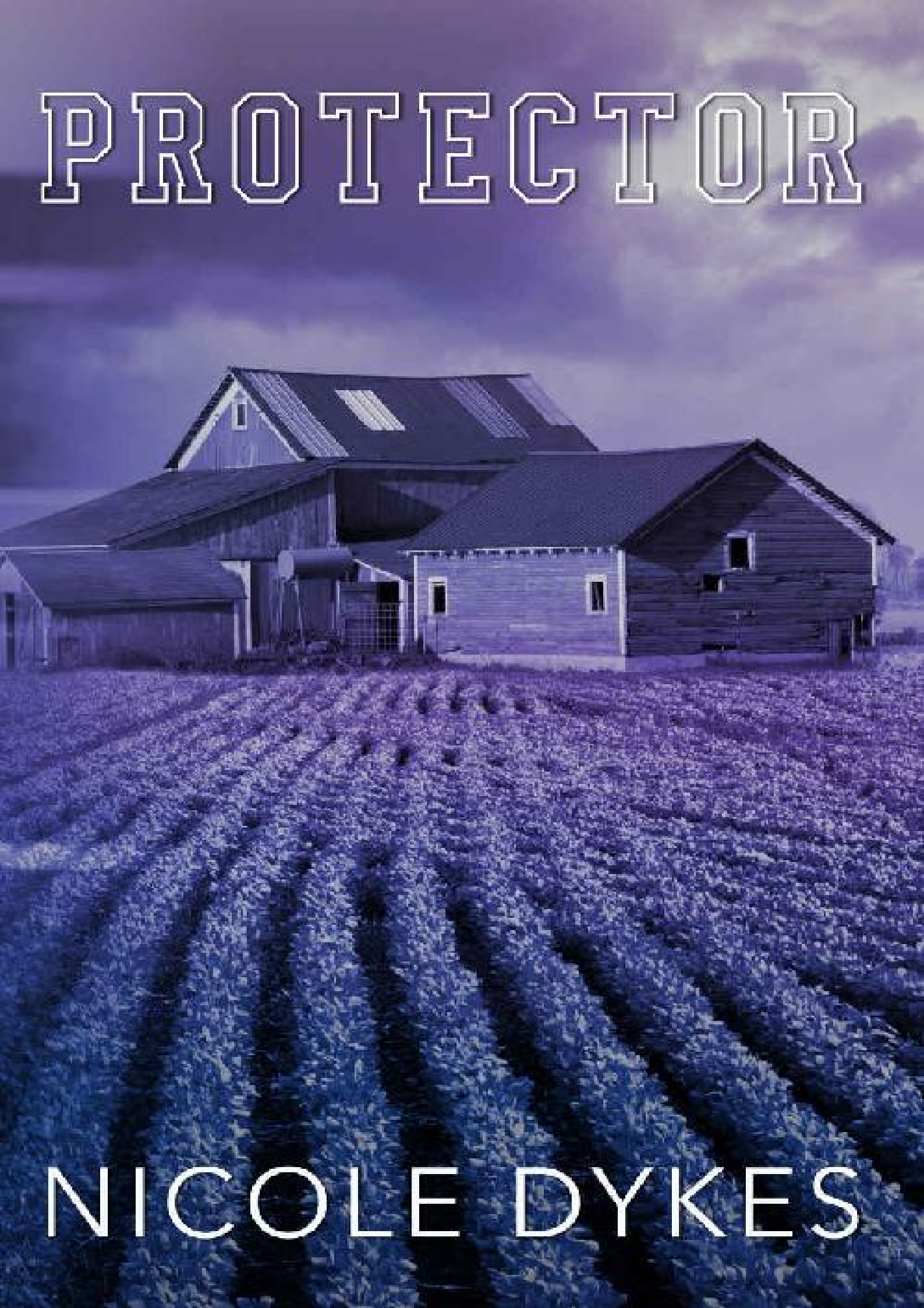


PROTECTOR



NICOLE DYKES

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I hope this book gives you strength you never even knew you had. I want it to give you hope that the world can and will change. That there's good everywhere, in small towns or big. You can find the good. And I hope you hang on to it.

PLAYLIST

Country Roads (with Charles Wesley Godwin, Jonathan Peyton & Abigail Peyton)

Zach Bryan

Save Me (with Lainey Wilson)

Jelly Roll

Millionaire

Chris Stapleton

Read My Mind

The Killers

If You Leave

Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark

Outskirts

Sam Hunt

Dirt Road When I Die

Dylan Marlowe

Something In The Orange

Zach Bryan

ONE

ADAM

“Come on, Bates.” I toss the now-empty beer bottle into one of the trash cans and shake my head again at Teddy Sheldon as he and Michael Rich try to get me to leave the street dance in town and head out to the lake.

It’s Kensley Days. Right before school starts. The end of the summer. It’s a whole thing in this town. They start with bingo and biscuits and gravy for breakfast. Then there’s a small carnival and booths set up with homemade shit people bring over from other towns to sell.

It all ends with a pig roast and barbecue for dinner, followed by a street dance. A dance literally in the middle of the street with a live band. We go every year. The entire town.

Because it’s tradition. And I’m a man of tradition. The Bates family is a staple in this town, going back to my great-great-grandfather. We own land here. We farm the land. We provide.

My entire family is here—minus my brother Jameson. He’s busy being shackled up and in love with his former teammate, Garrison Dixon. Fucking crazy. But no, it doesn’t bother me. Not at all. I’m happy for my brother.

But maybe I’m a little disappointed he wanted out of Kensley so badly and didn’t want anything to do with the land

our family owns—our legacy. He'd rather live in Hayes and work in landscaping than farm the land. Which is fine.

He didn't want this life, but it's all I've ever wanted. There's nothing wrong with tradition. Not in my opinion.

And speaking of tradition, every damn year, it's my best friend, Zachary, and me at this street dance. Both of us always avoid actually dancing—neither of us like people all that much. We keep to ourselves for the most part, and that's just fine with me. Except right now, I can't find my best friend.

Last time I saw him was an hour ago, heading to get us some food while we hung out with some of the guys from the team who can't seem to take the hint that we don't want to leave the dance to go to the lake to party.

Yeah, I'll have a beer here and there, but I don't go and get shitfaced. I rarely go to any parties. It's just not my thing. I have to get up early every morning. I have responsibilities.

And I take them seriously. Someday, that farm will be mine, and I intend for it to be in the absolute best shape when that happens. I want to make sure I can take care of my parents in their golden years. Let them rest, for once in their lives.

It won't be Jameson who does that. It'll be me. And that's honestly the way I prefer it. I thought for sure, I'd have to battle my brother for that right, but he didn't want it.

I do.

"I'm not going to the lake," I say again as my teammates try yet again to get me to ditch the street dance.

"Come the fuck on." Teddy pushes my shoulder, irritating the hell out of me. "I'm sure Olson is probably already out there. Probably getting laid, which is what you need to be doing too."

I roll my eyes at that. First of all, Zach would never ditch me here and certainly not to go to the lake. Not to get laid or to do anything else. But second of all, why the hell is everyone always so concerned about getting me laid? I just turned eighteen yesterday.

Know what I did for my eighteenth birthday?

Exactly what I wanted to do. I woke up. I did my chores. I showered. Had breakfast with my family, and then I hung out with Zach at the lake—swimming. Which is all I wanted to do before I dragged my tired ass back home and into bed. To do it all again today.

“Just go,” I say, waving them off as I find my way through the crowd, looking for Zach. I swear I find everyone else. My parents. Parents of my friends. Some friends. Some guys I played football with but who have graduated since.

Where the hell is Zach?

I navigate through the crowded main street, and that’s when I see him. Sitting across the street at the park on the damn carousel. I make my way across the street and grip the handles of the carousel—they used to be painted blue but are now mostly rust. “What the hell are you doing over here all by yourself?”

My tone isn’t stern—not with Zach. It never is with Zach. He looks up at me with his emerald eyes, his dark hair a total mess like he’s had one hell of a night. I realize then that his eyes are rimmed in red, looking tired and worn like no eighteen-year-old ever should.

“What’s going on?” I sit down next to him, my shoes in the dirt.

“Nothing.”

“Liar,” I say easily as I turn my head to look at him.

He just shrugs his shoulders. “Saw Chloe.”

Goddammit. Of course that’s what’s going on. Look, I don’t dislike Chloe. Not really. But they broke up years ago. She needs to let it go, but she can’t seem to. She runs her mouth all the damn time about how Zach is a shitty person and was a terrible boyfriend—which for the record, I was there, and he wasn’t a bad boyfriend at all.

He treated her like a queen, but they grew apart. When he broke things off with her, she lost it. Completely. And she hasn’t let up since.

“What did she say?”

Another shrug, but he answers, “Just called me a prick and then went on with her friends. It wasn’t bad.”

I grit my teeth because it *is* bad—Zach is not a prick. He’s one of the nicest guys I know, and it’s killing him that he hurt her. But what the hell was he supposed to do? Just date her forever even though he didn’t want to?

I think that would have been way worse, but I keep my mouth shut. “Where are Anna and Mary?”

“Staying with Grandma tonight.” I nod, silently happy that his little sisters aren’t stuck at home tonight. Anna is thirteen and has a lot of friends, so most weekends she isn’t at home anyway. But Mary is only eight, and while she has a couple of little friends she can stay with—it’s not every weekend.

Things were so different just around eight years ago, when Zach’s father was still here. He was a damn good dad. Hardworking and fiercely protective, but he died in an accident on the oil rig he was working on. Nothing has been the same since.

Their mom was pregnant with Mary at the time. Scared and alone with three kids. She married her husband's best friend, Elliot Finch, despite him being a total asshole.

I can't say I blame her. She got married right out of high school, and her husband was the breadwinner. He made the money, and she took care of the kids and the house.

She clearly didn't know what to do. So she convinced herself she could love Elliot, but the truth is no one should. He's an abusive prick and a drunk. Most of the time, his abuse is verbal, but I've seen enough bruises on Zach to know it sometimes gets physical.

I'd love to beat the shit out of the son of a bitch. He's built and in good shape from years of hard labor, but between Zach and me, he wouldn't stand a chance. But Zach won't do it.

He loves his sisters too damn much to risk getting kicked out and not being able to protect them. He's eighteen, but they won't be for a while.

"Wanna stay at my place?" He nods slowly, and I watch him stand up, a little wobbly on his feet. I shake my head at him with a small smile. "You're drunk."

It wasn't a question, but he argues with me anyway. "No. I just had a couple."

I laugh at him, standing up and putting my arm around his shoulders, shoulders that also quake a little with each step because he definitely had more than he can handle. Neither of us are big drinkers, but it doesn't matter to anyone in town that we're underage because we're Panthers. If they see us at an event like this, they offer us a beer.

Apparently, tonight Zach partook.

“Let’s get your drunk ass to bed,” I say as we stumble along the sidewalk from the park. I finished the one beer I had tonight a while ago, so I’m fine to drive home. I wouldn’t if I felt even a little bit of the alcohol in my system.

I drive the short distance to my house out in the country. It’s an old farmhouse that was built by my grandfather. I park and help Zach out of the truck and up the stairs of the porch.

My parents must still be at the dance, so thankfully, we don’t run into them or my younger brothers as I help him up the stairs to my bedroom. I used to share it with Jameson, but it’s all mine now.

He plops down on my bed, his fingers going through his dark hair like I assume he’s been doing most of tonight. I go to my knees by the bed and yank off his shoes and socks. “I can do it myself,” he slurs slightly. I think he’s reached the sleepy part of drunk, and for some reason, it makes me smile.

“Yeah, yeah.” I toss his shoes and socks to the side and stand up. “You sleeping like that?” I ask, gesturing to his clothes—a red Panthers t-shirt and jeans.

“Nah,” he says groggily and lifts his shirt up over his head, tossing it somewhere before he flops back on my bed. I’ve seen him like this too many times to count. It’s nothing new. We’re teammates on just about every team the school has to offer, and he’s stayed here every night he could since his mom married Elliot.

He fumbles with the buttons on his jeans a couple of times, his hands flopping down next to him. “Eh, fuck it.”

I chuckle as I watch his eyes slowly close. “You’re so damn lazy.”

“Fuck you, Bates,” he says, his eyes still closed and his hand lazily waving a middle finger my way.

I don't think too hard about it when I flick the button on his jeans loose and lower the zipper. He helps me push the jeans down, leaving him in black boxer briefs. His eyes are still closed, and I look away, leaving his jeans on the pile of clothes and shoes.

I move to my dresser, shedding my own shirt and jeans before pulling on a pair of joggers, then turn off the lights. He's passed out on top of the covers, but I managed to maneuver his big ass under the covers on the opposite side of mine and climb in with him.

Sleeping in the same bed with Zach is just familiar at this point.

I'm sure if any of our friends found out about it, they'd have something stupid to say—especially since my brother came out as bisexual not too long ago. But none of that really matters to me.

All that matters is that Zach is safe.

I'll always do everything in my power to protect him.

No matter what.

TWO

ZACH

I feel like shit. Not surprising, since I decided to down every beer handed to me at the dance last night. But to be honest, I don't do that very often. I hardly ever let my guard down.

But with my little sisters at our grandma's last night, I knew they were safe. And when Chloe bumped into my arm, her eyes full of rage and tears as she called me a prick, I just couldn't take it anymore.

The guilt of what I did to her eats away at me.

I really am a prick, despite Adam refusing to believe it.

Speaking of my best friend, he's lying next to me in bed, shirtless and fast asleep, without a care in the world. That's the only time Adam looks relaxed—in sleep. That's it.

The rest of the time, the weight of the world is on his very broad shoulders. And yes, again, I'm a total goddamn prick because the blankets have fallen to his waist, and I spend far too long letting my gaze drag over the muscles of his arms—built by backbreaking farm work and every sport imaginable in Kensley. And then, down over his firm pecs with a slight dusting of golden hair which matches the locks on his head. Then over his chiseled abs—eight. There's a pack of eight abs on his toned stomach.

That also has a light trail of the same golden-colored hair leading from his belly button and below the sheet bunched up at his waist.

Total. Prick.

Stop ogling your best friend.

I'm still scolding myself when his phone alarm goes off and his hand darts out to silence it. His eyes slowly open as he turns to look at me, and damn it, he's too beautiful to look away.

I can't think this way about him.

I can't.

But I can't stop myself either. Not when his blue eyes meet mine, and his blond shaggy hair falls over his face. A face, mind you, that's the most handsome, most gorgeous face I've ever seen, with those high cut cheekbones and full red lips.

He's perfect.

"How long have you been awake?" His voice is grumbly and rough from sleep. It does something to me. Something that forces me to pull the blankets a little more over my crotch, hoping like hell he doesn't notice the bulge there that's most definitely *not* only morning wood.

"Not long," I answer him, willing my body to calm the hell down. This is Adam Bates. He's not someone I'm allowed to drool over. Not at all. It's not right. He's my best friend. My protector. My fucking everything.

And this is how I repay him.

By ogling the shit out of him and getting hard in the bed he allowed me to sleep in last night so I wouldn't have to go home to my abusive shithead of a stepfather.

“You okay?” Of course, he’s concerned about me. That’s just how Adam is. Worrying about everyone except himself. But especially me. He’s always watched out for me, ever since we were little kids.

I highly doubt that would still be the case if he knew the perverted thoughts I have in my head about him. If he knew how often I touched myself while thinking about him. How often I’ve wanted to kiss him. Just once. Taste those full, red lips.

He’d likely never want to see me again if he knew.

“I’m fine. Must we wake up at the asscrack of dawn though?” I ask, already knowing the answer. If you stay at the Bates’, you’re waking your ass up early, and you’re going to do chores.

My body aches, and I feel like I could vomit, my head throbbing. But I don’t mind helping them out. The Bates family has been good to me. I’d stay here more often than not if it weren’t for my sisters being stuck at home. I can’t and won’t leave them alone with Elliot for too long.

He mostly leaves them alone, considering them a minor inconvenience, but that’s because he usually has me to knock around when he’s in one of his moods. I don’t want to think about what he’d do if I weren’t home when he’s had too much to drink and decides to be a pissed-off drunk instead of a happy one.

Because he can be an overly happy drunk. But after one drink too many, he’s off and in a rage about taking on his friend’s responsibilities. Not his friend’s family. No, we’re just an obligation to him.

“I can go do the chores. You should stay here and rest.” Adam stands up from the bed, and my stupid, prickish, traitorous eyes go straight to the bulge in his black joggers. *Damn it, I’m going to hell.*

I can’t keep doing this to him.

“No.” I stand up, having to close my eyes for a minute to keep myself from puking, but I can do this. I just need to rally. “It’s okay. I’m not going to let you do it all yourself.”

I open my eyes and see Adam staring at me with concern swimming in his. “You can barely stand.”

“Fuck you. I’m great at standing,” I say, trying to force a smile onto my face, but I’m pretty sure I look green because I’m about to lose whatever I have left in my stomach. I sway slightly on my feet but try like hell to appear okay. “I’m fine.”

He doesn’t buy it even for a second. He knows me far too well. “Lie down. I’ll go get you some water and painkillers.”

I look at his face—his perfect, chiseled jaw and stern mouth—and realize quickly I’m not winning this battle. I take a very careful and tentative seat on the edge of the bed, and he leaves the room, coming back moments later with a glass of water and ibuprofen.

I take them with as big of a drink as I can handle. “Lie down. I’ll be back in a bit.”

His gruff tone isn’t threatening, but it holds a hint of warning—telling me I need to listen to him. I do as he says and climb under the covers yet again, letting my eyes drift close as I try like hell not to think about Adam out there shoveling out the barns and slinging slop for the pigs.

His father will likely join him, along with his younger brothers. But I know I should be out there helping him out. He

does too damn much.

He has since we were kids. Jameson—he never really cared about the farm and let it be known recently that he wanted nothing to do with it. But Adam was always different. He wants to take the farm over for his father.

Let him retire and rest. That's his damn goal, and I swear, he's gonna kill himself trying to do that. The farm is large, and they don't hire out. It's just Bates and friends working the damn thing.

I groan because I feel like shit, knowing they need help, and I drank myself stupid last night. Making myself useless for the day.

But I think I needed the very brief escape. Not that my life is all that damn hard, but between Chloe, my sisters, my mom, and my stepfather, as well as a very deep secret I'm so tired of hiding, I was close to breaking.

I needed the break.

Not that I feel any damn better today.

I'm not sure that's ever actually going to happen.

And I don't think I deserve it anyway.

THREE

ADAM

I finish my chores and head back inside, with my little brothers grumbling and moaning about how tired they are. Which I get. It's hard work, but I love the burn my muscles have right now. The sweat pouring off me after a morning full of strenuous activity.

Always have.

“Boys, it's not that bad,” my dad tries, but they're still a grumbling mess as they make their way into the kitchen, both plopping down at the table. The smell of bacon fills my nostrils as I breathe it in.

“Boys.” My mom looks at them, nearly distraught. “You're a mess. Go clean up before breakfast.” She looks at the mud on their shoes and their faces with horror, and I try to stifle my chuckle. Mom hates messes. She keeps a clean house, but with four boys and a husband, she never had a chance.

They head off to clean up—which I'm almost certain will only be them changing their clothes and splashing water on their faces—as I give my mom a kiss on the cheek. “I'm going to go get a shower in. Save me some bacon.”

“Adam, is Zach here?” she asks as I head toward the stairs.

I turn to face her with a slow nod, not that I'm worried she'll be upset—they treat Zach like their own. So much so that my father was irritated he didn't come down to help this morning. I told him he wasn't feeling well, and he grumbled but let it go. "Yes."

"Is he okay?" Her face is full of worry. I know my parents aren't completely naive to all the things going on with Zach's family, but she usually doesn't ask about it.

"Yeah. He's okay. Just needed a night away."

Her mouth is drawn in a firm line, and she doesn't look satisfied with my explanation. I know my mom. She wants to mother him. She wants to make it all okay, but I'm not sure she can do that with Zach. He's stubborn as all hell and kind of rivals me when it comes to the strong silent type.

"He'll be okay, Mom," I try to reassure her, but all I get is a stilted nod, which I take as I exit the room and head up to my bedroom.

I find Zach still in my bed, but he's awake. His eyes meet mine as soon as I walk into the room. My bed is a mess, the sheets and comforter thrown around like he couldn't get comfortable. He's still shirtless, the blankets covering his lower half. And for a brief, slightly weird moment, my eyes sweep over all his bare skin.

I don't know why I do it, and I try to quickly meet his eyes again, but when I do, I see him staring back at me with curiosity.

The whole thing lasts a matter of seconds, though it feels like several minutes. I'm moving in slow-motion, trying to move past it. I sit on the edge of the bed, keeping my eyes on his face.

“Why did you drink so much?” It’s not like him, and even if I won’t admit it, it worries me to see him lose control like that. To most, it would seem like a kid letting off a little steam, but that’s so not like Zach.

If he wants to do that, he has other outlets. He takes it extra hard at practice or at the gym. He doesn’t drink.

He sits up, scooting up the bed to rest his back against the headboard. I try not to watch his muscles flex. Try not to notice his abs pulling tight and his bicep flexing as he runs his fingers through his hair.

I have no idea why I’m so fixated on him not wearing a shirt at the moment. I’ve seen him without a shirt before. Hell, I’m seen him buck naked many times—happens in the locker room all the time, but my eyes never linger.

“Chloe.” His answer brings my attention back to his face. *Thank fuck.*

But it’s temporary relief because when the hell is he going to stop blaming himself for that? “Zach . . .” I start, but he shakes his head, stopping me.

“I hurt her. She should be mad at me, Adam. She has every right to hate me.”

I wince because hearing that physically hurts me somehow. I don’t want him to feel so guilty. I don’t want him to blame himself. “People break up. Especially in high school. It’s normal. It was a long time ago. She needs to let it go.”

“Adam.” His voice is stern, and the look he’s pinning me with right now is even more serious. “Please don’t.” He sounds so damn tortured.

I don’t get it. They didn’t even date that long. Chloe needs to move the hell on. I’m sorry she lost a good guy like Zach. I

am. But it's not like they were going to get married.

He didn't cheat on her. He was a great boyfriend from what I saw—not that I have any idea what being a great boyfriend entails, but still. He walked her to class. He forced me to eat lunch at the same table as her and her annoying as hell friends.

He was a good boyfriend.

But I still feel like there's something there he isn't telling me. Which really, really sucks because we've always told each other everything.

Well—almost everything. I guess I may have a thing or two I keep to myself, but that's because I don't fully understand it. Never have. So I just don't really pay much attention to it. If I can't explain it to myself, how am I supposed to explain it to him?

Maybe that's how he feels about whatever happened with him and Chloe.

I don't know. But surely he can manage to tell me something about it. All I know is he broke up with her and she went batshit crazy afterward. Telling everyone he's an asshole. That all football players in Kensley are assholes.

Never really saying more than that. But it hurts him every single time, and I don't understand why. It's gutting me not to know what's really going on with him. How can I fix it if he won't tell me the whole story?

That's all I want to do. I want to fix it for him. Make it better.

I sigh deeply and stand up, patting his calf over the blanket. “Fine. But get up and get your ass dressed. We have practice in an hour, and Mom made breakfast.”

He groans, reaching both hands up to cover his face. “Tell Coach I’m sick.”

“Yeah. Not a chance.” I grin at him when he drops his hands and looks at me with bleary, tired eyes. “I’ll do almost anything for you, but I’m not facing Coach and lying to him.” I head for the door and then look back at him quickly. “And I’m not letting you miss practice. Our first game is coming up soon.”

He flips me off, which makes me laugh as I grab some clothes and head toward the bathroom for a quick shower. I may love farming, and that’s where my future goals are, but I love winning also. Football is where Kensley wins.

We’re a great team, and we have a chance to go far this year. So yeah, Zach better brush it off and get the hell out of bed.

Practice is just as important as the actual game.

And we’re going to give it our all, even if I have to drag Zach’s hungover ass there and back.

FOUR

ZACH

I flop down on my bed, dirty and sweaty and not giving a flying fuck. “I’m dead.”

I hear Adam’s laugh, but I don’t look at him. I can’t be bothered right now. Coach ran our asses ragged today, and it’s hot as hell outside. I mean, he’d never put us in danger or anything. He made sure we drank plenty of water and took breaks, but he didn’t let up.

Doesn’t help that he has a new assistant coach—a Big Bend Bear—who he doesn’t seem too thrilled about. So he took out his rage of being stuck with our enemy on us, and man, is my body weeping right now.

Doesn’t help that I’m still slightly hungover.

“You’re fine,” Adam says, and I swear he barely broke a sweat today at practice. The guy just has a natural talent out on the field. There’s nothing like it. The harder Coach pushes, Adam pushes back even harder and makes it look easy. Always has.

I finally look over at him, where he’s sitting on the chair by my desk. His hair is damp from sweat and the water he poured on it after practice, but he doesn’t look as wrecked as I feel.

We skipped the showers to get back to my place before my mom had to leave for her shift at the diner. But I don't know how I'm going to be useful to my sisters at all this evening.

“We have school tomorrow.”

I groan and toss my arm over my eyes. “Don't remind me.”

He chuckles again. “You like school.”

“I want to sleep for a year first. Then maybe go to school.”

Again. Another laugh. It's a quiet deep rumble I've become addicted to over the years. When I hear it, I can't help dropping my arm and sneaking another glance at my gorgeous best friend.

I wish I didn't think of him this way, but I can't seem to stop torturing myself. “I need to get home for chores and dinner.”

He stands up, stretching and showing off a sliver of the tanned, toned skin of his abdomen. I sit up, dragging my eyes away from him. “I'll go with you.”

He looks like he's going to argue with me, but it's cut off by a loud crash and then my youngest sister's scream. We're both out of my room fast and in the living room, where I see a vase has fallen off the side table where Elliot is currently sitting on the couch.

My sister is cowering behind a chair and looking at him in terror.

“What happened?”

Elliot takes a drink from the beer I now see in his hand. “I told her to go to her goddamn room. She's running around

here like a little maniac. Knocked over your mother's flowers."

I grit my teeth. The fucker picked the neighbors flowers and brought them to my mom yesterday. She was so happy. Mrs. Henderson was pissed-off about her missing hydrangeas. "She's eight."

"She's a goddamn menace," he says, taking another swig of beer, staring at my little sister, who's still crouching behind the armchair. "Clean it up."

My hands fist at my sides, and when I look down, I see Adam's are doing the same thing. "I'll get it," I say, looking at Mary and telling her silently to stay there with my eyes. She doesn't move, and I hate how terrified she looks.

Goddammit, I have to get Anna and her out of here. I'm eighteen. I could leave today if I wanted to—and God, do I—but I can't leave them.

Adam grabs the trashcan from the kitchen, and we pick up the broken glass and throw it away with the flowers as Elliot remains planted on the couch, drinking his beer.

"Uh, I guess I should stay," I say, looking helplessly at Adam. What I wouldn't give to go to his house with him and do some chores, despite my body being worn out from the day.

He looks over at Mary, just as Anna comes into the living room from the girls' room to check out what's happening. Adam's eyes meet mine again. "How about you guys come with me. Mom always makes way too much for dinner."

His eyes are pleading with me. I know he doesn't want to leave us here, but does it really matter? We'll end up here later anyway. Mary is only eight. She still has ten years left of this hell.

But when I look over at Mary's hopeful eyes, I know I can't deny her this. Not tonight. I just nod.

We don't bother saying anything to Elliot as we head out to Adam's truck. We pile in, and he drives us out to his place while Mary and Anna complain about being trapped between stinky boys.

Mary is giggling by the time we make it out to the Bates' farm, so I'll fucking take it. I want to lecture her about running wild around Elliot and how dangerous it can be, but I'm tired of telling her that. She's eight. She should be carefree. She should be able to have fun.

We hop out of the trunk and are greeted by Adam's mom, who seems thrilled we brought the girls over. They love her too. If they had their way, we'd live here, but it hurts too much to think about something so out of reach.

Mrs. Bates has her own family. Adam and his brothers are a handful. But seeing her wrap her arms around both of my sisters and then wave them inside to help her makes me long for the days when our mother was like that.

She was happy once.

But then it all disappeared. It left with my father when we buried him in the ground, leaving her a sad shell of herself.

"You okay?" Adam slaps a hand on my shoulder as I stare at his front door, my feet stuck in the gravel drive, not moving.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"You know you can talk about it with me, right?" That's the thing about Adam. He doesn't like to talk. He'd much rather not. But with me, he'll try.

I don't say anything, though, because what's there to say? We don't have any other family we can go to. It's just my mom. And he hasn't really done anything all that bad—yet. He's an asshole. He's knocked me around a couple of times, but I give it right back.

The girls—as far as I know—he hasn't laid a hand on them. And if he does, he's a dead man. But I can't always be there.

And his drinking is only getting worse, along with his bitterness of being saddled with three kids he didn't want.

“You have to get out of there.”

I don't chance a look at Adam because I know what I'll see. A sense of justice and determination. He grew up in a solid home. He doesn't get it. He can't. He thinks there's a black and white—a right and wrong in this world I just don't believe in.

“I can't leave them.”

“I know. Maybe the girls could . . .” He falters because he must realize the only other place for the girls would be foster care. Something I'm all too aware of, and I'll die before I let that happen.

It's either Elliot, the known evil, or the unknown evil I know lurks out there in the world. It's a tough choice, but at least with Elliot, I can keep them safe. I can check on them every night.

I give him a look, hoping like hell he'll drop it, and thankfully he does. Even though I hate seeing his shoulders droop in defeat. “If it gets too bad . . .”—his voice is a broken whisper—“promise me you'll tell me.”

I nod but can't stand to look him in the eyes because I don't want to lie to him. He lets it slide and then finds me some of his clothes to borrow before he changes. We head out to do chores.

But it's worth it to finally get to help the family who's taken care of me all these years. We shower and get dressed again before heading down to a delicious dinner of fried chicken and mashed potatoes before Adam's mom helps the girls with their homework and braids their hair while we all gather in their living room.

My sisters are full and relaxed by the time Adam drops us back off at our house. Adam's eyes show all the concern I know he's feeling, but I tell him I'll see him tomorrow before he can get any words out.

We go inside, and I notice my mom isn't home yet and the house is dark. Elliot is passed out on the couch in front of the television.

I roll my eyes and walk the girls to their room, instructing them to go to bed because we all have school tomorrow. I head to my own room, flopping back down on the bed.

As my eyes fall closed and I breathe slowly, trying to let go of today, my last thought is about Adam Bates.

My best friend. The best guy I know.

And by far the prettiest boy I've ever seen.

I allow myself these thoughts at night right before I drift off.

I know nothing can ever happen between us. I know he'd likely be horrified I catalog every single part of his handsome face and toned muscles as I fall asleep at night.

But this one guilty pleasure is all I get.

FIVE

ADAM

It's so damn hot outside that instead of practicing after school, Coach decided to move practice to the mornings before classes start. Which is fine with me, I was up early anyway, not only because of chores.

I can't stop thinking about yesterday. About how scared little Mary looked hiding behind the chair. About how unsurprised Zach looked. But he was equally as angry as I was. I think it's getting worse.

And I hate how helpless I feel.

Zach is so damn strong, so maybe I pushed the worry aside. But seeing just how afraid Mary was about knocking over a damn vase makes it hard to ignore.

After practice, we all head into the locker room to shower before school, but Zach doesn't seem like himself at all. I mean, I can't blame him after yesterday, and he's always quiet, but I can't shake the bad feeling that something is off. We reach our lockers, and I nudge him with my arm. "You okay?"

"Yeah," he says way too fast, like he was expecting me to ask. "Dinner was awesome last night. Tell your mom thank you again."

I'm about to tell him to tell her himself after school when an obnoxious asshole from our class nudges me with his hand. "Hey, Bates! How's your brother and his girlfriend?"

I roll my eyes at his half-ass attempt to rile me up. It's not the first time I've heard this shit, and it won't be the last. My brother dating Dixon is big news around here. I don't even turn around to face him. "That's a good one. Did it hurt to come up with it?"

"Aw don't be mad, Bates. Maybe it's Jameson that's the girl. He did always throw like one."

"Why don't you shut the fuck up?" Zach has turned around, his nostrils flaring, and his hands are clenched at his sides. He's not a fighter. Neither one of us are. We're the quiet ones who sit back and watch all the morons fight it out.

But he looks ready for a fight now, and I turn to look at him, not the dumbass goading me.

"Oh, come on, Olson. We're just having a little fun."

"It's not funny. Neither one of them are girls. They're both men. and they're together. And they're both more men than you'll ever be."

"Aw, maybe you're a little jealous, Olson. You have a crush on the older Bates?"

I roll my eyes again, but Zach starts to move forward like he's going to knock this fucker on his ass. I stop him with a hand on his chest. "Don't."

He turns to look at me. "He needs to shut his fucking face."

"He's an asshole. We know this." I don't focus on anyone else but Zach, trying to figure out what the hell is going on

with him.

And then another teammate is there, laughing his head off with the asshole. “Nah, Zach doesn’t want Bates. He’s just pissed-off because Chloe won’t give his sorry ass another chance.”

Zach’s entire body is rigid with tension, his jaw clenched tight. I whirl around to look at the fuckers who don’t know how close to a beating they are. “Shut the hell up and get to class.”

