



KISSES

TO

Remember

Blairwood
University #4

ANNA B. DOE

KISS TO REMEMBER

BLAIRWOOD UNIVERSITY #4

ANNA B. DOE

CONTENTS

[Blurb](#)

[FREE prequel](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Notes](#)

[Other books by Anna B. Doe](#)

[About the Author](#)

Text copyright © 2021 Anna B. Doe

All Rights Reserved

Copyediting and Proofreading by [Once Upon A Typo](#)

Cover Design by Najla Qamber Designs

Cover Photo by By Braadyn

Cover Models: Hannah & Spencer

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

✿ Created with Vellum

“Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.”

— Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam*

BLURB

Some moments define the trajectory of your life.

Grace Shelton has experienced her fair share of loss and trauma, but moving to Blairwood is her chance for a new beginning.

For Trent Remington, going to college is a chance to break free of his overprotective parents and finally play basketball.

Some moments will change it forever.

When Grace collides into Trent by accident, she sees the last person she ever expected to find - the boy that's been haunting her dreams for the past two years. Trent might belong to another girl, but he can't seem to get the redhead with the sad eyes out of his mind no matter how hard he tries.

Together, they might risk everything for a chance at love, but will a kiss be enough to make him remember?

FREE PREQUEL

Make sure to grab *Kiss Before Midnight*, which is a prequel to Grace's full story, *Kiss To Remember*.

[Grab your copy now for free!](#)

CHAPTER ONE

GRACE

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Jade’s question is followed by the loud snipping of scissors.

I roll my eyes at my best friend’s attempt to make me reconsider my decision. It’s pointless. I’ve made up my mind, and I’m planning to stick to it.

“For the hundredth time: yes, I’m sure.”

My tone must be snappier than intended because Jade lifts her hands in the air defensively. “I’m just making sure.”

“I’m sure.”

I’ve been thinking about cutting my hair for a while now. I’ve always loved my long auburn hair, although it’s a constant reminder of my mother. You’d think I’d want to get rid of it because of all the bad memories associated with Cassie, but I never had. It was a reminder of where I’ve come from and what I’ve been through, so I let it grow. I owned it, this part of me. But since coming to college a couple of months ago, I decided I needed a change, and the more I thought about it, I just knew I had to go through with it.

Coming to Blairwood was just the first step in letting go of my past. It’s up to me to make the real change. It’s up to me to actually start *living*. I know that. I’ve known that for a while now. But knowing it and actually doing something about it are two completely different things.

It’s time to move on.

It’s been for a while, but I just wasn’t ready yet.

“Oh, I know you’re sure about cutting your hair. God knows you’ve been talking about it for what feels like forever. What I’m asking is, are you sure you want *me* to do this? Are you sure about *that*?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” I rub at my temples. Seriously, she’s giving me a headache. If Jade doesn’t hurry up, I might just be

tempted to grab the scissors from her hands and do the damn deed myself. The results be damned.

“Shouldn’t we go to a salon or something? You know, a place where people know what the fuck they’re doing? We get mani-pedis, you get a haircut by a *professional*, and everybody leaves the place happy and even prettier than when we walked in.”

I glare at her. “No, I want this done, and I want it now.”

My stomach clenches tightly with nerves.

I don’t think I’ll have the guts to do it if I keep putting it off any longer.

It’s time.

“Besides, I showed you that Brad Mondo’s video on Facebook, all the dos and don’ts. I’m confident you won’t make me look like a monster, at least until I have enough time to go to a salon to have somebody fix it.”

“That.” Jade points at me with the scissors. “That is exactly why we should go to the salon. Then you won’t need any fixing.”

“And risk them not being able to cut my hair now? I think not. Chop away, Jade, or I’m going to do it.”

Jade sighs exaggeratedly. “If you say so.”

For all her dramatics, I’m really lucky to have met her through a mutual friend. Yasmin—her brother’s girlfriend—and I go way back. When Jade and Nixon joined Yasmin in New York for the summer, the two of us hit it off almost instantly, and when I found out Jade’s also going to Blairwood, it was like destiny brought us together. She was a friend I didn’t even realize I needed until she came into my life, and I think the feeling is mutual.

We’ve been so lost, Jade and I, at the beginning of the summer. I was still looking for Mason on every corner, in every place, and Jade had just lost her mother to cancer. We were two young women in a city of millions, just trying to hold on to something and survive, but in doing that, we’ve

found each other. We both knew loss, albeit different, and while people around us expected us to move on, when we were together, it was okay to be us. Broken and bruised hearts included. With each other, we could just be ourselves, and it was okay. It was okay to hurt, okay to hide, okay to cry.

“Why are you so determined to do this again?” Jade asks as she kneels next to my chair, so she has better leverage.

I’ve already straightened my hair and sectioned it into smaller pieces, tying them with hair ties where we want to cut, as we saw on all the videos online.

“You know why.” I give her a pointed look. “It’s time. It’s been over a month since we got here, and while I keep telling everybody I’m okay and that things are great, I still constantly look over my shoulder in hopes of finding him.”

Mason.

I bite the inside of my cheek, my heart squeezing tightly in response. Even just saying his name in my mind hurts.

Will that pain ever go away? I shake my head, pushing those thoughts away.

“But he’s not here. He’ll never be here again. It’s time to stop.” I say this last part more for my benefit than for Jade’s.

It’s time to put a stop to it, and I have to be the one to do it. Nobody else can do it for me.

It took me a while to realize it. My family kept telling me that. My brother J.D. and his wife Sienna, who have raised me since I was twelve, have been so worried about me these last few years. They tried to help me in any way they could, both to find Mason, and once it was apparent that he was gone, to try and heal, but they couldn’t do it. And that revelation’s been killing them slowly too. I could see the weariness in their gazes every time they glanced at me. It’s like they’ve been waiting for me to break.

But the thing is, I’ve already been broken. I broke the day Mason disappeared, and months later, when I finally accepted he wasn’t coming back, I broke all over again.

My heart.

Completely, irrevocably, shattered to pieces.

It seemed dramatic to some people. How could she be so heartbroken? She's just a kid. What they didn't understand was that it didn't matter. I *loved* Mason LeBlanc with all of my young sixteen-year-old heart. Would we eventually break up? Maybe. But I never got a chance to find out because he disappeared, vanished into thin air. It wasn't just the not knowing that was eating at me; it was that I never got closure.

I might have known Yasmin longer, but she couldn't understand this part of me, and Jade, she was my kindred spirit. She understands the darkness that swallows you up and eats you from the inside when you lose a person you love.

As if she can read my mind, she lifts her head—our gazes lock, and understanding flashes in her blue-gray irises.

Jade has been doing so much better lately. The first time we met, she was quiet and sad. So, so sad. That was what drove me to her. I understood her heartache, her pain. That's what brought us together. Just two broken girls, trying to find our lifeline. It turns out we're that lifeline for each other. Jade pushed me to be a bit more reckless, and in doing so, she awoke the spunky girl inside her and brought her out. Still, I see the darkness lurking around her. She's putting on a good front, but she's still hurting over the death of her mother, and I'm not sure if it'll ever go completely away.

“Atta girl. Okay, let's do this then.”

I blink, focusing on the present.

This is it. My heart somersaults; excitement and nerves getting to me. My breaths are shallow, the palms of my hands sweaty. I brush them against the sides of my legs. *No going back now.*

Jade brings the scissors to one section of hair, just above the hair tie.

“Chop it,” I say without blinking.

So she does.

The whole thing doesn't last ten minutes, if that. Section by section is chopped and falls in my lap, and I make sure to secure them with a couple more ties each.

Once she's done, Jade puts the scissors on the desk, tips her head to the side, and observes me carefully, not saying a word.

I lift my hand and let my shaky fingers slide through my shoulder-length strands.

"So?" I ask when the silence gets to me.

If my head looks like a mess, I think I might throw up. Yes, I'm vain like that.

Jade hums non-committedly, still staring at me. "How do you feel about bangs?"

"Jade..."

"What? I think it'll look cute."

"Bangs are messy, and if it looks awful, I'll want to strangle you. Then I'll feel like shit because I killed my best friend."

Jade grins and picks up the scissors once again. "You should have thought about that before letting me do this."

"Fine," I sigh. "It's your deathbed."

Additional fifteen minutes, and I have hair teasing my brows. I've never had bangs before, so it's a weird feeling, and I still don't have an idea of what I look like because Jade insisted on curling my hair before letting me go to the bathroom to see the final look.

"Close your eyes."

I lift my brow at her. "Seriously?"

Jade pinches my arm. "Yeah, seriously. Close your eyes."

I can't look that bad if she's smiling, right? So I do as she asks, closing my eyes as she helps me to my feet. Jade obviously doesn't trust I'll keep my end of the bargain because

she steps behind me and places her hands over mine as she leads me to our little en-suite bathroom.

“You ready?” she asks when we come to a stop.

“As I’ll ever be,” I say, taking in a deep breath.

“Okay, here goes nothing.” She pulls my hands along with hers, and I open my eyes.

The breath I’ve been holding comes out in a soft *whoosh* when I see my reflection. Jade was right. The curls look way better with the shoulder-length style I have going on. They make me look softer, more approachable.

I reach up, running my fingers through the short strands.

“It’s totally unfair how amazing this looks on you.” Jade shakes her head. “Think I should change my profession?”

I look up at her. “Don’t you dare.”

While I’m interested in marketing and public relations, Jade is an artist. I’ve seen some of the photos she’s done in the past, and they’re stunning. And while, yes, she’s pretty good with scissors too, I have to give it to her, she was born to capture moments with her camera.

“It looks amazing, J. Even the bangs.”

Jade grins wider. “I know, I’m awesome.”

I jab her in the side. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Rei’s going to shit herself when she sees you.”

Rei is our new roommate. And while she’s a student at Blairwood, she’s also a professional figure skater, and this weekend she’s out of town for one of her competitions. We might have met only a few weeks ago when she moved into the dorm with us, but we just clicked, turning our duo into a trio with no effort.

“You think?”

“I know. I can’t wait to see her face!” Jade nods toward the strands of hair that we left on the coffee table in the common area. “What are we doing with these?”

“Wigs for Kids.”

Tears gather in my best friend’s eyes, but she blinks them away. Still, I wrap my arms around her, pulling her in for a hug.

“That’s great, Grace. They’ll love it.”

Her voice is tight, words muffled. I’m not sure if it’s because of the tears or because her head is burrowed into my neck.

“I think so too.” I pat her back. “C’mon, let’s pack the hair so we can drop it at the post office, and then we can grab coffee.”

“Yas will freak out when she sees you,” Jade laughs, wiping at the corners of her eyes.

I try to imagine our friend’s reaction to my change. I’m so not good with changes, and Yasmin knows it.

Yup, she will totally freak out.

Yasmin’s head snaps up at the soft *chime* of the bell as we enter Cup It Up, the local café and bakery in which she works part-time. She’s carrying empty trays back into the kitchen, and she barely gives me a courtesy glance before shifting her attention to the kitchen door. “I’ll be right...”

The rest of the sentence dies on Yasmin’s lips as she turns back toward me and really looks at me.

“Holy shit!” she whisper-yells, her eyes widening in surprise. The coffee shop is almost empty, but Yasmin is nothing if not one hundred percent dedicated and professional. All that’s out of the window now. “What did you do?”

“That bad?” Self-consciously, I run my fingers through my hair. I’ve been doing it every few minutes like I still haven’t fully grasped what I’ve done. No matter the fact that the short strands keep tickling my chin every time I move.

“No! It looks amazing, really, but...” Yasmin stares a bit more and finally shakes her head. “It’s just strange to see you with such short hair, that’s all.”

“I did it. Of course it’s amazing,” Jade says, coming from behind me. It was her brilliant idea that I entered first to see if Yasmin would recognize me or not. I guess she was onto something, and now I owe her coffee.

You’d think your best friend since forever would be able to recognize you immediately, no matter what kind of hair you have. I guess not.

We move closer, taking the two open stools by the counter.

“You did what?”

“I cut her hair, duh.”

“*You* cut her hair?” Yasmin’s mouth hangs open, and I’m not sure if she’s surprised or terrified by the prospect. Maybe a little bit of both?

Jade slaps her on the shoulder. “Don’t look so surprised.”

But Yasmin ignores her, instead turning her attention to me. “And you let her?”

“It was my idea, actually,” I confess.

“She watched some hairdresser expert dude on Facebook and got this idea in her head that she should cut her hair and do it right in the middle of our dorm.”

Yasmin shakes her head once again, clearly dumbfounded. “I think I need a minute to process this.” She looks down at her full hands. “And put these down. I’ll be right back.”

Trays in hands, Yas nudges the door to the kitchen with her hip and slips inside.

I turn to Jade. “That went well?”

“Oh, she likes it. She just needs to wrap her head around this new, sexy Grace.”

I scoff. “New, sexy Grace?”

I don't think anybody has ever called me sexy. Sweet? Cute? Pretty? Check, check, check. Sexy though? Yeah, I don't think so.

Before she can answer, Yasmin pops back from the kitchen, her eyes going straight to me. "So what brought this unexpected need for change?" she asks as she gets on preparing our coffees.

She knows me so damn well. We've been friends for years, and I should have known she'd know something's going on. After all, a girl doesn't go from her practical, every-two-to-three-months-just-chop-my-split-ends routine to chopping off two-thirds of her hair overnight, now does she?

"Oh, it's..." Jade starts, but I kick her in the shin under the table and give her a warning look.

"I just needed some change, that's all."

Yasmin looks at me over her shoulder suspiciously. "You don't like change."

"I guess it's coming to Blairwood." I'm not lying. Not really. Coming to Blairwood put some things in perspective. A lot of things. "Being here made me realize it's a fresh start. A second chance." Yasmin picks up the drinks and puts them on the counter in front of us, and I look at her. "I want it, Yas. I really want this second chance."

My friend's dark eyes soften around the corners at my words. I can see the understanding on her face, which only makes the vice grip around my chest tighten.

Yasmin was the one who was with me when I fell in love with Mason. She was there when he disappeared on me without a word. She's been the one who helped me search for him even when everybody else had told me it was useless and I should let it go. Let *him* go. But I couldn't. For two years, I held onto his memory; it was time to let it go.

Her hand covers mine on the counter, giving it a soft squeeze. "And you deserve it; you deserve to find happiness, Grace."

"Thanks, Yas."

I'm not sure about the happiness, but I'll take anything over this constant heartache I've been feeling for the last few years. This empty void in my chest, in my heart, has only grown with time.

People kept telling me that time would help heal all wounds, but mine has only grown bigger over time. More painful.

"Anyway..." Jade drawls slowly, breaking the tension in the air. You can always rely on her to jump in when you need it the most. "Can we skip the sappy stuff and concentrate on how stunning those bangs look? I honestly didn't think I had it in me."

Yasmin rolls her eyes. "Maybe you should have filmed it and posted it online. See if that—what did you call him again, hairdresser expert?—sees it and maybe takes you under his wing."

Jade pokes her tongue out at her. "I hate you so much sometimes."

Yasmin rolls her eyes. "Like that could ever happen."

She's right, though. It was weird, this dynamic the three of us have. Yasmin is the one who introduced us to each other, a big sister neither of us had. Unconsciously, she gave us exactly what we needed, when we needed it the most.

We chat for a little while as we sip our coffees. Cup It Up has the best brew in all of Blairwood, and having a friend who works behind the counter doesn't make me biased.

Some twenty minutes later, the doorbell chimes again, and in walks Nixon. His hair is light brown, streaked with gold from spending a lot of time out in the sun, the complete contrast to Jade's long, dark brown locks. It's messy, ends curling in all different angles. What's the same is the smile and intense blue-gray eyes both Cole siblings share.

"I didn't realize this has become a meeting point."

He comes to the counter and leans over it to plant a kiss right on Yasmin's mouth.

“It’s almost disgusting how lovey-dovey you two are,” I say, shaking my head at the two of them.

It’s strange to see Yasmin, who isn’t one to show her affections, be so openly in love. Or maybe that’s just jealousy speaking. Because no matter how happy I am that my friend has fallen in love with an amazing guy that makes her smile like that, a part of me wants it too. Badly.

Yasmin’s eyes narrow as she looks at me over Nixon’s shoulder. “Who even says lovey-dovey anymore?”

“This girl right here.”

“There’s no almost,” Jade says, her nose furrowing. “They’re disgusting.”

Nixon wraps his arm around Jade’s neck and pulls her closer. “What did you say?”

“You heard me.” She pokes him in the ribs, trying to get out of his grasp.

“Not clearly enough.”

“Don’t be a bully, Nix.”

“Oh, now I’m a bully too?”

Yasmin and I exchange a look over the counter.

“Sometimes, I’m so happy that I’m an only child.”

“Girl, same.”

Although technically, I’m not an only child, the age difference between my brother and me is so big he could be my father, and while I love his kids like they’re my brothers, there’s again that age difference. Besides, I’ve grown alone for the first twelve years of my life, so J.D. and I don’t have the kind of relationship Nixon and Jade share.

Jade finally manages to shove Nixon off. She smooths her ruffled hair, still glaring at her brother. “Shouldn’t you be in class or gym or *something*?”

“I could ask you the same question, Smalls.”

Jade narrows her eyes at him. “I knew I shouldn’t have picked the same college as you.”

“Well, now you’re here, and there’s no going back.”

Jade huffs and grabs her cup off the counter. “Let’s go, Grace, before I get tempted to strangle my brother.”

Laughing, I get up. “I guess it’s time to go. See you later, lovebirds.”

We get a distracted goodbye since both of them are already lost in their own little bubble.

“Seriously, if I didn’t love them so much, I’d be tempted to strangle them.”

I take a peek over my shoulder just to catch Nixon brushing a runaway strand behind Yasmin’s ear. “It’s good to see them happy, though.”

The corner of Jade’s mouth lifts, but there is sadness in her expression, too. “Yeah. They’ve been through a lot.”

I put my hand around her shoulder, pulling her in a hug. *She’s* been through a lot too, not just Nixon and Yasmin. Not that she’d admit it out loud. “What do you think, cafeteria or takeout?”

“Takeout.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

We take the route back to our dorm when Jade suddenly stops. “Oh, shit!”

I turn around. “What?”

“I forgot my tote in Cup It Up. Gimme a sec,” she says, already rushing back inside.

“Okay.”

I watch after her and shake my head at her retreating back. I start to turn around, but I crash into somebody. I reach for the person, trying to steady myself. “Oh, I’m so so—”

The air is kicked out of my lungs as I look up and come face to face with the last person I ever expected to see again.

The person I truly believed I let go of in my past.

I pull my shaky hand from him quickly, as if I've been burned, and press it against my thundering heart.

“M-Mason?”

CHAPTER TWO

GRACE

Mason.

The name echoes in my mind like a bell. I shake my head and take a step back. My tongue slides over my dry lips. I open my mouth, but no words come out, only loud pants as I try to calm my erratic breathing and the intense pounding of my heart. The strong thumping makes it hard for me to wrap my mind around what's happening.

Mason is here.

Thump-thump.

With that shaggy dark brown hair that's just a little too long.

Thump-thump.

And those eyes.

I raise my hand to cover my mouth and swallow the sob that wants to come out.

Those deep, brown eyes that penetrate straight to your very core, with the thickest eyelashes I've seen on a boy, a man really, staring right at me.

Thump-thump-thump...

I blink, thinking the person in front of me will disappear, but he stands right there.

Mason.

My Mason.

The ringing in my head intensifies to the point it's painful. I cover my ears, hoping it'll go away, but it's no use.

This can't be happening.

It's not real.

It can't be.

He can't be here.

My heart is hammering hard against my ribcage, so hard I'm surprised it hasn't burst out by now.

This isn't real.

I close my eyes, welcoming the darkness. I sway on my feet, my chest squeezing so tight it's hard to breathe. I try to suck in so much-needed air but can't. My lungs are squeezing tightly, not letting the air in.

I can't breathe.

I bend forward, placing my hands on my knees to steady myself.

Breathe, Grace. I squeeze my eyes tighter, trying to concentrate so I can fight off the panic. I haven't had a panic attack in... I shake my head. *Just breathe. Don't think. Breathe.*

Somewhere through the haze in my mind, I hear a low voice speak.

"Hey, are you okay?"

A shadow falls over me, the smell of sandalwood and something deeper, darker overwhelms all my senses, taking me back. A hand lands on my shoulder to steady me. The palm is big and warm, the pressure of it burning through the layers of my clothes.

"I-I..." My voice stutters as I try to grasp what's going on. This shouldn't be happening. Not here. Not now. Not after I've finally, *finally*, decided to move on.

But it is.

I blink my eyes open, and there he is, standing right in front of me, in flesh and blood.

It so is.

A frown between his brows deepens as Mason stares at me.

It's him, all right.

Older but equally devastatingly handsome as he was when we were sixteen. The lines of his face are harder, more mature. There's a light stubble covering his cheeks as if he didn't bother with shaving this morning.

It's him.

I cover his hand with mine, my fingers tightening around his and holding on for dear life as I try once again. "M-Mason?"

That frown between his brows deepens at the name. His face is completely empty as if...

"Trent, babe..."

A girl appears from behind Mason—*Trent?*—and looks down at us.

What is she talking about?

The girl's eyes narrow at me as she takes me in. She presses her lips in a hard line and grabs Mason's hand, pulling him to his feet and creating distance between us. My hand slips down, slapping against my side as I watch them. I'm not sure if I should be thankful or angry. I'm still too stuck on the fact that Mason is here.

But she called him Trent! a little voice yells at me.

"What's going on here?" the girl asks. Her voice is soft, but I can hear the harsh undertone to her question.

She's gorgeous—petite, with long dark brown hair that's curled in perfect locks. Her makeup is impeccable, and she's wearing a beautiful dress that accentuates her sky-blue eyes.

Mason turns to the girl and wraps his arm around her, giving her hand a gentle caress.

A shiver runs through my body as I watch him look at her. The way his long fingers glide over her skin is like a phantom's touch, calling to me from the past.

There's a faint *crack* as what little is left of my heart shatters at my feet.

“We bumped into each other, and she had me confused with somebody else. That’s all.” Mason’s eyes turn to me, and the vice grip is back, squeezing tightly around my heart. It hurts so fucking much to look at him and see nothing reflected back. No recognition. Nothing at all. “Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah. Sorry,” I push a strand of my hair behind my ear, wishing like crazy that I didn’t chop it all off so I could hide behind it. “It was an accident.”

“That’s fi—”

“Well, maybe next time you should watch where you’re going.” The brunette glares at me and tugs at his arm. “Come, Trent. Let’s get out of here.”

He can’t go! I take a step forward but stop myself on time. My fingers twitch, wanting to grab him and never let go. Every cell in my body protests at the mere idea.

He can’t leave.

Not now.

Not just yet.

Not when I just found him.

He doesn’t even know who you are, my brain reminds me. And apparently, he’s already taken.

Mas— Trent, or whatever the hell his name is, looks over his shoulder, his gaze meeting mine for a split second, an apology written on his face.

Apology and nothing else.

One more tug from his girlfriend, and he turns around, breaking our stare.

But I can’t look away.

I’m not sure how long I stand here, just staring at their retreating backs. My whole body numb.

“Okay, I’m done, let’s— Grace? Are you okay?” From the corner of my eye, I see Jade stop in front of me and look worriedly at me, but my gaze is still fixed on the street,

although Mason has already disappeared from my eyesight.
“What’s going on?”

“He’s here,” I whisper, my gaze still fixed over her shoulder in the direction Mason and the girl—his *girlfriend*—disappeared into.

“Who’s here?” Jade puts her hand on my arm, shaking me slightly. “Grace, you’re scaring me. You look like you’ve seen a ghost or something.”

“That’s because I have,” I rasp, a tear sliding down my cheek. “In a way.”

“What?”

My tongue peeks out, sliding over my dry lip. I force myself to look away and focus on Jade.

“Mason.” The name comes out softly. So softly, it’s barely audible. Jade’s eyes grow wide when the name registers in her mind. “Mason’s here.”

And he didn’t even remember me.

CHAPTER THREE

TRENT

Mason?

A stab of pain spreads through my skull as the image of the redheaded girl pops into my mind. Those big green eyes were staring up at me, a mix of despair and hope swirling inside their depths. Fear and sadness, too.

I lift my hand and rub the side of my head where the pressure is slowly building. It reminds me a little of when I used to have migraines, but I haven't had those in a while.

“Trent?”

“Huh?” My head snaps up at the annoyed tone in Ashley's voice. “What?”

My girlfriend's fingers tighten around my hand as we come to a stop in front of her dorm. She turns around to face me, a frown between her brows.

“You're not even listening to me!” She lifts her arms in the air and lets them fall by her sides in her typical, overly dramatic fashion. “Seriously?”

She's right though. I haven't been listening. I've been quiet all the way back, letting Ashley do all the talking, humming in what I thought were all the right places. Guess I was wrong. But I couldn't help myself; my mind's still on that girl. For whatever reason, I couldn't shake off that expression on her face. For a while, it seemed like she was having a panic attack or some shit, and it didn't sit well with me that we just left her there all by herself.

I run my fingers through my hair. “Sorry, I've been distracted. What were you saying?”

“By what?” Ash asks suspiciously.

“I'm still thinking about that girl.”

I instantly know that's the wrong thing to say because her expression darkens as she props her hands on her hips. “What

the hell for?”

“What do you mean? She didn’t look okay, and we just left her there.”

Once again, those light eyes pop into my mind. They looked big on her face; her skin completely drained of color.

Mason.

My brows furrow as the name rings in my mind, the pressure behind my temples growing. Unstoppable, like the tide.

Who is Mason? And what did he do to get that reaction out of her?

I rub my temples, hoping to relieve some of the pain. The last thing I need is a migraine right now.

Ashley rolls her eyes. “She was faking it. I can’t believe you fell for it.”

“Why would she?” I snap, my voice rising. “Besides, did you really have to be such a bitch to her, Ash?”

Ashley lifts her chin, her lips pressing in a tight line. “You did not just call me that.”

Good, two of us can be angry. “There was no reason for you to treat her that way.”

“Why are you defending her?!” Ashley yells.

A few people give us curious glances as they pass by.

Great, just what I needed.

I rub my hand over my face. Taking a deep breath to calm myself, I lower my voice before continuing. “I’m not defending anybody. I’m just asking a question. There was no reason for you to snap at her like you did. She clearly had me confused with somebody else. Not everybody has an agenda.”

“Trent...” Ashley grabs my hand, but I tug it out of her grasp.

“I have a practice to go to. I’ll see you later.”

Turning on the balls of my feet, I stalk away. Ashley calls after me, but I don't bother turning back.

We've been together since sophomore year of high school. Ashley's been there when everything else was fucked up in my world. She was my anchor when my world turned upside down. She was my first love. My first everything. But my God, some days I wonder where did the girl I fell in love with disappear?

I'm still fuming half an hour later when I get to the locker room. I murmur my greeting to the guys as I go to my locker and pull it open, my duffle bag sliding from my shoulder and falling on the floor by my side.

"What the hell crawled up your ass?" Matteo asks, his brows rising.

We've been best friends since we were kids, and most recently, since coming to college, roommates. He knows me better than sometimes I know myself.

I pull my shirt over my head and toss it into the locker. "Just had a fight with Ash."

"Trouble in paradise already?"

"Might as well go ahead and say it."

Matteo was the first to say I'm crazy for even entertaining the idea, but how was I supposed to say no when my girlfriend told me she wanted us to go to the same college together? It didn't matter which college or where, just that we were together. I tried telling her that maybe she should apply somewhere she wanted to go. I didn't want her to wake up one day and hate everything about her life because she gave it all up for me. I knew we could make long-distance work somehow, but she didn't want to hear it, saying it didn't matter to her as long as we were together.

And since I was accepted to Blairwood and Matteo got offered a full ride on a basketball scholarship, it was a given.

Matteo grins. "I told you so."

“You don’t have to be a smug dick about it,” I narrow my eyes at him before pulling the jersey over my head.

“That girl is needy as fuck, bro.”

“She’s not that bad.”

Matteo rolls his eyes. “She’s like a serpent. Attacks when you least expect it and will eat you alive if you aren’t wary enough.”

“Now you’re just a dick.”

To say my best friend and girlfriend never got along is an understatement of the century. They can’t be in the same space without ripping into one another on a good day.

“Hey, I just say it as I see it. You do what you want with it.”

I open my mouth, but Coach blows the whistle, and all the talking dies down.

“If you ladies are done chatting, I want to see you out on the court in ten seconds flat for warmups.”

Matteo slaps me on the shoulder. “Forget about her. Let’s go play ball.”

An image of wide green eyes flashes in front of my eyes, but I push it back. “Yeah, sure.”

The practice is brutal, and by the end of it, I’m one sweaty mess. While Matteo got a basketball scholarship to attend Blairwood, the coach took a few other guys and me as walk-ons.

I always liked the sport, but my parents didn’t want me to play, especially not one so hands-on as basketball. Because of my migraines, they worried I might get hit in the head, or God knows what. Especially my mom. That woman’s capable of coming up with a dozen exaggerated scenarios in a blink of an eye. But I’ve been feeling fine. Better than fine, really. So, I signed up.

It was on a probation basis only. The coach was pretty clear that the number of spots he has is limited, and there are

no guarantees we'd make it on the final roster. Being a walk-on also meant I had to work twice as hard as everybody else to keep my spot by the beginning of the season, but I'm determined to make it and deal with the potential fallout later.

I ran the drills Coach put us through until I thought I'd puke, and then we scrimmaged.

I slip past Matteo's defense just in time to catch a pass from Quinn, our team captain and point guard, and shoot a three-pointer. The ball goes straight into the hoop just as the coach blows the whistle, signaling the end of practice.

With the back of my hand, I wipe the sweat off my forehead.

"You've been practicing without me, T?" Matteo pants.

"Not too shabby, Rookie," Quinn grins, extending his fist.

"Thanks." I bump my hand against his before turning to my best friend. "We can't all have fancy scholarships to lean on."

He shoves me. "Fuck off."

I laugh as we go to the locker room. Coach lifts his gaze to me just as we pass by.

"Good game, Remington."

"Thanks, Coach."

Coach nods and goes back to his clipboard and his conversation with one of the assistants.

As soon as we're out of earshot, Matteo bursts into laughter. "Thanks, Coach," he mocks.

I shove him away. "Shut up."

"You're such a sucker, T."

"Not as good as your mom," I throw right back, which earns me an elbow in the gut.

The locker room is buzzing with activity as everybody changes, getting ready to get out of here. A few older

teammates congratulate me on a good game as I go to the bathroom. I quickly shower before throwing on my clothes.

“Wanna grab something to eat?” Matteo asks, pushing the door to the gym open. “I’m starving.”

“Sure...” I look up and find a familiar figure sitting on the bench in front of the building. “Ash?”

Ashley stands up, smoothing the skirt of her dress in the process. Her gaze quickly darts to Matteo, but she ignores him, fixing her attention on me. “Can we talk?”

“And I’m out.” Matteo slaps me on the shoulder. “I’ll see you later, bro.”

I nod at him and wait until he’s out of earshot. “What’s up?”

Ashley comes to me, wrapping her arms around my middle and laying her head on my chest. “I hate how we left things earlier,” she murmurs.

Sighing, I slide my hand at the small of her back. “Me too, but you can’t keep pulling shit like that, Ash.”

This wasn’t her first jealous outburst. She’d always come and apologize afterward. I try to be understanding, but my patience is wearing thin. I could understand it if there was a reason for it, but I never, not once, looked at another girl that way.

“I know, and I’m sorry.”

“Sorry isn’t enough, Ash.” Gently, I push her away so I can look down at her face. “I never gave you any reason to doubt me. To doubt us.”

She nibbles at the inside of her cheek. Her gaze meets mine for only a second before she turns away, but not before I see tears glimmering in her eyes. Seeing her hurting is like a punch to my gut. I hate knowing that something I did made her cry.

“I know.” Her fingers grip my shirt, twisting the fabric. “It’s me. I keep thinking...” she snuffles and shakes her head.

I cup her cheek, forcing her to look at me. “What?”

We needed to talk about this. We needed to figure this shit out before it kills us slowly. I can't read her mind. I can't know if she doesn't outright tell me what's bothering her. But every time I brought this subject up in the past, Ashley would push it away.

“Ever since we came here, you've been so concentrated on classes and basketball, and it's like I've fallen behind.”

“You haven't fallen behind. Things are just different here, and I've been trying to find my footing. Trying to figure out what I want to do with my life.”

“I know, but it feels like I'm going to lose you, Trent. I feel like you'll slip through my fingers, and there's nothing I'll be able to do to make you stay.”

“That won't happen.”

“How can you be sure?”

I press my mouth against hers in a chaste kiss. “Because you were there for me when I needed you the most. It's you and me, Ash. Don't you trust me on that?”

“I want to. I really want to.” Ashley shakes her head. “I'm probably just overreacting. You know I'm not good with changes.”

“It's going to be okay.”

She nods and slips her hands around my neck, pulling me down. “You and me?”

“You and me,” I repeat.

Ash kisses me deeply this time. The kiss is hard and needy, but her words still ring in my mind.

Want to.

Definitely not the same as doing something.

CHAPTER FOUR

GRACE

“Hey,” Mason says, a smile spreading over his face.

My heart starts beating faster at the sight of two matching dimples that pop in his cheeks.

God, he’s too handsome for his own good.

We’re standing toe to toe. He bounces on the balls of his feet and shoves his hands into the pockets of his pants. He’s looking down at me, not an easy feat since I’m a tall girl, but next to him I feel small, almost delicate.

“I’m M—”

“Mason,” I finish before he can, feeling my cheeks heat in embarrassment.

A frown appears between his brows, his eyes narrowing in confusion.

“Who’s Mason?”

I startle awake, sucking in a long breath. I sit up and look around, disoriented. My hand covers my rapidly racing heart as I take in the cramped space of my dorm room.

It’s just a dream. Just a dream.

Mason is gone. I run my hand over my face. Has been gon

—

The memories of yesterday come rushing back.

Finally deciding to cut my hair. Going to Cup It Up with Jade. Stumbling into somebody outside of the café.

An image of that guy flashes in my mind. Him and the girl he was with.

Not just somebody.

Mason.

I let out a shaky breath, my hand trembling.

It wasn’t just a dream.

He was older, the lines of his face harder, but it was him. I'm sure of it.

Mason is here.

My chest clenches tight, making it hard to breathe. The panic I've been fighting since the moment I saw him comes back all at once. Tears burn my already puffy eyes. I close them tightly, squeezing my fingers into fists so hard my nails dig into my palms.

Why is this happening?

I'm not sure how long I cried or when I fell to sleep. I barely remember coming to the dorm. Jade helped me. If it weren't for her, I'd probably crumble down on the spot, but since she'd been there, she led me home, holding me together just long enough. But once the door was closed behind us, I let go.

I was sobbing uncontrollably. Ugly tears were streaming down my face while I struggled to breathe.

My emotions are all over the place. They were always bigger than me. Sienna told me I felt too much, and maybe she was right. Like an avalanche, there was no stopping them once they were out.

After all this time, why is he here just when I've decided to move on?

His face flashes before my eyes. That confused frown between his brows. And those eyes. God, those eyes...

Mason was everything to sixteen-year-old me. He was my first everything. My first crush. My first love. My first date. My first kiss.

How does he not remember?

I bite into my lower lip to prevent it from wobbling.

I'm *not* going to cry. Not again.

Forcing my eyes open, I look out the window. Early morning light peeking through the curtains makes my head

ache. The need to turn around and pull the covers over my head is strong.

I'm not going back.

Before I can think too much about it, I push back the covers and get up from the bed.

“I knew I’d find you here.”

I tilt my head to the side but don’t let go of the barre as I dip into third position. Most people would think it’s crazy for me to continue practicing ballet. After all, I’m taking valuable studio time from someone who’s studying dance, but I like the peace it brings me.

The music.

Graceful movements.

The repetitiveness, the structure, the poise.

It’s exactly what I need. Something familiar that will help ground me when all I want to do is fall apart.

“I’m fine,” I say calmly, not even bothering to turn around. “You didn’t have to come.”

In the reflection in the mirror, I see Yasmin push off the doorway and come to stand in front of me. “Like hell, I didn’t.” There’s a fire in her eyes that reminds me of a protective momma bear ready to fight for her cub but also a bit of disappointment and... hurt. “Why didn’t you call me? You know I’d have come.”

“Jade shouldn’t have said anything.”

“She’s worried about you. Said you closed yourself in your room after...” The rest of the sentence hangs in the air.

There’s a loud bang as the door shuts behind me. My body crumples to the ground as sob after sob rips out of my lungs.

“Grace, please let me in.” Jade bangs at the door behind me. “Grace!”

Tears fall down my cheeks, leaving a mess behind them. I can feel their salty taste on my lips.

Mason is here. At Blairwood. He’s here.

My whole body shakes, and I barely manage to wrap my arms around my legs. I pull them to my chest, burrowing my head into my knees, and then I scream.

I grip the barre tighter. “I’m fine. I just needed to regroup.”

That’s definitely one way of putting it.

I fell apart. It was like the rug was pulled from under my feet, and everything I thought I knew was wrong.

For two years, I believed something had happened to Mason. That was the only explanation. He just disappeared. One day he was there, smiling, playing ball, and flirting; the next day, he was gone, never to be heard from again. And it wasn’t just me he disappeared on. I talked to some of the guys he hung out with at the community center, and they told me the same, so at least I knew he didn’t just disappear on me. Not that it made it any easier to deal with the whole situation.

And now he’s here.

How did he get to Blairwood out of all places?

And what the hell is a girl supposed to do about that? I was just ready to move on with my life. After *two years*. Talk about divine intervention.

What the hell did I do in my past life to deserve all the shit that’s happened in this one?

So, yeah, I think I deserved to close myself in a room for a night and cry my eyes out.

Yasmin nervously bites the inside of her cheek before looking at me. “Was it really him?”

Sighing, I give up on dancing and lean my hands against the barre instead. “It was him, Yas. It was Mason.”

Goosebumps rise on my skin. Just saying his name out loud after all this time feels foreign on my tongue. Calling out to him yesterday was instinctual. I didn't think about it. He was there, and the word just left my mouth. But today... It's different.

I always hoped I'd see Mason again, but I guess after a while, I stopped believing it would actually happen.

"How?"

Isn't that the million-dollar question?

"I wish I knew," I whisper softly, chewing on my lower lip to prevent it from wobbling.

But, as always, Yasmin knows me too well for my own good. She wraps her arms around me from behind and leans her chin on my shoulder. "It's going to be okay."

Tears blur my eyesight, and I blink them away.

"Is it?" I croak out, my voice barely audible. "Is it really?"

It all still feels like a daze, a dream, a hallucination. How? Just how did he appear after all this time? And why? Why here? Why now? Why when I was just ready to move on?

"I was just getting ready to move on, Yas." I shrug out of her arms and move toward the window. Pressing my head against the glass, I look out at the sun shining brightly on the horizon. "I thought I was ready to move past it, and that same day, he appears out of nowhere, blowing my life up once again."

"Did he at least say something?"

Mason's face flashes before my eyes. The worry as he looked at me, the confusion at my words, the reluctance as he was pulled away from me.

It's all so vivid in my mind. The rich brown of his hair. The lines between his brows. The dark chocolate of his irises and those damn golden speckles scattered around them.

It's weird, up until this moment, I haven't even realized how his image became blurry in my mind. Like he was

standing in the fog of my past. Two years. It's been two years.

He was different, and yet the same in so many ways it doesn't seem real.

But it is.

"That's the thing. H-he doesn't..." A knot forms in my throat. I force it down, taking a moment to steady my voice. "He doesn't remember me."

The blank look on his face when he saw me is etched into my mind. I dreamed about that look last night. Only it wasn't a dream. More like a nightmare.

A frown appears on my best friend's face. "What do you mean, he doesn't remember you?"

"Just what I said." I look down at my hands—my fingers wound so tight my knuckles are white. I force them to relax. "You know when you think you see somebody, so you automatically call out their name?"

I feel more than see Yasmin slowly nod her head. "Yeah."

"Well, that's what happened. I saw him, and I called out his name, but there was nothing. No recognition not even a twitch. Just... nothing."

Like he never knew me at all.

"Do you think he faked it?"

I shake my head no. "He'd have to be a really good actor to pull that off."

To most of the people, what we had would hardly be worth mentioning. It was long glances across the court and one date we had in the winter when we were sixteen. Just a moment in time. Still, you'd think there'd be something. Anything. But it was like he never saw me in his life.

Maybe I was just that forgettable.

"And the girl he was with..." Just saying it leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

I imagined a dozen, no, a hundred different scenarios of what would happen if, *when*, I saw Mason again, but in none of them did I imagine he'd moved on. In none of them, did he not remember me at all.

Yasmin's brows shoot up. "There was a girl?"

"That's beside the point." *Why does your heart ache so badly then, huh?* the little voice inside my head asks, but I ignore it. "She called him Trent."

"Trent?" Yasmin frowns. There is a pause as she mulls over this information. "Grace, are you su—"

"I know what I saw, Yas," I snap. "It's him. It's Mason."

I'm not crazy. I know what I saw. *Who* I saw. He might be older, but it's still him. The boy I fell in love with. I grab my wrist, my fingers trailing over the bracelet that I haven't taken off since the day he put it on.

"Or Mason has a twin brother we never knew about."

"Okay, I trust you. It's just all so weird."

"Tell me about it."

Weird barely begins to cover it.

"What now?"

I shrug. "Nothing."

Yasmin frowns. "What do you mean, nothing?"

I slip a strand of my hair behind my ear. "Exactly as I said, nothing."

"But he's here," Yasmin points out as if I need a reminder. Like I could ever forget. "Do you really want me to believe you're going to just let it go? After all these years? After all you've been through to find him?"

"What can I do? He doesn't remember me. I can't just come up to him and tell him I've been madly in love with him since we were sixteen. He'll probably think I'm crazy." I know I feel like I'm crazy. "And besides, he has a girlfriend." Definitely *not* something I want to think about. "Hell, for all

we know, he isn't Mason at all, just somebody who looks like him."

"Oh, Grace," Yasmin sighs, hugging me once again. I wrap my arms around my friend and lean my head against her shoulder, letting her familiar scent surround me. "It's going to be okay."

But it's not. Nothing is ever going to be okay again. My world as I knew it had once again been destroyed, and I was left to pick up the pieces left scattered on the ground.

Yasmin pulls back. "How about something normal? Why don't you girls come over tomorrow for dinner? I'll be cooking at Nixon's." She nudges me playfully with her elbow. "Enchiladas, I know they're your favorite."

Although I don't feel it, I force a smile out. "Sure, sounds like a plan."

CHAPTER FIVE

GRACE

“Hey.” A hand lands on my shoulder. Startled, I look up at Marcus, who’s watching me expectantly. “You going? She dismissed the class like five minutes ago.”

“Oh.”

Sure enough, when I scan the auditorium, I find it almost empty except for *her*. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I saw the girl that was with Mason the other day sitting in my class today. What were the odds? But she was there, sitting in the middle row with a few equally gorgeous girls surrounding her, chatting and giggling.

How did I not notice it sooner?

Then again, how would I? The classes are big, and I’m not one to pay much attention to other people. Besides, seeing Mason messed with my head so badly I could barely remember my own name.

The brunette flips her hair over her shoulder, her eyes meeting mine. She starts to look away but then does a double-take. Her eyes narrow when the recognition sets in.

I duck my head and start shoving my things in my backpack. “Y-yeah, sure.”

“What’s going on with you, anyway?”

I close the laptop as soon as it turns off and shove it into my bag. “Nothing, why do you ask?”

Marcus shrugs. “You seem awfully quiet. That’s all.”

Jade and I met Marcus during the orientation week, and as it turned out, we also have this one class together. Marcus is awfully charming and genuinely nice. We clicked instantly, but that didn’t mean I was ready to share my secrets with him. Hell, I had yet to talk with my best friends about them.

In the end, Jade, Rei, and I joined Yasmin at her boyfriend’s house over the weekend. The little dinner turned

into a group gathering, and we ended up spending the evening helping one of Yasmin's friends, Kate, plan her wedding to one of the guys on the football team. They've been high school sweethearts, and he just proposed to her over the summer. But even that couldn't take my mind off of what happened just days earlier. Take my mind off of *him*.

Mason.

Ever since our encounter, I've gone back to old habits. Constantly looking over my shoulder, searching for him in the mass of people that I passed on campus, but I haven't seen him again—only his girlfriend.

I look up and let out a small sigh of relief when I don't see her in the auditorium.

Thank God for small mercies.

“Grace?”

“I have some things on my mind, that's all.” I slide the strap of my bag over my shoulder, and together we walk out of the classroom. “What are you up to now?”

“I'm meeting with some people from my anatomy class in one of the back rooms in the library.”

“What for?”

“A study group. Our professor loves to do these unexpected pop quizzes to recap all we've gone over, so we meet every time before a class and quiz each other in case there's one.”

“Smart move. Keeps you on your toes and forces you to study continuously.”

“I'm not against it per se, just not when I stayed up until four AM since there was a party on our floor, and I can barely keep my eyes open as it is.”

“Oh, yeah?” I push open the door, inhaling deeply as we head out in the sunny afternoon. “Who threw it?”

His grin widens. “We did.”

“Thanks for the invite,” I roll my eyes.

“Hey, I should be the one offended. I texted you but never heard back! You could have at least told me you’re busy or something.”

Maybe I would have if I wasn’t stuck in bed, mentally and physically exhausted from playing nice and keeping my shields up while I was with my friends, so I wouldn’t worry them. Checking my phone was the least of my worries.

I shake my head. *Don’t think about it.*

“You know I forget my phone more often than not.” That was true, at least. “How about we grab a coffee before heading to the library? My treat?”

Marcus checks the time. “What the hell. Let’s go.”

TRENT

My footsteps echo against the floor as I walk toward the main desk. An older woman, with a gray bob and glasses perched on top of her nose, sits behind it, shuffling through the stack of books. I move close to the table and ask quietly: “Hey, do you know where I can find books on Roman history?”

She looks at me—more like *glares*, really—and points her boney finger at one of the rows behind me. “That row over there,” she says in a barely audible voice, so quiet I have to stare at her mouth to try and decipher what she’s saying.

I turn around, scanning the rows of shelves, and sure enough, each one is labeled with a sign hanging in between the shelves.

“Thank you.”

The librarian huffs at me and goes back to whatever she’s doing.

The room is quiet as I walk between the tables toward the history section. I look over the shelves, searching for the books I need. I’m just about to go in search of a desk to work for a while when a glimmer of red on my right catches my attention.

Slowly, I turn around and scan the space, not even sure what I’m looking for until my eyes land on her—the redhead sitting by the window.

A book and laptop are in front of her, her eyes skimming the page as her fingers work the keyboard. There’s nothing unusual about her, except...

Goosebumps rise on my skin as the recognition sets in.

It’s the girl from the other day.

The one from the coffee shop.

The sunshine coming through the window makes her hair appear more vibrant, different shades of reds and browns

playing in her curled strands. One lock falls on her face. She huffs, as if irritated, and slips it back in place, only for it to unsuccessfully cascade back down after a few moments.

I move toward her as if pulled by an invisible force.

I'm not sure what it's about her—was it the way she reacted when she saw me or just the way Ashley treated her—but I couldn't get her out of my mind.

“Hey,” I say softly, stopping by her table.

Fuck, I don't even know her name.

She looks up, her wide green eyes staring at me like a deer caught in headlights. They're dark, dark green, the color of emeralds, surrounded by thick, long eyelashes. I place my hands on the back of the chair. “Is this seat taken?”

“I-I...” she stutters, clearly surprised to see me. Instead of finishing, she sinks her teeth into her lower lip and just shakes her head no. So, I pull out a chair and sit opposite her.

She lowers her gaze to her book, her short hair falling down and shielding her face from the world.

I narrow my eyes on her. The whole situation feels somehow familiar, which is strange since I've never seen her until recently. My heart tightens, and a sharp pain pierces my temples.

I shift in my seat, not knowing what to say. She seems skittish, like anything I say or do might send her running in the other direction, and I don't want that.

What's her deal? Is she embarrassed for confusing me with somebody else? Worried she'll make Ash mad? Or just plainly shy?

She was an enigma, and I didn't know what to think about it. What to think about her?

I shouldn't be thinking about her at all, but I couldn't get her out of my mind since last Friday. I might have passed by the café a few times in hopes of catching a glimpse of her so I could apologize, but I haven't seen her.

“I’m sorry about the other day,” I say, hoping it helps her relax.

My fingers itch to move forward. To touch her hand? Brush that strand of hair behind her ear? The hell if I know. Just *something*.

I don’t get it. This need to talk to her and make her feel at ease, but there’s no other way to explain it.

“That’s okay.”

Her voice is so soft I have to lean closer to hear her.

“My girlfriend can be too much sometimes. She’s one of those people who reacts first and worries about consequences later, but I’m sorry if she upset you.”

That was putting it mildly. Ashley’s used to getting her way. And in the last year or so, she’s become really jealous and possessive. What I never figured out is why.

I never looked at other girls, never gave her a reason to doubt me. There was never another girl for me before her. We’d been friends before we started dating, and everything just fell in line naturally for us. But lately, her constant doubts were driving me crazy. I had hoped coming to Blairwood, new surroundings and people would help, but it’s like she’s become even more insecure.

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not.”

She looks up, clearly surprised by my stern voice. She lets her lip pop. “No, it’s not,” she agrees.

The corner of her mouth lifts a notch as I watch her, and it’s like the air has been kicked out of my lungs.

What is it about this girl?

I mean, I’m not blind. She’s pretty in that natural girl-next-door type, but it’s not just that. It’s the mix of sweetness and sorrow that’s playing on her face. Like she’s older than her years. Like she might have seen more than her fair share of

ugliness in this world, and somehow, she found her way through it.

“I’m Trent, by the way.”

I offer her my hand across the table. She watches it for a split second as if she expects it to bite her but finally places her hand in mine. It’s small, her fingers lean and delicate, but they grip mine with surprising firmness. An unexpected jolt goes through my hand at the press of her soft skin against mine.

Her green eyes widen as if she too can feel this... whatever it is that’s going on between us. But almost as quickly as it appears, the surprise is gone, and the sadness is back in her gaze. It’s palpable, like a wall surrounding her.

“Grace,” she whispers.

“Grace,” I repeat, tasting the name on my lips.

It suits her. Simple, yet elegant, just like the girl sitting in front of me. There’s a quiet intensity to it, a deeper strength.

What’s your story, Grace?

Grace abruptly pulls her hand out of mine, her eyes going anywhere but at me. Finally, she lifts her book a little in the air. “I should probably finish this.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” I rub the back of my neck. Unsure of how to proceed. Is this a brushoff? I don’t remember ever getting one. Then again, I’ve been with Ash... Well, for as long as I can remember. “Is it okay if I stay here?” I don’t feel like leaving, but the last thing I want to do is make her uncomfortable. Grace watches me for a long while, not saying anything. I shift in my chair. “Or if you want I can—”

“No, that’s okay. Stay.”

I observe Grace for a moment, trying to figure out if she’s just being polite or not, but since her attention is back on her laptop, there’s no way to know that.

“Okay.”

I pull my laptop out of my backpack and get to work on my Roman history paper.

Choosing the right college has been a nightmare. Although my parents insisted I go to law school, I just couldn't see it. I couldn't envision myself working crazy hours stuck in an office with a tie wrapped around my neck. So, against all their protests, I've decided to take a mix of different courses throughout the semester in hopes I find the right path—my path.

I'm not sure how long we've been working in silence. The only sounds surrounding us are fingers clicking against the keyboards, turning pages, and an occasional cough.

Rubbing the ache behind my temples, I reread the last typed paragraph and click Save.

Grace's phone lights up. She gives it a quick glance before locking it once again. Closing the book, she lets out a sigh. When she looks up, her gaze meets mine.

“Done?”

“Not really, but my friend is done with her class, so she asked me to meet her in the cafeteria for dinner.”

My eyes dart toward the clock at the bottom of my screen. “Dammit, I hadn't even realized what time it was.”

If I'm late...

Together we gather our things and get out of the library. If Grace finds it strange, she doesn't comment on it.

“Where are you running off to, anyway?”

“Practice.”

“Oh?” Grace gives me a side glance. “What sport are you playing?”

“Basketball.”

CHAPTER SIX

GRACE

Basketball.

That one word repeats in my mind over and over again. There is a small, almost boyish smile on Trent's mouth with just a hint of a dimple as he says it. As if he loves the sport so much, even just thinking about it makes him happy.

Just like Mason did.

My mouth turns dry, and my heart leaps into overdrive. The furious *thump-thump-thump* is echoing in my eardrums. It reminds me of that one game. The clock was ticking down, and Mason got hold of the ball. The score was tied, so he started to dribble the ball toward his opponent's goal, completely unstoppable.

Only in this case, my heart is the ball, and each time it pounds against the ground, it's more battered and bruised than before.

Thump-thump-thump.

More memories of the past come rushing back. Mason playing with his friends. Those dimples, flashing on his face as he scores. The easy way he'd maneuver the orange ball, as it was an extension of his fingers. Countless times I'd sneak into the gym just to catch a glimpse of him playing.

How is it possible?

Trent turns to me. His smile falls, his expression turning serious. "Grace?"

I take a step back, only I miss the edge of the pavement and lose my balance. Trent curses and grabs my arm, steadying me before I can make an even bigger idiot out of myself.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his breath slightly rugged.

I look away, feeling the color creep up my cheeks. "Y-yeah."

Not in the slightest, but there is no way I can say it out loud.

“You sure?”

I tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear. “Yup, just clumsy.”

“Okay.” From the corner of my eye, I can see him rub the nape of his neck. “I didn’t realize basketball was so scary,” he jokes, a nervous chuckle following the statement.

“It’s not. I just...” How does one explain this? How do I explain that everything about him reminds me of the person who was gone for years? The person who looks exactly like him? And every time I see him, every time we talk, it’s like another stab to my heart? I can’t, not without looking like a crazy person. “I remembered something. That’s all.”

“Oh...”

Great, I guess there is no escaping Trent seeing me as a complete weirdo.

But why does it matter, anyway? I should turn around and get away from here. Get away from him—Trent or Mason or whatever his name might be—because if I don’t, the only thing awaiting me is more hurt, more heartache.

I was supposed to move on.

A few days ago, that was the plan. I was ready. But how do I move on now? Knowing that he’s here, mere feet from me? Knowing that I could see him every time I turned around?

And why does it feel like I’m taking a step back to that heartbroken sixteen-year-old girl all over again?

“Hey, did you end up finding him?” Trent’s sudden question snaps me out of my thoughts.

“Huh?” I blink, focusing on him.

“The guy you’ve been looking for?” A frown appears between his brows as if he’s trying to remember something. “Did you find him?”

The guy you’ve been looking for.

I watch him for a moment, trying to read him. Trying to see if he's messing with me or if he really doesn't remember. But just like on Friday, there's nothing. No recognition. Not even a twitch. Nothing. He looks genuinely confused and a bit curious, too.

If he really is Mason, or pretended to be back then, why would he ask about himself if he wants to forget it ever happened?

"No," I shake my head. "I haven't found him."

"What was his name again? Mike? Mark?"

"M-Mason," I say quickly. My voice is low, words barely audible. The goosebumps appear on my skin. I wrap my arms around myself and rub against the pebbled flesh. "His name is Mason."

Trent lifts his hand and rubs his fingers over the side of his head; his brows pulled together. "Does he go here?"

Tell him, a little voice inside my head urges. See how he reacts.

But tell him what, exactly? That he reminds me of somebody I used to know? Somebody who was a part of my life for a split second before he was gone, and I never saw him again?

"I don't think so." I try to force out a smile, but it's useless. "He's just somebody I used to know."

Eight words.

All that Mason was to me, reduced to just eight words.

A wave of sadness washes over me. There's a layer of finality to it. As if by saying those words out loud, I've put him in the past. But how is that possible if I'm standing in front of somebody who looks *exactly* like the boy I loved?

I always thought that if I ever saw Mason again, I'd get answers to what happened two years ago. But how do you get an answer from somebody who doesn't know you?

Trent opens his mouth as if to say something.

“Grace!” I turn around at the sound of my name and see my friends coming closer. Jade jogs ahead of Yasmin and Callie. She looks at Trent and then at me. “Where have you been? I tried calling you, but when you didn’t answer, we figured we would just meet you halfway.”

“Sorry, I guess I still have it on silent,” I say absentmindedly, my eyes going over her shoulder to the only person besides me who knew Mason—Yasmin.

She and Callie are just a few feet behind Jade. I watch as the color drains from Yasmin’s face with every step closer she takes to us. Her eyes are as big as saucers, lips slightly parted as she just stares at Trent, unblinking.

Her throat bobs as she swallows, and I’m pretty sure I can hear her mutter some profanities in Spanish. Usually, she keeps it in check until somebody pisses her off or something throws her off her game.

Trent shifts and rubs the back of his neck, clearly uncomfortable. “Hey,” he says to nobody in particular.

“Yas?” Callie elbows her in the side. “You’re staring,” she whispers through clenched teeth.

That’s enough to snap Yasmin out of it. She turns to me and opens her mouth, but no words come out. They don’t have to; the question is clearly written on her face.

How is this possible?

I close my eyes and let out a sigh of relief. I knew Yasmin didn’t completely believe me when I told her Trent looked exactly like Mason. Hell, I don’t think a part of me believed it, myself, either. But she sees it too. It’s not just me.

Tears prickle my eyes, but I push them back.

Get a grip, Grace.

I swallow the lump in my throat and open my eyes. Yas is still staring at Mason as if she’s seeing a ghost. Callie looks completely confused, and Jade... Jade wraps her arm around me, her eyes narrowing slightly at the man standing by my side, the dots slowly falling into place.

I showed her that one photo of Mason and me I had on my phone. But it's an old one. We're standing behind those cardboard characters at night, and we were drunk when I did it. I'm not surprised she didn't recognize him.

Trent's gaze meets mine. "She knows that friend of yours?"

"I..."

"Yo, Trent!"

We all turn around. A few guys who can only be from the basketball team are standing on the other side of the street.

One of them tips his head to the side. "You coming or what?"

"Coming!" Trent yells over his shoulder and starts to walk backward, his eyes taking me in as he goes. The corner of his mouth lifts, one dimple popping in his cheek. "I guess I'll see you later, Legs."

With that, he turns on the balls of his feet and joins his friends, not realizing the utter destruction he's leaving behind.

I'll see you later, Legs.

My knees wobble, and if it weren't for Jade holding onto me, I'd have fallen on the ground right then and there.

A sob comes out of me just as Yasmin and Callie move closer. They stand in front of me, a barrier between myself and the guy who just shattered my world with one sentence.

One word.

"Shhh, it's going to be okay," Yasmin says, gripping my other arm and pulling me in for a hug.

How can it be okay?

In some twisted way, the past is repeating itself, only harsher and uglier than it was before.

More tears start to fall. Heavy, ugly tears that leave wet trails down my cheeks. I bury my head in my friend's neck. My whole body is shaking as I cry.

“Can somebody tell me what the hell is going on?” Callie asks.

A hand brushes the strand of my hair away from my face. “That was Mason, wasn’t it?” Jade asks, her voice gentle yet firm.

I bite into my lower lip and just nod. Through my blurry eyes, I can see a group of people walking by, their gazes directed at us.

Great, just what I need; an audience to watch me fall apart.

“I c-can’t be h-here.” I brush my hands over my face furiously, wiping away the tears. “I have to go.”

I have to get out of here. Back to my dorm where I can close myself between my four walls, away from everybody and everything. Where I can let the broken pieces of my walls fall on the ground and just cry.

I try to push my friends away, but Yasmin doesn’t budge. Her hands slide to my shoulders, and she grips me firmly. “We’ll get you out of here. Just calm down.”

“Now.”

I need to go now.

“Okay,” Yasmin cups my cheeks and tilts my head back. Her thumbs swipe over my cheeks. “C’mon, let’s get you home.”

Home.

I wish I could do just that. Go back to my brother’s house—safe and familiar—so I can curl in my bed and cry.

Yasmin wraps her arm around me and starts leading me in the opposite direction. Back to the dorms. It’s not home, but it’s better than being out in the open like this, where I can feel people gawk at me.

Jade and Callie whisper something as they walk behind us, probably something about me, about him. I bow my head, letting my hair fall like a curtain around my face, blocking it all out.

Yasmin smooths her hand over my back. “Just a bit longer. We’re almost there.”

I nod, letting her lead me away.

Trent’s dimpled smile appears in front of my eyes.

I’ll see you later, Legs.

But then it’s not Trent any longer. No, his face morphs into another—younger, more open, but equally handsome.

I’ll see you later, Legs.

I close my eyes and press my lips together, feeling the walls around me crumble.

I’m not sure how long it takes for us to get to the dorm. It can’t be more than a few minutes, although it feels like a lifetime.

Finally, the door is unlocked, and we’re in our suite. I try to go to my room, but Yas is having none of it.

She stands in my way. “Was that really *him*?”

Too much. All of it is just too much.

I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

I wish I did. I wish this were simpler. I wish I could just ask. But how?

“He looks exactly like Mason. Or how I’d imagine him to look like when he became older.”

“But his friend called him Trent.” I turn around the room, feeling lost for a moment. In the end, I let my legs give out on me. I fall back on the couch and pull my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around them. “And he answered. He answered immediately.”

I let my words sink in—both for her sake and mine.

“He did, didn’t he?” There’s sadness and pity in Yasmin’s eyes. I look away. I can’t take looking at it.

The door opens once again, and Callie and Jade come inside. My best friend gives me a look before disappearing into her room.

“Can somebody explain what the hell is going on?” Callie asks as she sits down on the other couch.

“I...” I croak, but no words come out.

A bottle appears in my vision. Slowly, I wrap my fingers around it and take a long swig straight from the bottle. The alcohol burns as it slides down my throat and makes my eyes water, but even that doesn't stop me. I drink for as long as I can until the burn is so intense, I choke and start coughing.

Yas puts her hand over mine, taking the tequila from my hand. “Damn, slow down, will ya?”

“Deep breaths.” Somebody pats my back. Jade. I press my hands over my heaving chest, struggling to get my breathing under control. It takes me a good two minutes for my coughing to stop and to start breathing somewhat normally again.

“I just want to forget,” I rasp, my throat tender.

“It's one thing to want to forget, quite another to choke to death while doing so.”

Jade grabs the bottle from Yasmin. “Nobody is dying,” she bites out. Her fingers are gripping the bottle so tightly her knuckles have turned white.

I cover her hand with mine. “I'm sorry.”

“It's fine. You, on the other hand...”

But it's not fine. Not really.

Jade lost her mom to cancer earlier this year. The last thing she needs to listen to is about another person she cares about dying.

“I almost didn't recognize him.”

“You've never seen him in real life.”

“It took me a while, and I've seen him on numerous occasions.” Yas takes a pull from the bottle. I guess we've forgone the glasses altogether. “He's older, sure, but the lines of his face...”

“Him as in that guy you were with?” This comes from Callie.

“Sorry, Cals. It’s just...” I inhale deeply and hold my breath for a few seconds. “Talking about it... about *him*. It’s hard. Trent...” I look away, hoping that if I don’t meet anybody’s gaze, don’t see the expectation in their eyes, I’d be able to get the words out. “He reminds me of a guy I used to know.”

“Oh, that makes sense. It must be hard seeing him after all this time. Seeing Hayden here last year messed with my mind.”

“That’s not the same.” I shake my head. “We...” I nibble at the inside of my cheek. I haven’t talked about this in so long it almost feels foreign. Shouldn’t the pain lessen by now? Why does it hurt as much as it did after he vanished? “We went out on a date, and then he just... disappeared.”

A frown appears on Callie’s face. “What do you mean, disappeared?”

“He never showed up again at the community center. Never answered any of my calls or messages. He just... disappeared.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah.” *Damn.*

Jade sits on the armrest next to me and wraps her arm around me, pulling me in for a hug.

“What did he say when he saw you?”

I lean my head against Jade’s shoulder; my eyes fixed on Callie. “He didn’t say anything.”

“What?”

I extend my hand, and Callie gives me the bottle back. “He doesn’t know who I am.”

With that, I tip the bottle and take a drink, smaller this time.

Callie looks down at her own cup. “You’re right. You win in the weird department.”

Jade places her hand on my knee, giving it a supporting squeeze. “What are you going to do?”

“What can I do? You saw it yourself. He doesn’t know who I am. Besides, he has a girlfriend.”

Yasmin’s eyes narrow dangerously. “Do you think Mason lied to you?”

“I don’t know what to think anymore.” I shrug. “It’s all just too much.”

“Maybe...”

“No,” I shake my head decisively. “I don’t want to talk about it any longer.”

I need to think about something else, if only for a moment, or I might actually go crazy. *I’m done with this.*

My phone buzzes, and I pull it out. Sienna’s face flashes on my screen.

I stop and just stare at it for a moment, my stomach twisting.

I can’t do this.

I can’t talk to her right now because if I do, she’ll know that something’s wrong.

“You’re not going to answer that?” Yasmin asks.

I shake my head no. “I can’t. She’ll know something’s wrong, and I...”

Nope, no way.

I’m not going to put my family through this again.

“You’ll have to tell them eventually. You know that, right?” Yas says gently.

The call ends, and that pit in my stomach grows larger.

“Eventually. Just not now.” I take another pull from the bottle and frown at the bitter taste. I extend my hand. “Who’s

next?”

The girls exchange a silent look, which I don't miss. In the end, it's Jade who takes the bottle from my hand and drinks.

“Are any of you going to *Bright Haven* this weekend?” I ask, changing the subject.

Dancing. That's exactly what I need—my escape.

CHAPTER SEVEN

GRACE

“I’m never drinking again,” I mutter, rubbing my forehead.

My stomach clenches uncomfortably when somebody passes by our table with something that smells like eggs.

God, why did I let Jade convince me to come here?

It was a testament to my will that I hadn’t puked as soon as we entered the cafeteria, and all the different smells assaulted me at once.

“You need to *eat*.” Jade pushes a tray with a burger and some fries toward me. “Greasy food will help with your hangover.”

I glare at the plate. I’m not sure why. It’s not like it’s going to run away. “Why does it feel like I’m going to puke?”

“Maybe next time you shouldn’t drink the whole bottle of tequila by yourself.”

“You were there helping me.”

“Girl, between the three of us, we *maybe* drunk half. The rest was all you.”

“Ugh.” I hate it when she’s right.

“Did it at least help?”

My stomach rolls. That would be a definite no.

I shake my head. “He called me *Legs*, Jade.”

Even when I was sleeping, I couldn’t push it out of my mind. I had nightmares. Mason and Trent were haunting my dreams, and when I woke up, I was drenched in sweat.

Jade observes me quietly from across the table, licking the chocolate pudding off the spoon. “Well, you do have long legs.”

Jade lets the spoon fall back into the empty plastic cup and takes a fry off my plate.

“That’s beside the point. It was Mason’s nickname for me. He called me that.”

Nobody before, and definitely nobody after him. Yesterday when it happened, I just froze. It’s like the more I was around him, the more I was sucked back into the past.

I’ll see you later, Legs.

Jade places her hand over mine, snapping me back to the present. “Hey, are you okay?”

I stifle a yawn and rub my hand over my face. *God, I needed to sleep.* “Yeah, I just didn’t sleep well.”

“That was too much, al...” Jade squints at something over my shoulder. “Hey, is that Zane?”

I turn around, and sure enough, Zane and another guy, one of his hockey buddies probably, are walking toward us, trays in hands, their heads bowed down as they discuss something.

“Hey, Zane!”

His head snaps up at the sound of his name. He looks at us, his eyes scanning the table as if he’s looking for somebody. He gives his head a small shake when he realizes it’s just the two of us. “Hey, what’s up, guys?”

“Lunch break.” Jade looks pointedly at their trays. “Wanna join us?”

“Hell, yeah, this place is packed,” Zane’s friend says, already taking a seat next to Jade.

“Seriously, Spencer?”

“What? You wanna go and look for another table?”

Zane takes in the crowded cafeteria and mutters something under his breath before sliding next to me.

I shove the food this way and that before stabbing my fork in a fry. “So, what have you guys been up to?”

“Just finished with the gym.” Spencer looks at Jade and then me. “Hey, aren’t you Rei’s friends?”

“You know Rei?”

Spencer smirks, which makes matching dimples pop in his cheeks. He's cute, easygoing, and almost boyish. His brown hair is messy in that disheveled way only guys can pull off to look sexy versus having a bird's nest on your head. His blue eyes have a few yellowish speckles in them that seem to twinkle in amusement as he glances at Zane.

"Yeah, I know Rei. We met her at the rink, right, Zane?"

Zane, on the other hand, doesn't seem the slightest bit amused.

"Right," he grits through clenched teeth, glaring at his friend.

Jade raises her brow. "Was that before or after you ran in front of her car?"

"Of course, she'd tell it like that," Zane grumbles. "She ran me over, not the other way around."

Jade shrugs. "I guess it depends on who you're asking."

Spencer throws a piece of meat into his mouth and looks around as he chews. "Where's she, anyway?"

I take a fry off my plate and dip it into ketchup. "Probably practicing. She's been at the rink most of the time."

"So," Spencer points his fork at us. "How do you guys know Rei?"

"We're her roommates."

"All three of you huddled in one room?" Spencer lifts his brows. "Damn, I miss the days when I was in the dorm."

"No, you don't," Zane says. "Nobody misses those small beds, thin walls, and the complete lack of privacy."

"It's technically a suite," I point out. We lucked out in that regard. At least we didn't have to share the common bathroom like some of the girls on the lower floors. Then again, I've spent the first twelve years of my life in a place way worse than a dorm, so what did I know?

Spencer looks at us and wiggles his brows. "Do you guys have pillow fights?"

“What?” Jade and I exchange a look.

“Is that seriously what you guys think girls do when they’re sharing a room?”

“Why not?” Spencer shrugs. “It’s fun.”

Jade rolls her eyes, but even that doesn’t wipe the smile off Spencer’s face. “Only if it’s a Hollywood movie we’re talking about.”

Spencer watches her for a moment before pointing his fork at her. “You must be Cole’s little sister.”

Jade places her elbows on the table and twines her fingers. “And what if I am?”

Spencer’s grin widens. “Almost as deadly as your brother’s spiral.”

The corner of Jade’s lips tugs up in a half-smile. “That, I’ll take as a compliment.”

They just stare at one another, smiles on their faces. Jade’s so sure of herself, so comfortable in her skin. It’s not the first time I’ve noticed it either. I’d seen that side of her in New York this summer, too. I envied her a little bit since I’m always so awkward around guys.

There’s a low *thump* under the table.

“*Ouch*,” Spencer grimaces and turns to his friend. “What the fuck was that for, West?”

“Stop flirting with Nixon’s sister, or you’ll end up with that spiral thrown at your head. We can’t afford for you to get a concussion just because you pissed somebody off.”

Jade flicks her hair behind her shoulder and rolls her eyes. “Nixon isn’t my handler.”

“Keep telling yourself that. I think Nixon warned everybody on the team—”

“More like anybody who entered his house,” Spencer interrupts, his attention back to his food.

“To stay away from his little sister,” Zane finishes, still glaring at Spencer.

There’s a beat of silence. Jade goes still as the words sink in, and then...

“He did what?” Jade’s expression darkens with every word until she’s full-on scowling. I even think I can see fumes coming out of her ears. “I’m going to kill him.”

She grabs her bag and pushes away from the table. Her body is rigid, her fingers clenched into fists so tight her knuckles are white.

I look over my shoulder. “Where are you going?”

She doesn’t mean now, does she?

“To murder my brother.”

I guess she does.

“Well, call if you need help hiding the body!” I call out after her before turning toward Zane. “Now you went and done it.”

“It’s payback for the other day.”

I don’t even bother asking what happened the other day.

Zane pulls out his phone and frowns at the screen. “Duty’s calling.”

“What?” Spencer’s head snaps up from his plate. “Didn’t you say you’d go and study with me?”

“Can’t. Keith just texted. He has a job for me.” Zane throws the last of his lunch into his mouth.

“What happened to bro’s first?”

“Sorry, but I really can’t blow this off. Not after asking him to call me if he has an opening. Find a damn tutor, Spence.”

“I could pay you to tutor me. That would actually be perfect.”

“For who exactly?” Zane stands up. “Go to the tutoring center and find somebody to take pity on your sorry ass. But it

either has to be some dude or some old chick who'll be able to keep you in line."

"Fuck you, West."

He shows him the middle finger and grabs his backpack off the floor. "Later, Grace."

I murmur a goodbye, my eyes darting toward Spencer, who's still glaring at Zane's retreating back.

And then there were two.

As if he can read my mind, Spencer looks at me.

"I guess it's just you and me, Red." Spencer sighs, leaning back in his chair.

"Red?" Talk about a cliché. "Do you even know my name?"

"Should I?" His eyes narrow at me as if he's trying to place me. "I don't think we met?"

"Actually, we did." I start packing my things. "Not officially, but you're in my statistics class."

"Am I? Huh..." He tilts his head to the side as if appraising me. "Oh, you're always sitting with that guy." Spencer snaps his fingers. "That's why I don't remember you."

"Does that make me suddenly invisible?"

"No, what it makes you is *unavailable*." I frown at his logic, but he just steals a fry from my plate and throws it in his mouth. "Which is basically the same."

"Oh-kay."

I'm not sure how one is connected to the other in his mind, but whatever.

"I like my girls without attachments."

"So what you're saying is that you're a playboy? Good to know."

"Touché."

“And for the record,” I grip my tray, pulling it out of his reach just as he tries to go for another fry, and stand up. “It’s Grace.”

Turning on the balls of my feet, I walk away.

“I’ll see you in our next class, Red!” Spencer calls after me.

The corner of my lips tips up, but I don’t bother turning around.

I discard the tray and am ready to head out when I feel prickles of awareness at the nape of my neck. I look up, my eyes scanning the space, looking over all the unfamiliar faces until they land on him.

Mason.

Trent.

And he’s with her.

For a moment, I just stand there, dumbfounded. It’s like my body is stuck, and I can’t blink. Can’t think. Can’t move.

The air is kicked out of my lungs, and I can feel my throat closing up.

Breathe, Grace.

A hand falls on my shoulder, startling me.

But it’s exactly what I need. I blink and look over my shoulder, where I find Spencer’s grinning face looking at me.

“My statistics class, you said?” he pants, which makes me realize he ran after me to catch up.

I clear my throat. “Y-yeah.”

“That’s perfect.”

“Is it?”

“It is.” If it’s possible, his grin widens even more. “You’ll be my tutor, Red.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

TRENT

My eyes stay locked on the door as it closes after the familiar redhead. People move around the room, but in my mind, I can still see her.

Grace.

I'm not sure how I managed to spot her during the rush hour at the cafeteria. It had to be her hair color; the vibrant shade of dark red makes her stand out easily, even in the crowds. When you think about it, there aren't that many redheads around campus. That has to be it—the reason why now that I know her, I can't stop seeing her around the campus.

Who was the guy she was with? I frown at the door. Did she find the Mason guy she was looking for?

I guess the guy looks like me from the back. Similar height. Similar build. Similar brown hair, although mine is a bit on the longer side.

“Trent?”

My head snaps up at the sound of my name. I give it a little shake, pushing Grace out of my mind. Briefly, I meet Matteo's eyes across the table and see him roll his eyes before turning my attention to Ashley, who's sitting by my side.

“Yeah?”

Her eyes dart toward the door and then back at me. “Who were you looking at?”

Her head is tilted to the side, those sharp blue eyes watching me intently.

I rub the back of my neck, feeling the tension in my muscles. “I just got lost in my thoughts for a while, sorry.”

Ashley is quiet for a moment, but then she nods. “Are you done?”

I look down at my half-eaten plate. My food got cold while I was staring at a certain redhead and tried to figure her out. “Yeah, sure. Wanna get out of here?”

She smiles at me. “I was waiting for you.”

Maybe if she actually ate more than some lettuce and carrot sticks... Without a word, I get up and pull out Ashley’s chair. She stands up, smoothing her dress.

“Leaving already?” Matteo asks, stopping whatever conversation he’s been having with some of our teammates.

“Not that it’s any of your business,” Ashley snaps before I can even open my mouth.

I don’t miss the silent look the guys’ exchange before suddenly finding more interesting things to concentrate on, clearly uncomfortable. Since we’re new, they aren’t used to Matteo and Ashley’s antics so far.

