



THE  
SPACE  
BETWEEN  
LOVE  
& HATE

THE SPACE BETWEEN DUET  
BOOK ONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MELISSA TOPPEN

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# Chapter One

Aspen



Memories. Such an inconsequential word, and yet the very thing that defines our existence. What are we if not for our memories? Who are we? Who would *I* be without the memory of what came before? Without the memory of *him*? The memory that never leaves, like a silent whisper at the back of my mind, demanding to be heard.

I can still see his face. The curve of his jaw. His crooked smile that made my knees weak every time it touched his lips. Eyes the color of the sky on a cloudless, sunny day.

Sutton...

I remember the first time I saw him in perfect detail—like a fragment of time suspended in front of my eyes. I remember his shirt—faded blue against tanned skin that had seen countless hours of the summer sun. Wet droplets peppered his shoulders from where his still wet hair had dripped onto the fabric.

He rounded the bottom of the stairs, our eyes meeting for only a fraction of a second before he looked away, but it was long enough for me to know right then and there that nothing would ever be the same again. And I was right. At thirteen years old, I had predicted exactly what was to come. Some things you just *know* are an absolute inevitability.



“Earth to Aspen. Come in, Aspen.”

I blink at the sound of Remi’s voice, glancing up to see him looking back at me with a halfcocked smirk, his shoulders shaking in silent laughter.

“What are you on about?” I drop my phone into my purse before slinging it over my shoulder.

“I swear, sometimes it’s like you exist in an entirely different world than the rest of us.” He shakes his head, a chunk of dark blond hair falling into his eye as he leans down to grab my duffel from the floor.

“I do not.” I stick my tongue out at him as if in a polite way of saying *fuck off*. “I’m trying to make sure I’m not forgetting anything.” I offer a half-truth, knowing I could never divulge the real reason I’ve been so distracted since finding out about our trip home a few weeks ago.

“We’re only going to be gone a few days.” He needlessly reminds me.

I dare say a *few* days are going to feel a hell of a lot longer to me than they will to him. He, after all, has a lot more to go home to than I do. His friends. His parents. His *brother*.

Just the thought of Sutton has the muffin I had for breakfast turning sour in my stomach.

“You’re sure your parents don’t mind that I crash at their house?” I ask for what feels like the hundredth time. “I’d hate to be an imposition.”

“An imposition?” He blanches at me. “You have been a part of my family since middle school. Not to mention, how many times have you stayed at my parents’ already? You could never impose, and you know that. So why don’t you tell me why you really don’t want to go?”

“I never said I *didn’t* want to go,” I argue.

“Not outright, no, but you’ve been dragging your feet about this since the moment I asked you to come.” He pauses, trying to read what I’m trying really hard to hide. “Does it have something to do with work? I thought you said they were happy to give you the time off.”

“They were. I have more than enough vacation time to cover a few days. It’s not that.” I shift my weight from one foot to the other. “I just..”

“Hey.” He steps toward me, his large, muscular frame dwarfing my petite one. “I told you, Dad said they moved away months ago.” His hand closes over mine, his fingers giving me a reassuring squeeze.

Of course he would then assume if not for work, my resistance has something to do with my foster family. And while that’s definitely been a factor in my not returning up to this point, it’s *not* the reason I’m so knotted up over returning to Ohio today.

No, that is reserved for none other than Sutton Barnett himself.

My first crush. My first love. My first heartbreak. My first regret.

The thought of seeing him again is almost as painful as it is exciting, because for as much as I loathe Sutton Barnett, a part of me, the younger part of me I haven't been able to shake, still feels a hint of something in my chest every time I think of him.

It's irrational, stupid, and pretty much makes zero sense, but a part of me has loved Sutton Barnett since the first moment I laid eyes on him. There's no logic in my feelings. Nothing he's ever done to justify why I feel the way I do. All I know is that it's always been there.

Remi doesn't know anything about what happened between me and his brother. It's one of the only things I've ever kept from him. Partly because I was ashamed. Partly because I thought he'd never be able to look at me the same if he knew.

But mainly because of a promise I had broken before I even made it.

But when Sutton took my hand that night, not a single other thing mattered. I didn't care that he didn't feel for me what I felt for him. In that moment, I needed him. I needed him in a way I don't think anyone besides me could possibly understand.

Sutton Barnett, the boy I had pined after for three years, had *finally* noticed me, and I wasn't going to waste a single moment thinking about the consequences of my actions or what the next day would bring.

In case you're wondering, it brought me heartache and shame, and guilt like I had never felt before. And given that my life was basically a never-ending sad song, that's saying something. But weirdly, it also opened my eyes to what life could really be like. What it meant to feel happiness and pleasure and... *safety*.

"No, I know." I let him believe his assumptions are correct. "Just weird... Going back."

"I know." He gives my hand another squeeze. "But you'll have me. And my parents, who are so excited to see you. And Sutton, but no one really counts him." He snorts out a laugh.

*I do*, I think to myself. That's the problem. I've always counted him.

"Is he staying there, too?" I swallow past the knot that builds in my throat. "At your parents' house, I mean."

"I'm not sure. Probably. Is that a problem?" He steps back, adjusting the bag on his shoulder.

"No. Just curious who all's going to be there." I do my best to keep my expression relaxed.



“I don’t think anyone outside of the immediate family is staying at the house. Most will either stay with other family or in a hotel.”

“So this is going to be a *big* event, then.”

“You only renew your vows once. Well, I think you only do it once.” He chuckles. “And you know my mom, she doesn’t do anything halfway.”

“That she doesn’t,” I agree, the thought of Summer bringing a smile to my lips.

She’s the closest thing to a mom I’ve ever had, which is the absolute *only* reason I agreed to this. It will be the first time I’ve been back in Ohio since I graduated high school. While my foster family still resided there, I swore to never return. But they’re gone now, and because of that, Remi was not going to let me get off the hook on this one.

“We should probably get going if we don’t want to miss our flight,” Remi offers.

I nod, doing one last sweep of my small apartment, making sure I’ve shut everything off.

When we first graduated college, Remi and I lived together—mainly because I couldn’t afford to live on my own—but after two years of listening to him shag every blonde, brunette, and redhead he met—he’s a bit of a player, that one—I decided it was time to get my own place. Unfortunately, living expenses in D.C. are *not* cheap and even with my job as a legal assistant, I ended up having to settle for something much smaller than I was originally looking for.

I don’t much mind, though. I like the cozy feel and the incredible location right in the heart of everything. It helps that Remi lives right around the corner, too. I may not want to live with him, but having him close was a must, given that we’ve pretty much been attached at the hip for the last twelve years.

When I decided to go to GW, so did he. When I went into political science, he went into business so that we’d share a lot of the same classes. And when I decided to stay in Washington, D.C. after graduation, he had already secured us an apartment before I could even ask what his plans were. Honestly, had he been interested in law, I dare say he’d probably work with me too, instead of working at a marketing firm a few blocks away.

So, yeah, I think it’s safe to say that Remi and I are kind of a package deal. I’m sure his future wife is going to *love* that.

“Okay, I think I’m ready.” I blow out a slow, steady breath, though it does little to calm the rapid thrumming against my ribs.

“After you, Pen.” Remi’s green eyes follow me as I slip past him toward the door.

Taking the stairs down to the lobby, because Remi parked in the visitor section, his car is waiting for us just a few steps from the front door.

“You sure it wouldn’t have just been easier to drive?” I ask, waiting for him to unlock the door before tugging open the passenger side.

“You know how much I hate being in a car.” He tosses my bag into the back seat next to his. “An hour maybe... But eight. Pass.”

“And yet, with traffic getting to the airport, security, and waiting to board our flight, it’ll take us just as long to get there.”

“Better than driving the whole way.” He slips into the driver’s seat just as I settle into the one beside him.

“For you maybe,” I mutter.

“We’ve been over this. Flying is safer than driving a car.”

“And yet, this fact does very little to soothe me when I’m thirty thousand feet in the air,” I fire back.

“How is someone as fearless as you scared of flying?”

“Control,” we both say in unison.

Remi knows me well. Well enough to know that I don’t like to find myself in any situation I can’t control. Some might say I’m a control freak, but anyone who actually knows me, knows I just don’t like to be at the mercy of anyone but myself. If you grew up the way I did, you’d understand. I always have to feel like I have the upper hand, even if I don’t.

“I’ll hold your hand the whole time,” he reassures, firing the engine to life.

“Because holding my hand will save me when we’re plummeting to our deaths.”

“I’m pretty sure we’ve had this conversation every single time I’ve gotten you on an airplane,” he needlessly points out.

“And? Keep forcing me to fly and we’ll keep having it.”

“Worth it.”

“You’re such an ass,” I sneer, a smile playing on my lips.

“An ass you love.” He glances at me as he puts the car into drive, his eyebrows shooting up suggestively.

“Don’t be gross. I doubt you want to clean my breakfast off your dashboard.”

“Ouch, Pen. You wound me.”

“The thought of your ass wounds me.”

This earns me a playful shove to the shoulder.

“Focus on the road, please.” I shove him back.

“Says the girl who’s gonna make me crash if she doesn’t keep her hands to herself.”

“Ugh! Remind me again why I’m friends with you?” I sink into my seat, crossing my arms in front of my chest like a pouty child.

He doesn’t have to tell me *why* I’m friends with him. I know why. Because he basically saved my life. If it weren’t for him, had he not come into my life when he did, who knows where I’d be. In prison for murder. Dead. A homeless junkie. All seem like possible outcomes given my living situation at the time. Not that I’ve ever done drugs a day in my life or had the stomach for murder, but there’s no saying what I would have done to escape if Remi hadn’t come along.

“Because you love my ass,” he teases again.

“Would you shut up about your ass already?” I grumble, not the slightest hint of aggravation in my voice.

“Why, when you’re picturing it right now as we speak.”

“All right, I’m done.” I toss my hands up, reaching for the door handle, knowing there’s not a chance in hell I’m going to open it considering he’s weaving through traffic like a getaway driver who just robbed a bank.

Maybe I should be glad we’re flying after all.

“Okay, I’m done.” Laughter dances through his words. “Even though secretly I know you really do like my bum.”

“Well, I’ve seen it enough times, that’s for sure.” I snort.

“So you did look?” He chuckles.

“I lived with you for two years and you made a habit of not putting on clothes when you walked from your room to the bathroom. Yeah, I’ve seen it and many other things I’ll likely never be able to scrub from my brain.”

Don’t get me wrong, Remi is about as attractive as they come. He puts me in mind of a young Matthew McConaughey, though he lacks the dimples and his eyes are more green than blue. In another life, I’d probably fawn all over him like all the other women in his life do. And while there was a time

that I wondered if maybe there would be more between us, once I met Sutton, everything changed.

It didn't matter that for years he barely acknowledged me unless forced to do so. *He* was the one I wanted, and I was prepared to wait a lifetime for him. Of course, that was back before I was mature enough to realize what being with someone like Sutton meant.

He made me feel like a dirty secret. He made me feel ashamed. And given my past, given everything I had already been through, it was the equivalent of holding a gun to my head and pulling the trigger—an emotional kill shot of epic proportions.

“You're welcome.” Remi breaks into my thoughts with a quick-witted reply that takes me longer than it should to place.

“Ha. Ha,” I deadpan, pushing all thoughts of Sutton down deep, in a way I've perfected over the last few years. When you've been through some of the things I have, you get good at learning how to shut things out. And while yes, he manages to creep in more times than I'd like, he doesn't consume me the way he used to.

Returning home has stirred up a lot of things I've kept buried.

“Can I ask you something?” I wonder aloud as we near the airport.

“Anything.”

“Do you know where they went?” By pushing Sutton down, another has taken his place. I don't have to elaborate for him to know what I'm asking.

“No. Only that they moved away last fall.”

The image of that old house, tucked back off the road, flashes through my mind. The pit I used to feel in my stomach every time the school bus pulled up beside its long, gravel driveway returns with it.

“Did your dad say how they seemed? Before they left, I mean?” I swallow hard, not sure why this is the question I thought to ask. Maybe because deep down I'm hoping that karma finally landed a blow. If there's anyone who deserves it, it's Rick and Jean McKinney. Just the thought of their names makes my skin crawl. And don't even get me started on Harris... Bile rises in my throat like being shot out of a catapult from my stomach. I pull in a deep breath, trying to quell the ache it leaves behind.

“Do you really care?” Remi throws me a sideways glance before his eyes once again go back to the road.

“Not really. But if you say they seemed bad, it might make me feel a little better.” I force a smile to my lips, but it's solely for myself. I don't have to

pretend with Remi. At least not when it concerns most things. Or, well, all things that aren't his brother, really.

"In that case, they looked like shit and their lives had completely fallen apart. And last I heard, that asshole of a foster brother of yours is biding his time before someone finds him dead with a needle in his arm. How's that?"

"Better." I let out a soft laugh. I know he only said it for my benefit, but in some weird way, it does bring me a tiny sliver of solace.

I like to think the people who treated me so poorly got at least a little of what was coming to them.

"I know you're nervous about going home, and I get why, but don't let what those assholes did to you blind you from all the good stuff."

"Oh yeah, like what?" I'm poking fun at him now, and he knows it, too.

"That's your one freebie. Next time, you pay," he warns, his warm laughter filling the car.

"Because I'm so scared of you." I bite down on my lower lip to keep my own laughter from spilling out.

"You forget I know exactly where you'll be sleeping for the next seven days. When you wake up with shaving cream all over your face, don't say I didn't warn you."

"You wouldn't." I glare at the side of his face, watching his smile spread further.

"Oh, I would." His eyes dart to mine for a split second and then back to the road. "Payback nine years in the making."

"You can't blame me for something I did when I was fifteen."

"Oh, but I can. And I do. All I'm saying, it'd be best if you slept with one eye open this week."

"Stop it." I call his bluff. "You love me too much to do something like that to me."

"Is that your way of saying you *didn't* love me?" He quirks a brow.

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

"Sounds like what you meant," he teases, slowing the car as he veers into the airport parking garage.

"I know what you're doing, you know."

"What's that?"

"Trying to distract me."

"Is it working?" He smiles again.

"Maybe." I audibly sigh in fake annoyance.

“Sometimes you just gotta get out of your own head, Pen. Stewing on all this shit, it’s giving them a power you took away a long time ago.” He pulls into a vacant spot and shifts the car into park, seconds before killing the engine.

“I know,” I admit as he unbuckles his seat belt and shifts toward me.

“We’re going to have fun this week. You and me. Fuck everybody else. Fuck the past. Let’s just focus on us.”

“Well, and your parents.” The corner of my mouth twitches. “We are flying home for them, after all.”

“Okay, and them too. But only for a little bit. The rest of the time, you’re all mine.”

“So selfish,” I tease.

“I’ll admit, part of the reason I pushed you to come with me is because I wanted to spend some *real* time with you. I feel like I never see you anymore.”

“Remington Jonathan Barnett, what are you going on about? You see me almost every single day.”

“Not like I used to.”

“That kind of happens when you no longer live together.”

“Well, I don’t like it. Why did you have to move out?”

“You know why.”

“I told you I’d stop bringing girls back to the apartment.”

“Remi, you are an attractive man in your twenties. You deserve to be able to have fun and do whatever you want without me getting in the way.”

“But I like you in the way.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m serious, Pen. I miss you.”

“I live around the corner.”

“I miss living with you.” He pouts out his bottom lip in the most pathetic display I’ve seen in a while. “Do you miss living with me?”

“Do I miss trying to sleep while it sounded like your bed was going to come through the wall into my room at any moment? No, I can’t say that I do.”

“I think secretly you liked listening.” He leans in, doing that thing he does. That sexy smirk where he tries to convince you he’s into you, and what’s worse, you’re into him. Yeah, I’ve seen him use that look on me more

times than I can count. He's messing with me, of course. That much couldn't be more clear.

Even if he wasn't, I would never go there with Remi. Mostly because of what happened with Sutton—something I don't think Remi could get past—but also because I couldn't bear to lose him if things went sideways. I won't lie and say there's *never* been a time when I've thought about it. Of course I have. It's hard not to when a man as good-looking and fun as Remi makes you feel like his world begins and ends with you.

"And this conversation is over." I push open the passenger door and quickly climb from the car, his laughter trailing after me as I do.

"You're so easy to rile up," he tells me as he, too, exits the car.

"Probably why you keep doing it." I crinkle my nose.

"True," he agrees, laughter still shaking his shoulders.

"Come on, Casanova. We need to get inside before our plane leaves without us."

"So bossy." He tugs open the back door and pulls our bags out, sliding one on each shoulder. I don't even bother to offer to carry mine. I already know he won't let me. And while usually I hate other people doing things for me that I'm perfectly capable of doing myself, I've learned to just let Remi do what he pleases. It's easier that way.

"You ready?" I ask when he rounds the car, joining me at the back.

"What? Don't I look ready?" He gives me a cheeky grin.

"Sometimes I don't know about you." I take off walking without waiting to see if he follows, because I know he will. He always does. Remington Barnett has been following me everywhere for the last twelve years. No reason to believe he's going to stop now.

"So, what's the first thing you want to do when we get there?" He's beside me in an instant.

"Visiting with your parents seems like the appropriate thing to do, does it not?"

"Lame."

"Kind of the reason we're doing this," I remind him.

"Okay, but what about after?"

"After?"

"After we visit with my parents, then what?"

"Do we need to figure that out right now?" I quicken my steps, eager to get inside the air conditioning. It suddenly feels ten degrees hotter than it did

when we left my apartment. We've only walked a few feet and already I feel sweat forming at my hairline.

"I say we raid my dad's liquor cabinet and lounge by the pool."

Even I can agree that sounds pretty damn good.

"Under one condition... You promise not to throw me into the pool."

"Oh, my sweet Aspen, we both know that's not a promise I can keep." He steps ahead of me through the door, waiting for me to follow him in before he's once again at my side.

"Promise or you'll be swimming alone."

"Okay," he finally concedes. "I promise not to *throw* you into the pool." He emphasizes the word throw.

"You can't push me in either."

"Damn, you're raining all over my parade here." He visibly pouts as we make our way toward security. "But fine, I'll agree to your terms. Especially if you brought that little red two-piece I love so much."

"Remi." I shove his shoulder. "Why do you always have to be such a pervert?"

"What?"

"You know what." I shake my head, blowing out a heavy puff of air when I realize the line to get through security is so long we'll be lucky if it doesn't take us an hour to get through it. "See, we should have driven." I gesture to the line of people.

"Relax. You'll be thanking me when we're landing after only a couple of hours rather than still looking down the barrel of five or six more hours in the car."

"I wouldn't be so sure."

"Trust me."

"Like I'm supposed to trust you not to toss me in the pool later?"

"Hey, I promised." He knocks his shoulder into mine.

"You'll find a loophole." I turn my back to him before muttering, "You always do."



*Eleven years earlier*



*“Why do you look like you’re about to vomit all over the sidewalk?”*

*Remi cocks a brow at me, adjusting his bookbag on his shoulder.*

*“Because I might,” I admit, a slight tremble in my voice.*

*“If you don’t want to come over, you don’t have to. Though my mom has been hounding me about meeting you for months.”*

*“That’s your fault for telling her about me.”*

*“Come on, Pen, you’re my best friend. Of course I’ve told her about you.”*

*“My foster parents don’t know about you.”*

*“That’s because you don’t talk to your foster parents about anything.”*

*“You’re not wrong there, I guess.”*

*I stare down at my shoes, at the hole that’s forming between the fabric and the sole. It won’t be long until the whole thing rips apart. I make a mental note to look for superglue when I get home. It’s either that or go to school with half my foot hanging out because there’s no way I’m asking the McKinnys for a new pair. Not that they’d buy me some even if I did. And even if they were willing, it’s not worth what it would cost me.*

*“What size do you wear?” Remi seems to read my thoughts perfectly. It’s scary really, how he always seems to know the direction my thoughts have taken.*

*“What?” I try to pretend I don’t know what he’s talking about as I turn my gaze forward.*

*“Your shoes. What size?”*

*“You are not buying me new shoes.”*

*I love Remi. Ever since the day he walked into Social Studies and complimented the flower I had drawn on my hand with a pen. He is the closest friend I’ve ever had. I can’t imagine surviving this past year without him. But sometimes I want to punch him in the face for making me feel like a poor, little charity case.*

*“Your birthday is coming up,” he offers.*

*“You are NOT buying me shoes,” I say again, more firmly this time.*

*“Okay. Sorry.” He holds his hands up as if to say, I surrender. “Just thought it might be a nice present, is all.”*

*“I don’t want any presents from you.”*

*“Too bad for you, you can’t stop me from buying my best friend a birthday present. So there.” He tips his chin as if the matter is settled.*

*“I can manage on my own.”*

*“I know you can.” He bumps his shoulder into mine, trying to lighten the sudden heavy mood. “I’m sorry if I made you feel like you couldn’t.”*

*“Thank you.” I manage to push down my pride long enough to see he didn’t mean any offense.*

*Sometimes it’s hard for me to accept help from others. To feel inferior to them, like they’re better than me. I often forget that Remi isn’t like the rest. He doesn’t care that my foster parents would rather spend the state’s money on booze and drugs than on the actual child they get the money for. How the two of them ended up as foster parents is beyond me. I guess at this point there are more kids than foster families and the state can’t afford to be that picky.*

*“So, tell me again what your parents’ names are.” I redirect the conversation.*

*“My mom is Summer. My dad is Randel.”*

*“And your brother’s name is Sutton.” That much I remember, mainly because Remi spends a lot of time complaining about him.*

*“Yes.”*

*“And what if they don’t like me?” I fiddle with the threaded bracelet on my wrist. I used some of Jean’s thread to make it, which she thankfully hasn’t noticed I did. Otherwise, she’d probably have me scrubbing the floors with a toothbrush to pay her back. And no, that’s not an over exaggeration.*

*“Impossible.” He gives me a warm smile, nudging my shoulder again. “Come on, we’re here.” He grabs my hand, tugging me toward a large, two-story house with dark blue shutters and a bright red door.*

*It’s nicer than I imagined. Way nicer than where I live, that’s for sure.*

*Remi keeps a tight grip on my fingers as he leads me up the stairs onto the front porch and then through the front door. The smell of cinnamon hits me in an instant, the scent warm and inviting.*

*“My parents won’t be home for a bit. We can hang out in my room if you want.”*

*“In your room?” I swallow hard. I’ve never been in a boy’s room before. Well, none that I didn’t live with anyway.*

*“We have to leave the door open. Mom’s rules.”*

*“Right.” My tension eases slightly.*

*It’s not that I don’t trust Remi—I do, probably more than I’ve ever trusted another living person—but the thought of being alone with him in his room does make me a little nervous. It’s hard to convince my body of the*

*difference between going to Remi's room or being forced into Harris's. And while I know there couldn't be more differences between the two, my brain seems hardwired to feel fear when it's not always warranted.*

*I look up when I hear a door close above us, my chest tightening at the sight of the boy who appears moments later, coming down the stairs toward us. I know it's Remi's brother, mainly because I know there are no other teenage boys living here other than Remi and his older brother Sutton, and my God... is he beautiful.*

*I suck in a hard breath as time feels like it slows down around me. Every movement I see in perfect detail. The way his muscles flex as he moves. The way his faded blue shirt seems to cling to his lean body just right, the soft color accenting his tanned skin. The way his hand trails along the stair rail, a soft brush of his fingers as he makes his way down.*

*He reaches the bottom of the stairs, and I swear it feels like my heart might beat right out of my chest at the sight of him up close. Take the most attractive boy you've ever seen, multiply his looks by a hundred, and then you might, maybe, have an understanding of my reaction to Sutton Barnett.*

*When he stops in front of us, his dark hair still damp from the shower, I have to lock my knees to keep them from shaking. When Remi told me about his brother, this is not what I pictured. Not even close.*

*"Mom know you brought a girl home?" His voice, too deep to belong to any fifteen-year-old, kisses my ears.*

*"Duh." Remi grunts. "And she's not just any girl. This is Aspen."*

*Blue eyes flick to mine. Eyes the color of the sky on a sunny, cloudless day. Eyes I swear I could lose myself in for a million years and never find my way back. I haven't even processed the feelings suddenly swimming through my gut when he looks back at his brother.*

*"Whatever. Just stay out of my room." Sutton pushes past Remi, knocking his shoulder hard enough to cause Remi to take a step back.*

*"As if I'd want to go in there." Remi turns, calling to his brother's back seconds before he disappears through the front door. "So, yeah." Remi's attention comes back to me. "That's Sutton. Don't take his attitude personally. He treats everyone like that."*

*"I see." I try my best to seem unaffected, but the truth is I am. I am very, very affected. In a way I didn't know was possible.*

*I mean, I've seen attractive boys before. Heck, Remi is one of the most sought-after guys in school. Every girl wants to date him. But Sutton...*

*There's just something about him. Like a siren pulling me in, lowering my inhibitions with his lethal song.*

*"Come on, I'll show you my room." Remi takes off up the stairs and I'm quick to follow after him, still trying to wrap my head around what the heck that just was and why all of a sudden I feel like my whole world is about to change.*



Walking into Remi's parents' house feels like traveling back in time. Everything is exactly as I remember it. From the cream-colored walls to the dark wood flooring, to the weird painting Summer hung in the foyer the fall of our junior year. I still remember Remi's reaction when we walked in and saw it. He said it looked like a spilled litter box with cat turds spread all around. If it weren't for the nervous pit in my stomach, the thought might bring a smile to my lips.

"Mom. Dad," Remi calls through the house, dropping our bags next to the front door before heading down the hallway where the living room and kitchen open up into one large space. I follow closely behind, my heart hammering so hard against my ribs I'm fairly certain it might blow a gasket and send me straight into cardiac arrest.

"They're here!" I hear Summer squeal before we round the corner. By the time we enter the room, she's standing in front of us, pulling Remi into a tight squeeze. "My baby."

"Hi, Mom." I can hear the smile in his voice.

It's only moments before her arms close around me next, the sweet smell of her dark hair invading my senses. I hug her back, having not realized how much I missed that smell until this very moment.

"And my girl." She kisses the side of my head before releasing me. "My God, how beautiful are you?" She picks up a strand of my long hair, letting it slide through her fingers.

"Hi, Summer." I finally manage to say, the smile on my lips as genuine as they come.

“Honestly, could you be any prettier? Randel, would you get a look at this girl?” she asks her husband, who steps up next to Remi, clenching his shoulder as both men look on at me and Summer.

“As beautiful on the outside as she is on the inside.” Randel smiles at me, and despite the blush creeping up my cheeks, I smile back.

“I can’t believe how grown you are,” Summer continues on. “What’s it been, five years?”

“Six,” I correct her.

“Six years. And all I had to do was get married again for you to come visit.”

“I’m sorry, I—”

“No apologies needed. Remi’s told us how busy you’ve been. We’re just glad you’re here now, aren’t we, Randel?” She glances back at her husband, who looks so much like Remi it’s uncanny.

It’s funny how that worked out. Remi looks just like his father. Same blond hair. Same green eyes. Same build and height. But Sutton... Sutton looks just like Summer. Dark hair. Eyes so blue it’s as if they’re looking right through you into your very soul. He’s beautiful. They both are.

Then again, it’s been six years since I’ve seen him, the last time being Christmas break of my senior year when he came home from college to visit, so maybe he’s not that gorgeous anymore. Maybe he gained a few hundred pounds and all his hair fell out. Unlikely, but a girl can dream, right?

“We sure are.” Randel squeezes Remi’s shoulder again.

“Where’s Sutton? He here yet?” Remi asks, unknowingly sending my insides into a tailspin.

“He won’t be here until later. Dad and I have some errands to run, and we’re going to swing by and pick him and Olivia up at the airport this evening. They actually agreed to let us pick them up instead of insisting on letting a stranger drive them.” She steps back, looking between me and her son.

I force a smile, but it’s difficult to do given the downward spiral my mind suddenly finds itself in.

Who is Olivia and why is she coming with him?

I mean, the writing is on the wall, right? If he’s bringing a girl home for his parents’ vow renewal, that must mean it’s serious, right? I mean, this is Sutton. The guy who refused to take a girl to prom because he didn’t want to

be tied down to dance with just one person. Sutton, who never had a steady girlfriend a day in his life—that I’m aware of.

I should be relieved. That he has a girlfriend. That I no longer have to obsess over what might happen if maybe, just maybe, he looks at me and sees more than just his younger brother’s annoying friend. So why does it suddenly feel like someone has just sucker punched me right in the stomach?

To be honest, I’ve tried not to think about where Sutton’s life has taken him over the last few years. I know from Remi that he moved from Dallas, where he’s been since college, to Chicago last year, that he’s working as a structural engineer or something like that. But he never once mentioned he was dating someone. Then again, I have not gone out of my way to ask anything that Remi didn’t offer up in casual conversation. Mainly because I was afraid of what I’d find out, but also because I didn’t want to seem too eager to care about Remi’s brother when as far as he knows, other than a casual conversation in passing, we’ve barely spoken.

“Who’s Olivia?” Remi asks, seeming just as confused as me.

I guess it makes sense that Remi wouldn’t know much about his brother’s personal life. Remi and Sutton were never close. Sutton has always been the darker of the two, the one who always seems to have a chip on his shoulder, and no one ever seems to be able to figure him out. He’s quiet and mysterious and plays people like they are nothing more than strings on a guitar. Remi, on the other hand, wears his heart on his sleeve, loves having a good time, and is always the life of any party. The difference between them is staggering. Hard to believe they grew up in the same household if I’m honest.

“She’s Sutton’s girlfriend.” Now Summer seems confused. “He didn’t tell you? They’ve been seeing each other for a few months now.”

A few months... God, kill me now.

Okay, so I get it. I’m supposed to hate him. I *should* hate him. I do hate him.

*Good luck, Olivia, you’re going to need it*, I think to myself in the snarkest voice I can muster.

Now if only I could get my heart on board...

“We haven’t spoken in a while.” Remi rubs the back of his neck, like admitting this to his parents makes him uncomfortable. “Is it serious?”

“Seems to be. I haven’t met her yet, but I’m excited to. This is the first time he’s ever brought a girl home. Now, if only his brother could follow.” She arches a brow at her youngest son.

“I did.” Remi’s arm slips over my shoulders as he tucks me into his side. “The best girl ever.” I don’t have to look up to know he’s smiling.

“You know I love Aspen like a daughter, but unless you’re planning on marrying her and giving me grandbabies, she doesn’t count.”

“One step at a time, Mom. I gotta woo her first.”

“He’s full of crap, Summer,” I tell her pointedly, elbowing Remi in the side, who makes an *oomph* sound before dropping his hold on me. “One day I’m going to convince him to settle down with a nice girl and give you grandbabies.” I trace my fingers over my heart in the shape of an X. “I promise.”

“And that is just one of the many reasons I love you.” She pats my cheek. “I’m so glad to have you both here. To have you all back under the same roof for a few days.”

“Don’t go getting sappy on us now, Mom.” Remi rolls his eyes with a grin.

“I’m entitled to some sappiness every now and again,” she fires back. “I am your mom after all.” I swear I see a hint of tears fill her eyes, but she quickly blinks them away. “So, you two will have the house to yourselves for a few hours to get settled. We have a lot to do tomorrow, so no staying up until all hours of the night, understood?”

“What am I, ten?”

“Remi.” She gives him the kind of look only a mother can give.

“Understood.” He smiles past a chuckle.

“Understood.” I quickly tack on when her gaze comes to me.

“Good.” She turns, heading back into the kitchen. “Why don’t you two take your things upstairs. Aspen, you’re in your usual room and, Remi, well, you already know.”

“What if Aspen and I wanted to room together?” Remi quips, throwing me a smirk.

“Now why on earth would I make her sleep with you, who snores loud enough to wake the dead, when she can have the guest room to herself?”

“She has a point,” I tack on, trying not to laugh.

“Ouch.” Remi grabs his chest like I’ve physically wounded him.

“There are fresh sheets and blankets on the beds already. I’ll whip you up a quick snack while you take your things up.”

Even though I’m the furthest thing from hungry, I nod, following Remi back toward the front of the house. Collecting our bags, I follow him up the

familiar staircase, trying not to think about the first time I saw Sutton as he came down them, to the oversized landing that overlooks the foyer.

“So, Mom and Dad are out this evening. Sounds like the liquor cabinet will be fair game.” Remi leads me down the hall, stopping in front of the guest room door that was practically the bedroom I lived in for half of high school—that’s how often I stayed over.

I move past him, having the strangest feeling as I enter the room. Like when I stepped inside the house just a few moments ago, it feels like stepping back in time.

“Sounds good,” I finally say, dropping my bag onto the neatly made queen-sized bed that takes up nearly half of the small room.

“Hey, Pen.” Remi waits until I turn to where he’s still standing in the doorway before continuing. “You okay?”

“What do you mean?” I try to scrub my expression from whatever it is he might be seeing.

“You just seem... I don’t know... off.”

“Sorry.” I make my way back toward him, which takes me all of three steps. “I think I’m just tired. I didn’t sleep well last night. Anticipation of flying and all.”

“You sure?” His hand finds mine, his thumb skirting gently across my knuckles.

“Yeah. Don’t worry. I’ll be more than ready to drink you under the table tonight. Or under the pool chairs, as it were.”

I’m not much of a drinker, but tonight... Tonight I think I’m going to need it.

“You know I take that as a personal challenge, right?”

“That’s why I said it.”

The humor in his expression quickly fades.

“I know it’s weird, being back here. If you need anything, I’m right across the hall. You’re more than welcome to come snuggle with me on a sleepless night. You know I’m the best cuddler around.”

“I know.” I smile up at him. “And thank you.”

He nods, releasing my hand as he slowly backs out of the room.

“Meet you downstairs in ten?”

“I’ll be there,” I promise, watching him push open his bedroom door, which is directly across from my room, and steps inside.



Needing just a few moments to collect myself, I slowly close the door between us before turning and pressing my back to the wood.

Taking a deep breath in, I blow it out slowly.

Remi's right. It's weird being back here. And yes, being anywhere near Wilmington is like reopening a wound that's barely scabbed over and pouring a bucket of salt into it. And seeing Sutton again, along with his new girlfriend, will likely be even more painful. But I am skilled in the art of not letting my emotions stop me from carrying on as if nothing is wrong. This week will not be any different.

Sutton made his choice eight years ago, and truthfully, so did I. He's taken enough from me. I won't let him take what will otherwise be a great week with my best friend and people I love like family.

I may have loved him once upon a time, but I am not that girl anymore. Hate has filled the void he left behind. Instead of letting the way I used to feel cloud my sight, I'll let the way I feel now take the reins.

I don't care about Sutton. I don't care about Olivia. And I will continue to repeat that until eventually, I actually believe it.

He once treated me like I didn't even exist. I think it's about time I return the favor.

# Chapter Two

Sutton



“Well, how does it feel to be home?” my dad asks, following me and Olivia inside, my mom trailing just behind him.

I resist the urge to tell him I don’t want to be here or pretend to give a shit about this vow renewal bullshit that sounds like an epic waste of money if you ask me, and instead, give him a soft nod.

“Good,” I lie.

I’m not happy to be home. Not even a little. In fact, I’d go as far as to say that I’d rather stick forks in my fucking eyeballs. But alas, here I am.

Don’t get me wrong, I love my parents, I do. But being here means having to deal with distant relatives I haven’t seen in years who will no doubt pretend to give a shit about my life when really they’re just selfish pricks like everyone else and couldn’t care less about what I’ve been up to. And then, of course, there are the family friends I couldn’t give two shits about. The ones who would ask why I’m not married and try to set me up with a niece or daughter had I not brought Olivia along. Fuck, that’s precisely *why* I brought her along. The only reason, really.

And then there’s my brother and *her*. Don’t even get me started on how many ways that situation is fucked.

Picture this: you get drunk at a party a week before you leave for college, fuck your little brother’s best friend, who’s barely sixteen, leave her passed out in your buddy’s bed, and then the next day your brother confesses he has feelings for her when you fish around to see how royally you screwed up.

You see? Fucked...

She never brought it up afterward. And I sure as shit didn’t either. I also never told Remi what happened. Given that he hasn’t tried to beat my face in, I think it’s safe to say she hasn’t told him either. Which I do find interesting. Maybe, like me, she was really drunk and didn’t remember much of what

happened. Not that I intend to ask her about it. I have zero intention of going anywhere near her if I can help it.

I guess it's safe to say it's going to be a long-ass week all around.

"You have a beautiful home." Olivia clings to my hand like a timid child afraid to let go of their parent, and I have to resist the urge to shake her off. Perhaps I've sent the wrong message bringing her here, but I'm sure as shit not going to tell her as much right now, given how my mother looks like she's about ten seconds away from going to the nearest baby store and buying everything they have in stock.

Hate to tell her, but that is never going to happen. Especially not with Olivia. Don't get me wrong, she's gorgeous and great in bed, but she's also clingy, lacks any real depth, and tends to annoy me ninety-eight percent of the time.

"Thank you." My mom's eyes keep moving between us like she's waiting for us to profess something to her.

I now see, in an effort to keep everyone off my back about not settling down, I may have opened an entirely new can of worms.

"Well, it looks like your brother has made himself at home." My mother sighs, closing the liquor cabinet that's been left wide-open—a bottle of tequila and some cheap-ass mix left out on the counter. "I told you we should have locked it." She turns toward my father, who simply shrugs.

"He's a twenty-four-year-old man, Summer. What would you have me do? Treat him like he's still sixteen?"

"Dad has a point," I interject, knowing full well my ass will be getting into that cabinet sooner rather than later if I hope to get through this week unscathed. Though I doubt she'd say anything if it were me.

Even though I'm only two years older than Remi, she's always treated him like he was so much younger. Things I could do at thirteen, Remi wasn't allowed to do until he was seventeen. Used to piss him off to no end.

"Well, go check on him at least. Make sure he's pacing himself." She turns toward me.

"Me?" I gesture to myself. "Why can't one of you do it?"

"Because he's your brother. I'm sure he'd like to know you're here."

"Doubtful," I grumble.

Remi and I have never been particularly close, and after I left for college, we really didn't talk at all. We'd go months without speaking and now, the only time we talk is when we both come home for the holidays. The last time

I spoke to him was Christmas last year. Considering it's now June... You get the picture.

"Please."

"Okay," I mutter.

"While you do that, I'll show Olivia around," Mom offers.

"I'd like that." Olivia smiles, pushing her blond hair over one shoulder.

I have to resist the urge to roll my eyes.

Dad gives me a smirk as I pass. Unlike my mother, he can read between the lines. I have to resist the urge to flip his ass off for being so smug about it, too.

Making my way to the back of the house, I push open the double doors that lead outside, stepping out onto the deck that overlooks the in-ground pool.

I damn near lose my footing when the first thing I see is a tight little body, stuffed into a red bikini, push herself out of the water.

There's no way that's...

"You asshole." The instant her voice fills the space, I know it's her. I'd recognize that voice anywhere, considering she practically lived at my house my last couple years of high school, and I had to constantly listen to her and Remi skirt between flirting and bickering twenty-four seven. Used to annoy the piss out of me. "You promised." She stands, giving me a better view of her body as she glares down at Remi, who's casually treading water in the center of the pool.

What. The. Actual. Fuck.

There is no way this is the same girl who used to blush every time I walked into a room. The same girl who used to walk around in Remi's pajama bottoms with her messy hair knotted in a bun, looking more like a little girl than a teenager.

Yeah, that girl is long gone. And I mean, in another fucking stratosphere, gone.

"Technically, I did not throw or push you into the pool. I pulled you in." My brother laughs, sending a wave of water in her direction. She jumps back just in time for the water to barely reach her feet.

Neither has noticed me yet, probably because they have the pool lights on but not the deck lights, so I'm mostly hidden in shadows.

I take a moment to drink her in. Lean legs. Full chest. Curves that make my cock instantly stir. The fact that she's dripping wet doesn't much help the

situation—the way the water slides down her soft, ivory skin.

I shake my head, trying to right myself as I make my way to the edge of the deck where the light from the pool reaches.

I know the instant she realizes I'm here. Her entire body tenses, her spine going ramrod straight.

I smile to myself, not expecting the same reaction from her that I've always gotten. I won't say I'm not pleased to see my presence still makes her nervous. Though, given what materialized between us all those years ago, I'm not sure if what I'm reading is nerves or anger. Though I wouldn't know why she'd be angry. All I did was give her exactly what she wanted.

I feel like an asshole for even thinking it. And even more so for thinking that I would be happy to give it to her again.

I guess maybe I shouldn't have acted like such a dick afterward, but fuck, what else was I supposed to do. She was clearly into me, and I was trying to manage the situation the only way I knew how—avoidance.

I shake my head again, my focus going to my brother, who follows Aspen's gaze, finally spotting me at the edge of the deck.

"Look what the cat fucking dragged in." He smacks the water, a slight slur to his voice.

Drunk.

Well, at least that means I won't have to worry about the awkward conversation that usually ensues after too long of not speaking to one another.

"Mom sent me out here to scold you for getting into the liquor cabinet," I tell him, feeling *her* eyes burning holes in the side of my face.

I ignore it, keeping my gaze locked on my brother.

Partly because I want her to believe I don't give a fuck that she's here. But also because I'm afraid of what my face will give away if I do.

I was prepared for teenage Aspen. Not the bombshell lingering just out of my line of sight.

"How about instead, you join us? Pen makes a mean margarita." He turns, swimming to the edge. "Speaking of, would you hand me my drink?"

It isn't until Aspen turns that I allow my eyes to return to her. Bad idea, considering half her ass is on display. I watch as she leans down and picks up the plastic cup before turning back to my brother.

I know what's going to happen before she even tips the cup, but I still bark out a laugh when the cold liquid splashes on top of my brother's head and slides down his face.

“What the fuck, Pen?” Laughter rumbles through his words.

“Paybacks are a bitch.” Her gaze jumps to me for the briefest of moments before going back to my brother, but it’s long enough for me to get the message.

If I thought she didn’t remember what happened between us or didn’t care, I was wrong. Very wrong. That much she couldn’t have made more clear if she had spoken the words aloud.

“I’ll show you paybacks.” Before Aspen can react, my brother has his hand around her wrist. Seconds later, she goes head first into the water.

“You dick.” She sends a wave of water into his face the instant she surfaces.

“What? Did you say you love my dick?” He tugs her toward him.

Given their interaction, it’s clear to see that whatever my brother felt for her back then, he likely still does. Though, for whatever reason, he clearly decided not to take the leap. That much is confirmed by what she says next.

“You’re so gross.” She smacks his shoulder, trying to escape his grasp.