“Captain’s orders?” The guy is smirking at me. He’s big, but I could take him. Not to mention I *am* Captain on the team, and I have Coach’s respect. So if this guy doesn’t listen to me, his ass will be benched.

It wouldn’t be a loss.

“Yes.”

He rolls his eyes at me but turns and takes his little friend with him. Zach turns back toward his locker, his muscles tense with anger.

“Zach—”

“Don’t,” he cuts me off quickly, and it damn near shocks me. He doesn’t talk to me like that. “Just don’t.” His tone has softened, but something is for sure going on with him.

We both quickly shower and change, grabbing our backpacks. But Zach doesn’t wait for me as he pushes through the locker-room doors and heads toward his class. We have third period together, but I can’t wait that long to check in with him, so I race to catch up to him and pull his arm, stopping him. “Zach. Do you want to talk?”

“Nope. Gotta get to class.”

But he won't even look at me. I don't understand what's going on with him, and it's frustrating. "Please," I ask, keeping my voice down as students around us race down the halls to beat the tardy bell, which I don't care about that.

His eyes meet mine. Finally. But they aren't telling me anything. "Why do you always have to do the right thing?"

"What?" I ask, totally taken aback.

"Back there." He points toward the locker room. "Why not just deck that fucker? Tell him to shut his damn mouth. Break the rules if it means standing up for your brother."

"Jameson got in dumbass fights. Not me." I'm not my brother. I avoid fights, and so does Zach. I'm beyond confused now. He wanted me to get into a fight? One that wouldn't have solved anything and got us all benched or suspended? I release his arm, and he drops it to his side.

He's clearly frustrated and angry when he speaks again. "It's not a dumbass fight though. The girl? Fucking really? How goddamn ignorant can they be?"

Very. But I've heard it my whole life. So has Zach. It's just how Kensley is. And yeah, I think maybe it's getting a little better, but there will always be inconsiderate morons who refuse to think before they speak. "So hitting him would have made him less stupid?"

"It would have made him think twice before he starts saying that stupid shit again."

I stare at him, seeing the anger in his eyes and not recognizing it. "What's going on with you?"

He scoffs at that and starts walking again. "Nothing."

I don't let him walk away from me though, keeping pace next to him. "Nothing? This isn't like you. They say stupid shit all the time. And I know Chloe is a tough subject for you."

He stops and faces me again. "It's not Chloe. It's them being ignorant as fuck and me being tired of it. It's your brother. Your blood."

I search his face, trying to find the answers. It's not like I don't care about my brother, but it's what we've all heard before. I know they're stupid, but I don't think I can change their minds. I don't have the time or energy to try either. "Jameson is happy, and he can hold his own. He doesn't need me schooling some high-school prick who'll never leave Kensley and is likely to be on his third divorce before our ten-year reunion."

"You don't get it," he says, his voice a quiet rasp.

"I want to," I say honestly.

I desperately want to know what the hell is going on with him. "It doesn't matter. I have to get to class."

He adjusts his backpack strap on his shoulder and looks around nervously. This isn't the place to have this conversation, and I don't actually want to be late to class. "Talk later?"

He nods and makes a totally noncommittal noise, but then shuffles off without another word.

I hurry to class, but I'm left feeling nothing but empty and worried. I'm going to respect that he may not want to talk about Chloe and what's going on with him in public, but I'm not going to totally drop it.

I need him to talk to me and soon because I can't take this much longer.

SIX

ZACH

I need to get it together. I feel way too close to totally losing it. But I don't understand how Adam can be so damn calm around ignorance. No—not ignorance—just plain stupidity.

They were talking shit about his brother and . . .

No.

I need to shake this off and not think too hard about why I got so pissed-off this morning. I also need to smooth things over with my best friend before he tries to make me talk more about it.

I don't want to talk about it.

I don't want to think about it.

I want to ignore it.

I've done okay with that plan so far. *Well, sort of. Not really.*

But I can't do this. It's our senior year. I'm almost out of high school, and even though I don't plan to leave Kensley, I do plan to follow my dad's footsteps and go straight into the oilfield after graduation. And no one will be paying close attention to me then.

I'll be able to breathe without someone having something to say about it. Without walking down the halls of the high school and hearing whispers, knowing they're talking about Chloe and me.

Chloe.

I try to push all memories of her away. You'd think they'd have more to talk about than us. But Chloe seems hellbent on keeping the gossip fires burning, and I still can't bring myself to blame her.

I fucked up.

Big time. I know that.

I hurt her, and I have to live with that every day of my life. She won't let me talk to her. I want to apologize, but at the same time, I don't. Because I know an actual apology will have to include an explanation, and I won't let myself go there to do that.

So I'm just in this limbo-ish hell.

But I can't risk losing Adam. I won't. I just need to get my shit together and stop freaking out.

I want to go over to his place after school, maybe help him out with chores, but my mom's at work, and Elliot is home, so I need to be there with my sisters. I drive them both home after school, and when we walk inside, the shithead is just sitting on the couch with a beer in hand, watching television.

He doesn't seem concerned with our presence, so I quickly make a snack for Mary and set her up in her room while Anna joins her, avoiding Elliot completely. When they're settled, I head into my bedroom, but I leave the door open so I can hear if they need me.

I stay there until it's time to make dinner—just simple spaghetti because that's pretty much all I know how to make—but the girls don't complain. Elliot, of course, does. Grumbling the entire time he piles the food on his plate and then takes it into the living room.

He plops down in front of the television to eat, and I breathe a sigh of relief as the girls and I sit at the table.

I hate this.

I remember dinners with my family when my dad was still alive. He wasn't really a talker, but his presence was a happy one. He was content to just sit at the table with us and listen to our stories. Listen to my mother as she told him about her day.

I hate that Anna and Mary won't have memories like that.

None at all.

This is what they'll remember. Tiptoeing around their own home to try to avoid their asshole stepfather. Trying not to set him off so we don't have to listen to him rage for the next hour or so as we lock ourselves in our rooms.

I try not to think about it as I shovel food into my mouth, and then my mind wanders to Adam's face this morning. How he pled with me to tell him what's going on with me. As if I could actually speak the words out loud.

As if he doesn't know how shitty my life is. Even without knowing my biggest secret. I'm tired. So damn tired, and I'm only eighteen.

I can't take the ignorance of the town. The gossip. Shitty father figures and dead dads. Zombie-like mothers. I'm over it all. I'm happy for Adam's brother—that he got out and he's truly happy.

And yes, I know that actually hitting the stupid motherfuckers today wouldn't have done any good and we'd have just gotten into trouble, but every part of me wanted to take out my frustrations on them. I wanted them to feel even an ounce of pain that their stupid-ass words inflict on people, whether they know it or not. Whether they even mean to or not.

At least it would have been doing something. Something to let people know this shit doesn't fly. That it's not funny nor is it okay to say things like that. But no. We had to stay silent. Adam had to be the good one. The bigger man.

I'm really tired of being the bigger person. Of keeping my mouth shut and just barely existing.

I can't take the fact that I'm stuck here. And the fact that having Adam knowing every bit of it—if I unleashed the hell inside me and just spewed every single dark truth that's bugging me—I know he'd want to fix it.

He'd want to protect me. It's just who he is. Even if he didn't understand what I told him. Even if he secretly didn't like it. He'd still want to protect me. I can feel it deep in my bones.

But he can't.

Not from this.

Not really from anything.

My reality isn't something that can be fixed.

I just need to hold on for a little longer and keep it together. Put on a brave face for a little longer and push everything down.

I can do this. I have to do this.

I just hope Adam won't be too damn stubborn about it and will let me.

SEVEN

ADAM

I haven't talked to Zach nearly enough this week. I think he's avoiding me, at least avoiding talking to me. And I can't stand it. Every part of me wants to corner him and make him talk to me.

But I don't think it'll work. And it's not that I haven't seen him. We've been at practice every day this week. We eat lunch together and have three classes together at school, but he's not talking to me—not really. He's talking about school and football. Trying to make himself seem . . . okay? But I know he's not.

I know him better than anyone, and he's not okay.

So that's where my mind is tonight. Not on the game like it should be. Truthfully though, I could play football in my sleep and these clowns unlucky enough to be our opponents tonight wouldn't stand a chance.

We wind up winning 35–0.

And everyone is excited about the win. Pumped-up and heading to the party spot tonight—Oakley land, despite Oakley having graduated a while ago—to party. Normally, I'd opt out, but when we're in the locker room after we've showered, I turn to face my best friend as he tugs on a pair of jeans. “We should go.”

He looks confused as he grabs his shirt. “Go where?”

“To the party.” I tug my shirt on and look for my black Kensley Panthers hoodie, in case it gets chilly tonight.

He pulls his t-shirt over his head, his eyes surveying the locker room before they meet mine. “What? Why?”

I shrug, hoping I’m coming off as nonchalant. Like I don’t desperately need to get him alone so we can actually talk. Away from our houses with siblings and abusive, loud, shithead stepfathers. Out of the crowded hallways of the high school. I know I can find somewhere to talk to him where we can be alone. “We won. It was a good win, and this is our senior year. How much time do we have left to do it?”

“You mean with being the sad pathetic older people who sneak into high-school parties?”

I smile at that and nod. “Exactly.”

He looks conflicted, and my heart is racing as I wait for him to answer me. “Mary and Anna are staying with Grandma tonight.”

Thank. Fuck. “That’s good.”

“She’s getting older though, man.” His eyes meet mine with so much damn worry. “What if they need me?”

“Leave your phone on. They know how to reach you, and I’ll have mine too.” I made damn sure Anna has my number too. “We won’t drink. Just hang out.”

My eyes are pleading with him. I don’t even care how desperate I look. I have to get him to talk to me. “Okay,” he relents, and I let out a relieved breath. “For a little bit.”

I nod, quickly agreeing as I make sure I have my keys. He grabs a hoodie too, and we walk out to my truck. “I’ll drive.”

He doesn't argue, and we hop into my truck to make the short drive via gravel country road out to the Oakley place. I feel unsettled and nervous, which isn't normal when Zach and I hang out.

I can't stand it.

When we pull up, I park my truck in a row of other trucks and cars. I can see the bonfire is already going, and they have several camping chairs and logs pulled up around it. There are already a ton of people here, red solo cups being handed out with a keg nearby.

Someone has their truck radio blasting out music, and even though it's not really my favorite, I have to admit this isn't the worst way to spend a Friday night. But I'm not here for any of them. Zach pushes open his door and hops out of the truck as I quickly follow him.

"So we aren't drinking?" he asks, and I grin, looking around—almost everyone else is holding a cup.

"I'm sure we could find some soda or something."

He chuckles and punches my shoulder as he makes his way toward the crowd. I follow him, although I really just want to take his arm and lead him away from everyone. Force him to finally talk to me.

But I guess we're going for the long game here. Get him to relax and then question the hell out of him like our lives depend on it. And surprisingly, it's a good time. We just sit around the fire and talk with people from the team and other people we've grown up with.

But it all changes quickly when Chloe and her best friends show up with a couple of guys from Big Bend. You can feel the shift in the air as soon as they walk up to the fire. Chloe's

eyes blaze with fury as she approaches and her gaze locks on Zach.

He stiffens next to me, both of us still sitting. He's waiting. I'm waiting. And hoping like hell she keeps her mouth shut. But one look at the smirk that firms on her mouth, and I know this won't be good. "Here I thought this party would be asshole-free."

Zach shifts next to me, but he doesn't say a word. I look at Chloe, not bothered by the two Big Bend football players at her side. "Why don't you just grab a beer and chill out."

"Of course you're standing up for him." Her voice is shrill, full of anger. "I'm sure you guys had a really big laugh at my expense. Probably do that a lot, right?"

"Chloe . . ." Zach starts, his voice quiet and full of regret, and I hate that I can't fix this for him. I notice all eyes are on us. "I wouldn't . . ."

"Bullshit," she shrieks. "You're so full of shit. You're a lying prick. And everyone knows it."

I stand up now, but I don't move toward her. "No, he isn't. I'm sorry you broke up, but you don't get to treat him like this. You . . ."

"Don't." Zach stands next to me and grabs my arm, trying to pull me away. "Just don't."

"Don't you dare try to play the good guy now, Zach," Chloe spits, and damn it, I want Zach to say something. Maybe it's selfish, but I want him to speak up. I want him to defend himself.

Would it do any good?

Probably not. But watching him lie down and take it is ripping me apart.

“Come on, please,” Zach pleads with me, tugging on my arm again.

I give Chloe one last look but finally follow him. We walk and walk some more. Away from cars and the party. Through trees and leaves. Until finally, we stop walking, but Zach won't look at me.

“Why do you let her get away with that?” My voice is quiet and not stern at all. I sound hopeless, and I hate it.

“Just let it go.”

“No,” I say, taking his arm with my hand and making sure he stays put, facing me. “You have to talk to me. This isn't okay. She doesn't get to treat you like this.”

“It's my fault.”

I shake my head because I don't believe it for a moment. I have no idea what he thinks he did wrong, but I know he didn't. I can feel it. “Tell me what happened. Just tell me.”

He shakes his head. “I can't.”

I let go of his arm, but just long enough to place both hands on his shoulders. “Yes, you can. You're my best friend in the world. You can tell me anything.”

He's still shaking his head, his shoulders slumped as my hands hold firm. “I can't.” His eyes lift to meet mine. “I hurt her. I did this. I deserve it, and you need to let it go.”

“I don't believe you. Not for a second,” I say loudly. He needs to hear me. “You wouldn't hurt anyone. Not ever. I know you better than you know yourself, Zachary. And you didn't hurt her on purpose.”

He shakes his head again, looking almost manic, and even though it's fairly dark out here, the moonlight allows me to see his eyes are full of tears. "I fucked her."

For some reason, the admission is like a knife in the chest. I already knew that. I mean, not for sure, but I assumed. We never talked about it. "So," I say quietly now. "People in relationships have sex."

He looks away from me, his jaw set hard. "I took her virginity."

I try my best to swallow the lump in my throat and push through. "I know you, Zach. You didn't take shit. If you had sex with her when she was a virgin, it was because she gave it to you."

His eyes meet mine now, full of wet tears that haven't fallen. "She shouldn't have."

I'm quiet for a while. This kind of stuff—well, I don't know anything about it. Nothing. But I know him, and I know he didn't coerce her into sleeping with him. There's no way. "She wanted to."

"It doesn't matter. She wanted to, but I shouldn't have done it." His eyes meet mine. "I shouldn't have done it, Adam."

He sobs quietly, and I watch in horror, feeling his body shaking as I hold onto his shoulders and then pull him into a hug. "Hey. It's okay." I hold onto him, and he clutches my neck, softly crying.

I'm not sure how long we stand like that, not saying anything as he sobs through his pain.

I don't understand what happened, but it doesn't matter.

*Zach is all that matters to me, and if this is what he needs,
I'll damn sure give it to him.*

EIGHT

ZACH

Adam convinced me to come back to his house after I cried like a damn baby in his arms. I don't have any fight left in me, and the girls are at my grandma's, so I gave in. But we don't say anything on the ride to his place.

We greet his parents politely but go upstairs to his room. He closes the door behind us, locking it. Probably in case I burst into tears again and won't embarrass myself when his mom inevitably tries to find out what's going on.

I wanted to keep it together. Pretend like everything was fine. But as soon as I saw Chloe—when I saw how angry she still is with me—I just couldn't take it anymore.

He pulls his hoodie and shoes off but leaves everything else on and lies down on the bed. I follow and remove my hoodie and shoes, lying next to him and hoping he won't say a word.

Because if he asks me anything, I'm going to answer.

And that's dangerous.

I think I'm going to get by without having to talk anymore when it's quiet for a while. My eyes start to drift closed, but then his deep timbre fills the space around us. "Talk to me."

"Please just drop it," I try.

I turn to look at him and see his eyes are firmly on me, watching and waiting for me to talk to him.

I sigh and settle back against the wooden headboard. He sits up too, his eyes never leaving mine. “I didn’t force her. Of course I didn’t. I’d never do that. And I didn’t coerce her either. You’re right. But I’m not a good guy, Adam. I messed up. Badly.”

“How?” It’s a simple question, and I can hear the confusion dripping from that one word.

I know he doesn’t understand why I haven’t told him about this. Of course he doesn’t. And God, I’m so tired of keeping everything inside. I want to tell him, but I’m terrified of what will happen after he knows everything.

“It was bad, Adam.” My throat feels clogged, the words not coming.

“What was?” He looks into my eyes, no malice or anger in his. He seems scared, though, and that’s just not a look I’m used to from him. “Just tell me. Please. I’m sure that anything you have to tell me isn’t as bad as you’re thinking. You’re my best friend, and you can tell me anything.”

I hang onto every single word like a lifeline, hoping it’s true. “Sex,” I finally say, and his expression doesn’t change. Not at all. He’s waiting for me to say more. “The sex with Chloe . . . It was bad. So damn bad.”

His face finally morphs, but it’s into confusion as he shifts uncomfortably on the bed because this is so damn awkward. We don’t really talk about sex. We haven’t ever. The other guys on the team and at school, in general, can’t seem to shut up about it. But we never say anything, not in public and not in private.

“Um . . .” I can tell he’s searching for something to say. “Okay . . . You were new to it. I’m sure it takes a little bit to um . . .”

I scoff at that, not trying to be mean to him or anything. I know he’s trying to make me feel better. I have no idea what his first time was like, but knowing Adam, he was really, really good at it. Because he’s so damn good at everything. “No,” I say firmly, clearly surprising him with my tone. “It was bad. I . . .”

“Just talk to me,” he says just as firmly. “I don’t give a damn what happened, but I can’t take you holding onto this on your own.”

I feel tears threatening again. I have to look away. “I couldn’t get hard.”

“What?” His question is spoken quietly, but I can hear his confusion, plain as day. Because of course he’s confused. I was too. I was also humiliated as she tried everything she could to get my dick hard, and the fucker wouldn’t respond at all. Shame washes over me as my cheeks heat.

“She wanted to have sex. I tried like hell to put it off, to tell her we should wait, but she started to get really annoyed. Really . . .” I sigh deeply, still unable to look at my best friend as I relive some of the most embarrassing moments of my life. Moments I never told him about because the shame and fear were way too much. “She was upset. Thought there was something wrong with her.” A tear falls down my cheek, and I wipe it away angrily. “I knew she was close to breaking up with me.”

“So you had sex with her.” There’s no judgment in his tone, and how that’s possible, I’m just not sure.

“I tried,” I say, wiping at another tear. “But I couldn’t get hard. I don’t know what the hell was wrong with me. What teenage guy doesn’t want to have sex? She was naked, willing and ready, but . . .”

“Hey.” Adam’s voice is so confident and sure as his hand lands on my shoulder that I turn to look at him. My eyes are wet with tears and humiliation coursing through my veins. But his gaze is steady and familiar. Calming. “You weren’t ready for it. There’s nothing wrong with that. We’re young.”

I shake my head at that and sniff because that’s not it. And I think he knows it too. “I’m horny all the fucking time. I wake up hard all the goddamn time. I get hard just sitting in class sometimes and a stray thought pops into my head. My dick works. I want to use it,” I say firmly, anger taking over the humiliation. But not at Adam. Anger at my fucking body for not cooperating.

I just needed it to cooperate with me, damn it. “O-kay,” he says softly, removing his hand from my shoulder, and I flinch at the loss. He thinks I’m a freak. “Don’t.” I look back at him, realizing I looked away again. “Don’t look away from me. Don’t go back into hiding. Having sex is a lot of pressure. It was the first time for both of you. It makes sense. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

I want to laugh. Or cry some more because yes, I did.

“What happened after you . . . ?”

“Couldn’t get it up?” I supply, and he nods. My shoulders sag as I huff loudly and shake my head, but I don’t look away from him. I might as well just finish it. “She was upset. She said it was fine, but she wasn’t fine. I wasn’t fine. We were both confused and embarrassed, and I knew she was going to break up with me. Who the hell wouldn’t?”

“Who the hell breaks up with someone over something like that?” he growls, and I hate that my body responds to that. Because of fucking course it does. My dick has no problem rising to the occasion around Adam.

If he knew that part, there’s no way he’d be as nice to me as he’s being. “I begged her for another try.”

“What?” I swear he goes pale.

But I push forward. We’re in it now. “I got drunk off my ass at a party and begged her for another shot. Promised her it would go better. She agreed.”

He shakes his head slowly, the move almost unperceivable. “Zach . . .”

“I got hard and managed to take both of our virginities that time. But it wasn’t good. It was awful. I had my eyes closed the whole time, just waiting for it to be over.”

“Zach.” He sounds pained when he says my name.

“I didn’t even come. I’m sure she didn’t either. It was awful. I tossed the condom, and we both just sat there in silence.”

“What happened after that?” He sounds almost as numb as I do. I’m sure he’s disgusted with me now. I know I am.

“I couldn’t do that again. Not ever again. I knew she deserved better than a guy who has to get drunk out of his mind, close his eyes, and think about something else to have sex with her. So I broke it off.”

“There? Right after . . .”

I nod and look into his eyes, ready to take in any of the words he wants to say to me. If he wants to yell and call me a piece of shit, I’ll try to take it. I’ll let him say whatever he

wants to me as long as he can forgive me. “Yeah. I broke up with Chloe right after I took her virginity in the most pathetically sad way. I hurt her. I made her think something was wrong with her because I couldn’t tell her or anyone else the truth.”

“Which is?”

He sounds calm, his eyes imploring me to stay here and talk with him. I don’t deserve the chance to talk it out, but I can’t seem to keep my mouth shut either. “I’m not attracted to women.”

He nods his head slowly as if he’s taking it in. As if what I just said didn’t rock his entire world. That it didn’t shake mine completely because I’ve never said that out loud.

I barely let myself think about it.

“Adam.” I look into his eyes. “I’m gay.”

He doesn’t look as shocked as I expected. It’s more like he’s processing it, and I just sit there and wait for him to let me have it. Yes, his brother is bisexual, but this is me. His best friend.

The person he’s shared a bed with and more showers than I can count. I didn’t look. I swear. I wouldn’t let myself. I wouldn’t betray him like that, but he doesn’t know that. “Okay.”

I startle. “Okay?”

He nods, but he looks hurt. “Did you really think I wouldn’t be okay with that?”

“I mean . . .”

“How can you think so little of me?”

I hate that I hurt him. “I had sex with her, knowing that.”

“Did you?” he asks with no judgment.

“What do you mean?”

“Did you know you were gay? Before you had sex? Were you sure?”

I think about it for a moment, chewing on my bottom lip with nerves and then sigh. “I don’t know. I didn’t want to be.” Shame floods through me again. I’m a mess. A total goddamn mess, and why he hasn’t kicked me out or yelled at me is beyond me.

“You didn’t mean to hurt her. You were scared because being gay in Kensley isn’t easy. And being gay with the stepdad you have really isn’t easy.”

I wince and realize he knows he hit the nail on the head with that. “No one can find out.”

His lips purse, and I can feel his anger, but it’s not directed at me like I expected. “You didn’t mean to hurt her. You need to forgive yourself.”

“It’s not that easy. I used her.” God, did I use her. I was so damn afraid when we broke up that people would find out. Thought about dating another girl right after, I’m ashamed to say, because I was that desperate to hide what had suddenly become my reality.

I was pretty damn certain after that, that I was gay. Even if I couldn’t say it or even think about it, there was no denying it for me after that.

“I’m so damn sorry,” I say finally, and Adam’s big arms wrap around me in a tight hug I lean into.

He should push me away. He should hate me.

But he doesn't do that.

No. My best friend just hangs onto me and lets me give him all my pain in that moment because that's just who he is.

And selfishly, even though I know I don't deserve it, I let myself take it.

NINE

ADAM

Zach is gay. And I had no idea. None.

I don't really think about sexuality much. Not even after my brother came out, but he had a girlfriend. To think it was just a desperate ploy to make people, including me, *think* he was straight—to hide his true self—and he didn't think he could tell me . . .

God, that kills me.

I feel like I failed him in every single way.

He fell asleep, resting his head on my shoulder a little bit ago, but I'm too wired to sleep. I don't give a fuck if he's gay or bisexual or anything else. He's my best friend. That's all that matters.

But I don't understand why he didn't tell me about this. Except, maybe I sort of do. It's not like I'm totally innocent. He doesn't know every single thing about me. Most things, yes, but I've been keeping a secret too.

But not because I don't trust him.

I rub at the spot on my chest over my heart because, goddamn, that hurts. Zach didn't trust me.

“Hey.” His voice is soft, and his body feels warm pressed up against my side. I look at him, noticing how green his eyes

look with the moonlight behind him through the window. “Do you want me to leave?”

“What?” He starts to move out of my hold, but I squeeze his body, not letting him go. “Why would I want that?”

He looks tired, groggy from sleep, but tired in other ways too. My arms stay around him as we remain leaned back against my headboard, his body against mine. It feels safe in a way I can’t really explain in any other way. “Because . . .”—he clears his throat, his eyes red-rimmed and shiny—“of what I told you.”

“That you’re gay,” I state because I want him to say it. I don’t want him to be ashamed of who he is.

He nods, though, not saying the words. “That.”

“Not *that*,” I say firmly and use my free hand to tilt his chin, forcing him to look into my eyes. “You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Adam . . .” He tries to leave me again, but I hold firm. I drop my hand from his chin and wrap my other arm around him.

“Nothing. You don’t have to hide from me, Zachary. You never did. I’m sorry you thought you had to. But you don’t.”

“Adam . . . we’re . . .”

“Best friends,” I finish for him. “For life. And you can tell me anything.” I hold onto him, not letting him go, but he’s not fighting me.

His body relaxes against mine, his shoulders slumping. “You really aren’t mad at me?”

“For being gay?” I nearly laugh at that, but I know this town. I know it’s not easy to come out in this town. That there

would be stupid dickheads who would be angry over something like that. Over who other people are attracted to.

“That and for what I did to Chloe.”

I hate the shame he’s carrying. And okay—devil’s advocate—yeah, it sucks that he felt the need to hide it so desperately and Chloe got caught in the middle. But I don’t think he wanted to hurt her. I think he did like her. I’m sure he desperately wanted to be attracted to her, but he just wasn’t.

I don’t really understand completely, but not for the reasons you would think. I just don’t really understand wanting to have sex with anyone. I don’t really get attraction. And dating. Relationships.

It looks nice, but it also looks painful and messy.

“You didn’t want to hurt her, Zach.”

“But I still did,” he says softly, his body resting against mine even more. “I did hurt her. I used her.”

“Because this fucking town, and your good-for-absolutely-nothing stepfather would make your life hell if they thought you were gay, and we both know it.”

He doesn’t argue with me.

“But you could have told me.”

His eyes squeeze shut, and I can feel his remorse. “I just wanted it to go away.”

And goddammit, my heart squeezes tightly in my chest because I know what he’s telling me is true, and it hurts so damn bad. He shouldn’t feel like that. No one should.

“Best friends, Zach. No matter what.”

I slide down, still holding onto him and taking him with me until we're lying on our sides on my bed, facing each other.

"Thank you," he says, and I can feel how sincerely he means it. My heart cracks again.

"Nothing to thank me for. Chloe will get over this. You didn't mean to hurt her. You know that deep down."

"But I did. She didn't deserve to be treated like that just because I was a coward."

"You're not a coward," I say honestly, but I know he won't believe it either. Doesn't matter, though, because I know it's true.

He's brave. So damn brave, and he was put into a horrible position.

"Go to sleep, Zach," I say as I hug him to me, and I feel his body relax. I breathe in his shampoo and hold onto him as I close my eyes tightly and try to drift off to sleep. Zach is the best person I know. He didn't mean to hurt Chloe, even though he did. And he has to let this guilt go. I'm going to do what I can to help him with that because he deserves it.

My best friend.

My comfort.

And the person I need to protect more than any other on this earth. One I will not let down, no matter what.

TEN

ZACH

“Wake up.” I open my eyes but just barely, already wanting to close them again, despite the sound of my best friend’s voice in my ear. His sexy, deep, low voice and his breath against my skin.

Yeah, I need to wake the hell up before my normal wood turns into something so much more. I turn to look at him and see the crazy guy is already dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt. His boots are already on his feet. “Oh God, what time is it?”

He chuckles at me and tosses me a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt, that’s definitely his. It’s washed, but it still smells like him. “Five a.m. Time for chores.”

“You’re fucking crazy, you know that?” I ask as I sit up and then force myself to stand and get dressed. It’s something I’ve done in front of him many times, but I can’t help but worry that it’s weird now. Now that I’ve said the words out loud.

Oh, God. I told him.

I finish buttoning up my shirt and force myself to look over at Adam, who’s watching me cautiously. “And why am I crazy?”

His deep rumble does something to me. Something I'm ashamed of, but not because he's a man and not a woman. Because he's my best friend. My best friend, who was incredible last night. Who I was certain would kick me out and never speak to me again. But I shouldn't have ever thought that way about him. Nothing he's ever done pointed to that kind of behavior.

But I was still terrified.

It's been so engrained in my life that being with other men is wrong, that something was wrong with that, that I just couldn't trust it. Trust him.

Which fills me with the most shame.

Because I'm starting to see that it's not wrong, not at all. That love is a beautiful thing, and it doesn't matter if it's between two men, two women, or a man and a woman. It doesn't matter.

But this town is stifling. My home life is fucking stifling. And everything got so damn messed up in my head.

"You look happy to be awake this early." I finally force myself to answer his question before I sit back down on the bed and tug my tennis shoes on.

I can hear his grin. "I like chores. I like working hard and keeping this place going."

I smile and finish tying my shoes before I look over at him. "Yeah. I know you do. And I admire the hell out of you."

"I admire you too," he says, and I swear I believe him, although I have no idea why. He slugs me in the shoulder. "Let's go. We're already behind."

I chuckle, but I don't argue with him. I nod a greeting to his mom, who's already working on breakfast, and then we head out to the barn. It's hours of backbreaking work, but he's not totally insane because it does feel good.

Kind of like right after practice when I'm sweaty and my muscles are sore. It's a good tired feeling, one I can actually stand.

But then I find myself watching Adam a little too closely as he shovels out the barn, his sleeves pushed up and his forearms flexing with each movement. I look away quickly, but it must get his attention because he stops. "You okay?"

My entire mouth is dry, and I want to run away from this. Does he think I was checking him out? I mean, I kind of was, but it wasn't on purpose. Is he mad? He has to be mad.

He leans the shovel against the wall and walks closer to me. "Zach, are you okay?" he repeats, and it feels like my heart might beat right out of my chest.

"I'm fine. I am."

He's watching me carefully, and I know my breathing has picked up, just from him standing this close to me because I'm so damn ridiculous. *Who the hell falls for their very straight best friend?*

Who does that?

Especially when I couldn't even say the damn words *I'm gay* only yesterday. But I've felt like this for a really long time. I've tried like hell to push it down and away, but I can't. And now, he's even more perfect.

Because he didn't make me feel bad for being different from him. For being different from what this entire town expects. No. He went and said all the perfect things. All the

things that make my heart race and my palms sweat. My attraction to him is multiplying when I didn't think it was possible to want him even more.

“Talk to me.”

God. Damn. Him. Those words. Those simple damn words make me swoon like a total idiot.

“I wasn't checking you out,” I blurt out loudly.

His eyes widen, and thank fuck his brothers and father are checking on the cows out in the pasture and nowhere near us right now. I want to curl up in a ball and wait for him to leave me alone in my misery, but my best friend is stubborn. “O-okay,” he says, raising a brow and staying put as he watches me.

“I just . . .” I start and then huff, running my hand through my hair. My cheeks are blazing from embarrassment. “I just didn't want you to think I was checking you out, you know. I mean, you're hot.” His eyes widen at that, and oh my God, I might actually die from embarrassment, but I can't stop talking. “I mean obviously, you know you're hot. You're like the best-looking guy in the school. Hell, the town.” He cocks his head to the side and watches me, not saying anything. And unfortunately, I can't stop saying things. “And now, you know I'm gay. Because I told you, but I'm not, like, checking you out constantly. Even though you're well . . .”—I wave my hand in his direction—“hot.”

Kill me now.

Finally, his lips curl upward, and he's grinning, but I still want to die. “You think I'm hot?”

I roll my eyes at that and shove him gently. “You know you are.”

He chuckles, but he shakes his head, and I guess that makes sense. Despite all the girls in school having crushes on him and flirting with him nonstop, he probably doesn't even know how gorgeous he is. Adam just isn't like that. He's the most humble human I've ever met. "Yeah, look . . ." Now he seems a little uncomfortable, and I swear I notice a slight blush on his high cheekbones, but I can't be certain. "I don't care if you check me out or if you don't. I just don't want you to hide anything from me again. Not ever."

I think my jaw just hit the barn floor. "You don't . . ."

"I don't what?" he asks, all seriousness back.

"You don't mind me checking you out?"

He laughs, not cruelly in anyway, but he seems surprised by me asking. "Of course I don't. Nothing has changed, Zach. Except for now you don't have to hide from me. That's all that matters. I don't care if you think I'm hot or whatever."

Yeah, he's definitely blushing now, and I can't help smiling at him, feeling every single bit of love I always have for him. "Or whatever."

"Shut up." He chuckles and nudges my shoulder with his big hand. "Nothing changes."

