

A close-up photograph of a very muscular man's torso and arms. He is shirtless, showing his abdominal muscles and pectorals. He is holding a basketball in his right hand. The background is a textured, greyish-blue wall. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of his muscles.

on The
REBOUND

love hurts...

1. a. cotton

ON THE REBOUND

L A COTTON

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Love me or hate me, both are in my favor...If you love me, I'll always be in your heart...If you hate me, I'll always be in your mind.

~ Unknown

Chapter
ONE

Calli

“YOU CAN DO THIS.” I stared up at my dorm building and inhaled a deep breath, but despite my mental pep talk, my feet still didn’t move.

Until a hard body collided with mine, sending me flying. “Shit, sorry,” the guy said, gently grasping my shoulders.

I shirked him off. “They’re called eyes, use them.”

“Jesus,” he muttered, running a hand over his face. “It was an accident.”

“Sorry.” A gentle sigh escaped my lips as I folded my arms around my waist. “First day jitters.”

“Freshman?” His brow lifted with mild curiosity.

“Is there any other kind?” We shared a timid smile.

He was cute. Tall, but not too ripped like most of the football players I’d seen earlier congregating in front of the Student Union.

“I’m Joel.”

“Calli.”

“Nice to meet you, Calli.” My name rolled off his tongue with ease. “What’s your poison of choice?”

My brows furrowed as I stared up at him. I held up an arm, shielding my eyes from the bright Californian sun.

“Degree...” he chuckled. “What are you studying?”

“Oh, sorry. I haven’t declared a major yet.”

“Fair enough. I’m a humanities sophomore. You got assigned to Abrams?” He flicked his head to the two-story building behind me.

“Yeah.”

“Co-ed,” he grinned, “nice.”

“Hmm, is it?”

He laughed again, but it only made the knot in my stomach tighten. “You need to lighten up, Calli the freshman. Party at my place tonight? Nothing crazy, just a few friends. My sister will be there. You should come.”

“I... I’m not sure—”

Joel gave me a pointed look. “What are you going to do? Hide away in your dorm room and watch reruns of Sons of Anarchy?”

“Huh?”

“Sorry, my sister... she’s a huge Charlie Hunnam fan.”

“Does she go here?”

“Sure does, she’s a fresh—”

“Oh my god,” a female voice said, and I turned to find a petite girl with the same dark hair as Joel, approaching us.

“Speak of the devil,” Joel leaned in and whispered as if we were two old friends sharing a secret. “Hey, Sis. I was just coming to find you, see if you’d settled in okay.”

“Yeah, yeah. You mean you wanted to check up on me.” She waved him off, giving me the once over. “Who’s your new friend?”

“Josie, meet Calli, a new freshman. Calli, this is my sister Josie.”

The girl smiled, thrusting her hand at me. I took it gingerly. “Don’t believe anything he’s told you.”

Joel snorted. “Believe it or not, I can manage an entire conversation without even mentioning you.”

“Asshole.” She play-punched his arm.

“Bitch.” He flipped her off, and they both started laughing.

I didn’t realize I was gawking until Josie pushed her face in front of mine. “Uh, Calli?”

“I... sorry. I zoned out there for a second,” I lied. Because watching them gutted me in a way I hadn’t expected.

A way I hated.

I was over Callum.

He was no one to me.

Nothing.

Liar.

“Did Joel invite you to the party?”

“Affirmative.” He grinned again. They were like sunshine on a summer’s day... and I was all thunder and rain clouds.

“You’ll come, right? I don’t have many friends who are freshman. Actually, I have zero.”

“One.” Joel coughed. “Now you have one.” He tipped his head toward me.

“Are you always this...” I searched for the right word. “Intense?”

“Oh, you don’t know the half of it.” Josie chuckled. “But seriously, come to the party, please?” She pouted, batting her thick eyelashes at me.

“I—”

“Are you staying in Abrams?”

I nodded, feeling whiplash from this entire interaction.

“Cool, so not only are we new friends but we’re dorm mates too, yay.”

I internally winced. I didn’t know what was worse: having no friends and spending the semester as a social recluse in my dorm room... or having Josie and Joel extending an overzealous offer of friendship.

“Okay, Jos, I think we’re scaring her.”

They’re just being friendly, I scolded myself. “Actually, a party sounds great.” The words got stuck in my throat.

“Yeah?” His eyes lit up and I was sure I saw a flash of interest there.

“Ah-mazing!” Josie laced her arm through mine. “We can get ready together and have some pre-party drinks.... I mean, if you want to.”

“Oh, I don’t drink.”

“No biggie. You can have soda and I’ll drink the good stuff.” She winked. “See you later, J.”

Joel nodded. “It was nice meeting you, Calli.”

“Likewise.”

“Well, I guess I’ll see you tonight.” He started backing away, wearing a goofy smile.

“Oh Lord,” Josie squeezed my arm the second her brother was out of sight.

“What?”

“My brother totally has a thing for you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We were talking for like five minutes. He doesn’t —”

“I know my brother and I know all of his tells, and he likes you.”

A strange sensation washed over me. Part of me was flattered at the idea that a stranger, a guy as cute as Joel, could like me. But the other part... the other part was still too broken to care.

“This year is going to be so much fun,” Josie went on, “I can already tell.”

I murmured a vague reply. Because this year should have been fun, but then my world had been flipped on its head and I’d spent the last eight months in a permanent state of darkness.

Given everything that had happened, it was a miracle I was even here.

But I had to do this.

No matter how hard it was, and how much I didn’t want to be here, I had to do it.

If not for myself...

Then for her.

A FEW HOURS LATER, a knock at my door startled me.

“Hey,” Josie stared back at me as I opened it, her smile morphing into a frown. “Is everything okay?”

“What?” I blinked. “Uh, yeah. I didn’t realize what time it was.”

When I’d finally managed to untangle myself from Josie, after her insisting I attend the party, I’d thrown myself into a day of unpacking and pre-course reading.

I liked to keep busy. If I didn’t, it was too easy to become paralyzed by the grief I tried so hard to keep locked away.

“I brought supplies.” Josie held up a bag, and I gave her a tight smile.

“Great.”

Without invitation, she ducked past me and into my room.

Okay then. I guess this was really happening.

It was just a party, what was the worst that could happen? I would show my face, smile in all the right places, then quietly slip out and retreat to my room. I wasn’t against faking a stomach-ache if absolutely necessary.

Madison, my best friend from back home, would be rolling her eyes at me if she saw me now. She’d made me pinkie promise that I’d try.

‘Try to make the most of it, she’d want you to’, had been her parting words as we’d hugged before she left for UCLA.

I’d never been like her: outgoing and warm, a real social butterfly. But I was even less so since my mom passed.

Losing her had been like losing a part of me—all the best parts. Now I didn’t feel whole. A ship without its anchor, drifting through uncharted waters.

I shut down those thoughts, not ready to deal with them.

“Okay, I brought you some apple and peach fizz; no alcohol, but it tastes like fancy champagne.” She waggled her brows as she pulled out the bottle. “Have you decided what you’re wearing?”

“I was just going to wear jeans and a t-shirt.” My shoulders lifted in a small shrug.

“Not going to cut it.” Josie thrust the bag at me and sauntered over to my

closet. “It’s the first party of the semester. You want to make an impression.”
As if I cared.

“Jeans will work but you need to pair it with something sexy like...” she fingered through my limited array of blouses and halter tops, “this.” She pulled out a black lace cropped halter top. “Perfect.”

My brows furrowed. It was one my mom had insisted on buying last summer when she’d been going through her ‘push Calli to try new things’ phase.

“I’m not sure it’s—”

“It’s eighty degrees out. Trust me, the less you wear, the better. College parties can get crowded. Can I use your bathroom? I brought a couple of outfits to try.”

“Sure.” I flicked my head to the door, accepting the halter top from her.

“Joel is going to die when he sees you in this.” She shot me a saucy wink before grabbing her bag and ducking into the bathroom.

I spent the next thirty minutes helping Josie pick her outfit. She settled on jean shorts and a skintight cropped t-shirt with a black and gray ombre effect. She looked killer and was clearly confident in her own skin.

“Lip gloss?” she asked me.

“I’m good.”

“Suit yourself. We should probably leave soon if we want to get there ahead of time.”

“Do we want to get there ahead of time?”

“Sure we do.” Josie chuckled, rubbing the corners of her smoky-lined eyes. She caught my eye in the mirror and frowned. “You’re not having second thoughts, are you?”

“I’m just not sure I’m ready for a party.”

Disappointment glittered in her gaze, and I hated that I’d put it there when she’d been nothing but nice to me. “If you really don’t want to come, I can always go alone.”

“No, you don’t have to do that. I’ll come.”

“It’ll be fun, I promise.”

I wasn’t sure about that, but I could at least *try*.

“Ready?” I asked, not wanting the spotlight on me for a second longer.

Josie blotted her lips again before nodding. “Let me just finish up my drink.” She grabbed the glass and downed the rest of the contents. “All set. You won’t regret this, Calli, I promise.”

But all I could think as we left my dorm room and made our way downstairs was, *famous last words*.

THE PARTY at Joel's house was everything I expected a college party would be. Loud and raucous, with hordes of half-drunk people lingering out front, drinking from red Solo cups.

There was something oddly reassuring about it.

"Whahoo," Josie shrieked, grabbing my hand and tugging me toward the house. "I'm so freaking excited."

"So you've never been to a college party before?"

"Of course I've been to a college party before." She grinned. "But this year I'm not his annoying younger sister, I'm a freshman. I have just as much right to be here as Joel does."

"If you say so," I smiled, and this time, it did reach my eyes.

"Josie Molineux, is that you?"

"Hey, Brad." We came to a stop in front of a giant of a guy.

"Little Josie Molineux, all grown up." His eyes ran down her body, lingering on the ample cleavage spilling out her top.

My cheeks pinked at the crackling energy between them.

"Looking good, Brad," she purred, fluffing her curly bangs.

"Joel know you're here?"

"Of course," she sassed. "Does Reese know you're here?"

"We broke up." He didn't look in the least bit upset about it.

"I know."

"Of course you do." A smirk pulled at his full lips.

"Brad, you better not be hitting on my sister," Joel yelled from the porch. He looked good in ripped jeans and a red and white athletic jersey that showcased his tan, muscular arms.

"Just being friendly, J."

Although his words were for Josie's brother, they never once left her face. She giggled, lifting a brow at me. Clearly, something was going on here.

"You'd better get inside before he blows a gasket." Brad rubbed his thumb over his bottom lip. "Catch you later?"

“You know it.” Josie shot him a suggestive smile before pulling me around him. “Sorry,” she breathed once we were out of earshot. “I wasn’t expecting... crap, he’s so fine. I didn’t make a fool of myself, did I?”

“I don’t think he was too worried about what you were saying.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“He was blatantly checking you out, Josie.”

Her face lit up. “He was, wasn’t he?”

“He’s your brother’s friend?”

“Friend... housemate... teammate, they’re practically brothers.”

“T- teammate?” A sinking feeling spread through me.

“Yeah, Joel’s a Steinbeck Scorpion. Didn’t he tell you?”

“I guess it never came up. So he plays football then?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

Joel didn’t play football.

He played basketball.

He played the one sport that had ruined my life.

Crap. How had I missed that?

“Football? Hell, no. Surely you know Steinbeck is a basketball school?”

Oh, I knew, I would just have preferred not to.

“I don’t really follow sport,” I said, trying to keep a neutral expression.

“But it’s... *basketball*. Everyone here loves—”

“Ladies,” Joel sauntered over to us as we reached the steps leading up to the porch. “It’s nice to see you again, Calli.” His gaze travelled lazily down my body, as if he was checking me out. I didn’t like it, but I didn’t exactly hate it either.

Knowing Joel played basketball was a huge bump in the road. I didn’t date at the best of times, but I definitely didn’t date basketball players. It was one of my life rules. You know, like never eat yellow snow or never put your hand into a hole you couldn’t see into.

There was also another glaring issue with Joel now I knew he played for the Scorpions, but I wasn’t about to bring *that* up.

“Hey,” I kept it cool.

“Okay, J, you can put your tongue away now.” Josie tapped his cheek. “Me and my girl need drinks. Well, I need a drink and I want to introduce Calli around.”

“Stay away from Brad, Jos.”

“The guys know I’m off-limits.”

“Damn right, they do,” he growled, and it was so at odds with the goofy happy Joel I’d met earlier, I wondered what I was missing.

“Come on.” Josie yanked me away, and we slipped into the house.

The music hit me first. Like a bass drum, it reverberated inside me, making my bones rattle. “It’s loud,” I yelled, and Josie snorted.

“You really don’t get out much, do you?”

“I wasn’t exactly a social butterfly at high school.”

Understatement of the century.

“Good thing this isn’t high school then. Look.” Josie pulled me into the first room we came across. It was quieter in here, people sitting around chatting and drinking. “I didn’t have many friends in high school either. I’m too much for a lot of people, but it’s like my armor, ya know? I get...” She inhaled a deep breath. “Bad anxiety.”

“You do?” I could hardly believe what she was saying.

“Yeah.” Her smile was uncertain. “I always hung around with Joel and his friends at school, so last year was hard for me. I don’t find it easy to make girlfriends, so I’m really hoping I haven’t come on too strong and scared you off already?”

It was so weird. Josie was everything I wasn’t. Confident and bubbly and beautiful. But I guess you never knew what was going on for a person on the inside.

It was right then, I decided that I liked Josie Molineux. Maybe I could be the friend she needed and maybe she could be the push I needed to make the most of college.

But I should have known by now that life wasn’t usually that kind.

“Eeek, there is he,” she whisper-shrieked, clutching my arm to steady herself.

I inhaled a deep breath, steeling myself to face my brother. I didn’t know how I knew it was him, but something inside me did. I guess it was those old familial ties stirring to life.

“He’s so fucking hot.”

Slowly, I turned to greet him.

Callum James.

My estranged brother—the first guy to ever break my heart.

Only it wasn’t Callum at all.

A ghost from my past stared back at me instead.

“Z- Zach?” I choked out, sheer panic flooding every inch of me.

“You know him?” Josie glanced at me. “But I thought you said you didn’t
—”

“What is *he* doing here?”

This was bad.

Very fucking bad.

“Wait a minute, I’m confused.” She glanced from me to Zach and back again.

Zachary Messiah.

My first best friend.

My first love.

My first *everything*.

Including the worst heartache I’d ever experienced. And that was saying something for the girl who was abandoned by her father *and* brother, only to lose her mom a few years later.

I felt his hard stare. Felt his soulless gaze drilling holes in the side of my face. But I couldn’t look at him again. I wouldn’t.

This cannot be happening.

“I need to go,” I rushed out.

“Go?” Josie blanched. “But we only just got here. Don’t worry about Zach... see, he’s leaving.”

I risked peeking over at the door, and sure enough, he and his friends disappeared into the hall, taking the air with them.

“Do you want to talk about what just happened?” Josie asked.

“No,” I said, feeling the icy claws of the past wrap around my throat.

I needed to go.

I needed to run back to Abrams and hide inside my room and figure out how the hell this happened.

But I did none of those things.

Instead, I looked at my new friend and said, “I need a drink. Something strong.”

Because the boy I’d fought so hard to forget was here.

He went *here*.

And it was the worst possible thing that could ever have happened to me.

Chapter
TWO

Zach

“ZACH, my man, ready for a kick ass season?” Saul, the Scorpion’s shooting guard, held out his fist and I went through the motions.

Fist bump.

Guy hug.

Slaps on the back.

I’d gotten good at playing the part the last couple of years. This year was different though. That part was the same, but I wasn’t.

“Shit, man,” Saul’s friend said. “You must have grown two inches.”

Fucking idiot.

I hadn’t grown.

Physically, I was the same Zach I’d been when I’d transferred here in the spring. But emotionally... emotionally I’d checked out a long time ago.

“Hey.” Joel joined us, chugging on his beer. Joel, I liked. No, that was the wrong word. I could tolerate him. He didn’t push for more, happy to let me stew in my own thoughts.

I wanted to believe he got it. But I knew he didn’t.

How could he?

How could anyone?

No one could know what it was like to live in the shadow of your big brother, only to be thrust into his place, like some fucked up version of the body snatchers.

“Yo, J, when’s Josie getting here?”

“You keep your dirty fucking hands away from my sister.” He gave Saul a pointed look. “That goes for all of you. You know the rules, she’s off-limits, so don’t even think—”

“Whoa, dude, relax. Although you know she’s free game now she’s a freshman, right? If it isn’t me or one of the other guys from the team, it’ll be some jock thinking he can—”

“I need to piss.” I moved around them, heading down the hall to the bathroom.

This was Joel’s house. He lived here with some other guys from the team. They’d asked me to move in, but I’d drawn the line at that. Instead, I’d opted for a studio apartment just off-campus. It wasn’t much, but it was mine. The one place I didn’t have to worry about keeping up appearances.

I'd also been given a room in the Delta Pi frat house, but I had no desire to live with a bunch of frat brothers either, playing house in my brother's old stomping ground.

As I moved down the hall, guys called out my name, and girls let their eyes linger too long. I'd never really enjoyed this, the worship and adoration, but I enjoyed it even less since arriving back at SU a couple of weeks ago.

"Hey, Zach," a cute blonde stepped in my way.

"Hey," I ground out. "Uh, Steph—"

"Sapphire. We met before the summer, at the party, remember?"

I couldn't remember much about the weeks leading up to summer vacation.

Everything was hazy. A dark black mist cloaking my memories.

But it was better that way.

"Hmm, not really, sorry."

"That's okay." She wrapped manicured fingers around my arm. "You were going through a lot."

Understatement of the fucking century.

"Maybe we could get reacquainted?" Sapphire made a show of licking her lips and batting her lashes at me. She was hot, and my dick seemed to like her given the way he was straining against my jeans.

But I wasn't looking for *that* tonight. I needed to keep a level head if I was going to survive the party.

"Not tonight." I pushed her hand away, and dejection glittered in her eyes.

"I'll make it worth your while."

"I'm sure you would, but the answer's still no. Now I need to go take a piss. I'm sure one of my teammates would be more than happy to take what you're offering." My brow lifted as I moved around her and took off toward the bathroom.

Part of me contemplated ducking out early and going back to my apartment. But it wasn't worth the shit the guys would give me. I was their star transfer, the guy tipped to take the Scorpions all the way. The newly crowned King of SU. That came with certain expectations. Ones you didn't just walk away from. No matter how much the need to escape burned through me.

After using the bathroom, I found a group of guys in one of the quieter rooms. "What's up?" I said, approaching them.

“Zach, get over here. We were just talking about the season now we’ve lost some of our more experienced players...”

Silence fell over the five of us.

“Shit, man, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s all good,” I clipped out, my chest tightening with every word.

Of course it was a lie.

Everything was not good; it was a fucking mess. But no one wanted to hear that. They wanted to hear I was strong, that I was ready to carry the team to greatness.

That I was ready to represent the Messiah name.

“Holy shit,” one of the guys whistled, “Is that Joel’s sister?”

I glanced over at where he was looking, my eyes going straight to Josie’s friend.

No.

Fuck no.

“Who’s that girl with her?” I asked because it couldn’t be.

No fucking way.

“Hell, if I know.” He shrugged. “But I wouldn’t say no to a Josie and Josie’s friend sandwich.”

His words were drowned out over the roar of blood between my ears as I watched the girl. She finally lifted her eyes to mine—whiskey eyes that haunted me in my sleep—and shock instantly registered on her face.

My hands curled into tight fists, my nails digging into my palm.

It was her.

Calliope James.

The girl who had once been everything to me.

Until she’d betrayed me. Broke everything we’d had, everything we’d shared.

It was three years ago, back when we were just kids, but it didn’t stop hate filling my veins, turning my blood to ice.

She wasn’t supposed to be here.

So what the fuck was she doing, standing here, in my teammates’ house?

“Zach, my man, you coming?”

“I, uh, yeah, let’s go.” I needed to get the hell out of there.

I needed to figure out why the hell Calli was there, at SU.

It was the last place I ever expected to find her. Her brother Callum, my teammate—although our relationship was strained at best—went here. And

there was one person Calliope hated more than me.

Him.

I followed the guys into the kitchen where a bunch of dudes were taking body shots off a girl I vaguely recognized as one of the cheerleaders.

“Messiah, let’s go,” Brad yelled.

“Nah, man, I’m good.” I held up my beer.

“Not optional, Zach. It’s the first party of the year. We always take body shots off the cheer captain.”

“Yeah, Zach, I don’t bite.” The girl—Jenny, I think her name was—smirked. “Unless you want me to.” She pushed up onto her elbows and her tits jiggled, barely confined in the tiny bikini top she wore.

“*Messiah, Messiah, Messiah,*” Brad started chanting and soon everyone joined in, the words rattling around my skull like bricks.

It’s what they’d called *him*.

Declan.

My brother.

Their friend.

Their point guard.

But now he was gone, and I was here.

I wasn’t Declan... yet, they were treating me as if I was.

It was fucked up, but I was the only one who seemed to give a shit.

Stalking through the crowd, I thrust my beer at someone and said, “Fine, let’s do this.”

Brad slapped me on the back. “That’s the spirit, Messiah. Now for the fun part. Tits or pussy?”

The girl giggled as Brad glided a full shot glass down the valley of her tits right down the apex of her thighs. She had a skirt on, but it was so short it left nothing to the imagination.

“Tits,” I grumbled.

“My kind of man.” Brad expertly placed the shot there and stepped back. “On three, man. One, two—”

I dipped my head, closed my mouth around the glass and tipped it back. The tequila burned but I welcomed the sting. It was the small things that made me remember I was alive.

Shaking my head, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, accepting everyone’s applause.

“Nice, my man.” Brad squeezed my shoulder. “This year is our fucking

year. I can feel it in my bones.”

Nodding, I shirked out of his hold and grabbed another beer. I was supposed to be taking it easy, but the weight of responsibility crushed my chest like a sack of bricks. At least if I had another couple of beers my body would relax, even if my mind remained tense.

“Saul, let’s go.” Brad started the routine all over again and I slipped into the shadows.

At least there, I could breathe for a minute.

SOMEWHERE CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT, I finally made the decision to leave. I’d stayed there, on the periphery of the drinking games, forcing the odd smile, acting arrogant enough for most people to give me a wide berth.

A lot of girls loved an asshole though. They gravitated to that shit, but my answer was always the same.

Not. Interested.

Ever since laying eyes on Calli, I’d searched the party for another glimpse of her. If she knew what was good for her though, she’d already be tucked up in her bed, far away from here. What I felt toward her wasn’t healthy. It sparked anger in me so overpowering my body trembled.

Relax, she’s no one.

But that was the thing.

She wasn’t no one.

She was always there, in the back of my mind, taunting me. Her whiskey eyes haunting my dreams.

And now she was here.

It was some fucked up karma.

Dragging a hand down my face, I slipped around the bodies grinding to the music, dodging a couple of my teammates who were professing their bromance to one another, and left the house. The air was thick and balmy with the blistering summer heat.

It was about a fifteen-minute walk to my place, but I appreciated the quiet. Being around the constant noise... the questions... and conversation, it was exhausting.

I was exhausted.

But I didn't make it very far. There, in the shadows, falling over her own feet was Calli.

Fuck, she was beautiful. All delicate lines and soft curves, with a long slender neck I could imagine closing my hand around. But it was all a lie. She was nothing more than a snake wearing a swan's clothing.

"Come on, drunk girl." Her friend, Joel's sister, said, trying to hoist Calli into her side and pull her toward the path leading to the dorm buildings.

I watched as she struggled to put one foot in front of the other, unable to fight the smirk tugging my lips. She was so fucking pathetic. A fish out of water. A lamb in the lion's den. It would have been so easy to storm over there and torment her. To whip out my cell phone and document the righteous Calliope James' fall from grace... literally.

She went down like a ton of bricks, splattered on her back on the sidewalk. Josie looked to the sky, cussing to the heavens. I smirked to myself. *You won't find any help there.*

I watched for a few seconds as she tried to help Calli to her feet, and then took off down the sidewalk that led straight off campus. It was nothing I hadn't seen before; girls unable to hold their damn liquor, embarrassing themselves for all to see. So why, as I kept walking, did the image of her lying there refuse to get the fuck out of my head?

"Fuck," I hissed, coming to a sharp stop. I dragged a hand down my face and let out a long breath.

Just leave her.

Just fucking leave her there and let someone else deal with her.

Without overthinking it, I spun around and marched back toward the girls. Josie's eyes widened the second she saw me emerge from the shadows.

"Z- Zach?"

"Where is she staying?"

"Abrams."

"Grab her purse." I barked as I stared down at Calli.

She invoked so much emotion inside me, but none was more prevalent than hate.

I hated her.

I hated everything she stood for, everything she was.

So why I did what I did next, was beyond me.

Crouching down, I pushed her hair out of her face, and said, "Sweet pea, you alive?"

“Sleep, I just sleep riiiiight here.” Her eyes rolled.

“Okay,” I slid one of my arms under her shoulders and the other under her knees, “up we go.”

She barely weighed one-hundred and twenty pounds, and a strange memory hit me in the gut. I couldn’t remember her being this light.

Don’t. Fucking. Go. There.

Calliope James was woven into my soul. A dark stain that no matter what I did, who I fucked, I couldn’t get rid of.

For a second, I contemplated dropping her on the ground and leaving her there. I had no business being there, doing this.... and yet, in that second, she looked so fragile. So innocent and pure.

She looked like something I wanted to ruin.

“Zach, what the hell?” Josie called after me as I took off down the sidewalk. Steinbeck campus was a sprawling place, and the dormitories were located past the main buildings.

“Zach, I said—”

“Do you want to get her back to her room or not?” I ground out, not bothering to slow down.

Josie stumbled beside me, catching her breath. “Of course... I didn’t think she’d get so wasted. But she saw you and... what exactly is your history?”

Something snaked through me. Something I didn’t want to acknowledge.

“We’re both from Bay View. We went to school together.” I gave her a tight-lipped reply.

“Did you bully her or something? Because I swear, she saw you and almost passed out.”

“Bully her, really? What are we, twelve?” I shot her an irritated look.

“Hey, what’s your problem?” Josie ducked around me and planted her hands on her hips, making me draw to a stop. Calli murmured in my arms, hanging there like a rag doll. I tried to ignore the way her outfit molded to her curves... the way her tits were practically spilling out of the lacy halter top she wore, but I was only human.

“Look, I’m not doing this for her, I’m doing it for you. Joel would kick my ass if he knew I’d seen you and not helped out.”

“You’re doing this for *me*?” She balked.

“Yep. So if you don’t mind...” I raised a brow.

“Ugh, fine. Whatever.” Josie stepped aside and we continued down the sidewalk.

“Just how much did she drink anyway?”

“Not much at all. I got the impression she doesn’t drink a lot.”

“You don’t say,” I mumbled. We were almost at Abrams.

Thank fuck.

“And you just let her go at it?”

“I didn’t *let* her do anything. She’s eighteen, she can make her own choices.” Josie let out a resigned sigh. “I tried to make her alternate with water. But she wouldn’t listen.”

“You got your key?” I asked as we arrived at the door. Abrams was a co-ed dorm so there wouldn’t be a problem with me roaming the halls.

“Yeah, here.” Josie scanned her key card and the door clicked open. I cradled Calli close to my chest as I maneuvered her inside.

“What floor?”

“Second. She’s in two-eleven.”

“Lead the way,” I said, motioning for her to go on ahead.

I should have been home by now, passed out in bed with a bottle of Jack. Instead, I was about to put Calliope James, a girl I thought I’d never see—*hoped* to never see—again, to bed.

The universe clearly wasn’t done fucking with me.

We finally reached her room, and Josie dug around in Calli’s purse and pulled out another key card. “Here.” She pushed the door open and let me go inside first.

Thank fuck it was dark because I didn’t want to see where she lived. I didn’t want to see her things—photos, trinkets, her clothes—I didn’t want to see any of it.

“Okay, get her on the bed and I’ll do the rest.”

I laid her down and stepped back.

“Z- Zach?” She blinked up at me.

Fuck.

It was one thing bringing her back here, but I didn’t want her to know.

“Hey.” I grabbed Josie’s wrist and pulled her over to the door. “This stays between us, okay?”

“W- what?” Her brows crinkled.

“You can’t tell her.” My eyes went over to the bed. Calli was out cold again, her top ruffled up her body, revealing a sliver of her flat stomach.

“Why not? That’s just—”

“Tell her and I’ll tell Joel you’ve been sexting with Brad.”

Her mouth hung open. “You wouldn’t.” She seethed.

Interesting. I sensed there was something going on between them, but I’d guessed at the sexting.

“Prepared to take that chance?” I arched a brow. Josie was off-limits. It wasn’t only a team rule, it was Joel’s number one rule. He was next level protective of his sister.

“You’re an asshole.”

I didn’t argue. “So we have a deal?”

“Yeah, yeah, I won’t tell her. But one day I’ll find out what you did to her, and then maybe I’ll have leverage over you,” she sassed.

Josie had balls, I’d give her that. But then people didn’t know how deep my darkness ran. They thought I was just grieving, that I was just lost to the pain and regret. But I’d been like this long before I arrived at SU.

Calli made a moaning sound, and Josie glanced over her shoulder.

“You should go see to her,” I said.

“I’d say thanks, but—”

“Yeah, yeah, you think I’m an asshole.” With a dismissive shrug, I stepped into the hall and Josie slammed the door in my face.

And I walked away more than ready to forget this night ever happened.

Chapter
THREE

Calli

EVERYTHING HURT.

My head.

My stomach and insides.

My muscles.

I didn't need to crack an eye open to know I was hungover, I felt it in every inch of my body. Not to mention my cotton mouth.

Oh god, my mouth.

I tried to sit up, hoping by some small miracle there was water. To my relief, I found a glass and some Advil.

What the hell had happened last night?

Usually, I didn't get drunk, preferring to be in total control of myself at all times.

I remembered Josie turning up here and walking to Joel's house—

Basketball.

Joel played for the basketball team, so did all of his friends. So did...
Zach.

My body tensed. No. Zach didn't go here. I frowned, rubbing my eyes. I must have dreamed it.

So why did you get ass over elbow drunk?

Panic raced down my spine as I tried to piece together the hazy memories of last night.

We saw a guy... Brad, I think. He and Josie had some serious sexual tension. Then Joel showed up and got all big-brotherly. The house was crammed. We were in one of the less busy rooms...

It happened like waking from a dream. The memories shimmered and shifted on the edge of my consciousness, slamming into me one after another as reality yanked me out, planting me in the harsh light of day.

Zach was there.

He goes to SU.

That's why I'd told Josie to get me a drink—a real drink. One full of liquid courage and magical numbing powers.

Fuck. My. Life.

It wasn't a dream, it was a nightmare.

My worst nightmare.

He couldn't be here.

Declan, his brother, went here. But not Zach.

I never in a million years would have committed to SU if I'd have known.

But Callum knew. He knew and never said a word.

Damn you, brother.

Not that it was a surprise. We hadn't exactly talked. Even at Mom's funeral we barely managed to utter a few words to one another. We might have been siblings, bound by blood and DNA, but those things didn't make you family. They didn't excuse poor decisions and selfish mistakes.

Callum and I were nothing more than strangers these days. Strangers with the same name, the same pouty lips and whiskey-colored eyes. The family resemblance might have been there, but that's where our similarities ended. I was nothing like my brother.

Nothing.

I flopped back against the pillows, letting out a pained sigh. I hadn't even managed a whole twenty-four hours here and my world had already been flipped upside down.

It would be okay though.

Now I knew Zach was here, and that Joel was a basketball player, I could avoid them.

No more parties.

No more hangovers.

But most of all, no more nasty surprises.

“CALLI, ARE YOU ALIVE?” Someone hammered on my door, the noise rattling through my skull. “Calli, come on before I call the RA.”

“Ugh.” I threw back the sheets and dragged myself across the room to open the door. “Do you mind? My head is already pounding.”

Josie smirked. “That's what you get for drinking your body weight in tequila.

“Tequila?” My stomach roiled. “I hate tequila.”

“You didn't hate it last night.” She forced her way into my room, and I mumbled, “Sure, come in.”

“I brought you a green smoothie and a donut from Muds.”

“A what and what now?” I ran a hand down my face. It was midday, but I was still suffering.

“Kale, apples, blueberries, and some other crap they recommend. It’s supposed to replenish all the nutrients and make you feel energized.” She shoved the funky looking smoothie at me.

“Later.” I pushed it away, clutching my stomach. “I’m not sure it’ll stay down yet.”

Josie shrugged. “Suit yourself. That was quite the show you put on last night. I didn’t know you had it in you.” She dropped into the desk chair, twirling it.

“Please, stop.” The room began spinning.

“Sorry. You’re really suffering, huh?”

“I.. I haven’t ever been drunk like that before,” I admitted, shame seeping into me. For more reasons than one.

“Want to talk about it?” Josie offered me a warm smile that settled something inside me.

Less than twenty-four hours and she had already proved herself as a good friend. She could have abandoned me last night, written me off as some crazy girl unable to hold her liquor. Instead, she’d stuck with me, and then gotten me home. She’d even left me water and pain meds.

“Hey,” I said, realizing something. “How did you manage to get me home?”

“You don’t remember?” Her eyes narrowed slightly.

“Nope. I barely remember the party. Then the next thing I know, I’m waking up to a brass band party in my skull.”

“One of the guys helped me carry you.”

“Oh god.” I buried my face in my shoulder, flushing head to toe.

“It could be worse, you could have puked all over him.”

My head whipped up. “I didn’t... please tell me I—”

“Relax, you saved that for when I finally got you into your room.”

A fresh wave of shame pinked my cheeks. “Was it Brad?”

“Uh, yeah, but you can’t say anything. Joel would flip his shit if he thought—”

“Your secret’s safe with me.” I mimicked zipping my lips. “What’s going on there anyway?”

“Nothing.” She shrugged.

“Liar.”

“What’s going on with you and Zach?” Her brow quirked up.

“Nothing,” I said, schooling my expression.

“Liar.” Josie smirked. “You keep your secrets, Calliope James, and I’ll keep mine.”

“Touché.”

We shared another smile, but then I asked, “What’s his deal anyway? Zach, I mean. Why does he go here?”

Sadness washed over her face. “He transferred at the end of the season last year, after his brother...”

“After his brother what?” Chills ran up and down my spine making my hairs stand on end. It wasn’t so much what she said as much as what she *wasn’t* saying.

“There was an accident and he... you really don’t know any of this?”

I didn’t.

I’d been checked out for most of the spring, dealing with my own stuff, and Callum, my so-called brother, had never breathed a word of it to me.

Oh my god.

Declan.

He and Callum were friends.

“I can’t believe he’s gone...” The words got stuck over the lump in my throat.

“He’s not dead, Calli.” Her lips twisted in a grim line. “But he might as well be. He suffered a severe brain injury. He’s been in a medically induced coma for the last five months.”

Her words rattled around my skull. I remembered Declan. Remembered his energy and zest for life. I remembered how much he loved basketball. I’d hated him for that very reason.

He was like Callum; focused on nothing except going all the way to the NBA. The two of them had always dreamed of going off to college together and chasing their goal of going pro. Even after Callum left Bay View, I knew they had stayed in touch and eventually started SU together, taking the NCAA by storm.

“I can’t believe it.” A shudder rolled through me.

“Yeah, it’s been tough for everyone.”

A sudden burst of emotion hit me, and tears burned my throat. “I need to go clean up,” I rushed out. “You can hang out or whatever, but I need to shower.”

“I have nowhere else to be.” She got comfy on my bed. “Do your thing and I’ll find something to watch.”

Ducking into my small bathroom, I closed the door and inhaled a steady breath.

Everything was a mess.

Zach went here. Declan was in a coma. And Callum had failed to tell me *any* of it. If I thought our sibling connection was on thin ice before, this only confirmed it was completely shattered.

A rogue tear managed to slip through, and I caught it with the pad of my thumb, swiping it away. Clutching the counter, I stared at myself in the mirror. My hair was dull and lifeless, and my eyes were dark and bleary. My collarbones stood prominent against my pale skin and I knew if I lifted the t-shirt Josie must have wrangled me into last night, my ribs and hip bones would be obvious. I’d lost weight over the last few months.

Too much.

My eyes shuttered as I inhaled another ragged breath. Part of me wanted to run. To throw my life’s belongings into my suitcase and go far, far away from here. But where would I go?

I had no one.

My friends back home had all left for college. My mom was gone. The house was sold. What little family I had left was here, in Steinbeck.

Even if they hadn’t really been family in a long time, they were still my blood. That was better than nothing, wasn’t it?

“Calli,” Josie called. “Everything okay in there?”

“Yeah.” I dried my eyes on a towel. “I won’t be long.”

“Take your time,” she replied.

Stripping out of what little clothes I had on, I turned on the shower and stepped inside, letting the water wash away the hazy memories of last night.

It was safe beneath the spray. Josie couldn’t hear me sob. And if she couldn’t hear me, she couldn’t ask more questions. Then I wouldn’t have to tell her that I wasn’t crying for myself.

I was crying for a boy I knew once.

A boy who had been my best friend in the whole world. A boy I’d wanted... a boy I’d *loved*.

But most of all, I was crying because that boy, the boy who had broken my heart and made me question everything I knew about love and friendship, didn’t deserve my tears.

He didn't deserve my sympathy or heartache.

But my heart cared anyway.

And there, under the safety of the water raining down on me, my traitorous heart still cried for him.

AFTER SPENDING a couple of hours watching mindless TV, Josie insisted we go explore. She knew the campus pretty well, since she'd visited Joel a lot last year. We checked out the Societies Fair, collecting coupons and invitations to free taster sessions. Josie signed up to learn self-defense, but I passed. I also quickly dodged the photography society. But I did pause at the Student Community Action table. They had a ton of opportunities for people to get involved and give back.

"Interested in helping in the local community?" The girl manning the stall asked.

"Maybe." I flicked through one of the leaflets, pausing on a project that piqued my interest. "You work with kids coping with loss?" My chest tightened, a wave of pain crashing over me.

"We do. It sounds super depressing but it's actually one of our most rewarding projects. Is it... something you might be interested in?"

"Maybe."

"Awesome. I can take your email and send you some more information? I'm Lydia by the way."

"Calli." I smiled, accepting the pen and clipboard. After scribbling down my email, I handed it back.

"Great, me or one of the other volunteers will be in touch soon."

"Thanks." I went to walk away, but her voice gave me pause.

"Hey, Calli, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why that project?"

"I lost my mom earlier this year," I admitted, the words spiking through my heart like thorns.

"Gosh, I'm so sorry."

"Thanks."

"I sensed... something," she gave me a small smile, "but I wasn't sure."

Grief has a funny way of shadowing you.” I nodded, and she continued, “I lost my dad, five years ago. He was in the military. It never goes away, ya know?” Sadness washed over her.

“I’m sorry.”

She nodded too and then there was a pause. What else could you say? “I should...” I flicked my head over to where Josie was standing, waving at me.

“Of course. I’ll see you around,” she glanced at my handwriting, “Calli James.”

“Bye.”

I felt Lydia watch me as I walked over to Josie. Her words lingered, her strange observation about my grief shadowing me. I guess it wasn’t hard to see the dark circles around my eyes or the smile that didn’t quite reach them. But Josie and Joel hadn’t noticed. Maybe it was one of those things you needed to experience firsthand to know, like an exclusive member’s only club.

I suppressed a bitter laugh. It wasn’t any club I’d choose to be a part of. I’m not sure anyone would.

“What was all that about?” Josie asked me.

“I might think about volunteering.”

“Neat. I think Joel and some of the guys from the team got involved last year. They did a bunch of sport sessions with a few kids down at the local community center. Coach Baxter is big on that kind of stuff.”

“You and Joel are pretty close, huh?” I said as we walked under the leafy canopy leading away from the Students Union.

“Yeah. There’s only seventeen months between us, so we’ve always been close.” She paused, grabbing my arm gently. “Are we going to talk about the fact Callum James is your brother?”

“How did you—” I stopped myself. Of course she knew. It was foolish to think I could get away with remaining incognito.

“I had a hunch and you just confirmed it. Your face when we talked about Joel being a Scorpion kinda gave me a warning bell, and you freaked when you saw Zach... Why didn’t you tell me?” She gave me a sympathetic smile, motioning to a bench. We sat down and I let out a weary sigh.

“It’s a long story, but I’ll keep it short. Basketball has always been Callum’s life. Growing up, our dad doted on him. And I mean in that he can do no wrong, sun shines out of his ass, worship kind of way. So when I came along, and I was a girl without a single athletic bone in her body, I didn’t fit

the James' mold."

"Ouch, that's got to hurt."

"Oh, it still does." My lips pressed together in a thin line as I forced down the rest of the details. It wasn't something I wanted to relive, at least, not now.

"Families can be strange things," Josie said. "I know I've been super lucky. Sure, me and Joel fight sometimes but he's the best."

"There's just the two of you?"

"And Jay."

"Jay?"

"Our older brother. He's in the military so we don't see him a lot."

"Wow, that's got to be hard."

"It is. But he's six years older, and he's always been this free spirit, you know? Even when he was around, he was never really around."

"I guess we both know a little about absent brothers then," I said quietly.

"Okay." Josie clapped her hands together, startling me. "Enough of the heavy stuff. We should totally go to Muds, I'm starving."

I had no idea what Muds was, but it sounded better than sitting here, dredging up the past.

So I pasted on the best smile I could muster and said, "Let's go."

MUDS, it turned out, was a coffee shop. But not just any coffee shop. It was one of those quirky coffee shops with a bookstore attached.

It was my new favorite place.

There was something about a good book and a mug of coffee that settled my soul. Before Mom got sick, I'd always found solace behind the lens of my camera. It had been the one place I truly felt free. Ironic that my freedom came through watching, but there had been nothing I'd loved more than losing myself through the lens. Everything changed once she died though. The love I'd had for photography died right along with her. Instead, I'd spent hours at her bedside reading, escaping to faraway lands while she dipped in and out of consciousness.

"This is amazing," I said, letting my eyes run over the interior. The store was split-level, with the coffee shop on the ground floor. The entire back wall

was floor to ceiling bookshelves, and then there was a mezzanine level that housed even more. Its walls were a mishmash of literary quotes and artwork. A true book lover's paradise.

"Right?" Josie smiled, far more interested in the display cabinet full of mouthwatering muffins and pastries.

"I think I just found my new hangout," I said.

"Sybil, the owner, opens late Thursday thru Monday."

I made a mental note. The library at SU was well equipped and study worthy, but this was... this was something else. For the first time since arriving here, I felt a seed of excitement blossom in my chest.

"Where's the bathroom?" I asked Josie. She pointed to the spiral staircase. "Take the stairs, then go down the hall to the end, it's the second door on the left. I'll order, so what do you want?"

"I'll take a latte and a muffin, please."

"Flavor?"

"Surprise me."

I quickly made my way upstairs, and into the women's bathroom. It was just as quirky as the shop, littered with ornaments and trinkets paying homage to the literary greats of the past and present. A white rabbit soap dispenser. Golden snitch door handles. It was like an Aladdin's Cave of bookish treasures; somewhere I could have easily spent hours secreted away. But Josie was waiting, and I was trying not to hide.

After I was done, I washed my hands, and made my way back into the hall. I was so intrigued by the postcards hanging from the wall depicting the story of Moby Dick, that I didn't see the person heading this way before it was too late.

"Watch it," a gruff voice said.

"Z- Zach?"

"So it is you," he snarled the words, his displeasure at seeing me dripping from his pores. "I thought I must have been seeing things last night."

Heat bloomed in my cheeks as I craned my neck to look at him. He was taller, much taller than my five six. His face was all sharp angles and dark eyes. Eyes that made me want to disappear.

Memories flooded me. Him. Me... *Us*. Stolen touches and clumsy kisses in the dark.

"Listen," I swallowed hard, "I just wanted to say how sorry I am. I didn't know... about Dec—"

“Don’t.” He grabbed my arm and yanked me into an alcove, the venom in his voice stealing the air from my lungs.

“What the—” I was so taken aback by his manhandling of me that the words died in my throat. That and the hostility radiating from him, as I stared up at his icy expression.

He was here.

Zach was here, staring at me with so much anger, I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

“I’m truly am sorry, Zach,” I said, needing to fill the heavy silence.

He scoffed. “You shouldn’t have come here, sweet pea.”

God, that name.

It had once been spoken with so much love and adoration. But now he spat it at me like it didn’t deserve his breath.

“I- I didn’t know you would—”

“You think I give a shit about you being here?” His eyes turned even darker, burning with anger. The intensity in his icy glare seared my bones, scorching my soul.

Zachary Messiah hated me. I just didn’t know why.

“I should go,” I rushed out, desperate to get away from him. I couldn’t breathe, not with him looking at me like that.

Like I was a bug he wanted to step on.

He moved aside, letting me past, but he grabbed my wrist roughly at the last second, holding me in place. “If you know what is good for you, Calli,” his teeth ground together, “you’ll stay out of my way.”

WE DIDN’T STAY LONG after that. I thanked Josie for the latte and muffin and made my excuses. I couldn’t sit there, knowing Zach was in the building. He’d been so... so angry.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Josie asked for the third time since we left Muds.

“I’m fine.” I gave her a polite nod. I wasn’t.

I could still feel his fingers digging into my arm as he’d yanked me into the alcove. My Zach, the boy I’d once loved with all my heart, would never have done something so callous.

But he's not the boy you knew anymore.

Ignoring the little voice, I hitched my bag up my shoulder. "What do you have planned for the rest of the day?"

"I promised I'd go meet Joel later. You should come—"

"Actually, I think I'm going to head back to my dorm and catch up on some reading."

Josie's expression fell. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. But perhaps we can hang out later?"

"I'd like that. See you later then?"

I offered her a small nod, and Josie took off toward Joel's house while I took the path leading past fraternity row to the dorms. I didn't expect to see Callum, but the second I did, anger unfurled inside me.

How dare he keep me a secret.

Without thinking, I marched up to him.

"C- Calli?" His eyes grew to saucers. "What are you—"

"Doing here?" I snapped. "I go here remember? Or did it skip your mind?"

"I didn't... fuck..." He ran a hand down his face, letting out an exasperated sigh. "You're pissed."

"Pissed? I'm not pissed, Callum, I'm... ugh! You are so frustrating." My voice cracked. "I didn't come here expecting us to be best friends or anything, but you didn't tell a soul about me. Why?"

He shrugged, but I saw the flash of emotion in his eyes. "Who was I going to tell? It's not like we'll be hanging out or anything."

Even after all this time, I couldn't believe how clueless Callum was; how oblivious he was to the way his words cut deep.

"Of course not. God forbid we actually had any kind of relationship."

"Look, Calli," he released a long, steady breath, his eyes darting around me, "I can't do this, not right now."

"You can't do this?" I jabbed my finger at him. "Try being in my shoes. I get here... after Mom..." The word lodged in my throat. "Only to find out that my brother hasn't told his teammates about me."

"Teammates? How do you—"

"And Declan? Were you ever going to tell me about that, huh?" My voice was shrill now, laced with pain.

"Declan? What does he have to do with anything?"

"I saw Zach."

“I see.” His jaw clenched. “Well, I didn’t think you needed to know.”

“What is wrong with you? I know we’re not close, but I’m still your sister, Callum.” The words echoed around my skull. “I thought that might count for something.”

“I...” He hesitated, and it was enough for the little girl inside me to cling to the hope that Callum wanted to fix our broken relationship. His whiskey eyes—eyes we shared—darted to the ground as he rubbed the back of his neck. When he lifted his gaze again, I waited, hoping he might say something, *anything*, to fix this mess. But his silence was deafening.

“God, you are so frustrating,” I sniped, feeling my control slip. He was just standing there, acting so goddamn indifferent when I was barely holding myself together.

Inhaling a ragged breath, I forced myself to calm down. Yelling at him wasn’t getting anywhere, and it was only making me upset. Tears were already burning the backs of my eyes.

“I’m here, Callum. I go here now. We can’t just pretend it’s not happening.”

He stared at me, looked right through me, and said thirteen little words that gutted me.

“I’m not pretending. I just have bigger things to worry about right now.”

Chapter
FOUR

Zach

SHE'D WHIMPERED.

Calli had actually whimpered before flying down the stairs and disappearing into the stacks.

I couldn't get the image out of my head as I sat and listened to Victoria go on about some sorority mixer she was planning. I didn't want to be here, but Vic had asked me to come, and more and more, I found myself unable to say no to her. She was my brother's girl, and she was fucking lost. Much like myself.

We'd struck up an odd friendship before the summer. My parents had invited her over, and I'd stumbled across them all sitting around crying into their drinks. I'd taken one look at Victoria and asked her if she wanted to get some air. Air led to more drinking... and that led to a lot of anger... and maybe some destruction of private property. To this day, my old man still thought a bunch of kids snuck in our yard and ruined his beloved fire pit.

Fuck.

The anger in my veins had reached boiling point, and I found it hard to concentrate on anything she was saying.

How dare Calli stand there and act all high and mighty, trying to offer me sympathy?

Calliope James.

My sweet pea.

Fuck, I shouldn't have called her that, but it just rolled off my tongue as if my brain hadn't got the memo that she wasn't my Calli anymore.

It didn't mean the same thing it used to though.

Not anymore.

We weren't those people to each other now.

We weren't *anything* to each other.

"Are you listening to a word I say?" Victoria asked. "I'm starting to think I'm boring you." She smiled, tucking a strand of her glossy red hair behind her ear.

"I'm just feeling the pressure." I dismissed her, motioning to her empty glass. "You want another one?"

"Okay, another skinny latte please."

"I know your order, Vic." She never veered from her regular.

“Silly me.” She chuckled, batting her long lashes at me.

With a small shake of my head, I joined the line, trying my best not to let my eyes wander to where Calli sat with Josie Molineux. Of course she had to befriend the one girl at SU who had a direct link to the team. As if the universe hadn’t ass fucked me enough already.

A couple of girls behind me began whispering.

“That’s him... Zachary Messiah.”

“So tragic. But word has it, he’s even better than his brother.”

“I know, but surely it’s like a curse or something. I heard his parents and the school made some whack deal to let him transfer.”

“So freak—”

I glanced back, quirking a brow and they instantly swallowed whatever shit was about to roll off their tongues.

It wasn’t anything I hadn’t heard ten times already. Hell, even the guys liked to gossip like little bitches in the locker room, but it didn’t make it any easier to hear.

Finally, I reached the front of the line and ordered. I dropped the change in the tip jar and collected our tray. The second I turned around searching for Vic, my eyes locked on Calli. She was deep in conversation with Josie, the two of them laughing.

But I saw the cracks. The smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. The shadow over her expression. When you knew someone as well as I’d once known Calli, you saw past the mask they wore for the world to see.

“Zach,” Vic said, catching my attention right as Calli looked up.

Our eyes collided and everything slowed down until I could hear the roar of blood between my ears. I narrowed my eyes, scowling, forcing her to look away first.

“Who is that girl?” Vic asked as I sat down. Thankfully, she’d chosen a table near the bookshelves, away from Calli.

“Who?”

“The girl you were just staring at.”

“Oh, uh, you mean Joel’s sister?”

“Josie? I thought she looked familiar.”

I fought the urge to groan. Victoria knew exactly who Josie was, but she liked to think of herself as the Queen Bee of the baller girls: the girlfriends, sisters, and friends-with-benefits. Or, at least, she had until the accident.

Now her position was tenuous at best. Part of me wondered if that’s why

she clung to our fragile friendship... because I was on the team. Because my name brought me a certain level of status around campus.

“Who’s her friend?”

I shrugged. “Fucked if I know.”

“Jesus, someone’s got a giant stick up his ass.” Vic settled back in her chair and sipped her latte. I clocked a couple of guys watching her, but it wasn’t an uncommon occurrence. Victoria turned heads wherever she went. She was all soft curves, long silky hair, and a heart shaped face worthy of the runway. I’d heard from my brother once that she wanted to be a model. I didn’t know firsthand, because I hadn’t asked.

“I’m going to the facility soon. Your mom asked me to go with her.”

“And you said yes?” Irritation zipped up my spine.

“I know,” she let out a sigh, “but it’s your mom and she got so upset, Zach. I didn’t want to—”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“Come on.” She reached over and grabbed my hand. Her touch wasn’t supposed to comfort me, but I couldn’t deny that her touch always felt good. “Don’t be like that.” Victoria pouted, kicking my leg under the table.

“They just make me so fucking angry.” A black cloud descended over me, making my chest tighten.

“How about we go out tonight to that awful little bar downtown? We can get drunk and make fools of ourselves on karaoke.”

“If I remember correctly, I think it was you making a fool of yourself.”

“You loved it.”

“It was pretty fucking hilarious.” She’d serenaded a bunch of old men and me with an out of tune rendition of *Stand By Your Man*, it was depressingly fitting.

“Yeah, maybe. Although after last night, I might just hole up at the apartment and chill.”

“I can bring pizza and a six pack, if you want company?” Her eyes glittered with something... something I wasn’t sure I wanted to acknowledge.

She was Declan’s girl, completely off-limits. But Vic made it easy. She made all the background noise disappear. And maybe fucking her would temper some of the rage festering inside me. Declan and my parents had taken so much from me, maybe it was my turn to take something from them.

Something caught my eye.

Calli.

She and Josie were leaving.

“Zach?” Victoria’s voice yanked me from my thoughts.

“Sorry.”

“Are you okay, really?” Her expression fell.

“I’m good.”

Because what other choice was there?

WHEN WE LEFT MUDS, Victoria headed for the gym, and I headed home. But just as I was walking past the Delta Pi frat house, I saw her again.

Calli.

It was like the universe was determined to fuck with me. I didn’t want to snoop, and I didn’t want to be caught watching Calli and her brother argue, but I couldn’t stop myself. She was all up in his face, wagging her finger and pinning him with a hard look. Callum looked as awkward as fuck, standing there as rigid as a post while his sister chewed him out. But when he finally spoke, Calli cried out. She actually let out a cry of frustration.

And my dick... my dick stirred to life.

How fucking poetic.

My dick could no longer distinguish a cry of pleasure from a cry of anger.

Or maybe you just want to hurt her.

That was a given.

Calli stormed off and Callum stood there, dragging a hand down his face.

“Problem?” I finally revealed myself.

“Fuck,” he hissed. “How much of that did you hear?”

“Apart from Calli’s nice vocals at the end there... nothing.”

“She’s pissed at me.”

“When isn’t she?”

“True.” Callum gave me a strained smile. We weren’t friends. Teammates, maybe, but never friends. He was best friends with my brother though, the two of them riding the highs and lows of life at SU together before Declan’s accident, before I arrived here.

“You never said she was enrolling here.” I regretted the words the second they were out of my mouth. Callum’s eyes narrowed with suspicion.

“Didn’t know it mattered,” he said, coolly.

“It doesn’t.” My shoulders lifted in a dismissive shrug. “But she seemed pretty shocked to see me last night.”

“Last night?”

“Yeah, at the party. She turned up with Joel’s sister.” Callum hadn’t been there. He’d retreated into himself after Declan’s accident, and the guys were giving him some space.

“She’s friends with Josie?” he groaned. “Fuck, that’s all I need.”

“So that was the plan, huh? Dodge her for the entire year?”

“Something like that. She hates basketball. There was no reason for our paths to ever cross.”

“Dude, you’re her brother.” And this was SU, a basketball college.

“Yeah, and she hates me for it.” Callum’s eyes flicked over in the direction of where Calli had disappeared.

“Whatever. I didn’t come over for a trip down memory lane.”

“So why did you come over?” His brow lifted.

“You know what, Cal, fuck you. I’ve tried to be a decent human and—”

“Yeah,” he exhaled a long breath, “I know. I’m sorry, okay? I guess I’m just feeling it. It’s senior year, and Declan is...” He swallowed hard. “And I’ve got my old man breathing down my neck about what happens after graduation. It’s a lot.”

“You don’t need to tell me,” I ground out. I wasn’t a senior, but I easily outmatched him where over-involved parents were concerned.

“Shit, yeah. I’m sorry. How is... everything?”

“How do you think?”

Tension swirled around us, thick and heavy with the ghosts of our past and the nightmares of our present.

I’d lost my brother.

He’d lost his best friend.

But I knew it meant something different for him, something more. Because me and Declan might have shared DNA, but we’d never been particularly close.

“Have you been to see him recently?” I asked.

“I can’t...” He scrubbed his face. “Makes me a pussy, right?”

“Nah, I get it.” Understanding passed between us. “I should probably...”

“Yeah. I guess I’ll see you when practice starts. Oh, and Zach...”

“Yeah?”

“People are starting to talk about you and Vic.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Whoa,” his hands went up. “Don’t shoot the messenger. I get it, I do. But just be careful, yeah?”

A fresh wave of irritation skittered up my spine as I walked away from Callum. I couldn’t win. Nothing I did or said would ever go unnoticed because that’s what being a Messiah meant. But being the Messiah replacement only made everything ten times worse. People would compare me, constantly hold me to Declan’s standards.

Victoria was the only person who didn’t do that.

Part of me knew Callum meant well, that he was only trying to do the right thing for the team. But the other part, the part so sick and fucking tired of people trying to manipulate my life, couldn’t help but think he was doing it to be cruel. To take away the one thing that made any sense in all of this.

By the time I spilled onto the sidewalk just beyond the campus, I finally felt like I could breathe again. In there, everything was about basketball, about being the best, and going all the way. It was about upholding the Messiah legacy of greatness. In there, I wasn’t Zachary Messiah. I was a pawn, an actor... a body snatcher.

But out here, I was just a guy trying to make sense of things. Out here, I didn’t have to worry about keeping up appearances.

Out here, I could let myself break.

“YOU LOOK LIKE SHIT.” Vic pursed her lips.

“Hello, to you too.” I leaned against the door and quirked a brow.

“I know you said you didn’t feel up to hanging out, but I brought pizza and beer.”

“Vic, it’s late.”

“I know, I know... but I could really use the company.”

“Couldn’t sleep?” I knew she had nightmares. She’d told me about them once, when she was drunk on sickly sweet shooters.

“I tried to turn over and go back to sleep, Zach, I did, but....”

“Come on.” I stepped aside to let her enter, my stomach growling as the smell of tomato and garlic hit my senses.

“I got your favorite.” She placed the box down on the kitchen counter.

“Extra sausage?”

“Extra sausage.”

We worked seamlessly together, her getting plates and napkins while I cracked open two beers and joined her on the couch. “Want to talk about it?”

“Nope.” Vic helped herself to a slice of pizza and took a big bite. “See what’s on the TV,” she mumbled.

I grabbed the remote and began flicking, settling on some action movie.

“Oh, good choice. I like this one, the guy is a snack.”

“A snack?” I snorted.

“Yeah, you know, he’s tasty.”

“I know what a snack is, Vic. I just don’t think I’ve ever heard you say it.”

“I miss sex,” she blurted out, slapping a hand over her mouth. “Oh God,” it came out garbled.

“Relax,” I chuckled. “It’s been what... five months?”

“Five months, three weeks, and six days.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, because what the hell was I supposed to say in this situation?

“Yeah, me too.”

“You can still get yourself off, right?”

“*Zach!*” Her cheeks burned.

“It’s just sex, Vic. We all do it.” Not as much as I liked right now, but it wasn’t for lack of offers.

“I have options... yes.” And by options, I hoped she meant a battery-operated toy. “But it isn’t the same. I miss the intimacy. I miss feeling a guy’s lips on my skin. I miss kissing... God, I miss kissing.” Sadness filled her eyes and I braced myself for the tears. It didn’t happen a lot anymore, but she still had her moments. Usually when a bottle of vodka was involved.

“You don’t have to stay with him, Vic. You know that, right? The likelihood is he’ll never—”

“Don’t, please. Just don’t.” Her eyes shuttered and the first tear fell.

I took the pizza box from her lap and placed it on the coffee table, pulling her into my side. “You’re a good person, Vic.”

Her arm went around my waist, but fell short, her hand splaying on my stomach.

“Vic,” I warned. This was dangerous. Her tight little body pressed against mine, her fingers stroking precariously close to my dick.

“Don’t you want to feel something, Zach? Something beside the constant anger and frustration and pain?” She gazed up at me with big, sad eyes.

“And tomorrow when everything looks a little brighter? What then, Vic?”

Her lip wobbled. “It can be our secret.”

Because that’s what I was worth to her.

A dirty little secret.

My spine went rigid as I snagged her wrist, moving it away from my stomach. “We should watch the movie.”

