



*Dear*

**CREED**

BAYLIN CROW

DEAR CREED

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Dear Creed by Baylin Crow

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

I didn't always hate Creed Masters.

Growing up, Creed and I had been best friends. I'd thought that would never change and we'd always be inseparable.

I never expected to start thinking about how his lips would feel on mine, much less the constant ache in my chest knowing I'd never have him. I didn't just want my best friend in bed. I was in love with him.

Creed was never supposed to find out. But my secrets were exposed when I accidentally left my journal open on my desk, every detail of how I felt on the pages.

Our friendship was shattered in a single moment. Now I can't stand the sight of him. I wish I had changed my plans to attend the same college.

I've gone out of my way to avoid him on campus, but lately he seems to be everywhere.

*Dear Creed is an ex-best friends to lovers standalone novella.*

# CHAPTER ONE

---

JAKE

*JANUARY 21, 2021*

*Dear Creed,*

*Tonight is going to suck, and not in the way I keep imagining, kneeling at your feet with your cock... Anyway, I thought we'd agreed it would just be the two of us going to the movies like we used to every weekend. But as usual now, your girlfriend has decided to tag along. I miss hanging out with you without Jade around, although I'll never tell you that. I can only imagine your reaction if I told you why I'd like for us to be alone. Two years ago, no one would have been able to convince me that I'd think about your lips as much as I have our entire senior year. How they'd feel pressed against mine.*

*Instead, I have to watch as you lock lips with your girlfriend. In case you're wondering, I sort of loathe her because she has you. You don't have a clue how I feel, and I know it would ruin our friendship if you found out. So here I am, dumping my thoughts into this notebook like I have for the last twelve months. The only thing I want more than knowing what you taste like is to not lose my best friend. So, these stupid secret feelings I can't seem to shake will stay locked between these pages. Eventually, I'll toss the whole thing in a fire to hide the evidence. Because one day, Creed Masters, I will get over you. It'll be like this pointless crush never happened. In the meantime, could you kiss your girl a little less? Watching it sucks a giant, sweaty nutsac.*



“GROSS,” I whisper and grimace at the mental image I’ve created. I set down my pencil and read back over the words I’ve written.

Keeping my feelings bottled up had been driving me crazy before I’d discovered pouring them into a secret journal helped. I still feel like an idiot for pining over my lifelong best friend. My very straight friend. Creed, golden boy and quarterback of our high school football team, has had the same gorgeous cheerleader girlfriend for the last year. The worst part of this mess is Jade is actually pretty great so I can’t even hate her. Or at least I shouldn’t. But the truth is once I realized I no longer saw Creed as just a friend—and that he’d never see me that way—I sort of wished she’d...

Shaking my head, I let go of the disturbing thought that creeps into a twisted dark corner of my mind. What I really wish is that my heart will stop hammering in my chest when Creed stares at me with his intense dark brown eyes. Every morning, I hope my chest won’t tighten when he flashes his signature boyish smile that makes a single dimple pop. I also pray my cock will fucking stop getting hard when Creed whips his shirt over his head, leaving his lean, carved muscles on display. I want to run my fingertips and tongue across every dip and hollow of his body, and that’s a problem for obvious reasons.

I groan and rub my eyes in frustration as I slouch down on my gamer-style computer chair. Unrequited love is exhausting.

“Jake!” my mom yells loud enough from downstairs that it reaches my ears through my closed bedroom door. “Creed is here!”

“Fuck,” I whisper and swivel my chair around to glance at my alarm clock on my nightstand. The neon green lighted time makes me curse again under my breath. I hadn’t realized how late in the day it had gotten. I’m running behind as always, so I push off my chair and jog to my closet. Snatching a pair of stone wash jeans and a forest green long-sleeved shirt from their hangers, I quickly change out of my basketball shorts and faded t-shirt.

As I grab my white tennis shoes from the closet floor, a knock on my door makes me pause. I glance toward the sound just as it opens and Creed casually strolls into my bedroom, looking all kinds of fuckable as usual. Between his smooth, sharp jawline and six-four height that towers over my five-nine slim build, Creed is the stuff wet dreams are made of. His midnight black hair is just long enough to curl under his ears, and I'd give so many things to run my fingers through it, preferably while his mouth devours mine.

Speaking of Creed's lips, he frowns, thick lips downturned as a crease forms between his dark eyebrows. He takes in my appearance before his eyes dart up to meet mine. With a sigh, he rolls them. "You aren't ready. *Shocker*. Absolutely no idea why I expected anything else."

He makes a good point. Being late is something I unfortunately excel at. Still, I scoff as I shove my feet into my shoes. "No need to be dramatic. I lost track of time. Give me one sec and I'll be ready to go."

I rush to the bathroom, brush my teeth and then run a comb through my golden blond hair. After spritzing myself with a light, crisp scented cologne, I check my appearance in the mirror. My shirt matches my eyes, and I wonder if Creed will notice. I snort under my breath at the thought. Not fucking likely. Forcing the musing away, I jog back to my room.

Creed is leaning against the wall next to my door, arms crossed over his broad chest. He lets loose a long drawn-out sigh as I grab my wallet from my dresser and shove it into my pocket.

"I'm hurrying," I promise as I walk back to my closet, grab a leather coat, and slip it on.

Creed pushes off the wall, swiping his hair from his forehead. "Can we go now? Jade is waiting for us to pick her up. If we aren't at her house in the next five minutes she'll start blowing up my phone."

I cock a brow. "Sounds like a *you* problem, and I'm ready so you can stop with the moaning now."

Well, I wouldn't mind Creed moaning, but not in the context of him worrying about picking up his girlfriend.

Creed's phone rings and he fishes it from his pocket, blowing out a resigned breath as he glances at the screen. "So much for five minutes." His gaze lifts as he shoots me a glare. "If I don't get laid tonight, it's your fault."

The last thing I wanted to think about was Creed and Jade fucking. Heading for the door, I walk past him, into the hallway. "Well then by all means, if your sex life's on the line, let's go."

"Thank you for being so considerate." Creed snorts as he follows me to the staircase.

I scoff as I begin descending the stairs. "It's either that or listen to you complain about not getting your dick wet."

"Jake." My mom's voice grabs my attention as soon as I step into the living room. I glance over, finding her standing at the entrance of the kitchen, drying her hands on a dish towel. Her blond hair is pulled up into a bun and she isn't wearing a bit of makeup, making it clear I definitely look more like her than my copper haired father. "Depending on what time you come home, your dad and I may still be out. Do you have your keys?"

I pat my jacket pockets, realizing with Creed rushing me I hadn't remembered to grab them. "No, but I'll get them." I glance at Creed. "You'll have to wait five more seconds, if you can handle that."

"I'll grab them." He's already turning and taking the stairs two at a time back up to my room.

I look back at my mom. "Where are you guys going?"

"Dinner with one of your father's associates, but you know how they get sometimes. It could be late before we get out of there." She purses her lips in exasperation. "Do you have any fun plans after the movie?"

"Not really." If anything, I'd continue to play third wheel with Creed and Jade. No thank you. I shrug. "Probably just come home after."

Speaking of Creed... I turn around and yell up toward my room, "And you say I'm slow."

"Okay, well you two have fun," my mom says as I look back at her. "I need to get these dishes finished so I can throw myself together." She gives me a soft smile before heading into the kitchen.

I wait for a second longer before frowning. Creed should have been back by now. What the hell was taking him so long?

Curious, I charge up the stairs and then down the hall. When I reach the threshold of my room my blood runs cold and I freeze, blinking as I will away what I'm seeing. No fucking way.

Creed is standing in front of my desk with my keys hanging from one finger. In the other hand is my fucking notebook.

As I accept the reality of the situation, panic seizes my lungs. I barely find my voice enough to push out a raspy plea. "Put that down."

Creed does, tossing the notebook on my desk before he slowly brings his gaze to meet mine. His dark eyes appear... sad, and my heart sinks.

How did I let this happen? How could I have been so stupid? I feel like I'm crawling out of my skin, anxiety racing through my veins.

"The fuck is that, Jake?" Creed whispers in a voice so quiet I barely make out the words.

I open my mouth, lips parting and then clamping shut as I try and fail to find the words to answer him. What the hell am I supposed to say? He's already read all of my truths, exposing my secrets to the last person I ever wanted to find out.

In response, I do the only thing that makes sense to me. I step inside my room and offer a shrug I hope appears nonchalant while lying through my teeth. "It's not a big deal \_\_\_"

“Not a big deal?” His eyebrows shoot high as he interrupts me, each word swelling with incredulity. “What the fuck, Jake? You’re gay?”

My temper flares at the question and I narrow my eyes. “You’re a smart guy, Creed. Think you can figure that out on your own.”

His shoulders ease as he scrubs his hand over his face. He honestly looks miserable. On one hand, I’m glad because that’s exactly how I feel. The other half of me is filled with guilt and regret.

When Creed remains quiet for what feels like eternity in that moment, my anxiety bubbles over spilling from my lips in a whisper. “Fucking say something.”

When Creed lifts his head, he stares somewhere over my shoulder. “What am I supposed to say, Jake? I’m confused, and I can’t fucking deal with this right now.”

He tosses my keys on the desk and then starts toward me, passing me by without another word.

“That’s it? You’re just leaving?” I hiss as I spin around and follow him into the hall, stopping just outside my door and speaking to his back.

Creed reaches the stairs and pauses with one hand on the banister. He finally meets my gaze just long enough to say, “Jade’s waiting.”

My chest locks tight as his words slice through my heart. They were meant to injure and he’d succeeded.

I watch as he tears his gaze away and continues down the stairs, disappearing from view. Devastated, I take a step backward into my room and ease the door closed. As I walk to my desk and sink down onto my chair I feel as if my world has tilted on its axis.

I glare at the stupid notebook that destroyed nearly eighteen years of friendship in less than five minutes. How had everything gone so wrong so fast?

A tap on my door startles me and I glance toward the sound of my mother's voice on the other side. "Jake? Is everything okay?"

I wonder how much she overheard, but I need to deal with this myself. "Yeah, Mom. Everything's fine. I'm going to go ahead and stay in tonight. Change of plans."

"Well, all right." The doubt in her tone rings clear, but it isn't like I can be honest with her. She doesn't know I'm gay. No one did until thirty seconds ago, and I'm just not ready for that talk, especially now. She continues speaking, voice slightly muffled. "There's leftover chicken marsala in the refrigerator if you get hungry."