"Okay," I say, and I want to believe it, even if I feel a little skeevey for checking him out. Despite him saying he doesn't mind, it still feels like a betrayal of sorts, knowing he isn't into me. Not like that. But I know Adam well, and I know that he wouldn't say it if he didn't mean it. He's not really capable of lying.

I don't think there's a better human on this planet. I really don't.

Adam Bates is just fucking golden.

ELEVEN

ADAM

I don't want things to be weird. I won't let them. I refuse. And I hope like hell I handled it okay in the barn the other day because I can't hurt Zach. But I'm a bumbling idiot with this sort of thing.

I just am. Always have been. I knew at a pretty young age that I'm different. How different? I'm not really sure. I haven't spent too much time thinking about it because I don't want to.

But with Zach . . . I'm going to do what I can to make sure he knows just how little I care about his sexuality. That him being gay will not change anything at all. Him checking me out? I don't really get it, but it doesn't upset me at all.

Honestly, when Zach looks at me with that sort of goofy awe, I just feel kind of . . . warm inside. When he's around, everything feels right.

It's Homecoming week, which I love. The town changes and goes even more into the school spirit thing. The windows of all the businesses downtown are painted with our numbers in black and red. My front yard, along with every single one of my teammates', has a special sign in it with our number on it.

The other yards all have Kensley Panthers signs. The school is covered in glitter and black-and-red ribbons and

posters. It's a high, and I can't help thinking about how this is the last one where I'll be in school.

But it's not like I'm leaving Kensley. I still get to see it, but I won't be a football player anymore. I won't be sitting in the cafeteria as the cheerleaders gather and draw names out of a bucket.

It's tradition. They wear our jerseys for the pep rally later today. A tradition I could do without. But I'm sitting here with the rest of the team, with my practice jersey in my hand, all washed and ready to go, while I'm wearing my game jersey.

Zach is next to me, and when Chloe walks up to draw, he goes deathly pale when his name is read. "No," I say without thinking.

All eyes are on me, and damn it, I hate that. The only time I want eyes on me is when I'm out on the field. "What?" Chloe is glaring at me.

"Why don't you wear mine," I say, my cheeks heating, and again, I feel all eyes on me, including Zach's. He looks like he wants to crawl in a hole, but I won't let him. I hold my jersey up. "Take mine."

Chloe just glares at me and folds her arms over her chest. But it's Rachel who declares, "No way. You can't trade."

"You're never getting in his pants, Rach. Jeez," one of my teammates just has to pipe up, and he receives the middle finger from Rachel, who yeah, has asked me out on several dates over the years. I always politely turn her down, but I didn't realize this was common knowledge.

"Shut the hell up, Matt." Rachel's eyes meet mine, her lips turning up into what I think is supposed to be a sultry smile. "No trades, Adam. You should know better."

“Never gonna happen,” another teammate very unhelpfully coughs into his hand.

I tense, hating all this attention. Zach’s voice sounds frail when he speaks up. “It’s fine.” He stands, holding out his jersey for Chloe, and I want to scream. I want to walk right up there and take his jersey. To not let her have it.

Her eyes are coldly on him as she snatches it from his hand. “It better be clean.”

“It is,” Zach says, his shoulders hunched as he walks back over to me and plops down.

“Zach.” I keep my voice quiet as they draw another name, and I lean into him. “We can still have them trade. Brittany is really cool. I bet she’d agree.”

“Drop it.” His eyes meet mine, pleading with me to listen, and goddammit, I don’t want to. I don’t understand why he won’t let me try to help. “Please,” he adds, and I just nod, my jaw set hard, but I let it go.

We head back to class and wait for the pep rally to start in the gym. As we all line up like we normally do, the cheerleaders run in ahead of us and do a quick cheer. But unlike what we’re used to, there’s laughter instead of cheering.

We all look around, trying to figure out what it is, and then Matt, who’s standing next to me and Zach, nudges Zach’s shoulder. “Uh-oh, Olson. Looks like it’s payback.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I search the crowd, and Zach looks like he’s going to be sick. And then I see it. Right there on the back of Chloe is Zach’s jersey with *Zachary Olson is a liar* written across it.

It’s not clever or big. It shouldn’t be funny to anyone at all. But it’s enough to humiliate Zach, and she knew that. “What

the fuck?”

“Let it go,” Zach says numbly next to me.

“No.” I look around the pep rally for Coach or a fucking authority figure of some type, but I don’t see anyone. “She’s not getting away with that.”

I catch the principal’s gaze, and he finally seems to zone-in on what all the laughing is about. Finally—after what seems like hours—he escorts Chloe out of the gym, and everyone else seems to go back to normal.

Except Zachary. And me. Because I can feel his damn pain and embarrassment. I hate it. “Zach.” I reach for his shoulder, but he just steps out from my touch and backs away.

“I’m fine,” he says, but there’s no conviction in his voice whatsoever. He keeps walking, and then he exits the gym. I fight with myself for all of ten seconds before I ditch the pep rally and follow him out into the hall.

“Zach.”

“Please just go back.” I find him standing near a locker bay, leaning against it.

“I’m not going back in there. Fuck all of them. That shit was not funny.”

“She hates me.” His eyes lift to look at me with so much pain and sadness in them, my knees nearly buckle as I approach him.

“She has no right to torture you. You had every right to break up with her. You didn’t love her.”

He still looks too pale, like he’s going to pass out. “You know what I did to her.”

I shake my head, hating this guilt I wish I could take from him. I place my hands firmly on his shoulders and look right at him. “It was a mistake. One you’ve paid for. It’s enough.”

I feel his shoulders slump under my hands, and his head droops. “I just want out of school. I just want it to be over.”

“You deserve to enjoy your senior year. So you fucked her . . .” His head lifts, and his eyes widen.

“Shhh.”

“No,” I say firmly and squeeze his shoulders. “It doesn’t matter. She wanted to have sex, and you had sex. But then you didn’t want to keep leading her on, and you broke up with her. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“But—” he starts and I shake my head sharply.

“No. No buts. It’s enough, Zach. You don’t deserve this, and I have no idea why she’s taking it so far, but we’re going to the game tonight.”

“Adam . . .” He sounds exhausted, but he stops with just my name, and I continue.

“We’re gonna play the game of our lives tonight, and then we’re going to the stupid after-party.”

“What?” He looks horrified now, and I smile, patting his right shoulder.

“It’ll be fun.”

“You hate those parties as much as I do.”

I nod at that because yeah, I do. But who knows what’s going to happen after graduation. Will Zach and I stay close? I’d like to think so, but people change. They move. I don’t

plan to, but maybe someday Zach will want to go somewhere he can be himself.

I drop my hand from his shoulder and rub at the middle of my chest, that ache back because I can't imagine him not being here with me.

"I already have my tent in the truck. We're going to camp out and have fun."

"My sisters are going to my grandma's tonight." I figured they were since his mom and stepdad will likely go to the game with the rest of the town.

"Good," I say and then drop my other hand from his shoulder, liking that his smile is back, even though it's small. "It'll be fun."

"If you say so," he says with a smirk, and then we sit out the rest of the pep rally and chat about the game as we hang out on our own.

Which honestly is the way I like it anyway.

TWELVE

ZACH

Homecoming.

I thought it would be different. It's our senior year. Our last Homecoming. I thought it would be fun, but most of the game I just thought about my jersey with Chloe's handwriting on it.

Calling me a liar.

And that's exactly what I am. To her. To Adam. To myself. I lied for so long.

I hate it. I'm angry with myself, and no matter what Adam says to me to try to make it better, I think I always will be.

It's one thing to be gay and not tell the world, but to be gay and have sex with a girl, one who thinks you love her. That's not okay.

We pull out the win with the entire town watching, but there's really no joy in it for me. Chloe wasn't at the game. I'm guessing she got in trouble for her stunt at the pep rally, but I take no joy in it.

But my best friend seems to be hellbent on making me feel better, and after my second beer, I'm feeling . . . I guess a little more pleasant. We sit around the fire, and I notice not many of the older guys are there.

Jameson, Garrison, Oakley, and Travis were at the game. We saw them briefly, but after giving Adam a hard time with their *Little Bates* bullshit, they headed back to Hayes, and we came out here for the party.

I don't see Chloe here either, which is a huge relief. But I'm not really paying attention to much else, and I'm constantly checking my phone to make sure my sisters are still doing okay at our grandma's house.

No messages so far.

"Let's go," Adam leans in to say close to my ear, and God help me, my entire body shivers at his closeness. I need to get over this.

So he didn't kick my ass for checking him out, and he seems totally fine with me being gay. But if he knew any of the thoughts stirring around in my brain, there's no way he'd be this cool.

Or worse . . . God, would he humor me?

What if I told him how often I think about kissing him. How I wonder what his lips would feel like against mine. What his hard body would feel like pressed up against me. His big hands all over my body.

Would he push me away?

I don't know. Knowing Adam, he'd tell me to go for it just for the experience.

And I can't do that.

I won't let the pity go any further.

And tonight, I'm going to share a tent with him out in the middle of nowhere because apparently, I'm a glutton for

punishment. I should have told him no and that I need to get home just in case my sisters need me.

But I couldn't do it.

He looked so damn desperate to make me feel better that I agreed. I nod and swallow what's left of my beer before I stand up. He finished his a while ago and only had one. We toss our cups in a trash bag before we say goodbye and head out.

Adam drives us a little away from the party. There's a ton of empty land out here, but I think this still belongs to the Oakleys. We hop out, and he gets busy setting up the tent. I start a small fire nearby but not too close and try not to watch Adam like the creep that I am.

I think whatever this attraction is, is getting worse and worse. I can't help but watch the way his body moves as he sets up the tent. He's wearing a hoodie and jeans, neither showing off much of his body, but he's graceful and sure in each movement.

It's mesmerizing.

We grab our sleeping bags—thank God, we each have our own—and roll them out inside the tent. But when we get ready for bed, it doesn't matter that we're in separate sleeping bags.

His face is right by mine. I can feel his body heat through the nylon. I can smell his shampoo mixed with the smell from the fire.

“Are you sure you're okay with this?” I have to ask him. It was one thing before he knew I'm gay—that's still so damn hard to even think. But now that he knows for sure I'm interested in guys, this might be weird for him.

Us sleeping together out in the middle of nowhere.

No one else is around.

But he just looks at me with those big blue eyes, and I see the anger—or maybe frustration—flaring in them. “Okay with what? Sleeping on the hard-ass ground when it’s freezing?”

His tone has an edge to it because he knows that’s not what I’m asking. And yeah, I’m sure it’s frustrating to him that I won’t just take his word for it. But the thing is, Adam is just so damn good. He’ll protect me, no matter what, and I don’t want it to be at the expense of his own comfort.

“You know what I’m asking,” I say quietly, rolling to my back and looking up at the top of the tent and not at Adam.

I hear rustling, and I’m sure he’s rolling fully to his side to look at me. “I do, and I don’t like it.”

I sigh softly. “I’m sorry, Adam. I just can’t make it make sense to me in my head that you’re totally okay with all this.”

“Zach, look at me.” I don’t want to. My eyes slide closed, and I take a deep breath. I hate this. I wish I had just kept my mouth shut, but he doesn’t sound upset. He sounds concerned, and I can’t let him worry.

I open my eyes and roll to my side, mirroring his position.

“I’m broken.”

That’s not at all what I expected him to say, and I almost choke on my own spit when he says it, but I recover. “What are you talking about? You’re not broken.” He’s the least broken human I know.

“Haven’t you ever noticed that I never talk about sex. Or dating. Or girls. Or anything really, other than sports and the farm.”

I go over every conversation we've ever had—really quickly—and no, I guess it's usually about sports or farming. But that's not that weird. "I mean, those are your priorities."

"Yeah, and how many eighteen-year-old guys do you know who don't comment on how hot chicks are or how badly they need to get laid, even if they never have."

I shrug, using my hands as a pillow, watching him. What exactly is he trying to say to me. I've participated in those conversations a couple of times, but it was for show. It was always a damn facade. But Adam never has. "You're kind of a quiet guy. Everyone knows that."

He's lying on his big hands too, his eyes locked on mine. "I don't join in because I don't feel that way."

"You're private."

He sighs and gently shakes his head. "It's more than that."

I study him closely and suck in a deep breath. Is he saying what I think he is? No. He can't be. If he were gay too, he'd have said something, right? But I don't think that's what he's trying to tell me.

My heart is pounding in my chest so damn hard. "What is it?"

"I told you . . ." His voice is quiet and raspy. "I'm broken."

I frown. "What does that mean?" I mean, believe me, I thought I was broken many times over the past few years. "Are you"—I can barely bring myself to say it, but I finally accomplish it—"gay?"

I wait for so long I swear I can hear my heartbeat in my ears, but my stomach drops when he shakes his head. "No."

Okay. "So you're straight?"

He shakes his head again. I'm not a total moron, I know there are other ways to identify. But I haven't looked into it much. I don't really know how it works if I google this stuff, and the last thing I need is my mom or stepdad to see it. Or anyone at school.

"I don't think I'm straight either."

What the . . . ? I stare at him, and I swear I see his cheeks turn red.

"I don't know what I am. And I don't know how to explain it. I think I'm just . . ."—he sighs deeply—"nothing."

"Nothing?" I ask because he's for sure not nothing. He's everything. But I can feel his confusion.

"I don't think about sex." My eyes must widen as much as it feels like they do because he grins and shoves my shoulder. "I mean, not all the time. Not really. I hear everyone obsessing about sex all the time. Talking about it. Television. Movies. School. The locker room. But I just . . ."

I mean, yeah. Sex is everywhere. God knows it's always on my mind. Well, I mean like 80 percent of the time anyway. I wanted to have sex . . . just not with a woman. It's my turn to blush because goddamn, how much time do I spend thinking about sex and sex-like things with Adam?

Whether I feel guilty about it or not, the thoughts pop up.

"You just what?" I force myself to ask.

"I don't really think about sex with anyone else. Or sex all that often."

"So you've like never . . ." Shit, what exactly am I asking? I'm an asshole, I now realize, because I always just assumed

he's had sex but was just being Adam and his normal private, respectful self. Not talking about it.

“Never what?”

Okay, we can do this. We can talk like mature adults. “Had sex?” My voice squeaks when I ask, and so much for talking like an adult.

He smiles, but he doesn't give me a hard time. “No. I've never wanted to.”

Holy shit. I rack my brain, trying to figure out if I've heard about this before. He's not broken. I know that much. But a teenage guy who doesn't want to have sex at all? Yeah, I don't know if I've ever heard of that.

“So . . .” I clear my throat, chickening out. “Have you never . . . ?” Shit. Yeah, I can't ask this. I swear, just lying here next to him, saying words like *sex* has my dick wanting to poke through the damn sleeping bag.

“Never what?” he asks calmly and far more maturely than I've managed. “You can ask me anything, Zachary. You know that. The only reason I've never brought it up is because I don't understand it myself. Not at all. I don't know the words or how to express it. It's confusing as fuck. I know I'm supposed to feel a certain way, but I just don't.”

“First of all,”—yay, look at me, my tone is back to serious—“fuck what society says you're supposed to feel. They don't get to decide that. And second of all, you can talk to me too. This friendship isn't one-sided. If you want me to talk to you about my . . .”—I struggle with the word because *gayness* probably isn't right—“stuff?” He grins. “Then you have to talk to me.”

“About my stuff?” He’s smiling again, and damn it, his whole gorgeous face lights up when he does that. My dick is hard, and my body is thrumming with want. I scoot back from him a little bit in what I hope is a subtle move, but I doubt it is.

This is a serious conversation. No hard-ons allowed.

I try to school my dick, but it won’t listen.

“Go ahead and ask me what you wanted to.” Adam’s deep voice pulls my focus from my dick to him.

“Okay . . .” I try to keep my voice totally serious and focus. “You like, don’t . . .”

He’s nearly laughing now, I can feel it. And damn it, I hope I can get through this conversation. “Just ask me.”

“Fine. So your dick doesn’t get hard?” There. Totally normal question. See? I can do this.

He finally does laugh, and he shakes his head at me like I’m fucking ridiculous. Which right now, I feel like I am. “My dick works, asshole. It’s my mind that’s a mess.”

I frown. “What does that mean?”

“See?” He waves his hand before tucking it back under his head. “This is why I never brought it up because I don’t know.”

I bite my bottom lip, hating his frustration and feeling it myself. “We can talk about this. We can figure it out,” I say to both of us as I roll to my back again, looking head-on at him is almost too much. “So your dick works. And you like,”—*ah, fuck it*—“you jerk off, I’m assuming?”

A startled laugh leaves him, and I hear him shifting onto his back too. “This is so weird.”

I want to laugh and cry at the same time. Because yeah, it kind of is. We've gone from never talking about sex to talking about sexuality and some pretty serious things over the past week or so. "It doesn't have to be. Look, I'm gay and totally attracted to guys. Women just don't do it for me. I mean, I can see feminine beauty, and I know they're pretty, but I don't want to fuck them. Guys . . . phew. There are some hot men in this world. And a lot of them make my dick hard as steel."

"Is that so?" He sounds amused. "And I'm in that hot category?"

My cheeks flame, but I try not to show it. "Of course. You're a hot guy. But if that um . . ." Insecurity swamps me. "If that bothers you, I can try really hard to take you out of that category."

"I told you I don't mind."

He did. And it damn near melted my brain. "Okay, right." I sound like a crazy person, scrambling for words. But he's spent so much of his life trying to make me feel better, and I want to make damn sure it's equal. I want to make him feel at ease too. "So, I jerk off daily. Sometimes multiple times a day. Like I can't fucking help it. It's there. And since I'm not having sex with another human any time soon, might as well have sex with myself." I expect him to laugh at my babbling, but he doesn't. He just listens to me ramble on because he's Adam, and that's what he does. He humors me when I get like this. God help us all. "So I mean, what about you?"

He's quiet for way too long, and I'm worried I've crossed a line before I finally hear him speak. "I don't do it every day. Maybe like once a week or something. I don't know. It's . . ." I hear him swallow hard, and I hate that he's struggling.

"Once a week is good. No one gets to say what's normal."

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I see beauty too. I can tell when a girl or guy is attractive, but I don’t want to have sex with them. It seems like a hassle when I can do it myself when I’m horny.”

Ugh. Thinking about Adam jerking off is a little too much for my super horny, very attracted-to-him self. But I try to school my features as I turn my head so I’m looking at him. “There’s nothing wrong with that. You’re not broken.”

“Sometimes I feel like a damn robot. Because I don’t want to date. I don’t want to get laid. I’m happy hanging out with you. I’m happy playing football. I like planning to build my house out on my family’s land. I just don’t think about sex all that damn much. And I feel broken.”

I can’t resist moving my hand so it lands on his firm, solid chest, right over his heart. “I felt that way too. I knew I was supposed to want to have sex with girls, but I just didn’t. But if you don’t think I’m broken, then you’re not broken either.”

He turns to look at me, his smile so damn sweet. “Okay. We’re not broken then.”

“Nope.”

His hand covers mine, and I jolt at the electricity shooting through my entire body when he touches me, but I keep still.

“Thank you, Zach.”

“Nothing to thank me for,” I say, and I mean it.

He’s always been there for me. I’m so damn grateful I get to be there for him, even if I don’t understand it fully. It doesn’t matter.

THIRTEEN

ADAM

I should probably feel weird about talking to my best friend about my dick and well . . . his, but I don't. It actually feels a little freeing. I've felt like this for so damn long that admitting to him I think I'm broken has been liberating.

I mean, I still don't understand what the hell is wrong with me and why I don't want to fuck everything that moves, but Zach doesn't seem that worried about it. He's been more like himself lately than he has in a long damn time.

We joke and laugh at school, pretty much keeping to ourselves, but hanging out with the crowd too. We haven't had any run-ins with Chloe since she was suspended for three days after that shit she pulled at the pep rally.

Things just seem to be better in a way I can't really describe.

After practice, I need to head home for chores, but Zach asked if he could bring his sisters over and help out. There was no way I was going to say no to that. Not only does my mom love having the girls over, my dad loves having the extra help.

We grab the girls from their after-school programs and head to my place. His sisters ride with Zach and follow me out to my family's farm. We both showered after practice, so once the girls are settled with mom inside, we head out to the barn.

There's always a lot that needs to be done around here, but we start with shoveling fresh hay into the stalls. It's getting colder at night now. Zach is quiet, at first, as we work, but then he suddenly blurts out, "I did some research." And I stall in my movements and look over at him.

His cheeks flush, and goddammit, he's cute.

Cute?

Huh. That's a weird thought. But how else can I describe him, with his hair all tousled on his head but matted down with sweat at the same time. His cheeks blazing red and his eyes wide.

It's cute, and I'm sticking to it.

"Research?" I ask.

He nods and then walks closer to me, keeping his voice low. "On the internet. Don't worry, I just used my phone, and I don't think my search history will go on the bill or anything. If it does, I'll tell them . . ."

He's stuttering like he does when he's nervous, and I place a hand on his shoulder. "I don't think your search history goes on your phone bill either, but it's okay. What did you find?"

I hate that he's so nervous about what he searches for, but in this town and with his parents, unfortunately, I get it. "Well, okay . . . so . . ."

See? Cute.

"Zach," I say, trying to ground him. "Tell me."

His wide eyes meet mine. "Okay, so maybe you're asexual."

“Asexual?” I ask, playing with the word on my tongue. “Like not interested in sex at all.”

He nods. “I think? But like there’s a scale. You can not like sex at all. Or a little bit. Or only sex by yourself.” He points at me, his words starting to run together a little bit with nerves.

That kind of sounds like me. But I don’t know. “A scale?”

He bobs his head. “Yeah. There’s even a gay scale, like how gay you are.”

“What?”

His eyes widen again. “I mean. That might not be the right way to say it. I mean . . . this Kinsey Scale, it rates how close you are to being heterosexual and homosexual. The way I figure it, I’m almost all the way, if not totally, homosexual. But you . . .” he raises his hand. “Uh, well . . . I don’t know. Maybe it doesn’t apply to you at all if you’re not sexual.” His shoulders slump. “Shit. I thought I had it figured out.”

Damn, there he goes looking really damn adorable. I’ve noticed that more and more lately. I wouldn’t say it’s a sexual thing. My dick isn’t hard. But I notice myself watching him a lot. And he makes me feel kind of warm and fluttery sometimes. Like right now when he’s doing his best not to put his foot in his mouth and can’t seem to help it.

“You did this research for me?”

His eyes are locked on mine, and his lips part slightly when he uses his pink tongue to trace them nervously. And huh. I find myself watching the movement closely. “Well, I just don’t want you to think you’re broken. Like I think mine was more clear-cut, even if I fought it. I knew guys were making my dick hard, and no matter how much I fooled around with Chloe, she didn’t.”

He looks ashamed again, and I don't like that. But before I can comfort him, he's speaking again, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

"Anyway, I found this too. Hold on." He's searching for something and then must find it because his eyes light up. "There's um . . . demisexual."

"What's that?" I've never heard that term before.

"Demisexuality is a sexual orientation in which an individual does not experience primary sexual attraction." He reads from his phone, I'm assuming Google. "A demisexual person can only experience secondary attraction—the type of attraction that occurs after the development of an emotional bond." He looks at me. "Um . . . there's more, but it kind of makes my head hurt."

I chuckle, but I think that over. "So the person needs a strong bond before they're interested in sex?"

"Yeah." His head bobs excitedly again. "So maybe you have to be in love first. Or maybe you are asexual. Or graysexual. Or so many things. There are so many ways to identify, Adam. So many more than we've ever been taught."

He looks excited and bright at the moment, his smile wide. I like this side of him. I like it a lot.

"My point is . . ." He must realize he was getting a little loud with his excitement because he moves closer to me and lowers his voice. "You're not broken. Not at all. There are a lot of people out there just like you. The world has tried to make it seem like we're the freaks, but we aren't. Not even close. I mean . . ." He's rambling again, and I like it. "If you *are* demi, and you do need that strong connection to have an

attraction, isn't that what we should all be striving for anyway? I don't know, but I think so."

I smile because I can't help it. "Thank you for doing that research for me. Maybe that's what I am."

"Maybe," he says, his eyes lighting up. "But no matter what, just like I'm Zach, you're Adam. And there's nothing wrong with you."

I grin at that, feeling that warm and fuzzy feeling. "So there's hope for me yet?" I ask playfully.

He sighs softly and then moves to take a seat on the nearby hay bale. "Yup. So for now, we're just two guys stuck having sex with only our hands for God knows how long."

For some reason that makes me frown. "You know there are gay people around here. Plenty of guys into other guys. Just look at my brother." *Ick*. I don't like saying that, and it's not just because I don't want to think about my brother's sex life.

He just shrugs at that though. "It doesn't matter if there are or aren't. I can't go near them."

"Why?" I hate how hopeless he sounds.

His eyes meet mine. "You know why. It's one thing that you know, but no one else in town can. It can't get back to Elliot."

I want to say so many things, but I know at the end of the day, he's right. Elliot is a homophobic asshole. He'd make Zach's life even more hellish if he knew. "You're almost out of that house."

He laughs, but it's sad. "My sisters aren't. I can't get kicked out or banned from there. I'm already getting hives,

thinking about the day Elliot tells me to get out. That I'm eighteen and can't stay there anymore."

I want that for him, but I also know that the girls will be in danger. So I don't push. "We'll figure it out, Zach," I try to reassure him even though we've been saying that for a long time.

His grandma is great for overnights, but she can't take them full-time. Her health isn't steady enough, and neither is her energy. "Yeah," he says sadly, but I know he doesn't believe it. "Only ten more years in the closet." He says this so damn sadly, my heart cracks open.

That's not fair.

I may not exactly like thinking about Zach hooking up with some guy—or anyone at all—but it's not fair that he has to wait for ten years because of his stupid, asshole of a stepfather. And his useless damn mother.

And this fucking narrowminded town.

Damn it. I need to find a way to fix this for him.

FOURTEEN

ZACH

“I figured it out.”

Adam’s voice has my attention as I pull on my shirt over my head and look around at the emptying locker room. I’m on cleanup duty tonight. So since I had to stay behind anyway, I took my time in the shower.

The hot water felt damn good on my aching muscles.

“Figured what out?” He’s dressed and sitting on one of the benches by my locker. The final guy walks out, leaving us alone, except for Coach who is in his office with Coach Leighton.

He stands up. “Let’s go clean up, and I’ll tell you.”

I grin at that. It doesn’t matter whose turn it is to clean up, the other one always stays behind to help. I nod and go with him, curious as hell about what he has to tell me.

Maybe he did more research after what I told him in the barn a couple of days ago, but I’m not sure. He doesn’t seem too concerned with an actual label, but he did seem damn happy to find out he’s not the only one who doesn’t seem obsessed with sex.

A sense of pride flows through me as I think about how his eyes lit up when I read the definition of demisexual to him.

Even if my mom or Elliot saw my search history, despite me checking many times that I deleted it all, it would be worth it.

We start picking up the practice field. There isn't too much of a mess, but it'll give us a minute to chat in private before we go to put a load of jerseys in the wash and head out.

"So what did you figure out?" I ask.

"How to get you laid."

Shit. I almost trip over my own damn feet as I walk closer to where he's picking up some of the footballs used at practice. "What?"

He's grinning from ear to ear now, standing tall and proud. "I did. It's not fucking fair that you can't hook up just because you have to keep your secret." His face has turned serious now, and I can't help but think about which look is more attractive on him. Happy and excited or stern and excited.

They both work for him.

But also—I'm not sure where the hell this is going.

"You deserve to have all the normal experiences, Zach." He touches my shoulder gently, and holy fuck my brain short-circuits for a moment. He really can't talk about this while he's touching me.

"Experiences?" I barely squeak out, willing my brain to come back online.

"Yeah." He lowers his voice and leans a little closer to me. "Sex. With someone other than yourself."

Holy fuck. My dick jolts at his words. His deep voice saying the word *sex* is just too damn much, but I can't get myself to move away. And what exactly is he trying to say here?

Sex? With someone other than myself?

“Uh . . .” Shit. My brain is officially broken. He knows I can’t hook up with anyone here. Is he saying . . . No. No way is he suggesting that we . . . Nope. Can’t let my brain go there. It’ll never ever work again if I let my brain go to Adam and me having . . .

“Zach?” *Oh yeah. Words.*

Words would be good. But I can’t seem to form them as I stare at him and into those big blue eyes I know so well. That are so familiar to me that I feel instant comfort any time those eyes are on me. “Um, what?” I manage, but my voice breaks on the question.

“Look, we don’t have a game this Friday. It’s our one week off. So I booked us a hotel.”

Holy fucking shit. My cock is rock-hard in my jeans, and I hope like hell that the denim is strong enough to hold it in and hide my predicament. He can’t mean what my stupid-ass brain is hoping he means.

Hotel room. Adam and me?

“A hotel?” Jesus Christ, Zach. Get it together.

But Adam must not notice my complete lack of cognitive function because he goes on excitedly, “Yeah. But not here. I got it in this town three hours away. It’s a good-sized town, and no one will know who we are. I booked it for Friday and Saturday nights.”

Phew. That is a whole lot of alone time. He can’t mean this though.

I have to get myself to focus. He’s demisexual or quite possibly asexual. He said he doesn’t obsess about sex or really

think about it all that often. So, him doing this for me? What would that mean?

I want Adam. There's absolutely no denying that anymore, but I don't want him to do something like this just for me. And God knows he would. He would do anything for me. Even if he didn't want it or enjoy it.

I can't let him do this. "Adam." I force myself to speak up, my voice sounding strangled because every single part of me wants to let him do this. My body is screaming. My heart is yelling. My brain even wants this, but I can't do it.

"No, listen. I know you worry about your sisters."

Oh my God, my sisters. What kind of monster am I that I didn't even think about them at all during this conversation? Of course I can't leave them for an entire weekend. My grandma can handle one night, but two? There's no way. "I can't leave them."

This is good. It's at least an excuse to why I'm turning down my number-one fantasy. Two whole nights alone with Adam, when he's trying to get me some sexual experience.

My dick jerks again in my pants, and I try to steady my breathing, telling my body to calm the hell down. "I know that. Who do you think you're talking to?" He's grinning wide and happy. I love it. And I hate it.

Because I can't let him do this.

"Your sisters are going to stay with my mom for the weekend. She's even going to pick them up from school on Friday. And then, we'll be back Sunday evening."

"Your mom?"

He nods exuberantly. “Yeah. She’s excited. She said they can have popcorn and watch movies without explosions for once. Maybe paint their nails. Have a total girls’ weekend.”

I can’t help smiling at that because his mom had four boys, and all four boys are very damn loud. Not one of them likes anything without explosives or lots of cursing. I don’t think they’ll let their mom paint their nails. My sisters like romcoms and Disney. They’d love manis and pedis. Maybe even baking. I know Mary would.

“All weekend?” I ask because that’s a lot.

“Yeah. My mom is practically giddy. She can’t wait. She loves her boys, there’s no doubt, but she’s pretty damn excited about this.”

I frown. “My mom. Elliot.” I shake my head. “They’ll never go for it.”

He grins surely at me. “I already asked.” His shoulders slump slightly now though. “Your mom sounded almost relieved.”

I think that over for a moment. I don’t talk to my mom that much. I’m too damn mad at her for making us put up with Elliot, but I always hope that deep down she knows that he’s not good for us. That if push came to shove, she’d be on our side.

“A hotel.” I let myself think about it. “Three hours away.”

He’s back to full-on smiling now. “Yeah.” He lowers his voice. “And there’s this club close to our hotel. Like three blocks away.”

“A club?”

He nods his head, his eyes going bright. “Yeah. It’s a gay club. You can find someone to hook up with. And it’s three hours from here. You’ll have a hotel room. You can get as much experience as you need.”

My stomach dives, and my boner is officially gone now as I stare at him. “A gay club? You want me to hook up with someone . . .” Shit. Of course he didn’t mean himself. I can’t believe I let myself think that he’d want me like that.

He’s frowning now, but his shoulders remain pulled back, and his head is held high. “I don’t know, but I don’t want you to think you don’t have any options. I admire the hell out of you for wanting to be there for your sisters, but you can still have a life.”

A life. Right.

Hooking up with strangers in a club.

Fuck. My stomach actually aches at the thought. It’s not that I don’t want to have sex. And it’s also not like I haven’t had a sexual attraction to anyone else before, but after thinking for the briefest moment I could have Adam . . . anything else is just a letdown.

I can’t tell him that though.

He’s done so much for me already. He’s been there like I never expected.

“So you aren’t going with me?”

“Of course I will,” he answers quickly. “I’m going for sure.”

“And what are you going to do when I’m at the club?” I’m not sure he’s thought this through.

“I’m going with you.” It’s a stern exclamation, one that says there’s no room for argument. And goddamn, does my dick like that.

“To a gay club?”

He shrugs. “Sure. It’ll be fun. An experience.”

“And if I hook up? Where will you be?” My throat is dry, and I lick my lips when I realize they are too. I swear for a moment I think he’s watching my mouth, but I’m sure that’s just wishful thinking.

“Um . . . well, we’re sharing a room.”

“You aren’t going to stay in the room if I bring someone back,” I say firmly, but I think there’s a part of me that’s trying to push him to think about me with someone else.