“Y- yeah.” She sat up and put some space between us. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

“It’s all good.” I gave her a tight smile. “Besides, I don’t really blame you. I am quite the snack.”

“Jerk.”

Some of the tension seeped away as I smirked, and our strained laughter filled the room. Just like that we forgot all about the moment my brother’s girl tried to seduce me.

And I tried to tell myself, I hadn’t almost let her.

VIC STAYED. I didn’t have a guest room and I’d offered to take the couch, but she promised to keep her hands to herself. So here we were, in my bed. It wasn’t the first time she’d stayed over, and it probably wouldn’t be the last. Victoria was in Chi Delta Kappa. Their house was always loud and busy. I understood her need for some quiet.

She snored gently, curled in a ball, facing away from me, as I lay on my back, with one arm tucked behind my head, staring up at the ceiling. It would have been so easy to fuck her. To sink deep inside her and let sex carry us away to another place. But she was Declan’s. He’d been there first. No matter how much I wanted to get back at him, at my parents, it was pretty sick by anyone’s standards.

I wasn’t just anyone though.

I harbored a darkness inside me that sometimes scared me. Usually, I kept it in check. I had to. But sometimes, it pushed to the surface... like when I’d seen Calli at the party and again at Muds.

There had been another time too. A time that I gave in and let it consume

me.

Did she remember?

Did she remember how it had felt when I'd fucked her against that wall in the abandoned house?

It had been last Halloween, and I'd returned to Bay View with Mom to see her cousin's new baby. There had been a party and a couple of my old friends from school had talked me into going. I hadn't expected to see Calli, but the second I did, I knew I couldn't just walk away.

"I WANT MY CAMERA BACK." Calli said from behind me. I turned slightly, fixing my eyes on her.

"Maybe I don't want to give it back, maybe I want to negotiate." I took another photo, the flash lighting up the dark space.

"I won't play your games," she seethed.

But the fire in her eyes betrayed her.

"So I didn't hear your breath hitch when I touched you?" I stalked closer. "I didn't see lust glitter in your eyes? I didn't feel you fisting my t-shirt, pulling me closer?"

We were almost touching, Calli's tight little body right there pressed close to mine. I smirked, holding my camera, taking snap after snap of her. Wide eyed and flushed, she looked so fucking beautiful, and I hated it.

Click, click, click.

"You still look at me with stars in your eyes," I said quietly, hating the way the words twisted my insides. "Even after what I did to you. Even after what you did to me."

"What—" Her words died as my hand glided up the side of her neck. A shudder rolled through her, but she wasn't scared. She was turned on. I felt her arousal ripple in the air.

"Was it all a lie?" she whispered into the darkness, her voice wobbling. "Did you ever lo—" Her expression steeled as she swallowed the L word. "Did you ever care about me?"

"Does it matter?" My fingers moved to her cheek, stroking the skin there.

"No," she whispered, tears pooled in the corners of her eyes, "I guess it doesn't."

Leaning down, I brushed my lips over hers, but she pressed them together, refusing to let me in. "Open up, sweet pea." The words rumbled in

my chest. "Let me taste you. I really fucking need to taste you."

Calli hesitated, a shudder rolling through her.

"Calliope, please give me this."

I was begging. Fuck, why was I begging?

But I needed her. I needed her in a way I couldn't explain.

I saw the second she gave in. Her breath caught slightly, and her eyes burned with liquid lust.

"Good girl." I dived for her, plunging my tongue deep into her mouth.

"Zach," she whispered as I backed her up against the wall, kissing her like I was a man starved. The camera went off again as I captured the moment Calliope James fell from grace.

She pulled me closer. "One night," she breathed. "You get one night."

As if it could ever be anything more. This was madness, letting her back in. Giving a piece of myself to the girl who had ruined me. But I had to have her. One more time, I had to feel her.

"I need to feel you, now, Calli." My fingers clawed at her thigh, but the camera was making things difficult. Pulling away, I bent down and placed it on the floor. It was enough to break the spell and when my eyes found hers again, I almost growled. She looked so fucking good... so innocent and pure.

"Are you really going to let me do it?" I asked coldly. "Fuck you in the dark while your friends party down on the beach?"

"They are not my friends." Her strength surprised me. I half-expected her to break after my cruel words. Calli had changed. We both had. It was a challenge I hadn't expected—seeing how far I could push her until she broke.

"No, you never did play well with others, did you?" I stroked the side of her neck, dipping my other hand under her skirt, cupping her pussy. I couldn't resist sliding my thumb against her clit.

"Are you wet for me, sweet pea?"

"Why don't you find out?" Calli's brow lifted in a bold display of confidence.

Jesus, this girl.

Who was she?

"You're different," I said.

"So are you."

My brows furrowed. "Oh, you don't know the half of it."

"I—" Her words got stuck in her throat as I hooked my fingers into her damp panties and pushed a digit inside her.

“Jesus, Calli.” I nipped her earlobe. “You’re so fucking tight. Didn’t you let anyone else in here?” Why did I care so much?

But when I looked at her and saw the tears kissing her lashes, I knew. “Fuck, you didn’t.. No wonder you want it so bad.”

My hand flattened beside her head, caging Calli against the wall. I stared right at her as I worked her with my fingers, slow sure strokes that had her writhing beneath me. “Yeah, that’s it, Calli, ride my hand.” I went faster, harder, pressing my fingers deeper.

“God,” she moaned. “It feels...”

“I know, baby. I know.” I dragged my tongue up her cheek before kissing her hungrily.

It was enough to tip her over the edge, her cries filling the abandoned house.

Need burned through me and before I knew it, I had the button on my jeans open and my hands under her ass, lifting her against the wall. Calli’s slick pussy pulled me into her, and I was almost inside her when something made me pause.

“Are you sure?”

She stared at me, refusing to give me an answer.

“Are. You. Sure?” I barked. I was going to explode. If I didn’t get inside her in the next five seconds, I was going to combust.

“Fuck it,” I growled, slamming into her.

Calli’s ankles locked behind my back, as I pounded into her.

“Zach...” she panted.

“Yeah, baby?” I murmured into the crook of her shoulder as I went harder. Faster. Not caring that her back was probably being torn to shreds by the bare wall. She felt too fucking good. So tight and wet.

“Why does it feel so good?” she cried.

“Because you’re mine, Calliope.” My hand went to her throat, pinning her there. “You’ve always been mine.”

BUT SHE WASN’T MINE.

Maybe she never had been.

Chapter
FIVE

Calli

IT TOOK an entire five days of me being at SU before my father summoned me to his house—a big sprawling place overlooking the ocean, on a patch of land nestled right between Steinbeck and Morenta. For a second, I contemplated not going. But that would only give him ammunition. Besides, before she died, my mom had asked me to *try*.

God, I hated that word.

A promise I'd made to a dying woman. The woman who had been there for me no matter what.

For as much as I hated to admit it, there was still a small girl inside me, a child desperate for her father's approval. I'd had therapy to conquer that... but there were some things that no amount of talking could fix. They were just a part of you, the way blood flowed through your veins and salt tainted your tears.

Forcing myself up the path, I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. I hadn't bothered to dress up, sticking to my modest-length jean shorts and a striped t-shirt. Before I reached the door, it opened.

"You're late," Callum said.

"No, I'm not." I checked my wristwatch. "I'm two minutes early."

"Whatever. Dad is in the kitchen."

Except for the argument we'd had the other day, I hadn't seen my brother in almost three months—not since the funeral—and that's all he had to say to me.

It stung far more than it should. I wasn't the one who ruined our relationship, that was all on him. He'd chosen our father in our parents' separation. He'd chosen to pursue basketball at all costs.

I'd had no say in the matter.

"Nice to see you too," I grumbled as I stepped inside, watching his retreating form. As I moved through the house, I was hardly surprised to see the display cabinets and shelves full of Callum's trophies and medals. There was a wall full of newspaper cuttings and photographs, all of my brother. His face. His life. His accolades. He owned one hundred percent of my father's display real estate.

And what did I get?

A text message demanding my presence at the house today, five days

after I'd arrived in Steinbeck.

It would have been laughable if it wasn't so sad.

"Hello?" I called out. I'd only been here a handful of times, when I was younger. Back when I'd been desperate to salvage my relationship with Callum. But it quickly became apparent that it was pointless. You couldn't fight for something that was already dead and buried.

"In here," my father's baritone voice echoed through the house.

I found him in his study, nose buried in a stack of papers. "Ah, Calliope, you made it. Late as always, I see."

"Actually, I'm not—" I bit back the need to argue. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, don't just stand there, take a seat. Callum's around here somewhere. Did you two—"

"We already saw each other." *And it was as underwhelming as ever.*

"Good, good." He sat back, taking a hand through his salt and pepper hair. "You're settled in well over there?"

"It's fine."

"You know, you could have just stayed here."

"I think we both know that wasn't an option."

"Calli, don't be ridiculous. This is your home. Now that your mom is... gone." He inhaled a sharp breath. I was surprised. The man was usually as emotionally void as a tree stump. "You are more than welcome—"

"It was always the plan to stay in dorms."

"Still as stubborn as ever, I see." He steepled his fingers. "And money? You're okay?"

Do you really care? The words teetered on the tip of my tongue, but I didn't let them escape, trapping them behind a thin smile.

"I'm fine. The sale of the house closed last month." Mom had insisted the money went toward my tuition and living expenses. It wasn't much after the mortgage was repaid, but it was enough for now.

"You know, I really was very sorry to hear Fiona—"

"Can we *not* do this?" My teeth ground together. He didn't care. He'd called a handful of times throughout the whole ordeal.

I'd sat with my mom through chemo, hospital visits, endless days of sickness and pain. I'd clutched her hand near the end and tried to keep her spirits up. And what had Callum and Dad done?

They'd managed to check in on us a handful of times.

I would never forgive them for that.

Ever.

“Of course, I imagine it’s still all very raw.”

Un-fucking-believable.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to grab the trophy he kept on his desk, throw it at the wall and watch it break apart, the way I’d been broken apart.

But I didn’t. Because the little girl inside me desperate for her father’s attention refused to give up. Not to mention the promise I’d made to a dying woman to... *try*.

Despite all his flaws—and there were many—Andrew James was still my father, and I was still his daughter.

God, sometimes I wished I didn’t care so much. Sometimes, I wished that I could just step outside the lines of what was expected of me and just throw caution to the wind and go with my gut feeling.

But I’d tried that once... and it had ended with Zachary Messiah breaking my heart a second time.

No, I had to stay true to who I was. I liked rules and boundaries and I prided myself on adhering to them.

“Are we eating?” I took a calming breath, changing the subject.

“There are chicken and vegetables in the refrigerator. I’m not a great cook though so maybe you could...”

I stood up and clenched my fists at my sides, reveling in the sting of my nails in my palm. “I’ll get right on that.”

At least I could take my frustrations out with a knife on some unsuspecting carrots.

“Actually,” Callum poked his head around the door. “I’m not staying.”

“Son, we talked about this. I want us to sit down and eat as a family. You’re hardly here anymore, and Calli is... well, she’s going to cook us something delicious.”

“It’s a team thing,” he said.

“A team thing.” Our father sat straighter, his expression morphing into one of interest. A far cry from the strained smile he’d worn with me only seconds earlier.

But I was used to this. In fact, it almost felt like old times.

“It’s only a casual thing, to welcome the new guys to the team.”

“Ah, initiation.”

“Dad, you know we don’t do that shit.” Callum let out an audible groan.

“I’m not the school administration, Cal. I’m not going to admonish you for some good old team fun.”

“Okay, whatever. So, I can go?”

It amused me that at twenty-one years old, Callum still felt the need to ask our father for permission. My father hadn’t told him no in his entire life.

“Of course, go. Have fun. Say hi to the guys for me. Tell them I’m expecting big things this season.”

“Sure thing, Dad,” he grumbled, barely meeting my eyes.

Callum disappeared, the slam of the front door like a gunshot to my heart.

He just left.

Just when I thought things couldn’t get any worse between us, he went and proved me wrong.

Indignation burned through me. It started off like a small ember, quickly catching and sweeping into a firestorm. And before I knew what I was saying, the words rushed out, “Actually, Dad, I need to go too. Can we take a raincheck on the dinner?”

“Calliope, what on earth are you talking about. We can still—”

“I just remembered, I have a thing.”

“A thing? What thing?” His eyes narrowed.

“A society thing. We’ll rearrange. I’ll call.”

I wouldn’t, but whatever.

All I knew was, I wasn’t about to stand here and prepare vegetables for a father who could care less about me and a brother who would rather be with his precious team than spend time with his family.

With me.

I all but ran from the house, spilling out into the bright Californian sun, the way the tears flowed freely down my cheeks.

Callum’s car was already gone.

Asshole.

Kicking off my sneakers, I made my way down the beach, letting my toes sink into the warm sand. I pulled out my cell phone and dialed Madison’s number.

“Hey, girl! How’s SU treating you?”

“It’s... okay.” I sniffled, rubbing my eyes with the back of my hand.

“Oh no.” She sighed. “What happened?”

“My brother and dad, they’re just the same...” Anguish twisted my

insides. "I don't know why I thought... God, I'm such a fool."

"Calli, you are not a fool. They're your family."

"Unlucky for me," I grumbled.

"Want to talk about it?"

Dropping to the sand, I wrapped an arm around my knee and rested my chin there. "Zach's here."

"Excuse me?" she shrieked over the line and I moved the cell away from my ear. "Zach as in *Zachary Messiah*?"

"The one and only." My chest squeezed at his name. It always did.

It probably always would.

I figured first love was supposed to leave that kind of mark. An everlasting stain on your soul. But I'd underestimated just how much it would affect me still every time I heard his name.

"What... But how... I don't understand."

"Something happened to Declan," I whispered.

"What, like an accident?"

"Yeah, he's in a coma. How did we not know this?" Steinbeck was only three towns over from Bay View. Zach and Declan still had family there.

But as soon as high school was over, I'd been checked out from life and Madison had been off cruising the tropics with her parents. And Zach and his family hadn't lived in Bay View for almost two years by then.

"I can't believe Callum never said anything," she said.

"Tell me about it."

When I'd cornered him on campus and confronted him about everything, he'd acted like I was the one with the problem. I didn't know what I hated more: that he kept it from me because he thought I didn't need to know or that he was right.

I didn't need to know.

I wasn't friends with Zach anymore. As far as Callum was concerned, we were no one to each other. Old childhood friends who grew apart and went our separate ways.

Except, we didn't *grow* apart.

"So what are you going to do?"

"Honestly?" I curled my feet into the sand, reveling in how the tiny grains felt against my skin. "I don't know. I was prepared to handle Callum being here... but Zach?"

"Have you spoken to him?"

“We’ve shared a few words.” It came out clipped.

“Ouch, that bad?”

“It wasn’t good.” I let out a heavy sigh, remembering how angry he’d been at Muds. “I just wish I knew...” I swallowed the words.

“Maybe this is your chance.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, maybe this is the universe’s way of finally giving you some closure.”

“Really?” I balked. “Because it sure doesn’t feel like it. It feels like the universe’s way of fucking with me a little more.”

Madison gasped. “Calliope James, you kiss your mother with that mouth? Shit, I didn’t mean... God, I’m an idiot. Sorry.”

Soft laughter fell from my lips. “It’s okay, I’m okay.”

“Phew,” she breathed. “But I think I have a point. What are the chances that you and Zach would end up at the same college?”

Pretty slim considering he wasn’t supposed to be there.

I smoothed my fingers over my temples and down my face. “He hates me, Madison.”

“Well, maybe this your chance to find out why... or in the very least, it’s a chance to show him you’ve moved on. Go out, meet boys... hell, get laid. It’s college.” Her voice turned somber. “She’d want you to have all those rite-of-passage experiences, Calli.”

“I know, I just...”

“You’re scared.”

“I was going to say out of practice.”

“Hey, it could be worse. You could be a virgin.” She chuckled. “You went through something huge this year, something like that is bound to leave scars. But life isn’t about waiting for the storm to pass, Calli, it’s about learning to dance in the rain.”

“You know I don’t dance.” Strangled laughter bubbled in my chest.

“Maybe you should start. It’s college, babe. *College*. You don’t owe anyone anything. Your dad, Callum, even Zach. This is your fresh start. I know it’s complicated and I know you’re probably planning all the ways you can avoid them all,”—I was, but she didn’t need to know that—“but this is *your* life. Don’t waste it by sitting on the sidelines and watching everyone else live theirs.”

“You’re good at this.”

“Well, duh, I have a lot of experience with assholes.”

Her first and only boyfriend had ripped out her heart and stamped all over it right before they left for college, *after* they’d decided to do the long-distance thing. He was also a basketball player, the high school team captain to be exact. And although I’d wanted to give Finn the benefit of the doubt—because while they were together, they did make a cute couple—deep down, I knew he’d hurt her.

Ballers couldn’t be trusted.

They were too invested in the game, in the high of the win, the popularity and fame that came with being able to throw a ball through a hoop.

“Have you spoken to him?” I asked.

“What? No. *No!* I have nothing to say to him. Besides, I already met a cute guy called Toby who I think is the perfect rebound guy.”

“Madison,” I sighed.

“Relax, I’m not going to catch feelings. But I am going to let him help me forget all about Finn and his empty promises. And if you know what’s good for you, babe, you’ll do exactly the same.”

She made it sound so simple. But I didn’t want a rebound guy.

“Well, just be careful.” I knew my best friend, and I knew that despite her strong façade, she wore her heart on her sleeve.

Unlike me, who kept my heart locked away so tight no one could touch it.

After Zach, I hadn’t dated. I’d promised myself I wouldn’t put myself through that again. Then Mom had gotten sick and everything else took a back seat. Because I was all she had, and I didn’t walk out on the people I love.

But was Madison right?

Was this a chance to finally get some closure?

A chance to show Zachary Messiah—and myself—that I’d finally moved on.

“I’ll tell you what,” she said. “I promise to be careful, if you promise to take a risk now and again.”

“I... okay.”

“Okay?” Surprise coated the word.

“Yeah, okay.” I’d already gone against everything I knew and abandoned my father, along with the chicken and vegetables.

I had this.

It was college. Time to spread my wings and live.

“Atta girl,” I heard the smile in Madison’s voice. “She’d be proud of you, ya know. The second you realized Zach was at SU, you could have run, and you didn’t. That’s huge, Calli.”

It wasn’t, not really.

It wasn’t like I had anywhere else to go.

But I knew what she meant, and for a second, I’d wanted to hide. To barricade myself in my dorm and figure a way out of this mess. But I hadn’t.

Because Madison *was* right.

I needed closure.

I needed to know why Zach hated me so much.

Then, and only then, could I finally be free.

Chapter
SIX

Zach

THE PIVOT WAS a sports bar just off campus. It wasn't really my scene, but it was the preferred hangout for the team. And since I was a member of the Steinbeck Scorpions, I was expected to be present.

The season didn't start for another two months, but it was important for the team to bond, to practice, and spend time in the gym.

According to tradition, it was also important to get the freshman recruits fucked up and watch them do a bunch of stupid shit. After a serious incident with the basketball captain a few years ago, SU had a zero-tolerance policy toward hazing. But this wasn't hazing. It was just some good old-fashioned fun. No one would end up hurt or humiliated. Well, no more than usual where a bunch of college students was concerned.

"What do you think of the new guys?" Brad asked me. He leaned back against the bar, watching as they went head to head in a shooter contest.

Trev, the owner, was cool. An ex-Scorpion, he was happy to let us hangout in the back. It had some pool tables, a few booths, and an old jukebox. The walls were littered with Scorpion and NBA paraphernalia.

I took a long pull on my beer, shrugging. "Time will tell."

"That kid, Kaiden, seems okay."

"The kid's got skills," Joel added. "I saw some footage of him on the court. He could give you a run for your money, Messiah."

"Fuck off." I was the best. It's why Coach Baxter had agreed to my parents' fucked up proposal. I had natural talent, just like Declan. Just like my father. But what I had in talent, I lacked in ambition. Basketball was their dream, not mine.

"Is that Josie?" Joel groaned and all our eyes went over to where he was staring.

The back room didn't have a door, it had a big archway that led into the main bar area. And right there, on the makeshift dance floor, was Josie and Calli dancing.

"Holy shit, Molineux," our power forward, Devyn, said. "Your sister's got moves."

"Don't be looking at my sister." Joel punched his arm.

"What the fuck, dude? She's right there. It's not like I'm looking on purpose."

Dev wasn't wrong. You couldn't miss Josie, rolling and popping her hips, working her tight little body.

A mask of anger slid over Joel's face. "I need to go..." He motioned to the girls.

Brad snickered. "This year is going to be hella interesting."

I didn't miss the flare of interest in his eyes. "You and Josie?" I asked him quietly.

"What? Fuck, no. Joel would cut off my balls and feed them to me through a straw."

My eyes narrowed, studying him. He seemed cool and calm, but I saw a flicker of fear there. "Whatever," I grumbled.

He was a fucking liar. He wanted Joel's little sister; if he hadn't already had a taste.

"Who's the other girl?" Dev asked.

"Josie's little friend?" Brad said. "I don't know, but she got fucking wasted at the party the other night. I saw Josie carrying her out of there. Total lightweight."

My spine stiffened. It was messed up that they didn't know who she was. But I wasn't going to be the one to tell them. That would lead to questions. Questions I didn't have the answers to.

"I need to take a leak." Downing the rest of my beer, I headed for the restrooms at the back of the bar.

When I came out, I saw Josie and Joel arguing. I knew he wanted to protect her, but it was college, and Josie was a little firecracker. It was a fight he couldn't win.

Heading for the bar, I flagged down a bartender for another beer. The place was full of college students, all looking to let loose before classes started next week. Music blasted out of hidden speakers, drowning out the rumble of chatter and laughter. I probably should have headed back to the guys, but I needed to catch my breath.

My eyes had a life of their own, searching for Calli in the crowd. Joel and Josie were still arguing. He grabbed her arm, but she yanked it away. I could just make out the words forming on her lips. *'Fuck you, Joel'*. A smirk tugged at my mouth. She was trouble that one, and it brought me some relief knowing I didn't have a sister to look out for.

Josie melted into the crowd while Joel ran a hand down his face before disappearing back through the archway. I should have gone after him. Asked

him if he was okay, maybe offered him some friendly advice. But I wasn't his friend, not really. Besides, I still hadn't found Calli.

Cutting through the sea of bodies, I eventually found her with Josie.

Fuck.

The air *whooshed* from my lungs at the sight of her dancing. Her sun-kissed brown hair was all tousled and wild, and her hands were high above her head, weaving invisible patterns in the air. I'd never seen her like this before. She literally took my breath away... and I fucking hated it.

I hated that my body still had such a visceral reaction to her after all this time.

I needed to go. To get away from her. But I couldn't move. I was rooted to the spot, a potent mix of anger and lust coursing through my veins. I wanted to hurt her. To punish her and ruin her.

I wanted to break her.

It wasn't healthy, the feelings she invoked in me. Feelings that had once been pure and good, now tainted with pain and darkness and betrayal.

Even if she wanted to fuck me out of her system, the way I wanted to fuck her out of mine, she couldn't handle me.

I needed to get laid, stat. Before I did something stupid like march over there and drag her into the alley behind the bar and—

The room grew small as I watched a guy approach her. I didn't recognize him, but he looked like a preppy type; he was wearing a sweater vest for fuck's sake. He said something to her and Calli smiled, nodding. Then he pulled her around to his front and began dancing behind her. Calli's expression filled with surprise as his hands clamped around her hips... he was *touching* her.

That fucker was touching what was mine.

But she's not yours anymore.

My brain didn't get the message because before I could stop myself, I'd moved closer, sticking to the shadows as I watched them. Calli looked all kinds of awkward at first, but with a little encouragement from Josie, and Preppy, she began to find her confidence. She threw her head back, letting it land on the guy's collarbone as she continued grinding against him.

Fuck.

My nails dug against my palms as I clenched and unclenched my fists. She looked so fucking sexy. Tempting and teasing. Her eyes fluttered closed as she lost herself to the music, the guy's dick digging into her ass, no doubt.

My skin grew hot, vibrating with pure rage.

Mine, a little voice whispered.

But she wasn't mine. She hadn't been mine in a really long time.

I needed to get the hell out of there.

Before I could leave though, he spun her around and leaned down, brushing his lips over hers. Calli hesitated, her hands pushing against his chest. It was only a small action, but it was all I needed.

Shoving my way through the bodies, I grabbed his shoulder and yanked. "Take a hike, fucker," I sneered.

"Fuc—Messiah? *Zach Messiah?*"

Shit.

This wasn't good.

People started looking. I felt the weight of their stares burning into me.

"And you." I jabbed my finger at the guy trying to mack on Josie. "Do you have any idea who she is?"

"Zach, don't you dare," she seethed.

"Wait, you know him?" The guy balked.

"She's my teammate's little sister, asshole. And unless you want the entire team here, I suggest you take a walk."

The guys glanced at one another before shaking their heads and backing off.

"What the hell, Zach?" Josie batted my arm. "That was completely... Wait a minute, you didn't do that for me, you did that—"

"You should go find Joel," I barked.

"Joel?" she hissed. "I'm not going.... oh."

I finally looked at Calli. She'd wrapped her arms around her waist and was staring at me like she didn't recognize me. And maybe she didn't.

After all, I was different.

But so was she.

"I'll give the two of you some space." Josie glanced between us. "See you tomorrow."

"What? *No!*" Calli said. "We should go."

Josie grabbed her hand and pulled her to one side. I watched, rubbing my jaw, trying to work out some of the tension. I half-expected Calli to refuse to come with me, but she didn't. Josie hugged her, and then Calli stormed past me, making a beeline for the door.

Letting out a harsh breath, I followed. I was an asshole, yes, but I wasn't

about to let her walk home alone. The second I stepped out onto the sidewalk, she was all up in my face though.

“What the hell was that, Zach? Do you have any idea—”

Grabbing her wrist, I yanked her around the side of the bar into the dark alley. “Watch your mouth,” I snapped, feeling a lick of irritation zip up my spine. “I saved your ass back there and you know it.”

“S- saved me? You have got to be kidding me. I was dancing... *dancing*, Zach. Do you have any idea how deranged you are?”

“He was practically dry-fucking you right there in front of everyone.”

“It’s college,” she cried. “I’m supposed to get dry-fucked on the dance floor.”

My nostrils flared as she narrowed her eyes at me. Closing the space between us, I crowded Calli against the wall, not stopping until a gasp fell from her lips. “Is that what you want? To be someone’s fuck doll? To spread your legs and let some guy, some preppy fucking asshole, get you off? You’re not that girl, sweet pea, and we both know it.”

Anger simmered in her eyes. “You have no idea what kind of girl I am, Mr. Hotshot Basketball Player.” She practically spat the words at me.

Calli hated basketball the way Californian’s hated winter. She blamed it for ruining her family, for taking away her brother.

But what she didn’t realize was, it wasn’t a basketball thing, it was a human thing.

People made choices. They decided who to love and what relationships to nurture. They decided how to prioritize their time and who to let into their lives.

Basketball wasn’t selfish or arrogant or narrow minded.

People were.

And she was right up there with the worst of them.

“Oh, I remember, Calli.” I let my mouth linger near the corner of her lips. “I remember how you like to give it up to monsters hiding in the dark. I remember exactly how you taste, how your breath hitches right before you come. I remember every single thing.”

I wasn’t being fair.

Calli was a good girl. She liked rules and validation and order. But that night, last Halloween, she’d been reckless. She’d thrown caution to the wind and let herself believe that I was still the boy she once loved.

“I hate you,” she breathed, unshed tears clouding her eyes.

My hand slid to Calli's throat, pinning her against the wall, our lips so close I could almost taste her. "You should. I'm not a good guy anymore, sweet pea. I'm not the hero of this story."

"I didn't ask you to be." There was a hint of sadness in her words. "You ruined my night."

"I was sav—"

"Saving me? Yeah, keep telling yourself that, Zach." Her lips twisted into a wicked smirk, setting my teeth on edge. She was mocking me. Little Calliope James was mocking me.

Who the fuck was this girl?

"Know what I think?" she snarled, baring her teeth. "I think you saw that guy touching me and you didn't like it. Because you still care. That's why you chased me down last Halloween and that's why you're here now. You can't let me go, just like I can't let you go. So the question is... what are we going to do about it? Because I need to let you go, Zach..." Pain shone in her eyes. "I need this to be over."

I jerked away as if she'd slapped me. Who the fuck was she to come into my life and tell me how I felt?

"You think I care?" The words vibrated through me. "The only thing I care about, is not getting chewed out by my teammates for not saving you and Josie from being sexually assaulted by those two guys. Although I'm beginning to think I should have just let him have at it."

She sucked in a harsh breath, one I felt all the way to the pit of my stomach. But then her eyes narrowed, pinning me in place. "You're lying."

Somehow, she'd turned the tables on me, and suddenly I found myself on the back foot.

Well, fuck that.

Fists clenched at my side, I advanced on her again, pressing the entire length of my body against hers. Calli's breath caught again, as she craned her neck to look at me.

"Let's get one thing straight, sweet pea. I'm Zachary Messiah. I have a line of girls all looking to ride my dick, all I have to do is say the word. What could you possibly offer me that they couldn't?"

I expected her to lose it. I expected hitting and yelling and tears. But none of that happened.

Instead, Calli exhaled the softest of breaths as she pressed her hand to my cheek. "Who did this to you, Zach? Who made you this way?"

You, I wanted to roar. You did this.

But she'd managed to disarm me with her brave words and false bravado. Fine. She wanted to play dirty...

I plucked her chin between my fingers and lowered my face to hers, almost kissing her. Her hands curled around the back of my neck as I felt the fight leave her body.

If I kissed her right now, she'd succumb. She'd opened up for me like a flower.

She'd lose.

"Do you want me, Calli?" I whispered, ghosting my lips over hers, feeling blood pound between my ears and other places. But dicks were fickle things. They didn't care who the pussy belonged to so long as they got a taste.

"Do you want me to fuck you again?"

"I shouldn't," she admitted, her lashes fluttering against my face as her eyes closed.

"But you do, don't you?" I taunted. "You want me, sweet pea, even after all this time..."

"I've tried... I've tried so hard to forget about you. You hurt me, Zach. You hurt me so much, but I still want you. I still care about you."

She was drunk, high on liquid courage. It was the only explanation for her honesty. I, however, was stone cold sober. So there was no excuse for what I said next.

"I wouldn't fuck you again if you were the last girl on the planet."

Surprise registered on her face, but it quickly morphed to hurt.

Stark, blinding hurt.

"Y- you bastard." She slammed her hands against my chest and shoved. Hard. But I barely felt it, taking a step backward. "This is all a game to you, isn't it?"

"I don't play games." I ran a hand through my hair. "I just want you to stay the fuck away from me and the team."

"Well, that's tough luck. Josie is my friend, and her brother is on the team. We're going to be around."

"Your brother is on the team, but they don't even know who you are, do they?" My brow arched with accusation.

The blood drained from her face and I knew I'd taken it too far. But she drove me fucking crazy. It wasn't difficult. Calli needed to stay away from

the team, and in turn, I would stay away from her.

“It’s funny,” she laughed bitterly, the sound grating down my spine.
“Madison said I needed closure. And I think this is finally it.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

Why did I feel like she was about to pull the rug out from under me?

I was supposed to be in control here.

Me.

“It means stay the fuck away from me, Zach.” She shouldered past me and disappeared into the night.

Leaving me standing there wondering what the fuck had just happened.

Chapter
SEVEN

Calli

I WAS ready to start classes. Eager for the distraction and new focus.

After my last run in with Zach, I'd spent the weekend lying low. I didn't plan on hiding forever, but I needed to regroup.

That night, the night he'd pulled that faceless guy off me at the bar, I'd stupidly thought that maybe he felt it too. The lingering connection. The unfinished business between us.

But I was wrong.

Zach Messiah was a douchebag.

A douchebag I intended on cutting out of my life for good.

It wasn't like I had no experience of douchebags, so how hard could it be?

A knock at my door alerted me to Josie's arrival.

"Hey." I opened it.

"Ready for the first day of the rest of our lives?"

"Hmm, I guess." She was so weird sometimes.

"You missed a good time last night."

Josie had joined some of the other girls in our building for pamper night. But I didn't do well in large groups of girls.

"Maybe next time." I gave her a tight smile.

"Have you heard from you know who?" Her brows waggled suggestively. That's what we were calling Zach now.

"Nope."

"And you're okay with that?" She eyed me carefully as I hitched my bag up my shoulder and followed her down the hall.

"Zach is in my past. I want to look to my future."

"Okay... but will you tell me what happened one day?"

"One day." I nodded.

But not today or the day after that. It was still too raw, too painful.

Maybe it always would be.

One thing was for certain though, Zach—*my* Zach—was gone.

It was easier to think of my Zach and this Zach, the cold cruel boy with arrogance in his eyes and hatred in his heart, as two completely different people.

"So Joel was asking about you again," Josie said, pulling me from my

thoughts. “Total double standards if you ask me.”

Panic swelled inside me. “He doesn’t know who I am though, right?”

“I haven’t told him, if that’s what you mean.” Her shoulders lifted in a small shrug. “What’s up with that by the way?”

“I told you... it’s complicated.” Clearly Callum didn’t want his teammates to know about me, and I was happy avoiding all the awkward questions.

I knew it would come out eventually.

Secrets always did.

But for now, I wanted to keep my anonymity. I wanted to keep things simple.

We reached the Arts Department and Josie ground to a halt, turning to me. “I know we’ve only known each other a few days, and I know that I’m Joel’s sister and he’s on the team, but I want you to know you can trust me, Calli. I can keep a secret and I think I’m a pretty good listener. So if you ever need to talk...”

“Thanks, that means a lot. It isn’t that I’m trying to be all secretive, it’s just...” I searched for the right word, but Josie beat me to it.

“Families are complicated.”

“Oh yeah, you don’t need to tell me.” My heart cinched.

“Ready?” She glanced at the building.

“As I’ll ever be.” Butterflies beat wildly in my stomach. This was it... college.

“I’ll be done at one, so we can meet and head to Muds?”

“Sounds good.”

“Good luck.”

“You too.” I watched Josie take off toward her building. She was majoring in psychology. I’d always had my heart set on SU’s BA in photography, but then Mom got sick and everything changed, so I’d changed my major to undeclared. I was taking some arts and literature classes. I didn’t want to put pressure on myself to pick up a camera before I was ready.

If I was ever ready again.

My first class of the semester was Nineteenth Century Literature with Professor Harold. I was particularly looking forward to that class since it studied some of the literary greats. I found the room and slipped inside. It was a small theatre style layout with the rows of seats all facing down toward the stage.

Finding an empty seat, I pulled out my notepad and pencil case, a rush of

melancholy washing over me. Mom had helped me pick it out. It was a hotchpotch of Alice in Wonderland inspired fabric patches stitched together, and embroidered across the front was the quote, 'we're all mad here'.

It had become one of my favorite books while Mom was sick. We'd read it together, and then when she got too sick, I'd watched the movie on repeat, curled up in the chair by her bedside. It was the perfect fantastical escape while watching her deteriorate. She liked the Cheshire Cat with his knowing grin and impossible riddles. I liked Alice with her innocence and wild curiosity. There was something beautiful about the way she embraced the rest of the characters, regardless of their quirks and traits. She accepted them for who they were and the things they loved.

My stomach knotted. Even as a young girl, Alice was everything I wasn't. Adventurous to my cautionary, curious to my introverted.

"Calli?"

I looked up to find Joel smiling down at me. "Um, hi," I glanced around, confused, and he chuckled.

"This is Harold's class?"

"Yeah."

"I'm in the right place then. Can I?" He motioned to the empty desk beside me.

"Sure. I didn't know you were taking this class."

"It's an elective, I... uh, I have a thing for nineteenth century writers." He leaned in conspiratorially. "But don't tell anyone, I have a rep to protect."

"Your secret is safe with me." I chuckled.

"And what about your secrets, Calli? Will you trust me with those?" My brows knitted and Joel's smile slipped. "Joke. I'm joking. Wow." He pulled his t-shirt at the collar, inhaling a shaky breath. "I really need to work on my game."

"This is your game?" I teased, and he blanched. "Relax, I'm joking." Laughter bubbled in my chest.

"Maybe I should go out and come back in and we can start over?"

"Hi, I'm Calli." I played along.

"Joel. It's nice to meet you. So you like nineteenth century writers?"

"Oh yeah, they're my dirty little secret."

The words just fell out. Joel blinked at me and my cheeks pinked. "I... uh... okay, that came out all wrong."

"Don't sweat it, Calli." He gave me a shy smile. "Your secret is safe with

me.”

Joel made it so easy. I didn’t know what it was about him, but there was something.

Those Molineux sure had good genes.

“So how are you enjoying SU so far?”

“It’s okay.” I didn’t meet his eyes.

“Okay? You can’t be doing it right if it’s only okay.” He chuckled quietly, nudging my shoulder, and I finally lifted my gaze to his. “We should go out sometime. I know all the best places.”

“Joel, I—”

“Ouch,” he let out a small hiss, “not the dreaded it’s not you, it’s me speech.”

“I’m just not looking for... *that*.”

“Whoa, there. It’s just coffee, maybe dinner. I’m not proposing or anything. I wait until at least the third date for that.”

“You’re such a goofball.”

A really good looking goofball with defined biceps and broad shoulders, and he was tall in that way most basketball players were. But most of all, Joel wasn’t angry, and he didn’t look at me with hate in his eyes. It was refreshing. Nice.

It felt safe.

“I’m Josie’s friend.”

“Yeah, I know.” He grimaced. “But I saw you first, that should at least count for something, right?” His grin was infectious, and I found myself smiling back.

“I don’t know.” Because I had secrets, the kind that could make things complicated.

I was Callum’s sister.

If he knew that, he wouldn’t look twice at me. Or maybe he would, but he wouldn’t break his own rule.

I needed to tell him.

I needed to come clean and stop this before it spiraled into something I couldn’t fix.

But as I opened my mouth to confess, to ask him to keep my secret, Professor Harold appeared, and silence fell over the room. “Good morning, students, and welcome to Nineteenth Century Literature.”

I peeked over at Joel and he winked. I let out an internal groan. He wasn’t

going to give up, it was right there in his eyes. He was going to fight me on this.

Fight for me.

It was the last thing I needed, but I couldn't deny it felt nice.

It felt nice to not be Callum James' little sister. Because when I was, everything would change. And I knew he'd probably never look twice at me if he knew just how deep my secrets ran.

"OKAY, WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?" Josie wagged her finger between me and her brother as she reached us.

"Turns out, we have the same class."

"You do, huh?" She smirked. "What a coincidence."

"I was telling Calli that she should let me take her out... so we can... uh, discuss the class reading. But she's a little hesitant."

Josie caught my eye, and I shook my head discreetly.

"Maybe you can persuade her over lunch," he added.

"You're not joining us?" she asked him. "We're heading to Muds."

"I'm meeting the guys at the gym. But I'll see you around. Bye, Calli." Joel flashed me a blinding smile.

"Bye, Joel." I couldn't help but smile back.

"Okay, spill." Josie laced her arm through mine the second he was gone.

"There's nothing to spill. Joel showed up in my class, we sat together, he tried to talk me into going out with him."

"And you told him about Callum, right?"

I grimaced.

"*Calli!* It was the perfect opportunity."

"I know, but I don't want things to be weird. And if I tell him about Callum, he'll realize I know Zach."

"But it's going to come out eventually."

"I know." The knot in my stomach tightened. "Callum obviously doesn't want them to know I'm here or he would have told them."

God, it wasn't supposed to hurt this much.

I was used to being no one to my brother, so I hadn't given much thought to what would happen when I got here. I knew it wouldn't miraculously heal

things between us, but I hadn't anticipated that his team, his friends, wouldn't know about me.

That was just... cruel.

"I'll tell him," I said. "Soon, I promise."

"Good, because the whole thing is weird."

"I'm glad you find my life weird." My eyes rolled as we entered Muds. It was busy, but Josie managed to grab us a table.

"You sit, I'll order. They do these amazing spicy chicken paninis."

"Sounds good. Can I get an iced latte too, please?" I went to grab my purse, but she stopped me.

"I'll get this. You can pay tomorrow."

"Okay." I smiled.

Meeting Josie had been a blessing in disguise. I knew her being close to the team was an added complication, but in a strange way, it was like coming full circle.

In high school, Madison had dated a basketball player. And now my only friend at SU was the sister of one. It was like no matter how much I tried to escape the damn thing, the universe seemed insistent on weaving my life inexplicably with basketball.

Repeatedly, I tried to tell myself it didn't mean anything, but I was starting to wonder if maybe it did.

Josie joined the line and I watched students come and go. I felt more at home here, among the bookish treasures, than I had anywhere else in a long time.

The doorbell jangled, and I noticed the girl with red hair enter. I'd seen her here before with Zach. She was tall and willowy with a perfect complexion and silky auburn waves. She was everything I wasn't. Feminine. Graceful... Beautiful.

My heart galloped in my chest, wondering if Zach was joining her. But he didn't. Instead, she joined two friends, other girls with their perfect hair and perfect smiles and perfect manicures.

"I see you met the girlfriends." Josie sat down, sliding a tray onto the table.

"The who now?"

"The girlfriends. That's Victoria Penderton. Declan's girlfriend."

"She's beautiful."

"Don't be fooled." She snorted. "She's a class-A bitch."

“Josie,” I whisper-hissed, discreetly glancing over at them again.

“What? It’s true. She’s been chomping at the bit to be Queen Bee. But it was always Lo Stone and her crew.”

I frowned, and Josie let out an exasperated breath. “Sometimes I forget you know nothing. Lo Stone, Maverick Prince’s girlfriend.”

“Oh yeah.” I nodded as if I knew what she was talking about. I mean, I’d heard his name; he was big news around Steinbeck and the surrounding towns. But I didn’t *know* him.

Maybe if I’d ever been invited to SU to support my brother, to watch his games, and celebrate his wins, I would have known.

But I wasn’t... therefore, I didn’t.

“Lo was awesome, super down to earth and cool. She wasn’t into all that bullshit.” She flicked her head toward Victoria. “They’re all about status and power and who has the most expensive handbag.”

“She’s still with Declan?”

“I mean... I guess. I heard Joel talking to some of the guys over the summer and they said she’s clutching.”

“Clutching?”

“Yeah, to the dream of being with a pro.”

“I saw her,” I admitted. “With Zach.”

“Yeah.” Her expression hardened. “They have this weird friendship. Some of the guys are a little icked out about it.”

“Do you think they’re...” I couldn’t say it.

I couldn’t imagine Zach with another girl, let alone one who looked like Victoria.

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. But they do hang out a lot.”

My eyes wandered over to them again. Victoria held court, telling a story with big over-exaggerated hand movements. It matched her expression; wide eyed and animated.

I couldn’t imagine how it must feel to be her, to know your boyfriend, the guy you wanted to spend your life with, might never wake up.

Since learning about Declan’s accident, I’d searched the internet for more details. It was morbid, I knew that, but I still couldn’t believe something so huge had happened in Zach’s life, my brother’s life, and I didn’t know.

I’d only found a couple of reports. He and Victoria had been celebrating their anniversary at Long Beach. Declan took a jet ski out on the ocean and hit a buoy, flipped and came off. She watched the entire thing happen from

the shore.

A shudder ran through me as I remembered the eyewitness account. It was a freak accident. One that changed two lives forever.

“Calli?” Josie snapped her fingers in front of my face, and I blinked.

“Huh?”

“Where’d you go just now?”

“Nowhere.” I gave her a weak smile.

“So you and my brother—”

“Are not up for discussion right now. You’re right, I need to tell him first.”

Which I would do just as soon as I could find the words.

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to fess up. But Callum and I weren’t exactly brother and sister of the year. Joel would have questions, and then, when he knew the truth, he would walk away from me, like everyone else in my life.

“Joel is a good guy, Calli,” Josie said as if she had a direct line to my thoughts. “You can trust him with this.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Just then, Victoria and her friends got up and made their way toward the door. She paused at our table though, looming over us like the lady of the house. “Josie, I didn’t realize you were a freshman this year.”

“Victoria,” my friend’s tone was cool, “you’re looking good.”

“Keto. I lost like ten pounds over the summer.”

“That’s... great.” Josie forced a smile. I could tell because it made her eyes all crinkled.

“And who is your new friend?” Victoria glanced at me.

“Hey, I’m Calli.”

“Calli, you say?” Her eyes narrowed. “You seem so familiar. Have we met before?” She flicked her wavy red hair off her shoulder, like she was in one of those sexy shampoo ads.

My hands twisted in my lap. “I don’t think so.” Sweat beaded between my breasts as I silently prayed she didn’t ask me where I was from. Because I couldn’t lie.

Omitting the truth was one thing, but to lie... that was another entirely.

“Your friends are waiting.” Josie broke the thick tension that had descended over us.

“Well, see you around, girls.” The word ‘girls’ rolled off her tongue, half-pleasant and half-insult, as if we were somehow beneath her.

Although looking at her designer handbag and shoes, I realized we probably were.

The second she left, the air became breathable again.

“She’s really... something.”

“You don’t think Zach told her about you, do you?”

“No,” I gasped. “Why the hell would he do that?”

“I don’t know. There was something strange about the way she was watching you. There’s definitely no way she can know who you are?”

“I don’t see how she could.” I shrugged, a strange sensation trickling down my spine. “Why?”

“Just be careful with her.”

“Come on.” I laughed but it came out strangled. “She’s just a girl.” A girl who seemed to be too put together to be grieving for her injured boyfriend, but who was I to judge? I knew firsthand everyone dealt with grief differently.

Some people turned to drugs or alcohol or warm willing bodies to numb the pain. While some people threw themselves into a project. Then there were people like me who fell out of love with the things they’d once loved and found solace in new things. Or there were people like Victoria. People who plastered on their flawless makeup and perfect smile like armor and got on with it.

No approach was the right or wrong way. Not where the heart was concerned. You could only do your best.

“All I’m saying is, watch your back. Victoria Penderton is a viper.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine, I’m no one.” But as I said the words, a feeling of dread crept over me.

Because the truth was, I wasn’t no one. I was Callum James’ estranged sister. And I was Zachary Messiah’s dirty little secret. I had ties to two of SU’s star players.

And Josie was right...

That was a problem.

Chapter
EIGHT

Zach

“ZACH, GOOD TO SEE YOU, SON.” Coach Baxter motioned to the chair opposite his desk. “Take a seat.”

“Thanks, Coach.” I ran a hand through my damp hair.

“How is it being back?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“You can be honest. It’s as weird as hell, am I right?”

He wasn’t wrong. But I didn’t want to admit that. Admitting it made it real and making it real made it something I had to deal with.

I preferred to bury my head in the sand.

“I’m ready for the season, sir,” I said.

“I don’t doubt it, Zach. You’re in great shape. I hear you’re pushing yourself in conditioning. Don’t go too hard, we don’t want any injuries before we get to see you in action on the court.”

“You got it, Coach.”

“How are things at home? With your parents and Declan?” He swallowed hard.

“They can’t let go,” I said, feeling my muscles tense.

“He’s a fighter. If anyone can pull through, it’s Declan.”

What the fuck was I supposed to say to that?

He wasn’t going to pull through, and even if he did, he was paralyzed from the chest down. His life as he knew it was over.

“You know, son, this team has had some real bad luck over the eighteen months. First, Maverick had his accident, and then Declan. It’s about time we broke that cycle.”

“Yes, sir.” I’d become robotic, unable to provide anything except generic answers.

“We’re counting on you to help us get the job done, Zach.”

I let out a strained breath. It really didn’t matter to these people that Declan, my *brother*, was lying in a private facility being kept alive by a bunch of machines and doctors. I was only here to honor his legacy, to finish the job he started.

It was total bullshit.

My fingers curled around the arm of the chair, tight enough to turn white. “I’ll try my best, sir,” I gritted out, because this was my life.

Whether I wanted it or not.

“Now, your father called the other day. They want us to consider an exhibition game.”

“He isn’t dead,” I snapped.

“No, he isn’t. But they want to raise awareness and donate proceeds to the facility. I’ve begun reaching out to some alumni players. I just wanted to give you a heads up.”

“When?”

“The weekend before official practice season.”

That was in a little under a month.

Fuck.

“I know it’s a lot. But you’ve got this, son. You’re going to make everyone proud this season.” He tapped his desk as if it was a done deal, and I knew it was.

My parents wanted an exhibition game... they’d get an exhibition game. Because Timothy Messiah wasn’t a man you told no. Besides, his check book was big enough to make sure the answer was always yes.

“Is that all, Coach?” My voice was tight as I fought hard to maintain control. I couldn’t snap, not here.

“Yeah, get out of here, and remember what I said, don’t push too hard in the gym.” His eyes held some deeper meaning, as if he knew why I did it. As if he knew exactly why I pushed my body to its physical limit.

I got the hell out of there and went to class.

At least there, no one would try to talk to me. No one would ask questions or tell me they were looking to me to take the team all the way.

I was at SU to play basketball, to be an athlete, but the court wasn’t supposed to offer me any solace.

It was supposed to be my own personal version of hell.

Only, it wasn’t.

And I hated it.

I MANAGED to avoid Calli all week. Between classes, conditioning, and practice, it didn’t leave much downtime.

It was Thursday, and I was leaving third period when I finally saw her.

She wasn't alone though. Calli and Joel were walking down the path, huddled close, like two old friends sharing a joke. Her laughter was like a punch to the gut. It drifted over to me, coiling around my heart like barbed wire. Sharp... jagged... deadly.

She looked happy, grinning up at Joel like he hung the fucking moon.

My teammate.

My friend.

Anger exploded in my veins. She wasn't supposed to be latching onto the team and making them her own. The team was mine, whether I wanted it or not. The team was *my* territory.

Before I knew what I was doing, I'd cut across the street to them.

"Zach, my man." Joel noticed me first, holding out his fist. I bumped it, giving him a curt nod.

"Calli," I clipped out.

"You two know each other?" Joel frowned, glancing from me to her and back again. I waited, testing the waters. It was the perfect opportunity for her to fess up.

"I..." She hesitated and I knew then that she still hadn't told him.

Running a hand over my jaw, I flashed him a wolfish grin. "We met the other week at the party. Isn't that right, Calliope?" I let her name roll off my tongue with suggestion.

I was being a dick. But seeing them together, seeing her with anyone, brought out my monster.

Her eyes flared with indignation and my lips formed a slight smirk.

"The party?" Joel asked coolly.

"Yeah, she fell right into my arms," I said. "You should really watch your girl, J. It was a good thing I was there to catch her."

"Oh, it's not like... we're friends." Confusion clouded his eyes, but I was only interested in Calli. Her body went rigid, and I didn't miss her sharp intake of breath.

That's right, sweet pea. It was my arms who carried you home that night.

Her cheeks burned with embarrassment. "And that's why I'll never be going to a party again." Strangled laughter spilled from her pouty lips. Joel laughed too, but it was strained. They were both squirming while I stood there, like the asshole I was, reveling in the tension that had suddenly descended over the three of us.

"Next time, I'll look out for you." Joel winked at her. The fucker actually

winked.

My nostrils flared as I tried to rein myself in. Any other girl. He could have latched onto any other girl on campus... but no, he had to pick the one girl who had the power to make me crazy. The smart thing was to walk away. But I'd never claimed to be any such thing. I was a sucker for pain. A self-saboteur. It had happened last Halloween, and it was happening again.

And it was all because of a girl who had betrayed me.

Before I could stop myself, I said, "We should all hang out."

"We should?" Joel balked.

"Yeah, me, you, Calli, Victoria. She's struggling with things. It might be nice for her to make a new friend."

Calli's eyes were narrowed now, glaring at me as if she was trying to figure out my angle. I didn't have one except trying to get under her skin, the way she'd buried herself under mine.

"Uh, I guess. But isn't that a bit too... double date?" Joel's eyes flicked to Calli, and another flash of anger shot through me.

He was looking at her with longing in his eyes.

He wanted her.

He fucking wanted her.

Only because he doesn't know the truth.

"Nah, it's just a bunch of friends hanging out," I said. "But no pressure."

We both looked at Calli and she seemed to shrink under our attention. "I ___"

The blare of Joel's phone cut through the tension. He dug it out of his pocket and said, "I need to take this. Raincheck on lunch?"

"Sure." Relief washed over Calli.

"I'll catch you at the gym later?" he said to me, and I nodded.

Joel hurried away, arguing with someone on his phone.

"What the hell are you doing?" Calli said the second the coast was clear.

"Me?" I played dumb, folding my arms over my chest and pressing my thumb against my bottom lip. "I thought I was being nice."

"Nice?" She scoffed. "You were being an asshole."

"You and Molineux, what's the deal there?"

"We're friends."

"Friends?" I snickered. "Guys like Molineux don't want to be friends; they want to fuck the hot little freshman."

"You think I'm hot? I'm flattered." Calli sassed, surprising me. She was

different. Harder around the edges, and I wondered what had made her that way. She had enough ammunition sure—her old man, Callum... *me*—but she'd never been like this before.

Not even last Halloween.

"I thought I told you to stay away from the team." I moved into her space, forcing her backward until we were blanketed under a tree. Her eyes glittered with irritation.

"Joel is a friend."

"That wants to fuck you."

"So what if he does?" She jabbed her finger at my chest, but I snagged her wrist, holding it midair between us. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Do you think he'll want you once he knows I've been there?" I glanced around, checking we didn't have an audience. It was a quiet path, and the tree provided some cover. Deciding it was worth the risk, I leaned in, sliding my hand up her throat and running my nose along her jaw. "Once he knows I know how sweet you taste, how wet you get for bad boys and their dirty words."

"Zach..." It came out rough as she gulped.

"Yeah, sweet pea?"

"Fuck. You." She slammed her hands into my chest, and I stumbled back, laughter rumbling in my chest.

"Already been there and done that, and I hate to break it to you, but I'm not looking for a repeat anytime soon."

"You're disgusting."

"And you're testing my patience."

"Why do you even care? I'm not trying to insert myself into your life. I didn't even know Joel was on the team when I met him."

Just the mention of his name has my fists clenching. "Because..." I hesitated, and she saw it. Calli's eyes widened as my truths unraveled in the space between us.

"You—"

"Don't." It was a rough bark.

"You don't want me, but you don't want anyone else to have me. Is that it? Well, newsflash, Zachary," venom dripped from every syllable of my name, as she moved closer, "I'm not looking to play your game." Calli shouldered past me and took off down the path.

And for the second time in less than a week, I was left standing there

wondering what the fuck had just happened.

FOR AS MUCH AS I never wanted basketball, there was something oddly settling about being on the court alone at night. I cradled the ball in my hand, bouncing it a couple of times to get a feel for the weight of it in my palm.

It was after hours, but when your name was Messiah—my name literally meant savior, oh the fucking irony—it was like having the keys to the kingdom. I preferred to practice alone, but basketball was a team sport, and I was the Scorpions star point guard. I was expected to run the team's offense, to control the ball, the plays, to create opportunities to score. I was their reluctant leader. Their general. Their king.

And this was my kingdom.

Darting forward, I dribbled the ball towards the top of the key before snatching it up and taking a three-point shot. The ball sailed through the hoop, like it did every eight out of ten times. Of course, the percentage dropped in games. But out here, on the empty court, I sank point after point.

It was a strange thing, to be so good at the one thing you'd always hated. I could remember watching Declan as a kid. He was a couple years older than me and always had a ball in his hand. By the time he was eight, he could already run circles around most of the kids in junior high. I watched how proud my dad was, how much he doted on Declan, and instead of wanting that, inside of picking up a ball and trying to be like my big brother, I pulled away.

I didn't hate Declan, not by any means. I just didn't want to *be* him.

As the memories ran through my mind, I pumped my legs harder, switching between plays. I cut across the court, darting under the hoop and performed layup after layup, watching with bitter satisfaction as the ball bounced off the backboard and fell perfectly through the hoop.

Memorizing the playbook was the first thing Coach Baxter had me do when I arrived at SU before the summer. The team was at breaking point. They'd suffered a grueling season after losing their number one point guard, Maverick Prince. My brother stepped into the position effortlessly and led the team straight into March Madness. But they didn't quite have what it took to go all the way. Then the accident happened right after the tournament, and

the team fell apart at the seams. They lost a lot of experienced senior players *and* their point guard.

So when I turned up, with my brother's name, the same dark blond hair, and a near perfect record playing for the San Diego Aztecs, it was like I was the second coming.

The guy sent to help the Scorpions rise from the ashes.

Their savior.

Their messiah.

I'd expected some resistance from them, some confusion over everything. But it had been the opposite. The team were happy to have me. Relieved, even. Now they could look forward. They could go on and play a killer season in honor of Declan... because what better way to do it than with his brother leading the show.

Sweat trailed down my back and I jogged over to the bench to grab my towel. After wiping off, I chugged half a bottle of water, relishing the blast of icy cold liquid as it rushed through me.

I'd been here almost two hours. One-hundred and twenty minutes of pushing my body to its limits. My arms ached and my legs burned. But it wasn't enough. I needed more. I needed to push harder until the pain drowned out all the other bullshit.

Declan.

My parents.

Victoria.

Calli.

Her name was like ash on my tongue, and I hadn't even said it out loud. But the second I thought of her, I pictured those big whiskey eyes and pouty lips, her slim frame and pale skin. She looked fragile. Breakable. She looked like I could clench my hands around her bones and snap her clean in two. But she had more fight.

I liked that.

I wasn't supposed to like it, but I did.

It got me hard just thinking about it.

Fuck.

She wasn't supposed to get me hard.

But the harsh reality was, Calliope James was under my skin. She'd never left. But all the love I'd once felt for her was now something else entirely. Something darker and volatile. An unpredictable storm brewing beneath the

surface.

If she kept pushing me, I'd snap.

And if I snapped then nothing good would happen...

For either of us.

FRIDAY WAS A SHIT SHOW. My mom called, upset that I'd refused to go with her and Victoria to the facility.

I never went there.

I couldn't.

But it didn't stop her begging me to go next time, crying down the phone and making me feel like the worst son a parent could ask for. But my grief was my own and sitting next to Declan's unresponsive body wasn't going to change that. Besides, I was still too angry to be there. It was better I stayed away.

That landed me with a less than pleasant voicemail from my old man. He was disappointed with me, but that was nothing new.

I managed to get through two classes before bailing. After stopping at the store for supplies, I locked myself in my apartment and set to work on drinking my way through a bottle of vodka.

Somewhere around half a bottle in, the door buzzer rang. I staggered to my feet, hitting answer. "Fuck off."

"Zach, it's me...."

I dropped my head to the wall and inhaled. "What do you want, Victoria?" It came out slurred.

"Let me up, please."

I'd avoided her most of the week. After last weekend, when she'd tried to make a move, I'd closed down. I didn't want to be *that* guy, no matter how much my dick protested.

I was a fucking mess.

"Zach," her voice echoed through my skull. "Please."

My hand slammed against the buzzer and a minute later her gentle knock sounded at the door. Unlocking it, I pulled it open, and staggered over to the couch.

"Jesus, this place smells worse than a bar after closing." She loomed over

me. “You’re drunk.”

“And you sound like my mom.” She was so fucking righteous, standing there with her hand on her hip and disapproval shining in her eyes.

“What happened?” Vic crouched down, placing her hands on my thighs.

“You can suck it if you want,” my cloudy gaze dropped to my crotch and I palmed myself through my shorts, “although I’m not sure I can get it up right now.”

“I’ll pretend you didn’t say that.” She gave me a disapproving smirk. “Come on.” Vic grabbed my hand and started pulling. “You’ve had enough.”

“Nah, I can still feel. I’ll know I’ve had enough when I can’t feel anything anymore.”

“Zach,” she gritted out, “work with me here.”

I managed to clamber to my feet, letting her take most of my weight.

“Shower, then bed.” Vic marched me into my bedroom and shoved me toward the bathroom. “Think you can manage not to kill yourself?”

“Maybe you should come with me. Just to make sure.” I grinned at her, but she rolled her eyes.

“Go, you’re a mess.”

I stumbled into my bathroom and began tearing off my clothes. The room was spinning, the vodka sloshing around in my stomach. Tomorrow was going to be hell unless I soaked up some of the liquor.

“Hey, Vic,” I called, poking my head around the door.

“Yeah?”

“What are you doing?” I could just make out her standing over my dresser, her hands on the top-drawer handles.