I give them both a warning glare. They seriously need to get their shit together. “Yeah, I have some studying to do before practice. See you guys later?”

They murmur their agreement, and I steer Ashley toward the door before she and Matteo can get into it again.

“Ugh, I hate that guy,” Ashley says as soon as we’re out on the street. “Why did we have to go to the same college as him?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and take a deep breath. It’s on the tip of my tongue to say it’s she who insisted on coming to Blairwood with us, but I keep my mouth shut. We just smoothed things over, and I’m not in the mood for another fight.

“I don’t get why you two can’t find some common ground.”

“Because he’s a jerk.”

“That’s because he knows he can rile you up.”

Ashley glares at me, her lips pressed in a tight line. “So it’s my fault?”

My fault. Your fault. Why does it always have to be somebody's fault?

I inhale slowly, trying to keep my cool.

“All I'm saying is that you two can't keep doing shit like that. We're not in high school any longer, Ash.”

“Well, the moment he stops, so will I,” she shrugs.

I shake my head and speed up.

So much for keeping my cool. Seriously, sometimes I just want to shake them both, although I know that won't solve any problems.

“Trent!” Ashley calls after me, her high heels clicking against the pavement as she tries to catch up to me. “Will you stop already?”

Sighing, I rub my hand over my face. I can feel the headache building, that slight throbbing behind my temples growing stronger. Seriously, I've had more headaches in the last week than I did in the last year.

Ash grabs my hand and turns me to face her. “Why are you angry with me?”

“I'm not angry. It's just...” Okay, maybe I am a little bit angry. “I want this to work. I want my girlfriend and best friend to get along. Is that too much to ask?”

“Fine, I'll try.” She loops her arm through mine and starts walking. “You done with your classes?”

“Yeah. I figured I'd go to the library—”

Ashley looks up at me through her eyelashes. “Or you could come to my place?”

“I really need to get this work done before practice.”

“Well, it's quiet at the dorm. My roommate has classes all day today. Besides, I have a paper to finish too.” She smiles softly at me and tugs at our linked hands. “It'll be like the good old days. What do you say?”

It's one of those big, blinding smiles that kicks the air out of my lungs. The smile that transforms her face and makes her blue eyes sparkle. One that I fell for when I was sixteen. I could never say no to that smile.

"Fine. Let's go."

"What do you think about hitting the mountains during winter break?" Ashley asks, breaking the silence that has fallen over us.

"Maybe?" I say absentmindedly, my attention on my laptop.

True to her words, Ashley's roommate was nowhere to be seen when we got to her dorm, and for a while, we were both working in peace. Until now.

While both Ashley and Matteo could study from wherever I always needed to be sitting at a desk if I wanted to get any work done. Not that either of them would appreciate the comparison, but half the time, I wonder if they don't like each other because subconsciously, they know they're more alike than either of them would ever admit out loud.

The bed squeaks as Ashley gets up; her bare feet cross the short distance from the bed to her desk. She stops behind me, her hands landing on my shoulders. "I talked to Vivi the other day, and she told me her parents are going to Europe for the holidays, so we'd have her family cottage all to ourselves."

Vivi is one of our friends from high school. Well, technically, Ashley's friend. Her dad is some kind of investor in the pharmaceutical industry, so her parents travel more than they're at home. And their family "cottage" easily fits twenty of us. I know because we'd celebrated the New Year our senior year of high school there.

"I don't know, Ash. It's like months away."

"It's already October, so definitely not *months* away."

“Still, there’s a lot of time.” I save the document before looking over my shoulder at her. “Didn’t you say you have a paper to finish too?”

I was so close to finishing this, and I wanted to do it before I had to go to practice.

Ash waves her hand. “I have enough time later.” She turns the chair I’m sitting on so that I’m facing her and straddles my lap. “I had something different in mind.”

Her teeth graze over her lower lip as those bright blue eyes stare at me with fire burning in their depths. Slowly, her hand slips to my nape, fingers sliding through my hair as she pulls me closer, our mouths meeting in a kiss.

I grip her hips and pull her closer, the move making her rub against my growing bulge. A soft moan comes out of her, and I use this moment to slide my tongue into her mouth. Her tongue meets mine in a familiar dance. Her fingers grip me tighter as she rocks on my lap.

“Ash,” I sigh, breaking the kiss. “We can’t.”

She purses her lips in an exaggerated pout. “Why not?”

I slide my thumb over her cheek, forcing my breathing to calm the fuck down. “Because I have to finish this paper before I go to practice. I told you that earlier.”

“Well, I figured you were joking. Can’t you do it after practice?” Ash nuzzles her face in the crook of my neck, peppering kisses down my jaw and neck. “This is way more fun. Besides,” her hand slips down my chest and between our bodies. “I can feel how much you want me.”

My dick twitches in agreement. It’s the one part of me that doesn’t care about the paper or practice, just to find some relief. There is a low hissing sound as she pulls down my zipper, her fingers sliding inside my pants and wrapping around my cock.

Damn. My head falls back, and I close my eyes. “That’s never the issue, and you know it.”

Her teeth graze over my neck, her hot breath making the goosebumps appear on my skin as her grip on me tightens.

She looks up at me, her big blue eyes watching me expectedly. "Then show me."

Fuck it.

I tighten my grip on her ass, and crush my mouth against hers, the paper long forgotten.

CHAPTER NINE

TRENT

“That’s a wrap for today. I’ll see you guys on Friday.”

“Damn, that was harsh,” Matteo mutters as we walk back to the locker room.

I lift my shirt and wipe my face. “Tell me about it.”

The practice had been brutal, but I guess it’s to be expected considering that we have about a month until the season starts.

The locker room is buzzing with activity. A few people are joking around, but most of them are just too beat to even move.

“What do you think is more important, shower or dinner?”

I give Matteo a side glance as I pull off my practice shirt and toss it away. “Both?”

“Well, I can’t have both if I want to make it to class on time.”

“What idiot picks classes at six in the evening?” Nate, one of our teammates, asks.

“I don’t like to get up early,” Matteo shrugs. “It was either eight in the morning or six in the afternoon.”

“Damn.” Nate shakes his head. “I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes, bro.”

I grab my things from the bag, including an energy bar, and toss it to him. “Shower. You stink. Nobody wants to spend over an hour sitting by your foul ass.”

Matteo looks down at the food and then at me. “Aw, you worried I won’t make any friends?”

“What I’m worried about is that somebody will strangle you before the class is done.”

With that, I duck in the shower, where I quickly wash off. The warm water feels great on my body after two hours of a grueling workout. My whole body aches, but it’s a good kind

of pain. I could already feel my muscles transforming under the strict regimen.

Five minutes later, I'm wrapping the towel around my waist and going back into the locker room, which is still full.

"I need two volunteers." Quinn looks around the room. "Who wants to go with me?"

"Go where?" I ask as I walk back to my locker.

Quinn gives me a once-over. "You've got class, Rookie?"

"I'm done for today."

I look around, waiting for somebody to explain to me what's going on, but nobody says anything.

"Good." Another turn around the room. "Anybody else?"

"I could go," Nate shrugs.

"Okay, grab your shit, and let's go."

I pull my shirt over my head. "Are you going to tell us where exactly we are going?"

Quinn grins. "That's for me to know and you to find out."

"What is this place?" I ask as we get out of the car.

Quinn, the smug asshole that he is, has kept his mouth shut during the twenty minutes it took us to get from campus to here. Whatever *here* might be.

The two-story building looks like any other building in the area. Kind of on the industrial side, but there is only one truck parked in front of it.

"You didn't bring me here to hit me over the head with a bat and bury me somewhere where nobody will find me?"

Just the thought of it has that familiar flicker of pain burning behind my eyelids.

Nate bursts into laughter. "Dramatic much, Rookie?"

“This is *Bright Haven*.” Quinn slaps me on the back. “C’mon, let’s go inside.”

Bright Haven?

I frown as I mull over the words. There is a nagging sensation at the back of my head as if it’s something that I’ve heard before but can’t remember where or when.

Nate looks over his shoulder. “You coming or what, Rookie?”

Both he and Quinn are already at the door, and I’ve been standing here by the car watching them like an idiot. I rub my hand over my face. “Coming.”

I hurry after them, taking two steps at a time. The door is open, loud laughter coming from inside. I step into the foyer and look around what seems like a reception area. A woman, probably in her late twenties or early thirties, stands behind the counter, smiling. She looks cute. Long dark hair pulled in a ponytail, her light brown face clean of all makeup.

She gives me a curious glance, one of her brows arching. “Fresh blood?”

“You know it.” Quinn winks at her. The woman just tsks and shakes her head. “Welcome to *Bright Haven*. My name is Vanessa, and I’m the manager of this community center.”

“Trent,” I step forward and offer her my hand for a quick shake. “It’s nice to meet you, Vanessa. It would be even nicer if I knew why we’re here.” I give a pointed glare at my teammates.

“Still playing games, Quinn? I’d have figured you’d have grown up by now.”

“Hey, he’s just a rookie. And I need to have my fun somewhere.”

“Boys.” Vanessa rolls her eyes at him affectionately before turning to me. “This is a community center. We offer different classes to underprivileged kids in the community. The players from the Blairwood’s basketball team have been coming over

the last few years occasionally to play ball with the kids and give them some pointers.”

“Really?”

I look at my teammates, who just shrug. This is the first time I’ve heard about it. If it’s something that the team does as a whole, shouldn’t somebody have said something by now?

“We usually go in smaller groups so as not to overwhelm the kids, and it’s always whoever has some extra time on their hands. Volunteering isn’t required, but we love to do it.” Quinn’s face turns serious. “It sucks to be that one kid who can’t do something just because they can’t pay for it for whatever reason.”

There’s a tightness to his face that wasn’t there before. Quinn is a jokester. I don’t really know him that well, but it feels as if he’s talking from experience.

“Yeah, I get that.”

But do I? It’s not a secret that my family has money. I could have done anything I wanted. I just had to ask for something, and it was mine.

As long as it wasn’t sports, a little voice reminds me.

Quinn asks, “You ready to go back?”

“Kids are already in the gym.”

“Thanks, Vanessa.” Quinn cracks his fingers. “C’mon. Let’s go play some ball.”

The basketball flies through the hoop with a gentle *swoosh*. I grab it and high-five Stacy. The little girl runs past me with a big, toothless grin on her face. She’s five or maybe six years old. For such a short, scrawny kid, she has a good arm on her.

“Good job, Stacy!”

“Thanks, Coach. Will you help me slam dunk now?” She looks at me with the two biggest doe eyes I’ve ever seen on a

human. She's been asking me the same question since we got here, and I'm surprised I haven't given in just yet.

Vanessa wasn't joking. Some thirty kids were in the gym that was at the back of the property, waiting patiently for our arrival. It was a mixed group of boys and girls anywhere from five-year-olds to seniors in high school. We divided them into three groups, so each kid could get our full attention.

I chuckle but shake my head. "Not just yet. We're still in the middle of practice."

She pouts exaggeratedly. "But once we're done, promise?"

Stacy lifts her pinky, a serious look on her face. I loop my little finger with hers, and we shake on it. "A promise is a promise."

Temporarily content, she runs to the back of the row, and I throw the ball to the next kid in line. For the next twenty minutes, we practice footwork and throwing three-pointers. Some kids have gotten pretty good at it, while others are still trying to find their footing. You have to admire their determination, though. And the look on their faces when they actually managed to score is one of pure joy.

Quinn blows the whistle, calling practice to an end, and Stacy comes rushing back.

"Can I do it now? Please?"

I laugh at her enthusiasm. "Fine, but then you've gotta help pick up all the balls afterward, got it?"

Her grin widens. "Got it."

"Okay." With a ball in my hand, I crouch down, so my back is to her. "Hop up."

She climbs on like a little monkey, her tiny hands wrapped around my neck and holding on for dear life as I slowly rise to my full height.

"Ready?" I tilt my head back and hand her the ball. Once my hands are empty, I wrap my fingers around her ankles to steady her.

“I think so.”

“Ever dunked a ball?” I walk us all the way to the basket.

“No, but I saw Brian do it.”

That gets my attention. I tilt my head back so I can see her face. “Who’s Brian?”

“My friend. The one in the red jersey?”

She points at a group of boys talking to Quinn and Nate. He’s probably eleven or twelve—a ball cap pulled over his head hiding brown curls.

A friend who’s almost double her age? Is that a thing?

“And where did you meet this Brian?”

If she finds my question weird, she doesn’t comment. “Here. He and my brother play basketball together. He’s the one in green.”

I nod my head, spotting the boy she’s talking about. “So he’s your brother’s friend?” That makes more sense.

“He’s my friend too!”

“Okay, okay,” I chuckle. “So, you dunkin’ or what?”

“I’m dunkin’. Bend down. You’re too tall.”

Chuckling, I do as I’m told. I can feel her shift her weight on my shoulders.

“Now jump.”

I push lightly off the court, and she dunks the basketball through the hoop, cheering loudly. I look back up to see a big smile on Stacy’s face, arms raised in the air. “I did it!”

“You did, and it was amazing.”

I help her hop down and give her a high-five.

“Another one?” she asks, batting her eyelashes at me.

“Yeah, I don’t think so. If I remember correctly, you have some balls to pick up.”

Stacy groans. “Fine.” She gives me a smile. “Thanks, Coach.”

“You’re welcome.”

I watch Stacy run off toward the two boys. She tells them something excitedly, waving her hands. Her brother ruffles her hair, which makes Stacy squeal and run in the other direction, tugging on the hand of the Brian boy.

“Lost your fan?” Nate wiggles his brows, a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Oh, fuck off. She just wanted to dunk the ball. What the hell was I supposed to do? I’d like to see you resist her.”

“That’s why I don’t take girls on my team.”

“Sexist much?”

“I just know what I can handle, and little girls ain’t it.”

“Whatever, dude.” I look around. “We done or what?”

While this was way more fun than I expected, I also had a French exam to prepare for.

“Probably a few more. Quinn likes to stay as long as there is somebody here.”

The place had cleared a little bit, but a few kids were still talking to Quinn.

I tilt my chin in their direction. “There a story?”

With Nate being a sophomore, he’s probably had a chance to get to know other guys on the team better by now.

Nate’s expression darkens, but he shakes his head before turning his focus on me. “Ain’t there always?”

Nodding, I shove my hands into my pockets. “I’m going to the bathroom. Be back in a few.”

“Sure thing.”

Nobody pays me any attention as I head out of the gym. The hallway is mostly quiet as I walk toward the front. I’m pretty sure I saw a sign for bathrooms somewhere on my way toward the gym.

I'm just about to turn the corner when a light chuckle behind partially closed doors makes me stop in my tracks.

“Fine, I'll show you.”

Why does that voice sound so fam—

I stop in my tracks as I catch a sight of the person in the room.

Grace.

A tingle of awareness tickles the back of my neck as her laughter rings in the space.

I take a step back, almost on autopilot, peaking through the little crack in the door. Grace walks out of my view, and a few seconds later, the music changes.

I suck in a breath, waiting.

And I'm not the only one.

A group of girls, all different ages, stand by the wall, their big eyes full of wonder and excitement following Grace.

My heart beats hard against my ribcage, fingers curling and uncurling nervously by my side.

What is she—

Grace dances into my view, quite literally. I hold my breath as I watch her dance. If I thought the way she moved was fluid before, it has nothing on it now. Every step she makes is flawless, completely in tune with the beat of the song.

The tips of her toes are barely grazing the floor as she moves across the room. Calling her Legs the other day came out of nowhere, but the nickname fits her well. She has long legs, and as she stands on the tip of her toes, they only seem longer.

Her hair is unbound, dark red strands flying around her face as she goes into a pirouette or whatever it's called. Her muscles tighten as she pulls her feet to her thigh, hands forming a circle in front of her body to help her resist the gravity and turn.

I try to count the number of turns she makes but stop after three. She's just too quick, the control she has over her body, over her muscles, complete.

Mesmerized, I simply watch her. I've never seen her dance before, didn't even know it was something she does.

What other secrets are you hiding, Legs?

Grace jumps in the air, her head falling back, and for a split second, I catch a glimpse of her profile. As usual, her face is bare. Her pale skin, a complete contrast to the brightness of her hair, is covered with a sheer layer of sweat.

An intense pressure builds behind my temples. I raise my hand to rub them just as an image flashes in my mind. Red. A smile. I pull my brows together, trying to put it in focus, but it's blurry. The pain turns sharper, making me sway on my feet.

Dammit. Not now.

I wasn't a stranger to migraines, but there is usually some kind of buildup. A warning it's coming. Not lately. These days they just come out of nowhere, kicking the air out of my lungs.

I close my eyes and force myself to breathe.

Staggering backward, I lean my back against the wall. In the back of my mind, I can hear the music die down, and then there's clapping.

Each clap feels like somebody is drilling a hole in the back of my head. I should probably...

Before the thought gets to form, the door opens, and girls start coming out. They give me curious and some even wary looks as they pass me by.

"I'll see you all..." Grace sucks in a breath as those emerald eyes fix on me. "Trent." She pulls her brows together. "Are you okay?"

"Hey, Legs." I try to smile, but it feels tight. "Just a headache."

A little girl tugs at Grace's hand. "Miss Grace, is he going to be okay?"

Grace holds my gaze for a moment longer before turning her attention to the girl. "Sure thing, Mary. I'll see you next week?"

"See you next week." With that, she hurries after her friends, leaving Grace and me alone.

Grace turns her attention back to me. "How bad is it, really?"

Ignoring her question, I look after the girls disappearing down the hallway. The pain has subsided, if only a little. "They seem like a fun bunch."

"They are. Now can you tell me how you are feeling?"

I turn around only to find her hands propped against her hips, that frown still in place.

"I'm fine, really. Probably a five out of ten." Grace sucks on her lower lip, biting into the soft flesh.

"You have them often? The headaches, I mean."

"Sometimes." I shrug. "I haven't in a while, so this one caught me off guard." I look around, eager to change the subject. The room behind her catches my attention, reminding me of what I found out before the headache took over. "Dancing?"

Grace glances over her shoulder as if just now realizing where we are. She tucks a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Yeah, I've been volunteering here for a few weeks now."

Seriously, this girl. Is there something she isn't doing?

"Anything else I should know about you?" I chuckle, and after a heartbeat, she joins me.

"Nope. I'm just plain ol' me."

My eyes roam her body. "There's nothing old or boring about you, Legs."

“W-well...” Grace looks around, and if I didn’t know better, I’d think she’s avoiding my gaze. “I guess I should go and clean up the space before leaving.”

“Right.”

Maybe she *is* trying to avoid me.

She turns to me, but her eyes don’t quite meet mine. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, really. Go and do your thing.”

“If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay. Just... be careful.”

I force a smile out. “Always.”

With another nod, Grace walks back into the room.

I let out a long breath. Seriously, what am I thinking? Just because I’ve seen the girl and talked to her a couple of times doesn’t mean that I know her? That she wants to know me?

Seriously, what the hell’s my problem?

Shaking my head, I push off the wall and walk down the hallway. I see the bathroom but choose instead to get out of here. I’ve been gone a while, and the guys have probably finished. I pull my phone out of my pocket.

Where are you, assholes? I type as I walk into the foyer and find it empty. No Vanessa or any of the kids.

Nate: Saw you with that redhead. She’s smokin’.

Me: That doesn’t explain where you are.

I push open the door and exit the building, but there’s only that truck that was there before we got there and a black SUV—no sign of Quinn’s Toyota.

What the hell?

Nate: We figured you wouldn’t want to be disturbed.

Me: What the hell, dude? You ditched me?

Nate: You're welcome.

I run my hand over my face, pushing my hair back. "You can't be fucking serious!"

I turn around, hoping it's all a prank, and my teammates will jump out at me, laughing their asses off, but there's no one.

"Fuck."

Just then, the door squeaks open.

"Are you fucking..." Abruptly, I turn around, only to come face to face with no one other than... "Grace."

CHAPTER TEN

GRACE

I stop in my tracks just before I crash into none other than Trent, who looks to be royally pissed. My hand flies to cover my rapidly beating heart as I stagger backward. “Sorry, I didn’t see you there.”

I can feel the insistent *thump-thump-thump* against my palm as I let out a shaky breath.

This seriously needs to stop happening.

How is a girl supposed to avoid the guy that keeps popping into her life no matter where she goes?

There’s no way, that’s how.

Trent pinches the bridge of his nose and lets out a long breath. “No, I’m sorry. I thought you were somebody else.”

If that’s not a slap in my face, I don’t know what is.

I tuck the strand of my hair behind my ear and look away—anything to avoid his gaze. The last thing I need is for him to realize the impact he has on me. How unnerved being around him makes me. “You waiting for somebody to pick you up?”

Bright Haven isn’t that far from campus, but it’s definitely not within walking distance.

Trent scowls down at his phone. “I was, but apparently, my teammates were in too big of a hurry to wait for me.”

My brows shoot up in surprise. “You were here with your teammates?”

I hadn’t thought earlier to ask him what he was doing here. Just seeing him in this place, I’ve started to think of as my sanctuary was too big of a shock, and then realizing he’s in pain took my mind off of it further. I guess it makes sense, though. I don’t know the extent of the community center’s activities, and I make a point never to go to the gym if I can help it. Not since...

“Yeah. Apparently, Coach likes to work with the kids, and the team occasionally comes too. Which I don’t mind, except they forgot to mention that the ticket was one way only.”

“That seems like a shitty thing to do.”

“Tell me about it.” He runs his fingers through his hair, pushing it away from his face. The strands fall down, giving him a messy and kind of disheveled look that makes him look even sexier.

Get a grip, girl!

I pull the strap of my duffle bag higher. “You going back to campus?” the words are out before I can stop them or change my mind.

My eyes close for a moment as the realization of what I just did sets in. I’m so going to regret this.

It’s just a ride. Chill.

Only there’s nothing *just* when it comes to Trent. Being next to him is messing with my mind, my *heart*, and the only thing that will come out of it is more heartache.

But I can’t leave him behind.

“You don’t have to...”

“I’m going there, anyway.” I shrug, trying to play it cool when I’m anything but. My palms are clammy, every nerve ending on alert. When he doesn’t say anything, I shift my weight from one foot to the other, uncomfortable. “Or you could call somebody else.”

Like his girlfriend.

“No, it’s fine. If you don’t mind, I’d appreciate the ride. I still have some studying to do.”

“Sure.” My fingers tighten around the keys in my hand, the metal digging into my skin. “C’mon.”

I unlock the door as I walk to the driver’s side and toss my duffle bag into the backseat. The whole time, one sentence repeats in my mind over and over again.

It's just a ride.

Just a ride.

Just a ride.

I chant those words, hoping to reassure myself everything will be okay. I can totally do this and not freak out in the process.

Maybe.

Hopefully.

“Nice ride,” Trent says as we slide into the leather seats of my Escalade.

“Thanks,” I pull on my seatbelt and start the car. “It’s too much, but my big brother is just a tad overprotective.”

“Your brother bought you an Escalade?” his brows rise, the surprise clear in his voice.

“It was my graduation present.” I wanted to strangle him when I found out. I mean, I had an idea that he’d buy me a car since I was going to college, and he’d been asking me questions months before the event. What I hadn’t expected was a brand-new car that cost over six figures. Just thinking about it makes me sweaty all over again. “Way over the top, if I may say so myself, but there’s no fighting J.D. when he gets something stuck in his head. I guess I should be lucky. I didn’t need a car before since we live in New York, and there’s no way I’ll drive there.”

Trent turns to me. “You’re from New York?”

I give him a quick glance before returning my attention to the road. “Born and raised,” I confirm slowly, my fingers tightening around the steering wheel. “Why?”

The hairs at the base of my neck rise as I wait for his answer.

“I’m from New York, too.”

Everything seems to stop as his words ring in the small confines of the SUV. It’s like all the air is sucked out of the space. My throat is dry, and suddenly, it’s hard to breathe.

I'm from New York, too.

I'm from New York, too.

I'm from...

“Grace?”

“W-where in the city?” The question comes out low, distant even to my own ears. My grip on the wheel tightens.

“Upper East Side.”

“Fancy.”

“It’s home,” he shrugs. “But yeah, I guess you’re right. My dad’s a lawyer; Mom comes from old money.”

I’m only half-listening to his explanation. What would a kid from the Upper East Side of all places do in a community center in Queens? It makes no sense at all. Then again, does anything relating to Mason, *Trent*, make sense?

“What about you?”

“Huh?”

“Where in the city do you live?”

“Oh, nothing fancy like that.”

He chuckles. “Says the girl who drives an Escalade.”

“Yeah, I guess there’s that. Bronxville, but I was born and raised in Queens.”

I might not like to talk about my mother, but I’ve never been ashamed to admit where I come from.

I give him a side glance, but once again, there’s nothing on his face. Not a flicker of recognition, nothing.

How is that possible?

I slow down the car as we enter the campus. The afternoon classes have just finished, and more people are mingling around.

I should just come out and ask him. I mean, how much more awkward can this situation get, really? Just say it out loud and see how he reacts when I openly ask him if he knows

me. Or even if he ever went to the community center back in New York. Anything.

“You can take a right here.”

On autopilot, I turn on the blinker and slowly do as he asked. The last thing I need is to run into somebody crossing the road without looking.

“That’s me.” Trent unbuckles his seatbelt as I pull up to the curb in front of his dorm. “Thanks for the ride. I really appreciate it.”

“No problem.”

I watch him open the door and slide outside.

Ask him, the little voice urges me. Ask him.

“I guess I’ll see...”

“Trent?” I ask abruptly, interrupting him mid-sentence.

“Yes?” He watches me expectedly, those golden dots shining in the brown irises.

“I...” I clear my throat. My clammy fingers wrap tighter around the smooth leather of the steering wheel. “Good luck with studying.”

God, I’m such a wuss.

“Thanks,” he smiles at me, those dimples of his popping in his cheeks. “I’ll see you later, Legs.”

That damn nickname rings in my ears.

I bite into my lower lip as I watch him walk into the dorm. Only when he’s behind the closed door do I let my head fall. With my forehead pressed against the steering wheel, I finally let a silent sob out.

“Where were you yesterday?” Marcus asks in lieu of a greeting as I walk closer, slightly winded. He has a class in the

building next door, so he's the one waiting for me to jog across the campus for our statistics class.

"Bright Haven."

He pushes off the wall, and together we enter the auditorium. The place is already buzzing with students waiting for our class to start. I sweep the space until my eyes land on a familiar pair of blue eyes.

Great, I almost forgot she's here too.

"Bright Haven?" Marcus's question snaps my attention back to our conversation.

"It's a community center on the outskirts of Blairwood. I go there once a week to teach kids ballet."

"You volunteer?" Marcus's brows shoot up. "How did I not know you volunteer? And dance?"

He gives me a once over as if he's seeing me for the very first time.

"It's just a hobby. I like doing it."

Bright Haven was my safe haven when I was growing up. Even later, after everything happened with Mason, I couldn't give it up. I knew what it meant not to have anybody to look after you. I knew what it meant to need to have a safe space to hide and just be—a place where you can do anything you want to do, and nobody will judge you.

My life might have turned for the better when I was twelve and J.D. came into my life, but I never forgot where I came from. I wanted to give back, be that safe place to other kids like me, that aren't as fortunate.

The community center might have been my safe place but volunteering, seeing the smiles on the kids' faces, seeing them succeed that's what saved me.

Marcus shakes his head as we take our seats. "I seriously don't know how you do it all."

"It's just a couple of hours every week," I shrug.

Besides, *Bright Haven* is Sienna and J.D.'s baby. After seeing how much the community center helped me, they decided they wanted to do all in their power to give that possibility to other kids coming from different backgrounds. It doesn't necessarily have to be *bad* backgrounds, just families struggling financially or single parents who have to work but don't have a reliable place to leave their children. They started discussing the project shortly after they got together and immersed themselves in it full time after retiring from their careers. In a way, it was a family business. I love being a part of it and giving back to the community that has given me so much in the past. That's why I decided to study marketing in the first place. One day, I hoped to help make this project bigger and more accessible to even more children.

"I'm hoping to start—"

"This is not what we agreed on, Red."

I slowly turn around and find Spencer sliding into the open seat next to me. He lets his backpack land on the floor by his side, his hand falling on the back of my chair, feet wide. He reminds me of Jade. Unlike me, they're both so completely at ease in their own skin.

"I don't remember us agreeing on anything."

He places his hand over his heart dramatically. "You wound me, Red."

I roll my eyes at him and unzip my backpack, pulling out my laptop and books.

"A friend?" Marcus asks, looking between the two of us.

"More like a flea."

Marcus's eyes grow wide, brows rising.

Spencer laughs. "I knew you had it in you."

Reluctantly, I turn toward him. I have a feeling I'm going to regret it, but still, I ask, "What?"

"The redheaded temper."

Of course, it's always the red hair. I guess some things never change, no matter how old you are. "Tell me, am I old, or am I ugly?"

"What?" A confused frown appears between Spencer's brows. Why am I not surprised?

"Because the last time I checked, I'm not a man."

Recognition flashes on his face. It's the same words Zane told him the other day when he said Spencer should get a tutor.

"You're convenient." He tugs at one of my curls. "And cute. I like cute."

"Then maybe you should get a dog."

"Too many obligations."

"You're an obligation," I point out. The last thing I want is to get stuck tutoring Spencer. Don't get me wrong. He's sweet—like an overeager puppy. And kind of funny. A little. But after the whole mess with Mason, or Trent, whatever the hell his name is, the last thing I need is to add more boy drama in my life.

"But I'm a cute obligation."

My head falls back, and I let out a sigh, rubbing my temples. I'm definitely not equipped to deal with this right now.

"Am I missing something?" Marcus asks, clearly confused.

"Red here is going to tutor me," Spencer explains, a big smile on his face.

Marcus looks at me. "A job too?"

"Oh, trust me, I haven't applied."

Just then, the professor comes into the room, saving me from continuing with this discussion and probably the beginnings of a migraine.

Spencer leans closer, his hot breath tickling the side of my face as he whispers: "Think of it like taking a pro-bono case."

I roll my eyes at him and forcefully open my book. Thankfully, our professor gets to business straight away, and there's no room for us to talk for the next forty-five minutes. I push all the other things out of my mind and concentrate on taking notes instead. I have goals to complete, and failing class my freshman year won't bring me any closer to them.

As soon as the class wraps up, we gather our things and exit the auditorium. Marcus disappears almost instantly, going straight for his study group, and leaves me alone with Spencer, who doesn't seem like he's going anywhere.

I give him a side glance. "Don't you have somewhere to be? A class? Gym? Something?"

"Nope," he grins widely. "Where are you off to, anyway?"

"Coffee," I mutter. I could feel the headache building, and I still had work to do before I could call it a day.

"I could use a coffee."

I don't even bother protesting since I know it won't be of any use.

Spencer doesn't try to chat while we make our way across the campus. It takes us ten minutes, and thankfully the line isn't long, so we place our order quickly. Today there's a guy I don't know working behind the bar. Yasmin told me she decided to take fewer shifts at Cup It Up so she doesn't overwhelm herself like she did last year, and she wanted to spend more time with her dad and boyfriend. Who could blame her?

I pull out my wallet, ready to pay for my order, but Spencer beats me to it.

"You don't have to buy me coffee to get into my good graces," I say as Spencer hands the money to the guy behind the counter and glares at me like I just offended him.

"I'm not buying it to get into your good graces."

"Good, because it's not happening."

Spencer just looks at me. He's standing so close, unblinking, and I can see little yellowish flecks covering the

bright blue of his irises. A light stubble covers his jaw, giving him somewhat of a rugged look.

I'm not blind. I see the looks girls give him every time he enters a room. He's handsome, I'll give him that, but he's also a player if I've ever seen one.

"What?" I ask, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

"Nothing. Just trying to figure you out."

I tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear. "Good luck with that."

I'm not even sure I have me figured out. I thought I did, but everything that has happened lately makes me question myself.

The guy calls our names and hands us our drinks. I thank him and grab my coffee before heading for the door. I pull my phone out of my pocket and open a thread with the girls, typing in a message. I barely type in one word before the phone is yanked out of my grasp.

"Gimme that," I protest, standing on the tips of my toes, but he holds it out of my reach. Not an easy feat since I'm five-foot-eight.

"When do we start?"

"Spencer."

"Red."

"Fine," I huff. "Tomorrow. But you better not be late."

He grins. "I'm never late."

He looks down at my phone, his fingers typing quickly over the screen.

"What the hell are you doing?"

A phone rings, but the sound dies as quickly as it started. Clearly satisfied, he hands me back my phone and pulls out his own. "Text me when and where. I'll see you tomorrow, Red."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TRENT

“Dude, this is some serious shit you got yourself into.” Matteo shakes his head, his eyes fixed on the paper in front of him.

“How the fuck was I supposed to know?” I rip the pop quiz out of his hand. The onslaught of red on the piece of paper is almost too much to look at.

“Can’t you drop the damn thing?”

“The dropping period is long gone. Want it or not, I’m stuck with French until the end of the semester.”

“How much does that shit take from your final grade?”

“Ten percent. The biggest chunk goes to midterm and oral exams, but at this point, I’ll never pass this thing.”

Seriously, how is this shit possible? I’ve barely been here a couple of months, and I’m already failing. This was not the kind of record I was hoping to make.

“If you don’t pass it, you won’t be able to play.”

“Thanks, dude,” I mutter dryly. “That’s really encouraging.”

As if I need a reminder. Now that I’ve finally made it on the team, and there’s a real chance I’ll get to play, I’m going to screw it all up because I chose the wrong subject?

“Can’t you get a tutor or something?”

I rub my fingers through my hair, pushing it away from my face.

“I guess I’ll go to the tutoring center and see if somebody can help me. At this rate, I’ll continue to butcher the language and get my ass kicked off the team even before I get to play.”

Not that there’s much guarantee I’d get any play time now as it is.

“You should have gone with something easier. Or a dead language. Fewer chances of you actually having to use it.”

A dead language? Yeah, right.

“I don’t think it works that way. But next time I try to do something new, please punch me in the face before I actually go through with it.”

Matteo slaps me on the shoulder. “That I can do.”

I ball the napkin and throw it at his ugly mug. “I didn’t even think otherwise.”

We’re laughing when Ashley slips into a seat next to mine. “Hey.” Her lips brush against the corner of my mouth. “What’s up?”

“Just appreciating how good of a friend I have, that’s all.”

“And with that, my job here’s done.” Matteo pushes to his feet and grabs his coffee cup. “Don’t be dumb and go to the tutoring center. I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah, yeah. Later, asshole.”

“Tutoring center?” Ashley asks as soon as Matteo is out of earshot. “What’s that about?”

I slide the pop quiz over the table and show it to her. Ash scans the paper before lifting her gaze to me. “But a tutor? Can’t you just study next time?”

“That’s the result after I’d been studying on my own,” I mutter, slightly irritated that she’d think I didn’t lift my finger.

“I don’t know, Trent. Maybe you should give it more time? Finding a tutor seems so harsh.”

Because it is. And no amount of waiting will change the fact that I, plain and simple, suck when it comes to French.

I open my mouth, but before I can say anything, my phone flashes with the incoming call; Mom’s face on the screen. I pick up the phone and answer the call. “Hey, Mom.”

“Trent!” she says, slightly out of breath. “How are you?”

“Good. I just stopped to grab some coffee after my class.”

“Hey, Mrs. Remington,” Ashley says loud enough so Mom can hear her.

“Is that Ashley with you?” mom asks.

“Sure is. Her class just finished.”

“Say hi to her.”

I roll my eyes. “Mom says hi,” I tell Ash. She smiles and points in the general direction of the counter that’s currently empty. I watch her walk to the counter and place her order. “What’s up over there?”

“Oh, same old, same old. Your dad’s busy with work. That’s actually why I’m calling. We’re in Boston for one conference or another. We were thinking of stopping by Blairwood, grab something to eat?”

“We could do that,” I say tentatively, going over my schedule. “Do you know when you’ll be coming?”

“Tomorrow evening. I’ll text you the details later.”

“Okay, sounds like a plan.”

“Good. How are classes?”

My gaze falls to the pop quiz, a scowl forming on my face. “Oh, you know. The usual. I was actually planning to go to the library right now to get some studying done.”

And while I’m at it, I might take Matteo’s advice and stop by the tutoring center. There is no way I’ll flunk this class or get kicked off the team because of it.

“I’ll leave you to your classes then. I’ve gotta run, anyway. I’ll see you tomorrow. Oh, and make sure to bring Ashley with you.”

I look up just as Ash slides back into her seat, a coffee cup in her hand. “I’ll check if she can make it.”

“Okay. I love you, Trent. See you soon.”

“Love you too, Mom. Say hi to Dad for me.”

With a goodbye, we hang up.

“How is she doing?” Ashley asks, taking a sip of her coffee.

“Good. They’re in Boston for work and want to stop by tomorrow to grab something to eat. Wanna come?”

Ashley beams. “You know I do. Where are we going?”

“Knowing my parents? Probably the fanciest restaurant in a fifty-mile radius.” I drink the rest of my coffee. “She’ll send me the details tomorrow.”

I grab my backpack and push to my feet.

“Okay. I was thinking we could... Where are you going?”

There’s a frown between Ashley’s brows as she looks at me.

“Library. I need to check with the tutoring center if they have somebody who can help me with French, and then I need to get some studying in.”

“You’re no fun,” Ash pouts. “I was hoping we’d hang out for a bit.”

“Tomorrow.” I lean down and press my mouth against hers. “I promise.”

Ash’s fingers curl around the hem of my shirt and pull me closer. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“Are you sure you can’t make it at that time?” The girl behind the counter looks at me and then back at her computer.

“Positive. I have practice then. No way I can miss it.”

Her eyebrows rise, and the look she gives me clearly tells me she thinks I’m a complete dumbass, and she can’t believe she has to deal with me. Maybe I am. After all, if I flunk my midterm, I can say goodbye to basketball for good. And it’ll be nobody’s fault but my own.

“Well, then...”

She starts typing once again, and I wait for her to do her thing, hoping she’ll find somebody who can help me.

“I’ll email the tutor, see if she can fit you in somewhere that would work better for you, but I’m making no promises. Her schedule is really packed.”

“Yeah, okay,” I sigh. So much for that. “Thanks for trying.”

She offers me a small smile. I turn on the balls of my feet and leave the room. A guy sitting in front of the office lifts his head as I pass by him.

The hallway is quiet, and I go straight for the door. I was hoping to get some studying done, but the walls feel like they’re closing in on me, and I’ll suffocate if I don’t get out and breathe in some fresh air.

Why did I think it’s a good idea to pick *French* out of all the classes? And how is it possible there is only one tutor available? Does everybody know the damn language so well?

I push the door open, letting the gust of cool air hit me in the face.

A shiver runs through me, but I welcome the cold.

So much for that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

GRACE

I'll see you later, Legs.

My fingers play with the leather strand of my bracelet. Trent's warm smile flashes in my mind, taunting me. But then, it changes to a teasing smile Mason gave me that day two years ago. The way his eyes lowered to my lips like he wanted to kiss me but didn't want to piss my brother off. The way his teeth scraped over his lower lip as he pulled back.

So many times over the years, I wished Mason would have kissed me that night in the car. Maybe then I'd have more memories with him than a few photos I can't bring myself to look at and a couple of kisses to remember him by.

The kisses that over the years have started to fade. These days, I had to try really hard to remember the exact tone of his voice, the way his lips tasted under mine. What a fickle thing the human brain can be. It takes the memories you'd give anything to keep but leaves all the pain behind.

But even faded, he was still the best kiss I've ever had. That part was undeniable. There was nobody who could make my tummy quiver, not before Mason, and certainly, not after.

The ache in my heart grows as the memories of the past and present mesh together.

Later, Legs.

Those were the last words Mason ever said to me.

I flip the little charm between my fingers, the metal cool against my skin. So many times, I thought about taking it off, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. It was too much, too soon.

Later, Legs.

Like he's just going home, and I'll get to see him soon after. Like we'll get a chance to try and see everything we could be.

Only that never happened.

I'm from New York, too.

The lump in my throat grows thicker as my conversation with Trent replays in my mind.

No matter how much I thought about it in the past twenty-four hours, I still couldn't wrap my mind around it. How is it possible that two people who look almost like twins have lived in the same city all this time? Were they even two people? Or is this some twisted way he's playing with me?

You should have asked him.

"Hey, are you okay?"

Startled by the question, I blink softly, my gaze fixing on Rei. I almost forgot she's with me in the room. "Yeah?"

The answer comes out more like a question. I pull my legs closer to my chest and wrap my arms tighter around them.

Rei observes me quietly; her brown eyes fixed on me intently. Her black hair is a bit messy, and there's a sheer layer of sweat covering her olive skin. She's in her typical workout attire: black leggings and a sports bra since she's been stretching in her room after her workout in the rink.

"Isn't it your studio time?"

I look at the watch around my wrist. "I'm not really feeling it, so I think I'm going to skip it today."

"You're not in the mood to dance?" Rei's brows shoot up in clear surprise. "Now I definitely know something's wrong." She sits down next to me, her hand falling over mine. "I know I'm not Jade, but you can talk to me, you know?"

"What?" A frown appears on my face as her words sink in. "You think just because Jade and I..."

Jade and I have a connection built on loss. From the first moment we met, something just clicked between us. We could understand one another without either of us having to voice our worries or insecurities.

The relationship we have with Rei is different—a bit newer since we just met her after she moved in with us as our third roommate, but I knew the three of us would become good friends. We are already good friends.

Rei waves me off. “You’ve known each other longer. I wouldn’t blame you guys if you had secrets of your own. But I just wanted you to know I’m here if you need somebody to talk to.”

“I know, it’s just...” I look down, tugging at a strand of my hair. “There’s just a lot going on, and I’m not ready to talk about it. With anybody.”

“You’re not in trouble, are you?”

I look up and give her a small smile. “Nah, just some old memories I can’t seem to run away from.”

I know she wants to ask for more details, but I hope she doesn’t. I have to figure it out on my own first. But not right now. Right now, I need to take a step back. Thankfully, just then, the door opens, and Jade enters.

“Great, you’re here.” I turn to Rei, and before I can change my mind, I blurt out: “I changed my mind. I want to dance after all.”

Jade looks between Rei and me. “Did I miss something?”

TRENT

The bedroom door opens, letting a stream of noise from the hallway enter the small room. I look up, my fingers working on buttoning my shirt.

“Hey, didn’t you say you’re going to the gym?”

“I was. We finished earlier than anticipated.” Matteo lets his backpack drop on the floor and gives me a curious look. “Where are you going all dressed up like that?”

“My parents are in town.”

We exchange a knowing look. We’ve known each other our whole lives, and Matteo has had a front-row seat to my parents’ antics. They’re not bad, just overbearing.

“Oh, shit.”

“Yup.” The last button falls in place, and I turn to my best friend. “Wanna come?”

Ashley is going with me, but I wouldn’t object to an additional buffer between us in the form of my best friend.

“Sorry, man, but I already have plans with the guys. I just came home to take a shower and see if you’d like to join us.”

“I can only wish.” I’d give anything for a night out with the guys instead of some stuffy dinner with my parents. “I guess I’ll have to hope bringing Ashley will be enough.”

“Harpy? You wanted to throw the harpy at me? Not cool, bro.”

I groan loudly. “She’s not that bad. Besides, my parents love her.”

Matteo pulls off his shirt and throws it in the corner, grabbing his towel and a bottle of shampoo. “That’s because they’re practically the same. Now I’m even happier I’ll be out. Should I crash at one of the guys’ or...?”

I shake my head. “It’s fine.”

Matteo's brows raise. I'm waiting for the question, but he just shrugs. "Whatever you say. I'll see you later."

I grab the jacket off the back of the chair and shrug it on. "Later."

"There you are!" Mom jumps to her feet and wraps her arms around me, pulling me in for a hug. Her familiar Channel No5 surrounds me, and I dutifully bend down so she can press her lips against my cheek.

"Regina, give the boy some space to breathe," Dad grumbles, placing his hands on her shoulders.

"Oh, shush, Beckett." Mom swats Dad on the arm. "I'm just happy to see my baby boy."

"You are aware that I'm six-foot-four, Mom?" I ask, chuckling.

For as long as I can remember, I've always been her baby boy. I guess it comes with being an only child—their miracle baby. I'm not sure if I like that term better or not, but there was no convincing her to change it. I've tried many times, and the answer was always the same.

As if on cue, she props her hands on her hips and gives me her *mom* look. "You can be seven feet tall and fifty years old, and that won't change the fact that you're my child, Trent Beckett Remington."

Mom slaps me on the hand playfully before turning her attention to Ashley. "Ashley, my dear, you look lovely. Is that a new dress?"

Ash's smile brightens. "Thank you, Mrs. Remington. And it actually is new. I bought it just recently. You look beautiful yourself. Is that a new haircut?"

The two of them continue talking about hair and shopping, so I turn my attention to Dad.

“Trent, it’s good to see you, son.” He pulls me in for a half hug, giving me a slap on the shoulder. “You didn’t have trouble getting here?”

“No, it was fine.”

Just as I predicted, my parents found the classiest restaurant in the area, which happened to be in the next town over, so we had to drive to meet them.

“How was the trip?”

“Good. Business as usual.”

I pull out Ashley’s chair before taking my seat next to her. She turns to me, her lips curling into a bright smile. Mom wasn’t wrong. Ashley looks amazing, but then again, she always does. I don’t think I’ve ever seen that girl in something normal, like leggings and a hoodie. The pale pink dress hugs her body in all the right places, and she did that curly thing to her hair.

Another pair of curls, these auburn, flash in front of my face. The image is so vivid; it startles me slightly.

Ash places her hand on my knee, giving it a supporting squeeze.

I shake my head, trying to chase this strange and completely unexpected feeling away.

Brown hair, not auburn. Blue eyes, not green.

Just then, the server comes by the table, and we place our orders.

“So, how are your classes?” Mom asks, smiling brightly. “Do you like Blairwood?”

“They’re good.”

“You’d think they’re more than just good.” Ashley gives me a side glance before turning her attention to my parents. “He spends his time either studying or playing basketball,” Ashley pouts. “Barely has any time for me.”

Dammit, Ash.

With her focus still on my parents, she doesn't see the irritation flash on my face. This was exactly the one thing I was trying to avoid. She knows it since she's been with me numerous times when I tried to convince my parents to let me play, but they rejected the idea in a blink of an eye.

Mom's sharp gaze turns to me, her smile falling. "You are playing basketball?"

I guess there's no going back now. "Mom..."

I knew this would happen when they found out I applied for the team. That's why I didn't want to tell them in the first place.

"Don't you mom-me, Trent," Mom hisses quietly. Her fingers that were wrapped around the glass are now gripping it tightly, her knuckles white. "Are you playing?"

"Yes, but..."

"You can't be playing," she says instantly, shaking her head. "You know what your doctor said..."

"The doctor said I'm *fine*."

"You shouldn't be on that field at all."

"It's a court," I bite out. "And I want to be."

All heads turn toward me, eyes wide in surprise at my outburst. So much for keeping my cool. I don't remember when was the last time I snapped at my parents like that, but I've had it. I'm nineteen years old, not three, for God's sake!

I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself. "I'm fine. I'm taking care of myself, and the doc gave me the green light to practice. Nothing has happened for two years."

"That doesn't mean it won't. You know if you get reinjured, you could..."

"Basketball isn't that dangerous."

"It's a contact sport, Trent. You could fall or get hit in the head, and then what?"

And then what?

I've heard this question, or some variation of it, for the past two years of my life—ever since my accident. And quite honestly, I've had enough of it. I didn't want this to control my life forever.

"I've been practicing ever since the injury, and I've been fine. It's not like I'm playing hockey or football."

"You can't know that!" Mom pounds her fist against the table, making the dishes rattle. The motion startles us all since she isn't usually the one to lose her cool.

"Regina," Dad calmly places his hand over Mom's on the table. "Trent is old enough to know what he's doing."

Mom turns to him, a deep scowl on her face. They exchange a glance that I'm not fully sure how to interpret. It's intense, words said without uttering a sound. Mom's the first to look away. "I'm sorry, Trent," she sighs. "You're my only child—my baby. I just worry about you." She presses her lips together and shakes her head. "I can't lose you."

If that's not a kick to my gut, I don't know what is. I feel like a dick for yelling at her and making her worry.

"I know, but I'm fine, really. I'm just a freshman. I probably won't even get that much playing time, anyway."

I can't really know that, but it's the most likely outcome. Freshmen rarely got to start, and I doubted I'd be put on the roster since I haven't been on a high school team. I was good at basketball, sure, but I've seen some of the older guys on the team play, and they were ruthless. Still, it was a peace offering of sorts. The best I can give her since I'm not about to back down. Not from this. I love basketball too much to give it up all over again now that I finally have a chance to play. Not even to make my parents happy.

Thankfully, just then, the waiter comes with our food breaking the tension in the air.

Ash looks at me and mouths, "Sorry." She knew I didn't tell my parents about basketball, and I wanted to keep it on the down-low as long as possible, but now what's done is done. I just shake my head slightly.

It's not her fault, really. We had this conversation so many times in the past. I wanted to play basketball, but my parents didn't want to hear about it. It's not like I could have kept it a secret forever. Maybe it's better that we got it out now, so I didn't have to pretend and hide it in case I got a chance to play.

I could appreciate my parents being worried about me, but I'm not a helpless kid. For once, I want them not to look at me with trepidation, waiting for me to fall down.

I want them to look at me like Grace does.

There she's again. Sneaking into my thoughts when I least expect her to.

But it's true. For her, I'm just a regular college guy. I wonder if she would think the same if she knew what really happened. Probably not. And I don't get why the thought of it makes my stomach clench.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

GRACE

I close my eyes and lift my hands in the air, letting my hips sway to the beat of the song. My mind is blurry from all the alcohol, but the pain I've been feeling before is completely dulled, as is the headache that's been bugging me since I opened my eyes.

I could totally see why people get addicted to this stuff. It's so easy. So damn easy. Because when I'm drunk, I don't feel anything. No sadness. No worries. No love. It's all just an empty void. But even that's better than the constant pressure on my chest. On my *heart*.

I don't want to hurt anymore.

Firm hands land on my hips, and I can feel a wave of heat coming from the back. Prying my eyes open, I look over my shoulder. I squint my eyes, waiting a beat for my vision to clear so I can see the person standing behind me. A cute guy with messy blond hair and a crooked smile is looking at me.

"Dance with me?"

I turn around, looping my hands behind his neck. "I figured we're already dancing."

The corners of my mouth tip upward in a flirty smile. I'm not sure who's this person with a sultry voice or where she came from, but I don't mind her one bit.

His leg slips between mine. It's not the most comfortable position, but right now, I don't care one bit. I'm just happy to get lost in the moment with a nameless guy that's nothing like *him*.

My eyelids fall shut, and I let my body move. I'm rubbing against the guy's thigh, the sweet pressure building inside me.

It's been too long since I've let go like this. Too long since I let a guy touch me. Too long since I got lost in the oblivion.

The guy moves closer. Our chests brush together, and my nose scrunches when I smell a mix of his citrusy cologne and

sweat. His warm breath tickles my earlobe as he leans in. “Wanna go and grab a drink?”

A shiver runs through me, and I take a step back. “Sure.”

He takes my hand, and I let him pull me through the crowd of people out of the room.

“Where are you going?” Jade asks, appearing by my side out of nowhere.

“Drinks!” I yell, smiling.

But instead of smiling back at me, a scowl between Jade’s brows deepens. “Do you seriously think you need more drinks?”

“I figured you wanted to have fun,” I pout. My face feels tight, the movement foreign to my muscles. I’m not the pouting kind, but I bet Trent’s girlfriend is. She looks like the type, rich, queen B...

I shake my head. *Don’t think about them.*

“I do, but...”

“No buts,” I say quickly before she can finish. Tonight I wanted to be young and reckless and wild. Tonight I want to be free.

The guy jerks me to the kitchen. Jade follows after us and almost collides with a guy stumbling out of the kitchen. I giggle as she glares at him before she walks around him and joins us.

“What’s your poison?” the guy asks, drawing my attention to him. His bicep bulges as he produces shot glasses and fills one with amber liquid with the easiness of somebody who’s pulled the stunt many times.

If he’s disappointed at the interruption, he doesn’t show it. Then again, Jade is a beautiful woman. Maybe he’s hoping to get lucky with both of us? Who knows?

“Tequila.”

“Grace,” Jade drawls, looping her hand through mine.

“She’ll have the same.”

“A friend?” He asks, taking Jade in with open appreciation and hands us our drinks. Yup, he’s most definitely interested.

Jade glares at him but takes it. “Yes, so no funny business, mister.”

“Didn’t even cross my mind.” His grin widens. “Cheers.”

I lift my glass in a salut before tipping it back. I down the shot in one go before Jade can protest more. Tequila burns its way down my throat. You’d think I’d get numb after all the alcohol I drank tonight, but nope. I still shudder like I did the first time I tried it.

The guy looks at me with amusement. “Not used to drinking?”

“By the end of the night, she’ll be like a pro,” Jade comments dryly.

Out of the two of us, she’s the one who drowns her demons in the alcohol. I can’t count all the summer nights we used our fake IDs to buy some booze and spend the night drinking and chatting. I’d usually stop after one drink because I couldn’t let go of the control, but not Jade. She relished in it. I had a hard time understanding it before, but I can now. I want it. To forget, to just *be*, even if for a moment.

“I’ve learned from the best.”

A cool breeze touches my sweaty skin. I turn around, and sure enough, somebody left the window wide open. Although it’s already chilly outside in the evenings, the terrace is filled with people. There’s a large group gathered around the keg. I watch as they help lift the guy’s legs up and bring the tap to his mouth. The crowd cheers as he drinks.

“I want to do that.”

“What?”

“That.” I point at the window and grab Jade’s hand. “Let’s go.”

Somehow, we find our way through the crowd and out into the open. The keg is placed on the terrace, and just when we get there, a guy falls down to the ground while the rest of the people hoot in celebration. He grins widely, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Grace...” Jade says in warning, her grip on me tightening. “I don’t know what’s going on, but this isn’t you.”

I smile at her. “Then, that’s exactly what I need.”

“Who’s next?” one of the guys asks. He’s the picture of a frat boy. Dark blond hair tousled to perfection, a black polo shirt, and a huge, pearly white grin.

Before anybody else can volunteer, I lift my hand. “Me!”

Jade mutters something behind me but doesn’t try to stop me.

The guy does a double-take but nods his head. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

I brace my hands against the keg, and they help lift my legs in the air. One of the guys brings the tap to my mouth.

I’ve never been much of a beer girl, but I suck it up. *Oblivion*. That’s what I need, oblivion.

I drink for as long as I can take it. Being upside-down forces the blood to rush to my head, the mix of alcohol and elevation making my head spin. I lift my hand to signal that I’m done, and they put me back on the ground. My legs feel wobbly underneath me, and I stumble back. Dark spots appear before my eyes as the blood falls back into my body, leaving me lightheaded.

Everybody hollers, and the loud noise intensifies the throbbing behind my temples. Fingers wrap around my upper arm, and when I blink, I see Jade’s worried eyes.

“You okay?” she mouths.

“Amazing.” I smile and clasp her hand. “Let’s go dancing!”

The house is still full when we get back inside. The wave of heat hits me square in the face as soon as we step inside. Sweat coats my skin, making my clothes stick to my body.

I turn around and almost collide with Rei.

“Where were you?” I ask, giggling. We got here together, but then she just disappeared. Jade told me she went to the bathroom, but it’s definitely been a while.

Rei looks from me to Jade and back. “The better question is, what were you two doing?”

“Just having some fun,” I giggle, swaying on my feet. Or is the room spinning? I narrow my eyes, hoping to focus, but it’s useless.

Why is the room spinning?

“So I’ve heard.” Rei narrows her eyes at me. “You’re drunk.”

I push my hair back, hoping to feel that chilly breeze, but it’s useless. It’s like it’s a hundred degrees inside. “Just a little buzzed.”

“How about we go home?” Jade suggests.

“No,” I shake my head in protest, which isn’t a good thing because it only makes me feel more off-balance than before. “I want to dance.”

“You’ve danced enough.” Jade grabs my hand more firmly, steadying me. Not that it helps. The whole world has turned upside-down, and there’s no going back.

I close my eyes and press my hand against my temple. “Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

“C’mon, let’s get you home.”

With Jade’s help, we somehow manage to get to the front door without any issues. It feels good to be back out in the fresh night. It was so hot in the house. Or maybe that’s all the alcohol talking.

I close my eyes and let the cool air fill my lungs. The chilly breeze against my heated skin makes goosebumps

appear on my flesh.

“How do you feel?” Rei asks.

“Good.” I narrow my eyes on her. I’m pretty sure there are two of her. “You didn’t answer my question earlier.”

“I went to the bathroom.”

“That was an unusually long line.” Jade gives her a knowing look.

“Yeah, well...” Rei shrugs, and even in my intoxicated state, I can see there’s something she isn’t telling us, but I don’t have it in me to probe when I can barely keep myself upright.

Now that we’re finally outside, away from the music and all the people, it finally hits me how tired I am.

I let Jade wrap her arm around my waist and lean my head against her shoulder. She and Rei chat quietly on our way back, but my mind is all over the place, making it impossible for me to concentrate.

Everything I’ve been trying to push to the back of my mind comes rushing forward now that all the distractions are out of the equation. Only now, they’re even more persistent than they were before. So much for the oblivion that alcohol brings.

“C’mon, we’re almost home,” Jade whispers softly, brushing away a strand of my hair that fell in my face.

I blink and realize that somehow we got all the way to our dorm without me noticing. The space is quiet, apart from the soft buzzing of the street lamps.

I straighten and look up. That’s when I see him.

See *them*.

Trent is standing in front of the dorm talking with that dark-haired girl. She’s dressed in a silky pale pink dress that reaches just above her knee, a black blazer and high heels.

Date clothes.

Of course, he'd take her on a date. They're together, for God's sake!

She's looking up at him, smiling widely. Her hand slides from his chest to his shoulder and to the back of his neck as she lifts to press her mouth against his.

I suck in a breath.

I should look away, continue on my way, but it's like I'm stuck waiting for the train wreck to happen.

I'm not sure what I was expecting? That he'd push her back? Stop her from kissing him? *She's his girlfriend!*

Trent cups her cheeks, returning her kiss. He tilts her head to the side, deepening the kiss, and I'm pretty sure I can feel my heart crack all over again.

I stagger back, my throat closing.

Run. Run. Run.

"Grace?" Jade calls my name, snapping me out of it.

"Y-yeah?"

My best friend's eyes narrow at me. "Are you okay?"

"S-sure," I lie. Jade observes me quietly for a moment, and I know she can see something's going on.

Don't ask. Just don't ask.

"Let's go home?" I loop my arm through hers and pull her toward Rei before they see them, too. But no matter what, I can't get the image of Trent kissing his girlfriend out of my head.

My heart is beating a mile a minute, and the cold sweat coats my skin. My mind is still spinning with what I just saw in vivid detail, so I barely register us getting inside the dorm and climbing to our floor. Somewhere in the distance, I can hear a *click* as the door unlocks.

My stomach rolls uncomfortably. "I don't feel so good."

"Don't you dare throw up on me, Grace Danielle Shelton, or I swear..." Jade doesn't even bother to finish; she just pulls

me toward the bathroom.

The light flickers on in the common room, and although my eyes are half-closed, it blinds me. A sudden rush of heat goes through my body, and I can feel the bile rise in my throat.

I stumble over the bathroom threshold. Jade swears, trying to hold on to me, so I don't knock into something in a small space. My knees touch the ground, and since the bathroom is tiny, the toilet is just there. My hands grip the seat as the contents of my stomach come rushing out.

“Dammit, Grace!”

The tiles feel cool under my legs, soothing some of the pain away as I retch and heave. Jade pulls my hair back the best she can, but the short strands keep falling back in my face, getting stuck on the sticky skin.

I'm not sure how long we stay like that. It feels like forever until my stomach calms down enough for me to breathe. And even then, the smell of the puke has my stomach unsettling all over again.

“Is she okay?” I hear Rei ask in the distance.

“I really hope this helped.”

Jade gets up and flushes the toilet. Then she takes the towel by the sink and puts it under the water before crouching down by my side. She wipes the sweat and probably puke from my face.

“I guess I really didn't need that keg stand after all,” I chuckle, but there is no humor in the tone. It's strained, lifeless, just like I feel.

“That's not funny!” Jade chastises. “I was really worried about you.”

“I'm sorry.” I look at my two friends. Seeing their matched worried expressions undoes something inside of me. “To both of you. I just...”

I shake my head, the first tear slipping down. I brush it away quickly, hating myself for crying.

Two years. Two damn years, and I'm still crying over Mason LeBlanc.

"Grace," Jade puts her hand over mine. "It's okay."

"No, it's not!" I curl my fingers into a fist and pound it against my thigh. "I don't want to worry anybody. But it's hard. It's so freaking hard to see him. And with *her*. I don't think I can do it."

A frown appears on Rei's smooth forehead. "Him?"

"Mason. Or Trent. Or whatever the hell his name is."

"Mason?" Rei looks between the two of us, clearly confused. "Who's Mason?"

That's because you didn't tell her.

"Mason is—*was*—my first crush."

My first date.

My first kiss.

My first love.

My first *heartbreak*.

He was my first everything.

Until he wasn't.

"Then, who's Trent?"

I look up at Rei's confused face. The feeling is mutual. "Trent's Mason."

"I don't think I'm following."

I chuckle, but the sound lacks humor. "You're not the only one."

"Trent looks like Mason, but he's..." Jade smooths her hand down my back. "Well, Trent."

Rei's eyes widen. "You mean, they look similar?"

"Umm..." Jade rubs the back of her neck. "More like exactly like him."

Trent's face flashes before my eyes, and I let a shaky breath out. "Like twins. The only difference is that he doesn't remember me."

"Well..." There is a slight pause as Rei mulls over what she just heard. "Now I get why you wanted to get drunk."

I only wish it helped.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TRENT

“How did the dinner go?” Matteo puts the weights back on the rack before turning toward me, a water bottle in his hand.

“Disastrous,” I mutter, my gaze fixed on my reflection in the mirror as I work on squats.

“What happened?” Matteo stands next to me, his eyes meeting mine in the reflection in the mirror.

He wasn’t home after I dropped Ashley at her dorm. She wanted me to stay, but my head was killing me, so I went back to my dorm, took some pain meds, and crashed. It took all I had in me not to let it show in front of her or my parents. It would be just one more reason for them to justify why I should stay away from playing basketball, and I wasn’t in the mood to deal with it.

Hell, I was so out of it I didn’t even hear Matteo when he came in.

“Besides my parents being my parents?” I sigh. “Ash made a comment about me being too absorbed with my studying and basketball to pay attention to her.”

“What the hell, dude?”

“Right?” Ashley tried to apologize to me once again after dinner, but there was no point. The damage had already been done. “You know how my parents are. Especially Mom. To say they weren’t happy would be an understatement.”

More like epically pissed.

“I know.” Matteo nods. “But, it’s been two years.”

I put the dumbbell down and wipe my forehead with the back of my hand.

“That’s what I keep telling her. I can’t live my life like I’m going to die at any moment.”

“Dude, it’s all messed up.”

“Tell me about it.” I rub at my temples, feeling the soft pressure behind them. When I have a migraine, like I did last night, they rarely last just one day. But no matter how much I wished I could stay in bed all day, I had shit to take care of. Sighing, I let my hand down just to catch Matteo looking at me worriedly. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s just a headache.”

“I know. Wanna spot me?”

Matteo turns and goes to the bench, purposely avoiding my gaze. I watch him as he puts on some additional weights on the bar and sits down. Only then does he turn to me. “You coming or what?”

I nod. “Yeah, sure.”

I rush through the quiet library. There are a dozen places open for me to take, but I have a specific destination in my mind. A destination I hadn’t even realized I had until I found myself standing in front of the building.

What the hell are you doing, Trent?

I know exactly what I’m doing, and I’m not sure what to think about it. What to think about *me*.

I have a girlfriend. A beautiful girlfriend of three years who’s stuck by my side through all the shit that has happened, and yet, I was here looking for another girl?

I tried to reason that it’s not like that. I’m not having an affair with Grace behind Ash’s back. We’re just two friends studying in the library.

Can we even be considered friends when our interactions consist mostly of accidentally stumbling upon one another in different places? You’d think we’re at some tiny university, but we’re not. I hadn’t even seen her until a few weeks ago—hadn’t known she existed.

How is it possible that I didn't even know her, and now I can't get her out of my mind?

It's subconscious; this need to see her, to talk to her.

The desk that's tucked away in the little corner of the library, where Grace was the last time, now sits empty.

I let out a long breath that I hadn't even realized I'd been holding as the disappointment slams into me.

I guess I hadn't even realized how much I hoped she'd be here.

I run my hand through my hair and look around, wondering what to do now. The strap of my backpack cuts into my shoulder from the weight of all the books I'm carrying.

Since I'm here, I guess I might as well use the quiet to get some work done.

The words blur on the screen. I blink a few times, pinching the bridge of my nose to help ease the pressure behind my temples. I've been sitting here for the past hour studying for my French class and a possible future pop quiz. Why is that even still allowed in college? How can an impromptu quiz be a relevant measure of somebody's knowledge? Beats me.

What I do know is that my mind's getting fuzzier by the second, and it feels like I haven't moved an inch since I started.

But I don't have many options. Earlier today, I got the email from the tutoring center that the person they had in mind won't be able to fit me in their schedule, so I'm back to square one.

Why did I think it was a good idea to take this class again? I should seriously let Matteo beat some sense into me the next time I try to do something crazy like this.

Sighing, I get up and crack open the window to let in some fresh air.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t realize this was taken.”

I turn around at the sound of the soft voice and come face to face with Grace.

“Hey.”

She tucks a strand of her hair behind her ear, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. “Hi.”

Grace looks around, taking in the mess I made of the small desk. My laptop is open, and books and notebooks are scattered on the table, along with a half-empty bottle of Gatorade and a coffee cup that matches the one in her hand.

“You came here to study?”

The corner of her mouth lifts slightly, but before it can turn into a smile, she bites the inside of her cheek, schooling her features. “Is there another reason people come to the library?”

“Right.”

Dumbass.

Her eyes go back to the desk before shifting toward me. “I just didn’t realize this place was taken, that’s all. I figured not many people knew about it since it was always empty in the past.”

She takes a step back as if she’s planning to turn around and leave. My fingers itch as if they want to reach out and stop her.

I don’t want her to leave. The realization hits me out of nowhere. *Not because of me.*

“You want me to get out of your way?” I blurt out quickly. I came here hoping to find her. I can admit it if only to myself, but the last thing I want is to chase her away from her spot or make her uncomfortable.

Grace stops mid-motion and shakes her head no, auburn strands slipping from behind her ear. “It’s fine. It’s not like I own this place.”

“I’d own it if I could,” I say, only half-joking. “It’s so peaceful over here—helps me concentrate so I can study.” I

look down at the French notebook. It feels like the damn thing is mocking me. “Usually.”

“It is,” she agrees. “That’s why I love it so much.”

The corner of her mouth lifts in a small smile, but it’s interrupted by a yawn.

“A long night?” I ask, leaning against my desk.

Something flashes on her face. It’s there one moment, like a dark cloud hovering over the bright sun but gone in the next.

“That obvious, huh?” Grace chuckles, looking down at the cup clasped in her hand.

Now that she mentioned it, I let myself take her in. Her face seems even paler than usual, and there are dark bags under her eyes.

“Just a little,” I admit honestly.

She lifts the cup to eye level and gives it a little shake. By the sound of it, it’s almost empty. “You’d think drinking three of these would help.”

“Damn, that bad?”

Grace hums. “Now, I just wish I stayed in bed.”

You’re not the only one, I want to say but hold the words back. How weird would that be? Seriously, this girl will think I’m some kind of stalker or some shit like that. “Why haven’t you?”

I press my fingers against my temples and rub the tense skin. The pressure behind them has steadily grown since I left the gym, and I knew I should probably go back to my room since I forgot to take my migraine medicine with me, but I’m not ready to leave. Not just yet. Besides, if I take it, I’ll be out cold, and I have work to do.

“I promised somebody I’d help them out.” She looks around as if she expects that somebody to show up, but we’re all alone. “We were supposed to meet here.” Grace looks at the watch wrapped around her wrist and rolls her eyes. “But he’s late. Why am I not surprised?”

The corner of my mouth lifts. I've yet to see a spunky side to Grace, but it actually suits her. "Your friend always late?"

"No idea, really. We're acquaintances more than friends. We were supposed to meet here to work on statistics, but I guess this seat is taken, anyway."

"Yeah." I rub the back of my neck and take a seat. "I kind of stole it from you. Wanna sit while you wait for your friend?"

Grace nibbles at her lip and looks reluctantly at the chair. I push it out a little with my leg. "I don't bite."

Her lip pops out, and my gaze zeroes in on it, observing as the color rushes back into the flesh. Her mouth is bare, with no gloss or any kind of color covering it. Just plain pink on her lush mouth, her lower lip just a tad full— *Why the hell am I thinking about her lips?*

My heart thunders in my chest, but before I can wrap my mind around what just happened, Grace nods and sits down. "Okay."

She takes in the books on the table, grabs the closest to her, and turns it around, her eyes scanning the content. "French?"

"Y-yeah." I rub at the scruff on my neck, my fingers digging into my skin. *Seriously, what the hell's wrong with me?* "Although I was probably drunk when I picked it."

Grace raises her brow. "Le français c'est pas ton truc?"¹

I blink and then blink once again, just for good measure. "You speak French?"

What in the ever-loving...

"I can manage."

Manage my ass.

"That didn't sound like you can manage. It sounded like you know freaking French."

She knows French.

The words ring in my mind as I try to wrap my head around this information. Grace knows French.

Color rises up her cheeks, the dark pink just a shade darker than those lips. “I might have taken a few classes in high school.”

“Why?” I blurt out before I can think otherwise. “I mean, not that anything’s wrong with French or...”

“Ballet,” Grace interrupts before I can embarrass myself more than I already have. Thank fuck. “I’ve been dancing since I was twelve, and I picked some things up along the way, so I decided to take classes in high school.”

“You took French because of ballet?” The skepticism is evident in my voice.

Grace shrugs and tucks a lock of hair behind her ear and shrugs. “What can I say? I’m weird like that.”

“It’s not weird; it’s actually pretty cool. I just didn’t expect it. How long have you been dancing?”

That flicker of darkness is back in her eyes once again—sadness creeping into those emerald eyes.

Why would something that she obviously loves doing make her react like this? It just makes no sense.

“Since I was twelve.”

“And you like it?” I ask, although really, I already know the answer. I saw her in the community center with those girls. I saw the way she danced.

A little smile forms on her mouth. “I love it. Dancing feels like...” There’s a slight pause as she contemplates her words. “Going home in a way.”

Her words ring in the space around us. It’s like they’re calling to me.

I know. It’s the same for me.

The color in Grace’s cheeks turns even brighter than it was before. She ducks her head as if embarrassed. I start to reach out. I want to tell her that I understand because it’s the same

for me when it comes to basketball, but once again, she's quicker.

“Anyway... if you don't like French, why take it?”

The change of the subject is sudden, leaving me blindsided. Letting out a breath, I lean back in my chair. “The fuck if I know. I figured it would be easy.”

Grace quirks her brow. “And out of all the languages, you pick French as easy?”

The way she puts it... “Not my brightest moment, I'll admit.”

Grace nods in acknowledgment. “What's your major, anyway?”

“I'm figuring it out.”

Grace laughs, and I just stare at her. It's not one of those barely-there smiles, so tiny you have to look twice to know if it was an actual smile or just a twitch of her lips, but a full-on laugh. Low, so she wouldn't draw too much attention to herself, but a laugh nonetheless. “It's the story of our lives.”

“Is it?” I kind of find it hard to believe. “What's your major?”

“Marketing.”

“So you have it all figured out.”

I knew she did. Grace seems like a levelheaded person. Somebody who knows what she wants and has her life planned out.

“I think my calling found me, not the other way around.” She shrugs. “But there's nothing wrong with taking time to figure your future out. Isn't that why we're here to begin with?”

I look at the books scattered on the desk. “I guess you're right. Now, if only I could figure French out, that'd be great.”

“And how's that going?”

“It’s not,” I admit reluctantly and rub at my temples. The throbbing is still persistent, and I know I’m toeing a fine line here. “Being here helps me concentrate, however, my language skills are pretty nonexistent. I was hoping to get a tutor, but they can’t fit me in their schedule.”

Grace nods, returning the book to how it was before. “I get that. That’s why I’m here so often. Out there, there are all these distractions, but here I don’t have any other choice but to put my mind to work.”

“What kind of distractions?”

“Huh?” Grace looks up, her bright green eyes wide. They’re remarkable—a complete contrast to her fair skin and vibrant hair. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a shade like that before. Emerald, shining like two gems in the night.

“What kind of di—”

“Great, you’re here.”

Grace jolts in her seat as if she’s been caught with her hand in the cookie jar before dinner. She looks over her shoulder, and I follow her gaze to the person who interrupted us. It’s the same guy she was with the other day. He moves like he has all the time in the world, a smirk plastered firmly on his face.

Grace frowns at him, her tone clipped. “You’re late.”

The guy doesn’t seem bothered in the least. “Just by a few minutes.”

“I told you this isn’t going to work.”

“And yet, you’re still here, tutor girl.”

If it’s possible, the guy’s grin widens even more. What an asshole. If Grace was helping me...

Holy shit. That’s it.

Grace huffs. “Not because I’ve been waiting for you, that’s for damn sure.”

The guy looks up, his gaze turning to me. The corner of his mouth twitches, and I feel my jaw tighten.

What the hell's his problem?

“See, that's a clear sign that you were supposed to wait for me.”

Grace pushes up, pulling the strap of her bag over her shoulder. “What it is a clear sign of is that I was right from the beginning.”

“C'mon, Red. Don't be like that.” The guy throws his hand over Grace's shoulder and pulls her into his side, ruffling her hair. She swats his arm away and frowns at him but doesn't try to duck away from his touch. “The coach kept us in the gym longer than expected.”

“And I saw how fast you were running to make it here on time.” Grace rolls her eyes at him.

“And have Mrs. G yell at me? Hell no.” He looks around himself as if he expects the woman to jump him. “Let's go before the old witch shows up.”

“Spencer...” Grace groans. “I'm really not in the mood.”

“How about I treat you to something greasy? You look like you could use it.”

Grace's elbow connects with the guy's stomach, and he sucks in air. “Thanks a lot.”

“Hey, I'm just being honest.”

“Me too. I'm getting out of here.” Grace looks over her shoulder at me. “Sorry for disturbing your peace.”

“It's not a problem.” My eyes dart to the smug bastard behind her. “Need help?” I offer, narrowing my eyes at the guy. He just lifts his brow at me, that smile still clinging to his lips.

“Nah, I'm good, but thanks. I guess I'll see—”

“Hey, Grace?” I interrupt her before she can finish and go on her way.

“Yeah?”

My palms are sweaty, so I brush them against the side of my legs. *Don't be a pussy and ask her.*

“About French...” I start tentatively, unsure of how to ask her. “Do you think you could give me a hand sometime?”

“I...” She blinks a few times. Her lips are parted, but nothing else comes out.

From the corner of my eye, I can see the guy snap his head in my direction, but I ignore him and concentrate on her. On those wide eyes that look at me warily. Her tongue darts out, and she slides it over her lower lip. “I’m not...”

“It doesn’t have to be anything formal,” I rush out before she can say no. “Maybe some tips every now and then? I wasn’t joking when I said I suck, and I can’t risk losing my spot on the team because I’m failing this class.”

Grace’s throat bobs. “I’m not sure that’s the best idea.”

I frown. “Why?”

“It’s just not.”

Grace looks away, avoiding my gaze.

Dammit.

I need this. I need her help. She’s my last hope.

A slow chuckle comes from the guy.

Seriously, what a prick. And she’s tutoring him?

I press my lips together. Fuck that.

“Grace.” I get up and step into her line of vision. I’m not giving up. Not on this. “You’re my only hope. I asked the tutoring center, but they don’t have anybody who can fit in my schedule. I can meet you when you want. I’ll be on time and work hard.” *Take that, asshole.* “But this is really important to me.”