I’m a glutton for punishment. I want him to tell me he doesn’t want anyone else to touch me. No one but him.

“I’ll stay out in the hall then.”

Not what I wanted to hear, but I still smile because his protective side wouldn’t let him leave me alone with a stranger.

Still, the thought of going out of town with him. Of sharing a hotel with him and even going to a club—and maybe convincing him to dance with me. It’s all too great to turn down.

I’m a selfish, stupid son of a bitch.

But I nod my head in agreement because I can’t say no.

I can’t ever say no to Adam Bates.

FIFTEEN

ADAM

I hope this was a good idea. I mean, Zach seems excited as he sits in the passenger side of my truck and we drive into the biggest city I've ever been in. It's already dark by the time we get here, but there are so many lights that everything is illuminated.

There are cars everywhere, and we have to sit through stoplights for damn near five minutes each time we get stuck at one. But the way he's looking out the window at all the buildings makes me smile.

We left straight from school, taking my truck. Zach said the girls were excited this morning about getting to stay at my house for the weekend.

I don't think this was a bad call, despite the yucky feeling I get in my gut every time I think about someone touching Zach at the club tonight.

I don't know how to handle that shit, but I promised myself I'd find a way to make his life as normal as I can. And this was what I came up with. I park at the hotel, and we check in, grabbing our keys.

Obviously, we've both been in hotels before. We aren't total hermits, but this is the first time we've ever been on our own like this. It's honestly a great feeling. New and exciting.

We use the elevator to go up to the third floor, both of us with our bags over our shoulders, and he uses the key card to let us inside. The hotel isn't fancy by a longshot, but it's clean with two queen beds and a separate bathroom.

There's a desk with a coffee maker and a television on a dresser. Zach drops his bag and moves over to the window, pulling the curtains open. The view is just of other buildings—a hotel and a coffee drive-thru. That's pretty much it, but it's a vast change from what we're used to.

I drop my bag and plop down on the edge of the bed, watching Zach look out at the street. “So what do you want to do first?”

He turns toward me, his bottom lip tucked between his teeth, and I can tell he's nervous. “I'm starving.”

Phew. Okay. I'm here to get him laid or whatever the hell he wants, but truth be told, I could use a little easing into this. And part of me was worried he'd want to head right to the club.

“Sounds good. Let's go.” He's grinning big now, less nervous and not abusing his bottom lip anymore as we head out into the hall, making sure we each have our keys. We find a barbecue restaurant near our hotel and stuff our faces until we can barely move and then head back to the hotel.

I'm waiting for him to say he's ready to go out, but he just flops on his back onto the bed and grabs the remote for the television. “Score. The original *Fast and the Furious* is on.”

I watch him as he rolls to his side to watch the tv a little better. He looks comfortable and relaxed. I sit down on my bed, still full from dinner. His eyes are trained on the television, and I know it's time to talk about going.

Maybe we both need to shower and change before we go, but I can't seem to bring myself to do it. Instead, I kick my shoes off and scoot up to the top of the bed, leaning back against the comfortable pillows.

Zach turns his head to look at me and must also decide to make himself more comfortable because he sits up, kicks his shoes off, and then climbs up to rest on the pillows on his bed too.

He crosses his ankles, and then he's focused on the movie again. I know I need to say something.

The whole reason for the trip was to allow him to go out. To dance, flirt, and kiss. I don't want to think about anything more. The thought of it makes me sick and not at all because it'll be with men instead of women.

I didn't like seeing him do those things with Chloe either, if I'm honest. I hated it. Even now knowing that he didn't really enjoy it doesn't make it any better for me to think about it.

After an hour of watching the movie in the hotel room, I know I need to finally say something. Maybe he's worried about me. That's entirely possible.

"Zach?" He turns his head to look at me, and I swear he looks nervous again. But is it the good kind of nerves like before a big game or is it the bad kind like before a test? I can't tell. "Are you ready to go out? Maybe we should shower." His eyes widen a little, but he seems to recover pretty quickly.

He shifts on the bed but makes no move to stand up. "Um . . . I don't know. I'm kind of wiped out and really damn full after dinner."

I study him closely. “So you want to stay in tonight?”

He shrugs. To anyone else, he’d appear nonchalant right now, but I know him better. He’s anything but calm. “Yeah. Is that okay? I mean, I’d rather rest up for tomorrow and just go then.”

“Right. That makes sense,” I say dumbly. “There’s always tomorrow.”

“Yup. Tomorrow we’ll go to the club, and I’ll get my experience.” He grins at me goofily, and it’s not at all forced.

“Yeah. Tomorrow. Sex with someone other than your hand.” Which is all I know. He’s at least had some experience, even if it wasn’t exactly positive.

I’ve never even kissed anyone.

And my brain takes that moment to think about what it would be like. And not with some nameless faceless human. No. The lips I’m picturing pressed against mine are all too familiar. Pale pink and full. Often swollen slightly from him dragging it under his teeth when he gets nervous.

Shit. What the hell was that?

I look over to find Zach watching me, and I wonder for a second if he knew what I was thinking about. *Would he be mad? What if I told him it wasn’t the first time I thought about it?*

Would he think I’m messing with him?

I wasn’t lying when I said I’m not like other people, and the more I think about the demisexual label, the more it seems to fit me. That I need a strong connection before sex gets involved. There’s no stronger connection on earth than the one I feel with Zach.

Could it happen?

Would he want to?

Would I want it?

What if I freak the hell out the moment his lips touched mine and I wasn't as interested in the contact as I thought.

Jesus Christ, I am truly messed up.

“Adam?” His voice cuts through my thoughts, and I clear my throat.

“Uh, yeah?”

His eyes narrow as he watches me. “Is that okay? If we stay in tonight? I don't want to ruin your plans.”

“That's totally fine with me,” I say honestly. I'll always choose a night alone with Zach over everything. Doesn't he know that?

But I also don't want him to miss out on anything because of me. Because my brain doesn't really work like other people's. Because I'm different and would take the solitude of living out on the farm over the city noise any day. Because I can't get the courage to ask him if maybe he'd like to try the experience with me.

It's too damn scary. Too many variables.

I'm not sure if I'd want to actually kiss. Or touch. Or more. Although, if I'm being honest, my dick seems to be on board with all the above at the moment.

And that's strange.

Maybe I could.

I look over at Zach, who stands up now and grabs his bag. “I'm going to uh, go shower and change for bed then.”

I nod my head dumbly, thinking about Zach in that bathroom, stripping down and climbing under the spray of the shower. My dick jerks inside my jeans, and holy shit, I seem to like the idea of Zach being naked a whole hell of a lot.

Wow. I don't know what the hell is going on with me. He leaves the room, closing the door behind him, and I find myself hating that damn door. Wanting to look inside like some sort of damn creeper.

I lie on my back and breathe in deeply, trying to get my body under control—something I've never had to do before.

I don't know what the hell is going on, but I can't say I absolutely hate it. What I hate is the unknown. That and thinking about going to the club tomorrow night and watching Zach around a bunch of guys wanting to get into his pants.

Guys who can certainly give him exactly what he wants.

Could I be that guy for him?

I just don't know.

And if I don't know, I can't wreck his only chance at normalcy.

Fuck, I really am a mess.

SIXTEEN

ZACH

Can I really go through with this? I don't really know. What I really want isn't an option. I was able to hold off last night. Make the excuse that I was tired and way too full to go to a crowded club and dance. But the truth is if I were going there with Adam—as his date—I could've danced the entire night away.

But I can't back out tonight. We had an early dinner after a day of walking around the city. It was a perfect day. We found a cool history museum downtown and spent a couple of hours there. We had lunch at the food truck outside of it—talk about convenient.

We went to a couple of shops, and I got a couple of things for my sisters, and he grabbed a few things for his parents. It was a good day.

And honestly, I wish we could just skip this part and hang out in the room again. But he went to all this trouble for me, and I need to at least try.

So now, I'm showered and dressed in tight jeans and a black button-down shirt, and my hair is styled a little bit. I'm standing next to Adam—who's also freshly showered, wearing a bright-blue button-down and dark jeans. We're in the hotel elevator, getting ready to walk to the club.

He didn't spend too long fussing over his blond hair, but he didn't need to. Adam is just gorgeous, completely and totally without effort. My entire body flushes, thinking about how many men will be all over my best friend as soon as we go inside. But I try to force my jealousy away.

He's here for me.

He did all of this—going way out of his comfort zone—for me.

We make the walk in the cold night air to the club, and after we show ID to prove we're eighteen but not twenty-one and get a special stamp stating that, we go inside. The music is loud, the lights are low, and I notice the stamp on my hand glows in the dark.

I wish excitement was what I was feeling as I look around and see men and women dancing in the middle of the room. Lots and lots of men dancing together, grinding on each other.

It's nothing like anything I've ever seen in real life before. This does not happen in Kensley. Not ever. And while it's freeing to see, it also makes me sick because the only one I want to dance with is standing right next to me.

And I don't think that's going to happen.

"Let's go to the bar. Get a drink," Adam says in my ear. He's standing so close, I can smell the hotel shampoo he used. It didn't smell that good when I was washing my own hair with it, but damn, it smells great on Adam.

I nod, even though all we can grab is a soda. I could use a strong drink at the moment to loosen me up. My entire body feels stiff as we make our way to the bar and order two sodas.

Adam pays for our drinks, and then we take a seat on the barstools and look out into the crowd of sweaty bodies.

“Wow,” he says, and I turn to look at him.

“Wow?”

He nods, his attention still on the dance floor. “This is different.”

I wonder if watching men dancing and kissing other men bothers him. I don’t think so. But I can’t really read his expression. “Yeah. Are you okay?”

His eyes meet mine now, a frown on his handsome face. “Of course I am. See anyone you like?”

His voice sounds strained with the question as his eyes go back to the dance floor, and I force my gaze to follow. *Do I? I don’t know.*

Sure, there are a lot of hot guys here. But do I want to actually dance with any of them? Touch them? Let them touch me?

I’m not so sure.

I shrug. “The blond wearing the black tank top is kind of cute.”

I turn in time to see Adam scowling as he looks out at the dance floor. “The one wearing the leather pants?”

I smile into a sip of my soda. “Yeah.”

“He’s so . . .”—his nose crinkles—“small.”

I laugh and try not to spit out my drink as I turn to look at the blond again. He’s not really that small in stature, but compared to Adam and me, he definitely is. A good half a foot shorter than us both, and we each have fifty pounds of muscle on him. But he’s pretty.

“I don’t judge on size.”

“Is that your type?” he asks, turning his attention back to me. “Small, petite guys?”

My face flushes because I’m not really sure I have a specific type. Other than Adam, that is. Adam is, for sure, my damn type. But maybe that’s why I picked that guy. He looks the opposite of Adam—minus having almost the same color hair. The guy out there is small and bubbly looking, working the crowd and giggling as he dances.

“I don’t know.”

“Well . . .” Adam stands up, leaving his glass on the bar and taking my hand. “Let’s go find out. I don’t think he’s here with anyone in particular.”

“What?” I squeak as I scramble to place my drink on the bar and follow my best friend, who’s pulling me to the dance floor. “Now?”

“Yes, now.” We reach the dance floor, and Adam shocks me by placing his hands on my hips and swaying to the music.

I’m staring at him, trying to figure out who the hell this guy is because I’ve never seen Adam dance. Not ever. And it’s not like it’s anything crazy or special. But here he is, moving with the rhythm and trying to get me to go along. He’s touching me.

And when that happens, I think we’ve established my brain just doesn’t work. So I’m barely moving, and I don’t really notice when our bodies move close to the blond guy and he joins in.

This should excite me. I should turn toward the blond and touch him, grind on him. But he’s at my back, and Adam is at my front. I can barely breathe, and my dick is trying to escape

my way-too-tight jeans and attack my best friend, not giving one single fuck about the small blond at my back.

“Relax,” Adam breathes into my ear, and my body is doing anything but relaxing. It’s on high alert, every single nerve-ending standing at attention, just like my cock that is so fucking hard, it hurts.

Adam is holding onto me, but then he must take the hint from the blond stranger because he releases me just as I’m spun around. Now the blond guy is rubbing up on my front. I can’t see Adam anymore. I can’t feel him, and I don’t like it.

“My, my. Aren’t you a cutie? Let me guess, country boy coming into the big city.” The blond’s hands trail over my chest. “Oh, you’re big.” He leans into my ear, and I don’t remotely feel the way I did when Adam did the same thing. “You wanna show me just how big?”

He pulls back, his eyes a light shade of blue, blinking at me in mock innocence. I turn my head and see that Adam is back at the bar. He left me here, but he’s watching. He doesn’t look happy, but he nods his head in encouragement.

I turn to face the blond, who’s offering me what I should want.

But it doesn’t feel right. “Sorry. I uh . . . need to get back to my friend,” I barely manage, and the blond pouts.

His full red lips purse before he waves me off. “Your loss, sweetie.”

I don’t even think as I dart back to the bar, grab Adam’s hand, and then hightail it the hell out of there. The cold night air hits my lungs, but I don’t want to stop walking.

“What the hell, Zach?” Adam asks, but he keeps pace with me. “Are you okay?”

We make it a block away before I stop. I shove my hands in my jeans pockets because it's fucking cold, and I wish I had my coat. "Sorry. I'm really sorry. I just . . . Can we please go back to the hotel?"

"Are you okay?" he asks, placing his hands on my shoulders. "Did he say something? I thought you were okay. You looked like you were having fun."

"I was." Sort of. I mean I was when it was Adam's hands on me. "I just I don't want this. I want to go back to the hotel."

He gives me a quick nod and removes his hands from my shoulders, and I pull mine out of my pockets so we can walk faster to the hotel. Thankfully, it's warm as soon as we walk into the lobby and climb onto the elevator.

We don't say anything on the ride up to our room. We don't say anything when we both walk into the room and the door closes with a click or when we both sit on our own individual beds.

I feel sick, like maybe he's mad at me, but I couldn't stay there. I couldn't do it. I didn't want to do it.

"Adam . . ." My voice cracks, and he lifts his eyes to look at me. I don't see anger in them. Not at all.

He moves to sit next to me on my bed, and I feel the warmth of his powerful thigh next to me, but I try to force myself to focus. "I feel like I failed you."

"W-what?" I ask, my eyes wide as I stare at him.

"You deserve to have all the normal teenage experiences, despite living in fucking Kensley. You deserve to kiss and hook up. I thought I was helping, but if he said something . . ."

I put my hand on his thigh, which is a big mistake because it's powerful and warm, and it's hard to focus. But I try anyway. "He didn't do anything. And you definitely didn't do anything wrong. I know you wanted this for me . . ."

I don't know what to say to him.

"I did." His eyes close and he looks so pained. Damn it, I should have tried harder. "I didn't like it though."

What? His eyes open, and he's looking directly at me. "You what?"

"I hated watching him with you. Putting his hands on you." I'm shocked totally stupid when he brings one of his hands up and brushes his fingers over my cheek. I try not to, but I fail hard and lean right into his touch.

"You . . . you didn't?" I ask dumbly.

He shakes his head, his thumb brushing over my lower lip. I have no idea what's happening, but I'm entranced as I stare at him. "I hated it," he whispers.

I don't understand what he's saying, but when he leans closer to me, his tongue darting out to lick his full, luscious lips, I'm not listening anymore. My heart pounds so damn hard in my chest, and my palms sweat like crazy as he brushes his lips against mine.

I can't breathe. I can't think. I can't move. All I can do is sit here and feel. My eyes close as he moves his hand from my cheek to the back of my neck, and then he presses the sweetest kiss against my lips. We're barely moving, but I feel the jolt of electricity.

I feel like I'm flying as he kisses me, and then finally I move. I press into him, my hand clutching his thigh as I kiss him back. My lips part, and his tongue gently sweeps inside.

His hand clutches my hair as he explores my mouth, and my entire body feels like it's on fire. But just as I'm about to deepen the kiss and let my hands roam, Adam pulls back.

He looks dazed as he brings his free hand up to his mouth and drags his finger over his lips that look a little puffy from our kiss. "No more clubs."

I nod stupidly at his words, and then he stands up and grabs his bag. "I'm going to go change, okay?"

I nod again, even slower. *Because what the hell just happened?*

He kissed me.

Why?

Because he was jealous?

I think about that for a moment. He said he didn't like seeing that guy touching me, but Adam, as far as I know, isn't interested in me like that. He isn't interested in anyone sexually.

Was it a friendly kiss?

Or was it . . . oh God. My stomach rolls as I ponder that. *Was it pity? Did he just want to give me my first kiss with a guy.*

Adam walks out of the bathroom in sweats and a t-shirt and then grabs my bag, pulling out the same for me and tossing them to me. "Go change."

I'm on autopilot as I do what he says, all the while thinking about that kiss because I mean, what the hell else can I think about right now?

He kissed me.

And it was the best kiss of my life.

But what if it didn't mean the same to him? When I come out of the bathroom, Adam shuts off the light, and I climb into my bed, feeling cold and alone, despite the heat being on and Adam being in the room.

But it doesn't last long.

I'm shocked once again when Adam lifts the covers and climbs into my bed with me, wrapping his warm, solid body around mine.

I want to ask him so many things, but he just whispers softly in my ear, "Sleep."

And goddammit, I do. I close my eyes, and I just revel in his warmth and comfort.

It doesn't matter why he kissed me. It really doesn't.

Because he's my best friend, and he's here. I have him. And as he holds me tight, I know, no matter what, I'll always have him one way or another.

And that's enough for me to fall asleep with a smile on my face.

SEVENTEEN

ADAM

We should probably talk about that kiss. But we didn't. We woke up this morning, got ready, checked out of the hotel, and after a quick breakfast, we headed back to Kensley.

When we get back to my parents' house, it's pretty chaotic with my two brothers and his two sisters running around the farm. My mom looks happy though, peaceful almost, as she sits out on the front porch, watching the kids running around.

I walk up the stairs, and she greets me with a big smile. "How was your trip? Gonna leave me for the big city?"

I snort at that and take a seat on the porch swing. I expect Zach to sit next to me, but he chooses the porch ledge instead. I try not to read anything into it before I answer my mom. "Not happening. But it was fun."

She grins at that, already knowing my answer. She turns to focus on Zach now. "What about you, Zachary? Leaving us for the big city life?"

He shrugs, looking down at his shoes and then back at my mother. "Probably not. Not at least for ten years." His gaze moves to his sisters, who are petting some of the barn cats that are eating up all the attention.

Would he want that? To leave Kensley? If he wasn't here for his sisters. I'm not really sure. And I hate the unease, thinking about him leaving town.

He wouldn't be the first one. Kingston and Camden left. My brother and Dixon are in Hayes with Oakley and Travis.

Is it even possible to live here and have everything he deserves someday? Can he walk down the streets of Kensley, hand in hand with some guy? I'm trying not to focus too much on the thought of some other guy with him. But still, could he?

I don't know.

And I kissed him. I'd like to say I have no idea why I kissed him, or I did it just to comfort him, but it wasn't that.

I didn't like that cute little guy touching him. Not at all.

I hated it, in fact. And goddammit, I want to be enough. I want to be everything he deserves, but I don't know how.

That kiss—God, that kiss—was everything. It felt so incredibly good, but I don't know if I did it for the right reasons.

Or if I would want to do it again.

I study Zach for a moment as he's perched on the ledge, his hair blowing in the cool wind, his lips full and plump. God, they felt good against mine. I shift a little on the porch swing—my dick liking the thought of his lips a little too much for comfort with my mother sitting right here.

But Zach climbs off the ledge and stands up, facing my mother. "Thank you for watching the girls. It looks like they had a great time."

She smiles at him. "You all can stay for dinner, if you'd like."

“Oh . . .” He looks surprised and maybe a little conflicted, but Mary runs up the stairs excitedly, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“Can we? Mrs. Bates makes the best food!”

Zach hugs his little sister to him, but then shakes his head. “Uh, we should probably get going.”

“Why?” I stand up and ask, almost panicked. I don’t want him to leave. I want to talk about what happened with him. The truck was quiet on the way home, and normally I like that, but all I wanted to do was find the courage to talk to him about the kiss.

But I’m a fumbling idiot when it comes to stuff like that, and I didn’t know what to say. But I know I don’t want him to go now.

“Adam,” my mom scolds. “Maybe he’s ready to get to his own house for a bit.”

That’s definitely not it. Zach hates his house.

“Please. Can we please stay for dinner?” Mary asks, still holding onto him.

Anna walks up the stairs casually. “Seriously. You think El and Mom will have dinner ready for us? They’d be happy if we don’t come home.”

Zach and my mother frown, and my stomach clenches, thinking about their stepfather and mother. Anyone would be lucky to have these kids, but they’re assholes. “Please,” I ask Zach, and I swear his eyes look like they’re going to bug out of his head before he recovers and smiles.

“You just want help with the chores.”

I grin and let out a deep breath because I know he's going to stay. "You know it."

My mother smiles amusedly but turns to the girls. "How about I show you girls how to bake my famous cherry pie?"

"Yes!" Mary says excitedly, and Anna looks less exuberant but nods her head in agreement. She's a teenager, so she can't look too excited.

They go inside, and my brothers rush past us. They're followed by my father, who grunts his greeting and heads inside too, leaving Zach and me out on the porch.

"Thanks for, um . . ."

"For what?" I ask, my right brow quirked and amusement coursing through me as I wait for him to finish his thought. I can't have things being awkward between us. That just won't work.

"For taking me to the city, I guess." He grins. "Even though I think Coach would kick both our asses if he knew how much junk we ate when we were away."

I chuckle and flex my right bicep—even though you can't see anything with my coat on. "We'll be just fine."

He rolls his eyes at me, but he's smiling. "What should we do until dinner?"

There are a lot of ways I want to answer that question, but I take his hand and lead him down the stairs instead. He seems confused but goes along with me, and I know no one inside is paying attention to us.

I pull him into the large barn and close the door. "Adam, what's going on?"

What is going on exactly?

I kissed him. And I loved it.

But it's scary too. So damn scary.

I don't know what it means, but all I know is I can't let him down. I can't hurt him. And I cannot lose him.

"I think we need to talk."

He nods and looks almost numb. "O-okay." But I don't think he actually means it, and he starts to pace. "I mean, we really don't have to. Nothing has to change. We're best friends. We don't have to talk about what um . . ." He doesn't stop moving. "About what . . . well, you know . . ."

"The kiss," I answer for him, and then finally, he stops moving. He's just staring at me now.

"Yes. That um . . ." He takes a deep breath, and I'm worried he's going to pass out if he doesn't let it out, which thankfully, he finally does. "The kiss."

"It was a good kiss," I say, and I swear his eyeballs nearly pop out of his head.

"It was?" He steps closer to me, his breathing picking up, and he licks his bottom lip. I'm not sure if he's doing it on purpose or not, but I can't look away. "I mean, I know it was." He stops when he's about a foot away from me. "For me. But . . ."

"I liked it," I say honestly.

"You did?" He sounds so in awe, it breaks my heart. And yeah, I don't really understand it either, but I'd never lie to him. He has to know that. "I mean . . . I thought that . . ."

I can't help smiling. "I think we were maybe right. That I'm . . ." My chest swells as I think about what I'm about to

say because it feels right. The more I look it up. The more I think about it. “Demi.”

He studies me. “So you need a strong connection.”

I nod, moving a little closer to him. “I do. And what connection is stronger than what we have?”

He brightens at that, standing a little taller, and I swear I see his hand move, like maybe he’s going to touch me. But then he takes a step back, keeping his hands at his sides. “Is this you . . .” He clears his throat, and I watch his chest inflate with a deep breath. Even through his thick coat, I can see the motion. “Are you protecting me again?”

I lift a brow. “By kissing you?”

“No.” He waves his hand exaggeratedly between us. “By . . . saying you liked it. Is that you trying to guard my feelings? To make me feel better?”

I take a step closer to him and grab his hips with my hands to keep him still. “I kissed you, remember?”

His wide eyes meet mine, and I see the heat in them. Heat that makes my body react almost instantly. It’s so foreign to me, but at the same time, it feels so damn right. I want to kiss him again.

And again.

But I know that we need to talk about this. Despite finally feeling a sense of normalcy for the first damn time in my life, I won’t ruin what we have. “I remember.”

“So shouldn’t it be you making me feel better, if anything?”

He scoffs at that. “I’d kiss you every damn day. Every second, if I could. I don’t need comforting.”

That lights my entire body on fire, and I squeeze his hips a little tighter in my hands. “I wanted to kiss you,” I say firmly as he looks into my eyes, and we stand so close, I can feel his breath over my lips. “I just . . .”

“Just?” He sounds worried, but also dazed as he remains still, staring at me.

“I don’t want to hurt you. I can’t hurt you, Zach. And I am . . .” My brow crinkles as I try to find the right words to convey what the hell I’m feeling. “I’m different. This is all new to me. I’ve never felt the urge to kiss anyone before, let alone actually do it.”

The way he’s watching me . . . The way he licks his lips and then swallows hard. God, I might actually combust with need. I want to kiss him again so damn badly, I don’t fight it anymore. I lean forward a little but not all the way.

I wait.

And wait.

As we both breathe heavily, his hand moves over my heart on top of my coat. “Adam,” he breathes my name, and I hear the question in the way he says it. The plea.

I don’t wait any longer. I surge forward and steal another taste of his full, beautiful lips. He sighs against my mouth, and then his other hand moves to my hair, threading through the locks and holding me in place.

We kiss and explore, his tongue sweeping inside my mouth and massaging my own. It’s warm and wet, a whole new sensation, and I can’t fight the deep guttural moan I let out into his mouth. My lips feel swollen and puffy as we kiss, and my head aches from the delicious pull of his fingers in my hair.

I don't want it to ever end, but then, there's a loud bang of the screen door from the house, and I know someone is about to run in and find us.

It's not that I want to hide whatever this is or that I'm ashamed, but I don't know what it is yet, so I give his lips one last quick peck before I peel my body away from his.

"We'll figure this out," I say quietly.

I watch in complete awe as he brings his fingers up to his lips and touches them reverently. "Okay," he says softly just before one of my bonehead brothers busts through the barn door.

"Mom said it's almost time for dinner and you both need to wash up!"

"It's your turn to set the table," I say, and my brother huffs.

"I know." He turns and runs back to the house when I turn to look at Zach with a wink.

"Let's go eat."

I want to grab his hand. Take him inside and dare anyone to say anything about it, but we have more talking to do, sadly.

And more kissing, if I can help it.

A lot more kissing.

EIGHTEEN

ZACH

We didn't get to talk any more last night. I mean . . . we did, but not about what I wanted to talk about.

I wanted to ask him if this is just a fluke. Or if he's kissing me because . . . God, could he really want to? Kiss me? He kisses me like he means it. That's for damn sure. I've never experienced that kind of passion in my life.

I've never felt this way ever.

But . . . he's not gay.

He did light up when he said the word *demi* though. Maybe it's the same for him as it was for me when I finally said I was gay. Of course it is. I know Adam well enough to know he wouldn't lie to me and tell me he liked it if he didn't.

He definitely wouldn't kiss me again if he didn't mean it.

But what the hell does this all mean? I don't know.

Last night, we had dinner with his family and then did chores with everyone before I had to get my sisters home after my mom blew up my phone. She was fine all damn weekend without us there, but then suddenly it was *Get your ass home with your sisters*.

Whatever.

I'm surprised she even remembered we were gone.

But now we're stuck in school, and I'm just waiting for the last bell of the day to ring. Of course when it does, it's straight to practice where we run hard. Coach is in a good mood. I swear I even saw him smile once or twice, but that doesn't mean he goes any easier on us.

We all want to make it to state this year or at least as close as we can get. You don't get there by slacking off. Still when we drag our tired ass bodies in from outside, I can't keep my eyes off him.

I have to actively remind myself that a locker room full of our teammates is not the time or place to figure out what this thing between us is. Thankfully, most are busy talking about how we're going to kick ass at the game on Friday.

I quickly shower and change, but it's like my brain is a melted pile of goo. I mean, how did we get here? I came out to him, and then my brain went on overdrive, thinking about him being okay with it and letting myself indulge in the fantasy of having Adam . . .

But I never thought I could have him.

Not like that.

Not for real.

And now, I'm still not sure. Do I want him? Of course I do. I think I have for a really long time, but I just didn't let myself go there.

He pulls his shirt on over his head, and then those blue eyes are on me again. He doesn't look upset that my eyes seem to be glued to him. Not at all. If anything, he looks amused.

I can deal with that.

“How about we go pick up the girls and head to my place? That algebra test is going to kill me,” he says loudly—I’m assuming loud enough for anyone around us to hear.

I nod in agreement, but I hope we aren’t actually going to study. His grades are just fine. We pull our coats on and head out, picking up my sisters from their after-school programs and heading out to his farm.

He’s in his truck behind us, and when we park, the girls are both out of my truck and running toward the house before I even climb out. It’s good to see them like this. So excited and happy to be in a home.

Not our home though. I have to remind myself of that. And I wonder if I should remind them too, but I don’t want to take away this joy they have.

“You okay?” Adam’s voice comes from beside me, and I look over at him.

“Your parents are really good.”

He smiles at that and shrugs. His brothers don’t go to the after-school programs and ride the bus home from school. I can already hear their loud booming voices inside the house. I wonder if this is what our lives would have been like if our dad wouldn’t have died.

Would we have been excited to come home after school? Would our house have been loud and warm. Comfortable. Would my sisters run around without a care in the world?

“Zach.” Adam nudges me with his elbow. “They’re good parents and good people. I mean, they’ve messed up plenty. They’re human, but they’re good, and you and your sisters are safe here.”

My eyes close slowly, and I nod because I know we *are* safe here. It's harder and harder to leave this place. "How are you gonna move out?" I try to joke when I open my eyes. "I mean, who the hell is going to wash your dirty socks and feed your big ass."

He chuckles. "Always thinking about my ass."

I mean . . . yeah. But I can't believe he's joking about that and seems totally unbothered. I'm a little stunned but then shrug with a smirk. "Can you blame me?"

"Nope." He winks at me. "Let's go."

He starts to walk off, but I catch his elbow, and he stops. "Are you really going to move out?"

It's always been the plan. Not far though. His family has already started to build a modest house for him on this very land. The foundation is already poured, and I've spent some time helping his dad and Adam work on the structure over the summer. "Of course. But don't worry, my mom will still do my laundry if I need it. Or I'll force you to."

He laughs and punches me in the arm before he starts toward the house again, and I follow him. He's in a really damn good mood today—playful, and I like it. I follow him through the front door and greet his parents and brothers, but Adam must already have a plan because he's heading toward his room.

"We're going to go study, Mom. Let us know when it's time for dinner."

"Oh, no problem. I live to serve!" his mother shouts down the hall as I follow Adam and snicker.

"You're lucky she doesn't poison your food."

We go into his room, and he closes the door—locking it with a click. He peels off his coat and tosses it on a chair by his desk, rubbing over his stomach. “That must be why I haven’t been feeling so great.”

I frown now. “You haven’t?”

He just laughs and plops down on his bed. “No, dumbass. I was joking. Are you okay?”

I grin at that and roll my eyes, dropping my backpack by the door and taking my coat off, then leaving it on top of his. “Yeah. I’m fine. You’re just bad at jokes.”

He doesn’t argue with me, and then I still and stare at him. We’re alone. I mean . . . not totally. His parents, my sisters, and his brothers are all here and very loud. But we’re alone behind a locked door.

“Come here,” he says firmly, and I don’t know how he doesn’t seem more nervous.

I walk closer to him, and he spreads his legs. Sitting on his bed, he pulls me by my hips until I’m standing between them. I move my hands to his shoulders and let them rest there as I look down at his handsome face.

“What are we doing?” I barely manage to ask.

His lips quirk slightly as he gazes up at me. It seems so effortless as he moves one hand from my hip and over my t-shirt, grazing my abs with his fingers. “Whatever we want.”

I lick my lips nervously. My dick is already making an appearance, making itself known through my jeans. But Adam doesn’t seem disgusted or worried in any way. His hand moves under the hem of my shirt, brushing my bare skin, and I tremble under the touch. “Adam.”

“I can’t stop watching you. It’s insane.”

I swallow hard at the thought. “You watch me?” I mean, I really thought this creeper thing was one-sided.

“I do. All the damn time.” His hand goes higher, sliding over every muscle I’ve spent hours defining over the years. “It’s distracting.”

“I’m . . .” My voice is rough because my throat is dry, and I can’t seem to get my brain to work while he’s touching me. “Sorry?”

He chuckles, his hand creeping up further. His palm flattens over my thundering heart. “I like it.”

I grin, wanting to feel confident, but I’m just . . . I can’t be totally sure yet. No matter how much I want to be. “I just don’t get it. I mean, please don’t get me wrong.” I place my hand over his and can feel his warmth even through my t-shirt. “I like that you like it. I can’t believe you’re touching me, and I want you to. I want you to watch me . . .” His smile is blinding. “But I mean . . .” I can’t think.

“It’s like I had no idea.” He bites his bottom lip and then stares up at me. “I didn’t know it could be like this. It’s like this part of me was lying dormant. But now that I know you might be interested—and I know *I’m* interested—I can’t stop thinking about it. I can’t stop wanting to touch you.”

That makes sense. “You were just waiting,” I say with a grin.

“Guess so.” He smirks. “Hey, Zach?”

