"

"Humor me," she said, shrugging. "I don't really see the appeal."

"Of what? Hookups?"

Spencer rolled her eyes. "Sex, Nicholas." Just the thought of it made her squirm and her pitiful lunch threatened to make a reappearance on her shoes. Her disinclination toward sex at least eased her mother's anxieties about her first year away at college — she didn't even get a sex talk before being left to her own devices.

One might call it trust. Spencer just thought her mother wasn't confident she'd ever need one.

Nick frowned. "You're young and in college. Now's a good time to figure things out about yourself."

"I don't *need* to figure anything out," she snapped. "I know who I am and what I like and what I don't like. I don't need to have sex to know I won't enjoy it — with anybody."

Spencer braced herself for his reaction, but instead of trying to convince her otherwise, he just nodded. "Good. Keep that energy if anyone tries to tell you any different."

When he wanted to be, Nick wasn't a completely bad person to spend her time with. In fact, she'd much rather be in the library with him than this fucking party. She could've easily found another study room that wasn't occupied, but there was something about sharing a space with him that made it easier to get things done. Not that she'd ever tell him.

"Why'd you ask me if I had plans if you were going to be manning the door, anyway?" She was desperate for a subject change, and she was a *little* curious. He hadn't been the one to card them earlier.

Nick shrugged. "My other roommate has a job interview soon and can't risk failing the drug test. I figured I could let



him relieve me. Besides, I don't mind taking the night off to wallflower with a girl holding an empty cup."

So, he *had* noticed.

"If you promise not to spike it, I'll let you pour some Coke in here," Spencer said curtly, jumping up from her perch to slip past him into the kitchen. It was mercifully less crowded now that everyone had moved to play beer pong in the living room. Reese caught her eye and waved.

"She seems popular," Nick said, watching as he poured their Cokes.

Spencer sipped hers slowly, grateful for the excuse not to talk. She leaned against the counter, trying to absorb everything — the loud music, swaying movements of a slightly intoxicated crowd, the shouts of excitement as ping pong balls sloshed inside cups. She shuddered thinking about the bacteria.

Nick winked at her before gesturing upward. "Wanna get out of here?"

"Are you trying to get me into your bed?" She eyed him warily, wondering if she should keep drinking the Coke after all.

"Well, after you so bravely spilled to me that trying to do so would be a waste of *both* of our times, I assure you I mean this in the most platonic way possible," he said, chugging his Coke and tossing the cup into the trash. "I just figured you could use a break from all of this. I know I need one."

"As long as you promise not to keep me trapped in this damn frat house for the rest of the night," she said, also tossing her cup in the trash.

"Not a frat house," he corrected her as she followed him upstairs.

She snuck one last glance at Reese. She and Hunter were at the edges of the beer pong table watching the others play.

"They'll be fine. We can't afford to get a citation because we sanctioned underage drinking," Nick said.

She supposed he had a point. There were too many people — something was bound to slip out. Not like it was just the three of them passing around a single bottle of wine.

He turned a corner at the top of the stairs, leading them down to the end of the hall. The walls were painted a standard cream color, bare of any stains or personal pictures.

“This is my room,” he said, stepping aside to let her in.

Spencer pointed at the door. “That stays open.”

Instead of arguing, he just held his hands up and propped the door open with his backpack, which had been unceremoniously discarded on the floor.

Nick’s room looked like a typical guy’s room, not that Spencer had much experience being in one. His queen-sized bed was in the middle of the room and lacked a proper bed frame, but at least he had sheets, a box spring, and more than one pillow. The plaid navy comforter was only a little rumpled, but mostly made. He had a TV on a dresser directly across from the bed, connected to a modest-looking L-shaped desk. It looked like he even had his own attached bathroom.

He swept his arm around. “Feel free to sit anywhere you like.”

Spencer shook her head. “I’ll stand, thank you very much.” She allowed herself to close her eyes, relishing in the relative silence of the room compared to what was happening downstairs. The tension in her shoulders finally left, and she relaxed against the wall.

“What time is it?” she asked, eyes still closed.

“Barely nine, why?”

She bit her lip as she opened her eyes. “When’s the earliest one can leave a party while still ascribing to social norms?”

Nick cocked his head. “Chickening out already?” His gaze roamed quickly over her body, and she wondered if he noticed that her cropped shirt showed the slightest flash of skin.

She couldn’t help herself. “See something you like?” He had to think it was absurd that she thought he was focused on

her appearance.

He pursed his lips together in a thin line and turned away.  
“11:30.”

“What?”

“You asked when’s the earliest you can leave a party without being judged. 11:30.”

Spencer groaned and slid down the wall until her ass hit the floor, wondering on whose authority it was that almost midnight was the earliest anyone could leave a party. She had to admit though, Nick wasn’t the worst company to spend two and a half hours with. They’d probably spent much longer together whenever she stopped by the library.

“And Reese wondered why I didn’t want to come,” Spencer grumbled. “I could be finishing a reading or working on a paper right now.” She cursed herself for not bringing her headphones. She should’ve known herself well enough to figure she’d find some dark corner to sit in for the duration of the party.

Was it forgetfulness or some minuscule amount of hope that she might actually enjoy herself that kept her from bringing them?

Not wanting to unpack that, Spencer drew her knees up to her chin and closed her eyes again, wondering if it was safe enough to nap up here until it was time to go. She heard the bed creak as Nick sat down, and she took that as a sign he wouldn’t try anything while she was up here. Not that he’d ever given her a reason to be this paranoid, but her experience with the male species was limited. Better to err on the side of caution.



Nick thought Spencer had fallen asleep until she asked him a question, but he’d been too distracted trying to figure out how

to show her he wasn't going to try anything. Aside from propping the door open and staying a good ten feet away from her, he didn't know how else to make her feel more at ease.

But she had every right to be wary. He was still technically an upperclassman with access to alcohol and, currently, no witnesses.

"What?" Nick asked lamely. He hoped she didn't think he'd been staring.

Spencer smirked as she repeated her question, hugging her knees. "Do you always take random girls up to your room during parties?" It took him a second to realize it was a joke.

He didn't know what came over him. *No*, he wanted to say, *just you*. There was something about a girl who didn't expect anything of him that made him feel very at ease inviting her up here. It wasn't often he had anyone else in here who didn't have ulterior motives.

Instead, he shrugged and said, "You're not a random girl." She never indicated she thought of him as a means of getting herself off, and it's not like they were strangers. They literally saw each other almost every day for hours.

Spencer was silent, ruminating on his answer.

"I have Netflix," he said quickly, "if you wanna watch a movie."

She raised an eyebrow. "Netflix and chill? I thought you were more creative than that, Nicholas."

He snorted and grabbed the remote. "Well, how else did you want to spend the next two and a half hours?"

"Move over."

Spencer came and sat primly on the very edge of his bed, like if she touched any more of it, she might fall in it with him. He slid to the floor in an effort to make her more comfortable.

"Gimme." She grabbed the remote from him and began to scroll. "Have you seen *Heathers*?"

"I've seen *Mean Girls*."

She rolled her eyes. “*Mean Girls* is derivative and overrated. How have you seen that and not *Heathers*?”

Nick shrugged.

“Well, good thing we’re about to rectify that,” Spencer said smugly as she pressed play.



“What the fuck did you just make me watch?” Nick asked, turning to her. He had to admit, he did like the movie, even though he spent the entire time ogling both Winona Ryder and young Christian Slater rather than absorbing much of the plot.

Spencer actually *laughed*, something unrestrained and probably unintentional. “You should listen to the musical.”

“There’s a fucking musical?” His voice raised a pitch as he turned to stare incredulously at the credits screen.

She was scrolling on her phone, holding one finger up. “If it helps, it’s *slightly* less problematic than the movie. Just a bit more debauchery.”

“I somehow highly doubt that’s possible.”

She shrugged. “Your loss if you don’t choose to listen.” Glancing at the time, she asked, “11ish is good enough, right? I should probably head downstairs and find Reese.”

He deflated a little, but nodded. It was nice talking to someone who wasn’t crossed out of their mind for once. Or trying to sleep with him. “Let me walk you down.”

They found Reese still mingling at the edges of the crowd, but she looked tired. Her face perked up when she saw Spencer. “Hey, babe! Did you have fun?” She cast a sidelong glance at Nick, like she didn’t know what to make of him just yet.

Spencer shifted back and forth on her feet. “Where’s Hunter?”

“Bathroom, I think,” Reese said, twirling a strand of platinum blonde hair around her finger. “Let me say bye to some people and we’ll go.” She turned on her heel and walked toward the kitchen.

Nick looked down at Spencer. “It’s dark out, you guys want a ride home?” he offered.

She shook her head. “Hunter’s walking us back to campus. Speak of the devil, here he comes now.”

Nick vaguely recognized Hunter in the way that anyone at a small school eventually learned faces, if not names. It was kind of hard to miss him. He had a couple of inches on Nick — and he considered himself fairly tall at 6’3” — with a mess of dark, floppy hair.

“Yo,” he greeted. “We ready to go, princess?” *That* had Nick curious. Spencer didn’t seem like the kind of person to tolerate a nickname like that.

But she just nodded. “Let me grab Reese.”

Sam came up to see them all off at the door. Nick frowned at the way he was staring at the girls. “On your way out already, Reese?”

Nick glared at him. “Sam,” he said, a warning in his voice.

His roommate ignored him, hanging onto the polite smile Reese had plastered on her face, even as her hands twitched uncomfortably at her sides.

Nick was about two seconds away from shoving both girls behind him to hide them from view when Spencer nudged his arm. “What crawled up your ass?” she asked as Sam finally walked away. Reese and Hunter were accosted by another group of people almost immediately.

“Just stay away from him,” he said tightly, shoving his hands in his pockets.

She raised a brow. “Care to elaborate, Nicholas? Isn’t that your roommate?”

He sighed and rubbed his face. “I just think if the first thing you ask about a girl is if she’s 18, you’re probably a bad person.”

“So, he’s one of those,” Spencer mused quietly.

Nick turned his glare on her. “I’m serious. You tell Reese to be careful around him.” He was going to have a talk with Sam about it, too. Probably would be another waste of his time considering this wouldn’t be the first, but it’d been a while since he actually stuck around at one of his parties and saw this shit in action.

The other two finally rejoined them at the door. Reese looped one arm through Hunter’s and the other through Spencer’s.

Spencer turned to Nick. “I guess good night? See you.”

“Good night,” he said. After a beat, he added, “Text me when you get back.”

She gave him a look, expression unreadable. “I’ll try to remember.”

If she didn’t, he’d be up all night worrying. Wondering if he should have forced the issue and driven all three of them back to campus. At least Hunter seemed capable and sober. Neither Reese nor Spencer had anything to drink either. There really was nothing to worry about. But it was hard not to be wary knowing the kind of person Sam was.

He waved them out the door, turning back to the little pockets of people still there. He found Sam in the kitchen, somehow producing more beers even though he thought there was no way they hadn’t run out already. Jordan, his other roommate, was nowhere to be found. People had stopped coming in hours ago, so he must’ve been in his room.

“I’m turning in for the night. Don’t keep me up,” Nick said. He opened at work earlier and then immediately went to his three-hour lab, meaning he wanted nothing more than to fall into a coma for the rest of the weekend.

Sam rolled his eyes. “It’s Friday, and it’s not even midnight yet.” He offered a beer as a white flag.

Nick shook his head. “I’m good, man.”

“Suit yourself.”

Spencer finally texted him right before midnight, saying they made it back to campus okay.

Now, he could sleep.

Before turning out his light, he pulled up the music app on his phone and downloaded the Original Broadway Cast recording of *Heathers*.





# Chapter 3

I am,” Reese started, “in desperate need of caffeine.” She slumped forward on the table to illustrate her point. “Why can’t this school do anything right? The coffee here is practically sewer sludge.”

Spencer swatted her with her book. “*Ew*. Stop being dramatic.”

“Drop it, princess. She’s just being a little goblin right now,” Hunter said, scooting his chair slightly away from Reese in case she threw something at him.

“At least I don’t look like one,” she snapped.

Hunter rolled his eyes. “Ask me if I care what you think I look like.”

“If you two keep arguing, I’m never gonna be able to finish my reading,” Spencer said, slamming the book down to make her point.

Hunter plucked the book out of her hands and set it on the table. “You work too much. You need to relax.”

Spencer sighed. “Give it back.” After a beat, she added, “Please.”

“I’m doing you a favor,” he asserted. “You can have it back when you finish your lunch. You haven’t even touched that fucking salad.”

She shuddered as she stabbed her fork in it, a half-hearted attempt to appease him. “That’s because I’m pretty sure most of the things in here are rotting.”

“Then why didn’t you get something else?” He proceeded to eat his own lunch, which consisted of his usual burger and fries.

“The chicken they’re serving today is still clucking,” Reese muttered.

Hunter ignored her. “Look, if you finish your lunch without trying to read this damn book, I will *personally* find you guys a place to get your caffeine fix. There’s bound to be something close by.”

“Is that a promise? I think the nearest Starbucks is ten minutes away,” Spencer said, slowly picking out the most fresh-looking produce from her salad to eat.

“Like I said. I’ll find you a place. Now finish your damn food,” Hunter replied.

Reese kicked his chair. “Don’t curse at her.”

“You’re one to talk, goblin ass.”

“Charming, Hunter, truly,” Spencer said, halfway through her salad now. He slid her book and the rest of his fries halfway across the table in response.

“I try.”

“Try harder,” Reese grumbled.

“Do you want coffee or not?” *That* shut her up, and he sat back in his chair, smirking.



The Grind was just one of several brick-and-mortar buildings on the strip, nestled between a nail salon and a gym. A chalkboard just outside the door advertised a 10% discount for

Ravens students. Spencer wouldn't have been surprised if Hunter chose it specifically for the images the name conjured up. It sounded more like a strip club than a place to chill out or do work.

"I guess this is it," Reese said, checking the address on her phone. "Why didn't he come with us again?"

"Think he said he was working on a paper," Spencer answered.

Reese scoffed. "Hunter? Doing homework? Tell me you didn't believe that," she said as she swung the door open.

Spencer followed her in, the bell above the door announcing their entrance. "Of course not," she snorted. "He spends enough of his time discouraging me from doing *mine*. I'm just repeating what he said."

She claimed a booth in the back corner while Reese went to the counter to place her order first. They swapped, and Spencer proceeded to dissect the menu to within an inch of its life. The barista cleared her throat, and Spencer realized she was next in line. The girl had enviably smooth golden-brown skin and her red hair was in a twist out.

"Uhhh, just an iced matcha latte, please," she said, wondering how she still needed to write a fucking *script* just to place her order.

It was ready at the end of the bar just a moment later, but Spencer grimaced as she took a sip.

The barista looked at her curiously. "Something wrong?"

"Sorry, I panicked. I meant to ask you what dairy alternatives you have." *Script, idiot.*

"Soy, almond, coconut, and oat. I can remake your drink for you," the barista offered. Spencer read her name tag. *Joselyn.*

She shook her head. "It's no big deal, seriously. I'll just remember to ask for oat milk next time."

"I can remake it for her, Josie. You go on break," a familiar voice said from behind the counter.

Joselyn shrugged. “Don’t have to tell me twice.” She took her apron off and disappeared behind a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY.

Spencer threw her hands up. “*Why?*”

Nick’s face scrunched in confusion as he took Joselyn’s place. “Why what?”

“Why are you —” she gesticulated wildly, “everywhere? Are you following me or something?”

“Well, for the record, I work here. And second, you came in after me, so really, it looks like you’re following me.”

“You work here,” she deadpanned incredulously. “How do you handle work with your kind of course load?” Spencer knew from some other freshmen that most STEM majors had three-hour labs at least once a week, in addition to their regular classes. And yet, he still found the time to study in the library for hours whenever she joined him.

His eyes twinkled mischievously. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Spencer fought back the urge to smack him.

Joselyn poked her head out from the employees-only door. “Nicky, quit bothering our customers and do something useful. Aren’t you supposed to be remaking her drink?”

He scowled at her. “Aren’t you supposed to be on break?”

She laughed. “Cousin dear, you clearly underestimate what I do here. The word ‘break’ is not in my vocabulary. There’s inventory to order.”

*Cousin? Nicky?*

Spencer looked back-and-forth between them. They lacked any family resemblance — but the way they bickered suggested otherwise.

“Trust me, I know *exactly* what you do because I’ve heavily avoided being promoted for the past three years for that reason,” Nick said, rolling his eyes.

Joselyn cocked her head. “Really? I thought you were just bad at your job.”

“Not any worse than you are,” he shot back.

“Fuck off.” She flipped him off as the door closed again.

“Love you, too.” He turned back to Spencer. “Where are you sitting? I’ll bring it over in a second.”

Spencer fidgeted. “That’s really not necessary.” Then, she noticed Reese heading toward the gender-neutral bathrooms, leaving their booth unattended.

He followed her gaze and raised an annoying eyebrow.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine,” she sighed.



Reese slid back into their booth, her eyes curiously flicking between Nick and Spencer. “I don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced,” she said. “I’m Reese.”

Nick nodded at her as he set Spencer’s remade drink down. “Nick. You guys went to my roommate’s party last week.”

“Sam’s your roommate?” Reese cocked her head. “He’s friends with some people in my art history class.”

Nick sighed. “Unfortunately.” He glanced back at the counter, where Joselyn was waving him over frantically. “I gotta get back to work.”

After he left, Reese rounded on Spencer with a speed that gave her whiplash.

“Talk,” she said, her eyes following Nick as he walked behind the counter.

Spencer shrugged noncommittally. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“You went upstairs with him at the party,” Reese pointed out.

“So? Nothing happened,” she hissed. “I just needed some peace and quiet. We watched *Heathers*, which he shockingly has never seen before.”

Reese rolled her eyes. “Sure, Jan.”

“I’m serious!”

“He’s staring.”

Spencer felt her face warm. “No, he isn’t,” she snapped as she conspicuously whipped her head around to see that, yes, he was looking in their general direction, but that didn’t mean he was staring at them. For all they knew, he’d noticed a spill somewhere nearby and needed to clean it up.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Reese working on a sketch for her human anatomy class and Spencer heavily annotating her secondhand copy of *The Odyssey*. She had one earbud out as she followed along in her audiobook.

Reese, however, clearly wasn’t letting things go. “How do you even know him?”

“He’s always in the library at the same time I am,” Spencer said honestly, omitting the fact that they were usually alone in the basement. That would give Reese ideas about the nature of their relationship — and there was no way Spencer was going to be able to come up with an excuse for *all* of them.

“He’s cute,” Reese said as she sipped her drink, very obviously trying to gauge Spencer’s reaction. “Love his hair.”

She didn’t take the bait. “Is he?”

Reese snorted. “You are painfully obvious.”

Spencer glared over her book. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” She contemplated putting in her other earbud and turning the volume up.

“Is he single?”

Spencer slammed the spine of her book on the table with more force than strictly necessary, tired of this line of

questioning. Couldn't she have a friend of the opposite sex without having to vet him out as relationship material? "How should I know?"

She realized Reese had baited her again too late.

Her friend was smirking, looking quite happy with herself.

"If you don't shut up about him, I will pour my latte all over your sketch," Spencer hissed, her face warming.

Reese did not look remotely concerned at the threat. "An excuse for him to come back over here with another drink? Why didn't I think of that?"

Spencer snatched her cup from the table before Reese decided to act on any impulses.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she repeated, picking her book up again, but not reading a single line.

Reese finally dropped the subject as she concentrated on a particularly detailed part of her sketch. Spencer took the opportunity to put both earbuds in, albeit with the volume lower than normal in case she missed anything.

"Spence?" There was a guy walking toward their booth.

"Mark?" She vaguely remembered him from high school. They had a couple classes together. Not significant enough of a friendship — if she could even call it that — for her to consider removing both earbuds, but she paused her audiobook and closed her book, anyway.

"How's State?" she asked, because it seemed like the thing to ask when trying to emulate small talk. She was pretty sure he'd gone on a football scholarship. He looked pretty much the same — stocky yet tall with cropped blond hair.

Mark pulled up a chair. "It's chill. Mind if I join you two?"

Spencer snuck a glance up at Reese, who shrugged. She was too immersed in her sketch to really care.

"Uhhh, sure." A lot of her high school ended up going to school in-state, so she was bound to run into someone eventually. But Spencer eyed him curiously as he sat between

her and Reese on the outside of their booth. It wasn't like they were actually friends. Honestly, she was surprised he even remembered her name.

Mark's eyes hadn't turned to Spencer once, lingering exclusively on Reese even though she was barely aware of his existence.

He cleared his throat as he finally faced her, as if he realized he should be addressing *her* instead. "How's school?"

Spencer shrugged. "It's fine. Not too bad."

"You're studying English, right? Like your mom?"

Spencer nodded, surprised that he remembered. Or maybe he was just taking a lucky guess because her mom taught one of his classes.

"I'm undeclared right now," he continued, even though she hadn't asked. "What are you planning on doing? Are you going to teach?"

Spencer felt a prickle of irritation in her temples. "Maybe," she said dryly. She knew Mark wasn't really interested in her five-year plan. He was still staring at Reese.

Despite her aversion to small talk, she asked, "What brings you up here?" *What do you want?* seemed like too bitchy of a way to ask him his motivations.

Mark's eyes went to the ceiling. "Was meeting up with someone and saw you through the window on the way to my car." AKA, he'd just left a hookup. Spencer wondered what possessed people to go through the effort of a long drive just for sex. Especially in Atlanta traffic.

"My brother Paul's actually a senior now," he went on. "I think he was wondering if you wouldn't mind helping him with his admissions essays. You won all those awards, so you must be good."

She saw Reese roll her eyes at the attempt at flattery. She opened her mouth to tell him she wasn't interested, but he interrupted her.

"He'll pay. Maybe \$10 an essay?"



Reese stifled a snort. Spencer sipped her drink as she considered his offer. \$10 was definitely more than a little low, but it wouldn't be much work on her end. Getting through readings was one thing — editing essays had always come easy to her.

“Sure,” she said, because money was money. She scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it to him. “Just have him email me. We'll figure out the payment later. Make sure he includes the prompts.”

Mark turned back to Reese, clearly glad to not have to pretend he actually wanted to talk to Spencer anymore. “I don't believe we've been properly introduced,” he said, extending his hand. “I'm Mark. Spence and I went to high school together.”

As if she hadn't been sitting there for their entire fucking conversation, listening to all of these details. “Reese,” she said flatly, returning the handshake with a limp hand. “We're roommates.” She didn't look up from her sketch.

“What are you studying?” Of course, he was paying rapt attention as she answered, and Spencer fought the urge to roll her eyes. Men were painfully obvious, the ones attracted to Reese exceedingly so.

While Reese was explaining the intricacies of studio art and scientific illustration to her sketchbook rather than to his face, Spencer excused herself to get another drink. By the way he was holding onto Reese's every word, it was obvious Mark hadn't even registered her absence. She met Nick at the counter, sitting on a barstool as he wiped things down. He raised his eyebrows and jerked his head in the direction of their booth.

“‘Friend’ from high school,” she explained using air quotes. “His brother wants to pay me to help him with his college admissions essays.”

“Interesting,” Nick said, eyes still trained on Reese and Mark. “What's his deal with her?”

Spencer snorted. “Same deal every guy has with her. I think he’s trying to get her number right now.”

“That happen a lot?”

“Yeah,” she admitted, unable to keep the bitterness from seeping out of that one word. She wasn’t jealous — she really couldn’t care less about the attention Reese usually got. It was the fact that *her* time was also being interrupted by guys like Mark that bothered her.

Nick smirked. “Save the bitterness for the coffee beans, Spencer.”

“Who said I was bitter?” Spencer snapped as she sipped her drink. He’d made it for free again, pushing her hand away when she tried to give him her card.

He gave her a look. She rolled her eyes. “Why am I sitting here again?”

“Because I’m excellent company,” Nick said easily.

“Compared to the troglodyte trying to get into Reese’s pants, maybe,” she grumbled. “At least you give me free drinks.”

“There ya go,” he said. “Bribery. The foundation of any strong friendship.”

“You need better friends if that’s what you think.” But she was smiling, Mark temporarily forgotten.

Until he came up and sat on the stool next to her. “When did you run off?”

“I just sat down,” she lied. “Waiting for my drink.”

Nick snorted as she tried to hide her clearly half-empty cup in her lap. She swung her head around, mouthing *I will end you*.

But, true to his nature, Mark either didn’t notice or didn’t care. “It was good seeing you, Spence. Hit me up if you ever swing by State’s campus. And uh, you can invite your roommate, too.”

He didn't wait for a response as he walked out. Spencer contemplated throwing the rest of her drink at him, because what the fuck was that? And *nobody* called her 'Spence.' Not her friends, at least.

"What?" she snapped, not liking the smug look on Nick's face.

He didn't bristle at her rudeness. "Wow," he said, chuckling. "That — that was funny as hell."

"I'm glad you think that people using me is funny," Spencer said dryly.

"Oh, trust me, he's an ass. I get that. But seeing you trying to keep your emotions in check is very entertaining."

Spencer crossed her arms. "How is that entertaining? What are you talking about?"

"Your expressions give you away. You were very clearly about two seconds away from throwing your drink at him."

"Was not," she said, lying through her teeth.

"Sure, Spencer," Nick said. "Sure."

"If you're going to keep making fun of me," Spencer said as she hopped down, "I'm going back to sit with Reese."

"Before you go, take these." He slid over two blueberry muffins in a brown paper bag.

"Bribery again," she noted. "Thanks."

"For the record, sweetheart," Nick started, smirking again at Spencer's glare, "if you *had* thrown it at him, I would've made you another one."

She rolled her eyes. "Good to know. Not sure if this is the kind of behavior you should be encouraging, Nicholas."

"I never made myself out to be a good influence," he reminded her.



Reese glared as she sat back down. “You. Left. Me. With. Him,” she hissed through tightly clenched teeth. “You owe me.”

“Fine,” Spencer said, tossing her the bag of muffins. “Was he really that bad? I don’t actually know him very well.”

Reese snorted. “He acted like you did.”

“I don’t even think he would know my last name if my mom wasn’t a teacher at our school. Did he ask you for your number?”

“He tried,” Reese said. “I told him I didn’t have a phone.”

“It’s right there on the table.”

“Exactly.” Reese turned back to her sketch. “He didn’t even bother asking before he tried to grab my sketchbook to see what I was working on.”

Spencer frowned and placed her hand over Reese’s. “I’m sorry, babe. You can have my muffin.”

“Hunter could take a page from your book. A woman is not that hard to please,” Reese said. But she slid the other muffin back over, anyway. Spencer picked at it slowly as they continued to work, wondering if it was still worth it to consider helping Mark’s brother out given how he’d gone about asking.

*Money is money*, she remembered.



# Chapter 4

**A**bsolutely not. You are *not* swiping right on a guy named Chad,” Hunter argued, snatching Reese’s phone out of her hands.

Spencer walked up with her tray and sighed, wondering if she should keep her distance before food started flying. “Do I want to know?” she asked, sitting down anyway.

Hunter pointed at Reese with her phone. “This one,” he started, “has horrible taste in men.”

Reese scowled. “Give me my fucking phone back.”

“As soon as I swipe left on him.”

Spencer rolled her eyes and grabbed it herself. “Someone mind explaining what the fuck I just walked in on?” she asked, holding Reese’s phone hostage. “I just wanted to eat my lunch in peace, but clearly, you two can’t be alone for *five* minutes without trying to assault each other. How the hell have y’all been friends your entire lives without murdering each other again?”

“Hunter seems to think he has authority over my Tinder swipes,” Reese snapped, crossing her arms.

Spencer looked at the phone in her hand. “You’re on Tinder? Why?”

Reese shrugged. “Why not?”

“Because all men do on there is look for people to sleep with,” Hunter answered dryly. “You said you were going to make more of an effort to raise your standards when we got to college.”

Spencer cut in before Reese acted on any homicidal impulses. “I used to think when people said they were ‘sleeping’ with someone, they were actually sleeping. I thought it was highly unlikely that someone could ‘accidentally’ fall asleep with another person, but not impossible. Accidents happen.”

Her admittance was apparently enough to distract Reese from assaulting Hunter — albeit at her expense. “That is so fucking wholesome,” she said.

Spencer scowled, already regretting telling them. “*Shut. Up.* Or I will end you. I didn’t get a sex talk, okay?” Her mother hadn’t deemed it necessary considering she never looked twice at a guy growing up. The closest she got was reminding Spencer not to be a teen pregnancy statistic.

“The Internet exists, princess. No one needs a sex talk anymore,” Hunter pointed out unhelpfully as he rested his foot on the back of her chair.

“Excuse me for being scared that all the search results were gonna be questionable and pornographic in nature. No one wants to see that,” she grumbled, finally handing Reese’s phone back over.

Hunter scoffed. “There’s an entire industry built on a good sample of the male population that proves otherwise.”

She covered her ears and groaned. “Don’t talk to me about porn ever again.”

“You’re the one who brought it up.”

Spencer shrugged. “I just don’t see the appeal. What’s the point if I never plan on having it?”

Reese frowned at her. “There’s nothing wrong with not wanting to have sex, but the birds and the bees is more than just what sex *is*. It’s about learning how to set boundaries and

what to watch out for. Manipulation tactics and coercion are just as important to be aware of.”

“I’ve done okay with keeping my boundaries intact so far,” Spencer replied as she ate, remembering how well things had gone with Nick the other night. Her pizza was already cold, but she’d gotten to the dining hall too late to grab anything else. “What’s it matter, anyway? I’ve never even been on a date. The closest I’ve ever gotten was being asked out as a joke.”

“You serious, babe?” Reese asked, arching an incredulous eyebrow.

Spencer stared at her. “Does that surprise you?”

“Considering, you’re a catch — yes. Give me your phone.” Reese didn’t wait for a response before snatching it from the table.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Spencer snapped, trying in vain to get her phone back. At 5’10”, Reese was a good half a foot taller than she was. All she had to do was stand and hold it slightly above Spencer’s head.

“Setting up a Tinder profile for you.”

Spencer looked to Hunter for help. “Make her give me my phone back.”

He held his hands up. “You saw what happened when I had hers. You’re on your own.”

*“Traitor.”*

Reese sighed. “I’m not saying you have to hook up with anyone. You don’t even have to use it. But it might give you some opportunities to meet people. It’s not like you’re interested in anybody here.” She gestured around the rapidly filling dining hall.

Spencer snorted. “Yeah, because if things end badly, I’d still have to see them all the fucking time. This entire campus is made up of like six buildings and two parking lots. Hunter’s dorm is literally spitting distance from ours.”

“Don’t give her any ideas,” Hunter snapped.

“Too late,” she said. “Should’ve helped me get my phone back.”

He leaned back, stretching his other leg out until it hit Reese’s chair. “This might be good for you. You probably have better taste than she does.”

Spencer ignored him and crossed her arms. “Reese.”

Her roommate finally sat down and slid her phone back over. “Just try it, babe. I didn’t put much on your profile in case you wanted to do it yourself. Just added some pictures of us and set your range to the metro area.”

Spencer looked over the profile and sighed. “Fine. But no promises.” She turned to Hunter. “Are you coming over tonight?”

“Depends. Whose turn is it to pick?”

Reese’s blue eyes glinted mischievously. “Mine.”

He scowled. “I love you, princess, but I might have to skip. Reese’s picks always end up scarring me for life.”

“Scaredy-cat.”

Hunter kicked Reese’s chair, earning a kick to his shin like their limbs were a pair of Newton balls. He swore and glared daggers in her direction.

“It’s my turn to pay for takeout, though,” Spencer said amiably before he retaliated. “You can pick the place.”

He waved his hand. “It’s fine. I’ll come.”

Reese stuck her tongue out. “Thought so.”



Spencer nudged Hunter with her foot. “The delivery guy’s outside,” she announced. “Go get it.”

“What’d you order?”



“Chinese.”

Reese came out of her bathroom, wringing her wet blonde hair out with a towel. “That was quick. Let me pull the movie up.”

Hunter paused at their door. He turned to look at Reese. “What are we watching, you fucking goblin?”

“*House of Wax*,” she answered as she stole his spot next to Spencer on the couch.

Spencer stifled a snort when he shuddered. “What’s stopping me from just walking out and taking the food?” he threatened. “That movie is the textbook definition of fucked up.”

“Because I paid for it?” Spencer reminded him.

Reese threw a couch pillow. “Go. Before the food gets cold.”

By the time Hunter got back, Spencer had already taken the liberty of setting up his “nest” on the floor in front of the couch, complete with spare blankets and a pillow.

He dragged their coffee table to the wall and distributed the different cartons and chopsticks among the three of them.

“Fina-fucking-ly,” Reese muttered as she hit PLAY. “October is *tomorrow*. This is the perfect movie to start off Halloween.”

Hunter snorted. “Didn’t realize Halloween lasted the whole month.”

“Amateur,” Spencer quipped. Hunter responded by scowling and stealing a piece of her orange chicken.

“Ass,” she hissed, focusing on the beginning sequence instead of getting her revenge. She hadn’t seen the movie and was eager to see what had him so pressed about it.



“See?” Reese asked, getting up to turn the projector off. “That wasn’t so bad.”

Spencer rubbed her temples. “I love you, babe, but I’m inclined to agree with Hunt on this one.”

He rolled his eyes. “Don’t sound so shocked about that. Am I staying?”

“I dunno, are you?” Reese snapped, sitting back down.

Hunter scowled at her. “Was I asking *you*?”

Spencer leaned over the armrest of the couch. “If you want. It’d be nice.” The movie wasn’t that bad, but it was enough to make her concerned about potential nightmares.

He turned back to Reese. “*See?*”

She flicked her wrist at him. “She’s never seen it before. What’s your excuse?”

“Don’t need one,” he muttered darkly, settling in for the night.

“I will step on you,” Reese threatened.

Hunter propped himself up on his elbow. “Go ahead, you fucking goblin. See what’ll happen.”

Spencer grabbed Reese’s arm and pulled her back to the couch. “You will do no such thing. We need him.”

She nudged Hunter’s body with her foot. “And you, Hunter Hale, will not do anything, either. And keep your fucking shirt on. I don’t need to see all that.” She waved her hand vaguely, shuddering at the memory of the first time he’d stayed over, and she’d come out of her room to see nothing but *torso*.

“Yes, *mother*,” Reese said playfully as she stepped over him to flick the lights off.

Hunter sighed from the ground. “There is nothing inherently sexual about me sleeping without a shirt on.”

No, but Spencer wasn’t about to admit that anything close to nudity made her squirm uncomfortably like a pearl-clutching Victorian lady. It was why she never took anyone up on their offers to do typical summer things at the beach or pool. She could barely look at her own body sometimes.

She scrunched up one of the smaller blankets to use as a pillow. The couch shifted slightly as Reese settled back in her spot on the other end.

“Good night,” Spencer hissed in the dark. “Remember, no fighting or you’re both grounded.”

Hunter grunted in response, and Reese rolled her eyes. “Yes, *mother*,” she repeated.



Nick read the email once. Twice. Three times. Just to confirm what he was seeing wasn’t a dream or an extremely cruel joke from the universe.

Joselyn rested her chin on his shoulder from behind, screeching when she read the CONGRATULATIONS in the subject line. He was one of less than fifty final candidates for an extremely prestigious internship doing lab work in the public health sector. There were only five spots. Being a part of the chemistry honor society got his foot in the door, but it’d been a grueling two years of busting his ass to get him this far. He currently had the highest GPA in his class and the highest number of credit hours, which was clearly working in his favor.

“You know this means my hours are probably gonna have to be cut,” Nick reminded her, smile already fading at the

thought of Joselyn and everyone else having to pick up his slack. Hiring another person was always an option, but that required training, and neither Connor nor Madeline had been there long enough, and Christian only worked a few shifts a week. It'd be a moot effort.

Joselyn punched him in the arm. "We'll cross that bridge when we get there. Tonight, we celebrate." She was already beelining for the liquor cabinet.

He sighed. "It's three in the afternoon, Josie."

She cocked her head as she reached for a bottle of wine. "It's happy hour somewhere."

"You're not 21," Nick argued, trying to scowl, and failing miserably at the look of cheer in her eyes.

"*You are.*"

He grabbed the bottle from her. "Maybe later." Joselyn pouted halfheartedly before heading back to the couch. They'd been in the middle of a movie when the email came, and Nick had almost knocked his armchair over in his haste to read it.

Joselyn waved him over and gave him a hug that threatened to cut off all his air circulation. "I am so proud of you," she whispered in his ear. "Your parents would be, too."

Nick swallowed, feeling her arms tighten around him. "I know."

"So, what's next?" she asked, pulling back and steering things away from troubled waters.

He shrugged, grateful for the out. "More waiting. See if I qualify for the interview round in the winter. Another application and a final interview. The internship doesn't even start until next fall. A lot can happen between now and then."

Joselyn smacked him in the shoulder, forgetting that she was being soft for once. "Hey, no negative self-talk."

"I didn't even say anything."

"You were about to."

Nick sighed. "Can't be too cocky."

“There’s a difference between cocky and confident,” she reminded him. “I know you think you don’t have as much lab experience because of how much you’ve had to work —”

He cut her off. “I will not blame The Grind if I don’t get this internship. Absolutely not.”

Joselyn’s brow furrowed. “I know you won’t. But I’d be sorely mistaken if I didn’t take some accountability for why you’ve had to miss some opportunities before now. I know it’s not as important — and it shouldn’t be —”

Nick risked cutting her off again before she upset herself. He grabbed her by the shoulders. “*You* are important to me. The family business is important to me. End of discussion.”

She glared at him. “Nicky.”

“End. Of. Discussion,” he said, punctuating his words by starting the movie back up.

Joselyn was still staring at him, not paying attention at all.

“Yes?” he asked, pausing it again.

She reached to thread her fingers through his hair. “You need a damn haircut. And your roots are showing.”

Nick leaned away and batted at her hand. “I’m aware. When’s the next weekend you’re free?” She was the only one he trusted with his hair.

Joselyn shrugged and leaned back against the couch as she pressed PLAY again. “I’ll make time.”

When he glanced over a little bit later, she was looking at him with a smile that could light up stadiums, and he wondered how she could ever think she was worth less than a fucking internship.

He’d give up the most lucrative position in the world for his family, and he’d do it happily, with no hesitation. Some things were more important in this life.



Spencer scowled immediately when she walked into their study room.

“Something the matter, sweetheart?” Nick asked, laughing at such an intense expression on the face of someone who probably wasn’t even tall enough to go on half of the rides at Disney.

She narrowed her eyes as she set her stuff down. “You look way too damn giddy. Did you prank me? Is there glue on my seat or something?” She bent over and actually *checked* every single chair before finally sitting.

He frowned. “Why was *that* the first thing that came to your mind? Has someone actually pranked you before?”

“Answer the question, Nicholas,” she snapped.

Nick slid over in his chair with the email open on his phone. “If you must know,” he said, showing her the screen. He watched her eyes roam quickly as she read through it.

When her expression didn’t change, he raised an eyebrow and pocketed his phone.

Spencer bit her lip. “Congratulations? Sorry, I don’t know a lot about —” she gesticulated vaguely, “whatever that is. But good for you. I guess that’s an acceptable reason to have a shit-eating grin on your face.”

*As opposed to?*

He wondered if it was any of his business to make her answer *his* question, but he dropped it for her sake. Maybe she was embarrassed. “There are fifty finalists right now for this internship next fall, and there are only five slots. Not completely out of the woods yet, but maybe soon.”

She let out a low whistle. “Impressive.”

“You sound shocked. Should I feel insulted?” Nick would’ve given her more about what the position actually was, but he had a feeling she was the kind of person who didn’t appreciate hearing about anything she didn’t explicitly ask about.

And his suspicions were confirmed when all she did was offer him a small smile of her own before digging out her headphones and ignoring him for the rest of their time together.

Nick nudged her arm a couple of hours later. “I’m heading out.”

Spencer sighed as she removed her earbuds. “Why? Got a girl waiting up in your room at home or something?”

“I told you, I don’t just invite random girls up there. And to answer your question, I have a shift tonight,” Nick said, scowling. What kind of person did she think he was?

She winced slightly, and he felt a little bad for snapping at her. But she’d already packed up her things and turned to give him a wave as she slipped out of the accessible exit before he could apologize.

He texted her during his shift, still feeling guilty.

NICK

Sorry for snapping at you earlier

SPENCER

i wasn't upset. you had every right to be.

i shouldn't have assumed

Nick frowned at her answer, but he didn’t have time to come up with a response when a mob of people rushed in for a last-minute caffeine fix before they closed. Hopefully, she was telling the truth, or the next time they saw each other would be awkward as hell.



# Chapter 5

Nick hadn't been lying when he told Spencer he didn't invite random girls up to his room. The only other girl who'd been up there was his ex, Chelsea, who was currently sitting on top of a desk in the room he tutored chemistry in.

"Last month was fun," she said, her cheeks rosy as she leaned toward him, cleavage on full display. "Maybe we could do it again soon?"

Nick averted his gaze, shrugging as he tried to come up with a tactful way to say *not a chance in hell*.

It wasn't that he regretted still sleeping with her...it was just...

He didn't know. He just knew that he wasn't interested in continuing whatever it was they were doing. He'd only obliged her in this "arrangement" because it was obvious she wanted it badly, and he felt indifferent enough that he didn't mind it most of the time.

He realized now it was cruel of him, even if he hadn't meant to lead her on. He was a coward, using the excuse that he wanted to let her down gently as to why he hadn't done it yet.

If Joselyn knew, he'd never hear the end of it. She wasn't the type of person to spare anyone's feelings. She'd tell him it



was his own damn fault for letting things go on as long as they had.

Chelsea's voice brought him back to reality, much to his chagrin. His head was a nice place most of the time, much better than the real-life conversations he'd rather avoid.

"Are you coming?"

Nick stretched and checked his watch. "Where are we meeting again?" He'd come in the room to kill time, not realizing he was going to be ambushed.

Chelsea rolled her eyes. "Aren't you a member of the e-board? How do you not know?"

"Considering there's like four of us, Chels, everyone's a member of the e-board," he said dryly. "So where?"

"Room 303, I think. I got to stop by my dorm first. Wanna come?"

Nick didn't take the bait. "I'll just meet you later. I gotta take care of some things."

"What things?"

"I'll see you later," he repeated instead of answering, standing up so quickly he knocked into the desk behind him. He avoided looking at her disappointed face as he paced down the hall to the exit.

Nick was fine being single. He had Joselyn, and Christian came attached to her. And he liked Connor and Madeline, even if he never saw them outside of work hours.

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

JOSELYN

Are you busy right now?

NICK

I have a meeting in about twenty minutes

Then, he wondered what exactly Chelsea thought was going to happen in that length of time if he went with her to her dorm.

NICK

Why what's up?

JOSELYN

Oh never mind

Nothing important

NICK

Joselyn

JOSELYN

I was going to ask if you could come in later.  
Pretty sure we're gonna be short-staffed tonight.  
Just got a gut feeling

NICK

I'll try, but no promises



When he got to the library after a rather disappointing and unproductive meeting, Spencer was sitting on the ground outside the door, reading. Her head was bent down in concentration, both earbuds in. She probably hadn't even heard him coming.

He nudged her foot, like he did at the party.

She didn't look up from her book. "You're late, Nicholas."

“My meeting ran longer than it should have,” he explained as he moved aside to let her in first.

Spencer canted her head as she jumped up. “What meeting?”

“I’m in the chemistry honor fraternity on campus.”

“I should’ve known you were a frat guy.”

Nick rolled his eyes. “You know it’s not that kind of frat.”

“I don’t know, you *did* invite me up to your room during a party.” The corners of her lips twitched into a smile.

“I’m sorry, would you have rather stayed downstairs and been overstimulated by the game of beer pong in the corner and the smell of cheap beer?” he asked on the way to his desk, scowling without malice.

“Touché, Nicholas.”

He shook his head at her.

“What?”

“You know you’re the only one who calls me Nicholas?”

“It’s your name, isn’t it?”

Nick rolled his eyes for probably the tenth time that day. “Yes, it is. But I think the only other people who call me that are my grandparents, and they’re just this shy of senile.”

“Is that your subtle way of calling me crazy?” She hit him in the arm with her book on her way to her table.

“What even was your plan if I hadn’t shown up? Would you have come in here and sat by yourself?” he asked, ignoring her smart-ass comment.

Spencer shrugged. “I was fine out in the hallway. Everything’s so quiet down here.”

He snorted as he sat down to work for a bit. Maybe an hour had gone by when his phone buzzed again.

JOSELYN

Can you close tonight?

I was right. Mads is gonna be by herself.

NICK

Yeah, I'll be there soon

JOSELYN

Have I told you you're my favorite cousin?

NICK

I'm your only cousin

“Alright you,” Nick said, standing. “Time to leave.” He had to give himself enough time to run home and change into his uniform before the closing shift started.

Spencer looked slightly miffed — they usually stayed much later than this, but she didn't say anything as she followed him.

He didn't know why he felt obligated to explain. “Joselyn said Mads is closing by herself. She asked me to come in. We have a policy. None of the girls close without a guy on shift.”

“How thoughtful,” she said. “I might stop by later.”

Nick held the door open for her. “Is that conditional on if your drink is free or not, sweetheart?”

Another small smile tugged at the corner of her lips. “Maybe.”

He shrugged. “Guess you'll have to find out.”

They parted ways outside, her heading towards the residential quad and him, his house.



Chelsea texted him as he was pulling on his work shirt.

CHELSEA

You wanna work on the paperwork tonight? We could meet at the library

He severely hoped she meant in one of the study rooms upstairs as opposed to the one down in the basement. That was his sanctuary, and Spencer was the only one who even knew he went down there.

NICK

Sorry

He wasn't sorry at all.

NICK

Joselyn texted me earlier. I have to close tonight.

CHELSEA

I could meet you at work and wait til you go on break?

This needs to get done

He was well aware of that, but there was no way in hell this was happening if it was just going to be him and Chelsea. She didn't need to get any more ideas.

NICK

If you could see if any of the others can come in, then maybe

But I can't guarantee I'll actually have a chance to sit down with everyone

Are you sure you don't want to reschedule or push it to the next meeting?

The paperwork in question was for a research conference some of them were submitting projects for. Nick personally didn't have time to present a project of his own, especially given the application process for the internship, but it wasn't like the honor society had much else going on.

He wanted to feel guilty when he saw she read his message and elected not to respond, but all he could feel was a sense of relief he wouldn't have to deal with this tonight. He heard Joselyn's voice in his head calling him a coward again. There was a time and place for breaking up with your situationships, and that would be future him's problem.



Nick knew he should have been suspicious when he saw the two of them sitting together in the booth Spencer had decided was unofficially hers, in the back corner closest to the bathrooms and employees-only area.

Joselyn sat facing the door, so she saw him first. "Nicky," she greeted pleasantly. That tone never boded well for him.

Spencer turned to face him. "Late again, Nicholas."

"Wrong," Nick said, pulling up a chair. "Closing shift starts at five. It's 4:45, smartass. How long have you been here?"

“Long enough,” she answered vaguely. Considering she still had her backpack, she probably didn’t even stop by her dorm after they left the library together and came straight here instead.

“Where have you been keeping this one? I didn’t realize you two were close. We’ve just been getting to know each other,” Joselyn explained.

He narrowed his eyes. “Is that so?” He turned to Spencer. “Am I gonna find out what she told you?”

The look she gave him said *not a chance*.

Nick groaned and slumped back in his chair. He was going to have to do *a lot* of damage control the next time they saw each other.

Joselyn jumped up and pulled on his collar. “Time for work. No slacking on the job.”

He rolled his eyes. “Joselyn, I’m doing you a favor by being here right now.”

“You’re a GM. You were going to get called in regardless,” his cousin said as she dragged him toward the employees-only area. The last thing he saw was Spencer looking at the two of them with an amused expression as she opened her book.



Later, Nick slid an iced matcha latte with oat milk across the table. “On the house.”

Her lip quirked at the corners. “Are you sure it’s okay to always give me my drinks for free?”

He shrugged. “Don’t question a good thing, Spencer. This is my family’s business — I can do whatever I want. Which unfortunately also means I’m the first one called when shit hits the fan.”

Spencer raised an eyebrow. “Family business?”

Nick nodded. “Joselyn’s parents — my aunt and uncle — ran this place until Joselyn took over. We’ve both been working here since we could count, basically.”

Spencer canted her head in confusion. “If your aunt and uncle are the owners, how come I never see them around? I assume they don’t want to leave two college students in charge of their livelihood.”

“You would be wrong then,” he started, “because that’s exactly what they did. Joselyn chose to work here instead of going to school. She’s an only child, so the second she turned 18, they packed their shit for an extended vacation and started backpacking through Europe. It’s been like three years.”

“I thought they were in Asia now,” Joselyn said as she slid into the booth on the side across from Spencer.

“I don’t exactly keep up with them.” Nick couldn’t even remember the last time they’d texted or called, and he didn’t have time to look out for their social media posts most days.

“And you think *I* do?” Joselyn scoffed.

“They’re *your* parents,” he reminded her.

“So?”

“Can I just stay here until y’all close?” Spencer interrupted, apparently tired of their bickering.

Joselyn shrugged. “I don’t see why not.”

Nick tried not to ruminate on the fact that they were getting along so well after only just meeting each other.

“I’m about to be off, anyway. We start closing around nine. Nicky usually wraps everything up by 9:30. Is that alright?”

Spencer nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

“Great,” Joselyn said. “If you’ll excuse us,” she tried to grab Nick’s collar again, but he scowled at her and moved away.

“I’m not a fucking dog,” he snapped.



“Of course not,” she said as she slid out of the booth. “Dogs are cute. And good company.”

Spencer snorted from behind her book. Nick rolled his eyes and followed Joselyn back to the register.



The evening crowd had dwindled by eight, so Nick decided he and Madeline could start closing early.

He rapped his knuckles on the table when they finished. “It’s dark outside. Let me walk you back to your dorm.”

Spencer shouldered her bag and followed him out the door. “You really don’t have to go out of your way for me. Isn’t your place in the opposite direction?”

Nick shrugged and shoved his hands in his pockets. “It’s really no trouble. Come on.”

He waved as Madeline’s boyfriend picked her up before turning back to Spencer.

“I’ll be fine, Nick. Reese and Hunt are on their way. Reese found a theater in Atlanta that does shadow casts of *The Rocky Picture Horror Show* every Friday night this month for Halloween.”

“Then let me wait with you until they get here.”

She rolled her eyes. “I can’t get rid of you, can I?”

“Somehow, even if you could, I highly doubt you’d want to,” Nick said smugly. “What’s *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*?” He also wasn’t exactly sure what a shadow cast was, but there was no way he was admitting any more ignorance in front of this girl.

Spencer’s jaw hit the ground.

“What?”

“First it was *Heathers*, now it’s *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. I’m disappointed, Nicholas,” she *tsked*.

Nick shrugged. “Forgive me for not knowing your exact taste in movies.”

“What about you?” She cocked her head up at him.

“What about me?”

“What’s your taste in movies?”

He rocked back and forth on his heels. “Take a guess.”

Spencer sighed. “Do you have to make everything so difficult?”

“I could ask you the same thing, sweetheart.”

She glared at him and crossed her arms. “Fuck off.”

“I see Joselyn’s already been rubbing off on you,” he muttered. “And hey — I listened to *Heathers* like you told me to. That should count for something.”

“What did you think?” she asked, grinning.

“It was...interesting.” That sounded like a safe response. “But if you want an answer to your question, come by next week.”

She cocked her head again, eyes narrowing. “Why?”

“Joselyn and I have a weekly movie night,” Nick explained. “What, did you think I was trying to get you alone again?”

Spencer opened her mouth, probably to curse him out, but a white Jeep rolled up in front of them. Nick saw Reese in the back seat. He nodded at Hunter.

“I guess I’ll see you?” Spencer asked him instead of answering as she was climbing in.

He nodded. “Yeah. See you.”



After Spencer waved goodbye to Nick, Reese pounced on her immediately. “Anything you wanna share with the class, babe?”

Spencer’s face scrunched in confusion. “What?”

“Wasn’t that guy at the party?” Hunter asked as he stopped at a light.

“Spencer went *upstairs* with him,” Reese said, ignoring Spencer as she mouthed, *I will end you*.

“Wow, princess, I didn’t take you for that type of girl. At least buy a guy dinner first.”

The only thing stopping Spencer from throwing something at him was the fact that he was driving and therefore, responsible for all of their lives.

She rolled her eyes instead. “Hunter.”

“How do you know him?” he pressed.

“We study in the library together,” she snapped. “That *juicy* enough for your entertainment?”

She caught him smirking in the rearview mirror. “Somebody’s in a mood.”

“*Somebody* is about three seconds away from smacking you.”

“If you want to kill everyone in this car, go for it,” he said.

Reese sighed. “Hunt, just shut up and drive.” She leaned her head on Spencer’s shoulder. “Men,” she muttered under her breath.

“I heard that, you fucking goblin.”

“Good,” she snapped, closing her eyes. Spencer leaned her head on top of Reese’s and watched the cars fly by as he drove

them into the city.

“You’ve seen it live before, right?” Reese asked when it looked like they were getting close to their destination.

Spencer grimaced before nodding. “My high school put one on. Went through the whole ‘virgin’ thing in front of my mom and several other teachers.”

“The fuck kind of high school puts on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as a theater production?” Hunter asked incredulously.

Reese cocked her head. “Didn’t our school do *Heathers*?”

“My point exactly,” he said as he parked. “I genuinely believe the shit that went down there was worse than whatever happened in *Heathers*.”

Spencer let out a noise of disbelief. “You *cannot* be serious.”

But Reese just shrugged. “He’s not wrong.”

“What the fuck kind of high school did *y’all* go to?” Spencer asked. They’d started walking toward the theater, which was mostly full, but not crowded. Reese chose seats that were close enough to the stage without being in the first few rows.

“Give me your face,” she said, turning to Hunter sitting between them.

He backed away closer to Spencer. “What the hell for?”

“You’re a virgin,” Reese said, a mischievous lilt coloring her voice as she rummaged through her bag.

Hunter grit his teeth. “I’m severely hoping the word ‘virgin’ means something different here, because you know damn well —”

Spencer put her hands up to stop him. “Okay, ew ew ew, Hunt. TMI. It just means you’ve never seen the show live before. You’ll only have to do it the one time.”

He snorted. “Who said I was coming to another one of these with you two?”

“Just give me your damn face,” Reese said, holding up a tube of red lipstick. “Or you’re gonna wish you did.”

He narrowed his eyes as he looked between the two of them. Finally, he sighed, and let Reese draw a large red V on the center of his forehead. “Be thankful it’s dark in here and we didn’t bring props,” she hissed. “You don’t want to be embarrassed in front of this entire theater, do you?”

“What the fuck did you bring me to?” he hissed back. “I am *never* going along with one of your schemes again.”

“Yeah, you will,” Reese said confidently. She leaned over to grin at Spencer, who was having a hard time taking Hunter seriously while he was scowling at them.

Someone from the row behind her passed her something. She waved it around to show Reese. “Newspapers,” she whispered.

“Gimme,” Reese said, reaching behind her. At a look from both of them, Hunter sighed and accepted one, too.

“I regret every decision in my life that has led me to this point,” he grumbled. Spencer and Reese hit him with their newspapers on both sides.

Then the show started.



“You two,” Hunter said, pointing between the two of them as they walked back to his Jeep, “owe me. Because what the fuck was that?”

“Don’t act like you weren’t enjoying yourself,” Spencer said. “How ‘bout we let you pick the movie next weekend?”

He scoffed like that was the worst consolation he’d ever heard in his life.

“Take it or leave it,” Reese snapped as they all climbed into the car and headed back to campus.

Hunter dropped them off right in front of their dorm building before circling the parking lot and heading to his own at the other end of the residential quad.

Reese’s eyes were still glimmering with glee as they unlocked the door to their dorm. “Watching Hunt earlier was almost more entertaining than the actual show.”

Spencer snorted. “Probably because the two of us can quote the damn thing word for word.” She checked her phone for texts, forgetting she turned it off in the theater and never turned it back on when they left.

NICK

Do I want to know how the show went?

SPENCER

you should ask hunter

NICK

That sounds like I definitely shouldn't

SPENCER

only if you're lame

She yawned and pocketed her phone. “Good night,” she said to Reese from her bedroom door.

“Night, babe,” Reese said as she disappeared into her own room.



# Chapter 6

Nicky, if you don't start sitting still, your entire bathroom is going to look like I murdered a Smurf in here."

Nick was sitting sideways on the toilet while Joselyn stood in the tub with a dye brush and bowl. He ducked his head again as they tried to maneuver in the too-small space of his downstairs bathroom.

Nick snorted. "It would be an improvement, honestly." But he wondered if it was worth losing his deposit if they couldn't get the stains out.

He imagined Joselyn was rolling her eyes behind him. "Ha ha," she deadpanned. "Seriously, hold still." She hovered the dye brush precariously close to his cheek as she tried to adjust her stance.

"Watch where you're putting that thing, then," he muttered.

She paused and gave him a look. "Do you want my help or not?"

"It shouldn't be this hard. I only have so much hair."

"Are you implying you're already starting to go bald?" As much as Nick liked seeing her smile, it would be nice if it wasn't at his expense once in a while.

He sighed. "Joselyn."

"It runs in the family!"

“On your *mom’s* side!”

A minute later, Joselyn was finally done depositing all the color onto his hair. She set a timer before gracefully stepping around him on the toilet.

Nick elected to stay in the bathroom so he wouldn’t accidentally spread dye all over his fucking house. There were enough odd, gross mystery stains downstairs from Sam’s parties every weekend, plus a suspiciously dark one on the living room floor from before they moved in.

He pulled out his phone, looking for something to occupy his mind until Joselyn inevitably got bored of wreaking havoc when he wasn’t around to stop her. He had some missed texts from Spencer after he’d asked her why she wasn’t at any of her usual haunts yesterday.

SPENCER

miss me already?

don’t take that the wrong way

Nick wasn’t exactly sure if there was even a wrong way that could be taken. He kept reading.

SPENCER

hunter and reese are visiting family in huntsville  
this weekend and i’m tagging along

That one had been sent a couple of hours ago, so he wondered if there were any updates on when she’d be back.



NICK

What are you up to right now?

SPENCER

currently struggling to get through aeschylus

how come you're not at the grind?

NICK

I have Saturdays off. I thought you were visiting Reese's parents this weekend

SPENCER

we came back early

how the hell did you swing that kind of schedule

She conveniently avoided addressing the second part of his text, but Nick decided it really wasn't his business to dig further into.

SPENCER

joselyn's not here either. is it movie night?

Speak of the devil — the woman in question walked in and peeked over his shoulder with absolutely no attempt at being subtle. He scowled at her, trying to lean the other way before remembering he still had dye in his hair.

NICK

That's because she's currently up to her elbows in hair dye

She made me type that verbatim, btw

But to answer your other question, yes, it's movie night

SPENCER

she's dyeing her hair? what color???

NICK

Actually, it's mine

Sorry if that disappoints

SPENCER

are you touching up the blue?

can i come watch?



Spencer raised her hand to knock, but the door was already slightly ajar. She opened it all the way and followed the sound of voices to a bathroom by the kitchen.

“You’re just in time to watch me dry drown Nicky,” Joselyn said with a concerning amount of enthusiasm.

He scowled at her as he knelt next to the shower. “Stop being dramatic.”

“Stop being dramatic,” she mocked, rolling her eyes. “Stick your head under the faucet or I’ll get the hose.”

Spencer stifled a snort watching him trying to fit all six-foot-something of his height in the small space between the tub and the toilet.

“There has *got* to be a better way to do this,” Nick grumbled.

“What are you talking about? We’ve been doing it this way for years.” Joselyn turned on the faucet and shoved his head, foaming with shampoo suds, under. The water ran a deep blue in the bathtub.

Nick sputtered as he yanked his head out, hissing, “Joselyn.”

“I know what I’m doing,” she said amiably. “Just trust the process.”

When the water ran clear, Joselyn finally let him out with a towel for his head, and he scowled at her. “Just because we’ve been doing it for years doesn’t mean it’s *ever* been the best way.”

She flicked her wrist at him. “If it bothers you so much, you can start dyeing your own hair.”

Joselyn turned to Spencer as she ripped off her gloves. “He gets cranky when he hasn’t had his nap.”

He scowled at her again. “You know I can hear you, right?”

“My point exactly,” Joselyn said. She sat down on the couch and waved at Spencer to join her. Nick stared warily at the two of them together when he reemerged from the bathroom, no longer dripping blue water everywhere.

“What’s your sun sign?” Joselyn asked Spencer, even though it was clear she was watching for Nick’s reaction.

He ran a hand through his freshly dyed hair and sighed. “Joselyn.”

“Uhhh, I’m a Virgo. My birthday’s at the end of August,” Spencer answered.

Joselyn’s eyes sparkled. “Interesting.”

“Joselyn,” Nick repeated through gritted teeth.

She turned to Spencer. “Nicky’s a Cancer. Loyal, like a dog. Prone to being moody.”

“And you’re annoying.”

Joselyn ignored him. “If you’re ever curious, I can teach you some more about astrology. And crystals.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Spencer said, pulling her knees up to her chin.

Nick crossed his arms. “I severely hope you don’t.”

“What movie are we watching?” She hoped the subject change would help prevent the inevitable hernia Nick was getting from the stress of the current conversation.

“It’s Nicky’s turn to pick. Unfortunately.” Joselyn rolled her eyes, and he sat down between the two of them.

“Relax,” he snapped. “It’s *The Naked Gun*. You like this one. And for the record, your taste in movies isn’t exactly Oscar material either.”

Spencer let out a laugh as Joselyn flipped him off. She cocked her head. “What’s *The Naked Gun*?”

“Don’t get him started,” Joselyn mumbled before getting up and heading into the kitchen. “Please tell me you have booze.”

“You know Sam only drinks beer. And you’re not 21 until next month,” Nick called after her before turning back to Spencer. “Now it’s *my* turn to ask how the fuck you haven’t seen this before.”

“Sam,” Joselyn said, returning empty-handed, “is a malignant yeast infection.” She patted Spencer’s knee. “I will admit, *it is* a good movie,” she said begrudgingly.

“If you like slapstick,” Nick continued.

“*The Matrix* is good too,” Joselyn said. “It’s one of Nicky’s favorites.”

Spencer shrugged. “I’m open to new things, but maybe not *The Matrix*.”

Nick reared back as if she insulted him. “Why not?”

She shrugged, not caring enough to answer as he hit PLAY and the sound of sirens immediately filled the room.



“Don’t take this the wrong way. This doesn’t mean anything,” Spencer said as her head dropped onto Nick’s shoulder. “I’m just tired.” The movie had long since ended, but Joselyn was curled up on the other end of the couch, also sleeping.

“Does it have anything to do with your day trip to Alabama yesterday?” he asked, shifting slightly. Joselyn’s feet were in his lap, but he didn’t make any move to push them off.

“It’s not my place to say,” Spencer said, hoping he would drop the issue. She hadn’t realized their trip would end before it was even worth mentioning.

Nick draped a blanket over Joselyn before responding. But he got the hint, because the next thing he asked was, “How’d you like the movie?”

Spencer grinned, grateful for the subject change and also because she genuinely enjoyed the movie. There was something to be said about spoof movies that were so ridiculous you couldn’t even fathom how people came up with them. “I’m curious now. This might be my new favorite genre.”

“It’s certainly on the other end of ridiculous and weird as fuck,” he said, definitely alluding to *Heathers* again.

