



CRUEL PRINCE

ROYAL  HEARTS
ACADEMY

A. J A D E



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Royal Hearts Academy - Book One

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First published in USA, August 2019

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Cruel Prince

Photographer: Regina Wamba

Cover Design: Lori Jackson at Lori Jackson Design

Editor: Ellie McLove

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Cruel Prince

ROYAL HEARTS ACADEMY - BOOK ONE

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

—Proverb

Prologue

JACE

Four years earlier...

“We won’t let them get away with this.”

My little sister’s eyes were glassy when she finally looked at me. “There’s nothing we can do, Jace. They already won. Liam’s gone.” Another tear rolled down her cheek. I’d never seen her cry so much in my fourteen years. “Just like Mom.”

“She’s right,” my brother, Cole, whispered. “Maybe we can convince Dad to move somewhere else.”

His signature smirk was gone, and his hazel eyes were about as lifeless as Liam’s were when I found him in a closet three days ago.

My chest squeezed. It hurt to look at him.

You’d never know it by their personalities, but Cole and Liam were identical twins. And right now it only served as another reminder of how fucked up everything had become.

My family was falling apart bit by bit. And my father was too wrapped up in work and his own grief to do anything about it.

It didn't mean I couldn't.

I failed Liam—my little brother and best friend—but I wouldn't fail the siblings I had left.

I wouldn't let this town or the people in it destroy my family.

My mother once told me that as the oldest, it was my job to look out for the others. Be the person they could depend on. Show them how to navigate life so it would be a little easier for them.

But the only way I could do that was to turn all the pain I felt *off*, and let the rage simmering deep down in my soul rise to the surface.

My mother and little brother weren't coming back...no matter how many tears we shed or how often we begged God to undo the unthinkable.

God stopped listening a long time ago.

My father checked out the moment his wife took her last breath.

I was all they had left.

Which meant there was no longer room in my heart for sorrow or grief. Those emotions were wasted on the dead...I had to take care of the living.

Anger was a far superior driving force. *It helped mask all the guilt I was harboring.*

I stood up. "We're not leaving."

Confusion marred their expressions.

Cole opened his mouth to speak, but I shook my head. He'd have his time after I was done. What I had to say was important.

"Us leaving town is what they want."

Royal Manor was full of rich pricks who would rather get rid of the problem than acknowledging their own.

Fuck that.

Liam died because a bunch of assholes at our school thought it was fun to bully a kid with anxiety and a stutter.

And I wasn't there to protect him like I should have been. *Because of her.*

"They messed with the wrong family." I crossed my arms over my chest.

“I think it’s time for us to give them a taste of their own medicine. Fuck with everyone the way they fucked with Liam.” Determination flowed through me, so strong I nearly choked on it. “And we don’t stop until every last one of them fears us.”

Bianca wiped her tears with her sleeve. “Until they pay.”

Cole’s smirk was back. “Until we run this town and make everyone our bitch.”

*U*ntil we avenged the brother we lost.

Chapter 1

DYLAN

Dylan,

Hope you had a good flight. Uncle Wayne and I should be back from Paris tomorrow morning. There's food in the fridge and your bedroom is all set for you to move in. Oakley can show you where everything is. Can't wait to see you.

*Love and kisses,
Aunt Crystal*

PS: I'm going to get a key made for you, but until I do, you can use the spare key under the mat.

*A*nnoyance sets in as I stare at the hot pink Post-it stuck to the front door. A simple text message disclosing where the spare key was hidden would have been fine.

And a whole lot *safer*.

Not that Royal Manor is a dangerous town, far from it.

In fact, the low crime rate and good school district were the main reasons my parents wanted to raise me here.

And if it wasn't for my mom passing away when I was eight and my father snagging himself a new wife who wanted to move to an even ritzier town on the west coast when I turned fourteen...

Nope, not going down that road today. Wondering what my life would have been like if my mom was still alive and wishing things had turned out differently doesn't change the past.

With a heavy sigh, I rearrange my luggage on the porch and fish the key out from under the mat before entering what will be my new home for the next year.

I barely have one foot on the cherry wood floor when my phone rings.

I should do us both a favor and let it go to voicemail, but I swipe the green button anyway.

I'm hurt, angry...and still not ready to talk to him.

But I'm not above being petty.

"You have a collect call from Brian Taylor at Oak Creek Correctional Center. To accept this call, press five. If you don't wish to accept this call, press zero."

I swiftly press zero and hang up.

Fuck you, Dad.



Thanks to another Post-it note from Aunt Crystal, I was able to figure out which guest bedroom she cleared out for me.

Although cleared out is a bit of an understatement. Aside from the queen-sized bed covered with a purple bedspread, an empty bureau, and yet *another* Post-it note promising to take me shopping later in the week...the room is

bare bones.

Not that I mind. I managed to stuff my entire life into one duffle bag and a medium suitcase. No-frills suits me.

Less shit to get attached to.

I open the closet door to hang up some of my clothes, but three plaid skirts, three crisp, white button-down shirts, and three navy blazers snag my attention instead.

The Royal Hearts Academy emblem above the left breast pockets practically taunts me.

I wasn't in a position to make any requests considering my aunt and her husband were nice enough to take in a stray—but the one thing I insisted on was attending the local public school instead of Royal Hearts Academy. My dad forced me to go to private school for elementary and junior high and it was one of the worst experiences of my life.

The organ in my chest squeezes. *With the exception of meeting Jace.*

Of course, the one thing I wanted was the one thing Crystal's husband wasn't willing to negotiate on given it's my cousin's—technically, step-cousin's—senior year and he attends RHA.

Wayne thinks it would be beneficial for me to go to school with his son Oakley, so I'll have someone to show me the ropes.

However, it's clear good ol' Uncle Wayne must not be very observant. I only met him once briefly at my aunt's wedding four years ago, but a quick scroll through Oakley's Instagram suggests he's about as useful as a goldfish at a Bob Marley concert.

And by *useful*? I mean, stoned.

Which probably explains why he didn't pick me up from the airport like he was supposed to, or why I still haven't seen any signs of him...despite being here all afternoon and most of the evening.

I send him another text, but just like the first ten I sent today, he doesn't respond.

Curiosity getting the best of me, I slip out the door of my new room and venture down the long hallway. My aunt said there were six bedrooms in the house—but after knocking on several doors, it's obvious Oakley isn't in any of them.

Stifling a groan, I amble down the staircase and wander into the kitchen. Much like the rest of the house, the kitchen is spacious, and everything looks expensive, but price aside, it's pretty standard. Stainless steel appliances, glass table, large granite island in the center.

And no Oakley.

After checking the living room, my uncle Wayne's office, and the bathroom on the first floor, I make my way down the stairs leading to the basement.

The smell of marijuana infiltrates my nostrils almost immediately.

I'm not a buzzkill, I have no issues with people who smoke—what I have an issue with is people who indulge so much they forget the important stuff.

Like answering text messages or picking their step-cousin up at the airport.

The big screen television—which is currently broadcasting two naked girls grinding against one another to awful mumble rap—illuminates the basement enough I'm able to see the back of a leather couch. The smoke wafting toward the ceiling fan tells me there's a good chance I'll find Oakley on the other side of it.

I don't know whether to laugh or shake my head as I round the corner and see him passed out with one hand down his pants and the other holding what appears to be a partially smoked blunt.

The baseball cap he's wearing hides most of his face, but he definitely looks like he's been asleep for a while. How the house hasn't burnt down is anyone's guess.

I'm about to dispose of the still lit blunt and go back upstairs...but then he speaks.

“Hey, babe.”

Uh. Kind of weird, but considering I’ve been called worse by strangers, I decide to roll with it.

“Hey.”

“I was wondering when you’d get here,” he murmurs, his voice thick with sleep.

I tamp down the urge to tell him I would have been here sooner if he picked me up from the goddamn airport like he was supposed to.

We’re going to be stuck together for the next year and bitching at him isn’t a good way to start a relationship.

I open my mouth to ask if he wants to grab a bite to eat later, but he speaks again.

“You’re so fucking hot.”

Okay, this train has officially reached *awkward* station.

“Um. Thank—”

Before I can finish that sentence, he shoves his sweatpants down and...

Oh. My. God.

Bile works up my throat as he wraps his hand around his exposed dick.

“Come on, beautiful,” he groans. “Quit teasing me and sit on it.”

I’m positive I must have a contact high because that’s the only way to explain why the actual fuck my step-cousin is summoning me to sit on his penis.

“Gross. What is *wrong* with you?”

Shielding my vision with my hands, I proceed to back away. Unfortunately, I knock into the coffee table so hard I see stars.

“Dammit,” I yelp, gripping my throbbing calf.

“You’re not Hayley.”

Talk about stating the obvious.

“No shit, Sherlock.” I make the huge mistake of looking up. “Oh, my God, dude. Can you please put your wiener away?”

“Sure thing,” the pervert says, rising from the couch. “As soon as you tell me who the hell you are and why you’re in my house.”

He has got to be kidding me.

“Seriously?” I point to myself. “I’m Dylan.”

He tilts his head to the side, like he’s having trouble understanding why my name would have any significance to him.

“Your cousin,” I grit through my teeth and he blanches.

Eureka.

I breathe a sigh of relief as he pulls up his pants.

“You’re not supposed to be here until Saturday.”

“It is Saturday,” I inform him, and his eyes widen.

“Well, shit.” He places the blunt between his lips and inhales. “This stuff is better than I thought.” Coughing, he holds it out to me. “Want some?”

I give him a sardonic smile. “I appreciate the peace offering and all, but I’ll pass.”

He doesn’t look offended in the least. “That’s cool.” His expression turns serious as he snuffs the cherry of the blunt on a can of soda. “Look, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell the parental units I tried to bang you, okay? They’re on my case enough lately.”

Oakley doesn’t have to worry. I won’t be telling *anyone* he tried to bang me.

I give him a nod.

He nods back.

And then it’s nothing but uncomfortable silence.

Quite the riveting exchange we’re having here.

“It’s Saturday night,” he declares unexpectedly while stretching his arms over his head and yawning. “Christian’s throwing his big end of summer party before school starts.”

I don’t know who Christian is, but I wouldn’t mind going to a party. In fact, meeting a few people and reconnecting with some old friends before

school starts will probably make things easier for me on Monday.

My heart does a little flip. *Maybe Jace will be there.*

There are so many things I want to tell him.

And even more things I want to *ask* him.

Like why he blocked my number. Or why he never returned any of the dozens of messages I sent him on social media after I left.

“A party sounds like fun. I can be rea—”

“Don’t wait up,” Oakley utters, brushing past me.

Well, that settles *that* then. My cousin is a bigger tool than the one contained in his pants.

“By the way,” he calls out from the stairs. “The school admins are assholes. I doubt they’ll let you keep that blue crap in your hair.”

Highlights. They’re called *highlights*.

A smile touches my lips. I hope they hate my blue hair so much they refuse admission and I have no choice but to attend Royal Manor High instead.

Chapter 2

DYLAN

“*Y*our *hair*,” my aunt exclaims as she wraps me up in a hug the next morning. “I like it, but Royal Hearts won’t. I’m gonna see if I can book an emergency appointment with my salon girl today.”

Oakley peers up from the breakfast he’s currently wolfing down. “Told you.”

I shoot him a dirty look as my aunt squeezes me tighter.

“My goodness. I can’t get over how grown-up you are.”

Oakley grins. “Like a tall Smurf.”

I preferred it when he was passed out on the couch.

There’s a frown on my aunt’s face when we break apart. Like me and my mother—Crystal has pale blonde hair, dark blue eyes, and a freakishly fast metabolism that makes us appear to be in much better shape than we are.

She’s also disturbingly perceptive at times.

Her expression is careful, like she’s afraid I might break. “How are you holding up?”

I ignore the twinge in my chest. If I give in and break down now—I don’t stand a chance of making it through the next twelve months.

Falling apart won’t change the fact that my dad’s currently in jail for embezzling money from the multi-million-dollar company who employed

him as their chief financial officer.

Because of my greedy stepmonster.

Because he didn't want to lose her.

Because somewhere along the way, she became more important to him than me.

"I'm fine." I swallow the lump forming in my throat. "A little tired from jet lag, but other than that, I'm totally cool."

I'm positive my attempt to redirect her question was a failure, but fortunately my uncle waltzes in to save the day.

"Why does the basement smell like pot?"

Or not.

Wayne isn't a big man, his son easily towers over him, but there's something awfully intimidating about him.

Which probably explains why they call him a shark in the courtroom and he's one of the top defense attorneys in the country.

All eyes turn to the prime suspect.

For a moment, I feel bad for him—but then I remember what a jerk he is.

Oakley shoves a forkful of eggs into his mouth, no doubt buying himself a little time to answer.

I guess my cousin isn't as dumb as he looks after all.

"I have no idea." He shrugs innocently before gesturing to me. "I was at Christian's all night. *Blue* stayed home."

Yeah, I take that back. He's dumber than a box of rocks. Not only for the awful nickname but for thinking my aunt would ever buy his insinuation.

"Yup," I drawl, the sarcasm thick in my tone. "You got me. After I got off the plane and took an Uber here, I unpacked my bags and celebrated my new life by toking up in the basement."

Oakley stands. "See?" He looks at my aunt and uncle. "You guys should be more cautious about who you invite to live here."

My aunt rolls her eyes. "Dylan doesn't do drugs." Her gaze swivels to

me. “Right?”

I nod. “Not really my thing.”

My uncle pinches the bridge of his nose. “Christ. We’ve talked about this, Oak. If you want to screw up your life, do it under your own roof, not mine.”

Cheech...or is it Chong? Puts his dish in the sink. “I’m not screwing up my life, Dad. For fuck’s sake, it’s *legal* here now.”

“Legal for adults, not teenagers.”

“I’m—”

“You turned seventeen a month ago,” my uncle Wayne yells so loud the windows rattle. “Consider this your one and only warning. Smoke that crap in my home again, I’m taking away everything I ever bought you and shipping your ass off to military school.”

Oakley looks genuinely nervous. Can’t say I blame him. Something tells me Wayne’s threat isn’t an idle one.

“Dad—”

“End of discussion.” The tone of his voice leaves no room for argument.

My aunt’s forehead creases. “Why did you take an Uber here?”

I’m about to throw Oakley a bone, but I don’t have the chance.

“Because your stepson was so high out of his mind, he probably forgot,” my uncle booms before he turns to me. “I apologize for the monumental screw-up my kid is, Dylan.”

Whoa. That’s a bit harsh.

Apparently, my aunt’s thinking the same thing because her expression softens. “Wayne—”

“Fuck this.” Before anyone can speak, Oakley grabs his keys off the kitchen table.

Wayne’s eyes narrow. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Jace’s,” Oakley bites out, brushing past his father. “If that’s all right with you, *your highness.*”

My stomach somersaults. Oakley’s friends with Jace? *My Jace?*

The timing is terrible, but I have to know.

“Jace Covington?” I all but squeak.

“None of your damn business, tattletale.” He pauses mid-step to glare at me. “Word of advice? Better gobble up your Wheaties tomorrow...because you just lost the only ally you had. Royal Hearts is gonna eat you alive.” He snickers tauntingly as he strides toward the door. “Don’t worry, though. I’ll tell Jace you asked about him.”

Chapter 3

JACE

“*I* sent a check to your school.” My father sighs heavily, pushing away his bowl of oatmeal. “It should take care of any potential *issues* you and your brother cause this year.”

By *issues*, he means trouble.

Across the table, Cole’s lips twitch. “W—”

Whatever he was going to say falls by the wayside when Bianca walks in...wearing a skimpy outfit that’s two sizes too small.

Smiling to herself, she plucks an apple from the basket and winks. “And sister.”

Cole and I exchange a glance.

Dad should have sent Royal Hearts more money. Something tells me we’re gonna have our hands full with *issues* this year given Bianca’s now a freshman at RHA.

My father averts his gaze, muttering something under his breath.

Like most people she meets, Bianca’s got him wrapped around her little finger.

My mother’s partly to blame for that. She was a Bollywood star...until my dad went to India with his own father on a business trip, took one look at my mom, fell head over heels in love, and secretly whisked her away to the

states to live happily ever after.

Rumi Covington was the most gorgeous woman in the world. Hands down, no contest.

But unlike Cole who takes after my father with his light green eyes and pale Irish skin tone, or me who falls somewhere between with a mixture of both my parents' features—Bianca's the spitting image of *her*.

Needless to say, things were much easier when she was in the ugly duckling stage...before the braces came off and she got contacts. Amongst other things I'd rather not think about.

I grip my fork. What my dad needs to do is tell her to get the fuck upstairs and change...but he won't.

Jason Covington's a pro at avoiding any kind of confrontation with his children.

Which is ironic considering he owns *Trust Pharmaceuticals*—one of the biggest pharmaceutical companies in the world and has no problem making waves when it comes to getting what he wants at work.

It's a shame he can't muster half that energy to deal with his own kids, but he stopped caring a long time ago.

Hell, he practically invites me and my siblings to walk all over him.

"You're not wearing that," I tell my sister as the patio door opens and my friend Oakley walks out onto the veranda.

Or rather, he *tries* to. The fucker trips over his own feet halfway to the table because his bloodshot pupils are glued to Bianca.

I narrow my eyes at her. "You look like you shop at skank express."

She takes a bite of her apple. "Probably because I borrowed this outfit from one of your little *skanky* girlfriends."

Oakley and Cole laugh, but I shoot them a look of warning before turning my attention back to her.

"Go change."

She opens her mouth to protest, but I slam my fist down on the table. I'm

not in the mood for her or anyone else's shit today. "So help me God, get your ass upstairs and change or—"

"Fine, whatever," she huffs. "I can't wait until you go to college next year, you big bully."

Cole waggles his eyebrows as she stomps away. "Don't get too excited, I'll still be here to torment you."

She chucks the half-eaten apple at his head before she walks off.

His eyes spark with indignation as he rubs his scalp. "Bitch."

"Hey," my father snaps. "Don't call your little sister a bitch."

Would you look at that? Jason not only contributed to a conversation, he almost sounded like a parent.

As usual, it's always *after* I handle the situation.

Oakley plops down in the empty chair next to me. "What's up?"

Before he can blink, I swing my fist into his arm.

"Jesus. What the hell, man?" he grunts, clutching his shoulder. "That's my jerking arm."

"Well, if you ever look at my baby sister like that again, I'll break it and shove it up your ass. You feel me?"

He winces. "I didn't realize it was her. She looks so—"

"Dude," Cole interjects. "Quit while you're ahead." He gestures between us. "Last I checked, you have two arms and there are two of us. The odds aren't in your favor."

Oak holds up his hands. "You both need to *chill*. I'm not looking to cause any beef or mack on baby Covington. Trust me, I have enough on my plate already."

Cole and I exchange another glance. Oak's cool and all, but he's been known to make a few mountains out of molehills that resulted in him doing stupid shit.

Like calling 911 in the middle of a party because someone stole his weed.

I lean back in my seat, pondering whether or not it's worth the potential

irritation to find out what's bugging him.

I'm assuming it has something to do with the big party Christian threw last night. I was gonna go, but Britney Caldwell had other plans.

Plans that involved sucking my dick on the drive there and then begging me to pull over so I could put it in her ass.

Since I could use the entertainment, I decide to humor my friend. "Did something happen last night?"

"Nah. Not really." He gnaws on his cuticle but pauses, looking deep in thought. "Well, I almost dicked down my cousin before I went to a party."

My father chokes on his coffee.

Cole sits up straight. "What do you mean you almost dicked down your *cousin*?"

My dad pushes his chair back and stands. "Excuse me, kids. I have an important phone call to make."

With a shake of his head, he goes inside the house. His absence doesn't matter all that much anyway. Everyone's used to it.

Blowing out a breath, Oakley drags a hand over his scalp. "Man, I didn't know it was her. I was smoking and jerking it all day. I knocked out for a bit and thought Hayley came over to take care of business."

Hayley is Oak's on-again, off-again girl. Although it's usually more off than on with them. Yet no matter how often they break up, she always crawls back.

She claims she hates the drama that comes with dating my friend, but I'm pretty sure she's addicted to it.

Hell, everyone at RHA is. They practically thrive off it.

Cole takes a sip of his drink. "All right, so you were high and passed out. Still doesn't explain how you almost slept with her, though." He grins. "Unless you're saying she actually went along with it."

Oak opens his arms wide. "That's *exactly* what happened." He reaches for the bowl of grapes and pops one in his mouth. "She was all for it...until I

pulled down my pants.”

My lips twitch. “Poor girl probably forgot her magnifying glass.”

“Oh, fuck off, Covington. You’re not the only one who’s hung like a horse.” He slaps his chest. “Trust me. Your boy’s packing.”

I don’t know what’s more disturbing. The fact that he knows how big my dick is, or that he feels the need to defend his own with such vigor.

He chews on a grape stem. “The little blue-haired bitch is screwing up my life already. I don’t know how I’ll survive her annoying ass living in my house *and* going to RHA for an entire year.”

Cole’s expression matches mine. This is the first time Oak’s ever mentioned a blue-haired cousin coming to live with him, or that she’ll be attending our school.

I don’t like newcomers. Especially ones who are causing shit.

“Okay, back the fuck up. Why is she living with you?”

“More importantly,” Cole says. “Is she hot?” Amusement lines his face. “On second thought, who cares? A chick willing to bone her own cousin has got to be into some freaky shit, and you better believe I’m down for it.”

I’m not surprised. My brother has screwed almost everything in a skirt at RHA. Including teachers.

Oakley shakes his head. “Nah. I don’t think she’s the freaky type. Just a big tease.” He takes a joint from behind his ear and lights it. “A hot tease, but still a tease nonetheless.”

Cole rolls his eyes. “The hot ones always are.”

Oakley bumps his fist. “Word, brother. It’s hard to find a hottie with a body that will let you shift out of park and stick it in drive right away.” Blowing out a cloud of smoke, he looks at me. “Unless your name is Jace Covington. The asshole everyone is scared shitless of, but every girl still wants a piece of. Go fucking figure.”

He’s not wrong. But unlike him and my brother, I’m selective about who I stick my dick in. I won’t settle for the same mediocre snatch every other

guy has unlimited access to...I prefer prime.

Not that I always turn down easy pussy. It's still nice to get your dick wet whenever the urge strikes. That's why I have Britney.

But even she's starting to bore me. For once, I'd like a challenge.

"How big are her tits?" my brother asks, interrupting my thoughts.

Oakley sighs. "On the small side, but they're perk—"

"What's her name?"

These two will go back and forth, dissecting her body all day, but I'd prefer to start with the basics.

Oak takes a drag off his joint. "Dylan." His eyes crinkle. "And your reputation must precede you because she asked about you."

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I only know one girl named Dylan.

Cole makes a face. "How would your cousin—" He pauses mid-sentence, his gaze swiveling to me. "Well, shit. Small world, huh?"

Too small. What the hell is she doing back in town? Living with Oakley of all people.

Never one to turn down gossip, Oak doesn't bother hiding his newfound interest. "My dad said she used to live in Royal Manor. I'm guessing you two have history?"

Cole snorts. "More like chemistry."

I kick his chair so hard he falls back. "Shut the fuck up."

My brother knows damn well this isn't a joke. *He knows what she did.* What she's responsible for.

Anger brews in my gut. I don't know why she's back, and I don't care.

Dylan Taylor needs to get the fuck out of Royal Manor...*for good.* The bitch has already caused enough problems for me and my family.

I'm not about to give her an opportunity to do it again.

Confusion etches Oakley's features. "She left town a long time ago. How much histo—"

“Doesn’t matter.” I snatch the joint from him and take a long pull. “She won’t be staying long.”

I’ll make sure of it.

Chapter 4

DYLAN

Past...

A soft breeze caresses my face as my gaze drifts to the small figure sitting under a giant sequoia tree.

Jace Covington.

All the other kids are playing during recess, but as usual, he keeps to himself.

I figure his introversion is due to being new, having transferred to my school not only recently, but near the end of fifth grade. However, he's been here for over two months already and hasn't made any friends.

Not that I'm judging him. I've lived in Royal Manor my whole life and still haven't adapted. *I'm not sure I ever will.*

My therapist told my dad I was reclusive because I lost my mom so early. According to her, losing someone so important makes it hard for me to connect with others.

She's wrong, though. I get along with people just fine.

As long as I don't get too close.

The less you feel for someone...the less their imminent absence would hurt.

Feeling out of my element, I take a few steps in his direction but pause.

I'm not sure going over there would be a good thing. He seems to prefer solitude, which is something I can relate to.

My heart clenches. He looks so sad. So *lonely* on a playground full of kids.

Leave him alone.

But I can't.

There's something dangerously enigmatic about Jace Covington.

His edges are sharp like broken glass...detering someone from getting too close.

And while most people would walk away out of fear of being cut...I want to merge my broken pieces with his.

See what kind of alliance our strange, jagged pieces could form.

Head held high, I march over to him. Jace doesn't know it yet, but he's my new best friend.

My only friend.

"Hi."

I cross my arms over my chest when he doesn't return my greeting.

"I'm Dylan."

Silence.

Here I am, venturing far out of my comfort zone, and he's ignoring me.

Annoyed, I tap my foot. "You're being very rude."

Nothing.

Hands on my hips, I glare at him. "Let's try this again. Hi, my name is—"

"I know your name."

Dark, brooding eyes peer up at me, and even though his lips are twisted in a frown, there's a hint of a smile threatening to break through the surface. And God help me if it does, because my knees are starting to wobble.

Caution flickers over his face. “What do you want, *Dylan*?”

I blink, unsure how to answer. “Nothing.” I motion to the spot on the ground next to him. “Can I sit?”

“No.” His scowl deepens. “Go away.”

I swallow hard. This is obviously a mistake.

I turn on my heel, intending to return to my secluded spot near the fence.

“Wait,” he calls out when I’m a few steps away. “I changed my mind.”

He changed *his* mind?

I spin around to face him. “Too bad. Maybe I no longer want to sit with a meanie like you.”

And then it happens.

Those full lips of his part in a big grin, revealing a set of deep dimples.

My heart takes off in a sprint, rattling around in my rib-cage like a wild animal.

How could someone so gorgeous be so cruel? It’s a complete paradox.

“What are you, six? Who says *meanie*?”

I plop down next to him. I’m not going to let my new best friend bully me. “I do.” I zero in on the doughy thing he’s picking at from his open lunchbox. “What’s that?”

Like the flip of a switch, the gorgeous smile is gone, and his gaze turns inward.

We’ve only been friends for a few seconds and I’ve already screwed up.

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“Kachori.”

His voice is so low I almost don’t hear him.

“What’s that?”

He shrugs. “Stuff my mom used to make.”

His use of the past tense should sound strange, but it’s the exact opposite. *It is eerily familiar.* However, I don’t want to assume the worst without knowing for sure.

“Why doesn’t she make it anymore?”

My question lingers between us like a bad stench, and I immediately regret asking.

I know all too well how irritating it is when people pry about my mom. How painful it is to explain that I no longer have one...because she’s gone for good.

Like ripping off a scab that will never heal.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, then shake my head. Saying sorry is pointless. It doesn’t bring people back. “I’m sorry for saying sorry. My mom—she died when I was eight.”

His eyes cut to mine. “Does it get easier?”

My throat locks and my breath freezes. It’s such a candid question, and I don’t know how to answer without making him feel worse.

Perhaps I should tell him the same thing my dad told me. That my mom is an angel in Heaven and I’ll always feel her presence.

But that would be a lie. I don’t feel her.

I never will again...because she’s never coming back.

“No.”

He nods, then before I can stop him, he places his kachori on the grass and positions his foot over it.

“I don’t get how she was here one day and gone the next.” He stomps the crumbs into the earth. “Why does God give us people to love and then take them away?”

I wish I knew the answer, but I don’t. So, I do the only thing I can think of. I stomp on the crumbs with him. His pain is my pain. And even though I can’t make it better, I can let him know he isn’t alone.

He has a friend...whether he likes it or not.

“My dad...he cries at night.”

I nod in understanding. My dad used to cry at night too.

“He thinks I can’t hear him...but I do.” He pauses to look at me. “How are

we supposed to make it through this when *he* can't?"

Without waiting for a response, he growls and stomps harder. I follow suit.

A few minutes later, the kachori is nothing but dust.

"Do you like video games?" he asks suddenly.

I shrug. "Some."

"I have an Xbox." He eyes me warily. "I usually play with my brothers Liam and Cole...but I guess I can let you play with us...sometimes."

I want to take him up on his halfhearted offer, but I need to know something important first.

"What kind of music do you like?"

Music is my therapy. If Jace listens to garbage, I'm not so sure our newfound friendship will survive.

"Rap."

My face falls. Only certain rappers deserve my ears, and most of the great ones are already dead.

"What about rock?"

He considers my question for a moment. "Not really. It depends."

Depends? I wince. It's a good thing we're friends now. I can set him straight.

I reach for his hand and squeeze it. "Don't worry, Jace. I'll fix you."

Chapter 5

DYLAN

I carefully inspect my faded blue streaks in the mirror. The girl at my aunt's salon was good, but she couldn't get rid of all the blue.

Unfortunately, the new washed-out hue is less noticeable after I toss my hair up in a bun like my aunt suggested. Combined with the preppy RHA uniform I'm donning, it's all I can do not to gag.

Normally, I'd put up a bigger fight to not conform, but I don't want to make waves for my aunt. Wayne's nice to my face, but I know he wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea of a convict's daughter staying in his home for an entire year. It probably took some serious convincing on her end.

Crystal looks relieved when I turn around to face her. "I can hardly see it. You look beautiful."

She smiles and for a moment my heart pangs. At twenty-eight, Crystal's only ten years older than me, and right now she reminds me so much of my mom...

Nope.

Taking a deep breath, I force the ache down as far as it will go.

"She'd be proud of you, Dylan."

I highly doubt that. In fact, I'm pretty sure if she knew my father was in jail for embezzlement—which let's be honest, is just a fancy word for *theft*—

because he wanted to keep his gold-digging wife happy— and I was refusing to talk to him for the rest of eternity, she'd be rolling over in her grave.

Or maybe not. It's hard to say since our time together was so brief.

Crystal once told me my mom was strong, smart, sensitive, and sarcastic. When I asked her if she flipped to the S section of a dictionary for all those adjectives, she laughed and said my weird sense of humor was just like hers.

It really sucks I'll never get to experience it. But that's life...bad shit happens and the only thing you can do is deal with it.

Since I'm desperate to switch the subject, I bring up my plans for after school. "I'll probably be home a little late tonight. I want to go job hunting."

She raises one perfectly tweezed eyebrow. "You don't have to worry about money. I told you—"

I hold up a hand, cutting her off. "No. I can't let you do that."

I appreciate her offer to pay for everything this year, but I'm not her kid. I'm *his*.

And given my father's currently sitting in a jail cell and the government seized his house along with every dime he had; I officially have no choice but to fend for myself.

I'll be eighteen soon anyway.

"It's your senior year, Dylan. I want you to enjoy the best time of your life, *and* I want you to have time to study so you can get into a good college." She sighs. "However, I know telling you not to do something will only make you want to do it more, so how about we compromise?"

I reach for my messenger bag. "I'm listening."

"You can work on the weekends and one day during the week. Deal?"

I shake my head. "No one is going to hire me with that kind of schedule."

Her eyes twinkle. "Well, I happen to know that Mrs. Dickinson is looking for a little extra help at Top of the Muffin. I can swing by while you're in school and put in a good word for you."

“Top of the Muffin?” It must be new because I’ve never heard of it.

She laughs. “It’s a coffee shop...bakery. I’m not really sure, to be honest. But Mrs. Dickinson is the most adorable old lady. You’ll love her.”

I shrug as I leave my bedroom. “If you say so.”

It doesn’t really matter where I work or how adorable my boss is. I’ll scrub toilets if I have to. A job is a job.

“Oakley.”

I knock on his door again when he doesn’t answer. “We’re gonna be late.”

“His car isn’t in the driveway,” Crystal says behind me. “I think he left already.”

Of course he did. The douchebag.

She ushers me down the stairs. “I’ll give you a ride.”



I’m not sure why my aunt was so worried about my hair when it looks like every other girl at RHA is violating the school dress code.

Their plaid skirts are shorter than sex with my ex.

“Don’t be nervous,” Crystal says as I open the car door. “Guarantee you’ll be the most popular girl here by the end of the day.”

My aunt clearly doesn’t know me. She might have been popular in high school, but those genes weren’t passed down to her niece.

“See you later,” I mumble over my shoulder as I exit her convertible.

I’m typically not an anxious person, but I hate venturing into unknown territory and I downright despise being the *new girl*.

I had to do it four years ago after I left Royal Manor and the adjustment period sucked.

By the looks of things...this one is going to suck more.

My mouth feels dry as I walk across the parking lot leading to the cream-

brick building with high archways.

So far, I don't see anyone I recognize from back in the day. Not that it would matter much if I did. I wasn't exactly Miss Social.

In fact, the only true friend I ever had was...

My heart beats out of my chest and my knees buckle as I zero in on the tall figure leaning against a royal blue Lexus.

Jace Covington.

My breath catches as I take in those intense eyes, sun-tanned skin, full lips, and the dark stubble grazing his strong jawline.

Jace was always cute, but now he's...

So attractive it almost hurts to look at him.

I shake my head, feeling like an idiot for gawking like every other female in the vicinity. This is Jace. *My Jace.*

As if he feels my presence, he looks up and smirks. *Jesus.* That smirk is as dangerous as he is.

"Hey, you," he drawls in a husky voice that makes my cheeks heat. "Long time no see."

And just like that, all of my problems, all of the bad shit I've been dealing with and keeping inside no longer matters.

He's my person. He's *always* been my person.

The only one who can reach me when it gets too dark. *When it hurts too much.*

For the first time in four years, my universe feels right again.

I give him a smile so big my cheeks hurt. "I kn—"

A force pushes past me. "Very funny. I was with you last night, silly."

Heart lodged in my throat, I watch as a tall, busty, redhead trots over to his Lexus, leaving her small group of friends behind in the dust.

Nausea barrels into me as she leans in to kiss him. It takes everything in me not to vomit when I realize who she is.

Britney Caldwell.

Mega rich. Mega popular. Mega *bitch*.

The girl—along with her herd of Britney wannabes—tormented me every chance they could in elementary school, and made my life a living hell in junior high...and now? Now, she's making out with Jace.

Jace—who used to wipe my tears after she'd tease me about my mom dying.

My lungs burn as I force myself to draw in a deep breath. I knew things would be different when I came back to town, but not this much.

Fortunately, their little lip lock is interrupted by a silver BMW that whizzes through the parking lot before pulling into the spot next to Jace.

“What's up, fuckers?” Oakley greets them as he steps out of his car.

Like a scene out of a movie, I watch as Oakley, some other guy, and Britney's crew of mean girls form a circle around Jace and Britney.

I almost do a double-take as my gaze snags on a pair of piercing green eyes and razor-sharp cheekbones. Evidently, Jace isn't the only one who's changed. Even though they hardly resemble one another, his younger brother Cole is every bit as good looking as he is.

Only unlike Jace, who's silently leaning against his car and observing everyone, Cole's shamelessly flirting with Britney's posse.

None of them seem to mind, though. Quite the contrary—they're all soaking it up.

My chest pangs when it hits me. *There's a Covington brother missing.*

I don't know the details, but Cole's twin, Liam passed away around the same time I left town.

I tried to reach out to Jace after I saw someone post *RIP Liam* on social media, but he never responded to my messages or calls.

My dad promised we would take a trip back to Royal Manor so I could see how he was holding up—but as usual, his new job and new wife took precedence over my needs.

As much as it kills me, I can't blame Jace for shutting me out.

Jace always looked out for Liam and they were close. Losing him must have been absolutely devastating. As his best friend, I should have been there for him.

But I wasn't.

And it doesn't matter why or whose fault it was. All that matters is I was nowhere to be found during the hardest time of his life. The time he needed me the most.

Squaring my shoulders, I start walking toward his car.

I've always been the type of person to own my shit. So even though Jace might not accept my apology, it doesn't take away from the fact I still owe him one.

Not a single person looks my way as I approach their little circle, which is fine by me.

I'm not here for them.

"Hey."

As though I were invisible, Jace pulls his phone out of his pocket and proceeds to type something.

Adjusting the strap of my bag, I clear my throat and try again. "Listen, I know you're busy, but I was hoping we could talk in private for a minute."

Nothing. *It's like I don't even exist.*

Annoyance skitters up my spine. He wants to hold a grudge? Fine. That's his prerogative. I, however, refuse to be treated like a second-class citizen by the boy I used to call my best friend and tell all my secrets to.

For fuck's sake, we're turning eighteen soon, not eight.

"Jace." The bite in my tone has everyone looking at me.

Everyone except *him*.

"I'm sorry, hon. Are you lost?" Britney snaps. "It's obvious no one here wants to talk to you."

I open my mouth to respond, but something passes in her gaze. "You look familiar."

It's not surprising that a selfish bitch like her doesn't remember the girl she used to pick on.

Before I can inform *Britney* who I am, her mouth widens in surprise.

"Dylan Taylor." She looks at her posse with a mischievous gleam in her eye before turning to Jace. "You two were like best friends forever ago, right?"

My heart stops when his eyes finally connect with mine.

"No."

It would hurt less if he plunged an actual knife right through my heart.

"That's a lie and you know it," I whisper as he pushes past me.

I understand he's angry, but there has to be some small part of him that still cares. Some *chip* underneath the block of ice I can get through to.

Slowly, he turns. "You're right."

The ominous feeling in my gut intensifies as he steps forward, closing the distance between us.

"Welcome back, *buddy*."

The smile he shoots me is so cruel I nearly wince.

"Damn," Cole declares as his brother walks away for the second time. "Being on Jace's shit list is—" He laughs to himself as he slings an arm around some girl's shoulder. "On second thought—why ruin all the fun?"

I glare at him. Cole's always been a cocky punk, but evidently, he's upgraded to a full-grown asshole.

"Wow—"

"Ew," Britney screeches, looking at her phone screen in disgust. "Desperate much?"

I have no idea what she's talking about. And I don't have the chance to ask because she tosses her head back, giggling with her cronies as they amble toward the building. My asshole step-cousin doesn't even spare me so much as a parting glance before he chases after them.

For a moment, I consider calling my aunt to pick me up.

No. I won't give them the satisfaction of getting under my skin so easily.
Whatever it is, it will blow over soon. High school gossip has the shelf
life of fruit. There's always a new rumor that upstages the one before.
My steps are steady as I walk inside.
Besides, how bad could it be?

Chapter 6

JACE

“Thanks for the heads up, man,” Oakley calls out as he approaches me.

Second period only ended thirty seconds ago. Word got out quicker than I thought it would.

Then again, Britney’s rumors tend to spread fast...just like her legs.

Even still, I’m not sure why Oakley’s wasting his time and mine with this little confrontation in the first place. He knows damn well there’s a better chance of getting struck by lightning twice than getting an apology out of me.

I slam my locker shut. “If I told you ahead of time, I’d have to hear you bitch about it even longer.”

He considers my statement for a moment. “Fine, you have a point.” He runs a hand down his scalp. “But now Hayley’s pissed and she won’t talk to me.”

“And that’s different from any other day because?”

“Because he was *this close* to getting her to agree to anal,” my brother Cole declares as he joins us.

Oakley sighs as we start trekking down the hall. “Did you two make a pact to screw up my life today or something?”

“Stop being so dramatic.” Cole shrugs. “The way I see it, you’re down

one annoying girlfriend and up one hot freaky cousin.”

Although his jab was directed at Oak, he looks at me for a reaction.

I don't give him one.

Cole grins. “If you don't want her, I might take a crack at her.”

Before I can tell him to fuck off, a chubby brunette with black-rimmed glasses, who's carrying a stack of books, crashes into him.

Cole scowls. “Walk much?”

“Yes, I walk with my Lord and Savior daily,” the girl deadpans as she fixes her glasses.

My brother opens his mouth then clamps it shut, looking visibly uncomfortable.

The girl gives him a saccharine smile. “But he's on a break right now. Therefore, eat shit and get crabs, Covington.”

“Jesus. She's annoying,” Cole grits after she stalks off.

“Careful,” Oak mocks. “Her Lord and Savior might hear you.”

Cole flips him the bird before he ducks inside a classroom.

“Look,” Oakley says as we reach our next class. “I'll go along with the rumor because I want the blue-haired bitch gone too, but I'm gonna need you to do me a solid and come clean to Hayley.”

I don't know what's been going on with him lately, but he's more dependent on her than usual.

Well, whenever he's not off somewhere smoking himself stupid.

I decide to throw him a bone. “Fine.” I scan the classroom to see if Dylan's arrived yet. She hasn't.

“But not until tomorrow.”

She'll be long gone by then.

Chapter 7

DYLAN

The girls' restroom in a high school is the equivalent of a warzone.

Half the girls are trash talkers...the other half are targets.

And the handful who don't fit into the above boxes are casualties—they neither want to participate in drama nor defend it.

They just want to pee in peace.

Usually, I'm a casualty. But not today.

Today, I'm the girl who has a target on her back the size of Texas.

All because Oakley had to open his stupid mouth and tell everyone we slept together. Which was pretty shitty of him considering he was the one who asked *me* to keep quiet about him greeting me with a hard-on.

"I mean, seriously," some girl on the other side of the bathroom stall utters. "Who sleeps with their freaking cousin? So gross."

I grit my teeth as I finish my business in the stall.

"I heard she's new," another girl chimes in. "Maybe she's from one of those hillbilly states?"

I roll my eyes so hard I'm surprised I don't go blind. I don't know what pisses me off more. The stereotypes, or the fact that she referred to me as *new*.

"I think you guys are being a little too hard on her," a third girl interjects.

Hope springs eternal...until she finishes her sentence.

“Oakley’s hot. And before you two roast me—I know he’s a pothead and going nowhere in life...but cousin or not, I wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to jump his bones on the lowdown if I was given the chance either.”

Ew. It’s a good thing I’m near a toilet.

Laughter echoes off the walls.

“Don’t worry, Gina,” one of them assures her. “I’m sure you’ll have your chance soon. He passes that big stoner dick of his around like candy on Halloween whenever him and Hayley *breakup*.”

More obnoxious laughter.

Jesus. They’re so good at gossiping and judging, they should consider starring in a reality T.V. show.

I’m about to walk out and put an end to their little chit-chat, but the next sentence halts me in my tracks.

“Speaking of couples—what’s the deal with Jace and Britney?”

“I don’t know,” someone says with a sigh. “I think Brit-Brit finally snagged her man for the long haul. They were awfully *close* this morning.”

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck prickle. *They sure were.*

“Nah, I don’t believe it. Everyone knows Jace Covington doesn’t do relationships...not even with popular girls like Britney.”

Considering how they were kissing and flirting this morning, that’s a bit...strange.

I tuck this newfound kernel of information away for safekeeping.

“True.” I hear the rustling of paper towels. “At least there’s Cole. He’s no Jace, but he’s the closest any of us will get.”

Ugh. These girls are terrible.

“I’ll happily take Cole as a consolation prize.” She giggles. “Heck, if he wasn’t a junior, or such a player, he’d probably be a better catch than Jace.”

“Tru—”

The look of surprise on their faces tells me I caught them off guard.

“It’s the *cousin fucker*,” one of them—from the sounds of it, Gina—whisper-shouts.

They stare at me with wide eyes, but I keep my demeanor impassive as I walk over to the sink to wash my hands.

“I’ll make sure to put in a good word for you with Oakley...given we’re so close and all.”

Their expressions change from curious to horrified.

Some people run and hide at the first sign of a scandal. Not me.

I prefer to confront the jerks responsible for spreading rumors head-on. See what they’re really made of underneath all their hair extensions, push-up bras, and makeup.

“We’re late for class,” the tall blonde declares before they make a mad dash for the door.

Shocking.

People rarely have the balls to say the shit they spew behind your back to your face.

Chapter 8

DYLAN

Past...

“*I* caught your boyfriend staring at Britney’s boobs in gym class today.”

Given Britney’s the only girl in eighth-grade with double Ds, I’m not surprised. Especially since she loves showing them off in her tight, low-cut tops whenever the opportunity strikes.

Rumor has it she set her sights on Jace and wants him to ask her to the upcoming end-of-the-year dance, but he told me he isn’t into her.

My tormentor is going to have to try another tactic to get his attention.

Swallowing my annoyance, I turn to face Tommy DaSilva.

With his dark almond-shaped eyes, shiny black hair, and bronzed skin thanks to his half-Japanese, half-Brazilian descent—a lot of girls in my grade have huge crushes on him.

But not me.

The day he made fun of Jace’s younger brother, Liam—he officially became Jace’s arch-nemesis.

Which automatically makes him mine, too.

He grins. “He’s planning on asking her to the dance next week.”

Despite knowing better, my stomach drops.

No matter how hard I try to push the newfound and *intense* feelings I’ve developed for Jace down...they aren’t going away.

They’re only growing stronger.

Averting my gaze, I continue organizing the stands in the band room closet. Mr. Rigo knows how much I love anything music related, so he usually lets me stay after rehearsal and clean up.

“You must be lost, Tommy. Last I checked, after-school tutoring was held in the cafeteria.”

Tommy is nice to look at, but he isn’t very bright. He struggles in almost all his classes and has been caught cheating on tests more than once.

Brows furrowed; he crosses his arms. “Why are you always such a bitch to me?”

He’s standing in front of the doorway, but I attempt to shove past him. “You know why.”

His hand wraps around my wrist. “Because your stupid boyfriend says you’re not allowed to talk to me?” Disgust sweeps over his face as he releases me. “Does he give you a treat after you roll over?”

The jerk is way out of line. “Jace isn’t my boyfriend and I’m not his pet. The reason I don’t talk to you is because you’re an asshole.”

He studies my face intently. “Have I ever been mean to you?”

Tommy hasn’t, but it doesn’t matter. He’s mean to others. Particularly, Liam.

From the moment Jace’s younger brother set foot inside our junior high school, he has been Tommy’s target.

However, Liam is too shy and anxious to stand up for himself, and since his twin Cole isn’t the type to fight anyone else’s battles, it’s up to Jace to watch over him.

“You’re mean to Liam.”

Amusement lights up his features. “Don’t tell me you have the hots for the sss-stutterer.”

I don’t, but as usual, Tommy is missing the point. “I’d rather spend a lifetime in a closet with him than five more seconds stuck here with you.” I bare my teeth. “Now get out of my way.”

His eyes narrow as he steps aside and I maneuver past him.

“Dylan, wait,” he huffs as I head for the exit. “I won’t make fun of History anymore.”

History is the nickname Tommy coined for Jace’s brother. He tells everyone it’s because history always repeats itself...just like Liam does.

“Stop calling him that,” I hiss.

“Okay.”

I pause, unsure if I heard him correctly. “Really?”

“If that’s what it will take for you to be cool with me.” He gives me a crooked smile. “I’ll even apologize.”

I’m utterly dumbfounded. “You’re going to apologize to Liam?”

A weird feeling crawls up my gut when he nods. Tommy doesn’t strike me as the kind of guy to do something decent without wanting something in return.

“Wh—”

“Like I said before.” He moves uncomfortably close. “If you’re nice to me...I’ll be nice to him. Got it?”

I swallow hard. The subtext is loud and clear—I just don’t understand *why*. I’ve spent most of my life avoiding him rather than engaging with him.

“What’s your deal, Tommy? Why do you want to be friends with me so bad?”

His gaze drops to my lips. “Has he ever kissed you?”

Only in my dreams.

My cheeks grow hot and I shove him away. “That’s none of your business.”

Tommy laughs as he walks to the door. “See you around.”



“Tommy DaSilva told me he’s going to apologize to Liam.”

I’ve been at Jace’s house for the better part of an hour now, mulling over when I should bring up my after-school encounter with his rival.

Me losing the stupid zombie battle game yet again seems like a good time.

Jace’s fingers freeze on the controller briefly before he presses pause. “When did you talk to Tommy?”

“Today...” I swallow hard. “After school.”

I’m not Jace’s pet like Tommy implied...but there’s no denying the intrinsic sense of loyalty I have to him. However, that loyalty goes both ways. Jace is always there for me whenever I need him.

“Well, after band practice,” I clarify.

I’m not sure what to make of his expression. We’re opposites that way. While I’m an open book—Jace wears a mask made of steel.

It matches the force field surrounding him.

The one I still can’t penetrate, even though we’ve been thick as thieves for over two years now.

His expression remains neutral, but the suspicion is practically coming off him in waves. “Tommy isn’t in band.”

Seeing as I have nothing to hide, I have no problem telling him the truth. But I need to tread carefully since I don’t want to make their ongoing feud worse.

“I know. I stayed after to clean up, and he ended up joining me in the closet.”

Those dark eyes practically burn right through me. “So, you two made

plans to hang out alone in a closet together?”

It feels like a stone is trapped inside my throat. “No. It wasn’t like that. I’m not...we didn’t make plans to hang out. I don’t like Tommy.”

How could I when Jace holds my heart in the palm of his hand?

“Then why were you two alone in a closet...talking about my brother?”

Oh, God. I know he’s protective of his siblings, but Jace is acting like I committed treachery.

“Look, whatever you’re thinking, stop. I was organizing music stands in the closet by myself when Tommy approached me. I tried to leave, but he was standing in front of the door—”

“What?” The veins in his forearms bulge as his hands ball into fists. “He trap—”

“No. Can you let me finish?”

As much as I enjoy the protective side of Jace, I don’t want him to go after Tommy. The jerk finally agreed to stop making fun of Liam. Plus Jace has already been suspended once this year for beating Tommy to a bloody pulp.

That impermeable mask he wears slips into place again as he lays the controller on the floor beside him. “Go ahead.”

I pick at a piece of lint on my jeans. “Tommy wanted to know why I was mean to him, and I told him it was because he made fun of Liam all the time and I didn’t like it.” I look up at Jace. “When I started to leave, he said he’d be nicer to Liam. He even offered to apologize.”

His jaw works. “That doesn’t sound like Tommy.”

“I know. I thought the same thing. But when I asked him about his sudden change of heart, he said he wanted us to be cool.” I shrug. “I think he’s tired of being a jerk all the time and needs a friend.”

I’m not brave enough to mention the part about him wanting to know if Jace ever kissed me.

Jace snorts. “No. He’s messing with you.”

“Messing with me how?”

Annoyance sweeps over his features. “By making you think he’s into you.” He plucks the remote off the floor. “He knows we’re friends. He’s just pretending to like you so he can try to steal you away and get a rise out of me. Ignore him if he tries to talk to you again. I’ll set him straight tomorrow.”

A strange feeling brews in the pit of my stomach. It’s not that Jace isn’t right. Tommy is most likely using me.

But the dismissive way he’s implying that Tommy couldn’t seriously like me ...

It’s as if the notion of *anyone* having feelings for me was utterly ridiculous.

“Why aren’t you playing?” Jace questions after a few minutes go by.

“What if he’s not?” I whisper. “What if Tommy really does like me?”

Jace rolls his eyes. “He doesn’t, trust me. It’s not possible.”

Ouch. The sinking feeling in my stomach travels upward until it wraps around my heart.

I have to leave...before I make an even bigger ass of myself.

When I became a teenager, my aunt Crystal warned me the next few years would be some of the best and worst of my life.

When I asked her why, she told me it was the time most girls had their first crushes, first kisses, and first loves...followed by their first heartbreak.

I, however, thought I was safe, because the person I gave my heart to... was my best friend.

And best friends aren’t allowed to break your heart.

It’s against the rules.

“Whoa. Where are you going?” Jace asks when I stand up. “We finally made it to the next level of *Zombie Warfare*. We’re close to the apocalypse.”

The irony. I’m pretty sure *this* is it.

“Is it really so hard to believe someone might be interested in me?” The

question erupts out of my vocal cords like word vomit.

He grips the back of his neck as he stands, looking about as uncomfortable as I feel. *Great.*

“I don’t...what the hell is going on with you, D?”

God, he really doesn’t know. My vision becomes hazy and I close my eyes. *Why would he?*

“Is it because I don’t have huge boobs like Britney?”

Disgust rolls through me as the first tear makes its way down my cheek, but I can’t stop.

It turns out there is something even worse than unrequited love.

Being forced to pretend it doesn’t exist at all.

My feelings for Jace are slowly eating me alive...and it’s not fair that I’m the one forced to deal with them.

Jace—who always appears unflustered and in control—looks so confused, I almost feel bad for him. “What do Britney’s boobs have to do with anything?”

Ugh. He’s acting so dumb I could scream. “If I looked like Britney did, would it be easier for you to believe Tommy was into me?”

Annoyance flashes across his face. “Do you like Tommy? Is that why you’re so mad at me?”

I’ve never wanted to punch someone so badly before. Perhaps if I did, it would finally knock some sense into him.

“I already told you, I don’t like Tommy. I like yo—”

“Jesus. Stop ruining everything,” he shoots back. “We’re *friends*, Dylan. That’s all we’ll ever be.”

We stare at one another for what feels like an eternity as the full magnitude of his outburst seeps in.

Jace doesn’t feel the way I do. Far from it.

Holy shit. It would be more humane if Jace ripped out my beating heart and bludgeoned it with a mallet.

I wipe my tears with the back of my hand. The only thing worse than having your heart smashed, was crying in front of the person responsible for it.

Pain swells in my chest, and I draw in a heavy breath. The way I see it, I only have two choices. One—I can shove my love down as far as it will go. Keep pretending I don't feel anything for him.

But I'm done with playing pretend. And now that everything I've been holding inside has come to the surface...it's a long way down.

So long, we'll never be able to get back to the place we started.

Our friendship is doomed.

Which only left option number two. I need to find out *why*. Given Jace has clearly made his mind up about the possibility of us ever being more than what we are, I deserve to hear all the reasons we can't be together.

"Why?" I whisper.

My heartstrings are no longer pulling...they're hanging by a thread tethered to Jace Covington.

His throat bobs. "Because we're friends."

I hate the way he emphasized the word *friends*. In the blink of an eye, he managed to turn a positive into a negative.

Apparently, my heart isn't a fan of his answer either because I have the urge to dig deeper.

"Would you rather date someone you didn't get along with?"

He shakes his head.

I take a step toward him. "Do you like being with me?"

He nods. I take another step.

My pulse is beating so hard it echoes in my ears. "Are you happy when we hang out? Do I make your day a little better?"

"No." My lungs freeze...until he peers down at me. "You make it a lot better."

If that's true...it could only mean one thing.

“Am I not pretty enough for you?”

I’m not gorgeous like Britney. Much like my height, my features are perfectly average. My nose is a standard size. My cheekbones aren’t carved from stone. My eyes are blue, but they aren’t piercing blue. A handful of freckles sprinkle the bridge of my nose and cheeks, but they’re inconspicuous things and only come out when I spend time in the sun.

Unfortunately, my most noticeable feature is the dimple in the middle of my chin.

The one that made Britney call me stupid names like butt-chin.

Even on rare occasions when I dabbled with makeup, I was never a drop-dead knockout.

My aunt once referred to our similar looks as *girl next door* cute. She claimed it was a good thing, but I disagree.

I’m a mediocre girl with small boobs and a skinny, almost curve-less frame.

Mediocre doesn’t equal sexy. *It’s basic and boring.*

Embarrassment twists my guts. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

Jace isn’t attracted to me. My ordinary looks are a deal-breaker for him.

The ass is more superficial than I thought.

Then again, his mother was a former Bollywood actress. I’d seen a few pictures of her...even before her death, she looked just like an angel.

Heck, Jace’s entire family—with the exception of poor Liam who had a few scars from the car accident that killed their mother—is flawless.

No wonder he doesn’t want someone like me. We’re not in the same league.

“That’s not it.” His voice is so low I can barely hear him.

I inch closer. “Then what’s wrong with me?”

I hate sounding so desperate, but I need my best friend to make me understand how it’s possible for me to feel so much for him...while he feels nothing for me.

The small space between us tightens as I place my hand on his chest. His heart is beating even faster than mine.

“Nothing.” A heavy breath lodges in my throat when his hand grazes my hip. “You’re perfect.”

Tension hangs in the heavy silence between us. It’s obvious Jace is fighting this, I just don’t know why.

Heat rises to my cheeks and my palms grow sweaty. It’s now or never at this point, and if I’m going down, I might as well go down swinging.

“I never gave you your dare.”

Jace and I have a stupid game we play. Every Friday before school ended, we exchange notes with dares on them that have to be completed by the end of the upcoming week.

Usually, they’re harmless and *gross* challenges. Things like eating an insect, or finishing an entire pizza pie and two glasses of milk in ninety minutes.

If you refuse, you have to clean the other’s room and answer a personal—usually embarrassing—question of the other’s choosing.

Lucky for us, we’re both competitive, so we rarely ever lose.

For the last three months, I’ve had a certain dare burning a proverbial hole in my pocket...but I always chicken out.

Not today.

With shaky fingers, I reach inside my pocket for the folded note.

The hand on my hip tightens. “Don’t do this, D.”

Too late. I unfold the paper and hold it up to him.

I dare you to kiss me.

His features twist in pain, despite his grip on me tightening. “No.”

“If you’re so adamant that all we’ll ever be is friends, a stupid kiss shouldn’t be such a big deal.”

Silence.

It’s hard to argue with logic.

It's even harder to argue with jealousy.

"If the thought of kissing me disgusts you so much, I'll just ask Tom—"

I stop breathing when his hands frame my face. "No."

"Why?"

"Because you don't belong to Tommy." His nostrils flare. "He can't have you."

"So, you don't want me, but no one else is allowed to have me? Is that it?"

Long fingers wrap around the back of my neck, pulling me closer. "I never said I didn't want you." His face grows taut as he dips his forehead to mine. "I said we could never be more than friends."

He's talking in circles. Putting us through turmoil for no reason. The solution is simple. Literally right in front of us.

"Kiss me, Jace."

"No."

Irritation ripples through me. I'm growing tired of these stupid mixed signals that are impossible to decode.

"Then let me go."

His gaze falls to my lips and he leans in. "I can't."

Before I can blink, his lips feather over mine in a whisper of a kiss.

They're gone just as quickly.

"Got it," Jace declares, taking several steps back.

"Got what?" Cole questions, taking the words from my mouth.

Jace holds up his finger briefly then wipes it on his pants. "Dylan had an eyelash in her eye. You know what a baby she is when it comes to eyeballs."

Cole nods. "She's the worst. Couldn't even sit through *Saw IV* without getting squeamish."

Jace laughs while I shoot them both dirty looks.

Liam gives me a sympathetic smile. "I d-don't lik-k-ke eyeballs-s-s either, D-D-Dylan."

“Yeah, they’re gross.” I turn my attention back to Jace. “Um. Can we—”

“I thought you were leaving?” He averts his gaze. “I have shit to do anyway, so you probably should.”

We both know Jace doesn’t have shit to do. *I read the asshole loud and clear.*

“Right.” I grab my hoodie. “See you around.”

“W-w-wait,” Liam calls out. “Y-y-you could h-h-hang out w-w-with me.”

Normally I’d take Liam up on the offer, but I don’t want to be anywhere near Jace.

“Thanks, Liam. Maybe next time.”

Chapter 9

DYLAN

*T*urns out there are worse things at RHA than the girls' bathroom.

Arriving late to class.

Ignoring the beads of sweat trickling down my back, I quickly scan the room as who I'm assuming must be the teacher—given she's standing at the front of the room with a scowl on her face and all—sighs in exasperation.

“Class started three minutes ago,” she informs me curtly as I make a beeline for the nearest open seat in the back of the room.

Everyone studies me like I'm some new microbe in a petri dish and I walk even faster. “Sorr—”

“Move,” a gruff voice bites out the second my ass hits the seat.

When I turn my head to the right, I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

Jace is slumped over his desk...glaring daggers at me. “Get a new seat. *Now.*”

Breathe, Dylan.

I look him right in the eyes. “Nah. I'm good right here.”

Those gorgeous eyes of his darken as he sits up. “Trust me, you're not. Do us both a favor and sit somewhere else.”

“Is there a problem, Mr. Covington?” the teacher calls out.

He turns his attention to her. “Yeah. This bi—”

“Make me.”

If I wasn't already aware everyone was watching our exchange, I would be now.

Jace's voice drops suggestively and my heart speeds up for a different reason. “That would involve touching you.” His mouth curves into a disgusted sneer when our eyes connect. “Hard pass.”

I force myself to pretend his dig doesn't hurt like hell. “Good.” I straighten my spine and face forward. “Then sitting next to me shouldn't be such a big deal.”

I'm poking the bear, but I no longer care. It's clear he isn't the same Jace. *And the asshole who took his place can go fuck himself.*

I'm whipping out my tablet so I can take notes when he speaks again.

“You're right. I just figured you might want to sit next to Oakley.”