I hate that stuff, but it's Creed's favorite so she made it last night when he came over for dinner. What if he never does that again? I swallow the rapidly forming lump in my throat and croak, "Thanks, Mom. I'm fine. You and Dad have a good time tonight."

It's a lie. I'm not fine, and I'm not sure if my friendship with Creed has any chance of survival after this clusterfuck. I shake my head. There's so much history between us that it *has* to be fixable. Not being friends with him isn't something I can wrap my head around.

We both need to take the night to breathe and let the dust settle. And then tomorrow we can start mending what's been broken.

## CHAPTER TWO

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JAKE

*FEBRUARY 14, 2022*

*Dear Creed,*

*One year ago, I thought you'd be my best friend until our skin wrinkled with age and every last hair on our heads turned gray. In my mind I pictured us being placed in the same nursing home and eventually side-by-side cemetery plots with headstones that recited our unbreakable bond.*

*I never said the idea was realistic.*

*And I never imagined just the sight of you would send my blood boiling, and not in the same way it used to. I hate you. You are the biggest asshole on campus. So what if everyone else loves you? They don't know how easily you turn off your feelings. How a few stupid words on a piece of paper change the way you look at someone.*

*Why did you have to be at the quad today hanging out with your jock buddies when I happened to pass through? If I never saw you again it would be too soon.*

MY NOSTRILS FLARE as loathing for my *ex*-best friend etches from the pencil lead onto the pages of my notebook. Now that I've purged my thoughts, I feel better, but lingering anger simmers beneath my skin.

I groan as I drop the pencil on the navy blue bedspread that covers my twin-sized bed in my dorm room. With a sigh, I flop



back on the stiff mattress with my head sinking onto a soft pillow I'd brought from home.

I normally look forward to Fridays, but I'm just ready for this day to be over. Tossing an arm over my face, I do my best to block out the late afternoon sunlight filtering in through the cloudy glass window. I'm also hoping it helps stem the rush of memories that suddenly flood my mind. My thoughts rapidly flip through the years we'd been closer than brothers—before I saw him as much more than that.

This whole mess is his fault for snooping in my room in the first place. Sure, I'd left my notebook open, but no one forced him to read it. He has no one to blame but himself for peeking in on my private thoughts. I tell myself this over and over, but guilt still hollows my stomach for being so careless with the words I'd written, words that had led to the destruction of our friendship.

Somehow, I'd lucked out with a single for a dorm room, so I don't have to share the shoebox-sized space with another freshman. Being alone gives me plenty of opportunities to stew in this recurring cycle of unwanted emotions that happens every fucking time I catch a glimpse of Creed these days.

Before everything had gone wrong, Creed and I had made plans to attend the same college. I'd had enough time to choose a different campus after everything fell apart, but I hadn't. At the time, changing schools felt so final—a definite end to our friendship. Now, I wish I had because I'm forced to go out of my way to avoid him and dodge his usual hangouts.

When I'd gone for breakfast at the cafeteria this morning, the overgrown jock had been casually leaning against a tree with a few of his teammates hanging around. His eyes had briefly met mine before narrowing slightly, and then he'd looked away, dismissing me entirely. Fucking dick. Not that I want his attention on me in the slightest.

I blow out a frustrated breath. If I don't get up and find something to do for the evening, my mind will replay that scene over and over until I drive myself insane. With a groan, I reach over and grab my phone from the bedside table. Sitting

up, I scoot back and lean against the headboard as I scroll through my short list of texts. I stop when I come to the message thread with Caden, a guy I met during freshman orientation last semester. We don't hang out often, and truthfully, I haven't had a close friend since Creed and I parted ways. To say I have my guard up would be an understatement. Close or not, Caden is still a decent guy and happens to know exactly where the parties are happening around campus at all times.

I tap out a message, hoping there's something fun, or at least distracting, planned for the weekend. I hit send.

**Me: I need to get out of the dorm. Anything going on tonight?**

I switch apps, mindlessly scrolling through my social media to keep my brain from focusing on Creed while I wait for Caden to respond.

**Caden: There's a party at Beta Kappa. But it's a couples' party for Valentine's Day.**

I roll my eyes. Valentine's Day is the dumbest day of the year, and I'd completely forgotten today is the ridiculous holiday. I can almost guarantee this idea came from one of the member's sorority-sister girlfriend. On the plus side, I've never seen Creed at a Beta Kappa party. On the unfortunate side...

**Me: Guess I'm out then. No way I can find a date that fast.**

Not that I would ask someone out just to go to a lame hearts and flowers party anyway. Especially a girl. But Caden doesn't know I'm gay, and I don't really plan on changing that anytime soon. A response pops up under my message.

**Caden: I can see if one of Mack's friends wants to go. I'm sure we can find you someone to just get you in the door.**

Caden's girlfriend, MacKenzie, is cool so I'm sure her friends wouldn't be a total nightmare. I hear what he's saying,

and if the girl is down for a little ruse just to get inside, I don't see why it would be a problem.

**Me: Okay, let me know.**

**Caden: Mack's calling Summer now.**

I have absolutely no idea who Summer is, but does it really matter? No.

I scoot off the bed and stretch my arms over my head. I need a shower. Even if the party idea falls through, I can't sit around my dorm all night, thinking about Creed.

I'm still dressed in a decent outfit, but the burnt orange color of my shirt and light shade of my jeans are too bright for my current mood. After shoving my phone in my pocket, I snag a pair of dark wash jeans, a black long-sleeved t-shirt, and a black hoodie. I choose the specific color to match my anti-Valentine spirit. While scowling at the whole theme of this party, I grab a towel from my not so tidy short pile of them in a wire basket on my dresser. After I scoop up my shower caddy, I head out into the hall and lock my door behind me.

The communal bathroom is a short walk away and I only cross paths with one other guy who offers a chin nod in acknowledgement. I really should make more of an effort to befriend my peers, but I'm just too bitter over my split with Creed. I no longer trust myself or anyone else.

When I enter the bathroom, I'm immediately enveloped in a thick cloud of steam. A combination of woodsy and mint scents hangs in the air, and the sound of water rushing from multiple showerheads echoes off the tiles in the small room. I feel my phone vibrate against my leg, but I wait until entering one of the vacant stalls and setting down my caddy to pull my cell from my pocket and unlock the screen.

**Caden: Summer's cool with the plan. Meet us in front of the fraternity at nine?**

It's only five. I groan under my breath. That's still a lot of time to figure out how to waste, but beggars can't be choosers. I tap out a reply.

**Me: I owe you.**

**Caden: Nah. You don't owe me anything. You should hang out more. You might even like Summer.**

I scoff, but the sound is drowned out by the spray from the other showers. It's not Caden's fault I know for a fact Summer and I won't hit it off in any sort of romantic way.

**Me: See you at nine.**

I set my clothes and phone on the shelf and turn on the shower. As I wash my hair with my favorite eucalyptus shampoo and then my body with unscented soap, I force away thoughts of Creed and think about what I can do for a few hours.

---

AND THEN THE *world goes up in a catastrophic blaze of glory.*

As I wait to meet up with Caden and the girls, I sit in a dark movie theater that smells of buttery popcorn, watching as the final scene comes to an end on the large screen. The movie wraps up much like my day with a befitting unhappy ending.

I scowl. Maybe I'm being dramatic, but I blame Creed for my shit mood.

The spacious room is mostly empty. I take up one of the seats toward the back of the theater, and a few rows in front of me, an older man with dark hair sits alone. Everyone else seems to have chosen the new rom-com showing on two separate screens. Not me. And not this guy. I send a mental high five to my fellow loner.

As the credits roll, he stands first and doesn't even look my way as he strolls up the aisle to the exit. His expression is flat as if he's as unmoved by the world's cinematic demise as I am. I remain seated but lift my hips enough to fish my phone from my pocket to check the time. It's fifteen minutes until nine, so I stand and make my way up the aisle, pushing through the door into the dimly lit hallway. I keep my eyes down, focusing on the burgundy-colored carpet that's been

worn down by foot traffic. The lobby is busy, bustling with late night moviegoers standing in line for tickets and snacks. An arcade just off the main room is packed with people of all ages messing around before or after their films. I just want to make it to the party without being noticed so I can drink my weight in cheap beer and forget about the day.

When I push through the doors at the main entrance, I take a deep inhale of the chilly city air. It's nothing like back home where trees, plants, and animals give the small town an earthy smell, even in the winter. The thought triggers a sense of nostalgia. I miss home sometimes, especially on occasions like tonight when I feel alone despite being surrounded by so many people. These people are strangers to me, though, and I really only have myself to blame for not having a close circle of friends. After Creed cut ties with me, I found myself reluctant to form other close friendships, and that hasn't changed. It's probably time I put my ex-best friend in the past for good and move on with my life.

I sigh as I walk through the packed parking lot toward my car. What I really need is a beer and a guy who will distract me for the night.

I find my little black hatchback and slide into the driver's seat. I start the engine and crank the heat on, cursing when a blast of cold air fills the car. As I give the engine a few minutes to warm up, I scroll through my phone, choosing a nineties alternative playlist and turn up the volume on my radio. I pull out of the parking space and head back toward the campus, deciding to park my car by my dorm so I don't have to worry about getting it home later. I have no intention of leaving the party sober.

# CHAPTER THREE

---

JAKE

THE SMELL OF BEER, various cologne and perfume scents, and too many bodies in too little space are starting to make it hard to breathe. I let my gaze wander around the room that glows with dimly lit red bulbs. Couples dance in the center of the living room of the frat house where all the furniture has been pushed against the walls.

“What do you think about Summer?” Caden shouts over the noise of the party before tipping his head back and taking a long swallow of the cheap beer from the keg.

Music thumping from speakers stacked in a corner make it almost impossible to hold an actual conversation, but I try as I yell over the noise.

“Seems nice.” I sip from my own beer.

“Nice.” Caden snorts. “I’ll take that as you’re not interested.”

I glance over at him and offer a shrug. “I don’t know her.”

“And there she is all alone.” He tilts his head toward the attractive brunette sitting on one of the couches with her head bent over her phone. “If only, I don’t know, someone wanted to get to know her.”

At times like these I really hate not being comfortable enough to just say *Look, dude. I’m gay*. I’m tempted to out myself on the spot before any other matchmaking attempts can be made.