She checked her phone. “It’s late. I should probably head back to campus.” Nick grabbed her arm when she tried to stand. “Let me walk you back.”

“What about Joselyn?”

“She’ll be fine. This isn’t the first time she’s fallen asleep here, and trust me, you really don’t want to wake her up right now.” He gently slid her legs off his lap so he could join Spencer by the door.

“Fine,” she said, crossing her arms. “But only because I’m too tired to argue with you right now.”

“Is that all it takes? I should make you stay up late more often,” he said. At a look from Spencer, he grimaced. “That came out wrong.”

“Are you done being douchey?” she asked, leading the way briskly.

Nick easily kept up with her pace, aided by his too-long legs. “Depends. Are you done being difficult?”

“Never.”



# Chapter 7

It was Joselyn's turn to host movie night the next weekend.

"I'm starting whether you're in here or not," she threatened from the couch.

"I thought you wanted alcohol," Nick snapped as he made his way over with beers for himself and Christian and a bottle of wine for her. "Remind me why we let you drink again?"

He settled on the couch next to her, while Christian occupied his favorite armchair adjacent to them.

"Because you know better," his cousin quipped as she accepted the bottle.

Nick sighed. As the older of the two of them, it was probably his responsibility to stop her, but she'd already been drinking since she turned 18, after some fuck offered her a drink at a party. Nick almost killed the guy when he found her alone and puking over a toilet.

"What are we watching?" he asked instead, because like she said — he knew better than to get into it with her.

"Something from *Fast and Furious*," Christian answered.

"There's got to be like ten of them, now," Nick argued. "How does that help narrow it down?"

Joselyn smacked his arm. "There's only one right answer to what should be considered the best one in the franchise."

Nick rolled his eyes. “Humor me.”

She and Christian locked eyes before answering at the same time, “*Tokyo Drift.*”

*Get a fucking room,* he thought. Joselyn glared like she knew exactly what he was thinking.

*Watch it,* she mouthed.

He held up his hands in surrender, severely hoping she wouldn't take it out on his beer.



Christian's phone went off in the middle of the movie. “I gotta take this,” he grumbled, abandoning his drink on the coffee table as he answered, “Whitlock.” He waved his hand to tell them not to worry about him before disappearing behind his bedroom door.

Joselyn paused the movie anyway.

Nick looked over at her as she poured herself another glass of red wine.

“Spill,” he said.

She raised an eyebrow as she took a slow sip.

“You never pause the movie when I'm not in the room.”

“Jealous?” Her voice was light, but the way her eyes were smoldering told him he should drop the subject.

“Joselyn.”

“Nicky.”

He sighed. “Why are you so defensive about this? It hasn't been that long —” He let out a curse when she kicked him in the shin. “My point exactly.”

Joselyn downed her entire glass before responding. “People break up for reasons, Nicky. I don't have to tell you



mine.”

“Never asked you to,” he said. “But why’s he still living here?”

To be fair, it seemed like the two of them were better than civil to each other these days, which was more than he could say they were like around the six-month point in their relationship.

“Because I don’t want to have to find another person to take his room. I won’t even find someone to take yours.”

Nick frowned, his brow furrowing. “Why won’t you rent it out?”

“It’s still your room.”

“I haven’t lived here in *years*.”

“So? I’m not living with a stranger. At least I know Christian’s probably not going to murder me in my sleep or steal from me.”

He snorted. “I’m sure he knows more than ten different ways to kill a person, and doesn’t he make bank working security at the bar? What could he possibly steal that would be worth his time?”

“All you’re doing is proving my point,” Joselyn muttered.

“Proving what point?” Christian asked as he finally sat back down in his chair.

Joselyn leveled Nick with a death stare before he could say anything. “Nothing,” she snapped quickly. “Let’s finish this goddamn movie.”

Christian frowned at her answer and looked at Nick. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, shaking his head.



When Nick got home after the movie ended, Jordan was nursing a beer at their dining table. He offered one to Nick, who shook his head. He already had a couple at Joselyn's and didn't need to risk a hangover considering he had work in the morning.

"Did you just get back from seeing Chelsea?" Jordan asked as Nick joined him.

"Chelsea and I aren't together anymore," Nick reminded him tersely. "I was at Joselyn's."

"Shame. Natalie liked going on double dates."

Nick rolled his eyes. "Dates" was a strong word to describe him tagging along to fourth wheel with the three of them.

He turned his head as someone came shuffling down the stairs. Sam was leading a short blonde girl wearing his hoodie to their front door.

"Just meet me in the car," he said dismissively before pushing her out.

Jordan narrowed his eyes as Sam walked over, looking obscenely satisfied with himself. "Man, how old is that girl?"

"Relax. She's 18."

He leaned back in his chair, glaring over his beer. "And exactly how long has she been 18?"

"Fuck off," Sam retorted.

Nick crossed his arms. "You know you're a piece of shit, right?"

Jordan muttered an agreement. "I shouldn't have to ask that every time you have a girl over."

Sam flipped him off. "Then don't."

Nick felt a prickle of irritation and a vein in his temple throbbed. Jordan tended to mind his business, but Nick wondered if it was worth trying a more direct tactic. "Sam, seriously," he snapped. "Do we actually need to have a talk about this, or do you know better?" It'd be nice to be able to

have Spencer over without worrying about his fucking creepy ass coming onto her.

“I pay my rent here just like you two do,” Sam answered defensively. “Don’t worry about what I get up to. I stay out of *your* business.”

Jordan snorted as he finished his beer. “Yeah, because our business doesn’t involve barely legal girls every other week. Why the hell were there so many freshmen at the last party?”

“If you’re jealous that I’m getting some, just say so, dude.”

Nick threw his arm out in front of Jordan before his drunk ass decided to defend Natalie’s honor. He took a deep breath and counted backwards from ten in his head before speaking again. “Sam, just go.”

As much as he disapproved of what his roommate did, there wasn’t anything legally wrong with it. And clearly, trying to talk some sense into him was worse than talking to a brick wall.

He sighed, dropping his arm when Sam finally left. “Why is he our roommate, again?” Not that he and Jordan were best friends by any means, but at least he didn’t throw parties every weekend and have questionable morals.

“Fuck if I know,” Jordan answered. He got up and made his way to the fridge. “You sure you don’t want a beer? I need one after that fucking conversation.”

Nick shook his head. “I’m opening.”

“You’re a better man than me,” his more respectable roommate replied as he opened his bottle.



The Grind opened later on Sundays, but that didn’t stop Joselyn from waking him up at the asscrack of dawn with a phone call.

Nick rubbed his face as he answered his phone. “Josie, I’m already on the schedule. What is it?”

“How late can you stay?”

He groaned internally. “Why?”

“Just answer the question, Nicky.”

“Joselyn.”

Nick could hear her swearing on the other end. “We’re gonna be short-staffed in the afternoon. Maybe in the evening, too.”

“That’s *so* helpful,” he couldn’t help but snap.

Joselyn sighed. “If you hit over your hours, I’ll give you time-and-a-half.”

She must have been desperate for the coverage considering she would rather die than have anyone else work overtime. She regularly pulled eighty-hour weeks without asking for his help.

“You know that’s not the issue.”

“Then what is?”

Nick pinched the space between his brows and took a deep breath. “Aside from the fact that this definitely could have waited until I got there?”

“Why are you being such a pill? Even when you’re cranky in the mornings, you’re never this bad. Are you hungover? You didn’t drink that much last night.”

“Staying up trying to convince your jackass roommate to sleep with girls his own fucking age will do that to you,” he muttered darkly.

Joselyn let out another string of curse words that made *him* want to pray for forgiveness just for listening. “AGAIN?”

“She was 18. Barely. There’s no way she’s out of high school, yet,” Nick explained as he got up to get dressed, putting her on speaker.

“If you need help ‘convincing’ him, I’ll let you borrow my bat.”

“Joselyn, I’m going to hang up now before this conversation turns into evidence that can be used against me in a court of law.”

“Fine,” she snapped. He could practically see her eyes rolling as he ended the call.



He joined Spencer on his break.

“Reese not with you today?” he asked as he slid a refill of her drink over.

Spencer shook her head, taking an earbud out, but not looking up from her book. “She’s at the studio and Hunt’s working. When are you off?”

Nick leaned back and took a sip of his black coffee. “Yet to be determined. Josie said we’re gonna be short-staffed for the rest of the day.”

“Does that mean I can stay ‘til close again?”

“I guess, if you want to,” he said. “Why?”

Before she could elaborate further, someone called her name. She craned her head toward the front door as the bell rang, brows furrowed in confusion. Some guy in a blazer and jeans walked up to their booth. Nick thought he was decently good-looking, just maybe not his type.

“Liam? What are you doing up here?” Spencer asked, recognition flashing in her eyes as she looked him up and down. “You’re a long way from Athens.”

Nick had to hide his amusement as the guy’s face immediately turned pink when she addressed him.

Liam rubbed the back of his head and looked everywhere but at Spencer. “Was in the area and was gonna text you to see if you were free to catch up this weekend. Thought I saw you as I was walking and decided to try my luck.” He swallowed before continuing. “You look great, by the way.”

The poor guy was sweating bullets down his face. Nick raised a brow at Spencer. “Another ‘friend’ of yours from high school?” At the very least, it looked like she wasn’t as perturbed by his presence compared to the last guy.

She nodded before turning back to Liam. “How long are you here for?”

“I’m not in any rush to get back to UGA, if that’s what you’re asking,” he answered. His eyes flicked back-and-forth between Spencer and Nick sitting on the opposite side. “Mind if I joined you two?”

Spencer shrugged again, closing her book. “Sure. This is Nick. He goes to Ravens, too.”

Liam looked like he was struggling to figure out where to sit when Madeline shouted from the counter, saving him from deciding between right next to Spencer or across from her with Nick.

“Nick! I know you’re on break, but —” She was cut off as another person barked their order at her.

“On my way, Mads.” He rapped his knuckles on the table. “Duty calls. I’ll leave you two to catch up.”

When he glanced back over after the rush, Liam’s face had gone from pink to red. Spencer looked oblivious, continuing on like the guy wasn’t about three seconds from fainting in front of her.

Nick snorted, excited to have something to give her hell about later.



“So how do you two,” Liam jerked his head in Nick’s direction, “know each other?”

Spencer sipped her drink as she considered her answer. “We study together, and he gives me free drinks.”

Short, simple, and straight to the point. Completely devoid of anything that could lead to further, more invasive questions about her friendship with Nick. She didn’t need the third degree from him like she’d gotten from Reese and Hunter.

“Is he a freshman, too?” Liam was still staring at Nick as he helped Madeline get through the line of customers that now stretched almost to the door.

She shook her head. “Junior. Biochem and math.”

“Oh.”

“Why do you ask?”

“No reason,” he said quickly.

Spencer rolled her eyes at the non-answer. “Liam.”

“I think his hair is cool is all.”

She nodded in agreement as she finished her drink. “It is.”

Liam’s eyes zeroed in on her now empty cup. “Do you want me to get you a refill? On me?”

Spencer waved him off. “Nick’ll come over with another one when he’s free. It’s not a big deal. Did you want to get something for yourself, though?”

“What do you recommend?”

“I thought you just liked yours with cream and sugar.” They’d gotten coffee together enough times in high school that she was fairly sure that was how he took it. It *had* been a while though —maybe he’d changed.

“I do,” he confirmed. “Just thought I could branch out a little.”

Spencer waved her drink in the air. “If you’re not put off by the color, this is an iced matcha latte with oat milk.”

He eyed it warily. “I’ll take your word for it, but green drinks just make me think of lawn clippings.”

Spencer scanned the menu, considering. “Their regular coffee is pretty good. I think Nick just drinks it straight up.”

“Does he now?”

“If you wanted, I suppose you could go up there and see if they have any fall specials. Looks like they finally cleared the line.”

“Yeah, but do I want to be that guy who comes up immediately like that?”

“How thoughtful of you,” Spencer said, arching an eyebrow.

Liam smiled sheepishly. “Actually, are you hungry? I think there’s a pizza place across the street if you want to grab a bite to eat.”

“Uhhh, sure. Hold up a second.” She grabbed Joselyn’s arm as she passed their booth. “I’m gonna head across the street for some pizza,” she explained. “I was thinking I could bring y’all one since you never let me pay for my drinks.”

The other girl pursed her lips together. “If you insist. A half cheese/half pep is perfect. I think Mads deserves a treat after the mob that just came through. Nicky, on the other hand...” She waved her hand noncommittally.

Nick scowled at them from behind the register. “I heard my name,” he started. “I don’t know what’s going on over there, but probably nothing good.”

Spencer held in a snort when Joselyn flipped him off. Even Liam looked like he was having a hard time holding it together.



Nick narrowed his eyes in their direction. “*Definitely* nothing good,” he muttered.

Joselyn placed her hands on her hips. “Do you want pizza or not?”

“Depends,” he shot back. “Are you gonna poison it?”

She shrugged. “Guess you’ll have to find out.”

Spencer slipped out of the booth while the two of them continued bickering, gesturing at Liam to follow.

“Are you sure you want to leave your stuff there?” Liam asked as they walked across the street.

Spencer waved her hand. “That’s my booth. It’s kind of an unspoken thing that no one else sits there. Nick and Joselyn will watch over it.”

“How often do you go over there? Seems like they know you,” he said, opening the door for her.

She shrugged. “Enough.”

After she placed her order, Liam practically threw his card over the counter as he placed his. Spencer didn’t even have a chance to grab her wallet.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m gonna pay you back,” she said, grabbing her phone.

“I won’t accept it,” Liam threatened when they found a table. “It’s *one* slice of pizza, Spencer.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she hissed, glaring at him. He *definitely* should’ve known better than to try and pay for her, regardless of price. But she relented and put her phone away.

Liam sighed, but he was smiling. “You let them,” he jerked his head in the direction of The Grind, “give you your drinks for free. What’s wrong with me offering to pay?”

“You know better,” she quipped.

“They don’t? I thought you came in there a lot.”

Spencer snorted. “You try and see what happens when you argue with Joselyn. And Nick can be persistent when he

wants.”

Whatever he was about to say was cut off when someone brought their food over. Spencer’s was marked with the word VEGAN on the box.

Liam stared at her pizza. “I didn’t know you were a vegan.”

“I’m not, really. I just like to avoid milk products when I can,” she explained. “I prefer dairy substitutes. That’s why I always get my drinks with oat milk.”

“I’ll remember that,” he said quietly.

It was a few minutes of them eating before Spencer broke the silence. “Mark came by the other day,” she said.

Liam arched an eyebrow. “Sinclair? The meathead?”

Spencer stifled a snort as she answered. “That’s the one. Apparently, his brother wants help on his admissions essays, and I was unfortunate enough to have my writing accolades plastered all over my mom’s classroom. At least he’s paying me.”

“He better.”

Spencer rolled her eyes. “Almost immediately after I said yes, he flirted with my roommate and completely forgot my existence.”

“I see he hasn’t changed at all,” Liam said.

“He was literally leaving a hookup when he came up to us that day.”

Liam threw his head back and laughed. “Of course, he was. Did he drive all the way here from Atlanta?”

She scoffed. “I will never understand you men and your hormones. I don’t know anything I’d be willing to brave that much traffic for.”

His response was cut off again when the pizza for everyone else was ready. Liam beat her to the counter before she even got up from her chair.

“Guess that’s our cue to go,” he said, handing his card over and grabbing the box. “Let me.”

She scowled at him, but didn’t argue. Just opened the door and followed him across the street.



Nick was in her booth again, probably back on break.

Spencer cocked her head at Liam. “See? Told you my stuff was safe.”

“Sweetheart, you have absolutely too much faith in everyone who works here,” Nick scoffed, crossing his arms and leaning back. “What’s that?”

Liam set the box on the table. “Pizza,” he answered at the same time Spencer said, “Take a fucking guess, Nicholas.”

Nick rolled his eyes. “Why do I give you your drinks for free again?”

“Because she’s worth it,” Joselyn snapped, forcing him to scoot over.

Spencer smirked as she slid in on the other side. “Exactly.” She waved her hand for Liam to join them.

He checked his watch. “I’d love to stay, but it’s about to be rush hour and I’d like to be back in Athens before nightfall.”

“Good luck with that,” Nick said sardonically, cursing as both Spencer and Joselyn kicked him under the table.

“Fucking Christ, there’s two of them,” he muttered darkly, earning another kick from Joselyn on her way out of the booth.

Spencer looked over to see Liam laughing, too. “Guess I should probably leave before I become a witness to assault,” he joked.

She waved. “Don’t be a stranger. Maybe next time I’ll introduce you to my roommate and our other friend.”

Liam nodded. “Sounds good. And hit me up if you’re ever in Athens.”

She snorted. “I like you, Liam, but I’m not sitting through that amount of traffic just to see you for a couple hours. I don’t really have another reason to go over there.”

“Right,” he said slowly. “It was good seeing you.”

Spencer turned back to see Nick not even attempting to hide his smirk. She rolled her eyes. “Something funny?”

“Loads,” he said, leaning further back with his hands behind his head. “I think you hurt his feelings, sweetheart.”

A vein in her temple throbbed. “The hell are you talking about? He’s fine.” She turned around to watch Liam walk down the street.

Nick scoffed. “Spencer, he looked like a kicked puppy when you said you weren’t going to go visit him.”

“Don’t be dramatic,” she hissed, glaring at him.

“Who is he anyway?”

“I told you — a friend from high school. Why?”

Nick sipped his coffee and didn’t answer, raising an eyebrow.

Spencer sighed. “Nicholas.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t know friends looked at each other like that.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Like what?”

“I think you know,” Nick said seriously, looking her up and down. “Do you really not?” he asked, his voice devoid of humor.

Spencer crossed her arms. “No, I don’t. He’s always looked at me like that. Nothing’s changed. What’s your fucking point?”

“Interesting,” he mused quietly. She was about to snap at him when he changed the subject. “Are you still wanting to stay until close?”

“Is there any objection?”

He stood up, smiling again as he finished his coffee. “Not at all.”



# Chapter 8

Even though he definitely hit overtime hours last weekend, Nick thought doing another shift was infinitely more bearable than sitting alone in his house with Chelsea, who had invited herself over after he bailed on her for about the third time that month because no one else could join them to work on things.

He let her take the couch while he worked from the armchair. She hadn't gotten handsy with him yet, but it was only a matter of time. The fact that Sam and Jordan weren't home was also working in her favor.

Nick hated Sam's guts, but if he was being honest with himself, he'd stomach his presence if it meant Chelsea would be discouraged from coming onto him.

His phone buzzed from its perch on the armrest.

JOSELYN

Busy?

NICK

Kind of

Not really

Complicated

JOSELYN

The fuck kind of answer is that?

Chelsea was staring at him with her brow furrowed. She cocked her head to one side. “Something wrong?” she asked. He shook his head and waved her off as he finished his text.

NICK

Like I said

Complicated

JOSELYN

Well, when you're free, can you get your ass over here?

Nick had never been so happy to get a 911 text in his life. “I gotta go. Joselyn needs me.”

NICK

On my way.

He felt a little bad, but relaxed when Chelsea seemed chill about it.

“It’s no biggie. We’ll work on it another time. I think we’re almost done anyway. I need to ask the others.”

“Yeah, just let me know what they say,” he said, as if they weren’t all in a fucking group chat together.

His phone buzzed again, reminding him that he was needed elsewhere.



But when he got to her place, there didn’t appear to be an emergency of any kind. He looked around, finally noticing...

“*Spencer?*” It was strange to see her outside of their normal meeting spots, nestled so casually next to his cousin on the couch like they were best friends.

Joselyn looked over at him with an amused glint in her eye. “Nicky! How nice of you to join us. It’s girls’ night.”

“What the hell am I here for then?”

Joselyn flicked her wrist. “Lose the attitude. It’s only cute when I do it.”

He pinched the space between his brows and took a deep breath. “Joselyn.”

“What’s wrong? Did I interrupt something important?” she asked, clearly more for her own entertainment purposes rather than curiosity. He fucking told her Chelsea had come over to work on stuff.

“No,” he admitted. If anything, he was grateful for the excuse to cut their meeting short — not that she needed to know that. “But since when did you start inviting other people to movie night instead of me?”

Spencer leaned over the couch. “Jealous?”

Nick rolled his eyes. Then he found something else to focus on.

“Did you dye your hair?”



Spencer's normally dark brown hair was now a deep purple that shone like a jewel in the light. She'd painted her nails to match.

"Joselyn did. She had leftover bleach from when she touched up yours. Reese picked out the color. Too bad she had to go work in the studio before she could see this." She threaded her fingers through the locks, like she still couldn't believe it was actually her hair.

"Looks good."

Joselyn flashed him a blinding white smile. It was almost creepy and a little inappropriate how proud she looked of herself right now. "Actually, I take that back," he said, dodging a pillow. He didn't see which one of them threw it, but he wouldn't put it past either of them to start tag-teaming him.

Nick bit back a curse when another pillow was launched at his head. "Why am I here again?"

Joselyn was arming herself with another one before she answered. "Christian got called into work and I didn't think it was a good idea for two girls to be alone up here at night. Is there a problem with that?"

He sighed. "No, but you could've just said that instead of assaulting me with the furniture."

"They're fucking pillows. You'll survive. You act like I haven't done worse." He vaguely remembered she hit Christian with her car a while ago, but that'd been an accident.

"You really aren't making a good case for why I should stay right now," Nick said, even though he was already walking over to sit in the armchair opposite Christian's.

"What if I told you there's a pizza on the way?" Joselyn asked sweetly.

He cocked his head. "Is there?"

"There's about to be. If you call and place an order."

Nick rolled his eyes. "I assume I'm paying?"

"We could go Dutch on it," Spencer offered.

He waved her off. “Don’t worry about it. What does everyone want?”

“You know my order,” Joselyn said, making her way to the kitchen. “Do you want a beer?”

Nick scowled. “It’s a school night.”

“Lame,” she said, returning with a bottle of wine for herself. He thought about lecturing her again, but his patience was worn out from being around Chelsea earlier.

He rolled his eyes again before turning to Spencer. “You?”

She shrugged unhelpfully. “I’m good with whatever. Not like I could finish a whole pizza by myself.”

“You sure? Last chance, sweetheart,” Nick asked as he dialed the number for the place across the street.

Spencer threw another pillow at him.

“What the *fuck*,” he hissed at Joselyn, “do you have so many pillows for? You and Christian are the only two people that live here.”

Joselyn poured herself a drink. “Don’t you have pizza to be ordering?”

Nick sighed, lowering his phone. “It’s probably cheaper to just walk across the street and pick it up. Do either of you want to come with me?”

“You won’t be gone long, right?” Spencer asked. “Since it’s right there?”

“You two won’t be alone for long, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Good,” Joselyn said. “That’s why I texted you in the first place. Hurry back or we’ll start the movie without you.”

“If you do that, I’m taking the pizza home with me and dropping Spencer off at her dorm,” he threatened halfheartedly.

Spencer rolled her eyes. “Nick, just go.”

“Fifteen minutes, tops,” he said on his way out. “I’ll call ahead.”

The girls waved him off before turning to each other and no doubt plotting another way to make his life difficult. He shook his head, wondering why he still preferred this to what he’d been doing in the comfort of his own home earlier.



Spencer tried to hold in her amusement at Nick’s obvious confusion. When he showed up, his gaze had flicked back-and-forth between her and Joselyn sitting on the couch together, like his brain had short-circuited. She almost thought she saw smoke coming from his ears when he realized she’d dyed her hair.

True to his word, Nick returned with two minutes left to spare.

“Oh,” he said, sounding almost insulted as he looked at the TV screen, “so you’ll watch *The Matrix* with her —” he pointed at Joselyn, “and not me.” He glared at Spencer as he set the boxes down.

“Yes,” she deadpanned. “Men going absolutely feral for this movie is a cliché, Nicholas.”

“It’s a classic,” he argued.

“Never said it wasn’t, but it’s not the apex of cinema,” Joselyn countered.

“It’s not supposed to be. And don’t even act like you don’t like it either, Josie. You’re the one who has the disc.”

Spencer smirked at him. “You’re rather defensive.”

“Just play the damn movie already,” he snapped, scowling.

“Who said you were staying?” Joselyn asked as she pressed PLAY. She threw another pillow in his direction, but it

bounced harmlessly onto the ground.

Nick rolled his eyes as he settled between the two of them on the couch. “Uh, you did. Like thirty minutes ago.”

“A girl can change her mind.”

“If you think I’m leaving the two of you alone up here tonight...” He paused when Joselyn waved her hand.

“Then shut up and watch,” she said.



Spencer stretched as the movie credits rolled. She somehow managed to stay awake enough not to fall asleep on Nick’s shoulder this time. “What time is it?”

He checked his phone. “Almost midnight. I’m driving you back to campus.”

She knew it was pointless to try and argue with him on this — and it was way too dark outside for her to even consider walking by herself. She nudged Joselyn’s shoulder with her own. The other girl reached for her hand as she stood up. “We’ll do this again,” she said sleepily, and Spencer nodded. “Let me know when he gets you back safe.”

Joselyn rounded on him. “And you better get her back safe.”

“I don’t know what you take me for, but I promise I will. When’s Christian supposed to be getting off? I don’t want you by yourself,” Nick said, grabbing his keys. “That would completely negate my entire purpose for being here.”

“I’ll be fine for the twenty minutes it’ll take you to drop her off and come back,” she sighed.

Nick pursed his lips unhappily, but nodded. “Come on, Spencer,” he said, leading the way to the door.



He parked right in front of her dorm building and got out with her.

“The sign says no parking,” she pointed out unnecessarily.

“I’m just gonna walk you to your door. Not gonna be parked long,” he said.

“It’s on you if you get ticketed, Nicholas.”

Nick smiled at her, not looking at all concerned about the possibility. “Maybe I’ll just start charging you for your drinks to make up for it.”

Spencer rolled her eyes, but didn’t bother protesting anymore as they walked down the hall.

“This is me,” she said, unlocking the door. “Good night.”

“Night,” he said, looking infinitely more relaxed as he made his way back out. Hopefully in time to move his car before campus safety got to it.



“What time did you go to sleep last night?” Spencer’s seatmate Dani asked as soon as they sat down.

“Why? Do I look like shit?” she asked.

Dani tilted their head, neon pink braids cascading down their back. “Would it help you if I said no?”

Spencer rolled her eyes. “I’ve never heard a more roundabout way of saying ‘yes’ in my life, Dan. I thought we were English majors here.”

Dani shrugged. “You asked.”

Spencer slammed her head on the desk, cushioned by Dani’s open binder between the two of them.

“Rough night?” Dani asked, stroking her hair.

“Just late,” Spencer said, blinking the sleep from her eyes.

Dani’s voice took on a light, humorous tone. “Anything juicy happen?”

Spencer scowled as she sat back up. “Why would you assume that? Have you *met* me?”

They shrugged. “It’s always the quiet ones who are the wildest.”

Spencer hit them with her book and rolled her eyes again. “Just watched a movie with some friends and it ran late.”

Dani was still stroking her hair. “This is pretty,” they said. “Did you do it yourself?”

She shook her head. “My friend did it yesterday.” Her phone pinged.

“Ugh,” she groaned, silencing it before it went off during class.

“What’s got you all bitchy this morning?” Dani teased. They were currently sporting colored contacts that matched the shade of their braids.

“Some ass from my high school asked if I could help his little brother with his admissions essays and this kid is just now emailing me,” Spencer explained.

“Why’s he an ass?”

She rolled her eyes as she answered. “Because immediately after he got what he wanted from me, he started flirting with my roommate.”

Dani flipped through their binder. “Are you still gonna help the brother?”

Spencer shrugged. “Money is money. Not his fault he has the most uncouth Neanderthal for a brother.”

Dr. Albright finally walked in then, two minutes late as usual.



“I’ll see you,” Dani said when they were dismissed.

Spencer waved when the two of them parted ways. She checked her phone again, noting that Mark’s brother had sent her another three emails. She rolled her eyes, wondering if she should start charging him by the essay or by word count.

She made her way to her dorm to drop most of her stuff off and left for The Grind with just her laptop and charger, phone, and headphones. The sooner she got started on those fucking essays, the sooner she got paid and wouldn’t have to worry about dealing with either Sinclair brother any time soon.

She’d barely settled into her booth when someone came up to her. She read his nametag: *Connor*. He was tall, with tanned skin and curly blond hair. Looked a little young, so maybe he was a freshman like she was.

“What’s up?” Aside from Nick and Joselyn, she realized she never really interacted with the other employees here.

“Uh, hey.” Connor rubbed the back of his neck. “I know you usually get your drink subbed with oat milk, but we’re actually out so...is there another dairy alternative you wouldn’t mind? We should be getting more in stock by the weekend,” he said, not looking her in the eye.

Spencer wanted to tell him to relax; she wasn’t going to bite his head off for something that a) wasn’t a big deal in the first place and b) wasn’t his fault.

“Soy’s fine,” she said. “Thanks for letting me know.”

“Nick’s not on the schedule today,” he explained unnecessarily. “I know he usually makes your drink.” The *for free* hung unspoken in the air.

“You’re fine, Connor. Whatever you got is fine with me.”

“Oh, thank God,” he said, rubbing his face. “Sorry — it’s just sometimes this job is...”

She held up her hand. “Hey, I get it.”

He scampered away, relieved. Spencer shook her head. “Poor guy,” she muttered to herself as she opened her laptop to get through the essays.

Her drink appeared on the table a couple minutes later, but it wasn’t Connor who brought it over.

Spencer narrowed her eyes as she peered over her laptop. “Connor said you weren’t on the schedule today, Nicholas.”

“I can’t come into my own family’s business unless I’m working?” he asked, sliding into her booth uninvited.

She shrugged. “If you wanna risk having to work anyway, be my guest.”

Nick slid the drink across the table. “So, I assume you know we’re out of oat milk,” he said, spinning the cup around so the word SOY written in black marker was visible.

“Connor already came over and unnecessarily apologized,” she said, rolling her eyes. “It’s fine. It’s not that big a deal.”

“If you say so,” he muttered under his breath.

She resisted the urge to throw her drink at him. “Don’t you have anyone else to bother?”

“This is more fun. You’re very clearly thinking about pouring that on me.” He gestured at her cup.

“Considering how familiar you seem to be with the facial expressions of someone who wants to throw their drink at another person, it must happen to you a lot.”

“Have you *met* Joselyn?”

Spencer hid her smile behind her cup as she sipped her drink. The soy didn’t do the taste any favors, but it was still better than regular milk.



She had barely gotten through the first essay and was mostly finished with her drink when Nick's voice cut through the air. "You usually do your readings here. You don't work on your laptop."

Because the damn thing was too expensive for her to risk it being around food and drink often.

"So?"

He raised a curious eyebrow. "What are you working on?"

Spencer sighed. "Those fucking essays for Mark's brother Paul." She opened her email and downloaded the other three he sent her over the past hour.

She was scowling at her screen a moment later. Nick's reaction to her expression annoyed her further. He was enjoying her display too damn much.

"Can I *help* you?" she snapped.

He leaned back. "How bad are they?"

"What makes you think they're bad?"

He gave her a look that said *are you fucking serious right now?* "Aside from the look on your face and that evasive-ass response?"

She rolled her eyes. "I think he's a nice kid, from what I remember. Better than his brother at least, but that's not saying much. His writing is a little juvenile, though."

"Could be worse," Nick mused.

"Enlighten me."

"Some of my students can't remember basic arithmetic."

"Since when do you have students?"

He stared at her. "I'm a *tutor*. I thought you knew this."

Spencer threw her hands up. "How could I? It's not like you've ever brought it up before." She severely hoped he hadn't, or she'd feel like a shitty friend for not remembering. "What do you tutor?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

“I don’t think we have a course on being a prick, so no,” she snapped.

“Chemistry,” he said, like she should’ve already known that. “I told you my major the other day.”

“I know that,” she snapped again, embarrassed. “If you’ll excuse me, I have three more of these to get through and I’m already in need of another fix.”

“Matcha doesn’t even have that much caffeine in it, Spencer.”

She regretted no longer having something to throw at him. “Did I fucking ask?”

“Is that any way to ask for a refill?” Nick asked, standing and grabbing her empty cup.

Spencer glared at him. “Again. Did I fucking ask?”

He threw her cup away. “You don’t have to.” He came back a few minutes later, armed with another drink for her and a black coffee for himself.

“Thank you,” she grit out. From the amused look in his eye, she needed to stop being so easy to rile up.

“You’re welcome.”



# Chapter 9

“Is he being fucking serious right now?” Reese scowled as she read through their group chat with Hunter on Friday.

“Should we still go?” Spencer asked.

Nick pulled up a chair at their booth before Reese could answer. Spencer forgave the intrusion after he slid refills of both of their drinks across the table.

“Any plans this weekend?” he asked, straddling the back of his chair. “I trust you guys have more of a life than I do these days.”

Reese took a sip of her tea before answering. “One of my professors is offering extra credit if we attend this art show at the Masquerade tonight. Spencer’s going, but apparently Hunter’s working. He was supposed to come with us.”

Nick frowned at them. “You guys shouldn’t go out in the city that late by yourselves. Let me drive you,” he said.

Spencer shook her head. “It’s easier to take MARTA. I’m not gonna waste my time trying to find a parking garage.” Reese nodded in agreement as she worked on her sketch.

His frown deepened. “That’s even worse. I’ll ride with you.”

Reese and Spencer shared a glance. “But we don’t want you to have to go out of your way on a Friday night. I think we’ll be fine. I have mace,” Reese said.

Nick snorted, earning him a glare from Spencer. “Offer’s still open.”

“We’ll think about it,” she relented, though she’d prefer not to trouble anyone’s weekend.

His brow furrowed, clearly unsatisfied with her answer, but he dropped the subject and left to start his shift, rapping his knuckles on their table.



“Can we still take you up on your offer tonight?” Reese asked when he joined them again on his break.

Nick leaned back in his seat. “Depends. Are you still taking MARTA?”

Spencer rolled her eyes. “Unless you want to pay for parking.”

He pursed his lips together in a thin line and sighed. “What time did you want to leave? We still have to drive to the station.”

Reese checked her phone. “Uhhh around four? I told them I’d help set up.”

Nick glanced at his watch. “My break’s over, but I should be off in plenty of time. Do you want me to pick you up at Thorne?”

“We’ll just walk to your place,” Spencer bargained, daring him to argue with her. If he was already going out of his way to accompany them, the least they could do was meet him in the middle.



At 3:45 on the dot, Spencer and Reese were situating themselves inside Nick's Impala.

He scowled in the rearview mirror. "Will one of you at least take the front seat so I don't feel like your fucking Uber?"

"Aren't you, though?" Spencer asked, climbing in the passenger's seat, anyway.

The corners of his mouth curled upward. "You aren't paying me."

"Nick," Reese piped up from the backseat. "You're the one who offered."

Spencer shrugged. She still had her hand on the door handle. "We can go with the original plan if you —"

"Absolutely fucking not," he snapped. "The two of you are not going on MARTA or walking through the damn city by yourselves." Spencer and Reese jumped in their seats slightly at the sudden change in his demeanor.

He sighed. "Sorry, that came out worse than I meant it to."

"I'll say," Spencer hissed back. It was the understatement of the fucking year.

Nick pinched the space between his brows. "Look," he said. "The one time I wasn't with Joselyn in Atlanta is the one time someone tried to follow her home. Nothing happened, but I swore I'd never let her go alone again. So please, just trust me. Okay?"

He didn't turn back around until they both nodded.



The train was so crowded, Nick elected to stand and hold onto the handle hanging from the top of the car, shielding their seats from everyone else. His legs were pressed up against Spencer's. And even though they were both wearing jeans, she felt heat flaring up the rest of her body and causing a flush to creep onto her cheeks.

She told herself he couldn't help it, and that she should be grateful he offered to accompany them in the first place.

*You okay?* Reese mouthed. "Your face is red," she said out loud.

"It's just hot in here," Spencer insisted. "It's too crowded."

Nick leaned down as the train rolled to a stop, his face precariously close to hers. "At least we only have one more stop before we get off."

Spencer couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief when they finally walked out of the station, taking in big gulps of the cool autumn air to make up for the stuffiness of the train car.

Nick was rushing them away from the station when Spencer heard someone shout at her. She sped up, hoping he'd think she hadn't heard him. He continued catcalling, sounding closer.

Up ahead, she watched Nick whip his head around, and she practically *ran* to meet him.

The guy was still shouting behind her. She was desperate to tune him out when she finally caught up to where Nick was waiting. He placed his hand on the small of her back and pushed her forward, using his body to hide her from sight.

"Bitch," the guy said loudly as Spencer flinched. "Yeah, bet you heard that," he mumbled.

"Hey, asshole," Nick grit out. "Back off."

The guy walked in the other direction, cursing under his breath, but didn't deem them worth the effort of a confrontation. Spencer suppressed a shudder, and Nick rubbed her shoulder gently. His touch eased some of the tension out of her body, but the rest of him was stiff as they continued walking. "C'mon, sweetheart," he said tightly.

"Do I just have 'harass me' written on my forehead or something?" Spencer asked when they stopped outside the viaduct to The Masquerade.

Reese frowned. She'd walked ahead of them during the whole encounter, but Nick caught her up to speed.

"That happened at the gas station when we were on the way back from Huntsville, too," she said.

Nick dropped his arm and reared back to look at her. "It did?" He sounded incredulous despite what he just witnessed. "*This* is why I wanted to come with you two. This exact fucking situation." At least he held back an *I told you so*.

Spencer shifted on her feet. "It's not that big of a deal. Come on," she said, heading down the stairs first.

"He followed you for like three blocks, Spencer," Nick said angrily. "I saw him at the station."

Reese turned to look at him. "You did?"

He nodded. "Why do you think I rushed you both out of there?"

Spencer grit her teeth. "*We get it*. It's over now. Can you please chill the fuck out?" She was already wired up as it was — she didn't need him making it worse. She looked down and wrung her hands out before she massacred what was left of her cuticles. At least her pumpkin orange polish was still intact.

She glared when she caught Nick exchanging a glance with Reese and almost ran right into someone.

"Shit," Reese muttered as they weaved their way through the crowd with Nick's hands on each of their backs. "I forgot there's a concert happening here tonight, too. I need to get to

the venue, but you guys can hang out here for a bit. It's not open to the public until six."

Spencer checked the time on her phone. It was barely 4:30, and she had no idea how the two of them were going to spend the next hour and a half. It wasn't like there was a TV around for them to watch another debauched '80s movie.

"We'll walk you there and figure something out," Nick answered for the both of them. He glanced at Spencer. "Sound like a plan?"

They dropped Reese off at the door to the art show, walking aimlessly as the concertgoers milled around outside their venue. Almost everyone was wearing black and had at least three piercings. With his bright blue hair, Nick fit in with the crowd, only some of whom had naturally colored hair. The color in Spencer's hair was much more subtle in most lighting, especially with her dark roots.

"Are you hungry?" he asked as they narrowly avoided being run down by a group of teenagers.

Spencer opened her mouth to answer, but was interrupted by a girl with a septum piercing and fishnets tapping on Nick's shoulder. Her platform creepers made her almost as tall as he was.

"I just wanted to say I *love* your hair," she said, sporting a similar shade of blue at the end of her platinum blonde ponytail. She reminded Spencer of Reese, which was about the only thing keeping her from feeling weird at the particular way she was eyeing Nick.

She wondered if he got that kind of attention a lot. It was certainly much better than the gross objectification she got from men on the street. She shuddered thinking about the guy from earlier who felt so entitled to interacting with her that he followed her for several blocks and only stopped when Nick called him out.

Nick offered the girl a polite smile and kept moving. He turned back to Spencer as she struggled to keep up with his



long-legged pace. “I think there’s a burger joint not far from here,” he said.

It occurred to her that she hadn’t eaten since she and Reese got lunch right before heading to The Grind.

“God yes,” she almost moaned, earning a smirk as Nick looked up the directions on his phone.

She scowled at him. “Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything,” he said innocently.

“You were thinking it,” she muttered as they walked back up the stairs to the street.



They made it back to the venue right as the exhibit opened. Reese found them near the entrance, eager to tell them all about the different art being displayed. Spencer found the whole thing endearing, watching her friend flit around and nerd out about the different anatomical illustrations of marine life and even some crocheted coral structures.

She had a vague understanding of everything Reese was saying, but she was mostly there for her sake. The art was good, but thinking about what happened earlier had her on edge.

Thankfully, Nick was pretty active in listening to Reese’s spiel, even taking the time to read the little placards that accompanied each piece. Spencer couldn’t hope to be able to decipher the tiny text without everything running together. At one point, he raised a brow at her. *You okay?* he mouthed.

She nodded. “Just tired.” The lower part of her back was starting to hurt, but at least it looked like they were almost through with the entire exhibit. Reese went to make sure she wasn’t needed before they finally left.



To Spencer's relief, the walk back to the MARTA station passed without incident. They managed to squeeze in together on a bench seat at the end of the car.

Once again, Nick situated himself closest to the aisle, shielding them from the other riders.

"This doesn't mean anything," Spencer mumbled as she leaned her head on his shoulder. She was exhausted. Her stomach churned painfully even though she'd eaten not too long ago.

She wondered if she imagined the slight amusement in his voice as he replied, "Of course not. Just go to sleep. I'll wake you up when it's our stop."

Reese was on her other side with her head resting on the window. Her eyes were drooping, too. Spencer lifted her head as Nick slipped off his jacket and passed it to Reese.

"You can use that as a pillow."

"Ugh, have I told you you're my favorite? Aside from Spencer," Reese asked.

Spencer smirked as she laid her head back on his shoulder. "Don't tell Hunter."

Reese made a *pfft* sound. "He can handle it," she said, waving her hand.

It wasn't long before Spencer's eyes fluttered shut to the mechanical noise of the train and Nick's breathing.



Nick glanced over at the other two as he listened to the robotic announcer. He hated the idea of disturbing either of them, but theirs was the next stop.

“Wake up, sweetheart,” he said, nudging Spencer’s head on his shoulder.

She stirred, scowling at him and rubbing her eyes.

“Get Reese,” he whispered. “I can’t reach her from here.”

Spencer gently shook her friend’s shoulder.

“Hmm?”

“Nick said our stop is next,” Spencer explained. Reese let out a whine of protest as she straightened up. She passed Nick’s jacket back over.

He shook his head and didn’t take it. “It’s cold out, one of you can have it.”

Reese thrust the jacket into Spencer’s lap. “I’m sweating like a pig,” she groaned. “The cold air might do me some good.”

Spencer frowned and shook her head. Nick sighed before grabbing it and wrapping it around her shoulders. She refused to actually put her arms through the sleeves.

Nick rolled his eyes. He didn’t know why she was being so stubborn about this. It was just a fucking coat.



They got back to campus so late that Nick had to circle around twice before finding the last free space at the far end of the parking lot on the residential quad.

“I’m walking you in,” he said, leaving no room for debate as he went around the car and opened their doors for them.

“Our building’s not that far,” Spencer protested, anyway. “You go on home. We’ll be fine.”

Reese nudged her in the ribs with her elbow. “Stop being stubborn,” she hissed. “You know better. Just let him walk us. It won’t even take him an extra five minutes of his time.” Nick didn’t feel like reminding her he’d already spent several *hours* of his time with them and didn’t mind at all.

Spencer scowled. “Fine,” she said, crossing her arms.

Nick pursed his lips together. “Wasn’t waiting for your permission, sweetheart,” he said, shoving his hands in his pockets.

That earned him another glare, but at this point, he was used to her looking at him like that. He still walked them right to their door once they got into the building, even as her glare turned into full-on daggers staring into his back.

“Night,” Reese said as she unlocked the door to their dorm.

“Good night.” He waved, watching Spencer stalk inside without another word to either of them.

Reese was frowning. “Don’t mind her,” she said quickly. “I think she’s just tired.”

“I wasn’t worried. Prickly is her thing.”

“Yeah, it is,” Reese laughed. “Seriously though, we appreciate you taking the time to come with us tonight. Both of us. She would just rather cut off her own foot than say anything when she needs help.”

*That’s an understatement,* he thought.

“I’ll see y’all later,” Nick said, finally turning to walk down the hall. It wasn’t until he got to his car that he realized Spencer still had his jacket.



Spencer didn't look up when Nick walked over to her booth with her usual.

He frowned and gently nudged her arm. She didn't even swipe at him like the annoying fly she usually said he was. Just picked at her cuticles, which, frankly, looked a mess.

“Spencer.”

He sighed and sat on the other side of the table.

“What's wrong?”

Her voice was muffled when she answered, still laying her head on top of her arms. “*Nothing.*”

He scoffed. “Bullshit.”

“I'm not in the mood, Nicholas,” she said when she finally picked her head up to scowl at him.

“And why is that?” Wiser men would have known better than to continue poking the bear, but he was worried. Spencer wasn't exactly kittens and rainbows all the time, but this was something else. Maybe...she wasn't feeling well? It occurred to him that the answer might be glaringly obvious, but he didn't want to assume.

Spencer let out an exasperated sigh like she couldn't believe she had to explain this to him. “I'm on my period, Nick. Sorry if that bothers you, but you're the one who wouldn't let it go.” She laid her head back down on the table, all the fight leaving her body.

It didn't bother him in the slightest, but she couldn't have known that. They hadn't known each other that long, and this was the first time he'd seen her like this.

“When did it start?” he asked.

“Last night,” she mumbled into the table. “While we were on the way back.”

That explained her less-than-civil goodbye when he walked them back to their dorm. With this new information in mind, he couldn't fault her for any of it.

“Do you want me to come over later when I get off?”

That had her lifting her head back up to look at him suspiciously. “What for?”

“To take care of you, obviously.”

“I think I'm good to just lay here and die,” Spencer said, laying her cheek flat against the surface of the table. “I won't stop you, but I hope you know what you're in for. Reese's started this morning.”

Nick tried to hide his smile in case she thought he was mocking her pain. Really, he was just glad she wasn't fighting him on offering to help. He left her drink on the table next to her face. “I think I can manage.”



# Chapter 10

Spencer somehow managed to drag herself back to her dorm to lay with Reese on the couch as they bonded over their mutual agony. The sound of someone clearing their throat made her perk her head up, looking for the source of the disturbance.

Hunter and Nick peeked in through their door, neither man looking like they wanted any part of what was going on inside their dorm.

Reese moaned from her end of the couch. “I am. In so much. Pain.” She sat up slightly and put her hand on Spencer’s shoulder. “Kill me,” she pleaded.

Spencer sat up with her and clutched their shared blanket to her chest. “You first, babe.” She whipped her head toward the door. “And what the hell are you two hovering over there for?”

“You better have brought ice cream,” Reese muttered.

Hunter made a face at Nick. *See?* If she hadn’t been dying of cramps, Spencer would’ve thrown something at the both of them.

Nick ignored him and stepped into their dorm, amusement coloring his face. “Unfortunately, not, but I can take requests. I’m sure Hunter wouldn’t mind going on a food run with me.”

Hunter snorted. “What makes you think I want any part of this? I choose life.” He raised his hands in mock surrender and dodged the pillow Reese launched at his head. “See?” he said, out loud this time.

“Maybe if you weren’t being an ass, we’d be nicer.”

Nick perched on the armrest of the couch by Spencer. “Any requests?” She wondered if he ever had to deal with Joselyn when she was on her period. It seemed like he had a lot of practice. And patience.

“Ice cream,” Reese repeated.

“Pizza,” Spencer added.

Hunter threw the pillow back toward the couch. Spencer caught it and hugged it to her chest. “I guess I’ll do pizza,” he relented.

“Nick, that means you’re responsible for our ice cream,” Reese said. “Cookie dough.”

He turned to Spencer. “And you?”

She waved him off. “Surprise me.”



By the time the boys returned, Spencer and Reese were watching *Tucker and Dale versus Evil*. Hunter stopped short just as the woodchipper scene started.

“That’s it — I’m out,” he grumbled, leaving their pizzas on the table. But he just pulled out a chair and sat with his arms crossed.

“Think about how we feel,” Reese said, reaching for her box.

He handed it over with a shudder. “*Please* don’t plant any more images in my head. I just now stopped having nightmares from our last movie night.”



Reese scoffed as she took a bite of her pizza. “Quit your bitching. You’re being dramatic.”

“And you’re being psychotic, you fucking goblin.”

“Go to hell.” She flipped him off. “I’m bleeding out of my vagina, and I have cramps.”

“I got you pizza, didn’t I?”

Spencer’s head hurt too much to keep up with their back-and-forth.

Nick grabbed her pizza and sat back on the armchair by her.

“I hope you realize I’m not sharing,” she said through narrowed eyes.

He held his hands up as he placed the box on the armrest of the couch. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Ice cream,” Reese demanded. Nick passed over a grocery bag with two Ben & Jerry’s pints inside and some plastic spoons from his backpack. She looked over at him. “Have I told you you’re my favorite? I love Ben & Jerry’s.”

Hunter scoffed and threw his hands up. “What am I? Chopped liver?”

Spencer smiled. “Would it make you feel better if I said you were *my* favorite?” She picked up a slice as she watched his reaction.

“Depends,” he snorted. “Are you just trying to spare my feelings, princess?”

She shrugged. “Take it or leave it.”

Reese passed her pint over. Spencer examined it, curious to see what Nick picked out for her.

“Did you get me the non-dairy one?” she asked, looking over at him after she noticed the label. He raised his brow as he reclined back in his chair.

“Is there a problem with that?”

Spencer shook her head. “It’s just —” She faltered, not knowing where exactly she was going with this.

Reese and Hunter were too preoccupied still arguing about the movie to pay much attention to them.

Nick shrugged. “You always ask for a milk substitute with your drinks. I thought you might have a dairy complex.”

“I’m slightly lactose intolerant, but not enough that it actually matters. I just prefer to avoid milk products when I can. No one’s ever noticed or asked me about it before,” she said.

“What can I say? I notice lots of things,” he said with a wink.

Spencer scowled. “You know, I was going to offer you a slice of my pizza, but just for that — no.” She looked at the box again before looking up at Hunter. “You got me the vegan one?”

“Nick said you might have a dairy complex. I didn’t want to risk anything.”

She was about to respond, but another dull contraction of pain in her abdomen had her burying her face in a pillow, clutching it so tightly some feathers started coming out.

“Fuck,” she hissed, gritting her teeth. She felt tears welling up in her eyes.

Reese rubbed her back as a shudder wracked through her body. “Do you need some more painkiller?”

Spencer shook her head. She’d already taken more than what was recommended on the bottle. “Kill. Me,” she bit out as she curled into a tight ball.

Someone pressed a cool hand to the back of her neck. “Do you want to lie down? Come on. I’ll help you get to bed.”

“I can walk,” Spencer snapped, standing up on wobbly legs. She glared at Nick, unable to help herself even as she hunched over clutching her stomach.

Hunter rolled his eyes as he got up, too. “Sure, princess, sure. You don’t need any help at all.”

“*Hunter. Hale.*” Reese smacked him with a pillow. “*Not helping.*” She glanced over at Spencer, concern etching her features. “Seriously though, do you need help? Movie’s not that important. And I think I need to lay down, too. Hunter can clean up out here and we can save the food for later.” She stood and shut off the projector.

Spencer cursed as Nick braced her arms while they walked to her room. Her knees buckled when they reached her bed, and he propped her up as she doubled over. “Whoa, what was that about not needing my help?”

“Fuck you,” she snapped as she climbed the rungs and collapsed on top of her mattress.

He was frowning at her, and she wondered if she was being too bitchy. She always had to do an apology train whenever she was on her period, and she *really* wasn’t looking forward to this one after he’d gone out of his way for her and Reese the past few days.

Instead of chastising her, he pressed the back of his hand to her forehead. “Are your periods always this bad?” He gently wiped a rogue tear away with his thumb.

Spencer gave him brownie points for not being weird about menstruation. “Yeah,” she admitted. “I used to pass out on my bathroom floor from the pain when I was younger. It’s not so bad now that I can take more medicine.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Nick muttered. He removed his hand, and she buried her face in her pillows, crying. “Wait here.”

He returned a minute later, holding something. “I stopped by and borrowed this from Joselyn earlier,” he explained. “Do you have a plug up there?”

Spencer pointed at the extension cord she ran up the side of her bed. “Is that a heating pad?” she asked as she leaned up on her elbows. “You really didn’t have to.”

“You just told me you basically fucking pass out for a week every month, sweetheart. Take the damn heating pad. I’ll get it next time I see you. I will, however, be taking *this* back.” He picked up the coat that he let her borrow from the back of her desk chair.

She glared at him, but slid the pad into place and switched it on. It warmed up immediately, soothing her aching muscles. “Thanks,” she whispered as her eyes drooped of their own accord.

“Anytime,” he said. “I guess I should head out. Do you need anything else? I’m gonna check on Reese before I go.”

Spencer turned on her side to watch him go. “I’m good,” she said. “Thanks again. Sorry for snapping at you earlier.”

“I’ve lived with Joselyn for most of my life. I have a pretty thick skin when it comes to periods. But I accept your apology and I forgive you,” Nick said.

The quiet click of him shutting her door was the last thing she heard before she drifted off into a much less painful sleep than she anticipated.



# Chapter 11

**Y**ou're late, Nicky."

Nick rolled his eyes. "We don't have a set schedule for a reason. One of my students needed more help than he realized."

"How's that my problem? You're a shitty tutor if that's the case," Joselyn teased.

He sighed and wondered how much alcohol was in the kitchen. "Do you have any beer left?" he asked, going to check for himself.

"In the fridge," she called. "Bring me the Jack while you're over there."

"I hope you're not intending on drinking straight from the bottle," he said, grabbing it anyway.

Joselyn scowled when he brought it over. "I bought it, so I can do whatever I want." *Technically*, Christian bought it using her money.

Nick sighed again. "Joselyn, what's wrong?"

"What makes you think something's wrong?" Her tone was light, but he knew her too well.

At his face, Joselyn let out a groan as she plopped down next to him on the couch and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I don't know if I should go meet up with this guy. He said five p.m."

Nick checked his watch. “Your meeting is in two minutes. You’ve already decided.”

“It’s not a meeting. It’s a date.”

He raised a brow. “Since when are you going on dates? And why’d you tell me movie night was still on if you had a date planned?”

She shrugged noncommittally.

“Joselyn.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.” She reached for the remote.

Nick grabbed it from her. “Too bad. You’re the one who brought it up.”

“And I’m gonna be the one to put it away,” Joselyn snapped. But she was glancing at her phone. “Ugh, maybe I should go. I have an itch that needs to be scratched.”

“This is not something my cousin should be telling me,” he groaned, rubbing his face. “Why are you like this?”

“You’re the one who said I brought it up,” she said, standing and abandoning her whiskey on the coffee table. “I’ll just text him and say I had a work emergency.”

“Where are you meeting?”

“Gonna Uber to Christian’s bar,” she answered quickly. She was only 20, but Christian usually made an exception because he could keep an eye on things.

The question was on the tip of his tongue. But he knew damn well she wouldn’t admit to trying to make her ex jealous. He sighed.

“Well, let me know if this guy tries anything.”

Joselyn rolled her eyes. “I can handle myself.”

“I’m well aware of that, but I’d like to know if I’m gonna have to provide an alibi or bail you out of jail. Are you sure you don’t want me to drop you off?”

She shook her head. “I’ve already ordered it and shared the tracker with Christian. I’m not stupid.”

Nick followed her out to the parking lot while she waited for her ride. “Hey,” he said, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. “In all seriousness, you be safe, and I hope you have a good time. Just text me when you get home.” He knew she’d never go home with a guy, itch or not.

She leaned against him. “It’ll be late. I’m gonna ride with Christian after his shift ends. You don’t have to wait up here for me.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He noticed a black sedan slowly pulling in. “This your ride?”

Joselyn checked her phone. “Black Nissan,” she confirmed. But she didn’t pull away just yet.

The driver rolled his window down. “Are you Joselyn?” Nick stared him down while Joselyn climbed in the backseat. The other man blanched, which was exactly what he was going for. He’d be damned if he didn’t do everything in his power to make sure she got there in one piece.

If she noticed his display, she didn’t say anything. Just waved as the driver pulled out of the lot.

Nick sighed and rocked back-and-forth on his heels as he watched them go. He peered inside The Grind. Connor and Madeline had been working there long enough by now that they could handle things without either of them there — for the most part. But it wasn’t like he had anything better to do.

“You two alright in here?” he asked, pushing the door open and hearing the bell above it jingle.

Madeline nodded from the register. “Connor’s grabbing more milk from the walk-in. Hasn’t been too busy so far.”

Nick knocked on the wooden counter. “Don’t jinx yourselves.” He made himself at home on one of the barstools. “How are your classes going?”

Her ears turned pink. She’d been working there since the semester started and still wasn’t used to him talking to her

about anything other than work. “Fine. Just ready for break. Do I need to request off? Because —”

“Mads, it’s Thanksgiving. You don’t have to ask,” he said before she gave herself a panic attack. “We’re gonna close early that Tuesday and not open up again until Monday.”

Connor slid in behind the counter with the requested milk. “You aren’t on the schedule today,” he said, looking curiously at Nick. Compared to Madeline, Connor was much more comfortable around him, which was a relief. He was too damn young to be scaring them.

“Man, half the time I’m here, I’m not on the schedule. Be glad you guys are capped at 20 hours a week.” That was something they made sure all their student employees understood. As much as Joselyn loved this place, she knew it came second to a lot of people, including Nick.

He saw Madeline crack a small smile and considered it a win. “If y’all are good, I’m gonna head out then. Call if you need,” he said, rapping his knuckles on the counter before heading back home.



Spencer texted him as he was wrapping up a lab report.



SPENCER

how's movie night going

NICK

Joselyn bailed to go on a date

I'm just waiting up until she gets home

SPENCER

good for her

are you still gonna watch a movie

NICK

Why?

You want to come over?

SPENCER

nice try

He wasn't sure what exactly she thought he was trying to do, but he didn't have to wonder long.

SPENCER

i have two papers to turn in before the break and i'm not going to be tempted

NICK

If you get them done by next weekend, I'll let you pick the movie the next time we go to Joselyn's

SPENCER

bribery again

smart man

Nick rolled his eyes.

SPENCER

not this weekend?

NICK

Taking Joselyn out for her 21st

Seeing as how it'll actually be legal for Christian to let her in his bar

SPENCER

hope you two have fun

i'll be over here

slaving over my papers

*Probably still having a better time than me,* Nick thought.



“You go on and have fun,” Nick said, settling down at the bar. “I’ll watch your drinks.”

Joselyn cocked her head. “You sure? You can go if you want to. Christian’s here.”

He pushed her towards the middle of the dance floor. “I am here for *you*, for *your* birthday. Besides, the band here isn’t so bad.” Pulling Punches was a rock band made up of Ravens alumni, but they’d all graduated by the time Nick was a freshman. Their music probably wasn’t anything he’d listen to on his own, but it was tolerable enough.

She reluctantly ambled over to mingle, leaving Nick alone to watch whatever game was being played on the TV above

him. After a while, the bartender asked for his order as he watched his cousin let out some steam.

“Just a Coke,” Nick said. He didn’t exactly feel like paying six dollars for a beer. And he was driving, anyway.

After sneaking a glance to make sure no one was getting handsy with Joselyn, he checked the time on his phone. It was barely eleven, and the bar stayed open until two, but he was already getting a little bored of the atmosphere. But this was Joselyn’s birthday present, and he’d let her enjoy it as much as she wanted. It wasn’t like he had anything better to do.

Then, he noticed the string of texts he’d accidentally been ignoring because his phone was on silent.

SPENCER

how are things

joselyn's been sending me pictures

she looks like she's been having a good time

NICK

She is

SPENCER

aren't you?

you aren't in any of the pictures

NICK

I prefer to pilfer my booze from my reprobate roommate and drink in the privacy of my own home

I'm just here because it makes her happy

SPENCER

wow nicholas

reprobate's a big word

what'd you get on your SAT

A 1530, but Nick wasn't about to contradict her idea of him being less academically inclined than he actually was. He sent her back an eye-roll emoji.

“Hey.”

Nick looked up. The girl occupying the stool next to him was doing a passably good job at avoiding eye contact. “Mind if I join you?” She snuck a glance over her shoulder.

Nick shrugged. “Sure.”

“I’m Katie,” she said, twirling a strand of brown hair around her finger, still looking everywhere on his face but his eyes.

He smiled politely at her. “Nick.” His phone buzzed while Katie was getting the bartender’s attention.

SPENCER

if it helps

this is currently my view

She sent him a photo of her, Reese, and Hunter on their barely big enough, school-issue dorm couch. Hunter was rolling his eyes, Reese was poking him in the forehead, and Spencer had on a bemused, fake scowl on her face.

“She must really make you happy,” Katie commented next to him.

He looked up again. “Sorry, what?”

Katie jerked her head down at his phone. “I’m wondering if I should feel a little discouraged,” she said. “My first time putting myself out there with someone who clearly isn’t interested. My friends,” she pointed over her shoulder at the other end of the bar, “told me I should branch out a little. You seemed like the most approachable guy in here.”

That was probably meant as a compliment, but all it did was put more pressure on him to be a better drinking partner.

And Nick wasn’t exactly sure why he felt weird about what was happening right now. The only thing he could come up with was that it’d been a while since he’d gone out, and even longer since he actually got flirted with.

“Just my friends,” he said. “Apparently I’m missing out on some prime-time entertainment.”

He wasn’t sure why he felt the need to explain, but he was saved when Joselyn came up and wrapped her arms around his neck from behind.

“Cousin dear,” she sang in his ear. Not drunk, but definitely buzzed. “I think I’m ready to go home. I already told Christian.”

Nick offered Katie an apologetic smile. “Maybe I’ll see you around?” He doubted he’d come here again within the next six months, but he felt bad about being a shitty first foray out of her comfort zone.

She nodded encouragingly. “Yeah, maybe. I could give you my —”

Joselyn was tugging him toward the door before he caught the last part of her sentence. Hopefully, this whole experience didn’t turn her off from taking chances. She seemed like a nice girl— just not someone he was interested in pursuing anything with.

“Talk,” Joselyn said when they got to the car.

His brow furrowed. “About what?”

“That girl in there was all over you just now, and the bartender was *clearly* interested.”

Katie hadn’t been, but the bartender *did* leave his number on Nick’s receipt. Not that that meant much. But Nick decided he’d indulged her in this conversation, anyway. “So?”

“I’m just saying it’s been a while for you. Should I go home with Christian and let you go back in there?”

Nick pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath, regretting his decision to let her have this. “Joselyn Nicole Fuller, I am *not* discussing my sex life with you.”

She let out a low whistle. “Wow, Nicky. My government name? Somebody’s touchy tonight.”

Nick was grateful she was in a good mood, or he would’ve already faced the consequences of calling her by her full name.

“I’m just glad nobody got ‘touchy’ with you. Did you have a good time?”

“Broke my new boots in and my alcohol was paid for by our lovely customers. Of course, I had a fucking good time.”

She leaned her head on the window and it wasn't long before she was snoring softly. Nick made a mental note to leave a bottle of Gatorade and some aspirin on her nightstand after he helped her get to bed.



# Chapter 12

**S**cript, Spencer reminded herself as she read over the note on her phone with everyone's orders so she wouldn't mess things up when she got to the front of the line.

"Who's all this for?" Nick asked, not even bothering to ring her up as he slid two drinks forward in a cardboard carrier.

Spencer grabbed it by the handle and carefully slid it off the counter. "Hunt's working and Reese is at the studio. Pretty sure neither of them have had anything to eat all day. We didn't even have breakfast together this morning." She hoped her disappointment wasn't obvious. Of course, she knew they couldn't eat *every* meal together, but she hated eating by herself. It reminded her too much of years of separate dinners with her mother.