I hold her gaze, hoping she can see I’m serious. Because I am. I’m ready to do whatever it takes to make this work.

“Please. I have to get a decent grade in order to keep my spot on the basketball team, and there’s no way I’ll be able to

do it wit—”

“Fine.”

“—hout your...” I stop, realizing what she said. “Wait, fine?”

Grace lets out a shaky breath and nods once. “Fine, I’ll do it.”

A smile spreads over my face slowly. “Thank you.”

Before I can think about it, I wrap my arms around her and pull her into a hug. She sucks in a breath, her body growing tense in my arms. Still, I hold on for just a few seconds longer. The top of her head falls just under my chin, a sweet peachy scent surrounding her.

I open my lungs and drink her in, then I take a step back, letting my hands fall by my sides.

“Thank you,” I repeat once again. “You can’t even imagine...”

“Hey, babe. I knew I’d fi—” Ashley’s smile falls as she realizes we’re not alone. She shifts her gaze from me to Grace. “Am I interrupting?”

“No, we were just talking.”

“Oh?” Ash comes to me and loops her arm through mine, clearly staking her claim.

“Yeah, Spencer and I were supposed to study here, but it was already occupied.” Grace’s eyes meet mine for a split second before she averts her gaze. “We’ll leave you to it.”

She turns on the balls of her feet and walks away. Spencer stays in his spot for a moment longer, eyeing me carefully before he goes after her.

“What was that about?” Ashley asks as she sits down in the chair Grace just vacated and looks over her shoulder in the direction the two of them disappeared.

“Nothing.”

The word is out of my mouth before I can stop it. It's not a lie, not really. But it's not the complete truth either. Ashley knows I'm looking for a tutor. It's not like it's a secret, but I'm not sure she'd be happy if I told her Grace just accepted to be that person.

Ash turns to me, those blue eyes fixing on me intently. "Isn't that the girl from the other day? The one that crashed into you?"

I hold her gaze. Different emotions cross over her features in quick succession. She schools her expression quickly, but not before I clearly recognize one—suspicion. "Yes, why?"

"What was she doing here?"

"Waiting for that guy." I shrug. "Just like she said. What's this about?"

"I just find it strange, that's all." She looks at the books scattered on the desk. "Are you done?"

"Not yet." My gaze flickers to the French textbook, and my stomach clenches uncomfortably. It's going to be okay. Grace agreed to help me figure this shit out. It can't be worse than doing it all on my own.

"C'mon, you've been stuck here forever. Let's get some food into you so you can work later."

"Ash..." I try to protest, but she's already pulling me up on my feet.

"Everybody needs to eat, Trent. The work won't go away."

That's what I'm afraid of.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

GRACE

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Why didn't I leave? I should have done it as soon as I realized the nook wasn't empty. But, of course, I couldn't help myself. I had to stay. To see him. To talk to him. It's like I'm a glutton for punishment.

Even after everything that has happened and everything that I saw, even though I know he has a girlfriend he obviously loves, I still couldn't help but want him. Even if it's just bits and pieces of his attention, I'll take everything that I can get.

I should have run in the other direction like I said I would. But, of course, I stayed. Sometimes it feels like no matter what, when it comes to Mason, *Trent*, I'm always going to stay, no matter the consequences to my heart.

Even if that means tutoring the guy who is clearly unavailable.

It didn't feel like that when he pulled you in his arms.

My heart does a little flip in my chest. The hug caught me completely off guard. Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine he'd do it. I completely froze, not knowing what to do, how to react. It's good that he pulled away quickly because I feared if he held me for a second longer, I'd wrap my arms around him and never let go.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

"Who's that guy?" Spencer throws his arm around my shoulders as he finally catches up to me in front of the library. Apparently, he wasn't joking about not wanting to piss the main librarian off.

"I'm not in the mood, Spencer."

You'd think that throwing up last night would have made me less hungover today, but no such luck. When I woke up, my mouth was as dry as a desert, and just the thought of trying to put something in my mouth made me want to hurl again.

“Having a hangover will do that to a person.”

I glare at him. “How do you know I’m hungover?”

“I have my ways.” He smirks knowingly, and I have a sudden need to wipe that smile off his face.

“Then you should understand why I’m not in the mood to deal with all... this.”

“Oh, wait.” Spencer pulls us to a stop and turns toward me. “Don’t tell me this is your first hangover.”

“What?”

“Oh, c’mon. No need to be shy. Everybody has to pop their cherry sooner or later.”

I place my palm on his chest and give him one hard shove. “You’re not only insufferable but also an asshole.”

Booming laughter follows after me as I walk away, making my headache even stronger than it was.

“Was it the cherry part?” he asks, running after me. I turn to the side to find his grinning face looking down at me.

“Dude, if you don’t shut your mouth, I’m going to punch you.”

Spencer wiggles his brows. The guy has no self-preservation instinct whatsoever. “Only if you can catch me first.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Sure. You’re just grumpy because you haven’t had anything to eat.”

As if to confirm his suspicions, my stomach chooses that exact moment to grumble. Loudly. I’ve been living off of coffee because I was afraid if I put anything more in my stomach, I’d throw up, and I had enough of that to last me a lifetime.

“See? I knew it.”

“Probably due to your long nights of debauchery.”

“Using fancy words on me, Red?” Instead of being offended, his eyes twinkle in amusement. “Among other things. C’mon, let’s feed you.”

He takes my hand in his like it’s the most natural thing in the world, his long fingers clasp around mine and pulling me across the street in the opposite direction.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll have to wait and see.”

“Better?”

I look up, only to find Spencer watching me across the table. I take the paper napkin and wipe my mouth, suddenly self-conscious for whatever reason. “Mhmm.”

Spencer ended up taking me to Macey’s, a small diner some fifteen minutes by foot from campus. The place doesn’t look like much on the outside, but the food is freaking delicious. Plus, I have to admit—although reluctantly—that Spencer was right. The moment we stepped into the diner, and I smelled the greasy food, my stomach needed to be filled. Thankfully, since it’s late afternoon, the place is almost completely empty except for an older guy reading a newspaper at the table in the corner.

Spencer’s smile widens. “There’s nothing like greasy food to settle the stomach after too much alcohol. What made you drink so much, anyway?”

“How do you know I drank too much? Maybe I’m just a lightweight.”

“Possibly.” He nods his head, his finger tracing the rim of the glass. “But I don’t think that’s the case.”

I remember all the tequila shots and then the bitter taste of warm beer on my tongue. My stomach rolls uncomfortably. So much for me getting over the nausea. I’m never drinking again. Like ever.

“Plus, I saw a video of you doing a keg stand on Instagram.”

I blink, unsure if I heard him correctly. “You what?”

Spencer lifts his hands. “Hey, now. Don’t shoot the messenger.”

He saw me on Instagram? Where? How?

“Who posted it? And when?”

“I saw it this morning when I was in my Brit lit class.” He shrugs as if it’s not a big deal. *Maybe not for him.* “I don’t remember who posted it.”

“You watch Instagram stories while in class? Did it ever occur to you that this might be the reason you need a tutor?”

“I need a tutor for my *math* classes.”

As if that makes a difference.

“What’s your major, anyway?”

“English.”

My brows shoot up, and Spencer chuckles. “Don’t look so surprised. I’m not some dumb jock, you know.”

“I never said you’re dumb.”

Womanizer? Sure. Lazy? Definitely. Dumb? Not in the least.

“Most people do.”

“Most people are assholes.”

Spencer leans closer and quirks his brow. “I thought you considered me an asshole.”

“You have your moments.” Unable to resist, I take another bite of the waffle before pushing the plate away.

“So English, huh?”

“Yeah,” Spencer shrugs. “I like books. Math, not so much.”

He takes a piece from the plate I just pushed away and pops it into his mouth. He demolished his own plate in record time, and I guess he was just waiting for me to be done. He goes for another bite, but I slap his hand.

“Hey!” he protests, rubbing the back of his hand. “What was that for?”

“To stop your whining and get your books out.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GRACE

“Can you pull your right leg a bit closer, Marcy?” I ask, touching the girl’s shoulder. “You want your heel to touch the inside of your foot.”

She does as asked—her brows are pulled tight, a serious look on her small, seven-year-old face.

“That’s great.” I give her an encouraging smile. “Now switch to fourth. Lift that left arm high in the air. Not so straight. You want to be relaxed, Abi.” The older girl gives her hand a little shake to loosen it up. “Better. Fifth position, ladies. Remember, don’t try to overdo it. Practice makes perfect. The flexibility and fluidity of the movement will come eventually.”

I look over at my students. The group is small, just fifteen of them, but they’ve come to every class so far, which is encouraging. I was worried this community center might be too small to form an actual group. Not that it would change anything. If there were just one kid interested, I’d find a way to hold a class for them.

“Great! How about we go from the top, once again, a bit faster this time?”

I join them at the barre, sliding at the front of the line and look over my shoulder. “First.”

We ended up going over the basic positions two more times before I dismissed the class. The girls chat excitedly as they take off their shoes and slip into their clothes. Between Callie and I, we managed to get some of our old leotards and ballet slippers for the girls to use for the class, but I was hoping we’d also be able to buy more later on.

“Damn, I missed this,” Callie joins me, her gaze lingering on the barre longingly.

She slipped into the classroom just as we were wrapping up and stayed by the wall, watching.

“Have you danced at all since the accident?”

Callie shakes her head, the blonde strands teasing her cheeks and the scar that’s running over the side of her face. “I tried, but it just wasn’t working. My bones were broken in too many places, scars too big, skin too taut. It hurts, physically and mentally.”

“Do you go to PT?”

“Not any longer, but Hayden made me promise to exercise with Zane, and that one’s not joking around.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Zane’s usually quite serious and a little bit stoic. It’s actually really interesting to see the guy so unnerved by my friend Rei.

The girls say goodbye as they leave. Since Blairwood’s *Bright Haven* is smaller, Vanessa, the manager, let us use one of the classrooms for our dance class. It’s not the studio, but we make-do. I was hoping I’d get some portable mirrors so the girls could monitor their movements easier.

“How was the class?” Callie goes to the barre, her hand sliding over the smooth wood.

“Good, I missed teaching. There’s something about the joy on my students’ faces when they get something right that gets to me every time.”

I grab a towel to wipe down the barre and then push it against the wall.

“How long have you been teaching?” Callie grabs one of the desks and starts pulling it back in place, and I join her. In no time, the classroom is back as it was before we started.

“I started helping out when I was sixteen. My sister-in-law and her mother were leading the course in New York’s community center. That’s actually how we met.”

Sometimes I like to tease my brother that he would have never gotten the woman he loves if it weren’t for that community center and me. “They taught me all I know, and I wanted to give back to the next generation of girls what was given to me. I fell in love with dancing. I could lose myself in

the music and movement, and for a little while, it let me forget all the other shitty things that were happening in my life.”

“Why not study dance, then? You’re an amazing teacher.”

I look up, and our eyes meet.

“Why aren’t you studying dance?” I challenge right back.

Callie has recently declared a graphic design major with a minor in art. She’s been volunteering here for over a year now. It all started with a regular art class, but now they’re finishing up a picture book, and apparently, Callie’s been researching on how to publish it and use the royalties earned to help fund the center and their class.

The corner of her mouth lifts in a half-smile. “Touché.”

We’re both softly chuckling when Yasmin pops her head through the door. “You two done?”

“Just about.”

I give one final look at the space, but everything seems to be in order. Crouching down by my bag, I put on my sweater over the leotard. With a few quick tugs, the laces of my slippers loosen, and I slip my feet out, and then slide my legs into a pair of jeans and finally shoes.

We say goodbye to Vanessa, who’s still working at the front desk, and go outside. Yasmin’s car is parked in front of the building just next to Vanessa’s truck.

Callie opens the passenger’s door. “Remind me, why do you still drive this piece of shit?”

“Because I need my car to get around? Besides, I love this piece of junk.” Yasmin slides her hand lovingly over the hood of the car.

“And it doesn’t have anything to do with the fact that Nixon hates you driving it?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Yasmin looks away, all innocent, and slides into the car.

Callie turns toward me and rolls her eyes. “Of course, she doesn’t.”

Chuckling, I follow suit and get in the car just as Yasmin turns the key. The car makes some kind of noise before it dies. She tries two more times before it finally starts.

“I honestly can’t see the reason you’d want to change it,” Callie deadpans, pulling on her seatbelt.

“Right? Me neither. It’s so reliable.”

“That was sarcasm.”

“Like I don’t know that.”

The two of them continue bickering all the way back to campus. Yasmin tries to pull me into the discussion, but I just shake my head and keep my mouth firmly shut. There’s no way I’m getting in the middle of this.

Thankfully, it doesn’t take us long to get back to campus. Yasmin meets my gaze in the rearview mirror as we get closer to Callie’s place. “You wanna stay and hang for a while?”

So I can be a fifth wheel to them and their boyfriends? Yeah, right.

Callie and Yas were roommates during their freshman year of college, but since then, Callie has moved in with her boyfriend, Hayden. On the other hand, Yasmin has decided to stay in the dorms another year despite Nixon asking her many times to live together.

I shake my head no. “I have some homework to get done.”

“Want me to drive you to your dorm?”

“I’m fine walking. I think I’ll call home to see how everybody’s doing.”

I avoided my family’s calls for the past week. The first time it was intentional. I felt too raw after my interaction with Trent. I’m close to my brother and Sienna, and I’m a shit liar, so they would have known something’s going on, but I don’t want them to worry unnecessarily. And anything that’s related to Mason worries them.

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

Yasmin holds my gaze for a few moments longer before she nods. She takes a right turn and parks in front of the house, killing the engine.

“Same time next week?” I ask as we get out of the car.

The girls nod, and I wave at them, pulling out my phone. My stomach clenches with nerves.

You can do this. Deep breaths.

I scroll through the contacts until I find the one I’ve been looking for and dial. My palms are sweaty, so I brush them against the sides of my legs. The phone barely rings before she picks up.

“Grace Danielle Shelton!”

I close my eyes at the sound of Sienna’s voice. My fingers tighten around my phone as a wave of longing crashes over me. “Hey, Si,” I croak out. My voice is rough from all the pent-up feelings.

The nervousness. The excitement. The yearning.

God, I miss my family. Ever since I moved in with my brother—well, technically, half-brother—at the age of twelve, he and his now-wife have become my whole world. They practically raised me and were more parents to me than my mother ever had been.

“What’s up?”

I bite into my lower lip and wait. Si doesn’t disappoint.

“What’s up? *What’s up?! You don’t call, you barely text, and now it’s what’s up?*”

My ears hurt from her shouting. I expected her to be pissed, but this is another level completely.

“Sorry, there’s a lot going on. That’s all.”

That’s definitely one way of putting it.

The boy I loved and who disappeared is now suddenly back in my life. The only problem? He doesn’t remember me, and his name isn’t Mason, but Trent. Oh? And he has a

girlfriend, but he wants me to tutor him so he can keep his spot on the team, although I'm pretty sure that said girlfriend will kill me if I do.

I wonder what she would tell me if I told her all of this.

But I won't because I'm not the only one who suffered after Mason's disappearance, and I'm not going to put them through it again. I'll help him with French, and then I'll do what I should have done from the start. Walk away and not look back.

"Grace?" Sienna asks, and by the tone of her voice, it's not the first time she said something. "Everything okay over there?"

"Yeah." I shake my head, trying to clear my mind and focus on the conversation. The last thing I want is for them to worry about me. "It's all good. Just busy."

"I'm glad at least one of us is good." There's a clatter as she moves around the house. "I love my boys, but they're driving me crazy. Nicolas Anthony Shelton!" she bellows so loud I have to pull my phone away from my ear. "I better not see that bowl on the coffee table because you won't like what happens next, mister!" There's a loud sigh on the other end. "God, I miss my girl company."

"But, Mommy, Dad always leaves his things on the table!" I hear Nicky protest in the background. "And he and uncle William put their feet on it, too, when you're not home."

I have to cover my mouth to muffle my giggling—nothing like hearing my nephews to cheer me up.

"Well, you're not your father, so do as I said," she says to him, and then more quietly, "I'll deal with him later."

There's no stopping my laughter at the muttered threat. "I see some things never change."

"Seriously, I told him a hundred times not to put things on that table. It's an antique!"

"It is a coffee table, Si."

"An antique one."

“Maybe you should put it to the side, put a vase on it or something, and get an actual coffee table for the room?”

“I still wouldn’t want him to put his smelly feet on it.”

“Hey, whose feet are smelly?”

If I thought I missed them before, it has nothing on hearing my brother’s voice. With almost two decades separating us, J.D. has always been more of a father figure to me. When our mom reached out to him after she found out that he was playing in the NFL, he could have easily told her to go screw herself and continued with his life, but he hadn’t. Instead, he took me in and gave me everything I could have ever wanted and then some. But more importantly, he showed me what a true family means.

“Yours are.”

“I’ll give you smelly feet...” J.D.’s voice lowers to a growl, and I can totally see him wrapping his arms around Sienna and tickling her. I’ve witnessed the same thing so many times I lost count. Seeing my brother fall in love in front of me was eye-opening. Before Si and J.D., I’d never known love, and theirs has grown even more every day since they’ve been together. They still have their differences, every now and then, but their love is stronger than any of it.

As if on cue, Sienna shrieks, “Jack, stop it!”

“Oh my God, you two never change.”

Everything goes still on the other side of the line. “Is that Grace?”

“Hey, big brother.”

There’s more shuffling in the background, and when he speaks, his voice is clearer, closer.

“And she’s alive. For a moment there, I thought you lost your phone, although I’m quite certain I’m still getting your bill,” J.D. teases.

“I’m sorry for not calling. It’s been a crazy few weeks.”

“It’s okay. I get it. You’re in college, and you should enjoy it.” There’s a slight pause. “The boys miss you, though.”

“What he wants to say is that *he* misses you!” Sienna yells from the background. “You big softy.”

“I miss you too, guys. I can’t wait for Thanksgiving.”

“You could come home sooner, you know.”

“I just left,” I chuckle. “I thought you’d be happy to be rid of me after the last six years.”

“Never, Grace. I’ll never be happy that you’re gone.” My throat tightens at his words, making it hard to speak. J.D. must feel it, too, because he clears his throat before continuing. “How’s school going? Are you getting along with your roommates?”

We chat for a little while longer, and I tell him all about Blairwood, my classes, and volunteering. J.D. must have put me on speaker because Sienna joins in every now and then, and I can hear the familiar sounds of preparing dinner coming from the background, the cartoons playing in the playroom, the cupboards opening and closing, and drawers being pulled out.

My phone pings, signaling I have another incoming call. I check the screen.

“I should probably get going. That’s Jade on the other line.”

“Any exciting plans for tonight?” Sienna asks, and it’s hard to miss the hopeful undertone to her voice.

“Not sure, maybe? I was out, so God knows what they’re up to.”

“Well, go on and find out. You’re young. If you don’t party now, when will you?”

“But not too hard.” A loud smack follows J.D.’s comment. “*Ouch!* What was that for?”

“Don’t listen to your brother, Gracie. He’s getting even grumpier in his old age.”

“I’m not grumpy. I’m just taking care of her.”

“She’s a grown woman. I’m sure she knows how to take care of herself.”

“And on that note...” I shout because once the two of them get into it, there’s no stopping the train wreck from happening.

“Bye, Gracie!” Sienna yells, and J.D. grumbles in the background.

“Kiss the boys for me.”

“Will do. Remember, have fu—”

Before she can finish, the call is cut off. Chuckling, I shake my head. The smile is still firmly on my face as I pull the phone down from my ear. Jade hung up, so I clicked on her number, ready to call her when a flash of orange catches my attention. I look up, and that’s when I see him. Tall, lean body leaping through the air. Orange ball smacking into the hoop and falling through the net with a soft *swoosh*.

A dimpled smile flashes before my eyes.

Mason.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TRENT

A low buzzing sound breaks into my zone. My fingers stop over the keys of my laptop as the sound registers—my phone.

I let it ring and try to concentrate on the essay I've been working on. It's probably just Matteo. He tried to convince me to join him and the guys at one party or another, but I didn't budge. I couldn't get distracted with half an essay yet to write by Monday's deadline.

Only the damn thing doesn't stop.

Groaning, I look around until I spot my phone. I find it on my bed, half-hidden beneath a pair of jeans I took off earlier.

I pull it out and answer, not even bothering to check who's calling. "Yeah?"

"Trent?"

I sit upright at the sound of my mother's voice.

"Hey, mom." I rub the side of my head as I lean back in my chair. "What's up?"

"Just wanted to check in with you." There's a slight rattling sound in the background as if she's moving pots or something. "See how you're doing."

"I'm fine," I say absentmindedly, my attention going back to the cursor blinking on the screen. I have to finish this last paragraph, write a conclusion, and I'll finally be done.

There's a slight pause on the other end of the line. "You sound tired."

"I've been working on an essay for the past..." My gaze darts to the corner of the screen. "Damn, two hours. I didn't even realize that much time had passed."

"I think I taught you better than that, Trent."

I cringe. "Sorry, Mom. It's been a long day."

“Maybe you should slow down. I know you said you can take a full course load, but...”

“Mom,” I say slowly, interrupting her before she can finish. “I’m fine. Just tired. People get tired every day. It’s normal.”

“I’m just worried. I don’t want you to overwork yourself. Between school and *basketball*...”

The way she says basketball, you’d think we’re talking about a world war or some terrible and ugly disease.

I guess it was bound to happen. I should have known she’d call to check in with me after she found out about basketball.

“Can we not?”

“What?”

“Talk about it? I love playing basketball, and I have fun doing it. This is my last chance to actually play on a team.”

“It won’t be fun if you get injured.”

“I’m not going to get injured.”

“You can’t know that!”

I grit my teeth tight, my feet bouncing against the floor. I inhale deeply, taking a moment to calm myself before I say something that I might end up regretting.

“I can’t live my life in constant fear of what ifs, Mom,” I say slowly, finally voicing the words I’ve wanted to say so many times but didn’t. My fingers grip tighter around the phone, my feet bouncing against the floor in a quick rhythm. Furious *tap-tap-tap* matches my rapidly beating heart. “I love you, but I just can’t.”

There’s a low sniff on the other side.

Dammit. My fingers ball into a fist. The last thing I wanted to do was make her cry, but I can’t go back on this. I’m freaking nineteen years old. What does it say about me if I keep letting my parents dictate my life? “I should really go and finish that essay.”

“Okay, just...” Another sniffle. “Take care of yourself, okay?”

“I will. Don’t worry about me.”

“I’ll always worry about you.”

“I know. But nothing’s going to happen to me. I’m not that kid anymore.”

“I really hope so.”

I know so. I just don’t understand why they can’t see it too.

We say our goodbyes. I hang up and throw the phone on the bed, running my fingers through my hair.

It’s as if the walls are closing in on me, threatening to suffocate me. I turn in the chair, stopping, so I’m facing the desk. The damn cursor is still blinking on the screen, but I’m too wound up to concentrate on finishing this.

Tap-tap-tap.

Before I can think about it, I click Save and push to my feet.

I need air.

I dribble the ball letting it bounce on the tip of my fingers. Ducking left and right, I avoid my imaginary opponents, grab the ball, and shoot. The ball falls through the hoop with a satisfying *swoosh*.

Wiping the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand, I collect the ball and stand up, only to come to a halt. Somebody’s standing in the shadows just under the hoop. My heart kicks up a notch, the echo of the blood rushing through my veins growing louder.

I narrow my eyes, trying to see who it is as an unnatural fear spreads through my body.

Just then, the bright headlights illuminate the person as the car passes by.

Red hair.

Pale skin.

Big green eyes.

Long legs.

Grace.

I let out a shaky breath and feel my body relax a little.

It's just Grace.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’re stalking me.” I try to keep a neutral face, but there is a familiar twitch in the corner of my mouth.

Seriously, what is it about this girl that has me always smiling? Maybe it’s that she’s always so serious, and I want to see what it’d take to get her to smile. Or, God forbid, laugh.

Grace shifts from one foot to the other, pulling the strap of her duffle bag higher on her shoulder. “I was actually just on my way home.”

I throw a ball from one hand to the other. “What were you up to?”

“Volunteering.”

“No shit?” Slowly straightening to my full height, I take her in. She’s wearing boots and one of those ripped jeans that show a fair amount of skin. A black strap peeks out underneath her cream sweater. “Again?”

Grace just shrugs and looks away, clearly uncomfortable. “I do it once a week.”

“Volunteering once a week, tutoring, your own classes, dancing...” I put the ball under my arm and tick each thing off on my fingers. Just saying it out loud makes me look like a slacker. “Is there anything you don’t do?” I ask jokingly, but I’m genuinely curious. I could use any pointers I can get at this point.

“I just try to keep busy.”

“There is keeping busy, and then there is having a full schedule. I genuinely don’t know how you can do it all. I thought college was going to be fun, but the first semester isn’t even halfway over, and it’s already kicking my ass.”

“You’re going to get the hang of it.”

I run my fingers through my hair. “I really hope so.”

Grace moves closer, leaning against the pole of the basketball hoop. “What are you doing out playing so late?”

The phone call with my mom flashes in my mind, but I push it back. The guilt at making her cry is still eating at me. It doesn’t matter that it was the right thing to do.

“I just needed to breathe.” I spin the ball on the tip of my finger. “My dorm is close, and playing basketball helps ground me.” I look up at her and change the subject. “So dancing...”

“What about it?”

“If you like dancing so much, why not try your luck at going pro?”

“No way. I’m studying marketing. Dancing is just...” She takes a moment, her teeth grazing over her lower lip. “When I need to breathe,” she finishes finally, letting the lip pop.

The color rushes to the flesh, coloring it pink. Our eyes meet, the understanding passing between us. How can this person, who I barely know, understand me so well?

“I should—” Grace starts; at the same time, I ask, “Do you want to play?”

Her mouth falls open in surprise. “I... I don’t know how.”

“Never played ball?”

Something flashes on her face, but she masks it quickly, shaking her head no. “Never got a chance. I’m more of a football girl, actually.”

“Really? A boyfriend?”

I'm not sure what urges me to ask it, but I want to know. I want to know *her*. Her little quirks. Her wishes. Her dreams.

In some ways, she's so expressive, like an open book, but in others, I can't seem to read her at all.

Grace laughs. "A big brother." There's a slight pause. "He used to play professionally."

"No shit." She just shrugs. "Anybody I know?"

"J.D. Shelton?" Her voice is so tentative it comes out more like a question.

"He played for the Knights," I state the obvious.

Dumbass, she knows. It's her freaking brother.

"He did, but he retired a few years back."

"So cool. And he's your brother?"

She slips a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Half-brother, technically."

"I'm an only child, but I always wished I had a brother."

Grace looks to the side, her gaze growing distant for a moment as her smile falls. "So did I."

There's that sadness again—the one that's surrounding her so often. What's that all about? I want to ask her, but I worry she'll run away if I do.

"So you want me to teach you?" I ask instead.

Grace's head snaps up, her curls bouncing on her shoulders. "Huh?"

"To play ball?" I throw the basketball in the air and catch it easily. "Want me to teach you?"

Grace shakes her head. "I'm not—"

Before she can protest, I grab her hand in mine and pull her out onto the court. "C'mon, Grace. Please? It's not hard, I promise."

Together, we come to stand just in front of the basket. I turn toward her, tucking the ball under my arm, put my hands

on her upper arms and give her my best puppy dog look.

“Pretty please?”

Grace looks at me for a moment. Her teeth sink into her lower lip, nibbling at it as she thinks. The silence stretches for so long I think she’ll say no, but instead, she surprises me when she concedes. “Fine.”

“Yes.” I fist pump in victory.

Taking a step back, Grace shrugs the duffle bag off her shoulder and takes it to the side. She looks over her shoulder, a small smile on her mouth. “But if I end up hitting somebody, it’ll be your fault.”

GRACE

My heart thunders in my chest as I get back to the middle of the court. My hands are sweaty with nerves, so I brush them against the sides of my legs, hoping Trent doesn't notice it. Which is absurd since it seems that he sees everything.

It's just a ball game, I tell myself for the hundredth time. Hell, even calling it a game is a stretch.

But my heart doesn't listen.

Maybe I can teach you one day?

The familiar ache in my heart grows as I remember that day in the community center. The first time Mason noticed me. The first time he came and talked to me. The day he asked for my number. The day he asked me out on a date.

I squeeze my eyes shut and take in one shaky breath, trying to calm down before I give myself a heart attack. It doesn't help chase the memories away, though. If anything, they've been reoccurring more than ever since I met Trent. That smirk of his and the way his brown eyes shined as he looked at me.

Talk to you later, Legs.

"Ready, Legs?"

The past and present collide, and I feel my legs wobble underneath me. My throat bobs as I swallow, slowly blinking my eyes open.

"S-sure," I stutter. *Damn, Grace. Get a grip.* I slowly walk toward him. "How do you want to do this?"

"Do you know how to dribble?" Trent asks, easily bouncing the ball by his side. It goes up and down evenly, even though his attention is focused solely on me.

I lift my brow. That one movement has more bravado than I thought I had. Fake it till you make it, isn't that what people

say? “I’m pretty sure I’m capable of running and dribbling the ball.”

Trent scoops the ball in mid-air and hands it to me. “Humor me?”

“Fine.”

With a roll of my eyes, I take the ball from him. The bright orange leather feels rough under my fingertips. I take a step back and bounce the ball against the ground a few times before I start a light jog, dribbling it down the court and toward the basket.

I stop in front of it and shoot. The ball hits the hoop and bounces right back at me. I raise my hands in front of my face, but the hit never comes. I peek through my fingers and find Trent’s back in front of me.

He turns around and faces me, the ball in his hands. “Maybe try to be gentler next time? You don’t want to give yourself a concussion, trust me.”

“Gentler?”

Trent tsks, shaking his head. Before I can even realize what’s going on, he pulls me in front of him. I inhale sharply as his arms slip around me, his front pressing against my back, as he offers me the ball.

“Wh—” I look over my shoulder, and there he is. Standing so close, we’re almost touching. Almost, but not quite.

His hand goes to my belly, and he pulls me a few steps back.

“It’s easier if you have a decent arc. The closer you are, the higher you have to pop off the ground to make a shot,” he explains. His warm breath touches the soft skin behind my ear, making it pebble.

“O-okay.”

I turn my attention forward. The breath is stuck in my lungs, and I can’t seem to inhale properly.

God, please don’t let me faint.

“Your feet should be shoulder length apart,” Trent whispers. His head is just over my shoulder, his chin leaning against it. Trent taps his right foot against mine. “Just a smidge forward.” I take a step out. “Not that much.”

I correct my stance, heat pooling in my cheeks as Trent chuckles right into my ear. He’s standing so close I can feel his chest rumble against my back. He’s not exactly pressed against me, but close enough, I can feel the looming heat of his body.

And he actually looms over me. I’m a tall girl, so it’s usually a challenge to find a guy who’s at least my height, but not with Trent. He’s a good five or six inches taller than me, putting him at the perfect height. Just like Mason was.

He’s not Mason. I remind myself. He may look like Mason, but he’s not.

“Like this?”

“How does it feel?”

I shift my weight from one foot to the other, like I’ve seen boys at the community center do—*before*—when I still used to go to the gym to watch them play.

After Mason disappeared, and I realized he wasn’t coming back, I stopped. I just couldn’t bring myself to step foot in the place that held so many memories.

“You need to feel comfortable. There’s a lot of movement when you’re playing basketball, and you want to be able to shift quickly when necessary.”

“Yeah, I think this is good.”

“Okay, now...” Trent covers my hands with his, arranging my hands on the ball. My body quivers at his touch. The tips of his fingers are rough, probably from hours spent playing ball. I can hear his voice explain what he’s doing and why, but it’s just noise in the background because my heart is pounding rapidly, the sound of it echoing in my eardrums.

Thump-thump-thump.

Can he hear it? Can he see the pulse hammering rapidly in the hollow of my neck? Does he see the way he affects me?

The way having his body so close to mine messes with my head, my heart?

“And now you lift your hands up,” he maneuvers my arms over my head, “and you shoot. Got it?”

Closing my eyes, I nod my head yes. Anything that will put some much-needed distance between us so I can breathe.

This was such a bad idea.

“Wanna try?”

Another nod, and this time, Trent takes a step back.

Finally.

I let out a shaky breath and open my eyes. My body misses his warmth. Craves it, really. Just like I crave him. His nearness. His touch. I’ve yearned for it since I was sixteen years old. I crave it, and I hate it all at the same time. I loathe myself for wanting something I shouldn’t. For wanting something, *somebody*, that doesn’t belong to me. Never has and never will.

Sucking my lower lip, I sink my teeth into the soft flesh to the point of pain.

Concentrate!

Shifting my weight, I lift my arms in the air holding the ball over my head. Crouching down slightly, I jump off the ground and let the ball fly. It goes in a perfect arc, straight through the hoop, and bounces off the ground.

I turn around to Mason—*Trent*. “I did it!”

“Hell, yes! You did.”

Before I even realize what’s going on, Trent wraps his arms around me and pulls me up from the ground. I lift my legs in the air as Trent swirls me around on the court, laughing.

“Not that I had any doubt in my mind.”

Trent puts me back down, my wobbly feet barely holding me upright.

He just lifted me and spun me around like it was nothing.

The sad truth is, to him, it probably wasn't. He's just a guy who's happy to share his love of the sport with somebody else.

But to me?

To me, it was everything.

A little girl's dream. A grown woman's nightmare.

I run my shaky fingers through my hair, pushing it out of my face, and look at him. Trent's mouth is curled in a wide grin, his brown eyes filled with excitement as he stares at me.

Mason.

There is so much Mason in him it should be illegal.

He's not Mason.

But my heart doesn't care. It speeds up like it wants to leap out of my chest, beating to the tune of his name.

Ma-son.

Thump-thump.

Ma-son.

Thump-thump.

That smirk. Those eyes. It's all him.

We just stare at one another for what feels like an eternity. My throat bobs as I try to swallow, fighting the memories that want to overwhelm me.

Mason in the community center. Mason playing ball. Mason grinning at me. Mason standing on my doorstep to pick me up. Mason's hand holding mine. Mason's lips claiming mine. Mason taking a step back...

Somebody laughs in the distance, snapping me out of my thoughts. We both turn toward the sound of the noise, noticing a small group walking on the streets.

"I-I... I should probably get going," I stutter, taking a step back. Avoiding his gaze, I lift my hand and brush the corner of my eye.

You're not going to cry.

My bag catches my attention. I crouch down and pick it up, taking one deep breath before standing upright.

You can do this. Say goodbye and walk away.

“I’ll see you...”

Trent picks up the ball and turns to me. “C’mon, I’ll walk you home.”

“You don’t have to do that. You don’t have to leave because of me.”

Please, for the love of all that’s holy, stay.

“I’m leaving because it’s late, and I have work to do.”

“Then you should go back to your dorm.”

Which is on the other side of campus. I don’t say the words out loud, but both of us know what I mean.

Trent is quiet, so I force myself to look at him. His lips are pressed into a tight line; brown eyes fixed on me intently. I know that look, that stubborn set of his jaw.

“I don’t mind.” He tilts his head to the side. “C’mon, Legs.”

Legs.

“Okay.”

I’ve survived so far. I can surely survive a few more minutes. Right? It’s a better alternative than staying here and fighting him on this when I know he won’t give in. And I don’t think I can take him calling me Legs one more time.

Gripping my duffle bag tighter, I start walking. “But just so you know, I’m more than capable of walking home on my own.”

“I didn’t say you’re not capable, just that you shouldn’t walk alone when it’s dark.”

“This is Blairwood we’re talking about, Trent.” I give him a side glance. “It’s safe here.”

A frown appears between his brows. “There are bad people everywhere.”

“I know, but I’m not going to let them stop me from living my life.” I never have, not when I lived with my mother, and I’m not about to start now. “Besides, do you really think J.D. didn’t teach me how to defend myself?”

“You love your brother.”

It’s a statement, but I still answer. “I do. He’s the only parent I’ve ever known. My everything, really.”

Trent looks at me thoughtfully as if he’s trying to figure me out. “What’s your story, Grace Shelton?”

The bright light of my dorm shines in front of me, and I let out a sigh of relief.

“Maybe one day you’ll find out,” I chuckle nervously and tip my chin at the building. “This is me.”

Trent stops. “Saved by the dorm.”

“I guess you could say so.” But I don’t feel safe. For as long as Trent’s around, my heart will never be safe. And what does that say about me? “Thank you for teaching me how to shoot a basketball.”

I take a step back, ready to get out of here.

Trent rubs the back of his neck, that boyish smile curling his lips. “You could thank me by arranging that tutoring session?”

“Tutoring, right.”

The hopefulness in his voice makes my stomach clench. It’s unfair how attractive he is. How just one look at those brown eyes undoes me from the inside.

Of course, he wouldn’t forget. I was hoping for too much.

His smile falls a little. “If you’re too busy...”

“No, it’s fine. Text me when you have an opening, and we’ll figure something out?”

“You sure?”

I force out a smile. “Positive.”

Trent pulls out his phone from his pocket. “Give me your number?”

I rattle off the digits on autopilot and watch him type it in.

“I guess I’ll talk to you soon?”

Another step back.

Just a little bit longer.

“Sure thing.” There’s a slight pause. For a moment, I wonder if he’ll say something, but he just shakes his head. “Good night, Legs.”

“Night.”

I turn around on the balls of my feet, and only when I’m safely behind the door of my dorm do I let out a shaky breath. The realization of what just happened hits me in full force.

What the hell are you doing, Grace?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GRACE

“So, you what? Stayed and played basketball?” There’s clear skepticism in my best friend’s voice as she opens three packages of sugar and dumps them into her cup, stirring the black coffee.

“You know you can add creamer to that, right? No need to put yourself in a sugar coma.”

“Not if I want to survive the next few hours in class and then later in the darkroom.” Jade gives me a pointed look. “Now, if you’re done avoiding my question.”

I groan loudly. Of course, she won’t let it slide. Jade wasn’t home last night when I got to the dorm, so I got to avoid all her questions, but today... today is an entirely different story.

“I couldn’t exactly run in the other direction. Now, could I?”

“Maybe you couldn’t have done it, but you should have.” Jade shakes her head. “He’s not Mason. You know that, right?”

I tilt my head back and look up at the ceiling—anything to avoid her knowing gaze.

It’s rush hour at Cup It Up, so the place is loud as people come for their next fix, but it’s the only time of day where we could meet because Jade has a photography class later today, and I was hoping to catch up on some reading.

“I know that. I really do. It’s just...”

Hard doesn’t seem to cut it when it comes to explaining how being around Trent affects me and messes with my head. It’s like I can’t help myself. I want to leave and not look back. I know that would be the most rational thing to do, but I’m glued to the spot.

“I tried. I tried to walk away, but I just couldn’t. I can’t explain it to myself, much less to you.”

“I don’t want to see you hurting.”

“Yeah, I don’t think...”

My phone buzzes a few times, making the whole table rattle.

Jade gives me a knowing look. “Saved by the phone.”

But she doesn’t protest when I pick it up, just grabs her cup and takes a sip. I scan the message and feel a lump form in my throat. My heart skips a beat, fingers turning clammy as I force myself to read over the messages again.

Unknown number: If I thought I was bad before, I knew nothing.

Unknown number: *Nothing.*

Unknown number: I think I might have traumatized my French professor for life.

“What’s wrong?” Jade asks, sitting straighter in her seat.

I just shake my head and inhale deeply.

Me: What happened?

Unknown number: My professor asked me to write ‘I lowered my hand.’” So I did.

Unknown number: J’ai baisé ma main.¹

A loud snort escapes me. I can’t help it. It’s totally inappropriate, but it’s stronger than me, so I give in and laugh.

Me: Oh my god...

Me: You did NOT.

Jade kicks me under the table. “What’s going on?”

I shake my head. I’m still laughing so hard my stomach hurts. Jade huffs and sits next to me, peeking over my shoulder. A frown appears on her face. “What does that mean?”

“I fu...” I start to giggle uncontrollably, which only makes Jade’s scowl deepen.

“Are you okay?”

I nod, sucking in a long breath. “I...” I look around, noticing a few people watching us, so I lower my voice. “I fucked my h-hand.”

“You what?” Jade pulls back, a thoroughly shocked expression on her face. “What are you talking about?”

Before I can answer, the phone buzzes again.

Unknown number: Oh, I did. Who would have known one letter can change the meaning of the word so drastically?

Unknown number: If that’s not the sign that I need help, I don’t know what is.

Unknown number: Please, Legs. *clasped hands emoji*

I bite the inside of my cheek.

Me: When are you free?

Unknown number: At this point? Yesterday.

Letting out a long breath, I type out a reply before locking the phone and putting it back on the table. My stomach turns with the sudden nerves.

I’m actually going to do this. I’m going to tutor Trent.

Jade grabs my hands and turns me to face her. “Explain. What the hell just happened?” She tilts her head to the side. “Who was that?”

“Trent,” I admit softly and wait for her reaction.

Jade blinks and just stares at me for a while as if she didn’t expect that answer. Then she grows serious. “What did you do?”

“What did you say about avoir and that other one. What’s it called?”

“Hmm?”

I look up only to find Trent still scowling down at his book. “Those verbs?”

“Let me see.” I lean over the table, and a sharp zap of pain spreads through my belly. Apparently, the pain in my stomach I was feeling wasn’t just due to nerves; I also got my period. Lucky me. I wanted to take some ibuprofen earlier to help manage the pain, only to realize I didn’t have any in my bag, and I was too lazy to go back to the dorm. Something that I’m paying for right now.

Trent turns his notebook toward me, and I look at the example that’s giving him problems. *J’ai allé à l’école.*

“It’s *Je suis allé à l’école.* The verb you need is *être*, not *avoir*. The way you wrote it would mean ‘I have gone to school.’ When in reality you need ‘I went to school.’”

“Oh, right. I knew there was another one. Seriously, this shouldn’t be so hard.”

I sit back down in my chair. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. It’ll get easier.”

“You haven’t heard me speak yet. I swear my teacher cringes every time I open my mouth.”

“You can’t be that bad.”

“I repeat, you haven’t heard me speak yet. I’m pretty sure I traumatized the woman.”

I start to chuckle but stop as a throat clears just behind my back. *Loudly.*

Trent’s eyes grow wide, and I suck on my lower lip, trying to stay composed. Slowly shifting in my seat, I peek over my shoulder, only to find an older librarian glaring in our direction over the thick rims of her glasses.

A deep scowl between her brows only makes me want to laugh harder.

Trent can see it too. The corner of his mouth twitches upward, no matter how much he tries to keep a cool face.

Seriously? He mouths.

I just shrug.

It's funny. A little. I don't see what her issue is? It's not like we're disturbing anybody. That's why I liked this little nook in the first place. It's quiet and solitary. There are no people whispering or the music you can hear coming through the earbuds, and the air isn't hot from all the bodies gathered in the space, making it hard to concentrate.

Trent shakes his head. "If I only knew it would take bringing you to the library."

"What?" I shift in my seat, and another stab of pain goes through my stomach.

Damn.

"To see you laugh."

"I laugh," I protest. *Don't I?*

"You chuckle. Occasionally smile. But so far, I've never heard you laugh." He pulls his notebook closer. "It looks good on you."

His words unnerve me. I laugh. Maybe not with him, because he's a completely different story, but with my family and friends, sure.

I rub my low belly, hoping that it'll help ease the pressure but to no avail. The pain has been progressively growing, and if I don't take my pain meds soon, chances are I won't get out of this chair. I look at the books open in front of me, and Trent scribbling away in his notebook.

"I think I'm done for today," I whisper. I feel bad for leaving him, but I won't get any work done anyway, so why bother sitting here when I have a hot pack and a pint of ice cream with my name written on it waiting for me in my dorm?

Trent's eyes meet mine. And is that disappointment I see in his gaze? I'm probably imagining it. "Are you okay?" His eyes narrow at me. "You seem a bit pale."

I feel my cheeks heat for a moment. Yeah, I'm not going there. No way. "It's just one of those days," I say vaguely,

closing my books and sliding them into my backpack. “Besides, it’s getting late.”

Trent pulls out his phone as I grab my jacket and pull it on.

“You’re right. C’mon, I’ll walk you home.”

“Oh, you don’t have to,” I protest just as one loud “Shhh!” comes from behind me.

Seriously?

We both turn, and sure enough, the librarian is still there, her glare even harder than it was before. She makes a motion of zipping her mouth. Who still does that? Apparently, she does.

Holding in a sigh, I grab my backpack. There’s an amused smile on Trent’s mouth. He lifts his brow silently as if daring me to say something.

I cross my arms over my chest and press my lips in a tight line to show him just how not amused I am by the whole situation, which earns me a full-on grin, and my heart skips a beat as an image of Mason flashes in front of my eyes.

A warm ache squeezes my chest.

It’s unfair how gorgeous he looks when he smiles. How similar he is to Mason.

Why is life so unfair?

It took Mason from me, only to bring his exact replica back into my life to dangle it in front of my nose, knowing I won’t be able to do anything because he’s taken.

He’s taken. He’s taken. He’s taken.

Maybe if I repeat it enough times, I’ll accept it for what it is. The truth.

Letting out a slow breath, I wait for him to pack his things. Together we slowly move past the librarian, who’s still observing us with watchful eyes, and head out of the building.

“You’re going to get us banned from the library,” I say as soon as we’re outside.

“Hey, the last I remember, she shushed *you*, not me.”

“Whatever.” I hurry my step, Trent’s laughter following after me. The sound of footsteps grows louder, and it doesn’t take long for him to catch up to me.

“What are you up to, anyway? Any plans for the weekend?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “If you count curling up on a couch with a pint of ice cream and a movie as plans, sure. I have plans.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. What are you watching?”

“Not sure.” I shrug. “I usually just sit down and start whatever looks good on Netflix. But maybe *Les Enfants du Paradis*. I haven’t watched anything in French in a while, and helping you made me realize I miss it.”

Trent hurries in front of me and turns around so we’re face to face. “You watch movies in French?” He sounds so dumbfounded by the idea I can’t help but laugh.

“Not regularly, no. But every once in a while, I’ll turn on something and watch it. When I was just starting, I had a hard time with my pronunciation, so my sister-in-law suggested watching movies in French. It really helped me.” I give him a pointed glance. “Maybe you should try it.”

His brows rise. “Watching French movies?”

“It doesn’t have to be movies. You could try listening to the music or watching a TV show or something. Just so you get used to the way the language sounds. I could try to come up with a few suggestions for you if you’d like.”

“Or we could watch that... What did you say it’s called? Paradise something?”

“*Les Enfants du Paradis*,” I repeat.

“Yeah, that.” He tilts his head to the side. “What d’ya say?”

My fingers tighten around the strap of my backpack as I watch him for a moment as we come to a stop in front of my

dorm. “You mean, like now?”

He can't be serious, can he?

My heart starts beating faster as a wave of heat spreads through my body at the idea of Trent coming to my room. Being in my space. Sitting next to him in a dark room.

He has a girlfriend. Chill.

“Sure, if you don't mind me crashing.”

“I...” My hands are clammy, and the need to brush them against the sides of my legs is strong.

“If it's too weird...”

“No,” I say quickly, then force myself to calm down. “No, it's fine. I just didn't expect it, that's all.”

Walking me back to the dorm? Sure, I can totally see him doing that because he's kind and caring. But staying over to watch a movie? That's something completely different. He could be doing a number of things. Study. Hang out with his friends. *His girlfriend*. And yet, he chooses to watch a movie with me.

Why is that?

The corner of Trent's mouth lifts in a hopeful smile. “So, what do you say, Legs?”

TRENT

“This is so weird.”

“Why?”

I glance at Grace, who’s sitting on the other side of the couch, her gaze fixed on the TV in front of her. Her feet are on the couch, clad in one of those colorful, fuzzy socks. Her arms are wrapped around her legs as she hugs a pillow close to her chest. The bright light of the screen illuminates her pale face.

“Besides the fact that I’ve never watched a black and white movie?”

“Yeah,” Grace chuckles softly. “Besides that.”

Grace’s dorm, well, technically, a suite, was empty when we got there; no roommate in sight. The place was way nicer than my dorm, definitely homier. Throw pillows are scattered on the couches, curtains hanging on the windows, a fuzzy rug covers the floor, and candles on the coffee table. It made me wonder, how much of it was Grace and how much were her roommates?

“There’s also the fact that it’s in French. And they talk so fast I can barely keep track even with the subtitles on. How is that educational, again?”

“Because it’s not the point to understand everything by the end of the movie. You just want to get the hang of the language. The way they speak, the pitch of their voice, the accent. Maybe catch a new word here and there.”

Grace shifts in her seat, and pain flashes across her face. It’s there for a split second before she masks it, but I know I saw it, and it wasn’t the first time either.

I narrow my eyes at her. “Are you okay?”

She’s been acting weird the whole afternoon. Her face was even paler than usual, the lines on her forehead growing deeper as the day went on.

“Yeah.”

“You don’t look okay to me. Seriously, what’s going on?”

I’m not sure since it’s dark, but it seems like a little bit of color creeps up her cheeks as she avoids my gaze.

“I’ll be okay in a bit. It’s just cramps. I took the painkillers when we got here, but it’ll take some time for them to kick in.”

Cramps? As if she’s on her period?

“We’ve been here for like half an hour already,” I point out, rubbing the back of my neck.

Shouldn’t they have kicked in by now?

I know next to nothing about girls and periods, but I know my pain meds. And that’s usually how long it takes for my migraine medicine to kick in.

“What can I say? I’m one of the unlucky ones.” Grace runs her hand through her hair, pushing the strands back. “I didn’t have any with me earlier, so I should have probably taken two, but if I did, I’d be asleep by now.”

Asleep and pain-free. But she’s struggling. Because of me. Because I wanted to watch a stupid movie, and she felt obligated to do it.

“Why didn’t you say something? We could have done this another day.”

Or you could have done it on your own. In your own room, in your free time.

Not that I have much of that, but still. Only the idea doesn’t have as much appeal.

“It’s fine, really.”

“It’s not!” My protest comes out harsher than intended. I pinch the bridge of my nose and let out a shaky breath, trying to compose myself. The idea that Grace is in any amount of pain because of me does something to me I can’t name. “Is it usually this painful?”

“Mostly.” Grace leans her head on her knees, wrapping her arms tighter around her legs. “It helps when I take painkillers early, but today I forgot them in the dorm and was too lazy to go and get them before I went to the library. It’s my fault, really.”

“Is there anything I can do to help? Anything you need?”

From this angle, I can see her cheeks are bright red. I’m not even sure why I’m insisting. It’s clearly making her uncomfortable, but I can’t let it go. There must be something I can do that will ease my conscience. Because no matter what she said, I felt guilty.

“There’s a heating pad in the bathroom that I usually...”

A heating pad?

“Why don’t you have it now?”

“It was just...”

At my raised brows, she shrugs.

Seriously, this girl. I get up on my feet, eager to do something. “Where do you keep it?”

“You don’t have to...” Grace tries to get up, but the movement must cause her pain because she presses her lips so tightly together they’re white. Her throat bobs as she swallows, her hand gripping her lower belly.

“Dammit, Grace! Are you always this stubborn?” As gently as I can, I push her back on the couch. “Where do you keep it? I’ll get it for you.”

Grace looks up. Her pupils are dilated, making her eyes seem larger, more vulnerable. Or they would if it weren’t for the scowl etched deep between her brows. She jabs her finger into my chest. “You’re awfully bossy.”

“So you better tell me because you’re just wasting both of our time.”

Finally, she gives in. “Bathroom. Last drawer.”

I quirk a brow. “Was that so hard?”

“Just embarrassing,” Grace mutters as I walk toward her bathroom.

I flick on the switch, the bright light blinding me temporarily. I blink a few times to clear my vision and for the room to come into focus. If I thought the common area was girly, it has nothing on the bathroom: fluffy towels, makeup, and two dozen different bottles on the countertop plus a small shelf next to the sink.

A heating pad, I remind myself. You're looking for a heating pad.

What the hell does that even look like?

I crouch down in front of the sink and pull out the last drawer. Like the rest of the place, it's filled with different girly shit. Pink razors, cotton, tampons? I quickly move a few things to the side until I see a fluffy smiley face looking back at me.

“Hey, is it the smiley?” I call over my shoulder, my fingers wrapping around the oval thing.

“Y-yeah, that's the one.”

I shut the drawer and stand up, going back to the living room.

Taking my seat, I hand it to her. “How does this work?”

Grace puts the pillow to the side and lifts her shirt.

Involuntarily, my eyes go to the patch of skin, watching the shirt slide slowly up her flat stomach and showing more of her creamy skin. My throat tightens, making it hard to breathe. For a split second, my brain conjuncts the image of Grace pulling the shirt off completely. What is she wearing underneath? Something practical or sexy? Would her skin feel soft under my fingers?

I reel back as the thoughts settle in my mind. The heat creeps up my neck, my whole body turning rigid.

What the hell is wrong with you, dude?

My heart is pounding so hard; you'd think I ran a marathon. The beat of it is so loud I can hear it echo in my

eardrums.

I've never thought about a girl other than Ash in those terms.

Ever.

Much less react to one, but even if I wanted to, I couldn't deny it. My body is responding to Grace in every way it shouldn't.

"Trent?"

I look up at the sound of my name to find Grace observing me quietly. As inconspicuously as possible, I grab one of those fluffy pillows and pull it over my lap, praying to anybody who'll listen that she doesn't notice.

Talk about awkward.

"Y-yeah?" I clear my throat, but it doesn't help much. My voice comes out low and raspy.

"You asked how it works?"

Right.

Before I got distracted by her creamy skin and got a freaking boner.

"There's a switch inside of it to turn it on. That's it."

"And it helps?"

She slides her shirt back in place—Thank God—and pulls her knees close to her chest once again.

"It eases some of the pain. Think of it as an ice pack when you get hurt, only it warms you up." Her gaze darts to the TV. "We missed half the show."

I look at the screen but barely register what's going on. I was lost before, but there is no going back now. Maybe it's better this way.

I run my hand over my face. "Maybe we should finish this another time, so you can rest?"

"Oh." Grace's smile drops. "Yeah, sure."

Nodding, I jump to my feet. I quickly turn my back to her and grab my jacket.

“Let me just...”

The couch groans as Grace tries to get up. I turn around and put my hands on her shoulders to hold her in place—only it backfires. There’s a zap of energy at the touch. It courses through my arms and all the way to the pit of my stomach.

I quickly pull them back, breaking the contact. “You don’t have to get up.” Zipping my jacket, I grab my backpack off the floor. “Thanks for studying with me today.” I look at her but try to avoid her gaze. “I think it really helped. Talk soon?”

“Sure, talk soon.”

With one final nod, I get the hell out. I take two steps at a time until I’m standing outside, the door firmly closed behind me.

Only then do I let out a breath I hadn’t even realized I’d been holding.

What the hell was that?

I run my fingers through my hair. They’re trembling. My whole body is really. It’s like it’s filled with some repressed energy I can’t get out.

I close my eyes and try to calm my erratic breathing. But it doesn’t help. Because as soon as my eyes are closed, a pair of wide green eyes stare right back at me.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TRENT

“Dude, that was one sweet shot.” Matteo slaps me on the shoulder.

I wipe the sweat off my forehead. “Only thanks to your assist.”

Today Coach announced who would be starting in our next game, and there was nobody more surprised than me when he called out my name. I’ve worked hard, sure, but so did every other guy on the team. Besides, most of these guys have played their whole lives, while I’ve only done it on the rare chances when I could sneak off with Matteo.

But I’ve actually made it.

The practice has been grueling as always, but it seems like the team is slowly starting to mesh together.

“This could be our year,” Nate says longingly, which earns him a slap on the head from Quinn. “Bro, don’t go jinxing us.”

A few people nod their heads in agreement as we make our way toward the locker room.

Blairwood has always had a solid team, but they haven’t won a championship in years.

I pull my locker open and tug my shirt off before pulling out my duffle bag just in time to see my phone screen light up as a message appears. Wiping the sweat from the back of my neck, I unlock my phone. A notification awaits me on the screen.

Ashley: What are you up to?

Guilt slams into me like a train wreck. It eats at me from the inside out, leaving a hollow feeling behind and a bitter taste in my mouth.

I tossed and turned on my bed for what felt like hours, but I couldn’t fall asleep. Instead, I stared at the dark ceiling, my mind whirling. I couldn’t get the image of Grace out of my

head. The way my body reacted when she was near. The pull that I felt every time I was around her, to make her happy, to see that smile that she showed to just a few selected people.

No other girl made me feel that way.

Not even Ashley.

And the fact that I hadn't thought about my girlfriend at all while I was with Grace... what the hell did that even say about me?

Me: Just finished with practice.

I'm about to throw my phone back into my duffle bag, but the little dots appear on the screen that she's typing back.

Ashley: Come over?

My stomach clenches at the idea. But before I can think too much about it or get a chance to come up with an answer, Quinn yells loudly over the noise filling the locker room. "Yo, assholes. Get cleaned up. We're going to Moore's tonight."

Somebody whistles, probably Nate, and a few guys cheer in agreement. Matteo elbows me. His gaze falls to the phone in my hand before he looks me in the eye. "You coming?"

"Sure."

I look down at my phone and the message still waiting for an answer.

Me: Guys are going to Moore's. It's a team thing.

I hit send quickly, not giving myself a chance to change my mind. It *is* a team thing. I'm not lying.

Why do you feel so relieved then?

I shake my head, pushing the thought back. Besides, Ashley doesn't like anything that's connected to the sport. 'Cause God forbid you sweat.

I wait for a few heartbeats, expecting an answer, probably a pissed-off one at that, but nothing happens, so I drop my phone into my bag and grab my towel.

“What’s going on with you anyway?” Matteo asks as we head to the showers.

“Nothing. Why?”

“You seem off somehow. Where were you last night? Did Harpy take you shopping or some shit like that?”

“No.” I give him a pointed look just before we each slip into a stall. “I was studying. I found a tutor for French.”

“No shit? That’s good, man.”

“I don’t know about that,” I mutter, turning on the shower.

“Why? You can’t risk your grades dropping now. Not if you want to keep playing.”

“I know. That’s not the issue.” I step under the shower, hissing as the cold water hits my skin.

“Then what’s the issue?”

“It’s Grace.” I rub my hands over my face and run my fingers through my hair, pushing it away from my face.

“Who?”

“The redhead who crashed into me a few weeks back?”

“The one that Ashley can’t stand?” Of course, he’d remember her like that. “How did that happen, anyway?”

I put some shampoo on and quickly rub it over my body before rinsing off. My whole body is shivering from the icy shower, but it’s exactly what I need to cool my head.

“We saw each other in the library, and she saw my textbook. And since they couldn’t find me a tutor in the center who doesn’t already have his schedule full, I asked her if she could help me.”

I kill the shower and grab my towel to dry off.

“It doesn’t have anything to do with the fact that she’s smokin’?”

My jaw clenches at that comment. Grace isn’t just hot. She’s gorgeous, both inside and out. But does my best friend really have to take notice?

Why does it matter anyway? Maybe she's dating that guy she's tutoring or somebody completely different.

"Who's smokin'?" Quinn asks as he gets out of his cubicle.

Matteo opens his mouth, but I glare at him. "Nobody. Do you plan to sit here and chit chat, or are we going to the bar?"

"Damn, this place is packed," I mutter as we make our way through the crowd toward the back. Just when we get there, a group of people rises from a table, so we sit down in the booth they emptied.

"It's game night, so there are usually more people," Quinn explains, just as the server stops by the table to clear it out.

"Hockey season has started, right?"

Blairwood has a lot of different teams, but football and hockey are the two the university is most known for.

Matteo sits next to me, his phone in his hand. "Yeah, and they won six to one."

"Nice."

"Better than the football team, that's for sure," Kyle turns toward us as the server leaves the table.

"Damn, that game was hard to watch," Dave, one of our forwards, nods with a grim face.

I haven't seen the game, but Matteo has, so I've heard what a clusterfuck it was. It's a shame since the team has been doing so well this season, and they're the defending champions too. I don't know anybody on the football team, but I couldn't imagine the amount of pressure they must be feeling.

A server stops by our table, and we place our order. Then the conversation switches to basketball and our first few opponents once the season starts at the beginning of

November. I listen with half an ear. For some reason, my mind is still stuck on football.

I'm more of a football girl. Grace's words ring in my ears.

Did she watch the game? Or was she only interested in watching when her brother was playing?

Why am I still thinking about her?

Based on how things ended last night, I wouldn't be surprised if she told me to fuck off the next time I asked her for help. But I couldn't stay there. There was a real chance that if I did, I'd do something stupid like pull her to me and kiss her.

A shiver runs down my spine as I remember how she felt in my arms that night at the court. I didn't plan to hug her. It just sort of happened. Grace seemed so baffled by the fact that she actually scored. The look of wonder on her face. A flash of brightness shining in her green irises. I couldn't help myself. It was instinctual.

What I wasn't ready for was the jolt of electricity going through my body as soon as my arms wrapped around her. The same jolt was there yesterday when I placed my hands on her shoulders. It was there every time we touched.

Get your head out of your ass. You have a girlfriend.

It isn't right—the way she makes me feel, the things she makes me want.

I have a girlfriend, for fuck's sake. I shouldn't be thinking that way about a girl I barely know. A girl whose help I need and can't risk losing because I can't get my dick in check.

Hands slide around my neck, startling me from my thoughts. I grab them, tilting my head back, only to find Ashley's smiling face looking down at me.

“Hey, babe.”

The guilt slams into me with a vengeance. She's here, smiling, and just moments ago, I was thinking about another girl.

What the hell's wrong with me? I'm not that kind of guy. Just recently, I've been reassuring her nothing is going on, and now I'm doing the exact opposite.

“Hey.” Letting my hands drop, I turn around to face her. “What are you doing here?”

When she didn't answer that last message I sent her, I figured she was pissed at me for ditching her for the guys.

Part of me was relieved because it made this all a bit easier, but I knew I could only ignore what was happening for so long. Still, I will gladly take every precious second I can get to avoid the reality. To avoid guilt.

Because, wanting to admit it or not, something is going on between Grace and me. Something more than the fact I'm grateful for her help and that I find her mesmerizing. What more? I have no idea, but I want to find out. And Ashley, she doesn't deserve that kind of shit.

“We were bored, so we decided to come.” Only then do I notice a girl standing slightly behind her. Sanya? Sara? Stacy? I'm not sure what her name is, but I do remember seeing her around.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Quinn lean in his chair and beckon her closer. She gives Ash a squeeze and walks around the table to Quinn and slides straight onto his lap since there aren't any available chairs.

Ashley shifts her weight from one leg to another. “I hope that's okay. I mentioned to Sylvia you guys were hanging out, and since she knows Quinn...”

“Sure.” I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her down. Ash laughs and slides onto my lap, one arm curling around my neck, fingers grazing my nape.

“What were you up to?”

“Shopping with Sylvia. That's why I didn't text you back. We wanted to finish and come as soon as possible.” Ashley brushes her lips against my cheek. “I missed you this week.”

Another punch to my gut. As if I don't feel guilty enough as it is.

“A lot has been going on.” I'm not even lying. Between practices and classes, I barely had time to breathe.

And yet, you still went to Grace's place to watch movies instead of hanging out with Ashley.

Ash slides her finger over my bottom lip. “Well, maybe after a few drinks, you can make it up to me.”

GRACE

“This place is always so packed,” Rei yells so she can be heard over the loud noises of the bar.

“Especially on game nights.” Jade nods her head, her eyes scanning the place for an empty table, but no such luck. Moore’s is a sports bar, a local student hangout and athlete favorite. And after the Ravens wiped the ice with the opposing team, it was to be expected we’d find a crowd.

“There’s always some kind of game on in here.”

“That’s the secret to their success.” Jade looks at us over her shoulder and winks. “Plus, cheap beer and greasy food. C’mon, let’s go to the bar.”

Together we move toward the bar. It’s equally crowded as the rest of Moore’s, but Jade squeezes through the people and places our order in less than sixty seconds.

“How was your first hockey game, Rei?” Marcus asks, leaning down so he doesn’t have to yell over all the noises in the bar. This is the first time I’ve seen him outside of class in the last few weeks. I didn’t even realize he was going with us to the game until we saw him sitting in the stands. Apparently, Jade texted him to ask if he’d come. Me and Rei? She just told us to change since we were going out.

“Better than anticipated. I really had fun.”

“And that wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain hockey player?” Jade turns to her, her brows raised as she hands us two beer bottles.

Rei looks away, but I can see the color rising up her neck. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course, you don’t,” Jade laughs and turns around for the second part of our order. Handing one bottle to Marcus, she leans against the bar and takes a sip of her beer. “I’m just telling it as I see it. No nee—”

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Jade rolls her eyes at the sound of her brother's voice. Deliberately, just to piss him off, she takes one really slow sip of her beer. "We talked about this, Nixon."

"About your drinking?" Nixon crosses his arms over his chest, his face turning grimmer by the second. "I don't remember that conversation."

"About you treating me like a baby and trying to boss me around. Just because I decided to go to the same college as you doesn't give you the right to meddle in my life."

The scowl between his brows deepens. "You shouldn't be drinking. You're underage."

"This is a college bar. Who the fuck cares? Besides, can you honestly tell me you haven't been drinking since your first year of college? Hell, I'm pretty sure I saw you sneaking a bottle out of the house back in *high school*." Jade crosses her arms over her chest, too, matching her brother's stance, and cocks her brow at him in a challenge, daring him to contradict her.

"I care. And that's beside the point."

"That's *exactly* the point. Not that anybody cares about what you have to say, so there's that."

Nixon takes a step closer. "Don't be sassy with me, Smalls."

Jade jabs him in the chest and smiles sweetly. "Don't be a dickhead because I'll tattle on you to Yasmin." She looks around like she expects Yasmin to appear at any moment. "Where's she, anyway?"

"Working," Nixon runs his hand through his hair, taking a step back. "She'll come in a little bit."

"You're here without her?" Jade mocks surprise, and I chuckle lightly. I could understand her surprise. We've gotten used to seeing Nixon and Yas attached at the hip all summer long, even between all the obligations. Usually, when you see one, the other is right there too.

"She said she'll come once she's done."

“And you let her?”

“Don’t be a smartass, Smalls.”

Nixon ruffles Jade’s hair, which earns him a slap on the hand.

“Go hang out with your friends, and let me hang out with mine, you old man.”

Chuckling, I turn around, trying to find Nixon’s friends. Moore’s is always full of life at any time of the day. Two long, dark bars stretch on both sides of the room. There are high-top tables, big dark booths, pool, and other games all the way in the back room. TVs are propped on the wall above the bars that make this the perfect student hangout. Oh, and let’s not forget the different sports memorabilia from current students and past, proudly displayed on walls and shelves.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” Rei says to nobody in particular.

I’m just about ready to give up when something catches my attention.

No, not something. *Somebody*. Him.

Just like always, my heart speeds up at the sight of him. Ma—*Trent*—is sitting in the booth with some of his friends, and sitting on his lap is no one other than his girlfriend.

My body freezes at the sight of them, a lump forming in my throat.

Of course, he’s with her. It’s Friday night. People go out, have fun. Couples go out on dates.

“You want to go play darts?” Jade asks, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“I—” I try to swallow, but my throat feels dry, so I shake my head no.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I think I’ll stay here. Wait for Rei.”

Jade gives me a look but thankfully doesn't question me further. "Okay, we're in the back if you wanna join."

Forcing out a smile, I nod, my fingers tightening around the beer bottle. My gaze follows Jade and Marcus on their way to the back. Absentmindedly, I lift the bottle and take a long pull, the bitter taste making me frown.

Against my better judgment, I let my gaze wander in the direction of where he's sitting. People are going this way and that, so it takes me a while, but I finally spot them in one of the booths.

Trent's hand is around her waist, slowly caressing the small of her back.

The other night, his hands were on me.

But he doesn't belong to me.

He never did.

"Who are you looking at?"

My head snaps to the side, my heart thundering rapidly in my ribcage at being caught watching. I press my palm against my chest, feeling the wild beat under the tips of my fingers as I meet Spencer's amused face.

I let out a slow breath. "You scared me."

Spencer cocks his eyebrow, an amused grin on his face. "If you don't want to be caught, maybe you shouldn't be staring, Red."

"I wasn't staring," I mutter, looking away. But I totally was, and we both know it.

My cheeks heat under Spencer's watchful eyes. He's still staring at me. I can feel his probing gaze on the side of my face, waiting for me to turn around, but I don't.

Avoid, avoid, avoid.

Which turns out to be a bad idea because as I try so hard not to look at Spencer, my eyes instantly fall on *him*. Trent. It's like there's an inner radar or something that pulls me to him as long as we're a few feet apart.

Trent is discussing something with his friends, his girlfriend still sitting on his lap and talking to the only other girl at the table, an equally gorgeous brunette.

She, too, is sitting in the lap of another player. The dark-skinned guy with short dreadlocks looks familiar, although I'm not sure from where. He's playing with a strand of her hair as he talks to his friends.

I start to look away but stop when my eyes meet a pair of blue ones staring directly at me.

Shit, shit, shit.

Even if I wanted to, I couldn't avert my gaze. She saw me watching, as clear as day. I gulp down as we just stare at one another across the room. Her eyes narrow at me. All the noise falls into the background. The only thing I can hear is the hard beat of my heart and my labored breathing.

This is bad.

Before I can look away—something I should have done as soon as our eyes met—a guy rises, his tall frame coming between the two of us. Quickly, I turn my back to her, only to find Spencer observing me carefully.

Dammit. Can't a girl get a break around here?

"Yeah, I can see how you're not staring."

I press my lips in a tight line, not in the mood to talk about any of this. "Did you need something?" I cross my arms over my chest, my fingers wrapping around my upper arms, digging into my skin. "I figured you'd be busy with all your admirers after the game?"

A grin appears on Spencer's face. The guy is clearly amused by the question. Well, that makes one of us. "Are you keeping tabs on me, Red?"

"Don't flatter yourself." I turn my head around, so I once again have the basketball group in my sight. I'm such a glutton for punishment.

"Is he the guy?" Spencer asks, leaning on the bar next to me.

“What guy?” I feign ignorance. My gaze lowers down to the bottle in my hand, and suddenly, the label seems pretty interesting.

“The one from the library?”

Of course, he’d remember. The guy has a hawk’s eye that doesn’t miss a thing. It makes me wonder how much he noticed about me.

“Maybe?” I shrug. “I’m not sure.”

Leave it alone, I beg him silently. But today’s not my lucky day.

A finger sneaks under my chin, and a gentle push prompts me to lift my head.

“Are you into him or something?”

“W-what?” I sputter, my eyes go wide. I did *not* see this question coming. Maybe I should have.

“Are you into him?” The way he asks it, you’d think he’s asking me if I want to order fries or something, when it’s anything but.

“W-what gives you...”

His eyes are fixed on me, the blue of his irises darker. Hard and unwavering. “Because it seems to me, he has a girlfriend.”

My heart pounds faster, tongue sliding out to wet my dry lips.

I don’t know what to say. There is nothing to say, not really. Spencer’s right.

Slowly, as if waiting for me to stop it, Spencer turns around, his eyes going to...

I grab his hand and turn him toward me. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Just checking. You could do so much better than that. You know that, right?”

I’m not sure if it’s those words or the whole situation, but I finally snap. “You don’t know anything, so why don’t you stay

out of this?”

The dumbass has the audacity to smirk at me, a knowing look in his eyes. “But don’t I?”

“No, you most definitely don’t,” I grit through clenched teeth. “I’m going to find Jade.”

Without looking back, I walk around him and between the tables as fast as my feet can carry me through the crowd.

Jade and Marcus are still playing darts and have attracted quite a crowd. I slip between the throng and off to the side, away from the people.

Breathe.

I close my eyes, forcing even breaths in and out of my lungs. My whole body feels tight, and I don’t remember when I clenched my fingers into fists, but they are. I can feel my nails digging into my palms. In and out, I breathe until I can finally unwind. Only when I feel like I’m in control once again do I open my eyes.

Jade hits dead center, the dart joining the other two. People cheer as Jade sashays toward the board and picks up her darts. Only then does she notice me standing by the wall.

She smiles, and I only hope she can’t see my distress because I don’t want to be the one to dampen her mood. “Where’s Rei?”

“Still in the bathroom.”

“Weren’t you waiting for her?”

“I was, but Spencer showed up.”

Just saying his name had my jaw clenching. So much for being in control.

Are you into him?

Jade raises her eyebrows. “What did he want?”

“To drive me insane?” I shrug as we walk back to the line where Marcus is currently throwing his darts. His are nowhere near close to the center, but he seems determined.

Jade grabs a bottle from one of the nearby tables and takes a swig. “The guy’s into you.”

Wait, what? I peer at her. “No, he’s not.”

He said so himself. How did he put it? I’m unavailable? Yeah, that sounds like something he’d have said.

Jade laughs. A deep belly laugh. “Um, yes, he is.”

I shake my head. The idea is absurd. “You’re crazy.”

“Think what you want, but I say it as I see it.”

“He just wants to be in my good graces, so he doesn’t lose his statistics tutor. Pun not intended.”

Jade shrugs, but that smile is still on her face. “If you say so.”

“I do.” I’m not even sure why I’m insisting so much. She just agreed with me, so she must think I’m right. But that damn smile.

Marcus picks up his darts and turns toward us. “Do you two plan to chat all evening, or are we playing?”

Jade leaves her bottle on the table next to me, a wide grin on her face. “Oh, we’re playing. I’m not giving up now that I’m kicking your ass at darts.”

I watch them play for a little while longer. As expected, Jade wins by far, but Marcus is a good sport about it. Another guy challenges Jade to a match, but she just shakes her head as the two of them join me by the table.

“Hey, where’s Rei?” Marcus asks, looking around.

Jade turns to me. “She still hasn’t come?”

I shake my head no. “Not since she went to the bathroom, but it’s been a while.”

The two of us exchange a look.

“Let’s go find her.”

Marcus joins us on our way back to the bar where Spencer is still sitting and flirting with some girl. No surprises there.

I give Jade a pointed look that clearly says: See? I'm right.
She just rolls her eyes.

“Hey,” I slide next to him. I might still be pissed at him because of earlier, but this isn't about us. Not that there is an us. This is about figuring out where Rei is. The girl gives me the stink eye, but I ignore her and concentrate on Spencer. “Have you seen Rei?”

Lazily, he removes his gaze from the girl's cleavage enough to say, “She left.”

“Left?”

“Yeah, just a while ago. She and Zane got into a fight, and then she went home.”

Before the words are out, his attention is back on the girl. Not that I care. My gaze shifts to Jade's blazing eyes. “Let's go find her.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

GRACE

“I still can’t believe you two hooked up! Thank God for earplugs because I didn’t need to hear that.”

“Jade!” I chastise.

“What?” My best friend gives me a side glance. “You can’t honestly tell me you haven’t heard them. She should be happy I didn’t bring it up earlier when we were at the diner with everybody.”

Apparently, Rei didn’t need our saving last night. Whatever fight she and Zane had, they resolved it pretty quickly all on their own, and by the time we got to our dorm, we were greeted by clothes scattered all over the common space. At least they were hidden behind closed doors.

Rei’s eyes are huge, face positively red. She looks between the two of us. “We weren’t that loud, were we?”

“Eh...”

Rei turns to me. “Were we?”

“A little bit,” I admit, feeling my own face heat. I *don’t* know how to talk about sex. I’ve never had the need to talk about it because the only sexual experience I had was so bad and slightly mortifying, to say the least, that there was nothing to talk about.

Rei buries her face in her hands and groans loudly, “Oh my God...”

“Seriously, there’s nothing to be embarrassed about. You should hear our neighbors. I’m pretty sure they’re into some kinky stuff. Why do you think I need earplugs?”

“TMI, Jade. TMI.”

Just then, my phone buzzes, so I pull it out of my back pocket.

Trent: Have any time for my sorry ass? With the midterms around the corner, I want to hit the books hard.

Grazing my teeth over my lower lip, I contemplate the message. As far as I know, he hadn't seen me in Moore's last night, but his girlfriend had. What if she told him she caught me staring at them? How embarrassing would that be?

"Hey, you still up for dancing?" Rei lifts her arms in the air, stretching. "I need some exercise off the ice that doesn't include lifting weights."

"You know it." I check the time. "I have a studio booked this weekend. Wanna come?"

"Sounds good to me."

Me: How about this weekend? I have some plans for Saturday morning, but afternoon should be good.