Soft snickers fill the classroom. The organ in my chest twists at his betrayal.

Jace kicks the desk on the other side of him, and a groggy Oakley bolts up from his slumber. “Is it over yet? Can we go get pancakes?”

The snickers turn to laughs...until aggravation clouds Jace's features. “I think Dylan wants to sit next to you, bro.”

A deaf person could hear the implication loud and clear.

My stomach rolls. I think *Dylan* would rather eat dirt. “No—”

“I've got a seat she can sit on,” Oakley says, cutting me off. “Again.”

A few guys reach over to give him a pound, while a group of girls shake their heads in dismay before giving me a look of repulsion.

Oakley gets laughs and high-fives, I get abhorrence.

Even though the rumor *he* started impacts us both. *Double standard much?*

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Jace glance in my direction. *Waiting.*

Waiting for me to crumble...or better yet—go off the deep end and

scream obscenities at Oakley in the name of defending myself.

Put on a show and feed the drama.

Because that's what these people love most.

My throat grows tight as I look down at my tablet.

I'm not giving these people shit.

And Jace won't get a reaction out of me until he uses that asshole mouth of his to tell me why he hates me so much.

Chapter 10

JACE

“*H*ow do they expect us to be healthy when they serve crap like gourmet pizza and pasta?” Britney whines before pointing a finger at her friend stationed across the table. “Don’t eat that, Hayley. You were sloppy at cheer practice yesterday. Lay off the carbs.”

If I was Hayley, I’d tell Britney to shut the fuck up and eat my snatch. But like the loyal, pathetic Britney follower she is, Hayley puts her forkful of linguine down. “Yeah, you’re right.” She gives Oakley, who’s sitting beside her, the stink eye as she pushes her tray forward. “I’ve just been really stressed lately.”

High as hell and perceptive as fuck, Oak lunges for her plate. “More for me.”

“It’s totally understandable,” Britney coos sympathetically. “But just because your life is a train wreck, doesn’t mean you have to look like one.” Her gaze catches on something and she laughs. “Exhibit A.”

Old habits die hard because my initial reaction is to put Britney in her place. Fortunately, I come to my senses.

I’ll give my old pal credit. She’s lasted longer than most.

I tamp down the urge to laugh as I watch her look around the cafeteria for a place to sit. She’s not at her breaking point yet, but she looks out of her

element.

And nervous.

The earbuds in her ears and the fact she's absently mouthing the lyrics to one of her favorite songs are dead giveaways.

"The Middle" by Jimmy Eat World. The song was released the same day she was born. *And eight years before her mom died.*

But no one else would know those things about Dylan.

Not unless they know her like I do. *Like I thought I did.*

Britney grimaces. "Her bag is ancient, her *Doc Martens* are an emo fashion disaster, and that mop on top of her head looks like a blue snow cone...after someone pukes it up."

All that shit might be true, but I guarantee Dylan doesn't give a single fuck what anyone thinks about her appearance.

"I know," Hayley chirps. "Seriously, who the hell wears combat boots? Is she like...joining the army?"

"One can only hope," Britney mutters with a dramatic roll of her eyes.

Her friend Morgan laughs like it's the funniest thing she's ever heard. "The girl is such a loser. Such a tragedy that her uniform is the most stylish thing she owns."

Britney picks up her phone and snaps a photo of Dylan. "I have to post this on Instagram." She smiles down at the screen. "RHA's favorite cousin-fucker—Dylan Taylor." Her nose crinkles as her friends reach for their own phones. "I didn't want to be rude, so I tagged her. Think she'll mind?"

I barely manage to halt the groan lodged in my throat. Usually I'm able to tune out all their dumb bullshit, but their topic of discussion happens to be the girl I hate.

It's taking nearly every ounce of my willpower not to put my fist through the table and then beat the nearest person over the head with it.

Instead, I do the next best thing. I watch as Dylan loads up her tray, looking at the cashier with wide eyes as she pays—because the *gourmet* shit

they serve here is expensive as fuck, even by our standards—then wait for her to pass me.

A second before she does, I punt Britney's messenger bag from underneath the table.

Dylan goes down like a stack of dominos.

Chapter 11

DYLAN

*I*t was a bad idea to order spaghetti and meatballs for lunch.

I'm sure the red-orange hue of the tomato sauce I'm currently floundering in will pair well with my white button-down shirt.

Fuck. My. Life.

At least I can take solace in the fact that a portion of my meal spattered on Britney's thousand-dollar Burberry messenger bag. *Bitch.*

But as much as I want to beat her ass for intentionally tripping me, I won't give her the satisfaction of letting her know she's ruffling my feathers.

Instead, I calmly peel myself off the cafeteria floor, silently praying I don't slip. *Again.*

As suspected, everyone's eyes are trained on me.

Well, everyone except for Jace, who appears to be enjoying his food without a care in the world. And Oakley, who's laughing so hard he's shaking.

Assholes.

A faint flicker of pity passes in a few people's gazes as I straighten myself out, but not enough for anyone to hand the new reject a paper towel.

Whatever. Screw the sheep.

With a smirk, I pluck a strand of spaghetti off my shirt and plop it in my

mouth. “It’s good. But it could use a little salt.”

“Gross. You’re so wei—” Britney starts to say before her face turns ashen. “Oh my God, you dumb slut. You ruined my bag.”

I lick a drop of sauce off the tip of my thumb and shrug. “Consider it karma for ruining my lunch.”

With that, I walk away.

But not before grabbing the remaining spaghetti strands off my shirt and tossing them in her direction.

“You’re gonna pay for that, bitch,” she calls out as I head toward the exit.

My response is a middle finger in the air.



I’m barely in the bathroom thirty seconds when the door opens, and I feel someone gawking at me.

“Take a picture, it’ll last longer,” I snap as I vigorously scrub my stained shirt with a paper towel.

“Don’t have to. Britney already posted one on Instagram.”

Of course, she did.

“Before you bathed in tomato sauce,” the girl adds.

Lifting my gaze from the mess, I glare at the short, curvy brunette donning a pair of black-rimmed glasses. She’s cute, but she definitely doesn’t look like a typical member of Britney’s crew.

Probably a wannabe.

“Thanks for the play-by-play.” I crinkle my nose. “Now buzz back to your queen bee.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “That’s a bit hypocritical, don’t you think?”

Irritated, I stop scrubbing. “How so?”

“By assuming I was part of Britney’s posse.” With a huff, she unzips her bag and takes out a white button-down shirt. “You’re wasting your time. Those stains will never come out.”

I blink, feeling like an idiot. She wanted to help me, and I was an asshole.

“You’re right. I was being a hypocrite.” I eye the shirt warily. “I wouldn’t feel right taking that from you now.”

“Don’t worry. I have another one in my locker, two more in my car, and like twenty more at home.” She sweeps a hand up and down, gesturing to herself. “It’s gonna be huge on you...obviously. So, if you don’t wa—”

I take the shirt. “No, I do. Thanks.”

She gives me a curt nod before I duck into a nearby stall to change.

As expected, it’s big, but I manage to make it work with a few adjustments.

The girl is still standing by the sinks when I walk back out.

This is awkward.

It occurs to me she might be expecting something in return. “I don’t have a lot of money, but—”

She holds up a hand, cutting me off. “It’s on the house.”

I fidget with the hem of my skirt. I’ve never been good at small talk and it’s clear she isn’t either.

Since our weird exchange can’t get any worse, I ask her something that’s been on the tip of my tongue for the last five minutes. “Why do you keep so many spare shirts around?”

She looks embarrassed. For a moment I think she’s going to tell me she has some kind of perspiration issue, but then she says, “I transferred to RHA last year when I was a sophomore. I was barely here a week when Britney and her cronies stole my uniform out of my gym locker. It wouldn’t have been a big deal, but when I went to the shower, they took my gym clothes.”

My heart sinks as she continues.

“I forgot my cell phone at home so I couldn’t call my mom. Everyone was out of the locker room by then, so I had no choice but to walk back to the gym in a towel and get the teacher.” She points to herself. “And because I look like this, everyone who saw me laughed and mooed. The next day Britney posted a picture of me roaming the halls in a towel on Instagram. Needless to say, life really sucked for a while.”

Jesus. That’s terrible. “She’s such a cunt.”

She nods. “I can’t wait until she graduates. I might actually be able to enjoy my senior year.” She shrugs. “Truth be told, I was happy she found a new target, but when I saw you covered in sauce, I knew I had to help.” She smirks. “Not that you needed it. You were pretty badass back there.”

That gets a laugh out of me. “I’ve been dealing with Britney since elementary school, so I’m used to her bullshit. There just happens to be way more of it now.”

No doubt due to her and Jace dating.

Her brows crinkle in confusion. “You used to go to school here? I thought you were new?”

I shake my head. “Nope. I mean, I might as well be because it’s been so long and I only know a few people, but I moved out of Royal Manor when I was in eighth grade.” I blow out a heavy breath. “Now I’m back.”

And nothing has changed...except Jace.

“Which royally sucks,” she says, taking the words out of my mouth.

“Big time.”

She holds out her hand. “My name is Sawyer Church. I’m a junior and I drive an old ass mini-van. I’m not rich like everyone else here, but I enjoy studying so I managed to get a scholarship to RHA—really, it’s only because Principal Ryan is close with my family. Oh, and I dislike ninety-nine percent of the general population, but that doesn’t stop me from helping all the dipshits in the world because WWJD.”

I shake her hand. “WWJD? Is that like a band or something?”

“I wish. That would be awesome.” She motions to the bracelet on her wrist that has the same initials inscribed on it. “What would Jesus do.”

Not quite the answer I was expecting. “Oh...”

She grimaces. “Ugh. Don’t do that. I thought you were cool.”

I have no idea what she means. “Do what?”

“Look, just because I’m religious doesn’t mean I’m some kind of Jesus freak. Well, I mean I am, because he’s awesome, but I promise I’m *normal*.” She averts her gaze. “Okay, maybe not normal—but I cuss a lot, stay out past curfew, and watch bad movies.” She blushes. “I’ve also watched porn a time or two. And if Nick Jonas wanted to spend the night with me, I’d seriously consider tossing my virginity out the window.”

“I think he’s married.”

“God, don’t rub it in—” She quirks an eyebrow. “You never told me your name.”

“Dylan Taylor.”

She taps her foot. “And...”

Oh, boy. This girl is a trip. “I’m a senior. I have my license, but my car was repoed when my—” I stop mid-sentence because I don’t know her well enough to tell her about my dad being in the slammer. “It’s a long story.”

Sawyer tips her head to the side, studying me. “It’s okay. We’ll get there.”

“Get where?”

She adjusts her glasses. “The way I see it, we’re both misfits in this hellhole. Why not be friends?”

In theory, it makes perfect sense, but superficial friendships for the sake of not being alone don’t really appeal to me. “Um. No offense, but—”

“What? Did your best friend have sex with your boyfriend or something?”

“More like my worst enemy,” I whisper before I can stop myself.

Evidently, I’m in need of a friend more than I thought because I’m one

extra shirt away from spilling all my secrets.

Sadness clouds her eyes. “Ouch. That would definitely explain your trust issues.” She smiles. “For what it’s worth, you don’t have to worry about me having sex with anyone but my future husband.” There’s a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. “Or Nick Jonas. Because heaven help me, I would ride him frontward, backward, and sideways on a Sunday.”

I start to smile, but it occurs to me that if we’re going to be friends, I should let Sawyer in on the truth. “Since we’re on the subject of sex, let me state for the record that I didn’t fuck my cousin. Oakley started the stupid rumor to get back at me because he thinks I ratted him out to his dad about smoking weed in the basement.”

“Okay, let me get this straight...you’re saying you *didn’t* fuck your cousin?” Her face falls. “Damn. I’m not sure I want to be friends with you anymore. The apple’s lost its shine, you know?”

I kind of love that she’s as fluent in sarcasm as I am. “Well, shit. Would you reconsider if I tell you about the time I got drunk and dry-humped my uncle?”

A mixture of shock and intrigue washes over her features. “Really?”

“No. My dad’s an only child.”

She starts to laugh, but the sound of the late bell ringing cuts it short. “Crap.” Before I can protest, she steers me toward the exit. “What’s your next class?”

“Chemistry.”

She winces as we walk out the door. “Mrs. Beck can be difficult, but I can help yo—”

Her sentence is interrupted by the sound of something heavy hitting a locker...followed by shouting.

When we turn to see what the commotion is, my breath freezes in my throat.

Jace’s arm is pinned over some poor guy’s neck while Oakley and Cole

stand in front of a visibly irate girl who's so pretty, I have to do a double-take.

"Leave him alone, Jace. We were only kissing."

Sawyer tugs on my arm. "Let's go. Jace Covington is not only bad news, he's Britney's obsession. Your life will be so much easier if you stay away from him and the drama his family causes...especially now that baby Covington has entered the chat."

Oh, shit. Last time I saw Bianca she had a mouthful of braces and still watched cartoons.

Now she's...

I can see why Jace wants to pummel her make-out buddy.

"Go to class, Bianca," Jace grits through his teeth. "I'll deal with you when we get home."

Before she can protest, he seizes the guy's collar and slams his head against the locker. "She's a goddamn *freshman*, pervert." The guy starts to speak, but Jace pulls him forward and slams him against the metal for a second time. "She's also my baby sister."

The dude looks positively petrified and I can't say I blame him.

Jace has always had deep-rooted anger issues—but most people wouldn't know because they usually mistake his silence for contentment.

However, deep down, he's quietly stewing in all the rage simmering beneath the surface...like a deadly volcano on the verge of erupting.

It's why I sought him out on the playground that day.

We were best friends...but our demons were kindred spirits.

"I had no idea, man," the guy chokes out. When Jace eases up slightly, he adds, "She told me she was a senior and a foreign exchange student."

Bianca winks at him. "Bonjour."

Sawyer motions for us to leave again, but I stay rooted to the spot. Jace is a jerk, but I can't shake this intrinsic need to make sure he doesn't do something stupid.

Like commit homicide in the middle of a school hallway.

“See?” he proclaims innocently as Jace takes a step back. “It was all her. She was practically beg—”

His sentence is cut short by Jace’s fist.

“Try not to rough him up too much,” Cole utters as Jace winds his arm back, preparing to deal him another one. “The first game of the year is Friday and Declan’s one of the better players on the defensive line.”

The knee Jace sails into Declan’s groin makes it clear he doesn’t give a shit about his brother’s upcoming football game.

“Jesus Christ, Covington,” the guy wails as Jace strikes his jaw. “You made your point, all right? I won’t go near her again.”

Bianca rolls her eyes. “Pussy.”

Oakley and Cole snicker, but Jace isn’t amused. In fact, he appears to be growing angrier with every passing second.

Whatever’s happening now goes beyond some guy hooking up with his little sister.

“Take Bianca to class.” Jace’s tone is clipped. *Threatening*. “Now.”

“Are you serious?” Bianca groans as Cole shoves her messenger bag at her and Oakley takes hold of her elbow. “I’m not a bab—”

Jace sends a sharp kick to his adversary’s stomach. It’s so brutal I wince as he slumps down the locker. “Get the fuck up—”

“Stop,” I interject before Jace rams his foot into Declan’s abdomen. The guy is already on the floor, curled up in a fetal position with blood oozing from his lip...pleading with Jace to end the torture. *Enough is enough*. “I’m pretty sure he got the memo.”

Those piercing dark eyes flick to me. “F—”

“What the hell is *she* doing here?” Bianca interjects.

Aside from stating the obvious, I’m not really sure how to answer that.

Bianca takes several steps forward until she’s standing directly in front of me. “Haven’t you done enough?”

The venom laced in her words makes me inwardly wince. We didn't hang out much given our age difference, but we were always cool with one another.

Or so I thought.

Before I can ask her what her issue is, she edges forward, getting uncomfortably close to my face. "Stay the fuck away from my brothers, you backstabbing little snake. Or so help me God, I w—"

"What in the world is going on here?" someone shrieks behind her. "Are you okay?"

When I look up, I see a stern-faced woman who's visibly fuming. Her gaze keeps ping-ponging between Declan, who's still on the floor, and the rest of us.

"Crap," Sawyer mutters under her breath. "That's Mrs. Beck."

Perfect. At least now she'll know why I'm late.

Jace yanks Bianca toward him. "Go to class." He looks at Cole. "Both of you." His attention shifts back to Declan. "I'll handle this."

They start to walk away, but Mrs. Beck halts them. "No one will be going anywhere. Not until I speak to Principal Ryan." She pulls out her cellphone and brings it to her ear. "Sorry to bother you, Principal Ryan, but we have an urgent situation in the hallway by the science lab. It involves an injured student and the Covington boys."

She practically spits out their last name as though it were rancid food.

"Nothing happened. I'm fine," Declan tells her before she hangs up.

The teacher doesn't buy it. "No, you're no—"

"I was in a rush, so I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. I ended up running face first into an open locker and busting my ass." Rising from the floor, he juts his chin toward Jace, Cole, and Oakley. "They stopped to see if I was okay."

As if on cue, the three amigos nod.

"It's the truth," Cole exclaims with a shrug. "Just wanted to make sure

my teammate didn't do something stupid and *permanently* injure himself."

"Word," Oakley chimes in. "It would be a damn shame if something *terrible* happened to poor Declan before the big game on Friday."

"Before or *after* the game," Jace grits between clenched teeth.

Irritated, Mrs. Beck turns to Sawyer and I. "Tell me what really happened?"

"We don't know," I blurt out, gesturing to my new friend. "We were in the bathroom the whole time. We didn't see or hear anything."

Beside me, Sawyer sighs. I can practically feel the disappointment radiating off her. "Yeah...what she said."

I don't like to lie, but I also don't like to snitch. If Declan doesn't want to tell Mrs. Beck the truth, it's his prerogative.

Plus, there's also a small part of me that doesn't want Jace to take the fall for protecting his little sister. Even though he went too far, and it's clear she hates me.

The teacher doesn't look convinced, but it's out of her hands when Principal Ryan and the nurse arrive on the scene and Declan reiterates that he ran face first into a locker.

"All right, if that's the case, there's nothing I can do here." He throws his hands up. "You're all free to go."

We start to disperse...but not before Bianca calls out, "I meant what I said, bitch." She lunges in my direction. "Hurt one of my brothers again and they'll need dental records to identify your traitorous corpse."

Jesus. The girl isn't just holding a grudge against me...she's devising a plan for my murder.

As much as I'd like to blow off her threat, I can't...because I have no idea why she's pissed off in the first place.

I never hurt her brother. Unless you count me moving away abruptly, but that wasn't my fault. I tried to reach out to him, but Jace ignored me.

All this fury the Covingtons are harboring for me doesn't add up.

I'd never betray them.

“What’s your pr—”

“Enough, Bianca.” Jace steers her down the opposite hallway. “You need to chill.”

Sawyer waits until they’re out of earshot before she speaks. “I know it’s probably none of my business, but I have to ask. What’s the deal with you and Bianca? Why does she hate you so much?” Her eyes go big. “What did you do to her brothers?”

“I have no idea,” I tell her honestly.

But I intend to find out.

Chapter 12

JACE

“*Y*ou going to Christian’s tonight?” Oakley asks as we head to our cars. “Rumor has it he’s throwing a *back to the hellhole, so let’s get drunk* bash at his place.”

I’m not surprised. Christian will find just about any excuse to throw a party. And given his parents are gone most of the time and have a huge house, he’s got the perfect set up to do it.

“I’m not sure.” The words I’m about to spew taste like poison on my tongue as I approach my Lexus. “Depends what Britney wants to get into later.”

That earns me a strange look from my friend. “I thought you two seemed extra close today, but I figured it was because she blew you before school.” He lights a blunt and takes a quick pull before passing it to me. “But it sounds like things are getting pretty serious.”

I take a long drag as I conjure up my response. Technically, he’s not wrong. Britney and I are getting serious...but not because I’m interested in her for anything more than getting my dick wet.

I just want to hurt Dylan.

No. More than hurt.

I want to torture her until she feels even a small fraction of the pain she’s

caused me and my family.

And because I know my buddy so well, I know her Achilles heel.

Every time she sees me with Britney...it will gut her.

Whenever she thinks about all the dirty things I do to her nemesis when we're alone...it will dig the knife in that much deeper.

Until finally...she won't be able to take it and goes back to wherever she came from.

It occurs to me I never found out where exactly that was, because my brother's horny, one-track mind interrupted the convo.

"Why is she here?"

"Who?" Oakley looks around. "The parking lot's empty. We dipped out early to smoke, remember?"

"Dylan," I elaborate. "Why is *Dylan* here?"

He takes the blunt from me. "This shit must be better than I thought. Dylan ain't here, bro. You're just high as fuck."

It's all I can do not to knock him upside his head. "Living with you," I stress. "Why the fuck is Dylan living with you?"

Finally, I see the wheels in his head turn. "Oh." He exhales a puff of smoke. "Some shit happened with her pops. He's in the slammer for the next year or so. My dad was able to get—"

"Hold up. Brian's in jail?"

Not many things shock me, but Dylan's law-abiding—won't even go over the speed limit while driving—father being locked up definitely does.

"You know her dad?" Oak laughs to himself. "Or should I say, my uncle." He starts tapping invisible dots in the air. "Or is he? If Dylan's mom was Crystal's sister...and my dad married Crystal...and Dylan is Crystal's niece. What does that make Dylan's dad to me?"

I'm starting to see why he flunked biology and has to repeat it this year. "Nothing. Just a dude in prison."

His shoulders rise as he inhales. "Bummer. My dad's so fucking lame

and boring, the thought of being related to a bad ass in prison was kind of cool.”

“I hear you, man.” I take the blunt from him. “Why did he get put away?”

Usually I don’t mind Oakley venting about his dad, but time is of the essence.

He shrugs. “He embezzled almost ten-million from his job.”

“Christ.”

He nods. “I know. I overheard my dad and Crystal talking about it once. Apparently, he did it for his wife. Or as Crystal would say—his fake-titted, conniving, gold-digging, whore replacement wife.”

Crystal isn’t wrong.

Last I checked, Brian was a financial officer who was well off enough to own a home on the good side of town and afford private school for Dylan. Then out of nowhere, he uprooted his daughter and his new young fiancée in the middle of the night—all because he was offered a prestigious job opportunity, and his fiancée said she’d call the engagement off if he didn’t take it.

At least that was the gist of it from the frantic voicemail Dylan left me that night.

Right before the treacherous bitch turned *my* life upside down.

However, given the timetable of events...I quickly realized she was full of shit.

Dylan knew she was moving weeks before she left. Maybe longer.

My former best friend just wanted to punish me for not giving her what she really wanted.

What we both wanted.

Chapter 13

DYLAN

Past...

*M*y lungs burn like they're on fire as I continue running down the wet street, but it pales in comparison to the pain ripping through my chest.

My dad is engaged. To Savannah.

Savannah, who wears tight, revealing outfits that make me blush and talks to my dad in a stupid breathy voice I can't stand whenever she wants him to buy her something.

That's the woman he's choosing to take my mom's place.

He's making a big mistake.

Savannah can't make him happy. My dad never smiles the way he did when my mom was alive. He doesn't laugh or make silly jokes, either.

My heart sinks with my next realization.

He doesn't talk about her anymore.

Because somewhere along the way, he stopped loving her.

No...worse. He *forgot* about her. Like she never existed.

And I know the second he marries Savannah and they have babies...he's

going to forget all about me, too.

Because it's clear he hates anything that reminds him of her—and now that he's marrying Savannah and starting over, he won't need me anymore.

He'll have his replacement family.

Instead of the broken, damaged leftover daughter he got stuck with.

The one he no longer wants, because she's tethered to all the bad shit in his life.

Tears sting my eyes as I round the corner and charge down the next block. Not even the heavy rain is enough to keep them at bay.

He promised he'd never leave me. *He swore I wouldn't lose him like I lost her.*

It turns out my father's nothing but a lying asshole.

The pebble hits Jace's window so hard I'm surprised it doesn't shatter.

Mr. Covington's probably going to be mad if he catches me throwing rocks at his son's window in the middle of the night, but I don't care.

Regardless of our weird argument earlier, I need my best friend. It doesn't matter if Jace doesn't feel the same way about me, I'll get over it. I'd rather have part of him than none at all.

I launch another pebble at his bedroom window. If he doesn't wake after this, I'll throw a damn brick through it.

Fortunately, I don't have to, because a sleepy, shirtless Jace sticks his head out. "Dylan?" His face falls when he looks down at me. "What's wrong?"

"Everything." My voice cracks as every ounce of emotion I've been holding back for the last few months bursts wide open. "My dad...he... Savannah. Everything is *wrong*, Jace."

Since his room is located on the second floor, I begin mounting the large tree that slants toward his room, but he halts me.

"It's pouring outside. You'll slip and hurt yourself. I'll unlock the front door."

Before I can remind him I've climbed the very same tree over a dozen times, he's ushering me inside his house and up the staircase.

I try my hardest to be quiet so his dad doesn't wake up, but my sobs betray me.

It feels like I'm losing my mom all over again.

Only worse...because I'm losing *everything* right along with her now.

My memories. My family. Even Jace is slipping away.

"How could he do this to me?" I choke out as fat, ugly tears rivulet my cheeks. "How could he marry her?"

Anger splashes across Jace's face. "Shit. I'm s—"

"It's three in the morning." Mr. Covington's confused gaze bounces between us. "What is Dylan doing here?" Before either of us can say a word, he pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. "I was afraid something like this might happen. I know you two care about each other, but you're not old enough to be having sex—"

"Jesus, Dad," Jace argues. "I'm not fooling around with Dylan. Can't you see how upset she is?"

He blinks as he takes in my tear-stained face. "Oh." He rests his hands on his hips. "Look, I'm sorry, but I still don—"

Jace grabs my hand and wrenches me up the remaining steps. "I don't care what you think. Dylan's staying."

Mr. Covington starts to say something, but Jace slams and locks the door behind him. "He'll go back to sleep soon. He always does."

I'm so cold my teeth chatter. "I didn't mean to get you in trouble, I just didn't know where else—"

"It's fine." He grabs a hoodie off the back of his desk chair and hands it to me. "Put this on."

His cool, clean scent fills my nostrils as I slip it over my head. Most of the boys in my grade smell like cheese, sweat, and onions, but not Jace.

He always smells like freshly washed laundry right out of the dryer.

Warm and familiar. *Personal and intimate.*

After carefully maneuvering my wet tank top off, I slide into the bed next to him.

On instinct, he drapes an arm around my midsection and tugs me until my back is pressed against his chest.

Sneaking out to Jace's bedroom in the middle of the night to cuddle has been our little secret for the last two years. It's not something we bring up, and it doesn't happen all that often. Just when one of us is missing our mom so bad we can't take the pain and we need to be around someone else who understands.

Like my dad, the Covingtons don't like to talk about their mother either. Especially Liam and Bianca, since they were in the car during the accident.

According to Jace, the only one who brings her up from time to time is Cole.

But he only talks about the happy stuff. The Hallmark, cookie-cutter moments.

Never the important things.

Like how sad and depressed his mom became a few months before she died.

Or the fact that Jace is the only one who knows *why* she was so upset.

Well, Jace, Mr. Covington...

And the woman he cheated on his wife with.

Jace wants to confront him about it and tell his siblings the truth, but he feels like if he does, he'll be taking the only parent they have left away.

Given my current situation, I can understand why he's so hesitant.

"It hurts." My chest is so full of grief and heartache, I'd probably sink right down to the bottom of the deepest ocean. "It hurts so much."

He holds me tighter as I ride out the next wave of pain. "I wish I could fix it."

Me too.

“He promised me,” I whisper between sobs that soak his pillow. “He promised he’d never forget about her or get a new family.”

“I know it sucks, but you still have me.” There’s a serious edge in his tone, as if this promise is one he’s determined to keep. “I’ll always be here.”

“It didn’t feel like that today,” I say before I can stop myself.

The limbs wrapped around me tense. “I know.”

I’ve always been the kind of person to push the envelope, and this moment is no different. The thought of losing him terrifies me and I need to know our friendship will survive my stupid crush.

“I hate fighting with you, Jace. It feels like fighting with myself. It ruins my entire day and every day after that...until I know we’re okay again.”

“Same.” His heart speeds up and mine follows suit. “I don’t have a problem fighting with anyone else in my life. But fighting with you...it seriously fucks my head up.” His voice drops to a whisper. “It was the same way with my mom. Whenever we’d argue—I couldn’t stay mad at her for long. It would eat me up inside because I knew how much she loved me. And even though I hardly ever said it back, I...” His voice trails off.

“She knew you loved her.”

Jace might not ever say it, but I know he needs to hear it.

I keep talking when he stays silent, hoping he won’t shut down.

“She was really beautiful.” The first time Jace let me watch one of her old Bollywood movies, her beauty rendered me speechless. “She really lit up the screen.”

His forehead finds the crook of my neck and he lets out a heavy sigh. “She always smiled in her movies.” I can feel the shift in his demeanor. “She was great at putting on a show. Hiding behind a mask and pretending everything was perfect when people were watching. Cole’s a lot like her.”

I shift to face him. “He’s not the only one. You might not be as obnoxious as your brother, but you keep people at a distance.” I brush the hair out of his eyes. “Only let them see what you want them to see.”

He levels me with a look. “We both do.”

He’s got me there. With one small exception.

“Not with you. You get all of me.”

I’m not sure what to make of the expression on his face. It’s a strange mixture of pleasure and turmoil. “Don’t.” He averts his gaze. “You have to stop doing this, D. It’s not fair.”

To say I’m baffled would be an understatement. “What’s not fair?”

“You.” He unwinds his arms from around me. “Being around you when you’re like this.”

He’s not making any sense. “Like what?”

He sits upright. “I need you to stop having feelings for me. Or we can’t...” He crosses his arms. “If you can’t control yourself, we can’t be friends. It’s as simple as that.”

I’d almost laugh if he didn’t look so serious. “If I can’t *control* myself? You’ve got to be kidding me.” I stand up so I can locate my shoes. “Do you hear how stupid you sound?”

I can handle my best friend not having feelings for me. What I can’t handle is him being so hot and cold about it.

One second Jace looks at me like I’m the answer to some unspoken prayer. But the next? It’s like I’m the Devil dragging him on a road trip to Hell.

“Don’t leave,” he mutters when I finish tying my sneakers.

I glare at him. “Don’t be a *vapid* asshole.”

The first time I called him vapid during a fight, he stomped off and didn’t talk to me for two days. After we made up, he confessed he hated the word because that’s how he felt after his mom died.

Devoid of color and feeling. *Dead*. Just like her.

I’m about to apologize for hitting below the belt, but he narrows his eyes.

The next words out of his mouth are the equivalent of a knockout punch.

“I wouldn’t have to be an asshole if you’d learn to take the hint and quit

being a desperate parasite.”

Anger brews in my gut. *Screw him.*

He’ll see how desperate and dependent I am when I never speak to him again.

“Better a parasite than a coward,” I toss out as I walk over to his window.

It’s pouring again, but I’d rather be caught in the rain for an entire week than be anywhere near him.

I can feel him behind me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Being careful not to slip, I open the screen and slowly start guiding myself out the window. “Not everyone can keep their feelings bottled up inside for eternity because they’re scared.” I stretch my arm out toward the tree branch so I can swing myself over. The rain is beating so hard it’s hard to focus. “I’m not a robot like you are. I can’t pretend not to feel—”

I yelp when my hand slides off the branch and I lose my balance. I’m almost positive I’m going to plummet, and my face will break my fall, but Jace grabs my legs and hauls me back, causing me to bump the side of his house instead.

He doesn’t bother hiding the mocking glint in his tone as he wrangles me through the window frame. “I told you it was dangerous.”

After gathering my bearings, I turn to face him. “Want a cookie?”

“Considering you’ve burnt every single batch you’ve ever made; I’ll pass.”

Now he’s just being petty. “I’d rather be a terrible baker than a *vapid* coward.”

His eyes flash. “Call me that one more time and I swear—”

“What?” I goad. “You won’t talk to me for a few days? Threaten to end our friendship?” I jab a finger in his chest. “Guess what? I no longer care because we’re no longer friends.” I shove him with every morsel of frustration and rage I have flowing through me. “God, I can’t believe I gave

my heart to such a cruel, *vapid*, cowa—”

It happens so quickly, I’m convinced I must be dreaming.

Because why else would Jace Covington—my best friend turned crush turned enemy—be kissing me?

But he is.

Jace is kissing me.

And it’s...

I don’t know. I’m still too shocked to breathe, let alone move.

I want to kick myself when he pulls away.

“You talk an awful lot of shit for someone who can’t back it up, Taylor.”

I want to wipe the gorgeous smirk off his face. “I can back it up, Covington. Trust me.”

“Then prove it.” His hand finds the curve of my hip. “Kiss me like you’re mine. I dare you.”

I coil my fingers around the nape of his neck. “I *am* yo—”

His mouth is on mine so fast he nearly knocks all of the air from my lungs.

It should be nerve-wracking, considering I haven’t done this before, but it’s not.

It’s alleviating. Like scratching an itch you’ve had for months.

Only ten *million* times better.

Jace’s lips are every bit as full and soft as they look. I want to stay right here and kiss him forever.

The room starts spinning and I’m fighting to catch my breath when the tip of his tongue enters my mouth.

It’s a curious flicker at first. A quick tease that makes all my nerve-endings stand on end.

Then he groans and goes back for another taste...and everything becomes more.

More heightened. More *intense*.

As if neither of us can get enough.

One hand grips the back of my neck while his other goes to the small of my back, drawing me closer.

How I ever thought Jace was vapid is beyond me, because right now—I feel everything. His need, his hunger...all the rage that simmers below the surface.

He's the opposite of colorless.

Jace Covington is blue.

A beautiful, turbulent ocean full of depth...and an incandescent sky that only gives you small glimpses of all its radiant colors...before turning gloomy and dark.

“I see you,” I breathe between kisses. “You're my favorite color.”

I expect him to tell me I'm a weirdo, but his lips curve into a smile before he pulls me toward his bed.

My stomach freefalls when my back hits the mattress and he settles on top of me.

Jace might not act like his feelings for me are mutual, but he's kissing me like he's been trapped in the desert for days and I'm the only source of water for miles.

As if he wants me every bit as much as I want him. *Maybe even more.*

But that's not possible...because I've never wanted anyone or anything more than Jace Covington.

There's a heady tug in my lower belly when his hand slips under my sweatshirt and his fingertips trail along my abdomen.

Part of me is grateful. The other part of me is...worried.

I can't help but think if he was alone with Britney right now, she'd have no problem letting Jace go to second base.

For all I know, they already have.

“God, your skin is so soft.” The tip of his thumb traces the edge of my bra. “Is this okay? I can stop if you—”

“Take my shirt off,” I blurt out.

Another groan escapes him...then before I can process what’s happening, he’s on the other side of his bedroom.

As if he can’t get far enough away from me.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“I did.” He drags a hand through his hair, gripping the short strands. “I never should have kissed you.”

It would hurt less if he ripped my beating heart out with his bare hands.

“Why?”

“Because you’re not mine to kiss.” Frustration lines his features. “It was a mistake.”

I sit up and look at him. “If kissing me was such a mistake, then why did you keep doing it?”

The silence stretches between us for what feels like hours before he speaks again. “I wanted to see if I felt anything for you.” He looks me right in the eyes. “I don’t.”

White-hot pain infiltrates my rib cage until it latches around my heart like a vise.

Jace kissed me like he loved me. Like he wanted me as much as I want him.

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t need you to understand. I need you to accept it and stop.”

He makes it sound like I’m trying to seduce him every second of the day. “Stop what?”

His pupils nearly spear me with the severity of the storm swirling inside them. “Stop trying to make me feel something more than friendship, because it won’t ever happen. *Ever.*”

His statement is like a guillotine. *Final.*

I curl my arms around myself. Jace has pushed and pulled me around so much; I’m surprised I don’t have whiplash.

“I want to go home.”

The irony. Considering I came here to escape what was happening there.

He nods. “I think that’s a good idea.”

The prickle of tears lodges in my throat, but I refuse to break down in front of him.

“Dylan, wait,” he says as I approach the window.

The traitorous organ in my chest takes flight. “What?”

His throat bobs on a swallow. “I figured it would be best if you heard it from me first.”

“Hear what?”

He shoves his hands into the pockets of his flannel pajama pants. “I’m taking Britney to the dance.”

It’s like I don’t even know who he is anymore.

Neither of us says a word as I crawl out of his bedroom. *Out of his life.*

“D-d-dylan!” Liam calls out when I reach the end of the driveway.

I’m not really in the mood to talk to anyone, but because it’s Liam, I stop walking.

“Are y-y-you ok-k-kay?” he asks when he catches up to me. “Jac-c-ce s-s-said you’re upset.”

Seeing as I just left, it’s weird he would know that. It’s even weirder that he would send Liam after me. “When? Why would he tell you that?”

He shrugs. “He t-t-texted me and t-t-told me t-t-to c-c-check on you.”

Un-fucking-believable. “Tell your stupid brother if he’s so concerned about my well-being, he should quit being such an asshole and stop sending his little brother to do his dirty work.”

His face falls. “Oh.”

He reaches for my arm when I start walking. “W-w-wait. Let me w-w-walk you home.”

Normally I wouldn’t mind, but all I want to do is go home and sleep.

Hopefully when I wake up, the last twenty-four hours will all be some

horrible nightmare, and everything will be back to normal.

“I appreciate it, but I really just want to be alone right now.” I gesture to his house. “The sun’s almost up. You should get some rest.”

He frowns. “Oh. O-k-k-kay.”

I’m passing their mailbox when he utters, “By the w-w-way. T-t-thanks for the T-t-tommy t-t-thing.”

I’m not sure what he means. “What Tommy thing?”

“He mes-s-saged me on Ins-s-stagram and s-s-said you w-w-wouldn’t be friends w-w-with him if he w-w-was mean to me, s-s-so we’re c-c-cool now.”

That’s not exactly what transpired, but if Tommy stops being a prick to Liam, then I’m happy.

I give him a smile. “That’s awesome. See? I told you things would get better.”

He grins. “S-s-see you at s-s-school.”

Chapter 14

DYLAN

I shouldn't be surprised Oakley ditched me again.

However, I am pissed.

My aunt—who's also not picking up her phone—texted me earlier to say she scored me an interview with Mrs. Dickinson after school.

I'm so desperate I scan the mostly empty parking lot for Sawyer's minivan.

Of course, there's no sign of it.

I glance at my watch. "Shit."

I'd walk, but it's on the other side of town and my interview is in exactly seventeen minutes.

It will take me at least forty-five to get there on foot. Thirty-five if I start running now.

I rummage through my purse for my phone so I can check my bank account. I have exactly sixty-three bucks, which is enough for an Uber, but not enough to get me lunch the rest of the week.

Actually, make that *tomorrow* given the overpriced shit they serve here.

Fuck it. I need a job way more than I need lunch money.

I'm opening the app when I hear a deep voice call my name.

I look up at the same time an orange Subaru pulls up to the curb and the

driver rolls down the passenger side window.

“Hey, stranger. How you been?”

Holy shit. I’d recognize those dark almond eyes, jet black hair, and crooked smile anywhere.

Tommy DaSilva.

“Hey.” The excitement in my voice betrays me. It’s good to see a childhood friend who doesn’t treat me like garbage. “It’s been forever. How are you?”

He drapes an arm over the passenger seat. “Pretty good. A few ups and downs, but I’m hanging in there.”

“Yeah, I hear you.” It suddenly occurs to me this is the first time I’ve seen him all day. “I had no idea you went here. I didn’t see yo—”

“I don’t.” He sucks in a breath. “My little brother Stone does. Today is his first day of high school and I promised to give him a ride home.”

“Oh.” Disappointment flickers in my chest, but it’s quickly superseded by anxiety. If I have any hope of arriving on time, I need to get a move on. “Give me one second. I have to order an Uber for my job inter—”

“I can give you a lift.”

It’s all I can do not to jump through the window and hug him. “Are you sure? I don’t want to impose.”

“On what? Taking my little brother home?” He pushes the passenger door open and chuckles. “Get in. I won’t take no for an answer.”

He doesn’t have to worry about that. I’m in no position to object his kind offer. “Thanks. The interview is at a place called Top of the Muffin.”

“I’ve been there a few times. The owner is kind of rude, but the food’s good.”

That’s...reassuring.

I notice a football jersey and helmet along with a gym bag in his back seat. “I didn’t know you played football.”

His eyebrows dance. “Yup, I’ve been a Viking since sophomore year.”

He winks. “Some say I’m the best linebacker since Lawrence Taylor.”

“I have no idea who that is, but he’s got a stellar last name.”

He places his hand over his heart, feigning offense. “Ouch. Come on, Dylan. The Giants. Dude was a legend on the field.” He winces. “Off the field is a different story, but—” His eyes shift to something behind me. “There he is. Finally.”

I watch as a younger, *highly irritated* version of Tommy swings open the door and climbs into the backseat.

Despite his visibly sour mood, Tommy smiles at him. “About time, rugrat.”

The boy’s frown deepens. “Who’s the chick? Another jersey chaser?”

Tamping down my annoyance, I extend a hand. “Hi, I’m Dylan. I’m an old friend of Tommy’s.”

He dismisses my hand and directs his attention to his brother. “Deal’s off, prick. You couldn’t pay me enough to spend another day in that hellhole.”

Amen to that. Royal Hearts Academy sucks balls.

“It’s only your first day,” Tommy grits through his teeth. “It will get better.”

“Fat fucking chance,” the kid barks. “Not with that stupid bitch there it won’t.”

Woah. That’s some colorful vocabulary for a fourteen-year-old.

Tommy shifts the car into drive. “What happened?”

Stone whips out his phone and shoves it in his brother’s face. “I don’t know, you tell me.”

Tommy slams on the brakes. “I’m driv—what the fuck?” It’s obvious he’s trying his hardest not to laugh. “Damn, all this time I thought I was the one with the shitty genes.” Genuine pity flashes in his eyes. “You’re only fourteen, man. I’m sure it will grow.”

“Fuck you, shithead. That ain’t my dick.”

I nearly choke on my spit.

“That cunt got a picture of me from Debbie and photoshopped some dude’s baby dick on it.”

Tommy tilts the phone, and I regret not closing my eyes. It’s going to be near impossible to get *that* disturbing visual out of my head.

One thing’s for sure, whoever did it is a photoshop pro.

The only thing that’s off about the pic is the way Stone’s flexing his muscles in the mirror and smiling smugly, appearing mighty proud of his microscopic peen.

“Debbie’s his girlfriend,” Tommy supplies.

“Ex-girlfriend,” Stone corrects. “Any bitch who’d give Bianca a private photo of me so she can destroy my life can go fuck herself with a spiked dildo.”

I sit up in my seat. “Wait, Bianca Covington did this?”

Stone nods. “Yup.”

That seems...excessive. Even for her. “Why?”

Stone snorts. “Because I’m Tom—”

“You’re gonna be late for your job interview,” Tommy cuts in. He glances at Stone through the rearview mirror. “Relax. We’ll sort it out later.”

Stone shakes his head. “No. I told you, I’m done. There’s no way I’ll recover from this shit. Not unless I drop my pants, show her my real cock, and then shove it down her throat in front of everyone.”

Jesus. “Jace will literally kill you if you mess with his little sister.”

Just today he kicked the crap out of a senior she tricked into hooking up with her. I shudder to think what he’d do to a guy forcing his dick down her throat.

Stone’s eyes become tiny slits. “Funny, because last time I checked, it was the *DaSilvas* wh—”

“Shut up,” Tommy snaps. “Stop bringing up old bullshit.”

Stone rolls his eyes. “Whatever. You’re officially on your own when it comes to your *old bullshit*. When we get home, I’m telling Mom I want to go

back to public school. If she says no, I'll run away."

Tommy steps on the gas. "Fine. Do you, bro."

Given his little brother's outburst, I can't help but wonder. "Is there still bad blood between you and Jace?"

If there is, I'm almost positive whose photoshop skills were utilized for Stone's picture.

Not many people know it, but Jace is a savant when it comes to computers.

Graphics, programming, and creating his own video games are just a few of his areas of expertise. He can spend days—sometimes hours—in front of a computer screen doing things that would take mere mortals years to perfect.

Tommy grips the steering wheel. "No. I mean, not really." His expression turns solemn. "Truth be told, I don't think he'll ever forgive me for how I used to treat his brother."

"But you and Liam were friends before..."

My heart pangs and I can't bring myself to finish that sentence.

Liam should be here.

"I know," Tommy says softly. "You're right, we were." He shrugs. "You know how Jace is though. The Vatican can declare you a saint and he'd still hold a grudge against you for a mistake you made when you were a kid."

He's not wrong. Jace doesn't just hold grudges, he embraces them and uses it to fuel his rage.

His own father is a perfect example.

And now he's doing the same thing to me.

Freezing me out, but not before making my life a living hell.

For reasons I'll never understand.

Tommy squeezes my shoulder. "You okay?"

Not really, but I'm not about to unload my issues with Jace onto Tommy.

"Yeah. It just sucks that he can't let bygones be bygones."

"Don't stress. He does his thing and I do mine." He smirks. "The only

time I run into him is when we play against the Knights and my team whoops Cole's butt on the field."

His cockiness is almost endearing. "Guess I'll have to check that out sometime."

"We're scheduled to play against them on Friday." He winks. "It's the first game of the season so it's a pretty big deal. It would be awesome to see you there."

I'm mulling over a polite way to decline when he pulls up to a charming little building with a neon green sign that reads, "Top of the Muffin."

After checking my watch, I open the car door. "You're a lifesaver."

"I can pick you up if you want." He gestures to his little brother. "After I drop him off."

"Are you sure? I don't—"

"Sorry, can't hear you," he says with a wink as he backs out of the parking lot.



"We're out of cookies," a plump woman with fiery red hair and a hint of an Irish accent greets me as I walk up to the counter.

I muster a smile. "That's okay, I—"

"And that includes macaroons." She looks me up and down. "I know your type."

I can't believe this woman is judging me on my choice of baked goods.

She's also wrong. I'm a chocolate cake kind of girl. A macaroon passed my lips once, and that was enough.

I smile bigger. "That's cool, I'm no—"

"If you're looking for one of those pumpkin spice cream cheese disasters, there's a Starbucks up the road."

How in the world does this woman stay in business?

“Not looking for any of those either.”

The woman is visibly annoyed. “I don’t have any—”

“Job interview,” I blurt. “How about one of those?”

The woman blinks. “Oh.” She holds out her hand. “Dylan, right? Your aunt told me you’d be stopping by.”

I shake it. “Nice to meet you.”

She studies me cautiously, her irritation with me returning. “So tell me, Dylan with the blue hair. What’s your favorite dessert?”

“I like chocolate cak—”

“Sorry.” She gestures to the door. “I’m afraid we’re not a good fit.”

She can’t be serious. “Wait? Just like that? That’s not fair. You didn’t even interview me.”

She holds up a finger. “Oh, but I did. I don’t like liars.”

Okay, *now* I’m offended. “I didn’t lie. I really do like chocolate cake. It’s simple and classic and—”

“Not your favorite.” She folds her arms over her chest. “Fine. Let’s try this one more time. What’s your fav—”

“Irish Soda Bread?”

Now, I’m lying. But if it gets me the job, so be it.

“Kiss ass.” She waves a hand. “Goodbye.”

My heart sinks. “Please, just tell me what the right answer is. Or better yet, ask me some real questions.” I start ticking things off with my fingers. “Like how serious my work ethic is. Or if I’m able to work nights and weekends—I am, by the way. Or, if I have experience—okay, maybe don’t ask that because I don’t, but I’m a quick learner.” I hold her gaze. “I’m sorry I didn’t choose the fanciest dessert, or if you thought I was lying because I enjoy chocolate cake, but I really need this job, and I’ll do just about an—”

“What is your—”

“Cannoli,” I yell. “I like cannolis, okay?”

She rolls her eyes. “That was my fourth guess.”

“Does this mean you’ll give me a chance?”

Her lips twist. “Maybe.”

The bell above the door chimes and a man wearing a suit waltzes in. He’s holding a bouquet of flowers and appears like he’s going to pass out any second.

I step aside so he can place his order.

“Hi, I’m proposing to my girlfriend tonight. I know it’s last minute, but I was hoping I could get some chocolate covered str—”

“No.” She taps the counter emphatically. “You look like a cheesecake man.”

This woman is not only out of her mind, she’s the worst salesperson in the history of ever.

The man is *proposing*. Let him get some strawberries.

He smiles nervously. “Cheesecake is my favorite, but I know she really lov—”

“I assume you bought her a pretty ring?”

He nods emphatically. “Yeah, a little over two carats.”

She whistles. “Lucky girl.” She places an empty cake box on the counter. “Trust me, you want the cheesecake.”

His brows draw together as she removes a large one from the glass case. “But she likes stra—”

“Take it from someone who knows, young man. It is easy to halve the potato where there is love.”

Understandably, he’s confused. “I have no idea what that means.”

You and me both, buddy.

“It means,” she drawls as she closes, then tapes the box. “When you are in love, you share everything together without resentment.” She points to the now packaged cake. “Including this delicious cheesecake.”

Before he can speak, she punches some buttons on her cash register. “That will be \$52.47.”

To my astonishment, the man pulls out his wallet and pays her before leaving with the dessert he didn't ask for.

Her eyes shift to me. "Wednesdays after school from four to eight, and Saturdays six a.m. to eight p.m. The pay is twelve dollars an hour. No paid vacation or sick time. If you do well, I'll add another shift."

Her tone leaves no room for negotiation, so I accept. "Perfect."

She opens the glass case again. "Are you a good baker?"

"Yeah," I lie. "But you know what they say, there's always room for improvement."

She grunts. "How are your cleaning skills?"

"Top notch."

At least that's not a lie.

With a sigh, she sets a small paper bag on the counter and places a cannoli in it before handing it to me. "See you on Wednesday. Tell your aunt I said hi." She holds up a finger. "Wait."

I watch as she removes an apple turnover from the glass and drops it in the bag. "Her favorite."

Funny, because I would have sworn her favorite was cinnamon rolls, but I'm not going to argue.



As promised, Tommy's waiting outside for me.

"Thanks," I tell him as I slide into the passenger seat.

"Did you get it?"

"After a few tries."

When he raises an eyebrow, I elaborate. "Let's just say she's very picky about people's dessert preferences."

Snickering, he peels out of the parking lot. "I should have given you a heads up about that. My bad."

An awkward silence descends after I give him my address and he plugs it into his GPS.

“Is your bro—”

“For what it’s worth, I’m glad you’re back,” he says at the same time.

I play with a loose string on my skirt. “I wish I could say the same.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah—no, not really.” I draw in a breath. “If I tell you something, can it stay between us? The only people who know are my family and—”

“Dylan.” He peers at me out of the corner of his eye. “I’ll never judge you. Fuck knows I’ve done my share of horrible shit. You can tell me anything.”

Here goes nothing. “My dad...he did some bad things at his job.” I swallow the prickle in my throat. “And now he’s in jail for embezzlement. It’s the reason I’m back. My aunt lives here with her husband and they were nice enough to take me in so I could finish my final year of high school.”

“Shit.” He exhales sharply. “Damn. I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, it’s...I mean, I’m fine. My dad’s an asshole for stealing to impress his dumb wife and deserves to serve his time—but it’s still pretty embarrassing. Fortunately, it didn’t make national headlines, just a few articles in the local paper.” Nerves bunch in my stomach. “I’d really appreciate you not telling a soul. I don’t want everyone in town knowing my dad’s a thief or that he’s in the slammer.”

He reaches over and gives my knee a small squeeze. “Your secrets are safe with me.” The corner of his mouth tilts up. “If it makes you feel better, my dad’s been in and out of jail my whole life.”

It doesn’t. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugs as he turns down my block. “Don’t be. The guy is a loser. Always has been, always will be.”

“That sucks. I’m sor—”

“How about we stop apologizing for things that aren’t our fault?” he says

as he pulls up to the curb alongside my aunt's house.

That's something I can agree to. "Deal."

The awkwardness from earlier returns the moment he cuts the engine and faces me.

"I missed you."

"Yeah, same here. It was good to see you again." I fetch my messenger bag from the floor. "Thanks for the ride—"

"I tried getting in touch with you a few times after you left."

Shit. This is the conversation I've been dreading. "I know. I'm sorry."

I always meant to respond to his messages, but I was too busy trying to deal with all the new changes in my life.

Plus, Tommy reminded me of Jace.

Jace who was ignoring me.

Just like I was ignoring Tommy.

"I should have written you back."

"Why didn't you?"

How do you tell someone their feelings were scaring you? Or that you were into someone else way more than you were into them?

My stomach knots when it occurs to me. *Maybe that's why Jace refused to speak to me?*

No. If he didn't have any feelings for me, he wouldn't have done or said what he did right before I left.

"I don't know."

Tommy looks at me like I'm full of shit. He's not wrong.

"Wow," he scoffs. "One of the things I liked most about you was that in a world full of liars and fakes, you always kept it real."

He's right. Usually, I have no problem telling it like it is.

Nevertheless, I don't want to hurt him. Not when he's been nothing but nice to me, and I know how it feels to be snubbed by someone you *thought* was a true friend.

I scan my brain for a kernel of truth to pacify him. “It was a hectic time. I was trying to fit in at a new school, deal with my dad marrying my stepmonster, and—”

“Dating that hipster with a weird name.” His words have a slight edge to them despite the crooked grin he shoots me. “I might have peeped your Instagram a few times.”

Then he should know we’re no longer together. And haven’t been for a while.

Caspian—or Casper—as his friends called him was my first real boyfriend.

I didn’t like him at first, but when we were assigned partners for a school project, sparks flew.

For a little while, anyway.

In the end, Caspian and I only dated for eight months. I cared about him enough that I gave him my V-card a few weeks before our relationship ended, but I never fell *in* love with him.

Not like I did with Jace.

Which is why I knew I had to break up with him.

Considering he fucked my friend two days later; he bounced back pretty quickly.

Tommy, on the other hand, is obviously still upset with me for blowing him off.

“Look, I already told you I was sorry. I don’t know what else you want —”

“What I want is *my* chance.” His gaze fixes on my mouth. “It’s all I’ve ever wanted from you.”

Oh, boy. I’m so not in the right headspace to pursue any kind of romantic relationship.

“My life is a mess, Tommy.” A wave of exhaustion sweeps over me. “And it’s only going to get messier because Jace hates me and I have no idea

why.” I throw up my hands and laugh helplessly. “And he’s not the only one. Britney is back to her old tricks with her crew of mean girls. Bianca Covington’s planning my murder for some unknown reason. Hell, even my own step-cousin—” To my surprise and shame, my voice cracks. “I don’t mean to lay all this shit on you. I’m just really not read—”

“I get it, you have a lot to deal with.” Concern lines his features as he tips my chin. “I’m not trying to add any more bullshit onto your plate. I’m content being your friend...for now.”

“Thank you. That’s...I could really use a friend.” I tilt my head. “I should probably go before my aunt gets worried and comes out here.”

She won’t. Not only is she laid back, I doubt she can even see us because the house sits on top of a giant hill. However, the longer I stay in this car, the worse I’ll feel about not being able to give him what he wants.

“Hey, Dylan?” he calls out when I start walking.

I spin around. “Yeah.”

“You have my number. If you need a ride, or someone to talk to—if you ever need anything. I’m here.”

I give him a sincere smile. “That means a lot.”

A muscle in his jaw jumps. “The next time Jace starts with you, you better tell me. I don’t want him making you feel like crap or filling your head up with lies because he can’t deal with his shit and he’s taking it out on you.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him I’m perfectly capable of handling Jace on my own, but I really want to go inside so I can find Oakley and try to find some common ground with him.

“Sure thing,” I call over my shoulder before I start my ascent up the driveway.

I’m thankful when he starts the engine and I hear him drive off.

I’m passing Oakley’s car when furious, dark eyes slice right through me like a hot knife through butter.

“Jace. What are you—”

As if answering my question, Oakley rushes out the front door. There’s a beach towel slung over his shoulder and a pair of swimming trunks in his hand.

“Ready to—” He stops speaking when he spots me.

Of course Jace is here to see Oakley.

My stomach sours. Jace and Oakley are *best friends* now.

Jace’s eyes lock on something behind me, but he stays silent.

Oakley tracks his gaze and scowls. “What the fuck was Tommy DaSilva doing here?”

It’s all I can do not to roll my eyes. “Giving me a ride home. You know, like *you* were supposed to.”

He snorts. “Damn, I knew you were easy, but I didn’t think you were desperate.”

Anger races over my skin. “Excuse me.”

He takes a step forward. “That piece of shit is not welcome here. *Ever.*”

He has no right to tell me who I’m allowed to hang out with. Especially since *he* started the rumor that made me a leper.

“That piece of shit is my friend. Deal with it.”

He wags a finger in my face. “Christ, you got a lot of fucking nerve. You want to screw around with trash, do it somewhere else. If I ever catch him on my property again—”

“It’s not your property,” I remind him. “Last I checked; it’s your dad’s.” I glare at him. “You don’t own shit, *bitch*. Except maybe a few bags of weed so you can get high and forget what a loser you really are.”

Oakley tosses his head back and laughs. “*I’m* the loser. Baby girl, don’t get it twisted.” His voice drops to an icy whisper. “Rumor has it the coolest thing about you is that everyone thinks I stuck my dick in your snatch.”

It’s all I can do not to swing my fist into his nose. So much for trying to call a truce.

I mock gasp. “Oh my God, you poor thing.” I look at Jace who’s standing there as impassive as a statue. “You haven’t told him?”

My stare snaps back to my step-cousin. “I hate to break it to you, sweetie, but you’re only popular because of him.” Reaching over, I pat his shoulder. “How does it feel to know you’ll never be good enough to be more than someone’s puppet? Or that all the girls you screw...are not-so-secretly wishing you were someone else.”

I can tell it was a low blow by the way his voice drops. “Listen to me, you little twat waffle. Your place here isn’t a permanent one. All I have to do is snap my fingers.” To prove his point, he does. “And you and your aunt’s skanky asses will be out on the street.” He chest bumps me so hard I stumble back. “Fucking try me.”

“Let’s go,” Jace grunts. “Britney said the girls are already in the pool.” He clamps a hand on his shoulder, directing him to his car. “I bet Hayley’s wearing that little red bikini you like.”

Oakley grins like the Cheshire Cat. “I do freaking love that thing. Makes her tits look huge.”

Jace nods. “Yeah, man. Now quit fighting with her so we can go have some fun.” For a moment, I think Jace is doing me a solid, but then he says, “Hang out with girls who aren’t two-faced freeloaders.”

The frosty glare he gives me as they get into Oakley’s car and drive off could melt a glacier.

Chapter 15

DYLAN

“*H*ey, you’re home. How was your first day?” my aunt asks as I’m hanging my blazer on the coat rack by the front door.

My face must give me away because she frowns. “Oh, my God. I’m the worst aunt ever. Please tell me you didn’t walk home. I was going to pick you up, but I figured Oakley would drive you. And then, when I got your text, I realized he didn’t...but then I got your second text and you said a friend of yours was giving you a ride, so I—”

“It’s fine, I’m not mad at you.”

It’s clear she doesn’t buy it because she guides me over to the couch in the living room. “Okay, start talking. Dinner is in the crockpot, which means I’ve got at least an hour and a half for girl talk.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. If you don’t mind, I’m gonna take a nap before dinner.”

If I crack and tell her everything happening at school, it will be like experiencing it all over again and I just want to forget for a few hours.

Worry flashes in her eyes. “But I really want to know how your day was.” Her face lights up. “Did you get the job?”

I nod. “Yeah. Wednesdays after school, and Saturdays six a.m. to eight p.m.”

She scrunches her face. “That Saturday is a killer for your social life, but I guess you can rest on Sundays.”

It takes everything in me not to laugh. “What social life?”

She waves a hand. “Don’t worry, a pretty, smart girl like you will have the boys swarming in no time. I bet they’ve already started.”

That’s the thing about my aunt Crystal. I love her, but she was never a social outcast. She was the head cheerleader and dated the most popular guy at school.

She was Britney.

Only a blonde and way less bitchy version.

She sits up straight. “Tell me about this friend who dropped you off. Do you know her from—”

“Him,” I correct. “And yeah. We’re kind of...old friends. I guess.”

Her eyes light up. “Does this boy have a name?”

“Tommy.” I look at the carpet. “He doesn’t go to RHA, though. He goes to the public high school on the other side of town.”

Her brows furrow. “Then how did—”

“He was picking up his younger brother who goes to RHA. Or rather, *used to*.”

She blinks. “Oh.”

If there was ever a good time to push for going to public school again, this would be it.