“Nothing.” She smiled, pushing it shut. “Just cleaning up the place.”

“Right.” She really was like my mom at times. No wonder Declan fell in love with her. “I’m gonna need some carbs.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Vic went to leave my room, but I called after her.

“And thanks, yeah, for everything.”

She gave me a small nod. I probably should have apologized for being a dick earlier. But as I stepped into the shower, I figured we were even now.

Chapter
NINE

Calli

IT WAS FRIDAY EVENING, and I was deep in course reading, when the door knocked. I'd become familiar with Josie's knock over the last few days. If knocks had a sound, it was firm but gentle, which made me smile considering she'd explained to me how she had bad anxiety but also an over-confident personality.

"Hey," I said as it swung open.

"You're studying?" Her gaze landed on the pile of textbooks on my bed.

"I want to get a head start." I shrugged. I didn't want to tell her that I needed to keep myself busy to avoid thinking about Mom... or my dad and brother... Joel... or Zach.

Definitely not Zach.

After our run-in Thursday, I'd managed to avoid him.

I couldn't believe him, acting like a jealous psycho-ex all because Joel and I were walking to lunch. He was infuriating. Cocky and smug and so damn full of himself.

It made me wonder what I ever saw in him.

But people changed.

Still, I didn't understand why he was acting all Neanderthal when he obviously hated me.

Something was bugging me about the whole ordeal though. He'd brought up the party... purposefully insinuated to Joel that we'd met there.

Why?

"Josie," I said, unable to let it go. "You know the party we went to at your brother's house?"

"Yeah..."

"Who helped you carry me home?"

Her brows furrowed. "We already went over this. It was Brad." The words came out smooth, and well-rehearsed, but I saw the flash of guilt in her eyes.

I narrowed my gaze. "Yeah, I know that's what you told me... but I spoke to Zach yesterday—"

"Hold up, you spoke to Zach and didn't tell me?"

"I needed time to process."

She kicked off her pumps and folded her legs onto the bed. "He really

gets under your skin, huh?”

“Honestly,” I let out a frustrated sigh, “I don’t think he ever left.”

“Ready to tell me what happened?”

“I…” Did I want to open the can of worms? It had taken me a long time to get over the heartache Zach had inflicted on me. I wasn’t really looking to go back to that place.

But this was college. *A chance to put the past behind you.*

Except my past was right here, and it felt like no matter where I turned, I couldn’t escape it.

“Zach and I met the summer before I started junior high,” I took a deep breath, readying myself for the pain that remembering brought. “He and his family were new to the area. He found me down at the beach, crying. My parents were arguing a lot. Callum was already a local protégé. He and Zach’s brother became instant friends. They bonded over their love of basketball, and me and Zach bonded over our hate of it.”

“I can’t imagine that…” She frowned.

“It’s true. When I met him, Zach had zero interest in playing. We used to hang out in the treehouse at the bottom of his yard.”

“Calli and Zach, kissing in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n—”

“Really?” Disbelief clung to the word.

“Sorry.” She ducked her head, fighting a smug smile, “continue.”

“We were inseparable. Zach struggled to make friends, and I had none, so we just gravitated to each other. We had a secret club and everything.”

“Shut up, you did not.”

I nodded. “BHS, the basketball haters society. It was totally lame, but it made me feel a part of something.” My heart ached. “I’d never had that before.”

“So, what happened?”

“At the end of eighth grade, I found out my dad had been having an affair. He announced he was moving away… and Callum announced he wanted to go too. I was devastated.

“My dad had never showed an ounce of interest in me growing up, but he was still my dad. We were still a family. I’ll never forget the look in my mom’s eyes when Callum told her. He was a junior, the star basketball player at our school, and he wanted to leave that all behind.”

To leave *me* behind. That had taken some getting my head around.

“He’d already been recruited by SU.”

“I can’t believe Callum just left you.”

“We were never really close. He loved basketball, and I hated it... but I was pissed he chose my dad, a liar and a cheat, over my mom.”

“Yeah, that’s rough. So Callum and your dad left and you and your mom stayed?”

I nodded again. “It was hard for her though, being a single parent, trying to balance work life and me.”

“Didn’t she get a settlement?”

“There wasn’t much. It had been a tough few years for them.” My dad had lost his job at the investment bank during the recession. He’d found something else, but with Callum’s training camps and personal trainers, it didn’t stretch far.

“That summer, after they left, was hard. I cried... a lot. But Zach was right there to wipe away my tears.”

If I closed my eyes, I could still feel the weight of his growing body curled around mine. I was only fourteen, Zach a year older, but I could remember being fascinated with his changing body. He’d shot up that summer, his arms became bulkier thanks to his father’s home gym, and his voice turned deeper.

He was a boy on the edge of becoming a man, and there was something magical about witnessing that. Something powerful knowing he chose to let me be the one to witness it.

By the time we started school again—me in ninth grade, and Zach in tenth—he had shed his lanky frame and grown into his body. I wasn’t the only girl to notice either. I spent my days watching as other girls, older girls, all tried to catch his attention. But he never once strayed from my side.

We were best friends.

Until one day, we became more.

“You were childhood sweethearts,” Josie stated as if she’d gotten it all figured out.

“I wish it were that simple,” I said around a sad smile. “We danced around each other for most of the year. I think Zach was worried because I was younger than him.”

Josie let out a disapproving groan. “By a grade.”

“Yeah but there’s almost two years age difference.”

My birthday was June tenth, and Zach’s was late August. When you were barely fifteen, and the guy you were crushing on was almost seventeen, it

seemed like a big deal.

It was a big deal.

“Everything changed the following summer.”

“You had sex.”

“Almost... we *almost* had sex.”

We’d been fooling around all summer, learning each other’s bodies under the cover of darkness in the treehouse.

“I wasn’t ready, and I knew Zach wanted to wait until I was a hundred-percent sure. It just didn’t feel right. We weren’t even an official couple.” Even though we spent all our time together. “Declan left for college that summer and Zach finally asked me to be his. I was so relieved.”

I didn’t realize it then, but looking back, I think he’d been worried about what his brother would think. Even though Callum was gone, he and Declan were still friends. They were still our older and wiser brothers.

“This is like a soap opera.” Josie had stretched onto her stomach, her chin propped up on her fists.

“I’m glad you find my life so entertaining.”

“One of us needs some drama, because lord knows I have none.”

I wasn’t so sure about that given the way I constantly saw her watching Brad whenever he was around.

“So you went public. You’re in tenth grade and Zach’s in junior year... then what?”

“Everything was fine. I was blissfully happy.” One of those super annoying girls in love with her best friend.

“So what happened?”

“I wish I knew.” Dejection pulsed through me. “One minute everything was fine, and the next, I’m sitting in a school pep rally watching my boyfriend be announced as the new captain for the Bay View Vipers.”

“Okay... back up, I thought he didn’t play basketball.”

“He didn’t.”

“And you knew nothing about it? Not even a hint that something was wrong?”

“Nothing.” Tears pricked my eyes as I swallowed the ball of emotion lodged in my throat. “He’d asked me to Homecoming, and we’d gone as a couple. Afterward, we’d gone back to his place and...” My eyes widened.

“Oh... *oh*, got it.” She grinned but it quickly died when I didn’t return it.

I thought back to that week. After an amazing weekend, I’d been floating

on cloud nine. Zach had taken a couple of days off school with a stomach flu, but he'd been okay. We'd still talked and texted the whole time. Then the pep rally rolled around, and my entire world went up in flames.

"I CAN'T BELIEVE these things are still mandatory," I grumbled to my best friend, Madison, as we filed into the gym.

"It's a pep rally, of course it's mandatory. Besides, just because you hate all school spirit doesn't mean the rest of us do."

Rolling my eyes, I flopped down on the bench beside her. We were packed into the gym like sardines, waiting for the team's big arrival. I scanned the crowd for Zach. He was back in school today after a nasty stomach flu, but I hadn't seen him yet as he was late getting in.

I missed him so much. It had only been a few days, but it felt like lightyears. Maybe I was being slightly oversensitive, but after our amazing night together at Homecoming, it felt like there was an ocean between us.

He was sick, I knew that. But it didn't stop the little seed of doubt in my chest taking root.

"Relax," Madison nudged me as if she sensed my irrational thoughts. "He'll be here."

"I know." I smiled, discreetly checking my cell.

Nothing.

It wasn't like Zach to go more than a few hours without texting me. But after I'd stopped by his house last night to see if he was okay, I'd only had one message, saying he'd see me today.

He was being cagey. Or maybe he was just going to surprise me. That sounded more like it. He'd probably planned some grand gesture, maybe a repeat of Friday night. My stomach fluttered, remembering how he'd felt pressed down on me, his body moving against mine. It had been the single best night of my life.

"Earth to Calli." Madison clicked her fingers. "They're coming out."

She was too excited for my liking, but I knew it had to do less about the team and more to do with one of their best players, Finn Hopple. She insisted they were just friends, but I'd noticed the way she watched him a little too closely. Finn was okay as far as basketball players went but I didn't know what I would do if they got together.

You have Zach, silly.

“Eek, there he is.” She laced her arm through mine, barely containing her excitement.

“Give it up for our Bay View Vipers.” Principal Garth clapped, sending the gym into a frenzy as kids whooped and hollered.

“Ugh,” I grumbled, barely paying attention. Until a trickle of awareness ran down my spine. My eyes searched the gym, almost bugging when I spotted Zach... in a Vipers jersey.

My expression fell, confusion clouding my thoughts.

“Madi,” I breathed, my nails curling into her arm. “What is happening right now?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” she whispered, her eyes drilling into the side of my face. But I couldn’t tear my eyes off Zach. The boy I loved. Standing there next to Finn and the other players, as if he were one of them.

Zach hated basketball, almost as much as I did.

It was a joke surely. Some kind of elaborate joke. But as I waited for the punchline, Principal Garth ushered the gym into silence, a ripple of excitement crackling around us.

Not me though.

My skin vibrated for a different reason.

This could not be happening. I wasn’t watching Principal Garth beckon Zach closer. I wasn’t witnessing my boyfriend step up to the mic and run his hand through his hair, as cool as a cucumber.

There was just no way.

Except, there was.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” I said, clutching my stomach.

“We don’t know what’s going on yet.” Madison squeezed my arm in reassurance, but it did nothing to unravel the knot in my stomach.

Blood roared between my ears as Principal Garth began to talk. I could see his lips moving but I couldn’t hear him over the crash of my heart against my ribcage. I didn’t need to though. I knew what was happening... I’d known it the second I saw Zach standing there in a Vipers jersey.

He was on the team.

But he wasn’t just on the team; he was the captain.

The gym went crazy, stamping their feet and screaming Zach’s name. Messiah. Messiah. Messiah. While I sat there, willing him to look at me, willing for him to give me a sign—any sign—that this wasn’t real. That it was all some horrible nightmare that I’d wake up from any second. Because Zach

hated basketball... we had a club and everything.

But then his eyes found mine and my breath caught. The boy staring back at me wasn't my Zach at all.

He was someone else entirely...

“SO SOMETHING HAPPENED between Homecoming and the pep rally?”

“This isn't an episode of *True Crimes*, Josie. I'm not expecting you to solve the mystery of my epic heartbreak at the hands of Zachary Messiah.”

“But something must have changed or happened. You don't just wake up one day and decide you don't love someone anymore.”

I didn't think so either, but Zach had stood up there in front of our entire school and accepted the position of team captain. And no one questioned it, because he was Declan Messiah's little brother. Basketball was in his blood, even if it had taken him a little while to accept it.

‘He's a late starter,’ they'd said, like it made it all better somehow. “We always knew he'd follow in his brother's footsteps.”

But maybe even more surprising, was the fact he was good.

According to the whispers around school, and there were many, Zach was a natural on the court. I didn't know because if my hatred for the game had been strong before his betrayal, it became a violent storm afterward.

All that time we'd spent complaining to one another about how basketball had ruined our lives. All the times we'd laid up in the treehouse, wishing we had different brothers, different fathers... it had seemed too good to be true when Zach had found me that summer on the beach, crying into my hands. I'd thought it was me, that the resentment and rejection I felt at the hands of my father was unnatural. That the jealousy that burned in my veins toward Callum was unhealthy.

Zach made me feel normal.

He made me feel loved and cherished... and worthy.

And then in a single second, he stripped it all away.

“Don't you want the truth?” Josie's question yanked me back into the room.

The truth.

God, I'd agonized over the truth. Spent miserable days watching as Zach became Mr. Popular. He partied with the popular kids... dated the popular girls. And he never once tried to explain.

I'd asked him. Of course, I'd asked him. In the beginning, I'd cried and begged him for an explanation. But the answer was always the same. We were a mistake and I needed to get over it.

A mistake.

"He called our love a mistake," I blurted out the words.

Sympathy shone in Josie's eyes. "What an asshole."

I thought so too.

I'd thought it for years.

But now I was lost in the memories, reliving the moment my heart was permanently fractured, there was something else.

Something I hadn't wanted to see at the time.

"He was angry."

"Huh?"

"Zach... after he started playing for the team, he was like this different person."

Our paths had rarely crossed, I'd made sure of that. But I'd heard the rumors. The fighting, on and off the court, the detentions.

"More evidence for the hypothesis that some outside force was involved."

"I didn't push."

I don't know why but the words made me shudder.

"Calli?"

"I didn't push." The words bled from my lips as realization dawned on me. "I just accepted it. I was crushed... I thought it was me, something *I* did."

After my father and Callum had left, I'd had therapy. Hours of therapy trying to help me deal with the deep sense of worthlessness I felt over never being good enough for my father. When Zach betrayed me, all those feelings rushed back to the surface and I struggled with my self-esteem.

It had been the worst year of my life.

If it wasn't for Madison and my mom, I don't think I would have gotten through it.

"Oh, Calli." I hadn't even realized I was crying until Josie came over to me and wrapped her arm around my shoulder. "I'm sorry I pushed you to tell me."

"You didn't make me..." I gave her a weak smile, sniffing back another wave of tears. "And besides, I think I probably needed to get all that off my chest."

"I'm glad you told me."

“You’re a good friend, Josie.”

“And you are worthy, Calliope James. Don’t ever let a guy make you feel like you’re not.”

“Thank you.” The tears came thick and fast. “That means a lot.”

“Do you know what you need?”

“A new family?” I managed a weak smile.

Her expression sobered. “Some good old girly fun.”

“I don’t know. I’d kinda planned on staying in and studying.”

Josie rolled her eyes. “Exactly. You’re hiding.”

“I am n—” I stopped myself because she was right.

I was hiding.

Even now, even after everything I’d survived, my default setting was still to retreat when things got too hard.

“Come on, you.” She pulled me up. “We’re going out.”

“This is a bad idea,” I protested.

“All the good ones are.” She winked at me.

“Promise me there’ll be no brothers, ex-boyfriends, or basketball players?” I couldn’t believe I was saying the words, but I also knew I didn’t want to be that girl anymore. The girl afraid to step out of the shadows.

What was it Madison had said? It wasn’t about waiting for the storm to pass, it was about learning to dance in the rain.

I might not have been ready to dance in the rain, but I could at least try to walk through it.

Josie clapped with excitement, her eyes alight with mischief as she nodded. “I know just the place.”

THE PLACE TURNED out to be dive bar on the edge of town. It wasn’t a typical student haunt though, with its chipped paintwork and the row of mean looking motorcycles out front.

“A biker bar?” I whisper-shrieked, clutching Josie’s hand. “You brought me to a biker bar?”

“Relax. Xavier is good people.”

“Xavier?”

“The owner. He and my brother go back. Joel would lose his shit if he

knew we were out here, but Jay brought me here once. I liked the place, so started sneaking out to come here.”

“To a biker bar?”

Josie shrugged, pulling the door open. “What can I say? I like to live life on the edge.”

The more I learned about Josie Molineux, the more questions I had about her.

The inside of Steel ‘n’ Thunder was as dark and dismal as the outside. But the second the guy at the bar spotted Josie, his scowl morphed into a huge grin. “Little Josie Molineux. Well, I’ll be damned.”

“Hey, Xav.” She leaned over the bar to kiss his stubbled face.

“What brings you to the dark side of town?”

“My girl, Calli, needed to get away from student life for the night.”

His sharp eyes landed on my face and he scowled. “I’m Xavier, this here is my place. I’ve been trying to keep this one out of trouble since she was... how old? Fourteen?”

“Fourteen?” I balked.

“I used to follow Jay around trying to get him to like me.” A shadow passed over her expression.

“He likes you, Jos. Jay fucking loves the bones of you.”

She murmured something and then said, “Sure has a funny way of showing it.”

Xavier chuckled. He was a tall guy with thick black hair, styled in a wicked looking faux hawk. Two black rubber gauges stretched his ear lobes and he had snake bite piercings and a ring through his septum. All in all, Xavier was the most terrifying guy I’d ever laid eyes on. But given the fact we were sitting in a biker bar, I knew he’d probably be the first of many.

“It’s nice to meet you, Calli. Any friend of Josie’s is a friend of mine. Now, what can I get you girls?”

“I’ll take a beer with lime please,” Josie said.

He nodded then looked to me. “Hmm, the same, please,” I croaked.

It didn’t feel like the kind of place you ordered a soda. Besides, one beer wouldn’t hurt, and given the way my heart was beating wildly in my chest, I needed something to help me relax.

We found a booth near the back of the bar and slid into it. “So, what do you think?” Josie grinned.

“I don’t even know what to say,” I admitted.

“It’s a little rough around the edges, but I promise they’re good people.”

“You know these guys?” Discreetly, my eyes ran over the few patrons sitting round drinking. Men, mostly. The kinds of men you wouldn’t want to cross in a dark alley.

“A few of them. I like it here. No one gives me any bother.”

“And you and Xavier, what’s going on there?”

“What?” She gawked. “You think me and Xavier... he’s like thirty. Gross. It isn’t like that at all. He was in basic training with my brother, but it didn’t work out for him. So he came home and Jay didn’t. I don’t know, being here, talking to Xav, it makes me feel closer to Jay, ya know?”

I didn’t, but I nodded anyway.

“Two beers on the house.” Xavier slid a tray onto the table. “Just holler if you need anything.”

“You’re the best, Xav.” Josie blew him a kiss and he rolled his eyes, a playful smile tugging at his lips.

“He’s okay with us drinking?” I eyed my beer.

“Yeah, Xavier’s cool. As long as we keep it low key.”

“Low key sounds good.”

“Not that low key, Calli.” She smirked. “But we’re safe here, I promise.”

I gave her another weak smile.

“A toast is in order, I think.” Tilting her bottle to mine, she declared, “To the guys we love to hate and hate to love. Cheers.”

Chapter
TEN

Zach

THE CHI DELTA KAPPA sorority was throwing a mixer. It was their attempt at being sophisticated but given the number of jocks here, I knew it wouldn't be long before things got out of hand.

Victoria moved from group to group, making sure everyone had a full glass and a big smile. She was good at this, working a room, giving people what they needed. It's why she'd been such a good match for my brother. They were, what my parents liked to call, a power couple. They walked into a room and people stopped to look. She wore the best designers, he was set to go all the way to the NBA. Their future was bright.

Until it wasn't.

Vic liked to keep up appearances though. She'd persuaded the guys to come to her fundraiser mixer. Not that they needed much persuading where the sorority was concerned. Free drinks and pussy, and the team were all over that like white on rice.

And where they went, I dutifully followed.

"Dude, you need to relax," Saul nudged my shoulder. "It's a party."

"Mixer," Brad corrected him, snagging a strange looking canapé off the tray.

"There's beer, music, and pussy. It's a party." He shrugged.

"What's the fundraiser this year?"

"Vic wouldn't tell me."

"Really, and I thought you two were *close*?" A smirk tugged at his mouth.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" I ground out.

"Come on, Zach," Brad said. "You've got to know how it looks... Rumors are flying around about her being spotted leaving your place."

"I don't give a shit how it looks. We're friends. She's my brother's girl, or have you forgotten that?" Anger rolled through me.

"You know we haven't." His expression fell as he raked a hand through his hair. "We all miss him... shit, of course we do."

"Yeah, sorry." It came out clipped. I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to stand around drinking pretending everything was fine, when it was not fucking fine.

Saul changed the subject, and I zoned out as he told the others about the girl he was hooking up with. It wasn't until I heard the words exhibition

game, that my head whipped around.

“I heard Maverick is going to play.”

“Yeah?” Brad’s eyes lit up with excitement. Maverick Prince was an idol to a lot of these guys. He’d changed the direction of the team during his time at SU, not to mention uncovered the hazing bullshit. I’d met him a couple of times last year with Declan.

My brother looked up to him and the two of them were pretty tight. He’d tried to reach out after the accident, but I wasn’t exactly in a good place and I’d been avoiding his calls.

“Coach said Tom Balor is going to show too.”

“Balor, holy shit.”

“Any ideas who else Coach is reaching out to?”

They all stared at me as if I had the answer.

I didn’t.

“Fucked if I know.” *This is your team, not mine.* But that was just it, it was my team now. I was expected to know shit, to care.

I was expected to be grateful for being here, as if handing me Declan’s position was somehow a rare privilege I needed to treasure.

It was a fucking joke.

I wasn’t Declan. No matter how much I tried, I would *never* be him.

“Hey, guys.” Victoria joined us, flipping her long red hair over one shoulder. She looked like a nineteen-twenties pin up, her hair thick and curled and lips stark red. The black dress molded to her curves as if made to fit only her. “Are you all set?”

“Hell yeah,” Saul rubbed his hands together with the excitement of an eighth grader who had just discovered jerking off.

“What exactly are you up to?” I noticed the glitter of mischief in her eyes. Victoria was scheming, and in my limited experience that never ended well.

“You’ll see.” She winked. “Follow me.” Finger crooked, she sashayed away, leading us into the huge open living space. A few of the other guys were already lined up. Joel gave me a tight nod. I didn’t return it. I was still pissed about seeing him with Calli.

It wasn’t his fault, he didn’t know about her—*about us*—but my anger didn’t get that memo.

“Okay everyone...” Vic held court, ushering the room into silence. “As you know, it’s Chi Delta Kappa’s annual fall fundraiser, and this year, we thought we’d go old school with a... drum roll please.”

Everyone began clapping, the noise rising like a wave about to crash to shore. Vic lapped it up, laughing as anticipation crackled in the air. They lived for this shit. I on the other hand, could barely tolerate it.

“Kissing booth!”

“Hell yes.” Saul nudged me, wearing a shit-eating grin.

“No fucking way,” I grunted.

“Oh, yes,” Brad waggled his brows, “it’s the rules. Besides, Victoria will never let you duck out. You’re the new king on campus, Messiah. Girls will pay a pretty price to pucker up for you.” He started smacking his lips at me and I shoved him away.

“Asshole,” I mumbled.

“Now, now, ladies,” Saul stepped forward, running a hand over his hair. “There’s plenty of me to go around. And maybe if you’re lucky, you’ll get more than just a kiss.” He winked at a petite blonde who turned to her friends and giggled.

Jesus, the place was about to become a hunting ground. Girls loved this shit nearly as much as the guys.

“Okay, guys, if you’ll step forward please.” A couple of Vic’s friends appeared with a box. They began handing out black eye masks. I hung back, hoping to avoid being thrust into the line of fire. But, of course, Vic came over to personally make sure I was ready.

“A little heads up would have been nice,” I gritted out as I snatched the mask from her.

“If I’d have told you, would you have come?” Her brow lifted and I hated that she knew me so well.

“How long do you expect me to do this shit?”

“As long as people keep paying.”

“*People?* I’m not kissing any guys.”

“It’s for charity!”

“I’m serious, Vic. Don’t you dare—”

“Relax, it’ll be girls. Mostly.” She snickered before grabbing my arm and moving me into position.

“This is bullshit,” I complained.

“Way I see it,” Saul said, “It’s a good way to sift out the frogs.”

The guys all laughed but I was too pissed to join them.

“Who’d they get to come to these stupid things anyway?” I kept my voice low. Vic was busy explaining the rules to everyone.

No touching.

No peeking.

No seconds.

Tongue was optional.

Fuck that.

I didn't intend on tonguing anyone.

"The sorority sisters, other girly societies. Anyone got any Chapstick?" Joel asked around a strained smile. I wasn't the only one dreading the kissing booth. "We might need it."

"Ugh, this is a fucking joke."

"Nah, man, it's school spirit. I heard they did this once way back before our time, and some of the guys ended up with enough numbers to fill his calendar for the year."

"I'm not sure that's the point, Saul."

"If some chick wants to ram her tongue down my throat and give me her number all in the name of charity, I'm here for it."

"Okay, ladies." A low rumble of snickers and giggles filled the air. "Will the first four guys, Saul, Brad, Cooper, and Dev step forward."

A sigh of relief slipped from my lips. At least, I didn't have to go first.

"Masks on," Vic ordered. "Now ladies, if you'll please form an orderly line. Payment goes in Cadence's bucket, collect your masks from Kira. And remember, in the spirit of the kissing booth, you shall not reveal your identity to one another until after I end the round. Happy kissing!"

"Come to daddy." Saul smacked his lips together and a huddle of girls all shrieked with delight.

Jesus. I rolled my eyes.

Twenty minutes later, twenty-four girls were all thoroughly kissed, and Cadence's bucket had at least two hundred bucks in it.

"What do we say to our first volunteers?" Vic said, and the room exploded with applause. "Give it up for Saul, Brad, Cooper, and Dev. Next up, we have Joel, Tyrese, Kaiden, and Andre."

The guys moved forward and applied their masks.

"Girls. You know the drill by now. Get those dollars ready and join the line."

I noticed some girls sneak back into the line and I smirked. Sure, it was for charity, but still.

A commotion beyond the room caught everyone's attention and a new

group of girls appeared. “We heard there was a kissing booth?”

“You heard right.” Victoria grinned. “We were just getting started on our second round.”

“Sign me up.” One of the girls said, licking her lips. It wasn’t until they moved deeper into the room that I spotted her.

Calli.

What the fuck was she doing here?

She caught my eye, but instead of cowering, she lifted her chin in defiance. Disbelief burned through me as I watched her and Josie join the line, laughing and giggling with the other girls.

Joel was up there.

Calli was going to pay money to kiss one of my teammates... and fucking Joel was up there.

White hot fury exploded in my veins as I watched Calli inch closer to the front of the line. She was up with Josie and two other girls. Masks in place, they let Vic and the other girls line them up in front of their guy. Obviously, Josie couldn’t go with Joel, so she got Andre. One of the other girls got Tyrese, leaving Joel and Kaiden, Calli and another girl.

Vic caught my eye and smiled. I didn’t think anything of it until she started to position Calli in front of Joel. But there was no way she could know.

No way she could possibly know that I wanted to storm over there and tear Calli away from him.

I was rooted to the spot, powerless to stop it as their hands reached out, touching and feeling. Calli’s mouth curved, her nervous laughter ringing in my ears. She was laughing. It was such a beautiful sound, soft and full of innocence. But no matter how sweet it was, it hit me like a poisoned arrow through my heart.

Here I was, drowning in anger and hatred, suffocating in bitterness... and she was laughing as if she didn’t have a care in the world.

It happened in slow motion. Joel’s hands cupped Calli’s face, brushing her cheek reassuringly as he leaned down, aligning their lips with perfect precision. Calli’s hands found his t-shirt, curling into the material to steady her as she went up on her tiptoes to meet him in the kiss.

My teeth ground together so hard I half-expected to crack enamel.

She was kissing him.

Sure it was awkward and clumsy, but it didn’t remain that way. Her lips

were on that motherfucker's. Joel deepened the kiss, parting her lips with his tongue... His. Fucking. Tongue. I wanted to yell out that it was no tongues allowed, but I'd watched half the guys slip their more-than-willing girls the tongue. Victoria had even said it was optional, so I couldn't use that excuse.

The seconds ticked by. Maybe it was my mind playing tricks, but all the other rounds seemed to finish quicker.

I knew I wasn't making it up when Brad nudged my ribs, "Holy shit, would you look at Joel macking on her."

Look?

I couldn't take my fucking eyes off them.

My fists clenched so tight, I knew if I looked down my knuckles would be white.

"Oh wow, is it getting hot in here, or am I just imagining things?" Victoria fanned herself and some of the girls chuckled.

Her words were enough to break whatever spell Joel and Calli were under though because I refused to believe it was anything more than his annoying habit of always giving one hundred and ten percent.

Calli slipped off her mask, her eyes wide and lips parted with surprise. Color exploded in her cheeks, running down her neck. I wanted to claw my own fucking eyes out at how hot and bothered she looked.

Hot and bothered because of Joel's kiss.

He pulled off his own mask and everyone cheered and whooped. Someone even wolf whistled. Calli buried her face in her hands and Joel leaned in to whisper something to her.

"You okay, man?" Brad asked.

"Uh, what?" I blinked over at him.

"You look a little pale."

"I really don't want to go up there." The lie rolled off my tongue.

"Not scared of a little lip on lip action, are you? Some of these girls are creaming their panties at the thought of getting a taste of you, Messiah."

"Fuck off," I grumbled.

When I looked back over to where Joel and Calli had been standing, they were gone. I found her huddled with Josie over by the wall. Joel was standing by Andre wearing a smile so wide it almost took over his face. Smug bastard.

"Okay, time to bring up the final four." Vic winked at me. "Todd, Benji, Milo, and our star attraction, Zach Messiah."

Brad and Saul, the fuckers, wolf whistled, sending the girls into some kind of mating frenzy. Irritation rippled up my spine.

“Masks please.”

I gripped the elastic so tight I was sure it would snap. My eyes drilled holes at Calli, willing her to look at me. Finally, she lifted her gaze. Fuck, she was beautiful. All heavy-lidded and flushed. But she was wearing *his* kiss.

Motherfucker.

An angry inferno licked my insides as I slid the mask into place. No matter how hard I tried to avoid her, the universe had a strange way of forcing us back together.

“Okay, ladies... get those dollar bills ready because this is the round you’ve all been waiting for.”

I focused on my breathing, letting the steady rhythm of my heartbeat drown out the laughter and chatter. Over the last couple of years, I’d gotten good at filtering out all the bullshit, the day to day background noise. When your life wasn’t your own, and you were expected to play a part, you need to build impenetrable walls. And I’d mastered it.

But being around Calli again was like being under siege.

Bottom line, she was under my skin, and I needed to do something, *anything*, to regain the upper hand.

“Hi,” a meek voice said, and I felt the air shift in front of me. “Go easy on me. I’ve never been kissed before.”

Fucking hell.

Tentative hands found my arm, tracing their way up my biceps. Her nervous energy was like an annoying hum in the air. I leaned down and found her face, kissing her hard and quick.

“Wow,” she breathed, lingering there. “Can we do it again?” she whispered, her voice full of awe.

“No,” I barked. “Next.”

“Play nice, Mr. Grumpy Pants,” Vic cackled, the noise grating on me. She was enjoying this far too much.

The next ten minutes dragged. Three more girls, three more quick kisses. I kept it lips closed and tongue free. But on the last round, something changed. I didn’t understand what was different at first. Then it hit me. The girl was wearing perfume. But not just any perfume... perfume I recognized.

Perfume my body recognized.

Fuck. She smelled like Calli. Or how Calli used to smell when we were

just two kids finding our way around our growing bodies. It washed over me, transporting me to another time and place. I was so lost I didn't realize the girl was sliding her lips against mine. I didn't realize her hand had fisted my jersey, tugging me closer. I didn't register curling my hand around the nape of her neck and plunging my tongue deep into her mouth.

I didn't realize... because I thought she was Calli.

My sixteen-year-old brain was standing here, kissing his sweet pea.

I licked at her mouth, curling my tongue around hers and sucking. She tasted so fucking good, like mint and strawberries. My dick stirred to life and I slid a hand down to the small of her back fitting her body against mine. Her little needy whimpers spurred me on. I kissed her deeper... harder... Until someone coughed and I jerked away, reality crashing down around me.

Ripping off my mask, I inhaled a ragged breath, letting my eyes fall on the girl... the girl who *wasn't* Calli.

She casually slipped her mask over her head and smirked at me. "Well worth the ten dollars." She made a show of dabbing the corner of her mouth as her eyes ran down my body and back up.

"Uh, thanks," I stuttered, hardly able to believe what had just happened.

But then I felt her.

Calli.

She was over by the door, gawking at me, as shocked by my behavior as I was.

I didn't lose control.

Ever.

Yet, more than once now, she'd pushed me to breaking point.

All because you smelled her fucking perfume.

I internally groaned, melting back into my teammates as Vic and her girls rallied up the final total.

"Shit, Messiah, that was totally hot. I almost came in my pants like a twelve-year-old reading his old man's titty mags." I shot Saul a hard look, and he grinned. "Don't be so hard on yourself, she was hot."

Vic began the final announcements, but I tuned out, focused only on Calli. She was whispering something to Josie. They seemed to be arguing. Josie shook her head and Calli gave her a sad smile before hugging her and slipping out into the hall.

Shit, she was leaving.

Before I knew what I was doing, I pulled out my cell phone and cursed

under my breath.

“Problem?” Brad asked, and I nodded.

“Family stuff. I gotta bail.”

“Yeah, man, of course. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks.” I ducked out of the other door and exited the house out the back. Calli would only be heading to one place.

And lucky for me, I knew exactly where she was staying.

Chapter
ELEVEN

Calli

I SHOULDN'T HAVE LET Josie talk me into going to the fundraiser at Chi Delta Kappa.

We'd gotten back from the bar and some girls from our dorm had invited us to tag along. I could tell she wanted to go. Josie craved acceptance; I saw it every time we saw a large group of girls around campus. The longing in her eyes. The sadness.

So in an effort to be a good friend, I agreed.

The second I laid eyes on Zach, I knew I'd made a huge mistake.

A kissing booth, for God's sake. It was tacky and immature... and yet, part of me had been swept up in the excitement. And maybe a small part of me, the fourteen-year-old girl in love with the boy who saved her, secretly hoped I would be paired with Zach.

I'd known the second his lips touched mine, it wasn't Zach though. Disappointment had snaked through me, burrowing into the deepest recesses of my heart. I'd wanted it to be him. My head knew it was a bad idea to want such things, but my heart, my broken, battered heart, didn't care.

Then something unexpected happened. The guy kissed me. *Really* kissed me.

I was so stunned, all I could do was kiss him back. His lips were gentle and coaxing, eager but soft. It was the perfect first kiss. A first kiss I'd felt all the way down to the tips of my toes. But when I slid off my mask and saw Joel smiling back at me, I'd wanted the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

Joel had kissed me... and I'd liked it.

And Zach had been there to witness the entire thing.

When I'd finally snapped out of my lusty haze, I'd fled the party. Josie wanted me to stay, to confess my identity to Joel and give things a chance... but I wasn't ready.

So I'd done the only thing I knew how—I ran.

I only made it as far as the cluster of trees before Abrams when a hand shot out of the shadows, snagging me around the waist and pulling me into the darkness. "What the hell?" I shrieked, but the same hand covered my mouth, warm lips brushing my ear.

"Surprise, sweet pea."

“Zach?”

Of course it was Zach.

Only he was crazy enough to lurk in the shadows, waiting for his moment to strike.

“Get off me.” I bucked against him, but he was too strong. He spun me around, pressing me against a tree. “You put on quite the show back there.”

“Zach, let me go,” I hissed. He’d lost it. Completely and utterly lost it.

“You just had to show up here, didn’t you, sweet pea? Everything was fine until you—”

Twisting my head, I sank my teeth into his arm. It was so unexpected, I froze, my mouth still braced against his skin.

“Did you just fucking bite me?” Zach’s voice was so cold, a shiver ran up my spine.

His momentary surprise gave me a chance to turn in his arms. It was a mistake though. Now I could see his eyes glittering in the dark, see his truths staring back at me.

Zach didn’t follow me out here because he wanted to taunt me about Joel. He was jealous.

A thrill shot through me. Despite his unwillingness to fess up, Zachary Messiah, king of Steinbeck University according to his many—and there were a lot—adoring fans, still cared.

“Did you enjoy letting him tongue fuck you in front of all those people?” He sneered. “Did it get you wet?”

“It was very nice.” I smirked, feeling the need to fight back fill my veins.

I was done letting him pull my strings. He could push and push, pretending that we were nothing to one another.

But I felt it.

I knew the truth.

And it made my blood run hot, for more than one reason.

Zach didn’t take the bait though. Instead, his lip curled with disgust. “Nice? A kiss isn’t supposed to be nice.” One of his hands found its way to my throat.

He’d never touched me this way when we were younger, and I couldn’t help but wonder if he wanted to hurt me, dominate me, or both. Either way, I was completely at his mercy when he held me like this.

“A kiss is supposed to set your body on fire…” He leaned down, letting his lips ghost over mine. Another shudder rolled through me. He was too

close... too everything.

Zach had always had a way of completely disarming me, but, back then, it felt mutual. It felt like I affected him as much as he affected me. Now, I wasn't so sure. He was jealous, yes, but did he really want me still? Or was it just his caveman instincts coming to the surface?

"A kiss is meant to be a promise of things to come." He kissed the corner of my mouth, and I let him. Because nothing... *nothing* would ever feel as good as Zachary's kisses. I knew Josie wouldn't understand. She wanted me to give Joel a chance, and maybe he was the wise choice here.

But I'd never had much of a choice where Zach was concerned.

I'd fallen for him without warning. Slowly and then all at once. Being with him was as easy as breathing. Even after he'd broken my heart, I still watched him from afar. Loving him. Wanting him. My love never diminished, but over time, it had twisted and turned into something rotten.

Even when he'd returned to Bay View last Halloween, I'd been powerless against him. Just as I was powerless now. Maybe it made me weak... a fool... my own worst enemy. But Zachary Messiah wasn't only imprinted on my heart, he was entwined with the very fiber of my soul.

"What are you doing, Zach?" I finally found the courage to speak.

"You kissed him," he said coolly. "Do you want to kiss him again?"

"Does it matter?"

"I told you to stay away from the team, sweet pea."

"You don't get to tell me what to do, Zach. You lost that right a long time ago."

His hand remained at my throat, his thumb stroking back and forth. I wasn't even sure he was aware that he was doing it. Zach tipped his head back and inhaled a ragged breath. Torment rippled off him, turning the air around us thick and heavy.

I needed to go. I needed to slide out from between the tree and his hard body and go... but we both knew I wouldn't.

It was decided the second he pulled me into the shadows.

"Zach." I reached for him, tentatively running my hands over his shoulders. A low groan rumbled in his chest. "Maybe we should talk about what happened back then."

He froze, his eyes snapping to mine, and the expression he wore turned dark and menacing. "You think I want to talk? I don't want to fucking talk. I want you gone, Calli. This... you and me being here together. It isn't going to

work. I can't walk away from the team so you should go."

"Go?" I asked incredulously, trying to keep the hurt out of my voice. "I'm not going anywhere. This is my college, my future. If you can't accept that, then that's on you."

Go?

He wanted me to... *go*.

How dare he.

Anger unfurled in my stomach, spilling over like hot lava. "You're a real asshole, do you know that?" My eyes narrowed with indignation.

Zach's narrowed right back, the two of us glaring at each other, unwilling to surrender. I realized then that there would be no walking away. So long as we both went to SU, so long as our paths continued to cross, we would continue to butt heads.

"I could make life very difficult for you, Calli." His breath fanned my face, and I caught the faintest whiff of something sweet.

It was a girl's smell. Her perfume or lip gloss.

The thought hit me square in the stomach.

"Did you really kiss that girl like that to get back at me?"

His eyes flared, but then he smirked. "She was hot."

"Yeah, sure, keeping telling yourself that."

"Jealous, sweet pea?" He leaned in further, caging my body against the tree. It was dark, the shadows shifting around us. There'd been a time we had bathed in the light, but not anymore. Now we belonged in the darkness.

He flicked his tongue over my bottom lip, eliciting a moan from deep inside me. My body was fickle. She didn't care that Zach had hurt me over and over. All she cared about was the feelings he evoked. Feelings that distracted me from the loneliness, the bitter sting of abandonment.

It didn't make sense to want the thing that continually hurt you. But my brain wasn't wired correctly where Zachary Messiah was concerned.

Maybe it never had been.

He pulled away, chuckling. It wasn't a light sound, it was dark and twisted, full of wicked intent. "Just how much would you give me right now?" His knuckles glided down my cheek. "Would you let me slide my hands into your panties and finger fuck you? Or maybe you'd drop to your knees and open those hot pouty lips for me?"

"Fuck you," the words tore from my throat.

"That can be arranged." Challenge glittered in his eyes.

The air crackled between us. The invisible rope tethering us pulled so taut, it was at breaking point.

A beat passed.

We stared at one another, suspended in time.

Then the tether snapped.

“Fuck it,” Zach rasped before diving at me, kissing me so hard the air *whooshed* from my lungs. He plunged his tongue deep into my mouth, tangling it with my own. It wasn’t a kiss... it was a siege. A battle of the wills. One I was losing.

My fingers curled into his jersey, pulling him closer. Pushing him away. I didn’t know, my head at war with my heart. This was wrong on so many levels. I could still taste Joel, and Zach still had the girl’s lipstick smeared over his lips, but I didn’t care.

In that moment, nothing mattered other than Zach kissing me and never letting go.

“Fuck, Calli,” he breathed the words against my mouth, still kissing me. “Why does this feel good? Why does it always feel so good?”

We weren’t kids anymore. Zach was all man, his body a sculpted work of art. Lean muscle stretched over a broad frame. I felt his abs contract and ripple underneath my hands. And despite my recent weight loss, my body had grown into that of a young woman. His free hand traced down the flat of my stomach, desperately seeking out warm skin. He found it, dipping his hand under my tank top. The second his fingers touched my stomach, a whimper crawled up my throat and spilled from my lips.

“So fucking needy,” he said, sending another shiver through me.

I didn’t want to be needy, I wanted to be strong. But wasn’t being strong allowing yourself to take something you needed?

At least, that’s what I kept telling myself.

Joel’s kiss had been nice, toe-curling even, but it wasn’t like this.

Zach kissed me like he was starved. Like nothing would ever taste as good as my lips. It was addictive. Dangerous. It was like being set on fire and scorched alive.

After living in the cold for so long, I welcomed the burn.

My head swam with mindless thoughts. The slight scratch of his stubble across my chin. The bitter taste of beer on his tongue. His hard length pressed up against my stomach, teasing me. The way his hand felt wrapped around my throat, intimidating yet possessive.

Zach tore away, inhaling a ragged breath as he stared down at me. “The things I could do to you.” Wicked intention glinted in his eyes. “But first, let’s see if Joely boy manages to get you wet from just a kiss.”

My breath caught as he pushed his big hand into my shorts and found my center. “That must have been some kiss, sweet pea, you’re soaked.” He pressed a finger inside me, teasing me. My head fell back against the tree trunk as I smothered a moan.

God, why did it feel so good?

Why did the lines between love and hate make everything so confusing?

I hated Zach, I did. But part of me craved him. It craved his kisses, his touches, but most of all, it craved to know he still cared. Part of me needed to know our love, everything I’d felt back then, hadn’t been a lie.

“You’re so fucking tight, Calli.” He worked another digit inside me, letting his thumb circle my clit. Zach leaned down, pressing his brow against mine and pinning me to the tree. His eyes glowed in the dark as he watched me unravel.

“Did you imagine it was me?” he whispered against my lips. “Did you imagine it was my lips owning you, my tongue in your mouth?”

“Z- Zach,” I breathed, rolling my hips against his hand, desperate for more. But he pulled away, leaving me cold.

Zach nipped my lips, taunting me. “Tell me, Calli. Tell me again how it was kissing him?”

“It was nice.” It came out small.

“Nice?” He moved his mouth to my ear, pressing his thumb down hard on my clit. It wasn’t enough to make me come, but it was enough to make me cry out. “And how does it make you feel when *I* kiss you?”

His eyes slid back to mine, smirking.

“It hurts,” I admitted. *It hurts in the best possible way.*

Surprise flashed over his face, but he quickly schooled his expression. And then he said, “Good, it’s supposed to,” before diving at me again.

Our teeth clashed and tongues fought as Zach gave me what I needed—what I wasn’t supposed to want. His fingers weren’t gentle or kind, they were rough and cruel, but it only made me hotter. My legs began to tremble as I clung onto his body. I tried to bury my face in his shoulder to stifle my involuntarily moans. But Zach pinned me there, watching through hooded eyes as I fell apart piece by glorious piece.

“Oh God...” I panted, unable to catch my breath as waves of intense

pleasure rushed through me.

“Not God, sweet pea,” Zach kissed the words on my mouth. “Messiah.” He brought his fingers to my lips and ordered, “Suck.”

I opened willingly, completely under his spell. I knew I’d regret it. I knew the second Zach dismissed me and we went our separate ways, shame would burn through me.

But in that moment, I didn’t care.

“Good girl,” he drawled. “Next time you think about putting your lips on some other guy, remember who owns this pussy.” He cupped me over my shorts in a disgusting display of ownership.

“You’re a pig,” I snarled, the spell broken, and his dark laughter filled the air.

“You weren’t complaining a minute ago when I had my fingers deep inside you.”

“I won’t play your games, Zach,” I repeated my words from before, knowing it was a lie. He already had me entangled in his web and I knew if I wasn’t careful, I’d be unable to escape.

“No?” He stepped back, rubbing his jaw. “So what was that? Some lame assed attempt at reverse psychology?”

“Is that what you think?”

His eyes narrowed and I knew our moment was over.

“You were jealous,” I said, stepping up to him, the anger vibrating through my body smothering the lingering ripples of pleasure. “You couldn’t stand seeing Joel kiss me, so you followed me out here and—”

“Damn right, I didn’t fucking like it. He’s my teammate. I don’t need you barging in and ruining the season because Molineux has got a boner for you.”

Feeling emboldened, I leaned up on my tiptoes and pressed a single kiss to his jaw. “Keep telling yourself that.”

And then I walked away.

ZACH DIDN’T FOLLOW ME, but I didn’t expect him to.

By the time I reached my room, I was shaking. God, he made me so mad. But he also made me *feel*, and that was the problem.

Aside from my mom and Madison there had been one other person in my

life who had made me feel loved.

Zach.

No matter how much he hurt me, it was hard to just switch that off. Especially, when he was walking around campus acting so jealous and possessive all the damn time. I knew guys brains were wired differently. I knew they could want a girl without really wanting them. And I knew this thing between us was a game I couldn't ever win. But after Mom died, something inside me had changed. The hole she left in my heart never quite healed. It was a permanent scar. The pain and grief never went away. It just lived under the surface, waiting for the next trigger.

Part of me wondered if that's why Zach hadn't mentioned my mom. If he was saving me from the heartache of reliving the moment she left me... or if he genuinely didn't care.

Either way, it stung.

Exhausted, I changed into my pajamas and grabbed my cell phone to text Josie.

ME: I'm just about to go to bed. I hope you enjoyed the kissing booth.

JOSIE: Joel has not stopped talking about you. That kiss was epic... But I noticed Zach was missing too. Wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?

ME: See you tomorrow xo

IT WASN'T that I wanted to lie to her, but I didn't want to get into right now either. My past with Zach was complicated. It was also clearly unfinished. And until I figured stuff out with him, I couldn't lead Joel on.

Before she replied, I sent another text.

ME: I'm going to tell him. He deserves to know, and it should come from me.

JOSIE: I think you're right. He'll be cool about it, you'll see. Night xo

JOSIE: p.s. Keep your secrets, Calliope James, but if you ever want to share them, you can trust me. I promise.

AS I CLIMBED into bed and switched the light off, plunging the room into darkness, I smiled. Josie was a good friend. But weren't good friends supposed to tell you when you were making an epic mistake?

Closing my eyes, I drifted off to sleep with only one lingering thought...

Maybe I'd keep some of my secrets a little longer.

Chapter
TWELVE

Zach

I'D FUCKED UP.

I shouldn't have followed Calli from the party. And I definitely shouldn't have pulled her into the shadows and made her come undone like that.

But she was under my skin.

An itch that no matter how hard I tried to ignore it, I needed to scratch.

She was different—harder around the edges somehow. Her fire was an unexpected trait and for as much as I hated it, I couldn't deny it got my blood pumping.

Calli didn't look at me and see the star player, she saw *me*. Zachary Messiah. The boy before all that.

It was disarming.

She disarmed me.

I wasn't the same boy as I was back then. But she still knew me. She knew who I was before I became... *this*.

There was something comforting about it too, though.

It was fucking confusing.

I let myself into my apartment and kicked the door shut behind me. I could still taste her on my lips, hear her breathy moans as she came.

Calli was stunning.

It was wrong that something so beautiful could be so deceitful.

I forced down the memories. Nothing good could come from going there. We weren't kids anymore, and I was older and wiser. I wasn't a naïve boy, seduced by empty promises and a pretty face.

Grabbing a bottle of beer from the refrigerator, I dropped onto the stool and chugged it down. She made me fucking crazy. But Calli was right. Seeing her kiss Joel had lit a fire inside me.

I might not have wanted her anymore, but I sure as shit didn't want him to have her either. He was a good guy. The kind of guy that would treat her right.

The kind of guy she could fall in love with.

My fist clenched.

Love wasn't real. It was a lie people told themselves to feel better. Love didn't make a person strong, it made them weak. It made them vulnerable.

If you weren't careful, love had the power to ruin you.

A knock at my door made me groan. There was only one person who would turn up at my apartment this late, and I really didn't want to deal with Victoria.

"What?" I barked as I yanked open the door.

"Nice to see you too." She raised a brow, barging past me.

"Come in, why don't you?" I mumbled, mentally noting to talk to my neighbor about them leaving the front door open for anyone to waltz into the building.

"Where did you get to?"

"I wasn't feeling it."

"We need to be strong, Zach." She ran her finger along the edge of my breakfast counter. "People expect us to—"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

I'd left San Diego State and transferred to SU. I'd taken Declan's position on the team. Taken his friends and reputation too.

It was messed up. The way Coach and the guys and my parents thought this was the best way to honor Declan. I wasn't him. I was never going to be him. But I did it for an easy life. Because Timothy Messiah was not a man that accepted no for an answer.

"The team needs you," she said around a tight smile.

"The team think they need me. They have other point guards, Vic. I'm not—"

"But you are. After what happened with Maverick last year and now Declan, it's too much. They need hope, Zach. They need to win. You of all people should know that."

Me of all people?

Because Victoria knew me so fucking well.

She only knew this Zach. The Zach *after*.

"If you only came over to bitch at me, you know where the door is." I flicked my head to the hall.

"You know, sometimes, you're a real asshole," she hissed. "You're not the only one grieving, Zach. I love him too."

Bitter laughter rumbled in my chest. She was so far off the mark it was laughable. She'd lost her boyfriend, her future husband, the future father of her kids.

I might have lost my brother, but I'd gained his life.

A life I'd never wanted.

If it wasn't for him, I'd still have been at San Diego. At least there, I had some degree of freedom.

Victoria's eyes drilled holes into the top of my head.

"What?" I growled, finally lifting my eyes to hers.

"You're so angry all the time. It isn't good for you, Zach."

"Neither is sniffing around your boyfriend's brother."

Her sharp intake of breath made me feel like shit. But I couldn't help what came out of my mouth sometimes.

"I'll pretend you didn't say that."

"I'm sorry, okay?" I ground out. "I'm just so fucking sick of this crap, and the season hasn't even started yet."

Vic moved closer, laying a hand on my arm. "You need this, Zach. It's in your blood, your DNA. You're a Messiah, basketball is who you are."

For fuck's sake. She was starting to sound like my old man.

"Were you pleased with the fundraiser?" I asked, needing a break from the heavy stuff.

Victoria helped herself to a beer and joined me at the counter. "Yeah, it was a good night. I sense a few budding romances if some of the kisses were anything to go by." Mischief sparkled in her eyes. "Did you see Joel and Josie's friend? Holy shit, that was hot."

My fist clenched against my thigh. "Can't say as I noticed," I gritted out.

"Are you blind?" Her eyes danced with amusement. "It was the hottest kiss of the night."

Giving her a dismissive shrug, I drained the rest of my beer before going to get another one.

"You should set them up." She suggested.

My head snapped around to her. "Me? Why the fuck would I do that?"

"Joel likes you and he's so shy around the ladies."

"Do I look like Cupid?"

Vic chuckled. "I guess I could ask Josie. She'd do it, I bet."

"You do that."

What the fuck was happening right now?

"A bunch of us could go out, make it seem less formal. I bet Brad wouldn't mind getting some alone time with Josie."

"You noticed that, huh?"

"So obvious." She rolled her eyes, but her expression quickly sobered. "You know, I wouldn't ever cheat on Declan, Zach." Vic's voice cracked a

little. “I was just lonely. I mean, I am lonely. And hanging out with you... it makes me feel closer to him somehow.”

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck!

My chest squeezed at her words. I’d known all along what this was, but it didn’t make it any less hard to hear.

Vic wasn’t here for me. She was here for herself. For my brother.

“Good to know,” I mumbled, the urge to crack open a bottle of vodka burning through me.

But I’d arranged to meet the guys at the court first thing in the morning for a little three on three action.

“That’s not... That was a dumb thing to say.” Vic pouted. “I just meant —”

“I got it the first time. I’m not Declan.” *I’ll never be Declan.*

I’d heard it my entire life. But hearing it from Victoria, the one person I thought was on my side through this shit show... well, it stung. But deep down, I got it. She was lonely and she was hurting and no one else understood.

Except me.

Our mutual loss bonded us. It gave us common ground. But that’s all it was.

“So what do you think? Shall I set it up?”

“Whatever.” I took a long pull on my beer.

Victoria would do it with or without my blessing, so there was really no use in protesting.

“Yay.” She clapped her hands. “It’ll be fun. You’ll see.” There was something in her gaze. A glint of mischief that if I wasn’t a few beers in probably would have raised my suspicions.

But I knew Victoria well enough to know she was always working some scheme. It was just my fucking luck she’d decided to turn her attention to Calli and Joel.

“The fair is in town this weekend, it’s perfect.”

Jesus. I ran my hand down my face. This was really happening. She was going to set up Joel and Calli on a date, and I was going to stand by and watch it happen.

My teeth ground together.

“Are you okay?” Vic asked, eyeing me with concern.

“Yeah. I need to get some sleep. Are you staying or going?”

She flinched at the severity in my voice. “Can I stay?” It was barely a whisper.

This was the Victoria I liked—the girl who let her walls come down.

I gave her a curt nod as I stood and moved to the hall. “You know where to find me.”

“FOUL,” Brad yelled as I pushed Dev off me.

“Watch your fucking hands,” I gritted out, clutching the ball to my chest.

“I barely touched you,” he snickered.

“Come at me again like that and we’ll have a problem.”

“Relax, Messiah,” Joel jogged over to us. “It’s your free throw.”

“Damn right it is.” I edged to the free throw line and pulled my jersey up to wipe the sweat off my face. It was only a little after ten, but the sun was already soaring high in the sky. It was going to be a hot one.

“Drop back, D,” Joel said to Dev. “I’ve got him covered.”

“You think, Molineux?” I smirked, spinning the ball in my hands.

“Just take the damn shot, Messiah. We all know it’s a sure thing.” He rolled his eyes.

“Nothing in life is certain, Joely boy.” I lined up the shot, bending my knees slightly and snapping my wrist to release the ball. He jumped, throwing his arms high but nothing was going to stop it from slicing through the air, hitting the backboard and dropping through the hoop.

“And that’s how you do it,” Brad hollered.

“Nice one.” Joel held out his fist. I stared at it for a second, but then bumped mine against it. “So did Vic mention the thing to you?”

“Thing?” I played dumb as we walked off court to get some liquid refreshment.

“Yeah, the fair tonight? She said she mentioned it.”

“Oh that, yeah. Sounds cool.”

“And you’re okay with it?” He side-eyed me as he chugged his water.

“With me asking Calli to come along as my date?”

Date.

I fucking hated that word.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know, you tell me. I kind of got the impression you two—”

“Hey, man. I saw the kiss.” I clapped him on the back a little harder than necessary. “It was fire.”

“Yeah.” His chest puffed. “It was pretty fucking awesome.”

I liked Joel. Well, I had until he’d laid eyes on my girl.

She’s not your fucking girl.

But hearing him talking about Calli made me want to rip his tongue out of his mouth.

I could have told him right then and there who she was. It would have put an end to whatever he hoped could develop between them. But where was the fun in that?

Calli had walked away from me last night with the upper hand. She’d won the battle, but the war wasn’t over yet.

Not by a long shot.

Maybe Victoria was right. Maybe tonight would be fun.

“You bringing someone to the fair tonight?” I turned my attention to Brad.

“I... uh... what?”

“The fair. There’s a bunch of us going. Joel is going to ask Calli. Hey, you should ask Josie and—”

“What the hell, Messiah? That’s my sister you’re talking about.” Joel growled the words.

“Yeah, so? She’s fair game now she’s a freshman.”

“You know the rules.” His eyes turned hard. “Sisters are off-limits.”

As if I needed reminding.

“It’s a group thing. It doesn’t mean anything,” I added.

“You know what Brad is like,” Joel grumbled.

“Hey, fucker, I’m standing right here.” A dejected look washed over Brad’s face. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“You’re a dog, bro. I’m surprised your dick hasn’t fallen off yet.”

“I was with Reese for almost six months.”

“Yeah and look how that turned out.”

Brad arched a brow. “She cheated on me.”

“After you got caught kissing that volleyball player.”

“I was giving her mouth to mouth.” His eyes twinkled with amusement.

“Me and Reese were... open like that.”

“Yeah, well, I’d appreciate it if you keep your hands away from my sister.”

Brad pinned me a hard look, and I shrugged. I wasn’t the one sexting my teammate’s sister.

No, you had your fingers inside one’s pussy though.

It was different. Semantics. Calli and I had history.

Unresolved history.

And there was no chance of it becoming anything more than that. Unlike Brad and Josie who mooned at each other every time they crossed paths.

“Are you fuckers going to stand around all day, or are we going to finish this?” Dev yelled from the court. He threw the ball in our direction and I intercepted it, bouncing it a couple of times at my feet.

“You that eager to lose, D?” Saul yelled.

A small crowd had formed in the bleachers, all eager to watch the Steinbeck Scorpions shoot hoops. Most were girls, giggling and pointing, watching with eager eyes and seductive smiles. But there was a handful of teenage boys too, watching with stars in their eyes as they imagined the day they got to walk in our shoes.

Steinbeck wasn’t just a college town; it was a basketball town. People lived, breathed, and bled basketball. The game that had, somewhere along the way, become my lifeline. The feel of rubber in my palm settled something inside me. It was strange—to need the thing you hated.

Calli’s face popped into my mind, but I quickly shook it away as I went back into the center of the court.

I didn’t need Calli.

I hadn’t needed her in years.

But I wasn’t stubborn enough to deny that some part of me still wanted her. She had those soft, curved, pouty lips, and I was a hot-blooded guy. It was biological. A simple case of chemistry.

Evolution.

My body remembered her. Her smell, her taste, the way she trembled beneath my touch. It remembered, and it wanted more.

It wanted to destroy her kiss by stolen kiss, dismantle her bravado touch by dirty, desperate touch.

Fuck. It wanted her to remember.

And then it wanted to ruin her the way she’d ruined me.

“Let’s go, Messiah. Quit stalling.” Dev flashed me a shit-eating grin. He was really pushing my buttons, but that was his style.

The guy was a cocky fucker. He should have learned by now that I didn’t play to lose.

Ever.

IT WAS ALMOST six and I was due to meet Victoria and the guys in thirty minutes. So when my cell rang and I saw my father’s number, I let out a frustrated groan. He was the last person I wanted to talk to.

“Zachary,” he said with a hint of agitation. “I’ve been calling.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Yes, well, it wouldn’t hurt you to find ten minutes of your schedule to return my call. How are classes?”

“They’re okay.”

“A little more enthusiasm, Son. School is important.”

“Could have fooled me,” I mumbled.

“And the team? How is it being back?”

“The team is as well as to be expected.”

“Coach Baxter says you’re pushing it too hard.”

Of course he had.

Frustration skated up my spine as I bit back the words on the tip of my tongue. “There’s nothing wrong with working out, Dad. Kinda comes with the territory.”

“I know full well what it takes to be at the top of your game. But you can’t push too hard, not before the season has even begun. This year is important, Son. You can’t do anything to jeopardize it.”

As if I could forget.

It was Declan’s senior year, his final season. Except, he wouldn’t get to play it. I would.

It was so fucking messed up.

“Your mom wishes you would stop by. She misses you.”