“Did you seriously just call me gross?” Remi lifts Aspen over his shoulder with ease.

“No.” She giggles. “I called your dick gross.” She barely gets the words out before she’s in the air, hitting the water seconds later with a hard splash.

This time when she surfaces, she sputters, coughing water out of her lungs. Remi is next to her in an instant, an apology on his lips. He doesn’t see she’s playing him until it’s too late and another wave of water smacks him right in the face.

“Sut, would you come help me out with this one?” He wipes the water out of his eyes as Aspen quickly swims to the ladder, hoisting herself out of the water.

“Nope.” I hold my hands up. “You’re on your own with that one, brother.”

This earns me a slanted glare from Aspen and a laugh from Remi.

“Perhaps he’s just too scared that he can’t handle me,” she tells my brother, grabbing her drink before taking a long pull.

Okay, so Remi’s not the only drunk one among them. *Clearly.*

I have to bite back the urge to say I’ve already handled her and it was so easy I barely even remember it. Of course, doing so would out me to my brother, so I have no intention of taking her bait.

“Seems Remi is doing just fine with the task,” I say instead.

“Come on, dude, join us. Or are you still too cool to hang with your little brother? Or maybe you want to get back inside to your *girlfriend*.” He tries to bust my balls over bringing a girl home, which I already knew to expect.

“You two have... fun.” I don’t let *him* bait me either.

It takes a hell of a lot of willpower to keep my eyes from going back to Aspen, to not allow myself to feast on the sight of her in that fucking bikini one more time, but I manage to do it all the same. I’m no stranger to attractive women. Hell, I’ve got one inside my parents’ house at this very moment. But something about the way she looked at me just now, partnered with the fact that she is completely off-limits, suddenly has excitement churning in my gut.

I love a good conquest. Perhaps this time, I’ll make sure I fuck her good and proper so that she’s not so coarse at me the next time we’re forced to endure each other’s company.

Even as I think it, I know I would never go there again. If not for my brother’s sake, then for my own. It’s bad enough that I have the first time still hanging over me like an axe just waiting to drop and chop my head off.

It’s not just Remi, it’s my parents too. Aspen is like a daughter to them. If they knew what I did, what *we* did, I imagine the fallout would be catastrophic for all those involved. And by all those involved, I mean myself and Aspen.

Why I thought sticking my dick in her was a good idea is beyond me. Then again, I was a stupid teenager who had not yet learned how to handle his alcohol. Mistakes were made, I’ll admit. But I’m not so careless anymore.

“Well, how bad is it?” my mom asks, she and Olivia rounding the corner the second I step inside.

“I think it’s safe to say he’s not going to be feeling very well in the morning. I don’t think either of them will.”

“Perfect.” Her hands go to her hips as she pivots toward my father in the kitchen. “You see. Now he’s taking her down with him.”

“To be fair, Mom, I think she’s a willing participant.” I try not to grimace when Olivia slips in next to me.

“Peer pressure is a powerful thing.” My mom disagrees.

I had forgotten how highly my mother thinks of Aspen. Now that I think of it, she’s always viewed her as about as close to perfect as they come. I never understood it. Still don’t. I mean, yeah, she’s grown into her looks and all. But even when she was just a little scraggly thing, Remi and my parents

fawned over her like she was the most precious thing they'd ever seen. They even let her stay in our guest room on a pretty consistent basis. Like why the fuck she couldn't sleep at her own house is beyond me.

I did come across her crying in the hallway once. She didn't tell me anything of any real significance and I didn't care enough to ask, but it didn't take much to read between the lines. She was unhappy at home. But honestly, what fucking teenager isn't?

"She's a grown woman. I'm sure she drinks from time to time." I make my way into the kitchen, Olivia following closely behind. "You good if we head upstairs? I'm desperate for a shower and a bed," I say without consulting Olivia on the matter.

"But you just got here."

"I know, but I'm pretty tired and we have all week to spend time with everyone."

"Okay." I can tell she's disappointed, but she doesn't object further. "I'll see you two in the morning, then."

"I look forward to getting to know you better," Olivia offers.

"As do I." My mom smiles, tipping her chin.

"Good night." I kiss the side of her head before offering my dad a nod. "Night, Dad."

"Sleep well, Son." He returns my gesture with a small nod of his own.

Grabbing our bags that I left next to the front door, I take the stairs two at a time on my way up. I pass Remi's room and the guest room, where I know Aspen will be staying, before pushing my way into the bedroom at the far end of the hall, Olivia following in after me moments later. Thankfully, my parents' room is on the main floor, which I was very grateful for as a teenager, but equally grateful for now because it gives me, well, *us*, some semblance of privacy while we're here.

Stepping inside my childhood bedroom feels like a blast from the past. My parents have kept my room exactly the same as it was since the day I left for college. Every time I visit, I expect them to have cleared out my shit and found a better purpose for the room, and yet every time I arrive, it's always the same.

Dropping our bags on the floor, I kick the door shut, slip off my shoes, and flop back onto the too small bed, tiny in comparison to the one I have back at my loft apartment in Chicago.



“Your parents seem really nice.” Olivia makes a show of slipping off her shirt, revealing the thin camisole beneath.

“Yeah, they’re nice, I guess.” I shrug, keeping my eyes on her as she turns to lock the door. “What are you doing?” I arch a brow, watching her pop open the button of her jean shorts as she slowly walks toward me.

“Think they’ll be able to hear us up here?” She shimmies the material over her hips.

One thing I do like about Olivia, she’s as insatiable as I am. And... she never wears panties.

My dick stirs.

“Guess there’s only one way to find out.” I smirk.

Like a cat stalking a mouse, she moves, losing clothing as she goes, until eventually she’s straddling my lap, her tits right in my face.

I try to focus on that. On the pink hue of her nipples. On the way they sway as she moves. But when she slides down onto my cock, there’s only one face I see, and it’s not Olivia.

# Chapter Three

Aspen



“Why?” I groan aloud, rolling onto my back.

My head pounds like someone is hitting my temple with a hammer, and my stomach feels like it’s filled with rocks.

I open and close my mouth, my tongue heavy and dry.

“Why is exactly right.”

I jolt, my eyes darting open to find Remi sprawled out next to me, bare-chested, still wearing his wet swim trunks.

“What are you doing in here?” If I had enough strength to push him out of the bed, I probably would. But as it were, the thought of moving makes me want to hurl up my insides.

“You asked me to stay,” he grumbles, rolling onto his side seconds before his arm slips around my waist. The weight of it pushes a heave to the surface.

“Off.” I shove him away and am out of bed so quickly, I trip over my own two feet in my attempt to make it to the bathroom. I can’t imagine Summer would take kindly to my puking all over her near white carpet.

“Where are you going?” Remi half laughs, half groans behind me as I rip the door open.

I don’t answer, afraid that if I open my mouth the alcohol sloshing around in my stomach will come pouring out.

I turn, scrambling down the hallway to the bathroom that resides across the hall from Sutton’s room. I can’t tell you how many times over the years I made excuses to go to the bathroom for no other reason than I liked to linger outside his door, trying to listen to what he was doing inside.

I don’t have time to think about that this morning, though. Hell, I don’t even look at his door as I tear into the bathroom, running headfirst into a hard wall of tanned skin and muscles.

If not for strong hands that steady my shoulders, I’d likely have hit the floor next.

“Knock much.” Sutton snorts, his voice hoarse, as if he’s only just awoken.

“Sorry.” I shove past him without looking at his face, already mortified enough as it is.

Lunging for the toilet, I barely make it before what feel like gallons of liquid erupt out of my mouth, splashing into the water. My stomach retches, heaving more vomit upward. It burns like fire and tastes like rubbing alcohol as it slides past my tongue.

I groan, tensing when I feel my hair being swept off my neck.

“What are you doing?” I heave again.

“Trying to keep you from puking all over your hair.”

Humiliation covers me like a blanket, heating my entire body, but I can’t focus on it for too long because another wave hits me, and then another.

Sutton doesn’t say a word. He just stands there, holding my hair, watching me puke my guts out in... *Oh, God.* I glance down for a brief moment, realizing Remi isn’t the only one who passed out in his swimsuit. And what’s worse, my entire left tit is hanging out for the world to see. Or rather, for Sutton to see.

I try to tuck it back in discreetly, but there’s no way he didn’t already see it. My face burns with embarrassment as the wave of nausea *finally* passes.

I slink down onto my knees, forcing Sutton to release my hair as I lay my head on the seat, practically hugging the toilet bowl in an effort to shield my face.

“You, uh, might not want to put your face on that.”

I can’t tell if he’s amused or disgusted.

“I don’t care.” I reach up, flushing the toilet without lifting my head.

“I’ll get you some water.”

I feel Sutton shift, the floor creaking beneath his weight.

“What are you doing in here?” Remi asks.

“Holding your girl’s hair back so she didn’t puke on it,” Sutton retorts, annoyance in his words.

“You didn’t have to do that.” I fight back another heave, my stomach suddenly churning again, though I have no idea how there’s anything left in there.

“Well, shit.” Laughter is thick in Remi’s voice as he no doubt gets a good look at me. “You okay there, Pen?” I feel him kneel next to me, but I don’t open my eyes or dare to look at either of them.

“Define okay.” I groan, both in physical *and* emotional discomfort. Could this be any more embarrassing?

“What’s going on?” A female’s voice hits my ears next, answering my question for me.

Yes, it could, in fact, get worse. Because now, not only has Sutton watched me puke my guts out with my tit hanging out the whole time, but now his *girlfriend* is meeting me for the first time half naked with my head in the toilet.

“Tweedle dee and tweedle dumb drank too much last night.” It’s Sutton who answers.

I swear, if I had the strength, I’d stand up and throat punch him for his smugness.

“I can see that.”

I can hear judgment, too. Hell, I can *feel* it. Or maybe I’m just being paranoid.

Either way, I’d like to curl up and die right now, if you please.

“Show’s over. Out.” Remi reads my discomfort perfectly. He disappears from my side. “Out,” he says again, the door closing just moments later.

“Thanks for that.” I force my head up, my gaze finding Remi, who looks almost as bad as I feel. “You okay?”

“I’ve been better,” he admits, forcing a grin that almost looks painful.

“Yeah, me too,” I agree. “Why didn’t you tell me my boob was hanging out?”

“What?” He draws back in confusion.

“When I ran out of the room, apparently my tit was hanging out,” I tell him, gesturing to my bikini top.

“Trust me, Pen, if I’d noticed, there’s no way I wouldn’t have said something. I wouldn’t have missed the opportunity to get a good look at *your* tits.”

Even hungover, he’s still got jokes.

“Shut up.” I shove his shoulder, using the toilet to help me to my feet. I sway the instant I’m upright. “I think I’m still a little drunk.”

“I think I’m still a lot drunk.” Remi chuckles, lowering himself to the floor before stretching out onto his back on the cool tile floor.

“I’m gonna need you to leave so I can take a shower,” I tell him, hoping that might wash away the last remnants of alcohol swimming in my veins.

“If I move from this spot right now, I’m gonna puke, too.” He lays his arm over his forehead. “Just get in the shower. I promise I won’t look.”

“I am not showering with you in here.”

“Pen, you have a bathing suit on. Just get in and then take it off once you’re behind the curtain. I promise I won’t move from this spot.”

I consider how badly I need a shower, finally deciding that it can’t wait.

“Fine. But if you so much as move an inch, I will cut off your balls and feed them to you for breakfast.”

At this, his eyes dart open.

“Jesus, Pen. Do you always have to go straight to violence?” A small smile tugs at the corners of his mouth.

“Well, considering I know how much you love your balls, figured I’d make my point clear.”

“Message received.” His lids fall closed again. “No moving,” he confirms.

Stepping over him, I grab a couple of towels from under the sink before moving to the shower. Flipping on the water, I don’t wait for it to warm before stepping inside, pulling the curtain as flush with the wall as I can.

Carefully, I slip out of my bathing suit, discarding it at the edge of the tub as I finally step under the stream of water, which is thankfully warm by the time I do.

I make quick work of washing my hair, not able to shake the thought of how just a few minutes ago, Sutton was holding it as I emptied my stomach in front of him.

Another wave of mortification washes over me.

Of course, this would happen to me.

Of course, he would be coming out of the bathroom at the exact moment I was going in.

Of course, my tit was hanging out.

Of course, I upchucked my entire stomach while he looked on, probably in utter disgust.

Of course...

Because that is just my life. One tragedy after another. And while no, Sutton witnessing my misfortune does not hold a candle to some of the things I’ve endured, it sure as hell feels pretty devastating at the moment.

All I wanted was to show him what he missed out on. Instead, I’ve shown him what a hot fucking mess I actually am.

I hate how much that bothers me.

I hate that after all this time, I still care about what he thinks of me.

I hate that after everything, just the sound of his voice sends me spiraling.

If I thought time would lessen the effect he has on me, I was dead wrong.

Because six years have not lessened a damn thing.

When he looked down at me last night over the edge of the deck, I was a teenager all over again, begging for him to notice me, to look at me, to *see* me.

Well, this morning, he got to see me all right. And I'm sure he's had his fill.

"You gonna save any hot water for the rest of us?" Remi finally asks after several long minutes.

"Sorry. It just feels too good to get out," I admit.

"Say it like that again and I'll be climbing in there with you."

"You will not."

Even though I know he never would, my heart still spikes at the thought.

"Won't I?"

"Stop messing. Why don't you make yourself useful and go get my toothbrush?"

"No can do, Penny woo." He laughs at his ridiculous attempt at rhyming. I mean, technically he rhymed, it just wasn't very good. "I think I'm gonna be here for the foreseeable future."

"Well, can you at least keep your eyes closed while I grab my towels?" I ask, reluctantly shutting off the water.

"Maybe."

I can hear the smile in his voice.

"You're such an ass sometimes, you know that?"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

I roll my eyes, shaking my head as I slowly pull back the curtain, careful to keep myself covered.

Remi is exactly where I left him, lying on the floor, his arm still draped over his face.

Grabbing the towels, I pull the curtain closed again, making quick work of wrapping my body and then my hair.

"Okay, I'm coming out," I announce, pulling back the curtain. "Wow, you really do feel like shit." I chuckle when Remi doesn't even attempt to look up at me and make some crude comment like he normally would.

“Like I’ve been run through a meat grinder is more like it.”

A shiver runs through me when the cold air hits my wet back as I step out of the shower, creeping slowly around Remi, careful to keep the towel pressed against my legs so if he opens his eyes, he doesn’t get a full shot of my vag.

“That’s kind of a gross thought,” I admit. “I’m gonna go get dressed real quick. You gonna be okay while I’m gone?”

“I’ll do my best.”

“I guess that’ll do.” I tug open the door when I reach it, stepping out into the hallway hesitantly to make sure no one is around.

Pulling the door shut to give Remi a little privacy, I’ve only just turned when Sutton’s door abruptly opens. His blue eyes land on my face first before slowly moving down my wet body, covered only by a small towel.

My grip on the towel tightens.

When his gaze meets mine a second time, there’s a flash of something behind the blue depths that I can’t quite place. Something that makes the tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand to immediate attention.

God, he looks even better today than he did last night, and that’s saying something, considering everything looks better when you’re drunk.

“Feeling better?”

I watch the way his full lips quirk into a half smile.

It’s unreal, how different he looks and yet how much he looks the same at the same time.

He’s broader now, his teenage body all man, with thick, corded muscles and shoulders so broad that his T-shirt strains against their width.

His once bare jaw is now covered with just enough scruff to be considered a beard, albeit a very short one, but one just the same. And I’d be lying if I said it didn’t make him a billion times more attractive. I’ve always loved facial hair on a man, but facial hair on Sutton, that’s taking things to a whole new level.

He stands a few inches above me, about the same height as Remi, and yet, in this moment, he seems so much taller, towering over me like a giant who’s preparing to swallow me whole. Or maybe that’s because the longer I stand here, the smaller I feel like I become.

“Much. Now if you’ll excuse me.” I slip past him, my bare feet moving hurriedly across the soft carpet toward my room.

“I don’t even get a thank you?” His voice has my hand freezing mid-air as it reaches for the door handle.

My head swings in his direction, my entire body tensing as I watch him move toward me.

“You want me to thank you for watching me puke?”

“I want you to thank me for holding your hair back.”

*Has his voice always been so deep?*

“And for being a gentleman and not staring when you made it all too easy to do so.” His gaze falls to my chest for a brief moment.

So he did notice...

“Go fuck yourself, Sutton.” Even I’m surprised by my outburst, but Sutton, he doesn’t seem surprised at all.

Instead, he smiles, like he got the exact reaction he was hoping for, brushing past me without another word.

I stew the entire time I’m getting dressed, wishing I could have come up with a clever retort to put that asshole in his place, but alas, as per usual, I let him walk away thinking he won. I mean, I guess technically he did, as he always does.

When Remi *finally* vacates the bathroom, I’m able to brush my teeth and finish making myself look semi-human, staring back at my flushed expression in the mirror, wondering how it is that after all these years, I find myself right back here in the same situation, as if I’d never left.

This is how Sutton has always been. And it’s the little comments, the dark looks, and the suggestive way in which he says things that always kept me hanging on, hoping there was something more to his behavior. Hoping that secretly he wanted me as much as I wanted him. And when he took my hand at the party that night, I was so certain that I had been right.

The way he touched my face. The way his hand slid around the back of my neck as he kissed me. He handled me with such care and yet with reckless abandon at the same time. He wasn’t gentle, but I didn’t want him to be. I wanted him exactly as he was—raw, carnal, sex incarnated. He was everything I imagined he’d be.

And as we lay in that bed afterward, Sutton’s fingers stroking my hair as my head rested on his chest, I was pretty convinced there was no way life could get better than it felt in that moment.

I don’t remember dozing off, only that when I woke, he was gone.

He left me there. In a stranger’s room. Naked.



He didn't even have the decency to wake me.

It was then that I realized what I was to him. Nothing more than a quick fuck at some random high school party.

The walk home was the worst.

I wouldn't call it a walk of shame. More like a road to realization.

Sutton Barnett was never going to be the guy I envisioned when I lay in bed at night. Everything I thought I saw, I saw because I wanted to.

He used me.

Just like people have always used me.

Like I'm nothing.

Like I *mean* nothing.

To be fair, I used him too, but it wasn't even close to the same thing.

I made a promise to myself right then and there that I would never let someone use me like that again.

I guess, in a way, I should thank Sutton for opening my eyes and forcing me to see the world for what it is and not what I pretended it to be.

That morning, I stood up to my foster mother for the very first time. And while no, it did not end well for me, I did not let that stop me. For the next two years, I fought back. And it's my fight that got me out of that situation alive—not necessarily physically, but mentally and emotionally. That, and Remi, who never let me fall to my knees without being there to lift me back to my feet.

"Hey, Pen, you about done in there?" Remi's knuckles rap against the door.

"Finishing up now," I call back, smoothing my damp hair away from my face.

I look at my reflection again for a long moment.

"Sutton Barnett is the enemy," I mouth to myself.

I shouldn't need the reminder, I know that. But the heart is a fickle thing, and telling it what to feel doesn't always equate to making it listen. A part of me will always be that naive thirteen-year-old girl watching him walk down the stairs that first time, my entire fairy tale of a future flashing in front of my eyes.

But life isn't a fairy tale. And Sutton Barnett is no Prince Charming.

I nod at my reflection as if to say, *get your shit together, Aspen. You hate him, remember?*

And I do. At least, a part of me does. I just wish I could cut out the other part and burn it to ash. Maybe then I wouldn't feel so conflicted.

"Any day now, Pen. I gotta piss," Remi whines outside the door.

"Yeah, yeah." I turn, unlocking the door before pulling it open.

Remi rushes in past me, heading straight for the toilet. I hear his pee hit the water before I've even made it into the hallway.

"Seriously, you couldn't have waited ten seconds?" I groan, pulling the door shut behind me.

When Remi exits the bathroom moments later, I'm waiting for him in the hall.

"Better?"

"Much." He grins. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a new person," I admit. "You?"

"Better than I deserve, I suppose. Funny what the miracle of a shower will do for you."

"Agreed."

"But now I'm starving. You hungry?"

"I could eat."

"Let me grab my cell out of my room and we can head down."

"Okay." I follow him into his room, taking a moment to lose myself in the nostalgia of being back in here after all this time.

It hasn't changed. Everything is exactly as it was the day we left for college. Same navy bedding. Same old movie posters on the walls. Same dresser cluttered with random action figures that Remi collected when he was a kid and for whatever reason never got rid of.

"It's weird, right?" He reads the direction of my thoughts as if I'd spoken them out loud.

"It is." I watch Remi take his phone off the charger on the bedside table.

"Forty percent," he murmurs to himself. "Better than nothing." He drops the device into the front pocket of his athletic shorts.

"Better than mine. When I put it on the charger, it was so dead I couldn't even get it to turn on. Not that I much need it at the moment, considering you won't be blowing me up every five seconds." I poke fun at him.

"Don't act like you would know what to do if I didn't." He grins, joining me in the doorway.

"You think so?" I smirk, reaching up to push away wet strands of hair that stick to his forehead. "Come on. I need food."

“At once, my queen.” He bows his head dramatically.

“You’re so weird.” I shake my head, turning back out into the hallway.

“You love my weirdness.” He catches up with me at the top of the stairs, cutting in front of me with ease.

“Keep telling yourself that,” I call to his back.

It’s crazy how much better I feel than I did an hour ago. And how much better Remi seems, too. And thank goodness for it, because when we enter the kitchen, four sets of eyes land on us from the table in the breakfast nook.

I purposely avoid looking at Sutton, but in doing so, end up looking at *her* instead. And damn if I don’t instantly regret it.

She’s gorgeous. And even though I knew she would be once I got a good look at her, I was not prepared for just how beautiful she actually is.

Long, thick hair so blond it might as well be white. Tanned skin. Full lips. A perfectly symmetrical little nose. Eyebrows so perfect there’s no way they could be real. Big boobs accented by a tiny little crop top that shows off her flat stomach, not even a skin roll to be found. Jesus, is this girl for real? She looks more like a live Barbie doll than an actual human being.

“Didn’t think I’d be seeing either of you before noon.” Randel’s voice draws my attention to him, and I’m glad for it.

“Please.” Remi snorts. “Pen and I are pros.”

“Perhaps the toilet would disagree.”

My eyes dart to Sutton, who smirks directly at me as he pops a piece of bacon into his mouth.

“Screw you, Sut.” Remi comes to my rescue, as per usual.

“Don’t you two start,” Summer scolds, gesturing to the two empty seats at the table. “Sit, have some breakfast. Lord knows I made enough.”

I nod in thanks, following Remi, who pulls out a seat for me before taking the one next to me for himself. Much to my dismay, he puts me directly across from Sutton’s girlfriend, but given that the only other option was to sit across from Sutton, I guess it beats the alternative.

“Hi,” the woman across from me speaks, her voice high-pitched, but still soft enough to fit her face. “I’m Olivia.” She looks directly at me before her gaze flutters to Remi. “You’re Sutton’s brother.”

“Unfortunately.” Remi piles some pancakes onto his plate.

I elbow him softly in the ribs.

“I mean, yes. I am. And you’re his *girlfriend*?” He says the word like it feels funny on his tongue.

“I am.” She smiles, leaning into Sutton, who I notice does not return the gesture.

“I’m Aspen,” I cut in.

“Right. Remi’s best friend since childhood. It’s nice to meet you.”

“You as well.” I force a smile to my lips.

It’s unfair for me to hate someone simply because they’re beautiful and have questionable dating choices. I refuse to let my issues with Sutton spill onto the innocent.

“How long have you two been dating?” I take the serving fork from Remi, piling a couple of pancakes onto my own plate. I purposely avoid the eggs, not sure how well they’d sit on my stomach, which still feels a bit out of sorts, and instead, grab a piece of bacon.

“A few months.”

“A few months?” Remi speaks around a mouthful of food. “My brother doesn’t keep goldfish around that long. Must have a magic—” I elbow him harder this time and instead of saying what I *know* he was about to say, he groans and says, “personality,” instead.

“Ignore him,” I tell her. “He still operates on the brain of a sixteen-year-old.”

I jump when Sutton barks out a laugh, having not expected such an outburst from him.

“Man, fuck you.” Remi points his fork at Sutton.

“Language!” Summer interjects.

“Sorry, Mom,” Remi murmurs.

“So, Olivia. How did you and Sutton meet?” I ask, mainly because I’m curious, but also because I get the sneaking suspicion that this conversation is making Sutton a bit uncomfortable. ’Bout time that particular shoe was on the other foot.

“Actually, he’s one of the engineers at the company I work for. I’m the front desk receptionist, so we would see each other every day. And then in March, he asked me out, and well, here I am.”

Okay, so only three or four months. When she said *a few* I was thinking a bit longer than that.

It’s not hard to tell she likes Sutton. Of course, she does. He’s the kind of man you can’t help but to be drawn to, even when it’s completely irrational. Even when every fiber of your being is telling you to run, you can’t help but move closer.

I won't lie and say I'm not jealous of Olivia.

I am.

Anyone in my shoes probably would be.

She has everything I want.

But I refuse to dislike her for it.

"And we're happy to have you here," Summer interjects, her gaze meeting mine for the briefest moments, as if to say, *keep my other son in line, please*.

"So, what's on the agenda for today?" Remi asks, bored of the conversation.

"You and your brother need to go to Martin's so you can be fitted for your tux."

"Tuxedos, Mom, really?" Remi groans like a toddler.

"You will not ruin this for me by complaining." She gives him a pointed look. "Your father will accompany you. Meanwhile, the girls and I are going to have mani-pedis and drink too many mimosas."

I swear, my face turns green at the thought.

"You all right there, Aspen?" Sutton leans back in his chair, a smug look on his stupid, handsome face.

"Fine." I keep my gaze on Summer. "I think that sounds amazing."

"Olivia?" She turns to the woman across from me.

"I'm in."

"Great." Summer clasps her hands together. "Appointments are at noon. Finish up here and we'll head out about eleven thirty. As for you two"—she looks at Sutton and then at Remi—"be ready to go by one. Dad will drive you."

"Can't wait," Remi says sarcastically.

"Be nice," I mutter low enough that only he can hear.

He turns, his face just inches from mine.

"I am being nice," he mouths.

"No, you're not."

When he smiles, I can't help but smile, too.

"You too are so cute. Why is it you've never dated?"

Both of our gazes turn toward Olivia.

"Isn't it obvious?" Remi asks. "She's way too fucking good for me."

"Language!" Summer slaps the table.

“Sorry, Mom.” He apologizes again without looking at her. “I mean, look at her.” His gaze swings back to me.

“Stop it.” I shove his shoulder, feeling blood rush to my cheeks.

I hate when he embarrasses me like this. And no, it’s not the first time he’s made a spectacle out of answering the age-old question—*why aren’t you two a couple?*

“He’s full of crap. Don’t listen to him,” I tell her, avoiding looking at Sutton, whose gaze I feel hot on the side of my face. “Why do you always have to do that?” I turn back to Remi.

“Because I love watching you blush, Pen.” He taps the tip of my nose with his finger. “It’s my favorite look on you.”

“You’re such an ass.” I roll my eyes. “Sorry.” I peek over at Summer, who has the word *language* already touching her lips.

“And yet, you still love me.” Remi taps my nose a second time.

“And that’s my cue.” Sutton pushes to a stand, the legs of his chair scraping the floor.

“He’s just jealous,” Remi loudly whispers across the table to Olivia.

“So jealous, bro.” Sutton drops his plate into the sink with a loud clang.

“Olivia, do me a favor, the next time you’re alone with my brother, ask him to bend over so you can pull the stick out of his ass.”

“That’s enough.” It’s Randel who steps in this time. “You two will get along this week, even if it kills you.” His gaze bounces between his two sons.

“I’m cool, Dad.” Remi holds his hands up.

“Yeah, me too,” Sutton grumbles, pushing away from the counter, and without another word, disappearing from the room.

“You’ll have to forgive my children, Olivia.” Summer stands, taking her plate with her. “Sometimes they forget how to behave when they’re together.”

“I’ve got three sisters.” She smiles. “I know how siblings can be all too well.”

“Three sisters. You mean, there are four of you?” Remi gapes at her.

“Yeah, four girls, one bathroom. Safe to say my house was in a constant state of war.”

“Man, I can barely tolerate one sibling. But three.” Remi leans back in his chair, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “No, thank you.”

“Summer, do you need some help cleaning up?” I stand, abandoning any attempt to finish the pancake still on my plate.

“That would be nice, Aspen, thank you.”

I nod, quickly joining Summer in the kitchen.

By the end of breakfast, Remi and Olivia are chatting it up like old friends who have known each other for years. I won't lie and say it doesn't bother me a little. Of course, it does. First she shows up here with Sutton. Now she's getting all chummy with *my* best friend.

And while I know no one could ever replace what Remi and I have, sometimes I wish I had more friends, so as to not put all my eggs in one basket, so to speak. I mean, yes, I do have work friends, but none of them are actual friends. We don't hang out outside of work, other than office happy hours. We don't meet up for movies or text each other. He's quite literally all I have. Though, it's been that way half of my life, so you'd think I'd be used to it by now.

“You okay?” Remi joins me in the kitchen after Olivia goes in search of Sutton. He slides up next to me, where I've just finished wiping down the stove top.

“Yeah, fine. Why?”

“You just seem quiet, is all.”

“Just not feeling all that well. Pancakes didn't quite sit right.”

“You know, you don't have to go with my mom today. She'd understand.”

“Of course I'm going to go. This week is about her and your dad. I'm not going to let my poor decision to drink too much ruin her plans.”

“You're too good for these people.”

“You mean, your family?” I bark out a laugh.

“And me.” He leans his shoulder against mine.

“I know.” I smile up at him.

And just like that, all is right with the world again...

# Chapter Four

Sutton



“Damn, I look good, if I do say so myself.” Remi steps up next to me in the mirror, fidgeting with the sleeves of his jacket.

“Glad to see some things never change,” I mutter under my breath, fully intending for him to hear me, which he does.

“Unlike you.” He gives me a pointed look. One that says *you should know exactly what I’m talking about*. “Who knew you’d actually find a decent girl to commit to.”

“Who said I was committed to her?” I cock a brow, meeting his gaze in the reflection of the mirror.

“You brought her home for our parents’ vow renewal.”

“And?”

“And you’ve never brought anyone home before.”

“So?”

“So that’s a big deal.”

“It’s a big deal that I didn’t want to spend all week answering questions about why I haven’t settled down?”

“That’s not the only reason you brought Olivia home, dude.”

“Isn’t it?”

“She actually seems pretty awesome.”

“And you decided that in the five minutes you’ve known her?” I pivot on my heel to face him.

My kid brother has never lacked confidence or arrogance. He backs down from no one, especially me. Squaring his shoulders, he looks me straight in the eye.

“At least I took the time to talk to her.”

“You want a gold star or something?” I pat him condescendingly on the shoulder. “Good job, buddy.”

“Man, fuck you. I was wrong. You haven’t changed.”



“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.” He crosses his arms in front of himself, damn near shredding the seams of his jacket with his broad shoulders.

“And if you like Olivia so much, take her for a spin. I know how much you’ve always wanted to try my leftovers.” It’s an asshole thing to say—despicable really—but when it comes to pissing off Remi, there’s no line I won’t cross.

I don’t know why it’s always been this way between us. Why my greatest pleasure in life has always been getting under his skin. It started when we were really young and just grew from there.

“I’m sure Olivia would love to hear you say that about her.”

“I’m sure I don’t care.”

“Well, whether you care about her or not, at least I can say I made an effort. Unlike you.”

“If you’re referring to Aspen, I’m pretty sure I was the one in the bathroom holding her hair back this morning. I sure as fuck didn’t do that for my own benefit.”

“Yes, you did. You did it because you thought it would make me jealous.”

“Jealous? She was puking her fucking guts out. The last thing I was thinking about was *you*. And news flash, bro, she isn’t your girl, anyway.”

“She’s my girl in all the ways that count.”

“So you’re fucking her then?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Remi draws back, dropping his arms. I don’t miss the way his fists clench at his sides.

“So you’re not fucking her?” Now I’m just pushing his buttons to push his buttons.

“You’re an asshole.”

“You’re just now figuring that out?”

“No, I’ve known it my whole life, just thought maybe you’d grow out of it.”

“Just like I thought you’d have gotten your head out of your ass by now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Aspen.”

“What about her?”

“You still haven’t made a move.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand a relationship like the one Aspen and I have. You’ve never let anyone close enough to experience even a fraction of what we have. Our friendship means more to me than anything.”

*Friendship...* His words, not mine. And while I couldn’t give two fucks about the girl, a part of me still salivates at hearing him say it. Why, I have no idea.

“You know, you pretend like you’re so much better than me. You always have. And yet you do the same shit I do. You fuck who you want, when you want, and then you drag Aspen to everything so no one hounds you about shit because they’re all waiting for the day when you two finally get your heads out of your asses and get together. It’s a brilliant plan, really.”

“It’s not a plan. I genuinely want her around. I want her here for all the big stuff. And so do Mom and Dad. She’s a part of this family.”

“But she isn’t. She’s a stray you brought in off the streets that we haven’t been able to get rid of since. You know what they say, once you feed a stray, they never go away.”

“I’d advise you to shut the fuck up while you still can. You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Is that a threat, little brother?” I cock my head to the side, not able to keep a smirk from tugging at my lips.

“I’m more a man of action. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll keep Aspen’s name out of your mouth.”

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll make your move before someone else steals her right out from underneath you.” I do him a solid by saying.

“Someone like you?” He barks out a laugh.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, brother, but she’s not a little street rat anymore.”

“You stay the fuck away from her.” He’s in my face now.

“Relax.” I hold my hands up in front of myself. “I have no desire to go there.” *Again*, I resist the urge to say.

While Remi and I may be at each other’s throats ninety-eight percent of the time, he’s still my brother. And while I enjoy riling him up and pushing his buttons, I have no desire to actually hurt him. If I did, I would have told him about that night at the party the morning after it happened.

“I’m just saying, somebody is going to, so if you’re going to make your move, you better do it soon.”

“There are no moves to be made. Aspen is my best friend and if she finds someone who makes her happy, then I’ll be happy for her. It’s as simple as that.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” I clasp my hand over his shoulder as I step past him. “Keep telling yourself that.”



It’s late afternoon when we finally make it back to my parents’ house. I’m happy to report that Remi and I were able to get through a few hours together without a single punch being thrown. Might be a new record.

I’m kidding.

Well, sort of.

We have been known to punch out our differences from time to time.

I kick my shoes off at the door and follow my father and brother inside.

Laughter filters down the hallway from the living room and Olivia is among the noise. I’d recognize her high-pitched bellow anywhere.

I instantly tense.

I’ve seen too many movies and sitcoms to know that when you hear the woman you’re fucking and your mother laughing together, it probably has to do with some embarrassing shit about you.

I round the corner last, spotting Olivia first. She’s on the floor next to my mom, photo albums spread across the coffee table in front of them. My gaze darts to Aspen next, who’s sitting on the love seat opposite them, her feet curled in beneath her.

She senses our entrance, the smile slipping from her lips when her eyes meet mine for the briefest of moments before going to my brother next to me. Her smile instantly returns, this time lighting up her entire face.

“Hey.” She greets only him.

“Hey.” He’s next to her in an instant, flopping down beside her. “What the hell is going on here?”

“Your mom is showing me all of Sutton’s and your baby pictures.” Olivia is the one to answer. “You guys were so cute,” she says to me next.

“Really, Mom?” I cross my arms in front of my chest.

“What? It’s the first time you’ve ever brought a girl home. Isn’t it my duty to show her all the pictures from your childhood?”

“Yeah, if you’re trying to embarrass us.”

“Us?” Remi snorts. “I think you mean you. I was the cutest fucking kid ever.”

“Language.” My mom sighs in exasperation.

“Sorry,” he mutters, a smile playing on his mouth. “But it’s true. Look at that little guy.” He leans down, snagging a picture off the table. He turns it out for everyone to see. “Look at how cute he is.”

“So cute,” Olivia agrees.

“The cutest.” Aspen takes the picture, studying it for a long moment before handing it back to my brother.

“Sutton, on the other hand.” Remi drops his photo on the table and picks up presumably one of mine. “Not so much. I sure hope for your sake, Olivia, that he had a growth spurt.”

Olivia covers her mouth to hold in a laugh.

I arch a brow at my brother, who smiles from ear to ear.

When he turns the picture so I can see it, I realize what he’s referring to. My cock. Considering it’s a picture of me naked in the bathtub. Classic naked baby bathtub pic. Damn, my mother is so cliché.

“If we wanna play the comparison game, perhaps we should find one of you. I’m sure Mom has some nude pictures of you somewhere.” I challenge, not the least bit offended by his bullshit. I know what I have and I am *not* ashamed of it.

“Boys.” My dad shakes his head next to me. “Let’s not.”

“How did the fittings go?” my mom asks in an effort to change the subject, no doubt.

“We’re all set. We can pick them up the day after tomorrow,” my father informs her.

“Perfect.” My mother climbs to her feet.

“How was the spa?” he asks.

“Wonderful.” She presses up on her tiptoes, laying a kiss to his cheek.

“Here we go again,” Remi grumbles, earning himself an audible smack from Aspen. “Ouch, Pen. I think you hit a kidney.”

“That’s not where your kidneys are.” She rolls her eyes.

“You sure?” He rubs his stomach. “Because I’m pretty sure I just felt one pop.”

“Sometimes I don’t know about you.” She shakes her head, laughter vibrating her shoulders as she stands.

Fuck me. She really is beautiful. And not in the obvious way Olivia is. But in a softer, more understated way. I don’t know how I never noticed before. Or maybe I did and I chose to ignore it. Maybe that’s why when I saw her at that party, the way her hips and ass looked in that little black dress, I couldn’t stop myself.

I blamed the alcohol. I blamed it then, I blame it now. But what if, in my drunken state, I was just letting myself do what I wanted to do all along?

Don’t get me wrong, Aspen was a scrawny little thing when Remi first started bringing her around. But slowly, she grew into her looks. I noticed. Even when I pretended not to. Even when I convinced myself I didn’t.

“Wait, where are you going?” Remi pushes to a stand. I swear when she moves, he moves.

“Upstairs.”

“Why?”

“Jesus, Remi, let the girl do what she wants.” I don’t even realize I’ve spoken aloud until both sets of eyes are on me.

“Why don’t you mind your business?” Remi pivots toward me.

“Stop it.” Aspen turns, placing a hand on his chest. She leans in, whispering something I can’t hear.

Remi nods, glaring at me over Aspen’s head for a brief moment before the two of them turn and leave the room together.

I swear to fuck, my brother is so whipped it’s laughable. And what’s worse, he’s not even fucking the girl.

I’ll never understand those two.

I didn’t when they were teenagers and I sure as fuck don’t now.

“Don’t forget, Jack and Clara will be here in a couple of hours,” my mom calls after them, though who knows if they actually hear her.

“I didn’t know Jack and Clara were coming in this early.” I turn toward my mom.

I can’t remember the last time I saw my aunt and uncle. It feels like it’s been years. They live a few hours north and usually only visit for special occasions. Growing up, it was always us going to their house. I actually didn’t mind it much because it meant we always got gifts. Since they never had children of their own, they’d spoil us anytime they got the chance.

“They checked into their hotel this afternoon,” she confirms. “We’re just going to order pizza and have some wine. Nothing fancy or anything.”

“Okay.” I look at Olivia, who is still sitting on the floor, silently flipping through pictures. “You wanna go for a swim?” I ask, knowing we got fuck all else to do and hoping to entice her away from sifting through all my embarrassing childhood photos.

“Sure.” She starts to clean up the pictures, but my mom stops her.

“Leave those, dear. I’ll take care of them.”

“Are you sure?” Olivia stands.

“Yes, of course. You two go.”

“Okay.”

We head upstairs to change into our swimsuits, which takes us all of ten minutes, but by the time we make it outside, Remi and Aspen are already in the pool. Aspen laid out on an inflatable while Remi rests his arms on the side, floating alongside her.

“Fuck,” I grumble, stopping dead in my tracks. “On second thought.” I move to turn, but Olivia catches me by the arm.

“What are you doing?”

“Going inside,” I say like it should be so obvious.

“Why?”

“In case you haven’t noticed, my brother and I don’t exactly get along.”

“Maybe if you weren’t so mean to him, that wouldn’t be the case.”

“Mean to him?” I openly gape at her.

“You have been nothing but an asshole to him since the moment we arrived.”

I can’t help but be a little taken aback by her boldness. She’s usually much more *agreeable*.

“What, are you on my brother’s dick now?”

“You know what, I’m going down there, with or without you.”

Before I can say anything else, she’s crossing the deck.

“Mind if I join?” she calls down to Remi and Aspen.

“The more, the merrier,” my brother calls back, his gaze darting to where I’m still standing just outside the back door. “You coming in too or what?”

“Fuck,” I mutter to myself.

I don’t know why I give a shit if they’re here. It’s not like I hate my brother or anything. In fact, my resistance has very little to do with him and a hell of a lot more to do with *her*.

My eyes find Aspen, who's looking anywhere but at me. Today she's wearing black. Not as sexy as the red one, but on her, fuck me. I'm pretty sure she'd look good wearing a trash bag. And my fucking cock agrees.

*Down, boy.*

Off-limits, I remind myself, blowing out a slow breath as I reluctantly make my way across the deck and down the stairs that lead to the pool. I'm not sure that knowledge does much to keep me at bay, though, considering it makes her even more enticing. Even still, I try to remind myself of this fact just the same.