“Yeah?” I ask, my voice husky as I look into his eyes.

“Can I touch you?”

Shit. Shit. Shit. My dick jerks, and I'm terrified I might actually come in my pants just from his question. "You can do anything you want to me."

He chuckles and then slides his hand down and out from under my shirt. I move my hands to his shoulders, my nerves kicking in like never before. "I have no clue what I'm doing," he says, and I see the nerves are starting to take over him too.

"That makes two of us," I say and then grip his chin, lifting it so he's looking at me. "We'll figure it out together."

That makes him smile and a look of determination comes over him. "We have to be quiet and quick."

"The quick part won't be an issue at all."

He chuckles at that, but then he stands, not giving me another second to overthink or joke too much. He sweeps forward and steals my lips, giving me another taste of his sweet mouth, and I melt into him. I kiss him hard and wrap my arms around him, reveling in the feeling of his hard, big body against mine.

We're almost equally matched in height and weight. In muscle. It's a whole new sensation I can't quite get over. He undoes my jeans, and I curse when he just goes for it, his hand diving into my underwear and grasping my hard, aching cock. "Oh fuck, Adam."

He smiles against my lips and then nips the bottom one gently. "Quiet, remember?"

I shake my head. "Impossible."

He laughs and then releases me. Oh, fuck. *No.* "I can be quiet. Don't . . . Just come back."

He's laughing far too hard at my expense as he turns his music on loudly—not too loudly to where his parents would be suspicious, but as loud as he normally does. He saunters back over to me, and I can see the prominent bulge in his jeans.

My mouth waters, wanting a taste, but I'm determined to go at his pace. I can't lose him. I won't rush him.

But he doesn't seem concerned at all as he grips the back of my neck and pulls my lips to his again. "You're so damn hot," he gasps as his hands slide back under my shirt and over the muscles on my back.

"So are you. I think you broke my brain. I can't think when you're around me."

He grins, and I can feel it against my mouth. "What do you want, Zachary?"

Oh, holy fuck. The way he says my name and this desperate breath I decide I'm not going to need much of. "I want everything. I want to kiss you so much more. Forever, really." Zach, shut up. But of course I can't. "I want your hands on me. I want to touch you everywhere. I want to lick you everywhere. God, I want to taste you so badly. I want to play with your cock with my hands and my mouth. I want you inside me."

He lets out a low, deep moan, and I finally shut up. "Oh, yeah. All of that."

I shudder against him. "Now?"

He chuckles, and it feels warm, like the most at home I've ever felt in my life. He's not making fun of me or annoyed at my stammering. He sounds amused more than anything. And

there's raw affection there. "I don't think we have time for all of that, unfortunately."

I frown, and he kisses it away.

"Soon. All of it."

I nod far too eagerly and kiss his lips hard as my fingers slide through his hair. His hand moves back inside my briefs, and I can't resist touching him now. My hands coast down his arms, touching every muscle as he slowly slides his hand over my hard shaft. His big hand twists slightly when he reaches the tip, and his palm glides over the wetness pooling at the slit.

"Wow. You're really hard for me."

"You're really fucking hot," I say shamelessly. My hands slide over the cotton of his t-shirt and the firm muscles of his chest and stomach as my hips thrust into his hot hand.

He takes time to push my briefs and my jeans down, and they pool at my feet. His gaze moves between us, and I find myself holding my breath. What if he's fine with kissing and even touching, but what if . . .

"Wow," he breathes, and it sounds so genuine and full of awe, it stops my train of thought.

"Like what you see?" I ask, forcing some arrogance.

He soars forward enough to kiss my lips hard and then pulls back just enough that our noses are still touching. "How about you push my pants down too and find out for yourself just how damn much I like what I see."

Another full body shudder racks through my body and with trembling hands, I look down between us and undo his jeans. I push them down with his briefs, and his cock slaps

against his lower abs. He's hard and ready for me, leaking at the tip of his impressive as hell, rock-hard dick.

I swallow hard, just staring. "Zach?"

I finally pull my eyes off his dick and look at him. "Yeah?"

"Does that answer your question?"

I nod slowly, my hand moving to his cock as I wrap my fingers around him. He's slightly thicker than me, but I'm a bit longer. Still, we're almost evenly matched, and the prominent vein running over his has me mesmerized as I drag my thumb over it.

I feel him shudder and let out a shaky breath. "So good."

I nod my head and lean in for another kiss. "Please tell me you have lube."

He freezes and then turns his head toward his bed. "Uh. I have lotion I sometimes use to . . ."

I laugh softly. His cheeks are bright red, and it's just so damn cute. "Get it."

He releases me, and I reluctantly let go of him also as he shuffles toward the bed with his pants still around his ankles. He grabs the lotion and squirts some in his hand. He hands it to me, and I do the same before tossing it to his bed and use my other hand to grasp the back of his neck, pulling him back to me. We waste no more time now, both of us wrapping our slicked-up hands around each other's cocks.

I moan loudly into his mouth, and he swallows it down. We tug and jerk, our hips thrusting forward as we kiss hard. And when I cry out, my cum falling over his hand, that's when he lets go.

I pull back just in time to see his flushed cheeks, parted lips, and his closed eyes. The blissed-out sounds coming from him as he spills over my hand. God, he's even more beautiful when he comes.

How the hell is that even possible?

He kisses me again, though now that it's over, I thought he might have some regret or want to clean up fast. But he just holds onto me and kisses me with everything he has.

But then there's a loud bang on the door from one of his brothers, and we both part all too quickly.

“What?”

“Dinner!”

“We'll be down in a minute!” Adam hollers, and I grin as his eyes meet mine. “That was incredible.”

He presses a quick kiss against my lips, and I nod in agreement. He manages to grab some tissues and tosses them to me. We both clean up and right our clothes.

He kisses me again, surprising me every single time when he does that in the best way.

“We'll figure it all out.”

I nod again in agreement. “Yes,” I barely croak, and he smiles before we head out of his room to have dinner with his family.

We'll figure it all out.

And for once, that puts a damn smile on my face.

NINETEEN

ADAM

We've had no time to be alone. And I mean . . . no time. I think I'm going crazy. But how is it even possible that after eighteen years of having next to no sexual experience, I come my brains out once with my best friend and suddenly, I'm obsessed with sex.

Well, maybe not sex.

But Zach.

God, yes. I'm totally and fully obsessed with Zachary Olson. Though, honestly, it doesn't feel all that different. I've always cared about him. Always wanted to spend most of my time with him.

Huh. I wonder if maybe I should have figured this out a bit sooner. But I'm not sure it would have worked out before this. Not that we've worked anything out at all yet. We haven't had any alone time.

Zach's mom has been acting weird this week, telling Zach the girls need to come home after school. And Zach hasn't wanted to leave them alone at home—understandably. But after practice, I'm needed at home to help out.

So it's been a long damn week, and we have a game tomorrow night. Zach's mom is going out with her dumbass

husband after the game, and the girls are staying with their grandma, so I have plans.

Lots and lots of plans.

Zach walks out of the shower, a white towel wrapped around his waist and his dark hair wet as he approaches the lockers. I only pulled on my jeans after my shower when we got done with practice, and I can't keep my eyes off him.

This is not good.

"Adam." Zach's voice gets my attention. I look up at him from where I'm sitting on the bench, just staring at his body and drooling, right here in the locker room around all our teammates.

Great job, Bates. This isn't weird as fuck or anything.

"Yeah?" I ask, my voice not sounding like my own.

He moves a little closer to me, keeping his voice low and his green eyes on me. "You're staring."

I feel my cheeks flush, but I still can't help shamelessly letting my eyes drag over his body. His abs are cut to perfection. There's a little bit of dark hair between his pecs, and I notice his flat, pink nipples are starting to pebble. My throat suddenly feels very dry, and I try to swallow it away.

"Adam," he says again, a chuckle on his lips. He's shaking his head like he can't believe me, but I mean . . . look at him.

How did I not notice this before?

My best friend is hot as fuck with his puffy pink lips, sharp jawline, and piercing green eyes. His dark hair has some curl to it, especially when it's wet, like right now.

"Adam," he says again.

“Oh yeah.” I stand up from the bench and grab my shirt, pulling it on over my head. But I still can’t stop watching him as he turns away and drops the towel. Oh holy fuck, his ass is perfect.

I haven’t spent that long thinking about that perfect ass and never really saw the appeal, but now . . . Wow. I need to get the hell out of here before I have a really awkward situation.

Thankfully, he pulls on his boxer briefs and then his jeans before taking a seat on the bench and tugging on his tennis shoes. But I can’t stop watching his arm muscles flex, along with each ripple of his back, while he ties his shoes.

I all but toss his t-shirt at him, pleading with him to cover up when he catches it and thankfully, tugs it on over his head before standing up. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I try to sound convincing, but I’m pretty sure I fail. In my defense, it’s like my dick just woke up and now it doesn’t want to go back down. It’s ready to play. Like all the damn time.

He studies me carefully as we tug on our hoodies, then walk out of the locker room toward our trucks. “Hey, I forgot to tell you.” I turn to look at Zach, stopping walking all together.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he says with a grin on his face. “Just that my sisters are going over to a friend’s house for a bit after school, so I can come to your place.”

I want to grab him right fucking here and devour his mouth. But I keep my cool as much as I can. “Is that so?”

“That is so.” Fucker knows I needed to hear that. That I’m dying for time alone with him. He saunters to his truck, which

is parked next to mine. “Meet you at your place?”

“Oh, absolutely.” I grin and climb in my truck, starting the engine as fast as I can and barely closing the door before I’m peeling out of the parking lot. We make it to my house in record time and are both out of our trucks at lightning speed.

I know my parents are home and so are my brothers, so we need to play it cool. As cool as we can. We sling our backpacks over our shoulders, and I force myself to stay calm as we walk through the front door.

My mom is in the living room and looks pleasantly surprised to see Zach come in right after me. “Hey, Mom. Where is everyone?”

The house is way too quiet.

“Oh, some cows got out, so your dad and your brothers went to go get them. They should be back soon. What are you boys up to?”

Fuck. It’s almost better when they’re all home. My mom is watching us closely, and she has no one here to distract her.

As if fate is on my side, I hear my dad’s truck a moment later, followed by slamming doors and my loud-as-fuck little brothers. “Yeah. We’re gonna go study,” I say to Mom, not giving her a chance to question us anymore.

Thankfully, Zach is right on my heels as we head to my room, and I close and lock the door behind us. My lips are on his in an instant, my body thrumming with pent-up need.

I couldn’t have waited another second.

I should get an award for not mauling my boyfriend in front of my mother just now.

Wait.

Boyfriend?

I pull back just enough to speak but don't let him go. "Are you my boyfriend?"

"What?" Zach rasps, his breath hitting my lips, and God, I do not like my lips not on his right now. All I can think about is kissing those damn lips. And now that I can, am I seriously using the time to talk?

What an idiot.

I start to ignore my own question and right this very huge wrong when Zach pulls out of my grasp and steps back. Uh-oh. Did I fuck up already?

"Zach . . . I . . ."

"Do you want me to be?" he asks me, and it's so damn careful. So fearful that I want to shake him. Does he really not get that I'm totally into this?

I step closer to him, "Yes. Of course I do. I just . . . We haven't had any time to talk about it."

He cocks his head to the side, almost perplexed. "You do?"

I want to laugh and cry at the same time. "I thought it was obvious from the way I was eye-fucking you all week."

His eyes widen in surprise, and he drags a hand down over his face. "I thought you were freaked-out."

"What?" I ask, and it's my turn to be surprised.

"I mean, you were staring and trying to get me to get dressed."

"Because I didn't think humping your leg in the locker room was a good idea, and I was really fucking close to it."

That makes him smirk, the corners of his full lips lifting in amusement. “Really?”

I roll my eyes and scoff as I approach him again, my hands resting on his hips. “Really.” I surge forward and kiss him hard, but I don’t deepen the kiss. I grasp the back of his hair, which is still kind of damp. “I’m crazy about you. I don’t know how I didn’t realize it was more than friendship before, but now that I know it is . . .”—his eyes have gone comically wide now, and I smile kissing the tip of his nose—“I’m all-in.”

“All. In.” He says it slowly. Carefully. Like he can’t believe it.

“Turn the music on,” he commands, and I’m all too happy to make that happen. I turn the music on, and Zach strips out of his hoodie. Then he’s lifting mine up and off too. “We don’t have nearly as much time as I want.” He licks his lips, his eyes darting from my face to my chest and then lower. “God. I want so much with you. This week has been torture.”

I nod in agreement. “I haven’t been able to stop staring at you because I want you so bad, it feels like I’ll die if I don’t have you.”

He chuckles. “Who knew you were so dramatic?”

I grin as he undoes my jeans slowly. “Not me. But it’s how I’ve felt.” I lean in to kiss him as we make our way toward the bed. “God, I want so much with you too. I’ve spent way too much time fantasizing about it this week.”

He groans into my mouth. “Oh my God, that’s hot.”

I grab the lotion and undo his jeans, pushing them and his underwear down. He does the same to me, and then I pump some lotion into his hand and some into mine. “It is. And God, do I want to do so many things to you. But we have to hurry.

Dinner will be ready soon or one of my asshole brothers will be banging on the door.”

He nods, his nose brushing over mine as he fists my cock with his slick hand. My head tips back, and I feel his lips sliding over my exposed neck. “Yeah, I have to go pick up Mary and Anna soon.”

“Fuck. We need to work on our dirty talk.”

He chuckles, but it turns into a groan when my hand wraps around his thick shaft. I stroke him slowly. I need to hurry up, but every part of me wants to make this last. He must be on the same page because his grasp is loose, not nearly tight enough to make me come, and he knows it.

I lower my head and steal his mouth, licking and sucking on his tongue like I wish I was doing to his cock. “We have to hurry tonight, but tomorrow, I have plans for you.”

“Oh yeah?” he pants, his hand moving faster and gripping a bit harder now.

“Yes. So many fucking plans.”

“Should I bring anything?”

I stop kissing him for a second and think about that. Condoms. Lube. Are we ready for that? I don’t know. I’ve watched some porn, but not a lot, and logic says that’s not real. I haven’t really researched sex.

Oh God. Who needs to research sex?

Robots, that’s who.

Jesus fucking Christ. I’m going to ruin the best thing I’ve ever had.

“Hey.” Zach must realize I’m freaking out because one hand comes up to grasp my chin, and he’s forcing me to look at him. “We don’t do anything you don’t want to. I’m more than happy with hurried hand jobs for the rest of my life, as long as it’s with you.”

His honesty shocks me, and I’m shaking my head with my chin still in his grasp. “I want it all. I just don’t have any experience. I don’t want to disappoint you.”

“You could never disappoint me. Ever.” He releases my chin and leans forward, pressing his lips to mine. “I’d be happy just kissing you for the rest of my life. Damn happy. And it’s not like I have that much experience, by the way. For all we know, I’m horrible in the sack.” He cringes. “Shit. I actually am. My only experience was horrible.”

Well shit. I made him spiral. “No.” I shake my head and grip his cock a little tighter. His eyes are on mine. “That doesn’t count. It wasn’t right. This is right.” I stroke him slowly, holding eye contact. “This is everything.”

He nods hesitantly, and his hand starts to move. “We’ll figure it out.”

“Yes.” I kiss him hard as we both work the other one over. I go over first, trying like hell to keep myself quiet, and I’m grateful when he gasps and spills over my hand.

We clean up quickly and get dressed before we sit on my bed. My room smells like sex, but I’m sure it’ll fade soon.

I’m kind of sad about that.

“I’m all-in too,” he says softly, and I grin at him, but he’s not smiling. I hold my breath, wondering what he’s going to say next. “But”—he turns so he can face me—“I can’t tell anyone about us. Elliot . . .”

My heart squeezes tightly in my chest because I already knew this. It's probably the biggest reason why he tried so damn hard to make everything with Chloe look real. Why he forced it. "Is a dickhead."

A small smile emerges on his face but not big enough for my liking. "He is. But my sisters . . ." He shakes his head, and I see the worry in his eyes. "I can't leave them alone with that prick. And if he really wanted to, he could keep me from seeing them. I have to figure all that out and soon, but until then . . ."

I cup his jaw with my hand and bring my nose to touch his before pressing my forehead against his. "It's nobody's business what we do. We know we're together. You know I'm not going anywhere."

He doesn't say anything. His eyes just fall closed as we stay there with our foreheads touching.

"Zach, you know that. Right?"

He finally opens his eyes and sits back a little to look at me. "I just . . . You have a plan. You have since we were little. I don't want to fuck up that plan."

"If I'm being honest, you were always part of that plan too. How many times did we play out on the land and talk about the house we'd build together?"

He's smiling now. "I thought that was just kid stuff."

I shrug. "You were always part of my future. I just didn't completely realize the role you'd play, but you were there, Zach."

He nods his head and takes a deep breath, then lets it out. "Okay. We're together, and we'll figure it out. But for now . . ."

“We don’t tell a soul,” I finish for him, and I mean it. I don’t want anyone in my business anyway.

It would probably be the same for me if I was dating a girl. I’m a private guy.

And Zachary Olson is all mine.

Whether the world knows it or not.

TWENTY

ZACH

The game didn't go as planned. We were so damn close to winning, but at the end, they ran the ball in for a touchdown, knocking us out of the running for state. It's okay though. I don't think I needed it to feel complete.

I had my years playing football. And they were fun, but I have a hell of a lot more on my mind than football, and it's not like I was going to college for it. No. I need to find a way to get my sisters out of that house.

But tonight, Adam isn't letting me wallow in any of that.

My mom and asshole stepdad are going out of town tonight and staying in a casino hotel, and my sisters are safe with my grandmother. So tonight, it's just Adam and me. And his plans.

I shudder, thinking about what those plans could mean. But I don't really care what they are. I'm up for it. All of it.

"You ready?" Adam's voice is full of promise, and I nod, standing up after tying my shoes. Most of the guys in the locker room are down about losing the game, but my mind is on Adam.

We skip the party. I'm not sure where Adam is taking us until he turns down the familiar road, and I smile. "We have

the night to ourselves, and we're going to your house?"

I don't really care where he takes us. If we're staying at his place, that takes away some idea of the plan he had—because I don't know how long we can fool around in his room without getting caught. Though just hanging out with him is more than enough for me.

But he doesn't pull up to his house, which has the porch light on as usual when any of the kids are out at night. I smile at that, but frown when he drives down another road. One I'm familiar with also.

"We're sleeping on the concrete of your house?" No way will that be comfortable.

He chuckles at that as he pulls up to where the foundation of his home has been poured. "No. That would be fucking freezing and uncomfortable. Come on." He parks his truck and hops out, grabbing a bag from the back of his truck.

I sigh in uncertainty, with my heart thumping wildly in my chest. But I follow him anyway. I see a small trailer I haven't seen before and stop as he walks to the front of it. "What is this?"

He turns to me. "I bought it last week. Thought it would be good to have a place to go until I can finish the house."

I stare at the rusty old camper that's likely from the 1970s, if I had to guess. It's an ugly-ass green and has seen better days. It's not much, but it's not his bedroom with his parents right outside the door. It's close enough to his parents' home that we can see it but still a pretty good distance away.

"Do your parents know about this?"

He nods and pulls the creaky door open. "They do. I told them I'll be staying out here more and more so I can work on

the house in my free time. I'm eighteen. This was always the plan, Zach."

We walk in, he flicks on the light, and I gotta say, I'm surprised anything works. It smells old. Yes, old has a smell, and this is it. But it's fairly clean and taken care of, despite its age. There's a small bathroom I worry neither of us will actually fit in, a sink, and a stove. There's also a table with two booth-like seats that I know from seeing similar campers will fold down into a bed. But in the back of the trailer, I spot an actual bed, and a slow grin falls over my face.

"Easy. We have time," he says, coming up behind me. We barely fit in here, but my eyes are still stuck on the bed. This will be the most privacy and alone time we've had yet, and I'm here for it. "Here let me get it warmer."

I see a space heater he has set up in the middle of the floor and watch as he plugs it in. I'm hit with a different smell too, but it doesn't matter. This is perfect. He flicks the lock on the door and places the bag he brought on the bed.

I'm nervous, and when he stands by the bed and doesn't move, I realize he is too. "You okay?"

He turns to look at me, his eyes bright and full of promise. "Yeah. I'm okay. Are you?"

I nod and walk to him. "I'm here with you. I'm more than okay." I put my hands on his hips and breathe him in.

"You disappointed about the game?"

I shake my head and answer him honestly, "Kind of glad we aren't going to state and practice is done now. Until basketball."

He grins and sighs softly. "Yeah, but I liked practice. More time together."

“We’ll have plenty. Maybe I can bring the girls over more after school.”

He smiles, and his hand brushes my cheek. I lean into his touch the way I always do. “Yeah. Maybe.”

“Hey, Adam?”

“Yeah?” he asks as he looks into my eyes.

“Kiss me.”

And he does. He doesn’t hesitate at all, and it’s perfect. His lips fuse to mine, and his fingers go into my hair, gripping just tight enough. I love kissing him so damn much. How did I go so long without this?

Even when I started to realize how attracted I was to him, I never thought we’d be here. And yet, here we are, kissing in a camper, just outside of where he’s laying the foundation for his future.

A future, apparently, he’d always planned to share with me. “I wanna see you. All of you.” He breathes against my lips, and hell yes.

I quickly strip out of my coat and shirt with Adam chuckling when my shirt gets caught on my head, but I don’t care. We finally have a chance to be naked together, and I can touch him.

“You too. God, I need to see you too,” I barely manage as I pop the button on my jeans after tossing my shirt.

He’s still smiling wide, but he listens and pulls his coat off and then his shirt. He’s going a hell of a lot slower than I am. I kick off my shoes and pull off my socks before I push my jeans and my boxer briefs down and off, leaving me totally bare-ass naked in front of him.

He still has his entire bottom half to go.

“Adam,” I whine, and he laughs, but his gaze is heated as he drags his eyes over every inch of my naked body, and okay. This is okay too.

A full tremor goes through me, but I don’t hide from him. I stand there and let him look. My cock is hard as hell, pointing straight up and leaking, but I don’t dare move. He wants to look at me.

Adam Bates, my best friend, wants to look. I’m going to let him look.

I startle slightly when he reaches out and drags his big hand over my abs. The jolt of him touching me sends my brain offline. He drops his hand. “Sorry.”

“No.” I take his hand and place it back on my stomach. “Touch me.”

He smiles sweetly, almost shyly, as he drags his fingers over every ridge of my muscles. My stomach flexes with each movement, but the rest of my body is still. He moves over my ribs and up to my pecs, his rough fingers hardening my nipples when they drag over them.

Over the hair between my pecs and back down again, following the light trail of hair from my belly button to my pubes.

“You’re so damn beautiful.”

I gasp at his admission and nearly lose my mind when he drops to his knees in front of me. “Adam.” I barely choke out because holy shit, his face is right in front of my aching dick.

“Let me?” He looks up at me with those big blue eyes, asking permission. As if I would ever tell him no. I thought I’d

be the first to taste him—I wanted to, but I won't deny him.

I won't question him.

Adam knows what he wants, and if he wants this, I'm all-in. "Yes. Please," I gasp as he leans forward and breathes me in.

My cock jerks at his action and desperately wants to be inside the warm heat of his mouth. But no way I'm rushing this. My fingers slide through his soft hair as he kisses my inner thigh, his hands sliding up the back of my thighs.

He brings one hand forward, grasping my base and making me cry out with desperate need, but I keep still. I don't thrust forward like I want to. I watch his tongue tease the tip of my cock, run through my slit, and gather what has to be a lot of pre-cum onto it. His deep moan sends a shockwave through me, but I manage not to push my hips forward.

"Adam. You're killing me."

He chuckles as he sucks the head of my dick into his mouth, still teasing me with that tongue, and swirling it around the head before he sucks on me.

"Oh fuck." I hold onto his strong shoulders, my knees threatening to buckle.

He slides down a little further, his hand still on my base before he pops off my dick and looks up at me. "You taste so damn good."

I groan, "Holy fuck, Adam. I'm going to come, just looking at you like this."

He smiles shyly again. "So I'm doing okay, then?"

I hate that he sounds so unsure, and I run my hand over his cheek, letting my thumb brush over his bottom lip. "You're

perfect.”

“I don’t know what the hell I’m doing.”

“It feels so good, Adam. You can’t do anything wrong.”

He grins at me, and then, before I can say anything more, he’s taking my cock back into his mouth, meeting where his hand is still wrapped around me. And oh, holy fuck.

“Adam, it’s so good. So hot. So tight. So wet.” My hips thrust forward slightly, but thankfully, his hand stops me from going too far and choking him. “Adam, shit. I’m going to come. You need to . . .”

But he seems to only double his efforts, and then before I know it, I’m spilling into the wet cavern of his mouth. He swallows, but there’s a lot dribbling out of his mouth and over my dick and balls. He continues to lick me clean, like he can’t get enough.

When I’m too sensitive, I push gently on his shoulders. He stands up, stealing my mouth again and letting me taste myself on him.

My cock is already starting to rally again, wanting more of him. “Jesus. How could you think you would be anything less than perfect?”

He smiles sheepishly, but I don’t waste any time dropping to my knees too. “My turn.”

He doesn’t fight me either. We both know we’re exactly where we need to be. I pull his shoes and socks off. He braces his hands on my bare shoulders to keep from falling over. Then I undo his jeans and pull them off, along with his tight black briefs.

His cock is free, and as badly as I want to take my time and savor him, I need this too badly. So I lean in, tasting his pre-cum with a deep moan.

“Oh shit, you taste so damn good too.”

He groans, his fingers threading through my hair as I take as much of him as I can into my mouth. He’s fucking big and long, and it’s a struggle but one I’m ready to tackle.

The way his fingers flex in my hair and his loud, uncontrolled panting tells me I’m doing just fine, even if it’s sloppy and unskilled.

“Zach, I’m close,” he pants, and I smile around the mouthful of cock.

I don’t pull off. I’m too desperate to taste him. When I reach up and roll his full, heavy balls in my hand, it’s all over, and he’s coming down my throat with a harsh cry that’s so damn beautiful, I hope I’ll hear it replay in my head for years to come.

I try my best to swallow it all and lick him clean before he pulls me up to him and kisses me hard. He walks us over to the bed and pulls what smells like very clean sheets over our sated, sweaty bodies.

He wraps his arms around me and cuddles me close.

“Tonight was perfect,” I mumble before my eyes drift closed.

Tonight was everything.

TWENTY-ONE

ADAM

Last night was so goddamn perfect, and this morning is even better as I wake up, still totally naked and wrapped around Zach's hard body.

I planned for more. I even bought condoms and lube, but what we did . . . it was perfect.

There's no other way to describe it. It was everything I could have hoped for our very first night spent completely alone.

The camper sucks. It's old and musty. Really small. But I couldn't resist buying it when I knew it would give us time to ourselves. I let my hand slide down over his hip and love the way my cock feels nestled between his firm cheeks.

"Mmmm. Now that's the way to wake up," he says, moving against my cock and making me gasp.

"Oh shit."

I move my hand forward and grasp his very hard cock in my hand, letting my thumb sweep over the tip, which is sticky with pre-cum.

"Just like that," he says as I thrust forward, sliding my cock between his ass cheeks but not doing more than that as I stroke his dick.

It would be better with lube, but I can't be bothered to move, and he doesn't seem to care. I use as much of his pre-cum as I can to get him nice and slick. He turns his head, looking over his shoulder at me, and I crash my mouth against his as I slide through his crease, sticky with my own pre-cum.

"Oh fuck," he cries as his cock jerks in my hand, and I feel his cum spill over. It's all I need before I come too, my cum covering him in the most delicious way. I can't help thinking about what it would be like inside of him.

Or having him inside me.

Not something I ever thought would happen, but now that we've kissed and admitted our deeper feelings, I can't stop thinking about it.

"Okay." He turns in my arms and rests his hand over my cheek. "That's the way to wake a guy up."

I chuckle and kiss him hard, not caring at all about morning breath or the sticky mess we made. But it all ends far too quickly when we both hear a buzzing noise, which pulls us out of the happiness we shared.

"Shit. My phone." He scrambles off the bed and grabs it out of his pocket. "Shit. Fuck. Shit!"

"What's wrong?" I ask as I climb out of bed and grab a paper towel, wetting it so we can clean up. Because I already have a feeling we need to get moving.

"My sisters. Mary. Fuck!"

"Hey." I walk over to him, trying to calm him and clean him up at the same time. Wiping away the mess on his lower back and between his cheeks. Nothing sexual about it. We need to get cleaned up and dressed. "Talk to me."

He shoves his jeans on, and I do the same as I listen. “I had my phone turned down. I always have it turned up. They fucking needed me, and I didn’t have my goddamn phone.”

I wince because that was a fail on my part too. I know that. We always make sure his phone and mine are up loud and near us. But last night, I was lost in ecstasy, and I fell asleep before I could make sure we had our phones. “Shit. Are they okay?”

We pull on our shirts and hoodies, and I grab my keys as we head out of the trailer. “No. Mary is hurt. They didn’t say what happened. I just have missed calls, and Anna asking me to come home. They aren’t supposed to be home. Why the hell are they home?”

“It’s going to be okay. I promise.” We hop in my truck, and I know I can’t really promise that. It feels like my heart is living in my throat right now, but I want to comfort him in any way I can.

We reach his house, and he’s opening his door before I even get the truck into park. He flies toward the house, and I shuffle after him. He opens the door, and Mary is instantly in his arms. “Mary. What the hell happened?”

Anna is there, and she looks like she’s been crying, but my eyes stay firmly on Elliot and their mother. They both look worn and tired. Elliot looks pissed-off, and their mom has been crying.

“What the fuck happened?” Zach barks at his mother and Elliot when he sees the bruise on Mary’s forehead the same time I do. It’s already dark purple and swollen. He makes a beeline to Elliot and grabs him by the collar before I can reach them. “What did you do?”

“Nothing.” He shoves at Zach, but he’s like a bull when he’s mad, and right now, he’s fucking livid. Zach doesn’t budge, shoving Elliot against the wall and still holding onto his collar. “She fell.”

“Bullshit,” Zach snarls, getting into his face, and as badly as I want to watch him beat the living shit out of Elliot—and would like to help—I don’t want him going to jail.

“Zach,” I try to placate him.

But it’s like he doesn’t hear me. “What did you do to her, you piece of shit?”

“Zachary, please,” his mom pleads.

His eyes remain on Elliot while I look at their mom. “Why are you guys home? You’re supposed to be out of town.”

“You’re damn right, we were,” Elliot spits, and I glare at him. “But Mary just couldn’t let us have one damn night to ourselves.”

“She’s sick, you asshole,” Anna screams, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Zach looks over at his sisters. “You’re sick? Why didn’t you call me?” Mary shrinks into herself, and Zach looks pale. “Oh, God. You tried to call me, and I didn’t answer.”

“It was really early. I threw up. Grandma said she was going to take me home, and I called you, but you . . .” She’s crying now, and Zach releases Elliot, shoving him back into the wall as he moves to Mary and kneels down in front of her. “Grandma called Mom and Elliot.”

“I’m so sorry.” He hugs her, and my heart shatters. Goddammit. The phones. We know better. We know shit like

this can happen. I'm mentally kicking myself when Elliot has the nerve to speak again.

"She doesn't seem sick to me. She was running around like a little hellion and tripped."

"Bullshit," Zach says, hugging Mary again and standing up to face Elliot. "You motherfucker. If she tells me you laid one hand on her, you're dead."

"Zach no," Mary cries. "I just want to leave. I want to go to Adam's. I want Mrs. Bates."

"Honey, she's not your mom," their mom corrects her, and I bite my tongue, even though I want to shake this woman. To scream at her for letting her kids down so damn badly.

I know she's had so much bad shit happen to her, but these are her babies. She's supposed to protect them. She's supposed to put them first. And she does none of that. Instead, she's now pleading with Zach not to take them when he tells the girls to pack a bag and get their coats.

They listen to him, and Zach walks closer to Elliot and his mom. "They aren't staying here anymore. It's not happening."

"Zach." His mother reaches out to touch his arm, but he pulls away and direct a death glare at her.

"No. I'm taking them."

Elliot scoffs loudly. "You're eighteen. You're in high school. You don't have anywhere to go. You can't provide for them."

"You're not going anywhere near my sisters ever again," Zach says, determination on his face.

"Honey, you can't take them. We're their parents." His mother's tone is so damn patronizing, I want to strangle her.

They aren't parents.

"I can. I'm eighteen. I'll figure it out. I'll get a job, and I'll find us a place."

"You take them from here, I'll call the cops and have your ass arrested," Elliot says, and I hear myself growl.

"You go right ahead and call the cops, you goddamn coward. You explain that bruise on her head with that whiskey breath."

"Stay out of this, Adam," Elliot glares. "You think they'll believe you two? Kids fall. All the damn time."

"And some kids are pushed by their asshole stepfathers. You call the cops." Zach steps closer to them. "You dare go near them, and I'll tell them everything. Every drunken night where you shoved me. When you pushed me around and left me bruised. When you tripped me on purpose, and I fell head-first into the corner of the coffee table."

Goddammit. I knew Elliot had something to do with Zach needing four stitches that day, but he wouldn't admit it.