Trent: I'll be there.

TRENT

“Let’s go out for breakfast.” Ashley wraps her arms around my middle from behind and nuzzles her face in the crook of my neck, her lips brushing against my skin.

Gently, I remove her hands and turn around to face her. “I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

She pouts, “Why not?”

“I have to go to the gym for conditioning, which I’m already late for, and then I have a study session.” I grab a shirt hanging off my chair and sniff it. Good enough. I pull the material over my head and look around the room until I spot my duffle bag peeking from under the bed. Yesterday afternoon Grace texted me to meet her at five in the library for our French session, and I was hoping to grab her a coffee as an apology for ditching her so suddenly when she went out of her way to help me with French.

“Seriously?” Ash crosses her arms over her chest defensively and glares at me. I know that look well; she’s pissed. “Does everything come before me?”

“That’s not true.” I try to turn away, but she grabs my hand and holds me in place.

“It’s not? You said after that dinner with your parents that we’d do something just for the two of us, but since then, you’ve brushed me off a dozen times.” She deepens her voice, so it sounds like mine, mocking me. “Sorry, Ash, I can’t. I have to study. Sorry, Ash, I can’t, I have class. Sorry, Ash, I can’t, I have basketball. There’s always *something*. When is it going to be my turn, huh? When will I be the thing you put first? What was the point of us going to college together if we see each other less than we would have if we were miles apart?”

With each word she throws at me, my jaw tightens more and more until I’m surprised I’m not grinding my teeth.

I knew this would happen. From the moment she suggested it all those months back, this was the exact thing I feared the most; things falling apart just because life is different here.

But is it just life? A little voice inside my head mocks.

“See?” Ash huffs and flips a strand of hair that fell in her face back. “You can’t even deny it because it’s true. You’ve been pushing me off.”

I run my fingers through my hair, doing my best to keep my cool. “I haven’t been pushing you off. I’ve been busy. Besides, it was your idea to go to Blairwood. I told you to pick something *you* liked.”

“I picked Blairwood because I wanted us to be together. I picked Blairwood because I know what it means to turn my back on you for a split second.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “What does that mean?”

“Nothing,” she says quickly, looking away. “I’m apparently not as important as basketball or your friends since you always put me last.”

“What do you want me to do, Ash?” I lift my arms in the air and let them fall down, exasperated with the whole situation. “I’m spreading myself thin as it is.”

No matter what I do, what I choose, there will always be some kind of collateral damage. Somebody will always be unhappy.

“I want things to be as they used to be.”

“We’re not in high school any longer. I can’t fuck around and expect things to work. We’re talking about my future here, Ash. I can’t fuck it up.”

“And I’m not asking you to.” Ashley grabs my hands, and I let her. “What I’m asking you is to give us time. I just want us to do something together. A date. Just for the two of us. No school or classes or basketball. Please? There’s this movie later today I’ve been wanting to see.”

“I…”

I open my mouth to say I can't, not today, but then I'd have to explain what's so important that I'm ditching her, yet again. I'd have to tell her about Grace. About our tutoring session. And I know how well that would turn out.

Fuck this shit.

I guess I could always ask Grace if she can do it tomorrow. It shouldn't be a big deal, right? Just this one time, so I can appease Ashley for the time being. It's only the movies.

"Fine," I agree reluctantly, my mind still on how I'm going to explain to Grace why I suddenly have to change our plans after I asked her to meet me in the first place. "We'll go on a date."

"Thank you!" Ash squeals loudly and throws herself at me. I wrap my arms around her, so we both don't fall. I lower my gaze and catch the time on the watch. "Shit. Now I really have to go." I put her down and grab my duffle, throwing it over my shoulder. "Text me the details, okay?"

"Okay. Have fun doing whatever you're doing."

Whatever you're doing.

She can't even say it.

I run my hand over my face, feeling the headache looming.

It's all going to work out. It has to. I'll text Grace, say something came up, and ask her to change the tutoring to another day, take Ash on a date, so she's happy, and I can concentrate once again on passing my midterms and keeping my ass on the team. Win-win.

What could go wrong?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GRACE

I lift my arm in the air as my feet keep moving. The tempo increases, and so does my footwork. I let the beat of the song guide me as I move across the floor.

No overthinking.

No questioning.

No choreography.

Just music and me.

Dance at its barest.

As the song reaches its peak, I jump in the air—once, twice—before rolling down. My hair is a mess of wild curls as I rise back to my feet.

The way my body moves when I dance is effortless. That's the only way I can let go and just be. I get lost in the song, allowing it to pull me into the world where nothing matters, and my body is weightless.

Free.

The song tells a story about love and loss, and I feel it. Every note, every word, I can feel it in my bones. I let it lead me through this dance, hoping it'll help me exorcise the demons that have been haunting me for the past few weeks. Ever since Trent walked into my life, disrupting the hard-earned peace I've created for myself, destroying any hope I had of moving on with my life.

I pull my arms closer to my chest, my right leg lifting against my inner thigh as I go into a pirouette. Slowly, I spread my arms wide; my left leg lifts in the air as I balance my weight on the tips of my toes.

A moment.

Just a split second.

That's all it takes for your life to change forever.

“Damn,” Rei claps as the song ends, bringing me back to now. “Are you sure you don’t want to do this professionally? Because I think you’d be freaking amazing at it.”

I let out a breath, half-chuckle, half-pant. My heart is thumping hard against my ribcage. It’s been a while since I just let go and danced like this.

“Positive.” I sit down by my duffle bag and grab my water bottle. “I like dancing just for fun. When you do something professionally, you’re taking all the fun away from it.”

“In a way, I guess that’s true. The stakes are higher. That’s for sure.”

Slowly, I unclasp the bottle.

“Do you ever regret it? Becoming a professional figure skater, I mean?”

“Never. For me, not being able to skate would be like not being able to breathe.” Rei shakes her head. “It’s just unimaginable.”

I nod, taking a long pull from my bottle.

I guess that’s the difference between a professional athlete and a recreational one. We both love the sport, but some of us are just content with doing it, while others can’t live without it.

Would it have been different for me if I had been raised in a different environment? Maybe, but there is no sense in dwelling on what ifs. I’ll never get a chance to find out. Not that it matters. I love my life. I love dancing just because I can, and I wouldn’t change that for anything.

“How’s the practice going?” I ask, changing the subject.

Just recently, after a couple of months of intense practice, Rei finally managed to land a quad jump. The mere idea of it has my head spinning, but she was so giddy after it happened, I could only be happy for her.

I know what it means to be a professional athlete. I’ve lived with one long enough to know the sacrifices you have to make in order to succeed. Those first few years, before J.D. retired from football, had been insanely busy. Between the

Knights' facilities and traveling during the season, he was more away than at home, but it was all worth it to see the joy on his face when he was playing. Okay, when he wasn't scowling at the player standing on the other side of the line, that is.

"Slow," Rei sighs. "I never had much difficulty mastering anything, so to struggle so much with it now is hard."

"You'll get there. Didn't you say yourself that quad jumps aren't a normal sight in figure skating?"

"Not in women's figure skating, no."

"See? And you're working on it. I'm sure that sooner or later, you'll get there."

"Let's hope so." Rei stands up. "Show me that hand move again? I might steal it for my program if you don't mind."

"Steal away."

I push to my feet, and for the next thirty minutes, we go over her routine. I show her the move that she wants to put in her program, and we work it into her choreography.

"Shouldn't you have some fancy-ass choreographer?" I ask, only half-joking as we leave the studio a little bit later.

"Occasionally, I do. But I like the whole process of creating the choreography from top to bottom myself. After all, I know what I can and can't do the best. Although, there is a lot of math involved."

I give her a curious glance. Math in figure skating? "In what way?"

"At every level of skating, there are certain guidelines you have to follow. It's clearly stated in the rules which elements we have to perform, how many times, and how many points it can bring you."

"Are you for real?"

Rei chuckles. "I'm afraid so."

"Isn't that like... limiting?" I couldn't imagine somebody telling me how I should dance, which moves I'd have to

perform. Then again, I'm not a professional dancer.

"In a way, but there were some skaters who took advantage of the rules."

"Like how?"

"You get a ten percent bonus if you land a jump in the second half of your program when you're already tired, so there was this one skater who did *all* her jumps in the second half."

I tilt my head to the side. "So basically, she cheated?"

"Not really." Rei shrugs. Her bag starts to slip from her shoulder, but she grabs it at the last moment, pulling it higher. "More like used the rule to get what she wanted—to win."

I guess, in a way, that makes sense, although it still feels like cheating to me.

"So, how did they change it?"

"Now we're required to do jumps in both halves of our program, and you can get a ten percent bonus only for the last three jumps."

I think about it for a moment and nod. "That seems reasonable. Although I still don't know how I feel about being told what elements my program must contain."

"I mean, they're all skills you have to be able to perform to get to the senior level, so it's not like they ask the impossible from you. They actually had to develop a scoring system for quads for ladies since, until recently, barely anybody could land quads. Anyhow," Rei comes to a stop when we get to a crossroads. "Wanna go grab coffee before we go home?"

"You know I'm always down for coffee." The car passes by, so we both hurry across the street. "So..."

Rei raises her eyebrows. "So..." she repeats when I don't continue instantly, drawing out the word.

I start walking toward the coffee shop, and Rei follows after me. "How are things with Zane?"

Rei sucks in her lower lip, a blush creeping up her cheeks. “Good.”

“Just good?” I smirk. “It seemed more than just good if it’s to be judged by the amount of noise coming from your room.”

“Oh my God!” Rei burrows her face in her palms. “Please don’t start again.”

She’s so flustered I can’t help but chuckle. “What? I’m just asking.”

“Can the earth open and swallow me whole?”

“Why? It’s not a big deal.” I give her a side glance. “Or was it big?”

The question comes out of my mouth before I even realize what I’m saying. A silence falls over us for a heartbeat as the words settle in, and then we both burst into laughter.

“Oh my God, Grace!” Rei shoves me away. “You sound just like Jade.”

“I guess she has that influence on people.” I nudge her with my elbow. “But seriously, how is that going?”

“Good. He seems to get me, and he isn’t intimidated by the fact that I’m a professional figure skater with a year-long season.”

“It takes more than a pair of skates to scare Zane off.” Rei and Zane had a rough start, with Rei almost running him off the road the first day she got to campus. They’ve been crossing each other’s paths ever since—with him being on the hockey team and Rei figure skating, I guess it was to be expected. “Was that an issue before?”

“Occasionally.” Rei tucks a loose strand behind her ear. “I mean, it’s not like I dated a lot. Between practices and being homeschooled, there were just not that many opportunities. There were a few guys, though. Mostly skaters. You’d think they’d know what to expect, but the long hours meant we drifted apart pretty fast. Plus, God forbid you get to the next level sooner.”

I could understand athletes being competitive, but this sounds like another level. “That bad?”

“What can I say? We’re a competitive bunch.”

“Or maybe they’re just assholes.”

“Or maybe that,” Rei agrees just as I pull open the door to Cup It Up. The warm air hits me in the face just as Yasmin looks up from behind the counter, a smile spreading over her face when she sees us.

“Hey, you two.”

“Hey, Yas.” I look around the half-empty space. “Slow day?”

“More like quiet before the storm. Most partygoers are waking up right about now and will drag their hungover asses here for some coffee before they close themselves in the library for the day.”

“You’re probably right.” Rei gives me a side glance as we stop at the counter. “With midterms just around the corner, I’m really happy that I don’t have the full workload this year.”

“Well, I envy you.”

I give Yasmin a pointed look. “You know you could take a step back. Nobody will blame you.”

“I do, but you know me. Where’s the challenge in that?” She gives a half-hearted shrug. “What can I getcha, girls?”

We place our order and chat with Yasmin as she prepares our drinks. Just as she’s done, people start coming in as predicted.

I wonder if Trent’s going to be one of them. Did he go out to party with his friends? Out on a date with his girlfriend? Both are equally possible.

“I guess we’ll leave you to it.”

“Sure. Talk soon?”

I nod my head, but Yasmin doesn’t see it because she’s already filling the next order. We exit the café just as more

people stroll in, a few of them, I'm pretty sure, are still in their pajamas.

"God, I'm so glad I'm an early riser." Rei pulls out her phone, and a smile immediately appears on her face.

"Zane?" I ask, a pang of jealousy hitting me out of nowhere.

I'm happy for her, I really am, but is it too much to want the same for myself? Instead, I'm pining after a guy who reminds me of a boy I used to love. A guy that's in a committed relationship with somebody else.

"Yeah," Rei answers absentmindedly, typing back a reply. "Hey, what are you doing later today?"

"I have some reading to do and tutoring later in the afternoon."

"When do you think you'll be done?"

"No idea." I shrug. "Why? What's going on?"

"Zane asked me if I wanted to go to the movies tonight."

"So you want to take *me* on your date?"

I'm honestly not sure where she's going with this.

"No, silly. I figured we could go on a double date."

"Double date?" I repeat, still not understanding.

"Yes. A double date. Zane and I and you and Spencer."

Me and Spencer? I take a step back. *What the hell's with my friends and trying to set me up with Spencer?*

"You have to be joking."

"I'm not." She takes in my face. "Would that be such a horrible idea? I thought you guys were hanging out?"

"I'm tutoring him. I'd hardly call that hanging out. Besides, I promised..." My phone beeps. "Sorry," I mutter, grateful at the interruption. "Let me get this."

I slide it out of my back pocket and check to see who's texting me.

Trent: Hey, Legs. Sorry, but something came up. Raincheck?

So much for that.

Why am I so disappointed? It was just a tutoring session. A tutoring session I didn't even want in the first place. It's better this way. Distance, that's exactly what I need—distance between Trent and me.

“What's wrong?”

“Huh?” I look up, realizing I've been just staring at my phone like a total weirdo.

Rei tilts her chin toward my hand. “Did something happen?”

I shake my head no. “Trent just canceled our tutoring session.”

Rei's mouth falls open. “Is that who you're tutoring?”

Locking my phone, I shove it back into my pocket. “Not any longer.”

“He canceled?”

“Something came up.” I shrug. “It's not a big deal. You going back to the dorm? I want to shower before I get to studying.”

Without waiting for her answer, I start to walk. Rei hurries after me. “So now that you don't have plans any longer... Movies?”

“I don't know, Rei...”

“Please?” She clasps her hands and gives me a big, goofy smile. “It doesn't even have to be a double date. Just two friends who are hanging out. It'll be fun, I promise.”

I let out a shaky breath. “Isn't that what they always say?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to join us?” I ask, leaning against the doorway of Jade’s room.

“No way,” she answers instantly, not even bothering to look up at me as her fingers move against the keyboard.

“Please?”

“Nope.”

With a click, she finally pushes away the laptop and looks up at me, and I give her a big smile. “Pretty please?”

“I love you, but no.”

“I love you, too, but that doesn’t make the rejection sting any less,” I sigh and make sure to pout extra hard. “Please, Jade? I’ll do anything you want. Without complaining too.”

“Ha! That’s a little tempting.” Jade rubs her chin, pretending as if she’s thinking really hard about my request. “So many possibilities, really, but I’ll have to decline. You guys are going on a double date, and I have no desire to be the fifth wheel.”

“No, Rei and Zane are going on a date,” I correct. “Spencer and I are just friendly companions. Besides, didn’t you say you’re going to see that guy...”

I try to remember his name but come up empty. Jade sees it too because she supplies: “Michael.”

I snap my fingers. “Michael, right! Aren’t you seeing him tonight? You two could join us, and nobody is a wheel of any kind.”

It might feel less like a date that way and more of a group thing. I’m not even sure why I let Rei convince me to do this in the first place.

Because you were hurt, Trent ditched you for whatever was more important.

I shake my head, refusing to go down that road. Nope, I’m not going there. Not now, not ever.

Jade sighs, “I’m not going anywhere tonight. At least not until I finish this paper because the deadline is tonight at

midnight.”

My brows shoot up. “You still haven’t finished it?”

“Obviously not.” Jade rolls her eyes at me. “You know I like the challenge and adrenaline when I submit it at the very last minute.”

“The only thing that’d give me is anxiety.”

If that wasn’t a reminder of how big of a polar opposite the two of us are, I don’t know what is. But I guess that’s part of the reason why we work so well too.

“And if I manage to finish this at a decent hour, I have entirely different plans in the dark for Michael and me.” Jade wiggles her brows, her blue eyes shining brightly with mischief. “If you know what I mean.”

“Fine,” I sigh. “You go to your sexcapade and leave me alone.”

“You’re going to be fine.” She pushes off the bed and comes to me, taking my hands in hers. “It’s good that you’re doing this, Grace. You need to give people a chance. Let them in.”

Like you’re letting them in? I want to ask but bite my tongue because I know it would be a shitty thing to do. Jade has been through a lot—too much for anybody’s standards, and she deserves a break. Who am I to judge if that break includes hooking up with a different guy every few weeks? God knows my way of coping hasn’t been much better.

“It’s not a date,” I repeat for what feels like the umpteenth time. “We’re just going to the movies. Hell, Rei was the one who orchestrated all of it.”

“Still, you’re going out and hanging with people. Hanging with *guys*.” She smirks. “Hanging out with hot guys. Try to have fun.”

“I’ll try,” I sigh. “But I make no promises.”

Just then, Rei gets to the doorway. She slips her phone in a little purse she has hanging across her chest and looks up, a big smile on her face. “Ready to go?”

“You don’t have to frown like that, Red.”

I narrow my eyes at Spencer. “I’m not frowning.”

The guy actually laughs. “The lines between your brows beg to differ.”

Spencer cups my face. I suck in a sharp breath and try to pull back, but he doesn’t let go. Instead, his thumb slides softly over the lines between my brows.

I guess he might be right. Asshole. Ever since Zane and Spencer picked us up, he’s been acting like the other night at Moore’s hadn’t happened and just been his usual, joking self. I wasn’t sure what to make of it exactly.

There’s also the fact that I couldn’t get my friends’ words out of my mind. I give him a weary look, but trying to figure Spencer out is like figuring out what a kid wants. Is he really into me? Were my friends right? Or do they just want to see something that doesn’t exist?

“What do you think you’re doing?” I ask, trying to keep a serious face and not show how unnerving his proximity, his touch, makes me.

He’s leaning forward, completely in my personal space, a serious look on his face.

“What does it look like I’m doing? Preventing you from turning into an old lady.”

“Thanks,” I mutter dryly. He tries to do the same to my forehead, but I grab his hand before he can. “Stop doing that.”

The corner of his mouth lifts in that smirk of his. “Or what?”

There’s a gleam in his eyes as if he’s amused. Knowing him, he probably is.

“Why are you like this?”

“Like what?”

“Like this.”

“It amuses me to see you all unnerved. See how hard I can pull before you finally push.”

I roll my eyes at him. “Because that’s so mature.”

Spencer laughs. “Nobody ever blamed me for being mature.”

“What are you two doing?” Rei asks, snapping me out of our little exchange.

I turn toward her. “Spencer’s being...” The words die on my lips when I look up and see none other than Trent standing a few feet behind her.

And he’s with his girlfriend.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

TRENT

I stop in my tracks, my gaze glued to a very familiar, very *surprised* pair of emerald eyes staring at me across the room.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Grace looks from me to Ashley and then back to me, her lips pressing in a tight line as the realization hits her. Almost as quickly as she spotted us, Grace faced her friends, a short, dark-haired girl standing next to a tall black guy I'm pretty sure I saw around the gym and that guy she's tutoring.

Is this like a double date? Is she actually dating that tool?

I take a step forward, but a hand covering my bicep stops me from moving.

"Is it that girl again?"

Ashley's question is like a bucket of icy water thrown over my head. Forcing my attention from Grace, I turn around to face her. "Huh?"

Not really reassuring on my part, but my mind is still stuck on Grace and that guy. The casual way they stand next to each other, their bodies practically brushing.

"The coffee shop one?" Ashley clarifies. She slowly turns toward me, her mouth pressed in a hard line, one of her brows rising. "The one that keeps on popping up in all the weird places lately."

I blink as her words finally register in my mind. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, please, Trent." Ash rolls her eyes and starts walking toward the hall in the back. I follow after her, pushing back the image of Grace's stupefied face from my mind.

She wasn't the only one, though. Who would have thought that out of all the places, she'd end up here? On a freaking date, no less.

The only date you should be thinking about is the one with your currently really pissed girlfriend, my mind reminds me.

“Ashley,” I call once we get away from people. The last thing I want is to make a scene.

I hurry after her, and as soon as she’s in arm’s reach, I wrap my fingers around her wrist and tug her to face me. “What is this all about?”

“She’s always conveniently somewhere you are. What are the chances?”

“So are a lot of people,” I counter, trying to keep a level head.

“So you’re really telling me there’s nothing going on between the two of you?”

“No.” My answer is instant.

What is her deal with Grace? I seriously don’t get it. It’s not like Grace’s openly hitting on me or anything like that; on the contrary, really. All this time, she’s been going out of her way to avoid me. And now, I lied to her to get out of tutoring I desperately need, so I could appease my girlfriend, only for the whole thing to backfire.

Twice.

And now both women are pissed off at me.

Ashley watches me closely, her gaze fixed on mine as she nibbles the inside of her cheek. Tense silence builds between us. My heart is galloping in my chest as I wait for her to say something.

The moment seems to last a lifetime, but finally, she nods. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

She nods and closes the distance between us. When she’s pressed against my chest, Ash rises on the tips of her toes. Her fingers spread on my cheek as she leaned in and pressed her mouth against mine. “I trust you, Trent.”

Do you? I want to ask her. Do you really?

As soon as the question pops into my mind, I realize it doesn't matter. Not really. My heart sinks to the pit of my stomach as the realization, clear as day, dawns on me.

I don't trust myself.

I just openly lied to her. Not in the way she might think, but still... I lied. I'm not *that* guy. At least I wasn't until now. And I'm not sure how I feel about it.

Absentmindedly, I brush a curl behind her ear. "Can we go to our seats now?"

Ashley snuggles into my side, her attention on the movie playing. Mine should be too, but if somebody asked me what we're watching, I don't think I'd know the right answer.

Involuntarily, my eyes dart to the right, where Grace sits with her friends a few rows in front of us.. It's so easy to spot her since not even the darkness of the room can suppress the bright red of her hair.

The tool she's with leans closer, whispering something in her ear. Grace tilts her head to the side to look at him, and I just stare, unblinking.

It's messed up. I don't need anybody else to point it out for me, but I can't help myself. I noticed them as soon as they entered, although I did my best to pretend I didn't. But as soon as the lights were off, it's like my eyes had a mind of their own.

Grace's mouth moves softly, but no words come out. At least not ones loud enough for me to overhear them. The guy—Stefan? Steven?—shifts in his seat, leaning closer. Does he plan to move into her lap or something?

Why the hell do I even care? I have a girlfriend, for fuck's sake.

Ashley tilts her head back, her blue eyes fixing on mine.

"Don't like the movie?" she mouths softly.

“It’s okay.”

She brushes the tips of her fingers over my cheek. “Then why do you seem so far away?”

“Just tired, I guess.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. The headache from this morning seems to be back in full force and only growing stronger by the second.

Great, just what I needed. Another headache. They’ve been coming more often lately. They haven’t been this frequent in a long time. If I were home, my parents would most likely demand that I go and see my doctor, but this way, I don’t have to reassure them it’s just a minor headache. Everybody has them from time to time.

Ash shifts in her seat and gives me a long look, her eyes searching my face for any sign that something’s off. “Are you okay?” she asks, genuine concern in her voice. As if I needed more reasons to feel like a dick than I already do.

“I’m fine.” Somebody from behind us shushes us. “C’mon.” I wrap my arms around her middle and pull her closer to me. “Let’s watch the movie.”

GRACE

“So Red, what did you think about the movie?” Spencer asks, his hand around my shoulder as we make our way out of the theater with the rest of the people.

Maybe I should have tried to push it off, but by now, I know it’s useless. So I don’t even try.

I pinch his side, not even bothering to look his way. “It would have been better if somebody didn’t distract me all the time with his comments.”

“Ouch!” Spencer rubs at his side. “What was that for?”

“Distracting me for the past two hours.”

“He likes to do that,” Zane throws over his shoulder, giving Spencer a grim look. “He usually pisses everybody off with his non-stop talking. It doesn’t matter if it’s a movie or we’re watching a game film.”

“Thanks for warning me,” I say dryly.

“Hey, what’s this? Who finds Spencer more annoying contest?”

I tap my chin and pretend to think about it for a moment. “Sure, sounds good to me.”

“We can call it that,” Zane agrees, making Rei chuckle.

“You too, Skater Girl?” Spencer presses his free hand against his chest in that overly dramatic fashion of his. “You wound me.”

“Hey, I didn’t say anything.”

“You just laughed.”

“I did not! It was more of a chuckle.”

“Same difference.”

Zane turns around and tugs Rei to a stop. There’s a scowl on his face that’s directed at his friend, but he keeps Rei’s hand

firmly in his. It's strange seeing him like this. He's usually reserved, all broody and frowning. Although I guess there's no help with frowning. "Are we going to stay here all night and listen to you whine or what?"

"I don't whine. I just say it as it is." Spencer looks at Rei and then at me. "You ladies wanna go grab a drink or something?"

"Sure, why not?" Rei shrugs and turns to me with hopeful eyes. "What about you, Grace?"

"I'm game." It's not like I have plans anyway, and just because I'm not on a date doesn't mean I want to cut my friends' short. And I know if I say the word, Rei will go home with me. "But I have to go to the bathroom." I slip from underneath Spencer's arm. "I'll be back in a bit."

I hurry down the relatively empty hallway and slip into the bathroom. The space is unusually quiet. Then again, this is a small theater with only a few movie options, so I guess it doesn't draw a big crowd.

I quickly enter one stall and do my business. Just as I'm finishing, a door squeaks open, and heels *clink* against the tiles.

Flushing the toilet, I exit the stall and go to the sink to wash my hands. I lift my gaze and catch my reflection in the mirror. There are bags under my eyes that even the concealer couldn't hide. I've barely been sleeping, and if it weren't for Spencer and his constant talking during the movie, I'd have probably fallen asleep on the spot. Well, Spencer and the probing gaze I could feel on the back of my head.

What was he doing here?

Something came up. That's what he said. I assumed it was something important, but I guess Trent just wanted to go on a date with his girlfriend.

My stomach clenches. My insides are tying into a familiar knot. Seriously, by the time this year is done, I'd be surprised if I don't get an ulcer or something.

What happens then, though? What about next year? How long can I really go through this?

Sighing, I splash some cold water onto my neck, hoping it'll help me cool off, but no such luck. Bracing my hands against the sink, I look up in the mirror, but my reflection isn't the only one I find.

Cold blue eyes stare into mine in the mirror. My mouth falls open in surprise. For a moment, neither of us says anything. We just stare at one another.

I'm not sure how I hadn't heard her come out.

Maybe if you weren't too stuck thinking about her boyfriend...

"I see the way you look at him." Ashley is the first to break the silence.

"I—" My tongue darts out, sliding over my suddenly dry lips. I wasn't expecting *that*. I'm not sure what to say, so I settle for, "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't play coy," she huffs. Flipping her hair behind her shoulder, she goes to the sink next to mine and turns on the water to wash her hands.

"I'm not playing anything," I say softly.

"He's mine."

Her words are a stab to my already bruised heart.

As if I don't know that. As if I wouldn't give anything for things to be different.

Ashley turns to me. "Whatever you're thinking about in your head, forget it. It's not happening."

"I'm not thinking anything," I grit through my clenched teeth. I'm usually not temperamental, but there is only so much pushing I can take, and Ashley is toeing a fine line.

"Are you sure? Because it damn well looks like you do." Ashley turns off the water, grabs a paper towel, and wipes her hands. "Trent and I... we go way back. We have history."

So do we. My heart starts to speed up as the words ring in my mind. *He was mine first.*

Mine.

Thump-thump.

Mine.

Thump-thump.

Mine.

Thump-thump.

“You’ll never be able to get between us. Nobody will, really.”

“I’m not even trying.” Taking one deep breath, I lift my chin a notch. I have nothing to hide. I did nothing wrong. “I don’t know what you think is going on, but I’m only helping Trent with French. No more, no less. Now, if you’ll excuse me...”

Without waiting for her reply, I turn on the balls of my feet and go toward the door. Just as my fingers wrap around the door handle, Ashley’s words stop me.

“Stay away from Trent.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

TRENT

“A tutor?” Ashley grits as she walks toward me, or more like marches. If eyes could kill, I’d be ashes. She stops just inches from me and jabs her finger into my chest. “A freaking tutor, Trent?”

“What are you talking about?”

I wrap my hands around her wrists, stopping her from poking a hole through my chest.

“You know damn well what I’m talking about.” She tugs her hands out of my grasp. “I had a little run-in with the redhead in the bathroom.”

Fuck.

I tilt my head back and run my hands over my face.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

So much for keeping one of them happy.

“What the hell, Trent? What the actual hell?”

“It’s not like that.”

“Oh, so you didn’t lie to my face?”

“I—”

“Because when I asked you earlier if something was going on between you two, you looked me straight in the face and said no.”

“Because there isn’t!” I snap.

Faint whispering from behind me draws my attention. A group of girls is standing by one of the high tables by the windows. Only instead of looking out, they’re watching us and whispering.

Great, just what I need on top of everything.

“Can we not do this here? Please?”

Ashley just shakes her head. “I don’t even know you anymore.”

Turning on the balls of her feet, Ashley goes straight for the exit. I run my hand over my face, pushing my hair back.

Could this day get any worse?

Giving what I hope for is a reassuring smile in the girls’ direction—something that will tell them I’m not a serial killer on a hunt—I hurry after Ash.

The cold November air hits me as soon as I step outside and reminds me I’m still holding onto Ashley’s things. I scan the parking lot and find her standing by my car, her arms wrapped around herself.

Stubborn woman.

I slide my hand into my pants and press the button for the car to unlock.

Ashley jumps a little when the lights flash. She looks over her shoulder, her eyes finding mine before she looks away and slides into the car.

What was I expecting?

Not for the two of them to meet each other in the bathroom, that’s for damn sure. And definitely not for Grace to tell her she’s tutoring me. What would even bring up that topic? I’m not even sure I want to know.

Sliding into the driver’s seat, I throw our things into the back seat but don’t bother turning on the car.

Ashley keeps her eyes pointed straight, clearly ignoring me.

“It wasn’t like that,” I repeat, my fingers curling around the steering wheel.

“You said that already,” her voice is low, detached. “Then how is it? Explain it to me because I’m not sure I’m seeing it correctly.”

“It’s... I went to the tutoring center, but their tutors couldn’t fit me into the schedule.”

“Apparently, the redhead could fit you in her schedule just fine,” Ashley says sarcastically.

“Grace. Her name is Grace.”

Ashley whips her head in my direction, eyes blazing. “Do I look like I care?”

“Well, maybe if you weren’t acting that way, I’d have told you!”

Her mouth falls open. “So it’s my fault?”

“It’s nobody’s fault. I’m just saying that if you weren’t so damn possessive, I’d have told you I asked Grace to help me with French. *After* the tutoring center told me they couldn’t find anybody that would work for me. She said no, but what other choice did I have? I have to get a passing grade to be eligible to play.”

“And we’re back to basketball.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing.”

I grit my teeth. “It clearly means *something*. This is the second time you brought it up.”

“You shouldn’t be playing at all. You know the...”

“I’m fine,” I stop her before she can finish. I’ve heard enough about what I can and can’t do from my parents. I don’t need my girlfriend to do it too.

“Whatever. It still doesn’t explain why you lied to me. You could have told me earlier when I asked, and you didn’t.”

“Because I knew how you were going to react.” I turn on the engine but don’t move the car. I look to the side. “And I was right.”

Ashley presses her lips together and turns away.

I don’t bother saying anything. What else is there to say, anyway? So I pull out of the parking lot and drive, a thick silence following us all the way back to campus.

GRACE

“How did you learn to play pool like that?”

Sliding my hands deeper into my pockets, I turn to look at Spencer, the corner of my lips lifting in a smile. “My brother taught me.”

An image of J.D. and me playing pops into my mind. It’s been a while since we’ve done it. God, I miss him. Miss my family. Nobody tells you that when you’re packing your things, ready to move out on a new adventure, but it’s true. I love my family and can’t wait to see them for Thanksgiving. I just have to survive midterms first.

His brows shoot up. “You have a brother?”

“I do, yes.” The stupefied look on his face makes me chuckle.

“No shit? How did I not know that?”

“Umm... you never asked?”

He rubs the back of his neck. “I guess there’s that.”

“Besides, I don’t really advertise it.”

Talking about J.D. has always been hard for me. I love my brother, but it’s hard to explain our age difference and family history. Plus, there’s also the fact that he’s a retired professional football player, and it always worries me what people will think once they find out. Will they want to hang out with me for me, or because they want to meet my brother and his football friends?

“Why not? You two aren’t tight?”

“Oh, we’re tight. I’ve been living with him since I was twelve. He basically raised me.”

“How old is he?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“Seriously? That’s a...”

“A lot, yeah,” I finish because I already know where this is going. “Twenty years, to be exact. Our—” There’s a slight pause as I choose my words carefully, but I finally settle on, “—mother had him very young, and I didn’t come until later.” There, that’s diplomatic enough, right? The last thing I wanted on top of this crappy day was to talk about Cassie. Talk about a shitty ending to an even shittier day. “What about you? Any brothers or sisters?”

“Two brothers, actually.”

“Really?” Two more boys like Spencer? Damn, I don’t envy his mother at all. “Older or younger?”

“Older.”

“So you’re the baby of the family.”

Spencer narrows his eyes at me. “Don’t you start too.”

“What?” I bat my eyelashes innocently.

“You know what,” he grumbles, his face turning sour. I think this is the first time I’ve seen him frown.

The corner of my mouth starts to tip upward, but I school my expression acting all serious when all I want to do is crack up. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Of course, you don’t.”

“Some things make much more sense now, though.” I shake my head. “Damn, you must have been a handful for your parents.”

“Something like that.” Spencer nods his chin toward the dorm. “Is this you?”

I look at the brightly illuminated front door. “Yeah, that’s me. Thanks for walking me, although it wasn’t necessary.”

After having a few drinks at Moore’s, and me beating Spencer’s ass three times in pool, we called it a night. Rei wanted to go with Zane to his place but didn’t want me to walk by myself back to the dorm. They offered to take me home, but I refused. It was getting late as it was, and I knew

Rei was getting up early to go to practice. So Spencer swooped in and said he'd walk me home.

"It's not a big deal; it was on my way, anyway."

I give him a doubtful look. "Don't you live off-campus?"

"Maybe I like to take long walks in the evening?" He rubs the back of his neck, the first sign that he feels uncomfortable.

"Yeah, right." I roll my eyes. "I'll see you in class?"

I start to walk away, but Spencer wraps his hand around my wrist and pulls me back. "What happened in that bathroom?"

I blink, completely thrown off by the question. "W-what?"

"In the cinema. You were flustered when you came out of the bathroom. What happened?"

Stay away from Trent, Ashley's accusation rings in my head as loud as it did when she said it.

"N-nothing." There's nothing like stuttering out an answer to confirm you're a big, fat liar. Maybe he won't notice?

"I didn't take you for a liar, Red."

Right.

"I didn't take you for somebody who likes to stick his nose in other people's business," I counter right back and pull my hand out of his grasp.

"I thought nothing happened."

"Nothing that should concern you."

I start to walk away, but once again, Spencer's words stop me. "Are you into that guy?"

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath to calm myself. This is the second time he's asked me that question. And not the first person to ask it today. Am I really that obvious?

"It's not like that," I whisper softly, more for myself than for him, but he hears it too.

"Then how is it? What's the deal with the two of you?"

I press my lips into a tight line. Even if I wanted to tell Spencer, I didn't know how to explain it. Trent and I... there's nothing going on, but at the same time, there's everything.

"I can see the way you look at him, you know."

I see the way you look at him.

I turn around abruptly, ready to tell him exactly what I think, but I almost fall because Spencer is standing right behind me. I jab my finger in his chest. "You know nothing."

"Don't I?" he asks calmly, which only infuriates me further.

"No, you don't."

Another jab.

Nobody does.

Not really.

Not even me.

Spencer puts his hands on my shoulders. "You deserve better than a guy who strings you along while he fucks his girlfriend."

I stagger back. His words sting like a slap in the face.

"He's not stringing me along." I close my eyes and take a deep breath. I need to calm down because if I don't, I'll most likely burst into tears, and that's so *not* what I need right now. "I know he has a girlfriend. I don't need you or anybody else to tell me that. There's nothing happening between the two of us."

"Okay, let's say I believe you..."

"There's no, 'let's say' anything!" My eyes snap open and meet his. He's standing so close, barely a few inches away. Close enough that I can feel his body heat and a faint smell of his cologne, something dark and citrusy. "I'm telling you the truth. There's nothing between Trent and me."

"But you'd like it to."

I open my mouth to protest, but nothing comes out.

Spencer lifts his brows and waits me out, but when words don't come, he just shakes his head.

Sometimes I wish I was a better liar.

“You shouldn't let a guy put that look on your face. We're not worth it.”

“What look?”

“This look.”

Spencer cups my face, his thumb slowly sliding over my cheekbone and over my lower lip. His blue eyes stare down at me intently, following the path his finger makes until they finally fix on my mouth.

I gulp down, unable to say anything.

I know he's going to do it.

I should stop him.

I know I should.

But I don't.

Spencer leans down slowly, giving me enough time to push him back, and when I don't, he gently presses his mouth against mine.

And I let him.

Moving closer, he slips his hand at the base of my neck, fingers tangling with my curls as he tilts my head to the side to deepen the kiss.

Soft lips brush against mine, and for a moment, I let myself enjoy it. Let myself enjoy him. I haven't had anybody touch me, kiss me, in so long it feels slightly foreign, not since my disastrous date with Timothy Carmichael, my senior year of high school. I let him take me to prom, and later that night, he took my virginity, too. I don't regret many things in life, but that one I do. I wasn't ready—not mentally, and certainly not emotionally—but I wanted to feel whole, if only for a moment.

And while Timothy Carmichael was in no way memorable, Spencer is his complete opposite. His mouth moves against mine with the slow effortlessness of somebody who knows what he's doing, and I'm actually enjoying it, but there are no butterflies. There are no weak knees or warmth spreading through my belly, no shivers running down my spine.

He's not Mason.

But then again, neither is Trent.

I lift my hand and press it against Spencer's chest, giving him a slight push. He breaks the kiss and takes a step back.

I run my tongue over my lower lip. My breathing is slightly elevated, and so is his. For a moment, we just stare at one another, neither of us saying anything.

"You're a good guy, Spencer."

He chuckles bitterly, running his hand through his hair. He looks around, everywhere but at me. "Just not good enough for you?"

There is an edge to his words I'm not used to hearing. An uneasy pit opens in my stomach. I grab his hand, forcing him to look at me. "I never said that."

Spencer caresses my cheek with the back of his hand. The touch is gentle. Everything about him is, and when he's with me, I hear the wistful tone in his voice. "You didn't have to."

"You don't want me," I say softly, shaking my head. "Not like that."

The words feel wobbly on my lips. Unsure.

Could I be wrong? I never took Spencer's teasing as something more. Maybe I should have?

"We could have had so much fun together, you and me, Red."

"We can still have fun as friends."

Spencer lets his hand fall down, almost regretfully. "Yeah, I guess we can."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

TRENT

Me: Can we talk? Please?

Me: I know I fucked up, and I'm sorry.

Me: I should have just come out and outright said why I wouldn't make it to our tutoring session, but I wasn't thinking.

Me: Legs? Please?

Me: What can I do to make it up to you?

Me: I miss you.

I gulp down the lump in my throat as I read over the message I sent last night. In the previous five days, really. That last one I wrote in a moment of weakness. An admission came out of me before I knew what I was writing, and I hit send before I could overthink it.

But there was nothing.

No answer, not to my phone calls or my texts.

And I'd know because I've been checking my phone constantly, jumping at every beep, but the only thing that greeted me on Grace's end was silence.

She was nowhere to be seen.

If I needed a clearer sign that she's avoiding me? I wouldn't find one.

"Are you going to sulk all day long, or do you plan to put your ass to work, Remington?"

I look up from the phone and notice that most of my teammates have already left the locker room.

"Sorry," I lock my phone and throw it back into my duffle bag. "I'm just distracted."

"Well, better get undistracted." Quinn knocks his fingers against the doorway. "We need your head in the game. Get

your ass on the court before Coach comes looking for you.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

Pushing the thoughts of Grace out of my head, I throw my duffle into the locker and follow after him.

For the next two hours, basketball is the only thing I think about. I let the anger of the last few days fuel me as I push myself harder with each drill Coach leads us through until my shirt is drenched in sweat, and I’m panting so hard I can barely stand straight.

“Good practice, Remington,” Coach says as I walk off the court, wiping the sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand. “Keep up the good work, and we’ll see more of you in games soon.”

“Thanks, Coach,” I nod and quickly follow after my teammates.

“Dude, my legs are killing me,” Matteo grumbles as we get our asses back into the locker room.

“It shows. You’re waddling like a penguin.” I walk past them to my locker and pull out my stuff.

“More like a pregnant girl,” Quinn snickers.

Matteo punches him in the arm. “Are you shitting me, McLannister?”

“What the fuck, man?”

“Don’t joke about shit like that.”

“You scared of pregnant girls?”

“I’m not scared of pregnant girls.” Matteo shudders. “I just don’t need your sorry ass to jinx me.”

Quinn laughs hard. “Didn’t your daddy teach you to wrap it before you tap it?”

“I’m not an imbecile.” Matteo shoves him, which only makes Quinn laugh harder.

“Could have fooled me.”

“If I remember correctly, I fooled you well enough. Stole three balls right in front of your nose. Are you getting sloppy in your old age?”

Quinn gets Matteo’s head in a headlock. “Who is getting sloppy, Rookie?”

Sighing, I tune them out and grab my phone, but one look at the screen shows no new messages waiting for me.

What the hell should I do?

Midterms are next week, and if I don’t pass my French exam, I can kiss the team goodbye.

I check my sent folder next, and there it is, right on top.

Why didn’t she get back to me?

“Yo, Remington?”

My head snaps up at the sound of my name. “What’s up?”

“Are you even listening?”

“I stopped the moment you two started bitching. No time for that shit.”

“You hear that, Rook?” Quinn looks over his shoulder at Matteo. “Rookie number two doesn’t have time for us. Who’s keeping you busy? That hot girlfriend of yours?”

The image of Grace appears in front of my eyes.

Wait, what?

A feeling of guilt smacks me right in the face. Ashley. He’s asking about Ashley. Not Grace.

Then why was she the first one to come to your mind? a little voice taunts me.

I push it back. *Because I was just thinking about her and how to get her to give me another chance to help me with French. That’s all there is to it.*

“Nah, just checking to see if my tutor got back to me.”

“Tutor?” Quinn’s brows shoot up. “I thought you were the smart one.”

“Apparently not when it comes to French.” Sighing, I lock my phone and shove it into my pocket.

“Well, can’t help you with that. I’m more of a numbers guy.” He shrugs. “Anyway, want to go and grab something to eat?”

“Nah, I think I’ll go to the library, get some work done, so I don’t flunk my French midterm.”

“You do that. We need you for our upcoming game.” Quinn grabs his bag and slaps me on the shoulder. “I guess I’ll see you later, boys.”

I turn to Matteo. “You not going to eat?”

He shakes his head. “I’m going back to the dorm to change before meeting up with Stella.”

“A date?” This time I’m the one who’s surprised.

I remember he mentioned meeting Stella in the gym one day. I never gave it much thought since Matteo is a one-and-done kind of guy, but he brought her up a few other times since. Maybe he’s finally settling down?

Matteo snorts. “We’re just hanging out, don’t go making it more than it has to be.”

I pull off my dirty clothes and grab my towel. “God forbid you got tied down.”

“Hey now, there is more than enough of all of this for the ladies. I don’t see a reason why I should settle just for one. I’ve seen how well that worked out for you.”

I run my hand through my hair. “I know you don’t like Ashley. I can see it. Hell, everybody can see it.”

“This isn’t just about me not liking Ashley. It’s everything that’s been going on lately.”

“You know what? I don’t have time for this.”

Ashley and I might be on rocky terms since the debacle that was our last date, but I didn’t want to listen to my best friend tell me all the reasons we wouldn’t work together.

I start to walk away, but Matteo's words stop me. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Going to take a shower?"

He shakes his head. "You know what I mean."

"No, I don't. Why don't you spell it out for me?"

"I can see the way you look at her."

I grit my teeth, irritated with the cryptic conversation. If he has something to say, he better come out and say it. "And how is that?"

"Like you care."

"She's my tutor, for fuck's sake."

He gives me a who-are-you-trying-to-fool look. "Doesn't mean you don't want more, now does it?"

No, no, it doesn't.

"That's all she can be."

Before he can come up with another witty comeback that'll end with me punching him in the face, I walk into the bathroom.

I need a shower.

A cold one.

The library is full of people. Nothing strange, considering midterms will be here before we know it. It seems like half the campus has moved here in these last few weeks, and the place has become progressively fuller. At this point, I'm pretty sure there isn't an available seat left.

I work my way between the desks toward the back on autopilot. If she's here, I know where I'll find her. It doesn't matter that my theory hasn't worked so far. Each day I've been coming here in hopes of finding her. I figured it was a better option than going to her dorm.

I turn the corner and stop in my tracks, my hand gripping the edge of the shelf.

She's here.

It's like the air has been kicked out of my lungs. Air I wasn't even aware I'd been holding until now. She's sitting at her usual desk, her head bowed as she types something on her laptop, open books surrounding her. But there's no way I'd miss that red hair anywhere.

Loosening my grip on the shelf, I stalk forward until I'm standing by her side.

Grace looks up as my shadow falls over her, her mouth forming a little O as she faces me.

"W-what are you doing here?"

"I've been looking for you, but you've been a hard woman to find," I say easily, slipping into the other seat without waiting for an invitation. There won't be one.

"That's because I didn't want to be found."

"I know that, but Grace..."

I try to reach for her, but she pulls her hands off the desk and lets them fall in her lap.

"You lied to me."

I close my eyes and let out a breath. Although I knew it was coming, her accusation still hurts like a bitch.

"I did." There's no sense in lying. She saw me. "And I'm sorry about it. I really am, but..."

Grace shakes her head. "I can't keep doing this, Trent. I'm sorry, but I just can't."

This can't be happening.

"Please, Grace. I know this is a shitty thing to do, but I really, *really* need your help. With midterms..."

"I *can't*. There are things you don't know about..." Another shake. "I just can't."

Things?

“What things?”

“It doesn’t matter. I wish I could help you, but it’s all too much.”

I lean back in my chair, my bag falling down on the floor between my legs. “I know I screwed up, but I’m not joking when I say you’re my only hope. I need to pass this test in order to play. Just today, Coach told me I’ve got a chance at playing, actually *playing*, but without good grades, all the things I’ve done will be in vain.”

“You can’t put this on me. It’s not fair.”

All’s fair in love and basketball.

“I know, but I’m an asshole, and despite everything, I’m going to ask for your help.”

“Are you going to tell your girlfriend this time that I’m helping you with your classes?” The accusation is clear in her voice.

I nod. “I deserved that.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Grace...” I try once again.

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. There are dark bags under her eyes; they stand out against her pale skin. She looks like she’s barely been sleeping.

“Fine.”

I’m so captivated by her I almost miss her soft voice.

“Fine?”

“I’ll help you until midterms, but once that’s over, you’ll have to find somebody else.”

“I... okay, if that’s what you want.”

I should be ecstatic. After all, I just got what I came here for. Then why do I feel like I’ve lost so much more?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

GRACE

The warm air hits me in the face as soon as I step into Moore's. The place is buzzing with activity, although not nearly as much as on game nights. Unzipping my jacket, I walk between the tables, scanning the space for my friends until I find them sitting in the booth in the back.

Jade spots me first, lifting her hand in a wave, so I hurry toward them.

"What's wrong?" she asks instantly, as I slide into an open seat next to Rei.

"I might have done something stupid."

I spot the beer Jade's been drinking. I grab it and take a long pull.

God, I needed this.

"You seem thirsty," Rei chuckles, giving me a side glance. "Was it that hot in the library?"

My drinking doesn't have anything to do with the library being hot, but with a certain basketball player.

Seriously, how did I get myself into a mess like this?

Jade, on the other hand, just looks at me quizzically from across the table. "What did you do?"

Nibbling at my lip, I shift my attention between the two. Both of them giving me wary glances.

"I might have given Trent another chance." I focus my attention on the bottle, needing to look anywhere but at them. The edge of the label has started to rise thanks to the condensation. I wrap my hands around it, slowly picking it off.

From the corner of my eyes, I see Jade sitting upright. "You did not."

Yup, so much for that going over well.

“After everything that happened?” This comes from Rei. I filled them both in on what had happened that day at the movies, although I might have avoided telling them about a certain kiss. I didn’t want them to blow it out of proportion more than was necessary.

“Just until midterms are done,” I explain quickly. “I’d feel like an asshole if he didn’t pass his test because of me.”

Jade leans across the table and squishes my face between her palms. “Don’t do this. If he doesn’t pass the stupid test, it’s because he wasn’t studying enough. It has nothing to do with you.”

“Tell that to my conscience.”

Rationally, I know she’s right, but I couldn’t help myself. I couldn’t tell him no. Maybe it was my conscience. Maybe it was just my stubborn heart holding onto him for as long as possible.

“Grace...”

I gently pry her hands away from my cheeks.

“It’s only a few more days. What can happen?”

I just hope these aren’t my famous last words.

A familiar peach-colored cup appears in my line of vision, startling me. I look up, pulling my earbuds out.

“You scared me.”

“Sorry.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I didn’t realize you couldn’t hear me.”

“I usually like to tune out when I practice statistics, but I totally spaced out and didn’t realize the time.” I tilt my chin toward the cup. “What’s that for?”

“A peace offering.” Trent shrugs and slides into the seat opposite me. “I really do appreciate you helping me.”

“Just until you’re done with your midterm.”

The reminder is for me as well as for him. This thing between us has to come to an end, and the midterm is it—the end date.

Just a few more days, that’s it.

“I know.” He pulls his backpack into his lap and unzips it, pulling out his books. “What are we doing?”

I sift through my stuff until I find what I’ve been looking for. I hand him the paper.

“I created this mock exam. It should have all the things you’ve covered so far. I want you to go over it, and once you’re done, we can work on things you don’t know the answer to.”

Trent skims over the questions, his mouth moving as he reads. A little wrinkle forms between his brows. “I can do that.”

“There is no trying. I can help you, but you need to put in the work.”

Trent’s hand covers mine on the desk, and I suck in a sharp breath. The motion is so unexpected; I don’t get a chance to pull back. A little shock wave goes through my fingers as his skin covers mine, making the goosebumps appear on my flesh.

“I don’t expect you to magically make me an A+ student. I’ve been putting in some work too.”

“G-good. I—”

“Hey, am I late?”

At the sound of Spencer’s voice, I quickly pull my hand out of Trent’s, but not before he notices. The two men exchange a look, and I use it to compose myself. I shift in my chair, pushing a strand of my hair behind my ear.

“Now that you’re both here...”

As one, they both turn to me. A frown appears between Spencer’s brows. “You can’t be serious.”

“But I am. You wanted to practice statistics, so we will. In the meantime, Trent will work on that exam I prepared for him. Win-win.”

Or at least I hoped it would be. Inviting Spencer to join us seemed like the perfect idea at the time. I needed to study too, and Spencer wanted to do a recap with me before our exam. We’d get our work done, and I’ll have a buffer between Trent and me.

But now...

Spencer drops his backpack on the floor and grabs a chair from next to me. “Fine, let’s get to work.”

I meet Trent’s gaze across the desk, waiting to see if he has any issue with the arrangement, but he just shrugs. “I guess I better start.”

“Okay, I’m done.”

Trent leans in his chair, running his fingers through his messy hair. It’s grown in recent weeks, making it almost look like a mane.

I slide Spencer’s notebook back to him. “This looks good. You’re going to smash it.”

Spencer skims over the exercises, but there isn’t a lot to look at. He got them all correct. “Only because I had an amazing teacher. I could listen to our professor all day, and it would still sound like gibberish.”

Color rises into my cheeks. “I don’t know about that. You’ve worked hard these past few weeks.”

“Cause I knew if I didn’t, you’d have my balls.”

I roll my eyes at Spencer, not even dignifying that with an answer. I worried things would be different after that kiss. Difficult or even uncomfortable, but they’ve been the same. Spencer has been nothing but his usual easygoing self, and I was grateful for it.

I extend my hand toward Trent, who's been watching us silently. "Let's see what you've got."

After Trent finished the initial exam I gave him, we went over some of his mistakes. Most of them were pretty typical for foreigners. Not knowing the difference between when to use the definite or indefinite article, assuming the word's feminine or masculine just because it ends on a certain letter, some mixed meaning of the words, but overall, he wasn't half bad. His accent, though... yeah, that one's pretty terrible.

Trent hands me the notebook. "If I read one more page, I think my brain will be completely fried."

"Tell me about it." I rub my eyelids, hoping the slight pressure will help with the dryness, but no such luck. I grab a red pen and start going over the exercises.

"My brain *is* already fried," Spencer mutters, grabbing his phone. "Oh, damn. I totally spaced out."

He stands up and starts grabbing his things.

"Where's the fire?" I joke as he quickly shoves his things into his bag.

"I was supposed to be watching film with the guys ten minutes ago."

"Well, at least you're not just late for my classes. I guess I'll see you tomorrow? Please try not to oversleep."

Spencer grins. "I'll try my best but make no promises."

I shake my head. "You're lucky you're cute."

"At least you finally admit it. What gives, Red?"

I roll my eyes. "Go. You're late."

"Yeah, yeah." He lifts his hand in a wave. "Later, Red."

With another head shake, I get back to correcting Trent's work.

"You two seem close."

I look up to find Trent watching me. I hadn't even realized how quiet he'd gotten until now.

“He’s a good guy.” I push a stray hair behind my ear. “When you overlook the tardiness and a few other slightly annoying traits.”

“Are you two dating or something?”

“What?” He can’t be serious, can he? “No, of course not. Why would you think that?”

“You two went out on that date the other week.”

The movies. *Right*. Of course, he’s talking about the movies.

“Spencer is a friend of my roommate’s boyfriend. It was a group thing.”

“A group thing?”

“Yes, as friends.” I look down at the half-corrected page. “When do you have your French exam?”

“Tuesday. You feel ready for tomorrow?”

“I hope so. I’m at that point where I wonder what’s the meaning of all of this, anyway. And I think I forgot all that I’ve been trying so hard to memorize.”

“If you forget everything, then we’re all doomed.”

Before I can even open my mouth to answer, my stomach rumbles loudly, making my cheeks flush.

“Hungry?” Trent lifts his brows. The corner of his mouth is tipped in a half-smile, and I can see his eyes twinkle in silent amusement.

I burrow my head into my hands. “Oh my God, that’s so embarrassing.”

“Why? I’m hungry too, didn’t have anything to eat after practice.”

“But your stomach didn’t just scream like an angry lion.”

“More like a *hangry* lion.” Trent closes his books and turns off his laptop. “C’mon, let’s get out of here.”

“B-but...”

I look around, hoping to find a way out of this situation, but there isn't one. Trent sees it too.

"I don't accept any buts. It's not like you'll get any studying done on an empty stomach."

It's dark outside, has been for a while now, so I check my watch. "It's after nine in the evening. It's not like anything's open."

"*Cafeteria* isn't open," Trent points out, that mischievous smile of his curling his lips. "How do you feel about breakfast for dinner?"

"I can't move," I moan, leaning back in my chair and patting my stomach. "I'm so going to regret this in the morning."

"See?" Trent grins. "I was right."

My stomach clenches, and it definitely doesn't have anything to do with the amount of food I just ate.

Does he really have to grin like that?

"You were right," I admit.

Trent tips his chin at my half-empty plate. "Are you planning to eat that?"

I shake my head no. I swear this diner has the biggest pancakes I've ever eaten in my life. I can barely finish half without bursting. Every time I come here, I feel bad for wasting food, but there is no way I could finish it in one meal.

Trent pushes his plate away and pulls mine in front of him, taking a bite of blueberry pancake with chocolate syrup.

"Where do you put it all?" I chuckle.

He ate an omelet with extra bacon and waffles all on his own. And now this? Just looking at him makes my stomach unsettle.

“I’m a growing boy.” He throws another bite into his mouth and munches happily. “I need all the energy I can get.”

“You guys have it so easy.”

“Oh, please. You should eat more.” He cuts a piece and offers me the fork.

“If I take another bite, no matter how tiny, I’m going to puke. But thanks.”

Trent shrugs. “Suit yourself.”

A message lights up my screen. Wiping my hands on the napkin, I grab my phone.

Jade: Just wanted to check if you’re still breathing.

Jade: You coming home tonight, or should I bring you a blanket?

The corner of my mouth tips up. Jade knows me too well for my own good.

Me: Still alive. I’ll be home soon.

Jade: Good to know. I was getting worried I’d have to send out a rescue party.

Me: You’re too dra—

“Who’s that?”

“My roommate.”

I look up and find Trent watching me intently. He places the fork down on the empty plate and takes a napkin to wipe his mouth, but there’s a little spot of chocolate left on the corner of his lips.

“You have...” I point at his face.

“What?”

“Chocolate.” I point at my lips, but he goes for the wrong side.

“Did I get it?” Trent asks, still wiping the wrong corner.

“No,” I chuckle, shaking my head, “Here, let me...”

Before I can think too much about it, I lean forward. Since he's holding onto his napkin, and mine is sitting crumpled on the table, I use my finger to wipe the chocolate away.

Trent's eyes widen at the touch, and I can feel that familiar zap of electricity course through me as I swipe my finger over his mouth. Trent's lip is soft under my thumb, the complete contrast to his slightly scratchy cheek.

I pull my hand away quickly, looking anywhere but at him. "There, you're all set."

"Great." Trent clears his throat. "Thanks."

"Are you done?" I grab my backpack and pull it onto my lap. I need to get out of here. *Now.* "I should probably get going. I want to do some more revisions before bed tonight."

"Yeah, sure. Let me just pay the bill."

"Oh, no." My hand jolts forward, covering his. *Dammit.* "I can pay for myself."

Before I can even get the words out, Trent is already shaking his head no.

"I invited you. It's my treat." He slowly removes my hand from his before standing up. "I'll be back in a moment."

I could fight him on this. I didn't want him to think that he owes me anything, but that would require spending more time here than I wanted. And I should most definitely get out of here before I do something stupid. Like, touch him again. So instead, I take the easy way out and nod my agreement.

My heart is still beating wildly in my chest as I watch Trent walk to the older woman standing behind the counter.

I huff, my hands going to my warm cheeks. I'm thankful that I'm sitting because I'm pretty sure my knees would give out on me otherwise.

Get a grip, girl. Get. A. Grip.

This was such a bad idea. I should have never come here with him. I shouldn't have touched him the way I did. I shouldn't have let him pay. It feels too much like a date.

He isn't yours, Grace.

He hasn't been in a long, long time.

Well, Trent has never been, and Mason... He's long gone.

“Ready?”

Startled, I look up. I was so stuck in my own head I hadn't even heard Trent arrive.

I nod, forcing myself to unclench my fingers from the strap of my backpack so I can pull on my jacket before standing up.

Neither of us says anything as we pick up our things and leave the diner. A blast of cold air hits me in the face, making me shiver. It's not even that cold yet, but I can't help myself. My reaction is instinctual. Winter holds too many bad memories.

Sitting in a cold apartment and freezing because Cassie didn't pay the bills.

Losing Mason.

The lights flash, snapping me out of my thoughts as Trent unlocks his silver Range Rover. After leaving the library, we picked it up and drove to Macy's since it was too late and chilly outside.

“Cold?” Trent asks, pulling the passenger door open for me.

I slide into my seat, making sure not to brush against him as I do. “A little.”

“Heater should kick in soon.”

“It's fine.” Trent nods, closes the door, and walks to the other side. “It's probably a mix of nerves and lack of sleep.”

“Nervous about your midterms?”

No, I'm nervous because I'm sitting here with you.

Not like I can actually say it out loud.

I clasp my hands in my lap, intertwining my fingers. “Something like that.”

Trent watches me for a moment longer. His brown eyes look at me intently, that little line that appears every time he's trying hard to concentrate set firmly between his brows. I've noticed he does it often. Just looks at me as if he's trying to figure me out. As if he looks carefully enough, he'll see... something.

I bite the inside of my cheek, unable to look away. He's holding me hostage, and I can't—don't want to, not really—avert my gaze.

What do you see when you look at me, Trent?

Can you remember?

Or am I the only one holding onto the memories?

“I got nervous before my first game.”

His words surprise me, although maybe they shouldn't. If Trent notices it, he doesn't say anything. He chuckles and leans back in his seat, not in any hurry to leave. “When the coach told me to warm up to play, I thought I was going to puke.”

“Do you usually get nervous before a game?”

Trent shrugs. “No idea. Before now, I never actually got to play besides a game here or there with Matteo.”

“Really?” My fingers flex, holding so tight my knuckles turn white. “I thought you got a basketball scholarship to Blairwood.”

Trent chuckles. “No way. My parents hate the idea that I play.”

“Why?”

Trent sighs. “It's a long story.”

It doesn't matter. I can wait. For you, I don't mind staying here all night long.

The words are on the tip of my tongue, but before I can say them, he turns on the engine and pulls out of the parking place.

I swallow the lump in my throat, disappointed, and look out the window.

Maybe it's better that way. How many confirmations do I need that he isn't Mason for me to finally believe it? How many times do I have to reopen my wounded heart only to patch it back together before there's nothing left to patch?

I'm stuck in my own head all the way back to campus. Trent doesn't seem to mind the quiet because he doesn't try to fill it with unnecessary chatter, for which I'm thankful.

"Thanks for feeding me," I say, unbuckling my seatbelt as he pulls to a stop in front of my dorm.

"Grace."

The hairs at my nape rise at his soft whisper. I slowly lift my head until my eyes meet his.

I can hear the echo of my heartbeat in my eardrums as we stare at one another. Feel the persistent beat in the base of my throat.

Thump-thump-thump.

One lock falls down on my face. I reach up to push it back, but Trent's faster. His hand brushes against my cheek, his rough fingertips grazing over my skin. Goosebumps cover my flesh, making a shiver run through me.

Weak.

So freaking weak.

"T-Trent?"

My tongue darts out, sliding over my lower lip. Trent's eyes fall down, zeroing in on my mouth, and a little bit of air that was left in the cab of the truck is suddenly sucked away, making me breathless.

He cups my cheek. That invisible force pulling me to him is back at work. Unable to resist it, resist *him*, I lean my head to the side, loving the feeling of his warm skin against mine.

We're close.

So freaking close.

I'm not sure which one of us closed the distance, but it's not there. His warm breath touches my cheek. That intoxicating smell, a mix of cedar, sandalwood, sweat, and something that's uniquely Trent, fills all my senses, making me dizzy.

I place my hand on his chest, my fingers trembling. The need to pull him closer is overwhelming, but I can't.

He's not yours.

I close my eyes. My throat bobs as I take a deep breath, but even that doesn't help.

"I-I c-can't do this," I stutter, barely pushing the words out.

"Why?"

He can't be serious.

"W-why?" With every ounce of power I possess, I push him away. "Why?" I repeat, this time, my voice is firmer. "You're hers!"

His irises widened as if I had just slapped him. "Shit, Ashley."

Trent pulls back and runs his hands through his hair in frustration. Just then, his phone starts to vibrate. We both turn to look at it. At the picture of the smiling girl we were just talking about showing up on the screen. "Dammit."

"I can't keep doing this, Trent. It's not right toward her or toward m-me."

My voice wobbles there at the end. Tears fill my eyelids, burning, but I blink them away. I'm not going to cry. Not now. Not in front of him.

"Grace..." He tries again, but I'm already pulling away. Blindly, I reach for the door handle.

Why doesn't this damn door want to open?

"I can't be your friend." I shake my head, my fingers finally wrapping around the handle and pushing open the door.

I can't keep watching you with her.

It's killing me.

“I’m sorry. I never meant to—”

“I’m sorry too.”

Sinking my teeth into my lower lip to prevent myself from crying, I rush out of the car. I’m moving so fast I almost trip and fall face first but somehow manage to find my balance in the last second.

With my head bowed down, I hurry up the steps and inside, not slowing even when there’s a door between us.

Not enough.

I take two steps at a time, passing an odd person here or there on my way to the room.

Not enough.

Thump-thump.

Not enough.

Thump-thump.

Not enough.

Thump-thump.

My fingers are shaky as I push open the door of our suite. It swings open and bangs against the wall on the other side.

Jade looks up from her laptop, her irises wide. “What the...” She sits upright. “Grace?”

There’s a frown between her brows as her eyes land on me. I’m still standing in the doorway, my breathing ragged. It’s like now that I’m finally here, I don’t know what to do? Where to go? Jade puts the laptop on the coffee table and comes toward me.

“Hey, what’s going on?” She brushes my wild locks out of my face. “Why are you crying?”

“Am I?” Absentmindedly, I raise my hand and brush the back of it over my cheek. And sure enough, my hand comes

up wet. A bitter, and maybe slightly lunatic, chuckle escapes me. “So much for not crying.”

“What happened? Did somebody hurt you?”

I shake my head no. He didn’t hurt me. Not in the way she thinks, anyway. “He k-kissed me.”

Whispering the words out loud shatters something inside me. My knees buckle, giving out on me, and it’s only thanks to Jade I don’t crash down.

“Who... Shit.”

She wraps her arms around me and gently helps me to the floor. I pull my legs close to my chest as a sob rips out of my lungs.

“Grace,” Jade says gently, brushing my hair away. “Talk to me.”

“Ma—” I bite my lip, stopping myself on time. “Trent. He tried to kiss me.”

My heart squeezes at the memory. I raise my hand and cover my mouth before another sob can come out. But it’s useless.

I can still feel his warm breath touching my lips. The way his mouth brushed against mine ever so slightly, like the feel of butterfly wings.

“Oh, Grace.”

Jade wraps her arms around me in a tight hug. I burrow my head into my best friend’s neck and let my walls down. Tears fall down my cheeks, and I’m pretty sure I’m leaving a snotty mess on her shirt, but she doesn’t say a word. She just holds me.

“Y-you can tell me I t-told you so,” I stutter, wiping my nose with the back of my hand.

Jade leans her chin on top of my head. “I never wanted to do that. I want you to be happy.”

“I can’t keep on doing this, Jade. It’s killing me. He’s killing me. Two years ago, Mason broke my heart, but now,

Trent's stomping all over the pieces that were left in Mason's wake, and I..." I shake my head, feeling more tears pooling. "I can't. I can't be his friend. I can't keep on watching him with her. I just... can't."

"Then don't."

"But..."

"Don't." Jade pushes me back just enough so she can see my face. Her fingers dig into my shoulders, and she gives me a little shake. "You promised to help him until midterms. You did your part of the bargain. Tomorrow you have your last midterm, pack your bags and go home early."

Home.

"B-but what about you?"

"I'll go with Yasmin and Nixon." Jade shrugs like it's not a big deal. "Go home early, Grace. Put as much distance as you can between the two of you. I don't want to see you hurt."

Grace.

A tear rolls down my cheek.

"I think it might be too late for that."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

TRENT

“Oh, you finally decided to show up!” Matteo turns in his chair at the sound of the door opening, an annoyed scowl between his brows.

“I’m not in the mood, Matteo,” I mutter, rubbing my hand over my face. My head feels like a ticking time bomb, ready to explode.

My best friend either doesn’t see it, or he simply doesn’t care. Knowing him, it’s the latter.

“Where were you, man? Ashley was here looking for you. Do you know what a pain in the ass she can be?”

“I...”

You’re hers!

Green eyes filled with unshed tears flash before my eyes. Not that I could actually forget. There was no way I could erase Grace Shelton from my mind.

Not her sad gaze.

Nor her sweet smile.

Or the pain that was reflected in her irises earlier tonight.

The pain that I put there.

I can’t keep doing this, Trent.

The knot that I had in my throat ever since Grace ran out of my car grows bigger. I run my fingers through my hair, tightening the grip on the strands. What was I thinking? Trying to kiss her like that? Trying to kiss her at all? Where the hell did that come from, anyway?

“Seriously, Trent. She was driving me insane, and I couldn’t really tell her that you were out with your tutor. She’d go ballistic on me.”

For the first time, my brain registers his words.

Ashley.

She was here earlier today looking for me. All the while, I was with another girl.

I remember her image flashing on my screen—the look of horror on Grace’s face when she realized who was calling.

You’re hers!

I pull my phone out of my pocket, and sure enough, half a dozen missed calls, and even more, messages wait when I unlock my phone.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

After Grace left, I turned off the sound and just drove around, not knowing what to do. I didn’t want to go back to my dorm, and what I wanted to do—go to Grace and find a way to fix this mess that we’ve created—I couldn’t do.

Ashley: Where are you?

Ashley: Dumb question, probably studying.

Ashley: I tried stopping by your dorm, but you weren’t there.

Ashley: I wanted to talk about the other day.

Ashley: I might have overreacted.

Ashley: Call me so we can talk?

Ashley: P.S. Did you have to pick Matteo as your roommate? He hates me.

Ashley: I know things have been tense, but I know we can work through this. Love you xoxo

Her last words are like a slap in my face. As if I didn’t feel guilty enough as it is already.

She wanted to talk and work through our shit, and what was I doing at the same time? Trying to kiss my tutor.

“Fucking hell.”

I rub my hand over my face. My head is throbbing like a bitch, my back muscles so tight I’m surprised they didn’t snap.

How did I get myself in such a mess?

“What the hell happened?” I look up and find Matteo observing me. “Did you two have a fight again?”

I shake my head but then nod. “We had a fight last week, but that’s not why I’m upset. I fucked up.”

“What happened?”

I know Matteo is the last person ever to judge me, but it doesn’t make it any easier to say the words out loud.

“I...” I clear my throat, my mouth suddenly feeling dry. “I kissed Grace.”

Matteo sits upright, his eyes bulging. “You did what?”

Sighing, I sit down on my bed. “I wanted to kiss Grace.”

“Wait just a second.” He pushes off the chair and starts pacing in front of me. “You wanted to, or you did?”

“She stopped it, but...”

I would have done it if she hadn’t.

The realization isn’t even surprising. It just... is.

You’re hers. Grace’s accusation rings in my ear.

You’re hers.

You’re hers.

You’re hers.

She’s right, dammit. I’m still dating Ashley, and it isn’t right; to either of them.

Then why the hell does it feel right? Hanging out with her? Laughing with her? Being with her? Wanting to kiss her?

Why does it always feel so damn right?

“You wanted to,” Matteo finishes for me.

“I did.”

The admission, *the truth*, knocks the wind out of my lungs.

“What the hell are you going to do?”

I run my fingers through my hair. “I have no idea.”

“Well, you better figure it out. And fast.”

As if I don’t know that.

I throw myself on the bed, the bright lights blinding me temporarily. A sharp pain spreads behind my temples, nausea rising from the pit of my stomach, but I push it back. Lifting the phone, I bring it to eye level.

Ashley’s messages are still there, taunting me. But instead of answering her, I swipe them away and open a new one, typing in the message.

Seven letters, but I worry it might not be nearly enough.

I’m sorry.

“You didn’t get back to me last night,” Ashley pouts, her hand wrapping tightly around my arm.

She found me at the gym a while ago. Since I couldn’t sleep, I decided to get up and blow off some steam as soon as it opened. I hoped it would help me clear my head, but the only thing I achieved was to tire myself out, and now, I have to go back to studying before my exam tomorrow. Fucking great.

“Sorry, I... I was studying.”

It wasn’t a complete lie. I tried, but after a good twenty minutes of just staring at the screen, I gave up. I couldn’t get Grace out of my head. Then I’d remember Ashley, and I entered this never-ending circle of guilt and regret I couldn’t seem to get out of.

I didn’t know what to do. About any of this.

I like Grace. I really do. I like who I am when we’re together, but Ashley and me... We go way back. And she’s been with me through all the shit that went down. And I loved her. Don’t I?

I loved he— Loved, not love.

Ashley tugs me to a stop and turns me toward her. “I wanted to talk about the other day. When things went down, I was...” She stops for a moment as if weighing her words carefully. “I might have overreacted.”

“Ash...”

She presses her finger against my mouth. “No, listen to me. I know how important this is to you, and I should have been more understanding. It’s just this semester, anyway, right?”

“Until midterms,” I say on autopilot.

“What?”

“Until midterms. Grace can’t do it afterward.”

By the smile that forms on Ashley’s face, you’d think I just told her she won a million bucks. “See? Now things will go back to normal, and everything is going to be just like it’s supposed to.” She presses a kiss against my mouth. “Are we still driving to the city on Wednesday?”

City?

The change of subject gives me whiplash.

Fuck, Thanksgiving. I rub the back of my neck. “Yeah, right after my exam. I should be done by eleven or so. We can pick you up.”

She frowns. “We?”

“Matteo is going too.”

Originally, we were supposed to drive alone, but I asked him to join us after the fiasco yesterday. I couldn’t imagine going alone with Ashley. Not when I still didn’t know what the hell I should do about all of this.

The problem was somebody was bound to get hurt, no matter what or *who* I chose.

I close my eyes as the pain spreads through my skull. Lifting my hand, I rub the side of my head, but it’s useless.

Grace's tear-stained face flashes before my eyes, not that it's ever far from my mind.

Somebody already got hurt.

"Oh."

Blinking my eyes open, I see disappointment flash across Ashley's face, so I look away. A few people are passing by, but the campus is relatively quiet.

"No sense in him driving all on his own when we're going in the same direction," I shrug. God, can I be more of a dick? "Besides, it'll just be a few days."

"Yeah, sure."

Ash tries to force out a smile, but it's strained.

You're messing it all up.

Don't I fucking know it.

"Wanna grab breakfast?" There's a hopeful look on her face, and once again, I'm going to crash it down.

"Actually, I think I'll just grab something to go before heading to the library."

And the award for the biggest asshole to his girlfriend goes to... Yeah, that would be me.

"Fine," Ashley sighs and lifts on the tips of my toes. Anticipating the move, I turn my head slightly to the side, so her lips brush against the corner of my mouth. She jabs her finger into my chest. "But when this is all done, you owe me. Big time."

I owe her so much already. That's the whole problem.

Later that day, after I somehow managed to concentrate enough to get a couple of hours of studying behind me, I'm back at the coffee shop for more fuel.

Two girls and a guy are standing in front of me, but the whole place isn't as busy as it usually is. I guess some people may have already left for home for Thanksgiving if they were lucky enough to finish with their midterms early.

I pull out my phone, but apart from some stupid meme one of my teammates sent to the group message—there's nothing else.

No response from Grace, not that I'm surprised.

I can't be your friend.

Her words seemed decisive, final.

A shiver of unease runs down my spine.

This can't be how it ends.

I need to see her.

I need to make sure she's okay.

I need to apologize for yesterday.

I need to make her understand that...

What do I need to make her understand? That this isn't me? That I usually don't have a tendency to sneak around with other girls behind my girlfriend's back? Kiss them when she's not looking?

As if she'd listen to my bullshit. Only it's not bullshit. Grace... she's different.

It's probably the stupidest idea I've ever had, but I have to do it.

When it's my turn, I end up getting two coffees, and before I know it, I'm on my way to Grace's dorm.

I just want to make sure she's okay. That's it.

I'm just nearing the steps when the door swings open, and a dark-haired girl comes out. She's talking on the phone, but when she lifts her gaze, her blue eyes narrow at me.

She stops in her tracks and glares at me. "What the hell are you doing here?"

“What—”

Shit, Grace’s friend. What was her name again? Julie? Jude? No, that’s not it. Jade.

“I’ll call you later,” Jade mutters into the phone before hanging up and marching toward me. She grabs my hand and pulls me back down the stairs, only turning to face me once we’re safely on the ground. “I asked, what the hell do you think you’re doing here? Don’t you think you’ve done enough damage as it is?”

She lets go of my hand unceremoniously, glaring at me with that furious, icy gaze.

“I have to talk to her. Please? I tried texting her, but she didn’t get back to me. I’m wo—”

“Isn’t that answer enough?” Jade interrupts. “She doesn’t want to talk to you. Hell, she doesn’t want to do *anything* with you, so fuck off.” She accentuates the last three words with a decisive jab to my chest.