# Chapter Five

Aspen



## Nine years earlier

*“I’ll be right back,” I tell Remi as I slowly back out of his room, pulling the door shut behind me before crossing the hall to the guest bedroom.*

*Summer was kind enough to let me sleep over this weekend when she found out my foster parents were going out of town and leaving me home alone with my foster brother, Harris. He’s Rick and Jean’s biological son and as awful as his parents.*

*No, he’s worse.*

*Summer has no idea how grateful I am to her for this. How grateful I am for all the times she’s let me stay over the last year. I have no idea how I’ll ever be able to thank her properly.*

*Remi’s house is like a palace compared to the one I live in. And that’s in more ways than one.*

*I breathe in deeply as I enter the bedroom. It always smells like vanilla. Always.*

*Grabbing my duffel off the floor, I unzip the bag and dig around for a tampon, which I quickly find.*

*Stuffing it into the front pocket of my joggers, when I turn, my stomach drops to my feet when I see Sutton standing just outside my room, watching me curiously.*

*“Can I... uh, help you?” I stutter over my words.*

*God, why does he have to make me so nervous?*

*“What are you doing in here?”*

*“I was just, um, getting... getting something out of my bag.” I move toward him, grateful that he steps back to allow me enough room to close the door as I join him in the hallway.*

*“You’re a jumpy little thing, aren’t you?” He grins, the sight making my heart thunder like a stampede inside my chest.*



*“No.” I square my shoulders, hating that that’s how he sees me. I can’t help it that he makes me feel like I’m going to jump out of my skin at any moment.*

*It’s been this way since the first time I met him. I can’t explain it or even begin to understand it, but the way he makes me feel—it’s undeniable.*

*“How long are you staying this time?” He gestures to the now closed door behind me.*

*“Just for the weekend. My f—parents are out of town.” I catch myself before I say the word foster.*

*I don’t know why I don’t want him to know. His brother knows. His parents know. And yet, the thought of telling him, of having him see me as some poor foster kid—I couldn’t bear it.*

*Though even those who do know, don’t know how bad it actually is. Even Remi, who knows more than anyone, doesn’t know the full story. Mainly because I know if he did, he’d do something stupid and I’d bear the consequences of his actions alone. It’s not worth it. I just want to keep my head down and get through the next three years as seamlessly as possible. Then, I won’t ever have to see those people again. It’s what keeps me hanging on when everything seems bleak.*

*In truth, very few people actually know about my living situation at all. Harris doesn’t go to the same school as me and I have no other siblings. And it’s not like my foster parents go to conferences or school functions, so really, how would anyone know unless I told them?*

*“They out of town a lot?”*

*This is one of those rare occasions where Sutton actually acknowledges my existence. He doesn’t know it, but I cherish these short snippets of time above all others.*

*“Sometimes.”*

*“I was just asking because you’re here kind of a lot.”*

*“Does that bother you?” I tuck my hair behind my ear, a nervous tic of mine.*

*“I guess not.” He shrugs indifferently. “Keeps my brother out of my hair.” My breath catches in my throat when he reaches forward, plucking something off my shoulder. “Fuzzy,” he says, swiping it away.*

*“Thanks.” My voice catches funny in my throat.*

*“I’m going out for a swim in a bit. You should come.”*

*I bite the inside of my cheek to contain my squeal of delight. The Sutton Barnett just invited me to go swimming with him. I could die right here on the spot.*

*“Yeah. Okay.” I try not to seem too eager. Not the best timing with my period and all, but I guess that’s what tampons are for.*

*“Got a few friends coming. You can bring my tool of a brother. Not like he lets you out of his sight anyway.”*

*My excitement quickly evaporates.*

*“Yeah.” I try to hide the disappointment from my expression, but a small slice of excitement still stirs in my belly. Because even if he just invited me to be polite, he still invited me.*

*As if on cue, Remi’s door opens and he appears in the doorway.*

*“I was wondering what was taking you so long.” He smiles at me, but it quickly turns to a grimace when he looks at his brother.*

*The two share a rivalry I’m not sure I’ll ever understand. Then again, I’ve never had a real sibling, so it’s not like I understand what it might be like.*

*“I was just telling Coop here that you two should join me and some of my friends at the pool later.”*

*I love when he does that, calls me Coop, a shortened version of my last name. He’s the only person who’s ever called me that. I like that it’s his special name for me, though I doubt he’s actually given any thought to it at all.*

*“Why?” Remi seems confused. It’s not often that Sutton includes him.*

*“Why not?”*

*“You never let me hang out with you and your friends.”*

*“Just thought it might be nice to extend the invite. Come if you want. Don’t come.” Sutton shrugs. “Makes no difference to me.” Without another word, he turns, disappearing into his bedroom at the far end of the hall moments later.*

*“What the hell was that about?” Remi asks, brow slightly cocked.*

*“No idea.” I laugh to hide my nervousness. “I’m gonna run to the bathroom. Be right there,” I tell him.*

*“I’ll be here,” he calls to my back seconds before I dip inside the bathroom and close the door.*



“We should play chicken!” Olivia announces as she lowers herself into the water. I keep my eyes on her, which feels damn near impossible to do when Sutton is standing on the edge of the pool with no shirt, his muscles begging to be stared at.

“Aspen doesn’t like chicken.” Sutton snorts.

Still, I don’t look at him.

“I wonder why.” Remi immediately comes to my defense. “Wouldn’t have anything to do with how your buddy ripped her top off the last time she played with you.”

My stomach twists at the reminder that this morning in the bathroom wasn’t the first time Sutton Barnett got to see my goodies. Neither was the night we slept together. Because my stupid ass thought it was a good idea to pack the tiniest bathing suit I had, making it my only option to wear to a pool party with Sutton’s friends. I ended up flashing about six teenage boys that day. Not my finest moment, that’s for sure.

“That was an accident and you know it.”

My gaze finally slides to Sutton as he takes a seat on the edge of the pool, dipping his legs into the water.

“What happened?” Olivia swims up next to Remi.

“I’d rather not relive it, if you guys don’t mind.” I groan, slipping off the float because it makes me feel too visible.

Resting my arms on the edge, I look across the raft at Remi.

“Trent was trying to balance her on his shoulders when his finger caught in her bikini top,” Sutton tells her anyway. “She ended up flashing all the guys there.”

“Not all the guys.” Remi visibly pouts, earning him a small splash to the face. “Hey!” He bellows in laughter.

“Asshole,” I mouth to him.

“Well, you’re not wearing a bikini top this time.” Olivia gestures to my sports bra type top. “What do you say? Redemption.”

“I don’t know.” I shake my head.

“Oh, come on, Pen. It’ll be fun,” Remi chimes in.

“Fine. But if anyone so much as touches my bathing suit top, I’m out,” I warn playfully.

“Sut, you in?” Remi turns toward his brother and I reluctantly follow his gaze, wishing like hell I hadn’t when my eyes land on his body, on every ripple of muscle made available to my sight.

The hours that man must spend in the gym to look like that. I can’t even imagine.

Remi is pretty built too but not quite as defined as his brother, and I know for a fact he’s in the gym an hour a day normally. I’ve never had that kind of dedication, or motivation for that matter. I get enough exercise at work, running around the office like a chicken with my head cut off.

“Why not.” He grins, hoisting himself off the ledge and into the water in one swift motion.

I both curse and thank the heavens in the same breath.

“I call Remi!” Olivia announces.

I freeze mid-motion, as does everyone else.

There’s a long moment where I’m pretty sure no one takes a single breath, and then suddenly, it’s like nothing happened.

Remi grabs the float and tosses it out of the pool before turning to me with a wide smile.

“You’re going down,” he warns.

“I’m so scared.” I try to act like I’m not at all affected by what’s about to happen, but in truth, I feel seconds away from puking in front of Sutton for a second time today.

I feel him swim up behind me, the heat of his presence damn near suffocating.

“You ready for this?” He’s so close now that I can feel his breath on the back of my neck and yet he’s careful not to touch me.

“We need to discuss strategy,” Olivia says, looking up to see the two of them slinking off to the other side of the pool.

“Is it just me, or does it seem like she’s trying to get my attention?” Sutton asks.

“What?” I spin around, the sight of him wet and half naked almost more than my brain can take. I can feel it sputtering, misfiring in every direction.

No matter how much I convince myself I hate Sutton Barnett, the effect he has on me seems to have only grown stronger with time and distance, not weaker like I had hoped.

“Look at them.” He gestures over the top of my head.

I look back over my shoulder, watching the interaction between the two. I won't lie, they seem kinda chummy. Especially when Olivia slides her hand across Remi's shoulders and leans in closer like she can't hear him when I can hear him all the way across the pool.

“I guess you're not wrong,” I admit as I turn back toward him. “Kind of weird, though, right?”

“Not really.” He grunts.

“Not really? You mean to tell me you don't care that your girlfriend is getting handsy with your brother?”

“One.” He looks me dead in the eye. “She's not my girlfriend. And two, I don't give a fuck what she does. I only invited her to come with me to keep the vultures off my back.”

“Does she know that?” I ask, almost feeling sorry for the girl.

“I've made it pretty clear.”

“You sure? Because if I had to guess, that's *why* she's hanging all over your brother.”

“What do you mean?”

“She's testing you. Hoping to get a reaction out of you.”

“That's stupid.”

“It isn't,” I argue. “But if you understood anything about women, you'd already know that.”

“Oh, I know plenty about women.” He grins.

I've never wanted to slap someone so badly as I do Sutton in this moment.

“Sticking your dick in everything that moves does not constitute as knowing them. Perhaps if you ever took the time to get to know your conquests, you'd know that.”

“Look at you, acting like *you* know *me*.”

“I know plenty about you.” I turn his own words against him.

“Do you?” He cocks his head to the side, studying me like he's trying to figure something out. I feel uneasy being scrutinized so openly by him.

“I know enough,” I confirm.

“Perhaps we should stick to discussing strategy.”

“Is there a real strategy to chicken?” I arch a brow, trying to keep my demeanor detached and distant so as not to give him the wrong impression.

Even if the wrong impression I'm trying not to give is the actual impression that would appear naturally if I wasn't trying so damn hard to keep it at bay.

"There's a strategy to everything." His gaze darkens. "Take you for example." He leans in close, his mouth inches from my ear. It takes everything I have not to move, not to lean into his touch. "You wore that bathing suit because you knew I'd look but wanted to seem like you didn't. But at the same time, you wanted me to *see* you, which is why you didn't cover your body in a one-piece. You see, strategy."

It's terrifying how spot-on he is.

In fact, I went back and forth between this bathing suit and my only other clean one—a one-piece—for longer than I should have. On one hand, I wanted to be modest and not seem like I wasn't trying too hard. On the other, I wanted him to notice me. I *always* have.

"Or maybe I didn't bring a one-piece." I pull back, putting some much-needed distance between us. "And you're only seeing what you want to see. So tell me, Sutton, did you want me to *want* you to notice me?" I turn the tables on him.

I may have been an inexperienced, scared little girl before, but I am anything but that now. Even if my insides are twisted into knots. I'm damn sure not going to let him know it.

"What if I did?"

I don't have time to process his words as Remi's voice breaks the thick tension like a bowling ball crashing through a glass table.

I quickly turn to find Olivia already on his shoulders.

"You two ready or what?" Olivia smiles down at us.

"We're ready," Sutton tells them.

I jump when his hands touch my waist.

"What are you doing?" I hiss.

"Putting you on my shoulders." He chuckles, his breath tickling my ear. "She's weakest on the left side. Push her in that direction," he instructs me.

Before I can react, he lifts me effortlessly into the air, settling me onto his shoulders.

"You ready for this, Coop?" My heart skips inside my chest, missing a couple of beats in the process. And just like that, I'm sixteen all over again, melting at the use of *his* name for me.

"Ready," I say, though ready is the last thing I feel.

It's hard to focus on Olivia in front of me when Sutton's hands settle on the tops of my thighs, anchoring me to his shoulders.

She makes a grab at me, Remi cheering her on as she tries to push me down. I force my attention to the task at hand, focusing on her left side like Sutton instructed. With both of her hands in mine, I pull as hard as I can to the left. It's only seconds before she tips to the side, hitting the water with a splash moments later, despite Remi's effort to keep her upright.

"Yes!" I hold my arms up in victory, sticking my tongue out at Remi, who glares up at me, humor lining his face.

Olivia resurfaces with a laugh. "Rematch." She moves back in front of Remi, who lifts her back onto his shoulders.

This goes on for the next several minutes. I push Olivia off, and she gets back up, demanding another go.

I can't pretend like I'm not having fun. Even with the uneasy pit swirling inside my stomach, my laughter is genuine.

"I think we should swap," Remi says after Sutton and I have won for the tenth straight time.

"Of course you do because my partner is better than yours." Sutton barks out a laugh, his shoulders vibrating beneath me.

"Hey! I'm right here." Olivia pouts, crossing her arms in front of herself.

I'll give the woman this. She may not be very good at chicken, but she damn sure looks good doing it. She's like a freaking swimsuit model, soaking wet in her little yellow two-piece. It's impossible not to feel a little insecure around her.

While I'm usually very comfortable in my own skin, something about being around Sutton makes me feel much more unsure of myself than I normally would, especially when you throw someone as gorgeous as Olivia into the mix.

I absolutely *hate* the feeling.

"I think it's Remi," I offer, trying to make her feel better.

"Pen!" Remi looks up at me. "What the fuck? You're supposed to be on my side."

"I'm always on your side. But I'm also going to call a spade, a spade."

"Fine, you're so sure it's my fault, let's switch."

"Let's do it." I tap Sutton's hand that's still clenching my thigh, gesturing for him to put me down.

Before I've even processed his movement, Sutton's grip on me disappears at the same time he tips. I fall backward off his shoulders, hitting the water with a smack.

I'm only under the water for a brief moment before resurfacing on a sputter, quickly wiping the water out of my eyes.

"What the hell was that?" I send water flying at him.

"What? You indicated you wanted down." He chuckles.

"As in lower me down, not drop me on my back." I splash him again.

"Next time, be more specific."

"No worries there because there won't be a next time." I step past him.

"Good luck with that one," I tell Olivia, moving to stand in front of Remi.

"Don't purposely lose to prove yourself right that I'm the problem." He gives me a pointed look, humor dancing behind his eyes.

"I would never." I feign insult.

"Like hell you wouldn't." Remi laughs, gesturing for me to turn. Seconds later, I'm on his shoulders, watching Sutton hoist Olivia onto his.

She lunges toward me before I'm completely set, but I recover quickly and do exactly what I did while on Sutton's shoulders. Unlike he did with me, he doesn't hold on to her legs, so when I shove her to the left, she falls off his shoulders with a smack.

"I told you it wasn't me!" Remi erupts in victory.

I swear, sometimes this man reminds me more of a ten-year-old boy than a twenty-four-year-old man. Just one of the many things I love about him.

I laugh at his jovialness, my gaze going to Sutton, whose eyes I can feel on my face. Something about the way he's looking at me has the sound dying on my lips.

The corner of his mouth twitches, like he wants to smile but stops himself from doing so.

I cock my head to the side in question.

"Let's go again." Olivia steps in front of Sutton, breaking the moment.

When he hoists her onto his shoulders this time, he makes a show of running his hands up her legs, starting at her knees until he reaches her thighs, his fingers venturing much farther up than they did on me.

When I glance at his face, I find him watching me, gauging my reaction.

I try to scrub my expression, but it's already too late. Whatever he was looking for on my face, he found it. The smile that tips his lips next is all the proof I need of that much.



“I’m gonna get you this time,” Olivia warns as they move toward us.

I do as I’ve done every time before and push her to the left, only this time, she barely budes as she pushes back. I glance down at Sutton’s hold on her, realizing what he was trying to tell me. *He’s* the difference. He can choose whether to win or lose. *He* is the one in control.

The way he anchors Olivia makes it impossible to move her. As long as he stands strong, she’s not going anywhere. That much I realize pretty quickly. Try as I might, I find myself on the losing end. It’s not long before I tip from Remi’s shoulders, taking him down with me.

“Yes!” Olivia celebrates as Remi and I push to the surface. Only she doesn’t get to gloat for long because just like he did with me, Sutton tips her backward and drops her abruptly into the water.

When she resurfaces, she’s still smiling. Not even Sutton being his typical asshole self is going to take this one away from her.

“You were bound to lose eventually, Pen,” Remi tells me, nudging my shoulder.

“I think I can live with the defeat.” I snort out a laugh.

“Wanna go again?” Olivia asks.

“Hey, kids.” Summer’s voice washes over us, drawing our attention to where she’s standing on the deck above. “Jack and Clara will be here within the hour. Might be time to get yourselves showered and dressed.”

“Okay, Mom.” It’s Remi who answers, waiting until she disappears back inside the house before turning back to me. “We should head up.”

“Yeah,” I agree, purposely not looking at Sutton as I follow Remi to the ladder. He climbs out and then leans down, helping me out of the pool.

“You guys coming?” He turns toward his brother and Olivia, who haven’t moved.

“I think we’ll hang here until the shower is free.” He makes a show of tugging Olivia into his chest.

My stomach feels like it’s filled with tacks, pricking my insides when he kisses the corner of her mouth. The feeling spreads through my limbs when Olivia giggles, snuggling closer.

“On that note.” Remi leans down and grabs a towel, dropping it around my shoulders.

“Thank you.” I turn away from the show Sutton’s trying to put on. If he’s trying to get a rise out of me, he’s not going to get one.

Remi wraps his own towel around himself and heads toward the house. I follow closely behind him, refusing to glance back at Sutton and Olivia, no matter how badly I might want to.

Remi lets me take the first shower, which I make quick work of, not wanting to use all the hot water. I tap on his bedroom door to let him know the shower is free before slipping into the guest bedroom.

I close the door behind me, locking it before turning. As soon as I do, I catch sight of someone in my peripheral and instantly yelp, damn near dropping my hold on my towel as I jump in surprise.

I reaffirm my grip when I realize it's not just someone in my room, but Sutton Barnett himself. My stomach instantly bottoms out, like the floor has opened up and suddenly I'm free-falling into the abyss.

"Sutton. What the hell?" I whisper-hiss, trying to calm my heart, which feels like it's seconds away from beating a hole straight through my chest.

"What?" He grins.

I purposely don't look at his bare torso as he moves toward me.

"What are you doing in my room?"

"Hey, Pen? You okay?" Remi raps lightly on my bedroom door, having obviously heard me yelp.

"Yeah. I, uh... stubbed my toe," I lie, narrowing my gaze at Sutton when a smile tugs at the corner of his mouth.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just wasn't watching where I was going."

"You?" He snorts from the other side of the door.

"Ha. Ha," I deadpan, my eyes never leaving Sutton.

"I'm gonna hop in the shower."

"Okay," I call back, waiting for a long moment to make sure he's gone before speaking again. "What are you doing in my room?" I repeat.

"Last time I checked, this is the guest room, not your room."

"It's the room I'm staying in, therefore it's mine for the next few days. Now, tell me why you're in it?" I grit out, careful to keep my voice low.

"I make you nervous." He observes, taking a step toward me.

I take a step back but immediately realize I have nowhere to go, the door directly behind me.

"I don't know what you think you're doing, but you need to leave." My voice shakes slightly, but I keep my posture straight, squaring my shoulders

when he takes another step, and then another, until there are only a few short inches between us.

“But you don’t actually want me to leave, do you?”

“Sutton.” I tense when he steps into me, forcing my back flush against the door.

“Because if you did, you wouldn’t be blocking my way out.”

*What?*

“My mom keeps her extra towels in here. I noticed this morning there were only a couple of towels left in the bathroom, so I figured I’d grab some while you were in the shower.”

I swear, every ounce of color drains from my face when he lifts his arm, drawing my attention to the bath towels draped across his forearm.

“You could have said something when I opened the door.” I can feel my cheeks heat.

“Now”—he leans in so close that his breath slides across my face as he speaks—“where’s the fun in that?”

I feel the door wedge open, the motion pushing me slightly forward.

“Wear something sexy for me,” he purrs, his lips only a whisper from mine, and then suddenly the heat of his body is gone.

Before I’ve even processed his movements, he’s stepped around me, forced the door open wide enough to slip through, and has disappeared into the hallway.

What the actual fuck?

Pulling in a shaky breath, I press the door closed and lock it before slowly blowing it out. I am no stranger to Sutton’s games, but he has *never* been so obvious in his approach.

When we were teenagers, he used to make comments, things he knew would get a reaction out of me. I think deep down he just liked knowing he had an effect on me. Even if he has no interest in someone, he feeds off of knowing he could have them if he wanted them.

I wonder how fun his game will be if he’s the only one playing. Guess there’s only one way to find out...

# Chapter Six

Sutton



When Remi steps into the kitchen where we're all gathered around the island, followed closely by Aspen, I can't stop the smile that touches my lips.

I told her to wear something sexy, and in true Aspen fashion, she did the exact opposite. Wearing a high-necked top and wide-leg pants, it's clear she went out of her way to not only deny my request but to make sure there was no doubt that that's exactly what she had done. Unfortunately for her, she still looks sexy as hell. Or maybe that's unfortunate for me.

Her dark blond hair is pulled into a messy bun, little pieces falling down around her face. It's a look I've come to know over the years. She has a way of making messy look anything but. She never wore much makeup as a teenager and that is something that has also carried over into her adult life. Minimalism at its finest. Anything more on her and it would be too much. She doesn't need it. She never did.

Though it does make me wonder what took them so damn long. They both showered before Olivia and me, and yet, we beat them downstairs by a good twenty minutes.

For reasons I don't fully understand, the image of my brother pressing her up against the door the way I did just a little bit ago comes to mind, and when it does, it doesn't sit well with me.

It doesn't sit well with me at all.

I shake off the thought.

"There he is." My uncle Jack, a spitting image of my father, is the first to approach my brother, pulling him into a hug like he's still a five-year-old boy.

I already endured the awkward first greeting a few minutes ago when Olivia and I came down. You know the one. Where you haven't seen someone in a really long time and they try to act like no time has passed.

These people know fuck all about me, and yet they still treated me like they just saw me yesterday.

“Hey, Uncle Jack.” Remi seems a lot less uncomfortable than I did when Jack releases him and Clara steps in next, one arm slipping around his waist while the other is clenching a half empty glass of wine.

“Lord, how you’ve grown,” she coos, her small frame dwarfed by my brother’s much larger one. She was always a small woman, but now that we’re all grown up, she’s downright tiny.

“Wish I could say the same for you.” Remi grins, clearly his thoughts going in the same direction as mine. “Were you always so short?”

“Remi.” Aspen lightly smacks his arm.

“What? I’m just asking.” He chuckles. “Aunt Clara, I’d like you to meet Aspen.”

“Wait... *The Aspen*. The one you used to talk about incessantly?”

“The very one.” He steps back to allow Clara to pass.

“My goodness, it’s so nice to meet you.” She stops in front of Aspen, not hugging her like she did me and my brother, but cupping her cheek for a brief moment instead. “You are just as beautiful as Remi described.” Aspen’s gaze stays locked on my aunt even though I can tell every part of her wants to look at my brother. “Please tell me the two of you are finally together.”

“She wishes,” Remi interjects, giving Aspen a much-needed save.

“Just friends,” Aspen confirms.

“Best friends,” Remi corrects.

“Best friends,” she agrees, her expression relaxing.

“Well, it’s nice to finally meet you, whatever your title,” Uncle Jack interjects, tipping his chin in Aspen’s direction before turning back to my father. “Now, why don’t you show me this man cave you keep going on about.”

“Let’s do it.” He kisses my mother’s cheek. “Be back soon.”

“Take your time.” She sips her wine. “Us girls have a lot to discuss.”

“On that note.” I push away from the counter. “Brother?” I nod at Remi. “You coming?”

“Nah, I think I’ll stay up here with Pen.”

“Aspen,” I pronounce slowly, “can take care of herself.”

“He’s right.”

I’m surprised when she backs me up.

“Go, hang out with the guys. I’m good here.”

“I won’t be long.”

“Dude, she doesn’t need you up her ass twenty-four seven.” I have no idea where the aggravation in my tone manifests from, but it’s clear as day.

“I know that.” Remi is defensive in an instant.

“Can we please not?”

Both our gazes swing to Aspen.

“I swear, you two will literally find any reason to bicker,” she says to both of us but keeps her eyes on Remi, purposely not looking at me.

I have to bite back the laugh that forms at the back of my throat.

Clearly, our little interaction upstairs left more of a mark than I originally thought.

Now, if only someone would explain to me why the fuck that makes me want to pump my fist in the air in triumph.

I shouldn’t give two shits about what she thinks or feels. And yet here I am, trying to dissect every line of her face in order to try to figure out what she’s thinking.

“Do they ever!” My mother barks out a laugh, tipping her wine glass to her lips.

“I said I’m good here,” she repeats, turning away from both of us.

“Summer, would you mind if I poured myself a glass?” She gestures to the open bottle of wine on the counter.

“Not at all. Help yourself.”

“You coming?” I turn, making my way toward the hall. I’ve just reached the door that leads down to the basement when I sense Remi behind me.

“I don’t know why you have to be such an asshole all the time,” he grumbles, waiting until I tug open the door before following me down the stairs.

“I just don’t get why you treat her the way you do.”

“And what way is that?” He steps in front of me when we reach the bottom of the stairs.

I spot my dad in the far corner, showing Uncle Jack the new bar he installed this past spring.

“Like she’s going to fall apart if you’re not around for five minutes.”

“I do not.”

“You do actually. You always have.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I? I’ve watched you two for years. It’s always been this way.”

“If you knew anything about her, maybe you’d understand. But since you never took the time to get to know her, you’re not really in a place to pass judgment.”

“I know her. Or well, I know enough about her,” I argue.

“Oh yeah, what’s her middle name? When’s her birthday? What’s her favorite color?” He fires questions at me, not one of which I know the answer to.

“Those are just facts. They aren’t what makes up a person.”

“Aren’t they? What about her family?”

“What about them?”

“See, that’s the problem. She doesn’t have one. For someone who claims to know enough, you know nothing.”

“What do you mean she doesn’t have a family?” I find myself asking, more than a little fucking confused by this statement.

“Aspen grew up in foster care. Her mom died of a drug overdose when she was just a baby and she’s never known her father. You wanna know why I’m so protective of her? Because she has gone through more in her short life than your tiny little pea brain could ever comprehend.”

“If she was a foster kid, why am I just now hearing about it?”

“Because she didn’t want anyone to know.”

“But you know. And given that she practically lived with us, I’m assuming Mom and Dad know. So why did no one think it pertinent that I know?”

“Why? Would you have been more kind to her if you had known?” My lack of an answer says everything. Because no, I likely would not have been. “Exactly.”

“Who cares if she was a foster kid? Lots of people are foster kids.” I shrug, still not entirely sure what the big deal is. I mean, yeah, it sucks that she never got to know her parents, but it’s not like it’s the end of the world.

“See, you still don’t get it. Which is why I never took the time to explain it to you. You can’t see the writing on the wall even when it’s inches in front of your face.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Nothing, Sut. It means absolutely nothing.” With that, he spins on his heel and heads for my father and Jack.



I stewed on what Remi told me in the basement for the rest of the evening, my eyes finding Aspen every time I thought no one was looking. If anyone noticed, they didn't say anything, though I could have easily explained it away if need be. I'm nothing if not good at spinning the web. People don't see what's actually there. They see what I want them to see. Now, I'm realizing that maybe I'm not alone in that gift. Maybe Aspen has been weaving her own web this entire time.

Olivia breathes softly next to me and while the sound isn't at all bothersome, it still annoys the fuck out of me. Deciding sleep isn't going to come anytime soon, I gently throw back the covers and slip out of bed, careful not to wake Olivia as I quietly tug on my shirt and cross the room.

The hallway is pitch-black when I step out into it. I curse under my breath for whatever asshole flipped off the hall light as I run my hand along the wall, guiding myself through the darkness toward the stairs.

For reasons I don't entirely understand, I pause just outside of Aspen's room, leaning close to the door to see if I can hear anything from inside.

Silence.

Though I'm not surprised. Considering it's after two in the morning, I think it's safe to say she's sleeping.

Continuing toward the stairs, it isn't until I'm about halfway down them that I can finally see again, the foyer light lighting my path.

I move as quietly as possible, having mastered sneaking around my house undetected years ago. Though back then I was sneaking out and back in rather than heading to the kitchen to raid my parents' refrigerator.

I round the corner to the kitchen, my steps faltering when I spot someone sitting at the island, accented only by the tiny remnants of light that spill into the room from the front of the house, and yet I know in an instant that it's her.

She doesn't notice me right away, her head bowed forward, fingers wrapped around the mug sitting in front of her, but I can tell the moment she does. Her face swings in my direction, her shoulders going tense when she realizes it's me.



“What are you doing up?” I ask casually, careful to keep my voice low as I make my way toward the refrigerator.

I don’t look at her as I pass, but I can feel her eyes follow me as I move.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she admits softly.

“Me neither.” I tug open the fridge. Deciding I’m not really hungry after all, I grab a bottle of water before closing the door. “Olivia snores like the devil,” I lie, turning back toward her.

“She does not.” I see a hint of a smile tug at her mouth.

“You’re right, she doesn’t.” I grin, pulling out the stool across from her before taking a seat.

“Your brother does, though.”

I have no idea why, but the thought of her sleeping next to my brother makes me want to throw something against a wall.

“Were you, um, crashing in his room?” I clear my throat.

“No, but we did live together for two years,” she reminds me.

Truth be told, I’d completely forgotten about that. Not to be an asshole, but I haven’t really given her much thought since I left for college. It was easier to pretend that nothing happened than to admit to myself that I had crossed a line I couldn’t uncross.

“That’s right. I bet that was... fun.” I snort, twisting off my bottle cap before taking a quick drink.

“Yeah.” She lets out a soft chuckle. “I guess you could say it was... interesting.”

“How so?”

“Well, the walls were really thin.” She whispers as if there’s anyone awake to overhear her. “And your brother is not *quiet*... if you know what I mean.”

“He made you listen to him fucking?”

“He didn’t *make* me. But it was kind of hard to escape. Sometimes I could hear them over my earbuds.”

“Now that is something I didn’t need to know.” I curl my lip in disgust, not able to keep myself from smiling when her hand slips over her mouth to muffle her soft laughter.

I don’t know what it is, but she seems different tonight. More relaxed. Her hair is down now, soft waves falling around her shoulders and spilling across her back. She’s wearing a tank top, thin enough that if I turned the lights on, I’d probably be able to see her nipples peeking through.

Weirdly, though, that's not what holds my attention. At least, not entirely. I can't help but wonder if this is more like the Aspen my brother gets.

"As much as I love your brother, two years of fearing my wall was going to cave in on me was long enough."

"So where do you live now?"

"I didn't go far. I live right around the corner from him. It's small but more than I need."

"You like D.C.?"

"I really do." She nods.

"Forgive me that I don't already know this, but what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a legal assistant at a pretty prominent law firm."

"Wow. I didn't peg you as the law firm type."

"Why?"

"Just seems like a stuffy job."

"Stuffy?"

"Yeah, you know. Lawyers." I curl my lip. "You like it?"

"I love it. I know it may not sound enjoyable to a lot of people because it's pretty tedious work most days, but I love what I do. I honestly couldn't see myself doing anything else."

"I guess that's what's important." I take another drink.

"What about you? Remi said you're some kind of structural engineer. What is that, exactly?"

"How it sounds. I'm in charge of overseeing the construction of a building and ensuring its structural integrity."

"And do you like it?"

"I do." I nod slowly. "Don't get me wrong, it has its struggles just like any job, but like you, I can't really see myself doing anything else."

"Is that why you moved to Chicago? For your job?"

"Yes. Though I don't plan to stay there once it's complete."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm only contracted for one build. So, once it's complete, I will likely go wherever the next one takes me."

"How long will that be before your current build is done?"

"A couple of months, give or take."

"Do you like that? Moving from place to place?"

"I do," I admit. "I've never had a reason to stay in one place."

“What about Olivia? How does she feel about knowing you don’t plan on staying in Chicago?”

“Wouldn’t know. We’ve never discussed it.”

“Seriously?” Her eyes widen in surprise.

“You’re operating under the assumption that Olivia and I are more than a casual thing. We are not. When this project is done, she’ll go her way and I’ll go mine. For the time, I enjoy having her available when I need her.”

“Do you actually listen to yourself sometimes? You enjoy having her available when *you* need her. Seems pretty one-sided. Do you ever stop to consider what the other person wants?”

“If she wants out, she’s free to leave at any time.”

“You really haven’t changed, have you?” She slides from her stool, turning to set her mug in the sink.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She doesn’t speak until she’s facing me again.

“You don’t care about anyone but yourself. As long as you get your dick wet, you’re all good, right?”

“Are you getting at something specific here, Aspen? Because if you got something to say, you might as well just get it off your chest.”

“You left me there.” Her voice is barely a whisper.

And just like that, I’m a teenager all over again, standing in that room, looking down at her naked body. I remember the indecision that swam in my chest. How I wanted to crawl back into that bed with her. How I couldn’t remember ever wanting to stay with a girl after it was all over, but I wanted to stay with her. But I also knew I couldn’t. If not for myself, then for her. I’d only hurt her more by staying. At least, that’s what I told myself to lessen the guilt I felt.

“Aspen.” I move to explain, but honestly, how do you explain something you know was wrong? How do you justify a mistake that has no justification?

“Please don’t say anything.” She stops me before I can even try. “I just need to acknowledge what you did. You used me and you left me there like I was nothing.”

“I did.”

There’s no point in lying. She was there. She knows what happened.

“Was it worth it?”

“Was what worth it?”

“You know what, never mind.” She moves to leave, but I’m off my stool so quickly, she doesn’t even make it out of the room before I’m in front of her.

“Say what you need to say and let’s be done with it.”

“Did you know that was my first time?”

“Wait... What?” I draw back. I mean, I knew she was inexperienced. That much was obvious by the way she trembled beneath me. But I didn’t once consider why that might be. Then again, I was drunk. I don’t think I would have put it together even if she was wearing a neon sign on her chest. “But you came with me. You were so willing.”

“Because I wanted to. I wanted you to be my first.”

This admission doesn’t surprise me. It didn’t take a genius to know she liked me back then. That much was painfully obvious by the way she would always blush whenever I walked into a room.

“Why?” I can’t help but ask.

It’s a valid question, right? Why would *she* want someone like *me* to be her first? Someone who did not try to hide who he was. Back then, I would have put my dick into anyone who asked for it. My standards have gone up a bit over the years, but the statement still holds some truth.

I’m not ashamed of it. I’m a twenty-six-year-old, single man who likes to fuck. I don’t want a relationship. Never have. Don’t know if I ever will. And I’m okay with that.

“What do you mean, why?” She seems confused by the question.

“Why?” I repeat. “You knew the kind of guy I was. Certainly, you didn’t think one drunken night would change that.” I don’t mean to sound harsh, but sometimes the truth is just that... Harsh.

“Because I wasn’t just any girl. I was your brother’s best friend. I thought, when you took my hand that night, that maybe... It doesn’t matter now.” She squares her shoulders. “I needed you that night. That’s all that matters.”

“Aspen... I...”

“I saw you the day after that. Do you remember? You acted like nothing happened. Like I was just another forgotten notch in your bedpost and you were already onto the next one. You didn’t even look at me when I walked into this very room.”

“I know.” I blow out a hard breath. “I just didn’t know what to say or do. I was terrified my brother would find out. We may not be close, but he’s still

my brother.”

“So you’re saying if it wasn’t for Remi, things would have been different?” she asks, her hazel eyes burning with curiosity.

“I didn’t say that.”

“That’s what I thought.” Her expression falls for the briefest of moments.

“You know, he would never speak to me again if he knew.”

“I don’t think that’s true. Your brother loves you, and he loves me. He would have forgiven us.”

“Then why didn’t you tell him?”

“That I let his brother make me another one of his whores? No, thank you. I was ashamed enough as it was.”

“Then why do it at all?”

“I don’t have to explain my reasoning to you.”

I can see I’ve hit a nerve, so I decide not to push.

“You’re wrong about one thing, though. You were never a whore.”

“You’re right, I wasn’t. But you were. And what does that say about me?”

I don’t really know how to answer that, so I say something else instead.

“You’re right about what you said about Remi. He does love *you*. But not just as a friend like you think he does.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” She seems a bit taken aback by what I’m clearly implying.

“Don’t I? You can’t seriously be that blind.”

“Are you trying to say that Remi is in love with me?” She balks at the idea.

“If you think he’s not, you’re living in an alternate reality.”

“If you think he is, you are,” she sneers, her brow furrowed.

“The proof is written everywhere. Perhaps you should look a little harder.”

“You’re just trying to distract me. It was one thing to fuck me. I was a very willing participant, but to leave me there. Do you have any idea what it was like for me? To wake up in a stranger’s bed, naked and alone?”

“I’m sorry, okay? There’s not much more I can say. I was a fucking kid. I never should have taken you up to that room. I never should have... I’m just sorry. If I could take it back, I would.”

“And that’s supposed to make me feel better? That you regret being with me.”

“That’s not what I meant...”

“It’s exactly what you meant.” She pokes her finger into my chest. “You knew I liked you, and you exploited that. Be a man and own it. Don’t make up some bullshit about your brother.”

“You’re right. I knew you liked me. I knew it and I took advantage of you. There, is that what you want to hear?”

“Honestly, I don’t know what I want to hear.”

“Obviously not the truth.” I can’t stop myself from saying.

She opens her mouth to say something else, but the words die on her lips when we hear the floor creak somewhere in the distance. We both freeze. It isn’t until I hear the creak again that I know exactly where it’s coming from.

“The stairs,” I mouth. “Go.” I gesture toward the island.

Without needing further instruction, she slips around the counter and reclaims her original seat. I move to mine, sliding onto the stool seconds before the overhead light clicks on and my brother appears, rubbing his eyes like he’s barely awake.

It takes a long moment for him to realize he’s not alone. His gaze finds me first and then slowly moves to Aspen.

“What the fuck are you guys doing down here?” He’s instantly suspicious. Which truthfully, he has every right to be. Because even as I was apologizing for fucking her the first time, all I could think about was how I wanted to fuck her again.

“Couldn’t sleep.” I drop my elbows onto the counter. “Came down for some water and found your girl sitting by herself in the dark.”

“You okay?” He moves toward her in an instant.

“Yeah, fine. Just came down for some milk.”

“If you’re having trouble sleeping, you can crash in my room if you want,” he offers.

Her gaze darts to mine for a brief moment, and I can tell that what I said has her gears turning, even if she claims to not believe it.

“No, I’m good. I’m actually feeling pretty tired now, so I think I’m gonna head up.”

“Okay. I’m just gonna grab a water. Give me a sec and I’ll go back up with you.”

“Okay.” She slides off her stool a second time. “Good night, Sutton,” she says without looking at me.

“Night, guys,” I call after them as they exit the kitchen together.

# Chapter Seven

Aspen



“Pen, you look incredible.” Remi takes my hand, making me do a little twirl in the living room so he can get the full view of my sea blue, knee-length dress. “Wow.” He gives me another once-over.

“You like it?” I needlessly ask. I already know it’s gorgeous.

Summer gave it to me yesterday, or rather, she left it in a gift box on my bed with a note. Just thinking about her words has goose bumps peppering my bare back that’s covered only by straps of lace that cross my spine in the shape of an X.

The note read: *My dearest Aspen. You are more of a daughter to me than if you were born from my own womb. It’s only fitting that you stand at the altar alongside my other children as Randel and I renew our vows. All my love. -Summer*

“Like it?” Remi bites his fist, making a satisfied noise in the back of his throat.

“You don’t look so bad yourself.” I give him an appreciative once-over.

Remi in casual clothes is good-looking enough. Remi in a tux... Yeah, he’s pretty handsome, if I do say so myself. While I may be able to fully appreciate Remi’s looks for whatever reason, I’m not attracted to him in that way. Maybe I was a little in the beginning, but enter Sutton and well, the rest is history. That’s not to say I haven’t thought about it. Of course I have.

Normally, I wouldn’t give that a second thought, but something that Sutton said the other night has haunted me since it left his lips. And while deep down I know Remi feels the same way for me as I do for him, Sutton has planted a seed that even without water has begun to grow. And I hate him for it.

We haven’t spoken since that night. I’ve purposely avoided him and with the vow renewal drawing near, it wasn’t difficult to do. And now the day is here and while I’m sad to be going home in a couple of days, I’m also

counting down the seconds until I can be away from Sutton, hopefully for the rest of my life this time, though I doubt I'd be so lucky.

The worst part is, it's not even my hatred for him that has me wanting to run for the hills. It's how little I actually hate him at all. I'm not sure I ever did. I think I just tried to convince myself of it after everything that happened. Maybe I thought it would hurt a little less?

Whatever my reasoning, the last few days have proven that whatever I told myself to get over Sutton Barnett, it didn't work.

No, I don't think he walks on water like I did when I was a teenager, but there's still something about him I can't shake. Every time our eyes meet, every time he speaks, even if I want to throat punch the hell out of him, a part of me still feels it. The undeniable pull between us. Whether he acknowledges it or not, I refuse to believe it's just me.

Then again, maybe that's what Sutton wants me to believe. Another game of his. Another way to prove he's got me even if he doesn't actually want me.

"I still can't believe your mom did this without telling me." I refocus my attention on Remi, refusing to let myself go further down the rabbit hole.

"And you thought I couldn't keep a secret." He gloats.

"Wait, you knew?" I shove his shoulder playfully.

"She swore me to secrecy."

"That's how she knew what size to get."

"I will admit, I may have raided your closet when I was at your house for movie night." He grins.

"You sneaky bastard."

"You're welcome." He chuckles, something behind me catching his attention. "Well, holy shit." His smile grows even wider. "Who knew my brother could pull off anything but T-shirts."

I try to stop myself from turning, but the thought of seeing Sutton in a tuxedo is too sweet of an opportunity to miss.

I turn slowly, so as not to seem too eager, though once I have him in my sights, I wonder if I'll even be able to keep myself upright.

His tuxedo, like Remi's, fits him perfectly. The dark material accents his broad shoulders and tapers into his waist. His hair is combed straight back away from his face, which sports his now freshly shaved face.

I thought I liked Sutton with facial hair, and I do, but there's nothing like seeing his beauty in its entirety.

I fight the urge to bite my fist the way Remi did just moments ago.



Holy hell...

Can a vagina speak? Because I'm pretty sure mine is praising the gods at this very moment.

Our eyes meet and in that brief moment, I'm fairly certain he can read my thoughts perfectly. The way his expression darkens just slightly and a small smile tugs at the corners of his mouth as if to say, *I know you want me.*

"Oh, Aspen, I love your dress."

As if someone has snapped their fingers in front of my face, I'm back in the real world. My focus goes to Olivia, who, of course, is perfection in her strapless silver dress and red-painted lips. As if I could ever compete anyway.

"Thank you. You look beautiful," I tell her, trying to ignore the way my stomach drops when she slips her hand into Sutton's, who gladly accepts it, their fingers tangling together.

*I do not care. I do not care. I do not care.* I repeat the mantra in my head. And I don't care. Or at least, I shouldn't. But that doesn't stop the little green monster known as jealousy from tapping on my shoulder anyway.

"Thank you. Sutton didn't tell me the color scheme, so I thought silver was the best choice." She shifts her weight from one foot to the other, her heels making her damn near the same height as Sutton.