Elliot pales but only slightly, and his mother sobs like a moron. I feel no sympathy for her whatsoever, I realize. She should have been there.

"Fine. Take the brats," Elliot says with a snarl.

"What? No," their mother cries, but Zach isn't listening as we walk over to the front door, meeting Mary and Anna who both have their bags packed and their coats on.

"You choose. Right now," Zach addresses his mother. "It's him. Or it's us. But if you choose him, prepare for a goddamn battle because these girls aren't ever living under his roof again."

“Zachary . . .” she cries.

“No.” His tone is calm and in control as he pushes the door open, already knowing her choice.

I follow them out as the girls hop into his truck, which is still parked here, and I get into mine.

Zach drives off, and I follow. We don’t need words to know we’re heading to my folks’ house. I hope they know what the hell to do because I have no clue.

All I know is I have Zach’s back, no matter what.

TWENTY-TWO

ZACH

I'm numb as I drive to the Bates' farm. I can't believe I let them down like this. I can't even look over at my sisters as I drive. I let them down. I never let them down.

When we get there, I park my truck in the drive, and Adam parks his next to mine. I grab one bag, and Adam grabs the other, his hand smoothing gently against my back in a small gesture before we walk up the front steps to the door.

Adam unlocks the door and lets us all inside. But his parents are right there, concern dripping from their features because they're real parents. They worry. They care.

They don't start crying and babbling when they've been caught doing something bad. They don't ever hurt their kids, and they'd lay down their lives to keep them safe. "What's going on?" Adam's mother rushes to us, and her eyes instantly zone-in on Mary because of course they do. "What happened, sweetie?"

Mary instantly closes her little arms around Adam's mother and sobs, "Elliot got mad at me because I threw up and ruined his trip, and he shoved me. My head hit the wall."

Adam's mother's eyes meet mine and then land on Adam. "Did anyone call the police? Does she need a doctor?"

“No,” Mary wails. “I don’t want to go to the doctor. I don’t want the cops to come and take us away.”

“Oh, honey.” His mom sweeps her hand over Mary’s cheek, and it’s so comforting, I want to cry.

Adam’s dad looks furious as he glances at us. “What happened? Where is Elliot?” His teeth are tightly clenched when he asks.

Adam answers, “We took the girls. Told them if they called the cops, we’d tell them everything.”

Mrs. Bates hugs Mary and Anna to her. “Girls, why don’t you go into Adam’s room and get some rest. I’ll bring you some hot chocolate in a moment. Okay?” The girls nod and do as they’re asked.

“I’m sorry we came here,” I say to both of them. “We didn’t know where to go, and I couldn’t leave them there.”

“Why didn’t you call the police?” Adam’s mom asks.

“They’ll take them. We don’t have anyone. Our grandma . . . she’s not well, and the girls will end up in foster care.” My throat actually aches as my worst fears are spoken aloud.

“Can’t they stay here, Mom? Just for a little bit until we get it figured out?” Adam pleads, and my heart sinks because I shouldn’t have brought this trouble on them.

I’m not the girls’ guardian, and technically, I did sort of kidnap them. But I know Elliot isn’t going to call the cops. The asshole has had enough run-ins with the law that he won’t bring them to his front door.

Adam’s parents share a look, and his father looks at us. “Of course you can stay here for as long as you need, but . . .”

“I promise I’ll figure it all out. I won’t put you all in any kind of danger. I just need time to figure things out. I . . .” I’m stuttering.

Mrs. Bates walks close to me and places her small hands on my shoulder. “Sweetheart, we know that. We aren’t worried about us. I’ll go against your idiot stepfather and your mother any day.”

Adam’s father grunts, “Good for nothing son of a bitch, even in high school.”

Adam laughs at that, but quickly schools his features. “We’ll figure it out.”

Adam’s mom squeezes my shoulders. “You two may be technically adults, but you’re still in school. You’re figuring life out for yourselves. Two minors are a big responsibility.” The way she’s talking makes me wonder if she knows what we really are to each other. I can’t be certain. She may just know that we’re best friends and that Adam takes on everything I do, but it feels like she knows. “But I have no doubt you’ll figure something out. And in the meantime, you all can stay here. If your mom comes knocking, which sadly,”—his mom sighs—“I’m not even sure she will, I’ll handle her.”

“Football is over. I can get a job and help pay for things,” I say, having already planned on doing that. Basketball isn’t a necessity.

“Hell, son. We’d much rather have your physical labor around here.” Adam’s dad slaps me on the back.

Adam chuckles. “You all wanted this to happen, didn’t you? Free labor.”

“Adam Bates,” his mom scolds. “We’d never wish anything bad on those girls.” She squeezes my cheek with her

hand. “Now, if it was you . . .”

“Oh, thank you,” I say with a smile, and she kisses my cheek.

“You know I’m kidding. I don’t ever want you hurt. I want you all safe, and if it’s under my roof, then that’s even better.”

“Thank you,” I say, so not used to a mother being so damn kind and fierce at the same time.

“About that?” Adam says, and we all look at him. “The girls can stay in my room, and we can stay out in the camper.”

His parents both nod, and his mom releases me walking over to him. “I suppose you were wanting to move out there anyway.”

He grins. “I thought about it. It’s a little quieter.”

She laughs at that but doesn’t argue with him. Eighteen around here is a little bit different from the rest of the world, from what I can gather. Our eighteenth birthdays aren’t a huge deal, but they do signal adulthood for a lot of us. Time to move out and get a job.

College isn’t usually on our minds. Nor is living with our parents.

“You both look like you need to get more sleep too. Why don’t you go out to the trailer. I’ll take care of the girls, and you two come back for lunch.” I trust them. I do. But my feet won’t move. His mom places her hand on my cheek. “I promise you they’ll be okay.”

Her eyes look so much like Adam’s that I find myself nodding as he takes my hand and leads me toward the door. If his parents think it’s odd that he’s holding my hand, they don’t say a word. “I’ll have my phone on and up if they need

anything at all,” I say to them, and they both give me a firm nod.

I follow Adam outside, and we walk to the camper. It’s a long walk, and it’s cold, but I’m grateful for it. It makes me a little less numb somehow, even though I can’t feel my damn nose.

We reach the camper, and Adam locks the door before plugging the space heater back in. He strips his coat and then mine off and pulls me toward the bed. I need a shower. He does too, but I let him pull me down to the bed and wrap his big arms around me.

“They’re okay.”

“I let them down,” I say, glad he’s spooning me and that he can’t see my face—or the unshed tears in my eyes.

“You’re their brother. Not their guardian.”

We both know that’s not really true. I’ve been their guardian for a while now, officially or not. I should have been there. “I don’t regret last night,” I say because I need to. “But I hate that I let them down.”

He squeezes me tighter, his face in the crook of my neck. “I don’t either, but I hate it too.”

I smile because I know he gets it. I know he knows I don’t blame him. And he doesn’t blame me either. We both only blame ourselves.

But still, I can’t bring myself to regret last night. The way I felt with him. The way I always feel with him. So damn safe.

I check my phone to make sure it’s turned up and sit it next to me on the bed before I let my eyes fall closed with him wrapped around me.

Today was a disaster. I have no idea what I'm going to do. I can't rely on the Bateses forever. I have to form an actual plan.

But for right now, I'm going to give myself this moment in Adam's arms and not worry.

For right now, I'm going to let them take care of everything before it all falls right back on my shoulders.

TWENTY-THREE

ADAM

I don't want to pull Zach from his deep sleep, but I just got a text from my mom telling us lunch is ready. I know we need to face this head-on as soon as possible. My parents are cool, but I'm not sure where their heads are at.

They've raised four of us, and I'm not positive they really want to take on three more. Although, I always had the feeling my mom wanted to have even more kids, and I know how much she cares about those girls.

"Zach," I breathe into his ear, loving the scent of him, despite the mess we're in. He rolls over to his back and groans, but keeps his eyes closed. "Zach."

"Hmm?"

"We need to get to lunch. Mom wants to talk, I think."

He sits straight up now, his whole body going rigid. "What time is it?"

I sit up and hug his waist, hoping to calm him. "It's noon. Everyone is okay. It's just time to go back to my parents' house."

He nods, and I feel him slowly release his breath. "Okay. Let's go."

We climb out of bed and put our coats on, heading back to the house. When we walk inside, we're greeted with laughter. Lots and lots of laughter and warm heat from the fireplace.

Mom sees us walk in and directs us to the kitchen, where we join Dad, my brothers, and the girls already at the table and digging into to fried chicken and mashed potatoes.

"Sit, boys," Mom says as she hands us both a plate. We take them and load up as she sits down.

Mary seems awfully content, and I'm grateful she has a smile on her face right now after so much trauma this morning.

"I took Mary to the doctor." I feel Zach stiffen next to me, and I look over at my mom, waiting for her to continue. "She's okay. She's feeling better now. They think she might have had a stomach bug, and there's no sign of a concussion."

"Uh . . ." Zach seems at a loss for words, but I know he's worried about the same thing I am. Doctors would and should ask questions when a child comes in with a bruise like that.

She waves him off with a smile. "We may have told a little white lie." She looks over at Mary and then back at us. "That Mary was staying with us and fell. Don't worry. They know us pretty well, after all the years you boys have gone there hurt. They just checked her out."

"No cops!" Mary says happily, and my heart breaks for her that she was stuck in such hell for so long that she knows if the cops were called, she'd likely be taken into child protective custody.

"No, baby. No cops," my mom says, and I send a sad smile her way. I'm grateful as hell to her.

We all eat and chat about mundane things until the younger kids finish, and they all bounce off to play in the snow, which started to fall after we got here. It's not much, but enough for them to be excited.

That's when the discussion becomes serious, and Mom sets her eyes on us. "I talked to your mother, Zach."

Again he stiffens and looks like he's going to puke.

"And?" I ask, even though I'm as afraid as Zach looks right now.

"And the girls are going to stay here for a while. She understands, but I don't feel much sympathy for her." Her gaze softens on Zach. "I'm sorry, Sweetie."

Zach lifts a dismissive hand. "I don't have *any* for her."

She smiles sadly at him. "I don't blame you. I don't have much, but I have a little bit maybe because I've known her for so long, and I know how devastated she was when she lost your father." He looks pale again, but my mom keeps going. "But I told her that if she leaves Elliot and gets herself together, we can talk. Until then, she's agreed the girls are not safe there, and she knows where they are. She knows we'll take good care of them."

My heart is racing, but I'm in complete awe of my mother. I shouldn't have doubted her, but I'm amazed that in the few hours Zach and I were sleeping, my mother handled everything. "Now, we won't be their official guardians, obviously. It's all verbal agreements, but I know your mother pretty well, and I don't think she's going to make this difficult."

Zach nods. "She's probably relieved."

My mom reaches out and places her hand on Zach's that's resting on the table. "She knows they weren't safe. I think she wants the best for you kids, even though she's done a poor job of achieving that."

My dad grunts, and I know there are things he wants to say but keeps his mouth shut.

"Now." That's my mom's serious tone, and I focus on her again. "You boys can stay in the camper, but if it gets too cold at night or too cramped, you can always come here. The couch won't fit both of you, but we have an air mattress. We can figure it out. You're both to still go to school every single day. And Zach?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"If you want to get a job, we can't and won't stop you. But it would be better for us if you helped out here instead."

Zach isn't dumb. He knows, although my parents will always take the extra help, this is more for him and his not having to work while still juggling school. Still, he smiles and nods. "I can do that. I'll do my fair share, I promise."

My dad pats him on the shoulder. "We have no doubt about that, whatsoever, kid. We just want you to finish school."

"I will," he promises. "And I'll help with the girls. You won't have to do anything, I promise."

My mom holds up one hand and stops his rambling, thank fuck. "Stop that. Those girls are little angels compared to what I'm used to."

"I feel like I should be offended," I say, and my mom laughs.

"Zachary, we're here to help. You need to let us."

He nods his head but looks unsure, and I know he's held onto way too much responsibility throughout his eighteen years. But I hope he'll hear what they are saying. They'll help, and so will I.

He's not alone.

We do the dishes and help clean up after lunch. Then we head outside to play with the kids for a bit. Zach spends some extra time with Mary, making sure she's okay before we head back to the camper.

When we walk inside, Zach flops down on the bed, looking tired and worn out. I hate this for him. I know he's worried. I know it all still feels up in the air, but I also trust my parents.

My mom wouldn't bullshit us, not even to protect us. That woman only knows how to tell the truth, and if she doesn't think his mother will be a problem, then she's probably right.

I drop down on the floor in front of him and take his shoes off, tossing them behind me. His hand smooths over my hair, and I lean against his thigh, the denim still cold from outside.

"It's going to be okay."

"But for how long?" His voice is strained, but neither of us move. I rest against his thigh, and he strokes my hair.

"For as long as you need. My parents wouldn't offer to take care of the girls if they weren't totally up for it. My mom is right, compared to me and my brothers, those girls are angels."

"I can't ask them to do this."

"You didn't." I shift so I can look up at him, and his hand falls to my shoulder.

“Adam—”

“No,” I stop him because I know what he’s going to say. “You didn’t. You never ask for help, but you need it now. Let them help you. Please. Let us all help you.”

His hand moves up and sweeps over my cheek and he huffs. “You know I love you, right?”

I smile because I do. We’ve always loved each other. “You know I’m completely and totally in love with you too, right?”

His eyes shine, wet and tired. “You are?”

It’s my turn to huff as I climb off the floor and sit next to him on the bed, cupping his face in mine. “I am. I’m so in love with you, and everything we do, going forward, will be with that in mind.”

His shoulders slump, but I don’t release him from my grasp. “I can’t ask you to do that either. My future is . . .”—he sighs—“it’s going to be hard. It’s no secret I want custody of my sisters. That I want to give them a good life.”

“And you don’t think I want the same thing?”

“Adam . . .” He starts, but my hold on him tightens, and I hold his eyes on me.

“Zach, you’ve always been part of my future, and I’ll do everything I can to make sure that future is bright.”

His eyes are still wet with unshed tears, and I want them to fall. Because I don’t want him to hold anything back with me. “We’re eighteen in Kensley, Kansas. I don’t know how the hell to make that happen. I can’t lean on you and your parents forever.”

“You’re right. We are eighteen. And my parents taught me it’s okay to lean on family. And that’s what they are to you

too.”

“And us?” He looks pale now. “We’re . . .”

“Together,” I finish.

“Yes. And how do you think that’s going to go over with any custody concerns here in Kensley? This town . . . They’ll . . .”

“Hey.” I hold onto him and look straight into his eyes. “No one will find out about us. We can keep it quiet. My parents will take care of the girls. We’ll finish school and the house, and we’ll figure it out.”

“How are you always so damn sure?”

I grin at that because I can feel him starting to settle, which also makes me calm. “Because I am. I love you, Zach. And I’ll make damn sure you and your sisters are safe for as long as I’m breathing. So please, just trust me.”

He leans forward, my hands still on his face, and he presses a hard kiss to my mouth. “I love you too. I’m so damn in love with you. It feels like a dream. I wanted this for so long, and I never thought it could happen. But here we are.”

I smile against his mouth that’s still pressed against mine. “We are.”

“Thank you,” he says softly, and I want to tell him he never has to thank me. But he’d just argue, and I don’t want to argue right now.

I pull him down on the bed and wrap my arms around him, not bothering to take our coats off because it’s pretty damn cold in here, and I’m not getting up to turn on the heater.

We’ll be okay.

TWENTY-FOUR

ZACH

It's Thanksgiving, and we have been at the Bates' for almost two weeks now. There was a small part of me that thought maybe, just maybe, my mom would show up today or the day before and want us.

But she doesn't.

She hasn't reached out once, and I should be relieved. But it still hurts. It hurts so damn bad that she chose him over us. That she just simply gave up on life and doesn't give a damn. But it's nothing new. You'd think I'd be used to it by now.

"Hey." Adam walks up behind me in the tiny-as-fuck camper bathroom—and by little, I mean I'm in the bathroom, and he's outside of the doorway. The shower barely fits one of us, but it's still nice.

"Hi," I say, meeting his reflection in the mirror. I have a towel wrapped around my waist, and he's completely naked, waiting for his own time in the shower.

"We need a bigger shower." His hand slides down my sides, and I shiver. I lick my lips and think about last night when he had his mouth on me. God, I came so damn hard, emptying down his throat.

Staying here with him with the door locked . . . I'm a selfish asshole because while I'm worried about my sisters, and the situation totally sucks . . . it's been the best time of my life.

We haven't taken it any further than hand jobs and blowjobs yet, but I'm ready. If it weren't a damn holiday where we should probably get over there pretty soon, I'd ask him to fuck me right here and now.

My dick is hard as steel under my towel, and it jerks at the thought. We've had some conversations about it. Not much. But we've talked about how I got tested twice after I broke up with Chloe and how he hasn't been with anyone at all . . . so there's no need for condoms.

I trust him more than I trust myself, so I'm ready.

But when it's come to taking that next step, we just haven't yet. I'm okay with taking it slow though. He's in love with me.

My best friend. The one I've had so many fantasies about is in love with me too.

"We do. What kind of shower are you planning for the house?"

His hands run over my back to my shoulders, massaging my tense muscles, and I let out a soft groan at how good it feels. "I don't know. Oakley sent me some pictures from Pinterest. He's far too invested."

I chuckle, not at all surprised. That guy loves his Pinterest boards. "Well, make sure it's big enough for both of us, huh?"

His hands travel down my shoulders and over my pecs, making me groan when I feel his hard dick pressed between my cheeks. Any chance I can get him to fuck me right here, right now?

“No,” he answers my unspoken question with a deep rasp in my ear. He undoes the knot of my towel, and it drops to the floor as his hand grasps my hard cock. “When I finally get inside you, I’m going to take my time.”

I lean back against his naked, solid body, my head lolling back. “You’ve been edging me for weeks.”

He chuckles at that and strokes me slowly. “Pretty sure you’ve come many times.” His breath is warm against my skin. “Just feel, Zach.”

And I do. I close my eyes and let him take me to that high, my body tipping over the edge as I cry out and spray the sink with my cum. He spins me around and kneels on the ground, licking me clean. I pull him up, pressing a kiss to his lips.

I drop to my knees and take his big cock to the back of my throat—I have practice now and can do it without gagging for the most part. He doesn’t seem to mind when I do, though. The deep rumble of his moan is all that I focus on until he’s spilling down my throat, and I swallow every drop before I stand up and smack his firm ass. “Shower. We’re late.”

He shoots me the world’s sexiest wink and turns on the shower when I step out of the way. As he showers, I clean up and get dressed, brushing my teeth and doing my hair just as he’s ready to get out.

After he gets dressed, we put our coats on and make the short walk to his parents’ house, where it’s warm and full of laughter and screaming kids. But they’re happy. All of them.

Mrs. Bates bought dresses for the girls, and they both show them off to me with big smiles on their faces. I wonder how much they cost and try to mentally add it to the running total of what I owe this family.

But I try not to dwell on it too much. My sisters are happy, and that's really all that matters. We help Mrs. Bates out in the kitchen as much as we can, and soon, we're sitting down at their dining room table and stuffing our faces full of delicious food.

I'd say sex is probably off the table for tonight as I finish my second slice of pumpkin pie, but damn, it was good.

Jameson and Dixon are spending Thanksgiving in Hayes, but it doesn't feel like anything is missing. I can't get over how different this house feels from the one I grew up in. I have to believe it would have been different if my dad were alive, but I can't waste much time thinking about that. He's gone. My mom might as well have died with him, and I'm going to make damn sure my sisters are okay.

I need to think about the future.

Nothing else really matters at this point.

I look at Adam, who's sitting next to me, and I smile because I know he's going to be part of it.

There's nothing more comforting in the world than that.

TWENTY-FIVE

ADAM

“What do you think Zachary wants for Christmas?” My mom is loading bacon onto my plate while we wait for everyone else to get their shit together this morning after chores.

Zach is still in the camper, showering, and man, do I wish I was there with him. Even with the bathroom being way too damn small to fit both of us, I still want to be with Zach. I hope my smile isn't too damn goofy as I try my best to wipe it away. No boners in the kitchen with your mother.

Jesus. That's something I never thought I'd have to scold myself for. But Zach is just everywhere all the damn time. And I really, really like it. Awkward boners and all.

“I don't, Mom. He's probably say nothing.”

“Exactly,” my mom says as she places a plate of pancakes on the table. “That's why I'm asking you while we have a moment. I got the girls a lot of stuff. They're easy to buy for, but Zachary . . .”

I laugh at her heavy sigh. “He just wants them taken care of. Which you're doing.” I take a seat at the table and grab a few pancakes. She's been doing a fantastic job of taking care of them. It's effortless with my mother, and she seems completely happy to do it.

“Adam.” She places a bowl of scrambled eggs down and eyes me hard. “That boy owes us nothing, and we want to get him a present.”

I slather butter on my pancake and think about it. “I know that’s how you guys think, but he already feels like he owes you. I know that.” She doesn’t let up. “Fine. He could use a new stocking cap. The one he has is shitty.”

“Mouth,” she scolds, and I shoot her a quick smile.

“That’s all I can think of. He likes what I do. Football. Camping out under the stars, and that’s about it.” I can’t wait for it to get warmer and to stop snowing so maybe we can go on a little camping adventure.

“All right, honey.” She pats my head. “He really is your perfect match.”

Once again, I wonder if my mother knows about us, but I don’t say a word. I don’t ask her, mostly because I know that Zach’s worried about anyone knowing. He thinks it could hurt his chances of getting custody of the girls. And depending on who’s in charge of that, he could be right.

No matter what, I’m going to make damn sure he has everything he wants. He doesn’t need things. He needs security.

My brothers race down the hall and slide into their chairs, followed by Mary and Anna, who seem to be far more civilized. They each take a seat, and Anna looks at me. “Where’s Zach?”

“Camper. He’ll be here soon,” I answer her, and feel the weight of her gaze. She seems a little suspicious sometimes, always watching me with a wary look, but she’s been through a lot, and I can’t really blame her.

Thankfully, Zach comes through the front door a moment later, and I watch Anna seem to fully relax. She's depended on him for so damn long, I'm sure it's scary to be living under a different roof from him.

He walks inside, freshly showered and taking his coat off, then leaving it on the hook by the door. His dark-washed jeans hug his body perfectly, along with the dark long-sleeved Henley he's wearing.

Goddamn, he looks good.

And whether the world knows it or not, he's all mine. But when he sits down next to me and I finally pry my eyes off my boyfriend, I'm met with my mother's gaze. She looks pleased, though, as she offers up food to everyone who just joined.

"Hurry up now. You all need to get to school."

I'm ready to be finished with school, if I'm honest. I mean, education is important and all, but these last few months can't go by soon enough. I'm not going off to college or moving out of town.

I'm finally doing what I always wanted to do. I'm going to farm this land, build my house, and do it all with Zach at my side.

I can't wait for it, but I promised my parents I'll finish high school, and I'm going to do it. Thank God, Christmas break starts soon, and we'll have some time off.

I listen to Zach question his sisters about this week at school. And once again, I can't wipe the dopey grin off my face, thinking about all that free time we'll have during break.

Spending as much time as we can in that little camper.

We haven't had sex yet—not *sex*, sex, but we're getting closer to it, I think. I should probably be nervous, considering up until a couple of months ago I didn't think there was a sexual bone in my entire body. But now that I've had a taste of Zach, I can barely remember that time.

I'm ready to be with him in every single possible way. Nerves or not. I want this with him. I want everything with him.

Because as long as we're both involved, it'll be absolutely perfect, and I also know the only time he's not lost, stuck in his head, is when he's allowing me to explore his body and bring him pleasure.

A task I am more than happy to do over and over again.

TWENTY-SIX

ZACH

The Bateses do way too much for us. I'm not surprised in the slightest, but still. My sisters were absolutely spoiled this morning by so many gifts under the Christmas tree.

But they weren't the only ones. I received a stocking hat, and lots of clothes, including coveralls to keep me warm while doing chores. Mr. Bates said it was selfish on their part and was to keep me from whining, but we all know it was all given out of kindness. And there's nothing selfish about these people.

I also got a new sleeping bag and some cool camping gear. It's too damn much, but it felt kind of amazing, sitting in the warm living room with hot cocoa surrounded by family opening presents.

Mrs. Bates had loud Christmas music playing, but no one complained. And when Jameson and Garrison showed up, she shoved presents at them both, and we watched them open them up before a huge lunch.

Now we're walking around the land with Jameson and Garrison, catching up a little. It's been a while since we've seen them, but they both seem happy. Really damn happy. It's hard to believe there was a time when they used to hate each other.

But those days are long gone. Our shoes crunch over the fresh snow, and it's cold as hell out here, but there's still beauty. I've never not understood Adam's fascination with this place—I've always thought it was beautiful.

"You're really going to do it?" My attention is drawn to Jameson as he talks to his younger brother who looks an awful lot like him. Weird. Never had a thing for the older Bates, but the younger one really does it for me.

"Do what?" Adam's voice is firm and deep as they look out over the land.

"Stay in Kensley. Stay here and build a house. Be a farmer."

I sense Adam's tension even from the few feet away. This is where they're different. Very different. Jameson never wanted this. Not at all. This is all Adam has ever wanted, and it wasn't out of a sense of having to. It was always what he wanted.

"Yes," he says through gritted teeth, and Garrison and I share a look. We both know how these two can get.

"Easy," Jameson says, raising his hands in front of him and facing his brother. "I think it's great. I just can't believe it."

"Not all of us want to get out," Adam says with an edge still to his tone.

"Yeah. I guess not. I'm proud of you, little brother." He slings his arm around Adam's neck and pulls him close. "Show me your place."

"What? No." Adam shoves him off, but it's playful. "It's covered in snow and basically just cement at the moment."

“Oh, I can see some of the structure from here,” J says as he looks out over where Adam’s home is being built. I know it hasn’t come along nearly as much as he’d like. Winter hit early, but he doesn’t need to be ashamed.

He should be damn proud. How many people build their own houses from the ground up these days?

“Come on, Adam. Let’s show them.” I say, hoping he doesn’t get mad, but I’m proud as hell of him, and I want to show off his work too.

He only looks at me with affection as he nods and leads us all toward the soon-to-be home. Which yes, is currently covered in snow. But I’ve seen the plans for the house, and looking at it now, I can picture it.

Dixon lets out a sharp whistle. “This is nice.”

Jameson elbows his man. “It is nice. It’s going to be great.” His eyes lock on Adam’s, and even Adam can’t be too surly toward his brother when he’s trying so damn hard.

We walk around the structure, and then Jameson rubs his chin with his gloved hand like he’s thinking something over.

“It’s going to be spring before we know it.”

Adam shrugs. “If Kansas decided to have an early spring. Or it’ll snow in April. Who the fuck knows?”

That makes Jameson smirk as he stares at the concrete with some wooden beams in place. “I’m just saying Garrison and I will help. But you should also hit up Oakley. The guy is practically salivating.”

“Oakley does landscaping,” Adam says as he stares at his home.

“You need to pay attention. He also builds porches and firepits. The dude is loud but handy.”

Garrison smiles at the mention of his best friend. “He even has his own crew now. I’m sure they’d come out and help. We could get this done before summer.”

Adam looks confused and maybe a little anxious at the thought. “Oakley?”

Jameson grins and wraps his arm around his brother again. “Yes, Oakley. He and Trav have hired on quite a lot of workers. I’m sure they could use the experience and have been bored as fuck this winter already.”

Adam frowns, but his eyes meet mine like he’s thinking it over. I mean, having the house done by summer would be incredible, but I know how important this house is to Adam. He wants it done his way.

“Oakley will come in like a wrecking ball and take over.”

“Hey, as much as I love that song too,”—Dixon starts with a bigass grin—“Oakley has grown up a lot. And it helps that Travis holds onto his balls most of the time. Keeps ’em in his pocket.”

I cringe, but surprisingly, Adam laughs. “I still can’t believe Oakley and Travis are together.”

“Happy as fuck too,” Jameson says with a big grin. “Let us help.”

I eye Adam, silently conveying his own sentiment back to him when he told me to let people help. He reads my mind because he frowns and then sighs with a nod. “Okay. Thank you. Only if they have the time and want to.”

“Oakley loves shit like this. Don’t worry. He’ll be jumping for joy,” Jameson says and releases his brother. We go back to the house for pie and snack on leftovers for dinner before Mrs. Bates turns on a Christmas movie, and we all snuggle in the living room.

Jameson and Dixon take off, and Mary falls asleep before we say goodnight and make the walk to the trailer. I don’t know what it was about this day. Seeing Jameson and Dixon should be a damn turnoff, and so should all the food we consumed. But I want him so damn badly, I can barely stand it.

When we get back to the camper, I tell Adam I’m going to take a shower and head into the tiny bathroom and close the door. There’s barely enough room to get undressed in there with the door closed, but I make it work.

When I feel I’ve thoroughly cleaned every part of my body, I climb out of the cramped shower and sling a towel around my waist. When I walk out into the main part of the camper, I can’t hold back the laugh.

Not at Adam, who’s lying casually on the bed with his shoes and socks off but his jeans and thermal shirt still on. No, he looks hot as hell. What’s making me laugh is the carton of eggnog and two glasses sitting near the bed.

“Eggnog? Seriously?”

“‘Tis the season.” His smile is blinding as he looks over at me happily. And yeah, this may feel totally unreal, but it’s not. This is the man I’m going to spend the rest of my life with.

I can feel it.

I always knew he’d be part of my life, but never in a million years did I dream I could have all this.

I walk over to the carton and stare down at it. “Was puking our guts out freshmen year not enough? You want to try again?”

He chuckles and sits up before sliding off the bed and walking over to me, picking the carton up and opening it. “That was because we added way too much rum and thought we were badass, drinking it all.”

I grin at that as he pours the disgusting liquid into the glasses. “We needed it. That shit is awful on its own.”

He laughs again, and it’s so damn light and free. He hands one to me, and I take it, while he takes the other one. “Merry Christmas.”

We clink our glasses together and both take the world’s tiniest sip. I make some sort of choking noise, and my nose crinkles while Adam isn’t doing much better.

“Fuck, that’s gross.”

I cackle at that and put my glass down as I steal his from him and place it next to mine before grasping the back of his neck and pulling his mouth to me. I kiss him, not caring about the taste of eggnog on his tongue as it sweeps over mine. I moan, the need and desperation thick as my cock tents the flimsy towel.

“I want you,” I say breathlessly, still holding onto his nape.

“I’ll always want you,” he says so easily against my lips, and I grin, letting my forehead rest against his as we stand there in the camper, breathing each other in. The small space heater is doing its job and making it pretty toasty in here.

“I want you inside me,” I clarify.

His head snaps back slightly, and he looks deep into my eyes. “Tonight?”

I nod, nerves fluttering in my chest, but not enough to take it back. I want this. I’ve wanted this for a long damn time, and I trust Adam more than anyone on this planet.

He won’t hurt me.

Although he does look slightly sick right now. Shit. Did I misread this whole thing? Is this too much for him? “Adam.” I move my hand down from the back of his neck to his shoulder. “We don’t have to. I’m very happy with anything you’re ready for. We can cuddle all night, and I’ll wake up with the same smile on my face as I would if we . . .”

“Have sex?” he supplies.

“I was thinking *fucked*, but it didn’t feel quite right.”

His smile is back now, so bright and wide it’s almost blinding. “No. I don’t think it would be fucking with us.” He leans forward and presses a kiss to my lips. “I mean, at least until we get the hang of it. Then I’ll bend you over and fuck you any time.”

A wicked grin slides over my face because I love the sound of that. “Hopefully, in the bigass shower you’re going to have in the house.”

“Oh, absolutely. I have plans for an oversized marble shower with two showerheads and a huge water heater, so we can stay in there as long as we want,” he says as he flicks the knot in the towel free, leaving me standing there totally naked while he’s nearly completely clothed.

“Yes,” I say, thinking about him taking me in that shower and having his way with me. My face against the cool marble.

His hands all over me, and his cock splitting me open and pushing inside.

My cock jerks, and his eyes watch the movement, his tongue darting out to lick his lips. “You like the idea of that.”

“So much,” I answer honestly. “I want you in every place we can think of in that house. It’ll be perfect.”

“Because it’s ours,” he says and doesn’t give me a second to argue with him before his lips crash against mine and he’s guiding us toward the bed. His hands slide down my back to my ass, cupping my cheeks before pulling them apart. “Fuck. I can’t believe you’re going to let me inside you.”

“Anytime you want,” I gasp when his finger slides down my crease and circles over my hole. It clenches tight, but I try to breathe and relax, knowing this won’t go well if I’m tense.

He walks over to the duffle bag we’re still pretty much living out of and grabs a bottle of lube before he gently guides me to lie on the bed. “We don’t have to do this, okay? I love you. Don’t do this because you feel like you have to.”

I take the lube from him and squirt some onto my hands, faking confidence I don’t really feel and stroking my hard cock with it. “Does it look like I don’t want this?” I pointedly look down at my shaft, the tip flared and flushed an angry red. I’m already close to coming, and he hasn’t touched me yet.

Adam’s eyes are fixed on my hand moving over my cock, and when I start to slide down over my balls toward my hole, his hand reaches out and he grabs my wrist. “No way. That’s for me.”