“So, I was thinking, would you and Uncle Wayne reconsider me going to Royal Manor High—”

“Honey, no. I’m sorry, but it’s the one and only thing your uncle Wayne won’t budge on. He wants you to have the best education.” She sighs. “Obtuse people really bother him. He says he deals with them all day in the courtroom and doesn’t want to deal with them at home too.”

I want to point out that there are plenty of *obtuse* people with million-dollar educations. As well as a plethora of intelligent people who went to

public school, but it's moot at this point.

I stand up. "Right. I'm gonna take a quick shower and nap. I'll be down for dinner."

Her face scrunches. "That shirt is swimming on you. I could have sworn I got you a size small—"

"You did." I open my purse and hand her the bag with the pastries in it. "But Britney tripped me at lunch, and my tray of spaghetti and meatballs broke my fall. Luckily, a girl named Sawyer took pity on me and lent me one of her spare shirts."

Her hand flies to her mouth. "Wait. What? Some girl tripped you in the cafeteria."

"Yup."

"On *purpose*?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm her public enemy number one."

Crystal looks outraged. "What's this brat's last name? I'm gonna call her parents an—"

"Aunt Crystal, I'll be eighteen in a few weeks, not eight."

She looks deflated. "I know, but...I don't know, Dylan, you can't expect me not to do anything about this. No one messes with my niece and gets away with it."

Wait until she finds out what kind of rumor her stepson started about me.

I feel like crap for thinking she couldn't possibly understand when I see the tears in her eyes.

"We've always been close. You're like my...you know how much I love you."

I do. And seeing her so upset makes me feel like shit.

"I've been dealing with Britney for years. She's like a fungus that never goes away, but one I can deal with. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It is what it is. Sooner or later she'll get bored."

Sadness flickers in her blue eyes. “You remind me so much of your mom right now.” She takes a tissue out of a nearby box and dabs her eyes. “She was so strong and beautiful.”

I start to smile, but then she starts bawling her eyes out.

I freeze, unsure what to do. She’s definitely the more emotional one of the two of us, but I’ve never seen her *this* emotional before.

I’m completely out of my element. “Is...are...should I call—”

She waves a tissue. “I’m fine, I swear. It’s just the Clomid.”

I have no idea what that is. “Is that like a fancy yoga technique or something?”

She laughs, despite the tears still streaming down her face. “No, it’s my infertility medication.”

Well, shit. “Oh. I didn’t know you were doing that.”

Although I guess it’s not surprising. My aunt’s wanted to have babies for as long as I can remember. To be honest, I’ve always wondered why she and Wayne hadn’t yet.

I guess now I know.

“I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t want to make you feel like you were inconveniencing us by coming to live here.” She reaches for my hand and I sit back down. “You’re not. I needed something to brighten my spirits after the miscarriage and having you here has.”

My heart twists. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t—”

“You weren’t supposed to. I know how you are, Dylan. I didn’t want to make you feel like you were getting in the way. Or make you think about...” Her voice trails off.

My mom.

The only thing worse than finding my mother dead on the kitchen floor that morning...was that she was five months pregnant when it happened.

I didn’t just lose her. I lost my baby sister.

The one I told my parents I never wanted.

The irony...because I'd give anything to have them both today.

A disturbing, horrifying thought hits me. "Aunt Crystal, are you okay? You said you had a miscarriage. Did you have a heart attack like my mom?"

She looks fine, but so did my mother. The room starts spinning and it's a struggle to draw in oxygen.

My aunt is literally all I have left. If I lose her...I can't.

"No, nothing like that." She pulls me into a hug. "I'm okay. It happened a little over a month and a half ago. I barely even knew I was pregnant, it was so early. The doctor said it was just one of those things that happen sometimes."

I hug her tighter. "Are you sure you should be trying again so early?" It's absolutely none of my business, but I need to make sure she's okay. "I'm not trying to be a downer. I just don't want anything bad to happen to you."

"I'm in perfect health, I promise." She smiles. "In fact, I had an appointment with my doctor today. It's why I didn't respond to your first text right away."

Relief fills me and my eyes become glassy. "Oh. That's good."

"Look at you being the sappy one now."

"I can't help it. It's been a shit day and I don't want to lose my favorite aunt."

"I'm your favorite, because I'm your only. But I'll take it, kid. You're stuck with me forever."

"Promise?"

"Yes. But I'm gonna need you to tell me where this Britney girl is so I can kick her ass."

That only makes me cry harder. "She's with Jace having a stupid pool party."

I can hear the disappointment in her sigh. "Boys seriously suck sometimes. Jace may be the gorgeous, popular boy at school right now, but he's also a dumbass. Sooner or later he'll realize his idiot ways and come

crawling back.”

“I’m not so sure about that. He’s really angry with me and I have no idea why.”

She cups my cheeks. “You and I both know you did nothing wrong. You guys were best friends. A bond like the two of you had doesn’t just vanish into thin air. He’ll pull his head out of his ass and come around soon.”

The sound of my uncle clearing his throat interrupts our little hug-fest. “Is everything okay?”

“No,” Crystal says as we break apart. “We need chocolate.”

“And ice cream.”

I might as well go for gold.

My aunt hands me a tissue and holds up the empty box. “And more tissues.”

Wayne’s eyes widen. “Anything else you two want?”

Yeah. I want to make your son my personal piñata.

But mostly?

I want my best friend back.

Chapter 16

DYLAN

I feel it the moment my aunt drops me off at school the next morning.

Something is off.

People are staring.

Some of them are laughing.

Everyone is whispering.

And I've barely even stepped inside the building.

You'd think the stupid rumor about me hooking up with Oakley would be old news by now, but apparently not.

Sawyer rushes over the second she spots me in the hallway. "Hey. You're here."

"People really need to get a life."

She shuffles her feet. "Yeah."

"I didn't fuck my step-cousin," I hiss loud enough for the people gawking nearby to hear. "Find something else to feed your drama."

"We already have," some guy says smugly.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Sawyer blows out a breath. "I'm so sorry, Dylan. I tried to take as many as I could down, but they keep taping them back up."

"Taping what—" My knees buckle as we turn down the hallway where

my locker is.

This can't be happening.

“How did they...” I swallow and it feels like glass. “Who?”

My stomach churns as I pass the rows of lockers lined with my dad's mugshot and an article outlining his court case.

All my dirty laundry, the *one* thing I wanted to keep private is laid out for everyone to see.

Humiliation burns through me like wildfire as I approach my own locker where the word *thief* is spray painted in bright red.

Who would do such a cold-hearted, cruel...

I freeze as it occurs to me.

Oakley not only knows about my father being in jail, he dislikes me enough to use the information to hurt me.

Since the moment I stepped foot in Royal Manor, he's made it clear I wasn't welcome.

I figured it would blow over soon, but he's gone too far this time.

“I'm gonna kill him.”

Sawyer's eyebrows shoot up. “Who?”

I don't answer her because I'm too busy pushing my way through the hallway full of people, searching for the asshole responsible for today *and* yesterday's spectacle.

My pulse quickens as my Doc Martens hammer the shiny, terrazzo floor. Each step I take is fueled by vehemence.

I've been here less than a week and already I've reached my breaking point.

I've tried ignoring them.

I've tried turning the other cheek.

I've tried standing up for myself...all to no avail.

And the one person who should have my back in this hellhole—my family member—is the one pulling the strings to this little shit show.

If I don't do something drastic and put an end to the bullshit now, it will only continue.

I catch Oakley hanging out at the end of the hallway by his locker. His back is turned to me as a visibly agitated girl—who I presume must be his girlfriend—berates him about ignoring her phone calls.

Wait your turn, sweetheart. He's mine first.

Intuitive people who can smell a fight from a mile away step aside as I approach him.

Standing at just over six feet, Oakley has almost a hundred pounds on me, but it doesn't deter me from my mission.

I might be scrappy, but I've been in enough fights to know the first punch has to pack enough power to disorient him, or at the very least, throw him off enough that I'm able to get a second one in.

The bigger they are, the harder they fall. I remind myself as I tap his shoulder.

It's clear my presence is unwanted when he twists around. *Feeling's mutual, douche.*

“What do you—”

I don't think, I just act.

The second I register the sound of my knuckles cracking against bone, I know I landed a good one.

And I don't stop there. Not even when he raises one of his hands in self-defense.

“Christ. What the *fuck* is your problem?”

My answer is another punch. This time straight to his throat. “You.”

He stumbles back. The hand covering his eye flies to his neck and he coughs.

Half the people surrounding us gasp in surprise, while the other half encourage Oakley to sock me back.

But he won't. He *can't*. I've knocked the wind out of him temporarily.

It's exactly the position I wanted him in. Unable to fight back, but also too proud to ask someone for help while a girl beats his ass.

He lunges toward me, and for a split-second, I think he's going to hit me, but he starts walking away instead.

I'm not done with him yet.

Taking hold of his shirt, I wrench the material until it rips, and he's forced to face me again.

"Tell everyone the truth," I demand.

"About *what?*"

Wrong answer. My knee goes straight into his nuts.

He doubles over in pain. "Jesus Christ."

I grab a fist full of his dark blond hair, compelling him to look at me. "Tell them the truth."

"Fine. I didn't fuck you." His laughter is taunting. "I'm not that desperate."

I take another swing at his face with my free hand. Blood splatters across the front of my white shirt like drops of rain on a windshield.

"You crazy bitch," he barks as he tilts his head, attempting to halt the blood trickling from his nose.

He's not wrong. I made my point and I should stop, but I can't.

It feels too good.

My palm connects with his cheek. "Who's the bitch now?"

"I swear to fucking God," he roars, pushing me away.

"What's the matter?" I mock, sailing my knee into his junk for a second time. "Getting tired of having your ass handed to you by a girl in front of the whole school?"

He's crouched over grabbing his balls, but I hear a low snarl break free. I can tell it was the straw that broke the camel's back and he's going to charge me any second.

I must be more deranged than I thought, because I want him to.

“Come on,” I prompt as I smack him again and again, battering his back so many times I lose count. My vision turns glassy. “Hit me, bi—”

A pair of strong arms wrap around me and I’m airborne against my will briefly. I kick my legs as they begin towing me away, but their iron-clad grip is unyielding.

I assume it’s a teacher or security guard, but when I glance down at the arm around my midsection, I notice the sleeves of his white shirt are rolled up, showcasing veiny muscular forearms and perfectly bronzed skin I’d recognize anywhere.

“Let me go, Jace,” I grit through my teeth. “I’m not finished with your *precious* boy yet.”

Jealousy coats my insides and I make no effort to conceal it.

I loathe Oakley for starting rumors about me. I detest him for telling everyone about my dad in such a messed-up way and humiliating me.

But I’m straight-up bitter about him taking my place as Jace’s best friend.

I’m full-on fuming, high on adrenaline and anger by the time Jace drags me into a storage closet and locks the door.

The single dim bulb swinging above us like a pendulum illuminates his tall, lean frame enough that I make out the sharp line of his jaw and the perfect shape of those full lips.

My reaction to his close proximity is visceral. Instantly, my pulse, my breathing, my emotions—slam into overdrive.

When I was a kid, I didn’t understand why I’d experience such an extreme response whenever he was near, but now I do.

No one in the whole wide world has the power to make me feel both love and hate simultaneously the way Jace Covington does.

He’s the yin to my yang. The down to my up. The crazy to my normal.

The damaged pieces to all my broken parts.

I could befriend every single person on the planet, and no one will ever

know me the way he does.

No one will ever come close to making me feel so alive or light my soul on fire.

No one will ever hurt me more.

“Look, I don’t kn—”

“Shut up.” In two strides he’s closing the distance between us, pinning me against the wall. “You’re not the one calling the shots this time.”

Clearly his memory is different than mine because I’ve never called any of the shots when it came to us.

“What do you want from me?”

Why are you treating me like I’m lower than dirt?

His gaze drops down to my chest and his expression darkens. “Not a damn thing.”

He might want to believe that, but his eyes betray him. They’re full of longing and desire, despite all his hostility.

I press a palm to his chest and his heart rate speeds up. “You sure about that?”

My breathing hitches as his hand slithers up the front of my shirt, intentionally resting between my breasts before traveling up to my throat. “Let’s get one thing straight.” I jolt in surprise when he grips the back of my neck. “What I felt for you back then doesn’t exist anymore.”

We both know that isn’t true otherwise he wouldn’t be in a closet with me. *Again.*

My chest aches as the vivid memory of the last time I saw him washes over me. “Then why are you here?”

His heated stare burns like the sun. “You were right.” I see the glint of metal on his tongue before he dips his head and licks the column of my throat. “There is something I still want.”

“What—”

Whatever I was going to say evaporates when he flicks his tongue ring

over my pulse point and sucks the tender skin into his mouth.

A rush of heat settles between my thighs and my entire body vibrates with need. “Don’t stop.”

He’s so rough I know he’s marking my flesh, but I don’t care.

Digging my nails into his back, I hitch a leg around his waist, demanding more.

A low groan escapes him, and he bites harder. For a moment, I honestly wonder if he’s going to tear through the tissue and rip out my vocal cords with his teeth.

“Jac—”

“Take off your panties,” he growls into my neck. “Show me how fucking wet I make you.”

My cheeks flush as I slip my hands under my skirt and slide them down.

He swiftly picks them up off the floor and examines the damp spot. “Looks like you want something too.” His lips curve into a wicked grin. “But you’re gonna have to beg for it.”

I hold his gaze. “What happens if I don’t?”

“I’ll find someone who will.” He sucks my earlobe between his lips. “But that’s not what you really want, is it?”

I shake my head.

The thought of him doing this to Britney or someone else causes bile to surge up my esophagus.

I’m confused when he grabs both of my wrists and places them behind my back. “What are you doing?”

He kisses the hollow of my throat. “I want you at my mercy while I do all the sick, perverted things I’ve been dreaming about for years.”

Warmth rushes my insides and I don’t protest when he uses my panties to secure me to the frame of a nearby shelf.

“I can’t decide whether I should taste you here first.” His finger dips between my cleavage. “Or here.” I shiver when he clamps the inside of my

thigh.

Butterflies swarm my belly when his mouth descends. “Maybe I’ll just start with your tits and work my way down.”

Clenching my thighs to relieve some of the pressure, I rasp, “Please.”

“Please what?” The rough edge of his thumb caresses my nipple through my shirt. “You want me to fuck you?”

Licking my lips, I nod. “Yes.”

With a grunt, he seizes my shirt and tears it open, sending buttons scattering everywhere.

A crude smile lights his face as he peers down at me. “Not even if you were the last piece of pussy on earth.”

For a moment I think I’m hearing things, but it’s clear that’s not the case when I see the wrath swimming in his dark orbs.

This was nothing but a cruel trick.

And I fell for it...hook, line, and sinker.

I struggle against the restraints, but he’s tied them so tight there’s no way I’ll get out of them myself. “Why are you doing this to me?”

Anger tightens his features. “You know why.”

I honestly don’t. “Is it because I left?”

I’m grasping at straws here, but it’s all I’ve got. Nothing else adds up.

“I can’t decide if that’s your attempt at a sick joke, or if you’ve lost too many brain cells over the years.” A muscle in his jaw flexes and he gets so close to my face I don’t know if he’s going to kiss me or bite me. “You leaving town was the best thing that ever happened to me. And if you had any sense, you’d do it again. For good this time.”

My blood boils and I spit in his face. “Fuck you.”

Regardless of my feelings for him, he doesn’t get to talk to me like I’m a dense piece of shit.

He wipes his face and backs up. “Apparently you still haven’t gotten the memo.” His expression goes slack. “I’d rather stick my dick through a meat

grinder than inside you.”

“Hate to break it to you, but your dick was awfully responsive for someone who wants nothing to do with me.”

His hands clench into fists at his sides. “Don’t flatter yourself. The only thing turning me on was the thought of watching you crumble when I rejected you.”

“Damn. Guess you’ll have to try harder next time. Clearly, I’m completely devastated over our missed opportunity to hook up.” I snifle sardonically. “I’m not sure how I’ll ever recover from the depths of these despairs.” Batting my eyelashes, I look at him. “On second thought, I should be thanking you. Given your dick has been inside Britney, I’m sure it’s drowning in all sorts of venereal diseases. Therefore, you and your cock no longer appeal to me.” I sink my teeth into my lower lip and smile wryly. “Looks like you brought me here for nothing.”

“You’re right.” He moves toward me in predatory strides. “If shooting you down and watching you cry was my sole intention, I failed.” There’s a calculated note in his voice. “But it wasn’t.”

I roll my eyes. “Then pray tell, what exactly was the point of all this?”

He palms my cheek. It’s a gesture that’s way too gentle for the anger radiating off him. “To inform you that it wasn’t Oakley who started the rumor about the two of you.” There’s a mocking gleam in his eyes. “He also didn’t put up the mugshots of your dad all over school.” The pad of his finger brushes my lip. “And it wasn’t my girl who tripped you at lunch yesterday.” His teeth flash white. “That was all me.”

The pain that squeezes my heart is one I haven’t felt in a long, long time. I try to suck in air so I can force the sting out, but the agony spreads inside me like a virus, catching me by the throat.

What Jace did goes so far beyond betrayal there isn’t a term for it.

He’s like a tyrant holding up a magnifying glass to the sun’s rays, and I’m the ant who’s struggling to survive while he watches me burn from the inside

out.

I miss my mom. The thought is enough to bring me to my knees.

If she was here, she'd tell me what to do, how to get through this.

And if all else failed, she'd scoop me up in her arms and hold me while I cried.

To my sheer humiliation, a tear rolls down my cheek.

He catches it on his thumb, then brings it to his mouth. "Tastes good."

It's the last thing he says before he walks out, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter 17

DYLAN

Past...

“*H*ad a feeling you’d be hiding in here.”

Annoyance crawls up my spine at the sound of Tommy’s voice. He tried to tell me this would happen last Friday, but I didn’t believe him.

“Did you come here to gloat?”

He walks over to the music stands I’m organizing. “No. I figured you could use a friend. Since Jace is being such a shitty one.”

My heart gives a little painful thump at the mention of his name.

By third period it had gotten around that Jace and Britney were going to the dance together.

The fact that he sat with her during lunch was just icing on the fucked-up cake he’s shoving down my throat.

“Don’t look at me like that.” I avert my gaze. “I don’t want or need your pity.”

I’ve had more than enough of it today. When people aren’t whispering behind my back, they’re looking at me like I’m a lost puppy who can’t find

her way back home.

Which, I suppose, isn't far from the truth given nearly every aspect of my life has been turned upside down.

Tommy flips his pockets inside out. "Lucky for you, I'm all out." A faint dimple peeks out of his right cheek. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"A little ironic, don't you think?"

"What is?"

I level him with a look. "The school bully checking in to see how I'm holding up."

He leans against a large filing cabinet and waggles his dark brows. "Haven't you heard? I'm a changed man."

Despite my skepticism, a small smile breaks free. "Hate to break it to you, but the verdict's still out on that."

Only time will tell if Tommy's truly turned over a new leaf.

"Ahh. There it is."

He's lost me. "I don't—"

"That smile." He walks over to where I'm standing. "I'm glad the moron didn't destroy my new favorite thing."

"Jace isn't a mor—"

"He is for choosing her over you."

Can't argue with that.

He takes another step, almost closing the distance between us. "He's gonna regret it one day. Trust me."

Silence falls over the cluttered closet. Only, it isn't the awkward, annoying kind.

It's the kind that makes me anxious.

There's something strange brewing between us. It's not quite the magnetic pull I have with Jace, but I'd be lying if I said Tommy's presence didn't affect me in some small and *very* unexpected way.

I barely manage to suppress a flinch when he cups my cheek. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

I look down at the floor because looking into his penetrating almond eyes makes me feel off-kilter. “I’m not sure.”

His lips twitch. “Liar.” His expression turns serious. “If we’re gonna be friends...and stuff. We’re gonna have to be honest with each other.”

“What exactly does *and stuff* entail?”

If he’s expecting me to hook up with him because Jace broke my heart, he’s out of his damn mind.

“Whatever you want it to.”

“What if I just want to be friends?”

Goosebumps erupt over my flesh when he leans in and whispers, “Then we’ll just be friends.” His lips brush my temple. “For now.”

I take a step back. This—whatever he’s doing—is too much. I’m having trouble wrapping my head around him and his motives.

“What do you want, Tommy?”

“I thought we went over this already.”

“Yeah, but...” I don’t know how to finish that sentence without sounding stupid.

“But what?”

“I don’t understand w—”

“That’s because you’ve been too busy obsessing over Jace.” He shrugs. “You failed to notice who’s been crushing on you all these years.”

I’m taken back by his confession. “You’ve had a crush on me for years?”

His eyes flicker with amusement. “Give or take.”

This is definitely news to me. “I had no idea.”

“How could you? You’ve been glued to Jace’s side since fifth grade.”

He’s not wrong. “So, what exactly does this mean? What do you want?”

“I want whatever you want.”

“I have no idea what I want.”

That's not quite true. I know exactly what, or rather, *who* I want, but he doesn't want me.

His eyes search my face. "Are you going to the dance?"

"Um." My mouth goes dry. "I'm not sure."

I'd thought about it, but I don't want to go alone. Especially now that Jace is going with *her*.

I nervously pick at my cuticles. "What about you?"

"I don't know." There's a provoking note in his voice. "It depends."

"On?"

He grins coyly. "Whether or not you'll be there."

"Is that your weird way of asking me to go with you?"

I'm shocked when I realize there's a small part of me that wishes he would.

The way I see it, if Jace is going with *my* nemesis...I have every right to show up on the arm of *his*.

I can't decode his expression. "No."

Embarrassment heats my cheeks and I look down at the floor. I feel so stupid for assuming.

"Dylan."

"Yeah?"

"I'm no one's second choice. When I ask you out, it will be when I'm positive you're no longer pining over some idiot who chose the wrong girl."

With that, he takes off.



"*I*'m s-s-sorry."

I'm surprised to see Liam when I walk out of the band room, but I'm even more surprised he's apologizing to me.

"For what? You have nothing to be sorry for, Liam."

I shoulder my backpack and start the journey to my locker.

He follows after me. “I’m s-s-sorry Jac-c-ce is a jerk. I heard w-w-what he did.” He looks so dejected; you’d think *he* was the one his brother hurt. “It’s n-n-not r-r-right. Brit-t-tney is a bitc-c-ch to you.”

Yeah, she is. “No argument here.”

He drags his feet as we approach my locker. “I w-w-was thinking. Since you’re not going t-t-to the danc-c-ce, and I’m not going, maybe we c-c-can hang out? W-w-watch a movie or s-s-something.”

I spin the dial to my combination and ponder his question.

Usually I’d have no problem hanging out with Liam, but I really don’t want to see Jace getting ready for his big date with Britney.

Or worse, see him *after* their date.

“I don’t know. It’s nothing against you, I just don’t want to be around your brother.” I take a few books out of my locker and toss them in my bag. “But don’t let our feud stop you from going.”

If anyone deserves to have some fun, it’s Liam. Between the accident, losing his mom, and constantly being picked on for his stutter and scars—the kid can’t seem to catch a break.

“I d-d-don’t have anyone t-t-to go w-w-with.” His face lights up like a Christmas tree. “W-w-what if w-w-we go t-t-together?”

My apprehension must be written all over my face, because he looks down at his shoes and says, “Forget it. That w-w-was s-s-stupid. Of c-c-course you don’t—”

“Sure,” I interject.

I might hate his brother currently, but it’s not Liam’s fault.

Besides, going to the dance with him is better than sitting home on a Friday night watching *Friends* reruns with a gallon of mint chocolate chip ice cream in one hand and a remote in the other.

His eyes widen. “R-r-really? You’ll go w-w-with me?”

“Why not?” I slam my locker shut. “We’re friends, right? Friends can go

to dances together.”

A huge grin is plastered on his face when I look up at him. “Yeah.” His expression falters for a second. “W-w-we don’t have to t-t-talk to Jac-c-ce if you don’t w-w-want to.”

“Sounds good to me.” I reach over and give him a pound. “It’s a date.”

Chapter 18

DYLAN

I'm going to die in this closet.

They're going to find my body bound to a storage shelf by a pair of white cotton panties, while my equally plain, boring bra is on full display.

And let's not forget the mascara streaks staining my cheeks thanks to Jace—the royal asshole—Covington.

I blow out a breath, attempting once more to unknot the undies holding me hostage. *No dice.*

Whoever discovers me will probably think my assailant took off due to my spectacular taste in comfortable, but lackluster underwear.

My only options are to either scream my lungs out and hope some poor soul walking by hears me, or wait for someone to notice my absence and start a search party.

In which case it will be at least another twenty-four hours because the only person who will realize or care that I'm gone is my aunt Crystal, and by then school will be closed for the night.

My only hope is Sawyer.

However, we don't know one another well enough yet so she'll probably assume I went home.

My stomach sinks. Option A is not just my last resort, it's my *only* resort.

I gulp down as much air as my lungs can take, then I open my mouth and yell, “Help.” So loud I’m surprised my vocal cords don’t shred.

If I’m lucky, it will be a teacher who finds me and not a student.

“Hel—”

The doorknob turns, and my hero pops their head through the crack.

Or not.

“Dylan?” Oakley’s eyes—make that eye—because the other one is swollen shut, widen. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

He says it like I’m inconveniencing *him* by being tied up.

His brows furrow. “Why are you standing there in your bra?”

I glare at him. “Oh, you know. Just working on my suntan.”

Puzzled, he looks around the dim confines. “Really?”

“No, you imbecile,” I screech as he walks in.

He swiftly closes the door behind him. “Keep your voice down. There are people coming down the hallway.”

And yet, none of *them* were selected by whatever higher power is currently shitting on me to open my storage closet of doom and unleash me from this hell.

No, that would be too easy. Instead, I get stuck with *this* knucklehead.

This has got to be some kind of sick joke. Actually, with the way things are going, I wouldn’t rule it out.

“Let me guess, Jace sent you in here so you can *really* drive the cousin-fucking rumors home and ruin my life even more.”

He scratches the back of his head. “Look, I’m gonna need you to calm down and put the Jace shit on the back burner for a bit. We have more important stuff to worry about.”

It’s the most intelligent thing he’s ever uttered.

He walks over to me. “My dad and your aunt are on their way up to the school.”

“They are? Why?”

This time, it's him who looks at me like *I'm* high as he points to his face. "Because you made chopped meat out of my pretty mug in front of everyone and then took off to go have nakie time in a storage closet."

He can't be serious. "Wait. Are you suggesting I did this to myself...on *purpose*?"

He holds up his hands. "Some people are into the exhibitionist and BDSM lifestyle." He wags a finger at me. "But I'm gonna need you to partake in your kinky shit on your own time. We have less than ten minutes to pull it together and come up with a story before the parental units come through."

"I'm not...that's not... I didn't strip and tie *myself* up."

"Whatever." Rubbing his chin, he assesses me. "So what exactly am I working with here? What's your bondage of choice?"

"I don't have a bondage of choice. Jace tied me up with..." My cheeks heat and I swallow hard. "On second thought, does it really matter? Just get me out of here."

I want to punch him when he starts whistling. "Damn, he really went the extra mile. This knot is tighter than a motherfucker." He makes a face. "Are you sweating? The fabric is kind of—"

"Oh my God, shut up." I kick his shin. "Just stop talking."

"All right. Jesus." He gives the fabric a forceful jerk, freeing my wrists. "Don't get your panties in a—never mind. Too late for that."

I snatch them from him. "Turn around."

Remarkably, he does as I ask. "Relax, it's nothing I haven't seen before. Although if you want my honest advice, you'd benefit from a trip, or five, to Victoria's Secret."

I tug them on and rub my chafed wrists. "I'm good, thanks."

He stops me when I head for the door. "Not so fast. We still have to figure out what we're going to tell them."

"Tell who?"

“My dad and your aunt.”

“I don’t know, but the truth sounds like a pretty good start.”

He rushes over when I turn the knob. “Woah, hold on. Let’s not do anything crazy.”

He must be higher than usual. “You really expect me to lie to them for you after all you’ve done?”

Although now that I think about it, he didn’t really do anything. Jace did.

No. Oakley’s not exactly free of fault. Jace had to have gotten the information to use against me from someone.

I grind my molars. Oakley could have stopped the rumors and refused to feed Jace my secrets, but he didn’t.

He gloated and made everything worse.

I can tell he’s trying to choose his next words carefully. “I already let you kick my ass in front of everyone, isn’t that en—”

“You’re unbelievable.”

I swing the door open, but he lugs me back inside and stands in front of it.

“Dylan, please.” His expression is solemn. “I’m sorry, okay? I was mean to you and you didn’t deserve it. But my grades are shit and if I don’t pull my act together, I might not graduate. I really need you to have my back out there.”

I snort. “Like all the times you had mine these last few days?”

He opens his mouth and then clamps it shut.

I jab his chest with my finger. “Do you have any idea how much I dreaded coming back to Royal Manor?” My throat thickens. “I know how these people can be, and I hated the idea of returning to the place where people like Britney and her crew of mean girls reign, but I didn’t have a choice in the matter.” I shrug helplessly. “I figured maybe, just maybe, things wouldn’t be so bad at RHA, because I’d have a friend—no, *family*—here and we could look out for each other. I didn’t expect to be super close or

anything, and I didn't want to insert myself into your circle of friends—but I definitely didn't anticipate coming back to everything being a complete one-eighty from the way it was when I left. Or that you'd be helping my childhood best friend destroy my life because he insists on holding a grudge against me for some unknown reason."

He exhales sharply. "I didn't know you guys were so close. He never once mentioned you over the years. Not even after my dad married Crystal."

It's like a kick straight to the heart. Jace Covington isn't the boy I knew.

"Yeah, well. There are probably lots of things you don't know about him. He keeps almost everyone at arm's length."

"Truth." He leans against the door. "Then again, we all have our secrets." He runs a hand through his hair. "I think we got off on the wrong foot. Can we start over?"

I shift uncomfortably. "If this is another trick, I'd rather just lie to my aunt than fall for it."

"It's not a trick," he insists. "I mean it."

"Well, forgive me for not trusting you, but just yesterday you called me a skank and said you could have me and my aunt tossed out on our asses like—" I snap my fingers like he did. "That."

"I say a lot of shit I don't mean when I'm angry. *A lot.*"

"Understandable, I do it too, but let's get one thing straight. My mom's dead and my dad's in the slammer. The only person I have in my corner is my aunt. She's been the most stable, solid person in my life and the only one who's never let me down. So if you think I'm going to let you threaten her marriage and happiness—"

"I'm not. I wouldn't." A flicker of sadness passes in his gaze. "I'm not my father."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Forget it." He holds out his fist. "Friends?"

"Even when Jace and your harem of Britney followers are around?"

“Yes.”

“Are you sure? Won’t it cause issues with you and Jace?”

He shrugs. “Probably. But he doesn’t control me. He’ll be mad at first, but eventually he’ll get over it. No one understands the value of family more than he does, so even though he won’t like it, he’ll deal.”

Despite my apprehension, I give him a fist bump. “Don’t pull the wool over my eyes, Oak. I’ll kick your ass ten times worse than I did today.”

“I won’t fuck you over. But for the record? You only kicked my ass because I don’t believe in laying my hands on a female.” Grinning, he puts an arm around my shoulder. “Now, when Principal Ryan asks us what happened, don’t say anything.” He slaps a hand over his heart. “Take it from the kid of a district attorney, cous. Silence is your friend. If neither of us says a word, it’s like it never happened.”

I’m almost positive that’s not the way it works, but I give him a thumbs up anyway. “Got it.”

He looks at me, but then quickly averts his gaze. “You’re gonna need to fix the situation you’ve got going on before we walk out.”

I look down and curse. “I can’t. Jace ripped all the buttons off.”

He holds a hand in front of his face. “TMI, Dylan. Just put your blazer on...backward.”

“I can’t. I left it in Crystal’s car this morning.”

He frowns. “I don’t have mine either. I’m pretty sure Hayley’s making a voodoo doll out of it.”

I make a mental note to ask him about their relationship later.

I almost do a happy dance when it occurs to me. “I need you to find Sawyer. She’ll give me a shirt.”

“Consider it done.” His movements come to a halt. “I have no idea who this Sawyer girl is. What does she look like?”

“She short and curvy, has waist-length dark hair and wears black-rimmed glasses. Oh, and she’s a junior, not a senior.”

He makes a face. “Yeah, sorry, doesn’t ring a bell. I don’t hang out with losers.”

I pinch him and he yelps.

“She’s not a loser. She’s awesome. Go find her for me.”

He raises his arms. “How am I supposed to find some girl I’ve never met —”

The sound of the second-period bell ringing cuts him off.

I shove him out the door. “Go. Try and catch her before her next class.”

“Sawyer,” I hear him yell as he ventures down the hall, clapping his hands. “Okay, here’s the deal, fuckers. If anyone sees a chick named Sawyer, I need to speak with her immediately. We got a family emergency happening here.”

I rub my temples and groan. If nothing else, being friends with Oakley will never be boring.

When he’s not stoned out of his mind, he’s kind of...

The sound of scuffling interrupts my thoughts.

“Let go of me,” Sawyer shrieks as Oakley wrangles her through the door. “What the hell is *wrong* with you?”

Oakley pushes her toward me. “Take off your shirt and give it to her.”

Sawyer’s mouth drops open. “Are you crazy?”

I press the heels of my palms to my eyes. “Yes. Yes, he is.”

A normal person would have told her the situation and asked if she had a spare shirt.

But not Oakley. He drags the poor girl to a closet for a shakedown instead.

Oakley snaps his fingers. “Chop, chop, short stack. We’re on a deadline here.”

Jesus. He’s about to ruin the only friendship I have. “Sawyer keep your clothes on. Oakley stop badgering her.” I motion to what’s left of my uniform. “He means well, he’s just trying to help me.”

Sawyer understandably looks weary. “What happened?”

There’s no point in lying. “Jace Covington dragged me in here, seduced me, tied me up, ripped my blouse, and left me to suffer.”

Her eyeballs nearly pop out of her sockets. “What the actual fuck? That’s like a bad straight to Netflix movie.”

“Tell me about it.”

She unzips her bag and hands me a spare shirt.

“Thanks. I’ll pay you back.”

She gives her head a shake. “I don’t want your money. But I will take your phone number. This way your goon here won’t have to barge into the ladies’ room while I’m in the middle of peeing next time something happens.”

I leer at my goon as I put on the new shirt. “Seriously, Oakley?”

His shoulders rise in a shrug. “You told me what you needed, and I delivered. Don’t criticize my methods.”

Sawyer gives me her phone and I plug in my number. “I owe you one... again.”

She worries her lip between her teeth. “If you’re serious, I know a way you can make it up to me.”

“Sure. But I already kicked Oakley’s ass once today and I’m not sure he’ll survive a second attack so soon.”

She laughs. “No. Although I wouldn’t mind seeing you hulk out on him again.” She fidgets with her hands. “Uh. There’s a party at Christian’s house this Saturday. I’ve never been to one and I was hoping you’d go with me.” She straightens her spine. “I’m considering it a social experiment of sorts. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious to see how those at the top of the food chain get down.”

Oakley snorts. “Not to be a dick, but social experiment or not, I don’t think either of you goodie-two-shoes can handle one of Christian’s parties.”

The defiant look in Sawyer’s eye tells me that’s the *real* reason she wants

to go.

Unfortunately, I won't be able to. "I can't. I work six a.m. until close."

Her shoulders slump. "Oh. Well, it's no big deal. Maybe next time."

I hate the disappointment on her face. "On second thought, if you'd be willing to wait until after my shift, I can make it work."

Those big brown eyes practically sparkle. "Sure. What time do you get off? I figured we'd leave around seven, but—"

"No one even shows up until after ten," Oakley chimes in. "Why don't you two just meet me when you get there so you don't embarrass yourselves."

Sawyer raises an eyebrow. "Really? Are you sure the prince of Royal Hearts Academy will allow one of his noble subjects to hang out with two insignificant paupers like us?"

She's officially my new favorite person.

"Oakley's decided to go rogue and be a decent human," I answer for him. "And I get off at eight, so you should totally come to my house early and get ready with me."

With any luck, I'll be able to convince her to toss the navy headband she's been wearing since we met in the trash and try a little lip gloss.

"Okay, cool. Sounds like a pla—"

"Sorry to interrupt this little ya-ya sisterhood shit," Oakley grunts. "But Dylan and I have a pressing situation we need to deal with."

Shit. He's right.

All three of us exit the closet.

"I'll text you in a bit," Sawyer whispers before we go our separate ways.

The hallways are empty as we make our way to the principal's office, and after catching our reflections in a display case, I'm grateful.

Oakley looks like he lost several rounds with Mike Tyson, and I look like I woke up in a seedy alley after spending the nightclubbing.

We make quite the pair.



Principal Ryan is downright seething. “What do you mean you plead the fifth?” He thrusts a finger at Oakley. “*You* have a black eye, a bruised nose, and a bloody lip.” He points to me. “And you...” He falters. “Let’s just say you’re not exactly following the dress code, young lady.” His beady eyes shift between us. “Several students have come forward to report that an altercation happened between you two before homeroom this morning.”

Oakley shrugs. “Define altercation.”

I follow suit. “Define several.”

My aunt throws her hands up. “I’m sorry, but this is ridiculous. There’s no way my niece is capable of causing so much *damage* to a boy my stepson’s size. Not to mention, why in the world would she beat up her own cousin?” She casts a look of sympathy our way. “I think they’re not coming forward with the truth because someone is threatening them, and you need to figure out who.”

My uncle Wayne sighs. “Settle down, Crys. I told you to let me do the talking.”

I can see where Oakley gets it from.

He fiddles with his watch. “Calling us down here was a waste of time. You can’t charge either of them without firm evidence. All you have is hearsay.”

Principal Ryan looks so frustrated I bet he’s considering taking up drinking full-time. “We are not in a courtroom, Mr. Zelenka. I don’t need evidence to suspend or *expel* a student.”

I say a silent prayer to the good Lord up above. *Please, expel me.*

He huffs out a breath. “Multiple students reported the fight between them started because of a rumor about...” He flounders like a fish. “Their *close* relationship.”

This is awkward.

Wayne looks bored. “Really? That’s all?”

Principal Ryan’s flabbergasted. “What do you mean, that’s all? We have a zero-tolerance policy at Royal Hearts Academy when it comes to violence...amongst other things. We pride ourselves on class and dignity.” His face turns red. “Regardless of what goes on in your household, this school will not condone any *immoral* activities.”

It takes so much self-control not to laugh, I shake a little. Not only are we not having sex, we’re not even blood-related.

Wayne pokes the desk with his finger. “You know, for someone who claims to pride themselves on class and dignity, it’s *abhorrent* that you would suggest my son and his cousin are involved in some kind of sexual relationship. I should have your perverted ass arrested for slander.”

“Mic drop.” Oakley spans the air. “D.A. Zelenka is in the motherfucking house.”

I swear my uncle beams.

“Language, Oak,” my aunt hisses before she gives Principal Ryan a tight smile. “My husband has a valid point. There’s no way in the world these two are involved.” Concern flickers in her gaze when she looks at us. “Right?”

“Right,” I assure her.

Oakley nudges me. “Stick to the script.” He places a finger over his lips and mouths, ‘Silence.’

Crystal stands up. “These are good kids, Jim. It’s obvious whatever you heard was nothing more than a rumor, and there’s no need to drag them through the mud.” She gestures to Oakley. “Instead of wasting everyone’s time blaming my niece—who by the way is a straight-A honor student—you should be looking for the real jerk who beat up my stepson.”

Principal Ryan looks sheepish. “You have a point, Crystal.” He blushes. “As always, you’re as intelligent and level-headed as you are beautiful.”

My uncle’s jaw bunches.

Beside me, Oakley makes a gagging sound. “Dude, come on.”

I look around the room. “Does this mean I’m free to go?”

Despite his crush on my aunt, he looks unconvinced. “Not so fast.” He takes a pad out of the drawer of his desk. “I’m issuing you a slip for after-school detention for the next three days. The both of you.”

Shit. “I can’t. I have work.”

“Why are we still getting punished when we didn’t do anything wrong?”
Oakley questions.

He looks at my aunt and uncle. “Whether or not your parents want to believe it, it’s obvious something happened this morning based on your injuries.” He looks at me next. “In conjunction with the spray paint found on your locker, I doubt it was merely a coincidence.” Grabbing a pen, he furiously scribbles on his pad. “You might not be the culprit, but you both know who is and you’re covering for them.” He hands us both slips. “It’s the first week of school. If I don’t set an example now, it will only continue and get worse.”

“Hold on,” my aunt says. “Someone spray painted Dylan’s locker? Who would do something like that?”

“That’s precisely what I’m trying to figure out.”

Everyone turns to me.

I never thought I’d see the day where I’d squeal on Jace Covington.

But after what he did today, I don’t want to just sell him down the river, I want to drown the bastard in it.

I square my shoulders. “J—”

Oakley kicks my foot. “Don’t do it.” His mouth pulls tight. “Silence is your friend.”

I want to remind him that silence got us three days’ worth of detention, but he’s right.

There are other ways to get back at Jace.

I’ll strike when he least expects it.

Won’t stop me from pinning his crime on someone else though.

Like his precious girlfriend.

I look Principal Ryan right in the eyes. “Britney Caldwell. Yesterday she tripped me at lunch and today she spray painted the word thief on my locker.”

Oakley throws his hands up. “Are you crazy? Do you have any idea what you’re doing?”

Yup.

I’m destroying the kingdom.

And just like a game of chess.

You have to take down the queen before conquering the king.

Or in this case, *the prince.*

Chapter 19

JACE

I cut the engine and check my watch.

The bakery closes in five minutes, but Dylan's already flipping the sign on the door from open to closed.

I click my tongue. *Bad girl.*

She shivers as she turns the lock, and for a moment, I wonder if she saw me. It's unlikely though since the spot I parked in offers limited visibility from her angle.

And mine.

After tugging my ski mask over my face, I open my laptop and get to work.

Fortunately, Mrs. Dickinson's security system only has one video camera inside the store, and it's a cheap one.

A few keystrokes later, I've already hacked into the network and I'm pulling Dylan up on my screen.

I zoom in as she discards her green apron and reaches for a broom. She starts sweeping but pauses to shove her hand inside the pocket of her jeans.

A few seconds later her earbuds are firmly in place and she's singing while she cleans.

I know exactly what song is pumping through her eardrums the moment

she starts mouthing the lyrics.

“Sic Transit Gloria...Glory Fades” by Brand New.

Stupid name for a song, but it doesn’t take away from its worth.

Gritting my teeth, I tap my touch screen stereo and the taunting melody with cryptic lyrics fills my speakers.

The first time Dylan played it for me, I told her it reminded me of a cat and mouse chase gone wrong.

The irony isn’t lost on me tonight.

Neither is the way Dylan’s beginning to sway to the music.

The jeans and t-shirt she’s wearing aren’t particularly sexy, but the way the denim hugs her razor-sharp hipbones and molds around the curve of her ass as she moves to the beat most definitely is.

My dick stirs to life as I continue watching, but I’m too turned on to stop or scold myself for it.

Truth be told, I prefer this to our exchange in the closet where it took every ounce of willpower—the kind I wasn’t aware someone like me possessed—not to spread her thighs and watch my cock disappear inside her.

Observing her through a screen allows me the chance to let my dirty fantasies roam without the impending guilty conscience that always follows.

Here, in my car, I can pretend Dylan isn’t the conniving traitor she is, but the girl I once believed she *was*.

The one I broke the rules for.

Including the most important one of all.

Her phone falls out of her pocket due to her movements and she bends over to pick it up, granting me an even better view of her round behind.

I bite my knuckle as a punch of white-hot heat licks down my cock. “Fuck.”

I press my hand against my zipper to ease the ache, but it only makes it worse. Especially when she puts her hair up and I catch sight of the bite mark I left on her neck.

My other hand tightens around the steering wheel. *I want to sink my teeth into every inch of her flawless flesh.* Show her how much she makes my blood burn and my skin crawl.

How much she fucks me up.

I bet if I knocked on the door right now, she'd let me in. And with enough convincing from my mouth and fingers, I'd have her bent over the counter, taking every inch of my punishing dick hard and fast from behind.

Mind spinning, I grip my door handle.

And then it happens...just like it always does.

Guilt sinks its claws into my chest.

He never got to have a job.

Why should she?

Scrubbing a hand down my face, I inhale a breath and turn off my stereo.

Get your head in the game, asshole.

I eye the crowbar on the floor of my passenger seat.

The plan was to come here right after her shift so I could frame her for robbing her boss and get her fired. Not jerk off while she dances and sings.

Dylan Taylor doesn't get to be happy.

She deserves nothing but misery and heartache. The same kind she inflicted on me and my family.

Peering down at the screen, I watch her wipe down the glass countertop.

She'll be closing shop in a few more minutes.

I scan the parking lot for Tommy's car since he was the one who dropped her off, but there's no sign of it.

Good. I won't have to slam my crowbar into his skull and spend the next twenty-five-to-life in jail.

Pressing a few keys on my laptop, I shut the video camera off for the night so I won't get caught.

After putting on my gloves, I reach over the seat for my crowbar at the same time my phone starts vibrating.

Oakley's name flashes across the screen, but I ignore it.

When it goes off a second time in under a minute, I press a button on my steering wheel and accept the call.

The fucker is relentless, and he'll keep dialing until I answer. Especially now that he knows I'm ticked at him for befriending Dylan.

"Yo."

I stuff the crowbar into the pocket of my black hoodie and flip my hood. "What's up?"

"Not much, running a few errands. Was wondering if you wanted to meet up for a little impromptu smoke sesh."

Ordinarily I would, but fuck him and his weed for defying me. "Can't. I'm busy tonight."

"Oh, word? What you getting into? Maybe I'll swing by."

I should tell him it's none of his business, but if shit goes south, I could use the alibi. "I'm chilling with Britney."

I leave the implication hanging in the air.

"Interesting," he muses.

I don't have time to deal with him being butthurt or passive-aggressive about being snubbed. He did it to himself.

"Yeah. Catch you lat—"

My driver side door opens. *Shit.*

"Britney?" Oakley ducks his head inside my car. "Unless she's in the trunk, I'd say you're a fucking liar." Quirking an eyebrow, he assesses me. "And unless you're planning on skiing down the roof of that building, I'd say it also looks like you're about to do something really dumb."

Ripping my ski mask off, I shove him back and step out of my car. "Fuck off."

He lights up a joint. "Is there a way to fuck on? If so, I'd much rather do that."

His attempt at humor falls on deaf ears. "What the hell are you doing

here?”

“Me? What the fuck are *you* doing here?” He sweeps a hand up and down. “I might not be the smartest person out there, but I do know a black hoodie along with a ski mask and crowbar spell trouble.”

“I told you. I had to take care of something.”

He makes a face. “Don’t tell me you came here to attack Dylan. I know you hate her, but this is going too fucking far, man.”

I grind my molars. He doesn’t get to tell me what’s too fucking far. Not when it comes to her.

I laugh, but there’s not a drop of humor. “Are you seriously going to stand there and protect the girl who kicked your ass in front of the whole entire school?” Stepping forward, I snatch the joint from him. “Get the fuck out of my face, you make me sick.”

“It’s like I don’t even know who you are anymore.” He rips the joint out of my hand a second before it reaches my lips. “You two have beef, I get it. But your beef with her isn’t mine. I don’t want to be forced to pick a side or make her life hell because of some shit that happened back in the day between you two. You’re my boy, but she’s—”

“Family,” I finish for him.

And therein lies my biggest problem with Oak. He’s never given me a reason to doubt him or his loyalty. Until now.

“For the next year, we’ll be living under the same roof. I’d like things to be copacetic, you know?”

He offers the joint to me, but I decline. “Makes sense.”

He shakes his head. “Don’t look at me like that, man. Nothing has changed. I’m still your best friend.”

“Sure.” I’m placating him and he knows it.

Before I can blink, he charges me. “Stop being such an asshole. For the last four years, I have done everything for you aside from sucking your motherfucking dick, and now you’re gonna act like I did you dirty because I

won't help you destroy this girl's life?" He spits on my car before walking over to his. "Fuck you." He slaps his chest. "You don't want to be friends with me anymore? Fine. Unlike you, I don't need to go around ruining people to feel good about myself, you prick."

Leaning against my Lexus, I stare him down. "You done yet?"

"Yeah." He takes a cleansing breath. "Yeah, I think I am."

"Good." I take a step closer. "Because the next time you spit on my property, I'll knock your fucking teeth out and piss in your skull." I take another step. "You don't want to choose sides? Fine. But don't stand there and act like it's because you're so fucking noble. I can smell your bullshit from a mile away."

The guy puts more effort into his relationship with cereal than he does with Hayley, and it's clear he's looking for a way to end it without having to be the one to pull the trigger.

"You're not protecting or defending Dylan because she's family and you're a good guy. You're *using* her."

Something passes in his expression. "So what if I am?" He blows out a breath. "What's the big deal?"

Christ. Oak's like a puppy in constant need of supervision so he doesn't chew on a wire and electrocute himself.

Even though I should be kicking his ass across the parking lot, I know us not being friends will hurt him ten times more than it will me due to all his abandonment issues.

I throw the pup a bone. "Using Dylan to make her jealous won't help. You just need to find your balls and end the damn thing."

He lights up another joint. "I wish it were that easy."

"It is. Unless..." My insides coil when it occurs to me. "She's not pregnant, is she?"

He winces. "No. Not that I know of." He blows out a puff of smoke. "If she is, it's not mine. We haven't fucked in weeks."

I want to remind him that it can take months for a chick to realize she's knocked up, but I digress. With how uninvested he is, chances are it won't matter to him anyway.

"Listen, the longer you keep dragging it out, the worse it will get." I shrug. "But do what you want with your dick, man. Use and fuck Dylan or don't. Either way, I don't give a shit."

"I'm not interested in fucking her." Suspicion swirls in his eyes. "But I can't help but think you might be."

Oakley can go to hell. "Nah. Why would I dip my dick in some dry, mediocre meatloaf when I already have a nice juicy piece of filet mignon waiting for me whenever I want it?"

He flaps his hand around like he's been burned. "Damn. You ain't right, Covington. But since we're on the subject, I heard Britney's off the hook because her parents are throwing a fit and they never found the spray can."

They never will because I trashed it.

"Yeah."

I open my car door and get in. Dylan's locking up the bakery, so she'll be here any minute. Not only do I not want to see her, I don't want her questioning my presence.

"Guess you're heading home."

"Yup."

Since robbery isn't on the menu any longer, I'm done here.

He shoves his hands into his pockets. "We cool, man?"

For now. "Yeah."

"What about Dylan? Are you done fucking with her yet?"

I smirk as I rev the engine. "If you really don't want to be caught in the cross-fire, I suggest you stop asking me questions you won't like the answers to."

With that, I take off.

Chapter 20

DYLAN

“*A*re you sure I look okay?” Sawyer tugs on the long turquoise sweater she’s wearing. “It’s still the first week of September, maybe the sweater is a bad idea.”

I twirl the last strand of her hair around the barrel of the curling iron. I almost squealed when she agreed to nix the headband and let me do her hair.

Sawyer might not think so, but she’s gorgeous. And with her new silky waves, she’s not just going to turn heads tonight.

She’s going to break necks.

Her outfit, on the other hand? Needs a little work. Usually I’m all for retro and vintage pieces, but the purple skirt she has on is higher than her waist and longer than her legs. The sweater is cute though and it’s just low enough that it gives a hint of her generous rack.

I chew my lip, pondering how I should answer. I wouldn’t be a good friend if I wasn’t honest with her, but I also don’t want her to hate me and feel insecure.

“Do you want the honest truth? Or a little white lie?”

She raises one freshly tweezed eyebrow. “Is that a trick question? I’ll take the truth for five-hundred, Alex.”

I place the curling iron down and pick up a tube of raspberry lip gloss.

It's perfect for her complexion.

"The truth is you're beautiful." I begin applying some to her lips. "You don't need makeup or any of this stuff." I blot the excess with a tissue. "But that skirt does nothing for your figure. It would be better utilized as kindling for my aunt's fireplace."

"Oh." Her eyes dart around the room. "I didn't bring any other clothes, I thought—"

Holding up a finger, I open my dresser drawer and take out a pair of leggings. "No worries. Try these."

She looks at me like I'm crazy. "Yeah, that's not gonna happen. I appreciate the offer, but you're like a size two. I'm a fourteen on a good day. There's no way these will fit."

Suppressing a groan, I throw them at her. "Leggings are designed to fit almost everyone. Try them on before you complain."

She pouts. "Fine, but if they don't fit, we're stopping by my house on the way to Christian's so I can grab another skirt."

I turn around to give her some privacy. "Deal."

"Have you figured out what you're going to wear yet?" she calls out from behind me.

"Nope."

I'm not going there to impress anyone; I'm strictly offering moral support to Sawyer.

I start combing through a stack of concert t-shirts. "Probably the usual. Jeans and a t-shirt."

Why would I dip my dick in some dry, mediocre meatloaf when I already have a nice piece of filet mignon waiting for me whenever I want it?

I close my eyes as the cruel words I overheard Jace tell Oakley shoots through my skull like an arrow piercing its target.

I've struggled with normal hang-ups about my body and looks from time to time, just like most teenage girls. But for the most part, I'm pretty secure

with myself.

However, Jace's statement? It hurt.

It still does.

And while the rational part of my brain knows I shouldn't put much stock in it...

The other part? Wants to make him choke on his words.

I throw the Rob Zombie shirt I was going to wear on the bed. "I'm not motherfucking meatloaf."

"The singer or food?" Sawyer questions.

I spin around to face her. As predicted, the leggings fit. Paired with the teal sweater, and her long flowy hair, she looks awesome.

"The food. Although I prefer the singer. But never mind all that. You look hot."

Her nose crinkles. "Are you sure? If I bend over, everyone is going to get an ass full of cellulite."

"Sawyer." I grab her by the shoulders. "Your ass is fine. The only ugly part about you is your self-esteem. Swear on my life, you're classically beautiful. Like the love child of Adele and Sophia Loren. Anyone who thinks differently is either blind, jealous, or stupid and can go fuck themselves."

"Holy crap." For the first time tonight, she smiles. "Thanks. If managing indie rock bands doesn't work out, you should seriously consider motivational speaking." Her smile falters. "Now what were you saying before about meatloaf?"

I gave her the Cliff's Notes version of my history with Jace when she picked me up from work, so she's pretty much caught up on all the current drama. However, I never told her what I overheard the other night when Oakley gave me a ride home after my shift.

"Jace compared me to meatloaf." When she looks confused I add, "The other night at my job, I overheard him tell Oakley that Britney was filet mignon...and I was mediocre meatloaf."

She's visibly outraged. "That pompous asswipe needs a lobotomy with an ice pick."

I pick up the t-shirt off my bed and scrutinize it. "I know I should let it roll off my back...but..."

"You want to make him eat that black heart of his tonight," she supplies with a wicked grin.

My grin matches hers. "So fucking bad."

She checks her watch. "It's just after nine, we still have plenty of time to get you all glammed up."

"Are you sure? I'm not..." I swallow, trying to think of the right words to say without coming off wrong. "I'm not one of those vain girls who dress a certain way to get attention, and I don't want you to think I am."

Sawyer adjusts her glasses. "Dylan, you have a body I would legit *kill* to have. If you don't put on something that gives Jace an instant boner and makes Britney want to claw your eyes out for looking ten times hotter than her, I'm never speaking to you again."

Well, shit. "Okay, then. I guess we're doing this." I walk over to my bare-bones closet and grimace. "Only problem is, I don't own anything that would give Britney a run for her money."

I sold some of my more expensive clothes on eBay during my dad's first week of jail. It wasn't an issue for me since most were hand-me-downs disguised as gifts from the stepmonster, but they certainly would have come in handy tonight.

My friend stands next to me and whistles. "You're right. The leggings you loaned me are about the dressiest thing you have." There's a mischievous gleam in her eye when she looks at me. "But your aunt might have something. She looks like she knows a thing or two about fashion."

"She does. In high school, she was basically a Britney without the capital B."

"Talk about irony. On the bright side, you two could practically pass for

twin—”

A knock on the door cuts her off.

“Come in,” we both yell at the same time.

A moment later my aunt Crystal waltzes in holding up a necklace. “Hey, girls. Can one of you help me out? Wayne and I are catching a late-night movie in a bit, so I figured I’d get ready while he’s finishing up some phone calls in his office.”

“Sure.” I move behind her so I can fasten her necklace.

She looks at Sawyer. “Oh, wow, look at you. You’re like a completely different girl from when you walked in. I love your hair.”

Sawyer beams. “Thanks.” She looks at me. “Are you going to ask her, or should I?”

She can be awfully pushy when she wants something.

My aunt looks nervous. “Ask me what?”

“I was wondering if I could borrow an outfit for tonight.”

She looks surprised. “Of course. I mean, I’m not sure I have anything that fits your style but—”

“That’s exactly what we’re looking for,” Sawyer chimes in. “Dylan needs something sexy enough to make Britney keel over from jealousy and Jace from horniness.”

Subtle, Sawyer. *Real subtle.*

My aunt’s eyes widen. “I see.” She waves a hand, ushering us out of my room. “Between the three of us, I’m sure we’ll find something.”

Chapter 21

DYLAN

Two hours later, I'm sitting in Sawyer's car wearing more makeup and less clothes than I ever have in public before.

Tipping my head, I check to make sure my boobs haven't popped out of the lacey black halter-top I borrowed from my aunt.

Since Crystal and Sawyer couldn't come to an agreement regarding leather pants versus a miniskirt, I opted for a pair of my tight-fitting jeans.

"I have an extra sweater in my back seat, do you want it?"

"No thanks. I'm good."

I'm not fidgeting because I'm cold, it's my nerves. Britney's more pissed than ever since I tried to get her in trouble, so there's no telling how she'll react or what she'll do when she sees me.

I pull out my phone and text Oakley for the tenth time tonight.

As usual, it goes unanswered.

Sawyer sighs. "It's after eleven. I have to be home by one-thirty. We should probably head in without him."

I grab my purse off the floor. "You're right. Let's go."

"Wait." She squints as she peers through her windshield. "I think that's him. He's parked a few cars down from us. Talking to some guy."

I follow her line of sight, and sure enough, Oakley's in his car having

what looks like a very tense conversation with someone I can't recall ever seeing before.

I open my door. "Let's go."

Sawyer follows behind as I scurry down the street to where he's parked.

He's so sidetracked he doesn't see us approach.

I knock on his window. "Hey. Remember me?"

He rolls his window down and curses. "My bad. I forgot. I'll meet you in a few."

The guy next to him diverts his attention from Oakley to me. The threatening look in his eyes as he looks me up and down makes me inwardly shiver.

"Who's this?"

I don't know what to make of Oakley's expression. "No one. Just a friend."

Yeah, Oakley's definitely not acting like his strange, easy-going self.

I'm not sure what the deal is with the two of them, but I don't like it one bit.

I fold my arms across my chest. "I'm his cousin." I raise an eyebrow. "Is there a problem?"

Oakley tenses. "No. Go inside. I'll catch up with you in a little while."

Sawyer tugs on my elbow. "Come on. We can go wait in my car until he's finished."

Begrudgingly, I follow her lead.

"What do you think that was about?" Sawyer asks as we get back into her van.

"I honestly have no idea."

"Maybe that's who he gets his weed from?"

I shake my head. "Doubtful. I was with him when he used a fake ID and picked some up at a smoke shop the other night."

Shooting my gaze up the road to where he is, I watch their exchange.

Oakley's doing most of the talking and he's using his hands a lot, like whatever he's saying has him riled up.

The other guy sits stoic with a grim expression.

That is until he leans over the center console and whispers something in Oak's ear.

Oakley nods solemnly and the hand around his steering wheel flexes then clenches before he closes his eyes.

"I wonder if..." Sawyer starts to say until she stops herself. "Never mind."

"What?"

If Sawyer has a theory on what might be transpiring here, I'm all ears.

"Do you think maybe..." Her voice trails off and she draws in a breath. "Do you think he might be...gay?"

To say I'm thrown would be an understatement. "The guy he's with? Or Oakley?"

She picks at her cuticles. "I don't know...both? I'm probably wrong, but your cousin and Hayley were practically attached at the hip last year, and now it's like she doesn't even exist. He's also way more stoned than he used to be...as if he's trying to escape from whatever is bothering him." She shrugs. "I'm probably reading too much into it."

I think about her theory. It's not entirely out of the question. "No. You might be onto something. I caught him watching porn once, but his eyes were closed, so he wasn't really *watching* it, you know? It was basically background noise—and if my ex is anything to go on—that's not normal for guys." I sit up straight. "He also didn't object to or deny the rumor Jace started about us hooking up."

I watch as the guy gets out of Oakley's car and jogs to another one farther down the street. Oakley watches him the whole time. Almost like he misses him already. "They had a moment before. The guy whispered something to him, and Oakley looked like whatever he said hurt."