"Usually a safe bet," I agree, turning back to Remi. "Should we maybe head to the venue?" I ask, knowing Summer and Randel left a while ago and are likely wondering why we haven't arrived yet. I'd blame myself if it wasn't for the fact that Olivia and Sutton were the last ones down to leave. So instead, I choose to blame them.

The vow renewal and the party that follows will be held in the same event hall, just different rooms, which is pretty convenient. Funny enough, it's the same place Remi and I had our senior prom. And before you ask, yes, we went together.

*Of course, we did.*

It's not lost on me how much Remi has sacrificed on my account. He could have taken any girl he wanted to prom, and yet he insisted we go together. He could have dated any girl he wanted in high school and yet, other than casual hookups, I was his only priority.

One day it won't be like this, I remind myself.

One day, some lucky woman is going to win his heart, and I will no longer be his number one. And while I will celebrate that day when it comes, elated that my best friend has found his other half, a part of me will also

mourn it. Because I know it will be the end of what has been the most important relationship I've ever had, and not the end as in it's over. Remi will always be in my life, of that much I'm certain. But it will be the end of this. Of spending countless hours together. Of crashing at each other's houses. Of taking each other to social events and gatherings because we'd rather go with each other than anyone else. As all good things do, this too will eventually come to an end. But until it does, I'm going to hold on as tightly as I can.

"I'm driving." Sutton's voice pulls me from my thoughts.

"Oh, hell no." Remi shakes his head. "You drive like you just snorted fifteen lines of coke, and I have no desire to die in a fiery crash on the day of my parents' vow renewal."

"I'm with Remi on this one," I agree, having been in a car with Sutton once before. He drove Remi and me to a party before either of us was old enough to drive. By the time we reached our destination, my nerves were so shot it's a wonder I didn't pull my hair out.

"You guys realize I'm not sixteen anymore, right?" He looks at me when he asks it, like the question has a double meaning.

"Olivia, what do you think?" Remi asks the woman still clinging to Sutton's hand.

"I wouldn't know," she admits.

"You've never ridden in a car with him?" Remi seems to find this information almost as curious as I do.

"I haven't."

"We live in downtown Chicago." Sutton feels the need to explain. "I don't drive much. Everything is within walking distance."

"Well, in any case, I think it's safer if I drive." Remi abruptly takes off toward the front of the house, Sutton quick on his heels.

"What the heck?" Olivia stares after them.

"They're going to fight over the keys," I tell her flatly. "It's like they're kids all over again."

"They did this a lot when they were younger?"

"Yes and no." I snort out a laugh when I hear Remi squeal like a girl.

Seconds later, Sutton reappears, keys dangling from his hand.

"What did you do?" I ask, not able to wipe away the smile on my lips.

"He twisted my fucking nipple, is what he did." Remi appears, rubbing his hand across the left side of his chest. "Not cool, man. Not fucking cool."

"I could have bag-tagged you if you'd preferred."

“You fucking touch my nuts and I’ll kill you,” Remi warns with a wag of his finger.

“Lucky for you, I don’t want anywhere near your nuts.” Sutton chuckles. “Now, can we go? Or do you all want to suffer the wrath of my mother when we show up late?”

“Fine,” Remi mutters. “But Aspen gets to ride shotgun. She gets really carsick in the back.”

“It’s fine. It’s not a long drive.” I shake my head, my gaze locked on Remi.

The last thing I want to do is be forced to sit up front with Sutton when I can sit comfortably in the back with Remi.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You know how you get.” He looks at his brother. “Deal?”

“Fine by me.” Sutton shrugs indifferently.

“Olivia?” Remi has the courtesy to ask.

“I don’t mind.”

“Then it’s settled. Olivia will ride in the back with me. Pen, you’re up front with Sut.”

“Wonderful.” I don’t try to keep the disdain from my voice, though Sutton is the only one who seems to pick up on it.

We head into the garage where Randel’s car is parked. Knowing none of us had vehicles, they thought ahead enough to leave us one of theirs behind to take to the venue. Thank goodness. I absolutely hate riding with strangers, though Remi almost always insists on it. He likes not having to worry about it.

Climbing into the front seat, I quickly snap my seat belt on, keeping my gaze out the passenger window as Sutton climbs in next to me.

A good foot of console separates us, and yet it’s as if he’s sitting so close our shoulders are touching. I can feel the heat of him everywhere. Acutely aware of his every movement even though I’m looking anywhere but *at* him.

I instinctively grab the handle above my head and grip it tightly when Sutton fires the engine to life. Remi calls it the *oh shit handle*, which funny enough, I’ve learned a lot of people do.

“You know, I’m not going to kill you.” Sutton chuckles as he backs out of the driveway and onto the street.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” I mutter.

“How about you get us there first.” Remi snorts from the back seat.

“Is he really that bad?” Olivia asks, a touch of nervousness in her voice.

“He certainly used to be.” Remi’s hands settle on the back of my seat and suddenly his face is right next to my ear. “Do you remember when he drove us to that party?”

“I was actually just thinking about that.” I turn so I can see him in my peripheral.

“You guys do know I’m driving right now, right?”

“Oh relax, Sut, we’re just busting your balls. Metaphorically, of course. No one here wants to touch your balls except Olivia, and even then, she probably doesn’t like it.”

“Oh, she likes it plenty.” Sutton takes one hand off the wheel, placing it on Remi’s face seconds before he shoves him backward. “They all do.”

I feel his eyes hot on the side of my face for a brief moment, causing me to squirm slightly in my seat.

Did *I* like it?

Honestly, I don’t really know.

I mean, I *loved* it in the moment, but was it because I thought he was overly good in bed? I honestly wouldn’t have known. I had nothing to compare it to. Not to mention, I was too preoccupied with his kiss and the feel of him on top of me to really care how it felt *down there*.

And it’s not like I’ve had a lot of experience since then. I hooked up with a couple of guys in college—not a single time was I sober. And since college, I haven’t slept with anyone. First, it was because of Remi. Even though he was fine bringing every Sarah, Jessica, and Amanda he could find back to our apartment, I couldn’t bring myself to take a guy there. Not to mention I was so focused on work those first couple of years, I didn’t really have time for anything outside of work and spending time with Remi.

I’ve had opportunities over the last few months, sure. But I kind of lost my taste for random hookups after college. They always left me with this empty feeling afterward.

“Yeah, keep telling yourself that, brother.” Remi settles back into the seat.

“I will. Because it’s true.”

When I glance at Sutton, the asshole has the audacity to wink at me.

“Your ego was always bigger than *anything* else.” I have no idea where that comes from. It just slips right out of my mouth like word vomit that I instantly wish I could take back.

And for the record, while yes, his ego is enormous, so are *other* parts of him. Trust me, I would know. I remember feeling like he was ripping me open from the inside out when he slid inside me that first time. And while I know it's supposed to hurt when you lose your virginity, I don't think it's supposed to hurt *that* bad. It was the best sort of pain, though. A pain I would have endured a hundred times over if it meant it would have led me to that very moment.

What a foolish child I was.

"Oh, Aspen. My ego is big, but it's not *that* big." He takes the comment in stride, covering my ass in the process. He could have easily given me away, though doing so would have given himself away too, so I guess he covered his own ass.

"Can we get off the subject of your cock?" Remi groans from the back seat.

"Why? When it's such great conversation material."

The smile that tugs the corners of my mouth instantly falls when I realize where we are. Remi must realize it at the same time because it's mere seconds before his voice once again fills the car.

"Why are you going this way?" The edge to his tone is obvious, though Sutton remains completely oblivious.

"Why wouldn't I? It's the quickest way."

"It's okay, Remi," I intervene, knowing it's not Sutton's fault.

"It's not okay," he disagrees.

I turn, not surprised to find his face directly in front of mine.

"It's just a house," I remind him.

"What's just a house?" Sutton seems really confused now. "What the fuck are you two on about?"

"It's nothing," I say, shaking my head. "It's fine," I tell Remi again, more for his benefit than my own. Him freaking out and making a big deal about it only makes it worse for me.

"We can turn around," Remi offers.

"I said it's fine." I give him a look I know he'll read perfectly, and he does. With a single nod, he settles back into his seat and I settle back into mine.

"Does someone want to fill me in on what the fuck that was all about?" Sutton asks after a long moment.

“The house I grew up in is on this road.” It’s the only explanation I give him. I offer nothing more, and he doesn’t ask either.

Sutton knows very little about my childhood, if anything at all, so I don’t expect him to understand. But I don’t need him to, either. Hell, I don’t want him to.

A weird, silent tension seems to fill the car, though I’m fairly certain it’s only me who feels it. Because the closer we get to the house, the heavier the weight sitting on my chest becomes.

It’s like I’m a kid all over again, sitting in the back of the school bus with a nervous knot in the pit of my stomach. I never knew what I was going to go home to from day to day. Some days, no one was there. Those were the best. Other days, either Jean or Rick was there. Sometimes both. Typically, if they were home in the middle of the day, it meant they were drinking. They were always drinking. And then there were the days when only Harris was there. Those days were the absolute worst, because I knew the moment I walked in the door what would happen next.

The thought makes my stomach churn in the most uncomfortable way.

I try to push it away. The sight of him standing over me. The taste of him in my mouth. The way my eyes would water as I gagged over and over again. I can still feel the pain in my scalp from where he pulled my hair so tightly I could feel little strands snapping as he moved.

Not even Remi knows about this part. He knows about the abuse, something I never fully admitted to him until after we were in college, though he knew something was going on all along, of course. But he also respected me enough not to make me talk about it.

I opened up one night after a couple of beers, needing to just let it out. I told him about how Jean would slap me around a lot and how Harris would *bully* me. And that Rick mainly just ignored me but every now and again, he’d get on a bender and I’d end up on the receiving end of one of his temper tantrums.

But I never told him about what my foster brother actually did to me. I know he suspects—how could he not given everything—but I never confirmed it. I’ve never said those words out loud to another living person. I doubt I ever will.

I’ve spent the last six years trying to erase what they did to me, trying to burn it from my memory like a wildfire scorches the earth, but it still

resurfaces every so often. And right now, I feel it spilling from every pore in my body.

When the house comes into view, it's exactly as I remember it. Rusted metal roof, chipped white paint, the porch swing I used to sit on when I was trying to avoid whatever was happening inside.

Thank God Remi came into my life when he did.

The closer we became, the less time I spent at the house. My foster parents didn't care. As long as they got their money and I did all the chores, they were happy to be rid of me. But Harris... He didn't like me spending time with Remi. And he made sure I knew it every chance he got.

I no more than blink and the house is lost in the distance.

I can feel Remi's eyes burning holes in the back of my head, but I don't turn around to look at him.

"You know, you're not that bad of a driver after all," I finally say after too long.

Sutton's gaze comes to me for a brief moment, a smile tipping his lips before his eyes quickly return to the road.

"Is it too early to say I told you so?" he quips.

"It is." I nod. "But please, feel free to say it as many times as you want once we get to the venue. Just make sure you say it to your brother and not me."

"Pen!" Remi exclaims from the back.

And just like that, the moment is forgotten. Just another small passing in time that was insignificant to everyone. Everyone except me...



"So, what did you think of your parents' vows?" I ask Remi as he slides up next to me at the bar.

The ceremony just wrapped up a few minutes ago, and now everyone has filed into the banquet hall to enjoy the buffet dinner and open bar. Mainly I'm just enjoying the bar, as I'm already on my second martini.

"Gross." Remi curls his lip. "I mean, honestly, did they have to bring sex into it?"

"I think it's sweet... That they still love each other so much."

“That’s good and all, but the last thing I want to hear about is how much my father loves my mother’s naked body.”

“I thought it was a well-timed comedic moment. Everyone laughed,” I remind him.

“Yeah, because they were uncomfortable.”

“I think *you* were the only uncomfortable one. And maybe Sutton. You both looked green in the face.” I smile, knowing it took everything in me not to laugh right in the middle of the ceremony.

“Ya think?” He tips his chin at the bartender. “Scotch on the rocks, please.”

“Scotch?” I draw back, wide-eyed. I’ve never known Remi to drink scotch a day in his life.

“What? I can’t have Sutton thinking he’s the only sophisticated one around here.”

“And drinking scotch makes you sophisticated?” I snort out a laugh.

“My brother seems to think so. Look at that pompous ass. Thinks he’s too good for everyone.” He turns and I somewhat unwillingly follow his gaze to where Sutton is leaning against the far wall, his fingers wrapped around a glass of what I can only presume is scotch.

“He does give off that nose in the air kinda vibe,” I agree. He also looks good enough to eat, though I keep that part to myself.

“I don’t know what Olivia sees in him.”

My gaze shifts to the woman in the silver dress making her way toward us.

“Do I detect a hint of jealousy?” I tease.

“Not at all. I don’t fuck my brother’s seconds. It’s an immediate nonstarter for me.”

I suck my drink down the wrong hole and instantly start coughing.

“Fuck, Pen, you okay?” He reaches around me to pat the top of my back, like that will somehow help.

“Wrong hole.” I manage to get out, though my voice cracks and breaks as I continue to cough.

“You okay?” Olivia asks when she reaches us.

“Yeah.” I clear my throat. “Wrong hole,” I explain for a second time.

“I hate when that happens.” She looks at Remi. “What is everyone drinking?”



“Aspen has a martini. I’m waiting on my scotch.” He no more than says it and the bartender slides his glass in front of him.

“Gross.” Olivia crinkles her nose. “Sutton drinks that and I always taste it on him when he kisses me.”

A clip of the *Mean Girls* movie flashes in front of my eyes. You know the scene where Cady is envisioning she lunges over the table and attacks Regina? Yeah, that’s exactly what I envision doing to Olivia at this very moment.

“Eww.” I mask my feelings, turning my head to fake a gag.

“It can’t be that bad,” Remi says, picking up his glass from the bar. Lifting it to his nose, he takes a sniff before tipping it to his lips. The instant it touches his tongue, he grimaces. “Fuck, you’re right. This is nasty.” He sets the glass back on the bar. “Can I get a beer instead?” he asks the bartender.

“I’ll have what she’s having,” Olivia quickly adds, pointing to my drink.

“I’ll have another as well,” I say before turning back to Remi. “So, I think it’s safe to say that you are not a scotch drinker.” I smile over the rim of my glass before knocking back the remainder of my drink.

“I think that’s safe to say, yes,” he agrees, happily accepting the bottle of beer the bartender hands him before turning away to mix Olivia’s and my drinks. “Lesson learned.”

“This place is really nice,” Olivia says, making small talk while we wait for our drinks.

“It really is,” I agree. “Remi and I had our senior prom here.”

“Did you really?”

Remi nods. “It was a night to remember.”

“Maybe for you,” I mutter under my breath, knowing there’s no way he won’t hear me.

“You didn’t enjoy yourself?”

“You mean while Adam Conley tried to slip his hand down the back of my dress while we were dancing because my date had abandoned me to hook up with Janet Kelsey in the girls’ locker room? Yeah, I totally enjoyed myself.”

“That was a quick detour. I was with you for ninety-five percent of the night.”

“Quick would be the right word for it. Did Janet even feel you stick your dick in her before you came?” I tease.

“Oh, she felt it all right. And for the record, I was only quick because I knew it was only a matter of time before some creep stuck his hand down the back of your dress.”

“And alas, you still weren’t quick enough.” I nod a thanks to the bartender, who exchanges my empty glass for a full one before handing Olivia hers.

“I wish I had a friendship like the two of you have,” she says, looking between us. “Makes sense why your brother is so envious of it.”

“What?” Remi and I say in unison.

“Oh yeah.” She takes a sip of her drink. “He’s totally jealous. I could tell that the instant we were all in the same room together.”

“I think you’re mistaken. My brother has never been envious of me a day in his life.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” Olivia’s head tilts slightly in the direction of Sutton, who we all quickly realize is headed toward us. “Don’t tell him I said anything,” she whispers.

“No worries. That would require us to have a real conversation.” Remi takes a quick drink of his beer when Sutton pulls up next to us.

“What are you three talking about over here?”

“Hookups in the girls’ locker room and hands down the back of prom dresses.” Olivia gives him a cheeky grin. My God, she really is so freaking pretty.

“Do I want to know?” His gaze darts around the group.

“Nope.” I quickly shoot to my feet, setting my drink on the bar. “Remi.” I hold my hand out to him. “No one is on the dance floor.”

“Well, we can’t let that stand now, can we?” His smile stretches from ear to ear, lighting up his entire face as he abandons his beer and quickly slides to his feet.

“My lady.” He bows his head, taking my hand in dramatic fashion.

“Good sir.” I return the gesture.

Our cheesiness earns us an eye roll and a dramatic sigh from Sutton.

“Good Lord,” he mutters, but we both ignore him.

Hand in hand, Remi and I make our way to the dance floor, and that’s where we stay for the remainder of the night.

# Chapter Eight

Sutton



“Don’t you think maybe you’ve had enough?” Olivia slides onto the bar stool next to me, gesturing to the bartender for another drink.

“Say again?” I give her a pointed look as I lift the glass to my lips and take a long pull of scotch.

“I’ve been watching you pound those things back like they’re beer, meanwhile you have yet to dance with me a single time.” She visibly pouts.

“I told you, I don’t dance.”

“You mean you won’t.”

“Is there a difference?”

“Just one dance. Please.”

“But you just ordered a drink.”

“I think it’ll be fine here for a moment. Come on. One dance.”

Her persistence is annoying as fuck, but I won’t deny the idea isn’t without merit. After all, I’ve been forced to sit here and watch my brother and Aspen make a show all fucking evening. Perhaps it’s time I give them a show of my own.

“One dance,” I agree.

Olivia claps her hands together in excitement, her blue eyes accented by the thickest lashes I think I’ve ever seen. I don’t know why people think fake lashes are attractive. They aren’t. At least not to me. Then again, I don’t like anything fake on a woman. Fake nails. Fake tan. Fake tits. None of that does it for me.

My gaze travels to Aspen for a brief moment. There isn’t a fake thing about her and yet, she’s the most beautiful woman here. In some weird fucking way, I think I’ve always known how beautiful she was, but I wouldn’t let myself see it.

I think back to what happened in the car earlier. The way she reacted when we passed her childhood home, or rather, the way Remi reacted. I can’t

help but wonder what happened to her there. It's clear something did. Because even though she tried not to show it, I could quite literally feel the emotion pulsating off of her like ocean waves hitting me just around the shin, the impact knocking me backward.

And yet, I couldn't ask. No matter how badly I wanted to. And not just because she would have told me to fuck off, but because I'm not sure I want to know.

I swallow past the thought, standing as the D.J. switches over to a slow song. Taking Olivia's hand, I lead her onto the dance floor, the buzz running through my veins seeming only to intensify now that I'm moving.

I'll admit, I may have had one or two more than is socially acceptable at this type of event, but right now, I'm not sure I fucking care that much.

I purposely stop next to Remi and Aspen, who are swaying slowly as they share a private conversation between the two of them, before pulling Olivia into my arms.

Whatever she and my brother were discussing instantly ceases and for some reason, it makes me feel like they were talking about me. Not that I care if they were. I couldn't care less what either of them think of me.

*Lies...*

I can feel their gazes shift to me even though I don't once glance their way. Instead, I focus on the woman in front of me and no matter how fucking much I want to look at Aspen, I don't.

I stumble a few times but manage to keep my feet in proper working order as we move slowly. Olivia's hands glide up and down my back as we sway.

I feel her gaze shift up to mine. Lips parted, eyes dark. I know what she wants. I should want it too. Any man would consider himself incredibly lucky to be here with a woman like Olivia, and yet I feel anything but lucky. If anything, I feel annoyed.

And yet I lean in for a kiss anyway, putting on a perfectly crafted show for all to see. Especially *her*. Sliding my tongue along Olivia's, I kiss her good and deep, feeling her tremble against my body as I do.

"I think I need a drink." Aspen's voice is farther away than I expect, but I still catch it amongst the noise of the room.

Smiling against Olivia's lips, I pull away, not at all surprised to see her looking up at me with a wanton look in her eyes.

"We should get out of here," she tells me, voice dripping in seduction.

“Maybe later.”

Disappointment seeps into her expression.

“Why? It’s not like you’re needed anymore. Look around.” She gestures around the room. “So many have left already.”

“But those who have left are not my parents’ children.” I abruptly turn, giving her no choice but to release her hold on me.

“Where are you going?” She’s quick to catch up to me, slipping her arm through mine, which I allow her to do for no other reason than to keep up appearances.

I was right in my assumption that Olivia would keep the vultures away. Not a single family member has tried to set me up all night. In fact, many of them have approached me solely to tell me how beautiful my girlfriend is.

I just smiled and nodded, all the while thinking what fucking idiots they all are. Anyone who cared to look could see I don’t care about Olivia. At least, not in that way. And in that way, I mean, in any way other than the way that leads to me getting my dick wet.

I know that probably sounds horrible, but I’ve never given her a reason to believe anything else. Even coming here, she knew it was casual. And while, sure, I think a part of her hoped this was the beginning of something more, I think she’s getting the hint that is simply not the case.

Her attention toward my brother, whether genuine or simply a way to try to make me jealous, has not worked in her favor. I am no more jealous than Remi is into her. I’m sure he finds her attractive. You’d have to be blind not to. But as per usual, Remi has one focus and one focus only. Aspen.

“The bathroom.” I finally answer her question. “Why? You want to come and hold my dick?” Now I’m just being an asshole to be an asshole and honestly, I have no idea why.

But that’s not true at all, is it? Because I *do* know why.

“You’re a jerk,” she grumbles.

“And you didn’t already know this?” I throw her a questioning look. It’s not like she hasn’t seen this side of me. Hell, sometimes I’m convinced this is the only side there is to me.

“You could be a little nicer.”

“This *is* me being nice.” I snort out a humorless laugh but make sure to keep up appearances by pulling her in closer. “Maybe my brother can keep you company while I’m gone,” I offer.

“At least *he*’s not a complete and utter asshole.”

“Get to know him a little better. Not sure you’d still feel the same. He’s only different with her. You’d be just another wet hole like all the others.” I smile when we reach Remi, who’s sitting at the bar alone. “Where’s your shadow?” I ask, releasing Olivia, who retrieves the drink she left on the bar before sliding onto the stool next to my brother, not trying to hide her irritation with me.

“Bathroom.” He tips his beer to his lips.

“Weren’t you drinking scotch earlier?” I ask, arching my brow.

“I tried. I just couldn’t do it. I don’t know how you drink that stuff.” His forehead crinkles in disgust.

“It’s made for *real* men, Remi, not boys.” I give an unnecessary jab for no other reason than that I can.

“Real men?” He barks out a laugh. “If you see any, let me know.”

Olivia tries not to react, but it doesn’t stop the small giggle that slips past her lips.

“Ha. Fucking. Ha,” I deadpan. “Keep her company.” I dip my head toward Olivia. “I have to piss.”

“Something tells me she’d prefer my company anyway,” Remi calls after me, but I’m too far away at this point to retaliate.

I shake my head, pushing through the double doors that lead out into the main hallway. I stumble slightly as I round the corner, touching the wall to balance myself.

“Looks like someone has had a little too much to drink.”

I jerk my face upright at the sound of Aspen’s voice.

She’s just come out of the women’s bathroom, likely stopping at the sight of me.

“Nah, I’m good.” Instead of going to the right where the men’s restroom is, I veer to the left toward Aspen.

“You sure? Because you’re walking kind of crooked.” A smile she tries to hide plays on her lips.

“That’s how I always walk.” I smirk, drawing to a stop less than two feet from where she’s standing.

“Then maybe you should see a doctor.” Her smile spreads, lighting up her entire face. The sight does something funny to my insides.

“Aren’t you a fucking comedian.” I take another step toward her.

“I should get back out there.” She tries to sidestep me, but I manage to grab her arm before she can get around me. Somehow she ends up pressed

against my chest, looking up at me with wide eyes. “What are you doing?” There’s a slight shake to her voice this time.

“I have no idea.” I say the most honest thing I have all fucking day.

“Sutton, let go of me.” She squirms in my arms, but my hold on her only tightens.

“You’ve been teasing me,” I tell her, dipping my face down within inches of hers.

“What are you... What are you talking about?” She stutters over her words.

“You dancing with my brother. You wanted me to watch.”

“Sutton... I think—”

“You can deny it all you want. But you were putting on a show out there.”

“I wasn’t.” She shakes her head, her soft curls swaying from side to side as she does. “If anyone was putting on a show, it was you. Pretty sure your little display out there was more action than most of those people have seen in a long time.”

“So you were watching me.” I grin. “I should have known. You’re always watching.”

“The entire room was watching. You were practically swallowing each other’s faces.”

“Do I detect a hint of jealousy in your voice?”

Her cheeks instantly heat crimson. “What? Don’t flatter yourself, Sutton.”

“I would almost bet that if I kissed you right here and now, you’d kiss me back.” My face is so close now, I can smell the hint of gin on her breath.

“Try it and I’ll bite your tongue off.” She tries to threaten, but it’s missing her usual flare.

“Might be worth the risk.” My eyes fall to her mouth.

I know I shouldn’t. But I can’t stop myself. She looks too fucking delicious not to taste.

Her entire body tenses when my lips softly brush against hers. Her back goes ramrod straight, and yet she makes no attempt to push me away.

I take that as a sign, running my tongue along the seam of her lips. When she opens for me, I groan deep in my throat as it slips inside her mouth.

She tastes exactly as I pictured. Like gin with a hint of something sweet. It sets something off inside of me and before I’ve fully processed what I’m

doing, I have her pinned against the wall, my hands roughly palming her through the material of her dress.

The way she responds to me, how hard she tries and fails to resist, I eat it up. I can't stop. Fuck, I don't ever want to stop.

The heavy thud of the ballroom door breaks the intense moment and I abruptly jump back, my chest rising and falling quickly as I work to catch my breath.

Aspen stares back at me, eyes still wide, face flushed, lips swollen, her expression one of both surprise and regret.

I wish I could mirror the sentiment. I wish I could regret what just happened, but I don't. The only thing I regret was the interruption that caused me to pull away.

As if just remembering that we're no longer alone in the hallway, I take another step backward seconds before Olivia appears around the corner.

Her eyes go from me to Aspen and then back to me.

"What are you doing?" Her tone is full of accusation.

"Talking to Aspen," I say casually, a slight bite to my voice. "What are you doing?"

"I decided I need to pee."

"You decided?" I cock my head to the side.

"Remi's waiting for you." Her gaze slices back to Aspen.

If she suspects she interrupted something, she doesn't vocalize it. I think she knows it wouldn't do anything but earn her a one-way ticket the fuck out of my life if she did.

"Right." Aspen turns, and without another word, disappears around the corner.

"What are you doing?" Olivia waits until she's out of earshot before saying.

"Nothing," I state flatly.

"She's your brother's best friend," she tells me unnecessarily.

"And? We were talking. Can I not talk to my brother's friend or is that off-limits?" Agitation creeps into my voice.

"If all you were doing was talking..."

"What the fuck do you think I was doing? Trying to fuck her in the hallway where anyone could stumble upon us? Get a fucking grip. Jealously does not look good on you."

"I am not jealous." She crosses her arms in front of her chest.



“Keep telling yourself that.” I turn, shoving my way into the men’s restroom moments later.

I don’t have time to feel guilty for treating Olivia so poorly. Not when I’m too preoccupied with what the fuck just happened with Aspen.

I won’t lie and say I haven’t thought about kissing her as of late... In fact, I’ve thought about a hell of a lot more than kissing. But that doesn’t mean I was planning on doing it.

Fuck...

I stop in front of the sink, looking at myself in the mirror.

“You stupid son of a bitch,” I mutter to my reflection.

It was just a kiss, not unforgivable. But I know without a moment’s hesitation that if we hadn’t been interrupted, I would have been balls deep inside of her within minutes. That’s how fucking crazy she makes me.

I would have quite literally fucked her right there in that hallway.

I’ve never had a woman make me feel so out of control before. Like what the actual fuck.

I take a deep breath in and blow it out just as slowly.

“Get a fucking hold of yourself, Sut.” I run a hand through my hair, tugging at the ends.

As the heat of the moment passes, reality begins to creep in. And the reality is that when it comes to Aspen, I can’t just jump in and expect there to be no repercussions. I need to stop thinking with my cock and get my shit together.

Now if only I could get myself to fucking to listen.

# Chapter Nine

Aspen



“I think we better order an Uber.” Remi has his arm draped over my shoulder as we make our way outside, Sutton and Olivia directly behind us.

“Probably should have done that from the jump, little brother.” There’s a slight slur to Sutton’s voice, further solidifying that what happened in the hallway was a product of him being drunk and nothing more.

Funny. You’d think I’d have learned my lesson a long time ago when it comes to the way Sutton gets when he’s drunk. And even still, when he pushed me up against that wall, I made no attempt to stop him.

Because deep down I wanted it. I wanted *him*. And no matter how many ways I try to lie to myself, that fact still remains just as true as it ever was.

It’s been over an hour and I swear I can still taste him on my lips. The woody flavor of scotch continuing to tease me, reminding me of how it got there. Of how just sixty minutes ago, I was in Sutton’s arms, his tongue devouring me as if I were the sweetest fucking thing he ever tasted and he couldn’t get enough.

That’s what drew me in. Just like the first time he kissed me—it was the intensity of it. The way he made me feel like I was the only thing in the world that he saw. That he wanted me so badly he might combust if he didn’t have me right then and there.

The first time I walked into his trap, I didn’t know any better.

This time, I think it’s safe to say I more than knew better but for whatever reason couldn’t bring myself to care.

I can claim to hate Sutton until I’m blue in the face, but it doesn’t change the way my body and heart betrayed me tonight. The way they continue to betray me every time he looks at me with that knowing look in his eyes. Like he can see right into my soul and he knows... He knows everything I try to hide. Everything I won’t even admit to myself. He can see it all.

It's unnerving the way he can strip me bare with nothing more than a glance.

"I can drive." I stop just shy of the curb, stepping out of the heaviness of Remi's arm. "I haven't had a drink in hours."

I feel Sutton's gaze hot on the side of my face as he and Olivia pull to a stop beside us, his eyes questioning.

It would make sense that he assumed I was drunk, too. Maybe he even hoped for it. But alas, I can't use the alcohol excuse for my behavior. Not this time anyway. Nope, this time it was all me.

"You sure?" Remi narrows his gaze at me.

"When have you ever known me to drive when I'm feeling any sort of way?" I give him a pointed look.

"Good point." He finally concedes, knowing there's no way in hell I'd get behind the wheel of a car if I felt anything other than completely sober.

"I get shotgun," Sutton slurs, digging in his pocket for what feels like hours before finally producing the car keys, depositing them into my outstretched hand.

I'm careful not to meet his gaze.

"Fuck you, dude. I'm sitting up front with Pen." Remi urges me forward, practically glued to my side he's walking so close to me.

"Then you can clean the puke out of the back seat tomorrow," Sutton slurs behind us.

"Fuck," Remi mutters under his breath.

"It's okay," I tell him, even though it's so far from okay it's laughable. It's bad enough I have to be in the same car as Sutton, let alone be forced to sit next to him... Again. Especially after what happened outside the bathrooms.

"He'll be fine," he tells me with a quick shake of his head.

"You willing to take that chance?"

"Fuck," he repeats for a second time. "Fine," he grumbles loud enough for his brother to hear just as we reach the car.

I step around the front, clicking the key fob to unlock the doors. By the time I slip in behind the wheel, Sutton has already settled into the front seat.

I make the mistake of looking at him and when I do, I instantly regret it. Because he's not lulled over half passed out like I expect. Instead, he's looking right at me, a small smirk playing on his lips.

That fucker...

He may be intoxicated, but he's not fall over drunk like he's been playing up for the last little while. Though why he was trying to make everyone believe he was is beyond me.

What's more, the way he's looking at me makes it clear that he wants me to know he was acting, which is even more confusing.

Because if there's one thing I've learned over the years, it's that Sutton Barnett is an expert chess player. You don't know you're losing until the moment you've lost. And he never gives away his moves without a reason.

He wants me to know that alcohol wasn't in control tonight. He was.

I'm not sure if that makes what happened worse or better. But I do know this: it can't happen again. Because if it did, I'm not sure I'd be able to get myself out of the boat before it's fully submerged under water.

Sutton has always been my kryptonite. From the first moment I met him, I've been powerless against him. That much, time has not changed.

I force my attention back to the task at hand, starting the car before carefully pulling it out of the parking spot and across the lot.

There's very little traffic as I head through town and while it feels impossible to do, especially when I feel Sutton's eyes on me every couple of minutes, I keep my focus forward, pretending like I don't notice, or at the very least, don't care.

It takes us only a few minutes to reach the house, but by the time I pull into the driveway, it feels like hours have passed. Guess that's what happens when every second feels like a minute. Something that only happens when Sutton is sharing the same space as me.

"Good job, Coop. You managed not to kill us." Sutton nudges my shoulder like we're old buddies and then quickly climbs out of the car just seconds after I've shifted it into park.

I resist the urge to spit an insult at him.

He's fucking with me. That much couldn't be more evident.

I just don't know why.

What's his end game?

"Thanks for driving, Aspen." Olivia climbs from the car next, followed by Remi, who waits for me at the front of the car.

"Yeah, thanks for that." Remi winks, looping his arm through mine the second I reach him.

Guilt churns my stomach sour.

“You’re welcome.” I lean my head against his bicep as he leads us toward the house.

“You sure you two are just friends? You’d seriously be the cutest couple in existence.”

I swear, if looks could kill, Olivia would be dead where she stands. And it’s not me who’s looking at her that way, but Sutton. It’s only a brief moment, passing so quickly I’m fairly certain I’m the only one who notices.

“I’ve been telling her that for years.” Remi knocks his hip against mine, humor thick in his voice. “But alas, this one seems immune to my charms,” he teases.

“Maybe you can still win her over,” Olivia offers.

“What are you on about?” Sutton interjects. “They’ve been friends long enough. If they wanted to hook up, they would have already.”

Sutton’s reaction only confirms what I already knew to be true. She suspects she interrupted something in the hallway, which she did, and now she’s making us pay for it. Unfortunately for her, I’m not taking her bait.

“There’s still time.” Remi winks playfully at me.

“Keep dreaming, stud.” I slip my arm away from his before giving him a quick shove. He stumbles slightly to the side but recovers quickly.

“She wounds me!” He grabs his chest dramatically.

“And that, Olivia, is why we are just friends.” I laugh, shaking my head. “No offense,” I say directly to Remi.

“Offended,” he barks, causing me to shake my head again, laughter vibrating my shoulders as I quickly unlock the front door.

“Well, for the record”—Olivia follows me inside, Remi and Sutton pulling up the rear—“I think you two would be fantastic together.”

“We already are,” I say, dropping the keys on the table next to the front door. “Isn’t that right, Remi?” I look up at his crooked smile, wishing I could frame the expression he’s wearing.

“More than fantastic,” he agrees. “We’re utter perfection.” He gives an over-the-top chef’s kiss, smacking the air with his lips.

“Fuck me,” Sutton grumbles, shoving past his brother. “If I wasn’t going to vomit before, I’m sure as fuck going to vomit now.” His shoes are barely off his feet before he’s on the stairs, climbing the steps two at a time.

“Something tells me you’re in for an unpleasant evening with that one,” Remi tells Olivia, gesturing up after his brother.

“Yay.” Sarcasm encases the world like stone.

“Well, I’m exhausted,” I say to no one in particular. “Think I’m gonna head to bed.” I press up, kissing Remi’s jaw.

“Okay. I’m going to hang out down here for a bit.” He taps the tip of my nose with his index finger.

“Mind if I join?” Olivia asks. “He’s probably passed out already, and I’m not even a little bit tired.”

“Sure.” Remi nods, his eyes coming back to me. “Night, Pen.”

“Night, Remi.” I turn toward Olivia. “Good night.”

“Good night.”

I head upstairs without another word.

I won’t lie and say it doesn’t bother me that Olivia chose to stay downstairs with Remi. Not because I’m jealous but because I’m worried she might make implications to him that she can’t take back.

I know it’s wrong.

I should be able to tell Remi everything. But this... Sutton. I don’t think he’d be as quick to forgive me as I’d like. Not after the promise I made to him. And the thought of Remi being upset with me, I can’t even imagine how horrible that would feel.

I mean, sure, we’ve had our disagreements over the years, but I can’t say Remi has ever been downright mad at me before. And while I may have a weakness where Sutton is concerned, Remi is more important to me than he will ever be.

Then again, if that were true, maybe I wouldn’t have gotten myself in this mess to begin with.

I just have to remember that loving Remi and having feelings for his brother are not mutually exclusive.

I push my way inside my bedroom on a slow exhale, not bothering to flip on the lights as I head straight toward the bed, collapsing on top of it moments later.

I don’t bother changing. Hell, I don’t bother moving once my head hits the pillow.

I try not to think about Sutton’s kiss. About his touch. But as sleep threatens to take hold, I find it’s the *only* thing I think about.

I wish I could bring myself to regret it.

Maybe tomorrow I will.

But even if I do, I know that if given the chance to rewrite it, I wouldn’t do a single thing differently. Because being with Sutton is like a shot of

heroin to the veins. Once you've had a taste, there's no going back.



## Eight years earlier

*I have no idea what I'm doing here. At a party. Without Remi. All I know is I had to get away. I had to forget. Forget his smell. The taste of him that still feels like glue at the back of my throat. Things have been bad before, but they seem to be getting worse by the day.*

*I fight back a gag at the thought of what Harris made me do. Of him forcing himself into my mouth. I tried to fight him off. I tried to make him stop, but he's so much bigger than me. So much stronger.*

*I knew it would only be worse if I didn't just do what he wanted. And even as his penis hit the back of my throat over and over again, tears springing to my eyes, all I could think about was how worse it would probably be next time...*

*Next time.*

*I shudder at the thought.*

*So yeah, here I am, at a party I wasn't invited to, with every intention of getting drunk and getting some random high school boy to take my virginity before he has the chance to do it himself.*

*I scour the dim room, smoke clouding my vision as I try to find even one familiar face in the crowd.*

*And then suddenly, there he is. Sutton.*

*He's lounging on the couch, feet propped on the ottoman in front of him like it's his couch. His house. No surprise there. Sutton is the kind of guy who commands a room. Owns it even. Like it's his world and we're all just living in it.*

*There's a girl next to him, chatting excitedly over the thump of the music, but he couldn't seem less interested in what she's saying.*

*I briefly wonder if I should walk over there. I mean, he kinda looks like he could use a save. Then again, he's probably just waiting for her to stop talking long enough to take her upstairs. I know how parties like this operate. Or rather, I know how he operates.*

*I may not know much about Sutton—he's as secretive as he is attractive—but I've been around long enough to pick up on a few things. Like for example, how many different girls I've witnessed leaving the house late in the afternoon before Remi and Sutton's parents get home.*

*Remi and I always do our school work in the living room where there's a direct line of sight to the front door. We've actually taken to betting on whether or not we'll get to see the backside of some poor, foolish girl before we've moved from math to history.*

*I typically give Sutton the benefit of the doubt. And I typically lose because of it. Honestly, there are not that many girls at our school. Surely he's going to run out eventually. I guess then he'll move to recycling through those he's already been with. Though why any girl would let themselves be used like that is something I'll never understand.*

*Actually, that's not entirely true. Because this is Sutton we're talking about.*

*The decision to interrupt their conversation is made for me when Sutton looks up, his eyes locking with mine from across the room. There's surprise there but also something else. Curiosity maybe.*

*He cocks a brow, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.*

*And then he's on his feet, the girl next to him caught off guard by his abrupt departure. I know she's watching him as he moves toward me, but I don't look to verify. My focus is solely on him. On the way he prowls toward me like a lion about to devour a lamb.*

*I clasp my hands together in front of me to hide the slight tremble that runs through them.*

*"Well, well, well." His smirk turns to a full-blown smile. "What do we have here?" He leans in close to speak over the music. "Does my brother know you're here?"*

*I smell alcohol on his breath, but it doesn't bother me like I expect it to. If anything, I kinda like it.*

*And then there's that brow again, arching in question. His sky blue eyes holding my gaze so intently I don't think I could look away if I wanted to. Which, for the record, I don't. I figure that's probably how all the girls feel standing this close to Sutton.*

*"What do you think?" I retort, trying to sound annoyed.*

*"You shouldn't be here." He clucks his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "A little thing like you could get eaten alive at a party like this."*



*“I can take care of myself.” I fake confidence I’m not entirely sure I possess.*

*“I bet you can.” He trails his tongue across his bottom lip, following the action with a drag of his teeth. I swear, it’s the most seductive thing I’ve ever seen.*

*He knows exactly what he’s doing because I swear, I feel the action all over my body. The wet stroke of his tongue. The gentle scratch of his teeth.*

*“Is that your girl?” I distract myself by asking, gesturing to the girl sitting on the couch watching us with a slanted gaze.*

*“Who, her?” He doesn’t bother looking back at her. Instead, I get a half shoulder shrug in her direction. “Nah. She talks too damn much.”*

*“You don’t like it when girls talk?” I unlatch my hands, crossing my arms in front of my chest instead, which causes him to lean back slightly.*

*I breathe in deeply, trying to cleanse his scent from my nose. It doesn’t work. It’s as if it’s leeching into the air all around me.*

*“I don’t like it when certain girls talk,” he corrects.*

*“Better to be silent on their backs.” I pretend to be disgusted when in reality, I’d die to be one of those girls. Well, the irrational part of me would. The rational part of me knows that it would end very badly.*

*“You said it, not me.” He barks out a laugh that seems to vibrate straight through me.*

*I can’t say I’ve ever heard him laugh like that before. So freely and openly. He’s usually so quiet and to himself, like he can’t be bothered with the likes of someone like me. I mean, sure, we’ve talked, obviously, but he’s always very closed off. Guarded.*

*“You don’t have a drink.” He looks down at my crossed arms, as if just now realizing my hands are empty.*

*“You’re observant.” It takes every ounce of willpower I have to keep at bay the smile threatening to spill across my lips. And I do mean every ounce.*

*“We should fix that.”*

*“We should,” I agree.*

*“Come on.” He tugs on my forearm, forcing my arms uncrossed, and then he does something that has my chest exploding in a million different directions when he takes my hand, wrapping his fingers around mine.*

*I’m not aware of a single other person as he pulls me toward the back of the house. Only him. The feel of his hand around mine. The warmth and strength of his fingers. I could die right here. I swear I could.*

*Because for all the times I've been around Sutton, he's never touched me. To say I was unprepared for how it would feel when he finally did is the understatement of the century. And he's only holding my hand. Imagine if he hugged me. Or what if he kissed me? Not that I'd ever be so lucky to find out. But if he did, I'd probably go into cardiac arrest right there on the spot.*

*It isn't until we reach the kitchen that Sutton releases my hand. Disappointment floods through me, but I don't let it show.*

*"Beer or vodka? Or I think there's some tequila left downstairs if you'd prefer that," he says, grabbing two plastic cups off the counter.*

*"Um..." I stand there awkwardly, not sure what to say.*

*"Oh, Coop, please tell me you've drunk before."*

*"Well..."*

*"Fuck me." He groans. "So you're here without my brother. That's bad enough. Now, you're telling me you've never been drunk?"*

*"You say that like it's the craziest thing you've ever heard."*

*"Because it is."*

*"I'm only sixteen. It's not like every sixteen-year-old is out there hitting the bottle."*

*He snorts. "You'd be surprised."*

*"Would you just shut up and make me a drink? Whatever you think is good. I just need to forget."*

*"Forget what?"*

*"My life," I admit.*

*"Well, if we're in forgetting life territory, we're gonna need something a hell of a lot stronger. Lucky for you, I know where Seth's parents keep the good stuff." He winks, taking my hand once more.*

*I know in that instant that I'm in some serious trouble. Unfortunately, I can't make myself care. A decision I will no doubt live to regret.*



Movement has my eyes shooting open, the buzz of sleep still heavy as I blink into the darkness.