I take a step back. “I need to apologize to her.”

“You can apologize by leaving her in peace.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “Besides, she’s not here.”

Not here?

My heart starts to speed up, and my lungs squeeze, making it hard to breathe.

She left? How? Why?

“W-where did she go?” I wheeze out, panic coursing through my body at the idea that Grace might be gone.

Jade rolls her eyes. “She went home. Not that it’s any of your damn business.”

Home. I pinch the bridge of my nose, forcing myself to take a shaky breath in. *She just went home. She’ll be back. This isn’t the end.*

“I mean it.” Jade jabs me in the chest, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Grace has suffered enough. Let her go.”

I don't need Jade to tell me that. I know it. I've seen it on her face. Witnessed the sadness in her eyes too many times to count.

What's your story? What happened to you, Grace?

"We're just friends."

"And friends kiss other friends?" She lifts her eyebrow in challenge. "Especially if that friend has a *girlfriend*?" She shakes her head. "Let. Her. Go. Before you destroy what little's left of her heart."

With another shake of her head, Jade walks around me, leaving me standing out there on the sidewalk, her words still ringing in my head.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

GRACE

I pull into the driveway of the place I've called home since I was twelve years old. Killing the engine, I lean back in my seat, feeling for the first time in days like I can breathe.

I'm home.

The peace settles over me, and I can feel the corner of my mouth lift in a small smile.

I still remember the first time I arrived. The two-story house seemed huge to a girl who grew up in a pantry-turned-makeshift-bedroom in a tiny apartment in Queens. A mansion, but now it's just home.

In recent years, J.D. and Sienna added more rooms to accommodate their growing family. Sienna has also done some redecorating to make the place look homier, instead of the dark bachelor pad it used to be. But through it all, the heart of the house has stayed the same. It's the same house where I learned what family means. What love is. The place where I got my first period. It's the house from which I went on my first date and daydreamed about forever. The home in which I danced, and laughed, and cried.

The front door opens just as I get out of the car.

"Grace?" I look up to find Sienna standing on the front porch, the surprise evident on her face.

"Si." Shutting the door, I run toward her, throw my arms around her neck, and pull her in a tight hug. For a moment, she seems stunned, but she collects herself quickly, returning my embrace.

"Well, talk about missing somebody," she chuckles lightly, stroking my hair. "Already sick of living alone?"

I inhale deeply, letting her familiar scent fill my nostrils. *God, I missed her so much.* "No, but it's good to be home."

Sienna pulls back, her hands resting on my shoulders as she takes me in. "What did you do to your hair?"

I take a strand and twist it between my fingers. “Had Jade cut it. You like?”

Sienna observes me for a moment longer. “It suits you.”

“Thank you.”

When I was growing up, Sienna was my role model. She wasn’t just beautiful, but also caring, successful, funny, and hard-working. She was everything I wanted to be, and then some, and having her approval, even if it’s for a silly thing like a new haircut or shirt, meant the world to me. It still does.

“Did I get something wrong? I thought you were coming down tomorrow.”

I shrug, trying to act nonchalant. “I was supposed to wait for Yasmin, Nixon, and Jade but changed my mind at the last minute.”

That’s an abbreviated version. Not the complete truth, but also not quite a lie.

It’s not like I can exactly tell her everything that’s been going on in the last few weeks.

Sienna raises her brow but doesn’t comment further. I wonder if she can see right through me. Knowing her? Most likely. Still, she doesn’t press; she never does.

“Well, I’m glad to see you home.” Sienna gives me another tight squeeze. “C’mon, I’m sure the guys...”

“Hey, did I hear a ca—” J.D. stops in his tracks when he sees me. “Grace? Weren’t you supposed to come tomorrow?”

“I guess that’s the question of the day.” I give Sienna a knowing look before shifting my attention to my brother. “Next time, I’ll make sure to come exactly on the day I said I would,” I tease. “I don’t want to mess with your schedule.”

“I’ll give you...” J.D. crosses the distance between us, and before I know it, his arms are around me, and he’s lifting me in the air.

“J.D.!” I protest and wrap my arms around his broad shoulders, holding on for dear life, my legs dangling in the air.

“Put me down.”

“Nonsense.”

“You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to? An old man?”

I run my fingers through his short hair. “I do see some grays here.”

“Smartass.” J.D. puts me back down. “You can come whenever the hell you want. This place will always be your home.”

My throat tightens from the onslaught of emotions. Before J.D., I’d never had a home. Not in the real sense of the word.

When I was younger, I used to worry I was only an obligation for my half-brother. At one point, I even ran away, but he and Sienna found me and brought me back home.

I clear my throat, trying to compose myself before I burst into tears. “You didn’t turn my room into storage yet?”

“Hahaha, funny.” J.D. throws his hand over my shoulder. “It’s good to have you home, kiddo.”

“It’s good to be back.” I lean into his side, letting him ruffle my hair. As if I’m twelve all over again. If only things were that simple. Shaking my head, I look around the foyer. “Where are the boys?”

“In the playroom, watching cartoons.” Sienna rolls her eyes and bellows: “Boys, aunt Grace is here!”

“Acie, come!” Wren tugs at my hand. I look down at him, his hopeful green eyes staring right at me. “Play.”

At only two years old, he’s the real daredevil of the bunch.

I ruffle his locks playfully. With those bright eyes and dark hair, he’ll be a real heartbreaker one day. Probably a ladies’

man too, if he's anything like my brother. "In a minute, bud. I have to clean the table first."

He blinks, those long lashes making his eyes stand out even more. "Plewes?"

See what I mean? A troublemaker, that one.

"Go with Nicky and Violet. I'll be there soon."

Wren pouts unhappily. Crossing his arms over his chest, he stomps his feet. He looks exactly like Sienna when she's pissed off at somebody. Well, not somebody, J.D. in particular.

"Come, Wren." Violet wraps her fingers around Wren's. Instantly, he turns around to her and lets Violet pull him away toward the playroom.

Chuckling, I get up and start clearing off the table. The guys left a little while ago to the living room to watch the football game. J.D. and William might both be retired, but they are far from done with the sport.

Anabel, William's wife, joins me in the dining room and starts piling plates.

Stubborn woman. "You should let me do that."

I met Anabel around the same time I first met Sienna. That year, Anabel came to America to work as an au pair for Sienna's sister, which was how they met and became friends. Bel ended up falling for William Price, one of J.D.'s friends and teammates, and moving to America after finishing her master's in Croatia, where she's originally from. How's that for a story where love conquers all?

She rolls her eyes at me. "I'm pregnant, not an invalid."

"I didn't say you were." I give her a side glance. "How long until baby number three arrives?"

A smile spreads over her lips. "Two months to go."

Even at seven months pregnant, Anabel's equally stunning as the first time I met her, even more so. I guess pregnancy agrees with her. Her black hair is pulled into a high ponytail, and she's wearing minimal makeup, not that she needs it. Her

skin is almost like porcelain, and her naturally long eyelashes accentuate her dark blue eyes.

“Do you know what you’re having?”

Anabel sighs, smoothing her hand over her belly affectionately. “It’s another girl.”

“Another one?”

Along with Violet, she and William have an eighteen-month-old baby girl, Mia.

“Yeah, I was kind of hoping it was a boy this time around, but nope. Another girl,” she chuckles, a little bit of longing and a whole lot of happiness in her voice as she says it.

“Will loves to be surrounded by his girls.”

You’d think he’d be disappointed with no son to follow in his footsteps. Nobody to teach how to throw a football and take to the games, but nope. William is so in love with each of his girls. It’s crazy.

“That he does.” We each grab a stack of dishes and go toward the kitchen. “But enough about me. What’s up with you? How is college treating you?”

“I—” The image of Trent flashes before my eyes. The way he looked at me when we were sitting in his car. I graze my teeth over my lower lip.

Would he have done it? Would he have actually kissed me if I hadn’t put a stop to it? And even a scarier thought... Would I have eventually let him?

“Good,” I finish lamely.

“Good?” She looks at me over her shoulder, her brow arched. “So, what’s with that face?”

I put the plates by the sink, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “What face?”

“That face. You look like somebody kicked your puppy.”

“Right?” Sienna chimes in. She turns off the water and dries her hands on a towel. “I asked her the same thing

yesterday, but she evaded the question, and then she was saved by the boys.” Sienna puts wine glasses on the table in front of us and starts pouring the wine for the two of us and juice for Anabel. “Spill.”

I nibble at my lip, thinking. I knew the question would come up eventually. My family knows me too well for my own good, and there is only so much space they’ll give me. The problem is, I just don’t know *how* to tell them.

They all witnessed the wreck I was after Mason disappeared. The last thing I want is to worry them all over again.

Anabel leans her elbows against the counter. “Is it a boy?”

“It’s...” I start, but my mouth suddenly feels so dry. Wrapping my shaky fingers around the glass, I take a big gulp of wine. It’s hard to miss the look Anabel and Sienna exchange, but I don’t care one bit. If I’m going to do this, I need a little liquid courage. “It’s Mason.”

“I told you it’s no—” Sienna shifts her attention from Anabel to me, a frown between her brows. “Wait, what?”

“You mean that guy...”

“Who I had a crush on but disappeared after our first date?” I finish instead of Anabel. “Yeah, that’s who I’m talking about.”

“I think I need a drink for this conversation.” Sienna takes a big sip from her glass.

“At least you can have a drink.” Anabel rubs her hand over her baby bump, and with some effort, slips on the chair at the counter. “Tell us what happened.”

“You saw Mason? Where? How?”

“Not exactly...” I let out a long sigh. “It’s a long story.”

Sienna points her finger at me. “You better spill it, missy.”

So I do. I tell them everything that has happened since I came to Blairwood. My decision to move on, cutting my hair, stumbling into somebody, only to look up and see Mason, only

he's not Mason. All the times I've seen Trent since that first meeting, tutoring, almost kiss... Everything.

Telling them all of this, I realized how much had happened. I've been away for three months. Just three months and so much has already changed.

"So let me get this straight." Sienna picks up her glass. "He looks like Mason, but he isn't Mason. He's Trent."

"Basically."

Anabel purses her lips. "But why would he lie?"

"And which one's a lie?"

"Maybe he didn't," I say absentmindedly, tracing the edge of the glass with the tip of my finger.

"Didn't what?"

"Lie." I look up to find them both watching me expectantly. "Maybe he really is Trent."

A crease forms between Sienna's brows. "So, what? He just looks like Mason?"

The doubt is clear in Sienna's voice. I get it; the alternative sounds crazy, but after everything I've seen and heard, it's not *that* crazy. What would either Mason or Trent get for lying to me, both before and now? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And while I've never seen two completely different people look so much alike as Mason and Trent do, is the idea that there is a twin somewhere out there for each of us that unbelievable?

Maybe I have a twin somewhere out there in the world, but Mason's is Trent, and he's been living in the same city all along.

"Maybe..." I shrug. "I mean, he has a girlfriend and a friend he's known all his life."

"So maybe Mason lied to you."

"I don't think so, Si. What would he get out of it? And if Trent were really pretending to be Mason, he would have slipped up by now. Even more, he'd have tried to avoid me at

all costs since then. He was already dating his girlfriend. And he's not doing that."

He's actually going out of his way to seek me out. And for better or for worst, he seemed upset after the whole ordeal in the car.

"Maybe that's his plan all along. Maybe..."

I take Sienna's hands in mine. "I know you're worried about me, but he isn't like that, and you know it."

Sienna shakes her head, her fingers tightening around mine. "He hurt you."

"What happened hurt me."

Sienna waves her hand dismissively. "It's all the same to me. You were hurt and heartbroken, and there was nothing I could do to help you."

My throat tightens, my eyelids burning with unshed tears. "I love you, Si."

Sienna pulls me in a hug. "I love you too, Gracie."

We just stand there for a while, holding onto each other.

"What about me?" Anabel demands. "The pregnant and ultra-hormonal lady doesn't get a hug?"

We pull apart, and Si slides her thumb under her eyes. "Of course, you can."

We both go to her, each of us wrapping our arms around her from one side.

"Better?"

"Yeah." Anabel nods, and we pull back. "So you really think they're not the same person?"

I shake my head no. "I'm not going to lie, seeing Trent... It brings back memories. But when that initial shock is gone, I can see the differences between them."

"What are you going to do about it?" Sienna asks. "You said it yourself. He has a girlfriend."

The guilt over what has happened slams into me. The bile rises in my throat, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

I never thought I'd be one of *those* girls. No matter how unintentionally. But here we are. "What I should have done from the very start; stay clear of Trent Remington."

My words echo in the room, making it all seem somehow final.

It *is* final.

I can't keep doing this to myself. It's not fair. I might have loved Mason when I was sixteen, but he's gone, and I can't keep hoping he'll reappear. I can't keep hoping Trent will remember something that has never happened.

It's time to move on. It has been for a while now.

"Who's Trent Remington?"

My heart stops at the sound of my brother's voice. When I look at Sienna, I find a wide-eyed look that I'm pretty sure is reflected on my face, too.

"That one's on you," she mutters quietly, patting me on the shoulder.

"Thanks."

Grabbing her glass, she waves Anabel to join her, and the two of them exit the kitchen.

Once we're alone, he leans against the doorway and lifts his brows. "Is there something I should know about this Trent boy?"

Yeah, about that...

Downing what little's left in my glass, I go to the fridge, grab a beer, and hand it to him wordlessly before hopping onto the counter.

J.D. looks at the can and then at me. "That bad?"

I think about it for a moment, drumming my fingers against the counter. "Maybe I should have pulled out the good stuff."

J.D. switches the can from one hand to the other without making any attempt to open it. “How do you even know where we keep the good stuff?”

“Oh please, I bet Nicky can find your good stuff.”

Sienna and J.D. never hide anything from us. Then again, I never needed to steal something. I was a rule follower, and rule followers don’t drink alcohol. Well, at least we don’t *steal* alcohol from our guardians.

J.D. leans against the counter next to me and turns to face me. “You’re stalling, Gracie.”

“Am not.”

I totally am, sue me.

Telling Sienna and Anabel—that was the easy part—but telling my overprotective big brother everything I just shared with them? Yeah, I could do without it.

“Are too.” J.D. jabs me playfully on my side. Something he used to do when I was younger. “Which makes me think I won’t like what you have to say.” He tips his chin at me. “So who’s the Trent boy?”

“He is...” I sigh. “Promise you won’t get mad.”

J.D.’s smile falls. “Gracie...”

“It’s not like that. It’s just... complicated.”

“Aren’t things always?”

“So philosophical of you. Don’t think I haven’t noticed that isn’t a promise.”

“And you’re not stalling any less. Now spill before I call in the reinforcements.”

And he would do that. I know he would. There isn’t anything J.D. wouldn’t do if it meant keeping the people he loves, his *family*, safe.

I clear my throat, not that it makes the words come out any smoother. “So about two months ago, I met this guy...”

“This Trent?” Jack clarifies.

“Yeah, Jade and I were just getting our coffees, and he was there.”

“Okay, so what’s the big deal? I’m sure there’s a bunch of guys in college. I’m not stupid, although let me tell you, none of them will ever be good enough for my baby sister.”

If only that were the issue.

“Well, the thing is...” My tongue darts out, sliding over my dry lips. *Just get it out already!* I suck in a breath. “HelooksexactlylikeMason.”

The words come out in a heap, so fast even I’m not sure if I said it right, but at least, they’re out.

The teasing smile falls down, replaced by a grim expression. Jack presses his lips in a hard line, his knuckles turning white as he grips the can tighter.

“As in...”

“My Mason. Only he’s not.”

The silence settles over us, making it hard to breathe. I look down at my lap, my teeth sinking into my lower lip to prevent it from wobbling.

I knew this would happen. Bringing Mason up is like opening Pandora’s box. You never know what will come out, only that it won’t be good.

“Gracie,” J.D. sighs and turns around. His finger slips under my chin, lifting it, so we’re eye to eye.

“I know what you’re going to say.”

He raises his brows. “Do you now?”

“I know this has bad idea written all over it. He’s not Mason. I know that. And I’m planning to stay as far from him as I can once I go back. It’s time to let Mason go. I know that. I’ve known that for a while, just...”

“Good.” J.D. nods. “I want you to be happy, Grace. You *deserve* to be happy.”

I wrap my arms around him, burying my head into the crook of his shoulder. “I know.”

My mind does, at least. My heart... Well, my heart is a whole other story.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

TRENT

The door closes behind me, dulling the sounds of laughter and conversation coming from the inside. I inhale deeply, the chilly night air filling my lungs. A shiver runs through me as the cold air hits me in the face. I should have probably put on my jacket, but I just needed a moment alone so I could breathe.

I walk across the terrace and over to the fence. The backyard is dark. The only thing illuminating it is a faint light of a new moon.

Leaning against the fence, I dip my head and close my eyes. The darkness helps dull the throbbing behind my temples, if only a little. It's been a shitty few days, and the lack of sleep definitely didn't help. Thankfully, nobody has noticed it yet. I'm sure if they did, mom would insist on taking me to the ER, but she was otherwise occupied for now.

I know what my problem is, and it has nothing to do with my head.

It's Grace, plain and simple.

Regardless of what Jade told me, I couldn't stop thinking about her. I reached so many times for my phone, wanting to call her, text her, anything really, but put it back down before I could actually do it.

She's been through enough. Jade's words ring in my mind. They haunt my dreams. What did she mean by it?

I could see the wall Grace put around herself. It's a high and impenetrable fortress she hides behind, barely letting anybody take a glimpse behind it.

What happened to you, Grace Shelton?

Whatever it was, it probably wasn't pretty, and the last thing I wanted to do was cause her any more pain.

The door creaks open, snapping me out of my thoughts. A moment later, hands wrap around my middle. "Hey, what are

you doing out here all alone?”

My body freezes at the sound of her voice. There’s no helping it. The reaction is almost instinctual. I feel like shit about what happened with Grace. For keeping it from Ashley. She deserves far better than what I could give her.

Well, you better figure it out. And fast.

I know Matteo is right. It’s time to make a decision. I just don’t know if I can do it because, despite everything, I love Ashley. I’ll always love Ashley.

But are you in love with her?

I look over my shoulder. Ashley is standing right behind me, her face pressed against my back. “Just thought I’d get a little bit of air.”

Ashley hums but doesn’t comment. She loops her fingers through my belt loops and turns me around to face her. “You’ve been quiet all evening.”

“I’m just tired. The midterms kicked my ass.”

“I don’t know about that,” Ash pouts. “You’ve been studying so much I barely got to see you.”

“Yeah, well, if I don’t get good grades, I don’t get to play basketball.”

“I’m not sure why you even want to play so badly. It’s not like you’ll go pro anyhow.”

I press my lips into a tight line. “Because I love to play?”

This has always been one of our biggest issues. Ashley constantly needed to find a reason to do something, whereas if I liked something, that was reason enough.

“I know you do.” She places her hand on my chest, smoothing out my shirt. “And I’m not saying you shouldn’t play at all, but being on the team is a lot of work to spend on something that won’t be your future.”

I place my hand over hers. “Well, I’m not afraid of a lot of work, Ash.”

“I’m not saying you are. I’m just...”

I walk around her, running my fingers through my hair. “Just what?” I ask, my voice rising as my frustration with her grows. “Just what, Ashley?”

When I turn around to face her, her eyes are wide, lips parted as she just stares at me.

Fuck.

“Ash,” I sigh, rubbing my hand over my face. “I’m...”

The door squeaks open once again. Neither of us moves for a moment. It’s like we’re stuck in time.

“Is everything okay?” Mom asks.

The corners of Ashley’s lips raise as she turns to face my mother, smoothing her hands over her skirt. “Perfect.”

Nothing is fucking perfect. But then again, what’s another lie?

“Do you really have to leave already?”

I look up to find my mom standing in the doorway of my room, her arms wrapped around her middle.

“I’m afraid so. Coach wants us back early so we can practice for our upcoming game.”

Mom presses her lips together but thankfully says nothing. I was expecting more of a resistance, but so far, she hasn’t said a word about me playing ball.

Zippering my duffle bag, I throw it over my shoulder and go to her. “Nothing’s going to happen to me.”

“Doesn’t mean I won’t worry.”

I wrap my arm around her shoulders, and together we walk down the hallway. “Maybe you guys should come to a game, so you can see for yourself that it’s not as dangerous as you make it out to be.”

“Maybe,” she says slowly. It’s not an agreement, but it’s also not a flat-out no, an answer I’m sure she’d have given only six months ago, so I count it as a start.

“Think about it. I could get you guys tickets.”

“Fine,” she gives me a warning look that clearly says she’s had enough. “I’ll think about it.” We descended the stairs into the foyer, and she turned toward me. “What’s going on with you and Ashley?”

“Me and Ashley?” I repeat, trying to sound casual. I guess it was just a matter of time before she brought it up. After all, she did walk in on our fight after the Thanksgiving dinner.

“Yeah, you two seemed tense during dinner. You guys usually hang out later, but Ashley left for home early with her parents. Are you guys fighting?”

Every year we have Thanksgiving dinner along with Ashley’s family. Our families have been friends for years, and joint Thanksgiving dinner has been a tradition since we were kids.

I sigh, rubbing my hand over my jaw. “It’s complicated.”

“It’s complicated?” Mom raises one of her brows, and I can hear judgment in her tone.

“Yeah, it’s complicated, Mom.”

“I don’t see how complicated it can be?” The question is rhetorical since she doesn’t wait for me to answer before continuing. “You two have been together forever.”

“I wouldn’t say forever.”

“Oh, please.” She waves my protest off. “You’ve been crushing on her before you even knew what love meant. And the same is with her.”

“Maybe, but what if that’s not enough?”

“What do you mean, not enough?” She pulls her brows together, genuinely confused. “Trent, you’ve been in love with that girl for as long as I can remember. I’m sure whatever it is

that's going on, you'll figure it out. There is no relationship out there that doesn't have an obstacle or two along the way."

This is more than just an obstacle, but I don't say it out loud. The last thing I want to do is talk about my relationship with my mother or tell her that maybe I've started to have feelings for somebody else.

"Even you and dad?"

Something flashes over her face. Something I'm not sure how to interpret, but before I can even try to ask what that's about, she smiles. "Even me and your dad. And we're still together, aren't we?"

"Yeah." If she can hear the uncertainty in my voice, she doesn't comment. My phone vibrates, and I look down to see a message from Matteo. "I've gotta go, Mom. Matteo and Ashley are waiting for me."

"Okay." I lean down, and she brushes her lips against my cheek. "Drive safe, okay? And don't worry, whatever it is with Ashley, I'm sure you two will figure it out."

Well, that makes one of us.

I pull the truck to a stop in front of the dorm. Matteo sighs loudly, the leather creaking as he shifts his weight.

"I guess I'll see you later?"

Our gazes meet in the rearview mirror, and I give him a short nod. Matteo shakes his head but doesn't comment further as he opens the door and gets out.

A loud *bang* echoes in the truck cabin as I pull back on the road. The music is playing softly in the background, but it doesn't help with this tension that's been slowly brewing since the moment I picked up Ashley from her house. At least when Matteo was here, there was a semblance of a buffer, but now it's just the two of us.

My gaze darts toward Ashley. She's looking out the window, a pensive, unreadable expression on her face. She has barely said a word this whole time. Not even Matteo's taunting, something that always gets a reaction out of her, made her bat an eyelash.

What is she thinking about? Is she still pissed about the other night? Knowing her, it's most likely.

I stay silent on the short ride to her dorm. Thankfully, it takes barely five minutes before I pull the car to a stop by the curb in the first open space I find and kill the engine.

"Ash..." Her name comes out on a sigh. She nibbles on her lower lip but doesn't say anything. Can she feel it? Does she know what's been going on through my head for the past few days, *weeks*, really, if I want to be honest, at least with myself. I've been thinking about it for weeks. About the future. About all the possibilities. About us.

"I think we should talk."

Slowly, she turns toward me, her blue eyes staring into mine intently. I expect her to say something, *anything*, but she doesn't. Her fingers are intertwined in her lap, and she's fidgeting with her thumbs.

"I—" I start, but before I can get anything out, she interrupts me.

"I'm sorry about the other day. I know all I do lately is apologize, but I really am sorry. I know you've been under a lot of stress, and me bugging you all the time surely doesn't help—"

I shake my head. "That's not it."

"Not it?" Ashley clears her throat. "Then what's going on?"

"I—" My tongue darts out, sliding over my lower lip. My palms feel clammy with sweat, so I brush them against the side of my legs—not that it helps much.

Why is this so damn hard?

Ashley reaches for my face, her fingers cupping my cheek. “What’s going on, Trent?” she asks softly, her big blue eyes staring right into mine.

I close my eyes, a completely cowardly thing to do, but if I don’t, I’ll never say the words out loud. Not if she keeps looking at me like she does. With love and patience. Like we can figure this shit out if we try hard enough.

If only it were that easy.

“I think we should break up.” The words come out in a rush. A part of me feels terrible for blurting it out like that. The other part, a much bigger part, is relieved.

There, I finally said it. The words that have been going through my subconscious for weeks are now out in the open, and there is no going back.

There’s a beat of silence, a complete stillness.

Then, all of a sudden, Ashley pulls back as if I burned her. Her mouth parts in surprise. “W-what?”

She crosses her hands over her middle, her eyes wide.

“I think we should break up.” This time when I say it, my voice is steadier, more determined.

This is the right call. I know it. Deep down, I’ve known it for a while.

Ash just stares at me for a moment. “You’re serious.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re actually serious.” She shakes her head, dumbfounded. “W-why?”

I sigh. “I just...”

“Is this about *her*?” she asks before I can even finish.

“It’s not about her.”

She shakes her head more forcefully, and one tear falls down her cheek. “You didn’t even have to ask who I was talking about!”

I open my mouth but then close it again. There's nothing I'll be able to say that will make this hurt any less.

"I can't believe this." Ash looks away. She raises her hand and runs her trembling fingers through her hair. "I fucking can't believe this."

"Ash..."

"Don't you Ash me, Trent!" She turns around abruptly, her eyes staring daggers at me. "I knew it! I knew this would happen. The first moment I saw the Ginny girl, I just *knew*..."

"It's Grace. And nothing happened."

Ashley's eyes narrow at the correction, her mouth twisting in a grimace. "I don't believe you. Did you cheat on me with her? With your *Grace*?"

My Grace.

As if that's possible after everything that has happened.

"I'm telling you, nothing happened," I protest, my fingers gripping the steering wheel. "She's been tutoring me!"

"Tutoring," she huffs mockingly. "What exactly has she been tutoring you in?"

Her question rings in the space between us. We're both panting hard from the argument.

"French. She's been tutoring me in French."

"It doesn't look like that from where I'm standing," Ashley whispers.

"What does it look like, Ash?"

She shakes her head and wraps her arms around herself as if she's protecting herself. Maybe she is, in a way. Not because I'd hurt her. I'd never lay my hand on a woman, but this tension has been growing between us, and it was just a matter of time before it spilled over. And words... sometimes they can hurt more than fists ever could.

"Why did you even have to take French, huh?"

"Because I'm in college?"

“Well, if you followed your path as you should have, you wouldn’t have taken French! You’d have been pre-law.”

“Well, I’m not. I’m not the guy I used to be.”

Ashley blinks and looks away, but not before I can see the tears glistening in her eyes. “I can see that.”

God, I hate this.

I rub my hand over my face, sighing in frustration. The throbbing is increasing behind my temples, making the headache worse. The last thing I want to do is cause her any more pain.

Didn’t you say the same thing about Grace? Look how that ended up.

How can it be that I care about them, yet I’ve hurt them both? Made them cry. What for? Just because I can’t grow a pair?

“W-What...” Ashley inhales sharply and presses her lips together, holding her breath for a moment. “What happened to us, Trent?”

I would like to know the same thing. “I don’t know,” I shrug. “Life, I guess.”

Ashley nods and tilts her head back, looking at the ceiling. “Do you love her?”

“I told you...”

Ashley turns to the side, piercing me with her hard gaze. “Don’t try to make a fool out of me, Trent Remington. I deserve better than that.”

“You do,” I agree.

“I knew something’s been going on. I could feel it, but you kept insisting it’s all in my head when you damn well knew it’s not.”

“I’m sorry, okay?” What else does she want me to say? “I didn’t want it to turn out this way. It was never my plan to hurt you. Either of you.”

“You l-love her.” Her lip trembles, so she bites the inside of her cheek.

“I like her,” I admit. She’s right. It’s the least she deserves.

“And you don’t love me?”

“You’ll always be my friend, but what we had at the beginning, it’s gone now. Don’t you feel it too?”

“I *love* you, Trent.” She grabs my hands, clasping them tightly between her palms. “I’ve loved you my whole life. Can’t you give us another chance?”

I shake my head. “I’m so sorry, Ash.”

Ashley shoves my hands away. Her throat bobs as she swallows. “Well, screw you and your I’m sorrys, Trent.”

She pushes the door open and gets out, going for the trunk and pulling her suitcase before I can even get out, then she marches into the dorm without another glance at me.

I watch her until she’s safely inside because no matter what she might think, I still care about her. I might not love her, not the way she wants me to, but I care. She’s been more than just my girlfriend. She’s been my *friend*.

“This is for the best.” I run my hand over my face, pushing my hair out of the way. “She’ll see it too. Eventually.”

I lean my head back.

What now?

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

GRACE

“You’re back!” Jade yells and throws herself at me while I’m still standing in the doorway of our room.

“Umm... yeah?” I chuckle and pat her on the back. “What’s with the unusually warm welcome?”

My question earns me a slap on the arm. “Bitch, I always give you a warm welcome.”

“Let me rephrase. What’s with all the theatrics?”

Jade rolls her eyes and plops back down on the couch. “It’s so boring here when there’s nobody around.”

This has me laughing out loud. “Yasmin and Nixon are here,” I point out.

I pull my suitcase inside and close the door before joining her. Jade gives me a dull look. “Yeah, right. I’ve had enough of them ten minutes into our drive to the city. They’re so sweet I’m surprised I didn’t get a cavity yet.”

“I told you, you should have come to my place and let them return on their own.”

“Well, I figured you’d want to spend some alone time with your family.”

I missed them, that’s true, and it was good being back home. I remember my conversation with Sienna and J.D. For the most part, anyway.

“I could have used a saving.” Before she can question it, I smile, changing the subject. “What about you? Did you have fun?”

“It was...” Jade’s gaze grows distant as she trails off. “Different.”

The last word is barely a whisper. I place my hand over hers and give her a supporting squeeze. This is the first big holiday since her mom died last spring of cancer, and I can’t imagine how hard it must have been for both her and Nixon.

Jade blinks and turns to me. “Not bad or anything,” Jade hurries to explain. “Yasmin’s mom is amazing. She prepared all these traditional Mexican dishes, and we stuffed ourselves with food. Even Coach drove down to the city for Thanksgiving dinner.”

My brows raise. “How did *that* go?”

Yasmin reconnected with her dad, who’s also the football coach here at Blairwood, only last year, but they’ve come far since then if Coach is joining them for family dinner.

“Okay, I guess?” Jade sighs. “Nixon tries to avoid spending too much time with him outside of the field while still being there for Yasmin when she needs him.”

Understandable, all things considered. Yasmin really lucked out when it comes to Nixon. The guy’s smitten with her and would do anything just to make her happy. “Can’t be easy dating coach’s daughter.”

“No, I guess not. They actually get along well, but I think he doesn’t want his teammates to think he has special treatment or anything like that. Especially not with him wanting to enter the draft after senior year.”

Jade’s phone beeps, and she takes it from the coffee table, checking the message. “Are you hungry?”

“I could eat.”

“Great.” Jade types out a quick reply and jumps to her feet, shoving her phone into her back pocket. “Rei is done with her ice time and wants to meet at Moore’s.”

My shoulders tense at the mention of the bar. “I don’t know about that, Jade.”

“Why? What’s wrong with Moore’s?”

“It’s just...” I swallow the lump in my throat. “He goes there.”

I don’t have to explain to which he I’m referring to.

Jade frowns instantly. “So does like eighty percent of the people here.”

“I know, it’s silly. It’s not like I can avoid him forever, but...” I shrug helplessly. “I’m not sure I can face him. Not yet, anyway.”

Jade just watches me for a moment before she sighs. “Fine. We’ll stay here then.”

“No,” I shake my head. Just because I choose to stay locked and hidden doesn’t mean she has to do the same. “You go, meet with Rei like you had planned. I’ll stay here.”

“I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“You’re not leaving me alone. It’ll be Mr. Netflix and me. Please tell me there’s ice cream in the freezer.”

“I just got a new pint.”

I pull her into a bear hug. “Did I tell you how much I love you?”

“Not recently.”

“Well, you’re the bestest of best friends.”

Jade gives me a side glance. “You’re only saying that because I got you ice cream.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I laugh and feel my chest relax a little.

I had fun while I was home. It was hard not to when I was surrounded by people I love, including two nephews that were usually up to no good, but with every mile closer to Blairwood, the grip around my chest was back, strong and unyielding.

I’m not sure what’ll happen next, and the unknown is killing me, but I’ll put it off for as long as possible because I’m uncertain I’ll be able to resist Trent when I see him.

Jade gets up, and I give her a playful slap on the ass. “Go. Have fun. Maybe call that boy toy of yours.”

Jade groans as she goes into her room, pulling her shirt over her head. “Don’t even remind me.”

“What happened?” I shift on the couch, so I’m looking at her and pulling my legs up. Jade goes straight to her closet and grabs the first shirt she sees to put on.

“Can you believe he got offended because I didn’t want to go home with him for Thanksgiving? Like dude, we fucked a few times. I’m not meeting your parents.”

“Well, when you put it like that.”

Sliding the shirt in place, another black one, this one with a deeper V and straps covering her chest, she loosens the hair tie. A mass of dark curls falls down her back. Jade runs her hand through it; her eyes fixed on her reflection in the mirror as she pulls out a tube of dark pink lipstick. “Honestly, it’s better that I found out about it early on. I thought he was okay with the casual thing, and he didn’t seem so needy at first. Anyhow...” Jade turns around. “You sure I can’t pressure you to come?”

“Another day,” I promise. Far, far in the future.

“I’ll hold you to it.” She grabs her jacket and a small bag from the chair. “Don’t get too wild while we’re out.”

“Do I ever?”

“You have your moments.” She winks at me. “I’ll see you later.”

“Later.”

As soon as the door closes behind her, the resounding silence falls over the room. I grab the remote control peeking from under one of the pillows, and turn on the TV, going straight for Netflix.

Being in a quiet room feels weird after days of constant noise and chatter. And I can’t be in silence because if I am, my brain will start working overtime, pondering about things it has no right to think about.

I scroll through my options, and after some back and forth, finally set on *Gilmore Girls*. I always say I’ll pick up something new but somehow end up on reruns of old favorites instead.

As the intro starts to roll, I get up and go to the freezer. Just as I'm about to open it, there's a soft knock.

Shaking my head, I go for the door. "What did you forge ___"

The words die on my lips as I come face to face with the last person I expected to find. So much for going out of my way to avoid the temptation when the temptation has come knocking right on my door.

"Grace."

Trent sways on his feet, his hands grabbing the doorway to keep himself steady. At least I'm not the only one surprised here.

My fingers tighten around the doorknob. There is a lump in my throat, but I push the words out. "W-what are you doing here?"

Trent looks over my shoulder and then back at me. "Can we talk?"

He's dressed in a pair of dark jeans and a BWU hoodie, the sleeves pushed all the way to his elbows, showing off his muscular forearms.

Seeing him up close like this is like a punch to my gut.

How many more? How many more times can I be punched before I can't stand up? How much more hurt do I have to endure before life, or destiny, or whoever the hell is responsible for all of this, realizes that I'm broken beyond repair? With no more pieces of myself left to give. They're gone. Like grains of sand slipping through fingers out into the wind.

"I don't think that's the best idea." I start to close the door, but he slips his foot between the doorjamb.

"Grace, please!" Long fingers curl around the hardwood as he tries to push them open. His face is pressed against the wood, just next to mine. "I just need a few minutes, that's all."

I close my eyes and shake my head, pushing harder.

I need him to leave. Now.

“I already told you, I can’t keep—”

“I broke up with her!”

My breath hitches as I stop in my tracks. The light dances in front of my eyes, my heart is beating as if I had just run a marathon.

He what?

Before I can realize what’s happening, the door is shoved open. Losing balance, I stumble back. Trent swears loudly, his fingers wrapping around my forearm and pulling me closer. My chest bumps against his, kicking the air out of my lungs. His other hand goes to the small of my back, holding me steady.

“I broke up with Ashley,” Trent pants.

We’re standing so close, our chests brushing together. I can feel the warmth of his skin, the fast rise and fall of his chest, and the rapid beat behind it.

“W-what?” I try to push him away, but he isn’t letting me. Instead, his grip on me tightens, holding me in place. “Why?” I shake my head. “You shouldn’t have done that. I didn’t ask you...”

“No, you didn’t ask me, but I should have. I should have broken up with her weeks ago, *months* even. Because you were right. It wasn’t fair. To you, or to her, or to *me*. I broke up with her because I’m not in love with her anymore. I love her, a part of me will always love her, but I’m not *in love* with her anymore.”

My eyes fall shut, and I can feel tears gather behind my eyelids.

This can’t be happening.

Trent pulls me upright, his hands wrapping around me. I press my forehead against his chest, letting out a shaky breath.

This isn’t real.

“But it is,” Trent counters, making me realize I said the words out loud. His fingers brush against my cheek, pushing a strand of my hair out of my face. He tips my head back, those brown eyes looking at me intently as his finger slides under my eyes, wiping the tears away. He’s holding me hostage with no way to escape. Soft tingles run under my skin at the gentle touch, making me quiver. “I don’t think I have been in love with her for a very long time.”

“And you’re in love with me?” My question comes out harsher than intended, but I have to protect myself. I have to protect my heart.

“I don’t know.” His thumb swipes just under the curve of my lower lip. “What I know is that I can’t stop thinking about you. I can’t stop wanting to be with you. What I know is that there isn’t another person who makes me feel more complete than when I’m with you, Grace. You can tell me a thousand times that this is wrong, but why does it feel so damn right? Had been from that very first moment we met?”

“Trent...” I place my hand on his pec. His chest is rising and falling rapidly, like he couldn’t get enough air and had to blurt the words out while he still had a chance. He feels hot under my palm. Warm. Steady. Alive.

“Please tell me I’m not alone in this Grace.” Trent’s finger slides under my chin, and he tips my head back, so our gazes meet. The intensity in his brown eyes makes my knees wobble underneath me. “You feel this too, right?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. I should lie, tell him that no, I don’t feel it. That it’s all in his head so I can protect myself, my heart. Instead, I nod.

“I do,” I whisper softly. “God help me, but I do.”

“Thank fuck.”

Before I can blink, his mouth is on mine. My eyes widen in surprise as I suck in a sharp breath.

Trent cups my cheeks, his big hands cradling my face and holding me close as his mouth slides over mine. The kiss is

bruising, desperate, and needy. I brace my hand against his chest, my fingers digging into his hoodie as I return his kiss.

It's like lightning has struck my body. Like I've awoken from one really long, deep sleep.

My mouth molds to his, returning every brush with one of my own. His tongue slides over my lower lip, and I open up. Our tongues twist and tangle together almost desperately.

This.

This is what I craved. This is how it should have been like all along.

“Trent.”

His name is a moan ripped from my lungs. I slide my hand over his pecs, my fingers curling in the hair at the back of his neck and pulling him closer, deepening the kiss.

My body brushes against his, warm and solid. His musky scent surrounds me, and I can taste a mix of mint and something else, something sweet on his tongue as it slides deeper into my mouth as if he, too, can't get enough.

Trent breaks the kiss, but we're far from over. He nibbles at my neck as his hands slide down my back, grabbing my ass and lifting me.

I suck in a breath as he hoists me up. My body brushes against his, and I can feel every hard line of it—every ridge, every dip. Wrapping my legs around his narrow waist, I feel him settle between my legs, hot and hard. My core clenches at the contact needing more of him.

Trent cradles my face, his forehead pressing against mine. “God, you're perfect.”

And then his mouth is on mine once again. Kissing. Sucking. Nipping.

Grabbing his face between my palms, I pant: “My room.”

Trent's grip tightens around my ass as he leads us toward my room, his mouth nibbling his way over my jaw and down

the side of my neck. Every inch of skin he kisses has tingles following in his wake.

I shut the door as we enter my room, clouding us into darkness, and then my mouth is on his. We're frantic. Just a mess of limbs as we try to continue kissing and rip the clothes off each other.

My nails graze his back as I lift his shirt and throw it away. Our mouths brush together. I slide my hands down his chest, feeling every defined muscle. He grabs the hem of my shirt, pushing it up. I lift my hands to help him and then quickly unhook my bra, letting it fall down along with the shirt.

A low moan rips from my lungs as Trent's hands cup my boobs, fingers tweaking my sensitive nipples.

"Where's that damn bed?" Trent mumbles, and I can't help but laugh.

"Right."

He walks me backward and curses when he hits his legs into the frame, both of us falling back.

I brace my hand against the wall, my breathing rugged. "Are you okay?"

I go for my nightstand and turn on the lamp. Soft light illuminates the room, blinding me temporarily. I blink a few times, and when my vision clears, I see Trent rubbing his nape.

"Are you hurt?" Pushing his hand away, I try to feel the back of his head. No lump.

Trent blinks a few times, those dark eyes focusing on me. They darken as he takes in my face, and then slowly works his way down my neck, my chest...

He slides his hands up my sides and cups my boobs. "Perfect."

His voice is low and rough, just like the tips of his fingers. They rub over my nipple, making the tips even harder.

"T-Trent," I stutter, my hands going into his hair just as he dips his head and sucks one hard peak into his mouth.

My back arches, pushing my breasts more firmly into his face. My hips roll, rubbing against the firm line of his dick. I can feel his heat pulsing between my thighs, the pressure inside me quickly building with each time my clit rubs against his tip.

My body is hypersensitive. Every little touch, kiss... It's all too much.

His hand slips between our bodies. With a quick tug, he pulls my leggings down and then his hand is cupping my sex.

“Damn, you're so wet.”

My cheeks heat at the comment. It's been long, too freaking long since I last had sex, and that experience can hardly compare to this.

Trent slides his finger over my lacy panties, dipping it between my lower lips. The raspy material rubs against my clit, making my hips buck under his touch.

It's like my whole body is one giant nerve ending, and no matter where he touches me, I react.

It'd be embarrassing if I didn't need him so much.

“So freaking wet.”

Trent leans down, capturing my mouth just as his finger slips under the edge of my panties. I whimper as it slides between my lips, the base of his hand pressing against my clit just as his finger sinks inside me.

That's all it takes.

My back arches off the mattress, pulling him deeper as I clench around his finger. I plunge my tongue into his mouth, kissing him harder as the wave of pleasure hits me like a tsunami.

TRENT

Holy shit.

I watch Grace as she finally lets go. The arc of her back. The curve of her stomach. Those perky nipples are being pushed higher in the air as the release rocks through her.

Her body slowly relaxes as she comes off the high. Those red curls spread over the white pillow as she blinks her eyes open. Those emerald irises finding my face.

Red colors her cheeks. "Sorry, I didn't..."

I press my mouth against hers, stopping any possible protest. "Nothing to be sorry about."

Not a damn thing.

She nods, her hand touching my chest, and slides down to the edge of my sweats. She holds my gaze with her intense green eyes. I gulp down as she pushes my pants down, my cock springing free from its confines. Her fingers wrap around my throbbing dick and give it a few slow pumps.

"Fuck," I hiss, pressing my forehead against hers.

Soft fingers sneak around my neck, curling around it and holding me in place.

"I need you inside me," she breathes, her lips brushing against mine. I can feel her warm breath teasing my skin before she connects our mouths together.

We stare at one another as our kiss grows faster, needier. Her pupils are dilated, the usually bright green, darker, muskier. God, she's gorgeous. Her pale skin is pink all over. Her cheeks. Her neck. Her tits. Everywhere I touch that pretty pink spreads.

"Condom. Fuck, we need a condom."

Why didn't I think about this sooner?

But before I can even try to remember if I have one on me, Grace pulls open the drawer of the nightstand and silently hands me an unopened box.

Taking it from her hands, I rip the box open and grab one square package, tearing it open. Grace watches me as I carefully put the condom on before I settle between her legs.

She spreads them wider, a silent invitation, those hungry eyes drinking me in. Her fingers wrap around my length, and she pulls me closer to her. The tip of my cock rubs against her opening, making us both groan.

I slide my hands over the outside of her thighs. They're smooth under my touch and seem to go on for miles.

“You sure about this, Legs?”

Her teeth sink into her lower lip, and she nods. She raises her legs, wrapping them around my waist and pulling me closer. I brace my hands next to her head and lean down.

Grace pulls me into a slow kiss as I enter her in one long thrust.

“Shit.” I close my eyes as my dick slowly slides between her tight walls that hold on to me like a vice grip.

She's tight. So fucking tight it seems impossible.

I pull back a little before sinking back inside, deeper this time.

Grace lets out a breath as I repeat the motion. She lifts her hips, meeting me thrust for thrust. The steady rhythm is quickly turning frantic.

“Grace, fuck...”

Her hands tighten around me, nails digging into my back. “I'm so close.”

I slide my hand between our bodies, wrapping it around her tit and pinch her nipple.

“I need you to come for me,” I grunt, changing my angle so that I brush against her clit with every thrust.

Her pussy tightens around me, nails digging so deep I'm sure I'll have marks.

"Grace," I growl, burrowing my head in the crook of her neck. Her sweet scent surrounds me as I push inside harder and deeper, again and again. Pressing my lips against her neck, I feel the rapid beat of her heart. It matches the way her pussy pulses around me, and I'm not sure I'll be able to take it much longer.

I graze my teeth over the soft flesh. Her pussy grips around me firmly. Grace's whole body tightens around mine as she lets out a low moan. Quickening my thrusts, I feel the pressure at the base of my spine erupt, and I come inside her.

CHAPTER THIRTY

GRACE

Slowly, I come to my senses. Since my alarm didn't ring, I take a deep breath and let myself indulge in those first few minutes after I've awakened. I lift my arms over my head to stretch but end up bumping into something.

Someone.

The events of last night flash in my mind. I snap my eyes open and come face to face with a very awake Trent.

A lazy grin spreads over his face. "You could have warned me that I should be prepared to defend myself first thing in the morning," he chuckles, traces of sleep still clinging to his voice, giving it a raspy edge that has the hairs at my nape standing up.

"I..." I start but stop, not knowing what to say.

God, it's not fair how gorgeous he is. Even more now, when he's still half asleep, his hair mussed from the pillow.

An image of my fingers sliding through his silky strands as he pounds into me flashes in my mind.

My cheeks heat in embarrassment. Okay, I might have contributed to that look a little bit myself.

Holy shit.

Trent is here. In my bed. Completely naked. After we had sex last night.

The realization of what has just happened hits me in the face like a brick wall.

I just had sex with Trent Remington.

Trent slides the tips of his fingers over my cheekbone, startling me. That grin of his widening. "What's on your mind, Legs?"

"N-nothing," I stutter, pulling the blanket more firmly over my chest. I tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear, trying to

hide the fact that internally I'm freaking out. "You're still here."

And we're still naked.

Trent quirks a brow. "Did you want me to leave?"

Although he fights it, I can see his smile slipping a little.

"I... no. I just didn't think this was possible, that's all."

"It's possible," Trent reassures me, taking my hand and pulling it down, his fingers twining with mine. "Do you regret it?"

"No." It might not have been the wisest decision I've ever made, but I can't bring myself to regret it. "But I think a better question is, do *you* regret it? You're the one who just got out of a relationship."

The words sound bitter to my own ears, but I need to know what this is. I need to know what's the best way to protect my heart in case all this comes crashing down. Is this something more, or am I just a rebound to him? Maybe after a few days, he'll realize he made a mistake, and he'll get back with his girlfriend.

Ex. She's his ex-girlfriend.

"I'm not going to change my mind if that's what you're worried about."

I look away. "I'm not."

"Fuck." Trent slips his finger under my chin and turns me to look at him. "Listen to me, Grace. I'm not going to change my mind. It probably doesn't sound like much since we've done all of this upside down, but I'm serious. I like you. I really like you.

"I know I should have probably waited. Hell, I didn't even realize where I was going until I was here, at your doorstep, and even when I knocked, I hadn't expected you to open that door. But when you did, I should have talked to you, explained everything, maybe kissed you, and then walked away with a promise of taking you out on a date, but I just made an even bigger mess. I want to make this work, Legs."

Legs.

The nickname falls off his lips easily, like he's said it a hundred times before.

This is such a bad idea.

"I want this to work too. I'm just scared."

"Scared of what?"

Of you? Of all the feelings that come awake every time you're near? All the memories being with you will bring? What will happen when you find out about my past? About Mason?

The list is endless.

"Being hurt again."

Trent just looks at me for a moment. "Will you ever tell me who hurt you?"

This is my chance. I should probably tell him now. About Mason. About everything that has happened. About the similarities between the two of them.

I open my mouth, but no words come out.

Trent shakes his head and presses his mouth against my cheek. "One day?"

"One day," I agree. "What time is it, anyway?"

"The last I checked, it was seven-thirty." His arms tighten around me. "Would it be too—"

"Shit, I'm late." I scramble over his body and get to my feet, not even bothering to cover myself as I rush toward my closet. I slip on clean underwear and grab the first sweater on the stack, pulling it over my head.

Trent groans and turns to his back. "Can't you skip it?"

I turn to glare at him, but the blanket slips down, revealing the defined muscles of his chest and abs.

God, what I wouldn't give to... Focus, Grace!

“No, and you better get dressed, too, because we’re leaving in two.”

I crouch down, grab his sweats, and throw them at him. He catches them just before they hit him in the face.

“Kicking me out, Legs?”

I grab a pair of jeans and pull them on, too, slipping into my boots as I button my pants. “You could stay. Jade doesn’t have class until later.”

Shit, Jade’s here.

“I think I can live without that.” The bed squeaks as he gets to his feet. I quickly turn my back to him. Silly, I know, since last night I’ve seen every single inch of him, but I can’t help myself. “I’m going to the bathroom for a few.”

I slip through my door, shutting it firmly behind me. The common area is quiet. Jade’s door firmly closed. Since she doesn’t have her class until later, she’s still probably asleep. As quietly as I can, I walk across the room.

Only when I’m inside the bathroom do I let out a breath in relief. I’m not even sure why I’m so nervous. It’s not like I did anything wrong. Trent broke up with Ashley. It’s over between them.

I walk to the mirror and splash some water on my face before looking up and facing my reflection. My curls are wild, and I’m not sure even a brush will be able to help me with that. A blush covers my cheekbones and neck, and there’s a spark in my eyes that wasn’t there before.

Shaking my head, I quickly run a brush through my hair and tie it in a low ponytail, so it doesn’t look like a rat’s nest. I brush my teeth and do my business before returning to my room, where Trent is waiting for me, completely dressed.

What a shame.

He looks up when the door opens and smiles at me. “C’mon, I’ll drive you to your class.”

“Thanks.” I’ll still be late, but maybe if I’m lucky, I’ll get to sneak through the back door. I grab my jacket and backpack

and look around. “Where’s your jacket?”

“In my car.” He shrugs. “I told you, I didn’t really plan to stay for long.”

I nod and throw my backpack over my shoulder. “Okay, let’s go.”

The common area is as quiet as it was. I let out a sigh of relief as I go toward the door. Just as I’m pulling the front door open, there’s a loud squeak.

Dammit.

“Grace?”

Trent and I turn around and find a sleepy Jade standing in the doorway. She takes us in and blinks, a confused frown between her brows.

“Morning,” I squeak as Jade looks from me to Trent and back. “We were just leaving.”

“What’s going on here?” She glares at Trent. “What is he doing here?”

“I’ll explain later.” I turn the doorknob and push the door open. “I’m already late for class.”

“No...” Jade starts to protest, but I’m already shoving Trent out.

“Later, I promise!” I throw over my shoulder as I exit the room.

“You’ve got some explaining to do!” She yells so loud we can hear her through the closed door.

“Damn.” Trent shakes his head as we descend the stairs. “That girl’s scary.”

“You haven’t seen anything.”

TRENT

“You didn’t have to drive me,” Grace protests once again as I navigate the truck across campus. It’s just a few minutes before eight, so she’ll be late, but not that much.

“I don’t mind. My class isn’t until later, anyway.” I give her a side glance. “Is it always so hard for you to accept other people’s help?”

“I guess so. I’ve been left to fend for myself from an early age, so I don’t like depending on other people.”

I open my mouth to ask her what she meant by that, but the building comes into view, stopping me.

Grace unbuckles her seatbelt before I pull the car to a stop. She turns toward me and smiles. “Thanks for the ride. I really appreciate it.” She pushes the door open and slides out.

“Grace?” I call out.

She looks over her shoulder. I wrap my fingers around her wrist and pull her back inside, pressing my mouth against hers. “Talk later?”

Grace sinks her teeth into her lower lip and nods.

It’s cute seeing her so dumbfounded. With a wave, she closes the door and walks toward the building. I sit in the car and watch. A few times, she looks over her shoulder as if she wants to reassure herself I’m still there. So I wait until she’s inside before I drive off.

It takes some time to find a parking spot close to my dorm, but I do it. Grabbing my things, I walk inside and up to my room.

“Walk of shame? Seriously, dude?” Matteo asks as soon as I enter our room. “I thought you and Ashley were fighting.”

“We were. We are.” I rub my hand over my face. “We broke up last night.”

His brows shoot up. “No shit?”

“It was time.”

“Glad you finally realized it. So what then? Where were you last night? Please tell me you didn’t give her a goodbye fuck.”

A goodbye fuck?

“Fuck no. What the hell, dude?”

Do people seriously do that? Because that’s fucked up.

“Then what were you doing? I know you weren’t at Moore’s with the rest of the team because you haven’t checked your phone since you left me at the dorm.”

“I left it in my car.” I let my duffle bag drop on the floor and fish my phone out of my pocket. Sure enough, a dozen messages light up my screen. “I went to Grace’s place.”

“Already jumping onto the next girl?”

“I’m not jumping on anybody.” Isn’t he right, though? I might not have gone to Grace’s place with the intention of us having sex, but it happened. “I just wanted to apologize. That’s it.”

“But…” Matteo waves his hands as if to prompt me.

“Things went in another direction.”

Which reminds me… Ignoring all the messages, I pull out the one with Grace.

Me: You know how I said we did it all backward?

Me: Go out with me on a date, Legs.

I wait for a heartbeat, although I know she’s in class and won’t answer me.

“That girl really has you wrapped around her finger, doesn’t she?”

I look up to find my best friend watching me carefully.

“You have no idea.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

GRACE

“Yo, Red!” I turn around at the sound of the familiar nickname, and sure enough, Spencer’s walking a few feet behind me with a couple of guys. “Wait up!”

I do as he asks, but he just keeps on chatting with them, so I turn on the balls of my feet. I was already late for one class today, and I’m not planning to be late for another one.

“Where’s the rush?” Spencer asks as he catches up to me. We climb the steps and enter the business building.

“Some of us don’t like to be late to class, you know.”

“Are we back to that again?” he groans. “And here I thought we were over it.”

“Not in the least. Are you going to be late for your own wedding?”

“Since I’m not planning to marry, I don’t think so.” He taps at his chin. “Funeral, on the other hand...”

I shake my head. “You have one really twisted sense of humor. You know that?”

“I’m just being realistic, that’s all.”

I look over my shoulders. “At least you admit your faults. I guess there’s that.”

Facing forward, I take in the auditorium, looking for Marcus, but before I can spot my friend, I see her.

Ashley is sitting in her usual spot in the middle row, talking to a friend of hers. As soon as she sees me, she stops and glares at me. Her friend notices her distraction, so she turns toward me, too.

Great, exactly what I needed, a matching death stare.

He broke up with her. She’s entitled to be angry.

But no matter how many times I repeat those exact same words, I’m not going to feel any less guilty.

Maybe if you hadn't hooked up with her boyfriend, not even twenty-four hours after he broke up with her, you wouldn't feel so guilty.

Ducking my head, I fix my gaze on the floor as I take two steps at a time to our usual spot.

“What the hell’s that about?” Spencer asks as we slide into our seats, and I start pulling out my things.

“What?”

“What did you do to earn a death glare?”

Because, of course, he’d notice. I shrug, turning the pages in my notebook until I find an empty one. “No idea.”

“Does it have anything to do with the fact that she’s the girlfriend of that basketball dude?”

“Ex-girlfriend,” I bite out, irritated with him poking.

“Oh, so that’s the reason.”

I close my eyes as I realize what I’ve just said. *Shit*. So much for keeping this whole thing on the down-low.

“I’m really not in the mood, Spencer.”

I pull out my phone to check my messages.

Jade: I know where you live, and I’ll be waiting, so you better come.

Jade: I want to know what the hell happened last night!

Jade: You said you’re staying home so you could avoid him, and he left your bed this morning? What the hell, Grace?

My best friend is positively pissed, and I can’t even blame her. But she’ll have to wait because I have no idea *how* to explain any of this.

My heart does a little flip when I see from whom the other message is.

Trent: You know how I said we did it all backward?

Trent: Go out with me on a date, Legs.

I graze my teeth over my lower lip, unsure. I want to go out with him. That's all I've wanted for weeks now, but the way Ashley glared at me...

I start to type back a reply when our professor comes, so I quickly lock my phone and place it back in my bag.

Later. I'll text him later.

TRENT

I pull the towel off my shoulder and wipe the sweat from my face, grabbing my phone from the bench.

With a swipe of my finger, the phone comes to life, but if I don't count a few notifications, it's empty. I open my inbox; the only message waiting is the one I sent her earlier. It says she saw the message, but she never wrote back.

You promised you'd give her time, a little voice reminds me. Not that it makes my disappointment any less tangible.

Time. What the fuck does that even mean? Sure, I don't mind taking things slow, but I didn't expect her to be MIA.

Did she change her mind? Maybe her friends convinced her I was bad news, and she agreed with them. I didn't miss the murderous stare Jade gave me as Grace pulled me out of their room. I don't get what her issue is, really. Did I handle this whole thing well? I could have probably done it better, but I wasn't the one who had hurt Grace—at least not intentionally.

“Just text her already, will ya?!” Matteo says as he sits next to me, chugging down the contents of the water bottle.

I run my hand through my sweaty hair, pushing it away from my face. I don't bother saying I already did, but I have yet to hear back.

Maybe she's just busy with her classes?

Or maybe she just doesn't want to talk to you, a little voice from the back of my mind mocks me.

“Yeah, well, it's not as easy as that.”

“Why the hell not? You take your phone and write a few words. Try going for something witty, and maybe, you stand a chance of getting a reply sooner rather than later. Want me to do it?”

He tries to grab the phone out of my hand, but I push him back. “Fuck off. I’d promised her I’d give her time.”

“Fuck time. What the hell does that even mean?”

My thoughts exactly, not that I’d admit it out loud. If Grace wants time, I will find a way to give it to her. After all, she was the one who waited for me to figure my shit out first.

“I don’t want to scare her off.”

“It’s just a text. How scary can it be?” Matteo squeezes the empty bottle and gets to his feet. He lifts it in the air and shoots. The bottle falls right into the basket. “I’m starving. Want to go and grab something to eat?”

I give another look at my phone, but no new messages have appeared in the thread since I last checked it. I curl my fingers around it. “Sure, let’s go.”

Pushing to my feet, I grab my things, and we go back to the locker room, where we quickly take a shower and change. My muscles burn in protest, but it’s hard to complain when this is the best shape I’ve been in my whole life. Between practices and daily gym sessions, there was little time to slack, and my muscles were feeling it.

Matteo thankfully changes the subject to basketball. In two days, we’re facing our next opponent, Blairwood’s biggest rival, and it’s everything everybody’s been talking about. Still, I can’t get Matteo’s earlier words out of my mind.

Maybe I should just grow a pair and text her again. In case she forgot.

The cafeteria is packed. Not strange since it’s the middle of the day. We grab our trays and get in line. It takes us a good fifteen minutes to get our food, but at least I got the double cheeseburger.

I’m looking around, trying to see if there’s somebody I know, so we can join them since none of the tables seem to be empty when an elbow connects with my gut.

“What?”

“Maybe she doesn’t need time after all.”

I frown at his words, trying to figure out what he means. That's when I see her. Grace is sitting a few tables down with her friends, that guy she's tutoring beside her. She shakes her head at something he said, but that doesn't stop a smile from forming on her face.

My stomach twists as I watch her laugh at whatever he's said. Bile rises in my throat, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

I don't know if I've ever seen her so happy when she's with me.

"C'mon, I think I saw one of the..." Matteo starts, but I'm already walking in the other direction.

Toward Grace.

GRACE

“So you and basketball, dude?” Spencer asks as we take a seat in the cafeteria. He’s been quiet so far, but I guess it was too much to expect him to leave the subject alone. I turn toward him, only to find him eyeing me carefully.

“Don’t look at me like that.”

His brows shoot up, his face impassive. “Like what?”

“Like you’re judging me,” I whisper softly, the words I know people around me will think when they find out.

He left his girlfriend, and now he’s with her. Was there something going on between the two of them before? Is she the reason why they broke up?

“I’m not judging you.”

I remember Jade’s reaction and her earlier messages. “It seems like everybody is.”

“Screw everybody.” Spencer throws his arm over my shoulder and pulls me into his side. “The only thing I care about is that you’re happy. But if he acts like a douche, and you need somebody to kick his ass, you let me know.”

A small smile tips the corners of my mouth. “Thanks, Spencer.”

“Hey, what are frie—?”

“Grace?”

The hair at the back of my neck prickles, a tingle of awareness running down my spine at the sound of his voice.

Trent.

I gulp, pushing down the lump in my throat, and turn around slowly. Trent’s standing there, mere inches from me. His hair is mussed and pushed away from his face. Some strands look wet like he just got out of the shower but didn’t

bother drying it before going out. Insane since it's almost December, but who am I to judge?

“Hey, what are you doing here?”

The chair scrapes behind me, and I can feel Spencer move closer.

That man. He seriously has to find a girl that will deserve his kindness. While at the same time being able to deal with his inner child.

Trent's gaze shifts to look behind me, and a frown appears between his brows. “Just grabbing lunch.” He shifts his attention to me. “I actually wanted to talk to you for a moment.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, my palms growing sweaty.

Trent shifts his weight from one leg to the other. “What are you doing tonight?”

“Umm...” The message. I haven't answered the freaking message. “Probably just staying home with the girls.”

“How about I pick you up at six?”

Against my better judgment, my heart speeds up as his words sink in.

Is this what I think it is?

I tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear. “O-okay.”

His brows rise. He seems genuinely surprised by my answer. “Okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” He nods, his teeth grazing over his lips. “It's a date then.”

A date.

With Trent.

“A d-date,” I agree, my voice shaky.

With another nod, he takes a step back, a smile slowly forming on his mouth. “I guess I'll see you later, Legs.”

“Later.”

Matteo elbows him, and Trent shifts his attention to his friend. He mutters something, but I can't hear what exactly. Trent turns around, and together the two of them walk away, joining a table of guys on the other side of the room.

It's actually happening. I'm going on a date with Trent.

Sighing, I close the door and turn around, only to stop in my tracks. “You're home.”

Jade looks up from her laptop, her serious eyes meeting mine. There is a faint clicking noise as she saves whatever she's been working on and puts the laptop to the side. “Didn't I say I would be?”

I drop my backpack by the door and take off my jacket before joining her on the couch. “Are you still mad at me?”

Jade sighs. “I've never been mad at you.”

I tilt my head back and look at the ceiling. “I don't know about that. You seemed pretty pissed this morning, and the messages didn't help.”

“That's because I was thrown off guard by the whole thing. I'm worried about you, Grace. You say one thing, but then you go and do the complete opposite. I just don't want to see you get hurt.”

“It's not what you think.” I tilt my head over the edge of the couch and look at the ceiling before confessing. “Trent broke up with her.”

“He what?” Jade shifts in her seat, so she's facing me.

“That's why he came last night. To tell me he broke up with her. To tell me he hasn't been in love with her for a while now.”

“Holy shit.” Her brows are so far up her forehead they practically touch her hair. “He actually did it.”

I shrug, not wanting to make a bigger deal out of this than it has to be.

“So what happened?”

Taking a deep breath, I tell her everything that has happened since she left. Okay, maybe not *everything*. Because no matter how much I love Jade, some of those things I want to keep to myself.

Once I’m done, Jade just shakes her head, still clearly dumbfounded by the whole thing. “So... how was it?”

“It was...” I trace the outline of my mouth with the tip of my finger as I try to come up with the right words, but there’s only one. “Everything. It felt like all the pieces had finally fallen back in place for the first time in almost two years.”

Well, technically, in a few days, it’ll be three years. Three years since I went on that date with Mason and haven’t seen him since.

There’s a long pause in which Jade just watches me. Her light eyes, more gray than blue, fixing on me intently. The color of the sky before a storm.

“Say it,” I urge, wanting to get this over with. I have a feeling I’m not going to like whatever she has to say, so might as well get it all over with sooner rather than later.

“Are you sure this is for the best? You said it yourself. Being with him feels like everything. But maybe it’s not *him*. What if it’s the memory of the person you’ve once loved that’s messing with your mind?”

“He’s not Mason. I know that.”

“Then why do you...”

“Because I like him!” I interrupt her before she can even finish. “It’s not just about the way he looks, Jade. It’s more than that. I like the way he smiles when he’s excited about something. The way he interacts with kids at the community center. The frown between his brows when he tries to concentrate on something. It’s a dozen little things that just make him... Well, him.” I push upright, shifting, so I’m facing

her. “I want to know more about that guy, Jade. I have to figure out if there is a possibility of more.”

Silence settles over us as my words hang in the air. I let out a shaky breath, trying to force my heart to slow down before it bursts out of my chest.

“Okay.”

I frown. “Okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Jade nods. “If you have to do this, do it. I just want you to know what you’re getting yourself into.” Jade’s eyes narrow. “But if he breaks your heart, I’m bringing out the shovel.”

“Do you even have a shovel?”

“It’s waiting in the trunk of my car,” Jade says, not batting an eyelash.

“I...” My voice dies down as I try to find the right words to say but find none. “Can you not say that when he comes over later?”

Jade’s brows rise. “He’s coming over?”

I check my watch, and my heart skips a beat. “In an hour.” This is really happening. “He asked me out on a date.”

“Why the hell are you sitting here chatting?” Jade gets to her feet and pulls me up. She turns me around and gives me a hard push in the back toward the bathroom. “Go. I’ll find something for you to wear.”

I look over my shoulder at my best friend. We might not agree on everything, but I know she’ll always put my best interests first. “I love you, Jade.”

She rolls her eyes. “I love you, too. Now off you go.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

TRENT

“Boston?” Grace looks at me and then back out the window, taking in the city as I drive us through the busy streets. I give her a quick glance, just to see her turn toward me, her eyes big with excitement. She’s happy as a kid on Christmas day. “We’re going to Boston?”

Grace asked me where we were going when I picked her up, but I wanted to keep it a secret to see the look on her face when we got there. So far, it was totally worth it. “Technically, we’re already *in* Boston. But yes.”

“I thought you said this was fine.” Grace smooths her hand over the hem of her dress nervously.

Pulling the car to a stop at the red light, I turn toward her and take her in. She’s wearing a black dress with red roses on it. Her hair is falling down in soft waves around her face. Her lashes are darker and longer somehow, making her green eyes seem even bigger. And then there are her lips. I couldn’t take my eyes off of them from the moment I saw her. They’re dark red, and it takes all I have in me not to lean down and kiss her.

A loud *honk* snaps me out of my thoughts, making me realize the light has turned green without me noticing.

“You’re perfect,” I say, returning my attention to the road and stepping on the gas before we piss off somebody even more.

We drive for an additional twenty minutes until I find a parking spot.

“We’ll have to walk from here,” I say, killing the engine.

“That’s fine. Are you finally going to tell me what we are doing in Boston?”

I flex and unflex my fingers. I’ve been thinking about where to take her for hours. I wanted to make it special. Something more than just dinner. When it finally hit me, I

couldn't believe it took me so long to come up with it in the first place.

"Not yet." I give her a warning look. "Wait for me."

Grace opens her mouth, but I gently press my finger against it. "Wait."

She rolls her eyes but does as instructed. I quickly grab my jacket and get out of the car, pulling it on as I walk around the hood to the passenger side.

I pull the door open, and Grace slides outside. She's wearing high heels, which give her a few extra inches, putting us almost at eye level.

"I could have done that myself, you know."

I raise my brow. "And what would be the fun in that?"

Moving closer, I grab her coat off the seat. She inhales sharply, her chest brushing against mine, and I can feel certain parts of my body react.

Down, boy. We're doing it the right way this time around, which means you're in the doghouse for the time being.

There's something to be said about tall girls. The way they fit your body is just different. No bending down or craning your neck if you want to look at her, hold her, kiss her.

God, how I want to kiss her. To lean down and press my mouth against hers to smear that red lipstick. It'll be a real torture to have her so close all night but not be able to do anything.

Slowly, I take a step back and open her coat for her. This close, I can smell her perfume. The sweet smell taunts me, so I lean down, pressing my lips against the side of her neck. A shiver runs through her at the touch, goosebumps rising on her skin.

"Ready?" I ask, my voice coming out hoarse. Grace turns to face me. I let my hands slip down and take one of hers in mine. Her hand slides into mine like a missing puzzle piece, warm and soft. My chest tightens at the touch, and I have to force myself to take a deep breath and chill.

You're just holding her hand.

Why does it feel like more than that, then?

“Still not telling me where we're going?” Grace asks as I pull her down the street.

“Nope, you'll have to be patient.”

Grace purses her lips unhappily. “Haven't I been patient enough?”

“We'll be there soon.”

“I'm not really good at waiting.”

I let out a laugh, “I can see that, but I'm not saying.”

“Fine.”

“So... Jade didn't bite my head off,” I comment casually. I didn't miss the stink eye she threw my way when she opened the door for me when I came to pick Grace up, but she didn't say anything out loud, which I was thankful for. That girl is scary as fuck.

Grace slips a strand of her hair behind her ear. “I made her promise that she'd behave. Jade's not that bad. She just worries a lot about the people she cares about.”

“You two know each other long?”

“Not really. We met this summer, but we just clicked.”

“I can see that. It's good to know you have such a loyal friend.”

“Yes, it is. She'll...” her voice trails off as we turn the corner. Grace stops in her tracks when she sees the building in front of us. “Opera House?” She turns to look at me before switching her attention to the building and then back. “You brought me to the Opera House?”

Her eyes widen in surprise, genuine excitement and joy shining in their emerald depths.

“I figured you'd like it.” I shrug.

I wanted to make her happy, and I knew dance was her happy place. I saw the look on her face when she danced with

the girls at the community center—the pure happiness radiating off of her.

“I do. I haven’t watched ballet live in way too long. But what about you?”

I chuckle. “I think I’ll manage.” I tug at our joined hands. “C’mon, let’s get inside.”

The place is buzzing with activity as people mingle around. I hand our tickets to one of the concierges and help Grace take off her jacket before shrugging out of mine and handing them over to the staff.

I take her hand in mine and pull her down the hallway. There’s a bar area on the left. “Drinks?”

Grace shakes her head. “Can we just go and take a seat? Except if you want to grab something?”

“No drinks for me.”

Not only do I have to drive us back, but I also have a game the night after. Plus, I kind of don’t think my fake ID will pass through these guys. “Let’s find our seats.”

“What are we watching?”

“*The Nutcracker.*”

“Really?” If it’s even possible, her smile grows wider. “That’s my favorite. It was the first show I’d ever been to. My sister-in-law took me when I was thirteen, and although we’ve gone to a few different shows since then, *The Nutcracker* is the one we watch every year without exception. Well, I guess this year is an exception.”

“You close with your sister-in-law?” I ask, realizing this is the first time Grace ever talked about her family so openly.

“Yeah, she and my brother raised me. Maybe I’ll get us the tickets to go and see a show between Christmas and New Year’s once I’m back in the city for winter break.”

I check our tickets as we get into the hall and lead Grace to our seats. “Any plans you have for the holidays?”

“Just spending time with my family.” Grace takes her seat, and I join her.

“Maybe you could spend some time with me too?” The question was intended as a joke, but as soon as the words were out, I realized I’d actually like that. I’d like to see who Grace was before she moved to Blairwood. What did she like to do? What were her favorite things about the city we both grew up in? There were so many things, so many possibilities.

Grace bites the inside of her cheek. “Maybe I could.”

GRACE

“So, we’re here,” Trent says, killing the engine.

“We’re here,” I agree, shifting in my seat, so I’m turned toward him. Lights and shadows play on Trent’s face. A light stubble covers his jaw, giving him an edge I’m not used to seeing on him. “Tired?”

“A little.”

“Thank you for taking me to the ballet.”

“Did you have fun?”

I chuckle. “You know I did. The better question is, did *you* have fun?”

I loved watching ballet. The whole show, I’d been ohhing and ahhing at the performance. And I’m pretty sure Trent thinks I’m crazy.

“I did.”

“Really?” I ask, slightly skeptical. I could feel his attention on the side of my face throughout the performance, but I was so immersed in the story I didn’t want to move my eyes from the stage.

“I found my entertainment. But the performance wasn’t bad either.” He shakes his head. “I still can’t believe all the moves those dancers have.”

“They put a lot of work into what they do. You can’t join a company if you’re not an amazing dancer with a great work ethic.”

Trent places his hand over mine, our fingers intertwining. “Did you ever want to be a dancer?”

“Not really. Dancing is fun for me. I enjoy it, and I love teaching it to kids.”

“Is that what you want to do?”

“For fun? Sure. But I’m really hoping to join my brother’s non-profit once I’m done with college.”

Trent just stares at me, his thumb tracing circles over my palm. “Always trying to help others.”

“I don’t know about that.” I look out the window, feeling slightly uncomfortable under his scrutinizing stare. The snow was slowly falling when we got out of the Opera House, and it followed us all the way back to Blairwood. Contrary to the city where snow either melted or instantly turned gray, the campus looks like a winter wonderland.

A finger sneaks under my chin, and Trent coaxes me to turn my attention on him once again.

“I’ve seen you with those kids. You’re pretty amazing. You know that?”

I feel the heat rise up my neck at his praise. The way he says it, you’d think I’m doing something noble when in reality, they’re helping me.

“I just love doing it,” I shrug.

Trent’s serious eyes search my face. He doesn’t say anything, just watches me, taking in every detail of my face.

What does he see when he looks at me like that?

My teeth sink into my lower lip. Trent’s eyes fall down, zeroing in on my mouth. His irises grow darker, more intense, and a shiver runs through me.

“Grace,” Trent rasps.

His fingers slide to my cheek, spreading over it. The calloused tips send tingles running through my body.

“Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?”

I close my eyes, letting his husky voice settle over me. “You might have mentioned it.”

His finger slides under my mouth, making my lips part. “You’re so damn beautiful.”

“Trent,” I whisper, blinking my eyes open.

We're sitting so close to one another, as close as two people can get in a confined space of a truck. His gaze shifts from my mouth to my eyes and back.

"I want to kiss you, Legs."

God, I want to kiss him, too.

"Those red lips have been taunting me all night. I wanted to kiss you since I first saw you tonight, smear it all over your mouth."

Yes, yes, yes.

Another shiver runs through me. Instead of saying it out loud, I slide my hand to the back of his neck and pull him down toward me.

Our mouths meet in a soft kiss.

A moan rips out of my throat as the warmth spreads through my limbs at the simple touch, my body coming alive.

Trent's free hand goes to my other cheek. He tilts my head to the side and deepens the kiss, his tongue sliding through my parted lips and tangling with mine.

I missed his mouth on mine.

I dig my nails into his skin. Our chests brush together, the heat radiating off of his body.

"You taste so sweet," Trent whispers. His mouth traces kisses down my chin and neck, each peck leaving tingles in its wake. His hot breath tickles my skin, making it pebble.

"T-Trent," I run my fingers through his hair, letting the soft strands slip between my fingers. "I need more."

Trent pulls back, his heated eyes meeting mine. Thankfully, he doesn't need more encouragement because the next thing I know, he's pushing his seat back. "C'mere."