My eyes shuttered at the insinuation in his voice. That somehow by avoiding the house, avoiding the heavy atmosphere, I was a bad son.

It also didn’t escape me that he hadn’t said *they* missed me. Because

things between me and my dad hadn't been right for a long time. Declan was his golden child, his favorite. Always had been. And I'd been the rebel child, the one he needed to force to fit the Messiah mold.

But he'd gotten his wish in the end. I was here. Living out his dream for me. Sure, no one could have anticipated that Declan would take that jet ski out and hit that buoy, but the sentiment was the same.

"We were disappointed you didn't come with Victoria to see your brother. She's such a good girl, standing by his side. Would it really hurt you to—"

"Not this again, Dad. I can't..." I swallowed over the lump in my throat.

"You should have been there. You are a part of this family. Declan needs us. He needs you, Zachary."

"I'm here aren't I?" Wasn't that enough?

The breath he exhaled made me wince. "It's hard on everyone, but he needs us. Declan needs to know his family are with him through this."

My fist clenched around the cell phone until the blood drained from my knuckles. Declan didn't even know when someone was there. He was in a medically induced coma for fuck's sake. But my parents didn't want to hear it. It wasn't the Messiah way.

"If there's nothing else," I said, done with his third degree. "I have plans."

"With the team?" His voice held a trace of relief.

"Yeah. A few of us are going to check out the fair that's in town."

"Declan always did love the fair."

My spine went rigid, my teeth grinding together. "Sure thing, Dad. Say hi to Mom for me."

"I will. But you know, Zach, you can't hide from this forever."

I hung up, unwilling to listen to anymore of his lectures.

I wasn't hiding, I just wasn't living with my head in the clouds.

Chapter
THIRTEEN

Calli

“I’M NOT SURE ABOUT THIS,” I said, eyeing Josie in the mirror.

She fluffed her hair again, blotting her lips. “It’s a group thing, it’ll be fun.”

“With Joel and Zach there? I’m not sure that’s my idea of fun.” In fact, I couldn’t think of anything worse.

“What’s the worst that can happen? You and my brother hook up and Zach realizes he let you slip through his fingers again?”

“I don’t like the idea of playing games.” Despite the fact I was already in some game of push and pull with Zach.

“Joel invited you, right?”

I nodded.

“And he was upfront about Zach going too?”

Another nod.

“So, what’s the problem? Clearly Zach has no issue with you and Joel—”

“I thought you just said it was a group thing?”

“It is.” Her smirk did little to ease the knot in my stomach. “But it could be a you and Joel thing too. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.”

“Ugh, don’t.” I flopped back on the bed, letting out an exasperated breath.

SU was supposed to be my fresh start. A chance to move on. Instead, I’d landed myself in the middle of some nightmare. Zach was here, taunting me at every corner. Callum was treating me like I was invisible. And Josie—my *only* friend here—knew nothing about me, not really.

“My mom died,” I blurted out, clapping a hand over my mouth.

“What?” Her hand flew to her own mouth. “Oh my god, Calli, I’m so sorry.”

Sitting up slowly, I blinked away the tears. “Almost three months ago. Cancer.”

“But Callum didn’t—”

“Tell anyone? Yeah, I figured.” God, what was wrong with him?

Our mom had died. She’d had a slow, painful, lingering death and he hadn’t told the team.

That wasn’t normal.

“Jesus, babe.” Josie sat down beside me and wrapped her arm around my shoulder. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really. It’s still raw, you know?”

She smiled sadly, nodding.

“I cared for her, toward the end. Sat with her as she slipped away.” Silent tears streamed down my face as I let myself give in to the grief.

It was a funny thing. People talked about time healing you. But time didn’t heal you, it just made the pain lessen. The hole left would never fully heal. She was my mom, my best friend in the entire world. Time would never erase witnessing her lose the fight against such an ugly and brutal disease. It would always be a part of me. Ingrained in my memories, imprinted on my soul. As the days went on, you just learned how to harness the grief instead of drowning in it.

“Does Zach know?” she asked, and I shook my head.

“If he does, he hasn’t said anything.”

“So, let me get this right. Your brother didn’t tell you about Declan, and he didn’t tell Zach about your mom?”

I lifted my shoulders in a small shrug. When she said it like that it did sound completely ridiculous.

“You have to tell him.”

“Who, Callum?” I blanched.

“No, silly. Zach.”

“It won’t change anything.” Zach harbored some deep-seated hatred for me. It bled from his pores every time he was close to me.

I just wish I knew why.

“Anyway, I thought you were Team Calli and Joel?”

“I am.” She shrugged. “But it’s good to have options.”

“Okay, that’s just weird.”

“You’re a young, single, independent woman. It’s okay to play the field a little, babe.”

“That sounds... like a lot of work.”

Josie nudged my shoulder with hers. “Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.”

“So you and Brad are...”

“As far as my brother is concerned, we’re nothing.” Her brow quirked.

“And as far as he *isn’t* concerned?”

“A girl never kisses and tells.” Josie smirked, but her expression quickly fell. “Are you sure you’re okay? We don’t have to go. We can stay here and watch movies while eating our body weight in ice cream.”

“For as tempting as that sounds...” I flashed her a weak smile, knowing that I had to do this. I couldn’t explain it, didn’t really understand it, but deep down in my soul, I knew I had to go tonight. “I need to keep moving forward.”

Because if I stopped, that’s when the grief hit. Overpowering, unrelenting waves that knocked me off my feet.

“Well, if things get too much and you want escape, just whisper the safe word to me and we’ll leave.”

“Safe word?” I chuckled, and it felt good. Really good. But that was the thing about Josie, for as forward and persistent as she was, she was also really good at making me smile.

“Yeah, our safe word. If at any point tonight you whisper BHS, I’ll make up an excuse to get us out of there.”

“Oh my god,” I chuckled, hardly surprised that she’d remembered such a small detail of the history between me and Zach. “You’re a good friend, Josie.”

“I try my best.” She beamed.

“I think I’m going to tell him tonight. Joel, I mean.” He deserved to know the truth.

“I think that’s probably a good idea. The team have strict guy codes about dating teammates sisters.”

“How’s that working out for you?” I teased.

“It’s the worst. But I have a plan.” Josie shot me a mischievous wink.

“Why do I not like the look you’re wearing right now?”

“Ready for this?” She stood and offered me her hand. I followed her up and took it, my lips curving in a hesitant smile.

“As I’ll ever be.”

“I’M GLAD YOU CAME,” Joel said as we wandered from stall to stall. Our small group had grown along the way. Josie was busy talking to a couple of other guys from the team, Saul and Dev, while casting longing looks at Brad. Victoria had brought a friend called Kira, and the two of them had been glued to Zach’s side the entire night so far.

He’d barely looked twice at me.

“Me too.” I smiled, trying to ignore the knot in my stomach.

“Okay, ladies, who wants to see a real man in action.” Saul motioned to the strongman game.

“No way, bro. Those things are rigged.”

“Nah, I got this.” He pulled out his wallet and handed the guy some bills in exchange for the hammer. “Now stand back.” A smug grin tugged at his mouth. “I wouldn’t want to hurt anyone.”

“More like hurt yourself,” Dev muttered under his breath, and everyone snickered.

We all watched as Saul made a show of hiking the hammer up over his shoulder and slamming it down onto the button. The needle rose higher and higher and, for a second, it looked like it was going to ring the bell. But as quickly as it rose, it fell, sinking back down to its cradle.

“No fucking way.”

“What did I tell you, man?” Dev snorted. “Every damn time.”

“I bet Zach could do it,” Kira purred, running one of her manicured fingernails down his arm.

“You should totally try to win her a prize, Zach.” Victoria grinned with approval.

I may have retched a little. Kira was being so obvious, touching him. Batting her long lashes his way and constantly chewing her bottom lip as if it were the sexiest thing known to man.

“Down girl,” Josie whispered, sneaking up on me out of nowhere. My head snapped around and I pursed my lips. “We should all ride the Ferris wheel,” she suggested.

“I’ll ride with you,” I said.

“No way. You can ride with Joel. I’m sure one of the guys will ride with me.”

My money was on Brad, but I kept my theory to myself.

“Do you want to?” Joel asked, hope glittering in his eyes.

I glanced back at Zach, barely able to hide my irritation at the sight of Kira draped all over him. “Sure,” I said, flashing Joel a tentative smile.

“We’re going to check out the Ferris wheel.” He grabbed my hand and started pulling me in the direction of the ride.

Everyone joined the line with us, and somehow, I ended up wedged in between Joel and Zach. He had his back to me, acting as if I wasn’t there, as he chatted to Kira and Victoria. But I felt him. Much like my mom, Zach was

also ingrained on my soul. The lingering thread that had once tethered us was still there, expanding and contracting under the surface.

“We’re an odd number,” Saul said.

“Tough shit, Jameson. You’ll have to ride alone.”

“Fuck that. Vic, babe, ride with me.” He dropped down on one knee and clasped his hands together.

“Jesus, Saul, you’re making a scene.” She tried to yank him to his feet, but he refused to budge.

“Say yes, and I’ll get up.”

“Yes, you stupid idiot.” Victoria shook her head playfully, lapping up the attention. “But keep your wandering hands to yourself.”

“Deal.” He leaped up and pulled her into a bear hug. “She said yes, ladies and gents.”

“Oh my god,” Kira said. “Doesn’t he realize she’s still with Declan?”

That sobered the mood. Saul released Victoria so fast she stumbled a little. But Zach was there to catch her. “You good?”

She nodded.

“Shit, Vic, I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“It’s okay.” She gave Saul a sad smile. “I’m okay. Besides, we all know you prefer dick to pussy.”

“What the hell?” he spluttered, the blood draining from his face. “I don’t —”

“No? Huh,” Victoria shrugged, “I always assumed you were gay.”

The guys fell about into fits of laughter as Josie and I shared an amused smile.

“You know when I was in high school,” she continued to hold court, “there was this silly tradition that whenever you rode the Ferris wheel with someone, you had to kiss them when you stopped at the top otherwise it was bad luck.”

“Bull. Shit,” Dev grumbled.

Victoria’s eyes flicked to mine. She’d barely spoken two words to me or Josie, but Josie insisted we didn’t let her intimidate us.

“I’m down for some lip on lip action,” Saul smacked his lips together, “just say the word.”

“Maybe I’ll ride with Kira after all.”

“Hell no,” Kira laced her arm through Zach’s, “He’s is going to distract me from my fear of heights, aren’t you, Zach?”

Ugh.

Could she be any more obvious? He wasn't even really paying her that much attention.

More than you though.

"Almost there," Josie's announcement pulled me from my thoughts.

"Shit, my heel is stuck."

I smothered the laughter bubbling in my chest at the sight of Victoria trying to free her designer shoes from the ground. Saul bent down to try to free her while Kira pulled her leg.

"Best thing I've seen all day," Josie whispered, and I couldn't help smother a snicker.

Served her right for wearing stilettos to the fairground.

"A little help?" Saul looked to his teammates, but it was Joel who stepped forward.

"Try slipping off her shoe and pulling it out that way."

"Next," the ride attendant called.

"For the love of God, don't make me ride alone," Josie groaned.

"I'll hop on with you." Brad slipped past me before anyone could say anything.

"Another two," the guy said.

I was next in line, but Joel was still helping Victoria and Saul. "I'm sorry," I said to the guy. "Can we just wait a sec—"

"Let's go, James." Zach nudged me forward.

"What the hell are you doing?" I sneered, digging my sneakers into the ground.

"Are you riding or not?" The attendant grumbled. "I don't got all day."

"She's riding," Zach barked, manhandling me into the cart.

"Let me out. Let me out right now."

But Zach ignored me, pulling the safety bar closed and sliding his arm around my shoulder. "Don't make me ride alone, sweet pea," he whispered against my hair.

Damn him.

Damn his stupid name for me.

I glanced back at Joel. He was still trying to work Victoria's heel free from the metal grating, paying zero attention to us.

With an indignant huff, I shuffled to the edge, trying to keep as much space between us as possible.

“I don’t bite.” He let out a low chuckle that reverberated deep in my stomach. “Well, only if you beg.”

The attendant checked the safety bar and tapped the cart. “Enjoy your ride.”

“Oh, I will.” Zach pinned me with a dark look that sent shivers racing down my spine.

“I can’t believe you,” I muttered.

“Disappointed you won’t get to kiss Joel at the top?” He leaned in, his warm breath hitting my face.

“You’re drunk.” I could smell the bitter scent of liquor on his breath.

“So what if I am?”

My brows furrowed. What person got drunk to come to the fairground?

The Ferris wheel lurched forward, and my hands shot out, grabbing the safety bar.

“You’re scared,” Zach taunted, rocking his body to make the cart sway.

“No, I’m not.” I inspected the arm connecting us to the rest of the ride.

“Okay, sweet pea, whatever you say.”

“Stop calling me that.” I scowled at Zach, trying to ignore the nervous energy bouncing in my stomach. But it didn’t deter him. He leaned in closer, pulling me toward him until we were pressed together.

“Why? Does it get you wet?”

“You’re such a pig,” I spat the words, trying to press into my side of the cart as much as possible. But Zach was too big. Too everything. The air crackled around us as his intense gaze burned into me.

“And you’re testing the last of my fucking patience.”

“Kira seems nice,” I spat the words, growing tired of his bullshit.

His lip twisted into a wolfish grin. “She does, doesn’t she? I bet she sucks dick like a champ. Maybe I’ll take her for a ride later.”

Dammit.

Why did his words hurt so much?

I was here with Joel. He was a good guy. Kind and funny. Joel wouldn’t ever treat me this way. He wouldn’t play games. He wouldn’t try to scare me, all while trying to drive me insane.

“What are you doing, Zach?” I asked as the world fell away. We were approaching the highest point. Steinbeck and the beach beyond lay below. The sun was setting in the distance. It was beautiful. So peaceful and pretty.

He didn’t answer, but I felt Zach watching me as I tipped my head back

and inhaled a deep breath. I could taste the sea air. There had been a time, when my mom was near the end, that I thought I wouldn't get through it. I couldn't see past the heart wrenching grief, the constant pit of despair in my stomach.

But I'd done it.

I'd survived the single worst experience of my life, and now here I was, *trying*. For her.

Nothing Callum or my father or even Zach did, could touch me. Because I was different now, hardened from losing the person I'd loved most in the world.

He doesn't know. I shut the little voice down. Zach knowing wouldn't change anything.

The wheel lurched to a stop, the car swinging back and forth, and I swallowed the flash of panic.

"Isn't this fun?" Josie yelled and I was surprised she could talk, what with all the supposed kissing.

"What?" I barked, growing impatient with the way Zach was watching me.

I was done with the whole goddamn night. If Victoria hadn't gotten her heel stuck, he'd have been sitting here with Kira right now, not me. Maybe they would have done a whole lot more than kiss at the top of the ride.

I needed to remember that.

"I'm just wondering how I can hate you so much but still want to kiss you," he said as if it was the simplest thing in the world.

Zach pressed his thigh against mine, twisting his body into me a little. My breath caught, my heart racing in my chest as a beat passed between us. His eyes dropped to my lips, tracing their shape.

"Don't even think about it," I breathed, pressing myself against the back of the cart.

"No?" His voice cracked with lust. "Not even for good luck?"

He was close now.

Too close.

My body was paralyzed as he cupped my face, brushing his thumb along my cheek. His touch was soft and gentle, but I knew it was a lie. I knew it was all part of his game to break me.

To what end though, I still didn't understand.

"I shouldn't want you so fucking much, sweet pea." He ghosted his lips

over mine. “But I do.”

“Don’t do this, Zach,” I whispered, my hands reaching for him.

“Stop me,” he breathed almost painfully. “Stop me, Calli.”

A shudder rolled through me as my pulse ratcheted. *It’s just the ride, that’s all it is.*

“You’re trembling,” he said.

“It’s the ride.”

“Sure about that?” Zach’s hand glided to the side of my throat as he watched me. He kicked the cart, making us rock harder.

“Zach... don’t.” My hands dug into the seat beneath me, trying to steady myself.

“Say it, Calli. Say it, and I’ll stop.”

“S- say what?” I tried not to look down. Heights had never bothered me before but riding with Zach was too much.

He was too much.

“Tell me you want me the way I want you...”

“I hate you.”

“I hate you too, baby, but it only makes it sweeter.”

We crashed together, teeth and tongue and my salty tears. I was crying and I was kissing him.

I was kissing him.

God, it felt good, to feel his lips on mine.

Why did it always feel so good?

“Fuck, babe, you taste good.” Zach curled his tongue around mine, devouring me. And I let him.

I let him plunder my mouth and steal my breath, because where Zachary Messiah—the only boy I’d ever loved—was concerned, I’d never been able to say no.

His hands slid along my inner thigh, dipping under my skirt. “Are you going to let me get you off on the Ferris wheel, sweet pea?” He brushed my panties, and I froze. “Are you going to let me finger fuck you right here?”

What the hell was I doing?

“We should stop.”

“Stop?” He snarled. “You think you get to decide when this stops?” A dark expression washed over him. Another shiver rolled through me as his eyes burned into me. “Do you wish it was him?” He hooked his fingers inside the damp cotton. “Do you wish it was Joely boy here right now?”

I pressed my lips together in defiance. It was one thing to lose myself in the physical sensations Zach stirred in me, but I wasn't going to engage in these verbal sparring sessions.

Clamping my thighs tight, I tried to force him out. But a wicked smirk tugged at his mouth. "Don't you want to feel, sweet pea?" he rasped against my ear, smugness dripping from his every syllable as if he knew he had me all figured out.

And maybe he did.

Maybe he got me without even realizing it.

"Don't you want to just let it all go?" He bit the skin beneath my ear, sucking gently, sending bolts of pleasure ripping through me. I swallowed a moan, but he heard it. His lips curving triumphantly against my neck.

"I can make you feel so fucking good, babe. You know I can."

There was a vulnerability in his voice I hadn't noticed before. Zach was drunk. Or, at least, he'd been drinking. He was in pain, trying to escape whatever demons haunted his thoughts.

I reached up, brushing the hair from his face. "What happened to you, Zach?"

"You, sweet pea. You happened." Without warning he pushed two fingers inside me, and I cried out, the sounds lost in the background noise of the fairground. His hooded gaze captured mine, refusing to let me go, as he curled his fingers and rubbed in slow torturous motions.

It was so wrong... so dirty... I needed to stop him. I needed to—

"God, Zach," I cried as he started circling my clit with his thumb, dragging it back and forth.

"Not God, babe, Messiah. And I own this." He pressed his palm against me, "I own this pussy."

I tried to bury my face in his shoulder, embarrassed at his dirty words but he wouldn't let me. Zach trapped me there, rendering me incapable of doing anything except ride out the intense waves of pleasure he stirred inside me.

"Later, when you're kissing Joel, remember how this feels. Remember who owns you." His eyes were pitch black. Two soulless orbs come to steal my soul.

My body began to tremble. "Zach, please..." I whimpered.

"Fuck, yeah. Beg, Calli. Beg." He licked his lips, watching me fall apart at his touch.

"I... God... it's..." *Everything.* I swallowed the word. Zach didn't deserve

it.

He didn't deserve this.

But I couldn't stop myself. The second Zach kissed me, I was a lost cause. Because the broken part of me needed him. It needed his scraps of attention and rare moments of vulnerability.

It just needed him.

Maybe it never stopped.

Chapter
FOURTEEN

Zach

SHE WAS the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, losing control as we were suspended in the air.

"Zach..." she moaned my name and I almost came right there in my shorts.

I leaned in, rubbing my nose along the length of her jaw. "Tell me what you want, sweet pea."

"M- more." Her eyes were glassy, her cheeks stained with desire.

She wanted me to fuck her.

Sweet little Calliope James wanted me to ruin her.

I wanted to. Fuck, I wanted it so much. But I knew it probably wasn't a good idea. I was already struggling to maintain control around her.

Calli's legs began to shake and I knew she was close. Pressing my lips against hers, I stared right at her as she teetered on the edge. "Say it," I taunted her, licking the corner of her mouth. "Tell me you want me."

"I..." she panted, and I couldn't resist kissing her, swallowing her sexy little moans.

"Oh my god, I'm going to—"

I yanked my fingers away and she gasped.

"What are you—"

"Leaving you hanging, get it?" I smirked, bringing my fingers to my mouth and sucking them clean. "You taste good, sweet—"

"I can't believe you just did that," she seethed, refusing to meet my eyes.

Silence settled over us.

She had a point.

I shouldn't have done that. Not because I cared, but because I didn't want her to think I cared.

Truth was, I shouldn't have done a lot of things where Calliope James was concerned. But I couldn't seem to stop myself. She drove me in-fucking-sane.

"You still want me," I said devoid of emotion. "Even after all this time, you—"

"Don't." She let out a resigned sigh. "Just don't. We're not the same people we were back then, and you—"

"I what, huh?" I snapped, anger rolling through me like an angry storm.

“Why don’t you tell me what *I* did.”

Calli regarded me for a second, trying to find a chink in my armor. *Keep trying, sweet pea, you’ll never find it.*

She couldn’t hurt me. Not again. I was dead inside. Nothing but a black soul with darkness coursing through my veins.

I wanted her to hurt. I wanted Calli to experience even a fraction of the pain and betrayal I felt every time I looked at her.

“I’m not doing this.” She huffed defiantly, turning away from me.

It was for the best, because seconds later, our cart rolled into the loading bay and the guy was unclipping the safety bar.

Calli shot from the ride, rushing over to Josie’s side. Little Molineux pinned me with a hard look, but I shrugged it off, climbing out and going over to them. Kira intercepted me though, lacing her arm through mine.

“There you are.” She beamed up at me. “Take me for a ride on the Ferris wheel?” she said as if she hadn’t just watched me and Calli ride together.

“Later, yeah?” I brushed her off, fighting the urge to meet Calli’s death stare.

Victoria and Joel were next off the ride. “That was so embarrassing.” She clutched her necklace. The locket my brother had given her for their second anniversary.

“If it wasn’t for Joel I’d probably still be stuck there.” She shot me a look of disapproval.

“I couldn’t let Calli ride alone.” My shoulders lifted in a dismissive shrug.

“Of course.” Joel moved closer. “Thanks for that.” He gave me a small nod, making a beeline for Calli. “Hey, do you want to maybe get something to eat?” he asked her.

“That sounds perfect. That ride gave me an appetite.” Calli eye’s flicked to mine. “Besides, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about actually.”

My blood boiled. She was determined to push me to my breaking point.

Two can play at that game.

“We’re going to get food,” Joel announced. “Catch you guys later.”

“Actually,” Brad said, “I could eat? Josie? Guys?”

“Sounds good to me,” I said. “Kira, babe, you hungry?” Hooking my arm around her neck, I pulled her close and nuzzled my nose in her hair. Calli’s eyes flared but her anger quickly turned to rage when I smirked.

“Ravenous.” Kira gave me a suggestive smile.

We all headed over to the food truck area. There was everything from hot dogs to tacos to dirty fries.

“Everything smells so good,” Kira said. “I think I’ll get a salad.”

A fucking salad.

I smothered a snort.

“Zach, come with me?” She didn’t bother waiting for my reply, dragging me off toward one of the food trucks. We joined the line and I searched for Calli in the crowd. She and Joel were in the line for dirty fries. Her eyes were crinkled with laughter. But I wasn’t laughing.

I hated her, but I hated watching her with him more.

“Zach?” Kira yanked my arm.

“Huh, what?”

“I said, I was hoping you’d ask me out sometime.”

“You were?”

“Well, yeah.” She smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “You’re... so hot.”

Right. I fought the urge to roll my eyes.

“And I’ve always wanted to date a Scorpion.”

“Didn’t you hook up with Dev before the summer?”

Her cheeks pinked. “That was nothing.”

“No?” I leaned down slightly. She was at least a head shorter than my six two. “So what was it?”

“Zach...” A nervous giggle spilled from her lips. “You know how it is. We were drunk and I—”

“Couldn’t resist riding his dick?”

I was being an ass, but Calli had me all twisted up inside. Nothing made sense anymore, not since seeing her at the party and discovering she was a freshman at SU.

“But it isn’t Dev I want.” She glided her hands up my chest, gazing up at me like I was a fucking god.

“Next,” the server yelled with perfect timing.

Kira gave a little sigh and turned to reel off her order, which wasn’t much considering she was getting a salad.

Like a moth to a flame, I glanced over at Calli again. She and Joel had gotten their food and were seated at one of the huge wooden tables. They were huddled close, still laughing.

Fuck.

Why did I care so much?

You know why...

I pushed the unwelcomed thoughts down.

“I’m ready.” Kira nudged my shoulder, stalling when she noticed my fixation with Joel. “What’s up with that?”

I frowned.

“Joel and Cassie?” She looked at me like I was stupid.

“Calli?” I snapped a little too sharply.

“Yeah, who even is she?” Kira failed to keep the jealousy out of her voice. Victoria and her girls were possessive over the team. Everyone knew that.

If only you knew. I swallowed the words.

I ignored Kira, leaving her to her salad as we headed back to the others.

“That looks good,” Victoria said, tucking into her taco. “But I needed some grease.”

“A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips,” Kira sang, sliding onto the bench next to Brad. He and Josie were keeping their distance, but she’d looked a little disheveled when they stepped off the ride.

“What did you get, Calli?” Victoria asked her.

“Just some loaded fries.”

“Nice. So where did you say you were from again?”

It was an innocent enough question, but I knew Victoria and she’d barely spoken two words to Josie or Calli all night.

“I... uh...” Calli flushed, refusing to meet anyone’s eyes.

“Shit, get it off me,” Josie leaped up, flailing her arms around. “Somebody get it off me.”

“Relax, Jos,” Brad said, “there’s nothing there.”

“There’s not?” She heaved a big sigh. “I thought there was a wasp. My bad.” Josie dropped sheepishly onto the bench. I caught her eye and raised a brow, impressed at her theatrics.

But Victoria was like a dog with a bone, so I was hardly surprised when she said, “So Calli, you were saying?”

“I...” Her eyes darted to mine and I sat a little straighter, waiting to see what she would say.

Outing herself, would be outing our connection.

It occurred to me that given Victoria’s insistence Calli answer the question, that she’d probably figured something out. I didn’t know how she

knew, but I knew Vic well enough to know she was stirring the pot.

“I come from Bay View.” Calli inhaled a sharp breath as her words punctured the air.

“Bay View?” Joel stuttered, glancing between Calli and me and back again. “But isn’t that where—”

“Surprise.” I chuckled, but it came out strangled.

“So you two know each other?” he gawked at us.

I shrugged. I wasn’t about to bail her out of this.

“We went to high school together for a while,” Calli said.

Victoria looked triumphant, watching Calli splutter for words.

“You went to Bay View High School?” Brad added, oblivious to the tension crackling between the four of us—Calli, Victoria, Joel, and me.

She nodded and he rubbed his jaw. “Nice. Callum James went there too.”

The blood drained from her face, panic swimming in her eyes.

“Oh, did you know Callum too? How funny, you have almost the same name.” Victoria grinned, like the cat who got the cream, as she watched her plan fall beautifully into place.

It hit me then, she’d orchestrated this whole thing. From setting up Joel and Calli to getting them here tonight. She wanted the truth to come out... but why?

What did she stand to gain?

“Calli?” Joel said, a hint of hurt in his voice. “Were you and Zach friends?”

“Hardly.” The word spilled from her lips without hesitation. She might as well have taken the plastic knife on her tray and stuck it straight in my back.

“And Callum?”

“I...” She gulped, her face as red as beets.

Everyone else watched on, hanging on the tension swirling around the two of them. Joel looked at her with such disappointment it was almost as bad as hearing her say we weren’t friends.

“They’re not friends,” I said waiting for the flicker of relief in her expression. When it was firmly in place, I delivered what I knew would be a crushing blow.

But hearing her dismiss me so easily had fanned the flames already raging inside me.

“Calli is Callum’s little sister. Isn’t that right, sweet pea?”

“W- what?” Joel recoiled, confusion clouding his eyes. “You’re Callum’s

sister?”

“Fuck me, that’s some bad luck, man.” Brad whistled through his teeth, and Joel shot him a hard look.

“I.. I need to go.” Calli scrambled to her feet, almost slipping. She managed to right herself and took off into the crowds.

“I’d better...” Josie jumped up and went after her.

“So dramatic,” Victoria snickered. My eyes slid to hers in question and she smiled innocently. “What?”

“You knew,” Joel accused me. “You knew and you didn’t say a word. Why?”

“Wasn’t my story to tell.” I scrubbed a hand over my jaw.

“That’s kind of messed up that Callum didn’t mention her,” Saul said. “Did you know she was coming here this year?”

My shoulders lifted in a small shrug. “I was as in the dark as much as the rest of you.”

Joel’s eyes burned into the side of my face. He probably had questions, a ton of them. But I wasn’t about to sit around and argue with him over Calli.

“I need to get some air.” He got up and ran a hand through his hair. “Fuck.”

“Come on, bro.” Saul and Dev flanked his side.

“What the fuck, Messiah?” Brad hissed. But I wasn’t about to do this here, not with Victoria and Kira salivating for more gossip.

“Just think how Joel’s going to take it when he finds out you’re messing around with his sister.”

“Fuck you, Vic,” he snarled at her. “Just because you’re hurting doesn’t give you the right to—”

“Brad,” I warned.

“Seriously? You’re going to defend her?”

I ran a hand down my face letting out an exasperated breath. Victoria went to speak, but I cut her off. “You and Kira should take off.”

“W- what? But we came together.”

“Victoria, just go.” I met her scowl with my own. “You’ve done enough tonight.”

“Zach, don’t be such a—”

“Come on, Vic. I think we should go.” It was the first sensible thing Kira had said all night.

“Yeah, okay, whatever.” Victoria hovered, no doubt waiting for my

apology. But it never came. My eyes remained straight ahead, my jaw clenched so tight my teeth hurt.

The second they were gone, Brad exhaled a long breath. "I know she's hurting, but she's a real bitch at times."

He wasn't wrong.

But then I was asshole most of the time too.

Maybe that's why it was so easy to be around her. Pain and grief hardened you. It made you all jagged edges and sharp toothed.

"Want to talk about it?" he asked.

"No, I really fucking don't."

"I'm sensing there's more to the story than you're letting on. You know ___"

"Brad, I said leave it."

"Fine." He held up his hands. "But seriously, what's with Callum not telling any of us about her? That's fucked up."

"I don't know. I'm not exactly friends with the guy."

We were teammates.

He was my brother's best friend. His second. And his loyalty and friendship was the one thing I hadn't inherited since arriving at SU.

Callum didn't want me here, any more than I wanted to be here.

Josie stormed over to the table, glowering at me. "Seriously, Messiah. What the fuck is your problem?"

"Whoa, Jos, relax." Brad gawked at her. "This isn't on, Zach."

"Oh really?" she seethed, narrowing her eyes at me.

"Josie, babe—"

Her lips parted on a surprised gasp and Brad paled. "I didn't mean... fuck..."

"Yeah, the two of you clearly have this," I wagged my finger between them, "under control."

"Can you give us a second?" she asked Brad. He nodded, sliding out of the bench.

"Can I trust you with my girl, Messiah?"

"Brad!"

"What?" He shrugged. "Zach knows, there's no use in hiding it."

"But Joel—"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Messiah?" His brow flicked up.

“Yeah, yeah.”

His eyes lingered on Josie’s mouth and for a second, I thought he might kiss her. But reason prevailed and he stalked off, leaving me to face her wrath alone.

“What?” I barked.

“You’re a piece of shit, do you know that?”

“Now hang on—”

“Has it ever occurred to you that Callum had his reasons for not telling you all about her?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” My fists curled against the soft material of my shorts. I didn’t like the shadow in her eyes, like she was about to deliver a crushing blow of her own.

“Their mom...”

“Fiona, yeah? What about her?”

Josie hesitated, inhaling a harsh breath. “It’s not really my place to say anything, but that girl is currently breaking her heart because your little girlfriend enjoys feeding off of the misery of others.”

“Girlfriend?” I spat the word, my stomach dropping at the insinuation. “She’s my brother’s girl or have you forgotten that?”

“Have you?” Accusation coated her words.

Anger bristled under the surface. I knew what people were saying about me and Victoria. But it wasn’t like that.

Except that one time it almost was.

Fuck.

“Just get to the fucking point, Josie. I don’t have time for this.”

“She died, okay,” she blurted out. “Their mom died, and Callum hasn’t told a soul.”

“What the fuck did you just say?” I jerked back as if she’d slapped me.

Fiona wasn’t dead.

She couldn’t be.

I would have known.

Josie nodded slowly, sadness washing her expression once more. “Cancer. Three months ago. From what I can gather, Calli stayed by her side the entire time. God,” she rubbed her collarbone, “I can’t even imagine.”

“She’s... *gone*?”

A cyclone of pain and confusion slammed into me. I remembered Fiona. Her kindness and compassion. She was always accepting of me and my

fledging relationship with her daughter. Fiona hadn't turned bitter and angry at her husband for leaving them or even blamed Callum for his less than stellar life choices.

She was a good person.

A good mom.

"Why are you telling me all this?" I choked out, still reeling from the bombshell Josie had just dropped.

"Because she came here, knowing how hard it would be... and she did it for her mom. To honor her promise to a dying woman. That girl is so fucking strong." She heaved a deep breath.

"Look, I don't know all that went down between you. That's your business. But I do know this... Calli already has a brother that abandoned her and a father than sounds like a selfish asshole. She doesn't need you and Victoria tag teaming her. You don't want her? Fine. Then leave her be. SU is big enough for the both of you."

Her words were like a slap to the face.

Fiona was gone.

Dead.

And Calli hadn't breathed a word about it.

But why would she? I'd been nothing but an asshole to her since she arrived.

"I didn't know," I ground out, the words twisting something deep inside me.

Josie's eyes bored into me and I didn't like the fact she could see through the stone mask I wore as armor.

And then she said eight little words that rocked my world.

"Would it have changed anything if you had?"

Chapter
FIFTEEN

Calli

THE WALK back to campus was long. But I needed to clear my head.

They knew.

They all knew the truth.

All thanks to Victoria and Zach.

I'd seen the sick satisfaction on his face as he'd outed me in front of Josie and his friends.

And Joel.

Poor sweet, undeserving Joel.

I'd wanted so badly to tell him, but then the Ferris wheel happened, and I was confused. Confused about why my body responded to Zach so viscerally after all this time... after his betrayal.

I'd known the fair was a bad idea. I needed to distance myself from Zach and the team, not place myself in the center of them. But I couldn't help myself. I liked Josie and I liked Joel, even if he didn't evoke the same emotions inside me that Zach did.

God, Zach. Why?

Why?

I let out a shuddering breath as I crossed the street to my building. After the long walk and constant stream of tears, I wanted nothing more than to strip out of my clothes, slip under the hot shower jets, and wash away the stain of the night's event.

They knew.

My heart clenched.

I could still picture the crushed expression on Joel's face as realization dawned on him. He didn't deserve to be in the middle of this thing, but my selfishness, my desperate need to surround myself with good, trustworthy people, had outweighed my desire to protect them from the truth.

You should have told him.

It was too late now. There was no going back, and something told me, a line had been drawn tonight between me and the team.

Callum was their teammate, one of their leaders.

And I was his estranged sister. Someone he clearly didn't want in his life.

God, what a mess.

But I'd never expected to come to SU and be completely and utterly

shunned by him. It was as if I didn't even exist. What the hell was I supposed to tell Joel? The rest of the guys? *'Oh, by the way, I'm Calli, Callum's long-lost sister. Nice to meet you'*.

I didn't want to infringe on his life, to burrow my way into his team, and steal his friends. That was never the plan.

Yet, here I was.

With a heavy sigh, I made my way up the stairs of the building and slipped inside. Tomorrow, my anonymity would be gone. Victoria and Kira would tell their friends, Joel and the guys would let the cat out of the bag at practice, and I'd no longer be Calli James, freshman, and quiet girl just looking to survive college. I'd be Calli James, Callum James' sister. I'd be a question on people's lips, a puzzle they wanted to understand.

I passed a couple of girls in the hall, feeling their heavy stares follow me. *They don't know yet, they can't.*

But when I arrived at my door, I saw the source of their interest. "Zach?" I gasped, my heart lurching into my throat.

He was leaning against the wall, his head tipped back, and hands tucked behind him.

It hurt so much to look at him. From his dirty blond hair to his sharp jaw and defined cheekbones, his broad shoulders and tapered waist. He was beautiful enough to walk on the runway and rugged enough to be a basketball player.

I hated to admit it, but basketball looked good on him. It always had. Right since that first time I saw him at school, wearing a Vipers jersey. He wasn't supposed to like basketball, let alone be good at it. But he was.

I guess Messiah blood ran in his veins after all.

"We need to talk."

"No," I said, standing my ground. "We don't."

He let out a heavy sigh, scrubbing a hand over his slightly stubbled jaw. "Yeah, we do."

"So you can apologize for being an ass? Or maybe for assaulting me on the Ferris wheel?"

"Assault?" He scoffed, arching a brow. "You were begging for it."

"I was—" I stopped myself. "I'm not going to do this with you, Zach." I was tired. Exhausted from the constant push and pull, and hot and cold.

Zach didn't want me. Not the same way as part of me still, after all this time, wanted him.

“You should go.”

“I’m not leaving, Calli. Not until we’ve talked.” He pushed off the wall, taking the air in the hall with him. I edged backward trying to keep a safe distance between us. If he touched me, I’d break. And I couldn’t break, not now. Not here.

I’d already cried enough tears over Zachary Messiah.

He didn’t deserve anymore.

I turned my back on him and scrambled to retrieve my key card from my purse. I needed to get away from him. But the second I got the damn thing open, Zach was there. His arm went over my head, his palm flattening against the door.

“Calli, please...”

I glanced up to look at him, a slight gasp forming on my lips as his dark gaze pinned me in place. “No. Go away, Zach, I mean it.” I slipped into the room, releasing the breath I’d been holding and slammed the door in his face.

Tears collected in the corners of my eyes as the weight of tonight’s events hit me for a second time.

They knew—they all knew, and it was Zach’s fault.

The door flew open and he stood there, breathing harshly.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I barked.

“She died? Fiona, she—”

“Don’t. Don’t you dare say her name.” My body began to tremble, the grief I fought so hard to keep suppressed crashing over me in great powerful waves.

“You never said anything.” His expression was softer now, glittering with sympathy. Zach didn’t move, just stood there watching me.

Always watching me.

“I’m not going to do this with you,” I whispered, barely able to look at him as silent tears streaked down my face.

Zach crossed the room, his long muscular legs eating up the space between us. I had to crane my neck to look up at him, to see deep into his eyes. “Talk to me, sweet pea.” He cupped my face, his knuckles skimming my cheek as he brushed away the tears.

“I can’t, not anymore.” A sad sigh escaped my lips, pain breaking my insides apart.

His expression darkened. “But you can talk to Molineux and his sister? They don’t know you like I do, Calli. They don’t know your mom and what

she was like. She was a good person.”

“Yeah,” I choked out, forcing my gaze away from him, “she was.”

Zach slid his fingers under my jaw, tilting my face back to his, refusing to give me space. I squeezed my eyes shut, unwilling to do this. He wasn’t supposed to be here. Not now, standing in my dorm; not at SU fulfilling his brother’s shoes. It was like some sick joke. Some warped nightmare I couldn’t wake up from.

“Give me your eyes, sweet pea.” His voice was a soft caress, trying to coax me back to him.

“You hate me remember?” I said as my eyes fluttered open, the words cracking my chest wide open.

“Yeah, well, I hate seeing you with him more.”

A bitter laugh crawled up my throat and came out all strangled and wrong. “Between you and Victoria, you did an excellent job in making sure Joel never speaks to me again. So, congratulations, your mission was a success.”

“That’s not—”

“Not what? True?” I mocked. “We both know it is. Victoria clearly hates me for some unknown reason. Probably because she figured out Callum is my brother and I know you. She already lost Declan; she doesn’t want to lose you too.” I jerked back, clapping a hand over my mouth.

Zach ran a hand down his face, his eyes narrowed to thin slits. His anger was palpable, swirling around him like a dark, dangerous mist. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“It doesn’t matter. This... me and you,” I shook my head, “I think we need to just stop. We clearly can’t be around each other without acting crazy. I’ll stay away from the team and you can stay away from me.”

It was for the best.

It was stupid of me to think I could ever be around Zach and not completely lose all sense of reason. He was still inside me, wired into my make up somehow. There was too much unresolved crap between us to just forget.

Blood roared in my ears over the deafening silence. Zach didn’t do anything, didn’t say anything. Just stood, watching me. Searching my face for answers I didn’t have.

Answers I couldn’t keep looking for.

“Zach, I—”

“You think you just get to decide we’re done? I didn’t ask to be here... I certainly fucking didn’t expect to find you here. But you think I can just walk away?” His lip curled as he started to edge forward.

I inched back, trying to keep a safe distance. “Zach, please...”

He reached me just as my back hit the wall. The air crackled around us, thick and heavy with the sins of our past. Sins I still didn’t fully understand. But I realized now, maybe I didn’t want to. Too much time had passed, and we weren’t the same people anymore. I was broken, lost and fighting to keep my head above water every minute of every day, and Zach was cold, cruel and closed off. He was a menace to my heart, and I had to let him go.

If I was going to survive my time at SU, I had to walk away and never look back.

“Just go, Zach, please,” I said, pressing my palms against his hard chest. His eyes dropped to my hands, before slowly lifting to my face.

“I can still remember what it felt like to be inside you, Calli. To take you hard and fast against that wall, to lose myself in you.”

“Don’t...” I squeezed my eyes closed again, inhaling a ragged breath. I didn’t want to remember that night last Halloween.

“Don’t you remember, sweet pea?” His lips brushed my cheek, moving to my ear. “Don’t you remember how good it felt? How much you wanted it?”

“Zach...” My fingers curled into his baggy tank top as I smothered a whimper.

“Look at me,” he moved back, “give me those eyes.”

My lids fluttered open, and I was swallowed up by two black orbs glittering dangerously in the dark. “There she is,” he said. “My sweet little liar.”

“Zach, I—”

“Why can’t I just let you go?” He said it like I was a curse he needed freeing from. Like he wanted me to say something that would break this tether between us. A plea on his lips.

“You never forget your first love.” I gave him a sad smile, my heart galloping inside my chest like a band of wild horses.

“Love?” He laughed and it was so full of bitterness and pain it made my chest constrict. “Do you know what you taught me about love, Calliope? It hurts. It hurts so fucking much.” His fingers traced down my face to my neck, wrapping gently around my throat. “You’re under my skin, Calli. Buried in my fucking soul and I hate it... I hate—”

“Say it.” I hissed. “Go on, tell me how much you hate me. Say it.” I slammed my hands against his chest.

Zach staggered back a little, snagging my wrists. “Don’t fucking push me, sweet pea. You might not like the outcome.”

“What are you going to do? Hurt me?” I snarled the words, lost in a riptide of anger and pain and regret. “You’re a coward, Zach. You were a coward then and you’re still a coward now.”

Whatever I’d done to hurt him, he could have talked to me about it. He could have just told me so I could have tried to fix it. I’d spent three years questioning what went wrong. Why my best friend, the boy I loved more than anything in the world, turned his back on me.

And he still couldn’t tell me.

“Well?” I spat. “I’m waiting.”

Zach’s jaw clenched so tight it looked painful.

When it was apparent he wasn’t going to answer me, I let out a quiet laugh. “You’re a coward, Zach. You broke my heart, you ruined us, and for what, huh? You can’t even tell me, can you?” A sad smile tugged at my mouth. “All this time and you still can’t find the words to tell me what happened.”

I went to walk away, but Zach grabbed my arm. He looked murderous, his eyes burning with contempt. “You want to hurt me?” I stepped into his big imposing body and pushed up on my tiptoes. “Take your best shot.”

Nothing could hurt me the way Mom’s death had.

Not even the boy I’d once wanted forever with.

My challenge hung in the air.

A beat passed, the air so thick I couldn’t breathe.

“Fuck, I want to,” he confessed, anger flaring in his eyes. “I want to hurt you so bad, Calli. I want to dirty your soul the way you dirtied mine.”

My body trembled at the dark intention behind his words. But there was something else in his expression... hurt... longing... *regret*.

“Zach, I—”

His mouth crashed down on mine, hard and unrelenting. I grasped at his tank, fighting to hold on as he devoured me with hot dirty kisses, the kind of kisses that you felt all the way to the tips of your toes.

“Fuck,” he growled, the sound vibrating in his chest. “Why does this always feel so good? It’s not supposed to feel good.”

A thrill shot through me at his words, but it didn’t change the fact that we

were both broken. Irrevocably changed by the trauma we'd both faced. I wanted to believe that was the tether still linking us, but it was more than that.

It was him.

The boy who used to see me despite the fact I lived in my brother's shadow. It was the boy who hid with me in the treehouse and shared his hopes and dreams and secrets. The boy who gave me my first kiss, my first big O, the boy who took my V-card on a blanket under the stars after Homecoming.

My soul remembered, even if my head and heart knew we wouldn't survive Zach again.

But it wasn't enough to make me push him away.

I would give myself this.

One night.

One final time with the boy who would be forever etched on my heart.

Zach picked me up with ease, sliding my slender body along his as he carried me back to the wall and pressed me up against it. His hands were everywhere. In my hair, tracing my curves, squeezing my ass. I loved his passion, how hungry and desperate he was. Even caught up in his anger, Zach made me feel wanted. He made me feel like the center of his universe.

And I both loved and hated him for it.

"I want to fuck you until Molineux is nothing more than a distant memory. I hate that he touched you." Zach pressed his brow to mine, trapping me there. "I can't stand the thought that he kissed you."

"I hate you," I gasped, knowing that I couldn't resist him.

"I know, baby, I know. And I hate you right back. But it doesn't stop you wanting me, does it? It doesn't stop you getting wet for me. Every. Single. Time." His hand dived between us, finding the hem of my skirt. Zach didn't wait for permission or give me a chance to catch my breath, he just hooked the material aside and pushed two fingers inside me, stealing the air from my lungs.

"God..." I cried, so overwhelmed by his touch.

"Not God, sweet pea. Messiah. And you will fall at my feet."

My eyes snapped to his, narrowing.

"There she is," he chuckled, "my little fighter, my little warrior."

Zach continued working me with his fingers, sliding them back and forth through my wetness. "Did you let him touch you, Calli?" He drawled against

the corner of my lips. “Did you spread your legs and—”

“Like you haven’t slept with hundreds of girls,” I hissed, my chest heaving between us.

Zach kissed me again, with deep punishing strokes of his tongue as if he was trying to swallow my words and take them for his own.

Why did he have to be like this with me?

Wanting me... desiring me... always taking from me.

And then abandoning me, just like everyone else.

The frustration wasn’t only building in my body, it was unfurling from my heart and mind. I felt it rise from my throat and spill out in my words.

“I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I HATE YOU.” Tears flowed down my cheeks. Zach felt them, breaking the kiss. He stared at me, his fingers still inside me, his expression giving nothing away.

God, I wanted to know what he was thinking, I wanted to know everything about the boy I’d once known better than myself.

“Yeah, there have been other girls. More than I can count.” His words rattled inside of me. Vicious brutal lashes over my heart. “But they were never you, Calli. You’re in-fucking-here,” he tapped his temple. “And now you’re here, at SU, and I don’t know how the fuck to deal with that.”

“Talk to me... please, just talk to me.”

A flash of something filled his eyes, but it was gone in an instant. “Is that what you want, sweet pea? To talk?” Zach leaned in close again, licking up my tears. “Or do you want me to give you what you really want?” He dragged his fingers out of me and rubbed my clit in slow torturous circles, pausing the second my body began to shudder.

“Tell me, Calli,” he taunted me, a wicked grin plastered on his face. “Say the words.”

I looked him dead in the eye and gave him a little smirk of my own.

“Make me.”

Chapter
SIXTEEN

Zach

I'D ALREADY NOTICED the difference in Calli on campus, but seeing the challenge sparkle in her eyes made me wonder if we were more similar than I gave her credit for.

I pinched her clit and her entire body shuddered. "You like that?"

She moaned, nodding. Her eyes were barely open as she lost herself to the pleasure. I wanted to devour her. To own every single part of her. It was some deep-seated need to control her. To hold her emotions, her happiness, in the palm of my hand, the way she'd once done with mine.

I would have done anything for this girl.

Any-fucking-thing.

Seeing her again made me realize I wasn't over her. That all this time, I'd been lying to myself. Ignorance was bliss. But now Calli was here, at SU, and I couldn't keep the lock fastened on those old feelings.

"Zach." My name fell from her lips in a breathy sigh.

"Come for me, sweet pea, now." I curled my fingers, rubbing deep inside her as my thumb circled her clit. She cried out, clinging to my body as she shattered apart at my touch.

"God." Her head hit the wall as she swallowed, trying to catch her breath.

I needed inside her. I'd never needed anything as much as I needed to feel her warm heat wrapped around me.

Calli's body was lax in my arms as I carried her to the bed, laying her out before me. "Look at you," I drawled.

She gazed up at me heavy-lidded and lust drunk. There was something else in her eyes too, something I chose not to acknowledge.

I made quick work of stripping the clothes from her body before removing my own. Calli's eyes flared when they landed on my dick, hard and ready. Palming myself, I pumped a couple of times, biting down on my lip to stop a moan from escaping.

"You want this?" I smirked. "You want me to ruin you?"

She nodded. "Take your best shot, Messiah." Damn, those words again.

The challenge.

She was so different.

Harder.

Sassy.

Distant in a way I didn't like.

My Calli had always been so soft and kind and warm.

But we weren't the same people. The old Calli wouldn't have been able to deal with the new Zach. So this was perfect. We could both fuck away our frustrations and then go our separate ways.

This wasn't a reunion; it was an exorcism. A chance to finally purge myself of Calliope James once and for all.

I planned to fuck her so hard she never forgot me. And then I planned to walk away, for good.

I faltered. Only for a second, but it was enough for Calli to frown. "What is it? What's wrong?" Her voice was all sultry and ragged.

Dropping a knee to the mattress, I crawled over her small delicate body. Her skin felt like silk and I had to smother another moan.

Jesus, this girl.

This infuriating, treacherous, foolhardy girl.

Why did she always feel so fucking good?

Nestling between her legs, I let my dick slide through her wetness, bumping her clit. She let out a throaty moan, and I watched in awe as Calli unraveled for me.

"What do you want, sweet pea?" I gently grabbed her throat, forcing her to look at me.

"You," she whispered, the word piercing my heart. "I want you, Zach."

"Your wish is my command." I slammed into her, making us both cry out. Calli hitched her legs around my waist, letting me drive deeper... Harder... Faster.

There was nothing slow and soft about this. I wasn't making love to her, I was fucking the very soul from her body. I wanted her to hurt, to make her feel my anger, to force her to experience the pain and frustration I felt every second of every day.

But most of all, I wanted to fuck her out of my system.

"More..." she rasped, nipping my jaw. "I need more, Zach."

Sliding my hands under her ass, I changed the angle.

"I can feel you everywhere." Calli whimpered as I lay siege to her body. My mouth trailed hot wet kisses down the slope of her neck and along her collarbone, sucking and biting. I wanted to mark her. That way, when the sun came up, she would have no choice but to remember this moment.

She stared up at me, her lips parted, and skin flushed. "I'm sorry," she

whispered. “For whatever I did to hurt you. I’m sorry.”

Fuck.

Fuck!

I buried my face in the crook of her neck, trying to ignore the word ringing in my ears.

Sorry. She was sorry.

It didn’t change anything, and yet, it changed everything.

The familiar tingle at the base of my spine spread through me as I chased the calm after the storm. Calli clutched onto my shoulders, crying my name over and over as she clenched around me, finding her own release. I followed, coming hard and fast inside her.

We lay there quietly, lost in the moment... the memories.

I’d been with a lot of girls. Faceless girls I used to work off some of the tension that lived inside me. But none of them came close to affecting me the way Calli did.

Even now, after everything that had happened to us, she still brought me to my fucking knees, and I hated it.

I hated her.

It wasn’t just an emotion I felt, it was something that lived inside me like a disease. Festering and spreading, turning everything good left inside me to poison.

Reluctantly, I rolled off her, flopping onto my back.

“I should probably clean up,” she whispered, uncertainty creeping into her voice.

Calli disappeared. A couple of minutes later, the bed dipped, and she slid in beside me.

“I’m sorry,” I said thickly, “about your mom.”

“I’m sorry about Declan.”

Her words made me flinch. I didn’t want her sympathy. I didn’t want anything from her except this.

“I should go,” I said.

“Okay... Unless you want to stay?”

My eyes flicked to hers and she gave me a timid smile. “No pressure. It’s just nice not to feel so alone sometimes, ya know?”

Fuck.

Her honesty gutted me.

She got it, I realized that now. Calli knew how it felt to feel completely

alone in the world. Except, she was alone. And I was surrounded by people who wanted to know me and never would.

“Yeah.” I swallowed over the giant fucking lump in my throat. “I can stay for a little while longer.”

She didn’t ask for more. She didn’t ask for anything.

Calli let out a soft sigh and closed her eyes. I couldn’t imagine how she felt after losing her mom. The one person who had stood by her when so many people had walked away.

My chest squeezed.

I might have hated her for what went down between us, but I wasn’t completely heartless.

Life was so fucking cruel sometimes.

So much bad shit happened to good people, like Fiona.

But Calli wasn’t good, she was just like everyone else in the world. Selfish and untrustworthy.

Calli’s breathing slowed, and I knew she’d fallen asleep. She looked so peaceful, with her soft features and pouty lips. I couldn’t resist tracing their shape with my finger, remembering how many times I’d kissed this mouth. It had been different back then. We were young and innocent, untainted by the harsh realities of life. We’d both been inexperienced, learning together; exploring our changing bodies and curious desires together.

We didn’t need any lessons now. Our bodies knew exactly what to do, and I didn’t like to think of her learning with some other douchebag.

A low growl rumbled in my chest, my heart having a real fucking problem with accepting she wasn’t ours anymore.

It had been a dick move to out her to Joel and the guys, I knew that. But at least I wouldn’t have to deal with him jonesing after her anymore. In a way, I’d done us both a favor. If she was on the outs with Joel, she had no reason to be coming around the team. Which meant she had no reason to be showing up in my life at every turn.

It was for the best.

We’d fucked away our frustrations, given in to our lingering connection one last time. And when morning rolled around, we could finally go our separate ways.

So why as I closed my eyes, did I have a huge fucking pit in my stomach?

I WOKE to a stream of light dancing over my face. “What the—” I pushed up onto my elbow and rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

Where the fuck was I?

Memories of the night before slammed into me.

The fairground.

The Ferris wheel.

Victoria dropping the bomb about Calli... me detonating the thing wide open.

Calli.

Fuck.

My name on her lips.

My dick buried deep inside her.

I glanced at the empty space beside me and frowned. “Calli?” I called out to the empty dorm room. The bathroom door was ajar, no sign of life.

She was gone.

That was a fucking first, waking up alone in the girl’s apartment. Usually, I was the one ducking out of dorm rooms in the cover of darkness, not the other way around.

Perhaps she went to get coffee.

But after lying there for another fifteen minutes, I realized she wasn’t coming back.

I hadn’t meant to fall asleep and spend the night, so maybe she woke up and panicked, and decided to save us both from an awkward morning after.

I didn’t know how to feel about that.

Throwing back the sheet draped over my body, I climbed out of bed and pulled on my clothes. Checking my cell, I ignored the messages from my teammates. They had questions, no doubt. But I wasn’t ready to answer them.

I had more pressing issues—like how the fuck I was going to get out of Calli’s room without attracting attention. Attention we didn’t need if I wanted to put this thing between us to bed.

Ducking into her small bathroom, I cleaned up a little. Even with the hood on my tank pulled on up, there was no way I making it out of Abrams without being recognized.

Splashing some water on my face, I tried to tame my bed hair out of my eyes. It was a little past eight thirty. Maybe everyone would still be sleeping or at least enjoying a lazy Sunday morning in their own rooms.

Whatever.

I couldn't stay in here forever. Calli had obviously left for a reason. I didn't want to be here when she came back.

But when I left the bathroom, I didn't head for the door. Instead, I was drawn to the collection of photos hanging above her desk. There was Calli with her mom, Calli with her best friend Madison. Photos of the three of them. Photos of Bay View's coastline. One of the old Travers house on the edge of the beach. Another taken from higher ground looking down on the bay, a bonfire roaring below.

I plucked the photo off its crocodile clip.

Halloween.

This was last Halloween. It had to be. Calli had her camera with her that night. I knew because I'd snatched the damn thing from around her neck and taunted her with it.

Fuck, that had been hot. Snapping photo after photo of her while I kissed her, tormented her. My dick twitched already missing her.

I needed to get out of here.

Adding the photo back to its clip, I let curiosity get the better of me, taking one final glance around her room. I half-expected to see her camera laying around but there was no sign of it.

Strange. Back when I'd lived in Bay View, she'd never left home without it.

Shaking the thoughts from my head, I slipped out of her room. The hall was quiet, so I kept my eyes down and got the hell out of there.

Telling myself it was better this way.

THE SECOND I stepped foot in my apartment, my cell phone rang. At the sight of Callum's name, a groan reverberated in my chest.

"You told them?" he barked. "You had no fucking right."

"Back up a minute, I didn't tell them anything." Technically, that wasn't true. But Victoria had started it. "Besides, what did you think was going to happen?"

"I... I don't know. Fuck." I heard a crash in the background.

"Yeah, man, this is all on you."

Callum let out a strained breath and I could imagine him, brows knitted,

expression hard. We weren't friends, not by a long shot, but I knew him.

"You didn't tell anyone about your mom, why?" I asked quietly, hating the way my chest tightened.

"Because it's no one's fucking business," he gritted out.

"Yeah, I get that. But come on, man. This is your team, your family. They would have supported you—"

"Do you know what, Messiah? Fuck you. None of this would even be happening if—" He stopped himself, heaving a deep breath.

"Yeah, that's right, blame me, Callum. It's all my fault. None of this could possibly be because you're a stubborn asshole who can't grow some fucking balls and own up to his mistakes." I ended the call and threw my cell down on the table. Anger vibrated beneath my skin, making my teeth grind together.

Pulling my clothes from my body, I left a trail in my wake as I padded into my small bathroom. A cold shower would sort out my head.

But the second I stepped into the cubicle all I could smell was her.

Calli.

Jesus, she was smothered all over my fucking skin, and I grew hard just thinking about the way she'd let me take her last night.

It had been so raw, so damn real. There was something intoxicating about the pain and hatred that existed between us. It made everything... *more* somehow.

Fuck.

It was supposed to be closure.

One final time.

But as the water sluiced down my body, washing away her scent, the pit in my stomach only grew.

I'd wanted this—I'd wanted to get her out of my fucking head. But it seemed like the harder I tried, the deeper she burrowed.

"Fuck." I slammed my hand against the tiles, roaring my frustration into the water.

She'd betrayed me. The moment I'd needed her most, Calli had betrayed me... I needed to remember that.

Shutting off the water, I grabbed a towel. The water wasn't enough. I needed something more. And since running back to her dorm room and sinking deep inside her again wasn't an option, I was going to have to settle for hitting the gym or the court.

I'D BEEN WORKING out for about an hour when Joel and Brad entered the gym. I'd hoped to avoid him, but I knew it was probably better to get this conversation over sooner rather than later.

I pulled out my earbuds and tipped my chin at them.

"Messiah," Brad nodded getting himself set up with the free weights.

"Can we talk?" Joel said, hardly able to meet my eyes.

"Uh, sure." I grabbed my water bottle and took a big swallow, before rubbing my head with a towel. "Listen, I'm sorry about how things went down last night. I shouldn't have—"

"Save it," Joel said thinly. "I knew there was something weird between the two of you, but I didn't ever think..." He trailed off. "Were the two of you... *together*?"

Fuck. Molineux was intuitive. That or we'd been more obvious than I thought.

"It's complicated," I said.

"Isn't it always?"

"I'd appreciate it if you keep this between us. Things are weird enough for her given Callum didn't tell the team."

"You're protecting her."

I ignored that and added, "We good?"

"Team before all else, right?" A faint smile tugged at his mouth, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"And Calli?"

"I'm done." Joel held up his hands. "She's Callum's sister. You know the rules."

Yeah, I did. But it hadn't stopped me last night. Or the night I'd followed her from the mixer.