"Remi?" I grumble, rolling to my side to face him.

"It's not Remi."

My entire body tenses at the sound of *his* voice.

Before I can move, an arm snakes across my middle, holding me in place.

“What are you doing in here, Sutton?” I flatten my palms against his *bare* chest, trying to give myself some leverage to escape his hold, all the while doing my best to ignore how incredible his muscle definition feels beneath my fingers.

“I don’t know.” His admission has my arms going limp.

“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“Exactly that. I don’t know.”

“What *do* you know?” I try to keep the tremble of nerves from my voice, but it doesn’t do me much good. Even I can hear the unmistakable shake that vibrates around my words.

“That I’ve been lying in my room for the last two hours trying to fight the urge to sneak in here and finish what we started earlier.” He moves in closer, his breath warm on my face. “Clearly, I lost the battle.”

“What makes you think I’d want you to come in here?” I try to fake an annoyance that isn’t anywhere to be found.

“You don’t have to pretend with me, you know.” His lips are so close I can practically already feel them pressed to mine.

My heart thunders erratically inside my chest, beating against my ribs so hard there’s no way he can’t feel it.

“Who says I’m pretending?”

“Your body...” he purrs. “You’ve always tried to hide it. But I can see it. I’ve always been able to see it.”

“See what?”

“How badly you want me.”

And then his lips are on mine, soft and warm, lacking all the intensity and urgency from before. But I know from experience that this kind of kiss is so much more dangerous. And while my brain is screaming to push him away, I can’t get my body to comply.

I curl into his touch, fighting back the moan that works its way into my throat when I feel the hardness of his erection press into my belly.

This all feels so familiar and yet so foreign. Like an old movie I know I’ve watched before but can’t quite remember the plot to.

“Sutton,” I breathe against his lips. “Please.”

I don’t know what I’m asking for. For him to leave. For him to stay. For him to take me to a place I know only he can.

“Please what?” He trails his tongue across my lower lip, causing my insides to scream in desire. My body wants him, even if my brain knows better.

“I need you to stop,” I mutter against his mouth, finding some semblance of willpower from way down deep. And I do mean *way* down.

“Why?” He pulls back just far enough to meet my eyes. It’s too dark to see him well, but I *can* see him.

“I can’t do this with you again. We both know how it ends.”

“What if this time is different?” There’s so much promise to his words they’re almost painful to hear. Mainly because I know it isn’t true.

“We both know it won’t be.”

“I mean, yes, you’ll wake up alone. But given that my brother is right across the hall, I’d venture to say you would prefer it that way.”

“I’m not someone you can just fuck when you decide you want to.”

“What about when *you* want to?”

I can’t see the smile on his lips, but I can sense it.

Every second that passes pulls me farther down the rabbit hole. I should *make* him leave. I shouldn’t give him a choice. But a part of me, a very foolish part of me, has dreamed of this moment for far longer than I would ever be willing to admit.

“I’m not doing this. You realize you have a woman lying in your bed in the next room over.”

“I don’t care about her.”

“You don’t care about me either,” I argue. “You just want what you can’t have.”

“Who says I can’t have you?” he whispers, his lips touching my jaw and then my chin.

“Sutton. What about Remi?”

He flicks his tongue against the base of my throat. “If he doesn’t want you, why can’t *I* have you?” He nips and licks his way back up to my mouth.

My brain is screaming to turn my face before his lips land on mine, but I can’t get my body to cooperate. It’s as if the stingy bitch has a mind of her own and she doesn’t care what *I* want—only what *she* needs.

One swipe of his tongue at the seam of my lips and I open for him on command. As if I could ever fight against him. As if I even want to.

Because who I am really kidding? When it comes to Sutton Barnett, I’m powerless. I always have been.

He groans deep in his throat as he deepens the kiss, shifting so that he's on top of me, the full weight of him pressing me deeper into the mattress.

The taste of scotch still lingers faintly on his tongue all these hours later and for some reason, this seems to be the thing that snaps the last remaining thread holding me in place. All I want is *him*. All I feel is *him*. All I see is *him*. And everything else simply flitters into the background.

It's senseless and reckless, but I don't care. I'm blinded by lust. Driven by desire. And entirely lost in a man who has not left my thoughts for one single day in the six years I've been gone.

He kisses me like a man starving for air. Like I'm the only thing keeping him alive. It's deep and passionate and reverberates through every pore in my body.

I am his.

He's making sure I know it.

As if there was ever a doubt.

As if I haven't been his since the moment our eyes met that day on the stairs.

I hated him because it was easier. But when he touches me like this, it only solidifies that I never hated him at all.

His hands are soft and yet firm as they explore my body, removing articles of clothing as he goes. First the dress I fell asleep in. It's over my head in one swift motion and then abandoned on the floor. Then my bra, which he removes with expert precision. I try not to think about why he's able to do it so effortlessly, because, well, I already know.

He hesitates only a moment at the band of my panties, giving me just enough time to stop him if I want to.

I don't.

He has the thin material down my legs and tossed to the side so quickly that I've barely processed his movements before he's kissing his way up my leg.

He gets to my knee and then shifts inward, kissing his way up my inner thigh. My chest feels like there's a stampede inside of it, and my stomach feels like it's housing a million butterflies. One flick of his tongue at my center has them erupting through my body, fluttering up and down every limb until collectively gathering at my core.

Another flick and my back lifts from the bed. Another and I'm fisting the sheet beneath me like it's the only thing anchoring me to the earth.

Another and another, lick and nip, suck and kiss, he devours me so completely that when I finally fall over the cliff, I don't plummet to the ground. Instead, I'm in the sky, my body soaring so high I don't think it will ever come down.

And then Sutton is on top of me, abandoning his boxers seconds before his hips settle between my thighs, pressing his impossibly hard erection against my center.

His lips brush my ear before he gently sucks the lobe between his teeth.

"Are you on birth control?" He presses harder against me.

"Uh-huh." My body is so desperate that I grind shamelessly against him.

"Would you trust me if I told you I was clean? I don't fuck bare. At least, I don't usually. But with you, it's all I want. Tell me I can fuck you just like this." He dips the tip of his arousal inside of me and I physically quiver.

All sense and reason went out the window long ago, so my next words shouldn't be surprising.

"Do it." I urge him forward, digging my nails into his hips. "Do it." I practically beg.

I should be prepared for what comes next, but it doesn't stop the yelp of surprise that escapes my lips when he fills me impossibly full in one powerful thrust.

"Fuck..." He groans and I swear, I damn near orgasm again at the sound of his gravelly voice. "I don't think there's any way I can fuck you quietly. You feel too fucking good."

"The floor?" I suggest breathlessly, figuring that's probably a quieter option.

"I have a better idea."

His arm snakes beneath me, anchoring me to his body before effortlessly lifting me from the mattress. Carrying me to the far wall, which I know for a fact is an exterior wall and does not butt up to anyone else's room, he presses me against it, his dick still buried deep inside of me.

"Hold on tight with your legs," he instructs.

I nod, using his hips as leverage to tighten my grip on him.

And then he's moving, thrusting in and out of me at a relentless pace as his mouth closes down around my nipple, sucking it into a hard bud before moving to the next. So many sensations flood my body. Pain and pleasure blending into the most tantalizing concoction that has my second orgasm ripping through me without warning.

I whimper, fighting against the moan that so desperately wants to escape. Sutton's mouth finds mine, greedily swallowing my pleasure as he continues to thrust inside of me. I've barely recovered from the second when the third hits me like a brick wall, slamming into me with so much intensity my body begins to shake violently, trembling.

The waves are still rippling through me one after another when Sutton's hand closes around my shoulder, holding me in place as, in a few hard thrusts, he pumps his release inside of me.

It is both the most erotic and the most pleasurable thing I've ever experienced, feeling his warmth fill me up.

He buries his face into my neck, trying to calm his erratic breathing as together, we both slowly come down from the high.

It's strange. The whole ordeal couldn't have lasted longer than five minutes and yet my body is so spent, it feels more like five hours have passed when Sutton pulls out of me and slowly lowers me to my feet.

I expect him to slip on his boxers and leave, so when he tugs me into his chest, his hand going into the back of my hair as he angles my face upward, my heart does a full three-sixty in my chest.

"That was..." He smiles down at me, the light from the moon hitting the window just right to illuminate the sheer beauty of it.

"Yeah," I agree, still not able to fully process what just happened or what's still happening for that matter.

"Can I stay for a bit?" His thumb slides across my bottom lip. "I promise to be gone before anyone wakes up," he quickly adds, sensing the objection forming on my tongue.

To further squash my reservations, he leans down and kisses me softly, effectively killing any and all misgivings I might have on the subject.

"I'm just not ready to leave," he murmurs against my mouth.

As if I had the power to say no to begin with, he goes and puts a nail straight into my coffin.

"I, uh..." I pull back slightly. "I need to go to the bathroom for a moment." I feel almost embarrassed to say. But given that I can quite literally feel his cum sliding down the inside of my thigh, I think I should probably go clean myself up.

"Okay. I'll be here when you get back." He nods, releasing his hold on me.

I quickly head toward the door, which has my robe hanging on the back of it. It's thin and short, but it's good enough to sneak across the hall in. Draping it across my shoulders, I quickly and quietly twist the lock on the door before tugging it open.

I watch Remi's door closely as I tiptoe to the bathroom, not letting out a breath until I'm locked safely inside.

I should feel guilty, I think as I wipe away any and all traces that Sutton was ever inside me. But guilt is not what I feel at all. Nor is regret. If anything, I want to go back in that room and do it all over again.

I move to the sink to wash my hands, not able to stop the smile that touches my lips at the sight of my messy hair and flushed complexion.

Yep, I should definitely feel guilty. And maybe tomorrow I will. Maybe in the light of day all of my regrets will flow freely to the surface, but right now... Right now all I feel is pure and utter joy. And right there lies the problem.

*A problem I will deal with later*, I think to myself as I exit the bathroom and quietly make my way back across the hall.

I half expect Sutton to have snuck out while I was gone, so I'm honestly a little surprised to find him lying in bed, waiting for me.

I lock the door before making my way toward him.

"You're still here," I state the obvious, climbing into the bed next to him.

"I am," he confirms, rolling onto his side before tugging me toward him so that we're lying face to face.

"Figured you'd hightail it out of here the minute I was gone," I admit, tucking my hand under my cheek.

"I regret that, you know? The way I left you there. I know it's no excuse, but I kind of panicked."

"Why?" My voice is just a whisper as I stare back at him, his face barely visible.

"In truth, because I was pretty certain my brother was in love with you and I had just royally fucked up. I guess a part of me hoped you were so drunk you didn't really remember much. Sounds fucking stupid now, but in my teenage brain, it made total sense."

"Is that why you never told him? Because you thought he was in love with me? Which, by the way, is laughable. If you knew our relationship, you wouldn't have thought that."

"Why did *you* never tell him?" he asks instead.



“I have my reasons. Besides, after all the girls we watched you parade in and out of this house and then I ended up being one of them, can you imagine what he’d think of me? No offense.”

“None taken. I was a bit of whore back then.” He smiles.

“A bit?” I tease.

“Okay, a lot of one. But in my defense, I was a teenager. I think you’ll find most guys in my position would have been the same way.”

“Remi wasn’t,” I say before quickly realizing that is absolutely not true. Remi has always been like Sutton in that way. I guess I just saw it differently coming from him. “Actually...”

“I was about to say...” He chuckles. “Pretty sure he was worse than me.”

“Not in high school. In college... Now that’s a different story.”

“Have you two ever hooked up?”

“What?” I draw back. “God, no. Why would you ask me that?”

“I don’t know. I mean, you two lived together for a while. Was there never a drunken night where things got a little out of hand?”

“Never,” I admit.

“Damn, he’s got it worse than I thought,” he says, more to himself than to me.

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing.” He shakes his head. “Just surprised, is all.”

“Well, you shouldn’t be. We’re more like siblings. We always have been.”

I can tell he wants to say something, but for whatever reason he chooses not to, and for some odd reason I choose not to push, almost as if I’m afraid to hear what he’s thinking and not saying.

“When do you go back to D.C.?” he asks instead, completely changing the subject.

“Sunday morning. You? When are you heading back to Chicago?”

“Same.”

I try not to let the thought sit too long. That we have only one full day left before we return to our normal lives. Lives that don’t include each other.

It’s for the best. That I know with complete certainty. This—Sutton and I—it could never work. Even if he was capable of a real relationship, Remi would never accept it. And even if he did, I know it would cause a divide between us and the thought of that breaks my heart more than the thought of living without Sutton. I know what this is. I knew the moment I awoke to him

in my bed. This was a one-night thing. Best not to become too preoccupied with things that will never come to fruition.

“Guess I’ll see you again in another six years.” I snort.

To this, he has no response.

We let the silence of the night blanket all the things we don’t say.

I stare at his face in the darkness for what feels like hours, knowing that if I close my eyes, the next time I open them he’ll be gone. But eventually it becomes impossible to keep them open any longer, and I find sleep taking me under like a quilt of darkness, blanketing out the world until there is nothing left but the soft sound of Sutton’s breathing and the promise that when I wake up, everything will be different and yet exactly the same.

# Chapter Ten

Sutton



I don't know what time I finally moved from the guest room back to my room, only that the sun had not yet broken the horizon when I did.

Crawling into bed with Olivia felt wrong for reasons my tired brain didn't fully understand, but the feeling didn't last long. My head no more than hit the pillow and I was out. My body and brain fucking spent.

It's late when I wake up. I don't know how I know, but I can just tell. Rolling to my side, I glance at the bedside table. Nearly noon... Fuck. I never sleep this late.

Forcing myself into an upright position, I stretch my arms over my head, trying to work out the kink in my back from sleeping on this stiff-ass mattress.

Scrubbing my hands down my face, I stop with my fingers just beneath my nose when *her* scent catches me by surprise. Taking a deep inhale, I can't stop the smile that touches my lips. Delicious...

My cock stirs beneath the blanket thrown across my lap.

I didn't intend for last night to happen. I'm not even sure I know how it did. Too much scotch. Too little willpower. I think that solves the mystery.

Does it make me a bad brother if I'm already counting down the seconds until I can be balls deep in his best friend again? I mean, if he's not going to claim her, someone should. Even if that someone is me.

Shaking off the thought, I throw my legs over the side of the bed and push to a stand.

I may have enjoyed last night, but that doesn't mean it meant anything. I wanted to fuck someone who wasn't Olivia, and she was available.

I don't believe the lie, not even for a fucking second.

I fucked her because I wanted to. And not because I wanted sex. I could have rolled over and done that with Olivia if that's all it was. It wasn't about the sex. It was about *her*. I just don't yet know what that means.

That I'm a selfish bastard who can't resist a good challenge?

That I get off knowing she's off-limits?

Both are true. But they aren't the only truth...

In nothing more than my boxers, I make my way across the hall to the bathroom, reemerging fifteen minutes later freshly showered and feeling semi-human again.

Tugging open the bathroom door, I step into the hallway, a towel hanging loosely on my hips, to see Aspen coming out of her room. She instantly looks my way, the sexiest fucking blush creeping up her neck.

Without a thought, I move toward her.

Before she can form a single word on her lips, I push her back inside the bedroom, turning for a short moment to click the lock behind me.

"What are you doing?" she whisper-hisses.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" I drop the towel, grinning like a fucking fool when her gaze drops, her eyes widening at the sight of me.

It hadn't occurred to me that she'd never actually *seen* me like this before. So, being the gentleman that I am, I give her the luxury of having a good, long, hard look. By the time her eyes flick back to mine, I'm so hard it's borderline painful.

I stalk toward her, my hands going to the hem of her shirt, which I quickly tug over her head and discard on the floor. Then my fingers are on the band of her shorts and in one quick pull down, I take her lace panties down with them.

She lets out a soft gasp when my arm slips around her back, pulling her flush against me.

"Remi is across the hall," she warns me on a ragged breath, her pulse spiking against my touch.

"Then we'll just have to be extra quiet." I raise my foot and use it to push her shorts and panties to the floor.

I smile against her mouth when she takes my cue and quickly steps out of them.

I haven't kissed her yet. Haven't even fucking touched her. And yet, she's breathing so hard, she sounds like she's just come back from a run. It brushes my face, smelling sweet, like maple syrup and honey. I can't resist leaning in for a taste, running my tongue along the seam of her lips.

I let out a soft groan.

“You taste like pancakes,” I tell her, leaning down to grasp her just below her ass cheeks before tugging her up. Her legs go around my waist as her hands find the back of my hair, her fingers playing in the wet strands.

“Do I?” She grins, pressing her mouth to mine.

I bypass her lips, dragging my tongue seductively against hers.

“So fucking good,” I murmur, repeating the action.

Her grip on me tightens as I reach between us, positioning my cock at her center. She’s already so wet, I barely have to move before I’m slowly slipping inside of her.

She kisses me hard, using her arms to help guide herself up and down my shaft. With my hands on her hips, I move with her, thrusting upward with a slow, steady pace, like I don’t have anywhere else in the world to be.

Or maybe I just don’t have anywhere else I *want* to be.

I devour her mouth, reveling in the feel of her wrapped tightly around me.

Last night I was still feeling the buzz of scotch in my veins, but today, I’m crystal fucking clear. I swallow every soft moan and relish the feel of her as she releases around my cock, throbbing against me, coaxing my own orgasm to the surface.

I slow for a moment to regain my bearings and then begin to move again, this time at a slightly more aggressive pace. As if her body knows what I want, she comes again, and this time, there’s no fighting against it.

Pleasure forms deep in my nuts, warming my entire body as it swells and builds before finally spilling deep inside of her. I grunt, burying my face into her neck as I pump out the last remnants of my release.

She falls still against me, hands still knotted in my hair, her chest rising and falling in quick succession, and even though my quads are burning like fucking fire, the last thing I want to do is set her to the ground. In fact, I think I would be perfectly happy standing here for the remainder of the day if it meant I got to feel her warm and wet around me.

I have yet to look up at her, my face still buried in her neck as I work to compose myself. She doesn’t seem to mind, her fingers now playing gently with the strands of my hair.

Reluctantly, I pull out, damn near whimpering at the loss of her around me, as I slowly lower her to her feet.

When I finally meet her gaze, I find that she looks equally as satisfied as I do. This brings a smirk to my lips, but it doesn’t stay there long when the sound of the doorknob being jiggled causes both of us to go ramrod straight.

Her eyes go wide and I imagine mine do much of the same. Neither of us moves. Hell, I'm sure neither of us fucking breathes.

"Pen." My brother's voice filters into the room. "Why is the door locked? I thought you were just getting your purse."

"I was," she chokes out, clearing her throat. "But I decided I didn't like the shirt I was wearing."

"You about done then?"

She looks at me for a long moment.

"Yeah, just give me a sec."

"Okay, well, I'm gonna wait downstairs. And hurry it up, would you? We don't have all day."

"Actually, we do," she quips, trying to seem as natural as possible.

"Yeah. Yeah," he grumbles.

I wait until I hear the sound of his footsteps falling away before I finally speak.

"Where are you going?" I ask, voice as low as I can get it without whispering.

"Remi and I are meeting up with some old friends for lunch."

"Didn't you just eat breakfast?" I lean down and kiss her to make my point.

"Really, we're just meeting up to day drink," she admits, another soft blush touching her cheeks.

"So you're telling me that tonight I get drunk, Aspen."

"Tonight?" She blinks slowly.

"It's our last night. You didn't think I was going to let you leave without taking full advantage, did you?" I palm her bare ass.

"Honestly, I didn't think *this* would happen today," she admits.

"So, is that a yes?"

"Did you ask me a question?" A smile plays on her soft lips.

I can't stop myself from thinking about how good it would feel to slip my cock between them and fuck her mouth.

"Can I see you again tonight?" I grab her other ass cheek and grind my still hard erection into her belly.

"Okay," she quickly agrees. "But you need to let me go or your brother is going to come up here and catch us."

"Fine." I reluctantly release her before snagging my towel off the floor, wrapping it around my waist once more.

“Go.” She shoos me toward the door.

With a soft chuckle, I turn and reach for the knob, clicking the lock before quietly tugging it open. I glance down the hallway in both directions before stepping out of the room. Giving Aspen a wink over my shoulder, I head to my room, dipping inside seemingly undetected.

Since my parents are gone, off on a second honeymoon to Belize, the only person I have to be careful of is Remi. Or at least, that’s what I think until I find Olivia coming out of my room just as I’m going in, her suitcase dragging on the floor behind her.

I look down at the luggage and then back up at her face.

“Going somewhere?” I ask, my brow furrowing in confusion.

“Home.” She squares her shoulders before attempting to push past me. I cut her off. “Get out of my way, Sutton.”

“Not until you tell me what the fuck this is about.” I grind my back molars together.

“What this is about?” She draws back like I’ve physically struck her. “What this is about?” Her voice shoots up an octave.

“Move.” I gently nudge her inside the room before shutting the door.

“You are a fucking asshole.” Her finger is in my face the second I turn back around. “You bring me here, you introduce me to your family, you act like you want more. And then you sneak off in the middle of the night to fuck your brother’s girl.”

Her accusation, no matter how accurate, hits me like a slap to the face. It takes me a full ten seconds to recover from the impact.

“What the fuck...” I start. “She is *not* my brother’s girl,” I hiss, not even bothering to deny it or question how she knew.

“You don’t even care enough about me to lie.” Tears fill her eyes.

Truth be told, I have no idea where this is coming from. Olivia and I have never been exclusive. I’ve been nothing but honest that I was still sleeping with other women. She acted like it was fine. Like she didn’t mind. I guess where I fucked up was asking her to come here with me. I knew it wasn’t a good idea, and yet, for selfish fucking reasons, I did it anyway.

“I respect you enough not to,” I correct.

“I thought maybe I was overreacting. That maybe I was seeing things that weren’t there. You were gone half the night and still, I rationalized that you probably couldn’t sleep and just went for a walk. But then I come up here a few minutes ago and again, you’re nowhere to be found. And what’s more,

Aspen is conveniently missing as well. Doesn't take a genius to figure out what's going on, especially with the way you've been staring at her all week."

"What are you on about?" I bite, not sure if I'm frustrated by how easily she figured it out or by what the fuck she's implying.

"Why did you bring me here?" she asks instead.

"I told you why."

"Was it to make her jealous?"

"What? No." I shake my head. "You should know me well enough to know that I don't play games. I brought you here because I needed a date for the week. It's not my fault if you thought this meant more." I gesture between us. "I never pretended this was anything but casual."

"Men don't bring women home to meet their families if it's just casual."

"I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression." I try to keep the edge from my voice, but it still drags up my throat like razor blades.

"You're sorry?" She barks out a humorless laugh. "Let's see how sorry you are when I go down there and tell your brother about what you've been up to."

"You will do no such thing." I again cut off her path.

"You wanna bet?"

"What did I do that you haven't been doing all week?" I turn the tables on her. "You think I haven't noticed the way you've been up on my brother's nuts?"

"To get *your* attention." She pokes me in the chest with her index finger. "To get a rise out of *you*. I didn't sneak off to fuck him, did I? No, because he isn't who I want. You are."

"Why didn't you just say so? Say what the fuck you want, Olivia."

"You!" she yells in my face. "I want you."

"I'm sorry, but that's not something I can give you. I thought I made that pretty clear going in."

"You did." She swipes at a stray tear. I may be an asshole, but I don't get off on making people cry. "Stupid me for thinking maybe I could be the one to change you. Now I see, you are who you are and no amount of wishful thinking is going to change that."

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," I start.

"No, you aren't."

"I am. Truly. It was never my intent to lead you on."



“Don’t pretend like you didn’t know what you were doing. You owe me more than a generic apology peppered with half-truths.”

“You’re right. Okay. You’re right. I suspected that you wanted more out of this. I realize now that maybe I should have made my intentions for this week much more clear. For that, I *am* sorry.”

“Do you love her?” She surprises me by asking.

“Who?” I draw back in confusion.

“You know who.” She narrows her gaze at me.

“Why would you ask me that?” I feel the snarl of distaste all over my face.

“Because even though you pretend that you’re immune to falling in love, deep down you know it’s only a matter of time before someone breaks open the cell you keep your heart prisoner inside of. If I were a gambling woman, I’d bet you met her long ago and have been lying to yourself about it ever since.”

I don’t know what to say to that. Not because it’s true. But because I’m not sure it *isn’t* true.

“I need to go.” She shuffles her feet. “I was able to get a flight for today, but it leaves in a couple of hours.”

I hesitate, wondering how in the fuck she managed to not only find a flight but book one so quickly. Then again, perhaps my time with Aspen lasted longer than I realized in the moment.

“Olivia.”

“Please just let me go, Sutton. I won’t tell your brother. I won’t say anything to anyone.” She touches my shoulder as she passes me, pausing for a brief moment to look me square in the eye. “But you should.”

With that, she moves past me, tugging open the door before disappearing into the hallway. I don’t try to stop her. Hell, I’m pretty sure she’s already left the house by the time I fucking move a single inch.

Confusion and shame melt into relief as I dress, still having not fully processed what the fuck just happened. I shouldn’t be surprised that she put it together. Olivia is a pretty perceptive person, and it’s not like forcing my way into Aspen’s room in nothing but a towel is exactly being discreet.

And while I feel really fucking bad for hurting Olivia, I can’t deny that I’m glad it’s over. I knew where this was headed. I just thought she’d at least fucking wait until we were back in Chicago.

When I enter the kitchen a few minutes later, I'm surprised to see Remi and Aspen are still here, huddled together at the island, sharing a private conversation.

I ignore the sting in my gut at the sight of them. It's not anything new, but for some reason, it hits a little differently today. I don't have to think about what that reason is. I already know...

I'm jealous. I'm man enough to admit at least that much to myself.

"I thought you two were leaving?" I don't have to pretend to sound annoyed. I *am* annoyed.

Both of their faces swing in my direction, but I keep my focus forward as I move toward the refrigerator.

"Greg called. We had to push it for an hour." My brother is the one who answers. "Want to explain why Olivia just left a few minutes ago with her suitcase in tow?" There's accusation in his tone, but I choose to ignore it.

Grabbing a water bottle, I knock the door closed with my hip as I let out a slow breath, turning to face both sets of eyes I feel burning holes in the back of my head. I briefly look at Aspen, who has trouble holding my gaze, before locking onto my brother.

"She had to get back. Work stuff." I lie so effortlessly that he quickly accepts it as the truth.

"Oh, I didn't know. I assumed she would leave when you did."

"She planned to, but some stuff came up and she had to get back early." I take a swig of water, this time avoiding looking at Aspen at all. "Any other questions?"

"What are you doing today?"

"No plans." I grunt. "Anything else?"

"Nope, just curious." Remi seems at least somewhat satisfied with my explanation.

"Okay, well, if that's all." I move to leave the kitchen.

"Do you want to come with us?"

I damn near fall over I stop so abruptly at the sound of Aspen's voice.

I turn to see my brother giving her a *what the fuck* look.

"He doesn't have anything to do. Olivia left. Your parents are gone." She quickly tries to explain.

"I'm sure he doesn't want to hang out with *us*." Remi tries to reason with her.

“Actually, I could tag along if you’re good with it,” I find myself saying, though I have no fucking idea why.

My brother’s right. The last thing I want to do is hang out with him and his lame-ass friends. But that’s not why I want to go, is it?

“Seriously?” Remi looks at me like I’ve grown a second head.

“Why not? As Coop so eloquently pointed out, I have nothing else to do. Besides, we’re all leaving tomorrow.”

“And?” He’s suspicious and why the fuck wouldn’t he be. I’ve never gone out of my way to hang out with him before. The only real time we’ve ever spent together is at family functions when we’re forced to interact.

“And maybe I want to spend some time with my little brother before we do.”

“Are you feeling okay?” He eyes me skeptically.

“You don’t want me to go, I won’t go.” I start to turn back around.

“I mean. I guess you can come.”

I stop mid-motion, pivoting back in his direction.

“Okay.” I do my best to seem indifferent. “I’ll just go change then.” I gesture down at my athletic shorts and old tee.

“Don’t take forever,” Remi calls to my back as I turn. “We leave in twenty.”

“Twenty. Heard,” I holler back, disappearing around the corner seconds later.



“So, Sut, what have you been up to these days?” one of the guys at the end of the long, rectangular bar table asks, pulling my attention from the half empty beer in front of me.

Fuck, I can’t even remember the dude’s name. Adam. Alex. Something like that.

“Not much.” I shrug.

“Remi said you’re living in Chicago.” He tips his beer to his mouth. *I’m honestly a little surprised Remi has talked about me at all.*

“I am.”

“I’ve never been to Chicago. What’s it like?”

“Crowded,” I say flatly, relieved when a petite girl with tight red curls takes the attention from me to her.

“Chicago is bad. But New York is the worst.”

I tune her out after that, my gaze flicking to Aspen, who sits beside me, my brother on the other side of her. If not for that, I doubt I’d be able to keep my hands to myself. But alas, I’m forced to be on my best behavior.

“You know, you didn’t have to come.” She speaks low enough that only I can hear.

“I know.” Is all I say as I finish off the remainder of my beer in one long pull.

Taking another out of the metal bucket in front of me, I twist off the cap and take another drink, this one much smaller.

I swear, after this week, my liver is going to need a serious break. Other than the occasional glass of scotch, I rarely drink, especially not multiple days in a row. I can already feel the effects of what I’ve consumed, and of how many days I’ve missed being in the gym.

I’m gonna have a rough couple of weeks getting back into the swing of things after all of this.

“You seem kind of miserable,” Aspen speaks again after a minute or two.

I glance over at my brother, who’s deep in conversation with the two guys at the other end of the table.

“I’m not,” I admit.

“You sure?” She quirks a brow at me.

It’s funny that I never realized how beautiful she is. Or rather, that I never let myself admit that I thought so. But sitting here now, with her sitting so close, it’s hard to see how I ever ignored it.

Her big eyes. Her soft lips. The small peppering of freckles across her nose. If we were alone, I’d lean in and kiss every single fucking one of them.

I nod, leaning in to speak directly into her ear. “I’d be enjoying myself much more if it were just you and me here.” I pull away before anyone has the chance to think too much on the interaction.

“Me too,” she admits after a long moment, her gaze darting around the group. “Guess you’ll just have to wait for later,” she mouths.

I take a drink of beer to mask the smile that tugs at my lips.

Fuck... Later can’t come soon enough, I think, but don’t say.

I have no idea what the fuck I’m doing. I know this won’t end well, and yet I can’t seem to stop myself. It’s like the top being popped on a soda can—

once it's open, there's no closing it. You either drink the contents or let them go flat.

And I, for one, am not one to let things needlessly go to waste.

I force my attention back to the table, and I'm glad that I do when Remi turns, pulling Aspen into the conversation.

"When did we spend the night at that frat house? Do you remember? We ended up locking ourselves in some random dude's bedroom." Remi chuckles.

"Oh my gosh." Aspen's shoulders shake as she laughs at the memory. "That was our first week on campus. We crashed some party where we knew no one. Learned the hard way that it's almost impossible to get a driver late on a Friday night. We either walked three miles in an area neither of us really knew yet, or we stayed."

"What about the guy whose room you stayed in?"

"We found him passed out outside the bedroom door the next morning." My brother barks out a laugh.

Something catches Aspen's attention across the room. I know the instant it happens. The smile fades from her lips, and I swear every ounce of color drains from her face.

I follow her line of sight but can't pinpoint exactly who or what she's looking at. It takes Remi a full ten seconds to realize she's gone silent but once he does, his complete attention is on her. He, too, follows her gaze, only where I wear confusion, he wears instant and sudden anger.

"Pen." His hand slides over hers. "Pen. Look at me. Look at me, Pen." His hand slides up the side of her face in a way that makes me want to shove his ass right out of his stool, forcing her face to him. "Let's get out of here." He speaks like she's the only other person in the room.

I can't see her expression, only the back of her head move as she wordlessly nods.

"Hey, guys," Remi addresses the group. "Sorry, but we're going to have to run."

"What? Why? Don't go," filters around the table, but my brother and Aspen are already on their feet.

"It was great seeing you. We'll catch up next time we're in town." He doesn't even give his friends time to say proper goodbyes before he's guiding Aspen toward the door.

"What the hell was that?" one of the guys asks me.

I shrug, just as clueless as the rest of them, realizing I should probably get moving before they leave without me.

Pushing to a stand, I turn, and without a word, exit the group. It's not like they're my friends anyway. The one and only reason I came just walked out the door. Or, well, not quite out the door, I quickly realize when I find Remi and Aspen standing at the front of the restaurant, just a few feet from the door. And they're not alone.

There's a man standing in front of them, blocking the exit, a humorless smile revealing a mouth of broken and rotted teeth. His dark hair is slick with grease, like it hasn't been washed in weeks. His clothes are dirty—tattered jeans, a T-shirt that looks like it was rolled in mud before he put it on. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that he's an addict. He might as well have that shit tattooed right across his forehead.

Uneasiness grows in my chest as I watch the way Aspen practically curls into Remi as the man speaks.

“What do we have here?” He clucks his tongue, rolling his eyes over Aspen. “If it isn't my *best* girl.” He has the audacity to try and touch her face, but my brother is quick enough to slap his hand away before he can.

“You have one second to step the fuck out of the way...” Remi's voice is so tight I swear I can actually hear his back molars grinding together.

“Or what, pretty boy? Huh? You ain't shit.” He snarls at my brother, whose fist I see flex at his side.

“What's going on?” I ask as I approach them, my eyes locked on the man who has the balls to challenge my brother, who, mind you, is a full head and shoulders taller than him and outweighs him easily by fifty pounds. But my brother isn't even his biggest problem anymore... I am.

“None of your fucking business.” He sniffs loudly, tugging at the band of his jeans that looks like it's barely hanging on to his narrow hips.

“I think I'll decide what my business is.” I've got him by the neck of the shirt so fast, he's already out the door before he realizes what's hit him.

Throwing him to the concrete, I hover over him, baring my teeth like a fucking animal about to attack.

“My brother told you to fucking move.” I shove his shoulder down with my foot when he attempts to get up.

“Man, fuck you! Do you know who the fuck I am?”

“A dead man if you keep running your fucking mouth.” I spit. And I do mean spit, quite literally.

I may have no fucking clue what's going on here or who this fucking guy is, but given Aspen's reaction to seeing him, which I can only assume is what spooked her at the table and prompted their quick exit, I know whatever he did to her, it wasn't good. Add in the fact that my easygoing, almost never riled brother seemed seconds away from knocking his head off, and my assumptions get even worse.

"Sutton." My gaze slices to Remi as he steps outside. "This isn't the place. Let's just get out of here."

"You want me to fuck him up?" My eyes swing to Aspen as soon as she comes into view, ignoring Remi's request.

"Fuck me up! Ha!" Shitbag doesn't get out another sound before my foot stomps down onto his stomach, knocking the air straight from his lungs.

He chokes and gasps, rolling to his side in an effort to push himself upright. As soon as he tries, I put my foot on his ass and shove, sending him lurching forward, his hands getting stuck beneath him as his jaw drags on the concrete. He groans, rolling to his side again.

"Stay the fuck down!" I growl.

"Sutton." Remi grabs my bicep and tugs me backward. "That's enough."

"Is it?" Again my question is for Aspen.

"I just want to get out of here," she finally says, a tremble to her voice that seems to travel down her limbs as well. Only her words are said to Remi, not me.

"Let's go." He has his arm around her shoulders in a second, leading her away.

I turn back to the asshole at my feet.

"Today is your lucky fucking day," I tell him, pivoting on my heel. "I see your face again, you won't be so fortunate." With that, I follow my brother and Aspen, who are already several feet ahead of me.

I can't hear what my brother is saying, only the slight rumble of his words as I catch up to them. I'm careful not to get too close, not wanting to draw too many red flags despite the fact that I'm desperate to see if she's okay.

I'm not worried about what Remi thinks of me teaching that asshole a lesson. That shit I would do for a complete stranger. But if I start intruding into a situation I otherwise wouldn't, I doubt my brother is just going to overlook it.

When he leans down and presses a kiss to the side of her head, I swear to fuck I see every fucking shade of red in existence. The rational side of my

brain is reminding me that they've always been like this and this is nothing out of the ordinary. But the irrational side of my brain... Well, that fucker wants to smash my brother's head into the fucking concrete sidewalk beneath his feet.

I don't know why all of a sudden the sight of them together has me so twisted. Then again, that's not entirely true. Because just a few short hours ago I was balls deep inside of her. In guy world, that means she's mine until I decide she isn't. And I don't like when people touch what is mine. Even if that person is my brother.

It doesn't help that my adrenaline is still thrumming erratically through my veins after giving some dopehead a much-needed lesson in manners. When someone tells you to move, you fucking move.

The farther we walk, the closer I inch forward in an effort to hear what they're talking about. What can I say? I'm curious. And since I can't ask her outright, for obvious reasons, I have to resort to eavesdropping on the two of them.

"I thought he moved," I hear Aspen say, almost losing her words to the wind.

I can only assume *he* is the fucker I just left bloodied and a bit bruised on the sidewalk.

"He did. Apparently not as far away as we had thought. Either that or maybe he's in town for some reason." Remi tightens his hold on her. "Are you okay? I know that couldn't have been easy for you. Seeing him."

"I'm fine." She blows out an audible breath.

"And I'm sorry about Sutton. He's always been a strike first, ask questions later kind of guy."

See, didn't raise a single red flag. I may be an asshole, but I'm an asshole who doesn't tolerate bullies of any kind.

"It's okay. I'm not entirely upset that Harris got a taste of his own medicine."

Harris, a name to put to his nasty face.

And what the fuck does that mean, a taste of his own medicine?

I inch closer.

I swear to fuck, if I find out he put his hands on her in any way, I will go back there and beat that motherfucker to a pulp.

And that's not just about Aspen. That's about *all* women. Any man who puts his hands on a woman should be taken out back and shot.



“Does someone want to fill me in on who the fuck that was?” I finally ask.

“No,” Remi answers first.

“It’s okay.” Aspen shrugs off Remi’s hold but doesn’t object when he takes her hand instead. Anyone standing on the outside looking in would think these two were not only a couple but madly in love.

Of course, I know better.

Because I know things about her Remi will never know.

Like how she tastes.

How she smells.

How she *feels*.

I know the tiny noises she makes when she’s close...

“That guy... The one you...” She glances at me over her shoulder.

“The one I made eat concrete.” I nod.

“Well, he was, um, he was my old foster brother,” she quietly explains, turning forward again.

“What did he do to you?” It’s a fair question, because he *did* do something. A woman doesn’t look at a man the way she looked at him if he didn’t hurt her.

The thought sours my stomach. Hell, up until a couple of days ago, I didn’t even know she grew up in a foster home, let alone had a foster brother. One look at him and you knew he was one of those self-entitled pieces of shit who fuck up their entire lives and then blame everyone else for their misfortune. I know the type. The kind who think they can do whatever they want, like the fucking world owes them something. I can only imagine what growing up with someone like that must have been like.

“Let’s not, Sut,” Remi answers for her.

“Why? Was it that bad?” Anger stirs in my chest.

“Why? You going to go back there and make things even worse?” Remi bites.

“Make things worse? I did you a fucking favor.”

“You made this worse for Aspen, is what you did.” His nostrils flare as he throws me a glare over his shoulder.

“Me? Pretty sure that fucking dope dumpster back there was your problem. I simply removed him after he denied your request to remove himself.”

“No one asked you to do that.” My brother is upset but not because of what I did. Because I did it before he could.

“You didn’t have to. I can read a fucking situation. Now, what did he do to you so I can determine whether or not I should turn the fuck around and finish what I started.”

“You don’t have to tell him anything,” Remi murmurs directly to Aspen. She shakes her head softly. “He was a difficult person to live with. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Difficult how?”

I mean, I can think of a few ways off the top of my head how someone like that might be difficult to live with, but I want to know how he was difficult specifically to *her*.

“Just difficult.” That’s all I get.

And you know what, it should be enough. If she doesn’t want to tell me, then I don’t want to know. What do I care what happened to her, anyway?

She’s a good fuck. I don’t plan on marrying the girl or even dating her, for that matter. So why the fuck do I care what bullshit she’s got in her past?

Only weirdly, I do care and for no other reason than that I *care* about her. And that, my friends, is a real fucking problem.

# Chapter Eleven

Aspen



“Tell me what happened earlier. Really.” Sutton’s voice is soft against my ear, his body curled into mine so tightly, it’s hard to tell where I end and he begins.

Seeing Harris today, I didn’t expect to feel the way I did. One minute, I was obsessing over every little thing Sutton did and said next to me, and the next, all I could see was *him*. He looked so different, drugs taking their toll on him over the years. But in some weird way, he looked exactly as I remembered too.

It was the strangest sensation, like suddenly six years had vanished and he was standing over me again, that sadistic look in his eye.

But then Sutton was there, standing over Harris rather than Harris standing over me. He protected me without even knowing what I needed protecting from.

The sight of him standing there, shoulders tight, muscles flexed, I don’t think I’ve ever seen that side of Sutton before. And my God, if it didn’t steal my breath.