Nibbling at my lower lip, I do as he says, maneuvering to the driver's side. The space is so small; I trip over the middle and fall right into his lap.

Trent's arms wrap around me instantly, pulling me close to his chest. His hand soothes up and down my back. "You, okay?"

"Yeah."

"Good," he grins, and then he's kissing me again.

I straddle his hips, trying to find a more comfortable position. My legs fall on his sides, and my knee connects with the door handle, that I'm pretty sure will leave a bruise. The skirt of my dress has risen up my thighs, pooling around my waist. If the situation was different, I might have cared, but all I'm interested in is that his mouth is on mine.

He kisses me with abandon. But he's not the only one. I meet every hard, demanding swipe of his mouth with one of my own. I suck at his lower lip, grazing my teeth against the soft flesh. My hips move on their own accord, rubbing against the bulge in his pants—a really big, really hard bulge. It nestles between my thighs perfectly, each move of my hips sending out little shock waves through my body.

It feels so good.

He feels so good.

How is that even possible?

Trent runs his hands down my sides, his fingers digging into my hips. To stop me or help me move? I'm not sure either of us knows.

A low growl comes from Trent, making his chest rumble. "We should slow down," he pants against my neck.

His words ring familiar in my mind, but my body protests the idea. I close my eyes, my head falling back as his lips trace the path down my neck and over my cleavage.

No slowing down. I need more. More kisses. More touches. More of Trent.

"Grace?"

I run my fingers through his hair. Prying my eyelids open, I fix my gaze on Trent. "I want you, Trent."

With that, I kiss him again. My mouth captures his in a long kiss. We're like two starved teenagers, unable to keep our hands from one another.

Trent's hands slide down my thighs and then up. Only the thin barrier of my stockings separated his skin from mine.

"Trent, I..."

Before I can finish, there's a loud knock right by my head. I yelp loudly, completely surprised by the sound. I meet Trent's wide eyes that I'm pretty sure match mine.

Quickly, I stumble off his lap and into my seat, smoothing my skirt into place. Trent runs his hand over his face and takes a deep breath before rolling down the window.

"Good evening, Officer."

The guy looks at Trent before his eyes dart to me. I'm pretty sure I have "guilty" written over my forehead, which doesn't help chase away the redness from my cheeks.

"Evening." He tilts his chin toward the car. "Everything okay in here?"

"Yeah, we were just talking."

The guy gives us an are you shitting me look. "Mhmm... Talking. How about taking that conversation somewhere else? Public exposure isn't legal."

Trent nods his head. "That sounds like a good idea, sir."

"If I find you here in the next five minutes, I'm taking you down to the station." The guy gives us another long look and knocks on the roof. "You've been warned."

"You won't find us here," Trent reassures him. "Thanks."

The officer shakes his head, muttering something that sounds a lot like damn kids under his breath as he walks away.

I let out a breath, my body sagging against the seat. "We were almost charged with public exposure."

My heart is still beating frantically from the whole ordeal. Never in my life have I been stopped by an officer, and I've

lived in some pretty shitty places.

“But we weren’t.”

“We could have been.”

Trent puts his hand on my thigh. I snap my attention to him, forcing my breathing to steady. “We weren’t. Now, I’ll come out and walk you to your door, give you a kiss on the cheek and watch you walk inside before I get back in my car and drive away. All in less than the five minutes he gave us. Okay?”

I nod, unable to form the words.

Satisfied with that answer, Trent gives me another reassuring squeeze before getting out of the car. He walks around the hood in only his shirt and opens my door for me. I slip my coat over my shoulder and grab my purse before sliding out.

Trent wraps his arm around me as we make our way to the door of my dorm.

“I’m sorry about that. I shouldn’t have gone that far.”

I feel the heat rise up my neck. “I think I was the one asking for more.”

“You won’t hear me complain.”

We come to a stop before the ring of light coming from the lamp. Trent turns me to face him, his fingers tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “I really had fun tonight, Grace. The police interruption not included.”

“Me, too,” I say, then add. “The police interruption not included. I guess I’ll see you soon?”

“Yeah, I need to head back. Get some sleep before tomorrow’s game.”

“Are you playing here?”

“Yeah, it’s a home game. Why? Do you want to come?” Trent asks, almost hesitantly.

I chuckle nervously. “I mean, do you want me there?” Before he can answer, I continue in a hurry. “I know some people don’t like their friends and family to come because of the attention or whatnot...”

“Yeah,” Trent says quickly, stopping me from my blabfest. “I mean, if you can, I’d like to have you there. Ash never...” His voice trails off as if he just realized who he was talking about—with *whom* he’s talking. “Well, you know what I mean.”

“What time is it?”

“Six.”

“Six,” I repeat, pretending to think it through when, in reality, I knew what my answer would be all along. “Yeah, six sounds good.”

“Okay.” A shy smile slowly spreads over his mouth.

There’s a movement behind his shoulder that catches my attention. Somebody, probably the police officer, is coming back. “You should go.”

Trent cups my cheeks, his lips brushing against the top of my head for one long moment before he pulls back. “Good night, Legs.”

The familiar ache in my stomach is there, but it’s softer somehow.

“Night, Trent.”

He doesn’t move; his intense eyes fixed on me. “Get inside.”

Nibbling at my lower lip, I nod slowly and take a step back. With the next step, I turn on the balls of my feet and cross the short distance. A slide of my card, and the door beeps open. With one final look over my shoulder, I slip inside, a smile still firmly on my face.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

GRACE

“Oh, look who decided to come.” Yasmine props her hands on her hips as she watches me stomp off the snow from my boots before I enter the café.

“Hey, it’s you who’s not here when I stop to grab coffee.”

Yasmin sighs. “I figured as much.”

“Did you finally start to take fewer shifts?”

“Yeah. Nixon is pretty busy with football, so we don’t get much time to hang out. Which means *Dad* is also busy. Which means if I want to see either of them, I have to work around their schedule to do so. Seriously, how did I end up with all the football players and their stupid schedule?”

I take one of the high chairs by the bar and unzip my jacket. “Beats me. At least the football season is almost over.”

“True. But, they’re also lucky I love them.” Yasmin shakes her head, but there’s a fond smile on her lips. “You should see them. Every time Nixon comes with me to Dad’s house, all they talk about is football.” Yasmin starts moving behind the counter. “So, what’s up with you? Anything new going on?”

“Same old,” I shrug, trying to play nonchalant. Since she was busy, and I barely got to see her these last few weeks, I haven’t had the time to tell her everything that’s happened with Trent.

Yasmin puts a cup under the coffee machine and looks over her shoulder, her piercing eyes fixing on me. She just watches me for a few heartbeats without saying a word. Talk about an effective extraction method. I shift in my seat, nibbling at the inside of my cheek.

Her eyes narrow. “What are you not telling me?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, right.” Yasmin tilts her chin at me. “Spill.”

She clicks the lid on my cup in place and puts it in front of me. I wrap my fingers around the steaming cup. It burns, but I welcome the warmth seeping through my icy fingers.

What will Yasmin say when I tell her what has happened? Will she get it? Or will she also think I'm making a mistake?

"Grace? Did something happen? You're kind of scaring me."

"It's a long story," I sigh.

"So give me the cliff notes version."

I force myself to lift my gaze. "I went on a date with Trent last night."

The frown between her brows deepens. "You what?"

I'm not sure if she's more stunned or disappointed in me. In all honesty, I don't like either version of it. Yasmin has always been like a big sister to me, somebody to look up to, and to know that I've disappointed her hurts.

"But isn't he dating..."

"He broke up with her," I say quickly. "Like I said, it's a long story."

Yasmin looks down at the watch around her wrist. "Well, my shift ends in ten. Which is good because you're not leaving before you tell me what the hell exactly happened."

"Actually..." I rub the back of my neck. "I was just stopping here to grab a drink before going to the gym."

Yasmin's brows rise in a silent question. I feel my cheeks heat, so I duck my head, my hair falling like a curtain around me. "Trent asked me to come and watch him play."

There's a long pause, so I take a peek at my friend. "I guess it'll be like the good old days, huh?"

"You're coming too?" I ask, completely thrown off guard. The last thing I expected was that she'd want to join me. But she was right. This definitely wouldn't be the first time we'd gone to the gym together to watch the guys play.

Three years ago, I stumbled by accident to one of the community center's games while I was waiting for my brother to pick me up. I noticed Mason almost instantly. There was just something about him that drew your attention to him, whether you wanted it or not. It was the way he played, like he was one with the ball, moving around the court like he owned it. The cocky smile he got every time he scored flashes in my mind.

“Grace?”

I blink, coming back to the present. My hand is pressed against my chest where I can feel that familiar ache, only this time it's not as intense as usual. Instead, there's a small smile curling my lips at the memory.

Maybe there is hope after all.

“Sorry, I spaced out for a bit.”

“I'm going to change. I'll be back in a few.”

Only then, do I notice that her coworker has slipped behind the counter when I was lost in my thoughts.

“You don't have to go with me.”

“Ha! No way is that happening. You're telling me *all* the dirty details.” Yasmin points her fingers at her eyes and then at me, walking backward. “Don't try to slip away. I'm watching, and if you do, I'll hunt you down.”

I roll my eyes at her. “I'm not going anywhere.”

Yas laughs. “I see that Jade has had an influence over you.”

“Maybe,” I huff, pulling out my phone. “Now go before I change my mind.”

“Fine.” I watch Yasmin move to the staff room in the back, and only when she's gone do I turn my attention to the phone.

There's a message from Trent from about an hour ago. My heart does a little flip as I open it.

Trent: Just heading in to prep before the game.

Trent: There are two tickets waiting for you in the ticket box, but don't stress if you can't make it.

My fingers tighten around the device. I don't bother replying since I know he probably won't see the message, anyway. Instead, I locked my phone and put it back in my pocket. When I lift my gaze to see if Yas is back, the bell on the door rings, drawing my attention.

Blue eyes meet mine from across the room.

Seriously? This is what, a third time this week?

She stops in her tracks, her eyes narrowing at me across the room. Her friend bumps into her and looks up to see what distracted Ashley, and then they're both scowling at me.

You didn't do anything wrong, a little voice reminds me.

Then why does it feel as if I had?

"Ready?" I turn around in my chair to find Yasmin standing behind me, her eyes fixed at the door.

"Yeah, let's go."

Jumping off the chair, I grab my things. Ashley and her friend have moved to the counter, so I do my best to avoid their gazes as we walk outside into a chilly December evening.

"Was that..."

"Yup," I say quickly before she can even finish her question. I do not need a reminder of who Ashley is. I'm quite capable of reminding myself of it too many times to count.

Yasmin shakes her head. "What the hell happened?"

"Well..." I take a deep breath, bracing myself before I let it all out.

All the times I've run into Trent. The study sessions. The connection I felt toward him, no matter how hard I tried to resist it. *The kiss*. The fight. Making up. The date. Everything.

"Seriously, how did I miss all of this?" Yasmin asks a little while later as we slip into our seats, courtesy of Trent.

The gym is almost completely full, something I hadn't expected since Blairwood is mostly known for its football and hockey teams. Between people chatting and the loud music playing, the place is vibrating, and I have to shout so Yasmin can hear me over all the noise.

"A lot has happened in a short amount of time," I shrug, taking my seat.

Talk about an understatement of the year.

"I know, but still. I've been a shitty friend."

"You have a *life*," I correct. "No need to apologize for that."

"How do you feel about all of this? I mean, with Trent looking like Mason..." she lets her voice trail off.

"I'm not going to lie. It's been hard at the beginning. Hell, sometimes it still is. Trent just looks so much like Mason. It's surreal." Yas gives me a worried glance, so I hurry up to reassure her. "I know he isn't Mason, but it definitely messed with my head. Their resemblance is just so uncanny. But I got to know him in the past few weeks, Yas. I really got to know him. Even when..." I suck in a shaky breath, needing a moment to compose myself. "Even when he was with her, it was impossible to resist him, hard to walk away."

"I know that feeling well."

"Is it messed up? Yeah, but he isn't Mason. He can't be because it just wouldn't make sense."

"I hope you're right."

I hope that too.

"Do you plan to tell him?" Yas asks gently. "About Mason, I mean?"

I shrug. "I'll have to." It's not like I can avoid it forever, no matter how much I'd like that. "I'm just looking for a perfect moment."

Before Yas can say anything else, the music shifts to the Blairwood's fight song, and my attention turns to the court just

in time to catch the players run out.

I take them all in until my eyes land on Trent. It's like my body is designed to find him, no matter the place or situation.

He's standing next to his friend, Matteo and another guy I don't know as they chat about something, but his attention is not on the conversation. At least not fully. No, his eyes scan the bleachers, meeting mine for a split second before moving to the next person. Then he snaps his head back and really looks at me. It's like he hoped I'd be here but didn't expect it to actually happen.

He lifts his hand, rubbing against his temple as a grin slowly spreads over his mouth. I nibble at the inside of my cheek, but it isn't preventing a smile from coming out. Then Matteo elbows Trent. He looks at me before turning to Trent and shaking his head. Their mouths move, but from up here, I can't decipher what they're saying. Whatever it is has Trent turning his attention back to his coach and teammates—not before giving me one last glance, though, making my heart skip a beat.

Yasmin sighs. “Just like the old days.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

TRENT

“Dammit,” I mutter as the Boston player steals the ball from Quinn and goes toward our hoop.

Mark runs after him instantly, following him like a shadow, but the guy’s just a smidge faster. They both jump off the floor. Mark tries to block the shot, but the guy pushes him and slam-dunks the ball.

I wince as I watch Mark fall down, his six-foot-eight frame making the floor rattle on impact.

Coach curses loudly just as the ref blows the whistle, calling the foul. Matteo and Quinn help Mark to his feet. His face twists in pain, but somehow, he makes his way to the line. The ref throws him the ball, and Mark gets in position.

I shift my weight forward, my elbows digging into my knees as I watch Mark brace himself before his free throw.

We’re halfway through the second half, and the whole game has been mostly tied so far, with Blairwood currently two points behind Boston.

Mark throws, and the ball falls neatly through the hoop. The crowd cheers as the ref grabs the ball and throws it back to Mark for another free throw. He bounces the ball a few times before he throws it. The ball sails through the air in the perfect arc and falls through the net.

“Hell, yes!” Nate claps his hands excitedly as the ball falls to the ground, tying us up once again at 56-56.

“Remington.” I shift my attention to the coach at the sound of my name, my feet bouncing with suppressed energy. “You’re up.”

“Yes, Coach.” I jump to my feet, stretching a bit while I wait for the ref to call the change.

Mark and I slap fists in passing as I make my way out onto the court, slipping into Mark’s position as a wing. The Boston player tries to slip past me, but I don’t let him, so his teammate

has to pass to the other side. The transfer is sloppy as fuck. Matteo snatches the ball in mid-air and dribbles it across the court. I dash after him. Our eyes meet for a split second as the rest of the guys reach us, falling into a familiar line.

One of the Boston players tries to steal the ball, but Matteo dodges him and throws the ball in my direction just as I get to the three-point line. The rough leather lands on the tips of my fingers. I push off the ground and jump, scoring my first goal of the night.

The crowd cheers, and I can't help the smile that tugs at the corner of my mouth.

“Do you seriously have to make the rest of us look bad?” Matteo shakes his head as we get out into the hallway.

The guys chat all around us excitedly as we make our way out of the locker room.

After the game, Coach gave us his, what I came to know as his usual post-game talk. This time it was short since we won. Still, I swear the guy could always find a way to improve our game. Then Quinn told us to take a shower and change quickly because the whole team was going out to celebrate. One guy tried to protest, but Quinn wasn't having any of it.

“How did I do that?”

“You were playing for like ten minutes and scored fifteen points.”

“Twelve,” I correct.

Matteo waves me off. “Same difference.”

“We won. That's all that matters.”

It wasn't just because of me, either. The guys were pissed at what happened to Mark. Thankfully, he didn't break anything, but his side is pretty banged up from the fall, and he'll probably have to sit out the next game. That was the final

push we needed. We owned that court for the last ten minutes of the game and ended up winning 80-62.

“True, but I bet the coach puts you as the starter for the next game.”

Excitement buzzes under my skin at the prospect of that. I wouldn't protest more playing time. Rationally, I know that some of the guys have been on the team for way longer than I have. Hell, most of them got a scholarship to play ball while I just walked in, hoping they'd let me try out. Just the fact that I scored a place on the team at all, when I barely got to play at all through high school, is a miracle, but I couldn't deny that now that I've gotten to play, I want more. I'm playing the best game of my life, and I could only hope that Coach will notice it too.

“I guess we'll see.”

I grab the door before it slams shut, burrowing my neck deeper into my jacket. Some fans, mostly girls, really, are waiting outside. They're already chatting with the players, waiting for autographs, and to see if one of them will ask them to join us for the night.

“Trent!”

I look up at the sound of my name to see two girls waving at me. But it's not them that grab my attention; it's the girl that's standing behind, away from everybody else, her hair glimmering under the streetlight.

My chest tightens, a rush of air coming out of my lungs. There's a light flicker at the back of my mind, a recognition that I'm not sure where to place so I push it back.

“Grace?” I step toward her, but the two girls zero in on me.

“That was an amazing game, Trent!”

I give them a passing look and a small smile. “Thanks. The team really appreciates your support. Now, if you'll excuse me.” I duck between the two to join Grace. “What are you doing here?”

Last night she said she would come, but seeing her out there in the stands wasn't any less surprising, maybe because I've never had that before. Never had anybody care enough to show up to watch me play.

Basketball was always something I had to keep quiet about if I wanted to play. And Ashley had never shown interest in coming to my games before, so I didn't bother asking her to come now.

"I figure I'd wait to congratulate you in person." Grace shrugs and pulls her hands out of her pockets.

"Oh, yeah?" The corner of my mouth lifts in a smile. "Did you have fun?"

"It was an amazing game, Tre—"

Before she could finish, I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her in for a hug, lifting her off the ground.

"Trent!" Grace half yells, half laughs, wrapping her arms around my neck. "What are you doing? Put me down."

It's silly, I know it, but I can't help myself. It was good to look out in the stands and know there's somebody out there who's excited to watch you play. But to find her waiting for me after the game? I can't even put it into words.

Somebody whistles and I can hear the guys snicker behind my back. Even so, I hold on for a while longer, loving the feel of Grace's body pressed against mine.

"I'm just glad you got here," I whisper, my throat tightening a little. I'm grateful nobody can see my face because I'm sure I'd get a ton of shit for it otherwise.

Taking a deep breath, I put Grace down. She tilts her head back, her fingers cupping my cheek and pushing a strand of my hair back. "Of course. I had fun. I haven't been to a basketball game in..."

"Remington! You coming or what?" Quinn yells, interrupting whatever Grace wanted to say.

Dammit.

“Not yet, but maybe if he’s extra *nice*...” Nate wiggles his brows suggestively, and the guys burst into laughter.

What are they? Ten?

I turn around and glare at the group. “I’ll show you nice, assholes.” Sighing, I grab Grace’s hand in mine. “C’mon, let’s go.”

“Go where?” Even as she asks that she starts walking.

“Guys want to celebrate the win. There’s some kind of party or something.”

“Oh, I can go home...”

I stop and turn toward her. “Or you could come with me?”

Grace looks toward the guys. Her teeth graze over her lower lip as she thinks it through. “Won’t they mind? Like, is it a guy thing?”

“Nah, I’m pretty sure they’ll find entertainment quickly enough, and then we can get out of there without them bitching about it. What do you say?”

I hold in a breath as I wait for her to answer, my heart racing with every second that passes by without her answer. I want her to say yes, but if she doesn’t want to hang out with the guys, I’ll take her home and join them later. It shouldn’t be a big deal. I rub my sweaty palm against the side of my leg. Then why does it feel like it is?

After what feels like forever, Grace nods. “Sure, okay. Let’s do this.”

“So Grace, how do you know this guy?”

Quinn sits down on the couch next to us, taking the little space that was left and making me press closer to Grace.

Cheers and boos ring inside the room, and when I look up, I find Matteo downing a cup of beer, a smug smile on the face of the blonde across from him. Such a sucker.

I shift in my seat, putting my arm around Grace's shoulder.

"Umm..." Grace tucks a strand of her hair behind her ear. Her nervous tell. "We met on campus."

She's wearing another one of those off-the-shoulder sweaters that constantly slips down, so I slide my finger over the patch of revealed skin. Her soft skin pebbles under my touch as a shiver runs through her body.

"She's been helping me with French."

"French kissing?" Nate wiggles his brows suggestively, and a few others snicker.

Seriously, these guys act like kids most of the time. You'd think they never kissed a girl in their lives. I kick him in the shin. "With my French *class*, you dumbass."

"Bummer. French kissing is way more fun."

"What do you even know about French kissing, Williams?" Matteo asks as he joins the group, the blonde under his arm.

Huh, I guess there is something to his tactic, after all.

"I know how sweet your mom tastes. Is that good enough?" Nate taunts right back.

Sighing, I turn my attention down to Grace. "Ignore them. Nobody taught them how to act in company." She stares for a moment longer at the guys before tilting her head back to face me. "You guys seem like a lively bunch."

"They like to poke to see how far they can push before somebody snaps."

"Reminds me of my brother and his friends. I guess it's a guy thing."

"To act like idiots?" I chuckle. "Probably."

Grace laughs, and my eyes fall down to her soft mouth, my throat going dry. After all the talk about kissing, I couldn't stop thinking about kissing her. Remember the gentle moan that came from deep in her throat when my mouth was on

hers. The feeling of her body pressed against mine in the small confines of my car. Her warm breath, her warm ce—

“So you’re like his tutor?”

Fucking Quinn.

Grace and I pull apart. I haven’t even realized we’ve been moving closer to one another. So close that our lips are practically brushing together.

“She’s his girlfriend, you idiot.” Matteo chimes in, always helpful. “Or at least he’s trying to get her to commit.”

Green eyes go wide at the words, like a deer caught in headlights.

Seriously, is it too late to get new friends?

“Fuck off, you assholes. Don’t you have better things to do? I figured we came here to party.”

I slide my hand under her legs and pull them over my lap. Grace seems to be surprised by the motion but doesn’t try to pull back, so I count that as a win.

“There, better.” My hand stays on her thigh, and I let my thumb slide over the side of her knee.

“And on that note,” Quinn groans as he gets up. Other guys follow, including my best friend, who winks at me and pulls the blonde out in the hallway where the music is blasting louder.

“They didn’t have to leave.”

“Hell, yes. They did.” I pull her closer so she’s fully sitting on my lap.

“You’re mean.”

“Because I want you all for myself?” I brush my fingers over her cheek, letting them slide between her silky red curls.

“You were supposed to celebrate your win with your friends. I don’t want to get in the way of that.”

“You’re not getting in the way of anything. Trust me. They just wanted to get some dirt to give me shit later. They’d have

gone out and found themselves company sooner or later, anyway. I just sped that up a little.”

“So, what do you want to do now?”

My gaze falls down on her mouth again. “Something I should have done when I first saw you.”

“And what is that?” Grace whispers, her pupils dilating as she cups my cheek.

“This.” I lean down, closing the distance between us. I trace my nose along the side of her neck and inhale deeply. She smells sweet, like roses and spring days—a temptation wrapped around in an irresistible, long-legged package.

I press my mouth against the hollow of her neck, drinking her in. My tongue darts out, tasting her skin. A shiver runs through her at the gentle touch.

“Cold?” I murmur, placing another kiss, this time a bit higher.

Her throat bobs as she swallows but shakes her head no. She turns to the side, her gaze falling to my mouth. Her fingers dig into the collar of my shirt, holding onto the material for dear life.

Her nose brushes against mine, once, twice, and then her lips are on mine.

My fingers tighten on the back of her neck as our mouths collide and the air between us sizzles. I’m not sure if it’s attraction, chemistry, or just plain Grace. It’s like a living, breathing thing, and it burns brighter than with anybody else.

A low groan comes from deep in my throat as she nips and nibbles at my lower lip. Her mouth parts, and I slide my tongue inside. Teasing. Tasting.

My grip on her tightens, and I pull her closer. I run my hand over her leg, cursing the material of her jeans that stands in between the two of us. My fingers slide higher under the edge of her sweater until I get to the soft, warm skin.

A wolf whistle snaps me out of it, reminding me that we’re not alone.

Seriously, how do we always get ourselves in these kinds of situations? First my car and now a party?

We need a room with a locked door and bed. No distractions allowed.

Reluctantly, I break the kiss. My forehead touches her as I try to calm my ragged breathing. “Let’s get out of here?”

Grace slowly blinks her eyes open. Her pupils are dilated, cheeks pink. She slides her tongue over her lower lip. It’s all plump and tender from our kisses. “Let’s go.”

I get up; Grace tucked in my arms.

“Trent!” she laughs, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“Yeah?”

“What are you doing? You can’t carry me.”

“You want to bet on it?”

“Well, it would be an easy win.”

I lift my brow. “Is that a challenge, Legs? ‘Cause I don’t mind carrying you *all* the way across campus.”

“It’s not a challenge. Besides, I can walk.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

Sighing, I put her down on her two feet. Cupping her face, I press my mouth against hers in a hard kiss that leaves us both breathless.

Breaking the kiss, I take a step back, letting my hands fall by my sides. “C’mon.” Interlocking our fingers, I pull her toward the door.

The hard bass assaults my senses as we walk down the hallway. I hear my name called a few times, but I don’t bother to stop. We’re getting out of here, STAT.

“Dammit!”

I turn around, looking for the source of the familiar voice, and find my teammates standing next to the keg in the kitchen.

Matteo grins widely. “You better pay up, McLannister.”

“Fuck you, Rookie.” Still, he pulls out his wallet and places a ten on Matteo’s extended palm. “I had more faith in you, Remington.”

Shaking my head, I continue walking.

“Did they...”

“I don’t even want to know.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

GRACE

“Can you slow down?” I try to hold in my laughter as Trent pulls me up the stairs. It’s late, and the hallways are empty. The last thing I want is to cause a commotion or wake somebody up with my giggling. I’m not even drunk to have it as an excuse.

Well, not drunk on alcohol, at least. Drunk on Trent? That’s a completely different story.

Yasmin was right. Seeing him play was exactly like the good old days, only better because I got to wait for him after the game. It was everything a sixteen-year-old me could have ever wanted.

“I’m not slowing down now that I’m so close to the finish line.”

“The finish line?”

Trent looks over his shoulder at me, his brown eyes filled with intensity and an unspoken promise that makes my stomach clench with anticipation.

“You and me behind a closed door.”

My throat bobs. “What about your roommate?”

“Matteo won’t be coming home tonight.” There is certainty in his voice that I don’t bother to question.

We come to a stop before a door, and Trent fiddles with the lock, cursing silently when it doesn’t want to budge. After a few more attempts, there’s a soft *click* when the lock gives in, and before I know it, I’m pulled into the dark room.

The door falls shut with a loud bang. In a blink of an eye, my back is pressed against it, and his mouth is on mine. I wrap my arms around his neck, my fingers digging into his hair as I deepen the kiss.

Trent groans, moving closer. Our bodies are pressed tightly against each other. He’s everything I can feel. Everything I can

smell. Everything that is. And I can't get enough of him.

He nestles between my legs, hard and hot. I hook one leg behind his knee, and his hands slide under my thighs, helping hoist me up. Air is kicked from my lungs as my back meets the wall.

Breaking the kiss, I pull his shirt over his head and then do the same with mine. My chest is rising and falling rapidly in a frantic tempo. With each hard inhale, my already sensitive nipples brush against the lace of my bra, turning into hard peaks.

"So fucking sexy," Trent whispers as he drinks me in, his voice hoarse. He slides his finger over the delicate lace, tracing the outline of the bra until he finds the clasp at the front. His eyes hold mine as he undoes it, and I let it slide down my shoulders and onto the floor. "And so fucking mine."

He cups my breast, lifting it slightly, and dips his head pulling one erect nipple into his mouth.

"G-God." It's like a zap of electricity went right from my nipple and into my core. I tighten my hold on him, my thumb grazing over the scar just above his collarbone. *Scar?* Just then, Trent flicks his tongue over the sensitive flesh. My back arches as he switches between sucking and licking until I can't take it anymore.

"You're going to make me come," I protest, my head falling back against the wall.

My nipple pops out of his mouth, and he looks up at me. His hair is messy from my fingers, his dark-with-desire eyes holding mine. "I thought that was the point."

"Only if you're inside me."

If it's possible, his eyes gleam darker. Those rough palms tighten on my ass, and before I can blink, I'm bouncing on the bed.

The small light flickers on, blinding me temporarily. "I don't want to miss a thing."

I lean against my elbows and take him in. "Pants. Off."

The corner of his mouth lifts. "As you wish."

His fingers work on his jeans, undoing the button, and with one swift motion, he pushes both his pants and boxers to the floor, making his dick spring free.

My throat goes dry as I watch him wrap his fingers around his shaft, slowly working his length. The way his forearm muscles flex with each stroke he makes.

The light and shadow dance across his broad shoulders and well-defined muscles. My tongue darts out, sliding over my lower lip.

"Come here."

Slowly he moves toward me, one knee coming to rest on the mattress and then the other. Leaning down, he kisses me deeply.

"Now you're the one who's overdressed."

His mouth licks and nips its way down my body, tasting every inch of my skin until he's at my belly button. Those expert fingers have my jeans undone in no time, and he pulls them down my legs, throwing them on the floor. And then he's back between my legs. Lifting one in the air, he presses a kiss against my ankle.

My whole body flutters as he locks his eyes with mine as he slowly, oh so painfully slowly, works his way up my leg. He kisses and licks my skin, a day's worth of stubble scratching the sensitive flesh as he presses a kiss at the juncture of my thigh.

"Trent..." my voice comes out all breathy, fingers tangling in the sheets beneath me.

"Yeah?"

"Don't tease me," I protest impatiently.

"Oh, but it's so much fun," he chuckles, his hot breath making the goosebumps rise on my skin. "Do you have any idea how long I've been wanting to do this?" He lifts my other leg, repeating the same process there. "How long have these legs of yours been taunting me? It's time to pay up." His hands

slide over the outside of my thigh. “Put your legs over my shoulders.”

“Wha—”

Before I can even think to move, he does it himself, hooking my legs over his shoulders as he dips down. And then his mouth is on me.

Trent goes straight for my core, his tongue sliding between my folds, from my opening all the way to my clit.

“Holy shit.” I squeeze my eyes shut as wave after wave of pleasure rolls over me. My thighs quake as Trent works his magic tongue over me—sucking, nipping, swirling.

His fingers tighten around my ass and pull me closer to him. He flattens his tongue over my clit, sucking it into his mouth.

My legs clamp around his head, pulling him closer as my fingers grip the bed sheet under me. “T-Trent, I can’t...”

His teeth graze the sensitive bud as he lets go, and I’m falling over the edge, hard and fast. White dots cloud my vision as the sweet pleasure washes over me.

Trent pulls back slightly, pressing his mouth against each of my inner thighs one more time before sitting upright, his dark, dark eyes fixing on me.

“Good?”

Good? Is he serious right now? He just rocked my whole damn world.

A smile spreads over my lips. “Better than good.”

Way, way better.

TRENT

Grace lifts her leg, slowly dragging it down my stomach. My abs tighten at the touch, dick twitching. The way this girl affects me is surreal. Just one gaze, just one smile, just one touch, and I'm a goner for her.

"C'mere." She beacons me closer, a lazy smile on her face. A smile that I put there. There's something satisfying in knowing that fact. The corner of my mouth lifts as I lean down.

Grace reaches for me, her tits bouncing with the movement. Our chests brush together, her taut nipples rubbing against my pecs. I slide my hand at her nape and pull her in for a kiss. Her lips part, my tongue sliding inside her mouth and tangling with hers. A low moan comes from deep in her chest as our kiss grows stronger, hungrier.

One of her legs slides behind my knee, and she uses it as leverage to lift her hips and rub her pelvis against mine. My cock falls perfectly in line with her pussy, and I let it slide through her lower lips.

God, she's so fucking wet for me. My dick slides easily, coating in her juices, her warmth.

"I want you inside me."

"Fuck, yeah." I pull open the drawer and fish out a condom. Grace takes it from my hand and gives me a little push. I let the gravity pull me on the mattress and watch her straddle me, one hand bracing against my chest as she finds the perfect spot. Her tits bounce as she wiggles, and I can't resist grabbing them. She's a perfect handful, her nipples a pretty pink color. I give them a squeeze, rubbing my fingers over the hard tips.

"You're distracting me," she protests, nuzzling her head in the crook of my neck. Her teeth graze over the hollow before she kisses the spot.

"From what?"

“From this.” There is a husky note to her voice as she makes her way down. Her hands lead the path, followed by her mouth and tongue. She sucks on my nipple and then licks and nibbles her way down my abs.

“*Shit,*” I hiss as those lean fingers of hers wrap around my base tightly, giving me a firm squeeze.

“I figured I’d get a little taste before having my wicked way with you.”

Her hand pumps my length in steady strokes. Each time she comes to the top, her finger slides over the sensitive head, smearing the precum over the tip of my dick.

“Taste as you’d like. You won’t hear me c-complain,” the last word comes out as a stutter because her lips wrap around my dick, and she sucks it deep into her warm mouth. My hips jolt from the bed on their own accord, eyes falling close as I let out a long hiss.

It’s like every nerve ending has awoken inside me.

Forcing myself to open my eyes, I look down, only to find Grace watching me as she slowly sucks on me like a freaking lollipop. She pulls as much of my length inside her mouth as she can and then slowly releases it, her tongue stroking the underside of my cock until just the tip is in her mouth. Her tongue flicks over my head, making a few lazy circles before she’s working her way all the way down until the tip of my dick touches the back of her throat.

My fingers tangle in her hair, and I hold her, helping guide her movements.

“Legs,” I call out, which earns me a little hum on her part. I can feel the vibrations go through me, making me groan. I hold her face and shake my head. “I’m not coming in your mouth. Not tonight anyway.”

With one final stroke, she pulls back. “You’re no fun.”

I grab the condom from the bed where it fell at some point and rip it open. “I’ll give you no fun.”

She holds my dick as I put the condom on, giving it a few strokes before she straddles my lap. I kiss her chest and neck, going for her mouth.

Sucking her lip between her teeth, she slowly implants herself on me. My dick enters her painfully slowly, making us both gasp as I slide up to the hilt.

I tighten my grip on her waist, holding her still for a moment, giving us both time to adjust. Loosening my grip, I slide my hand up her body to the back of her neck and pull her down. "Ride me, Legs," I breathe, my mouth crashing over hers as she lifts up and sinks back down.

Our teeth clash as we kiss greedily. Tilting her head to the side, I slip my tongue into her mouth, fucking her mouth with my tongue in tune with her hips riding me.

"I n-need..."

Holding onto her, I flip us over without even bothering to pull out of her. I lift her leg, getting a better angle. The next time I slide into her, it's deeper. Grace's eyes fall closed, and a low moan comes out of her lungs.

"There." Her nails graze the skins of my back, head tilting back. "God, just there, don't stop."

"I'm not even sure I could." Her sweet pussy tightens around me, holding me in a vice grip as I quicken my pace until I hit that magical spot that earns me a breathy gasp.

Grace's body arches as the pleasure rolls through her. I don't slow my pace, chasing my own release. I hold her closer, clinging to her as I thrust deeper until the pleasure builds inside me, and I explode inside her.

My body topples over her, crashing her to the bed. We're both a sweaty, panting mess. Bracing against my elbows, I look down at her. Grace's cheeks are bright pink, her lips swollen and what I'm pretty sure are scratch marks covering her neck.

A few of the strands of her hair stick to her face, so I brush them away.

Grace blinks her eyes open, those bright green irises peeking at me. My chest tightens at the sight of her, a feeling I'm not sure how to name spreading through me.

"That was..." she sighs, words drifting. There's a sleepiness to her that comes only after sex.

"I know." Pushing that unsettling feeling back, I press my mouth against her neck. "I've got to take care of the condom."

Her legs tighten around me, stopping me from moving. "Do you have to?"

"I'll be back in a bit," I promise, trying to stifle my chuckle.

With another kiss, this one on her lips, I pull out of her and get up. I quickly take care of business and return to the bed. Grace is pulled all the way against the wall, so I slide inside and pull her over me. The damn bed is too small, but I guess there are some advantages to it.

Grace snuggles into me, throwing her leg over my thigh, and sighs happily. "I could get used to this."

"Me too." She slides her fingers over my chest until they stop at a carefully closed incision at my shoulder. "What's that? I noticed it earlier, but..."

Her voice drifts off, pink spreading over her cheekbones.

"An old injury."

My muscles tighten as she continues sliding her fingers up and down the scar on my skin. The doctors have carefully closed it, and it has healed nicely, but the scar has stayed.

"From what?"

"A fall when I was younger," I say non-committedly, not in the mood to open this particular topic.

I lift Grace's hand to my mouth and press a kiss against her knuckles before placing it on my chest. A shimmer catches my attention. I look closely at the little charm hanging from Grace's wrist, wondering how this is the first time I've noticed it.

The leather looks slightly worn; the color faded in some places. The knot that's holding it on her wrist is so tangled I'm pretty sure she'd have to cut it off if she wanted to remove it.

"Didn't you say you weren't into basketball?" I ask absentmindedly, swiping my thumb over the little basketball charm hanging on a leather band.

Grace stiffens, her attention going to her wrist. "I wasn't. It was a gift." That faraway look is back in her eyes. "From a friend."

My throat tightens. "You had a friend that was into basketball?"

My stomach lurches, a feeling I'm not sure I want to name, twisting my insides.

"Yeah." Gently, she pulls her hand out of my grasp and places it on my chest, her fingers rubbing the worn leather. "It was a long time ago, and wearing it has been a habit."

I look down at the top of her head. She snuggles closer to me, sighing happily. I should probably let her rest. It's clear that she's tired, but for whatever reason, I can't seem to let it go.

"How long?"

"Years."

Years. She's been wearing it for years, yet she didn't think to tell me that? I'm not even sure why I'm so upset by it. If it were something else, anything else, I wouldn't think twice about it. But it's not any charm; it's a basketball.

"Do you want to play?"

Her mouth falls open in surprise. "I... I don't know how."

"Never played ball?"

Something flashes on her face, but she masks it quickly, shaking her head no. "Never got a chance."

Absent-mindedly, I run my hand down her back. "Didn't you say you never played basketball?"

“Not enough time...” she murmurs, her voice distant.

I look down, and sure enough, her eyes are closed, lips slightly parted as she sleeps.

Not enough time. I rub the side of my head. *What does that even mean?*

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

TRENT

A loud *bang* startles me awake. My eyes snap open just in time to see a dark figure entering the room. My heart kicks up as I jolt upright in the bed, covers falling into my lap. My heart thumps in a wild tempo as blurry images flash before my eyes. Men in black. Two, no, *three* of them. Shouting. I can't understand the words, but it's there, an incomprehensible noise that overwhelms all my senses.

Sweat coats my skin, and the throbbing behind my temples is so intense it makes it hard to breathe.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Light flashes on, blinding me instantly. I squeeze my eyes shut, my hands covering my pulsing temples.

“Shit. Sorry. I didn't mean to barge in.”

“What... Trent?” Small fingers wrap around my wrists. “What's wrong?”

I grit my teeth harder and shake my head. Which is a mistake because the only thing it does is intensify my headache. I grab my head with both hands, pressing my palms against my eyes.

God, why does it hurt so badly?

“What's wrong with him?” a panicked voice breaks through the loud thumping of my heart echoing in my eardrums, which makes all of my senses dull.

No, not just any voice.

Grace.

We came back to my place, and she slept over.

“Trent, open your eyes.” Grace tries to pry my hands away from my face, but I hold still. “Please.”

“He probably has a migraine.”

Matteo.

The light flickers off, plunging me back into the darkness.

Thank fuck.

“A migraine? Is that it?”

It’s not, at least, not what my usual migraine feels like. Yes, my head is hurting, but this is different, more intense. It paralyzes all of my senses, making it hard to breathe.

Still, I nod my head since I don’t have it in me to explain. With my eyes still firmly shut to block everything out, I force myself to breathe, taking in one shaky breath after the other.

“Better?” Grace whispers softly.

I nod once. It’s the best I can do. I can hear her sigh in relief. Her fingers gently pushed a strand of hair that got stuck to my sweaty face behind my ear.

“I’ll get you a cold towel.”

Matteo opens and closes the door softly, leaving Grace and me alone once again.

“How about you lie down, huh?”

“Y-yeah,” My voice is hoarse as if I’ve been yelling this whole time. I clear my throat as I slowly lay down. “Sorry about this.”

“Nothing to be sorry about.” The mattress squeaks as Grace gets out of the bed and helps me lie down. There’s light shuffling as if she’s putting on clothes, her voice slightly distant, “You scared me there for a second, that’s all.”

I scared myself.

I don’t even remember falling asleep. One moment I was awake, the next I was dreaming, and then... That muffled shouting rings in my mind once again. The loud bang, but it wasn’t like somebody shut the door. It was something different and happened quickly. I’ve never experienced something like it. It almost seemed real. Like it was happening right in front of my eyes.

“Sorry,” I repeat. My body sags against the mattress as a wave of exhaustion hits me like a train wreck.

The whole episode might be strange, but this part is painfully familiar.

“Does this happen often?”

The door slowly opens, a trace of light entering the room through the small gap. I frown as the pain in my temples intensifies.

“Not really,” I lie.

I know I should probably tell her about my migraines, but I can't bring myself to do it not now after she's witnessed this.

It's completely selfish.

But Grace sees me just like any other guy. She's not looking at me verily like I might fall unconscious at any moment. She doesn't question my love of basketball and what *risks* there are if I continue playing. She's just... there. To her, I'm a normal college guy with a love for the game, and I don't want that to change.

“Occasionally,” Matteo corrects, walking closer to the bed. “Nothing like this, though. Not that I know of.”

There is a trace of accusation in his voice. Like he thinks this isn't the first time, but I've been hiding it from him. Which, granted, is technically possible. I've been trying to hide the number of headaches I've had since coming to Blairwood. I knew if I didn't play it off, I'd worry Matteo and Ashley, and I didn't even want to think what would happen if my parents got wind of it. Still, there's no way I'd be able to conceal an incident like this.

It's like I just had the flu. My body feels exhausted and weak. Even if I wanted to get up, there's no way I could do it.

Something cold touches my face. I suck in a breath and then let it out slowly as the pain eases off only a little bit.

“Better?” Grace asks, rearranging the cold towel on my face.

“Yeah, this feels good. What time is it, anyway?”

“Ten,” Matteo announces.

“Shit.” Grace jumps off the bed, and I can feel my stomach roll. I don’t even want to imagine how I’d feel if I were standing.

“What?”

“I have a class I need to go to.” There is a slight pause as if she’s debating her options.

I push the towel off my eyes and meet her gaze. It takes some adjustment since the room is dark, but I manage to find her worried face. “Go.”

There is no sense for both of us to miss our classes, especially not so close to the finals.

Grace crouches by my side. “Will you be okay?”

“I’ll be fine. Go to your class.”

“You sure? I don’t mind st—”

I shake my head and try to hold back my wince as the pain spreads through my head. “No, go to class.”

Grace sighs. “Fine.” She brushes her mouth against the top of my head. “Try to rest, okay?”

“Not going anywhere,” I try to joke, but I don’t think either of them buys it. “Seriously, I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll see you later,” Grace whispers as she brushes her mouth against the side of my head and gives my hand another squeeze. Placing the towel back in place, she gets up. I can hear her feet move across the room, but then there’s only silence. “You’ll let me know if he needs something?”

“Sure thing.”

“He’s still here and can hear you perfectly fine,” I mutter dryly, not amused in the slightest.

Matteo huffs. “I’ll look out for his grumpy ass. Don’t worry.”

I’m half tempted to pull off the cloth and open my eyes, but it feels too good to remove.

“Thank you.”

Then the door opens and closes quickly, and Grace's gone.

"What the fuck, dude?" Matteo whisper-yells at me. "You scared me half to death."

"I scared myself," I admit. "And can you not be so loud? My head is killing me."

"Sorry."

"Hand me the migraine pills?" I ask, hating that I'm so dependable on others, but I'm not quite confident I'd stay on my feet if I try to get upright.

There's some shuffling as the drawer opens and closes. Matteo walks toward me, tapping my hand with a water bottle.

Removing the towel, I push into a sitting position. My whole world spins on its axis. I close my eyes, pushing the nausea away before trying again.

Matteo wordlessly hands me my pills. I open the bottle and get two, throwing them in my mouth and chugging down some water.

Matteo crosses his arms over his chest, watching me until I'm done. "You're not lying when you say this is new?"

"I'm not lying. This is new."

His lips press in a grim line. "Maybe you should see a doc ___"

"No," I say harshly and almost instantly regret it when pain stabs through my skull. "I'm fine. It's just a migraine."

"Stubborn bastard." Matteo shakes his head. "You don't believe that shit any more than I do."

No, I don't, but I don't want to go back to poking and probing either, so I think I'll keep this to myself.

GRACE

“Gosh, how many times have you looked at that thing?”

I look up from my phone to find my two friends watching me expectantly. My cheeks flush as I turn my phone face down on the coffee table and clasp my hands together. “Sorry. I’m out of it.”

A frown appears between Rei’s brows. “What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“No,” I shake my head, then think better of it. “Well, in a way.”

Just thinking about Trent in those moments after I woke up has an icy shiver running down my spine. It was like he wasn’t there at all. His eyes were wide open but unblinking. I’ve never seen anything like it, and it scared the crap out of me.

Jade’s eyes narrow. “Did something happen with Trent?”

“It’s not what you mean.” I run my hand through my hair. “It’s just... I’m worried about him. His roommate came this morning...”

“And saw you two in bed?” Jade waves a hand dismissively. “Trust me. It’s not a big deal. It happens more than you’d think.”

“Yes, but that’s not the issue either. The door banged against the wall, which woke us up, and Trent just jumped upright and froze. He said it was a migraine, but he looked really off.”

Jade crosses her legs, a container of Chinese in one hand, chopsticks in the other. “Off how?”

“I don’t know. Like a nightmare, but not exactly.”

It was hard to explain it even to myself, and I was there to witness it. Yeah, sure, the door was loud, but to just freeze like that? It makes no sense.

“Have you talked to him since?” Rei asks from her spot on the couch.

“I had to leave for class, but I texted later. He hasn’t gotten back to me.”

“Maybe he’s sleeping,” Jade shrugs. “If it were a migraine, he’d probably try to sleep it off.”

Could it really be that simple, and I’m just making it more than it is?

I push my food from one side of the container to the other. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Okay, so.” Jade clasps her hands excitedly. “Are you still down for Thursday?”

Rei frowns in confusion. “What’s Thursday?”

Jade’s mouth falls open, a look of complete bewilderment on her face.

I try to remember what she’s talking about, and then it hits me. “*The* girl’s night.”

“Thank you,” Jade huffs. “I seriously can’t believe you don’t remember, Rei! Do you know how hard it was to find *one* day that everybody could attend? Chloe and I had to make a chart. A freaking chart! I mean, seriously, why is it so hard to organize a girl’s night? Guys do it all the damn time. It’s just not fair.”

“Because they decide they want to go out and just get up and do it?” I suggest. “No charts necessary.”

Jade glares at me. “You’re not funny.”

“I thought it was funny,” Rei adds helpfully, which earns her a glare too. “Sorry, with Nationals just around the corner, I’ve gone into full-on prep mode.”

“What does that even mean?”

“The magical four: gym, food, skating, and sleeping.” She ticks each word off on her fingers.

Jade purses her lips. “Doesn’t seem like you have a hard time finding time for Zane.”

“He’s usually there for all four.”

“Yeah, I don’t remember you actually sleeping.”

“Well, sometimes a girl just needs to work out tension and soreness before she can fall asleep.”

Jade laughs, “I bet that’s the case.”

Giving up the pretense of eating, I put the container on the coffee table. “So what are we doing for girl’s night?”

Jade tells us the plans for Thursday night and who all is going with us. The more she talks, the more excited I get about the prospect. Between all the obligations, it’s been a long time since we all hung out together, and I miss it.

After all the plans are made, we settle down to watch *Game of Thrones*. When Jade realized Rei hadn’t watched it, she decided we were going to have to show her what she’s been missing this whole time.

Two episodes later, we decide to call it a night. I get back to my room and plop down on my bed with a sigh and unlock my phone. My heart skips a beat when I find Trent’s message waiting for me.

Trent: Hey, sorry. I slept for most of the day, and then I had to go to practice.

Practice? He can’t be serious.

I worry at my lower lip as I type back.

Grace: No worries.

Grace: Practice? Do you feel well enough to play?

Trent: It’s just a little headache. I’m used to it.

Oh-kay. I guess he can be serious.

God, the stubbornness of men. Why do they always have to think they’re invincible?

And what does he mean, he’s used to it? This was the first time I’ve heard anything about him suffering from headaches,

and I will be glad not to witness it anytime soon. Ever even.

The image of Matteo going out to get a wet towel pops into my mind. I might have frozen, but he knew exactly what to do.

How often does he really have them? And what's the cause of it? So many questions swirl through my mind, but I don't have one answer.

I've seen him rub his head occasionally in the past, but I never thought too much about it.

Trent: Besides, I'm better now.

Trent: What are you up to?

Grace: Hanging with roomies.

Grace: And what do you mean you're used to it?

Grace: Do you get them often?

Trent: Sometimes.

Trent: Don't worry about it, seriously.

Trent: I'll be better soon.

Grace: I figured you are better since you went to practice.

Trent: I am.

Trent: We have a game in two days, and I'm starting. Couldn't miss the practice.

Stubborn, stubborn man.

I start to type back, but he's faster.

Trent: I guess I should try to get some rest. I have class in the morning, and I can't risk missing it.

I sigh. I guess he's right.

Grace: Okay. Get some rest.

Trent: Talk soon?

Grace: Sure. Sleep well. :*

Trent: Sweet dreams, Legs. :* :*

I roll to my back and stare at the ceiling, going over our conversation. There's a weight on my chest that wasn't there yesterday.

Is he telling me the truth? Do I just worry too much? Or is there something he isn't saying?

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

GRACE

“You have to remember your conjugations,” I say, turning the notebook Trent’s way. I point to the part I’m referring to.

Trent leans forward, his mouth moving as he reads his answers, a little furrow forming between his brows. “But it’s you.”

“Yeah, but it’s different for you, singular and plural. Tu aimes is singular, but *vous aimez* refers to plural¹. Also, be careful when you choose a grammatical genre. They usually always put a few words that are confusing, like un trampoline or une oasis.²”

“French sounds so much better when you speak it.”

I chuckle lightly, ducking my head down. “I don’t know about that.”

“I know,” Trent grins, pushing a strand of hair behind my ear. “Say something else.”

I pull my lower lip between my teeth and look around warily. “We shouldn’t be talking at all. We’re in the library.”

The desk creaks as he leans his elbows on it and moves closer—his nose brushes against my ear. “Nobody’s here but us,” he whispers, his warm breath tickling my skin.

“Tu es incorrigible. Tu vas nous attirer des ennuis, Monsieur Remington.”³

Trent pulls back slightly, just enough so his dark eyes meet mine. “See? Sexy as hell, I could listen to you all day long. Maybe if you were my teacher, I’d be better at this.”

“I don’t know about that. You’re already doing pretty good for somebody who’s been learning French for a few months.”

“That’s only because I have an excellent tutor. What did you say anyway?”

I shake my head and lean back in my chair. “You’ll have to find that out on your own.”

“You’re not playing fair, Shelton.”

“Tout est juste dans l’amour et dans la guerre.”⁴

Trent’s eyes narrow. “What does that mean?”

“À toi de découvrir.”⁵

“You’re no fun, Legs.”

“I’m having fun just fine. Besides, didn’t you want me to talk to you in French?”

“I figured you’re going to whisper sweet nothings in my ear. Tell me what you mean.”

“I’m not teaching you dirty words.”

A wicked grin spreads over his face, golden dots twinkling in his brown irises in mischief. “See? That would be fun. I’m sure I wouldn’t have a problem figuring out the grammatical genre of the word fuck.” He shakes his head. “Why don’t they teach us practical stuff like that?”

“And fuck is a practical word?”

“If I ever go to France, sure.”

“I don’t even know what to say to that.” I grab my phone and check the time. “Dammit.”

“What?” Trent’s brows furrow. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I give him an apologetic smile. “But I’ve gotta go.”

I close my books, putting them in a stack before shoving them all into my backpack.

“Where’s the rush?”

“It’s girl’s night.”

A frown appears between his brows. “Didn’t you guys just have one of those?”

“It was just Jade, Rei, and me. This time a few other friends of ours are joining us too.”

Zipping my backpack, I jump to my feet and put on my jacket.

“So you’re ditching me for chicks?”

“Chicks before dicks. Sorry, pal.”

Grabbing my backpack, I stop by his side and lean down to press my mouth against the corner of his. Before I can straighten, Trent’s hand sneaks to my nape, and he pulls me down, deepening the kiss. His mouth brushes against mine, his tongue teasing me mercilessly.

When he finally lets me go, I’m slightly dizzy and breathless.

He wiggles his brows. “I bet your friends can’t kiss you like that.”

Nope, they sure can’t.

“Think about that when you’re out having fun tonight.”

I nod my head wordlessly and start to back away. My lips still tingle from his kiss. I turn around and almost bump into the edge of the shelf.

Trent chuckles after me.

The nerve of that man.

TRENT

The phone burns a hole in my pocket. My fingers itch from the need to wrap around it and check if I have a message waiting for me. Or just to check Grace's social media to see what she's up to. She sent me a message before she left with her friends for their girl's night.

A photo, actually.

She was with her two roommates, standing in front of a mirror. Not that I actually gave her friends more than a passing glance, because holy shit, Grace looked hot. I mean, I know she's hot, obviously. But Grace is a comfy kind of girl, a complete contrast to Ashley, who was always put together. It might be an asshole thing to compare the two since they couldn't be more different, but it's true.

Tonight, though, there's nothing comfy about what she's wearing. Her shirt might have long sleeves, but it shows off a part of her flat stomach. A little black skirt reaches mid-thigh and high-heeled boots make her legs seem to go on for miles.

I'm pretty sure I drooled a bit. That is until I saw her message.

Legs: Going out. Might be MIA since we were "strictly prohibited" from using our phones during the girl's night. Guys not allowed even in the virtual way, according to Jade. xoxo

I almost swallowed my tongue.

Going out? Dressed like that? I figured they'd hang out in the dorm or something, not go out clubbing.

"Remington, you plan on playing today or what?"

I blink at the sound of my name. The screen comes into focus, as do the noises surrounding me. My player is the only one standing uselessly at the fictional court as my teammates run around him. Quinn is doing his best to make up for my lack of attention, but there's little he can do on his own.

“Shit. Sorry.”

“Fucking right,” Nate laughs from the other side of the couch, a big grin on his face as he steals the ball from Quinn and runs for the basket. “Thank God this isn’t a real game, or we’d be screwed. Well, Quinn is screwed either way.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Gripping the controller firmer in my hands, I move my player, quickly running after Matteo. I just catch up to him under the basket. We both jump at the same time, and by some miracle, I manage to break the ball from him before he scores. Quinn catches it and dribbles it toward the other side of the court, popping up in the air and scoring.

“Who’s screwed now, Natey-boy?”

He punches me in the gut. “Fuck you.”

“That’s what I thought.”

More insults fly around the room as we continue to play. I give my best to keep my attention on the screen until we finish with Quinn and me as the winners.

“That’s the way to play, Remington.” Quinn gets up, and we bump fists as he walks around the couch. Passing by Nate, he slaps him on the shoulder. “You’re buying us beers next time, pal.”

“I demand a rematch.” Nate crosses his arms over his chest and huffs, which makes the rest of us laugh.

“You’re such a sore loser, Nate. But fine, have at it. Double or nothing.”

Matteo and Nate exchange a look. “Fine, double or nothing.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Quinn grins and rubs his hands together. “I’m going to take a piss, and we can wipe the court with your asses all over again.”

“We’ll see about that!” Nate yells after him, which only makes Quinn laugh harder.

Chuckling, I finally give in and pull out my phone. There is no new message from Grace. Not that I expected there to be one. She said she's *prohibited* from using her phone. What the hell's with that?

"Why are you frowning like that?" Matteo asks as he sits next to me and hands me a beer bottle.

"Not frowning," I mutter as I open my Instagram and start scrolling through the stories.

I'm not one for social media, hell I don't remember when was the last time I posted anything, but a few years back, Ashley bugged me into opening an account. Might as well give it a look, right? I'm just going to see what my friends are up to. It's not like I'm checking in on her or anything.

"There's a crease between your brows that makes your mug even uglier than usual. I think that constitutes as frowning."

"I'm just looking at something. That's all."

Matteo sprawls over the couch, propping his foot on his other knee. "Yeah, tell that to somebody who hasn't known your ass as long as I have. Grace angry at you? Is that it?"

I frown, "Why would she be angry at me?"

"Because of the whole debacle from the other day? Dude, you scared *me*, and I'm used to your weird-ass."

"What happened the other day?" Nate asks, looking at us, well, *me*, curiously.

"Nothing," I say quickly, giving my best friend a pointed glare. The last thing I need is for my teammates to find out about my migraines. "And no, she's not angry with me. We were together earlier. She went out with her friends. That's all."

"Aww, so you feel left out? Is that it?"

"Who's left out?" Quinn asks as he gets back into the room and plops down on the couch.

“Nobody.” I run my hand through my hair, done with this conversation. “Can we just play already?”

“Are you still okay with me driving home for winter break?” Matteo asks as he types something on his phone as we walk back to our dorm.

Quinn and I ended up beating him and Nate two more times. That guy seriously is a sore loser. At least I won’t have to worry about paying for drinks next time we go out.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll probably take my parents’ car when I’m in the city. No sense in driving two cars back and forth.”

Matteo raises his brows. “You have any plans to go somewhere?”

There’s that familiar tug at the corner of my mouth. “I’m hoping to get Grace to go out with me.”

I figured it would be nice to do something just for the two of us in a place that’s not tainted with memories and people who know our situation. Somewhere we can just be us. Grace and Trent—lost in the sea of people who don’t give a damn about who we are.

“Oh, did you now?”

“Shut up.”

Matteo lifts his hands in surrender. “Hey, I didn’t say anything.”

“As if there is a way I could stop you. The thing is, I really hope being away from Blairwood eases some of the tension between us.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know Grace finds it hard to deal with seeing Ashley around campus. She feels guilty because she thinks she’s the reason we broke up.”

“That’s bullshit. You guys should have broken up months ago.”

“I know that now, and I tried explaining it to her, but she has a hard time accepting it for what it is. And I just want us to have fun.”

We fall into silence for a moment. Matteo turns to me. “Don’t you find it weird?”

“What?”

“The fact that you both come from the same place but never saw each other until now.”

I laugh at that. “There are nine million people living in New York. It would be strange if we knew each other.”

What would it have been like? If I met Grace before Blairwood? Would I have still ended up with Ashley? Would we still share this connection we have now? Would we have gone to the same college and fallen apart like Ashley and I did? Would she have looked at me differently if she knew what had happened?

I pull my brows together, that familiar throbbing growing by the second as my mind swirls with ideas.

There are so many possibilities. And if only one thing played out differently, we wouldn’t have ended where we are now.

It doesn’t matter. The past is in the past, and you have now, which is way better than any what ifs.

“Still, don’t you think it would have been cool to know her before?”

My stomach tightens as an image of a young, smiling girl flashes in my mind. There are no worry lines on her face, no sad, haunted eyes. She looks so similar to the version of Grace I know. You’d think I did know her.

“Yeah, maybe,” I agree absentmindedly, rubbing at my forehead.

Matteo observes me for a moment. “What is it? Are you having a migraine again?”

I force my hand to drop by my side. “Nah.”

“Don’t lie to me. I know you too well for that shit.”

“Not this again,” I groan. “I’m fine, really.”

Matteo shakes his head. “You weren’t fine the other day. You can’t keep hiding this shit from people in your life. Grace included.”

“You just surprised me. That’s all.”

I tried to figure out what could have caused my reaction from the other day but came up empty-handed. This wasn’t the first time there was a sudden noise around me. It didn’t make any sense.

“This wasn’t the first time I surprised you, and you know it,” Matteo says as if he can read my mind. “Did you talk to your doctor?”

I open my mouth, but before I can say anything, Matteo gives me a warning glare. The one that says he’s over it and not to test him.

“Not yet,” I admit. “I’m going for a check-up over the winter break, anyway. What’s a few more days in the big scheme of things?”

“Was there more?”

I look away guiltily.

“Of course, there was!” And if I didn’t feel like an asshole so far, I do now. “Why haven’t you said anything?”

I haven’t told anybody about all the headaches I’ve had since the fall, nor all these weird images that occasionally pop into my mind. I’m not sure if they’re real or just a play of light or a fragment of my imagination. They just come and go, and there is no sense in worrying people about something that is most likely just in my head, anyway.

“It’s not like that. Everybody has a headache every now and then.”

“You’re not everybody, Trent. You suffered a head injury, and they had to keep you in a medically induced coma to give your brain time to heal...”

“Hey!” We both turn around at the sound of a soft voice only to see Grace standing in front of our dorm; a phone pressed to her ear.

She lets her hand drop to her side. “I’ve been trying to call you.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket, and sure enough, there’s a missed call from her on my screen.

“Sorry, I didn’t even notice.”

“I can see that,” Grace giggles. She shifts her attention from me to Matteo and back. Her brows pull together as if she can sense the tension between us. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” I say quickly before Matteo can open his mouth. The last thing I need is for him to blab something to Grace. “We were just talking about the game.”

I’m going to tell her. I will. Just not yet.

“Game?”

“We were at Quinn’s place, playing ball.”

A cute frown appears between Grace’s brows. “In this cold?”

“A video game,” I explain.

“Oh, I guess that makes more sense.”

I go to Grace and wrap my arms around her. She’s wearing a thin coat over her clothes, which can’t possibly be warm enough for her. “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be out with the girls? How did you get here, anyway?”

“I was, but then their boyfriends came, and we cut our night short.”

My brows go up. “What happened to no boys?”

Grace shrugs. “Don’t ask me. I followed the rules.”

Of course, she would. If there were photos in the dictionary, Grace's would have been right next to the definition of a rule follower.

"Please tell me you didn't walk here all by yourself."

"No, my friend and her boyfriend dropped me off. I figured if you weren't in the dorm, I'd just walk back to my place."

I kiss her forehead. "You shouldn't be walking around all by yourself at night."

The smartass rolls her eyes. "Yeah, yeah."

"I mean it," I whisper, leaning down and placing my mouth on hers.

Grace sighs softly as our lips connect, and my tongue dips into her mouth. The kiss is tender. There's a mix of tart and saltiness lingering in her mouth. I slide my tongue over her lower lip, swiping over the little grains sticking to her skin.

"Tequila?" I ask, breaking the kiss.

"Yeah," she laughs, pushing a strand of her hair behind her ear. "It's our go-to drink these days."

"It tastes good on you."

I'm about to lean down for another taste when Matteo interrupts me.

"I'm going to leave you guys to it."

I turn around to my best friend to find him typing something on his phone.

"Oh, you don't have to..." Grace starts to protest, but Matteo lifts his hand to stop her from finishing.

"It's okay. I had plans beforehand, anyway."

Grace leans her head against my chest. "Why does it feel like we're always kicking you out of your room?"

"You're not kicking me anywhere. My date is waiting for me." Matteo tips his chin at me. "You kids be careful with what you're doing, and I'll see you in the morning."

My best friend's gaze lingers on mine for a moment longer. We might have been interrupted beforehand, but I know I haven't heard the last of it.

Can I blame him? Not really. I can understand the worry. But he needs to understand where I'm coming from too. I don't want Grace to constantly worry and hover over me like Matteo, and my parents do. I don't want her or my teammates to look at me differently—treat me like I'm weak.

With a wave, he turns on the balls of his feet and walks away in the opposite direction.

“Later!” I call after him, throwing my arm over Grace's shoulder and pulling her toward my dorm.

“Maybe we should have gone to my place? I really feel bad about always kicking him out.”

“Don't worry about it. He's probably going to that girl he's been hooking up with.”

“Who's this mystery girl?”

“No idea.”

Grace's wide eyes fix on me. “You haven't met her?”

“Not really,” I shrug, pushing open the door to the dorm. “Matteo likes to keep his business private.”

“But you're his best friend.”

“He'll tell me when he's ready.” I lead her up the stairs. “Any plans for winter break?”

Grace looks up at me. “That's a sudden change of subject.”

“I'm done talking about Matteo.” I bring our joined hands to my mouth and press a kiss against her knuckles. “So... Winter break? Plans?”

“Just hanging out with my family. Nothing special.”

I nod my head. “How about we do something special?”

“Like what?”

“Like a date.”

Grace turns around, her brows raised. “A date?”

“You know, two people dressing up nicely. I pick you up at your house, and then we go and do something fun.”

Grace smacks me on the shoulder. “I know what a date is.”

“Good, because if my memory serves me right, I already took you to one of those before. It would have been really weird if you didn’t remember it.”

Color drains from Grace’s face, her eyes going vacant for a moment.

“Grace?” I ask tentatively, wondering if I said something wrong.

She blinks and lets out a shaky breath. “I remember everything about you.”

“That’s good to know.” I cup her cheeks and brush my mouth against hers. Her whole body shudders at the light touch, and I revel in what just a single kiss can do to her.

“Anything special you have in mind?”

I grin widely as my hand sneaks behind her back. I unlock the door and push her inside. “That’s for me to know and for you to find out.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

GRACE

Trent: So...

Me: So?

Trent: When will I be able to give you your Christmas present?

Me: How about you tell me what my present is, and then I'll tell you?

Trent: Nice try.

Trent: But no.

Me: You're no fun.

Trent: You didn't say that the last time.

My cheeks heat at the innuendo.

Trent: So...

Trent: Will you, Grace Shelton, let me take you out on a date?

Me: I guess since our last date was a 9/10, I might take a risk.

Trent: Hell yeah.

Trent: Wait, NINE? Why was it nine?

Me: I just like to leave that extra point for something off the charts amazing.

Trent: Now you've activated my competitive side, I hope you're aware of that.

Me: Did I?

Trent: Sure did. I'm going to get that ten no matter what. On that note...

Trent: On a scale of one to ten, how much should I worry about meeting your brother?

A light chuckle escapes me as I read the message.

Me: Jack is one big teddy bear.

Trent: So, like eleven?

This time, I burst into laughter. I can't help myself.

“What has you all smiley like that?”

My head snaps up at the sound of my brother's voice coming right over my shoulder. I lock my phone and quickly turn around to face J.D.

“Hey, I didn't see you there.”

My heart is pounding hard against my ribcage. For somebody as big as Jack, he sure as hell doesn't have a problem sneaking behind your back.

“I can see that.”

“So? Who put that smile on my little sister's face?”

My cheeks heat from his watchful stare.

I push a strand of my hair behind my ear. “I'm not that little any longer.”

Jack waves a hand dismissively. He walks around the couch and plops next to me. “You're always going to be my little sister, Gracie.” He nudges me playfully with his elbow. “Stalling doesn't look good on you. So spill.”

“I'm not stalling,” I protest, which only earns me a raised brow.

Not really. Okay, maybe a *little*. But can you blame the girl after her shitty luck in men? The last guy I introduced to my brother vanished into thin air and left me heartbroken. And the next guy I plan to bring home just accidentally has the same, although slightly more mature, face as the last one.

Fucked up? Probably.

But being with Trent... It makes me feel alive, whole, in a way nothing, and nobody else does.

I tilt my head back, leaning it against the headrest, and let out a sigh. “It's Trent.”

There. That wasn't so hard now, was it?

J.D. is quiet for a moment. So quiet that I start to get jittery. My leg bounces as the nerves get the better of me.

“Trent as in *that* Trent?” J.D.’s voice is even, not a sign of what he might be thinking showing on his face.

“Is there another one?”

Jack shakes his head. “I don’t think I’m that lucky.”

So much for that going well.

He leans in his seat, turning his full attention to me. “So are you guys, like, together now?”

Are we together? We’ve never put a label on it. We are dating, but that’s not the same. Defining things never seemed important. I was just happy to have him.

I slide my tongue over my lips, contemplating my answer. “I...”

J.D.’s eyes narrow as I struggle to find the words. His hard gaze clearly tells me that yeah, we better be together, or somebody will get his ass kicked. J.D.’s nothing if not protective of the people he loves. And for some reason that I couldn’t understand now any better than when I was twelve, he thought I was a person worthy of that love.

J.D. shifts in his seat. “Do you really think this is for the best?”

“That’s the thing, J.D.,” I shake my head. “I don’t know. I don’t know what’s for the best. I really wanted to move on. I had every intention of doing so a few months ago, but the moment I made that decision. He was back. And for a while, I thought he was Mason. Not just the way he looked, but also some little things. And then there are moments where he’s not Mason at all, but Trent. And it’s not just him. He has friends. He has a life.”

“Which one is the one you love?”

I turn to him, the green of his eyes that match mine perfectly staring at me. “Both. I love them both.”

Mason might have been my first real love, but somewhere along the way, I fell in love with Trent, too.

“You’ll always be the first man I loved. You know that? If it weren’t for you...” I shake my head, letting the rest of the sentence hang in the air between us. I loved J.D. even before we met. One day our mother was drunk, and she told me about him. About the family she had before she packed up her things and left because she thought she wasn’t ready to be a mother. She never remembered it afterward, but I did.

I couldn’t get it out of my head, get *him* out of my head. There was this whole other person out there that was my family. A brother.

I found out everything I could about him, watched his games, followed him on social media when I could. Jack Daniel Shelton was somebody. He made something out of himself. And knowing there is somebody out there in the world who shares the same blood as me, even if only half, made all the difference. I never thought I’d meet him, but then one day he just appeared in our house, and he saved me. In more ways than one.

J.D. cups my face, his thumb swiping over my cheekbone. “You’d have been fine all on your own.”

I chuckle, sniffing softly. “I don’t know about that.”

“I do.” His hand falls down, and he takes my clasped hand between his. “You never needed a savior, Grace. You were always more than capable of fighting your battles all on your own.”

I sniffle, the corner of my mouth lifting. “Just because you taught me how to throw a punch.”

“The most crucial of the life skills,” he grins, but soon his face turns serious again. “Promise me you’ll be safe. What happened...”

“I’ll try.”

He nods, and I press my lips against his cheek. “Thank you for worrying about me. You’re the best big brother a girl could ever wish for.”

“What did I miss?” Sienna strolls in and looks between the two of us. “Hey, where are my kisses?”

She sits on my other side, curling her bare feet under her, and takes a sip from her wine glass.

“We were just having a discussion about that Trent boy.”

Si meets my gaze and rolls her eyes.

Of course, my brother doesn't miss it. “What?”

“I love you, Jack, but sometimes you can be such a man.”

His eyes narrow into tiny slits. “What does that mean? You can't possibly be on her side.”

“Of course, I'm on her side! I want Grace to be happy, and if,” she deepens her voice to sound more like his, “*that Trent boy* is what makes her happy, then I'm all for it.”

J.D. harrumphs, crossing his arms over his chest. “Didn't he have a girlfriend?”

I know his intention isn't to hurt me, but his words gut me. If my own brother thinks I could get in between two people that are in a relationship, what must other people, just mere onlookers, think of me?

“He broke up with her. I would never...”

“I know.” J.D. presses one of his palms against my clasped hands, the other sneaks under my chin. He tilts my head up, his eyes filled with remorse meeting mine. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that.”

“I know, it's just... I don't want to be *that* girl. That was part of the reason why I tried so hard to resist it. But the pull...”

It was hard to put into words the way Trent made me feel.

J.D. sighs and gives my hands a hard squeeze. “As long as you know what you're getting into.”

Do I? I'm not so sure, but at this point, there is no going back.

“Does that mean you’re going to be nice when he comes to pick me up for a date tomorrow?”

That piques his attention. “Tomorrow?”

“Yes, tomorrow,” I give him a pleading look. “Please be nice.”

“I’m always nice.”

Sienna chuckles. “Like a tiger ready to pounce.”

“Hey, as long as he treats you nice, we won’t have any problems.”

“That’s not really reassuring, J.D.”

“I’m not meant to be reassuring. I’m meant to kick ass of everybody who messes with my little sister.”

I don’t even bother to correct him. I never doubted it, not even for a second, that J.D. would have my back.

I stayed with them for another hour, just chatting about everything I had missed since the last time I was home. It was the first time we could catch up since things were pretty busy just after I got home from college after the finals with the last preparations for Christmas. I love the boys, but they’re definitely a handful.

Sienna stifles another yawn.

“C’mon, baby doll, let’s get you to bed.”

J.D. gets up and gently pulls Sienna to her feet.

“We can stay a little while longer,” she protests, but her body is leaning against my brother’s. “We barely get to see our girl.”

My heart warms at her words.

Our girl.

To Sienna and J.D., I’ve always been theirs. No questions, no doubts. They loved me in all the ways that mattered and embraced me as a part of their family.

J.D.’s mouth brushes against the side of Sienna’s head as he rubs his hands down her arms. “She’ll be here for a little

while still. No need to get your panties in a twist.”

“Yes, besides, we have those tickets to go and watch the ballet.” After Trent took me to watch the ballet in Boston, I knew it’d be the perfect Christmas present for Sienna. “Just the two of us.”

A smile spreads on Sienna’s face. “Just like the good old times.”

“Just like the good old times,” I agree.

Si points her finger at me in warning. “But we’re getting our nails done too.”

“It’s a date,” I chuckle. “Night, you two.”

They say their goodnights and leave the room. I listen as their slow footsteps climb to the second floor. J.D. murmurs something to Si, his words too quiet for me to decipher. The door to their room squeaks as it opens and closes before the silence falls over me.

Sighing, I pull my legs on the couch and grab my phone from my lap where it fell earlier. The TV is buzzing softly in the background, but I ignore it as I read the messages.

Trent: He is, isn’t he?

Trent: I knew it.

Trent: Grace?

Trent: Where did you disappear to?

Trent: ???

Trent: Should I be worried?

Trent: Don’t tell me that your brother saw the messages and decided to lock you in your room.

Trent: If you don’t get back to me soon, I might call the cops to come and check on you.

I laugh softly, my eyes falling down to the timestamp on the last message. It came less than ten minutes ago, which means he’s still awake.

Me: You do realize you’re dramatic, right?

Trent: Maybe just a little.

Me: More like a LOT.

Trent: Where did you disappear to?

Me: I was talking to J.D. and Sienna.

Trent: See? I wasn't being dramatic; I was being right.

Me: And dramatic too.

Trent: So what did you talk about?

Me: Just catching up.

I nibble at my lower lip, thinking my next words through.

Me: I might have mentioned our date.

Trent: Did you?

Trent: Should I consider wearing body armor?

An image of Trent wearing one of those sixteenth-century battle armors pops into my mind, making me chuckle.

Me: Do you seriously think my brother is that scary?

Trent: Tell that to somebody who hasn't seen his picture.

Me: Where did you see his picture?

Trent: I might have stalked him on your profile.

Trent: Body armor doesn't sound like such a bad idea.

Me: He's *not* that scary.

Trent: We'll see about that tomorrow.

Me: Fine. Where are we going, anyway?

Trent: hahahaha... nice try.

God, this man is infuriating.

Me: I need to know how to dress.

Trent: Dress warm.

Me: Warm? That's all you've got for me?

Trent: That's all you'll get. I'll see you tomorrow, Legs.

Me: If I don't change my mind. *poking tongue out emoji*

Ha! I lock my phone, my fingers wrapping around the sleek device. *Take that.*

Blood rushes through my veins, and I can feel it echo in my eardrums.

The phone buzzes in my hand.

Damn him, of course, he wouldn't let me have the last word.

I won't answer him. Easy, right?

I won't answer him.

I won't...

“Oh, screw it, just a peak.”

Trent: Change your mind, and I'll have to come and get you myself. I'm not against throwing you over my shoulder.

I bite the inside of my cheek, my finger itching with temptation. I don't want to cave in, but I also don't want him to have the last word. Petty? Maybe.

Me: Neanderthal.

Trent: Maybe, but you still like me.

A small smile appears on my face. “Love.”

It takes me a moment to register the word, but when I do, it's like I've been run over by a train. The feeling hits me out of nowhere, leaving me breathless.