“Where’s your girlfriend anyway?” I ask, and Caden shrugs.

“Last I saw she was making out with some guy I’m pretty sure is in her English class.”

I frown. “I thought you two were serious. You don’t sound bothered at all.”

Caden drains his beer too. “We have an open relationship of sorts, and I’m not worried about it. Want another beer?”

Their relationship really isn’t any of my business, so I don’t question him further. I have my own issues to worry about. I’m not sure how much alcohol it’ll take to get Creed out of my mind, but I’m not even close to drunk enough yet. “Definitely. I’ll grab—”

“What the fuck?” Caden interrupts me while narrowing his eyes toward the crowd.

Curious, I follow the direction of his stare and freeze when I spot a tall guy with broad shoulders and midnight black hair that curls around his ears weaving through the crush of bodies. My spine stiffens when I catch a glimpse of his profile standing several inches over the crowd. The straight nose, carved cheekbones, and a sharp jaw I’d been trying to stop thinking about all day are suddenly less than twenty feet away.

“You seeing this shit?” Caden asks. “Did Creed fucking Masters, super jock, just show up at a Kappa party?”

The sound of his name alone leaves a hollow pit forming in my stomach that quickly turns into a burn, growing hotter by the second as my anger rises with each step he takes through the house. Heads turn as he passes by, and some people appear to attempt to engage him in conversation. The only response he seems to give is a brief flash of pearly white teeth. *The fuck is he smiling about?* He should be miserable or pissed since I was feeling a sudden combination of both.

Pain shoots through my ribs, and I dart a scowl at Caden who digs his elbow into my side. “You see—”

“I see him.” My teeth grind together as I bite out the words while attempting to hide how Creed’s sudden appearance is



affecting me. I'm pissed. More than pissed, actually. I'm livid. This is not his stomping grounds. I should know since I keep up with his frequent hangouts.

What is Creed doing at a Kappa party? With my eyes narrowed, I watch Creed until I lose sight of him around the corner into the kitchen.

"He didn't seem too interested in stopping and saying hello to anyone. Maybe he's just here to meet up with some girl," Caden suggests casually, unknowingly rubbing salt into a wide-open, bleeding wound.

This party is for couples, and I hadn't seen anyone enter the fraternity with him. The only reason I can think that Creed would bother spending his time here is because of a girl. I'm suddenly nauseated on top of the other emotions swarming in my belly. I do my best to hide my feelings.

"What Creed Masters is, or isn't, doing doesn't make the list of things I care about." I'm lying, but Caden doesn't know that. I tuck on a shrug and then tip my head back, downing the rest of my beer. I need a refill. Hell, I need several now, but I'm not going in the kitchen where I could potentially come face to face with my past. Not before I have a chance to gather both my thoughts and composure.

My cup is suddenly snatched from my hand, and I glance at Caden who tilts his head toward the kitchen. "You good?"

"I'm fine." Caden studies me curiously, so I assume I'm not hiding my reaction to Creed's appearance very well. He also appears on the verge of asking me what the hell my problem is. We aren't that close, so being honest with him isn't an option, especially since it'll just lead to more questions I can't answer without outing myself. I need a breather from the whole situation. I tip my head in the general direction of the back door. "I'm going to get some air."

Taking the hint that the conversation about Creed is over, Caden lifts the empty cup. "Sure. I'll grab the beer and meet you outside."

After he turns to walk away, I scrub a hand over my face. Creed's here. *What, or more likely who, could have drawn him from his normal haunts?* I consider leaving before he spots me. I'm not sure if it would be worse if he spoke to me or ignored me altogether, as usual. I need to get drunk. I don't want to think about him anymore. That's *clearly* the way to solve this problem. I let out a derisive scoff under my breath as I scan the packed room. Everyone's having a great time, completely unaware of the inner turmoil I'm struggling with.

*Fuck this.* I push off the wall and weave through the crowd until I reach the back door. The moment I step outside I shiver from the chilly breeze that sweeps across my flushed cheeks. I'm grateful for the cold since it's kept everyone indoors and I can get a few minutes to myself. I take a deep inhale, attempting to relax. The alcohol flowing through my body helps, but I'm nowhere near calm yet. My heart hammers in my chest and I realize my hands are shaking. *Where's Caden with that beer?*

The moon is high in the clear, obsidian-colored sky that's dotted with bright stars. A sliver of moonlight casts a pale glow on the dead grass that covers the back yard of the house. I'm staring at nothing in particular, lost in my own thoughts of the past when I hear someone clear their throat to my right. Startled, I glance toward the sound.

The lights outside haven't been turned on, leaving dark shadows everywhere across the porch that stretches the full length of the fraternity. While I can see the silhouette of the person leaning against the side of the house, I can't make out many details. Based on his size and build, I know it's a guy who's both much taller and broader than I am. Squinting into the darkness, I try to get a better view.

"You're staring." The voice is a low rasp I'd recognize anywhere, and my spine stiffens at the familiar sound.

"Creed." The one-word response that bursts through my lips is little more than a choked whisper laced with bitter disdain. I shouldn't have responded at all. Why am I not turning on my heels and removing myself from the situation I'd unknowingly walked right into?

Just as I decide to leave, Creed leans forward, bringing his face into the moonlight that highlights his sharp features. I find myself frozen in place when familiar, intense brown eyes stare back at me. His expression is hard to read even though I'm trying desperately to figure out what he's thinking. Why do I care what Creed is thinking? I don't. When he runs a long finger leisurely across his lower lip, I do my best not to track the movement.

"Jake," he finally responds.

That's it? *Jake*? I scowl, but my name on his lips fucks with my head, leaving me with conflicting emotions. I miss the sound, but his tone lacks the animosity mine held, and the casual way he says my name feeds my anger. Why isn't he affected by my presence like I am his?

"Why are you here?" I ask pointedly, pushing aside the part of me that misses him.

He tilts his head, studying me. "Making a call."

Creed holds up his phone that I hadn't noticed in his hand. The screen is dark, and I hadn't heard anyone speaking when I'd stepped outside.

I frown, drawing my eyebrows together. "I wasn't asking why you're outside, Creed. What are you doing at a Kappa party in the first place?"

His stony expression never falters. "I was invited."

My stomach sinks. Of course he's here with a girl. Even though I'd suspected it, the confirmation twists my gut. "Where's your date then?"

Creed opens his mouth to respond, but the creak of the back door opening interrupts whatever he was planning to say. I glance over as Caden steps out onto the patio. His gaze swings from me to Creed then back to me again. He arches a brow in question as he stops in front of me, holding out a plastic cup. "Your beer."

"Thanks." I take it and take a long swallow, downing half of the beer. Caden snorts, but when I glance at Creed, he's glaring. I narrow my eyes back. Does he not approve? Does he

think he gets a vote in what I do? It's his fault I'm a mess in the first place.

"Jake." My name coming from Creed's mouth holds a flinty edge this time, and he pushes off the wall taking several steps toward me. When he stops, his lips press into a flat line.

He's mad. Good. I'm mad too.

"You two know each other?" Caden asks, and I'm not sure how to answer. I know he's not asking if we just met. The disapproval in Creed's tone isn't one that comes from a stranger.

Creed doesn't seem to share the same issue, easily replying, "Yes."

Caden lifts an eyebrow that tells me he expects an explanation at some point, but I have no intention of giving him one. He takes a step back. "Right then. Well, it's cold as balls, so I'm headed inside. You two have fun...catching up?"

It sounds like a question, but if he's expecting an answer, he'll be waiting a while. He must see the reluctance in my expression because he sighs and then opens the back door again before disappearing inside. I decide I should follow and get away from Creed.

"Have fun on your date." I don't actually care if he has a good time. In fact, I hope he doesn't. I do want him to know the conversation is over, and then I want to go drown myself in alcohol until I forget who the hell Creed Masters even is.

I turn on my heels to make my escape, but he moves fast, quickly stepping into my path.

My nostrils flare, and I swing a hand toward the door, a not-so-subtle *get the fuck out of my way*. "Can you move?"

Creed's shoulders are tense and his jaw tics. "Can you just take it easy on the drinking tonight?"

I snort, but I don't find any humor in the situation. "Careful, Creed. You sound like you might actually give a shit. We both know that's not true anymore, don't we?"

After a long moment of what appears to be some sort of internal struggle that I won't pretend to understand, Creed sighs and steps aside.

I don't glance his way as I move past him and open the back door, returning to the party. I decide to ignore Creed entirely for the rest of the night. This day has only gotten worse and more confusing.

# CHAPTER FOUR

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JAKE

I'M DRUNK. No, I sailed past *drunk* several beers ago. Now, I'm struggling to put one foot in front of the other as I stagger down the cracked sidewalk that leads from the fraternity to the street.

“Fuck him,” I whisper to myself and grind my molars as I think about the way he'd tried to tell me to go easy on the alcohol. He isn't in any position to tell me what to do, or even make suggestions.

The ground seems to sway beneath my feet and my vision fades in and out. I pause at the curb and lean on a random sedan. Closing my eyes, I take steady breaths to calm the spinning in my head. I'd meant to get totally wasted, but blacking out wasn't the goal. Why did I do this? And more importantly, why did I do this just because Creed had shown up at the party?

Deep brown eyes shadowed beneath long, dark eyelashes had tracked my every move most of the night leaving me on edge. Even though I'd avoided Creed as much as possible, his stare burned hot against my skin. I could feel him even when I wasn't looking. Every time I would convince myself it was only my imagination, I would glance around the room and find Creed's gaze focused on me. I'm not sure why he was showing sudden interest, or paying me the slightest attention, but it's messing with my head.

I glance across the street and down the block at the row of chapterhouses. Once I feel like I won't fall on my ass, I step between two cars parked along the curb. I cross the dark street

and reach for the tailgate of a beat-up, red pickup truck parked on the opposite side of the road. I lean on the truck, using it to steady myself as I step up the curb onto the sidewalk. The dorm isn't too far of a walk, but I'm not confident in my ability to make it there in one piece. Unfortunately, Caden left the party an hour ago, so I'm on my own.

"This was a bad idea," I mutter to myself, teeth chattering slightly as I shiver. I shove my hands into the pockets of my hoodie to ward off the cold as best I can. The crisp night air helps me clear my head a little at least.

The large trees bereft of any leaves masquerade as ghosts in my blurry vision, and silence replaces the music the further I get from the party.