Yes, I was rattled and unnerved by seeing Harris. But I was more rattled by Sutton’s reaction to my reaction. And while I’ve tried not to let my mind run away with what that might mean, I’ve still had to reel it back in a few times.

Had I run into Harris six months ago, or hell, even six days ago, I would be so thrown by the interaction that it would take me a full month to recover. But when Sutton crawled into my bed just after one in the morning, it took him only minutes to soothe away every wound seeing Harris tore open.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I finally answer, feeling the rocks from earlier resettling into the pit of my stomach.

“Did he hurt you?” The way he says it brings tears to the backs of my eyes in an instant.

“If I say yes, will you leave it at that?”

“That depends...” He falls silent for a brief moment. “Does Remi know what happened?”

“Yes and no,” I admit.

“What does that mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. He knows parts but not all.”

“And what is all?”

“If I haven’t told Remi, I’m not going to tell you.” I don’t mean to sound harsh, but it’s the truth. This secret is mine and mine alone, and if I have anything to say about it, I will carry it to my grave.

“Okay.” If he’s offended, it doesn’t show, because he snuggles into me deeper, burying his face into the back of my neck. “Will you tell me about them? About your foster family.”

“What do you want to know?” I ask, entering unfamiliar territory. Remi was around while most of it happened. I can’t say I’ve ever sat down and just talked about it with someone after the fact.

“Everything.” He presses a kiss to my shoulder.

I wish I could explain in words what this feels like. To be here, with Sutton like this. It’s sudden and unexpected and even though I know I shouldn’t, I can’t help but drink in every second I have with him like a woman who’s spent days lost in the desert only to stumble upon the most delicious spring. I know if I drink too much, too quickly, I’ll end up sick, but it doesn’t stop me from guzzling it down anyway.

“I can’t tell you everything.”

“Then tell me what you can.”

“I...” I hesitate, not really sure what, if anything, I feel comfortable sharing. “I don’t know where to start,” I finally admit.

“What happened to your birth parents?”

“That one is easy enough to answer, I guess.” I blow out a slow breath. “My mom died of a drug overdose when I was young, and I never knew my father.”

“Aspen.”

“Please don’t say you’re sorry. I don’t remember my mom anyway. And from what I’ve learned over the years, I’m better for it.”

“Did you ever try to find your father?”

“No. He wasn’t listed on my birth certificate and honestly, given my mother’s lifestyle, I’m not sure I’d want to know.”

“Is that when you went into foster care?” He’s gentle with his questions, like he’s afraid to ask something the wrong way.

“It is. I was bounced around to a few different families before I ended up with the McKinneys, who I was with from eleven to eighteen. I actually met Remi the summer after I was placed with them.”

“You didn’t have any other family that could take you in?”

“No.”

“What were the foster families like that you stayed with before? Were they good to you?”

“Well, they kept me alive.” I shrug against his embrace. “But yeah, I guess they were okay. I don’t really remember some of the earlier ones I was placed with. When I was eight, I went to a group home after the woman fostering me grew ill. I hated it there so much. So many kids. Some from really bad homes. Sometimes I was afraid to close my eyes and sleep, scared of what might happen to me if I did. So, when I found out I was being placed with the McKinneys, I was so relieved.”

“Were they good to you?” he asks even though I suspect he already knows the answer.

“Would I have stayed here as often as I did if they were?” I ask a question that requires no answer.

“What were they like?”

“Awful.” I grimace. “Jean was a lot like my birth mom. She spent most of her days high. Rick wasn’t much better, though he did hold down a job as a truck driver, which is more than I can say for his wife.”

“Did they ever…” The question dies on his lips.

“If you’re asking if they abused me, they did smack me around from time to time, but they were more neglectful than anything.” I readjust, rolling from one side to the other so that we’re now facing each other in the dark.

“And did he—”

I lean in, pressing a kiss to his lips to silence the next question he’s about to ask. Because if he asks it, I’m afraid my reaction will be all the answer he needs.

“I don’t want to talk about them anymore.” I slip my arm around him, scooting in closer as I deepen the kiss.

“You’re trying to distract me,” he murmurs against my mouth.

“Is it working?” I slip my hand between us, finding him already hardening against my palm.

“Maybe.” He groans softly when I wrap my fingers around his shaft and squeeze.

“What about now?” I pump my hand a couple of times.

“Getting warmer.” His tongue slides against mine.

Pressing my hand to his shoulder, he rolls to his back without further instruction. Climbing on top of him, I straddle his lap, positioning his thick erection at my entrance.

“And now?” I whisper, slowly sliding down on top of him.

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he bites back a groan that vibrates deep in his throat rather than spilling across his lips.

And just like that, everything else fades away.

There is no thought of anything but this.

Of him moving deep inside of me.

Of his fingers digging into my hips.

Of the sound of my name on his lips, a whisper lost to the night.

Of the pleasure that sears through my body like a hot branding iron being pressed to my flesh.

And when we climax together, Sutton holding on to me like I’m the very thing tethering him to the earth, I know with complete certainty that no part of me will ever want to let this go. No matter what that costs me.



“How does it feel to be home?” Remi asks without giving me a chance to even say hello.

I balance my phone between my ear and my shoulder as I work on emptying my bag and sorting out my dirty laundry.

“You realize you just dropped me off twenty minutes ago, right?” I laugh into the phone.

“I can’t help it if I miss you already.”

I can hear the smile in his voice as if he were standing right in front of me.

“You’re incapable of being alone. You realize this, right? I think you might have a problem.”

“Which is why you never should have moved out.”

“You don’t seem to have any trouble finding company,” I point out.

“I meant to ask you this on the plane, but do you think my brother was acting weird?”

My heart lodges in my throat at his abrupt change of topic.

Not only because I feel guilty as hell, but also because I’m already suffering from the worst sort of withdrawals. And given that we didn’t discuss seeing each other again after we parted ways, I have a feeling I’m going to be facing a long road to recovery.

I guess that’s what happens when you relapse. You think you can handle more than you’re equipped for and well, it never works out for the user.

And while yes, I realize Sutton is not a tangible addiction like drugs or alcohol, it doesn’t mean my entire body doesn’t feel the absence of him everywhere.

“Weird how?” I do my best to sound as uninterested as possible.

“I don’t know. I just... He used to avoid us like we were diseased and this week... He was just acting very un-Sutton-like.”

“Perhaps he’s just maturing.”

“That’s not it.”

“How do you know?” I swallow hard, trying to keep the nervousness from my voice.

I know the right path here. It’s to come clean. Tell him everything and beg for forgiveness. But I do none of those things.

“Something was up with him. I can’t pinpoint what it was, but I’m telling you, he was being weird. Did you not notice?”

“I mean, yeah, I noticed. But it just seemed like he wanted to spend some time with you. Is that a bad thing?”

“No. I guess I’m just not used to it, is all.”

“At least he’s making an effort.”

Is there an award for worst best friend? Because I think I’ve earned it and then some.

“I guess you’re right,” he concedes. “So, you wanna meet up for drinks later?”

In true Remi fashion, he never dwells on one thing for too long. I wish I could steal a little piece of that for myself. Maybe then I wouldn’t feel like a woman who’s ridden the crazy train straight to obsessed.

“Drinks?” I laugh. “We just got home. I don’t need drinks. I need sleep. And to do laundry. I don’t think my bosses would take too lightly to me

returning to work Monday in yoga pants because that is seriously the only thing I have clean right now.”

“I love you in yoga pants.” He uses his sexy voice on me.

I roll my eyes, even though he can’t see me.

“On that note, I’m hanging up.”

“Pen!” He objects, but I’m already pulling the phone away from my ear.

“Love you, Remi. I’ll call you tomorrow,” I say, clicking the end call button.

I’ve no more than dropped my phone onto the bed when it starts vibrating again. Shaking my head, I don’t even look at the number as I answer it.

Because really, I already know who it is.

“I said not tonight, Remi.” I laugh.

“This isn’t Remi.”

My heart is in my throat in an instant.

I didn’t expect to hear his voice for a long time, maybe never again. The sound is like a soothing balm to my achy skin, instantly taking the edge off.

“Sutton...” My voice comes out hoarse. “How did you...”

“I stole your number out of my brother’s phone before you left.” He answers the question before I have a chance to finish asking it.

We didn’t exchange numbers before he left for the airport. In fact, he didn’t say a single word to me before slipping out of my bed in the middle of the night. When I awoke, he was gone.

It was an all too familiar feeling.

I accepted it for what it was. I knew that first night he crawled into my bed, it was nothing more than sex. And me, being so desperate for any part of him, I gobbled it up like a starved woman.

I think it’s pretty safe to say that him calling me was the last thing I expected.

“Oh.” It’s all I can think to say. “Did you, uh, need something?”

“Yes.”

God, his voice is just as beautiful as he is. Deep and rich with just the right amount of rasp to draw goose bumps to the surface of my skin.

“O-k-a-y.” I draw out when he doesn’t say anything else. “What did you need?”

“I don’t know.”

If I close my eyes, I swear I can envision him in this very moment. Brow furrowed, fingers tugging through thick strands of hair, trying to figure out



what the hell he's doing. Not that I've ever seen him that way. Normally he oozes confidence, never uncertainty. But right now, that's all I'm getting from him. Uncertainty.

"You don't know why you called me?"

"I, well, fuck... I don't know how to do this."

"You don't know how to talk to someone on the phone?" I bite back the laughter vibrating my shoulders.

"Not really. I can't say I've ever done it."

"You've never talked to someone on the phone?"

"No, I mean, I have. Just never a woman. Texting, sure. But calling..."

"But you're calling me," I state the obvious.

"I am."

"But you don't know why?"

"No, I do."

"You're really not making much sense. You realize that, right?"

"I guess I... Fuck. I guess I just wanted to hear your voice."

My hand slides over my mouth to contain the girly squeal threatening to spill from my lips. My insides shake with excitement and I swear, my cheeks hurt, my smile is so big.

I shouldn't let a simple comment affect me so deeply, but dammit, I can't help it. The man I've spent years loving and then hating and then I think loving again is saying things I've only ever dreamed about for the better part of a decade.

"Are you still there?" he says after a long beat.

"I am." I force my words to come out even.

"Did you just get home?"

"A few minutes ago."

"Why did you think I was Remi when you answered the phone?"

"Because he was trying to get me to go out for drinks, and I hung up on him."

"Drinks. Didn't you say you just got home?"

"Exactly." I toss my free hand up in the air as if to say, *finally, someone gets it.*

"His obsession with you is bordering on unhealthy."

"He's not obsessed with me. You don't understand our friendship, is all."

"Okay, so then make me understand."

Abandoning the pile of dirty clothes I'm trying to sort through on my bed, I take a seat on the edge of the mattress, crossing one leg over the other as I think about the best way to explain it.

"Remi has other friends, of course. And so do I. But I'm his only *real* friend, the kind of friend you share everything with. And he's mine. He can be unapologetically himself around me and I him. When you have a friendship like that, someone you can be nothing but real with, no fake pleasantries, no boasting or trying to make yourself seem more interesting than you are, it's special in a way I can't explain with words. We miss each other when we're apart and so we tend to spend every free moment we have together."

"Sounds like something more than friendship if you ask me." Something in his voice gives me pause.

Is he... *jealous*?

But that can't be right.

To be jealous, it means he would have to care. And Sutton Barnett cares about no one but himself.

*Then why is he calling you?* My inner voice wonders.

"Because it *is* more than friendship. Just not in the way you're thinking. We're not in love with each other in the typical sense. Yes, I love him and yes, he loves me. But we don't want to be *together* in the way couples are. What we have is so much more special than that. Anything more would only complicate things unnecessarily and why would we do that when what we have now is so good?"

"So you've never thought about dating him?"

"Sure, I've thought about it. But thinking about it and wanting to do it are two very different things. Remi is my person. I would never jeopardize that for anything."

"Not even for me?"

Thank God I'm sitting, because I'm fairly certain the floor just moved beneath me.

"That's different." I swallow hard. "If Remi and I dated and it ended badly, there'd be no going back. But if I upset him in *another* way." I pause. "That's something else entirely. I know Remi and shy of murdering someone he loves, I don't think there's anything he wouldn't forgive... Eventually."

"I see." He falls silent for a long moment. "What are you doing right now?" Shifting topics almost as abruptly as his brother. Guess it runs in the

family.

“At this exact moment?” I ask without waiting for an answer.

“Procrastinating on doing this mountain of laundry I have. You?”

“I’m at the airport.”

“You haven’t left yet?”

“No, my flight was delayed. They should start boarding soon.”

“But you left super early this morning...”

“I had a few things to take care of beforehand.”

“I see.” I can’t help but wonder if one of those things was avoiding having to share an awkward goodbye with me. “So that’s why you called me. You’re bored.”

“I am, but that’s not the only reason I called.”

“Then why did you, really?”

“I told you. I wanted to hear your voice.”

I swear my insides feel like melted liquid and yet alive with electricity all at the same time.

“You know, you already fucked me. You don’t have to turn up the charm now.”

“Such language.”

I uncross my legs and push to a stand, unable to sit still any longer.

“Product of spending a week in the same house as you,” I fire back, the smile on my lips like a permanent fixture at this point.

“Fair.” He chuckles. “And yes, I already *fucked* you.” His voice drops low. “But I’m nowhere close to done.”

A flurry of excitement mixed with nerves erupts in my belly.

On one hand, I’d walk on hot coals to get even one more night with Sutton Barnett. On the other, the longer this goes on, the harder it’s going to be to recover from once it’s over.

But really, who am I kidding?

A couple stolen hours in the middle of the night and it’s like I’m sixteen all over again. Completely and utterly consumed by a man who has proven he doesn’t have the capacity to give me what I really want... His heart.

And yet, even knowing that, I know I could never say no to him. And I don’t want to. Because being with Sutton is like free-falling from a plane—the biggest rush you can imagine, peppered with the fear of what happens if your parachute doesn’t open as you draw nearer to the surface. But the fear isn’t enough to keep me from jumping. I’m not sure anything could.

“My plane is boarding,” he says before I can come up with a single response. “Can I call you again?”

“I’d like that,” I admit, trying to keep the shake from my voice.

“And the other thing I said?”

“I’d like that, too.” This time, I fail miserably at keeping the tremble from my words.

“Bye, Aspen.”

I can hear the smile in his voice as if I were staring right at him.

“Bye, Sutton.”

Seconds later, the line goes dead, and with it, the last remaining thread of my self-restraint. If I’m going to burn in hell, I might as well enjoy myself on the way down.

# Chapter Twelve

Aspen



“Aspen, can you call Ms. Reynolds and let her know the paperwork she’s been waiting for is in? Charles said you were assisting on the case.”

“I am.” I nod at Laura, the middle-aged woman standing in the doorway of my office, which is so small it’s more like a broom closet than an actual office.

It’s nowhere near the kind of offices the attorneys have, but considering most legal assistants who work for the firm don’t have an office at all and tend to work in common spaces and meeting rooms, I have no room to complain.

“And I will do that as soon as I finish up with this list.” I hold up a piece of paper lined with so many phone numbers you’ll likely go cross-eyed if you look at them for too long.

“The Hightide case?” she guesses, sliding her glasses farther up her nose with the tip of her index finger.

“It’s the most tedious thing I think I’ve had to do since I started here,” I admit with a sigh.

Working in business law isn’t quite what I pictured it would be. When I decided I wanted to work in the field, I envisioned something much more glamorous. It’s anything but. My days are filled with drowning in paperwork, calling people who don’t want to talk to me, or worse, being forced to find them in person when they won’t take my calls.

Basically, I’m the wheels on the ground. I research cases, doing a lot of the leg work to give the lawyers the information they need to take to trial. And as much as I moan and groan along the way, I actually really do enjoy what I do, oddly enough. Maybe not today so much. But most days.

“You’re just lucky you weren’t here for the Jackson Maverick case.” Laura shifts her weight from one foot to the other. “That case took two years and we lost not one, but two legal assistants in the process.”

“They quit?”

“They did.” She nods.

“Well, I’m not going anywhere, so you don’t have to worry about me.” I glance down at my phone that vibrates on my desk, a smile tugging at my lips when I see Sutton’s name on the screen.

**Sutton:** *What time do you get off work?*

I have to resist the urge to pick up my phone and text him right back.

“Uh-oh. I know that look.”

My gaze darts back up to Laura, her red-painted lips tipped upward in a smile.

“Who is he?”

“What?” I croak.

“The guy who has you smiling like you just won the lottery.” She gestures to the phone on my desk. “Who is he?”

“No one.” I’m quick to answer.

“Really? Because when a woman’s face lights up the way yours just did, there’s usually a man involved.”

“It’s nothing. I mean, I guess it’s *not* nothing, but I’m not sure it’s something either.” I let myself admit.

I honestly don’t know how to classify what Sutton and I are or what the hell we’re doing. It’s been over a month since we returned from Ohio, and while I haven’t seen him—obviously—we have spoken every single day since.

Sometimes he texts me. Sometimes he calls me. Sometimes he does both. We never really talk about anything of any real significance, but it feels significant just the same. We discuss work. What we’re having for dinner. Who pissed us off that day or if something annoyed us. It’s strange. In some weird way, it’s almost as if Sutton and I have become *friends*.

“Either way, I don’t want to talk about it,” I quickly add before she can press for more.

“Well, if you ever do, I’m around.” She turns in the doorway, disappearing back into the hall before I have a chance to respond.

“Thanks,” I mutter under my breath, snagging my cell off my desk.

**Me:** *That depends on whether or not I get through this call list. Supposed to be six. Will probably be more like eight.*

Dots instantly appear on the screen as he types out his response. It’s almost as if he were staring at the text thread just waiting on my reply, they

appear so quickly.

**Sutton:** *Make it six.*

**Me:** *Not really in my control, but I'll see what I can do. Why, what's up?*

**Sutton:** *I have some news.*

**Me:** *What kind of news?*

I chew nervously on my bottom lip as I wait for his reply.

**Sutton:** *The kind I don't want to share over text. Will you call me as soon as you're off work?*

**Me:** *I will. Now let me get back to work so I can hopefully get out of here on time.*

I can see he's read the message, but he doesn't respond. His way of telling me to get my ass back to work, then.

I smile, setting my phone face down on my desk as I try to refocus on work, which proves more difficult than it normally would be, because for the remainder of the day, I find myself obsessing over what he needs to tell me but wouldn't tell me over text.

By the time I exit work just after seven—a win in my book—I've imagined a million different scenarios. Most of them not very good. What can I say? When you grow up having the worst happen to you, you tend to expect the worst at all times.

I don't wait until I get home to call Sutton, too anxious over what news he has to share to wait. I have the phone pressed to my ear the instant I'm outside.

He answers on the second ring.

"You're late." I can hear the smile in his voice, which instantly relaxes me.

"Sorry. You have no idea how hard it was for me to get out even at seven." I sigh. "Now, what is it that you wanted to tell me?"

"Look up."

"Huh?" I quickly glance up, looking around the busy walkway.

My heart kicks violently against my ribs when Sutton suddenly steps into my line of sight. I stop so abruptly that the person behind me nearly walks right into me, muttering a curse as he steps around me. And still, I don't move.

My eyes drink in the sight of him.

Messy hair. Faded jeans. A black T-shirt that clings to his muscular torso just right.

Like stepping out into the sun for the first time in months, my entire body warms.

“Hi.” He gives me a cute little wave.

“Hi.”

Another person steps past me with a hiss, knocking me from my trance. I feel my body begin to move, though I’m not entirely sure my brain has fully processed the action, autopilot kicking in.

A smile slides across his mouth as he lowers his phone.

I do the same, making my way toward him on shaky legs.

It feels a lot like walking through a dark tunnel toward a bright light beckoning you closer.

He matches my steps, meeting me somewhere in the middle.

“What are you doing here?” I’m breathless when I speak, like I’ve run ten miles rather than taken a few short steps.

“I had some business to attend to.” His fingers close around my forearm as he guides me off to the side of the walkway. “You look... different.” He gestures to my pencil skirt and silk button-down blouse. “I like your hair like this.” He snags a tendril of hair that escaped my low ponytail at some point in the day, twisting it around his finger before gently releasing it.

“Good different or bad different?” I suddenly feel overly self-conscious, even though I was pretty sure this outfit looked good when I left my apartment this morning.

“Good different. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I love you casual, but I could get on board with this look, too.”

I don’t miss the way he uses the word love. Though I doubt he meant it in any sort of way, it still makes my heart beat a little faster.

“What kind of business did you have to attend to?” I refuse to let him distract me, which is damn near impossible to do. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming to town?”

He rocks back on his heels.

“I wanted to surprise you.”

When he smiles this time, it draws my attention to the scruff that has regrown on his face.

My pulse spikes again.

I know he’s always been good-looking, but I don’t know, right now I don’t think he’s ever looked more breathtaking.



Maybe because now I feel like I actually know him. Well, as much as you can know about someone like Sutton.

And while I may not know his deepest, darkest secrets, I know other things. Things that make him who he is. I know his favorite food. I know that every Wednesday he goes to the same Chinese restaurant and gets noodles on his way home. I also know what he sounds like over the phone slurping said noodles. I know he detests just about any movie made after 2010, that his favorite color is orange, which he laughed at me for asking. That he loves working out, obviously. That he hates bananas, loves football, and that his shoe size is twelve. Though I can't remember what we were talking about that prompted me to ask that.

"Well, I'm surprised," I finally say after a long beat. "Does Remi know you're here?"

"No." His response is clipped. Absolute.

"Why not?" I don't know why I ask. If he's here with me, of course Remi doesn't know.

"Because I'm only in town for a few days and there's only one person I want to spend time with while I'm here."

When he slips an arm around my waist and pulls me close, I'm pretty sure I forget how to breathe.

"Oh yeah, and who might that be?" I play coy, mainly because I just want to hear him say it.

"You know who." He leans in close, running his nose against mine. "I've been dreaming about these lips for weeks." He brushes his mouth against mine. Not a kiss, but somehow more seductive.

Acutely aware of our surroundings, I press my hand to his chest and push, putting enough distance between us that I can look at his face.

"Where are you staying while you're here?"

"I thought that much was obvious." His smile turns wicked. "I'm staying with you."

"Awfully presumptuous, isn't it?"

"Is it?" He gives me a knowing look, no doubt sensing the desire that feels like it's pouring out of me in waves. "So, are you going to take me back to your place or what?"

I bite my bottom lip, not able to contain the giddy expression that takes over my entire face no matter how hard I try to.

"Come on." I take his hand, tugging him back onto the sidewalk.

When he tangles his fingers with mine, I'm so taken by the action that my feet quite literally forget how to work. I stumble forward, damn near losing my footing.

"Walk much?" He chuckles next to me.

"Shut up." I crinkle my nose, heat spreading up my neck.

"So how far do you live from here? You walk every day, so it can't be that far."

"It isn't. I'm actually just a couple streets over."

"And my brother lives where?"

I feel his gaze on the side of my face but keep my eyes forward.

"One street over from me."

"Jesus, are you serious?" He snorts out a humorless laugh. "I mean, I knew he lived close, but that close? His level of obsession with you never ceases to surprise me."

"One, he's not obsessed with me. And two, technically I'm the one who moved close to him. When I decided to get my own place, one of my must-haves was it had to be within walking distance of Remi's apartment."

"I see."

"Remi is the closest thing I've ever had to family. Is it strange that I wanted to stay close to him?" I find myself asking.

"I guess not," he admits, his shoulder lifting in a half shrug. "Though, it does make sneaking in and out of your building a little more difficult."

"Well, lucky for you, Remi works during the day, just like the rest of us. Just make sure you don't leave before eight a.m. and you'll be fine."

"And what about after work?"

"He's usually home by six and at the onsite gym for at least an hour after that. So, he's probably taking his post-workout shower as we speak."

"You know his schedule down to the minute, don't you?"

"Pretty much," I admit. "I mean, we did live together for two years." I feel the need to remind him again.

"I can't say I've ever known anyone like that. Not sure I'd want to."

"I don't know. As much as you like to control everything around you..." I glance up at the side of his face.

"Who said I like to control everything?" He meets my gaze and we both smile.

"That's what I thought." My shoulders vibrate with laughter, but the sound doesn't reach my lips as I turn my focus forward again. "Well, we're

here.” I gesture to the brick building in front of us as we cross the street. “I must warn you, it isn’t much,” I tell him, using my key to unlock the building door before leading him inside.

“Is there a bed? Or a wall?” He lifts his eyebrows suggestively.

“There is a bed. And plenty of walls.”

“No elevator?” he asks when I lead us through a door that opens to a stairwell.

“There is. But there’s only one and it takes forever, so I usually just take the stairs.”

“You’ll get no complaints from me,” he says, staying behind me as I climb the first flight of stairs. Glancing back, I realize why he’s not complaining. Because he has the perfect view of my ass.

“Perv,” I tease.

“Don’t pretend you don’t like the idea of me staring at your ass. In just a few minutes, I’m going to be doing a hell of a lot more than staring.”

His words send a full-blown tremble straight through my body.

Anticipation has my feet moving faster, my legs screaming for mercy by the time we reach the fourth floor landing.

Sutton follows me out of the stairwell and down the hall to my apartment, where I fumble with the keys for far too long before I finally manage to unlock the damn door.

It’s dark when we enter. Not pitch-black or anything, but thanks to the blackout curtains I keep up, dim enough it’s hard to see fully into the room. Dropping my things onto the small table next to the door, I hear Sutton drop his bag onto the floor as I turn to flip on the light. Only, before I reach it, Sutton catches my wrist, pulling me into his muscular frame.

“I know you probably want to show me around, but it’s been a month since I’ve been inside you, and I can’t wait a second longer.” He backs me into the door as his lips smash against mine.

If his words weren’t enough to send my body into a spiral, his kiss sure as hell does the trick.

Sutton Barnett isn’t just the epitome of male beauty, he’s also a master of his trade. When he kisses me like I’m the very air he needs to breathe, it serves the very purpose he wants it to.

I’m putty in his hands. Moldable and willing to do everything his touch commands.

He's completely aware of the control he has over me. What he isn't aware of is how rare it is for me to give anyone control, especially a man.

"What is it with you and walls?" I tease, letting out a soft moan when his tongue slides against mine.

"Technically, this is a door."

I feel his smile against my mouth.

"I have a bed." My fingers find the back of his hair, tugging at the silky strands. "And, we don't have to be quiet." I hum in pleasure when his hand slides down the front of my shirt, palming my breast.

"Directions." He pulls his hand away seconds before hoisting me in the air.

I yelp out a laugh, hanging onto him for dear life as he spins.

"Straight," I tell him, squinting through the apartment over my shoulder. I know where everything is, but directing him when I can't see that well makes me a little nervous that I'm going to run him into something. "Go to the left a couple of steps. Okay, now do a forty-five-degree turn to the right. Yes." I let him know he's following correctly. "Just a few more steps. Now stop. Turn to the left and reach out. You should be able to feel a doorknob."

"Got it," he says seconds before I hear the creak of the door as it opens.

"Walk straight."

My room is so small that he takes only a couple of steps before his shins hit the edge of the bed.

I feel him pivot forward seconds before I land flat on my back on top of the soft mattress.

"Now..." His hands are at the waistband of my skirt. "Where were we?" He starts to shimmy the material over my hips and down my legs. The cool air hits my bare thighs, causing goose bumps to pepper my skin.

"Sutton." I'm not sure if I'm objecting or pleading when he bends down, running his nose along the seam of my underwear.

He inhales my scent, groaning deep in his chest.

"Is this okay?"

My heart ricochets off my ribs.

I've never had a man go down on me before. Never wanted one to. I used to cringe at the thought. Of being so open and vulnerable to another person. But with that one question, I've all but opened wide for him.

"Yes." My voice is breathy and peppered with nerves.

“You have no fucking clue how many times I’ve thought about this over the past four weeks.” He laps his tongue over the thin material of my lace panties, soaking them in one long swipe. And then suddenly they’re gone, shoved to the side, replaced by the warmth of his tongue as it slides against my clit.

My back arches as a cry of pleasure tears from my throat.

I can feel him smile against me. Feel the weight of his approval as he devours me like a starving man who’s been let into a feast.

I move my hips, riding his tongue shamelessly.

I didn’t know it was possible to feel so many things at once. It’s like my brain, body, and heart are firing on all cylinders and the signals are getting all tangled.

My brain says to slow down.

My heart says it’s too late.

My body says it wants more. It *needs* more.

My fingers are in his hair now, pulling at the strands with reckless abandon as the flame of the rocket burns hotter and hotter inside of me until suddenly, it launches, exploding into a million tiny eruptions I can feel all the way to the tips of my fingers and toes.

Sutton laps up my pleasure like it’s the sweetest nectar he’s ever tasted before slowly crawling up my body, losing his pants somewhere along the way because when he settles between my hips, his thick erection teases my center, free of any confines.

“Better than I could have imagined.” He leans down and kisses me deeply, forcing me to taste myself. “See how good you taste.” He swipes his tongue against mine again. “See what you do to me.” He nudges at my entrance. “You drive me crazy.” He slides in slowly, letting out a deep groan of pleasure when he’s completely sheathed by my body. “You’re all I think about.” He’s moving now. “I go to bed dreaming about this.” His thrusts quicken. “I wake up thinking about this.” He buries his face into my neck, his entire body taut, rippling with desire. It’s enough to have another orgasm building deep in my core. “You have me so fucking tied in knots, you’re all I can think about.”

I want to scream *me too!* I want to tell him he’s all I’ve thought about for far longer than he deserves. I want to beg him to make me his and never stop. Never stop touching me. Never stop making me feel *this* way. Like I’m

weightless, leaving all the pain and guilt and regret on the ground below me. It can't touch me up here. When I'm with Sutton, nothing can.

He's all I feel. He's all I hear. He's all I see and smell. He's everywhere. Consuming me from the inside out until there is nothing left but this. The intensity that builds between us.

There is no real future for us. He won't be able to love me the way I know I deserved to be loved. And while I may never own his heart, in this moment, I am his, and he is mine. And for now, that's enough.



When I pictured what it would be like to wake up and find Sutton in my apartment, even my wildest dreams couldn't capture the absolute vision he would be standing in my kitchen, bare-chested as he fidgets with the coffee maker.

The muscles in his back flex as he moves, and I have to bite down on my lower lip to keep myself from groaning at the pure deliciousness that is Sutton Barnett.

He hasn't noticed me yet, and I'm perfectly content to take in the view for a few moments longer before he glances over his shoulder, our eyes locking in an instant.

"Morning." He grins, turning so I get a full view of his broad chest and chiseled abs.

It should be illegal to be so damn beautiful. And yet, here he stands, in all his glory. It's hard to think straight when he looks at me the way he's looking at me right now.

"You're up early." I force out the first thing I think to say, pulling out one of the stools that lines the breakfast bar that separates my living room from the small, galley-style kitchen.

"I have a meeting at nine." Because of the small dimensions of the room, he only has to take one step before he's standing just on the other side of the counter from me.

"Right. I almost forgot you were in town for business," I admit.

We never discussed what business he had in D.C. or exactly how long he was staying. But in our defense, we were a little preoccupied. I fight the smile

that touches my lips at the memory.

“What time do you have to be at work?” He drops his elbows to the cheap laminate so that his face is level with mine.

“Eight.”

When he slides one arm across the breakfast bar and takes my hand, I let him. As if I’d ever have the strength to deny this man of anything.

“And what time do you get off?”

“Six. I hope.” I sigh, wishing that today of all days I could call in sick. But alas, I’m drowning as it is. If I take today off, I’d have to work through the weekend just to catch up. “What’s your meeting about?”

He smiles, his eyes twinkling in the morning sun pouring in through the windows. He must have opened the curtains when he got up. I rarely keep them open, mainly because a lot of nights I don’t get home until after dark, whether from work or hanging out with Remi, and I don’t like the idea that people can see inside my apartment.

“A potential job opportunity.”

My breath catches in my throat, and every nerve ending in my body sparks to life.

“You’re interviewing for a job in D.C.?” I’m careful to keep the excitement from my voice, though it just about kills me to do so.

“I am.” He nods slowly.

“What about Chicago?”

“My project is in the final stages. It’ll be complete before the end of the month. Figured it was time to move on.”

“To D.C.?” My throat feels too dry all of a sudden.

“It’s a good opportunity. One of the best I’ve found in my search. I figured it was worth checking out. Besides, it might be nice to move somewhere where I actually know people.”

“You don’t strike me as the type who has trouble making friends.” I feel the need to say.

*He’s not doing this for you*, I silently remind myself. *Don’t get too ahead of yourself*. But how can I not? After all the things he was saying last night. And now this...

“But I already have a friend here, so I’m one step ahead.”

*Friends...* I can’t tell if he’s being playful or serious.

“Are you forgetting about your brother?”

“Well, there’s him, too. Though I doubt he’d be very pleased if I do end up moving here.”

“How long is the project?”

“Eighteen months, give or take.”

“And you’d be here the entire time?”

“Well, I wouldn’t be living in Chicago and working here, if that’s what you mean.” He chuckles, the sound deep and rich.

“No, I know.” I shake my head, heat spreading across my cheeks.

“Besides, it’s just a meeting. Nothing will be decided today.”

“So you don’t know when you’ll find out?”

“Depends on how eager they are to get things underway.”

“What’s it for?”

“A corporate building on the east side of the city. Right now there’s an old, abandoned warehouse occupying the lot, so there’s the timing on demolition to consider.”

“I see.”

I glance at the clock on the microwave mounted to the back wall above the oven. As much as I want to find out every detail I can about what all this means, if I don’t want to be late for work, I need to get a move on.

When I slip off my stool, Sutton straightens.

“I need to get ready for work,” I explain my abrupt movement.

“Okay, but if I hear the shower turn on, I won’t promise not to join you.”

“And I won’t stop you if you do.” I narrow my gaze at him. “But if you’re coming, you better be quick.” I don’t need to explain my double meaning of *coming*. I can tell by the way he adjusts himself in his shorts that he’s got my point loud and clear.

“Oh, I can be quick when I need to.” He gives me a sexy smirk, already rounding the counter before I’ve even moved.

“You can’t make me late for work,” I tell him as he moves toward me like a lion stalking his prey.

“We’ll see what we can do.” He leans down, picking me up with ease. My legs instinctively go around his waist.

“You being here is going to get me in a lot of trouble.” My hands slide around the back of his neck.

“Let’s hope so.”

I yelp when he smacks my ass... Hard.



Needless to say, I do *not* get to work on time. But damn, is it worth every single minute I'm late.



“Hey.” Remi pops his head into my office, the rest of his body following. He’s wearing his usual business casual attire—a dark blue button-down and gray dress pants, his dark blond hair combed to one side instead of the rolled out of bed look he sports outside of work.

“Hey.” My brow furrows in confusion. It’s not unusual for Remi to stop by the office. It is unusual for him to do it without telling me first.

“You about ready?”

His question confuses me further.

“Ready for what?”

“Oh, come on, Pen. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten.” He leans against my doorframe, crossing his arms in front of his broad chest. “Lunch at O’Hara. We talked about it yesterday morning. I was telling you about the stuffed mushrooms I was dying to try. Any of this ringing a bell?” An amused grin tips the corner of his mouth.

Jesus. So much has happened between yesterday and today that yesterday seems like a distant memory.

“Crap.” I look around at the mess of paperwork spread across my desk. “I’ve got so much on my plate right now that it totally slipped my mind.” I blame work when really, it’s not my work that has me so distracted.

No, the fault lies with an incredibly sexy man who just happens to be the brother of the man standing in front of me. Guilt pings around in my chest like a pinball that can’t find an opening to fall into.

Then there’s the fact that I already agreed to meet Sutton for lunch after his meeting...

“If you can’t do it today—” He starts, but I quickly cut him off.

“No, I said I would and I will.” I shake my head. “Can you, uh, just give me like five minutes to wrap up a couple things?”

“Of course. I’ll meet you out front.” He pushes away from the doorframe.

“Perfect.” I watch him turn, disappearing from the doorway seconds later before quickly snagging my cell phone off my desk.

The last thing I want to do is go out to lunch with Remi. That's not true. The last thing I want to do is sit across a table from my best friend and lie straight to his face. And while I may not be lying outright, because I highly doubt he's going to ask me if I spent last night and this morning having sex with his brother, omitting the truth is still lying, and aside from Sutton and certain details from my past, I've never kept anything from Remi.

*Me: Sorry but no go on lunch today. Forgot I made plans with Remi.*

I fire off the text message before silencing the device. If he texts me back, I'll deal with it once I get back to the office.

Closing a few windows open on my computer, I push away from my desk before grabbing my purse off the back of my chair.

The heat is stifling when I step outside. It hits me directly in the face, giving me a moment's pause.

"Hot as a bitch, isn't it?" Remi stands from the bench that sits just outside the office.

"It's awful," I agree.

"Just wait until the end of the month. It'll be so hot and humid we won't be able to breathe."

"Don't remind me," I grumble. August is by far my least favorite month of the year. Then again, I've never liked the heat and it's the hottest month, so... "Where is this place, anyway?" I ask, following him to the left. "Please tell me it's close." I fan myself with my hand, beads of sweat already forming on the back of my neck.

"I'm honestly surprised you haven't heard of it before. It's right around the corner." He doesn't loop his arm through mine the way he normally would, likely because of the heat.

"To be fair, the only places I go are with you, so if you haven't taken me there, I probably haven't heard of it."

"Well then, I guess you're lucky you have me." He winks, knocking his hip into mine.

"Duh." I snort, smiling up at him.

Remi is the kind of person you can't help but want to be around. His humor. His smile. His kindness. He is hands down the best person I've ever known. Fun. Adventurous. Selfless. And while I'm sure not everyone sees him that way, I can't help but *only* see him that way. Which makes what I'm doing behind his back that much worse.

I should just tell him. I should just come right out and say it. He's my *best* friend. I should be able to tell him what's going on. But just like all those years ago, every time I think about opening up and telling him the truth, something stops me. Fear. Guilt. Shame. A combination of all three.

"See, right around the corner." He points to a black awning that reads O'Hara across the front and side in bold white lettering. And it is, quite literally, right around the corner from my office.

"How have I never even noticed this place before?" I wonder aloud as Remi holds the door open for me.

"Because you are the most oblivious person in the world." Remi chuckles, following me inside.

The restaurant is beautiful, yet simple. Round tables. White linens. Soft classical music playing in the background.

"Seems kind of fancy," I admit.

"Last time I checked, you like fancy." He nods at the host, a younger man dressed in a full black suit and tie. "Two, please."

"I do but this is..." I look around the room as the host leads us to a small table along the back wall, waiting until we're seated before finishing my sentence. "They have like ten chandeliers." I point at the ceiling that is lined with big, grand, crystal chandeliers that hang down to various lengths. "I'm surprised you wanted to come here."

"I told you... Stuffed mushrooms." He grins, picking up the hardback menu the waiter sat on the table in front of him.

We fall silent as we browse the options. Remi, of course, orders the mushrooms. I settle on a summer salad. Once we place our orders with a blond waitress who makes goo-goo eyes at Remi, we're once again left alone, and for the first time in maybe forever, I feel this weird tension fill the air.

I'm completely aware that it's me. I'm the reason I feel tense. And I'm the only one who feels it. Guess that's what happens when you realize you've become a big, fat liar.

"So, how's work?" If Remi senses something is off, he doesn't voice it.

"Work." I shrug. "Busy. You?"

"Same old, same old." He tips his water glass to his lips. "Jeff is up my ass again about the Jefferson account."

Where I went into law after graduation, Remi went into marketing. It doesn't take a genius to figure out why that makes total sense. Remi is the

most charismatic person I've ever met. He could charm the pants off a straight man if he really tried.

"Remind me which one that is again." I give him an apologetic smile, glad to be on the work topic. It's about the easiest thing there is to talk about.

The remainder of lunch is spent alternating between Remi bitching about his boss and an account they have no hope of winning, to moaning over how delicious the stuffed mushrooms are. And while the guilt never leaves, like a pit of tar swimming around in my stomach, when we exit the restaurant less than an hour later, I feel much more at ease than I did when we entered.

It's strange because I've never felt that way with Remi. Well, that's not entirely true. I couldn't look him in the eye without feeling a certain way for weeks after I slept with Sutton that first time. In fact, I faked an illness so I wouldn't have to see him the day after it happened, when Sutton sat at the table and acted like I wasn't even in the room. Faking an illness to stay home at the McKinnys should tell you how horrible I felt over what happened. And not just for Remi, but for myself. I wasn't just avoiding Remi. I was avoiding Sutton and the entire freaking mess I had made.

"So, Sarah and Alex roped me into going out with them for drinks tonight. Think maybe I can talk you into going with us?" Remi asks as we pull to a stop just shy of the entrance to my law office.

"Actually, I can't. I'll be lucky if I'm out of here before nine." I gesture to the building next to us.

"What about after?"

"I don't think I'm going to feel up to it after a twelve-plus-hour day." The lie catches in my throat, which I quickly clear to cover.

"Come on, Pen. It's Friday."

"I know, which is why I can't. This case goes to court next week. I'll probably be here all weekend." Another lie. One that he could easily verify should he feel so inclined.

Yes, the case does go to court next week. That part was true. But I'm not going to work all weekend because of it. I obviously only said that to clear a path for me to spend the weekend with Sutton.

Another wave of guilt washes through me, and yet I do nothing to alleviate the horrible feeling. Maybe because I'm afraid of how he'll react if he finds out. Or maybe it's because *if* he finds out, I know it will likely be the end of whatever Sutton and I are doing. And in truth, I'm not ready for it to end yet. Hell, it's only just begun and already I'm not sure I'll ever want it to

end. But I can't lie to Remi forever. I know that. I just don't want to hurt him or our relationship over something I know isn't going to last.

Sutton is incapable of being in an actual relationship. His behavior with Olivia really drove that point home. And while I was jumping up and down on the inside when she left, a part of me also felt really bad for her. Because I know what it's like to pine after someone who doesn't want the same things you do. I've experienced it firsthand with Sutton himself.

"You're killing me, Pen. What am I going to do for an entire weekend without you?" He pouts out his lower lip dramatically.

"I'm sure you'll figure it out." I roll my eyes. "You sure didn't have any trouble finding things to entertain you when we were living together," I remind him.

"I'd rather hang out with you any day."

"Well, one weekend won't kill you." I force a smile, reaching out to give his hand a squeeze. "I have to get back," I tell him, releasing his hand.

"I miss you already." His pout turns into a full-blown frown.

"Love you."

"Love you, too." He lets out an audible sigh.

"Bye." I turn, tugging open the door.

"Bye." I hear him say before the cold air of the building settles over me, cooling my heated skin in a matter of seconds.