Nick grabbed two sandwiches from the display and shoved them into a parchment bag for her. "That's nice of you," he noted. "Tell them these are from me."

She shifted uncomfortably on her heels as she tucked the bag under her arm. "It's really nothing."

Nick frowned at her answer, but waved her off to take care of his next customer.





Hunter hadn't had much time to talk during his shift, so Spencer just dropped off his lunch and headed back to campus. When she got to the studio, she found Reese in the exact same position that she'd been in hours ago.

The canvas in front of her was also considerably more complete than when Spencer visited that morning armed with a coffee and a bagel from the dining hall.

"When's the last time you ate? It better not have been when I brought you breakfast."

Reese sipped loudly through her straw instead of answering. Spencer sighed and grabbed the cup of paint water sitting on the easel. "That's it — I'm helping you clean up and we're going to get some actual food."

"Can it be pizza?" Reese asked between bites as she took her brushes to the sink.

Spencer grabbed the sandwich out of her mouth before Reese got any paint on it. "Yes, babe." She rolled her eyes. "What do you want to watch?"



Forty-five minutes later, the two of them were lounging on the couch with one large pizza on their coffee table and *American Horror Story* playing quietly in the background. Probably not most people's first choice, but they'd seen *Asylum* enough times that they didn't need to pay much attention.

Spencer watched Reese pull out a compact mirror and wipe delicately at the corner of her eye, careful not to smudge

her eyeliner. She marveled at her friend's commitment to take the time every morning to make sure her hair was neat and put on some makeup, even if she was currently wearing some old clothes of Hunter's that were perpetually covered in paint.

"Can you teach me how to do makeup?" Spencer asked slowly.

Reese cocked her head and shut her mirror. "I thought you didn't like makeup, babe. You barely let me do your eyeliner for the party."

"It's not that I don't like it. It's just that my mom never taught me. And you know me. I don't like things I don't know," Spencer explained.

Her friend snorted. "That's one way of putting it."

Spencer scowled and smacked her in the arm. "I don't want to make a big deal of it," she hissed.

To her surprise, Reese nodded in understanding. "I get it. My sister's mostly mute, but she hates it whenever she *does* speak, and people make a spectacle of it. Hold on, let me grab my stuff."

She emerged from her room a second later with a large acrylic organizer and shoved the empty pizza box to the floor before pulling out a couple things from each drawer.

"So, what's your mom's deal with makeup and personal style? I feel like I never see you in anything but jeans and a sweater."

Spencer picked up an eyeshadow palette and tested the colors on her arm as she answered. "I have a couple theories on that. Either she's got some unresolved internal misogyny, or she was afraid me getting into makeup was going to be like a gateway drug into premarital sex." She didn't want to admit that she still somewhat bought into that narrative — what if guys thought she was trying to get their attention in the hopes of hooking up?

Reese snorted and rolled her eyes. "As if men can actually appreciate the work that goes into it," she muttered.

Spencer admired the colors she'd swatched on her arm and listened as Reese walked her through some basic steps until she was confident enough to try herself. It wasn't anything special — just something to do when she wanted to make more of an effort in the mornings.

But it was more than that. It was the fact that Spencer *finally* allowed herself to indulge in something like this, with someone she actually considered a close friend rather than one of proximity that had her feeling warm inside.

"I used to wish I was like other girls. They thought I wasn't into this kind of stuff because I thought I was better than them. I didn't want to explain it was because of my mother."

Reese frowned. "So, you've never had any girl friends?"

"I've never had anyone I was especially close with until I got here," Spencer admitted. Liam was nice, but not someone she imagined keeping in constant contact with. "Hope that didn't come out as pathetic as it sounded."

Reese squeezed her hand. "Babe, you are the farthest thing from pathetic."



The next morning, Spencer was proud to say that she only took half an hour to apply what she'd learned yesterday before rushing out the door with Reese to meet Hunter for breakfast in the dining hall.

He stared at her face for a moment. "You look good, princess. What's the occasion?"

"Hunter!" Reese hissed, kicking him in the shin. "Who says there has to be an occasion?"

Reese's chair actually *screeched* backward as Hunter retaliated with a hard kick to its leg. "Forgive me," he replied,

looking at Spencer, “but it’s not like you’ve ever done it before.”

“I wore some at the party,” she reminded him.

“Is that it then? Are you going to a party?”

Spencer sighed and rolled her eyes. “No, Hunt. Just gonna head to the library later.” Hopefully, Nick wouldn’t make a big deal of it. She wasn’t even sure the makeup she wore for the party was visible in the shitty lighting of his house. But as long as he didn’t think she was wearing it for anyone in particular, she supposed she could deal with a little light teasing.



Nick studied her when she joined him at the usual time. “You look nice,” he said. Spencer steeled herself waiting for the *what’s the occasion?* but it never came. He just went back to working without another word.

She didn’t know why that disappointed her so much. Before she could unpack that, she grabbed her headphones and set about following along to the last bit of *Antigone*.

After the words started running together, Spencer sighed and shoved everything away. She rubbed her temples and saw Nick still concentrating intensely on his computer.

She rested her chin on his shoulder and peered at his screen. “What are you working on?”

“Interview prep,” Nick explained. “For the internship. Mine’s scheduled right before Thanksgiving.” He shut his laptop with a sigh. “I’m done overthinking this. Wanna head out?”

Spencer gathered her things and met him by the door. “Where are you off to?”

“Joselyn wants to roast marshmallows at the fire pit before it gets too cold, so I gotta head to the store.”

“There’s a fire pit?”

“On the other end of the academic quad. Past Turing,” he answered, like she should have already known.

“Well, that’s why I didn’t know. English majors practically live in Morrison.” She cocked her head. “Room for a couple more? I think the only way Reese and Hunt are going to take a break is if I *drag* them out. Might be a nice way to relax before midterms.”

“Sounds like someone else I know,” Nick snorted.

She scowled. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Sweetheart, the last time you went to a party, all you did was hide in a corner and lament how you could have been doing homework.”

“Fuck off,” she said, trying in vain to shove him as he walked with her across the residential quad.

Nick was failing to keep his amused expression in check. “I’ll shoot you a text so you can meet us there later.”

“You better.”



“What the fuck are you doing? It’s a marshmallow, not a torch for an angry mob, Spencer,” Nick asked incredulously, watching the outside turn charred and almost coal-like on the end of her spit.

Spencer scowled at him. “Well, how do *you* like your marshmallows, Nicholas?”

“Golden-brown,” he snorted. “Just burned enough for the Maillard reaction to cause the sugar to caramelize.”

He swore as Joselyn hit him in the arm and nearly caused his marshmallow to fall right into the flames. “Stop showing off. No one knows what the fuck you’re talking about.”

Hunter speared another marshmallow on his spit and added it to the fire. “Are you sure that’s not because you don’t know when to take them out, princess?”

“It adds texture,” Reese said, wielding her own burnt hunk of sugar. She waved it at him.

He jumped up. “Come near me with that thing and I will chuck it in the fucking fire.”

Nick looked over to see Spencer watching her friends with a soft fondness in her eyes. On the other side of the pit, Christian was pulling his spit lined with five marshmallows out so Joselyn could make a pile of s’mores on the plate next to her.

They had the quad to themselves, the only other sounds being the crackling of the fire and the occasional hoots of the resident Ravens owl.



When the temperature dropped into the low fifties and the sky had long since turned as black as Spencer and Reese’s marshmallows, Nick decided it was a good time to extinguish things.

Especially because it looked like the girls were about two seconds away from falling asleep where they sat. Spencer’s cheeks were pink from the chill in the air even though the warmth from the fire should have been more than enough to combat the cold. She’d been leaning her entire body against him as opposed to just her head on his shoulder.

Christian and Joselyn peeled off first to check on The Grind before heading back up to the apartment. Hunter was giving Reese a piggyback ride, leaving Nick and Spencer to pull up the rear.

She grabbed onto his arm and stumbled along sleepily as they made their way to the residential quad.

“Alright there?”

Her eyes were barely open. “Mmhmm.” She narrowly avoided tripping on a rock, not even registering the almost disaster on her face.

Nick frowned at her. “Need Hunter to help you?”

“As much as I’d be willing to, Reese is already on my back choking the fuck out of me because she’s a fucking menace. I won’t be able to carry both of you at the same time,” Hunter grunted. He swore as Reese smacked him on the side of the head, even while half asleep with her cheek resting on his shoulder.

“S’okay,” Spencer murmured as her head lolled and Nick had to start propping her up. She was tugging on his arm so hard, he almost fell over. As good of a time as he had, Nick really didn’t think the experience was worth a concussion.

“Sweetheart, you keep that up and we’ll both go tumbling down before we get to the dorms.” He stopped and bent his knees. “Hop up.”

She must’ve been exhausted if she so willingly climbed up on his back without so much as a glare. Her arms were limp noodles around his neck, so he was already faring much better than Hunter. He wrapped his arms tightly around her thighs to keep her secure.

“Alright up there?” he asked again.

“Mmhmm,” she repeated into the crook of his neck. “This doesn’t mean anything, by the way.”

“I know. Just let me help get you back.”

When they got back to Thorne, Spencer and Reese were so soundly asleep, Nick and Hunter resolved to just tuck them both in their beds before locking the door on the way out.



# Chapter 13

Spencer managed to finish her midterm papers impressively early, but almost everyone else had things due right before the holiday. At least most Ravens professors elected to cancel class for the entire week, with reminders to check the online portal for any updates.

Reese and Hunter were both out in the living room working – him on his laptop and her on her rented drawing tablet. Spencer hadn't actually called ahead to see if her mother even had anything planned, but it wasn't like she'd visited home after orientation week.

“When are y'all leaving?” she asked, dragging her overnight bag behind her. “I'm about to head home. It's only about an hour drive without traffic.”

Hunter rolled his eyes. “This is Georgia. There's always traffic.”

“I have one more thing to turn in on Wednesday,” Reese answered grimly. “So...Thursday. Hopefully, we'll get to Hunter's house before the turkey gets cold.” She set her stylus down on the table. “I need a break.”

Hunter grabbed the overnight bag before either of them could protest and led the way to Spencer's car. “All set?” he asked, shoving it in her trunk.

Spencer nodded. “Should be. Probably gonna grab a coffee before I head home if y'all wanna join me.”



Reese was already climbing in her passenger seat. “Yes, *please.*”

Hunter let out a sigh as he sat in the back. “Great. Now I have to deal with that one,” he pointed at Reese, “hyped up on caffeine by myself.”

“You guys have been friends for over a decade,” Spencer reminded him. “I’m sure you can manage without me for a couple days.”

They somehow lasted the short drive to The Grind without anyone trying to assault each other in the cramped space of Spencer’s Camry, and she considered that a miracle. The bell above the door jingled loudly as the three of them walked in. Spencer noted the seasonally appropriate cornucopia by the register and the fake autumn leaf garlands lining the walls.

Joselyn was in the process of decorating Spencer’s booth when they approached. “How lovely of you to join us today,” she said, climbing down from the table to sit. She dropped more leaves in a heap next to her.

Spencer and Reese slid in on one side of the booth, with Hunter pulling up a chair from a nearby table. He eyed the pile of leaves. “Did you need any help finishing up here?”

“Yes, she does,” a voice behind him said. Joselyn scowled.

“Josie, you’re 5’6” and the ladder isn’t tall enough for what you’re trying to do. I don’t like you standing on the tables because you’re stubborn. Let him help.” Nick walked over and deposited a tray of drinks on the table next to the leaf pile.

Reese pulled the tray closer and took a sniff. “What’s in these?”

Joselyn passed the drinks around. “Madeline came up with a new special for the season,” she explained. “You guys can be our guinea pigs. It’s steamed apple juice with caramel and spices. Haven’t come up with a name for it just yet.”

“I just need *something* with enough caffeine or sugar to get me through my drive back home,” Spencer said, taking a sip. She never got hot drinks, but she might start making an

exception. And considering the average temperature outside was in the fifties, it was a welcome change of pace from her usual iced lattes.

Nick raised an eyebrow. “How long’s your drive?”

“An hour without traffic. But there’s always traffic, so we’ll have to see,” she answered.

Joselyn leaned against her. “When are you leaving?”

Spencer checked her watch. “Probably now. All of my classes got canceled, so no point in waiting around on campus. I might even beat rush hour if I book it.”

“Don’t jinx yourself, princess,” Hunter warned, moving out of her way. “Drive safe.”

“I’ll let y’all know when I get there,” she said, waving her drink as a goodbye.

Her phone buzzed as she unlocked her car. Spencer carefully set her still-piping hot drink in a cup holder before answering.

“Hello?”

“Were you planning on coming home for break?”

Spencer held her tongue. *Hello to you too, mother.* “I’m about to leave campus now. Is that a problem?”

“I guess not,” she replied dryly. “I might not be home until late. You’ll have to figure food out yourself.”

“That’s fine,” Spencer said evenly. “I’ll order Chinese or something.”

Her mother made a noncommittal noise before hanging up.



After spending a good hour and a half cursing out idiots on the freeway, Spencer finally pulled into the driveway of her house.

It was barely four in the afternoon, but the sun was already mostly set, plunging her neighborhood into twilight darkness. She lugged her duffel bag from her trunk to just barely inside the front door before giving up. There was no way she'd get it all the way up to her room by herself. She sighed, electing to lounge on the couch watching a *Law & Order* rerun until she saw the lights of her mom's hatchback from the front door.

"You're home already?" Lori Weiss asked, barely sparing her daughter a second glance as she hung her coat up and set her work tote on the back of a dining room chair.

Spencer nodded from her perch on the couch, scrolling on her phone so she had an excuse to not attempt eye contact.

REESE

Did you make it home?

SPENCER

yep

my mom just came back from work

HUNTER

It's just you and her, right?

No dad?

SPENCER

no dad

idk the story there

i've never asked

maybe i should

someone tell me yes or no before i lose my nerve

While she was waiting on them to tell her to go for it or leave it alone, Nick texted her.

NICK

Did you beat traffic

SPENCER

what the hell do you think?

NICK

Taking that as a no

Spencer rolled her eyes before remembering he couldn't actually see her. A knock at the door distracted her from giving him a smartass response.

She gave the delivery guy an extra \$5 bill and set the cartons of food on the dining room table.

It took everything in her to not pick at her cuticles as she sat across from her mother and slowly swallowed some fried rice. She couldn't even remember the last time they'd actually eaten together – her mother usually left her to her own devices and buried herself in her grading.

Like she was doing now.

“Are you wearing makeup?” Lori asked sharply after a few minutes of silent eating, scrutinizing her over her papers.

Spencer squirmed in her seat as she tried to shrug as nonchalantly as possible. “A little.” She scraped a peeling cuticle with her nail, feeling satisfied when it finally detached from her skin. Her nails were painted a shimmery copper in spirit of the holiday.

“What for?”

“Reese was showing me how,” she answered defensively. “Something wrong with that?”

Her mother continued staring at her, like she also couldn't believe Spencer actually talked back instead of biting her

tongue.

She was about to apologize and try to pacify things when her mother just sighed and returned to her grading. “How long are you staying?”

“Classes don’t start up again until Monday,” Spencer replied curtly. Her mother just nodded and didn’t say anything else.

This was getting ridiculous. Lori Weiss was a grown-ass woman giving her the silent treatment over a little eyeliner.

Spencer pinched her brow. “You’re mad. You’re mad I’m wearing makeup.”

Her mother looked over her papers with an unamused expression, like she was talking to one of her students instead of her child. “I won’t lie. I’m not pleased about it.”

“Why?” Spencer pressed. “What’s wrong with me wearing a little bit of makeup? What’s the big deal?”

Lori scoffed and returned her attention to the paper in front of her, hiding her expression. “You’ve never worn any before. Who are you wearing it for?”

“Are you fucking serious?” A vein in Spencer’s temple throbbed in annoyance. “I’m literally 18 – and I never wore it before because you never showed me how. Who said I was wearing it for anybody?”

“*Are* you wearing it for anybody?”

“Is that any of your business?” she snapped.

Her mother finally lowered the paper to level her with her gaze. “Yes. I’m trying to make sure you don’t make my mistakes. I got pregnant with you during my last year of college.”

“Well, you have nothing to worry about. I have no interest in dating right now.” Spencer wasn’t about to mention her Tinder – even if her time on there had been less than unsuccessful. “How come you’ve never told me about my dad, anyway?”

Her mom's voice somehow turned even more harsh as she answered, "Because he's not important."

Spencer snorted. "I think giving me half of my DNA makes him pretty important."

"Well, he's not the one who raised you," Lori snapped.

Spencer's jaw clenched as she tried to keep her emotions in check, even if her mother didn't deserve the courtesy of her compliance. "You call my childhood you raising me? I fucking raised myself because you kept telling me I had to grow up. I was out of diapers before I was two years old!"

Her mother glared at her and slammed her papers down. "I've had to work my butt off to be able to give you a roof over your head, food in your body, and clothes on your back. I couldn't afford to take care of you all the time."

Spencer threw her hands up. "That's not my problem. I didn't ask to be born. I don't know why you're punishing me for something that isn't my fault."

"I never said it was your fault. I just said you should understand why I had to do what I did," Lori said, like teaching your toddler independence was the most logical thing in the world.

*"Why didn't you ask for help?"*

She scoffed. "From whom? Your grandparents are *dead*, and your father is a *deadbeat*."

Spencer couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You could've called him. Taken his ass to court so he could help you with child support. Were you too stubborn? Was that it? You cared more about your fucking pride than taking care of me?"

"Spencer Lynn, I am not going to sit here and let you lecture *me* about how I raised you when your father's the one who didn't even bother to show up when you were born. That's why his name isn't on your birth certificate," her mother snapped.

“Are you sure it’s not because that would’ve made it easier for me to find him when I grew up?” Spencer shot back.

“If I thought there was even a particle of hope that your father would step up, you wouldn’t have to find him. I raised you just fine on my own. Look at where you are. Full ride to college. Nothing to worry about except your grades. You didn’t get here because of him.”

*I didn’t get here because of you either*, Spencer wanted to say, but deep down, she knew all of her academic efforts had always been attempts to get validation from the woman who ‘raised’ her. Something that showed she wasn’t just a really high maintenance and emotional houseplant in her mother’s eyes.

“All you ever did was tell me not to get pregnant,” she muttered.

“And now you see why.”

Spencer stood up so fast, her chair toppled over. “Excuse me?”

Her mom crossed her arms. “Just saying you should get some perspective before you judge me. Or else you might end up making a mistake with a ton of regrets and misery.”

“You saying you *regret* me? That I make you *miserable*?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth. You know that’s not what I meant.”

Spencer wasn’t listening anymore. “Screw this. I’m not staying another minute here with you.”

Lori stood up and followed her to the door. “Spencer Lynn, you are not leaving at this time of night.”

Spencer scoffed. “I’m not a teenager anymore, Mom. You can’t stop me.”

“Fine. Leave me like your father did. You already look just like him.”

Spencer flinched. “I wouldn’t know,” she snapped. “I don’t know anything about him. Maybe we’re more alike than you

and I are.”

“You’d be better off if you were more like me.”

“Too stubborn to admit when she needs help? Too fucking difficult to be around?” Spencer squashed down the feeling that she was already a carbon copy of her mom in terms of personality. She wasn’t as bad.

She hoped.

Spencer grabbed her bag from near the door and slammed it shut on her way out, not bothering to look back and see if her mom was watching.



As if her night couldn’t get any worse, her tire pressure light started flashing on the dash.

“Shit,” she muttered. “Shit shit shit shit shit.” The car shook violently, trying to hold itself together as she looked around for a safe place to pull over.

She settled on the blessedly empty Waffle House parking lot up the road. Not trusting the car enough to properly pull into a spot, she drove in just far enough to not be hit by oncoming traffic.

The yellow glow from the sign provided light as she inspected the damage to her front passenger tire. It sank into the asphalt, and she could easily squish the rubber under her boot.

Spencer debated her options. The employees watched her wearily, but no one came outside to check on her. She pulled her phone out scowled at the time. It was just before midnight, but she didn’t know who else to call.

Hunter answered on the third ring, sounding groggy. “Hello?”



“Hey, it’s me. Look, I’m really sorry to wake you, but I need some help. I hit a pothole on my way back to campus and my tire’s flat,” she said.

“Where are you?” His voice already sounded clearer, more awake.

“I pulled over in the Waffle House parking lot. There’s no way I would have made it back in one piece.”

Hunter grunted, and she heard rustling. “I’m on my way. Get in your car and lock the doors.” He hung up before she had a chance to thank him. Glancing back toward the Waffle House, she sighed and did as she was told.

He showed up five minutes later, still wearing his pajamas. He parked next to her and knocked on her window. “You alright, princess?” he asked as she rolled it down. She nodded.

“Pop the trunk so I can get your spare.” He handed her his hoodie when she got out so he could jack her car up. Considering it was near the forties tonight, Spencer didn’t hesitate to slip it on.

She also didn’t want to admit to herself that she was having to make a conscious effort to not be like her mother.

Despite waking up only ten minutes ago, Hunter made quick work of the tire.

“Thanks again for helping me. I don’t know what I would’ve done if you two had already left for your dad’s place.”

“I’ll be right behind you in case something happens on the way back to campus,” he said, leaning on the roof of her car. “And I’m gonna get you a new tire at some point so you don’t have to keep driving on your spare.” He slapped her door twice before getting into his own car.



# Chapter 14

Nick was on his way home after yet another meeting of staying as far away from Chelsea as he possibly could without seeming obvious when he noticed Reese struggling with canvas boards on her way to Thorne. Hunter wasn't too far behind her.

"Need some help?" Nick asked as he jogged over to grab one that was in a questionable position in her arms. It was bigger than she was.

"Nick! Oh my God, yes, please," Reese said, sounding out of breath.

Hunter, hands also full, simply nodded at him and scowled at Reese. "How the hell did you rope me into this?"

"Don't be a prick," she snapped. They'd finally made it to her dorm, and she set her load on the ground to unlock the door. She moved to turn the lights on, but stopped short, holding a finger to her lips to shush them.

"Spencer's sleeping," she hissed. "For the first time in like a week. *Do not* wake her up. I will end both of you if you do."

Not wanting to incur the wrath of either of them, the boys deposited the canvases in Reese's room with a supernatural silence.

"Hunt," Reese called quietly, kneeling by where Spencer was curled up at the end of the couch.

“Coming.”

At Nick’s raised eyebrow, she gently grabbed everything out of her lap until she had a neat stack of Spencer’s things in her hands. “She’s done this a couple times since coming back from the break. We have a system.”

“Alright, princess, time for bed,” Hunter whispered, earning a glare from Reese as he gently picked Spencer up and carried her to her room. She stirred, letting out a curse as she protested weakly and wriggled in his arms. Her eyes were still closed, brow furrowed. It almost looked like she was pouting.

“Yeah, I know. Just let me help you,” Hunter said.

Nick frowned. Spencer hadn’t needed to tell him she wasn’t sleeping well. He could see it every time she came to the library.

Asking about it promptly earned him a scowl and the silent treatment every time. That didn’t stop him from trying again the next time he saw her at The Grind.

He slid her usual across the table, figuring the free caffeine might ease her mood.

“Why haven’t you been sleeping?” He cocked his head at her, watching as she paused mid-sip and put her drink down.

Her eyes narrowed. “How do you know I haven’t been sleeping?”

Nick sighed, debating if it was worth the potential argument to get into this with her right now.

*Fuck it.*

“I came over the other day and you were curled up on the couch. Hunt had to *carry* you to bed. And if we’re being honest, sweetheart, you don’t look like yourself lately.”

He wondered how much hell she would give him if he said what was really on his mind. *You look like shit.* Then, he wondered if it would be worth it just to see her come alive again.

Spencer touched two fingers to the space right below her eyes, like she hadn't realized how obvious it was. She shook her head. "Got in a fight with my mom over the break. I can't sleep because I can't stop thinking about it."

Nick pursed his lips together in a tight line. He leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms behind his head in a show of nonchalance. "I won't pry if you don't want me to," he started, "but I've been told I'm a pretty good listener. And if you're not sleeping at night anyway..."

Spencer waited, taking another slow sip of her drink. He couldn't read her expression with the cup in the way, but maybe that was the point.

"Whenever I couldn't sleep, I used to just go out and drive somewhere with Joselyn."

She set her cup down, perusing him like she thought he had ulterior motives. "Apparently whenever I was being fussy as a baby, my mom would just stick me in my car seat and drive around until I fell asleep."

"We don't have to talk about her if you don't want to," he reminded her.

"It's fine." Spencer rubbed her temples. Then, in a rare show of acceptance, asked, "What time?"

Nick cocked his head. "Is this you taking me up on my offer to help?"

"It's me about to tell you to forget it if you ask another question like that," Spencer said sharply, glaring at him.

But he didn't care, because this was the most alive he'd seen her since before the break.

He gently smoothed her hair back. "I'll shoot you a text."

All she did was rub her eyes again and lay her head back on the table. Nick made a mental note to tell the others not to bother her if she fell asleep.



It was closing time when Nick finally relented and went to wake her up. He nudged her arm.

“Closing time, sweetheart.”

Spencer blinked the sleep from her eyes, glaring at him again. “Why’d you let me sleep so long?”

“You needed it,” he said unapologetically as he rapped his knuckles on the table. “Christian’s closing, so I’ll walk you home.”

She bit her lip. “Are you busy tonight?”

Nick grabbed her bag off the table before she had a chance to. “Why?” He relished another win when she didn’t give him a hard time about it.

She cocked her head. “Can we go on that drive?”



After dropping her bag off at her dorm and sending Reese a text explaining where she was, Spencer trailed a few paces behind Nick while they walked to get his car.

She saw a muscle in his jaw tick when he noticed the other car in his driveway. She didn’t recognize it, but it looked expensive with its shiny paint job and chrome accents. There were only two seats.

Nick grabbed her by the arm and unlocked his car. “Get in the car, Spencer. *Now*,” he said sharply as she slipped into the passenger seat.

The front door opened, and Spencer saw Sam come out. Nick practically shoved her head down into the car, hiding her from view. She scowled, about to ask him what his fucking problem was, but then she remembered Sam's penchant for girls her age. He was probably just trying to save her from attracting any unwanted attention.

She pulled the door shut, watching Nick cross his arms to stand guard in front of it. She couldn't make out what either of them were saying.

It wasn't long before she heard the front door slam and Nick finally climbed in the driver's seat. He was swearing under his breath.

Spencer weighed her options – pretend she hadn't noticed anything or ask him what was wrong? On the one hand, avoiding things was entirely up her alley, but on the other, she didn't like being around anyone when they were this upset. It usually triggered a need to pick at her cuticles until the skin around her fingers was raw and sometimes bleeding.

She took a deep breath as he sped out of his driveway, still muttering to himself. His knuckles were white across his steering wheel.

“Is everything okay?”

Nick jumped and swore loudly like he hadn't expected her to speak. Spencer wondered if he even remembered she was in the car with him.

He sighed. “Sorry. Just give me a minute. A little on edge right now, and I don't want to take it out on you.”

*Then don't.* Spencer bit her tongue and nodded anyway, taking out her phone to torture herself by answering Tinder messages as a distraction and for validation until Nick calmed himself down.

DANIEL

I have a question.

SPENCER

shoot

DANIEL

Is the girl in your profile pic single?

Could you get me her number?

SPENCER

excuse me? why bother matching with me if you just wanted to get with her? she has her own fucking tinder, you know

DANIEL

whoa chill out. I like you too, I just know I could never get with someone like her.

SPENCER

that's not the compliment you think it is. nice to know you're settling

DANIEL

you should take it as a compliment. how many other guys have matched with you and asked about your friend? I can't be the only one.

She scowled at her phone and moved on to the next thread.

ALEX

hav u changed ur mind yet?

SPENCER

i told you i'm not interested in sleeping with anyone

It took all of her self-control not to type “especially you” at the end of her sentence.

ALEX

i mean how else do you expect people to want to match with you

you know this is tinder right?

five minutes with me

I guarantee you'll change your mind

Spencer resisted the urge to chuck her phone in one of Nick's cup holders. So much for validation. Where the *fuck* did men find the audacity? She stared a hole into the dashboard instead, wishing she had the nerve to send the rest of her text earlier.

Nick cleared his throat. “Spencer.”

“Hm?”

“What the hell did my car ever do to you? You're staring my dash down like it owes you money.” He sounded calmer now, and Spencer wondered if she should press the issue of why he was so upset when he first started driving.

She sighed and leaned back in her chair. “Just these guys on Tinder,” she admitted. “What's the deal with *you*? What got your panties in a twist earlier?”

Nick pursed his lips in a thin line. “Did you get that from Joselyn? ‘Panties in a twist’?”



Spencer felt her mouth curl up in a smile despite her mood. “Maybe. But answer the question, Nicholas.”

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Just Sam,” he started, like that was enough of an explanation. He paused to merge onto the freeway before speaking again. “Didn’t expect him to be home – and *really* didn’t want him to see you. I was just gonna let it go until he asked me how old you were.”

Spencer felt her mouth dry. “Oh,” she said timidly, watching out of the corner of her eye for his reaction.

“I told him it was none of his fucking business,” Nick continued. “Your turn.”

Her face scrunched up in confusion. “My turn for what?”

“Tell me what got *your* panties in a twist. Since when did you have a Tinder anyway?”

Spencer sighed again. “Reese made a profile for me after I told her I’d never been on a date before.” She rolled her eyes. “One guy asked me if she was single, and the other doesn’t understand what the word ‘no’ means. He keeps trying to convince me to sleep with him.”

Nick’s jaw tightened just slightly before he relaxed it again. Spencer wondered if she was supposed to notice.

“You block them yet?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Not worth it. I just don’t respond. They’ll get the hint.”

Nick snorted. “Don’t be so sure about that, sweetheart. Men aren’t the most observant of creatures.”

“Speaking for yourself?”

His mouth twitched into a smile, and Spencer considered it a win. “Enough about my piss-poor excuse of a love life,” she said. “I never got the chance to ask you how your interview went. Wasn’t it right before Thanksgiving?”

“I think it went well. But I won’t know anything until next semester. There’s one more application if I make it through,

and then a second interview. Final results come out in the spring,” Nick answered.

Spencer stopped short of scraping a cuticle off with her nail. “At least one of us had a promising break,” she muttered, staring out of the window. She didn’t recognize any of their surroundings. “Where are you taking me anyway? Is this part of some plot to murder me in the woods?”

“Trust me, you’re probably one of the last people I’d want to murder in the woods.”

“Probably?” She risked bringing up the elephant in the room. “I assume Sam is somewhere near the top of that list.”

Nick swore under his breath again. “Sam *is* the top of that list. And I’m sure I’m not the only one. And to answer your other question, there’s a place Joselyn and I found once where you can actually see stars because there’s less light pollution from the city. Nice, quiet. Secluded.”

“You’re not really helping your case as far as murdering me in the woods. Quiet and secluded sounds like the perfect place to take your victims.”

“Any reason that’s plural?”

She shrugged. “You tell me.”

“Spencer, if there’s anyone you need to worry about – it’s those fucking Tinder guys. One of them is much more likely to be an axe murderer than I am.”

Spencer waved her phone at him. “Maybe I should let you swipe for me. You probably have better taste.”

Nick grimaced. “More experience, definitely. Better taste? That’s questionable.”

“Do I get the privilege of hearing more?”

The corners of his lips turned up again. “Maybe.”



It'd been a while since Nick had driven to this particular park to stargaze because of how far it was. It wasn't even the best of nights visibility-wise, but this excursion was meant more as a distraction rather than a specific mission to see the night sky.

Spencer glanced out of her window wearily. He could see her eyelids already beginning to droop. "Alright over there?"

She nodded and rested her head on the glass. "Tired."

Nick wondered if he should just keep driving until she fell asleep, but she was looking at him expectantly through half-open eyes, and he ended up pulling over at the edge of a lake.

"You don't exactly look like you're in a star-gazing mood, sweetheart," he noted, not bothering to turn the car off.

"It's cloudy, anyway," Spencer murmured, still staring at him. She curled up in the seat and tucked her legs underneath herself. Her phone was sitting in his cup holder. "I'm waiting."

Nick turned and rested his hand on the back of the passenger seat. "For?"

"Your Tinder horror stories," she said, like it was obvious.

"Who said they were horror stories?" he asked, reaching in the back seat for a blanket.

Spencer accepted it without protest. "You implied it."

"I'm too sober for this conversation," Nick groaned. He pinched his brow and sighed as he looked back over at her.

"But you promised," she pouted.

"I did no such thing," he snorted before putting the car into drive and heading toward the highway. They were far enough away from campus that there was plenty of time for her to fall asleep on the way back.

“Please?” she asked softly.

*God. Fucking. Dammit.* Did she have to sound so pitiful right now?

Nick rolled his eyes. “Fine.” Then, he noticed the time on the dash. “It’s 11:11,” he said, wincing. He had to open in the morning, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care about the lack of sleep he was going to get. Not if it meant the girl next to him was actually going to get some rest. “Want to make a wish?”

“Do I have to tell you?” Spencer asked sleepily. Her eyes weren’t even open, anymore.

“Is it a secret?”

“Only if I want it to come true,” she murmured. Nick waited for her to finish before realizing she was already sound asleep.



# Chapter 15

Spencer should have known something was wrong when the lights were off. The door to the study room was unlocked, but there was enough light in the hall for her to see Nick slumped over his desk. He didn't even have his laptop open.

She flipped the light on and nudged his arm. "Earth to Nicholas."

"Not today, Spencer," he said sharply, not bothering to lift his head up.

Spencer frowned. "What's wrong?" She hoped he wasn't sick. "Did something happen?" Even when running on barely three hours of sleep after a closing shift at work, Nick was never this...catatonic before. It scared her.

"Nothing," he hissed. "Just need to be alone today. Please."

Spencer let out a small sigh, but elected to give him his space. She was only letting this slide because he never really snapped at her. She turned to leave. "Will I see you at work, then?"

"Not this week."

That made her raise an eyebrow. She'd never known him to miss work for anything, not even in the midst of midterms. It wasn't like him to leave Joselyn out to dry like this.

“Nick,” she said, going back and tugging on his sleeve. He jerked out of her grip.

Spencer let her hand drop to her side. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll see you around,” he said, burying his face in his hands and turning away.



Spencer’s drink appeared on her table before she even had a chance to set her stuff down.

“What’s wrong, dear?” Joselyn asked, cocking her head as she slid in on the opposite side of the booth. “You look upset.”

Spencer scooted to make room. “Do you know what crawled up Nick’s ass and died?”

Joselyn pursed her lips together. “This week is always a bad time for him. It’s not really my place to say why.”

“Wasn’t gonna ask,” Spencer said, accepting that if he didn’t tell her, it wasn’t any of her business. “Is he gonna be okay?”

The other girl nodded slowly, but didn’t meet her gaze. “Eventually. Best to give him his space, though. He’s off the schedule for the rest of the week.”

“Well, it’s a good thing he’s not the only reason I come in here.”

That earned her a small smile. “Love you, too. Unfortunately, without his help, I’m swamped here. I wish I could stay and chat, but Connor’s over at the register giving me panic eyes.”

Spencer turned to see the poor guy getting mobbed by a line, his face red as a tomato as he fielded orders. Madeline was behind him running between several different machines and slinging things across the counter.

She sipped her drink slowly. “Good luck.”

Joselyn patted her on the back. “Gonna need it,” she muttered as she got up and rushed over.



This might have been a bad idea, but it was too late to back down now.

Spencer banged on the door before she lost her nerve. “Nicholas, let me in.”

The door swung open, but she only vaguely recognized the guy standing on the other side. He looked like the same person who carded her and Reese at Sam’s party. She wondered how the job interview went.

“He’s really not in the mood for visitors,” he explained dismissively.

Spencer crossed her arms and stood her ground, grateful it was him who answered the door and not Sam. “He can tell me himself, then.”

She heard Nick’s gravelly voice from inside. “Who is it, Jordan?”

Jordan narrowed his eyes as he looked her up and down. “She’s got purple hair, bro. I told her it’s not a good time.”

Spencer prepared to turn back and respect his boundaries until she heard Nick answer, “Let her in.”

Jordan blinked in confusion, but stepped aside to let her in before closing the door behind him on the way out. “Good luck,” he muttered darkly. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

She wasn’t sure what she expected to see when she came in, but it definitely wasn’t Nick sitting stiffly on the couch with a six-pack of beer on the coffee table in front of him. Half

of the bottles were already empty, and he was working on the fourth.

“Nick,” she sighed, coming around the other side of the couch. She stopped short when she got close enough to see his face. His cheeks were blotchy, and his eyes were bloodshot from the combination of alcohol and tears streaking wet paths down his face.

“What are you doing here?” he asked sharply, leaning back to finish his beer. He wiped angrily at his eyes, like it offended him to have her see him like this.

Spencer grabbed the bottle and pushed the last two on the table away from him. “I’m cutting you off,” she snapped.

“Dammit Spencer, I’m not in the fucking mood,” he said, glaring at her. He reached for the bottles, but gave up when he saw the look on her face.

She rolled her eyes. He wasn’t getting rid of her that easily. “Too bad. You helped me when I was going through that shit with my mom. I’m here to return the favor.”

“So, you’re here because you think you owe me,” he said slowly.

“I am here,” Spencer replied curtly as she joined him on the couch, “because you and I are friends and I care very much about your emotional state. Which, given what I’m seeing right now, is lower than rock bottom.”

Nick scoffed. “You think you know me?”

She returned his glare. “I know you well enough that I can tell you’re trying to push me away because you don’t want to talk about what’s wrong.”

He shrugged. “So what? You gonna take the hint?”

Spencer tucked her legs under her thighs. “Nope.” She popped her lips on the ‘p’. “You don’t have to tell me anything. I just wanted to show you you aren’t alone.”

“What if I *want* to be alone?”



“Too bad,” she repeated, reaching into her backpack. She tossed a DVD at him.

Nick turned it over in his hands. “*Spaceballs?*”

“Have you seen it? Seems like it would be right up your alley.”

“Several years ago, I’m pretty sure.” He sighed and got up to put the disc in. “I’m not getting rid of you any time soon, am I?”

“Nope,” Spencer repeated, shaking her head. She started typing on her phone.

He raised an eyebrow as he sat back down. “Now, what are you doing?”

“Ordering takeout. Chinese,” she said, not giving him room to argue.

Nick was staring at her when she finally looked up from her phone. “What? Something the matter?” she asked.

He shook his head. “What are you doing here, Spencer?”

“I told you. I’m gonna be here for you while we watch this fucking movie and eat some fucking chow mein and fried rice.”

That earned her the ghost of a smile. “Did you get any orange chicken?”



When the food came, Nick sat back down and looked her in the eyes for the first time since she showed up.

“Something wrong?” she asked again, tilting her head.

“Not even Joselyn wants to be around me when I’m like this,” he said. “What’s keeping you from doing the same?”

Spencer shoved a carton of food and chopsticks at him. “Don’t question a good thing. Consider it payback for always giving me my drinks for free if you can’t accept charity.”

His brow furrowed. “Is this charity or pity?”

“Neither. It’s called being a good friend. Play the damn movie already. And if you ask one more dumbass question like that, I’m taking the food and going to Joselyn’s.”

Nick scowled at her again, but there was no bite to it. She leaned against him and stole a piece of chicken from his carton.

“You know you have your own,” he said dryly, trying to grab one of hers in retaliation. Spencer scowled and batted his chopsticks away, noticing a genuine smile forming.

*Success.*

“You are something else, sweetheart,” he said as he pressed PLAY.



“Movie’s over,” Nick said. He nudged Spencer’s head, which had been resting on his shoulder since the third act.

She blinked slowly, her eyes still at half-mast. “How’d you like it the second time around?”

“It was a lot better than I remember, actually,” he admitted. “Thanks for the food.” His living room table was currently covered in Chinese takeout boxes and the beer she hadn’t let him finish earlier.

Spencer stretched next to him. “I can stay over. If you want me to.”

Nick shook his head. “I think I’m sober now if you want me to help you get back to campus.”

He felt bad as he watched her deflate. “I can’t stay?”

“You want to?” He cast his eyes downward. “Couch isn’t exactly that comfortable. Or clean for that matter.”

“Depends. Are your roommates home this weekend?” she asked. “I didn’t see anyone else’s cars in the driveway.”

“Sam’s out somewhere and Jordan was on his way to his girlfriend’s when you came over.”

Spencer cocked her head curiously. “So, what’s the problem?”

“Nothing,” he finally relented. “Just wanted you to know you’ve already done more than enough to help me tonight. I definitely don’t deserve any of it after being such a prick earlier.”

She was staring at him for several seconds before she spoke again. “Are you sure you’re okay, Nick?”

He sighed. “I’m doing better than I might be if you weren’t here. Though I’m not really sure what ‘okay’ looks like for me right now,” he admitted.

Spencer pursed her lips together. “That’s something. I’ll take it.”

Nick didn’t know what to say to that. He was still reeling from the fact she hadn’t let him push her away that he almost missed her question.

“You’re not on the schedule tomorrow, right? Joselyn said you had the whole week off.”

Nick nodded. “Why?”

She shrugged as she rummaged through her backpack. “We could do something if you wanted to. Maybe another drive?”

“Were you *planning* on staying over?” he asked instead of answering. The idea that this girl wanted to spend more time together after he treated her like fucking shit didn’t sit right with him.

“It’s good to be prepared,” Spencer quipped, pulling out what looked like a bag of toiletries. “I literally spent the night

in your car,” she reminded him. “What’s so different about your couch?”

He scoffed. “Aside from its questionable and sordid history and the fact that you’ve never stayed over before?”

“It almost sounds like you’re still trying to get rid of me,” she mused over her shoulder as she made her way to his bathroom.

Actually, Nick was enjoying her company more than he’d like to admit, but that didn’t stop him from feeling apprehensive about this entire arrangement. And he *really* didn’t like the fact that he was having to make a conscious effort not to bite her head off when she was trying to comfort him.

He’d be better, for her. It was the least he could do.

When she came back, Nick was halfway up the stairs. She narrowed her eyes. “Where are you going?”

“Showing you something,” he said. “Be right back.”

He slipped into his room and made his way to his desk. The picture tucked away in the drawer stared up at him as he carefully removed it from its frame.

Nick told himself he hid it away to protect the picture from fading, but he knew the truth. His thumb gently traced his parents’ faces, looking up at the camera with Joselyn’s parents holding her squirming body in their arms. Nick was perched up on his dad’s shoulders.

He sighed, hoping some semblance of feeling would force itself to the surface the longer he stared at it. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I wish you were here, but...”

His mouth clamped shut. *Coward.*



Spencer watched him warily from her spot on the couch when he made his way back down carrying some blankets, the picture tucked carefully in his back pocket.

He set his load down on the floor and she stood back to let him cover their dubiously clean couch with at least three blankets. “I see you’ve changed your mind about me spending the night,” she noted dryly.

Nick rolled his eyes, feeling his lips curling into a smile anyway. “Jury’s still out on that, sweetheart.”

He patted the space next to him and shoved the picture at her in lieu of an explanation.

Spencer arched an eyebrow. “Your parents?”

Nick nodded. “And Joselyn’s.”

“Your dads were brothers,” she noted softly.

“Twins,” he confirmed.

Spencer’s eyes flicked briefly from the photo to him. “You look just like him.”

Nick swallowed as he prepared to share a part of himself that Joselyn barely saw. “Why do you think I dye my hair? I see my dad every time I look in the fucking mirror. Blue was his favorite color.”

Spencer’s hand twitched toward his head like she wanted to touch his hair for herself, but she drew back and returned her focus to the photo. He stilled, letting her gently caress it.

Nick watched her trace his face, then Joselyn’s. She avoided his parents’. “Joselyn and I were twelve. This week is the anniversary. Sorry about biting your head off when all you were trying to do was help. I think even she’s still too scared to call me out on my shit every year.”

Spencer rubbed circles into his back with her palm. “You don’t have to tell me. You don’t owe me an explanation just because I’m here with you.”

Something about that made a jolt strike down his spine. Nick wasn’t used to her touching him this much. It was nice to

have someone touching him for a reason other than as a vehicle that led to sex. They were just sharing each other's space, and there was something intimate in that, too.

It was almost enough to alleviate the migraine berating his fucking skull.

He sighed. "My parents were closing. I was up in the apartment waiting for us to go home. Someone came in and tried to rob The Grind and..."

Nick elected to leave out the part where they'd complied and given them all the cash in the register and died anyway. He wasn't putting that image in her head.

Spencer's hand on his back went still, and he almost asked her to keep going. But she was looking at him expectedly, and he figured he owed it to her to finish his story.

Nick took a deep breath and steeled himself for this next part. "I couldn't even go up and see the caskets. My aunt and uncle were staring at me, and I just couldn't move. I still don't know if I really regret that or not. I just remember shutting down and not being able to talk to anyone but Joselyn for almost a month after it happened."

Spencer leaned her head on his shoulder and gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "I'm sorry, Nick."

"No, this doesn't excuse me for treating you like shit," he said. "Can I be honest with you about something?" Nick waited until she nodded before swallowing the lump in his throat. "This is going to sound awful, but...I'm 21 now. It's been almost ten years and I...I don't feel anything anymore. When it first happened, I practically shut down. Now...I can't even remember the last time I cried when it wasn't the anniversary. And really, I've been forcing myself to feel something, and when it doesn't work, I drink until it does. I keep telling myself it's because it's better to isolate things for this one week, but that's bull. Does that make me heartless?"

Nick didn't care about other people's opinions of him, but he found himself holding his breath until she answered.

“You’re not heartless, Nick,” Spencer finally said softly. She pulled back to look at him, her brow furrowing. “But didn’t anybody ever try to enroll you in some fucking therapy?”

Nick scowled at her. “The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that there’s nothing wrong with how you’re feeling, but trying to force the issue by drinking isn’t the way to deal with things,” she chastised.

He waited for her to continue putting him in his place, but all she did was resume rubbing his back. “Did you want to watch another movie?” he asked.

Spencer frowned and drew her knees up to her chin. “I only brought the one disc.”

“It’s a good thing I have Netflix,” Nick said.

She wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and jerked her head toward the TV. “You pick.”

Nick settled on *The Princess Bride* before making another decision. He held his arm out. “C’mere.”

Surprisingly, Spencer didn’t hesitate to curl up against his side as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder. “This feels backwards,” she said as she settled her head in the crook of his neck. “I’m supposed to be the one giving you comfort.”

“You are.”

“Shouldn’t it be my arm around *your* shoulders?”

“This is better,” he insisted. It was nice to be able to touch another person without the expectation of sex. He didn’t realize how much he’d been restricting himself until now.

When the movie was over, she looked up at him. “How are you feeling, Nick? Really.”

“Better,” he said sincerely. He avoided her gaze, still feeling strangely stripped and vulnerable.

There were takeout boxes and beer bottles littering his living room table, but Nick couldn’t find it in himself to care. He’d take care of it in the morning.

Spencer got up, looking at the mess, but he pulled her back to the couch and shook his head. "I'm not making you clean right now. I'll get it later."

She opened her mouth like she wanted to protest, but just nodded and curled back up in her blanket. "I don't know about you, but I'm tired as shit." She pushed him off the couch so she could stretch out on it properly. "Good night."

"Good night," he replied, watching as she fell asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.



Spencer's hand was hanging off the edge of the couch just above his face. The tips of her fingers barely brushed his hair.

Once again, Nick marveled at this girl who didn't want anything but his company, who trusted him enough to fall asleep next to him. Who cared enough that he hadn't been able to drive her away while purposefully being an utter dick.

He really should've apologized harder. He'd find some way to make it up to her.

Spencer blinked the sleep from her eyes, scowling when she noticed his position on the floor.

"Did you not sleep in your own bed?"

"Too tired to make it up the stairs," he lied, not exactly sure how she'd react to him saying her presence somehow made it easier for him to fall asleep.

"As much as I enjoyed our little sleepover," Spencer said, stretching, "I should probably head back to my dorm. Did you want to go on another drive? Offer's still open."

"I'll let you know," he said. "I should probably clean this shit up and apologize to my cousin for taking so long to deal with my feelings in a healthy manner." Escapism with movies



and takeout might not have been much better than falling into a drunken stupor, but at least he hadn't been alone.



When Joselyn came over later, however, Nick still hadn't gotten around to cleaning. Instead, he spent some time figuring out the logistics of taking advantage of the Ravens-provided counseling services.

"What's all this?" she asked, gesturing toward the mess in the living room.

Nick didn't look up from his computer. "Spencer came over last night."

Joselyn eyed the blankets draped over the couch. "Did she stay?"

He nodded.

"And you made her sleep on the couch," she continued slowly.

Nick sighed and finally closed his laptop. "She insisted. You try getting her to do something she's already decided she's not gonna do. Sound familiar?"

Joselyn ignored his smartass comment as she continued her assessment of their sleeping situation. "You slept on the floor?"

"Don't act like you wouldn't castrate me if I told you I slept in my bed while she was down here on the couch."

"So that's a yes."

Nick didn't dignify that with a response and got up to take care of the takeout boxes and straighten up the rest of the living room.

"Was Sam home?" Joselyn asked. She dumped his half-empty beer down the kitchen sink and returned the unopened

bottles to the fridge. She wrinkled her nose at the smell.

“Absolutely the fuck not,” he snapped. “You think I would’ve let her stay over here if he was?”

Joselyn’s forehead creased. “Sounds like she didn’t want you to be alone, though. Would you have stayed over at her dorm?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. If she asked.” He waited for her to bring up the fact that he *never* stayed over at anyone’s dorm before, not even Chelsea’s. But all she did was look at him with concern in her eyes.

“How are you really feeling, Nicky?”

“Better,” he said honestly. “I think I needed last night a lot more than I thought I did.”

“I hope you told her that.”

Nick rolled his eyes. “What do you take me for? Of course, I did.”

Joselyn shrugged noncommittally, but she had that look on her face that said she was holding something back. Then Nick remembered he wasn’t the only one affected – she lost an aunt and an uncle that night, too. What kind of person was he to take an entire week to be moody without thinking about her feelings?

Spencer was right. He *should* get enrolled in some fucking therapy.

Joselyn’s sharp voice brought him back to the present. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I’m sorry I’m always such a pill this time of year,” he murmured, pulling her in for a hug. Joselyn’s body went rigid for just a second before settling, like she hadn’t expected it. “I need to be better about considering your feelings, too.”

He felt her hands on his chest and took a step back, looking down at her face. “Where did that come from?” she asked, looking him up and down like the answer was right in front of her.

Nick shrugged. “Something Spencer said last night. Might be time to actually get some professional help.”

Joselyn crossed her arms, the ghost of a smirk etching her features. “Almost half a decade of drowning your feelings in booze, and it takes *one* night with that girl to convince you to go to fucking therapy?”

He scowled at her, wondering what the hell she was implying. But she was smiling at him, no longer looking wary that he might explode on her at any moment. And that was enough to get him to bury that question and pull her in for another hug, which she reciprocated much more easily this time.

After they broke apart again, he followed her to the door. She paused at the threshold and wrapped her arms around his neck for another hug. “You know I love you, right?”

Nick rested his chin on top of her head. “Of course, I do.”



# Chapter 16

Nick met up with Spencer outside Thorne later, shivering with his hands in his pockets even though he had two jackets on.

She came out a second later, sporting a long coat and waving her keys. “It’s on you if I lose my parking spot by the door,” she said, leading the way to her Camry.

He snorted as he climbed in her passenger side. “Why don’t we just take my car, then?”

“I don’t want to owe you for the gas,” Spencer snapped, tapping her fingers on the steering wheel impatiently when they stopped at the stop sign leading out of campus. “I already owe you for when we went out last time.”

Nick pinched his brow and took a deep breath. “Why would you owe me? I’m the one who offered in the first place.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

He counted and tried to police his tone before it came out too aggressive. “Can’t you accept when people do nice things for you because they want to and not because they’re looking for anything in return?”

“Nick,” Spencer sighed. “I really don’t want to argue with you.”

He clamped his mouth shut. He'd started his day with the intention of making things up to her for his shitty behavior, only to end up making things worse.

Spencer turned up her music, which was shuffling Michael Bublé's Christmas album, humming softly.

Nick reached to turn it down just enough for them to continue their conversation, earning a miffed look as she took the entrance ramp to the highway. "I'm sorry. I don't want to argue, either. Where are we going?"

"The city," she said, with only a little distaste coloring her voice. "Atlantic Station always puts on a drive-through light display this time of year."

He leaned back in his seat. "Guess now I get to see how bad your road rage is, sweetheart."

Her mouth finally curved up in a small smile. "You have no fucking idea."



Spencer scowled at the man sitting next to her. Nick was doing a piss-poor job at hiding the fact that his hand had been on the *oh shit* handle ever since she got on the highway.

"Stop being dramatic," she hissed, gripping her steering wheel tightly to avoid an idiot in a coup weaving in and out of traffic.

He grimaced and lowered his hand into his lap. "Sorry. Force of habit. I'm not used to being the passenger. I love my cousin, but Joselyn has even less patience on the road than she does normally."

"Well, we're in Atlanta now, so I think you're safe."

"Debatable."

Nick kept his hand down until she had to pay the admission fee, at which point he practically shoved the money into her hands before she could even fully stop the car.

She scowled at him again, but remembered her vow to herself to be less difficult about these things. “Thanks,” she grit out, hating that she couldn’t bring herself to sound as grateful as she actually was.

Nick placed his hand over hers, which was resting on the gearshift, and gave it a squeeze. “I’m sorry about yesterday. Think of it as my apology. You don’t owe me for it.”

Spencer nodded and rolled her window down slightly when he removed his hand. She hadn’t had the heat blasting that bad, but it still felt stuffy inside.

They didn’t say anything more as she drove at a snail’s pace, admiring the brightly lit scenes and taking in each other’s company.



“I don’t understand how your exams always end up on later dates than mine,” Spencer said, glaring at the spreadsheet she’d made of everyone’s finals. She was the first one that would technically be done with the semester – Hunter and Reese’s exams didn’t even *start* until the week her last paper was due.

“At least you’re getting all of yours out of the way,” Hunter said. He closed her computer with his finger and pilfered it. “No more work. Eat.”

She glared at him. “It’s not even work.”

“Don’t care.” He slid his extra breakfast bagel over. “Eat.”

Spencer obliged him by taking a small bite and chewing slowly until his watch beeped. Hunter swore and grabbed his

backpack. “I’m covering for someone after class,” he explained.

“Does that mean you can’t come over?” It’d been a while since all three of them actually spent any time together – at least one of them was always off doing something else at this point in the semester.

But Spencer didn’t want to seem like she was codependent on her only close friends, so she tried not to let how much it bothered her show.

Hunter ruffled her hair. “Soon, princess, I promise.”

She managed a smile as she took another bite of his bagel. “It’s fine. You go on. I’ve got readings to finish.” She pulled out her headphones and book to illustrate her point.

He stared at her seriously as he stood up and gave back her laptop. “Eat first.”

She waved him off, already feeling the pang of his absence from the empty space across from her.



Later, Joselyn was making it her mission to give her cousin hell on his break, much to his chagrin and Spencer’s entertainment.

“You thought Cameron Connors was cute in high school, and he was a walking red flag.”

Nick leaned back and crossed his arms. “I’m bisexual, not stupid. Just because I thought he was cute doesn’t mean I thought he was relationship material.”

“You can’t just say something like that and not show us what he looks like,” Reese said. Spencer nodded her agreement.

Joselyn held up a finger and scrolled on her phone while Nick scowled in her direction.

Reese whistled as she took the phone and angled the screen to show Spencer. “I’d have rose-tinted glasses on, too, if anyone who looked like him went to my high school.”

“He is dangerously close to having two first names,” Spencer pointed out. But she had to admit, she could see where they were coming from. Not enough to let the man ruin her life, but he wasn’t bad to look at.

“What picture are you showing them?” Nick asked sharply.

Joselyn waved him off. “Don’t get your panties in a twist. It’s the one from Pride last year.”

Reese scrolled through the rest of the pictures on the post. “I love their makeup,” she said, pointing to a picture of Cameron posing with three drag queens in front of a bunch of protestors with misspelled signs. She pouted at Hunter from across the booth. “Hunter promised me I could make him into a Vegas showgirl for my birthday and never delivered.”

Hunter scowled at her. “That’s because you asked me while I was shit-faced.”

“Well, you can make it up to me this Christmas,” Reese reasoned. “Think of it as a present for my sister if you don’t want to do it for me. Or Aaron.”

“Stop using our fucking siblings to get me to do things. And how would it be a present for my brother, anyway?” Hunter grumbled.

Her eyes lit up. “Because it’d be a present for Peyton.”

When it was clear Hunter wasn’t budging, Reese turned to Nick. “What about you? You feel like being made up by yours truly?”

Nick shook his head with a small smile. “No promises, Reese.” He tapped his index finger along to the Christmas song playing in the background.

Spencer splayed the rest of his fingers out on the table and looked them over with an analytical eye. “Would you at least



let us paint your nails?” She secretly wanted to see how he would react to that kind of request as a guy. Just because he was bisexual didn’t mean he conformed to *every* stereotype, even if he was currently sporting a hoodie and denim jacket combo.

“I would actually, but I work in food,” Nick answered, taking his hand back.

Reese raised an eyebrow. “What color?”

He shrugged. “Probably would let Joselyn pick.”

“Because I have taste,” Joselyn responded smugly. She looked at Spencer’s hand. “Yours are always painted so nicely.”

Her nails were currently a rich red, like a Christmas ornament. She’d painstakingly done them that morning while waiting for Hunter. “It’s to distract from the fact that my cuticles are always a mess,” Spencer admitted. “I pick at them when I’m stressed. And I’m a recovering nail-biter.”

Reese continued scrolling on Joselyn’s phone. “Pride looks like a lot of fun. Don’t know why Atlanta always does the parade in October instead of June, though.”

“I think my school’s GSA used to get a bunch of MARTA passes so people could go,” Spencer said. She cocked her head curiously at Nick. “Does this school even *have* a GSA?”

Nick grimaced. “We do, but they spend most of their time dating each other rather than offering support or doing any sort of activism.”

Spencer raised an eyebrow. “Speaking from experience?”

“Sweetheart, you could not *pay* me to experience that.”

“Lame,” Reese said, sticking her tongue out. She sighed and glanced at her phone. “Does anyone want to come to the student center with me? There’s a showcase featuring some of the upper-level studio art majors, and I get extra credit if I bring people with me.”

“You already know Hunt and I are coming,” Spencer reminded her. “Nick?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but Joselyn beat him to it. “He can. His shift’s over.”

Nick frowned. “I thought I was closing.”

Joselyn shoved by him on her way out of the booth. “You need a break, Nicky. You’ve been working all week and it’s finals season. It’s not a request.”

He held his hands up in mock surrender. “Okay, okay. Clocking out.”



Nick pulled Spencer aside while the others walked ahead toward the student center. “Why the sudden interest in the GSA?”

She shrugged noncommittally. “I’ve just been researching something and wanted an outside opinion.”

Nick stopped in his tracks, almost causing her to crash right into him. “You know you can ask me anything.”

“It’s not so much a question as much as a request for you to not judge me,” she admitted, shifting uncomfortably on her heels before continuing to walk.

Nick annoyed her by raising an eyebrow and keeping up easily despite her attempt at literally running away from her problems.

“That Tinder guy messaged me last night asking if I was willing to put out again. Claims he can change my mind,” she explained, omitting the part where he’d been extremely graphic about the things he’d like to do to her, and her subsequent nausea just thinking about it. And the fact that it was like three in the morning when this was happening.

Nick frowned at her. “Why haven’t you blocked him yet?”

“I don’t exactly get a lot of matches.” The fact that she explicitly stated she was against drugs, alcohol, and hooking up significantly dried up her already limited dating pool.

“Still.”

Spencer looked at her fingers, fighting the urge to pick at her cuticles. She hadn’t done that since the fight with her mother, and she wasn’t about to break her streak now. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“The truth’d be nice,” Nick answered dryly. “Why are you beating around the bush? We’ve already established I’m never going to judge you.”

She sighed and dropped her hands. “You wouldn’t get it.”

“Try me.”

“Nick, people of all genders practically throw themselves at you—”

He cut her off. “Don’t be dramatic.”

She scowled at him. “I’m just saying. You’ve always had *options*. If someone doesn’t work out, it’s not the end of the world. Someone else will come along. It’s not like that for me. I can barely get someone to match with me because my bio screens most of them out, and the ones that do end up messaging me just ask what the fuck’s wrong with me and how I have fun.

“You wouldn’t understand what it’s like trying to put yourself out there when this is the playing field. Before this, guys used to ask me out as dares or jokes. At least on Tinder, I can know a guy’s motivations before I get my hopes up. It’s not like I can just start a conversation with someone I meet in real life with, ‘Hi, just wanted to let you know that sex will never be on the table and if that bothers you, walk away now.’”

“So no, I can’t just block every person that does this to me. There’d be no one. And at this point, I’m settling for what little attention I can get. Call me shallow, but like I said. You’ve never had to struggle to get anyone to want to be around you.”

Spencer pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes and groaned so she didn't have to watch his reaction. "Jesus fuck, I'm pathetic. I can't believe I just dumped all that on you. Forget I said anything, please."

"Hey." He grabbed her wrist and pulled it down. "No, you're not. And I get that I wouldn't get it. But there are at least three people other than me who want to be around you."

"You're just saying that because I support your family business," she grumbled, snatching her wrist back so she could cross her arms.

Nick gave her a crooked smile. "You get your drinks for free, sweetheart."

"Yeah, why is that?" Spencer asked.

"Why not?" he replied, shrugging unhelpfully.

She rolled her eyes before noticing they'd finally made it to the student center, which was covered in a slew of winter wonderland-esque decorations that greeted them as they walked into the blessedly heated building.



After the four of them had made it through the entire showcase, Reese peeled off to talk to some of the other studio art majors, and Hunter grumbled about having to catch up on studying.

Spencer and Nick made their way back downstairs, where the student government association had several tables of different stress relief and holiday-themed activities. There were at least three puzzles with too many students working on them, an entire table dedicated to adult coloring sheets, and even a sign advertising therapy dogs at the end of the week.

Someone handed Nick a small cup of hot chocolate, which he immediately passed to Spencer. She attempted a scowl, but

secretly appreciated the gesture and also the fact that she hadn't had her knee-jerk reaction of refusing something nice.

"Nicholas!" They both turned to follow the source of the voice. Spencer didn't recognize the tall, bespectacled man with a receding hairline and suspenders. Probably a STEM professor.

The professor cocked his head at her as he walked up. "You don't mind if I steal him for a few minutes? We have much to discuss about the..." He trailed off, wrapping his arm around Nick's shoulders and steering him toward an alcove by the bathrooms.

"He's all yours." Spencer sipped her hot chocolate and left to watch the action at the puzzle tables.

She jumped when she felt a warm hand on her shoulder a couple minutes later, grateful for the fact that her cup no longer had any boiling liquid in it.

"You gave me a fucking heart attack," Spencer snapped. She waved her cup. "What if this still had something in it?"

"I do believe we were having a conversation," Nick snapped back. He took the cup from her and tossed it in the trash. "Are you avoiding me?"

"No," Spencer clarified. "Just this particular topic."

Nick, looking unimpressed at her answer, claimed a bench in front of the fake fireplace and gestured for her to take a seat. He crossed his legs and waited, not saying a word.