"What?" Joel asked.

"Nothing." I locked down all thoughts of Calli away, where she needed to stay. "And for what it's worth, I am sorry how things went down. But it wasn't my story to tell..."

"Until it was?" He gave me a knowing look before moving to the chest press.

Joel was a good guy. The kind of guy that liked rules and liked to follow them. He wouldn't pursue Calli anymore because she was someone to me,

not to mention Callum's sister. Because the team came first.

Basketball came first.

I knew how it would affect her once Joel made it apparent he wasn't interested anymore. Because she wasn't worth the drama. She wasn't worth more than the game.

It's what I'd wanted, and yet I couldn't help but feel a flash of anger that he wasn't prepared to fight for her.

Nothing made sense anymore. I'd wanted to hurt her. I'd wanted to topple her carefully constructed world. But I didn't feel the sense of satisfaction I thought I'd feel.

In fact, I felt pretty shitty about the whole thing.

It was confusing as fuck.

But I guess in some strange way, it made sense. Love and hate were just extreme emotions on the same spectrum. Like two ends of a piece of string.

I didn't love Calli anymore but maybe I didn't entirely hate her either.

Chapter
SEVENTEEN

Calli

“JOEL, HEY,” I said as he approached Professor Harold’s class.

“Hey, Calli.” He barely met my eyes and a sinking feeling spread through me.

“I was hoping we could talk for a minute.” I’d gotten here early for that very reason. “Listen, I owe you an apology.”

“It’s all good,” he said coolly. “We should probably go inside. We don’t want to be late.” Joel shouldered past me and made for the door, but I grabbed his arm.

“Joel, please.”

He raked a hand through his hair and let out a heavy sigh. “I knew, you know. I knew there was something weird between the two of you...”

“I’m sorry. It’s complicated.”

“Yeah, that’s what Messiah said.”

My brows pinched. “He talked to you about me?”

“No, Calli. He talked to me about the situation.”

“Oh.”

My heart sank.

“But I see where your heart lies.” Dejection burned in his eyes and I hated it. Joel was a good guy. He deserved better than how I’d treated him. But I’d gotten to SU and everything had been so confusing.

“I didn’t know Zach went here.”

“What? How is that even possible?”

“Callum and I aren’t exactly close. There’s a lot he didn’t tell people.”

“No shit.” Joel tugged at the neckline on his jersey and I figured he probably felt as uncomfortable as I did right now. “If I’d have known who you were, Calli, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation right now.”

“Wow, okay.” My eyes darted to the ground as I clutched the strap of my messenger bag. “I don’t even know what to say to that.”

“It’s just how it is.” He shrugged, oblivious to just how deep his words cut. “Teammates don’t date each other’s sisters. It makes things messy.”

“I see.” My lips thinned.

“I like you, Calli, I do, but it could never have gone anywhere.”

“You’d really give up someone you liked for the team?”

“It’s just how it is.”

I lifted my chin, letting my hurt give me strength. “Then I guess you’re not the guy I thought you were.”

“I guess I’m not.” He gave me a sad smile. “See you around.” Joel ducked into the room, taking the air with him.

When I finally made myself go inside, I was hardly surprised to see Joel sitting down in one of the front rows.

He’d made his choice.

And it was the team.

“GOD, I LIVE FOR THESE CUPCAKES.” Josie made a show of licking the frosting off her fingers. “You know, all this sugary goodness would probably make you feel a whole lot better.”

“I’m not hungry.” After my strained conversation with Joel, my stomach was still hollow.

“My brother is an ass, Calli.”

“He’s just loyal.”

“To a freakin’ game.”

My brow arched. “You know it’s more than that to these guys.”

“Yeah, I know.” Her expression fell. “It’s just so stupid. Like Brad,” she mouthed his name. “We just click, ya know? And he wants me, I know he does. But he’s worried about Joel and the team...” A defeated sigh escaped her lips. “I don’t want to be his dirty little secret, Calli.”

“At least he didn’t just write you off.”

“Joel knows there’s something between you and Zach, babe. He’s just doing the chivalrous thing.”

“I thought we were friends.” I’d known he was interested, but we were friends first.

At least, I’d thought we were.

“Guys and girls can’t ever be *just* friends.” Josie rolled her eyes. “There’s always feelings in there somewhere.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I ran my thumb around the lip of the mug. “It’s probably for the best,” I said. “I didn’t come here to get tangled up with the team.”

The second I said the words, the doorbell chimed, and Victoria and Kira walked into Muds.

“Ugh.” Josie grumbled.

“Just ignore them.” It was what I planned on doing.

I risked peeking over at them in the line. As if she felt me looking, Victoria looked up and smirked.

“Are she and my brother friends?” I asked Josie.

“I don’t think Callum is her biggest fan.”

Obviously one thing we had in common.

“Why do you ask?” Josie asked.

“Well she’s walking around campus like nothing happened, and Callum is...” Well, I’d barely seen Callum. As far as I was aware, he’d been lying low since semester started.

“It feels weird telling you all this since he’s your brother and all... but since you asked... I heard Callum and Declan were on the outs before the accident. From what I can tell, your brother didn’t like the way Victoria was pushing their relationship and Declan didn’t appreciate him sticking his nose in.”

“It’s like I don’t even know him.”

I didn’t, not really.

After Callum and my father left Bay View, our struggling relationship only got worse. I was angry at him for leaving, for choosing him over me and our mom. For choosing basketball above family.

That kind of pain didn’t just evaporate. It only grew deeper as time went by, taking root and coiling around your heart.

So I shouldn’t have been surprised I didn’t know my brother, or anything about his life.

Because I didn’t.

“I’m sorry.” Josie offered me a sad smile.

“It’s fine.” I swallowed over the lump in my throat, inhaling a shaky breath. “I just have to focus on the things I can control. Like classes and volunteering.”

“You’re going to do something with the Student Community Action group?”

I nodded, taking a sip of my caramel latte.

“The coordinator of the youth project left me a voicemail. They want me to go in this afternoon.”

“That’s great, babe. I think this will be good for you.”

“Yeah, me too.” I just needed to stay busy.

And far, far away from Zachary Messiah and the Steinbeck Scorpions.

“UH, HI,” I said, approaching the front desk at the community center. “I’m Calli, I’m here to meet—”

“You must be Calliope, I’m Freya.” A tall, willowy woman popped her head out of one of the doors, approaching me with a warm smile. “We’re glad to have you here, Calliope.”

“You can call me Calli.”

“Calli it is. Please, follow me.”

We moved down the hall to another door and slipped inside. The small office was littered with children’s artwork that had been arranged into a huge rainbow. I couldn’t help but smile.

“You like it?” She noticed me admiring the mural.

“It’s beautiful.”

“I think so too. We like to believe here at Next Steps that you can’t have a rainbow without a little rain.”

“The greater the storm, the brighter the rainbow,” I murmured to myself.

“One of my favorite quotes,” Freya relaxed back in her chair.

“My mom, she used to always say that.” My heart squeezed. I could still picture her now, hugging me tight as we listened to a storm rage overhead. I’d been terrified of the thunder, the wind and rain lashing against the windows.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.”

“Was it recent?”

“Over the summer.”

“That must have been hard?”

I nodded. “She had cancer. It was a rough few months, watching her deteriorate like that.”

“The fact you’re sitting here tells me how strong you are.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” I didn’t feel very strong. Most days I felt like I was wading through quicksand, about to slip under at any second. “But I’d like to keep myself busy and I saw the flyer about the project at freshman orientation. It looked like something I might be interested in.”

Freya steepled her fingers, regarding me with her soft blue eyes. “Your grief is still fresh, Calli. It would be irresponsible of me to place you with our kids going through the same thing...”

Defeat washed over me. I wanted to help. I wanted something good to come out of losing Mom.

“But I have another project in mind. How do you feel about being a big sister?”

“You mean like a buddy?”

She nodded. “We’re always looking for new mentors. We’d match you with a young person and the two of you would spend time here at the center initially to build the foundations. Then once you both feel comfortable, you can meet at a place of your choosing.”

“I... I’m not sure.” The other project had been a group thing. I wouldn’t be solely responsible for the young people participating.

“It’s a lot of responsibility,” Freya added, as if she’d heard my thoughts. “But the rewards are steep. These young people need guidance. They need to know it’s going to be okay. But most of all they need an adult figure who will show up no matter what.”

I thought back to all the times I’d felt alone growing up. Being Callum’s sister was like being invisible. I’d had Mom but she was my mom—she was supposed to love me unconditionally.

“You’ve experienced a huge loss, Calli. That kind of thing changes you. It molds you into someone new. Someone stronger and more aware of the fragility of life. I think you’d be a great asset to the project and could make a real positive impact on the lives of some of our young people.”

“Okay,” I said, a tiny seed of excitement taking root in my chest. “Let’s do it.”

Freya gave me a little smile of encouragement. “I was hoping you’d say that. There’s a bunch of paperwork and some training you’ll need to do, but we should be able to get the ball rolling pretty quickly.”

“That sounds great.”

I left Next Steps feeling more positive than I had in a while. Freya was so easy to be around and had this way of making me already feel a part of the team, and I was eager to get started.

The center was only a fifteen-minute walk from campus, so I enjoyed the afternoon sunshine. Downtown Steinbeck was full of students and young professionals checking out the numerous cafes, diners, and bars the college

town had to offer.

When I walked past a bar called The Pivot, a loud chorus of cheers startled me. Through the tinted windows, I could just make out a group of athletes... no, basketball players.

Ugh. I hurried away. The last thing I wanted was to cross paths with my brother or Joel, or even worse—

“Calli?”

His voice was like lead in my stomach. I was frozen to the spot, completely disarmed by Zach’s husky voice.

“Calli?” He moved closer. I could feel him at my back. Big, strong... imposing.

A shiver rolled through me as I steeled my spine to face him. “Hey,” I said, keeping my expression neutral.

“Hey, I... uh...” He ran a hand through his tousled sun-kissed hair. “I thought it was you.”

“You were in there?” I flicked my head to the bar, and he nodded.

“Monday happy hour.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to keep you from happy hour.” I went to leave, but Zach snagged my wrist.

“You were gone.”

Letting out a weary sigh, I lifted my gaze to his questioning one. “You were out cold, and I didn’t want to make things anymore awkward than they needed to be.”

“Yeah, but shit, Calli, it’s your dorm room. You didn’t have to leave.” Something flashed over his expression.

“It’s no big deal.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

The air turned thick with tension. This... *this* is what I’d wanted to avoid when I’d left my dorm room yesterday morning.

When we were angry, bitter and frustrated we could fight it out, use each other’s bodies to express ourselves. But in the quieter times, when our white flags were waving a temporary truce, everything about us felt wrong.

Strained laughter tumbled from my lips.

“What?” Zach frowned, his eyes clouded with confusion.

“It doesn’t matter. I should go.” I looked down to where he was still holding me and Zach released me, thrusting his hand into his hair. It was a move I’d once loved, but now it only served to make my heart ache.

“Calli, I...” He hesitated, his torment wrapping around me and sucking the air from my lungs.

But his words never came.

And even if they had, I knew they wouldn’t be the ones I wanted to hear.

“I’ll see you around, Zach.” I gave him a weak smile and took off down the street, knowing it was goodbye.

He let me go.

And I didn’t know whether to be relieved...

Or disappointed.

CALLUM DIDN’T CALL. He didn’t text or seek me out. If he was pissed that everyone knew his secrets, I didn’t know because he was still like a ghost around campus.

By the time Friday rolled around, I was beginning to think maybe *I* was the ghost. Or maybe I’d just built it up to be something in my head that it wasn’t.

This wasn’t high school, it was college. People had more important things to be thinking about.

I kept myself busy with assignments and the training program at the center. Josie checked in on me and we hung out at lunch. If I tried hard enough, I could almost forget that I was Callum James’ sister. If I ignored the jagged little hole in my heart, I could almost forget about Zach.

But I should have known it was only the calm before the storm.

I was sitting in Muds minding my own business when a shadow loomed over me. “Can I help you?” I stared up at Victoria Penderton.

She gave me a dismissive huff and slid into the seat opposite me. “I thought it was about time we got to know each other.”

“I really don’t think that’s necessary.”

“You’re not still sulking over what happened last weekend, are you? That was just banter, Callista.”

“It’s Calliope.”

“Same thing.” She waved me off, touching up her lipstick with the tip of her finger. “You’ve got to understand our surprise to find out that Callum James’ little sister is at SU. I mean, he didn’t breathe a word of it, or you, to

anyone.”

I internally winced at her cruel words.

“He has his reasons.”

“I’m sure he does. But now you’re here.” She pinned me with a saccharine smile. I knew girls like Victoria. Mean girls wrapped up in designer clothes and expensive perfume.

“What do you want, Victoria?” I refused to let her intimidate me. I had as much right to be here as anyone else.

“It’s an important season for the team. With Declan out of action, they need to focus. They don’t need any... *distractions*.”

“Let me guess, you think I’m a distraction?”

“Aren’t you?” One of her perfectly plucked brows rose.

“I’m nobody, Victoria. Believe it or not, I didn’t come here to mess with your precious team. I came here to honor my mom.” A ball of emotion swelled inside me.

She drummed her diamanté encrusted fingernails against the table. “Good, let’s keep it that way.” Victoria stood, swishing her deep auburn hair off her shoulder. She could have easily been a supermodel. She was too perfect, too flawless to be real.

It was as if the whole coffee shop had stopped to watch her and bask in her beauty. And there I was, sitting in my comfortable leggings and an oversized tank with my hair pulled into a messy bun, my face free of makeup.

“Oh, and Calli,” she said as an afterthought. “Don’t fool yourself into thinking Zach could ever want you again. He’s a Messiah, he’s going places.”

Before I could reply she breezed out of Muds as if she hadn’t just shot an arrow right through my heart.

“Calli?” Josie found me sitting there a few seconds later, my mouth still hanging open. “Please tell me I didn’t just see what I think I saw?” She dropped into the chair Victoria had occupied only seconds ago.

“We were ‘getting to know each other’,” I failed to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

“I can’t believe she did that.”

“She doesn’t want me distracting the team.”

“She’s just jealous. You know Zach, and you have family ties to Callum. She won’t like that.”

“But that’s ridiculous.”

Josie shrugged, helping herself to one of my cookies. “What did I tell

you?” She took a big bite, grinning.

“That’s gross,” I mumbled.

“So what are we doing tonight?”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah, it’s Friday. We have to do something.”

“No parties.”

She rolled her eyes, sucking the crumbs off her fingers. “We could go to Steel ‘n’ Thunder? Sometimes they have live music on a Friday.”

“Hmm, I don’t know.”

“Come on. It’s a guaranteed Scorpion-free zone.” Her brows waggled. “And Xavier is good people.”

“You’re not going to take no for an answer, are you?”

“Nope.”

I grumbled my disapproval. But it was all a front. Because really, I was relieved to have someone like Josie in my corner.

Someone to push me out of my comfort zone.

But most importantly, someone to comfort me when it all went wrong.

Chapter
EIGHTEEN

Zach

“HOLY SHIT,” Brad mumbled beside me as we watched The Pivot fill with SU alumni.

Scorpion alumni.

With only a week until the exhibition game, Coach Baxter had organized a meet and greet with some of the retired players.

Maverick Prince made a beeline for me as I took a long pull on my beer. “Zach,” he said. “It’s good to see you.”

“Prince.” I gave him a curt nod. If he thought we were about to have a heart to heart, he was sorely mistaken.

My mood had only gotten worse as the week went on, and I knew it had something to do with Calli ghosting me. It’s only what I’d wanted, but all week I’d looked for her around campus, and all week, I’d been disappointed.

When I’d finally seen her, walking past The Pivot, I hadn’t thought twice about chasing her down, but she’d completely blown me off.

“I tried to call,” Maverick said, leaning against the bar next to me.

“I know.” I looked out at the sea of red, white, and black.

The guys were all pumped to hang out with some of their idols.

“Where’s Callum?” he asked.

“Beats me.” I shrugged, draining my beer and slamming it on the counter.

“Zach, come on.” Maverick laid a hand on my arm. “Talk to me. How is Dec—”

“Don’t,” I growled. “Just don’t.”

Brad caught my eye and raised a brow. I shook my head. No, I didn’t want to talk about it. I didn’t want to talk about Declan or Callum or Calli.

Fuck.

Calli.

Fucking her was supposed to rid her from my system, but it had only had the opposite effect. She was inside me. Buried deep in my soul. And I didn’t know what the hell to do about it.

“Are you ready for the exhibition game?”

“We’re going to kick some alumni ass,” Brad whooped. He was like a kid at Christmas, lapping up the excitement of being surrounded by some of the Scorpions most iconic players from the last decade. Maverick Prince, Tom Balor, Luis Ayton, Khris Lowry. Scorpion royalty was in the house and

everyone felt the buzz.

Everyone except me apparently.

“Zach?” Maverick asked, and I lifted my shoulders in a small shrug.

“We’re ready.”

He turned around, leaning on the bar. “You know that’s not what I asked. I asked if *you’re* ready.”

“Why do you care so much?” My eyes lowered to his.

I was being an asshole. Nothing new there. I thought Calli and I going our separate ways was supposed to make me feel better, lighter somehow. But I felt like I was drowning. Being swallowed whole by the darkness circling me every second of every day.

“I know what it’s like to have everything ripped away from you.”

I assumed he was talking about Declan. Because that’s what people cared about—Declan’s accident. His dreams. His life. But then he added, “It can’t be easy leading the team in his stead.”

Brad left us, probably sensing the heaviness of the impending conversation. I took a shuddering breath, running a hand over my face. “It’s a fucking joke.”

Maverick gave me a small nod. “I was surprised, when I found out you’d transferred.”

“You and me both.” I would never forget the moment my dad told me about his grand plan to salvage the Messiah reign at SU.

“You need to do it, for Declan,” he’d said. “For our family. For Declan.”

I’d argued. Of course I had. But it didn’t make any difference. Once my father had a plan, he always saw it through. And it was easier to go along with it than fight him on it. Besides, my brother was lying in a coma... how the fuck was I supposed to tell him no?

“It’s a lot of pressure, if you ever need someone to talk to—”

“Yeah, yeah, Prince, I got the memo.”

“You won’t push me away that easily,” he smirked. “I can be quite persistent.”

“Is Lo in town?” I changed the subject. I couldn’t imagine him leaving her in Wicked Bay. The two of them were couple goals. High school sweethearts who had stood the test of time, and four years at college.

“No, it’s girls’ weekend. She and my mom and sisters are busy wedding planning.”

“Oh shit, that’s right. It’s soon?”

“Christmas. We’re spending the holidays in Lake Tahoe.”

“Marriage, that’s a big step, man,” I said.

“Not when you find the right girl.” Maverick’s whole face lit up, twisting something deep inside me.

I thought I’d found the right girl once. We were only young—too fucking young to be dreaming of forever—but it hadn’t stopped me imagining a life with Calli.

“Have you been to see him?” Maverick asked me and I froze.

“Hey, relax.” He eyed my hand, the one white knuckling my beer. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think I’d be able to do it either. But your parents really want—”

“Seriously?” I balked. “You came here to do their bidding?”

“It’s not like that and you know it.” His smile thinned. “But I know something about family, Zach. And despite how much we think we don’t need them or how much they hurt us, you don’t want to grow old with any regrets, man.”

I sighed.

“You know, I used to be a lot like you. Angry at the world and everyone around me.”

“I’m not angry.”

He cut me with a knowing look. “I get it, I do. It’s hard to carry the weight of people’s expectations. Sometimes you have to cut free. Sometimes you have to put yourself first. All I’m saying is, make sure it’s what you really want. You’re here now. The way I see it, you can spend the next two years living in Declan’s shadow, or you can prove to everyone that you deserve to be here. That you have as much to offer. You’re not him, Zach. And that’s okay.”

I felt sucker punched.

It was like he’d looked into my soul and plucked out every insecurity I had and laid them out before me.

I flagged down the bartender and ordered something stronger. “You in?” I asked him.

“I’ll drink with you, Messiah,” Maverick teased. “But only if you promise to think about what I just said.”

Think about it?

I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

The bartender slid our glasses over the bar. “To a new season.” Maverick

lifted his glass and tipped it toward mine.

“A new season,” I said.

“You can honor Declan without trying to be him, Zach.”

“You don’t know what it’s like... I came here and they just accepted me.” It had been weird as fuck. Still was.

“Because they’re good guys. A strong team. And because your name means something to them. They respect you.”

My lips pursed. That was the thing though. I didn’t want their blind respect. I wanted to earn it. To feel worthy of it.

“Callum isn’t coming?” Maverick changed the subject, and I was glad of the reprieve. I hadn’t anticipated tonight turning into a counseling session, but I couldn’t deny I felt a little bit lighter than I had walking through the door.

“He’s not in a good place.”

“Understandable. He’s also been fielding my calls.” He threw me a bemused smirk.

“You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?”

“Nope. Just promise me you won’t do it again.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re about to become a serious pain in my ass?”

Laughter rumbled in Maverick’s chest as his eyes danced with amusement. “Because you’re right. I don’t want you to go out there and play for Declan or your family or the college. I want you to go out there and play for yourself.”

“What happened to there’s no I in team?” My brow quirked up.

“Sarcastic fucker,” he murmured, taking a sip of his whiskey. “So tell me, what else is new on campus? Any girls caught your eye yet?”

I almost choked on my beer.

Maverick clapped me on the back, chuckling. “I sense a story there.”

“Not going there,” I said. “Not a chance.”

“That bad?” He smirked. “Well, whoever she is, she sounds like someone I’d like to meet if she’s giving Zach Messiah a challenge.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Remember, I used to be you... And let me tell you, if she’s under your skin, chances are she’s not getting out anytime soon.”

“Helpful, really fucking helpful.” I rolled my eyes, pretending his words didn’t affect me.

“Can’t stop thinking about her? Trying to tell yourself you hate her? Treating her like she’s nothing to you? Ring any bells?” His brows waggled. “Because I’ve been there... and look where it got me. I’m getting married in less than three months. Fuck, I’m getting married.” He drained his drink.

“Hey,” I flagged down the bartender. “I think you’re going to need to keep those drinks coming.”

Something told me it was going to be a long night.

THINGS STARTED TO GET MESSY. The crowd in The Pivot grew, everyone wanting to hang out with Scorpion royalty. After our little heart to heart, Maverick left me alone with my drink to stew on his words. He was a class act, moving from group to group, spending time with the freshman players, making everyone feel included and important.

He was a true leader.

One of the best the Scorpions had ever seen.

“So are we going to pretend you’re not standing over here mooning over Callum’s sis—”

“Don’t, Brad,” I barked. Liquor coursed through my veins and I felt more than a little buzzed. The last thing I needed was to get into it with one of my teammates about Calli.

“You can talk to me about her, you know? I mean, it isn’t like I have no experience in the field of wanting to bone one of your teammate’s sisters or anything.”

“I said leave it.”

“Okay, my bad. But seriously, do you really think Joel will cut off my dick if he finds out about me and Josie?”

“Dude,” I clapped him on the shoulder, “I think he’ll take your balls too.”

“Fuck,” he breathed.

“Yeah, fuck.”

“But what if I can’t switch off how I feel? I know things didn’t go right with Reese, but I really feel like Jos could be the one.”

“The one?” I jerked back. “Just how drunk are you?”

“I’ve had a few.”

My eyes narrowed. “Don’t let Joel hear you talking like that.”

“The rule is stupid though, right?”

I shrugged. “It keeps things drama free I guess.”

Just then Callum appeared, parting the crowd like Moses.

“Well, shit,” Brad whistled through his teeth, “he actually came.”

“I guess Maverick finally got through to him.” I watched the two of them hug. Maverick leaned in, whispering something to Callum and he nodded, letting out a strained breath.

“He’s like the Scorpion whisperer or some shit.” Brad sounded kind of awed.

“Scorpion whisperer?” I snorted. “You’re a fucking idiot.”

“Who’s an idiot?” Saul joined us.

“Brad, he’s got a man crush on Prince.”

“Who doesn’t have a man crush on Prince, the guy’s practically a god.”

I smothered a groan. They all had fucking stars in their eyes. But I guess that was the difference between them and me. They lived, breathed, and bled basketball. I on the other hand, didn’t. It had become an outlet for all my anger and frustration, sure. But it would still never mean the same thing it meant to these guys. They had hopes of the NBA, of fame and fortune and going all the way to the top.

Most of them wouldn’t ever get there, but they wanted it all the same.

I just wanted to survive college.

Didn’t I?

“It’s a good thing Callum came,” Saul said. “He’s still a senior player. He should be here, especially for the freshman.”

Brad nodded. “Yo, Callum, come take a shooter with us, man.”

Maverick guided him over to us. “Did somebody say shooters?”

“Hell yeah.” Saul fixed his eyes on Callum. “It’s good to see you here, man.”

“Yeah, well someone was like a dog with a bone.” His hard gaze flicked to Maverick, who smirked.

“He wouldn’t want you to be sulking in your room.”

“I’m not—yeah,” he ran a hand through his hair, “you’re right. Go on then, line them up.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.” Saul flagged down the bartender and ordered a tray of shooters, handing them out to everyone. “I just want to say,” he cleared his throat, “it’s a real fucking honor, Maverick.”

“Oh, Jesus,” I grumbled beneath my breath.

“Just how drunk is he?” Maverick whispered out the side of his mouth.

“Drunk enough that he might get down and start kissing your feet.” Brad snickered.

“Okay, okay, Sa—”

“Saul.” He flashed Maverick a goofy grin.

“Saul. Why don’t you let me take it from here?” Maverick faced us, lifting his glass in the air. “This team has had it rough over the last eighteen months, but the harder the fight, the sweeter the victory. This season is yours. You just have to want it. You have to leave all the other shit at the door and when you step out onto that court, you have to believe it can happen.”

Everyone stopped to listen to Maverick’s pep talk. He hadn’t gone pro—his accident had prevented that—but he’d had it. He’d had what it took to go all the way. So he knew what the game meant to everyone here. Knew what it meant to the college and the town. People didn’t want the Scorpions to play well and score points and do their best... they wanted us to win. They wanted us to go all the way.

As captain and point guard it was a huge fucking burden to carry.

He raised his glass high in the air. “For Declan.”

“Declan.” His name reverberated inside me like a dull ache I couldn’t get rid of. I sucked in a sharp breath.

So much for playing for myself.

Maverick met my narrowed gaze and gave me a small nod. His eyes shone with sympathy. There was an apology in there somewhere, but I knew he was only doing his part.

I downed my shooter, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand before grabbing another one.

“Is that a good idea?” Brad asked me and I waved him off.

“Probably not.”

But I couldn’t find it in me to care.

“WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU SAY?”

“Uh oh,” Brad whistled from beside me, nudging my shoulder. It was getting late and I was about ready to call it a night.

I turned around, to see what all the commotion was, narrowing my eyes

when I saw Callum and Saul squaring off with one another.

“Easy, boys,” Maverick approached them. “Why doesn’t everyone just take a breath?”

“It was a joke. I was joking.”

“You’re a fucking moron,” Callum spat, swaying gently on his feet. He was toasted. We all were. “She’s my sister, you asshole. You think I want to hear you talking about her like that?”

My spine snapped straight as I edged closer to where they were standing.

“I didn’t think you’d care.” Saul’s brows pinched. “You didn’t even tell us about her. How the fuck was I supposed to know you’d go all caveman just because she’s hot as sin.”

Red hot jealousy exploded in my veins. He was talking about Calli.

My Calli.

“What did you just say?” I ground out.

“Zach?” Saul blinked. “What are you—”

“Fuck off, Messiah,” Callum glared at me, his eyes glassy from all the liquor. “This isn’t your fight. She’s my sister. I should be the one to—”

“You’re drunk,” I hissed, feeling anger lick up my spine. “You should go home before you say or do something you’ll regret. Somebody get him out of here.”

“Come on, Callum.” A couple of the senior players started to pull him away, but he shirked out of their hold.

“Who made you the fucking boss, huh?” He stepped into me, jabbing his finger at my chest. “You wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for Declan’s accident. You think you’re so fucking slick walking around campus like—”

“Callum,” someone barked, but I cut them off.

“No, let’s hear what he has to say, since he obviously has such a problem with me. Go on then, James, I’m waiting. Tell me how it is?”

“Zach, man,” Brad inched closer. “This isn’t helping.”

But I couldn’t stop myself. Rage vibrated beneath my skin, desperate for a way out.

“Brad’s right, Zach,” that was Maverick, “walk away.”

“Yeah, whatever.” I spun around ready to get the fuck out of there when Callum’s voice gave me pause.

“It goes for you too, Messiah. Stay the fuck away from my sister. She’s too good for you, she always was.”

Without thinking I turned around and threw my fist straight into his face.

Callum saw it coming and ducked out of the way, my knuckles clipping his cheek instead of his jaw.

“Fuck,” he grunted, righting himself and throwing himself at me, his fist mashing straight into my eye. Pain exploded along my cheekbone as I blinked, trying to shake off the stars in my vision. He started to come at me again, but a couple of players grabbed him, hauling him just out of reach.

I straightened myself, my eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. The air shifted around us, cracking with tension as we stared at one another.

“Okay.” A heavy hand landed on my shoulder. “That’s enough for tonight. Messiah, you’re with me, let’s go.” Maverick shoved me hard, and I stumbled toward the door, cutting through the crowd like butter. Pain radiated across my knuckles, but it wasn’t enough.

“Here,” Maverick thrust a bottle of water at me, “drink it.”

I stared at it as if it was poison.

“You’re going to need it.”

What the fuck?

My brows furrowed.

“You think I’m taking you home to sleep it off?” His lips curved into a smug smile. “Oh, hell no, we’re going to the court.”

“It’s almost ten thirty on a Friday night and I’m pretty sure he broke my eye socket.”

He leaned in, inspecting what I imagined was an ugly fucking bruise. “I’ve seen worse. And I’m Maverick Prince. If I want to use the court, who’s going to stop me?”

“Are you always this fucking irritating?” I grumbled, ripping the cap off the water and chugging it down.

“Let’s go,” he said, ignoring me. “I’m going to put you through your paces and then you’re going to tell me what the fuck that was all about.”

“I used to like you,” I murmured, falling into step beside him. Because what other choice did I have?

It was Maverick Prince.

Besides, I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep until I’d burned off some of the tension swimming inside me.

And Prince was one of the best.

Chapter
NINETEEN

Calli

“OH MY GOD, SHE DID NOT.” I could barely contain my laughter as Xavier embarrassed Josie with story after story of her as a freckle-faced teenager.

“She did. Caught her brother balls deep in some girl but didn’t realize until it was too late.”

“Xav!” Josie slapped his arm, burying her face in her hands. “I thought they were swimming.”

“And got into the pool with them.”

“I was twelve!” Josie’s cheeks burned a deep shade of red. “I’m not sure I like you anymore.” She stuck her tongue out at Xavier, who I’d come to realize was actually a big teddy bear, especially where Josie was concerned.

“Hit me with another.” She wafted her empty beer at him.

“I’m cutting you off at six.”

“Eight and I’ll switch to water.”

“Seven and you’ve got yourself a deal. Calli?”

“Oh no, I’m good. I’ve still got half of this one left.

“Suit yourself.” He winked before disappearing down the bar.

“I was wrong about him,” I said.

“Told ya. Xavier is good people.” Comfortable silence settled between us as we sat at the end of the bar. There was no live music tonight, but the place was brimming with biker types. Josie seemed completely at ease around them though. I still felt a little out of my depth, but I was glad I had decided to come with her. Not that she’d given me much choice.

Josie’s cell vibrated and she snatched it up, scanning the message.

“Let me guess, starts with Br ends with Ad.” I said, eyeing the slight curve to her mouth.

“They’re at The Pivot. Maverick Prince and some of the old players are there.”

“Great.” I picked at the label on my beer bottle.

“So you won’t be coming to the exhibition game with me?”

“Seriously?” My brows went up. “No, I won’t be coming.”

“Because you hate basketball.”

“Among other things.” Mainly being the fact that Joel had ignored me all week, my brother wished I didn’t exist, and I was trying to avoid being within breathing distance of Zach.

“Guess I’ll have to go all alone then.” She pouted.

“Won’t your parents be there?”

“Yes, and I’ll be avoiding them at all costs. They’re so embarrassing.”

“It’s nice that they want to be there to support Joel and the team.”

“Shit, sorry, Calli,” her expression fell, “I’m such an insensitive bitch at times.”

“It’s fine. But as someone who doesn’t have that anymore, don’t be too hard on them.”

“You’re right. In fact, I bet they’d love to meet you. We could all go to the game together and get dinner afterwards.”

“I’m not sure Joel would appreciate that.”

“Joel smole.” Josie waved me off. “You’re my friend, Calli. And if I want you there, then it has absolutely nothing to do with Joel or the fact he got his feelings hurt.”

“Way to make me feel better.”

“Oh, babe. I’m not trying to make you feel guilty. But it is what it is. Besides, he’s so stuck on that ridiculous team rule. Honestly, I thought he’d make an exception for you. Or I at least thought it would push Zach into action.”

“W- what?” I gawked at her.

“He wants you, Calli. He might be trying to fight this thing between you, but I see it every time he looks at you.”

“Zach hates me, Jos.”

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you, love and hate are just the same emotions experienced in different ways?”

“Is this your psych classes talking?”

“What? It’s true.” She shrugged. “There’s this whole body of research that basically supports the hypothesis that the deeper the love, the stronger the hate.”

“Okay.” I frowned, not really sure where she was going with this.

“So... you keep saying Zach hates you, right?”

“Yeah...”

“Well, it’s been what, three years?”

I nodded. “So he must have really loved you, babe, if he’s still harboring all those angry vibes toward you.”

“Xavier should have cut you off at four.” I eyed her fresh beer.

“Oh, come on. Every time he looks at you, I get weak in the knees, babe.

That boy is all twisted up inside for you, all that love and hate mixed up.” She gave a little shudder of excitement.

“Josie.” I averted my gaze. I didn’t want her to see how much her words affected me.

“I know something happened between you...”

My eyes snapped to hers, and I frowned. “How?”

“It’s written all over your face every time I mention him. Want to talk about it?”

Did I?

How did I possibly begin to explain what had happened between us?

“You can trust me, babe, I promise.”

I groaned, torn between keeping my secrets and sharing the burden.

Finally, I said, “I’m going to need more alcohol for this.”

“Xav,” she yelled, “we’re going to need something a little stronger.”

“For real?” He arched a brow.

“Just line ‘em up,” she waved him off, “me and my girl are having a moment.”

A couple of minutes later, he slid two shooters in front of us.

“Oooh, cherry sours, nice.”

I eyed the glasses and sighed. “I’m not sure I should—”

“Relax, it’s just a little Dutch courage.” Josie grabbed her shooter and gave me an encouraging smile. “I want details, babe. All the glorious and gory details.” Her brows waggled suggestively.

I snatched up my glass and brought it to my lips. “Promise me I won’t regret this.”

“Promise. Ready?” I nodded. “On three. One... two...”

Throwing the glass back, I downed it in one. Fire exploded in my throat, chased off by the sickly sweet taste of cherries.

“That was disgusting.” I grabbed my beer and washed the shooter down.

“You’ll live.” Josie chuckled. “Now, tell me everything.”

“CALLIOPE JAMES!” Her eyes almost bugged. “You’ve been holding out on me, babe.”

“Ssh.” I tried to smother her mouth with my hand, but she pushed it away.

“I’m proud of you.”

“Seriously?”

“Hell yes. You came to a college after losing your mom, knowing your brother and dad weren’t going to make it easy. On top of that, you find out that your high school sweetheart, the boy you’ve never gotten over, also goes here... and is harboring some major anger toward you. Throw in a basketball team who doesn’t know you exist, and a best friend who is pretty freakin’ awesome, and I think you’ve got yourself a script to any good soap opera.”

“Josie, this is my life.”

“I know. And it’s so damn juicy.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Am not.” She pouted. “I’m merely happy.”

“Well, drunk or not, I’m cutting you off,” Xavier said, glowering at her.

“You’re no fun.” She beeped his nose. “Xavier, back me up on something... if you, a guy, says he hates a girl, what’s really going on there?”

“Oh no, Jos, don’t be pulling me into your female psych class bullshit. I have drinks to serve.” He threw his towel over his shoulder and moved down the bar.

“Shall I order an Uber?” I asked. Campus was only a fifteen-minute walk, but I didn’t want to get halfway and have Josie pass out on me.

“I can probably get us a ride.” She started scanning the bar.

“What? No. *No*, Josie!”

“Consider it done.” She completely ignored me and marched off toward a group of mean looking bikers.

For a girl who claimed to have anxiety she sure did handle herself well.

Josie returned with a guy on tow. “Skeet, meet Calli. Calli meet Skeet. He’s going to give us a ride back to campus. Come on.”

“Oh no, that’s okay. I’m not sure—”

“Skeet will make sure you girls get back okay,” Xavier said. “You watch them good, okay? They’re precious cargo.”

It was silly, but his words warmed something inside me. I’d never had a brother who cared or looked out for me. Growing up, Callum had always been too busy with practice or training camps or games to care.

My heart clenched. Xavier was a good guy, and he clearly adored Josie, treating her like an annoying younger sister.

“See you soon.” Josie leaned over the counter and kissed his stubbled cheek.

“Thank you for having us,” I said.

“Anytime, Calli. And don’t be a stranger okay? It’s nice to see Josie bring a girlfriend around here.”

“Let’s bounce,” our ride home said.

“Are you sure about this?” I whispered to Josie as she pulled me along with her.

“Skeet is good people.”

“Josie, you think everyone is good people.”

She flashed me a knowing smile. “If he kidnaps us and turns us into his sex slaves, you can totally blame me.”

“You did not just say that.”

She chuckled as we spilled onto the sidewalk.

“I’m just down here.” Skeet motioned down the street. He didn’t seem like the chatty type, walking ahead of us with his hands in his pockets and head lowered.

When we reached his truck, I hesitated. “Are you sober?” I blurted out.

He gave me an amused smile. “Two years and four months.”

“Oh gosh, I didn’t mean—I’m sorry.”

“Relax.” He opened the passenger door and Josie climbed inside. “I’m not ashamed of my past.”

“And you shouldn’t be. It makes you who you are today,” I said, surprised at my boldness. Skeet gave me a nod, waiting while I clambered inside, and then slammed the door.

Josie laced her arm through mine, tucking her head into my shoulder. “Thank you for coming tonight, Calli.”

“Thank you for inviting me.”

We rode in silence, but I couldn’t stop thinking about what Josie had said, about me and Zach.

By the time we reached campus, my head was swimming with memories and thoughts of him.

“Here we are.” Skeet pulled up at the main entrance. “You girls good to walk the rest of the way? I have some shit to take care of.”

“Sure thing.” Josie smiled at him. “Thanks for the ride.”

He nodded. “Anytime.”

We climbed out and set off toward the dorms. “Uh oh.” Josie read a text on her cell.

“Why do I not like the sound of that?”

“It’s Brad. He says Callum and Zach got into it tonight.”

“They did?” My heart raced in my chest.

“Yeah, at the bar.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what to say to that, so I kept my eyes forward and kept walking.

“Don’t you want to know why they were fighting?” Josie caught up to me.

“No, I really don’t.”

“Okay.” She shrugged, tucking herself against my arm. “Brad wants me to meet him... but I’m scared.”

“Scared?” I stopped to look at her.

“What if he never wants to tell the team about me?” Her eyes flickered with dejection. “I mean, it’s fun and all now. I enjoy being with him and we have a good time together, but all the sneaking around? I’m not sure I’m cut out for that... and I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

Joel.

She meant she didn’t want Joel to get hurt.

“Has Brad said he doesn’t want to tell the guys?”

Josie shrugged, averting her gaze.

“Josie?”

“He doesn’t want my brother to find out, which means keeping it from everyone else. Zach knows, but since you and Zach have been sneaking around—”

“We haven’t been sneaking around,” I corrected her.

What Josie and Brad had, and me and Zach had, wasn’t the same.

Not by a long shot.

Her cell beeped again.

“He must really want to see you.”

“I guess.” Josie chewed her bottom lip. “So you think I should do it?”

“I don’t think it’s for me to tell you what to do, Jos. But weren’t you the one who told me I was worthy and not to let any guy make me think otherwise?”

“Ugh, you’re right. You’re totally right. I’m going to tell him I want us to come clean to Joel. Do you mind if I bail? A bunch of them are at the frat house.”

“Be safe,” I said. “And text me when you’re back so I know you’re okay.”

“I will.” Josie leaned in for a hug. “I know things didn’t work out with you and my brother, but I’m really glad he bumped into you that day.”

“Yeah.” I smiled warmly. “Me too.”

We reached the split in the path that would take her to the team’s frat house, and me onto the dorms.

“See you tomorrow,” I said.

“Unless you come with me and see if a certain baller who shall not be named is there.”

“Somehow, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Especially if Zach and my brother had been fighting.

“Okay, you sure you’re okay walking back to Abrams?”

“Yeah, it’s like a two-minute walk. Go. Find Brad and enjoy... well, whatever it is that you two do.”

She grinned. “A girl never kisses and tells.”

“That’s not what you said earlier.” My brow rose and she chuckled.

“Night, Calli.”

“Night, Josie.” I took off down the path.

I really hoped Brad didn’t break Josie’s heart. He seemed to be into her as much as she was into him, but the team had rules, and to go against the rules would be to go against the team.

I’d almost reached Abrams when I heard male laughter. Instinctively, I picked up my pace. Until I saw the two guys round the corner and froze.

“Calli?” Zach gawked at me.

“Uh, hey.”

My eyes instantly went to the bruise kissing his eye. He noticed and ran a hand through his hair. I didn’t know if he was trying to distract me or if he was nervous.

But that was silly. Zachary Messiah didn’t get nervous.

“Hey, I’m Maverick,” the other guy said after a few painfully silent seconds. “Let me guess, you’re the sister.”

“Calli.” I blushed, trying not to read too much into the fact he seemed to know who I was.

“Nice to meet you, Calli. I’d say this one has told me all about you, but the guy is like a closed book.”

“Tell me about it,” I murmured, lifting my gaze to Zach again. He looked exhausted, his hair damp and skin glistening with sweat.

“What have the two of you been doing?”

“Maverick was putting me through my paces on the court.”

“On a Friday night?” I didn’t even know the gym was open that late.

“I have friends in high places.” Maverick winked. For a campus legend, he wasn’t anything like I expected. “What are you doing out here all alone?”

“I... uh...” Crap. I didn’t want to drop Josie in it. “I was out.”

“Out?” Zach finally spoke, although it was more of a growl.

“Yeah.” I steeled my spine. “I was at a bar.”

“You were at a bar? What the fuck, swe—Calli.”

My breath caught at the harshness in his voice.

“Where are you staying?” Maverick asked.

“Abrams.”

“We can walk you.”

“Oh, that’s okay, you don’t need to do that.”

“I insist. My girl would never let me live it down if she knew I hadn’t.”

They flanked me like two bodyguards as we headed for Abrams. Thankfully, it wasn’t too far because it was so suffocating under Zach’s hard stare that I could hardly breathe.

Maverick seemed all too happy to let us fester in the awkward tension.

“Must be hard,” he eventually said, breaking the silence, “being Callum’s little sister.”

“Not really.” I gave a little shrug.

“You’re not close?”

“Close?” Bitter laughter spilled from my lips. “Callum acts like I don’t exist.” I peeked up at Maverick, regretting it the second his dark gaze found mine.

“Want to know a secret about us guys?” He flashed me a knowing smile. “We’re idiots.”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself.”

“I can see why you’ve got Messiah all tied up in knots.” His eyes flicked over my head to the brooding guy on my other side. Zach mumbled something beneath his breath, but I knew I probably didn’t want to hear whatever it was.

When we finally reached Abrams, I exhaled a small breath. This entire night had been weird. From drinking at Steel ‘n’ Thunder with Josie to walking back to my dorm with Maverick and Zach.

“Well, this is me,” I said. “Thanks for walking me back.”

“Should I give the two of you some space?” Maverick glanced at me and

then Zach.

“No,” I said, right as he said, “Yes.”

“I really should go. It’s late and I’m sure you have other things to—”

“Just five minutes. Please, Calli.”

“Give the boy a chance. After all, he did jump in and defend your honor tonight.”

My brows furrowed at that. They’d been fighting... over me?

Surely, Maverick had it all wrong.

“You can shut up now,” Zach grumbled.

“I think I should just go.” Giving Maverick a little wave, I took off toward the building. I didn’t want to do this. I didn’t want to hear whatever Zach had to say. Not when it wouldn’t change anything.

“Calli...” My name pierced the air, the frustration in his voice hitting me right in the stomach. I ground to a stop, inhaling a shaky breath. Zach moved closer, the air shifting around me as he stepped up behind me. “Five minutes, please...”

Slowly, I turned to meet his conflicted gaze. “You’re hurt.” I reached for his face, snatching my hand to my side when I realized.

“You should see the other guy.” He let out a strained laugh, rubbing the back of his neck.

“What happened?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

My stomach sank. Of course it didn’t. Because we were both going to keep pretending that this thing between us was nothing more than unfinished business. A volatile storm of pent up anger and frustration that we needed to let run its course.

“You were out?” I thought I heard a hint of jealousy in his voice.

“I wasn’t with Joel if that’s what you’re worried about. He hasn’t spoken to me all week.”

“Shit, Calli,” he breathed, “that’s not—”

“It doesn’t matter.”

We were going round in circles.

“I had all this stuff I wanted to say...” Zach hesitated, a rare flash of vulnerability falling over his expression. It reminded me of the Zach I used to know, the boy who was uncertain of his place in the world.

I waited, trying to ignore the seed of hope taking root in my chest. Even though he constantly let me down, I still couldn’t help but cling onto a fifteen

year's old dream of forever.

A beat passed, and another as we stood there staring at one another.

But he couldn't do it.

He still couldn't talk to me.

"You know," I gave him a sad smile, "Josie said something to me tonight. She said, the stronger the love, the deeper the hate. But she's wrong, she has to be wrong. Because you walked away from me, Zach. You tossed me aside like I was nothing, like our love meant nothing."

The tears I fought so hard to contain dripped down my cheeks as I inhaled a shuddering breath. "So don't stand there acting like you care after everything we've been through. You say I betrayed you, but you never even gave me chance to fix it. You never even—"

An ugly sob tore from my throat. Swiping my eyes, I took a deep calming breath, meeting his dark gaze once more. "It doesn't matter now. None of it matters. I lost my mom, Zach, the one person in the whole world I could count on. I am so tired of people leaving me... So this time, I'm walking away. It's the only way I know how to protect myself."

"Calli, please—"

"No." I started backing away slowly, each step like a knife to my heart. "You had your chance, Zach."

Goodbye.

Chapter
TWENTY

Zach

“FUCK,” I snapped, watching as Calli walked away from me.

“What the hell did you say to her?” Maverick appeared, a deep frown crinkling his eyes.

“It’s complicated.”

“Doesn’t look complicated to me. It looks like you had your chance and blew it.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“Hey,” he smirked, “just telling it like it is, man.” Maverick moved to a bench outside Abrams and sat down. I joined him, my eyes locked on the dorm building.

“She seems nice.”

“Calli...” Her name was like ash on my tongue. “She’s like no one else I ever met.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“She screwed me over when we were kids.”

“How kids are we talking? Like grade school or—”

“High school. It was my junior year, she was in tenth grade.”

“You guys were together?”

“We were...” Fuck. How did I even begin to put into words what Calli had meant to me back then?

“Yeah, we were together. But it was more than that, you know? She was my best friend.”

The only person I trusted with my secrets.

“You had that high school soul mate thing working for you?” Maverick glanced at me, nothing but sympathy shining on in his eyes.

It made my chest tighten.

“Something like that.” Or at least, I’d thought we had. I didn’t know what it was about this guy, maybe that he did seem to get it, to have been in a similar situation in the past, but I was talking, spilling my secrets to him. “We were both lost, I think. After her dad had an affair, he and Callum left. She didn’t handle it very well. I was struggling with living in my brother’s shadow. Declan was everything I wasn’t: popular, athletic, a real American boy next door. It was a lot to live up to.”

“Sounds rough.”

“I mean, my parents didn’t neglect me or anything, not like Calli’s dad did her, but there was this constant expectation that I would follow in my brother’s footsteps. That one day, I would just snap out of what my old man called my ‘rebellious’ phase and become who I was always supposed to be.”

“You didn’t like basketball?”

“I didn’t hate it,” I shrugged, “I just didn’t want to play. I wanted to carve my own path, follow my own dreams. But my old man always dreamed of having his sons follow in his footsteps. He played for the Scorpions, almost got drafted, but then he met my mom and they fell pregnant with Declan, so he did the right thing by her; graduated, got a job, and settled down.”

“Yeah, Declan told me the story. Never really mentioned much about you though.”

It didn’t surprise me. Mine and Declan’s relationship was strained at best. He’d never understood me as a kid, couldn’t fathom that I didn’t want to pick up a ball and become my old man. Even after he graduated, and I finally gave in to my father’s demands, things didn’t get much better. He was off living his dream at SU and I was still living in his shadow.

“What happened with Calli, Zach?”

Jesus. He wasn’t going to let it drop.

“We danced around each the whole summer before junior year. I wanted her...” I’d wanted her so fucking much. “But I was almost seventeen and she was barely fifteen, and her dad’s affair and the way he and Callum just up and left, did a real number on her.”

“You were scared.”

“Fuck yeah. I was scared.” Sex changed things. Even at the tender age of sixteen, I knew that. And I didn’t want to do anything to mess up our friendship. “I wanted her to be one hundred percent sure,” I said, “so we waited.”

“Until you didn’t?” He gave me a knowing glance.

“Why do I feel like you’re in my head?”

“I have two younger sisters. I know shit. Not to mention the fact, I’ve been where you are. Trying to fight the inevitable. Because that’s the thing about love, Messiah. Once you meet the right girl, boom... there’s no escaping it.”

“We were just kids.”

“Yet here we are. She’s under your skin, man. After all this time, she’s still there. It wasn’t just some high school crush. It was real.”

“She betrayed me.”

“Did she? Or did something happen, and you did what most guys do and run scared? The best defense is a—”

“Good offense,” I muttered.

My old man loved that saying.

Maverick’s words reverberated deep inside me as I let the painful memories flood my mind. He wasn’t right though, he couldn’t be.

Calli had betrayed me... I’d heard it with my own ears.

As my life had started to crumble down around me, the one girl I’d thought I could trust to always be there, had let me down.

“Zach?” Maverick frowned.

I ran a hand down my face, letting out a weary sigh. “Junior year we made it official. She was my girl. I was so fucking relieved. I can still remember walking into school the first day of the semester. I didn’t care that I was Declan Messiah’s younger brother.”

Because Calli made me feel worth something. She made me feel like I could do anything, be anything.

My chest tightened as I flicked my eyes back up to the dorm building. Was she up there, thinking of me the way I was thinking of her?

No.

She’d walked away.

I’d tried to talk to her, and she’d fucking walked away from me. Again.

My fist clenched against my thigh.

Maverick noticed. “You need to learn to harness that,” he said without judgment. “Anger like you’re carrying around, it isn’t good for the soul.”

I barked a laugh. “Seriously, what are you now, my shrink?”

“A friend,” he replied. “I’m a friend. And I’m going to give you a solid piece of advice. Don’t let her slip through your fingers. So she hurt you back when you were kids, get the fuck over it. You were kids. Kids are supposed to mess up. It’s not your mistakes that define you, Zach, it’s how you deal with the consequences.”

“It’s late, we should probably go.” I stood, done with this conversation, and he followed me up.

“You can avoid me, but you can’t avoid facing all the unresolved crap—”

“Yeah, yeah, *Dr Phil*, I got it.”

He chuckled, clapping me on the back. “You’re a good kid, Messiah, you’ll figure it out.”

“Hey, less of the kid, I’m twenty.”

Fuck.

Twenty.

And I was still bending to the will of my father because it was easier than stepping out on my own two feet.

“Promise me you’ll call if things get too heavy?” Maverick said.

I managed a nod, but I knew I wouldn’t call him. I wasn’t that guy; one to sit around and talk about my feelings. Besides, I’d lived with my anger for too long to just let it go. In some ways, it had always lived inside me. Every time my dad praised my brother or compared us. All the times he’d yelled that he wished I could be more like Declan. I always came off worse than him. I was too disinterested, too unmotivated, too awkward. He’d never stopped to consider that I had different interests. That maybe I didn’t fit the Messiah mold, and that was that.

We reached the frat house and Maverick slowed to a stop. “I never did like this place,” he said, staring up at the imposing building.

“Yeah, it’s not my thing either.”

“No, but I promised the guys I’d stop by before heading back to the hotel. Do you want to—”

“I’m done,” I said. The only thing I wanted was to retreat to my apartment and forget this night ever happened.

“Okay.” He held out his fist and I bumped it with my own. “It was good to see you, Zach. I’ll see you at the exhibition game.”

“Damn right. I’ll be the one running circles around you.”

Maverick exploded with laughter, chuckling into the night. “I’ll look forward to it,” he said, amusement still twinkling in his eyes. “Now get the hell out of here.”

I didn’t need telling twice.

THE NEXT MORNING, I was down at the court with the guys. I had planned on bailing on them, but when I woke up a tight ball of tension, I decided to go work it off.

“Hey, man. You okay?” Brad jogged over to me. They were already warming up. “That looks nasty.” He motioned to the ugly bruise around my

eye.

“I’ll live.”

“You and Callum—”

I let out a frustrated breath. “It’s too early for this, Brad.”

“Yeah, my bad.” He clapped me on the back. “It’s good to see you though. The guys are pumped after last night.”

I dumped my water bottle and cell phone over with the guys stuff and started warming up. Brad hovered though.

“What?” I barked

“Did you see her?”

My brows crinkled as I stretched out my calves and quads.

“Calli, I mean.” He glanced around to make sure we were alone. “Josie said—”

“You’re playing a dangerous game. You saw what happened with me and Callum last night,” I gritted out. “What do you think will happen when Joel finds out? He’s not going to welcome you into the family with open arms... he’s going to be pissed.”

“It’s not like that, we’re just... fuck. Do you really think he’ll be that upset?”

“You know he will. Look at how he walked away from Calli.” I was still pissed about that.

“You know it wasn’t just the team rules that made him walk away, Zach. He liked her, a lot, and she lie—”

“She didn’t lie, she just omitted the truth.” Shit. Why was I defending her? “Come on.” I shoulder checked him. “We should go play.”

The others were already in position, watching me and Brad with mild curiosity. They had all been there last night, they’d seen me and Callum go at it... over Calli. They knew some of our history.

But no one said anything. It might have had something to do with the angry storm cloud hanging over me.

They were watching me, waiting for me to assume my role as leader. To step into my brother’s place and become their captain, their number one. It still felt wrong. I didn’t want it. I didn’t want to be here, pretending to care. Pretending to want this.

I didn’t fucking want it.

My fists clenched and unclenched at my sides. Declan was hanging onto life by a thread, and I still wasn’t free of his shadow. If anything, I was bound

to it more now than ever.

“Let’s go, Messiah,” someone yelled, and I jerked out of my reverie.

I might not have wanted it, but I was good at it. They were right, basketball was a part of me, woven into the very fabric of my DNA. I was shackled to it and it to me.

Before I could overthink it, I beckoned the guys in. Because no matter how much I didn’t want this, I had it, and the need to prove myself wouldn’t let me walk away.

“Okay, the exhibition game is only a week out. I know it’s for charity, but everyone will be looking to us to win.”

The guys all nodded, mumbling their approval as I cradled the ball in my hand, feeling its weight, the same way I felt the weight of responsibility press down on my chest.

“This game could set the tone of the entire season. We don’t go out there to goof around, we go out there to win. I know it’s been a tough year.” The knot in my stomach tightened. “I know you didn’t ask for me to show up, but I’m here now and I’m not going anywhere. Last night wasn’t about the team, and that shit should have never happened.”

I made sure to lock eyes with Saul. He gave me a sharp nod. “Last year, you missed out on the championship, but this year, it’s ours. As long as we work together and stay strong.”

“Hell yeah,” Dev hollered, and everyone snickered.

“Official practice starts soon. We show up, do the work, and push hard. Anyone got a problem with that?”

Silence greeted me as I ran my eyes over each of my teammates. Callum wasn’t here, neither were the couple of other senior players. It was as if they’d already given up, handed me the gavel and walked away. Except, they hadn’t handed me anything. Coach Baxter and my father had. They’d manipulated my place here, giving the guys no choice but to fall in line.

“Okay, then let’s shoot some hoops.” I bounced the ball and backed up to the center line.

Brad caught my eye and gave me a reassuring nod. He knew why I’d done what I’d done. After last night, I needed to show the team I had control, that I was in control. Callum was a senior player, my brother’s best friend. But I wasn’t about to cower at James’ feet. He had his own demons, his own mistakes to right. Maybe I should have felt a little weirded out by the way I’d stood up for Calli, but the truth was, I didn’t.

I felt a shit ton of guilt over how things had gone down between us since she arrived at SU.

But I didn't know how to fix it—if I should even try to fix it.

She'd made it obvious she didn't want to have anything more to do with me, and I couldn't blame her. But things still felt unresolved. And I couldn't help thinking back to Maverick's words last night about avoiding my past.

Because I knew he was right, I knew the past would come around and bite me in the ass one day.

It already had.

MONDAY MORNING, Coach Baxter called me into his office.

I didn't expect to find Callum there too.

“Take a seat, son,” he said coolly.

“What's up, Coach?”

“Want to tell me what the fuck happened Friday night?”

I smothered a groan. I should have known someone would spill the beans to him.

“Callum?” He pinned the quiet guy beside me with a hard look.

“It was a misunderstanding, Coach.”

“A misunderstanding?” His lip twisted with disapproval. “Zach, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“We were just goofing around, Coach. It got out of hand.”

“Goofing around he says.” Coach whipped off his Scorpion ball cap and ran a hand through his salt and pepper hair. “Do you think I'm an idiot? You both come in here looking like you went ten rounds with Rocky Balboa and I'm supposed to what, turn a blind eye?” He scoffed. “Not gonna happen, ladies.”

“Coach, come on, we—”

“Save it, James. You need to get your shit in order, son, before you let it ruin your entire senior year. I know things are hard right now.” He leaned on his desk and steepled his fingers. “That's why we need to band together, not pull apart.”

“It won't happen again.”

“Damn right it won't. I'm signing you both up to the youth project down

at Next Steps.”

“Coach—” Callum started to protest.

“Save it, son, I already made the call. You report to Freya Jenkins tomorrow after classes. You do the crime, you pay the time.”

“It was nothing, Coach,” I protested, but he cut me with a hard glare.

“I expect better. You two got issues you need to iron out, do it behind the scenes where it doesn’t affect the team’s reputation. Now get out of my sight.” He waved us off with an irritated huff.

We both skulked out of there in thick silence.

“Listen, Callum, I—”

“Save it.” He flicked his eyes to mine, burning with contempt. I didn’t know if he was angry at himself, me, or both of us. But much like me, Callum was in a dark place. I wasn’t about to be the one to try to pull him out though, we weren’t those people to each other.

“Just do me a favor yeah and stay the hell away from me.” Callum barged past me but glanced back before he disappeared into the locker room.

“And stay the fuck away from my sister.”

Chapter
TWENTY
ONE

Calli

“CALLI, COME ON IN.” Freya motioned for me to take a seat. “How are you? How was the training Sunday?”

“It was great. I’m excited to get started.” I needed the distraction. I needed to focus on something besides the gnawing pit in my stomach.

Zach knowing about my mom had changed things. He cared—that bastard tried to act like he cared, and it had completely thrown me for a loop.

“Well, we’re excited to have you. Do you want the good news or the good news?”

“The good news.” I released a tentative breath.

She clicked her fingers and pointed at me. “Right answer.”

I smiled.

“We’ve got a new girl coming into the project. Jasmine. A real hard ass if her file is anything to go by. But the kid has had a tough time of it lately. Bounced between her mother and father’s guardianship since she was eight. Poor school attendance. Her teachers report she has low self-esteem, lack of motivation, and displays a range of attention seeking behaviors.

“How old is she?”

“Fourteen. She’s in ninth grade.”

Oh boy.

She was a girl on the cusp of becoming a young woman, full of raging hormones and turbulent emotions.

“Are you sure I’m the right person to buddy with her?” Because now I was sitting here, I wasn’t so sure. What if she didn’t like me? Or didn’t engage with me?