Without glancing back through the glass walls, I make my way through the lobby and down the hall to my office before pulling out my cell phone for the first time since texting Sutton earlier.

His reply is waiting for me when I unlock my phone.

**Sutton:** *You'd think I'd be used to taking second place to my brother.*

I scroll to the next message.

**Sutton:** *He can have you for lunch, but I get you for dinner... And dessert.*

I can't fight the smile that slides across my lips as I type out my reply.

**Me:** *You can have me for dinner, dessert, and breakfast all weekend if you want.*

I hang my purse on the back of my chair, my phone pinging with an incoming text message just as I've settled down behind my desk.

**Sutton:** *I'll take your weekend. Every single second of it.*

The excitement that spreads through my chest is almost more than my poor heart can take.

**Me:** *You're on.*

I send the message before locking my phone and setting it face down on my desk. If I want to get out of here on time, and believe me, I really do, then I need to focus on nothing but work for the next four hours, no matter how impossible that may feel.

# Chapter Thirteen

Sutton



“How did your meeting go?” Aspen asks, her cheek pressed to my bare chest.

I had her bent over this couch within seconds of her walking into the front door after work and we haven’t left it since. She left me a key to let myself in after my meeting, and I swear to fuck, waiting for her to get home felt like an endless form of torture.

I can’t explain it because I don’t understand it myself.

I used to laugh at guys like me. Guys who would get their nuts all twisted up over a woman. I never understood it. Couldn’t even begin to wrap my head around what could possibly possess them to settle down with one person when the world is filled with so much fucking variety. At least, not until now.

At first, I just thought I needed to fuck Aspen out of my system, a conquest of sorts. Taking something I wasn’t supposed to have. I know how fucked up that sounds, but I never claimed to be anything less than an asshole. But getting to know her over these last few weeks, I find the more I get, the more I want. And as much as that terrifies me, the thought of this ending tomorrow scares me more.

Trust me when I say, I have never even thought that before, let alone felt it.

“It was okay.” I lazily play with the ends of her hair. “Just an initial introduction.”

“Did the project they’re proposing interest you?”

“Yes,” I lie. The project doesn’t interest me at all. It’s your standard fucking build with little to no creativity. And yet, I want the job like I want my next fucking breath.

I think it’s pretty easy to figure out why.

“Do you think you’ll get it?” She shifts so that she’s looking up at me.

“Not sure.” I shrug indifferently.

The last thing I want her to think is that I'm doing this for her, or that I have any intention of continuing whatever the fuck it is we're doing *if* I move here, even though that's exactly what I'm hoping for.

I haven't let myself think too much of it, though. All I know is I damn near jumped out of my seat when I first saw the email about the project, most specifically the location of the project. I don't think I've ever replied to a job posting so fast. Though if I'm being honest, the entire flight here I honestly half expected that I'd see her and realize what I was feeling during our long phone conversations was just all in my head and that she didn't make me feel like I was hurtling toward a brick wall at a hundred miles an hour.

And yet, when I saw her standing on that sidewalk, I knew. I knew I was completely and utterly fucked. No seat belt. No airbags. The brick wall drawing closer by the second. All I could do was brace for fucking impact.

I don't know how long I want to keep her, only that I do. And I realize that eventually that's likely going to cause a problem with my brother. But I'm more of a cross that road when I get there kind of person, so in truth, he's the least of my concerns at the present moment.

"When do you think you'll hear something?" She continues to look up at me with those big hazel eyes of hers.

Fuck. Her beauty still hits me like a punch to the gut every time she looks at me, leaving me struggling to pull in air.

"I think within a couple weeks if they're interested in moving forward with the interview process."

"So you'll just go back to Chicago and wait?"

"Well, I still have some time left on my current project, so yeah, I'll go back to work and see what happens."

"And if you don't get it? Do you think you'll stay in Chicago?"

I don't know what she's fishing for, but whatever it is, I'm not going to give it to her, no matter how badly I want to. I don't ever show my cards until someone forces my hand, because I don't ever want someone to think they've got the jump on me.

Don't ask me where my fight or flight, protect myself at all costs mentality comes from. You would think, given how happy of a marriage my parents have, that I would want that too. That I would want to find a good woman and settle down, but really, I've never wanted that life for myself. I could never picture it. The wife. The kids. The house. All things I've never wanted.



But I'd be lying if I said I didn't want *her*.

"Unlikely. I don't like staying in the same place for very long. Too much out there to see and explore."

This seems to have the effect I was hoping for as her expression falls slightly.

I'm not trying to hurt her. I'm just trying to temper expectations. Hers and mine.

"So you're leaving on Sunday, right?" She rests her cheek back on my chest, her hand splaying across my abdomen.

"Yep."

"So then I have just one full day to make you fall in love with D.C. so you'll have no choice but to come back."

"Is that your grand plan, then?"

"Yes, because if you love the city, maybe if this job doesn't pan out, you'll be tempted to try for another."

"You want me to come back?"

Her head pops up a second time, her face turning up to mine.

"What do you think?" She's unapologetic in her delivery.

"Careful now, Coop. You're starting to make me think you might like me," I tease, tipping her chin with my index finger.

"Because you didn't already know that?" Her eyebrow cocks in question.

Damn, I love her forwardness. It's not something I realized about her until recently, how honest she is. She just says what she means and means what she says.

I haven't met anyone like Aspen before, that's for damn sure. It's easy to see why my brother cares for her the way he does.

Though, she wasn't like this as a teenager. She was backward and nervous and honestly, kind of walked around like a scared kitten. I think that's why I found pleasure in messing with her. I loved watching her blush. And while yes, she still blushes, a lot, she's more confident now, more sure of herself. More woman than girl. And fuck me if she isn't the sexiest fucking thing when she looks at me the way she's looking at me right now.

Her eyes speaking for her as if to say, *I'm yours. Just take me*. I remember her looking at me a similar way the night I unknowingly took her virginity. I should have guessed it, and in a way, I think I did know, but she was so willing and I was drunk and well, you know the rest.

I used to regret the whole thing. Now I'm fucking glad it happened. I'm glad I claimed her first, that I took something no other man can take again. The thought alone has my hands going around her as I abruptly roll, taking her with me as I trap her small frame between me and the couch.

She lets out a little squeal of surprise, smiling up at me as I hover over her. I'm already so fucking hard it hurts, and while her pussy sounds so good right now, there's one thing I've wanted since that first night I saw her in that tiny bikini by my parents' pool.

Pressing up on my knees, I place one foot on the floor, taking Aspen by the hands before pulling her upright. She lands exactly where I want her to, her face lined up with my cock.

Tangling my hand into the back of her hair, I urge her forward. Only, instead of taking me into her mouth like I expect her to, she presses her hands to my stomach to stop the progression of my force.

I look down at her, curious and a little amused, only to find her wide-eyed and pale as a ghost. Before I even know what the fuck has happened, she's shaken off my hold and ducked under my arm.

"I'm sorry. I can't." She moves so fast that by the time I'm standing upright, she's disappeared inside the bathroom.

I won't lie, I'm a little offended. But more than anything, I'm confused. She's always so open to me. There isn't one thing I've done that she hasn't been completely on board with. So why, out of everything, is this her hard limit?

Maybe she's never done it before and she's scared?

Won't lie, the thought has my cock stirring back to life after its abrupt and epic downfall.

"Aspen?" I tap my knuckles against the bathroom door. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." She says it as if she's trying to convince herself. "I just... am not feeling very well all of a sudden."

"Are you okay?" I ask again, pretty sure she's bullshitting me, but I'm not in a place where I feel like I can call her on it.

"Yeah, I just, uh... I just need a minute."

"Okay. How about I order us some food? Are you hungry?" It's my lame attempt to let her know that it's okay, and I'm not even a little fucking upset. In truth, I'm not. Disappointed, sure. But not mad. How could I be with the way she looked up at me?

She was scared, that much was clear. I just don't know why, exactly.

“Um, yeah, that would be nice.” Her tone is more relaxed this time. “There’s a menu folder in my kitchen, second drawer down by the fridge, if you want to look and see what sounds good. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Okay.” I nod, stopping in the living room to slip on my boxers before heading into the kitchen.

I’ve just spread the contents of the folder onto the counter when she reappears from the bathroom, a robe tied tightly around her slender waist.

“You good?” I look up from the various menus in front of me.

“Fine.” She gives me a tight smile, slipping onto the stool across from me.

“You know, you can tell me the truth. If it was too much, that’s okay.”

Didn’t I just get done saying I loved how honest she was? I guess that doesn’t always hold true. Then again, we’ve all got shit we bury down and don’t want anyone to know. And while I want to dissect every single fucking thing about her, I’m smart enough to know when to let things lie... Usually.

“It wasn’t. I just... I’m sorry.”

“Hey.” I catch her hand as she reaches for a menu. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. You set the tone here, not me. If that’s something you’re not comfortable with, just say so and we’ll leave it at that.”

I swear her eyes fill with tears, but when she blinks, it’s as if they vanish in an instant.

“Thank you.” A semblance of a smile tips her lips. “I think maybe I’m just not ready for that yet.”

“And that’s completely fine. I’ll put the ball in your court. If you ever want to do it, just know that I will be more than happy to let you. Either way, that decision will be yours.”

She looks at me for a long moment, like she’s trying to decode me. It’s a little unnerving. I’ve always been a pretty secretive person, but with Aspen, sometimes I swear she can see right through me.

“Is it weird if I say that you’re not at all what I expected?” she finally speaks.

“I guess if it’s weird to say that you’re not at all what I expected.” I lift her hand to my lips, kissing her knuckles. “Now, let’s figure out what we want to eat. I’m starving.”

And just like that, things go back to normal. If there is such a thing as normal when it comes to whatever the hell Aspen and I are doing. I mean, I

know what we're *doing*. I'm just not sure I know what it means. I'm not sure I want to give it much thought either.

Right now, I just know I want to be around her. The rest, well, I'll figure that shit out later.



“My brother again?” I ask when Aspen’s phone pings for what seems like the hundredth time since we left her house earlier this morning.

I get that they’re friends and all, but his incessant calling is a step above. I can’t tell you how tempted I’ve been to take that damn phone from her and answer it myself. Maybe that would get him to leave her the hell alone.

Of course, I know I could never do that because that would be starting one hell of a shit storm that I’m in no way prepared to deal with just yet. And yes, I realize I said *yet*. As if I’ve already decided it’s something I *will* need to handle eventually.

“Yeah. I’m going to have to call him back or he’s going to call out the search dogs.” She looks down at her phone, at the missed calls that light up her notifications.

“Call him back,” I tell her, pulling her toward a small café with round tables lining the outside sidewalk. “I’ll run in and get us drinks. You see what the emergency is.” I pull out a chair for her at one of the empty tables. Even though it’s hot as hell outside, it feels a lot cooler under the dark awning overhead. “Just need to know what you want to drink.”

“Something cold and sweet. You choose.” She smiles up at me once she settles. Like every fucking time she’s smiled at me this weekend, I feel winded by the sight.

Trying my best not to show the effect she has on me all over my fucking face, I quickly turn on my heel and head inside, leaving Aspen at the table to deal with my asshole of a brother.

I have no idea what she likes or doesn’t like, for that matter, so I settle on what I feel like is a pretty safe bet, freshly made iced tea. Not sure if she likes it sweetened with actual sugar, I get unsweet and then grab a handful of different sweeteners on my way out the door.

She’s still at the table, her phone pressed to her ear as I approach.

“No, I’m fine. You don’t need to come over. I think it’s just a virus or something. I’m just going to stay in bed and try to get some sleep.”

Her cheeks flush at the sight of me, like she’s embarrassed to be caught in a lie.

“Yes, I’m sure,” she continues, chewing nervously on the inside of her cheek. “Okay, I will. Love you, too.”

Blowing out a long sigh, she drops the device face down onto the table in front of her a few seconds later.

“Everything okay?” I take the seat next to her, setting our drinks on the table before dropping the sweetener packets next to hers.

“I told him I was working today. He showed up to see if I wanted to do lunch and well, I wasn’t there. Told him I called in because I wasn’t feeling well,” she admits, looking down at the various sugary substitutes on the table.

“Didn’t know how you took your tea,” I say, tipping my cup to my lips to take a sip. “I got sweet, but I figured I’d get you unsweet and let you sweeten it how you like.”

“That’s very thoughtful, thank you.” She picks up two yellow packets. “For the record, unsweet with two Splenda is my preferred way to take iced tea, but I would happily drink it sweetened any way. I’m not very picky. When you grow up the way I did, you learn how not to be.” She shrugs.

As much as I want to know more about that, her past, I know it’s not something she likes to talk about, so I turn back to the matter at hand.

“So.” I clear my throat. “Did your sickness excuse get my brother off your back for the day?”

“Probably.” She pauses. “Well, I hope.”

“Any chance he’ll show up to bring you soup?”

“Doubtful. He’ll probably want to let me rest.”

“And if he decides to venture out and sees us?”

“He won’t.” She insists. “I know everywhere Remi goes in the city and I’m telling you, if he can’t walk there, he’s not going. He hates the city traffic. No idea why he even has a car anymore.”

“I can see why,” I admit, having spent the better part of thirty minutes sitting in the back seat of an Uber to drive three miles. “Though I thought the point of today was to sell me on the city, not deter me.” I smile over the rim of my cup.

“The traffic’s not great, I’ll admit. But if you get a place close to where you’ll be working, you can walk or bike.”

“And if it’s raining?”

“You take an umbrella.” She smirks.

“And if it’s snowing buckets?”

“You wear boots and a coat. And when it’s blistering hot, you wear thin layers and always carry extra antiperspirant.” She rambles off before I can ask.

“You have a solution for everything.” I relax back into the metal chair, crossing my feet at the ankles as I stretch out.

“Tell me you haven’t enjoyed today. I mean, come on. There is so much to do here, so much to see...”

“So many fucking people,” I tack on.

“Because there aren’t a lot of people in Chicago?” She gives me a knowing look. “Not to mention, Chicago has one of the highest crime rates in the country.” She taps her finger on the rim of her cup. “Besides, in Chicago you have no one. At least here you have Remi. And, well, me,” she finishes softly.

“You are a much bigger selling point than my brother. Let’s stick with that.”

Her smile matches my own and for a brief moment, we just stare at each other, smiling like damn idiots.

“Careful, Sutton. I might start thinking you like me.” She uses my own words against me. Words I said to her just last night.

“Maybe that’s the point.” I lean forward, setting my cup on the table before my hand finds her bare leg just above the knee, slipping under her sundress a few inches.

“Keep touching me”—she leans forward too so that our noses are almost touching—“and this tour is over.”

“Everything I really want to see is right here anyway,” I tell her, pulling back just far enough to give her a full once-over, doing so in a dramatic fashion to get my point across before leaning back in. “You think showing me the city is going to convince me?” I cluck my tongue against the roof of my mouth. “You should know me better than that, Coop.” I move in, my mouth only a breath away from hers. “Everything I *want* in this city is right *here*.” My hand goes farther up her skirt and her breath hitches across my face.

“People can see, Sutton.” Her voice shakes.

“Then I guess you better take me somewhere more private.” I press a firm kiss to her lips before completely pulling away, leaving her all but panting as I quickly stand and wait for her to join me.

# Chapter Fourteen

Aspen



## Eight years earlier

*“Did you hear me, Aspen?” Jean snaps at me, pulling me from the daydream I’ve currently lost myself inside of.*

*It’s something I’ve always done a lot of—finding ways to escape from reality in the recesses of my mind. And after last night, after Sutton, I have a real-life memory to relive as many times as I want. I don’t have to pretend what it would be like to be with Sutton in that way. Now, I know.*

*Yes, I woke up alone. And yes, it really hurts me that he just left me there. But even that can’t damper the happiness I feel bubbling from my chest as if it might explode from me at any moment.*

*Last night was hands down the single best night of my life.*

*“Sorry, what?” I reluctantly turn away from the sink where I’m currently doing dishes, to face Jean.*

*“You didn’t take the trash out to the cans like you were supposed to and now the dogs have gotten into it and dragged it all over the backyard.”*

*“Maybe if you wouldn’t give me five hundred chores all at once, I could remember simple tasks, like taking the trash bags out to the cans.”*

*I’m even surprised by my outburst, given that I rarely ever talk back because it usually gets me in more trouble than it’s worth.*

*“What did you say to me, young lady?” Her hands are already on her hips in that pissy way she does before she’s even finished the question.*

*“I’m not your servant, you know? Believe it or not, you’re capable of doing some of the work yourself.” I’ve already opened the can. Might as well eat the contents.*

*“Do you want to spend the rest of the weekend in your room?” She sneers.*

*“Better than standing here looking at you.” The words no more than leave my mouth when I feel the sting of her hand across my cheek.*



*I already knew it was coming, so I was able to brace for the impact a little, but it doesn't do anything to lessen the pain that sears through the side of my face.*

*"Feel better now?" I snarl, anger that I've kept pushed down for months and months boiling to the surface.*

*Another smack vibrates through the room as her hand collides with the side of my face again.*

*"Now you listen to me, you little bitch. We took you in when no one wanted you. We gave you a roof over your head and food to eat. It isn't too much to expect that you pull your own weight around here."*

*"You're right, it isn't." I blink away the tears in my eyes, refusing to let a single one fall. "But that doesn't mean I should be pulling all the weight. You do nothing. You sit on your asses and spend money the state gives you to care for me to get high or drunk or both. Wonder how they would feel if they find out how you're spending the monthly checks that are meant for me."*

*I don't know where any of this is coming from. It's all true of course, but I've never had the courage to even insinuate such a thing, let alone say it outright. Something about last night has lit a fuse so deep inside of me that I didn't even know it was there until it burst into an inferno.*

*For the first time in my life, I believe in something more. I touched happiness last night. I tasted it. Held it in my grasp. And now that I have, I can't ever go back. I won't. I deserve more. I deserve better. And I'm done letting people use me and abuse me for their own sick gains.*

*"Are you threatening me?" She draws back, something I've said finally giving her pause.*

*I don't mean a single word of it, of course. Because by the time child protective services finally found the time to make it out here, they'd have all the proof covered up. No proof. No action. I learned a long time ago how broken the system actually is. It doesn't stop me from making her think I'll do just that, though.*

*"Put your hands on me again, and you'll find your ass rotting in a jail cell. And while you're at it, tell that sick son of yours that if he ever tries to put his dick in my mouth again, I'll bite it off." I ball up the dish rag still in my hand and throw it violently at her feet. "Finish your own fucking dishes," I spit, shoving past her with so much force she stumbles backward.*

*I don't wait around to find out what comes next. Instead, I head to my room, locking myself inside for the next several hours. It's only after Rick*

gets home and the two leave a short while later, that I take the bag I packed and run for the hills.

While I feel proud of what I said earlier, I'm afraid there may be consequences I didn't thoroughly think through. Because no matter how fast I run to Remi's, I know that eventually I will have to come back here. And when I do, I know the fallout from what I said will be waiting for me.

Only this time, I won't just bend over and take it. For the first time ever, I had the courage to stand up for myself. And from now until my dying breath, I will do just that. I will fight. I will never let any of them hurt me again. Especially Harris. I meant what I said. If he ever tries to touch me again, I'll bite his dick off. I almost hope he decides to call me on that bluff because I will be all too happy to show him just how serious I am. Maybe then child protective services will have no choice but to show up.

I glance back at the house for a brief moment before jogging up the long driveway. Remi's house is a few miles from here, but I've walked it before. Several times, actually.

It's after eight in the evening when I finally arrive. I knock only once before Remi is on the porch, pulling me into his arms. I breathe in the scent of him, feeling safe in a way only he makes me feel.

He knew I was coming, of course. I called him before I left and told him what happened. Or rather, a very condensed version since he doesn't actually know the extent of what has happened inside that house, especially where Harris is concerned.

"You okay?" he speaks into my hair.

I can only nod, my body and mind spent.

"Come inside. My mom saved you a plate." With an arm still around my shoulders, he leads me inside the house. "Mom said you could stay as long as you need. She made the guest bed up for you."

I nod again, afraid if I speak I might let everything catch up to me and break down crying.

But when we enter the kitchen, everything that happened at home feels like a million miles away at the sight of Sutton sitting at the table.

I swear my heart feels like it's in my throat and excitement splinters down my extremities. Only, when he looks at me, it's nothing like he did last night. He doesn't seem happy to see me or even remotely interested that I'm here. In fact, he barely even acknowledges my presence before he stands.

"Doesn't she have her own house?" He sneers at Remi.

*The heart that was in my throat just seconds ago? Yeah, that bitch has plummeted all the way to my feet with a deafening thud.*

*I pray for the floor to open up and swallow me whole.*

*My chest aches, the pain radiating everywhere.*

*“Man, fuck you, Sut,” Remi barks at his brother’s back as he walks away. “Sorry about him,” he says, but it’s already too late. The tears are flowing now, coming on so hard and fast, they blur my vision in an instant. “Pen.” Remi’s in front of me now, his hands on my cheeks. “You’re okay. Everything is okay.”*

*He pulls me into his arms and holds me while I cry, never once suspecting the main source of my pain is his brother, who after spending last night with me, just dismissed me like a piece of garbage on the ground. His brother, who I foolishly slept with despite everything I know about him. His brother, who managed to put my heart back together, only to break it more than it was before he found it, and all in a matter of less than twenty-four hours.*

*Remi never questions why I’m upset, assuming it has to do with what happened with Jean. That knowledge makes me cry harder. Because on top of everything else I feel, guilt settles over me like wet cement that’s growing harder by the second.*

*There is only one person on this earth who has ever truly been there for me, and I go and do something so stupid like sleep with his brother. And what’s worse, I can’t tell him. He would never understand. He would never look at me the same. And the way Remi looks at me... That’s something I can’t bear to lose.*

*So, I let him comfort me. I let him feed me. And when I sneak across the hall in the middle of the night and climb into his bed, I let him hold me until I fall asleep. All the while swearing to myself that my days of obsessing over Sutton Barnett are over.*

*I took a stand today. I put myself first. And I plan to do that from today until the end of my days, where Sutton and anyone else are concerned.*

*He wants to treat me like I don’t exist. Fine. Two can play that game...*



“What’s up with you?” Remi asks as I reenter the living room with an armful of blankets.

“What do you mean?” I drop the pile onto the couch.

“First you act weird at lunch last Friday. Then you call off work on Saturday. Today you tried to get out of movie Monday.”

*Oh nothing, you know, I’m just screwing your brother behind your back and now I feel guilty as hell being around you, I think but obviously don’t say.*

“I’m still not feeling a hundred percent,” I lie, purposely avoiding looking at him as I cue up the movie on the remote. “Is it so wrong that I don’t want to give my best friend my cooties?”

“I love your cooties.”

“You say that until you’re hugging a toilet.”

“Pen.” He slides up next to me. “I like to think I’ve known you long enough to know when you’re lying. So why don’t you tell me what’s really going on.”

I want to tell him. Hell, I almost do. The words form on the tip of my tongue so fast they almost spill past my lips. But how could I possibly explain it? Our past. What happened all those years ago. What’s happening now. How the last eight years since the night Sutton and I first slept together have pretty much been one big, fat lie.

Not everything has been a lie, of course, but it *is* still a lie that has existed between us for far too many years.

I want to unburden myself. I want to tell my best friend what’s got me so out of sorts, but by freeing myself, I will in turn be burying him. In my lies. In my guilt. In my anger. And Remi doesn’t deserve that.

I have to be sure.

If I’m going to hurt him, I have to know it’s worth something.

It’s complicated enough in itself, what’s happening between me and Sutton, but then add on my little meltdown Saturday where I basically had a full-blown panic attack when he put his dick in my face, and I’m even less certain where we stand, which makes this whole situation that much more confusing.

The knot in my throat thickens at the thought.

I can’t explain what happened. I wanted to do it. I wanted to experience something that should feel completely natural, but when Sutton’s hand pushed on the back of my head, something inside me coiled like an invisible

tether, pulling me back the other way. And when I looked up at his face, it wasn't Sutton I saw, but Harris.

And not teenage Harris, either.

No, I saw Harris as he is today. Smiling at me with rotted teeth and greasy hair, that same look in his eyes he always had when he forced me to do something I didn't want to.

The whole thing still sits heavy on my stomach. I mean, I've had sexual encounters that have brought back memories and sometimes those images are hard to tuck away once they surface, but never have I looked up and seen that monster staring down at me.

I still haven't shaken the effects it's left me with. Even though Lord knows I've tried.

Sutton was amazing about it. He didn't push for answers. Didn't seem to care one bit that I freaked out. In fact, it was almost as if it hadn't even happened. Only it did. And unlike Sutton, I wasn't able to dismiss it as easily.

"It's nothing," I finally say as I move around the couch, collapsing on the far end with an audible huff. Grabbing one of the blankets, I pull it over my lap. "Now are you going to sit down already so we can get this movie started? I do have to work tomorrow, you know." I try to sound playfully annoyed, but I'm not sure if it comes out like I intend for it to.

"Okay." Remi rounds the couch, taking the opposite end from me. "But you know, whatever it is, you can tell me, right?"

"Remi..."

"Because I see you on your phone, you know. You haven't just been acting weird the past couple of days. It's been the past few weeks. You're always distracted. Even when you're here, you're not really here. You're constantly on your cell. And I've even caught you text smiling a few times. Add on the fact that you *never* try to blow me off..." He gives me a pointed look, giving me enough time to come clean on my own... I don't. "I'm going to ask you again, Pen, what's going on with you?"

My gut instinct is to stick to my original story because when you get tangled up in too many lies, you're bound to slip up. And Lord knows I can't tell him the truth. Not yet. Because there are repercussions to what Sutton and I are doing that stretch beyond Remi. Funny, I never gave Summer and Randel much thought until now.

"I'm kind of seeing someone," I finally admit, knowing Remi well enough to know he won't let this go until I give him something. And it's not

a lie... per se.

“What?”

I don't miss the way his expression falls for the briefest of moments, no doubt hurt that I haven't told him until now.

“Since when?”

“It started while we were in Ohio. We, uh, started talking on the phone.” I swallow, my throat growing increasingly more dry by the second. “Anyway, once we got back, we started talking more and we've uh, hung out a few times since.”

Okay, so not all lies. Actually, a lot of it is true. We *did* start talking in Ohio, just not on the phone. And we *have* hung out since being back. All true, I try to reason with myself, even though the guilt stirring in my chest feels heavy enough to swallow me whole.

“It's new and I'm not sure it's even going to go anywhere, so please don't ask me five hundred questions,” I quickly add.

“You're dating someone?” he asks again, as if he hasn't fully wrapped his head around it. I can't blame him. He usually knows every second of every minute of every single one of my days. So to not know this, it's kinda big.

“I don't know if you'd call it dating. More like hanging out.” I chew on my bottom lip nervously.

“Who is it?”

“No one you know.”

*If that isn't a lie for the ages...*

“Pen.”

“You don't know him,” I say again, though it seems to be overkill. I think he got that part the first time. “And like I said, it's not serious.”

“Not serious.” He mulls over the words as he grabs his beer off the table, tipping it to his lips.

“No. Not at all.” I confirm with a slight shake of my head.

“But it's obviously serious enough to blow me off and to lie to me.”

“You've blown me off a time or two for the casual hookup,” I remind him. “Does that mean those women were serious?” I turn the tables on him.

“Fair,” he agrees, taking another drink of beer.

“And I wasn't lying. Just didn't want to tell you about something that likely won't amount to anything.” I continue to say things that don't need to be said, my guilty conscious coming through.

“So, *who* is he?” he asks again.

“No one you know,” I repeat... Again. “Just someone I met through a friend.”

At least that part isn't entirely untrue.

“Can I get a name?”

I shake my head.

“Pen.”

“It's still so early. I don't want to jinx it.”

“You really like this guy.” It's not a question, and Lord knows I'm in no position to deny his statement. In my effort to downplay it, it's clear I've shown more of my hand than I intended.

I *do* really like Sutton. In fact, I more than like him. I guess a part of me always has. Even when I hated him. Or rather, when I claimed to hate him but really didn't.

“I do.” I finally let myself admit.

It feels pretty good just to say it out loud, even if the truth is still peppered with lies and omissions.

“I didn't even know you were interested in dating,” Remi says.

“Isn't everyone? I mean, if you meet the right person, yeah?”

“And you think you have? Met the right person, I mean?”

I'm not sure if it's just me, but Remi seems almost uncomfortable talking about this. For all the years we've been friends, relationships and our sex lives aren't something we've really discussed in great detail.

“I have no idea,” I reply. “Why are you acting so weird?” My brow furrows in question.

“I'm not. I just feel like I should get a say before things get too serious. What happens if I don't like the guy?”

“What does happen?” I ask, because I honestly want to know his answer.

“The same thing that happens if I meet a girl you don't like. You are my number one. If you say she's a no-go, she's a no-go.”

“I would never do that.”

“Not outright, no. But I know you, Pen. You wear your disdain like a neon sign for the whole world to see. Just ask my brother.”

I swear my insides do a full turn inside my body.

“I'll know if you don't like her and if you don't like her, she's not the woman for me.”

“And you expect the same from me? I mean, if you don't like the man I'm with?” I bark out a laugh because honestly, I don't know what else to do.

I can't say I've ever seen Remi like this. He's usually all dirty jokes and sexy smirks.

"Obviously."

"So, what you're saying is, you get final say? I just want to make sure I'm understanding you correctly." I bite down on my bottom lip nervously.

"Exactly."

I blow out a slow breath when his easy smile slides into place.

"Now that we've got that covered, can we maybe watch the movie now?" I gesture to the television, desperate to move past this conversation.

"Fine, but only if you get your ass over here. You know I don't watch movies without snuggles." He leans forward and sets his beer on the table before settling back against the cushions, holding his arm open for me. "That is, as long as your *boyfriend* won't get jealous."

"Not my boyfriend." I shake my head, as I shift my way across the couch, finally settling in the crook of Remi's arm. It's the only place I've ever felt safe. Truly. With Remi I am more myself than I've ever been with another person, current predicament excluded, of course.

I don't have to wonder why that is. I know why. Because Remi is *my* person. He has been since I was thirteen years old. The person I love more than any other. The one I would literally kill for if I had to.

So why am I doing this to him, you ask?

Why am I hooking up with his brother and lying to him about it?

Because Sutton is like the most lethal drug, and I'm starved for the high he gives me. He's the only one who makes my pulse quicken and sets my skin ablaze with a single touch. He makes me feel alive in a way I've never felt before. Each time I try to tell myself it will be the last, but then only hours pass before I'm craving his intoxication again.

I guess I'm weak. When it comes to Sutton, I always have been.

"Happy?" I slide my hand across Remi's stomach, getting comfortable.

"Very." He kisses the top of my head before snagging the remote from my hand. "Now, stop talking. I'm trying to watch a movie."

And just like that, the weird, awkward tension is gone and it's just me and Remi, like it's always been.





“So you remember Olivia?” Remi asks, holding my foot in his hand as he works his fingers up my arch. The great thing about having a friend like Remi, he’s always willing to help a girl out when she’s had a long day at work and her feet are killing her.

“Um, yeah.” I arch a brow at him as if to say, *how short do you think my memory is?*

“She called me.”

“What?” I prop myself higher, my elbows pressing into the couch cushion. “How did she have your number? What did she want?”

“One, I gave it to her. And two, did you know Sutton was in D.C. last week?”

It feels impossible to hold my expression neutral when I feel every ounce of color draining away.

“He was?” I try to act confused in lieu of guilty. “Is that why she called you?”

Thank God he can’t see inside my chest right now because if he could, he would know I’m lying by how violently my heart is pounding against my ribcage.

“Yeah. I guess she found out from some guy he works with. She called me to see if I’d heard from him.”

“Why would she do that?”

“No idea. I got the impression there was something she wanted to tell me, but she decided against it. Fuck, I don’t know. It was weird.”

“Sounds weird.” I snort, trying my damndest to seem as natural as possible even though a million possible scenarios are now playing out in my head.

Does Olivia know about us?

And worse, was she calling to tell Remi?

“So, are you two like friends now?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I really like hanging out with her.”

“Like hanging out with her as in, you’re into her?” I raise my eyebrows.

“Not like that.” He shakes his head. “You know I have a strict, no fucking my brother’s seconds policy.”

I scrunch my nose to hide what I know has to be written all over my face.

“Anyway, I mentioned it to Mom last night on the phone and she confirmed he had a meeting with some building designer last week.”

“Wonder why he didn’t call you if he was in town?” I try to seem offended on his behalf.

“No idea. Guess he didn’t want me to know he was here.”

“You don’t think he’s thinking about moving here, do you?” I act appalled by the idea.

“No idea. In case you haven’t noticed, he doesn’t fucking tell me anything.”

“Did Olivia say anything else?”

“We talked a bit.” He shrugs, moving on to my other foot. “The shit my brother said about her having to leave early for work was bullshit. Apparently, she broke things off with him.”

“Did she say why?”

“No, but she didn’t have to. I know my brother. He’s incapable of exclusivity and from what I gathered, she wanted that from him.”

Exclusivity. It’s a word I hadn’t much thought of until now. Sutton and I never discussed being exclusive. I think I kind of just assumed... I realize now how foolish of me that was. He’s probably balls deep in someone right now. The thought has the pasta sitting in my stomach stirring uncomfortably.

“She thought him bringing her to the vow renewal meant he wanted more, but turns out he just wanted to keep the vultures off his back. Shocker.” He rolls his eyes in a very Remi sort of way, getting his whole head involved in the action.

“Poor girl.” I don’t have to pretend to feel bad for her because I know firsthand what it’s like to be hurt by Sutton Barnett. I *do* feel for her. Of course, I do. If anyone understands, it’s me. I spent years with feelings that were entirely unrequited.

“I have a hard time feeling sorry for anyone who gets involved with my brother. He might as well have *player* tattooed on his forehead.”

My throat is suddenly so dry it feels like sandpaper as my words make their way to the surface.

“Pot meet kettle.” I give him a pointed look.

“I don’t play. I’m upfront from the jump.”

“How do you know he isn’t?” I cock a brow. “Have you tried dating your brother?” I quickly add to cover up my blunder.

I don’t know why I’m defending him. Sutton has not once given me any indication of what he wants out of this. He does things that make me think he wants more from me, but then he says things to contradict his actions, like he’s trying to give himself an easy out if he decides he wants one. I can’t say he promised me anything because he hasn’t. I can’t say he’s led me on because he hasn’t. I went into this with no guarantees. Hell, I didn’t even ask for any. That was my first mistake. Because without even realizing it, I played right into his hand.

“No, but I had enough girls bitch to me in school to know how he rolls. He’s not one to drop the shoe until he’s ready. So, no, I am nothing like Sutton.”

“You are like him in some ways, though,” I disagree. “Neither of you seems to have any desire to settle down.” At this point, I’m just trying to say what I think I would have said before Sutton and I started sleeping together.

“That’s not entirely true, either.”

“It’s not?” I’m surprised by his response.

“I would settle down.”

“You would?” I ask when he doesn’t fully finish the thought.

“If it was with the right person, yeah.”

“What makes a person right, though? Like how do you know if someone is the *right* person for you?” I’m asking because I’m genuinely curious about what he’ll say.

“I don’t know. Someone who makes you excited about each day. Someone who enjoys a lot of the same things you do. Someone who will laugh with you *and* cry with you, taking on both your joy and your pain. Someone who makes you want to be a better person. Someone...” He pauses for a brief moment. “You can’t imagine your life without.”

“Sounds like you’ve given this a lot of thought,” I croak, something funny settling in my chest.

“I have.” He sets my feet in his lap, his hands wrapping around my ankles as he stares back at me.

“And here I thought you were just a horny meathead,” I tease.

“Come on now, Pen. You know me better than that.”

“I know,” I admit. “One day you’re going to make someone very happy. And I can’t wait for the day that I get to babysit tiny little versions of you.”

“If I have kids.”

“What do you mean, *if*? You’ve always talked about having kids someday.”

“Maybe I don’t know if I want that anymore.” He shrugs.

“Careful, you’re starting to sound like me.” I bark out a humorless laugh.

It’s no secret that I don’t want kids. I don’t ever want to bring someone into this world, only to leave them in the hands of monsters if something happens to me. I know the odds of that happening are slim, and even if the child was to end up in the foster system, I know there are some wonderful families out there. But there are also families like the one I ended up with, and that’s not a risk I’m willing to take.

“I don’t know. The more time I spend in this world, the more I think it’s almost cruel to bring children into it.”

“Now you really *are* sounding like me.” I snort.

“Maybe you were on the right track all along.”

“Where’s this coming from?” I can’t help but ask.

“Nowhere. Just been thinking about the future recently, is all.”

“What about it?”

“I don’t know. Where I want to be in ten years. What I want my life to look like.”

“And what did you come up with?”

“Not sure. I do know one thing, though. In every scenario I imagine, you’re always in it.”

“I better be.” I nudge him with my foot. “You’re my family, Rem.” I fall serious for a moment. “My favorite human on the planet.”

“And you’re mine.” He grins.

“Until some lucky lady comes along and scoots me into the number two slot.” The mood shifts into something more playful.

“Not a chance. You will always be firmly in the number one position.”

“Yeah, your future wife is going to love that.” It’s my turn to roll my eyes.

“Well, you could save me the strife and just marry me yourself.” He lifts his eyebrows suggestively, being playfully sexy in a way that only Remi can.

“Now I know you really have lost it.” I teasingly kick him.

“Did you just kick me?” He cocks his head to one side.

“Remi... Don’t you—” I can’t get the words out before he has my foot in his hand, tickling me from heel to toe. He knows exactly how to move to get

the optimal tickle power and before long, I'm laughing so hard, trying to kick out of his grasp, that I nearly pee myself.

And as we lie side by side later that evening, watching some stupid reality show Remi loves, a thought occurs to me that never has before.

What if I'm choosing the wrong brother?

What if the person I'm supposed to be with has been here all along, right under my nose?

But even as I think it, I know it could never happen. The decisions I've made as of late have pretty much sealed that fate. And while there is a world where I could've pictured it—the two of us happy, in love—I don't think I could ever give him my full heart, not when Sutton has claimed so much of it already. And that's not fair to Remi.

He deserves someone to love him with everything that they are. And as much as I wish that person could be me, deep down I know it isn't. Even if Sutton wasn't in the picture, I don't know if I would ever be enough. How do you give someone everything that you are when so much of you has been stolen by others?

Sometimes I wonder if I'm even truly capable of loving another person in that way—fully, I mean. I think in a way that's *why* I was drawn to Sutton all those years ago. Because I knew he would never give me the time of day and even if he did, he wouldn't want my heart, let alone ask for it.

I've clung to this idea of what love should be for so long, I'm not sure I even really know what love is supposed to feel like. But I do know this: when Sutton looks at me, it's like my world stops on its axis. If that doesn't mean love, I don't know what does.

It's not a revelation. Not some *aha* moment where it hits me all at once. I've always known it was there. But I think I'm just now starting to realize why it's always been Sutton. Because he is the only one who has ever made me feel this way, like I've just been struck by a bolt of electricity or taken a shot of adrenaline straight to the heart. When he's around, I feel alive in a way I've never felt before and I'm fairly certain I'll never feel again.

The thought is as terrifying as it is exciting.

# Chapter Fifteen

Sutton



I feel like a giddy, fucking teenager as I rap my knuckles against Aspen's front door. She doesn't know I'm coming. Something about watching the way her cheeks flush when she sees me too priceless to rob myself off.

Rocking back on my heels, I resist the urge to knock again.

I know she's home. I confirmed it before leaving the airport under the guise that I was going to call her and I needed her to be alone when I did. Her reply was instant.

If only she'd answer the door as quickly...

Raising my fist, I knock again, a little harder this time, despite the late hour.

"Coming." Victory blooms in my chest at the sound of her breathy voice. I hear her fumble with the lock, never once asking who it is. I make sure to scold her for it the second the door swings open.

"Why didn't you ask who I was?"

"Sutton." Just like I said, a flush of pink slides up her neck and spills across her cheeks as if on command.

"I could have been a serial killer coming to claim his next victim." I give her a hard look, trying not to become distracted by the tiny little nightgown I now see she's wearing. "Not to mention, you're practically naked." I step into her, giving her no choice but to step backward as I drop my bag on the floor and quickly kick the door closed.

"One, a serial killer would likely not knock. Two, I am not even close to naked." She gestures to the tiny scrap of material that might as well be see-through it's so sheer. "And three..." She takes a quick breath as if to steady herself. I love how nervous I make her. As sure as she is of herself, she still trembles when I reach out and touch her arm. "What are you doing here?"

"What?" I tug her into my chest in one quick pull, my hand releasing her arm to go into the back of her hair as I angle her face up to mine. "Aren't you

happy to see me?”

“I didn’t say that.” She tugs her bottom lip through her teeth as she stares up at me. “Just surprised, is all.”

“Good surprised?” I lean in, our lips so close I can smell the minty toothpaste that lingers on her breath. If I had to guess, she just brushed her teeth, preparing for bed. And here I am, happy to throw a big fucking wrench into that plan.

“Really good.”

I don’t let the smile fully blossom on her mouth before I press my lips to hers, groaning at the feel of their softness against mine.

“Really good, huh?” I hoist her up, turning toward her bedroom in one fluid movement.

“The best.” She opens up for me and I greedily slide my tongue inside her mouth, eager to taste her.

Good luck getting me to admit how many times I’ve thought about this very thing over the past couple of weeks. I also won’t admit that when I didn’t hear from the building designer right away, I started blowing up his secretary until he finally called me back for a second meeting. I think it’s pretty clear why. Because I couldn’t wait to be balls deep inside of her again, but I needed an excuse. Can’t have her thinking I would come all this way just for her, even if that’s exactly why I’m here. Fuck the job. There are dozens of others just like it in D.C. alone. No, I’m here for one reason and one reason only.

I navigate her small apartment like I’ve been here a million times before. It helps that the entire thing can’t be more than six or seven hundred square feet and that she keeps it immaculately clean so that I don’t run into any unexpected objects on the floor on my way to her bedroom.

When my shins meet the edge of her bed, I lean forward, depositing her on the mattress before quickly removing my shirt and pants. I’m so greedy to feel her tight around me that I’ve no more than kicked my boxers across the floor and I’m on top of her, settling between her soft thighs.

Shoving her panties aside with my fingers, I enter her on one, quick thrust, a groan rumbling deep in my chest at how wet and ready she is for me even though I never even touched her.