Spencer sighed and rubbed her face with both hands. "I was researching sex repulsion this morning," she admitted. "After I got those messages. He said maybe there's something wrong with me, health-wise. All these things kept popping up. The fucking *DSM-5* popped up. Like it can all be chalked up to a hormone imbalance that has to be treated. Like there's something so wrong about not wanting to procreate."

She shuddered. "Just the thought of it makes me want to hurl, honestly." Spencer felt Nick's hand on hers, watching as he pulled it away from her lap. She hadn't even realized how

badly she'd been picking at her cuticles until her fingertips turned as red and raw as the polish on her nails.

So much for not breaking her streak.

“And a bunch of articles came up with words like allonormativity and all these other ‘A’ words. Everything just got so overwhelming. The one thing I got out of it was the term ‘asexuality,’ but I couldn’t find much about it. I thought maybe the GSA could help with that. But I also read that some people don’t consider it an actual sexuality, so now I’m not sure anymore.”

“You remember what I told you at the party?” Nick asked, gently rubbing his thumb across her knuckles.

She nodded warily, hyper-aware of the way he was touching her. “Keep my energy. Never let anyone tell me different.”

“Good,” he said. “Just remember that. Whether you find a label for yourself or not.”

“I thought a lot of people didn’t like labels.”

Nick shrugged and dropped her hand, gesticulating vaguely. “Labels aren’t so bad. I mean, sure, people don’t like being defined by their sexuality or anything. But there’s nothing wrong with wanting one to find some community or someone who words things in a way you can’t.”

“I guess,” she mumbled, standing and wiping her sweaty palms on her jeans. “I should probably head back to my dorm. Readings aren’t going to finish themselves.”

Nick followed her out. “I’ll walk with you. I’ve got some chem to work on at home. As much as I love our study room, the basement of the library doesn’t have central heating.”

*Our?*

Now that they were far from the heat of the building, Spencer found she didn’t have a good explanation for why she still felt warm and flustered as she and Nick walked back to her dorm in a comfortable silence, occasionally bumping elbows.



# Chapter 17

There was something wrong with the scene in front of him. Spencer had her earbuds in, as usual, following along in her book. She'd finished her latte, leaving the ice-filled cup next to a can of...

Nick cocked his head. "Is that a Monster?"

"Are you betraying us, dear?" Joselyn asked as she walked by with someone's order. "I'm hurt."

Spencer took one earbud out. "It's just to get through finals, guys. Don't worry. I haven't gone over to the dark side. Yet."

"I'm disappointed in you, sweetheart," Nick said jokingly. "It's informal energy."

She raised an eyebrow. "As opposed to?"

"Formal energy. From coffee," he deadpanned, collecting her cup and tossing it for her. He slid in on the other side of the booth, armed with his own caffeine fix.

Spencer rolled her eyes. "It's not that serious."

"Are you fucking kidding me right now, princess?" Hunter scowled as he walked up to the booth. He snatched the can away.

"Cut her some slack, Hunt. It's finals season."

"It's her third one of the day," Hunter snapped.

Nick heard Spencer's foot connect with Hunter's shin and his muttered curse a second later. "Traitor," she hissed. "Give it back. I have four papers and an exam to study for."

Hunter poked her in the forehead, earning a hiss as menacing as a kitten's. "You're only taking four classes."

"Dr. Kower has us doing both."

Nick sighed. "If you manage to get through this week without completely overloading your body with caffeine, we'll do something special."

She narrowed her eyes. "Like what?"

He shrugged. "Guess you'll find out."





# Chapter 18

Spencer couldn't fathom how she got through all of her finals surviving on one single iced coffee – exam season required more caffeine than her usual matchas could provide – per day. Nick hadn't even let her have more than three shots of espresso, a fact that he shared with everyone else who worked at The Grind. Not even Joselyn would throw her a bone.

“See?” he asked with a shit-eating grin when they met up outside Thorne after she submitted her last paper. “Was that so hard?”

She scowled at him. “I will end you.”

“But then you wouldn't get your surprise, sweetheart.” He knocked her elbow as they walked toward his car.

Spencer rolled her eyes. “Bribery again, Nicholas.”

“It worked, didn't it?”

She hoped he knew she would rather die than admit he was right about something. “Where are we going?”

“That's for me to know and you to find out,” he quipped unhelpfully as he started the car and turned the heat up.

“As long as you're not trying to get me alone in the woods again,” she grumbled, crossing her arms and smiling.



When they were stuck on the merge ramp to the interstate, Nick reached in his glovebox and passed her something covered in shiny silver wrapping paper. “Here.”

At her raised eyebrow, he explained, “Hunter and Reese wanted me to give that to you. They’d have done it themselves, but they’re caught up in the rest of their finals. It’s not your Christmas gift. They just thought it was an appropriate add-on to your surprise.”

“I still don’t understand how following a caffeine quota that’s been strictly regulated anyway is worthy of a surprise,” Spencer muttered as she took it from him.

She slid a finger under the seam, watching him out of the corner of her eye. He was staring at her.

“What?”

He shook his head. “Spencer, I was *messing* with you. Your friends wanted to give you something special because they love you. Is it that hard to believe you mean something to them?”

Spencer didn’t want to indulge the part of her that specifically wondered, *to you?*

She shrugged. “The only surprises I got were on my birthday. And even then, they weren’t big productions or anything.”

Nick cocked his head. “Liam never tried to do anything special?”

“Was he supposed to?” Spencer asked defensively. She wracked her brain trying to remember. It’d barely been one semester of college, but high school already felt like a different lifetime. “I mean, he and a couple of our friends tried to do dinner sometimes, but something always came up.”

Nick snorted, the look on his face saying everything. He said it out loud anyway. “You mean you came up with an excuse every time.”

Spencer threw her hands up. “I just don’t see how it was worth the effort. I’m not that special.”

“So it wasn’t that nobody ever tried,” Nick said slowly, “but you feel like you don’t deserve it. Why?”

Spencer squirmed in her seat, resentful of the fact that they were trapped in the car together until the traffic deities of Atlanta were in the mood to answer prayers. She pulled her sleeves down over her hands in case she started picking at her cuticles again.

Thankfully, they were actually moving now, and Nick had to concentrate on not endangering their lives on the road.

“You still haven’t opened your gift,” he reminded her, frowning after finally taking an exit that led downtown.

“You distracted me,” she snapped, taking great care as she slipped the rest of the wrapping paper off.

Spencer let out a low oath. “Is this...?”

Nick nodded. “I guess we’re close enough for me to tell you what the surprise is.”

Spencer was barely paying attention to her surroundings, too busy marveling at the beautifully painted copy of *Othello* in her hands. “Did Reese do this?” It even had gold gilded pages and a ribbon bookmark with a metal quill charm on the end of it.

She finally looked up, noting a couple buildings as Nick made his way to a parking garage. “Are we going to the Shakespeare Tavern?”

“Open the book, Spencer.” He leaned out of his window to get a parking ticket from the automated machine at the entrance.

Spencer opened the inside cover to two tickets that confirmed her suspicions. On a whim, she flipped through the

pages, her breath catching at the intricate drawings in the margins of the script.

Nick was watching her. She hadn't even realized that while she was perusing the book, he'd pulled into a spot with the car idling. "It's your favorite, isn't it?" He jerked his head toward the tickets before grabbing them and slipping them into his pocket.

She narrowed her eyes. "How'd you know it was my favorite Shakespeare play?"

"I told you. I notice things. The copy you have is the most worn-looking book on your shelf. I assumed you read it a lot."

"What if it was because it was secondhand?" she pressed. "Or a required reading for class?"

Nick shrugged. "Then it would have been a lucky guess, but even secondhand books have to be up to a certain standard. Your copy is still by far the most disheveled."

He got out and went around to open her door. Spencer shoved the book carefully into her purse and held her tongue before she snapped at him for simply being courteous.

It was an unusually cold night in Atlanta, even for winter. Her entire body was trembling as she shoved her hands in her pockets, cursing herself for not having the foresight to wear gloves. She pressed herself closer to Nick, welcoming the extra warmth from their proximity. Hopefully, he wouldn't get the wrong idea.

Nick handed their tickets to an usher before they were led to a table in the back of the room, furthest from the stage. It wasn't the best of viewing spots, but Spencer liked being out of everyone else's way.

She felt his eyes on her as she pulled the book back out of her purse.

"Joselyn and I came up with the idea to get the tickets. Hunter found that copy and Reese thought she could personalize it and make it special," he explained.

She flipped through the pages again, tracing her fingers down as she skimmed the words, which were in a much larger font than standard, and the spaces between each character's lines made keeping things straight much easier. She gulped. They really had thought of everything.

“You okay, sweetheart?”

She finally perked her head up from the book. “Hm?”

Nick crossed his arms, studying her. “You look like you're about to cry.”

Spencer swallowed thickly. “It's a cry-worthy gift.”

Before he could respond, an announcement was made that the show was due to start, and Spencer watched eagerly, happy to follow along in her copy.



“What is it?” Nick leaned over and whispered in her ear after she set her book down and started to stare more intensely at the actors on the stage.

“The guy playing Othello,” she hissed back. “I think I know him. He looks like this guy from my high school.” She took the program from Nick and scoured the cast list. “Bingo.” She tapped his name. “Barron and I had English together our senior year. My mom actually assigned him the part when we had our Shakespeare unit.”

Satisfied, Spencer returned her attention to the stage, still feeling the weight of Nick's gaze on her.



After the show, Barron walked right up to their table. It was jarring to see his exaggerated features up close – his stage makeup had done its job. “I thought I recognized you back here. I’d give you a hug, but those stage lights are hot as hell, and I am *definitely* sweating into my shoes right now,” he said.

Spencer waved him off. “Don’t worry about it. You were great up there.”

Barron rubbed the back of his head humbly. “Thanks.” Someone from near the stage shouted something, and he rolled his eyes. “It was good to see you, Spencer.”

He turned to Nick. “Nice meeting you, too. Hope you’re treating her right, or I might have to come after you.”

Nick arched an eyebrow as he looked back down at her. Spencer felt her cheeks warm. “Oh – we’re not —”

Before she could stammer out the rest of her explanation, Barron had already rejoined his fellow cast members, leaving behind a very mortified her and a hopefully indifferent Nick.

Nick spared her by not commenting on Barron’s assumption about the nature of their relationship as they made their way to his car. Instead, he asked, “Why don’t you keep up with people more? From what I’ve seen, a lot of them are very fond of you.”

She shrugged uncomfortably. “I don’t really know what to tell you. You’ve only met like three of them anyway – and you didn’t even talk to Mark.”

“Mark doesn’t count. I didn’t need to.”

“I told you. Barron and I only had the one class together.”

“What about Liam?”

She should’ve known that was coming next. She sighed. “What about him?”

Nick opened his mouth to answer, but apparently decided against it. He made sure to immediately crank the heat up before walking around to open her door for her. His arm brushed hers, and Spencer almost jumped at the contact.

He thankfully didn't comment on *that* either, but he still had a curious look on his face. "You didn't hug Liam either. And he wasn't a sweaty mess."

"Touching makes me uncomfortable," she blurted without thinking.

Nick raised a brow. "Then why do you —"

"Certain people are okay," Spencer said, cutting him off. "I can tolerate it from certain people. Reese. Hunter. Joselyn." *You.*

There was something about admitting that out loud that terrified her.

She stared out the window, so she didn't have to keep feeling like he was peeling back her layers with his questions.

His next one came out of left field, though. "Is that why the idea of sex makes you uncomfortable? The touching?"

"That's..." Spencer trailed off, trying like hell to figure out how she was going to answer that. Technically, she knew she didn't *have* to, and he'd be fine with it. "I'm not sure," she continued anyway, swallowing back bile.

"It's okay if the answer is 'no'," Nick started, and her heart hammered in her chest in anticipation, "but do you think that means if you found the right person, it wouldn't make you feel like that?"

She groaned and wrung her hands out. "I'm the opposite of a person who is sexually attracted to anyone." At least, that was the bare bones definition of asexuality, according to the Internet. "So no, I don't think the 'right person' will fix it for me because there won't ever be a 'right person'."

"Asexuality's not something that needs to be fixed, Spencer. There's nothing wrong with any of that."

Spencer startled, shocked at him openly using and understanding a term she only just learned even existed.

Nick softened his voice as he continued. "But I can tell this conversation is making you uncomfortable, so we're not going to talk about it anymore." He reached over and grabbed

Spencer's hand and set it back down in her lap. She hadn't even realized she'd been *biting* her nails until he did so, and then the chemical taste hit.

Spencer found a napkin and spat into it, feeling hot with shame. At their conversation, at her admittance, at the fact that she'd fallen off the wagon and chipped her nail polish in the process. She rolled her sleeves back down to cover her hands. "Thanks," she whispered.





# Chapter 19

Spencer's head slumped forward on the table. She glared at Nick's questioning glance when he sat down in her booth uninvited.

"Why," she asked, lifting her head, "is it so *fucking expensive* trying to Uber anywhere in this goddamn city?"

He narrowed his eyes at her phone screen. "Where are you trying to Uber to?"

"I need to get my Christmas shopping done, but my car is out of commission. Hunt still hasn't had the chance to replace my tire and I don't want the spare getting worn out. I was already pushing it when we went to Atlantic Station."

"I could take you. I wrapped up all my finals last week."

Spencer bit her lip. "If you insist," she said, shrugging. "There's an art supply store in Midtown that I think I can get something for Reese at."

"It's settled." He got up and rapped his knuckles on her table. "I'll pick you up after my shift."



Nick parked outside Thorne, right under the NO PARKING sign like he took it as a challenge to see how long it would take before he finally got ticketed.

His back bumper caught Spencer's eye. It was dark all the other times she'd ridden with him, and she hadn't bothered to look. In the daylight, she could see the entire back bumper of the Impala was covered in stickers that all communicated the same theme:

**If you're going to ride my ass, at least pull my hair.**

**If you're going to ride my ass, don't forget to KISS it.**

**Keep tailgating. It's probably the only tail you get.**

**Do you follow JESUS this closely?**

**BACK OFF BUMPER HUMPER**

**MY BRAKES ARE GOOD. IS YOUR INSURANCE?**

**COME ANY CLOSER AND I'LL EXPECT A PHONE NUMBER AND DINNER**

"What's with all the bumper stickers," Spencer asked as she slipped into the passenger seat. "And why are they all," she waved her hand, "like that?"

"If you must know, it is how I indulge my road rage in a healthy manner," Nick answered.

Spencer raised an eyebrow.

"Every time someone tailgates me, I buy a new sticker. Safer than flipping the bird, and much funnier. Who are you trying to get gifts for anyway?"

"Hunter and Reese," she said. "What about you?"

He waited a beat before answering. "Just Joselyn, I think."

"Really? There's no one else?" She wracked her brain for any information he might've told her about his extended family, drawing a blank. And his aunt and uncle weren't even in the country. "No girlfriend?" she asked timidly.

His mouth was pressed in a thin line. "No," he said quietly. "No girlfriend."

“Boyfriend?”

“Spencer,” he sighed, “do you ever see me with anyone? Or even anywhere else other than the library or The Grind?”

She shrugged noncommittally. “It’s none of my business what you get up to or who you see.”

This line of conversation was veering into a territory she adamantly wanted to avoid at all costs, so she changed the subject. “Do I need to give you the address?”

“Nope,” Nick answered. Spencer wondered if she imagined the grateful note in his voice, like he would also rather not be having this conversation. But like she said – that wasn’t any of her business. So, she just sat back and entertained herself by watching the vein in his temple throb as he cursed his way down the interstate.



“I thought you didn’t want me in the city after what happened with that asshole,” she said after he parked in another public parking garage.

“The art supply store’s not far from here. And I’m gonna be right next to you this time, so nothing should happen.”

“If you say so,” Spencer grumbled quietly as she got out.

Nick stopped walking and looked at her. “Do you not trust me?”

“I trust you just fine,” she snapped. “It’s other people I’m worried about.”

“Let me worry about them. Just stay close,” he said.

Spencer grabbed onto the back of his jacket, forcing him to slow down and keep pace with her. “This close enough for you?” she asked, rolling her eyes.

Nick swung his arm around her shoulders. “I think this is better.” After a beat, he said, “You can let go of my jacket now, Spencer.”

She glared at him until he sighed. “Relax, sweetheart. This doesn’t mean anything. I just like this jacket and if you hold onto it any tighter, it’s going to rip.”

“Stop being dramatic,” she hissed, letting go anyway.

“Stop being stubborn,” he snapped. “It’s working, isn’t it?”

Spencer glanced around the street. There were a good number of people, but she noticed the men were giving them a wide berth and not looking in her direction. She decided she liked having his arm around her and pressed herself closer to his side.

“I do the exact same thing whenever Joselyn and I come out here,” Nick pointed out.

“She lets you?”

“Considering she was followed home when she was by herself, yes. I almost killed that fucker when I saw him.”

“What’d Christian do? Were they still together?” she asked as they waited at a crosswalk.

Nick nodded. “Working, unfortunately. He gave her hell about it when he got home, though.” A wry smile crossed his face. “He also slept on the balcony that night.”

“Damn. Not even the couch?”

“Nope. That was for me. Josie didn’t want me going after that guy, so she made me stay over and didn’t even let me sleep in my old room. There’s your store, by the way,” he said, pointing.

There was something about shopping with him – *running errands* – that made Spencer wonder why she ever did things by herself. He helped her reach things on high shelves, gave her his honest opinions, and made her laugh when things felt overwhelming.

Then, she had to remind herself not to make a habit of asking for his help.

Nick walked ahead to hold the door open for her, but she glared at him and made a point of walking through the other door by herself.

Right out into the pouring rain.

“Shit, fuck,” Nick hissed. “Stay here,” he said, shrugging off his jacket. He wrapped it around Spencer’s shoulders and drew the hood over her head before she could protest.

She pulled the jacket tighter around herself, shivering from the wind chill. “Where are you going?”

“Car’s too far. I’m not making you walk in this weather. Just go back inside the store and I’ll pick you up out front.”

“Won’t you need your coat? Nick!” Spencer swore, watching his retreating body disappear down the street. “If he gets pneumonia, I swear to fucking God...” she muttered darkly under her breath.



“I thought I told you to wait inside,” Nick snapped angrily as Spencer climbed in.

He didn’t get a chance to hear her reply when somebody blared their horn behind them. She barely had time to pull her door shut before he had to take off or risk getting rear-ended.

She looked pointedly at the car behind them as she buckled her seatbelt. “*That*, Nicholas, is why I didn’t. People in this goddamn city are too impatient to wait.”

“People can go fuck themselves,” he muttered. “But you have a point.”

Spencer tried to breathe some warmth into her hands. “Fuck, it’s cold,” she whispered.

Nick's expression softened. He tucked a strand of wet hair behind her ear. The poor girl looked like a drowned rat sitting in the seat next to him. "Heat's not all the way on yet, sweetheart. Gonna have to give it a minute."

"I'm fine," she insisted, teeth chattering.

Nick rolled his eyes and reached in his backseat at the next red light. "Here," he said, passing her a hoodie. "Toss the other one in the back. It won't do you any good to wear wet clothes."

Spencer narrowed her eyes and didn't take it. "Aren't *you* cold?"

"Oh, I'm fucking freezing, thanks for asking," he grumbled. "But that doesn't mean you have to be. Just put the damn hoodie on."

"Please," he added a second later. "I'll be able to concentrate better on driving if I'm not worried about you."

Spencer crossed her arms and glared at him. "I didn't ask you to worry about me, Nick."

Nick smacked himself in the forehead and swore. "Dammit Spencer, will you just fucking put it on? I can't get *one* minute of you not arguing with me on something like this? Do you have to be so fucking difficult all the time?"

He could feel an immediate shift in the air after he said that. Spencer flinched and turned away, staring out her window. Her mouth was pressed in a tight line as she slipped his hoodie over her head and threw the wet one in his backseat. He could see her hand twitch toward her mouth like she wanted to bite her nails.

Nick's throat dried. "Shit, fuck. I'm sorry, sweetheart." There was no excuse for him to go off on her like that. He reached to pull her hand back down, but she recoiled against his touch.

Nick counted to ten before he made things worse. "I shouldn't have said any of that. I didn't mean —"

"It's fine," she whispered.

“No, it isn’t,” he said. Why wasn’t she fucking yelling at him?

“I shouldn’t take out my frustrations on you. No matter how bad traffic is on this godforsaken highway.”

People in Atlanta could barely drive in ideal conditions, never mind when there was a couple inches of water on the road. Nick didn’t dare hit over forty miles per hour the entire rest of the way back to campus.

Spencer broke the silence when he pulled into a parking spot outside her dorm. “I’m not used to people worrying or taking care of me,” she admitted. “It’s just been me and Mom for my whole life. I don’t know what it’s like to not do things on my own.”

Nick sighed. “You can say it. It was my fault. I shouldn’t have yelled in the first place.”

He felt her hand on his arm. “I’ll try to be less... argumentative. But no promises.”

“I wasn’t asking that of you.”

Spencer stared at the spot where they were touching and pulled back quickly, like she hadn’t realized she’d grabbed him. “You didn’t have to.”

Before he could respond, she canted her head and paused with her hand on the door. “Do you just want to come in with me? If you try to drive to your place right now, you might end up swimming there instead.”

“I don’t want to put you out, but you have a point. Again,” Nick said.

He pointed at the seat behind her. “There’s an umbrella in the pocket. You take it. I’ll just take my chances with this.” He grabbed his still-damp jacket from the backseat.

Spencer looked like she wanted to argue, but in the end, she nodded and didn’t say anything else.

Nick almost felt disappointed. It didn’t feel right, her not snapping at him. He grabbed her arm before she could open her door. “Spencer, wait.”

She glanced back at him with a raised eyebrow.

He sighed. “I need you to understand I didn’t mean anything by what I said. I was just stressed and took it out on the closest person. Please don’t be upset. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I’m not upset, Nick,” she said flatly, opening her door and climbing out with Reese’s present tucked under her arm.



Reese looked relieved as she took them in. “I was getting worried when I saw how bad the rain was getting and you two weren’t back yet.”

Spencer set her stuff down on the coffee table. “No peeking,” she said, shooing Reese away. “Your Christmas present’s over here. Didn’t have time to get anything else before the storm got bad.”

“Babe, it’s like you *want* me to come over there and peek.”

Spencer scowled and Nick helped her gather everything to hide in her room, instead.

“Fuck,” she hissed as she tried to peel off her wet clothes, only succeeding in removing the borrowed hoodie. Her hands shook too much when she tried to unbutton her coat.

Nick took a few steps forward. “Let me.” He paused with his hands over hers, waiting. Her skin felt like ice.

She glared, gaze switching from him to down at her coat, which was so sopping wet, it dripped a small puddle around their feet. But then Spencer just nodded, still not saying anything.

He sighed. “Spencer, please. I need you to say something.”

“It’s fine.”

Nick felt his patience wear a little. “Spencer.”



She turned her glare on him, a challenge in her eyes. “Just do it. Before I freeze my ass off.”

*That's more like it.* He tried to rein in his smile as he helped her with the rest of the buttons.

“Might be better if you took a warm shower,” Nick blurted when he finished and took a step back. “Don’t take that the wrong way. I didn’t mean —”

But she was nodding again, not looking at him. “You’re probably right.”

Nick had to stop himself before he asked if she was feeling okay. The girl in front of him would rather die than admit he was right about anything.

Then again, maybe asking was a good way to provoke her.

“Are you feeling okay?” he asked teasingly. “You never tell me I’m right about anything.”

Spencer shrugged in lieu of an actual response. She stalked around to her closet without saying anything else, and Nick realized he was being dismissed.

He cursed himself as he went back out into the living room. He lost his temper and now Spencer didn’t even feel like she could say anything to him.

Nick rubbed his face. “Fuck,” he whispered.

Reese was sitting at the dining table. Her brow furrowed. “Something wrong?”

He pulled out a chair. “I lost my cool in the car earlier and now she won’t talk to me.”

Her blue eyes blazed. “The fuck did you do to her?”

Nick pinched his brow and sighed. “If you must know, I think my exact words were, ‘Do you have to be so fucking difficult all the time?’ She was being stubborn about putting on one of my jackets while we waited for the heat to kick in. Now it’s like she thinks she can’t say anything to me without me thinking she’s being difficult.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Reese, I know,” he grit out, burying his face in his hands.

“Do you, though?”

His head shot back up. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Reese held a finger up to her lips until they heard the shower turn on. “How much do you know about her family?”

“Only that it’s just been her and her mom for her whole life and she doesn’t know what it’s like to have other people try to take care of her. And that they had a fight over Thanksgiving. That’s about it.”

She let out a sigh. “Nick, her dad left her mom before she was born and hasn’t bothered to pay a cent in child support. Spencer practically raised herself like freaking Matilda while her mom worked hard as hell to keep a roof over their fucking heads. Of course, she doesn’t understand how to accept any kind of help.”

“She told you all this?” he asked. “I can’t get her to tell me anything.”

Reese shrugged. “My dad’s a piece of shit, too. Maybe she thought I’d understand. Daddy issues and stuff like that.”

Nick thought back to when Spencer went with her to visit home, and how evasive she’d been when he asked about it.

“My dad died when I was 12,” he admitted. “But he was a good father. So, I guess I wouldn’t understand.”

Reese’s expression softened. She laid a hand on his arm. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think she’s upset at *you*.”

“I kind of want her to be.” It didn’t feel right when she wasn’t scowling or snapping at him.

“She wouldn’t have invited you in here if she was.”

The shower shut off. Reese craned her head around Nick to peer down Spencer’s side of the dorm. “Feeling better, babe?”

“Loads.”

Nick turned. Spencer was towel-drying her hair, looking him up and down. She’d changed into a pair of Ravens flannel

pajama pants and an oversized shirt.

He stared back at her. “What?”

“You should probably take one, too,” she said.

“I didn’t exactly bring any extra clothes.”

Reese held up a finger and disappeared into her room. “Hunt keeps some here. Pretty sure you guys are the same size,” she said when she came back out. “Here.”

“Thanks,” Nick said as he accepted what looked like a plain t-shirt and gray sweatpants.

She grimaced. “Probably gonna want to keep your undergarments.”

“Uh, yeah.”

Spencer pointed down her end of the suite. “You can use mine. I think some of Hunt’s stuff is in there, too.”

“You guys have two bathrooms?”

Reese shrugged. “Got *really* lucky. Spencer’s has better water pressure, though. Should still be some towels in there, too.”

Nick paused before he went in. “I hope I’m not putting you two out.”

Spencer rolled her eyes. “It’s more of an inconvenience if you catch pneumonia from staying in wet clothes than it is for us to let you use our freaking shower. I’m not taking care of your ass if you get sick because you’re being stubborn.”

Her mouth clamped shut at the last sentence, like she recognized the irony.

Nick suppressed a frown as he closed the bathroom door. He hoped by the time he finished, she would be back to her usual self. He didn’t like seeing her upset – especially over something that wasn’t even her fault.

Maybe the shower would help clear his thoughts so he could figure out how he could make it up to her.



Spencer was waiting for him when he finished. She held her hands out.

“I’m putting all the wet stuff in the wash,” she explained as he reluctantly handed her the bundle of his clothes and used towels. “Should be dry in the morning.”

Nick frowned. “You don’t have to.”

“Needs to be done anyway,” she said with a shrug before turning on her heel and disappearing out in the hall to the communal laundry room.

Nick sighed, running a hand through his wet hair as he sat down on the couch and waited for her.

“Are you working tomorrow?” Spencer asked when she got back and curled up on the middle of the couch, leaving at least half a foot of distance between the two of them.

Nick wasn’t sure why that bothered him so much. “It’s Saturday. I’m off. Why?” he answered.

She drew her knees up to her chin. “Movie?”

“What’d you have in mind?”

“It’s Reese’s turn to pick.”

The girl in question plopped on the other end of the couch next to Spencer. “Hunter’s working tonight,” she said, grabbing the remote. She scrolled aimlessly through the Netflix library before settling on a superhero movie. “Any objections?” she asked.

Spencer shook her head and Nick shrugged. He was more focused on getting a read on *her* over any movie they’d be watching.

She caught him staring and cocked her head to the side. *What?* she mouthed.

*Nothing*, he mouthed back, turning his attention to the projector.



Reese stretched after the last end-credits scene finally ended. “I’m tired as fuck,” she said, yawning. “You two have at it.”

Spencer grabbed her hand as she stood. “Night, babe.”

“Night.”

After Reese’s door closed, Nick decided enough was enough. He stole the remote to hold it hostage. “Can we talk please?”

Spencer stared at the screen instead of him. “We’re talking right now.” Nick thought he saw her hand twitch toward the remote.

He sighed, pushing it toward her as an olive branch. “I’m sorry about what happened in the car earlier.”

She grabbed it and started scrolling through the Netflix catalog again. “You’re still on this? I said it was fine.”

“You haven’t yelled or snapped at me in about two hours, sweetheart. It is not fine.”

“I thought you wanted me to stop being difficult.”

He pinched his brow. Counted. “Spencer, you’re not difficult. I never should have said that.”

She pursed her lips together. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

*That’s it*, Nick thought. “You,” he said, grabbing her gently by the shoulders, “come over here.” He pulled her flush against his side.

Spencer settled in next to him without resisting. “Nicholas,” she said flatly, looking at him out of the corner of her eye.

“You say everything’s okay, then you shouldn’t have any problem sitting next to me.”

She rested her head in the crook of his neck. “I don’t.”

Nick snorted as he adjusted his position. “Could’ve fooled me.”

Instead of responding to that, Spencer gave him the remote back. “You pick. I don’t know what I’m in the mood for.”

“You sure?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Just put something on, Jesus fuck.”

He felt his mouth curl up in a smile.

“*What?*” Spencer sat up and glared at him.

Nick pushed her head back down. “Nothing, sweetheart.”



# Chapter 20

**B**y the time Spencer woke up in the morning, Nick had already been awake for at least an hour, just staring up at the glow-in-the-dark stars scattered across her ceiling. He wondered how she got them up there, or if they were left over from whoever stayed there before her. Then, he wondered if there was any rhyme or reason to their configuration – maybe a constellation he didn’t recognize or a pattern known only to her.

The bed shifted above him. Nick propped himself up on his elbow and flicked his gaze over as she let out a string of curses, the sound of which was much better to wake up to than any alarm clock.

“Good morning to you, too, sweetheart.”

Spencer swore loudly again as she peered over the side of her bed. “Nick? The fuck are you doing in here? How’d *I* get up here?” She rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “I could’ve sworn we were on the couch watching that God awful John Hughes movie.”

Nick pulled himself up into a sitting position. “You fell asleep. I thought you’d be more comfortable in your own bed.”

“So you carried me?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

He shrugged. “I didn’t want to wake you.”

Spencer frowned at the single blanket and pillow beneath him. “You slept on my floor? What was wrong with the couch?”

He shrugged again. “You seemed like you didn’t want to be alone.” It wasn’t a lie – when he tried to pull away after tucking her in, she held onto his sleeve with a vice-like grip and murmured for him to stay. Not that he’d ever tell her. No reason to embarrass her further.

She fell silent, ruminating on his answer. Truthfully, he would have been fine on the couch, but there was no way he was making her sleep out there with him when her bed was right down the hall.

And Nick wasn’t going to deny that he slept better when she was around.

“You’re staring,” Spencer said sharply. Her cheeks were pink.

He didn’t think he had been, but he focused his attention elsewhere to make her more comfortable. He turned his eyes heavenward. “Who put those up there?”

Spencer followed his gaze to her star-covered ceiling. “Hunter,” she answered. “Reese said she craft-hoarded a bag of those and didn’t want it to go to waste.”

Nick looked out the corner of his eye as she leapt down from her perch and started rummaging through her closet. He backed up until he was out in the hallway. “I’ll just...wait out here. Or be on my way home.”

“You’re not hungry?” Spencer asked, cocking her head. “Dining hall’s still serving breakfast for another hour. I feel like I’ve never seen you in there.”

“I don’t live on campus. I cook at home.” He thought that was obvious, but then he remembered she was a freshman, and it probably hadn’t even occurred to her that he wasn’t even on a meal plan.

She scoffed, and Nick wondered if he should have felt insulted. He raised an eyebrow. “Something funny?”



In lieu of an answer, Spencer's door gently clicked shut. She emerged a few moments later, wearing jeans and a Ravens sweater instead of her pajamas.

She yanked a comb through her purple hair on her way to the bathroom. "Just didn't peg you for a home cook," she explained. Nick heard the sink turn on.

He leaned on the wall and crossed his arms. "You also didn't peg me to be a STEM major," he reminded her dryly when the sink shut off.

Spencer winced as she dried her face. "So, you noticed."

"Contrary to what you might believe, I do notice these things."

"Nick? You stayed over?" Reese asked, shuffling into the living room with a yawn. She looked him up and down, recognition sparking in her eyes at his borrowed clothing. "Right, the rain." She rubbed her face. "Forgive me, I just woke up. I have my own Christmas shopping to do today."

"Wow babe, really? We couldn't tell at all," Spencer snorted sarcastically.

"Be nice, sweetheart. You've barely been awake for five minutes," Nick said, unable to hide an amused smile when Reese flipped her off on her way to the bathroom.

She glared at him. "Oh? And how long have *you* been awake?"

*Long enough.* He shrugged and checked his watch. "Little over an hour."

Spencer scowled at the time when she checked her phone. "Why the *fuck* were you up so early? I don't think we even started watching the movie until almost midnight."

"I open The Grind like two, sometimes three times a week. Waking up early is part of my job description."

"Still." She sighed, looking at her phone. "I left our clothes in the dryer overnight. Hopefully, no one got to them. Be right back."

When she laid their freshly dried laundry on her bed, Nick changed quickly and folded his borrowed clothes into a neat stack next to the pile before joining her outside.

Spencer stopped by Nick's car, looking expectedly at him.

"Yes?"

She shrugged. "Time to put your money where your mouth is. Let's see if you're better than Waffle House."

Nick smiled as he started the car. "Nothing's better than Waffle House."



"Looks like you *are* a decent cook, Nicholas."

Nick paused mid-sip. "You sound shocked, sweetheart." He was currently drinking his coffee straight from the pot because he hadn't felt like dirtying a mug.

Spencer stared at him over her breakfast. "Care to share?"

"We don't have any oat milk, and you don't drink your coffee black," he reminded her.

She rolled her eyes, but didn't say anything else as she continued to slowly pick at her food. Nick wondered if he should apologize for last night again. It still seemed like there was something she wasn't telling him.

"I'm sorry about what I said in the car," he said. "It was out of line."

Spencer twirled the tines of her fork around in the syrup pooling on her now empty plate. "It was the same thing I said to my mom when we fought over Thanksgiving," she explained, not looking at him.

"I called her difficult and said she was too stubborn to ask for help from my dad and that's why I had to grow up the way I did. I kept wanting to believe I was better than that. That I

wasn't exactly fucking like her. I thought I was doing good. I asked Hunter for help when my tire went out that night. Now, I'm not so sure."

Nick felt like a jackass. "Spencer, I didn't mean it. You're not difficult."

Spencer rolled her eyes again. "You don't have to lie to spare my feelings, Nick. I'm self-aware enough. Not your fault, anyway," she mumbled. "You couldn't have known."

He frowned. "I'm not lying. And I shouldn't have said it regardless." He raked a hand through his hair and leaned back in his chair. "Are we okay?"

"We were always okay." Her cheeks were flushed a deep pink, but he didn't think the heat was blasting that bad. They couldn't afford to foot that kind of bill every time the temperature dipped below forty.

He raised an eyebrow. "You sure?"

"Trust me, you'd know if I wasn't," Spencer said dryly, finally looking at him.

Nick was seriously questioning whether or not he should push the issue, but just sighed and changed the subject. "How were your finals?"

"I finished my papers, but one of my professors had us doing an actual exam, too. I asked if I could do it on my computer or get it printed in a larger font, but he's ridiculously anti-technology and anti-accommodations," she answered with a grimace. "I barely finished on time because I couldn't keep any of the passages straight. And I don't have an official diagnosis, so the university's not going to do anything about it."

She groaned and pinched her brow. "Sorry," she said. "Didn't mean to dump all that, but he pissed me off."

Nick muttered a consolation, hand twitching to pat her on the arm, but he stopped himself. Despite their proximity last night, he hadn't been on her list of people she was comfortable touching, and he resolved to keep his distance.



Spencer stacked her and Nick's plates neatly in front of her. "I can do the dishes," she said, getting up.

At Nick's disapproving look, she scowled. "You cooked. That means I clean. That's how this works."

Was she being difficult again? Maybe, but Spencer didn't like feeling like she owed him. She made her way to the kitchen, leaving Nick with his coffee pot and furrowed brow.

She was on the last dish when she felt a hand on her lower back, causing her to jump with a yelped curse. The bowl she was rinsing clattered loudly in the sink.

She took deep breaths in and out of her nose as she tried to silence the alarm bells going off in her head at the unwanted touch.

"Sorry, just trying to get by." She turned, seeing Sam jerk his head at the cabinet behind her.

Considering there was ample space between her and the cabinet, there was no damn reason his hand should've been on her back in the first place, but Spencer wasn't in the mood for a confrontation. She shook her hands dry and moved out of his way. "My bad."

"Don't worry about it." He winked at her, and she suppressed a gag.

Nick appeared in the entryway, setting the coffee pot back in its spot on the counter. "Let's go, Spencer," he said stiffly, jaw clenched.

Spencer quickly met him at the door. "Nothing happened."

But Nick was already shaking his head, cursing under his breath as he ushered her out of his house. "I am *never* having you over again. Absolutely not."

Spencer bumped his arm in an attempt to loosen him up. “Ouch, Nicholas. I didn’t think I was that bad of company.”

He turned on his heel and glared at her. “I’m serious. It was incredibly irresponsible of me to have you over when he was home.”

“Well, it’s over, and it won’t happen again,” she snapped.

“Yeah, because you’re never coming over again,” he snorted.

Spencer grabbed his arm to slow him down, planting her feet and holding onto his sleeve when he tried to keep walking. “Nick, stop. It wasn’t that bad.” When it didn’t look like his mood was budging, she slipped her hand into his and gave it a squeeze.

Nick stiffened, but didn’t let her go when she tried to pull away.

Spencer felt her pulse start to race as she registered that they were actually *holding hands*. She was suddenly very aware of the sweat on her palms, and she shook him off quickly to wipe them on her jeans.

She wondered if she imagined the flash of disappointment crossing his face, but someone up ahead called out to them.

“Nick?”

Jordan was walking toward them from the opposite direction, a girl on his arm. He frowned at Nick’s expression. “What’s got you all pissy?” he asked, ignoring Spencer entirely.

Nick jerked his head back toward the house. “Sam’s home,” he said, like that was enough of an explanation.

And it must have been, because Spencer noticed Jordan’s arm tighten around the girl as he nodded. “I see.”

“C’mon, sweetheart,” Nick said tightly, turning in the direction of The Grind. She waited until the other two were out of sight before slipping her hand back into his.



# Chapter 21

Are you coming?" Jordan asked, shrugging on a blazer. Nick played dumb. "Coming where?" He already knew where this was going.

Jordan rolled his eyes. "The formal. Chelsea's going to be there."

Nick was well aware of that. Which was exactly why he wasn't really entertaining the idea, but he hadn't cared enough to give her a straight answer when she'd asked him about it at the last meeting. While also trailing her fingers down his arm and giving him a *look*. He'd bolted out of there immediately, saying he'd get back to her.

"You know we haven't been together for months, right?"

"She said you told her you'd think about it," Jordan pressed. Before Nick could come up with a tactful way to say that was because he didn't feel like dealing with her reaction if he rejected her outright, his roommate sighed. "I know you aren't really interested, but Natalie made me promise to at least ask you about it."

"Is she on her way over?" Nick asked, grateful for a chance to deflect.

"Are you crazy? Sam's home."

Nick pinched his brow and sighed. "He is?" When Jordan nodded, he continued, "He try anything?"

Jordan's jaw clenched. "Not outright. But I've seen the way he looks at her. There's no way in hell I'm letting him anywhere near her."

"She's a little older than his usual pursuits," Nick noted dryly.

"Yeah, because he's just trying to piss me off," Jordan muttered back. At Nick's tight expression, he raised a curious eyebrow.

Nick felt his hackles raise just thinking about what happened the other day. "I should've checked to see if he was home before I brought Spencer over. He..." Nick chose his words carefully, "made an advance toward her. And it was my fault. Won't be making that mistake again."

"Fuck." Jordan ran a hand through his hair. "Why did we let him be our roommate again?"

"Because our only other option was that guy who wouldn't shut up about his podcast," Nick quipped, even though he'd asked the same question a couple of months ago. "I don't think I could handle listening to that much misogyny without committing a crime of some sort."

Jordan grunted his reluctant agreement as he made his way to the door. "If she asks, I'll make something up."

"Don't worry about it," Nick said, feeling slightly like a prick for being appreciative anyway. After waving Jordan out, he sighed and pulled out his phone.

NICK

Are you gonna be at the formal?

SPENCER

nope

reese and hunter are currently arguing about what movie we're gonna watch

That sounded *infinitely* better than weaving through a crowd trying to avoid Chelsea and anyone else who might want to talk to him tonight. Especially since Joselyn had bailed on him to do God knows what with Christian and told him not to come by. He severely hoped she wasn't still sleeping with her ex, but there was no way in hell he was touching that with a ten-foot pole.

NICK

Room for one more?

SPENCER

depends

The corners of his mouth quirked up.

NICK

On?

SPENCER

reese requests pizza from the slice again

NICK

Is that so?

SPENCER

it's the price of your admission, nicholas

take it or leave it





Half an hour later, Nick showed up outside her dorm with two pizzas and wearing considerably more casual clothes than he thought he'd start the night off with.

“What are you guys watching?” he asked, making sure to hand the box marked VEGAN to Spencer, who was sitting on top of a nest of blankets lining the floor in front of the couch. She gave him a smile that made him equal parts curious and wary as she drew her knees up to her chin. “You’re just in time. We’re about to start *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.”

“I can’t believe you haven’t seen it,” Reese said as she stalked over and stole the other box.

“A tragedy, truly,” Spencer quipped.

Nick settled next to her on the floor, wondering if she would move away so they weren’t so close. He didn’t know what to make of this girl – who was so put off by the idea of touching other people it literally made her nauseated, but who also held his hand like she never wanted to let go.

His breath caught as he stared at her, pajamas and all. She didn’t have her walls up right now, none of the spiky exterior she usually gave off. And she hadn’t moved to get away from him, instead sitting so close he could feel the heat radiating from her body.

She caught him, brow furrowing as her face settled into a frown. “The fuck are you looking at?”

Nick smiled. “Nothing.”

Spencer narrowed her eyes, but dropped the subject when a pair of red lips appeared on the screen.

“Here we go,” Hunter muttered.

Reese threw a pillow, and he swore at her.

“Shut up,” she and Spencer said at the same time. Nick looked back and grinned at Hunter’s scowl.

This was going to be fun.



# Chapter 22

Spencer's eyes started to droop, and she didn't realize she was leaning on the person next to her until they stiffened slightly.

"Tired?" They almost sounded amused.

"Shit. Sorry," she mumbled as she sat back up against the couch. The movie had long since ended, leaving them with a blank projector screen.

"It's alright," Nick said quietly. "You can stay there if you want. I know it doesn't mean anything."

*Don't tempt me.* Spencer bit her lip and wondered why the thought of it had her heart racing. She felt her forehead with the back of her hand, checking for a fever.

There was a voice in her head nagging her about this borderline non-platonic touching, but she reminded herself that Hunter and Reese were literally sleeping on the couch together, as friends. What made this so different?

*Fuck it.* Spencer leaned her head back on his shoulder, feeling something about the way his body immediately relaxed against hers.

"Are you sure you don't want any help getting to bed?" Nick asked a couple minutes later, blinking the sleep from his eyes as he looked at her.

Spencer buried her face into his shoulder. “Nope,” she said, popping her lips on the p. “I’m good where I am.” Hopefully, he wouldn’t read too much into it. She definitely wasn’t going to. Like he said. This didn’t mean anything.

Nick muttered something under his breath, but instead of pushing her off, he adjusted his position so her head rested more comfortably in the crook of his neck. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and sighed.

*This doesn’t mean anything, she reminded herself angrily. Don’t think about his arm around your shoulders. He’s just tired and this is a comfortable position. That’s it. It doesn’t mean anything.*

But all she could think about while she drifted off to sleep was what it would feel like if he ran his fingers through her hair.



# Chapter 23

There was a weight across Spencer's chest. She buried her face into something warm and soft, not wanting to move to figure out its source.

Until she realized the thing she was snuggling against was *moving*. Breathing. Spencer blinked open her eyes slowly, first registering the arm around her waist and then the chin resting on top of her head.

Nick murmured something in his sleep, and she didn't dare move. Her feelings of contentment were overridden by the fear of him waking up and seeing them in this position. Cuddling under a blanket together.

The panic started to set in as she took in the gravity of the situation. She'd fallen asleep. With a *guy*. Who was still holding her like he didn't want to let go.

The same heat from last night burned its way through her body with a vengeance, setting her cheeks on fire as she realized what this meant.

Because what if he didn't feel the same way? Would this ruin them?

Spencer sat up immediately and jumped to her feet, feeling a pang at the loss of contact. Nick stirred on the ground next to her, rubbing his face.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. His eyes flicked between the empty space next to him and her sudden position on the other side of the room.

“Nothing,” she answered too quickly. “Morning.” She tried sounding more chill that time, but it just came out strained and reedy.

Hunter yawned on the couch before Nick could call her out on her shit. “It’s morning?” He threw a pillow at Reese’s head. “Get up.”

Instead of dignifying him with a verbal response, Reese held up her middle finger, the scene made all the more comical by the fact that she hadn’t bothered to move the pillow off of her face. Hunter muttered something about her being a fucking goblin again and swore when she kicked him.

Spencer watched Nick gather himself, folding their blanket neatly on the ground. “I’m just gonna...” he trailed off, rushing out the door with a soft click. Somehow, to her, it was louder and said more than if he’d just slammed the damn thing.

Reese finally tossed the pillow off as she sat up and stretched. “Did Nick just leave?”

“He probably had to work,” Hunter groaned. “It’s like five in the morning.”

Spencer didn’t bother telling them Nick didn’t work on Saturdays.



# Chapter 24

Nick never brought up what happened at Spencer's the other night, and she definitely wasn't going to.

Nothing changed between them – she kept showing up for free drinks and he still joined her on his breaks. But she felt something in the air every time they were together, and that feeling left knots in the pit of her stomach. Whenever he was near, she felt that familiar heat travel through her whole body and her pulse quickened. He didn't seem to notice – or at least – he never said anything about it.

With finals wrapping up, it wasn't long until most of the campus was vacated for the holiday break. Hunter and Reese were going to visit home, but Spencer hadn't wanted to intrude by asking to come with them. Besides, she was content to have all of campus to herself for the next few weeks. The only other people staying were the ones who lived too far for traveling to be anything less than a complete hassle.

“Are you sure you don't want to come with us, babe? Hunter's dad would love it,” Reese asked over their last dining hall lunch of the semester.

“It's fine,” she insisted. “I may still go home and see my mom. I haven't decided.”

Reese's brow furrowed, but she let it go.

Hunter thankfully changed the subject. “When are we exchanging gifts?”

“I’ve got one more commission to wrap up,” Reese said thoughtfully through bites of food. “Sooo meet up at our dorm around five?”

Spencer nodded in agreement, her mind still racing about her mom. About Nick. About both of them at the same time. She wished her brain would just pick one instead of tag-teaming her like this.

If Reese or Hunter noticed her less-than-present mental state right now, neither of them brought it up.



At five p.m., Hunter and Spencer were already settled on the couch in their dorm, presents completely covering their small coffee table in front of the projector. Reese had tried to make things more festive by putting a mini tabletop tree out, but it was lost among a sea of boxes, gift bags, and tissue paper.

“What’s this?” Reese asked as she walked in, grabbing something from the front of their door. “It’s got your name on it, babe.”

“Let me see that.” She all but snatched the envelope from her. There was no card or note – just a voucher for...an audiobook subscription service?

“This isn’t from either of you?” Spencer asked, looking back and forth between Hunter and Reese. It hadn’t been there earlier.

He looked thoughtful as he took the envelope from her. “As much as I want to take credit, wasn’t me.”

Reese shrugged. “Same. Maybe you have a secret admirer,” she teased.

Spencer wanted to argue that maybe someone just taped it to the wrong door, but her name was on the envelope.

“Maybe.”



They drew straws to see who would get to open theirs first.

“Merry fucking Christmas,” Hunter said as he passed Spencer a box wrapped in white paper covered with iridescent silver foil snowflakes, far too neat for a man’s work.

She couldn’t resist a small smile. “Did you make Reese wrap this?”

“Yes, yes he did,” Reese said, smirking at him. “He’s been strictly a gift bag and tissue paper person for years.”

“What the fuck’s it matter for? It’s what’s on the inside that counts,” he growled. “Open the damn gift, princess.”

“Watch your mouth,” she snapped at him as she carefully peeled back the wrapping paper. “Headphones?”

Hunter leaned back and threaded his hands behind his head. “They’re noise-canceling. For whenever you listen to your audiobooks.”

He clearly paid good money for these, and the thought of that made her feel self-conscious. She still didn’t like when people spent any money at all on her – big occasion or not.

“My turn,” Reese said, saving Spencer from the responsibility of choking out more than a ‘thank you.’

Her box was bigger, a fact that she was clearly smug about. It was wrapped in the same snow-white wrapping paper as Hunter’s.

“Size doesn’t matter,” he said when she stuck her tongue out at him. “Fuck, this shit’s heavy,” he hissed as he helped her pass it to Spencer.

Reese, apparently too excited and impatient at Spencer’s attempt to preserve the wrapping paper, helped her rip it to shreds and opened the box.



There was a pink blanket folded up in a neat cube, but Spencer could barely hold part of it up. “Why’s it so heavy?”

“It’s a weighted blanket,” Reese explained. “I’ve heard people say it makes a huge difference in their sleep quality.”

Spencer snorted. “Is that a fucking *hint*?”

“Yes babe, you’re an insomniac. Trust me, you need this.”

“I can’t tell if you’re being sweet or insulting her,” Hunter said. He plopped the box down on the floor with such a loud boom that they should’ve gotten a noise complaint.

“Enough about me,” Spencer snapped, wanting the attention off her. “Someone else go.” She picked one of her wrapped gifts up at random and thrust it at Reese. “You next.”

Reese hummed appreciatively, taking in the slim, rectangle box covered in plaid wrapping paper, topped with a shiny bow in the corner. “At the very least, I think you win the award for best gift wrapping,” she said, carefully peeling the paper apart where it was taped instead of ripping it.

“Didn’t I just say it’s what was on the inside that counts?” Hunter repeated. He grimaced as Reese opened the box and let out a high-pitched squeal. “Jesus fucking Christ,” he muttered, holding a hand to his ear. “Maybe I should start calling you a fucking banshee.”

Reese ignored him as she turned and wrapped her arms around Spencer’s neck, almost cutting off her circulation. “Thank you thank you thank you,” she whispered in her ear.

Hunter was perusing the gift – a set of markers from the art store in Midtown.

Spencer finally broke away from Reese’s hug/murder attempt. “You kept saying how you had to buy these one at a time because of the price.”

Reese’s eyes narrowed. She turned the box over. “And how much did you pay for these, exactly?”

“Nice try,” Spencer said, miming her lips zipping. She ignored Reese’s glare as she watched Hunter fish around for

his gift. It was a thin, plain white box, barely the size of his hand.

“What?” he asked. “It’s not like I could ask you to wrap your own gift.”

“A little effort would’ve been nice,” Reese muttered. Her eyes widened and Spencer thought she actually saw her jaw drop to the floor.

“No fucking way.”

Spencer tried to peer over her shoulder. “What is it?”

“A membership to the aquarium,” Hunter explained, leaning back against the couch. “You kept saying how often you wanted to go to the one here.”

“Not nearly as often as I’m about to,” Reese said. “This pays for itself in what – like two trips?”

“Something like that. And whoever you bring gets their ticket at a discounted rate.”

“I’m going to hand you your gift before I start fucking crying,” Reese said, clutching the gift to her chest.

She grabbed a box. “This is something you’ve been needing for a while.”

“I swear to God, if it’s another fucking shampoo set...”

“Hunter Hale, you should *not* have been using three-in-one anything as a grown-ass man.”

Hunter rolled his eyes. “Just give me the damn box.” He swore a minute later, holding up a manscaping set. Spencer had to cough into her elbow to keep from laughing. “I don’t even want to think about your thought process behind this.” Was he turning red?

Spencer never thought she’d see the day Hunter Hale got *flustered*.

“If it helps, I don’t really want to think about it either,” she said, helping him cover the front of the box with the torn wrapping paper.

Reese crossed her arms, apparently feeling no shame. “I am going to get you to start grooming yourself properly if it kills me.”

He scowled at her as he set the box on the floor. “I’m not a fucking dog.”

Spencer tilted her head. “But you always come running when we call.”

Before he could turn his glare on her, she shoved another box into his hands. He manhandled the plaid wrapping paper in his haste to clear the air Reese’s gift left behind.

“A new hunting knife?” He turned it over in his hands, flicking the blade in and out.

Spencer shrugged nonchalantly. “You said yours broke a while ago.”

“And you remembered?”

“Why wouldn’t I? I wasn’t gonna get you something you wouldn’t use.”

Reese smacked her in the arm. “Was that a fucking call out?”

“Same as when you gave me that fucking hint,” Spencer snapped without malice. She jerked her head toward the weighted blanket.

“Trust me, you’re gonna love it,” Reese said, resting her cheek on Spencer’s shoulder.

“When are you two leaving?” Spencer asked now that all the gifts were exchanged. She turned the envelope from the door over in her hands.

“Sometime tomorrow,” Hunter answered, still playing with the knife. “Whenever that one,” he pointed the blade at Reese, “wants to wake up.”

“Keep talking like that and the next gift you’re getting is ball deodorant,” Reese threatened as she lifted her head.

Spencer put her hands over her ears. “That’s it – new rule. Every time someone references Hunter’s genitals, they have to

put money in the jar.”

The jar in question was a graduation gift that once held the ingredients for hot chocolate, but it'd sat empty for months after she used it.

Reese canted her head in wonder. “What’s the money for?”

“It doesn’t matter, because no one’s going to have to pay it,” Hunter grumbled.

“It’s like you *want* me to keep talking about your genitals,” Reese muttered.

Hunter sighed. “Princess, please move out of the way so I can stab her.”

Spencer shielded Reese’s body with her own. “Not a chance,” she said. She turned to Reese. “But if you keep talking about them, I’ll gladly move and let him do it.”

“Prudes,” Reese said, rolling her eyes. She glanced at her phone before turning back to Hunter. “Isn’t it time for you to get going?”

He swore at the time. “Shit. I’m supposed to take someone to the airport.”

“Why?” Spencer asked.

“Because people at this school will pay ridiculous amounts of money to not take an Uber.” He jumped up, gathering all of his gifts – including the manscaping set. “I’ll see y’all tomorrow.”



Reese and Hunter left for home after stopping for coffee at The Grind, but Spencer elected to kill some time there before walking back to campus.

Nick was not-so-subtly judging her as he slid her usual across the table. “Isn’t it a little cold for iced drinks? Are you

sure you don't want me to make you a hot one?"

Spencer rolled her eyes. "It's fine, Nicholas." She pulled out the envelope from yesterday, twirling it around in her hands.

"I see you got my gift," Nick said, still sitting with her even though his break should have been long over by now.

"This was you?" she asked, canting her head, and raising the envelope.

Nick steepled his fingers in front of his face, hiding his expression. "Yeah. I taped the card to your door. Figured it would've been a nice gesture. I didn't expect to get to see you before you went home for the holidays is all."

Spencer wondered if she should tell him she wasn't going home at all for the break. That she couldn't stand being around her mom that long after their argument. That it was going to be lonely without Reese and Hunter around, but maybe the two of them could make plans...

She said none of those things.

"I got you something, too," she said instead, shoving the envelope she'd brought with her towards him from an arm's length away. It felt weird to be so far apart after they'd basically slept together last week.

"What is it?" he asked, his fingers brushing hers as he took it from her.

Spencer drew her hand back quickly. "Open and find out."

His lip curled into a smile as he pulled out the bumper sticker. He flipped it around and let out a wry chuckle. "Wow."

Spencer was particularly proud of herself for what she'd found. It read: **BUMPER TO BUMPER, BUTT TO BUTT, GET OFF MY ASS, YOU CRAZY NUT.**

"Is this because of that ass the night we went Christmas shopping?"

She nodded before reaching for the other thing she'd brought. "Here's Joselyn's, if you wouldn't mind giving it to

her.” It was much smaller, wrapped in a tiny box.

Nick didn’t take it from her. “Why don’t you just come over?”

“Aren’t you guys going to visit family?”

He snorted. “Joselyn *is* my family. Her parents aren’t even in the country, remember? What is it anyway?” He shook the box.

“I got her an aquamarine crystal necklace. I read online that it’s good for Scorpios. Do you think she’s gonna like it?”

“She’d love it. I think you’re gonna be her favorite person now.” Nick gently set the box back on the table despite the fact that he was just manhandling it.

Spencer glanced around in case Joselyn was nearby before lowering her voice anyway. “What’d you get her?”

“Another tarot deck. There’s some special significance when they’re gifted rather than personally acquired,” Nick explained. He ran a hand through his blue locks. “Not that I know much about it, but it makes her happy.”

“Why don’t you still live up there with her?”

“Spencer, I love her to death, but there’s no way in hell we wouldn’t kill each other if I still lived there. Christian took over her parents’ room after they left. Probably makes more than enough to get his own place, but he didn’t like the idea of Joselyn living alone once I moved out.”

“That’s sweet.”

Nick snorted. “There’s no way in hell he’s not still in love with her. He practically stops breathing every time she’s around.”

“I imagine she would be hard to get over,” Spencer said. “If it’s not too much trouble, I guess I could come over. What time?”

“I’ll pick you up after my shift and drop you off at your mom’s if your tire’s still out of commission.”

Spencer felt her muscles lock up in panic, which didn't go unnoticed.

“What?”

“I'm...not actually planning on going home for the break,” she admitted. “My mom and I haven't made up, and I really don't want to spend the next two weeks avoiding her in her own house.”

“So, you're staying on campus, then? In your dorm?”

“Where else, Nicholas?”

Nick rolled his eyes. “What about Reese and Hunter?”

“They left for Huntsville earlier.”

“It's settled, then,” he said.

Spencer narrowed her eyes. “What is?”

“You're coming over later. Josie's off today, so you could head up there right now if you wanted to. My shift doesn't end for another hour and a half.”

Spencer checked the time. “Wasn't your break over fifteen minutes ago?”

Nick rapped his knuckles on the table as he stood up. “Yeah, but I'd rather stay over here.”

Her heart jumped into her throat when he said that, and she shoved her straw in her mouth before he noticed.

*It doesn't mean anything, she repeated to herself. Absolutely nothing.*



“Is Christian coming or not?” Nick asked Joselyn as he kicked the door open. His hands were currently occupied by the concerning amount of alcohol she asked him to pick up after his shift.

Joselyn flicked her wrist. “He’s coming, Nicky. Chill out.”

“Good,” he muttered. “I won’t be outnumbered.”

“The hell’s that supposed to mean?” Spencer snapped from the couch. She’d already been up here for over an hour, not wanting to wait for him to get off. He didn’t even want to think about what the two of them had gotten up to while he was working.

“Take a damn guess, Spencer.”

Joselyn got up and grabbed the alcohol from him to chill it in the fridge before dragging him into the living room by his collar. “Time to exchange gifts, Nicky. We’ve been waiting for you.” She grabbed one of the only boxes under her tree and pressed it into his hands.

Inside was a dark purple velvet pouch, which held a roughly cut crystal he didn’t recognize.

“What is this?” he asked, holding it up to the light.

“Amethyst. Might help your temper mellow out,” Joselyn explained. “Keep it in your pocket.”

He narrowed his eyes. “This feels like an intervention.”

She shrugged. “Call it preventative measures.”

Nick scowled at her. “Joselyn.”

“You *do* have a temper, Nicholas,” Spencer quipped, drawing her knees up to her chin.

Joselyn fingered something around her neck, which he recognized as Spencer’s gift. “All you’re doing is proving my point,” she muttered quietly.

“You’re one to talk,” he snorted. “I’m not the one who hit my ex with a car.”

Spencer turned an incredulous eye on her. “You did *what*? Is he being facetious?”

“Actually, he’s being dead serious,” Christian said as he walked in, looking warily between the three of them. He set a plain cardboard box on the dining table.



Joselyn crossed her arms. “You’re late. And stop being dramatic.” She turned to Spencer. “My car is old and doesn’t have a rear-facing camera. I didn’t see him.”

In a dangerous act of what was either bravery or stupidity, the man rolled his eyes. “Joss.”

She scrutinized the box on the table. “That better be what I think it is.”

“It’s not even Christmas yet, Sunshine.”

“Don’t,” she grit out, glaring, “call me Sunshine.”

Christian glared back, and Nick wondered if he should leave before furniture started flying. Again. It was a good thing neither of them really cooked, or there would be a lot more sharp objects in the kitchen to be worried about.

“Okay,” he said, getting up and stepping between them. “Are you two going to be civil or are we going to have to do separate Christmases like children of divorced parents?”

Spencer frowned from the couch. “Are we the children?”

“In this analogy, yes.” He jerked his head toward the box in Joselyn’s hands. “What is it supposed to be?”

Joselyn set the box on the kitchen counter and looked pointedly at Christian. “*Somebody* promised me a French press for my birthday and didn’t deliver.”

Christian pinched the space between his brows and took a breath. “I told you they didn’t have it in stock. Be glad you still have a Christmas present.”

“My birthday’s not close enough for it to count for both,” she countered.

“Barely,” Nick snorted. She ignored him, still glaring at Christian.

He sighed. “Your Christmas present is downstairs.” Joselyn raised an eyebrow, but nodded. She followed him out, pausing with her hand on the knob.

“We’ll be alright up here, Josie. You go on,” Nick said, waving her off as he settled back next to Spencer on the other

end of the couch.

“You feeling okay?” he asked. “Your face is red. Should I take you home?” Nick reached to check her temperature with the back of his hand, but she shrank from his touch.

“It’s just warm in here. I’m fine,” she stammered out.

*Bull. Shit.* But he really didn’t want to fight her on this right before Christmas. Nick dropped his hand. “If you say so.”

He couldn’t figure out what her fucking deal was. She’d been jumpy around him since the night he stayed over at her dorm. When he woke up, she practically bolted to the other side of the room. But if she had such a problem being around him, why was she still coming to The Grind? Why was she even up here in the first place?

Nick sighed. “Spencer.” He angled his body to face her. “Do we need to talk about the other night?”

Spencer’s brown eyes narrowed, but her voice was deceptively lighthearted. She canted her head, hair falling in dark purple waves that contrasted against the tan leather of the couch. “What other night?”

He sighed. “I think you know what I’m talking about. You’ve been acting weird since we —”

“I. Have. Not,” she said hotly.

“Wow, you are such a shitty liar,” Nick scoffed, shaking his head. Even with her glaring at him, it was hard to take her seriously when she was so obviously embarrassed by this.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” she insisted.

Nick rolled his eyes. “I’ll believe that when you start looking me in the eye again.”

Spencer made a noise before burying her face in his shoulder.

“This is kind of the exact opposite of what I just said. Do you want me to come to my own conclusions? Does this mean anything?” He adjusted his position so his back was against

the couch again and he was facing the TV. “Spencer,” he sighed impatiently.