Sawyer's eyes widen. "Oh my God, you're right. Not to mention, that guy didn't like you very much, but he relaxed when you said you were his cousin. Maybe he's upset Oakley's pretending to be something he's not and he was afraid you were his new beard." Sawyer clutches her chest. "Look—Oakley's watching him drive off. He can't keep his eyes off him." She sighs. "They're like star-crossed lovers. A modern-day Romeo and Juliet. Only... Romeo and Romeo." Her face falls. "He's obviously scared to come out. We *have* to be there for him, Dylan. He has to know he has people who will love and support him no matter what his sexuality is."

I agree. "Yeah, definitely. I mean, we're family." My heart sinks. "He said something about his dad not caring about other people's happiness the other day. Maybe he tried to tell my uncle, and he refused to support him. But he doesn't need Wayne's support. He has me. And you."

Her voice wobbles. "We won't turn our backs on him."

We're so wrapped up in our conversation we both jump when Oakley knocks on the window.

"You guys ready to blow this popsicle stand?"

Sawyer and I exchange a glance as we exit her van.

Then, before I can talk myself out of it. I wrap my arms around him. "I know we didn't start off on the right foot, but I need you to know I'm here for you."

Oakley freezes. "Uh. Thanks."

I hug him tighter. "I mean it, Oak. We're family. Whatever you're going through, I've got your back. You're not alone."

Sawyer joins our group hug. "I'm here for you, too." She points to the sky. "And so is he. God loves all his children."

Oakley's mouth drops open. "What the *fuck* are you two smoking, and can I please have some?"

"We just want you to know how much we support you," Sawyer says before she looks at me and mouths, 'He's not ready yet.'

I nod. We can't push him. He'll come out whenever he feels the time is right.

And we'll be here for him when he does.

Oakley clears his throat. "As nice as this little love fest is, there's a bottle of whiskey with my name on it inside."

His eyes are trained on me as we all break apart. "Nice shirt."

My mind flits back to the closet and the suggestion he made about me needing to make a trip to Victoria's Secret. Perhaps he enjoys going there himself?

"Thanks. Maybe, we can go shopping sometime?"

"Dylan," Sawyer hisses. "Don't stereotype him."

Crap, she's right. "I'm so sorry. It's totally cool if shopping isn't your thing. We can do whatever you want."

He pops the collar of his shirt. "I mean, I do have a dope sense of fashion." He slings an arm around my shoulders and another one around Sawyer's, leading us to the Mediterranean-style villa that's bumping house music. "But we can talk more about that later. First, let me give you two the run down. Some skeevy dudes are here, so always make and pour your own drinks. If you set it down, leave it and make another one. Christian stocks enough booze to keep a third world country drunk for months."

I'm not a drinker, but good to know.

"People fuck on the second floor. If a bedroom door is closed, take it somewhere else or wait your turn for a free one." He pauses. "Also, don't drink the punch."

Sawyer swivels her head to look at him. "Because it's spiked?"

"No," Oakley answers with a grin. "Because Cole once got so drunk, he thought it was a urinal."

"Gross," Sawyer says, echoing my thoughts.

He laughs to himself as we approach the entrance. "Nah. He kept calling it the golden nectar of the gods and daring people to take a sip. It was funny

as fuck...until a few chicks fell for it and asked why it was warm and tasted funny.” His eyebrows dance. “Then it was hysterical.”

Sawyer and I exchange another appalled glance as he turns the knob.

The moment Oakley opens the front door, it’s utter pandemonium.

There’s a monsoon of people in various areas of the house, and everyone we pass has a red Solo cup in their hands.

To the right of us, some people are dancing and having a good time, while others are *trying* to dance and having a terrible time.

A few couples are fighting...others are making out on whatever surface they can find.

I can tell Sawyer is even more overwhelmed than I am because her jaw damn near hit the floor the second we walked in.

“Is it *always* like this?” she questions.

“What?” Oakley shouts above the music as he makes a beeline for a table full of liquor.

“I said, is it always like this?”

Oakley splashes a generous helping of amber liquid in a cup. “Sometimes. It dies down a little as the night goes on. You’ll see.”

Sawyer takes an empty cup from the stack and peruses the table. “Is there anything here with an alcohol percentage *under* five?”

Oakley takes a long swig before reaching for the whiskey again. “Fuck if I know.”

I spot a half-empty bottle of soda hidden behind a pitcher and grab it. “Here.”

After taking a cautious whiff, she fills up two cups. “So what should we do now? To be honest, I’m already kind of bored.”

She hands me one of the cups and I take a sip. “Me too. Not to mention, the music sucks.”

Oakley rolls his eyes. “That’s because you’re both sober.”

Sawyer holds up her keys. “That’s because I’m driving.”

Oakley looks at me. “What’s your excuse?”

I’d like to stay alert and oriented in a house where most of the people I know are my enemies.

“Just not a big drinker,” I settle on.

“Yo,” a deep voice bellows from across the room.

I don’t miss the way Sawyer cringes as he walks up to our circle.

“Yup, this party officially blows.”

Evidently my friend is not a fan of Cole Covington.

Can’t say I blame her. The star quarterback might be beautiful, but he’s obnoxious and cocky as hell.

It also hurts to look at him, because he’s a walking apparition of his twin.

A cruel glimmer at a future that will never be.

A sad reminder of what once was.

I’m not sure how Cole—or Jace and his family—cope with it.

“What’s the matter, Dylan?” Those sharp green eyes of his glare daggers at me. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

For once, I’m rendered speechless.

Sawyer isn’t, though. “Lay off her, Covington.”

“Well, if it isn’t my favorite nerd.” His face lights up in a mocking grin as he takes her in. “I almost didn’t recognize you. Are you sure you’re not lost, sweetness?” Leaning in, he tilts his beer bottle toward the exit. “Bible study is down the road.”

Crossing her arms, she stares him down. “Please. You wouldn’t know a study group if it slapped you upside the head and crawled up your ass.”

He licks the tip of his beer bottle suggestively. “Oh, baby. I love it when you talk dirty to me.”

Her face scrunches in disgust. “God, you’re such a pig.”

Cole zeroes in on her chest and bites his lip. “Oink, oin—”

A girl I recognize from Britney’s posse sidles up to him mid-sentence and he puts his arm around her. “Hey, sexy. Thought I was meeting you in the hot

tub?”

She starts to speak, but Cole diverts his attention to something behind us. “About time you finished.”

My stupid, traitorous heart jumps into a sprint when I see Jace coming down the staircase.

He’s wearing a black Henley that does delicious things to his sculpted arms, and well-fitted jeans that hang low on hips.

His face, as usual, is goddamn perfect. Even more so with the fine dusting of stubble lining his jaw tonight.

I’m so focused on his appearance it takes me a second to realize he’s fixing his belt...and that Britney is slinking close behind him, like a stench that lingers even after you took out the trash.

I’m considering grabbing Sawyer’s hand and heading out to the patio for some air, but Britney’s already noticed me.

The split-second look of envy immediately followed by uneasiness on her face is worth having to endure her for a bit.

“Well, look what the pot-head dragged in.” She shoots Oakley an irritated glare. “Thanks a lot, Oak. I’m sure Hayley, your soon-to-be ex, is going to be *thrilled* when she gets here.”

Oakley doesn’t seem fazed by her threat one bit.

Jace makes a beeline for the makeshift bar without sparing me or anyone else a glance. Like Sawyer and I, he goes straight for the soda, disregarding the alcohol.

I smirk as he examines the bottle and grits his teeth. “What asshole has been helping himself to my shit without permission?”

Beside me, Sawyer goes rigid.

I down the rest of my drink, and proudly hold up my empty cup. “*This* asshole.”

The muscles in his neck tense. “What the fuck are you doing here?” His stare lowers, and his dark orbs flash with something other than disdain for a

quick second before he focuses on Oakley.

“You don’t want problems? Don’t fucking bring any.”

“I was coming here with or without Oakley,” I inform him. “But hey, if me being here annoys you so much...you should really try to ignore me.” I trail a finger down my bare arm. “Unless I have so much of a hold on you, you won’t be able to enjoy yourself. In which case, I suggest you seek professional help.” I cast him a look filled with mock sympathy. “It’s not healthy to be so obsessed with someone who’s no longer in your life.”

I don’t realize the horrible way my words could be misconstrued until I see a flicker of pain etched in his features.

“Jace, I didn—”

“No.” My stomach drops when he smiles, showcasing that deep dimple of his, and picks up the bottle of soda. “You’re right.” Faster than I can blink, he walks over and pours the soda over my head. “Enjoy the rest of your night.”

Britney and her friend laugh like hyenas as he throws his empty bottle in my direction and stalks off.

“Someone is obsessed,” Britney sneers. “But it’s definitely not Jace.”

Sawyer grabs a roll of paper towels off the table and hands them to me.

“Thanks.” I start dabbing as much of the excess liquid off me as I can.

“Okay.” Cole rubs his hands. “I’m going in the hot tub, who’s coming?”

“Me,” the girl next to him coos.

“I’ll see if Jace wants to,” Britney chimes in. “If not, we’ll probably head back to my house so I can make him feel better...you know, since *someone* ruined his night.”

It takes a substantial amount of effort to ignore her.

Oakley looks at me. “A quick dip might help you get cleaned up.”

I’d really love to know what universe he’s living in, because in mine, I’m not taking a quick dip in a hot tub with Jace’s brother or Britney’s BFF for any reason.

“Seriously, Oakley?” Britney snaps. “Unless you want Jace to kick your

ass, stop inviting her places. She's *not* welcome. And if you keep it up, you won't be either."

Her friend pops a hand on her hip. "Same goes for her fat ass friend."

"Chill," Cole says. "Sawyer didn't even do anything."

They both ignore him.

"God." Britney tosses her hair over her shoulder. "Can you imagine seeing that blob in a hot tub?"

"Water is a whale's natural habitat," her friend says smugly.

Sawyer turns red with embarrassment.

I, however, am *seeing* red.

Especially when Sawyer's lower lip begins to tremble.

"Fuck them," I tell her. "They're just jealous."

"Of what?" Britney's side-kick cackles. "Congestive heart failure and diabetes? No thanks."

"Awe," Britney coos. "I think she's gonna cry."

Anger brews in my gut. Britney's the most vile, miserable person I've ever met in my life, and I'm so tired of her thinking she's so much better than everyone else.

She's like a fungus that keeps growing, infecting everyone with her cancer.

But she's spread far enough. No way in hell am I going to stand here and let her keep hurting my friend.

I clench my hands. Whoever talks next is the first one going down.

Side-kick crinkles her nose. "Oh my God. She is. Lard ball is totally cry —"

A fist flies into her mouth.

Only, it isn't mine.

It's Sawyer's.

And my girl packs quite a punch because she knocks her to the floor.

Baring her teeth, Sawyer looks down at her. "I might be crying, but

you're the one who's bleeding...bitch."

The girl lunges for her, but Sawyer's got the advantage and climbs on top of her.

Britney pushes me. "Get that fat ass off my friend before she suffocates her."

A red mist washes over my vision. This has been a long time coming.

I grab a handful of her red hair. "Eat a bag of dicks, fire crotch."

And then I drive my fist into her nose.

Chapter 22

DYLAN

“That was awesome,” Sawyer says from her spot on the bathroom floor.

Despite the throbbing in my hand and the blood trickling from my lip due to the one and only punch Britney landed, I have to agree.

For almost fifteen minutes, Sawyer stood up for herself, and I got to pummel the shit out of my childhood terrorizer.

Things got so crazy, a circle of partygoers formed around us, and someone changed the music to the *Rocky* theme song.

Cole and Oakley tried their best to break it up, but whenever they’d pull me or Sawyer off, we’d start tag-teaming to ensure Britney and her friend wouldn’t have the upper hand.

It got so bad they had to call Jace for backup because half the people around didn’t want to get involved and the other half didn’t want to stop the entertainment.

The look on Jace’s face when he pried me off his little girlfriend then peeled *her* off the floor was priceless.

I pet the lock of red hair on the bathroom sink. “We even managed to get a souvenir.”

Laughing, she heaves herself off the floor. “We’re gonna be so sore tomorrow.”

I wince as I check out my knuckles. Nothing is broken, but they are swollen and bruised. “Tell me about it. Technically this is my second fight in a week.”

She holds out her hand and helps me up. “You should start training professionally.”

“Only if I can use Britney as my punching bag.”

I turn on the faucet and wash my face since it’s still sticky from the soda Jace poured on me.

“Shit,” Sawyer says as she looks at her watch. “It’s one-fifteen. I’m gonna be late for curfew.”

Crap. We’ve been holed up in the bathroom gathering our bearings and time must have slipped away from us.

She takes out her phone. “I’m gonna text my dad and tell him I’ll be home as soon as I drop you off.”

“No, I can hitch a ride with Oakley. If you leave now, you’ll make it home on time.”

She eyes me warily. “Are you sure? I don’t want to leave you stranded here. Plus, Oakley’s been drinking.”

“He has, but I haven’t. I’m sure he’ll have no problem with me driving.”

After giving her a quick hug goodbye, I walk her to her van and search for my step-cousin.

I figured he’d still be in the living room, but there’s no sign of him. In fact, half the people who were here are gone now, and I’m seriously hoping he isn’t one of them.

I walk over to two guys sitting on a couch. Their red eyes and the way they’re slouched over—not to mention the big ass bong they’re sharing—tells me they’re Oakley’s people and they might be able to tell me where he’d be.

“Hey.”

The guy wearing a beanie lifts his head. “Oh, shit. It’s you.” He slaps his friend’s shoulder. “It’s the cousin fucker who beat up that Britney chick

before.”

If I never hear the term *cousin fucker* again in my life, it will be too soon.

His friend blows out a big puff of smoke and coughs. “You’re a legend, B. Mad respect.” He points to his bong. “You wanna hit this?”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m actually looking for Oakley. Have you guys seen him?”

They exchange a glance.

“Nah,” one of them says. “Not since the fight.”

“But Cole’s outside in the hot tub,” his friend adds. “O-dawg might be with him.”

“Okay, thanks.”

I start to walk away, but they halt me.

“Yo, B. Maybe next time you fight, you can pop a titty out or something.” He swishes an imaginary basketball. “Try to go viral and be on some next level shit. Know what I’m saying?”

God help me if I ever take social *or* career advice from these guys.

“Sure. I’ll see what I can do.”

With a short wave, I leave them to their bong and make my way outside.

Tiny strings of light illuminate the path leading to the large hot tub stationed on the far side of the patio.

And just like they said, it’s where I find Cole.

With the exception of a few people passed out on some patio chairs, he’s all alone.

However, there’s a good chance he’ll know where Oakley went.

His eyes are closed, and the back of his head is resting on the ledge of the jacuzzi when I approach.

He’s so relaxed I have to clear my throat to get his attention.

“Hey, sorry to bother you, but I was hoping you knew where Oakley was. I need a ride home.”

He opens one eye. “Didn’t you come here with Sawyer?”

“Yeah, but I told her to go home because she was late for curfew.”

Stretching his arm out, he plucks a nearby Solo cup off the edge. “Last time I saw him was right after we put the kibosh on your rumble with Britney and Casey.” He takes a leisurely sip of his drink. “Have you tried calling him?”

“Yeah.” I turn on my heel, preparing to go back inside. “Thanks anyway. Enjoy the rest of your night.”

“Not so fast.” He pats the edge of the tub. “Step into my office. We need to have a little chat.”

Whatever’s in that cup of his must be strong. “I don’t have a bathing suit.”

His lips twitch. “Nothing I haven’t seen before.”

“Sorry, I’m not...no.”

He shrugs. “Suit yourself.” Curiosity dances across his face as he maneuvers to the side of the tub closest to me. “But I can’t help wondering...” His voice trails off, inviting me to either fill in the rest of his statement or inquire about it.

“Fine, I’ll bite. Wonder what?”

His expression turns angelic. “M-m-maybe if I t-t-talked like t-t-this.”

It’s like a sucker punch right to the gut. Before I can stop myself, my hand strikes his cheek. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I cried myself to sleep after I found out Liam had passed, and again after it became clear Jace no longer wanted to talk to me, and I had lost not one, but two people I cared about.

Eventually, I forced myself to tuck my feelings about Liam’s death in the same box with my mom.

However, being taunted with his memory by his identical twin is not only downright ruthless, it sends a rush of pain crashing to the surface.

Tears spring to my eyes and I clutch my chest.

Liam should be here...but he’s not. *My friend is never coming back.*

“I’m sorry,” I whisper as my brain processes what I’ve done. “I’m so sorry.”

Cole starts to say something, but I’m already running back to the house.

It hurts too much. I can’t breathe. I can’t...

A force slams into me and I stumble, but a steel grip captures my upper arm, righting me before I fall on my ass.

“Watch where you’re going,” Jace bites out.

The fact that he’s shirtless and there are two girls in bikinis trailing behind him are insignificant. My focus is on the tattoo across his chest.

Scrawled in thick black script, the words, *My Brother’s Keeper* sit perched above a pair of intricate angel wings spanning over each pec.

A lump rises in my throat as a fresh wave of pain washes over me. *Liam.*

Impulsively, I brush my fingertips over the ink.

Jace sucks in a sharp breath...then whacks my hand away. “Don’t fucking touch me.”

“I—” I shake my head, feeling stupid for doing something so personal. So *insensitive.* “I’m sorry.”

Curling my arms around myself, I push past Jace and the bikini-clad girls.

I need to find Oakley so I can leave. Being here, dealing with these buried emotions...it’s all too much.

Chapter 23

DYLAN

I've been searching for Oakley for over twenty minutes, and there's still no sign of him.

In a last-ditch effort, I climb the staircase, preparing to barge through every door I come across.

After checking the first two bedrooms and pissing off two couples in the throes of passion, I make my way to the one stationed at the end of the hall.

The door is closed, so I knock a few times.

When I don't get a response from the other side, I let myself in.

The room is dim, but I spot Oakley right away. He's alone and sprawled out in the middle of a king-sized bed.

I breathe a sigh of relief. I hate to wake him, but the sooner he hands me his keys, the sooner he can sleep in his own bed.

"Come on, party animal." I tap his ankle. "It's time to go home."

He makes a low noise in the back of his throat.

"Oak." I pat his leg. "Get up."

He squints at me through bloodshot pupils. "It's you."

"Yup, it's me. Sawyer had to leave." I scan the nightstand for his keys but come up empty. "Where are your keys?"

His lids lower. "Huh?"

Placing my knee on the bed for support, I start digging through his pockets.

“I miss you.”

His speech is so slurred, I almost don't hear him.

Evidently Oakley is the *I love everyone* kind of drunk.

I rub his shoulder. “Miss you, too. But you know what else we're missing? Your keys. Do you remember...” Nope, no point in asking. He won't. Shifting on the bed, I try my best to get into the back pockets of his pants.

He closes his eyes in pain. “You're killing me.”

Dramatic, much? “Sorry, but I need to find your car keys.”

His hands frame my face. “I can't.” His hooded, glassy eyes become even glassier and his voice cracks. “It hurts.”

I blink, unsure what to do or say. Drunk or not, there's a *lot* of conviction behind those words and my heart aches for him.

Oakley deserves happiness. But even more than that? He deserves the freedom to love who he wants.

His grip becomes tighter and he trembles. “I can't take it.”

Oh, man. I've always been bad at this sort of thing. However, I want him to know I'm here for him and he *will* get through this.

“I can't imagine what you're going through, but I'm here—”

He tugs me closer. “I need you so fucking bad.”

The alcohol is clearly impacting his comprehension. “You have me. I'm not going any—”

He shoves his fingers through my hair and the next thing I know...his lips are on mine.

What. The. Fuck.

I open my mouth to ask him what he's doing, but the second I do, his tongue plunges inside.

I freeze, completely caught off guard. I get that he might be confused, but

I am so *not* the right person to test the waters with.

I slap at his shoulders when he deepens the unwanted kiss.

He shifts his hips and groans.

My stomach churns as one thing becomes abundantly clear.

The thing currently poking me in the side. *Yuck.*

“I’ve heard the term kissing cousins, but I’ve never actually seen it before now,” a voice that sounds a lot like Cole’s says from the door.

I shove Oakley as hard as I can, until finally, he unfastens his mouth.

Wiping my lips with the back of my hand, I get off the bed and whirl around.

Of course, it’s not just Cole. Jace is standing there too.

And his gaze is as scrutinizing as ever.

“We’re not...this isn’t.” I glare at the drunk idiot on the bed. “I thought you were gay. I was trying to *help* you.”

Oakley’s head lolls to the side and he dozes off.

Cole’s lips twitch. “For real?”

“Yes,” I spit. “And I’m not the only one. Sawyer thought so too.” I kick the bedframe. “I was gonna take you shopping, jackass.”

Amusement lightens Jace’s expression.

Cole doubles over in laughter. “This is the best shit I’ve ever heard. I can’t believe he pretended to be gay to get into your pants.”

“What? That’s not what happened.”

His laughter comes to a halt. “But you just said...”

Clearly, Sawyer and I jumped the gun and got carried away. “We saw him in the car with some guy before and assumed—”

“What guy?” Jace questions.

Before I can answer, he brushes past me. “Shit.”

All the blood drains from my face when I turn around.

Oakley’s violently shaking.

Panic spirals through me and I pull out my phone. “I’m gonna call 911?”

“No,” Jace barks. “He has epilepsy.” His features harden as he rolls Oakley onto his side. “He hasn’t had a seizure in a while, but severe stress and drugs are his triggers.”

If that’s the case, Oakley really needs to evaluate his favorite hobby.

“He smokes weed all the time.”

Jace gives me a look. “Weed isn’t the problem. If anything, it helps.” He looks at his watch. “It’s when he messes around with stupid shit that things like this happen.”

Oh. The guy Oakley was with before really *was* a dealer after all.

Jesus. I feel utterly helpless—but even more than that—mad at myself for not stopping him.

I’m at a loss for what to do or how to make it better. “Maybe I should call my uncle.”

“No,” Cole snaps. “If you tell him, he’ll not only be pissed because of the drugs, they’ll take his car away for a year.”

Probably. “But if he’s doing dr—”

“One minute, ten seconds,” Jace declares.

Oakley blinks up at the ceiling, looking so lost and confused I want to run over and give him a hug.

Jace peers down at him. “You had a seizure, man.”

Oakley tries to speak, but Jace leans over and grips him by the collar. “You fucking *promised* me.”

His tone is colder than ice, but his eyes are full of so much fear my heart constricts.

Jace pulls on his shirt until their heads are pressed together. “Lose Loki’s number for good and end this bullshit, or I’m fucking done with *you* for good. Got it, asshole?”

Oakley’s guilt is palpable as he gives Jace a small nod before closing his eyes.

Cole blows out a breath. “Okay, what’s the plan? Am I driving his car

back to our house?”

Jace shakes his head. “No. You’ve had a few beers tonight, so I don’t want you driving either. We’ll leave it here and get it in the morning.” He swipes Oakley’s phone off the nightstand. “I’ll text Wayne and let him know he’s spending the night at our house.”

“I can drive. I haven’t had anything to drink.” I narrow my eyes. “Other than soda.”

With a grunt, Jace digs into the pocket of his jeans and tosses a set of keys at me. “Fine. You can drive him to my place, but after that, you need to bounce. You’re not welcome in my home.”

A mixture of hurt and confusion wash over me. “If that’s the case, why don’t I just take Oakley’s car and drive us both home?”

Jace crosses his arms. “No.”

“Gee, I’m sorry, Daddy. I wasn’t aware I needed your permission, to begin with.”

Cole snorts. “Look, either work with us or get out of our way while we handle shit. Wayne thinking his son spent the night at our house because he drank too much at a party is different than shoving the actual evidence in his face and getting Oakley in trouble.”

I guess he has a point. Sort of. “Okay, so how about I drive Oakley’s car home? This way you won’t have to—”

“No,” Jace says tightly.

“Why are you being so freaking difficult?”

“Because I’m looking out for my friend.” Jace advances toward me. “Are you really prepared to face your uncle’s cross-examination? What are you gonna say when he asks why his son’s car is in the driveway but he’s not home? You gonna cave and tell him he seized? Or let it slip that he was so high and drunk out of his mind he kissed you?”

I fight the urge to string him up by his balls. “Of course not.”

His laugh is bitter. “Well, call me crazy, but I don’t trust you. If you

really want to help Oak out, you'll keep your mouth shut and do whatever the fuck *I* tell you to." He juts his chin at Cole. "Ride with her. Make sure she doesn't pull a fast one and take Oak home."

Christ, he's unbelievable.

Cole and Jace cart Oakley off the bed then reposition each of his arms around their shoulders.

"If you could walk in front of us and open the front door, that would be swell," Jace grits through his teeth.

If he wasn't physically supporting a very groggy Oakley right now, I'd kick him in the junk.

A horrible thought crosses my mind as we head down the stairs.

I fought Oakley the other day. *He could have had a seizure.*

All because Jace let me believe his friend was the one responsible for all the stuff *he* did.

My blood boils as we make our way outside.

The second we get Oakley situated and I know he's okay, I'm going to have a little *chat* with Jace.



*T*he ride to Jace's is pretty silent, aside from Oak's periodic snoring in the back seat.

I peer at him through the rearview. "Will he be okay?"

I don't know much about epilepsy, but I plan to do my research.

Cole nods. "I've only seen him have a few over the years, but he's always really tired after." Shifting in his seat, he surveys his friend. "He's also drunk as a skunk and high as a kite right now, so it's best we let him sleep it off."

Agreed. As upset as I am with him for doing drugs and putting the moves on me, I'm far more concerned about his health than I am about reading him the riot act.

I can feel Cole's eyes on me. "I can give you a ride home if you're willing to wait a bit."

"I appreciate it, but I'm covered."

I'm not since Tommy hasn't returned my text, but I'd rather crawl back to my aunt's home on broken glass than accept a ride from a Covington.

I'd probably be better off too, because at this rate they'd kill me and bury my body in the woods.

He faces forward. "Suit yourself."

Whereas Jace is a consistent asshole, Cole has been almost pleasant for the duration of our short trip.

It puts me on edge. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

His brows raise in surprise. "I'm sorry." He runs a hand through his dark hair. "Didn't mean to offend you by *not* being a dick. I'll do better next time."

I make a left, turning down their block. "I didn't mean it like that. I appreciate you being...polite. However, it's no secret Jace hates me, and you're not too fond of me either. I guess I'm just wondering why the sudden change of heart is all."

I can tell he's mulling over his response by the way his jaw works as we pull up his driveway.

I'm undoing my seatbelt when he finally speaks. "We all make choices and mistakes in this world." Sadness shadows his eyes. "And there's a small part of me that can't help but think yours might have been the latter." He shrugs. "If I'm right, chances are every time you look in the mirror, you're already being punished far worse than Jace or I am capable of."

He steps out of the car before I can ask him what he means or what mistake of mine he's referring to.

Jace pulls up behind me, blocking Oakley's car in, then meets his brother.

Oakley's a little more alert after they help him out of the backseat, but

he's still really out of it.

"Are you mad at me?"

He looks so dejected I fold like a cheap lawn chair. "A little, but we'll talk tomorrow." They're about to head inside, but I wrap my arms around him. "You scared me."

"I'm sorry," he whispers as we break apart and Jace and Cole take hold of his arms.

I zero in on my nemesis. "After you get him inside, come back out. We need to have a little conversation."

Those sinister eyes examine me from head to toe. "Excuse me?"

I stand my ground. "You heard me."

Jace starts to argue, but Cole says, "I got it from here." He slaps Oakley on the back. "Come on, big guy. We can wake Bianca up and get her to make us some food."

He perks up a bit and they make their way up the driveway.

The second they're inside, I shove Jace against the car. "You're a goddamn hypocrite. You knew Oakley had epilepsy, yet you still let me think he did all those bad things."

Jace doesn't look amused. "You've got to be kidding me."

"No, I'm not, asshole. I attacked him over it." My heart drops. "I could have *seriously* hurt him, Jace."

I'm not sure what to make of the expression on his face. "Yeah, *you* could have. Yet, here you are standing in my driveway blaming me."

He wraps his fingers around my wrist and yanks me until I'm the one against the car. "Newsflash, Dylan. I didn't make you do shit. You chose to beat him up, because that's your MO. Whenever someone hurts you or pisses you off, you take it to the extreme."

Anger rises in my throat. He's got a lot of nerve considering all *he's* done. "Are you sure you didn't steal from Oakley's stash tonight? That's *your* MO. The only thing I've ever done was be a good friend, which is a hell

of a lot more than I can say for you.”

His upper lip curls and he leans in. “I wish you were a guy, because I swear, I’d beat the goddamn heartbeat out of you, you vile, manipulating cunt.”

I’ve been called a lot of bad things before, but this takes the cake. It’s the worst thing anyone’s ever said to or about me.

I slap his cheek so hard my own hand stings. “I hate you.”

I honest to God do in this moment. It doesn’t even matter why he’s mad at me, because I no longer care.

He plants both palms on the car, trapping me. “Is that supposed to scare me? Because it doesn’t. There’s nothing else you can do—there’s nothing else you can take from me. I won’t fucking let you.”

My heart slams against my ribcage. He’s talking in circles and it’s getting us nowhere. “I didn’t do anything to you.” I grab his face, forcing him to look at me. “You *know* me, Jace. You know me better than anyone. Whatever you think...”

“No. I don’t.” The sorrow in his voice strikes me low in the gut. “I’m not sure I ever did.”

I was wrong before. *This* takes the cake. “You’ve held my heart in the palm of your hand since I was eleven-years-old. If anyone has the power to hurt the other, it’s you, not me.” My throat prickles and a rush of anger fills the cavity of my chest. “Hell, it’s all you’ve been doing since I’ve been back.” I jab a finger into his pec. “Britney Caldwell? You think I’m vile? *She’s* the very definition of it.”

His hand slides to the nape of my neck and he grips my ponytail, tilting my head back. “She might be a bitch, but at least she never betrayed me.”

“Give her time.”

The tip of his nose skims the length of my exposed neck. “Careful, Taylor. Your jealousy is starting to show.”

I laugh. “Please. She has nothing that I want.” My eyes narrow. “Not

anymore.”

“You sure about that?” he challenges.

“Positive,” I lie.

His lids lower. “Is that why you wore this sexy little shirt tonight?” His warm breath tickles the side of my neck. “Hoping to get my attention.”

“No.”

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

That earns me a husky chuckle. “Too bad.” He presses his lips against my throat. “Because it’s working. You have all my attention.” He walks his fingers down my torso. “Question is...what are you going to do with it?”

My teeth clench in frustration. “Tell you to go fuck yourself.”

I shiver when he flicks his tongue ring against my pulse point. “I think it would be more fun to fuck you.”

“As if I’d let you.”

My pulse skyrockets when his knuckles brush the bare strip of skin above the waistband of my jeans. “We both know you would.”

“You’re wrong.”

His nostrils flare on an indrawn breath. “Fine. Then tell me to stop. Tell me to stop touching you and go inside.”

I can’t.

“That’s what I thought.” I gasp when he traces the zipper of my jeans with his thumb. “I wonder what I’d find if I tugged these down and slipped my hand inside.”

Blood whooshes in my ears when his teeth graze the hollow of my neck. “I bet you’d be nice and wet for me.” He sucks the sensitive skin into his mouth. “I bet you’d beg for my cock, too.”

“I wouldn’t beg you for shit,” I say, although it sounds unconvincing even to my own ears.

He clamps down on my flesh, sucking and biting so hard it hurts. “Who says you’d have to?” His palm slithers up my abdomen. “Maybe I’ll just give

it to you.” He hitches my leg around his waist, pressing his erection into me. “Pull those jeans down and fuck you senseless right here. Get it over with so we can both move on.”

I swear I stop breathing. “Is that what you want?”

“I don’t know.” He grinds against the spot that’s aching for him. “You tell me.”

My insides swoop when he lowers his head and his mouth brushes the lace material of my shirt. But no matter how much I want this—I’m not willing to accept him with a side of Britney.

I want all of Jace. Every fucked-up piece and broken part. All to myself.

“I won’t fuck you while you’re with her.”

He starts to speak, but my phone rings, cutting him off.

Growling, he shoves his hand inside my pocket and pulls it out.

Instantly, his face fills with disgust and he pushes off me.

His expression is so vicious, it’s like he’s carved from stone. “And I won’t fuck you...*ever*.” He chucks my phone at me. “But, hey. I bet Tommy would.”

Chapter 24

DYLAN

“Thanks for coming to get me.”

Tommy gives me a curt nod and shifts his car into drive.

Five minutes go by before he speaks.

“Jace’s house was the last place I expected you to hang out.”

We’re not dating so technically I don’t owe Tommy an explanation for my whereabouts, but if I was in his position, I’d be curious too.

“I wasn’t. I was at a party.” I wind a loose thread on my pants around my finger. “Long story short, the friend I went there with had to leave because she was late for curfew and my cousin, who I was planning on hitching a ride home with, got really drunk.” I pull the thread tighter. “Jace and Cole are his friends, so they insisted he spend the night at their house, but Cole was drinking so I drove Oakley’s car.”

Tommy makes a face. “Wouldn’t it have made more sense to drive your cousin’s car back home since you live together?”

I blow out an exasperated breath. “Jace didn’t want me to.”

His jaw muscles pulse as he heads down my block. “Old habits die hard, I suppose.”

“Don’t be like that. I didn’t have a choice.”

The look he gives me tells me exactly what he thinks about my excuse.

“If that’s what you really believe, then I guess you’re right.” He parks by the curb near the end of my driveway and cuts the engine. “But don’t expect me to be at your beck and call just so I can end up playing the part of the chump. *Again.*”

It’s aggravating that he views our relationship that way when I thought we were friends. Not to mention, he *told* me to call him if I ever needed anything.

“Wow, okay.” I undo my seatbelt. “Appreciate the ride. I won’t bother you *again.*”

“Dylan, wait.” He reaches for my arm. “I’m not trying to be a dick, but I’ve been completely honest with you from the start. I’m not interested in just being your friend or playing second fiddle to your screwed-up relationship with Jace. I want more than that.” His palm skates over my bare shoulder. “I *deserve* more than that...and so do you.”

I get what he’s saying, and on some level, he’s right. Neither of us deserve to be jerked around, but I’m not ready. Tommy wants way more than I’m capable of giving at this point.

“I’ve only been back a week. I need more time to sort my head out.”

“I know and I’m willing to give it to you.” His eyes spark. “But don’t play me for a fool.” His shoulders sag a little. “And don’t let Jace play *you* for one, either. It’s no secret he and Britney have been hot and heavy for years. Those two have been end game since eighth grade.”

My throat closes. “Right.”

His gaze drops to my lips. “Did he kiss you tonight?”

I’m not sure how to answer. Partly because it’s none of his business. And partly because we almost did a whole lot *more* than kiss.

I settle on the truth. “No.”

“Did you want him to?”

I avert my gaze. “What difference does it make?”

Closing the distance between us, he presses a soft kiss to my lips.

As far as kisses go, Tommy's isn't bad. It's swift, gentle, and safe.
It's everything I should want.

I start to pull away, but his hand cups my cheek, urging me to open my mouth. The moment I cave; he pushes his tongue inside.

An image of Jace zips through my head like a missile, and I have to remind myself to kiss Tommy back before drawing back.

"I won't hurt you like he will." His lips travel to the corner of my mouth, then my jaw. "I like you too much."

I give him a watery smile. "I know."

Inclining his head, he goes in for another, much longer kiss.

"Do you have any idea how long I've wanted to do this?" he whispers when we break apart.

"Since you were fourteen?"

He laughs. "Give or take." Desire darkens his expression and his hand slides down my stomach. "But the real thing is so much better than any of my jerkoff fantasies."

Yeah, he could have kept that little detail to himself.

I stop him before he goes too far. "Sorry, I'm—"

"Not ready," he finishes for me.

Sucking in a deep breath, I nod. "We're just...this is all happening a little—actually, a lot—too fast for me."

"It's cool." He holds up his hands. "I'll keep these to myself until you're ready."

Cheesy line or not, the fact that he respects me earns him some major brownie points.

His eyebrows pinch like he's mulling something over.

"What's wrong?"

"Go on a date with me."

Zero to sixty again. "My schedule's pretty hectic this week—"

"Then next week. After the Vikings whoop the Raiders. You can come

hang out with me and a few buddies from my team.”

“Okay,” I say, because I honestly can’t think of a single reason to turn him down.

He grins. “You’ll have fun. I promise.”

“Fun sounds perfect.”

Aside from hanging out with Sawyer earlier, I haven’t had any in a long time.

Sadness claws at my belly. *I don’t think Jace has either.*

Tommy tips my chin. “Okay, my turn. What’s wrong?”

The events of tonight sit heavy on my heart. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

Given Tommy’s lived in Royal Manor his whole life, there’s a chance he knows a lot more than I do about Liam’s death.

“How did Liam die? I tried messaging Jace and his family, but they never responded. And his obituary—if you can even call it that—only lists his birthday along with the month and year he passed.”

Even to this day, Liam’s last post on Instagram is a picture we took together at the school dance. I kept hoping the *RIP Liam* comment I saw two days later was a mistake.

I’ll never forget the ominous feeling in my heart when the option to comment on his pictures was disabled shortly before his account was memorialized.

Tommy shifts forward in his seat. “I don’t have all the details, but from what I understand, it was just one of those freak accidents.” There’s a slight grimace on his face. “To be honest, everything surrounding Liam’s death was pretty hush-hush. The funeral was very private—family only.” He squeezes his shoulder. “Given Liam died so close to the last week of junior high and Jace and I went to different high schools, I never really saw him around.” His features twist. “However, I heard from a few people that he has one hell of a short fuse. If you get caught talking about Liam, he’ll rearrange your face.”

Based on what I've witnessed recently, I don't doubt it.

I can't say I don't understand it though. Lord knows how bad I wanted to punch Britney in the throat every time she teased me about my mom.

He shrugs. "Can't really condemn the dude, I guess. Stone annoys the hell out of me, but if he died, I'm not sure I could move past that kind of loss. You know?"

A ball of pain lodges in my throat. "Yeah."

The fact that Jace and his family find the strength to get up every day is a feat in itself.

He drums his fingers on the steering wheel. "Look, don't tell anyone I told you this, but I once overheard from a teacher that it was a complication from the accident he was in when he was younger."

I assume he's referring to the car accident that killed his mom. "How so?"

"Well, apparently he also developed some kind of heart condition after." He reaches for a bottle of water in his cup holder. "Rumor has it his father—you know, the owner of *Trust Pharmaceuticals*—was having Liam test a drug they developed for it, but it didn't go so well, and he passed in his sleep."

My hands fly to my face. "No."

Jace already had a rocky relationship with his dad after his mom's death, but now? I wouldn't be surprised if they hardly ever spoke.

Tommy's eyes fill with sadness. "Yeah, it's really awful. I get why his family doesn't talk about it. Both for personal and legal reasons."

Who could blame them?

Mr. Covington tried to help his son and ended up killing him.

Jesus. I can't imagine the kind of guilt he carries...or the resentment his children must harbor for him.

"Hey," Tommy whispers after a few minutes. "I know you cared about Liam, but I don't think he'd want you feeling miserable." Leaning over, he

kisses my temple. “He’d want you to find a way to move on.”

Tommy’s not wrong. My mom aside, Liam was the kindest, most unselfish person I’d ever known.

It’s what makes his loss so profound.

I clear my throat and open the passenger door. “I’m gonna go inside.” With a wave, I step out of the car. “Drive home safe. Thanks again for the ride.”

I’m barely two steps up my driveway when I hear his car door open and shut.

The second I turn, he wraps his arms around me.

“You look like you needed one of these.”

I didn’t realize I did until this moment. “I miss him so much.”

I miss my friend.

Both of them.

“I get it.” He ruffles my hair and kisses the top of my head. “But you know how much it would hurt him to see you like this.”

I wipe the mist out of my eyes as we break apart. “I know.”

Tommy’s right. Liam definitely preferred smiles over tears.

My heart twists, protesting the thought my brain is forming, but deep down, I know it’s the right thing to do.

Jace was my best friend before he became my everything, and no matter how much it hurts to see him with someone else, I want the best for him. And while I don’t think Britney is it, she must make him happy...otherwise he wouldn’t be with her.

Perhaps it’s time I get off this merry-go-round with Jace and open myself up to the possibility that there may be someone else who can find their way into my heart.

If the few butterflies I have are any indication, I’m pretty sure that someone is standing in front of me.

“I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Tommy dips his head and I rise up on my toes to meet his lips.
Just like the first kiss we shared, this one is soft, gentle, and safe.
It's everything Jace Covington isn't.
And for the first time, I'm realizing that's exactly what I need.

Chapter 25

DYLAN

Past...

Strobe lights bounce off the walls of the gymnasium like laser beams as Liam and I finish what must be our twentieth dance in an hour.

I can tell he's getting a little worn out even though he won't say it.

I wave an arm when the song changes and a slow one cues up. "How about we get some juice?"

The relief that crosses over his face is adorable. "S-s-sure. If you w-w-want."

We walk over to the table full of refreshments and I pour him a cup before doing the same for myself. "I can't believe I'm about to admit this, but I'm actually having fun."

His face falls and I realize my error.

"Not with you, silly. I always have fun with you. I meant here at the dance. I'm happy we came."

Regardless of the stink-eye Britney aims my way every time she spots me or how hot Jace looks in his button-down shirt and dress slacks—or the

massive surge of jealousy I get whenever I spot them dancing—I don't regret coming here.

He smiles. "Me t-t-too."

I rest my head on Liam's shoulder. "Thanks for still being my friend despite your brother being a giant douche canoe."

He laughs. "You don't have t-t-to t-t-thank me. I c-c-care—"

"Well, if it isn't my two-favorite people," a familiar voice behind us says.

Liam juts his chin. "Hey, T-t-tommy. Having f-f-fun?"

I don't miss the way Tommy's eyes shine with mischief when he looks my way. "I am now." Leaning against the table, he surveys the dance floor. "It looks like your brother's having a good time."

I fight the urge to toss my fruit punch in his face.

Liam shuffles his feet. "Yeah."

Tommy nudges Liam with his elbow. "Britney—and her twins—are looking pretty hot tonight, huh?"

I don't miss the look he gives me as he pours himself a cup of juice.

Frowning, Liam moves closer to me. "Nah. Not r-r-really."

And that, right there, is just one reason Liam is so awesome. Unlike his stupid brother, he's loyal to the people he cares about.

Tommy's stare lingers on us for a minute too long before he smiles. "Oh, snap. I forgot to tell you."

Liam takes a sip of his drink. "T-t-tell me w-w-what?"

"Rumor has it Heather Gibson wants to dance with you."

His eyebrows lift in confusion. "S-s-she c-c-came here with C-c-cole."

After placing his drink down, Tommy points to Liam's twin, who sure enough is *not* dancing with his date. "Cole's been hanging out with Hayley for the last ten minutes." He gestures to a brunette who's sniffing by the bleachers. "Needless to say, Heather doesn't look happy about it."

That's because two out of three Covington brothers are jackasses.

Liam's frown deepens. "S-s-so why d-d-don't you danc-c-ce with her?"

Tommy winces. "Can I tell you a secret?"

I grind my molars. I know Tommy well enough to sense when he's up to no good.

He looks around the gymnasium, like whatever he's about to say is groundbreaking information. "You see, I'm into Heather...but you know how I am. Always screwing everything up and saying the wrong things." He swipes his drink off the table and takes a lengthy sip. "I was hoping maybe you could do me a solid and dance with her for a bit." Smiling slyly, he motions to himself. "Put in a good word for your boy."

Liam looks at me. "B-b-but w-w-what about Dylan?"

Tommy rolls his eyes. "Don't worry, I'll keep your little date occupied."

Like hell, he will.

Liam's eyes dart between me and a visibly hurt Heather across the gym, and I can sense his internal struggle.

Liam's too kind for his own good. The thought of a girl crying on the sidelines because his twin brother is a jerk doesn't sit well with him.

Heck, it's the reason he's here with *me* tonight instead of someone he's actually interested in.

"You should go," I tell Liam. "She's obviously upset, and if anyone can cheer her up, it's you."

"Are you s-s-sure?"

"Positive. Don't sweat it."

He blows out a breath. "Ok-k-kay. I'll be bac-c-ck s-s-soon."

Leaning down, I kiss his cheek and whisper, "Don't ever change, Liam Covington. The world needs more awesome people like you."

He blushes. "T-t-than—"

"Come on, man," Tommy interjects. "Ronnie Higgins looks like he's about to ask her to dance and if he does, I'm toast."

"Don't w-w-worry. I'm on it-t-t."

“You’re an asshole,” I tell Tommy after Liam leaves.

He places his hand over his heart, feigning offense. “And here I thought I was doing something nice for that poor girl.”

I motion to Liam, who’s rummaging through his pockets for a tissue to hand Heather. “Liam’s the one doing something nice. You’re just manipulating him.”

He shifts his stance so we’re standing next to each other. “What makes you say that?”

“You don’t like Heather Gibson.”

He waggles his eyebrows. “I might.” His voice drops to a whisper. “Would that make you jealous?”

“Being jealous would imply I like you.” I muster my best dirty look. “I don’t.”

His breath whistles between his teeth. “Damn, I forgot. My last name isn’t Covington.”

“Don’t be like that.”

“Like what?”

“The reason I don’t like you has nothing to do with Jace. I don’t like you because you’re mean.”

“Not to you.” His gaze zeros in on Liam, who’s now dancing with Heather. “Or him. Not since you told me to stop.”

He’s unbelievable. “That’s not how it works. I appreciate you being nice to Liam, but you shouldn’t do it because you like me. You should do it because you like *him*.”

He winks. “Sorry, but he’s not really my type.”

I roll my eyes and he playfully knocks his shoulder against mine. “Relax. For once, my intentions are good. Liam’s my boy, so I’m going out of my way to play matchmaker and set him up with Heather.”

He obviously hasn’t thought this through. “How do you expect that to happen when you sent Liam over there to put in a good word for *you*?”

His arms open wide. “All part of the plan. No matter what Liam says about me, Heather will be too focused on the guy who actually cared enough to see if she was okay.” He grins. “No girl can resist a white knight. Ten bucks says they name their first kid after me.”

I can’t help but laugh. No matter how frustrating he can be, Tommy has a certain charm that sucks you in.

“You’re insane.” I give him a sincere smile. “It’s sweet of you to do that for Liam. I hope this little diabolical plan of yours works out.”

He deserves something good.

Something passes in his gaze. “Dance with me.”

“No.”

His voice lowers. “You know you want to.”

“Then why would I turn you down?”

He leans in so close his breath tickles my ear. “Because you still haven’t figured out your prince charming has already found his Cinderella.”

My heart rises in my throat when he tilts his head and I follow his line of sight.

Jace is slow-dancing with Britney. His hands are on her waist and her head is on his shoulder. They’re so beautiful and *perfect* together, they should be on the cover of a magazine.

“You and I are a lot alike, you know.”

A scoff pushes through my lips. “How so?”

“We don’t have everything handed to us on a gold platter like your prince does. We have to fight like hell for everything we want.”

It’s clear he has no idea who Jace really is. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He shoots me an incredulous glare. “What makes you so—”

“Because he’s my best friend,” I snap. “I know *everything* about him. Like how much it sucks that his mom died and how her death forced him to grow up way before he was ready to. Or how he would literally do *anything*

for his siblings because they're the most important people in the world to him. Jace isn't some spoiled rich kid with an attitude problem. He's the guy who makes dinner, helps Bianca and Cole with their homework, goes with Liam to his speech therapy appointments so he's not alone, and somehow still finds time to hang out with me and listen to my—"

He snorts. "Sounds like *he's* Cinderella."

Revulsion, anger, contempt—it all surges through me like a tsunami. "You're pathetic, Tommy." It's not enough, I want to hit him where it really hurts, because right now, *I'm* hurting. "A pathetic and jealous loser. It's why you bully everyone all the time." I get close to his face. "No matter how much Jace likes Britney—even if he marries her and they have a million babies—I'd *still* never be with someone as insecure and pitiful as you are."

With that, I storm out of the gymnasium.

I'm passing the lockers when I hear footsteps behind me.

"Dylan, wait," Tommy calls out.

Rounding the corner, I continue down the empty, semi-lit hallway. I'll apologize for blowing up later, I just need some air so I can get a grip.

"I just want to be alone."

He clamps a hand on my arm. "I'm sorry."

He speeds up so he's ahead of me. The genuine remorse on his face is enough to make me speechless.

"You were right," he whispers. "I am jealous."

I swallow, unsure how to respond.

"My dad left for good after my little brother was born, and even though my mom works two jobs, things are still really tight." He rakes a hand over his scalp. "I don't have it easy like half the kids who go here do. And seeing someone like Jace, who walks around like he owns the world, and acts like everyone should bow at his feet just for breathing the same air as him." His teeth clench. "It pisses me off."

Tommy's got it all wrong. "Jace isn't lik—"

“Yes, he *is*. You might not want to believe it, but he’s not a good guy.”
He flicks a hand in my direction. “Look what he did to you.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to argue, but I can’t. Jace didn’t just pull the rug out from under my feet, he strangled me with it.

“I’m sorry I upset you back there. I just wanted you to understand.”

“Understand what?”

“I like you, Dylan. A lot,” he confesses as he takes a step closer. “And I’m pretty sure you like me too. Even if you won’t admit it.”

“I—” Words jam in my throat. I should deny it and tell him no...but a small part of me knows he’s right.

It’s not all-consuming or intense like what I feel for Jace, but it’s a flicker of...something.

As much as I wish I could force myself to like Tommy because he’s obviously the better choice for me...I can’t.

It would be like running after experiencing what it’s like to fly.

It will *never* be enough. Not when my heart knows what the real thing feels like.

Tommy’s an *almost*.

But Jace is my absolute.

Tommy’s eyebrows pinch in concern. “What’s wrong?”

I can’t answer him. If I do, I’ll break his heart.

I’m not the kind of person who could do a cruel thing like that.

I’m not my best friend.

He takes another step. “If you’re scared I might hurt you, don’t be.” His hands frame my face. “I’m not Jace—”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

I jump at the sound of Jace’s voice.

Tommy’s eyes flash with anger. “Do you mind? We’re in the middle of something.”

I can practically feel the rage swirling around inside Jace as he

approaches us. “Yeah, I do mind.” In one fell swoop, he snatches Tommy’s collar and yanks him back. “You’re wasting your time. Dylan isn’t interested.”

Tommy snorts. “How would you know? You’ve been too obsessed with Britney and her tits—”

Tommy doesn’t get to finish that sentence because Jace shoves him. Hard. “Shut your mouth or I’ll make you eat the floor.”

My stomach rolls. “Stop it, Jace.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ve been wanting to beat his ass for a while now.” Tommy takes off his jacket. “Let’s do this, Covington.”

Jace removes his tie and cracks his neck. “Ready when you are, dirtbag.”

Exasperated, I look up at the ceiling. “You both need to calm down—”

I scream when Tommy’s fist goes sailing into Jace’s cheek and he stumbles back.

“What the hell, Tommy?”

His eyes narrow. “Rule number one when you’re in a fight—pay attention to your opponent. Not *his* girl.”

Jace bares his teeth. “She’s not *your* girl.”

“She’s not yours either.” An evil gleam lights Tommy’s face. “You’re too much of a p-p-pussy.”

Seething, Jace charges for him. However, Tommy moves at the last minute, causing Jace to slam face first into the lockers.

“Son of a bitch,” he roars.

Cackling, Tommy bounces on the balls of his feet. “Wow, for someone who runs their mouth the way you do, you sure fight like a sissy.”

My heart constricts when I see the blood oozing from Jace’s now swollen nose.

I need to put an end to this before they wind up killing each other. Since I already know how stubborn Jace is, my best option is Tommy.

“Tommy, you need to relax.”

It's like he doesn't even hear me.

"Come on prissy boy." He points to his jaw. "Take your best shot."

Drastic times call for drastic measures. Jace is already hurt and there's no way in hell I'm going to let Tommy make it worse.

Stepping between them, I grab Tommy's face. "Did you mean what you said before?"

He nods. "Yeah, why?"

"Stop fighting and go back inside."

"Are you kidding—"

"Please, Tommy." I hold his gaze. "I know you're a good guy. You don't have to fight Jace to prove it. Take the high road for once...for *me*."

If Tommy's really changed, he will.

"I—fine." His eyes search my face. "You coming with me?"

"Yeah. I'll meet you after I talk to Jace."

I can tell he wants to argue, but to my surprise, he relents. "Okay." He leans at Jace. "Keep your grubby paws off *my* girl, pansy."

I place my hand on Jace's chest when he lunges for him.

"Tommy, go," I growl like a mother protecting her baby cub.

Hell, right now I kind of feel like one.

My stomach is in knots for the several agonizing moments it takes Tommy to walk down the hallway and turn the corner.

"He's gone." I spin around. "Are you okay?"

Jace looks like someone kicked his puppy...and then butchered it right in front of him.

"Tommy DaSilva?" For a second, I think he's going to be sick. "You like *him*?" He kicks a locker. "Jesus, it's like I don't even know you."

Pot meet kettle. "I can say the same about you." Placing my hands on my hips, I stare him down. "You came here with Britney Caldwell, remember?"

He averts his gaze. "I didn't want—" Shaking his head, he wags a finger in my face. "It doesn't matter what my reasons were. You have a lot of balls

coming here with Liam and then *ditching* him to make out with Tommy. What the hell is wrong with you?”

I fight the urge to smack some sense into him. “Did hanging out with Britney rot your brain cells? Liam is in there dancing with Heather Gibson.”

He blinks. “That’s Cole’s date.” Before I can explain, he circles his ear with his finger. “I think your little tonsil hockey session with Tommy has you all screwed up. *Liam* is the twin you came here with.”

I roll my eyes. “I know that, you jackass. Cole ditched Heather in the middle of the dance to hang out with Hayley. She was crying, so Liam went over to check on her and now they’re dancing.”

His nostrils flare. “So you decided to come out here and make out with your new *boyfriend*.”

He spits the last word out like it’s rancid.

For someone so intelligent, he can be awfully stupid sometimes.

I start ticking things off with my fingers. “Okay, one—Tommy’s not my boyfriend. Two—we weren’t making out. But even if we were, Liam and I are friends, so I really don’t think he’d care. And three—stop acting like I did something wrong when *you’re* the one who came here with *my* enemy.” Anger spikes through me and I push him. “You are literally the *worst* best friend ever.”

“Yeah? Well, you’re not much better.”

He’s downright certifiable. “Screw you. I’m a great friend. I haven’t done a damn thing wro—”

“You ruined *everything*,” he shouts so loud I swear the lockers rattle. “We were fine, but then you had to act like some kind of lovesick puppy and dare me to kiss you.”

It would hurt less if he punched me.

Because he’s right.

We would still be friends and my heart would still be intact if I hadn’t fallen in love with him.

I ruined everything. Just like he said.

“Right, well, don’t worry. It won’t happen again.” Curling my arms around myself, I head down the hallway. “You should get your nose checked out. It looks pretty bad.”

“Dylan,” he growls.

Closing my eyes, I force myself to breathe. “Go back to Britney.”

I hate the way my voice cracks.

My mom used to tell me it was okay to cry if someone hurt me, but after the pain subsided, I needed to get up off the floor and dust myself off... because I didn’t belong there.

However, I don’t know how to get back up when Jace keeps kicking me down.

Every time I see him, he steals another piece of me.

Pretty soon there won’t be anything left.

“Dylan, stop.” His voice is rough, unsteady. Almost like he’s unraveling too. “Please.”

“Go back to Britney,” I repeat with conviction I don’t feel.

“I can’t.” He sounds out of breath, like he just got done running a marathon. “I *can*’t.”

That does it. I turn around. “Why?” I laugh, but there’s not a drop of humor. “Let me guess—”

“She’s not you.” The force of his stare has my heart pounding and my knees going weak. “She doesn’t make me feel even half the things I feel for you. I don’t think anyone ever will.” He looks utterly defeated. “God, I’m so screwed.”

My heart stops cold. “Why?”

A combination of turmoil and determination lines his face as he starts walking toward me. “Because what I’m about to do will change everything.”

Nerves pluck at my belly the closer he gets. I can’t tell if this is about to be the greatest moment of my life...or the worst.

I find my answer when he grabs my face and his mouth captures mine.

Chapter 26

JACE

I knew it was a bad idea the second I jumped in my car.

But like a moth to a motherfucking flame, here I am.

Watching in disgust as he wraps his arms around Dylan and hugs her like she's the most precious thing in the world.

Part of me wants her to resist his advances. Kick him in the nuts and run inside.

But the other part—the one that's winning—wants to walk over there, douse them in gasoline, and light a match.

Make them suffer for their sins.

Relief fills me as they break apart. However, it's short-lived when he lowers his head and leans in.

Don't kiss him.

For the briefest of seconds, her body goes rigid and I think she's going to turn away...but then she rises on her tiptoes.

The hand around my steering wheel flexes as their lips meet.

He kisses her like she's made of glass, liable to shatter at any moment.

It proves how little he knows about her.

Dylan Taylor is stronger than steel and tougher than leather.

There's no way she's enjoying Tommy handling her like a little porcelain

doll.

I smirk when I see her hand flinch ever so slightly, like she wants to push him away, but she's forcing herself to withstand it a little longer.

Eat it up, baby.

Because it will be a cold day in hell before I touch you again.

Reaching over my dashboard, I tap a button on the touchscreen.

Britney picks up on the second ring. "Hey."

"You busy?"

"No, why?"

"Meet me outside your house in ten."

Chapter 27

DYLAN

“Do you need a ride home?” There’s no hiding the slight edge in Oakley’s voice.

“Nope.” I take my blazer out of my locker. October in Royal Manor means the weather is gorgeous during the day and chilly at night. “But thanks for asking.”

The look he gives me is full of contempt. “I don’t like this, Dylan. I don’t like this one bit.”

Oak’s made his aversion to me seeing Tommy well-known. Whenever I ask him what exactly he has against Tommy personally when he’s never even spoken to him, he goes on a tangent about how Jace is like a brother and if Jace hates Tommy’s guts, then he does too.

It’s so juvenile. Almost as juvenile as the fact that Jace hasn’t spoken to me in a month.

Actually, that’s not quite right. Him not speaking to me is something I can deal with.

The asshole *literally* doesn’t acknowledge my existence.

“Yo, Oak,” Cole calls out as he and Jace sidle up to my locker. “Let me holler at you real quick.”

Speak of the devil and he’ll appear.

Oakley leans against my locker, closing it. “What’s good, man?”

I poke him in the shoulder. “Do you mind? I still have to get my Chemistry book.”

He starts to move, but then Cole says, “How do you feel about strippers?”

Oakley stays rooted to the spot, grinning like a fool. “I feel awesome about strippers.”

I nudge him again. “Can you mo—”

“Great,” Cole interjects. “I think we should hire some for Jace’s birthday party next week.”

“Hell motherfucking yes,” Oakley exclaims. “That’s the best idea you’ve ever had.”

I throw my hands up. It’s clear Oakley’s attention is elsewhere, but I refuse to leave without my textbook.

“I know.” Cole slaps Jace’s arm. “Now please tell this asshole that, because he said he doesn’t want them.”

Oakley looks insulted. “Dude, why?” Reaching over, he places his palm on Jace’s forehead. “You feeling all right?”

Jace swats his hand away. “I’m fine. I just don’t see why we need to hire strippers for my birthday.”

“Because you’re turning eighteen,” Cole says. “You’re officially legal.” He drapes his arm over Jace’s shoulder. “The least I can do for my big brother is buy him a few dozen exotic dancers.”

“And a big booty hoe jumping out of a cake,” Oakley adds.

“My man.” Cole gives him a pound. “I like the way you think.”

Seriously? “They’re human beings, jackasses. Not hoes.”

Cole gives me the stink eye. “Take that feminist bullshit elsewhere, party pooper. This is between me and my boys.”

“Hate to point out the obvious, but one of your *boys* doesn’t seem to be into the idea. Seeing as it’s his birthday, you probably shouldn’t force him to

do something he doesn't want to."

Too far, Dylan. Too far.

"On second thought, strippers sound perfect." Jace smiles at his brother. "The more the merrier."

Dickhead.

"Hey," Sawyer greets me as she joins our little circle. "I found my old notes for chemistry if you still want them."

"Yes." I glare at Oakley. "At this point, they're the only thing I'll have to study with tonight since someone refuses to move."

"Chill." Oakley slides out of the way. "I got side-tracked."

"Yo, Sawyer," Cole says as I open my locker and shove my chemistry book into my bag. "I was wondering if your church would be willing to contribute to a good cause next week."