I'm in love with Trent Remington.

The feeling is familiar yet foreign. I never imagined I'd fall in love with somebody, not after Mason.

The boy who had stolen my heart and shares the same face with the only other man who managed to do the same.

I run my hand over my face.

What the hell should I do about this?

I should tell him that's what I should do.

My phone buzzes again, a message flashing on my screen.

Trent: I'll see you tomorrow. Sweet dreams, Legs.

I'll have to tell him. Everything. Not just how I feel about him, but about Mason, too. Who he was. What he meant to me.

If I don't, how can I expect us to have any kind of future together?

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

TRENT

I button the top two buttons of my dress shirt, with my eyes fixed on my reflection in the mirror. My throat tightens, or maybe that's just the lump that's been growing bigger as the day passed, and my nerves started to get the better of me.

It's just her brother, for fuck's sake.

Her six-foot-five, two hundred thirty pounds of an ex-professional football player brother.

Seriously, what's the big deal?

It's just a date. Not like I'm going to ask for her hand in marriage or anything like it.

I tug at the collar hoping, by some miracle, it won't choke me to death, but it's useless.

"Fuck it," I slip my finger between the buttons, but the little fuckers won't budge. "Seriously, whose idea was it to make these things so tiny?"

"Trent?" Mom's head peeks through the crack in my door. "Who are you talking to?"

"Just cursing whoever invented this death trap," I mutter, still struggling to unhook the buttons.

Mom shakes her head and pushes the door to enter. "Let me."

She swipes my hands away and slips the buttons from their confines. "Better?"

"Yeah, thanks."

She smooths her hand over my chest, corrects my collar before taking a step back and giving me a once-over. "You look awfully nice. Any special plans?"

Mom's trying to go for casual, but I can see the curiosity in her gaze.

“You make it sound like I’m wearing a suit or something,” I laugh nervously. I don’t even know why I’m making such a big deal out of this.

“Considering you’re in sweats most of the time, this is an upgrade.”

She has me there, but I want to make a good impression on Grace’s family since I know how important they are to her. A good impression on her. So sue me.

“So, where are you going so dressed up?”

My hands are clammy with nerves, so I wipe them on the side of my jean-clad legs. It’s one of the nicer pairs Mom bought me, but I rarely wear them. I paired it with a white button-down and emerald sweater over it; another gift from Mom I almost never wear but reminded me of Grace’s eyes. I look like some preppy frat guy.

Maybe this is a mistake.

“A date.”

Mom’s brows rise. “A date?”

“Yeah.”

I give myself one final look in the mirror before turning to face Mom. Her head is tilted to the side as she observes me quietly.

“What?”

“I didn’t realize you and Ashley got back together.”

I cringe and rub the back of my neck. “We didn’t. It’s somebody else.”

“Oh.”

Well, that’s one way of putting it.

“I didn’t realize you were dating someone new already.”

Yeah, right. If she knew Ash and I broke up, which she probably found out from Ashley’s mom at one of their weekly brunches, I’m pretty sure she knows why we broke up.

“Her name is Grace.” I shove my hands into my pockets. “We met at Blairwood.”

Mom nods, but I can see that she’s not happy about it. Mom loves Ashley, has since she’s been a little girl. For as long as I can remember, she’s been throwing us at one another. But Matteo was right all along. I couldn’t keep dating her because it was easy or expected.

“And you’re going on a date?”

“Yeah, she’s from the city, too.” Another nod. Her lips are pressed into a tight line. “You’d really like her.”

“I’m sure she’s a nice girl,” she says diplomatically. “But...”

I grab my phone and wallet and put them in my pockets. “But?” I ask although a part of me knows it’s a bad idea.

“Don’t you think it’s too soon?” She places her hand on my forearm. “Honey, you and Ashley have been together for so long...”

“And we should have broken up ages ago, too,” I interrupt. “I love Ashley. A part of me will always love her, but I’m not in love with her—haven’t been in a while.”

“And you love this Grace girl?”

“I’m getting to know her, and I love the person I am with her. Now,” I gently pull my arm out of her grasp. “I really need to go. I don’t want to be late.”

The big house comes into view as I put the Cadillac in park and shut down the engine. Since we took Matteo’s car to drive down to the city, I had to borrow my parents’ car.

Not bothering with my jacket, I get out and walk to the front porch. The Sheltons live in Bronxville, a good hour away from my parent’s place on the Upper East Side, but when Grace suggested she meet me in the city, I shut the idea down instantly.

The house is big, Christmas lights twinkling over the roof and balconies. A small snowman is built in the front yard, a bright yellow scarf shining like a beacon in the dark night. There's a Santa hanging off one window and reindeer just chilling on the front porch.

Taking one deep breath, I press the doorbell and wait—the sound echoes inside the house, along with the sound of rushing feet.

“Nicholas Shelton! Get your brother's underwear off your head, and put it back on his butt before your mother sees you.”

Choked laughter comes out of my lungs as the image pops into my mind. And I'm not the only one. Somebody, probably said Nicholas, is laughing like a maniac behind the closed door.

Before I get a chance to prepare, the footsteps draw closer. The key turns in the lock with a soft *click*, the door pulling open. “You won't be laughing when she puts her hands on you,” the warning is clear in the guy's tone as he turns to face me.

“Wha—”

The words die on his lips, mouth hanging open. A familiar pair of emerald eyes stare at me for a moment, his face completely unreadable.

Oh-kay.

“Hey,” I say lamely, but seriously, what am I supposed to do?

Grace's brother might have only a couple of inches on me, but somehow, he seems bigger. Although he's been retired for a few years now, he obviously still keeps up with his workout regimen because the guy doesn't seem to have an ounce of fat. His dark hair is peppered with some gray, there are a few wrinkles around his eyes and mouth, and they don't appear to be from smiling.

“Trent, I presume?” he asks, assessing me from head to toe. His eyes narrow, the skin around his mouth drawing tight as he finishes his perusal.

“Yes, sir. I’m here to pick up Grace.”

I offer him my hand. He just stares at it for what feels like forever before taking it into his and giving it a firm shake.

“Jack Shelton.”

“Trent Remington.”

“So I’ve heard,” he mutters. There’s something about his tone. I can’t quite wrap my mind around, but before I can overthink it, Jack’s gaze darts over my shoulder. “Planning to drive to the city?”

“Yes, sir.”

Jack hums noncommittally before those piercing eyes return to mine. “Any special plans for tonight?”

“Just a date.” When Jack lifts his brows and waits. I shift my weight from one foot to the other. “It’s a surprise.”

“I don’t like surprises.”

A shocker. Not really.

“Jack, did I hear the doorbell?” A woman shouts from somewhere in the house. The floorboards creak, and she appears on the steps. “Grace…” her voice trails off as she lifts her gaze and sees me. Her lips part slightly as she takes me in. “Oh. Hi there.”

She descends the rest of the stairs and comes to stand by her husband. “I’m Sienna, Grace’s sister-in-law.” She smiles kindly and extends her hand toward me.

“Trent. It’s nice to meet you.”

Sienna Shelton is a gorgeous woman. Tall and lean, with shoulder-length brown hair and captivating light brown, almost amber eyes. She and Grace might not be blood relations, but there are some similarities between the two. The way Grace smiles, the way her body moves, it’s all Sienna.

“Why are you standing here? Come on in,” She elbows her husband in the side. “I thought I heard the doorbell. Why didn’t you let him in?”

“He just got here,” Jack grumbles but steps away.

“Mhmm...” Sienna glares at her husband pointedly. She’s totally not buying it, and if I wasn’t so nervous, I might find it in me to laugh. “Feel free to ignore his grumpy ass. Would you like something to drink? Grace will be down in a few minutes.”

“No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

I follow Sienna down the hall until we get to the living room. I take in the space, hoping to get a glimpse into who Grace Shelton is and where she comes from.

The place is bright and modern. The TV is playing in the living room, and I can still hear the kids’ laughter coming from down the hall. A mix of art and family photos hang on the hallway wall. My eyes scan over them. Sienna, Jack, and Grace all dressed in Knights jerseys the year they won the Super Bowl. The three of them at Sienna and Jack’s wedding. Sienna and Grace dancing. Birthdays. Christmases. Births of kids. It’s all documented there. I watch Grace grow in front of my eyes, her smile as big and bright as her hair that makes her stand out. Then there’s a photo when the light in her eyes is no longer there.

I stop in front of it. It’s a photo of that friend from Blairwood. Not her roommates, but the other one. They’re probably in high school there, sitting on the front porch of the house, both of them smiling, but it’s that sad smile that I’m all too familiar with.

I continue walking, and every photo is the same after that. It’s like a switch was flipped, and the light disappeared from her gaze. I lift my hand and rub the side of my head, easing the pressure building behind my temples.

What happened to you, Grace?

“Trent?”

My head snaps up at the sound of my name, and that’s when I see her standing on the landing, her fingers wrapped around the handle. Seeing her takes my breath away.

“Hey,” I croak, my voice all raspy.

God, she looks beautiful.

She's wearing one of those little black dresses and those high-heeled boots that make her legs seem to go on for miles. Her wavy hair is bouncing off her shoulders as she slowly comes down. She put on a bit of makeup because her lashes seem longer and darker, making the emerald of her irises shine even brighter.

"Hi," she whispers softly, a small smile on her pink lips.

"You look..." I shake my head and take her hand in mine.

Grace smooths her free hand down her side. "Will this do?" She narrows her eyes. "Since somebody didn't want to tell me where we're going."

I chuckle. "I'm not telling you where we're going."

She jabs her finger playfully into my chest. "If I am cold, you'll have to keep me warm. You know that, right?"

A wave of heat rushes through me, my body reacting to her touch, her words, just plain her. I move in closer, dropping my voice, "Then maybe you should go and change to something shorter."

But apparently, not quiet enough because a throat clears behind us, reminding me we're not alone.

Damn.

Grace rolls her eyes and looks over my shoulder at her family. "I guess I'll see you guys later."

I turn around and find her brother and wife standing by the door and looking at us. Sienna is smiling, but Jack gives me a hard glare.

"You better bring her home by midnight."

"Jack!" Grace protests. "I'm not a..."

I pull her into my side and wrap my arm around her. "Midnight. Got it."

Grace huffs, clearly exasperated. "Anything else?"

A tingling sensation runs down my neck.

I look down at her to find her glaring at her brother. Something about this whole situation feels almost... familiar.

Nonsense.

I shake my head, trying to clear my mind.

Jack gives me a passing glance before fixing his attention on his sister. "You good?"

The question seems innocent enough, but it feels like there's a deeper meaning to it.

Grace sighs, her body relaxing. "I'm fine." She tilts her head back, looking at me. "Let's go?"

"Sure."

CHAPTER FORTY

GRACE

“Your brother is scary as fuck.” Trent gives me a side glance before returning his attention to the road in front of him. He’s casually leaning back in his seat, one hand on the steering wheel as he drives through the busy New York streets with the ease of somebody who’s lived here his whole life.

“He has a way about him, that’s for sure,” I chuckle, looking out the windshield at the crazy New York traffic. Why somebody would want to willingly drive in the city is out of my grasp. I mean, I got my license and all, but I’d rather take public transportation any day of the week. You’ll get to your destination faster, and you won’t risk possibly getting killed in the process.

“He loves you a lot.”

“That he does.” A small smile curls my lips. No matter how annoying J.D. can occasionally be, the feeling is mutual. “He’s really the best big brother a girl can ask for—when he’s not too overprotective.”

I turn to Trent as he pulls in front of a red light, our gazes meeting. There’s a small grin on his lips. The heated look in his gaze makes my stomach clench with anticipation. I sink my teeth into my lower lip. He follows my movement, his eyes falling down to my mouth. I let my lip pop, and he leans down, his mouth brushing against mine.

A shiver runs its way down my spine.

I love the way he kisses me. Slow and thorough, his mouth molding to mine, tongue teasing its way between my lips. The way his fingers grip the side of my face as if he wants to hold on and never let go.

“Hey.”

“Hey, back,” I whisper breathlessly.

A horn blasts loudly, snapping us out of it. We both turn forward, and sure enough, the light is green. Trent continues

driving, completely ignoring the pissed-off drivers behind him.

Gotta love New York.

I tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear. “So, will you finally tell me where you’re taking me?”

Trent grins as he takes a turn. He grabs my hand, twining our fingers, and puts them on his knee. “You’ll have to wait and see.”

I purse my lips. “You’re no fun.”

“Maybe.” I give him an annoyed stare, which only makes him laugh harder. I don’t get what’s up with all the secrecy. “So, what did you end up doing for Christmas?”

“We went to Atlanta for a few days. Jack’s dad’s from there, so we had our annual Shelton-Price Christmas. Between all the adults and kids, it’s always a fun time.”

“Price?” He turns to me, bewilderment clearly written on his face. “As in William Price?”

“The one and only.”

Trent shakes his head. “Damn, you’re just casually hanging out with New York legends, huh?”

“To me, they’re just J.D. and Will,” I always knew they were famous, but to me, they’re just my big brother and his sidekick. “Does it bother you?”

There were always usually two reactions when people found out who my brother was; either they wanted to be my friends in order to meet him, or they hated me because they thought I was entitled just because of who my brother was. That was the main reason why I usually kept my mouth shut when it came to my brother.

“Bother?” Trent gives me a quick glance. “Why would it bother me? Do I find it amusing that you’re so chill about it? Sure. But I couldn’t care less about who your brother or his friends are. He’s your *brother*. Who I, by the way, don’t think likes me all that much.”

“He’s just overprotective.”

“Doesn’t make him less scary.”

His face is so serious I can’t help but laugh. “He’s one big teddy bear, you’ll see. What about you? Anything exciting happen during the holidays?”

“We stayed home this year since Dad has some meetings he has to wrap up before the end of the year. He’s been pressing me to come and join him to start learning the ropes.”

“Is that the end goal?” I frown. “But isn’t he a lawyer or something?”

Trent rarely talks about his parents and only in passing. I guess it’s normal. We’ve only started to get to know each other, and I’d lie if I said I didn’t worry about meeting them. He dated Ashley for years. How was I supposed to compare to that?

Trent shrugs. “He wants it to be.”

“But you don’t,” I finish, knowing damn well he doesn’t. The only thing that could be connected to pre-law was his history class, but even then.

“No,” he answers absentmindedly as he enters the parking garage. “Like I said, I’m still trying to figure it all out. The last few years have been hard.”

Hard?

This is the first time he mentioned it. Granted, we don’t talk much about our pasts, especially our high school years. I know he’s been dating Ashley, and it’s not something I want to probe into, but more than that, I don’t want to talk about it because of me. Talking about high school would mean telling him about Mason, and I just can’t do that yet. I want to. God knows I should, but every time I tried, I’d end up chickening out.

You’ll have to tell him eventually, a little voice reminds me.

Soon, but not just yet.

Still, I can’t help myself but ask. “In what way?”

My heart speeds up a notch. I'm not even sure why. Trent is quiet for a long moment. So long, I think he might not answer at all, but he surprises me. "There were..." A frown between his brows deepens. He shakes his head as he slides into a parking spot. "I had some medical issues for a while."

Medical issues?

"I'm fine now," he rushes out and kills the engine before he turns to look at me. "Really, I'm fine."

I'm not sure who he's trying to reassure, himself or me. But I can't deny that hearing it piques my attention.

What had happened to you, Trent?

Before I can decide whether to probe him further or let the matter go, Trent continues.

"Ready to go?" The corner of his mouth lifts in a half-smile, but it's enough to make his dimple pop. "And no, I won't tell you where we're going. You'll see soon enough."

"Fine, let's go."

Trent gets out of the car and walks to my side. Just as I pull my jacket on, he opens my door, and I slide out, my body brushing against his.

Trent's hands go to my hips, and he pulls me closer, his lips brushing against mine. I lift on the tips of my toes and wrap my arms around his neck, my fingers sliding through his soft strands. Trent groans softly, his fingers gripping me tighter.

"C'mon," Trent rasps, breaking the kiss. His eyes are darker than usual as he stares at me. "Let's get out of here before I throw you back inside and have my way with you."

My tummy quivers in excitement. "Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad idea."

Trent shakes his head. "Don't tempt me, woman."

He takes a step back and pulls our interlocked hands. I laugh all the way out of the garage and into the chilly December evening.

There is nothing quite like New York City during the holiday season, illuminated in all its glory. The twinkling lights, the Christmas trees, the little businesses scattered on the street and in parks, people singing carols... It used to be my favorite time of the year. Until...

Trent pulls me to his side, wrapping his arm around my middle. He leans down, his mouth brushing against my temple. "This way."

"How much further?"

"Not much."

Trent checks the street before we hurry across.

"Seriously, next time, I'm going to..." The words die on my tongue as I realize where we're standing. My steps falter as the memories of three years ago come rushing back.

It can't be.

I suck in a breath, but it's like it's stuck in my throat. My eyes are glued to the place in front of me. I blink a few times, hoping the image will change, but nope. We're still here.

Bryant Park.

How?

My heart is racing, making the blood rush through my veins. Snapshot after snapshot of the past coming back at me all at once, making me dizzy. My ears are buzzing, dulling the outside noise and leaving me alone with my memories.

No, no, no.

How is this possible?

"Grace?"

Trent's voice is just a faraway echo in my mind. I must have stopped walking because Trent turns to face me. "Hey," he cups my face, his thumb sliding over my cheekbone. "Are you okay?"

I'm not okay.

“I-I...” I stutter, my eyes still glued to the park entrance. My lips form a little O, but I’m unable to finish the sentence.

What are we doing here? Here, of all the places.

Trent turns my head to face him and presses his forehead against mine, shifting my focus to him.

“What’s going on? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I close my eyes and push the memories that want to rise to the surface, back where they belong.

This is Trent, not Mason.

“I-I...” My tongue darts out, sliding over my dry lips. “I’m fine. I’m just surprised, that’s all.”

If Trent finds it weird, he doesn’t comment. “Have you ever been to Bryant Park?”

My throat bobs as I swallow. “Yeah,” I rasp. My voice feels tight from all the emotions whirling inside me. The panic. The sadness. The hurt. The longing. They’re all boiling inside my stomach, making the bile rise in my throat. “A few times, but it was a long time ago.”

A shiver runs through me. I wrap my arms around myself. I’m not sure if it’s the cold or this whole situation. I rub my forearms, trying to chase away the chills. My fingers slip under my sleeves, and I feel the worn leather of the bracelet I got in this very place.

“It’s usually less crowded this time of the year, so I figured it’s a better option than going to Central,” Trent says, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I breathe in a shaky breath, but it’s no use. His soft words echo in my head as I try to force my lungs to open up, only they remind painfully closed.

A group of girls rush by us and into the park. One of them bumps me on the shoulder, making me stumble.

Trent’s hands fall on my arm, steadying me.

“Although that’s not saying much,” Trent turns me around and looks at me. “Do you want to go somewhere else?”

I'm not sure what he sees on my face, but his eyes crinkle at the corners as he narrows them at me. It's the same look he had so many times in the beginning. As if he's trying to figure me out, but he isn't sure what to make of me.

"No," I shake my head and force out a smile. "No, this is fine."

It's fine.

I'm fine.

I just haven't stepped foot in this place in the last three years, that's all. Not that he knows that or the reason behind it.

I still don't get it, though. Out of all the places he could have taken me, why this one?

What does this all mean?

Trent's thumb swipes over my lower lip. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, silly. Let's go." This time, I'm the one tugging him toward the entrance.

The big metal gate is decorated with bright lights. Although not as touristy as Central Park, the place is still packed. People mingle around, chatting and laughing as they make their way through the Winter Village.

"What did you want to do?"

A smile slowly spreads over his lips. "How about first we warm you up a little bit?"

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

TRENT

Grace's fingers tighten around mine as another kid skates past us like the devil's at his feet. You'd think the fact that the rink is packed would deter them from chasing each other around the ice, but no such luck.

"Damn, I forgot how stressful this is."

"Skating not really your thing?"

"I like it just fine, but I prefer to have fewer people around. Or to have my feet firmly on the ground."

I chuckle, holding tighter onto her. "I've gotcha."

Grace tilts her head back, her eyes finding mine. "So... Basketball and ice skating?"

There's a prickle of awareness at the back of my mind, but I brush it away. "I manage," I shrug. "Don't expect any fancy moves, but I can keep my balance just fine. No need to worry —" I lift my hand, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear "— I won't let you fall."

Light and shadow play on her face as little Christmas lights twinkle away over our heads. There's a smile on her face, but I can still see the shadows hiding in her irises.

I'm not sure what happened earlier. It's like she just... froze for a moment. It makes no sense. It's just a park. What's the big deal? But after the longest minute of my life, Grace snapped out of it. I tried bringing it up again, but it's like she was determined to push it back.

Now that darkness is back in her eyes; it's making me feel uneasy. The pressure behind my temples intensifies. I've been trying to fight off this headache for the last couple of days, but it's just been slowly building.

I know it's only a matter of time before it turns into a full-on migraine, but not yet. I'm not going to let anything ruin our date.

“Do you usually come here often?”

“Occasionally. There was this one time when Matteo and I skipped school and came here.”

“Skipping school?” Grace turns to me but almost loses balance. I grip her hand tighter, and she turns forward. “I didn’t take you for a rule breaker.”

“Hey, it was just *one* time.”

I remember that day clearly. It was shortly after the accident. I was lost and confused. My parents were driving me crazy with their worry, which didn’t help with my constant headaches and lack of sleep from these creepy nightmares I’d been having.

Mom dropped me at school after we just had another fight. She wanted me to go see more doctors and do more tests, and I just wanted to get out of the hospital and be *normal* for a change. Matteo could see that I was in a shitty mood, so he volunteered we get out of there. We walked around the city for a while and somehow ended up in Bryant Park.

“Mhmm... Just one time.”

“It’s true. Matteo got into so much trouble,” I chuckle at the thought. “Coach was pissed that he skipped school, so he made him warm the bench for the next three games and clean the gym for the next two months. Matteo hated every second, but he never complained.”

If I felt unsure about Matteo before, I never did after that moment. He could have easily blamed me for the whole situation, but he never did. Instead, he suffered through the punishment, and we never ditched again.

“Did you get in trouble?”

I shake my head no but don’t explain further.

I know Matteo is right, and I should tell Grace about what happened to me. And I will. But today’s not that day.

Not now that we’re finally away from Blairwood and can actually walk around without peoples’ scowling looks

reflected at us, that's the charm of New York City. It's a place that's so easy to get lost in.

Soon, though. Soon.

“He was on the basketball team. Coach got angry and wanted to make an example out of him. You can be sure nobody tried to skip classes after that.” The lights flicker, signaling our time in the rink is up. I throw my hand over Grace's shoulder and steer her toward the nearest exit. “But after that, I'd occasionally come here. Sometimes with friends, sometimes on my own. There was always something about this place that drew me in.”

I couldn't explain it. Sometimes I'd walk around, and the next thing I knew, I was in front of the park. But even when I came here intentionally, it's like a part of me was always waiting for something.

Grace's body tenses under my arm. I look down at her to find her lost in her thoughts, a deep line crossing her forehead.

“Hey, are you sure you're okay?”

She blinks, those bright green irises somehow seeming larger, more vulnerable. It's like that old Grace, the one I found the first day in the library, and for some reason, I don't like it one bit.

“Yeah. Just got lost in my thoughts for a bit.”

We stumble into a group of kids that are hurrying onto the ice. One of them crashes into Grace. I pull her closer to me just in time to save her from losing her balance.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it's nice to see them so excited. Everything was so much easier when we were little.”

I look up, taking in all the people around us. The lights. The laughter. “Yeah, I guess so,” I agree absentmindedly, feeling that familiar pressure behind my temples.

“Trent?”

“Huh?” My head snaps up as Grace calls out my name. She’s looking over her shoulder with a knitted cap pulled over her hair. She had her roommate trim it once again, so the locks are teasing her shoulders. “What did you say?”

“I asked what did you want to do now?”

“Oh, right.” I run my hand through my hair. “How about we walk around a bit? See the village?”

“Sure.”

We get out of the skates and into our shoes. Intertwining my fingers with Grace’s, I pull her out on the sidewalk and wrap my arm around her. We walk slowly in companionable silence.

There’s a group of people gathered around a street singer singing Christmas carols. A small smile appears on Grace’s face. I pull her to a stop so we can listen, too. Some kids are running and jumping around the woman, and there’s even an older couple swaying slowly to the music. The man leans down and whispers something in the woman’s ear, which makes her laugh.

“They’re so cute together.” Grace leans her head on my shoulder.

“Is that something you want?” I shift so I’m standing in front of her and take her other hand. “To dance in a busy street?”

I could totally do it too. I’m a shit dancer. Ashley always used to complain that I stepped on her toes during school dances. Apparently, the agility on the court doesn’t transfer to the dance floor. But I could manage some swaying if it’d put a smile on her face.

Grace turns to me and shakes her head. “It’s not about dancing. I want somebody who’ll look at me like that. Who’ll love me even when we’re old and gray-haired.”

I want that.

My heart squeezes in my chest the longer I look at her.

I want to be that person for her.

The realization is like a kick to my gut. I'm not sure why. It shouldn't be surprising at all. I've liked Grace from the very start. There was always something about her that called to me, and I couldn't let her go.

Not when I was dating Ashley.

Not when I knew it was wrong and selfish.

Not when I hurt Grace and knew she didn't want anything to do with me.

I wanted her, and I still do.

Because being with Grace makes me feel alive in a way nobody else can make me. When I'm with her, I feel whole. There're no requirements, no expectations. I'm just me, and she's fine with it. Fine with me being me.

I lift her hand and bring it to my mouth, placing a kiss over her knuckles. "Is that a no to dancing?" I ask, my voice coming out low and raspy as I push back all the emotions she evokes in me. "Because I can't promise not to step on your toes."

A smile spreads over Grace's face. She lifts on her toes, her hands cupping my cheeks as she leans in and presses her mouth against mine. "We can't all be good at everything."

"Well, I wouldn't put it like that. There's plenty I'm good at," I wiggle my eyebrows suggestively.

Grace laughs and shoves me slightly. "I'm pretty sure that's the case."

She holds my gaze, her teeth grazing over her lower lip to prevent her from smiling as she takes a step back. Amusement glitters in her eyes before she shifts on the balls of her feet and starts walking.

Shaking my head, I follow after her, dropping a bill in the little basket for the singer.

It doesn't take me long to catch up to Grace. We walk between the people commenting on all the things they've put out this year.

“Want something to warm you up?” I ask, spotting a hot beverage cart not that far away. “Maybe some hot chocolate?”

Grace turns toward me, surprise flashing on her face for a split second. “I could never say no to hot chocolate.”

Well, I could never say no to her, so I guess that makes two of us.

“Hot chocolate it is then.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

GRACE

Trent's fingers tighten around mine as he pulls me toward the cart. My heart is going into overdrive. It's beating so hard I'm surprised it hasn't jumped out of my chest. There's a slight ringing in my ears, dulling all the other noise.

It's all too much.

This place.

This time of year.

Skating.

Hand holding.

Hot chocolate.

It's like I've been thrown back in time to three years ago.

A young girl out on her first date with the boy who she had a crush on for what feels like forever.

He's not Mason. I chant on repeat. He's not Mason, and I'm not the girl I used to be back then.

Maybe I'd actually believe it if the situation was different.

"What can I getcha?"

The question snaps me out of my thoughts. But before I can open my mouth to order, Trent already does it.

"Two large hot chocolates. One regular, one with extra marshmallows."

My heart sinks to my gut, palms turning sweaty as the ringing in my ears intensifies. "H-how did you...?"

Trent turns to me, a confused look on his face. "Did I get it wrong?"

No, he got it right. Too right.

I try to swallow the lump in my throat, but it's like it's fixed there. "H-how..." My voice trembles, so I try again. "How did you know?"

His brows furrow as he thinks about it. “You must have ordered it at some point?”

But I haven’t.

Not with Trent, at least.

These days I rarely drink hot chocolate. It holds too many memories of that night, memories I gave my best to push back, just like all the other things that are connected to Mason.

“Y-yeah. Probably.”

Before he can comment further, the guy calls out our names and hands us the drinks. I wrap my shaky fingers around the cup, letting the hot liquid warm my hands.

What is happening here?

It feels like I’ve entered a parallel world in which nothing makes sense.

Trent’s not Mason.

Since the few tables that are just next to the cart are occupied, we walk a little until we spot one couple leaving the bench.

Trent looks down at me. “Wanna sit?”

“Yeah, sure.”

We quicken our steps and slide onto the bench just in time. I take a small sip of my hot chocolate, careful not to burn my tongue. It tastes divine—the mix of rich cocoa and extra marshmallows lingering on my tongue. I sigh happily and hold the cup close to my face to keep me warm.

Damn, I missed this.

“I seriously don’t know how you can drink that.”

“How can I drink that?” Chuckling nervously, I jab him in the chest. Not even the thick winter jacket can prevent me from feeling his strong muscles. “What about you, Mr. Boring?”

“I’m not boring,” Trent protests.

“Who drinks regular hot chocolate?” I ask before I can think better of it.

A sense of déjà vu hits me all at once. *That* night is coming back.

“Umm... a lot of people?”

“Umm... a lot of people?” Trent says. It’s the exact same words Mason told me all those years ago.

“A lot of boring people,” I echo softly, almost in a trance, my vision turns blurry as I’m taken back in time.

How can this be happening? Different, yet the same. How can he know all these things? It just makes no sense. He’s not Mason.

That sentence echoes in my mind like a mantra, completely in tune with my racing heartbeat.

He’s not Mason.

Thump-thump-thump.

He’s not Mason.

Thump-thump-thump.

He’s not Mason.

There’s just no way.

He lives in the Upper East Side, for God’s sake. He’s known Matteo and Ashley their whole lives. He wasn’t playing basketball in high school.

Then how does he know all of these things? A stubborn part throws right back at me.

This is just a coincidence. It has to be because otherwise...

“Grace?”

“Y-yeah?” I breathe, my voice shaky.

“Look up.”

I tilt my head back, my mind still trying to process everything that has just happened.

It's all probably just one big coincidence. That's it. Just one really big...

"Mistletoe," I whisper, turning my attention to Ma—Trent.

Dammit.

"It seems so."

We stare at one another. His deep brown eyes have turned darker, more intense. Trent lifts his hand, tracing my cheekbone with the back of his hand.

My eyelids fall shut as a shiver runs down my spine.

"You know what that means, right?" he whispers. He's so close his warm breath tickles my skin.

I pry my eyes open and slide my hand up his chest. "Kiss me."

Remind me of what's real.

Trent grins, both of his dimples popping out. "My pleasure."

He leans closer. Slowly, oh so slowly. My stomach clenches in anticipation as the distance between us disappears.

Our lips brush together. Once, twice.

I slide my hand at the nape of his neck, pulling him closer.

The air between us sizzles as we kiss, slow and sweet. His scent fills my space—sandalwood, hot chocolate, and something that's uniquely him.

"Mason," I whisper, my hands clutching onto the material of his jacket. I swipe my mouth over his, my tongue sliding over his lower lip, seeking the entrance into his mouth.

Only it takes me a moment to realize he's not trying to deepen the kiss. He's completely frozen, his hands gripping my shoulders and pushing me back.

I break the kiss, my breathing ragged as I open my eyes, slightly dazed. "What's..."

The color has drained from his face, his pupils dilated. “W-What did you call me?”

What did I...? The meaning of his question registers in my mind, and all the kiss-induced haze is gone. *Shit.*

The dread paralyzes me as the realization sets in.

I called him by the wrong name. I actually called him by the wrong name. *Mason.* That’s what I said because everything about today reminded me of Mason. Of that winter when we were sixteen. Of my first date. *Our* first date.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

This can’t be happening.

“I-I...” I run my trembling fingers through my hair. *How the fuck do I explain this?*

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

MASON

“I-I...” Grace tries again, but no words come out. The horror is clearly written on her face as she just stares at me with her big emerald eyes.

Mason.

The name echoes in my mind like a broken record. A stabbing pain rips through my skull, making me suck in a breath. I grit my teeth, trying to push through the pain, but it’s useless. It’s like everything that’s been accumulating over the last few months has finally caught up with me. I lift my hands and press my palms against the side of my face, rubbing at my throbbing temples.

God, I don’t remember the last time my head hurt so much.

I squeeze my eyes shut and suck in a shaky breath. An image of younger Grace flashes before my eyes.

“We’re standing under the mistletoe,” she says, those big eyes of hers staring into mine. Her tongue darts out, sliding over her pink lips, and my whole body tightens in response.

God, I want this girl so bad. *Still, I try to play it cool. “It seems so.”*

A slow breeze pushes her hair in her face, so I reach to tuck the strand behind her ear.

“Have you ever been kissed?”

Grace shakes her head no.

“I’ll be gentle,” I promise. Leaning down, I press my mouth against hers.

“Trent?” Grace asks, her gentle voice so low I have to strain to hear it over the loud ringing in my ears and the memories coming back in rapid flashes.

And it’s not just memories of Grace either.

An unknown woman’s face.

A few teenage boys I've played basketball with.

A building... *a community center?*

I shake my head. A wrong move because the only thing it accomplishes is making my head hurt more. The headache has been building slowly since earlier this afternoon, but hearing her call out that name was the final straw.

My hands fall down on her shoulders. "Grace, what did you call me?" I ask once again. I already know it, but I need her to say it out loud.

Mason.

"Tell me." I tighten my grip on her shoulders and give her a small shake.

Grace's eyes grow wide. Her throat bobs as she swallows. "T-Trent, you're scaring me."

"Trent, baby?" a woman asks, panic lacing her voice as a hand grabs mine.

Trent?

The name doesn't sound familiar. I try searching through my mind, but the only thing it does is make my headache worse. My heart speeds up, and the beeping in the room intensifies.

"Careful, you need to give him time," a man warns. "Trent, can you hear me? Nod once if the answer is yes."

Gulping down, I do as asked. My head hurts like a bitch.

Where am I? What happened?

The memory disappears almost as soon as it appeared in my mind, leaving me breathless.

"But it's not Trent, is it?" I ask, feeling the panic grow with the thumping of blood in my veins. "Is it? My name... It's not Trent."

Mason.

Mason.

Mason.

“I-I don’t know...” Grace closes her eyes, her fingers wrapping around my wrists and pulling my hand back. “Can you please stop it? You’re hurting me.”

Her words are like a bucket of icy water poured over my head. I let my hands drop down in my lap, my breathing hard.

Calm the fuck down, dude, before you have a heart attack.

I force myself to inhale deeply through my nose, counting slowly backward from ten in my head as I hold my breath before letting it out. I repeat the process a few times until I’m finally calm enough to talk.

“I’ve been having these headaches ever since I met you. Well before that too, but they have only grown stronger in the last few months. F-flashbacks.” As if to confirm that another stab of pain goes through the back of my head, accompanied by a blurry image of a man yelling. I pinch the bridge of my nose and close my eyes. “Memories that make no sense at all.” *What the hell is happening to me?* “Take today, for example. I can’t escape the feeling that it all happened at some point before.”

A sob rips from her lungs. Her hand flies to cover her mouth as if to stifle it, but I hear it. Unshed tears glisten in her eyes, her teeth sinking into her lower lip to prevent it from trembling.

“It had happened before? Hadn’t it?” My fingers clench and unclench in my lap, fighting those damn tingles. It’s like I put my finger in an outlet, and now my body is full of static.

Grace nods her head once, her eyes darting to the side to avoid looking at me. Well, fat chance of that happening.

She knows something. She has known something all this time, and she kept quiet about it.

“Because I’m not Trent, am I?” I ask, my voice steely.

This time, Grace shakes her head no. One tear falls down her cheek, followed by another one. It’s like the dam broke, and there is no stopping them any longer.

My fingers itch to touch her, pull her into my arms, and reassure her that everything will be okay.

She knew. All this time, she knew.

From that first moment, she stumbled into me in front of Cup It Up. She knew. She called me by that name.

“I’m him,” I whisper, my voice hoarse. “*Mason.*”

“Hey!” I smile down at the girl that’s been coming to the gym for weeks now. But that’s not the first time I’ve noticed her. I saw her one day dancing in the studio, a little frown between her brows as she went through the motions with the concentration of somebody trying to deactivate a bomb. She looked cute. Plus, those tights made her legs look amazing. And now she is here.

“Hi,” Her voice is high-pitched, her cheeks turning a pretty shade of pink. My grin widens.

“I’m M—”

“Mason,” she finishes and ducks her head, that mass of red hair falling around her like a shield.

So she does know my name.

Good.

I blink, coming back to the present. We stare at one another, his name ringing in the space between us.

My name.

Grace closes her eyes as if hearing it physically hurts her. Well, she’s not the only one.

“You knew.” Grace shakes her head but doesn’t say anything. *Fuck this.* I jump to my feet—the cup of hot chocolate I left on the bench falling and spilling over in the process—and point my finger at her. “Since day one. You knew. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I don’t know which part hurts the most. The fact that she’s known all this time or that she’s kept it a secret.

“I d-didn’t know.”

Is she for real?

“You didn’t know? What the fuck do you mean, you didn’t know? You called me by that name. That first day. You called me Mason.”

Just saying it out loud has a ripple of pain going through my mind. My lungs tighten, making it hard to breathe.

Grace wipes the tears from her cheeks and tilts her chin up. “Because I thought I saw M-M...” her voice breaks before she can finish. She sucks in a breath, bracing herself before continuing: “Him. I thought you were him, but then...” she shakes her head helplessly, more tears falling down.

“You should have told me,” I insist firmly.

“What should I have told you?” Grace chuckles humorlessly, wrapping her arms around herself. “Oh, hey, you remind me of this guy I knew in high school. We went on a date. *Once.*”

“You should have told me.”

I had the right to know.

“I did!” Grace balls her fingers in a fist and pounds them against the bench. “I called you Mason that first day, and I got *nothing*. Can you imagine what it’s been like for me? Standing back and watching you be with your girlfriend while you knew nothing about me. There wasn’t a trace of recognition. Not one.”

“You never brought it up again. I asked you about your “friend,” but you didn’t say a word.”

Grace flinches like I slapped her. “Because I haven’t seen or heard from Mason in years. For all I knew, he was dead. Matteo said he knew you from when you were kids. That you have been best friends all your lives, you dated *her* all throughout high school. What was I supposed to think?”

“You knew I was from New York.”

“So are nine million other people,” she lifts her arms helplessly in the air and lets them fall back by her side.

We're staring at one another, both of us breathing hard as people pass by us. They must think that we're crazy, fighting like this, but I don't have it in me to care.

"But how many of those nine million other people look alike?"

"We all have a double out there somewhere. Isn't that what people say?"

"But what are the chances?"

"In my mind, they were bigger than you actually being Mason and forgetting all that had happened. Or even worse, pretending you don't remember."

"I didn't remember!" I yell loudly.

Grace doesn't even blink. More tears fall down her cheeks as she just looks at me with those sad eyes that kick the air out of my lungs. When she opens her mouth, her words come out so softly they're barely audible. "And how was I supposed to know that?"

I shake my head. "Was this a game to you, Grace?"

"A game?" she huffs. "You seriously think that? That this is just a game?"

"Is there another reason why you'd date a guy that looks exactly as... how did you put it again?" I pretend to think about it, although there's no way I'd ever forget this day. "This guy you knew in high school and went on a date. *Once*," I repeat, throwing her earlier words back at her.

"I loved you, Mason. I loved you with all I had. I had looked for you for years. *Years*. Coming to Blairwood was a wake-up call that I needed to let you go because you weren't coming back. And what happened when I made that decision? You showed up." She jams her finger in my chest once again. My fingers wrap around her hand and pull her closer.

"Stop this."

"Why?" She looks up at me with defiance I'm not used to seeing on her face. "Because the truth hurts? I've never lied to you. I never played games. I wanted you. I wanted you then,

and when I saw you, it all came back. All the feelings. All the memories. All of it. I tried to stay away, but it was *you* who kept coming back. Over and over and over. Taking pieces that were left of my heart all the while you were with her. So don't you tell me about playing games.

"You seemed *fine*. You never said anything that could cause me to suspect I might have it wrong. That you might actually be Mason. To me, you were Trent. The guy that reminds me so much of the boy I used to love. The one similar, yet different from him in all the ways that mattered."

That pulsing pain behind my temples intensifies with every word she throws my way. I press my fingers against them, rubbing the painful spots, but it's no use.

This is all too much. Everything that has happened. All the memories coming back.

"I need to go."

"G-go?"

Her voice, laced with pain, breaks at that one word.

It doesn't matter. She knew. She knew who I was but had kept it to herself all this time.

"I need to get out of here. I—"

I look around. The light, the crowd, the noise, all coming back into focus. Some people are looking over their shoulders while others openly stand and stare at us. The twinkling lights that only a few minutes ago seemed romantic now make me hiss in pain. *I need to get out of here.* "I have to go."

Preferably to some cold, dark place. Away from the crowd, away from the noises, away from people.

Away from Grace.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

GRACE

What the hell just happened?

“Mason!” I take a step forward, but he’s already gone. Swallowed by the large crowd that had gathered around us while we were fighting. Some people look at me with curiosity, while others have judgment written all over their faces. I can only imagine the spectacle we just made.

But it’s not Trent, is it?

Another sob rips out of my lungs.

He remembered.

Trent is...

Like a train wreck waiting to happen, panic slams into me, making my knees wobble. I fall down on the bench behind me. Bracing my elbows on my knees, I bury my face in my hands and try to force myself to breathe.

Trent is Mason.

Trent is *Mason*, and he just left.

If this whole evening felt like I was thrown back three years ago, it has nothing on this moment.

He left.

My breathing turns shallow, breaths coming out in quick pants as my heart goes into overdrive.

It’s okay. I try to reason. *He just left. He isn’t gone for good. He probably just needed some time to wrap his head around it.*

But what if he disappears like he did three years ago? What if this is the last time I see him? What if...

I shake my head, refusing to entertain the idea. He won’t disappear. He’s not gone. He can’t be.

But it’s not Trent, is it? My name... It’s not Trent.

How the hell is this even possible?

It's like I'm stuck in a dream, or more like a nightmare, without a way out. One moment everything was almost perfect, and the next, it all went up in the air.

What happened to you, Mason?

I have to go and find him. I have to get some answers from him. Figure out what the hell just happened. Make this right.

How can we even make it right?

I look left and right. Most of the people have left, and nobody is paying me any attention—typical New Yorkers.

Wiping the tears from my cheeks, I push to my feet and start walking in the general direction of the entrance.

Maybe he went back to his car. That's probably it.

I hurry my footsteps until I'm running. I almost slipped a few times over the ice on the ground, but even that doesn't stop me. I run and run and run until I'm back in the garage.

My heart stops when I spot the car sitting where we left it.

“Mason!”

I rush toward it but come to a sudden stop a couple of feet from the car.

He's not there.

The car is empty. Mason is nowhere in sight.

“See you at the center next week?” he asks hopefully.

“You know it. You still have to show me how to throw a three-pointer.”

Mason grazes at his lower lip, slightly pulling back. “It's a deal. Later, Legs.”

“Night.”

He left.

Once again, he left, and this time, I didn't even get a goodbye.

“Damn you, Mason!”

Damn you for doing this to me all over again.

My eyesight turns blurry as the tears gather in my eyes. I sniffle, trying to hold it back, but it’s no use.

I need to get out of here. I need...

With my frozen hand, I reach into the pocket of my jacket and pull out my phone. I dial the familiar number, and he picks up on the first ring.

“Grace? Is everything okay?”

Although I promised myself I wouldn’t cry, my voice breaks on the first word.

“N-no.”

There’s shuffling in the background, and I can imagine my big brother jumping to his feet with worry. “Grace? What’s going on?”

I don’t think I’ve ever heard such panic in his voice.

“I’m fine,” I sniffle, rubbing my nose with the back of my hand. “Just... Can you come and get me?”

“Where are you?”

“Bryant Park.”

There’s a slight pause on the other end of the line. “But that’s...”

“I was w-wrong,” I admit quietly. “Trent is M-Mason. He... He remembered.”

Once again, my legs give out on me. I slide down to the floor, pulling my knees close to my chest.

J.D. swears on the other side of the line. “Listen to me, Grace. Send me your location and wait for me. I’ll come and get you. Okay?” I can hear movement in the background. “Do you understand?”

“O-okay.”

“Your location, Grace. I’ll be there soon.”

I nod, although I know he can't see me. J.D. hangs up, and I do as he asked. It takes me a few tries before I can clear my vision enough to find the correct app on my phone, but I finally do it. Once finished, I let my phone fall down into my lap.

Tears come rushing out, and there is nothing that could stop them. So I don't even try.

I let it all out.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

MASON

“I need you to slowly open your eyes,” an unfamiliar voice says. It’s a man’s voice, low and soothing. “Can you do that for me?”

I could try. I attempt to open my mouth to say it out loud, but no words come. So instead, I nod and slowly do as asked. It takes so much strength to pry my eyelids open. It’s as if somebody poured glue in my eyes, sticking them together. After what seems like forever, a crack appears between my lids. A crack so small I can’t even see anything, or maybe it’s the bright light that assaults my senses.

I wince in pain and shut them almost instantly. My whole body is so sweaty with exertion. You’d think I just ran a marathon by how sweaty I am and didn’t do something as basic as opening my eyes. Hell, I didn’t even open them completely.

“Trent!” This voice is different. Female and full of panic. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Slowly, now,” the male voice says, much calmer. “He suffered trauma. This will take some getting used to.”

Trauma?

I try again, this time bracing myself for the brightness of the room. The movement takes everything from me, but I manage to do it.

My fingers grip the sheets underneath me as I look up at the white ceiling. The beeping continues ringing in my ears. I turn to the side, blinking a few times until the space comes into focus. A heart rate monitor? So the constant beeping wasn’t just in my head.

There’s movement in my peripheral vision, but I don’t have it in me to turn around and see what’s going on.

“Well, hello there.” A big hand cups my face and gently turns my head. “How are you feeling, Trent?”

I blink, my attention focusing on the man standing in front of me. He's an older guy. Gray hair. Beard covers his jaw, and a pair of glasses are propped on the bridge of his nose.

"H-hurting," I stutter out, my voice weak and raspy. I try to clear my throat, but it's desert dry. Still, I try again. "H-h-head."

"That's to be expected." He takes a pencil-like object and opens my eyelids, blinding me with it.

Holy shit.

My stomach rolls, bile rising in my throat.

"You've been in an accident. Can you remember what happened?"

He continues poking and probing me. I want to push him away, but I can't find the strength to lift my hand.

I shake my head.

"W-what... a-am... here?" My words come out choppy and unintelligible. Each one feels like I'm moving a mountain. I'm trying to push against it, but it's not budging.

The guy, a doctor, assesses me with narrowed eyes. "You were brought to the hospital after an accident."

An accident?

I try to remember, but the only thing that I find in my mind is blackness. Another wave of dizziness hits me, making my stomach turn.

What the hell happened to me?

"Will you tell me what's wrong with him?"

A woman appears in front of me, tears pooling in her eyes.

"Regina, you need to..." A man comes behind her, pulling her back.

I narrow my eyes at both of them. "W-who... a-a-are... you?"

Who are these people?

The couple staggers back a step. They look at the doctor and then back at me, eyes wide.

“We’re your parents,” the woman finally says, her lip trembling.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

My eyes snap open, arm flying up to cover my rapidly beating heart.

“We’re here,” the cabby says, glaring at me through the plastic that’s separating the front seat from the back.

He was just knocking. I rub my trembling hand over my face. *That’s it. Knocking.*

My breathing is ragged, sweat coating my skin. I’m pretty sure I look like a lunatic.

Sighing, I slide my hand in my pocket and pull out a few bills. I’m not even sure if it’s enough to cover my bill, but it must be because the dude lets me get out and drives off with a loud screeching of the tires left in his wake before I even close the door behind me.

Fucking cabs. But it was a necessary evil. Not only was I in no shape to drive, but after leaving Grace, I wandered the streets for what seemed like hours, and when I snapped out of it, I could barely register where I was, much less find it in me to get back to my car. Besides, the last thing I needed was to get in an accident.

You’ve been in an accident.

I press my hands against my head. The throbbing increases once again, making me sway on my feet.

“Dammit.”

I run my fingers through my hair, tightening my grip on the strands. I need this pain to stop. It’s like all the migraines I had in the past, times ten, if not more. The searing pain is spreading through my head and down my neck. The worst of the pressure is just behind my temples, making my vision spotty at times as the flashbacks come back. They’ve been continuous ever since I remembered.

Mason.

Grace's soft voice is still in my mind. I can hear her clearly, past and present mixing together.

She knew.

It baffles me. All this time, she knew me, but she didn't say a word.

Inhaling a shaky breath, I turn around and look up at the house in front of me.

The woman, my mother, gives me a tentative smile as she pushes open the front door to the house I've never seen before.

"Welcome home."

Home.

There's hopefulness in her voice that's been there since I woke up, and I try my best to keep my reaction in check. I've seen how disappointed she is when I don't remember something from my past. My parents try to pretend it's okay, but I don't miss the look of disappointment crossing their faces.

I slowly enter the house, taking in the high ceiling, marble floors, the grand staircase leading to the upper floor. A side table that looks like it belongs to a museum stands by the door, a vase with flowers sitting on top of it. Different art hanging off the walls.

It's strange that I know everything around me. I can name every object I see, know what it's for, but ask me what I did a month ago, and I'll have no idea.

My parents don't say anything as I walk down the hallway, letting me take it all in. There are photos put on the wall leading to the back of the house. Photos of a little dark-haired boy. His first steps. Smiles. Birthday. Vacations. Playing in the park. Riding a bike. First day of school. Photos with my friends and me.

Matteo and Ashley.

*I stare at the photo of the three of us and another girl.
We're dressed up like we went to a school dance or something.*

*They've come to visit me in the hospital. Ashley's eyes were
teary as she watched me lie in that hospital bed.*

The walls start closing in on me, making me sweat.

*My whole life is documented on this wall. The only
problem? I don't remember any of it.*

A loud honk has me snapping out of my head once again.
The house that's been my home for the past three years comes
into focus. Only it was all a lie.

How is that possible?

The photos.

The stories.

The memories.

It can't all be a lie.

There has to be an explanation.

Has to.

And I'm going to get some answers.

I climb the steps two at a time. My legs still feel unsteady,
but I press my lips together and push through. The light is still
on on the ground floor, so they have to be awake. Not that it
would stop me if they were sleeping.

I pull out the key and unlock the door, letting it bang
against the wall as I barge in and walk down the hallway
toward the back of the house.

There's commotion coming from the living room,
shouting, followed by hurried footsteps. My mom's the first to
come out.

No, not my mom.

"Trent!" she yells and throws herself at me, wrapping her
arms around my neck before I can stop her. "Where have you
been? We were worried sick when you didn't come home."

I don't bother telling her that I haven't been home for just a few hours. Instead, I take a step back, pushing her hands away.

A frown appears between her brows. "Trent? Is something wrong?"

There's genuine concern on her face. What a bunch of bullshit.

"Who the hell are you?" I hiss, looking between the two people who have lied to me for the past two years.

Mo—

She takes a step back, her hand covering her chest. "What the—"

"Trent, what's the meaning of this?" Beckett Remington turns his disapproving eyes on me. His expression is dark, but I've gotten used to seeing it directed my way in the past year. After he realized I was not just going to blindly follow in his footsteps. Maybe if I had done that from the start, none of this would have happened. "This is no way to talk to your parents."

A blurry image of the blonde woman flashes before my eyes.

"Mason, my beautiful baby boy." Her hazel eyes are foggy as they stare into mine. Her hand is cupping my face, the tip of her finger sliding over my cheekbone. Her skin is fair and paper-thin. It tickles when she touches me, but then her hand falls on the mattress. Still and lifeless. "Mommy?"

Before I can grasp what's going on, I hear a man yelling.

Glass shattering.

Sting in my cheek.

A hand falls on my shoulder, pulling me back to the present. "Trent?"

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts. "But you're not my parents, are you now?" I ask, taking another step back.

Surprise flashes on their faces, followed by panic and finally guilt. The two of them exchange a look.

“W-what...” Mo—Regina—starts but ends up shaking her head.

“Are you?!” I yell, not in the mood for bullshit. I’ve had enough of that to last me a lifetime.

Beckett’s eyes narrow as he takes me in, probably for the first time noticing my disarrayed state. “Trent, son, I thi—”

“Don’t call me that! I’m not Trent. I’m not your son,” I say slowly, watching, waiting for their reaction. “But you already knew that, didn’t you?”

Mom—damn, that will take some getting used to—*Regina* gasps, clutching the pearls around her neck. Eyes huge, mouth gaping open.

“Who are you?” I look between the two of them. “Because I sure as hell am not Trent.”

“T—” Beckett stops himself just in time. He runs his hand over his face. “Can we sit down and talk like adults?”

“Like we sat down and talked three years ago?” I mock. “No, I’m not sitting down. I want answers. Who are you?”

“We’re your parents,” Beckett says calmly. “Your *real* parents.”

“My...” I stop as his words register in my mind. I narrow my eyes at him. “What?”

It can’t be. He’s lying. That has to be it. They’re lying because I remembered. I remembered my parents. I remembered Grace. I remembered my life from before.

At least bits and pieces of it.

Regina and Beckett Remington haven’t been a part of it until three years ago.

Until the accident.

“Trent, please sit down.” Regina puts her hand on my shoulder. “You don’t look well.”

I don’t feel that well either, but then again, who would, after finding out that people you’ve trusted have lied to you for

the past few years?

My breathing is ragged, and my skin feels tight. Clothes stick to my sweaty skin, and the sweater I'm wearing suddenly feels too tight.

Still, I don't want her worry or kindness. Not from a liar.

"Don't call me that," I grit through clenched teeth and shrug out of her reach. If I hear that name one more time, I think I might scream.

Beckett sighs and goes to the bar, grabbing a bottle of Jack. "It's a long story," he says as he pours himself a generous amount into the crystal glass and takes a long sip. "A twenty-year-old story. We'll tell you, but please let's sit down."

"Please, Tre—" Regina catches herself, biting into her lower lip before finishing. "Please."

"Fine."

I walk into the living room and sit down in the armchair that's the furthest away from them, my body sagging in relief. The fire is on in the fireplace, but my whole body is shaking. Cold, adrenaline, or something else? I'm not sure I know.

The Remingtons take a seat on the couch opposite me, exchanging a silent glance before Beckett picks up Regina's hand and places a kiss over her knuckles.

"I-it all..." Regina stutters, so she stops, taking a shaky breath. "It all started twenty years ago."

"You already said that. What happened?"

If they don't give me something, I'm getting out of here. I'm seriously sick of people li—

"We couldn't have children," She takes a small pause. "Well, technically, *I* couldn't have children."

"Regina."

"It's true, Beckett." She places her hand on his knee reassuringly and looks up at him. "I was the one who couldn't

have kids. The one who couldn't give you something that we both so desperately wanted.”

“So you did what? Stole a baby?”

Only I wasn't a baby when they found me. And there were photos. All those photos from different stages in a boy's life. A boy that looks so fucking similar to me. I never questioned what they told me when I woke up in that hospital. But it couldn't be me because I grew up with different parents. Lived in a different house. Had a different life.

Photos could be manipulated, sure, but for somebody to go to that extent? I look at them, like *really* look at them. They always seemed so... normal. Sure, they had their moments. They were always so worried about my health, but after the accident, it just made sense. And they both had high expectations of me, but it seemed more to me like something a career-driven parent of an only child would want. They never seemed like psychos who'd try to steal a kid off the streets and go to the extent of manipulating the photos to show him his whole life and make it believable.

“No, but we might as well have because what we did was illegal at the time. We hired a surrogate.”

I'm so stuck in my own head, with all the what ifs, that I almost miss it. “Wait, what?”

“We hired a surrogate,” Beckett repeats. “It was the only way we could have the family we wanted so badly.”

“And that surrogate was?” I ask, although I already have a suspicion of the answer to that question.

“Josie LeBlanc,” Regina says softly.

My mother:

The woman with blonde hair and brown eyes from my memories.

“She worked for us at the time, and one day she heard us fight about it. Josie entered and told us she'd do it.” Regina's eyes meet mine. “For a price, of course.”

There's no judgment in her tone, just plain facts. The hairs at the nape of my neck rise as she continues.

"We paid for her procedure. One round of IVF, that's all it took. One time and she was pregnant." Tears glisten in Regina's eyes, but then a smile forms. "Then we found out that she was carrying twins. Two boys."

Two boys.

I gulp down and force the question out, "What happened?"

My fingers curl around the armrest tightly, the only thing that's helping me keep the panic at bay as the walls slowly close in on me.

"Everything was going okay, all things considered, but Josie went into an early labor. Although I asked her to stay at our house while she was pregnant, especially in the later months, so we could help her. She refused, saying she preferred her own space. We don't know what happened, but she called us and said her water broke and that she'd meet us at the hospital. Trent was in a breech position, but doctors were hopeful that Josie would be able to deliver safely. The birth was long and hard, and when Trent came out, he wasn't crying." A tear slides down her face. "It felt like forever before doctors got his airways cleared, and he started to cry, but even still, they wanted to do some more testing. In the meantime, you came too, crying loud and hard. Josie insisted we go with Trent, saying he needed us. So, we did. But later, when we got back to her room, it was empty. She left and took you with her."

My brows furrow. "And you just let her?"

"We didn't have many options," Beckett chimes in. He moves forward, leaning his elbows on his knees. "Surrogacy was illegal at the time. There was no official contract, and even if there were, it wouldn't hold in court."

"And we had T-Trent," Regina's voice breaks at the last word.

I shake my head, not knowing what to say. All this seems surreal. Like something that would happen in a book or a

movie, not something that happens in real life. To actual people.

Illegal surrogacy. Twins that were separated at birth and grew apart until...

I take two steps at a time as I get out of the subway. I'm tired, my whole body aching since I had to get up early to go into work before I quickly stopped at my house to shower and change to make it to my date with Grace.

I have a date with Grace Shelton.

I don't know what she sees in a punk like me. She's all the good and nice in the world. Just one smile from her, and it feels like my whole world is brighter, better. I don't deserve her. Fuck, her brother is a former professional football player. But I'll be damned if I don't hold on to her for as long as I can.

"Give that back, you asshole."

My head snaps up at the sharp voice only to see a guy chasing after two dudes, yelling after them. Realizing it's useless, he stops and kicks a can from the ground, cursing loudly.

I give him a once over. Expensive leather boots. Fancy brand jeans and jacket.

Stupid rich kids.

"In a place like this, you have to always watch your back," I say as I stop just behind him.

The guy quickly turns on the balls of his feet, caught completely unaware.

Like I said, stupid rich kids.

"And who are..."

The words die on his lips as he faces me, his mouth falling open the same moment mine does, probably mimicking his expression. The face that looks exactly like mine stares right back at me as if I was looking at my reflection in the mirror.

"What the fuck?"

“Trent?” Hands on my shoulders shake me gently.

The headache is back, my vision blurry as the past and present fight in my mind. My breaths come out in short bursts, shallow and completely erratic.

I rub my hand over my face. I don't think I can do this much longer, but it doesn't seem like I have much of a choice. Now that my memory is back, it's *back*, and there's no stopping it.

“I s-saw him,” the words come out in a stutter, “T-Trent. I saw him that night.”

Before I can say anything else, another memory comes rushing back in full force. I look down, holding onto my aching head. I dig my fingers into my forehead as the pain explodes, leaving me breathless and weak. I can hear the Remingtons calling my name, but their voices are just an echo in the background.

“You've gotta be shitting me,” the guy mutters.

We circle around each other, taking the other in like two dogs waiting to attack. I blink, hoping maybe the image will change, but it's still the same. The guy that looks like my exact, although more expensive and preppy, replica is standing in front of me. The temptation to lift my arm and touch him to convince myself I'm not imagining it is unreal.

I tip my chin toward him, eyes narrowed, “Who are you?”

“Who are you?” the guy throws right back.

We're quiet for a moment, but realizing we won't get far this way, I give in. “Mason.”

The guy looks at me warily, as if he doesn't trust me completely. “Trent.”

I shake my head. It's surreal. Even the way we talk and move is the same. “This can't be happening.”

“No shit. It's creepy. Like I'm looking in a mirror.”

I quirk my brow at him. “Have a tendency to stare at your own reflection, don't cha?”

“Fuck you.”

“Same to you, buddy.”

With a wave of my hand, I continue on my way home. I don't have time to stay here and chitchat, not when I have an early morning shift to get to. Besides, the old man wasn't at the apartment when I stopped earlier, so God only knows what I'll find when I get there.

Yesterday was a payday, so he's most likely gambling his money away. His drinking has increased tremendously in the last year, too, not that it was under control at any point since I can remember, but he seemed off, even for himself. Jittery and on edge.

“Where do you think you're going?” the guy yells, footsteps pounding after me.

I don't bother turning around. “Home.”

“Where's home?”

“Not in the penthouse on the Upper East Side, that's for damn sure.”

Trent checks me with his shoulder as he finally catches up. “Judgy much?”

I shrug, “Don't care one way or the other. I have better things to do.”

“That's exactly how it looks,” Trent deadpans dryly. Seriously, I want to smack the guy. “You can't seriously tell me you're not interested.”

“In what?”

“In all of this.” He points at his face and then mine. “Aren't you curious?”

“Not really.” Another shrug. “Don't they say we all have our doppelganger somewhere out there?”

“Who's they?”

Another shrug. “My point exactly.”

That shuts him up, and for a while, we walk in silence. I expected him to leave, but Trent's stuck by my side, following like a lost puppy. He's looking over his shoulder constantly, jumping at the slightest noise.

I give him a side glance. "I'm not going to walk you back home. You know."

Trent glares at me. "I don't need you to walk me home. I'm not going there, anyway."

The same narrowing of the eyes. The same defiant tilt to his chin. The same lines appear on his face as he presses his lips into a tight line.

"Don't tell me you fought with your dear ol' folks? And you came here of all places?"

"Screw you," he hisses and then marches in another direction.

"You do not want to go there," I warn loudly enough so he can hear me.

Trent looks over his shoulder but stops, "Worried about me?"

"I just don't want the wrong people to come knocking on my door later when they see your ugly mug and connect the dots. Contrary to you, I do actually have to live here."

Trent crosses his arms over his chest, "You do realize we have the same face?"

I sigh and run my hand over my head, "Fine. Come with me, but as soon as the sun's up, you're out of here."

Trent stops and just looks at me.

I bounce on the balls of my feet, irritated, "You coming or what? I'm not asking twice."

I don't have time to wait for his ugly ass to make up his mind.

Trent starts moving.

Fucking finally.

We're walking in blissful silence, but of course, it doesn't last long. "So, what's your story?"

"Just a kid trying to get out of this hellhole and live."

Trent gives me an assessing glance, "How old are you, anyway?"

"Sixteen," I narrow my eyes at him. "You?"

"Same. Born on October 17th." He lifts his brow and waits for my answer.

"Same."

How is this possible?

Before either of us can say anything else, we're in front of my building. There's shouting coming from inside, but that's nothing new.

I pull a key out of my pocket, but before I even attempt to unlock it, it bangs open. Three men, at least I think they're men since they tower over my six-foot frame, come to a stop in front of me, black hoodies pulled over their heads.

"What do you..."

Before I can finish, the one closest to me extends a hand. A gun firmly clutched in between his fingers.

I've seen guns, seen the violence, but never faced one directly. A paralyzing fear goes through my body, rooting me to the spot. I open my mouth to tell him we'll get out of his way, but before I can utter a word, his finger presses the trigger.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

A sharp pain goes through my shoulder as an invisible force pushes me back. I try to reach for something, anything, but there's only thin air as I fall down, my body hitting against the hard ground, and then blissful darkness.

"W-what..." I take a deep breath and force the words out. "What happened to the real Trent? What happened to your son?"

A tear slips down Regina's cheek as she sobs loudly. Beckett places his arm around her and pulls her into his side. "Didn't you say you remembered?"

"I did," I rub my forehead. "I do. But some things... They're still blurry."

"H-he didn't m-make it."

"We had a fight, so he left." Beckett pulls sobbing Regina closer, soothing his hand down her back as she burrows her head into his chest and cries harder. "We wanted to give him some time to cool off, but when he didn't return in normal time, we managed to locate him with the GPS on his phone. We just got there when the shots were fired." His face twists in pain as he remembers the events of that night. "Three shots were fired. One ended in your shoulder, making you fall back from the blast. The other two ended up in his chest. Trent was dead on the spot."

He's dead.

He died because of me. Because I asked him to come home with me.

I push to my feet abruptly, a wave of dizziness making me sway on my feet. "So you what? Figured you could take me instead of him?"

"It wasn't like that." Regina shakes her head, her trembling fingers covering her mouth.

"That's exactly what it looks like to me!" I clench my hands into fists by my side. "You told me I was Trent! You told me everything about my life, about *Trent's* life, when it was all just a bunch of bullshit!"

"You are our son!" Regina protests.

"No, I'm not. Trent was your son. I was the son of Josie and Craig LeBlanc." I inhale sharply, but no matter how much I try, I can't seem to get enough oxygen into my lungs. I look around myself, the room narrowing in on me. "I can't stay here any longer."

I have to get out.

I have to breathe.

I turn around abruptly, tripping and almost knocking over the coffee table.

Dammit.

“You can’t leave.” A hand lands on my shoulder, helping steady me. “You need to see a doctor, Trent...”

I slap her hand away. “My name isn’t Trent!” I look between the two of them. People who have lied to me all this time. People who have so easily replaced one son with another. “It never was.”

They yell after me as I run out of the house. With shaky fingers, I fumble with the key to the front door, but it doesn’t want to budge.

“Open, dammit,” I mutter until it finally gives in. The door bangs loudly against the wall, and I stumble out. I suck in gulp after gulp of air, but it’s not enough. It feels like it will never be enough.

“Trent?”

“Will you stop calling me that?” I shout and turn around. I expect to find my parents, but instead Ashely is standing at the bottom of the stairs looking at me with wide eyes and a frown between her brows.

“Um... by your name?”

I run my hand over my face. “Sorry, Ash, I didn’t mean to yell at you.”

She’s the last person I expected to find here at all. Except for a few random encounters on campus in the last few weeks, I barely got to see her. Or maybe that was intentional, considering how pissed she was when I broke up with her. Not that I deserved better. I let her mold her life to meet my needs, only to break up with her a couple of months into our freshman year. But she’s here, looking at me with concern in her eyes.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just...” I push back a few strands of my hair that are stuck to my skin. “A lot has happened, and my head is killing me, that’s all.”

She looks at the open door behind me. “You should probably go back inside and lie down.”

“I’m not going back inside.” I shake my head. “I can’t.”

I have no idea where I’m going to go, but I’m not returning to that place. I could probably find a hotel or something. But for that, I’d need to use their credit card, and I don’t want that either. It’s not mine to use.

I take a step forward, but my knees finally give up on me. I stumble and bump into Ash.

“What the hell, Trent?” She wraps her arms around my middle and steadies me. “What’s wrong with you? Do you need a doctor?”

“No,” my protest comes out rough, so I clear my throat. “No doctors.” Holding onto the little bit of strength I have left, I put some space between us. “I’m not Trent.”

“What are you talking about?” Ashley chuckles nervously and shakes her head. “You know what? It doesn’t matter. You look awful, and you need to sit down. Now.” She slides her arm around my middle. “C’mon. I need you to help me out here. Let’s get you to my place.”

Unable to do anything but what she asked, I lean against her for support. “I-I... Are you sure?”

I guess I could try to call Matteo. He’s out of town visiting his grandparents, but maybe if there’s a spare key...

“Yeah, sure.” She tilts her head toward her house across the street. “Come. You have some explaining to do.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

GRACE

The door squeaks open, and light peeks through the small crack, illuminating the otherwise dark space. The soft footsteps pad across the room, but I don't bother to turn around.

"How are you feeling?" Sienna asks as she sits down. The bed dips under her weight, and she smooths my hair away, just like she did when I was younger and didn't feel well.

"I don't even know, honestly," I sigh.

Wrapping my hands around the pillow tighter, I nuzzle closer to it.

"Did you talk to him?"

I shake my head no. "I tried calling him, but he didn't answer." My lip wobbles, so I sink my teeth into it. "It was like the past repeating itself right in front of my eyes. One moment everything was perfect, and the other, he was gone."

Just a flicker of a memory.

A mirage.

A nightmare. Only once you wake up, you realize it isn't over yet. Maybe it never will be.

I close my eyes, letting the tears stream down my face silently.

"Oh, Gracie. Shhh," Sienna croons. She lays down on the bed behind me and wraps her arms around me. "It's going to be okay, sweet girl. It's going to be okay."

But will it?

It sure doesn't seem that way. Not with the way the last few years have gone by.

I wipe away the tears and look over my shoulder into Sienna's worried face. "I'm not sure I'll be able to survive this once again. It's all too much. It *hurts* too much."

She cups my cheek and presses her forehead against mine. “You’re a Shelton, Grace.” Sienna presses her lips against my forehead. “You can survive anything.”

Although I appreciate her faith in me, I’m not so sure about that. I’m not a Shelton. Not really. I don’t have my brother’s strength or Sienna’s determination and stubbornness.

I’m just plain ol’ Grace.

Weak.

Hollow.

Heartbroken.

That’s all I’ve been for years. For so long, I don’t even remember who I was before I was this version of myself. Losing Mason changed me in ways I never imagined possible.

“What happened anyway? I thought you said he didn’t remember.”

“I don’t understand it myself. Everything was like that date we went on when we were sixteen. *Everything*. It was surreal. Even the things he said. It was the same words he used then, but there was no reaction. No sign that he’s watching out for me to react. He was completely normal.”

“Maybe it was his subconscious? The recreating of the date?”

“It has to be. There’s no other explanation. He’s been complaining about migraines. Even earlier today, he had a headache, but he assured me he was okay to go. That he didn’t want to miss our date. And then he kissed me under the mistletoe, just like we did on our first date.” I shake my head, feeling the tears coming back to the surface. “It was stronger than me. That place. The words. Everything. It was just too much. So, I called him Mason. It’s the first slip I had in weeks.”

Sienna’s gaze fills with sympathy. “That’s when he remembered?”

“That’s when he remembered.”

You should have told me.

I couldn't get his words out of my mind. His accusation. Was he right? Should I have said something sooner?

"He thinks I lied to him," I tell her. "He thinks I knew all along that he's Mason, and I didn't tell him."

"Did you?"

"What?" I sit upright and turn to her. "Of course not! I've searched for Mason for years. Do you really think if I knew it was him—we're talking here about being one hundred percent certain—I wouldn't have said something?"

"Not even subconsciously?"

I let out a shaky breath and pull my legs closer to my chest, resting my chin on my knees.

"Maybe," I admit softly. "It's like my body knew. I'm not going to lie. I felt connected to him. But I figured it has to do with the fact that he reminded me of Mason. Because seriously, what are the chances he's Mason, but he doesn't remember me?"

"Apparently pretty high." She shifts in her seat. "Did he tell you what exactly happened?"

I shake my head. "He kind of freaked out."

"Can you imagine?" Sienna shakes her head. "Believing that you're somebody else for God knows how long, only to realize it's all been a lie?"

No, I couldn't. It seems surreal. How did something like this happen? And who would do such a thing, anyway?

"It just makes no sense. I mean, Ashley and Matteo knew Trent. It's not like he was a baby, so he changed, and nobody noticed. Mason was sixteen when he disappeared. Could he and Trent really look so similar that nobody else would have noticed the switch? And if so, what happened to the real Trent? It's all just so confusing."

"It sounds like something from a TV show. That's for sure."

“I know,” I sigh and lean my head against her shoulder. “It doesn’t change the fact that he thinks I kept this from him.”

Sienna brushes my hair away from my face. “Maybe he just needs to process things. Talk to his parents. Give him some time.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

But the thing is, I’m not so sure about that.

You should have told me.

Me: Please, Mason, talk to me. I just want to know that you’re okay.

I press Send and wait. And wait. And wait.

My eyes are fixed on the screen and dozens of other messages that are sitting in the thread left unread.

It’s been almost twelve hours since I saw him since everything that had happened.

Did he get home safely? Did he even have a place to go? What did he say to his parents? Or Trent’s parents? Did he find out what had happened to him all these years ago?

So many questions, but not one answer.

Panic grips my throat, making it hard for me to breathe.

I just need to know that he’s okay. I just need a sign that he’s out there, and that I haven’t lost him once again.

If I could just hear his voice...

“She’s in her room,” I hear Sienna say in the hallway. There’s more low murmuring, followed by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs before the door to my room opens.

“There you are!” Yasmin says.

“What the hell, Grace? We were supposed to meet up an hour ago.” Jade plops on the windowsill next to me. Her eyes

falling down on the phone in my hand. “I see your phone is working just fine.”

I’ve seen the messages they sent me, but I couldn’t bring myself to answer back. Not when Mason could call me at any moment.

“Sorry, I just...” I look away, tears filling my eyes.

“Grace?”

A sob rips out of my lungs at the soft question. So much for keeping it cool. This was the exact reason why I didn’t want to see my friends today. They’d know something was wrong almost instantly, and I knew I couldn’t talk to them without breaking.

“What happened?” Yasmin asks. She crouches down by my side, holding onto the window seat.

I just shake my head, my hand covering my mouth.

Jade’s hand cups my cheek, and she turns me to face them, a determined look on her face.

“Whose ass do we need to kick?”

There’s no helping it. I burst into tears. I wrap my arms around Jade’s shoulder and bury my head into the crook of her neck, sobbing loudly.

“Oh, Gracie,” Yasmin sighs as she sits behind me, joining in for a hug.

I’m not sure how long we just sit there. They don’t say anything, just let me cry it all out until wrenching sobs turn into little hiccups.

I slowly let go, untangling myself out of their arms. With the back of my hand, I dry the tears and snot. Talk about sexy.

“Can you talk now?” Yas asks, watching me with worry in her eyes. She brushes my hair back.

I sniff and nod my head.

“T-Trent,” my voice comes out wobbly and hoarse from all the crying. Jade’s eyes narrow into tiny slits.

I clear my throat and try again. “Trent’s really Mason.”

“What?”

“You have to be freaking kidding me!”

The two of them look as surprised as me, eyes wide, mouth gaping.

Nobody could have imagined something like this could have happened. Nobody.

Mason doesn’t think that way, now does he? my jaded heart throws right back.

No, no, he doesn’t.

Shaking myself out of my thoughts, I tell them everything that had happened yesterday.

“So let me get this straight.” Jade gets up and starts pacing my room as soon as I’m done, hands propped on her hips. She’s pissed on my behalf. It’s written all over her face. “He got pissed because you should have told him? Told him what, exactly? Your suspicion based on the fact that he reminded you of somebody you used to know when you were sixteen?”

When you put it like that...

It was the only thing I thought about. I sure as hell wasn’t going to fall asleep, not after everything that had happened, so I went over every possible scenario in my head, tears streaming down my face.

“Maybe he’s right. Maybe if I said something earlier...”

“Bullshit,” Jade says before I can even finish, her voice so hard it could cut steel.

“I agree on that with Jade,” Yasmin chimes in. “If he hadn’t remembered on his own for two years, there’s no reason to believe he would just because you said it out loud.”

“Of course, he wouldn’t.” Jade rolls her eyes. “He’s just being an asshole.”

“He’s dealing with a lot.” Even after everything he said, I can’t help myself, and this need to defend him. “It can’t be

easy finding out that the last few years of your life have been a lie.”

“What is easy is acting like a dick. Oh, wait, that’s the road he took rather quickly.”

“Jade,” Yasmin chastises.

“What?” She shrugs. “I’m just telling the truth.”

“Maybe try to be less harsh?”

That familiar darkness appears in her blue eyes. “Why? Life rarely bothers to coddle us. Might as well say it as I see it. Now...” Jade comes to me, grabs my hand, and tugs me up. “You’re going to take a shower, put on some clothes and makeup, and we’re going out.”

I groan, “Do I have to?”

Even though I haven’t seen my reflection, I know I look like shit. I haven’t bothered to brush my hair from all the tossing and turning. My eyes are probably red-rimmed and swollen from all the crying.

“Yes,” her answer is non-negotiable.

Reluctantly, I get to my feet. “I’ll get back to you someday for this.”

“You can always try,” she winks at me. Then she shoves me toward the door. “Shower, you stink.”

“Being here sure brings old memories back. Right, Grace?” Yasmin wraps her arm around me and pulls me in for a hug.