Spencer lifted her head from his shoulder. “I mean...what if it does?”

Nick cocked his head and tried to force her to look at him. “Does it?” he asked again.

She nodded, face somehow getting even redder.

Nick’s brain stopped working. He shook his head, convinced she wasn’t saying she...

“I-I don’t know how things like this are supposed to go,” she said, maybe nervous at his non-response. “This is the first time I even – well – fuck.” She buried her face in her hands, whispering. “Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.”

“Spencer,” he said when he found his voice again. “Are you saying you —”

She was nodding before he even finished his question. “Please don’t say it out loud.”

Everything started to click into place. The flush that crept up her cheeks whenever he was near. The little jumps she tried to hide every time he came up to her. Her reaction when she realized they had slept together.

Nick ran a hand over his face. “No.” He couldn’t. Not with her. Not with her looking at him like that and asking for an answer.

She blinked. “What?”

*Fuck.* That wasn’t how he wanted it to come out.

“No – Spencer. We can’t.” *Shut. Up. Stop while you’re not ahead.*

“It’s fine,” she said tightly as she scrambled further away from him on the couch.

“Doesn’t sound fine.”

“Well, it is,” she snapped.

“So why won’t you come back over here?”

“Nick, stop. You don’t have to —” Spencer waved her hand and let out a deep sigh. “It’s alright that you don’t feel the same way. Let’s just forget —”

Nick cut her off. “I never said that.”

Spencer narrowed her eyes. “Then, what did you say?” The way she was studying him made him feel on edge, like saying the wrong thing was going to drive them both over.

“We just – we can’t. I’m sorry.”

She bit her lip. “Don’t be sorry.”

“Sweetheart, just come back over here,” he begged, just wanting the chance to explain.

“You can’t just tell me ‘no’ to something like this and then call me sweetheart.”

She had him there.

“Look,” he sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I want this, too,” he admitted honestly. How could he expect them to spend most of their free time together and *not* want it to develop into something else? He liked being around her – he knew that. Spencer made things easy for him. Didn’t expect anything of him other than his company. Made him laugh – even when she was scowling and snapping at him.

And then there was the fact that the other night with her was the best sleep he’d had in months. Apparently, she felt the same way.

That didn’t make this okay.

“So, what’s the problem? I mean...it’s kinda logical,” Spencer continued, her hands fidgeting in her lap. “What would change between us?”

Nothing, probably, but...

“It’s just not a good idea,” Nick insisted, shaking his head before he could convince himself otherwise.

Her brown eyes blazed, daring him to explain himself. “Why not?”

But all Nick could think about was that her eyes were the same color as the way he took his coffee. He had to snap himself out of it before it clouded any more of his judgement.

Nick counted to ten to collect his thoughts. “Spencer, I’m 21 and you just turned 18 in what? August? You can’t even drink. This is wrong on so many levels.”

If he said yes to this, he’d be no better than Sam.

Spencer traced circles across the back of his hand with her finger. She probably wasn’t even aware she was doing it – they’d gotten used to that kind of small, casual touching between the two of them. Which was probably part of the problem. “There are worse age gaps, Nick,” she whispered timidly.

He reminded himself that Christian was at least five years older than him and Joselyn, but that didn’t erase the fact that -

“You’ve never had a boyfriend before, have you?” *This is wrong*, he thought. Her first boyfriend shouldn’t be this much older than her – not at this stage in her life, when she couldn’t even drink legally. Maybe if they’d met at a different time...

*Don’t go there. It’s not happening. Get it out of your fucking mind, you piece of shit.*

She cocked her head at him. “And your point is?”

“Do you even know —” He stopped and tried to compose himself. *Do you even know what you’re asking me for? What an intimate relationship entails?*

Spencer crossed her arms. “Are you trying to convince me, Nick? Or yourself?”

Nick felt like he needed to pull his hair out. “This is my point exactly. You’re acting like a damn child, Spencer.”

Something in her expression hardened when he said that. After a tense moment, she pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes and let out a deep, shaky breath. *“I get it.”*

Nick’s mouth clamped shut. He didn’t really know what was happening anymore. He just knew that she was upset, and it was his fault, and he didn’t want her to be.

“I should go,” Spencer said finally. She stood up and wiped her hands on her jeans before making her way to the door.

Nick reached for her sleeve. “Spencer, wait. You don’t have to leave.”

She yanked herself out of his grip. “I’ll see you around.”

*Will you?*

“Merry Christmas, Nick.”

“Merry fucking Christmas,” he muttered to himself as the door clicked shut.

*What the fuck just happened?*

*Spring Semester*

# Chapter 25



UNKNOWN NUMBER

hey nick?

this is reese i got your number off spencer's  
phone

NICK

What's up?

Nick frowned at his screen. Not that he had any problem with Reese, but she'd never needed to text him before.

Most of their communication happened whenever they were both with Spencer. Who had conveniently been avoiding him since Christmas.



REESE

i have to stay late in the studio and hunter's working. can you go to our dorm and keep an eye on spencer?

she swears she's feeling better but that's probably bull

i think her temp was like 104 last we checked

NICK

You cannot be serious

REESE

as a heart attack

she thinks it's strep but there's no way she's gonna make it to urgent care the way she is right now

He remembered finding out from *Joselyn* that Spencer was sick. He tried to convince himself that was the only reason she hadn't been coming around or answering his texts and not the absolute *bomb* that got dropped the last time they saw each other.

NICK

When do you want me to come by?

REESE

as soon as you can. i left the spare key under the mat.

NICK

Please tell me that's not where you keep it

REESE

it doesn't stay there jfc it's just so you can let yourself in

Nick wondered what it meant that he noticed she texted almost exactly like Spencer – barely any punctuation or capital letters.

NICK

I'm almost done with my shift. I'll be there soon.



After handing the reins over to Connor and Madeline for the night, Nick headed to Thorne. Like Reese said, the spare key was discreetly taped to the underside of their welcome mat.

He knocked quietly, listening. “Spencer? It’s Nick,” he called. “Are you feeling better? Can I come in?”

The sun hadn’t quite set yet, so there was enough light from the windows for him to see her sleeping form on the couch without flipping the switch. He gently grabbed the open book in her lap and tugged her headphones off of her ears.

With no furrowed brow or scowl lining her face, she looked more at peace. But her skin felt clammy and looked significantly paler, almost translucent. The polish on her nails was half chipped off, and her cuticles were a mess. He could feel the heat radiating from her body like a fucking space heater. “Christ,” he muttered, wondering if he should find a thermometer and check her temperature.

“C’mon love,” Nick murmured, barely audible even to himself, “let’s get you to bed.” He didn’t want to think about how easily the word had slipped from his lips, convincing himself it was because she looked so pitiful laying there curled up in about a thousand blankets.

Carefully, he lifted her limp body and carried her down to her room.

Just as he was about to lay her on the bed, her hands clutched his shirt as she stirred. He stilled, waiting for her to curse at him or try to squirm out of his grasp.

Instead, Spencer sighed contently as she rested her head on his chest. He hoped the hammering of his heart wouldn’t wake her.

There was something about having her cradled against him that made Nick pause. He almost didn’t want to put her down. For a brief moment, he let himself imagine it. Being with her. Holding her in his arms and never letting go and...

He shook his head to clear his thoughts and tugged the covers over her before another impulse came over him.

It wasn’t until after he’d slipped out of the dorm that he realized.

He was absolutely fucked over this girl. The same girl he rejected over Christmas. The same girl who was so embarrassed over it that she hadn’t spoken to him since.

*Fuck.*



Out in the hallway, Nick leaned against the door and slid down until his ass hit the ground, checking his messages. Anything to put some space between the two of them.

REESE

are you over there yet?

how's our girl doing?

Something primitive and possessive rose up inside him. Nick snapped himself out of it before replying.

NICK

Found her sleeping on the couch again. Just finished putting her to bed.

REESE

i have another favor...

NICK

Yes?

REESE

i really need to finish this piece so i might need to pull an all-nighter. since it's the weekend, would you mind staying with her?

if not, me or hunter can come back whenever you need to leave

NICK

I'll do it. As long as you don't mind me staying overnight.

Granted, the last time he stayed overnight caused a bomb to be dropped on his idiotic head, but that wasn't important right now.

REESE

you are the BEST

she's lucky to have you

He grimaced at that. Did she think so? Considering they hadn't seen each other since Christmas, he highly doubted that. He wondered how much Reese knew about what happened – if Spencer bothered to tell her at all.

NICK

I need to run back to my place to grab my car in case we need to take her to urgent care in the morning.

I shouldn't be gone long, but she's got her phone in case she wakes up.

Reese sent back a thumbs-up emoji, and he practically sprinted home so he could get back as soon as possible.



Nick slowly opened the door to her bedroom in case Spencer was still sleeping, trying not to feel like a creep. He was supposed to be taking care of her, but that didn't help him feel any better about this.

“Reese?” Her voice was barely a hiss.

“It's Nick.”

Spencer braced herself up on her elbows to look at him through heavy-lidded eyes. A bead of sweat trailed down her face as she strained from the effort. He wanted to push her back down on the bed, force her to rest, but stayed rooted to his place.

“What are you doing here?” she rasped.

“Do you want me to leave?” Nick wouldn't blame her if she did considering there was no way she already got over what happened between them.

But Spencer just shook her head.

“Reese asked me to come check on you. She said she has to stay late in the studio,” he explained, throat suddenly very dry. He tugged on his collar, feeling feverish even though she was all the way on the other side of her room.

Spencer cocked her head. “How long have you been here?”

*Long enough.* “Not long.”

She let out a shuddering breath and tightened the covers around herself, not even trying to put on a brave face anymore.

Nick’s control finally snapped as he walked forward to check her forehead with the back of his hand. “Christ, you’re burning up.” If her temperature was still upwards of 102 in the morning, he was going to drag her to urgent care whether she liked it or not.

“But I’m so cold.” Her lips were trembling. “And everything hurts.”

He hated seeing her like this. It wasn’t right. She should be scowling right now, snapping about something he said. Yelling at him to get out because he hurt her.

He cupped her face, gently tracing his thumb across her cheekbone. “I know, love. I know,” he murmured. Half hoping she didn’t hear him and half hoping she did. Maybe it’d get a rise out of her.

Instead, she leaned further into his touch, sighing. “Are you staying the night?”

“Do you want me to?”

A slow nod as her eyes fluttered.

“Okay.” He’d stand there with his hand on her cheek forever if she wanted him to.

Spencer whimpered again. “Cold.”

Before he could stop himself, he blurted, “I can help you stay warm.” He couldn’t even try and play it off and say it wouldn’t mean anything. Besides, he wasn’t that cruel. Nick was the one who rejected *her* – what made him think he had any right?

She was sicker than he thought, because instead of acting scandalized or yelling at him to get out, she just looked...sad?

“I don’t want you to get sick, too.” As if to prove her point, she sniffled slightly.

“I think I can handle it,” Nick said, bracing himself on the rungs of her lofted bed frame. “Tell me right now if you don’t want me up here with you.”

“It’s a twin,” Spencer protested weakly.

“Is that a no?”

“No,” she pouted finally. “Come over here.”

Nick pulled himself up and leaned his back against the wall, his feet hanging off the edge of the bed. He patted what he hoped was her leg under the covers.

“Good?” he asked, not really sure where he thought he was going with this, but wanting to oblige her.

Spencer shivered some more. “I said come over *here*,” she grit out.

He paused. This felt too intimate, too close to the edge of something they’d never come back from.

*It’s just because she’s sick*, he told himself, *she’d probably ask Reese for the same thing if she were here*. He tried not to think about whether she’d ask Hunter, too.

What happened next did absolutely nothing for his poor, wretched excuse of a heart.

“Better,” Spencer sighed as she moved closer, tucking herself into his side. Her eyelids fluttered shut. He pressed the back of his hand to her forehead again, hissing at the heat radiating from her skin.

“That feels nice,” Spencer mumbled. “Keep it there.”

In truth, his entire presence could probably be replaced by an ice pack and some tea, but he’d indulge her anyway.

“Alright, love,” Nick whispered. He could only hope she didn’t remember any of this in the morning. It felt a little inappropriate and almost cruel being up here given what happened. He’d have to sneak out before she woke up and reacted to him being in the bed.



Spencer let out another sigh and threw her leg over his, and Nick had to remind himself this didn't mean anything. She probably wasn't even aware of what she was doing. The Spencer he knew wouldn't have even let him in the room after her confession.

He didn't dare move, not until he saw the gentle rise and fall of her chest as she fell asleep. The selfish part of him wanted to stay in this position with her all night, but he knew better.

Nick shifted as little as he could to not disturb her as he climbed down. She let out a weak protest and reached like she wanted to pull him back. But that was wishful thinking, and wishful thinking was dangerous.

He was three years older than her for God's sake. Just because it was technically legal didn't make it any less sleazy on his end. He really should stay away from her.

*As if you could*, he snapped at himself. *You are entirely, irrevocably fucked.*



Nick left the door wide open, hoping he could hear from the living room if she needed anything. It was late, but there was no way he was getting any sleep now.

He tried anyway after half-assing his lab report, resisting the urge to check on her every five goddamn minutes.

Reese texted around midnight, sending another flood of gratitude that he definitely didn't deserve and a picture of the huge piece she was working on. It looked like a bunch of jellyfish. He felt like if he touched one, it would bounce right off the canvas.

NICK

That looks really good

REESE

you think so? it's for a commission

NICK

Who for?

REESE

...the aquarium

NICK

Seriously?

REESE

they like displaying art along the walls as you walk in.

one of my professors showed them my work and they emailed me over the break. i need to have it done by monday.

NICK

I assume that's why I'm on sick duty?

REESE

do you need to leave? i'm at a good stopping point anyway

NICK

It's fine. But you should get some rest soon. I'll still be here.

REESE

i'm really glad she has you looking out for her

A sense of guilt wracked his body. If only she knew he wasn't doing this for altruistic purposes. At least – not entirely. He wanted to touch her again, hear her wanting him. He wanted her to get better and snap at him for even thinking such thoughts, tell him he had no right after saying they shouldn't...

Nick pocketed his phone and leaned back against the couch. He was more tired now, but he couldn't resist checking on Spencer one last time before turning in for the night.

She was still sleeping, but she shifted like she knew he was there. He could've sworn he heard her say his name.

He couldn't help himself.

Nick crept up silently until he was next to her. He smoothed her hair away from her face, which was covered in a thick sheen of sweat.

He checked her temperature again, noting the slightest change since earlier. But before he could take his hand away, she shifted again and held onto his sleeve.

"It's alright," he whispered, not wanting to fully wake her up.

"Don't go," she murmured. "Stay."

God, she was killing him. But he needed to hold his ground. This was the sickness talking, not her. She'd be mortified if she could hear herself begging him to stay.

Nick didn't even trust himself to sleep on her floor tonight. "I'll be right in the living room," he said as he gently moved to free himself, but she maintained a claw-like grip on his sleeve.

He sighed. "I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart. I promise."

She let out another protest, but relented.

When he was on the couch with a borrowed blanket, he laid awake thinking about how he hadn't wanted her to let go.

# Chapter 26



Spencer's head hurt like hell, her body felt like she'd been hit by a train, and her throat felt like it'd been scraped raw. She pulled the covers tighter around herself, shivering. She tried to remember everything that happened last night, but her brain was foggy.

"Morning," a low voice said, and she let out a curse as she jumped in surprise, regretting it instantly when a sharp pain wracked through her throat.

She rubbed her eyes, which were beating right out of her fucking skull. "Nick? You're still here?"

She vaguely remembered he'd come over to check on her for Reese. She cringed at remembering how clingy she'd been. Then, she remembered something else.

He called her *love*.

If she thought too much into it, she'd have to slap herself as a reality check. Maybe he hadn't even called her anything, and that was the fever dream at work. That made more sense. After all – he *rejected* her not two weeks after she'd shown him the only vulnerable side she thought she had. That wasn't a mistake she would be repeating.

His sharp voice jolted her out of her reverie. "Spencer." It sounded like it wasn't the first time he'd called her name.

The good thing about being sick was that he'd *have* to cut her some slack. "Hmm?" It didn't take her any effort to sound weak and pathetic.

"I asked if you were feeling any better," he said, leaning against the door, but not coming any closer. Her heart panged as she thought of all the reasons why.

Maybe it was just that he didn't want to get sick. But then why did he climb up on the bed with her last night? And why had she wanted him to stay so bad? She'd done fine avoiding him until now. She threw her *leg* over him for God's sake.

The fever was making her lose it.

"Fine," she lied. "Better."

Nick narrowed his eyes. "Spencer," he said tightly, finally closing the distance between them and laying something thin and white on the edge of her bed. "Here. It's more accurate."

Spencer frowned, but didn't say anything as he retreated to the safety of the door.

Nick cleared his throat, and she remembered she was supposed to be doing something. She slid the thermometer under her tongue until it beeped.

She held it out, not wanting to look herself.

Nick swore under his breath as he took it from her.

"What is it?"

He shook his head. "I'm taking you to urgent care. Do you need Reese to help you get dressed?"

Spencer tried sitting up, but her joints ached too much to do anything beyond raising her head. "I'm fine," she protested, swallowing painfully.

He glared at her. "Your temperature is still 104, you are not fine. And you clearly can't even sit up right now."

"It's not that bad," she argued. "I don't need to go to urgent care. I just need some fucking aspirin." Spencer had been much sicker in the past and got by without anyone else's help. She didn't need him.

Nick grabbed her by her chin and forced her to look at him. “Dammit Spencer, I swear to God, I will drag you out of here kicking and screaming if I have to. *Don’t* test me.”

Spencer glared back at him, fighting against the instinct to jerk away from his touch. “Stop being dramatic. And what the hell makes you think you have any right?”

He pinched his brow, a vein in his temple visibly throbbing. “Stop. Fucking. Talking.”

“Or what?” she snapped.

“Fucking Christ,” Nick muttered. He took some deep breaths through his nose before he spoke again. “You’re only gonna make it worse on yourself if it is strep.”

She mustered up what little strength she had to turn over and stare at the wall. Maybe acting childish again would frustrate him enough to leave her alone.

He sighed. “If you aren’t going to let Reese help you get dressed, you’re going in your pajamas.”

*Make me.*

Someone knocked on her door. “Nick? How is she?”

Spencer resisted the urge to turn over and speak for herself. Instead, she listened as Nick opened the door and spoke in a low voice to her roommate.

“Temp’s still 104...”

“Fuck, really...?”

“Gonna take her to urgent care. You stay here and help her get dressed. I’ll bring my car around.”

She wondered if he thought she couldn’t hear what he said next, or if he knew and that’s why he said it anyway. “She’s being stubborn as fuck and I’m about two seconds away from carrying her out myself. See if you can convince her.”

She imagined Reese was nodding. *Traitor.*

“Sounds good.”

The door slammed shut, and Spencer finally turned back over to look at Reese with what were hopefully puppy eyes. “I’m fine, Reese. Nick’s being dramatic.”

Reese checked her forehead with the back of her hand. “Yesterday, Hunt and I found you passed out on the couch with a 104-degree fever. You are *not* fine.”

“I fell asleep. I didn’t ‘pass out’.”

“Spencer.” She sighed. “I’m grabbing you some clothes. Unless you *want* to go out in public dressed like that.”

Spencer sat up painfully. “I can do it myself.” She braced herself on the rungs of her bed as she tried to climb down, but almost fell backward on the last one.

Reese caught her by the arm and steadied her. “*Please* let us help you. You scared us yesterday.” When Spencer finally relented, Reese released her and tossed a shirt, a Ravens hoodie, and jeans on the bed.

Her brow furrowed when she inspected the hoodie. “This looks a little big, is it yours?” she asked.

“It’s Nick’s,” Spencer answered quickly as she got dressed. “I washed our wet clothes from when we went Christmas shopping and I guess it got lost with the rest of my shit.”

They heard his muffled voice behind the door as he knocked. “Is she decent yet, Reese?”

Spencer angrily flung the door open before Reese had a chance to respond. “Decent enough for you?” she asked caustically, shoving him. Totally worth the fact that speaking that loud made her want to claw her own throat out.

Nick placed his hand on the small of her back to steer her outside. “I parked my car out front, sweetheart. Let’s try to get there before I get ticketed.”

“You’re the one who wanted me to get up. It’s your fault if you get a ticket,” she hissed.

Nick rolled his eyes as he helped her get in. “Ask me if I care about that right now.” He grabbed a blanket from his back seat.

Spencer begrudgingly accepted it and glanced at the time on her phone, wondering how far the nearest urgent care was.

“About five minutes,” Nick said as he started the car.

“Did I fucking ask?” Spencer snapped. She cranked the heat up, wincing at the sharp pain that spiked up her throat.

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “You were thinking it.” His gaze flicked over to her briefly when he stopped at a four-way. “Is that mine?”

Spencer looked down. She’d already forgotten she was wearing his hoodie. “Why? You want it back?”

Nick scowled at the road. “I swear to God if you try and take it off right now...”

“You’ll *what*, Nicholas?”

“You have body chills, and you want to take it off for what? To make a fucking point?”

Spencer crossed her arms, but didn’t make any move to take it off. Even with the heat blasting and the blanket, she was still freezing. Not that he needed to know that. “I was fine at home. You don’t need to take me anywhere.”

He clenched his jaw, not looking at her. “Spencer.”

Maybe it was time to go about this a different way. “Please, Nick?” she asked, tilting her head and making another attempt at puppy eyes. They’d probably work better on him than Reese. She risked grabbing his arm and resting her cheek on it to drive her point home. “You don’t have to go out of your way for me.”

His expression softened as he glanced down at her. He sighed and looked away quickly. “Being cute’s not gonna help you here, sweetheart.”

Spencer stiffened and pulled back. “Stop.” *That’s it*, she thought. *No more making excuses to touch him.*

“Stop what?”

*You know what.*



“You can’t say things like that, Nick. You can’t say I’m being cute.”

Nick snorted. “You saying you *didn’t* give me that look on purpose to try and get me to turn around?”

She said nothing.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Spencer snapped angrily, giving up and scowling instead.

The corners of his lips drew up in a small smile. “There she is.”

Spencer crossed her arms. “Excuse me?”

“It’s just nice to see you acting more alive,” he said, finally looking at her again.

“You mean acting more difficult,” she deadpanned, taking in some satisfaction as she watched his body go rigid with guilt.

“I never said that,” Nick growled. “And I shouldn’t have said it the first time. That’s on me. But don’t put words in my mouth because you don’t want me taking care of you.” He pulled into the parking lot of a small building with a vaguely familiar-looking hospital logo.

She glared when he tried to help her out of the car, abandoning the blanket. Nick kept his hand on her back as they made their way inside to wait at the end of a concerningly long line.

He turned to her. “Do you have insurance?”

Spencer shook her head. Her mom’s insurance from the school system was so shitty, she wondered why they even bothered. “Even with insurance, I can’t afford the copay.”

“I’ll handle it.”

“You will do no such thing,” she hissed as she grabbed his arm, already forgetting that she shouldn’t be touching him anymore.

Nick stared at the spot where they were joined. “Spencer.”

“Nicholas.”

“You won’t be in my debt, sweetheart.” The way he was looking at her had her knees turning to jelly.

*Stop. Saying. That.*

Spencer was fully prepared to play dirty if it meant he wouldn’t spend any money on her. She tugged on his arm and blinked up at him with puppy eyes again, thinking more physical contact would increase her chances of winning.

His body deflated with a sigh. “Just let me do this. Please?” he whispered in her ear, sending shivers down her spine and making her feel warm in a way that had nothing to do with her fever.

*Dammit.* He was doing what she tried to pull in the car, only this was actually working.

Spencer pulled away quickly before her face got any redder. “*Fine.*”

She stalked over to the corner of the waiting room, where the only available seating was a bench next to a potted plant. She leaned her head against the wall and watched Nick bend over the counter to speak with the receptionist.

The harsh, clinical lighting and the TV playing infomercials in the other corner made her migraine come back with a vengeance. The commotion of people also waiting to be seen wasn’t helping. Spencer could feel the drumbeat of her pulse reverberating throughout her skull. She shut her eyes and contemplated if she could take a nap or not.

She felt the bench shift as Nick joined her and opened one eye, scowling at the intrusion.

He shoved a clipboard with paperwork at her. “Fill it out.”

Spencer glared at him, but took the attached pen and did as she was told. The sooner she got through this, the sooner he would leave her the fuck alone.

Nick's jaw clenched tightly as he watched her. "Would you be protesting this much if it were Hunter or Reese helping you right now? Or is it just because it's me?"

Spencer shrugged before thrusting the clipboard back into his hands. "You," she admitted dryly.

He scowled when he returned from delivering it to the receptionist. "Am I not allowed to care about you?"

"Is this care or guilt?" she asked, crossing her arms even as her head involuntarily dropped onto his shoulder and her eyes struggled to stay open.

"You know damn well what it is," he snapped.

"Do I?"

She was saved from his response when a nurse called her name.



*Fucking Christ.*

After Spencer disappeared down the hall, Nick leaned his elbows on his knees, buried his face in his hands, and forced himself to count until he calmed down. He'd been prepared for her to give him hell, but this was a new level of stubbornness even for her.

This had to be her idea of a punishment – why else would she willingly touch him for the first time in two weeks? While wearing his hoodie. And with that fucking look on her face. Christ.

Nick was a weak man, he knew. That *please* from the car was almost single-handedly enough to make him turn the fuck around and apologize on his hands and knees for forcing her out of bed.

He'd barely gotten through that line by the skin of his teeth with her touching him like that, and only because he figured he could try and beat her at her own game. Thank fucking hell it worked, because he didn't have a backup plan.

His phone buzzed when he finished.

REESE

update???

NICK

She's getting seen now

REESE

but how is she

NICK

She told me to go fuck myself in the car.

So maybe not as bad as we were thinking.

REESE

i texted hunt too so just let us know what they say

Nick sighed and prepared to make his least favorite type of call. He needed to call out of work if he was going to be taking care of Spencer, but he was pretty sure they were already down a person.

Joselyn answered on the first ring. "Yes?"

"Hey, Josie..." He always used this tone whenever he had to break this kind of news, which – thankfully – wasn't often.

"Out with it, Nicky." He could almost *see* her tapping her foot impatiently.

He took a deep breath. "I can't come in today."

"Why? Is something wrong?"

“Had to take Spencer to urgent care. Her temp was 104 this morning...” Nick explained, rubbing his face. He could barely sleep knowing she was in pain just down the hall. But, he also knew he’d never be able to sleep as soundly as the night he slept over with her next to him, cradled in his arms, period.

Joselyn cut him off. “Don’t worry about coming in. Take care of her. Text if you need anything.”

Nick still felt guilty about putting her out at the last minute. “Are you sure you have enough coverage?”

“Is that really what’s important right now?” she asked sharply.

Nick didn’t know what to say to the fact that Joselyn deemed something else more important than the family business. He was fairly sure if she could only save either him or The Grind, she’d have to think about it before saving him.

He sighed. “No, but let me know if you need me to come in anyway.”

“Nicky,” Joselyn snapped. “Not. Important.”

Nick pocketed his phone and took care of the copay before Spencer came back out and demanded to see the bill, which he crumpled up and threw in the trash. He knew her too damn well. She’d balk at the cost of it and immediately try to pay him back instead of focusing on getting better.

Just in time. A nurse emerged from the double doors with Spencer shuffling behind her. She was still shivering, but her skin looked clammy with sweat.

He cocked his head. “Strep?”

The nurse nodded at him. “Are you her boyfriend? She’s gonna need to take it easy for a couple days and it would be good if someone’s around to keep an eye on things.”

Spencer’s eyes widened in alarm as she held a hand up and tried to correct her. “He’s not —”

“Hush up, dear. You really should rest your throat a little,” the nurse said.

Nick raised a knowing eyebrow as he turned to Spencer. “Does it hurt to talk, *sweetheart*?” She glared at him, scowling. If she hadn’t been so obviously focused on *not* touching him, she probably would’ve punched him for that.

The nurse *tsk-tsked*. “I was there when Dr. Chen checked her. I’d be surprised if it didn’t.”

“Good to know,” he replied, still looking at Spencer. She mouthed *I will kill you* at him, brows knitting together in anger. Looking about as menacing as a fucking kitten.

“We’ve sent the prescription to the pharmacy by Ravens if that’s alright with you two,” the nurse continued, eyeing Spencer’s hoodie. “And we’ve emailed the discharge paperwork to the address y’all put on the forms.”

Nick waved his hand. “That’s perfect. Thank you for all your help. I can take it from here.”

Spencer stalked past him on her way to his car, not saying anything as he helped her in and wrapped the blanket back around her shoulders.

“Are you hungry? When’s the last time you ate?” he asked, realizing it was almost noon and she hadn’t had breakfast.

She ignored him.

“Spencer.”

He pinched his brow and took a deep breath. Counted. “Dammit, will you just answer the question?” he asked after getting to ten.

“Not. Hungry,” she finally snapped, staring out the window.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

She turned and crossed her arms. “It hurts to swallow, okay?” It came out in a wheeze, and he instantly felt guilty about making her talk. But he was driving and couldn’t risk checking his phone every time he needed an answer.

“Were you gonna tell me if I hadn’t asked?”

A shrug.

He sighed. “Spencer.”

When he pulled into the pharmacy parking lot, he snuck a glance over. Her eyes were at half-mast, and her head lolled to the side like she didn't even have the strength to hold it up anymore. In short, she looked even more pitiful than she did last night.

“Is this you trying to get me to do something again, sweetheart?” Nick hoped she never realized how easy it would be to get him to do whatever she wanted, because he was fucked as it was.

Spencer pulled the blanket up to her neck. “I don't have the energy to try anything right now,” she mumbled.

Nick resisted the urge to brush the hair from her eyes, knowing any more contact wouldn't be good for either of their hearts.

“Well, you don't have to come in with me if that's the case. I'll leave the car running and be quick.”



Spencer watched him warily from the couch when he set the shopping bags on her coffee table.

Nick sighed as he laid everything out for her: pudding, applesauce, soup, tea, honey. Her antibiotics. “You need to eat, Spencer. After this, I promise you can go back to bed.”

The next look she gave him asked what made him think he could tell her what to do.

“Please?” It seemed she wasn't the only one who could weaponize that word, given that it was all he needed to get her to let him take care of the copay.

Her eye twitched, but she didn't argue. Nick hoped it wasn't solely because it hurt too much to talk, trusting that the

girl sitting across from him would deem a caustic reply worth the pain. He nudged an applesauce cup and spoon forward.

Spencer stared at him over her food. “You didn’t correct her when she called you my boyfriend,” she whispered.

He leaned back in the armchair and casually propped his foot up on his knee. “What’s it matter? I’m the one keeping an eye on you, regardless.” So were Reese and Hunter, but that’s not what this was really about.

“You know why it matters, Nick.”

He did. But what could he say? That he liked the way it sounded? That he hadn’t meant what he said over Christmas?

Nick knew he didn’t have any right to any of this, but he was going to take what he could get anyway. If all he could do was pretend, so be it.

Spencer considered his non-answer for a minute, slowly swallowing small spoonfuls of applesauce. “Last night,” she started, “you called me ‘love.’”

“Yes.” No point in denying it now.

“I thought it was a fever dream,” she admitted.

Nick swallowed thickly. “Honestly, I thought it’d get you to yell at me.”

“Is that why you said it?” Spencer asked, her head shooting up. This was her begging for an answer.

Just not the one he was going to give. “...no.”

She pushed the half-empty applesauce cup toward him, her spoon neatly laid on top of it. “Where does this leave us, Nick?”

“I...don’t know,” he admitted. He knew exactly where he *wanted* it to leave them, because he was selfish and didn’t care about how wrong it was at the moment.

Nick frowned at her barely eaten food on the table. “Do we need to have another talk?” He pulled out his phone. “Or text if it hurts too much.”



Spencer stared at the phone in his hand for several seconds before pulling out her own, fingers hovering over the screen like she was struggling to find the words.

SPENCER

i just don't know if i can handle being around you  
right now nick

it's hard being around you and not

She flicked her eyes briefly upward to watch him read it.

SPENCER

...you know

thank you for everything but

hunter and reese can take over now

Nick watched her over his phone. “Spencer.” How could he explain how much *he* wanted to be the one taking care of her, if only just so he could spend more time with her?

SPENCER

please

She gave him the look from the car earlier, and once again, he found himself ready to do whatever she asked.

*God. Fucking. Dammit.*

More than anything, Nick wished he could show her just how hard things were for him, too. How he wanted this thing with her just as much as she did.

But he was old enough to know better, so he swallowed the heart-shaped lump in his throat and forced the words out. “Okay, sweetheart.” He pushed the applesauce back over. “As long as you finish your food.”

He wondered if he imagined the look of regret that slipped through her mask as she obliged him. Or if that was just more

wishful thinking.

# Chapter 27



Spencer had asked him for space, and Nick gave it to her. That didn't mean he was happy about it. Especially considering he knew for a fact that she still showed up at The Grind whenever he wasn't working.

At least without her around, he could focus better. For the most part.

The universe apparently had other plans.

Chelsea was sitting at the counter when Nick came in for his shift. She perked her head up when she saw him, waving.

Joselyn gave Nick the side-eye as she joined him at the register.

"What?" he snapped, glaring at her.

She didn't look remotely fazed. He almost wanted her to smack him. Give him an excuse not to go over there. "I think she's waving for you."

"So?"

"Go take care of that so you're not in a shitty mood for the rest of your shift. You're bringing me down and I think you're scaring the others."

"I," he grit out, "am not scaring anybody. Just put me in the back if you're so worried about it. Truck just came in anyway."

Joselyn sighed, and he wondered if he should start running. “Nicky, you’ve been on edge since the beginning of the semester. You yelled at Connor the other day for messing up an order.”

“You do it, too.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, because it’s what I do. You’re the patient one. You’re the one they shouldn’t feel afraid to go to.”

“Since when was sparing their feelings a part of my job description?” Nick snapped.

The vein on Joselyn’s temple throbbed dangerously, and for a second, he thought he pushed her too far. But she just pinched the bridge of her nose and pushed him away from the register. “That’s it – you’re on break. Go get whatever stick is up your ass out and talk to the damn girl before she comes over here and puts *me* in a mood. *Now.*”

Nick clenched his jaw, but he knew better than to argue. His cousin’s lack of affection for Chelsea had never been a secret, but why did she have to make it *his* problem? He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms and sighed, trying to remind himself not to ruin every goddamn relationship he still had.

Chelsea’s face brightened almost immediately when he slid on the stool next to her. He really wished she could see he wasn’t worth any of this.

“Hey, Chels.”

“Nice of you to join me,” she said, sounding only a little passive aggressive. “Congrats on making it past the first interview round.”

With everything that happened over the break, Nick had completely forgotten about the internship, until his professor congratulated him in front of his entire fucking class. And he wasn’t even out of the woods yet – they were still weeding people out with another set of applications that he’d turned in while trying to distract himself from the fact that Spencer was no longer speaking to him. Not to mention the final interview.

Nick muttered a ‘thanks’ anyway as Chelsea slid some papers over so they could work on an assignment together. But the conversation steered toward making plans that he had no intention of following through on. His mind was wandering so badly at this point that he kept having to ask her to repeat herself.

“Sorry what?” he asked, for probably the third time in as many minutes, feeling like a dick when he noticed her hand on his arm.

Chelsea smiled at him, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “I think I read this wrong.” She pulled back so they were no longer touching.

He sighed into his lap. This was a long time coming, he knew. He just hadn’t anticipated just how *guilty* she would make him feel about everything.

“You don’t feel the same way,” she admitted for him finally, after months of him trying to ease out of their ‘arrangement.’

What could he say? That it wasn’t her, it was him? That was a cop-out at best and downright cruel at worst. It was the most cookie-cutter non-answer he could give her.

“I’m sorry we never worked out,” he said. But if he was being honest with himself, his heart hadn’t been in this for a long time. He couldn’t even remember the last time they slept together.

*Not since before Spencer*, his mind taunted him.

“It’s alright, Nicky.” She bit her lip. “Is there someone else?”

He leaned back in his chair, prepared to say *no*.

“I don’t know,” he said instead, because apparently, his last brain cell had just left the building. His feelings on her aside, that wasn’t something you said when you were breaking things off with someone.

Chelsea’s mask fell briefly before she schooled her expression back. “Well, I guess there’s my answer right there.”

Nick made a show of checking his watch so he didn't have to watch her crumble. "Break's over. I gotta get back to work. Talk soon?"

She gave him another sad smile, leaving his question hanging in the air as he replaced Connor at the register. Joselyn might have had a point earlier – the other boy jumped about three feet in the air when Nick came up behind him.

Joselyn, who was rotating inventory in the walk-in, raised her eyebrows and jerked her head toward Chelsea. She pulled him aside.

"Why the hell does she look like you just killed her cat?"

Nick scowled at her. "You know she doesn't have a cat."

"Nicky." Joselyn rolled her eyes. "Are you ready to stop being a pill now? Did you get all of it out of your system talking to her?"

He turned away. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm going to get back to work." He could feel her staring daggers at him, but he couldn't find it in himself to care. Because he'd just noticed Spencer sitting at the counter, looking curiously back and forth between him and Chelsea.

Nick didn't know why that bothered him so much. They weren't together. And *she* was the one who asked for space. That didn't stop him from avoiding her gaze or purposefully staying on the opposite end of the counter from where she was sitting.

Later, when he asked to work in the back again, Joselyn nodded curtly without saying anything else. Probably because even she couldn't stand to be around him right now.

So much for not ruining all of his relationships.



Someone was banging on his front door. Nick scowled. If Sam fucking lost his key again...

“Nicky, open the damn door.”

If it were anyone else, he would've told them to fuck off. But he didn't have that much of a death wish.

He opened the door.

Joselyn looked livid, her cheeks as red as her hair. She shoved past him into the kitchen, stealing one of Sam's beers from the fridge.

“Talk,” she snapped as she slammed it on the counter and opened it. “I'm going to give you one chance to explain yourself before I decide how badly I should kick your ass right now.”

Somehow, even the threat of being on the receiving end of her wrath wasn't enough to get Nick to stop being a prick. He kept his mouth shut, staring at the wall behind her.

“Fine.” Her voice took on a dangerous, low tone as she narrowed her eyes at him. “I'll start.”

She downed half the bottle before she said anything else. She didn't even *like* beer. Couldn't stand it. But it was the only alcohol they had, and clearly, this was something she didn't think she could get through sober.

“You wanna tell me why,” Joselyn started, in a tone that very much said he was going to tell her why whether he wanted to or not, “Spencer's been coming in less. I know she's not sick anymore. She used to come in all the time, but now, it's like whenever you're around, she's not. I saw her with a *Starbucks* cup the other day.”

Nick's throat dried. He should've known this was coming. “What she gets up to is none of my business. I didn't even notice.”

Joselyn stared at him, giving him a chance to correct himself. When he didn't, she finished her beer and reached for another one.

This was going to be a *long* night.

“Is she why you’ve been in a pissy mood? What the hell did you do to her? She fucking *paid* for her coffee at a place ten minutes away,” Joselyn asked as she reached for her third bottle. At the rate she was drinking, she’d be shitfaced in the next few minutes, and as much as he loved her, Nick really wasn’t in the mood to be dealing with her when she was angry *and* drunk.

“Joselyn,” he sighed, reaching for her hand before she could open it.

She narrowed her eyes. “Unless the next words out of your mouth are an explanation, I suggest you take your hand off me before I *rip it off*.”

He moved his hand, but she didn’t open the bottle. She cocked her head instead, waiting for whatever bullshit was going to come out of his mouth next.

“Nothing happened, Josie. We’re just not spending a lot of time together right now.” It was dangerous to lie to her, but he really didn’t want to talk about this anymore.

She rubbed her temples, her veins visibly throbbing at this point in the conversation. “Are you going to tell me why that is?”

When he didn’t answer, she sighed loudly. “Nicky.”

“Did you walk or drive here?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Christian’s waiting outside in his car. I told him this was between you and me.”

“I think you should go home. *Please*.” He meant for it to come out abrasive, but at this point, he was just pleading for her to spare him.

Joselyn narrowed her eyes and shoved past him as she headed toward the door. “My place. Tomorrow after close,” she snapped, leaving no room for him to argue before she slammed it shut.





Nick knew better than to not show up. But the consequences would've been worth it if it meant he wasn't walking straight into an ambush.

"Oh, what the hell," he cursed as Spencer shot to her feet from the couch, eyes wide with panic. Seeing her was enough to twist the knife he'd already stabbed himself with, and seeing her upset drove it deeper.

Joselyn snuck behind him with her hand on the doorknob. "You two," she said, looking back-and-forth between their faces, "are going to sit and make up or do whatever it is you have to do to get the sticks out of your asses."

Nick grit his teeth. "Joselyn." Against his will, he flicked his eyes over at Spencer, who looked like she was contemplating the drop from the balcony.

Joselyn leveled him with her gaze, her hazel eyes smoldering. "Nicky."

His lip thinned unhappily. "Fine." Spencer, on the other hand, still looked like she wanted to take her chances with the drop. But she sighed, realizing they were stuck together whether they liked it or not.

She curled up on one end of the couch and Nick perched on the armrest on the other.

It was killing him, having her this close, but so far at the same time. She couldn't even look in his direction right now. Not that he blamed her.

The selfish part of him made him scoot over and brush the hair from her face. The slight contact of his fingers had her cheeks reddening. He drew his hand back quickly, feeling his control slipping.

“I miss you,” she whispered finally, keeping her eyes trained on a plant in the corner of the living room. Her hands were fidgeting in her lap. “I thought about texting, but it’s probably better to say it in person.”

Nick waited, mesmerized at the way she nervously picked at her cuticles. Her perfectly painted nails were olive green today. “I’m sorry for springing that on you. I-I think I’m okay now if you wanted to just...go back to what we were.” He’d never heard her sound so vulnerable before. Never seen her so openly lay her heart out for anyone, let alone *him*.

*Say you’re fucking sorry. Say you miss her, too.*

“I’m not sure we can go back to what we were doing.” He didn’t even know what he’d call it, but it was way past trying to convince themselves it was anything other than what it was. “Like you said. It’s too hard.” Too hard fighting the feelings he knew he shouldn’t have. Too hard to not have her in his life anyway.

*Coward.* Nick’s heart was already cleaving in two before he even finished his sentence, the words burning like acid as he forced them out.

How could he explain that he couldn’t be what she needed? What she *deserved*?

“You don’t even want to try?” Spencer asked in a shaky whisper. But she was a tough girl. Even if she didn’t want to, she could take it. She could find someone better than him. Someone her age who had the sense to tell her how she made them feel. Someone who could treat her better than he ever could.

Someone who wouldn’t hurt her like this.

“Maybe you should give Liam a call, sweetheart.” More acid down his throat, another twist of the dull knife in his chest.

Spencer reared her head back, voice raising a pitch. “Excuse me?” Nick focused on the way she started picking at the polish on her nails, fighting the urge to grab her hands and make her stop.

“He seems nice,” Nick said honestly. He tore his eyes away. “Good-looking.” *Good for you.*

Her nostrils flared. “He’s not you, Nick. I don’t think of him like that.”

He sighed, running a hand through his hair as he tried to sound casual and not like every word that came out was physically hurting him. “I think you should give him a chance. He likes you.”

“You mean like how you’re giving *me* a chance?” she snapped, crossing her arms.

“Spencer, please,” Nick begged, not exactly sure what he was begging for. “Don’t —”

*Don’t what? Cry? Too late, asshole.* “Don’t cry, sweetheart.”

If saying these words was like burning his throat with acid, watching the tears streak down her face was a stake through the heart.

She glared at him, her voice tight. “Why couldn’t you have just told me ‘no’? Why couldn’t you have just left me alone when I was sick? Were you just trying to spare my feelings?” She took a heaving breath. “Is it because I won’t have sex with you?”

“No!” The urge to pull his hair out returned with a vengeance. “God, Spencer.” Nick took a deep breath and counted to ten before continuing. “That’s not why. It’s wrong for me to want you in the first place, and I shouldn’t even be considering it. You may not have any experience, but I know better. You’re young. You shouldn’t waste your time on me. Not when I’ll only be here for one more year. I have my internship to think about. I can’t —”

“Can’t what?” She was looking at him with another challenge in her coffee-brown eyes, and he couldn’t help but think how he’d give up every opportunity in the world to have this thing with her instead.

*Tell her the truth, you piece of shit. She’s more important to you than any internship.*

Spencer stood up, her hands forming tight fists at her sides. “I wish I’d never come here. I wish you had the balls to just tell me ‘no’ and not give me hope. I wish I never —” She cut herself off, shaking her head angrily as she made her way to the door.

He should have left it alone, but he couldn’t. He deserved to hear exactly what she had to say, his own feelings be damned. “Never what?” he whispered.

“Met you,” she spat, slamming the door shut behind her.

And, because he knew what a shitty liar she was, there was no mistaking she meant every word she said.

Nick forced himself to close his eyes and count to 100, rubbing the amethyst in his pocket. He normally liked to take it out and watch it in the light, but the color would remind him of the one person he wasn’t supposed to be thinking about.

Joselyn gave him a sad glance when she came back in. “You two really couldn’t work it out?”

Nick threw his hands up in the air as he shouted. “There’s nothing to work out!”

He regretted it immediately when he saw Joselyn *flinch*. She backed away from him slowly, the way someone doesn’t take their eyes off a wild animal.

“Shit, I’m sorry, Josie. I didn’t mean to yell. I just...” he ran a hand through his hair and took a deep breath.

She stared at him, and for once, he couldn’t get a read on what his cousin was thinking. She should have slapped him for yelling at her like that. Should have yelled at him back.

“Oh Nicky,” she said softly instead, cocking her head to one side as understanding clicked into place. She started walking toward him, but Nick was already halfway out the door.

Joselyn grabbed his arm and tried to pull him back inside the apartment, but he stayed rooted to his spot out in the hall.

“You’ve got it bad, don’t you?”

“Please stop. I’m not in the mood.” He yanked his arm out of her grip.

“Too bad.”

He couldn’t do this right now. “Joselyn.”

“You tell me right now it didn’t absolutely destroy you when she walked out of here crying and I’ll leave it alone,” she snapped.

Nick’s jaw clenched, but he didn’t move.

“That’s what I thought.” She grabbed him again and this time, he let her drag him back inside.

Joselyn crossed her arms and shockingly seemed like she wanted to have this conversation while sober. There was a bottle of whiskey out on the counter that she wasn’t even looking at.

“She told me what happened over Christmas.”

He nodded slowly. “I figured.” Why else would she orchestrate this meeting?

Joselyn’s tone grew sharper. “She told me you said you wanted to be with her, too – right before rejecting her anyway.”

Nick pressed the heels of his palms to his eyes as he felt a prickle forming. “I’m too fucking old for her. It feels wrong. She’s not even old enough to drink.”

“Christian’s five years older than me.”

“And look how well that turned out.”

“Nicky,” she warned. “Don’t change the subject.”

He threw his hands up again. “What do you want me to say?”

Joselyn made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snort, but there was no humor in it. “I want you to tell the truth about your feelings. Do you want to be with her?”

“... Yes,” he finally admitted. This word hurt less, scraping by as opposed to clawing its way out.

She narrowed her eyes. “Yet, you decided the best thing was to break her heart and tell her no.”

“It was the best thing.”

“For you or for her?”

“For *her*,” he grit out.

Joselyn shook her head. “Not from where I’m standing. I don’t know what you consider ‘best’, but I hope it’s not her being closed off and miserable for the past month. If you wanted what was best for her, you’d want her to be happy. Being around you makes her happy.”

Nick wondered if Spencer ever mentioned that *she* was the one who asked him for space.

“You call what just happened me making her happy?” He swore under his breath and rubbed angrily at his eyes. “God, I’m no better than Sam.”

“Sam,” Joselyn said tightly, “gets off on taking advantage of vulnerable girls who don’t know any better. You two are not the same. You wouldn’t take advantage of her. You don’t even want to sleep with her. You want to spend time with her.”

“That’s the bare fucking minimum. That doesn’t make it okay.” Nick couldn’t believe Spencer actually thought of all things – it was her sex repulsion that bothered him. He didn’t give a fuck about that if it meant he could be around her. Hadn’t even considered it might be an issue until she brought it up.

“You’re staying here tonight.” It wasn’t a question. Joselyn was already walking into his old bedroom, clearly expecting him to follow.

He sat on the edge of the bed, trying to count to ten about a thousand different times before he gave up and let himself cry.

*You fucking deserve this*, he told himself. *But she doesn’t.*

# Chapter 28



It was his own damn fault, really. He was the one who told her to call him. But Nick wondered if Spencer scheduling her date on a day she knew he'd be working was her way of punishing him.

Especially considering it was Valentine's Day.

The Grind was decorated to the nines with red, pink, and white heart garlands hanging from the rafters. There were even rose petals scattered on the ground. Nick thought the whole thing was a little ostentatious, but there was no denying they could capitalize on the holiday – especially with all the themed drinks Mads dreamt up over the break. Even Joselyn was humming along to the cheesy playlist emitting from their speakers. It made him feel like the Grinch, ready to shit on the love others felt for each other because he ruined it for himself.

And of course, Spencer barely acknowledged his existence when she came in, veering sharply to her booth and taking great care to interact with everyone else that worked there instead. Nick noticed she'd taken the time to curl her hair and put a bit of makeup on. Her nails were painted soft shades of pink.

He focused on the dishes in the sink before she caught him staring. It was everyone's least favorite part of the job aside from bathroom duty and taking out the trash, so parking his ass there was his excuse to not do anything else during his shift that might bring him in her general vicinity.

Liam had arrived not much earlier, dressed similarly to how he'd been the first time they met last year. Blazer, skinny jeans. Easy, conventionally attractive smile. Heart eyes for Spencer. Accompanying pink flush whenever she addressed him.

Nick snorted, as if his insides didn't look exactly like that whenever she was around now. But he turned back to the sink, forcing himself not to pay attention to something that was definitely not his business.

He was aggressively scrubbing a mandoline when he looked up later to see Liam twirl some of Spencer's hair around his finger, like it was lined in purple silk.

Not that Nick was thinking about how it felt to have her hair between his fingers.

Not.

At.

All.

From the look on her face, she didn't plan on telling him to stop.

He felt a sharp pain sear itself across his palm, and he yanked his hand out of the water with a curse as the sting from the soap intensified the burn.

Joselyn ran over from the office.

"Nicky, what happened?" Her eyes widened, and Nick looked down, watching the water run red. He couldn't even see the offending cut, barely registering the pain between the shock and the roaring in his ears.

"Nothing," he managed to grit out. "My hand slipped on the mandoline. I'm fine. Just let me take care of this."

Her brow furrowed as she inspected his hand over the sink. "You are not fine," she argued. "What's going on? You've never done this before."

"Accidents happen."

She shook her head. "Not to you. Let me see your hand."



“It’s just a cut. I’ll put a bandage on it,” he argued, trying to fight out of her grip. He looked up and caught Spencer’s eye before shaking his head and turning back to the situation at hand.

“Nicky, there’s literally blood dripping down your arm. Move. Someone else can take of this,” Joselyn said. She waved Connor over as she wrapped a dry dish rag around his hand and pulled him away from the scene. “There’s bleach under the register.”

Nick stayed rooted to his spot when she stopped to unlock the door to the apartment. “Don’t be so fucking dramatic. Why are you dragging me up here?”

“Christian’s home. He can take a look at your hand.”

“It’s just a cut, Josie.”

“He’ll be the judge of that.”

“Joselyn.”

She ignored him as she banged on Christian’s door. Nick heard a crash and a string of curses before it swung open. For lack of a better term, Christian looked like shit. Must’ve had a rough shift at the bar last night.

“What, Joss?” he asked, rubbing his face. His voice sounded like sandpaper and his eyes looked almost bruised in the light.

Joselyn thrust Nick’s still-bleeding hand in his direction.

“Fuck, how’d that happen?” Christian let out another groan as he slowly closed his door. “Give me a second.”

He emerged a beat later wearing pants over his boxers and a t-shirt before groggily leading the way into the bathroom to grab the first aid kit. Nick could hear Joselyn pacing outside when he thrust his hand under the faucet.

Christian took off his belt and passed it to Nick. “Put this in your mouth and bite down.”

He reared back. “Excuse me?”

“Just do it. This is gonna hurt like a mother,” Christian ordered, grabbing a bottle of rubbing alcohol and dousing his hand.

Nick hissed and bit down on the belt, grateful it wasn't his tongue as the alcohol burned like fire on his hand.

“What the fuck happened?” Christian questioned. He quickly wrapped gauze around the wound and bound it tightly. The white material was already turning pink, and he swore as they watched it in case the blood soaked through.

Nick spit the belt out and breathed a sigh of relief, feeling his heart finally settle back into a safe rhythm when it didn't.

He stood aside and let Christian open the door to handle Joselyn, who was still pacing.

“It's not as bad as it looked. Shouldn't need stitches.”

Nick thought he actually saw her gain a couple years of her life back. He felt like a jackass for worrying her so bad.

“Hey.” He grabbed her arm. “I'm sorry about earlier. I panicked and took it out on you.”

She avoided looking at his bad hand. “I'm going back down. You're off until that heals.”

“It's not that bad,” he protested.

Joselyn gave Christian a sidelong glance. “He'll be the judge of that,” she said, repeating her statement from earlier. “Won't you?”

Despite the close call, Nick let out a snort when Christian actually *saluted* her before turning back to him. “So, what happened?” he asked again when Joselyn shut the door behind her.

“Lost a fight with the mandoline,” Nick grumbled. He could still feel the wound throbbing under the gauze.

Christian arched an eyebrow. “*Why* did you have an accident with the mandoline?” he pressed.

“It wasn't on purpose,” Nick insisted, raking his good hand through his hair.

“That’s not what I asked.”

Nick scowled. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

“You don’t want me asking Joselyn, Nick,” Christian threatened, crossing his arms.

“She doesn’t know either,” Nick snapped.

“So, there *was* a reason.” *Dammit.* He fell right into that. Christian continued, “Does it have anything to do with what happened here with Spencer the other night?”

Nick narrowed his eyes. “How do you know anything happened with Spencer?”

“I was home. Joss told me to stay in my room because you two were working your shit out here.”

Nick snorted again. “And you listened? Christian, you can bench press like two times her weight.”

“Don’t change the subject. Tell me about Spencer.”

Nick eyed him warily. “How much do you already know?”

“Enough to guess she’s at least partially related to your ‘accident’ today.”

“It’s not her fault,” Nick said sharply. “Just mine.”

Christian cocked his head. “Care to elaborate?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Just in the kind of alcohol you want,” he answered, heading straight for the liquor cabinet.

Nick rolled his eyes as he sat down on the couch. “Great,” he muttered under his breath. “Fucking peachy.” A moment later, he sighed. “Whiskey. If we’re going to be talking about this, I need something stronger than a fucking beer.”

“Trust me, this isn’t exactly how me and Joss planned on spending our Valentine’s Day,” Christian mumbled as he procured the alcohol.

*That* had Nick curious, and he was grateful for the distraction. “You two had plans?”

Christian shrugged. “Somewhat.”

At Nick’s raised eyebrow, Christian threw him a bone. “She wanted to watch *Naruto* after work.”

“Not exactly the most romantic anime in the world,” Nick replied dryly.

“Who said it was anything romantic?”

“The fact that you’re defensive tells me everything.”

Christian rolled his eyes. “Nice try. Don’t change the subject.” He passed Nick the bottle of whiskey.

“If this is you trying to get me to loosen up, you’re wasting your time,” Nick said, chugging it anyway. It burned going down his throat, and he remembered why he usually stuck to beer. But there was no way in hell he was going to get through the rest of this conversation sober.

Christian took the bottle and took his own, much more conservative sip. “Tell me what happened with Spencer,” he repeated. “Or I’ll walk down there and ask her myself.”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Nick snapped. He pinched his brow and counted backwards from ten. “She’s on a date right now.”

He scowled as understanding registered across the other man’s face. “I see,” Christian mused quietly. “That bother you?”

“Don’t give me that,” Nick said, crossing his arms. “You telling me you didn’t react the same fucking way the last time Joselyn met up with a guy at the bar?” He snatched the bottle back.

Christian’s voice turned hard. “I,” he said icily, “have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Bull.”

The two men stared at each other, daring the other to say what they were thinking. Eventually, Christian sighed. “I won’t say anything if you won’t.”

Nick passed him the bottle. “Thank you.” He got up. “I’m gonna go check on things.”

Christian leaned back and took another sip. “You sure that’s what you’re doing, Nick?”

“I thought we weren’t talking about this anymore,” Nick snapped, looking back with his good hand on the knob.

“We’re not,” the other man said. “Just hope you know what you might see if you go down there.”

*Trust me, I do.*



“This looks good,” Liam said as he twirled her hair around his finger.

Spencer nodded noncommittally, too focused on the panicked shouts coming from the front counter. Her head snapped toward the noise, watching the blood drip down Nick’s hand as he swore. Their gazes met briefly, and Spencer wondered if the flash of pain she saw was solely from his injury.

“Shit,” Liam cursed. “Do you think he’s gonna be okay?” He dropped her hair.

“No idea,” she mumbled, unable to tear her eyes away. It was like watching a car accident – everything was happening in slow motion and the sounds of everyone’s shouting became muffled. “But it looks like Joselyn’s got it covered. Not like we can do much from here. Might make things worse trying to help.”

Liam nodded slowly. Up until that point, they’d been having a good time catching up, but Spencer could tell he didn’t really know where to go from there. She tossed her drink in the trash. “Probably a good sign to head out, yeah?”

“Right with you,” he said, following her.

They were halfway to the parking lot when Spencer decided to dig her heels in and let Liam walk the rest of the way to his car alone. She leaned forward to give him a handshake, but recoiled back immediately when his lips managed to just barely brush her cheek.

“Oh,” he said softly, rubbing the back of his head. “Shit. This...is awkward. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have tried to do that. I just thought —”

Spencer shook her head quickly, but kept a small smile on her face. “This isn’t a date, Liam,” she reminded him gently. In his defense, she hadn’t explicitly said that when she asked to meet up again – and it *was* Valentine’s Day.

His face turned as pink as the hearts painted on the windows. “I am so sorry. I thought...I don’t know what I thought, to be honest.”

She waved her hand. “It’s fine.”

The color on his cheeks darkened to an alarming shade of red. “This goes without saying, but I’ll say it anyway. I’ve liked you for years, Spencer. Wanted to ask you out for so long, but I was afraid you didn’t see me that way. Guess I was right,” he stammered. “Not that there’s anything wrong with not – I mean – this doesn’t —”

Spencer almost blanched at his confession, the confirmation that Nick was *right* about Liam’s feelings for her. The idea that she’d missed all the signs. The idea that even if she hadn’t, it wouldn’t have mattered because she didn’t feel the same.

She cut him off before he continued his confession. “I said it was fine. Don’t worry about it. Can we still be friends?”

Liam nodded earnestly. “Of course.” He rubbed his face and sighed. “I just might need some time to get over how mortified I’m feeling right now. But that’s not your fault. I’ll get over it.”

She patted him on the arm in consolation. “You’re a great guy, Liam. You’ll sweep some girl off her feet one day.”

Liam gave her a rueful smile. “Suppose it’s not going to be you, though, is it?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Are you seeing anyone?” he asked quickly. “You can tell me if it’s not any of my business. I won’t be upset. Just curious.” His eyes flicked to where Nick was watching them from the inside, the unasked question hanging in the air.

Spencer bit her lip as she followed his gaze and shifted uncomfortably on her heels. “It’s...complicated.”

There was a beat of silence before Liam spoke again. “Well, for what it’s worth,” he said solemnly, “I hope he gets his shit together soon. You deserve more than complicated.”

Her smile widened as she looped her arm through his on the way to his car. Might as well give Nick a show. “He just sliced his hand open. I think I’ll cut him some slack.”

*Or give him just enough rope to hang himself,* the petty part of her whispered.



After she and Liam parted ways, Spencer decided she couldn’t leave without checking on Nick, even if she’d been doing mostly fine ignoring him up until the chaos from earlier.

“How’s your hand?” she asked timidly, sitting right in front of him.

He didn’t look at her when he answered, very focused on wiping down the counter. “I’ll live. It’s just a cut.”

“Didn’t look like it,” she muttered.

Nick shrugged silently in response. There was a line forming, but Spencer noticed him signal Connor to take over the register instead of going over there himself. She took that as a good sign.

She leaned on her elbows and steepled her fingers in front of her face to hide her expression. “Reese wants to go to that frat party next month. Are you going?”

“Probably not,” Nick said curtly. “Why?” He seemed very interested in a microscopic speck of dirt that he attacked with the rag.

“No reason,” she lied. “Just trying to make conversation.”

He changed the subject so fast it gave her whiplash. “How was your date?” His gaze traveled briefly to the parking lot, where Liam had just peeled out of not five minutes ago.

She narrowed her eyes, prepared to tell him it wasn’t any of his fucking business. “It wasn’t a date,” she found herself saying instead.

Nick snorted. “Did he know that?”

Yes. “Does it matter?” she asked.

“Don’t be cruel, sweetheart. It isn’t your style,” he said, shaking his head.

She grit her teeth. “You’re right – it’s not. It’s yours,” she snapped.

His jaw clenched. “Spencer.”

“Nicholas.”

Nick sighed and pressed the heels of his palms to his red-rimmed eyes, probably forgetting he had a fresh cut on one of them. He winced and swore loudly.

Unable to stop herself, Spencer jumped up and grabbed his wrist before he hurt himself again. Despite everything that went down between them, she knew she couldn’t handle it if something else happened today.

“Spencer,” he said flatly, looking at where they were joined. “Let go of me.”

She glared at him. “Make me.”

His voice turned icy. “I assure you, sweetheart, you don’t want me making that decision for you.”



Spencer rolled her eyes before deciding to hit him below the belt. “I fail to see how much more you can hurt me.”

“You said the other night you regret meeting me,” Nick said tightly. “Maybe it’s mutual.”

Spencer flinched, her grip loosening, but he didn’t free himself. Instead, he continued, “Lose my number, Spencer.”

*Excuse me?*

She yanked her hand away like he burned her. “Fuck you.”

He shrugged. “I told you, sweetheart. Should’ve let me go.”

Spencer could feel the sting of tears as she jumped down from the counter. “You get your wish, Nick. Hope you’re fucking happy.” She stalked to the door, not looking back in case he decided to kick her while she was down.

Joselyn caught her by the arm. “What’s wrong, dear?” She canted her head in concern.

Spencer reluctantly pulled away. “Ask *him*,” she snapped, voice laced with venom as she jerked her head in Nick’s direction. “I probably won’t be back,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

The other girl called her name, but Spencer was already sprinting back to campus.

*Happy fucking Valentine’s Day.*



There was no way to prepare Reese for what she would walk into when she returned to their dorm later that night. Spencer was hunched over sitting on the couch, wrapped in a blanket, and watching *American Horror Story* again with a blank expression on her face. She’d long since scrubbed the makeup

off, not wanting to turn into a cliché with mascara running down her face.

“Babe? You’re still up?” Reese asked as she flipped the light on and set her stuff down on the table. “How long have you been sitting like this?” She actually *waved* her hand in front of Spencer’s face as she sat down next to her.

“A while,” she admitted. “You’re home late.”

Reese stared at her. “Studio,” she explained a beat later before sighing. “Spencer, what’s wrong?”

Spencer kept her eyes on the projector, watching an obscenely gory murder scene as she considered her answer. “Something happened with Nick. Over Christmas,” she said finally.