The sound of footsteps behind me catch my attention. Even though I'm sure it's just another student heading from one place to another, I glance over my shoulder and stop so suddenly I lose my footing. The ground rushes up at me and I catch myself just in time to avoid a collision between my face and the pavement.

"Damn it," Creed growls. He's standing in front of me a second later with his hand outstretched.

I don't want to touch him, but I'm also not sure I'm capable of standing upright on my own. Reluctantly, I grab his hand and allow him to pull me to my feet. His hands immediately go to my shoulders to steady me, but I shrug him off and shoot him a glare. "Are you fucking following me?"

"Yes." Creed doesn't look remotely sorry for it either.

I arch an eyebrow. "Never took you for the stalker type."

"Never took you for the getting wasted to the point you can barely stand upright and then attempt to walk home type," he responds flatly, which only adds fuel to the anger simmering in my stomach. He continues before I get a chance to tell him exactly how mad I am. "Let's keep walking. I just want to make sure you get back to your room."

I scoff. "And then you'll disappear again. You're good at that." He doesn't reply, and honestly, what could he say



anyway? “I can get myself home. Don’t follow me.”

His lips press into a firm line before he shakes his head and sighs. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“I’m being ridiculous?” I ask indignantly. “Coming from the guy who ended our friendship because of some silly words on a page.”

“Silly words...” Creed’s eyebrows scrunch together as he trails off. “I don’t think that’s how I’d refer to what I read.”

“Exactly. *You* read. You shouldn’t have been looking at my journal to begin with, Creed.” I take a wobbly step toward him. Creed doesn’t move, standing his ground as I take another step in his direction, bringing me directly in front of him. “That was private, and you had no right looking at it.”

Creed sighs. “You left it open. It wasn’t like I went in there looking for it.”

“That’s not the point. Yes, it was open, but you stayed and read it even after realizing what it was. You shouldn’t have done that.”

He opens his mouth and then closes it again. Just when I think he won’t respond at all, Creed groans. “I’m sorry, okay? It just happened so fast. And honestly, what I was reading didn’t really even register until you walked in. Maybe it was shock, or surprise? I don’t know, but I’ve never purposely invaded your privacy.”

I can see how the words would have blindsided him, but my anger stems from his reaction after the fact. “That doesn’t change anything between us. You completely walked away from me. You cut off our friendship like it was never important to you in the first place.”

“Not important to me?” Creed’s dark eyes pierce mine, appearing black in the shadows. “That’s bullshit and you know it, Jake. You were my best friend. But what the hell was I supposed to do? I had no idea you were gay. I had no idea you had feelings for me. How was I supposed to react in that situation?”

He might have a point about being put in a tough spot, but it doesn't change the fact that he'd severed our friendship without even talking to me first. "We could have talked about it at the very fucking least."

"It was a lot to process. I didn't know how to handle any of it. I just reacted." He scrubs a hand over his face. "I thought it was best to put some distance between us while I sorted everything."

"Best for *us*?" I know my voice is rising again, but I don't care. Is he serious? "You didn't even talk to me, Creed. You mean you thought it was best for *you*."

Creed sighs and runs his fingers through his hair. "I don't know what you want me to say, and this probably isn't the best time to have this conversation. I doubt you'll remember it tomorrow." He gives me a pointed look.

"When is the right time then?" I ask, ignoring the real possibility I won't remember the conversation in the morning. "Do you need another year?"

Creed lets out a harsh breath, and I realize how closely we've ended up standing together. He's so close that the rush of air from his lips coasts over mine. A hint of liquor topped with mint lingers on his breath. Creed has been drinking but doesn't appear drunk. Although, I'm likely not the best judge of that tonight.

I'm staring at his mouth, I realize, and quickly draw my gaze back to his. Creed's nostrils flare, and then his dark stare dips down, hovering on my lips. If I didn't know any better, I would think Creed wants to kiss me, but I *do* know better. Creed is straight.

The longer he stands there with his eyes glued to my mouth, the more I start questioning what the hell is going on in his head. Or mine. Maybe I'm hallucinating. The question burns on the tip of my tongue until the whisper bursts free. "What are you doing?"

Startled, Creed drops his gaze to the ground and he takes a step back. "Nothing. I think we should get you to your room."

Confused, I can only stare at him as he avoids looking at me. I want to demand answers, but whatever openness he'd shown seems to be sealed behind a locked door.

Now is the opportunity to explain himself, yet once again, he's closing me out. I remember the year of silence and decide I won't wait for him to talk to me. I need to accept I may never get answers and move on with my life without the bitterness that creeps in when I think about my ex-best friend.

My nose and cheeks have grown numb from the icy wind. Now, if my heart would freeze as well that would be great. I can't see that happening in the next five seconds, so I need to escape. This is too much. It's not enough. I begin stepping away from him and shake my head. "I'm leaving. Don't follow me this time."

I expect some sort of argument, but Creed just gives me a nod without saying a word. I don't believe him. Creed is a stubborn bastard and has already decided he wants to see me safely home. But as I stumble along the path back to my room, Creed gives me enough space that I can almost pretend he isn't there at all. *Almost.*

My dorm building comes into view beneath the moonlight, and I pick up the pace. I want to lose my self-appointed bodyguard. Some may consider what he's doing a thoughtful gesture. I'm too conflicted to see it as anything other than frustrating.

The dorm lobby is quiet when I step inside, and I resist the urge to look back outside for any trace of Creed. Thankfully, no one is around to witness me staggering along on my way to the elevator. After a couple of tries, I press the button and the door immediately slides open. I step inside and press the number for my floor before slumping against the mirrored wall.

When the elevator glides to a stop, I wobble out into the hallway and pass a guy who's heading toward the bathroom.

I stumble to my room and unlock the door, pushing it open and lurch inside. After closing it behind me, I toss my keys in the general direction of my dresser. Exhausted, I turn around

and fall back onto my bed while still wearing my hoodie and shoes because I don't have the energy to remove them.

My eyes close and the world suddenly tilts and begins to spin. I immediately regret drinking as much as I did. My stomach is never going to forgive me.

Tonight had not gone the way I'd expected at all. I was looking for an escape. Instead, I'd run smack into the very person I was running from.

# CHAPTER FIVE

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## CREED

MY MUSCLES ARE BURNING and sweat is rolling down my temples as I grit my teeth and push the weighted bar back up one last time. The metal bar clangs when I set it back in the cradle above me, and I shake out my arms. Sitting up, I glance at the mirrored wall, checking my reflection. I'm red in the face, and my hair looks like I just climbed out of the shower. My teammates lift and strain around me, looking equally rough. Grunts and groans accompany their efforts.

Jackson, the wide receiver who's been spotting me, swipes his blond hair from his forehead and flashes me a pearly white smile. His vivid green eyes twinkle with humor. "Thought you weren't going to get that last one in for a second."

I glare. "Shut up, dick."

He chuckles, and gestures for me to get up. "Switch with me. I'm so glad we don't have workout or class tomorrow. I want to get this done so I can meet up with my girl. Her roommate's out of town, so—"

"I'll pass on the details," I interrupt while swinging my leg over the bench and pushing myself up on tired arms. I grab a towel and dry the sweat off the bench and the weight bar.

Speaking of girls, my phone has about ten unread messages from my date on Valentine's Day. When I'd followed Jake home from the party a week ago, I'd only returned to let her know I was leaving. I hadn't been in the right headspace to fake having a good time. I hadn't been able

to draw my attention away from Jake all night. My thoughts haven't been any clearer since then.

I'd known there was a possibility he'd be there. I think it was part of the reason I'd agreed to attend with Anna, someone I'd met a several months ago in the library but wasn't genuinely interested in. That probably makes me a dick. No, it definitely makes me a dick.

What I hadn't considered in my ill-planned night out was having an argument with Jake, or how just being near him would bring so many memories rushing through my mind.

The sounds of workout machinery and my teammates giving each other shit echo off the concrete walls of the weight room. The smells of sweat and commercial grade cleaner linger in the air. The athletic complex is a second home, and conditioning is so routine I operate on autopilot most days, but my focus has been off all week. My thoughts are centered on Jake.

"Are you going to spot me or what?" Jackson's voice cuts through my tangled thoughts, and I realize I've been staring at the concrete floor that's been painted with the purple and gold Tigers logo.

"Sorry, man. Just distracted." I move behind the bench, positioning my fingers under the bar.

His hands are wrapped around the bar, but he doesn't lift. Instead, he cocks a brow. "You've been this way for days. What's going on with you?"

I like Jackson. We get along well and connect nearly flawlessly on the field. That doesn't mean I'm going to start sharing my innermost secrets with him. I frown. "Nothing. I thought you were in a hurry to leave."

Jackson rolls his eyes, but his attention moves to the bar once again as he begins his set. I force myself to focus on my task because his safety is my responsibility, but I can't help thinking of Jake and the conversation we'd had that night. A conversation that was still incomplete and a year late. Too late maybe.

I'm still not sure what I want to say to him. I miss him. I miss our friendship. But there are so many question marks where he and I are concerned that I've been stuck on this hamster wheel in my head. There are so many things he doesn't know yet. Things I can't think about right now because of my environment, and more truthfully, because I'm an asshole who'd rather ignore real feelings than face them.

"Shit." Jackson grunts, and I instinctually wrap my hands around the bar.

I arch a brow down at him. "You good?"

He smirks. "Just making sure you're alert back there. Can't let anything happen to this pretty face."

Jackson does have a pretty face, almost feminine, not that I'm going to tell him that. Instead, I glare. "Not funny."

He snickers, but it's breathless. Jackson already sounds tired, so I need to concentrate on the heavy weights over his head. I push aside thoughts of Jake for the rest of the session.

An hour later, I drag my sweaty ass to the locker room and grab a shower, quickly soaping my body and washing my hair. Once I'm clean, I wrap my towel around my waist and head to my locker, pulling out my gym bag and spare clothes.

"What are you getting into when you leave here?" Jackson asks, while slipping on a long-sleeved t-shirt.

It's Friday and I don't have any classes until Monday, but I hadn't planned on doing anything except maybe seeing what some of the boys were getting into. Jake is still on my mind, and I know he's working today. He's worked every Friday at this little electronic store a short walk from campus since he started the job this semester. I could stop by and see what he's up to, but he'd probably kick me out. It's a bad idea. Besides, I still haven't decided what I want to say to him.