“Always so ready for me,” I purr against her lips, pulling nearly all the way out before sliding back in until I’m nuts deep again. “Always so wet,” I

tell her, licking the seam of her mouth as I begin to establish a relentless pace.

I told myself I was going to take my time, that I was going to savor this, but now, feeling her so tight around me, milking me of my pleasure like her body was made to do just that, I feel my control already beginning to slip, especially when I feel her nails bite into my back as she urges me forward.

“Aspen...” I groan, almost apologetically as my balls begin to tighten with my impending release.

“I’m there,” she cries, and within seconds I explode inside of her.

It’s so intense that my entire body shakes. I keep myself angled above her even though my arm muscles are screaming against my weight, despite the fact that I’ve only been in this position for maybe two minutes. It was that quick. And as much as I want to collapse down on top of her, I can’t deprive myself of the sight of her face contorted with pleasure, my name on her lips as she pulses around me.

It’s the single best thing my eyes have ever witnessed, the sight of her coming so completely undone by me.

I feel the overwhelming need to claim her. To make her mine in a way I’ve never made another woman.

“You belong to me now.” I finally let my weight settle on top of her, my nose sliding against hers. “Do you understand me?” I kiss her mouth softly. “Mine.” I move to her neck. “Mine,” I repeat, slowly kissing my way down her chest. “Mine.” I suck a nipple into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it through the thin material of her nightgown. “Mine,” I repeat, moving to the other nipple.

“Yours,” she readily agrees as I move down her stomach.

When I reach her pussy, slick with our combined releases, I can’t resist the urge to slide my tongue inside her folds and taste our intermingled pleasure.

“Mine.” I lap my tongue up to her clit, swirling the tip. “Say it.” I repeat the motion, smiling when she arches her hips, silently begging for more.

“Yours.” She whimpers when I suck her clit into my mouth, rolling my teeth gently over the small bud. “Sutton.” Her hands are in my hair now, urging me forward, and I am all too happy to comply.

I feast on her sweetness until she’s begging for me to be inside of her again.



And who am I to deny her of the one thing she can't seem to get enough of?

I'm even rougher this time, our skin slapping against each other, clapping loudly through the room as I move. And when I come inside of her for a second time, I make sure she understands fully.

"You." I grunt. "Are." I make sure she's looking at me when I say it. "Mine." I fill her full of my pleasure, watching her face as her greedy little pussy drinks it in.

"I am yours." Her body trembles as she rides out the remnants of her own orgasm.

Collapsing on top of her, I again revel in how perfect she feels beneath me. I've been with a lot of women before, but never one who has pulled every ounce of me into it. She consumes me so deeply that all I can see is her. All I can smell is her. All I can taste is her. All I can feel is her.

I don't know how or when, but Aspen Cooper has buried herself so far under my skin that I don't think I'll ever be able to get her out. And if I'm honest with myself, I don't think I'll ever want to.

I won't lie, it scares the shit out of me the power she seems to wield over me. But there's something that scares me a fuck lot more than that. And that's waking up tomorrow and this all being over.



"Hey, can you get that?" Aspen calls from the bathroom, the door open as she tries to work the tangles out of her hair.

I won't apologize for putting them there. The last twelve hours have been pretty fucking perfect if you ask me. Mainly because half of that time I've spent buried deep inside her. I honestly didn't know I had the stamina to go most of the night, but with her, one look and I swear to Christ I'm rock-hard seconds after getting off.

"And you did tip, right?" She pokes her head out of the room.

"I know how food delivery works," I tease, slipping a shirt over my head before heading to the front door.

Aspen offered to cook breakfast, but I figured after keeping her up most of the night, the least I could do was order her breakfast.

Sliding the lock, I tug open the door, barely even looking at the person on the other side. That is until I realize that the man isn't holding any food.

"What. The. Fuck."

My gaze finds my brother's face just as the words leave his mouth. I watch the confusion, the realization, the anger, all meld together as he takes in my appearance. Disheveled hair. Wrinkled shirt. Boxer briefs. Which, in hindsight, I probably should have covered before answering the door regardless of who it was.

I know what it looks like. Because it's exactly how it looks. I don't bother spouting bullshit or insulting him with a lie. He wouldn't believe it anyway. Instead, I let him barrel right past me into the apartment without trying to stop him.

"Where is she?" He looks half mad as his head swings around the small room. "Aspen!" He locks onto her as she steps out of the bathroom, every ounce of color in her face draining away.

She hasn't wanted to tell my brother about us, and in truth, neither have I. It's been kind of an unspoken agreement from the beginning. But we both knew sooner or later he was going to find out. Though I'm sure I speak for both of us when I say that this wasn't the way we intended for it to go down.

"So this is who you've been seeing?" My brother's voice clogs with anger. "Sutton!" He gestures back toward me without turning. Not that I blame him. If roles were reversed, I probably wouldn't want to look at him either. "My fucking brother!"

"Remi... I—"

"Don't you dare try to lie to me!" he cuts her off. "How long? How long has this been going on?"

"Remi, I can explain."

"What you can explain is how long you've been fucking my brother and lying to me about it."

It isn't until I see the first sign of tears forming behind her eyes that I decide it's time to step in. He may be angry and he may have every right to be, but he will not take this out on her. Not when I'm the one who initiated it in the first place.

"That's enough." I square my shoulders as I close the space between me and my brother.

"You don't get to say what's enough." Remi spins on me and I see that Aspen isn't the only one on the verge of crying.

An intense pang of guilt hits me square in the chest.

He told me once he loved her. And despite what he's insisted since then, it's clear to anyone with fucking eyes that he *still* loves her.

Deep down, I think I knew it. No, I *did* know it. And I made it some kind of fucking game. Which is why when he swings at me, I don't try to duck away. I let his fist hit me square in the jaw.

"Remi!" Aspen's voice is too close.

I see her panicked expression over my brother's shoulder seconds before his fist connects with my face again, this time splitting my lip clean open. I taste blood upon contact.

"Remi, stop!" She pulls on his arm, which is already drawn back, ready to deliver another blow.

I don't fight back.

We both know I deserve every single thing I have coming to me.

But you wanna know the fucked up thing? I'd do it all over again. Every single fucking second of it. Because it was worth it.

*She is worth it.*

And I never thought I'd feel that way, let alone allow myself to admit it.

"How could you?" He shakes off Aspen's grip, twisting his hand in my shirt collar as he gets right in my face. "All the fucking women in this world and you had to go after her. Why?" He moves, taking me backward with him. "Why?" He slams me against the door, my back molars clanging together. "You know what she means to me. And yet, you just couldn't help yourself, could you?" He releases my shirt, taking a full step back as defeat quickly replaces his anger.

"I never meant to hurt you." I clear my throat, wincing when I run my tongue along the painful slit in my lower lip.

"No? Then what did you mean to do, Sutton? What did you think fucking the only person in the world I actually give a shit about would do to me? Because I can fucking guarantee that you didn't think of me for one goddamned, single second."

"Remi." Aspen's hand slides around my brother's bicep before she's at his side, urging him to look at her. "I'm so sorry." Her chin quivers as the first tears fall, staining her cheeks as she looks up at him. "We never meant to hurt you."

"No? What did you think fucking my brother behind my back would do?" He shakes off her touch.

“Remi...”

“Stop saying my name and tell me the fucking truth. How long has this been going on?”

“Two days before we left Ohio,” I answer for her.

“Pen.” He waits until her gaze comes back to him. “How long has this been going on?”

“I just fucking told you.” I step forward, trying to wedge myself between the two of them.

He can hit me and scream at me all he wants, but I won’t let him do the same to her. Not that he’d ever lay a hand on her, he wouldn’t, but that doesn’t mean he’s not causing her pain. That much is written on every feature of her face. Or maybe I should own that pain. I did this, after all, did I not?

“Fuck you!” He shoves me backward, stepping into Aspen. I damn near slam his fucking head into the ground when his hands come up to cup her face.

I didn’t know I could feel such an array of fucking emotions watching him hold her this way. Jealousy. Anger. Guilt. They all slam into my chest so hard that it physically steals the air from my lungs.

I knew my brother loved her. He’s loved her since they were kids. But seeing it now, in a way I’ve never seen it before, it’s like forcing barbed wire into your stomach. Every time I move, it tears and slices, gutting me from the inside out.

“How long?” he asks again.

“The first time was March of sophomore year.”

I can’t see her face anymore, but I imagine if I could, the shame I would see there would be enough to drop me like a fucking sack of potatoes being tossed onto the floor. Hearing it in her voice is almost as bad.

It had never occurred to me that the reason she never told my brother after the night of the party all those years ago was because she was ashamed of being with me. And without even realizing she’s done it, she’s told me exactly why she didn’t want him to know today.

Remember that barbed wire? Yeah, well, that shit just cut straight through me and is now gapping through the flesh of my abdomen.

Here I thought all this time, it was me who was hiding her. But in reality, it was always her hiding me.

“Sophomore year.” My brother stumbles backward, his voice and face filled with disbelief. “Eight years, Pen. You’ve been lying to me for eight

years?”

“No. It only happened the one time before.”

“I don’t care if it happened once or a hundred times. It still happened. And you lied to me about it.”

“I was only trying to protect you.”

“No.” He shakes his head, anger tugging at his features. “You were only trying to protect yourself. I’ve made a lot of excuses for you over the years because of how you were raised, but I’m done. You’re not some wounded lamb, Aspen. You’re a fucking lion. You are not the victim. You are the villain. And I hope for your sake, it was fucking worth it.” He moves to leave, but she cuts off his path.

“Remi, please.”

He takes a full step back, his gaze jumping between the two of us.

“You know, I never thought I’d say this, but you two deserve each other. You’re both selfish, lying assholes, and I hope you rot in fucking hell together.”

When he shoves past her this time, she doesn’t try to stop him, but she does try to go after him. I grab her forearm before she can follow him out the door.

“Let him go,” I tell her, tightening my grip when she tries to pull away.

“He just needs time.”

“Fuck you!” she screams in my face, her pain morphing into anger. “This is your fault. If you had just left me alone, none of this would be happening.”

Her words hurt, but I’m careful not to let it show in my expression.

“Last time I checked, you were a very willing participant in this,” I remind her through gritted teeth.

“A mistake I’ll regret for the rest of my life.” When she jerks her arm away this time, I let her go.

“If you go after him, we’re done,” I warn her before she makes another dart for the door. “I won’t play second to my little brother. I’m not built that way.”

“You’ve always been second to him.” She swipes angrily at her tears. “If you don’t know that already, then you’ve been lying to yourself.” With that, she takes off through the door left open moments earlier by my brother.

All my life, I could never understand why I was the way I was. Now I know. I was simply sparing myself this feeling.

I wish I could say it wasn't worth it, but that would be just another lie in a long list of others.

It was worth it, which is why it hurts so fucking bad to watch her walk away.

To watch her choose him, the way I always knew she would.

# Chapter Sixteen

Aspen



## Eight years earlier

*“I fucking hate him so much.” Remi groans, collapsing down on top of his mattress with a heavy sigh.*

*“Uh-oh, what did he do this time?” I mark my chapter in the book I’m reading for English before setting it face down on Remi’s desk.*

*“What didn’t he do?” Remi opens his arm to me, gesturing for me to join him, which I quickly do, tucking myself in the crook of his arm.*

*It’s been a little over three weeks since that night at the party and while I’ve done my best to pretend it never happened—something Sutton appears to be very good at, considering he’s barely even looked at me since—and yet every time I see him or someone mentions his name, it comes flooding back. Like right now, for example.*

*“Okay, well, what did he do this time?” I ask, resting my hand on his stomach as I stare up at the side of his face.*

*“My mom bought those chips you love so much, just for you, and he and some blond chick he’s fondling on the couch ate them all.”*

*I try to ignore the pang of jealousy I feel in my gut, but it’s impossible to do.*

*It doesn’t matter how many times I’ve told my heart not to care about Sutton Barnett. It still does. I can’t force myself to hate him any more than I can force myself not to love him. But I’m sure as hell gonna keep trying because loving him hurts too much.*

*“That’s okay, though, right? They’re just chips.”*

*“Chips my mom bought for you.”*

*“Remi.” I wait until his head tilts down toward me. “Your mom has done more than enough for me. I don’t care about the chips.”*

*“Well, I do. He thinks he can just have whatever he wants. Someone needs to teach him that the world doesn’t belong to him.”*

*“And maybe someday, someone will.”*

*“That would require him to actually give a shit about someone other than himself.”*

*“You’re right, that’s never going to happen.” I force out a laugh.*

*“Will you promise me something?” He rolls toward me, forcing me to reposition my head on the pillow.*

*“Anything.” I wait until he’s facing me to say.*

*“Promise me you’re something he won’t ever be able to have.”*

*“What?” The word gets stuck in my throat.*

*“I mean it. Sutton is the kind of person who takes things simply because he can. I wouldn’t put it past him to try something with you, just to prove a point. Promise me, if that day ever comes, you’ll tell him to go fuck himself.”*

*Guilt swims in my stomach like it’s full of piranhas, biting and nipping my insides until eventually, there won’t be any parts of me left.*

*I want to tell him the truth, now more than ever. But how can I? How can I say what I know needs to be said when I know how badly it will hurt him?*

*How do I look him in the eye and tell him that day has already passed and I failed?*

*Pulling in a deep breath, I say the only thing I can say.*

*“I will.”*

*It’s a promise I’ve already broken, and I feel physically ill for my mistake.*

*I wish I could regret it the way I should. And I guess a part of me does, because of Remi. But if I’m honest, if given the choice to relive that night again, I wouldn’t do a single thing differently. And knowing that stirs a different kind of emotion to life. One I wasn’t expecting until I feel the anger churn in my chest.*

*I didn’t do this to Remi. Sutton did.*

*“But I don’t think you have anything to worry about there,” I quickly add. “He’s leaving in a couple months,” I remind him.*

*Knowing Sutton is leaving for college soon has been the only thing that’s given me any peace. Because as sad as I am to see him go, a part of me can’t wait to be rid of him. Out of sight, out of mind, as the old saying goes. I’m hoping that’s true in my case. I’m hoping that with time and distance, I can see Sutton for what he really is.*

*“Thank God. This place is going to be so much better without him here.” He blows out a breath, the warmth of it dancing across my face.*



*“You don’t think you’re going to miss him even a little bit?”*

*“Not really, no. Once he’s gone, it’ll just be me and you.”*

*“It’s already just me and you.”*

*“You know what I mean. We can watch television when we want. We can swim when we want. We won’t have to worry about him eating all the good snacks.” He grins.*

*“All good points,” I agree, trying to share in even a semblance of his excitement. “Though you know, I am going to have to go home eventually.” I feel the need to remind him.*

*I haven’t gone back to the McKinnys since the morning after the party. And while Sutton’s parents have been so welcoming, I know I can’t stay here forever, even if I wish I could.*

*“Says who?”*

*“Says the state if they find out I’m not staying there.” Just the thought of stepping foot back in that house, of seeing Harris again, makes my skin crawl.*

*“Well, let’s make sure they don’t find out.”*

*“I have to go back.” I reach out, pushing a chunk of dirty-blond hair away from his forehead.*

*Remi is so different than his brother, and yet, just as beautiful. If only I could see him the way I see his brother. Things would be so much easier.*

*I could picture our life together.*

*Lazy summer days at the lake. Cold winter nights snuggled by the fireplace.*

*It would be so easy with him. So simple. And yet, when I look at him, I don’t feel it. And clearly, he doesn’t either, because he’s never once made me feel like I meant anything more than exactly what he means to me. We’re family. Now and forever.*

*“What if I kidnap you and keep you locked in my closet?”*

*“As wonderful as that sounds, I’m only putting off the inevitable. It’s time.” I let my hand fall to his cheek.*

*“If they hurt you again—”*

*“They won’t,” I cut him off.*

*“I would kill for you. You know that, right?”*

*“I do.” I smile. “And I for you.”*

*“You’ll be my number one forever.”*

*“And you’ll be mine.” I let my hand fall away.*

*“Swear it on your left tit.” He says it with a straight face, but it doesn’t take long for a wide smile to tip his lips upward.*

*“On my left tit, huh?”*

*“Doubt you’ll ever wanna go through life without it. Seems like a good thing to swear on.”*

*“Sometimes I don’t know about you.” I snort out a laugh.*

*“Swear it.” He doesn’t let me off so easily.*

*“Fine.” I place my hand over my left breast. “I promise on my left tit that you will always be my number one.”*

*“And I promise on my left nut, that you will always be mine.”*

*I bark out a laugh, unable to hold it in.*

*And this right here is why I love Remi so damn much. Because even though he’s being playful, I know he means every word, and so do I.*

*Remi is my person. The only other person on this planet who makes me feel whole when I’m full of missing parts and broken pieces.*

*And I’m determined to make sure nothing and no one ever changes that. Especially Sutton Barnett.*



“Remi, please wait!” I chase after his fleeing form, having not even bothered to put on shoes as I follow him across the parking lot.

I can’t think about how I left Sutton or the things I said. My focus right now is Remi. It has to be.

Of all the ways for him to find out... I swipe angrily at my tears.

I did this. I knew what I was doing. I knew it would hurt him and I did it anyway. What does that say about me?

It says I’m a horrible person.

It says I’m selfish.

So very selfish.

“How could you?” Remi stops so abruptly I almost run into him as he spins toward me. “Sutton, Aspen? Of all the people it had to be him?”

“I can explain.” My voice breaks.

“There is nothing you can say that would make me understand how you could do this to me. You promised. You promised you would never let him

have you. And now I find out you broke that promise before you even made it. And what's worse, then you kept breaking it over and over again. My whole life I've had to sit back and watch him take everything he wanted. But you, Pen, you were the one thing I knew he could never have. You were *mine*."

"I'm still yours." I choke back a sob. "We can figure this out."

"How?"

"I love you, Remi. You know that."

"Do you? I thought you did. But now..." He tosses his arms up in the air, the hurt and betrayal on his face almost more than I can bear. "Now I'm not sure I know anything anymore."

"You are my best friend."

"I thought that too, but best friends don't lie to each other, Pen. Best friends don't keep shit like this from each other." He gestures behind me to where my apartment building sits a few yards away. "You chose him."

"No! No, I didn't." I reach for him, tears blurring my vision.

"You did. You had a choice, and you chose him." He jerks his arm away before I can touch him.

"How many women have you slept with over the years? Twenty? Thirty?" Anger slides through my chest.

I know I messed up.

I know I should have been up-front with him from the beginning. But right now he's acting like a boyfriend who just caught me cheating.

"This isn't the same thing."

"Yes, it is. So, I slept with Sutton. It's nothing you haven't done dozens of times over." I have no idea what point exactly I'm trying to argue, only that I'm desperate to make him see that what I did isn't unforgivable.

"If you don't see the difference, then you're not the person I thought you were." He squares his shoulders, his green eyes filled with something I've never seen before when he looks at me... Hatred.

"I'm sorry I hurt you."

"You're sorry?" He blanches at me.

"Yes. I'm sorry. Please, tell me how to fix this. I swear I *will* do anything to make this right. To make us okay again."

"You can't."

"You don't mean that." My shoulders shake.

“I do. Because while I was over here waiting years for you, you were fucking my brother behind my back.”

“What?” Confusion bleeds into the lethal concoction of emotions swimming through me.

“Don’t act like you didn’t know.”

“Know what?” I sniff, wiping at my nose with the back of my hand.

“You were meant to be mine.” It’s his voice that breaks this time, and it damn near breaks me right along with it.

“Remi... I don’t understand. What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I’m in love with you, Pen. Jesus, I have been for years.”

The ground feels seconds away from opening up and swallowing me whole.

“Remi...”

“I asked you not to let him have you because *I* wanted you.”

“Why? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I did. I say things constantly, but you didn’t listen because you weren’t ready to hear it. You laughed me off and thought I was joking, but everything I have said to you, every single thing has been true.” He raps his fist against his chest. “This”—he repeats the motion—“has belonged to you since the first day I saw you.”

“You can’t expect that I would know that. You never said anything. You make dirty jokes and comments, but never have you ever indicated to me that you wanted more. Truly. I’m not a mind reader, Remi. If you wanted something from me, you should have told me. Straight out, no bullshit. And you didn’t.”

“Because I was waiting.” Emotion explodes from his voice.

“For what?” I throw my hands up in the air. “What were you waiting for?”

“For you to be ready.”

“What makes you think I wasn’t ready?”

“Because I know you, Pen. I know you like no one else does. I know the shit you went through growing up in that house. I know the things *he* did to you, even if you didn’t say it out loud. I knew, Pen. I could feel it. Your pain. All I wanted was to be the person to help you through it, even if you didn’t want to tell me about it. And then I watched you. I watched you avoid relationships at every turn. I watched you make every excuse not to get close to someone. And so, I waited. I’ve been waiting...”

“You can’t harbor secret feelings for me and then hold me accountable for actions I made not knowing the truth. You lied to me just the same as I lied to you.”

“No!” Anger flares his nostrils. “I was protecting you.”

“You were protecting yourself. If you truly loved me in that way, you would’ve told me by now. You don’t want me, Remi. You just don’t want anyone else to have me.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is. And now you’re punishing me for it. Yes, I lied to you. Yes, I broke a promise. But I did not betray you. You are my *friend*, not my boyfriend or my husband, my *friend*. I am free to sleep with whomever I choose and as my friend, you should be okay with that.”

“You’re not listening to me.” He tugs at the ends of his hair in frustration. “I’m in love with you.”

“Stop saying that!” I scream, a fresh batch of tears drawing to the surface.

“I’m in love with you,” he repeats, stepping closer, his hands coming up to cup my face.

I’m paralyzed by the moment, unable to say or do anything to stop him as he leans in closer. And then his lips are on mine, warm and soft, like I knew they would be, and suddenly I understand everything, and yet, nothing at all.

It’s familiar, the kiss. As if we’ve done it a million times before. And while I love Remi with my whole heart, when he sweeps his tongue against mine, I don’t get the same electrical charge that surges through me when Sutton kisses me.

I won’t lie and say it doesn’t stir something inside me that I didn’t know was there, but it’s also not enough to erase the etches Sutton has scratched into my soul.

“Remi,” I murmur against his lips, pressing my hands to his chest as I work to untangle myself from his grasp.

Confusion furrows his brow as he pulls away.

“If you had told me from the start, then maybe...” I touch my lips with the tips of my fingers, wishing things could be different. Wishing it were him I wanted. Him I craved. Him who lit my body and soul on fire, not his brother.

“Maybe what?” he asks when I haven’t yet found the right words to complete my thought.

“Maybe things could have been different.”

“What are you saying?” He steps back, emotion deep in his features.

It's almost enough for me to change my mind. It's almost enough for me to agree to be his even though my heart isn't fully in it. Because the last thing I want to do is hurt him. Well, more than I already have.

"I can't..." I shake my head, the look that crosses his face next damn near making me buckle over.

"You love him?" he barks, anger quickly taking the forefront.

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to," he sneers. "So you've made your choice then. It's him."

"If you make me choose, I will choose *you*, not him." My chin quivers as I fight back more tears, tears that seem never-ending at this point.

God, how did everything get so messed up?

How did Remi go from being my favorite person on the planet to someone I now feel a world away from?

"I shouldn't *have* to make you choose."

I don't know what to say to that. He's right, he shouldn't have to make me. It shouldn't even be a choice, but the thought of giving up Sutton feels about as easy as throwing myself out of a plane with no parachute, knowing that all that awaits me at the bottom is certain death. But I also know I can't have it both ways, and I'll do anything to make things right with Remi.

Because at the end of the day, he's my person, and I won't lose that. I can't.

"I'm done with him." I try to sound convincing, but it lacks the conviction I was shooting for.

"You see, that's the problem now, isn't it? I don't believe a fucking word that comes out of your mouth anymore. I think maybe you should choose him. Because honestly, Pen, I don't think I can ever look at you the same again, anyway."

When Remi turns to leave this time, I don't try to stop him or go after him, no matter how badly I want to.

Instead, I stand rooted to the spot, tears spilling down my cheeks, my heart shattering into tiny little pieces inside my chest as I watch him walk away.

Sobs wrack my shoulders, my pain and anger and guilt spilling out of me in waves.

All I want to do is what I've always done when the pain is too much to bear alone—crawl into Remi's arms and let him make everything better. But Remi isn't going to be there this time, and it's entirely my own doing.

I don't know how long I stand in the parking lot, staring at the corner Remi disappeared around what feels like hours ago. All I know is that when I turn to head back to my apartment, my feet feel cemented to the pavement beneath me they're so heavy, or maybe it's my heart that's weighing me down, making each step feel more difficult than the last.

I don't know what I'm going to say to Sutton. Don't know how I'm going to face him after everything I've already said. Even knowing how badly we hurt Remi, a part of me wants to run into Sutton's arms anyway. To have him kiss me, touch me, and make me forget, if even for a moment. But I know I can't do that. Because it's that way of thinking that got me into this mess to begin with.

I'm barely holding it together as I twist the knob to my front door and push my way inside. Nerves swim violently in my stomach.

I stop just inside the door, listening intently.

It's quiet. Too quiet. Eerily so.

"Sutton?" I call out, my voice breaking at the end.

Nothing...

Not a single sound other than the loud thud of my heart as it violently collides with my ribcage.

*Thump. Thump. Thump.*

The noise reverberates through me.

"Sutton?" I call louder, moving farther inside the apartment.

Again, nothing.

It doesn't take me long to realize he's not here. The knowledge hits me so hard my knees buckle from the impact, and I crumble into a heap on the floor. Pulling my knees into my chest, emotion clogs every pore of my body, causing it to tremble uncontrollably.

He left...

Just like that.

In one fell swoop, I've lost them both.

I guess in a way I've gotten exactly what I deserve.

Doesn't make the pain any less real, though...

# Chapter Seventeen

Aspen



*Memories. Such an inconsequential word, and yet the very thing that defines our existence. What are we if not for our memories? Who are we? Who would I be without the memory of what came before? Without the memory of him? The memory that never leaves, like a silent whisper at the back of my mind, demanding to be heard.*

It's been six days since Sutton left. Six days since Remi has spoken to me. Six days since my entire world blew up in an instant. I wish I could say I've made some kind of peace with the way things have worked out, but I haven't. How can you learn to be okay with something that feels like it's ripping your flesh from your bones a little more every single day and you know that eventually, there's going to be nothing left?

I stare down at the text thread on my phone, of the last message Sutton sent me the Friday morning before he showed up at my apartment.

***Sutton:*** *I miss those lips.*

And of all the ones I have sent him since he seemingly fell off the face of the earth.

***Me:*** *Can you call me please?*

***Me:*** *We need to talk.*

***Me:*** *Sutton, please talk to me.*

***Me:*** *Why did you just leave?*

***Me:*** *Sutton?*

I sent the last one just last night. He hasn't replied to a single one. He also hasn't answered any of my calls. My fingers hover over the screen of my phone, itching to type out another message that will no doubt be ignored.

Shaking my head, I back out into my messages screen and click on my text thread with Remi. A smile tips my lips despite the heavy ache in my



heart.

*Remi: Would it be considered poor taste if I told my boss to lick my balls?*

I never replied to that message. He sent it to me after Sutton had shown up unannounced on my doorstep. But I've replied since then, several times. The messages are almost identical to the ones I sent Sutton.

*Me: Can you call me please?*

*Me: Remi...*

*Me: Remi, please talk to me.*

*Me: I'm miserable without you.*

*Me: Please answer my calls. Or at the very least, text me back and let me know you're okay.*

And like Sutton, he has yet to respond to a single attempt I've made to talk to him.

I don't know how I screwed up so badly. In one fell swoop, I lost both of the men I care about. And what's worse, I don't even know why. I mean, Remi makes sense. I see now how badly I misjudged that situation. But Sutton?

He helped me create this mess, and now he's nowhere to be found.

I know I said some hurtful things, but honestly, was it so bad that he just decided I'm no longer worth even speaking to?

Maybe he, like me, has realized the repercussions of our selfishness and has decided, for his brother's sake, to leave well enough alone.

And if that's the case, I get it.

I wish like hell I could do the same.

I wish I could forget.

I wish I could let him go, just like that.

I wish I could cleanse him from my pores. Wash away every memory of his hands roaming my flesh. Of his lips pressed to mine.

But I can't.

Believe me, I've tried.

And even though I know I can't keep him, I also feel like I'm not completely myself without him. Like he took a piece of me with him when he left.

That statement is even more true for Remi.

When your life pretty much revolves around another person and then suddenly that person isn't there anymore, it's hard to find your footing

without them. I feel lost in a world that is unfamiliar without his clover green eyes and half-cocked smirk. Like I'm feeling around blindly in the dark, trying to find my way.

"You okay?" I jump, having not noticed Charles standing in my doorway until he speaks.

He's an older man with hard lines and stern eyes, but I've gotten to know him well working with him these past few months and he's more kind than most people realize. I mean, he's still a hard-ass sometimes too. He is an attorney after all.

"Yeah, of course." I straighten, trying to force an easy smile to my lips. I can tell by his expression that my attempts at seeming fine are less than successful.

"You know I call people on their bullshit for a living, yes?" He moves farther into the office, unbuttoning the front of his perfectly pressed, navy suit jacket before taking a seat in the chair opposite my desk.

"Just going through some personal stuff." I give him the only shred of truth I can without risking a complete and total meltdown.

"I assumed. Considering we won the case you prepped for, I'd expect you to be in better spirits."

Knowing that my hard work paid off and helped the attorneys I work for win a pretty big case does offer me some semblance of relief from the steady flow of punches my soul seems to be taking as of late.

I did it to myself, of course.

I have no one to blame but me.

Doesn't make it easier to stomach, though. If anything, I think it makes it worse.

"I am glad you won."

"That we won," he corrects. "My victories are your victories."

"Right." I once again try to force a smile to my lips, not sure if I'm any more successful the second go-round.

"Do you want to talk about what's going on? Is it something maybe I can help with?"

The offer seems strange coming from him. While we've worked pretty closely in my time here, Charles has never been one to really get into the personal side of his employees' lives. And while I appreciate the offer, I think I'd rather stick pencils in my eyeballs than tell him why I feel like I'm

stranded in the middle of the ocean and am not sure how much longer I can keep treading water before the violent turn of the sea finally takes me under.

“I’d rather not, if that’s okay.” Apology lines my words.

“It is.” He clasps his hands together, placing them on his lap. “While I appreciate that you have a life outside of this firm, when you’re here, I need you here.”

I should have expected the sudden shift. This is a business at the end of the day, and I’d be lying if I said I was anything but way off my game this week.

“I understand.” I nervously chew on the inside of my cheek.

I swear to God, if he fires me right now, I might seriously lose my fucking mind.

“What are you working on right now?”

“Just some research for the Hopkins case.”

“Why don’t you send Laura what you’re working on and let her take over. I think maybe you could use a long weekend.”

“Am I in trouble?” I can’t help but ask. Certainly being sent home early isn’t a good thing.

“Not at all. In truth, you are one of the hardest working employees on the payroll, and I’d hate to lose you because you feel like you can’t take time off to deal with personal issues.”

The dam holding my emotions in place finally breaks under the extreme pressure, and I instantly burst into tears. Embarrassment bleeds into the cracks of my sadness and I cry harder.

My vision is too blurred to make out Charles’s expression, but I can bet he’s pretty uncomfortable right about now. Lord knows I am, and yet I still can’t get the tears to stop. Now that they’ve started back up, I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to.

I have not cried a single tear after my initial meltdown the night everything happened, keeping everything I was feeling on the inside even though there was no one around to see it anyway. I think it’s because I knew that if I let myself fall apart, I may never be able to put myself back together again.

“I’m sorry,” I choke past a sob, my shoulders shaking violently as I drop my face into my hands.

Charles doesn’t say anything, probably having no idea what to say. Instead, he just lets me cry it out until I finally find the strength to somewhat

collect myself. I swipe angrily at the tears still sliding down my cheeks, having to force myself to look at him even though it's the last thing I want to do.

"I shouldn't bring this to work, I know." I sniff, accepting a tissue that Charles leans forward and takes from the dispenser on my desk.

"It's impossible to keep your personal and professional life separate at all times. Every now and again, the two are going to intermix. Trust me, I've had my fair share of hiccups over the years." He gives me a sad smile, understanding behind his eyes that I didn't expect to find there. "It's late. Go home, Aspen. Take tomorrow off. Take care of whatever this is. And if you need more time, please do not hesitate to ask for it."

"Charles, I—"

"I have Laura doing busy work. I'm sure she'd appreciate the break from dusting and filing," he reassures me. "Email her what you need her to take care of, and I'll see to it that it gets done." He abruptly stands, rebuttoning his jacket.

"Thank you." I barely manage to get out before he's heading toward the door.

"In my line of work, it feels pretty good when you can be the good guy for once." He tips his chin, disappearing into the hallway moments later.

I quickly pull up my email and shoot Laura the details of what I'm working on. She's been here longer than me, so I don't give her much instruction, knowing she doesn't need it.

And while I still feel mortified by my outburst, I'm also grateful to Charles for being so understanding. If I worked any other type of job, I probably would have called in sick all week. But knowing the size of the firm's caseloads, I just didn't feel like I could. Now I see, maybe it would have been better if I did. Would have saved me from breaking down in front of my boss.

Then again, work has been the absolutely only thing that keeps me getting out of bed every morning. The one thing that remains constant in a world of chaos, and in truth, I need something to focus on other than the shattered pieces of my heart that seem to chip away more and more as the days go by.

It's late as I make my way home from work, as it has been every day this week, the last remnants of the sun casting an orange glow across the sky. It's beautiful in a way that it shouldn't be if you really stop to think about it. I guess that's true about most things in this world.

Blowing out a slow breath, dread pools in my stomach as I cross the street to where my building sits on the corner. I should be relieved to be home, but the thought of sitting here for the next three days, drowning in my own self-pity, is a venture I have no desire to run toward. Unfortunately, I have nowhere else to go. No family to call. No real friends. At least not ones I feel comfortable talking about this stuff with. In a world of billions, I'm more alone than I've ever been. And that is really saying something.

It isn't until I'm just a few feet from the front door that someone steps out of the shadows, arms crossed in front of their broad chest as they cut off my path. There's a ballcap sitting low on his forehead, but I know it's Remi before he even looks up.

I could pick him out of a lineup of a million without ever seeing his face. I know him that well.

And while my lungs swell at the sight of him, I'm quickly reminded of what happened between us the last time we spoke. Things haven't felt right since. Not a single damn thing.

He tips his face upward, giving me the first look at his face in days. My knees wobble, my heart galloping inside my chest like a wild stallion fighting to get free.

He doesn't smile at me like he normally does. Doesn't tug me into his arms and give me one of his famous hugs I've grown so accustomed to. In fact, he makes no attempt to even greet me really.

"Can we talk?" His voice is tight, shoulders flexed as he stands in front of me.

For as messed up as things are right now, I can't help the small part of me that wants to leap into his arms and beg him to never let me go. I love Remi in a way I don't think I could ever fully explain. Like he's gravity and without him, I can't keep my feet on the ground. I need him like I need air. I knew that the instant he walked away. I know it now even more. But I also know that the knowledge doesn't make what I feel for Sutton any less. As much as I wish it did.

"Sure." I turn, pushing my way inside, glancing over my shoulder to make sure he's following me.

I don't speak on the way up to my apartment and neither does he. It's strange because I can't ever remember a time being with Remi and not hearing his boisterous voice or his deep laughter that shakes his entire body when he really lets it go.

It's a stark reminder of how far we've fallen, further intensifying the churning in my stomach.

He waits silently as I unlock my front door and then hesitantly follows me inside. Normally, he'd be stealing the keys from me and unlocking the door himself, already grabbing a beer and flopping down on my couch rather than standing awkwardly inside the foyer as I drop my things on the kitchen counter.

"Can I get you a drink? I think there's still some beer in the fridge," I offer as I turn back to face him.

"I'm good."

"Okay." I cross my arms in front of myself to keep myself from fidgeting. "So..." I let the word hang, not sure what to say.

"I miss you." His green eyes meet mine, the sadness behind them tearing through my chest like a serrated knife.

"I miss you." I sniff, my tears already welling to the surface.

"I don't know how to do this without you." He shoves his hands into the front pockets of his jeans, like he's not sure what to do with them.

"Me neither."

"I just... I don't know how we move past this."

"Me neither." I uncross my arms, wiping at a tear that springs free, no matter how hard I will it not to. "Remi... I—"

"Don't say you're sorry. We both kept things from each other. I'm just as much to blame as you are."

"You aren't," I disagree, shaking my head.

"I feel like half a person without you." He shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

"I *am* half a person without you." Another tear snakes past my lashes.

"I meant what I said, Pen. I love you. I know you may not want to hear it, but it's true. I can't live that lie any longer. I can't. Because doing so is what brought us here."

"I—" I start, but he quickly cuts me off.

"If you say you don't feel the same way, that's something I will have to learn to live with. But this"—he gestures between the two of us—"I can't live with this. With this distance between us. I tried. For the last week, I've tried and it's killing me, Pen. It's killing me not to talk to you every day."

"It's killing me, too." You'd think I'd be all cried out after today, but nope, the tears just keep on coming. "So what do we do?"

“I don’t know.” His jaw moves as he wears holes in his molars.

“Do you think you can forgive me?”

“Do you think... Do you think you could ever love me that way?” he asks instead of answering.

“I don’t know,” I admit. Because truly, I don’t. I thought I could at one time, then decided I couldn’t. Now, I don’t know anything.

“Maybe we can try just getting back to us and then let the rest figure itself out?” He seems hesitant to ask, like he’s not sure he even should.

“I’d like that,” I reply eagerly, the heavy boulder sitting on my chest lifting its weight slightly.

“But I don’t think we can do that if *he’s* in the picture.”

The mention of Sutton has the very weight I was just referring to slamming back down with so much force my knees wobble.

“He isn’t.” I choke back the sob that wells in my throat.

Missing Remi has been hell. Missing Sutton has been a pain I don’t think a single word in the English dictionary could describe. Not because I love him more than Remi but because I *love* him in a different way. And now that he’s gone, I feel like I have a gaping hole beneath my ribs where my heart used to be.

“I need you to be certain that whatever was going between the two of you is over.”

“It is.” I nod.

Even if I didn’t want it to be, Sutton made that choice for me when he left. Doesn’t mean I would have made a different choice. Just hits differently, I guess.

“I’m so sorry, Remi. For all of it.”

“Me too.” He gives me a sad smile.

“So, what now?” I ask, wishing I could shake away the nagging feeling that tells me things will never be the way they used to be between us, no matter how badly I want them to be.

“I don’t know.” He pulls his hands out of his pockets, reaching up to scratch his chin, which I’ve just realized is covered with a thin dusting of hair.

Remi is always clean-shaved. In fact, I can’t remember a time I’ve ever seen more than five o’clock shadow on his face.

It’s proof of what I already knew the moment I looked into his eyes. He’s miserable without me. And I’m just as miserable without him.

“Maybe we could start with a drink?” I offer.

“I’d like that.” A semblance of a grin tugs at the corners of his mouth, though it doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“We can go down to Jett’s Pub,” I suggest, knowing it’s one of Remi’s favorite restaurants.

“You always did know the way straight to my heart.” His statement means something different than it used to, and we both realize it at the exact same time.

“You know, it’s okay.” I move toward him, unable to take this distance any longer. “I love you and you love me and we’ll find a way to be us again. Whatever that turns out to be,” I promise, not sure I entirely believe the words that slide past my tongue.

“I hope you’re right.” He turns before I reach him, tugging open the door and stepping into the hallway.

*Me too, I think but don’t say.*

“Do you need a minute or are you ready now? Because I could really use that drink.” He turns to where I’m standing in the open doorway.

“I’m ready.” I join him in the hallway, pulling the door closed behind me before quickly locking it.

“Can I ask you something?” Remi doesn’t speak until we’re outside, slowing his pace to make it easier for me to match his stride.

“Anything.” I nod, swearing to myself that whatever he asks me will be the truth, no matter how painful it may be to say or for him to hear.

Only honesty from here on out. He deserves that much.

“You love him, don’t you?”

I feel like every ounce of blood in my body rushes straight to my ears, deafening out the world for the briefest of moments. I almost wish I could hold onto the sensation. Block everything out for a little while longer so I don’t have to answer the question I know I can’t avoid.

“Yes,” I finally admit with a broken word.

I watch his shoulders rise out of my peripheral, like he’s trying to pull in a breath but can’t find enough air. Funny enough, I know the feeling all too well.

“Why?” he asks after too long.

“I don’t know.” I can’t think of a more honest thing to say.

I don’t know.

I don’t know why I’ve always been drawn to Sutton.



I don't know why, even after years and distance, I could never fully shake him.

I don't know why he makes me feel a way no one else ever has.

I simply do not know.

"He'll never be able to love you the way you deserve." He keeps his gaze forward as he speaks.

"I know."

"And yet, you love him anyway."

"Not sure I have a choice in the matter."

"Do you love him more than me?" He stops so abruptly that I'm two steps past him before I realize he's no longer next to me.

Spinning on my heel, I reach out and take his hand, not just for his sake but for my own as well.

"I could never love anyone more than I love you." I squeeze my fingers around his, deciding not to clarify that when I say that, I mean as his friend. Because I still haven't figured out the rest. "And that is how I know that we're going to be okay." I offer reassurance I feel like we both need right now.

"I'm sorry you're hurting." He doesn't pull his hand away like I expect him to, allowing me to hold it instead.

"I'm sorry you're hurting." I repeat his words back to him.

"Can we promise never to hurt each other again?"

"We can promise to try." I squeeze his hand again.

"I guess for now, that'll do."

He intertwines our fingers, offering me the comfort I desperately need. And while it quells some of the pain stirring in my chest, it doesn't take it away. I'm not sure anything will.

But at least for now, I have this. I have Remi. Where that will take me, I do not yet know. Will he be able to forgive me? Will I be able to forgive myself? Will I finally be able to let Sutton go or will I lose everything because I realize I can't? Will I even get a choice at all?

My future has never been more uncertain than it is right now. But I'm hopeful that when I come out of this on the other end, I'll end up exactly where I was always meant to be. I just don't know which Barnett brother will be by my side when I finally do.

*To be continued...*



Aspen, Remi, & Sutton's story will *conclude* in *The Space Between Now & Forever*

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Melissa Toppen is a USA Today Bestselling Author who specializes in Fantasy, New Adult and Contemporary Romance. She is a lover of books and enjoys nothing more than losing herself in a good novel. She has a soft spot for romance and all things fantasy, and focuses her writing in that direction; writing what she loves to read.

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