“Is that why you guys haven’t been hanging out lately?” Reese asked. She leaned her head on Spencer’s shoulder.

“You noticed?”

“Babe, you practically *lived* at the library and The Grind, and you haven’t been to either since last semester.”

“I go sometimes,” Spencer argued hotly.

“Spencer.”

She sighed. “I confessed my feelings. He said no.”

Reese sat up, frowning. “You guys would have been good together. I’m sorry.”

“I meant to tell you earlier,” Spencer said quickly, “but then I got sick and —” She stopped when her friend drew her in for a hug.

“You don’t owe me an explanation,” Reese reminded her. “You have every right to decide when or even *if* you want to tell me these things.”

Spencer sighed. “I know. I wanted to. I just...everything was so confusing. Actually, I think his words were ‘we can’t.’ Not a straight-up no. What am I supposed to do with that?”

“Whatever you need,” Reese answered. “I assume you guys decided you needed space.”

She nodded. “I did. But then we got into it when I asked if we could at least try. He told me to call up a friend from high school. Said he was good for me.”

Reese swore, rearing her head back. “He told you to go on a date with another guy? What the fuck?”

Spencer offered her a small smirk. “Why do you think I scheduled it for Valentine’s Day? We met up at The Grind earlier.”

“Hope you gave him a show,” Reese muttered. “How was it? Was he nice to you? Have I met him?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. His name’s Liam – he’s at UGA now. Nick insisted he had a thing for me, but I didn’t believe him until...”

Reese raised her brow and waited.

“It wasn’t actually a date,” Spencer explained. “I just wanted to catch up. But I guess he thought it was. He tried to kiss me on the cheek. I let him down gently, but he seemed chill about it.”

“I hope Nick was watching,” Reese snorted.

“Oh, he definitely was.” A satisfied smile tugged at the edges of Spencer’s lips, but she couldn’t bring herself to be happy about the situation. Reese’s eyes urged her to get on with her story.

Spencer sighed and steeled herself for the next part. “He cut his hand earlier, so after Liam left, I went inside to check on him. We were talking, and I think he forgot about it, because he tried to use his bad hand and it was obvious it still hurts. I grabbed him before he made it worse. We argued. He told me he regretted meeting me and to lose his number.”

“What the fuck’s his problem?” Reese repeated.

Spencer shrugged, trying to make the action as nonchalant as possible. “Fuck if I know.”

Reese jumped up from the couch and started to rummage through her bag on the table. “I know what I said earlier about you two being good together, but fuck it. He doesn’t deserve you,” she said, typing on her phone.

“What are you doing?” Spencer asked warily.

“Texting Hunter,” Reese answered. “Told him to bring over some Ben & Jerry’s after his shift ends. Gonna let him think we’re both on our periods again.”

Spencer bit her lip. “I’ll tell him eventually.” She felt guilty about keeping her best friends out of the loop on this, but some small part of her hoped things would work themselves out before she had to.

“I think you need a break from men, babe,” Reese said, grabbing the remote and throwing her other arm back around Spencer’s shoulders. She started scrolling through the Netflix library until she found *Heathers*.

“I think you’re right,” Spencer admitted, a little apprehensive given that the last time she watched it had been up in Nick’s bedroom. “Not *Rocky Horror*?”

“Not enough revenge,” Reese quipped.

She sighed, but didn’t say anything else. At least watching it with Reese held the possibility of replacing memories of the last person she should be thinking about.

# Chapter 29



**I** *diot.*

Did Nick really just say that to her? What the fuck was he thinking?

He hadn't been, obviously, because what the fuck was wrong with him? The whiskey from earlier had him a little buzzed, but not nearly enough to excuse his behavior just now. All Nick could focus on was her hand around his wrist, the shock of her skin on his completely consuming his mind. The fact that she hadn't wanted him to hurt himself so bad that she broke her own rule about touching him.

*You get your wish, Nick. Hope you're fucking happy.*

Actually, Nick was burning in his own personal hell. He wanted to take the words back immediately, but Spencer had already turned on her heel, tears in her eyes.

Nick told himself it was for the best. There was no other way to make her let him go.

But he definitely should've expected the shitstorm that happened the second the words came out of his mouth, and she stalked away from him crying. Again.

Joselyn didn't even give him a chance to blink before she grabbed him by his shirt collar and dragged him up to her apartment for the second time that day.

“Joselyn,” he grit out, standing his ground just outside the door, his good hand on her wrist. She pulled out of his grasp. “Why the hell are you taking me up here again?”

“So, there aren’t any witnesses when I fucking murder you,” she snapped, unlocking the door and shoving him inside. “What the fuck did you say to her?” Her worry and concern for him earlier were completely gone now, replaced by nothing but pure rage.

Nick felt the knife return to his stomach. He’d rather slice his other hand open than have this conversation right now. “She didn’t tell you?”

Joselyn slammed her door shut and stood in front of him, arms crossed. Presumably because if they weren’t, they’d already be around his throat. Not that he blamed her.

There was no excuse for what he’d said, no matter how hard he tried to justify it.

He sighed and headed to the kitchen for some liquid courage, but Joselyn had other plans. She grabbed his uninjured hand and hauled him over to the living room before pushing him onto the couch.

“Talk.”

Nick swallowed, the knife in his stomach twisting. His bad hand was throbbing again in a way that had nothing to do with the cut. “I told her that I regretted meeting her. And to lose my number...I told her to let me go.” He buried his face in his hands and waited for the blow.

It never came. The only sound for several moments was his own breathing, which was almost worse than anything Joselyn could have shouted. He could feel the disappointment and shock in the air.

“I don’t understand,” she finally said, sighing. She sat down next to him on the couch. “You didn’t even try this hard to get Chelsea off your back.”

“She’s not that bad, Josie, Jesus fuck.”

Joselyn raised an eyebrow. “Are you actually *defending* her? Why?”

“What is your problem with her?” he bit out.

She threw her hands up and swore. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me. Is it because you’re still sleeping with her? Is that why?”

“No! God, Joselyn, where did you get that from?” Nick asked, the disbelief causing cracks in his voice.

“Make it make sense, Nicky. You haven’t had any boundaries with that girl ever. You broke up and were still sleeping together until you and Spencer —”

Nick cut her off before she reminded him of how royally he fucked up his relationship with the only person he’d ever wanted. “Don’t act like you and Christian aren’t doing the same fucking thing.”

“Don’t act like you know *anything* about what I’m doing. And stop trying to change the subject,” she shot back.

He scowled. “I just don’t understand why you hate her so much.”

“You weren’t happy with her, Nicky. She *used* you for sex. She never even tried to get to know me, and I’m your fucking cousin. Spencer makes you happy. I can see it; Christian can see it. Hell, Connor and Madeline can see it. And she calls you ‘Nicky.’ I’m the only one you used to let call you that. Does she mean that much to you?”

Nick’s heart fell into his stomach.

But Joselyn’s control was slipping, too. Her voice shook, like she was also close to tears over his fuck up. “Spencer makes the effort to be my friend, too. And not just because you and I are close. She likes hanging out with me regardless of if you’re around or not. She comes in *just* to see me even for a few minutes on break. And she just told me she’s not coming around anymore. How could you say any of that shit to her?”

“I had to!” He wanted to pull his goddamn hair out. “I’m no good for her, Josie. She needs to stay away from me.”

“You don’t get to make that decision for her.”

“Joselyn.”

Joselyn stood up angrily and made her way to the liquor cabinet. “You’re off the schedule.”

He followed her, sure he hadn’t heard right. “What did you just say?”

“Paid,” she grumbled. “Just don’t come in.”

“For how long? You need the coverage, Joselyn.”

“For however long it takes you to get your fucking head out of your ass,” she snapped, taking the top off the bottle of whiskey. “I’ll figure it out.”

“Josie.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Just get out,” she sighed. “I can’t do this right now.”

*You and me both*, he thought.



# Chapter 30



**S**o, what are you going to do now?" Reese asked over dinner. "Are you still on Tinder?"

Spencer nodded. "Haven't matched with anyone in weeks, though." She didn't want to admit that she hadn't even gone on the app since her 'coming out' talk with Nick back in December.

"I hope you still have standards, princess," Hunter said. She hadn't gotten around to telling him what happened – all he knew was that she met up with a guy and it hadn't panned out.

She sighed and slid her plate forward. "I'm not that hungry."

Hunter frowned, staring at her barely touched garlic breadsticks "You like these. What's wrong?"

Reese kicked his chair. "*Nothing*," she answered for her, because Spencer was a shitty liar.

Someone plucked one off her plate and dipped it in marinara sauce. "Mind if I take them then?"

Spencer looked up. "Sam?" Something about her expression had Hunter loudly scooting his chair over until he was between the two of them. Sam sized him up, his lip thinning even as the rest of him exuded an air of composure.

"Uhhh, sure," she said. "I guess."

“Haven’t seen you guys at any parties lately,” Sam said, still standing there and no longer operating under the pretense of stealing Spencer’s food. He rested his hand on the back of her chair, ignoring the low growl Hunter let out. “I’m having another one this Friday if you’re interested.”

“We’ll think about it,” Spencer blurted before she could stop herself, just eager to have him finally leave them alone.

Reese nodded, playing along, while Hunter just stared stoically with his arms crossed. “Maybe.”

When Sam finally left, Spencer felt her whole body deflate. “Did either of you actually want to go?”

Reese raised an eyebrow. “Why? Are you actually considering it?”

Spencer shrugged. “Why not? It’s not like I’ve been to any others.” Reese and Hunter had gone to a few kickbacks since then, mainly composed of other art students and the occasional less popular frat guy.

“It *is* at...” Reese trailed off, probably remembering Hunter didn’t know about the thing with Nick. She shook her head and redirected. “I got a text from Peyton the other day.”

Hunter stiffened. “What did she say?”

“Did your dad —” Spencer asked.

Reese cut them both off. “Nothing new. I’m gonna drive over there anyway, just to be sure. But you two should go. Might be fun.”

At least with Hunter around, Spencer wouldn’t have to focus all her time and energy on just avoiding people. She hoped he’d at least entertain the idea.

“It might be a good way to practice before the frat party,” Spencer reasoned. “It’s smaller, and I’ll be able to adjust better.”

Hunter stared between the both of them, clearly knowing something was off. But he just sighed. “I’ll see if I can get off, princess.”



But by the time Friday rolled around, Hunter had work, and Reese clearly still had her own thoughts about everything.

“You know you don’t have to go,” she reminded Spencer gently as she stroked her hair. “You don’t have to prove anything to anyone.”

“I know,” Spencer said, biting her lip. “But I need this. Think of it as a learning opportunity. Aren’t you glad I’m going to one of my own accord? You basically had to drag me kicking and screaming to the last one.”

“Babe, that was before N —” She cut herself off. “Just be safe. Call Hunt when you want him to pick you up.”

Spencer leaned her head on Reese’s shoulder. “I wish you two were coming.”

Reese sighed. “Me too. I’ll be gone all weekend.”

“Your sister is more important,” Spencer insisted. “I’ll be fine. I can handle myself if something happens.”

Even if she couldn’t, Spencer knew Nick wouldn’t let anything happen to her – regardless of what’d gone down between them. She cocked her head. “When are you leaving?”

Reese shrugged. “I got something to work on in the studio, so it might be kinda late. You should be able to see me on the tracker.” Hunter made them download a location-sharing app over the holidays, precisely for situations like this where none of them were together.

“And you’ll be able to know when I leave the party and make it back here,” Spencer said, dropping down from her bed. “Drive safe.”

“You be safe, too.”



Sam accosted her immediately as she soon as she walked in, holding a beer. “I see I convinced you to come,” he said conversationally. “Where’s Reese and...?”

“Hunter,” she clarified for him, stepping away when she saw his arm twitch toward her. “It’s just me tonight.”

He offered her a blindingly white smile. “You say that like it’s supposed to be a disappointment. ‘Just’ you is perfect.”

Was this flirting? Or was Sam just being nice?

She knew she should be wary of him – she knew enough about him even without Nick’s obvious disdain for his roommate. But he hadn’t made a move on her yet, and there was no reason to believe he would. Maybe he was just being friendly.

Or maybe he was trying to get a rise out of Nick, who she hadn’t seen yet.

“Can I get you anything?” Sam asked, finishing the last of his bottle and waving it in the air.

Spencer wrinkled her nose at the smell. “Do y’all have Coke?”

He nodded. “I’ll pour you some.” Maybe he wasn’t *as* bad as she thought. It’s not like he was trying to pressure her into drinking.

“Having fun?” he asked as he poured her drink straight from the bottle.

Spencer leaned her hip on the counter as she sipped her Coke, glad she’d been able to make sure he didn’t put anything in it. “I don’t really have much to compare it to.”

“You came to the one a couple months ago, right? Can’t have been too bad if you’re back,” Sam pointed out, grabbing

himself another beer. He had the decency to turn away from her before taking a sip.

“I guess,” she said, shrugging again.

“You look good.”

Spencer grimaced before attempting a smile. *Definitely* flirting. “Thanks.” It was close enough to spring that going out in shorts and a tank top was practically a survival method, but she wasn’t used to showing this much skin.

Still feeling his eyes on her, she downed the rest of her drink and made her way back out into the living room. She found Nick immediately. He was on the stairs where they’d first talked at the party last semester. With a *girl*. The one she saw at The Grind. Who was sitting on his fucking *lap*.

Sam sat in one of the dining chairs, his eyes tracking to where she was just looking. “That’s Chelsea,” he said, answering a question she didn’t ask. When Spencer didn’t respond, he continued. “I think they’re fuck buddies or something.”

“And this is my business because...?” she asked nonchalantly, shifting on her heels as the knot in her stomach tightened. She knew Nick wasn’t a saint but...

*No*. What he got up to behind closed doors wasn’t any of her concern.

Sam shrugged like he wasn’t knowingly rubbing it in her face. “Just thought you’d want to know,” he said, sipping his beer slowly.

“Well, I don’t,” she snapped, tearing her eyes away to focus on the particularly uninteresting paint job on the wall instead.

He put his hand on her lower back to get her attention. “Hey.”

Spencer stared back at him warily until he stopped touching her.

Sam raised a suggestive eyebrow. “Wanna make him jealous?”

“Excuse me?” She scoffed and crossed her arms. “Are you that confident in yourself? Or do you just believe my self-esteem is so low that I’d actually agree to that?”

Sam snorted. “I’m not asking for a lap dance, Spencer, Jesus fuck. I’m just saying you can sit on my knee and get him riled up. I love messing with Nick’s uptight ass.”

She glared at him, not believing she was actually considering this. “No funny business.”

He held his hands up. “My hands will be nowhere near you.”

This time, Spencer was the one who snorted.

But when she snuck a glance back at Nick and Chelsea, something shifted in her. *Would* this get him riled up? Would it be because of her, or because he didn’t like his roommate?

She sighed. At least she was getting some attention that wasn’t solely related to her proximity to Reese.

Sam manspread on his chair and Spencer rested the edge of her ass on his knee. She wasn’t even sitting really. More like hovering.

Sam rolled his eyes.

“What?” she snapped.

He shook his head, smirking. “You better hope he’s drunk enough, because there’s no way this would be believable if he’s sober. You’re a shitty actress. You can’t even *try* and act like you’re into me?”

Spencer stood up angrily and crossed her arms again. “I knew it. You just wanted a way to get your fucking rocks off.”

But Sam wasn’t even looking at her. He was grinning from ear to ear.

She grabbed him by the collar so she could hiss in his ear. “You better have a damn good reason before I smack the look off your face.”

He pointed with his beer. “That good enough for ya?”

Spencer turned to see Nick had gotten up and was white-knuckling the banister like it was the only thing stopping him from marching over.

Not that he had any right to be mad about this. *Hypocrite.*

Spencer let go anyway and took a step back before Nick's face went from red to purple.

The whole thing should've made her feel good about herself – like she accomplished something by making him jealous and getting a rise out of him.

But all she could feel was a little shame and disgust at herself for stooping so low.

She wrung her hands out and stalked back into the kitchen for a little privacy to catch her breath and cool her head.



As much as Nick despised Sam throwing parties like he was Gatsby waiting for Daisy, he had to admit, access to free beer was a perk. Especially considering the *last* thing he wanted to do tonight was think about his problems.

He could've definitely done without Chelsea sitting on his fucking lap, but she was tipsy, and he didn't want to get physical and risk hurting her while drunk. He couldn't even remember what fucking beer he was on.

“Chels,” he sighed, pinching his brow. “Can you not?”

She leaned her head in the crook of his neck. “But I like it here. Please?”

Nick rolled his eyes and chugged the last of his bottle, looking at everything else in the room but her.

His gaze zeroed in on a flash of purple in the dining room.

Nick stood up quickly, ignoring Chelsea's offended squeal as he dethroned her. Everything she was saying was going in

one ear and out the other as Nick gripped the banister tightly before he lost all control and ripped a certain someone off his roommate's lap.

The last straw was when Sam followed her into the kitchen looking like a lion going after prey.

“Over my dead fucking body,” he muttered as he went after them.



# Chapter 31



**A**m I interrupting something?” Nick asked sharply as he took in the scene in front of him. Sam’s body pressed Spencer’s against the kitchen counter, hands bracketing either side of her hips.

The only thing stopping him from committing violent assault right now was her terrified expression, which turned into wide-eyed relief when she saw him.

“Get the hell away from her,” he snapped at Sam, who was about two seconds away from no longer having his hands attached to his body.

His roommate backed up from the counter with narrowed eyes, but was still way too close to her for Nick’s liking.

“Leave,” he barked. “Now.”

After Sam was safely out of his eyesight, Nick rounded on Spencer, who was still gripping the kitchen counter behind her so hard, her knuckles were white. “Did he touch you?”

She blinked slowly, staring at the spot where Sam was just standing. “What?”

Nick took a deep breath and pinched his brow. “Did. He. Touch. You.”

“No.” She swallowed hard. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

Nick ignored that for the sake of his patience. “I thought I told you to stay away from him. What the hell were you doing in his fucking lap?”

“I’ll talk to whoever I want to,” Spencer snapped. “We’re not together, Nick. You don’t get to have any say in what I do or who I do it with. You had your chance. You told me to let you go. I did.”

Nothing she was saying was a lie, but he was drunk and at this point, willing to do anything just to have her talk to him again. “Did you come here alone? Where are Reese and Hunter?”

She rolled her eyes. “I can go to these things by myself. I don’t need babysitters.”

Nick felt his blood start to boil. This was getting ridiculous, and he wasn’t sober enough to keep his temper in check. “Yeah? What if I hadn’t come in when I did? What was your plan then?”

Spencer glared at him. “I don’t need you to play hero. I didn’t need saving. I had it under control.”

Nick snorted loudly. “Sure, sweetheart, sure. *Definitely* looked like you had it under control from where I’m standing.”

She flinched and turned away. It took him a second to realize she was crying. He reached forward to wipe the tear away, but one look from her and he faltered.

Nick cursed himself. He shouldn’t have been giving her a hard time over something that definitely wasn’t her fault. Especially because he could tell she was already blaming herself.

“It wasn’t your fault. You know that right?” he whispered.

Spencer shook her head angrily. “I should’ve known better. I-I should’ve —” Her hands were shaking, but her polish was still intact. She wasn’t picking at her cuticles. Nick didn’t have any excuse to touch her right now.

It still took all of his leftover willpower to stop himself from pulling her close and never letting go. “What did he say

to you?”

She bit her lip before answering. “He said he’d make my first time good for me. When I told him to stop, he called me a tease.”

Nick was going to fucking kill him. Slowly. Maybe rip his eyeballs out for good measure.

He ran a hand over his face and sighed before he said anything else he’d regret more than what had already come out of his mouth this entire month. “Go home, Spencer. Please. For your own good.”

Spencer scowled. “Who are you to say what’s good for me?” She kept her voice tight even though she was clearly long past being able to keep her emotions under control. “You tell me to call Liam and go on dates, but you get mad when I get the attention of other men. It isn’t fair for you to do this to me. I don’t owe you an explanation. Besides, Sam wasn’t the only one who had someone in his lap.”

Nick stiffened at the fact that she’d seen him with Chelsea. Again. And in such a compromising position, no less.

*Can’t you see?* he thought. *Can’t you see I don’t look at her the way I look at you?*

Despite every instinct screaming at him not to, he wanted to make her understand.

Nick took a step closer. Saw her hands grab the kitchen counter as she backed up against it again. Smelled the sweet strawberry scent of her hair.

Which he twirled a purple strand of around his finger, unable to help himself. The alcohol was making him bold.

“Tell me to stop, Spencer.”

She didn’t. Instead, she used the counter to hoist herself up until she was sitting on the edge.

“You let Liam do this, too.” he said, still staring at the purple strands between his fingers.

“He was admiring Joselyn’s handiwork.”

“Sure, *that’s* what he was admiring.” He wondered if he was meant to see their almost kiss, the way she looped her arm with his out in the parking lot.

Not that it should have been any of his business.

Spencer narrowed her eyes. “I haven’t seen you around there lately. Are you avoiding me?”

*You’re the one who said you wouldn’t be coming by anymore.* “Joselyn took me off the schedule,” he admitted.

She let out a noise of disbelief. “She can’t stand being around you, either?”

He flinched.

“You can go now,” she snapped when he didn’t respond. “What are you even doing in here? Isn’t there a girl in the other room you need to get back to?”

Nick swallowed. “Spencer, love.” He took another tentative step forward until he stood between her legs. “I’m exactly where I need to be right now.” He finally wiped a tear away with his thumb, feeling her shudder beneath his touch. He let the tips of his fingers linger on her cheek. “Where I want to be.”

Nick waited for her to tell him that he had no right to say these things. Waited for her to tell him to get the hell away from her.

Spencer raised an eyebrow as she grabbed him by the front of his shirt to pull him even closer. It was dangerous, him being this close to her. Indulging in the one thing he had no right to want. The one thing he almost killed his roommate for wanting.

“You don’t want me, Nick,” she hissed in his ear, clouding his thoughts. She shoved him away from her, chest heaving.

“You don’t know what I want,” he snapped, clenching his jaw.

“Do *you*?” she asked.

He had to put an end to this.

But instead of backing away, Nick's hand slipped from her cheek to the back of her neck, tilting her head up slightly. He could feel her pulse fluttering under his fingers.

Spencer's eyes widened, her lips parting slightly as she met his gaze. "Nick..." she breathed, and he wasn't sure if he wanted her to tell him to stop again or to keep going. Maybe she wasn't sure either.

That hesitation was enough to make Nick snap out of it. He dropped his hand. Took a step back. "I think you need to leave," he said. *For your own sake.*

Spencer sucked in a breath. "*Coward.*" Her cheeks were flushed, pupils dilated even as her brows furrowed in anger. She glanced toward the entryway to the living room, gaze hardening. "Go talk to your fuck buddy. She's probably waiting for you."

Nick smacked himself in the forehead. This was getting old. "I'm not sleeping with her."

"Anymore," she clarified for him.

"*Spencer.*"

She shrugged and crossed her legs nonchalantly, like she hadn't just been crying. "It's not my business what you get up to or who you see. You can do whatever you want."

What he *wanted* was sitting right in front of him.

"Go home, sweetheart," Nick said tightly, stepping away and not sparing her another glance. "You shouldn't be here."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" He ignored her, praying to God she wouldn't be difficult and just listen to him while secretly hoping she would, because that was the Spencer he knew and -.

*No. Don't even think about that.*

# Chapter 32



Hunter hadn't hesitated when Spencer called him to pick her up after his shift.

"Everything alright, princess?" he asked, glancing over at her. "Your face is red."

"Fine," she said flatly. She leaned her head on the window. "Just tired." A half lie. He didn't need to know any specifics. She wasn't in the habit of sharing the worst moments of her life with anyone, her best friends included.

He frowned, but didn't press her. They were almost back to campus when Spencer made a decision.

"Wait," she said when they stopped at a red light. "I need you to teach me how to throw a punch." She couldn't always rely on Nick's impeccable timing.

"Did something happen at the party?" Hunter asked sharply as he slammed on the brakes too early, scrutinizing her. There was an uncharacteristically hard edge to his tone. Spencer almost shrank back in her seat and told him to forget it, but sighed.

"No, but I don't really want to go back to Thorne yet, and it's probably as good a time as any to learn." She willed him not to ask for any more details, because according to Nick, she was a shitty liar. And because thinking about what almost happened made her sick to her stomach.

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “Tell me what happened, Spencer,” he demanded. “You don’t just ask someone to teach you how to throw a punch.” His knuckles were white on the steering wheel. And he must’ve been even more on edge than he was letting on. Spencer didn’t think he called her by her name since they first met. It was always ‘princess.’

“Nothing,” she said. It wasn’t a lie, technically. Nick had shown up and stopped things before anything happened.

“Spencer.” She could tell he didn’t want to let this go, but he should also know by now that she wasn’t giving up shit. “Just forget it, Hunt. Please.”

Hunter sighed. “I’ll pull over so you can have a minute,” he said before parking on the side of the road and waving her into the backseat. He slipped his arm around her shoulders, and they sat in silence for a while.

Spencer wasn’t sure when she started sobbing, or when she’d started chewing on her nail. She just knew that everything was coming out at once, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Hunter pulled her wrist down to her lap and smoothed her hair back.

He didn’t let go until she did.

“You don’t have to tell me,” he relented when she finally pulled away to climb back in the passenger’s seat. “But you know I’m always gonna be here for you, princess.”

Spencer tried to croak out a *thanks*, but it came out as a hiccup. She rubbed the rest of her tears off her face and hoped to God she didn’t look as messy as she felt. It was a good thing Reese hadn’t had time to help her put on any makeup, because looking like a trash panda would’ve added insult to injury at this point.

Hunter made it about ten seconds before slamming his palms on the steering wheel as he started the car back up. “I know what I said earlier, but fuck it. Tell me what happened, Spencer. You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“I do not,” Spencer said hotly, crossing her arms and glaring. She leaned her head on the window, welcoming the

feeling of the cool glass on her face.

Hunter drove right past campus. “Are you hungry?” he asked suddenly. “Because I personally could go for some Waffle House right about now.”

Spencer couldn't even remember the last time she'd eaten. “Please.”



He was staring at her over his coffee, his plate mostly picked clean aside from a couple bites of a waffle left.

Spencer scowled defensively. “What, Hunt?”

Hunter didn't bristle at her rudeness. “Are you finally ready to tell me what happened earlier?”

She should've known he wasn't the type to give up easily. He'd lulled her into a false sense of security by dropping it in the car earlier. “Nothing.”

He raised an eyebrow and leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms. Waiting.

Spencer sighed, rubbing her temples. “Don't be mad,” she said timidly.

“Why would I be mad?”

“Sam's been...coming onto me. It wasn't anything too bad until tonight. He wanted me to sit on his lap, and he called me a tease when I told him not to touch me. He trapped me against the kitchen counter and tried to —” She swallowed a sob before it ripped out of her.

Hunter's jaw clenched, but she continued before he had the chance to voice his thoughts. “Nick came in before anything happened and told him to leave.”

“Good.”



She sighed again. “Hunter, there’s more. And it’s kind of a long story.”

Hunter shrugged as he sipped his coffee. “I’ve got all night. And that’s probably a good thing. The closer we get to campus, the closer Sam is to no longer having all of his teeth.”

Spencer rolled her eyes. “Hunter.”

“Get to your point, Spencer.”

She stumbled over her story, but hopefully, he got the gist – her confession, Nick’s subsequent rejection, what he said the last time they spoke before tonight. How he kept trying to get her to go on dates and talk to other people, only to react like a jealous boyfriend when she did.

“What?” Spencer asked when she finished, and he hadn’t said anything yet.

Hunter shrugged. “Wasn’t that long of a story. And despite what you think of my intelligence, it wasn’t very hard to follow.”

“So? What are you thinking right now?” Spencer leaned back in her seat and played with the remains of her food, pushing it around the syrup flooding her plate.

“Put the knife down, princess,” he sighed.

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously, pausing. “Why?”

“Because you’re probably not going to like what I have to say,” Hunter grumbled, sliding her plate to the side. “But I don’t think Nick meant any of the shit he said.”

Spencer reared back. “What part of ‘lose my number’ and ‘let me go’ wasn’t clear to you?” Just thinking about it brought that familiar prickle to her eyes. She swiped at them, hoping he hadn’t noticed.

“Guys aren’t the best at communicating things,” he said. “Doesn’t matter how old we are. We fuck up the good things in our lives all the time.” He started twisting the braided leather bracelet around his wrist. The way he said it, with a hint of bitterness and an avoidant look in his eye made Spencer wonder if he was speaking from experience. She had

to fight the urge to ask him to elaborate and deflect the attention from her pitiful excuse of a love life.

“I fail to see any ambiguity in what he said,” she snapped, even if the words were at odds with his actions earlier tonight.

Hunter sighed again. “He probably thought it was what was best for you. If I were to put myself in his shoes, my guess is he probably thinks he isn’t right for you.”

“But that’s not something he gets to decide for me,” Spencer said, crossing her arms. “I can make my own decisions.”

“He *is* older than you.”

She rolled her eyes again. “Three years isn’t that big of a deal. And older doesn’t necessarily mean wiser.”

“True,” he relented. “But you’re smart enough to know most 21-year-olds don’t have the best of intentions when it comes to 18-year-olds. And you’ve never had a boyfriend before, right? He probably thinks the worst of himself for wanting anything to do with you.”

Spencer thought of Sam and shuddered. “He’s never tried to coerce me into anything. He knows how I feel about sex.”

“I know. He’ll come around.”

She cocked her head. “You think?”

“You don’t sound upset about it.”

“I should be,” she muttered darkly, burying her face in her hands. “I don’t know why I’m still chasing him.” Didn’t she think she deserved better than this? Was she hung up on him because she thought she’d never find anyone else she felt anything for? Was it because she was scared? Embarrassed?

Was it because Nick made her feel like she wasn’t broken? Because he made her feel the things that people wrote songs about and took risks just for a chance to feel? Because he made her feel like she could experience romantic love with another person without sex?

Was it because touching him made her feel *safe*?

*Fuck.* Spencer hadn't even considered any of this shit until now.

When she went quiet, Hunter shifted gears. "What are we gonna do about Sam? There's no way we're letting that shit slide."

Spencer's head shot up. "We can't tell Reese."

He scowled. "Why the fuck not?"

Spencer glared at him. "She's on her way to check on her sister. If she finds out what happened, she'll turn around and come straight back here. I'm not doing that to either of them. I'll tell her when she gets back. I don't have a choice."

"There's always a choice," he growled.

"Hunter."

He sighed angrily. "Fine. But I'm staying over tonight."

"Why?" she asked, cocking her head.

"Impulse control."

Spencer raised an eyebrow.

"If I'm focused on being there for you, I probably won't be inclined to commit aggravated assault tonight."

She narrowed her eyes. "Probably?"

He reached over the table to wipe away a stray tear she hadn't realized had fallen. "He made you cry, princess. I should already be over there kicking his fucking teeth in."

"*Hunter. Hale.*" Spencer grit out, though the fact that he was so openly willing to go to bat for her made her insides feel warm and funny. She didn't want to unpack how his touch hadn't completely short-circuited her entire body the way Nick's did back in his kitchen. But it was there, in the back of her mental closet, just waiting for her to get her shit together.

He stared at her seriously. "Where's Nick in all this?"

"Probably doing exactly what you were just talking about," she answered as she stole a bite of his waffle.

Hunter shoved the plate at her. “Good. Because he’d be the next one on my list if he wasn’t. He’s already on thin fucking ice.”

Spencer raised an eyebrow as she finished the rest of his food. “And why’s that?”

“He hurt you. Just because I understand him doesn’t mean I agree with what he did, Spencer,” Hunter said, like the answer should have been obvious.

Spencer bit her lip as she slid his empty plate away.

“What?”

She gave him a soft smile. “I don’t think you’ve ever actually called me by my name ever until tonight.”

Hunter cocked his head. “Does that upset you? Do I have to kick my *own* ass, princess?”

“I kinda like it when you call me ‘princess’ now. It’s grown on me. Why do you call me that, anyway?”

He shrugged. “Fits.”

Spencer didn’t know whether to press him for details or not. “Why’s Reese a ‘fucking goblin,’ then?” Out of the two of them, with her halo-like hair, long, lithe limbs, and charismatic charm, Reese definitely fit the bill of ‘princess’ more than Spencer ever could.

“Aside from the fact that she’s a fucking menace?” he snorted. “Halloween costume when we were kids. I’ll see if my dad has a picture laying around if you’re curious.”

“I’d love to see that.” Her phone buzzed on the table. Speak of the devil. “Looks like Reese made it to your dad’s house,” she said, looking down at the tracking app notification on her screen.

He finally relaxed a little in his seat. “Good. You ready to go?”

Spencer nodded, wiping her sweaty palms on her jeans. “I’m just gonna go to the bathroom. Meet me in the parking lot.”

Hunter crossed his arms. “I’m staying right the fuck here. It’s way too damn dark outside for you to walk anywhere by yourself.”

She rolled her eyes halfheartedly. “Fine.”



Hunter parked in the lot near his dorm, and they walked across the residential quad silently. It wasn’t a bad or awkward sort of silence – just comfortable. Spencer hadn’t realized how much she relished in these quiet moments – everything else in her life was loud, confusing. Overwhelming.

Then, she realized there was only one person other than Reese and Hunter she enjoyed silence with.

She tugged on his arm before they got too far. “Can we go to your dorm, instead? I feel like I’ve never been there before.”

“There’s a reason for that, princess.” She gave him her most pitiful look, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Fine.” He shrugged off his hoodie and tied it around her waist.

She raised her eyebrow, but he didn’t offer an explanation as he led her to his dorm.

Hunter burst through the door of his room, earning a string of expletives from his roommate on the opposite bed.

Their room wasn’t that much bigger than Spencer’s, but housed two times the furniture – two beds, two dressers, two desks. They’d run a piece of painter’s tape straight down the middle between their beds like sitcom characters.

Spencer suddenly realized the importance of the hoodie when Hunter’s roommate stared right where her legs were exposed without an ounce of shame. She crossed her arms

over her shirt – which wasn't even that low-cut – and shifted uncomfortably on her feet.

“Keep looking and I'll pluck your goddamn eyes out and feed them to a crow,” Hunter snapped, shielding her from view with his body. “Give me the room tonight. You owe me.”

His roommate threaded his hands behind his head and scoffed. “You can't blame me for looking. Tell your girl to cover up.”

A muscle in Hunter's jaw ticked. “I'm not telling her shit. She doesn't have to cover up. *You* look away when it's clear someone doesn't want you looking.”

His roommate reluctantly tore his eyes from Spencer and threw his hands up. He kept his head down as he left and closed the door quietly behind him.

Spencer uncrossed her arms and let out a breath. What was up with the men at this school? It was like every other guy was Sam in a different font. “Why does he owe you?”

Hunter snorted. “He had a girl over like every weekend last semester. Why do you think I'm always over at your place?” He went to his dresser and tossed her a shirt and a pair of sweatpants. “You can sleep in those if you want.”

Spencer quickly changed in the corner of the room, turning back to find Hunter laying a pillow and spare blanket on the ground.

“What are you doing?”

“You're taking the bed, princess. Don't argue with me.”

“By myself?” she asked as she climbed onto his unlofted bed.

Hunter raised an eyebrow. “You want me up there with you?”

She nodded slowly and drew her knees up under her chin. “Please.”

He reached to pull his shirt over his head before pausing, looking at her with a question in his eyes.

“You can take it off,” she said timidly. “I want to see something.”

Hunter stared at her as he slowly pulled it all the way off and tossed it on the ground, revealing his defined torso. “You sure?”

“If I’m not, I’ll just shut my eyes and scream until you put it back on,” she said, only half joking.

Spencer tried not to think about the fact that she was literally getting spooned by a shirtless guy and feeling absolutely *nothing*.

Her heart wasn’t trying to beat itself out of her body; her face wasn’t flushing.

Aside from the warm feeling of his bare chest against her back and the arm across her waist, she felt...nothing.

“Hey, Hunt?”

“Yes, princess?”

She sat up. “What’s it like? Liking someone. Being attracted to them.”

He frowned at her seriousness. “There’s not an easy answer to that.”

“Humor me,” Spencer said, shrugging.

Hunter sat up with her. “Why are you asking?”

She sighed, trying to figure out a way to explain things. “I don’t know if what I’m feeling toward Nick is attraction or a crush or indigestion at this point,” she answered dryly. “He’s —” She waved her hand.

“Explain.”

“I don’t even know where I was going with that,” Spencer said, groaning. She leaned against him and put her head on his shoulder.

“You don’t have to,” Hunter replied, shifting slightly so she was more comfortable.

She picked at her cuticles to avoid looking at him. “When I’m around him, I get nervous. My face gets hot, and I start fidgeting.”

She sighed. “And I’m laying here next to you, and I don’t feel any of that. And you don’t even have a fucking shirt on.”

Hunter acted wounded, clutching his chest. “Ouch, princess. Harsh.”

Spencer rolled her eyes. “Hunt.”

“So, Nick makes you nervous,” he concluded for her.

“He didn’t use to,” she explained. “Then, one day...it just...hit. It’s like every time he’s near me I don’t know if I want to get closer or get away from him.”

“Do you get scared around him?”

She shook her head. “No. It’s different from that. Being around *Sam* scared me. I wanted to get away from him. No confusion there. Nick...makes me feel safe. It’s weird. I don’t know how to describe it.”

Hunter’s jaw was tense from her mention of Sam. “Feelings are complicated. People, too.” He went silent for a moment, his brow furrowed in concentration. “You feel different about him than you feel about me.”

She didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

Hunter leaned back against the wall. “There’s your answer.”

“I didn’t realize that was part of the question,” she said. “Where are you going with this?”

“Sometimes, we don’t always ask ourselves the right things,” he said, smoothing her hair back absentmindedly. He still looked deep in thought.

“Well, what do you think I should’ve asked?”

“Maybe instead of asking what it feels like, ask yourself *why* you think you feel that way about him and nobody else.”



Spencer already knew the answer to that, but she wasn't going to think about it. Not now. She changed the subject and hoped he wouldn't call her out on it.

“What about you?”

He cocked his head. “What about me?”

“Is there anyone you've felt that way for?...Reese?” she asked. She'd been wondering this since last semester. He never hung out with anyone else.

Hunter grimaced. “God no. You two are like fucking sisters to me. I don't even want to think about it. I know I'm from Alabama, but still.”

Spencer actually snorted and had to cover her mouth as a soundless laugh took over her body. “You did not just make that joke,” she wheezed.

He pulled her back down with him until they were supine again. “It made you laugh, didn't it?” he asked.

She gave him a small smile. “Yeah. Why didn't you go with her?”

“Trust me, I thought about it. But this is her shit, and she wouldn't have let me. And I wanted to pick you up tonight, anyway.”

Spencer turned on her other side, their faces close enough that she could see the way his long, dark lashes fanned over his eyes. Their proximity relaxed her slightly, even if it wasn't *anything* like how it felt when she and Nick were together.

Hunter glanced at the time on his phone. “It's late, princess. Go to sleep. Your feelings will still be there in the morning, and you can deal with them then. Good night.”

Spencer sighed and closed her eyes as she turned back over. Hunter's arm was around her waist again, and she wondered at the differences in how she felt about the two men in her life. Just being in Nick's vicinity earlier had been enough to make her common sense fly out the window.

“Hunt?” she asked a few minutes later, hoping he wasn't asleep yet.

He grunted and shifted slightly. “Yes, princess?”

She sat up again. “...I can’t sleep.”

He propped himself up on his elbow and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “Do you want to watch *Rocky Horror* or something?”

Spencer canted her head. “I thought you didn’t like that movie.”

Hunter shrugged. “I don’t mind it actually. I just like giving you two hell over it.” He got up to put his laptop on his desk and started dragging it between the two beds.

Spencer rolled her eyes. “Ass.”

“Don’t act like you two don’t love messing with me over it. Y’all were fucking cackling when we saw it live.”

“In our defense, your reactions were very entertaining,” she quipped.

He rolled his eyes back at her as he logged into his computer. “Well? Are we watching it?”

Spencer sat with her back against the wall, considering. “Can we watch an *actual* horror movie? I’m in the mood for something more intense. Might be a good distraction from everything,” she said, drawing her knees up under her chin.

Hunter snorted as he rejoined her on the bed. “*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* IS an actual horror movie. But fine. How’s *House of Wax* sound?”

She smiled. “That sounds perfect.”

He put his arm around her as they watched the movie, but it still didn’t make her feel anything like what she felt when Nick did it. It was nice. Comforting. But there were no butterflies in her stomach, no heat flooding her skin, no random desire to touch him *more*.

It was nice, but it wasn’t the same. Spencer swallowed down the feeling of disappointment as she once again contemplated what this meant.

And against her better judgment, she wondered if Nick felt any of the same things whenever they were together. And if he did, would they be enough to change how things were between the two of them?

Spencer hated that she cared about the answer. She really, really hated it.



Nick knew it would be pointless to try and sleep, not after everything that happened tonight. He rubbed his eyes and sighed.

It sounded eerily quiet downstairs. Maybe the party was finally fucking over. If he was sober enough in the morning, he and Sam were going to have a serious talk about things. Assuming he didn't rip his eyeballs out or murder him first.

He shouldn't have drunk so much. There was absolutely no excuse for his lack of control with Spencer earlier.

He'd be no better than Sam if he hadn't stopped things when he did.

And at least with everyone gone now, Nick didn't have to worry about making a fucking scene when he went back downstairs to kill his roommate.

He found Sam hunched over their kitchen sink. Nick severely hoped he wasn't puking, because he wasn't in the mood to deal with anything else tonight. He slammed his hand on the counter to get his attention.

Sam swore and straightened his back. His eyes were bloodshot, and Nick would've bet any amount of money he was crossed right now. "What the hell, man? What's your fucking problem?"

Nick grabbed him by the shirt. "You stay the fuck away from her."

Sam's gaze sharpened instantly, and he arched a knowing eyebrow. "Who?" Maybe he wasn't high after all. Maybe not even tipsy.

"You know damn well who. What the hell was she doing in your fucking lap?" Nick growled, wanting to keep Spencer's name out of this as much as he could.

Never mind the fact that he didn't trust his voice not to choke when he said it.

"You need to chill the fuck out," Sam said. "Seriously. And first of all, *she's* the one who wanted it. I didn't make her do shit. Chelsea's been all over you for months, man. I don't know why you're so fucking pissed about Spencer. From what it looks like, you aren't gonna make a move. She's 18 and she's cute. She's fair game. *Especially* in those fucking shorts. But if you want, I'll let you know how she f —"

Nick threw him against the counter, his hands tightly fisting Sam's shirt as he bent him over and twisted his arm behind his back. He shoved the other man's face into the granite surface. "I will fucking *kill* you if you finish that sentence."

*Hypocrite. You almost kissed her an hour ago.*

He felt someone grab his bicep, trying to pry him off Sam. "Nick," Jordan hissed in his ear when it was clear he wasn't budging. "That's enough. He gets it, don't you, Sam?"

Sam swore again, but nodded. Nick only let him go because if he stayed around him any longer, somebody was going to get hurt.

He glared at Sam as he stood up and backed away. "You stay the hell away from her. Don't even think about her. She looks at you, you turn the other way. You even so much as *breathe* in her direction – I will end you. She doesn't exist to you. Same goes for Reese. Am I making myself clear?"

Sam narrowed his eyes. "Crystal."

Jordan was still holding onto him. Nick scowled as he yanked his arm away. "Where the hell did you come from?"

The other man rolled his eyes. “If you must know, I just wanted to get some fucking water and instead walked in on you two having a pissing contest. Not saying he didn’t deserve what you were doing, but I think you need to go cool off.”

“*I* think you need to mind your damn business,” Nick snapped.

Jordan glared at him. “It becomes my business when my roommates want to kill each other.”

Nick scoffed. “I’d love to see him try.” The man in question had since made himself scarce. Apparently, he hadn’t lost *all* of his brain cells from being constantly inebriated.

“Nick,” Jordan said seriously. “Do we need to talk about this?”

“What in fucking hell makes you think I want to talk about this?”

He kept going like Nick hadn’t spoken. “Were you talking about the girl —”

Nick tried to cut him off with a death glare, which Jordan ignored.

He sighed. “You told me to let her in. You don’t like visitors when you get like that. You barely tolerate being around me and Sam.”

“I barely tolerate being around Sam, period.”

“Stop avoiding the subject.”

“Stop trying to get me to talk about it.”

“Nick.”

Nick pinched his brow and took a deep breath. “I don’t give a *fuck* if you think I need to cool off. I walked in on him trying to touch her even when she kept telling him to back off. *Again.*”

Just the thought of what Sam might have been thinking of doing with Spencer made him want to run upstairs and make his point *extra* transparent. After he ripped out his fucking eyeballs for the way he was looking at her.

Tonight had him seriously wondering if Christian had the connections to keep him out of jail.

Jordan swore. “Fucking hell,” he muttered darkly, raking a hand through his hair. His eyes lingered on the staircase where Sam had just gone up. “You can’t be serious.”

Nick raised an eyebrow. “This is news to you? You remember what happened —”

The other man nodded reluctantly. “Still,” he sighed. “I think you need to sleep it off. You’re drunk, man. I’ve never seen you lose control like this before.”

“Never had a reason to before now,” Nick reminded him curtly, through clenched teeth. “You weren’t there. You didn’t see what I saw.”

“Are you sure it’s not because of *who* Sam was with?” he pressed. “Who is she to you, anyway?”

*Everything.*

# Chapter 33



What happened at Nick's last week had Spencer reconsidering her attendance at the frat party. But when she got back to their dorm to meet up with Reese after class, the other girl was already gone.

Spencer didn't want to think about all the reasons why she wouldn't have waited for her. She just made her way over, hoping they could talk more there. Reese had been on edge for the entire week, snapping at her and Hunter when they tried to ask her what was wrong. Something definitely happened when she went back home over the weekend, but trying to get anything out of her was like pulling teeth.

She followed the line of people who were trailing like ants up to the frat house. And even though the downstairs area of it was quite a bit bigger than Nick's living room, the number of bodies made Spencer feel claustrophobic. She balled her hands into fists and tried to breathe. She was here for Reese.

She saw Nick leaning against the wall, head bent down as he listened to the girl next to him. It looked like the same girl who'd been sitting in his fucking lap at the last party – *Chelsea*.

He perked his head up as Spencer weaved her way inside, walking over to meet her in the middle so she couldn't avoid him.

“I thought you said you weren’t coming,” Spencer snapped, hating that she cared.

Nick waved his beer dismissively. “I changed my mind.”

Spencer flicked her eyes over to Chelsea. “Clearly.” Then she kicked herself. They weren’t together – he made that very clear the other night. What he did and who he did it with was none of her business, and Chelsea was doing absolutely nothing wrong by talking to him. She tried harder to keep her feelings in check.

“You’re mad at me,” he said. “Why?”

What kind of fucking question was that? *Where do I begin*, she thought, biting her tongue before she made things worse. When she didn’t answer, he ran a hand across his face and let out an exasperated sigh.

“What are you even doing here, Spencer?”

*That* had her blood boiling, and she quickly abandoned her mission of not starting anything with him. “What? I can’t go to a party? I didn’t realize —”

He cut her off. “You don’t *like* parties,” he reminded her. His jaw clenched, and she wondered if he was thinking about what happened at the *last* party she went to. She glared, but couldn’t think of a good enough retort.

So, she decided to be petty, instead. “You don’t *like* me, either, but we’re still talking, aren’t we?”

Nick’s jaw clenched tighter. “Spencer. You know that’s not true.”

Spencer cocked her head, hating how dangerously that one admission made her heart flutter. “Do I? You and I seem to remember what almost happened between us very differently. I’m not the one who —”

“It would have been a mistake, sweetheart,” he said sharply. “It was a good thing it didn’t happen. I saved us both from doing something we’d regret.”

*Fuck*. That hurt more than she wanted it to.



“I’m just looking for Reese,” Spencer said, swallowing back bile. “Have you seen her?”

Nick shook his head before opening his mouth to speak again.

“Go talk to your fuck buddy, Nick,” she snapped before he could get any words out. “She’s clearly waiting for you.”

With that, she turned on her heel and stalked in the opposite direction, ignoring when he called after her.

Spencer made her way up the stairs, hoping to God she wouldn’t accidentally walk in on anyone.

“Reese?” she knocked on a door, but it swung open on its own.

She heard a male voice curse. “I thought I locked the damn door.” Spencer poked her head in to apologize until she saw who else was with him on the bed. They were sitting on the edge, but considering where his hands were, she was clearly interrupting something.

“Hey – what the fuck do you think —” She rounded on him and cut him off. “Who the fuck are you?” He looked way older than the two of them. The parallels between what was happening now and what almost happened to Spencer made her sick to her stomach.

Spencer reached for Reese’s arm and tried to ignore the glare of the guy next to her. “Reese, come on. He’s way too old. He’s taking advantage of you.”

“You’re such a hypocrite,” Reese snapped as she tried to shake her off. It took Spencer a minute to realize she was drunk.

She snatched her hand back. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“What about you and *Nicky*? He’s just as much older than you are,” Reese taunted.

Spencer glared at her. “We’re not together.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Reese scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Wait – that’s right. It’s unrequited. This is fucking pathetic, Spencer. You can’t have him, so you try and ruin this for me?”

“Reese, you’re drunk,” she said, ignoring her before the words sunk in and weakened her resolve.

“I’m taking care of her,” the guy said defensively, continuing to snake an arm around Reese’s waist, touching the bare skin that her crop top didn’t cover. “Just because no one wants to be with you doesn’t mean you get to ruin it for the rest of us.”

Spencer’s jaw dropped. “*Excuse me?*”

He smirked at her. “I heard from Sam that you’re a fucking tease. Sat on his lap and didn’t let him get any? No wonder that other guy didn’t want you.”

Spencer flinched against her will, earning a laugh from this fucker. And *of course*, he knew Sam.

Reese raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t know about that, babe. Why didn’t you tell me?” Her eyes were rimmed red, and Spencer wondered if she was high, too.

“I don’t even know why I came here,” she muttered angrily to herself, feeling the prickle of tears.

“Neither do I,” Reese said before turning back to the guy.

Spencer slammed the door behind her and ran back downstairs, weaving around people as she made her way to the front door. She thought she saw Hunter by the stairs. He gave her a *what the fuck* face, but she didn’t stop.

She noticed Nick was still talking to Chelsea. She shook her head and made a point of not looking back as she finally left the house.



“Are you even listening to me, Nicky?”

He blinked. “Sorry, what?” He wasn’t sorry at all.

Chelsea rolled her eyes. “You’ve been checked out this entire time.” Despite her tone, she was so obviously hurt that he would’ve felt guilty if he was sober. Nick wasn’t nearly as drunk as he was the night he almost murdered Sam, but close enough that he wasn’t in the mood for any of her shit tonight. He’d made an effort to be civil for most of their conversation, but his patience was wearing thin, and he contemplated fabricating an excuse to leave early. Especially after what he said to Spencer earlier, because apparently, he couldn’t keep his fucking foot out of his mouth when it came to her.

“Got a lot on my mind,” he snapped instead, finishing the rest of his beer and leaving the bottle on the side table next to him.

She crossed her arms. “I can tell,” she muttered dryly.

“Something you wanna say to me?” He knew he was being unnecessarily rude, and he wasn’t so sure he could blame the alcohol at this point. Seeing Spencer so upset at him put him on edge, even if she had every right to be.

“No.”

Chelsea closed the carefully crafted distance between them, putting both her hands on his chest as she pressed her lips to his. Her tongue sought entrance into his mouth.

Nick stiffened immediately, shock paralyzing his body for a second before he came to his senses and gently pushed her away with his hands on her shoulders.

Just in time to look behind her as Spencer was running out the door.

*Shit.* Had she seen them? Or was something else wrong?

He turned his attention back down. “Chelsea.”

“I just thought we could —” She rocked back and forth on her heels. “I know you said you weren’t interested in dating again or anything.” A wince as she said it, but he couldn’t find it in himself to care.

“But I thought we could at least, you know?” She gestured vaguely with her hands.

He sighed. *Why now?* They hadn’t slept together in months.

When she answered, he realized he asked it out loud.

“I’ve been in a dry spell lately,” she admitted. “And I thought if you weren’t up for dating, we could do something more casual.”

He regarded her coolly. “You want to be friends with benefits.” *Again.*

To his surprise, she nodded. “What’s wrong with that? Clearly, I’m not going to string you along, make you think we’re anything more. A lot of guys would jump at the chance for no strings attached sex.”

Nick glared at her, knowing damn well there was no way he was even entertaining the idea, not when the one person he wanted clearly thought the worst of him. “Then go find one of them,” he snapped, stalking away. He needed to find some privacy to clear his head, or else he’d look for another beer and do something else he’d regret later.

He made his way upstairs, hoping to find an empty bedroom. One of the doors was slightly ajar, and he took it as a sign it was unoccupied.

He couldn’t have been more wrong.

Reese was on the bed with some guy, who swore at Nick. “Is that door fucking broken or something?”

Nick glared at him, feeling his blood boil. “Get the hell off her. She’s too young for you.”

“I don’t have to do shit. She’s legal,” the asshole snapped back, apparently not feeling any shame as he groped her right in front of him.

“Reese,” Nick called, feeling a vein in his temple start to throb angrily at the sight in front of him, so similar to the last time he was in this situation. “Come on, I’ll take you home.”

She snorted. “What if I don’t want to go? You don’t control me, Nick.” She raised her head, and he noticed her bloodshot eyes.

“Are you *drunk*?” he asked, voice raising a pitch. “Doesn’t matter if she’s 18 if she’s fucking wasted. She can’t consent to anything.”

Reese scowled and leaned away. “Fuck off.”

The guy pressed a sloppy kiss on her neck, and Nick contemplated the consequences of attempted murder for the second time in as many weeks.

“Why are all your friends such cockblocks, baby?”

*Don’t call her baby*, Nick wanted to snap. At least it sounded like they hadn’t done anything yet, but that would change if he didn’t put a stop to this right fucking now.

Reese shrugged, suddenly very giggly. She leaned into the guy’s touch and rested her head on his shoulder. “Don’t act like Spencer’s any better,” she slurred, staring at Nick through heavy-lidded eyes. “You’re 21, too. What makes you two so special? At least I’m not chasing after someone who doesn’t want me.”

Nick’s jaw clenched. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, Reese. Come on.” He reached for her hand, but she wasn’t done.

Reese rolled her eyes. “Who do you think she ran crying to after you *rejected* her, Nick? After you told her to lose your number? I know more than you do.”

The guy snorted as he addressed Nick with a smug look in his eye. “Sam said she’s a fucking tease anyway. Not worth it, man.”

Maybe he *should’ve* murdered him the other night, after all.

Nick counted to ten in his head. Once. Twice. Three times. Anything to keep him from completely losing his shit and scaring Reese. He didn’t want to leave her alone with this

prick, but he wasn't getting anywhere with her clinging to him like that.

"Reese," he said calmly, trying not to sound judgmental. She narrowed her eyes as he continued. "You're drunk. You won't be feeling so good in a little bit. I'm not gonna make you come with me if you don't want to. But do you want me to tell Hunt where we are and he can take care of you?"

There was a beat of silence before Reese bit her lip and nodded. "It's been a while for me," she admitted without looking at him. "I haven't had a drink since high school."

"You're okay," Nick said soothingly, ignoring the death glare from the other guy. Reese scooted further away from him, like she just now realized the situation at hand. Nick took that as a good sign. "Where's your phone? I'll text him."

Reese jerked her head toward the nightstand. "Passcode is 0513." She rested her forehead on Nick's arm as he stood and typed it in. "Room's spinning now," she murmured, rubbing her temples.

The guy shot to his feet, eyes focusing in on where they were touching. "You're seriously listening to this guy, Reese? How do you even know him?"

After sending the text, Nick handed the phone back. "I know her better than you do," he said coolly.

"You think you know her better? Just because you're trying to fuck her roommate? How well is that working out for you? She let you hit it yet?"

*Still better than how well it's working out for you.* Nick held his tongue and tried not to let his anger show. This prick could say whatever he wanted about him, but he drew the line at involving Spencer. He needed to see if he could catch up and find out why she ran out crying earlier, but not until things were settled up here.

Reese's low voice startled them both. "Jake, just shut up." She pinched her brow and groaned loudly. "I don't want to do anything anymore."

Nick cocked his head. "You heard her."

Jake's nostrils flared. "Who the hell do you think you are? You think you can come in here and just —"

"Since you're such good friends with Sam," Nick interrupted as he stood to his full height and grabbed him by the front of his shirt, "perhaps you should ask him what happened the last time he pissed me off." He might've been *more* than interested in introducing Jake's face to the drywall, but that wasn't what was important right now. "You should leave before I give you a demonstration."

Jake opened his mouth like he wanted to argue some more, but thought better of it.

He tore himself out of Nick's grip and stalked out the door, cursing under his breath. Nick thought he heard the words, "fucking bitch," but he forced himself to return his attention back to Reese.

She scooted to make more room for him on the bed. "I feel like shit."

"Drinking'll do that," Nick said, glancing around as he sat back down. *Ask me how I know.* "Whose room is this, anyway?"

"Jake's," she whispered timidly. "You just kicked him out of his own room."

That explained why it was much cleaner in here than expected. Nick shrugged. "Not sorry." There was a commotion at the door, and both their heads snapped toward the noise.

"Get the fuck out of my way," Hunter growled, shoving Jake to the side to make his way in. "Nick? Reese?"

"In here, Hunt," Nick called. "I don't know how much she had, but she doesn't look too bad."

Reese laid on her side and hugged a pillow to her chest. "I can speak for myself, Nick. I just had a couple shots."

"Shots of what, exactly?" Hunter pressed.

"Fuck if I know," Reese admitted. She buried her face in the pillow. "Save it, Hunt. I don't need a lecture. And I *don't* wanna talk about it, so don't ask."

Hunter sat on her other side and smoothed her hair back from her head. “Wasn’t gonna.”

Reese swatted his hand away. “Can I just get *one* minute by myself, please?”

Hunter muttered something about her acting like a fucking goblin under his breath, but Nick nodded and jerked his head toward the door. “We’ll be right outside.”

They kept it cracked open as they made their way out into the hallway. Hunter rubbed his face. “Thanks for texting me.”

Now that things were settled up here, Nick let out a deep breath and redirected. “Did you see Spencer earlier? Looked like she was crying.”

The other man frowned. “She wouldn’t stop when I tried to get her to tell me. You should go after her. I’ve got things covered here.”

“Why me?” Nick asked slowly, wondering how much Hunter knew about what happened between the two of them.

“You care about her,” Hunter answered simply. “And she knows that.”

*Does she?* Nick wouldn’t blame her if she was questioning that considering how shitty he’d been acting lately.

Hunter sighed and peeked back inside the room at Reese. “I’ve already got this one trying to bite my head off. You have a better chance of getting through to Spencer than I do.”

“Don’t be so sure about that,” Nick muttered.

Hunter raised an eyebrow and met his gaze. “You gonna let that stop you?”

“Not a chance in hell.”



# Chapter 34



Spencer noticed Sam following her when she was almost to Thorne. She quickly pulled herself together, not wanting to seem vulnerable enough for him to exploit. Which she had no doubt he would do if he saw her crying.

“Hey.”

She backed away slowly, ready to bolt. “Don’t come any closer.” She hadn’t forgotten that he’d also apparently been going around calling her a fucking tease to all of his creepy ass friends.

Sam held his hands up in surrender. “Just wanted to say Nick’s looking for you.”

Spencer frowned. “But I just saw him,” she said. “At the party.”

Sam shrugged. “He just said if I saw you, I should let you know.”

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously, still keeping a good amount of distance from him. Sam seemed like the *last* person Nick would want to talk to about her.

Her curiosity – or perhaps it was stupidity – got the better of her. “Where is he? Is he still over there?”

“I can take you to him. It’s on my way.”

Spencer eyed the other man warily. “That didn’t answer my question.”

“You want to see him or not?” Sam asked curtly, staring at her from the corner of his eye as he led the way. “What’s the deal with you two, anyway?”

“I’m not sure I follow.” Spencer made sure to keep a good six feet of distance between the two of them as they turned back toward the frat house.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Considering he was about three seconds away from murdering me when he saw us together —”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Spencer snapped. “He heard me telling you to stop. Anyone else would have reacted the same way.”

Sam stopped walking. “Don’t act like you didn’t want it,” he said.

“Excuse me?” Spencer backed up a few feet.

He moved forward and grabbed her by the arm until he was close enough to whisper in her ear. “Admit it. You liked sitting in my fucking lap. I bet if I snuck my hand in your shorts, you would’ve been soaking. What would’ve happened if he hadn’t been there, huh? Would you have taken it right on my kitchen counter? Or did you already give it up for Nick?”

“Fuck you.” Spencer felt the sting on her palm as it connected with his cheek. His fingers wrapped around her wrist as she pulled back.

He sneered at her. “You’re gonna regret that, sweetheart.”

Spencer flinched.

Sam grinned. “Guess I hit a nerve there.” He cocked his head. “Let me guess – only Nick gets to call you that? You tease him the way you teased me the other night? He’s such a fucking hypocrite, I swear to God. Always on *my* ass about the girls I bring home like you aren’t the same fucking age as them.”

“Let go,” she said, trying to break out of his grasp. His hold on her wrist tightened painfully as he pulled her closer. His other hand gripped her chin and forced her to look at him.

He kissed her.

Spencer sputtered for a moment as he forced his tongue into her mouth before she found the strength to finally push him off. “What the hell is wrong with you?” she choked out, doubling over and spitting. She felt like she needed to vomit, anything to get the feeling of him out of her mouth.

Sam let out a growl as he grabbed her from behind, one hand clamped tightly over her mouth and the other wrapped around her waist to keep her from struggling. He dragged her from the walkway to the side of one of the dorm buildings.

“Shhh,” he whispered in her ear. “I think you’re smart enough to realize who’s in charge here, Spencer.”

She shook her head and kicked violently in an attempt to shake him off, barely able to hear him over the drumbeat of her heart. Tears started blurring her vision, not that she could see much in the dark.

“Let me make something clear to you,” Sam hissed, his breath sending shivers down her spine. “Either you give me what I want...” He trailed his nose up the side of her neck, peppering more kisses that made her skin crawl. “Or I’ll just get it from Reese. She looked pretty willing at the party earlier, don’t you think? Think she’d be up for taking two at once?”

*What the fuck is wrong with you,* she wanted to scream.

Instead, Spencer went limp in his arms, but Sam didn’t relax his hold or move his hand off her mouth. He used his other hand to twist both her arms behind her back, forcing her to let out strangled cries. “That’s what I thought,” he said, punctuating his sentence by pressing a wet kiss to her throat. “Now, you be a good girl and get on your knees. And if you tell Nick what happened here, I’ll just tell him *you* wanted it because he was too much of a pussy to make a move on you. I think something like that would devastate him. You don’t want to hurt him, right?”

Sam let out a humorless chuckle before continuing. “I saw what you two were doing the other night. I know what you

mean to him, Spencer.”

She glared as he pushed her to the ground, hand fisting her hair. He tugged on it sharply until she was looking up at him. “This is what he gets when he acts all high and mighty and doesn’t mind his fucking business.”

Sam let go to undo his belt, and that’s when she scrambled to her feet. He swore and reached to grab her, but Spencer’s instincts kicked in. She leaned over and bit down on his arm until the taste of copper filled her mouth.

“Fucking bitch, get off me,” he snapped, shaking her off like she was a rabid dog.