Jackson's eyebrows crash together. "Did you go mute sometime in the last minute or so?"

I shake my head, clearing away my thoughts. "No, I was just thinking. No plans. And I still don't want details on your night."



He snorts. “I wouldn’t give them to you anyway. You’d probably try to steal my girl if I told you she can do this thing with her tongue that’s just...” Jackson sighs dreamily, and I frown, deciding no reply is necessary. I don’t care about his girlfriend or any of her *talents*. “Anyway,” he says while standing and then slinging his gym bag strap over his shoulder, “have fun doing whatever it is you broody dicks do on Friday nights.”

“I’m not broody,” I reply automatically. His eyes call me a liar. I don’t argue again. It’s not the first time the label has been thrown at me, but truthfully, I just get in my head a lot.

Jackson purposely knocks into my shoulder on his way out, and I roll my eyes. I don’t talk to anyone else or join in the chaos of discussions going on around me. I need some peace and quiet. I need some time to make a decision about what I want to say to Jake before I end up causing a disaster during winter conditioning.

After dressing quickly, I grab my gym bag and offer a few chin nods and promises to text later on my way out. I head to the door and then through the athletic complex until I reach the parking lot. Settling into my truck, a lifted black crew cab Mom and Dad had surprised me with for high school graduation, I start the engine to get the heat circulating through the vents. While waiting for it to warm up, I contemplate my next move.

I should go home and sit my ass on my couch like I’d planned. Force myself to come to some resolution. But when I back out of the parking space, I find myself heading in the complete opposite direction of my dorm.

I’ve avoided Jake since the party, going back to our usual routines, making sure to keep out of his way. I never planned on staying away permanently, but I figured I should have a plan in place at the very least. Some sort of guideline on how to navigate the clusterfuck that damn journal had made. I drum my fingers on the steering wheel in frustration as I pull up to a stop light. The journal wasn’t the problem. Not really. I’m the problem. I worry more with each day that passes that Jake will

cut me off forever, never giving me a chance to explain myself.

Unsettled by that idea, I glance at the clock on the face of my stereo. It's past five in the evening, so I know Jake will be getting off work in less than an hour. I've memorized his schedule as much as I know he has mine. Anxiety buzzes in my veins at the thought of seeing him again. Will he be mad when I just waltz into his store? I have no idea, but I guess we're about to find out because I need to see him even if I don't plan on laying out the whole truth in a public place.

It's more than an apology I owe him. It's a confession. I need to explain what really happened that day. He may not forgive me and rejection would smart like a son of a bitch, especially from him. Even if I deserve it.

When the light turns green, I move through the intersection and take an immediate turn into the parking lot of a small shopping center. I pull into a parking spot directly in front of the store with a red neon sign over the door that reads "Marco's Electronics".

Not giving myself time to overthink, I step out of my truck and glance around. A few customers are coming in and out of the shops. My hands are shaking slightly, and I drop my keys. I curse under my breath as I grab them off the blacktop before I turn back to the truck and snag my wallet I keep in my center console. I shove it in my pocket and close the door before I head into the store.

A bell chimes when I open the door, and my gaze darts around the store searching for Jake. Neat groupings of chargers, phone covers, phones, laptops, and some other things I don't recognize at first glance fill the store in orderly rows, with the most expensive devices stored in the glass counters. The décor is an institutional gray, but everything is spotlessly clean and organized.

I find Jake standing behind the counter wearing his uniform shirt, a white polo with a red collar, and a name tag. With the phone pressed to his ear, he glances in my direction

and his eyes flash a touch of surprise, followed by a look of annoyance.

The look on his face gives me pause, but I take my chances and approach the counter just as he hangs up the phone.

“Hey.” *Brilliant, Creed.* I even offer a smile, but Jake’s lips fall into a thin line. All right, then. This is going just about as smoothly as I’d worried about.

“What are you doing here?” Jake asks, studying me suspiciously.

“Um, I broke my old earbuds, and I’m looking for replacements. What kind do you have?” I glance around trying to figure out where they are displayed.

“The kind that go in your ears, Creed,” he replies flatly.

I don’t mean to laugh, but the comment surprises me, and a chuckle escapes, earning myself an irritated scowl from him. Perfect way to start this *accidental* run-in with my ex-best friend. First, I lie about my earbuds. There’s not a single thing wrong with them. And now I’ve just pissed him off.

*Well, fuck.*

# CHAPTER SIX

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“I’M SORRY.” Creed makes an attempt to school his features, but his lips twitch with the effort.

I sort of want to strangle him. Since I figure I’d get fired for that, I decide to just get him out of the store as soon as possible. “Just follow me so we can get this over with.” I circle around the counter and lead Creed to an array of possibilities hanging on a wall in the back corner of the store. “Here ya go. If you need anything else...search for answers online.”

My boss would lose his mind if he overheard me telling a customer that, but luckily, he’s in the backroom messing with payroll and there are no other customers in the store. I have no intention of standing here with Creed, discussing earbuds of all things while pretending he’s just some random oversized, hot as sin guy coming in the store. When I turn to walk away, Creed clears his throat. I groan under my breath, facing him again. “Yes?”

He’s scanning over the selection, standing casually with his hands tucked into the pouch of his dark blue hoodie. “Which of these do you recommend? I mean, which do most people buy?”

I attempt to nail him to the wall with a glare, but unfortunately, he remains standing, totally unaffected. “I just started working here and, so far, most people ask how much the damn things cost, which is clearly labeled on each package. I haven’t memorized the inventory yet.” A sudden

thought strikes me, and I study his face as I ask, “Did you know I work here?”

Creed’s features remain neutral as he continues looking at the earbuds and picks up a couple that seem to be similar, only the price tags indicate a hundred-dollar difference. He turns each of the boxes over, reading the specs and features. “Are either of these waterproof?”

“You are literally looking at the details, so you know more than I do. And you didn’t answer me.” I’m beginning to think he’s deliberately frustrating me. I continue watching his face closely, but as usual he gives very little away as he hums to himself.

He goes to put one of the pairs back on the wall, but pauses. “I can’t decide. Do you think—”

“They’re fucking earbuds, Creed. Just pick one,” I whisper-shout while checking over my shoulder to make sure my manager is still safely tucked away in his office.

“Someone’s in a mood,” Creed mutters, and I grind my molars to keep from responding. He’s ignored everything I’ve said up until this point anyway. He grabs the cheaper set and rehangs the other.

*Finally.* While leading him back to the register, I press my lips together tightly because I don’t trust myself to keep my mouth shut without the added effort.

I make quick work of ringing up his purchase and keep my gaze on the cash register, avoiding any eye contact with Creed. Thankfully, he doesn’t say a word either. This has been yet another confusing run-in with my ex-best friend, and I just want him gone before either one of us makes it worse. I rip off the receipt from the printer and shove it in the bag before holding it across the counter.

“Yes,” he says out of nowhere as he takes the bag from my hand.

Baffled, I blink at him. “Yes, what?”

“Yes, I knew you worked here.” Without giving me time to form a complete thought, much less a response, Creed turns

and heads for the door.

I don't move an inch while I watch him leave the store. My mind is trying to decipher some sort of meaning in what he'd just said. Why does it feel like he was saying more than simply acknowledging that somehow he'd found out where I work? And why hadn't he gone to a different store then? The more I think about his trip here, the more bewildered I get which then morphs into agitation. Or rather *more* agitation than I already felt.

Several minutes later I'm frustrated, borderline furious, as I continue to stare at the door where Creed had walked out. Last week he'd shown up in the quad, conveniently at the same time on the same day of the week I regularly pass through it. Then he walks into a party he'd never normally attend. And a week later, he happens to show up where he knows I work? It's hard to believe it's all a giant coincidence. I'm not buying it. I don't know what his game is, but I feel like I'm being toyed with. Taunted maybe. That sort of thing isn't the Creed I know. But these days I'm not sure I know him at all.

I eye the time on the register. I'm off work in fifteen minutes, and I make up my mind on the spot that the second I punch out, I'm hunting him down and demanding answers. Why is he suddenly in my orbit? Why do I feel like there are things he's not saying? I have so many questions, and unfortunately the asshole who just left my store is the only one able to shed any light on the truth.

The next quarter of an hour feel like an interminable stretch of time, so when the clock finally hits six and no customers are loitering around in the store, I beeline for the front door. After I flip the lock and pull the chain to switch off the open sign, my manager strolls through the employee room door.

He's tall and slim, wearing a matching uniform to mine. His salt and pepper hair is in disarray as if he's been running his hands through it, and he flashes me a tired smile. "You in a hurry to get out of here tonight?"

My eagerness to leave must be apparent, so I don't bother lying. "I have somewhere I need to be. Do you need any help before I go?" *Please say no.*

He shakes his head. "I'm all set here. Take care of what you need to, and I'll see you Monday afternoon. Enjoy your weekend."

I breathe out a sigh of relief as I head for the breakroom and snatch my things out of my locker.

Freshman athletes are required to stay in the campus dorms for the first year, and I don't give myself an opportunity to second guess confronting Creed before I hop into my car and make the short drive back to campus.

When I pull into the parking lot closest to his building, I scan the rows of vehicles, searching for his lifted black beast of a truck. It's easy to spot, and I glare at it as if he'll be able to feel it. I'm assuming he's home. If not, I'll find another way to hunt him down. Social media seems to track his every move. While I usually find that annoying because it makes it too tempting to see what he's up to, tonight I'm not afraid to use the tool to help locate him. I have one goal—find Creed and get some sort of understanding about why he's always around after an entire year of avoidance.

I pull into an empty parking space and step out of my car, shut the door, and click the key fob to lock it up. As I approach the dorm building, my heart begins pounding in my chest. I'm angry, but I'm also nervous. There is no telling what Creed will say, if he even bothers to answer my questions at all. But enough is enough. I'm not going to continue playing whatever game this is. There's a strong possibility he's going to destroy me emotionally—more so than he already has—but maybe that's what I need to finally move forward with my life. One way or another, things are getting settled.

While I know what building Creed lives in, it doesn't occur to me until I step inside the lobby that I actually don't know what room is his. I stand just inside the room while I consider how to handle the obstacle. I could just call him, but there's a chance he won't answer. He'd done many times when



I'd called and texted after the journal incident. I don't think he would shut the door in my face if I show up to his room though. There are several guys sitting around the main floor on couches staring at a TV mounted on the wall that's showing some stupid cartoon comedy. I make the decision to just ask them. What could it hurt?