“The fact you just asked that question is exactly why you’re the right person, Calli. Jasmine needs somebody who understands what it’s like. She doesn’t need another adult telling her to get her head screwed on straight.”

“Okay.” I nodded. Freya was right, I did know. More than she could possibly know.

“It’s open doors Tuesday. We have a bunch of activities out back for the kids to participate in. I thought it would be a good chance for you and Jasmine to get to know one another.”

“You want to start our sessions today?”

“No time like the present. Just trust your instincts. Coax don’t push.

Listen, don't over talk. A lot of kids just need stability and trust. Ready?"

My lips pressed into a tentative smile.

I guess we were about to find out.

"CALLIOPE," one of the center volunteers, a short woman called Maureen, said. "This is Jasmine. She's excited to meet you."

"Hey Jasmine. I love your bracelets."

"Yeah, whatever." She dropped down on the bench beside me, refusing to look at me.

"Good luck," Maureen mouthed, and I grimaced.

Boy. This was going to be harder than I thought.

"How was your day today?" I tried to keep the tremor out of my voice. My body hummed with anticipation. I didn't want to mess this up, but I felt like a fish out of water.

Jasmine barely replied, mumbling some half-hearted comment beneath her breath.

She was a pretty little thing. Easily five-six with white-blond hair in short bangs around her face. She had bright bluish-green eyes, a smatter of freckles across her nose, and skin so pale it almost looked translucent. She reminded me of a pixie or some other ethereal creature like a fairy or nymph.

"You're staring," she hissed, and I inwardly cursed.

"I'm sorry. It's just you have really pretty eyes."

Slowly, she lifted her face to meet my soft gaze. The corner of her mouth kicked up a fraction. "You think my eyes are pretty?"

I did. They sparkled like the ocean as she gawked at me.

"They are."

"I'm a freak," she huffed indignantly, folding into herself. She radiated hostility, a fragile cyclone of pain and anger circling her. But there was something beneath the surface. Something I understood more than she realized.

Loneliness.

"I think most teenagers feel like that at some point. I know I did."

She scoffed. "You felt like a freak when you were my age?" Her eyes narrowed at me. "I highly doubt that, Cantaloupe."

“It’s true,” I said, ignoring her insult. “My brother was kind of a big deal growing up. You know, one of the popular kids. It wasn’t easy being in his shadow all the time.”

“Big whoop. At least you had a brother. I have—” Jasmine stopped herself, pressing her lips into a thin line. “This is all bullshit,” she mumbled. “I don’t want to be here.”

“Why don’t we go outside and check out some of the activities? It might be fun?” I got up, desperate for some fresh air.

Jasmine was hurting, that much was obvious, but I didn’t expect her to just open up to me after two minutes. When the people you loved—the people who were supposed to love you back—constantly let you down, the wall around your heart started to turn into a glacier. Cold and impenetrable. And before long, it would freeze everyone out.

I was lucky, I’d had my mom and Madison. But even their love and support hadn’t been able to undo the damage caused by my father and Callum. That gnawing feeling of never being good enough, of worthlessness, didn’t just vanish. Even now, I couldn’t allow myself to really reflect on everything without a huge pit carving through my stomach.

“Or we can sit here and talk some more,” I suggested.

Jasmine leaped up, scowling at me as she barged past me and took off for the door leading to the center’s huge yard. There was a basketball court and small patch of grass with a couple of benches. The wall had been decorated with spray art, another rainbow. It made me smile.

Mom would have loved this.

Forcing down the emptiness I felt whenever I thought about her, I turned my attention to Jasmine. She’d taken up residence at one of the tables. There was a bunch of art supplies: papers and crayons and markers. I grabbed some and began doodling, hoping to coax her into joining me. But Jasmine ignored me, watching the other kids play a game of kickball with one of the volunteers.

“You could join in, you know?” I suggested.

“Nah, they probably wouldn’t want me. I’m not very good at sports.”

“It’s just for fun, Jasmine. I’m sure they’d love to—”

“I said no.”

“Okay,” I conceded, smothering a small sigh. “What do you like to do?”

“This won’t work, you know.”

“What won’t work?” I asked, innocently.

“This, pretending you care. You’re only here to put something on your resume and make yourself look good.”

“Jasmine, that’s not—”

“Save it, Cantaloupe.” She got up. “You think you’re the first person to try to fix me? There’s been a long line of people who have already tried... and guess what? They all failed. So let’s not do this.” She stomped off toward the other side of the yard where a couple of kids were playing swing ball.

“How’s it going?” Maureen came over and sat down beside me.

“She’s...” I searched for the right words.

“Hurting,” she said softly. “Her pain is a shield. It’s going to take some patience and persistence to break through the armor she’s built.”

“How long have you been doing this?”

“Long enough that I’ve seen it all by now.” She got up again when two kids started fighting over the ball. “Patience and a whole lot of persistence.” Maureen smiled knowingly at me before taking off toward the fray.

Just then a commotion over by the doors caught my eye. Some of the kids began clapping and cheering and I wondered what all the fuss was about until I saw the telltale red, white, and black jerseys appear.

Jerseys worn by none other than my brother... and Zach.

“CALLI?” Callum blurted out as they reached me. Neither one of them looked happy to be here, but my brother looked positively pissed.

“Uh... hey,” I croaked, hardly able to believe my eyes.

What the hell were they doing here?

“Ah, Mr. James and Mr. Messiah,” Freya joined us. “I see you made it. Coach Baxter reassured me you would be here, but I’ve got to say, I was a little skeptical. You’re both late.”

“You’re volunteering here?” Callum balked, ignoring Freya’s questioning stare.

“I... yes. It’s my first session today.”

“I’m sorry,” he finally looked at Freya, “but I can’t do this.” Callum spun around and disappeared back inside the center, leaving me with a giant hole in my stomach.

“Okay, what did I miss?” Freya glanced to me and then Zach, who was

still staring at me as if he couldn't believe I was here.

"I'm so sorry," I rushed out, trying to smother my hurt. "I didn't know..."

"Calli?" Her eyes filled with concern, but it was nothing compared to the violent storm raging inside me.

"Callum is my brother. Things are... complicated."

"I see. Well, why don't you help Zach get settled and I'll go find your brother."

My breath caught. "Sure," I forced out the word. "I can do that."

Oh God.

Why?

Why did the universe seem intent in forcing us together?

I'd walked away... and now he was here. No matter where I went or what I did, there was no escaping him.

Freya left, taking the air with her. Zach still hadn't taken his eyes off me. His head was lowered as he cupped the back of his neck, looking up at me through those thick long lashes of his.

Dammit, why did he have to be so gorgeous?

Beautiful but deadly.

To my heart, at least.

"So this is a surprise," he broke the awkward silence between us.

"I didn't know... if I had—"

"You would have run the other way?"

"Something like that," I mumbled.

"So what are you doing here?" He motioned to the bench.

"See that girl," I pointed at Jasmine as we sat down, "she's my new little sister." His brows furrowed, and I chuckled. "I'm her buddy. Mentor. Wiser, older confidante. Although, I'm not feeling any of those things right now. It's our first session and she already hates me."

"Nah, not possible." Zach leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he watched the kids play. "She's just lost."

"Yeah..."

Silence settled over us again. This was bad, very bad. I'd jumped into the volunteering gig with both feet to keep myself distracted, not to end up with another headache. Zach let out a weary sigh, and there was something so defeated about it, emotion slammed into me.

He must have felt it because he said, "Calli?"

I forced a smile. "So what brings you here?"

“Coach Baxter signed us up. Consider it punishment.”

“Punish—for the fight.”

He nodded. “I guess he thought it would help us bond.”

“I can’t believe he left.” Except, I could. That had been Callum’s MO my entire life. Pain lanced my chest.

“Who are you?” Jasmine loomed over us. I hadn’t even noticed her approach, too confused by Zach’s presence.

“Me? I’m Zach.” He frowned up at the timid girl. “Who are you?”

“Jasmine.”

“Calli was just telling me you two are going to be hanging out.”

“Whatever.” She shrugged around the words, her eyes darting anywhere but at me. “How do you know her?”

She talked about me like I wasn’t sitting right there.

“Me and Calli?” He gave me a sideways glance and smirked. “We go way back, don’t we, sweet pea?”

Was he... flirting with me?

Why the hell was he flirting with me?

“Sweet pea? What kind of nickname is that?” Jasmine snickered.

“Zach,” I grumbled, although it was a damn sight better than Cantaloupe.

“So you’re like what, a basketball player?”

“You know about basketball?” he asked her.

“A little.” She blushed. “I like watching it on ESPN sometimes.”

“Yeah? You ever play?”

“Oh no. I’m not good at stuff like that.”

“Stuff like what?” Zach stood up. “Bouncing a ball? Come on, let’s go shoot some hoops.”

Her skittish gaze finally landed on mine and I gave her a reassuring smile. “You should go. He’s an excellent teacher.”

Crap.

I don’t know why I said that.

From the way Zach’s brow was raised, he didn’t either.

“Come on, Elsa.”

“E- Elsa?” She blushed deeper.

“Yeah, you remind me of Elsa. You know, from Frozen.”

“I know what Frozen is.” Her shyness gave way to a blinding smile but quickly fell. “The kids at school all call me Gandalf.”

“Well, the kids at school sounds like ass—” I shot Zach a warning look,

and he corrected himself. “Douchebags, they sound like douchebags.”

I watched the two of them walk off to the basketball hoop. Zach snagged a ball from the huge crate and bounced it in front of him. Jasmine watched him with awe sparkling in her eyes. I couldn’t believe how good he’d been with her. How easy their banter came. I’d struggled to get her to say two words to me, yet she’d talked to Zach like he was an old friend. I tried not to take it personally, but it was hard. I wanted to build a rapport with her, to help her.

The lingering pang of dejection didn’t stop me from smiling as Zach talked her through a couple of moves. He ducked and dodged around her, cutting from side to side and putting on quite the show. So much so that everyone else in the yard stopped to watch the SU basketball star teach a fourteen-year-old girl, looking at him like he hung the moon, how to shoot hoops.

But something even more magical happened.

Jasmine snatched the ball from him and began dribbling it from side to side as she approached the hoop. “Take the shot,” someone yelled, and she pushed off on one foot, sailing into the air right as she released the ball. It hit the backboard, dropping clean through the hoop.

The whole yard applauded while Zach stood there, looking dumbfounded.

“Holy crap, Elsa’s got moves.” He grinned over at me and I couldn’t help but grin back as I approached them.

It felt like old times.

A glimpse of the boy who had spent hours with me as I dragged him all over Bay View, taking photograph after photograph. The boy who lay with me up with the treehouse, holding me as I cried for a father I’d been convinced didn’t love me.

“I... I practice sometimes,” Jasmine stuttered.

“What happened to ‘I don’t play sport’,” I teased but instantly realized my mistake. She folded into herself, averting her gaze to the ground. “Jasmine, I didn’t mean—”

“Hey, Elsa, how about you and me challenge some of the guys to a little two on two?”

Her head snapped up, her bewitching eyes full of wonder and awe. “Seriously? You want to play... with me?”

“Hell yeah, I do.”

I dropped back, kicking myself for messing it up again. Zach caught my

eyes and mouthed, “Relax, she’ll come around.”

But I wasn’t so sure. If it wasn’t for Zach showing up, I doubted Jasmine would have spoken two words to me.

“He’s good with her.” Freya joined me on the bench.

“Apparently so.”

She chuckled. “He’s a college athlete who looks like... well, that. Don’t write yourself off too soon. I wouldn’t have paired you with Jasmine if I didn’t think you have what it takes to reach her.”

I managed a small nod, watching as Jasmine and Zach ran circles around another volunteer and a tall boy with floppy hair. Laughter filled the yard: Zach and Jasmine’s, their captivated audience. She seemed so carefree, so different to the girl who had turned up almost an hour ago.

She wasn’t the only one though. Zach looked happy. Gone was the angry brooding guy I’d bumped into at the beginning of semester, replaced with a guy who smiled and took the time to teach Jasmine and the boy his best moves. It wasn’t hard to believe he was the captain of the Scorpions. He oozed leadership but wielded it with humility. He wasn’t cocksure or conceited like so many athletes. He seemed genuinely happy to be here.

And I honestly didn’t know what to do with that.

On the one hand, I wanted to hate him a little bit more. He’d always turned his back on basketball. Rejected his destiny as the third Messiah to pursue a career in college ball. But watching him, seeing how easy he glided across the court and handled the ball, I knew I was witnessing something special.

It made my heart ache, knowing that my Zach, the boy who once refused to conform and walk in his brother and father’s footsteps, was gone. Because I knew enough about the game that haunted me, to know a great player when I saw one.

Zach set Jasmine up with a shot and she sank the ball, setting the yard off in another round of applause. Kids cheered and volunteers laughed and clapped. Magic was unfolding before my eyes and it was impossible not to be swept up in it.

There was just one problem with magic...

Eventually the spell wore off.

Chapter
TWENTY
TWO

Zach

THE SESSION CAME TO AN END. My jersey was damp, and my skin felt tight from two hours under the afternoon sun, but most surprisingly, my cheeks hurt from all the smiling and laughing.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd had so much fun.

Well, I could... and every single one of those memories included Calli.

It had been a total shock walking into the yard at Next Steps and finding her sitting there. If I'd have known she was volunteering, I probably would have begged Coach to give us something else to do.

Or maybe I wouldn't.

Because here, she couldn't escape. And it was safe. It gave us a reason to be in close proximity without making it too awkward.

"Thanks," Jasmine said quietly.

The second we'd finished playing, she'd shrunk back into herself. But man, had she blossomed with the ball in her hands. I'd never seen anything like it. She was a little rocket, zipping all over the court with some pretty impressive ball skills.

It was obvious she was self-taught, Her footwork was sloppy and more than once, she'd gotten confused about the rules, but she possessed a raw talent most kids didn't have.

"Anytime, Elsa." I teased. "You did good out there. You should think about playing for your team at school."

"They wouldn't let me."

"What do you mean they wouldn't let you?" My brows knitted.

"The kids... they don't like me. They all think I'm this white-haired weirdo. I guess Elsa fits." She shrugged, her words making my spine go rigid. I didn't like hearing her talk about herself that way.

Looking down at her, I said, "Don't ever let anyone tell you what you're worth, Jasmine."

"I..." She trailed off, ducking her head.

"That was amazing." Calli joined us, my body hyperaware of her. It was as if every time we were near the air crackled and shifted around us; some invisible force trying to push us together.

"Yeah, whatever." Jasmine shouldered past her and disappeared into the center.

“Maybe you should be her buddy.” A defeated sigh escaped Calli’s lips.

“Just give her time.”

“Time, right. Because that fixes everything.” Her eyes widened with horror. “Crap, I didn’t mean—”

“Relax. It’s all good.”

It wasn’t though. Something had changed between us. The need to hurt her had been tamped down by her constant attempts at pushing me away. But it was more than that. It was *her*. The young woman she had become. Harder around the edges but still with a softness I wanted to bask in.

Fuck. I was losing my goddamn mind over the girl who had broken my heart into tiny little pieces when I was just a boy struggling to find his way.

We entered the center together in thick silence. Jasmine was talking to Freya, but the woman didn’t look pleased.

“Why not?” Jasmine cried with frustration. “I don’t like her, but I like Zach.”

Shit.

Calli gasped, her eyes brimming with tears. I’d only wanted to help when I saw how much she was struggling with Jasmine, not make things worse.

“Jasmine,” Freya said calmly. “Why don’t we talk about it in my office?”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I’m telling you I don’t want her to be my buddy. What kind of stupid name is Calliope anyway?”

Freya realized we were standing there and shot Calli an apologetic look, but the damage was already done. My sweet pea was two seconds from falling apart in front of all the volunteers and about a dozen kids.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Freya gave me an understanding nod as I guided Calli out of the center. The second we hit the sidewalk she dragged in a shaky breath.

“She’s just a kid,” I said.

“Who clearly hates me. This was supposed to make me feel better and now I just... ugh.” Calli buried her face into her hands but I didn’t let her wallow.

Sliding my fingers over hers, I gently pried them away, forcing her to look at me. “You’re going to let a fourteen-year-old kid upset you?”

“You don’t understand.” Her brows crinkled making her eyes look so sad it gutted me. In that moment, I didn’t want to hurt her, I wanted to take her pain and make it my own.

Fuck... this girl.

“So talk to me.”

“What are you doing, Zach?” Shirking out of my hold, Calli put some space between us.

“I... Well, I was trying to help.”

“But why? We’re not friends... we’re not anything anymore.” Her eyes shuttered as she sucked in another sharp breath.

I hoped it hurt her to say the words because it fucking hurt listening to them.

“I just...” All the endorphins and adrenaline coursing through me drained away, replaced with frustration.

“I need to go,” she rushed out.

“At least let me walk you back to campus.”

“Actually, I’m not headed back to campus. I think I’m going to head down to the beach. I need some air. See you around, Zach.” Calli hurried away from me like I had the plague.

A giant fucking black hole carved through my stomach, as I watched her go...

Wondering if this was how it was always going to be between us now.

I HAD JUST GOT out the shower when there was a knock at the door.

“Just a second.” I secured a towel around my waist and went to check the peephole. “Hey,” I said opening the door to Victoria.

“Hi.” She smiled, her eyes instantly running down the length of my body.

“I’ll go put some clothes on.”

“Yes, please do.” It came out breathy, but I didn’t feel the usual sick sense of satisfaction I used to.

Since the fair, things were strained between us. Maybe even before then. I’d avoided her most of last week, and she’d been out of town at the weekend. But taking some space was probably a good thing. The guys had a point, we were getting too close. Victoria had started to overstep, and in a bid to get back at my parents, my brother, I’d fucking let her.

The second I joined her in the living room she locked eyes on me. “You’re avoiding me,” she got right to the point.

I let out an exasperated breath, really not wanting to do this.

“It’s her isn’t it? Calli or whatever she’s called.”

“You know what her name is, Vic,” I gritted out.

“Were you two—”

“Doesn’t matter if we were. We’re not now.” My chest tightened. “I had no idea she was coming here, just like she had no idea I was already here.”

“But—”

“No buts, Vic. Calli isn’t the issue here, we are. What are we doing? You’re my brother’s girl for fuck’s sake.” My fingers went into my hair, tugging the ends in frustration.

“We need each other.” Victoria inched closer, her big eyes staring up at me with hurt.

“Do we?” My eyes narrowed. “Or are we just using each other?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Her claws came out. This was the version of Victoria Penderton most people got to see. Cold and vicious. Vic was your friend if she was your friend. But if she wasn’t, she didn’t hold back. She had a superiority complex and it showed.

“You said it yourself, you like being around me because it makes you feel closer to Declan. That’s messed up, Vic. Is that why you almost let me fuck you? So you could pretend it was him?”

I immediately regretted the words, but she was pushing too hard. And when an animal was backed into a corner, it usually attacked.

“That’s... I can’t believe you just said that.” An indignant huff escaped her lips.

“Look, I’m sorry. But this... us... I don’t think it’s a good idea we hang out anymore.”

Hurt flashed across her face but she quickly steeled her expression. “Did you grow a pussy overnight? This isn’t the Zachary Messiah I know.”

“Watch it, Vic.” A low growl rumbled in my chest.

“Or what? You only got to where you are right now because of him. The team, Coach Baxter, your parents... they all only wanted you here for Declan.” Her words cut me like tiny daggers. “You were no one. No one before they plucked you from San Diego and brought you here. So don’t stand there acting smug because when Declan wakes up, and he will... everyone will forget all about you. You might be the King of Steinbeck U right now, Zachary, but the crown you wear belongs to him. Don’t forget it.”

She spun around and stormed from my apartment, slamming the door behind her.

Fuck.

Her words rattled around my skull, sinking into every crack and insecurity I had. Before I knew it, I'd grabbed a glass off the counter and thrown it across the room. It crashed against the wall, shattering into a thousand pieces.

She was such a cruel bitch. She knew exactly how to hit me where it would hurt most, and I hated that more than anything. I hated that she saw me enough to know the truth.

Going over to the cabinet, almost ripping the door of its hinges, I grabbed a bottle of vodka and knocked down a couple of mouthfuls. Is that what people thought—that I was here because I wanted to be Declan? Because they thought I wanted to follow in his footsteps?

Who was I kidding? Of course that's what they fucking thought. That or they really didn't give a shit so long as I got the job done and led them all the way to the championship.

She was right, they didn't want me. They wanted my name, my skill on the court. They wanted me because basketball was in my blood.

No matter how much I wished it wasn't.

I WOKE CONFUSED. There was a kink in my neck and a fucking bass drum in my skull.

“What the—”

A loud knock at the door perforated the haze surrounding my thoughts.

“Just a minute.” Pulling myself up, I took in my apartment. I was on the couch, a bottle of vodka beside me.

Shit. I may have overdone it given the fact it had been three parts full and now it was empty.

The knocking continued, drilling through me. “Yeah, yeah, give me a second.” Testing the waters, I stood up. My stomach churned as I moved sluggishly across my apartment. I opened the door to be met with Brad's concerned expression.

“You missed conditioning.”

“I was—”

“What the fuck is that smell?” He leaned in and gagged. “Jesus, how

much did you drink?”

“Lower your fucking voice, my head is pounding.”

“I’m not surprised.” He clapped me on the shoulder before slipping around me and into my apartment. “So this is where the Messiah lives.”

“Did you want something, or did you just come here to torture me?”

“Coach Baxter stopped by the gym, saw you weren’t there and got concerned.”

“So he sent you.”

“Actually, he called you a bunch of times. But—”

“My cell is dead.” I vaguely remembered it powering off last night somewhere between the third and fourth glass of vodka.

“You should go brush your teeth or something.”

I flipped him off before padding into the bathroom. The motion along with the overpowering taste of mint made me want to puke, but I managed to keep my stomach contents on the inside. Teeth done, I quickly washed my face and hands, before going back into the living room.

“Want to talk about it?”

“What the fuck are you doing?” I snapped, watching Brad as he rooted around my refrigerator.

“You need one of my epic hangover cures. I call it hair of the egg.”

“I am not drinking that shit.” My brows furrowed as he began pulling out eggs and spinach.

“It’ll fix you right up.”

“You can make me an omelet instead.” Not that I could stomach food yet. “Was Coach pissed?”

“Not so much pissed as he was worried. You never miss a session. And given the way you and Callum went at each other the other night... Everyone is feeling the tension, man.”

“You heard what he said.”

“I did, and it sucks. But Callum is working through a lot of stuff right now. Would it really hurt to cut the guy some slack?” My eyes narrowed and Brad let out a heavy sigh. “Forget I said anything. So how did community service go?” He gave up his smoothie mission and grabbed a pan adding a little oil.

“I was joking about the omelet.”

“It’s not for you.” A smirk played on his lips.

Cheeky motherfucker.

Grabbing a bottle of water from the refrigerator, I sat down at the breakfast counter. “It was surprising actually.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Calli was there.”

“No shit.” He gawked at me. “That’s some bad fucking luck, man.” I didn’t answer and he frowned. “Isn’t it?”

“I don’t know...”

“Wait a minute, you’re not seriously thinking about—”

“I’m not having this conversation with you.”

“She’s already got your head messed up. Don’t let her get under your skin any more than she already has, Messiah. It’s only asking for trouble.”

“Like you banging Josie isn’t?” My brow lifted and he gulped. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“The difference is though, everyone’s not watching my every move.”

I flipped him off before running a hand down my face, muffling a groan. “Why did you come around again?”

“Because you need a friend, and I’m it.”

“Lucky for me.”

“Lucky for you indeed.” Brad grinned like a fool, beating the eggs in a dish and adding them to the pan.

“So what happened at the center?”

“There was this girl—”

“Ah, the start of every good story.”

“She was a kid, asshole. Real quiet little thing. She got buddied up with Calli.”

“I’m sensing that’s not a good thing?” His brow lifted.

“I got the impression she didn’t like Calli very much.”

“That’s hard to believe. She’s one of the most inoffensive people I’ve ever met.”

“Yeah. I think she was trying too hard, ya know?”

“Let me guess, the kid didn’t like Calli, but she took an instant shine to the Messiah.” Amusement twinkled in his eyes.

“Please stop calling me that.”

“If the cap fits...”

“Asshole.”

“Takes one to know one.”

“Your eggs are sticking.” I flicked my eyes to the pan.

“Fuck.” He spun around and started flipping his omelet. “Plate.”

“Top right,” I grumbled, the smell making my stomach churn.

“You want any?”

“No, I’m good.”

Brad found a fork and started digging in. “It’s good,” he said around a mouthful.

“So how is Josie? Ready to confess to Joel that you’re fucking her?”

“Dude!” He spluttered. “I’m eating.”

Laughter rumbled in my chest. I still felt hungover, but the water was helping a little.

“Seriously though, man. You want to talk about this shit with Callum and Calli, I’m your guy.”

“Good to know, but the answer is still no.”

What the fuck would I say anyway? I thought I hated Calli, part of me still did, but I also missed her. I missed her so fucking much. Being around her had always made breathing a little easier.

At first, I’d thought it was the thrill of the chase, of luring her into a game of cat and mouse. But I was beginning to realize it was just her.

Calli was the flame and like a moth drawn to the light, I couldn’t seem to stay away.

“Oh shit, you’ve got it bad.”

“Fuck off.”

Brad snickered. “It’s written all over your pretty face. This is a shitshow just waiting to happen. But maybe it’ll distract everyone from the fact I’m boning Joel’s sister.”

“Nice, man. Real nice. Maybe I’ll have a little chat with Josie and see what she thinks about your little arrangement.”

He shot upright. “Don’t you dare, Zach.”

“Or what?”

“Seriously, man. Don’t mess with me over this. Josie is—”

“Say it.”

His brows puckered. “Come on, don’t be an asshole.”

“Takes one to know one.” I threw his words back at him.

“I like her, okay. I like her a lot.”

“There,” I said around a smug smile, “that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“It can never work though.” He let out a resigned sigh. “You know as well as I do that Joel will never...” He trailed off.

“Fuck what Joel thinks. It’s a stupid rule anyway.”

“Stupid because you want to get into Calli’s—”

I pinned him with a dark stare, and he threw up his hands in surrender.

“Joke, I’m joking.”

“You’re a fucking idiot.”

Silence settled over us. What a pair we were: him fooling around with Josie behind Joel’s back, me and Calli... doing whatever the fuck we were doing. Which was a lot of nothing at the minute given she was freezing me out. Maybe I needed to make a gesture, to extend an olive branch? But she didn’t seem to appreciate my direct and to the point approach, so I needed to think outside the box.

“Serious talk time.” Brad washed his omelet down with a carton of juice.

“Are you feeling ready for the exhibition game?”

“The team’s ready.” We hadn’t played much together yet since official practice didn’t start until next weekend. But we’d been meeting and doing our own thing, working on plays and refining our flow.

“I didn’t ask if the team is ready, I asked if you were ready.” His brow lifted but I chose to ignore him. “It’s already a sell out,” he added. “Coach said we all get a couple of tickets for our families; not that I have anyone to invite.”

An idea sparked in my mind.

I’d need to speak to Freya first, but it could work.

“Oh no, what are you up to?” Brad whistled through his teeth.

“Me?” I smirked. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Chapter
TWENTY
THREE

Calli

I AVOIDED ZACH AROUND CAMPUS. Which wasn't hard considering he was an athlete, and I was no one. Joel was still giving me the silent treatment, and Callum was nowhere to be seen.

So when my father called to invite me to the exhibition game, I almost laughed hysterically down the phone.

"You want me to *what*?"

"Calliope, must you be so..."

"So what, Dad?" I could hardly keep the venom from my words.

He let out a heavy sigh. "All this anger is no good for you."

"I'm not—" I stopped myself. He didn't get it. He hadn't got it back when I was a kid, and he didn't get it now. It was sad really, that the man responsible for half of my genetic makeup didn't give a shit about me.

Sad, but true.

My heart cinched.

"I have two tickets," his tone softened, "and I'd really like you to come with me. I've barely seen you since you arrived, and it'll be nice for you to support your brother—"

"Are you kidding me?" I breathed, the weight of his words coiling around my heart like thorns. "*Support him*? You do realize that he hasn't spoken two words to me since I arrived here? He didn't even tell the team his sister was starting at SU. What kind of person does that?"

"Callum is hurting, Calli. He's been through a lot..."

"You just don't get it, do you?" A rush of tears overpowered me, and I fought to keep them in.

"Get what?"

"You abandoned me, Dad. You both just left me like I was nothing. I spent my entire childhood trying to get you to notice me. Do you have any idea what it feels like to be so... so invisible?" My chest heaved as the words spilled from my lips.

"Calli, I—"

"Let's *not* do this, Dad. You didn't care then and it's crystal clear you don't care now. I've got stuff to do. Goodbye." Tears exploded from my eyes as I hung up.

God, he was so clueless. So blinded by Callum and *his* hopes and dreams

and aspirations.

“Calli?”

I spun around to find Josie standing there. “I heard shouting,” she said, “and the door was unlocked so I...” Concern shone in her eyes.

“It’s fine.” Sniffing, I dried my eyes and took a shuddering breath.

“Your dad?”

“Yeah. He wanted to invite me to Callum’s exhibition as a peace offering.”

“He sounds like a clueless idiot.”

“Oh, he is.”

“Hey, want to get out of here? I’m sure Xavier won’t mind us hanging at the bar.”

“It’s a school night,” I said, eyeing the stack of course reading I had to get through.

“So? It’s college. You can skip morning classes or throw on some shades to hide your hangover eyes.” Josie gave me a warm smile and it settled something inside me.

I’d lucked out meeting her. Sure, the fact she was Joel’s sister was a slight issue, but I could be her friend and still avoid the team.

It was working out okay so far.

“What?” she asked.

“I’m really glad I met you, Josie.”

“The feeling is entirely mutual. Come on, I’m starving.”

STEEL ‘N’ Thunder was quiet, but it wasn’t even six on a Wednesday evening.

“You two keep coming around here and I’m going to start thinking you ain’t just coming for the beer.” Xavier chuckled at his own joke as we slipped onto the stools at the bar.

“My girl needed to get out of her dorm room, and you do some of the best beer in town.”

“Damn right, we do.” He grinned proudly. “So whose face do I need to rearrange for hurting you, Calli?”

“I...”

“Relax.” Josie snickered. “He’s joking. Mostly.”

“Any guy who makes you cry isn’t worth your time, sweetheart.”

“What about fathers who make you cry?” I asked, managing a weak smile.

“Shit,” a dark expression crossed his face, “for real?” I nodded. “Then he definitely ain’t worth your time. Let me get you both a little something to drink. You hungry? I could have Munster rustle you up some food.”

I didn’t know who or what Munster was, but my stomach growled all the same. “I could eat some fries.”

“Calli, girl, we don’t just serve fries here, we serve the best damn fries you’ll ever eat.” Xavier winked before stalking off down the bar.

“Thank you,” I said to Josie. “You were right, this is just what I needed.”

“Well, duh.” She grinned, but then her expression sobered. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know what there is to say. He just makes me so... so angry, you know?” I curled my fist against the bar, relishing how the cool surface felt against my heated skin. “When he had the affair, I was hardly surprised. He and Callum were away a lot for training camps and traveling for the game with his team. I can’t ever remember him and Mom being a happily married couple. They didn’t fight or argue a lot, they were just never very warm to one another.

“She let him go without a fight. But when Callum announced he was going too, she was devastated. I begged him to stay. I think I might have even hugged him, and I never did that.” Tears collected in the corners of my eyes, but I felt more in control than I did earlier.

“Your brother is an ass.”

“A motivated ass.” I sobbed. “Sometimes I wonder how much of it was Callum and how much of it was Dad, but he never confided in me or Mom and he didn’t seem too upset to leave Bay View. His friends threw him this huge party at one of their houses. It backed right onto the beach. Me and Za —” I stopped myself. Did I really want to go for a trip down memory lane?

“It’s okay,” Josie said around a knowing smile, “you can talk about him. It might do you good.”

“Me and Zach gatecrashed. Well, we hid in the shadows, watching, pretending that we were gatecrashing.” I smiled at the memory.

I’d been so upset about the news, that Zach wanted to cheer me up. He had stolen one of his mom’s wine coolers and I’d had my first sip of alcohol.

There had been a moment, as we lay in the sand under the cover of darkness, where I thought he might kiss me, but he'd been the perfect gentleman. A couple of years later, when we finally became a couple, I confessed how badly I'd wanted him to kiss me that night. To make all the pain and hurt and disappointment go away.

And he'd confessed he'd wanted to kiss me too.

"It sounds like he was a good kid."

"He was."

Until he wasn't.

"I know he did a real shitty thing to you, Calli. But have you considered that this might be your chance to put the past behind you? Your mom wanted that, right? She wanted you to try."

"Low blow, Jos." I grumbled, snagging my beer the second Xavier slid it in front of me.

"I know, and I'm sorry. But it's like you're still hiding."

"I'm not—"

Oh, who was I kidding?

Of course I was still hiding.

"You came to SU for a reason, don't forget that."

She was right.

I hadn't picked up my camera in almost eight months, since Mom had gotten her diagnosis. The one thing that had always been my sanctuary, my escape, had become too painful.

"I used to take photographs."

"Yeah?" Josie asked, and I nodded. "I did wonder. You have all those cool photos on your wall above your desk."

"It was my thing back in high school. I never felt like I fit in. It was impossible to shine when Callum was the brightest star in our school. My mom got me my first ever camera. An old Nikon. She didn't know the first thing about them, but I learned how to use it. Spent hours in our yard trying to capture the perfect shot." Pain splintered through me, remembering how happy it made her to see me come alive behind the lens, how happy it made me feel.

"Callum was athletic. He lived for the spotlight and attention." I nursed my beer, letting myself fall into the memories. "But I preferred observing, being behind the lens... for those few moments, it let you into another world. There was something thrilling about that. I didn't want to be the person in the

shot, but it was nice to experience what it was like to be them just for a second.”

“You don’t take photographs anymore?”

“I can’t... every time I’ve tried to pick up my camera... it’s just too hard, you know?” I shrugged, draining the rest of my beer. “Xavier,” I called, “can I get something stronger?”

His eyes flicked to Josie and she chuckled. “I’m not her keeper, Xav. If the girl wants the strong stuff, fetch her the strong stuff. I’ve got her.”

“Okay, something stronger coming right up.” He returned a minute later and pushed a glass toward me. I didn’t even sniff the contents, just took a big mouthful, shuddering at the bitter taste.

“Atta girl.” He winked before leaving us alone again.

“I always wanted to come to SU. They have one of the best photographic arts programs in the state. I knew Callum would be here, but I didn’t care. Then Mom got sick and I started talking about changing my plans, taking a year out to figure out what I wanted to do with my life... but she wouldn’t have it. She made me promise...” Silent tears ran down my cheeks as I tried not to fall apart in a biker bar, of all freaking places.

“Oh, babe. Come here.” Josie leaned over and hugged me, as I blubbered into her shoulder.

I was a mess.

“You know what we need?” She held me at arm’s length. “Shooters.”

“Oh, I’m not sure—”

“Relax, I won’t let you get blitzed like you did at the party.”

God, the party.

It felt like a lifetime away, when in reality, it had barely even been a month. And in that time, I’d seen my father once for a few minutes and my brother only long enough to give him a small piece of my mind.

Josie flagged Xavier down and leaned over the bar to whisper something to him. His brows furrowed but then he said, “Yeah, yeah, okay.”

I dried my eyes on my SU hoodie sleeve. It was warm out, but the bar had AC and I’d been cold the last time we were here. “What are we getting?” I asked.

Josie smirked at me and chuckled. “You’ll see.”

“Do you know what else I hate?” I was draped all over Josie, the room spinning as I tried to hold my head upright. “Pickles,” I hiccupped. “I really hate pickles.”

“Not the best idea you’ve ever had, Jos.”

I squinted up to find Xavier glaring at me. “Xavier,” I shrieked. “Look, Jos, it’s Xavier. I bet Xav would make a good big brother. He wouldn’t abandon me and then pretend I didn’t exist, would you Xavy wavy.” I tapped my hands against his stubbled cheeks.

“Yeah, lighten up, Xavier,” Josie added. “You sound like my brother.”

“Which one?” I asked, hiccupping again.

She squinted her eyes, pondering the answer. “Both of them. Definitely both of them. God, big brothers suck.”

“That’s it, I’m cutting you off.” Xavier started clearing up our drinks. “Both of you.”

“What?” Josie’s shrill voice set my teeth on edge. “I’m fine. Tell him, Calli. Tell him I’m fine.”

“She’s fine... I mean look at her... whoa, there’s like two of you.” I blinked trying to make everything go back to normal.

“Fuck,” Xavier grumbled. “You two, don’t move. I mean it, Josie. Don’t pull any teenage escape bullshit.” He jabbed his finger at her.

“Ooh he’s so growly, like a bear.” I snickered.

“I bet he’s calling the cavalry,” she grumbled.

“Cavalry?”

“Yup, Joel.”

“Oh no!” My eyes almost bugged. I didn’t want Joel to see me like this. In fact, I didn’t want to see him at all. I’d done a horrible thing leading him on.

I was a bad person, a horrible, bad person.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” I groaned into the crook of my arm.

“We weren’t supposed to get drunk?” Josie asked.

“No! I wasn’t supposed to be a horrible person to your brother.”

“Ah, don’t worry about Joely. He soon got over you, banging one of the cheerleaders at a party.”

“He did that?”

“Oh shiiiiit, did I say that out loud?” She clapped a hand over her eyes.

“He really did that?” My stomach sank.

Josie nodded. “The night of the fair.” Sympathy shone in her eyes as she

peeled her fingers away. “I’m so sorry.”

“I deserve it.”

“Don’t talk crazy. You had your reasons. Besides, he has that stupid rule.”

“You mean the ‘don’t touch a teammate’s sister’ rule?”

“Yes, it’s a stupid, *stupid* rule. What if the sister is hot?” She flung her arm wide. “What if she’s clever and smart and has amazing tongue tricks? What if she can do this incredible thing with her—”

“I get it, I get it. She’s a catch.”

“Damn right, she’s a catch. Any teammate would be a lucky guy to snag her.”

“Brad is—”

“Don’t.” She smushed my lips together with her fingers. “Don’t you dare say it. I knew, I fucking knew he was a Scorpion, and I went there anyway and then I went and caught all these stupid feelings... dammit, Calli, what am I going to do? Joel is going to lose his shit if he ever finds out.”

“I’m too drunk to give you any advice.” My head hung on my shoulders like a limp noodle. “Not that I have any. I mean look at me. I’ve been sneaking around with Zach—”

Josie’s eyes widened, but she wasn’t looking me at me anymore. She was looking over my shoulder. “You need to revisit the part where you just said you’ve been sneaking around with Zach.” She smirked.

I didn’t need to turn around to see him, I felt him. The hairs along the back of my neck prickled with awareness as I inhaled a shaky breath.

“You’re not Joel,” Josie said bluntly.

“He was... busy. I said I’d come.”

“I bet you did.” She shot me a knowing glance.

“So what is this exactly?”

I finally found the courage to turn around and face him. His eyes glittered with something or maybe it was just the alcohol swimming through my veins.

“We’re drunk.”

“You don’t say.” His brows drew together making him look funny.

“Calli’s father called and upset her so we decided to—”

My hand flew out covering her mouth. “You can go,” I said, trying to sound as sober as possible. “We can call an Uber.”

“There’s some scary guy over there expecting me to give you both a ride home, so not gonna happen, sweet pea. Let’s go.”

“Sweet pea, you call her sweet pea? Oh my god—” I pressed my hand closer to Josie’s lips, trying to drown out her words.

Zach lowered his face, rubbing the back of his neck as if he couldn’t quite believe what he’d walked in on. But I saw the trace of a smirk lift the corner of his mouth as he looked at me through his thick lashes.

My stomach clenched.

Damn him.

Why did he have to be standing there looking all gorgeous? Like a handsome white knight sent to save the princess from her ivory tower. I snickered, imagining him riding in on a beautiful horse.

“Horse?” he asked.

Oops.

I must have said that out loud.

“You should have a drink with us, Messiah,” Josie suggested. “One for the road.”

“I think you’ve had enough.” He glanced around the bar before his eyes grazed my face again.

He looked pissed.

“Come on, let’s go.”

“Party pooper.” With a reluctant huff, Josie slid off the stool and stumbled into him. “Oops, I must have tripped.”

“Yeah, I bet you did. What the fuck did you give them?”

“Hey, don’t look at me, man,” Xavier replied. “Your girl can be hella persuasive.”

“Oh, I’m not his—”

“She’s eighteen,” Zach growled.

“It’s a college town, everyone is eighteen. You need a hand with that?”

“I think you’ve done enough.”

“Suit yourself, man.”

“Bye, Xavy wavy, thanks for the drinks,” I sang, climbing down off the stool. Zach tried to help me, but I shooed him off. “I’m fine.”

He grumbled something beneath his breath, but I didn’t catch it over the roar of blood in my ears.

Zach was here... he was here, and he was going to give us a ride home.

Why?

Why was he being so nice all of a sudden, so freaking reasonable?

My head hurt just thinking about it.

“You have a car?” I blurted out, leaning closer to his arm despite refusing his offer of help. I was fine, even if the room was spinning so quick, I felt like I was on a Tilt-A-Whirl.

“Whoa.” I grabbed ahold of his thick bicep, steadying myself.

“You good?” His gruff voice was magnetic, and slowly, I lifted my eyes to his, electricity crackling between us.

“Do you feel that?” I said part-awed, part-freaked the hell out.

“Yeah.” He swallowed thickly, his Adam’s apple pressing against his throat. I’d never noticed anyone’s throat before. but Zach had a nice throat, the kind of throat I wanted to lean in and lick.

“Calli?”

His voice startled me, and I blinked up at him. “Y- yeah?”

“You look like you’re about to kiss me... or bite me.”

“I...” Heat rolled through me.

“Hey, lovebirds,” Josie yelled from the door breaking our connection, “let’s roll.”

“Jesus, this isn’t what I had in mind.” Zach went to walk off, but I grabbed his arm again.

“What did you have in mind?”

His eyes grew darker. “Trust me, sweet pea, you don’t want to know.”

Chapter
TWENTY
FOUR

Zach

FUCK.

I wanted to kiss her.

I wanted to take Calli in my arms and slide my mouth over hers until we both had no other choice but to use each other for air.

But anger vibrated inside me. She was drunk with Josie at some dive bar on the edge of town.

What the fuck was she doing there?

When Joel had gotten the call, we were all hanging out at the frat house. I didn't particularly want to be there, but the exhibition game was this weekend. And Brad was right, the team were cautious after Callum and I had gone at it. We'd drunk some beer, shot some pool, and bonded over our hopes and dreams for the upcoming season.

I'd overheard Joel yelling down the phone at someone and tried to do the right thing asking him if everything was okay.

I hadn't expected him to ask me if I could go pick up Josie and Calli from some biker bar.

We managed to get outside. Calli was still draped over me like a bad rash but Josie seemed okay. "Brad didn't want to come?" she blurted out.

"I didn't ask him," I replied. The second Joel had said the girls were at a bar drunk, I'd hightailed it out of there.

"Oh." Her expression fell as she stared up at me. "Were you guys—no, don't answer that. I don't want to know."

"We were at the frat house," I said. "Guys only. But Josie, a little word of advice..."

Fuck what was I saying?

I didn't care if little Molineux got her heart broken by one of the guys.

Did I?

My eyes flickered to the drunk girl by my side. I was a fucking hypocrite if I lectured Josie and Brad on their relationship, when I was imagining being balls deep in Calli every time I saw her.

"I don't feel so good," Calli croaked.

"Come on." I slid my arms under her legs and hoisted her up against my body.

Josie fought a knowing smile, despite the hurt in her eyes. She knew it

was different with us—she knew we had history. Deep down, I also think she knew that I wasn't like the other guys on the team.

“You good?” I asked her.

“Yeah.” Josie nodded. “Be careful with her.”

Calli was barely awake as we walked the remaining distance to my car.

“Think you can stand?” I whispered against her hair.

“Hmm-mmm.”

Lowering her down, I leaned her against the car while I dug out my keys. Josie climbed into the back and I helped Calli in the front. I couldn't explain it, but I needed her close.

I went around and got in the driver's side, taking a second to watch Calli. Her head was pressed against the window, her eyes screwed shut. In fact, her whole face seemed tense as if she was warding off a nightmare... or the urge to puke.

“Sweet pea?”

“Uh... yeah...?” She cracked an eye open at me.

“You going to be okay?”

“I don't know.” Her sad smile almost gutted me. “It hurts, Zach. Everything hurts.”

I knew she wasn't talking about her impending hangover.

Gripping the wheel, I stared straight ahead, trying to tamp down the tsunami of emotion I felt every time I looked at her.

She was my Achilles heel. My Kryptonite. Still, after all this time, Calli was my weakness.

I was done denying it.

I just needed to figure out what the fuck I intended on doing about it. Because Brad was right. She was off-limits. The team wouldn't bend their stupid sister code for anyone. Especially not me, their star point guard. They wanted me to be focused, one hundred and ten percent on the ball. I was their meal ticket, their secret weapon to take them all the way to March Madness... to help them win.

Calli shuffled on the seat, leaning her head to the other side. She was closer now, and I wanted nothing more than to reach out and touch her, to brush the hair from her face and lose myself in her big whiskey eyes.

“Zach,” she croaked.

“Yeah, Calli?”

“Drive fast... I'm trying really hard not to ruin your nice car.”

Quiet laughter spilled from my lips as I gunned the engine and pulled into the flow of traffic.

This girl.

This fucking girl.

I PULLED up to Abrams ten minutes later and cut the engine. Calli was out cold, the gentle rise and fall of her chest hypnotic.

“I need my bed,” Josie groaned. “Are you okay dealing with sleeping beauty if I head up to my dorm?”

“Give me a second and we’ll all walk up together.”

She met my narrowed gaze in the rear-view mirror. “I appreciate your concern, Messiah, but I think I’ve got it.”

“Straight to your dorm, Josie. You don’t want to go over there and do something you might regret.”

“I wasn’t—” She stopped herself, guilt shining in her eyes. “Fine.” An indignant huff slipped through her lips as she slid across the seat and shouldered the door. Climbing out, Josie paused at the last second. “Zach?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for not letting me go over there and do something stupid.”

I nodded, too overwhelmed to reply.

I watched Josie as she disappeared into the dorm building and then I got out and went around to the passenger side. I’d have to carry Calli unless by some small miracle she woke up and found her legs.

“Z- Zach?” It was a muted groan.

“Yeah, sweet pea, it’s me.” I managed to pull her from the car and into my arms.

“What’s happening?” she asked.

“Ssh. I’ve got you.”

That seemed to settle her, but it only made my heart beat harder.

I cradled her against my chest as I carried her into Abrams. A couple of girls were milling in the hall and gasped when they saw me.

“Is she okay?” one asked.

“Nothing a good night’s sleep and a gallon of water won’t fix.”

They both sighed dreamily as I stalked off toward the elevator. Of course

she had to live on the second floor.

Thankfully, Calli's hall was empty when the doors pinged open. Until I realized my rookie error. Her key card. How the fuck was I going to find her key card?

"Calli?" I whispered, shaking her gently as we came to stop outside her door. "Calli."

"Hmm-mmm." She murmured, cuddling up closer to my body.

Shit, I was going to have to put her down.

Holding her weight with one arm, I gently lowered her legs to the ground, keeping her close to my body as I fumbled in her pockets to search for the key card. Eventually, it grazed my fingers and I plucked it out, reaching around her to open the door.

"Let's get you to bed," I mumbled to myself since Calli was still out of it.

I picked her up again and carried her straight into the bedroom, laying her on the bed. "Z- Zach?" Her eyes flickered open, and I froze. "What are you —"

"Ssh, sweet pea," I said, brushing the flyaway hairs out of her face. "Sleep."

"Stay..." she whispered, her fingers twisting into my t-shirt. "Please."

"Calli, I'm not sure—"

"Please." Her glassy eyes pleaded with me. "Things always felt better when you were next to me."

Fuck.

Calli began trying to strip out of her clothes, her clumsy uncoordinated movements making me smile.

"A little help?" I asked.

"I can do it," she slurred, her head rolling as she tried to pull the hoodie off her body.

"Calli, stop." Swatting her hands away, I gathered the material in my fingers and gently eased it over her head.

She dropped onto the pillows with a gentle *thud*. "That's better." I couldn't help but look at her as she shifted and wriggled to get comfortable.

In fact, I couldn't take my fucking eyes off her.

Calli let out a little sigh, her eyes closed and her chest rose and fell with every breath. I waited, certain she'd fallen back to sleep, then I went to leave.

But her hand shot out, grabbing me. "Stay," her voice was a pleading whisper, "Please".

“Yeah.” I swallowed over the ball of emotion in my throat. “Okay.”

Toeing off my sneakers, I pulled off my t-shirt and crawled into bed beside her. It was only a single, with barely room for the two of us. But Calli snuggled close, our bodies pressed together. “I’ve missed this,” she said quietly, the liquor still coating her words. “I’ve missed you, Zach.”

She lifted her head, her lips grazing my throat. My body stirred to life, anticipation and need vibrating beneath my skin. It would be so easy to roll Calli underneath me and take her. She wanted me. Even in her inebriated state, she still wanted me, as if her body sensed I was close. But I wasn’t about to fuck her while she was wasted. Because the next time I was inside her, I wanted her to remember every single detail.

Her hands started exploring my skin, setting me on fire.

“Sweet pea,” I warned. “What are you doing?”

“I- I don’t know,” she admitted. “But I don’t want to stop.”

Fuck. She wasn’t making this easy. I cupped her face and tilted her to me. “Sleep.”

Calli blinked, hurt flashing there. “You don’t wa—”

“Don’t even go there,” I said. “You’re drunk. I don’t want you to do something you’ll regret in the morning.”

“Asshole Zach would.”

“Yeah, well asshole Zach would do a lot of things, so it’s probably a good thing asshole Zach isn’t here right now.” I tucked her back against my chest, hoping she would drop it. Now wasn’t the time for a heart to heart.

Relief spread through me, but then she pressed a single kiss to my throat and my entire body froze, waiting.

A beat passed.

And another.

My skin burning for her.

But eventually her breathing evened out and I knew she was asleep.

Calliope James was asleep in my arms and I hadn’t felt such peace in a long time.

SOMETHING BRUSHED MY NOSE, rousing me from a deep sleep. I cracked my eyes open to find Calli’s hair fanned over my face. At some point in the

night, she'd rolled away from me, her ass brushing dangerously close to my morning wood.

Jesus, she felt good.

My arm hung possessively over her waist as I spooned her, and our legs were tangled together with easy familiarity, as if we did this all the time. But despite our precarious position, I still had the almighty need to drag her closer, to erase every molecule of space between us.

"Zach?" My name was a sleepy sigh.

"Yeah?"

"Just checking." Her soft laughter was like music to my ears.

My fingers tickled her ribs. "Nice, Calli. Real nice."

She became a breathless mess under my touch, thrashing and bucking to get away, but I had her completely at my mercy. Her skin was soft and warm as I trailed my fingers along the curve of her waist. Calli settled, letting me explore the dips and planes of her body.

"What are you doing?" Her voice quivered.

"I have no fucking idea," I admitted.

All I knew was I had to touch her. I wanted to.

"I'm a mess," Calli whispered.

I pulled her hair off her shoulder and pressed a small kiss there. A shiver ran through her entire body, sending a rush of blood straight to my dick. Not that he needed any encouragement.

"What happened yesterday?"

"What do you mean? N- nothing happened, I was—"

"Ass over elbow drunk in some biker bar with mascara streaked all down your cheeks."

"I need a minute." She shot from the bed leaving me cold and slipped into the bathroom without even looking at me.

I rolled onto my back, pinching my temples, and let out a heavy sigh.

Five minutes later, when she still hadn't returned, I climbed out of bed and walked to the door. "Calli?" I knocked.

"Just a minute." Panic coated her words.

I pressed my forehead against the wood. Even from here, I could sense her torment. "Calli?"

She didn't answer, but screw that. I grabbed the door handle and pushed.

"What are you—"

"What's wrong?"

Floods of tears rolled down her cheeks as she braced the counter, staring at herself in the mirror. The sight of her standing there, her heart breaking, was like a punch to the gut.

“Sweet pea, talk to me.” I inched forward, sweeping my hands up her arms. Our eyes connected in the glass, and I saw the slight hitch in her breath.

“Why does it always feel so good?” she whispered. “It shouldn’t...”

“I know, babe, I know.” The magnetic force between us had me dipping my head to taste the skin right underneath her ear. Calli gasped, a full body shiver rolling through her.

“I’m a mess.”

She’d said the same thing in bed. But she didn’t look like a mess to me, she looked perfect. Real and vulnerable, her face chock full of emotion. They said the eyes were a window to the soul, well I could see the grief and heartache Calli harbored there.

“I am so fucking sorry about your mom,” I said once more.

“My dad called, inviting me to the exhibition game. Even now, even after everything... he doesn’t get it...” I felt the shuddering breath she took all the way down to the pit of my stomach. “I know they’re my family... I know I promised her I would try, but I don’t think I can do it anymore. I don’t think I can keep letting them hurt me like this.” Big fat tears rolled down her cheeks and I couldn’t stand it for a second longer.

I spun Calli around and tugged her into my arms. Thank fuck she let me hold her because I needed to do this. It was either that, or march over to Callum’s place and finish what I started the other night.

“What are you doing, Zach?” She peeked up at me, the flash of vulnerability in her eyes stealing my breath.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, my heart thumping in my chest.

She was the only girl to ever get me—the only girl to ever own a piece of my heart.

And she’d broken it.

But somewhere along the line, hate had turned into something more. Something I couldn’t contain or control.

My fingers glided up the side of her throat and gently gripped her chin.

“Zach?” she croaked as I lowered my face to hers. “I don’t think this is a good—”

My mouth fixed over hers, swallowing her protests. I didn’t want to hear that this was wrong or a mistake or a bad idea... I just wanted to feel.

Because for as much as it unnerved me, that's what it came down to.
Calli made me feel.

She made my heart beat a little harder and my blood pump a little faster. She ignited a fire inside me; one that swept into a raging inferno whenever she was around.

My hand slid into her hair, deepening the kiss. She was reluctant at first, barely kissing me back, but the second my tongue slipped past her lips, Calli melted against me.

"Zach," she whimpered, her hands pressing against my chest. Her touch fanned the flames rising inside me. I backed her up against the counter, lifting her onto the edge and forcing my body between her legs. Her fingers traced the hard ridges of my stomach, sending shivers racing up and down my spine.

Hooking my hands around Calli's ass, I dragged her closer, grinding my rock-hard dick against her core.

"Zach," she pulled away, staring at me through lust drunk eyes, "I'm a mess. I should take a shower—"

"Does it matter when I'm only going to dirty you up again?" I nipped her neck, sucking the skin there.

"Oh God..." Her fingers clawed at my skin as I continued trailing my tongue up and down her throat.

Without warning, I picked Calli up and marched us into the walk-in shower. Flipping on the jets, her shrieks were drowned out by the stream of water as it beat down on us. But the second I pushed her up against the tiled wall and started kissing her, Calli's anger melted away. She rocked her hips against me, making us both groan.

"I need inside you." I kissed her deeply, plunging my tongue deep into her mouth. It was dirty and messy but so fucking right.

The thought hit me out of left field. I knew things were changing between us. I knew my hatred was softening into something else. But this moment felt significant. It felt like the first step to putting the past behind us and looking to the future.

Calli reached between our bodies and found the waistband of my shorts, pushing them down my hips enough for my dick to spring free. Her slim fingers circled the base and started pumping.

"Fuck, Calli," I gritted out, loving how good it felt.

How good she felt.

Taking her weight with one arm, I trapped her body between me and the

wall and managed to work a hand between us to find her pussy. “These need to come off.” I tore at the soaked material before pressing two fingers inside her.

“God, that feels...” Calli swallowed, her head falling back against the tiles. But I needed her eyes. I needed to look into her eyes as she came apart for me.

Touching my head to hers, I pinned her there. “Eyes,” I ordered as I hooked my fingers deeper. Calli smothered a moan, rocking against my hand, letting herself get lost in the sensations.

She let go of my dick, holding onto my shoulders as I took her to the brink. Her body began to tremble, and her eyes started to flutter again.

“Eyes, sweet pea,” I growled. “I want to see you when you fall apart.”

They flared with indignation, but I saw the flash of lust. Calli liked it when I took control.

She just didn’t want to like it.

“What do you need?” I held my fingers still, not giving her what she wanted.

“I...”

“Use your words, Calli.” My eyes narrowed, waiting. Hoping she’d fall off the edge of sanity with me.

“Zach, please...” she tried to wiggle against me, but I pressed the entire length of my body against her until she had nowhere to go.

“Please, what, sweet pea? Say it...” *I need you to say it.*

She pressed her lips together defiantly, but it only made me harder.

I speared my fingers inside her, making her cry out. “What. Do. You. Need?”

Calli inhaled a shaky breath and then she whispered the one word I was desperate to hear.

“You.”

Chapter
TWENTY
FIVE

Calli

A GROWL of approval rumbled in Zach's chest as the word hung between us.

This was a bad idea, something I'd probably regret tomorrow. But I was tired of always doing the right thing.

So tired.

Zach stared at me as he slowly worked his fingers inside me, rubbing his thumb over my clit in a way that had my body shattering apart in no time.

"Beautiful," he sighed, still watching me as he grabbed his dick and slid it through my wetness, teasing me.

A muffled moan built in my throat. He felt so good—too good.

Sinking into me with one smooth stroke, Zach fucked me hard against the tiles, the water still raining down around us. There was something symbolic about this moment, like we were being cleansed. The water absolving us of our sins and secrets, washing them into oblivion.

I clung to him, letting him ride my body, taking me to some faraway place where there was no pain or betrayal or heartache. Nothing existed there except for this, us... me and the boy I'd once loved with my whole heart.

"Fuck, Calli... you feel..."

Pleasure drenched my veins as we rocked together. Waking up in Zach's arms, I'd panicked. I hadn't wanted him to see me weak and upset. But the second he'd stepped into the bathroom, and our eyes connected in the mirror, I knew I wouldn't be able to deny him.

Zachary Messiah knew me; he knew my heart. I didn't want to risk giving it to anyone else. Not when people had a history of leaving me.

My eyes started to flutter closed, but Zach pinned me with a hard look. He needed to see me, to know this was real.

He leaned down, kissing me, sliding his tongue against mine in deep erotic licks. "I want to hate you, Calli, I want to hate you so much..."

"But you can't." I gave him a sad smile because I couldn't hate him either.

Something flashed in Zach's eyes, but he didn't reply. Instead, he loved my body, silently tell me everything I needed to know.

Zach didn't hate me.

He hated to love me.

And the feeling was entirely mutual.

“BETTER?” Zach asked me as I entered the room, towel drying my hair. His eyes ran down my body, the oversized Steinbeck SU t-shirt barely covering my thighs. But surprisingly, I didn’t feel shy under his intense gaze, I felt all warm inside again.

I felt strong.

“Yeah, thanks.” My cheeks pinked as I realized my slip. “Crap, I didn’t mean—”

“I know what you meant, Calli.” He patted the bed and I climbed up beside him. “So your dad’s still an asshole, huh?”

“Yup. I’ve kinda accepted that’s how it’ll always be. He just doesn’t get me.” A small shrug lifted my shoulders.

I wasn’t male for starters, or an athlete. Aside from the DNA we shared we had nothing in common. Not a single thing.

Silence settled between us as I scooped down and lay beside Zach, shoulder to shoulder. Just the two of us like old times up in the tree house, basking in the aftermath of what just happened.

“Can I ask you something?” I said, breaking the thick silence.

“You want to know what happened junior year.”

“Yeah...” I steeled my spine. “I’ve thought about that moment a lot. Replayed Homecoming and the surrounding days over and over in my mind.” I swallowed the fresh wave of tears. I didn’t want to cry, not again. But it was just so damn frustrating.

Zach stiffened beside me, but I didn’t look over at him. If I did, the tears would fall, and I knew I needed to brace myself for whatever was about to come.

The truth of why he betrayed me so brutally.

“It all seems so insignificant now,” he said quietly.

Insignificant?

How could anything about what happened that year be insignificant?

I’d given him my heart, my body... my virginity, and then he’d cast me aside for the game that had ruined my entire childhood.