Spencer spat his own blood at him before finally running back toward the walkway. She was still crying, wiping the tears away to get her bearings.

“Spencer?”

She whipped her head around, ready to scream, but it was only Nick. His expression changed from confused to worried as he took her in. “Spencer,” he repeated, reaching for her, “sweetheart, what’s wrong?”

“Get the hell away from me,” she snapped, eyes searching for any sign of Sam.

Nick was still walking toward her. “Not until you tell me what’s wrong, love.”

She felt her eyes prickle with more tears. “Stop.”

“Stop what?” He was close enough to grab her arm.

“You don’t love me, Nick.” She almost choked on the words.

He reared back as if she’d slapped him. “Spencer. You know that’s not true.”

*Don’t. Don’t give me hope.*

Spencer swallowed, seeing Sam watching them from a streetlamp behind Nick. “You called me a *mistake*,” she reminded him, shaking her head free of the intrusive thoughts

punching through. “Just leave me alone, Nick. I don’t want to see you anymore.”

She was running by the time he called her name again.



Spencer braced herself as she inspected the damage in the bathroom mirror the next morning.

She cursed taking in the yellow band of bruising on her torso and the purple splotches littering her arms from when Sam twisted them behind her back. She could hide the dark ring on her wrist with longer sleeves, but the hickey was going to be a challenge without any makeup. How Nick hadn’t noticed it on her neck last night was a miracle, but she couldn’t think about him right now.

She got dressed quickly. It wasn’t cold enough to justifiably wear a coat, so a long-sleeved shirt with a high enough collar would have to do. Nick’s hoodie sat on top of everything else in her drawer, and she couldn’t help but bunch the fabric between her fingers and smell it. She’d washed it ages ago, his scent long gone. But the material brought her some comfort, even if she couldn’t bring herself to wear it.

Spencer stared down at Reese’s end of the dorm. A very small, naïve part of her thought they’d be able to patch things up once Reese was sober. She knocked timidly before she lost her nerve. “Reese? Babe? Are you awake? Can we talk?”

The door remained closed, so either she’d already gone out for the day or was actively ignoring her. The smart part of Spencer suspected she’d just not come back to the dorm after the party.

Something snapped inside her. Why should she care? Reese was her own damn person, and clearly, Spencer should have spent less time worrying about her roommate and more time worrying about herself.

She weighed her options as she wandered aimlessly across the campus. She couldn't remember Nick's schedule this semester, so she couldn't risk going to either the library or The Grind. Besides, he'd ask too many questions she couldn't answer. And she didn't know how long she could be around him before she broke.

She found herself walking in the direction of the student center, listening to an audiobook – courtesy of Nick's Christmas present – to keep her mind occupied. She hadn't brought along her physical copy, and she kept one earbud out to make sure she was still aware of her surroundings.

Dani came from the other dorm building and fell in step with her. "You look like shit," they said.

Spencer rolled her eyes and took out her other earbud. "Ouch. Way to kick me while I'm down, Dan." She shoved their shoulders lightly as they walked together.

They shrugged. "Just saying you look like you could stand to forget your problems. And I just happen to know where to procure the most ill-advised way to do just that."

"Where?" Spencer asked before she could stop herself.

"A friend," Dani said vaguely, waving their hand. "Just let me know if you're interested. I'm heading over there tonight."

Spencer bit her lip as she considered the offer. "I'll do that," she said, feeling the bravado leave her as she remembered her interaction with Reese last night. She wasn't sure she wanted to put herself in the position to say anything incriminating about what happened.

But her only other option was to go back to her dorm and avoid her roommate. She guiltily read through Hunter's texts from last night, not having a good answer for any of them. Hadn't even responded to let him know she was okay.

There were no new messages from Reese.

Nick had texted her, too, but she hadn't even bothered to read them before deleting the message thread. Spencer knew she was being petty – clearly, he still cared about her, no

matter what he said to hurt her. But Sam's threat played over and over in her head like some sort of devil on her shoulder.

It was too risky to text him back. She'd spill eventually, and...*don't think about it*. She shoved it out of her mind before it wore her down.

She sighed, making a decision.



"Dani!" Spencer called when she saw them outside again later.

They stopped. "Yeah? What's up?"

"I wanna take you up on your offer," she said before she could stop herself.

If Dani was curious about her sudden enthusiasm, they kept their mouth shut as they walked, shockingly, in the direction of The Grind.

"One of my friends just bought some vodka," Dani explained as they rounded the corner and unlocked the door to the back entrance. "It'll just be us. No party or anything."

"Good, because I think I've had enough of those for the rest of our time here," Spencer said. "You know Joselyn?" She couldn't imagine Christian sanctioning that much underage drinking considering his line of work.

Dani's eyebrow raised. "Yeah, I used to work over here in high school. You know her too?"

Spencer shrugged, not wanting to get into it. "We're friends."

Joselyn opened the door and looked surprised to see her. "Dear —" She cut herself off when she saw the look on Spencer's face. "Nice to see you two," she said, recovering quickly.

"Likewise," Spencer said as she followed Dani inside.

Joselyn pulled her aside, frowning. “Does Nicky know you’re here?”

“Why would he? What I do is none of his business,” Spencer snapped, hoping her voice wasn’t giving anything away.

The other girl pursed her lips into a thin line, but she didn’t press the issue. “What’s your poison?”

Not wanting to admit her naïveté regarding alcohol, Spencer shrugged and said, “Just give me whatever. I’m trying to avoid thinking about my problems.”

“As someone older than you, I should highly discourage you from drinking as a coping mechanism,” Joselyn started, earning incredulous looks from both Dani and Spencer before adding, “but then I’d be a hypocrite.”

“Yes, yes you would,” Dani said as they reached for a big clear bottle with a red label before passing Joselyn a bottle of whiskey.

Spencer’s stomach churned, remembering how much she abhorred the smell. But it was too late to back down now. She could learn to like the taste if it meant not having to think about anything for a while.

She glanced over and saw Joselyn’s concerned stare from the kitchen island. She shook her head. *I’m fine*, she mouthed, noting the way the other girl’s forehead creased in concern. Before Joselyn could call her out and press her for details, Dani brought her attention to something in the kitchen, and Spencer thanked whichever deity was listening for the brief reprieve as she tried in vain to forget why she was there in the first place.



# Chapter 35



Nick willed the clock to move faster. It wasn't even close to the end of his shift – his first one in two weeks.

Joselyn had begrudgingly asked him to come in earlier, but with things going by as slow as they were, he had ample time to think about Spencer, and what could have possibly happened last night. He worried he'd fucked up beyond all repair after the party when she didn't bother to answer his texts or even look at him after he said kissing her would have been a mistake.

One of the biggest lies he ever told in his goddamn life, and it probably cost him everything.

Joselyn's voice pulled him from his thoughts. "Nicky," she hissed, appearing out of nowhere and grabbing his arm.

He turned to look at her, blinking slowly at the realization that she was actually speaking to him now. "Yes?"

"Clock out. *Now*," Joselyn said, pulling him away from the register before he could even do so. "You need to get your ass upstairs."

That snapped him out of his reverie. "Joselyn," he said, digging his heels in. "You don't have a closer. What's going on?"

She sighed. "Your girlfriend is learning the hard way that alcohol doesn't solve problems."

“Spencer? She’s not my girlfriend,” he reminded her through gritted teeth as he took the stairs two at a time anyway.

“And whose fault is that?” she shouted up at him. “Just go. I’ll close.”

“Not by yourself,” he snapped when he reached the apartment door.

Joselyn threw her hands up. “I’ll call Christian. Jesus fuck, Nicky. Priorities.”

“Your safety is just as much my priority as hers is,” Nick said. “You know he won’t be able to get off. I’m not leaving here until after close.”

Joselyn smacked herself in the forehead, taking a deep, calming breath as she fingered the crystal around her neck. She looked to Connor, who had been watching the two of them volleying shouts from the back corner near Spencer’s booth. “We’re closing early.”

She turned back up toward Nick with a raised brow, opening the apartment door. “Happy? Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“Where is she? How much did you give her?” he asked sharply.

She pointed. “Bathroom. And a couple vodka cranberries that were mostly cranberry juice. I’m not an idiot,” Joselyn said defensively. “She said it wasn’t any of your business, anyway.”

He paused with his hand on the knob. “So why call me up here?”

She gave him the side-eye as she shoved him forward. “Like I said. I’m not an idiot. Now go in there and take care of her.”

*Don’t have to tell me twice,* Nick thought, steeling himself for what he was about to see.

# Chapter 36



**Y**ou're okay," Dani soothed, holding her hair back as Spencer vomited the contents of her stomach out.

She groaned, still leaning her head on the blissfully clean toilet bowl as she heaved.

Someone else entered the bathroom. "What the hell?"

She knew that voice. But when she tried to speak, the words caught in her throat, slipping through her fingers before she could articulate them.

Dani's voice sounded muffled as they answered. "She had some vodka cranberries and pretty much threw up immediately."

Joselyn hadn't even let her drink that much, but she still felt like she'd been hit by a train.

Someone swore. "Fucking Christ," the voice said. "This is her first time drinking. Let me take over – she knows me."

Dani's arm curled protectively around Spencer's shoulders. "How do I know you can be trusted, Nick? Just because I know you doesn't mean she does. I'm not going to leave her with a stranger."

Nick? What the fuck was he doing here?

"She lives in Thorne Hall; I'll make sure she gets there in one piece. Ask Joselyn, she can vouch for me."

“That’s not good enough.”

Nick sighed. “She’s an English major, but the only way she can retain anything is if she plays an audiobook as she’s reading along. She hates that because it takes her twice as much time to get her work done. Her favorite milk substitute is oat, but she’ll settle for soy. Her favorite movie is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and yes, she’s seen it live. For an English major, she has a habit of texting exclusively in lowercase letters and run-on sentences with an obscene lack of punctuation. She’s also irrationally stubborn and can’t accept help for shit.

“Is that good enough?”

Dani relaxed their hold slightly. Spencer tried speaking up for herself, but it came out choked. “Nick?”

“I’m right here, sweetheart,” he reassured her from the doorway.

Dani stroked her hair, waiting for Spencer’s confirmation.

“S’okay Dani,” she whispered. “He’s good.”

“If you say so,” they let go of her reluctantly and stood up.

Spencer heard Nick cut them off over the roar of the blood rushing through her ears. “Do you need Connor to walk with you back to campus or are you staying the night? I want you to be safe, too.”

Dani waved their hand on their way out. “I’m staying to help Joselyn retwist her hair. Don’t worry about me.”

Nick nodded as he knelt down beside Spencer. “Are you okay?” He rubbed soothing circles onto her back with his hand. “Everything’s alright. I’ve got you now. Come on, I’ll get you back to your dorm.” He braced her arms, and she stood up wobbly.

But she hadn’t forgotten how much he hurt her the past few weeks. He didn’t have any right to swoop in and try to save the day.

She shoved his hands off. “Get the hell off me. I don’t need your help.”

“Too bad,” he snapped.

Spencer stumbled toward the door. “No. You don’t get to do this. You don’t get to be here right now, Nick.”

“Nicholas,” he corrected her.

She grit her teeth. “Nick.”

“Spencer.” Nick grabbed her arm, unknowingly pressing painfully on her bruises through the thin barrier of her sleeve.

“Look,” he sighed when she didn’t budge. “Be mad at me all you want. It’s not going to stop me from taking care of you. You’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

She yanked her arm out of his grasp again. “Fuck off. I don’t need you to take care of me.”

Nick blocked the doorway with his body. “Sweetheart, please.”

Spencer stiffened. “Don’t. You don’t get to call me that. I’m not your sweetheart. I’m not anything to you.”

“That’s a fucking lie and you know it.”

She felt her eyes watering. “Really? What would you call the past few weeks? When you told me to go on a *date* with another man? Or how about when you said you wished you never met me and told me to lose your number? When you told me to let you go?”

The words came easier now, flowing out like her dam had burst.

“What are you even doing here? You think I’m just going to forget everything? It’s not going to work, so don’t even try.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t give a rat’s ass whether you forgive me or not.”

“Noted,” she said coolly. Nick glared at her.

“Dammit Spencer, will you let me fucking finish?” He raked his hand through his hair. “I’m still gonna take care of you. If you don’t want that, at least let me help you get home.”

Spencer didn't even know where home was anymore. Certainly not her dorm with Reese.

He snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her flush against his side, careful not to touch the bare skin where her shirt had ridden up. The memory of that guy's hands on Reese's exposed midriff forced itself to the front of her mind, and she felt the fight leave her body as he helped her out of the apartment and down the stairs.

Nick let her push him off again when they got to the parking lot. Spencer crossed her arms. "I don't want to go home."

He pursed his lips together in a thin line. "Fine." He grabbed her hand and tried leading her to his car.

She stayed rooted to her spot. "Where are we going?"

"My place."

Her blood ran cold at the possibility that Sam was home. The logical part of her brain said there was no way he'd willingly put her near him after what he walked in on the other night.

But the logical part of her brain was also hazy from the vodka. Spencer tried to yank her hand out of his grip, but his fingers locked around her bruised wrist as he pulled her. It hurt a little, but she wasn't about to let him know that. Not if it meant having to explain why. "I don't recall agreeing to go anywhere with you," she snapped caustically, trying in vain to get her hand back.

Nick opened the passenger door with his free hand. "Just get in the fucking car," he grit out. He dropped her wrist and sighed. "I promise I will give you all the time you need to curse me out or yell at me or anything you want to do *after* I take care of you. Now get in. Please."

"Whatever," she snapped, strapping herself in. "All this means is that I'm too damn tired to keep standing. This doesn't mean I forgive you."

Nick started the car. "If you think that bothers me, you have no goddamn idea what you mean to me."

“I’m well aware that I mean nothing to you, Nick,” Spencer said, feigning indifference as she crossed her arms. She wondered if the alcohol made the hurt in her voice more obvious.

The car jerked to a stop. They weren’t even out of the parking lot yet. Spencer felt another wave of nausea hit, but she forced it down. There was no way in hell she was going to prove his point that she needed help, even if the idea of painting the inside of his car with vomit was very tempting.

“I thought we were going to your place.”

Nick’s jaw clenched. “Not until you stop lying to yourself.”

“I’m not lying.”

He shut the car off and turned in his seat to face her. “So, you really believe that? That you don’t mean anything to me?”

“You made your feelings quite clear over the past few weeks,” she said dryly.

Nick closed his eyes and pinched his brow. “You’re wrong.”

“Excuse me?” Spencer cocked her head and glared at him, afraid that whatever he had to say would be enough to make her break and tell him what happened.

“I know what I said hurt you. But I need you to know I didn’t mean any of it. I know this is the worst time to do this, but I’m not gonna let you keep thinking you mean nothing to me.”

“Stop.” A rogue tear rolled down her cheek. “You don’t get to say that to me.”

Nick used his thumb to wipe the tear away. “It’s the truth, love. And I meant what I said earlier. You don’t have to forgive me. I’m not going to beg you for something you don’t want to give. I just ask that you let me take care of you tonight and then you can keep on hating me in the morning.”

When she didn’t respond, he turned the car back on. Spencer spent the rest of the short drive to his place staring out

of the window and trying not to cry or vomit.



She scowled when Nick tried to help her out of the car, only relaxing when she realized the driveway was otherwise empty.

“Spencer, please,” he pleaded again.

“How many times do I have to tell you? I. Don’t. Need. Your. Help.”

But when her knees buckled, she didn’t protest when he caught her by the arm and helped her walk inside.

“You can let go of me now,” she said, giving him a pointed look. He ignored her, leading the way upstairs.

A muscle in his jaw ticked when she tried to pull away. “I will as soon as we get to my room.”

“I don’t want to be alone with you in your room,” she snapped, trying to shake him off. He let her win earlier, but it was obvious it didn’t cost him any effort to overpower her.

“Spencer, you’re drunk. You need to sleep it off.”

*Tipsy* might have been more accurate, but she wasn’t experienced enough to know the difference.

She crossed her arms when they got to the top of the stairs. “I’m not stealing your bed from you. And we’re certainly not sleeping in it together.”

“If I say you’re borrowing it, will that make things better?” He pushed her toward his bedroom. “I’ll take the couch.”

Another wave of nausea wracked through her body, so Spencer reluctantly sat on the edge of his bed to settle her stomach. “This doesn’t mean anything,” she said, hoping he didn’t take this as a sign of acquiescence. She closed her eyes briefly and rubbed her temples. “I just don’t want to get puke on your carpet.”



Nick reached for her arm again, but let his hand fall when she flinched.

“Nick, please. I can’t —” She closed her eyes again and shook her head.

“Can’t what, sweetheart?”

*Stop calling me that. It’s not fair. You don’t get to do this. You have no right.*

“I can’t be around you right now!” she choked out, angry she couldn’t say any of the other things she was thinking. Her head hurt and her heart hurt and she wasn’t sure it was entirely the alcohol’s fault for how sick she felt.

“Then I’ll leave,” he said, rising to his feet. At Spencer’s face, he continued, “I’m going to give you your space. I’ll be downstairs whenever you’re ready.”

“Ready for what?” she asked warily.

He paused with his hand on the doorknob. “For me to show you what you really mean to me.”



There was absolutely no way in hell she was staying. Spencer couldn’t think straight when he was around, and she absolutely needed to start thinking straight if she wanted to avoid any more heartache.

*Fuck it.*

He couldn’t make her stay no matter how sorry he said he was. Spencer sighed, preparing for a fight anyway as she made her way down the stairs. Nick was opening a beer on the kitchen counter, and she rolled her eyes.

*Hypocrite.*

She was almost to the door when his sharp voice cut through the air. “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

Spencer turned on her heel to glare at him. “Leaving.”

“Like hell you are,” he hissed, abandoning the bottle on the counter and moving to block the door.

Spencer crossed her arms. “Nicholas. Move.”

“Absolutely not, you’re still drunk and you’re the one who said you didn’t want to go back to your dorm.”

She felt another wave of nausea hit her, and she grabbed the back of the couch for support as she dropped to her knees, resting her head on top of them.

“Christ,” Nick muttered as he shoved a trash can under her face. “What was that about leaving again?”

“Go fuck yourself,” Spencer snapped, swallowing down a bunch of bile. There was no way she hadn’t thrown all of it up already, so this had to be the stress getting to her.

She was about to make a comment about his presence being vomit-inducing when he braced her arms and helped her stand.

He led her to the front of the couch before making himself comfortable on the armchair. The trash can was conveniently placed in front of her.

Spencer glared at him, the urge to throw up mostly gone now. “Don’t you have anything better to do on a Friday night?”

Nick leaned back and crossed his legs at his ankles. “Spencer, I can assure you there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

She stiffened, forcing her voice to stay tight and not shake. “*Stop*. Stop saying things like that, Nick.”

“I told you; it’s the truth.”

“How do I know you’re not lying?” Her voice broke. “How do I know this isn’t just because you feel guilty? How do I know you aren’t just going to push me away again once you’re done taking care of me?”

“I’ll never be done taking care of you, love.”

“*Stop.*” She felt treacherous tears forming with every word he said.

Before he could protest again, Spencer leaned over the armrest as more blood-red sludge leaked out of her mouth.

Nick held her hair back and didn’t seem at all disgusted at her display. “How much did you have?”

“Don’t know. Not much. I don’t think. Ask Joselyn,” she managed to choke out. She coughed the last of it out, dry heaving into the trash can.

He sighed. “You should start feeling better soon now that you’ve gotten all of it out of your system.”

As much as she hated agreeing with him, he was probably right. She still had a raging migraine, but at least her stomach was finally settling.

Nick frowned at the trash can. “Did you not have anything to eat?”

“What’s it matter?”

His frown deepened. “Spencer,” he said. “You know better than to drink on an empty stomach.”

Did she? She’d been so desperate for a distraction she hadn’t even thought about it.

Nick sighed again as he moved the trash can back to its original spot in the kitchen.

“Why?” he asked when he sat back down across from her.

Spencer was rubbing her temples. “Why what?”

“Why were you drinking? When I first met you, you were vehemently against it. You barely let me pour you a Coke because you were afraid I spiked it. Just tell me. *Please.*”

“Why, so you can judge me some more? Fuck you, Nick.”

His nostrils flared. “If you’re going to drink and end up puking your guts out on a bathroom floor, I want to be the one to take care of you. And I would at least want to know why.”

“Things change. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“Does it have to do with what happened last night?”

Spencer’s heart stopped.

“With Reese?” he clarified.

*Oh, thank God. He doesn’t know.* “How do you know something happened with Reese?” she snapped, eager for a subject change.

“Because I went upstairs after I saw you running out and she was with some guy in one of the bedrooms. I tried to get her away from him and she said you —”

He listened when she held up a finger and asked him to stop. “Please,” she pleaded. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

Nick’s expression softened. “Okay,” he said, standing. “I’ll be in the kitchen. You can keep sitting here if you don’t want to go back upstairs.”

Spencer stayed on the couch, not wanting to be tempted by the idea of sleeping in a nice big bed and letting him win.



He set a plate and a bottle of water on the coffee table in front of her. “Eat.”

“Eggs?” she flicked her gaze from the plate back to him suspiciously.

“They’re good for upping your glutathione production,” he explained, like any normal person had any idea what the fuck glutathione was.

She pushed the food away. “I’m not hungry.”

“You need to eat, Spencer.”

“I said I’m not hungry.”

“Try.”

She pinched her brow. “If I have *one* bite of this, will you leave me alone?”

“Are you seriously trying to bargain with me right now?” he asked incredulously.

He should’ve known that she wasn’t going to make this easy for him. Spencer sat back and crossed her arms. “What if I am?”

But Nick was just as stubborn. He grabbed her chin. “I’m not above feeding you myself. Do you want that?”

She glared at him, saying nothing.

“That’s what I thought,” he muttered, sliding the plate forward.

As much as she would have loved to spit his food out on him, she hated the idea of him spoon-feeding her like a child more.

After she swallowed a few bites and downed most of the water, Nick visibly relaxed in his seat. “Thank you,” he said tightly. “Was that so bad?”

“Watch it, Nicholas.” She wasn’t about to admit that it actually seemed to be helping, and she *definitely* wasn’t about to admit she liked his cooking again.

His eyes narrowed. “Something else is bothering you.”

“Yeah,” she snapped. “You.”

“Spencer.” She scowled at him, but he ignored her. “You’ve gone through lots of shit and never once did you reach for a bottle. What. Happened?”

“None of your fucking business.”

“I think we’ve already established that you *are* my fucking business.”

Like hell she was.

He reached for her hand like he wanted to hold it, but the way his fingers wrapped around her wrist pressed painfully down on her bruise.

Before she could stop herself, Spencer let out a whimper.

Nick let go immediately, his eyes darkening. “What’s wrong?” But he was already tugging down her sleeve, revealing the bruised skin.

“Spencer,” he said in a low voice. “Who did this to you?”

She yanked her arm back and held her hand to her chest, hiding it from view. She didn’t need his pity.

He sat next to her on the couch and crossed his arms. “I want a name. We can sit out here all night, or you can tell me now and save us both the time.”

Spencer knew he’d make good on his threat, but she was more afraid of how he’d react if he found out who did it.

“I’m waiting.” The urge to throw the rest of her food at him was increasing exponentially.

“I don’t know!” she lied, hoping her tipsy state masked any hint of her deception. “Some guy, okay? After I left the party, some guy dragged me from the sidewalk. He put his hands on me and didn’t listen when I told him to stop.”

Spencer swallowed hard as she watched him go completely rigid. She’d never seen him angry like this. Not even when he caught her and Sam in the kitchen. His jaw was clenched so tight she would’ve been shocked if he didn’t crack any teeth. He buried his face in his hands and counted to himself.

“Give me a minute,” Nick said finally, taking slow, measured breaths through his nose. “And don’t you fucking dare tell me it’s none of my business and that I don’t care about you. I’m not in the fucking mood.”

She hadn’t been planning on it, but he definitely should’ve known him telling her not to do it was almost certainly the way to make sure she did. “And I’m not in the fucking mood to be around you right now, so I guess we’re both gonna be unhappy.”

*“Spencer.”*

“Go to hell, Nick.”

It was uncalled for, and she knew it. But she needed him to leave her alone before she told him everything, and she was running out of ideas.

Nick's eyes were closed, so he couldn't have seen her expression. But it was like he was reading her mind anyway. "I know what you're doing, sweetheart, and it's not going to work. I'm not kicking you out no matter what you say to me."

Spencer grit her teeth. "What if I don't want to stay?"

"How many times do I have to tell you what a shitty liar you are? I'd be an idiot if I actually believed that," he snapped as his eyes fluttered back open. He looked calmer than before, but that wasn't saying much. At least he hadn't picked up on her lie from earlier.

"You *are* an idiot," she shot back.

"Stop deflecting. I'm not gonna force you to tell me exactly what happened..."

Good, because she had no intention of doing so.

"But will you please stop fighting me on taking care of you? Can you do that for me?"

"You're not really in any position to ask me for anything." He raised a brow dangerously.

Spencer glared back at him. "Don't you understand how much you fucking hurt me? Why should I let you help me right now? Why should I even give you the time of day?"

Liam wouldn't have hurt her like this. But she couldn't kid herself into thinking she'd ever reciprocate his feelings.

"Sweetheart —" Nick tried to wrap his arm around her shoulders.

She flinched away from his touch, knowing it was enough to make her fold and accept anything he wanted to give her.

He dropped to his knees in front of her and took her hands in his. "Spencer, I'm sorry. I'll do whatever it takes. Just let me fix this. Please." The desperation in his voice had her

resolve slipping, and it was a good thing she was sitting, because she felt her knees turn to jelly.

Spencer avoided his gaze. “I-I can’t.”

“You don’t even want to let me try?” he asked, his voice cracking at the seams.

She tore her hands from his and wiped angrily at the tears forming in her eyes, sucking in a breath. “*You’re* the one who didn’t want to try, Nick. Why should I offer you that courtesy now?”

But she wanted to. Badly. And she hated herself for it.

“I told you I wouldn’t beg for your forgiveness if you don’t want to give it to me,” Nick said slowly, massaging her knees. “But goddammit, I can’t stand seeing you like this. I know I can’t even *begin* to understand what happened to you, and I can’t make it go away. Just let me help carry your burden for you. You don’t have to be strong right now.”

Another tear rolled down her cheek. “I don’t know any different.”

“I’ll do whatever you want,” Nick pleaded. He stood and rubbed his face. Tilted her chin up with his finger. “I’ll give you space, but I’m not letting you get rid of me. Just let me help you.”



# Chapter 37



It had to be the alcohol. That was it. The only reason why she didn't fight him on helping her back up the stairs to his bedroom.

"I need a minute," she said, sitting on the edge of his bed and rubbing her temples. "Please."

Nick leaned his shoulder against the threshold of the door with his arms crossed. "I'll give you all night."

Spencer's head shot up. "No."

His brow furrowed in confusion. "No?"

"I...can't be alone," she admitted. "Stay with me." *Please.* There wouldn't be any more unpacking of her feelings tonight. Spencer would just let herself ask for what she wanted for once in her goddamn life.

Nick sighed and settled on the ground next to her. "I want to give you what you want." He nudged her foot with his. "But you have to tell me. Am I sleeping in here with you or not?"

Spencer hugged one of his pillows to her chest. "If we put these between us," she relented. She had to tread carefully here – stay strong enough to stand on her own two feet in case he pulled the rug out from under her again.

She watched Nick line the space between their bodies with pillows, cursing herself for wanting nothing more than to be

close to him when she was supposed to be mad. He didn't balk at her request, didn't protest.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

Spencer picked at her cuticles, which were a lost cause at this point. "Why are you doing all this?"

Nick pulled her hands apart. "Because I care about you."

"No." She shook her head angrily. "You don't get to say you care about me."

"*Spencer.*"

She met his glare with one of her own. "Nick," she said flatly, "You're the one who told me 'No' and to give Liam a chance. What part of that is supposed to make me think you care about my feelings?"

"Liam likes you. A *blind* person could see it."

She wondered if she could still blame the alcohol for how warm and fuzzy her face felt.

"How the hell did you know what he feels about me? You met him *one* time," Spencer reminded him.

Nick threw his hands up and swore. "Because he looks at you the same way I do!"

She blinked slowly. "And what way is that?"

"You know exactly what way."

It was the way he was looking at her right now. And something about that terrified her.

"Could you really not see it?" he asked quietly. "From either of us?"

Spencer squirmed as she contemplated her answer. "I've known him for years and he's never made a move on me – or anyone for the matter. I just thought he wasn't interested in dating. He was always focused on his grades. That's why we got on so well. I didn't know until we met up on Valentine's Day and he tried to kiss me. I told him I didn't feel the same way."

She didn't have a good answer to the second part of his question.

But he prompted her anyway. "And me?"

Spencer leaned her elbows on her knees and buried her face in her hands. "I thought I was seeing what I wanted to see, Nick. I told you – I've never felt this way about anyone before. I don't even know what's going on anymore."

She took a deep breath before continuing. "When I first realized things were different between us, I didn't know what I was feeling. I just knew I liked being around you even more than I did Reese and Hunter. And I didn't mind it when we touched. That scared me. I've never felt anything like this before."

This conversation was exhausting her in a way not even the vodka could compete with. Spencer peeked out at him from between her fingers, afraid of what she might see staring back at her. "Can we go to bed now?" she whispered. "Please?"

The longer this went on, the more she just wanted to let him help carry her burden. And she'd learned her lesson about relying on people from her mother. They always asked for something in return, or guilt-tripped you every chance they got. Even the people who were supposed to love you unconditionally.

She could get by just fine without him. She'd just let herself have tonight, and that was it. When he didn't answer, Spencer sighed and laid down on her side, letting her eyes droop.

The bed shifted, and she saw him mirroring her position, eyes roaming her body. She resisted the urge to pull the covers over herself and hide.

"Does it hurt anywhere else?" Nick asked softly.

There was that urge again. The urge to let him carry her burden so she didn't have to be strong. Spencer sat up and lifted her shirt just enough to show the mottled, yellowing skin

on her stomach. She flinched at the string of curses he let out before laying back down.

“It’s not that bad. It didn’t go that far,” she whispered.

Nick shot up out of the bed and walked around to her side. He pulled her hand away from her mouth before she even registered the nail-biting. “What. Happened.”

“You said you wouldn’t force me to talk about it,” she reminded him.

Nick clenched his jaw. “That was before I saw —” He took a deep breath and sighed. “Tell me who did this to you,” he said, gripping her chin so she was forced to look at him.

Spencer shook her head and propped herself up on her elbows. “You have a temper, Nick. I reserve the right to limit my exposure to it. I don’t need you to be angry for me.” Realistically speaking, she had a feeling he’d skip the anger and go straight to murderous if he ever found out the truth.

Nick dropped her chin and got up to pace before banging his head and fist on the door. “Christ,” he muttered darkly. “I need a fucking drink.”

Spencer scowled. “Hypocrite.”

He raised an eyebrow as he turned back around. “There she is.”

“You keep saying that,” she grumbled. “Every time I snap at you.”

“Because it’s what makes you *you*. You don’t take shit from anybody. Least of all, me.”

“I don’t want to be difficult anymore.”

He scoffed. “You’ve been doing a grand job tonight, sweetheart,” he said sarcastically. Instead of shrinking back, Spencer glared at him.

Which only made Nick look even more pleased.

“I think we’ve established I’m no sweetheart.”

“Yes, you are. I’ve seen the way you are with your friends. With me. You bring your friends food when they’re too busy to join you for meals. You visit Joselyn at work even when she can’t talk long. Those might not seem like much to you, but they’re everything to us. To me.

“And for the record,” Nick continued as he returned to his side of their makeshift wall, “I *like* when you’re difficult.”

Spencer snorted. “Even now?”

But he nodded solemnly, laying down and facing the other way. “Even now,” he confirmed.

It didn’t take long for Spencer to say *fuck it* and shove everything to the floor until there was nothing between them anymore. She settled her neck onto his outstretched arm, nodding when his other one snaked gently around her waist to pull her back flush against his front.

“Careful,” she whispered. “Bruises.”

“I know, love,” he whispered back. “I know.”

# Chapter 38



Nick lost himself in that calm, peaceful sleep that only came whenever Spencer was around now. She had her face buried in his chest with his chin resting on the top of her head, and his arms wrapped around her back. All was right with his world.

Then his fucking phone rang.

Nick tried to disentangle his body from hers, but she let out a weak protest and tightly fisted the front of his shirt.

“Sweetheart, I need to answer my phone,” he whispered. She reluctantly let go of him and turned on her other side as he fumbled around for it. He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, swearing.

Joselyn’s voice crackled from the other end. “Nicky? Really need you to come in. I’m opening alone.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, seriously?” Nick rubbed his face and checked the time. 5:01 a. m. “Give me thirty minutes.”

“Nicky.”

He rolled his eyes. “Fine, twenty. It’s the asscrack of dawn on my day off, Joselyn, cut me some fucking slack.”

“Have I told you I love you?” she asked brightly now that he’d agreed to come in. She sounded so grateful, she even ignored the fact that he cursed at her.

“I love you, too. Now let me get ready,” he grumbled.

“Wait. Did you get Spencer back to her dorm okay?” Joselyn asked.

He sighed. “She didn’t want to go back to her dorm, Josie. She stayed with me last night. She’s fine – still sleeping it off I think.”

“I told you, you were the best person to come and take care of her. Now hurry up and get over here.” She hung up before he could respond.

Spencer was propped up on her elbows. “Who was that?” she asked, still sounding half asleep. At least she wasn’t trying to fight him. Yet.

“Joselyn needs help opening,” Nick answered on his way to his closet for his uniform shirt. “Do you want to come with me?” Not that she actually had a choice in this, but he wanted her to think she did.

“I don’t need your help,” she snapped, sitting up.

*There it is.*

“I can get back to Thorne on my own.”

“Bull,” he muttered.

Spencer glared at him. She opened the drawer next to her like she was looking for something, but before Nick could ask, she slammed it shut. “I told you me sleeping here didn’t mean anything, Nick. I’m still mad at you and you’re the one who said I could keep on hating you in the morning.”

Nick wasn’t going to bring up the fact that they’d just been cuddling, or how badly she protested when he let go, no matter how much it would have decimated her argument.

“Spencer,” he sighed instead. “I know what I said. And I don’t want to fight you on this. But you can either stay here with my roommates or come to work with me.”

There wasn’t a damn chance in hell he was actually letting her stay if Sam was home. The only way Sam was going to be anywhere near her again was over his dead body.

Something flashed in her eyes as she crossed her arms. “Fine,” she snapped. “I’ll come with you.”

Nick bit his tongue. *That’s what I thought.*



There was something soothing about the monotony of work after staying up arguing with one of the most stubborn people Nick had ever met in his goddamn life. He went through the motions, watching Spencer do a poor job of acting like she wasn’t picking at her cuticles.

He shoved her usual between her hands to separate them. “How are you feeling?”

She responded by holding the cold drink to her forehead and scowling. “How do you fucking think?”

Joselyn sauntered up, armed with a Gatorade and some aspirin. “Your first hangover, dear?”

Nick pinched his brow and let out a deep sigh. “Joselyn.”

She waved him off. “Don’t you have opening to be doing?” She turned to Spencer. “Do you mind texting Dani back and letting them know you’re alive? I’ve been making a valiant effort to keep them from kicking down Nicky’s door, but I can’t hold the fort for much longer.”

Spencer patted her pockets for her phone and swore at the black screen. “My phone died.”

Nick slid his across the table. “Use mine. Pretty sure we had an old work chat.” At another warning look from his cousin, he reluctantly went back to work, his gaze frequently returning to the slumped-over form in the back booth.

Maybe an hour had gone by before Christian came stumbling down the stairs, also clearly hungover, but wearing his uniform shirt. “I can take over,” he grumbled as he clocked in. “Joss told me to come relieve you.”



“Didn’t you work a shift last night?” Nick asked, cocking his head and looking the man up and down.

“I’d say you still probably had a rougher night than I did,” Christian snorted, looking from him to Spencer. There was a question in his glance that Nick had no interest in answering, so he quickly clocked out and ushered Spencer through the back door.

She must’ve found a charger while he was working, because she was frowning at her now lit phone screen.

“What’s wrong?”

Spencer chewed on her bottom lip and tapped on her phone instead of answering. Finally, she sighed. “Trying to time how long I can be in Thorne without running into Reese. Her location’s pinging at the studio, but I don’t know how current that is.”

Nick narrowed his eyes. “You’re avoiding your roommate.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Spencer hadn’t given him any details about what happened between the two of them, but considering what Reese said to *him*, he could only imagine how much worse it was on her end.

“I avoid my roommate, but I can assure you it’s for vastly different reasons.” Such as the fact that Nick had been close to murdering said roommate about a week ago. He sighed and gently laid his hand on her back to steer her in the direction of her dorm.



Spencer made Nick stand out in the hall, staring at him through the barely open bathroom door.

“I need to take a shower,” she mumbled at his raised eyebrow. “I won’t be long.”

Now that the shock had worn off – probably delayed from the alcohol and last night’s emotionally taxing conversation – the reality of what happened hit her with full force as she rubbed soap on her aching skin.

Hands. Touching her. Forcing her to her knees.

A tongue shoved in her mouth. A hand covering her screams.

She fell against the wall of the shower until her ass hit the ground. She hugged her knees and hoped like hell Nick couldn’t hear her sobbing over the sound of the water.

No such luck.

“Spencer? Sweetheart, what’s wrong? Are you okay in there?”

The doorknob jiggled, and Spencer remembered too late that the bathroom door didn’t lock properly.

She kept crying, unable to see anything past her own tears and the water flowing over her. Nothing felt like enough. Scrubbing her skin raw only served as a reminder that she’d rather crawl out of it than continue living with the memory of what happened to her.

Nick knocked some more. The door opened, and Spencer shut her eyes, steeling herself.

“I’m not coming in here. I promise I’m not looking. I just want to know you’re okay.” It sounded like he was facing away from her. Spencer could barely catch what he said next. “I’ll call Joselyn to come in here if that’s what you need.”

*I’m not okay, but I don’t know how to ask for what I need.*

Spencer reached her shaking hand up to shut the water off.

“Spencer?”

“Get out,” she heaved. “I’m almost done.” *Pull yourself together. You don’t need anyone’s help. It wasn’t that bad. It could have gone a lot worse.*

Spencer winced at the way the fabric scraped across her raw, bruised skin as she dressed herself. She grit her teeth and

reminded herself that she could survive this. She had to, because no one else was going to do it for her.

But when Nick held his arms out when she finally opened the door, Spencer collapsed against him, feeling the way his chin rested gently on top of her head.

“Hey,” he whispered. “What’s wrong, love?”

# Chapter 39



Nick knew he had to tread carefully here. He knew the significance of this moment – both because she was letting him touch her and also because she was letting him see this side of her. He wasn't jeopardizing the trust she'd finally put in him. He was her friend first, and then maybe something else. If she'd have him that way.

But then he thought maybe he should let go; she doesn't want this, until he felt the front of his shirt getting damp. Glancing down, he saw her clutching the fabric tightly, her body shaking so bad he had to keep holding her up.

*Please don't cry*, he wanted to tell her, even though she had every right to.

"Shhh," he said instead, cradling the back of her head with his hand. "You're safe with me."

He knew he'd hold her forever if she asked, but he also knew the longer they stayed, the more likely it was they were going to run into Reese before she was ready.

"Do you want me to grab some of your things for you?" Nick asked when she finally let go of him.

Spencer shook her head. Wiped her eyes. "I'll just be a minute."

Nick nodded as he pulled her door shut behind him and sat on the couch to check his phone.

UNKNOWN NUMBER

Nick this is Hunter.

Have you seen Spencer?

Reese says she hasn't been home and she's not answering her texts.

She turned her location off too.

NICK

She's been with me.

HUNTER

She okay?

NICK

For the most part

I haven't been able to get much out of her.

How's Reese doing?

HUNTER

I made her sleep over so I could keep an eye on her.

NICK

I thought she and Spencer were vehemently against drinking.

HUNTER

They are. I'm not sure what the fuck happened, but it's been a while since I saw her that wasted.

“Ahem.” Spencer stared at him with her arms crossed. She had her backpack on. “Who the hell are you texting? You look

guilty as fuck.”

“No one important,” he answered quickly, shoving his phone in his pocket.

“Nicholas.” It sounded like she felt better whenever she had something to yell at him about, which he could live with if it meant she stopped crying.

Nick sighed. “...Hunter’s asking about you.”

Spencer raised an eyebrow. “And what did you tell him?”

“Just that you’ve been with me.”

She snorted. “That’s it?”

“*You* text him back if you want him to know anything,” he snapped. Then he remembered what she said about his temper last night. “Hunter’s not the one you’re mad at,” he reminded her gently.

“You’re right,” she said. “*You’re* the one I’m mad at. And no grand gesture is going to make me forgive you any faster, so don’t get any ideas.”

Nick shoved his hands in his pockets as they walked back toward his house. “I know, sweetheart. I know.”



“You’re staring,” Spencer grumbled, glaring at him over her untouched dinner. If she didn’t take a bite soon, Nick was going to make good on his threat to feed her himself.

He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “Am I the only one who knows about what happened?”

*That* got her shoving a forkful of salad in her mouth, and Nick wondered if he should just take his victories where he could get them. He sighed and pinched his brow. “Spencer.”

When she'd eaten about half of her food, she shoved her bowl forward like a bargaining chip.

He scowled as he pushed it back. "That's not how this works, sweetheart. You don't weaponize eating because you don't want me asking questions."

"I won't weaponize if you won't ask," Spencer countered.

Nick rubbed the amethyst in his pocket as he counted under his breath, knowing full well she was trying to get a rise out of him.

But he was working on being better for her, and that included keeping his anger in check. He slid to his knees in front of her chair and grabbed both her hands.

"If you won't let me help you, let me help you find someone who can. You don't have to let me in. You don't owe me any of this, but you owe it to yourself to get the help you need. I'll be right next to you if you need me. But you can't keep this shit bottled up."

Spencer's hands clenched into fists, and he worked to gently uncurl them as he waited for her to say something.

When she didn't, Nick let out another sigh. "It doesn't have to be me. You don't need saving. But goddammit, don't think you have to go through this alone. There's nothing wrong with needing help."

He almost suggested going through the Ravens Counseling Center before remembering with a grimace the school's shitty Title IX policies.

"*Nick,*" she finally bit out, pulling him from his reverie.

His head shot up.

"I don't want to talk about this right now," Spencer said flatly. She returned to eating her dinner, albeit with a purposeful slowness that was *definitely* testing his patience.

But he was focused on her words. "Does that mean there *will* be a time when you want to talk about it? With anyone?"

She shrugged, not looking at him. "No promises."

That wasn't good enough.

Nick slid the half-eaten salad away so she didn't have something to hide behind. "What would you tell Reese? If she were in your position."

He knew it was the wrong thing to say when her gaze hardened, and her hand twitched toward her mouth. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought her up."

Spencer chewed on her thumbnail. "It's fine." He resisted the urge to yank her hand away, instead gently coaxing her fork into it.

"I'm sorry," Nick whispered, standing up. "We don't have to talk about it anymore." If he pushed her any more tonight, she might snap back like a rubber band and go back to shutting him out entirely. That wasn't an option. Not in the slightest.



Spencer stared at the pillows and blankets littering the bedroom floor. "Should we even bother?"

Nick cocked his head as he sat on the edge of the bed next to her. "What do you mean?"

She waved her hand at the mess as she slid under the covers. "We tried building a wall between us last night. Clearly, it didn't work."

"Does that bother you?" Nick asked, raising an eyebrow. "I could take the floor."

He'd barely started to slide down when Spencer hauled him back up and tugged on his arm until he got the hint to climb in next to her. "This doesn't mean anything," she hissed, even as she pressed her face into his chest and gripped his shirt tight.

Nick's arms wrapped around her back instantly. "Okay."



Last night, she'd been drunk and exhausted enough that she'd fallen asleep almost instantly. Tonight, Spencer's entire body was tensed up, and he could feel her pulse beat frantically even as her eyes finally drooped.

Nick thought they were out of the woods until she writhed in his arms, eyes still closed. "Get off me!"

He let go immediately, but she was still convulsing, hitting at something that wasn't there.

*Fuck.* Was she having a nightmare?

"Don't touch me!" She kicked at the air, her limbs getting tangled in his sheets.

"Spencer, stop." He pinned her wrists to her sides before she hurt herself, remembering too late that she had a nasty bruise on one of them.

Spencer whimpered and tried to rip herself out of his grip, sending them both tumbling over the edge of his bed onto the ground. Her eyes widened in panic as she finally woke up and he jumped back, giving her space.

"It's just me," Nick said slowly, standing with his hands up. "You were having a nightmare."

She was still looking at him like a wounded animal, eyes darting around the room as she stood up on shaking legs.

"Get out," Spencer hissed. "Just leave me alone, Nick."

"You know I can't do that," Nick said, even as he let her push him out the door, falling on his hands and knees out in the hallway. He could hear her sobbing as he knocked.

"Love," he pleaded, resting his forehead on the door. "Just let me hold you. Please." He knocked some more. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to. Just please let me in."

He didn't know how long he sat out there before the door slowly swung open. Spencer's face peered out at eye-level, like she'd also been sitting against it, waiting.

"You promise you won't make me tell?"

Nick nodded earnestly. “I just want to hold you.”

“I’m still mad at you,” she reminded him.

“Then it’s a good thing I’m not asking you to forgive me.”

She stared at him for several seconds before letting out a deep sigh and slowly backing away from the door.

Nick took that as permission to crawl back inside his room, kicking the door shut behind him and sitting with his back against it. Spencer watched him warily, hesitating before collapsing against him, limbs limp with obvious exhaustion.

Nick rested his chin on the top of her head as he wrapped his arms around her back. “Just let me hold you,” he repeated, whispering the words to the crown of her head as he pulled her close. He felt more of her tears soaking his shirt, her body shuddering as she choked them out.

“Shhh...” He cradled the back of her head with one hand and rubbed her back with the other. “Everything’s alright. You’re okay. I’ve got you. I’m not going anywhere.”

Spencer slowly lifted her head, cheeks blotchy and wet with tears. “Promise?”

“Promise,” he confirmed in another whisper, holding in the other words threatening to spill out of him.

*I love you I love you I love you.*



The feeling of Nick’s arms around her and the conviction behind his words almost made Spencer reconsider everything. Maybe she *could* let him in, tell him what happened. Who hurt her.

But she also wanted nothing more than to stay here, in the home he’d made for her with his own body. To fall asleep with

him stroking her hair and rubbing her back with the reverence of a pious man who just found heaven.

To fall asleep in his arms, like that night so long ago when she'd been terrified he could see her feelings for him plain as day.

*You love him*, she realized with a jolt.

Nick's hands stilled. "Spencer," he whispered, his breath sending shivers down her spine. "What's wrong?"

*I want to tell you I love you and I want you to love me back, and not knowing if you do or not is slowly killing me. And even if you do, I still don't know how to let you in.*

"I'm sorry for being difficult," she said instead, because she was a coward.

Spencer felt the barest brush of his lips on her head. "For what it's worth," he said thickly, "I'd take difficult with you over easy with anyone else."

Why? Why did he have to go and say these things? Why did he have to make it so hard for her to keep her walls up and not let him in?

"But that's not what's bothering you, is it?" Nick asked.

Spencer found herself fisting the front of his shirt and shaking her head against his chest.

"I won't pry," he reminded her gently. "Just let me hold you." He squeezed her tighter. "I know I can't help fight your demons for you. But I'll be here if you need me."

When she didn't say anything, Nick pulled a blanket from the ground over their bodies. "Just go to sleep. I'll watch over you."

But that was the thing about feeling exhausted. You *couldn't* sleep. She squirmed in his arms, squeezing her eyes shut.

*Go. The fuck. To sleep.*

Nick's body shifted beneath hers slightly. "You can't sleep, can you?"

“No,” she whispered, still clutching his shirt.

“Do you want me to read to you?”

She blinked slowly, trying to register the words. “...what?”

“If you can’t sleep,” he said, reaching for his phone, “I’ll read to you until you do.” Spencer watched him aim the screen away from her face, the light illuminating his profile in a series of harsh shadows and angles.

She couldn’t deny she liked looking at him – even if it wasn’t wrought with sexual pining or desire. But it was certainly enough to make things harder for her right now.

“Why?”

Nick wrapped his arm around her back again, pressed her head in the crook of his neck, and peered over her shoulder at his phone. “Pick a book, Spencer.”



*“It was five o’clock on a winter’s morning in Syria...”*

Agatha Christie wasn’t exactly bedtime story material, but Nick found the e-book easily enough, hoping like hell this was going to work. She’d fallen asleep listening to audiobooks enough times that it was worth a shot.

He hadn’t been keeping track of how far he made it through *Murder on the Orient Express* before Spencer asked him a question.

She blinked sleepily, eyes at half-mast. Walls down. “How are you getting through the French parts so well?”

“Took it in high school,” Nick explained, stroking her hair. At least she wasn’t crying anymore.

He rubbed his hand up and down her arm. “Go to sleep, Spencer. I’ll keep reading.”

Her breathing finally lulled just as a man was found dead in his train cabin. Nick brushed the hair from her eyes and sighed. "I love you," he whispered to the top of her head before kissing it softly.

# Chapter 40



**I** *love you.*

Spencer wondered if she was meant to hear it. The way he whispered it like a prayer suggested otherwise. The fact that he stopped reading was further evidence he thought she was asleep.

But now she knew what it felt like to have him run his fingers through her hair. And that this, him being here with her, meant everything.

# Chapter 47



Sleep came easier after that, but it was still the early morning when Spencer opened her eyes and breathed in the smell of his shirt.

“Morning,” she murmured.

Nick stiffened slightly, and she registered the glow from a laptop on the ground next to them.

He closed it and pressed his lips to the top of her head. “I’m sorry. I was working on a lab report. Did I wake you?”

Spencer shook her head.

He squeezed her tighter. “Did you have any more bad dreams?”

She shook her head again. “Thank you,” she whispered. “For staying with me.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I’ll do it every night if you want me to.”

Spencer pulled her phone out to check the time. It was just after six in the morning. “Did you even sleep?”

“No. I wanted to watch over you. In case it happened again.”

She scowled at him. “Don’t you have work today?”

“I’ve functioned on less sleep before. I’m closing anyway,” Nick reasoned.

Spencer pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes and sighed loudly. All the crying last night had given her a migraine, but at least she wasn't hungover. She stretched, wincing at the cracking sound her joints made, and the dull ache that followed.

They'd kept all their clothes on when they slept, a fact she was grateful for, because two days definitely wasn't long enough for her bruises to heal, and Nick's patience had its limits.

His voice pulled her out of her reverie, bringing her back to this moment with him, in the quiet of his bedroom. "Are you hungry?"

She'd admittedly been purposefully childish with her dinner last night, so the idea of a nice, home-cooked breakfast sounded like heaven.

Nick busied himself in the kitchen while Spencer sat at the table, lamenting the state of her nails. She'd been biting and picking at them non-stop, so she was surprised there was even any polish left on them. Not that it did much to distract from her fingers, but she was itching to just fix them already. There weren't a lot of things she had control over right now, but this was one of them.

She was set on cooperating and eating everything on the plate in front of her when a flash of movement on the stairs caught her eye.

"Just so you know, I'm having a girl over later —"

Nick's jaw clenched, but he kept his eyes trained on Spencer, ignoring his roommate. She saw Sam pause on the bottom step. It took all of her self-control to maintain a neutral expression as he made his way over.

He smirked at her behind Nick's back, miming zipping his lips shut. She found yet another loose bit of skin on one of her fingers and started scraping it off with her nail under the table. She was too focused on watching Sam walk out the door to hear Nick's question.

"Spencer," he said sharply.



She arched an eyebrow and tried to sound casual. “Yes?”

“I asked you what was wrong,” he snapped, leaning back in his chair. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m fine,” she lied.

The look on his face said she had about ten seconds to change her answer. Spencer sighed like he won. “Just don’t like seeing Sam,” she said honestly. “Can you blame me?”

Nick’s expression softened, and he reached to play with her hair. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know he was home.”

“Not your fault,” she whispered, unable to stop the single tear streaming down her face.

He wiped it away with his thumb. “I’ll do anything. Whatever you want. So long as you stop crying. I can’t stand seeing you like this.”

As if to demonstrate his point, he said nothing when Spencer slid her uneaten breakfast over and shook her head. Her appetite disappeared the second Sam reminded everyone of his existence, and she didn’t see it returning any time soon.

Nick’s brow furrowed, but he just nodded and took the plate away. Even though it wasn’t even eight in the morning yet, Spencer already felt like she wanted nothing more than to go back to bed.

They sat on the couch together, with her legs thrown over his lap and her head tucked under his chin. He stroked his hand up and down her arm.

“Do you want to stay at Joselyn’s?” Nick asked her suddenly. “In my old room?”

Spencer’s head shot up. “Is that an option?”

He nodded. She sensed there was something else coming and waited anxiously for the other shoe to drop.

“Do you still want me to stay with you? At night?” Nick asked timidly. “Or do you need your space?”

She slipped her hand into his and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Stay,” she whispered. “Please.”



Nick hadn't seen any point in waiting for his shift to start, so he drove them both over to The Grind immediately, wondering how his cousin would feel about him so readily offering up his old room as lodging.

Given that it was for Spencer, though, Joselyn hadn't hesitated to steal her from him, shooing him back down the stairs way before the closing shift was supposed to start.

He scowled and stood his ground. "I haven't slept in over twenty-four hours, Joselyn. Do you *want* me to accidentally burn down the family business because I'm running on fumes?"

Joselyn rolled her eyes in mock annoyance, but at Spencer's request, left them in his childhood room to attempt sleeping on his old, but freshly made-up, twin bed.



Trying to fit two people on a bed the same size as the one in Spencer's dorm should have been a lost cause, but they made it work. Somewhat. There was an alarming amount of contact between their bodies, but Spencer realized the feeling of his skin on hers, of his warmth through their clothes, was enough to calm the raging tempest in her brain. The one that tried to bring her ship down last night with memories of what almost happened to her.

Nick said it himself. He couldn't save her. But he could be there for her while she saved herself.

She was also still mad at him – or at least – trying to convince herself she was because she'd been enjoying the way

she kept bringing him to his knees. There was something about him dotting on her that was different from Liam's fumbling attempts at doing the same.

Not that she was going to unpack *that* anytime soon.

"Do you want me to read to you again?" he asked, even though he'd just finished imploring Joselyn for a chance to sleep. "Why Agatha Christie?"

Spencer attempted a shrug in his arms, but it was hard to do given their limited space. "My mom used to read to me."

His voice raised a pitch, and his body shook as he processed his incredulity. "The fuck kind of parent reads their kid twentieth-century murder mysteries as bedtime stories?"

"The kind that teaches English? I had my fair share of *Sherlock Holmes* and Edgar Allan Poe, too."

Nick shook his head and muttered to himself. "What part were we at?"

"I don't remember. I fell asleep after he refuses to work for Ratchett," she lied. The whispered 'I love you' from last night was still playing in her head, and Spencer refused to ruin his memory of it by revealing that she'd heard.

"I'll start from there, then," he said, pulling it up on his phone. He cleared his throat. "*Poirot rose. 'If you will forgive me for being personal – I do not like your face, M. Ratchett,' he said.*"

Spencer tried to hold in her first laugh in a while, but it was impossible. "Did you choose that line on purpose?" she wheezed.

"I like seeing you laugh," Nick said. "What's wrong with that?"

"Aren't you supposed to be sleeping?" she countered. But he kept reading, and eventually, Spencer found herself sound asleep, in the arms of a man who was teaching her it was okay to let people in.



“From now on,” Spencer mumbled into her pillow, “we are only sleeping together at your place.”

Nick wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her away from the edge, her back to his front. There was something about the way their bodies fit together in this position that made his heart leap up in his throat and choke him in the best of ways. “Careful love,” he managed. “You almost sound like you’ve forgiven me.”

“I haven’t yet, Nicholas,” she replied, still mumbling into her pillow.

He buried his face in the crook of her neck, drowning himself in her. “At the very least,” he murmured, “I should probably get up now.” It was the last thing he wanted to do, which was probably a sign that it was exactly what he *should* do.

He checked the time, groaning. He’d gotten a decent five hours of sleep, and, like he told her – he’d functioned off less. That didn’t mean work was going to be any easier tonight. “Closing shift starts soon, sweetheart. If I don’t get up now, Joselyn’s gonna march up here and rip me a new one.”

“She should. I’d love to watch.”

Nick stroked her hair as he swung his legs off the side of the bed. “You can stay if you want. I’ll be right downstairs.”



Nick noticed Hunter sitting at the counter when he came down for his shift, nursing a hot black coffee. It was almost jarring,

seeing the man sitting there by himself. He didn't think he'd ever seen him without the other two somewhere nearby.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, slipping behind the counter to clock in.

Hunter sized him up over his drink. Nick didn't know why being under his scrutiny had him so on edge. They were damn near the same height, and Hunter was the same age as Spencer – he couldn't even fucking drink legally either.

His lip curled as he took a slow sip of coffee. “Stopping myself from kicking your roommate's fucking teeth in,” he answered finally. “Seeing as how my impulse control's been staying with you.”

*She's your impulse control,* Nick wanted to say. *She's my entire heart.*

Out loud, he snorted. “Get in line. How much did she tell you?”

Hunter took his time answering again, much to Nick's chagrin. He left to help a customer and came back to the other man still scrutinizing him.

“Just that Sam doesn't understand the meaning of the word ‘no.’ And that you stopped him before anything happened. When we woke up the next morning —”

Nick cut him off. “We? You two slept together?” He couldn't stop the way his voice raised a pitch as he asked, the possessiveness he had no right to feel palpable in the air even though he'd literally been in bed with her less than ten minutes ago.

He didn't like the way Hunter's eyes glimmered with interest. Or the single eyebrow he raised in curiosity. “She slept over in my dorm, yes. Even let me take my shirt off.” That last detail had a vein in Nick's temple visibly throbbing, and he wondered if that was the intention. To get him to admit his feelings.

“I see.” Nick grit his teeth and stepped aside briefly to help another customer, taking the time to get his emotions under

control. They were friends. And he had absolutely no right to feel anything about this anyway.

No right at all.

“What about your roommate?” he asked when he returned.

Hunter paused mid-sip. “What about him? I told him to get the fuck out.”

“Weren’t you worried he might get the wrong idea?”

“You mean how it sounds like you are right now?” Hunter rolled his eyes and apparently decided to spare him. “Relax, Nick. She made it very clear she felt absolutely nothing about the whole thing. She just didn’t want to be alone.” He paused, no doubt noticing the way Nick’s body visibly relaxed at the news. “I hope you taught him a lesson.”

Nick remembered how it felt to have Sam’s body under him as he forced him against the counter, not unlike how he’d trapped Spencer. “If he’s smart, he won’t go within fifty feet of her.”

Hunter hummed approvingly. “How’s she holding up? Did she tell you what happened the other night?”

“It’s not my place to say, Hunt. She didn’t give me that many details, anyway. Just that someone hurt her after she left. She’s got some bruising on her chest and arms.”

Nick ignored the growl that rose from the other man’s throat. “She didn’t tell me how far it went. And I won’t ask. I’m not gonna force her to do anything she doesn’t want to do.”

Hunter’s jaw clenched. “Tell me you didn’t just accept that.”

Nick crossed his arms. “I told you. I’m not about to take that choice away from her,” he said defensively. “She has every right to not tell me these things. Doesn’t mean I’m happy about it.”

Now that she wasn’t around, the gravity of what happened the other night was starting to sink in. Nick rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands as he remembered the panicked

look on her face, the way she wouldn't look him in the eye. Her voice when she said he didn't love her, so sure, so confident. She had to have known how he would react.

“*Do* you love her?” Hunter asked suddenly, and Nick wondered if he should get some professional help seeing as how it wouldn't be the first time he said something out loud and been unaware of it.

He swallowed thickly, very aware of how dry his throat had gone.

“Does she know?”

*Oh, she knows*, he thought. She hadn't been awake to hear his whispered confession, but there was no way she couldn't see it. But he wasn't going to kid himself into thinking *his* love in particular was what was going to solve her problems.

Hunter thankfully dropped the subject. For now. “Look, I'm going to talk to Reese, see if she's ready to talk to Spencer.”

“You do realize this also hinges on Spencer wanting to talk to *her*,” Nick pointed out. “She's barely speaking to me.”

“Where is she, anyway? While you're here?” Hunter glanced around, like she was hiding somewhere.

Nick jerked his head upward. “Up in the apartment with Joselyn and Christian,” he said.

“And I assume Christian's the only reason you're even letting her out of your sight right now,” Hunter said dryly. “I'd feel the same way.”

The man was built like a semi-truck and was always packing at least three borderline illegal weapons at all times – of course, he was the only way that was happening.

Nick sighed as he pilfered Hunter's empty cup, mentally calculating how much longer until he could see her again.

# Chapter 42



After Nick went down for his shift, Spencer decided enough was enough. If nothing else, she was going to get up from bed and get a fucking reading done. She'd been able to slack off for most of the weekend, but she didn't need to risk falling behind.

Like her nails, this was something she had control over. She curled up on the couch with her headphones on and a book in her lap, listening to the dulcet tones of a professionally recorded audiobook.

She'd barely gotten through the first required section of the reading when she noticed she had company.

"Hello dear," Joselyn said, stroking her hair. "I think it's time we did something about this, don't you? We haven't touched up the color since we dyed it."

Spencer stared at her hair in the other girl's hand, noticing that the color was more gray than purple. "Shit. I hadn't even noticed."

While Joselyn remedied the situation, Spencer tried to relax, comparing the experience to when Reese first showed her how to do her makeup.

After a rinse that significantly stained the tile in the bathroom and reminded her of the *last* time she was in there, Spencer was back on the couch, towel drying her hair under the watchful eye of Christian, perched in his armchair.



Despite his size, Spencer always felt a little calmer around him, probably due to the fact that like her, he wasn't particularly social or loquacious, especially compared to the other two people who usually occupied this space.

He let out a deep sigh and pinched his brow. "So, what happened to you?"

Spencer's head shot up. "How do you know something happened?" If she hadn't been panicking so bad at this line of questioning, she would have laughed at the bluntness of his execution.

"Dear, you came over here to *drink*," Joselyn reminded her. "I've seen the way you react every time someone even opens a beer near you. Something had to happen to make you change your tune."

"There's also the fact that Nick hasn't let you out of his sight in days," Christian quipped. "He barely wanted to go downstairs for his shift earlier."

Spencer figured it was only Christian's presence that stopped him from making her come with him, a suspicion that was corroborated when Joselyn replied, "That's because you're here."

Christian leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "Let me ask this. What are you trying to hide from him?"

He swore as Joselyn kicked him. "*Christian. Whitlock,*" she hissed.

"What makes you think I'm hiding anything from him?" Spencer asked, fully aware of how defensive that sounded.

Christian scoffed. "Try again, Spencer." He moved his leg out of the way before Joselyn could get another kick in. "I think you need to leave the room, Sunshine," he said seriously.

She crossed her arms, mirroring him. "What for?"

Spencer watched Christian sign his own death warrant by rolling his eyes. "You telling me you'll be able to keep anything she says from him? Besides," his gaze flicked briefly

over to Spencer, studying her. “I doubt Spencer would want to put you in that position. You don’t hide things from Nick.”

“I hide some things,” she said, an edge to her voice.

Joselyn was giving her an out. A way to steer the conversation to what she could possibly be hiding from Nick.