I still feel awkward as I approach the group. One guy notices me first and offers a chin nod. "Sup?"

I clear my throat as they all seem to turn as one and eye me curiously. I obviously do not belong with the gathering of jocks seated in the room. I focus on the guy who greeted me. "I'm actually looking for Creed. Could you point me to his room?"

He studies me with pale blue eyes that narrow in consideration as he scans me head to toe. He must find me non-threatening, a fact I try not to take offense to, because he finally shrugs. "Okay. Second floor. Room 203, I think. Second door on the left."

I don't hang around for any of them to question me. I take off toward the stairs, hoping to avoid running into anyone else. After climbing the steps and finding room 203, I immediately knock on the door because I don't want to chicken out.

When I hear footsteps on the other side, anxiety swirls in my stomach, but I force myself to stand my ground. The door swings open, and Creed's eyebrows jerk upward, disappearing beneath his fringe of black hair. "Jake."

He's clearly surprised to see me. Good. It's my turn to catch him unprepared, and I'm hoping that won't give him a chance to come up with any bullshit excuses for any of his sudden appearances lately.

"Creed," I reply, but my tone holds an edge he didn't.

The shock seems to wear off as he leans against the doorframe. "You keeping tabs on my dorm situation?"

I roll my eyes. "Like you haven't been doing the same thing. You were the one who showed up at my work and left

with some dramatic *yes*.” I do my best to mimic his deep raspy voice.

Creed folds his arms over his chest, eyebrows drawn together. “I don’t sound like that. Do I?”

“Sure do, or close enough.” I glance into his room around his sides, and I’m relieved when I don’t see any trace of his roommate. “You letting me in or what? We need to talk.”

Creed runs his fingers through his hair and takes a step back, moving aside before sweeping an arm toward the room. “Of course. Come in.”

Now that this discussion is really going to happen, my anxiety spikes once again. I take a deep breath to steady my nerves and step inside.

Creed closes the door, and I look around his space for the first time. His half of the living quarters reminds me of his room back home. A tidy disaster is the only way I can think to describe the area.

His bed is made with a purple and gold Tigers comforter, but the pillows for some reason seem to have just been tossed on the extra-long twin sized bed. A laptop sits perfectly squared on his desk next to a jar full of mix and match pens, most of which are missing their caps. A half-empty water bottle and a power bar wrapper are on his nightstand, despite the small trash can only inches away. My nose wrinkles at the smell of sweaty workout clothes coming from an overflowing basket, but there’s not a single dirty sock on the floor. Over the bed, a large poster of the team mascot Tiger is tacked to the wall, but it doesn’t even appear Creed made any attempt to make it level. What surprises me is the lack of noise. It’s quieter than I would have expected in a building full of students, most of who are jocks.

“Do you want a water?” Creed asks.

“Please.” I nod because my mouth is dry as dust, and he grabs us each one from his minifridge.

After he passes me one, he walks over to his bed and sits on the mattress before gesturing toward a computer chair

pushed up to the desk. “Have a seat.”

# CHAPTER SEVEN

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## CREED

WARILY, I lean forward, elbows on my knees, with my gaze fastened on Jake who's staring back. The longer he silently watches me, the more uneasy I get about why he's here. I have an idea, of course, but I want to hear it from him. He seems in no hurry to fill me in. Finally, I ask, "Do you want me to apologize for showing up at your work?"

He sighs in clear exasperation as if I should know exactly why he showed up at my room. "I don't want you to apologize, Creed. I want you to explain. First, you happen to be in the quad at the same time I pass through there, then you show up at the party and proceed to follow me home—"

"To make sure you got there safely," I interrupt because that part I won't apologize for, even if he demands it.

"Whatever." He rolls his eyes. "And then you show up at my job. I don't see you hardly at all for a year, and then suddenly you're everywhere. I thought maybe it was coincidence at first. It was strange, but possible. But then earlier, you said you knew I worked at the store, so now I'm questioning every time I've seen you recently. This isn't coincidence, is it?"

I was out of time to figure things out. Maybe I already had figured things out and that's why I'd set the whole thing into motion. Why else would I continue to put myself in his path? It's time to put up or shut up. At the very least, I owe him the truth, and then Jake can do with that information as he chooses. Even if one of the possibilities is that he could

potentially cut all ties permanently. He deserves a choice after he has all the facts.

I lift one hand and run it through my hair repeatedly as I consider how to even start telling him everything. Finally, I swallow hard and blow out a shaky breath. It's now or never, and judging by the determined set of Jake's jaw, the only option is *now*.

Jake studies me closely, "Don't even think about lying to me either. I want the truth."

"I won't." I wince. "Well, I won't lie...again. My earbuds aren't broken."

He groans and leans back in the chair, folding his arms over his chest. "Not one part of me is shocked. I think I've lost the ability to be surprised at this point. Just tell me what's going on. What's honestly happening here."

"That day we saw each other at the quad..." I start hesitantly and decide there's no turning back now. "You're right. I was there on purpose. Left to our usual routine, we'd never cross paths, and I was tired of it. I didn't have a plan really. I just wanted to see you."

Jake freezes at the admission. There's no reaction from him. Not a single muscle twitches anywhere on his face.

When it becomes clear he's waiting for me to continue and has no intention of responding to that revelation, I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans. "I don't know how to do this other than just tell you the truth. The whole truth," I amend. "I came to your job with a made-up story about the earbuds to see you again. I wasn't positive you'd be at that party, but I knew there was a good chance, and that was reason enough to put myself there."

"Why?" he asks with no emotion in his tone. I can't tell if he's disguising how he really feels, or if he is simply unmoved and only here for an explanation.

So far, the admissions I've made are trivial compared to what I haven't told him yet. And if I'm being totally honest with myself, I'm scared shitless.

“That day I read your journal...” My voice shakes, and I pause to clear my throat and possibly gather some damn composure. I start again. “That day I read your journal... What you wrote wasn’t one-sided.”

His eyebrows crash together as he frowns. “What are you talking about?”

Fuck, this is hard. I push through the doubt creeping into my mind, and force the words through my lips. “I might not have given voice to it, or written down my feelings the way you did...but the thoughts were there.”

Now, Jake just appears confused. *I’m screwing this up.*

I wrack my brain to find the right words to clarify what had happened that day, and what’s been happening every day since I turned my back on our friendship. I blow out a harsh breath. “When I read your journal, it was like you’d taken a peek into my thoughts and put them on the page, making them real. It was too much for me to process, and I made a bad call when I decided to walk away instead of being honest and talking to you about how I was feeling.”

Jake looks as though he’s had his breath knocked out of him, with his mouth slightly parted and staring at me in complete bewilderment.

“Say something,” I urge because I’m not sure I’ve ever been this nervous in my life. I’ve definitely never put myself in this vulnerable a position.

Jake blinks a few times before slightly shaking his head. “But you acted like I’d betrayed you in some way. Now you’re saying you felt the same way?” His forehead creases when he frowns. “What the fuck, Creed? You could have told me. You could have talked to me about anything back then, and you know it.”

I shrug because some of what I’d been feeling is hard to explain. Jake seemed so sure that he was gay back then, where I was still questioning my sexuality, or at the very least having trouble accepting it. But I am who I am. I’m bisexual. I’m attracted to both women and men, with Jake at the top of the

two lists combined. After so much wasted time and leaving him believing I'd bailed because of how he was feeling, I do my best to explain myself.

Nodding, I sigh. "I know. The first time I saw you as something other than a platonic best friend was freshman year of high school."

"Creed!" Jake stands up from his chair so fast it nearly knocks the thing over. He begins pacing the small room, scowling at me while his nostrils flare. "Freshman year. Of *high school*. Are you fucking serious right now?"

"I know. I'm an asshole." I can only imagine how he's feeling. After years of indecisive waffling, I'm just tired of running from my heart. I'm tired of running from Jake. "At first, I brushed it off as normal curiosity, or I tried to. But when I realized you were having the same thoughts... Well, I freaked out because I was still struggling to accept that I'm bisexual. I didn't know what to do. So, I ran and did my best to pretend none of it had ever happened."

"Dick move," he fumes as he stops pacing and sinks back down onto the chair.

I agree. "Total dick move."

"So, what's changed? You haven't answered those questions yet. Why are you suddenly always around, wanting to see me? Do you just not feel those things anymore and want to be friends?" Jake folds his arms across his chest again.

"No. That's not what I want. I don't care what everyone else thinks. Not anymore." I've tortured us both for far too long, and now I don't know if I've waited too long to wake the fuck up.

Jake shakes his head slightly. "This is not what I was expecting at all. What are you saying?"

The raw vulnerability in Jake's eyes gives me hope. At the same time, it breaks my heart. I'd done this to him. I'd put him in a position where my truth appears almost painful for him.

I'm searching for the right words to fix everything, but there aren't any. All I can do is hope he'll forgive me. I blow



out a shaky breath. “I’m saying I’m fucking sorry. I’m sorry for the year we were apart because I was a complete asshole. I’m sorry I made the call to end our friendship. I’m sorry about everything, *except* finally telling you the truth. I want to fix this somehow, but I’ll take what I can get, even if you’re only willing to give friendship a try again.” I swallow hard. “But I also want more. I always have. At least since ninth grade.”

Now that he knows everything, I steel myself for his reaction. I expect him to tell me to fuck off. I expect him to be the one that walks away from me this time, and I can’t blame him if that’s what he chooses to do. But he remains seated, not saying a word. I wonder if his mind is as shaken as mine is. It’s both frightening and liberating to know I finally told him everything when I wasn’t sure I’d be able to.

“I don’t know.” Jake bites his lip. “I can’t just let one conversation erase the last year.” He pauses, nibbling his lip again. “Can I?”

I shrug helplessly because I’ve done all I can think of to make things right, but it’ll never be enough. I’d abandoned the person who meant the most to me in the world. “I don’t know. I don’t deserve it, but yeah, I guess that’s what I’m asking because I’m a selfish asshole who’s tired of doing life without you.”

“What if you get scared and jump ship again? If we do this, I need assurances that you’re not going to freak out and bolt the second things get too real for you.”

It’s a fair request, and one I have no hesitation giving. “There’s not a single chance in hell I’m leaving you again. No matter what. Even if you want out, I’m going to be there for you. You were always my best friend, even when I was being a dumbass.”