“My dad informed me at the beginning of junior year that he wanted me to play for the team.”

“What? I don’t understand.” My voice cracked as I tried to rein in my emotion.

“He said I’d had enough time to rebel and that it was time to become who I was born to be. Obviously, I told him to go fuck himself.”

“You never said anything?” Hurt lashed my insides. Back then, Zach and I didn’t keep secrets from one another, at least, I didn’t think we had.

I guessed I was wrong.

“Because I knew what it would do to us.” He let out a steady breath. “You hated basketball more than me, Calli. I didn’t want to put you through that. I had no intentions of ever playing. I didn’t want to be Declan 2.0. I just wanted to be me...” Zach trailed off, lost to the memories.

“I was so excited about Homecoming, about finally being with you. But right before I came to pick you up, my father collared me and started saying all this stuff about the family legacy and doing the right thing and that I was too young to be in love. He kept harping on about childhood sweethearts rarely going the distance. I knew he wasn’t going to let it drop, but I wanted to enjoy Homecoming with my girl, so I pushed it to the back of my mind.”

Zach’s hand found mine and he tangled our fingers together. It felt so natural... so right. But there was still a vastness between us. “That night was one of the best nights of my life, Calli. I realized I didn’t care about my dad hounding me to play, it was just a game. A stupid game. I figured I could play and keep him happy and we could still look forward to our future. So I decided to tell you.”

His fingers tightened around mine, and I finally risked peeking over at him. Zach’s eyes were closed, his brows drawn tight. I wanted to smooth my fingers over his face and reassure him that whatever he was about to say didn’t matter. Too much had happened since. Declan was in a coma unlikely ever to wake again, and my mom was gone. Between us, we’d lost too much already. But maybe together, we could wade through the grief and the pain toward a place of healing.

“I was sick, remember?” he went on. “As soon I felt better, I planned on talking to you.”

My brows crinkled as I searched my memories. “I remember. I came over to see if you were okay, I was worried. But when I got there, your dad said he thought you were sleeping. He invited me to wait while he checked on you.”

Mr. Messiah had never been my biggest fan. He thought I was a distraction Zach didn’t need, and he’d never tried to hide his feelings toward me. It’s probably why Zach didn’t invite me over often and we hung out in the treehouse instead.

“He came back down and said you were sleeping, that I should probably give it a couple more days.”

“I woke up, Calli,” Zach said flatly, and I knew if I looked over at him again, his jaw would be clenched. I could hear the tension in his voice, the pain. “I came downstairs, but I heard the two of you talking. I should have just announced myself... don’t go snooping for answers you might not like, right?” He let out a bitter chuckle.

“Zach, I don’t understand.” I sat up, needing to see him. He pushed up on his elbow and gave me a sad smile.

“I heard you, Calli. I heard you tell my dad that you didn’t love me.”

I reared back, hardly able to believe my ears. “*What?*”

“I heard everything. There I was, ready to sacrifice myself to the thing I hated more than anything in the entire world so that we could have an easy life, so that he wouldn’t try to drive us apart, and you were telling him I meant nothing to you.”

Confusion swam through my veins because I could remember that conversation with Mr. Messiah and it went nothing like the way Zach was suggesting.

“Zach, that’s not—”

“Stop, Calli. Just stop.” He let out a frustrated sigh. “It doesn’t matter anymore. All this time, I thought I hated you. I wanted to. Fuck. I wanted to hate you so much. And then I saw you and it was like being struck by lightning. I don’t hate you, Calli, I never could. I just hated myself for trusting you. I hated myself for giving you the power to hurt me. And in the end, I hated that I wasn’t enough for you.”

“Zach,” I reached for him, but he flinched. My stomach sank. “I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about. I didn’t tell your dad I didn’t love you.” In fact, I’d spent most of the awkward conversation defending our relationship.

“AH, Calli, it’s nice to see you again.”

“Hi, Mr. Messiah, I just wondered if Zach was feeling better?” I said, trying not to sound too eager. I knew he didn’t particularly like me. Or rather, he didn’t like that his son liked me so much. But I hadn’t heard much from Zach all day and I wanted to make sure he was okay.

“Come in, I’ll go see how he is. But I’ll warn you now, he’s been pretty

out of it all day.”

“Oh, I don’t want to be a nuisance.”

“Nonsense, come in, make yourself at home. I’ll just be a second.” He disappeared into the hall and I took a seat on one of the stools at the breakfast counter.

A couple of minutes later, he returned. “He’s still out for the count, sorry.”

My stomach sank. “Oh, okay.” I stood. “Well, I guess I’ll call him later.”

“You know, Calli. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about things for a while now.” He ran a hand over his jaw.

“You have?” My mouth went dry.

“This thing between the two of you, do I need to be worried?”

“W- worried?” I choked out. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“Zach is destined for great things, Calli. He just needs a little push in the right direction. This high school crush you have on each other, it isn’t healthy. And quite frankly, it’s a distraction he doesn’t need. The next couple of years are very important for Zach’s future.”

“Crush?” The words soured on my tongue. “It isn’t... I... I care about Zach a lot, sir.”

“I know.” He grimaced. “And you’re a good kid, Calli. You are. But it’s puppy love. It won’t last. Zach will go off to college and you’ll be stuck here and then what?”

His words lashed at my insides. It wasn’t like that between us. What Zach and I shared wasn’t fleeting, it was real.

I loved him.

I loved him with my whole heart.

He was the only person who got me, the only one who knew what it was like to grow up in the shadow of your sibling. Invisible. Overlooked.

“I love Zach, Mr. Messiah.”

“Love?” He scoffed. “What could you possibly know about love? You’re kids. You don’t love him, Calli. One day you’ll realize what you have isn’t grown up love, and it’ll be too late. You’ll have both have wasted so much time, and for what?”

“You’re right,” I snapped, frustration racing through my veins. “What can we possibly know about love? We’re just kids... what we have isn’t real. Zach will go off to college and leave me and he’ll probably cheat, or I will. Because that’s what people do to each other, isn’t it? They lie and cheat and

break promises. You're right, why the hell would I put myself through that?" My chest heaved with the weight of my words as anger swarmed inside of me.

"I'm glad you're able to see the truth of it," he said looking a little taken aback at my outburst.

"You're right. So, so right." I began to cry and looked at the floor. I needed to get my words out, but thoughts of my parents were choking me, and I couldn't make sense of the overwhelming emotion swelling inside me. I needed a minute. Zach's dad carried on talking, not realizing I'd not finished.

"And that's why he needs to leave, because he's better than this small town."

I finally found my fire. "What me and Zach share isn't like that. I would never hurt your son, and he would never hurt me. We might be young, sir, but don't tell me what I feel isn't real. I would do anything for your son, anything..."

"OH MY GOD," I breathed, tears pricking my eyes. "I did say that... but it wasn't what you think. I would never have... Zach, I loved you." I still love you.

My heart ached as the truth of what had gone down settled into my bones. "I loved you so much, and your father was saying all these things, making it sound like what we had was just some childhood crush. It wasn't..."

"But I heard you, I heard you—"

Taking his hand in mine, I looked at where our fingers twined together. So much anger and heartache and all because he'd heard half a conversation.

Oh, Zach.

"I told him that I didn't love you, yes... but only before I told him that loving you didn't do justice to the way I felt about you. I was in, all in, Zach." Yeah, we were young, babies really where matters of the heart were concerned, but I knew without doubt that Zachary Messiah was my heart, my future.

I didn't want anyone else.

"N- no." Painful realization etched into the lines of his face. "I heard you."

"You heard half a conversation, Zach, that's all."

I couldn't believe that all this time he thought I'd betray him like that.

Didn't he know how deeply I'd loved him? How much I'd wanted to be

his?

But part of me knew the root of his uncertainty. When you grew up being constantly compared to your brother, overlooked because you didn't fit the family mold, your self-esteem weakened until eventually it disappeared altogether. Zach never lived up to his father's expectations just as I'd never lived up to mine. We were two lost souls, vying for attention, desperate to feel worthy and wanted. And we'd found that in each other. We'd found it and gradually, we let it heal us. But the second it got called into question we'd both pulled away because that's what you did when someone you thought you could trust hurt you.

You didn't push for the truth or demand answers. You barricaded your heart and internalized your emotions until love turned to heartache, and slowly, over time, heartache became a festering black hole inside you.

"I- I don't understand." He looked gutted. His eyes two pits of despair.

"He was asking about my plans for the future, about what would happen after you left for college. He said that I was a distraction, that what we had was nothing more than a childhood crush." Sadness coiled around my heart. Zach had spent all this time hating me, wanting to hurt me because of a simple case of crossed wires. He'd walked into half a conversation at the wrong time and not stuck around to listen to the rest.

"I told him that I didn't imagine a future with you or hope we'd survive a long-distance relationship if you left for college... I looked your dad in the eye and told him that I didn't just love you, I understood you. I told him that I trusted you more than anyone else in the world. And if you'd have a stuck around to hear the entire conversation, you would have heard me tell him that one day I was going to marry you, because that's how much I believed in us."

I'd forgotten half of that conversation with Mr. Messiah, the awkward silence that had followed my rather startling confession. But he'd made me so angry, the way he constantly dismissed Zach and his feelings, his relationship with me. We were young, yes, but we shared something most people didn't. We shared a deep sense of disappointment and abandonment toward the people we called family.

Those experiences tethered us. But it was more than that. We'd opened ourselves up and allowed someone else inside, so when Zach cut me out of his life without so much as an explanation, I was crushed.

"I can't believe you did that." He stared at me with awe glittering in his eyes, but it was tarnished with regret.

“I loved you, Zach, and I believed in us. I believed in you.” The words got stuck over the ball of emotion lodged in my throat. “Seeing you step up at that pep rally, watching the principal announce you as the new captain of the Vipers was one of the worst days of my life.” Tears rolled down my cheek as the dam inside me broke wide open.

He shot up and climbed off the bed, standing rigid.

“Zach?” My voice trembled at the anger radiating off him.

“All this time I thought... and he never said anything. He never said a fucking word.”

I was hardly surprised that his dad had left out the part where I tried to fight for his son. He shared the title of world’s shittiest father right alongside mine.

Gingerly climbing off the bed, I went to Zach, taking his hands in mine. “It’s okay,” I said. The truth was finally out, and I already felt lighter. Did I wish things had gone differently? Of course I did. We’d wasted so much time hating one another, hating ourselves. But part of me got it. If I’d have walked in on Zach having a similar conversation, I would have felt the same without all the facts.

I just wished he’d have tried to talk to me first before jumping to conclusions.

“Nothing about this is okay, Calli. I spent an entire year hating you... I gave into his demands because I thought you didn’t care... I thought you...” The fight drained from Zach’s eyes as he dropped down onto the edge of the bed. “Fuck.” He raked a hand through his hair, tugging the ends in frustration. “It was all my fault. All of it.”

“Zach, let’s not—”

“I fucked up.” He stared at me with such intensity, such hopelessness, I felt winded.

I wound my arms around his neck, moving into the space between his legs. “We both messed up. I should have pushed you harder.”

“And I should have given you a chance to explain... fuck, Calli. We wasted all of this time.”

“Maybe it was always supposed to be this way? Maybe we had to go through all the hurt and anger and pain to realize it was real?”

Because it was.

I loved Zach.

Part of me never stopped.

He pulled me down onto his thigh, and buried his face in the crook of my neck, breathing me in. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Hey, hey...” I eased back, sliding my face against his cheek, my tears wet between us. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not, nothing about this is okay. But I won’t mess up again, Calli. You’re mine, sweet pea, every single inch of you.”

Warmth spread through me at his bold words. I wanted that—I wanted it so much. It was all I’d ever wanted.

“But what about the team?” I didn’t want to ask the question, but we couldn’t ignore the fact he was a Scorpion... he played basketball with my brother.

“Honestly, I don’t give a fuck what they say. I’m only here to keep my old man off my back.”

I winced at the harsh tone, but I wasn’t entirely convinced he was speaking the truth. I’d seen him play with Jasmine. I’d witnessed how free he’d looked in that moment.

“The exhibition game is this weekend,” I reminded him, choosing not to push him about it. “Maybe we should wait until after that to...” I trailed off, realizing how presumptuous I sounded.

“Go on, say it.” A faint smile traced his lips.

“Say what?” I played dumb, curling my fingers into the hair at the back of his neck.

“Whatever you were about to say.” His lips hovered over mine, teasing. My body stirred to life, desperate for more of his kisses. His touch and attention.

I was already losing myself in Zachary Messiah again, but this time, I knew he’d be there to catch me.

“I’m waiting, sweet pea...”

“What’s it worth to you?”

“A negotiation?” His brow rose playfully, and I nodded around a smile of my own. “Name your terms.”

“I was hoping you might be able to get Jasmine and some of the kids at the center tickets to the game. I think it would really be good for them.”

“Already done.”

“W- what?” I gasped.

Zach grinned. “Had the idea the other day. She’s got raw talent... she just needs the right direction.”

“Thank you.” I kissed him. “Thank you so much.”

“There is one catch though.”

My body stilled as I narrowed my eyes at him. “Why do I not like the sound of this?”

“I want you there.”

“No, Zach, I can’t...” Dread flooded me. “I can’t be there while my dad and Callum are—”

“I know, babe.” He touched his forehead to mine. “I wouldn’t ask unless it was really important. Jasmine needs you there, Calli. She needs to know she can depend on you...” He hesitated, a rare flash of vulnerability sparkling in his eyes.

“And I need you there, sweet pea. I really fucking need you there.”

Chapter
TWENTY
SIX

Zach

MY HEART CRASHED VIOLENTLY against my chest as I waited for Calli's answer. I was railroading her, playing dirty by using Jasmine as an excuse to get her to the game. But I needed her there.

"Yes," she breathed. "I'll come to the game."

Sweet relief coursed through my veins. It was more than I deserved, but I'd take it. I'd take whatever I could where she was concerned.

Fuck.

I still couldn't believe I'd gotten it so wrong... although, deep down, I wasn't surprised. Maybe part of me had always known that Calli wouldn't have betrayed me in that way. But I was so fucking angry, full of resentment and bitterness. When I'd heard the words fall from her lips, my world and everything I thought I knew about Calliope James came crashing down around me. All the love and adoration I felt exploded into a blinding rage. Throw in a father determined to get me to bend to his will and a brother who could never put a foot wrong, and my carefully constructed defenses cracked wide open.

If Calli didn't want me, I had no one.

No one.

She was everything... and then she was nothing.

In that split second, I let our love become something dark and twisted because it was easier to believe it had all been a lie than confront her and risk my heart all over again.

"Zach, talk to me," she said, nudging her nose along my cheek. "Tell me what you're thinking."

"I don't even know where to start." I had a giant knot in my stomach and a boatload of regret swimming in my veins. I was drowning, fighting to stay afloat in a torrent of self-hatred and guilt.

She brushed the hair from my eyes. "We were kids..."

"It doesn't change the fact I fucked up," I choked out. "I should have talked to you. I should have..." My voice cracked as I swallowed over the lump in my throat.

"Even if you'd have told me and it hadn't gone down like that, I wouldn't have been able to watch you play. I could barely be in the gym without wanting to scratch off my skin. It would have created a wedge between us."

“I should have stood up to him, told him no.”

“Part of you wanted his validation—”

“Calli, that’s not it.” I hadn’t wanted my father’s validation. I wanted him to get off my back. Pacifying him seemed like the easiest way to do that.

“Yes, it is. And do you know how I know that?” She let her lips slide over mine, kissing me softly. “Because even now, even after everything, I find myself wanting the same thing. Our parents are supposed to love us, Zach. They’re supposed to stand by us and support us. It’s hard to accept that is never going to happen.”

“I hate your dad for treating you like this. Callum too.” My arm tightened around her. “You deserve more, Calli. So much more.”

“I have to make my peace with the fact that I’ll never be the child he wanted. But you can. I watched you play ball with Jasmine. It’s inside you, Zach.” Her hand slipped to my chest, right over my heart. “The question is, do you want it?”

Her words sank inside of me. No one had ever stopped to ask me what I wanted. When you were the little brother of an athletic star, you were neglected, forced into the shadows. When my father had demanded I play for the Bay View Vipers, I’d assumed it was a punishment. It had sure felt like it at first. But slowly, over time, I grew to need basketball the way an addict needs the high. It settled my soul. Soothed some of the anger and pain living inside me. Maybe Calli was right. Maybe all this time, I’d been lying to myself.

I stared up at her, trying to reconcile everything that had happened. Not just right now in this moment, but ever since the first day I laid eyes on her. Calli had been such a vital part of my life, looking back now, it was foolish to think I could ever give her up.

She was the only person to ever get me. To know what it was like to be constantly compared and held to the standard of someone else. But despite all of my old man’s downfalls, he’d never actively pushed me away. He just wanted me to be someone I wasn’t.

Now I was stuck at a crossroads and I had no fucking idea which path to take. The team needed me. Coach Baxter, the college... the fans, they all wanted me to carry them to the championship. Because I was a Messiah, and it was my legacy.

Except, it wasn’t *my* legacy. It was Declan’s. I was stepping into his shoes, assuming his position. If I did it—if we got to March Madness and we

won—I wouldn't be remembered for *my* successes, I'd be remembered as the guy who held things together while his brother was lying in some facility fighting for his life.

"I'm so fucking confused," I confessed. "Nothing makes sense anymore." A heaviness settled in my chest.

I was stuck here living Declan's life, like his second-rate replacement. If he woke up tomorrow and defied the odds and walked out of the hospital, I knew I would be cast aside. Because people's loyalty to me was only good so long as he was out of action. And I'd allowed it to happen. I'd allowed my father to negotiate the transfer because Calli was right, part of me craved his approval.

Deep down inside me, there was a child desperate to shine in his own right. Coming to SU, being needed by the team and Coach Baxter, being praised by my father, it fed my need to be validated. But it was all a lie. A sham. People didn't really care that I was here, they just cared that they had someone to fill Declan's shoes.

What a fucking mess.

"I need some air," I said, gently nudging Calli off my lap.

"You're leaving?" The hurt in her voice was nothing compared to the dejection shining in her eyes.

"I need some space." I shot up, running a brisk hand over my face. "Not from you... never from you, but I need time to figure some things out." My chest was too tight, and I felt like I couldn't breathe.

"Let me help you." A smile lifted the corners of her mouth, but it quickly died when I shook my head.

"You can't, sweet pea." It came out tighter than I wanted it to. "This is one thing I need to figure out alone."

Each step away from her was like a knife to the heart. I wanted to stay here. I wanted to strip Calli naked and bury myself deep inside her until nothing else existed, but my head was a fucking mess.

As I reached the door handle, her voice rang out like a shotgun. "Zach, wait."

I glanced back, my chest squeezing at her crushed expression. I wanted her to beg me to stay, but at the last second Calli's expression steeled and she whispered, "I hope you find what you're looking for."

I gave her a small nod and got the hell out of there.

“I DIDN’T EXPECT you to call,” Maverick said as he approached me. I snatched the ball to my chest and stopped to greet him.

“Me neither,” I admitted. “I’m sorry to bring you out here but I needed to talk to someone who’d understand.”

“Don’t be. I’m glad you called. Let me guess, you and Calli finally had that talk?”

“Something like that.”

He motioned to the bench and we both sat down. Placing the ball at my feet, I grabbed a bottle of water and chugged it down. “You were right.”

“You’ve going to have to give me a little more than that...” He shot me an amused smile.

“I got it wrong. Back when we were in high school... I got it so fucking wrong.”

“Hey, man,” he clapped me on the shoulder, “it happens to the best of us.”

“I think deep down I always expected her to leave me.” My head hung low as I circled my thumbs. “Declan was the popular one, the one all the girls wanted. He was the golden child...”

“You were scared of losing her.”

“Yeah, I was fucking scared. Calli was the only person in the world who got me. So when I heard her tell my dad she didn’t love me, I didn’t stick around to hear the rest.” I’d gone into full defensive mode, barricading my heart behind a steel fortress. At the time, I’d told myself cutting her out of my life was the right thing to do—the strong thing. I didn’t need her. I didn’t need anyone.

“My old man encouraged it,” I murmured.

“What do you mean?”

I let out an exasperated breath, meeting Maverick’s confused stare. “After things between me and Calli went south, he told me I needed to forget about her. Said that now Declan was off at college it was my time to shine and follow in their footsteps. And I fell for it.”

I’d been so angry and hurt, that I knew it was the perfect revenge. Not only would I cut Calli out of my life for good, but I’d become one of the best damn players Bay View had ever seen. I’d become the thing she’d always hated.

What a fucking chump I was.

“He played me.” Because I was too heartbroken to see the truth. “I didn’t even give her a chance to explain.” I slammed my fist down on the bench.

“You know, my dad was an asshole. A real controlling, interfering type.”

“Was?” I asked.

“Still is.” Maverick shrugged. “But I cut him out of my life for good in senior year.”

“You think I should cut him out—”

“That’s not what I’m saying. You only get one family, Zach. Only you know if his actions come from a genuine place. I knew my father’s didn’t. He didn’t care about me. He only cared about his legacy, about keeping up appearances. But something tells me that it might not be so cut and dry with your dad.”

I considered his words. Timothy Messiah wasn’t a bad person, he was just highly driven and motivated. He’d had his shot at going pro cut short, but he was determined not to let that happen to his sons.

Maverick was right, his intentions came from a good place. They just got lost in translation along the way.

“Have you ever told him what *you* want?” Maverick asked.

“Most of time, I’m not even sure what I want.”

If I wanted basketball, I would always be in Declan’s shadow. If I didn’t, I’d be giving up something that had become a part of me. Something that, no matter how hard it was to admit, I needed.

And I was good.

No, I was fucking great.

I had a shot at going all the way. But I’d never let myself think too far ahead... until Declan’s accident.

“You need to talk to someone,” Maverick said.

“Why do you think I called you?” The corner of my mouth tipped.

“I don’t mean me. I mean a professional or the college guidance counselor. Someone with actual training.”

“I’m not going to see a shrink.”

“It might help. You have a lot of residual shit going on in there.” He motioned to my head. “Add in what happened to Declan and you transferring here, and now this stuff with Calli... it’s bound to take its toll.”

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence,” I snorted. But deep down, I knew he was right.

The chances of Declan ever waking up grew smaller with each passing day. Even if he did wake up, he would never play ball again. He would never win March Madness or draft to the NBA. Declan's dreams were over... but mine were still alive.

And that was a hard fucking thing to swallow.

How was I supposed to go after what I wanted, knowing he would never get that opportunity?

A ball of emotion lodged in my throat.

"I need to go see my brother," I said. I'd been putting it off for a reason. But I couldn't put it off any longer.

Until I reconciled everything that had happened, I couldn't move forward. I couldn't even begin to figure out what I wanted.

But I also knew I couldn't do it alone.

"So I was wondering..." My fingers went to my hair. "Would you...? Uh..."

"Consider it done." Maverick gave me an understanding nod. "Just name the date and time and I'll be there."

"Thanks, man. I really appreciate it."

"I was thinking we could shoot some hoops," he said, "but how does breakfast sound instead?"

"I could eat."

"Well, let's go. I know just the place."

THE PLACE TURNED out to be Flippers Diner on a quiet street downtown. It was popular with the student crowd, but the last people I expected to find sitting in a booth there were Victoria and Kira.

"Maverick, Zach." She waved us over.

"Did you plan this?" I grumbled, and Maverick chuckled.

"You're kidding right? She's... a lot."

"You're telling me." I hadn't spoken to her since she'd stormed out of my apartment the other day and I'd hoped to keep it that way, at least until after the exhibition game.

"Fancy seeing you two here." She grinned as if everything was fine between us. "Maverick, it's so good to see you."

“Hey, Vic,” he said. “And... Kira, right?”

She nodded. “You’re in town for the exhibition game?”

“Yeah, something like that.” He picked up a menu. “What’s good?”

“The pancakes are to die for,” Kira answered. “But I went with a fruit salad and granola.”

I had to refrain from rolling my eyes.

“So, Zach, how are you?” Victoria’s brow arched and I saw the flash of accusation in her gaze.

Yeah, she was still pissed.

But the feeling was mutual.

“I’m good,” I clipped out, and Maverick slid his eyes to mine in question.

“Ready for the game? I spoke to your parents. They want to do dinner with the team after. Nothing fancy, so I spoke to Trev at The Pivot and he’s going let us have the back room and put on some food. I’m hoping to talk the alumni players into auctioning off their jerseys.” She glanced at Maverick.

“Uh, yeah, sure. Whatever.”

“Excellent. Coach Baxter has arranged full press coverage and there’s going to be an address before the game.” I knew her eyes would have flicked to mine, but I didn’t react.

“Vic, we should go,” Kira said, “or we’ll be late for our appointment at the salon.”

“We have time.” She swished her hair off her shoulder. “I want to talk to the guys about—”

“Another time,” I barked.

Surprise flashed over her expression, quickly morphing to indignation. Victoria didn’t like being dismissed, but I didn’t have the energy to do this.

Kira took the hint, grabbing her purse and standing. “Enjoy your breakfast,” she said, pulling out some bills.

“I’ve got this,” Maverick said.

“So generous.” Victoria beamed at him, reserving a scowl for me. For a second, I thought she was going to dig in her heels and refuse to leave. But to my relief, she grabbed her purse and followed Kira out of the diner.

“Dare I ask?” Maverick let out a low whistle.

“Fuck you, man. Fuck you.”

“I always knew she was trouble. You’ve got to watch your back with girls like Victoria.” He grimaced.

“She thinks she knows about Calli.”

“Does she?”

“Enough to make waves, yeah.” I scrubbed my jaw, anger trickling through my veins.

Although Victoria didn’t know anything, not really, she could still make Calli’s life difficult. More difficult than she already had.

In reality, the worst she could do to me was tell Callum she suspected I still had feelings for Calli. But something told me he already knew; it’s why he’d warned me off her.

“You know if you want to be with her, you’re going to have to come clean eventually?”

“I know. Calli wants to wait until after the game.”

“Smart girl,” he grinned. “So she’ll be there?”

“I hope so. I asked her to come.”

“Was that before or after you fled her dorm room and called me?”

“I didn’t—” Ah, fuck. I totally had. “I guess I have some groveling to do.”

“Yeah, you do. Question is, are you going to stew on your feelings for a little while longer or are you going to grow some balls and show her you’re worth it?”

“If we’re talking about balls, I think you need to look in the mirror,” I teased.

Maverick glowered at me. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Dude, you’re getting married. If Lo doesn’t own your balls now, the second you say, ‘I do’, she will.”

“Fuck,” he breathed. “You’re right.”

For as much as I was joking though, I couldn’t deny the slight pinch around my heart. Maverick was a lucky bastard. He had a girl by his side who shouldered his burdens as if they were her own.

I’d had that once... but I’d lost it.

And although Calli had sounded ready to give me another chance earlier...

Part of me would always wonder if I deserved it.

Chapter
TWENTY
SEVEN

Calli

WHEN I LEFT FOR CLASSES, I was still a little dumbfounded by the events of the morning. But I wanted to give Zach his space. I could sense his anger spiraling out of control and I knew he had a lot to process. Besides, there were still two days until the exhibition game, and I didn't want us to do anything hasty.

Zach needed to focus on the game, and I needed to focus on classes and my session with Jasmine at the center later. Hopefully, it would go a whole lot better than it had on Tuesday.

"There you are," Josie caught up with me. "How are you feeling?" Her eyes glittered with insinuation.

"Is there something you want to ask me?" I could practically smell her desperation.

"Who, me?" She flashed me a salacious grin, leaning in closer. "You had sex this morning."

"What?" My cheeks burned. "No, I didn't."

"Girl, it's written all over your face. But that means he must have stayed over... which means..."

I clapped a hand over her mouth. "You can stop talking now."

She rolled her eyes, muttering something inaudible.

"I mean it, Josie. It's complicated and there are still a lot of things to figure out. Promise me you won't make a big deal out of this."

"I promise." It was muffled against my palm.

Releasing her, I pinned her with a serious look. "I mean it."

"But—"

"No, Josie."

"But—"

"*Seriously?*"

"Gah, do you have any idea how hard this is? I have questions... lots of questions."

"I know," I frowned, "which is exactly why we are *not* talking about this."

"Did something happen? Because you don't seem very relaxed for a girl who just got fu—"

"He left." I let out a heavy sigh.

“Huh?” Josie ground to a halt, snagging my wrist. “What do you mean he left?”

“We had... sex. We talked... things got heavy... then he left.”

“Like he said ‘goodbye, I’ll see you later’ left, or he hightailed it out of there quicker than you could say ‘harder, Zach, harder?’” She smothered a chuckle.

“Oh my god,” I spluttered. “What is wrong with you?”

“You’d be lost without me now.” Josie smirked.

“Yeah, I would. But it doesn’t change the fact you’re a freak sometimes.”

She waved me off. “Back to Zach, which ‘he left’ was it?”

“Somewhere in the middle?” My lips thinned, and it was her turn to frown.

“Well, have you heard from him since?”

“Nope.” The knot in my stomach tightened. “I’m giving him space.”

“Noooo, babe,” she groaned. “That’s the last thing you want to do. He might be having a crisis of confidence. You need to tell him how you feel and lock that shit down.”

“Tell who how you feel?” Victoria and Kira appeared out of nowhere.

“Uh, private conversation.” Josie wagged her finger between us.

“Well maybe if it’s private you should try *not* having it on the sidewalk.” She flashed me a saccharine sweet smile.

“We’ll remember that next time,” Josie sneered, “thanks for the advice.”

“You’ll be at the game Saturday, right?” Victoria said, completely unaffected by Josie’s prickly attitude. “There’s a thing afterwards, at The Pivot. You should come. I’m hosting an auction to raise extra funds for the facility. Everyone will be there.”

“We’ll be there.”

We will?

I’d agreed to the game, not the celebrations after.

“Gosh, is that the time already.” Victoria checked her diamond encrusted wristwatch. “We’d better shoot. But if you see Zach, could you tell him we need to finish the conversation we started this morning over breakfast?” She walked straight between us, her hair whipping around my face like a red wave.

“Did she just say what I think she said?” Josie said around a sad smile.

“Yep.” I tried to contain my hurt.

“Nah, she’s lying. She has to be. No way Zach left you to go eat breakfast

with her. Unless... no,” she shook her head, “he wouldn’t.”

“Unless he what?” I really didn’t want to know the answer, but I had to know.

“Well, they are friends... maybe he left and met her for advice or something.”

“Oh God.” I folded my arms around myself. He wouldn’t go to her, of all people... would he?

“She’s such a smug bitch. Until you get the facts from Zach, don’t let her mess with your head, babe.”

“Yeah,” I gave her a tight smile.

Easier said than done.

I DIDN’T SEE or hear from Zach all day. I mean, I didn’t expect to hear from him, but it didn’t stop me from checking my cell throughout the day. By the time the session at Next Steps rolled around, I felt queasy.

For more reasons than one.

Jasmine had made it crystal clear last time that she didn’t want to work with me. I knew I wasn’t supposed to take it personally. But it was hard. Especially when Zach had strolled in and hit it off with her without so much as blinking.

I didn’t know if Zach was going to be at the session again. We hadn’t talked about it. We hadn’t talked about a lot of things.

I let out a heavy sigh as I grabbed my bag and left the dorm. It was a nice afternoon out, so I enjoyed the walk to Next Steps. As much as I could enjoy it, with the giant knot in my stomach.

All day, I’d replayed Victoria’s words over in my head. I didn’t believe Zach had left me to go and confide in her, which meant there was more to the story... it also meant she was going out of her way to try to hurt me.

“Ah, Calli.” Freya greeted me at the door. “I’m glad you’re here early. I wanted to touch base with you on a couple of things.” My pulse spiked as I followed her to her office. “Come on, take a seat.”

I did.

“I got a call earlier from Jasmine’s guidance counselor. She’s had a bad day at school. Some girls cornered her in the locker room, and it got

physical.”

“God, is she okay?”

“She’s fine. The other girl... not so much.”

“I see.”

“I just wanted to give you a heads up.”

“Okay.” I nodded.

“You seem... relieved.”

“I just thought that after Tuesday you were going to tell me you were going to assign her to somebody else.”

“Absolutely not. It was your first session together. Progress doesn’t happen overnight.” Her reassuring smile settled my nerves. “There was something else. Coach Baxter called about the exhibition game Saturday. I think it’s an excellent idea. I’ll need to clear it with the kids’ parents and guardians first. But it’ll be a great opportunity for them. Nice work.”

“Excuse me?”

“For suggesting it to Coach Baxter.”

“Oh, that.” I schooled my surprise. “It was nothing.”

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but we decided to put Callum on a different session. Coach is keen for him to get involved and I agreed that it’s perhaps best to keep the two of you separate for now.”

“Of course.” My stomach sank, her words leaving a sour taste in my mouth. “Whatever you think is best.”

“The kids will be here any second. We’re keeping things inside today. Arts and crafts, board games, and the tech corner.

“Sounds good.” I got to up to leave.

“I’ll let you know about Saturday, but I don’t imagine it’ll be a problem. You can mention it to Jasmine, but don’t make any promises.”

“Okay.”

I walked out of Freya’s office just as Jasmine was entering the center. Her eyes locked on mine, narrowing to hostile slits. But I didn’t let it deter me. “Hey,” I said approaching her. “How are you?”

“Is Zach coming?” Her bluish-green eyes went over my shoulder as she scanned the room.

“I... uh, I’m not sure.”

“Oh.” Disappointment washed over her.

“I thought we could make some friendship bracelets.”

“I’m fourteen,” she scoffed, “not eight.”

“Okay, how about fabric painting? I think I saw—”

“Stop.” She shook her head. “Just stop.”

Defeat sat heavy in my stomach.

“I don’t want to paint or make crappy pieces of jewelry. Don’t you get it? I don’t want to be here.” Her aloof façade cracked, and I saw a glimmer of sadness in her eyes. “What?” she snapped.

“It’s okay to not be okay, Jasmine. I’m not here to judge or tell you how to—”

“Whatever.” She stormed off toward a group of other kids all huddled around a small flatscreen.

“Perseverance,” Maureen whispered as she passed me, clapping me gently on the shoulder.

“Yeah,” I said as if it was that simple.

Sitting down at one of the craft tables, I began threading beads onto a bracelet. “Looks tricky,” a voice said over my shoulder and I glanced up to find Zach looming over me.

“You came.”

“I wasn’t going to, but then I remembered that my favorite girl was going to be here, so I thought, why the hell not. How is Jasmine by the way?”

My lips parted on a small gasp, and Zach chuckled, leaning down a little until I could feel the warmth of his breath. “Don’t tell her, but she’s my second favorite.”

“You can’t do that, not here.” A tingle of awareness spread through me. “Not while I’m working.”

“Do what?” He sat down beside me, one of his long legs brushing mine. “What am I doing, sweet pea?”

“Zach...”

“Calliope...” Amusement glittered in his eyes.

“Zach, you came.” Jasmine skipped over to us with a boy in tow. “Me and Joseph were hoping you might teach us a few more tricks.”

“I’m not sure we’re supposed to play—”

“It’s okay.” Freya joined us. “I’ll make an exception. Perhaps a little warning next time.” She glanced at Zach and he nodded.

“Sorry, I just thought I’d drop by.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I should have called ahead.”

“Next time, yes, but you’re here now. Might as well put you to work. Jasmine, Joseph, why don’t you grab a couple of balls and anyone else who

wants to play and meet Zach and Calli out back in a minute.”

They shot off in a hurry.

“Shit, I’m sorry, Freya. I didn’t mean to just—”

“The kids loved having you here Tuesday. I know we agreed to four sessions, but you’d be an asset to the team, Zach. If you’re interested.”

“I’ll definitely think about it, thank you.”

“And this,” she wagged her finger between us, “do I need to be concerned?”

“No,” I said. “Absolutely not.”

“Believe it or not, I was young once too.” Her lips curved into a knowing smile. “All I ask is you keep your relationship outside that door. That goes for texting, calls, and making moon eyes at each other.”

“We weren’t—” I snapped my mouth shut, smothering the sheer embarrassment burning through me.

“Relax,” she laughed, “I’m joking, about the moon eyes at least. I trust you both not to let it get in the way of you doing your job. You’d better go, it would appear you have quite the captive audience.” Her eyes twinkled as she walked off.

“I can’t believe that just happened.”

“Relax, swe—Calli. You heard her, she was young once. She knows how it is.” Zach’s eyes darkened with lust as he watched me.

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him what happened this morning, but I swallowed the words. It wasn’t the time or place. Besides, he had a flock of kids eagerly awaiting his attention.

“You should probably get over there.”

“Calli, I—”

“Go. We can talk after.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I nodded.

“Okay.” Zach jogged out of the back doors and found himself swarmed by kids. Jasmine was front and center, smiling up at him like he was all her dreams come true.

I knew the feeling.

I’d been her once. A fourteen-year-old girl swept away by Zach’s charm and irresistible smile. Only back then, it was his lost boy persona and rebel heart that had captured my attention.

Now though, it was different.

He was different.

Gone was the shy boy unsure of himself and his place in the world, and in his place stood a man. As equally lost as he was sure.

I got comfortable on one of the benches and watched him cast his magic. Wondering if I looked at him that way still.

With stars in my eyes and lust in my heart.

“WE’VE GOT to talk to your athletic director about getting you on the team.”

“Never gonna happen.” Jasmine accepted a bottle of water from Zach.

“Is there a local team you can join?”

She shrugged. “I bounce back and forth from my mom and dad’s a lot. There isn’t much time for extracurricular activities.”

“But if I could arrange it, would you go?”

“I...” Her cheeks burned as she folded in on herself.

“Zach’s right,” I said, and her head snapped up. “You’re good, Jasmine. Really good.”

“What do you know about basketball?”

Zach let out a low whistle.

“What?” Jasmine frowned, glancing between us.

“Are you going to tell her, or should I?”

“Zach...” I shook my head.

“No, go on.” Jasmine looked eager. “I want to know.”

“My brother plays.”

“What, is he like some famous player or something?” It was the first time she was engaging with me and of course it was because she thought my brother was a famous basketball player.

“Not quite. But he does play for the Scorpions.”

“Is he good? Do I know him? What’s his name?”

“Whoa, Elsa,” Zach chuckled. “Take a breath. Calli’s brother is Callum James, the guy I was here with Tuesday.”

“Callum James is your brother?” She eyed me with suspicion.

“He is.”

“Is that why he left the other day? Because you were here?”

Crap. She was intuitive.

“It’s complicated.”

“I heard some of the kids whispering.” Her gaze slid to Zach. “They said you’re Declan Messiah’s brother. Is it true?”

Zach grimaced. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.”

“They said he won’t ever walk again.... That he might not wake up.”

“They were right.” Zach tipped his face to the sky and inhaled a ragged breath.

“Listen, Jasmine. Why don’t we go help clean up?” I suggested.

“Yeah, okay.” She fell into step beside me without argument. “I didn’t mean to upset him.”

“You didn’t.” I offered her a reassuring smile.

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Is it true? Can we really go to the exhibition game Saturday if our parents agree?”

Zach had let it slip earlier. Something told me he was almost as excited as the kids about them getting the chance to go.

“Zach said it was all your idea.”

“I thought you might like it.”

“No one’s ever bothered to do anything like that for me before.” Her eyes found mine. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Will your brother be playing?”

“Yes.”

“Maybe I’ll get to meet him too?”

“Maybe.” I forced a smile. “It’s almost time to go. Why don’t you grab your jacket and I’ll check on Zach?”

“But I’ll see you Saturday, right, for the game?”

“Assuming your parents give permission then yes, I’ll see you Saturday.” A faint smile traced my lips.

“Cool. I’ve heard it’s really loud and big and gets kind of crazy.”

“I’ve never been to a college game either,” I admitted.

“For real?”

“For real. So it will be my first time too.”

“That makes me feel better. I’ll see you Saturday.” Jasmine began

walking toward the door when she stopped and glanced back. “And Calli?”

“Yes?”

“I guess you’re all right.” She gave me a half-shrug and skipped off toward the reception area.

It was the best compliment she could have given me.

“*All right?*” Zach whispered against my hair. “She clearly doesn’t know you the way I do.” His warm breath tickled my neck, sending bolts of desire shooting through me.

“Zach!” I scolded.

“Relax, all the kids have gone.”

“Yes, but the other volunteers haven’t.” Maureen was watching us with mild amusement. “Besides,” I hissed. “We need to talk.”

“Why do I not like the sound of that?”

“I’ll just grab my things.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said.

But he had.

He’d fled my dorm room this morning in such a panic I hadn’t expected such a one-eighty already.

After collecting my things and saying goodbye to Freya, I found Zach talking to some of the other volunteers.

“All set?” he asked me, and I nodded.

“Night everyone.”

“Night.”

The second we hit the sidewalk, Zach pulled me into the shadows and pushed me up against the wall. He stared at me for a second, the air crackling around us, before his mouth crashed down on mine, and he kissed me with total unrestraint.

“Zach,” his name was a whispered sigh on my lips. “Stop.”

“Stop?” He dropped his lips to my shoulder, letting out an exasperated breath. “Now she wants to stop.”

“We should talk.”

“You’re right.” His eyes lifted to mine. “I just really hoped we could skip the talking part and go straight to the kissing part. I missed you today.”

“You did?”

“Of course I did.” Zach slid his fingers into my hair. “Didn’t you miss me?”

“I did... but I was a little confused too.”

“I’m sorry.” He exhaled a long breath. “I didn’t handle it very well.”

“Did you have breakfast with Victoria?”

“What?” He reared back, his brows knitted together. “Why would you ask that?”

“She said some things.”

“What things?” He went rigid.

“Zach?” My stomach sank at his expression. “It’s not true, is it? You didn’t meet her after we...”

His silence was deafening, and blood roared between my ears as I tried to understand.

“You went to her for advice about us... about me?”

“What? No? Fuck, no. I swear, Calli, it wasn’t like that. When I left you, I called Maverick. He wanted to go for breakfast, and she was there.”

“So the three of you had breakfast?”

“Four,” he admitted. “Kira was there too.”

“So it was like a double breakfast date?”

“What the fuck? No! Maverick is engaged. He would never do that to Lo.”

“But you’d do that to me?” Disbelief coated my words. “Is that it?”

“Calli, listen to yourself.” He cupped my face, staring at me intently. “Where is all this coming from?”

“You just left me, Zach. I let you back in and you just left.”

“I just needed some time. That’s all. I called Maverick and we got some breakfast. Then I spent the day trying to figure out how to tell you that I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?”

He nodded. “I hate that we wasted so much time.” His lips ghosted over the corner of my mouth, his words a gentle caress against my skin. “I hate that I wasn’t there when your mom got sick.” He kissed me and then breaking off he tucked my hair behind my ears, meeting my gaze, his expression soft. “But most of all, I hate how I treated you over the last few weeks. I love you, Calliope James. I don’t think I ever stopped.”

“You love me?” My heart crashed against my ribcage. Zach’s words were like a balm to my broken and bruised heart.

“I love you so fucking much it terrifies me. It’s you, sweet pea. It’s always been you. I was just too fucking stupid to see it.” Zach touched his head against mine. “After the game I want to tell everyone. I don’t want to

waste a single second more of our time together.”

“Okay,” I breathed, the weight of his confession a burden I would gladly carry. “And, Zach?”

“Yeah?”

My smile grew. “I love you too.”

Chapter
TWENTY
EIGHT

Zach

WAITING to tell everyone was like torture. I knew Calli was right—we needed to get the exhibition game out of the way before the shit hit the fan. But it didn't mean I had to like it.

“You're tense as fuck,” Brad said as we all sat around on the bleachers waiting for Coach.

“I'm okay,” I clipped out. But his eyes dropped to my leg, the one bouncing up and down. “It's nothing.” I shirked him off. My heart thundered in my chest, sweat beading down my back. It had been an intense practice, but I'd needed it. We all had.

“Right, ladies,” Coach boomed, his voice echoing off the walls. “The day has finally come.” The guys began to hoot and holler, the noise deafening. “Okay, okay, settle down.” He tore off his ball cap and ran a hand through his graying hair. “It's our first game of the season. Now it might only be an exhibition game, but I want you to go out there tomorrow and play like your lives depend on it. I always say the first game of any season sets the tone of that season. And this season is ours, you hear me?”

My teammates began cheering again. I found Callum along the bench. His head bowed slightly; eyes shielded from everyone. He didn't want to be here. A month ago, it was something I would have said we had in common, but something had changed the last few weeks.

I'd changed.

“Zach, son, you ready?”

“I'm ready, Coach.” My voice rang loud and clear over the guys'.

“It's not the way we wanted to do this. I know that. We're missing the heart of our team.” His expression hardened. “Declan was a good kid, one of the best. When we go out there tomorrow and play, we play for him. We play to honor his legacy.”

“He isn't gone.” Callum shot up, silencing the gym.

“I know that, son,” Coach stuttered, the blood draining from his face. “I didn't mean no disrespect.”

“It's bullshit, right, you know that? An exhibition game isn't going to fix Declan. No amount of money we raise for the facility is going to give him back his legs.”

“Son, you need to—”

“Need to what?” Callum roared. “Pretend everything is okay? Everything is not fucking okay. He wasn’t just our shot at the championship. He was our friend. He is my best friend... and he’s—”

One of the senior players, a guy called AJ, jumped up and threw his arm around Callum’s shoulder. “Come on, Cal, let’s go take a walk.”

“Douglas, go with them.” Coach ordered one of the assistant coaches, and he took off after them.

The silence was deafening. My pulse was a steady drum beneath my skin. I’d known Callum a long time and I’d never seen him so... so angry. But it was more than that. He was in pain. It had rippled around him like a storm, turning the air in the gym dark and heavy.

“Okay, why don’t we call it a day.” Coach expelled a long breath. “You looked good out there today. Strong and together. I know it hasn’t been easy. I know there’s a lot of uncertainty right now. But we’re a team. We stick together and we get the job done, okay?”

A collective round of, ‘Yes, sir,’ rang out around me. Brad cast me a concerned look though.

“What?” I said.

“That was some heavy shit.”

I shrugged. “That’s James’ problem, not mine.”

“Dude, he’s your brother’s best friend. Not to mention the fact you’re boning his—”

I elbowed him hard in the stomach, glaring at him to shut the fuck up.

“Yeah,” he croaked, “my bad.”

“Okay, hit the showers,” Coach said. “Zach, a word please.”

“Uh oh, Messiah’s in trouble,” Saul snickered, and I flipped him off.

I waited for the gym to empty before approaching the court. “What’s up, Coach?”

“I want you to talk to Callum for me.”

What the fuck?

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea, Coach. We—”

“I don’t give a shit what’s going on between the two of you right now. He’s your teammate, your brother’s best friend. And this is his senior year. He needs to get his shit together if he wants to draft in the spring.”

Fuck.

“Yeah, okay,” I said through gritted teeth. “But I can’t guarantee he’ll listen.”

“Then make him. Callum has too much to lose this season. I know he’s hurting but Declan wouldn’t want him to throw everything away because he can’t get a handle on his pain.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Coach gripped my arm. “I knew I could count on you, son. What we’ve asked of you this season is too much, I know that. But I want you to know I brought you here because I truly believed you had what it took to lead this team in your brother’s stead.”

Before, his words would have rubbed me the wrong way. But there was something sincere about the way he said them now, as if he knew the burden resting on my shoulders was too great for any one person to bear.

“Whatever happens out there this season,” he added, “this is your team now, Zach. Not Declan’s, yours. It’s up to you what you do with that.”

“IS HE HERE?” I asked AJ the second he answered the door.

“Yeah, he’s here, but I’m not sure you coming around is a good idea.”

“I’m not leaving until I speak to him.”

He shook his head, his lips quirking with amusement. “I thought you’d say that.” He pulled the door open wider. “Enter at your own peril.”

“I can handle James,” I mumbled.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m worried about. He’s in the den,” he said as if I knew where that was. “Last door on the left.”

“Thanks.”

The house Callum shared with the other senior players was the last place I wanted to be, but the second Coach had asked me to come, I knew I’d do it. Because Callum wasn’t only my teammate, or my brother’s best friend—he was my girl’s brother. And despite the ocean between them, they were family. Which in some strange fucked up way, made him my family.

I wiped my clammy hands down my shorts and knocked on the door.

“Fuck off,” Callum yelled.

“Nice to see you too.” I slipped into the room. It was a typical guy’s den, the lingering scent of sweaty socks, liquor, and sex permeating the air.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” He glowered.

“Coach sent me.”

“You came. Obligation fulfilled.” He swigged the bottle of whiskey hanging from his fingers. “Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

“We should talk.”

“No, we really shouldn’t.” Callum’s eyes shuttered as he inhaled a sharp breath. He looked about as pleased to see me as I was to be here. “He’s a fucking vegetable and everyone’s acting like it’s business as usual. It’s bullshit.”

I winced at the pain in his voice. “It sucks,” I said. Because it did.

Declan didn’t deserve this. He didn’t deserve any of it. But the world went on. *Life* went on. It had to.

“Coach is right though, Cal. He wouldn’t want you to throw away everything you’ve worked for. It’s your senior year. You have a real shot at going pro, man. You can’t just let that slip through your fingers because you’re hurting.”

“You think I want to feel like this?” he spat. “He isn’t getting better, Zach. He isn’t going to magically wake up and be okay. He’s lying there in that bed, clinging onto life, when we both know...” He heaved a ragged breath, unable to say the words.

I dropped down on the couch and ran a hand over my face. “They’re not ready to let go.” My parents and Victoria were clinging onto the hope of a miracle that would never come true. Declan wasn’t coming out of this.

He was gone.

The truth hit me like a wrecking ball. I’d known it for some time. Deep down, I think it was why I hadn’t been able to go and see him again. Because I knew it would be goodbye.

I tried to swallow over the giant fucking lump in my throat. “He’d want you to go all the way, Cal. Declan would kick your ass right now if he knew you were sitting here, ass drunk, unable to keep it together.”

“I’ll never forgive him for taking that jet ski out that day.”

“It was a freak accident, nothing more.”

“Fuck.” He launched the bottle across the room, and it smashed against the wall, shattering into pieces.

“Better?” My brow arched, and he shrugged.

“A little. How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Act so damn calm all the time. You’re like this fortress, man. Nothing touches you.”

“Don’t be so sure about that,” I muttered, my mind instantly going to his sister.

But it wasn’t like I could tell him the truth, not now. Not when he was two seconds from losing it.

“The team needs you, man,” I said. “We need you.”

Stormy eyes met mine. He had the same whiskey eyes as Calli, the same nose and jaw. But he was harder around the edges. Ground down by the events of the last few months.

He let out a weary sigh. “I’ll be there. Of course I’ll fucking be there... it’s just hard... it’s so fucking hard.”

“I know.” I did. We were just on opposite sides of the scale where our grief and emotions were concerned.

“But I’m not sure I can do the thing after,” Callum added.

“My parents will want you there.”

“I know... I just... fuck...” He clenched and unclenched his fist, staring at his hand as if it was the only thing grounding him. “Victoria irritates the hell out of me.”

“You’re not the only one,” I confessed.

“Yeah?” His brow rose. “I thought you two were besties?”

“Fuck off.”

We shared a tentative smile.

“She’s only out for herself.”

He wasn’t wrong. I’d just been too angry and bitter to care.

“She’s threatened by Calli,” I said, testing the waters.

“This is exactly what I didn’t want to happen.” Anger flared in his eyes. “I didn’t want her to come here and be pulled into this world. I was only trying to protect her.”

Yeah, I could see that. Girls were brutal, even at college. They would trample over each other without looking back if it meant climbing the social ladder or bagging themselves an athlete boyfriend. And Victoria sat proudly at the top.

“You should tell her,” I suggested. “She thinks you did it because you’re ashamed of her.”

“I’m not...” His lips thinned. “I fucked up. She’s my sister, and I just left her there... I don’t deserve her forgiveness.”

“Isn’t that for Calli to decide?”

“You sound awfully confident you know what my sister is thinking,

Messiah.”

“We’ve been hanging out... at the center,” I added, hating the way the lie tasted on my tongue.

But I didn’t want to add fuel to the fire for Calli, or for Callum.

His eyes grew thin, but he didn’t ask whatever was on his mind. It was probably for the best because I didn’t want to lie to his face. Not when I was here to try to smooth some of the cracks.

“I really don’t want to go to the thing after either,” I admitted, “but how about I make you a deal? I’ll show my face if you do.”

He clucked his tongue. “We both know you’ll be there, with or without me.”

“Yeah, but I’d really prefer it if it was with you.” I smirked.

Callum barked out a laugh. “Is that your pickup line? Because you need to work on your game if it is.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.” Guilt snaked through me. He was going to kick my ass when he found out the truth about me and Calli. But this wasn’t about me and the girl who owned my heart, it was about me and the team.

Callum and the team.

Once the game was over, then I’d deal with everything else.

But one thing was for certain, if he—or anyone else—tried to make me choose: Calli or the team... I would pick Calli every day of the week.

Because I wasn’t losing her. Not again.

Not ever.

I WAITED until after dark to sneak into Abrams, not that I really needed to sneak around given that a) it was a co-ed and b) I was Zach Messiah. But I wanted to surprise Calli, and I knew she wouldn’t appreciate me showing up and making a scene. So I opted for stealth mode.

Either the girls living on Calli’s floor were bookworms or out partying because the hallway was empty as I kept my head down, my black and red SU ball cap pulled low over my eyes.

I knocked gently. It was late, a little past ten, so when Calli opened the door in her pajama shorts and thin tank top, I almost pounced on her.

“Zach?” she whispered-shrieked as I ducked inside, closing the door

behind me. “What are—”

Snagging Calli around the waist, I pulled her into me and kissed her. She melted against my body, letting out a little sigh of contentment when my tongue slipped past her lips and curled around her own.

It was a sound I wanted to bottle and keep with me always.

“Fuck, you taste good, sweet pea.”

“It’s called fresh mint toothpaste.” Calli giggled against my mouth. “I just got done brushing my teeth.” She smiled up at me. “What are you doing here?”

“What, I can’t come see my girl?”

“Am I? Your girl?” Love shone in her eyes. Warm golden flecks glittering in two deep whiskey pools I wanted to drown in. Jesus, she was beautiful. The only girl I’d ever looked at and wanted to *know*. Her secrets, her hopes and dreams, her fears. Her eyes called to me in a way I’d never experienced before, shackling me to her in a way I never expected.

And you almost lost her.

I pushed down the unwelcomed thoughts. Calli was here. I had a second chance at doing things right. Besides, I had a near perfect offensive rebound record in practice—I wasn’t about to miss my shot with her again.

I grabbed the back of Calli’s neck, brushing my lips over hers in a possessive manner.

“God, I don’t think I’ll get used to this feeling,” she said.

“Good, I don’t want you to.” Picking her up, I walked us to the bed and lowered her down. “I can’t believe I was stupid enough to ever let you go.”

“Zach—” My name got stuck in her throat.

Dropping to my knees, I ran my hands up her legs, ankle to knee, knee to thigh, stroking her smooth, silky skin until I was brushing the edge of her tempting little pajama shorts.

“I saw your brother today.” She went rigid, and I chuckled. “Relax. It wasn’t about you. Coach asked me to talk to him.”

Calli pushed up on her elbows. “Why, what happened?”

“He’s finding it hard...”

“Because of what happened to Declan?”

“Yeah, and me being here... and you.”

Her expression fell.

“I think you should talk to him.”

“W- what?”

“He’s carrying a lot of guilt, Calli. I think losing Declan has made him realize some stuff. Just... try, yeah?”

Uncertainty flickered in her eyes. “You’re asking me to try... with the brother who abandoned me?”

“You’re giving me another shot.”

“That’s not fair,” her lips thinned, “and you know it.”

“Look at it another way then. You have Josie and Freya and the center and me.”

“And Xavier,” she added.

“Xavier?” A low growl rumbled in my chest, a deep sense of possessiveness snaking through me. “The dude at the bar?”

She nodded around a little smirk. “Xavier is good people.”

“Are you trying to make me burst a blood vessel?”

“Are you really trying to make me bury the hatchet with my brother?”

“He’s still here, Calli. I don’t want to be an asshole about it, that’s not what this is, but your brother is here, and deep down, I think he wants to fix things. He just doesn’t know how.”

Calli sat up, winding her hands around my neck. “Do you always play this dirty?”

“Where you’re concerned? Yes.” I pecked her lips.

“I got some good news earlier.”

“Yeah?” I asked, letting it slide that she was deflecting the conversation about Callum.

“Jasmine and the boys can come tomorrow.”

“That’s amazing. I’m going to have Coach look into a team for her. Maybe even get him to speak to the coach over at the high school. She’s too good to not be playing regularly.”

“She’s like a different person around you.”

“It’s the Messiah effect, baby.”

Calli rolled her eyes. “You are such a dork.”

“A very sexy, very skilled dork?” I smirked.

“Oh my god,” laughter spilled from her lips and it was like music to my fucking ears, “who are you right now?” She brushed the hair from my eyes and let out a contented sigh.

“Penny for your thoughts, sweet pea?”

“We wasted so much time, Zach. It just feels unfair somehow.”

“I think it’s like you said. We weren’t ready then. We needed to wade

through all the bullshit and heartache and come out the other side to know that this is real.” My hand slipped to her chest, right over her heart. “Feels pretty real to me,” I whispered, reveling in the steady beat of her heart beneath my fingers.

“Promise me, this is it?” Calli’s voice cracked with uncertainty. “Promise me you won’t break my heart again.” She leaned in, pressing her lips against mine. “Because I don’t think I’d survive it.”

“I promise, Calli. I promise.”

Chapter
TWENTY
NINE

Calli

“YOU’RE DOING IT AGAIN,” Jasmine said, failing to hide her irritation.

“Sorry, I’m a little restless.”

“A little?” She balked. “Your leg hasn’t stopped trembling since we got here.”

“It’s just so... big.” I glanced around the Nixon Arena.

“What did you expect?”

“I don’t know... something smaller.”

“This is the Nixon Arena,” Joseph leaned around her. “Built in the sixties, it holds eleven thousand, two hundred, and ten people, and it’s a sellout.”

“Dude,” Jasmine looked impressed, “how do you know all of this shi—stuff?”

I smothered a chuckle. It was nice to see her so relaxed. There had been a second when Maureen and I had ushered the kids inside, that Jasmine had gone quiet and withdrawn. But as soon as we found our seats—which were right on the center line a few rows back from the front—she’d settled.

“Calli, there you are.” Josie waved, climbing over the other people in our row. “Sorry, I’m sorry. I got held up.”

“Is everything okay?” I asked, very aware of our little eavesdropper.

“Fine.” She flashed me a blinding smile. “And this must be Zach’s protégé. Elsa, was it?”

Jasmine flushed and her eyes dipped. “Only Zach calls me that.”

“She’s only joking, aren’t you, Jos?” I pinned her with a serious look.

“Of course. It’s nice to meet you, Jasmine. Who are your friends?”

“I’m Joseph, but you can call me J.” He winked at her.

“Whoa there, kid, you have some serious swagger.”

“Don’t let it go to your head, J,” Maureen teased. “You’re fifteen. You got some growing to do yet.”

“Hey, I’m grown.” He suddenly seemed very childlike, shrinking into his seat.

“Give it a couple of years and you’ll have all the girls eating out the palm of your hand.” Josie winked at him and I nudged her in the ribs. “What?” She frowned.

“Never mind. Oh look, there they are.” I pointed at the team who were jogging onto the court. It was impossible to miss Zach, the invisible tether

linking us knew exactly where to find him.

“You have a little drool,” Jasmine snickered.

“You did not just—”

“High five, girlfriend.” Josie leaned around me and the two of them high fived.

“What the hell is happening right now?”

“She’s cool,” Jasmine said. “I like her.”

“Of course you do,” I grumbled beneath my breath.

“Jealous?” Josie mouthed at me. But then everyone started cheering as the alumni players entered the court. “Holy hotness.” She fanned herself.

Jasmine glanced around me again, but I covered her eyes. “Ignore Josie, she’s just—”

“Thirsty. Sweet baby Jesus, I’m thirsty.”

“Josie!”

“Relax, she doesn’t know what thirsty means.”

“Yes, I do. It means when a—”

“Okay, why don’t you and the boys start on the snacks?” I thrust a packet of Swedish Fish at her.

“Your boy looks good out there,” Josie whispered out of the vicinity of eager ears.

But it wasn’t Zach who had my attention.

“Does Callum look okay to you?” I said.

“Callum?”

“Yeah.”