Sawyer raises an eyebrow. "Uh, according to my mom, our funds are pretty tapped out, but I'll see what I can do." She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "What do you need?"

"Donation baskets." He looks at Jace and Oakley. "I figure we can have them going around the room while the girls are stripping and giving Jace lap dances."

"Word," Oak says. "Way classier than throwing cash at them."

Sawyer blinks. "Let me get this straight. You want my church to loan you our donation baskets for strippers?" She grimaces. "What the hell is the matter with you? Hard pass."

"Fine, but just so you know, there are other ways to donate." Cole shoots her a lewd grin. "Like giving me a private show, for example."

She wrinkles her nose. "In your dreams, pig."

He bites his lip. "Nah, sweetness. In *my* dreams, you'd be doing a whole lot more than stripping."

Sawyer turns redder than a tomato.

Linking my arm through one of hers, I save her from the enemy. "Come

on, let's leave the dirty boys to their enthralling conversation."

She hands me a notebook as we head for the exit. "They're color-coded and everything."

"Perfect. You're the best." I transfer the notebook to my bag. "Tommy and I are grabbing a quick bite to eat and going to the movies, but I'm planning on doing a *major* cram session after."

Her steps ease up a bit. "Dinner and a movie, huh? Sounds like things are getting serious between you two."

I'm not sure how to answer that. For the most part, Tommy's been pretty understanding about me not wanting to make things official, but lately I'm beginning to feel like the slack he's been cutting me is wearing thin.

"Not really. We're still having fun. He knows I'm not ready for a relationship yet. He's free to see other people and so am I."

Sawyer looks unconvinced. "Does *he* know that?" I follow her gaze to the orange Subaru parked by the curb. "He's been here to pick you up every day this week."

Why do I feel like my friend's giving me the third degree? "Didn't know you were keeping count." I hike my backpack up my shoulder. "Thanks for the notes. I'll have them back to you tomorrow."

I start to walk away, but she reaches for my elbow. "Dylan, wait." She guides me to an empty corner under the overhang. "I have to tell you something, and I hope you don't hate me."

This can't be good. "Okay."

"I wanted to tell you sooner, but every time I tried, you told me it wasn't serious between you two, so I felt like an idiot for bringing it up. Then I figured Tommy would mention it at some point, but he obviously never did and I—"

"Sawyer," I cut in when she runs out of air. "Take a breath. Whatever it is, I promise I won't hate you."

She wrings her hands. "Tommy and I hooked up once—no, twice

technically. It happened over six months ago, but I swear it didn't mean anything."

"You don't need to explain yourself."

"Yes, I do. That's what a good friend does." A furrow appears in her forehead. "I don't want to be sitting at your wedding seven years from now still feeling guilty for never telling you I hooked up with your husband. I can't live like that."

Boy, she's really jumping the gun. "Understood." I debate asking her the question on the tip of my tongue because it's really none of my business. "I mean, it's not like you guys had sex. Right?"

It's fine if they did, but it might make our girl convos kind of awkward when I start having sex with him. *Eventually.*

She makes a face. "Heck no. I told you, my V-card is firmly in place until Nick Jonas realizes we're soulmates." She draws in a heavy breath. "To be honest, I don't even know why I did it. I was lonely, he was there...the rest is history."

Yup. Been there, done that. "I get it. Shit happens."

"You're really not freaked out about this?" She eyes me skeptically. "Are you sure this isn't one of those passive-aggressive episodes where you act like everything's cool today, but in two weeks you'll randomly slash my tires? Because if that's the case, we should just get this shit over with now while *Goodyear* is still running a sale."

She's adorable when she's incredulous. "Sawyer, my cousin stuck his tongue down my throat last month and we're totally fine." I shrug. "I have a pretty high tolerance for this sort of stuff. It's really nothing to stress over. I appreciate you telling me, but I don't think any less of you. We're still friends."

She looks relieved. "Thank you for not hating me." Her expression turns serious. "I promise I would never, *ever* knowingly hook up with him, or anyone else you were into."

Placing my purse on the ground, I put my blazer on. “You can if you want. He’s not taken.”

“The boy may not be taken, but he’s definitely smitten.” She gives me a hug. “Text me later.”

After she leaves, I make my way over to Tommy’s car.

“Hey.” He smacks a quick kiss on my lips when I get in. “How was your day?”

“Good. Yours?”

“Not bad. Coach has been riding us harder than usual, but I can’t complain.” He takes a large swig from his water bottle. “What were you and your friend talking about? The conversation looked pretty intense.”

“Not really. She just wanted me to know you guys hooked up a while ago.” I fasten my seatbelt. “I told her it was no big deal.”

He starts choking on his water. “That’s weird. I have no recollection of that ever happening at all.” He puffs out his cheeks. “Man, I must have been *really* drunk.”

Something about his tone rubs me the wrong way. “That’s too bad. Not only is she awesome, she has the best pair of tits I’ve ever seen.”

His mouth opens and closes like a fish. “I have no idea what to say to that.”

“Silence is probably your best bet.”

Shifting his car into drive, he nods. “Right.”

I peer out the window as he steps on the gas.

My stomach knots when I see Jace and Britney walking out together.

Finding out Tommy and my friend hooked up doesn’t cause me a lick of jealousy or uneasiness.

But seeing Jace walking next to *her* causes me so much strife, my molars are in danger of turning to dust.

Chapter 28

DYLAN

Past...

“*W*ould you stop it,” Jace growls. “Every time I go to kiss you, you try to stick that *thing* up my nose.”

“The sooner you let me do it, the sooner I’ll stop.”

Scowling, he looks around the band room closet. “Fine. But only if I get to kiss you after.”

“That depends,” I say coyly.

“On?”

I shove the tampon up his nostril. “If you and Britney are over for good.”

I need to hear him say the words.

“Over? We never even started.” His hand finds my waist. “How could we when the only girl I want is you?”

It’s all I can do not to pinch myself to make sure this is actually happening. “Really?”

His lips curl in a slow smile. “You have no idea, do you?”

“About what?”

The intensity of his stare makes my breath catch. “How deep my feelings for you run.”

No, but if what he feels for me is even a fraction of what I feel for him, I fear we’ll both spontaneously combust.

“How deep are we talking? Puddles? Ponds? Lakes?”

Tell me oceans, dammit.

His hands frame my face. “The Mariana Trench isn’t deep enough.”

My heart flutters like the wings of a hummingbird.

Jace Covington just told me he loves me...with a tampon in his nostril.

This is officially the happiest moment of my life.

“Can I kiss you now?” he huffs. “Trust me, I’m much better at that than this romantic shit.”

I start to laugh...until he slants his mouth over mine.

Then I’m soaring, flying...

“I can’t do this,” he grunts.

My lungs seize. *No, no. no.* I knew it was too good to be true.

I’m so stupid.

“Whoa.” Concern flashes in his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Lord help me, I’m going to kill him. “Please tell me you’re not that dumb. You just said you can’t—”

“Kiss you with a tampon stuck up my nose.” He yanks on the string until it comes out. “Not only is it a mood killer, it’s screwing up my incredible kissing abilities.”

I look down. “Oh.”

Evidently, *I’m* that dumb. And insecure.

Seeing him with Britney seriously screwed me up.

As if sensing my internal distress, he wraps his arms around me, drawing me into a bear hug. “I’m sorry.”

I breathe in his cool, clean scent. “Why Britney? Out of all the girls you

could have chosen to go to the dance with. *Why her?*”

“Because I wanted to hurt you and push you away. I hate that it worked so well.” He tips my chin. “But it won’t happen again. Promise.”

He looks so earnest; warmth floods my chest.

But just as quickly, a spark of jealousy blooms. “Did you kiss her?”

“No.”

I peer into his dark orbs. “Have sex with her?”

He looks at me like I’ve sprouted another head. “Seriously?”

Considering some of our classmates have started going at it like rabbits, it’s not entirely out of the question.

“If I didn’t want to kiss her, what the hell makes you think I’d screw her?”

He has a point.

Exhaling, I look up at the ceiling. “I don’t know. I’m just...”

Jealous. Bitter. Anxious. All of the above.

“I get it.” A muscle in his jaw flexes. “I wanted to rip every limb off Tommy’s body and bash his head in with them when I saw you two in the hallway before.”

“Wow, that’s quite the visual.”

“What can I say? It sucked.” He gives me a lopsided grin. “Now kiss me and make it better.”

I rise up on my tiptoes. “For what it’s worth, you don’t have to worry about Tommy. I’m all yo—”

Warm lips crash into mine before I can finish my sentence.

It doesn’t take long for the kiss to go from sweet and gentle, to intense and all-consuming.

Slow shivers dance over my skin when he presses me against the wall and flicks his tongue against mine.

“It’s not fair how good you are at this.”

His lips curve. “I excel at things I love doing.” Tenderly, he nips my

bottom lip. “Kissing you is my new favorite thing.”

“Mine too.”

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I tease him right back.

“Jesus, Dylan,” he whispers before he cups my nape and kisses me deeper.

I claw at his shoulders as he explores my mouth. Every sense of mine is heightened, and my hormones are spinning out of control.

I can’t get enough of this. I want to taste, touch, and feel every part of him.

“We should have done this sooner,” he murmurs.

“Yeah—” My ears perk up when I hear a faint click. “Did you hear that?”

“What?”

I crane my neck, but it’s impossible to see around the large filing cabinet we’re next to. “I thought I heard the door open.”

He kisses down my jaw. “I’m pretty sure I locked it.”

“Oh my God.”

The tremble that runs through me when Jace’s lips brush my neck is almost violent.

He does it again, only this time he gently suckles my skin.

I shiver and my legs turn to putty. “You’re killing me.”

Jace laughs, sending another quake down my spine.

“It feels so good.” I dig my nails into the back of his head. “I want more.”

His fingers pause on the first button of my dress. “Is this okay?”

When I nod, he kisses the spot and groans. “You have the softest skin.”

I’m about to tell him to unbutton the next one, but my phone rings.

“Don’t answer it,” Jace mutters as he kisses my collarbone. “We still have an hour before the dance ends.”

Normally I wouldn’t, but it’s my dad’s ringtone. Given he’s so

preoccupied with Savannah, he never calls me unless it's something important.

"It's my dad."

Jace bolts upright. "Yeah, you should probably get that."

I fight the urge to laugh as I fish my phone out of my purse. Nothing ruins a make-out session like the father of a teenage girl calling.

"Hey, Dad," I answer. "What's up?"

"Grab your things, tater tot," he says, sounding flustered. "I'm parked out front."

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask if he's been drinking because he hasn't called me *tater tot* in years.

"I appreciate you coming to get me, but the dance doesn't end for another hour. Mr. Covington said he'd pick us up since I was planning on hanging out with Jace for a little while afterward."

I'm not sure what to make of the expression on Jace's face, but I don't have time to dwell on it, because my dad's next statement has my mind reeling.

"Sorry, honey. Tell Jace there's been a change of plans. I need you to get your things and meet me outside."

My stomach drops. "Is everything okay?"

Jace moves closer to me.

My dad chuckles. "Better than okay, tater tot. I have fantastic news. I don't want to explain everything over the phone though, so meet me outside."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "I'll be there in a minute, just let me say bye to Jace."

"Okay but make it snappy."

Uh. *That's weird.* "Why?"

"Christ, Dylan. Stop with the ninety-nine questions. I promise I'll explain everything when I see you."

“All right, fine.”

“Everything okay?” Jace asks after I hang up.

“According to my dad, everything is better than okay. Apparently, he has some exciting news to tell me that couldn’t wait until after I got home.”

“That’s...”

“Strange? Yeah, I know.”

His shoulders rise in a shrug. “Maybe he won the lottery.”

I snort. “I’m sure Savannah will just love that.” I clutch my chest when the thought hits me. “What if she’s pregnant?”

Jace blanches. “I—shit. You think so?”

“What else could it be? I can’t think of anything that would warrant him being *this* excited.” Drawing in a shaky breath, I pace back and forth. “He mentioned applying for a promotion at his job, but that’s something that could have waited ‘til later.” I swallow the lump forming in my throat. “My dad’s always wanted a big family. When my mom died and my sister—” Pausing, I look at Jace. “If he expects me to be happy about the spawn of Savannah, he’s out of his mind.”

“I don’t blame you.” Reaching for me, he pulls me into his arms. “But it won’t be all hers. Considering you have half your dad’s genes too, there’s a fifty percent chance this kid will turn out awesome, just like their big sister.”

No one has the ability to talk me off the ledge like he does.

“You’re right.” I rest my head against his chest. “I hate change.”

“Sometimes change is good.” He kisses the top of my head. “I know you’re worried, but having siblings isn’t that bad. Sure, they get on your nerves, but the positives outweigh the negatives. It’s like having a best friend for life.” His expression borders on pain. “Someone who always has your back.”

I tilt his face. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I just have to talk...” He shakes his head. “Everything’s fine.” He juts his chin toward the door. “You should go before your dad gets mad.”

After fastening the button on my dress, I give him a quick kiss. “If I can feign enough excitement about the baby, I should be at your house by ninety-three the latest. If not, keep your window open.”

Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he blows out a breath. “Sounds like a plan.”

Something’s definitely going on with him. “Are you—”

My dad’s ringtone cuts me off again.

Jesus. He’s never been this annoying before.

“I’m coming out now,” I yell before I hang up and focus on Jace. “I’ll text you in a little while.” I stop short when I realize. “Tell your brother I’m sorry I left early.”

“Yeah.” He squeezes the back of his neck. “I’ll tell him.”

I blow him a kiss and hustle out the door.



“*S*o, what’s the big news?” I ask as I climb into the back seat of my dad’s car.

Of course, Savannah’s sitting in the passenger seat, like the succubus she is.

My dad smiles from ear to ear as he shifts the car into drive. “Remember how I told you I was gunning for a promotion at work?”

I nod as I fasten my seatbelt. “Yeah, did you get it?”

He shakes his head. “No, they gave it to Jim.” Reaching over, he kisses Savannah’s hand. “But Savannah here—incredible goddess she is—found out that her friend Brandi’s husband, who happens to be the CEO of Flash Corp, had to fire his CFO due to some financial discrepancies and needed a replacement ASAP.”

Savannah smirks as she looks over her seat. “Guess who they hired to fill the position?”

Gee, I have no idea.

It's all I can do not to tug on her cheap hair extensions, but I don't want to ruin my dad's good mood. "Congrats. That's awesome."

"Told you tator tot would be happy." Before I can ask why he thought I wouldn't, he adds, "I know I sprung this on you last minute, but Savannah has everything covered. She was able to find a full-service moving company on short notice, and they're coming to pack up the house tomorrow." He makes a face. "We'll be staying at a hotel for the time being, but you and Savannah can start house hunting tomorrow while I'm at the office getting settled."

Record. Freaking. Skip.

"Wait...what? Why are we moving? What's wrong with the house we live in now?"

The home I grew up in.

The home my mother loved.

"Come on, Dylan. I thought you were smart," Savannah chirps as she flicks down the visor and peers into the mirror. I'm surprised it shows her reflection and not some demon witch. "Flash Corp is in Orange County."

"Orange County?" If it wasn't the first week of June, I'd think this was a sick April Fool's joke. "That's over five hours away."

Turning the steering wheel, he nods. "I know it will take some adjusting, kiddo, but opportunities like this are rare and you have to strike while the iron is hot. Flash Corp is the biggest up-and-coming software company since Microsoft. My starting salary is *triple* what I was making at Mayer Inc."

My heart is pounding so fast I'm certain this is what having a heart attack must feel like. "But what about—"

"School will be over in less than a week." He waves a hand. "I'll call them on Monday, but with your grades, I'm sure everything will be fine."

Jace. What. About. Jace?

"Jace." My voice cracks. "I have to—"

“Stop being so dramatic,” Savannah whines. “You and your little buddy can still keep in touch. It’s why God created Instagram and Facetime.”

My dad chuckles like it’s the funniest thing he’s ever heard.

Anger rolls through me and I clench my hands into fists. “How can you just rip me out of my childhood home and away from all my friends without giving me a chance to say goodbye?”

Hot tears run down my face. How can the *best* night of my life turn into the worst?

Savannah clicks her tongue as she applies her lipstick. “Really, Dylan, can you try to be happy for your father? This is an amazing opportunity.” I don’t miss the daggers she glares at me as she kisses a tissue. “He’s done nothing but work his butt off so he could give you everything you ever wanted. It’s the *least* you can do.”

My dad beams.

He’s ruining my life and he’s freaking lighting up like a Christmas tree.

This is a nightmare.

“How the hell would you know, you stupid bitch? You’ve barely even known him a year.”

And in that short time, my father’s personality did a complete one-eighty...all because of her.

I know he misses my mom—I miss her too—but Savannah and moving isn’t the answer.

Royal Manor is all I know. My parents specifically chose to raise me here because my mom loved it.

Why is he destroying her memory?

“Watch your mouth,” my father barks.

“How dare you talk to me like that.” Savannah whirls around in her seat. “Whether you like it or not, I’m going to be your mother soon and I won’t tolerate having a spoiled brat who talks like a sailor for a daughter.”

My nails dig into my palms so hard I break the skin. *She’s crossed the*

line.

“You’ll *never* be my mother. You’re nothing but a gold-digging whore my dad screws because he’s lonely and misses her.”

She gasps and my father slams on the brakes so hard I hit the seat in front of me.

He pivots around. “That’s *enough*, Dylan.”

“I hate you.” I try to open the door, but it’s locked. “Let me out.”

I can run back and beg Mr. Covington to let me live with him. It’s not like my dad will care. If anything, not having me around will be less of a headache for him.

His forehead crinkles. “I’m sorry you didn’t get to say goodbye to your friends, but this is the opportunity of a lifetime. I thought I’d have more time to prepare, but they need me to start right away. I don’t have a choice.” He reaches for my hand but I pull away. “Tator tot—”

“I’m not your fucking tator tot.”

As of tonight, I’m not even your daughter anymore.

My tears are coming down so fast they soak the front of my dress.

“Would you stop acting like such a baby!” Savannah snaps. “I’ve never met someone so ungrateful in my life.” She looks at my father. “If she keeps this behavior up, we should start searching for boarding schools.”

He clasps Savannah’s knee. “Relax. She’s just...it’s a lot. Dylan’s not usually disobedient. She’s a good girl.”

He says it like I’m the freaking family pet.

Not to mention, how in the world would he know how I *usually* am? We haven’t had a conversation longer than three minutes since my mom died.

“Please, baby,” my father pleads. “I *need* this.” Despite my resistance, he reaches for my hand again. “We need this. It’s a fresh start for both of us.”

“I don’t want a fresh start.”

I want the home where my favorite memories with my mom are.

I want my best friend.

Chapter 29

DYLAN

“*Y*ou sure your little boyfriend doesn’t mind me stealing you away for the night?” Oakley questions as we head for the table full of booze in Christian’s living room.

“First of all, he’s not my boyfriend. Second, even if he did mind, it wouldn’t change anything. I’d still be here.”

Truth be told, Tommy and I had plans tonight, but when Oakley asked if I’d go with him to Jace’s birthday party and be his DD, I didn’t give it a second thought.

Not only because I care about my bonehead cousin and want him to be safe, but Tommy’s becoming a little too *clingy*.

I’m hoping some space will tone things down.

“I still don’t approve,” he murmurs with a shake of his head. “You can do so much better than that dickwad.”

Here we go again.

I decide to give him a taste of his own medicine. “Speaking of relationships. How are things with you and Hayley?”

He pours himself a cup of whiskey and downs half of it before he answers. “Fine.”

Uh-huh. Those two are so up and down they give me whiplash. One

second Oakley says he wants to work things out, and the next he's doing everything in his power to avoid her.

I glance around the table for something non-alcoholic, but all I find is Jace's Mountain Dew hidden behind some ice. Given it's his birthday—and I'm wearing my favorite *Jimmy Eat World* concert t-shirt—I won't jack his stash again.

“Is Sawyer coming?” he asks, changing the subject.

I wish. “Nope. She said she's not comfortable watching women resort to stripping for men to make money.”

I peer around the room. For all the fuss Cole made about wanting dozens of strippers, I don't see a single one.

Then again, we arrived on the later side, so it's possible they came and left already.

“I guess we missed them?”

Oakey shakes his head. “Nah. Cole wasn't able to hire them because he's not eighteen yet. Same for me.” He takes another sip of his drink. “We asked Jace to do it, but he refused. Something's going on with him lately. Dude's not acting right.”

That gets my attention. “What do you mean?”

He levels me with a look. “I'm thinking a certain blonde with a big mouth and one hell of a right hook has him all kinds of fucked up.”

“Well, if he would just...I don't know, *talk* to me, maybe we could work out our issues.”

As much as I try to convince myself that Jace ignoring me for the past month doesn't sting, it does. The other day I told Sawyer I actually preferred it when he was going out of his way to bully me.

She told me I was crazy. I'm starting to think she's right.

Oakley snorts. “Don't hold your breath. He's a stubborn motherfucker.”

Don't I know it. However, I'm pretty sure I also know why Jace isn't feeling festive, and it's not because of me.

“The reason he’s not acting like himself is because it’s his birthday.”

Oakley’s baffled expression tells me he doesn’t get it. “Why would that make him upset?”

“Because it’s another reminder that his mom and brother aren’t here.”

Kind of hard to celebrate being another year older without thinking about how much time has passed since you’ve last seen the people you love.

Given our birthdays are exactly two weeks apart, I feel Jace’s pain. I’m not looking forward to mine either.

“Shit. I didn’t even think of that.” He looks sheepish. “I probably should have though. Lord knows my mom’s ignored enough of mine over the years. It’s not the same thing you and Jace go through, but it still sucks.”

I don’t doubt it. The little I know about Oakley’s mom isn’t good. According to my aunt, she’s a drug addict who uses men—or anyone really—and Oakley and Wayne will be much better off once she kicks the bucket.

“I’m sorry, Oak.” I rest my head on his shoulder. “We should abolish birthdays.”

“Hell yeah,” he concurs. “And get rid of laws while we’re at it.”

I open my mouth to respond, but Hayley meanders over to us.

“We need to talk.”

Oakley looks at me. “I’ll leave you two to it.”

I tug him back when he starts walking away. “I’m pretty sure she means *you*.” I gesture to the kitchen. “I’m gonna see if I can track down a bottle of water.”

“Traitor,” Oakley hisses under his breath before I leave him with what I’m guessing is his soon to be ex-girlfriend.

In all honesty, I’m doing him a favor. The sooner they put an end to it, the better. Why keep holding on to someone you need to let go of?

I’m making my way to the kitchen when my phone vibrates.

Irritation crawls up my spine when I see Tommy’s name light up the screen. It’s the second time he’s called me since I told him I had to cancel.

And if I don't answer, he'll just *keep* calling.

"Hey." Cradling the phone between my ear and shoulder, I open the fridge. "What's up?"

"Just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Yup," I tell him as I rummage through various brands of beer on the shelf. "Nothing's changed since the last time we spoke."

A whole forty minutes ago.

"You said you had to be with family tonight, so I was wor—where are you? It sounds like a party."

"I told you, my cousin needed me to come with him so he could do this thing—"

"A party thing," he says tersely.

Lord. Does anybody drink water in this house?

"Yup. A party thing," I repeat, closing the fridge door.

"Interesting."

I walk over to the sink. Tap water it is. "What is?"

"I think it's a little messed up that I invite you to parties with my friends, but you never invite me to parties with yours."

He has a point. "You're right."

I locate a glass in the cabinet and fill it with tap water. I chug half a cup before I come clean. "I didn't invite you because I figured the space might do us some good. Plus, it's Jace's birthday party tonight—"

"Jace's birthday party," he bites out. "Yup. It all makes sense now."

I finish what's in my glass and refill it, trying to decide how to answer.

On one hand, I can understand his concern. According to Tommy, he *lost* me to Jace once, and he doesn't want it to happen again.

But on the other? I've made it perfectly clear there are no strings in our relationship for the time being. Jace or no Jace, I should be free to do what I want.

Like go to a party with my cousin without being made to feel like I did

something wrong.

“Look, I haven’t even seen Jace tonight if that’s what you’re worried about.” Bringing the cup to my lips, I take another sip of water. Evidently, confrontation makes me thirsty. “But I’m not your girlfriend, Tommy. We’re taking things slow and getting to know each other again, remember?”

“Dylan, I’m not five. I know what the deal is. I also know if the shoe was on the other foot and I canceled our date to go to a birthday party for some chick you didn’t get along with, you’d have every right to be upset.”

Well, when he puts it like *that*.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “You have a point.”

“I’m glad you finally realize it.” He clears his throat. “What do you say I swing by and pick—”

“I think we should cool it for a bit.”

I hate doing this to him, but I need to clear my head.

I’m not the kind of girl to lead someone on, and right now I’m not sure about my feelings for Tommy.

They exist, so I know I’m into him...but not nearly as much as he’s into me.

“Dylan, come on. I thought we were having fun?”

“We are. But I think you should do your thing and I’ll do mine. I’m not ready to be locked down and right now it feels like I am.”

There. I did it.

“You said you had feelings for me too,” he grits out.

“I do. I just need time to sort them out.”

“So what—a few days, a few weeks?”

“I’m not sure,” I answer honestly. “But I’ll let you know when I do.”

“Right.”

With that, he hangs up.

“Trouble in paradise?”

Turning my head, I find Cole watching me with a bemused expression.

“I plead the fifth. I already know anything I say can and will be used against me by you and your brother.”

That gets a laugh out of him. “Fair enough.”

Walking over to the fridge, he takes out two beers. He offers one to me, but I decline.

“I’m Oakley’s designated driver.”

Nodding, he leans against the counter. “Where’s Sawyer?”

“She didn’t want to come because of the strippers.”

Smirking, he pops the tab of his beer open. “God, I get a kick out of that girl.”

By the twinkle in his eye, I’d say it’s a little more than a kick.

“She’s not exactly your biggest fan, but if you’re serious and promise not to hurt her, I can put in a good word for you.”

He gives me a boyish grin. “You’d do that for me?”

Holy shit. Cole already looks like a movie star, but throw in that smile with those wolfish green eyes, and he’s practically a nuclear bomb.

But as beautiful as he is, it hurts like hell to stare for too long. Liam’s looks were toned down by his air of innocence and purity. However, I can’t help but wonder if older Liam would have looked and acted like Cole if he were still alive.

It’s a terrible thought to have, because Cole and Liam were different people, but...

“What else would you be willing to do for me?”

I was so lost in my head, I failed to notice Cole’s moved over several inches, intentionally invading my personal bubble.

“What do you mean?”

He skims a fingertip down my arm. “Come on, gorgeous. Don’t be such a prude.”

“I’m not...what the hell is wrong with you?” I assess the beer in his hand. “How many of those have you had?”

Leaning in, he whispers, “Enough to know I want to drag you upstairs and fuck you ‘til you can’t stand.”

My mouth drops open, but I have to close it because bile surges upwards. “That will never happen.” My hand twitches with the need to slap him, but I move out of his grasp instead. “Stay the hell away from me.”

If he feels rejected by me turning him down, he doesn’t show it. If anything, he looks pleased. “Why?”

“Because I’m not interested.”

He takes a step forward. “Why?”

“What do you mean why? You *know* why.”

No matter how much Jace pisses me off, I’d never sleep with his brother.

I start to walk away, but his hand wraps around my forearm. “I think you should leave.”

“What?” Disgust ripples through me. “Why? Because I won’t have sex with you?”

“No.” His expression darkens and he tightens his grip. “Because you’ve already hurt Jace enough. And if you came back here to do it again, I swear to God I will fucking *kill* you.”

The resolve behind his threat tells me it’s not idle, but I’m more disturbed by him believing I would come back to hurt Jace.

“Despite what you think, I would *never* hurt your brother. Ever.”

“Why?”

I tell him the first bit of truth that comes to my mind. The one I feel all the way down to my marrow. “Because I love him.” I hold his stare. “And I don’t hurt the people I love.”

Not if I can help it.

He searches my face for what feels like an eternity. I don’t know what he finds, but whatever it is has him releasing his hold on me. “You can stay.”

Without another word, he stalks out of the kitchen and I leave to track down my cousin.

I find him sucking Hayley's face off on the living room couch.

Guess they're on again.

Shaking my head, I turn around and head for the bathroom. All the water I had is catching up with me.

Evidently, I'm not the only one who has to pee like a racehorse, because the line for the closest bathroom is almost all the way down the hall.

The one on the other side of the house isn't much better.

"Is there a bathroom upstairs?" I whisper to the guy wearing a beanie in front of me.

His eyes open a little and I realize he's one of the bong boys from the last party I went to. "Nah, B. Bad idea."

"Why?"

"My boy, Bugs, heard Christian was getting a rim job from some chick and she blew chunks everywhere but the toilet in that bitch."

Wow, that was way more information than necessary. Not to mention *gross*.

"Thanks for the heads up."

He gives me a curt nod and holds up the bong in his hand. "You wanna hit this while we wait?"

"I appreciate the offer, but I get paranoid behind the wheel when I'm high. My speed drops down to thirty and I think every car I pass is the police." Since I don't want to sound like a total loser I add, "But definitely next time."

"Word." He brings the lighter to the bowl and inhales. "No worries."

Squeezing my legs together, I look down the line. Not counting my bong buddy, there are four more people in front of me. "Can you tell whoever's in there to hurry up?"

Some guy ahead shrugs. "Already did."

"I'm not gonna make it."

I'll take my chances with the puke. If she missed the toilet, at least it will

be clean.

“Whatever you do, don’t piss in the hot tub,” my buddy advises. “People get real mad when you do that.” He grins at Cole when he walks by. “Try the punch bowl instead.”

Cole downs his beer and fist bumps the air. “Nectar of the gods.”

Hopefully it won’t come down to that, but it’s nice to know I’ve got options.

I hike a thumb in the direction of the staircase. “I’m gonna go upstairs.”

His expression turns solemn as I exit the line. “Godspeed, my friend.”

Racing up the stairs, I make a mad dash for the first bathroom I see.

To my surprise and relief, there’s no puke to be found. For once, the rumor mill worked in my favor.

After taking care of business, I walk over to the sink.

I’m in the middle of washing my hands when I hear a voice that sounds a lot like Jace’s growl, “My dick isn’t gonna suck itself. You’re either down to or you’re not.”

I roll my eyes. *Subtlety has never been Jace’s strong suit.*

Quickly, I turn off the sink and forgo drying my hands. The last thing I want to hear is Jace and Britney going at it.

“And if I’m not?”

Dammit. I’m too curious for my own good. I press my ear to the door on the opposite side of the bathroom so I can hear them better.

“It’s no skin off my balls.” Something jingles. Possibly a belt buckle? “Your friend Casey told me she’d be up for whatever I want, whenever I want, so I’ll hang out with her tonight.”

Harsh. Although I’d give almost anything to see the look on Britney’s face right now.

“Are you serious?” Britney screeches. “I can’t believe that dumb slut is trying to screw my boyfriend behind my back.”

Your hoes ain’t loyal, Brit-Brit.

I slap a hand over my mouth so I don't laugh, but Jace's next words have my jaw dropping.

"Retract the claws. I'm not your boyfriend, remember?"

Jesus. To be a fly on the wall of this shitshow.

She sighs. "I know, babe. I just...it's a girl thing. Casey crossed the line." Her voice becomes breathy. "But let's not talk about her anymore, birthday boy." She giggles. "I wore those little pink panties you like."

It's all I can do not to gag as I retreat. *It's definitely time to go.*

"Not interested," he grits through his teeth.

I scurry back to the door.

"Right. As usual, you just want to sit back while I give you head," she grumbles. "Not to be a bitch, but I'm getting *really* sick and tired of being a blow-up doll. Once upon a time, you were interested in more than my mouth."

I cringe. Fairy tales, blow-up dolls, and Britney make for a bad visual.

"Look, I've never forced you to do anything you didn't want to." The mattress creaks. "Suck me off, or don't, I no longer give a fuck. I'm over your bullshit."

"Oh my God, it's her. Isn't it? Ever since she came back...we haven't." Britney sounds like she's a razor's edge away from crying. "You don't want me anymore, do you?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," Jace growls. "Shut the fuck up."

"If I'm wrong, then prove it. Fuck me right here, right now. Just like you used to before *she* showed up."

My heart twists and I place my hand on the door, as though that alone could stop him.

Don't do it, Jace.

I'm not sure what's happening, because they stop talking.

Which can only mean one thing.

A green tinge of jealousy clouds my vision as the seconds tick by.

Just when I've lost all hope, Jace grinds out, "You're right. You don't do it for me anymore."

I let out the breath I was holding.

"You're lying," Britney hisses. "Look at me and look at her. There's no way in hell any guy with a pulse would choose *that* over me."

Jace laughs but there isn't any humor behind it. "There's something wrong with your head, Brit."

"There's something wrong with your *dick*, Jace," she spits. "And that's exactly what I'm going to tell everyone if you make me look like a fool."

"Fuck off. The only one who makes you look like a fool is you."

He slams the door so hard it rattles.

Oh. My. God.



I wait a few minutes before I venture downstairs again. When I do, I find Jace slamming back shots with Oakley and Cole.

Oh, boy.

"Hell yes," Oak shouts. "About time you loosened up and had some fun, Covington."

Forgoing the shot glass this time, Jace picks up the bottle of Jack and takes a huge swig.

My stomach drops. Jace isn't doing this for fun. He's doing it to get trashed and forget.

Fortunately, Cole catches on. "Slow down, bro. We have the whole night ahead of us."

"Exactly." Oak takes the bottle from him. "Save some for the rest of us, man."

Jace gives them the finger and walks off.

He might not realize it yet, but all that whiskey is going to hit him in the balls soon.

Cole's uneasy eyes lock with mine and I walk over to him and Oakley.

"Has he eaten anything tonight?"

He shrugs. "Not really. My dad took us out for dinner to celebrate, but Jace bounced before it was over."

That's not good.

Thinking quickly, I dig into my pocket for my phone and pull up a local pizza place.

"Hey, I'd like to order a pineapple pizza please."

For reasons I'll *never* understand, it's Jace's favorite.

"We're closing in fifteen," the guy on the phone responds.

I look at my watch and curse. "Not to be a pain, but is there any way you can make this happen? It's my friend's birthday and he's...I *really* need a pineapple pizza."

Oakley grabs my phone. "And one more with extra cheese."

"Some garlic knots, too," Cole adds.

I snatch my phone back. "I'm so sorry, but I promise I'll give you an amazing tip when you get here."

I silently say goodbye to half my paycheck from the bakery.

"All right. Be there in twenty," the guy grumbles before he hangs up.



*T*wenty minutes later, Jace is bumping and grinding with a group of girls out on the patio.

Cole takes a sip of his beer. "At least he's having fun."

I motion to the pizza box I'm holding. "We should get some of this in his

system before that changes.”

After setting everything up on a nearby table, I turn to Cole and Oakley. “Which one of you wants to grab him?”

Oakley pulls out a blunt and lights it. “I got this.”

In the blink of an eye, he enters the makeshift dance floor, ebbing and flowing with the crowd until he reaches Jace and gestures to his blunt.

Flashing a Cheshire Cat smile, Jace follows him.

But not before giving Hayley—one of his many dancing partners—a swift slap on the ass.

Fortunately, Oak doesn’t seem to mind.

Cole chokes on his beer. “Jesus.”

I hang back as they make their way to the table. Jace can’t stand the sight of me when he’s sober, so I can only imagine how he’ll react to my presence when he’s buzzed and on his way to shit-faced.

“Pineapple?” Jace exclaims as he takes a seat. “Man, you douchebags are the worst, greatest best friends ever.”

Cole and Oakley exchange a glance.

“It wasn’t us,” Oakley says, despite me signaling for him to keep his mouth shut.

Cole jerks his chin at me. “Dylan ordered it.”

Jace shifts around in his chair. “Sure you didn’t poison it?”

“Only a little.” I study my nails. “Couldn’t get too carried away though, given it’s your birthday and all.”

He grins, and fuck me, because it’s like seeing a rainbow after a terrible storm. “Thanks, asshole.” Lifting the pizza to his mouth he takes a huge bite. “Shit’s good.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Oakley makes a face. “You’re the only person I know who enjoys that crap on pizza.”

My heart gives a sad thump. *It was Liam’s favorite too.*

Jace tenses, but a small group of girls from the dancefloor wander over

and disperse themselves among the guys.

Hayley plops on Oakley's lap, a brunette flutters to Cole, while the remaining two make a beeline for Jace.

And me? I'm hoping the bong boys are still here because I'd much prefer their company to whatever this is.

Jealousy stirs when the girl to the right of Jace whispers something in his ear and his face lights up like the fourth of July.

"Tell you what, go grab me a bottle of Jack and let me finish this slice, then I'm all yours." He winks at the girl's friend. "And yours."

Yup, the bong boys are looking better and better.

The girl and her friend scurry off like they hit the jackpot.

I'm about to leave too, but Jace bites out, "Where's your boyfriend?"

"Last I checked, I didn't have one."

He appears to be mulling that over as he chews.

I'm getting ready to walk away for the second time when he speaks.

"Well, the next time your boyfriend, not boyfriend picks you up from school, I'm beating his face in and shoving a motherfucking bat down his throat." Tilting his head, he pins me with a look. "Consider that your only warning."

He can't be serious. Who the hell threatens someone for giving someone else a ride home from school?

I don't even know how to respond. On second thought, I do.

"You don't get to control who picks me up and who doesn't. You also don't get to threaten my friends."

He starts to say something, but the two girls—who are now donning bikinis and carrying a bottle of whiskey—saunter back over to him.

Instantly, he swipes the bottle from the girl in the white bikini and starts drinking.

"Damn." Oakley's eyes go big. "Be easy, son."

Jace doesn't listen. Almost half a pint is gone before Cole rips it away.

“You’re gonna have a killer hangover tomorrow, dude.”

He wolfs down another slice of pizza. “I don’t give a fuck.” He smirks at the girls. “Go wait for me in the hot tub.”

They don’t waste a second following his orders.

I look at Oakley who’s pouring himself a shot. “I’m gonna head inside for a bit. Let me know when you’re ready to leave.”

Oakley starts to speak, but Jace stands up and barks, “Get over here.”

Oh no he didn’t.

I look around the patio. “I’m sorry, are you talking to me? Because I don’t respond to Neanderthals.” I narrow my eyes. “If you want me so bad, you can bring your ass over here.”

Slowly, he rakes his gaze over my body. “Is that so?”

My heart is in my throat as he treks the short distance to me.

“Here I am,” he rasps, his voice rough and husky.

There’s no denying the challenge laden in his words, but I force myself not to react. He’s drunk, it’s his birthday, and he’s pushing my buttons. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Yup, here you are. Now what’s your problem?”

My breath hitches when he hooks his finger onto the belt loop of my jeans and tugs me to him. “*You.*”

Jesus. I tamp down the urge to run my hand over the impressive set of abs and prominent bulge I’m compressed against. “Fine, then I’ll leave.”

His hand curls around my hip possessively, and he sways ever so slightly. “No—”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, you ugly little tramp?” a shrill voice demands.

Of course, Britney would come out here to mark her territory.

Although after what I overheard, *territory* is debatable.

Oakley and Cole stop talking, no doubt preparing for round two. However, I’m tired of the drama, so I pay her no mind.

I start to withdraw, but Jace tightens his grip and looks over his shoulder at Cole. “I’m gonna head out.”

The way he’s slurring his words and swaying tells me the whiskey just hit him like a freight train.

Britney’s the least of my worries when he digs his keys out of his pocket.

“You can’t drive, Jace.”

“I’ll be fine,” he argues, taking a step back.

“Are you okay, sweetie?” Britney coos.

Ignoring her, I concentrate on him. “You’re drunk.” I look at Oakley. “Come on, we can drop him off on the way home.”

Oakley starts to nod, but Hayley pouts. “But, bunny, you promised we could spend the night here.”

That’s news to me.

Something passes in Oakley’s gaze and he shrugs. “She’s right. Sorry, cous.” He kisses Hayley’s arm. “What my girl wants, my girl gets.”

Awesome. He pretty much dragged me here for no reason.

Cole holds up his hands. “I’d drive, but I’ve had a few beers.” He grins down at the brunette. “I was planning on crashing here for the night too.”

Jace plows past me. “I’m fine.”

I grab his arm. “Give me your keys. I can drive you home.” Thinking fast, I add, “Or I can call you an Uber. Either one works.”

He mumbles something incoherent.

“Um, excuse me,” Britney snaps. “I’m his girlfriend, therefore, I’ll take him home.”

I swear it feels like everyone’s eyes are on us.

Stuffing down the urge to put the bitch in her place, I twist around to face her. “Have you had anything to drink?”

As much as I hate the idea of Britney giving him a ride, it’s more important that he gets home safe. Considering he hates my guts, I’m pretty sure he’d prefer leaving with her.

“I had like half a Bay Breeze three hours ago.”

A quick assessment attests she’s not impaired. “Fine, but—”

“Oh, God. Fuck off, bitch.” She pushes me out of the way. “No way in hell am I gonna stand by and let you try to violate him.”

Say what now? “Excuse me?”

She tosses her head back and cackles. “Oh, honey. Everyone knows you’re obsessed with Jace. I wouldn’t put it past you *or* your desperation to take advantage of him in his inebriated state, because you know it’s the only way he’d ever fuck you.”

“Wow, Brit-Brit. *Projecting* much?”

Her eyes narrow into tiny slits. “I beg your pardon?”

Nope, not gonna air Jace’s dirty laundry. “Nothing.”

“That’s what I thought.” She drums her talons up and down Jace’s chest. Eyes closed, he looks like he’s trying his hardest not to throw up. “Now run along and find some other poor guy who’s drunk enough to screw trash like you.” Her nose crinkles. “I’ve got this covered.”

A few people laugh.

“Want some cream for that burn?” some guy calls out.

More laughing.

My hand twitches with the need to launch my fist into her face, but if I do, it won’t end there and Jace might take off during the fight.

Swallowing my pride, I move out of the way.

Britney laces her arm through one of Jace’s. “Let’s go, babe.”

Shaking his head, he staggers back. “No.”

Britney rolls her eyes. “Fine, we’ll hang out inside for a little while.”

She tries tugging him, but Jace doesn’t budge.

“Jace, hon—”

“No,” he grinds out so low and deadly the tiny hairs on my arms stand up.

Laughing nervously, she looks at Cole and Oakley. “A little help, please.”

Neither of them moves a muscle. It's clear by their expressions they're not too happy with her at the moment.

She reaches for him again, but that only makes him more irritated.

"Don't fucking touch me," he growls, side-stepping her. "I told you before I was done with you and your bullshit."

Hayley gasps.

"Oh, shit," Oakley exclaims.

"About damn time," Cole mutters.

Britney gives Jace a tight smile. "Sweetie, you're obviously drunk. Earlier you dragged me upstairs because you couldn't keep your hands off me and kept begging for my mouth."

That's a distorted version of an event if I've ever heard one.

Britney's not done yet. "I know I hurt you when I told you we should take a break, but I meant what I said about wanting to be friends." She tries touching his face, but Jace turns his head. "This is me being your friend. I suggest you don't do anything to screw that up."

I'm starting to think *she's* the inebriated one, because that's not what happened at all.

I open my mouth to say something, but Jace starts laughing.

Hysterically.

"Jesus Christ." He's literally shaking with laughter. "Your easy access snatch used to be worth the side of freak show that came with it, but not anymore."

My jaw drops. So does Britney's.

"Want some cream for *that* burn?" Oakley calls out.

She shoots him a dirty look before focusing on Jace. "Look, this is your last chance. Do you want to stop being a drunk, belligerent asshole so I can take you home or not?"

He tosses me his keys. "Ready when you are."

He doesn't have to tell me twice.

“I swear to God if you leave with her,” Britney warns when he staggers over to me. “I will tell *everyone* about your little issue.”

Back to her, he flips her the bird.

“Fine. But just so you know, the alcohol will only make that limp dick of yours even more limp.” Her smile is cruel as she looks around the patio. “It’s why I broke up with him tonight. He no longer has what it takes to satisfy me, or any other girl...if you catch my drift.”

My hands curl into fists as Jace turns around.

“You can’t break up with someone who never wanted to date you in the first place,” he snarls. “And maybe my dick would have liked you better if you took care of your little issue down south.” Waving a hand in front of his face, he steps to her. “I’m no doctor, but I’m positive your cunt shouldn’t smell like something crawled up there and died.”

Well, shit. Not only are his words brutal, they’re punctuated by the fact that he *seriously* looks like he’s going to be sick.

“If I had to spend another minute in that room with you and your fish box, I would have—”

I watch in equal parts horror and enchantment as he projectile vomits chunks of pineapple pizza and whiskey all over her.

Britney screams so loud I’m surprised my eardrums don’t shatter while everyone laughs and cheers.

Jace takes off his shirt and wipes his mouth with it before throwing it at her. “I would have done *that*.”

He looks over at me. “You ready?”

I try not to focus on those washboard abs of his on display. “Yup.” I sling an arm around his waist when he sways. “But what do you say we find you a toothbrush and some mouthwash first?”

Chapter 30

DYLAN

*A*part from warning me not to crash his Lexus and asking to stop at a twenty-four-hour gas station, Jace hasn't said a word since we got in the car.

On the bright side, he's looking much better after puking all over Britney.

He flips the hood of his sweatshirt up—the one he asked me to fish out of his trunk while he got cleaned up in the bathroom. “I'll be out in a minute.”

“Are you sure you don't want me to go in for you?”

He steps out of the vehicle, slamming the door behind him.

Guess that's a no.

Between the black hoodie and his indignant expression, you'd think he was about to commit a crime as he walks into the tiny convenience store.

Two minutes later he comes back out, carrying a can of ginger ale and a bottle of water. “Let's go.”

Shifting his Lexus into drive, I mutter, “Are you allergic to manners?”

All I get in reply is a grunt.

We're almost to his house when he gestures to my side of the road. “Make a left here.”

“That's not the way to your house.”

“We're not going to my house.”

That isn't ominous or anything. I slam on the brakes. “Why?”

“I’m not in the mood to go home yet, all right?” He crosses his arms. “Start driving...or I will.”

I step on the gas pedal and make a left. “As you wish.” *Dick.*

I’m not sure where we’ll end up, but the narrow, winding road combined with the pouring rain gives me the creeps.

“Turn right,” he instructs.

“Where exactly are we going?”

I have my answer as we approach what appears to be a run-down park.

I pick a spot and turn the car off. “I didn’t know there was a park here.”

“They built it after you left, but the rich pricks on our side of town weren’t interested in it.” He lays his head against the seat. “So now it just rots.”

“That sucks.”

We sit in silence for what feels like forever before I find my proverbial balls. “Jace, can we—”

“No.” There’s a dark note in his voice, a warning not to poke the beast. “I *can’t* fucking go there. Not tonight.”

I don’t know where *there* is, but I don’t want to upset him on his birthday, so I drop it. “Okay.”

Shifting ever so slightly, I turn to look at him.

He’s reclined in his seat, with his legs spread out and his hood covering half his face...it makes my insides swoop, but my heart hurt.

It’s clear he’s battling some demons...but he’s doing it all alone.

I hate it.

Reclining my own seat, I relax against the plush leather. “Hey.”

He tilts his head a little, his gaze moving over me like lava. “Hey.”

Lifting my hand, I trace the curve of his brow. “It’s kind of crazy.”

His gorgeous face is all hard edges, chiseled bones, and full lips, but in this moment, his eyes hold a softness and vulnerability I haven’t seen in years.

“What is?”

I run my thumb down his cheek. “That it’s been so long since we’ve seen each other, but being this close to you still...”

The reality that we’re no longer friends sinks its claws into my heart and I stop talking.

His fingertips trail up my outstretched forearm. “Still what?”

Makes me want to merge my broken pieces with yours.

“Cracks me wide open,” I whisper, because friends or not, I’ll never be able to keep anything from him. “I guess my broken pieces missed yours as much as I missed you.”

He exhales sharply. “You say the weirdest shit sometimes.”

I can’t help but laugh. He’s not wrong.

He’s also the only one who ever truly got me.

“Yeah, but you love it.”

He grins before his expression turns serious. “Yeah...I did.”

I wish I knew what caused that change, or how to fix it, but Jace has built his walls so high, they’re impossible to climb.

However, I’ve never been the kind of girl to give up. The locks to his fucked-up kingdom might have changed, but I still remember the layout.

“Cole said you left in the middle of your birthday dinner.”

A muscle in his jaw tics. “Cole has a big fucking mouth.”

He does, but that’s beside the point. “We were worried about you.” I hold his gaze. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to, but your secrets have always been safe with me. No matter how much you hurt me.”

After Jace confessed to doing all those awful things, I could have retaliated by spilling everything he ever told me when we were kids, but I didn’t.

We were best friends before we were enemies, therefore my love for him will always be stronger than my animosity.

I can feel the ice around him thaw a little before he speaks. “My father

keeps pushing me to go away to college. Then tonight at dinner he mentioned me working for Trust Pharmaceuticals and starting an internship next year.”

“But that’s not what you want to do.”

It’s not a question, it’s a fact. Jace has never expressed any interest in working for his father’s company. He’s always had his sights set on being a video game developer.

He shakes his head. “Fuck no. I don’t know shit about what he does, and I have no desire to.”

Not to mention the elephant in the room. Why would Jace ever want to work for the company responsible for his little brother’s death?

Granted, it was an accident, but still. It would be a punch-you-in-the-face reminder of your grief, day in and day out.

“It’s really messed up of him to push that on you.”

“I know.” His throat bobs on a swallow. “I’m not sure I even want to go to college in the first place. But if I did, I’d go to one close by so I can be here for Cole and Bianca.” He shrugs. “I was planning on getting an apartment after graduation with the money I made from Z.I. anyway. And if I’m not taking classes, I’ll have time to develop and sell more games.”

Pride swells in my chest. “You sold a game? That’s awesome.”

His eyes light up. “Zombie Island. Well, that’s what the company who bought it renamed it. Originally, I called it Zombie Nightmare.”

“Zombie Nightmare is way cooler.”

“Right?” He makes a face. “They wanted to market to younger kids though, so I had to change some things and…” He shakes his head. “Doesn’t matter. Point is, I don’t have to go to college in order to make something of myself.”

“No, you don’t. Not unless you want to. I mean, I’m going so I can have a business degree under my belt—”

“Not a bad idea,” he interjects. “That way when you start your record label, you won’t need to hire a bunch of schmucks who will take you for a

ride and run it into the ground.”

“Exactly.” I chew my thumbnail. “Although it will take a lot more than a business degree to get the ball rolling. I still have to find bands—good bands—that will trust me enough to put their dreams in my hands. Plus, with my dad in jail and the authorities sequestering every dime from his bank accounts, I have to find a way...” I suck in a breath. “I’m getting ahead of myself.”

Just the thought of everything I’ll need to do soon makes my head spin. Not to mention the fact that I’ll be so broke, ramen will be a splurge.

But where there’s a will there’s a way, and I’m determined to make it happen.

“I still can’t believe he’s in jail.” Disapproval lines his face. “I’m guessing Savannah might’ve had something to do with it?”

Does a bear shit in the woods? “Yup. However, she managed to get off scot-free by claiming she was an innocent young wife who didn’t know a thing.” Anger plows through me and I sit up. “Meanwhile, *she* was the one who got him the job in the first place. The CEO was her friend’s husband. And with the way she kept pushing him for more money after we moved—there’s no way it wasn’t part of her big plan from the get-go.”

“What a bitch,” Jace grinds out. “But with her out of the picture now, your relationship with your dad must be better.”

“Not really.” I avert my gaze because what I’m about to say will no doubt make me sound like a heartless bitch. “I still can’t bring myself to answer his phone calls or visit him.”

“Oh.” There’s surprise, but not a hint of judgment. “Why not?”

“Because I’m angry,” I say, swallowing the lump building in my throat. “I guess it’s my way of punishing him for forgetting about my mom and choosing Savannah over me.” I close my eyes. “Jesus, how fucked up is that?”

“No, I get it.” Swiftly, he withdraws inside of himself again, that cold

demeanor firmly back in place. “There are some things you can’t forgive.” The look he gives me slices right through my heart. “No matter how much time has passed.”

I can’t take it anymore. I feel like a blind person trying to dismantle a bomb. “Wh—”

“Don’t.” His gaze sharpens. “Drive me home.”

With a nod, I push a button and adjust my seat. The one thing I didn’t want to do was ruin his birthday, and of course that’s exactly what I ended up doing.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper as a bolt of lightning illuminates the sky and the rain comes down harder. “But it’s killing me—”

“Good.” His tone is clipped, *lethal*. “Now you know how it feels.”

Frustrated, I slam my hand against the steering wheel. “I don’t want to fight with you.”

“And I didn’t want to ever see you again, yet here we fucking are.”

Jesus. No matter what I say or do, he’s determined to make me pay. I need him to get the fuck over his resentment and realize I’m not his enemy.

I know he wants to go home, but I’m the one with the keys. Which means I still have time to get through all his layers of stubborn.

I glance at the clock on the dash. It’s a little after two a.m.

“Technically it’s still your birthday in Hawaii.” Shifting in my seat, I look at him. “If you could have one thing for your birthday—excluding the obvious, because I can’t bring them back—what would it be?”

He looks at me like I’ve sprouted another head. “You think a stupid birthday gift is gonna make it all better?”

“No.” Reaching over the console, I poke his rock-hard stomach. “But the sooner you tell me, the sooner I’ll shut up and take you home.”

Irritation etches his features. “You’re a real pain in the ass, you know that?”

I smile wryly. “Trust me, I’m aware.”

The corners of his lips twitch for a second before they compress, and his expression turns solemn. “I wish I could turn it off.” His gaze snaps to me. “Just for a little while.”

His pain is so palpable it takes the air from my lungs.

Inching closer, I run my fingers along the stubble of his jaw. “Turn what —”

His mouth crashes against mine.

The kiss is vibrant desperation laced with spiteful greed. Our lips soothe and clash like lovers and enemies who are indulging and sinning...trying to see which will win out.

One of his hands hovers around my throat and the other cups my face as he feeds me his tongue with passionate strikes, daring me to join.

He growls when I do, and his hand slithers downward. A shiver courses through me as the edge of his thumb sweeps the curve of my breast.

“Jace,” I pant into his mouth.

He dips his head, sucking and biting his way down the column of my throat. I run my nails along his nape before latching onto the fabric of his sweatshirt. “I need this off.”

Without warning, he breaks the kiss...and gets out of the car.

I sit in confusion for the better part of a minute, trying to comprehend what just happened.

Anger rolls through me like the thunder above when I realize...and I begin shaking with the force of it.

He doesn't get to keep doing this to me.

One minute he's hot, the next he's ice. *I'm sick of it.*

I'm not a damn video game he can turn off and on whenever he pleases.

I'm not someone he can keep punishing because he can't get a handle on his emotions.

Jace Covington wanted a fight...but he's going to get a whole lot more than he bargained for.

Because I'm about to give him a motherfucking war.
My chest heaves and my blood pressure soars as I step out of the car.
The rain is coming down in buckets, but my eyes stay locked on his tall form as I march toward him.

"Yo, Covington."

Another bolt of rage lights me up when he ignores me.

I pick up my pace. "Hey, asshole!"

The muscles in his back tense and he turns. "What?"

"Fuck you," I scream.

Then I launch my fist into his face.

He staggers back a little, no doubt caught off guard.

Then he straightens his spine. "Do it again." Lightning zaps through the sky, illuminating the dangerous look he's pinning me with. "I fucking *dare* you."

I must be full-blown crazy because the threat isn't enough to stop me.

If anything, it spurs me on, and I punch him again.

He's downright seething as he takes a step in my direction. "Harder."

So I do, hard enough to split his lip.

Nerves pluck at my belly as he spits blood on the ground and advances forward, backing me into his car. "Done yet?"

Not even close, but I give him a small nod.

"Good," he rasps as his hands latch onto my hips. "Now it's my turn."

In one fell swoop, he jerks me around, bending me over the wet hood. "Don't start something you can't finish, Taylor."

"Who says I'm not prepared to finish?" I grit through my teeth.

He unzips my jeans and shoves them down. "I guess we'll find out." His hand slips between my thighs and he snaps the crotch of my panties before ripping them off. "Won't we?"

"Do your worst." I look over my shoulder at him. "I dare yo—"

I gasp when two long fingers slip between my flesh.

He chuckles. "I knew you'd be wet for me." The hard swell of his cock nudges my ass as he pumps his fingers. "So nice and tight."

The nerves along my skin prickle and I grind against him, needing more. "Take it out and fuck me."

He removes his fingers. "Nah, baby. You gotta earn this dick." Shifting, he lowers himself on top of me. His agitated breath tickles my ear as he tugs on my ponytail. "Spread your pussy." He nips my earlobe and my body jolts in response. "I'm in the mood to eat."

Warmth rushes through my veins as I step out of my jeans and kick them to the side.

With a grunt, he wedges his leg between both of mine, nudging them apart as far as they'll go.

A flush creeps up my cheeks when he kneads my ass, exposing me. "Much better."

Pushing my t-shirt past my ribcage, he nibbles and bites his way down my spine, striking his tongue ring along each vertebra he passes until he's on his knees.

Another flash of lightning zaps across the sky and he makes a low hum in the back of his throat. "Look at you, all pretty and pink for me."

Jesus. His mouth is a weapon in more ways than one.

I hiss when his stubble prickles my flesh and he inhales me.

It's so intimate. *So dirty and illicit.*

My breath comes out in quick, short pants as his face settles between my thighs and he licks the length of my slit.

A low, strangled grunt leaves him. "Fuck, that's good." His tongue plunges inside and he proceeds to eat me like a filthy, ravenous animal.

He's so gluttonous, so perverted. So...

"Oh, God."

I'm growing lightheaded with every wicked stroke. Falling faster into his abyss.

Adjusting his hand, he massages my clit with his fingers as he coils his tongue, flicking the metal against my wetness.

“Jace.” I’m wound like a slingshot, preparing to launch wherever he wants as he works me to the edge of oblivion. “Fuck, that’s it.”

Reaching behind me, I grip his head, keeping him there. “Don’t stop.”

A guttural sound rumbles in his chest and his movements speed up. The sensation that whips through me is so intense, it vibrates through my bones as I shudder and shake around him.

Snarling, he laps at my orgasm. “That’s all you got for me?”

“I—”

He rubs a slow circle around my clit, causing aftershocks that have me jerking and thrashing. It’s like being on a non-stop roller coaster.

I’m so sensitive, I can’t take it. A pained groan rips from my vocal cords when he flips me over and sinks two fingers inside me...right before fastening his mouth on the spot that makes my toes curl.

My thighs tremble around his head as I whimper and squirm. It’s too much. *Too intense.*

Emotion clogs my throat as I choke out his name.

It’s a struggle to draw in air as my body seizes and I fall apart again, only unlike the last time, this one is quick and raw. Pleasure tinted with splatters of pain.

I feel so vulnerable, like I just shared something private and sacred. Until now, I was the only person able to make myself orgasm, but I’ve never had such a visceral response before.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he stands up. His eyes rake over me like two hot coals, making me feel even more naked than I am.

I open my mouth to speak, but I don’t get the chance...because he takes off.

Chapter 31

DYLAN

*A*lmost two weeks have passed since Jace left me half-naked on the hood of his car and took off without a word.

It's the same as before, except now he goes out of his way to actively dodge me, even going so far as to avoid stopping in the hallway to talk to Oakley if I'm around.

The only bright side to all this is that he won't talk to Britney either. According to the RHA rumor mill, she's already moved on. And if those rumors are right...it's with Cole.

Which is the reason for the scowl on Sawyer's face while she visits me at work.

"I don't understand," Sawyer huffs. "What in the world would Cole see in *her*?"

Same thing Jace did.

"Her double Ds?" I offer as I wipe down the counter.

Then again, my friend's rack is pretty spectacular. Not to mention, she has a *way* better personality.

Cole is a straight-up dumbass for not pursuing her.

"I thought..." Shaking her head, she looks down. "Forget it. It doesn't matter."

Oh, man. She might not realize it yet, but she's got it bad.

"You thought what?"

"That maybe, just *maybe* he was different from all the other jerks in the popular crew." She shrugs. "I don't even know why. But, obviously I was wrong and he's not."

Her disappointment is tangible.

I wish I could tell her something positive, but I've got nothing. Boys suck. *Especially the Covington boys.*

"I'm sorry, Sawyer."

"Oh, dearie. He didn't lick it off a stone," Mrs. Dickinson declares as she removes a tray of croissants from the oven.

The look on Sawyer's face tells me she's as mystified as I am by my boss's statement.

"I don't know what that means," Sawyer says. "Why would Cole lick a stone?"