There’s a long beat of silence that I’m afraid to break, so I wait for him to tell me what he wants this time.

Finally, he whispers two words that make me feel truly alive for the first time in more than a year.

“Kiss me.”

# CHAPTER EIGHT

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JAKE

CREED DOESN'T NEED to be told twice. He's off the bed and striding toward me, giving me just enough time to stand before he weaves his fingers through my hair. A low groan rattles in his throat before he dips down, bringing his lips to mine in a feather soft touch. He allows the barely-there kiss to linger, causing my lips to tingle, and then he presses firmly against them. Sliding his tongue along the seam, he asks for permission to deepen the kiss. I readily grant the request, parting my lips and accepting his tongue in my mouth. He tastes of mint, reminding me of his breath on my lips only a week ago.

I break off the kiss, gasping for breath. "What about your roommate?"

"He's at his girlfriend's like usual," he barely whispers. Then he steps over to lock the door. My heart flutters and then he's back, kissing me like a starving man.

My mind is reeling with all of Creed's confessions, but through the tangle of thoughts, one thing is clear. I fucking want him.

The kiss is better than anything I've ever imagined. A moan slips free from my mouth, and Creed growls. Before I can process what's happening, I'm flat on my back with Creed between my legs.

"Is this okay?" he rasps.

"Better than okay," I whisper, and a small grin tilts his lips. With his taste on my tongue, and the feel of his body against

mine, I'm on fire. The only thing that would make this better is to feel his skin on mine. I'm waffling on whether to say it because I don't know how Creed will react, but it turns out I don't need to breathe a word. As if Creed's reading my mind, he suddenly rises on his knees and whips his shirt over his head, revealing half of his lean, athletic body.

My mouth goes dry. I've seen Creed without a shirt so many times that I have every dip between the muscles memorized. But he's changed a lot in the last year. His body is even more defined, but I've never been allowed to touch him the way I want to.

Slowly, I raise my hand, tracing my finger along the dip between his pecs and then down the center of his firm abs. I draw a circle around his bellybutton before following the thin trail of dark hair that disappears beneath the waistband of the jeans he wears low on his hips.

Creed isn't breathing, not that I blame him. I don't think I've taken a solid breath since we started. It makes me wonder how far he wants this to go. Though I've been with other guys, I don't know how much experience Creed has with men. What does he want here? I need to know so I don't push things too far, even if he seems to be the one controlling the pace.

Even though I may not like the answer, I ask, "Have you ever been with a guy?"

Creed slowly shakes his head, finally sucking in a shuddering breath. "No. There's only one guy I want."

My chest aches at the admission. It makes me feel special, but I need to be honest with him too. "Creed, I've been—"

"It doesn't matter," he interrupts me, but there's no anger in his tone. "Who you've been with before me is my own fault for not taking a chance on us in the first place. You're mine now, aren't you?"

"I think I've always been yours," I say honestly.

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows hard. "I'm yours too."

There's not a time in my life I ever truly thought I'd hear those words from Creed, and if I wasn't so turned on I might even cry.

"I want you," I murmur because they're the only words I'm capable of forming at that moment.

He groans. "I want you so bad it's painful."

My cock is rock hard, and I need him inside me. "You can have me."

"Fuck," Creed curses, and steps off the bed, quickly shoving his pants and boxer briefs to the floor. He kicks them aside so fast I'd laugh if I was capable, but my gaze is glued to his hard cock. I've seen the outline of Creed's dick many times over the years, so I knew he was big, but now I'm wondering if my ass can actually handle his size. I trust Creed though, and I know he'll make sure I'm ready for him.

"We don't have to actually do anything." Creed interrupts my visual inspection with laughter in his voice. "I can just stand here, and you can—"

I narrow my eyes as I pull off my shirt, unbutton my jeans, and hook my fingers inside my boxer briefs. Lifting my ass off the bed, I push them both over my hips and down my legs. After I kick them off, it's my turn to watch Creed's eyes burn a trail of scalding heat down over my body. His gaze pauses over my dick. I'm not swinging a giant hammer like some people in the room, but my size is still nothing to sneeze at. I've never had any complaints. And Creed doesn't seem to be in line to be the first either. I watch as his hand absently wraps around his cock and strokes.

My balls draw tight just watching him, and I know it isn't going to take much to send me spiraling over the edge. I'd prefer to have him actually touch me first though.

"We don't have to do anything," I adopt his raspy tone as best as possible while I mimic his words to me. "I can just lay here, and you can..."

His lips twitch in amusement before a different expression replaces the humor. His dark brown eyes blaze with heat as he

takes a step toward the bed. “Hands and knees, smartass. I’ve been waiting a long time to see you bent over for me.”

He better stop saying shit like that or I will come before he manages to lay a finger on me. Not that I’ll admit that to him. I quickly turn onto my stomach, and get ready to have Creed in a way I never thought was possible until tonight.

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## Creed

HAVING Jake on his hands and knees, kneeling on my bed in front of me, ass spread with my fingers deep in his ass was not how I saw this day ending. I can’t think of a better way to spend the night. As I finger fuck him, he moans, and it’s the most beautiful fucking sound. My cock is rock hard, and I want inside him more than I want my next breath.

Jake glances over his shoulder with narrowed eyes. “Stop making me wait. I’m ready.”

I arch a brow back. “You’re demanding as hell in bed, aren’t you?”

To be fair, I’ve been torturing the both of us as I slowly work him open. I wanted to make sure he was comfortable, and I honestly don’t have a lot of experience in this department. I figure he can teach me, or we can learn together. But it appears Jake’s patience has worn thin, and I’m not sure how much longer I can wait either.

“I’m only demanding when I’m being teased relentlessly, and right now I can’t think of anything except you inside me.” He pushes back, riding my fingers.

“Fuck,” I say between gritted teeth. He knows exactly what he’s doing, and it takes every ounce of my control to keep myself from following his command. My dick is leaking so much precome it’s rolling down my shaft.

I slowly slide my fingers out of him and trail my fingertips down to his balls where I cup his hanging sac. He moans and pushes back against me again.

“Now, Creed. You can touch me all you want later. I need you.”

Jake telling me he needs me snaps my control. I reach for the nightstand drawer and grab a condom, ripping the foil and then rolling the rubber over my cock. I snatch the lube I’d used to stretch his ass and coat my cock.

“If I don’t come the second I stick my cock in you, it’ll be a fucking miracle,” I murmur under my breath.

Jake snorts. “You better not. I need to come, and when I do, I want it to be with your cock in my ass.”

After tossing the lube back in the drawer, I step behind Jake and smack his ass. “Who knew you had such a dirty mouth?”

Jake sighs. “You did. Now, fuck me and stop messing around.”

“If you insist.” I guide the tip of my dick to his ass and pause, taking a deep breath to ground myself and keep from coming too fast. Hopefully.

“I definitely insist.”

Jake is once again pushing his ass back, trying to ride my dick. Hell, at this point, maybe that’s exactly what the greedy little shit should have done. Except then I wouldn’t have this view. I watch my cock as I push forward and fight to keep my eyes from rolling back. *Holy fuck.*

I have to squeeze my eyes closed and bite my lip hard enough I’m sure it’s blanched of all color to keep from driving my cock all the way inside him.

“You’re going to come before you even fuck me, aren’t you?” Jake asks, and I think he’s only half teasing.

When I open my eyes, he’s watching me over his shoulder. He has to have seen how I am barely keeping myself in check.

“Your tight little ass is damn near strangling my cock. Cut me some slack.” Each word is pushed through gritted teeth, and a low groan vibrates my throat as I settle balls deep in his ass.

“Oh my god.” Jake’s skin breaks out with goosebumps as I lightly trail my finger down his spine.

It takes more control than I realized I’d had left, but I gently pull back and ease forward again, making sure he’s comfortable. His moans and demands that I fuck him assure me he’s ready. Thank fuck for that because the effort to hold back is making me lose my damn mind.

This time when I pull back, I slam forward and my eyes *do* roll back. Getting lost in the sounds of skin slapping skin and Jake’s moans, I fuck him hard until he’s a shaking mess.

He feels fucking amazing. Too amazing. My balls are already drawing tight, and I know he’ll never let me live this down, but I am dangerously close to point of no return.

I pant, trying to control the need to come, but it’s not helping. “Jake, I’m close.”

“It’s okay. I’m close too. Just keep fucking me.” He reaches under himself, and though I can’t see what he’s doing, I know he’s stroking his cock. The visual isn’t helping me keep things under control. If anything, it’s made it worse.

Through clenched teeth, I growl, “Come for me, and tell me how good it feels.”

“So good,” he breathes out. “So fucking good.”

I dig my fingers into his hips, thrusting even harder. My balls ache and my limbs tingle as I get closer. And then he moans. This one is different. The sound is long and drawn out while his whole body shakes. I can’t hold back anymore. Shoving deep, I bury my cock inside him, holding still as I come so hard I nearly black out. My cock pulses over and over, leaving me absolutely wrecked.

“I’m about to collapse,” Jake mumbles. “I think you drained every last ounce of energy straight out of my dick.”

I laugh as I take the hint, sliding my dick out of his ass so he can flop down, which he does, narrowly avoiding the mess he made on my bed. Why is that hot as hell?



He glances at my ruined blanket and his cheeks redden slightly. "Sorry about that."

"Why? I'm not. I think it's sexy." I remove the condom, wrap it in a tissue, and toss it in the trashcan. "Come shower with me."

"Not even a full minute to recover?" he complains, and I shake my head as I hold out my hand to help pull him up. "Brutal."

He grabs my hand, and I haul him up on his feet. "Let's get cleaned up and then we can crash if you want. I'm beat."

Jake's brow furrows. "Crash? You want me to stay the night?"

Why does he sound surprised? I arch a brow. "Well, yeah. Unless you want to...leave."

The idea of being so close to Jake only for him to turn around and go home feels wrong. Although if it's up to me, I'll spend every minute I can with him. I've wasted so much of our time already over the last year.

I'll never get enough of Jake, and I hope he realizes how serious I am about us. The two things I know I want in life are a career playing football and having Jake at my side doing whatever makes him happy. I can't imagine my life without him in it.

Jake squints. "What about your roommate? Won't he be coming home?"

I shrug because I hadn't really considered my roommate when I suggested Jake sleep over, but now that I have, it changes nothing.