Zach had planted a seed inside my chest last night, and I couldn’t take my eyes off my brother. It was the first time I’d seen him on the court in years. He’d always looked so at home out there, so free. But not today. Today, he looked so lost, I wanted to go down there and hug him.

The thought was disarming to say the least.

“Calli?”

“I’m okay.” I gave Josie a reassuring smile despite the pit in my stomach.

The teams shook hands and both Zach and Maverick converged in the center to talk to the referee. They shared a joke, fist bumped, and then moved to their respective sides of the court.

The lights dimmed, plunging the arena into darkness. “What the hell?” Josie whispered just as the huge screen flickered to life.

“Oh my god,” I grabbed her arm, rendered speechless at the huge image

of Declan's face. But it wasn't an image at all, it was an amateur movie.

"Why do you love basketball so much, Dec?" the person off camera said.

"There's nothing better than the feel of snatching the ball and just taking off, you know?" He sliced his hand through the air, a goofy grin plastered on his face. "Those few moments before you make the shot... It's the best kind of high."

"What's the goal once you get to SU?"

"The goal?" He smiled at the camera. "I'm going all the way, baby. Straight to the motherfucking NBA. Shit, can I say that? Or will you guys need to edit that out?"

Quiet laughter rippled through the arena. It was too dark to see Zach's face, or my brother's.

"It's a tribute," Josie whispered, clutching my hand in hers. A lump formed in my throat as the video montage cut to some Scorpion game footage. Declan had the ball right at the top of the key. He took the shot, and the ball sank clean through the hoop. The crowd on the video went wild but it wasn't just them. It was us. Everyone around me clapped and cheered, chanting Declan's name as if their chorus would carry on the wind and reach him.

By the time the video ended, and the lights came back on, there wasn't a dry eye in the building. Mine included.

"That was... intense," Josie said, and I nodded. But I was too fixated on the man moving toward center court.

Timothy Messiah.

Zach and Declan's father.

Coach Baxter greeted him, the two of them shaking hands.

"I want to thank you all for coming out here this afternoon," Coach Baxter started. "And thank you to Victoria Penderton for such a moving tribute to one of the best damn players this team has ever seen.

"Let me tell you something about Declan Messiah. He isn't a good player. He isn't even a great player. He's the kind of player that you remember. It isn't just his skill on the court, it's his leadership on and off it too." He dragged in a shaky breath. "This team has had a run of bad luck over the last couple of seasons. It's even been dubbed the Scorpion curse. But I'm not a superstitious man. I'm a man who believes in making your own destiny. Declan might not be here to lead our team to the championship this year, but I don't doubt for a second, that he's here in spirit. Now before we get this

show on the road and raise what I hope will be a great amount for the Cali Institute of Brain and Spinal Injuries, Declan's father, Timothy Messiah, would like to say a few words."

Coach Baxter handed him the mic and clasped him on the shoulder.

"Thanks, Coach. When Victoria suggested we host an exhibition game, I'll be honest, I was a little apprehensive. But seeing you all here, to support my boy," he swallowed hard, "well it just means the world to me and Debra. Declan was a bright kid. Always had a ball in his hand and a Twizzler hanging out of his mouth. At one point, I didn't know what he loved more: playing basketball or eating those damn candy sticks. But it didn't take long to realize he was going to continue the Messiah legacy..."

His voice became white noise as I watched Zach watching his dad. His expression was like steel. Cold and unmoving.

My heart ached for him. He'd been brought here and handed Declan's team because his parents couldn't let go of Declan's dream. Mr. Messiah couldn't accept that his eldest son wasn't going to continue his legacy, so he handed that responsibility to Zach.

It was a mess.

As if he felt me watching, Zach glanced over his shoulder and for the briefest moment, our eyes connected. I felt his pain. It slammed into me, flooding my veins. This wasn't his dream—it was theirs.

No sooner had our eyes met did the arena explode with applause and Mr. Messiah melted into the crowd to join his wife.

The players swarmed the court, moving into position.

"Hey, are you okay?"

I glanced at Jasmine and forced a smile. "I'm fine."

"You're crying."

Bringing my fingers to my face, I felt the wetness there. "They're just happy tears," I lied.

"It's okay to not be okay," she whispered, lacing her arm through mine and we sat there, two girls uncertain of their path in life, scared to take a leap.

But when I looked down at Jasmine again, I realized we weren't the same at all. Her eyes were alight with excitement as she watched the game. Every time Zach got the ball she leaned forward, cheering him on, and when he scored, she almost leaped out of her seat. Basketball was in her blood, she just had to chase her dream. To grab it with both hands and go after it.

I'd given up my dream. So overcome with grief at losing my mom, I'd

given up the one thing that had always brought me joy.

But I missed it.

I missed the weight of my camera around my neck, the feel of the clicker beneath my finger. I missed spending time perfecting the shot, hearing the *click click click* of the shutter.

God, I missed it.

“This is amazing,” Jasmine breathed, peeking up at me.

“Yeah.” I couldn’t deny I felt swept up in the electric atmosphere. Everyone was here for Declan, to support a team who had lost their leader and star player.

But me...

I was here for his replacement.

I was here for the boy who was born to play, even if he’d never wanted it.

AFTER THE GAME, I’d taken Jasmine and the boys home with Maureen. Josie wanted me to go to dinner with her parents, but I didn’t want to spend two hours trying to avoid Joel, so I used the kids as an excuse.

They’d been bouncing off the ceilings, high on adrenaline at the fact the Scorpions had beat the alumni team by three points. All the candy hadn’t helped. But it was good to see Jasmine excited about something. She had that sparkle in her eye. The same sparkle I’d seen so many times, growing up with Callum.

By the time I reached The Pivot, my heart was racing, and my stomach fluttered with butterflies.

“Hey,” Josie jogged over to me. “Everything okay?”

“I guess.”

“We don’t have to go in there. We can go back to the dorm and—”

“No,” I took a deep breath, “I have to do this.”

Something had happened to me watching the game. It was like my past had circled the arena, slowly creeping up on me. My dad had been there somewhere in the crowd, Zach’s parents too, while we all watched Zach and my brother play the game that had caused me so much heartache over the years.

But it was just that... a game.

I didn't have to give it power over me anymore. It had already cost me too much.

Losing my mom made me realize how short and precious life was. I'd been given another chance with Zach. I wasn't going to let basketball or our families come in the way of that.

"Okay, then, let's go." Josie went first, holding the door for me as I slipped inside. The bar was full of players, students, and their families.

"Wow, it's busy."

"Everyone wants a piece of a Scorpion." She rolled her eyes, grabbing my hand and pulling me toward the back of the bar.

Zach spotted me first. His eyes raked over my body. I'd kept it casual, jean shorts and a SU t-shirt, but the way he looked at me made me feel like the most beautiful girl in the room.

With the heat in his eyes, I half-expected him to stride over here and claim me in front of everyone, but he didn't. And I couldn't deny it stung a little. But it was only what I'd asked of him. We needed to survive tonight and then we could come clean to everyone.

Josie managed to get us to the temporary bar set up at the back of the room. "Two beers, please," she said to the server.

"I wasn't expecting to see you here." I looked up to find Joel standing there.

"I... uh, hi."

"Actually, I was talking to my sister."

"Wow, okay." Hurt swam in my chest.

"Joel, don't be an asshole."

"I'm not... it's just weird." He ran a hand down his face, letting out an exasperated breath. "I'm sorry, Calli. That was rude."

"It's nothing I don't deserve."

"No, it was uncalled for. I get why you did it. Well, I mean, I don't, not really... but Josie assures me it's complicated, and I trust her with my life, so..."

"I really am sorry," I said. "I tried to tell you but every time something got in the way... and I can't help but think it wouldn't have changed anything."

"You're right, it wouldn't." He shrugged. "The rules are there for a reason."

Josie scoffed at that.

Joel narrowed his eyes at her. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, big brother, it means nothing. You should go. I think cheerleader Barbie Britney is waiting for you.”

His cheeks pinked. “Yeah, okay.” He looked ready to say something else, but he thought better of it as he melted back into the crowd.

“Don’t,” she said.

“I wasn’t—”

“Yes, you were. You were about wallow in your feelings. I give you permission to not wallow. It’s over, it’s done. No one really got hurt and Joel has moved on with Barbie Britney.”

“She is *that* bad?” Josie had told me earlier that Joel had invited a plus one to their dinner with their parents.

“So bad.” She snickered. “She spent the entire meal with her lips attached to my brother’s neck. I could barely eat my meal.”

“She sounds... lovely. And Brad?”

“What about Brad?” Her eyes hardened.

“Are you two...?” My smile fell as something caught Josie’s eyes and tears pooled in the corners, clinging to her lashes.

I turned slowly, gasping when I saw what she’d already spotted: Brad with his hands all over some girl.

“He wouldn’t,” I whispered, clutching her hand. “He cares about you.”

“Not enough apparently.” Josie spun around and ordered another drink. “I can’t believe I was foolish enough to think he’d choose me.”

“Josie, you don’t know the facts yet.” Although Brad seemed to have no problem letting the busty blonde sidle up to him. They were laughing and when she leaned up to whisper something in his ear, his eyes lit up with hunger.

Josie knocked back her drink in one.

“Is that a good idea?” I asked.

“We shouldn’t have come,” she murmured. “He told me not to come.”

“He did?”

She looked at me, her bottom lip wobbling. “Said it would be too hard on us both. And he knew my parents would be here. I think he got cold feet.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I knew... I knew he wouldn’t choose me over his stupid team, but I let myself fall for him anyway.” Her eyes flicked down the room. “Will you hate me if we leave? I can’t do it, Calli, I can’t be here and watch him with her.”

“Of course not, let’s go”. I grabbed her hand and led her back through the crowd. But a hand shot out and stopped me.

“Calliope.”

I glanced up at my father. “Oh, it’s you. Now is not a good—”

“Please,” Callum said, joining us. “We’d really like it if we could all get a drink. For old times’ sake.”

“Go,” Josie said. “I’ll be fine.”

“No, I’ll come.”

“No, you should stay.” She gave me a pointed look.

“You’re sure?”

Josie nodded. “You need to do this,” she whispered.

“Okay, I’ll see you tomorrow.” I hugged her tight. “He’s a fool, Jos. Because you’re worth it, babe. You’re so worth it.”

A weak smile tugged at her mouth. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” She disappeared into the sea of bodies.

“Will she be okay?” Callum asked me.

“Yeah, she’s just... it doesn’t matter. Congratulations, you played a good game.” God, this was awkward.

“Can I get you a drink, Calliope?”

“No one calls me that anymore, Dad,” I said.

“Yes, well—”

“There he is,” a deep baritone voice said, and Timothy Messiah clapped my dad on the shoulder. “Andrew, it’s good to see you again. You too, Callum.” He pulled my brother in for a hug.

I spotted Zach lingering behind, his expression grim.

“We’re glad you came, Callum,” Victoria appeared at Tim’s side.

“Ah there she is,” he slipped his arm around her shoulder, “the girl holding us altogether.”

“Victoria is helpful like that,” my brother gritted out.

Indignation flashed in her eyes, but she schooled her expression into a warm smile. “You’re too kind, Callum.”

“Son, get over here.” Tim beckoned for Zach to join us. “We’re celebrating.”

Callum’s teeth ground together as he visibly withdrew. I offered him a reassuring smile.

“We don’t want to intrude, Tim,” my dad said. “We’re just here to show our support.”

“Nonsense, Drew. Drink with me.” He thrust his glass in the air, sloshing liquid everywhere. “It’s a celebration. We should drink.”

Apparently, he’d had one too many drinks already.

“Dad, come on, I think that’s enough.” Zach tried to lead him away, but Tim shirked him off.

“I’m fine, Son. Got plenty of life left in me yet. Where’s your mother? She should be here. She should—”

“Mom already left, Dad,” he said quietly, pain glittering in his eyes.

“She did?” Tim frowned. “But it’s a celebration. The team did good tonight. They’re looking strong. Don’t you think they’re looking strong, Drew?”

“They played well,” my dad agreed, “I think they have a real shot this season.”

“Damn right, they do. They’re going to go all the way.” He roped his arm around Zach’s neck and pulled him close. “With my boy Declan at the helm, they’ll go all the way.”

My eyes widened with disbelief as a gasp escaped my lips. Zach’s eyes shuttered, his mouth twisting with anguish. “Nice, Dad, real nice,” he muttered.

“Z- Zach?” Tim blinked at his son, confusion clouding his eyes. “N- no, you’re not—”

“Okay, Tim,” Victoria said, showing a crack of concern through her usually perfect veneer. “Why don’t we get you home.”

“But the party—”

“Come on, Dad. The party is over.”

They started to lead Tim away, but I couldn’t just watch them go.

I couldn’t.

“Zach,” I called out, stepping forward.

He glanced back, looking so defeated, so lost. I wanted nothing more than to run to him and hug him tight and never let go.

But then he said three little words that cracked my heart wide open.

“Not now, Calli.”

“ARE YOU OKAY?” Callum asked me as we sat at a quieter booth in The

Pivot. After Zach and Victoria had left with Tim, the party began to wind down. It didn't feel right celebrating when Mr. Messiah was obviously suffering so much. Dad had left not long ago, unable to suffer in the awkward silence any longer, but Callum had stayed.

"Honestly, I don't know..." I picked at the label on my beer.

"How long?" He shuffled closer, our knees brushing. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been this close to my brother. It felt so strange and yet, oddly reassuring.

All I'd ever wanted was a big brother who cared; a big brother who would always stand by my side and protect me from the monsters of the world.

Instead, I'd gotten a brother who only cared about himself.

"Excuse me?" My brows knitted.

"You and Messiah, how long?"

"I don't... I..." My cheeks flushed.

"Calli, I know we're not close by any stretch of the word, and I know I've been an asshole to you for most of your life, but you're still my sister. I watched you fall in love with him before, I know the signs."

"You—" The words died on my lips.

He knew.

Callum knew.

"But how?" I gawked at him.

"It's written all over your face every time you look at him."

"Oh."

"I'm not angry. If that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not... I mean, I was a little worried, but not because I want your permission, Callum, I don't. It's just the team has all these rules and I—"

"Fuck the rules."

"W- *what*?" I almost spat out my beer.

"Calli, my best friend is lying in some facility and he's probably never going to wake up again. And then Mom died... she just... fuck." His eyes shuttered, his Adam's apple pressing harshly against his throat as he swallowed. "I really fucked up. I fucked everything up and for what?"

"You love basketball," I said, unable to keep the sadness out of my voice.

"Yeah, but more than friendship? More than family? That's what's important. This," he glanced around the bar at the basketball paraphernalia littered over the walls, "it doesn't mean anything without family."

I laid my hand on his arm. “I’m so sorry about Declan, Callum.”

“And I’m sorry about everything. Mom. The divorce. Leaving... I’m sorry about every-fucking-thing. I was an idiot. A self-absorbed idiot and I’ll never get a chance to fix it with her. But you’re here, you’re here, Calli, and I want to do better. I need to do better.”

“Okay,” I said, tears dripping down my cheeks. “Okay.”

“Yeah?”

I managed a small nod.

“Good, that’s good. But first I need you to do one thing for me.” My brow arched, and he smiled. “I need you to go get your guy.”

“But the team...” The words got stuck over the lump in my throat.

“If the team want Zach strong and ready to lead them into the season, then they’re going to have to accept you, Sis. Because Messiah needs you... he needs *you*, Calli.”

I HEADED STRAIGHT for Zach’s apartment after Callum gave me the address. His confession had spun my world. It didn’t fix everything. It didn’t fix the years of hurt and disappointment, but it was a start. There was still the small matter of Dad to deal with... but as Callum had suggested, we could take baby steps.

I checked my cell phone to make sure I had the right building. My heart beat wildly in my chest as I slipped inside. I couldn’t imagine how Zach felt after what happened at the bar. Mr. Messiah had called him Declan. That wasn’t just plunging the knife into his heart. It was twisting it and tearing open his chest for good measure.

My hands trembled as I knocked on his door. I could have called ahead but I didn’t want to give him a chance to tell me that it wasn’t a good time. When you loved someone, you loved them through it all—the good, the bad, and the downright ugly. I wanted to be there for Zach, even if he thought he didn’t want me to be.

The door opened and relief sank into me, but it quickly melted away, replaced with confusion as I stared at Victoria dressed in nothing but a shirt.

“Oh, it’s you.”

“I... is Zach here?” My brows furrowed.

I couldn't stop looking at her. Her long bare legs peeked out from under the shirt, a man's shirt.

Zach's shirt.

No.

My stomach fell away as the truth of what I was seeing slammed into me.

No, he wouldn't.

She was his brother's girlfriend, and I was his—

"He's a little preoccupied right now." Her voice yanked me from my thoughts, the smug victory painted on her face like a slap in mine.

"But you're Declan's—"

"I know. It's weird, right? But Zach and I have been helping each other come to terms with things and well, it just happened."

"N- no, he wouldn't." I sucked in a shaky breath, feeling myself begin to unravel. "We're... I'm his..."

"Look, I know you two share history. He told me all about it. Even showed me the photograph..." She smirked. "I gotta say, I didn't know you had it in you."

"Ph- photograph?" I felt sick.

"Yeah. The one from Halloween."

I couldn't process what she was saying.

Zach still had the photo of me from last Halloween... and he'd showed it to her?

Fuck. I was going to puke. I was going to puke all over her, standing there looking like a supermodel, wearing *his* shirt.

"I need to go." I took off down the hall, stumbling my way down the stairs, and spilled out onto the sidewalk.

I barely made it around the side of the building into the alley before my entire stomach contents emptied all over the ground.

I'd promised myself never to let Zachary Messiah hurt me for a third time...

Yet here I was, my heart in pieces and my pride in tatters *again*.

And this time, I only had myself to blame.

Chapter
THIRTY

Zach

“FUCK,” I groaned, reaching out and fumbling around to locate the persistent bleeping piercing my skull. My fingers grazed my cell and I dragged it to my ear. “What?”

“I swear to God, Messiah, if you don’t answer your door right now, I will kick the fucking thing down.”

“Callum?” I shot upright, rubbing my temples. I hadn’t even checked the name, my eyes bleary from a night I’d rather forget.

My chest tightened as I forced out the memories.

“I mean it, Zach. Answer your fucking door.”

“Yeah, yeah, keep your hair on.” I climbed out of bed and pulled on some shorts. My room was a fucking mess, clothes strewn everywhere.

Running a hand through my bed hair, I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror. I was a mess. Hickeys dotted my neck and chest, so I grabbed a t-shirt on the way out and pulled it over my head. Callum didn’t need to see those.

The second I opened the door, he burst inside, knocking me backward. “What the fuck?” I barked, righting myself.

“I should knock your head clean off your shoulders, you fucking asshole.”

“Whoa, man,” my hands went up, the banging in my skull making it a little hard to concentrate. “I know I screwed up, but I can explain.”

“Explain? You’ve got some fucking nerve, man, screwing my sister over like that and standing there acting like you didn’t break her heart all over again.”

Shit.

I’d known Calli would be upset, but I didn’t think—

“This is what I was worried about,” he hissed. “I knew the second you two were in close proximity everything would go to shit again. I should never have told her to come here.”

I jerked back as if he’d slapped me. “What did you say?”

“Last night, after you left, we talked... and I told her to come here because you needed her. What a fucking chump I am.”

“She was here?” My brows knitted. “But that doesn’t—”

“Yeah, she was here. Me and Josie spend the entire night trying to calm

her down. She's fucking crushed. How could you do that to her? To Declan? You're a real fucking piece of work, Zach—"

He wasn't making any sense but the pounding in my head wouldn't stop. I padded over to the refrigerator and pulled out a gallon of juice, chugging it down.

"Really? That's all you've got to say for yourself?" Callum followed me.

When I'd drained the thing dry, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. "I can't think with you yelling at me and the hangover—"

"Hangover?"

"Yeah, I didn't exactly enjoy seeing my dad like that. We managed to get him back to his hotel, but he was a fucking mess. We came back here and well, you can see how well that worked out for me." I flicked my eyes to the empty bottles littered everywhere.

"Was that before or after you fucked Victoria?"

Everything slowed down and then slammed into me so fast I didn't know which thought to deal with first.

Fucked Victoria?

Had he lost his goddamn mind?

"What did you just say?"

"You heard me," Callum gritted out. "Don't even try to deny it. Calli saw her, she saw her with her own eyes."

"Calli saw... seriously, man, I have no idea what you're talking about." I ran a hand down my face wondering if I'd woken up in some alternate dimension.

What the fuck had happened last night?

"I don't understand," Callum said, his expression softening. "Calli said she came here and saw Victoria wearing your clothes."

"I lent her a shirt after my dad puked over us both. She had a shower here and then I told her to go. I wasn't in a good place."

"So, you didn't fuck her?"

"Are you kidding me? I'm ass over elbow in love with your sister. Why the fuck would I jeopardize—oh shit, Calli thinks..." My heart lurched into my throat.

"Yeah, now you can see my predicament. Victoria made it pretty obvious something went down between the two of you."

"Fuck." Panic welled inside me. "Where is she?"

"Who, Victoria?"

“No, not Vic, you asshole. Calli?” My voice cracked. I needed to find her. I needed to find her and explain.

“She spent the night with Josie. I’m not sure you should go over there yet. She was pretty pissed.”

“I can’t believe she thinks I’d... fuck...” I slouched against the counter, my initial anger giving way to bone-crushing defeat.

“Look at it from her point of view.” Callum grimaced. “She came here to be with you and Victoria opened the door half-naked, wearing your shirt, acting like the two of you—”

“Yeah, okay,” I cut him off unable to hear anymore. I got it, I did. But I couldn’t help the disappointment coursing through me at the thought that she didn’t have more faith in me.

“It’s going to take time,” Callum said as if he could hear my thoughts. “The two of you have history... She mentioned Halloween.” His voice dripped with accusation.

“I... uh, yeah... we saw each other last Halloween.” This was as awkward as fuck.

“Victoria said some stuff... stuff I’m thinking you didn’t share with her. So you need to figure out how she knows, because if you don’t handle her, I will.” Protectiveness burned in his eyes, but I only felt relief. It was about time he stepped up and acted like the brother Calli deserved.

“This has been a long time coming, you know?” I said.

“What?”

“You, pulling the big brother card.” My lips curved into a smirk and he flipped me off.

“Yeah, well break her heart again and I’ll break your legs. Let’s see you try to run circles around me then.”

“Dude, I could run circles around you blindfolded *and* legless.”

“In your fucking dreams, Messiah.” Quiet laughter rumbled in Callum’s chest as some of the resentment and anger between us faded away.

“I gotta tell you, man, this is not how I saw this conversation going.” I rubbed the back of my neck.

“You need her. If you’re going to get through what’s coming, you’re going to need her.”

He meant Declan; the hard decisions that would eventually have to be made.

“So what? Is this you giving me your blessing?”

“No, it’s me telling you that if you don’t find a way to fix things and make my sister happy, I’ll make life very difficult for you.”

“Get in line,” I grumbled.

“What?”

“You haven’t met Xavier yet.” The guy was scary as fuck.

“Xavier? Who the hell is Xavier?”

“Owns a biker bar on the edge of town. Calli and Josie hang out there sometimes.”

“My sister hangs out at a *biker bar*?”

“Yup. From what I can gather, he’s taken quite a shine to her.”

“I... I don’t even know what to say to that.”

“It’s a good thing.” I chuckled. “At least, I think it is.” Calli had people. Josie. Xavier. Freya. She’d found a tribe to lean on and I couldn’t be prouder of the girl she’d become.

“Still, I don’t like the sound of it. A biker bar...” He cussed under his breath.

“You won’t be here next year, and who knows where I’ll end up. She needs people around her, Cal. People who care.”

“Ouch.”

“That’s not... you know I didn’t mean that how it sounded.” I let out a heavy sigh. “But with your mom gone and Madison off living her life, Calli came here on her own...”

His expression fell. “And we both let her down.”

“Yeah, we did.”

“So we’d better figure out how the hell to make it up to her.”

“Actually, I have an idea.”

“You do?”

I nodded.

But first I needed to take care of something.

“ZACH, THIS IS A SURPRISE.” Victoria smiled but I saw the flicker of fear. “Do you want to—”

I shouldered past her and entered her room at the sorority house. Of course, she had the biggest room built into the loft conversion. The Dorma

window gave her great views of the campus, but I wasn't here to admire the view.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" I snapped, the second she closed the door.

"What are you talking about?"

"Last night, when I was taking a shower..."

"Oh, you mean that." She flicked her hair off her shoulder. "It was nothing. I knew you wouldn't want Cassie sniffing around after that stuff with your dad, so I got rid of her." She shrugged. "It was no big deal."

"No big..." I dragged in a ragged breath. "Are you really that fucking vindictive that you let her leave thinking we fucked?"

"I never said that." She pouted, batting her long lashes at me as if it would actually work.

"You answered the door wearing my shirt and nothing else. I know you, Vic. I know you've had it out for Calli since the second you realized who she was to me." I stalked toward her, my eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. "You're jealous, but what I can't quite figure out is if it's because you care about me as a friend or if you're really that sick and twisted that you'd fuck your guy's brother."

Crack. The sound of her palm against my cheek filled the space between us. "How dare you? I'm just trying to protect you. She doesn't care about you, she's just—"

"She is the *only* person who cares about me. Calli isn't a jersey chaser, Vic. She doesn't give a shit if I play ball or if I never play again in my life."

She saw me.

Not the name.

Not the jersey.

Not the talent.

She only ever saw *me*.

"Zach, come on," her cold façade melted away as she tried to reach for me, "we're friends, aren't we? We need each other."

"No, Victoria," I shirked her off. "We're not friends. We're not anything. Stay away from me and stay the fuck away from Calli. Because if you don't, I'll make sure everyone knows what a conniving, selfish bitch you really are."

Her gasp filled the room, but I didn't stick around to hear her pleas.

I was done with her.

And if she knew what was good for her, she'd be done with me too.

"THANKS, MAN." I clinked my beer against Callum's. "I couldn't have done this without you." We were up on the roof terrace of my building. It wasn't much, a few planters and old garden chairs but the view was pretty sweet.

"I'm just surprised my old man had all that stuff lying around still."

"Do you think they'll ever figure it out?" Calli and her dad were worlds apart and he really didn't deserve a second chance, but then, neither did I.

"Stranger things have happened."

"Like this? Us sitting here, drinking a beer and shooting the shit?" I chuckled.

"Yeah, exactly like this."

Comfortable silence settled over us, until Callum asked, "What do you think you'll do? You know, about the team, being at SU?"

"No way I'm leaving now." Calli was here, and I'd only just got her back.

"I thought you'd say that..."

"Growing up, I never wanted it. I used to watch Declan and I was so in awe of him, of his passion for the game... but I never once thought I wanted to do that. Because deep down, I knew I'd never shine so long as he was in the room."

"Yeah, I get that."

"But junior year, when I joined the team, I was surprised how easy it came. Or maybe I wasn't, not really. It was weird, you know, being so good at the one thing you'd rejected your entire life. Honestly, I don't know where my head is at right now."

"You have time. But know what I think?"

"Go on, I'll humor you."

"I think you want it," Callum said. "You're just too scared about what it means."

"You sound like her, you know? You sound just like Calli."

"Taught her everything she knows." His eyes crinkled with laughter, but his expression quickly dropped. "I was a real fucking asshole to her. I wouldn't blame her if she never spoke to me again."

"She came here, didn't she? Deep down, that has to mean something."

“Yeah, maybe.” He scrubbed his jaw, staring out at the town below.

“I keep thinking it’s fate,” I said quietly. “I wouldn’t have ended up here if it wasn’t for Declan’s accident...”

“And Calli might not have ended up here if it wasn’t for Mom’s death.”

“Yeah.” My chest tightened. “But what I can’t figure out is if that’s really fucking tragic or some kind of poetic justice.”

“Does it matter? Life threw you both a curveball and then gave you the one thing you needed to come out the other side. Lucky,” he muttered. “I think it makes you both as lucky as hell.”

“I haven’t won her back yet.” My eyes slid to his, my lips pressed into a thin line.

“You’ve got this. She loves you, Zach. She never stopped.”

“How do you—”

“Because she told me. She looked me in the eye and told me. And do you know what? I wasn’t angry or pissed, I was relieved. Because it means she’s stronger than we ever gave her credit for. It means we didn’t ruin her.”

I flinched at his words. But he was right.

Calli was strong... and beautiful... and humble. She was fucking perfection, and I would spend my life making it up to her if that’s what it took.

“Okay,” Callum stood up, draining the rest of his beer. “It’s time. Are you ready?”

I accepted his offer of a hand up and nodded.

“Let’s do this.”

Chapter
THIRTY
ONE

Calli

“UH, CALLUM, WHERE ARE WE GOING?”

“You’ll see,” he said cryptically as he drove suspiciously near to Zach’s apartment building.

“Seriously?” I hissed when I realized he was pulling off the road into the parking lot. “You said we were going to hang out at the bar with Josie.”

He wanted to meet Xavier. It was weird, having him pull the big brother card, but I couldn’t deny I liked it.

I liked it a lot.

“Zach didn’t sleep with Victoria, Calli.”

“I know.” I pressed my head against the car window. I think I’d known it the second the words tumbled from her lips, barbed and cruel. Victoria wanted me to think she’d had sex with Zach. But by the time Callum had come to pick me up, I’d calmed down enough to realize the truth.

Zach was many things, but he wasn’t a cheat. Which meant Victoria was a liar. Still, I’d been upset and confused. She was there, in his apartment, forcing herself between us.

I’d spent the night with Josie watching cheesy romcoms on her small laptop screen. I wanted to confront Zach, but I also needed to get my head straight. Because being with him, being with the King of SU came with baggage. There was the team, girls like Victoria, his family...

I needed to figure out where and how I fit into all of that.

Besides, I hadn’t heard so much as a word from Zach all day. It didn’t exactly instill me with hope.

“So if you know, why have you spent the day hiding—”

“I haven’t been hiding,” I protested, “I’ve been regrouping.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” Callum chuckled, and I finally glanced over at him. “This is nice.”

The words hung between us.

“Yeah, it is.”

“For what it’s worth, Calli, I am sorry. For the divorce, Mom... everything. When she got sick, it was like I let my guilt grow into this living thing inside me. And then Declan had the accident, and I was a mess. I didn’t know how to process everything... I didn’t know how to swallow it all and do the right thing.”

“You know, just because she’s gone, doesn’t mean you can’t make your peace with her.”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about it... a lot. But I’m not sure I could go alone. I was wondering if...” He stared ahead, his face pale and etched with shame.

“I’ll go with you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” We shared a sincere smile.

“Word of advice?” Callum said, and I nodded. “Go easy on him. She played him too, Sis.”

“I can’t make any promises.” I gave him a wry smile but didn’t move.

“This is the part where you get out of the car.”

“I know... I just need a minute.” I stared up at the building. Zach was in there, waiting for me. It felt like everything we’d been through, all the heartache and pain, had been building up to this moment.

“Okay,” I said, gripping the door handle. “Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need luck, Calli. Zach has loved you since you were an awkward eighth grader, and something tells me he’s going to love you for a long time yet.”

God, I hoped so.

Because my heart wouldn’t survive Zachary Messiah again.

I DIDN’T EVEN MANAGE to knock on his door. It swung open and Zach stood there, his eyes glittering with so much love and relief, emotion welled inside me.

“You came.”

“Technically, my brother kidnapped me and brought me here. Wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?” My lips curved of their own volition.

“I swear nothing happened with Victoria, not a damn thing. She’s a manipulative bitch and I—”

“I know.”

“You do?” His brows furrowed, and I nodded.

“I think I knew the second I fled your building. I was just hurt and

confused and sick... really sick.”

“Fuck, I’m so sorry, Calli. She was only here because she helped me with my dad and he puked all over us, more than once,” he grumbled. “The least I could do was let her get showered.”

“It’s me or her, Zach,” I said without hesitation. “We can’t both be in your life. I won’t play games with her. I just won’t.”

“You think there’s even a choice?” He strode toward me and ran his knuckles down my cheek. “It’s you, sweet pea. It’s always been you. It’s always going to be you. I don’t want Victoria, I never did. And we’re done, my brother’s girlfriend or not. I told her as much today.”

“You did?” The knot in my stomach slowly began to unravel.

“I did, babe. She knows if she even comes within breathing distance of you, she’s done.” The conviction in his voice sent a shiver down my spine. “I hate that she tried to come between us again. But most of all, I hate that I gave her the power to.”

“So, what happens now?” I asked, feeling lighter than I had when I stepped into Zach’s apartment.

“I guess that’s up to you.” He let his fingers brush my jaw before gripping it gently and tilting my face to his. “I love you, Calliope James. So fucking much.”

My fingers curled into his t-shirt, pulling him closer. “Show me,” I whispered.

Zach kissed me softly at first. Like I was fragile glass, and he was scared of breaking me. His lips peppered tiny kisses over my mouth, his tongue flicking and tasting, driving me crazy. A whimper crawled up my throat, liquid lust swimming through my veins.

“Zach...”

“I can’t believe I’m doing this.” He dropped his lips to my shoulder, kissing the bare skin there. “But there’s something I want to show you.”

He took my hand and pulled me toward what I assumed was his bedroom. “Close your eyes.” He slipped behind me, looping his arms around me and guided me into his room.

“What are you—”

“Patience, sweet pea.” He kissed right beneath my ear, sending bolts of desire shooting through me. “Okay, open them.”

My eyes flickered open, my lips falling open on a sharp gasp as I took in the sight before me.

The wall was covered in photos... photos *I'd* taken.

"I- I don't understand."

"Callum and your dad helped. He had a bunch of your old photos in storage."

"He did? I had no idea. I'd always assumed he didn't care."

"He cares, Calli. He's just not very good at showing it." Zach moved us closer to the wall but didn't let go of me.

I looked at every photo. The ones of the beach, the waves rolling onto the golden shore. Shots of our yard, the Messiah's treehouse. There were even some rare family shots of my mom and dad with Callum. Zach and Madison littered the images too. But there was only one of me.

A single photo pinned right in the middle. The one from last Halloween.

"You kept it," I said, my cheeks burning with memories of that night. The photo captured my lust as Zach kissed me. My skin was flushed, my eyes half-lidded. It was provocative and sensual, but it was also crystal clear that I was a girl in love with a boy.

"As if I could ever let it go." He nestled his chin into the crook of my shoulder.

"How did Victoria find it?"

"She must have been snooping. I keep it in my drawer." He flicked his head to the dresser. "I caught her one day in there, but she said she was cleaning up after me and I never thought anything of it."

"God, I really hate her."

"She can't touch us anymore, I promise."

I wanted to believe him, but he was still on the team, their paths would still cross.

"I'll quit," he whispered so quietly I almost missed it.

"What?" I turned my head, grazing his lips with mine.

"You heard me, sweet pea. I said, I'll quit. Nothing... *nothing* will ever mean more to me than you do."

"You can't quit the team, Zach."

"Says who?" His eyes clouded with confusion.

"I do. They need you and something tells me you might need them too."

"I have everything I need right here." He turned me in his arms, staring down at me with an intensity that made my toes curl. "I need you to know that I choose you, Calli. It will always be you."

"I know. But it's okay to want it, Zach. I've seen you play. You're good,

you're so freakin' good. I want you to follow your dreams."

"And what about your dreams, huh?"

"I..." My eyes shuttered. I knew what he was getting at, but I wasn't ready.

"Wait here." Zach dropped a kiss on my head before striding across his room. He rummaged in the bottom of the closet before grabbing a plain black box and coming back to me. "I'm not interested in chasing my dreams alone." He handed me the box.

I stared down at it, feeling its weight in my hands.

No... he wouldn't...

"Go on, open it." My body trembled as I opened the lid. Tears burned the backs of my eyes as I caught the first glimpse of a brand-new Nikon D780.

"The guy at the shop said it's top of the range. Honestly, I don't have a clue, but he promised me—"

"It's perfect." But it came with a hefty price tag. "It's too much," I blurted out, completely overwhelmed.

"After everything I've put you through, it seems like small change to me." Zach cupped my face, brushing away my tears. "I know you haven't picked up your camera since your mom passed, but she'd want you to follow your dreams, Calli. She'd want you to live."

"Okay." I smiled through my tears. "We'll chase our dreams... together."

"Together," he said.

Zach took the box from me and went to place it on the dresser. When he returned, he curved his hand around the back of my neck and leaned in, ghosting his lips over mine. "Now would be the time to back out, sweet pea."

"Never," I breathed. "I'm in, Zach, all in."

"I was hoping you would say that." He lifted me up without warning and carried me over to his bed. Lowering me down, he started stripping me out of my clothes, kissing my skin as he went. My fingers slid into his hair, relishing the feel of his slightly stubbled jaw as he worshipped my body.

"You are so fucking beautiful, Calli." He pushed my t-shirt up my body, tugging me up to pull it over my head. His hand spanned my ribs, as he leaned down and kissed me. Soft and searching gave way to hard and unyielding. Zach devoured me like a man starved, desperate for his next breath. His tongue tangled with mine, long languid licks that made my skin tingle and legs clench.

I helped him out of his t-shirt, trailing my hands over his chest. His skin

was warm under my touch, contracting as I explored every ridge and groove. But it wasn't enough. I wanted to taste him, to run my tongue along the lines of his muscles.

Dipping my head, I flicked my tongue across his nipple.

"Fuck, Calli," he rasped, on the verge of pain.

Feeling bold, I licked and nipped across his chest, giving his other pec the same attention.

"Keep that up, and this isn't going to last very long." A low groan rumbled in his throat when I scraped my nails down his obliques. But it was nothing compared to the sound he made when I pushed my hand into his shorts and circled my fingers around his shaft.

"Jesus..." His breath caught.

"I want to taste you," I stared up at him, slowly working his shorts off his hips. His dick sprang free, long and hard, the tip glistening with his arousal.

"Take whatever you want."

"I haven't... not since..."

"Fuck," it was a graveled rasp, "really?"

My gaze dipped, embarrassment staining my cheeks.

"Don't ever shy away from me, Calli." He gripped my chin. "I'm yours, use me."

Heat pooled deep in my stomach as I imagined all the things I wanted to do to him. Things I wanted him to do to me. Things we could do together.

Flicking my tongue over the tip, I took him in deep into my mouth.

"Fuck, Calli, that feels... holy shit." Zach wound his hand into my hair, but he didn't try to take control. I licked and sucked, gliding my hand up and down in rhythm with my mouth.

"Yeah," he grunted, "just like that."

Power surged through me as I felt him begin to unravel. He gently thrust into my mouth never taking more than I was willing to give. And when he tried to pull away as his legs locked up and a string of cuss words fell from his lips, I kept my hand wrapped firmly around his root, swallowing down every last drop.

Pushing me down on the bed, Zach covered my body with his. "Do you have any idea how amazing you are? I want to experience everything with you, Calli. I want to teach you everything." His eyes darkened with unwavering love.

"I want you," I said, wriggling against him. He was already hard again.

A tremor rolled through me.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asked, and I nodded.

“I’m just a little nervous.”

It wasn’t our first time. It wasn’t even our second or third time. But it felt like the most important time.

The time where we left our past behind us and finally walked into the future.

Zach slipped his hand between our bodies and found my center, sliding two fingers inside me. My breath caught at the feel of him stretching me. He didn’t take his eyes off me as he worked me slowly at first. Every drag of his thumb over my clit, every press of his fingers, deeper, faster, he watched me. Even when my eyes grew heavy and my breath became rapid, he still watched.

“Eyes,” he murmured against my lips as I crashed over the edge. “I need your eyes.”

They locked on his as intense waves of pleasure rolled through me.

Zach didn’t wait, he guided himself inside of me in one smooth stroke.

“God,” I breathed. “It feels...”

“I know.” He kissed me, rocking into me with measured restraint. Sliding a hand underneath my thigh, he went deeper, fitting our bodies impossibly close. Close enough that I didn’t know where I ended, and he began.

Nothing else existed, only skin on skin and hearts beating. Zach loved my body until I was breathless, boneless and weak. He loved me until he’d imprinted himself on my soul and etched his name on my heart, replacing the lingering marks of the boy he used to be with the stamp of the man he’d become.

I was fourteen the first time I’d fallen in love with Zachary Messiah. A naïve girl with nothing but stars in her eyes and love in her heart.

I wasn’t that girl anymore.

I was older. Wiser. Worn down by the tragedies of life and made stronger by the pain. My heart was tarnished, pieced together with jagged edges and fading scars. But one thing remained the same.

My soul still recognized Zach as hers.

It always had...

It always would.

EPILOGUE

FIVE MONTHS LATER...

Calli

“Foul,” Zach yelled from beside me. I grabbed his arm, trying to wrangle him back into his seat.

“Babe, you’re making a scene.”

“A scene?” His brows knitted as his eyes slid to mine. “It’s clearly Elsa’s ball and they just—”

“Let it go,” I smothered a chuckle, shooting a saccharine smile at some of the other parents.

Zach had made quite a name for himself at Jasmine’s games. He was a little too passionate, but he just wanted to support her since her own parents couldn’t find the time to get behind her.

We tried to get to as many games as we could and when we couldn’t come, another volunteer from the center did. Everyone wanted to support Jasmine; being the first female player on her high school team was a pretty big deal. After finding out that Steinbeck High School didn’t have enough female players to form a team, Zach had personally petitioned the school board to let Jasmine try out for the boys’ team.

I was so proud of him, of them both. Jasmine had flourished under his guidance, shedding her quiet meek persona to become a quietly confident young woman. She still had a long way to go in terms of building friendships with her peers, but she was getting there. One step at a time.

“Oh, come on.” Zach shot up again, grumbling under his breath about the poor decision.

“Zach,” I scolded, trying to drag him back into his chair. “You promised.”

He flopped down with a defeated sigh. “They’re singling her out.”

“No one is singling her out.” I nuzzled his neck, kissing his jaw. “They’re just covering her because she’s that damn good.”

“Yeah, she is, isn’t she?” I felt the smirk in his words.

Everyone in Steinbeck and the surrounding towns knew about Zach Messiah and his protégé, Jasmine Moran. They had even made the local newspaper. Zach had spent hours with Jasmine working on her skills and conditioning. She’d even started helping him run a session down at Next Steps. It made my heart full watching their friendship blossom.

“This is it.” He lurched forward. “Dodge... that’s it, El... reverse pivot...”

His fist clenched. “Layup, hit the—YES!” Zach was out of his seat again cheering Jasmine’s name as she celebrated with her team.

I gave up after that. Zach only grew more animated and excited as the Steinbeck High Sabers took the lead.

And when the final whistle blew, declaring them the winners, Zach was the first one on the court, congratulating them.

“ARE YOU NERVOUS?” Jasmine asked Zach, tucking into her chocolate sundae. It was our post-game ritual. Win or lose, we always got ice cream at Flippers after a game.

“Nervous? Is that a joke?” Zach scoffed. “We had one of the best seasons on record.”

“Yeah, but it’s the final four. Duke, Auburn, and Purdue are all looking —”

“Don’t say it.” He jabbed his spoon in her direction.

“Whatever, man,” she chuckled. “I’m just saying, you sound mighty sure of yourself.”

Zach licked the last drop of ice cream off his spoon and threw it into the glass, slinging his arm over the back of my chair. “It’s ours, it has to be. For Dec.”

Sadness washed over Jasmine. “Yeah, you’re right. You’re totally right. It’s for Declan, no way you won’t bring it home.”

I dropped my hand to Zach’s knee and squeezed gently. It had been almost three months since Zach’s parents had made the heart wrenching decision to switch off Declan’s life support. They’d wanted one last Christmas with their eldest son, and they’d gotten it.

Tim had taken it the hardest, but after Declan’s latest round of MRI scans, the doctors had confirmed what nobody wanted to believe: the damage to his brain was too extensive.

Zach had been surprisingly strong throughout the whole ordeal. Not long after we made our relationship official, we’d both visited his brother. Zach had taken some time to tell him about us, about the team, and Jasmine, and then with me nestled into his side, he’d said goodbye.

He’d made his peace with it, even if it took his parents a little while

longer.

Leaning down, Zach brushed his lips over mine, completely ignoring Jasmine's gagging sounds.

"I love you," he whispered, the words affecting me as much now as they always had.

"I love you too." I laid my palm on his cheek, running my thumb over the corner of his mouth. "But you need to behave while we're on Elsa duty."

"Heard that," she muttered.

"Guess it's time to return Elsa to her castle then." Zach winked at her.

"One day, I'm not going to be a kid anymore and I'll be able to tell you exactly what I'm thinking."

"You're fifteen. Still plenty of time to be a kid."

"Cantaloupe, a little help here?"

It was a standing joke now. Zach called Jasmine 'Elsa', and she called me 'Cantaloupe'.

"You're on your own with this one, Jas, sorry."

"Ugh." She rolled her eyes. "One day, Zach... I'm warning you."

"I'm shaking in my boots."

"You are such a dork."

"Now that, we can agree on." I held up my hand and she high fived me across the table.

"Oh crap, is that the time?" Jasmine checked her cell. "I need to get home anyway. Macauley Denver is picking me up at eight."

"Macauley Denver? Who the fu—who the hell is Macauley Denver?"

"Just a friend." She gave a little shrug as if it was no big deal.

"Doesn't sound like a friend to me, El." Zach practically growled the words. "It sounds like a boy, that's what it sounds like."

"Yeah, so? We're friends."

"And just how old is this Macauley?"

"He's sixteen, he's in tenth grade."

"Oh, hell no. Does your mom and dad know about this?"

"They know, not that it's any of their business..."

"Have they talked to you about the birds and—"

"Okay, that's enough of that." I clapped a hand over Zach's mouth. "Remember what we talked about?" I narrowed my eyes at him.

"I remember." The words were muffled against my palm.

"We can't overstep."

He nodded, and I slipped my hand away. “We have to stick to the rules, Zach. Freya made it very clear, we—you—can’t keep overstepping.”

“Got it, I got it.” He pouted.

Jasmine’s shoulders shook with quiet laughter. “You should see your face.”

“You should see Macauley’s face after I’m done with him should he ever lay a—”

“Zach!”

“What? She’s fifteen. I know what kids that age are like. Remember what we were like?”

“That’s different.” My cheeks pinked.

“No, it isn’t.”

“This is fun and all,” Jasmine said, “but I have a date.”

“See,” Zach muttered. “It’s a date. She called it a date.”

“Jasmine, let’s go.” I stood up. “We’ll leave the crazy man here.”

“I think that’s the best idea you’ve ever had.” She followed me up.

“Very funny, you two. Is it so wrong that I care?” He glanced between us and I felt my resolve slip.

I actually loved that he cared so fiercely. But Jasmine wasn’t our kid. She wasn’t even my little sister anymore, not officially. But we hung out still. Her parents were still as flaky as ever, something Zach and I had a wealth of experience in.

“No, it’s very chivalrous of you.”

“I dig it.” Jasmine shrugged. “But I’m still going out with Macauley.”

“What time did you say he was picking you up? Maybe I should stick around to meet—”

Jasmine strolled up to him and laid her hand on his shoulder, and said, “It’s going to be okay, Messiah.” She took off toward the door while Zach gawked after her.

“Did I just get schooled by a ninth grader?”

“Yeah, babe.” I fought a smile. “I think you did.”

Zach

“Where do you think you’re going?” I snagged Calli around the waist and pulled her back against my chest. Sweeping the hair off her shoulder, I peppered tiny kisses there, dragging my tongue up the slope of her neck to nip her jaw.

“I wanted to unpack,” she said.

“Unpack?”

“Babe, I just spent hours cooped up on a bus with a bunch of guys and you think *now* is the time to unpack?”

The journey from Steinbeck to Phoenix had been almost seven hours. We’d been up at the ass crack of dawn to head to the location of the final weekend of March Madness, being held at State Farm Stadium.

Calli had traveled behind with her dad, Josie, and Josie’s parents.

“Seriously, you want to talk rides from hell?” she grumbled. “I had to listen to my dad and Mr. Molineux talk about the tournament for seven freakin’ hours.” She turned in my arms staring up at me with those big whiskey eyes of hers. “I love you, Zach, and I love the team, but nobody, and I mean nobody, needs to listen to basketball talk for that long.”

Laughter rumbled in my chest as I pressed a soft kiss to her lips. “You did a good thing letting him travel with you and the Molineux family.

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t like I could just let him come alone.”

Calli and her old man were a work in progress. They’d tried to repair their damaged relationship over the last five months, but some scars were simply too deep to heal. They were civil, and we visited the house sometimes with Callum and his new girlfriend, but Calli had made her peace with never having the father she’d wanted.

“God, I love you.” I ran my knuckles down her cheeks. Our relationship had only gone from strength to strength. Calli was my biggest supporter. She handled the team and their bullshit with nothing but grace and a smile, and they loved her right back.

Sometimes a little too much for my liking.

Her fingers curled into my jersey, yanking me closer. “It’s a good thing, Messiah, because I am completely gone for you.”

“You love me, sweet pea?”

“I don’t love you, Zach.” She smirked. It had become our thing over the

last few weeks. For her to repeat the words that had ruined us the first time around. “Because *I love you* couldn’t possibly do justice to the way I feel about you.”

“You are amazing, Calliope James. And you’re mine.” *So fucking mine.*

Her lips curved, but I didn’t give her time to respond, crashing my mouth down on hers and taking what I needed.

What I’d always need.

I’d loved this girl since I was fifteen. And I’d love her forever more if she let me.

We stumbled our way to the bedroom, both of us unwilling to break the kiss. Our tongues tangled together with easy familiarity, but the heat never subsided. The second Calli touched me, she set off a wildfire inside me.

Only ever her.

“We have the dinner,” she murmured against my lips. “We can’t be late.”

“We’ll be quick, but I need you, sweet pea.” My hands were already tugging at her clothes. I needed her naked and writhing beneath me. Or maybe on top of me, her riding me while I lay back and—

“Zach.” She tapped my cheek. “Where’d you go just now?”

“Less talking, more undressing.” I made quick work of stripping her before starting on my own clothes. The second my jeans hit the floor, I dived for her, tackling Calli to the bed in a *whoosh* of laughter and limbs.

I stared down at the girl I loved more than anything in the entire world.

“What?” she whispered, her eyes twinkling with adoration.

“You, Calli.” I rocked into her without warning, making us both cry out. She gripped my shoulders, shuddering beneath me. Her soft fingers gripped my jaw, bringing my face level with hers.

“You’re going to win, Zach. For Declan. For the team... For you.”

I touched my head against hers, breathing her in, gently sliding in and out of her wet heat.

I wanted it, I wanted it so fucking much. To bring the team victory. To honor my brother the only way I knew how. But no matter what happened this weekend, I’d already won.

I had my girl by my side, and we had our whole lives ahead of us.

Anything else was just the icing on the cake.

Calli

“There you are,” Josie hurried over to us the second we stepped into the restaurant Coach and his team had reserved.

“Hey.” I hugged her back. “We, uh... we lost track of time.”

“I bet you did.” She gave me a knowing smile. “Everyone’s already here.”

“Okay, lead the way.”

My best friend led us to the back of the restaurant and into a private dining room, full of the team and their families. Big round tables had been laid out much like a wedding, dressed with red, white, and black balloons.

“It’s fancy,” I whispered to Zach who had an iron grip on my waist.

Callum caught my eye and beckoned us over, while Josie took her seat with Joel and her parents. I noticed she’d chosen a chair which meant she had her back to Brad.

Things had gone south with them after the exhibition game. Five months later, they still couldn’t be in the same room together without things getting prickly. It made our lives interesting, given she was my best friend and Brad was one of Zach’s closest friends.

My father and Callum rose, as did Zach’s dad.

“Sweetheart, you look beautiful.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I gave him a kiss on the cheek. It still felt strange accepting his compliments. In truth, I wasn’t sure I’d ever get used to it. But I was trying.

“Sis, get over here.” Callum pulled me into his arms, and I hugged him back. Things were easier between us, better than they had ever been. And he and Zach had become fast friends. Losing Declan had tethered them, but they had both come out of it stronger.

And my brother had found love. Jessa wasn’t just a beautiful person, she was a beautiful soul.

“You look... shit, Calli. You grew up good.”

“You’re not so bad yourself.” I smiled up at him. “Ready for this weekend?”

“I think so.” He ran a hand through his hair. “But whatever happens, I’m glad you’re here. It feels right.”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

We all took our seats and waited for Coach Baxter to take center stage. Usually, teams celebrated *after* the tournament, but Coach had wanted to do something special to commemorate Declan.

He stood up and the room ushered into silence.

Zach gripped my hand and my eyes slid to his. "Okay?" I mouthed.

He nodded, emotion glittering in his gaze.

I knew what this weekend meant to him, we all did. But whatever happened, he'd done himself proud. He'd done the team proud.

And whether he'd wanted it or not, he'd done his family proud.

"Last season, I honestly didn't know if we'd be here again this year. The team took a big hit," Coach Baxter inhaled a ragged breath. "We were still reeling from Maverick's accident when we got the news that Declan had... wow," he let out a long steady breath, "it doesn't get easier. Declan Messiah was the heart of this team. He stepped up when we lost Maverick and he refused to accept less than our best." He took a big sip of his drink.

"I think we hoped for a miracle. Deep down, we all hoped to see Declan here for this. He deserved it. God knows, he deserved so much more. But it wasn't to be. Declan might be gone but he will never be forgotten. His spirit will live on through the young men who move through the ranks of this team. And when we go out there tomorrow, we will play for him. So I'd like to take this opportunity to raise my glass to Declan."

"Declan." His name rippled around us, as I tucked myself into Zach's side. He kissed my hair before giving me a small smile.

Despite everything that had happened, he'd chosen SU. He'd chosen to pursue basketball because it was a part of him as much as it had been a part of Declan. Things weren't perfect. He and his dad still butted heads. Their relationship was still strained. But the Messiahs were healing. Slowly, they were finding their way. A new way. We had dinner with them every other week and I loved listen to his mom and dad tell stories about Declan and Zach as small boys. And then, after we left, I would love Zach with my body and words, reminding him that he was worthy. That to me, he would always be the most important person in the world.

He was my sun and I always wanted to be in his light. And when things got hard, when the pain or grief or self-doubt became too much to bear, I would be his star, lighting the way.

"I love you, Zachary Messiah," I whispered against his ear. "I loved you then, I love you now, and I'll love you to the end."

“The end?” He slid his finger under my jaw and angled my face to his, staring into my eyes. “That sounds a lot like forever.”

I pressed my lips together, suppressing a smile.

“Say it, sweet pea.” He ghosted his lips over mine, not caring that we were surrounded by our friends and families. We were done letting other people dictate our relationship.

I loved Zach.

And he loved me.

“Use your words, Calli. Say it.”

It was a game we played. A game of who would break first. But there was no hesitation this time when I curled my arm around his shoulder and kissed him.

“Forever, Zach. I want forever.”

Zach

I'd spent a long time angry at the world. Angry at my dad, my brother... the people around me who only ever saw him. His achievements, his potential. I'd spent my entire childhood in Declan's shadow. But as I stood there, under the harsh glare of the lights in the State Farm Stadium, I didn't feel angry. I felt determined. This game wasn't only for me, or the guys, or Coach and the fans, it was for Declan.

And I'd made my peace with that.

We were tied at the end of the second half with twenty seconds left on the clock. It had been a grueling forty minutes. Purdue scored, we scored right back. Back and forth. Back and forth. My legs and arms ached, and my lungs burned. But we had time for one last play.

I pulled up my jersey and wiped the sweat from my face. "We've got this," I mouthed to my teammates.

Brad was on the baseline, ready to run the play. My body hummed with awareness as I slowed my breathing, waiting for the whistle. The second it sounded, I jogged into place. Brad threw the ball to Devin who cut around the defense with precision and power, looking up for his receiving player. It all happened so fast. One second, I was watching the play unfold, the next I was cradling the ball in my hand and leaping into the air, my wrist snapping. The ball flew... sailing clean through the hoop.

The buzzer sounded and the crowd went wild.

Before I could realize what was happening, my team swarmed me, chanting my name. Not Messiah.

Zach.

Zach. Zach. Zach.

It rang loud in my ears as adrenaline raced through me.

We'd done it.

We'd won the championship, and *I'd* scored the winning point.

I closed my eyes, tilting my head to the ceiling. *We did it, Dec. We did it.* Emotion lodged in my throat as my teammates jostled me, all high on the win. But when my eyes opened, I only saw one person.

Calli ran onto the court wearing my jersey, my fucking number, tears clinging to her long lashes. The guys parted like the sea, giving her a clear path to leap into my arms. "You did it," she breathed, burying her face into

the crook of my shoulder. “You did it.”

My hand went to the back of her neck, holding her there as I tried to rein in my emotions. She knew. Calli knew what this meant to me, what it meant to my family. She’d been there every step of the way. The ups, the downs, and the downright ugly, she’d been there.

“I love you, sweet pea.”

She lifted her head and took a shuddering breath. “I love you too, so much. And I’m so proud of you, Zach. So, so proud.”

“Yo, Zach, put your girl down,” Brad yelled over the noise. “We’ve got plenty of celebrating to do before you leave.”

I flipped him off over my shoulder, striding towards the tunnel that led to the locker rooms. “Uh, Zach, what are you doing?” Calli’s brows pinched. “You can’t just abandon the team.”

“Watch me.”

“Seriously, you can’t—”

“Listen to me, Calli, and listen good.” I touched my head to hers, marching her through the crowd that had swarmed the court. “Nothing, *nothing* will ever mean more to me than you. The team got what they wanted, we won. We fucking won, babe. But now... now I get what *I* want.”

“Yeah?” Love and lust glittered in her eyes. “And what do you want, Zachary Messiah?”

My lips fixed over hers as we stumbled into the wall, our laughter vibrating between us. “You, Calliope James,” I said the words with total conviction. “I want you.”

Calli was my anchor. She always had been. When I’d lost her, the sea had gotten stormy for a while. Like a ship without its sail, I’d veered off course and hit rocky ground. But she was back, and she was mine.

And I was never letting her go again.

Not for anything.

Thanks for reading *On the Rebound*.

If you’re curious about Maverick Prince, you can read his story in *Wicked Bay*. [Start the series here](#).

PLAYLIST

You Broke Me First – Tate McRae
Favorite Ex – Maisie Peters
Stuck with U – Ariana Grande ft. Justin Bieber
Graveyard – Halsey
Walk Me Home – P!nk
Make Me Cry – Noah Cyrus ft. Labyrinth
Missed – Ella Henderson
I Don't Want You Back – AJ Mitchell
Between the Wars – Allman Brown
Half A Man – Dean Lewis
What We Had – Sody
That Way – Tate McRae
You Were Good to Me – Jeremy Zucker, Chelsea Cutler
No Right to Love You – Rhys Lewis
I Can't Stay Away – The Veronicas
Anitdote – Faith Marie
8 Letters – Why Don't We
Worthy of You – P!sted
Tell Me That You Love Me – James Smith
Somebody Else – Jonny Brenns
I Still Love You – Josh Jenkins
Say - Ruel

Author's NOTE

What a year it's been. Calli and Zach were never part of the plan. Zach first appeared in *Wicked Forever*, the final book of the *Wicked Bay* series, and he definitely caught my attention. I wanted to know what secrets the quiet reluctant basketball player had lurking behind his eyes. So when the chance to write a short Halloween story presented itself, I knew exactly who I wanted to write about.

But I wouldn't have gotten to this point without a few mentions. Andie, my editor and bestie, thank you for holding my hand through this one. My beta team—Annessia, Heather, and Amanda—I appreciate your input and ideas. Ginelle, thank you for being there to proofread at the drop of a hat. Tracy, Anna, Nina, for continuing to be my people. To Candi at Candi Kane PR for handling all my promo, and to all the bloggers and bookstagrammers who helped spread the word. THANK YOU! This is book number 50 or something and it never ever gets any easier (in fact, I'm pretty sure it gets harder).

I hope you enjoyed Calli and Zach's story.

Until next time,
L A xo

About The AUTHOR

ANGSTY. EDGY. ADDICTIVE. ROMANCE

Author of mature young adult and new adult novels, L A is happiest writing the kind of books she loves to read: addictive stories full of teenage angst, tension, twists and turns.

Home is a small town in the middle of England where she currently juggles being a full-time writer with being a mother/referee to two little people. In her spare time (and when she's not camped out in front of the laptop) you'll most likely find L A immersed in a book, escaping the chaos that is life.

L A loves connecting with readers.

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The best places to find her are