Mrs. Dickinson sighs. "It means that people's personalities and actions are always influenced by someone." She opens the cash register and slips some bills into an envelope. "Perhaps he's involved with this lass because he feels like it's the kind of girl he's supposed to date."

As much as I hate to admit it, my boss may not be too far from the truth. Cole is the star quarterback...and as of now, Britney is the head cheerleader. They go together like peanut butter and jelly.

Or rather, peanut butter and some artificial gelatinous substance with no calories, because *Britney*.

"She's right. I highly doubt Cole's actually into her. He's just keeping up appearances because of his social status."

Mrs. Dickinson nods. "Like my mother used to say—if you lie down with dogs, you'll rise with fleas."

"Exactly." I give Sawyer a smile. "But the big flea graduates this year, so she'll be gone soon."

Sawyer frowns. "So will *you*."

"It's not like I'm going away to college." Heck, I couldn't afford it even if I wanted to. "We'll still see each other on weekends and talk on the phone."

"Promise?"

I hold out my pinky. "Swear it."

She wraps her pinky around mine and waggles her eyebrows. "Does this mean you'll tell me what happened with Jace?"

I go back to cleaning the counters. "I told you. He was drunk, it was his birthday, we hooked up...and now he's back to pretending I don't exist."

She purses her lips. "Did you ask him why he's so mad at you?"

"I tried, but he didn't want to talk about it." I scrub the counters with more vigor. "I'm beginning to think I'll never find out. And to be honest, I'm starting to care less and less. Screw Jace Covington, I'm over him *and* his games."

I heard if you repeat the same thing over and over, sooner or later you'll start to believe it.

Sawyer eyes me skeptically. "Guess that explains why you're going out with Tommy tonight."

Yes. "No. Tommy's my...well, friend. Sort of. We're still taking it slow."

"So slow you went from hanging out every day to not seeing him for almost two whole weeks," Sawyer points out.

"I've been studying," I defend, despite knowing the truth.

The truth being I've been waiting for Jace to get his act together. But he's not...so it's time to move on.

Sawyer and Mrs. Dickinson exchange a glance.

I wag my finger at them. "Stop that. I'm not using Tommy to get back at Jace. I genuinely have feelings for him."

They just don't come close to the feelings I have for Jace.

Mrs. Dickinson clicks her tongue. "Put silk on a goat and it's still a goat."

“Tommy isn’t a goat.” Opening the glass cabinet, I cut the slice of banana bread Sawyer ordered. “Are you sure you’re not giving me grief because you want him?”

I regret the words the moment I see Sawyer’s hurt expression.

“No. I told you it didn’t—”

“I know.” I place the bread in a pastry bag. “I’m sorry, okay? I’m just...I guess part of me realizes it’s wrong to string Tommy along, but I’m not doing it to be a bitch. I’m doing it because I *really* want things to work out between us. I’m tired of being stuck on Jace’s messed up merry-go-round. For once, I’d like to see what it’s like to have someone treat me like gold and give back as much effort as I put in, you know?”

Sadness lines her features. “Yeah, I get it.” Rising on her tiptoes, she smacks a kiss on my cheek. “I’ll be at choir rehearsal tonight, but I’ll text you after I get out. I want to hear all about your romantic date.”

“It’s not that romantic,” I inform her. “We’re just grabbing some ice cream and going to the docks to talk.”

“Sounds pretty romantic to me,” she says with a sassy smile before walking away.

I hold up the bag. “Don’t forget your banana bread.”

I attempt to hand it to her, but Mrs. Dickinson snatches it away. “Banana bread is *not* her favorite.” She turns her fierce gaze on me. “Did we run out of éclairs?”

Oh, brother. “No, but that’s not what Sawyer asked for.”

She tsks. “Customers rarely ever get it right. You’re not supposed to give them what they *think* they want. You’re supposed to give them what they really want.”

Here we go again. And she wonders why sales start to dwindle every time she’s running the front counter.

Sawyer snatches the bag back from her. “What I *really* want is my banana bread.”

“You’re not a banana bread kind of girl,” my boss protests. “You, my dear, are an éclair. Sweet, unique, and doug—”

“Maybe I don’t want to be an éclair anymore,” Sawyer growls before she storms out.

“People change, Mrs. Dickinson. Sometimes what you thought you wanted doesn’t cut it anymore.”

She eases a tray of cupcakes into the oven. “Nonsense. No matter how much you change, you’ll still arrive home with one arm as long as the other.”



“*I* think the Knights are going to the playoffs this year,” Tommy informs me.

“That...” I pause, unsure what to say since the Knights are technically his rival team. “Sucks?”

He laughs. “Yeah, it does. But I’m pretty sure we’ll be in the playoffs too.” His eyes hold mine. “If—or should I say *when*—that happens, will you go to the game?”

“Yeah.” I scoop some ice cream on my spoon. “I’d like that.”

More like *tolerate* since I don’t particularly like football, but either way, I’ll be there.

His lips curve. “I missed you. I’m glad you texted me earlier.”

I place my bowl on the dashboard of his car. It took us over an hour to get here, but the view of the marina at night is totally worth it.

“I missed you too.”

Like one would miss a nice pair of cozy socks.

As opposed to the missing-an-essential-organ way I miss Jace.

Tommy drums his fingers on the steering wheel. “Look, I gotta ask you something. You can tell me it’s none of my business, but I’m really hoping

you tell me the truth.”

I sit on my hands to stop from fidgeting. “What do you want to know?”

“A couple guys from RMH were at Christian’s party two weeks ago.” His eyes cut to mine. “You know, the same one you were at when you broke things off with me.”

I’m not really sure where he’s going with this. “Yeah, I remember.”

His nostrils flare. “Well, my buddy said you left the party with Jace after he yacked all over Britney.”

“Okay.” I chew on my thumbnail. “It seems like you got the play-by-play from your friend, so what exactly is your question?”

His eyes blaze. “Did you fuck him?”

Wow, okay, that’s none of his business.

Words strike me silent. I have no idea how to answer him, because I don’t owe him an explanation in the first place.

“You did.” His jaw works. “Your mouth might be closed but your face is an open book.”

If that’s the case, he *seriously* needs to work on his reading comprehension.

“I didn’t fuck him.”

I don’t know what to make of the look he shoots me. “Suck him off?”

“Excuse me?”

He blows out a breath. “Look, I’m not trying to be a dick. I just don’t want Jace Covington’s sloppy seconds.”

My cheeks burn. And here I thought Tommy was a nice guy. “I’m not *anyone’s* sloppy second, asshole.”

His face goes slack, as if the idiotic thing he said just dawned on him. “Shit. That came out wrong.”

He tries to cup my cheek, but I turn my head. “Please take me home.”

He grabs my face with both hands. “Look, I’m sorry.” Sincerity swirls in his dark orbs. “But he doesn’t deserve you, Dylan. Not like I do.”

He's right. But the heart doesn't choose who we love by their worth.
Because love isn't a choice.

It's an illogical, all-consuming consequence that results from someone stealing a vital piece of you.

And I wish like hell Jace would give me my piece back.

He drops his forehead to mine. "Give me a chance. I'll make you so happy."

"You not making me happy isn't the problem."

"Then what is?"

"I don't know," I tell him honestly. "I'm fucked up, I guess."

I have to be, because why *else* would I choose the guy who keeps hurting me over the guy who wants to make me happy?

Closing my eyes, I plant a kiss on his cheek. "I wish I wasn't. I'm sorry."

It shouldn't be this hard. Jace or no Jace, I shouldn't have to force myself to feel more for Tommy.

I also don't want to ruin his opportunity to meet the love of his life when I'm certain it's *not* me.

"You're awesome, but I think we're better off as friends. And because I'm your friend, I don't want to keep jerking you around or hurting you."

His jaw tightens. "Dylan—"

"You're gonna make some girl so happy one day."

But that girl isn't me.

His eyes narrow. "If that's how you really feel, why the hell did you make me drive an hour out of my way tonight just so you could end things for good?" His face fills with outrage. "Why the *fuck* did you waste my time, Dylan?"

He has a right to be annoyed. "I'm sorry, I thought—"

A cold snicker cuts me off. "What? That we could paint each other's nails and braid each other's hair while we gossip?"

Now he's just being obnoxious. "No—"

His mouth slams into mine so hard my teeth hurt. I slap at his chest, but he's already pushing down the lever to my seat and climbing across the console.

No, no, no, no, no.

I bite his lip so hard I taste blood. "Get off me."

He fists my ponytail, forcing me to look at him. "I tried to be nice and do right by you, but you kept teasing me." I grimace when he licks the side of my face. "You know what I think? I think you like to be treated like a little slut—"

I knee him in the balls.

He falls forward and howls. "Jesus Christ. That fucking *hurts*."

"Good."

Reaching over, he opens the passenger door. "Get the fuck out of my car, you stupid bitch." He pushes me when I don't move quick enough. "Now!"

Gladly.

I climb out of his car and he zips out of the vacant marina.

As I look around, it sinks in that it's after midnight and I'm stranded in the middle of west bubblefuck. Awesome.

The first person I call is Sawyer, but it goes straight to voicemail. Given she usually shuts her phone off when she's at church or choir rehearsal, chances are she forgot to turn it back on. It wouldn't be the first time.

I rub my hands on my jeans as I walk to one of the floating docks and sit down.

If I call my aunt, she'll probably freak out and get my uncle involved.

Ugh. Oakley's going to give me so much shit for this, but he's my best option since Sawyer isn't answering her phone.

Fortunately, he picks up after the second ring. "Yo."

"Hey, are you busy right now?"

"Not really. Just smoking a little ganja."

Surprise, surprise. "Oh, that's cool. I...um. I was hoping you could do

me a favor?”

I hear muffled voices in the background, but Oakley tells them to pipe down. “You don’t sound okay. What’s up?”

“I’m kind of stranded at the docks.”

“The docks?” he questions. “What docks?”

“At the marina in Richm—”

“What?” Oakley roars before I can finish my sentence. “What the fuck are you doing all the way out in Richmond? Do you know how dangerous it is there this time of night?”

No, but I’m really hoping I don’t find out. “I guess it’s a good thing I’m all alone then, huh?” I swallow hard. “I’m sorry I bothered you, I just didn’t have anyone else—”

“I’m on my way. Keep your phone close by and don’t talk to any strangers,” he says before hanging up.



Forty minutes later, I see the headlights of Oakley’s car as he speeds into the marina.

But upon closer inspection, I realize it’s not Oakley’s car.

It’s Jace’s.

Oakley is sitting in the passenger seat, and from looks of it, Cole is in the back.

Fuck. My. Life.

I’ve barely even started walking toward them when Oakley and Jace jump out, looking like they’re ready to pummel the shit out of someone.

“What happened?” Oakley yells. “Are you okay? Who did this to you?”

He can be so dramatic sometimes. “I’m fine.”

No way in hell am I telling Oakley a thing while Jace is here.

My eyes ping pong between my cousin and my nemesis. “I just really want to go home, okay?”

Grumbling, Oakley leads me to the backseat of Jace’s car.

Cole doesn’t say a word as I slink inside and I’m thankful for it.

Jace—as usual—pretends I don’t exist as he burns rubber out of the parking lot.

Oakley, however, talks enough for the both of them. “How did you get here?”

I pick at my cuticles. “One day my mommy and daddy—”

“I’m serious,” he mutters as Cole snorts. “There’s no way you just happened to go for a walk and end up in Richmond. Someone drove you.” Turning around, he glares at me. “I thought it was that punk-ass motherfucker, but you said you broke up with him at Jace’s birthday party.”

I really wish Oakley would learn to shut up and keep the things I tell him private. “I didn’t break up with him. We were never together.”

His eyes narrow. “I want a name.”

I smile sweetly and extend my hand. “My name’s Dylan. Pleasure to meet you.”

He looks at Jace. “Has she *always* been this much of a smart ass?”

Jace’s lips quirk. “Only when she’s nervous or hiding something.”

I open my mouth to tell him to fuck off but clamp it shut. If he doesn’t want to talk to me, I don’t want to talk to him. *Two can play at this game.*

Oakley pouts. “Why won’t you tell me?”

I wish he would stop drilling me. “Because it’s not a big deal.”

His mouth drops open. “Someone left you for dead and it’s not a big deal?”

“No one left me for dead, Oak.” I cross my arms. “Quit being such a drama queen.”

Cole laughs. “She—”

The sound of my phone ringing cuts him off.

I see Sawyer's name flash across the screen and I press the green button.
“H—”

Oakley swipes my phone and brings it to his ear.

I try to snatch it from him, but he motions for Cole to restrain me.

The jerk slides across the seat and sits on my lap.

“Hey, Sawyer. This is Oakley, Dylan's cousin. Look, something very bad happened to her tonight and I need you to tell me everything you know. Starting with who she was with.”

He's got to be kidding me. “Don't tell him anything, Sawyer. I'm fine,” I yell.

“No, that's not her,” Oakley says. “That's my stepmom. Not only do they look alike, they sound alike too. Crazy, right? Anyway, I'm gonna need a name.”

“Stop talking, Sawyer,” I shout into Cole's back. “Hang up the damn phone.”

“Romantic date?” he hums and I mutter a curse.

“Huh, that's funny.” He looks at me. “I don't find being stranded by yourself in the middle of the night very romantic, do you?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Jace tense up.

Hypocrite much? Although Jace left me his car when he bounced, so it's not exactly the same thing. Still fucked up, though.

“What?” I hear Sawyer screech over the line. “Oh my God. Is she okay? What the *hell* is wrong with Tommy?”

Crap. I pinch Cole's ribs until he yelps and gets off me.

“Tommy. Got it. Peace, baby girl,” Oakley says before he hangs up and glares daggers at me. “Did he rape you? I swear I'll—”

The car swerves and multiple people on the freeway honk their horns.

“I'm fine, Oakley. He didn't...I'm okay.”

I'll fill him in later when he's calmer and Jace isn't around.

My cousin points to his face. “Look me in the eyes and tell me he didn't

hurt you.”

Jace’s hand flexes around the steering wheel.

“If by hurt you mean he kicked me out of his car, then yeah. I guess technically he hurt me, but I promise I’m fine.”

Oakley still doesn’t look satisfied after that, but at least he drops it for the rest of the ride home.

I scramble out of the car after Jace pulls up our driveway, but fingers wrap around my wrist.

For a second, I think it’s Oakley, but he’s already halfway to the front door.

Spinning around, I peer up at Jace’s stern, but gorgeous face. “Thanks for the ride.”

Gently, he tips my chin. I feel his gaze roam over every part of my face and body, but for once, it’s not in a sexual way.

“I’m fine,” I tell him. “Tommy and I...we’re over.”

He remains silent as he finishes his careful appraisal of me.

When he’s satisfied, he gets back into his car and drives off.

Leaving me without so much as a single word.

Like he always does.

Chapter 32

JACE

*H*is orange Subaru sticks out like a sore thumb among the other cars in the parking garage.

After checking the time on my dash, I pull my ski mask down and grab my bat.

Given Tommy lives in a low-budget complex, the one and only security camera was a breeze to dismantle.

Doesn't mean someone won't roll up on me, though, so I have to make this shit quick.

I go for the hatchback window first before moving on to the windshield and the side windows.

But I'm not finished yet.

After pulling the lever for the gas cap, I reach into the pocket of my hoodie and take out the liter bottle of water and empty it into the tank.

Then I unzip my pants and piss in it.

Now you're stranded too, motherfucker.

Chapter 33

DYLAN

*M*y aunt whistles as she walks into my bedroom. “Wow, you look...”

I put the finishing touches on my makeup and turn around. “That bad?”

“No...just different. Older.”

I smirk. “I mean, it *is* my birthday.”

She looks me up and down, taking in my blown-out hair, smokey-eye makeup, and the bodycon slip dress I purchased with one of the gift cards she got me. It’s red, super short, and the ruched fabric makes me look like I have some dangerous curves going on.

“You look gorgeous, Dylan.” She stands behind me in the mirror. “I just hope you’re doing this for the right reasons.”

“The only person I’m doing it for is me,” I tell her honestly.

I thought dating Tommy would help me get over Jace, but it didn’t work.

I’m starting to think nothing will...except time.

But that doesn’t mean I can’t let loose and have fun in the process. All my life I’ve been responsible—and according to every adult I’ve ever met—mature and wise beyond my years.

For once, I’d like to go wild and not worry about the consequences. Not that there will be any, given I’m meeting Sawyer and Oakley at Christian’s house and I know they’ll have my back.

My aunt winces when I reach for my Doc Martens. “Nope, I can’t let you do that.”

“But I love these shoes.”

“I know, honey, but they don’t go with your dress.” She raises a finger. “I’ll be right back.”

Two minutes later she’s thrusting a pair of Louboutins at me. “An outfit like that deserves Lou.”

“But these are super expensive. Are you sure me wearing them to a party is a good idea?”

“Positive. I have like fifteen pairs, so I can be without these for a night.”

“Fifteen?” *I’m not sure I have fifteen anything.*

She smirks. “Wayne knows the way to my heart.”

I feel like a baby deer learning to walk after I slip them on, but all things considered, they aren’t *too* terrible. Plus they make my legs look miles long.

“Perfect,” she exclaims. “God, to be young again.”

“You are young,” I remind her.

Something passes in her gaze before she smiles. “Come on, birthday girl. I’ll give you a ride to the party.”



I can feel everyone’s eyes on me the moment I step foot in Christian’s house. And for once, it’s not because something embarrassing happened or because I punched someone.

“Holy shit,” Sawyer says as I walk over to her and Oakley. “Who are you and what did you do with my best friend?”

“Is it too much?”

She shakes her head. “No. You’re hotter than the Eta Carinae.”

“The hottest star in the galaxy?” *I’ll take it.*

I pluck an empty Solo cup from the stack on the table. “Are you sure

you're okay with being my DD?"

"Positive," she tells me. "It's your birthday. I want you to have fun."

I look at Oakley, who's been silent this whole time with his hand in front of his face. "You okay, Oak?"

"Yup, everything's cool," he tells Sawyer.

Sawyer and I exchange a glance.

"Why won't you look at me?"

"Because I might start drooling like every other guy in the surrounding area and that's creepy, fam."

I roll my eyes. "Oh, stop. It's just a dress." I poke him in the stomach. "Have a drink with me for my birthday. On second thought, have several and teach me a thing or two about how to party like *O-dawg*."

He grins. "You sure about that?"

"Positive."

He turns to the table full of liquor. "Then consider me your personal bartender tonight. But don't say I didn't warn you."



One...two...I'm not sure how many hours later—the Louboutins don't matter because I can no longer feel my feet.

Hell, I'm not sure I can feel anything other than the pounding of the music and the energy of the people around me as I sway my body to the beat.

Someone—Oakley, from the looks of it—makes his way over and hands me a glass.

"You're the best cousin fucker I've ever had," I shout because I want to make sure he hears me.

His eyebrows shoot up. "Oh, yeah. Someone's feeling it." He stares down at the drink in his hand. "Be easy with this one, okay?"

I give him a thumbs up. "Yes, sir."

I bring the cup to my mouth, and right down the hatch it goes.

“Or not,” Oakley mutters. “I think I’m gonna switch you to water for a little bit.”

“Water is for pussies,” I yell at the top of my lungs.

Some guy passing by gives me a fist pound. “Hell yeah, it is.”

I blink. It’s Cole.

“It’s you,” I say to his tall frame. “You’re here.”

Taking a sip of his beer, he looks at Oakley. “Something tells me things are going to get very interesting soon.”

Oakley balks. “Dude, where have you been? Things have been interesting for the last hour and a half.”

Leaning over, Cole shows Oakley something on his phone.

Oakley exhales sharply. “Yeah, I say we both get drunk so he can’t blame us for this shit.”

“I like the way you think,” Cole says before they wander over to the liquor table.

I have no idea what they’re talking about. “Who? Who’s going to blame you?” I ask the room before turning to Sawyer. “Is everything okay?”

Evidently, I get super emotional and worried when I drink.

She nods. “Everything is fine.” She checks her watch. “Although I do have to be home in a half hour.”

Oh. That sucks. I was just starting to have fun.

“Oakley, will you split an Uber with me later?” I ask when he and Cole return. *Wait, that was rude.* I look at my friend. “Do you hate me?”

Laughing, she shakes her head. “Of course not. I just want to make sure you have a safe ride home before I leave.”

“It’s all good,” Oakley says. “I’ll take care of her. Worse comes to worse, we’ll sleep our hangovers off in one of the bedrooms upstairs.”

A few people near us snicker.

“Wouldn’t be the first time you two shared a bed. Ain’t that right, O-

dawg?” some guy calls out.

“Man, shut the fuck up before I slap your momma with my dick and make you my step-cousin too,” Oakley jeers.

Sawyer blinks. “I think you mean stepson.”

He shrugs. “Whatever. Tomato, tomato.”

“Tom—” She waves a hand. “You know what? Never mind.”

I toss an arm around their shoulders. “Aren’t you guys having so much fun?”

“Not yet.” Oakley raises his cup. “But I’m getting there.”

“I have to pee,” I tell Cole because he’s the one standing directly across from me.

He looks at Oakley. “Is that her way of saying she wants the punch bowl? Because *that* would be epic.”

Sawyer smacks him on the arm. “If I find out you let my friend pee in the punch bowl after I leave, it will take your doctor a week to count the scratch marks on your body.”

Cole’s eyes turn hooded. “Well, shit. Let’s go, sweetness.”

She cringes. “Not even in your dreams.” Her eyes swivel around the room. “Shouldn’t you be hanging out with your new girlfriend? Or did someone do us all a favor and drop a house on her?”

Cole smirks. “I’ll be damned. Is that a hint of jealousy I detect? You going soft on me, Bible thumper?”

She shoots him a dirty look. “Never. I’d rather crawl over broken glass and eat the vomit your brother spewed all over Britney than sleep with you.”

Cole considers this for a moment. “So you’re saying there’s still a chance?”

Huffing, she links her arm through mine. “Come on, I’ll go with you to the bathroom.”

“Okay, but we have to stop and talk to the bong boys on the way back.”

“The who?”

“You’ll see,” I assure her.

Chapter 34

JACE

The music is bumping as I trek to Christian's front door. Only instead of the usual house bullshit, I hear "*Control*" by Puddle of Mudd pumping through the speakers.

It's a good song. One of my favorites by them.

The tiny hairs on my neck raise. *Thanks to Dylan forcing me to listen to it nonstop one summer.*

I grip the handle harder than necessary as I walk inside.

A few girls sweep their eyes over me as I pass them, but I'm not interested in hooking up tonight. I'm just here to check in and make sure my brother and friend don't get too wasted and do something stupid.

I spot them in the living room hovering near the liquor table. No surprise there.

I'm heading over when my gaze snags on some chick dancing on a coffee table. I can't see her face because her back is to me, but it doesn't matter. With a body like that, she could look like a bulldog, and half the guys here would still fuck her.

I stifle a laugh when I spot Oakley's pothead friends from Royal Manor High. Until tonight, I've never seen them pay attention to anything other than their bong. However, it's clear the hottie on the table has them both

transfixed.

And they aren't the only ones. Dwight Davis and Courtland Bennet, two of the best players on the offensive line for the Knights are practically salivating. Dwight is a good guy, but according to my brother, Courtland is a pretentious bastard.

My groin stirs as I focus on the girl again. Long legs, curvy little ass, and the kind of hair I'd like to run my fingers through and tug while getting my dick sucked.

Yeah, I'm starting to understand the gravitational pull.

I'm not alone either, because a few more guys from the football team surround the coffee table.

"You're so hot," one of them calls out. "How much for a private lap dance?"

The girl doesn't pay him any attention. She's so into the music, no one else matters. I bite my lip as she moves her body to the beat like a snake charmer. There's something sexy as fuck about a girl who gives none.

"Hey," Oakley shouts. "How much for you to shut the hell up?"

Cole squeezes his shoulder. "Relax. Griffin's harmless."

Hmm. Oakley doesn't usually have such a short fuse. Not unless someone is dumb enough to mess with those he cares about.

Like some kind of personal *fuck you* from the universe, my brain puts the pieces together at the same time the girl turns around.

A mixture of anger, confusion, and something else I'm not ready to acknowledge twists my guts as I stare at Dylan.

Why the fuck is she dancing on a table... looking like *that*? The red Solo cup she brings to her glossy lips answers my question.

It's her birthday...and the anniversary of her mother's death.

Of course, she's drinking. For the same reasons I did.

She wants to forget.

I grind my molars as I make a beeline for Oakley and Cole.

Oakley nudges my brother when he sees me approach. “Look who’s here.” He bumps my fist. “Hey, man. What’s good?”

Placing my soda on the table, I glare at him. “Any reason your cousin is stripping for half the school right now?”

He makes a face. “She’s dancing, not stripping.”

Cole smirks over his beer bottle. “Not yet, anyway.”

Oakley smacks his arm. “Shut up.” His stare drifts to Dylan who’s now shaking her ass—this time to some godawful hip-hop song—which is how I know she’s past the cutoff point. “It’s her birthday. She deserves to have some fun.” His eyes cut to mine. “Everyone needs a break from their bullshit from time to time.”

He’s not wrong, but it doesn’t mean he should stand by and be complacent while a bunch of guys ogle her like she’s a cold drink of water on a hot day.

Annoyance brews in my chest as Dylan slowly gyrates her hips and rakes her fingers through her blonde hair.

One of Oakley’s pot buddies holds up his bong and asks if she wants a hit. I want to scream at her not to be a dumbass because while they seem harmless, there’s no telling what they could have laced that shit with.

My fingers curl into fists as she leans over and inhales.

“You gonna put a stop to this?”

Oakley looks at me like I’m crazy. “A stop to what? Her taking a bong hit?”

No, the way Courtland Bennett’s leering at her like a dog who wants a nice juicy bone. My teeth clench when he says something to Dwight.

I can’t hear him, but I know what the phrase *run a train* looks like coming out of someone’s mouth.

Dwight appears hesitant before he laughs and shrugs.

Irritation makes me snap. “Seriously, Oakley?”

“Seriously, what?” He fixes his gaze on me. “Quit acting like I’m doing

something wrong because you're jealous."

"He's right," Cole chimes in. "If you want to stop the dogs from peeing on your lawn, you need to put up a fence. Not a sign."

Not only does that analogy not make any goddamn sense, it doesn't apply.

"The both of you can fuck off. I'm not jealous."

I've had enough of this shit. If I spend another minute here, the Knights will be down two players for the upcoming playoff game.

Digging my keys out of my pocket, I flip them the bird. "I'm heading out."

Chapter 35

DYLAN

“Do you want another one?” my bong buddy asks.

Nodding, I lean over and place my lips around the mouthpiece.

“Damn,” some guy wearing a football jersey says as I inhale. “You sure look like you’re enjoying that.”

Coughing, I reply, “It’s pretty good. Not that I’m a professional or anything.”

He exchanges an impish smile with his friend. “That’s a shame. Such a pretty mouth shouldn’t go to waste.”

I’m not so far gone I can’t understand his crude attempt at a joke.

Paying them no mind, I go back to dancing like no one’s watching.

Just like my mom used to tell me to do.

Although I don’t think she had this particular scenario in mind.

A sharp pain infiltrates my chest. *If she didn’t want her daughter dancing on tables for her eighteenth birthday, she shouldn’t have died.*

I shake the terrible thought out of my head. I rarely feel such resentment and bitterness about her death, but given this birthday is one of the big ones—combined with the alcohol currently flowing through my system—I guess it’s starting to bring out an angry side of me.

I close my eyes. *Keep it together, Dylan.*

Forcing myself to take a few deep breaths, I stuff the pain down as far as it will go.

I'm gonna need more alcohol. *Enough to drown it out.*

I'm about to get off the table and find Oakley, but a hand skates up my leg.

"So, I was thinking," the jersey-guy begins. "How about me and my buddy take you upstairs for a little while?" His hand travels higher, coasting up my thigh. "We'll take *real* good care of you, gorgeous. Promise."

Deep down, I know it's not a good idea, but it's better than thinking about my mom and how much I hate that she's not here. Or how my dad's in prison for my birthday and...

Tears prickle my throat and I have to clear it before I speak. "I—"

Don't get a chance to finish that statement because Jace grabs the guy's hand and bends one of his fingers backward. "Touch her again and I'll break the other nine."

The dude in the jersey screams in agony as he lunges for Jace, but Cole and Oakley grab him.

While Jace grabs *me*.

"What the hell are you doing?" I scream as he picks me up and tosses me over his shoulder like a rag doll.

Oh, boy. The ground looks way too far down from up here.

"Have fun," Oakley says as Jace turns us around. "We'll take care of the dogs for you."

I have no idea what that means, and I don't have time to wonder because Jace charges out of the living room like a man on a mission.

I slap at his back as he walks out the front door. "Can you put me down?"

"No."

That's it. That's all I get.

"Oakley has my purse."

“Oh well.”

“It’s my birthday,” I remind him, hoping he’ll concede.

He checks his watch. “Not anymore.”

Bastard.

“Can I at least have another shot before we leave?”

I’m gonna need it to survive another car ride with him.

“You’ve had more than enough already.”

“Then you should probably put me down before I puke on you.”

He chuckles darkly. “Knock yourself out.”

“I’d much rather knock *you* out,” I mumble as he opens the passenger door of his car and drops me into the seat.

A vulgar smile curves his mouth. “I bet you would.”

Then he slams the door.



I’m grumpy, a little dizzy, and very confused as Jace reverses into his driveway.

“I thought you said I wasn’t allowed in your house?” I chirp in a taunting voice.

His expression is impassive. “You’re not.”

I’m perplexed when he gets out of the car and comes around to my side.

I mock gasp when he opens my door. “Wow, who said chivalry was de —”

I yelp when his hands fasten around my waist, and over his shoulder I go for the second time tonight.

“I can walk, you know,” I tell his lower back.

He grunts.

“Where are you taking me?” I ask when his movements come to a halt and I hear the click of a latch.

Silence.

However, the opening and closing of his gate, along with the grass below us, tells me we're in his backyard.

“What, did you dig a grave for me or something? Planning on burying me next to Bianca's rabbit?”

Nerves crawl in my belly, mingling with the alcohol. *Oh, shit.*

Why else would he be carrying me against my will into his backyard? *In the middle of the night no less.*

“Holy shit, you freaking psycho. Do *not* kill me and bury me in your yard.”

He doesn't say a damn thing to ease my anxiety.

A moment later, the grass turns to cobblestone.

“Jace! I swear to God!” I pound on his back as the pretty teal glow from his inground pool comes into view. “Put me down, asshole—”

I scream when he lets go of me and I plummet into a chasm of cold water.

I sputter and cough as I come up to the surface. “What the fuck?”

Hands in the pockets of his jeans, he shrugs innocently. “You told me to put you down.”

Narrowing my eyes, I prepare to tell him off, but then a horrifying realization hits me.

My heart sinks when I see the black heels with red-soles floating on the other side of the pool.

“You asshole.” I swim over to them. “These are *Louboutins!*”

“Lou—what?” His face twists. “Who even are you right now?”

One by one, I throw them at him. “These are my aunt's, you idiot. She lent them to me tonight and now they're ruined.”

He doesn't look at all concerned. “They're shoes. If she's upset, buy her another pair.”

I want to scream because he doesn't get it. “They're eight-hundred-dollar

shoes. It will take me at least six weeks to earn the money at Top of the Muffin. I was trying to save for a car.” Frustration jams in my throat and I slap the water. “Not everyone is rich like you.”

Hell, even before my dad landed in the slammer we didn’t come close to having the kind of money Jace’s family does.

For the briefest of moments, sympathy flickers in his eyes, before they harden. “I’ll be in the guest house.” He starts walking down the short pathway leading to the stone and brick cottage. “Feel free to continue your late-night swim.”

“Jace?” I bat my eyelashes as he turns. “Would you mind helping me out?”

He smirks. “So you can pull me in? No thanks.”

Dammit. That’s exactly what I was gonna do.

With a sigh, I swim to the deep end and climb up the ladder.

A glimmer of satisfaction runs through me when his eyelids lower and I see his Adam’s apple bob.

It’s the first week of November so it’s chilly at night. Considering I didn’t wear a bra with my dress, I’m sure he’s getting quite a show.

Straightening my spine, I stick out my chest and walk past him. “Enjoying the view?”

The muscles in his back ripple before he blows out a breath and meets me at the guest house.

He avoids eye contact as he unlocks the door and walks inside.

It still looks the same as I remember, with a few minor upgrades.

“I’ll get you a towel,” Jace mumbles before he disappears into the one and only bedroom.

I wander through the tiny living room until I end up in the kitchen which shares the same open space.

Given Jace ended my party early, he owes me a good time.

Unfortunately, the only thing I find is a half empty bottle of wine and a

few beers.

“The beers are Cole’s,” Jace says behind me. “And they suck.”

I opt for the wine bottle instead. “Is this safe?”

“No idea. Some girl brought it over the other night.”

My stomach coils. It hadn’t even occurred to me that he might be hooking up with someone else after Britney.

After *me*.

“So are the rumors true?” I open the cabinet and fish out a wine glass. “Is Britney really dating Cole?”

He walks over to the couch and sits. “Don’t know. Don’t care.”

I ponder this as I take a long sip. “It doesn’t bother you? He’s your brother and she’s your...whatever.”

“Are you fucking with me right now?”

I have no idea what just transpired, but judging by the death glare he’s aiming my way, clearly *Britney* is a trigger for him.

“Sorry, I won’t bring her up again.” I take another sip of my wine and I realize how heartless that was. He might not want her, but there’s no way it doesn’t sting. “For what it’s worth, you can do so much better than her.”

He stares at me for what feels like forever before he speaks. “I can’t decide if you’re actually being serious, or if you’re just a really good actress who’s nailed her role.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I’m honestly offended he thinks I’d ever fake anything around him.

“Nothing.” He reaches for the television remote. “Forget it.”

I finish what’s in my glass and refill it. I’m starting to get that relaxed and buzzy feeling again which is exactly what I wanted.

“Why did you bring me here, Jace?”

He doesn’t answer. *Shocker*.

I’m almost positive I know, but I want the confirmation.

No. More than want. *I need it*.

And something tells me there's only one way to get it.

I take one more sip of wine for courage, then saunter over to the couch stopping when I'm in front of him.

He's watching some boring video game thing, but I pluck the remote from his hand and turn it off.

He glowers. "Do you mind?"

"I do actually." I sharpen my gaze. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Because you're drunk."

"I was at a party...on my birthday."

Oakley was watching out for me. Cole too, for that matter.

There was no reason for Jace to interfere...and definitely not a good enough one for him to drag me out and bring me here.

Unless he was jealous.

And he wouldn't be jealous if he didn't have feelings for me.

Feelings he refuses to acknowledge.

"You never brought me a towel," I remind him coyly.

He starts to get up, but I straddle his lap and press my body to his, saturating his clothes. "Guess I don't need one anymore."

His hands find my hips. "What are you doing?"

"They wanted to take me upstairs." Easing back slightly, I look at him. "Both of them."

His eyes darken. "They wanted to run a train on you."

"I thought it took four or more guys to run a train?" I give him a sultry smile. "Then again, maybe they were planning on inviting their friends...that could have been fun."

"Dylan," he growls, his fingers digging into my hips.

I lick my bottom lip suggestively. "They promised they'd take good care of me."

He snorts. "If you believed them, I have a bridge to sell you."

I trail my lips along the shell of his ear. "I wonder if they would have

eaten my pussy as good as you did that night?”

I feel him thicken in his jeans and his eyes become tiny slits.

I kiss a path along his jawline before going in for the kill. “I dare you to make me forget all about them.”

He makes a rough growly noise in the back of his throat as he closes the distance between us. His kiss is half desperate, half ravenous—like he’ll never get enough.

And then he’s pulling away. “I don’t fuck drunk girls.”

“I’m buzzed. Big difference.”

He holds my stare. “Not to me.”

“I can walk a straight line if you want.”

“Whatever gets you the fuck off my lap.”

Narrowing my eyes, I rock against his dick. If the heavy outline pulsing under his jeans is anything to go by, I’d say he wants me just as much as I want him.

Our breaths mingle as we stare at one another.

“I’m pretty sure you like me on your lap.”

Nerves prickle along my skin when he pivots his hips, grinding against a spot that has my heart racing.

Closing his eyes, he whispers, “I told you, I *don’t* mess around with drunk chicks.”

I hate the way he’s sticking me in a generalized box. As if I’m just another girl looking to screw that he has to turn down.

“And I told you, I’m not drunk.”

When he looks unconvinced, I say, “Fine. Don’t touch me.” Dipping my head, I kiss down his neck, breathing in his familiar clean scent. “I’ll just touch you.”

He makes a gruff, almost painful sound as I drop to my knees. I can’t tell if it’s pleasure from my touch, or annoyance because I’m pushing his buttons. Knowing Jace, probably both.

My hands slip under his shirt and I'm treated to golden buttery skin and rippling muscles. "You never had abs like these when we were kids."

That gets a laugh out of him. "That's because I didn't hit the gym five days a week."

Yeah, his hard work definitely shows.

I smirk as I kiss down his chest. "I'd tell you how sexy you are, but I'm pretty sure you're aware."

I run my tongue over one of his abs and he sucks in a breath. "Someone's full of compliments tonight."

My mouth waters as I zero in on those deep V-lines. "Want to fill me with something else?"

His nostrils flare. "You're killing me."

I look up at him. "I haven't even started yet."

His thumb strokes the edge of my jaw. "Maybe you shouldn't."

"Fine. If that's what you really want." I trail my nail down his zipper, unfastening it. "Mind if I take a peek at what's under the hood first? See what I'll be missing out on because you're too stubborn?"

He opens his mouth and closes it before grinding out, "Go for it."

Anticipation sparks through me as I pop open the button on his jeans and tug them down. I stare, impressed if I'm being honest, at the massive erection tenting his black boxers, begging to be free.

With a small smirk, I brush my fingertips along the elastic waistband, taking my sweet time.

His head falls back, and I watch the tendons in his throat move as I push his boxers down.

My breath leaves me in a rush when his cock bobs free, slapping against his navel.

He's long, thick, and veiny. Perfect through and through.

The smug smile on his face tells me he knows it.

But I'm not done teasing him yet. I want to make him lose control.

I get as close as I can without making contact. “You have no idea how much I want to put my mouth on it.”

His dick twitches and a little drop of fluid glistens his tip.

Groaning, he wraps his hand around the base and gives it a slow stroke. “That so?”

Nodding, I lick the edge of his thumb. “But someone thinks it’s a bad idea...so I can’t.”

He mutters a curse. “You made your point.”

My, how the tables have turned.

Another drop of fluid forms at his tip, this time leaking onto his stomach.

“Are you sure?”

“You tell me,” he rasps, his voice low and husky.

My pulse skitters as I glide my tongue over the pearly bead on his stomach. “You taste like you’re sure.”

His lips part as he stares down at me. “Dylan.”

There’s so much lust and longing enveloping my name, my skin heats.

I walk my fingers up his thigh. “You never asked me what I wanted for my birthday.”

His eyes blaze. “What do you want for your birthday?”

Lowering my head, I lick a circle around his tip, giving him my answer.

His breathing becomes labored. “Christ.”

Wrapping my hand around his base, I stretch my lips over his wide crown.

He watches me with urgent intensity. “Jesus.”

Tension lines his features when I release him with a wet pop. “Keep going.” His eyes snap with heat and his hand tangles in my hair, keeping me right where he wants me. “I *need* more of that.”

The carnal tone lacing his words goes straight to my core and my mouth finds him again, taking him deeper this time.

His brow furrows and he releases a low groan. “Yeah, baby. Just like that.”

There’s something so hot about the way he’s directing me, letting me know exactly what he likes.

Feeling bold, I lick and suck him as far down as I can.

His body shudders and the hand in my hair tightens. “Fuck.”

I go to repeat the movement, but he leans over and hauls me back onto his lap.

“What—”

His lips find mine and he cups my nape, holding me steady as he kisses me with such hunger, I melt into him.

“I was having fun,” I tell him as he tilts my head back and licks my throat.

“Me too,” he rasps. “Too much fun.” He tugs on the top of my dress, exposing my breast. “Wanted to see these before it was over.” Lust rushes through me like a live wire when he inclines his head and flicks my nipple with his tongue ring. “So fucking worth it.”

I’m a helpless mess as he sucks with calculated, eager tugs. “Jace.”

Rough hands grab my ass, bringing me closer to his mouth. “I fucking love the way you say my name.” He yanks on the top of my dress again, exposing my other breast. “And your tits.” My body jerks when he does that thing with his tongue again. “Especially these tight little nipples.”

Oh, Jesus. I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of his dirty mouth.

I moan when his lips find the hollow of my throat.

He chuckles, knowing full well how sensitive I am there. “I bet you’re so fucking wet for me right now.” His hand slips under my dress. “Let’s see if I’m right.”

I hiss when his fingers trace the lace of my panties.

“You wear these for me tonight?”

“No. I wore them for me.”

“They’re wet,” he notes, snapping them against my skin.

Reaching between us, I give his cock a slow, teasing jerk. “I know. You dropped me in a pool, remember?”

“Smartass,” he mutters before he sinks his teeth into my neck and my eyes flutter closed.

“How about this?” A cocky grin tugs the corners of his mouth as he moves my panties to the side and cups my pussy. “Is this for me?”

“For tonight,” I taunt, and his eyes darken.

My breath hitches as the tip of his finger slowly circles my opening. “Take that dress off. It’s ruining my view.”

I clutch the hem and pull it over my head. “Anything else?”

His free hand wraps around the back of my neck, and he pulls me close, as if he wants to tell me a secret.

“Yeah actually.” He sucks my earlobe between his teeth and dips two fingers inside me. “Ride them.”

Looping my arms around his neck for leverage, I start grinding myself against his hand. I make a choked, jittery sound as he curls them inside me.

“There we go.” He makes a husky sound of approval as he slides them back out, showing me my fluids before he sucks them into his mouth. “So fucking good.”

The sight of him licking my wetness clean off his fingers sends a violent tremor through me. It’s so hot I’m liable to combust. “Oh my God.”

Smirking, he sinks them back in, deeper this time. “Put your hand back on my dick.”

I jack him up and down as his fingers work me, plunging hard and fast into my slickness.

“This isn’t working,” he says.

My body silently protests the loss of his touch. “What? Why?”

He grips my hips before shifting us so we’re lying longways on the couch. “I need you to sit somewhere else.”

“Where?”

Grinning, he taps his chin. “Right here.” Those dark orbs flash as he takes my panties off. “Right fucking now.”

I start to move, but he shakes his head. “Turn around. I want you to finish what you started while I eat this little pussy.” He slaps my ass as I reposition myself. “Trust me, it won’t take long.” Warmth rushes through my veins like a potent drug as he guides me over his mouth. “For either of us.”

Shivers dance over my skin as he laps at me, flicking the metal against my most sensitive spots.

I’m so turned on I can’t see straight. I suck him as deep and fast as I can, gunning for those rough, wild sounds he makes.

My body thrums with tension and my thighs start quaking as he pulls and licks my flesh. Just when I think it can’t possibly feel any better, he adds a finger to the mix, strumming it over my clit like his favorite instrument.

White-hot heat sizzles up my spine as I pick up the pace on my end. His cock pulses in my mouth and he thrusts his hips upward. It’s the only warning I get before he groans and shoots down my throat. Some liquid trickles out in the process and I lick it off his balls, loving the way he shudders underneath me.

Hands kneading my ass, he goes back to working me into a helpless frenzy. A moment later, the tight coil of pleasure inside me snaps and I buck against his mouth, whimpering his name as I come.

Little shivers rake up and down my spine as he plants a soft kiss on my pussy, before easing me onto the couch and standing up.

Neither of us says a word as he tucks himself back into his jeans and picks my wet dress up off the floor.

Dread sinks like a stone in my gut when he places it in my hands without looking at me.

I’d say he’s disconnected—but that’s not it. I can feel his pain digging into my soul as though it were my own.

Jace looks so guilty, so disgusted with himself, *I* feel sick as I put my dress back on and gather my heels.

I can sense the agitation and repulsion stirring inside him as he types something into his phone. It's as if he can't wait for me to leave so he can make plans with someone better.

Someone who doesn't repel him the way I do.

My throat clogs as I blink back tears I refuse to shed.

I don't understand why hooking up with me causes him to act like this.

One second he's worshipping my body, and the next it's like my presence repulses him and he'd rather claw his eyes out than spend one more second in a room with me.

"Jace," I whisper, my voice a razor's edge from cracking.

"Oakley will be here in a few hours," he informs me. "You can stay here until then."

He can't even bring himself to share a car with me for the ten whole minutes it would take to drop me off?

Shoving his phone into the back pocket of his jeans, he heads for the door.

"Jace," I choke out, my voice shattering like glass.

Talk to me. Tell me what I did.

Why you hate me so much when I've never stopped loving you.

He pauses, his breathing staticky. "We can't do this anymore."

There are a million things I want to say, and even more, I want to ask.

Instead, I brush past him.

I have too much self-respect to let him reduce me to nothing. *I'm* the one leaving this time around.

"Tell Oakley I walked home," I say over my shoulder as I march out the door.

My heart rattles in my ribcage with every step I take.

I want him to run after me, tell me he made a mistake and that he'll never

let me go again...but he's already made it perfectly clear *I'm* the only mistake he made tonight.

Chapter 36

DYLAN

“*W*hy is it so freaking cold?” Sawyer gripes as we walk up the stands.

I feel her pain. The temperatures don’t usually drop below sixty-five in November, but tonight it’s almost fifty. Far too cold for our west coast blood.

“I don’t know, but I’m grateful it’s my first and last football game of the season.”

Behind us, Oakley groans. “Would you two quit your bitching? You’re putting negative energy into the universe right before my boy’s big game.”

“Whatever, you big hippie,” I tease as we find some empty seats and park our asses.

“Remind me again why we came tonight?” Sawyer says through chattering teeth. “I’m pretty sure my brain is frozen.”

I point to my cousin, who’s sitting between us. “Ask him.”

Oakley rolls his eyes. “I told you, Cole banned me from coming to any of his games because he thinks I’m bad luck.”

Sawyer scrunches her face. “So you’re here because...”

“It’s the last home game of the season,” he states with wide eyes. “I figure what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” He taps his head. “After all, luck only exists in here.” His voice drops down to a whisper. “Plus, I’ll be

out five-hundred bucks if the Vikings don't take the Knights."

Sawyer and I exchange a glance.

"You mean if the Knights don't take the Vikings."

Oakley looks sheepish. "Sure. Let's go with that."

Sawyer smacks his arm. "You bet *against* the Knights?"

I smack his other arm. "What is wrong with you? I thought Cole was your friend?"

Oakley looks around. "Will you two keep your voices down?" He rolls his shoulders. "Cole is my boy, but everyone in Royal Manor is banking on the Knights whooping the Vikings."

"Yeah, everyone except *you*," Sawyer points out.

"Pipe down, short stack." His expression turns pensive. "Like I said, *everyone* is banking on the Knights going to the state championship game... which means there's a hell of a lot of money on the line for some lucky asshole if the Vikings win."

"I thought you didn't believe in luck?"

"Yeah," Sawyer mocks while pointing to her head. "I thought luck only existed in here."

He makes a face. "Would you two get off my case?" He pulls out his phone. "Talk amongst yourselves until the game starts...and then..." He makes a zipping motion across his lips before focusing back on his phone.

"Fine," Sawyer says before focusing on me. "Have you decided what you're going to do yet?"

"I'm not sure there's really anything *to* do." I shrug. "I gave the shoes to my aunt. She was a little confused since she told me not to worry about it but otherwise thankful."

She wasn't the only one.

Two days ago, I opened my locker to find a box containing a pair of Louboutins identical to the ones I wore the night I took an unsolicited dip in Jace's pool.

To say I was shocked was an understatement, but then Oakley let it slip that a few days after our disastrous night together Jace asked him to find out my aunt's shoe size so he could order her a new pair.

Evidently, they were on backorder due to the upcoming holidays, but he was able to track down a pair this week.

The thought of Jace Covington jumping through hoops so he could get my aunt a pair of shoes is...mind-boggling.

Especially since we haven't spoken.

Sawyer purses her lips. "I'd say text him, but after wham, bam, thank you ma 'am-ing you before kicking yo—"

"Okay," Oakley declares. "That's enough girl talk."

Sawyer looks over his head. "I think they're serving gourmet hot chocolate at the concession stand tonight. Want to get some?"

It will be the most expensive cocoa powder and water I've ever had, but it's freezing, so I'm game. "Sure, let's go." I look at Oakley. "Want anything?"

He starts to speak but Sawyer cuts him off. "Dylan, he's a traitor. Let the boy fend for himself."

I suspect my girl may be a not-so-secret fan of the Knights.

Or maybe just Cole. Then again, she still swears she doesn't like him and claims he makes her skin crawl...so maybe not.

"Sorry, cous. Knights' fans only," I say before we scurry down the stairs.

"Are you going to Christian's tonight?" Sawyer asks after we get in line.

"Probably not. I'm pooped."

She frowns. "I forgot you had to work on Thanksgiving." She gives her head a shake. "Even my boss wasn't that heartless, and that's saying something."

Yup, Sawyer's boss at *Cluck You*—the chicken restaurant she works at—makes mine look like a saint.

"It wasn't so bad. Only a half-day yesterday. Granted we were slammed

the whole time.”

So slammed Mrs. Dickinson let everyone order whatever they wanted without argument.

“Are you working tomorrow?”

Nope. Normally I work on Saturdays, but I’ll be doing something much worse.

Visiting my dad in jail.

My aunt said he’s been calling and asking her to convince me to see him.

I wasn’t going to, but then I recalled Jace’s assumption about my relationship with my father being better now that Savannah was out of the picture.

Obviously, that’s not the case, but it still struck a chord with me.

I never saw him being in jail as an opportunity to reconnect, but now that the dust has settled, I’m hopeful I can salvage my relationship with him.

It would be awesome if something positive came out of such a disaster.

Sawyer waves a hand up and down. “Earth to Dylan.”

Oh, shit. “No,” I answer. “I’m not working tomorrow.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Are you okay?”

I chew my bottom lip, debating the right words to say. Sawyer knows all about the drama with my dad, but I don’t want her doing her typical Sawyer thing and well...caring.

The girl will end up baking me cookies, offering to drive the two hours it takes to get to the jail, queuing up my favorite songs on the way there, and giving me her shoulder to cry on in the process.

It makes her an incredible friend, but I don’t want her to feel like she did something wrong when I’m not responsive to it.

Ever since I found my mother dead on the kitchen floor, I’ve learned to bury all my feelings and emotions regarding her death and other bad shit into a box and tuck it away.

According to the therapist my dad forced me to see when I was younger,

it was my way of coping with something so heavy at a young age.

Then again, she also told my dad it was only a matter of time before I'd snap, and that has yet to happen, so fuck her.

"I uh...I'm visiting my dad," I whisper so no one around us will hear.

Her eyes widen. "What? Really? Wow...that's huge."

I know. "Yeah, but I don't want to make a big deal out of it."

She eyes me skeptically. "Afraid you might chicken out?"

I'm starting to hate how perceptive she is. "Yeah."

She gives my hand a small squeeze. "I'm here if you need me."

I know.

Fortunately, we're next in line.

We order our hot chocolates—and one for Oakley because we're both softies—and make our way back to the stands.

At least, that was the plan. I'm so distracted by the idea of seeing my dad, I'm not paying attention and I bump into someone. Hot chocolate spills over the side of my cup, but I'm too focused on Jace to care.

His full lips and chiseled cheekbones are slightly flushed from the cold and both hands are tucked into the pocket of his black hoodie.

As always, he looks so gorgeous it makes my breath catch.

The bastard.

"Watch where you're going."

And he's not alone.

Casey—Britney's second in command, and the one slated to take over her position as cheer captain next year—is next to him.

I can't help but notice that the Knights' jacket draped over her shoulders is three times too big for her petite frame and shields most of her cheerleading uniform.

It's obviously not hers.

My heart twists painfully in my chest.

Jace grabs a napkin from a nearby table and hands it to me, but I back

away.

I don't want anything from him...ever.

All he does is hurt me.

For the briefest of moments, his eyes soften. "Dyl—"

"Come on, Jace. I have to be back on the field in two minutes," Casey says curtly.

She huffs when he doesn't budge. "Fine. I'll get my own bottle of water." She shrugs out of her jacket and throws it at him. "Give your brother his jacket back after the game." Her eyes sharpen on Sawyer. "I don't want my boyfriend getting mad at me."

Beside me, Sawyer tenses up.

I'd heard a rumor about Cole and Casey being an item, but after the Britney rumor turned out to be false, I assumed this one was too.

The flummoxed look on Sawyer's face tells me I'm not the only one.

Appearing satisfied, Casey flutters her fingers in a dainty wave before skipping off to the concession stand.

Jace's eyes ping-pong between us like he wants to say something, but I'm not interested.

I chuck one of my hot chocolates and grab Sawyer's hand, because even though she might not say it, I know she needs the support.

For some reason, she truly believed Cole was a good guy underneath his flirty, outgoing exterior.

But he's not. Neither of them are.

The only good Covington brother is dead.

"Breathe," I whisper as we brush past him. "You're gonna be fine."

Although I'm not sure who I'm trying to comfort. Her or myself.



“*W*hat the hell?” Oakley mutters when the kicker for the Vikings

misses their field goal. “That was our only hope!”

Sawyer and I exchange a glance. *Hardly.*

We’re in the fourth quarter and the score is twenty-three to three in favor of the Knights.

Even if the kicker scored, it still wouldn’t be enough to put the Vikings ahead.

From the stands I see number sixteen—who Sawyer pointed out earlier was Tommy—punch his hand in frustration.

Can’t say I blame him. They’re getting creamed tonight.

Sawyer rubs her hands together and blows on them. “There’s only a minute left in the game.”

It’s adorable how into this she is, despite lucky number seven—aka Cole—being a douche canoe.

The excitement throughout the stands is infectious as we watch the Knights get into formation. Over the fan noise, Cole’s voice is barely audible as he calls the play, sending both teams into motion. He pulls back and launches the ball down the field, bringing the crowd to their feet.

I’m focused on the player catching the ball when I hear Sawyer scream Cole’s name. My gaze snaps back just in time to see him picked up off his feet from behind and slammed down onto the turf. Dread floods my stomach as his head bounces off the ground at an abnormal angle, and he lands on his neck and shoulder.

“What the hell just happened?” Oakley yells.

“He hit him so late. Cole never saw it coming,” Sawyer says, her voice wobbly.

A combination of anger and shock fills me when I realize who’s responsible for it. “It was Tommy.”

The refs run in, throwing yellow flags as number sixteen climbs off Cole and throws his hands up in the air, acting as though he made a great play.

The asshole is celebrating...while Cole’s lying there...lifeless.

“Oh my God. He’s not moving,” Sawyer croaks out as her hands fly to her face. “Cole’s not moving.”

Beside me, Oakley goes rigid. “What the actual *fuck*? Cole already threw the ball, there was no reason for Tommy to touch him!”

I don’t know the mechanics of the game, or who’s not supposed to do what, but I do know that hit was beyond brutal. Opponent or not, Tommy shouldn’t be happy about it.

Not unless he did it on purpose like Oakley’s implying.

I clutch my stomach as I watch the medics rush onto the field.

“Is he gonna be…”

My heart’s in my throat as Jace jumps over the chain-link fence faster than lightning.

“Shit.” Oakley flies down the stairs and I follow after him as fast as my feet will carry me.

People in the stands start shouting as Jace makes a beeline for Tommy, but I tune them out.

Oakley and I pick up our pace, rushing through the gate, but it’s too late. Tommy’s already on the ground and Jace is hovering over him, twisting his leg at an odd angle. Tommy struggles to get away, but Jace’s grip is iron-clad.

We’re barely on the field when I hear the snap of bone and Tommy screaming in agony.

Seconds later, a bunch of men in Viking’s uniforms swarm around them, blocking our view, but not before Tommy howls again.

“You two, off the field,” someone barks at us as they take Cole away in an ambulance.

“Let me go,” Jace roars at the players restraining him.

He’s practically foaming at the mouth like a vicious animal. His dark orbs are locked on Tommy who’s writhing on the grass, shouting something incoherent about his leg and wrist.

“I’m not finished with him.”

The sadistic look in his eyes sends a chill up my spine.

“The police will take it from here,” someone states before the medics rush over to Tommy.

As if on cue, I hear the sirens looming in the distance.

“Shit.” Oakley pulls out his phone as someone official escorts us off the field.

“Who are you calling?”

My heart is beating a mile a minute. All I want to do is run out there and protect Jace, but two officers are slapping cuffs on him and dragging him away.

“Hey, Dad,” Oakley says into his phone. “I’m gonna need you to meet me at the police station, pronto.”

Chapter 37

DYLAN

I'm gazing out the window of a Greyhound when my phone vibrates.

I pick up on the first ring, silently praying for good news. The last update Oakley gave me was that they were keeping Cole overnight.

When I asked how bad his injuries were, he said he didn't know. They were still running tests.

"Hey," I answer. "Any news?"

"Yeah," Oakley says. "Concussion...a bad one. But they're discharging him later today."

I breathe a sigh of relief and make a mental note to text Sawyer the latest update as soon as we hang up. Poor girl has been up half the night praying.

"Thank God."

"I know." He snickers. "Can't say the same for the asshole, though. Rumor has it Jace fucked him up so bad he'll be in the hospital for a couple weeks...at least."

"He deserves it," I utter before a horrifying thought hits me.

After Jace beat the living shit out of Tommy for hurting his brother, he was dragged off the field in cuffs.

Surely the severity of Tommy's injuries would mean worse charges for Jace.

“What about Jace?”

“I told you,” Oakley starts. “My dad took care of it. He’s a dick sometimes, but he’s legit the best defense attorney in the state. Jace was released late last night. He’s at the hospital if you want to swing by and see him.”

“I can’t,” I say as the bus pulls up to the station. “I...uh. I have a thing.”

“What kind of thing?”

“It’s not important. I’ll fill you in later tonight.”

“Um...okay,” Oakley says uneasily. “If you need me, call me.”

“I will. Thanks for the update on Cole. I’m really glad he’s okay.”

“Me too,” he says. “Scared the shit out of me. It’s safe to say I’m never going to another game of his again.”

“It wasn’t your fault. It was Tommy’s.”

He didn’t just cross a line last night, he bulldozed over it. I’m ashamed I was ever into him.

“Yeah, well. There’s a good reason I never liked that motherfucking assface douchebag,” Oakley spits before he clears his throat. “Oh, shit. Gotta go. The nurses are giving me dirty looks and asking if I’m family.”

I shoulder my purse and walk off the bus. “Talk to you later.”

“Yo chill, lady. Cole’s my brother from another mother,” I hear Oakley shout before hanging up.



I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans as the door opens and the bailiff brings my father out.

All things considered, he doesn’t look too terrible. There are bags under

his eyes, his lean frame is a little thinner, and the orange jumpsuit looks all wrong on him, but his eyes sparkle with optimism when he sees me.

I offer him a rueful smile as he takes a seat on his side of the plexiglass and reaches for the phone.

I pick up the one on my side. “You look good.”

His smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “I was gonna say the same thing to you.” He points to his head. “What happened to the blue?”

“It’s against RHA’s dress code, so I had to get rid of it.”

He nods in understanding. “How are things? Crystal told me you’re still getting straight A’s, and you met a friend.”

“Sawyer,” I inform him. “And yeah, she’s amazing. I’m lucky to have her.”

His eyes crinkle at the corners. “Look at that—you both have boy names.”

I can’t help but laugh. The one and only thing my parents had in common, other than love, was their taste in music. Specifically, their favorite artist, Bob Dylan.

My dad wanted to name me Bob, whether or not I was a boy, but thankfully my mom insisted on Dylan.

“That we do.” I look around. There aren’t a lot of visitors. “How are you holding up in here?”

“I’m okay. The food sucks and they only let us out for an hour a day, but it could be worse.” He looks down at his feet. “I get lonely sometimes.”

Something in my chest dislodges and I’m about to promise him I’ll visit more...until his next statement.

“Savannah’s been visiting me a lot lately, though...keeping my spirits up.”

I feel like I’ve been dunked in a vat of ice water. “I thought she wanted a divorce?”

A genuine smile lights up his face. “No, we’ve worked things out.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Sitting up in my seat, I move closer to the glass. “Dad, *she’s* the reason you’re in here.”

Sadness lines his face. “No, tator tot. I have no one to blame but myself for this mess.”

I’m all for people taking responsibility for their actions, but Savannah definitely played a part in all this.

“I was there, remember? She was always complaining about you not making enough money, meanwhile she was spending almost every dime you earned while *she* sat on her ass all day. She put too much pressure on you... made you feel like you weren’t good enough.” I place my hand on the glass, hoping to get through to him. “She was wrong, Dad. You are good enough and you don’t need her.”