After I took a shower, they forced me to go down to the kitchen where my family had been waiting for me. I didn’t miss the worried glances Jack and Sienna exchanged every so often, no matter how much I tried.

They didn’t say anything, but they didn’t have to. I knew exactly what they’d been thinking. Still, the girls didn’t let me leave until I ate a slice of toast and drank some coffee.

“It sure does.”

I look at the building looming in front of us. On the outside, it looks like any other building in New York, but on the inside, you’ll find a safe haven for anybody who needs one.

Jade tilts her head to the side as she examines it. “So, this is the place where you two met?”

Yasmin nods. “I was tutoring, and Grace attended dance classes. For a while, she was one of my students.”

Jade’s brows rise in surprise. “Grace needed tutoring?”

“One year, I got pneumonia, so I missed a lot of classes,” I explain. “Yas tutored me to help me pick up once I was better.”

“So, what can you do inside?”

“Anything?” I laugh as we go to the front door. “Tutoring centers, art classes, dance classes, sports, you name it, and...” I turn around to pull open the door, but before I can do it, it opens from the inside.

My heart stops when my eyes land on the familiar brown eyes.

“Mason.”

He, too, stops on the other side. We stare at each other for a heartbeat, neither of us saying anything.

He’s here. Alive and well. He’s he—

“Why did you sto— Oh.”

And he’s not alone.

“Ashley.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

MASON

Grace: Please, Mason, talk to me. I just want to know that you're okay.

My fingers tighten around my phone as the anger spreads through me. I stopped counting the number of messages she sent. The number of times she tried to call me, but I just couldn't bring myself to talk to her.

Not yet, anyway.

Locking my phone, I slide it back into my pocket.

“Do you really think this is a smart move?” Ashley gives me a side glance as we walk around the car. “You're still dealing with the migraine and, well, everything.”

I give her a warning glare, but don't slow my stride.

Last night I told Ashley what had happened. It seemed only fair after she took mercy on me and invited me to stay at her house until I figured things out. Plus, I just couldn't deal with her calling me Trent all the time. I had to give her some kind of explanation on why I insisted on it, so the truth was it. I mean, it can't get any crazier than that.

To say she was surprised would be an understatement.

I hoped things would be more transparent in the morning after I got some time to think about it, but I still couldn't wrap my head around it.

How is it possible? For three years, I've lived in somebody else's shoes, and nobody noticed. Not my—Trent's, I remind myself, *Trent's*—girlfriend, not his best friend, not his teachers. Nobody.

I pull open the passenger side door. “And I'll be dealing with it until I find out what exactly happened that night.”

“I'm not saying you shouldn't do it, just that you should wait until you feel better.”

“I'll feel better once I know the truth.”

The complete truth.

Without waiting for an answer, I slide into the passenger's seat and shut the door behind me. My eyes fall closed, and I barely manage to hold in a sigh of relief as my body relaxes into the leather seat. Wanting to admit it or not, Ashley is right. What happened yesterday whipped me mentally, emotionally, and physically. My head is still pulsing with repressed pain as different memories flash before my eyes every now and then, leaving me breathless.

Ashley huffs as she joins me and turns on the car. "This."

I force my eyes to open a small crack. The bright light of the morning makes my headache worse. "What?"

"This is the reason I never doubted you were Trent, not even for a moment."

"My determination?"

Ash rolls her eyes. "More like your asshole ways." She shakes her head, her fingers gripping around the steering wheel as she drives through the busy streets. "I couldn't stop thinking about it last night," she admits softly, her gaze growing distant. "How did I miss something so crucial, something that's been in front of my nose this whole time?"

"Trent was my boyfriend, but we'd been friends long before that. And sure, there were days when something felt off, but I always wrote it off as the memory thing. If you can't remember your past, how would you know how to act? But there were some moments when you're just like him."

"You loved him, and you were happy to have him back," I say simply.

"I did, but that didn't mean I was blind to the ways he acted." Her throat bobs. "We actually had a fight before he..."

"Really?" I pry my eyes open to look at her. "You never mentioned it."

"What would be the point?" Ash shrugs. Her face is pale, and there are dark shadows under her eyes as if she too couldn't sleep last night. "When I found out what happened, I

felt awful. I loved him, and the last words I said to him were uttered in hate. Then you woke up and didn't remember anything, so I figured what was the point in bringing it up?"

"What did you fight about?"

Ashley lets out a shaky breath, her fingers tightening around the steering wheel. "He cheated on me."

"Oh..."

"Yeah, well." Another shrug.

That explains so much of how things played out after I got out of the hospital. The possessiveness. Her insistence that we go to the same college. Her insecurities.

All because her boyfriend—*your brother*—couldn't keep his dick in his pants.

"I'm sorry he was an asshole."

She gives me a quick glance, her brows raised.

Right.

"That *we* were assholes."

"Yeah, well, I guess I have a thing when it comes to attracting those." She shakes her head. "Can you imagine it? How many people can tell you they dated both of the twins without even realizing it?"

Grace's tear-stained face flashes before my eyes.

"You knew I was from New York."

"So are nine million other people," she lifts her arms helplessly in the air and lets them fall back by her side.

We're staring at one another, both of us breathing hard as people pass by us. They must think that we're crazy, fighting like this, but I don't have it in me to care.

"But how many of those nine million other people look alike?"

"We all have a double out there somewhere. Isn't that what people say?"

“But what are the chances?”

“In my mind, they were bigger than you actually being Mason and forgetting all that had happened. Or even worse, pretending you don’t remember.”

“I didn’t remember!”

The throbbing between my temples increases; I lean my elbow against the door, rubbing the pain away.

The constant flashbacks are a nuisance. I wished I’d get all the memories back, but some parts of my past are still a blur. Then again, maybe it was a blessing in disguise because I’m not sure my brain could take any more of it.

Ashley thought I should go and see a doctor, but how the hell am I supposed to do that when I am dead?

For all intents and purposes, Mason LeBlanc is dead.

Grace’s name flashes on my phone like I summoned her with my thoughts. And, of course, Ashley notices it.

“Okay, I stand corrected. I know somebody who has dated two twins, or at least thought she did.” Ash tips her chin toward my phone. “You’re not going to answer that?”

“We’re not talking about that.” I silence the phone and turn it screen side down, for good measure. “Better yet, we’re not talking, period.”

I could use a break right about now, especially if the place where we’re going brings back more memories. I mean, that’s the whole point of this little trip, but still. Although I won’t admit it out loud, Ashley is right. This might be too soon, but I was too impatient to wait any longer to get some much-needed answers.

“You do know you need me, right?”

“I could always take a cab.”

Maybe I should have done that. It was my original idea, but Ashley didn’t want to hear of it.

Ashley turns to glare at me. “Fine, be a dick.”

“Sounds good to me.” I close my eyes, welcoming the darkness.

Unfortunately, it doesn't last long because Ash blasts the music, and when the next red light comes, she presses on that break a little harder than usual. I jolt forward in surprise, but the seatbelt zaps me back in place.

I glare at her, but she keeps her attention on the road—her silent way of telling me to go and screw myself.

Fine.

I close my eyes once again, trying to push my headache away. Not that the loud music is helping, but I'm not about to let her know that.

Ashley can be pissed all she wants, but she isn't the one who just found out that her whole life is a lie, and her parents kept it a secret for years.

She can't understand it.

Nobody can.

It's like my past has been erased—my present and future altered. All I was, and all the things I could have been were gone in seconds.

I'm not sure how long it takes before Ashley finally breaks the silence. “Is this it?”

I open my eyes and look out the window at the tall building.

Laughter.

The hairs at my nape rise as a different series of images flash in my mind.

Feet pounding, sneakers screeching against the court, ball bouncing...

I blink, trying to focus on now.

The building is in slightly better shape than it was before. There's a new coat of paint on the outside, and somebody

changed the door at some point. The sign is new, too, but it still blends pretty easily with the other buildings here.

“You want to go see it?” Ashley asks me verily.

“Yeah, sure.”

We unbuckle our seatbelts and get out. The building is relatively quiet when we enter, probably since it’s early in the morning. There’s a woman standing at the front desk. She looks up when she hears the door open.

“Hello, can I help you?”

“Yeah, hi.” I look around, more flashes, more memories coming back. I rub my temples. “I actually used to come here but have moved since.” A truth and a lie. I haven’t actually thought much of what would happen beforehand, which was stupid on my part. “Do you mind if we walk around for a bit? We won’t be long. I promise.”

The woman’s dark eyes narrow, and she shifts her attention from me to Ashley and back. “I’m not sure...”

“Please?” Ashley steps forward, a tentative smile on her face. “Mason has been in an accident, and he can’t remember all that has happened, but he remembers this place. We hope being here triggers some of his memories back.”

The woman’s wide eyes turn to me. “I’m so sorry to hear that.” She gives us another long look, biting the inside of her cheek as she thinks it through. I’m ready to turn around when she says: “Okay, but just for a few minutes, and only because there are not that many kids here.”

“Thank you,” I croak out, the relief swarming over me.

“But please don’t enter any of the rooms. You can check them out through the windows in the door, but...”

Ash nods. “We really appreciate it.”

Together, we turn around and walk down the hallway. Dull noises come from behind the closed doors.

Children’s laughter.

The running of feet.

Music.

I watch through the little windows in different rooms. Library. Common area. Game room. Study. Little kitchen.

“Anything?”

“Besides that, this is the right place?” I shake my head. “Nothing.”

Then again, this isn't the place where it all happened. I don't know what I really expected. I just knew I needed to come to this place. I might not remember the details, but I remember coming here a lot in those days, trying to get away from my father's wrath and his drunkenness.

Coming here had more to do with reclaiming a part of myself than anything else.

Shaking my head, I look into the next room and come to a stop.

Long legs clad in one of those super tight pants girls like to wear.

My heart kicks up a notch.

Shimmering red hair.

Palms sweaty.

A flash of a smile as she looked over her shoulder, laughing at something somebody said.

Grace.

I blink, only to realize I've been leaning against the door, my heart hammering in my ribcage. Then I spot an older woman standing on the other side, looking at me suspiciously. Her silver hair is pulled in a tight bun, her lips pressed in an unamused line.

I mouthed an apology before turning around and walking back to where we came from.

“What was that?”

“Just memories,” I say quickly. “I think we better leave before they throw us out.”

Ashley doesn't seem convinced, but she thankfully doesn't ask any more questions. The same woman is still sitting at the front desk. I thank her once again before going for the door.

I need some air.

I pull the door open, and the air is kicked out of my lungs all over again.

“Mason.”

My name comes out in a whoosh of air like she, too, had it kicked out of her lungs. Relief, happiness, hope all pass through her face in quick succession. An open book. That's exactly what she is.

Those emerald eyes are wide as they look into mine. They're slightly puffy and red-rimmed like she spent last night crying.

You did this.

Well, she lied.

Somebody bumps into me from behind, making me stumble.

“Why did you sto— Oh.”

Grace's lips part, her eyes going over my shoulder.

“Ashley.”

She takes a step back. Any bit of hope that shined in those emerald depths just moments ago completely extinguished.

It's only then that I notice that Grace's not alone. Her roommate and another friend are standing behind her, both of them glaring at me with daggers in their eyes.

Something about that other girl tugs at my memory. I narrow my eyes, trying to figure out where I know her from. It's probably co—

The memory slams into me unexpectedly.

A guy pulls my ball cap off my head and messes my hair.

“Hey, give that back,” I protest, trying to snatch it out of his grasp.

“Somebody’s little fan is here,” Mark, no Mac says with a shit-eating grin.

My head snaps up, and I look around the gym until my eyes land on hers.

The little redhead that’s been coming to the gym for weeks is now standing by the door with her friend. Our eyes meet, and she grabs her friend’s hand as if to steady herself.

“Mason?” Ashley puts her hand on my shoulder.

That’s her friend from back then.

I shake my head to clear my mind. Three pairs of eyes are staring at me. Or more precisely, at the hand on my shoulder.

Grace’s lips wobble. She bites the inside of her cheek and shakes her head. Before I can even think to say something—not that I know *what* to say—she turns on the balls of her feet and strides away.

“Grace!” the curly-haired friend yells after her.

Not her roommate, though. She walks right toward me, her eyes blazing fire.

“I warned you,” is all she says as she lifts her knee. Before I even realize what’s happening, her knee connects with my balls. A blinding pain spreads through me as I double over, white dots clouding my vision.

Fucking hell! This shit hurts.

There’s commotion around me, but I can’t register who’s talking or what’s being said because I’m in so much pain.

Ashley crouches in front of me, her worried face coming into my line of vision. “Are you okay?”

“Do I look okay?” I groan.

She cringes. “Sorry.”

I inhale deeply, trying to breathe through the pain. I’m not sure how long it takes for it to subside, but after a while, I slowly manage to stand to my full height.

“Let’s go.”

“What?”

I walk to Ashley’s car and don’t bother turning back. I try to open my door, but it’s locked.

“Fuck,” I mutter. Head falling down, I pinch the bridge of my nose.

My back stiffens as I hear footsteps marching toward me. If that’s Grace’s roommate coming for seconds...

“What the hell are you doing?” Ashley hisses when she comes near me.

“Open the car, Ash.”

“I’m not opening the car until you tell me what the hell you are doing.”

I turn around and glare at her, but she only crosses her arms over her chest and glares right back. What the hell did I do to deserve all these spunky women in my life?

“Leave it, Ash,” I grit through my clenched teeth.

“Leave it? Are you nuts?” her tone rises with each word that comes out of her mouth.

“It’s none of your business.”

“None of my business?” She tips her chin upward, her eyes narrow into tiny slits. “None of my business? You’re just going to let her walk away like that?”

“It’s better this way.”

“Better for who?”

“Ashley,” I growl in warning, my patience wearing thin.

“No, let me get this straight. You’re going to let the girl who you’ve been in love with for most of your life walk away like it’s nothing?”

I shift my weight from one foot to the other. Pain shoots through my groin area and down my leg. “That’s pushing it.”

She ignores me and continues. “Bullshit. Your brain remembered her despite the trauma it suffered. I might not have wanted to accept it, but I wasn’t blind. I could see the

way you looked at her since day one. Want to admit it or not, some part of you deep down inside recognized Grace, and you're just going to let her walk away thinking that we're back together?"

My brows shoot up. "I thought you didn't like Grace."

"I don't. But you didn't have to be an asshole just now."

"Can we not, Ash?"

I'm tired, I'm in fucking pain, and this is the last thing I want to deal with right now.

Grace was the last person I expected to find today. Then again, was it really such a surprise? Ashley is right. I couldn't even deny it if I wanted to. From the day I saw Grace again, it's like gravity has been pulling us together, over and over again. If she were in the room, I wouldn't be able to look away. And even when she wasn't there, my mind would find a way to conjure her in some way.

"I think we really should talk about it. It's not her fault, you know?"

"She knew," I remind her.

"She knew *Mason*. But you've been Trent for the last three years. You can't blame her for being confused. Hell, I'm here, and I know... I *know* you're not him, but I can't help but see him. Do you know how many times in the last twenty-four hours I wanted to call out to him, only to stop myself just before I opened my mouth and remembered?" Her fingers tighten around her upper arms, tears glistening in her eyes. "I know this is hard on you, but you're not the only one, Mason."

"She should have tried harder."

Maybe if she told me more about... *me*, I'd have remembered before. I rub my hand over my face. It's all just so fucked up. The whole situation is something that's a better fit for a movie than real life.

Stealing babies.

Brothers meeting after years.

One twin dead, the other one taking his life.

But maybe, *maybe*, if she gave me a sign, if she tried harder, I'd have known months ago.

And then what?

“Why?” With the back of her hand, Ashley wipes away the tears before they can slip much further. “Because she hasn’t suffered enough heartache as it is?”

The plain sorrow in Grace’s emerald eyes flashes in my mind. Those first few times we met, and how clearly sad she looked. I shake my head, which doesn’t help with the pulsing pain between my temples, so I close my eyes. “I can’t think about Grace now.”

Ashley is quiet for a moment. “Okay. If that’s what you want, but you’re not going to use me as a way to get back at her.”

My eyes snap open just to see her walking around the car. There’s a soft beep, and lights flash. I pull open my door and slide inside just as Ash does.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go to the doctor? Your brain just went through extreme trauma.”

“I’m fine.” I lean in my seat and close my eyes, welcoming the blissful darkness.

“That’s why you look like you’re about to pass out.”

“It’s just a little headache. It’ll pass.”

“Or maybe it’s taking the knee to the balls. Which you totally deserved. I think I might have a little girl crush on her friend.”

Yeah. Yeah, I did.

Ash clicks her seatbelt in place and turns on the engine. “Where do you want to go next?”

I force my eyes to open. “I want to go to my old house.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to do that another day?”

I shake my head. “I need to do this now.”

I need to go back. I need to... I'm not even sure what.

For all I know, that part of the city could be gone by now, completely demolished, like it should have been ages ago. Besides, nothing is going to change the fact that he's gone.

Dead.

Because of me.

If I hadn't invited Trent to come with me, the situation would have been reversed now.

"Okay."

Ash starts the car. We drive in silence, only speaking when I give her directions to my old neighborhood. It's like I'm on autopilot. My mind is still hazy, making my head hurt when I try to pull too many memories at the same time, but other things, like directions to my childhood home, come out without any problems. Like they were there all this time, and I just couldn't quite reach them.

Although it's still early in the afternoon, and the sun's still up, people give us curious stares as Ash drives slowly through the streets.

"We shouldn't have taken your car."

"Too late for that."

I look at the street, my eyes searching for the familiar building until I finally spot it. "That's the one."

The pressure builds behind my temples to the point it's unbearable. I grab the door handle tightly as the sweat coats my forehead—the memories of that night flash in front of my eyes in quick succession.

Seeing Trent for the first time. Both of us stopping and just staring at one another. Bickering. Trent wanting to leave, but I stopped him. I had asked him to come home with me instead. It was supposed to be safer. Only it wasn't. The men with masks coming out of the building just as we were entering. The shots. Three loud shots echoing through the night. The blast in my shoulder that threw me back. Falling. Falling. Falling. Searing pain going through my head. And then blackness.

“Mason!”

I open my eyes to find Ashley’s worried face right in front of me. Her hands are gripping my shoulders and shaking me slightly.

“Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah,” my voice comes out hoarse, and when I run my hand over my face, I realize I’m all sweaty.

“It’s like you spaced out or something.”

“More memories.”

“Of that night?”

“Yeah.” Ash opens her mouth, but before she can ask, I shake my head no. “You don’t want to know.”

My hand instantly goes to my collarbone, rubbing the permanent scar that marks that night and all that has happened since.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

GRACE

“Grace!” Yasmin calls after me, but I don’t stop running.

I stumble when I get off the sidewalk, my eyes blurry with tears.

He was with her. Out of all the people, out of all the places, he was with her, at *our* place.

Arms wrap around my middle and pull me back just as a loud honk rings in the street, followed by some really creative cursing when the car rushes past me.

“Are you insane?” Yasmin yells in my ear. “Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

Pure adrenaline rushes through my body. Blood is pumping through my veins so hard I can hear it echo in my eardrums. My lip quivers. I sink my teeth into it and cover my mouth for good measure, but there’s no stopping the sob from coming out.

He was with her.

I turn in my friend’s arms and bury my head in the crook of her neck just as a low whimper breaks out of my lungs.

“Oh, Grace,” Yasmin sighs, soothing me with her hand over my back. Up and down. Down and up.

I suck in a sharp breath, trying to get some semblance of control, but it’s useless.

“I-I c-can’t...”

“It’s okay,” Yasmin reassures me. “It’s all going to be okay.”

I shake my head no.

It’s not okay, and it won’t be.

The sound of feet pounding against the pavement reaches us, but neither of us moves. Hands wrap around me from behind.

“What an asshole. I swear I could go back and strangle him,” Jade grits through her teeth. She’s furious on my behalf, but I don’t want her to go back.

“I-I...” I suck in a breath. “H-home. I just want to go home.”

The New Year has come and gone. The girls wanted to party, but I wasn’t feeling it.

Seeing Mason with Ashley... It broke the last piece of me. I could understand him being angry at me for not saying anything. I could understand him freaking out and needing time to process everything, but to see him with her? At the one place that has been ours all these years? That wasn’t something I could or wanted to understand.

Besides, how was that fair? If she was Trent’s girlfriend, shouldn’t she have seen the difference? His best friend, too? Why was he only angry at me?

That day, after I got home, I rushed to my room. And then I cried. I cried until there were no tears left inside. It was the only chance I got because the next day, Yasmin and Jade were at my door, insisting I get up and get out of my room. So, I did.

I put on clothes and let them drag me out for shopping, lunch, and the gallery, but I drew a line when it came to going out for a party.

So in the end, we agreed to have a small party just for the six of us. Nixon and Yasmin, along with Jade and I, huddled in the living room at my place. Wren and Nicky joined us too, so Sienna and J.D. could go out for their annual charity party.

The girls insisted that we had to dress up. I tried to argue it was pointless, but they were having none of it. So we dressed up only to spend the night on the couch watching cartoons, drinking champagne, and making faces every time Nixon and Yasmin kissed, which was all the damn time.

I loved seeing my friend happy, but looking at them hurt so badly. It was like a reminder of all I could have had in another lifetime.

A light knock on my door startles me. I look up to find J.D. leaning against the doorway, his hands in his pockets.

He tips his chin at the bed and my suitcase. “All packed?”

“Just finishing.”

I place the sweater inside and pull the zipper.

“You don’t have to go, you know? I mean, if you’re not ready.”

I turn around to find my brother watching me carefully. The corner of my mouth lifts as I watch him nervously shift from one foot to another. I cross the room and wrap my arms around him.

“I have to go,” I whisper, letting his familiar scent ground me. I’m going to miss him when I’m back on campus. Miss all of them.

The spring semester and my classes are starting tomorrow. Ready or not, it was time to go back.

It’ll be okay. I’ll just do my thing and try my best to ignore Mason and Ashley. Something I should have done from the beginning.

If he’s even going to be there. Trent went to Blairwood, not Mason. It’ll be one hell of a mess to explain to the admin office.

Not that it’s my problem.

J.D. tightens his arms around me. “Do you want me to find him and punch him in the face?”

“Jade already did one better.”

It was still hard for me to wrap my mind around the fact that Jade actually went and kicked him. *In the balls*. And if it’s to be judged by Yasmin’s words, Jade didn’t hold back.

Jack lets go of me, a wide smile on his lips. “Smart girl. Maybe you’d feel better if you did it yourself.”

“How weak am I?” I shake my head, a humorless chuckle parting my lips. “Even after all that happened, I still hate to see him hurt.”

J.D. sighs. “You’re not weak.”

Tears burn my eyelids. “It feels that way,” I admit and look away.

J.D.’s finger slides under my chin and forces me to look at him. “You have a big, loving heart. There’s nothing weak about it. But please, promise me something? Be more careful with who you give it to. I hate seeing you hurt and knowing there’s nothing I can do to take away your pain.”

A lump forms in my throat. I gulp it down and nod. “I love you, Jack.”

His finger slides over my cheek, brushing away one lone tear. “I love you too, Gracie.”

MASON

A cold January air bites into my skin as we walk through the silent cemetery. There's an almost creepy stillness in the air. I'm not sure if it's this place or just the fact that we're doing this.

Finding out what happened to Trent took longer than anticipated, but we finally managed to find his—*mine*—death certificate and the place he was buried.

“I think it's this way,” Ashley says softly and points at one of the rows.

She's been awfully fidgety all the way here, leg bouncing against the floor, finger tapping away against the window, but that all changed once we got here. There is a stillness to her that I'm not used to seeing.

She's going to visit her dead boyfriend's grave. What did you expect?

I just nod and follow after her and a stone-faced Matteo.

I told him what had happened as soon as he got back to the city. He stopped by my house, Trent's house, but ended up texting me when he didn't find me, so I told him to meet me at Ashley's.

At first, he thought I was pulling his chain. Who could blame him? Not only did I ask him to meet me at Ashley's only weeks after we broke up, the story I told him when he got there utterly confused by what was going on was so freaking weird, even I barely believed it, and I remember enough to know it's true.

Ashley inhales sharply and comes to a stop, her fingers wrapping around my bicep and giving it a firm squeeze.

I look up to see what caused her reaction. I spot it almost instantly.

The grave.

The letters carved into white stone.

Mason LeBlanc.

A chill runs down my spine, making the goosebumps rise on my skin.

It feels... weird being on my brother's grave. Looking at my name etched into the stone.

My stomach clenches uncomfortably.

I look around at the other tombstones around it. Reading the names carved into the stones surrounding it until I find another familiar name.

Craig LeBlanc.

My throat bobs as I swallow the lump in my throat.

They buried him too. There is nobody else who could have done it but the Remingtons. We didn't have any other family left, as far as I know. After mom died, it was just the two of us, our own dysfunctional little family.

"At least they had enough decency not to bury them together," Matteo mutters from my side, noticing the same thing.

"Yeah." I look down at Ash. "You, okay?"

Tears glisten in her eyes as she just stares at the stone.

"Ash?"

This time, her head snaps to me. She brushes under her eyes, sniffing softly. "Yeah, sorry."

Letting go of my hand, Ashley walks to the grave and crouches down by the headstone. She removes the dead flowers and replaces them with the fresh ones she insisted on buying.

I would have never thought of it myself. Dad and I didn't visit mom's grave. He was a nasty prick toward her, toward both of us, really, but in some twisted way of his, he actually loved her. On the anniversary of her death, he'd usually drink until he passed out. Either that or go out and gamble the

money we didn't have, something that most likely ended up costing him his life—*our lives*.

I tried finding out if there was any info on how he died, but there was nothing. Not surprising, considering the life he lived.

My eyes dart back to Trent's grave.

How could they have done it?

How could they have switched our identities? Let their son, their actual *son*, be forgotten like this? Lying in a tomb with another's name on it?

Who the hell does something like that?

"This is so freaky," Matteo mutters.

"You're telling me that?"

If anybody knows how twisted all of this is, it's me. I had to live it for three years, have to live it still until I find a way to get my life back.

"He deserved better than this," Ashley sniffles softly, tracing her fingers over the stone.

"Everybody does."

I never knew Trent, not in the way these two had. We didn't spend even a full hour together. He might have been my brother, my twin, but these two people knew him way better than I did. Than I ever would.

I rub my hand over my face, feeling that ever-present pressure behind my temples building once again.

"We sho—"

I don't get to finish because I hear a familiar voice call out my name.

"Fucking..."

Ashley gives me a hard look as we turn to face my parents, Trent's parents, *our* parents.

This is a mess.

You'd think having more memories of my past would make things clearer, but apparently not. Despite all their lies and deceit, Regina and Beckett Remington have been my parents for the past three years as much as Josie and Craig LeBlanc had been for the first sixteen years of my life. Neither of them had been perfect, but they were all that I've got.

"C-can we talk?" Regina asks, her voice low. Beckett smooths his hand over her back, his face not revealing a thing as he looks at the grave behind me.

I brace myself, putting on a mask of cool aloofness. "How did you know where to find me?"

Did they follow me like they did with Trent?

"We always come here." She, too, looks toward the grave, a tear slipping down her cheek. "Once a month."

"You don't have to do this," Matteo says, not bothering with who can hear him.

Beckett's lips tighten at the words, but he says nothing. Regina wipes away the tears, her pleading eyes returning to me.

"I know." The devastation and understanding pass over both their faces. "Go," I tell my friends, my gaze still glued to my parents.

"Mas—"

"C'mon, Ashley," Matteo says gently, a tone I've never heard him use with her before, as he gives her a slight push. "Let's give Mason some privacy."

I give him a thankful nod.

"We'll wait for you in the parking lot." His gaze darts to my parents before it returns to me. "If you need anything..." He lets the rest of the sentence hang in the air.

"Thanks, man."

Matteo slaps me on the shoulder, and then he and Ashley walk away.

I turn my attention back to the headstone—a better option than to look at them. My name taunts me from the stone, raising a surge of anger inside of me.

“How?” I asked loud enough so they can hear me. “How could you have done it? How could you have let him be forgotten like this?”

“He isn’t forgotten,” Regina protests, walking around me. She places a bouquet next to the one Ashley got him. “We do come here often.”

Does she seriously think that makes it okay?

“What about other people? What about his friends? Don’t they deserve to know what happened to him? Doesn’t the world?”

“We did what we thought was best,” Beckett says, stopping by my side.

“Best?” I turn around to him. “Best for whom?”

The only people who benefited from this were the two of them. They got to clean up the mess their actions created and get a replacement for their son. A son, if it’s to believe their story, they didn’t bother looking for in the first place.

“Best for everybody.”

“Everybody?” I turn to the side to face him. A low chuckle escapes me, but there’s no humor in it. “It wasn’t best for me. And it sure as hell wasn’t best for Trent. You lied to me for three years. *Three fucking years.* You made me live another person’s life!” I yell, not bothering to be mindful of who can hear me. I point at Trent’s grave. “You buried your son under the wrong name so you can keep living your life as if nothing happened. You put me in his shoes and just expected me to fit it. It’s not even strange it took me this long to remember. How could I have when nothing, *nothing*, rang a bell in my mind?”

Regina grabs my hand and tugs me toward her. Her hands are clammy, nails digging into my skin as she tightens her hold on me. “We’re sorry about that.”

I look into her wide, desperate eyes. “Are you really? Because you sure have a strange way of showing it.”

“W-we’ll... We’ll make it right.” She nods her head as if that’ll solve everything. “We’ll help you get your life back.”

“And who’s going to give me back three years of *my* life that I have lost?”

“Mason...” Her lip trembles.

I expect at least a part of me to feel bad, but there’s nothing. No sympathy for what they’ve done. No sympathy for their hurt feelings. They might feel bad for losing Trent, mourn his loss, but it still doesn’t rectify what they’ve done.

Shaking my head, I take a step back. “Being sorry doesn’t change what you did.”

Tears gather in her eyes. “How can we make this right?”

My eyes dart toward the grave, and it takes all of me to push my anger back. “Give him some peace,” I say softly. “And give me back my life.”

With that, I turn on the balls of my feet and start to walk away.

“Do you think you’ll be able to forgive us?” Regina calls after me, stopping me in my tracks.

I don’t turn around. There’s no point.

Tears and begging won’t change my mind. Not on this. If not me, if nobody else, Trent, her *son*, deserved better.

And then I tell them the truth.

“I don’t know.”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

GRACE

“How are you holding up?” Yasmin asks as she takes a seat opposite me, a coffee and a sandwich in hand.

I just finished my class, so I figured I might as well get my caffeine refill and try to get a little work done while I’m at it.

“Shouldn’t you be working?”

Yas takes a huge bite of her sandwich and mumbles, “Lunch break.”

“So classy.”

I look at the counter where her colleague is prepping the order for a guy standing in line. When I got here, the place was packed, but I guess at some point, while I was stuck in my own head, it died down.

“Hey, don’t protest. I’m doing this for you.” She taps my foot with hers under the table. “So? How are you for reals?”

I shrug, not really sure what to say. “Good?”

I’ve been sleeping like shit since my date with Mason, so at this point, I’m practically living on caffeine. And while I knew I probably wouldn’t get much work done in Cup It Up, I couldn’t bring myself to go back to the library. One more spot to add to the list of places that just hold too many memories.

Maybe I should have gone back to the dorm, but then I’d risk seeing Jade and Rei, both of which give me the same look Yasmin does.

I guess there’s no escaping the inquisition, no matter where I go.

Yasmin narrows her eyes at me. “You don’t look good.”

“That’s exactly what every girl wants to hear.” I roll my eyes, which earns me a hard glare from my friend.

“It’s not funny!” She gives me a little shove. “When was the last time you slept?”

Days? More like weeks. Even if I close my eyes, I rarely sleep through the night. Nightmares haunt my dreams. Mason leaving. Disappearing on me completely. And no matter how hard I run after him, it's useless.

I rub my hands over my face. "It's been... hard," I admit finally.

Yasmin puts her hand over mine. "Have you seen him?"

There's only one him she can be talking about. Not like my friends ever say his name out loud. I'm not sure if it would be easier or more challenging if they did.

I shake my head no, my hands tightening around the cup. I take a small sip, letting the caffeine enter my bloodstream.

"Grace..." Yasmin's soft voice is my undoing.

"I don't want to see him."

Yasmin just looks at me, a confused frown between her brows. "You don't?"

"You all were right." Admitting it out loud hurts more than I expected, but it's true. "I should have never gone there. Not just because he had a girlfriend, but also because there were just too many similarities. I should have made sure to stay as far from him when I saw it. All of this... it's my own damn fault."

Yasmin puts her hand over mine. "It's not your fault that he's acting like a jackass. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Exactly!" Tears burn my eyes, but I blink them away. "To say this is my fault..."

My voice trails off, that familiar pain wrapping around my heart and squeezing tightly.

Why does it still hurt so badly? Thinking about him? About everything that has happened?

He made his choice. He wanted to blame somebody, and that somebody turned out to be me.

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. "He..."

The doorbell chimes, and I instinctively look up. I almost wish I hadn't because none other than Ashley is standing in the doorway. Her eyes are on me, and she looks almost as surprised as I am.

I suck in a breath. Seeing her is like adding salt to a barely healed wound. For the first two weeks of classes, I've managed not to stumble into any of them. But I guess it was pure luck, and I was, like always, running out of it.

"What's..." Yasmin looks over her shoulder and finds the reason for my distress. "Oh, shit." She turns to me. "Do you want to go?"

"No, it's fine." I look down at the table. *God, please let her get her coffee and get out of here.* "I'll have to get used to seeing her around campus."

Seeing them.

"You don't have to get used to anything. If you want to leave, nobody will blame you for it."

Maybe not, but I will. I should be stronger than this. It's been two weeks since classes started, almost a month since the incident. I have to move on. Like Mason has. With her.

Stupid, stupid girl.

"I'll be fine." I force out a smile. "How are your classes?"

Yasmin just stares at me, and I can see the skepticism clearly written on her face. But instead of pointing it out, she tells me about her classes and an internship she just started at the local elementary school.

I focus all my attention on Yasmin. That's why I don't hear her until she stops at my table.

"Grace?" My whole body turns stiff at the sound of Ashley's voice. "Can we talk?"

My fingers clench into fists, but I keep my gaze on Yasmin. "I don't..."

"Please?" She places her hand on my table. "It's important."

Yasmin shakes her head. *You don't have to do it*; she tells me wordlessly.

But that's where she's wrong. I can't keep running from this. I might as well face it now.

"Okay."

"Grace..." Yasmin warns.

I give her a reassuring smile. At least, I hope it's reassuring. "I'll be fine."

Yasmin holds my stare for a moment before she nods. "I'll be here if you need anything."

With that, she grabs her lunch and gets up. Her back is to me, so I'm not sure, but I'm pretty confident she glared at Ashley before going to the counter.

"You have good friends. You know that, right?" Ashley pulls out the chair and takes the seat Yasmin just vacated.

"They're the best."

"That they are."

There's almost a wistfulness to her tone that I'm not used to hearing. Ashley wraps her fingers around her cup and just looks at me for a while from the other side of the table.

It's unnerving, the way she just stares at me like that.

"So..." I shift in the chair. "Was there a point to this conversation?"

"Yeah, right." She nods. "What happened last time..."

I shake my head. "You don't need to explain."

The last thing I want is to listen to her tell me about Mason.

"But I do. Tre—" Ashley bites the inside of her cheek, stopping herself. "*Mason* told me what happened. God knows if he would have done it if I hadn't stumbled upon him just as he was getting out of his parent's house." A frown appears between her brows. "The Remington's house?" She shakes her head. "God, this is confusing."

“Tell me about it,” I mutter. At least this is one thing we could agree on.

Ashley tucks a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Anyhow, I saw him that night. He looked like a mess, and no matter how angry at him I was, I just couldn’t leave him alone. Not when he was like that.”

I hated the implication behind her statement. Nobody forced Mason to do this alone. He left. He left and never looked back.

He didn’t even take a minute to try to understand where I was coming from.

“I don’t know what that has to do with me,” I say, doing my best to keep my face even.

“I guess I just... There’s nothing going on between Mason and me. He needed a friend, and that’s what he got. We’re not together.”

“Again, I don’t see how that’s any of my concern.” I push to my feet, ready to get out of there, but Ashley’s next words stop me.

“I don’t know how you did it,” her voice rises, her fingers tightening around her coffee cup. “I never suspected. Well... there might have been a situation or two when something about him seemed... off. But Mason suffered a brain injury from the fall and couldn’t remember anything from before. I figured I’d give him some slack. But you knew. From the very first day.”

“I suspected.” I shift my weight from one foot to the other. “But he seemed so... sure. And between you and Matteo, I figured this is some really twisted way destiny is playing with me. Maybe the resemblance is just that uncanny. Maybe...” I shake my head. It doesn’t even matter. Not any longer.

“He was. Sure, I mean. I knew Trent all my life, but even I didn’t see it. I guess we all saw what we wanted to see.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I run my fingers through my hair, taking a step forward, but Ashley stops me once again.

“He’s hurting, you know.”

“Well, I’m hurting too,” I throw right back.

The last thing I need is to have somebody rub his pain in my face after everything that has happened. Does what happened to him mean his pain matters more than mine? That I should just forgive him?

Ashley nods in understanding. “I can see that. But what he’s been through... he lived a life of his dead twin for years. Just... don’t give up on him, Grace. Not yet. Give him time.”

“Give him time,” I chuckle, pushing back my hair. “I’ve given him three years of my life, Ashley. *Three years*. I loved him. I looked for him. I mourned him.” I shake my head. “I think it’s time I put myself first for once.”

With that, I grab my bag and leave.

CHAPTER FIFTY

MASON

“Gimmie another beer, kid.”

I wipe the glass and put it back in its place before turning my attention to the tall man sitting hunched over the bar and staring at the empty glass like it holds the answers to all of his questions.

“Sorry, Greg, can’t do.”

Slowly, he looks up, a frown etched deep between his brows. “‘cha mean, can’ do?” he slurs, his face growing redder by the second.

In these past few weeks, ever since I started working here, I’ve become quite familiar with Greg and a few other regulars at the Cottage, some dive bar, just on the outskirts of Blairwood.

Greg’s an older guy, probably in his mid to late fifties. He’s maybe a few inches shorter than me but built. The dude works construction and always comes after his job, but that “just one drink” turns into staying here for hours. His face is weathered, hair grayer than brown at this point. Watching him is like going back in time. He reminds me of my father, my real father.

I never thought I’d be working at a bar, not after I’d lived with an alcoholic for a better part of my life and knew what it could do to people, to families, but here we are. Life has a funny way of showing you where you can stick your morals. Then again, it’s not like I had many options. Not while I was still waiting for the Remingtons to sort this shit out and hiding in my dorm in the meantime. Tim, my boss, doesn’t care one bit what my name is. I show up and work; he pays me. As easy as that. And I need a little bit of easy right about now.

“Just like I said, can’t do. You’ve had more than enough for one night. Do you want some water instead? Or I can call you a cab?”

“I d-don’t wanna water. Or c-cab,” he hiccups. “Gimmie my whiskey.”

I open my mouth, but before I can utter a word, my boss comes from the back. “You heard the boy, Greg. How about a glass of water?” Tim gives me a nod. “Your shift’s up, kid. I’ll see you tomorrow. I have an order coming in that I’ll need you to stock.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

Leaving the mop on the counter, I grab my jacket and head out.

The cold January air hits me in the face as soon as I step outside. I unlock my car and rush to get inside. The snow has started to fall sometime recently because the car’s covered in a fine layer of white powder. Just as I sit in my car, my phone starts to vibrate. I pull it out of my pocket, and my heart stops for a second as I see Dad written on the screen.

I didn’t change their names in my contacts. Maybe I should have. Like maybe I should have returned the car they gave me and left the dorm they were paying for, but fuck it. Where was I supposed to go? I’m basically homeless.

My friends from before were still blurry in my mind. Besides, I haven’t talked to them in years, and all my friends here knew me as Trent. The man who raised me was buried by the brother I barely got a chance to meet. I was virtually all on my own.

Taking a deep breath, I push the rising panic at bay and answer the call, “Yeah?”

“Mason?” He seems surprised I’d answered. I guess that makes two of us.

We have barely talked since that day at the cemetery. There was nothing to be said, really. I couldn’t be who they wanted me to be, and I don’t think I will be able to forgive them anytime soon for what they’ve done.

My fingers tighten around the phone. Another thing I should give back. Seriously, that list is never-ending. “It’s me. What’s up?”

“I-I...” He lets out a long breath. “It’s done.”

“W-what?” I sit up straighter, wondering if I heard him correctly.

“It’s done. My lawyer just called me. You’re Mason LeBlanc once again.”

“But...” I run my hand through my hair, at a loss for words. “How?”

I knew they’d said they’d make it right, but I expected it to take time. Years maybe. I mean, how many people suddenly come alive after they’ve been presumed dead for three years?

“Right people, enough pull, and you can get everything done.”

When he puts it like that.

I let my free hand fall down, finger curling around the steering wheel. “Just like that, huh?”

“Just like that.” There’s a slight pause. “If you give me your address, we’ll send you your documents right away.”

This is actually happening. I’m... I’m me again.

I close my eyes and take in a shaky breath. It feels surreal. A part of me actually didn’t believe it’d be possible.

“Mason? You still there?”

“Yeah, sure.” I rub the back of my neck. “I was staying in the dorm, but I guess I’ll have to find my own place now.”

My own place. My own clothes. Food. Car. Phone.

That familiar panic hits me once again. A lump in my throat makes it hard to breathe.

“You don’t have to leave. I called the dean and explained the situation. He agreed to make the name change. You’ll keep all your credits and your spot on the basketball team.” His tone turns more serious. “He even said he’d overlook you missing the first couple of weeks of classes.”

Why does it feel like he just busted me for doing something wrong?

Damn, this is so messed up.

I shake my head, although I know he can't see me. "I can't accept that. This was all Trent's..."

"All of this belongs to my son. *Sons.*" There is a trace of pain laced through his voice. It's the first time he's shown feelings since this whole fiasco started. "Trent is gone, and he's not coming back. Go to college, Mason. Live. Do what you want to do. If we had done the right thing from the beginning, it would have been yours, anyway. The whole situation was a ticking time bomb, and it was just a matter of time before it blew up in our faces. It doesn't excuse what we did, but it's the truth. And Regina... she felt so bad for taking you boys from Josie. Having kids was what we wanted, desperately, but after not being able to have them of our own for years, a part of her could understand Josie too. She wasn't a surrogate. She was a desperate woman in need of help. She carried you two for nine months. It couldn't be easy to walk away from that. Walk away from *you*. She probably wouldn't have done it if she wasn't desperate enough to get money to cover her husband's debts." Beckett lets out a long sigh. "At least think about it? I know it can't be easy starting over like this, which was our fault."

"Okay, I'll think about it."

"Okay," he echoes. "Well, if you need anything, we're here. Regina and I talked about it, and we know you said you don't know if you'll be able to forgive us, but if and when you do, we're here. I mean it. We'd really like to know you, Mason. The real you."

My throat tightens, all the pent-up feelings I've been pushing back coming to the surface. Drowning me.

"Okay," my voice is rough, so I gulp down and try again. "Thanks for taking care of all of that for me."

"Anytime."

There's a moment of silence. I should say my goodbye and hang up, but there's still one other thing I need to know.

"You buried my father, didn't you?"

There is a long pause on the other side of the line. So long that for a moment, I think he hung up. “Yes,” he says finally. “It was easiest to take care of everything so people wouldn’t ask questions.”

Of course, it was. His words leave a bitter taste in my mouth. “Do you know what happened? That night?”

“Like I said, Craig has been a gambler since before you were born, but that year he’d gone way over his head, owing money to some pretty shady people who had finally had enough of it and paid him a visit. The place was trashed, and he was beaten pretty badly, which caused internal bleeding.”

“He bled to death,” I state plainly.

“Yes.”

I don’t know what to say about that. My memory is still fuzzy at best, but from what I remembered, I had a difficult relationship with my father. He was a mean drunk who couldn’t take care of himself, much less his family. For him, everything was somebody else’s fault. Was it wrong that I didn’t feel sorry for him or the way he died? Maybe, but then again, if he weren’t who he was, I wouldn’t be in this mess at all, to begin with.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“No problem, son.”

I don’t bother correcting him. Instead, we say our goodbyes. Once the connection is dead, I let the phone fall down in my lap and tilt my head back, but it almost instantly beeps once again with a text message. It’s from Beckett. The only thing the message contains is a photo. I click on it, and a snap of my ID appears on my screen.

Mason LeBlanc.

It’s real.

“So, this is it?” Matteo asks, looking over my shoulder at the plastic card.

I didn’t want to tell him anything, not until I saw it with my own eyes, but just like Beckett promised, an envelope had been waiting for me when I got to my P.O. box, all my documents inside.

“This is it.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“Stay?” I shrug. “Hell, if I know. If you asked me yesterday, I’d have told you I’d move on. Find a job and try to get my life in order, but Beckett told me to stay.”

I slide the envelope safely inside my backpack. Never again will I take a piece of plastic for granted.

“And today?”

“Today, I don’t know. Apparently, he cleared everything with the dean, and the spot is mine. I can stay here as Mason.”

“That will be some hell of explaining.”

We exchange a look and burst into laughter. It feels good just to joke and laugh around. I hadn’t even realized how much I needed it until this very moment.

“It sure will.”

Matteo’s face grows serious. “Do you want to? To stay, I mean.”

I bury my hands in the pockets of my jacket and look around. The campus is busy with people going to and from classes. There was something about this place that drew me in from the very first time I saw it. Blairwood is a good college, one of the very best actually, and my best friend wanted to come here, but there was something more. Something that I couldn’t pinpoint at the time.

Destiny maybe?

Snow that had fallen last night gives the whole campus a winter wonderland look. People have built snowmen around the campus. There’s even one igloo decorating the main

square. The fountain is empty, but the faculty had decorated it with twinkling lights for the holidays. They had yet to take it down.

Her soft face, illuminated by the glimmering lights, flashes before my eyes.

Grace.

After that day at the community center, when she saw me with Ashley, she hadn't bothered calling or texting. I guess I deserved that for ditching her like I did and blaming her for what had happened when it was anything but her fault.

But I missed her.

I didn't allow myself to, not often. My life was too messed up to worry about anything but sorting it out, but even so, she'd occasionally sneak into my thoughts.

The redhead with the most brilliant green eyes.

My chest aches, and I lift my hand to rub against the hollow spot.

How did we come to... this?

“Mason?”

Matteo's question snaps me out of my thoughts. “I think so. There was always something about this place that I liked. It's actually a relief knowing that I have a place to stay for the moment, but a part of me feels guilty because I know this doesn't belong to me.”

Matteo shakes his head. “Trent would have wanted you to have it. Besides, you deserve it for all the shit they put you through.”

I run my hand through my hair. “I guess. I'm just bad at accepting help. My dad, my real dad, was an addict, so for most of my life, I had to take care of shit if I wanted to see it done. Relying on somebody else's charity...”

“I get it, but trust me when I say the Remingtons can afford it.”

“I know. I might keep that shift at the bar, though. It’s not a lot, but it would be something.”

Something that’s just mine. Something I can rely on if things go south.

“Whatever you want, man. As long as it doesn’t mess with our ball schedule.” He gives me a side glance. “You coming to practice today, right?”

But I hear the question he doesn’t ask. Are you ready to face your teammates and tell them the truth?

“Yeah, I...” Whatever I wanted to say dies on my lips because when I look up, I see her.

Grace.

Those emerald eyes grow wide when they land on mine, her lips parting in surprise. She’s mid-step, and when she tries to put her foot down, she stands on an icy patch.

“Shit.”

I reach her just in time, my hands grabbing hers to steady her. “Are you okay?”

“I-I...” She takes a step back, out of my reach, my hands falling down to my sides. “Yeah.” Her throat bobs as she swallows, looking anywhere but at me. “Hi, Matteo.”

With a small smile directed at my best friend, she ducks her head and rushes past us.

Hi, Matteo.

Her words are like a bucket of cold water. My best friend got a hello and even a smile. Me? She walked right past me without another glance back.

What the hell did you expect, asshole? You blamed her for the shitshow that’s your life, and then you left.

I stare dumbfoundedly at her as she hurries away.

Matteo elbows me on the side. “What the hell was that?”

“Nothing.”

From the corner of my eyes, I can see him turn to look at me. “You still haven’t talked to her.”

I cringe at the accusation in his tone.

“What the hell, dude?” He shoves me. “Go after her.”

I shake my head. “Maybe it’s better this way.”

I’ve hurt Grace too many times to count as it is. First by disappearing three years ago, then by dating Ashley when we met again, and finally that day in the park.

“Better for who?”

“Better for *her*.”

The last thing I want is to hurt her again. She might have looked at me just for a heartbeat, but it was enough for me to notice those shadows in her eyes. The ones that were there last fall. The ones that I put there.

“That’s just saying you’re too chickenshit to try and make this right. You fucked up? So what? You’ll probably do it again. But you better put on your big girl panties, apologize, and beg her to take your sorry ass back.”

“It’s not that simple.”

Matteo jabs me in the chest. “It’s exactly that simple. You want the girl? Go and get her. Seriously dude, what are the chances of your paths crossing for the third time? There must be a reason you both ended up here.” His brows rise. “So, are you going to stay here and feel sorry for yourself, or are you going to go after her and make things right?”

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

GRACE

Too soon.

This is all happening too soon.

My heart is racing as I rush as fast as my legs can carry me over the icy ground. Tingles are still running through my limbs from where he had touched me.

Will it ever stop? Will my body finally get the memo that it's over? Mason and I, we're like star-crossed lovers. Meeting over and over again, but it's never the right place, never the right time.

I wrap my arms around myself and rub my upper arms.

I was doing fine. Just fine. Until now. Until I laid my eyes on him.

It's that damn face. Those dimples. They're my undoing.

Why did I think this was going to be okay? That I could actually do this? Who was I kidding?

Me. That's who.

"Grace!"

Just keep on walking. Just keep on walking. Just keep on walk—

A hand wraps around my wrist, and before I can blink, my body turns around, and I'm standing face to face with him.

Mason is breathing hard like he ran so he could catch up to me. His cheeks are red from the cold, and there's almost a wild look in his eyes.

"Can we talk?"

Can we talk? Is this guy for real? Now? Now he wants to talk?

"I think we said all that needed to be said."

I try to take a step back, but Mason doesn't let go of my hand.

"Please, Grace," his voice is soft, pleading. I sink my teeth into my lower lip. "Just a few minutes, that's all."

I shake my head. "I can't keep doing this, Mason. I just can't. I can't keep playing this game because no matter what I do, I won't come out as a winner."

He cups my cheek. I turn my head away, but it's not far enough. There is not enough space to put distance between us, not enough space to run.

"No more games, I promise. Just hear me out." Mason runs the back of his fingers down the side of my face. My throat bobs as I swallow as he caresses my skin. The need to lean into his touch is so overwhelming it leaves me breathless.

You're stronger than this.

Sniffing softly, I school my features the best I can, and then I turn to face him. "Like you listened to me?"

"I'm sorry, okay? My head was all messed up that day. It's a shitty excuse, but it's the truth. I didn't know what was left and what was right. What's true and what's false."

"So it was easiest to think I'm the one lying?" I place my hands on his chest and shove him away. *I'm so sick of this. I'm so sick of being a proverbial punching bag for everybody. For always coming second.*

He runs his fingers through his hair, making a mess of it. "I didn't know what to think! You called me Mason, yet you've been with me as Trent."

"I tried to stay away!"

How many times will I have to repeat it until he finally believes me?

"And look how well that turned out."

"Screw you, Mason."

Tears fill my eyes, but I duck my head and turn around. I'm done with letting him see me cry. Letting him break my

heart over and over again. I'm done with Mason LeBlanc, period.

"You can run away all you want, but I won't give up," he yells after me. "Our paths keep crossing for a reason. You can't tell me you don't think the same."

My footsteps slow down until I come to a stop. I wrap my arms around myself, holding tight.

If it was only that simple. I wanted to believe there was more to us meeting here. More to our story than three years of heartache, but how could I when the evidence showed exactly the contrary.

"The only thing I know is that every time our paths cross, I end up with my heart severed into even smaller pieces than it was before. There's nothing left to give."

"Grace..."

"No," I shake my head. "I'm done, Mason. This time, I'm picking me."

And with that, I walk away from the boy I've loved my whole life.

"You did the right thing," Jade whispers, brushing my hair away from my face.

"Why does it hurt so much then?"

"Because it hurts letting go of the people you love." Jade leans her head against the top of mine. "No matter how much you know it's the right thing to do for yourself."

I know she's right. I know *this* is right. No matter how much I love Mason, this has to stop. I can't keep giving him chances to break my heart. It was so easy for him to forgive everybody but me. Why do I have to be the villain of our story?

I don't.

I can't.

I'm not.

"I don't know how I'm going to do it, Jade," I admit, voicing the words out loud for the first time. Tears pool in my eyes, and it takes everything in me to hold them back. My fingers clench in my lap, nails digging into my skin. "I don't know how to stay here knowing that he's going to be around. Walking on the same campus. Meeting him at random places. Maybe Rei is right. Maybe it's best just to pack and start over somewhere new."

Just the other day, Rei had a fight with her boyfriend, Zane. So she packed her things and left. At first, I thought she had just left for one of her competitions, but then a guy came over a day later to get the rest of her things.

At least Zane's reasons for wanting to break up were somewhat noble. Although seriously, why guys think they can dictate how we feel and who we love, what's right and what's wrong, I'll never understand.

"Screw that!" Jade pulls back abruptly, startling me. "You're not going anywhere, and neither is Rei."

"She already left," I point out, sitting up on the couch. "That guy came the day after to pick up her things."

"So what? There's nothing saying we can't get her to come back." Jade jumps to her feet. "Seriously, you two are so lucky I love you because all this boy drama is giving me a headache."

"Jade..." I say slowly, watching her pace the room. "What are you doing?"

"Planning." She rolls her eyes as if I should have known that by now. "I'm planning."

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

MASON

My eyes scan the campus, looking for her face in every person I see, but it's not her.

It's never her.

Where are you, Grace?

I've tried searching for her. I've been to the dance studio, I've passed by her dorm, cafeteria, coffee shop, I've been to our spot in the library, but she was nowhere to be found.

"You can do this." Matteo slaps me on the shoulder enthusiastically, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I look over my shoulder at him. "Are you planning to dislocate my shoulder?"

"Sorry, I'm just nervous."

"You're telling me that?"

For the most part, my classes so far have gone well. But that's only because I haven't known a lot of people, and they haven't known me.

This, however, is different.

These guys know me. We hung out together. We talked and joked. We played ball.

Explaining things to them will be different.

Harder.

"You can do this. They'll probably give you shit, but they'll chill out after a while."

My throat bobs as I swallow. "Maybe they won't even be in the locker room. Maybe..."

But before I can finish, I hear the voices. I stop in my tracks, but it's already too late. Quinn looks up just as I step into the doorway, his smile falling.

"Oh, look who's alive!"

The chatter in the locker room dies, and all eyes turn to me. So much for arriving late and hoping nobody will see me sneaking in.

Quinn finishes tying his shoe and lets his foot fall on the ground before standing up, arms crossed over his chest, one brow raised. “You were kidnapped or some shit?”

I rub the back of my neck, feeling self-conscious about the whole situation.

“Some shit,” I try to joke, but nobody laughs.

Matteo nudges me with his elbow, and I let out a sigh. “I’m sorry, guys. I wanted to be here, but things have been... crazy, to say the least.”

“Crazy, Remington? That’s the best you’ve got after you left us hanging for the past few *weeks*?”

I take in all the faces in the room. These guys have been standing by my side since day one. And I let them down.

“It’s not Remington.”

“What?” Nate gets up and stands next to Quinn.

“It’s not Remington,” I repeat, this time louder. “My name’s Mason LeBlanc.”

Quinn’s eyes narrow in confusion. “Who the hell is Trent Remington then?”

I look him straight in the eyes and tell him the truth, “Trent is my dead brother.”

The silence that falls over the locker room is almost deafening. I can feel the guys’ probing gazes directed at me as if I just grew another hand or something.

Matteo is the first to break the silence. “Mason wasn’t joking when he said things have been crazy.”

I turn to my best friend and give him a grateful smile.

“It’s a long story, but I’m back, and I’m here to stay.” I make sure to look at the eyes of every single one of my

teammates until I finally reach Quinn. “And I’d love to keep my spot on the team if you’ll have me.”

I shift my weight from one foot to the other. This is it, the moment of truth. I said my piece. Now, it’s up to them to make the call.

But before they can say anything, Coach pops his head into the locker room. “What the hell is this? A tea party?” Those narrowed eyes finally set on me. “LeBlanc, why aren’t you dressed? Just because you slacked for the past few weeks doesn’t mean you get a free pass today. I want to see you all in the gym in sixty seconds. Who’s not there is running suicides.”

With that, he leaves as abruptly as he came. Not needing any more encouragement, guys get to their feet and head toward the door. Quinn stops next to me. “You better not screw up again, Rookie. Now better hustle. You’ve got some making up to do.”

Grace’s tear-stained face pops into my mind, the ache in my chest that I’ve been pushing coming back in full force.

In more ways than one.

“You’re cranky,” Stacy pokes me in the cheek.

“I’m not cranky,” I protest.

Maybe coming here wasn’t such a good idea after all, but I wanted to get off campus, and this was the only place that came to my mind.

Her little hands cup my cheeks and press against them. “There are lines between your brows.” She slides her fingers over them in an attempt to smooth them over, a serious look on her face. “Usually, when there are lines between Mom’s brows, it’s because somebody made her angry. Who made you angry?”

Life, I want to say, but knowing her, it’ll only lead to more questions I don’t have answers to.

“Nobody made me angry. It’s just been a hard day, that’s all.”

Try more like a hard month, but who’s counting?

Going to Bright Haven was my final option, but only Vanessa was here. I hoped this place would at least give me some solace, but no such luck.

It’s like she disappeared from campus, and no matter where I tried to look for her, I couldn’t find her. If this is a sliver of what Grace felt when I disappeared, I didn’t want to be in her shoes.

God, I miss her.

I hadn’t even realized how much until I saw her again. I’ve been too focused on figuring out all that has happened to me since that December night—figuring out what to do with my life now that I have my name back.

But seeing her on campus was a kick to my gut, reminding me of what has happened to cause my memories to come back. Of what I’ve done. What I’ve *lost*.

I couldn’t even blame Grace for walking away. I don’t deserve her, not after everything that has happened. I should probably let her go. Let her heal and find happiness with somebody who deserves her way more than I do.

A sour taste spreads over my tongue as the bile rises in my throat.

Then why does just thinking about it feel like somebody has poured acid into my stomach?

It’s exactly that simple. You want the girl? Go and get her. Seriously, dude, what are the chances of your paths crossing for the third time? There must be a reason you both ended up here. So, are you going to stay here and feel sorry for yourself, or are you going to go after her and make things right?

A finger jabs me into my side. “Mason?”

I shake my head and look down at her. “Yeah?”

“Are you okay?”

No, I'm not okay. I don't think I'll be okay until I talk to her.

One last time.

One last chance.

If I don't find her, or if she doesn't want to listen, I'll let her go, but I have to try.

“Sorry, I spaced out there for a bit.” I check my watch and sigh. “I’ve gotta go. Finish that homework before you go out to play.”

Stacy pouts. “I don’t wanna.”

“Well, you have to. And I’ll know if you don’t do it, and you know what that means, right?”

She pokes her tongue out at me. “You don’t play fair.”

“Life’s not fair, kid.” I ruffle her hair before getting to my feet. “Finish your homework.”

“Yes, Coach.”

Laughing, I get to my feet and throw my backpack over my shoulder. “I’ll see you later.”

She just waves me off, her tongue poking out of the side of her mouth as she gets back to her math homework. I shake my head and go out into the hallway. Before I can turn around to get to the foyer, an open door at the end of the hall catches my attention, beckoning me.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

GRACE

“How was Boston?” Yasmin asks as we get out of the car.

I shut my door and threw my duffle bag over my shoulder.
“Good. Rei was amazing.”

Callie looks at me. “Did she land that jump?”

“She landed the quad, and it was stunning.”

She’s been working really hard on it for the past few months, and I was so happy that her dreams were coming true. And not just when it came to figure skating.

“Did you know Zane came to Boston?”

Yasmin rolls her eyes. “Who doesn’t?”

I look between the two of them. “Did I miss something?”

“Somebody posted the video of the two of them, and it went viral.”

“What?” My mouth hangs open as I look between the two of them. “You’re joking.”

I’ve been avoiding the internet, my phone in general, really, since everything played out with Mason. I didn’t want to constantly reach for it, only to realize we were through.

“Nope, not joking,” Yasmin grins. “The guys are going to give him so much shit when he gets home from Boston.”

While Jade and I came back to campus after Rei’s last performance, Zane decided to stay with her at her father’s house. They should join us in a day or two once Rei wraps up all things back home.

A few days away from campus, away from *Mason*, was exactly what I needed, but after seeing Zane and Rei make-up, that ache was back in my chest, stronger than ever.

You have to let him go.

Only it’s easier said than done.

“Grace?” Yasmin stops in her tracks and looks over her shoulder. “You coming?”

“I...” I look down the hallway before facing my friends once again. I hadn’t even realized I’d stopped in my tracks. “I’ll be there in a bit. I have to do something.”

She and Callie exchange a look. “Want us to join you?”

I shake my head no. “I’ll be just a minute. You girls go on ahead.”

Yasmin opens her mouth as if she wants to say something but thinks better of it. “See you later?”

I nod and watch them walk in the opposite direction. Only when they’re out of earshot, do I let out a shaky breath.

My stomach clenches tightly, but I put one foot in front of the other until I’m at the very end of the hallway.

I take one deep breath in front of the door, my fingers curling around the doorknob. Closing my eyes, I let out the air that I’ve been holding on to and push it open.

Stepping inside this room is like opening a box of memories.

In my mind, I can hear the familiar scratching of sneakers against the wooden floor. The *thump-thump-thump* of the ball bouncing. Yelling and cheering as the memories from three years ago come rushing back.

Sliding my fingers across the door, I slowly stepped inside. The gym is surprisingly empty, but it’s better this way. So I can say goodbye in peace.

I wrap my hands around my biceps, rubbing against my upper arms as I slowly walk around. This might not be the same gym, but it’s similar enough.

The floorboard creaks slightly as I make my way toward the bleachers to the same place I always took when I came to the games. Close enough so I can see everything, but far enough, so he doesn’t notice me.

I sit down and look out at the empty court.

How many games have I attended without him even knowing? Wanting but also dreading Mason seeing me sitting there, watching? How many times have I daydreamed about what it would be like if he saw me? What would it be like if he kissed me?

What I could never have imagined was the heartache that would follow afterward.

The walls start zeroing in on me, making it hard to breathe.

I need to get out of here.

Shaking my head, I push to my feet. Keeping my eyes on the ground, I hurry down the stairs, wiping at my cheeks. I'm not sure when I started crying, but I could feel the salty taste of my tears on my lips.

This is it.

“Good—”

I lift my head and stop dead in my tracks, the words dying on my lips as a person steps through the doorway.

No. I shake my head. *No, destiny can't be so cruel.*

But it can. Of course, it can.

“Grace,” Mason's voice is barely a whisper as he stares at me from across the room. “You're here.”

At least I'm not the only one who's surprised. “I was just leaving.” I try to walk around him, but he steps in my way, his hand holding onto the door to prevent me from getting out of here. I look at his shoulder, unable to face him. “Can you move?”

“Not yet,” Mason shakes his head.

“Not... what do you mean, not yet?”

He can't be serious, can he?

But, obviously, he can. He is.

“Just like I said, not yet.” He takes a step forward, forcing me to move back. My bag slips from my shoulder, falling on the floor with a loud thump. “I've been looking for you.”

“I think we agreed to let go,” I say softly, taking another step back.

“No,” Mason shakes his head. “You agreed to let go. I told you, *I promised you*, I wouldn’t give up.”

My eyes fall shut as a flicker of hope starts to bloom in my chest.

No, I can’t do this. I’m not doing this again.

“Please, don’t,” I whisper, shaking my head. “Don’t do this. I can’t. I came here today to say goodbye.”

I take another step back, but it’s not enough. It’s never going to be enough. Even if I went to another country, another continent. It would never be enough.

Mason’s hands land on my shoulders, his fingers rubbing my arms. “And yet here we are again.”

“Mason...” I whisper. Begging, pleading, I’m not even sure for what exactly.

“I was leaving,” he continues as if I said nothing. “I was about to get out of this place and try once again to look for you. I was just about to walk down that hallway and get into my car and go find you, but you know what happened then? I saw this door was open, so I came here to look. Tell me this is a coincidence. Tell me all these feelings that have been building between us are gone. Tell me you don’t love me the way I love you.”

I shake my head, tears streaming down my face. “I can’t. I told you already. I’ve been broken into too many pieces. There is no more left to give.”

Mason’s hands slide down my arms, twining with my fingers. He moves closer, his warm body brushing against mine.

“There is more left,” he whispers softly, leaning down. His warm breath tickles the soft skin at the back of my neck, making goosebumps appear on my skin.

Not fair.

He's not playing fair.

“You have the biggest heart I've ever known in a person. And even if shattered pieces were the only thing you could give, I'd take it. I'll take anything you'll give me because you're worth it, Grace. You're worth fighting for. You're worth waiting for. You're worth remembering.” His voice is strong, not a sliver of uncertainty tracing his words.

I let out a shaky breath, at a loss for words. My heart beats so fast it's like there are a hundred butterflies in my chest rushing to get out.

You can't.

You shouldn't.

Not again.

Mason slowly turns me around. His finger slips under my chin, and he lifts my head to face him. With the tip of his finger, he slides a strand of my hair behind my ear.

“You're worth loving. I mean it, Grace. You're worth it all. I never told you this, not three years ago, and not since, but I love you. I loved you when I was just a sixteen-year-old boy who didn't know what love was, and I fell in love with you all over again since I met you. My heart knew you, Grace. It recognized you even when my mind couldn't, and I'm sorry I hurt you in the process of trying to make sense of things because you deserve better. So much better.”

I love you.

My eyes fall shut as those three words ring in my ears on repeat. My lip trembles, and a tear slides down my cheek.

After all this time.

“Grace...”

I place the tip of my finger over his lips. Blinking, my gaze fixates on his mouth. Lush and so soft they shouldn't belong on a man.

“I only ever wanted you. I tried wanting other guys. Hoped for it, but I just couldn't. You have always been my undoing,

but I don't know if I can do this again. I don't know if I can risk my heart."

He clasps my hand in his. "I'll make it right. This time, we're going to do it right. I promise you this, Grace." He leans down, his forehead pressing against mine. "If you give me one last chance, I'll be careful with your heart."

I graze my teeth over my lower lip. "P-promise me."

Am I actually going to do this? Am I actually going to give him what little's left of my heart?

"I promise." He brushes his lips against my right cheek, stopping one tear from falling. "I'll be careful." Left cheek. "Every piece you're willing to give, I'll take it." The tip of my nose. "Any time you might need?" My forehead. "It's yours." The corner of my mouth. "I'm yours. I've always been yours, Legs."

Another tear falls as I finally let my admission out. My truth. The words that I've been holding back for the last three years. "I love you, Mason."

"I know..." His eyes widen in surprise as my words register. "What did you say?"

"I love you." Slowly, oh so slowly, that familiar smile forms on his lips, matching dimples popping in his cheeks. Mason grips my face harder, his fingers slipping between the strands. "Say it again."

"I love you, Mason LeBlanc."

His fingers tangle in my hair, tilting my head back. "I love you too," he whispers, and then his lips are on mine.

The kiss is slow yet deep. My heart leaps at the first brush of his mouth over mine. So soft, so tender.

Mason.

My Mason.

I slide my hand up his chest, over his neck, pulling him closer. Our mouths open, the kiss deepening as his tongue slides into my mouth.

Time stops, present and past, everything that happened and everything that has yet to, cease to exist. It's just him and me, and it feels... right.

Whole.

Mason breaks the kiss, his forehead pressing into mine. "Every single piece," he promises.

I lift my hand, gently tracing my fingers over his cheekbone. "Every single piece."

No matter how small or how jaded, it belongs to him.

It always has.

EPILOGUE

MASON

“Next week, we’ll start working on the routine.” I watch Grace pat the girls on the shoulder and send them off with a smile. “I’ll see you then.”

They chat excitedly as they head out of the room. Some give me curious glances as they pass me by, but others just smile, used to finding me waiting for Grace.

Finally, she looks up; those green eyes fixed on me. The corner of my mouth lifts slowly, and I push off the wall.

“What are you doing here?” There is a mix of surprise and excitement lacing her tone. It’s not the first time I picked her up from the community center in the last few weeks, but every time she reacts the same way, as if she still can’t wrap her mind around the fact that this is happening. That it’s real.

“I wanted to see you,” I say with a shrug. Crossing the distance, I wrap my arms around her middle and pull her closer.

Grace rises on the tips of her toes and meets me for a soft kiss. “I missed you,” I confess, brushing a runaway strand behind her ear.

“I missed you too. But seriously, what are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be in the gym?”

“We finished earlier, so I figured I might surprise my girlfriend and take her out.”

She looks down and then at me. “I’m hardly dressed for going out.”

She’s wearing one of those tight-fitting leotards that hug her every curve.

“You’re perfect.” Unable to resist, I press my mouth against her forehead. “What do you say, Legs? Are you going on a date with me?”

“Movies?” Grace asks as we get out of the car in front of the theater.

I walk around the hood and wrap my arm around her. Ever since we got back together, I have had this need to have her close. Who am I lying to? I’ve always wanted her close, from the very first moment I met her, but now I have every right to do so because Grace Shelton is mine.

“Yup.”

Grace tilts her head back. “How so?”

“Just because.” I shrug. “There are so many things we should have done before but never got a chance.”

We have been robbed of so many things, so many moments, so many memories we could have had, should have had.

Somebody could probably counter that we don’t know if we would have made it by the end, so many couples don’t. Just look at Ashley and me. But I want to believe we would have survived all the obstacles and still made it. At least we’d have gotten the chance to find out.

I look down at her, intertwining our fingers. “I want that, Grace. I want it for us. I don’t mind going slow and taking our time. We have so many things we need to make up for. So many moments we should have had. Starting now.”

Grace’s throat bobs, and she nods. “Okay.”

We enter, and I buy us tickets. I let Grace pick what she wants to watch because I don’t care one way or the other. I just want us to be together. We grab drinks and snacks before going into the theater.

The room is blessedly quiet since it’s early evening in the middle of the week. We climb all the way up to the top row and slide into the corner.

“How are your classes going? Anything troubling you this semester?” Grace asks, shrugging out of her jacket.

“Nope, I’m all good.”

She jabs her finger playfully at my side. “Only because you didn’t take French this semester.”

“I know when I’m in over my head.” I slide my hand under her legs and pull them over my lap. “Although I wouldn’t mind some private tutoring.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t?”

Her eyes fall on my lips. Her tongue slides out, wetting her lower lip.

“Nope.” I brush my fingers over her chin, trace the underside of her mouth and down her neck. The slow movement making a shiver run through her.

“I thought you brought me here to watch a movie, Mr. LeBlanc.”

“Did you?”

“You did bring me to the theater after all.”

I lean down, tracing the tip of my nose over her neck. “I wasn’t planning on actually watching the movies,” I whisper in her ear.

Grace squirms in my arms. “Oh, no?” she breathes, her voice low and husky as I run my hand up her thigh.

Just then, the light flickers and slowly starts to die down.

“What did you plan then?”

I brush my mouth over her neck, placing little kisses as I work my way up to her ear. “To have my wicked way with you, of course,” I whisper.

Then I press my mouth against hers; the movie, already forgotten, but the memories of that day, they’ll stay remembered forever.

Thank you so much for reading Kiss To Remember! I hope you enjoyed Grace and Mason's story. Did Mason make up with the Remingtons? You can find out in free bonus epilogue [here](#). Blairwood University is coming back in early 2022 with Maddox and Alyssa in Kiss To Belong. [You can now pre-order your copy.](#)

If you're new to Blairwood University you can go back to beginning and read [Kiss Me First \(Emmett and Kate's story\)](#).

Stay in touch with Anna! Join Anna's reader's group [Anna's Bookmantics](#) or [subscribe to her newsletter](#) and be the first to know all the latest updates!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Finishing a book always feels surreal, especially if it's a story that's been on my mind for a while. I knew I wanted to write Grace's story ever since I'd finished *Until* (J.D.'s book), but it never felt like the right time. I knew I wanted to see more of that protective side of J.D.'s, and having Grace go on her first date was exactly that. That's how *Mistletoe Kisses* anthology was born, but of course, my brain couldn't stop at that. It was too easy, and it definitely didn't have enough angst, but even I couldn't imagine the way Grace would lead me with her story. The twists and turns that would have to be overcome in order for her to get her happily ever after.

I want to thank my beautiful friends and alpha readers Nina, Melody, and Carrie for having patience with me through writing this book. If you follow me online, you know it was an extremely difficult story to write for various reasons, but as always, they stuck by my side and helped me overcome all the difficulties and make this story the best possible.

A special thank you to Alexandria Bishop for talking to me about surrogacy in the United States and helping me research this topic, and sharing her experience with me.

Thank you to Braadyn, Hannah, and Spencer for a stellar photo shoot and for helping me bring Grace and Mason to life, as well as my cover designer Najla and her team for creating this gorgeous cover. And a shoutout to Kate, my editor, who squeezed me in her schedule so I can publish this book as planned.

To all the bloggers, bookstagrammers, and my street team, thank you guys for helping me promote my books.

And finally, to you, my readers, thank you for reading and loving my books the way you do. I wouldn't be here without you.

Until the next book...

Xoxo,

Anna

PLAYLIST

Ruelle - Find You
Clara Mae - Call Your Girlfriend
Camilla Cabello - First Man
Kelsea Ballerini, Halsey - the other girl
Beth Crowley - Take It Back
Ed Sheeran - Happier
Calum Scott - If Our Love Is Wrong
Daughtry - What About Now
Patty Smyth, Don Henley - Sometimes Love Just Ain't
Enough
Natalie Tylor - For A Reason
Lady A - Hurt
Lady A - What If I Never Get Over You?
Camilla Cabello - Consequences
RuthAnne - Remember This
Beth Crowley, Krono - Cry
Mimi Webb - I'll Break My Heart Again
Olivia Rodrigo - deja vu
Maddie Zahm - How To Be Your Friend
Lewis Capaldi – Bruises

SLANDER, Bylan Matthew – Love Is Gone
David Kushner – Love You From Far Away

NOTES

Chapter 14

1 “French isn’t your thing?”

Chapter 18

1 I fucked my hand. baisser = to reduce or to lower; baisser = to fuck

Chapter 37

- 1 You like.
- 2 a trampoline or an oasis
- 3 “You’re incorrigible. You’ll get us in trouble, Mr. Remington.”
- 4 “All is fair in love and war.”
- 5 “Figure it out.”

OTHER BOOKS BY ANNA B. DOE

New York Knights

NA/adult sports romance

[Lost & Found](#)

[Until](#)

[Forever](#)

Greyford High

YA/NA sports romance

[Lines](#)

[Habits](#)

[Rules](#)

[The Penalty Box](#)

[The Stand-In Boyfriend](#)

Blairwood University

College sports romance

[Kiss Me First](#)

[Kiss To Conquer](#)

[Kiss To Forget](#)

[Kiss To Defy](#)

[Kiss Before Midnight](#)

[Kiss To Remember](#)

[Kiss To Belong \(early 2022\)](#)

Standalone

YA modern fairytale retelling

[Underwater](#)

Box Set Editions

[Greyford High \(book #1 - #3\)](#)

[The Anabel & William Duet](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna B. Doe is a young adult and new adult contemporary romance author. She writes real-life romance that is equal parts sweet and sexy. She's a coffee and chocolate addict. Like her characters, she loves those two things dark, sweet and with little extra spice.

When she's not working for a living or writing her newest book you can find her reading books or binge-watching TV shows. Originally from Croatia, she is always planning her next trip because wanderlust is in her blood.

She is currently working on various projects. Some more secret than others.

Find more about Anna on her website: www.annabdoe.com

Join Anna's Reader's Group [Anna's Bookmantics](#) on Facebook.