"He spends a lot of weekends with staying at his girlfriend's apartment, so probably not. But if he does come home..." I shrug again as if to say *so what?* and hope my point is clear. I'm not hiding Jake from anyone.

Jake eyes me skeptically. "You really wouldn't care?"

I shake my head. "I wouldn't say that. I care, but not about what anyone thinks. I care that you know I want people to

know we're together."

"Together," he repeats, as if tasting the word on his tongue. "So, you want to date?"

I hum as I think over his question. "Dating doesn't sound like the right word. It doesn't sound like *enough*. But if that's what you want to call it, then yes. I want us to be together, and share our lives like we used to, but different. I want you to still be my best friend, the person I trust most in the world. But I also want to strip you naked and do dirty things to you. I want to take you out, and I want to stay in and watch movies while we binge on pizza."

"You are talking about being in a public gay relationship?" he asks still appearing like he doesn't quite believe me, which is valid considering our history.

"As far as I'm concerned, I'm in a relationship with the person I love, and should have been with for years. You can call it whatever makes you happy. Everyone else can think whatever they want. I'm not concerned about them anymore, not when I have you." Everything's changed so fast, but I'm grateful Jake decided to come over demanding answers. This is what I've wanted. We should have been together this whole time, and I've acted like such an idiot.

Jake sucks in a shuddering breath. "You love me?"

I grab his hand again and yank hard, forcing him to stumble into me. Wrapping my arm around his waist, I hold him close. "I do, and probably more than you know."

"I believe you, even though I didn't expect any of this." Emotion clogs his throat as he stares up at me. "I love you too."

I feel my own throat closing tight at the sound of those words I wasn't sure I'd ever hear. I can't believe I'd almost lost Jake for the rest of my life. The thought is devastating, so I shut it down. I have better things to look forward to now.

I lean down and press a soft kiss to his lips, murmuring against them, "So about that shower..."

“I can’t believe you guys have showers in your own dorms,” Jake says as he backs away. “Jock royalty.”

I snort as I watch his fine ass stroll to the bathroom. “Well, now you can just think of it as a perk of *dating* a football player. You can use it anytime.”

He stops just inside the doorway. “I can think of several perks of having a strong, muscled boyfriend.”

My cock twitches. “Stop. I’m fucking tired.”

Jake rolls his eyes. “We have years to make up for, Creed Masters. Get your ass in here.”

I have a feeling I won’t be getting any sleep anytime soon. I sigh as I follow him. Honestly, I’d follow him anywhere, and sleep is overrated.

# EPILOGUE

JAKE

## Two Years Later

THE SWEET SCENT of cinnamon rolls and bold smell of dark roast coffee wake me up Christmas morning. I yawn as I attempt to stretch my arms, but I find myself anchored to my childhood bed by a heavy arm. From behind me, Creed mumbles something indecipherable in his sleep that sounds like *pina colada with a pink umbrella*. Maybe he's dreaming about some hot summer destination vacation since it's below freezing outside, and my boyfriend is definitely not cut out for the cold. My lips hook up in a grin. The broody bastard is fucking cute as hell. He's also mine. *Finally*.

I glance over my shoulder, scanning over his face as he sleeps. It's hard to believe after everything that's happened that we are spending half of the holiday weekend at my parents' house...as a couple. Tonight we'll head to Creed's home to spend time with his family as well. It's all still very surreal to me, even after the nearly two years we've been together.

We're squeezed tight together on the mattress, mostly because we sleep that way most nights when I stay at his place, or he stays at mine. But we are also forced into the position because the full-sized bed is barely enough space for his big body, let alone both of us.

As early morning sunrays stream through my thin white curtains, I look around my old room. While I'd noticed a few

things had changed around the neighborhood over the last few years I'd been gone, my room had remained exactly the same. Pictures from high school were still taped to my mirror, and even my old notebooks were still stacked on a bookshelf. Other than cleaning the room from time to time, my mom and dad hadn't touched a thing.

My leg begins to cramp, so I need to get out of bed. There's no reason to wake Creed, so I gently move his arm and free myself from his grasp. Trying not to make a sound, I grab a pair of black sweatpants and slide them over my boxer briefs. I pair them with a red shirt and then sneak out of the room, easing my door closed behind me.

The smells coming from the kitchen grow stronger and the sounds of plates and glasses being moved around reach my ears as I make my way downstairs. I glance around the living room where my mother has decorated as exuberantly as she does every year.

A seven-foot Christmas tree is placed in the corner of the living room, lit up with red and white lights. A matching tree skirt is almost completely covered by wrapped presents that coordinate with the color scheme. Ropes of green garland with twinkling white lights and faux berries line the fireplace mantle and wrap around the staircase handrail. Mom's Christmas village is set up on a massive wooden display my father had built her when her collection had grown large enough that it could be considered more of a Christmas city. It's almost impossible not to feel the holiday spirit the moment you step inside their house, and I hope that never changes.

I walk into the kitchen and find my mom sipping a cup of coffee that still has steam rising from the mug.

"I swear you must have a stomach made of steel." I chuckle and pop a kiss on her cheek. "Merry Christmas, Mom."

"Merry Christmas." She flashes me a wide grin as I open the cupboard and retrieve my own mug. "Where's Creed?"

"Sleeping like a baby." I grab the bottle of vanilla creamer from the refrigerator and make my own cup of coffee. "Dad?"

Mischief twinkles in her blue eyes. “Sleeping like an old man.”

I snort. “Better not let him hear that. Don’t think he’s hit his midlife crisis yet.”

“That’s what you think. He’s been shopping for cars, and you should see the things he’s looking at. Can you picture your father driving a red convertible? Imagine.” She shakes her head, but honestly, I can totally see him driving one. I can see my mother riding passenger, just as happy.

“Do I smell cinnamon rolls?”

That raspy voice would never fail to make me melt. I glance over at Creed as he strolls into the kitchen wearing a black shirt and matching basketball shorts. His hair is a mess, and a pillow line runs down one side of his face. Yet he still manages to look sexy as hell.

My mom sets her coffee down on the counter and wraps her arms around Creed. “Merry Christmas, and yep. They are about to come out of the oven. I hope you boys are okay with a simple breakfast. We’ll do something special for lunch before you head to your parents’ for the night.”

“Sounds perfect.” Creed hums in approval, and I agree with him.

Mom finally releases Creed after almost a moment too long. I don’t fail to notice he got more love than I did and frown at my boyfriend who flashes me a knowing grin. Good thing I love the cocky asshole. My mom has always adored him, and he knows it. It’s only gotten worse since we broke the news of our relationship to our families a few months after making it official the night the truth had brought us together.

“And then after breakfast we can do gifts. That sound okay to you two?” She continues to plan the day, pretending we get any sort of vote. Mom is the commander of Christmas in this house, and rightfully so. She’s always made the day special.

“Yep,” Creed and I reply almost at the exact same time, and my mother seems delighted based on her smile widening to the point that the corners of her eyes crinkle.

“Great. I’ll go wake up your father then.” She pats us both on the shoulders as she passes by on the way out of the kitchen.

I glance up at Creed, my gaze dropping to his lips in a silent demand. He easily obliges, leaning down and placing his soft, full lips against mine. “Merry Christmas,” he mumbles against my mouth, and I can’t help but smile.

When we pull apart, I remember taking the gifts we’d brought for my parents upstairs because they still hadn’t been wrapped. “Do you mind running back upstairs for the gifts?”

An odd expression passes over his face, there and gone so quickly I might have imagined it. “Actually, I need some coffee. If I head back up there, I’ll likely faceplant on the bed and go back to sleep. Do you mind grabbing them?”

I roll my eyes. “Okay, drama queen.”

Creed scowls. “King. Drama *king*.”

“Whatever you say,” I snark as I head toward the living room, listening to the deep sound of his laughter that makes me grin.

I climb the stairs and head into my bedroom where the gifts we’ve covered in green and white striped wrapping paper are stacked next to our bags.

On top of the stack, one of my old notebooks is open with the cover folded back. I frown as I pick it up, immediately recognizing Creed’s handwriting.

DECEMBER 25, 2024

*Dear Jake,*

*It’s Christmas morning, and I’m waking up in your bed. Alone. That’s rude by the way. I’ll forgive you though because I love you. I love you a lot actually. More than I realized one person could love another, and it only gets stronger by the day. How is that possible?*



*I also woke up thinking about the two of us in Maui for some reason. Maybe we should spend a Christmas there one year so I don't freeze my balls off. Just a thought. You do seem to love my balls after all.*

I snort as I continue reading.

*But I also started thinking how I never want to wake up on a Christmas morning without you. Or even how the occasional morning we don't stay the night at each other's places sort of...sucks. I don't want to do that anymore. I want you in my bed every night so I can wake up with you every morning.*

*What do you think?*

*In case I wasn't clear, I want us to move in together, but the decision is yours. I'm not going anywhere either way.*

*Love forever,*

*Creed*

I'M NOT BREATHING, but my heart is pounding an erratic rhythm. My head feels light and my body tingles. I'm not sure if it's from the lack of oxygen or the words on the page. I force myself to take a deep breath before I pass out. Living with Creed is something I've imagined. I've even considered bringing it up myself, but I wasn't sure if he was ready for that. I'm glad I didn't ask, because this is...everything.

My eyes begin to tear up, and I have the urge to run downstairs to answer him, but I can't seem to make myself move. I don't want to put down the notebook.

A throat clears behind me, and I glance over my shoulder where I find Creed standing just inside the doorway with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his sweatpants. He appears cautious as if there's a chance in hell I'll say no.

I can't speak. I'm afraid if I do it won't be comprehensible English anyway. So I do the only thing I can. I bite my lip and nod.

Creed's expression relaxes and a boyish grin tilts his lips. "Really?" I nod again, and he chuckles. "That's it? No words? No kiss?"

I can tell he's teasing, and while I'd usually roll my eyes and pop off with a smartass comment, I can't do anything but stare at him.

Creed is mine.

The love I have for him is endless.

He's my best friend.

He's my forever.

The End

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-Baylin

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Baylin writes gay romance stories full of sweetness and steam. She's best known for her Sugar Land Saints series that follows a college football team set in Texas, which she also calls home. Whether writing books or reading them, Baylin spends the majority of her time tucked into the pages of stories about men who love other men. She has two amazing children, a spoiled cat, an insanely energetic dog, and a heavy addiction to caffeine.

Want to connect? Find Baylin on social media.



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