We don’t need her.

“Savannah’s a good woman,” he begins. “She—”

“Mom was a million times better,” I say, because someone has to make him see the light. “Mom never would have pushed you for any of the material crap Savannah did. She *never* would have made you feel worthless. Mom loved you. Savannah *uses* you. Big difference.”

Briefly, I see pain flash in his eyes before he bows his head. “Last I checked, your mother wasn’t coming back from the grave we buried her in ten years ago, Dylan.” He lifts his gaze to mine. “I know you and Savannah have your differences, but you’re gonna have to learn to get along.”

Never. I will *never* get along with that manipulating witch. She can kiss my skinny ass. “No—”

“She’s pregnant.” His eyes gleam. “You’re finally gonna be a big sister, tator tot. It’s why I wanted you to visit me...so I could tell you in person.”

I clutch my chest. I can’t breathe. I can’t...

“What?” The room is spinning. “How is that even possible? It’s almost December. You’ve been in here since August.”

“She’s four months along,” he says slowly, like I’m dense.

That may be true, but my spidey-senses are telling me something is very fishy about all this. They've been married for years, but Savannah just so happens to get pregnant...while her husband is in prison.

Sounds more like she got knocked up by the first guy she could find after my dad was arrested, and *that* guy didn't want to stick around.

"You shouldn't be so quick to believe her." I hold his stare. "Do us both a favor and have a paternity test done before you take responsibility for this baby."

Outrage crosses over his face. "She's my wife."

Frustration bubbles inside me. "And I'm your *daughter*." I glare at him. "Something you always seem to forget."

"What are you talking about? I've done nothing but provide for you all these years."

Shelling out money for your kid doesn't make you a parent...it just makes you a donor.

A real parent builds a relationship with their child.

A real parent takes the time to nurture and learn who their child is as a person.

A *real* parent doesn't let their child feel unloved and unwanted for a single day, let alone years.

"Unlike your wife, I never wanted your money. All I ever wanted was *you*." I shrug helplessly. "But you weren't there."

He blinks. "I'm having trouble understanding exactly what it is you're implying."

As usual, he doesn't get it. He's too wrapped up in Savannah.

"I'm saying I had one parent...and she's gone."

"That's not true," he protests. "I've been here your whole life."

"Yeah, like a ghost. We don't talk. You don't know my hopes, my dreams, my fears. Hell, you don't even know my favorite color."

"Yes, I do. It's pink."

“It’s blue,” I scream. “Pink was mom’s favorite color.”

He scrubs a hand down his face and sighs. “I don’t know what you want me to say here, Dylan.”

Nothing.

I stand. “Not a damn thing. Just like the last ten years.”

I shouldn’t have to work so hard to get him to love me.

I shouldn’t have to fight so hard to make him understand how much he’s hurting me.

“Sit down.”

I jab the glass with my finger. “No. I am *done*. You want to keep burying your head in the sand while Savannah walks all over you? Be my guest. But I’m not sticking around for it.” I snatch my purse off the counter. “Congrats on your new baby. I hope you don’t ignore *this* one and fuck the whole parenting thing up like you did with me.”

With that, I turn and walk out.

Fuck his wife.

Fuck his new baby.

Fuck *him*.

Chapter 38

DYLAN

*M*y phone rings for the third time in four hours.

Sawyer's name flashes across the screen and I press the ignore button again.

As soon as I walked through the front door, I told my aunt I didn't feel good and had no intention of talking about the visit with my father. *Ever.*

I've been holed up in my bedroom ever since. *Barely holding it together.*

My phone vibrates with an incoming text:

Sawyer: You don't have to talk. I just want you to know I'm here if you need me.

Guilt prickles my chest. It's not Sawyer's fault he's an asshole.

Putting the phone to my ear, I call her back.

She answers on the first ring. "Hey."

"Hey," I whisper. "I'm not ignoring you. I'm just...I'm in a really bad head space right now."

One small nudge off the tightrope and I'll go tumbling.

"I'm sorry." I can hear the hesitation in her voice before she says, "I was thinking about making a midnight fast food run if you want to come with."

I look at the clock on my nightstand. It's only ten forty-five. "It's not midnight yet."

She laughs. "I know, but I've been trying a new diet this week, and I'm seriously going to rip my hair out if I don't get a cheeseburger in my system soon."

It's my turn to laugh. "I guess for the sake of your gorgeous hair, I have to come, don't I?"

"Yes. Trust me, I don't have the bone structure to pull off bald." Her voice drops a little. "We don't have to talk about today if you don't want to. We can just drive around, gorge ourselves on greasy burgers, and listen to your favorite rock music."

"Sounds perfect to me." I pry myself off the bed. "Mind if I ask Oak to tag along? He texted me on my way home from the prison and told me he broke up with Hayley for good. He could probably use a pick me up, too."

"Wow...that's...I mean, a blind person could see that coming from a mile away, but yeah. Tell him to come hang. I'll be there in twenty."

"Awesome. See you then," I say before ending the call and texting Oakley.

After I put on a pair of Chucks and check my phone, I wander across the hall to Oakley's room.

I knock four times but he doesn't answer, so I head for the kitchen. Lord knows it's his second favorite room in the house. The first being the basement.

There's no sign of him.

I'm about to ask my aunt and uncle if they've seen him, but I remember my aunt mentioned something about going to some kind of charity auction tonight.

Lifting my phone to my ear, I call his cell. I'm lazy and don't want to walk all the way downstairs and back up if he's not there.

It rings a few times before going to voicemail.

Hmm.

A weird sensation tugs in my gut as I turn the doorknob to the basement. *I hope he didn't have a seizure.*

I tread down the stairs, but stagger to a stop when I hear voices.

"I miss you," Oakley says, his speech slurred.

I roll my eyes. *Here we go again.* Another round on the Hayley train.

I'm about to walk back upstairs, but the next voice I hear stops me in my tracks.

"I told you, it's over. We can't keep doing this."

I shake my head, convinced I'm hearing things.

"It's killing me," Oakley says, his voice thick with emotion. "I can't take it."

They're the very same words he said the night I found him drunk upstairs at Christian's.

Oh, my God. Oakley wasn't kissing me...he thought I was *her*.

"I'm so sorry I hurt you," my aunt says. "But I love my husband."

Bile works up my throat. *No.* There's no way this is happening.

"You and I both know that's not true," Oakley grits out. "You're just scared of losing your ATM machine."

"How dare you. You know I'm not like that."

"Then prove it," Oakley says. "Run away with me. Just like we talked about."

I have to cover my mouth so I don't gasp.

"You're out of your mind."

"No," he objects. "For the first time, I'm finally thinking clearly."

There's nothing but the sound of heavy panting and then, "We have to be quick. Wayne will be home any minute."

"Good. I want him to see how good I fuck his wife while he's gone." My aunt moans as the sounds of skin slapping together assault my ears. "Show him how much she loves taking his son's dick."

The room spins and I grab the banister so I don't fall.

This has to be a mistake. I know my aunt. She would never do something like this. She's a good person. She would never cheat on her husband or use her teenage stepson to get her rocks off.

No. I don't believe it. I refuse to. Shaking my head, I tiptoe down the stairs.

This is a sick joke.

A stupid, sick...

My stomach lurches as Oakley furiously drives himself into my aunt who's bent over the couch moaning his name.

They're so into what they're doing they don't even see me.

My mind wants to reject the entire scene as I dart up the stairs and close the door behind me. *But I can't*. It's too real. Too raw. Too...

"Hey, Dylan," Wayne greets me as he walks through the front door. "Is your aunt upstairs?"

"My aunt?" I squeak.

"Yeah, I tried calling her on my way home from the auction to see if she needed anything, but she didn't answer."

"Oh?" It's like my brain can't form a cohesive thought to save my life.

"Yeah, last time we spoke, she said she still wasn't feeling good." He smiles. "Between me and you, I think the morning sickness is getting to her."

My heart stops. "Morning sickness?"

He shrugs. "Yeah, I mean we haven't confirmed it officially yet, but she's been sick for almost a week now."

Oh...she is *sick* all right.

And so am I. Nausea hits me with a force so strong, my breath catches. *She's destroying her entire family...just like my dad.*

"Whoa, kiddo. Are you okay?"

No. No, I'm not.

I stagger to the front door like a drunk person. "I, uh. I need some air."

The second my feet hit the welcome mat, big, ugly tears roll down my cheeks, mirroring the rainstorm outside.

She's the one I go to for advice. The only adult I had left to look up to.

The last good piece of my mom.

I'm all alone now. I no longer have a family. I don't have...

Something inside me snaps and I take off running like a bat out of hell... speeding toward the only person in the world who will understand.

The only person who can make it better.

The only one who can put me back together again.

Chapter 39

JACE

I pause when I pass Cole on the staircase. His jacket's on and his car keys are in his hand.

"Where are you going?"

He shrugs. "It's Saturday night."

Over my dead body is he getting drunk at Christian's tonight. Hell, he shouldn't even be driving for another few hours. Especially in this crazy ass weather. We rarely get storms here, and this is the second one in a month.

"You were discharged three hours ago. Stay your ass home."

He levels me with a look. "Dad doesn't have a problem with it."

No surprise there. The second he heard Cole's injuries weren't dire, he went back to the office and he's been there ever since.

I'm also willing to bet Cole didn't even ask him, he's just trying to get under my skin.

"Fine. Next time you need something, make sure to ask your sperm donor."

I brush past him, but he stops me. "I'll stay home."

I give him a curt nod. "Good choice."

He squeezes the back of his neck. "Look, I know we didn't talk about it at the hospital, but what you did..."

“I don’t need a thank you.”

He’s my little brother. Going after the person who hurt him—especially *that* motherfucker—wasn’t even a thought, it was instinct.

If the Vikings didn’t pull me off him when they did, I’d still be sitting in a jail cell...facing twenty years to life.

Cole’s expression is uneasy as he digs his hands in his pockets. “I guess what I’m trying to say is...I would have done the same for you.”

I raise a brow. “Really?”

My brother has no qualms about being selfish. Just because I have his back doesn’t mean I expect him to have mine.

I fight my own battles.

“I don’t know, maybe.” Grinning, he shrugs. “It’s the thought that counts, right?”

My lips twitch. “Asshole.”

“Never claimed I wasn’t.” His expression turns serious. “I know we don’t say it...but...” His voice trails off.

This conversation is officially awkward as fuck, but I catch his drift. “Yeah. Ditto.”

If Cole or Bianca think I won’t go to the ends of the earth and back protecting them, they’re dead wrong.

He blows out a breath. “Now that we got that out of the way, wanna play some *Black Ops*?”

“Wow, you really do love me if you’re willing to play—”

A loud thwack against the house cuts me off mid-sentence.

“What was that?”

He lifts a shoulder. “Beats me. Probably the storm.”

“Yeah, you’re proba—”

Another thump, much louder than before, has us both running up the stairs.

“Bianca?” I shout.

She comes out of her room as we reach the hallway. “What?”

“Are you okay?”

She looks at me like I’ve sprouted another head. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You didn’t hear that?” Cole asks.

She makes a face. “Yeah, but I figured your dumbass dropped something.” She motions to her door. “Can I go no—”

The sound of glass shattering has the three of us sprinting down the hall.

Thinking quick, I grab Bianca’s arm and yank her back. “Stay here.”

“Seriously?”

Swear this girl’s sole ambition in life is to give me a heart attack before I’m twenty.

The look I give her must make it clear not to press me, because she relents.

“It’s your window, Jace,” Cole shouts.

I mutter a curse when I enter my room, taking in the glass on the floor, the big-ass rock, and the busted window. *Shit* is right.

Cole rubs his chin. “Think it was Tommy?”

“Doubtful.”

Not only is the fucker without wheels, he’s also without legs.

Well, one of them at least.

Cole catches the next rock that sails through my now broken window. “Well, whoever it is, he’s still out there.” He flaps his hand around. “And he has a killer arm.”

I seize his shirt sleeve when he takes a step forward. “No.”

Last thing he needs is to get pummeled in the head with a rock and develop another concussion.

I march across the room to my window, narrowly missing the next rock. “Hey, assho—”

I freeze when I see Dylan. Although I’m having a hard time believing it’s actually her because she’s...a wreck.

I can count on one hand the number of times I've seen her cry. *Because she doesn't.*

"Shit."

Without thinking, I charge out of my room.

By the time I reach her, she's doubled over on my front lawn in the pouring rain, clawing at the grass and dry heaving.

Something in my chest dislodges. I want to find whoever's responsible for this and beat them to a bloody pulp. No *worse*.

Much. Worse.

"What—"

"The fuck?" Cole says behind me, taking the words from my mouth.

"What the hell is *she* doing here?" Bianca snaps before her eyes zero in on Dylan. "You couldn't just knock on the door like a normal person, bitch?"

I spin around to face them. "Go inside. Both of you."

"Now," I yell when they don't move.

Bianca wants to protest, like she always does, but Cole takes hold of her forearm and leads her inside.

I focus my attention back on Dylan.

"Hey." I approach her as one would a bomb. With caution. "What happened?"

She doesn't answer. She can't.

The girl is so beside herself, her small body is shaking with the force of her sobs.

I've never seen someone so upset.

Not since...

Stuffing the ball of pain down, I place my hand on the small of her back. Her clothes are soaked.

The temperature is barely over fifty degrees and it's windy as fuck outside. At this rate, she'll get pneumonia before she's able to tell me what's

wrong.

Wrapping an arm around her waist, I haul her into my arms.

She burrows her head against my chest, clutching my shirt for dear life.

“Breathe, baby. I got you.” With a heart full of lead, I carry her inside.

I’ve spent the last four years pining for the opportunity to destroy this girl’s life so I could watch her break.

Who knew success would taste so fucking bitter.



*M*y window is boarded up with a large piece of cardboard and Cole is sweeping the glass into a dustpan by the time I enter my bedroom.

“Thanks.”

He continues sweeping. “I owed you one. Figured this was the least I could do.”

I start to deposit Dylan on my bed, but she fastens her arms around my neck and locks her legs around my waist.

“I need to find you clothes,” I tell her, but it only makes her tighten her grip more.

“I can ask Bianca to lend her some,” Cole suggests.

Yeah, that will go over like a fart in church.

“Nah. I got this.”

Carrying a distraught Dylan, I head over to my dresser. I pull out a sweatshirt and pajama pants with a drawstring.

They’ll be too big on her, but it’s the best I can do.

Reaching between us, I start to unbutton Dylan’s jeans, but my eyes land on Cole. “A little privacy.”

He waggles his eyebrows. “I read you loud and clear, brother.”

Yeah, because emotionally unstable chicks are such a turn-on.

The door clicks closed, and I plop us down on my bed.

She's still crying and shaking, so I feel like shit when I have to pry her death grip from around my neck, but I don't have a choice. I need to put dry clothes on her.

Her teeth begin chattering when I remove her shirt.

"I know," I say as I place the new one over her head. "We'll get you under the covers and warmed up soon."

Christ. I don't know who this guy caring for the girl he's supposed to hate like she's the most precious thing on earth is...

Actually, I do.

It's me...circa four years ago.

Back when the girl crying in my arms was my best friend.

My everything.

Forcing my dick not to react, I stand her up and slide her jeans down her hips. Then I slip my pajama pants on her and tie the drawstring tight so they don't fall.

"You gonna tell me what happened?"

Whose ass I'm kicking.

Whose life I'm destroying.

Whose blood will be on my goddamn hands for being stupid enough to hurt you.

"My dad," she croaks.

"I thought—"

"Savannah...the baby."

Oh shit.

I'm starting to get the picture, until she chokes out, "Oakley...my aunt Crystal...you." The guttural sound she makes goes straight through me like a bullet. "Everything is so fucked up. I can't...I *can't*..."

The muscles in my chest draw tight. Our demons are almost identical, and

it's clear hers are wreaking havoc right now.

For once, Dylan can't fight them off on her own.

Wrapping my arms around her, I pull her close. "It's okay. You don't have to."

I'll fight this battle for you.

Chapter 40

DYLAN

The sound of thunder booming wakes me up with a jolt, but strong arms clutch me tighter.

Jace.

I'd recognize his touch anywhere.

It's like a warm blanket wrapped around me in the middle of a snowstorm. *Keeping me safe and warm.*

"It's just thunder," he whispers against my temple.

Turning in bed, I face him. "How long was I asleep?"

"Three hours and seventeen minutes."

"Wow, that's...*precise.*"

The edge of his thumb traces my jaw. "How are you?"

He's looking at me with so much concern, I fear my heart might burst right out of my chest.

"Better."

Because of him.

After I ran over here like a psycho during a meltdown, Jace took care of me.

No, more than that.

He listened without judgment as I unleashed everything I've been

keeping inside.

My problems. My fears. My *pain*.

And then he held me while I cried myself to sleep.

His eyes search my face. “You should get some more rest.”

I’m about to concede, because the exhaustion coursing through my body makes me feel like I could sleep for weeks and it still wouldn’t be enough, but then I remember.

I bolt up. “Oh my God, Sawyer. We were—”

“Relax.” He nods to my phone on his nightstand. “Your phone kept ringing, so I answered it. I told Sawyer you were going through shit and spending the night here.”

Oh. “How did that conversation go?”

Amusement lines his face. “After asking for photographic evidence proving you were safe, she threatened to take a chainsaw to my nuts and my brother’s if I didn’t return you in one piece.”

That’s my girl. “I’ll give her a call in the morning.” Nausea barrels into me. “I should probably tell my cheating, *cradle robbing* aunt I’m here.”

Slinging an arm over my waist, he eases me back on his bed. “Don’t have to. I told Oak to cover for you and say you’re spending the night at Sawyer’s house.”

“Oh.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask if he told Oakley what I walked in on, but I can’t without bile rising up my esophagus.

“I...uh...” My voice trembles with the threat of tears and I clear it. “I don’t know why I’m being so dramatic about this. It’s just...”

“Someone you loved made a mistake.” I feel the muscles in his body knot up. “One that permanently changed who they were in your eyes.”

That’s exactly it. “I don’t know how to get past this. Between her and my father...”

“I know. I get it.” He rises up on his elbow and stares down at me. “At

least I *thought* I did.”

Lifting my hand, I trace the curve of his eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Maybe everything isn’t so absolute, you know?” He exhales sharply. “I used to believe everything was black and white...right and wrong. But now I’m starting to think people might not be the sum of their greatest achievements...or their worst mistakes.” He swallows thickly. “Maybe someone can do the cruelest thing imaginable...and somehow...still be a good person underneath.”

I think about this for a moment and realize he has a point. My aunt did something awful, but she’s still my aunt.

She’s still the one who drove four hours to see me when I got my period for the first time, and then whisked me away to my first concert to celebrate. The woman who took me shopping for my first bra. The person who didn’t even hesitate to take me in when my dad ended up in jail.

“The bad doesn’t always erase the good,” I whisper.

“No.” His eyes cut to mine. “I think it just blends.”

Kind of like the sky. The clouds are in the way, but it doesn’t make the blue any less beautiful.

Unfortunately, Jace’s concept doesn’t apply to everyone.

“I might be able to salvage the relationship with my aunt, but I can’t say the same for my father. It hurts too much.” The tears welling in my eyes spill down the sides of my face. “He doesn’t want me, Jace. He stopped loving me the day she died.”

I force myself to breathe and try to calm down, but it’s no use. I’ve unearthed the underbelly of the beast.

The cold, hard realization that you’re unloved by the *one* person who’s supposed to love you the most is the worst feeling in the world.

My chest heaves and it becomes a struggle to breathe. “Sometimes I’m not sure if *anyone* loves—”

His mouth is on mine so fast, I’m breathless.

The possession in his kiss is absolute...as if he has a point to prove.

And my heart is so tattered and needy for him, I soak it up like a sponge. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I pull him closer.

I part my thighs and he settles between them. Instantly, the feeling in my chest kicks up a notch, going from soft and needy to urgent and frantic.

I need this...need *him* so badly I'm willing to put myself directly in the line of fire again.

Raising my pelvis, I grind against him and he groans. I can feel how much he wants me, and I want him just as much, if not more.

We stare at each other, both panting before our lips meet again. Our kiss grows hungry, all-consuming, like a rocket right before blastoff.

My hands tug at the fabric of his t-shirt, there's too much clothing between us. "I need this off."

Breaking the kiss, he reaches behind him and pulls his shirt over his head.

But it's not good enough for me. *I need more.*

His lips descend until they coast along my neck, but he doesn't bite, he nips and licks my flesh until I'm clawing at his shoulders. "More."

It's the only word I'm capable of at this point.

Reaching for the hem of my sweatshirt, I peel it off and toss it across the room. My bra quickly follows, courtesy of Jace.

His eyes are hooded as he stares at my breasts and my insides swoop when his mouth dips, ghosting over my nipple. He teases and taunts me with his breath on my skin until finally, his lips part and he sucks me with greedy pulls.

I stroke his neck when he moves to the other one and lavishes it with the same attention. "That feels so good."

"It's about to feel even better," he rasps, lowering himself down my body.

Warmth surges through me when he kisses the spot under my navel and

unties the drawstring of my pants.

I raise my hips and he pulls them off, along with my panties.

He smirks coyly as his gaze settles on where I'm wet and aching, like he knows what he's about to do is going to drive me absolutely out of my mind.

I gasp when his head disappears between my thighs and he plants hot, sloppy, open mouth kisses up and down my slit.

My toes curl and I wiggle with need.

"Jace, please," I beg when I can't take it any longer.

His head snaps up and he places his finger over his lips, reminding me to be quiet because his siblings are right down the hall.

Oh God. I have no idea how I'm supposed to be silent when...

I slap a hand over my mouth as long fingers spread me open and his tongue licks me into a helpless frenzy.

I glance down and find he's staring up at me. The heat swirling in his dark orbs sears my skin as he suckles my clit and slides a finger inside.

Squirming, I bite my hand because my orgasm is close, and I can't make a sound.

I buck my hips into his mouth as he relentlessly draws every ounce of pleasure from my body until I'm shaking and spasming.

I barely have a chance to catch my breath before he climbs up my body and attacks my lips.

Lust rushes through me when he grinds against my core, hitting all the right places. I arch my back, silently pleading for more.

The tips of his fingers press into my jaw and he searches my face, as if seeking permission.

I nod. He already has my heart, if he wants my body and all my fucked-up fragments too, I'll gladly hand those right over.

God knows I want every single jagged piece of Jace Covington there is to have. *I don't care how sharp and deep the cuts will be.*

Inclining his head, he maps kisses down my throat while reaching into the

nightstand for a condom. “Spread your legs for me, baby.”

I do, without hesitation.

Kneeling in the open space between them, he shoves his sweatpants down. Anticipation floods through my veins when his cock springs free, long and thick. It twitches and pulsates as he tears open the foil packet.

A low, strangled grunt leaves him when I wrap my hand around his length, giving it a light stroke. *Every part of him is perfect.* My pulse thuds in my ears as I swirl the fluid leaking from his tip around with my thumb before taking the condom and rolling it down.

His nostrils flare on an indrawn breath as he settles between my parted thighs, lining himself up with my entrance.

My blood quickens and I place my hand on his heart. It’s pounding just as fast as mine.

The space between us tightens and we lock gazes. Gently, he lifts my ass and angles his hips, slowly guiding his dick inside me.

He’s so big it almost hurts as I stretch to accommodate him.

A moan lodges in my throat when he drives forward, filling me to the hilt. I’ve had sex a few times before, but *this* is unlike anything I’ve ever experienced.

His eyes close and the muscles in his back ripple as he pulls out and pushes back in.

“Christ,” he groans low and deep. “You’re so goddamn tight.” His eyebrows pinch. “I can go slow.”

Spreading my thighs wider, I whisper, “Don’t.”

I bite back a whimper as he moves faster. Fucking me with quick, steady strokes.

His mouth finds mine and he gives me a slow, languid kiss. “You feel so fucking good.”

Me? This is all *him*. Every time he moves, a shiver of pleasure races through me.

I *never* knew it could feel like this. I want to have sex with Jace Covington every second of every day from here on out.

An incoherent sound leaves me when he thrusts again, hot and strong.

“Oh, God. Don’t stop.” My voice is thready, desperate.

Gripping the headboard with one hand, he picks up his pace, working me so well I have to bite down on his shoulder to stop from screaming.

His eyes lock with mine and something passes in his gaze. It’s as if he’s memorizing every moment of this. *He’s not the only one.*

Tension in my core tightens and my breathing becomes shallow when he reaches between us and rubs my clit.

The sensation is so intense my body vibrates. “I…”

I can’t speak. Hell, I can’t even move. I’m too far gone.

The coil of pressure snaps and pleasure slams into me so fast and harsh I swear I see actual stars.

He nuzzles the hollow of my throat as I clench and squeeze him. “That’s it, baby.” Shuddering, he thrusts harder, fucking my orgasm out of me. “Jesus Christ.”

My legs shake and I cling to his shoulders as the final ripple courses through my body.

Cupping my nape, he holds me steady as he pumps into me hard and fast one last time. “Fuck.” His cock pulses and a low, strangled grunt escapes him as a violent tremor runs through his frame.

My hands glide down his back as we both catch our breaths.

Emotion clogs my throat when I catch the pained look on his face and the storm brewing in his eyes.

Oh. God. He’s regretting this. Just like last time.

I start to move, but he halts me. “Stay.”

My vulnerability must be palpable because he shifts and pulls me into his arms.

I snuggle in close, pressing my cheek to his chest as his fingers trace the

curve of my back.

“I love you,” I whisper.

Always have. Always will.

When I look up, his eyes are closed. The soft, steady sound of his breathing tells me he’s already fast asleep.

Tilting my head, I plant a tender kiss on his chest.

It’s not long before the sound of his heart beating lulls me to sleep.

Chapter 41

JACE

Past...

I have to tell him the truth.

The longer I wait, the worse it will get.

The more he'll end up hating me.

Cracking my knuckles, I inhale a breath.

I need to get the fuck out of this closet and get it over with. Rip the sucker off like a Band-Aid so we can deal with it and move on.

Mind made up; I turn the knob and walk out.

Dylan said he was hanging out with Heather so maybe he...

Nope. Not a chance.

Liam's been in love with Dylan since the second he laid eyes on her.

I swear it was like nothing I'd ever seen before. He was a heartbeat away from turning into a cartoon with little birdies circling his damn head.

I didn't give a shit at the time, Dylan was my best friend and I still thought most girls were annoying and had cooties.

But then the same bug that bit him, turned around and unleashed its

venom into my veins.

From that moment, everything changed.

Dylan Taylor was no longer meant to be my best friend...she was meant to be my *everything*.

Problem was, Liam had already staked his claim.

Didn't matter that she was technically *mine* first.

I figured he'd get over his crush and move on, but he never did. If anything, his feelings for her continued to grow.

Right along with mine.

I tried to tell him so many times, but I couldn't get the words out.

Maybe if Liam was an asshole like Cole—or me, for that matter—it would have been easier.

But he's not. He's sensitive and compassionate. The kind of person who would give you the shirt right off his back if you needed it.

Life had already handed him a shit deal between his stuttering caused by anxiety from being in the crash that killed our mom, some facial scars from the accident, and the bouts of depression he tries to hide from everyone.

Just like our mother.

But every time he saw Dylan, he said it was like the sun was finally shining on him.

As his brother and friend, I refused to be the one to tear that away.

No matter how much I wanted her, I couldn't do that to him.

For *years*, I ignored my feelings and pretended they didn't exist.

Until the day she dared me to kiss her.

It confirmed my greatest desire and my worst fear.

She had feelings for me too.

I just hope like hell Liam will understand, because this thing between us...it's too powerful to ignore.

I sense the shift the moment I walk back into the gymnasium.
Something's off.

People are looking, some of them are whispering...others are laughing.
And there's no sign of Liam.

I catch Cole in my peripheral vision and grab him. "Where's Liam?"

He shrugs. "What do I look like, his keeper?"

No, but as the oldest, I am. And right now, there's a brick in my gut the size of Texas.

"Cole," I grit through my teeth.

"He ran home crying like a little bitch."

"Why?"

A hint of sympathy flashes in his eyes. "I'm not sure. Tommy and Liam left the gym for a few minutes. When they came back, Liam was crying and Tommy was grinning like a cat who ate a goldfish."

"Shit."

"It gets worse." He winces. "Tommy started pointing and laughing at him. Calling him a prissy fag. Pretty soon everyone else joined in." He averts his gaze. "Liam tried defending himself, but he was so upset he—"

"Got stuck on the first word."

He snorts. "More like the first letter. It was pretty brutal, even I felt bad for him."

Not bad enough to step in and do anything about it.

But I don't have time to worry about Cole and Liam's lousy relationship. I have more important shit to take care of.

Rage lights me up like an inferno and I scan the gym for Tommy. "Where the hell is he?"

I'm gonna shove my fist down his throat and rip out his goddamn tongue so he can never talk shit about Liam again.

"Not sure. I saw him leave a few minutes after Liam did."

I check my watch. "Dad won't be here for another half hour."

If he gets here, that is. Most of the time he's still working at his office and it's easier to walk the twenty minutes to our house rather than wait for him to

remember his kids.

“I’m gonna walk home.”

Cole nods. “Have fun. I’m gonna find Hay—”

I grip his jacket. “The fuck you are.”

Annoyance twists his features. “This isn’t *my* problem. Why do I have to —”

“Because you’re his brother, too.” I shove him. “Start acting like one, prick.”

“Fine. Whatever.” He looks over at Hayley and sighs. “Let’s go.”



*W*e make it home in fifteen.

Bianca’s parked on the sofa painting her nails. Given I see no signs of Mrs. Garcia—the babysitter my dad hires on the rare occasions me and my brothers aren’t around—I assume Liam is home.

“Liam is so mad at you,” Bianca says when she spots us.

Cole and I exchange a glance.

“It’s not *my* fault he ran out of the dance crying,” Cole says with a scowl. “Blame Tommy DaSilva.”

Considering Cole didn’t defend him tonight, Liam has a right to be pissed at him.

“Not you.” She looks at me. “You.”

“Me?” *That doesn’t make any sense.* “Did he say why?”

She thinks about this for a moment before replying, “Nope.” Smirking, she looks up at the ceiling. “But he did ask me where the bat was.”

As if on cue, there’s a loud crash upstairs.

Cole whistles. “I’m gonna take a guess and say you pointed him in the right direction.”

Bianca blows on her nails. “Duh.”

“Thanks a lot.”

I take the stairs two at a time.

Cole follows behind me. “What did you do?”

“I have no idea.”

“I’ve never seen him so mad before,” Bianca whisper-shouts.

Cole and I turn around. “Go downstairs.”

Pouting, she slinks down the staircase. “I hope Liam takes a bat to your balls.”

Great. Another sibling I’ve managed to tick off tonight.

Glass shattering assaults my ears as I open my bedroom door.

My stomach falls when I see my broken computer screen. “What the hell are you doing?”

Bat in hand, those angry green eyes swivel to me. “T-t-taking s-s-something you l-l-love aw-w-way.” He swings again, attacking the tower this time. “Maybe n-n-now you’ll k-k-know w-w-what it f-f-feels lik-k-ke.”

Jesus Christ. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I didn’t take anything away from—”

“Dylan,” he seethes, moving on to my Xbox. Various pieces of plastic and metal fly across the room. “I s-s-saw you two k-k-k-kissing in t-t-the c-c-c-loset.”

Shit. How do I even begin to explain this?

Easy...I can’t.

“About damn time,” Cole says unhelpfully.

“S-s-shut up,” Liam screams, his voice breaking.

Cole holds up his hands. “Bro, you’re acting like a psycho. Put the bat down.”

“No.” He strikes the stack of my most prized video games next. “You k-k-knew how m-m-much I l-l-loved her.”

He’s right. I did.

My chest feels like it’s made out of lead. “How did you find out?”

Dylan told me he was dancing with Heather, there's no way he could know we were in there.

"I j-j-just t-t-told you, dumbas-s-ss. I s-s-saw—"

"How did you know we were in the *closet*?" Cole's words from earlier detonate my brain. *Tommy*. "Goddammit."

He smashes my television next. "Tommy t-t-told me you were s-s-sneaking around b-b-behind my b-b-back. I didn't b-b-believe him, but he s-s-said he could p-p-prove it."

How did he know?

It doesn't matter. The only thing that matters right now is Liam thinks I betrayed him.

"I'm so—" The sound of my phone ringing cuts me off.

The ringtone tells me it's Dylan calling, but no way in hell am I going to answer it in front of him.

As if sensing my internal debate, Liam zeros in on me. "Is t-t-that her?"

Taking my cell out of my pocket, I turn it off. "Doesn't matter."

Shaking his head, he places my brand-new laptop on top of my desk.

I take a step toward him. "Liam, stop!"

Liam swings at the air between us before he flips my laptop open and proceeds to smash the screen and keyboard to smithereens.

"Did you t-t-tell her I l-l-loved her?" He swings again and his voice cracks. "Did you b-b-both g-g-get a g-g-good laugh?"

"No." Liam made me promise never to tell her until he was ready. I swore I'd take his secret to my grave. "I told you I wouldn't do that to you."

"Ha. Like I c-c-can t-t-trust you," he screams. "You're n-n-nothing b-b-b-b-but a liar."

"Christ, man. Get a grip," Cole yells. "Stop acting like a maniac and destroying Jace's stuff."

Liam glares at his twin. "He k-k-kissed, Dy—"

"Yeah, I know. But Dylan was never yours, dude." He snorts. "Did you

really think you had a shot with *her*?” He rocks back on his heels. “A blind person could see she’s been into Jace for a while now. But even if she wasn’t, no way would she *ever* date someone like you.”

My fingers curls into fists. “Cole.”

Despite my tone and Liam’s tears, he continues.

“No one likes you, Liam. Not even your own family.” His features twist in disgust. “You’re embarrassing. Always looking for attention with your crying and stuttering—”

“That’s enough,” I growl, winding my fist back. “Say another word and I swear to God I’ll beat the shit out of you.”

“Whatever. Screw this.” He looks at Liam. “Screw you.” He flips us both the bird. “You assholes sort your own shit out. I’m done.” He starts walking but pauses when he reaches the frame. “I wish it was one of you who died instead of Mom. Maybe then this family wouldn’t be such a disaster.”

With that, he leaves, slamming the door behind him.

Three siblings down. Zero to go. *Awesome.*

After clearing a spot, I sit down on my bed. “I’m sorry, Liam. I know you’re mad. You have every right to be. But I didn’t mean to hurt you. Dylan and I—”

“Yes, you d-d-did. Otherwise you w-w-wouldn’t have d-d-done it.” Tears cloud his eyes. “You k-k-know how m-m-much I l-l-love her. S-s-she w-w-was the only g-g-good t-t-thing in m-m-my l-l-life.” His body starts shaking with sobs. “N-n-now she’s g-g-gone. J-j-just like M-m-mom.”

I feel so helpless it’s all I can do not to scream. I didn’t want to take Dylan away or upset him like this.

For once, I just wanted to be happy...which is exactly what Dylan makes me.

But as usual, I don’t get that privilege. Liam’s my little brother and I have to make things right between us.

It’s what Mom would want.

Scrubbing a hand down my face, I utter, “Tell me how to fix this. What will it take for you to forgive me?”

My mother always told us nothing in life was broken beyond repair. With enough determination, everything could be mended and restored.

However, the inconsolable look on Liam’s face deflates her theory.

“You c-c-can’t, a-s-s-shole.” Anger radiates off him in waves and he goes back to smashing my stuff. “I’ll n-n-never f-f-forgive you f-f-for t-t-this. You’re a b-b-backstabber. The w-w-worst b-b-brother in the w-w-world. F-f-fuck you.”

Dammit. I’ve tried to stay calm and be understanding, but I’ve had about all I can take. I could turn myself inside out and roll over every broken piece of glass in this room, and it wouldn’t matter at this point. He’s determined to make me suffer.

Why should I care about him when it’s clear he doesn’t give a shit about me or my happiness?

Standing, I point to the door. “Get out. I’m not your punching bag.”

His jaw clenches. “No.” He smashes the frame containing a picture of me and our mother on my nightstand. “I hat-t-te you.”

Whatever thread I was hanging onto snaps. “Fine, but hating me and smashing my shit still won’t make Dylan like you.” Rushing toward him, I snatch the bat out of his hand. “Get the fuck out of my room, crybaby.” His eyes widen and he freezes, but it’s too late. He’s already pushed me to my limit. There’s no going back now.

Taking hold of his arm, I begin hauling him toward the door. When he struggles, I grab his hair and drag him across the room like an animal. It’s exactly what he’s acting like. “Congrats, you just lost the only friend you ever had.” Opening the door, I shove him past the threshold. “Actually, make that two friends. Because you bet your ass I’m telling her *everything* when she comes over later.”

“Jac-c-c—” He starts to say but I push him so hard he falls.

“Shut your mouth, because I am *done* listening.” I slam a fist into my chest. “I refuse to be miserable just because you are. Dylan makes me happy and I make her happy.” My throat tightens to the point of pain. “Which is something you’ll never be able to do.”

With that, I slam the door in his face.

Seconds later, I kneel down next to the shattered picture of me and my mom and bury my head in my hands.

I wish like hell she was here to help me pick up the broken pieces of my life.

But a small part of me is thankful she’s not...so she can’t see the mess I’ve made.



The sun peeking through the curtains is like a laser zapping through my skull. With a grunt, I roll over and stuff my pillow over my head, attempting to block out the light.

The events of last night come rushing back like a tsunami.

Dylan.

Liam.

The room my little brother destroyed that took me four hours and seven garbage bags to clean up.

On impulse, I reach for my phone on the nightstand.

It’s off.

Turning my head, I eye the window.

The one I locked last night.

The hand on my phone twitches with the need to call her and explain.

No.

Not until I talk to Liam and hash everything out.

Family comes first.

No matter how much the three of them piss me off—and Jesus Christ, they do—taking care of them has been my sole responsibility ever since my mom died and my father became a ghost.

No matter how much I want to throw in the towel and say fuck it some days, I can't.

I'm all they have left.

The fight with Liam last night was bad, but it's not irreparable.

My mom used to tell me that every sunrise brought a brand-new day and a chance to start over.

After tossing the covers off, I throw on a t-shirt and some sweatpants.

It's the weekend, which means everyone but the sperm donor is home and when they wake up, they'll be hungry.

I contemplate knocking on Liam's door when I pass his bedroom but think better of it because I know he—along with my sister Bianca—like to sleep in for as long as humanly possible on the weekends.

Since it's barely seven, I jog down the stairs instead.

Cole's already sitting at the table shoving cereal into his mouth when I enter the kitchen. It's no surprise, since we're the early birds of the family. It's one of the only non-physical traits we share with our dickhead father.

“Hey.”

He makes a noise in the back of his throat before he lifts the bowl to his mouth, finishing off the leftover milk.

“If you're still hungry, I'm making breakfast.”

I grab some butter, milk, and a carton of eggs from the fridge. Then I reach into the cupboard and take out a box of pancake mix.

Pancakes and eggs are Liam's favorite, and I'm hoping it will be a good enough olive branch for him to want to talk.

Cole's expression is sour as he peruses the items on the island. “I hate pancakes.”

“I know.”

His eyes narrow. “Pancakes are Liam’s favorite.”

I grit my teeth. Cole needs to get over this internal competition he has with Liam.

“I know.” I crack two eggs over a frying pan and stir in some milk. “I’ll make you some scrambled eggs.”

“I don’t like scrambled eggs.”

Christ almighty. I started the day with only one fuck to give and he’s already pissing on it. “You liked them last week.”

“Not true.” Crossing his arms, he leans back in his seat. “Come on, Jace. What’s *my* favorite breakfast food?”

“Pretty soon it’s going to be your face in a pan of yolk.” I crack open three more eggs and add some seasoning. “You’ve always liked scrambled eggs.”

“Yeah, Mom’s scrambled eggs.”

Sorry, asshole. *Last I checked, Heaven doesn’t deliver.*

“What do you want to eat, Cole?”

“My favorite breakfast food.”

This has turned into some kind of test I’m doomed to fail. “Fine. Since it’s no longer scrambled eggs, what’s your *new* favorite?”

Smugly, he pushes his cereal bowl away. “Frittatas and crème brûlée.”

Scrambled eggs it is. “You’ve never had a frittata in your life. Also, crème brûlée isn’t a breakfast food, it’s dessert. And just so we’re clear—I’m not a motherfucking chef so either eat the shit I’m making or don’t.”

“Why is everyone *still* yelling?” Bianca whines as she plops down on the seat next to Cole.

“Because Jace likes Liam more than he likes me.”

“That’s not—”

“Duh.” She fishes an apple out of the fruit basket. “Everyone likes Liam more.”

He sulks. “Mom didn’t. I was her favorite.”

Bianca starts laughing. “No—”

“Bianca.” I give her a warning look. “Cut it out.”

If Cole wants to believe he was Mom’s favorite, I won’t correct him.

Truth be told, she coddled Liam way more. But it’s only because Liam was what she referred to as high maintenance and he needed the extra attention.

When Cole started acting out—no doubt trying to steal Liam’s thunder—she was already giving birth to Bianca and finally had the little girl she always wanted. Her focus was divided even more.

I guess I can see why Cole has a jealous streak.

I need to nip this shit in the bud before it gets out of hand. “Why don’t you, me, and Liam hang out today?”

Bianca screws up her face. “What about me?”

“Duh,” I say, repeating her new favorite word. “We can call Mrs. Garcia and ask her to take us to the mall.” I place the eggs on a large dish. “Or we can go to the movies.”

“Those are *Liam*’s favorite things,” Cole grumps.

Sighing, I pinch the bridge of my nose. “We can toss a football around the backyard for a little while before we leave.”

Where Liam despises sports, Cole can’t seem to get enough of them. Especially football. Kid’s got a killer arm.

That gets a smile out of him. “Okay.” He looks at Bianca. “Think Liam will cry like last time?”

“Only if you throw the football at his face again.”

Cole contemplates this. “Good idea.”

“Will you stop?” I toss the dirty pan in the sink and take out a clean one. “Can we spend *one* damn day together without all the bullshit?”

Bianca nudges Cole with her elbow. “What’s his problem? He’s moodier than usual.”

I pour the pancake mix into a bowl. “I can still hear you, you know.”

Ignoring me, Cole leans over and says, “Jace and Dylan hooked up last night at the dance and Liam lost his shit.”

“Why?” She grimaces. “Jace and Dylan have been making googly eyes at each other for months.” She swipes a few grapes from the basket. “I can’t believe Liam actually thought he stood a chance.”

So help me God, I’m going to dump this damn batter over their heads.

“Here’s a great idea. How about we *not* talk about this?”

Bianca makes kissing noises. “But you and Dylan are in *love*.”

Dig the knife deeper, kid.

“No, we’re not.” I clear my throat. “We’re uh...we’re taking a break.” I stir harder. “Until Liam...you know.”

Doesn’t hate me for stealing his girl.

“Gives you his permission?” Bianca probes.

“More or less,” I mutter.

“That’s dumb,” Cole declares. “Liam needs to suck it up. The world doesn’t revolve around him.”

I’m starting to suspect Cole coming to my defense last night had more to do with his annoyance toward Liam than it did with helping me.

“Maybe you and Dylan can see each other in secret,” Bianca offers. “I saw this movie the other day where this lady’s husband left for work, but the pool boy snuck in after. She was so excited to see him she got down on her knees—”

“What the fuck?” Cole and I yell at the same time.

“How did you...where did you...”

I can’t formulate words because my brain doesn’t want to know how my baby sister got her hands on porn.

Bianca takes a bite of her pear. “I went into Dad’s room last week looking for some of Mom’s nail polish. I didn’t want to go back downstairs to paint my nails, so I turned on the television and the movie was on.” She pouts. “I didn’t get to finish it though. I ended up spilling the polish on the carpet right

when the lady started praying.”

Cole and I exchange a glance.

“Started praying?” Cole questions.

“Yeah.” Bianca shrugs innocently. “Why else would she be on her knees?”

“Because she was b—”

I shoot Cole a death glare.

“Praying.” He coughs. “Bet she was praying real good.”

I force myself to breathe again. With not one, but three older brothers, odds are Bianca won’t start *praying* until she’s eighty-five.

I’ll make sure of it.

I flip the pancakes and check the clock. It’s barely even eight now, but I know Liam prefers the first two pancakes out of the stack. According to him, the rest are never as fluffy and they don’t taste as good.

“Can one of you go upstairs and get Liam? Breakfast will be ready soon.”

“Not it,” Cole and Bianca say at the same time.

Yeah, I should have seen that one coming from a mile away. “Fine—”

The rest of my sentence falls by the wayside when I hear the front door open.

You can cut the tension with a knife the moment my father steps into the kitchen.

After placing his briefcase on a nearby chair, he looks around and smiles.

“Oh, wow. What’s all this?”

As if I don’t make breakfast for his children most mornings. “What does it look like?”

“Right, well. It smells really good.” Averting his gaze, he playfully messes Bianca’s hair. “Thank you, Jace.”

I don’t need him to thank me for doing what *he* should be doing.

I need him to either get out of my way or step the fuck up and be a dad.

“Whatever.” I toss the spatula on the counter next to the stove. “I’m gonna go wake Liam up.”

I overhear his piss-poor attempt at making conversation with Bianca and Cole as I make my way up the staircase. From the sounds of things, they’re over his bullshit too.

Good. Fuck knows I’ve been over it for years.

I pound on Liam’s door harder than necessary. “Time to wake up.” When he doesn’t respond, I try again. “I know you’re mad at me, but put it on hold for a few because I’m making your favorite breakfast.”

No response.

I’m not dumb enough to think pancakes will fix things between us, but the least he can do is respond.

“Come on, man.” I pound on his door harder. “For fuck’s sake, just answer me.”

Yell at me. Tell me I’m the worst brother in the world again. *Something.*

I get nothing.

I go down the hall and check the bathroom. *Empty.*

An ugly feeling crawls up in my gut and I bang on his door again. “Liam.”

This time when he doesn’t respond, I turn the knob.

The ugly feeling in my gut snakes up my spine when I take in his empty, made-up bed.

He must have woken up before me. *Shit.*

My brain’s trying to conjure up all the places he could have run off to when my eyes land on his closet door.

It takes me a second to process what I’m seeing.

Rope.

My eyes track the rope’s path from around the knob to where it’s wedged between the top of the frame and the door.

Why would Liam have rope...

It hits me like a brick to the head and my knees buckle.

No. No. No. No.

A guttural sound rips from my throat as I run across the room to the closet.

“Dad!” My voice is so shredded I hardly recognize it. “Dad, I need you. Something’s wrong with Liam!”

God, please tell me I’m wrong.

Tell me he didn’t do what I think he did.

Tell me my little brother is...

My worst fears are confirmed when I turn the knob, and whatever was left of my heart after my mother died...

Shatters into a thousand tiny little pieces.



*M*y mother was wrong.

Some things can’t be fixed.

A new day doesn’t always bring new chances.

Sometimes it just brings pain and more grief.

Liam had already been dead for hours by the time I found him, but I didn’t need the paramedics to tell me that.

His lips were blue. His skin was blue. The fingertips digging into the rope were blue.

Even the basket he kicked over was blue.

Everything was blue.

Ironic that a shade representing the best things in the world—the sky, the ocean, the color of Dylan’s eyes—also symbolized the worst.

My once favorite color...now made me sick to my stomach.

Almost as sick as the fact that my siblings and I were downstairs, talking and acting like everything was fine...while our brother was hanging from a

rope.

All alone in a closet. *Discarded like an ugly Christmas sweater.*

The muscles in my chest draw tight as I stuff a pillow in my mouth and scream so loud my ears pop.

This is all my fault.

I killed him.

I loved him.

I killed him by loving her.

I scream again, louder this time, but just like Liam's...my screams for help are silent.

The stone-cold truth of the last forty-eight hours seeps into my bones like an aggressive toxin, contaminating my reality.

He's gone and he's never coming back.

He didn't give me a chance to fix it.

He didn't give me a chance to apologize.

He didn't give me a chance to prove I could be a good brother.

He didn't give me a chance to tell him I'd do anything for him.

Including giving her up.

Balling my fists, I punch my skull.

I'm his big brother, I should have been the one he came to.

The one to help him find a different resolution than the one he chose.

Instead, I was the one who caused the pain that ended his life.

I punch my skull again. So hard I become lightheaded.

If I didn't kick him out of my room.

If I had checked on him before I went to bed.

If I didn't fall in love with the girl he gave his heart to.

Should've. Would've. Could've.

There are so many, I'm drowning in them.

But not a single damn one of them will bring Liam back.

Nothing will.

Death is a permanent scar that the people left behind are forced to bear.
And suicide a burden you shoulder forever.

The sound of my phone ringing hums in the background and I snatch it off my bed.

Dylan.

It's always Dylan calling.

I should tell her what happened...tell her what I did, but I can't.

Liam's dead, because I was selfish. Talking to her would be the equivalent of spitting on the grave we'll be burying him in tomorrow.

I miss her.

The metal casing digs into my fingertips as I clench my cell, combatting the urge to talk to her.

I can't.

Maybe when things aren't so fucked-up and I'm able to breathe without the overwhelming rush of pain twisting like a knife, we can be friends again.

I throw the phone against my wall and watch as the screen cracks.

If I never kissed her at the dance, Liam would still be alive.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

If Liam hadn't walked in on us, I would have had a chance to explain everything to him. *He wouldn't have been blindsided and embarrassed.*

But that didn't happen...because someone stole the opportunity from me. Then he poured salt in the wound by laughing and pointing while Liam cried.

They all did.

Adrenaline lights me up like a rocket as I stand.

I look at the clock on my nightstand. School will be out in twenty-five minutes.

I can't bring Liam back. I can't fix the part I played in his death.

But there *is* something I can do.

Something that will dull the pain...and teach someone a lesson they'll never forget.

“Where are you going?” Cole questions as I run down the stairs.

I take the bat out of the closet in the foyer, the very same one Liam used the other night. “To make him pay.”



The need for vengeance thrums through my chest with every step I take toward the building.

I’m not stupid enough to walk inside and beat the shit out of him. There are too many witnesses.

But I happen to know his mom works all the time and he walks home instead of taking the bus.

I check my watch. The dismissal bell should be ringing any minute now.

As if on cue, I watch hundreds of kids file out of the school.

Most of them are laughing and smiling...no doubt glad the last day of classes are on the horizon.

While they’ll all be celebrating making it through another year tomorrow...I’ll be burying my little brother.

Because of that motherfucking asshole right there.

Pure wrath pulses through my veins as I watch him wave to a few people before heading down the sidewalk...without a care in the world.

Must be nice to have friends.

Other than me and Dylan, Liam didn’t have any.

Because of him.

History. The nickname Tommy gave Liam burns like acid in my throat.

All Liam wanted was to fit in, to feel like he belonged...it’s the reason he forgave Tommy and befriended him even though I warned him not to.

Unfortunately for Tommy, I’m not the forgiving kind.

My footsteps pick up speed as he reaches the end of the block.

A wooded area is coming up ahead. Which means there’s no place he can

run...no place he can hide.

Tick tock, fucker. Your time is coming to an end.

I'm going to do things to him that not even his worst nightmares can conjure up.

Euphoria fills me as he pulls out his cell phone and brings it to his ear.

He's distracted. *Perfect.*

Without warning, I strike the bat against his back. To my amusement, he simultaneously trips over a crevice in the cement and goes down like a stack of bricks.

I take the opportunity to drag him into the woods, belly down.

"What the fuck?" he yells, clawing at the dirt and branches. "Somebody help!"

Sorry, man. There's no mercy for a piece of shit like you.

I stop when I find a good spot and get on top of him, pressing his face into the dirt.

"Help!"

He struggles against me, but I mush his face harder before letting him up for some air.

If I kill him too quickly, I'll miss out on all the fun.

"Why are you doing this?" he chokes out. "Who are you?"

Leaning down, I whisper, "I'll give you a hint."

His body tenses. "Jace?"

He tries to get up and we grapple in the dirt for a minute. I give him just enough leeway to turn over but the second he does, I wrap my hand around his throat and bash my forehead against his nose.

Confusion mars his bloody face. "What the hell? Why...w-why are you doing this?"

I spit at him. "Look who's stuttering now, bitch."

Before he can speak, I place the barrel of the bat over his crotch and press down on it as I stand up, crushing his nuts.

I laugh when he screams in agony.

“Stop!”

“Okay,” I tell him. “But if I do, this bat is going somewhere else. Somewhere a little *narrower*.”

I can feel the fear wafting off him. “I’m sorry for what I did to Liam at the dance.” He sucks in a shaky breath. “I’ll apologize when I see him. Swear on my life.”

Another bolt of rage slices through me. “You can’t, fuckface.”

“Yes, I ca—”

“He’s dead.” I apply more pressure and watch in delight as he trembles from the pain. “He ended it...because of you.”

And me.

“Fuck!” I’m not sure if his outburst is from the agony he’s experiencing or shock from the news. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be.” I lean down on the bat and he yelps. “But don’t worry, this will all be over.” I flash him some teeth. “Eventually.”

He looks up at the sky and curses. “I wish I never listened to her.”

I have no idea what he’s rambling about. “Listened to who?”

“Dylan.”

Evidently, I do still have a heart because it speeds up at the mention of her name.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“It was her plan.” His voice becomes hoarse. “She tricked me. She tricked *all* of us, Jace.”

I’m not sure what he’s getting at, but Dylan is my best friend, so the need to defend her instinctively trumps whatever bullshit Tommy’s slinging.

I stomp on his leg. “Dylan didn’t trick anyone, motherfucker.”

“Yes, she did.” He lets out an ear-piercing scream when I twist the bat. “Fuck, man. I have no reason to lie to you. I have a little brother too, so I know how it works. If Liam killed himself because of something I did, I

know I have no chance of getting out of these woods alive.” His breath leaves him in shallow pants. “But you might want to know the truth before you bash my skull in.”

The shithead has a point. I ease up on the pressure ever so slightly. “Start talking.”

His expression flickers with guilt. “I’ve had a crush on Dylan since seventh grade.”

I stop him right there. The last thing I need is to hear him go on and on about how much he wants her. “I’m not interested in your—”

“It’s important,” he insists. “It’s why things went down the way they did at the dance.”

I’m not following. “What did you liking Dylan have to do with you taking Liam to the closet to see us, or making fun of him in front of the entire school?”

“That was the plan.” He slaps the dirt with his palm “She wanted to get back at you for going to the dance with Britney.” He sucks in a sharp breath. “Let me back up. I approached her in the band room closet after I heard you asked Britney to the dance. I knew Dylan would be upset about it and I was hoping to use it to my advantage.”

I press down on the bat.

“Goddammit, Jace. I’m not done.”

“Then I suggest you talk quicker,” I grit through my teeth. “Because every word out of your mouth makes me want to rip off your nads and shove them down your throat.”

He blanches. “She told me how upset she was, and I suggested that she even the score by going to the dance with me.” He shrugs. “I’d hung out with her in the band room a few times after school by then, and our conversations...I thought I finally had a chance now that you were out of the way.”

My mind floats back to when Dylan mentioned she spoke with Tommy

after class.

I ignore the weird feeling brewing in my gut. Shady people aren't honest with their best friends.

Not to mention, she dared *me* to kiss her that day.

"Okay. Then what?"

"She turned me down. She said she was already going with someone and it would do a much better job of pissing you off. When I asked her who...she told me it was Liam."

He's lying. "Dylan wouldn't do that."

"I have no reason to lie to you, man. Not now." He swallows hard. "Can I ask you something?"

Despite myself, I oblige. "What?"

"Did Dylan ever do or say anything that would make you believe she was into Liam?"

The look on my face must give away my answer because he says, "I'm not trying to be a dick, but why *else* would Dylan go to the dance with him?"

That thought churns painfully in my stomach. As much as I hate to admit it, there was a small part of me that briefly wondered if she went with Liam to dig at me.

But then I quickly realized how stupid that was, because no matter how angry she was with me, Dylan would never make Liam her pawn.

I figured Liam had finally decided to make his move and she was starting to come around to the idea of him.

Which made me even more of a terrible brother for kissing her.

Regret and remorse punch through my chest.

I convinced myself I was going out there to confront her in order to protect Liam, but seeing her so close with Tommy made my blood boil.

I never spared my little brother a thought after that.

Not until Dylan mentioned she wanted to hang out at my house that night.

Tommy continues talking when I'm silent. "She told me she'd give me a chance if I could help her come up with an even better plan to get back at you." He looks sheepish. "So I did."

It feels like a rock is wedged in my throat. "What was the plan?"

I need to hear all the details. Every link in the messed-up chain they constructed that ended with my baby brother dying.

"Since she was already going with Liam, I told her I'd come through with a way to distract him halfway through the dance. This way we could sneak away. As luck would have it, Cole ditching his date provided a perfect one."

The rock in my throat becomes a boulder, siphoning off my air supply with every word he says.

"My plan was for you to catch us making out in the hallway after you noticed she wasn't with Liam, but she said that wasn't good enough. She wanted me to provoke you and start a fight with you."

I gesture for him to keep going because I can't formulate words.

"Liam was supposed to catch us out in the hallway fighting over her. The goal was to cause a rift between you and your brother because she knew it would hurt you."

"Liam said he saw us in the closet, not the hallway."

I'm grasping at straws here, but it's all I've got.

I don't want to believe Dylan would be capable of doing something so spiteful and vindictive.

Tommy nods. "Dylan deviated from the plan when she told me to go back inside. I was so angry with her, I decided to spill the beans to Liam myself..."

His voice trails off, but I need to hear the rest.

I push down on the bat. "Keep talking."

He sputters a curse. "Liam didn't believe me, so I told him I could prove it." His face twists in pain. "I took him to the hallway, but you guys weren't there. I quickly figured out where you might have gone because it was where

we used to hang out. However, what I didn't expect to see was...it didn't look fake."

It didn't feel fake, either.

White-hot pain races through my chest. I hate that Tommy's version of events line up perfectly with what actually went down that night.

He scowls. "I was pissed. I thought Dylan was *my* girl. Liam became upset too...even more than me." He holds up his hands. "I fucked up, Jace. I was wrong for bullying him. But, man. I was so angry with her." His nostrils flare. "Like a fool, part of me kept holding on to hope, but when I found out she moved away, everything made sense. The bitch was playing me too."

What the actual fuck?

"She didn't move away."

"Yes, she did. A teacher at school confirmed it today. She's gone, dude." His eyes connect with mine. "Evidently, her father found out he landed a new job a couple of weeks ago." His jaw tics. "Guess she wanted to burn a few bridges before she left Royal Manor for good."

Jesus fucking Christ.

My lungs compress and my vision turns red.

It's like seeing Liam hanging in the closet all over again...only somehow worse.

Because the person I trusted most in this world *betrayed* me.

Dylan's intent might not have been for Liam to kill himself, but she still used him.

No, worse. The bitch intentionally *hurt* him, even though he was completely innocent.

Tension locks my jaw and rides down my neck. Liam never did a damn thing wrong to warrant being caught up in any of this.

Hell, he'd never even *think* about hurting Dylan. *He'd rather die.*

Liam never deserved any of this.

The roar that slashes through me as I place a foot on Tommy's stomach

and pick up the bat has a wet spot forming on the front of his pants.

I'm gonna kill him. I feel it in my bones.

It hurts too much, and Liam isn't here to be my conscience and tell me all the good shit Mom used to spout off.

"Holy shit. Put the bat down, Jace."

My lungs freeze when I see Liam making his way through the woods.
"Liam?"

He's okay. Everything is fine. I can fix my mistake. I can...

My heart drops when Liam walks over to me and I realize it isn't Liam after all...it's Cole.

Everything is not fine. It won't ever be again.

"He hurt Liam." Wet shit is dripping down my face, blurring my sight as I raise the bat. "Dylan hurt Liam."

I hurt Liam.

Everyone at school hurt Liam.

Why'd they all have to laugh and pick on him?

Why couldn't they just see him for the awesome, genuine person he was?

Why couldn't I fall for someone like Britney instead of *her*?

I'm spinning in circles, but I can't make it stop. I can't make any of it stop.

All I know is I want my little brother back so bad I'd gladly trade my own life for his without hesitation.

And Tommy has to die, because it's not fair that he's allowed to go on breathing when Liam isn't.

Cole squeezes my shoulder. "I know it hurts." He pries the bat out of my hands. "But killing Tommy won't make it better."

Like hell it won't.

Tommy begins slinking away, but Cole snatches his t-shirt.

"Just so we're clear. Me stopping him from killing your sorry ass has nothing to do with you." He crashes his forehead against Tommy's. "If I still

believed in God or any of that bullshit, I'd personally beg him to send you straight to hell where you belong." He tightens his grip. "Swear on your family, if you *ever* say a word about what happened in these woods, I'll—"

"I won't." His frantic eyes dart between us. "If my mom notices anything, I'll blame it on someone else."