But there was no avoiding this anymore. “He’s right, Joselyn,” she said quietly, not looking at either of them. “I’m sorry.” She felt the other girl’s arms wrap around her from behind the couch.

“Don’t be,” she whispered, squeezing lightly. “I’ll be around. Let me know if that one -,” she pointed her middle finger at Christian, “is rude to you.”

“*Joss.*”

Spencer turned to see Joselyn throwing her hands up in surrender. “Leaving, leaving.”

After she left, Christian gestured for Spencer to take a seat in the armchair across from him. “Did Nick tell you what I do for work? Whenever I’m not downstairs.”

“You do security at a bar,” she answered timidly, like she was back in school, and the teacher was trying to call her out for not paying attention. Something about being directly across from him was *definitely* a tactic, and it was working. She squirmed and tried her damndest not to bite her nails.

He nodded approvingly, and Spencer felt like she passed a test of some kind. Until his next question. “Do you trust me?”

She blinked. “What?”

“It’s a simple question, Spencer,” he said, not unkindly. Just bluntly again.

“There’s not a simple answer,” she said, narrowing her eyes.

“At the very least,” he started, “I’m not Nick, and I won’t tell him anything you don’t want me to. Whatever you tell me is privileged information, and it doesn’t leave this room unless you want it to. That make you feel any better?”

Spencer straightened up. “A little, actually.”

“Good.” Christian leaned forward on his elbows and steepled his fingers in front of his face. “Because I was damn near out of ideas, sweetheart.” The corners of his eyes crinkled just slightly from what Spencer realized was a genuine smile.



Nick could actually *feel* his chest getting lighter when he saw Spencer walk down the stairs into the cafe. Christ, he was fucked. To hell and back again.

Hunter tugged on her sleeve until she sat on the stool next to him. “How’s my princess?”

The cup Nick was filling overflowed, and he narrowly avoided second-degree burns. He swore and backed away quickly from the counter as the boiling hot liquid spilled onto the floor. It was a good thing Joselyn was still upstairs, or he’d have more hell to pay in the form of another uncomfortable conversation.

The amused look Hunter was giving him said he shouldn’t even try and play it off. He cocked his head at Spencer, wondering what she thought of his display. But her eyes were trained on her hands in her lap.

“Has Reese said anything?” she asked so softly, it was a wonder either of them could hear her over everyone else inside.

Nick grit his teeth watching Hunter play with a lock of Spencer’s hair as he answered. It looked freshly dyed, and Nick could smell the faint scent of bleach hidden under her shampoo. “You’ll have to talk to her yourself.”

Instead of responding to that, she turned to Nick. “What the hell have you two been talking about? How long have *you* been here?” The last part was directed at Hunter.

“Cars,” he said evenly, and Nick almost sputtered.

Spencer raised an incredulous eyebrow. “Really?” she asked, not a hint of belief in her voice.

Nick nodded slowly. “Joselyn’s dad taught me how to drive stick when I was younger. We were talking about seeing how rusty I was by taking the Jeep for a spin,” he lied, hoping he was a better actor than she was.

“What about you, princess?” Hunter asked. “What have *you* been up to? You haven’t been answering your texts.”

“Hunt,” Nick said warningly. He knew where the man was coming from, but he wasn’t about to let him guilt-trip her, not after everything she’d been through.

Spencer held her hand up. “It’s fine.” She turned to her friend. “I was going to reach out,” she explained, her hands fidgeting in her lap. “But I thought Reese would when she was ready.”

Hunter snorted. “She said the same thing about you.”

Nick highly doubted either of them were actually ready to hear the other out, but this wasn’t his game to play. He’d have to sit on the sidelines and let her handle things.



The boys were shitty liars, and that was rich coming from *her*. But Spencer didn’t want to get into it, feeling extremely exhausted after her ‘interrogation’ with Christian.

He’d waited patiently for her to tell her story, never sighing or acting like it was a chore to listen to her. But she still didn’t tell him who hurt her, because Sam tested even the most imperturbable of people. He’d tell Nick in a heartbeat and wouldn’t be sorry about it.

It’d been liberating to *finally* tell someone what happened to her, but also incredibly draining. She’d come downstairs

wanting nothing more than the comfort she knew Nick could provide, not anticipating Hunter to be here.

Her heart should've been pounding with excitement at the sight of one of her closest friends, but instead, panic seized her limbs. Spencer hadn't forgotten what Reese said the other night, and it would be foolish to assume things between them could be fixed simply with time.

No, a conversation would have to be had, but that was not happening tonight. Nor tomorrow. Not for the rest of this week, if she had any say in it.

Hunter pressed a kiss to her forehead as he got up to leave, but not before making Spencer promise to be better about answering his texts. She'd agreed halfheartedly, but whether or not she kept it was a different story.

Nick called her name, and she fixed her gaze on him like she hadn't just been completely zoning out. "Did you want something to drink?"

"Just came down to see you," she admitted, shaking her head and feeling more grounded when he stroked her hair. "I'm still mad at you," she reminded him before dozing off.

Nick was washing dishes when she looked back up again. "What time's your first class?" he asked. "Do you need to go to sleep?"

It was barely nine – The Grind technically wasn't closed yet, but they were the only ones left aside from Madeline, who was waiting to be picked up.

Spencer found herself nodding anyway. "Probably," she mumbled, reluctantly getting up. "Will you be up soon?"

"Soon," he promised.

# Chapter 43



Nick entered the room quietly in case Spencer was already asleep. But she was on her side, watching him from the bed.

“Do you need space tonight?” he asked from the doorway. “I can take the floor. Or the couch. I know the bed’s a little small.”

She shook her head. “Are you mad?”

His brow furrowed as he climbed in next to her. “Why would I be mad?”

“Because I told Christian and not you,” she said, hand reaching to clutch his shirt. There was something desperate in the way she was holding him that had his heart racing.

Nick covered her hand with his. “I told you. It didn’t have to be me. I just wanted you to tell *somebody*, so you weren’t dealing with this alone.” He took a breath to calm his nerves. “So, he knows? Who it was?”

Spencer shook her head quickly, hand tightening on the front of his shirt. “No,” she whispered. “I didn’t trust him not to tell you. And I don’t want you to know.”

*Why not?* Nick wanted to ask, but she already told him why. She didn’t want him to react badly, and he knew damn well she was justified in being wary. He’d almost put a hole in

his wall when he saw the bruising on her chest the other night, and that was putting it mildly.

He pressed his forehead to hers. “Okay.” Nick was about to ask if she wanted him to read to her again, when her hand slipped under his shirt, and she placed it over his rapidly beating heart. She was trembling.

“Spencer,” he rasped. “What are you doing?”

Her answer came out in a choked sob. “*Trying.*”

*Trying what?* Before he could ask her out loud what she meant by that, her other hand snaked to the back of his neck, tugging on his hair like she was trying to pull him lower. Nick sucked in a breath when he realized she was staring at his lips, not with desire, but with a panicked desperation.

He tried to pull away. “No.”

“I can do this,” she insisted, even as tears were falling, and Spencer buried her face in the crook of his neck instead. Her hand was leaving scorching trails as she roamed his body, palming him fervently over his waist. “I can learn to make it good for you.”

“No.” Nick grabbed her hands and pinned them to her sides. “We’re not doing anything, love. We’re going to bed.”

Spencer yanked herself out of his grasp and scrambled to the corner of the room. She bent over the trash can, dry heaving. But she hadn’t eaten anything all day, and it showed.

“I want to help you,” Nick said, getting up and kneeling a little away from her. “Do I need to give you space?” He hated seeing her like this, but being near him is what got her that way in the first place.

Spencer pushed the trash can away and buried her face in her hands. “You can’t fix me, Nick.” She backed away further into the corner, hugging her knees.

“Who said you needed fixing? You’re not broken, Spencer.”

“Don’t you understand?” she shouted at him. “We wouldn’t be in this situation if I wasn’t. I wouldn’t be *sobbing*”

at the slightest bit of intimacy if I wasn't. I'd have been able to just sit there and take it and —”

“I am gonna fucking kill him,” Nick said, crawling forward and grabbing both her hands. “For making you think that. For taking advantage of you. *There is nothing wrong with you.* Do you hear me?”

“I wish I believed that,” she whispered shakily.

*Would you believe that I love you?* he wanted to ask, but he couldn't drop that bomb on her. Not yet. It was different when she was asleep, when the only person who had to know was himself.

“You don't need me or anyone else validating this for you,” he said instead. “My opinion doesn't mean shit. Please just love yourself.” *Like I do.* “Extend yourself the kindness you deserve.”

*You don't have to hate yourself because of how you love.*

Nick dropped her hands and slowly started backing away. “Do you need space? I'll give you as much as you want. You don't have to be afraid to ask me.”

Her head shot up, eyes wide with more panic. “Don't leave me.”

“I'll never leave you,” he promised. “Just tell me what you need.”



Spencer almost wished he would just be cruel and kick her out already. It would hurt less than having him resent her for what she could never give him.

The coward in her wanted to shut him out completely and not let him in. Make him get out so she didn't have to see the look on his face when he realized she was never going to be



enough. Even if Sam hadn't tried to hurt her, she wasn't naïve enough to think she could avoid this forever.

She loved him, but obviously not enough. If she did, she'd be able to give him this, give him *her*.

Nick reached his hand forward again. His fingers barely grazed her cheek, setting her skin on fire. "Tell me what you need," he repeated. "I'll give you anything you want."

Spencer pressed his hand to her face, leaning into his touch. "You," she whispered. "I just need you."

# Chapter 44



Nick spotted the tall blonde figure sitting in the back booth when he came in for his shift.

“Reese?”

She glanced around furtively, like she was afraid of getting caught doing something she wasn’t supposed to be doing. “Can we talk?”

Nick nodded. “My shift doesn’t start for another fifteen minutes.” He slid in across from her, noticing the dark half-moons under her eyes that she usually covered with makeup.

“I’m sorry about the other night,” Reese whispered to the table.

He tapped his finger on its surface. “Don’t be.”

She wiped at her eyes, which were rimmed red like she’d been crying. “I realized I never thanked you for helping me. I shouldn’t have said any of that shit to you. Being drunk doesn’t excuse that.”

“Reese,” Nick sighed, “all I cared about was keeping you safe. You don’t owe me an explanation.”

“How’s Spencer?” Reese asked. “Hunt said she’s been staying with you.”

“She’s...a different story,” he said tersely.

She slumped forward. “I suppose I deserve that.”

“She’ll come around.”

“You think?”

He checked his watch. “Metaphorically and literally. Her class ends soon.”

Reese chewed on her bottom lip and stared at him. “What’s going on with you two?”

“It’s...complicated,” Nick said. He stood up and gave her shoulder a squeeze before she asked another question he couldn’t answer. “I’ll be around.”



Spencer’s knees locked when she saw Reese sitting in the back booth, sketchbook open in front of her. Hunter frowned and tugged on her arm, pulling her forward.

“What’s wrong, princess?”

She yanked her arm back. “I can’t do this, Hunt.”

“Yes, you can,” he said seriously. “She’s your best friend.”

Spencer scowled. “I don’t know how much she told you about what happened at the party, but best friends don’t say the shit she said,” she snapped.

Hunter rubbed his face. “If it helps, she’s been beating herself up about it for the past week.”

“How is that supposed to help?” she asked sharply, finally letting him pull her to the booth. Just because she was mad at her didn’t mean she enjoyed hearing about her suffering.

“I’ll be at the counter,” Hunter said, pushing her the last few feet toward the booth. “This is between the two of you.”

She nodded, policing her expression. Reese looked up from her sketchbook slowly, her brow furrowed. “Hi,” she whispered.

“Reese,” Spencer said curtly, crossing her arms. It felt like armor, but she didn’t want to have to protect herself from her friend.

“Babe, I’m *sorry*,” Reese said. “I was drunk, and I know that doesn’t excuse anything, but —” She stopped, her eyes focusing on Spencer’s wrist on the table.

She worked to pull her sleeve down, but it was too late. The bruise had faded from dark purple to a more mottled gray, but was still very visible.

“What happened to you?” Reese asked, eyes widening. “Did...did that happen at the party?”

Spencer’s hands fidgeted above the table. “No,” she whispered. “After.” She wiped angrily at her eyes and perused her friend. Aside from the fact that she wasn’t wearing any makeup and her hair was a mess, she looked fine. Tired, but fine. “I see things turned out okay for you, though.”

Reese chewed on her lip and reached like she wanted to hold Spencer’s hand, but thought better of it. She let it fall in her lap instead. “Yeah,” she confirmed slowly. “Nick told Hunt where to find me. He got me away and I slept it off in his dorm.”

A rogue tear slipped down Spencer’s cheek. “I see.”

“Spencer —”

“Why were you drinking?” Spencer asked sharply, searching for a distraction before she started spiraling. “You don’t drink.”

Reese tapped a finger on the table and avoided her gaze. “You know I went home that weekend,” she said. “Peyton texted me. Said she thought dad might’ve been drinking even more than usual. I had a bad feeling, so Hunter’s brother Aaron came with me to check on things.”

She buried her face in her hands. “She was fine, but apparently dad saw her with Aaron at school and called her a whore. I begged her to come with me and just stay with Hunter’s dad before things escalated at home. But she told me

to leave. Said she thought it was just a one-time thing and didn't want to make it worse.

“After my mom died when I was a junior, things got out of control. Dad tried to keep up appearances in public, but drowned himself in whiskey at home. I started drinking, too. And sleeping with anyone who would give me the time of day. But Peyton's always been a good kid, and she doesn't deserve any of this. I swore I'd never drink or hook up with anyone once I got to college, and I was doing okay until...”

Reese let out a shaky breath. “I'm sorry. I know that doesn't excuse what I did. But I just —”

Spencer held her hand up. “You don't owe me an explanation, Reese. You hurt me. You can't take that back. I'm not going to blame you for trying to cope. But I'm not going to pretend like I can just forget all the shit you said at the party.”

Reese gulped. “I was a bitch to Nick, too. When he was trying to help me.”

“What'd you say to him?” Spencer asked, narrowing her eyes.

“He was trying to pull me off Jake,” Reese explained guiltily. “I told him to fuck off. When he said I was too young, I asked him what was so special about you two, because he's just as much older than you are. I said at least I wasn't chasing after someone who didn't want me. He told me I didn't know what I was talking about.”

“You didn't,” Spencer said dryly.

Reese finally looked her in the eye. “*Is* there something going on between the two of you?”

Spencer glared at her. “Is that any of your business?”

“...I guess not,” Reese sighed. She returned to her sketch, still chewing on her bottom lip.

Spencer waited a couple beats before speaking again, trying to keep her emotions in check. “Reese, I'm not mad at you for drinking. I *am* mad that you let that guy talk to me that way.”

“He shouldn’t have called you a tease, I know.”

“No,” Spencer snapped. “You don’t. And you know why? Did you even know why he said that?”

Reese looked up and shook her head slowly.

“Sam came onto me at the party at Nick’s. Wouldn’t listen when I told him to back off. Nick stepped in before things went any further.”

“I didn’t know,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“You shouldn’t have had to know,” Spencer said. “You shouldn’t have let him get away with saying any of that shit anyway. I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d turn around and come back here. Your sister was more important.”

“Babe —”

Spencer cut her off. “Reese, I’ve never had a best friend before. *That’s* what hurt about all this. I told you. I’m not judging you for drinking, and you don’t need to explain yourself to me. That’s not any of my business unless you want it to be. But you knew how much that whole thing with Nick hurt me, and you threw it back in my face when all I wanted to do was help you. How am I supposed to trust that won’t happen again?”

Reese grabbed her hand. “Please believe me when I say I won’t even *look* at another bottle. I don’t like myself when I drink. I know what I said was shitty, and you don’t have to forgive me, but...

“You’re my best friend, too,” Reese whispered, giving Spencer’s hand a gentle squeeze. “I didn’t have many girl friends, either. It was always just me and Hunt. I’m sorry I hurt you. I’ll do whatever I have to to make it up to you.”

Spencer squeezed back and made a decision. There was no sense in dragging this out for the sake of being petty, especially when she could see the earnestness in Reese’s glacial blue eyes.

“This happened when I was on the way back to Thorne from the party,” she explained, rolling her sleeve down to

show the rest of the bruising on her arm. “Sam was following me. Dragged me from the sidewalk and covered my mouth so I couldn’t scream. When he tried to get me on my knees, I bit him in the arm and ran.”

She took a deep breath before continuing. “Nick doesn’t know. And I don’t want him to.”

“Why? He needs to know. This is his roommate, and you can’t be the first girl he’s done that to.”

Spencer shook her head angrily. “I reserve the right to not tell him things. Like you said, we’re not together, anyway.”

“Spencer, I know you know that’s not entirely true,” Reese said.

Her eyes flicked to Nick at the register, where he was steadily getting through a mob of customers. Hunter was sitting at the counter near him, looking over his shoulder at them. Spencer sighed. “Don’t make me regret telling you. You’re the only one who knows.”

“You can’t ask me to hide something like this from him,” Reese replied. “I’m fully prepared to have you hate me for this.”

“Reese —”

Her friend was literally *waving* for him to come over there.  
*Traitor.*

“I will end you,” Spencer snapped, glaring at her before bolting for the door and running outside into the alley between The Grind and the neighboring building.

This was too much, the idea that he was going to find out *today* when she’d just now talked to Reese for the first time in a week. Spencer leaned her back against the hard brick and closed her eyes. It was quieter here, and out of view from anyone passing on the street or inside the café. She rubbed her temples and tried to get her breathing under control.

*In.*

*Out.*

*In.*

*Out.*

“Hello, sweetheart.”

Her eyes snapped open just as Sam turned her roughly until she was facing the wall, her cheek digging into the rough surface. She felt his breath on the back of her neck as he pressed his body against hers and whispered in her ear. “Just let it happen. I could make it good for you, you know. Fix your little ‘problem’ with intimacy.”

Nick’s words played over in her mind. *Who said you needed fixing? You’re not broken, Spencer.*

Spencer rolled her eyes even as the panic set in, trying to come up with a plan. She couldn’t hit him with her hands pinned to her front. But she there was no way in hell she was going to let him rattle her. “First of all, I’m not interested. Second, I highly doubt that.”

“Why don’t you put your money where your mouth is and find out?” Sam’s breath skated down her spine, and Spencer reared her head back to headbutt him. He moved out of the way, swearing before using his forearm as leverage to push her harder into the brick. “*Stop. Fucking. Fighting.* And don’t even think about biting me again, you fucking bitch.”

She looked over at him with hatred in her eyes. “I have *nothing* to say to you.”

“Good thing I’m not interested in what you have to say,” he teased, fisting her hair to tilt her head back. She spat at him when he went to kiss her neck.

“I should put a muzzle on you,” Sam muttered angrily. “Should’ve just taken it like a good girl and I wouldn’t have to go searching for what you owe me. I think I saw Reese in there, though. Guess I could always go ask her if you aren’t going to make this easy for me.”

Spencer found her footing and aimed a hard kick to his shin.



He swore loudly, but kept his body pressed against hers, trapping her to the side of the building. “You’re gonna pay for that,” he growled.

“I don’t think so.” Spencer didn’t have a chance to process who said that when she felt Sam’s weight disappear and she saw his face slam into the brick next to her.

“I am gonna fucking *kill* you,” Nick hissed as he pinned Sam to the wall, hands tightly gripping his shirt.

Spencer stumbled away from them before collapsing to the ground. She shut her eyes and hugged her knees to her chest when she heard the distinct snap of Sam’s nose breaking. She forced herself to focus on trying to get the air to return to her lungs and the hot tears welling up in her eyes instead of what was happening just a few feet away.

Someone grabbed her hands to pull them from her face. When she tried shaking them off, Hunter’s voice cut through the panic. “It’s just me, princess. You’re okay. He’s not going to hurt you anymore.”

She could still hear Sam swearing at Nick to let him go as she registered Reese’s position just behind Hunter. “He said if I didn’t give him what he wanted, he was going to get it from Reese.”

Reese took a few steps back, going deeper into the alley and away from the action. “What?”

Spencer swallowed hard, voice shaking. “He said if I told Nick what happened, he’d lie and say I asked for it.” She looked up slowly and met Nick’s gaze. “And that you’d believe him over me.”

Nick drove his elbow into Sam’s back until he was on his knees. “I am gonna fucking kill you,” he repeated, looming over him.

There were more footsteps coming from the mouth of the alley as Joselyn rushed in, Christian just behind her. Her hazel eyes narrowed, and she crossed her arms. “Nicky, what the hell is going on out here?”

Spencer saw Christian's hand twitch toward the holster conspicuously clipped to his hip, and she severely hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"Don't even think about it, Christian," Nick snapped sharply without taking his attention off Sam, who had blood trailing from his bruised nose.

He swore and glared at Nick. "You think this is going to make her put out for you? Her knight in shining armor? Not worth it man. Bitch is a fucking tease," he spat, his voice laced with venom.

"You say that like I'm supposed to care," Nick replied curtly, but Sam wasn't done.

"She probably likes it rough. You wouldn't know, would you? How's it feel, Nick? Knowing *I* was her first kiss? She let you get that far yet? Or is she still teasing you?" There was a smirk lurking beneath the mess of blood on his face. Spencer thought he looked straight out of a horror movie, and her stomach churned when she couldn't bring herself to tear her eyes away from the scene in front of her.

A muscle in Nick's jaw ticked. He leaned down to whisper something else in the other man's ear before jerking his head at Hunter and Reese. "Have at him," he grit out, before roughly shoving Sam to the ground.

Joselyn held her hand up. "You should let me grab my bat."

Nick shook his head as he knelt in front of Spencer. "No bat."

She pouted, but sighed and grabbed Christian by the arm to drag him out. "No messes," she reminded them.

Nick gently rubbed the tears from Spencer's eyes with his thumbs. "Are you alright? Do you want to get out of here?"

"Where would we go?" Her voice was barely a whisper. She snuck a glance at his face, noticing, for the first time, that the blue in his hair deepened the already intense color of his eyes.

He held out his hand. “Want to go on a drive?”



Spencer didn't know how long they'd been driving when she finally found her voice. “You didn't have to do all that. I told you no grand gesture was going to make me forgive you any faster.”

Nick drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “I'm well aware of what you said.” His gaze swept over her briefly before he turned back to the road. “That's not why I did it.”



Nick felt the intensity of her glare without even looking. He wasn't delusional enough to think that showboating with Sam earlier was going to magically convince Spencer of his feelings for her. But he was damned if he didn't make his point *explicitly* clear to the girl sitting next to him demanding an explanation.

“You had a crush on me. Just because I reciprocated doesn't mean I'm not old enough to know better. There was no way I could justify it. I'd feel like I was taking advantage of you, and I couldn't do that. I'm just sorry that meant I hurt you in the process.”

Spencer crossed her arms. “Yeah, you did. How could you do that to me? Just saying ‘no’ would have hurt less.”

“Because I couldn't stop myself from being around you if I tried. I had to make you hate me.” He took a deep breath. “Spencer, I've never wanted anyone more than I want you.”

“*Stop.*”

Nick's grip tightened on the steering wheel, turning his knuckles white. "I can't. Let me prove this to you."

"I don't know how," she grit out, hands clenching into fists in her lap.

He'd been driving on autopilot, and muscle memory allowed him to pull into the parking lot of the park, which was empty aside from the littered remnants of a birthday party and the sound of birdsong. The sun would be setting soon, painting the deep blue of the lake in a fiery blaze.

Spencer got out first and walked toward the water until she reached the fence separating it from land. Nick followed, watching as she laced her fingers around the metal wires.

She turned back to look at him. "Can we stay a while?" The setting sun outlined her silhouette with an almost ethereal glow.

Nick swallowed hard as he stared at her, feeling like the eighth wonder of the world was standing right in front of him. "We can stay for as long as you want."

# Chapter 45



Spencer had never operated under the assumption that the healing power of nature was *complete* bullshit, but she was still taken aback by just how much peace she felt listening to the gentle lap of the waves and feeling the warmth of the setting sun on her skin. It was quiet here, but not silent, allowing her the space to finally process everything that'd happened as she watched a family of ducks swimming around in a lazy, meandering pattern.

And even though her thoughts about Nick were all over the place, she wasn't going to deny the intense amount of comfort she got knowing he was right behind her. She hadn't let him off the hook entirely, but the possibility was there, and growing with every second. Because as much as she wanted to make him work for it, she wanted this just as badly. And she was tired of thinking she didn't deserve the things she wanted.

The sky was darkening when she felt something wrap around her shoulders. Spencer accepted the blanket without protest, placing her hand over Nick's before he had the chance to move away. He got the hint, wrapping his arms around her waist and resting his chin on top of her head.

"Are you ready to go back yet?" he whispered, the soft timbre of his voice barely audible over the sound of the water.

Going back meant having to confront the elephant in the room, and Spencer wanted nothing more than to stay in this moment with him, instead.

But she just nodded, clutching the blanket tighter around herself when Nick ran ahead to start the car.

Spencer broke the silence again when she started recognizing the exit signs on the interstate. “Nick.”

It was late enough that they were the only ones on the road save for a couple of semi-trucks in the other lanes. Nick cocked his head, but stayed silent.

She sighed. “What are we?”

He didn’t look away from the road as he answered, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “We are whatever you want us to be. I’m just sitting here asking you for the same chance you asked me for. It’s yours to give. Or not. I won’t force your hand and make the decision for you.”

Spencer tried to think with the logical part of her brain, the one that looked out for her heart when it was already pulling her back toward him. It was nowhere to be found. Her heart hammered as he continued.

“If I can’t be your boyfriend, let me be your friend. I’ll take whatever you’re willing to give me. Even if that means nothing. You had to go and be one of the most amazing people I’ve ever met. I can’t *not* have you in my life, Spencer. I want you in any way you’ll have me.”

Spencer bit her lip. “It’s not that simple, Nick.”

He frowned, brow furrowing. “Why not?”

“I don’t know anything about how dating works,” she explained. “I just know I like the things people think lead to sex. Cuddling. Touching for the sake of touching. It makes things hard, no matter how many times I try to explain it’s never going to lead to anything more.”

“Are you trying to convince me, Spencer? Or yourself?”

“I...I don’t know,” she admitted softly, knowing she’d asked him the same thing last semester. Only, now she realized just how it felt to be on the other side of it. “Maybe both?” She’d wanted this – him – for so long now. But now that it was right in front of her, she wasn’t sure.

Nick was silent again as he pulled into the parking lot of The Grind, maybe because he didn't want to go home yet, or maybe because it was closer. Spencer wasn't sure. All she knew was that when he unbuckled his seatbelt and reached to tuck her hair behind her ear, she wasn't going to stop him. Nor when he tentatively snaked his hand to the back of her neck like he'd done that night at the party, his fingers massaging some of the stiffness out. Spencer wondered if he could feel her pulse going crazy at the increased contact of their skin. Nick tilted her head up.

“Did you want this? That night?” he asked softly.

She nodded.

“You wanted me to kiss you.”

Another nod as she finally looked him in the eye. “Yes,” she whispered. “But I thought you didn't. You said it would have been a mistake.”

Nick sighed and leaned back in his chair, and Spencer felt a pang at the loss of contact. “I wasn't going to take advantage of you. I was drunk off my ass, sweetheart. It wouldn't have been good. Your first kiss should have been good for you.”

Spencer didn't think there was any scenario where it wouldn't have been good if it was from him. She closed her eyes, imagining what it would have been like. Then, she noticed the time on his car's dashboard. “It's 11:11.”

Nick nodded. “So, it is.”

“Do you want to know what I wished for?”

He raised an eyebrow and nodded again.

She unbuckled her seatbelt and angled her body towards his. “I wished for a reason to get off Tinder. Not because guys were being gross or because I gave up. But because I found what I was looking for.”

Nick leaned over the console and turned his head just slightly, giving her the chance to pull away. “And what are you wishing for now?”

*This.* Spencer didn't even have to think about it before she used both her hands to bring him closer and eliminate the space between their lips entirely.

Nick startled just a moment before composing himself. They kept it chaste, tentative. He didn't seem to know what to do with his hands. One settled lightly on the small of her back, like he wasn't sure if that was okay. The other cupped her cheek.

He tasted like coffee and mint. Spencer wanted more of it. She opened up slightly in permission. She didn't really know what to do with her tongue, and he seemed hesitant, wary of pushing her too fast.

His hand slid from her back to cup her other cheek as he copied her, and suddenly, she understood why people did this so often. It was everything her first kiss should have been, gentle and full of reverence.

*I love you,* it said again.

Spencer opened her eyes when they finally broke apart. She imagined it was like they were both looking in a mirror. Eyes bright, pupils dilated, chests heaving, cheeks flushed even though they'd barely done anything.

They kept their faces close together, a small bubble of something that bordered the line between want and need.

"Hi," she whispered.

"Hi," he whispered back. "Guess there's my answer?"



# Chapter 46



**K**issing Spencer wasn't like the movies. It wasn't explosive or heady. There wasn't the promise of "more." It was clumsy and awkward, and it was very obvious she didn't really know what she was doing. And Nick was sure the inside of his car in a dark parking lot wouldn't have been her first-choice location, either. His body contorted uncomfortably as she wrapped her arms around his neck to pull him closer across the console.

But Nick knew this was something he could spend the rest of his life doing and still never get enough of. He was greedy for the feel of her on his lips, her taste, the way her body moved against his. The way her fingers snaked into his hair and tugged him toward her, like she couldn't get enough of this.

He was drunk on the idea that this was something just for them. Something they wouldn't share with anyone else. Something they wouldn't expect of each other, but wanted to give anyway.

Something soft from the girl who thought she was too hard to love.

Nick almost protested when they broke apart again, but he could tell she needed to take things slow. She said she'd never done any of this before.

Spencer sighed and rested her forehead on his, and he wondered how he could've robbed himself of this for so long. How he almost ruined the only thing he'd ever wanted. The best thing that ever happened to him was this girl accidentally walking into his part of the library and deciding to stay.

There was a knock on the driver's side window behind him, and they jumped apart. Nick was about two seconds away from snapping at their interloper before he realized it was Joselyn, who was looking obscenely happy taking in the scene in front of her.

"Well then," she said when he rolled the window down, crossing her arms. "It's about damn time."

He scowled at her. "How long have you been standing there?" Hopefully, she hadn't caught them making out like horny teenagers inside his car.

"Long enough." *Definitely* caught them making out. Nick glanced at Spencer, noting the very visible blush creeping up her skin even in the dark.

Joselyn cleared her throat. "It's late. Do you two want to take the room upstairs for tonight?"

"Is that an option?" Spencer piped up, eyelids fluttering like she was struggling to stay awake.

"We'll be up in a minute, Josie," Nick said dismissively, rolling the window back up so he could savor the last bits of this moment between the two of them.

Joselyn raised a suggestive eyebrow. *Don't be too long.*

He resisted the urge to raise a certain finger and turned back around to face Spencer, who was nervously chewing on her bottom lip. Nick swept his thumb over it, tugging gently until she stopped. "What's wrong?"

She scowled at him, face flushing deeper as she leaned back into her seat and away from his touch. "I told you. I'm no good at -," she waved her hand, "whatever this is. I don't know what I'm doing."

“Spencer, there’s nothing for you to be ‘good at.’ This,” he mirrored the wave of her hand, “is whatever we make of it. Frankly, I think the only thing that’s changed between us is the label.”

Spencer shrugged as they finally got out of his car, still wrapped in his blanket. “I guess.”

Nick cocked his head. “Is this just because you don’t want to admit I’m right, sweetheart?”

“...yes.”

“C’mere.” He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, feeling the way her body nestled perfectly against his side as they made their way up to the apartment.

Spencer fell asleep almost as soon as she climbed in the bed, neck resting on his arm, but Nick didn’t know how long he spent lying awake just watching her, mesmerized by the slow rise and fall of her breathing and the way her hair splayed like purple silk across the pillows.

He pressed his lips to the top of her head. “I love you,” he whispered, hoping like hell he’d find the nerve to say it to her one day when she was awake.

But for now, he was content to have his nighttime confessions, so long as she was next to him.

# Chapter 47



Just so you know, it's not my fault if you fail," Spencer reminded Nick as they settled in the basement to get some last-minute studying done. Nick rubbed her foot, which was resting in his lap, as he scribbled in the margins of his notebook. She was supposed to be helping him study chemistry, not that she had any clue what was going on on any of his review sheets. Considering he was a tutor, she doubted he needed much help to begin with.

"What's my reward if I don't?" he asked, pulling her chair closer.

Spencer leaned her head on his shoulder as she considered. "Guess you'll have to find out," she said.

"Tease. And for the record, you being in here is helping more than enough."

Spencer hid her flush behind her laptop screen as she worked on final papers.

After she finished, she swung her legs off his lap and hopped up on the table to get his attention.

Nick raised an eyebrow as he slid his papers out of the way. "Yes?"

"How about I let you sleep over tonight?" Even though she slept better with him around, they were taking things slow –

alternating sleeping over at each other's places only on the weekends.

He reached to play with her hair. "You sure that counts as a reward?"

"What, you don't like sleeping with me, Nicholas?" Just because she was adamantly asexual didn't mean she was opposed to the occasional innuendo.

There was a gleam of mischief in his eyes. "I like sleeping with you just fine," he said. "Just in my queen-sized bed instead of that prison cot this school calls a mattress."

"Size doesn't matter," Spencer said, attempting a scowl even as she stifled a laugh. She loved this – joking around with a man knowing he wouldn't take things the wrong way.

Nick glanced at his watch and sighed. "I don't suppose I get a kiss for luck?"

"Do you think you'll need one?" She leaned forward until their foreheads were touching.

He shook his head, smiling. "No. But can I get one anyway?"



Spencer's eye peeked out at him from her barely open door. "Score," she demanded.

Nick rolled his eyes halfheartedly as he showed her his final grade. He pushed his way in and made his way to the couch.

Spencer laid her head in his lap as she joined him. "I want to take a nap, Nicholas."

He ran his fingers through her hair and snorted. "You're not the one who just took a two-hour final."

"You finished it in forty-five minutes."

Nick grabbed the remote and scrolled for something to watch. “So?”

Spencer smacked his knee as she shifted to face the projector. Her brow furrowed when she saw what he’d settled on. She cocked her head up to look at him as a pair of red lips appeared on the screen. “I thought you didn’t like this movie.”

Nick cupped her cheek. “I like *you*. And you like this movie. I can learn to like it, too.”

And he loved *this* – having the freedom to touch her without scaring her into thinking he wanted to take things to a different level. And because just being with her was enough.

Spencer sat up and poked him in the side.

“Yes?”

“So, what’s gonna happen with Sam?” she asked timidly.

“I told him he had an hour to get his shit out of my house,” Nick said. “I think Christian went along to ‘help’ him the other day.”

He still remembered the panicked texts he’d gotten from his more tolerable roommate while they’d been at the park.

JORDAN

What the hell happened

Who's the big scary fucker with Sam

And why is he fucking bleeding

I'm literally hiding in my room who the fuck is this guy

NICK

Do you really want to know?

JORDAN

I can't say I'm not a little curious

Does it have to do with a girl?

NICK

Is that even a question?

JORDAN

Your girl?

Spencer's voice pulled him back to the present. "What about his room?"

Nick shrugged. "He's paid through the rest of the lease, which we aren't renewing until the end of the summer. I guess we can find someone to take over if we really want to, but I'm not worried about it for now."

"Where's he gonna stay?"

He shrugged again. "Not my problem." As satisfying as it had been to break his face, Nick was content with never having to think about the man ever again.

Then, he noticed Spencer's forehead was creased in worry.

“Hey,” he whispered, brushing the hair from her face. “What’s wrong? Talk to me.”

Spencer’s hands fidgeted in her lap. “I just wanted to say that...I won’t mind if you...need to go out and ‘take care’ of things once in a while.”

He blinked slowly. “I don’t follow.”

Spencer covered her face with both hands, which he immediately pulled down. This wasn’t the time for her to hide the things she wanted from him. “Spencer.”

She gulped and wiped angrily at her eyes, and he wondered if he pushed her too hard. He ought to pull back a little, let her get used to everything.

“Nick, I’m saying if you need to go out and sleep with someone to get it out of your system, I’m fine with that. As long as you come back to me.”

Nick’s brain actually sputtered for a moment as he tried to comprehend exactly what she was proposing. “Are you suggesting an open relationship?” he asked incredulously, voice raising to a pitch he didn’t even know he could reach.

Spencer chewed on her bottom lip. “It’s a compromise. I know men have needs, and I know I can’t fulfill them. Everyone’s always said I’m either going to have to put out or let my partner sleep with other people if I wanted to find love.”

Nick pinched his brow and counted backwards from ten so he could string his words together properly. “First of all, absolutely not. I don’t *need* to take care of anything. I’ve gone months without thinking about sex and didn’t even notice it until you brought it up.”

When she’d asked him through tears if that was why he didn’t want to be with her. Christ, it was absurd she could ever think that of him.

“Second of all, there will never be anyone else for me. Only you. And just so we’re clear, you don’t *need* to fulfill anything. I want you as you are.”



“I saw the condoms in your nightstand,” she blurted. He could feel the heat rising through her whole body at this admittance.

“Haven’t needed them for months,” Nick said flippantly. “Honestly, I’d be shocked if they aren’t fucking expired at this point.”

Spencer’s eyes widened. “Condoms expire?” She smacked herself in the forehead. “God, I’m naïve.”

“Hey,” Nick said. “It’s alright. You’ve never needed that information before. And you don’t even need it now. My ‘needs’ will never overshadow your comfort. That’s the bare fucking minimum.

“I don’t want you to ever feel like you have to change yourself – for anyone. Including me. Your asexuality and sex repulsion are not and will never be something you have to ‘overcome.’ You’re not worth any less because you have boundaries other people think you shouldn’t have. You don’t have to justify anything. You don’t owe anyone an explanation. And I know you know that. You don’t need me telling you this.”

He kissed her forehead. “Have I made myself clear?”

Her brow finally relaxed. “Crystal.”

“Good, because we have a movie to watch. And I think the food’s here.”

She cocked her head. “You ordered takeout?”

Nick nodded. “Chinese. We are going to sit here and watch this fucking movie and eat some fucking chow mein and fried rice.”



They’d made it about halfway through the movie when Nick’s phone buzzed.

“That better be important,” Spencer grumbled as she muted the movie and set her empty food carton on the coffee table.

He grinned and showed her his screen. “I qualified for the final interview round next month.”

Nick watched Spencer’s eyes quickly scan the email, wondering how he managed to get so lucky. How the universe decided he deserved the girl currently wrapping her arms around his neck.

Getting the internship would be the icing on the cake, but he was more than content to spend his time with his friends, his family, and *her*.

“You can let go of me, sweetheart,” he choked out, even though death by one of Spencer’s hugs didn’t seem like a bad way to go in his mind.

She buried her face in the crook of his neck for a fraction of a second before finally releasing him. “Can we go to bed now?”

# Chapter 48



Even though she said she wanted to take a nap, a different urge overtook Spencer when they climbed up the rungs to her bed. Nick was looking at his phone over her shoulder, searching for another book to read. She didn't really have a preference, just that it be another Hercule Poirot mystery, and only so she could hear him reading in French again.

Spencer slipped her hand under his shirt, hearing his breath catch as she rubbed his back. Only now, she wasn't acting out of a desperate need to prove anything.

"I just like the feeling of your skin on mine. Is that weird?" she whispered.

Nick swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. "You can keep touching me if you want. I know it doesn't mean anything."

She snorted. "It kind of does."

"You know what I mean."

Spencer let out a noncommittal agreement before she slid her hand from his back to his chest, exploring the peaks and valleys of his toned torso with the tip of her finger. They weren't quite abs, but that made him that much more attractive in her eyes. "Are you sure?" she asked when his breath hitched slightly.

“Spencer, you could be touching me with all of our clothes completely off and I still wouldn’t assume we were having sex.”

“Just as a hypothetical,” she started, watching as he raised a brow, “what would you say if I said I’ve been...curious? It might just be the hormones, though. I’m on my period. Don’t think I’m questioning my sexuality, or anything.”

Nick played with a strand of her hair. “Libido and arousal are separate from attraction. And behavior’s different from all of those. It’s a spectrum anyway. You don’t have to feel guilty or like a fraud if your boundaries change. If you feel like you want to do it with anyone.”

“Not anyone,” she clarified. “Just you. It’s not like I’m attracted to everyone who looks like you. I don’t want to sleep with everyone with blue hair.”

“I should hope not. And I don’t mind if you never want to sleep with me, either,” he reminded her.

*Never say never.*

She noticed him staring with an odd look in his eye. They were laying so close that she could feel his cheeks warming.

“Spencer, I —”

“I love you,” she blurted before she could stop herself.

Spencer actually thought she could feel his heart stop. His entire body froze, like his brain was short-circuiting. She rolled her eyes before pressing her lips to his in a soft, chaste kiss to reboot him. “I know.”

She buried her face in his chest and smiled. “But tell me, anyway.”

Nick pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. “I love you, sweetheart.”

# Chapter 49



**A**fter turning in her last paper, Spencer walked to The Grind for a much-needed caffeine fix. The bell above the door rang as she walked in and waved at Madeline, who was manning the register.

She swept her gaze around for Nick and Joselyn, figuring they were in the back. She was almost to her booth when...

“Spencer?”

She whirled around, chest tightening when she recognized the voice.

Her mom was sitting in her booth, looking at her with glassy, red-rimmed eyes. “Can we talk? Please?” She clutched her teacup for dear life.

Spencer knew she owed it to her to hear her out. Especially after storming out right before the holidays and not even coming home for Christmas.

She slid into the booth just as Joselyn and Nick came out of the employees-only area. He raised a brow when he saw her, but was immediately accosted by Madeline to replace her at the register.

Spencer turned back to her mom and looked at her warily. “What are you even doing here?”

Lori took a deep breath before she answered. “I wanted to come see you on campus, but I walked by this place and lost

my nerve. I was going to order a tea and be on my way, but now..." She waved her hand. "I guess this works, too."

"Mom, why are you here?" Spencer asked again, only a little harshly. She probably needed to dial back the venom until she heard her out.

But there was no way she could have anticipated what she said next.

"I'm sorry, Spencer. About what I said last time you were home. About what I did. I shouldn't have pushed you to take care of yourself just because I couldn't do it. I should've asked for help. I almost reached out to you over the break and asked you to come home, but..."

She smiled. "But you are my child, and stubborn as a bull. You got that from me. I knew you'd reach out again when you were ready. I didn't want to push you and make things worse. I used the time to think and pull myself together to be better for you."

This entire conversation was throwing Spencer for a loop. Her mother rarely smiled, and she *never* apologized.

"You have his eyes," her mom said sadly. "You've always looked more like him than you ever looked like me."

Spencer flinched like she'd been slapped. The last time she heard those words was when her mother said she regretted ever having her.

Lori took a long sip of her tea before continuing. "I lied when I said I didn't try to keep in contact with him. I held onto his number, but I was too proud to do anything with it. Even if it meant not giving my child the best life she could possibly have.

"After you left, I called your dad. Tried to see if he wanted to get to know you now that you're older."

Spencer cocked her head, her heart pounding a dangerous rhythm. "What did he say?"

Her mom couldn't meet her eyes. "I tried, honey. I really did. He doesn't want anything to do with us. All I could get

was him agreeing to pay for some of your expenses while you're in college – like if you wanted to get out of the dorms into an apartment or something.” She paused before the next part. “As long as you don't go looking for him.”

Spencer swallowed, feeling a knot forming in her stomach and tears prickling her eyes. “He really doesn't want me that bad?”

“I'm sorry, Spencer.”

She wiped her eyes angrily. “Don't be. Looks like you were right to keep this from me.”

“Don't say that. I shouldn't have made that decision for you,” Lori said. “Do you still want his name?”

Spencer shook her head. “I need a minute,” she said quickly, tearing out of the booth and running toward the bathroom. Her mom's face looked stricken, but she let her go without saying anything.

She hadn't realized Nick was right behind her until he caught her by the wrist, her pulse fluttering beneath his fingertips. “Hey,” he whispered. “What's wrong?”

“It's my mom...she just kinda dropped a bomb on me and I need to freak out for a second.”

His eyes flicked around briefly before he led her further down the hall to an unmarked door. “In here,” he said, pushing her inside first.

It must have been a storage closet or something. It was barely big enough for both of them to fit; she was practically standing on his feet.

Spencer fumbled around for the light switch, but Nick was still holding onto her.

“Hey,” he whispered again, his breath tickling her face. “Just breathe a second. It's alright.” She stilled as she felt the softest brush of his lips on her forehead.

“Better?” he asked after a minute of them just standing there, being in each other's space.

She nodded, forgetting that they could barely see each other in the dark. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze before opening the door.

Where Joselyn was on the other side, looking amused.

Nick scowled at her before she said anything, and Spencer took the opportunity to slip back to her booth.



Nick delivered her drink right to their table, also armed with an unasked-for refill of her mom's tea. He nodded politely at the both of them, but made a point to brush Spencer's hand with his as he set her drink down. The contact was brief, yet calming. She wondered if her mom had noticed.

"He looks like a nice boy," Lori said, watching as Nick disappeared back into the employees-only area. "Do you know him? Does he go to your school?"

Spencer shrugged noncommittally. "He's nice." This wasn't exactly the best time to bring up the new man in her life. She still needed some closure about the one who should have been there already.

Her mother didn't know her well enough to read into her words. That was the nice thing about being kept at arm's length – there was none of that 'When I was your age' lecture shit. She'd figured most things out just fine. Periods, sex, boys. Up until now, the most her mother had provided was a roof over her head and a desperate need for approval. But maybe that was about to change.

"Do you know why I chose to study English?"

Her mom's hands shook as she sipped her tea. "No." She never asked, not even when Spencer's senior year came and was entirely dominated by applications, test scores, and essays. She simply gave her the money for the application fees



and said nothing else. Didn't offer any advice, and Spencer didn't ask.

Spencer sighed as she tried to figure out how to word things. "Because of you," she explained. "I did it because I wanted to feel closer to you. I don't know, like maybe our relationship could be better if we shared this thing between us."

She felt her mouth dry and took a sip of her drink as she watched her mom take in her words. Her hands were no longer shaking on her mug.

"Does it make you happy? Is this what you want to do?"

Spencer nodded. "I'm good at essays." That wasn't a shocker – her mom was the one who announced the awards every time there was a contest. "And I think I like teaching, too." Her mom's lips curved up in a small smile at that.

"I helped someone with their essays, and I think I want to get into tutoring."

Her mom finally looked up from her cup. "You'd make good money," she said. "Just don't go into teaching, trust me. It is not worth the headache. Besides," she swept her head around. "There's a private school nearby, and I'm sure parents would pay a lot of money for some one-on-one sessions."

"You're actually okay with this? You don't think I'm making a mistake?" Spencer couldn't mask the incredulity in her voice. Her mom had never once commented on anything she was doing after high school – not her college, not her major, not even when she said she wanted to live in the dorms instead of commuting.

"Spencer, honey, the reason I never said anything when you were applying to schools is because I would've been okay with anything you chose. I didn't want to influence you into doing anything you didn't want to do. You're a hard worker, and I know you don't need me telling you can do anything you set your mind to. Stubborn, remember?"

Spencer let out a breath, feeling ten times lighter now. "There's so much I have to tell you about this year. Classes,

friends,” she paused.

“Boys?” her mom asked. “Girls? ...People?”

Spencer wasn't letting her touch that subject with a ten-foot pole. At least – not yet anyway. They were only just starting to reconcile things. And this thing with Nick was still so new. She didn't know what to make of it just yet.

“I'm not quite there yet,” she lied. “Mostly just hang out with my roommate and our friend. I don't have time for much else considering —”

“How long it takes you to get your readings done,” her mom finished for her. “Trust me, I've been where you are. It gets easier, once you figure out what works for you. Sometimes, I wish it wasn't. Reading hundreds of essays full of nothing but drivel and bad grammar will do that to you.”

Had she actually made a joke just now? She was smiling and Spencer smiled back.

Things were a long way from perfect, but this was a good start.

*Summer*



# Epilogue

What's wrong Nicky? What's got your panties in a twist?"

Nick scowled across the table. "You mean aside from the fact that my girlfriend is currently sharing a milkshake with my cousin and her best friend instead of me?"

Spencer was sandwiched between Joselyn and Reese on one side of their already cramped booth, sharing a dairy-free strawberry milkshake with three straws poking out. She shrugged. "It's not their fault you have questionable taste." She gestured toward his chocolate milkshake.

Nick rolled his eyes.

Joselyn smugly stuck her tongue out at him, and he wondered how easy it would be to convince Christian to help him get his revenge.

"Nicky?"

He turned to see Chelsea standing over them with their check, and he resisted the urge to frown. He really wasn't a fan that Spencer heard that nickname coming from someone who wasn't Joselyn – *especially* his ex-situationship.

"Hey Chels," he said anyway, because he wasn't a dick.

"Joselyn," she nodded at his cousin, who gave a curt, "Chelsea," in response.

Nick kicked her under the table, and she responded by shoving the heel of her combat boot right in his shin. He glared at her and bit back a curse as white-hot pain flared up his entire leg.

*Be nice*, he mouthed at her.

She gave him a look that said the most he was going to get was *civil*.

“Everything alright?” Chelsea asked, suddenly all business as she addressed everyone else at the table. Spencer and Reese gave polite nods as they slid their milkshake back and forth.

*Why*, Nick wanted to ask, *are you still here?* He scowled, noting that Joselyn’s face said the same exact thing.

“What brings you over here?” Chelsea asked him, still standing there.

Joselyn raised an eyebrow, and Nick started calculating the risks of kicking her again. Keeping his composure, he answered, “Celebrating my last weekend of freedom. I got into Dr. Walden’s summer orgo class.” It was the only way his schedule in the fall would be free enough to accommodate both work *and* his internship.

Spencer pouted across the table. “It’s *summer*. We’re supposed to go to the beach, Nicholas.”

He reached to twirl a strand of her hair around his finger, half just because and half so Chelsea would get the fucking hint without Joselyn having to resort to violence. “I’ll make it up to you, sweetheart.”

“You better,” Reese snorted.

“I’ll just leave this here for y’all then,” Chelsea said, setting their check down and finally leaving.

Nick dug out his wallet and left some cash, eager to get out of there. Joselyn raised her brow. “Generous tip.”

“She works in the service industry, Josie. I’m not an asshole.”

Joselyn shrugged. “Never said you were.”

He sighed. “Are we done here?”

Reese checked her phone. “Might as well be. Hunter and Aaron just got to campus with the truck.”

“And my mom’s meeting us at the leasing office,” Spencer said.

As soon as the semester ended, she and Reese had decided to take over the lease for a two-bedroom apartment even closer to both Nick’s townhouse and The Grind – aided significantly because of Spencer’s dad’s extreme aversion to having any involvement in his daughter’s life. Paying her rent was basically a bribe to get her to not look for him.

They’d spent the entire morning packing up her and Reese’s shit so they could move in today, but there was no way to get the furniture over considering the biggest car between all of them was Reese’s Pilot.

After piling in Nick’s Impala and heading back to campus, they found Hunter leaning against a pickup next to a guy who could’ve passed for his twin – aside from the dark tattoos that snaked up Aaron’s muscular forearms. Over six feet tall, broad shoulders, tan skin, and a mess of dark hair. He’d be useful for all the manual labor. Or as a shield if any of the girls’ tempers flared.

“We ready?” Hunter asked. “Aaron has to drive back before sundown, or our dad will have half the town out searching.”

“Everything’s packed,” Reese said as she fell into step with him. “Me, Spencer, and Joselyn will get all the boxes into our cars while you boys handle the heavy lifting.”

“Wasn’t aware heavy lifting was part of the deal. I thought I was just the asshole with the truck,” Aaron quipped, his voice low and teasing. Judging by the size of his arms, it didn’t look like he had anything to be worried about.

“You *are* the asshole with the truck,” Reese shot back. “But face it, what else did you have going on at home?”

“I can think of a couple things,” Hunter muttered next to her.

A soft pink flush climbed up Aaron's neck as he smacked his brother on the back of the head. Reese didn't appear to have noticed, but Spencer coughed out a laugh.

Nick slipped his hand into hers and wrapped his free arm around Joselyn's shoulders as they brought up the rear.

"How long do you think this is gonna take?" Joselyn asked. "I left Christian in charge of things while we've been out, but he has a shift tonight and needs to get some sleep."

Nick raised an eyebrow. "Are you two at that point? Trusting him with the love of your life like that?"

Joselyn scowled and punched him in the arm before pushing off to walk alone. "Watch it, Nicky," she warned.

They'd finally reached their dorm. Everyone else on their hall was in the process of moving back home for the summer, but neither Reese nor Spencer had any desire to stay with their families for longer than strictly necessary, and sometimes they couldn't even stomach that.

Reese's dad was apparently a real piece of work, but at least Spencer was working on reconciling things with her mom.

"Alright," Reese started, "the bigger ones can go in my trunk, and Spencer and Nick should be able to fit the rest. The furniture might take a couple trips though."

"Then let's get fucking to it then," Hunter replied, reaching down for the nearest box. "Can't get shit out the door until everything else has been cleared."

Spencer let go of Nick's hand to grab a box, which he promptly snatched from her. She glared, but made no move to take it back. He didn't win often, so he relished the feeling of this small victory while he still could.

The six of them made quick work of everything, and Nick stayed behind while Joselyn followed Spencer and Reese to their new apartment in his car. He grimaced thinking about her driving it. Not that she was a bad driver, but he wouldn't put it past her to 'accidentally' dent it to get back at him for his comment about Christian earlier.

It wasn't his fault she was fucking blind to what was blooming between the two of them again. When she'd gotten stuck on the side of the road after picking up things for The Grind a while ago, it'd been *Christian* she called and not Nick. And she couldn't stand asking either of them for help.

Hunter looked over as he finished strapping down the first of the girls' new mattresses, his face red and dripping with sweat. "How the fuck did we get roped into this again?"

Nick shrugged. "Anything for our princesses, right?"

The other man rolled his eyes, but nodded begrudgingly as he joined Nick and Aaron inside the cab.



Spencer's phone rang as she pulled into the apartment's parking garage.

"I'm here," her mother's voice said through her car's speakers.

"Great," she replied. "We're parking now. The boys should get here soon with the rest of our stuff."

Reese and Joselyn parked in the spots next to her, and Spencer disconnected her phone's Bluetooth and held it to her ear.

"Oh, I think I see Liam coming in here. Did you call him to help you today, too?"

Spencer leaned against her car as she answered and held up a finger to signal to the other two to wait a second. "Yeah. Reese and I are heading over now to get the keys and sign the last of the paperwork." Joselyn would stay to stand in the last free parking spot so Aaron could claim it when the boys got there with the truck.

She sighed as Reese looped her arm through hers and she ended the call.



Reese raised an eyebrow. “What’s wrong, babe?”

“It’s Nick’s first time meeting my mom. I just want this to go well.”

“I don’t think you need to be worried. This is *Nick* we’re talking about. He’ll probably charm her pants off,” Reese reminded her.

“Liam’s here, too,” Spencer said. “He offered to help me move into the dorm, but I didn’t have nearly the same amount of stuff.”

“So, I finally get to meet the man who’s been in love with you for years?” Reese teased.

Spencer scowled. “He is *not* in love with me.”

“Anymore.”

“*Reese.*”

They finally made it to the leasing office to sign a couple more forms before being handed two keys.

“All set?” Lori asked, getting up from a chair in the waiting room. “Liam and I were just catching up.”

“Hey,” he said, face only a little pink as he looked at Spencer. He held out his hand hesitantly, but she shook her head and held her arms out.

“It’s alright, Liam. You can give me a hug.” When they broke apart, she gestured to Reese. “This is my roommate, Reese.”

While Liam and Reese exchanged pleasantries, Spencer walked ahead with her mom to ride the elevator to their unit, eager to get a look inside her home for at least the next twelve months. And for some privacy for what she was about to say.

She bit her lip. “Hey, Mom?”

Lori raised an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“What would you say if I told you I’ve been...seeing someone...and this someone is on his way to help us move in?”

“How long have you and this ‘someone’ been seeing each other?” her mother asked, a teasing note in her voice that Spencer still wasn’t used to hearing.

“Officially? Since April.”

“And I’m just now hearing about this?”

Spencer rolled her eyes as they exited the elevator and rounded a corner until they reached the unit at the end of the hall. “It took you eighteen years to even *talk* about dad in front of me.”

Her mother groaned. “I’m never going to hear the end of that, am I?”

“Nope.” Spencer popped her lips on the ‘p’.

“Are you being safe? Do you need condoms?” Lori asked as Spencer unlocked the door.

She glared at her. “*Mother.*”

“You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Spencer, but I want you to have the choices I didn’t.”

“Mom,” Spencer said seriously, though she was taken aback by her statement. “There’s nothing to worry about. We aren’t...active.”

Her mother raised her eyebrow again. “If that changes, you’ll be safe?”

*It’s not going to change.* “Yes, I promise. Now can we *please* stop talking about this?”

Reese and Liam finally caught up, having gotten into a deep discussion about SEC football.

“I’m from Huntsville,” Reese said. “You can’t blame me.”

Liam rolled his eyes. “And I go to UGA.”

“I’m sorry,” she quipped.

Spencer sighed. “Reese, are you done antagonizing him?”

“Yes, babe,” Reese said, looping her arm back through Spencer’s so they could take a look around together. Their unit had two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a decently-sized

kitchen. Spencer guessed there were perks to having a deadbeat dad with a large bank account.

“This one’s mine,” she said, claiming the smaller of the two bedrooms. “I don’t like having too much space to fill up.”

“Are you sure you don’t want the one with the attached bathroom?” Reese asked, poking her head in.

“Babe, I’ve already marked my territory.”

“I hope you mean that metaphorically.”

Spencer slapped her arm on her way out. “Come on. We have manual labor to supervise.”

After leaving Lori inside the apartment, Spencer and Reese led Liam to the parking garage, where they found the boys and Joselyn debating which of the *Fast and Furious* movies was the best.

Spencer cleared her throat and gestured at everyone. “You’ve met Nick and Joselyn before, and this is Hunter and his brother Aaron,” she said. “Everyone, this is Liam.”

“Princess, I don’t know how the fuck you got this many of us to do your bidding, and at this point, I’m afraid to ask,” Hunter muttered darkly as he shook Liam’s hand. He jerked his head toward the truck bed. “This is the first of *many* trips. Hope you cleared your schedule.”

Liam held both his hands up in surrender. “You have me for the rest of the day. I have nowhere else I’d rather be.”

With the extra set of hands, they were able to quickly unload the boxes first, since Joselyn had to rush back to work in Nick’s car.

Spencer tugged on his arm to stop him right before he entered the unit.

Nick raised his eyebrow. “Yes?”

“My mom’s in there,” she reminded him.

“Yes, love, I’m aware. Is there something else you want me to know?”

She chewed on her bottom lip. “No,” she sighed before shoving him through the door like a lamb to the slaughter.

“Mom, this is Nick,” Spencer said quickly, feeling the back of her neck heat up. How did people do this? Her milkshake was threatening to make an appearance right on their new carpet.

Her mother perused him up and down, recognition flashing in her eyes. She turned to Spencer. “You said you didn’t know him very well. At the coffee shop.”

Spencer crossed her arms defensively. “I said he was nice. Not my fault you assumed.”

“I think it’s still lying if it’s by omission, sweetheart,” Nick said. He set his load down to shake her mom’s hand.

“Omitted something pretty big there, honey,” her mother said, rolling her eyes. She turned to Nick with a soft smile to return his handshake. “So, what are you studying?”

“Mom,” Spencer grit out. “*Not. Now.*”

Nick picked up the box. “Where am I putting this?” He lowered his voice to a loud whisper and turned to Lori. “We’ll talk later.”

“Like hell, you will,” Spencer muttered as she pointed to her room.

It took three more trips with Aaron’s truck before they finally had everything inside the apartment.

Spencer set about breaking down boxes while the others ran like ants around her – Hunter and Aaron handled the furniture while Reese started putting things in their proper places.

Liam offered her a crooked smile as they watched Nick and her mom continue to hit it off while unpacking things in the kitchen. “I see he finally got his shit together.”

Spencer felt the corners of her lips curl upward. “You could say that.”

“He making you happy, Spencer?”

She caught Nick's curious eye, and felt her smile widen. "He is."

"Good," he said seriously. "I told you you deserved more than complicated."

She nudged his arm with a piece of cardboard. "What about you? You sweep some girl off her feet yet?"

"Nope," Liam shook his head. "If we're being honest, I think I might have an easier time getting into law school than I do getting a girl to like me back."

When Spencer frowned, he fumbled for his words. "I meant that as a joke – I – *fuck*." He rubbed his face and groaned. "*This* is what I'm talking about."

"It's alright," she said, knocking his arm again. "I didn't take it personally. But you should have faith in yourself. I don't think you'll have a hard time with either of those things."

"You think?"

She thought back to where she'd been a year ago – struggling with self-hatred and barely on speaking terms with her only family. Now, she was standing in the apartment she would share with her best friend while her boyfriend and mother were bonding as they helped her unpack. "Yeah, I do."

# Playlist

*Somebody to You - The Vamps*

*The Very First Night - Taylor Swift*

*Until I Found You - Stephen Sanchez (Piano Version)*

*Put You Through Me - Arrows in Action*

*Dandelions (slowed + reverb) - Ruth B.*

*Honey, I'm Good - Andy Grammer*

*Campus - Vampire Weekend*

*Enchanted - Taylor Swift*

*Harry and Sally - Taylor Bickett & Charlie Pittman*

*I GUESS I'M IN LOVE - Clinton Kane*

*What If (I Told You I Like You) - Johnny Orlando & Mackenzie Ziegler*

*Crush - David Archuleta*

*Just Friends - Virginia To Vegas*

*Message In A Bottle - Taylor Swift*

*Holy Ground - Taylor Swift*

*Stay Stay Stay - Taylor Swift*

*Save Me - TALK*

*A Pearl - Mitski*

*Wonder - Shawn Mendes*

*HAPPY WITHOUT ME - MONSTA X*

*Last Birthday - Valley*

*Let You Break My Heart Again - Laufey*

# Further Readings

The following is a list of resources for anyone who is looking to learn more about asexuality. While it is by no means exhaustive, I hope it will help those who might not know where to start.

## **Websites:**

**The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN):** <https://www.asexuality.org>

**The Trevor Project:** <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/article/understanding-asexuality/>

**Human Rights Campaign (HRC):** <https://www.hrc.org/resources/understanding-the-asexual-community>

## **Books:**

### **Nonfiction:**

- *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* by Angela Chen
- *How to Be Ace: A Memoir of Growing Up Asexual* by Rebecca Burgess
- *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality* by Julie Sondra Decker
- *Sounds Fake But Okay: An Asexual and Aromantic Perspective on Love, Relationships, Sex, and Pretty Much Anything Else* by Sarah Costello and Kayla Kaszyca
- *I Am Ace: Advice on Living Your Best Asexual Life* by Cody Daigle-Orians

- *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality: A Black Asexual Lens on Our Sex-Obsessed Culture* by Sherronda J. Brown

**Fiction:**

- *Loveless* by Alice Oseman
- *Let's Talk About Love* by Claire Kann
- *The Charm Offensive* by Alison Cochran
- *Aces Wild: A Heist* by Amanda DeWitt
- *Elatsoe* by Darcie Little Badger

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# About the Author

Sarah Whalen is a recent graduate of Oglethorpe University, where she earned her BA in Communication Studies with a minor in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. When she's not reading or writing, she spends her time journaling and being an angry feminist killjoy. *This Doesn't Mean Anything* is her debut novel.