I chuckle and pull my hand away, spreading my legs a little on the bed and planting my feet on the mattress, allowing myself to be totally exposed. But it doesn’t feel embarrassing

like I thought it would. The way he looks at me is empowering and stirs so much damn need, I could pass out from the rush.

“You’re a little too dressed for the task.”

He grins and pulls his shirt up over his head in a quick motion. Then just as fast, he removes his pants and briefs, kicking them away and climbing on the bed between my parted legs.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” he says, his eyes sweeping over my naked body, and I know it’s not just a line or something he’s saying to get laid. Adam isn’t like that. He only says what he means.

I drag my hand over his tight abs. “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. Nothing has ever felt so right before.”

“Nervous?” he asks, his hand moving to my wrist as I touch him.

“I should be. Probably.” I look at his hard dick, the girth and length making my head spin a bit. “No way this isn’t going to hurt.”

That, of course, makes him frown. And I’m honestly worried he’s going to climb off the bed at the thought of hurting me. “I won’t. I’ll never hurt you.”

I smile because I know he won’t do it on purpose. I look at his dick again and then back at his eyes. “That thing is going to wreck me, but in the best possible way. It’ll feel so damn good, stretching my hole.” I feel him tremble underneath my hand, his abs tightening. “I can’t wait.”

I grab the lube and squirt more into my hand, stroking his cock and getting it nice and slick before directing him to hold

his palm out. He does, and I pour a generous amount in his hand before I close the lid and toss the bottle next to us.

I shift a little on the bed, widening my legs a little more and trying to breathe. “Get me ready. One finger and then two. Try to get to three. I’m okay. I can take it.”

I’ve played around a little with my own fingers before. Not a lot, but enough to know this. He looks determined, his forehead creasing with thought as he stares at my exposed hole. I start to feel a little self-conscious until I finally feel one of his lubed fingers sliding down the prominent vein in my dick and then down over my balls.

I shiver and watch in awe as he circles my hole with one finger, pressing only the tip inside. “You okay?”

I smile. “I’m fine. I want this,” I reassure him. He’s so damn protective of me, I shouldn’t be surprised at how cautious he’s being. “Trust me,” I say, knowing that will make him relax.

It finally does, and he presses his finger inside, starting to stretch me out with one thick digit.

“Yes,” I say to encourage him, and he adds another finger. This one burns a little more. It’s not horrible, but I wouldn’t say it’s pleasant. But Adam takes his time, adding more lube and scissoring his fingers before they swipe over the spot inside me that makes my toes curl and my ass lift off the bed, seeking so much more of that. “Oh, holy fucking shit.”

“Good?” He grins, just watching me.

“You know it is,” I say, my breathing picking up, and I’m full-on panting by the time he removes his fingers and adds more lube, slowly pushing three in.

Okay. Yeah. That's different. I feel full and needy at the same time. I know his dick is much bigger, but I still want it. He's doing his best to prepare me. And while it feels good, I need more.

"Adam." He stops moving and looks at me. "You. I want you inside me. I can't take it anymore."

He looks nervous and excited as he stares at my face and then removes his fingers, leaving me feeling empty and even more needy.

"Are you sure?"

I smile at that and pull him down for a hard, hopefully reassuring, kiss.

"More than sure. Get inside me."

He grins at that, and thank fuck, he seems over the questioning. Ready to make me his in every single damn way.

I'm nervous, but mostly, I'm just excited.

This is how it should feel when you're about to lose your virginity. And to me, that's what this is. With Chloe, it was so damn wrong. I felt sick and afraid.

Not nervous. I didn't want to do it, and I never should have. Guilt threatens to take over, thinking about my time with her, but it has no place here.

All I want with Adam is to do this every single chance we have. The difference is astounding.

Because that was so very wrong.

And this is so very right.

TWENTY-SEVEN

ADAM

Okay, I'm nervous. Not because I don't want to do this, but because I don't want to hurt him.

He's looking up at me with so much trust and love that I don't want to mess this up. I can't stand the thought of ruining this.

Not that sex is a requirement to be together. I'll take anything he wants to give me, but I know he wants this to be part of it, and I do too. It's surreal how badly I want this.

Making him feel good . . . seeing his intense pleasure is a high like none other. The way he jolted when I brushed that spongy spot inside him. The way he panted my name and begged . . . Yeah, I could have come right then and there.

It's something I'm becoming addicted to—his pleasure. It's a high like none other.

I'm between his legs, staring at his hole that's stretched out for me. But I know it's still not nearly the size of my cock. How the hell am I going to fit inside him?

“Breathe, baby.” My eyes dart up to Zach's amused face as he watches me stare at him like an idiot.

“That's my line,” I say, the nerves skittering around in my chest.

“I think you need it more.” His hands sweep over my chest and down my stomach, making their way to my cock, which has flagged slightly with the nerves. But it comes rearing back to life when he starts to stroke me.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.” He says this with so much certainty, I almost believe him. He pulls me toward him, one hand guiding my cock to his entrance and the other on my shoulder as he brings me forward for an intense kiss.

I push my hips forward slightly, my tip slipping inside of his tight heat and nearly black out from the sensation. It’s too much and not enough all at once. But when I hear him gasp and grunt in what has to be pain, I’m ready to retreat.

“No.” His hands move to my ass and clamp down hard. “I’m okay. Keep going.”

“Maybe you should do me first,” I say, only half joking. Because I think it’s something I want to try, and I hate the thought of hurting him. I’d much rather he hurt me.

“Next time.” He nips at my bottom lip and then kisses me softly. “If you want to. But right now, I want this more than I’ve ever wanted anything, so please give it to me.”

I pull back enough to meet his eyes, bracing my weight on my hands next to his head and blanketing his body with my own.

No more words are needed as I nod and slowly work my way inside him. The intense grip of his body makes it so damn hard to concentrate, but he kisses me hard and lets me know he’s okay as I pant and kiss his face.

When my balls are flush with his ass and I’m fully inside him, I can barely believe we made it work. His ass is

strangling my dick, and I'm terrified to move, the pleasure too great. But when I pull back and see the glazed look in his eyes—that wonder—I'm nearly a goner.

His hand snakes between our bodies and rests over my heart. "Move, baby."

And I do. Slowly at first until he's begging me for more, pleading with me to slam into him harder, over and over. His fingers dig into my ass cheeks and coax me to give him what he needs.

"I'm close," I warn. "Oh, fuck. I'm so damn close. It's too much. You're too fucking hot. Too tight. Holy shit."

I swear I hear him laugh and say something along the lines of *look who's rambling now*, but I can't be sure because it turns into a deep, guttural moan when I peg his prostate just right.

He lifts his legs, holding them back at the knees and spreading himself for me. "Again. Please. Oh God. Again."

I do it over and over, pushing up and taking over holding his legs back as I slam into him and watch his hand fly to his cock, stroking desperately.

I wasn't lying. I'm damn close to blowing my load, but it doesn't happen until I see that moment of unreal bliss on his beautiful face. When his head tips back and he cries out with pleasure, his cum sprays his chest and hits his neck.

That's when I come deep inside him with two more strokes of my cock inside his heat. "Oh, holy fuck," I breathe and fall onto him.

He lets out an "oomph" but wraps his arms around me. "Fuck, that was perfect."

“Did you have any doubt?”

“Nope,” he answers so quickly, I smile into the crook of his neck as he holds me. “You?”

“Not that it would be good for me, but I wanted to make it good for you.”

I can feel him smiling but don't have the energy to lift my head to see it for myself. “Everything we do is good. I wasn't worried at all, and you have to stop worrying so much about me, Adam.”

Yeah, not a chance.

And he knows it because he just lets out a low chuckle, shaking his head. “Best Christmas ever.”

Agreed.

TWENTY-EIGHT

ZACH

“Hurry up. We’re going to be late for school,” I gasp and thread my fingers through Adam’s hair.

He looks up at me and cocks his head to the side. “Really?”

A wicked grin comes over my face as I brace my hands on his firm chest and continue riding his thick cock, bringing us both closer to the edge. I swear, this is pretty much what we’ve been doing since Christmas, and I’m not complaining.

My ass may be a little sore, but it’s a small price to pay to have my boyfriend underneath me, his hips flexing and his powerful thighs helping to push his dick deep inside me and hitting that perfect spot each time.

God, I’m addicted.

I mean, really fully it’s-becoming-a-problem addicted. Every chance I can get him inside me, I do. His big hand reaches up and grasps my cock, stroking me with the firm grip I need to get off.

“Oh, yes. That.” I tip my head back and ride him, getting lost in the rhythm and the feeling of being full and stretched by him. His hand is on my dick, guiding me toward release. It’s so damn good.

I come moments later, and it was like he was just waiting for that because he follows me over, his warm release filling my hole and spurting deep within me.

I lean down and kiss him. “Good job.”

He rolls his eyes, and when I lift off him slowly, letting him slip out of me and enjoying the feeling of his cum sliding out of my body, he slaps my ass and makes me laugh. “Let’s go before we’re late,” he mocks me.

We clean up and get dressed quickly. I hope we don’t smell like sex, but also, I kind of hope we do as we head up to the house in our trucks. He takes his brothers to school, and I take the girls to theirs before we meet up in the halls at our own school.

It’s our last semester of high school.

This is it. Christmas break is over, and so much has changed, but I’m ready for all of it. I have to head to class, and everything inside me wants to grab Adam and kiss him hard before sending him off. But we settle for a smile and nod, promising to see each other at lunch before he heads down the hall.

Something else happened over break—something that nearly broke my damn brain. It seems Coach and his assistant coach are together.

Like *together*, together. Like Adam and Zach *together*, and I can’t seem to wrap my head around it. Obviously, it’s not the two-men-together thing for me. It’s the two very influential, huge parts of the community being a couple, out and proud in Kensley.

It gives me hope, but it also terrifies me for them at the same time. I know how this town is.

But I smile when I see them near the gym. They aren't touching, but the way they're looking at each other right now makes it obvious how much they love each other.

Coach Leighton heads off, but then Coach catches my eye and walks over to me. "Zach."

"Uh, hey, Coach." The man still intimidates me after all these years. I admire the hell out of him, and that was before he came out, apparently not giving a damn who saw it.

I didn't get all the details, but Jameson told Adam it was quite the event in town and involved Oakley's dad.

Maybe the town is starting to change.

"You playing basketball this year?"

I shrug. "Yeah. But only because it's the last year. Football still has my heart."

He chuckles and something about him seems somehow free. Just different from the surly man I've always known. I mean, don't get me wrong, he still scares the hell out of me, but he seems lighter now.

"You okay?" His eyes bore into mine, and I swear there's something he wants to ask me but doesn't.

I don't know if he maybe suspects I'm . . . well, gay . . . or if maybe he thinks that I could have a problem with him and Coach Leighton. But either way, I smile at him and nod. "I'm okay."

"Good." He smiles. "You need anything, you let me know, okay?"

I nod again. "Yeah. See you around, Coach."

The rest of the day goes by so slowly, I want to poke myself with a pencil just to get some damn excitement. Seriously, I'm ready to graduate and be done. But I won't let the Bates down and quit.

So I finish it out. Adam and I have basketball practice after school, but my heart isn't in it. I'm ready to be home—in that little camper with Adam. So when we pick up the girls and bring them home, we're in a rush to get back there, both of us on the same page.

“So what should we do?” Adam asks with a smirk when we toss our bags into the camper while we're still standing outside.

“Hmm . . . how about you get your ass in there and strip down,” I say as I grab his hips and lean in and kiss him.

“Oh my God.” Shit. That wasn't Adam. And it wasn't me.

We both turn to see Anna standing on the trail leading to the camper and the house, her eyes wide and her mouth agape. “Anna.”

“I'm sorry. I just . . . I wanted to.” She's flustered, and goddammit, I know better. I shouldn't have kissed him outside the camper.

Adam looks more worried when he sees me freaking out than he is at seeing Anna. “Anna, let's go for a walk,” I say and then look at Adam, hating how concerned for me he looks. I quickly peck his lips with my own, clearly surprising him, but I'm not sorry. “It'll be okay.”

He gives me an uncertain nod but doesn't stop me as I walk toward my sister and plead with her to hear me out. “I'm so sorry, Zach,” she starts.

I stop dead in my tracks when I meet her. I hear Adam head inside the camper and close the door, but I stare at Anna. “Why are you sorry?”

“Because I didn’t mean to spy.”

“I’m not worried about that. At all.”

She looks distraught, and I swear my heart is cracking. Anna means the world to me. So does Mary. Is she disgusted by what she saw? Is our childhood going to make this really damn ugly? I want to ask her so many things about what she’s feeling, but I’m terrified to hear the truth too.

“You and Adam?” she asks quietly.

I nod slowly. I know we’re keeping this quiet, but I’m not going to hide Adam when I’m outright asked. He isn’t my dirty little secret. “I’m in love with him, Anna. I have been for a long time.”

Her head bobs slowly as she appears to take in that information. “That makes sense. You look at him like he’s the whole world.”

I grin stupidly at that and can’t argue. “You aren’t mad?”

She startles and then shakes her head. “Why would I be mad?”

I shrug, starting to walk along the gravel path, and she walks along with me. “I wasn’t sure if maybe Elliot . . . I mean the shit he’s said.” I don’t know what to say and huff, running my fingers through my hair. “He raised you.”

She grabs my arm and effectively stops my walking and forces me to look at her. “That asshole did not raise me. Or any of us. And I’m nothing like him. I know he’s a horrible human, and I’m happy for you.”

My eyes fill with tears that I won't allow to fall, but I'm so damn grateful to her. "Thank you."

She cocks her head to the side, looking slightly irritated and maybe a little confused. "I can't believe you thought I'd be mad that you're with a guy. And not just any guy but your best friend in the world."

"I'm sorry," I say sheepishly and then pull her into a hug I think we both need. She sniffs, hugs me back, and then shoves me away.

"He *is* pretty hot."

I fake gag. "Please never tell me my boyfriend is hot ever again."

She giggles at that, and we start walking a little closer to the Bates' home. I look up at the classic house I know is full of warmth from the fireplace and probably Mrs. Bates running around the kitchen, trying to get dinner prepared.

"Hey, Anna?"

"Hmm?" She stops walking again and looks at me.

"I don't want you to have to keep my secrets, but can you please not tell anyone?"

She looks troubled by that, looking up at the house and then back at me, blinking. "Why? You really think they'd care? Jameson has a boyfriend too."

"No. It's not that." Although, Mr. Bates was kind of an asshole at first when he found out about Jameson and Garrison. He's changed a lot since then and apologized, so hopefully, he wouldn't say anything hateful. "It's just . . ." I don't really know how to explain it, but I know she deserves the truth. She's more mature than I gave her credit for. "I want

to get custody of Mary and you. I want to make sure you're safe, and in Kensley . . ."—I swallow hard, fear threatening to cripple me—"I'm not sure they'd make it easy for me if they knew."

She's quiet for a moment and then her eyes darken. "Fuckers."

I bark out a quick laugh, never having heard my sister say that word before, but I can't disagree. "Yeah."

She purses her lips and her nose crinkles as she thinks. "Maybe we could stay here. I really like Adam's parents."

I smile at that, but my gut clenches, thinking about putting that on them. "I don't know how long Mom and Elliot are going to let this go. We need something permanent."

She places her small hand on my shoulder. "You can't give up your life for us, Zach. It's not fair. You deserve to have love."

"I have love," I assure her, even if maybe I don't deserve it. I have Adam. He isn't going anywhere. "But you and Mary are my family, and I will make sure you're taken care of."

"Don't sacrifice too much. You've taken care of us long enough."

I don't know about that, but I hug her tightly and then walk her the rest of the way to the house.

I want to find a way to have it all, and I'm going to do everything I can to make it happen.

TWENTY-NINE

ADAM

Goddamn, it feels good to see the beginning of my actual house. The framework is done. And okay, J was, for sure, right about Oakley's crew being amazing. They came out last weekend and helped us get a lot done, now that it's starting to get warmer.

I'm hoping it will be finished by graduation next month. It'll be the perfect graduation gift for Zach and me. Oakley and a few of his guys are coming out later today, and I can't even express how damn grateful I am.

And—okay, a little surprised. Because the guy has grown into an absolute professional. And while they don't build houses for a living, they knew what the hell they were doing.

Although Oakley obsessed a hell of a lot about the porch, which I wasn't all that worried about. You know, with my house not having actual walls yet and all, but whatever he wants to do is fine with me. Free labor and all that.

I'm hoping someday I can pay him back, but he swears it's fine. That he's more than happy to help out *Little Bates*, and just for that, I let the stupid-ass nickname slide. I do owe him a whole lot.

The house is four bedrooms and two full bathrooms. It's not an easy feat.

“Looks good, son.” My dad slaps me on the shoulder as we look at the house, standing on the outside. Zach is still asleep inside the camper, and I couldn’t wake him up.

He looked way too damn peaceful and should, after coming his brains out not once but twice last night. Once deep inside my throat and the other while I was filling his tight ass with my dick.

I shift a little uncomfortably and try to push away the memories of last night. “Yeah. It’s going to be perfect.”

My dad smiles and looks almost at peace as he looks at the home he’s helped me build. “You sure this is what you want?”

I turn to him, surprised by the question. “The house?”

“The house,” he confirms. “And the land. The farm. It’s a lot of responsibility.”

“We’ve talked about this most of my life, Dad. You know this is what I want.” My stomach feels a little sick as I worry. “Do you not want me to take over?”

His contented smile puts me at ease quickly. “Of course I do, son. I’m proud as hell you want to continue the Bates legacy.” He rubs his hand over his thick beard. “It’s just, Jameson . . .”

“Didn’t want this,” I say firmly because it’s not a secret. I meet his eyes. “But I do. This is all I’ve ever wanted.”

My eyes involuntarily go toward the camper where Zach is sleeping, and I smile, thinking about my future with him. That is before I meet my dad’s eyes and see him watching me watch the camper like a lovesick puppy.

Shit.

“Well, it’s not all you want, right son? There’s a little more to it now.”

My cheeks flame, and it’s obvious he knows, but I can’t be sure if he’s okay with it. It doesn’t matter if he is or he’s not. Just like Jameson, I won’t sacrifice what my heart wants.

But I want to have faith in my father, so I stand a little taller. “What do you mean?”

He’s smiling now. Wide and knowing. “I don’t want to make this awkward son, but you and your boyfriend aren’t exactly subtle or stealthy.”

I swallow hard, my cheeks on fire. “I uh . . .”

He puts a heavy hand on my shoulder and looks directly at me. “I fucked up with Jameson. It’s my biggest regret. I won’t ever make that mistake again with any of my children.”

“But you apologized.” I’m not sure why I’m defending him. He was a total asshole to J.

“Doesn’t matter. You only get one chance at that very first reaction, and I should have done better. I just want you kids happy. That’s it. And if you’re happy, I’m happy.”

I can’t contain my goofy smile as my eyes dart over to the camper. “I’m happy.”

He grins and squeezes my shoulder before releasing me. “That’s all I need to hear. I’m proud as hell of you, son.”

“Thank you, Dad,” I say, standing a little taller still, my chest puffing out. It’s weird how badly I wanted to hear that.

Just then a loud rusty truck pulls up and sputters to a stop right by us. I shake my head. “When the hell is he going to get a new truck? He owns his own business,” I gripe, and my dad chuckles.

“Don’t be talking about my baby like that,” Oakley says as he hops out. Travis climbs out of the passenger seat and closes the old rusty door with a whine and groan of the metal.

“Your baby is old as hell,” Travis says with his own goofy grin, looking at his boyfriend before his eyes meet mine. “He has a brand-new truck but insists on taking this one.”

“She needs to get some fresh air, damn it.” Some other much newer trucks pull up, and guys I met from Oakley’s crew last weekend climb out and pull toolboxes and materials out of the truck beds like a well-oiled machine.

“Damn, Little Bates.” Oakley swings his heavy ass arm over my shoulder. “This is the way to spend a Saturday, am I right?”

I chuckle and again don’t call him on the stupid nickname. “Thanks for showing up, Oakley.”

“Always.” He winks at me and drops his arm. “Where’s your man?”

“My . . . what?” I startle, and he cackles, tossing his head back while Travis snorts.

He then scolds his dumbass boyfriend. “Leave them alone.”

“Oh, come on.” Oakley keeps his voice down as he approaches. My dad is already inside the house with most of the crew, but he seems to have enough sense to double-check no one is around. “Tell me you aren’t giving it to him every night in that tiny-ass camper.”

“Classy,” Travis says, shaking his head. “Sorry, Little Bates.”

I groan. “Please don’t start that too.”

Travis just laughs and shrugs, like there's nothing that can be done. "We're together." I say, though, wanting to confirm it out loud. But then, I wince when the camper door swings open, and Zach walks out.

I have no doubt he's heard. We're standing close to the camper, and Oakley is fucking loud.

"I fucking knew it," Oakley says, doing an honest-to-God fist pump like he solved a mystery.

"Oakley . . ." Travis warns, and Zach walks over to me, grabbing my face in his hands and leaving a loud smacking kiss on my lips.

"You called it. Probably the worst-kept secret around, but still." Zach looks into my eyes as he drops his hands and releases me. "We're together."

"Knew it," Oakley says.

Travis snorts. "Actually, J called it months ago, but sure."

"What?" I look at Travis. "Jameson knows?"

Travis shrinks a little now. "Uh . . . maybe?"

A laugh bubbles up my throat and leaves my mouth. "Well, damn. I guess we really aren't subtle." I look at my boyfriend—the love of my life. "Dad also guessed."

Zach laughs at that and shakes his head. "Well, damn."

But he doesn't look shaken or all that worried. We just head into the house and get to work, because it seems to me that my parents won't be surprised in the least when Zach and I move in here together.

And that has me even more excited.

Though I might miss the tiny little camper. Just a little bit.

THIRTY

ZACH

“So . . . everyone knows we’re boyfriends now,” I say casually after everyone else leaves and we’re tucked into the camper. It’s starting to get warm out, and the camper doesn’t have A/C. All we have is a floor fan that doesn’t do much good.

“Are you okay?” Adam asks and looks far too nervous about it.

I step closer to him and put my thumbs through his belt loops, pulling him into me. “I fucking love it.”

His eyes light up with shock. “Oh, yeah?”

“Everyone knowing that you’re mine? Of course.”

“You’re a possessive motherfucker,” he says with a grin.

“Who wouldn’t be?” I flick open the button on his jeans and lower the zipper. “You’re mine. And I’m yours.”

I push his jeans down and drop to my knees, helping him out of his boots, then his socks, and finally his jeans. “I am. And you are.”

I smile, unable to help it and mouth his hardening cock through his tight boxer briefs. He moans softly and threads his fingers through my hair. I’m still in awe that I get to do this.

That he really, truly is mine.

I push his briefs down, and he kicks them away. But before I can take his cock in my mouth, he pulls me to my feet and wraps his arms around me, kissing me hard. I let him plunder my mouth as he starts to undress me, and we wind up on the bed, totally naked.

I go for the lube, but he takes it from me. I'm all too happy to let him get me ready for him, but he stops for a moment, looking at me with what looks like nerves. Why, I'm not really sure. We've done this a whole hell of a lot by now.

“Zach?”

“Yeah?”

“I want to try.”

I nearly fall off the damn bed with the surprise but recover and manage to sit still. “Try?”

“I want to feel what it's like for you to be inside me.”

Holy. Shit. I didn't think he'd want to do this. And I was more than okay with that. Having him at all is more than enough, but now that he's said it, my dick is leaking so damn much, it hurts at the idea of being inside him.

“I uh . . .” He looks adorably shy, holding onto the lube as he sits on the bed next to me. “I like it when you use your fingers when you go down on me.”

I've only ever used one, just playing a little, and if he ever asked me to stop or seemed uncomfortable, I'd stop. But knowing he wants to try this . . .

Phew, it's almost too much for my brain to comprehend.

But I trust him to know what he wants. So I ask one more time to be sure, “You really want this, and you're not just

doing it for me? Because I'm more than fine to take that nice cock you have any day."

He snorts at that. "Nice?"

"I'm sorry. Huge, monster cock. Very manly."

He rolls his eyes at me, but it makes us both relax, so not sorry. "I'm sure. I don't know if I'll like it nearly as much as you, but I want to try."

I grin. "Can't even argue. I am a needy bottom."

He leans forward and kisses me, effectively shutting me up. "I love you."

"I love you too," I say and then take the lube from him. "How do you want to do this?"

"I want to see you," he says almost instantly, and it makes me smile. We've tried a lot of positions since we first had sex, and I'm fond of them all, let me tell you. But for this first time, I want to be able to look into his eyes and know he's enjoying it.

I know Adam, and he doesn't want to be questioned anymore. He doesn't want to talk, so I take the lube and pour a generous amount in my hand. I stroke my cock and then his, leaving as much as I can behind and then lean forward and kiss him. "If you last until I come inside you, you can have my ass right after."

"Yes," he gasps against my mouth, and I feel his cock flex against mine as we grind together on the bed, and he lies flat on his back, taking me with him.

I push some lube into myself, not needing a lot of prep and then wipe my hand and add a lot more lube, getting to work on Adam's tight hole. And goddamn, is he tight. But my Adam is

determined and stubborn. When I get to two fingers, he's still and quiet.

"You have to let me know what you're feeling, baby," I say, my fingers still inside him as I move up to kiss his lips.

"I feel . . ." I wait for him to finish what he's saying. "Full. Kind of weird."

I nod my head, my nose dragging over his. "Okay." I press in a little deeper, dragging over that magic spot inside that makes him groan deep and take a deep breath. "How about that?"

"Good," he pants. "So good."

I continue to press against his prostate and love the way he clenches around me, his breathing increasing. I kiss him hard, letting my tongue drag over his as I stretch him open.

"Zach, I want you." His hand moves to my wrist, stalling me. "Please."

I don't question him, and instead, I remove my fingers from him, watching as he squirms.

"Now, I just feel empty and wrong."

I smile at that and kiss him before grabbing more lube and slicking my cock, notching the head at his hole and waiting. "Just breathe and let me in."

He gives one quick determined nod, and I press the head of my cock inside, pressing through that first ring of the tightest muscle in the damn world. I nearly embarrass myself right then and come, but I gain control.

Still, even if I did come, I know he wouldn't mind. He wouldn't mock me or be mad at me. He'd just kiss me, and we'd move to the next step.

But I want to know what it's like to be seated deep inside him, so I'm grateful when I gain composure and inch in until I'm buried to the hilt. I look at Adam and see that, of course, he's watching me.

Always watching me.

I kiss him softly and start to move. His hands slide to my back, and he holds on. His erection that had flagged is now going strong between us, flushed and leaking, but I know him.

He'll wait until I've come. He always does. He seems to need that to take his own pleasure.

"You feel so damn good, Adam. Jesus fuck. I knew it would be good, but this?"

"Yes." His head falls back, but his eyes are still on me. "Please come. I want to feel it. I need to feel it."

I sit back, moving a little faster inside him and loving when his hands move to my front, dragging over my stomach as I push inside of him over and over. "I'm close."

"Yes," he groans deeply, the rumble of his voice spreading through my entire body.

"I can't take it anymore. It's too much," I say, feeling my balls pull up tight and that tingle going down my spine until I'm coming deep inside him, leaning forward and biting into his shoulder as I ride every wave of pleasure.

I'm still trying to catch my breath while I very carefully pull out of his body and move to position his cock at my waiting hole. He presses forward slowly, giving my body time to adjust. When I finally catch my breath, I start to ride him with vigor, needing to see him come.

He holds onto my hips as his cock slides in and out of me, his nails digging deliciously into my skin. My cock is spent as I ride him, and I relish every single smooth glide he makes into my body, and soon he's coming inside me too.

He's content when I climb off him and lie next to him, my head on his chest as he strokes my back.

We don't say anything.

We don't really need to.

No matter what the world throws at us. No matter what we need to overcome . . . At the end of the day, it's just us.

Zach and Adam.

THIRTY-ONE

ZACH

Graduation is coming up fast, and damn, am I in a good mood as I walk the halls of the high school after school. I had a meeting with my algebra teacher for some extra credit, so Adam is already home. But I'm heading there now, and I cannot wait.

I think I'm actually whistling when I make it out to the parking lot. But I come to a dead stop when I see Chloe walking toward her car.

Shit.

I haven't talked to her in so damn long, and we haven't had any more altercations since Homecoming. But I don't really want to fight with her now. I still hate the look of pain on her face when she looks over at me though.

“What the hell are you so happy about?”

Yup, she's still really angry. And she has every right to be. I wince and shake my head, trying to make it to my truck, but she cuts me off. It's warm out, but she's wearing her Kensley Panther black hoodie. Her eyes, lined with black, are fiercely stuck on me.

“Answer me.”

“Chloe . . .” I start, but I don’t know what to say. A lot of people know about Adam and me, but no one at school does. No one who will ever say a thing.

“Please.” Her eyes shift from angry to so damn sad, it breaks my heart. “Just . . . how the hell are you so happy when I’m so miserable?”

“I’m . . .” I deflate. “I’m sorry, Chloe.”

She chokes on a sob, and I hate myself even more for hurting her. “I loved you. I mean, I really loved you.”

I know she did. I wanted to love her too. “I’m sorry,” I say again, and I know it’s lame, but I mean it. “I’m so damn sorry. I’d take it back if I could.”

She flinches, and I feel even worse. “Why wasn’t I good enough for you? Why? Just tell me. I mean, I know . . .” She lets out a puff of air, “I know, I’m trash, okay? I live in a shitty little house in town with my mother, who says she’s a waitress but we all know she’s a stripper.”

“What?” I say, actually dumbfounded. “I don’t care about that.”

And I never did. Her mom is nice. A hell of a lot nicer than mine. And she doesn’t have a shithead stepfather at her house. I actually didn’t mind hanging out there. “Don’t do that. Don’t lie to me. I know, okay? But I tried to be a really good girlfriend. I did everything.” She sobs and catches herself. “Just tell me why you couldn’t love me.”

“Chloe . . .” I swallow hard, trying to make my gut unknot with all the guilt I’m feeling. “It wasn’t you. It really wasn’t. You were a fantastic girlfriend, and I didn’t mean to hurt you. But I did, and I can never tell you how sorry I am because words just can’t say it.”

Her eyes are wet with tears, and she wipes one away, smearing her eye makeup. “I just wanted out of here, and you . . . I thought you were one of the good ones. One who would get out.”

“I didn’t want out. Not out of the town anyway, and you don’t need a man to get what you want, Chloe.” Although I know growing up here makes girls think that they need to rely on a man for a future.

Hell, I swear half of our class is engaged and planning to be married right out of high school. It’s just that way around here.

She scoffs at me. “Right.”

“Take care of yourself, Chloe.” I say, walking toward my truck again because, as bad as I feel, I don’t think there’s anything I can do.

“I’m pregnant.” I stop and turn to look at her, my eyes wide. She rolls her eyes. “Do you need to go back and take biology again? It’s not yours.”

I snort a disturbed laugh because that wasn’t on my mind at all, but I’m still totally shocked. “I know that, but . . . you’re pregnant?”

She tries to stand tall, her small shoulders lifted, but it’s a front. She’s scared to death, and I can see it plain as day. “Yeah. I’m a total fucking cliché.” Her tiny shoulders droop, and her chin lowers. “The dumbass cheerleader getting knocked-up senior year. I’m becoming my mother.”

I don’t know what to say. She looks so damn lost and distraught, and no matter what anyone says, I had a hand in getting her into this place. She trusted me, and I failed her. “What are you going to do?”

She laughs, but it's not joyful in any way. It's cold and angry . . . and a little sad. "I went to the abortion clinic. I was ready, you know? I was just going to make it go away, but . . ." Her eyes shine with tears as she meets mine, and I think she decides not to say what she was going to. "I didn't. I'm going to have the baby. And I know you think I'm stupid . . ."

I shake my head vehemently. "No. I don't. Not at all. I think you're brave." I grab the back of my neck with my hand. "Really brave. This isn't going to be easy."

She scoffs. "Nope. It won't be. Not at all. I'll probably wind up on the pole just like my mother, but I couldn't . . ." She shakes her head again, and I step forward, wanting to hug her.

Wanting to comfort her. Wanting to be there for her the way I should have been before. Not because I'm in love with her, but because we were friends, and she deserved so much better.

I don't touch her though. I'm not that stupid. "Who's the father?"

She laughs again, but there's no joy whatsoever. Her mouth forms a deep frown, and she cups her stomach delicately with both hands and looks down at her belly affectionately. And for some reason, in that moment, I know she's going to be okay.

I don't know how I know. I just do. She loves this baby already. She wants it.

"My baby was conceived at a Bear party, with me smashed up against a tree and all of us drunk out of our minds. Classy, I know."

I stare at her and take that in. “Wait.” I stare some more. “You’re having a Big Bend Bear’s baby?”

She rolls her eyes, but I see a flicker of a smile on her pretty face for the first time in a long time. “That’s what you focus on?”

I shrug playfully. “I don’t know, Chloe. Lots of people get drunk, have sex, and end up with babies. But a Bear? Come on. That’s just wrong.”

She shoves my chest, but she’s laughing now as she says, “Shut. Up.”

I laugh too, and damn, does it feel good. I sober up a little, though, and then place a very careful hand on her shoulder. “It’s going to be okay.”