I get close to his face. "Don't think for one second this means we're cool. You see me walking down the street, you better turn the other way and pray to whatever higher power you believe in that I don't spot you first, motherfucker."

"Got it." He sits up and looks around, as though he's waiting for us to stop him.

"Get the fuck out of here before I change my mind," I shout so loud I'm positive my vocal cords have snapped.

Peeling himself off the ground, he hobbles out of the woods as fast as his punk-ass legs can carry him.

"What the fuck was that?" Cole grits out after he's gone. "You were really going to *kill* him."

"It hurts." I sink to my haunches. "It hurts too much."

He joins me on the ground. "You can't do that to us, Jace. You still have me and Bianca. We need you."

He's right. It would be hard to take care of them from a jail cell.

"I miss him."

I miss his smiles and his jokes. I miss his compassion for people and his understanding for those who didn't deserve it.

I don't know how I'm supposed to just accept that I'm never going to experience any of that again.

He made the world a better place.

Cole nods. "I do too. I..." He squeezes his eyes shut. "I feel different." He pounds on his chest. "Something in here...it doesn't feel right anymore." His voice cracks. "I feel empty and hollow. Like I'm missing a big piece of

something.”

“That’s because we are.” I dig the heels of my palms into my eyes to stop the wet shit dripping down my face. “I’m not ready to say goodbye.” Words clog my throat. “I don’t want to say goodbye to him.”

I just want to go numb.

Chapter 42

DYLAN

A soft kiss behind my ear makes my eyelids flutter open.

We must have switched positions while we were sleeping because my back is pressed against Jace's chest and he's palming my breast.

"Good morning," he rasps.

My nipples pucker when he rocks his hips and his cock nudges the curve of my ass.

Good morning indeed.

Reaching behind me, I run my hand along the swell of his erection. Just one small movement and he'd be inside me...exactly where I want him.

His teeth graze my shoulder. "Keep doing that and I'll give you my dick for breakfast instead of eggs."

The thought of Jace making me breakfast is sweet and all, but his other offer is more appealing.

"Promise?"

His fingers dig into my hips. "I've been rock hard for you for the last hour." My heart kickstarts when he cups me between my legs. "So this will be quick." I mewl when he spreads me open and teases me with the tip of his finger. "And dirty."

He runs it back and forth over my clit before sliding down to my opening.

“I love how wet your little pussy gets for me.” He dips his finger inside, sending shivers to my core. “It’s gonna feel so fucking good when you ride the cum out of my cock.”

My breathing turns choppy and I reach into the nightstand drawer for a condom.

The minute he’s suited up, he rolls onto his back and fists his dick. The hunger shadowing his eyes when he looks my way is unmistakable.

I want to keep the sight of him like this in my memory bank forever, because it’s honest to God the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

His gaze is stormy as he pulls me on top of him. “You’re taking too long.” He brushes his knuckle over my nipple. “I’m an impatient motherfucker when it comes to you.”

Teasing him, I ever so slowly lower myself onto his cock.

His hands clasp my waist, and he juts his hips upward, filling me to the hilt. “You’re killing me here.”

Using the headboard for leverage, I rock against him. “Better?”

His lips part with a groan when I find a rhythm he likes. “Yeah, just like that.” Dark eyes roam over every inch of my skin. “Christ. You’re fucking gorgeous.”

Um...has *he* looked in the mirror lately?

A jolt of heat rushes through me when he presses his thumb to my clit.

I glare at him. I’m trying to concentrate on *his* pleasure so I can drive him crazy, and he’s making it beyond difficult to focus.

He gives me a smug smile and does it again, only this time he swirls the swollen nub and thrusts hard.

“Jace,” I hiss as he massages me in fast, wet circles.

His eyes darken as the sounds of him working me over fill the room.

My breath comes out in sharp bursts while he continues his slow torture. “Oh my God...” I tremble as the friction builds. “You asshole.”

I wanted to fuck *him* until he melted into a pile of goo, but as usual, he

flipped the script and took control.

Gravel thickens his voice. “An asshole who’s about to make you come all over his dick.”

With one hand on my lower back, he takes my clit between his fingers and proceeds to drive his cock against a spot that lights me up.

Oh hell.

The first stirrings of my orgasm crash through me and I bite back a scream as I lose my balance.

Rough hands grab my ass and he pulls us into a sitting position, thrusting fast and wild.

I cling to his shoulders, clamping his dick as I fall apart.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he rasps against the skin of my throat, and then he’s joining me.

God, I love the way he groans as he comes. Carnal and savage, like he’s dying and waking up at the same time.

I graze my nails down his back as we catch our breath and he buries his nose in the crook of my neck, inhaling me. “You smell like sex and candy.”

“There’s a song about that, you know.”

He lets out a low, sexy laugh. “God, I fucking missed you.”

My heart rattles inside my rib cage. I want to pinch myself because it took us four long years to get to this place, but we’re finally here.

Nothing can tear us apart now. He’s embedded in my soul.

And I hope like hell he feels the same about me.

“Hey.” My hand finds his jaw. “We’re okay now...right?”

His features sharpen and that pained look in his eyes is back again. Slowly, he untangles his limbs from mine and reaches for his sweatpants on the floor.

“I’m gonna get a bottle of water. Want one? Maybe some food?”

Screw the refreshments. What I want is to know is *why* he always looks so riddled with guilt after being with me.

I clutch my chest as the vile thought infiltrates my brain. “Are you back with Britney?”

It’s the only logical explanation I can come up with at this point.

He looks at me like I’m crazy. “What? Hell no.”

That’s a relief at least.

I pull the sheets around me and he bolts for his door, like he can’t get away fast enough.

“Be back in a bit.”

Frustration jams in my throat.

I’m starting to think I should tie him up the next time I broach the topic with him.

That way he can’t run away.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Jace’s voice booms from the other side of his door. “You brought her *here*?” A big thwack makes me jump. “In my mother’s *bedroom*?”

Oh, shit.

Scrambling, I put my clothes on and open his door.

My eyes widen as I take in the scene before me.

Jace is standing there shirtless, madder than I’ve ever seen him.

While his father looks...well, ashamed and very uncomfortable.

The beautiful, albeit timid woman hiding behind him, doesn’t look much better.

For a moment, I wonder if Mr. Covington is sleeping with one of his dead wife’s relatives. There’s no denying the uncanny resemblance she has to Jace’s mom...or Bianca for that matter.

Oh, boy. This is bad. *Really* bad.

I take a step forward. “Ja—”

“What the hell?” Cole questions as he comes out of his bedroom. Confusion mars his face as he looks between Jace and his father.

I can see the moment it clicks because he narrows his eyes. “Seriously?”

You couldn't take your whore to a motel?"

Before his dad can answer, the door to Bianca's room opens and she steps out. "What's going on?" Yawning, she rubs the sleep out of her eyes. "Why is everyone yelli—" Her eyes zero in on the woman hiding behind her father. "Who is she?" Hope shines in her dark eyes and she turns to Jace. "Is she a family member visiting from India?"

"No. Our sperm donor just has a particular type," Jace spits, glaring daggers at his father. "Ain't that right, Pops?"

Clearing his throat, Mr. Covington attempts to speak, but Bianca cuts him off. "Wait...you spent the night with her? In *Mom's* bed?" Her lower lip wobbles. "How could you do that?"

Understandably, the woman in question looks absolutely mortified.

Truth be told, I feel terrible. Unbeknownst to her, she just walked into a full-on warzone.

And the sinister look on Jace's face tells me this is only the beginning.

Mr. Covington blows out a heavy breath. "I know you guys are upset, but I think we all need to calm—"

"Fuck you," Jace yells. "You don't know a goddamn thing about what this family needs." He laughs, but there's not an ounce of humor. "Christ, you can't spend time with your kids, but you have time to fuck her?"

His father bristles. "Excuse me—"

"No." Jace pins him with a menacing look. "You haven't talked in over seven years, why start now?" His gaze flicks to the woman behind him. "I'll tell you what though. I'd *love* to talk to your girl. Tell her all about the man she's screwing."

Shaking, the shy woman buries her head against her lover's shoulder.

"That's enough," Mr. Covington barks. "Leave Nadia alone."

Whatever composure Jace was hanging on to snaps and he advances on his dad. "Wrong time to find your balls, Jason." He shoves him. "It's enough when *I* fucking say it is." Flashing some teeth, he crooks a finger at Nadia.

“Don’t be scared, sweetheart. I don’t bite.”

She cowers.

I don’t blame her. Jace is acting like an unhinged maniac.

It’s been a long time coming though. *Sooner or later all volcanoes erupt.*

Jace squeezes his father’s shoulder. “I also don’t cheat on my wife or ignore my kids like *he* does.”

Mr. Covington’s pale skin turns white as a sheet.

“You told me your wife died,” the woman whispers.

All three siblings leer at her, but it’s Jace who speaks.

“She did, so don’t worry.” The look he gives his father makes my blood run cold. “You’re not the one he cheated on my mom with. That was a different whore.”

The sick feeling in my stomach intensifies when Cole and Bianca rear back in shock.

“You cheated on Mom?” Cole bites out

“Oh my God.” Bianca looks at her dad. “How could you?”

“I did *not* cheat on your mother!” Mr. Covington shouts.

Jace’s eyes become tiny slits and he gets close to his father’s face. “Liar, liar pants on fire.”

Mr. Covington shakes his head profusely. “No—”

“Mom told me about you and your secretary,” he grits out. “So don’t you *dare* fucking stand there and tell me she lied.”

He sucks in a sharp breath, no doubt realizing he’s caught in a catch-22 and needs to tread carefully. “There are a lot of things I’ve done wrong in my life, but cheating on your mother wasn’t one of them.” He looks at all three of his children. “I loved her more than anything.”

Even more than his own kids.

His gaze drifts back to Jace. “I loved your mother dearly, but she had a lot of issues. There were times her manic-depressive episodes were so bad she believed things that weren’t true—”

I gasp when Jace punches him. “Shut your mouth. Mom wasn’t a liar.”
Stumbling back, Mr. Covington holds his jaw. “Jace, I—”

Jace bares his teeth. “Shut the fuck up.” He focuses his attention on Nadia again. “You want to know what kind of man Jason Covington *really* is?”

Without waiting for an answer, he spreads his arms wide and says, “He’s the kind of man who will marry you and whisk you away to a new country to start your lives together...but then never let you see your family again. No matter how sad you are or how much you miss them.”

I hear his teeth clack. “He’s the kind of man who ignores his children for years.” He punches his chest. “The kind of man who couldn’t be bothered with his own flesh and blood, so *I* had to step in and raise them.” He shrugs. “I didn’t do a bad job though, right? I mean, only *one* out of four died.” His laugh is cruel and ominous. “Who knows? Maybe—just maybe—Liam would still be alive if you were there. Perhaps if you paid a little bit of attention to your son, he wouldn’t have died. Ever think of that, *Dad*?”

My heart sinks. Considering his company manufactured the drug responsible for killing him, that was the lowest of the low blows.

Mr. Covington’s green eyes fill with sadness. “Ja—”

“No.” There’s a dark note in Jace’s voice I’ve never heard before. “Of course, you didn’t.” Pure agony—the kind that twists my guts and makes the tiny hairs on my arms stand on end—contorts his expression as he grabs his father by the collar and looks him in the eyes.

“After all, you’re the man who made *me* take my little brother down from the closet door and cut the rope off his neck...because you couldn’t fucking do it!”

A whirlwind of emotions forms one giant knot in my stomach.

I shake my head as if the action alone will erase Jace’s horrible words.

“What?” I try to draw air into my lungs, but it’s impossible. “Liam... killed himself?”

Their expressions tell me I’m insane and I hope to God I am, because I

can't make any sense out of this.

Something passes in Jace's gaze and he opens his mouth to speak, but he doesn't get the chance, because Bianca snaps, "Don't act like you didn't know."

Pressure tightens against my ribs. *Of course, I didn't know.*

My head spins. "Tommy to—"

"Save it," she grits out through clenched teeth. "We already know about you and Tommy." A scowl twists her mouth as she takes a step forward. "And how *you* took advantage of Liam so you could get back at Jace for being with Britney."

The implication hits me like a brick. Liam and I were friends.

I would *never* use him to hurt Jace. I'd never use Liam, period.

I shake my head. "I didn't—"

"Bianca," Jace growls and she glares at him.

"*You* promised Liam you wouldn't tell Dylan he was in love with her... not me." She turns her furious gaze my way again. "Besides, it's not like the bitch didn't know. It was all part of her master plan, remember? Take Liam to the dance, make him think he actually stood a chance with her...and then boom...crush you both like bugs." Her eyes become glassy. "How do you live with yourself? How do you wake up every day knowing you're responsible for taking someone so amazing out of this world?"

I try to take a breath past the ache in my ribs, but it hurts too much. This can't be real.

"I didn't...I'm so sorry," I choke out, my legs buckling.

I didn't intentionally hurt Liam, but it doesn't matter.

He died because of me.

A rush of emotion squeezes my heart, catching me by the throat.

Oh, God. *I killed my friend.*

She spits in my face. "Fuck you and your apology." She lunges for me, but Cole and Jace rush over. "You already killed one of my brothers. I'm not

going to stand by and watch you do it again. Stay the hell away from Jace, or I swear to God, I will ruin your life.”

She struggles against Jace when he picks her up. “Get out before I wrap a rope around *your* neck!” She starts sobbing so hard she trembles. “I hate you.” A guttural sound leaves her, and it cuts through me like glass. “I miss him so much.”

Jace wraps his arms around her small frame. “I know you do.” He closes his eyes. “I miss him too.”

Mr. Covington looks as helpless as I feel when his gaze lands on me. “You need to leave.”

He’s right.

I’ve already destroyed this family, the least I can do is stay far away.

Chapter 43

DYLAN

“Dylan?”

I’m not sure how Sawyer knew I’d be here, but it doesn’t matter.

I’m still not going to talk to her.

The headstone I’m currently staring at is a glaring reminder that I’m the worst friend in the world.

I hurt the people who care about me. *Just like my father does.*

It’s best I stay away from Sawyer, Jace, and everyone else I love. For good.

Not taking the hint, Sawyer kneels down next to me. “You haven’t been at school the last three days. I tried calling and texting, but you didn’t respond.”

Because I love you and I don’t want you to end up in a grave like Liam.

Clearing her throat, she tries a different tactic. “I talked to Cole and Oakley...they told me what happened. Well, Cole mostly. Oak only knew as much as I did.”

She reaches for my hand, but I pull it back.

“Dylan, what happened wasn’t your fault.”

“If you honestly believe that, then Cole must not have told you everything,” I whisper, drawing my knees to my chest.

“He did.” She gives me a small smile. “I threatened to slash the tires on his new car if he didn’t.”

Her fingertips caress the marble headstone. “I didn’t know Cole had a twin brother.”

I close my eyes. *Had.*

“Yeah, well, that’s because of me.”

Her face scrunches. “That’s no—”

“Stop.”

I don’t want her to defend what I did and tell me a bunch of shit to make me feel better.

I don’t deserve compassion.

Liam died because I hurt him. Nothing will ever change that.

“His favorite color was green,” I inform her. “He loved zombie movies and he was so smart he probably would have become a doctor or scientist.”

If only he had the chance.

Tears roll down my cheeks, but I make no move to wipe them away. “He was sweet and kind...even when others weren’t.” I look at her. “You know how after a person dies, their family and friends claim they lit up a room and were the best person they’d ever known?”

She nods.

“It’s bullshit. Most people don’t light up rooms and they most definitely aren’t inherently selfless and compassionate...not like Liam was.” I turn back to the headstone. “Liam didn’t just light up a room—he lit up the whole world...until I broke his heart.”

And now everything’s gray.

“That’s n—”

“Pineapple pizza was his favorite food. He hated ice cream because he loathed the cold. He loved having pancakes for breakfast...but only the first two out of the stack. Jace used to give him a hard time about it, but it always made sense to me. The other pancakes just aren’t as flu—”

“Dylan why—”

“Because it’s not about me.”

It’s about Liam. And if she wants me to talk, *he’s* who we’ll talk about.

“You can’t keep doing this to yourself.” Her head finds my shoulder. “It’s not fair to punish yourself because you didn’t return his feelings. You can’t help who you fall in love with.”

A jolt of agony slices through my chest. “I never knew he felt that way... we were friends.” I wipe my tears with the back of my sleeve. “I just keep thinking about how happy he must have been when I agreed to go to the dance with him...and then...”

He found out I was in love with his brother.

And killed himself.

Because he thought I was using him.

“According to Cole, Liam made Jace promise not to tell you until he was ready, so there’s no way you could have known.”

“Whether I knew or not doesn’t matter anymore. The end result is still the same.”

He’s gone...and he’s *never* coming back.

“It *does* matter.” Her voice softens. “I didn’t know Liam, but I do know you. You’re not the kind of person who would intentionally hurt or use someone.” She grips my hand. “What happened to Liam was a terrible tragedy. But take it from someone who’s been bullied and turned down by plenty of guys she’s had crushes on, Liam’s death *isn’t* your cross to bear.”

She tucks a strand of my hair behind my ear. “There was more going on with him.” Sadness etches her features. “Cole said Liam struggled with depression and was bullied at school for years.” Turning to the headstone, she gently runs her finger over the angel next to his name. “Liam didn’t want to go to counseling and his father didn’t press the issue. I’m not a psychiatrist, but I’m positive that played a big role in what happened.” Her voice drops to a whisper. “He needed help, but he didn’t get it.”

My insides twist. “I didn’t know that.”

I knew he was bullied, but Liam never acted like it bothered him that much.

Not around me at least.

It doesn’t alleviate the guilt I feel or my culpability in his death, but it puts some things into perspective.

“Some people hide it better than others.” She grabs me by the shoulders. “Look, if you won’t listen to me, listen to Liam.”

“How? He’s de—”

“Yes, but he still loved you. Which means he *knew* you were a good person.” Her brown eyes soften. “You *are* a good person.”

“You really think so?”

Because I sure as hell don’t feel like one anymore.

“I *know* so.” Smiling, she wraps me up in a hug. “Trust me, you will have no trouble getting through those pearly gates. And when you do, Liam’s gonna be waiting for you with his arms open wide.”

The weight in my chest feels a little lighter. *God, I hope so.*

I’d give anything to erase what happened.

A thought occurs to me as we break apart. “Bianca mentioned something about me and Tommy...it didn’t make sense to me then and to be honest, it still doesn’t.” I rub my hands on my jeans. I’m not sure whether Tommy intentionally lied to me about Liam’s death, or if it was a rumor he heard, but there’s been a weird feeling in my gut ever since.

“Is there any way you can ask Cole what Bianca meant? I would, but I don’t want to bother—”

“No one told you?”

“Told me what?”

Scowling, she stands. “I swear half the world’s problems would be solved if people would just learn to communicate—”

“Sawyer,” I cut in before she goes off on a tangent. “Tell me what you

know.”

She nods. “Right. Okay...um...so...in a nutshell, Tommy set you up to take the fall for the shitty thing he did. At least that’s *my* interpretation of it.” She starts pacing back and forth. “From what I understand, Tommy brought Liam to the closet in the middle of the dance...because he wanted him to see you and Jace making out. And then when Liam ran back to the gym crying... he started picking on him in front of everyone.”

I bolt up. “What?”

That’s not a shitty thing to do, that’s an *evil* thing to do.

She winces. “It gets worse.”

My stomach coils. “How much worse?”

She stops pacing. “Evidently when Jace confronted Tommy about it a few days after Liam’s passing, Tommy told him you came up with a plan to use Liam to hurt Jace because he took Britney to the dance.”

Outrage roots me to the spot. “That lying motherfucker.”

I went with Liam to the dance because he was my friend, not to get back at Jace. And I certainly would never devise a *plan* to hurt either of them.

“Cole said Tommy was very convincing. Even he believed it...until recently.” Sawyer wrings her hands. “I imagine it was a difficult time for all of them. Grief can make it hard to see the forest through the trees.”

Don’t I know it.

“I guess that explains why Jace hates me so much.”

Being near me was the equivalent of ripping pieces of his heart out over and over again.

No wonder he looked so miserable after we...

It hurts to breathe again. “They all think I...” Helplessness jams in my throat. “I didn’t hurt Liam on purpose.”

“I know.”

“You do, but *they* don’t. And I have no idea how to prove it when they all believe Tommy’s story and I wasn’t here to defend myself.”

Her face perks up. “Who says you can’t do it now?”

“I have no idea how that’s possible after all this time.”

“I get what you’re saying, but…” I can see the proverbial wheels in her head turning. “Wait…Tommy doesn’t know you know the truth, right?”

Given he obviously lied to me about Liam’s death, I’m gonna go with no. “Nope. Not to my knowledge.”

She chews on her bottom lip. “And the last time you saw each other was at the marina when you ended things with him?”

I’m not sure what she’s getting at, but I trust her, so I’ll follow the bouncing balls. “Technically it was at the football game when Jace kicked his ass, but I don’t think he saw me—”

“That’s perfect.”

She starts pacing again.

“Uh…Sawyer. Would you mind filling me in here?”

She holds up a finger. “Give me a second.”

A moment later she stops pacing and sighs.

I’m not sure what to make of her expression when she looks at me.

“I’m not gonna lie to you. My idea is totally fucked up, gross…and all kinds of wrong, but it *will* give you tangible proof.”

The suspense is killing me. “I’m all ears. Tell me what I have to do.”

“Go to the hospital and seduce Tommy.”

Yup, it’s official. She’s lost her mind. “Say what now?”

“Tommy’s obsessed with you. I bet if you go there and work your magic…you can get him to confess and record it on your phone.”

I have no idea what kind of magic she’s referring to, but I’m willing to do anything at this point, so it’s worth a shot.

I grab my purse off the ground. “You really think it will be that easy?”

“Are you kidding?” She zips a finger up and down. “I’ve seen what you’re working with under that. Trust me, it will be a piece of cake.” She tugs on my arm. “We should go before visiting hours are over.”

“Wait.”

Bending down, I run my thumb across Liam’s name.

I’m so sorry I hurt you.

I turn to walk away, but a blue butterfly lands on my nose.

Sawyer smiles. “My nanna used to tell me butterflies appear when angels are near.”

Emotion clogs my throat as the butterfly flaps its wings and flutters over to Liam’s headstone.

Her nanna was right.

Chapter 44

DYLAN

“*J*udging by how long you were in there, I’m guessing it worked?”
Sawyer says as I slip out the door.

I shudder. “Yup.”

She was right, it really *was* that easy to get Tommy to spill the beans once I convinced him I hated Jace and turned on the...charm.

The painkillers he was high on might have also helped.

Not to mention his very limited range of motion given one of his legs is in traction and there’s a cast on his arm.

Sawyer eyes me cautiously. “Ready to go?”

I suppress another shudder as I slide my phone into the pocket of my jeans. “Definitely.”

Now that I have my proof, the only thing left to do is send it to Jace.

On second thought.

My steps come to a halt. “Would you mind dropping me off at the bakery?”

“Sure. I didn’t know you had work tonight.”

“I don’t. I have to ask Mrs. Dickinson for a favor.”



Thanks to Mrs. Dickinson insisting on teaching me how to bake for the last five hours, it's almost midnight by the time I get to Jace's house.

Heart bursting out of my chest, I place the flash drive and the small basket of kachori on his porch.

There's nothing I can say or do to erase his pain, and I know we can never be together given everything that's come to the surface.

But I want Jace to know that the girl he stomped kachori with on the playground when we were eleven...

Will always love him.

With every broken, jagged piece of her heart.

Chapter 45

JACE

“*Y*ou’ve been staring at that basket of kachori and sulking for two days now,” Cole states as he barges through my bedroom door.

I glare at him. “Ever heard of knock—”

“Wow, would you look at that? He’s alive,” Oakley shouts.

Fucking hell. I’m not in the mood for this shit.

Swiveling in my computer chair, I face them. “Get out. Both of you.”

Hurt flashes in Oakley’s eyes before they narrow. “Fuck you, prick. You haven’t answered any of my phone calls and you haven’t been at school all week.” He wags a finger at me. “I demand an explanation.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Last I checked, my mother was dead.” Raising my middle finger, I turn my chair back around. “Unless you’re feeding or fucking me, I don’t owe you shit.”

Behind me, Cole snorts. “I guess that means we should get Dylan over here then.”

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end at the mention of her name.

“Fuck off.”

Focusing on my computer screen, I punch in a new line of code.

But then the screen goes black...because Oakley pulled the plug on my

desktop monitor.

“What the hell, asshole? I was—”

“I don’t give a fuck.” Frowning, he gestures to Cole. “We’re worried about you, man.”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not.” Scrubbing a hand down his face, he sits on the edge of my bed. “I figured you and Dylan would work your shit out, but that doesn’t seem to be happening.”

“Wow, good observation, Captain Obvious.”

Dylan and I *can’t* work out our shit.

There’s too much of it.

“Well, for what it’s worth, she’s miserable too,” he informs me. “Yesterday was her first day back at school and it’s only because my dad flipped his shit and Crystal forced her to go.” His eyes are grim. “She won’t talk to me...not like she used to. All she does is go to work and visit Liam’s grave.”

I’m about to remind him her lack of conversational skills probably has more to do with him screwing her aunt, but his last statement reverberates through my skull.

I swallow the brick in my throat. “She visits Liam?”

I can’t even bring myself to go there more than twice a year.

Cole takes a seat next to Oakley. “According to Sawyer, she’s been there every day this week...apologizing.” His face screws up. “Ever since the night of your birthday party, I’ve had a feeling something wasn’t adding up, but when Bianca unleashed on her...I fucking *knew* it.” He holds my gaze. “That wasn’t guilt, Jace...that was grief. I don’t give a fuck what Tommy says, that girl didn’t do a damn thing to Liam.”

His words are the equivalent of bullets piercing straight through my heart.

I know she didn’t.

The anguish in her eyes...it was like seeing Liam in that closet all over again.

I exhale sharply. "I know."

It's why I haven't been at school this week.

Seeing her will rip me to shreds. Or rather, seeing her so upset and not being able to fix it will.

But I can't. *Not without betraying Liam.*

As much as I hate to admit it, making Dylan pay for what I wrongly assumed she did was easier.

At least then, I got to have little pieces of her while trying to convince myself it was okay because I was defending my little brother's honor.

Now I'm just back to feeling hollow and guilty all over again.

Just like I deserve.

I stand up and plug my monitor back in. "I have to get some work done."

Cole and Oakley exchange a glance.

"Dude, seriously?"

"Seriously what? I have work to do."

The company who purchased Z.I. asked if I could develop a sequel. The kind of money they're offering will set me up for a while after I graduate, so I'd be dumb to screw it up.

"Are you kidding?" Cole's nostrils flare. "Dylan being innocent doesn't mean *anything* to you?"

"It means she's a good person who didn't deserve the shit I put her through, but..." I curb the end of my statement before I can finish it.

"But what?" He wrinkles his forehead. "You waiting for some other guy to tap that ass and set down roots before you come to your senses?"

My lips twist into a scowl. "What?"

He opens his arms wide. "I don't know, man. I'm just trying to figure out why you're still moping around when you know Dylan didn't do anything wrong."

“Because it doesn’t change anything,” I bite out.

I can’t have her.

He looks at me like I’ve sprouted another head. “Like hell it doesn’t.”

Huffing, Oakley walks over to my window and opens it. “I’m with Cole. Now that the truth is out, it’s time to man the fuck up and get your girl.”

What don’t these idiots understand? “She’s not my girl.”

Oakley takes the joint out from behind his ear and lights it. “Not yet.” Coughing, he hands it to me. “Give her a call and fix that shit.”

“Sure. Want me to resurrect Liam too, while I’m at it? Because that would be the only way to *fix* any of this.”

Confusion mars his face. “I thought we already settled this, my dude. Dylan didn’t do your brother dirty.”

Bringing the joint to my lips, I inhale deeply. “I know she didn’t.”

He snatches the joint from me. “Then no more ganga for you because you’ve obviously smoked yourself stupid.”

I glare at him. “I’m not stupid, dickhead. I’m—”

“Still letting your guilt over Liam’s death eat you alive,” Cole says with a heavy sigh. “Figured as much.”

“You say that like I don’t have every reason to.”

“You don’t.”

“Well, unless you performed a seance and asked him yourself, I’m not sure why you would think that.”

Cole was there that night. He knows what I did.

Liam would still be alive if I wasn’t so goddamn selfish.

He looks up at the ceiling. “I know Liam had feelings for Dylan, but it doesn’t mean you owe him the lock and key to your eternal happiness.”

“I betrayed him.”

Therefore, I deserve to suffer like he did. *It’s only fair.*

“No, you didn’t,” Cole argues. “You fell in love with your best friend. Last I checked, that wasn’t a crime.”

Cole doesn't get it. Then again, his sense of loyalty has always been skewed.

"It is when she's not mine to fall in love with. I broke the rules."

And I'll forever pay the price.

Muttering a curse, he stands up. "There were no rules, Jace. Dylan was never his."

I open my mouth to argue, but it only makes him more enraged. "That girl has been looking at you like you strung up the goddamn moon since the first day you brought her home, you dumbass." He pokes my chest with his finger. "Liam never stood a chance, because Dylan's heart was already taken."

"I know."

Animosity surges in my gut. *I loved her first.*

Hell, I loved her before I even knew her name.

Back when she used to sit on the playground by herself with her headphones on...tuning out the world.

I wanted to join whatever world she'd built.

Then one day she walked over to me...and I got my chance.

But Liam declared she was his and it all went up in smoke.

Now he's dead, Dylan's heartbroken...and I'm still sitting here choking on the goddamn ashes of the mess I made.

All because I didn't know the feeling in my chest when I saw her for the first time was love.

But Liam did...therefore he won the proverbial coin toss and got the girl.

Only he didn't.

Shame crawls up my spine. "I can't be with Dylan and grieve Liam at the same time." My jaw is so tight I can barely get a word out. "I can't truly atone for what I've done if—"

"Listen to me and listen to me good," Cole grits out through clenched teeth while pointing to his face. "You are *not* responsible for Liam's death."

“If I’m not then who is?” If it wasn’t so tragic, Cole’s resolve would be laughable. “Not only did I betray him, I said some really awful shit to him that night. As his big brother and best friend, I should have been there for him...but I wasn’t. I wasn’t *any* of the things Liam needed me to be when it actually fucking counted.”

There’s no coming back from that.

His gaze cuts to mine. “Still wasn’t your fault.” He sits back down on the bed. “Liam, and Liam alone, chose a permanent solution to a temporary problem.”

“A problem *I* created for him.”

“How was loving Dylan a problem?” Oak interjects with a shrug. “I know Liam had a crush on Dylan and all but—not to be a dick— Liam and Dylan never dated. Hell, they never even came close. Given what Cole said, it seems like it was pretty obvious she was in love with you from the get-go and vice versa. Therefore, I don’t see how his death was your fault. Or anyone’s for that matter...except those assholes who teased him at school.” He looks around the room. “Or are we just going to keep ignoring that?”

“Bullying wasn’t why Liam killed himself.”

“And you know that how?” Cole bites out. “Were you with him in the closet that night?”

“Of course not, but Liam killed himself hours after we got into a fight because I betrayed him.”

“And hours after Tommy and those other dipshits made fun of him at the school dance.” He jumps to his feet. “You know he had issues, Jace. You and Dad can bury your heads in the sand all you want about that shit, but Liam was bipolar...just like Mom. The signs were all there. One second, he was happy...and two weeks later he was lying in bed the whole weekend acting like an irritable, miserable prick.”

A spike of anger runs through me. “Just because someone is bipolar doesn’t make them an asshole.”

“No, it doesn’t...but it does make them human. I know in your eyes Liam was a saint, but if he was here right now, he’d tell you he wasn’t. He’d also tell you he missed Mom, and how much it hurt him that Dad wasn’t around. And how much he hated being bullied at school and that it seriously fucked him up.” Shame etches his features. “He’d tell you what happened to him wasn’t your fault. Because you were the best brother he could have asked for. You protected him and loved him...which is a hell of a lot more than anyone can say for me.”

Shit. “Cole don’t—”

He slaps his chest. “I was his twin brother, Jace. I knew him better than anyone. Why do you think it was so goddamn easy for me to hurt him all the time? If *anyone* is responsible for what happened, it’s me.” He laughs, but it’s a dark, humorless sound. “Screw the kids at school, his biggest bully was right here at home.”

Fuck. I have no idea what to say to that. Cole and Liam had a shitty relationship. But I don’t want Cole placing this burden on his shoulders.

I don’t want to lose the only brother I have left.

I drag a hand over my scalp. “You can’t blame yourself.”

“Well, then *you* can’t either.” Crossing his arms, he stares me down. “If you want me and Bianca to be happy...you have to lead the way. Show us good things can still happen, because right now it feels like all this fucked-up family is destined for is tragedy after tragedy.” He takes the joint from Oakley and brings it to his lips. “I don’t know about you, brother, but I’m getting really fucking sick of it.”

Ain’t that the truth. “Me too.”

“Then prove it.” Blowing out a cloud of smoke, he juts his chin toward the window. “Dylan makes you happy, man. And if you love me and Bianca —”

“And me,” Oak chimes in.

He shrugs when we look at him. “What? I was starting to feel left out.”

Cole smirks. “And Oakley, you’ll man the fuck up like he said and get your girl.”

Either Cole just manipulated the hell out of me, or he knows me better than I thought.

Either way, it worked.

It’s impossible for me to be truly happy without Dylan.

She’s the one this fucked-up thing in my chest beats and bleeds for.

I’m tired of living without the other half of my soul.

I’m tired of missing my best friend.

I’m tired of waking up every day with nothing when my *everything* is right there.

Determination flows through my veins. “Where is she?”

Oakley lights another joint. “Home.” He blinks. “Wait...nope. She’s gone.”

I bolt out of my chair. “What do you mean she’s *gone*?”

“Crystal felt bad about Wayne blowing a gasket and threatening to kick her out yesterday morning, so she got her tickets to some rock concert tonight.” He takes a quick drag and blows out a puff of smoke. “Sawyer was supposed to go with her, but her boss wouldn’t give her the night off work.” He shrugs. “She asked if I wanted to go, but I told her I’d rather shove a fork in my eye than listen to that crap.”

It’s all I can do not to wring his neck. “You let her go to a rock concert alone?”

He looks at Cole. “Was I not supposed to?”

Cole winces. “Judging by the murderous look in Jace’s eye, probably not.”

His gaze swings back my way. “My bad. I thought—”

“What concert?”

“Shit, I don’t know. I think it was Jimmy eating...*something*. Wait, maybe it was Lenny. Nope, it was definitely Ben—”

I don't hear the rest of Oakley's sentence because I'm charging out the door to get my girl.

Chapter 46

JACE

“*I* need to see your ticket.”

I slap a stack of hundred-dollar bills in his hand. “This should cover it.”

“I can put you in the second row or you can stand in the pit. Which one do you want?”

“Pit’s fine.”

It’s where Dylan will be.

He hands me a badge with the words, VIP on it. “Need a poncho?”

“No.”

I just need Dylan.

He lifts up the rope. “Have fun.”

After walking through a tunnel that goes on for too fucking long, I enter the outdoor amphitheater.

Despite the rain trickling down and the thunder rolling in the distance, it’s still packed.

Flipping my hood up, I trek down the pathway leading to the entrance of the pit...but pause when I spot her.

Eyes closed and one hand thrust in the air, Dylan’s singing every lyric to “The Middle” by Jimmy Eat World into the sunset while swaying her body to

the music.

She looks so gorgeous and carefree it makes my breath catch.

The people in the pit are getting frustrated due to the impending storm, but Dylan doesn't give a single fuck.

It's one of the things I love most about her.

The sky opens up and the rain starts coming down in buckets, soaking her hair and clothes...but my girl keeps singing and dancing, never missing a beat.

Determination fuels my steps, but it's quickly replaced by rage when some guy comes up behind her and places his hands on her hips.

A haze of red mist clouds my vision and I clench my hands into fists as I push through the crowd.

He's a dead man. I'm going to crush every bone in this motherfucker's body and...

Dylan sails her fist into his jaw two seconds before I reach her.

The asshole staggers back before running away like a little bitch.

Well, shit.

"You just ruined my big romantic gesture."

Her eyes widen with shock when she peers up at me. "What are you doing here?"

At least I think that's what she says. It's hard to hear her above the music.

"I'm an asshole."

It's not the best opening line, but hell if it's not the truth.

Scrunching her pretty face, she gestures to her ear. "What?"

Evidently, she can't hear me either.

Closing the distance between us, I place her hand on my chest, right over the organ that belongs to her.

Then I repeat the same words I told her in the closet that day, picking up right where I dropped the ball.

“The Mariana Trench isn’t deep enough for what I feel for you.”

And I’ll gladly bleed my heart out to prove that shit to her if that’s what it takes.

She points to her ear with her free hand, signaling she still can’t hear me.

Oh, hell.

I know a better way we can communicate.

Cupping her face in my hands, I crash my mouth against hers.

Chapter 47

DYLAN

Jace is kissing me like I'm the oxygen he needs to survive, in the middle of a rock concert...in the pouring rain.

I want to pinch myself to make sure it's real, because I'm positive *this* is exactly what sweet dreams are made of.

My head spins and my heart pounds against my ribs as he teases me with little flicks of his tongue, coaxing me to give in.

The moment I do, whatever tether we had between us snaps and the kiss becomes desperate and all-consuming. His fingers dig into my hips and he lets out a low, rough grunt that has me throbbing with need.

I never want to come down from this high.

Unfortunately, this magical moment is bittersweet, and it comes at a hefty price.

Because I know the second Jace pulls away, his guilt will consume him, and he'll look at me like I'm a mistake. *Again.*

I don't want that for him...or me.

Being this close to me rips him to pieces, and I love him too much to let him keep hurting himself.

I love myself too much to keep spinning on his merry-go-round.

It's not healthy for either of us.

Pressing my hand to his chest, I push him away.

I would do *anything* in the world for Jace Covington.

Including giving up my happiness to spare him from his sorrow and guilt.

“I can’t do this.”

He looks so bewildered it slashes right through my heart.

He tries to reach for me again, but I pull away from his touch.

We can’t be together...so it’s best we stay far apart.

Before he can stop me, I push through the crowd and start running, putting as much distance between us as I can.

When I reach the parking lot, I make a beeline for the small row of taxis and Ubers.

“Where you headed, Miss?” the driver asks after I get in.

I quickly rattle off the address for Sawyer’s job and he steps on the gas.

If anyone can reassure me I’m doing the right thing by walking away from Jace, it’s her.

I pull out my phone so I can text her, but the driver snaps, “Stop riding my ass.”

I look up. “Everything okay?”

“Sorry, sweetheart,” he says. “This damn car has been riding my bumper since I left the parking lot.”

Well, shit.

I look out the windshield behind me, and sure enough, a royal blue Lexus is tailgating us.

The driver slams on his horn. “What the fuck!”

My heart jumps to my throat when Jace’s car swerves into the next lane, narrowly dodging a vehicle driving the opposite way, before cutting us off.

A moment later, his Lexus is nothing but a blue speck in the sunset.

The driver snorts. “Can you believe that asshole? Some people are so—what the hell? He’s blocking the road!”

My mouth drops open as we skid to a stop.

He's out of his goddamn mind.

Irritation races over my skin as I open the door and step out onto the shoulder. "What the hell are you doing?"

My heart stops and then picks up, pounding as Jace stalks toward me.

His lip is curled, his jaw is tight, and his dark eyes are shining with so much vehemence he looks like a predator.

"You fucking *left* me," he seethes.

He's got to be kidding. Considering all the times he's left *me*, he has no right to be so hostile.

"We're not good for each other."

His eyes flash. "Bullshit."

I'm *trying* to do the right thing. "Ja—"

"Tell me what it will take to get through to you?" he roars. "Name it and I'll fucking do it."

No. He doesn't get to fight for me this hard...not now.

Not when he's just going to push me away again.

"You can't." Frustration rises in my chest when he opens his mouth to argue. "Jesus, don't you get it? Every time we touch, you look at me like I'm a mistake. I'm hurting you and you're hurting me."

He falters. "I'm sorry."

Never in a million years did I think I'd ever hear Jace Covington apologize.

But for once, this isn't his fault. "For what? You can't help..." I pause because I don't want to say the wrong thing. "Neither of us can change what happened."

His breath leaves him in a rush. "No...we can't."

At least that much we can agree on.

I stroke his cheek. "You were the *best* thing that ever happened to me, Jace Covington." Tears prickle the back of my throat as I drop my hand. "I'm so sorry I ended up being the worst for you."

I can physically feel my heart breaking as I turn around.

Tragedy brought Jace and me together...and, in the end, it's what tore us apart.

"That's not true." He grabs my wrist and spins me around. "I love you, Dylan." The veins in his forearm bulge as he pounds on his chest. "I can't change the past, but I can change the future...and mine includes you."

Shock roots me to the spot. "I—"

"No. Goddammit." My heart beats wildly as his hand slides to my nape. "You can try to fight this thing between us as hard as you want...but I promise you *won't* fucking win." His nostrils flare on an indrawn breath. "I lost you once...and I'll burn the whole fucking world to the ground before I ever make that mistake again."

Tears blur my vision and my lungs seize. Every word he says cracks me wide open. "Jace—"

His teeth graze the shell of my ear. "Go ahead, try to run from me again, baby. I fucking *dare* you."

I have no desire to anymore. Not after he just laid his heart out for me like that.

Emotion clogs my throat. "I can't. I love you too much."

"Good." In one fell swoop, he hauls me into his arms. "Because no way in hell was I leaving without you."

I lock my legs around his waist and he pulls me into a kiss so sizzling I forget how to breathe.

Tingles dance up and down my spine as I fall deeper into his abyss, needing more, more, mo...

"Move your vehicle or I'm calling the cops," the driver barks while honking his horn. "You're causing a traffic jam."

Oh, shit. When I tilt my head, I see the string of bumper to bumper cars.

Jace flips him the middle finger. "Fuck off, old man."

"God, you're such an asshole," I mutter as he walks us toward his car.

His lips curve into a cocky smirk. “Yeah, but I’m your asshole.”
Yes, he is.

Chapter 48

DYLAN

Six months later...

A jolt of excitement flows through me as I stare at the cap and gown hanging on my closet door.

In just two more hours, I'll officially be a high school graduate.

My heart sinks. *Unfortunately, the same can't be said for Oakley.*

Two days ago the school informed him he was ineligible to graduate and would have to repeat his senior year.

To say my uncle is pissed would be putting it mildly.

However, as bad as I feel for him...I can't say I'm surprised.

Oakley's been on a downward spiral the last few months...one that resulted in him skipping more classes than he attended.

I wanted to confront my aunt for screwing with his head and fucking up his life, but Oakley begged me not to and swore it was over between them for good.

Given my aunt announced she was three months pregnant during my celebratory graduation dinner last night ...I hope for his sake he was telling

the truth.

My chest feels heavy as I walk out of my room and knock on his door.

He doesn't answer, but I can hear him moving around in there.

"It's me. Can we talk for a few?"

"Yeah. Come in."

He's tossing some clothes into a duffle bag when I open the door.

"Planning on going somewhere?" I try to keep my voice light, but I fail miserably.

"Cole asked his dad if I could stay in their guesthouse for the summer and he agreed."

Oh. That's news to me. "You're leaving?"

He smirks. "Don't act like you won't still see me every day while visiting your boyfriend."

He makes a valid point.

Jace and I are pretty much attached at the hip these days. And I'd be lying if I said I wasn't loving every minute of it.

Especially *all* those minutes he spends with his head between my...

Dammit. Focus, Dylan.

"I know...but it's gonna suck living here without you."

Especially with my aunt being knocked up.

I want to be happy for her, however I'm still finding it hard to separate the amazing aunt I love from the two-timing, cheating whore I despise.

It's a juggling act most days.

But at least she's attending my graduation...which is more than I can say for my father who was released from jail a week ago and has yet to make any contact.

I'm starting to realize that family isn't always blood...it's the people who are there for you when no one else is.

And for me, those people are Jace, Sawyer, and Oakley.

He opens the suitcase on his bed and starts filling it with more clothes. "I

can't stay here, Dylan."

I can't say I don't understand. My uncle can be...difficult sometimes.

In his mind, he's right about everything, and everyone who disagrees with him or thinks a different way is dead wrong.

You can't even have a conversation with the man for more than five minutes without your blood pressure rising.

It's why I opted to dorm at Duke's Heart University in the fall—which is only a fifteen-minute drive away—rather than stay here.

I fidget with my fingers, trying to figure out how to ask the question that's been burning on my tongue since last night.

I decide to just come out with it. "Is there a chance the baby is yours?"

Please say no.

He blows out a breath. "No."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. The last time we screwed was the night you found out." There's no mistaking the pain in his eyes. "She doesn't love me...she loves him."

"I'm sorry."

He snorts. "No, you're not."

He's right, I'm not. My aunt had no business fooling around with her stepson.

That said, I am sorry he's hurting. "You're better off without her."

He rubs his chest. "Doesn't feel like it." He pulls a joint out from behind his ear and lights it. "I've been hoping she'd come to her senses and choose me over him, but it's safe to say that's never gonna happen now."

I've always sucked at this sort of thing, but I tell him what I know to be true.

"There's someone out there for you, Oak. And when you find her, I can guarantee you won't be her second choice. You'll be her first and *only* choice."

“Nah. Fuck that. I got burned once and it was enough for me to learn my lesson.” He blows out a puff of smoke. “But enough about my shit, this is your big day.”

I wince. I don’t know how I’m supposed to be happy about graduating when he isn’t. “Sawyer told me to tell you she’d tutor you this year.”

He gives me a curt nod. “I should probably take her up on that.”

“I can tutor you too, you know. Just say the word.”

Another curt nod. “Yup.”

I can feel the band around him start to snap.

“Oakley?”

“Yeah?”

I walk over and throw my arms around him. “It’s gonna be okay.”

His breathing goes staticky and he buries his face in my neck. “I fucked up, Dylan.”

“But you can fix it.”

“I’m not sure about that,” he chokes out. “I did it to get back at him and now...everything’s so screwed up.”

Oh. He’s referring to *that* fuck up.

“It takes two to tango, remember?” I frame his face with my hands. “She was the adult. Therefore, *she* was in the wrong.”

“Trust me, I’m a grown man. I can be very convincing when I want to be.” He scrubs a hand down his face. “I don’t know...I just need to get away from him...from her...from everything.”

I poke him in the ribs. “Well, you can’t get away from me. I’ll be stopping by the guesthouse every day this summer to bug you.”

He laughs. “Is that a promise or a threat?”

Rising on my tiptoes, I kiss his cheek. “A promise.”

He looks me up and down. “You should probably get ready.”

Crap, he’s right. I’m still in my pajamas. “Text me later?”

“Sure, but I’ll see you at the ceremony.”

I blink. “You’re going?”

He looks at me like I’m crazy. “Last I checked you and Jace were still graduating. So fuck yeah, I’m going.”

I wrap my arms around him for the second time. “You’re the best cousin in the world, you know that?”

He snorts. “At least I’m good at something.”

“You’re good at a lot of things, Oak. Have some faith in yourself.”



Jace: Have I told you how sexy you look in that cap and gown?

I can’t see him since he’s sitting a bazillion rows up from me and has already gotten his diploma, but I shake my head and laugh.

Dylan: You know you’re wearing one too, right?

Jace: Looks better on you.

A second text immediately follows that one.

Jace: Bet it looks even better off. ;)

Dylan: Perv.

Jace: You love it.

I do. I really, really do.

Dylan: So...how does it feel to be a high school graduate?

Jace: You tell me. They’re calling your name, baby.

Panic shoots up my spine when I realize my row went up, and I never

went with them. *Crap.*

That's what I get for making out with Jace during graduation rehearsal instead of paying attention.

The announcer clears her throat and scans the audience. "Dylan Taylor."
"I'm here!"

Laughter breaks out as I run up to the podium as fast as my legs can carry me.

"Whoop. Whoop. Yo, that's my cousin!" I hear Oakley yell as I accept my diploma.

But over all the clapping—and Oakley's shouting—there's still one person I can hear cheering the loudest for me.

Jace.

He's standing on his chair, clapping and shouting my name so loud he probably won't have a voice when he's done.

There's nothing but pure pride in his eyes when our gazes clash and he mouths, 'I love you.'

My throat locks up. I never knew I could feel so happy...so complete.

But that's what falling in love with your best friend does.

It makes everything so much better.

The world could end right now, and I know I'd be fine...as long as Jace was standing next to me when it happened.

I smile so hard my cheeks hurt. "I love you."

Breaking all the rules, I run off the stage and kiss him.

Because he's mine and I'm his.

And I want to spend the rest of my life making unforgettable memories with him.

Epilogue

Two months later...

I pick up my phone and call Sawyer. If anyone can talk me off the ledge when Jace isn't around, it's her.

"Something's wrong," I blurt out the moment she picks up.

"What's going on?"

I stretch a strip of duct tape across the box in front of me. "Jace has been acting weird for the past two days."

"Weird how? Sick weird or moody weird."

"I don't know...*weird* weird." I place a stack of folded clothes in a different box. "I think he's freaking out about me going to Duke's Heart."

"Why?"

"Because he's not. Because I'm dorming there. I don't know. Something just feels *off*."

"Well, did you try asking him what's wrong?"

"I don't have to," I mutter. "This morning he texted me."

"And?"

I swallow hard. "He said we needed to talk."

“Oh.” She goes silent for a few seconds before she squeaks out, “Hey, that’s not always a bad thing. Communication is important in a relationship.”

“Sawyer, how many couples are still together at the end of a conversation that begins with the words ‘*we need to talk?*’”

She sucks in a sharp breath. “Okay, I see your point. But it doesn’t matter. You and Jace are soulmates.”

We are...which is why I don’t understand any of this.

Two days ago, everything was perfect.

Then I mentioned I was going to be busy because I needed to start packing for school...and suddenly we need to have a talk.

Grumbling, I stand up. “I’m supposed to meet him in fifteen minutes.”

“Your place or his?”

“Neither.” Trekking to the mirror, I do a quick once-over. “He wants to meet at our old elementary school.”

“Really? Why?”

“I don’t know. The only thing I can think of is that he wants to end things the same place it began.”

There’s a sharp intake of breath. “Whoa. Do you really think Jace would be so cruel? Actually...don’t answer that. Think happy thoughts,” she says before hanging up.



The ominous feeling in my gut gets worse with every step I take toward the giant sequoia tree.

He looks up when I approach. “Hey.”

No kiss. No hug. Just *hey*.

“Hey.”

The look in his eyes right now is like nothing I’ve ever seen before.

He motions to the spot on the ground next to him. “Sit.”

Begrudgingly, I do.

The smile he gives me is uneasy...like he doesn't want to have this conversation any more than I do.

“How are you?”

How am I? If he'd bothered to speak to me for more than two seconds over the last forty-eight hours, he would know I'm freaking the fuck out.

“Fine.”

His dark eyes roam over my face, studying me.

I grind my molars. It should be a crime to look so hot when you're about to break someone's heart.

He reaches for my hand. “You know I love you, right?”

My heart seizes. *Oh my God.* This is it.

“Yup,” I croak.

He makes a face. “Are you okay?”

“Just peachy,” I grit out through clenched teeth.

“Really? Because you don't—”

“Good God, man. Just get on with it.”

Break up with me so I can break your jaw and knock some sense back into you.

“Didn't realize you were in a rush.” I feel his gaze bore into me. “You were wearing a blue dress with white stripes. Your hair was up, and you had a pair of red earbuds in your ears.” He traces the length of my forearm with his finger. “Your eyes were closed, and you were singing your favorite song.” Laughing, he gives his head a shake. “You sounded terrible...but you looked so happy in your own little world. I couldn't take my eyes off you.”

I have no idea what he's talking about. “When?”

His Adam's apple bobs. “The first time I saw you.”

Really? He's going to say something like *that* before he smashes my heart to smithereens, and he can't even bother to get it right.

“The day we met I was wearing overalls, not a blue dress. My hair was

down...and I had headphones on. The babysitter's cat destroyed those red earbuds the week before."

He smirks. "I said it was the first time I saw you...not the first time we spoke."

Oh. I always thought *I* was the one who noticed him first.

That uneasy look in his eyes is back. "I've been doing a lot of thinking lately."

I brace myself for impact. "About?"

"Us." He runs his thumb over my knuckle. "The future."

"Okay."

"Do you remember when we used to exchange notes with dares on them?"

Of course I do.

"Yeah, they'd have to be completed by the end of the upcoming week or you lost." I give him a smug smile. "I never lost, by the way."

"I know." He pulls a piece of paper out of his pocket and hands it to me. "I'm hoping you continue your winning streak."

Confused, I unfold the paper.

My heart constricts when I see what's written on it.

I dare you to move in with me.

"Are you serious? Like into your house?"

He grins. "No. Into an apartment...our apartment. I found three I think you'd like that are less than five minutes from Duke's. I talked to the land—"

"Wait, what? You went apartment hunting?"

He nods. "That's what I've been doing the last two days." He blows out a heavy breath. "I know you were planning on dorming and I didn't want to take that experience away from you, but I'm a selfish prick." He crosses his arms. "I want to be the first one to see you when you wake up. Not some stupid roommate—whoa, what's happening? Why are you crying?"

"I thought you were breaking up with me," I choke out, wiping my tears

with my sleeve.

He makes a face. “Breaking up with you? What the hell? Baby, why would I ever break up with you?”

“I don’t know, asshole. You said we needed to talk and then you pretty much ghosted me for two days.”

“I did not ghost you. *You* said you were busy.”

“I’m never too busy for you.” I twine a blade of grass around my finger. “I just had to get ready for my first semester of college. It’s a big deal, you know?”

“Yeah, I do.” He pulls out another piece of paper. “I’ll be seeing you around on campus.”

My mouth drops open. “I thought you said you didn’t want to go to college?”

He shrugs. “I didn’t, but then I figured getting a BA in computer science might not be a bad idea. It’s only part-time, so I’ll still have plenty of time to work on video games.” He tips my chin. “And for you.”

That happy, fuzzy feeling is back in my chest again. “I love you.”

Dipping his head, he kisses the hollow of my throat. “Is that a yes?”

“Are you kidding? That’s a hell yes. Of course, I’ll move in with you.”

The relief on his face is apparent. “Good. Because I set up meetings with the landlords this afternoon.”

My stomach sinks like quicksand. “I can’t move in with you.”

He blanches. “The fuck you can’t. Why?”

It’s almost laughable that I forgot how broke I am. “I don’t have any money. I only got a partial scholarship to Duke’s. The rest is all loans—”

“You don’t have to pay for anything.” He kisses me slow and sweet and my heart swoops down to my toes. “I’ve got you. Always.”

“But I’m not a mooch.”

“No, you’re not. You’re mine.” His thumb strokes the edge of my jaw. “And I take care of what’s mine—what the hell?”

My eyes widen in shock as a blue butterfly lands on Jace's nose.

Jace, however, doesn't seem to share my sentiments. I stop him when he tries to swat it away.

"Dylan, there's a butterfly...on my fucking face."

My throat prickles as I recall what Sawyer told me that day in the graveyard.

"Jace." I wait for him to look at me before I whisper, "Butterflies appear when angels are near."



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If you or anyone you know is are struggling, I urge and I *beg* you to reach out.

You are never alone.

Acknowledgments

There's honestly no way I can possibly thank each and every one of you. You're all amazing and I can't do any of this without you. I'm also praying I didn't leave anyone vital out, because man, that would suck.

I won't go into how Devil's Advocate was the hardest book for me to write, or how risky it was because I knew where this story was going back when I wrote The Devil and how I know if I had spilled early readers would have jumped ship. For those who *stayed* and didn't give up on my vision—thank you. For those who loved it despite it being what you thought it would be—you have a piece of my heart. For those who loved it AND shared with others how much you did—you have a piece of my soul.

Kristy: I can't thank you enough. Thank you for letting helping me out of my creative spiral and letting me talk and plot your ear off and untangling my brain when I was going crazy. I'm pretty sure I'd still be sitting at my desk having a panic attack over whether or not I could put my big girl panties on, pull the trigger, and write the damn story if it wasn't for you. And that was just with the Devil. With Advocate you went above and beyond. There will never be a way to thank you that would do it justice, so just accept my lifetime of gratitude. This book wouldn't have been finished without you, and I can't thank you enough for not only being my right hand cheerleader, but

bringing a special voice to Kristy. I'm sorry about killing you though.

Ellie: I love your face. I'm keeping you. Thank you for everything. I know it's not easy working with my schedule and I know I probably drive you crazy. Even though you claim I don't. I don't know many editors who will do what you did for me. I love the crap out of you and I'm so thankful. Also, #PiranhaBlowJobsForTheWin

Brandi, Vickie, Jackie, Crystal, Rebecca, Mary, Dee (Chief Trejo), Jodie, and Kris.

You all have been *vital* to this process. Thank you so much for trusting me and giving me your input. Thank you for being there at all hours of the morning (or night) and putting everything aside to read my words. Thank you for your continued support and for being my cheerleaders. <3

Stacy Garcia: I love you. Thank you for not only reading Devil's Advocate as I was writing, but also making gorgeous teasers!! You're amazing, lady!!!

Candi: I think you deserve two awards. One for being so organized. And one for *patience*. Holy cannoli. If I had a penny for every time something changed with this release...I could probably buy myself a notebook to write down deadlines and stick to them. Thank you so much for sticking with me!!!

Stephanie: Bahaha. I don't know whether to apologize profusely or just keep saying thank you. I'm sure you didn't expect all this...um, *excitement* when you signed on to be my agent. Thank you for sticking with me and being so incredible at what you do.

Lori—Thank you (yet again) for such a gorgeous cover and for making my vision come to life! You are such a beautiful, talented woman.

A *VERY* special shout out to these *amazing authors* who not only took a chance on this duet, but were so gracious and shared it with their own readers!

Isabella Starling, Tabatha Vargo, Kate Stewart, Lexi Ryan, Melissa Andrea, Mira lyn Kelly, Hayley Faiman, Abby Gale, Kailee Samuels,

CoraLee June, Parker S. Huntington, Jade West, Amara Kent, and Lucy Smoke.

I seriously can't thank you all enough.

And Readers,

Please—read them, Fall in love with them. And tell everyone you know about them. They are immensely talented, and they work their butts off. These authors don't just bring you words on a page. They bring you stories that will break your heart in one chapter only to mend it the next. Stories that drive you outside your boxes (and usually your comfort zone). Stories that challenge you. Heal you. Stories that make you laugh. Make you cry. Inspire you. Make you angry. Make you swoon.

Stories that never fail to always make you feel. And THEN they go out of their way to tell you about books and authors THEY love. How amazing is that?

So please—review our books, spread the word, and share your knowledge of them with others just like they have. <3

My reader group—I have the best *Angry Girls* on the planet. I love you all so much. Thank you for all of your support and giving me someplace where I can be me and connect with all of you. You guys rock.

And Jesus...let me mention this because I forgot him in the last one. Mike. I love you. You're my strength, my weakness, my everything. <3

Last but not least—to all my fellow ***underdogs*** in the world. We're just Eden's in the making, babes. Don't give up. <3

About the Author

Want to be notified about my upcoming releases?<https://goo.gl/n5Azwy>

Ashley Jade craves tackling different genres and tropes within romance. Her first loves are New Adult Romance and Romantic Suspense, but she also writes everything in between including: contemporary romance, erotica, and dark romance.

Her characters are flawed and complex, and chances are you will hate them before you fall head over heels in love with them.

She's a die-hard lover of oxford commas, em dashes, music, coffee, and anything thought provoking...except for math.

Books make her heart beat faster and writing makes her soul come alive. She's always read books growing up and scribbled stories in her journal, and after having a strange dream one night; she decided to just go for it and publish her first series.

It was the best decision she ever made.

If she's not paying off student loan debt, working, or writing a novel—you can usually find her listening to music, hanging out with her readers online, and pondering the meaning of life.

Check out her social media pages for future novels.

She recently became hip and joined Twitter, so you can find her there, too.

She loves connecting with her readers—they make her world go round'.

~Happy Reading~



Feel free to email her with any questions / comments: ashleyjadeauthor@gmail.com

For more news about what I'm working on next: Follow me on my Facebook page:
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Ashley-Jade/788137781302982>

Other Books Written By Ashley Jade

Blame It on the Pain - Standalone

Blame It on the Shame - Trilogy (Parts 1-3)

Complicated Hearts - Duet (Books 1 & 2)

Complicated Parts - Series (Books 1 & 2 Out Now)



Thanks for Reading!
Please follow me online for more.
<3 Ashley Jade