Her bottom lip trembles, but she manages to lift her chin and nod. “Yeah. I think it will be.”

“Hey, you should come for dinner,” I blurt out before I really get a chance to think about it, and it surprises us both. But I stick with it. “I moved out of my mom’s. So did the girls, but we’re staying with the Bateses.”

“Wait. You moved?”

I nod, my expression going grim. “Mary ended up hurt. Elliot . . .” My hands clench at my sides. “The fucker pushed her and bruised her head when I wasn’t there. We left. Adam and I—we took the girls to his parents, and they’re taking care of them for a little while until I can get everything settled.”

“Is Mary okay?” she asks with sincere concern.

I smile now and nod. “Yeah, she’s okay. She’s happier than I’ve ever seen her. She really loves Adam’s mom.”

That makes Chloe smile. “Yeah, she seems really nice.”

“She is,” I confirm. “Anyway, I’m staying with Adam in the world’s ugliest camper while he builds his house out there. You should come over for dinner tonight.”

“Um . . .” She looks conflicted and nervous. I can’t really blame her. But she needs a friend, and that’s what I should have been to her all this time. “I need to pick up my sister.”

I nod, understanding all too well what it’s like being responsible for a sibling. “Is your mom working tonight?”

She shakes her head. “No. She had the day shift, but I need to get my sister and wait until Mom gets home around seven.”

I squeeze her shoulder gently. “Come over. Okay?”

She studies me closely and a tear slides down her cheek. “Why are you being so nice to me? I was horrible to you.”

“I deserved it and more, Chloe. I don’t blame you at all for being mad.”

She snuffles and wipes at her face. “I’m sorry. I know what I had in you, Zach, and I was so upset I lost it.”

“You didn’t lose me,” I say firmly, and I mean it. “We just . . .” I sigh loudly. “We didn’t fit. But you don’t need anyone to take care of you Chloe. And you know I’ll be your friend.”

She smiles brightly at that, which reminds me of the girl she was before we started dating and things went south. “Okay. I’ll be there.”

And I should maybe regret that, but I only feel lighter as I walk to my truck to go tell my boyfriend I invited my ex to dinner.

THIRTY-TWO

ADAM

Finally. He's home. And yes, I'm totally becoming that guy who waits for his man to get home. And no, I do not care at all.

Zach walks through the door, and I immediately light up as I climb off the bed and walk over to him, grasping his face and welcoming him home with a passionate kiss. My hands roam over him, and we get lost in it before his move to my chest. "I need to tell you something."

I pull back, hearing the worry in his tone instantly. "What's the matter?"

"Um, nothing?" His voice pitches high, and I don't know if I should laugh or be worried.

"What did you do?" I go on instinct and can't fight the grin.

"I may have invited Chloe to dinner tonight?" He says it like a question, and this time I do laugh, but it's almost a disturbed sound.

"Chloe? Your ex-girlfriend, Chloe? The one who hates you and has made your life hell for a year? That one?"

He steps back from me a little, but his thumbs hook in my belt loops. "She had every right to hate me." I open my mouth

to argue with him, but he lifts one of his hands, placing two fingers over my mouth to silence me. “She did, and she needs a friend.”

He lowers his hand again and puts his thumb back through my belt loop. “A friend.

“She grew up like me, Adam. Her mom is a single mom, trying to make it and is hardly ever home. She takes care of her little sister. She needs a friend.”

I think I just fell even more in love with him.

I brush a hand over his cheek and then lean in and kiss him softly. “You’re incredible.”

He looks surprised by that as he pulls back. “No. I’m not. She just looked so lost and alone, and she’s having a baby all on her own.”

“She’s what?” I gape at him, and he looks horrified.

“Oh shit. I shouldn’t have said that. I mean, she didn’t tell me to keep it quiet, but still. Damn it.”

“She’s pregnant?”

He nods his head, “Yeah.”

I don’t like Chloe. I mean, how could I after the way she treated Zach? But I still don’t want her to suffer. “Is she keeping it?”

He nods and then pulls me over to the bed, where we sit side by side, but he holds my hand in his. “Yeah. She seems oddly at peace with that decision. I think she’s already in love.”

“Huh,” is all I can really say, and he leans his head on my shoulder.

I send my mom a text to let her know we might have an extra person for dinner, and we do our homework before I see headlights approach the camper. My heart thunders in my chest, hoping like hell she doesn't go crazy on us and light the camper on fire or something. But when Zach lets her into the small camper, I'm greeted with an honest-to-God smile from her.

"Chloe." I nod my head in greeting.

"Hi, Adam." She stands by the door, waving at me but looks kind of meek and small, wearing an oversized hoodie that goes down to her knees.

"Come in. Sit." Zach motions toward the bed, and we both take the kitchen table booth. She sits down and eyes us warily.

"Um, Mom said dinner will be done soon." She wasn't thrilled about having such a late dinner, but when I explained to her Chloe had to wait for her mom to get home, Mom softened a bit.

"You didn't have to invite me to dinner," she says, playing with the hem of her sweatshirt, and damn it, I feel sorry for her. Her eyes lift, and they land on me, shiny and full of sorrow. "I'm sorry for being so awful. I just . . ."

"I was awful to you," Zach cuts in, and I want to argue, but I don't.

"No," Chloe does instead. "You were good to me, Zach. Really good. You made me feel safe and wanted for so long. I was so upset when you broke up with me because I thought you were my one chance to be happy."

Zach looks distraught, and without thinking, I reach out and grab his hand to squeeze it. Chloe's eyes dart to our hands,

but instead of pulling away from me, Zach only tightens the hold.

“Chloe, I couldn’t be that for you because I’m gay.” He meets her eyes, and I watch as Chloe’s gaze transforms into complete shock.

“You’re . . .”—her eyes widen more, but she doesn’t look like she’s about to lash out— “gay.” She says it quietly, and then it’s like something clicks inside her, and her eyes move to me. “You two are together.”

We both nod, even though it wasn’t a question. But it surprises me when she smiles at that and then shakes her head.

“That makes sense.” She looks at Zach, her smile still in place. “You never looked at me like you looked at him.”

Zach looks a little bashful now, but he just squeezes my hand again. “I’ve been in love with him since I can remember. I’m so sorry, Chloe. If I could have loved you like that, I think I would have. It had nothing to do with you.”

She smiles, and I swear, she looks at peace. Then I notice she’s rubbing her belly fondly, and Zach and I share a look when she says, “I think . . . I get that now. The unconditional love thing. I have no idea if this baby will love me, but I know I love him.”

“Him?” Zach asks, and she nods, not seeming to care if I know about her pregnancy or not.

“Yeah.” She looks over at us. “You two are the first people to know. I was so scared, but I went to the clinic, and they helped me out a ton. They helped me with insurance and appointments. I’ve gone to all of them.”

“You haven’t told your mom?” Zach asks.

“No. Not yet. I know she’d have tried to talk me into an abortion, and I didn’t want her to. I wanted time to save up some money in case she kicks me out, and I’ve been working at the diner.”

We both nod, and my heart breaks for her. It’s not fair that there are so many shitty parents out in the world. I know I got lucky with mine. They might not be perfect, but still, I’ve always known deep down they’d have my back.

“Your mom won’t kick you out,” Zach says with certainty. “She loves you.”

Chloe offers him a sad smile. “I’m not so sure, but I’m going to do this on my own if I have to. I won’t put it on her anyway.”

“What about the father?” I ask, and Zach cringes.

I have no idea what that’s about, but Chloe rolls her eyes at him. “Oh my God, do not start.” She looks over at me. “He goes to Big Bend.”

My jaw drops, and my eyes widen. “You’re having a Bear’s baby?”

She throws up her hands and then laughs. “You’re both idiots.”

That makes us both grin. Zach shakes his head in mock disappointment. “You could have had a Panther baby, and you chose a Bear.”

She tosses a pillow at him, and he laughs. He walks over to the bed and wraps an arm around her, and all I feel is total awe when it comes to my boyfriend. “We’re here for you. Bear Baby and all.”

She playfully shoves him, but she lets him hug her. “Why though? Honestly, Zach, I was so awful to you.”

“Because you deserve better, and it’s not your fault that you were born in this town, where women are made to believe they need to find a man,” I answer, and I have both of their attention. “You’re strong, Chloe. And you don’t need anyone else to make it. But we’ll be there for you. Okay?”

Her eyes are watery as they meet mine. “Thank you.” She looks at Zach. “Both of you. I’ll never stop regretting how I treated you.”

“You both need to forgive yourselves,” I say before Zach can say just how badly he treated her because the truth is they’ve both made mistakes. But who the hell doesn’t when they’re young?

They smile, and he hugs her to his side. “I’m starving, and I’m not even eating for two,” Zach says as he stands and holds a hand out for her.

She takes it. “Yeah, feed me.”

We all laugh and head out of the camper, walking toward the house when Zach asks, “So which Bear was it?”

She groans and covers her face with one hand. “I only know his first name. Dallas something.”

I scrunch my nose, trying to think, but I don’t know a Dallas. I avoid the Big Bend Bears as much as I can. “You going to tell him?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I don’t know. It was a drunken mistake. It wasn’t sweet or romantic. We were both drunk out of our minds and barely introduced before we wound up fucking against a tree in the dark night.”

“Hey, nothing wrong with tree-fucking,” Zach says, and I cock my head at him. He barks out a startled laugh. “That didn’t come out right.”

She shoves him and calls him an idiot before we finish the walk to my mom’s house.

It’s so damn weird how life turns out because I’m pretty sure Chloe is our friend now, and all I feel is protective over her too.

THIRTY-THREE

ZACH

We graduated today. I'm so damn happy, I don't even know how to deal with it. We graduated. High school is over.

My mom didn't show, which I'm not at all surprised about at this point. How people can make babies and just forget about them is beyond me. But I was surprisingly okay with her not being there today.

I was very happy Elliot wasn't there. So there's that. But the Bates family cheered for me just as hard as they cheered for Adam, and I've never felt so loved in my life.

Mr. Bates has been showing Adam and me more and more how to run the farm over the past few months. And yesterday, we finished up the house.

It's done. We're moving in tonight. We don't have much to move in. But we'll grab some stuff, here and there, maybe at some garage sales or something. But all I really need is Adam.

Hell, I'm going to miss our little camper, I think.

"What are you grinning at?" Adam asks as he wraps his big arms around me, and we stand back, looking at the house we built together.

"We have a house."

He nuzzles my neck and holds me close. "We do."

I don't argue with him and say that it's his house. He doesn't tell me it's his because I've come to understand it was always ours. Even when I felt helpless and alone and desperately in love with my best friend, who I was convinced was straight, I was never alone.

It was never just me. It was always Adam and me.

“You ready to move in?”

I nod my head. “I was thinking how much I'll miss the little camper. But the truth is”—I turn in his arms and face him—“someone promised me some filthy time in that big ole shower that I can't wait for.”

He's smiling so damn wide now, I need to kiss him. But before I can, a deep throat clears, and we both turn to see Jameson and Garrison standing there. J's arm is draped over Garrison. “Aw, aren't you two so cute?”

“Fuck off, Jameson,” Adam says, but there's absolutely no venom in it.

“Can't. Mom wants to talk to you both at the house.”

We share a look, and I can't help but feel worried before we both rush toward the house. My sisters were fine at graduation, and if anything were seriously wrong, Garrison and Jameson wouldn't be looking so happy.

But maybe they aren't aware of what she wants to talk about. What if my mom is causing trouble?

Adam and I are both going to start full-time work at the farm this week, and we have the house. But all a judge is going to see right now is likely two best friends who are eighteen and too immature.

As far as I know, no one knows about Adam and me in town. Chloe won't say anything. My mind is racing when we go into the house, and I see Mr. and Mrs. Bates sitting with my sisters in the living room.

"Boys, sit," Adam's mom directs, and I feel like I'm going to throw up as we take a seat on one of the sofas.

"What's wrong?" Adam asks for me because I can't seem to form words.

Mrs. Bates looks at the girls and then at me. "Zach, I want to talk to you about something, and to be honest, I'm a little worried about how you might react." That doesn't help, but the fact that my sisters seem calm does relax me a little bit. "I talked to your mother last week."

"My mom." My stomach roils.

She nods solemnly. "Elliot got a job in Colorado. They're moving."

Yeah, I might actually throw up right here. I feel dizzy and can barely manage to sit upright. "They aren't taking the girls."

Fuck. I need to get my ass moving. There's so much I need to do. Will farm work be stable enough? We talked a little about salary, and it seems to be more than enough to support us. But I don't know if they have some certain number. And if I want to include Adam's salary, we'd probably have to come out as a couple.

Then deal with bigots.

Fuck!

"Zachary," Adams says, placing his hand on my thigh. "It's going to be okay."

“It is.” Our attention is pulled to Adam’s mom again, and both of our eyes are on her. “Zach, your mom doesn’t want to take the girls.” My sisters both look stoic, and my heart breaks again for them. “She’s agreed to sign over custody to us.”

“Us?”

Adam’s dad nods his head at us and says, “Us.”

The Bates. “You want to adopt my sisters?”

“Well, it would be guardianship,” Mrs. Bates says. “Zach, I know you want to adopt them, but honey, you’re eighteen.”

“I can take care of them,” I say firmly, and Adam squeezes my thigh gently. “I mean, you all have been amazing. I appreciate it all . . .”

“Sweetheart.” Adam’s mom’s voice is so calming, I finally shut up. “We didn’t do it just as a favor. We care about all three of you. We wanted to do this, and we can take care of them. No doubt, you can too. But what I mean is you deserve to be eighteen.” She smiles at me sweetly and looks at Adam. “You both do. You deserve to travel when you want to. To be in love. To just be.”

I look at Anna. “You want this?”

She nods so fast, I’m worried she might hurt herself, but then she becomes solemn. “I don’t want to hurt you. I know you wanted to raise us . . .”

“I just want you guys to be okay,” I say because I didn’t mean to put that on them.

“We like it here,” Mary says and hugs Mrs. Bates. “A lot.”

I smile at that and then turn to look at Mrs. Bates. “I’ll help you in any way I can.”

She nods with a smile but doesn't look worried at all. Adam squeezes my leg again and looks over at his parents and my sisters. "They'll have a room in our house too. Any time anyone needs a break or just wants to stay there."

They all nod at that, and I sit there, trying to process this.

This was my goal. I was going to graduate and then find a way to get custody of them, keep them safe.

I needed to protect them, and even if this isn't at all how I saw this going, I think somehow, I ended up doing just that.

"Are you okay?" Adam asks me, and I nod my head, looking at Mr. and Mrs. Bates, who are the best parents I've ever known.

"Thank you. You don't have to do this. But thank you for wanting to."

And they do. I can see it on their faces. They want this. They're more than okay with this. "Go enjoy your new house," she says like it's the easiest thing in the world.

Like she didn't just take on this huge thing. But to her, it's not. It's family. It's simple.

People think simple is some sort of bad word, but it's not. There's something absolutely beautiful about simplicity.

I stand up, giving my sisters and Mr. and Mrs. Bates a big hug before taking Adam's hand and walking to the home we built together.

"Are you really okay?" he asks, now that we're alone.

I unlock our front door and pull him inside before closing and locking it again. "More than. It's . . ." I sigh softly, feeling bad for what I'm about to say, but I know he'll understand.

“It’s this huge weight off me that maybe I didn’t even know was sitting there.”

He smiles and brushes the hair out of my eyes. “You take a lot on.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Yeah. You’d know all about that.” He just grins and kisses my nose. “But your mom seems to be fully invested in this.”

He nods. “She always wanted more kids. She loves the girls.” He kisses my nose again. “And you.”

I grin. “And this means we don’t have to hide.”

He kisses my lips now. “Nope. We sure don’t. Not ever.” He kisses me softly, and my back hits the foyer wall. “But if you want to get custody of the girls in a year or two or three, we’ll figure it out.”

I nod in agreement, although I think that maybe they’re right where they’re supposed to be now.

And so am I.

THIRTY-FOUR

ADAM

“Oh, holy fuck, my body hurts. I think I’m dying.” I laugh at my adorable boyfriend as we make the short walk to our house after a day full of farming.

“You’re getting more and more used to it every day.”

He groans again, and I chuckle, wrapping my arm around him and kissing his sweaty temple. It was hot today, and the sun is no damn joke out here in the corn and wheat fields.

But goddamn, did it feel good out in the heat, knowing every bit of hard work is going to benefit the family. We hooked Oakley’s crew into adding on an extension to my family’s house so the girls can have their own rooms. They’ll all have more space, in general.

This time, though, I made Oakley charge us, and he set up a convenient payment plan that’s more than affordable. They did a damn good job too.

We make it to the house and head inside, closing the door behind us as Zach kicks his boots off. I follow, taking off my shirt as well, which is caked with mud and sweat. He turns to watch me, licking his lips in that way that tells me he’s not all that tired anymore.

But when he lifts his own shirt over his head, he groans and moans loudly in pain and not pleasure. I snort and take his hand, leading him up the stairs to our bedroom.

“I’m totally going to rock your world,” he promises, and I laugh.

“Sure you will, babe.” I snort. “You know Chloe and Christian will be here soon, right?”

“Oh, motherfucker,” he curses, and I can’t help but laugh at him again. Chloe had a healthy baby boy at the end of May. How she hid her pregnancy that damn long, I have no idea, but she was pregnant for a lot of our senior year, apparently. She’s a great mom though. Her mom didn’t kick her out, thank fuck, and she helps Chloe out with the baby.

As far as I know, Chloe hasn’t told the father, Dallas, about the baby, but she’s totally in love with Christian. Still, there are nights when Chloe needs a break and her mother is at work, like tonight, where we offered to watch Christian for a bit.

We know our way around taking care of babies, considering we both have younger siblings, but it’s still been a learning experience. Still, I’m happy we can help her out, and the days of her hating Zach are long forgotten. She just needed someone to love her, and she definitely has it. We’ll always be her friends for as long as she needs us, and I hope someday she finds the type of love Zach and I have.

Someone who treats her with all the love and respect she deserves. I don’t think she ever actually loved Zach like that, and I know he didn’t love her that way. So it’ll be fun to see it when it happens.

Zach doesn't say anything else, but instead of putting his sweaty ass on the bed, I lead him into the large bathroom and head straight to the marble walk-in shower with two showerheads and turn one on.

He grins wickedly at me and strips off the rest of his clothes. "I love the way you think."

"I figured you wouldn't mind a nice hot shower on these muscles," I say, dragging my hands over his strong biceps which have filled out a lot in the few months since graduation.

He pops the button on my jeans, and I undress the rest of the way. "Not at all."

We climb into the shower, and the hot water pelts my skin, making me moan deeply because holy fuck, that feels good right now. I must have been hogging this one because Zach turns the other showerhead on and just stands under the shower of water for what feels like an eternity.

Finally, I peel myself away and walk to his side, blanketing his body with mine and kissing the back of his neck. "I love you."

I can feel him smiling, even though he's facing away from me. "I love you too."

I kiss down his spine, my hands going along with me, sliding over his wet skin until I drop to my knees behind him. I stare at his firm ass in awe before my hands grasp his cheeks and pull them apart.

His hole is puckered and pink, waiting for me, and I don't waste any more time before I dive in. I lick over his pucker, dragging my tongue in teasing circles. Zach's hands move to the marble wall, his ass pushing back against my face as he pleads with me to give him more.

I'll give him everything, no begging required.

I lick him and hold onto his firm globes, pulling him apart so I can shove my tongue inside him, moaning deep and loud against him because he tastes so damn good. My cock is rock-hard, wanting to be inside of this tight hole, but I make us wait.

Zach is cursing, shoving his ass back and pleading for more. But I take my time. I got the biggest water heater I could, damn it, and I'm going to make good use of it. Eating him out like this is one of my favorite things.

Listening to him curse and beg while his body lets go is fucking everything.

“Inside me. Now. I . . . shit, I need it,” he says, gasping, and I chuckle when the bottle of lube we keep in here drops next to me on the floor. I finally take the hint, pulling my tongue from his ass and adding lube to my fingers, pressing two inside him.

We fucked this morning, and I know he doesn't want a lot of prep, but I'm still unwilling to cause him any pain. When he's ready for me, I slick up my cock, stand up, and slide into him like I'm going home.

Because that's exactly what Zachary Olson—soon-to-be Bates, if I have anything to say about it—is to me.

He's my home. My comfort.

He isn't weak, and he never needed me to survive. He didn't need me to dote on him or fix anything for him. I just wanted to. I've always had that deep need to watch him and make sure he was safe.

I wrap one hand around his neck, not adding too much pressure but just enough so when I slide into him over and

over, our bodies are connected. I reach my other hand down to stroke his hardened cock, and it doesn't take long before he's exploding, his cum hitting the shower wall. His sated body leans back, pliant, against mine.

I stroke into him a few more times before I bite into his shoulder and come deep inside him, marking him in every single way as mine.

I don't waste too much time thinking about how we ended up here. I don't really need to.

To me, this was always where we'd end up. The how didn't matter to me or the why. Just the fact that we're here now.

Together.

The End

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

You all! I can't believe this is over. Kensley has meant so much to me because it really felt like going back to my roots. I'm a small-town Kansan. And while this small town is far from perfect, I have hope that it can grow and change.

That the world can be better.

I hope you enjoyed this series as much as I did. Don't worry though. Even though this is the official end of Kensley, there'll be spinoffs.

Oakley's Crew Series and the Big Bend Series are coming soon, and I cannot wait!

Be sure to stalk me for all the details!

And I'm sure I'm going to miss these Kensley friends so damn much, so if you can, be sure to join my Patreon for lots of bonus scenes!

<https://www.patreon.com/Nicoledykes>

Thank you all for being there for me. Thank you to Lark, Willow, Cora, Mads, and Ari for always being there. I love you all so dang much!

Thank you also to all my readers, and please remember to be kind. Even when people are ugly, try to remember they may be going through something deeper we just don't know about.

Be kind always. Be strong. And have the most beautifully simple life you can manage!

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ONE

RHETT

I stare at the blue frosting on the cupcake in front of me and try like hell to feel joy. Any kind of joy. Hell, at this point, I'll settle for feeling anything other than the ugly bitterness dragging me down daily.

I'm eighteen.

Eighteen years old and should feel like the luckiest guy in the world but the truth is . . . I'm broken. Undeniably broken.

“You aren't going to eat your cupcake? I think that's bad luck.”

I smile when I hear Bree's voice behind me and then see her red Converse sneakers before she plops down on the front steps next to me. I turn to look at her, setting the cupcake down. “What other luck is there?”

Her eyes narrow, and then she rolls them. “Please. We're the definition of good luck, Rhett.” She slightly turns to gesture to the big-ass house belonging to the steps we're sitting on. “Foster kids adopted by rich people who aren't assholes but instead, are amazing.”

I swallow hard and try to force a smile, but it just doesn't come. Because I know how lucky I am. Or how lucky I should feel. My parents were young when they had me. Really young.

And then, they lost me to the system several times before my mom took off and my dad permanently relinquished his parental rights to me, leaving me to drown in foster care. I bounced around from house to house, each one worse than the others.

I met Bree and Fletcher in foster care. They became my family. We rarely ended up in the same place but usually stayed in the same area and the same schools until Bree literally ran away from her foster father and into Rhys.

Rhys. A badass tattoo artist. Loyal and fierce. He didn't rest until she was safe. He and his wife, Blair, adopted Bree and then eventually, Fletch and me as well. They're amazing. They have money and a love most people only dream about.

They moved us into this big-ass house that's full of shit I could never have imagined, including a heated pool in the backyard I use frequently. We each have a car of our own, although I rarely drive mine because I feel guilty. I feel like I didn't earn it, so I shouldn't drive it.

They want us to focus on school. And they pay for a fancy prep school kids like me would never have a shot at. And I hate it. I fought going there for a while, but when Fletch gave in and went, I went too. To be with Bree and him. I hate the pretentious, preppy rich kids at that school. I hate the teachers who tell me I'm not applying myself. I hate the football games and the players who rule the school simply because they can catch a ball. I mean, a fucking dog can do that, but sure, let's give them props.

I live under the same roof—a safe roof, I might add—with Bree and Fletcher, my best friends in the world. But I feel like I'm suffocating every single day when I wake up and go into my very own bathroom with the heated marble floor.

I stare at myself in the mirror, and all I feel is that I'm a fraud. That this is not me. That I don't deserve any of it.

But I can't tell Bree that. And I can't tell Fletcher. Because they're nothing but grateful, as they should be. And I, for sure, can't tell Blair and Rhys because they're everything I could have ever dreamed of and amazing people I do love. But none of that changes the fact that there's something broken deep inside me.

Something clawing its way out, and I'm sinking every single day. And now, I'm eighteen.

"Yeah, you're right. I'm just in a mood."

Bree nudges my shoulder with her smaller one, and I turn to look at her, wishing like hell I could explain it. To describe to her everything swirling around in my mind, but I don't know how. Fletcher and she are the best things to ever happen to me and yet, I can't talk to them anymore. Not about me.

Her small hand slides through my hair that's grown out a little too long, and she rests her hand on the back of my head, searching my eyes with hers. I think she's trying to comfort me. I'm sure she's worried. I've been a moody asshole for a while now. But then, I notice her eyes on my lips and see her starting to lean in.

Oh. Shit.

No.

"Bree."

"It's okay, Rhett . . . Really."

She moves in closer, and my heart threatens to escape my chest with how fast it's pounding. And not with the good kind

of anticipation you should feel before a kiss. This is full of dread. “Bree, don’t,” I finally choke out.

She pulls back, looking shocked. Then, there’s the hurt look I was dreading. She doesn’t say anything and drops her hand.

“I’m sorry.”

She just stares at me, and I’m afraid she might cry. Which Bree does *not* do. “I . . .”

“It’s not you. It’s not.”

Now, she looks pissed, which, honestly, is a little easier to deal with. “Don’t give me that bullshit.”

“It’s not, Bree. We’re friends. Best friends.”

“Oh yay. What every girl wants with the guy she—”

“Don’t.” I shake my head and hold up a hand, hoping to stop her. Because I knew this was coming. I knew she was starting to see me that way, and I can never reciprocate what she feels. Not only because she’s my friend, but . . .

I shake it off because . . . No, I’m not going there. I don’t allow myself to go there.

“Don’t?” *Yeah, she’s back to looking hurt.*

Goddammit, why do I even exist? I should be in love with her. In the perfect world, I *would* be in love with her. Bree is beautiful—beyond beautiful. Every guy in our class salivates for her, but she wants no part of the preppy douchebags at our school.

No. She wants her moody, broken best friend.

I look away from her, that suffocating feeling coming back in full force. “Don’t say what you were about to say.” I lock

eyes with her again. “I’m not worth it, Bree.”

“You’re . . .” She folds her arms. The hoodie she’s wearing is too big for her because it’s mine. “Don’t give me that self-deprecating bullshit. You’re amazing, Rhett. I mean . . . you’re so kind. You volunteer at shelters on the weekend, and you paint murals for free to make the world more beautiful. You’re . . .”

I stand up, trying to pull air into my lungs. “Stop. Don’t make me into some sort of saint. I’m fucked up, and you know it.”

She stands too. “No more than the rest of us.”

“You think two fucked-up people make a whole? They can’t. They just break each other more. I’ve seen it firsthand.”

Her eyes darken, and she’s pissed. And hurt. I hurt my best friend. “So, because I’m a former foster kid, you can’t love me back?”

Goddammit. “Don’t say you love me.”

“But I do.” Her eyes are shining with tears, and I want to die.

I hold onto her small shoulders with a loose grip. “I love you too, Bree . . . Just . . .”

“No.” She wipes at a tear, and I die a little more. “Don’t tell me it’s not like that. Or that you love me like a friend or a sister.”

But I do.

“I’m sorry.” I wipe another tear away with my thumb. “I’m so sorry.”

“Happy birthday,” she barely whispers before she pulls away and goes back inside, away from me.

Yeah. Happy fucking birthday to me.

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THE PRETTY BOY VS THE BAD BOY

Read on for a peek at *The Pretty Boy vs The Bad Boy*, the first book in the On the Track series.

<https://amzn.to/45EeivC>

PROLOGUE

SEBASTIAN

“Are you kidding me?” I climb out of my car, anger flooding through me as I try like hell to calm myself. He knows that was dangerous.

Axel Lennon may be a rookie, just like me, but he knows the track. He knows he can't cut off a fellow driver at the last minute like that. He spun me into a wall and messed up my car.

Though, it could have been so much worse.

And now he's being congratulated at Victory Lane as if he's some sort of hero. I begin to make my way over to him, but I'm stopped immediately by my agent. “Sebastian, remember what we talked about?”

I narrow my eyes at him. Yeah, I do. I signed with Kevin when I was brand new to NASCAR racing and thrilled just to be signed by anyone. But now, I'm regretting it. He created this whole image for me.

But it's not me.

“Yes. He could have killed me.” Shouldn't he be worried about that?

“Axel knows exactly what he's doing. If you go over there spitting fire, you'll destroy everything we've created.”

He. He created. I had nothing to do with it.

All I want is to race.

I look over in Axel's direction, his cocky grin and that dark hair matted with sweat, which he rakes his fingers through. He's conducting an interview, but the motherfucker has the nerve to shoot me a wink. My feet are moving before I can even think.

But Kevin, despite being portly, catches up quickly and intercepts me. "No."

I glare at him. "No?"

"You heard me. No."

I point at Axel, gesturing wildly. "That motherfucker is proud of himself for nearly killing me."

My entire body thrums with angry adrenaline, but Kevin stands firm, his body blocking mine. "Language," he scolds. "Anyone recording you right now could read your lips. You're the good one, remember? The angel to his devil."

I glare over at said devil, who's watching me with that cocky, arrogant air surrounding him. He's not worried I'll punch him right in his face—just like he has coming.

He knows it. I know it. But he's also confident my agent will wrangle me because that's what I've let him do for the past year.

"This is bullshit," I spit out.

"Be that as it may—and watch your damn mouth—here's what you're going to do." Kevin leans in close, his coffee breath wafting into my nostrils. "You're going to go over there, head held high, and shake his hand. Tell him that was a good race."

My jaw nearly drops as I look into my agent's eyes and listen to what he's suggesting. But then it clenches tight when I realize he's not joking. That's actually what he expects me to do.

God, I wish he was kidding.

"I'm not congratulating him on playing dirty."

Kevin glances over his shoulder at Axel, then back at me. "He's playing his role. He plays dirty, and they're eating it up. Now is the time for you to go over there and play yours."

"I just want to race." My jaw hurts from the way it's clenched so damn tight as I grit my teeth.

"And you can. But as I've explained to you repeatedly, there's still a role you have to play. You're in the entertainment business. Just like an actor. Just like a social media influencer. It doesn't matter. You have to entertain the masses, and trust me on this, the more you play into this good-guy role, the more money you'll make. And the more you can secure for your retirement."

That hits me directly in the chest, just like I'm sure he intended.

Racing doesn't expect you to retire as young as some other sports, but you can't keep it up forever. I need to plan for the future now. Set up my security.

And if that means playing a role now so I'm more memorable, then that's what I need to do.

"Fine." I finally get my mouth to say the word, but Kevin already knew it was coming. He straightens and moves to my side to escort me toward my fate.

I try my best to calm my heart rate as I make my way over to Victory Lane, where Axel Lennon stands like a king.

My hands clench into fists at my side as his dark eyes run over my firesuit all the way up to my face, studying me. Waiting to see if I'll finally hit him or if I'll let Kevin keep that hold on my balls like he's had for a year.

When I reach my hand out to shake his, a wicked smile slides over his features, and his devilish eyes meet mine. "Ah, Sebastian. So good of you to join us."

Some of the people around us snicker, but I just breathe deeply, steeling myself to do what I'm told. "Axel, good race."

My hand is still outstretched in his direction as he lifts his and firmly grabs hold. "So close, Sebastian. You're getting a little better at this."

More snickers.

Eating up his cool demeanor like they always do.

The camera loves him.

The bastard.

"Yes, well, that was a little risky at the end." I can't help myself.

He just smirks at me, squeezing my hand a little tighter. "Only if you don't know what you're doing." The bastard releases my hand with an arrogant wink, and again my fists want to swing, but I keep them at my sides.

"How about a picture of you two?" a reporter asks, and our attention shifts in their direction.

Axel—the cocky shithead—wraps an arm around my shoulder before I can shove him away and pulls me tightly to

his side, flashing a huge, white smile at the camera. “Of course.”

My entire body tenses at the sensation of his pressed against me, but fury rages through my blood. I force a smile, and there are a few flashes of the camera.

When they’re done, I start to pull away, but Axel only pulls me in closer, his breath hitting my ear as his voice comes out with expert smoothness, “Good boy.”

I turn my head quickly, glaring in his direction, but I don’t say anything. And I *still* don’t hit him.

He just winks again and then releases me so I can finally get away. My feet are fast on the asphalt, my rage threatening to explode, but thankfully Kevin doesn’t follow me.

I don’t think I could take talking to him right now.

Good boy.

That motherfucker knows my role in this.

Although he normally calls me *pretty boy*, which he knows I can’t stand either.

And he’s very good at playing his role.

You see, while I’m the good one. The pretty, all-American, clean-cut one . . .

Axel Lennon is now, and will forever be, the bad boy.

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